GAYS AND THE MILITARY
How Far Will Clinton Go?
What's Fair in Love and War

A chronicler of the gay-rights movement argues that the military actually eases up on its anti-homosexual rules when it needs people to fight

By Randy Shilts

On the first night of the Scud missile attacks on American troops in the Persian Gulf, an army specialist fourth class with the 27th Field Artillery found himself cramped in a foxhole with three other men. Like many young enlisted men, the specialist (who asked that his name not be used) had previously confided to the other men, his friends, that he was gay.

During that night in the foxhole, they huddled together in their suffering quite meant to protect them from chemical and biological warfare agents. They could not see one another, but to reassure themselves that they were still there, still alive, each man kept one hand on the other. Nobody seemed to mind that one reassuring hand belonged to a homosexual, the soldier recalls—there were more important things to think about.

Defense Department policy contends that the purpose of excluding gays from the armed forces is to preserve the "good order, discipline and morale" of the military, because no heterosexual soldier would want to serve with, take orders from or share a foxhole with a homosexual. America's experience in its past three wars suggests otherwise. The behavior of military officials in accepting gays during these wars also suggests that the generals themselves know their arguments are fallacious. At no time is good order, discipline and morale more crucial for a fighting unit than in time of combat; at no time have the military's regulations against gays been more broadly ignored than in periods when troops were sent out to fight.

President Clinton's intention of integrating acknowledged lesbians and gay men into the armed forces has raised a great cry from opponents of reform, most of whom question how soldiers will respond to sharing a foxhole with a gay soldier. These arguments belie the fact that gay soldiers have served in U.S. military foxholes since the days of Valley Forge, some openly.

From the first days of the Defense Department's anti-gay regulations in the early 1940s, the government was willing to waive the for-heterosexuals-only requirement for military service if barring gays interfered with manpower exigencies. In 1945, just two years after the regulation was adopted, and during the height of the final European offensive against the Third Reich, Secretary of War Henry Stimson ordered a review of all gay discharges in the previous two years, with an eye toward reprinting gay men who had not committed any in-service homosexual acts. At the same time, orders went out to "salvage" homosexuals for the service whenever possible.

The Korean War saw a dramatic plunge in gay-related discharges. In the late 1940s, the navy meted out 1,100 undesirable discharges a year to gay sailors. In 1950, at the height of the Korean War, that number was down to 483. But in 1953, when the armistice was signed at Panmunjom, the navy cracked down again with vigor, distributing 1,353 gay-related undesirable discharges in that year alone.

The Vietnam War provides some of the most striking examples of the military's tacit acceptance of homosexuality in times of war. When Air Force Sgt. Roberto Reyes-Colon was seen leaving his base near the demilitarized zone with his Marine corps boy¬friend, military police brought him before his commanding officer the next day. The commander listened to the MPs complain that they had seen Reyes-Colon kiss the Marine, but once they left the room, the commanding officer ripped up the report they had written on the incident. Reyes-Colon's defense was that "there's a war going on," and the officer agreed.

Marine Corps Lt. Ben Dillingham, assigned to lead a reconnaissance platoon in Vietnam in 1970, was surprised to discover that two of his enlisted men were lovers, inseparable, patrolling together, even sleeping together under the same blanket. All the other soldiers in the tightly knit platoon were aware of the relationship, and no one cared. It seemed to Dillingham that with a war going on, and everyone's life depending on the others, no one had time to quibble about gay soldiers.

Discharges for homosexuality still occurred, but Pentagon statistics themselves bear out that the armed forces became strangely uninterested in enforcing their regulations against homosexuals during this period. Between 1963 and 1966, the navy, which at the time was the only branch of the military to keep detailed statistics of gay discharges, "separated" between 1,600 and 1,700 enlisted members a year for homosexuality. From 1966 to 1967, as the Vietnam buildup began in earnest, the number of gay discharges dropped from 1,708 to 1,094. In 1969, at the peak of the escalation, gay discharges dropped to 643. A year later, only 461 sailors were relieved of duty for being gay.

These dramatic reductions occurred during a period of some of the service's highest membership since World War II. It was not that there were any fewer gays in the navy; by all appearances there were many more. But the navy had effectively stopped enforcing regulations against homosexuality. Draftees who announced themselves to be homosexual at their induction centers frequently were told by army doctors that they were welcome in the army just the same. In at least three circumstances in the early 1970s, gay activists had to go to federal court to force the government to observe its own policies regarding the exclusion of gays.

History repeated itself two years ago during Operation Desert Storm when numerous military personnel, most serving in the
reserves, tried to escape mobilization by telling their reserve commanders they were gay—and many reserve commanders responded that gay soldiers could serve anyway. When a lesbian officer in a Western medical-support group told her commander that she was a lesbian, he replied, "That's all right. We wouldn't have a medical service without gays." When army reservist Donna Lynn Jackson told her commander she was a lesbian, she says he told her bluntly that she would go to Saudi Arabia, and be discharged for homosexuality at the end of the war. Jackson went to the newspapers, and an embarrassed Pentagon discharged her quickly, insisting that such cases were aberrations and that the Defense Department had an ironclad ban on gays in the military.

Despite the public pronouncements, military commanders made it as difficult as possible to separate gay personnel for the duration of the conflict. Decade-old Defense Department regulations demanded that anyone who even intimated that he or she was gay—or had the "intent" to commit gay sexual acts in the future—must be discharged, with no exceptions allowed. In the days before the ground war in the gulf started, however, the staff judge advocate's office of the Marine Corps Reserve Support Center instructed a lesbian who had acknowledged her homosexuality that "claimed sexual preferences do not constitute an exemption from the mobilization process."

At the 40th Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron at MC-Chord Air Force Base in Washington, another gay reservist seeking to avoid mobilization by announcing she was gay was told that she would not be certified as a homosexual by the air force unless she produced a marriage license listing another woman as a spouse. No jurisdiction in the United States allows gays to marry. Demanding that the woman produce a marriage license was like insisting she produce a piece of Mars.

Once stationed in the gulf, many of the gay military personnel found a remarkably accepting environment. When officers supervising a navy corpsman stationed with a Marine Corps unit on the front lines of Kuwait became concerned that his Marines all knew he was gay, the corpsman was transferred to another unit. The Marines in the new unit soon heard the rumors that he was gay, but befriended him anyway, and even jokingly nicknamed him "Precious," after the miniature poodle in the movie "The Silence of the Lambs."

The acceptance of gays in some quarters does not mean that lesbians and gay men will be easily integrated into every fighting unit. As with African-Americans and with women, the ability of the tradition-bound institution to accommodate gay members will take years, if not decades. The travails of gays in the military will not stop with a new president's executive order—they will just begin.

Still, animosity toward gays in the armed forces is not nearly so ingrained as opponents of the change would have us believe. For the past several years, some navy ship commanders have been quietly candid with their crews about no longer having any intention of enforcing the ban on homosexuals. In 1990, the reluctance of ship commanders to pursue lesbians led Vice Adm. Joseph Donnell, commander of the U.S. Atlantic fleet, to order all his commanding officers to enforce regulations more aggressively against lesbians. The memorandum acknowledged why many commanders were reluctant to do this: because, Donnell wrote, "the stereotypical female homosexual" was "hardworking, ca-

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his brings us to the fundamental truth about the military's policies toward homosexuals. The point is not to eject all gays, but to allow the military to say it does not accept homosexuals. This preserves its image as the upholder of traditional notions of masculinity, the one institution in the nation that claims to take boys and turn them into men. In harsh economic times, this raises the question as to whether the taxpayers grant the Defense Department nearly $300 billion a year to provide the most cost-effective defense for the nation, or whether it is an investment in preserving a club where heterosexual men can assure themselves of their masculinity.

The argument that gays will unalterably subvert discipline and good order in the armed forces is also hard to justify within the context of the history of the U.S. military. History tells us that the man who first instilled discipline in the ragtag Continental Army at Valley Forge was the Prussian Baron Frederick William von Steuben. It was he who took what were essentially 13 different colonial militias and molded them into one army.

Von Steuben at first had declined Benjamin Franklin's offer of the job, because the Continental Congress could not pay him. But when von Steuben learned that ecclesiastical authorities were planning to try him for homosexuality, he renegotiated with Franklin and was appointed a major general to the Continental Army. When he came to Valley Forge to begin his drills, he appeared with a 17-year-old French interpreter, who must have had other talents useful to the general, because it soon became clear that he had no linguistic skills.

Nevertheless, von Steuben, the army's first inspector general, came to have an incalculable impact on the U.S. military, writing the drill books that would be used for the next 35 years by the fledgling U.S. Army. His plans for a military academy became embodied in West Point. Some military historians have judged von Steuben as one of only two men whose contributions were indispen-

sable" toward winning the Revolutionary War; the other was George Washington.

It is a crowning irony that anti-gay policies are defended in the name of preserving the good order and discipline of the U.S. military, when that very order and discipline was the creation of a gay man.

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