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Admiral hammers on gender inequity:

He aggressively aims to humanize academy, ready Mids for war

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At the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Vice Adm. Rodney P. Rempt, the superintendent, is known for scooting around the 330-acre campus on a golf cart and leading cheers at Navy events with a bullhorn.

At 60, he has a grandfatherly rapport with many of the 4,200 midshipmen.

But Rempt, tapped to lead the academy in 2003 after his predecessor resigned amid criticism of his harsh management style, has taken a decidedly no-nonsense approach to a long-standing problem at the academy: sexual harassment and assault.

Last week, the academy took the unusual step of announcing Rempt's decision to charge standout quarterback Lamar S. Owens Jr. with rape, conduct unbecoming an officer and indecent assault. The academy is also investigating another rape allegation involving a football player.

This year, Rempt drew attention for ordering the court-martial of an academy oceanography professor who allegedly made explicit sexual comments last summer to midshipmen. In past cases, military and civilian lawyers say, an offender likely would have been reprimanded at most.

Supporters praise Rempt's aggressiveness in dealing with sexual assault, harassment or just about anything else that crosses his mind. They say he is an advocate for change in a place that needs it. Some have described him as an "activist," noting improvements for women on the campus and his appointment of the school's first black commandant, the No. 2. leadership position at the academy.

Critics say Rempt has gone too far. Old-guard alumni bristled when he changed the lyrics of the school's centuries-old alma mater to make it gender-neutral, and some staff have complained that Rempt has little tolerance for dissent. The attorney for the oceanography professor contends that Rempt's zero-tolerance policy on sexual harassment has created a "witch-hunt atmosphere" at the academy.

In an interview with The Sun late last year, Rempt discussed his views on dealing with sexual assault and harassment.

"To me it comes down to a pretty simple thing to say, and not so easy to do, and that is establishing a command climate where we are helping these young people to learn how to treat

each other, to treat people the way you yourself want to be treated,” he said. “We don’t want people that harass other people. We don’t want those who call other people names. We want those who build each other up and generate the teamwork so critical to success.”

Rempt has not directly commented to reporters on the Owens case, relying on statements issued through his public affairs office. A spokesman said he was unavailable yesterday.

Genteel visionary

A native of Southern California and a 1966 academy graduate, Rempt came to Annapolis from the Naval War College in Newport, R.I., a graduate school for midgrade military officers.

Before that assignment, he was known to ride around the Pentagon on a foot-powered scooter while serving as the Navy’s specialist and program manager on missile defense.

He succeeded Vice Adm. Richard J. Naughton, who resigned after a Navy investigation rebuked him for his management style and for allegedly using force against a Marine guard who asked for his ID on New Year’s Eve. Naughton denied the charges.

In a July 2003 interview with The Sun, Rempt described himself as a “consensus builder” who wanted to humanize the academy and treat the academy’s officers and students as “the important individuals they are.”

For many faculty and staff, Rempt has been a calming, genteel leader.

Standing about 6½ feet tall, with graying hair, Rempt is given to monologues about academy affairs and often uses rhetorical questions to explain his thinking, sometimes punctuating his sentences with “Right?” for emphasis.

“He’s a real gentleman and a great boss to work for,” said Capt. Brian McCormack, director of the academy’s sailing program. “He has a great vision of where he thinks the Naval Academy needs to go.”

McCormack said it was Rempt’s idea to use sailing – both on patrol craft and sailboats – as a leadership laboratory, even pushing to allow midshipmen to command summer sailing trips by themselves, without the supervision of officers or faculty members. Mids have praised the practice.

Rempt is also credited with placing a renewed focus on preparing midshipmen for war by focusing on leadership and cultural studies.

“The most sweeping change that Rod Rempt has brought to the academy has been the reintroduction of the rationale for the school,” said retired Gen. Charles Krulak, chairman of the academy’s board of visitors, a civilian oversight body. “His legacy is that he did everything in his power to prepare his men and women graduates to go out and lead their troops in the war on terrorism.”

Senior administrators say he makes decisions carefully and includes stakeholders in changes that may push the envelope. He often challenges subordinates in brainstorming meetings, questioning them on their ideas or inviting them to counter his proposals.

“He’ll make a radical decision just to shake things up, just to get people thinking,” said Chet Gladchuck, the academy’s athletic director, noting that his boss wants to bring a full-fledged cannon into the football stadium, for school spirit. “He’s pushing us; he’s testing us.”

But Rempt has also clashed with civilian faculty members. When English professor Bruce Fleming criticized the academy’s admissions process in *Proceedings*, an influential defense magazine, Rempt fired off a letter questioning Fleming’s professionalism.

Since that time, faculty members said, Rempt has taken a more diplomatic approach. In one instance, Fleming recalled, Rempt in essence said he “appreciates all faculty members, even the ones who are way out there.”

Climate for women

Since women were first admitted in 1976, the academy has been dogged by allegations of rape and sexual assault. The most notorious example came in 1989, when a female midshipman was handcuffed to a urinal and photographed. The woman resigned, and her attackers were punished with demerits and loss of leave.

All too often, critics said, similar allegations met with the same punishment. Between 2001 and mid-2003, none of 14 sexual assault allegations resulted in a court-martial, a Sun review at the time found. As recently as last year, a Pentagon task force criticized the academy and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y., for failing to change a culture that was hostile to women.

Rempt has tried to address the issue by dealing forcefully with sexual harassment and assault allegations, by making it easier for Mids to report harassment and assault, and by trying to improve the climate for women, who now make up about 17 percent of the brigade.

During recent pretrial hearings in the sexual harassment court-martial of Lt. Bryan Black – the oceanography professor accused of making comments about sexual arousal to a female Mid and using a vulgar term to refer to his ex-wife – Rempt was accused of using Black as a scapegoat.

Charles Gittins, Black’s lawyer, said Rempt first offered his client “admiral’s mast,” a military hearing that proffers a less severe punishment for offenses. But Black declined when he was told Rempt intended to make the hearing public, inviting faculty and staff to attend, Gittins said.

“This was going to be a show trial,” Gittins said at the time.

Charlotte Cluverius, a law instructor at the academy from 2002 to 2004 who now works at a Washington law firm, said Rempt’s decision was unusual.

“Given the facts of that case and the apology he [Black] gave that was accepted by the midshipman, it seems a little extreme,” she said. “In the past, it’s certainly something he would

have been counseled for informally, but to take an officer to mast is an instant career-killer and a pretty major issue in the fleet.”

When the academy last week charged Owens, who had led the Navy football team to a winning season and bowl victory last year, the school’s spokesman explained: “The superintendent has made constantly clear to all of our staff and midshipmen that the Navy does not tolerate sexual harassment or assault.”

Under Rempt, at least three other midshipmen have resigned or been expelled, though the incidents occurred before his appointment.

Advocacy groups for victims criticized Rempt when he dropped the charges against another midshipman accused of rape after the alleged victim in the case refused a judge’s order to testify about childhood sexual abuse. Robert A. Curcio, the accused, was eventually expelled in December 2003, but not before his accuser left the academy.

In August 2003, two midshipmen resigned after being accused of raping two female classmates at a Commissioning Week dorm party in 2002.

Rempt, who often says that concerns about drinking and sexual impropriety keep him up nights, has also focused on improving conditions for women at the school. He brought in more high-ranking female officers and leaders - including the academy’s chief of staff, Capt. Helen Dunn - and created an on-campus salon. He eliminated Cinemax – a cable channel known for its explicit programming – from the academy’s TV system. And he has increased the number of female midshipmen.

“All the books tell you that if you get above 20 percent, a lot of the subculture minority issues go away,” he said. “We see that’s true with race. We’ve grown to about 22, 23 percent minorities here, and we have very few issues. Obviously, it’s not zero, but we have very little.

“And we’re now at 17 percent women and we’re growing. ... The men-women angst is less – there’s no question about it. So if we get the brigade up to 20, 21 percent women, I believe a number of the issues that have existed will go away because even the guys will start correcting the other guys. They won’t put up with any comments or off-color jokes or harassment.”

Krulak, the board of visitors chairman, said he and the board support Rempt and believe his message is even more significant in wartime.

“What Rod is saying to the brigade is that we’ve got to get beyond this idea of ‘What is the role of women?’” Krulak said. “Women are going to combat. Women are being wounded. Women are dying. Women are shedding their blood just like their male counterparts.”

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