

How Exclusion From the Military Strengthened Gay Identity in America

Armed forces long prohibited gay people from service – but that only encouraged their communities and cause

It's only been five years since Don't Ask, Don't Tell was repealed, finally allowing gays, lesbians and bisexual people to openly serve in the [military](#). For most of our nation's history, the military systematically excluded and discriminated against homosexual people. But despite attempts to ban gay service members and to stamp out all evidence of homosexuality in the armed forces, the military's persecution didn't keep same-sex desire in the closet. Instead, it actually helped create a gay minority identity in the U.S., as the military unwittingly brought visibility and connectedness to the homosexual community, which continues to influence gay culture in America.

According to [historian Nathaniel Frank](#), “Ever since the Revolutionary War, men have been drummed out of the U.S. military for homosexual acts.” But when the U.S. military first began punishing gay soldiers, people didn't perceive a gay identity the way they do today. People weren't so much thought to be gay, but rather, particular acts were punished for being homosexual. It wasn't until [around the time of World War I](#) that the idea of excluding soldiers for being gay, instead of just punishing those who engaged in homosexual acts, began to circulate. This change – punishing people for their gay identity as opposed to punishing people for same-sex conduct – was [led by developments in psychiatry at the time](#), which cast homosexuality as a mental illness. As [philosopher Michel Foucault](#) put it, “The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.”

While soldiers would eventually be punished just for being gay, it was still much easier for military officials to expel gay service members if they had proof of gay sex taking place. During one infamous purge at a naval base in Newport, Rhode Island, Navy officials in 1919 [persuaded enlisted men to entrap and seduce suspected gay sailors](#) so they could “obtain information and evidence pertaining to cocksuckers and rectum receivers” that would be used to court martial and discharge gay sailors.

Although the U.S. military has a deep history of rejecting gay troops in various ways, its policies from World War II in particular stand out in creating a tangible impact on sexual identity in America. “For many gay Americans,” [historian John D'Emilio wrote](#), “World War II created something of a nationwide coming-out experience.”

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Before the 1940s, soldiers accused of committing sodomy were often court-martialed, discharged and sent to military prison. But with the mass mobilization of troops during WWII, courts-martial for each soldier accused of being gay would have created an unsustainable economic drain. To speed up the process of discharging gay service members, draft boards started to screen for suspected homosexuals and issue them “blue discharges,” which were named for the color of paper that homosexual dismissals were printed on.

To “identify” which men were gay, doctors [inserted tongue depressors](#) into patients’ throats to trigger their gag reflexes, assuming that men who performed fellatio wouldn’t gag. Doctors also asked suspected homosexuals on how they felt when engaged in the “[application of the mouth to the sexual organ](#)” of another guy, theorizing “true homosexuals” gave so many blowjobs they’d report they felt pleasure in their mouth while their penises remained flaccid during fellatio. Hormone tests were also introduced under the theory that gay men would have more estrogen and less androgen than straight men, but the practice was abandoned because correlating hormone levels with sexual orientation was “too uncertain and too expensive to try on every inductee,” [according to a 1947 Newsweek article](#).

Though they had to conceal their sexuality from draft boards after successfully enlisting, many gay service members had their [first gay experience](#) while serving during World War II. “In fact, the army had in a sense encouraged homosexuality by making men aware of their sexual orientation,” [wrote sexologist Vern Bullough](#), who noted that the war allowed gay soldiers to meet other gay people while also witnessing their heterosexual peers practice situational homosexuality, which led many to conclude their same-sex behavior wasn’t all that unusual.

Because of strict criteria that didn’t allow for married or pregnant women to enlist, a [disproportionate number of lesbians](#) served in the military during WWII. And in interviews with homosexual service members, journalist Randy Shilts found the prevalence of lesbians in the military became [a self-fulfilling prophecy](#), as some lesbians joined the military primarily because they expected to find other lesbians there. Shilts also claims that it was while serving in the military that many service members [first heard of the concept of gay identity](#). As sociologist [Donald Webster Cory put it](#), “It was not until after Pearl Harbor that it [the word “gay”] became a magic by-word in practically every corner of the United States where homosexuals might gather.”

Ironically, by targeting and excluding homosexuals, the military encouraged gay service members and those with blue discharges to take on a stronger gay identity, historian [Allan Bérubé argues](#). Having to always strategize and conceal their sexuality, gay service members realized that being gay was integral to their overall sense of self. Several military personnel Bérubé spoke with [said they felt “more homosexual”](#) after joining the military than they had previously.

A gay veteran [told Bérubé](#): “You lived a lifetime of experiences in four years that you would never have lived ordinarily in your own hometown. And to get some awareness of yourself and

also, being a homosexual, to learn to be crafty, to be careful, to have fun when you can, be careful when you can't. So that I think I was much more prepared to be an upfront homosexual once I settled here in San Francisco.”

The rhetoric and discrimination surrounding blue discharges – soldiers were expelled, stigmatized and denied benefits – produced an aura of political legitimacy, where struggling soldiers felt emboldened by anti-gay stances. After fighting discrimination, and finding others who shared their sexual orientation, gay and lesbian soldiers came back to the states with a more concrete sense of their identity and new expectations for their civilian lives, [Bérubé wrote](#). This new sense of identity inspired some gay and lesbian vets to publicly express their persecution as a discriminated-against minority group in hopes that it would lead to reformed military policies and social changes in the broader American society.

[Bullough notes that gay organizations](#) – such as the Veterans Benevolent Association – formed and grew after WWII because the war gave gay people a chance to meet other gay people and realize they weren't alone, which led to the formation of communities and advocacy groups. But the visibility and personal-rights issues these gay advocates helped promote was far from being the largest unforeseen outcome of the mass issuing of blue discharges.

While screening for gay soldiers, the military outed people in an era where gay tolerance was nonexistent in most areas of the U.S. For many of these soldiers, living publicly as a homosexual meant becoming a social outcast. Instead of returning home and answering to fearful, angry and worried family members and acquaintances, many stayed in the locations where they had been discharged, hoping for a fresh start, which [led to the emergence](#) of large and visible gay communities in port cities such as San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York.

[According to Randy Shiltz](#), “By the end of World War II, the military establishment had given San Francisco a disproportionately large number of identified gays.” It's possible that without the military's insistence on outing and discharging gay soldiers, San Francisco's Castro district wouldn't have become an “[international gay Mecca](#).”

By barring gay people from serving their country, the military ensured that only homosexual men who hid their orientation would die in war, [Bullough wrote](#). In wars with many casualties, such as WWII and Vietnam, anti-gay procedures held the potential to save the lives of thousands of gay individuals. Draftees caught on, and during the Vietnam War pretending to be gay became a tactic draft dodgers used to avoid service. At protests, activists [chanted phrases such as](#) “suck cock, beat the draft.” *The Realist* magazine stated that being a “[hoaxosexual](#)” was the best way to avoid service. And as one [draft counselor quipped](#), “All of my clients who faked [homosexuality] got their exemption – but they drafted the one fellow who really was gay.” There was even a pamphlet advising dodgers to “[find an excuse](#) to bring it [homosexuality] back into a conversation again and again, and each time deny it [being gay] and quickly change the subject.”

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Although the military discharged only a few thousand gay service members each year, those numbers eventually accumulated to [about 100,000 disenfranchised veterans](#) by the 1980s – among them several gay and lesbian advocates who brought increased visibility to the gay political movement.

One such individual, Leonard Matlovich, won the Bronze Star and the Purple Heart for his service in the Vietnam War. As a decorated service member, Matlovich's battle with the military became controversial after he was [discharged for publicly acknowledging his homosexuality](#). The notoriety surrounding Matlovich's dismissal led him to grace the cover of *Time* and become the focus of a 1978 TV movie, *Sergeant Matlovich vs. the U.S. Air Force*. Matlovich [died of AIDS in 1988](#). On his tombstone is the statement: "When I was in the military they gave me a medal for killing two men and a discharge for loving one."

According to the [New York Times](#), Miriam Ben-Shalom was "one of the first two women to serve as drill sergeants in the Eighty-Fourth Division of the United States Army Reserve." Because it was still rare for women to hold these types of positions in the 1970s, Ben-Shalom attracted the attention of local press. When she graduated from drill sergeant school in 1975, Ben-Shalom was interviewed by a TV reporter. During this televised interview, the reporter asked her how it felt to be a gay person in the military, and Ben-Shalom answered truthfully– which earned her a discharge. "I couldn't see any reason to lie," [Ben-Shalom later said](#). "What kind of leader would I be if I lied?"

Ben-Shalom [took her discharge to court](#) and won in 1980, when a U.S. District judge ruled in her favor, but the Army wouldn't let her reenlist – triggering years of court battles. In 1987 she won the right to reenter the service, but in 1988 the military once again challenged the decision. Finally, in 1990, Ben-Shalom appealed her case to the U.S. Supreme Court, but it declined to hear the case, effectively ending her military career. That same year, though, Ben-Shalom cofounded the Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Veterans of America, Inc. (now called the American Veterans for Equal Rights, Inc.) and became a vocal opponent of policies such as DADT.

Like Ben-Shalom, Perry Watkins was an openly gay army sergeant who won a court battle to stay in the military after getting discharged for his sexual orientation. A federal appeals court ordered Watkins's reinstatement in 1989, which was, [according to the New York Times](#), "the first ruling by a full appellate panel that struck at the military's ban on gay and lesbian service members." In 1993, Ben-Shalom and Watkins were [co-grand marshals](#) of the New York City gay pride parade. Watkins' story was chronicled in the documentary, *Sis: The Perry Watkins Story*.

Official military policies – which long excluded people such as Matlovich, Ben-Shalom and Watkins – have shifted with the cultural zeitgeist. A [1957 Navy report](#) stated: "The service should not move ahead of civilian society nor attempt to set substantially different standards in attitude or action with respect to homosexual offenders." Subsequently, naval officers in the 1950s [were instructed](#), "Homosexuality is wrong, it is evil, and it is to be branded as such."

By 1981, the condemnatory language was dialed back. Rather than being branded as "evil," [military policy](#) said that the presence of gay service members "seriously impairs accomplishments of the military mission." DADT, which theoretically allowed gay people to

serve if they hid their sexuality, was passed in the 1990s, when public acceptance of gay and lesbian people was growing. While DADT was more inclusive than its predecessors, it still led to [an inordinate number of discharges](#) and its proponents relied on vague constructs such as “unit cohesion” to exclude gay service members.

What these policies show is that the military has continually altered and updated its reasoning for banning gay service members. Initially, sodomy was criminalized. Then, with the rise of psychiatry, homosexuality was branded as a mental illness, and we couldn't have mentally ill people at war. As it became untenable to link sexual orientation to mental disorders, the military then claimed gay service members posed security risks. After the [security risk hypothesis was disproved](#), gay service members were accused of undermining unit cohesion, another claim that's [now been debunked](#).

President Barack Obama's repeal of DADT five years ago came after several states had approved same-sex marriage and it became politically viable in some states for politicians to pass nondiscrimination ordinances to protect gay and bisexual people. Of course, these changes in societal perception that ultimately influenced military policy were led by the gay rights movement. And the gay rights movement relied on a growing gay identity, which, in circular fashion, had been created in part by the military's persecution of gay service members.

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Since gays, lesbians, and bisexuals have been allowed to openly serve, the change that's occurred in military policy has been swift and extensive. In 2013, the Pentagon announced it would [lift a ban on women serving](#) in ground-combat units, and late last year Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter said that [all combat positions would be open to women](#). Last June, [sexual orientation was added](#) to the Military Equal Opportunity policy, which meant that gay servicemen and women would be protected from discrimination that prevents them from rising up to higher levels in the military. And this June, the Pentagon [ended its ban on transgender service members](#).

After the military ended its ban on transgender troops, transgender columnist Amanda Kerri [wrote in *The Advocate*](#) that the military had “stepped out ahead of most governmental organizations, schools, and companies with this policy to become a leader in social change.... This makes it one of the most socially progressive institutions in America.” It's apparent that, despite the difficulty the world's most powerful military has historically had in dealing with issues surrounding the sexuality of its troops, it has recently become more open and accepting about who can serve. Just last May, Army Secretary Eric Fanning [became the first openly gay leader of a U.S. military branch](#), which indicates that the newfound changes can impact even the top of the organizational chain.

But what's perhaps more remarkable than these recent developments is the long-term ramifications that resulted from the military's past exclusionary policies. As openly gay people were being targeted and excluded from service during the World Wars, the military unintentionally helped create supportive gay communities, made many gay people aware of their

orientation and ultimately contributed to the creation of a gay identity in America. And after World War II, policies excluding gay people continued to carry on for more than sixty years, until DADT was repealed just half a decade ago. What's remained hidden to many people regarding this legacy of intended marginalization is how the prohibitive policies inadvertently brought together gay individuals and communities who went on to influence their world.

Ross Benes is the author of The Sex Effect, which will be published by Sourcebooks next April. This article was adapted from the chapter "Soldier Sex: How the U.S. Military Inadvertently Helped Form Our Concept of Gay Identity."