

Gay and Lesbian Ex-Soldiers Barred From Service

New Study Suggests Open Gays Could Serve Effectively

By Robert Blair

As the nation confronts the possibility of sustained military conflict in the war against terrorism, the roughly ten thousand former soldiers who have been fired since the Gulf War for being gay, lesbian or bisexual, have had to look beyond the armed forces for ways to serve their country.

In interviews conducted last week by the Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military (CSSMM), a research center at the University of California, Santa Barbara, men and women whose military careers were cut short due to harassment or outright dismissal, expressed a variety of reactions to the ongoing international conflict.

John Malady, who became an Army counterintelligence agent in 1995, after a four-year stint in the signal corps, was fired in June, 2001, under the terms of "don't ask, don't tell."

As a uniformed member of the intelligence community specially trained as a linguist, Malady's job was to oversee personnel security investigations, including espionage, sedition, treason and subversion. "The work was precisely the kind of intelligence now in great demand in the effort to rout out terrorism," says Aaron Belkin, Director of the CSSMM.

"I would have been ready to go," Malady said. "Work finally comes along that military intelligence has a big part in," he says, and he is no longer in the military. "It would have been excellent to have a role in that."

Now a cashier at a

convenience store "until something better comes along," he can only watch as his former colleagues in the intelligence community move into action. Malady says that other soldiers in the Army, both gay and straight, knew he was gay, but that knowledge never seemed to affect anyone adversely. "There were a lot of people who knew, and nobody cared," he says. "The fact that I was gay and serving in the military didn't affect me doing my job and being a professional."

Lt. Richard Watson, who joined the Navy in July, 1981, became a highly trained nuclear-qualified officer, and received numerous honors during his Naval career, including a Letter of Commendation from the Commanding Officer of his submarine. But his Naval career was cut short in 1994, when discharge proceedings were initiated against him.

"I would love to serve today," Watson says. "I'm a professional military man, and it was my hope that I could continue to serve based on my perfect record. The joke for me is that my blood is navy blue; I've always been hyperpatriotic and I would definitely serve today, because even with all our social ills, this is still the greatest country in the world."

Clay Doherty, currently a fundraiser for the Democratic party, spent two years at the U.S. Naval Academy before fellow students told him they would pursue rumors that he was gay and would try to initiate a discharge based on homosexuality. "I would have preferred a career in the Navy," he said.

Doherty, who fully supports the current military campaign against Afghanistan, does not dwell on the past. He says. "The reality is that you deal with the circumstances

you're faced with, and when the circumstances change, you really can't linger on them; you have to move on, and that's exactly what I did."

Laura Spaulding, who enlisted in the Army in May, 1994 at the age of 20, was discharged in September, 1994. In violation of the "don't ask" and "don't pursue" terms of the current gay policy, Spaulding says her battalion commander called people into his office and asked them to name people they thought were gay.

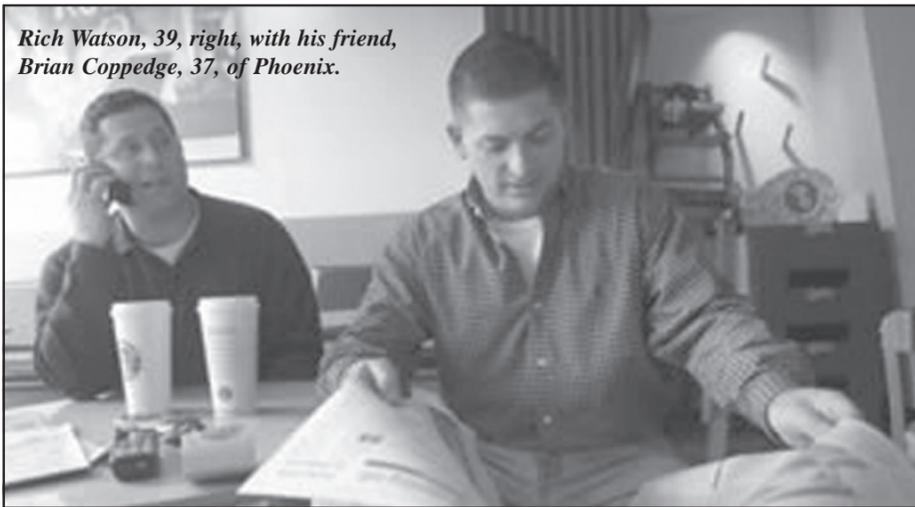
Spaulding remains far too angry to want to serve today. "They treated me like a prisoner, like a second-class citizen," she says. "After what they put me through, I wouldn't reenlist if they gave me a million dollars."

Speaking of the current war against terrorism, she says, "I guarantee that discharges are going down now that we're not in peacetime. If we suit them, they'll take us, but if there's no conflict, we're not allowed to serve. After they give all their purple hearts out [to gay soldiers], they'll be discharging them again when the war's over."

There is much evidence for this pattern. According to a new study by Rhonda Evans of UC Berkeley, the Pentagon's policy of routing out gays and lesbians during peacetime normally is suspended during times of crisis.

The 90-page study, which is available at www.gaymilitary.ucsb.edu, documents a historic pattern by the U.S. military of suspending enforcement of the gay ban during wartime. Frequently, the study reports, discharge proceedings are resumed against soldiers when they return from war.

Rich Watson, 39, right, with his friend, Brian Coppedge, 37, of Phoenix.



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