



# The Death of Kara Hultgreen

by John Corry

Journalistically, the case seemed clear. An injustice had been done, but now it would be rectified. As Peter Jennings said on the ABC "Evening News," there had been "a vicious campaign against allowing women to serve in combat." After Lt. Kara Hultgreen was killed in a crash while trying to land her plane on a carrier last October, "a lot of men took that as an opportunity to say that women were not up to the job." But now the Navy had concluded that the plane had crashed because of engine failure. Therefore, Lieutenant Hultgreen was blameless, and it was reprehensible to suggest anything else. When Ted Koppel expanded on this on "Nightline," he added a provocative point. The Hultgreen story, he said, is "also a story about us, in the media."

Actually, Koppel was right about that, although not in the way he intended, and almost everything that had been reported on the Hultgreen case was untrue. There had not been a vicious campaign against allowing women to serve in combat, and it was unlikely a lot of men had used Hultgreen's death to say "women were not up to the job." Moreover, while the Navy was saying publicly that Hultgreen was blameless, privately it had reached a different conclusion: Pilot error, not engine failure, was the principal cause of the crash. Political expedience, however, made it unwise to say so. And the real media story, as opposed to the one Koppel imagined, was that so few reporters wanted to know.

There is, of course, a background here. Our major news organizations think it appropriate, even desirable, for women to take part in combat. This may be counter to everything in the book of

life—not to mention all its chapters on military history—but feminist politics take precedence in the media culture. The 1992 finding by the Presidential Commission on Women in the Armed Forces that women should be kept out of air and ground combat was met with general disdain. The *New York Times*, for example, called the commission's report "a hash" and "unhelpful." When the Navy moved to put more women on ships the next year—the Clinton White House was then signing off on admirals' appointments—the *Times* applauded the Navy for "in effect junking the commission's work." Even the batty proposal by Adm. Jeremy Boorda, the new chief of naval operations, to put women on submarines met with its approval.

It was probably inevitable, then, that the Hultgreen story would be covered so poorly. The media culture was locked in place. Lieutenant Hultgreen died when she stalled one of the engines on her F-14A Tomcat fighter while she was trying to land on the USS *Abraham Lincoln*, and flew the plane into a spin. Her radar intercept officer was ejected safely from the rear seat, but as the plane rolled over she was ejected into the sea. Lieutenant Hultgreen was buried in Arlington National Cemetery in November after her body was recovered in some 3,600 feet of water, still strapped into the ejector seat. A month later the Navy succeeded in recovering the wreckage of the F-14A, and began to examine its two engines. Two months after that the Navy issued a report on the crash; it also gave the networks four seconds of video—taken by the camera mounted on the deck of the *Abraham Lincoln*—that showed the F-14A on its fatal approach to the carrier. The report said the crash "was precipitated by a malfunction of the left engine." It also said that while "a more

experienced pilot might have been able to save the plane . . . that reality is gender neutral." As proof, the Navy asserted that eight of nine pilots crashed when they faced "similar circumstances" in a flight simulator.

The finding was enthusiastically received. "So it was the engine after all. Not the pilot," the columnist Ellen Goodman triumphantly proclaimed. "Lieut. Kara Hultgreen did not die on the altar of political correctness or reverse discrimination." And to suggest that she had, as Jennings said, was "vicious," or, as his ABC colleague Jackie Judd said, "a smear." Meanwhile, Ted Koppel played media ethicist. He said some people had even insisted that the Navy had lifted its ban on women combat pilots because it was embarrassed by the Tailhook scandal (which, of course, was just what the Navy had done) but after Lieutenant Hultgreen died "it got worse than that." Apparently, anonymous critics had charged that the Navy had lowered its standards so that Lieutenant Hultgreen could become a combat pilot. Koppel said the charge had spread, and that now "we are left to wonder how the story got as much credence as it did in the first place."

In fact, the charge had never spread, and the media had never given it any credence. Koppel's real objection was the same as that of his colleagues: that the charge had even been raised. Shortly after Lieutenant Hultgreen died, the *New York Times* had alluded to "spurious accusations about her flight record . . . apparently from disgruntled male aviators." Then the columnist Georgie Anne Geyer wrote in the *Washington Times* that some pilots from "the old school sent anonymous faxes around impugning her qualifications." Otherwise, few had paid attention to the accusations, and those who did had dismissed them. The only place they had received any more

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than cursory mention was in San Diego, the home port of the *Abraham Lincoln*. "Nightline" reported that Roger Hedgecock, a San Diego talk-show host, had gotten an "anonymous seven-page fax, allegedly from a naval aviator," which said Lieutenant Hultgreen's grades were below average in flight school. Hedgecock read part of the fax: "And something is terribly wrong with the United States Navy today, and it ought to be fixed before it's too late. We owe it to Kara Hultgreen."

"Nightline" also said that Hedgecock had received a call from someone who claimed that Lieutenant Hultgreen's flight instructors had been ordered to pass her, "whatever her grades." He had gotten a call, too, from someone who said Lieutenant Hultgreen had received special treatment because she was a woman. "Nightline" replayed part of the call: "We have taken that minimum and changed it so that we can allow various people in there for social programs, including me."

But none of this seemed vicious, and surely Lieutenant Hultgreen was not being smeared. Indeed, as the anonymous author of the fax had insisted—and almost certainly he was a naval aviator, just as he had claimed—something was wrong in the Navy, and "we owe it to Kara Hultgreen" to fix it. Naval aviation is an exacting profession. Mistakes are punishable by death, and of all that is required of naval aviators, carrier landings are probably the most demanding. Was it possible Lieutenant Hultgreen had received insufficient training, or been placed aboard a carrier too soon? Many news organizations quoted statements by Lieutenant Hultgreen's mother, Mrs. Sally Spears, about her daughter's abilities: "She had some really good days and some really bad days. . . . But her total grade was slightly above average. . . . She wouldn't have been doing what she was doing unless she was very qualified."

Nonetheless, naval records show that Lieutenant Hultgreen failed the carrier-landing phase of her training in April 1994. She received a second chance in July, and passed. Thus, while her total grade may have indeed been slightly above average, her ability to land on the pitching deck of a carrier was somewhat below average. Naval historians may one day note that just after she failed her carrier-landing training, Admiral Boorda

announced that he wanted to open combat positions to women, and that he wanted to do it quickly. Then Lieutenant Hultgreen took the training again, and passed. Shortly afterwards she was assigned to the *Abraham Lincoln*.

The press, of course, has dismissed the idea that politics were at work here: but it is not realistic to think that Admiral Boorda's whimsies, or more importantly, those of Patricia Schroeder and her congressional allies, did not have some effect. The Navy is a bureaucracy, and bureaucracies, especially military bureaucracies, are run by osmosis. The attitude at the top seeps down, and the attitude implanted there by Tailhook was that Navy personnel would suffer if they appeared to mistreat women. Boozy leg-shaving and groping in Las Vegas, after all, had led to the resignations of a secretary of the Navy and a chief of naval operations; many other careers had been ruined, and thousands of Navy and Marine promotions had been put on hold. And for the most part, the media had cheered, considering this no more than just retribution.

But back now to Lieutenant Hultgreen, by all accounts a brave and indomitable woman, and just possibly a pilot who had been pushed too far and too fast as well. The four-second video of her crash that the Navy distributed to the networks was part of a 12-second video that it kept to itself. Nonetheless, copies of the longer video were passed around among present and former naval aviators. Many of them, it seems, were appalled by what they saw. The landing signal officer on the *Abraham Lincoln* had tried repeatedly to wave Lieutenant Hultgreen off as she approached the fantail of the carrier. At least seven seconds—a lifetime in naval aviation—passed by between the first wave-off call and the time her plane spun out of control, but she had made no apparent effort to "fly out of it." Carrier pilots are supposed to react instinctively in emergencies, their hands and feet moving automatically without conscious messages from the brain. But only the most demanding training can bring this about, and Lieutenant Hultgreen showed few signs of having received it. An unknowing press reported that a stalled left engine on the F-14A had led to the crash, but without noting that it stalled because Lieutenant Hultgreen mistaken-

ly had jammed on the rudder. The Navy keeps meticulous records on such matters. In the twenty years that F-14As have been in operation, no pilot had ever stalled an engine this way before.

Revelations like this spread quickly in the clannish world of naval aviation. Consequently, many junior officers knew their superiors were not being candid in their public comments about Lieutenant Hultgreen. They knew, too, that if they said this openly they would jeopardize their careers: hence, their anonymous calls and faxes. One former naval aviator, Gerald L. Atkinson, though, had raised the salient issue. "Of the thousands of field practice and carrier landings I have observed," he wrote, "Lieutenant Hultgreen's pass was the worst I have ever seen." Then Atkinson, who also has a doctorate in nuclear engineering, offered a technical analysis of what had gone wrong. He finished by saying: "It is my professional judgment that Lieut. Kara Hultgreen was not yet ready to fly the F-14A aboard ship as a combat fighter pilot. I can only conclude that the Navy allowed an inexperienced and unqualified pilot to be assigned to a fighter squadron because of political pressure to place females in combat billets as soon as possible."

Atkinson almost certainly was right. Two weeks after the Navy had released its public report on Lieutenant Hultgreen, it completed its own Mishap Investigation Report, or MIR. MIRs are never released to the press. They are kept confidential so that participants in an investigation will be protected from outside pressure. The Navy is serious about this, and the cover page of an MIR always warns that anyone who leaks or discloses its content is subject to criminal prosecution under the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Nonetheless, the MIR on Lieutenant Hultgreen's death was leaked to major news organizations, presumably by one or more junior officers distressed by the whole affair.

The major news organizations, however, barely noticed. The *Los Angeles Times* and *Newsweek* published stories that said the MIR contradicted the Navy's earlier statements on Lieutenant Hultgreen, but without presenting much detail. Only the *San Diego Union-Tribune* did anything useful. Robert J. Caldwell, a conscientious reporter, closely compared the Navy's public and private pronouncements, and



## Up From Subsidy

by David Frum

noted the great difference. Publicly, he wrote, the Navy attributed the crash of the F-14A mostly to engine failure; privately it was “sharply critical of Lieutenant Hultgreen.”

Subsequently, whoever leaked the MIR to the news organizations took another extraordinary step. Presumably disappointed that it had attracted so little attention in the press, he placed it on the computer network America Online. Subscribers who access the Military City Online text library may read it in its entirety. It is unlikely, though, that many reporters or correspondents will bother to do this. Given the parameters of the media culture, Caldwell seems to have the topic to himself.

When Vice Adm. Robert Spane, the commander of Pacific Fleet Naval Forces, appeared on “Nightline,” he asserted that nine pilots had replicated Lieutenant Hultgreen’s mishap on a flight simulator. And even though the pilots were told that the engine was going to fail, he said, eight of the pilots still crashed. Spane meant this as a defense of Lieutenant Hultgreen and her training; confronted with the same circumstances she had faced, only one of the nine pilots would have survived.

Recently, however, Caldwell uncovered three sources, “all reporting independently,” who charged that the simulator test “was configured to produce an almost automatic crash.” In other words, it was rigged. The Navy had ordered the simulator pilots not to use the emergency procedures they might have been expected to use if they had been in the same situation as Lieutenant Hultgreen. This was deceit of a high order, and Caldwell’s story ought to have been picked up by ABC, say, or the *Times*, but obviously that could not happen. If they had used the story, it might have been construed as an argument against putting women in combat.

So give Caldwell the last word now to explain to his media colleagues what they clearly do not understand: “Integrity, and the moral authority it conveys, is the very heart of any leadership, including that in the military. Without it, morale plummets, discipline suffers, and warriors lose faith in their superiors. That is why questions surrounding the Navy’s response to the death of one aviator last October off the coast of San Diego have grown so important.” □

Which matters more: friends or principles? This dilemma afflicts all political parties, but seldom does the wrong choice bristle with as much danger as it now does for the new congressional Republican majority.

On principle, of course, the Republicans champion free enterprise and smaller government. But all too many of their friends—agriculture and ranching interests, logging and mining companies, export-oriented manufacturers—have come to expect a helping hand from Uncle Sam. The Cato Institute’s Stephen Moore counts 125 federal programs that subsidize business at an annual cost of \$85 billion. And in his 1995 report “Cut and Invest,” Robert Shapiro of the liberal Progressive Policy Institute identifies \$131 billion in business subsidies that could be cut over the next five years, along with \$101 billion in highly targeted tax exemptions.

Such vast sums are big enough to do more than put a bulge in overall federal spending. As Shapiro points out, they also distort the American economy by attracting excessive investment to the most heavily subsidized industries: farming, energy production, and transportation. But the harm done by federal subsidies to business cannot be measured in dollars alone.

The massive repudiation of the Democrats last November should not automatically be interpreted as a declaration of confidence in the Republican Party. Newt Gingrich’s victory came only 24 months after the party’s presidential nominee collected a smaller proportion of the vote than any nominee since Alf Landon in 1936. While the word

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“conservative” elicits positive feelings in opinion surveys, pollster Frank Luntz reports, the word “Republican” still does not. The steady, high support for term limits—even after voters demonstrated they can toss out-of-touch incumbents out by themselves—suggests a continuing mistrust of the institution of Congress.

Elected officials warn that the voter wrath that immolated Tom Foley and his pals could easily turn against an out-of-touch Republican Party. What was rejected in November, Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) has argued, was not merely liberalism as an ideology—it was interest-group politics as a way of doing business. If that’s right, how the new Republican majority produces laws may be just as important as the actual content of those laws. Republicans’ willingness to disregard the immediate self-interest of their constituencies may matter as much to voters as the size of their tax cuts or the toughness of their crime bill.

Unfortunately, the Republicans have been sending some ominous signals that business in Washington is continuing as usual. The *Washington Post* in March reported one petty but obnoxious example: although the Republican welfare reform plan enacted by the House in March abolished federal benefits for immigrants under age 75, it made one exception—for temporary farm laborers. These workers will remain eligible for food stamps, Medicaid, and other benefits likely to lower the employment bills of large food producers. Nobody will say who inserted this provision into the act, but everyone understands how it got there and who profits from it.

Even more startling was the last-minute amendment of the Republicans’ “private-property protection act,” which defined any federal action to reduce the generosity of the subsidies to users of federal water projects as a compensable “taking” under the