

Resisting Homophobia in the Military

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Homophobia arguably manifests itself in the worst form of discrimination in the military, surpassing even racism. Instead of enabling recruits to vanquish their prejudices and strengthening the individual and the collective spirit, all military training seems to be geared toward invoking the darkest elements in human nature – fear, hatred, pettiness, insecurity and similar aberrations. Under normal conditions, such an orientation legitimizes unacceptable behavior; under harsh and hostile conditions, it makes beasts of men. It is immaterial whether one is at the perpetrating end or the receiving end of unjust behavior. Of greater significance is the general air of violence and inequality that gets normalized in the process.

As the occupation of Afghanistan increasingly leads the military to search for more boots on the ground, homosexual soldiers who are beginning to resist the treatment they are receiving in the military are slowly becoming yet another hurdle the overstretched military faces.

As the Don't Ask Don't Tell (DADT) policy instituted under President Bill Clinton continues, more soldiers are beginning to resist this repressive and discriminatory practice. Many, like New York Army National Guard member Jennifer Hogg, have found it a reason to begin questioning their involvement in the military.

“Being a lesbian on 9/11 is what initially led me to begin to question my involvement in the military and the military’s involvement in the world,” Hogg explained to Truthout, “If on 9/11, I did not have the freedom to hug my girlfriend goodbye before we left as a unit for NYC, then what freedom was I protecting? What freedom could we offer to the world if we treat it so restrictively based on who a person falls in love with?”

It is a question that, with suitable modifications, is perhaps pertinent for each one of us to ask, even outside the military. We who never tire of vaunting the freedoms that America allows its citizens, and feels authorized to export elsewhere at all costs.

Hogg confronted homophobia at all levels in the military. “During advanced individual training, after the conclusion of Bush versus Gore [election], a male E7 [higher ranking] teacher, during his introduction of the class for that day, stated that he was glad that Bush was going to be president because now we won’t have all these fags in the army.”

She chose not to report the incident for fear of being singled out and picked on. “I felt as though physically I would easily fit the stereotype of a lesbian ... not to mention that I was in a service position that was heavily male. I did not feel that even the full provision of Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Harass, Don't Pursue would suffice to protect me. I heard the word

'fag' used on a daily basis by other soldiers in uniform. If the military does not stop or intervene in casual usage of a word as hate-filled as 'fag,' how could I expect them to take my accusation seriously or treat it as a violation? Besides, what I saw the military do to address DADT was a joke."

Hogg explained, "In my unit, all briefings relating to sexism were treated as a joke and were never attended in full strength by the unit. Most people found ways to avoid briefings in general, or have a friend sign them in. Briefings on sexual orientation and DADT invariably had leaders who were embarrassed to give them, so it was never done in an effective or serious manner. Most had low attendance and the information offered was incomplete."

Like most homosexuals in the military, Hogg felt compelled to conceal her sexuality both in and out of uniform, so as not to face discrimination, or worse, though DADT officially only applies to soldiers while in uniform. "While it was not made into an issue for me while [I was] in uniform, I still felt heavily pressured to conceal my sexuality as a civilian for fear of being outed. So even if I served one weekend a month and two weeks in the summer, I was actively under DADT every single day of my contract. This caused considerable stress on my relationship and personal outlook."

The fact that Hogg felt the need to conceal her sexual orientation at all times speaks to the dysfunction of the policy and the widespread homophobia in the military.

Martin Smith, a retired Marine Corps sergeant who served from 1997 to 2002 as a Russian cryptologic linguist, also struggled with having to hide his homosexuality during his stint in the military. In an article for the International Socialist Review, he wrote:

I remember my first visit to the chow hall in which three Drill Instructors (DIs), wearing their signature "smoky bear" covers, pounced upon me for having looked at them, screaming that I was a "nasty piece of civilian shit." From then on, I learned that you could only look at a DI when instructed to by the command of "Eyeballs!"

In addition, recruits could only speak in the third person, thus ridding our vocabulary of the term "I" and divorcing ourselves from our previous civilian identities.

Our emerging group mentality was built upon and reinforced by tearing down and degrading us through a series of regimented and ritualistic exercises in the first phase of boot camp. Despite having an African-American and a Latino DI, recruits in my platoon were ridiculed with derogatory language that included racial epithets. But recruits of color were not the only victims, we were all "fags," "pussies," and "shitbags." We survived through a twisted sort of leveling based on what military historian Christian G. Appy calls "a solidarity of the despised."

Smith describes in the same article how the process of dehumanization of marines occurs concurrently with the dehumanization of the "enemy." The aim is ostensibly to train them to overcome all fear or qualms against killing: "Given the fact that marines are molded to kill the enemy 'other' from TD (training day) One, combined with the bestial nature of colonial war, it should come as no surprise that rather than turning 'degenerates' into paragons of virtue, the Corps is more likely capable of transforming men into monsters."

Smith told Truthout he was aware of DADT before he joined the forces, but, for him, "part of joining was about trying to find myself. From my own internalized homophobia came the

thought that I still needed to prove myself as a man.”

As with so many other recruits, in addition there was the economic factor, since Smith was in dire need of an income.

In boot camp, another recruit accused Smith of being gay. “It became a rumor and the drill instructors picked up on it, and I was ostracized from the beginning. There is a tendency to identify a handful to pick on and use that to build solidarity with the other guys.”

After transferring to Monterey, California, to study as a linguist, Smith hid his sexual orientation because “on base, being gay, you are vilified. But in the civilian world you’re sort of a rock star because you are gay and in the Marines. It’s schizophrenic ... so that was difficult. I would find other gay friends, marines, and we kept it secret because people would be suspicious of us just for being friends. So we would meet fifty yards from the barracks and sneak off base just to hang out as friends.”

A hate crime in Laramie, Wyoming, in 1998, heightened Smith’s survival instinct, forcing him to further hide his homosexuality.

After Matthew Shepard, a gay University of Wyoming student, was brutally murdered, Smith found the NCOs starting class with vile jokes about gays and unabashedly declaring, “That fag deserved to die.” It bothered him that no one protested.

After a transfer to Hawaii, Smith found a simpler method of disguising his orientation. “I had a boyfriend in town, and his brother’s wife pretended to be my girlfriend, and we went to the Marine Corps ball together. She was a really attractive Asian woman, and it drew attention ... People would ask us questions, and we improvised elaborate stories about what we were doing. My story was that I had this girlfriend out of town ... when in reality I lived off base and was regularly seeing my boyfriend about a half-hour away.”

While on base, Smith still found it necessary to maintain a facade of being “normal” by doing things like leaving copies of Hustler magazine lying around.

“I would tell people I was going to stripper clubs on the weekends ... constant lies. Don’t Ask Don’t Tell forces you to lie. It’s not just about being gay, but who you are spending time with, who your friends are. Your whole existence becomes a lie. I turned to drugs, any kind of escapism. I made it a point to get out of my mind, which was the only relief I could get. That’s the kind of toll it took on me.”

While there are no hard numbers on the number of gays in the military, Smith believes that it is not dissimilar to that in the civilian population. “However, the difference is likely in who is ‘out.’ I think that far fewer people in the Army are out to themselves and/or friends because of the extreme homophobic, masculine environment, and the obvious fear of losing your job and benefits.”

Smith, who was honorably discharged on January 5, 2002, had numerous stories to tell about other gays in the military he saw gay-bashed and discriminated against. He found it necessary to keep his orientation hidden for fear of negative consequences such as physical assault, loss of job, and discrimination.

Jeff Key, a lance corporal in the Marine Corps Reserve, was deployed to Iraq in 2003. After coming out on CNN during an interview in March 2004, he was finally discharged two years later in April 2006. When he spoke with Truthout about his experience, he had much to share from his experience as a gay man in the Marines.

Five years after his return from Iraq, Key admitted that on some levels his joining the military was an attempt to “sort of heal my internalized homophobia and to hopefully be accepted by my culture, because I never felt accepted by my culture and that was very much tied into the gender paradigm and homophobia. And so I thought to become that thing which is the paradigm of American masculinity: a United States Marine.”

Key had expected and been prepared for abuse, but unlike most gays in the military, he did not experience any overt discrimination.

“I was pleasantly surprised that on the inside there wasn’t very much homophobia. There’s a lot of sort of homoerotic joking, which is kind of peculiar. Historically, since man has waged battle, there has been this homoerotic component to the whole military thing. But there’s more joking around it than anything else, and that isn’t necessarily malicious.”

Nevertheless, he did feel constrained to keep his sexuality a secret, at least for a time. He decided to come out when he felt it was a lie to pretend to his fellow marines to be something he wasn’t.

“I have to say that I never had a negative coming-out experience when I decided to do so. I did not broadcast my homosexuality because, actually from a selfish point of view, I did not want it to harm my military career and I wouldn’t have been put in a position of leadership – like I was – had the chain of command known ... [and] if I had been more forthcoming about my sexuality.”

Key contextualizes his vehement opposition to the US occupation of Iraq. In the beginning, he believed, “I brought to my country and to the Marine Corps what was, to me, a very noble, kind of sacred commitment. And it was based on a contract. And the written contract that I signed, which includes my willingness to give my life for our constitution, this country, and its people; to always follow lawful orders; and to never follow unlawful orders. And the stated part of the contract is that I’ll be willing to give my life for you, I will dedicate myself as a marine to standing up for the principles of the country, and the unspoken part is that you will never use my blood for money.”

For him the contract ended when “invasion and colonization, blackout prisons, and torture [began to] get portrayed and received as not only patriotic and democratic, but holy.”

Key was candid about his experiences after returning from Iraq.

“When I came back from the war, I was overwhelmed with depression. Becoming a marine was one of the very, very best things that had ever happened to me. I was very happy being a marine. I mean, just driving around on Camp Pendleton, I felt great. I loved putting on a uniform, and I loved hanging out with my fellow marines, who are funny, entertaining, sweet, awesome people. And finally, after all those years of struggling with this sexuality thing, I realized, I’ve got to let go of all that straight-acting bullshit, and live comfortably in a world ... where I’ve got to be myself. And so here I am with this epiphany, this waking up, realizing oh my God, this wonderful thing that’s happened to me in my life has been

betrayed and I cannot continue. Because, ultimately, as much as my commitment to my country means to me, and how much being a marine means to me, I am responsible for my own life to my creator.

The prospect of having to live the rest of my life and try to keep silent or in some way continue to be a party to the evil that is the running machine, the machine I call them, is perpetuating in my country, is in some ways worse than death. So when all these things came to light, out of a dark depression, I remember walking into that office and I remember raising my right hand, and I thought about what my oath meant to me. And that is that I'm willing to die to stand up for, the principles that I believe this country stands for. So I decided to leave the military and use Clinton's stupid DADT policy to leave."

Key set out to do this on March 31, 2004. Being a ranking marine and easily accessible at Camp Pendleton in California, Key was invited on the Paula Zahn Now show on CNN to discuss soldier morale in the wake of the killing of the four Blackwater mercenaries in Fallujah that day. But Key had other plans when he walked into the Los Angeles bureau.

After showing the video of the brutal treatment of the corpses of the mercenaries in the streets of Fallujah, Zahn asked Key, "I know I winced when I saw these pictures for the first time. When you saw these images of American soldiers not only being brutally beaten and murdered, but dragged down the street, what went through your mind?"

Key responded, "Oh, I first saw it this morning when I was sitting at the computer. And, honestly, the first thoughts I had were a lot of intense anger. I wanted to go back there to find the people who did that and to hunt them down. It's the marine in me. I wanted to exact vengeance for it."

Then, using the platform he had been offered, he proceeded to speak out against the US occupation, quite unexpectedly:

"And then shortly after, I started to think about the families ... There are several families today that are changed forever because of the events in Iraq today. I felt a huge amount of sadness for those people. I know that the American service members that lost their lives there, the Americans working there did so out of noble purpose, and it's really - it's a shame. I've spent a lot of time and introspection and thinking since I came back from Iraq about our mission there, what it meant to me. I have very conflicting feelings about it. I'm still intensely committed to the reasons I became a marine four years ago and have decided this week to leave the Marine Corps, actually, and came out of the closet as a gay man. I had made sweeping rationalizations that allowed me to continue to lie about my sexuality and stay in the Marine Corps in attempts to stay true to my commitments, to the reasons I joined. And having come back and having received a lot of information, things we didn't know when we were there, that we were never told about weapons of mass destruction, about our entering there in the first place, I just ..."

Zahn cut him off, not knowing how to respond to his comments on Iraq and his sexuality.

Key's action changed his life. He had let his marine buddies know in advance of the interview that he was going to come out on national television in front of millions of viewers, and had their support. He had even gone so far as to detail, in a seven-page letter to his commanding officer, what he was going to do and why. After the show, however, he was surprised at the lack of reaction from the military. "Sometimes with Don't Ask Don't Tell,

people are discharged the next day, but I just wasn't getting any answers. Six months went by." He was told he would get an "other than honorable" discharge because he had not been showing up for drill at his base. He had made that choice in the hope that the military would immediately discharge him, as was usually the case with DADT.

It perplexed him. "I was under the impression that coming out of the closet as a big homosexual meant you couldn't be in the United States military anymore." That not being the case for him, he resumed service and started showing up to drill as this out, queer, anti-war activist on Camp Pendleton, the largest Marine Corps base on the planet.

"It was awesome, because my being out of the closet to my buddies enabled us to have some really edifying conversations. They got to ask me questions, I felt [I] really made a lot of headway with regard to homosexuality and misconceptions about it, and about what gay men think, straight men think, and all that stuff. So that was sort of multiplied because I was very out of the closet, [and] five million people had seen the interview."

Key took advantage of not being ejected to not only be forthright about homosexuality, but also be "out of the closet about the fact that I thought that the occupation of Iraq was dangerous to my nation. And that I felt that it was immoral and believed that it was illegal. We were signers to the UN Charter and to the Geneva Conventions, and for all manner of reasons, it was illegal."

Marines began approaching Key to talk about both issues, and he was relieved to find that they were all "really, really cool about it. Even some very high-ranking enlisted men in my unit pulled me aside and said, 'We're going to take care of you, marine, you're still a marine and this is not going to be a problem for you, and if it is in any way, you come to me.'"

Even his fellow marines in Iraq have written him letters of support. Eventually, the major of his unit told Key he needn't show up for drill anymore, that he had fulfilled his obligations. "And I said, OK, sir, if there is anything I can do for you or my marines, at any time, please don't hesitate to call. And then I drove off base for the last time."

It has not been easy. Key's departure began another period of depression for him. "I left Fort Pendleton that day and as I was driving ... realizing I would never drive on that base again as a marine was horrible. I was so angry at the people who had stolen that from me and just disgusted, disgusted at the bloodbath that was going on in Iraq and continues to go on."

He wanted to just leave it behind, but his conscience compelled him to speak out. Today, he does not advise anyone, gay or straight, to enter the military. "I would say don't. Do not join the United States military. In the foreseeable future, no matter which wing of the one party we have in this country happens to sit in the White House, their soldiers' commitment is going to be abused."

His advice to a young, gay person who may be considering joining the military is to "work through your homophobia in another way ... If you think that your homophobia doesn't have any bearing on your wanting to join the military, then I would ask them to examine all the other good reasons somebody might want to join. If you need money for college, I promise you there are other ways. Money is not a justification for what you'll be asked to do. I would say to those kids, don't join."

For those already in the military, Key says, "I would tell them to take a long, hard look at

how the military is being used now. If that resonates with their spirit in a good way, then God bless them and keep going. If I could ever help you, let me know, I will. But if it does not resonate with what you believe to be noble ... then step up to the front, say, 'I'm a big, fat homosexual,' and leave the military today."

Dahr Jamail's new book, The Will to Resist: Soldiers Who Refuse to Fight in Iraq and Afghanistan, is now available.

Order the book here <http://tinyurl.com/cnlgyu>

As one of the first and few unembedded Western journalists to report the truth about how the United States has destroyed, not liberated, Iraqi society in his book Beyond the Green Zone, Jamail now investigates the under-reported but growing antiwar resistance of American GIs. Gathering the stories of these courageous men and women, Jamail shows us that far from "supporting our troops," politicians have betrayed them at every turn. Finally, Jamail shows us that the true heroes of the criminal tragedy of the Iraq War are those brave enough to say no.

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