The Ship That Dare Not Speak Its Name

Donahue Show, negotiations with a well-dressed Beverly Hills entertainment lawyer on the book and movie rights to their story, and star-studded fundraisers hosted by the likes of Ed Asner and Norman Lear.

The U.S.S. Norton Sound should be the ship that dare not speak its name. Instead, it's the ship that won't shut up—the stories that are beginning to emerge paint a startling portrait of how the United States military enforces its ban on homosexuality. Among the charges stemming from last month's trials:

- The Naval Investigative Service ferret out suspected gays—and she is now planning an unprecedented civil suit against NIS agents in hopes of ending the tactics. "The only thing that makes the Norton Sound case different from others is that the women went public," says McGreivy, the daughter of a former U.S.S. Coral Sea commander who booted over 100 sailors off his ship for homosexuality. "This time the public got a chance to see how the Navy routinely conducts its witchhunts."

Observant officers must have noted she vanished into the fog banks off the coast of Washington state, a probable suicide. By Spring, four women sailors had accused a petty officer of sexual harassment; he was found guilty and discharged.

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Women have told McGreivy that the Navy routinely threatened them with court-martial for withholding evidence.

Significantly enough, the witnesses who did ultimately testify were often vulnerable to prosecution themselves. Three of the five major witnesses had been accused of lesbian activity, though they mysteriously escaped prosecution. A male witness, testifying under cross-examination, claimed that he had had an adulterous relationship with one of the very women he accused of lesbian activity. Adultery is grounds...
By Randy Shilts

The young sailor pulls her yellow Datsun pickup to the end of the dock where the U.S.S. Norton Sound is snuggled against its berth. "There she is," the yeoman chuckles, "Love Boat."

Blond, 23-year-old Barbara Lee Underwood is known as Puppy to her friends, a nickname suited to her teenage playfulness and her scrappy giggle. "Sort of a neat-looking ship, isn't it," she enthuses. "Right there is the fantail. That's where we had the Captain's call and he announced..." Puppy pauses to bring her voice into a deep, mock-serious tone, "...the investigation into the homosexual problem in the female berthing area."

The investigation about which Underwood so casually jokes ultimately turned into the most publicized attempt to stage a mass purge of gays in recent military history. No fewer than 24 of the ship's 61 women were accused of being lesbians. By the time four of them went before their discharge hearings last month, newspapers around the world were calling the U.S.S. Norton Sound the navy's "floating soap opera," a "just boat." As in most discharge proceedings, there was disgrace and humiliation; unlike most hearings, however, much of the disgrace seems to have been accruing by the navy.

What does Puppy Underwood think about having her sex life made into front-page news during the internationally publicized Norton Sound lesbian trials? "I guess it'll always give me something to talk about. The hearings were living hell," she says, but once she weighs in the dozens of press conferences, rallies, fund-raisers and new friends, she concludes, "It was a lot of fun..."

Difficult days clearly lie ahead for the United States military establishment which long has viewed homosexuality as only slightly less offensive than matricide. Back in the good old days, the mere accusation of homosexuality was enough to prompt immediate resignation. For the fiesty women of the Norton Sound, however, the celebrated lesbian trials have meant appearances on the Phil Donahue Show, negotiations with a well-dressed Beverly Hills entertainment lawyer on the book and movie rights to their story, and star-studded fund-raisers hosted by the likes of Ed Asner and Norman Lear.

The U.S.S. Norton Sound should be the ship that dare not speak its name. Instead, it's the ship that won't shut up—the stories that are beginning to emerge paint a startling portrait of how the United States military enforces its ban on homosexuality. Among the charges stemming from last month's trials:

- The Naval Investigative Service threatened sailors with court martial and demotion if they did not produce testimony against the investigation's targets.

- When threats and intimidation were not enough, the NIS fabricated statements against the accused homosexuals to the extent that nearly half of the witnesses who formed the basis of the Navy case now say that the NIS distorted or falsified some of their testimony.

The Port Hueneme NIS office refuses to answer any questions concerning the charges, forwarding requests for comments to the Chief of Naval Information in Washington. The Norton Sound command also refuses to comment on any aspect of the case as it has done throughout the entire affair—referring reporters to Commander of the Naval Surface Forces of the U.S. Pacific Fleet in San Diego (COMMSURFAC). This office, however, also forwards information requests to Washington, which has maintained throughout the

The investigation of the U.S.S. Norton Sound turned into the most publicized atter purge gays from the military in recent history. Twenty-four of the ship's 61 women were accused of lesbianism. But charges against women have led to charges against the ship and how it enforces its ban on homosexuality.

proceedings that it was unable to comment on the case. Finally, on Monday evening, the office of the Chief of Naval Information issued the following response to the charges of NIS threats and falsification of evidence: "The Navy has evaluated the claims and believes they do not require any additional investigation."

Yet, ACLU attorney Susan McGeary, who represented the Norton Sound women, says the Navy has reason to be nervous about the allegations. She says that intimidation and falsification of evidence are standard tools used by the military to ferret out suspected gays—and she is now planning an unprecedented civil suit against NIS agents in hopes of ending the tactics. "The only thing that makes the Norton Sound case different from others is that the women went public," says McGeary, the daughter of a former U.S.S. Coral Sea commander who quit over 100 sailors' off his ship on homosexuality. "This time the public got a chance to see the 'Navy routinely conducts its witchhunts.'"

Observe officers must have noted that a definitely New steam last June when the executive officer assembled some homosexuals to hand out charging them with a NAVINST 1900, which the Navy. Rather than find sober sailors eager for me was greeted by a rowdy off-duty singing that they would Q's on their foreheads so they confuse them with allegories. The women were courteously arranged their seats so they were never charged with cavorting. Their was written, "Free the Navy. By then, the women had written their own message: the H.S. 19-19.

But the humor belies a problem that has plagued the testing vessel since last year...
Rear Admiral Paul Lautermilch launched an inquiry into the ship's command in April, and the following month Kenney's congressman, U.S. Rep. Robert Dornan—a key defense supporter on Capitol Hill and a likely member of the House Armed Services Committee next year—threatened the Navy with a Congressional investigation of the ship.

An outspoken opponent of the ERA and gay rights, Rep. Dornan (R-Santa Monica) may not have confined his interest in the Norton Sound to his constituent's stabbing. ACLU lawyers say Dornan also pushed the Navy to investigate homosexual activity on the ship. Dornan's office denies this, but the Navy has pointedly refused to answer lawyers' queries on the issue, saying the matter is classified.

Getting evidence on the serious charges of arson, violence, loan sharking and drug dealing proved a tough task for the NIS; to this day, no charges have been lodged against anyone for these crimes. But morale problems certainly existed on the ship, and the NIS did not come away from the investigation empty-handed.

"At first it was just whispers," recalls ENFA Alicia Harris, considered a model sailor until the probe started. "People would say that the NIS had called them in, asked a few questions about the Dirty Dozen—and then started asking about homosexuality."

Soon NIS agents were calling in dozens of Norton Sound women to accumulate evidence about alleged lesbian activity. The litany of NIS tactics—documented by testimony and statements gathered by McGreivy—Makes Kafka's Trial look like an even-handed criminal justice manual penned by William O. Douglas.

The NIS opened interviews by presenting women with a list of all females on the ship, and asking that they place a check by the name of anyone who might be a lesbian. If the women refused, the NIS could be more persuasive. "He [the NIS agent] told me that if I didn't tell him what I wanted to know I would be labeled gay with the rest of the gay women," witness Joyce Arnold later wrote. "He told me that my leave could be held up if I knew stuff and wouldn't tell him." Other women have told McGreivy that the NIS routinely threatened them with court martial for withholding evidence.

Significantly enough, the witnesses who did ultimately testify were often vulnerable to prosecution themselves. Three of the five major witnesses had been accused of lesbian activity, though they mysteriously escaped prosecution. A male witness, testified under cross-examination that he had had an adulterous relationship with one of the very women he accused of lesbian activity. Adultery is grounds for
... decided against pushing for a classical gay-rights defense—which would have challenged the mandatory exclusion of gays from the military—and built a case based on the lack of Naval evidence and privacy arguments. (To this day, none of the Norton Sound 8 will discuss their sexual orientation, maintaining to the press, as they did to the Navy, that it's nobody's business but their own.) Still, since administrative discharge hearings have no evidentiary rules—allowing the prosecution to admit hearsay, innuendo and unworn testimony as evidence—McGreivy thought she would lose six or seven of the eight cases.

The Navy did all it could to frustrate the defense team's efforts. Neither the defendants nor the witnesses were readily available for the defense lawyers' interviews. And the Navy refused to put attorneys in contact with the NIS agents who conducted the investigation, saying that since the agents were civilians, they did not fall under military control.

The Norton Sound crew didn't make things any easier for the eight accused.

Composition
Alicia Harris and Wendi Williams, recommended for discharge, are appealing the decision in federal court.

honorable discharges if they resigned immediately. Says McGreivy, "The statements were obviously given the kids in hopes they would be terrorized and resign."

When they didn't, the NIS began applying heavier pressure to the accused women. Tangela Gaskins, the first woman to be tried on lesbian charges, says the NIS asked her questions like, "Did I eat Underwood? Did she eat me? Did I buy dildoes and other tools of the trade?"

When an NIS agent was searching the fashion-conscious Gaskins' locker and found a copy of Vogue magazine, he asked Gaskins, "Do you get off on looking at their bodies or at their faces?"

After this round of interrogations, the ship's command reduced the number of accused women from 24 to 19—"We'd be homos one day and not the next," says Williams wryly—and told the "H.S. 19" that they would be discharged for "unsuitability for the Navy." Would they get hearings? No, the executive officer said. Would they discover who had accused them of homosexuality? No, nor would the women be told details of the charges. Of course, the officer reminded them, they could still avoid discharge if they resigned.

Accused gays tend not to give mass resignations anymore; they give press conferences. Within days of the meeting with the executive officer, the Norton Sound command turned off their television set to see all 19 accused women standing defiantly.

azine significant proof of her alleged lesbianism. Another wrote, "Gaskins likes to use endearing terms when she's talking to other women, especially the gays."

Overtones of racism tinged the investigation, highlighted by the fact that the only black woman to escape lesbian charges was a prime witness for the prosecution. "The black gays flaunt their size and authority over the other females on the ship," wrote one important witness who named all the black female sailors among the 22 women she said was lesbian.

Moreover, the Norton Sound officers who seemed keenest on pursuing the investigation were widely known to be opposed to having women on ships. "A lot of officers saw this as a way to stop the Woman At Sea program," says Underwood. One prosecution witness even went on CBS network television to state his opposition to the program. Beyond this, many women found it improbable that the NIS could conduct any serious investigation of homosexuality and come up only with female suspects.

The turning point for McGreivy came when she interviewed the dozen women who gave statements to the NIS. "I really began to see the weakness of the Navy's case when I started talking to the witnesses—only to find that the NIS had simply falsified the information," she says. "It was incredible." The NIS office has rebuffed all attempts to procure a response to McGreivy's charges.

women. Pornographic photographs of women in lesbian acts mysteriously appeared in the sailors' lockers and drawers. Spray-painted graffiti branded the women's sleeping quarters the "Dykes' Den" and the mess hall the "Dykes' Diner." Defendant Sharris Heusser was greeted by large graffiti in a ship corridor announcing "Heusser Eats Puss."

As the pressure mounted, Alicia Harris refused to follow her normal regimen of working mess at the 5:30 AM shift—so the Navy sent the teenager to a federal prison where she was fed only bread and water for three days.

Fortunately for the women, however, they quickly found that they were less pariahs than celebrities in the outside world. Brock accepted an invitation to be the Grand Marshal of the San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Parade where an estimated 250,000 cheered her cause. The sailors' schedules began to include not only mess and muster, but guest spots on Phil Donahue and the Today show, and late-night appearances at chic Los Angeles gay discos where they hosted fund-raisers alongside socially-conscious Hollywood stars.

In a desperate move to thwart press coverage of the hearings, the Navy said it would permit only three reporters to cover the trials. The reporters promptly formed a pool to insure coverage, so midway through the hearings, Commander Seeber ruled that prosecution witnesses could bar the press from the courtroom. Over de-
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At the end of the four-day hearing, the board voted to retain Underwood. "I think at this point, the Navy probably would have loved to drop the hearings," engineerman Carol Brock speculates, "but by then, the trials had gotten so much publicity, they had to get somebody."

The administrative boards took up the cases of Bronx-bred Wendi Williams and young Alicia Harris. As in the other hearings, some of the "evidence" against them consisted of witnesses who had heard rumors that they were gay. But there was a difference—three witnesses claimed to have seen the pair "touching and caressing" each other in a public area of the ship in the middle of the day.

Both Harris and Williams denied the story. "You'd have to be the world's biggest fool to lie around in front of everybody in broad daylight and do that," complains Williams. "If I did it, I should be dishonored—not for misconduct but for stupidity."

But unlike Gaskins and Underwood, these two defendants did not produce men who would testify that either had heterosexual relations. Even worse, Harris had been on board the ship only seven weeks before the investigations began, so her lawyers could not provide substantive character witnesses. "I think that if those charges had been made against sailors with blond hair and blue eyes, they never would have gone anywhere," says McGreivy. "But people would believe it about Wendi and Alicia because blacks are supposed to be stupid and oversized."

Both women were recommended for discharge. With the spectre of homosexuality thus excised, Commander Seebring quickly dropped the charges against the remaining four women "for lack of sufficient evidence." The affair had all but paralyzed one of the Navy's most important missile testing ships for four months and produced only two convictions—both of which will be appealed in federal court—and, of course, a lot of bad publicity for the Navy.

It used to be easier for the military. Gay veterans remember times in the 1940s and 1950s when a single purge could force as many as 250 men silently to resign—on evidence far less substantial than even that presented in the Norton Sound case. Suicides were not uncommon among men and women who wanted to evade the disgrace inherent in such discharges.

The military maintains that its anti-gay policies will stick. "The Navy is not looking into changing its policy at present," says Lt. Mike Thurwanger of the Navy's public affairs office. True to its word, the Navy is now circulating a check-off list of suspected gays at the Great Lakes naval base in Chicago, according to Norton Sound defendants.

But many in the military establishment now privately say the anti-gay stance is an idea whose time has passed. Increasingly, the courts are taking a dim view of the mandatory exclusion of gays. The Norton Sound trials were only weeks old when a federal court judge in Washington ruled that former Air Force Sgt. Leonard Matlovich should be reinstated, as the Air Force had never persuasively shown that gays represent a prima facie threat to the military.

The Norton Sound case could drive a wedge further into military policies, not on constitutional grounds but through a civil suit McGreivy plans to file against the individual NIS agents for falsification of evidence and malicious prosecution. McGreivy has already amassed substantial evidence, leaving the agents to plead either that their tactics represent Navy policy or that it's not policy and they're personally liable.

"If we can stop these kind of standard NIS tactics, we can reduce the number of gay discharges to an infinitesimal fraction of what they are today," says McGreivy. "These days, the only way the military can get evidence against gays is through threats, intimidation and hearsay."

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But the coup de grace for the military's ban on gays will ultimately come more from the times than the courts. The dissonance between military policies and social realities can only create more embarrassment in the future. After all, the purpose of discharge hearings is not to make celebrities and heroes of the accused, or mental patients of the accusers. By the end of the hearings, four of the five prosecution witnesses were in mental hospitals.

The anomalies are not lost on the women in the case. "It used to be the other way around," says Carol Brock, who plans to move to San Francisco and form a group to help gay veterans when she leaves the Navy in October. "Their witnesses were the ones who ended up in psych wards, refusing to testify, and getting transferred off the ship—with the Navy dying to keep the whole thing quiet. We were the ones in control."

Editor’s note: Randy Shilts is a San Francisco-based free-lance television reporter who currently is writing a biography of the slain gay San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk for St. Martin's Press.

OTHER MOVIES
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Filler Bulletin Board

PHYLIS:
You were a beautiful blonde from the Philippines—now living in Philadelphia—and you told me you loved filler. Did you mean it, Phyllis? Meet me at the Philharmonic and we’ll talk some more. H.

I have what doctors call a filler fixation. You?
555-1213

Handsome young filler artist would like to meet others in the filler field and party it up someplace. 555-1213

—Hugo Flesch