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GAY SOLDIER RETURNS FROM MIDDLE EAST

Reports Acceptance From Peers, But Hardships From "Don't Ask, Don't Tell"

SANTA BARBARA, CA, October 15, 2003 - A U.S. soldier whose homosexual orientation was known to most members of his unit returned recently from deployment in the Middle East, and described his experience this week to researchers at the Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military (CSSMM) at the University of California, Santa Barbara. The soldier, who will be referred to as Ryan, is the president of Gay and Lesbian Servicemembers for Equality (www.glsme.org), which was formed shortly after national attention focused on the expulsion of gay Arabic translators from the Army in the fall of 2002.

Ryan, who was deployed to the Middle East for a six-month tour, reported that most of his unit knew he was gay and that serving openly had no adverse effect on cohesion or readiness. "It was a non-factor," he said. "Especially in a combat situation, it's really the last thing on anyone's mind. It's just a question of doing your job." Ryan explained that the military has many methods of addressing inappropriate behavior, such as sexual harassment, and that there should be a single standard for the conduct of gays and straights alike.

Although other soldiers' knowledge of his sexual orientation did not undermine cohesion, the "don't ask, don't tell" regulations themselves added extra burdens to the task of bonding with his fellow troops. The policy prohibits any conduct or statements that reveal a "propensity" to engage in same-sex sexual conduct. "You cannot have any sort of relationships with people in that sense," including emotional ones, Ryan explained, because the law bans any behavior which a "reasonable person" might regard as indicating likely homosexual conduct. This regulation, he said, interferes with the bonding process essential to forming cohesive fighting forces. "When I was in a unit where people didn't know [that I was gay], it made it harder to form interpersonal relationships to the point where people can go to war together." When soldiers deploy, he explained, "it's not like you can go home at the end of the day and you have your friends who you can talk to about something like this."

Ryan's remarks on the round-the-clock nature of military service offered new insight into the effects of the gay ban on military effectiveness. Defenders of the ban have argued that allowing known gays to serve would compromise heterosexual privacy rights because they cannot go home at the end of the



day. Ryan's experience, however, seemed to indicate that that same situation for gays can hamstring their capacity to bond with their peers. "It is not the presence of gays in the military that undermines privacy, but the ban itself," said Nathaniel Frank, senior research fellow at CSSMM. "'Don't ask, don't tell' forces gay soldiers to train, live and fight under a peculiar burden of isolation, which is particularly onerous when troops deploy to hostile territory."

Researchers have noted that the gay ban, although it was designed to protect the privacy of straights, actually "occasions a systematic invasion of heterosexual privacy." Melissa Sheridan Embser-Herbert, a professor of sociology at Hamline University, and a retired U.S. Army Captain, argues that "don't ask, don't tell" does not only affect gay soldiers, but requires all soldiers to "go out of their way to be read as heterosexual." In her research of soldiers' attitudes toward gender and sexual orientation conformity, Embser-Herbert was stunned by the degree to which women, in particular, spoke of the need to "display heterosexuality." "The part that really shocked me," she said, "was the number of women who talked about either dating or having sex with men to ensure their heterosexuality." She added that many of these women were actually straight. "By creating an environment where people are at risk if they're thought to be non-heterosexual," she concluded, "you create an environment where soldiers are compelled to make sure people think that they are heterosexual, and that creates an invasion of their privacy."

These "compelled performances," some observers worry, may interfere with the bonding process in training and combat situations. Ryan described how serving under the gay ban erodes the mutual trust that is essential to effective bonding. "A great deal of military service is being able to trust the people around you," he said, "being able to be comfortable enough around them that you can trust someone with your life." When you are forced to offer a partial picture of who you are, he explained, it becomes difficult to have confidence that your peers are embracing the true you. "Having to conceal something like this [one's sexual orientation] can make you doubt the personal bonds and professional bonds that you have with people," he said. "Lying makes it hard for others to trust you. It's a forced lack of integrity on your part, and if you're living a lie, they're not trusting you, but a picture of you that you put in their head."

Ryan also cited feelings of resentment toward the military that can undermine a soldier's morale and commitment to the institution. He said that some gay soldiers question why they should put themselves in harm's way for an organization that treats them as second-class citizens. "If the military is going to discriminate against me, [some people feel,] why should I fight for that institution and risk death? This is the way a lot of gay people feel, and it's unfortunate because it's a great opportunity to serve your country."



"One of the biggest tenets of military service is personal integrity," Ryan added, "and what the military is doing is forcing people to lie."

The Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military is an official research unit of the University of California, Santa Barbara. The Center is governed by a distinguished board of advisors including the Honorable Lawrence J. Korb of the Council on Foreign Relations, Honorable Coit Blacker of Stanford University and Professor Janet Halley of Harvard Law School. Its mission is to promote the study of gays, lesbians, and other sexual minorities in the armed forces.