

Gays in Canada's military

The Federal Government has recently stated that a discussion paper on the role of women and homosexuals in the Armed Forces will soon be tabled in the House of Commons along with the appropriate legislation. In view of these recent proceedings, the present time is as good a time as any to review the treatment of homosexuals to today's Armed Forces.

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I didn't know anything about this discussion paper but I think it's about time, actually. Nobody talks about it but everybody knows that there are gays in the Armed Forces, right? You read the Queen's Rules and Regulations and there's a big slash across the word (homosexual) but nobody does anything about it, so I think it's about time. Who knows what is going to happen with this paper? I have a feeling it may be thrown right out. If officers really want to get rid of homosexuals they'll find some way to drum them out.

Personally, I don't think that gays will ever be allowed to serve openly. The homophobia encountered in civilian life is turned around and magnified in the Armed Forces. There's a certain amount of tolerance in the civilian population but when you get within a military structure there is absolutely no tolerance whatsoever. Servicemen don't know what they're talking about or who they're directing their comments at, other than "those fucking queers." Officers are quick to proclaim that "there's no queers in our regiment, dammit!"

The PPCLI (Infantry) are as macho as all getout. But what's so funny is that you come across a group of these infantrymen in the mess flexing their muscles and showing off their military mustaches and short hair, and they look like the kind of gay men you'd find on Christopher Street. They could pass for regulars at a gay bar — flexing their muscles and body posing. Of course you'd never actually say that to them!

Homosexuality is such a foreign concept for most military men. Nobody knows about it, and if they do they'd rather not say anything. Thus, when someone comes across homosexuality, they don't know how to handle it. They tend to err on the side of overboard discipline rather than to stop and ponder whether this individual's homosexuality has actually affected his performance on the job. In other words, they don't treat that person as a person. You're either gay or you're straight, and if you're gay you're out, it's that simple. There's no questions asked, and no excuses accepted. It's really a catch-22 situation. If you open your mouth, it doesn't matter how effective you are, or what kind of leadership skills or trade qualifications you possess. None of that matters. YOU'RE OUT.

People don't join the Armed Forces because they are homosexuals or because they are straight. They do join for just about every other reason. I don't think that allowing homosexuals in the Armed Forces would have a negative effect on morale, except with those who are totally unfamiliar with it. The bottom line is that it's not your job in the Armed Forces to be gay or to be straight. Your job in the Forces is to complete your trades training, to abide by military law and to perform to the best of your abilities. That has nothing to do with your sexuality, the color of your skin or your religion, or anything else for that matter. You're ordered to do your job, you do it, you finish it, and then you go home.

Then again, some people would inquire as to what a person could do if a homosexual made advances to them. That's also unfair: You cannot make assumptions about homosexuals that you do not make about heterosexuals; does being a heterosexual male mean that you're automatically going to assault all the heterosexual females? Of course not. That's just common decency. So why make that assumption about gay people? It's just not giving us credit for very much at all.

Sexism is rampant in the Armed Forces. I've come across specific cases where women have inquired about joining the Armoured Regiment. On our base the Armoured Regiment has an aura of glamour about it. These women were told in no uncertain terms that the only positions open to them were as a finance or supply clerk. Under these circumstances, even if they were allowed to get near the equipment (tanks) or actually touch them they would not be allowed to operate them. So sexism is rampant in the Armed Forces against women first of all, and against gay people always.

When I first joined up I was well aware of the misogynistic attitude of the military and I've noticed a big difference between attitudes in the Militia and attitudes in the "Regular" Armed Forces. Militiamen tend to be a lot more vehement about their rights as Militiamen. A lot of them see themselves as regular soldiers so they are very strict about rules, regulations and military bearing. So when I joined up I got a lot of negative feedback from my male drill instructors. Female drill instructors were generally more supportive and looked after the recruits much better than the males did. When I got adjusted to the whole atmosphere it became very apparent to me that you had to shut up, say nothing and lie if necessary. You lie to anyone in your rank and above, because it says in the military regulations, in polite terms, that anyone of any rank can denounce you. That's what it comes down to. It's not a matter of reporting someone or having them put on charge for breach of military regulations. You are denounced, and there you are on charge before you know what hit you. The charge does not have to be corroborated.

I knew of an incident involving a woman whom I thought was probably gay. I had never heard her say that she was gay or found by any of her actions that she was anything other than a senior serving ranker. But somehow it became known that she was a lesbian. Now I did not know for sure, nor did anyone else. It was just an accusation. But nevertheless she was drummed out within three months. Nothing, that I know of was ever proven either. She came from the first regiment that I joined, and of course a lot of things were heard through the grapevine, and from friends and non-commissioned officers regarding "Did you hear what happened to..." or "Have you heard about so and so?" And being very cautious, I'd just remark "No, really, what?" Then they'd whisper "She's a lesbian." Of course then you'd have to feign surprise and shock. This woman was a very effective member of the regiment. They couldn't throw her out so they increased her workload so much that she could not carry out the duties assigned to her, she

could not function as a proper member of the regiment or attend mess functions. If you're incapable of doing your duties then that's one way of getting kicked out.

There's no coming out process in the military as you would experience in civilian life. There's just no process at all. The only coming out you do is if you're discovered. Then you have no choice as you become cross-Canada military news. Or you declare yourself as gay and request a discharge. If you're going to come out, it has to be to people you know you can trust implicitly. But there again you don't know who you can trust because you never know if someone will use that information against you. I think if I ever came out to anyone, it would be to someone I knew was gay. Not just someone who stated it but someone who had a lover or who had had relationships or went to gay bars when on leave or something to back up their claim. Anyone can come up to you and say that they are gay and you would naturally reciprocate by saying that you are also gay. But it might turn out that that guy is from the Secret Investigations Unit, and by then you've been nailed to the wall. So coming out is a very selective process.

There isn't a concerted effort by service people to search out other gays in the Armed Forces. You get to know more gay people the longer you stay in. It's just like anywhere else in society. But in the military nothing is really said about it. You stumble upon it and then you go from there. There is a certain percentage of gay people on any given base. You get to know one gay person and that person probably knows another lesbian stationed on the same base or somewhere else, so in that way a network is built up. When you're going to be transferred to a new base, your gay friend will say "I know so and so and he knows such and such a person. Drop in, here's her phone number." That's the only way to find out about the other gays in the Forces. Open enquiries are just too dangerous.



I've often come upon women in the mess who I would almost swear were gay. But I don't generally pursue the matter. If I see the senior officer of NCO in question in the corridors or in the performance of my duties, our behaviour is very up and up. If it's an officer you give the correct military salute and greeting and continue on. If you get to know them, then maybe you can drop hints.

Gay service people do not really take pains to congregate in a gay ghetto. A homosexual male seen with other males is assumed to be just out "having a beer with the boys" because he's invisible as a gay person. The whole damn bunch of them could be gay but if they act properly in the military mess no one has to suspect anything. It's always a good thing to talk about your boyfriend, or your girlfriend if you're male, or your fiancée. One thing I find very funny about the Armed Forces is that everybody's got fiancés but nobody's married.

I think Canadian lesbians in the Armed Forces differ a lot from their American counterparts. We haven't had the publicity that American servicewomen have had. I've found from my own experience that when the Americans come upon something like this there's generally a great whacking fuss about it. It's not confined to military courts martial or to Military Boards of Inquiry. Rather, it's splattered all over the damn newspapers, all over T.V., and all over the Armed Forces Radio and Television Network. It's ridiculous!

Another important difference is that a lot of American servicewomen who are lesbians have in some cases stood up to the military and legally challenged the Force's right to deny them a career solely because of their sexuality. I heard of one case where an American officer cadet informed her commanding officer that she was a lesbian. He summarily brought charges against her so she took the matter to court. The judge ruled that he had no right to release her from her duties because of her lesbianism. The military subsequently appealed the judge's decision.

You hear a lot of cases of American lesbians in the Navy who have been charged. There's just a lot of publicity down there. I think publicity can often be very frightening because it puts you on the spot, but it also tends to pump up one's backbone and it usually increases knowledge about homosexuality in the American Forces. Here in Canada there's a total news blackout concerning investigations into homosexuals.

American gay service people also have the American Civil Liberties Union and the National Gay Task Forces to go to bat for them. When you have two high-power organizations like that on your side it tends to make you feel a little better. But I'm not trying to say that being gay in the American Armed Forces is easier than being gay in the Canadian Armed Forces. It's still just as difficult, still just as traumatic, and you still lose your job. That's the bottom line. You still lose your job no matter who's on your side.

You always go to great lengths to hide your sexuality, obviously. It's not so much the fact that you don't have a boyfriend or a fiancée or you don't talk about men. It's just the little things that catch you. Some male could be talking about women and putting them down by using the most disgusting terms imaginable. Now, if a woman stands up and says "I beg your pardon. I object to that. That's disgusting," they will automatically turn around and say "What's your problem." So if a woman stands up for herself she can sometimes end up in big trouble.

If I was going to a social function outside of my own regimental activities I always mentioned that there were men in that group, and that I knew men while living here at my house. I mentioned the fact that my sisters lived here and that we have an all-female household, but naturally I never stated that we were lesbians. I would always mention, "my sister and her boyfriend..." They really catch you more by omission than admission in most cases. It's what you don't say that nails you.

You constantly have to catch yourself: "Do I say something or don't I?" And if you do say something you have to tell a lie. Then you have to tell another lie to back up the first lie. If you lie about having a boyfriend then you have to attend a unit function they inquire about his absence. You could say, "He's studying late tonight." But that excuse can be used only two or three times before someone vehemently reminds you that you and this boyfriend have received an official regimental invitation. "Where is he?" You are under incredible pressure to appear as a couple or a twosome. After using so many excuses you have to scramble find some nice man who will attend with you. But not many people are willing to do that for you.

When I do sometimes get time off from my duties, I make sure that I don't bring any identifiable gay reading material — and I never mention the fact that I've seen a gay movie.

It's gotten to the point where you don't dare say anything because if you mention that you've seen a gay movie, or a movie with a gay character, people will look at you in a state of horror and ask each other why you would want to see a sick movie like that. Of course you can't stand up and say that there's nothing sick about it, whether you're gay or you're straight. People would start looking at you with raised eyebrows. So yes, you guard your words and your actions whether on or off the base. If you are seen at a local gay club you have to try and pass it off. You could say "I just went with a friend of mine, I didn't know what kind of bar it was."

I try not to get into gay joke-telling or name calling on the base. We always tell each other that you should never get involved in something like that because it's wrong. And it is wrong. It puts down that person even more. Here you are having to hurl insults at someone who doesn't even know you. So I usually just shut up, turn around, and walk away.

I know many guys who indulge in a lot of calling-down of various members of the forces. If you're not macho enough, and can't heft around 40 pound artillery shells as well as some 200 pound ape, they think you're not man enough, so they cast slurs on you right away. Thus you don't even have to be gay to be called a queer.

You can be wimpy, but only in the glamour service. You can't be wimpy if you're an infantryman or an artilleryman. Forget it. But you can be wimpy if you're a pilot, because you've got to be small to fit in the damn cockpits. And besides, flyboys are glamour boys. They're the cream of the crop. So if some 200 pound infantryman with an IQ of '2' calls a pilot down, the pilot just turns around and says "yeah, right" and keeps on walking. So there are various levels of machismo and what you can and cannot do.

I think that the military is a good career in some ways. There are a lot of opportunities, and women are slowly being allowed to perform jobs that have traditionally been barred to them. If you find a trade that you like, and you wish to go into it, that's fine. If you enjoy doing that, and it's the life for you, then I can't say that you shouldn't do it. But if you are a lesbian and you want to pursue a career in the Armed Forces, then I would say that you should be prepared to have a very limited social life, and in some cases a very lonely life. Don't expect to find a lover in the next platoon or the next office. It doesn't happen. Don't expect to find gay friends. It doesn't happen. Don't expect to find people who are supportive and understanding. Forget it. It doesn't happen. Be prepared to lie a lot and to receive slurs against you as a woman first of all. And if you won't go out with these guys, be prepared to be called a lesbian because you won't put out. I'm not saying that the possibilities of having a social life are nil. I'm just saying that they are very limited and hard to come by, and you will have to be prepared to make a great personal sacrifice. If you can bury yourself in your job, fine. But how long is that going to last? Five years? Ten years? If you can subordinate your lifestyle and your feelings to your job, then I say go for it. You'll probably make a damn good officer, or sergeant, or whatever. But if you're not prepared to do that then always watch your step, look over your shoulder, be wary of people you talk to and if you do have gay friends, be prepared to be separated from them because transfers happen all the time. It's not an easy life.

The Army's always been the Army but somehow, somewhere, the Armed Forces have attained the image of glamour. I would tell anyone not to let the glamour fool them. Yes, you can have it if you want it. If you work hard enough you can have the glamour, and the nice postings. That all comes in time. But be prepared to sacrifice everything else that you hold important about your homosexuality. If you can put it (your homosexuality) in a nice little box and stick it in a closet then you'll have a wonderful career. If you can't, then I say prepare yourself for a long difficult life.