

GUEST COMMENTARY

# Let Gays And Lesbians Continue To Serve With Pride

By DWIGHT MERRIAM

End “don’t ask, don’t tell” now. We don’t need to wait for a report on how to implement it. We can figure that out. The chiefs of the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines are wrong to ask Congress to delay voting on the repeal until the implementation report is released in December.

It is essential that we, all of us in America, send a clear message to all the men and women who serve in the armed forces or may consider doing so that we are an open, inclusive and diverse society that wants our military to reflect those societal values. It is equally important that we end a policy that forces some of our service members to be deceptive and to lie to protect their right to serve their country.

I entered the Navy in 1968, under the pressure of the draft, and served 18 months in Vietnam aboard ship during three deployments 1969-72. Then I taught ROTC and left active duty in 1975 to attend law school. I came to love the Navy and my job as a surface warfare officer, so I continued on for 24 more years in the reserves, retiring as a captain in 1999.

Many of my shipmates were gay. I had “gaydar” early on – the portmanteau of “gay” and “radar,” the term popularized in the last 20 years for that innate sense of who is straight and who is gay. It took me about two nanoseconds to realize my yeoman (Navy speak for a secretary) was gay. He did a good job for me and that’s all I needed from him. His sexual orientation wasn’t an issue in our relationship. So, too, with the 5 to 10 percent of the crew on my ship who were gay. Some of them rendezvoused in the Number 4 gun tub midships at night to communè. The rest of us stayed away. So be it.

There was never any gay bashing on my ship, at least not that I saw. Gay men doubtless had relationships with gay men aboard ship, just as straight men had their own dangerous liaisons ashore in overseas ports.

So far this year a dozen or so commanding officers in the Navy have been relieved of command. Several of those were men who had inappropriate relationships with women. Such is human nature. But the reality is that gays and lesbians are not going to seek intimate sexual relationships with straight people, no more

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than straight people will be attracted to persons of the same sex.

The only time in my 31 years of service that I ever saw a problem was when a gay sailor, coming back to the ship drunk, sexually assaulted his former partner. That was 40 years ago. Most troubling was that both the assailant and the victim were administratively discharged on the same, less-than-honorable terms.

## Poll Results

Since “don’t ask, don’t tell” was implemented in 1994, more than 13,000 men and

women have been discharged under the policy. This is shameful, especially when measured against the Pew Research Center’s polling showing that 59 percent of Americans favor having gays serve openly and a *Military Times* poll reveals that only 10 percent of the military would not re-enlist if the law was repealed.

Other polls show even more support for inclusion: according to ABC News/



*Washington Post* 75 percent support gays serving openly (2008) and Zogby International reports 73 percent of military personnel are comfortable with gays and lesbians.

Maybe I’m biased in favor of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community. One of the two people who stood up with my wife and me when we married in 1995 was my gay friend. His being gay was largely irrelevant. More importantly, he was a developer’s consultant who had become a friend in the course of our doing a project together.

One of my three sisters is married to a woman. It’s just another fact of her life, like her red hair and artistic talent. The only thing I sometimes think about is this: Given how hard it is to develop and maintain satisfying and lasting heterosexual relationships, it must be so much more difficult for members of the LGBT community in the face of discrimination.

I am soon to become chair of the American Bar Association’s Section of State and Local Government Law and one of my initiatives includes having a friend, who happens to be gay, head up a new diversity law committee to focus more directly on all diversity law issues including those of the LGBT community. We can do a better job in the ABA, in the military, and nationally in fully integrating the LGBT community and eliminat-

ing discrimination.

The military has led the way before when it racially integrated following President Harry Truman’s executive order on July 28, 1948. It was a remarkable and generally smooth transition largely complete by the mid-1950s. The same can and should be done for gays and lesbians, right now. ■

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