

The following text is an excerpt from my grant-winning proposal to create a short documentary about a culture of sexual misconduct in the Navy. Recipient of the 2020 IDEA Grant.

She Made the Navy Keep Its Promise: The Story of Darlene Simmons

Our proposed documentary will follow the story of [Darlene Simmons](#), a former Navy officer whose promising career was derailed in the 1990s after she reported her superior for sexual harassment. Simmons' case was a watershed moment. After enduring retaliation—including a forced psychiatric evaluation and a near career-ending discharge—she fought back in court, ultimately receiving a public apology from Navy Secretary John Dalton and a formal censure against her harasser. Her case forced the Navy to confront its own “zero tolerance” policy on sexual harassment, hastily introduced after the notorious [Tailhook scandal](#). Her resilience sparked a wave of government effort focused on urgent prevention, meaningful accountability, and long-overdue support for victims.

"While we have done much, I realize we still have far to go," Dalton wrote to the Tampa Bay Times in 1994.

That remains an understatement. Thirty years later, the Pentagon's own statistics show that the problem remains alarmingly present. Between 2016 and 2018 alone, reported sexual assaults in the military rose by 38%. In 2019, one young Marine recounted to focus group researchers how a sergeant casually remarked, “Oh, don't tempt me,” after she bent over to retrieve an item. Moments like these remain disturbingly common throughout the Navy today.

Our documentary will use Simmons' story as a lens—a case study to explore the gap between public promise and practice. We will expand upon the cultural, institutional, and legal shifts within the Navy since the 1990s, asking: *Why have prevention efforts failed? What systemic barriers remain? And urgently, what must take place to create meaningful accountability?*

Through personal testimony, archival materials, and expert interviews, we hope to illuminate the long shadow of sexual misconduct in the U.S. military—and spark a conversation about what it takes to create meaningful institution-wide change.