

VETERANS SPEAK OUT: A
COLLECTION OF ESSAYS FROM THE
DOCUMENTING COURAGE PROJECT[†]

Phil Adams

Sharon E. Debbage Alexander

Patricia Baillie

Lara Ballard

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*Phil Adams**

I grew up in San Francisco and lived in the Castro before it became known as a gay neighborhood. I entered the U.S. Naval Academy in the summer of 1979 and excelled there. My grades were excellent, and I was busy as captain of my battalion's crew team. I embraced Christianity as my excuse for why I wasn't dating girls—further delaying issues regarding my sexuality. I was conflicted about my sexual orientation, my religion, and the military's and society's homophobic norms.

I was a second lieutenant at the Marine Basic School in Quantico, Va., when the first significant terrorist attack on Americans took place late in 1983. In just a few months, we would be taking up the torch of freedom from our fellow officers—many of whom died in Beirut. In what must have seemed at the time like an act of complete insanity, I volunteered for duty with the Marine infantry. It was tough training but the beginning of a great challenge.

I was assigned to the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines and met 3rd Platoon, Company A at the Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center. There are few greater challenges for a young second lieutenant than to meet his rifle platoon for the first time in the field. I was very demanding—perhaps too demanding—at first. We were living in snow caves and traversing mountains with snow shoes. Over time, my Marines learned that I demanded more of myself than I required of them.

At this early point in my career, a young Hispanic marine from another platoon “came out” as gay to a chaplain. I watched the chain of events that took place very carefully. It confirmed my views about Marine leadership. This young man was afraid that if his peers found out

* Captain, U.S. Marine Corps (1983-1992).

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that he was gay they would beat him up—maybe even kill him. Nothing was further from the truth. The first sergeant took time to speak with the young man and find out what he was all about. His company mates looked out for him and took care of him until he was discharged. There was never any discussion about his shower or living arrangements. We Marines were all brothers and the first sergeant made sure everyone understood that. Leadership creates the mindset of an organization, and the leadership in my unit set the standard.

Back at Camp Pendleton, I worked with my Marines to improve their performance as individuals and our performance as a platoon. Whenever we had “down” time in the field, I had available a number of prepared training topics. Sometimes I would use little green plastic soldiers I purchased from a toy store to coach my marines on infantry tactics. I added toy helicopters and tanks for combined-arms lessons. I even had a supply of cotton balls to simulate mortar or artillery shell impact points and gave my Marines a chance to develop “call for fire” skills. The “toys” kept the Marines entertained as we trained in blistering heat, rough field conditions, or crowded barracks.

Unlike other platoons, we rarely brought sleeping bags to the field. We did most of our training at night and slept during the day when it was warm. My Marines’ skills rivaled those of their peers in other platoons, and promotions were the rule for my platoon members. We prepared privates and lance corporals to become non-commissioned officers, and they learned skills they would need to serve at the staff level.

At one point during our training at the amphibious base in Coronado, California, my marines played a joke on me. At mail call, I received a plain manila envelope and opened it—revealing the contents to all present. Inside was a gay erotic magazine, which my Marines admitted they had sent. It was certainly funny to them, and it was their way of communicating to me their sense that they knew I was gay. It never affected our relationship.

In fact, everything we seemed to touch turned to gold. We were chosen to lead the battalion on tactical operations for dessert warfare training in 29 Palms, California. We practiced hostage evacuation operations, amphibious assaults, and chemical warfare exercises. I took numerous correspondence courses and challenged my Marines to improve their skills too. We led the 7th Marine Regiment in barracks inspections and were asked by our battalion commander to represent the battalion as the drilling platoon for the general inspection.

I was selected to lead our company on the advance party to the 3rd Marine Division in Okinawa, arriving a month prior to the battalion's deployment overseas. I was selected to become the executive officer of Company A as a second lieutenant.

Just after my promotion to first lieutenant, I took command of a company. I took my Marines as the lead company of a battalion-level exercise to the Republic of Korea. We conducted live fire operations in Korea, where I was now in charge of a reinforced rifle company. I was awarded the Navy Achievement Medal for my performance on this exercise.

In 1986, I became the headquarters company commander for the Weapons Field Training Battalion, Edson Range, at Camp Pendleton. We trained Marine recruits on small arms marksmanship, and I enjoyed another successful command—this time having the privilege to lead women Marines too.

I know I have made a lasting difference in the lives of those who protect our national interests at home and abroad. I am proud to be an openly gay American, a graduate of Annapolis and a Marine for life—"once a Marine, always a Marine." I will never forget both who I am and where I come from, or elude my responsibility to make my community a better place for all people.

*Sharon E. Debbage Alexander**

When I accepted an Army ROTC scholarship and started college in 1989, I didn't really understand what it meant to be gay, or that people suffered any kind of discrimination on the basis of being gay. I am straight, came from a small town, and didn't really understand the politics of sexual discrimination back then.

Within a couple of years of starting school, the campus bisexual, gay, and lesbian alliance ("BiGayLA") began protesting to get ROTC removed from campus. I remember being stunned at the prospect of losing my scholarship, and therefore, given my economic situation, my chance to earn a college degree. I decided to take action, and made a lunch date with one of the women behind the anti-ROTC protests from BiGayLA.

I explained to her that we cadets weren't such a bad bunch of kids, and asked why she would want to get us kicked off campus. She replied that the scholarship I enjoyed was unavailable to gay, lesbian, and bisexual students. I remember naively telling her she was crazy—"we've got plenty of lesbians in my cadet battalion—what are you talking about?" I asked. My ignorance of the real impact of the ban at that time aside, the bottom line was that this woman was right. The rules said no gay people were allowed in the military, and technically, anyone who broke that rule and got caught would lose their scholarship and their opportunity to serve. I had to agree that this seemed really unfair and arbitrary.

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I was commissioned in 1993 as a second lieutenant, just in time for the advent of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” Like many of my colleagues at that time, I believed that this was at least a step in the right direction. I figured that the new policy represented some sort of an intermediate stage between a ban and no ban, and that after a few years of this policy the ban would be lifted and gay people would be able to serve openly. I could not have been more wrong.

I served in Third Infantry Division in Germany and the Southern European Task Force Infantry Brigade (Airborne) in Vicenza, Italy and spent five years on active duty, over three years of that time as a platoon leader. I spent three more years in the National Guard while attending law school. During that time I saw the negative effects of the ban and the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy first hand. Harassment and discrimination were rampant and in many cases infused with violent rhetoric and real hatred, and this problem was made much worse by the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy itself. If the Army says you can serve if you’re gay as long as no one ever finds out about it, the average soldier translates this to mean that being gay is definitely wrong. If the Army says you have to hide it otherwise you’ll be discharged, the implicit message is that being gay is shameful. The “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy buttresses pre-existing prejudices and gives them new life by legitimizing them with an official stamp of military approval. Far from a step in the right direction, “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” took us from a time when an ROTC cadet like myself didn’t even really understand that there was a ban on gay people serving in the military to an era where institutional discrimination against gay people in the military rises to the level of sport in some segments of the military. Anti-gay language and rhetoric is part of the every day experience of many people in the military nowadays, and it was not always like that.

In my eight years of service I knew a number of gay and lesbian officers, NCO’s, and junior enlisted personnel. The only way I could know they were gay was to put two and two together, because, unfortunately, none of them could ever share that part of their lives with me because it could have cost them their careers. These folks were soldiers just like anyone else—no better, no worse—but carrying a heavier burden than I can even imagine in having to hide who they were. While I could—and in fact, was expected—to bring my husband to company and battalion social events, for example, a gay officer has to come up with a million excuses at every turn as to why he or she still hasn’t married or

showed up to any social events with a person of the opposite sex. The policy forces people to be deceptive as a means of survival. As company grade officers, both my husband and I lost soldiers to the ban, and I think that was the final straw in my decision to leave active duty. I loved the Army and enjoyed many, many aspects of military life, but I found it difficult to work inside an institution whose core values—values like *integrity, loyalty, and respect*—sometimes stand in stark contrast to the everyday experience of soldiers. “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” was perhaps the most shining example of this kind of contradiction.

Since I left the Army, I have become very involved in the struggle for equality for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (“GLBT”) Americans, in large part as a result of what I saw in the military. I worked for the Human Rights Campaign for two years and currently work as an attorney with the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network. I am an officer in DC’s chapter of American Veterans for Equal Rights. Through this work, I have come to know dozens of GLBT veterans who have served our nation honorably and in many cases with great distinction, and I believe very strongly that one’s sexual orientation has nothing to do with one’s ability to serve in the military. My GLBT veteran friends represent more talent lost to our armed forces that I could ever even begin to describe, and there are thousands of others like them around the country. I also know that American service members of the heterosexual persuasion are perfectly capable of bonding with their gay brothers and sisters in uniform. The only thing stopping the successful integration of open gay and lesbian service members is the ban itself.

*Patricia Baillie**

When I joined the Air Force in 1978, I had been out for almost 10 years. I identified as bisexual, so when they asked me if I was gay, I could answer “No” in good conscience. At basic training, lesbian technical instructors spotted me right away. When I headed for officer training school, they arranged for me to meet several high-ranking women officers—both active and retired. They talked to me about how to survive in the military and what some of my options were.

I hadn’t been much of an activist in my life. I voted and went to pride but hadn’t really gotten involved. I began to get involved in gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (“GLBT”) groups. I couldn’t take the lead but I could help in the background and educate other military members. I also found a GLBT community within the military. I played softball on the base teams with many other lesbians. When a witch-hunt would start, I wouldn’t get called in for questioning because I was an officer, but I could connect the other team members with gay men in the community. They would talk and create cover stories about their dating and their lives and the security investigators would back off.

The only time that I was investigated, I found out later, was when I was in Alaska. Apparently the investigation was dropped when I was reassigned to a different duty station. Other than that, the first 12 years of my career were quiet and successful. I was selected for the Air Staff

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Training Program at the Pentagon and worked in the Joint Chiefs of Staff offices. As my military career progressed, I was also becoming more involved in the GLBT groups. I even changed my religious affiliation to United Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (“UFMCC”) in 1988 on National Coming Out Day. I was the volunteer coordinator for a GLBT community center. This was when I was in a very high-security job with a high-level of clearance.

My partner, at the time, was a Metropolitan Community Church pastor and, as required by Air Force regulations, I reported that she was living with me. When my security clearance update came up, I was asked if I knew that the woman I lived with was the pastor of a gay church. My first response was that I was also a member of that church and didn’t think my religious beliefs were part of a clearance update. The investigator then asked if I was a lesbian. This was in 1989, before President Clinton and “don’t ask, don’t tell.” I knew I shouldn’t answer the question and said as much. That ended the interview, and I started my wait. I was pretty sure the investigators weren’t going to let it go but had no idea when it would come.

Two weeks before Operation Desert Storm, I got a call to come down to headquarters. When the war started and my boss had a heart attack, suddenly I was acting commander. The interview was canceled, I continued to serve and was even decorated for my service.

Then, three weeks after the war, the call came and I had to meet with security. It was a strange interview. It was a theoretical discussion of why didn’t I get out and work as a civilian where I could be out as a lesbian. I made it clear that after 12 years, I wanted to stay in and retire. I continued to refuse to answer any questions. I had talked to a law firm in San Francisco and said I would answer the questions in writing if they would mail the questions to them. It was a standoff and although I was terrified inside, I didn’t blink.

I went back to my duty station, with my clearance not revoked but—by now—expired. For the next three years, I waited for the next call. There were several calls from staff members and I believe one of them was a gay brother. He asked if I would answer the questions, I said I wouldn’t. He volunteered that if I said “Yes,” I would be discharged, if I answered “No,” I would be given a lie detector test and discharged for lying. I missed a couple of good assignments because my clearance was in limbo.

I took an assignment with the Navy, as it was clear I was in a dead-end at my Air Force job. Of course, the Navy then started looking for my clearance. After several calls back and forth between the Navy and the

Air Force, I received a message stating that my clearance had been renewed. It took every bit of control I had in the meeting to not get up on the table and cheer!

I had won this round but saw that if I stayed in the Air Force, I could end up not getting promoted to lieutenant colonel and be forced out due to the Air Force's "up-or-out" promotions system. When Clinton announced the "don't ask, don't tell" policy and the Air Force was doing a reduction in forces and allowing early retirement at 15 years, I decided it was time to go. I retired in October 1993 and came out to my last commander, attended a statewide GLBT veteran's event at the state capitol and submitted an article to the *Air Force Times* on leaving because of the military's position on GLBT service.

I was one of the lucky ones who was able to survive the system, serve honorably and get a retirement check each month. I take that check as a reminder each month to be politically active and remember those who never had a chance to complete their careers. I continue to support and advocate as a veteran and speak out—whenever I can—about a system that drives good GLBT military members out of service.

*Lara Ballard**

My name is Lara Ballard, and I am a lesbian former Army officer. I used to find it hard to introduce myself to people that way, marrying these two very central aspects of my identity. These days I do it frequently, and it makes me feel better every time I say it.

I went into the Army for the same reason a lot of folks do—to pay for college. I attended Georgetown University on a full-tuition Army ROTC scholarship. I thought I wanted to be a foreign service officer, and the ROTC scholarship was the only way I could pay for my education.

The scholarship and the Army were also a way out of the small Tennessee town where I grew up. It brought me to Washington, D.C., where, naturally, it was only a matter of time before I encountered a vibrant and active gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community. Ironically, it was the Army that helped me come out of the closet, and I suspect that the military has served this purpose for a lot of people; getting us out of small homophobic towns and sending us to places like Washington, Berlin and the Netherlands—cosmopolitan places where we learn more about ourselves than ever before.

In 1992, I was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the air defense artillery, one of the few Army combat specialties open to women. I was assigned as the only woman in a leadership position in a ninety-person PATRIOT battery on an emergency deployment to Kuwait. That was the fall of 1992, when Bill Clinton was running for

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president and already talking about lifting the ban. The first time the subject of the ban came up, my battery commander joked about how everyone was going to have to be issued soap-on-a-rope, since it would no longer be safe to bend over in the shower. I suppose he thought this was funny, since every time Clinton was mentioned in conversation, he would exclaim, "Soap-on-a-rope!" I love the non-politically correct humor of the military, but in some cases it can create a command climate that is not only oppressive but also downright dangerous.

I remember once at about 2 a.m. while deployed to Kuwait, when a couple of infantry soldiers stopped by our command post (CP) as they were coming off their shifts. I was the officer in charge that night, and the only other person present was an enlisted soldier who manned the radios. The two infantry soldiers started up with the "soap-on-a-rope" jokes, and kept it up until their comments were beyond the point of decency. I finally shooed them out of the CP. I didn't criticize the jokes, but I told them the CP was not their hangout and they needed to go elsewhere. They left with a scowl. Even that, I knew, would raise suspicions—that I didn't think their jokes were funny could mean I was a lesbian. The enlisted soldier said nothing. I returned to the Upton Sinclair novel I was reading, and the CP was silent for several moments except for the quiet din of the generators outside.

"Thanks," the soldier said suddenly.

"Nothing to thank me for," I said, defensively. "The CP is not the damned water cooler." I was thinking, "I do not want to talk about this. I do not want to talk about what just happened with this soldier." I returned to my book.

"You know," he tried again, "there aren't many folks around here who read Upton Sinclair."

Aha! Now I was marked as both a faggot-lover and a socialist. I really did not want to have this conversation. I turned the book over and stared at the cover. "It's just something I picked up off the free stack on the bookshelf," I said nonchalantly.

Long silence. He stared at the door, again breaking in on my attempt to read. "Yeah," he sighed, "those guys . . ."

By now I had read the same paragraph five times. "The thing is," he said finally, "I have a gay cousin."

I put the book down. "OK," I said. I was trying my best to convey calm acceptance, but my heart was racing. I was thinking, "I do not want to have this conversation. I do not want to out myself to a soldier. And I do not want to have to lie to him."

But his mind was not on me. A look of fear came over his face, as he realized what he had just said to me. "PLEASE don't tell the guys about this," he said, "They'll think I'm 'that way,' too."

I assured him, with a chuckle, that I would not tell a soul. Looking back, I think that moment was my first indication of how bad things were going to be under "don't ask, don't tell." The policy was not only going to keep gays and lesbians in the closet, but also silence anyone who was heterosexual but knew better than to support such a policy. If you knew how many senior officers have said to me, "Strictly off the record, I think the ban should be lifted," you'd wonder who it is that is supporting the policy. Yet no one thinks they can speak out.

The memory of that night has always struck me as so ironic—me, a closeted lesbian officer hearing true confessions in the middle of the night from a soldier who had committed the unpardonable sin of having a gay cousin.

*Jeff Cleghorn**

I am from a working-class family in a small town in Georgia. I pursued an Army ROTC scholarship that allowed me to attend college, graduating as a “distinguished military graduate” from North Georgia College.

Commissioned into the Military Intelligence Corps, I served in South Korea, Arizona, South Carolina, Germany and the Pentagon. I twice successfully commanded company-size units. I spent my final years on active duty serving as a counter-terrorism analyst for Asia on the staff of the Joint Chiefs.

I was medically retired in 1996, after which I enrolled in the George Washington University Law School. I worked as an attorney with the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network from 1999-2003.

I now confidently live my life as an openly gay American veteran, and I am committed to helping those who continue to serve in enforced silence by ridding the armed forces of “don’t ask, don’t tell.” I hope all

* Major, U.S. Army (Retired). Director of the Military Education Initiative, a non-profit public education project working to inform America’s 27 million veterans, and organizations representing them, about current research and facts surrounding the military service of gay and lesbian Americans. The author has traveled across the country and spoken extensively about the policy before academic and military audiences, including the Army War College. He has also discussed and debated the issue on national television, including appearances on CNN, C-Span, FOX News’ The O’Reilly Factor, MSNBC’s Buchanan and Press and CNNfn. The author has also written extensively about the “Don’t Tell” policy, including contributions to SLDN’s annual policy evaluation reports from 1999 through 2003, as well as authoring opinion pieces in the Army/Navy/Air Force/Marine Corps Times newspapers, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, and other publications. Mr. Cleghorn is admitted to the Georgia and District of Columbia Bars, and is a member of the American Legion, the Association of the United States Army, the Military Officers Association of America and American Veterans for Equal Rights (AVER).

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gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender veterans will stand up and speak out, as our service and sacrifice are powerful testimonies to counter those who falsely state that we are unfit to defend our nation

*Nick Marulli**

I enlisted in the Navy right out of high school. As a son in a military family, it was the natural thing to do. I loved my country, and my parents taught me that freedom is something we do not take for granted.

Early in my career, I worked in the administrative field. I later changed my rating and transferred into military intelligence, which I found highly rewarding. I remained in that field for the rest of my career.

I loved the Navy. I worked hard and received a lot of encouragement and praise for my performance. Routinely earning high marks, I was twice selected "Sailor of the Quarter." I attended college at night and eventually was selected to participate in a program that allowed me to attend college full time while on active duty. I graduated summa cum laude from the University of Baltimore with a bachelor's degree in history.

I did not accept my homosexuality until my last tour. Those years were difficult. I couldn't seek counseling because I had to use military medical facilities and didn't know who I could trust. Before I retired, my best friend—an army officer who was also struggling to accept his homosexuality—committed suicide. I had to cope with the pain alone, in silence, lest I risk being discovered myself. After all I had given to the Navy, living in fear of losing my career or my pension seemed like an unjust reward.

* Born in Phoenix, Arizona on September 18, 1958. Petty Officer First Class, U.S. Navy (Retired). Active duty March 1977 – March 1997.

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It is not easy to lead two lives. Under “don’t ask, don’t tell” I was forced to be distant and introverted at work, which is very much against my nature. During my early career, I bonded with my shipmates, establishing honest friendships based on trust and mutual respect. During the last years, I had to be a stranger to my shipmates—never discussing my personal life—while listening to them share stories about their families and friends. When they asked about my life, I had to hedge and change the subject.

After 20 years of honorable service, I retired. I have a new career and an honest life now, which I share with my partner, Tim. But unlike my straight veteran counterparts, Tim and I live as a second-class family. Because we do not have the right to marry, I cannot sponsor my partner for the benefits that the spouses of married retirees share, including medical care and use of on-base facilities like the commissary and the Navy Exchange.

It seems ironic that while much of corporate America offers equal benefits to gay and lesbian employees, my military benefits are still off limit to my partner. If I had worked for a private company for 20 years, Tim and I might be sharing a normal package of retirement benefits today. As it is, we are in a much less advantageous position. This inequity seems to me an unjust reward for 20 years of service to my country.