

Military Soft On Don't Ask, Don't Tell?

CBS 60 Minutes: Is Military More Tolerant Of Gay Members In Wartime?

Dec. 16, 2007

One of Bill Clinton's first acts as president was to propose that gay servicemen and women be allowed to serve openly. That was 15 years ago, and it almost derailed his presidency.

Instead, the military adopted a policy called "don't ask, don't tell," where gays can serve as long as they remain in the closet. The Pentagon says it's been a success. But 12,000 military men and women have been discharged under the policy.

Now something curious is happening. As correspondent Lesley Stahl reports, discharges of gay soldiers are dropping, dramatically: from over 1,200 a year in 2001 to barely 600. With the military struggling to fight two wars, there are growing calls to repeal the policy and growing evidence that some commanders could care less about sexual orientation.

Army Sergeant Darren Manzella, a medical liaison for his division, is in Kuwait on his second deployment of the Iraq war. He spoke to 60 Minutes without permission.

Manzella served as a medic with a field artillery unit in Baghdad back in 2005, earning a combat medal for rendering treatment under fire. "I've treated everything from blast injuries to gunshot wounds," he tells Stahl.

Manzella was out to his Army buddies and even introduced them to his boyfriend A.J. But then, he started getting anonymous e-mails, saying he was being watched, and warning him to "turn down the flame."

"As in flamingly gay?" Stahl asks.

"Yes," Manzella says.

He went for help to his commanding officer, and in the process, told him - as in don't ask don't tell - that he was gay. The officer in turn told Manzella he'd have to report him.

"He did report me, yes," Manzella says. "I had to go see my battalion commander, who read me my rights."

"So, what you did, in effect, by telling him, was trigger the investigation you feared was underway?" Stahl asks.

"I did. And I felt more comfortable with that. I felt more comfortable bein' the one to say, 'This is the truth. This is what is real,'" he says.

"What a Catch-22. You go and tell your lieutenant the truth and now you violated the Army's rule," Stahl remarks.

"I didn't know how else to do it and keep my sanity," Manzella explains.

Manzella didn't hold anything back in the investigation, submitting photos of himself and A.J., and a video of a road trip, including passionate kissing. But when the investigation ended, Manzella says he was told to go back to work. "There was no evidence of homosexuality and go back to work," he says.

"Wait a minute. You've given them photographs of you and A.J.," Stahl remarks.

"Yes, and then they're like, 'Go back to work. You're not gay,'" Manzella says.

"So, no one ever said anything to you about the -- I don't even know what word to use, absurdity, confusing response?" Stahl asks.

"The closest thing that I was given by my superiors was, 'I don't care if you're gay or not.'"

Cholene Espinoza was an Air Force Captain who flew combat missions. Now she works with the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, a group pushing to repeal "don't ask, don't tell."

"Darren is in a critical field. He's a medic. His commander needs him," Espinoza says. "He's a known quantity. He gets along with others. He does what he's supposed to. He goes above and beyond. Why do I want to lose Darren?"

Espinoza, who's now a captain for a commercial airline, left the Air Force after eight years so she could live openly as a lesbian.

"You're saying that you think these commanders are looking the other way?" Stahl asks.

"I think they have to," Espinoza says.

She says she knows of at least 500 such cases. To her mind, retaining these soldiers especially in Iraq is a no-brainer. "Something that's often overlooked is the number of deployments, you know. I met a man who missed the birth of his child and he's been there three times. It's like, 'Why not allow a gay soldier to ease that burden?' They want to serve. They can serve," she says.

"Our purpose in the military is not social engineering or whatever else you want to call it. It is about fighting and winning the nation's wars," says Army Major Daniel Davis, a Gulf War veteran and now a specialist in battlefield tactics.

Davis says allowing gays to serve openly would hurt unit cohesion. Davis came to the 60 Minutes interview out of uniform, emphasizing that in defending "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" he was not speaking for the U.S. military.

His view is that military troops are generally conservative and allowing gays to serve openly would offend them and jeopardize battle effectiveness. "If you introduce something in there that's going to cause chaos and division, then that's going to prohibit that unit from forming the bonds and the cohesion and that teamwork that's necessary to really win and do well in hard combat," he argues.

"What do you think would happen if a unit with a gay person went out into a combat situation?" Stahl asks.

"In my view, men are going to die, units are going to fail that would otherwise not fail, that would otherwise not die," Davis says.

"Didn't they say exactly the same thing about blacks?" Stahl asks.

"You know, I've heard that many times," Davis replies.

"And then cohesion was achieved," Stahl says.

"However, if you have a moral or religious issue, you cannot order me to bond and cohesive with that person," Davis says. "Because he's morally repugnant to me."

But Espinoza says if the policy were changed, the troops would have to fall in line. "You can believe that black people are not as smart as white people - you can believe that and still serve in the U.S. uniform. You can believe that women should be barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen - you can believe that. But you cannot bring those beliefs to your job front," she says.

Each of these gay men was, to some degree, open in their units: Steve Lorandos was a nuclear submarine mechanic with the Navy; Brian Fricke, a Marine Corps avionics technician who served in Iraq; David Santos, a Navy-trained Arabic linguist, and Army-trained Korean linguist Jarrod Chlapowski.

Chlapowski says "at least" 100 people knew he was gay, but that he wasn't discharged.

"The only thing that ever happened to me was my leading petty officer came up to me and he said, 'You know, I think that everything about homosexuals is disgusting. It makes my skin crawl. But, we still love you,'" Lorandos recalls.

"Why do you think the people who knew didn't tell on you?" Stahl asks Fricke. "That was required."

"They don't care," he says. "You know these are our peers. This is the generation that also -- like the 'Will and Grace' generation," Fricke says.

"Yeah. That's what we kind of refer to them as; they grew up with it in the media. Gays and -- they understand -- they see gay people as people. As humans, as Americans. They don't see gay people as people with a disability or a disease," Fricke explains.

These men say the military's top brass is out of touch with the troops, and with the American public. Recent polls show three-quarters of the country now favors allowing gays to serve openly, which is what the British military has done since the year 2000.

"I don't believe for a second it's affected the fighting capability of our forces," says Admiral Sir Alan West, who was head of the Royal Navy back then and is now an anti-terrorism minister in the British government.

Asked if the process was smooth or difficult, West tells Stahl, "Actually, to be quite honest, there's been almost no trouble. The people who have said, 'Oh, well, you know, young soldiers and young sailors will never accept this'...they actually accepted it much more easily than silly old blighters like me."

"You actually told us that you think that the product or the outcome of this is actually making the military better," Stahl remarks.

"I think it is better. I think it is better," he replied.

Asked why, West says, "Because people feel they can be open about who they are. And they can really throw themselves totally into what you want to achieve with your force."

Talk about being open, the Royal Navy now allows sailors to march in gay pride parades, in uniform. And gay couples are even eligible for married military housing.

"We aren't the Brits. We're not the Europeans. We're not the Swedes," says Republican presidential candidate Duncan Hunter, who is the ranking member of the House Armed Services Committee.

Hunter argues that gays do not belong in the U.S. military because American troops need to be hardened warriors, unlike soldiers in the 15 NATO countries where gays serve openly.

"The Fallujahs of the world, the Ramadis of the world that require heavy combat and lots of fire-fighting capability - those are the places the Americans go. The other countries tend to go to the so-called peacekeeper zones, where they have fewer fire fights and less contact with the enemy," Hunter says. "And the European nations show little will to send large contingents of their military people into dangerous places."

West responds: "I think American troops are very brave and I think British troops are very brave. But we do it in a little bit of probably a quieter way generally, you know? We don't have to go 'Huh, huh, huh' and shave our heads off and shake hands very hard. You can still kill someone without having to do that."

"But there is a culture of conservatism and macho-ness that goes way back," Stahl remarks.

"You read about the Spartans, they were all homosexuals, the whole lot of them," West says. "And I don't think anyone would suggest for a second that the 500 Spartans fighting against the Persian Army were not pretty macho."

But introducing openly gay troops into gung-ho U.S. combat units could be difficult. That David Santos, the Arabic interpreter, was gay was no secret at his home base in Georgia, but he went back into the closet when he was assigned to a combat unit of Marines in Fallujah.

"When it comes to those kind of places, there's a lot of homophobic remarks made," Santos says.

Like what?

"Never directed at me," he says. "Just anything that a high schooler would say negatively about a homosexual."

Santos says the remarks weren't aimed at him because he was in the closet at that point, but that he heard remarks "all over the place."

"Are you guys being a little naïve? I mean there is hostility. David's the only one of you who's admitted it so far. But there is," Stahl asks Chlapowski, Lorandos and Fricke.

"I never experienced hostility," Chlapowski says.

"Yeah, but you know it's there," she says.

"Oh sure it is. Sure it's there. But there's also still sexism in the Army. There's still racism in the Army. It still exists," Chlapowski says. "But you have harassment policies to cover that."

Harassment policies notwithstanding, Steve Lorandos, the submariner, Brian Fricke, the Marine, and Jarrod Chlapowski, the Army linguist, did not re-enlist because of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," like an estimated 4,000 other gay soldiers a year. After David Santos was caught chatting about being gay on a government computer, he was discharged.

Congressman Duncan Hunter says with the Pentagon starting to meet its recruiting goals, now is not the time for change. "Would we risk doing away with this system that works, where American families sit around the dinner table and they make a decision that their young man or their young woman is going to go into this military because they share the values of that military. Or should we experiment at a time when our military is totally volunteer, when it's extremely capable and perhaps lose that capability and perhaps lose

those numbers? Perhaps lose those re-enlistments and perhaps lose that effectiveness?" he asks.

But Cholene Espinoza says "Wait a second. In 2006, the Army -- the only way they could meet the recruiting standards was to give waivers and allow convicted felons, lower mental standards, lower physical standards. We are giving twice the number to enlist of bonuses financially, three times to re-enlist. Thousands of gay people go out the door voluntarily."

"Like you," Stahl remarks.

"People like me. I'm gone. Never to come back. You spent \$2 million training me to fly airplanes. Thank you very much. And what do you get for all this? What do we get as a country? Because we've thrown out an Arabic linguist or because we've thrown out a medic. Are we any safer? Are we anymore secure?" she asks.

Army medic Darren Manzella says he thinks he will probably be discharged now because of the interview with 60 Minutes.