

The Pursuit of Life, Liberty and Acceptance

Who does the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy benefit, and who does it hurt?

By James Johnson

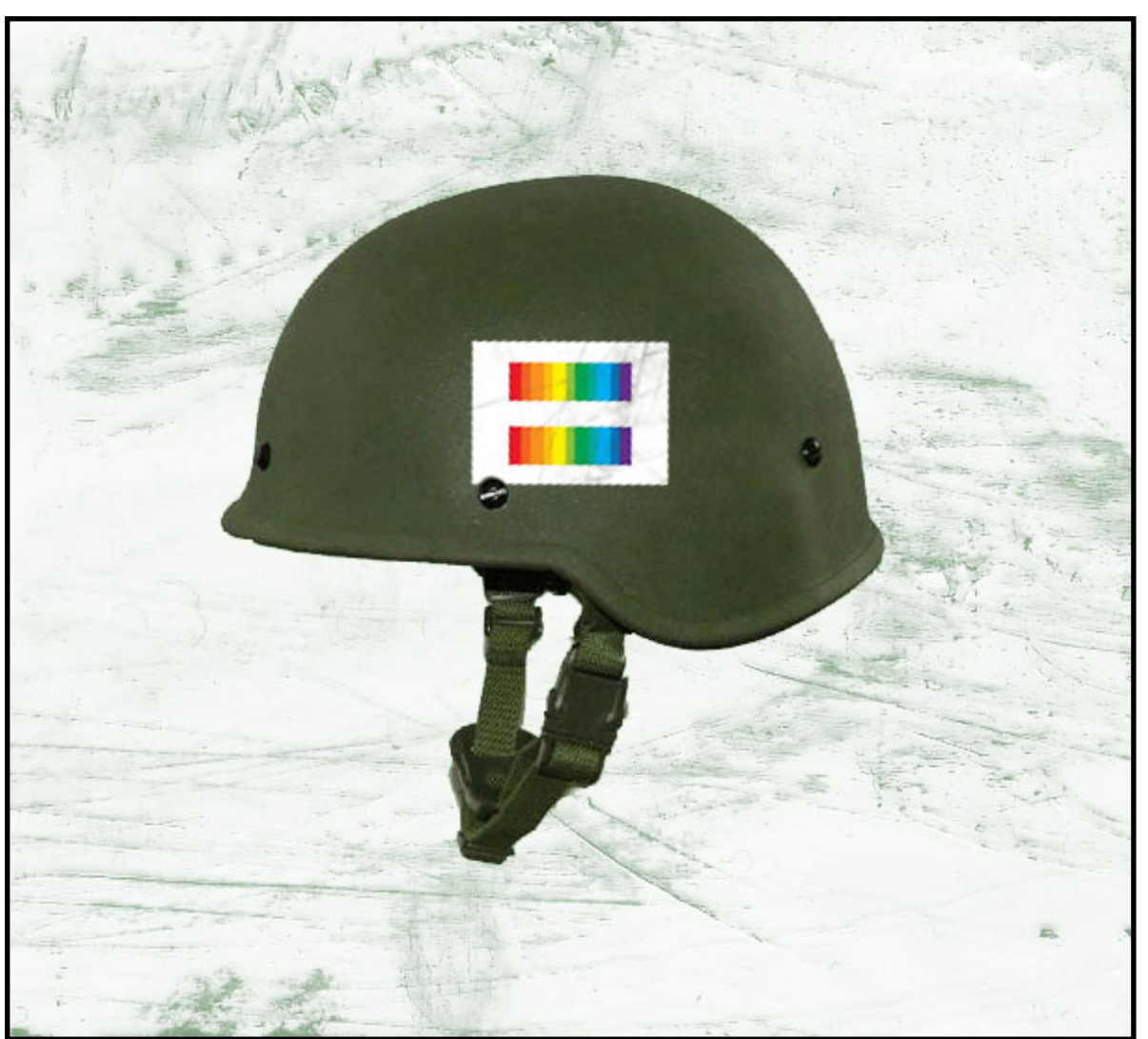
“When I was in the military, they gave me a medal for killing two men and a discharge for loving one.” – The tombstone epitaph of decorated Vietnam vet, Sgt. Leonard Matlovich, 1943-1988.

In Iraq, half a world away, a young woman is fighting back tears, scared to death of being found. For her protection, she will be called Jane. G.I. Jane. She is a high-ranking member of the United States military. She has seen combat and has come back for more, but none of that matters because Jane, like thousands of other service men and women, is trapped. Jane is scared, but able to appreciate the irony in her situation.

"It's funny, but I'm actually talking to you from inside a closet," she whispered into the receiver of her Internet phone. "It was the only way I could get some privacy."

For the past eight years, the closet is where Jane has spent her life, though not always so literally.

The “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy was introduced in 1993 by then President Bill Clinton, who had campaigned on the promise of allowing gays into the military. The policy was a compromise — to appease those still concerned with the effect having openly gay men and women serving in the



armed forces would have on morale.

“Homosexuality is incompatible with military service. The presence in the military environment of persons who engage in homosexual conduct, or who by their statements, demonstrate a propensity to engage in homosexual conduct, seriously impairs the accomplishments of the military mission. The presence of such members affects the ability of the armed forces to maintain discipline, good order and morale.”

– The U.S. Department of Defense’s 1981 directive on homosexuality in the military.

Jane, however, believes that her own morale has been severely compromised. "What fucks with your head the most is that you're in a war zone; you could die any day and the people to your left and to your right don't know who you are," Jane said. "They know a lie ... So this time when I deployed, I came out. I came out to my superior and he told me 'it doesn't matter.

You're a soldier.' But to me it was important. It was important for him to know who I am because I need to trust him and for that, he needs to trust me.”

Trust hasn’t always come easily to Jane. Years ago her career was threatened when an angry ex had called each of her commanding officers, leaving the message, “Jane's wife is tired of her shit.”

Jane was devastated and humiliated by the news. It was only due to her record as an outstanding soldier that her superiors looked the other way.

“I was scared out of my mind,” Jane said. “I was scared that I had spent four years in the military, seen war, experienced all of this, and that I would be kicked out because of an angry ex.”

That, says Jane, wasn't the only thing that her superiors were forced to overlook. “She had been abusive to me,” Jane said. “And I couldn't seek help. There is no way I could talk to a chaplain or anybody because I could be

kicked out. There was no protection for me.”

It is for this reason that Jane feels that her security has been severely compromised as well.

“It keeps unhealthy relationships going,” said Jane’s new partner, who will be called Jill. “Just because of the fear of them contacting her superiors. That is not healthy for the soldier or the unit morale.”

While there are some heterosexual soldiers who have pretended to be gay in an effort to get out of their duty, Jane has applied for an extension, saying that she believes strongly in what they are doing there and in the country she is serving.

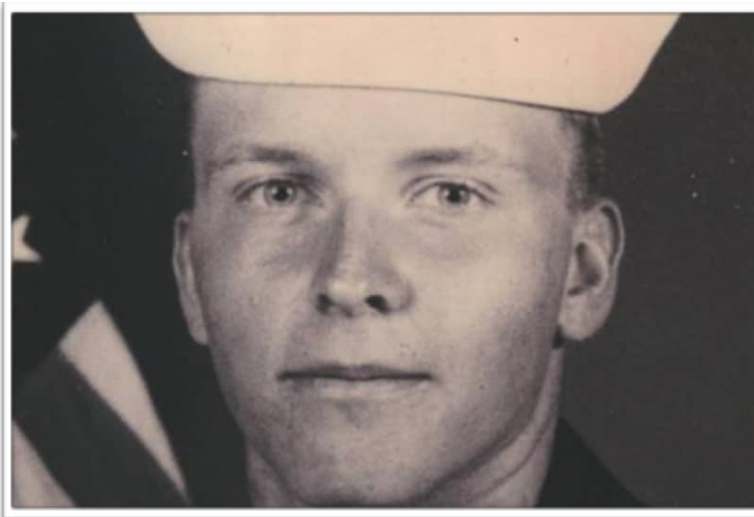
“I want to serve my country. I want to be here,” Jane said. “I believe in this. There are plenty of gay people who want to serve and are frustrated that they have to hide who they are. We need soldiers really, really bad, and yet they have a policy that impacts my entire life.”

Not according to Army public affairs officer, Major Anne Edgecomb, who points to the more than 80,000 soldiers recruited last year as evidence that the Army is in no way suffering due to this policy.

“We have no problem meeting our recruitment goals,” Edgecomb said from her office in the Pentagon. “I think that is pretty incredible.

I don’t think that this law has impacted our ability to recruit volunteer Army in any way.”

According to the Members Legal Defense Network, there have been 11,082 soldiers discharged from the military due to the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy since 1994. The Network estimates that if the policy were repealed, more than 41,000 able bodied and skilled men and



ALLEN R. SCHINDLER JR., WHO WAS MURDERED IN 1992 BY FELLOW SERVICE MEMBERS FOR ALLEGEDLY BEING GAY.

women would enlist.

A 2000 Census report estimated that there are 65,000 gays serving in the U.S. Armed Forces. The report also found that the length of service for gay men is equal to that of straight men and that lesbians tend to serve longer than straight women.

A study done by the University of California Blue Ribbon Commission states that the recruitment costs, training costs and separation travel costs of replacing gay soldiers has cost taxpayers \$363 million.

“Living in a post 9/11 era, we should be looking at this issue with fresh eyes and open minds,” said local equal rights activist Russell Bramlett. “The policy is such a tremendous waste of tax

dollars and human potential.”

Before “don’t ask, don’t tell,” the military used to have a policy informally referred to as “Queen for a Day,” that allowed service members to remain in the military if they could prove that their homosexuality was a temporary lapse in judgement.

The current policy is less forgiving. No matter time served, medals earned or skills learned, the policy applies. Even if the skill is as useful to today’s military as being an Arabic linguist. The number of Arabic linguists discharged due to their orientation is currently 52.

While stationed at Fort Bragg, military Arabic linguist Bleu Copas made national news when he was discharged. “The lifestyle does not destroy morale,” Copas said. “So many other countries do not have this policy and the soldiers work together fine. Many of these are countries we work alongside with.”

Of the 25 countries in NATO, 20 permit gays to serve. Of the permanent members of the United Nations, two – Britain and France – allow gays to serve, while three – Russia, China and the United States, do not.

The policy has not only affected the lives of those serving, but their loved ones as well.

Jane’s partner, Jill, lives in Fayetteville.

“The hardest thing on Earth was when I was leaving ... Everyone ... Everyone got to

say goodbye to their wives and loved ones and ...” Jane struggled to speak, choking on her

words. She didn’t want to let herself cry and be heard by someone

outside of

the closet in the base where she was stationed at. “ ...

And I had to have her bring my mother and uncle just so I could see her. It couldn’t look like she was there to see me off. While everyone else is kissing their girlfriends goodbye, I’m ... I’m shaking her hand. I’m shaking her hand before getting on a bus to leave for a year.”

“That was the hardest day of my life, not knowing if I would ever see her again,” said Jill. She too struggled to hold back tears. She failed. “God, I’m sorry.”

After composing herself, Jill continued.

“I was hanging out like I was just a friend. We would give each other these long looks, telling each other everything but saying it with our eyes. It was so hard to have to sit there and say goodbye, with her going to war ... and to not telling her, not expressing how much I love her. It is a constant stress. If we walk down Hay Street during 4th Friday, and we hold hands, will someone see that?”

Acceptance isn’t easy to earn. Gays in the military have been the target of various forms of harassment from their fellow servicemen,

among them, the “blanket party.”

“Blanket party” is an assault in which a group of service

members

gang up on a victim while asleep in their barracks, cover the victim with a blanket and physically beat them. In some cases, such as that of Allen R. Schindler Jr., the attack can be fatal. In 1992, while stationed in Japan, Schindler, who had reported that he had been harassed for months before his murder, was stomped to death. His head was crushed, his ribs were broken and his penis was cut off. With nearly every organ in his body destroyed, Schindler was left unrecognizable.

Schindler’s captain kept his death a secret for months.

“We don’t allow threats of violence or harassment,” Edgecomb said. “We just don’t stand for that.”

Jane feels differently.

“The actual policy is, ‘don’t ask, don’t tell, don’t pursue, don’t harass.’ Most people ignore the ‘don’t harass’ part,” Jane said. “If someone were to harass me, nothing would happen. Yesterday in the office there was a joke made. Someone calling someone a ‘queer faggot.’ I can’t say anything because if I say something, it will be

perceived that I am gay.

Which is true. It doesn’t bother me as much as it used to. It just shows ignorance on their part. Now, if someone calls me a dyke, I say, ‘what if I am? What are you going to do about it? I’m here, I’m me, and I do my job. I do my job better than a lot of other people.’”

Whether the policy is harmful to the military or not, Army officials are powerless to change the law.

“This policy is a



congressional issue that needs to be handled by Congress,” said Tom McCollum, Fort Bragg public affairs officer. “The Army does not make the law. Laws are made by congress.”

In the meantime, Jane, Jill and thousands like them, will remain hidden, expressing their feelings behind closed doors and inside closets. “It’s just stupid ... It doesn’t hurt anybody else but us. If you get to know us, you’ll find that we are just like everybody else,” Jane said. “Huh ... Isn’t that strange?”

*Story by James Johnson, staff writer.
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