

Two Fronts for Gays in Military

Part I: Local Reservist Tells Her Story

by Cynthia Janes

War in the Persian Gulf has left the US military in a somewhat confused state about their status on another front: gays in the military. Despite official Department of Defense policy banning gay men and lesbians from serving in the US armed forces, many continue to serve.

A local reservist whose partner is stationed in the Persian Gulf shares what it has been like for her as a lesbian in the military.

When Sue filled out her application form for the service, she was asked "the three biggies": "Do you use drugs?", "Are you a homosexual?", and "Are you a felon?" In the seventies she didn't really lie when she answered "No" to all three, because she hadn't yet come out, but several years later, when Sue transferred to another branch of service, she lied, and marked "No." Falsifying one's record, for whatever reason, is grounds for automatic discharge.

Why do gay men and lesbians go into the military, even though they have to lie under oath about their sexual orientation to do so? Sue pointed out several attractive features: you meet new and diverse people all the time, you work with a great bunch of people who are from all over the country, you get to travel to interesting places, and the work itself is interesting. For reservists, who work one weekend per month and spend two weeks at camp each summer, the pay comes in handy, too. Sue brings home about \$200 for her weekend work, and all meals and lodging are paid by the service. There are fringe benefits, too, such as a GI bill for reservists, which Sue says pays some tuition, depending on how many credit hours you carry in college.

After a gay man or lesbian gets into the service, things can go smoothly for them if they are very careful not to reveal their sexual orientation to the wrong people. In the reserves, at least, most people, especially the older ones, seem pretty accepting of gays, according to Sue. "People I work with know that I live with a woman and they seem really concerned about my well-being and my partner's. They know both me and my partner, because we drill together, and we're always together. They just know." But the younger service people seem generally less tolerant. "Anti-gay jokes are common in the military, especially in the younger age groups."

Many gay men and lesbians choose to leave the military, simply because they get tired of leading a double life. Others go to extremes to "play the game," some

even marrying opposite-sexed gays. There are financial benefits to military

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dependents, another factor to consider.

But Sue thinks that overall there is more acceptance of gays in the military than outside the military. "A few years ago they said they didn't want homosexuals in the service because of security reasons, because they could be blackmailed. Nowadays, people are a lot more open, and more liberal in their attitudes. People seem to realize now that we're no different than anyone else."

The official position of the military remains unchanged, however, and one has to be more cautious. "In the higher echelons, they really don't pay any attention unless you really wag it under their nose, so that they are not forced to take any action to protect themselves."

When asked whether she thinks that gays in the military cause morale problems for the rest of the troops, Sue answered with an emphatic "No." She continued, "We're just trying to do our job like anybody else, and to live our lives without any harassment. If that causes a morale problem, then *those* people have a problem."

Sue says that gays in the military meet in just the same ways as non-military gays: sometimes in social settings, sometimes by just striking up a conversation with someone. "But when you are wearing a uniform," says Sue, "you are just a little more careful, because the stakes are high."

Sue's partner is also in the military. They met two years ago, through a mutual friend, and now live together. Sue points out that many military gay men and lesbians prefer a non-military partner, because it's usually easier to stay together when the one in the military gets transferred. (Married people are transferred together whenever possible.)

We asked Sue whether or not the policy against gays in the military will change. She answered, "God, I don't know, I hope so. Right now it doesn't look good." But, she added, if it does change, she would probably come out.

Partner in Saudi

Sue's partner is currently stationed at a hospital unit in Saudi Arabia. We asked

What Does the Military Think of You?

"Homosexuality is incompatible with military service. The presence in the military environment of persons who engage in homosexual conduct or who, by their statements, demonstrate a propensity to engage in homosexual conduct, seriously impairs the accomplishment of the military mission. The presence of such members adversely affects the ability of the Military Services to maintain discipline, good order, and morale; to foster mutual trust and confidence among servicemembers, to ensure the integrity of the system of rank and command; to facilitate assignment and worldwide deployment of servicemembers who frequently must live and work under close conditions affording minimal privacy; to recruit and retain members of the Military Services; to maintain the public acceptability of military service; and to prevent breaches of security."--Military's official policy on homosexuality, as stated in DoD Directive 1332.14, Jan. 28, 1982.

Sue what it is like to be the lesbian partner of someone in Saudi. She said, "Well, it's just like any heterosexual married couple, when one of you has to go off and fight a war. I don't see any difference, except that in a gay relationship you're not recognized as a grieving spouse.

"You feel like someone has cut a hole

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in your body, because this other person is gone. You feel as if no one cares. Big deal! Your roommate is gone! It's hard to keep your stuff together, try to keep some sort of anonymity, ...but still get the emotional support you need to go on and do the things you need to do, and then try to be supportive to your partner who is in the Gulf. They need an anchor in you to keep them going.

"You're totally passed over by the system. And it's a two-edged sword, because neither partner is getting the kind of community support she needs. There are support groups here, but they cater to heterosexuals. You can get factual information [from the groups], but no emotional support, if you are gay or lesbian. I am lucky, because I get some support from other people in my unit, who

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