Professionally, Randy Shilts is on top of the world. When I went to interview him at his Diamond Heights apartment, in San Francisco, a television truck with a satellite dish was sitting at his curb. People are lined up these days to get his opinion on the topic of gays in the military, the subject of his most recent book, *Conduct Unbecoming: Gays and Lesbians in the U.S. Military*. As the first journalist hired to cover gay news for a mainstream newspaper – the *San Francisco Chronicle* – Shilts covered the gay movement from its inception. His history of the discovery, spread and treatment of AIDS, *And the Band Played On*, turned down by publisher after publisher, has now been translated into seven languages and was made into a movie for Home Box Office. In fact, all three of his books are filmed or being developed as movies. The first book, *The Mayor of Castro Street*, covered the life and murder of San...
Francisco's gay city supervisor Harvey Milk.

Shilts, 42, small, bearded, animated, wears a wedding ring (his companion of two years is a college student). He welcomed me to a room dominated by a large church painting of Saint Anthony of Padua. I asked him how, as a journalist, he had assembled all the records of gays in the military that cover a 40-year time span in Conduct Unbecoming.

Shilts: I thought, going into it, there were two problems I was going to have with this book — one, that nobody cared about the issue, that people would view it as a subheading of a subheading, not something important enough to read a whole book about, and my second fear was getting people to talk to me. Actually, though, both of them proved rather groundless. On the latter problem, I guess I was operating on my own stereotypes of military people, that they wouldn't want to rock the boat, that they wouldn't want to be named, they were more conservative, even people who are open. But it was actually very easy.

What I did was put little blurbs in gay papers around the country asking for military personnel, people who had served from Vietnam to the present. I got like 300 responses from the ad, and from that I just used friendship networks. Once you met one, then they would say, "Oh, I have a friend in Camp Lejeune," and then they would have a friend someplace else, so it was mainly just using friendship networks and then being willing to spend time, because all the interviews, minimally, took two, two and a half hours. You have to interview so many people before you find the people you want to focus on, and so you spend a lot of time with them, and what I always do is walk through a person's entire life. I start when they are kids, find out what their mom and dad did, because I think it is important where people come from and where they went to high school. So, very often it will be a few hours before we even get to their military experience, because people don't just appear in the military.

Wills: The effect of the interviewing is that a lot of people in the book start out not knowing each other, and then they get acquainted through their trials, through their lawyers. Had you expected to end up with that effect?

People sometimes say, "Have you ever thought about writing fiction?" and I always say I could not be as imaginative as the world is. What you get, you couldn't make up. One example was Tom Dooley and Lenny Maddowich both having the same lover. [Dooley was a Catholic doctor famous in the 1990s for his humanitarian work in Indochina — his best-selling book helped involve the U.S. in Vietnam. Maddow was one of the first Air Force personnel to challenge the ban on gays in the military.] There was this guy [Cliff Anchor] I had known for 5 years because he lived up at the Russian River, where I have another home. I knew that he had been very close to Maddowich, and then when I started doing the book, he pulled out all those files he had on Tom Dooley (who was secretly dismissed from the Navy for being gay). I mean, he had everything substantiated — totally, perfectly. That stuff, it just happens. Part of that, though, is always asking extra questions — always, because there are two ways you can be a journalist. You can ask enough to get enough information for a story or try to do more than enough, because it is always the little connections that come out in side comments. For example, with the Patient Zero story [the unnamed Air Canada steward who was identified as an early spreader of AIDS by the Centers for Disease Control], it was just a couple of people making side comments that let me piece it together (that Patient Zero was Gaetan Dugas). I had known there was a guy [with AIDS] knowingly having sex in the bathhouses, and I did a Chronicle story on that in November of '82, and I also knew that there was this study that had linked a lot of the early cases, but I didn't know that the person in that study was also the person who was having sex in the bathhouses. And it was only through people dropping comments that I was able to piece all that together.

How did you learn his thoughts, reported in the book? Did you ever talk to him? No, he was dead by the time I found out about him. But I was speaking in early '86 at an investigative reporters' conference at Vancouver, British Columbia, and on the panel on AIDS reporting, there was the head of the People with AIDS group in Vancouver, and when I mentioned to him that I was interested in finding friends of Gaetan's, this man's great counselor was Gaetan's best friend. So the next day I was sitting with him, and he is the guy in the opening scene of Babel, who was asked to dance with Gaetan. It was just luck that I had opened the book on that specific day, Gay Freedom Day 880, and he remembered what they were doing. He had a great big photo album with all kinds of pictures, he had flown with Gaetan, he was a flight attendant, too, so it was just totally serendipitous.

Some Catholics wanted to canonize Tom Dooley, an anti-communist praised by Cardinal Spellman.

Cliff Anchor had contacted me and gotten a letter from Ted Werner, who was Dooley's best friend and his pilot and who always wanted the story out and was always frustrated that he couldn't get it out. Here is a guy who was so good that they wanted to make him a saint, who did so much. There has been sort of a reawakening around Dooley, because people blame him in part for involvement in Vietnam; but he undeniably did a lot of good things for a lot of people and could even be in the category of being considered to be a saint, and it still doesn't make any difference, you are still rendered valueless as a human being by the military (if you are gay).

Did you have a religious upbringing?

No. When you are a northern Methodist, it is a very generic, non-denominational religion, so it never had much impact. My father was very conservative, he was in the John Birch Society. And in Aurora [Ill.], up to that point, there had not been a Democrat elected in Kane County since, I believe, since John C. Fremont ran for president in 1856. Everybody was Republican. When I got involved in politics, working on congressional campaigns and stuff by the time I was 12 or 13, all we were Republicans. I was very involved in the Young Americans for Freedom, and I formed a chapter in Aurora and was president of it and was Illinois' vice president. And then, like a lot of people when the war emerged — I graduated from high school in '69 — I was right at the age where they would draft you, so that really shifted a lot of my political ideas. But I have always felt it was great having been exposed to conserva-tives, I think people on both ends of the political spectrum tend to dehumanize the people on the other end, and they think that they are evil, they are monsters. Having been on both sides, they let me see that people tend to be motivated by sincere beliefs.

After I graduated high school, I went a semester to Aurora College, which was just four doors down from where I grew up, and I organized anti-war protests. Then I went to Oregon to be a hippie.
LIVE IT AND WRITE ABOUT IT IS TOO MUCH.

I had much more conflicts in my family over being a hippie than over being gay.

What was the sequence of their finding out? Well, the anti-war stuff I was doing was by late '69, so I was living at home at the time. We were just always fighting about it, the way everybody was back then. And then I didn't come out as a gay person until 1972, when I was 20, and I told my brothers right away, and they were fine. My oldest brother, who is still a lawyer in Aurora, responded by saying, "Well, every family should have one to talk about at cocktail parties." I waited another year before telling my parents. It is always very frightening, telling your parents. Even if you have had conflicts with them, you never want to be alienated from Mom and Dad. But they were actually very good about it. My dad, when I told him, he just said that he had known I was different since I was 8. That was that. And my mom was a little more certain about it. But I think the moment somebody said something bad about it, then she was my greatest defender.

A lot of your characters in both the books have trouble telling their mothers.

Oh, there is always this terror, largely unarticulated, that your parents will reject you, and very few parents really do reject their kids. You have a line in your Harvey Milk book where a man says, "It will kill her," and someone responds, "There would be a lot fewer loving mothers if that was the case." It is a great fear you have, but it is relatively rarely borne out. Sometimes parents will take six months or a year to adjust to it, but they always come around, especially mooms. Moms always come around on stuff like that.

You say you went to Oregon. Yeah, I went to Portland Community College for the first two years, because that was so much cheaper, and I had never been that good a high-school student, because I was just sort of interested in my thing. I was reading John Locke when I was 16 but not doing well in history, so I got a lot of Bs and Cs. I didn't have great grades to be alive, that you didn't have to live in fear and trepida-
tion all the time. And so that was real. We had all this idealism left over from being hippies, very essential to it was the idea that we can change the world and make the world a more just place. For the hippies that sort of faded out, but the gay thing was a new cause we could apply that idealism to. In '80 the TV show got canceled, and nobody would hire me, because nobody had ever hired an openly gay reporter before, even in San Francisco. I couldn't get a job, so my last-ditch stand for being a reporter was doing the Milk book.

Right around that time — I don't know if I should admit this — I read Hawaii, by James Michener, and that gave me the concept of doing books where you take people and have them represent sort of different forces in history and different social groups. I realized that is how I could do The Mayor of Castro Street, with a cast of characters who represented different elements of the community, and then just weave their stories together the way that Michener does. I went on unemployment and wrote The Mayor of Castro Street, and then the Chronicle hired me right away.

I was hired in early August, Aug. 4, I think, of '81, which was about two months after the first notification that AIDS was starting to happen. It was after the first six cases had been announced, which was in June, the first week in June of '81. Marc Conant, who plays a role in Band, who discovered AIDS in San Francisco, actual-
ly had a letter I wrote two weeks before, Aug. 4, I think of '81, saying I was interested in writing a book about AIDS. I don't in the slightest remember writing this letter, but it was something that was there almost from the day that I entered the Chronicle. I didn't write that much about it at first. My first story was in April of '82, and at that point there were 330 cases in the whole country, and it was called GRID, Gay-Related Immune Deficiency. There were 330 cases nationally, I think maybe 30 or 40 cases in San Francisco, so I didn't really perceive what it was going to become at that point. There was a lot of gay opposition to your writing about things like closing the bathhouses.

At first, I just felt it was something you had to write about. How can you write about this sort of fire going on and not write about the people who were throwing gas on it? I didn't think the bathhouses would be closed, but I felt it was something you had to write about in the context of this epidemic. But back then, the whole gay community stand was "Should we even discuss whether to close the bathhouses?" I never felt I was an [any] . I never felt I was an [any] . I never felt I was an [any] .
SHLTS

[Cont. from 49] when I became the sexual fascist, the Uncle Tom. And then my drinking was accelerated because of all the criticisms I got within the community, over the bathroom thing. The day that [gay psychotherapist] Gary Walsh died, Feb. 21, 1984 — he was the first person I knew well who died — I went out and had six double Jack Dan¬nells's back-to-back during a dinner break, when I was working a swing shift. That just terrified me, because I realized that if I had worked so hard, and it was a struggle to get to the point where I could be at the Chronicle, be at a major newspaper, and I was just going to throw it away for this cheap high. And so that is the last time I had a drink, which would have been nine years ago.

Did you do that on your own? No, I did it with the help of support groups. I think it is very difficult to do on your own. Like a lot of people in the Beatles generation, I smoked a lot of marijuana, too, and I didn't drop that for another year after that. There is that sort of lie that marijuana is not addicting, and it is a terribly addicting drug, and it is not good for you. It clouds your perceptions. So I quit that in 1983, and my writing ability made a quantum leap forward. You just have so much more clarity when you are not using that drug. So now I don't use anything.

Then you went on to do the AIDS book ['Bend']? That book was done out of frustra¬tion. Here I had been writing stories about the government problems, the blood banks, the government funding, since '83, and we would put it on Page 1 of the Chronicle, and nobody else in the country would cover it. The stories were stopping at the Chronicle, so the political aspects of this disease remained largely uncovered. I was so frustrated by '84 — and '85 especially — I felt this information wasn't going to get out. Writing a book was the way to get over the heads of the New York Times and the other papers that weren't covering this issue, in terms of the political com¬ponents of it. There was an epigraph I used at the end of it from Hermann Hesse, The Journey to the East, that summed up exactly how I felt when I was doing this book — that I would have gone crazy if I had not done it. I had such a clear vision of what had gone wrong in the early years of the epidemic, one shared by hardly anyone, except the very people who were involved in it.

So many things went wrong. And very few people were in a posi¬tion to know it. People in virology knew what was going wrong in terms of viro¬logical reasons. People in the blood banks, who cared about the issue, could see what was going wrong, but nobody else was in a position of seeing all the dif¬ferent pieces together, because nobody else cared. I talked as much as I could.

Did you have trouble finding a publisher? Oh, that was terrible. Nobody was interested at the beginning. Nobody thought a book about AIDS and poli¬tics would have any market. They felt that you would only get a book out of AIDS when you had a cure or if you had a doctor write it. My editor at St. Martins, Michael Dennis, had done Mayor of Castro Street, and he was com¬mitted to doing this. He is gay, and he thought it important. But nobody else at St. Martins was, and they turned it down at first. Well, every other publisher turned it down, too.

How many? Oh, at least 15 or 16. But finally Den¬niss was able to persuade the president of the company to override himself, basically, and so I got a $20,000 advance, which really helped the phone bills. Here is how you knew when you were in trouble: The Chronicle was great. They created a sort of night shift, so I worked at night as city editor and sometimes as a night editor, and then would work in the mornings and afternoons on the book. Then I took all my vacation time to do trips. Knowing what I do now about what my health status probably was, then, I think I lost quite a few T-cells doing that book.

Did you learn you were HIV positive after finishing the book? Yes. The test became widely available for personal testing in '86, and I always felt it had medical use, so I wanted my doctor to have that information if he wanted it. But at that time, I was right in the middle of writing Band. It was very depressing. I was interviewing lots of people who were going to die, people I liked. I didn't really expect I would be HIV positive, I was sort of surprised when that happened. I mean, within parameters: You're gay in San Fran¬cisco, you can't be terribly surprised to be HIV positive.

Were you surprised because you had prac¬ticed safe sex? Yeah, since '82. I was one of the first people I knew who changed. I got my first infection in August of '82, and some studies have shown about 11.6 years [lag after incurring the virus], which would have been in the same time period, which means that a year or two before I changed. William F. Buckley wrote a nude column saying that the fact that I knew so much about AIDS and now have it indicates that I had compulsions that were alien to com¬mon sense. But people getting diag¬nosed today are still likely to have gotten the virus before anybody knew that AIDS was going to be a threat or even that it existed. Anyway, I felt my doctor should have this information, so I said, "You can test me if you want to, but only tell me if it is good news." Then I promptly forgot telling him that I had this. This gets psychologically compli¬cated. I think in the day that I fin¬ished Band, which was, I think, March 16, 1987, I had finished writing the text of the book, not the epilogue, and I had a previously scheduled doctor's appoint¬ment, so I went in and said, "OK, now I am done, you can test me now." I had been afraid that if I knew I was positive that it would influence the book in a way that might make me unfit. I don't think now that would have been the case, but that was my fear. So I told him, "OK, you can test me now." And then he told me that he already had.

Then I made the decision to be pri¬vate about it. I told the Chronicle right away, and they were great. I knew I would want a reduced shift. But when I told people I didn't know as well, who weren't my best friends, you always got this sort of very shocked, melodramatic response. It ended up being very de¬pressing, people would write to you, it would be, "Oh, how are you feel¬ing?" All these questions that are basic¬ally "Have you died yet?" The other thing is, I didn't want to become an AIDS poster boy. I didn't want to be doing interviews on TV about sub¬stantive issues and then have it over¬shadow the AIDS issues. So I kept a lot of personal questions about me. I still don't think I am that interest¬ing, you know, as opposed to the infor¬mation I have.

What made you finally announce? Well, I almost died. It was clear Clin¬ton was going to get elected by about October, and he had said ages ago, he said back in '81, that he would change the policy [on gays in the military], and that we had to put a lot more deadline pres¬sure on getting Conduct Done. I was working 14, 16 hours a day. In August last year, for example, I got pneumonia again in December, and that was in the last two or three weeks of writing the book. I had written 81 of what was supposed to be 84 chapters. We ended up condensing some, but I was just right at the end. I was just pushing myself too hard, working these insane days, only took two days off when I got pneumonia and again for four days last year. So that I got pneumonia again in December, and that was in the last two or three weeks of writing the book. I had written 81 of what was supposed to be 84 chapters. We ended up condensing some, but I was just right at the end. I was just pushing myself too hard, working these insane days, only took two days off when I got pneumonia and again for four days last year. So that I got pneumonia again in December, and that was in the last two or three weeks of writing the book. I had written 81 of what was supposed to be 84 chapters.

After I had been out of the hospital for about six, seven weeks, there were a lot of rumors, because a large number of us didn't get a cancel¬lation. My lung collapsed — they cut you open, staple it back together again, and then sort of glue it to the inside of your chest. And so my breathing problems now are almost entirely related to having had open-chest surgery. And so they are supposed to get better. They are worried that the other one might collapse, so this one is all glued into place.

What is your next project? I don't know yet. I am going to do a column for the Chronicle on national affairs. I promised myself I would write a column. Basically, what I will be looking for is a social issue that needs to be covered. I have always tried to write about things that would not get written about. I never had a chance.

I need a fifth Elizabeth Taylor biography. I am sure that something will emerge, the Lord provides these things. It certainly is not going to be on AIDS. To live it and to write about it is just too much. And probably not on gay issues, either.

How you avoided being an advocate rather than a journalist I never thought of much of a problem. I don't think anybody is really objective, you know, and I can't claim to be ob¬jective, but I think you can be fair and tell both sides of the story, no matter who you are or what you are writing about. I feel strongly that gay people should be accepted, but I always felt it was my job to be responsible. I never wanted to come across as being an activist when you become a journalist, because it is like public officials — you don't want to create the appearance of impropriety. I have never belonged to any gay groups or donated money to them.

What do you think of President Clinton's compromises on gays in the military? Well, I think the bottom line is that it is going to alienate people from the politi¬cal process. You want people involved in the process, and I think when a presi¬dent goes back on a black-and-white promise like this, that it will just keep pushing people out of the process.

Are you discouraged by that? If you look at the short term, yes. But the gay issue has really less to do with discrimination, or even prejudice, than with a taboo, that we have had this taboo for centuries within our culture saying that is wrong, and it is not you.
people. So I did an article on national myself. I would take
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can't even talk about it. The silence is
what keeps taboo. What the gay move-
ment is basically about is breaking this
 taboo. Every time you have a debate, it
weakens the taboo. People are talking
about it, and it is not this horrible and
dark subject that decent people don't
even discuss. And so I think that you
have to look at this in terms of decades
of social change rather than years. In the
short term, things won't change, at times
it is going to look like it is worse off,
because now that you have an assertive
gay community, you are having much
more backlash.

I don't think it is creating new prej-
dices, it is just that people who have had
prejudice for all these years, they always
ran the show, so they never had to or-
ganine. Their attitudes were the attitudes of
the mainstream culture. Now that there
is more conflict, you are going to see
them much more outspoken. They are
going to win some of the fights. But I
don't think it means that the gay side is
losing so much as it is important
enough now to have a fight about.

I remember when I grew up, in
Aurora, I never heard the word homo-
sexual until I was 18 years old, in 1969
it was. My favorite sociology teacher,
who I just adored, said one day some-
thing that was terribly liberal in that
part of the country, that maybe homo-
sexuals aren't criminal, maybe they are just sick.
To have this teacher, who I
just thought was the greatest thing, to
have her say that was so crushing.
And that was the only context I had
ever heard homosexuality discussed in,
other than locker-room talk about
queers. Now kids are growing up who
hear gay issues discussed every day,
usually in the context of civil rights.
That is going to have such a deep
impact on their ability to accept them-
selves, to get involved in politics and
change things. I have seen a tremen-
dous change in those 20 years, and I
think that we will see that more accel-
erated. But it is going to take a long
time. The political institutions change.
I think, you know, that is where
you will see the change last.
And the military?
In the 50th century, there were con-
gressional hearings to pass a law to ban
whipping in the Navy, and you had all
the same cast of characters, the admiral-
s and the secretary of the Navy went
before the Senate and said: "No, this
will destroy good order, discipline and
morale. We have surveys of enlisted
personnel saying that they favor public
flogging." You know, the dire predic-
tions — if they made it so you couldn't
flag people, it would just destroy the
Navy. Every time there has been a
change, they have always resisted it.
The military is an institution that is al-
most mystically bound up in the idea of
tradition. And then they change, and
everything is fine.

— Alan King

Pilot Pen delivers a great line

AIDS is nothing to laugh about.
That's why Pilot Pen donates a
portion of each sale to AmFAR.