

The Experience of Military Service for Lesbians and Gay Men

Introduction

This paper reviews testimonies of gay and lesbian servicemembers of militaries in the English-speaking world. Most of the material is drawn from those who have served in the Canadian and American armed forces, however, some pertinent observations have been included from Britain and Australia. The evidence spans the period from the Second World War, when homosexuals were first categorised as a group by the armed forces under consideration, to the modern era of ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ restrictions in the United States open service in Canada, Britain and Australia.

The material is discussed thematically. The individual servicemen and women presented here served in different times, varying circumstances as well as in all three branches of the service. Also, they served under a variety of policies that would be too cumbersome to detail in each case. I have highlighted those contingencies where they are especially important. However, there are continuities and commonalities in their experiences that bridge geographic and historical gaps. Constructions of homosexuality, understandings of gender and sexual identities as well as the social meaning of military service have not changed substantially as a result of new regulations. Modern strategies for surviving and coping in military environments would be familiar to earlier generations.

The material used in this paper is drawn from dozens of interviews, both formal (taped) and informal, published accounts of military service by gay men and lesbians and newspaper and journal articles collected over the last decade. Extensive discussions with currently serving members of the Canadian forces inform the analysis; however, that material is not extensively cited in order to protect the individual identities.

The themes are set out in the first section of the paper which is a detailed summary of the service career of a captain retired from the Royal Canadian Navy, drawn from both taped interviews and informal discussions from 1997 to 2002. His long-term service and strong naval and gay identities make Captain Duncombe an articulate and passionate voice. His observations and concerns have been used to order the remaining sections of the paper. They address the issues of the disclosure of a homosexual orientation in military environments, the gendered construction of military service, the relationship between service and sexual identities, and the effects of military service and policies on homosexual, and sometimes non-homosexual, individuals.

Captain Bob Duncombe

At the peak of his career as an officer in the Naval Reserve of Canada, Bob Duncombe considered coming out as gay to a senior officer. “I had a great deal of respect for him and he had a great deal of respect for me. We worked well as a team. He told me later when his secretary would tell him that Commander Duncombe was on the phone he would always look forward to the conversation. And I knew that and I thought, ‘Well, I

can't put him in a difficult position because he'd be between a rock and a hard place on how to deal with me.' So I just let it ride."

Restrictions against gays and lesbians in the Canadian Forces were lifted in 1992. In fact, throughout his career, from 1955 to 1980, Bob was serving his country illicitly. Still, something in him wanted to come out to this officer whose esteem he valued. Ideally, the superior would have kept the knowledge in his private file. "But I was risking that he might say, 'Well, I have to take some action here.' And I didn't know where he was in the game." Bob saw him as "arch-typically straight". "I knew that when he wanted to cut someone off at the knees, he was quite capable of doing it. I'd seen it happen and his face would just become a mask and his eyes would turn cold and I thought he could just switch on that with me." With no compelling reason to disclose his homosexuality, and so much to lose, Bob left well enough alone. The issue of disclosing one's homosexual orientation in the context of military life will be explored in this paper.

This high-ranking officer, who Bob had seen as the quintessence of male heterosexuality, retired from the Navy and quietly came to terms with his own homosexual orientation. For Bob, the knowledge that this key player in his career had in fact been in the same boat was part of his sexual coming of age. Repeatedly, he discovered straight officers who advanced to gay retirement.

Both men had mastered the game of survival in the military. Throughout his twenty-five year career, Bob kept the service police at bay "by being very straight in everything that I did. ... I could get away with it. I had no mannerisms which I had to conceal." In retirement, the masculine bearing that once deflected suspicion remains: he impresses people as assured, incisive and sensible – traits not exclusive to men, but

marked as masculine nonetheless. The apparent contradiction between homosexuality and manliness was at the root of his choice to enter the Navy. Along with the desire to travel and to assume the responsibilities that came with service was a need to address his insecurity as a gay man. As a cultural preserve of manliness, the military attracted Bob in his formative years, when he was unsure of his position in the hierarchy of masculinity. In retirement, he reflects on how his naval service had calmed his private doubts about his manhood: “If I’m in the Navy and I’m an officer and I move through the ranks ... then I must be okay. I must be a man.” The common perception of the military as a masculine organisation and military service as a symbol of manliness will be explored through the personal accounts of homosexual servicemen and women.

It was not enough to conform to the military’s ideal of manhood. Bob also had to hide his sexual desire and stay a step ahead of the service police. “I was very street-smart. I was excellent at looking around and seeing who was watching me watching other people. Whenever I got any desire I would just look around and see what was going on. If I wanted to cruise somebody I wouldn’t be seen doing it. By anybody. You’re survival instinct is such that you get very good at it.” Knowing that the security police periodically interviewed his neighbours and acquaintances, Bob could never expose his sexual desire. “No one was gay in those days. Certainly not in the military because of the Code of Service Discipline and the arbitrariness of the whole thing. And there was no legal recourse.”

While no one was gay, homosexual urges flourished and the Navy provided the means to satisfy them. “I certainly pounced on a couple of people in the barracks of the officers’ mess in bed – we used to share cabins – and I did that in Base Naden”

(Victoria). But in that oppressively straight environment, more complex relationships were stillborn. “I had one other officer who I went sailing with in his own sailboat. He was quite an adventurous sailor – he sailed around Vancouver Island when he was about 20 years old. Anyway he took me sailing one day, we had a good time and I remember being sort of interested that somebody would be interested in me.” In retrospect, Bob thinks that his friendship with this colleague could have been, in other circumstances, the beginning of an intimate relationship. However, Bob (and, quite possibly, the other officer) would not risk exploring the potential of the relationship. Once again, in the sober second thought of retirement, he understands that he had made major sacrifices at the personal level in order to protect his career. Recent evidence seemed to validate Bob’s speculation that the other man had also been gay: “I just discovered recently that he had died of AIDS.”

However, the Navy did provide another kind of emotional support. The uniform brings together members of the “navy blue family.” While Bob sacrificed a domestic, private life for his career, he found in the Navy a place of belonging. With his sexual and romantic lives largely sublimated, Bob focused on his career. “I was very busy – I was very active – that’s why I moved ahead through the system pretty quickly – I was conscientious, worked hard, got high marks and one can say that although I was not consciously running from myself, I certainly didn’t have time to be diddling people. I had to be up and alert at 6 am the next morning in the Navy.” In fact, the anti-homosexual policies and practices of the CF that kept him from developing a private life worked to the advantage of the Navy. With fewer domestic responsibilities than most of his heterosexual colleagues, he was more devoted to his career. The Navy enabled Bob to

travel and to assume responsibilities. He was aide-de-camp to Governors-General Leger and Michener, commanded HMCS Carleton and finally retired with the rank of four ring Captain.

It is possible that the importance of being part of the Navy family was even more important psychologically for people like Bob than for heterosexual officers who were able to nurture private family bonds and support systems as well as naval ones. This, in turn, makes the ruthless investigations and releases all the more insidious. Since gay servicemen and women were so vulnerable to exposure during the Cold War years, it seems that many neglected their interpersonal development. The social construction of gay men as sexually promiscuous and emotionally immature may have been true for people who chose not to expose themselves to the complications of developing private relationships that could destroy their careers if discovered by the military.

Once out of the Navy, nothing stood in the way of Bob coming out as gay. He had little time to nurture resentment towards the Navy for its homophobia. “I’m mature enough to say ‘Well, you can’t rewind so you better go on fast forward.’ Which I did do. I moved very quickly to understand the whole culture of the gay community. Within three years I had Gay101, Gay201, 301 and 401.” In fact, it is less the Navy than the media that Bob criticises for having provided no images or role models through which he could recognise himself.

Finally coming into his own socially and sexually, Bob found himself in the role of activist. “I was at a SAGE [a group for senior gay men and lesbians] meeting in 1994. Alex Munter [a gay city counsellor in Kanata, near Ottawa] was there. He saw a reporter from the Citizen looking for a story and he was keen to help her and so he talked to me

and said ‘Nobody else in this room will give a story, but you will, won’t you, Bob?’ and so I did. And the next thing you know she wanted a picture and so she said ‘There’ll be a *Citizen* car over there in an hour if you go home right now.’

“All the previous thoughts in my head had been a lead up to the day when I decided to come out and I guess the newspaper story was the most compelling one because there wasn’t any time to think about it. The interview was given at four in the afternoon, the photographer was at the front door at six and when he got up to leave I said ‘When’s this story going to appear?’ and he said ‘It’ll be in tomorrow morning’s paper.’ I said, ‘How many copies do you print tomorrow?’ and he said ‘Monday morning – 155,000.’ And I said, ‘Oh. Good-bye.’ And the next morning came and I thought ‘Oh, there’s something different about today. Gosh, yes, the *Ottawa Citizen* article.’ And I thought, ‘Well, it’s 7 o’clock. I guess I can’t go out and buy them all.’”

“There was a bit of activism in my head at that point. I felt very strongly as I still do that this [being homosexual] is all quite normal. So that a person like myself who everyone thought was quite normal should be normal as a gay person. I had a lot of equity in the Navy of course and in public service and I said if anybody is going to make a statement here which is going to make people reconsider stereotypes it’ll be me and that’s why I did it. I thought it was just the right thing to do.” The military’s treatment of homosexuals can have an effect on their subsequent personal development and relation to the state and society. That issue will be discussed in the following pages.

It frustrates Bob that so few gays and lesbians in the Canadian Forces have come out under the policy of zero tolerance for discrimination against homosexuals. “If I’d written the policy, I’d be impatient with people who said, ‘I still will not come out.’ I’d

say, ‘Well, I’m sorry, I just don’t know what else I can do for you. I’m trying to create an atmosphere for you as a gay person to be totally out and equal and if you can’t buy into that then I don’t know what I have to do.’” Bob thus takes the CF at their word, that they are committed to an atmosphere of equity and pluralism. He feels that it is the responsibility of individuals servicemembers to give substance to the policy that opens the forces to sexual diversity. This position follows from Bob’s total commitment to both the Navy and to his self-identity as gay in his post-service life. The personal sacrifices that he had made are no longer required of homosexual servicemembers. He believes that his own development had been obstructed by official policy during his service years and that the current generations do not have to limit themselves as he did. Bob has a deep respect for authority and is committed to both following and implementing orders. Now that the CF have declared that sexual orientation should be no issue in service, Bob sees it as up to individuals to effect that new order.

At the same time, he acknowledges that the anti-discrimination orders may be irrelevant to many. “Those that are in it to prove to themselves that they are men, I guess the policy doesn’t change their attitude to themselves. It just means that the system now supports them. But they won’t come out even then, because they deny the reason they’re even in the Forces.” Years ago, those words could have defined Bob himself. But Bob has a healthy relationship with his past, the prologue to his future. At least on paper, the military he served is committed to that same future.

Disclosure

Why does one's sexual orientation matter? At the present time, the Canadian Forces say it does not, the American military says it does. In this section, I will explore the issue of intimacy, disclosure and sexual orientation. My interest is to determine when it is significant and why people feel compelled to assert their sexual orientation in military settings from time to time. It is important to appreciate the historical and social contexts in which people disclose their sexual orientation. However, even over time and in quite different settings, some servicepeople have chosen to make their homosexual orientation public. In other cases, the information has been offered within the context of an intimate friendship. Examples from across time and space will be chosen and compared in order to identify the commonalities that have motivated different historical actors.

In 1944, Private Anderson was being tried in a Canadian martial court for desertion. At the time, homosexuality was an offence against both the military and civil codes of Canada and classified as a psychopathic disease by the Army's Medical Services. Moreover, it was understood to be something beyond the pale of decent society, a source of great shame for men. Nevertheless, in answer to his defending officer's questions regarding his physical "make-up", Anderson told the open court:

Upon reaching the age of about 15½ I discovered I would rather be with boys than with girls. .. since here at Little Mountain I have acted like a soldier, but the fact remains that if you have the desire you are going to slip and I would just as soon let that be known. I am not ashamed of it and I don't try to hide the fact.

Anderson wanted to complete his training and be sent overseas, so his disclosure was not motivated by a desire to be released by the Army as unfit. In fact, at that point in the war, it would not have been a successful strategy in any case. Anderson discussed his homosexuality in other military settings as well; he refused to see his sexual desires in the

shameful way that military authorities prescribed.¹ The Canadian Army had no policies governing such self-exposure during the war. The idea that anyone would voluntarily label himself as homosexual in a public military forum was almost unimaginable at the time. Homosexuals policed themselves so effectively that Anderson's proclamation stands out as rare. Since he stipulates that he is not ashamed and does not try to hide it, it may be that his assertion was meant to distance himself from exactly those responses. He was defining himself on his terms rather than leaving it up to others to denigrate him.

In 1996, the American forces were operating under the infamous 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' policy whereby homosexuals can serve as long as they keep their sexual orientation secret. These codified regulations are fundamentally similar to the unofficial practices in effect in Canada (although not the USA) during the Second World War. When James Garcia enlisted in the United States Air Force in that year, his father advised him that his sexual orientation would not be an issue under the regulations in effect, as long as he did not discuss it. He completed training with honours and was assigned to McGuire Air Force Base. After two years of service, Garcia was finding it difficult to continue to maintain his part of the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy. In fact, the policy had denied him the ability to define himself on his own terms, as Private Anderson had been able to do in wartime Canada. Although the American policy also forbids the harassment of suspected homosexuals, it is not possible to address harassment without drawing attention to one's homosexuality. Garcia said that some of his comrades at the base had identified him as different and taunted him for it: "The conversations I was interested in were different. Not that I was flamboyant, but I wasn't a macho Midwestern guy, so they had an idea." When he was assigned to clean the bathroom, he was labelled the "latrine queen."

Occasionally, his comrades would make sarcastic comments or mock him by sashaying in his presence. Journalist Joseph Dee wrote of his experience: “What he didn't plan on was the frustration that would come from leading a double life, from denying a part of his identity. It felt like he was being dishonest to himself, to his airmen friends and to his superior officers. The feeling gnawed at him, slowly at first, but eventually it became intolerable.”

In 1998, Garcia wrote to his commanding officer:

Sir, after struggling with a serious moral dilemma, my sense of honor and integrity dictates that I inform you that I have come to acknowledge I am gay. I believe I have been serving my country honorably in the Air Force; however, I cannot continue to do so at being required to be less than fully forthcoming with my chain-of-command, colleagues and friends. To do so would violate my deeply held personal values as well as those instilled by my Air Force training. ... In recent months, the work environment has become increasingly uncomfortable for me. I have overheard numerous hostile comments about gay people and been subjected to innuendo and speculation about my own sexual orientation.

In response, his squadron commander asked him if the letter was “some kind of joke and called Garcia’s brother and sister for confirmation that he was gay. After this disclosure, Garcia says, “Nobody said anything to me for about a month.” Finally, he was released.

Garcia, like Anderson, saw the issue as one of integrity, not sexuality. Before his disclosure, he felt that he belonged and was accepted by the majority of his colleagues, many of whom, he thinks, knew that he was gay. In fact, he had discussed his orientation with a few of his most trusted fellow airmen. However, the need to lead a double life was too uncomfortable to endure. Moreover, his enforced silence handed power over to those who wanted to mock him for his sexual difference.²

While Anderson and Garcia disclosed their sexual orientation publicly, in acts of integrity and principle, more intimate disclosures can address other needs. Moss

Brentwood served in the US Navy in the 1950s. He describes the circumstances in which he shared his secret as well as the benefits he derived from that event in the subsequent years: “After the induction, on the train headed toward San Diego, I met a fellow and within – oh, I’d say forty hours of the actual time on the trip, we had come out to each other. Not sexually, but as ‘sisters.’ We became very fast friends and remained great friends for years after. We always had one another for moral support.”³ Moss found comfort in being able to share his ‘secret’ with someone who would understand his situation. While armed forces in Canada and the United States have argued that homosexuals in the service would disrupt units because of sexual intimacy, evidence points rather to the need for emotional intimacy between people in common, vulnerable circumstances. Disclosing one’s homosexual desires to either hetero or homosexual colleagues is more likely to be a sign of trust than of lust.

Bert Sutcliffe’s evidence further negates the military rationale. Sutcliffe, who served in the Canadian intelligence service from the Second World War until 1962, made a point to never have sexual relations with other Canadians in the CF: “I always had a horror of getting involved with another Canadian just in case, at a future date, he might be in my unit and I might have to give him orders. And he might turn to me and say ‘You son of a bitch, I’m not going to do what you tell me, I’ll tell them what you’re doing.’”⁴ So, while Moss found personal support in dealing with his secret, Bert shared his with no one in the military. Despite his great care, he was discovered to be homosexual by the extensive police surveillance networks during the Cold War. His experience reveals why avowing one’s homosexual orientation is understood to be an intimate act. In 1962, on the eve of his promotion to lieutenant colonel and posting to Washington, he was

discharged as homosexual. The experience of having his secret exposed by someone else was different than disclosing it oneself. He recalls being told by his superior officer at NDHQ that he would not be promoted to lieutenant colonel and posted to Washington. The Colonel told him instead: “ ‘The RCMP has told us that you are homosexual and I’ll have you out of the army in 48 hours time. Go back to your apartment and wait for me to call.’ And that was like taking a couple of pieces of brick and smash them about each side of my head.” He later learned how the police had discovered his secret: “I’d had a young French Canadian back to my apartment a couple of times; he stayed over. And he was working for the civil service and the RCMP knew that he was gay and they took him down to headquarters and they showed him a couple of pictures and then they showed him a picture of me and they pressured him and he finally said, ‘Yes. He slept with me a couple of times.’ And that was it.”⁵

While the repercussions have changed over the course of the twentieth century, information that someone is homosexual has always been classified ‘confidential.’ The current American Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy had *forced* Garcia to conceive of his homosexuality as a secret; consequently, the power to use that knowledge was in the hands of his most unsympathetic colleagues. Bert, decades earlier in Canada, had thought that he could control the secret by revealing it to no one who could possibly betray him. Unfortunately, he underestimated the extent of the state’s policing practices.⁶

Revealing one’s homosexuality can only be seen as an intimate disclosure when the knowledge can be used to defame, belittle or shame the subject. To tell someone such a secret has generally understood as a sign of trust. Since everyone is assumed to be heterosexual, there is no equivalent revelation. (However, to discuss one’s bisexuality in

a strictly gay or lesbian environment can also be problematic.) For instance, a gay man who had been an officer in the British Army during the Second World War understood the wartime context in the following terms: “In the Officer’s Mess on dining-in nights everyone became very drunk and heterosexual and aggressive, asserting their masculinity. . . . there were no real limits on straight sexual conduct at all and the men would boast of their sexual conquests, and some of them would have constituted rape these days. It was a double standard because any gay consenting sexual acts were clamped down on.”⁷ Since straight activity was not considered an admission of failure, discussion about one’s heterosexual prowess could be interpreted as meaningless chatter rather than intimate disclosure.

The power of the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy to enforce silence on homosexuals has some insidious effects that work for the benefit of those whose goal is the construction of an exclusively, blissfully heterosexual America. Steve May was a Republican member of the Arizona State Legislature in 1999 when, during a debate on barring counties from offering domestic-partner benefits to gay couples, May disclosed his own homosexual orientation.⁸ Another representative had denounced gay men as “disease-ridden dangers to the family who were doomed to early deaths.” May countered that his “gay tax dollars” were also being collected by the state: “If you’re not going to treat me fairly, don’t take my money.” Afterwards May said that his response was motivated by self-defence: “But when you attack my family and you steal my freedom, I will not sit quietly in my office.”⁹ Since May was a Reservist lieutenant, his remarks, made in the context of discharging his political responsibilities, were considered a violation of the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy. In the course of the military’s

investigation, leading to his release under the policy, Lieutenant May came to understand the effects of the policy that enforces heterocentrism: “People are using the military to impose their social agenda on the country. They're afraid of treating gay people fairly at the risk of normalising homosexuality. The reality is, gays are in the military, and always have been. That's not the issue. The issue is letting us live our lives honestly.”¹⁰ As with Garcia, May saw the issue as one of integrity. However, in his case, the public disclosure of his homosexual orientation was not a personal act of self-affirmation, but a vindication of a minority under attack made in the context of his responsibility as an elected representative. May’s disclosure was necessitated by his desire to give added weight to his political arguments.

Staying in or coming out of the closet remains a concern for many gay and lesbian people in the CF where there are no official restrictions. In the course of my relations with support groups for Canadian gay and lesbian servicemembers, I have witnessed debates over the significance of ‘coming out’ to one’s unit. At times, these discussions are instigated by individuals who are struggling with the issue of personal integrity and honour, as described by Garcia. While my correspondence on the matter is copious, the sensitive nature of the issue redounds upon me as a researcher and I must respect the privacy of my correspondents. In general terms, however, most gay people who ask their fellow servicemembers for advice are cautioned from making their orientation public. Some advise that disclosures should be made only to trustworthy colleagues. Most servicemembers in such support groups think it best to avoid telling anyone, since the secret cannot be controlled once made public. Those few who have made their homosexuality public find that the issue seems to colour their working relationships in

various ways. While those in office settings tend to focus on the work in the face of apparent aversion, those confronting combat settings can be subject to more serious challenges and repercussions.

The Gender of Military Life

Commander Duncombe thinks that his very choice to pursue a naval career was, in part, motivated by his uncertainty about his masculinity. In the 1950s, he felt that his homosexual urges may have been a sign that he was inadequate as a man. His success in the Navy helped to allay fears about his masculinity brought on by his homosexuality. Many men have felt that their success in the military was dependent on projecting a masculine image, according to standards that some people identified and adopted without difficulty. Bert Sutcliffe, for instance, constructed his outward personality according to the gender standards of the Second World War: “As I say, because of my demeanour no one ever gave any thought to [my sexual orientation]. People sometimes say to me, ‘Why do you swear so much?’ And really this was something I did to cover over the fact that I was gay. Everytime I turned around I’d say to someone ‘F--- off you son of a bitch.’ And that was considered standard butch and I developed a whole language of offensive words that I felt I had to use to cover up what was inside me ...”¹¹

Serving in the United States Navy in the 1950s, Moss Brentwood relates an experience that demonstrates the importance of a masculine bearing and aggressive reputation in ordering the limits of acceptable sexual behaviour. “I can remember – I’ll never forget it – our last night in basic, there was an incident with this big hunky,

handsome bruiser, a married man with one or two kids. I was coming through the barracks. The barracks was loaded with all the guys. As I was going by his bunk, he grabbed me, embraced me, and kissed me full on the mouth! It left me limp. He said, 'I have been wanting to do that since the first time I saw you.' He was such a bruiser, and had such a reputation, that not a soul in there made a remark or stood up to the man."¹²

The manly protagonist in Brentwood's story was acting under the provisions of the proverb, 'Get a reputation as an early riser, and you can sleep till noon.' In his defiance of the prescriptions against homosexual actions, he seems to have re-enforced his reputation for manliness. First, he clearly asserted himself as the aggressor in the encounter. Unlike instances of homosexual rape in all-male prison societies, which centre on depersonalised sexual acts, he kissed Brentwood on the mouth, a symbol of intimacy. In the context of his reputation for aggression and independence so thoroughly established, he was able to literally embrace homosexuality without censure. In doing so, he exposed the fear that underlay the expression of homosexual desires in his particular community of men.

On the other hand, Brentwood's experience with his seducer was a bolder example of a particular social, sexual order that others have reported from their service years. During the war years in the US Navy, Paul Hardman recalls seeing "the line of demarcation" in the sexual, gendered roles available on board ship: "Those who were aggressive and were casing boys were looked at as very masculine. If you were the boy, the catamite – the Navy termed it pogue – they talked about you." The all-male society he describes, like prison culture, was ordered on a hierarchy of pleasure and power: "If you were putting our for someone, then you were supposed to be passive ... I knew the

technique and I was very, very careful as I grew into the system not to be the one they talked about. I would let them chase me until I caught them.”¹³ Naval culture, in which men served for long periods in isolation from women and in conditions that almost precluded privacy, evolved differently from the other services and accommodated, within strict limits, homosexual activity among men.¹⁴ Ironically, the campaign that was mounted to discredit President Clinton’s pledge to lift the ban on homosexuals in the American forces culminated in a well-publicised tour by the senate committee aboard a submarine in 1993, in which the lack of privacy was exhibited to demonstrate the impracticality of allowing homosexuals aboard.¹⁵

Ironically, while gay men have commonly adopted markers of masculinity to deflect suspicion from their sexual orientation, those opposed to their presence have seen them as a threat to the manly reputation that the militaries have propagated in the modern era. Since the rights of homosexuals to serve their nations was first raised in the wake of the gay liberation movement, gay men have been seen by the traditionalists as threatening the fundamental masculinity of military institutions. However, servicewomen are often elided from such constructions of military life as masculine. It is imperative to bring women back into that debate and to understand how they see their own service in an institution marked as male and masculine.¹⁶

Kate Muir, in researching a book on women in the armed forces, remarked on the high percentage of lesbian women she had met.¹⁷ Elaine Chambers, who served in the British forces, thinks that lesbian women are especially attracted to military life: “As gay women the stereotypical view is that we should all be working in the forces, or the police, or the prison service, or in hospitals. There is something about an ordered female life that

is attractive to gay women, and I think that for once the stereotypes are right. In the population at large there are not that many lesbians, statistically, but when I was in the army there were lots of us. I wouldn't say we were in the majority or anything like that, but there are a hell of a lot of us – in every area, every hospital, every unit.” The fact that there have been so many women investigated and released under restrictive policies may be due, in part, to the greater presence of lesbians in the services.

However, the relationship between gay and straight women in the forces is not subject to the same principles that order male military society. While homosexual males are understood as a threat to the masculine self-image of the group, lesbians can be marginalised only according to their presumed threat to the reputation for decency of the female members. The violence and passion that can mark servicemen's fears of gay men is not generally present in regard to women. Chambers reflects on the differences: “For the most part the gay and straight women integrate well. You can basically know soon after joining who is and who isn't, but no one really makes an issue out of it. Some straight women don't mind at all and are really relaxed about it. Some don't like it at all, but there's a sense of live and let live and if you keep your sexuality pretty much to yourself, even the women who don't like it would do nothing to drop you into trouble. In my case [of being discovered and discharged] it was another gay woman looking for promotion.”¹⁸

The relationship between straight and gay men can be marked by much greater passion, a function of the fear that some men have of losing their masculine status. In the American forces, Private Calvin Glover was tried for the murder of Private First Class Barry Winchell in 1999. The testimony tabled in court revealed much about the

relationship between masculinity and homosexuality in that community. Once marked as queer, soldiers do not have the same freedoms as non-stigmatised comrades. Witnesses at the trial testified that Glover's "outrageous macho bragging" was annoying to all of the soldiers drinking and partying outside their barracks on the eve of July the Fourth. *Time* magazine described the crucial encounter in terms that highlight the homophobic basis for the ultimate confrontation, in which Glover would kill Winchell, while he slept, with a baseball bat. "Finally one of the beer drinkers, Winchell, told Glover that he was full of it. Glover walked up to Winchell and tried to knock a beer from his hand but failed. Winchell insisted he didn't want to fight, but something drove Glover to keep provoking one. Finally, Winchell tossed his beer aside and hit Glover quickly several times with the heel of his hand. As Glover reeled backward, Winchell grabbed him around the waist and threw him to the ground. That should have been the end to an ordinary fight, but for Glover the stakes were higher. He had just been beat by a man whose suspected homosexuality had preoccupied the barracks for months. 'It ain't over,' Glover vowed to Winchell. 'I will...kill you.'"¹⁹

In his experience in the British forces, Hall noticed: "Of course there are now women in the Mess as well – but where they are part of the some Mess they have had to enter on the same terms as the men, effectively becoming honorary men."²⁰ The heterosexual and sexist banter that was common during the Second World War remains in many military environments. Hall witnessed: "Besides competitiveness, uniformity, strength, dogged determination and deference to authority, another quality is required in men – and is expected to be accepted or encouraged by women – and that is regular, ribald and detailed discussions about the sexual desirability of women. A woman who

can't at least play along with the game is a lesbian and a man who can't keep up with the conversation is either a virgin cherry, or a poof, or both.”²¹ To reject heterosexual norms was to reject the group itself: “as a young Royal Navy officer I visited sex shows in St John's, Newfoundland and Montreal. It was the norm. To have said ‘no’ would have been to reject the group ethos, to have failed to bend to peer pressure, consciously not to be *one of the boys*. We all, except the sad and lonely cases, expressed a constant and determined interest in heterosexual sex.”²²

The fact that the armed forces have been defined historically as male and continue to be signifiers of masculine prowess means that success and failure are read in opposite terms for men and women. Hall eloquently describes the interpretation ascribed to success under those conditions: “If a male recruit is unable to run far enough fast enough, or march in step, or get over a rope net on an assault course then he is probably a poof. He will need to run faster and farther, march better, or climb the net more quickly in order to prove that he is not a poof. Women fare no better, although, as we have seen earlier, the logic seems to be reversed in their case. In other words, to succeed in running faster and farther, marching well, or leaping over large obstacles in a single bound, is to open up the suspicion that the woman is not feminine, and therefore, by default, a lesbian.”²³

The relationship between service and sexual identities

Sexual identities must be distinguished from sexual behaviour. “To identify” is “to understand and sympathise with a person or group because one regards oneself as being

similar or similarly situated”.²⁴ Homosexual behaviour has not been a reliable marker of a gay or lesbian identity throughout the twentieth century in the English-speaking world. Homosexuals have been constructed in the public consciousness as failed citizens. For people who thought of themselves as fundamentally decent, it was difficult to reconcile oneself with a ‘deviant’ and ‘perverted’ social category. Consequently, coming to terms with one’s sexual difference can require considerable self-inquiry and reconciliation.

Since the militaries of the Second World War were conscripted, they should be analysed in a somewhat different light than post-war voluntary forces when considering the meaning of a military identity. Evidence from the war years consistently suggests that sexual identities were not dependent on behaviour. In fact, many married men (who, presumably, did not think of themselves as ‘homosexual’) animate the wartime Canadian military records regarding homosexuality. Gay veterans have frequently remarked on the flexibility of sexual behaviour during that period.

Paul Hardman had affairs with many men in the US navy during the war. He remembers that “most of the ones that *were* playing were the married men. Almost everybody that was in this condition was married. Whether this is because I selected it that way, or it was the phenomenon, I don’t know. But I knew the safe bets were the married guys who were apparently used to something.”²⁵ In the US Army during the same conflict, Archibald Wilson made a similar analysis: “Often straight guys would be married and try to attack a guy on a troopship going to Europe. One actually tried to rape me! He was a married man from a farm somewhere in the Midwest. Down in the hold with the lights on, he got me somehow over to his quarters – some pretext. He was wrestling me on the bed, just trying to get my pants off; he was crazed – actually trying to

rape me. I was screaming. I said, 'Stop! Don't! Stop! Don't ...' A straight guy! And then there were other straight, married guys who'd kid about getting me into bed with them and so on. I was small and tender and all that, but nothing ever happened."²⁶ Sometimes, homosexual behaviour was an expression of power and domination, rather than sexual identity. John McPherson from the US Army remembers spending three days in a stockade: "A lousy MP forced me to have relations with him in a solitary-confinement cell. Another MP came in at midnight for the same reason, but he was unsuccessful."²⁷ At Camp Ipperwash in Ontario, Russ was a young gay man in 1944 when he witnessed the recruits harass an effeminate young man who "was so obvious, I mean, it stood out like a sore thumb." Finally, "one time I came back and I heard all this commotion going on in the showers and I went in and, I don't know, there was certainly three or four – maybe five or six – of them and they had him in there and they had him naked and they were doing things to him ... they were f---ing him.... They were raping him."²⁸ When used as a symbol of masculine power, homosexual actions could signify, paradoxically, the repudiation of a gay identity. Similarly, in the 1990s, soldiers in Canada's Airborne Regiment could allow a measure of homosexual activity as long as it did not interfere with a heterosexual identity.²⁹

For many, the homoerotic elements of military life can be more difficult for those with a gay or lesbian identity to negotiate. Especially those who have neglected the social and personal significance of their homosexual desires. For instance, Hall draws attention to the difficulties that face some gay men in very masculine settings: "I remember in about 1980 I was in a lorry with a group of soldiers driving hundreds of miles for an exercise, and the guys kept wanking into a sandbag to pass the time. They'd come really

loudly and then tell everyone that they had had a really good wank. I think one of them may have been cracking on to me, but I'm not really sure – I wasn't out to myself then. I, the gay man, was definitely the most uncomfortable with the situation.”³⁰ Such an open display of sexuality, in a heterocentric environment, could be intimidating for someone whose sexual fantasies were privately homosexual.

Some people, like Commander Duncombe, see their military service as proof that they are not limited by their homosexual orientation. Richard Teats says that he was motivated to escape the surveillance of the service police in the US Navy during his career in the 1950s because “I had something I wanted to prove to my father. My father knew I was gay, and I was going to prove to him I was man enough to be in ‘this man’s Navy.’”³¹ Meanwhile, many servicepeople have seen, and continue to see, their military service as incompatible with homosexual desires. For instance, Hall thinks that “some men and women join the armed forces in an attempt to ‘straighten up’: they believe that they will grow up and out of a homosexual phase once they are part of the competitive heterosexual environment of the army, navy or air force.” While the military may offer a ‘straight’ environment for youths who want to distance themselves from homosexual inclinations, Hall suggests that instead, it can have the opposite effect: “but for many others the heterosexual emphasis only confirms for them that they are different. Although they can point to events or feelings during their schooldays that should have given them clues, the commonest experience amongst the [gay] men and women I spoke to seems to be a self-discovery which took place some time after joining up.”³²

The meaning of military service can differ for homosexual men and women. While gay men can attempt to distance themselves from their fear of feminine characteristics

through their identity with the forces, military service can offer lesbians an identity that they see as decent and patriotic, and, therefore, not queer. Johnnie Phelps was a WAC soldier in the American forces during the Second World War. She addresses explicitly the issue of competing identities: “I was an American first, a soldier second, a woman third, and whatever else came in line fell in behind, you know. It’s unimportant. In fact, I fought *not* to be a lesbian for many years after I knew I was one and knew it was ‘wrong.’ I *wanted* to be like everybody else. Of course, I was not winning the battle, but I was fighting it!”³³ Even when young men do not look to the armed forces, consciously or otherwise, to resolve their self-doubts, the military environment can repress their self-actualisation as gay. Darren served throughout the 1980s with the Royal Canadian Navy. After he left the navy, he came out to himself and to others as gay. He does not regret his years of naval service, even though they interfered with his sexual and social development. He feels that the camaraderie that he experienced with his crew mates was invaluable. Entry to this community of sailors was conditional on being heterosexual, the reward was an exceptional level of trust and commitment that he feels is unique in the modern world. While he claims that he would “rather be dead” than have had his homosexual orientation known to his crew mates throughout his years of service, he remembers his naval career with fondness.³⁴

For others in the service who are coming to a recognition of their sexual orientation, the tension between the two identities can be difficult to reconcile. Mike had grown up in the cadets as a young teenager in Canada in the late 1980s. The army had become part of his life and identity. However, in the cadets, as in most educational institutions, there was no talk of sexual diversity; homosexuality, if it existed, existed

elsewhere. As an officer in the Reserve Army, he finds himself in the same environment, however he is not the same person. He finds it difficult to conceive how to “come out” when his superior officers quietly mock homosexuality. Since the sexual harassment guidelines have been enforced, his superiors will prefix their anti-homosexual remarks with such qualifiers as, “I know I shouldn’t say this but, ...”. Not being able to find a meeting place for his two identities, he lives a double life.³⁵

The Australian forces have also lifted their restrictions on homosexual servicemembers. Nevertheless, the problem of serving as an openly gay man remains. One Royal Australian Navy sailor, who decided to leave the service, explains the tension that he foresees should he remain: “If I was to stay in and ‘come out’ I’d always be watching my back. Some positive role models might help but unlike the army or the air force no one is yet being visible in the navy. My ship has a complement of a hundred and forty, and I am aware of five other homosexuals serving on board. Of these two have been removed, one to another base and another from the navy altogether. One other has resigned. Now I’m going too.”³⁶

For forces that do not allow homosexuals to serve, being released can open up the “possibility of finally being honest about themselves to others. It seems to become a time of personal development and reflection; whilst serving, few of the men and women interviewed [for Hall’s book on the effects of the exclusionary policies of the British forces] had really had a chance to sit down and talk about ‘coming out’, about the way in which being gay affected their emotions and feelings.”³⁷ The complex relationship between military service and gay identity was addressed by Simon Ingram, dismissed from the RAF: “When I was seventeen and eighteen, and just before I joined the RAF

when I was nineteen, I was having a kind of detached relationship with another boy. We had sex, of sorts, but never spoke about it. I always believed I would just be able to give it up whenever I wanted to. I assumed I would just stop and get married and have children and stuff. Before I joined the RAF I had never met an 'out' gay man and so had no role model or culture to evaluate myself against. I certainly did not consider myself to be gay."³⁸ Without clear role models and a sense that the military provides a place of belonging, gay and lesbian servicemembers in forces that have no restrictions continue to feel the need to choose between sexual and military identities.

The effects of the military's treatment of homosexual men and women

Being homosexual in the armed forces can be a stressful experience whether one is open or not about one's sexual difference. The coping strategies that individuals adopt can have short and long-term consequences in their lives. Some people feel that they have constructed their personalities fundamentally in response to their war service. Paul Hardman, who served in the US Navy during the Second World War feels that "the Navy made [him] incapable" of having a long-term relationship in his youth: "I remember one guy was in tears, who was in love with me so much, but I couldn't respond to it. It cheated me out of my whole emotional life; it trained me not to respond. And that tears you up. You don't realize the damage it's doing, and it ruins a kid's emotional life."³⁹ On the other hand, some people have responded defiantly, at some personal risk, to regulations against homosexuality. One British Army officer explains his active homosexual life during the war: "Well, I had a normal healthy sexual appetite. But it was

much more than that. I had a burning sense of indignation against the injustice of it all. If I had been celibate it would have been a capitulation to tyranny.”⁴⁰ Recalling his war service in the US Navy, Charles Schoen regrets that, as oppressed as he was as gay, he was no more compassionate to other disadvantaged groups: “The blacks were treated unequally, but *I even fell into that group by unconsciously* treating them with less respect, as if they were some sort of lower-class citizens.” He remembers that gay sailors under sentence, guarded by the marines, would be mocked and cajoled by everyone in the Mess. He feels that his silence in the face of that injustice influenced his life: “As one who knew what it was like to be gay, I still couldn’t jeopardize my own career by speaking out against those clowns. So I remained silent. The price one pays for silence is overwhelming!”⁴¹

The shame that could accompany a dishonourable discharge for homosexuality could indeed be overwhelming, especially for men who, like Commander Duncombe, had sacrificed their private lives for their military careers. In 1962, on the day that he learned that his twenty-year career had come to an abrupt end as a result of an RCMP investigation into his sexuality, Major Bert Sutcliffe remembers: “I went in the bedroom and I got the luger and I put bullets in it and I brought it out put in on top of the television... and went to the kitchen and poured myself a scotch and soda, then I came out and had a couple of drinks of that and then I thought, why the f--- should I kill myself?”⁴² Of course, many did not rebound easily from the effects of such an experience. When Lieutenant DiPierro was discharged from the Canadian Army in 1945 after serving the country faithfully throughout the war and risking his life repeatedly, he fell into a depression. His discharge certificate, which read “Medically unfit for active

service” because of his suspected homosexuality, had a long-term effect on him: “You get over it, but it took me years to get over it ... And I think about it everyday. I was thrown out of the Army ... I don’t know what – is it your pride or something that you are ashamed that something like that should have happened to you or you just sense the injustice of it all? Why should that have happened to me?”⁴³

For homosexuals who remain in the service, the pressure can be ongoing. Serving as a physician in the American forces in the 1980s, ‘Emily Black’ felt that not being able to disclose her sexual orientation created an unpleasant atmosphere: “This paranoia affects everything I do. ... You have to be careful when talking about things you’re going to see. I couldn’t just openly say, ‘Are going to the gay pride parade next weekend?’ You know, that just wouldn’t go over in a military hospital. ... The gay nurses that I’ve talked with are the same way. ... I resent having to be closeted so much on the job.”⁴⁴ There are times when she feels professionally compromised by her enforced silence: “And people (medical types) in the hospital will – and I really resent this – will make digs about people with AIDS. ... Once someone has a positive test result, everyone knows about it.”⁴⁵

While anti-harassment orders in Canada and Australia should protect vulnerable men and women, they are limited in practical terms. For instance, a sailor with the Australian Navy observed the effect of harassment of a female colleague: “One girl on the ship, she’s a lesbian and she was very open about it. She had big problems. It was the guys, not the girls that harassed her. It was like they couldn’t cope with the idea that she wasn’t available. But she eventually tried the ADF freephone number to report sexual harassment. Ultimately the only way that the ADF would take action is if she named the

people that were harassing her. That's a really stupid idea because if she dropped other people in the shit who would want to serve alongside her in the future? She left the navy instead."⁴⁶ Homosexual Canadian servicemen have also found that anti-harassment regulations are ineffective. By bringing charges against colleagues who have the support of the majority of the unit, the complainant can become the victim of a campaign of ostracism.⁴⁷

Over time, the aggressors in cases of sexual harassment can become the victims. The murderer of Private Winchell, whose case was cited earlier in this paper, had been goaded into the attack by Army Spc. Justin Fisher. Found guilty of a reduced charge of obstructing justice, Fisher was sentenced to twelve years in prison. In court, he called out in tear to the deceased, "Barry ... I'm sorry for the part I played in this ... I hope you know that if I could go back to the morning it happened, I would have changed it all." Journalist Deb Price reported, "It was as though Fisher were pleading with the American people to do something about the lethally anti-gay climate inside the military, a climate worsened by the ban on gay Americans serving openly. Because of an atmosphere that pits soldier against soldier, practically begging them to prove their manhood by proving their homophobia, Winchell is dead." The convicted, meanwhile, was sentenced to a life sentence. President Clinton observed, in a criticism of the policy he that he had implemented, that "Glover wasn't born hating that way. Somebody had to teach him to hate like that." Price argues that in the American forces, he "had no shortage of tutors."⁴⁸

Conclusion

The militaries in Canada and the United States had been important targets of the gay liberation movement in its struggle to ensure basic human rights for non-heterosexual people. Since that goal was achieved in Canada in 1992, the service experiences of homosexuals has not been a priority in the Canadian press. In the American case, the issue remains significant and cases of the abuse of gay and lesbian people are frequently publicised. I have turned the focus in this paper onto the actual experiences of service life. The formal policies of inclusion and exclusion are only one factor that determines the quality of that experience. It is important to understand what the armed forces signify for homosexual recruits, what expectations they have for their military service, and how they negotiate their way through their careers.

The evidence I have discussed in this paper shows that, for those who have been targeted by investigations, official policies have had devastating effects. However, in the absence of anti-homosexual policies, gay and lesbian servicemembers still face unique challenges. I have presented some of the elements of service life that have been continuous since the Second World War. The issue of whether or not to disclose one's sexual orientation is only partly influenced by policies that allow or disallow disclosure. The fact that the armed forces are gendered as masculine in the cultures under observation has influenced the social arrangements and expectations that take shape. Since the war and certainly at the present moment, reconciling military and homosexual identities has been a challenge for many servicemen and women. As long as militaries continue to project heterocentric self-images, that will continue to be a problem.

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- ¹ NAC, RG 24, reel T-15548, file 55-A-365.
- ² Joseph Dee, "Serving in silence comes at a price" *Trenton Times* February 27, 2000.
- ³ Mary Ann Humphrey *My Country, My Right to Serve* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1988), page 7.
- ⁴ Bert Sutcliffe interview 2000/11/09.
- ⁵ Bert Sutcliffe interview, 1994/08.
- ⁶ Gary Kinsman and Patrizia Gentile "*In the Interests of the State*": *The Anti-gay, Anti-lesbian national Security Campaign in Canada*, A Preliminary Research Report (Sudbury: Laurentian University, 1998); Daniel Robinson and David Kimmel "The Queer Career of Homosexual Vetting in Cold War Canada" *Canadian Historical Review* 75, 3, 1994.
- ⁷ Edmund Hall *We Can't Even March Straight: Homosexuality in the British Armed Forces* (London: Vintage, 1995), page 132.
- ⁸ E.J. Montini, *Arizona Republic*, September 28, 1999.
- ⁹ James Sterngold *New York Times* "Army May Discharge a Gay Lawmaker" 1999/08/26.
- ¹⁰ Montini.
- ¹¹ Bert Sutcliffe interview, 2000/11; Humphrey, page 46.
- ¹² Humphrey, page 8.
- ¹³ Humphrey, page 21.
- ¹⁴ Bérubé, Allan *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (New York: The Free Press, 1990).
- ¹⁵ David Rayside "The Perils of Congressional Politics" in Craig A. Zimmerman ed. *Gay Rights, Military Wrongs* (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1996).
- ¹⁶ Ilene Rose Feinman *Citizenship Rites: Feminist Soldiers and feminist Antimilitarists* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2000).
- ¹⁷ Hall, page 44.
- ¹⁸ Hall, page 45.
- ¹⁹ Mark Thompson, "Why Do People Have To Push Me Like That?" *Time Magazine*, 1999/12/13.
- ²⁰ Hall, page 69.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, page 70
- ²² *ibid.*
- ²³ *ibid.*
- ²⁴ Collins Concise Dictionary and Thesaurus (Wrotham, England: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995).
- ²⁵ Humphrey, page 22.
- ²⁶ Humphrey, page 56.
- ²⁷ Humphrey, page 33
- ²⁸ Russ Thomsom interview, 1994/08.
- ²⁹ Donna Winslow, "Rites of Passage and Group Bonding in the Canadian Airborne" *Armed Forces and Society* Volume 25, Number 3, Spring 1999, pages 429-457.

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- ³⁰ Hall, page 145
- ³¹ Humphrey, page 50.
- ³² Hall, page 116.
- ³³ Humphrey, page 39.
- ³⁴ Darren interview, 1996/10.
- ³⁵ Mike, interview 2000; also see Michael Rowe, “Another Soldier’s Story” *Fab National* 9, spring, 1999.
- ³⁶ Hall, page 149.
- ³⁷ Ibid., page 30.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Humphrey, page 26, 27, 57. Hall, page 31.
- ⁴⁰ Hall, page 137.
- ⁴¹ Humphrey, page 44.]
- ⁴² Bert Sutcliffe interview, 2002/09.
- ⁴³ Henri DiPierro interview, 2002/10.
- ⁴⁴ Humphrey, page 195.
- ⁴⁵ ibid, page 195-196.
- ⁴⁶ Hall, page 149.
- ⁴⁷ Michael Rowe.
- ⁴⁸ Deb Price, “Change law that breeds intolerant military” *The Detroit News* 2000/01/17.

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