

THE EDUCATION OF A SAILOR

*Keith Taylor**

There were no gays in the Navy when I joined in 1947. We had queers. Oh, the officers called them homosexuals, at least to us enlisted guys. Whatever they were called, they weren't to be trusted or tolerated, and they were discharged as soon as they were caught, simple as that. Well, sometimes their sexual proclivities were overlooked during an emergency when the Navy needed manpower, at least until the emergency was over. Then it was out the door with them "for the good of the service." I stayed in for twenty-three years and, bit-by-bit, learned things weren't as simple as we were told.

As a callow eighteen-year-old stationed in the Pacific Northwest, one of the first bits I learned was that queers were an easy source of income. An old sea dog about nineteen or twenty told me so.

"Hey, you want some extra money," he asked? "Just go into Seattle, walk around the bar district and one of them will pick you up. When he goes down on you, hit him in the head with something hard. Then you take his money and get the hell out of there. Don't worry about him fighting back. They'll just lay there because they're all yellow."

You can't imagine how many times over the past fifty-four years I realized how lucky I was to not have had enough courage to try that.

As I climbed up the promotion ladder, I shared what I'd learned with those in my charge. By the late fifties I was a chief petty officer and an instructor at the Navy's communications training center in San Diego. My students were sailors and Marines right out of boot camp. Once during a break I overheard a couple braggadocios giving with the same old theme I'd heard back when I was a young Sailor – rolling queers. The justification was they were, "ya know," queer.

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When the class reconvened I took a few minutes to point out that assault and battery, even if done to someone they were encouraged to hate, was still assault and battery. A person could go to jail for something like that. My main objective was to keep the young sailors and Marines out of trouble. I had no particular concern for the men they might assault. I knew no homosexuals (this was years before the term “gay” became vogue) so it wasn’t my fight. Such is the way of apathy.

Not long after that, one of my fellow instructors referred to me as the chief who gave queer lectures in class. Content and context doesn’t matter to those who need someone to look down on.

Then, a few years later, Greg, my skipper, was caught in bed with another man and was booted out. By then I was an ensign, a mustang with fifteen years enlisted service, and stationed on a small radio station on a far-away island.

Greg was also a mustang and a veteran of World War II. His many campaign ribbons and personal decorations told the story of a proud sailor who had served his country well. His demeanor showed he also had served it proudly. Then, this very masculine guy went to Washington to straighten out some problems. I never saw him again.

The Uniform Code of Military Justice uses the term “any penetration, no matter how slight” to prove a violation of forbidden sex. I don’t know if Greg penetrated or was penetrated, but he did something forbidden.

That did it! Twenty-six years of naval service were flushed down the drain immediately. No pension. No medical care. No farewell ceremony. No nothing. I hope he was able to keep his ribbons. He had so many of them and was so proud of them.

Greg was a person, a grump, an overbearing martinet at times, and maybe even a homosexual – at least for a night. I realized that the only trait of his that carried a penalty was the one that hadn’t harmed anybody for twenty-six years. For the first time, I saw one of them as merely a person. The journey from apathy to realism is a long, tedious one.

I’m long retired from the Navy and look back with nostalgia on the most significant twenty-three years of my life. That near quarter-century shaped my attitude and opinions in many ways, but some of the shaping took a long time.

All my ideas show up in a regular column I write for a military paper. As the token liberal in a paper with a conservative readership, I find myself swimming upstream on many issues, none more so than the issue of gays in the military. A recent survey showed that most of the popula-

tion in general supports gays to serve openly. For the folks on active duty, the numbers are reversed. A mere twenty percent support the idea.

Still, like a horny salmon, upstream I go. The reaction is automatic. Anything less than hatred of gays is considered by eighty percent of the readers as just plain wrong.

Most of my rants are about official policy. It just doesn't make sense to me. The so-called Don't Ask/Don't Tell (DADT) law is the best example. DADT was installed in 1993 to placate irate military officers who disapproved of Clinton's campaign promise to do away with the prohibition of gays to serve openly in our armed forces.

Its effect is to encourage both military commanders and the gays themselves to pretend a problem doesn't exist. I once wrote that the military ought to engrave that bit of nonsense on a rock in front of our academies. Our future admirals and generals could avoid a lot of problems, at least temporarily, if they just stuck their collective heads in the sand.

DADT was supposed to reduce the number of discharges for homosexuality, but did exactly the opposite. According to the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, a group devoted to defending gays who are being discriminated against by the military, discharges have increased 72% since the policy was implemented.

Those discharges aren't just for marginal sailors or soldiers either. One was Senior Chief Petty Officer Timothy McVeigh (not the bomber). McVeigh erroneously sent a semi-official e-mail from the wrong address. The profile on the incorrect America Online address indicated he was gay.

Claiming this mistake was "telling" and a violation of DADT, the seventeen-year veteran was processed for discharge. McVeigh was the senior enlisted person, "Chief of the Boat," on U.S.S. Chicago, a nuclear powered attack submarine. He had been described by his skipper as a perfect sailor. With a complete disregard for an impeccable service record and shortly before he would have been eligible to retire, the Navy processed the perfect sailor for discharge.

McVeigh fought back, and hard. He set up a web site, hired top notch lawyers, and refused to slip away. Several papers picked up the cause. I wrote two articles on it. Members of congress chipped in. The senior chief petty officer held the line.

To add to the confusion at the time, the same Navy, which felt he was unfit to even serve, promoted him to the highest enlisted rank, master chief petty officer. Finally the case ended up in a civilian court where a conservative judge, one appointed by Ronald Reagan, Judge Stanley

Sporkin, ordered him returned to full active duty. The judge was pissed. His written decision ran on for more than 5000 words.

Finally the Navy caved in and then some. It gave him ninety grand for his trouble and allowed him to retire early. He also settled a lawsuit against America Online for an undisclosed amount of money. It would have been much simpler if it had simply obeyed the law, bad as that law was.

Nor were the nine students booted from the Defense Language School at Monterey marginal. They were learning Arabic and Korean, languages deemed critical in the war on terrorism. I served as a cryptologic specialist and as an old spook, I insist that intelligence is the most potent weapon in this war. Intelligence will remain a blind spot unless we understand what the enemy is saying.

Sadly, the justification for continuing a failed policy is based on feelings, not facts. This is demonstrated by the reactions to the articles I've written on the subject. Each opinion piece on gays will bring forth a spate of letters, mostly from that eighty percent that disapprove of gays serving openly.

Not a bit of evidence is cited, nor are any studies. Mostly folks simply rant about nebulous terms like unit cohesion or what it's like for straight folks to take showers "with one of them."

Evidence and at least one scientific study are there for the asking. The armies of all NATO countries except Turkey and the U.S. allow gays to serve openly. So does the CIA, NSA, FBI, and most police and fire departments.

As for a study, a comprehensive one was done by Professor Aaron Belkin of Santa Barbara and Professor Melissa Embser-Herbert of Hamline University in Minnesota. It has been ignored by the Department of Defense.

So, too, was a conference that brought me to Hofstra in the fall of 2003, and a dignified one it was at that. Panelists included the chancellor of MIT, the president of Hofstra, a couple folks with the title of "distinguished professor of law," assorted other professors, some attorneys, representatives from three foreign countries, along with about a dozen veterans (gay and straight) of the U.S. armed forces.

Although invited, the department of defense didn't even respond to the invitations. I'm sure the Bush administration knew that the eggheads of America would be against anything other than a homophobic response to anything his strong supporters from the religious right was opposed to. Again we had the "head in the sand" routine.

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That's too bad. They ought to pay more attention. This problem won't go away, and it is a problem when so many Americans are excluded from the full right of citizenship. It's equally a big problem for the military when the services of such as Timothy McVeigh and many linguists are curtailed.

I've been around too long to be surprised by what our military and political leaders might do. Nothing has changed much since 1947 except one word and the opinions of one old man who used to be a sailor.