

# The Effect of Leonard Matlovich

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The first time I heard the name "Leonard Matlovich" I was a student at the U.S. Naval Guided Missile School located outside of Virginia Beach, Virginia. I had been in the Navy a little more than a year then in 1975. I remembered the name because it was the name of the central figure in a controversial courts-martial that was taking place over at the Langley Air Force Base which was only thirty miles away in Hampton, Virginia.

I learned that Matlovich was a Technical Sergeant and an instructor, who had openly admitted to being homosexual. And even more shocking, he was a decorated war hero! I followed the story during that time and later.

His life was to become a source of strength and inspiration to me, as I struggled with being gay and in the military, like many other people both within the military structure and the civilian populace.

Technical Sergeant Leonard Matlovich, up to that time, had had a remarkable military career including duty in Vietnam where he



was awarded the Bronze Star and the Purple Heart - both medals were directly related to bravery in a hostile enemy action.

Indeed, here was a man who, very well,

could have served out his time in the military and have retired the hero he was without anyone knowing about his "deep dark secret."

However, this was not the course that Sgt. Matlovich chose to take. Instead, he dared to stand up and say, "I am who I am." And because of that declaration he bore the full wrath of the military establishment. I remember the trial because it was in the news constantly. And then, it was over. Matlovich was drummed out of the service with a general discharge - I suppose he would have received even less except for his valiant record. For most people, surely that would have been the end of the story but for Leonard Matlovich it was not. It was the beginning of a life's journey - a quest that would lead him through five years of legal wrangling to end in the U.S. Supreme Court in victory. In 1980 the Court ordered that he be reinstated and the Air Force settled by awarding him an honorable discharge and \$160,000.

One would think that this would definitely have been the end of the story, but

Leonard Matlovich then set about actively pursuing the cause of gay rights and spent the rest of his life doing so. He was involved in many projects, on many fronts. The list is long. But more important than the list is the man he was.

Many people say they believe in the Constitution of the United States and many say they believe in life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all peoples, but few like Leonard Matlovich are willing to stand on those principles against the popular norms and say, out loud, that even though we are different in our lifestyle, we are Americans and demand the full measure of all that that means.

Even in death, his choices in life exemplify his spirit of stating the unpopular truth. I refer to his choice of words as his epitaph: "When I was in the military they gave me a medal for killing two men, and a discharge for loving one." Leonard Matlovich taught us a lot. We as Americans and we as gay and lesbian people are eternally indebted to him.

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