



Capt. Brett Hansen entered the Army at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington, in June 2013 and was assigned to Fort Gordon/Eisenhower Medical Center in July 2017 as a neurologist. PROVIDED BY RAINIER EHRHARDT

Sex assault claims against Fort Gordon doctor result in one conviction

Sea Stachura and Jozsef Papp Augusta Chronicle | USA TODAY NETWORK



Brittany Renton out in the field in November while serving at Fort Bragg. Renton is one of the victims of Capt. Brett Hansen's sexual misconduct. PROVIDED BY BRITTANY RENTON

In U.S. Army Sgt. Adriana Meczywor's view, what her neurologist was doing was sexual in nature, not medical. ● "He held the stethoscope initially over my shirt, but he said he couldn't hear my heart beat," she told The Augusta Chronicle in late April. ● Meczywor (pronounced MESS-whar) was eight months pregnant and experiencing headaches and dizziness. Her obstetrician had referred her to neurologist Dr. Brett Hansen, a U.S. Army captain who had arrived at Fort Gordon's Dwight D. Eisenhower Army Medical Center a few months before, in July of 2017. ● She arrived at the October appointment hot, another effect of pregnancy, and wearing a thin T-shirt. She didn't understand why he couldn't hear her heart beat. **See ASSAULT, Page 4A**

Assault

Continued from Page 1A

"He moved inside my bra and the whole time was cupping my breast. This went on for an hour," she said. That entire time, she said, he leaned in close, one hand cupping the underside of her breast, the other moving the stethoscope across her chest. "No doctor has ever done that to me," she said.

He asked her to schedule a follow-up appointment, and she did, but almost immediately canceled it. "I canceled several times," she said.

She said she received four calls, two from the scheduler, and she would make an appointment and then cancel. "He even called personally, telling me he wanted me to go ahead and reschedule. Even after my OB had approved me for bed rest, he kept saying he would like to see me," she said.

Mezzywor felt confident this was sexual assault, but she didn't believe it was worth the hassle and potential stigma of reporting it.

"It's not the first time that someone in the military has done something inappropriate" to her, she said.

She had her baby, now four years old, and her vertigo stopped, so she had no need to see Hansen or any other neurologist. But three years after that first appointment, Mezzywor received a phone call about Hansen. Another female soldier had reported that Hansen sexually assaulted her. Had anything inappropriate happened during Mezzywor's visit? Yes, she said, and told her story.

For a while, she said she didn't hear anything else about it, then she received an email from the office of the U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Division's Special Victims Unit.

Supervising Special Agent Larry Ervin apologized to her for the lack of communication.

"The investigation is rather extensive and you are not the only victim within the investigation at this time," the email read. "We are actively working to try to complete remaining investigative leads before a decision is made by the military on possible adjudication."

Another two years would pass before Hansen was charged.

'Probable cause' found for 9 cases, 3 ultimately tried

According to emails provided to the Augusta Chronicle, the Army's investigation resulted in a total of 11 accusers coming forward.

"We investigated a total of 7 criminal offenses, that were either Assault or Sexual Assault in nature for the 11 victims, 4 of these offenses were determined to be Probable Cause/Founded; with at least 1 offense as Probable Cause/Founded for 9 of the 11 listed victims," the email read.

In other words, 11 individuals said Hansen had assaulted or sexually assaulted them. Army investigators determined that a reasonable person would believe Hansen had violated four military regulations with nine of the victims. One of the charges was on Article 120, Abusive Sexual Contact. Whether Hansen would face charges from all of the accusers would now be up to the prosecutor and the individuals' willingness to testify.

Ultimately, the Army started its trial with seven counts between two charges on four of those nine cases. Three of the accusers were enlisted — a private, private first class and a corporal — and one was an officer, a lieutenant colonel.

In each case, the charge sheets, provided to the Chronicle by two of the vic-



Fort Gordon doctor Capt. Brett Hansen was found guilty on one charge of abusive sexual contact. He was sentenced to 18 months confinement and dismissed from the Army. MICHAEL HOLAHAN/THE AUGUSTA CHRONICLE

tims and the Army, accused Hansen of similar behavior in similar circumstances. Hansen "touched directly or through clothing the breast and buttocks" as well as the genitals of these soldiers on seven separate office visits.

Similar stories among victims

Online records for Hansen are sparse. A profile for "Brett M. Hansen DO" on the social networking site for health professionals, Doximity, is Hansen's, according to one of his accusers.

The account, created in 2015, indicates that he attended Lindenwood University in Missouri on a full scholarship for wrestling, then transferred to the University of Utah where he earned a bachelor's in exercise and sports science. He then attended Touro University Nevada College of Osteopathic Medicine, graduating in 2013. His medical license is from the state of Nebraska — military doctors can hold licenses outside of the state in which they practice.

According to officials at Fort Gordon and Doximity, he did his residency in neurology at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington, and stayed there until 2017, when he came to Augusta. The profile lists him as Chief of Neurology at Eisenhower and affiliated with multiple hospitals in the State of Washington, and Augusta University Medical Center. AU Health does not list Hansen as a medical provider.

While Mezzywor's encounter took place soon after Hansen's arrival at Fort Gordon, it was over a year later that another soldier, Pfc. Brittany Renton, reported that she was assaulted by Hansen.

Renton joined the military, inspired by her sister in the U.S. Marine Corps. A few months into her Army career, Renton had a seizure following a wisdom tooth surgery. Doctors told her to follow up with a neurologist.

When she got to the exam room on Aug. 29, 2018, Renton met with another doctor first, she said. He asked her questions about what happened, tested her reflexes, blood pressure. The doctor left, and she waited in the room.

"I was just sitting in there, and Dr. Hansen comes in the room by himself. He shuts the door, locks it and he starts asking me weird questions like 'Am I married? Do I have a boyfriend? Do I have any kids?'" Renton said. "Nothing to do with a seizure. He never asked me what happened. He never asked me if I had any headaches, no questions that were involving what happened."

According to the charge sheet, Hansen made similar remarks to another enlisted soldier. "Your husband is a lucky man." "I think about you when I'm

not at work." "If your marriage doesn't work out, we could talk."

Hansen asked Renton to take off her blouse, belt and boots. She thought it was normal. She said he didn't call for a nurse.

"I did all that thinking he is going to check for certain things," she said. "This was one of my first interactions with an officer. I had five months in the Army. I was straight out of basic training."

Renton said after she took her clothes off, he told her to stand facing the wall and turned off the lights. Her back was facing Hansen. He stood behind her and pulled her pants down.

"My butt was showing," she said.

Without wearing gloves, he touched and groped her breasts and butt, she said. Renton said Hansen kept telling her to relax.

In the trial, Renton said Hansen's defense counsel did not dispute his actions but instead referred to his actions as negligent and a lapse in judgment.

Hansen's lead attorney, Stephen Carpenter Jr. of Court & Carpenter, a military defense law firm, did not confirm or deny how Hansen's actions were described during trial. He did respond to Renton's accusations generally.

"In the case of Ms. Renton, my client treated her as a Osteopathic Physician with a professional affinity, training and experience in Osteopathic Manipulative Treatment, which is undoubtedly why the panel found my client "Not Guilty" of all of Ms. Renton's claims," Carpenter said.

"I don't know how long I was in there, it felt like an hour," she said. "I really couldn't see anything. He gets up, and he turns on the lights."

Renton, already on base, went directly to her commanding officer. "I just kept saying to my drill sergeant, 'I just went in for my head, why was he touching me?'"

Renton said her drill sergeant told her to take lunch to calm down. "They asked me what I wanted to see happen and I told them I didn't think he should see be able to see patients," she said.

'SHARP'ing didn't trigger investigation

To Renton's mind, she had publicly 'SHARP'd' an officer, triggering an investigation.

"In Basic (Training) you're taught that if you 'SHARP' you basically ruin the guy's career," she said. What might he do in retaliation, she wondered?

SHARP refers to the Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention program. SHARP began in 2008 in response to revelations of rampant sexual assault and harassment in the military. The program includes training on sexual assault and harassment, mental and physical support for people who report assault or harassment, and a special investigation unit.

The program has had limited impact on the prevention of sexual harassment and assault, according to research conducted by the Department of Defense and the Government Accountability Office, though reporting has steadily risen.

In Renton's case, submitting a SHARP report didn't trigger an investigation, but she didn't know that. That lack of clarity is a well-documented problem. A 2019 report by the Department of Defense's Inspector General found that of 82 sexual assault reports, only five victims were definitely asked if they wanted their cases prosecuted. In 56 of those cases, investigators reported that they had asked, but they could not provide evidence of the victims' responses.

Renton's case did not get prosecuted because it was filed as "restricted" — not "unrestricted" — and kept private.

"They gave me one option, no other. I didn't know enough about SHARP to know," she said.

Renton told her father what happened and he came to visit her. Otherwise, she said, she had no one to talk to. Shortly after, Renton was transferred to South Korea. She said she was afraid

that Hansen was going to get himself transferred to her duty station. She deleted all her social media and everything she could to make sure Hansen couldn't find her.

In the witness statement she read at trial, she said in part, "For the next two years, I lived in so much fear; fear of men, of officers, fear of people I'm supposed to trust. I couldn't be alone in a room with another guy, I couldn't have doors shut around me or I'd panic, I still to this day sleep with the lights on. In a real sense, I was scared for my life — and I never wanted to see another doctor ever again."

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has reported a strong correlation between military sexual trauma and suicidal thoughts among victims without a history of mental health problems.

Renton tried to kill herself in April 2019. She was found by her first sergeant. That was when she learned Hansen hadn't been alerted to her complaint and no investigation had begun. As a result, she changed the status of her SHARP report, making it public to the Army's Criminal Investigation Division.

By then, the Army had already begun an investigation. Lt. Col. Dean Carter, U.S. Army Cyber Center of Excellence director of Public Affairs told The Augusta Chronicle an investigation began Dec. 20, 2018. He declined to comment on what prompted the investigation.

"(Hansen) was reassigned administrative duties not involving patient care at Eisenhower Medical Center as soon as the allegations were reported," Carter wrote in an email.

Investigative process took time

The process wasn't swift, though. Renton said she told her story of abuse at least 10 times: via video, over the phone and in person. Mezzywor said she probably told her story to four different investigators.

"Why did it take them four years? ... They kept saying they were getting close," Mezzywor said. "Then they'd PCS [get a permanent change of station] and we had to start all over again." Mezzywor said.

Military personnel are often relocated and reassigned, and, as Mezzywor learned in March 2020, the case agent she'd spoken with at first, Special Agent Justin Baxley, had left Fort Gordon. That was when Ervin, the supervising special agent, contacted her.

"I was the supervisor of the investigation and upon SA Baxley's move, I decided to take the case over and work it until completion," Ervin said in his first email. He also offered her access to counseling and other services, which Mezzywor said she hadn't known about.

She heard from Ervin again four months later, in August 2020, stating that he had received the final legal opinion and would be writing the final report within the next 30 days.

He again reminded her there were 11 victims listed in the investigation. Investigators had found probable cause to pursue sexual assault charges stemming from nine of those accusers. Now it was up to the prosecutor and the accusers' willingness to move forward.

"Please anticipate the legal/prosecutorial decisions of how to proceed from this point to move quickly over the next several months and you should anticipate contact from CPT [Michael] Marchman or a representative of his office if your part of this investigation was closed as Probable Cause/Founded."

It was seven months later, in March 2021, that Hansen was presented with his charges: one count of adultery (UCMJ 134) and eight counts of abusive sexual contact (UCMJ Article 120). Then, in June, two of those sexual assault charges were "dismissed without prejudice," meaning the court dismissed them, but they could be brought again.

Carter, with the U.S. Army Cyber Center, explained via email that a number of factors influenced its pace.

See ASSAULT, Page 7A

USA TODAY NETWORK

Dining Deals USA

U3ND6KA

BONUS CODE

- 1) Register and enter codes at: www.diningdealsusa.com
- 2) Enter today's code before Tuesday, June 14 at 11:59 p.m.
- 3) Redeem today's bonus code for coupon redemptions that interest you. Coupons cover restaurants, travel, family fun, automotive, shopping and more!

entertainment

* Discounts vary by merchant, location and offer. Subject to availability. Offers may change without notice. Total savings vary based on the number of discounts and coupons redeemed and value of offers.

TODAY'S BONUS CODE

Assault

Continued from Page 4A

"After the allegations surfaced, information was received concerning similar allegations in another state. A copy of the state investigation was requested, obtained, and examined for possible prosecution. The COVID-19 pandemic seriously delayed the completion of the investigation. Once charges were prepared, proceedings in Federal courts were significantly delayed until COVID-19 mitigation efforts could ensure publicly safe proceedings," he wrote.

The prosecutor overseeing the case, Marchman, had taken a position at West Point earlier that year, according to his LinkedIn profile. Prosecution was then reassigned to Capt. Sierra Tyrell, in Washington D.C..

Tyrell, according to the court docket, was the only counsel for the four women's cases. Hansen had two lawyers, private attorney: Carpenter and JAG Corp Senior Defense Counsel Cpt. Michael Barrett.

The trial that was supposed to happen in short order hung over Renton and Meczywor, who remained in the service. Hansen pleaded not guilty in November 2021. The trial began in March 2022, a year after Hansen was charged and three and a half years after Renton first reported her experience.

Soldiers feel justice wasn't served

Meczywor had not wanted to participate in Hansen's trial, initially, she said, because she didn't want to be stigmatized. She believed she would face consequences from other soldiers, especially in her all-male unit.

"They would treat me differently because I SHARP'd," she said. "So they're going to think that, 'Oh, she's going to do it to me.'"

She was publicly accusing an officer of sexual assault, and everyone in her unit was going to find out.

"We were subpoenaed," she said, and told the accusers would need to temporarily relocate during the trial. "I had to explain to my command team what I was doing. I couldn't say where, but I had to say why."

Ahead of the trial, Meczywor and Renton were sequestered together with the other enlisted soldier and the ranking officer accusing Hansen. For Renton,

it was the first time she was talking with other accusers.

"It was really shocking because all of our stories were the same," Renton said. "I was the only one that didn't go back to the appointment. A couple of the girls had multiple appointments with him so they had to endure it multiple times."

According to Renton and Meczywor, one of those soldiers decided not to testify, so Hansen was then tried on five charges of abusive sexual contact instead of six, and one count of adultery.

Hansen had a general court martial trial, which is the most serious of the three types, and requires a panel of eight or more jurists. Renton remembers all of them being high ranking officers; two were women.

A medical expert witness testified, according to Renton, that there was "no medical reasoning," for Hansen to touch the women as he did.

"I was there because of stuff above my shoulders. All of us were," Renton said.

But Hansen, Renton learned at the hearing, had added paperwork to her records saying she was there for back pain. She said she was not.

"They said we were confusing medical treatment for being touched," Meczywor said.

Carpenter told The Augusta Chronicle via email that they also brought an expert who testified on Hansen's behalf. That individual's testimony, "carefully explained Dr. Hansen had a legitimate medical purpose for nearly all of the charged acts he was facing," Carpenter wrote.

Renton said she believes the panel gave more credence to the officer's accusations than to those of the enlisted members.

The trial lasted a week. The jury, according to Carter, deliberated for hours. They found Hansen guilty of one charge. He was sentenced to 18 months confinement and dismissal from the Army.

Carter previously told The Chronicle that Hansen will serve his sentence at Fort Leavenworth Disciplinary Barracks at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. But Hansen doesn't turn up in inmate searches.

"(Hansen) is appealing the sole charge upon which he was found guilty," Carpenter said of his client in an email.

Bill E. Cassara, a military lawyer based in Augusta, is Hansen's appellate attorney. In response to an interview request, Cassara told The Augusta Chron-

Were you assaulted?

Any potential victims who were not contacted by Army CID investigators can reach out to Fort Gordon's CID office at (706) 791-4611.

via email that he may not be able to speak to Hansen "for a couple of weeks."

Carpenter and Cassara were both asked twice via email about Hansen's incarceration status, but neither responded to the question.

Additionally, Hansen still holds his medical license. According to the Nebraska Division of Public Health, Hansen's active license is set to expire Oct. 1, 2022. Hansen's military trial did not trigger a license review.

Meczywor and Renton were told they could file a medical malpractice suit or issue a complaint.

One conviction: Progress or 'waste of time'?

Even when military sexual assault accusers come forward, like in this case, prosecuting hasn't resulted in many trials, according to Department of Defense data. Service members have made slightly less than 40,000 unrestricted, or public, reports of sexual assault in the past seven years. Of those, 8% went to trial, according to the National Institute of Military Justice, a nongovernmental organization that produces research on the military justice system.

The post's author, Don Christensen, wrote that Department of Defense data showed only "1,242 (cases) being convicted of an Article 120 offense or 3% of all reports." In fiscal year 2020, the number of convictions across the branches was 50. Data for 2022 is not yet available.

Carter said, at least in this case, Hansen is in confinement.

"Bottom line, we took a predator off the streets and out of our formation ... Cases like this highlight what right looks like as we continue to make positive strides in eliminating sexual harassment and sexual assault from our Army."

But Renton sees things differently.

"I got a not guilty on my charge as well as the two other girls," she said. "The only person that got a guilty charge was the [lieutenant] colonel, so that was like, 'OK, they didn't believe us.'"

"Now it looks like we're making

things up," Meczywor said. "In my eyes, he won."

She felt it was her words against his and he was going to win that argument.

"I already didn't have trust in the military system. I knew it was going to be a waste of time. I knew we were all going there ... and go through hell being called liars and everything. Then find out they called us for absolutely no reason," Meczywor said.

Faith in the military justice system has been lacking for years, according to multiple studies by federal, defense and academic reports. So is conviction. Of the more than 6,200 military sexual-assault reports made in fiscal year 2020, only 50 resulted in conviction.

Carter said no one can say what went through the panel's mind during sentencing.

"The panel was comprised of seasoned officers who heard all the evidence and deliberated for hours before announcing their findings," he explained. "We strive to provide a safe and secure medical environment for our patients and staff and sincerely regret the effect this has caused on those involved."

And Carter said if other individuals come forward, their reports will be rigorously investigated.

"This story may not be over yet as the potential still exists for more victims to come forward," he wrote.

For Renton, though, this story is over. She will not re-enlist.

"I don't want any involvement in the Army. For me, they did nothing for me other than make me re-live the same thing over and over again for four years just to not get any justice," she said.

Renton said at least one woman in a senior ranking position criticized her decision to leave the Army. "She said I was letting him win ... and ruining my own career," she said.

Career isn't what first comes to mind for Renton. She remembers the suicide watch, the mandatory psychotropic medicines and twice-a week therapy that she said, per regulations, kept her from advancing her career, and then the trial.

"When Hansen gave his statement, they looked really sympathetic. They looked sad and were shaking their heads. But when we testified, they were looking down, avoiding eye contact with the victims," she said.

She doesn't want to serve in a military that didn't believe her.