A Writing Conduct Unbecoming “was a way of asserting that I was going to live,” says Shilts, who tested HIV positive in 1985.

Randy Shilts fought off AIDS to report on the bitter reality faced by gays in uniform

WRITER OF WRONGS

For a time, Randy Shilts gave in to despair. Last January he needed emergency surgery after his left lung collapsed—the first major health crisis in his eight-year battle with AIDS. He had been racing to complete his third book, but weeks after the operation Shilts was still languishing and staring at the walls, leading a doctor to predict that he would never leave the hospital alive.

The next day friends found the patient sitting up in bed, performing leg exercises to regain his strength. “It never crossed my mind that I might die,” he says. “When someone stood over me saying I was on the way out, it made my will to live kick in.”

Shilts, 41, has survived to see the publication of Conduct Unbecoming: Lesbians and Gays in the U.S. Military (St. Martin’s Press). Based on nearly 1,100 interviews with gay service personnel, the book details the ruthless methods the military uses to hunt down gays and expel them—destroying careers and, in some cases, lives. He also reports stories of beatings and suicides and graphically portrays the quiet fear gays in uni-
form experience day in and day out.

Conduct Unbecoming will likely add fuel to the already contentious debate between President Clinton and the Pentagon as the Senate conducts hearings on whether to overturn the military's ban on gays. The passionate public discussion surprises even Shilts, who began the book in 1988, following his searing history of the AIDS epidemic And the Band Played On (scheduled to air as an HBO movie featuring Richard Gere, Lily Tomlin and Steve Martin in September). "I honestly didn't feel people would be interested," he says. "My big concern was that nobody would care."

Sitting in the living room of his apartment near San Francisco's predominantly gay Castro District, Shilts is energetic, despite his obvious weight loss and the thin plastic oxygen tube in his nose. His eyes brighten and his hands slice the air as he talks about the 16,500 gay men and lesbians who have been expelled from the military—an effort he claims costs taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars every year. "You get the impression from the Senate hearings that gays are taken by the hand, shown the door and courteously told to seek employment elsewhere," he says. "That's not how it works."

In his book Shilts explains that although the ban was instituted in 1943 on the now discredited theory that homosexuality was a mental illness, the Pentagon still places a high priority on keeping the services straight. "An investigative agency will get a tip that someone is gay," says Shilts. "They'll take that person into a small room and tell them they have all the information they need to throw them in prison with hard labor if they don't confess." Shilts says another ploy commonly used against mothers suspected of being lesbians is to threaten to jail them and even have their children taken away. The goal, he maintains, is always the same—to get the accused to name other gays.

A typical tale in Shilts' book involves Dan Bell, 27, a former airman at Carswell Air Force base in Fort Worth. In 1989, during 10 days of questioning, Bell's superiors allegedly kept him
locked in a small closet for hours on end, forcing him to urinate in the corner. When Bell finally broke, he gave the names of six gay friends who had left the Air Force and agreed to be identified, hoping to throw off the investigators. But the plan backfired, setting off a chain of similar interrogations. By the time the probe was over, gay activists estimate, more than 40 active airmen were discharged. "These tactics aren't aberrations," says Shilts, "and they have only become more vicious."

Shilts says military protocol made his job easier. "It was wonderful because they're so bureaucratic. There are paper trails everywhere, so you can substantiate everything—and that's crucial," he explains. Service personnel "are always on time, if not early," for interviews, he says, and "if they said they were going to get you documents, they did."

Raised a political conservative in Aurora, Ill., Shilts, the son of a salesman of prefabricated housing and a housewife, was founder and president of his local chapter of Young Americans for Freedom. Then, at 20, after leaving conservative politics, he came out of the closet and later became head of the Eugene [Oreg.] Gay People's Alliance. Shilts says his transformation was typical of the

> "My work is very human driven," says Shilts (with Dash). "Politics are irrelevant unless connected to people's real lives."

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times. "I was influenced by the counterculture."

In 1975, Shilts went to work for The Advocate, a gay newspaper, in San Francisco. Six years later he was hired by The San Francisco Chronicle, becoming, he says, the first openly gay reporter at a major daily. His first book, in 1982, was The Mayor of Castro Street, a biography of Harvey Milk, the gay member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors who was murdered by former supervisor Dan White. In 1985, as he just finished typing the final page of his next book, And the Band Played On, Shilts learned he was HIV positive but kept his condition quiet until this year because he was afraid it might undermine his journalistic credibility. "To me it's no different than having high blood pressure or some other life-threatening illness," he says. "But in our culture AIDS has this melodramatic veneer to it. I didn't want to be a professional AIDS victim."

Shilts never set out to be a pariah in the gay community either—but that's what he became in the early years of covering the AIDS epidemic for the Chronicle. He was branded "a gay Uncle Tom" when he called for the closing of bathhouses and an end to gay promiscuity. "There was a time when he would walk down Castro Street and people would spit on him," says Ann Neuenschwander, Shilts' closest friend. "It hurt him a lot." Adds Shilts: "No one ever questioned the truth of what I wrote but just whether the dirty little secrets should be told to heterosexuals." For him, getting the facts out on AIDS was paramount. "It was hard on him, but he thought he was doing the right thing," says Neuenschwander.

Shilts is convinced President Clinton will find a way to lift the ban preventing gays from serving. "Politically, he almost has to," Shilts points out. "It won't be as apocalyptical to the military as the generals say it will. It took many years for people to get used to blacks and women in the military." Meantime, Shilts is getting on with his own life. Next month he and his companion, 23-year-old film studies student Barry Barbieri, plan to formalize their relationship in a commitment ceremony. Aside from walking their golden retriever, Dash, and planting rhododendrons at his rustic 10-acre spread in the redwoods north of San Francisco, Shilts is passionately committed to his work. He will rejoin the Chronicle as a weekly columnist in June and is now putting the finishing touches on a new chapter for the book—on the role of gays in the Persian Gulf War. It may be his last work on gay issues. "I think I've sort of said it all," he says. "But if I find a good story, I'll do it tomorrow."

DAVID ELLIS
JOHNNY DODD in San Francisco

"You can't be too serious about it," Shilts (with Barry Barbieri at their country home) says of AIDS. "You can't let it wreck your life."
Homosexuals in the military: The debate marches on