

The added stress of war on closeted couples' military lives

Parting partners feel the pain —
a handshake instead of a hug

by Eils Lotozo
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When the soldiers of the 82nd Airborne were deployed in late February, their loved ones traveled from all over to Fort Bragg, to offer an emotional, public send-off.

The same-sex partners of gay troops in the unit, though, had to say their farewells in secret, behind closed doors.

That's how it was for JR, who sent the 82d Airborne soldier he describes as the love of his life off to war with a Bible, a rosary and a medal of St. Michael, the warrior's patron saint.

"I felt cheated," said JR, a North Carolina resident. "I watched the goodbyes on TV. I would have liked to be there too, waving to him."

Because of the military's decade-old "Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Harass, Don't Pursue" policy, that wasn't possible.

Though the controversial rule, adopted during the Clinton administration, allows gays and lesbians to serve, it requires them to keep their sexual orientation a secret. Under "Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Harass, Don't Pursue," soldiers can be discharged not just for homosexual conduct, but for simply acknowledging they are gay.

The rules are problematic during peacetime, critics say, but in times of war they put an added burden on homosexual soldiers and their loved ones.

"Imagine what a 20-year-old soldier is feeling facing a war zone," said Nathaniel

Frank of the Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military, a University of California, Santa Barbara, think tank. "Then imagine doubling the burden."

"They can't talk to their peers, they can't even talk to clergy or social workers." If their orientation were revealed, it could trigger an investigation, Frank said.

"The partners we have talked to are very distressed," said Steve Ralls, spokesman for the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, a legal aid and advocacy group for homosexual soldiers. "They are left with no support and with very few options in terms of keeping in touch."

Ralls said his organization had seen a sharp increase in calls since mobilization began. The group has received 281 inquiries since January 1, a 30 percent increase over the same period last year.

There is no way to know how many homosexuals are in the armed forces, but the Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military puts a conservative estimate at 60,000.

Brian, who like JR is afraid to use his real name, saw his Air Force officer partner deployed six weeks ago. After five years he is used to impersonal goodbyes in public.

"The hellos are even worse," said Brian, a Philadelphia native who works for a Los Angeles talent agency. "We have to shake hands and pretend we're just friends."

The current separation has been the toughest, Brian said. While the families of straight soldiers have a support network, Brian, whose partner keeps a photo of a woman on his desk as part of a cover story he created, is alone.

"The military has a lot of activities on the base to keep spouses busy and informed," he said. But he can't go on base.

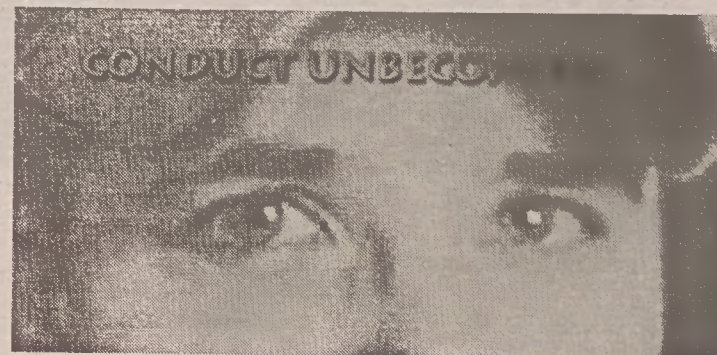
Among the supports offered to partners of deployed soldiers are counseling, child care, and a 24-hour phone referral service. Navy families can reach sailors at sea through video teleconferencing on some bases.

For deployed homosexual soldiers, a simple thing like pinning up a photo of a loved one can be risky. Staying in touch is difficult because the military can monitor letters and email.

Brian said he and his partner had worked out some codes to communicate endearments, but, he said, "mostly our emails are sterile and cryptic."

JR developed a scheme to allow him to speak his heart to his partner, who fears not just discharge but violence from antigay soldiers. (The Servicemembers Legal Defense Network documented more than 800 incidents of harassment in 2002.) Two women rewrite his letters — his handwriting looks too masculine, he said — and JR signs them with his first name, which is conveniently unisex.

W.F., whose partner left for Kuwait from Good Fellow Air Force Base in Texas in January, is also cautious. Although most of his platoon knows he is gay, WF said, his fears that messages could be screened make him



think hard about what he writes. "I can't be too specific, like telling him how much I miss him," WF said. "I wish I could be more open."

Lynne, who opened a dummy email account to write to the female naval officer she is involved with, said her partner had been at sea so long that she was bolder about what she put in her messages. "You can't be superficial," Lynne said. "We wouldn't be able to stay close."

Lynne, who lives in California, is keenly aware of the toll that "Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Harass, Don't Pursue" imposes. A former naval officer, she was one of 906 who were discharged from the military during the last year for being gay.

While many of the people she worked with knew she was lesbian, her discharge was triggered when she told the truth to her command. "I couldn't live that way anymore," she said. "I felt strongly about lying. I'd been taught from birth about honor."

When Lynne came clean, the Navy

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