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Gays in the British Military: Ask, Tell and Then Move On

By Sarah Lyall
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For the last year it has been perfectly legal for Chief Petty Officer Rob Nunn, who is openly gay, to serve in the Royal Navy. But there have inevitably been awkward moments, like the time someone jokingly asked, using slang for homosexual, why he was "standing around like a poof."

"The senior guy who was there said, 'That's probably because he is one,' " recalled Petty Officer Nunn, 45, who in 1992 was discharged from the navy for being gay, but who re-enlisted last year after the military lifted its ban on gays. "I didn't mind -- I'm not at all P.C. -- but the guy was mortified. He spent the next month apologizing."

For many of the submariners stationed at his base in Cornwall, near Plymouth, Petty Officer Nunn is the first gay person they have ever knowingly met, and certainly the first in a navy uniform. But what is perhaps most surprising about his presence here is how little disruption it has caused, even among the aggressively heterosexual men he serves with.

"When you're locked in a tin for months and months at a time, you have to really get along, and it's easy to think gays would disrupt that," said Chief Petty Officer Andrew Reid, a friend of Petty Officer Nunn's. "We thought Bob would be a catalyst for trouble and discord. But since I met Bob, my whole outlook's changed. He's just a bloke like the rest of us."

It would be hard to overstate how surprising such a response has been in the British military, whose rationale until last year was much the same as that of the uneasy American "don't ask, don't tell" policy adopted under President Bill Clinton. The existence of openly gay personnel in the ranks, the argument went, would weaken morale and foment division by leading to gay cliques and provoking antigay prejudice and violence from heterosexuals.

"Homosexual behavior can cause offense, polarize relationships, induce ill discipline and, as a consequence, damage morale and unit effectiveness," the British Defense Ministry said then in its guidelines on the subject.

But contrary to most expectations, Petty Officer Nunn's experience seems to be the rule rather than the exception in Britain's newly inclusive military. Even the Defense Ministry, which fought hard to keep gays out, has acknowledged an unexpectedly smooth transition. In a report last fall, it said there had been "widespread acceptance of the new policy" and "no reported difficulties of note concerning homophobic behavior" among service personnel.

"Before the lifting of the ban, many senior officials predicted that military performance would suffer," said Aaron Belkin, director of the Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military at the University of California, Santa Barbara, which recently published a report about the British experience. "But we found that there has been no problem in terms of morale or discipline or recruitment."

Interviews with current and former members of the armed forces and with military officials and academic experts tell a similar story: at least so far, the presence of openly gay personnel has caused minimal disruption.

"At a personal level it's been absolutely fine," said Lt. Cmdr. Michael Griffiths, 37, a Royal Navy warfare officer who is gay. "Among the people I'm living and working with, it does not appear to have caused any problem at all."

And Claire Clarke, an air force electronics technician who is straight, said the presence of an openly gay man in her unit had not been an issue, except perhaps to stifle traditional military jokes about the feebleness of others.

"People think they have to be a little more careful with jokes, with ribbing someone by saying, 'Oh, you big girl's blouse,'" Technician Clarke said, using a British term for wimp.

"For the first week or so people edited what they said around Andy, but then it became obvious that he didn't mind if we said, 'Oh, you great big girl,'" she added. "I would lift things and say, 'I'm more of a man than you are.' He'd take them as the lighthearted jokes they were."

The government never kept count of how many people were discharged when its ban was in place, but campaigners for gay rights estimate that as many as 4,000 people have been forced to leave over the years. (There are now about 205,000 people serving in the British armed forces.)

Before the policy changed, people suspected of being gay were often investigated in elaborate operations that could include surveillance, interviews with friends and acquaintances, interrogations and searches of personal items.

"Targeting and uncovering homosexuality was a large part of what the military did," said Edmund Hall, a broadcaster who wrote "We Can't Even March Straight: Homosexuality in the British Armed Forces," after being discharged from the navy in 1988 for saying he was gay.

Despite the hard-line stance -- and despite a 1996 survey in which a majority of personnel said they did not want to serve with gays -- it was clear by the mid-1990's that change was in the air. In 1998, four highly decorated gays who had sued the government after being discharged won their case when the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the antigay policy violated the fundamental right to privacy.

The government officially scrapped the ban in January 2000, bringing its policy on gays in line with that of most NATO countries, including France, Germany and Canada.

In contrast, the policy fashioned for the American military under President Clinton was not so much a lifting of the ban as a studied and often stilted avoidance of the issue. Gays are allowed to serve, as long as they keep their sexual orientation secret and do not engage in homosexual acts.

In practice, the policy has been confusing and difficult to enforce. Advocates for gay men and lesbians in uniform have complained that there is still widespread harassment in the ranks and, in the worst cases, violence. In response to the 1999 bludgeoning death of an Army private suspected of being gay, the American military ordered new training to explain the policy more clearly to personnel.

Since Britain lifted the ban, its military says, there have been no reported incidents of harassment.

In announcing the changes here, the military issued a new code of conduct that applies to heterosexual as well as homosexual relationships. It stresses that harassment will not be tolerated, but also emphasizes that sexuality is a private matter and that offensive or overly demonstrative behavior is inappropriate in the armed forces.

The new code is meant to make it clear that the service role is all important, said a senior military official. "The criterion we use is, has the behavior of the person brought the service into disrepute?" he said.

As far as gays go, "our policy is that it's not an issue," he said, adding: "Officially, whatever side a person bats for, it's all the same. But people have to respect other people's orientation and be discreet."

If the United States policy is "don't ask, don't tell," said Christopher Dandeker, who heads the war studies department at Kings College London, Britain's can be described as "don't fear it, don't flaunt it."

"The crucial thing for gay personnel is that they have to be service personnel first and gay second," said Professor Dandeker, who teaches military sociology. "The team comes first. They are not to let their own sexual identity undermine the service identity."

The real test, he said, will come when more people enter the service and undergo training as openly gay personnel, and when gays come out in army combat units and other traditionally macho areas. "Just because there are no problems now does not mean there are none to come," he said.

And even in the newly relaxed climate, it seems that relatively few gays have publicly come out so far. Others have come out only to select groups of friends.

"Even though the ban's been lifted, some people aren't entirely happy about it," said a lesbian who is a captain in the Royal Army and who asked that her name not be used because she has not come out fully at work. She has some 100 people under her command, she said, but has revealed her sexuality only to a handful of people she trusts -- including, recently, her commanding officer.

"The other day, she asked me what my boyfriend does," the captain said. "I said, 'I don't exactly have a boyfriend, but I've been seeing someone for four years now.' She was very polite about it, not nasty or overly inquisitive, and she said, 'Well, whatever makes you happy.' "

It helps, experts say, that people who have come out so far are already well established in their careers and respected by their colleagues.

Petty Officer Nunn, who has spent more than 20 years in the navy -- during which he got married, had a child and left his wife after he realized he was gay -- certainly fits that description. But even he takes care not to flaunt his sexuality, and has not yet introduced his partner to his friends.

"My private life has never been embroiled in my working life," he said. "If I'm asked, I'll answer, but I don't walk around with a big flag saying, 'I'm gay.' "

That's not to say that his friends don't tease him mercilessly -- and that he doesn't tease them back -- in classic naval humor that involves homing in on one another's vulnerable spots and pounding them into the ground.

At Christmas, for instance, each person in the mess gives a gift, after drawing the recipient's name out of a hat. This year, Petty Officer Nunn got a tiara and a fairy wand. "The mess was determined to get me to say 'fairy lights,' " he recalled, using the usual British term for Christmas lights. "But I kept saying 'sparkly lights' and 'bright lights.' "

By the same token, his friend Petty Officer Reid, whose wife recently left him, got a pack of condoms and a book of pickup lines.

Petty Officer Nunn's friends ask him questions about what it is like to be gay, of course. But mostly they marvel that a gay man can be so similar to them, joining so enthusiastically in their pointed humor and hard-drinking weekend social life.

"Most people would think of a homosexual as an effete person," said Chief Petty Officer Nigel Crocker. "But he's not, and that's why he's so accepted."

Some people on the base still don't know about Petty Officer Nunn's sexuality. But when they ask questions, his friends are the first to defend him.

"We're quite a close-knit group, so nobody would be able to say anything negative to us," said Petty Office Reid. "If we were out and someone said, 'Bob Nunn's a big poof,' we'd say, 'He is, but so what?' "