

Uniforms in the Closet

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Before R., a Marine Corps officer, leaves Camp Pendelton, he changes out of the starched camouflage suit that is the everyday uniform of marines into "civvies" -- in R.'s case, jeans and a T-shirt. It is normal for a marine to change clothes before leaving the base; by shedding his "cammies," R. leaves behind the obligation to salute other marines in uniform. But for R., the change is also symbolic: as a marine who is gay, he looks forward to the end of each workday as a reprieve from hiding part of himself from everyone around him.

Most days, the marines in R.'s battalion are not in the field but at their desks in a modest office building, set amid scrubby Southern California coastland, where images of wives and crinkly faced infants smile from picture frames and computer screens. In R.'s office, the decor is strictly military: photographs of his various units over the 12 years he has been a marine, a picture of the general whom he served as an aide -- a demanding and highly prestigious job. (R. has also been a commanding officer, bearing ultimate responsibility for a unit.) R. wishes he could place on his desk a photograph of David, a civilian mechanical engineer and his partner of three years, but a man's picture would almost certainly kindle suspicions. Even a personal telephone call from a man might be considered unusual, so David almost never calls R. at his office, where a single phone line serves dozens of marines.

Yet despite these and a multitude of other precautions, he worries that some men in his unit suspect that he is gay -- in part because he is over 30 and unmarried; in part because years of hiding have made him deeply paranoid. "Sometimes I feel like they can look at me and just tell," says R., who would speak with me, and allow me into his life, on condition that I refer to him only by one of his initials. (Other gay military personnel I interviewed for this article similarly requested anonymity.)

Driving from Camp Pendelton into San Diego, 40 miles south, R. grows visibly more relaxed. He has a California tan, deep-set eyes and the sturdy build characteristic of marines, along with a large Marine Corps tattoo -- eagle, globe and anchor. A vigorous, sociable man, he is full of plans. After work tomorrow, he will make the two-hour drive north to David's house in Los Angeles, as he does each weekend. On Sunday, they will go to brunch at the home of a gay Marine officer. In a couple of weeks, R. will accompany his battalion to "the desert," Twentynine Palms, a Marine base outside Palm Springs where field training exercises are performed. From there he will head into Palm Springs for the annual White Party, a large all-night gay dance.

This constant switching between mutually exclusive worlds can have some odd, hallucinatory effects, R. says: "Several times I've met someone on base and wondered, Haven't I seen him at a bar? And then I've seen people at bars and thought I recognized them from the base. When I see someone at the mall, I can't remember where I know them from."

R. joined the Marines as a teen-ager and is fiercely loyal to the Corps, particularly to the enlisted men who answer to him -- "my marines," he calls them, and adds, "I'm a marine first and gay second." His career has been stellar; he is what is known in the Corps as a "mustang," an enlisted marine who crossed over to become a commissioned officer. "Now that I've been a commanding officer and a general's aide, sky's the limit," he says. Military retirement, which can begin after 20 years, would allow him to draw half his base pay for the rest of his life. But R. plans to leave the Marines at the end of his current commission. The reason is simple. "I'm fed up," he says, "with having to hide."

It has been more than four years since the policy known as "Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Pursue" went into effect. This policy was a compromise eked out among the White House, Congress and the Pentagon after President Clinton's announcement of his intention to lift the ban on homosexuals in the military -- a ban that prohibited homosexuals from serving under any circumstances -- set off a firestorm of opposition. Under "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," homosexuals (and bisexuals) may serve as long as they tell no one about their sexual orientation, refrain from

"homosexual acts" and forgo homosexual marriage. The policy bars the military from questioning service members about their sexual orientation or investigating them without credible information that they have engaged in homosexual conduct. The stated goal of the policy is to allow homosexuals to serve while preserving morale and unit cohesion, which the military believes would be impaired by the presence of openly gay soldiers. But "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" forces a difficult choice upon homosexuals: in order to serve, they must either do without sex, romance and companionship or live uncelibate lives and lie about it -- breaking the law and forfeiting their careers if they are caught.

Two months ago, the Pentagon issued figures indicating that the number of homosexuals discharged -- 997 in 1997 -- has risen 67 percent since "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" went into effect. Michelle Benecke, co-founder and co-director of Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, a watchdog group that assists military personnel accused under "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," says she believes the rise in discharges indicates that commanders are continuing to seek out homosexuals despite the fact that they are no longer supposed to. "No one has informed commanders of what the new rules are," says Benecke, whose organization has documented 1,379 command violations of the policy in the four years of its existence. "No one has ever told them the intent: to back off."

The Pentagon disagrees, attributing the rise in discharges to an increase in "statement" cases, in which homosexuals -- many of them in their first year of service -- openly declare that they are gay. But what the military regards as a statement is not always so clear-cut: last November, the Navy tried to discharge a senior chief petty officer named Timothy McVeigh, a nuclear submarine expert who had been in the service for 18 years, on the basis of what it called his homosexual admittance. McVeigh's so-called admittance was an Internet posting with America Online in which he stated, anonymously, that his marital status was "gay"; a Federal judge ruled in January that the military's investigation of McVeigh was in violation of policy and ordered that McVeigh, who has declined to discuss his sexual orientation, be retained. Earlier this month, McVeigh and the Navy reached a settlement under which he will retire this summer with full benefits and receive a payment of \$90,000 to cover his legal fees.

During a recent interview, Kenneth H. Bacon, the Pentagon spokesman, told me: "Obviously, there are many people serving in the armed forces who have gay relationships, but they're discreet. They aren't pursued, and they may not even be known about." This suggests a split between the letter and the spirit of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell": the letter says, Don't do it; the spirit says, It's O.K. to do it as long as you are discreet. But this double message leaves homosexuals on queasy middle ground: theoretically, they are allowed to serve, but their private lives are illegal and will cost them their careers -- if they get caught. But then, no one is supposed to be trying to catch them. When I raised this notion of the policy's murkiness with Rudy de Leon, Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, he said, "I think we're at the heart of some of the conflicts that are built into the policy, which tries to balance many competing interests."

If, as the Pentagon says, some homosexuals are outing themselves with the knowledge that they will be discharged, it may be that for them, the pressures and risks of serving under "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" are too intense to bear.

R is part of a sprawling social network of gay marines and sailors, men and women, based in and around San Diego, where the shoreline bristles with dull gray ships and the sky is full of lumbering choppers and S-3's, anti-submarine-warfare planes that honk like gigantic geese as they fly. On this unseasonably cool spring evening, I accompany R. to a 6:30 dinner at the home of a Navy doctor near Hillcrest, a gay neighborhood north of downtown San Diego. The group tonight includes a tank officer who was one of the first to enter Kuwait during the gulf war, where he earned a bronze star; a Navy helicopter pilot, and several noncommissioned officers, or N.C.O.'s -- enlisted men who have worked their way up through the ranks. The off-duty mingling of officers and enlisted people of different ranks is prohibited because of its potential to break down the chain of command, but the fact that gay personnel are forced underground creates a bond among them that transcends military hierarchy. None of these friends work together; they met socially and communicate mostly by E-mail, using a code that eliminates gender-specific pronouns, since the military can monitor any E-mail exchanges that take place on a base. (Most of R.'s friends say they have never met a gay person on duty; even when they suspect that a fellow sailor or marine might be gay, they rarely approach -- the risk of being wrong is too great.)

Like a number of his friends, R. joined the military believing he was heterosexual. Reared and educated in a strict Southern Christian community, he was profoundly homophobic. "I would say, 'AIDS is God's judgment on homosexuals' -- I really felt that," he says. He was drawn to the Marines by the camaraderie, by the promise of adventure -- and also by the largely single-sex environment. "I would think, I'm going to be with all these men -- that's kind of exciting," he says. "But I didn't know why I was excited."

Some of R.'s friends, aware of their homosexual inclinations, joined in hopes that the military -- the Marines in particular -- would "cure" them. "Everybody knows that there are no fags in the Marines," says a former infantryman. Over pizza, R.'s friends talk of other motivations for joining the military, including the desire to get away from home and the hope of proving themselves to a disapproving world. "I'm supposed to be that one guy that can't survive in this environment," says one powerfully built man, an operations officer in the Marine air wing. "I'm the guy that's supposed to be filtered out, the weak one who can't carry the pack."

This officer goes on to tell me that his homosexuality is an open secret. "I know that in my command there are marines who work for me that assume I'm gay," he says. But he is clearly the exception. A logistics officer I'm introduced to at dinner has a dedicated "stunt babe" -- a woman who poses as his girlfriend at military events and whose picture he keeps on his desk. The annual Marine Corps Ball, I learn, is the biggest command performance of this sort; R. usually brings a date with whom he has collaborated on a complex romantic history while David stays home, watching TV. It isn't enough to say nothing about your private life; unless you give the appearance of being heterosexual, people will start to wonder -- especially now that "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" has alerted them to the fact that there may be homosexuals in their midst.

As a result, R. and his friends monitor themselves obsessively, aware that a single blunder can lead to exposure, humiliation and a discharge they regard as a disgrace -- particularly those, like R., whose families don't know they are gay. A strange car in front of your house, clicks on the telephone line, a summons from the commanding officer -- in the life of a gay soldier, any one of these can prompt a flicker of anxiety, even all-out panic. "Say you're out with four or five of your friends at a restaurant, and there goes somebody in your department with his wife," says the Navy doctor who is the host of the pizza party. "You know you're nailed."

Even gay nightclubs can be a hazard, although "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" has discouraged the trolling of clubs by investigators, a formerly common practice. One officer says of a popular San Diego club: "Last time I was there on a gay night, I ran into two of my marines, who were there by mistake. They were like, 'Hey, Sir, what're you doing here?'" Another of R.'s friends, P., was an F-18 fighter pilot who dropped bombs on Iraq during the gulf war before leaving active duty three years ago. (He is still with the Marine reserves.) P. was in a long-term relationship with his civilian "roommate" while in the military, but feigned a romance with a lesbian friend for three years to avoid having to go on any more blind dates set up by the Officers' Wives Club. A fair, soft-spoken man who has retained his marine build and haircut, P. says his hardest times were the six-month deployments on aircraft carriers, when he and his partner were rarely able to speak, and when P. rationed the letters he sent home out of fear that too many to the same man would draw attention. The letters his partner sent him were unsigned or signed with a female name, sent without a return address and chary on endearments. (During R.'s ship deployment, he asked his partner to have a woman address his letters.)

Each month, P. recalls, a videotape would arrive on his ship, fashioned by the Officers' Wives Club, filled with greetings from loved ones. "Everybody else in the squadron's wife or girlfriend would be in the video saying, 'Hey, honey, how're you doing?'" he says. "And you'd be the only one without anything on that tape."

At the end of the deployment, when the ship was within six or seven days of land, senior pilots with wives or fiancées would get to fly the planes ashore early to be with their loved ones. Though P. was always among the most senior, he, being single, had to wait until the ship docked. "You get off, you have this huge welcome-home party and everyone else is there, except yours," he says. "He could be, except you'd have to stand there and shake his hand: Thanks for coming, buddy." And, of course, being met by a man after six months at sea might well arouse suspicions.

Still, in this crowd it is generally felt that gay enlisted people, not officers, have it the worst. The enlisted are a tighter pack, which makes keeping secrets much harder, and the homophobic atmosphere tends to be far more virulent. Twelve of the homosexuals discharged in 1997 were officers; the remaining 985, enlisted people. J., an N.C.O. who says he has witnessed beatings and harassment of those suspected of being gay, told me he would fear for his life if his subordinates were to discover his secret. He socializes in Hillcrest, but tells subordinates that he goes to bars they can't afford: "I'll say: 'Dude, I met this babe last night. We hit it off!' You have to lie. They're like a pack of dogs -- if they smell blood, they're going to go after it. You're dealing with kids, 18 or 19, who are trying to prove their manhood." Homosexual jokes and slurs, he adds, are a constant.

So saturated is the Marine Corps with homophobia that some of R.'s friends agree with the Pentagon that they should not be allowed to serve openly, that it would hinder their ability to lead. R. used to feel this way, but like the majority of gay personnel I spoke with, he has come to believe that although President Clinton had good intentions in seeking to change a draconian policy, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" amounts to a step backward. For one thing, it has turned discrimination against homosexuals -- formerly just a military policy -- into Federal law. And by forcing homosexuals to remain invisible, R. says, the policy deprives gay military people of the chance to prove themselves and begin to dispel the prejudices against them. "The best way to change people's attitudes is the personal one-on-one relationship," he says, and tells of how a close friend, a heterosexual Marine fighter pilot with whom R. used to trade jokes about homosexuals, has completely revised his views since learning that R. is gay. But under "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," R. could be discharged simply for having told his friend that he is homosexual.

"Clinton thought he was doing us this big favor," R. says, "and all he did was build a brick wall around the closet."

Each time J., the N.C.O., recalls one of his fabrications, he begins, "I told a lie," as if to keep straight in his mind what is a lie and what is the truth. Clearly, so much lying troubles him. He shows me the red plastic Core Values card that every marine must carry. "Honor," begins the text, which also includes the words "Integrity," "Responsibility" and "Accountability."

"Look at those and tell me if a marine who lives by that code can be gay in the military and live with himself," J. says. "They encourage integrity, but they expect us to lie."

Yet none of this seems to have blunted J.'s passion for the military. "If I could do it all over again, I would have gone Air Force," he says. (The Air Force and the air wings of the Navy and the Marines are seen as being less intensely homophobic environments.) "But now that I'm a marine, I'm a marine through and through. It's in my blood."

Still, for gay service members, devotion to the military is fraught with the knowledge that it will turn on them instantly if it learns one of the most basic facts about them. Many are haunted by the story of Lieut. Col. Loren S. Loomis of the Army, winner of two bronze stars and a purple heart in Vietnam, whose homosexuality was exposed in a way few could have imagined. After his house near Fort Hood, Tex., caught fire in 1996, the Fire Department, suspecting arson, took a video camera and a videotape from Loomis's home as part of its investigation. The video showed Loomis engaging in gay sex. Although the Fire Department had removed the video without a search warrant or a subpoena, the district attorney's office nevertheless turned it over to the Army. Loomis offered to retire early, but was discharged instead, and thus deprived of his active-duty pension and retirement benefits. Most chillingly to gay service members, his ouster came just five days before his 20-year retirement eligibility would have begun.

"In flight school, in every school I was in," says P., the former F-18 pilot, "I finished first. In every squadron I was in, I was always the No. 1 guy. But no matter how many times you're No. 1, if they find out you're a homo, you're out."

After dinner, I head with R. and some of his friends to Flicks, a gay bar popular with military men and their civilian admirers, known as "chasers," some of whom emulate the distinctive Marine "high and tight" haircut -- shaved

almost to the scalp around the sides of the head with a flat wedge of hair along the top. Part of the allure of military men is that they're tested regularly for H.I.V. and thus are perceived as "clean."

Andrew Cunanan, who is believed to have murdered Gianni Versace and others, was a chaser, and Flicks was his bar of choice. His bloody rampage across America has fueled the wariness R.'s crowd already says it feels toward civilian homosexuals; at Flicks, he and his friends are a somewhat insular presence, clean-cut and light drinking -- most rise at 5:30 A.M. and are in their offices by 6:30 or 7. They talk among themselves or with the other military men they encounter. The night's entertainment is a performance by a former marine, now a stripper and porn star, but that's not why they're there. Military socialization, with its emphasis on patriotism and war, structure and rank, is conservative and unique; it creates a gap between soldiers and civilians that doesn't disappear simply because both are gay. R. and his friends tend to be leery of "nellie," or effeminate, men, though it is a prejudice of which they are somewhat ashamed.

"I know very little about gay culture," R. says. On a gay cruise he and David took recently with some military friends, R. was mystified by a drag spoof of "Whatever Happened to Baby Jane." "The whole place is going wild, and none of us had seen 'Whatever Happened to Baby Jane,'" he says, and admits to finding the hedonism in some pockets of gay culture -- the all-night dance parties, for example, which David enjoys -- wearying and empty. As for gay advocates in San Francisco and Washington, many of whom are left-leaning and anti-military, R. says: "I don't think they speak for us. I don't think they understand us."

Part of what they don't understand, of course, is what it's like to function in a world where even saying that you are gay is illegal. After the gay cruise, R. says: "When I was going back to work, I actually felt sick, nauseous with dread. I go to bars and these people are able to live without fear. It makes me jealous. It puts a barrier between us."

Yet this barrier leaves R. and his friends in something of a no man's land: socialized by the military but divided from it by sexual orientation; bound to gay culture by definition, yet culturally estranged from it. In a sense, they belong to a group consisting only of one another.

Most of them leave Flicks at 10:30, before the stripper begins performing, and head home to bed.

What R. and his friends hope to ward off through the use of stunt babes, phony photos and other false trappings of heterosexual life are any formal inquiries into their sexuality. Under "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," an inquiry cannot begin without credible information that a person has made a statement of homosexual orientation or engaged in homosexual conduct, but what exactly constitutes "credible information" is up to the commanding officer. (C.O.'s are advised to check with legal counsel before beginning such inquiries.) Sonya Harden, a heterosexual black enlisted woman with the Air Force, was investigated for homosexuality after a former civilian roommate who claimed that Harden owed her money forged letters in Harden's name stating that she was gay and gave them to her commanding officer. Harden's C.O. initiated an inquiry. Such inquiries are often as simple as questioning the service member -- or, in the practice, discouraged but still extant, known as witch hunting, pressing the service member for the names of other homosexuals in exchange for leniency. Some inquiries are more complex: in the case of D., a black female marine who was in training for the Military Police, the inquiry included interviews with her parents, her childhood friends and even her prom dates -- 300 pages of testimony.

After investigating, a commanding officer must decide whether a service member has, in fact, made a statement of homosexuality or engaged in homosexual acts, which current policy defines as any bodily contact that "a reasonable person" would understand to be for purposes of sexual gratification or an expression of homosexuality -- in some cases, as little as a kiss, a hug or handholding. If the C.O. determines that a basis for discharge exists, he or she will initiate "separation" proceedings -- the administrative process whereby a service member may be prematurely discharged. In the case of D., who had been caught lying on a bed fully clothed with another female trainee, the C.O. read through hundreds of pages of testimony and decided not to seek a discharge. But in Harden's case, the C.O. went ahead with her discharge despite the fact that, by then, her accuser had recanted and had admitted to having forged the incriminating letters.

Service members like Harden who choose to fight their separations must appear before a separation board. Once things have come this far, though, a number of factors weigh heavily against the accused. For one, because a separation hearing is an administrative rather than a criminal proceeding, there are no strict rules of evidence; the Government can present or exclude virtually anything it wants, no matter how it was obtained. (That was why, in Colonel Loomis's case, the videotape could be used against him.) In Harden's case, the Government presented the forged letters -- even though the forger herself testified before the board on Harden's behalf -- and also chose to exclude a polygraph, which Harden had passed.

Another factor weighing against a service member in a separation hearing is that the members of the typically three-person panel who will determine his or her fate are chosen by -- and sometimes answer to -- the very commanding officer who is presenting the allegations. Moreover, although the accused is entitled to a military defense lawyer, and by all accounts these lawyers defend their clients assiduously, they are notoriously overworked. Sometimes service members are not provided a lawyer -- or even told what they are being charged with -- until discharge paperwork is already pending, at which point little can be done to stop it. And most enlisted people cannot afford civilian lawyers.

But perhaps the biggest hurdle facing a service member in a homosexual case is the near impossibility of proving that he or she is unlikely to engage in homosexual acts. "You have to prove that you not only don't have sex, but you have no propensity to," says Beatrice Dohrn, legal director of the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund. "How do you prove that?" With great difficulty, it would seem -- even if, like Harden, you are heterosexual. Three former boyfriends testified on her behalf, and Harden gave a sworn statement, but the separation board still ruled against her, and she was discharged in August 1996. "Once somebody says you're gay, you can sleep with a hundred guys, but they're still going to say, 'She's gay,'" Harden says. Harden filed a complaint with the Inspector General of the Air Force, whose job is to investigate alleged command abuses. He ultimately concluded that Harden had been treated fairly without ever interviewing her.

On Harden's discharge form, beside her honorable discharge (in the absence of aggravating circumstances, policy stipulates that the character of a homosexual discharge be commensurate with the character of the person's service) are the words, "Homosexual Acts." She will carry that form with her for the rest of her life, and some employers will want to see it. Even on the so-called short form, there is a code barring re-enlistment that many employers recognize. "The humiliation goes on," says Harden, a sad-eyed woman who now works as a police officer in Louisiana. She still wears her Air Force ring.

On a bright, windy spring Friday, R. and I attend the weekly graduation ceremony at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego. R. wears his dress-blue trousers, which have a thick red stripe down each side to show that he is an officer; his white "cover," as hats are known in the military; a long-sleeved khaki shirt, and khaki tie. He has misplaced his officer's tie clip; appearing at the graduation without one is out of the question, so we stop to buy another. The marines we pass on our way to the graduation salute R. crisply and say, "Good morning, Sir," as R. returns the salute. He admits to falling naturally into the designated marine walk, swinging his arms so that each hand extends six inches beyond his body and then three inches behind it.

The six graduating platoons, all male (female marines are trained on Parris Island, S.C.), stand perfectly still, occupying a tiny fraction of a runway-size courtyard surrounded by golden California Mission-style buildings. They have just completed three months of famously punishing training -- longer than boot camp in the other military services. As the Marine band begins to play, R. looks at the hundreds of identical-looking soldiers and says: "There's 500 of them. You figure, probably 50 are gay."

During his early years in the Corps, R. had two homosexual experiences, which he viewed as the temptations of Satan. His transformation from rabid homophobe to gay man occurred haltingly over seven confusing years. At times he felt an urge to bond with his enlisted men that led him once to share a hotel room with some of them during a trip in Asia -- an act of fraternization and favoritism that he now deplors. "I was in denial," he says. "I told myself I was an officer looking out for my men in a foreign country. Now I see that I was attracted to my men."

It was in 1992 that R.'s perception of himself began to shift. In an officer's meeting, he says: "Somebody told a gay joke, and everyone laughed. Then he said, 'You know, faggots are the last group of people that a marine can joke about without having to worry about offending anyone.' And I said, 'Yeah!' But somewhere in the back of my mind I thought: Good. He can't tell I've had sex with two men."

Several months later, R. admitted to himself that he was homosexual and experienced a tremendous relief, even euphoria, along with a heightened awareness of his actions. "Right after I admitted it, we went to some training in the desert, and they had field showers," he recalls. "It's a room full of 50 naked men. I purposely waited until the very end, when I was the only one there, because I thought, Someday everyone's going to know I was gay, and I don't want anyone saying: 'Oh, I remember. He used to leer at me in the shower.'" To this day, he showers alone whenever possible.

R.'s problems as a gay marine were just beginning. A rumor reached him that after a group sexual experience he was involved in with female prostitutes in the Philippines a year earlier, someone had described him as a guy who was looking a little too closely at other men's anatomy. Desperate to quash the rumor, R. invited a female friend to San Diego to pose as his girlfriend. While at a bar with R., she became interested in one of the straight marines she was supposed to be deceiving. R. made it clear that if she wanted to flirt with the man, she and R. would first have to stage a fight, which they proceeded to do. "We were screaming," he says, "and I went like I was going to hit her. 'You bitch, you're a slut.'" R. charged out of the bar, passed a couple of hours at a gay bar nearby, then returned to pick up his "girlfriend." By this time, however, the heterosexual marine was bruising for a fight over the way R. had treated the woman, and R. narrowly escaped a punch-out. His life of paranoid dissembling had begun.

When the graduation ends, we drive to Camp Pendelton for lunch. Passing through one of the many military checkpoints in and around San Diego has the quality of falling into a parallel universe; today, near the Staff Noncommissioned Officers' Club, teams of military prisoners in bright orange coveralls are manicuring hedges. As we head inside the dining room, R. is greeted by a leathery man with vivid blue eyes wearing cammies. "How's life on the other side?" the man barks.

I feel R. go tense beside me. "What other side, Sir?" he asks.

"The other side you're on," the man says, and laughs.

While eating his Reuben sandwich, R. mulls over the encounter, trying to recall where he had previously met the man, what he could have meant by "the other side." There are many "sides" in the Marine Corps: officer versus enlisted, ground versus air wing, active duty versus reserves. Most likely, R. muses, the man was alluding to his stint as a general's aide. But the question lingers: Does he know?

We have arranged to meet M., a gay female friend of R.'s, at lunch. Because she is not in uniform, having just come from a farewell party, M. is able to join us despite the fact that R. is an officer and she is a staff N.C.O. Still, M. grows anxious at our table; like most military women, she functions in an overwhelmingly male environment where she says that she feels intensely scrutinized. An attractive woman with a small gold cross around her neck, M. has told only one of her heterosexual colleagues, a civilian, that she is gay. "It is relaxing, or easing, to feel like she knows me," M. says.

If male homosexuals feel pressure to invent heterosexual lives, the pressure on women is exponentially greater -- they represent 14 percent of the armed forces, yet have accounted for roughly a quarter of the homosexuals discharged over the past four years.

Several years ago, M. took a step that is quite common among gay military personnel of both sexes: she got married. In addition to the obvious boon of creating the appearance of heterosexuality, marriage in the military brings myriad financial benefits; the most important is a higher Basic Allowance for Quarters when you live off-base -- essential for any homosexual who wants a private life, but on an enlisted salary, which begins at \$11,113 per

year, virtually unaffordable. Marriages of convenience, either between gay men and women or with foreigners seeking American citizenship, are one solution.

M. married a civilian homosexual so that she could live off-base with her partner while securing medical benefits for her "husband," who was her partner's best friend. But guilt over deceiving the Government soon began to gnaw at her. Her relationship foundered; when M. told her partner that she was divorcing the friend, the woman threatened to tell M.'s C.O. that she was gay. Panic-stricken, M. nevertheless held her ground. "I said, 'Go ahead, there are going to be three of us in jail,'" she says. M. proceeded with the divorce, and her partner kept quiet. "I felt haunted by that nightmare for years," she says.

Yet perhaps the biggest problem for gay military women is a problem they share with straight women: they are often deeply resented by their male colleagues and subordinates, many of whom still feel that women shouldn't be serving at all. Being gay is a vulnerability for women that some male colleagues are only too happy to exploit. The C.O. of one of M.'s friends has threatened to sit outside her house all night to prove that she has female lovers. Often, gay women are reluctant to report sexual harassment for fear of retaliatory investigations into their sexuality. A., an Army officer who has been deployed to both the Persian Gulf and Bosnia, filed a sexual-harassment complaint against a superior who demanded sexual favors from her. Some months later, an anonymous assertion that she was homosexual appeared in A.'s personnel file, and her security clearance was suspended.

M. has spent more than 10 years in the Corps, but like R., she plans to end her career when her present enlistment is up. "I'm sick of living the lie," she says. "What scares me is that it gets to the point where you don't even notice it. You start to withhold information that you don't have to. How was your night? Oh, good. I'm practicing saying, We did this and we did that. Kind of remembering that this is human interaction, and this is O.K."

The military is adamant that it cannot allow homosexuals to serve openly without greatly compromising the readiness and effectiveness of its troops. Military personnel live and work under intimate conditions that would shock most civilians. (On the U.S.S. *Constellation*, an aircraft carrier I toured, the enlisted men's berthing quarters were crammed with three-tiered bunk beds the size of large dresser drawers.) Unit cohesion is at the heart of a successful fighting force, and Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf and Gen. Colin Powell argued passionately before Congress that openly homosexual men and women would polarize units and destroy that cohesion.

At least some of R.'s gay friends in the military don't dispute this view. "Homophobic people don't want to work with a fag," one officer said. "The group falls apart, we do not fight effectively." And while it is true that many NATO countries allow homosexuals to serve openly in their militaries (as does Israel), anecdotal evidence suggests that most homosexuals in these forces still remain closeted -- and must, if they wish to advance in rank.

There is a hesitation to dispute the military's arguments. I, like most Americans, have no idea how wars are fought, and it is easy to underestimate the deep animus toward homosexuals that exists in the armed forces. (General Schwarzkopf, for one, says he believes that allowing homosexuals to serve openly would sharply discourage enlistments.)

Still, several factors complicate this picture. For one, homosexuals have served in the armed forces since the country was founded (even earlier, actually; one of George Washington's generals is said to have been gay), and many have served openly -- their units knew of their sexual orientation -- without apparent problems. Brig. Gen. Pat Foote, who retired in 1989 after 29 years in the Army, says, "I don't know many serving officers or N.C.O.'s who have not, in units with which they were affiliated, known that there were men and women other than heterosexuals doing magnificent jobs." Maj. Gen. Vance Coleman, who was wounded in the Korean War and is now retired from the Army, says that he served with homosexuals without incident.

General Coleman, who is black, says that the present-day arguments against allowing homosexuals to serve openly echo prior ones against integrating blacks in the armed forces -- including the claims that white soldiers would not follow orders given by black officers and that whites and blacks could not peaceably share a foxhole. When

President Truman overrode those arguments in 1948 with an executive order to integrate, military personnel, among others, reacted with horror.

Referring to homosexuals in the military, General Coleman says: "This is a civil rights issue and a human rights issue. You're not the same as I am, therefore you're inferior."

Perhaps another factor complicating the military's argument against homosexuals serving openly is that discharges of homosexuals, some suspect, fall during wartime; indeed, revelations of homosexuality during wartime are often received skeptically by the military, as possible ruses to avoid combat, and a person must sometimes furnish sworn statements from sexual partners to be discharged. Though the Pentagon disputes this, General Coleman, among others, says he believes that concern about the presence of homosexuals is a peacetime obsession. "When there's a war, nobody has time to deal with that," he says. "It's about fighting and winning."

Tom Carpenter, a former Marine fighter pilot who met his partner of 20 years, a former naval flight officer, while on active duty in the 70's, says he believes that the military's revulsion from homosexuality is linked to the intense male bonding that has traditionally been a part of military life. Like many historically all-male environments, the military has had its share of homoerotic rituals -- most famously the Navy's "Crossing the Line" ceremony ("modified" and "supervised" nowadays, according to the Navy, but said to still occur unmodified on at least some ships). "Crossing the Line" is an initiation for new sailors, or "polliwogs," making their first Equator crossing. Elements of this ritual include the crowning of "King Neptune's queen," played by a young sailor in drag; the whipping and paddling of polliwogs by a gantlet of seasoned sailors, known as "shellbacks," and sometimes simulated fellatio and anal intercourse between shellbacks and polliwogs. At the conclusion, the young initiates strip off their soiled uniforms and pitch them into the sea, then mill about in the nude as proof that they, too, are now shellbacks.

Indeed, by many accounts, what is known as "conditional homosexuality," or homosexual behavior by men who are normally heterosexual, is not uncommon among soldiers during long periods when women are unavailable. Navy phrases like "It ain't queer unless it's tied to the pier" allude to such behaviors. Some married men, it is said, believe that sex with another man does not constitute adultery. There is even a provision in "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" that excuses homosexual conduct if it is aberrant behavior for an individual. Bridget Wilson, a San Diego lawyer who has defended gay military personnel, calls this the queen-for-a-day exception.

Lois Shawver, a clinical psychologist whose book "And the Flag Was Still There" studies attitudes toward homosexuality in the military, says, "The sense of the troops' being demoralized is built on the anxiety that gays are going to stare at them and turn on them sexually." But Shawver's research suggests that this fear is unfounded -- that, in fact, homosexuals regulate their behavior even more carefully when they are known to be gay. As for exceptions, military policy and, in some cases, the Uniform Code of Military Justice prohibit displays of physical affection while in uniform, sex in military barracks, sex between people of different ranks and sodomy, which includes oral sex.

"We have within the U.C.M.J. all that we need to deal with people that bring any type of sexual misbehavior to the workplace or the barracks," says General Foote, who recently served as the vice chairman of the Army's Senior Review Panel on Sexual Harassment. "We don't need any more laws."

The next time I see R., a few weeks later, the weather is warmer and El Nino has roused rashes of fluorescent purple flowers along Interstate 5. At the end of his workday, we drive from Camp Pendleton to Hillcrest and meet the tank officer I'd first met at the pizza dinner and his male partner, a naval nurse, in the home they share with a burly chow and a small striped cat.

Over beers, R. recounts a quintessential gay-military snafu that occurred at the Marine officer's brunch he attended a few Sundays back. The officer had invited his straight military friends for brunch on Saturday, his gay friends on

Sunday, but one straight Navy pilot got the days confused and arrived with his wife in the midst of the all-male brunch. The host panicked, feigned an emergency and bolted from his own party.

But the heterosexual couple, apparently unfazed, were still there when the shaken host finally returned. According to R., the Marine officer then took his straight friend into a quiet room and said, "There's something I have to tell you" -- at which point the guest seized his arm and answered: "Don't worry. I'm on board with the program."

There are people who feel that as a younger generation rises to power within the military, attitudes like that of the Navy pilot will gradually prevail, and that the laws barring open homosexuality will fall away, just as those barring women and blacks eventually did.

But "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" is now Federal law, and laws are not changed easily. So far, the Supreme Court has refused to hear a case challenging it, and three Circuit Courts have upheld the policy. However, the Second Circuit Court, in New York City, recently heard an appeal of a case in which a lower-court judge ruled that "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" violates the constitutional rights of equal protection and free speech. That case, *Able v. the United States*, may yet reach the Supreme Court, but even then, precedent suggests that the Court may defer to the military.

"If you look at the case in terms of the law and reason, it looks like an overwhelming winner," says Matt Coles, director of the Lesbian and Gay Rights Project of the American Civil Liberties Union, which filed the case jointly with Lambda. "But if you look at it in terms of the courts and the military, it looks like it doesn't have a chance."

The more likely venue for change is Congress, but that, too, seems a long way off. Republicans are virtually unanimous in their opposition to gay rights; so far, even the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, a basic gay rights bill, has failed to pass. Representative Barney Frank (Democrat of Massachusetts), who is openly gay and opposes "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," says that should the Democrats win even a small majority in the House and the Senate in November (no small task), the gay rights bill could eventually pass. However, he holds out little hope for lifting "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" anytime soon.

"The military issue is unfortunately seen as a tougher one," he says. "So you'd need a bigger Democratic majority for that."

Whatever happens, R. will be reading about it in the newspapers, like everyone else; in a few months, he will become a civilian for the first time in his adult life. It won't be an easy transition for him. "It's a way of life," he says of being a marine. "David and I will be walking down the Oceanside Pier, and somebody will see me, and they'll be like, 'Sir, how are you doing?' David's like: 'You're not at work! You're not in uniform! Why are they calling you Sir?' I'm like: 'That's just the way it is. I can't explain it.'"

But R. joined the Marines for the brotherhood, the esprit de corps, and ultimately, his sense of brotherhood has been eroded by the years of hiding. "For the longest time, I felt close to the people," he says. "But more and more, when you hear somebody make an anti-gay comment, that becomes a bookmark in your mind. I can't become close friends with the people I work with. It's definitely made me grow apart from the Marine Corps."

His experience raises the question of whether openly gay soldiers are as great a threat to unit cohesion as closeted homosexuals, whose enforced secrecy gradually distances them from their fellow soldiers. A., the woman who served in the Persian Gulf and in Bosnia, says that as a homosexual "you have this barrier to intimacy with the people you're serving with -- and that intimacy is what keeps people alive in hostile situations."

Among the many paradoxes surrounding the issue of homosexuals in the military is this: the fact that R. has thrived in the military -- and has the record to prove it -- is partly what impels him to move on. "I want to leave in a pristine state," he says. "I'm tired of the looming prospect that tomorrow the whole world could come crashing down."