

In the face of war "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" discharges decline

Since the beginning of war, fewer are discharged, but still anti-gay harassment continues

WASHINGTON, DC — According to Pentagon statistics, during fiscal year 2002 the armed services reported 906 "Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Harass, Don't Pursue" discharges, down from 1273 in 2001 and the fewest discharges since 1996.

Conduct Unbecoming, a new report from Servicemembers Legal Defense Network (SLDN) notes that, "During any time of war or conflict, gay discharges have dropped. Gay discharges decreased during the Korean War, the Viet Nam conflict, the Persian Gulf War, and now again during Operation Enduring Freedom."

SLDN estimates thousands, if not tens of thousands, of lesbian, gay and bisexual troops are serving in the current Middle East conflict. "When they need lesbian, gay and bisexual Americans most, military leaders keep us close at hand," said SLDN Executive Director C. Dixon Osburn. "The time has come to do away with the Pentagon's charade and make sure no one loses his or her career at the hands of anti-gay discrimination."

Though the specific reasons for the reported decrease in discharges is unknown, the report finds two factors may be responsible:

1. Commands are increasingly reluctant to discharge openly lesbian, gay and bisexual personnel. A recent memo from Twenty-nine Palms Marine Base, cited in the report, states, "Homosexuals can and do serve honorably in the Marine Corps. Homosexuals can and do make some of the best

Marines. Homosexuals are capable of Military Service and can and do perform as well as anyone else in the Military."

2. More and more service members are serving openly, disputing arguments that open lesbians and gays undermine unit cohesion and morale. The report cites the case of Marine Corps Captain Kira Zielinski whose command learned she was a lesbian in April 2001, but delayed her discharge for more than a year. In another case, the Navy attempted to retain openly gay Hospitalman Roy Hill after learning about Hill's sexual orientation.

LGB discharges continue, however, at a rate of nearly three per day.

"The absurdity of the military's gay ban is vividly illustrated by its recent discharge of lesbian and gay Arabic linguists," Osburn said. "Even though the Army faced a 50 percent shortfall in trained Arabic linguists, they continue to fire qualified and trained linguists who happen to be gay."

"Visualize blowing up a gay bar"

While reports of harassment have declined as well (from 1075 in 2001 to 802 in 2002), anti-gay harassment remains a serious problem across the services. Typifying the harassment faced by lesbian, gay and bisexual service members, SPC Brad Powell reports in *Conduct Unbecoming* that a Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) instructed his unit, during hand grenade training, to visualize "blowing up a gay bar." SPC Powell also tells SLDN that he heard NCOs tell soldiers that "the only way to decrease our nuclear arsenal is to put all fags

on an island and nuke it," and "the only thing a good fag needs is a good fag bashing."

Each of the services as well as Pentagon leadership have failed to implement an Anti-Harassment Action Plan adopted in 2000. "The Department of Defense has failed to issue a single Department-wide directive on harassment as required by the [plan.] During time of war when good order and discipline is vital, it is irresponsible for the Pentagon to not take its commitment to end harassment seriously."

SLDN also faults the Bush Administration for "indifference towards lesbian, gay and bisexual service members," citing the President's recent re-nomination of Major General Robert T. Clark, former commanding general of Fort Campbell, for promotion to Lieutenant General — an appointment vehemently opposed by all LGBT organizations.

Other report findings:

- "Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Harass, Don't Pursue" discharges in both the Navy (218) and the Air Force (121) reached their lowest levels since the law's implementation. The Army led all services in gay discharges (429 in 2002, down from 638 in 2001), while Marine Corps discharges dropped slightly, to 109 from 115 in 2001. The Coast Guard had the only increase in discharges, rising from 14 in 2001 to 29 in 2002.
- Serious harassment continues. SLDN documented 405 incidents of anti-gay harassment in the Army (down from 480 in 2001), 76 incidents in the Air Force (down from 119), 230 in the

Navy (down from 271) and 57 in the Marine Corps (down from 150 in 2001). Only the Coast Guard saw an increase in anti-gay harassment, with SLDN documenting 34 incidents in 2002, up from 21 in 2001.

- Women and youth continue to be discharged at a rate disproportionate with their presence in the services. While some services did not provide a gender break-down, 36 percent of the Army's discharges were women, while women comprise only 15 percent of the Army's total force strength. While women comprise only 7 percent of the Coast Guard, 34 percent of Coast Guard discharges were women. Similarly, young men and women ages 18 to 25 comprised 58 percent of SLDN clients during the 2002 reporting year. And, while young adults comprise only 35 percent of the Air Force, 83 percent of Air Force discharges were youth.

The report, which SLDN has made available to each of the Services and Members of Congress, calls on leaders to repeal "Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Harass, Don't Pursue" and implementation of the Pentagon's Anti-Harassment Action Plan. "Equal opportunity...continues to be withheld from uniquely qualified American patriots," the report says. "The time has come to lift the ban and welcome all qualified patriots to our struggle for freedom, regardless of their sexual orientation."

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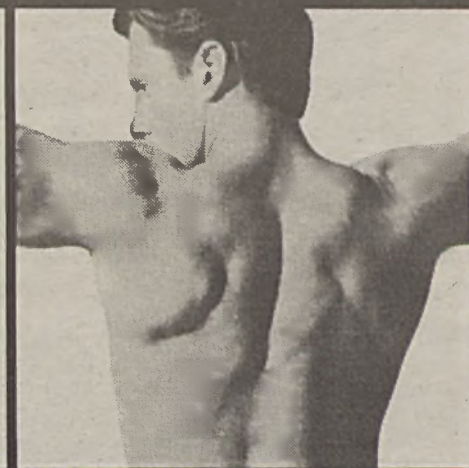
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