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October 8, 2009

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AIR FORCE ACADEMY CENSORS PROFESSOR FOR DISCUSSING GAYS IN THE MILITARY
New Data Show Lesbian Discharges in Air Force Are Disproportionate; Lt. Col. Is Reprimanded and Removed from Classroom

SANTA BARBARA, CA, October 8, 2009 – The Palm Center has learned that a Lieutenant Colonel who taught at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, CO, was punished and barred from teaching after she invited three Academy alumni to campus to discuss sexual minorities in the military. The professor, Lt. Col. Edith A. Disler, told Palm Center researchers that the classroom visit was approved by her course director, but Academy officials pulled her from the classroom anyway, launching an investigation that ended in a formal reprimand based on the subject matter discussed.

Also today the [Associated Press](#) is reporting on new Pentagon data obtained by the Palm Center showing that women made up a majority of Air Force discharges under the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy in 2008, even though they represent a distinct minority of the overall service. Women received 56 of the 90 total Air Force discharges under the policy, which is 61% of firings, even though women make up only 20% of the service. By comparison, women received 36% of discharges in the Army, where they make up 14% of personnel, 23% in the Navy where they make up 14%, and 18% in the Marines where they make up only 6%.

“We have always known that women are disproportionately affected by ‘don’t ask, don’t tell,’” said Dr. Aaron Belkin, Director of the Palm Center and a professor of political science at UC-Santa Barbara, where Palm is based. “But the Air Force data are particularly troubling and raise questions about why women might be targeted there for persecution under the current policy. Lt. Col. Disler’s experience with censorship at the Air Force Academy adds urgency to the need to assess the command climate in the Air Force, as well as to the need to re-examine the costs of ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ more broadly.”

Lt. Col. Disler was an Air Force officer for twenty-five years, and has served as senior speechwriter to the Chief of Staff and Secretary of the Air Force, executive support officer to the Secretary of Defense, and an arms control inspector. Her reprimand occurred late last year when she learned that a group of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) combat veterans, who were also alumni of the Academy, offered speaking engagements as part of the Blue Alliance, which promotes education for, and support of, GLBT service members. A week after a classroom visit that Disler described as very well-received by students, she learned that she was being investigated, and was told she could not return to the classroom and could not discuss the matter with students, but she was not told the reason for the investigation. She was eventually told she was being investigated to



determine if she had violated any policies or procedures or any “classroom decorum.” A formal [letter of counseling](#) followed, which scolded Disler for a “lack of judgment in not recognizing that negative publicity could follow” from her decision to have members of the Blue Alliance visit campus. “Your failure caused significant consternation with USAFA’s senior leadership and had the potential to create the perception that the USAF Academy does not support current Air Force and Department of Defense policy on a this [sic] sensitive matter.” The letter states the reason for the punishment was that Disler should have obtained prior approval not just from her course director, but also from her department head, but Disler says there is no written policy stating that is required, and that such a requirement would undercut academic freedom.

Belkin contrasted the censorship in the Air Force, which has been plagued in recent years with allegations of tolerating both sexual harassment and religious proselytizing, with the willingness of the Defense Department to publish an officer’s essay criticizing the current ban on open gays. The [essay, by Col. Om Prakash](#), won a military essay contest and was published, with the approval of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in the current issue of the flagship military journal, *Joint Force Quarterly*. “This public criticism of the policy by a military official is an important indication that the Pentagon welcomes genuine discussion on the issue,” Belkin said. “In this sense, the Air Force seems out of step.”

Disler, who had her retirement date set, said her superiors seemed to suggest she take pains to avoid garnering attention or visibility around the incident, saying, “We just want you to make it to your retirement date.” Disler said this was “about the last, worst insult I could receive after my long career, to be told, ‘we just want you to leave quietly.’” She interpreted the comments as saying she should be grateful to leave without a last-minute court-martial or investigation of her sexuality under the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. She also found the episode to be detrimental to the educational climate. “It’s amazing to say that Air Force Academy combat veterans are not welcome on campus just because they’re gay or because they advocate a certain view or want to be helpful to the Air Force when the current policy [on homosexuality] changes,” she said. Her course focused on war, literature and leadership, and emphasized the core value of respect for human dignity. “It’s easy to say you have respect for others,” she said, “but this was a test of whether that was just an abstract concept or would be applied in actuality. If you censor a presentation about sexual minorities in the military, you’re not only failing to prepare officers for what they’re going to face in the future, but you’re not engaged in a college-level discussion.”

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The Palm Center is a think tank at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Since 1998, the Center has been a leader in commissioning and disseminating research in the areas of gender, sexuality, and the military. For more information visit www.palmcenter.ucsb.edu.