

How 'Don't Tell' Translates
The Military Needs Linguists, But It Doesn't Want This One

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Cathleen Glover was cleaning the pool at the Sri Lankan ambassador's residence recently when she heard the sound of Arabic drifting through the trees. Glover earned \$11 an hour working for a pool-maintenance company, skimming leaves and testing chlorine levels in the backyards of Washington. No one knew about her past. But sometimes the past found her.

Glover recognized the sound instantly. It was the afternoon call to prayer coming from a mosque on Massachusetts Avenue. She held still, picking out familiar words and translating them in her head.

She learned Arabic at the Defense Language Institute (DLI), the military's premier language school, in Monterey, Calif. Her timing as a soldier was fortuitous: Around her graduation last year, a Government Accounting Office study reported that the Army faced a critical shortage of linguists needed to translate intercepts and interrogate suspects in the war on terrorism.

"I was what the country needed," Glover said.

She was, and she wasn't. Glover is gay. She mastered Arabic but couldn't handle living a double life under the military policy known as "don't ask, don't tell." After two years in the Army, Glover, 26, voluntarily wrote a statement acknowledging her homosexuality.

Confronted with a shortage of Arabic interpreters and its policy banning openly gay service members, the Pentagon had a choice to make.

Which is how former Spec. Glover came to be cleaning pools instead of sitting in the desert, translating Arabic for the U.S. government.

In the past two years, the Department of Defense has discharged 37 linguists from the Defense Language Institute for being gay. Like Glover, many studied Arabic. At a time of heightened need for intelligence specialists, 37 linguists were rendered useless because of their homosexuality.

Historically, military leaders have argued that allowing gays to serve would hurt unit cohesion and recruiting efforts, and infringe on the privacy rights of heterosexuals. In 1993, at the urging of President Clinton, Congress agreed to soften the outright ban on gays in the military with a policy that came to be known as "don't ask, don't tell," which allowed them to serve as long as they kept their sexual orientation secret.

On its 10th anniversary, "don't ask, don't tell" exists in a vastly changed nation. In 1993, there was no "Will & Grace," no gay Jack on "Dawson's Creek," no gay-themed Miller Lite commercials. In 1993, fewer than a dozen U.S. high schools had Gay-Straight Alliance organizations. Today, there are almost 2,000. In 1993, fewer than a dozen Fortune 500 companies offered health benefits to domestic partners. Today, nearly 200 do.

This newer version of America is the one young enlistees leave behind when they join the military. On average, three or four service members are discharged each day because they are gay. Most are discharged for making statements about their sexuality, and most are younger than 25.

"In the case of some, they get in the Army and they are traumatized by an awareness that the military is 20 years behind the societal curve," said Jeff Cleghorn, a former lawyer with the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, a gay-rights group monitoring military justice.

The Army says the discharged linguists were casualties of their own failure to meet a known policy. "We have standards," said Harvey Perritt, a spokesman for the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command at Fort Monroe, Va. "We have physical standards, academic standards. There's no difference between administering these standards and administering 'don't ask, don't tell.' The rules are the rules."

Many military scholars agree that it's a matter of time before the ban is lifted. Said John Allen Williams, a professor of political science at Loyola University in Chicago and president of the Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society: " 'Don't ask, don't tell' is an interim step until the inevitable change. It's a useful speed bump."

President Bush has made no move to reexamine the ban, despite the enormous strains placed on the military since the Sept. 11 attacks.

Alastair Gamble is one of the Arabic linguists discharged from the DLI. He was caught in his dorm room with his boyfriend, another linguist, during a surprise barracks inspection at 3:30 a.m. While several heterosexuals were also caught in the sweep, Gamble and his partner became the subjects of an investigation into homosexual conduct. Both were discharged. Gamble, an Emory University graduate who had also completed a nine-week intelligence course, assumed that his value to the Army would save him.

"I developed a hubris about my ability," said Gamble, 24, who lives in Washington and works for an architectural design firm. "I believed I could do my job well and they would be foolish to separate me."

The Defense Language Institute, at the Presidio of Monterey, is the primary foreign-language school for the Department of Defense. For decades, Russian was the dominant language taught. But since Sept. 11, 2001, the size of the Arabic class has soared. Of the roughly 3,800 students enrolled at the DLI, 832 are learning Arabic, 743 Korean, 353 Chinese and 301 Russian, with the remaining students scattered in other languages.

Many of the discharged gay linguists were studying Arabic or Korean, among the most rigorous taught at the DLI and most costly to the U.S. government. The DLI estimates the value of its 63-week Arabic language program -- not including room, board and the service member's salary -- at \$33,500.

The Army gave Cathleen Glover a proficiency in Arabic, but it also typed the words "HOMOSEXUAL ADMISSION" on her official discharge papers. The best job she could find was cleaning pools.

Glover looks like the standout soccer goalie she was in high school in rural Ohio. Her skin is tanned from a summer spent outdoors, her hair streaked blond by pool chemicals. Her backpack is crammed with books on Islam and the latest issue of Foreign Policy magazine. She shares an apartment in Adams Morgan with another discharged gay linguist, who works as a temp in a law firm. The two of them watch al-Jazeera on cable to keep their Arabic oiled.

Glover graduated from Miami University in Ohio in 1999 with a degree in political science. She'd spent a semester in Ireland studying conflict resolution. She was substitute teaching in Ohio, contemplating graduate school, when an Army recruiter called her parents' farm. The recruiter pitched the DLI. Glover thought that learning a language would prepare her for a career in foreign policy.

Glover knew she was gay. A private person by nature, she thought she could live under a rule such as "don't ask, don't tell."

"It sounds simple," she reasoned. "Don't say anything."

Glover arrived at the DLI after nine weeks of basic training. The campus was beautiful,

studded with palm trees and overlooking Monterey Bay. Like Glover, many students had college degrees. Glover had hoped to study Russian, but her high scores on the language aptitude test bumped her into the more difficult Arabic program.

The new soldier immersed herself in modern Arabic. Six hours a day, five days a week, 63 weeks. Nights were occupied by homework and study groups. Some students were so intent on absorbing Middle Eastern culture that they wore Arab headdresses to class.

Glover's class was midway through the program on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001. The DLI campus went into lockdown. The only channel that came in on the TV in Glover's classroom was al-Jazeera. The students used their limited Arabic to piece together what had just occurred. In just a few hours, their value in the military had skyrocketed. An officer visited Glover's classroom to remind the linguists that their job was to defend the United States. "He told us not to get too close to the culture," she said.

Glover was maintaining a 3.2 grade-point average and leading study groups, but privately she was stressed. Being gay at a place such as the DLI had its advantages -- San Francisco was two hours up the coast, and the DLI campus was more academic than most military posts. But "don't ask, don't tell" was still the law of the land. She was making every contortion to hide the fact that she was a lesbian.

"What if a married person in the military couldn't tell anyone that his wife exists?" Glover said. "And if he did, he'd be fired?"

That was Glover's predicament. Her partner had moved from Ohio to an apartment in Monterey. Glover told no one, splitting her time between the post and her partner's place, and lying about her whereabouts on the sign-out log. She was afraid to be seen in public with her partner. The hiding took its toll; the four-year relationship ended. The breakup fueled Glover's anger toward "don't ask, don't tell."

Then came the surprise room inspection that snagged Alastair Gamble and his partner, raising the level of anxiety for gays at the DLI.

Glover's best friend was another gay linguist. He received orders to ship out to Fort Campbell, an Army post in Kentucky dreaded among gay service members. In 1999, Pfc. Barry Winchell was bashed to death in his barracks by a fellow soldier for being gay. Rather than shipping out to Fort Campbell, Glover's friend declared his homosexuality and was discharged.

Glover graduated from the Arabic program in 2002, but emotionally she was sliding. Her first sergeant suggested she see a counselor. Finally, she confessed her problem: She was exhausted from hiding her identity. Confirming Glover's fears, the counselor asked her for the name and phone number of her commander. Not long after, she was ordered to see an Army psychiatrist.

Glover sat down at her computer. After a year of intense internal struggle, I have come to the conclusion that it is in the best interest of both the United States Army and my mental well-being that I inform you that I am a lesbian. She carried the letter in her pocket for two days. When she finally gave it to her commander, he accused her of lying. It's possible that he was looking the other way in order to keep her. In frustration, Glover wrote an essay about her experience living under "don't ask, don't tell" and mailed it to the Monterey County Herald.

Within a week, she was shipped to Goodfellow Air Force Base in San Angelo, Tex., for intelligence training. In class one day, a sergeant used a mocking lisp as he talked about all the gay linguists discharged from the DLI.

Finally, Glover's letter-writing caught up with her. She was ordered to report to battalion headquarters, where the captain was holding a copy of the op-ed piece from

the Monterey paper. She was recommended for a general discharge, a less-than-honorable characterization that could have meant no veterans' benefits and would send up a red flag to potential employers. With the help of an Army lawyer, she won an honorable discharge.

Glover's last day was March 24, 2003. "It was a day of feeling nothing," she said. She drove to Fort Hood to sign her paperwork. The hundreds of tanks and armored vehicles that usually stretched for acres were in Iraq.

She cleaned out her barracks room. In an act of symbolism, she left one of her Army uniforms -- her class dress uniform -- hanging in the closet.

Instead of relief, Glover felt a sense of disloyalty. She moved to Washington, where she applied for a job at the National Security Agency. Since her security clearance had been revoked, a background check would take months. She took a job with the pool company. In what she calls an act of "karmic irony," one of the pools she cleaned each week was owned by Pat Buchanan.

On the same day in late October that car bombs hit the Red Cross and police stations in Baghdad, killing 35, Glover had eight pools on her route. She wore Army shorts and listened to the radio as she drove from house to house. Rain slashed down sideways. She finished a job in Foxhall by scribbling a note for the homeowner: "Your skimmer has been reopened! Thank you, Cathie!"

Finally, her luck changed. Three weeks ago, she was called for an interview with a nonprofit organization in Washington that builds private enterprise overseas. Her Arabic sealed the deal. The salary: \$28,000, with possible travel to Cairo.

To brush up, Glover dug out her dog-eared Arabic-English dictionary from her days at the DLI. On the inside page was the inscription she'd written as a new soldier: "Property of the U.S. Government (just like my head!!)"

Glover looked at the exuberant inscription. "They wasted me," she said.