



Big Issues

## Tell: An Intimate History of Gay Men in the Military

As "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" comes to an end, we sent Chris Heath to interview dozens of gay servicemen from the past and present to find out what life was really like as America's military struggled with its last great identity crisis

BY CHRIS HEATH | PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAN WINTERS

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**JOSEPH ROCHA**

25, former navy dog handler

**"It would require such a level of deceit and deception and such a removal of everything beautiful in your life."**

On a day to come very soon—September 20, 2011—a serviceman's sexuality will no longer be grounds for dismissal from the U.S. Armed forces. These are the voices explaining what it has been like to be a gay man<sup>1</sup> in the American military over the previous seventy or so years, from World War II veterans in their late eighties to young servicemen on active duty.

### 1. Life Today as a Gay Serviceman

How we got here: In 1992, many people thought that the discrimination was nearly over. "I remember being in the Castro," says John Forrett (army reserve, 1987–99), "and watching the TV at a bar with some friends, watching Al Gore and Bill Clinton swearing that if they became the tag team for America they were going to get rid of the harassment of gays and lesbians serving in the military." But when the tag team prevailed, they underestimated the resistance to such a reform from a coalition of social conservatives, religious groups, and a large part of the military itself. The consequence, the following year, was a messy kind of compromise that became colloquially known as "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." Gay people were allowed in the military but only as long as they didn't reveal their sexuality; to facilitate this, all members of the military were also prohibited from inquiring about anyone's possible orientation. This was presented as a kind of victory for the forces of progress—you were no longer excluded from serving—but it could instead be seen as solidifying discrimination. Gay people were only acceptable, in effect, to the degree to which they could successfully masquerade as nongay. Still, the whispered message from Clinton and Gore seemed to be that this was only a temporary stopgap while the nervous military took a large deep breath: *Trust us*, they

seemed to imply. *We'll be there soon.*

It took seventeen years. Seventeen years in which gay servicemen have existed in a paradoxical kind of netherworld. Even when it worked as it was supposed to, it was a very weird way to ask anyone to live.

The moment last December when President Obama signed the bill repealing "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" only marked the start of a period of training and preparation leading up to the final removal of the policy. Servicemen were advised that until then the policy would still apply, and that they could potentially face its sanctions if they identify

themselves publicly as gay. That is why the active service personnel interviewed here—whom I met with off base across America and in England or communicated with electronically in Afghanistan—are only referred to anonymously.

**Air Force #1** (*lieutenant colonel, eighteen years of service*): "It's always in the back of my mind. Even as private as you try to keep, you may slip up. Someone may find a Facebook post. See you out and about. So frustrating because, if it happened, there was no ability to assume that your record stood for itself. All of a sudden there was this mystical discovery that made your record go into the trash."

**Navy #1** (*lieutenant, fourteen years*): "There's always been a fear that people would find out and then hold it over you for some kind of leverage. I have seen it happen: 'If you don't do this, I'm going to report you.' "

**Air Force #1:** "Two of my friends were discovered, both officers—it's a long and arduous process for an officer to get kicked out for being gay. For an enlisted member, it takes about five days. Paperwork is much easier. It's really just 'You do not meet standards.' Within five days, out the door."

**Air Force #2** (*senior airman, three years*): "No one at my job would ever, ever suspect that I was gay at all. I talk about Sam, I even say 'Sam' at work, 'I'm meeting Sam, we're going to do this and that,' and they're like, 'Oh yeah, how's she been?' The worst part is when they start asking me about our sex life and I have to make shit up. But I'm 'That's the woman I'm going to marry, so I'm not cool with you guys talking about my wife like that,' and everybody goes, 'Yeah, you're right.' "

**Marines #1** (*major, fourteen years*): "I'm older, I'm single, and I don't talk about a girlfriend. I don't what we call 'gender fuck,' don't do any of that. So I always feel like there is a bright light shining on me."

**Marines #2** (*captain, nine years*): "Part of what has really allowed me to hide in plain sight is the fact that I don't meet the stereotype. And you're good at your job—a gay person wouldn't be good at his job, so obviously you're not gay. You're a Marine, you don't mind getting dirty, going out into the field and not showering for weeks at a time...and, if you were gay, when you have to shower with all these other guys you'd get all excited. You're not getting excited so you're clearly not gay. I mean, if you want to hide, the Marine Corps is one of the best places to do that, because nobody wants to admit they are standing next to a gay guy. Nobody wants to admit that they have gone to war with gay people."

**Air Force #3** (*captain, eleven years*): "You can be upset about a lot of things—you can be upset that the law was what it was. But I don't think you can be upset about your service, because ultimately it was your choice. You know, we're a volunteer force."



**TOM NORTON**

*61, former army medevac pilot*

**"I went to Vietnam with post-traumatic stress disorder, which I had had from the age of 5 when I learned the word *homosexual* and knew that's what I was."**

**Marines #2:** "When I went into the recruiter's office to sign all the paperwork and we got to 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell,' I started reading through it, because this was significant to me. I was raised by an attorney—it's important to know what you're signing. I had made it about halfway through and the recruiter was frustrated with how long it was taking me, and he said, 'Well, basically, are you gay?' I hadn't even joined the military yet, and here he had asked me! If my life had been a movie, that would be the dramatic foreshadowing of what was to come. Of the way it was going to be."



## 2. One Man's Operation Iraqi Freedom

Many gay servicemen in the modern era—including Eric Alva (Marines, 1991–2004)—have completed long military careers without their sexuality ever being revealed. And therefore few people realized that the first American seriously wounded in the invasion of Iraq during the second Gulf war was a gay man.

When Alva signed up, before "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," he had to lie on his paperwork. "I knew I was lying," he says. "But I loved what I did, I loved my job, and I didn't want to tell anyone. I said, 'It's going to be my secret.' I knew I was not going to be happy in a way, but I knew this was what I wanted." In 2003 he was deployed to the Middle East, and on March 21 he crossed the border from Kuwait. His unit was part of a huge convoy that stopped outside Basra. Alva got out of his Humvee and went to fetch something from the back of the vehicle. "That's when I triggered the IED. I was awake, my hearing was sort of gone. My hand was covered in blood and part of my index finger was gone. The chaplain was holding my head and I was telling him I didn't want to die. I was taken off a helicopter in Kuwait—it was estimated that I was only in Iraq about three hours—and carried into surgery. I woke up later and when I looked down I saw that the right side of my sheet was flat. I cried myself asleep, only to wake up hours later and see that it's true: My leg is gone."

As he recuperated, he learned about his inadvertent status. "I don't know who designated me to be the first. I was never given a certificate or anything. One-millionth shopper. Now I have the dubious distinction of being the first American injured when the war started. It didn't make it better or worse. I mean, my life was changed forever. I was angry that my leg was gone. Even when I was still in the hospital, hours would go by so slow, and I actually said to myself: 'Who is going to love me now?' I'd never really experienced dating anyone. 'Who is going to love me now? I'm missing a leg.' "

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*1. Lesbians have suffered under the same prohibitions and prejudices and share many of the same experiences, as well as some that are distinct, but this article concentrates on the experience of gay men.*

Meanwhile, the media picked up on his story. He went on *Oprah*. *People* magazine gave him an award. But nobody thought to pry too deeply into his personal life. After the attention died down, his post-military world began to take shape. He went back to college; he did find a boyfriend. And when, in 2006, the battles over "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" in the military and gay marriage in the wider community were simmering, Alva's boyfriend at the time pointed out to him that he did have some notoriety that might be of use. "I finally said, you know what, I'm going to tell my story. The first American injured in the Iraq war is a gay Marine. He wanted to give his life to this country."



## 3. Invisible Partners

It is often difficult enough for straight men and women to balance the demands of a military career—the extended periods away, the risks involved—with that of a romantic life. For gay military members who choose to do so, there has been the extra burden that their partners must remain invisible. In one of the meetings I hold with active military men, three meet me in a chain restaurant. (These meetings have been arranged through a private online network called OutServe, set up only last year, which allows gay and lesbian servicepeople a safe and secure way of finding and communicating with one another.) This evening, two arrive with their boyfriends. One of the boyfriends tells me how difficult it was when his partner was recently in Afghanistan. "If something happened," he points out, "I wouldn't have got a phone call. I would have known nothing about it at all. If he didn't call for two days, I was freaking out." While sitting here with me, the couples often hold hands under the table, but they are also ever watchful of the restaurant door in case someone from their base walks in. To be in the military and still try to live any kind of life as a gay man, it's not easy.

**Air Force #4** (senior airman, four years): "Right now our relationships don't exist."

**Air Force #3:** "I've had three deployments [while] with the same person. Every time it's been 'All right, see you later.' All the spouses get together, do stuff. He's just there by himself, fending for himself."



**CHUCK SCHOEN**  
86, former navy nuclear specialist

**"My success for nineteen years was: The people I was with didn't know or never said anything, and I never said anything."**

**Marines #2:** "The relationship lasted for about four years, but I always felt like I was disrespecting him, to have to pretend he didn't exist when I went to work. When I got deployed, he was there with my family when I left. It kind of sucked—to shake his hand and a little pat on the back and 'I'll see you when I see you' kind of thing. And when you're getting ready to come back, the spouses were getting classes—here's how you welcome your Marine back into the family—and my boyfriend didn't get any of that. I had a really hard time adjusting to being home. We tried to make it work for a year but he was getting more and more paranoid about people finding out about us. It killed me that he felt that way because of me. I don't think we ever really had a chance, ultimately."

**Air Force #3:** "When I was deployed, every Sunday we would sit down on opposite sides of the world and we would each order a pizza and we would watch a movie together over Skype. We weren't doing anything bad except trying to spend some time together. But there was no 'I love you.' Certainly nothing sexual, or anything like what some straight guys do over Skype."

**Navy #2** (captain, twenty years): "Personally, I haven't had a lot of struggles. The hardest thing that I faced was about eight years ago. I was dating somebody for about two years who had gotten out of the army. He was HIV positive, and I didn't know that, and he ended up dying—it just happened very quickly. I am not positive, luckily. So I had a lot of difficulties grasping with that personally, dealing with his death, and I had to take time off work, but still not tell them. I couldn't go to the doctor or the psychologist. There wasn't really anybody to talk to."

**Army #1** (lieutenant colonel, seventeen years): "I met my boyfriend in '97. We've been together ever since. This will be our fourteenth year. It's worked out. Honestly, while I'm certainly happy to see its demise, I've never had a 'close call' or any significant hardships serving under DADT."

**Navy #2:** "I take my boyfriend to the commissary and to the grocery store on base, and it's always an interesting dynamic when I see people that I know. Just doing the same thing that every other couple is doing—buying Wheaties and milk and yogurt and dog food."

**Air Force #2:** "As soon as we see someone, we always split in separate directions. Even going to the movies, I go and line up at one end of the line and he is at the other end of the line."

**AIR FORCE CAPTAIN**

*in active service*

**"It's a sanity issue. Guys I've flown with for a couple of months, they all know, because for my mental sanity I can't handle being this close to these guys and keeping that charade up. It's like: How many times can you lie before you go completely nuts?"**

**Navy #2:** "My boyfriend is not in the military. In fact, he's left of Che Guevara in his social viewpoint. And he thinks it is just all great fun and he's corrupting the military. I think it's funny, because he's not changing me. Just today we put down money on a house that we're buying together and, now I'm retirement-eligible, that's part of what's buying this nice house. [laughs] So, as much as he thinks he's corrupting the moral fabric of military society, he's actually sucking off the teat of Uncle Sugar."



#### 4. One Man's Tale of Life Under "Don't Ask, Don't Tell"

Silence can protect, but it can also provide a potent and despicable weapon. In the shadow of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," whenever gay servicemen did face any kind of homophobic harassment, they were powerless to draw attention to it without potentially triggering the end of their military career. The rule itself became the very tool of their oppression: "The 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' policy," says Joseph Rocha (navy, 2004–7), "punishes homosexuals who comply, and it protects bigots."

Before his own experience turned ugly, Rocha was exactly the kind of idealistic, motivated recruit the military must wish for. He signed the paperwork on his eighteenth birthday, and eventually applied to join a K-9 unit in Bahrain, training to be a dog handler. "I just got caught up in this little unit with no oversight, with a history of corruption and a history of abuse and harassment and hazing, and I didn't survive it. It was a boys' club—they liked to gamble, they liked to drink, they liked to smoke, and there was a large aspect of the solicitation of prostitution. None of these things appeal to me—one, because my mother was a drug addict; two, because I had a Catholic upbringing. Nothing to do with the fact that I was gay. But when you get caught up in these little groups of boys, the first excuse for anything that doesn't fit in with them is that you're gay. And I had too much pride to say that I wasn't gay. I felt that I deserved to not have to answer that question. So then all I did was make it worse for myself, in that it became a curiosity that was insatiable for them. I think my downfall was the fact I didn't stand up for myself...but how would I have?"



**ERIC ALVA**

*40, former Marine and veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom*

*“If I could, you know what I’d want to tell my story?”*

The harassment grew worse. Of a number of escalating events—Rocha was also force-fed dog food and locked into a shit-filled dog kennel—the most abusive and explicitly homophobic was when he was ordered by his commander to act in a dog-training scenario, repeated over and over so that every dog in the unit could be run through it. "The scenarios were supposed to be relevant to what the dogs or the handlers would experience. Like a domestic dispute, or an armed individual who has been spotted on the base, or someone strapped with explosives. This day he chose that the scenario would be that I would be getting caught giving another service member a blow job and, once the dogs came in, I was supposed to jump up from having been in between this guy's legs. He would coach as to how exactly he wanted it played out, which was the sickest part of it." Rocha says he had to act this out between half a dozen and a dozen times, about fifteen to twenty minutes each time. As they repeated it, his commander ordered Rocha to make the scenario more extreme. "He wanted me to be very queer and flamboyant. He wanted me to pretend like there was stuff on my face. Loving it so much that each scenario was gayer and more disgusting—the introduction of fake semen, that I would have to wipe my face, or that I would have to make slurping noises. The level of humiliation I experienced that day, that's when I knew I wasn't safe in the military."

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Marine. He wanted to give his life to this country."*

Nonetheless, Rocha chose to say nothing about what had happened. "There's this self-righteous and cocky attitude that if it was really so bad then I would have reported it. Anyone who gets off thinking that in 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' under the Bush administration anyone could have gone and said, 'Hey, I'm being antagonized under the principle that I might be gay' and feel safe is absurd." Eventually these events—details of which are still disputed by other participants—came to light in a broader investigation; in its aftermath one of the senior officers being held responsible—a woman who happened to be Rocha's best friend in the unit—committed suicide. Rocha's sexuality was not exposed, and he was subsequently admitted into the Naval Academy Preparatory School. There he reluctantly decided that he was no longer prepared to live with the fear of being discovered: "In order for you to be protected by 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell,' it would require such a level of deceit and deception and such a removal of everything that is beautiful in your life—of relationships, of meaning, of friendships. You would have to have no gay friends, no friends that knew you were gay, no friends who understood what it was like to be you. That's not human and shouldn't be asked of anyone, especially not of our service members."

Following full repeal, Rocha intends to rejoin. "I'm lucky," he notes, "because a lot of people whose lives and careers were ruined by 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' don't have that opportunity anymore. I just can't wait to be in uniform again."



### **5. Life Seventy Years Ago as a Gay Serviceman: World War II**

It was only really around the Second World War that military discrimination became codified and organized, and that the focus moved from simply sanctions against homosexual acts to an attempt to identify and weed out homosexual tendencies—though, as would be seen again and again, when fighting bodies were needed badly enough, such concerns would often evaporate. Here, as over the years, people's experiences vary greatly; one of the pernicious aspects of prejudice is that it is often applied, or not applied, in such an arbitrary manner.

**Arch Wilson,<sup>2</sup> 87:** "We're going back a hell of a long way. I was 19 then. The myth was, if you volunteered instead of waiting to be drafted, you would be treated better. Well, that was false. I do have to thank the military for tearing me out of the typical hometown setting where I would have been trapped in Scranton, Pennsylvania. If I had stayed there, I would have had to get married like everybody there, and it would have been a disaster. I would have been crushed. No space for homosexuals back then. It was something to be ashamed of and hide."

**Jack Strauss, 88:** "We had heard about these very frightening psychiatrists who were going to grill you. We thought they were the all-seeing people. So we were a little apprehensive. But it certainly didn't happen that way. I was called in, and there was a man sitting behind this desk, and he pulled down his glasses and looked at me, and the only thing he said to me was 'Do you like girls?' I said, 'Oh yes. And I love to dance.' And he looked over at the door and said, 'Next!' "

**John McNeill, 85:** "They were in desperate need of more cannon fodder—they didn't care whether we were gay or straight."

**AW:** "In January '45, the Belgian Bulge occurred, and American troops, Patton's Third Army, were slaughtered, and the army decided: We don't need any more hot pilots, we need more infantry, so I did go overseas as an infantry rifle replacement in the spring. This man tried to rape me on the troop ship between Boston and Le Havre. I was small and I was cute—who wasn't cute at 19, 20?—and he was a big, horny guy. I was afraid to scream, because people would wonder, 'Why was he after you?' I was afraid I had it coming to me because I was made that way."

**Edward Zasadil, 86:** "I was not revealing my gayness to anybody. I did have one or two incidents, but no one noticed it. We were in two-man tents, a good-looking fellow from another platoon was bunked with me, and I woke up at night, finding he was playing with my penis. And we did that every night after that. It was taking a chance. But all in all I just kept everything very straight. There were the usual nasty remarks about gay people—'homos' and whatnot. But I passed it off. All my life. Acted as straight as possible. Listen, my life was a pretense the whole time."<sup>3</sup>

**JM:** "Many of us were in army divisions primarily composed of 17- and 18-year-olds. We tended to be intellectuals, who don't make good soldiers. We were sent into combat right at the Battle of the Bulge—I was with the 87th Infantry Division and we were the first in the Alsace-Lorraine to cross the border into Germany. And the Germans

counterattacked with Tiger tanks and the whole group was either killed or captured. I ended up a prisoner of war within two weeks of arriving at the front. We were literally starved—I went down to about eighty pounds. All we could think of was where the next meal was going to come from. The drive for survival greatly outweighs the drive for sexual fulfillment—under those circumstances, this is not an issue. As soon as I got back and started eating well, the problem was back again."

**AW:** "In this boxcar going overnight from France to Germany, May of '45, I had a little romance with a married man next to me. Oh, that was a kick. There we were, sleeping on straw. Absolutely no lights. We wound up next to each other. And it was just easy, it was natural. That was it. Troops that pass in the night. In the morning we opened the boxcar doors and we were in Germany, and very quickly the word came to us that Germany had that morning surrendered. Wow, can you imagine the exhilaration in that boxcar? A day earlier, I could have become a statistic. We were flown out to the Philippines to form a new army to invade Japan. Well, timing. The day my plane landed in Manila, the U.S. dropped the first atomic bomb. We didn't have to invade. We were brought home, sent to a big camp in North Carolina. In the rec center, the men's room was so busy—big glory holes in the toilet partitions. Play out in these vast fields at night. Everybody was just waiting to be discharged, so lots of people were taking chances. It just happened, it was spontaneous. Just because: Mission Accomplished."

**JM:** "I found out right after the war that if someone were discharged as homosexual, a notice of that fact was sent home to their local draft board, so that their whole community would come to know that they were gay. And this led indirectly to the formation of gay ghettos in the major cities, where people who couldn't go home, because their sexuality had been revealed by the army, had to move into Greenwich Village or the San Francisco Castro. This was the beginning of the huge gay communities in the major cities."



## 6. An Out American Soldier at War

If sometimes "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" has been compromised by persistent asking, then, as Darren Manzella (army, 2002–8) discovered, there have been other times when, curiously, the military shut their ears to what they'd been told.

"I finally accepted that I was gay the first time I went to Iraq in 2004. We were being hit by mortars and rockets every day, we had car bombs going off. A friend of mine was killed the fourth day we were there. That experience made me come out to myself and accept it." It was when he returned to Texas from his tour of duty that the problems started. "I started getting e-mails harassing me, getting phone calls at work. Finally my supervisor said he could tell something was wrong, and I told him: 'I'm getting these e-mails, I have a boyfriend in Austin, and I don't know what to do anymore—I need some guidance here.' He was very understanding at first. He said, 'Okay, take the rest of the afternoon off, go home, and we'll see you tomorrow morning.' After I left, he went to the legal department and turned me in."

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2. *Sadly, Wilson passed away in July, just before this article went to press.*

3. *Zasadil did not come out until the age of 80.*

This was the summer of 2006. From here, Manzella's case was supposed to follow a well-established one-way path under "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" that would lead to his inevitable discharge. But that is not what happened. Manzella cooperated fully with the investigation; when he was asked for evidence that he wasn't just claiming to be gay in order to trigger a discharge, he even supplied photos, and footage of him and his boyfriend passionately kissing on a road trip. A month later he was called in to see his battalion commander and told that the investigation had been closed: "His words were 'We found no proof of homosexuality.'" While wary of putting further words in the commander's mouth, Manzella felt what was clearly being communicated was: *You're a good soldier. We don't want to lose you.* Manzella was puzzled. "It doesn't make sense, but in my mind I was able to stay in the military and keep serving my country."

As far as he was concerned, this meant that he no longer had to hide his sexuality, and in an era when no such category of person was supposed to exist, he started to live as an out soldier in the U.S. military. When he returned to Iraq, it was on that basis. "I was open, and my colleagues knew and my bosses knew. The generals knew. I looked at

everybody else's desks and they had pictures of their wives, husbands, or boyfriends or girlfriends, so I had pictures of my boyfriend up."

While he was deployed, the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, a campaigning group who had been giving him guidance, told him that *60 Minutes* wanted to do a piece about an openly gay man serving in a combat zone, persuading him that it would give a voice to the "65,000 men and women in the military" who weren't able to live as openly as he was. Even after the interview aired in December 2007, the military took another four months to decide. This time it was agreed that he would leave with an honorable discharge. "I met people who have horror stories. I was very lucky at every step."



### **7. A Report from a Trailer Park in the Desert**

Just before 10 a.m. each weekday morning in a Desert Hot Springs trailer park in California, a few old men gather to watch *The Price Is Right*. I first came here a day earlier to find Chuck Schoen, an 86-year-old veteran slowed down just a little by his Parkinson's, but after I arrived he asked whether I would like to speak to anyone else. I was confused until it became clear that, partly by chance and partly by a chain of personal recommendations over the years, this trailer park had become some kind of gay-veteran hot spot: There are eight or ten others living here, and more nearby. And some of them like to gather in the trailer shared by Schoen and his partner of forty-two years, fellow veteran Jack Harris, for this morning ritual.

Though I'm forewarned when I arrive this morning that "we all suffer from CRS—Can't Remember Shit," most of these trailer-park veterans remember plenty. They had very different experiences, too. David Schneider, for instance, served in the navy until 1980 doing aircraft maintenance, retiring with a pension after twenty years of being secretive and careful. He says that he didn't seek promotion past a certain point because it would have required an investigation to get him clearance, and he was concerned they would discover his subscriptions to gay magazines. He avoided gay bars because he was worried about undercover agents and so would use prostitutes and hustlers instead. When he had a relationship with someone for three years, he never told his partner he was in the navy. "He figured it out, but that's how paranoid I was." Right toward the end of his service, he remembers being very tempted by someone he was giving after-hours counseling to at work. "There was a real opportunity. The thing that went through my head: 'Don't be an idiot and throw it all away.' I was only six months from retirement. And to this day I am very happy with the decision that I made."

Mel Tips, conversely, seemed to have threaded a path through the military that was the most open and least problematic of any I hear. He says that when he would travel aboard ship after joining the naval reserve in 1949, sexual opportunities were rampant: "They were giving blow jobs in the laundry almost every night. Somebody knocks, they'd let me in, close the door, and there would be a whole roomful just carrying on like mad. I thought it was funny. On the ship going up to Halifax, Nova Scotia, we would sit out on the fantail jacking each other off, watching movies." Tips says he also owned and ran a male go-go bar called The Brig with male strippers on Beverly Boulevard in Los Angeles. "Remember Sal Mineo? He came to my bar. Oh, and Liberace. He loved to come in and watch my dancers." Even more brazenly, when Tips opened a bar next door, he called it Tips Tavern. "It was advertised in magazines as a gay bar owned by Mel Tips. I never had anybody accuse me or say anything."

But it is Schoen who I had initially come here to see, for his tale seems emblematic of many who fell afoul of the more vindictive scrutiny that became commonplace in the '50s and '60s. Schoen joined the navy on July 20, 1942. He was 17. "I knew I was gay, and I knew that they kicked you out in the military," he says. "I don't know if I gave it any thought." Like many, his chosen path was one of discretion. "Most of them were quiet like me. There were very few who weren't quiet. Privately I was comfortable with it, but I was never open about it. My success for nineteen years was: The people I was with didn't know or never said anything, and I never said anything." Whatever sexual activity he engaged in, he waited until he was off the ship. "As a matter of fact, I wasn't that active sexually. It seemed like it was safer just not getting involved with anybody." Then, in 1953, he met a man at the YMCA, and they were together for seventeen years. "We had a house like this and we lived together. Come home at night and did what we wanted to do. A normal life."

His navy career flourished: "I was in an assembly team for nuclear weapons which took the top-secret clearance." But in 1963, when he was only months away from earning his pension, things went awry. "The commanding officer gave me the message that I was to report to the office of naval intelligence. I thought, 'Oh, it's them, they've got me.'" They claimed that he had been named as a homosexual and pressured him to confirm the details, showing him photos of



other men who were implicated. "Of course, I denied everything they asked me," he says. He has always considered what happened three months later to be entrapment. "An undercover cop, we had a few drinks at the bar and talked and so on. We went upstairs to his hotel room and, after we got started, he pulls a badge out." Another police officer had also been watching from the room next door. That same night, they released him to the navy, and it seemed clear to him that this whole chain of events had been instigated by navy investigators.

"I thought I should commit suicide," he remembers. "I was pretty depressed. You think of so many things." The next day the navy gave him a choice—he could either go through a court martial (it was suggested to him that he could get five years of military prison and hard labor for each offense) or accept an other-than-honorable discharge. So he agreed to the latter, even though he knew he would lose his pension.

Back then, people were yet to raise their voices and suggest that this wasn't right. The first high-profile legal attack on this system would not come until 1975, when an airman named Leonard Matlovich initiated a long battle in which he managed to highlight many of the system's absurdities, inconsistencies, and cruelties—most pithily summarized by the quote on his gravestone: "When I was in the military they gave me a medal for killing two men and a discharge for loving one." In Schoen's era, there were many men like him who, after years of service, were summarily dispensed with. "I don't ever expect to get a retirement check," he says.



### 8. One Man's Vietnam

"Back in the '50s in Oregon," recalls Tom Norton (Army, 1968-71), "they were still putting people in jail for homosexual activity, and that certainly sends a strong message to a young kid. I realized I was gay when I was 5 years old, and I struggled with it my whole childhood, thinking about suicide. I decided I would join the army, thinking that would change me. Make me a man, so to speak. The day I joined the army was the first I had had a good night's sleep in as long as I could remember, that I didn't think about committing suicide.

"I wanted to be a pilot. Again being dumb and naive, when I graduated from flight school I thought, I'll do the honorable thing and volunteer to be a medevac pilot in Vietnam. I got shot down four times in a month. I was in so much emotional pain over being gay that anything was better than that. I went to Vietnam with post-traumatic stress disorder, which I had had from the age of 5 when I learned the word *homosexual* and knew that's what I was. Whatever I experienced in Vietnam was better than that."

Norton wasn't sexually active in Vietnam—"I would numb myself and avoid anything sexual"—and it was only years later that he realized that some of the men in his social circle there were gay. "A group of enlisted gay men that seemed to be at ease with who they were. They smoked a lot of marijuana, and they would mince heroin in with their cigarette tobacco—that was kind of the drug of choice. Medevac companies, we were treated differently than other military units just because of the danger of our job. Our life expectancy was so short they let us do our own thing. I literally got shot down over twenty times—I stopped counting at twenty. It's just a miracle, really, that I didn't get killed."

Norton, who has spent many years recovering, now lives in Portland with his partner, a man who happens to be Vietnamese and grew up there during the war. "It is quite ironic," Norton reflects. "You never know where life is going to lead you. He struggled so much with growing up gay in Vietnam and being ostracized for his sexuality, just wanting to be loved and cared for with the war going on around him. He's never really asked me about the war, and I've never really talked to him about it."



### 9. Silence or Trust

Many servicemen serving under "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" decided that their only option was literally to tell no one for the length of their military career. Others, inevitably, concluded that the only way to survive was to take some people into their trust. Given the potential implications, the decision of whether—and whom—to trust is an enormous one.

**Air Force #4:** "No one knows about me."

**Air Force #2:** "There's one good friend that I thought about telling, but always right when I think, 'Okay, it's cool to tell him,' he'll say something that is kind of weird about gay people."

**Marines #2:** "I came out to one person when I was in my first unit. Everything was fine, then something came up—I said something job-related that she took offense to personally. And her form of retaliation was to go in and tell my officer in charge that I was gay. It's the easiest thing you can do because there's no defense against that. Thankfully, I had proven myself at that unit and his response was: 'He's a good Marine. I'm not really interested in any of this nonsense.... Mind your own business.' And that was the first, last, and only time that I ever explicitly told another Marine I was gay."

**Marines #1:** "I worked in the House and Senate. I remember riding the elevator with Jesse Helms, just thinking, 'You hateful son of a bitch.' I was looking for a career change so I joined the Marine Corps. The senator I worked for and the congressman I worked for knew I was gay—they were both conservative Republicans—and they wrote a letter of recommendation to get me into the Marine Corps."

**Air Force #3:** "It's a sanity issue. Guys I've flown with for a couple of months, they all know because for my mental sanity I can't handle being this close to these guys and keeping that charade up. It's like: How many times can you lie before you go completely nuts?"

**Navy #1:** "The Marine Corps is so stringent—I don't see the navy being that way. People are already open. When we talked about 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' being repealed on the ship, nobody really cared."

**Marines #1:** "The problem for me a lot of times is my buddies' wives. They think, 'He's got a great house, he's nice, he's wonderful,' and they want to set me up and set me up. And I'm demur...demur...demur...and finally you don't do stuff with them, because, come on, girl, get over it. Drop it already."

**Navy #1:** "I'm always listening to Britney or Lady Gaga or Madonna—I don't turn it down or hide it. That starts a lot of rumors and discussions, but that's who I am."

**Air Force #1:** "All of the pilots in the squadron who talk about the episode of *Glee* last night—that would have been a giveaway before. I just assume everybody is gay now because you can't tell anymore. Some of my married friends act gayer than any of my gay friends."

**Marines #2:** "You'd be amazed how gay Marines are when they don't believe there's anyone gay around."

**Air Force #5 (senior airman, two years):** "Every three or four months I go out with people I work with to a club and I make out with some girl in front of them. It doesn't give me any pleasure, but if they don't see someone constantly getting with someone, they question it. I don't go for the good-looking girl. I've told them I like old fat women and they believe me. I tell the women: 'I have some friends there, they don't know I'm gay and I don't want them to know I'm gay. I will buy you drinks for the rest of the night and we'll dance together and is it okay if I kiss you a few times?' Most of the time they're fine with it. They just want somebody to dance with."

**Navy #3 (commander, reserves, twenty years):** "A pal of mine on a carrier went to the CO and said, 'What is your policy on gays?' The CO looked at my friend and said, 'If somebody wants to get off my ship for being gay, they have to come to me with two Polaroids, in both of them they have to be clearly sucking cock, and I want to be able to see their face.' That's why I love my navy."



## 10. One Man's Secret Too Many

It's tempting to see gay servicemen's entire military existence through the prism of this single issue—the campaigner, the oppressed, the stoic endurer—and as the totality of who they are. Real lives tend to be much more complicated. In June 1998, Richard Merritt (Marines, 1985–98) appeared on the cover of *The New York Times Magazine*, in uniform but with his face obscured, and inside the story described what life was actually like for someone gay serving in the military. But his true story, and how he actually accommodated his sexuality within a military that wanted to pretend it didn't exist, was more complicated than he revealed at the time.

Merritt partly agreed to participate in the article, written by novelist Jennifer Egan, because he had already decided that he was leaving the Marines. (He would become a lawyer.) Gradually he became the focus of her reporting. He knew this wasn't a good idea: she was writing a story about a man living with a secret, but he knew that he had another secret that he couldn't tell her, one that would cast him in a very different light. "If I could go back I would smack myself across the head and say, 'Tell Jennifer you cannot be the focus of her story.' But I wasn't at that place. I

wanted to be on the cover." In her story he came across as, he says, "a very conservative type of gay," but when he started letting people know that its subject was him, he must have known the clock was ticking. Eventually, *The Advocate* exposed him.

His other secret happened midway through his military career. "Depression was always an issue for me, always has been," he explains. "I had taken some time off from my battalion and was sitting at home just flipping through the *San Diego Gay and Lesbian Times*, and there was an ad for 'male models wanted.' I can't say I wasn't looking for it—I was looking to see how easy is it to get into porn." Soon Merritt was appearing in his first gay porn film. (It was called *Barracks: Glory Hole 4*.) Over the next four months—a period in which he was promoted from first lieutenant to captain in his day job—he appeared in seven more, stopping only when he got into a steady relationship. In one he even wore a navy uniform (he drew the line at being a Marine) and didn't hide his background from his co-stars. "I remember being on a shoot up in the Russian River, and all of us in the video were in the Jacuzzi, and they were passing pot around, and I said, 'No, I can't smoke pot, I'm in the Marines, I get drug-tested.' And they all looked at me and said, 'You're in the *Marines*? You're crazy.' I thought, 'Oh my God, I've got a Jacuzzi full of porn stars telling me I'm crazy.'" The way he sometimes justified to himself what he did was that it was a response to the military's homophobia, albeit an extreme one: "I would feel very angry at the policy, and it became 'Well, fuck you, Marine Corps—I'm going to do this and be as gay as I want to be for the world to see. I'll show you what I think of your policy!'"



### 11. A Report from the White House

**Marines #1:** "Since I'm a single officer in the Marine barracks and I've got the highest security clearance you can get, I also serve at the White House in close quarters with President Bush and President Obama at social events. Very seldom was the president ever alone, but one time the president had said, 'Go and get the vice president,' and all the straphangers went, and the president went in the Blue Room and was just standing there waiting for Biden. And there was no Secret Service around or anything, and I went, 'Fuck it, I'm going to go and talk to the president about "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." ' He was looking out south—there's an incredible view down past the Washington Monument to the Jefferson. And I just stepped in and said, 'Sir?' and he turned around and walks to me and I just started: 'You know, sir, I want to let you know that there are a number of us that work very close to you who appreciate very much what you're doing on "Don't Ask, Don't Tell"—more than you probably realize.' And he was shaking my hand, he looks up and it's like...he got it. I said, 'I want to thank you for this.' And he goes, 'No, I want to thank you. Thank you for your service, and thank you for your courage.' "

### 12. On the Day Everything<sup>4</sup> Changes

New freedoms don't just wash over those receiving them. You have to decide what to do with the liberty they allow, and also what not to do. I asked the active-duty servicemen I spoke with how they actually plan to act on the day "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" finally ends, and in the days that follow, and what they believe will actually change.

**Air Force #3:** "After lying for so many years to people that you see every single day, it's kind of weird. 'Hey, by the way...' That's why I don't think I'm going to say anything."

**Marines #2:** "A straight Marine doesn't walk into work and say, 'Just so everybody knows, I'm straight.' So I don't want to walk into work and say, 'Just so everybody knows, I'm gay.' I don't think I should have to do that."

**Navy #3:** "Nobody joined up to be 'the unit gay guy,' but that's who you're going to be, and I think it's incumbent on us who are senior to basically identify ourselves so that younger kids can look and say, 'Hey, it is okay.' Because we didn't have that."

**Air Force #1:** "I'm a commander of a fairly large unit. When the Senate and the House passed the law, I watched it and I cried. I DVR'd it and I'll keep it forever. Then I thought, Do I come out and tell everybody that works for me that, 'Hey, guess what—you guys are all part of history'? I still don't know what I'm going to do, to be honest. I have lived my life in a manner where I have a clear separation of work and personal life. Am I going to put a picture of my boyfriend on my desk? Probably not. But I could, and that's going to be a nice feeling. Will I put a rainbow flag on my house? No, but I could. That's a nice feeling."

**Air Force #2:** "There's nothing different except that I like guys. I respect straight people, you know. I'm not going to make you uncomfortable."

**Air Force #3:** "For the most part we're just normal people in normal relationships. We are not all crazy and promiscuous and stuff. I go home at the end of the night to my partner, just like straight people do, and make dinner."

**Navy #1:** "There are a couple of people I work with, I really just want to tell them. I'm good friends with these people. As good as I can be. And I feel like I could be such better friends with them if I could just be honest with them."

**Navy #2:** "I think what is going to happen is there is going to be a lot of angst, and then no one is going to care."

**Air Force #1:** "What I'm most looking forward to..."

**Air Force #3:** "... is when nothing happens."

**Air Force #2:** "Like Y2K. Everyone went to the stores and bought all this stuff—you couldn't get toilet paper or water. It's the exact same thing, everyone building up this giant crazy massive change, like homosexuals are going to bring down the entire military. And it's just like any other change. Life goes on."

**Marines #1:** "When we finally get certification, for me it is no longer controlled information. I don't give a rat's ass who knows. And I'm not going to swallow words rather than saying it. If you say something fucking stupid then I'm going to say: 'Hey, motherfucker, you're a fucking idiot, shut the fuck up. Because we ain't going to put up with that shit no more.' I mean, I'm *ready* for that. Right now I'm angry. I've had e-fucking-nough. We've eaten a shit sandwich for seventeen years. History is here."

*Chris Heath is a GQ correspondent.*

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*4. Nearly. Some likely post-repeal complications: resistant pockets of homophobia in the military; the continued right to voice certain homophobic sentiments under, for instance, the freedom of religious expression; possible fraternization charges if gay servicemen of different ranks continue to associate with each other as they often did in the silent years; growing disquiet at the absence of partner rights equivalent to those for servicemen's wives.*

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