

trauma.)

#### Alicia Menendez:

# C: Our team has been absolutely gripped and horrified by the story of Vanessa Guillén, a soldier who back in April went missing from her base in Fort Hood, Texas. Vanessa's family says that before she disappeared, she had complained to them about being sexually harassed by a superior. Last week, her remains were found near the Leon River. She was 20 years old. A suspect in the case, also a soldier at Fort Hood, took his own life as authorities began to close in. Another suspect has been arrested and charged with conspiracy to tamper with evidence. Today, I'm with two veterans, Lucy Del Gaudio and Pam Campos-Palma. In the first part of our conversation, we talk about Vanessa's death and how the circumstances around it have brought aspects of military culture into sharp focus.

To Honor Vanessa Guillén, These Two Latina Veterans Are Telling Women Not To Enlist

Latina Veterans Lucy del Gaudio and Pam Campos-Palma are

women, especially women of color, endure while serving. In this powerful conversation, they detail the repeated abuses and military

sexual trauma that robbed them of the pride in serving their country, their sense of worth, and military careers they worked so hard to establish (This episode contains graphic language about sexual

spearheading a campaign demanding justice after the disappearance and killing of Army Spc. Vanessa Guillén. Their service experience includes misogyny, discrimination and sexual violence that many

In the second part of our conversation, we talk about how they're seeking justice for Vanessa. Over the course of this entire conversation, we discuss sexual trauma and assault in explicit terms. If that's emotionally challenging, or triggering, or just too much, please take care of yourself. Don't listen, listen with someone you love, or wait until you feel ready.

Thank you both so much for taking the time to have this conversation. Lucy, I want to start with you. Why did you decide to join the military?

- Lucy Del Gaudio: I joined the military, just like a lot of us Latinas from lower income demographics. So, both of my brothers served in the military, and I had a very frank discussion with them of which service branch would be better for me. One was a Marine, one was in the Army, so I went with the Army, basically on the shorter bootcamp, and that's what made the decision for me. I just wanted to make a better life. I wanted to get outside the doors of Union City and just really try to create something for myself.
- Menendez: Pam, how about you?

#### Pam Campos-Palma:

Yeah. It's been interesting the more I think about this origin story. So, I'm originally from Boston. My mom is an immigrant from Honduras, and she was the one who encouraged me to enlist, and I just remember she was saying like, "You know, I fought to be here. I don't want you to lose your potential. And we need to get you to go to college." At the

time, I didn't know anybody who had gone to college and I did not know anybody who had served, and she walked me into the recruiter's office because she wanted to give me a better life. So, I went there for college money, and also I wanted to make my mom proud. I wanted her to be proud of me and I did feel like this country was fine, and so I wanted to serve it.

- Menendez: I'm curious, though, what was it that you weren't getting at school that you did get in the military?
- Campos-Palma: I had a really interesting experience. So, I served as a counterterrorism intelligence analyst, and when I signed that line to enlist, I had no idea what it was, but I knew that it was one of the hardest schools to get into. I feel like as a young person, I had people constantly thinking that I was going to fail. I had a guidance counselor who told my mom, "Kids like yours, they just don't make it in college." And so, this school-to-military pipeline is really I think significant, and I also had people that really believed in me. So, I was in the Air Force, and I was really eager to prove myself, and I had officers that were like, "Oh yeah, you should be an officer." And I was also really sharp and really good at my job.
- Menendez: That's just so interesting, because I think part of what we're gonna get to in this conversation is some of the gender bias, race and ethnicity bias, that you run up inside the institution, and so it is interesting to me that you found it to be a place of opportunity.
- Del Gaudio: You know, and it's interesting what Pam said, too. I experienced that same bias as when I first intended on going to school, one of my guidance counselors told me, "You know, Lucy, you're really not higher ed material. You should just go find a good husband and become a wife." And I looked at him like, "Really? That's what you think of me?" Because again, I was raised by a Cuban grandmother, who again, wanted me to become the best housewife I could possibly become.
- Menendez: Lucy, how would you describe the experience of being a woman, being Latina, in the military branch you served in?
- Del Gaudio: When I got to basic, when I got to AIT, I met a lot of girls like me, a lot of women like me. You know, Black and Browns, Latinas. We had a very small portion of white soldiers with me in basic training at Fort Jackson, so it was very interesting, because I kind of met more people with my mindset, and that was to me incredible. But I had to deal with a lot of... I was called really derogatory names. They didn't respect me in a sense, because I came in as a private, so I had nothing. No type of rank. So, I really had to build respect.
- Menendez: Pam, I see rigorous head shaking.
- Campos-Palma: Yeah. I mean, I have to be clear, like my experience at the very beginning was an absolute exception, but my experience throughout the military was that gender and racial oppression was really baked into the institution. I testified to Congress last December about this, so I'll just say I also served during Don't Ask, Don't Tell. And what I think is really interesting is that I served in an era when there was all of these illusions about progress, like women can serve, and we repeal Don't Ask, Don't Tell, and I came out to myself in the military, but that doesn't mean that there's culture change.

I experienced discrimination and violence, and it took me years. It took me years to realize that someone groping me under the table at a Christmas party, at my first Christmas party as a 19 year old at the unit, was not normal. I was 24 when I went to my first gender violence event on a campus, and I remember hearing these stories and being like, "But

that's what happened to me all the time. I see that everywhere." Rape culture is embedded in the DNA of the military culture. And racial discrimination, xenophobia, Islamophobia is embedded in the DNA and has been normalized for so long. And so, in an institution where that is the case, I've gotten asked a lot, "You know, why don't people report these things? Why don't people just report?" And I've said you can't report something that is not deemed a problem, because then you're the problem, right?

And that's definitely what happened to me. I served in a unit that was fraught with abuse, and I myself was made a target of racial and sexual discrimination, and I filed an Inspector General complaint. And I think the thing that I don't want to be lost is that anyone fighting for justice within such a gridlocked institution has some of the most incredible courage, because it is terrifying. And the bigger thing is people know in the institution that it's a problem.

- Menendez: Lucy?
- Del Gaudio: I couldn't agree with Pam more. It's such a... It's so disheartening that we go there to achieve the best that we could be, and we don't raise our right hand in order to get assaulted. For me, it was so... I didn't know what to do at the point where the harassment started, because one person told me, "But that's, Lucy, that's just the way it is."
- Menendez: What did the harassment look like?
- Del Gaudio: I remember walking into... We had like a dress down type of day, and where they told us we didn't have to wear our BDUs, and we could come into the office space just in regular civilian clothes, so I came in with like a pair of jeans, had my Smith's t-shit on and a pair of Doc Martens, and one of the higher ups in my office said, "Don't wear that again, because then I'm gonna harass you even more."
- Menendez: And you, Pam?
- Campos-Palma: We've been talking to so many Latina veterans lately, and it's just been interesting the pattern of similar stories. The pervasiveness. I'm remembering how at my very first unit, somebody said to me, "You know, you're either gonna be a mattress or you're gonna be one of the boys." Which means you're either gonna be a slut or you're gonna be a bitch. And something that I really experienced is this internalized oppression, as well, that in order to not be in... if you don't want to get raped or harassed, then you have to adopt misogyny and patriarchy yourself, just to survive. And I feel so much sadness for my younger self. The big hypocrisy here, too, is you're in the supposed band of brothers. You're in the supposed camaraderie institution, where you're literally signed up to take bullets for each other, but these are the very people that are targeting you. Your own brothers or peers are the enemy.

And then the people that you would report to are their brothers, and so it's really interesting. I've said that we live in two different worlds, where they're... Predominantly men, but people of all genders, there is this dynamic where men are like, "I'm so proud of my service," because they get rewarded for having served the country that they love, and what's so damaging to me right now is seeing so many women in whisper networks, where they can't be proud of their service to this country, no matter what war or peacetime that they served in, because it was so painful, and we are also erased.

Del Gaudio: For me, I never met the height and weight requirements that the military wants you to stay in like standards, so I always had to get measured, like for my BMI. And there was one

sergeant that the minute he saw me coming in to get measured, he was like, "No, I want to do Lucy's." And he would go really tight, to really get my breasts together, and I would be like, "I can't believe this is happening to me." And everybody's watching me, and people from my unit are watching me, and commanders are watching, and he's really, and he'd, "Oh, let me do it again. I just want to make sure I got the right..." And he would just adjust it, and I'm like, at one point I said to him, "You got the number. Just stop touching my boob." And everybody looked at him like, "Okay, that's enough."

Menendez: And what I hear, what I was about to say is what I hear when you say that is not sexuality or lust, but humiliation and power, right? That's actually what's playing out there.

- Del Gaudio: And you know, some of my humiliation, too, was by women in powerful positions. I had a first sergeant call me a doormat. She's like, "Oh, here comes the unit doormat." And I was like, "Excuse me?" And that, to me, it just left a bad taste in my mouth, and I remember going back to the barracks and everybody's like, "Lucy, what's wrong?" And I'm like, "Am I a doormat to people?" And that just, again, as much good as... Because I did, there's good parts of my service, and I appreciate, I met some of my greatest friends, and some of the... I have. But the bad and the good, and sometimes when I start thinking about the bad, and how as the last 60, 70 days have really brought up a lot of my bad memories that I've kind of stored away in components in my brain that I really don't want to think about. It's an ugly military for when it comes to women, and we really need to change the culture.
- Menendez: Can I... Lucy, I do want to loop back to something that I didn't get to and I do think is important, which is that in 2015, you were diagnosed with military sexual trauma, MTS, and post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD. 25 years after your experience with sexual assault in the military. What did you go through in order to get that diagnosis?
- Del Gaudio: Oh my God. You have no idea. So, after I totally left the military, which was '98, so I was forced to leave my active service and become a reservist, so after my service, I said, "You know what? I'm not a servicemember anymore." I didn't identify as a veteran. I think the only way you knew that I served is if you knew me personally. So, I was at work, and I had a confrontation with a gentleman who spoke to me in a tone that just triggered me, and actually I had a massive panic attack that I thought was a heart attack, and I was hospitalized. And then that's when my husband actually told the physician that when they brought me in, "My wife is a veteran." And they came in and the physician who was a woman goes to me, "Could you talk to me about your service?" And then that's when it all came into light and I told her, "I experienced X, Y and Z. This is what happened to me." And then she goes, "You know what? I'm going to start treating you for PTSD because of your military sexual trauma."

Again, I hid so well. I never told anyone, because I... Again, it was the tarnish of my service, and it's hard, because I want my children, I want them to be proud of their mother serving. I don't want them to relate the two, but that's what actually happened.

- Campos-Palma: I want to say something just really quick and really important on this piece, so I'm currently in the process. This is kind of a mind-blowing parallel, Lucy. I can't believe this. So, I'm currently in the process of my disability claim, and I had to list five incidents of rape or harassment to get the military sexual trauma claim.
- Del Gaudio: And isn't it disgusting that they make us say five?
- Campos-Palma: I mean, you have to list them out and you have to kind of prove them, and if you can't prove them, you have to get a letter. So, it's this rigorous process, and it's really telling that Latina to Latina: To Honor Vanessa Guillén These Two Latin Veterans Are Telling Women Not To Enlist

this has become institutionally an occupational hazard, that military sexual trauma, rape, and harassment is an occupational trauma that people are... It is a disability. But that is something that I think I'm holding a lot lately. And the other thing is in one of my... In my appointments, I'm often asked like, "Well, what happened before the military? Was your mother married? Oh, tell me. Your mother's an immigrant?" And I also feel that there is racial bias in that those of us that are working class and Brown and Black, that we must have been damaged goods before we came into the military, and that we're not getting those claims paid out. When we talk about reparations for war-affected people, and this is an occupational hazard, who's getting those checks from the government? It's not us.

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Menendez: Vanessa Guillén was one of five siblings. An athlete, she played soccer and ran track and cross country, her family says she dreamed of serving in the military since she was a child. Vanessa wanted to protect her homeland. Now a grassroots effort that's been led by people like Lucy and Pam is asking if enough was done to protect Vanessa. What does justice look like for her?

Help those of us who are civilians understand not only how the culture allows that harassment to take place, but why it is so difficult to report it. That was one of the things we heard over and over again with Vanessa Guillén, right? That she would tell her family about this, but she was very scared about going to anyone who actually had the power to fix it, and she was very, very scared about the possibility of a family member intervening and communicating about it on her behalf out of some sense that there would be consequences for them, as well. Does that ring true to you?

Campos-Palma: Yeah, absolutely. So, when I personally heard that she had told her mother, one of the immediate things is it has to be really bad. Not to generalize, but my own experience is that I wanted to shield my family as much as possible from the realities of the military. I didn't want them to worry. So, for her to tell her mother, a working class Brown woman in America, in this moment, in this time in this country about that, to me, I was like, "It has to be very bad." And I think what it comes down to is it is about power. She was a lower ranking soldier. And I would say that there are not real mechanisms. Even the mechanisms that are said to be put in place, if you feel that the system is already stacked against you, why would you create more and invite more harm?

The other thing is that you have to then defend your complaint, and if you don't have enough power to do that, if it's just you and a bunch of men with shiny things on their shoulders, right? That's a problem. The other thing I'll say is that and also the system, the military cannot investigate itself. There is no independent mechanisms for investigating violence within the military system. And the last thing is there's no political will. This has happened for decades, I would just say. The fact that Congress members right now, who are veterans themselves, have no spoken out about this, tells you how little political will there is, that if this is happening to one woman who told her mother, you have to believe it's happening across dorms and units on that base.

#### Menendez: Lucy?

Del Gaudio: Well, for me, it was I couldn't tell my family because my brother was my actual recruiter, and when... I didn't tell my family until recently what happened to me, and my brother, who served in the Army, called me and he's like, "Sis, why didn't you tell me what happened to you?" And I'm like, "Because you put me into the Army. You held my hand. You were there with me every step of the way when I went to Fort Hamilton." And it was like I didn't want to disappoint my brother that I was actually sexually traumatized. Because his Army is a complete different Army than his sister's Army, and my Army is tarnished, and where his is incredibly decorated, because my brother served 30-plus years, and that's where I tell him, "It's not your fault that this happened to me, but I have to explain to you that I shielded you from it because I didn't want you to think that you were responsible for the actions of others, because you were my brother."

You know, I come from a wildly religious Catholic family. It just made things so much worse, because again, I hid for so many years under this rock, and then every time I saw things, inklings of sexual trauma reported, or things to that nature, I did not watch any media on Vanessa until like 23 days in. I totally took myself out, and it was a phone call from someone that I served with, and he called me, and he goes to me, "Are you okay?" And I said, "Why are you asking me?" He goes, "I'm watching the news. It's really ripping me apart." He goes, "But every time I look at the picture of her, it reminds me of you." And that killed me, and that's when I said, "You know what? I'm going to start opening up."

And I felt responsible, because all the work that I'm doing in this space still didn't save her. It didn't save the others that don't have the voice, and we have to create a voice for these women that are constantly being harassed, constantly being abused. We have to be a stronger voice. Let me scream so a soldier in the next wave will not have to scream. Let me do the screaming and I'll take care of you, so when you enter the military, this will not happen to you.

- Menendez: Pam said that as she was reading about Vanessa's case, the first thing that really popped up to her was the fact that Vanessa Guillén had told her mother, and that things must have been really bad if Vanessa had gone to her mother. What sort of struck you, Lucy, as you began reading about this case?
- Del Gaudio: Again, the cultural aspects of it. I could just imagine the thoughts. When I heard Lupe talk about her sister, and that we matter, like my sister matters, that really got to me, because for years, I felt like I did not matter, and I served, and I served really, really passionately, and I served with so much commitment, and they took it away from me. They took that away from me, and where my brothers, you go to their homes, and they have all their declarations up and all this proud service, and I have little to be seen, because I wanted to get to that pinnacle. I wanted to follow my brothers' footsteps, and one person just took

that all away from me, and when I saw how she really wanted to serve, and Lupe said she wanted to make her family proud, and that just ripped me apart.

And I'm sorry I'm getting emotional, but it just... It's too common. It's a common thread that civilians don't understand. They automatically think that you're in the military and everything is glory. Everything is rose-colored glasses. Everything is fine. But when you deep down tell them that this happened to you, they look at you differently. I felt like my military sexual trauma was a cloud over my head, this dark cloud that was always following me.

### Menendez: And you, Pam?

Campos-Palma: I have a thought that's been rattling in my head. I say that I have a complicated feeling about my service as I do with my country, where on the one hand I feel this honor, like I do, I believe that I am a patriot, because I believe that my mother sacrificed and this country is mine, and there's a part of me that feels like no bigot will take it away from me. But when I saw the family, when I saw her mother, I saw my own mother. When I saw her sister, something that I think cannot be missed, and the reason that the Latino community is so angry is that you immigrate to this country and you give the most precious thing that you have, your daughter, and my mom says it a lot. My mom is the biggest patriot. She has 13 flags in her house, and she says... She loves saying, "My daughter served, and I gave my daughter to this country to serve, because I believe in its ideals and I want to shape it for us." Right?

And when I saw her mother, I'm like how damning. How damning that our community, our community is the lifeblood of this country, and we're treated with such disrespect, as subclass citizens, and we are one of the highest enlistment demographics. We enlist at higher rates. Puerto Ricans enlist at higher rates. The children of immigrants are enlisting in this military for what? We're tired of being the lifeblood of a country that will not protect us or see us as fully human, and I have seen Black, Brown, Muslim communities rally around Vanessa Guillén and that family, because this is bigger than also the military. This has to do with patriotism, and who gets to be an American and who does not. And I am tired, especially in recent years. I have had Latinas especially come to me and say they have seen my career and they say, "I admire you so much, Pam. I'm going to enlist. I want to be an officer."

And it crushes me every time, and I have to tell them the real deal of what you're really signing up for. And we should not be put in that position where we want to serve our country in a real way, but it means that it takes our life and our sanity. And so, we are saying if there is no justice for this family, and for this Latina, then you will not get any more enlistments and we are boycotting enlistments into the military until Congress does their job. Because we are not expendable, and the thing that the Guillén family did, the thing that that mother did that is so powerful is she decided that the military is not just this trophy that cannot be touched, and she went after those generals and said, "Yo tengo poder. Yo vivo aquí también, y yo no me voy a ir.." I have power and I'm not leaving. And you owe us justice.

Menendez: It's hard to understand how a soldier went missing and that there wasn't immediately an effort to find her.

Del Gaudio: A weapon could go missing and they'll tell everybody to stay on post. You cannot leave until we find this weapon. She went missing and everybody went home, put their heads on

their pillows, and went along their day. That's what pisses me off. A weapon has more value than an actual human being.

Campos-Palma: I learned about this through social media. Through social media and Latino networks. And even then, it was like a month. She had been missing for a month. Even at that early juncture, nothing happened. There was no real movement. And the Army can say all they want, and this is what they do every time. They'll get us lost into, "Well, this happened. Well, this didn't happen. Well, this didn't happen." And for me personally, it's distracting. Again, they said that they were self-investigating and that they were investigating, but the family themselves publicly said that they were being blocked. And so, it doesn't surprise me that the Army now is saying, "Well, there was no credible evidence of harassment." Because they've actually never found us credible. And the family said that she was being harassed, so we find Vanessa credible. We find her family credible and the thousands of women who have shared stories under #WeAreVanessaGuillen, they are credible. And so, when it comes to sexual harassment, and violence in the ranks, it is the Army and the Department of Defense who are not credible.

She was on base. In the United States and across the world, military bases have the highest level of security. This does not add up.

- Menendez: Pam, what does justice look like for Vanessa?
- Campos-Palma: I mean, justice... This is the hardest question for me, personally, because I don't know that there's anything. It's hard. My belief is that the Guillén family has been the most courageous, has done the heavy lifting, and has done what is necessary to finally bring, to finally have hope of even justice in a multi-decade plague of violence in the military. It's not just Vanessa Guillén. It's LaVena Johnson, a Black woman who never got justice, and many other women, as well. And so, justice right now is about not reform, but completely overhauling this entire system that is plaguing us. Justice means Congress having a hearing. We want Vanessa Guillén's family to have a congressional hearing, and for those generals to be in front of Congress. And what justice is is their demands. Their demands have been very clear. Fort Hood should be shut down. People that are saying that it's not possible, it is possible. The Army regularly shuts down bases under different initiatives. No soldiers would lose their jobs. They would be reassigned somewhere else.

And beyond justice, they deserve repair. Reparations for their loss.

- Menendez: Lucy, how about you?
- Del Gaudio: For me, it's about creating that third party reporting structure. Commanders' commands should not the actual investigation of these allegations. Again, the culture has to change. The third party investigation to me is something that's crucial. I don't understand why we have to report to someone that is idealistically going to protect their own. The boys club is always going to protect their own. To me, that's justice. No mother should bury their child under these circumstances. Not at all. And I'm a mom of a daughter. I have four children. I have one daughter. I would never at this juncture or any juncture, would have allowed my daughter to enter the military, because I would not sleep at night knowing that I put my daughter in the same space as me.

When people ask me about joining the military, I used to tell people to do it. I will never in a million years tell a young woman to join at this juncture, because I would be an absolute

hypocrite to say to someone, "Join the military." Join the military once they solve this problem. It is a major absolute abomination of what they structurally do to women.

- Menendez: Pam, what would you say to a young Latino who's thinking about enlisting?
- Campos-Palma: Oh my gosh. I mean, it's an impossible situation. It is my belief that if we leave a vacuum in the military, that it will be filled with ethnonationalists. So, that is one thing that I'm very nervous about. But right now, we cannot enlist. We are not disposable. We are not expandable. Latinas are too valuable, brilliant. We are hardworking. We are everything. And we should not give our bodies and souls to an institution that will not value us and that did not value our sister enough to do a simple investigation on her disappearance, and whose murder is on their hands. As much as I believe in serving this country, and in the safety of all people, we need to take a real hard look that enlisting into a military for healthcare and college, in questionable wars where we will not be protected and we're treated as subclass is a broken system and part of a sick nation. This is a time of reckoning and we need to take our power back. Latinas should not enlist. We should boycott the military and we should build our political power in order to do so, and that's what this grassroots movement is doing.
- Menendez: If someone is listening and they want to get involved, how can they help?
- Del Gaudio: Right now, the biggest support we need is A, we need voices. We need influencers. We need people to get out there and say, "This is the cause that you need to support." Our Latino influencers need to get out there and make it vocal. They need to get out there and show that you are supporting your Latina community. We've gotten a lot of momentum, but we need more.
- Menendez: Pam?
- Campos-Palma: Congress needs to do their jobs, and Congress serves us, the people. And Latinos, communities of color especially, need to make their voices heard, and so it is critical that people reach out to their congressperson and make it clear that this is important, and that we need congressional investigation for this family. Also, we are looking for more signatures from activity duty and veteran women, and so the letter is circulating, but if you go to bitly.com/justiceforvanessaguillen, you also can sign on and join us.
- Del Gaudio: And I'm gonna plead to support organizations that do this fine work. <u>Minority Veterans of</u> <u>America, Vet for the People</u>. If you have deep pockets, I need you to go into your pockets and support the organizations that are making the change, that are out there, stomping their feet and making the change, being vocal, making phone calls. The group of women that are doing this work by far are outstanding. I'm like, I guess, I call myself the grandmother of the group, because all these young women are... They blow me away. I might be the marathon runner in the group, but they blow me away and they've energized me, because again, in '92, when I experienced my trauma, I had no one. I had absolutely no one. And it took me 20 goddamn years to find women that are gonna stand by me and say, "Lucy, you are not alone." And those organizations need support.
- Menendez: Lucy, Pam, thank you both so much for your time.
- Del Gaudio: Thank you.

Campos-Palma: Thank you for having us. Thank you.

Menendez: Thanks as always for joining us. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Virginia Lora is our managing producer. Cedric Wilson is our producer. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com, and remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, wherever you're listening, and please, please leave a review. It is one of the fastest, easiest ways to help us grow as a community.

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