LGBTQ Rights and the U.S. Military

By Morgan Carlton, Ph.D. Candidate, Department of History, University of Michigan
THERE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN gay people in the United States military, even if it hasn’t always been legal to be gay and in the military. Although the military had discharged gays and lesbians for their sexual orientation since the 1700s, the policy was not codified until the 20th century. The Articles of War of the United States was modified in 1920 to state that military personnel who committed sodomy would be subject to court-martial, and in 1949, the Department of Defense decreed that “homosexual personnel, irrespective of sex, should not be permitted to serve in any branch of the Armed Forces in any capacity and prompt separation of known homosexuals from the Armed Forces is mandatory.”1 In 1993, President Bill Clinton offered what he termed as a “compromise”: the military policy now known as “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” or DADT. This policy barred homosexual or bisexual military persons from disclosing their sexual orientation while also prohibiting discrimination and harassment of LGBTQ military persons.2 It was not until 2011, when President Obama’s 2010 repeal of DADT went into effect, that LGBTQ military personnel were granted equal rights. For students and researchers interested in learning more about this history, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, ProQuest LGBT Magazine Archive, and ProQuest History Vault allow researchers to find primary sources tracing the history of the U.S. military and LGBTQ personnel during the second half of the 20th Century. This use case highlights several stories pertaining to LGBTQ women in the U.S. military in order to give researchers ideas of the types of documents they can find in ProQuest databases.

During World War Two, the U.S. military kept surveillance records on female military personnel who were suspected to be lesbians. These reports, written up as “violations of codes of conduct,” were part of a broader effort of policing women’s behavior for perceived failures of hetero-cis-sexist norms. For instance, in the December of 1942 document “Briefs of Current Delinquency Cases,” one woman’s report says, “Seventh Service Command Investigation indicates venereal disease [sic], has a home record as common prostitute.”3 Another report reads, “Reported suffering from social disease; to be of base moral character; to have engaged in the activities of a common prostitute.”4 Other issues documented in the reports include “considered wild,” “has several paramours,” and “money crazy.”5 The language in these reports is often vague — what does it mean to be “considered wild”? Are the “activities of a common prostitute” meant to literally imply sex work, or, using the language of a different report, simply having “several paramours”? Rather than listing evidence of specific activities that might compromise a WAC’s service, the report leaps ahead to judgments: it is the judgment that one has been “wild” that is reported, not the specific activities that are considered to be “wild.”

The same report lists six WACs accused of being gay currently "under observation.”6 Throughout the document, there are phrases of “reported as homosexual,” “suspected homosexual,” “evidence of being homosexual,” and “appears to be homosexual based on Confidential Report.”7 This document indicates a high level of concern by the Women’s Army Corps with rooting out lesbians...
within the WAC through policing among the women’s colleagues and superiors. The overall writing of the cases and investigations convey an environment that attaches lesbianism to “unfitness” and “immoral behavior.” These women suspected of lesbianism were either recommended for dismissal because of resulting actions from being reported as a lesbian or were recommended to be allowed to continue their assignments but “under observation.” In addition, these anti-LGBTQ policies encouraged or caused some WAC women to police and report on one another. Some of these reports led to WAC members being dishonorably discharged.

Some of the women listed in the “Briefs of Current Delinquency Cases” are further discussed under a separate report summarizing pending disciplinary cases. Mae Belle Fink, for example, is described as “very masculine in appearance and action, sexually unbalanced, [and] considered by informants to be homosexual.”8 But what does it mean to be “very masculine in appearance and action”? The report relies on the hetero-cis-sexist legibility of women’s appearance and sexual identities to create the logical leap that she is “considered by informants to be homosexual” because she is “very masculine in appearance and action.”

In 1945, the military produced a pamphlet titled “Sex Hygiene Course: Women’s Army Corps” to distribute to personnel. The pamphlet covers anatomy and physiology of the reproductive system and menstruation, prevention and control of venereal disease, sexual relationships, and homosexuality. The pamphlet frames homosexuality as issue of “hygiene” — that is, an issue of both moral and physical cleanliness. The pamphlet informs its reader that “Homosexuality is of interest to you as WAC officers, only so far as its manifestations undermine the efficiency of the individuals concerned and the stability of the group.”9 The pamphlet identifies homosexuality as both a threat to the group, as well as to them as individuals: “the possible effects of homosexual indulgence; that it is, first of all, something unnatural, and as such may cause psychological development contrary to nature’s intention.”10 In contrast to earlier reports on suspected homosexual women in the military, the pamphlet makes clear that “outward appearance and mannerisms do not necessarily indicate a tendency to homosexuality.”11 The pamphlet continues by suggesting ways to prevent or remedy women who might be curious or susceptible to homosexual relationships; the pamphlet recommends dismissing “active homosexuals” as quickly as possible.

The idea that gay and lesbian military personnel were “less efficient” and morally suspect is one that continued for several decades, and frequently comes up in the
reporting on court-martial cases. In 1952, the Chicago Daily Tribune reported on a court-martial case in which a private, Ann Kierce, was assaulted by six sergeants. During the trial, the defense argued that the "court martial should have been allowed to question Miss Kierce about alleged homosexuality in an effort to discredit her testimony." The article reports that "Judge Paul W. Brosman of the United States military court of appeals today raised the question of whether all homosexuals are liars."

In February of 1973, after having married two weeks prior, Private Valerie J. Randolph and Private Gail J. Bates spoke with the Sun Reporter. "Over 90% of the women who join the WACS leave the WACS married, to each other," one of the women explained. The reporting on this particular case is important because Bates’ experience in the military was also specifically as a black lesbian. The news article illustrates the way in which race shaped how they were treated:

"Gail told members of the press that she and Valerie were given a warning against fraternizing by a white lesbian sergeant. (Fraternizing in the WACS has been described as being overly friendly with each other). The two women explained that they could not understand the warning or the sergeant’s behavior. "Most of the officers are white and lesbians. “Mixed couples, like me and Gail are frowned upon,” Valerie said. "Gail presented a threat by being black and the male figure in our relationship." "The Sergeant who gave us the warning really wanted me to be hers," Valerie said."

Randolph and Bates explained that they were speaking up to the press to "denounce the racist tactics of the Women’s Army Corps and the sexual oppressive and exploitative trips of commanding officers who use their rank to try and gain sexual favors." At the time, both women were being threatened by the military with long term imprisonment, court-martial, and a dishonorable discharge. By March of the same year, the newspaper Afro-American had reported Randolph had been discharged from the Army since the marriage. An information specialist had informed the paper that "Pvt. Randolph confessed openly to homosexuality before an Army board and that admission warranted her release. Pvt. Randolph was given an honorable discharged from the military, but the release carries a notation that she was separated because of her homosexual perversion."

In 1975, the Boston Globe reported on a court-martial case held at Fort Devens. Private First Class Barbara Randolph and Private Debbie Watson had disclosed their relationship to the military because "other women were being threatened with dishonorable discharges for homosexuality." Although Randolph and Watson were stationed at a different Fort than Randolph and Bates, it is possible that they believed that the prevalence of homosexual relationships in the military would save them from dishonorable discharge, despite being against military regulations. A dishonorable discharge came with a hefty consequence socially as well as financially that would follow them for the rest of their lives. They believed if they disclosed, they would "be allowed to stay in the Army," but instead they were court-martialed for their personal life actions outside of the WAC. The Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts represented their interest and argued that the "Army’s action against the women [were] unconstitutional and it [was] an invasion of their privacy." Randolph and Watson, along with their legal representation, fought for their right to privacy directly challenging
“Army regulation 635-200 [which] states: ‘Personnel who voluntarily engage in homosexual acts, irrespective of sex, will not be permitted to serve in the Armed Forces in any capacity, and their prompt separation is mandatory.”

Despite their arguments, the Army still decided to give them “a general discharge for unfitness.” The discharge, although not dishonorable, still made them ineligible for all veteran’s benefits. During the court-martial, Randolph was accused of only “admit[ting] being a homosexual to avoid taking an assignment in Korea and being separated from her lover.” In every step of their fight for equality, the Army used the lesbianism of Watson and Randolph to characterize them as “unfit” for military service. This characterization, however, was contrary to the Privates’ own military records; The Austin American Statesman reported that “Ms. Randolph had received an accelerated promotion and had been named WAC of the month and soldier of the month at Ft. Devens in Ayer.”

In 1977, The Atlanta Constitution reported on the court-martial of Marie Sode and former WAC Kristian von Hoffburg for their marriage. They were officially married in Alabama near Ft. Rucker by a probate judge “who said he did not realize both were women.” Sode was “expelled for [her] homosexual tendencies,” which was “based on her marriage to a former WAC who claim[ed] to be a transsexual male.” Sode’s legal team argued that their marriage was a heterosexual one as Hoffburg was “psychologically a male transsexual.” It was the first court-martial case dealing with a transgender individual and the board defined Hoffburg as “biologically female,” rejecting his identity as a transgender man. It was the first court-martial case dealing with a transgender individual and the board defined Hoffburg as “biologically female,” rejecting his identity as a transgender man.

In 1993, while President Bill Clinton was in office, Congress passed “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, Don’t Pursue,” now known as “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” or DADT. This policy prohibited the practice of investigating and discriminating against military personnel for suspected homosexuality, while simultaneously barring openly gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons from military service. The Advocate reported: “President Clinton emphasized that the government should not ‘appear to be endorsing a gay lifestyle.’ The President offered support for the approach of ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ – the label given to a range of plans – that would allow lesbians and gays to serve in the military but would impose limits on how open they could be about their sexuality.” Although Clinton had campaigned on a promise to allow all citizens to serve in the military regardless of sexual orientation, many people in the LGBTQ community were disappointed and angered by the compromise of DADT.

Barney Frank, himself a gay Democratic Congressman, had proposed the compromise, stating that “it became increasingly clear to him that gay and lesbian groups were losing ground in the debate to right-wing political groups and antigay military officials who dominated the Senate hearings on the ban,” and feared that they might propose an even stricter policy. In 2010, under the Obama administration, DADT was repealed.

The WAC collection on History Vault, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, and ProQuest LGBT Magazine Archive tell a story of not only homophobic policies but of invasive investigations of servicewomen’s lives attempting to impart the organization’s more way of life. These archival collections contain military reports, policies, and pamphlets, as well as news coverage that represent how the LGBTQ community responded to their treatment in the military.
Notes
4. Ibid., 16.
5. Ibid., 16-17.
6. Ibid., 13.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 15
10. Ibid., 26-27.
11. Ibid., 24.
13. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
30. Ibid.

DATABASES COVERED
• Ethnic Newswatch
• LGBT Magazine Archive
• ProQuest Central
• ProQuest Historical Newspapers  
  • The Atlanta Constitution  
  • The Austin American Statesman  
  • The Baltimore Afro-American  
• The Baltimore Sun
• The Boston Globe
• Chicago Tribune
• The Globe and Mail
• The New York Times
• ProQuest History Vault: Women at Work during World War II: Rosie the Riveter and the Women's Army Corps

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