

Allan Bérubé Is Dead at 61; Historian of Gays in Military
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Allan Bérubé, a MacArthur Award-winning independent scholar whose history of gay men and lesbians in the military in World War II is widely considered the definitive book on the subject, died on Tuesday in Liberty, N.Y. He was 61. A former resident of Manhattan, Mr. Bérubé had lived in Liberty in recent years.

The cause was complications of stomach ulcers, a friend, Wayne Hoffman, said.

“Coming Out Under Fire” (Free Press), published in 1990, explores the uneasy but at times surprisingly benign relationship between the United States military and its gay members.

Mr. Bérubé’s book was invoked frequently during the debate that simmered in the 1990s around President Bill Clinton’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy, which officially allowed gay people to serve in the military if they kept their sexual orientation secret.

“Coming Out Under Fire” was also the basis for a documentary film of that name, released in 1994.

The book sprang from a box of letters. One day in the 1970s, a friend of one of Mr. Bérubé’s neighbors salvaged from a Dumpster a cache of correspondence exchanged by a dozen gay G.I.’s during the war. The men, who had met at an Army base in Missouri, were posted to different spots, but they continued to write — in particular about what it was like to be gay wherever they had fetched up.

The letters found their way to Mr. Bérubé. “I sorted them out and had a good cry,” he told the University of Chicago alumni magazine in 1997. “It really captured my heart and raised a lot of questions, so I started doing research.”

“Coming Out Under Fire” draws on interviews with dozens of men and women from all branches of the service. It argues that although gays were specifically barred from the armed forces from 1942 onward, homosexuality and military service, at least early on, were not as incompatible as they might seem.

At the start of World War II, the military, desperate to meet enlistment quotas, quietly admitted gay people with the tacit understanding that they would be discreet about their sexuality. For many gay men and lesbians, Mr. Bérubé wrote, military service was actually a godsend: It took them away from small-town life and gave them their first opportunity to meet other gay people.

On the whole, Mr. Bérubé found, gay service people who did their jobs ably were treated well by comrades and superiors. (Conditions worsened toward the end of the war, when

the military stepped up its purges of homosexuals.) But those early war years, Mr. Bérubé concluded, were the wellspring of the gay-rights movement of the late 1960s and beyond.

Reviewing “Coming Out Under Fire” in The New York Times Book Review, Doris Kearns Goodwin called it “a timely and valuable perspective,” adding: “Mr. Bérubé tells his story with a clear and remarkably evenhanded voice.”

A longtime community organizer, Mr. Bérubé was also active in the civic life of Liberty, a former Catskill resort lately grown careworn. In a project that attracted considerable attention in the news media, he arranged to have the Munson Diner, a derelict Hell’s Kitchen landmark from the 1940s, moved there from Manhattan.

Allan Ronald Bérubé was born in Springfield, Mass., on Dec. 3, 1946. (His family name is pronounced BEH-ruh-bay.) His father was a television cameraman for NBC, a job that in the early days of the medium was more glamorous than lucrative; Allan spent part of his childhood living with his family in a trailer park in Bayonne, N.J.

Mr. Bérubé studied at the University of Chicago before dropping out in his senior year to work against the war in Vietnam. He came out as gay in 1969 and later settled in San Francisco, where, in the 1970s, he helped found the San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project.

Mr. Bérubé’s approach to history was pragmatic rather than academic: he traveled the country giving illustrated lectures on gay military history and other subjects. (He did teach at several universities, among them Stanford; the University of California, Santa Cruz; and Portland State University in Oregon.) In 1996, he was awarded a MacArthur “genius grant.”

After living in Manhattan in the 1990s, Mr. Bérubé moved to Liberty a half-dozen years ago. In 2005, he convened a group of investors to buy the Munson Diner and transport it, in its faded chrome-and-neon splendor, from 11th Avenue and 49th Street to Liberty. After extensive refurbishment, the diner opened there last month.

Mr. Bérubé is survived by his companion, John Nelson; his mother, Florence A. Bérubé of Monson, Mass.; and three sisters, Florence J., of Westfield, Mass.; Annette, of Mint Hill, N.C.; and Dianne Taylor of Healdsburg, Calif. At his death, he was working on a history of gay men in the Marine Cooks and Stewards Union in the 1930s and afterward.

Though “Coming Out Under Fire” deals with a serious subject, it also has moments of deep subversive levity. At one point in the book, Ben Small, a gay former Army Air Corpsman, talks about a drag show he organized while stationed on a tiny atoll near New Guinea. For costumes, he ordered a stack of gold lamé dresses from San Francisco.

Mr. Small recalled the day the glittering package arrived. “Well, here’s everybody in the office from the lieutenant on down trying on dresses!” he told Mr. Bérubé. “Everybody suddenly becomes a drag queen!”