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Hickam CO defends GI screening

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This week wasn't the first time the Air Force called in airmen en masse to interview and photograph them in search of a sex criminal, the Hickam AFB commander said yesterday. The system is "a good technique" which may be used again, he said.

The practice drew fire this week after some 120 black and Hispanic airmen were interviewed and 80 of them photographed by Hickam's Office of Special Investigation in connection with several sexual assault cases on the base this year.

When some black servicemen complained and news reporters started asking questions, Hickam vice commander Col. Thomas Reagan asked the OSI to stop its "field interviewing survey." (The OSI is not directly under the Hickam command.)

Yesterday, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the local chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union attacked the procedure.

The Air Force said the same procedure was used a year ago in connection with a rape investigation. That time, 200 "Hispanics, Filipinos and Polynesians" were summoned and photographed by the OSI, a spokesman said.

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There was no public outcry in that case, however. Despite the large scope of the survey, the case remains unsolved.

Hickam commander Col. Sharm Stevenson returned here from Washington Thursday night and spent yesterday meeting with black airmen and assuring them that the screening has been stopped. Stevenson, however, called the screening "a good technique" that has worked in the past on other bases.

"We would have done the same thing if it was a Caucasian suspect," Stevenson said. "But I can't erase the fact that the witnesses said it was a black male."

"The primary motive behind the survey was elimination of possible suspects," he said. "You've got to eliminate X number of people so you get down to the smallest number you can."

Stevenson said "I can't say we won't use it again." But he added, "I'm sure there's probably some other way we can go about this."

He did not rule out the possibility that the screening of blacks will resume in connection

with this investigation, but he said orders for resumption "would have to come from a pretty high level."

"I don't see where we should publicly apologize for the OSI," Stevenson said. "What they did was not wrong, although they could have used a little different approach — a briefing note here or there."

"No one was screened against his will," Stevenson said. But he admitted that the interviews were "not entirely voluntary."

"The OSI went to the unit commanders and NCOs in charge and gave them the description," he said. "Then the units told the people who matched the description to go to OSI."

Apparently all blacks and Hispanics under 40 were to be interviewed, although investigators had a far more specific description of a suspect available.

On a composite sketch that has been circulated on the base, the suspect is described as a black male 20 to 30 years old, about 5-foot-10, of slender build, clean-shaven with close-cropped hair and a pock-marked complexion.

People not fitting that description were interviewed and dismissed, the Air Force said.

One noncommissioned officer, however, told The Advertiser yesterday that he was photographed despite the fact that he is almost 40

years old, 6-foot-3, has a mustache and a clear complexion.

"I shouldn't even have been called in, much less photographed," said the 16-year Air Force veteran who asked that his name be withheld. "Why would they do this to someone who doesn't even look like the composite drawing?"

Another black NCO who was interviewed and photographed said "My first sergeant told me to see the OSI. When I got there, there were 20 or 30 people there, including some Mexican guys."

"They told us we were not suspects, that they were more or less following up and that they were looking for a guy about 5-9, 5-10, less than 30 — a black or dark Puerto-Rican. But why did they have these Mexican guys there?"

"A lot of the guys who went in didn't even fit the description, so they weren't photographed. I'm about 5-9, less than 30 and have no facial hair, so they photographed me."

"They had me put on a smock — they told us that was to hide the name tags — and took two photos."

The sergeant agreed with Stevenson that better communications might have prevented

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