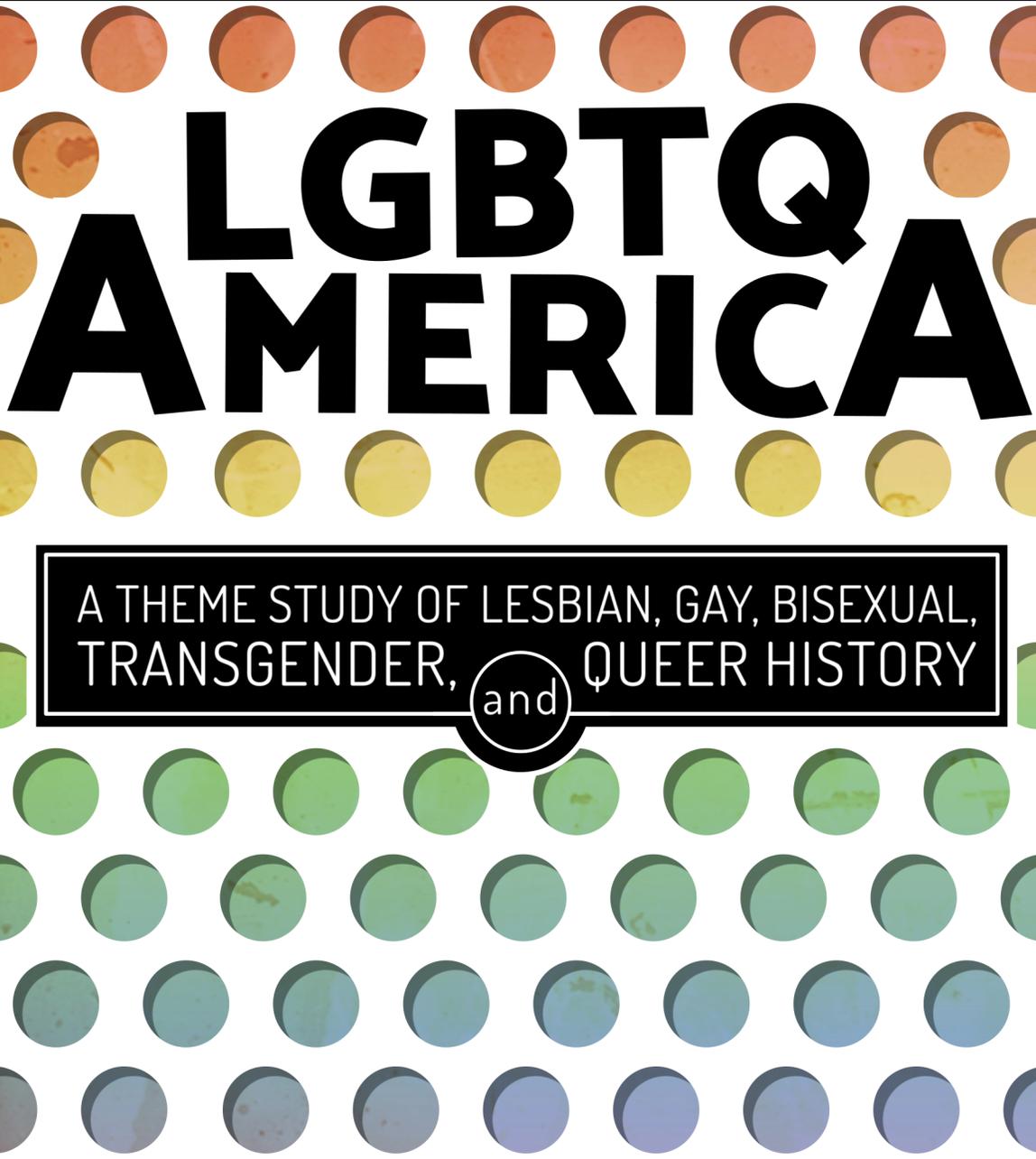


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LGBTQ AMERICA

A THEME STUDY OF LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL,
TRANSGENDER, and QUEER HISTORY

Edited by Megan E. Springate



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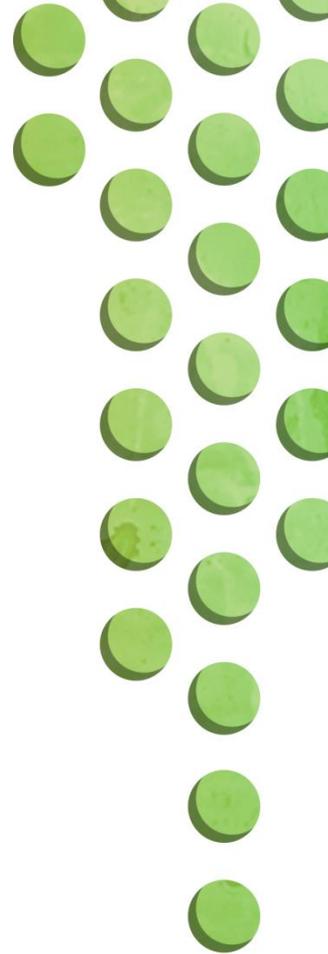
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THEMES

The chapters in this section take themes as their starting points. They explore different aspects of LGBTQ history and heritage, tying them to specific places across the country. They include examinations of LGBTQ community, civil rights, the law, health, art and artists, commerce, the military, sports and leisure, and sex, love, and relationships.

LGBTQ MILITARY SERVICE

20

Steve Estes

Eric Alva was raised in a military family in San Antonio, Texas. His grandfather had served in the army in World War II and Korea. His father served in Vietnam. When Alva graduated from high school in 1989, he joined the Marine Corps. He was deployed in Somalia in the 1990s and rose gradually through the enlisted ranks to become a staff sergeant. During Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003, Alva was leading about a dozen men in a supply convoy near Basra when he stepped on a landmine. “The explosion was so powerful,” he remembered, “it blew me to the ground about ten feet away and took off part of my right leg.”¹ Alva was the first American serviceman seriously wounded in Iraq. He would receive a Purple Heart and a prosthetic leg. The President and First Lady visited him in the hospital, and he was interviewed by dozens of magazines and television news programs. Alva was a military hero. He was also gay. Many of his fellow marines knew, but this wasn’t part of his public story in 2003. By 2006, Alva was no longer willing to hide his sexuality.

¹ Eric Alva, “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell: From the Inside Out,” *Huffington Post*, February 28, 2007, accessed August 1, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eric-alva/dont-ask-dont-tell-from-t_b_42310.html.



Figure 1: Lesbian veterans lead a 1993 march in Washington, DC. Photo courtesy of Cathy Cade, photographer.

Alva's courage under fire and willingness to sacrifice for his buddies and his country placed him in a long line of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) US military personnel. Until "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was lifted in 2011 most LGBTQ troops served in secrecy and silence. In fact,

thousands of them did serve and had served since the founding of this nation. By the 2000s, increasing numbers of queer troops were opening up about their sexuality to comrades and even superiors, despite the potential risk to their military careers. This essay chronicles the long history of queer military service with an emphasis on the twentieth century when modern queer identities emerged.² With this overview of queer American military history, the National Park Service and local historians can better preserve and promote historical sites related to LGBTQ military service and sacrifice (Figure 1).

Before there was a United States, before there was even a gay identity, there were men who loved men, and some of them served with the Continental Army under General George Washington. We know that men had sex with men in General Washington's army because such sex was illegal, as it would be for two more centuries in the United States. As with other aspects of queer history, we need to find indirect evidence of these soldiers, sailors, and officers who were intimate with other men. Sadly,

² Throughout this essay, I use the term "queer" to refer historically to individuals who had or acted on same-sex desires and those who did not fit into historically defined gender norms. Before the second half of the twentieth century, the military focused much of its regulation on homosexual activity and not "identity" per se. This is, in part, why it is harder for the earlier period to distinguish between the various queer categories that we identify today. This is particularly true—even in the current era—for bisexual individuals. In writing this essay, I have had difficulty doing justice to bisexual military personnel. Although a few of my oral history interviews with veterans for the Library of Congress Veterans History Project address this issue, there is not enough information in them to draw broad conclusions or link to specific historical places.

much of this evidence comes from records of legal proceedings and military courts martial.

At the end of a brutal winter at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania in 1778, an ensign in the Continental Army claimed that he saw Lieutenant Gotthold Fredrich Enslin having sex with Private John Monhart in the officer's cabin.³ Enslin had only been in America since 1774. Much of his time in the country had been spent in the American military during the Revolutionary War. Though Lieutenant Enslin denied the charges against him, Lieutenant Colonel Aaron Burr found the junior officer guilty of sodomy in a court-martial trial. General George Washington ordered that Enslin be "dismissed with Infamy" and "drummed out of the Camp." That was the end of Enslin's military career, but he was apparently not the only officer serving with Washington at Valley Forge that winter who had intimate relations with other men.⁴

Two weeks before Enslin's court martial, a German officer had arrived at Valley Forge to help drill the soldiers under Washington's command. Benjamin Franklin had invited Baron Frederich Wilhelm von Steuben, a Prussian nobleman with experience in his country's esteemed military, to help the struggling American rebellion. Von Steuben might not have come to the Americans' aid if not for rumors of homosexual behavior that dogged him in his homeland. One 1777 letter suggested that the Prussian officer's affection for younger men was of the sort "which the law forbids and punishes severely."⁵ Whether or not General Washington knew of these rumors, he was impressed with von Steuben's military skill and the professionalism he brought to the Continental Army. Unlike American officers, von Steuben drilled the enlisted men himself at Valley Forge, and his drills ultimately formed the foundation of military training for the entire

³ The battlefield at Valley Forge was listed on the NRHP on October 15, 1966 and designated an NHL District on January 20, 1961. It was designated Valley Forge National Historical Park, becoming a unit of the NPS, on July 4, 1976.

⁴ Randy Shilts, *Conduct Unbecoming: Gays & Lesbians in the U.S. Military* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1994), 11-12.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 7-11.

Continental Army.⁶ Von Steuben rose to the rank of major general, serving for the duration of the war and commanding an American division at the battle of Yorktown. His sexuality did not apparently affect his service. In fact, von Steuben would spend the rest of his life in his adopted country, which named the frontier Fort Steuben after him. A replica of Fort Steuben draws visitors to Steubenville, Ohio to this day.⁷

The experiences of Enslin and von Steuben suggest the two different ways that the American military dealt with queer troops from 1776 to 2010. When servicemen (and later women) could plausibly deny their same-sex desires or when their skills proved vital for combat success, the military would often look the other way and retain their service. But when there was “proof” of homosexual activities, the military could and often did punish and discharge LGBTQ individuals. The difficulty for historians then is that the best records of gay military service highlight individuals who ran afoul of military justice, not those who escaped scrutiny as they contributed to American military victories.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that men with same-sex desires fought for both the Union and the Confederacy during the Civil War, and the first women with queer sensibilities also served during this period until their gender and sexuality were discovered. As women were prohibited from military service (particularly combat service) in this period, the only way for them to serve was to pretend to be men. General Philip Sheridan found two such women serving under his command in the Fifteenth Missouri Regiment during the Civil War. The women had gotten drunk and nearly drowned. When rescued by fellow soldiers, the women’s true identities were revealed. Sheridan immediately sent the women back from the Civil War battlefield, noting that “an intimacy had sprung up between them.”

⁶ General Von Steuben’s Headquarters at Valley Forge National Historical Park was listed on the NRHP and designated an NHL on November 28, 1972.

⁷ One of General von Steuben’s closest comrades in the Continental Army was Washington’s aide Alexander Hamilton. Randy Shilts and others have suggested that Hamilton himself was gay. The letters between Hamilton and another Washington staffer named John Laurens suggest a passionate and intimate friendship, but reading such letters through a twenty-first century lens potentially distorts the historical record of a time when men’s correspondence exhibits effusive emotional outpouring rarely seen in the modern era.

According to Sheridan's report, one of the women was so masculine as to easily pass as a man, while the other seemed more feminine.⁸

The Civil War also saw the first service by a gender transgressive female doctor. Dr. Mary Walker challenged gender norms by earning an MD and practicing surgery in the mid-nineteenth century, but she was also a social activist, arguing against women's corseting and often outfitting herself in men's clothing (though never disguising herself as a man). Rejected when she first attempted to enlist in the medical corps of the Union Army, Dr. Walker volunteered her services as an assistant surgeon in Northern Virginia and Washington, DC.⁹ Finally, in March 1864, Walker was hired as a contract surgeon attached to the Fifty-Second Ohio Volunteers. She was the only female surgeon working for pay with the Union Army during the Civil War. As was her custom, she wore men's clothing during the war—a modified version of the male doctor's uniform that she argued allowed better flexibility to treat patients than traditional female dress. Walker saw patients at Bull Run, Chickamauga, the Battle of Atlanta, and several smaller skirmishes, as well as tending to wounded soldiers alongside Walt Whitman at a hospital set up at the US Patent Office in Washington, DC.¹⁰ She was held captive for four months at Castle Thunder Prison in Richmond, Virginia, after being accused of spying on Confederate military positions.¹¹ After the war, Walker became the only

⁸ Shilts, *Conduct Unbecoming*, 14-15.

⁹ During her time in Washington in the early 1860s, she lived various places, but two that we know of are a rooming house at 52 Morton Street and a residence at 374 Ninth Street, both now demolished.

¹⁰ The Old Patent Office was located at Ninth and F Streets NW, in the District of Columbia. The building currently houses the National Portrait Gallery. It was added to the NRHP on October 15, 1966 and designated an NHL on January 12, 1965.

¹¹ Castle Thunder was located in Richmond's Tobacco Row, along the James River. It burned to the ground in 1879. Details of Dr. Walker's capture were printed in the *Richmond Sentinel* on April 22, 1864: "The female Yankee surgeon captured by our pickets a short time since, in the neighborhood of the army of Tennessee, was received in this city yesterday evening, and sent to the Castle in charge of a detective. Her appearance on the street in full male costume, with the exception of a gipsy hat, created quite an excitement amongst the idle negroes and boys who followed and surrounded her. She gave her name as Dr. Mary E. Walker, and declared that she had been captured on neutral ground. She was dressed in black pants and black or dark talma or paletot. She was consigned to the female ward of Castle Thunder, there being no accommodations at the Libby for prisoners of her sex. We must not omit to add that she is ugly and skinny, and apparently above thirty years of age." See Angela M. Zombek, "Castle Thunder Prison," *Encyclopedia Virginia*, Virginia Foundation for the Humanities website, last modified June 7, 2011,

http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Castle_Thunder_Prison

woman in US history to receive a Congressional Medal of Honor for Meritorious Service, and she continued to speak out for feminist causes until her death in 1919. With her dress, professional ambitions, and medical publications, she challenged gender norms for the rest of her life.¹² Walker is buried in the Union Village Rural Cemetery in Oswego, New York.

Although it is likely that gay male troops served in most American conflicts before the twentieth century, the historical record is strongest for the modern era, when the military, state, and emerging profession of psychiatry began to codify arguments against same-sex relationships and military service. World War I was the first major American military conflict that saw an explicit crack down on gay male military service, and World War II saw the emergence of queer veterans who “came out under fire” and then returned to the home front to build communities and fight for their rights.

As the Assistant Secretary of the Navy during the Great War, a young Franklin Delano Roosevelt authorized an investigation of homosexual activities in March 1919 at the Newport, Rhode Island YMCA, which was frequented by both gay civilians and sailors from the nearby Naval Training Station.¹³ Roosevelt was certainly not alone in his concerns about homosexual conduct and the military. As we are “recruiting the elements which make up our invincible army, we cannot ignore what is obvious,” a San Francisco psychiatrist wrote in 1918. “The homosexualist is not only dangerous, but an ineffective fighter.”¹⁴ The following year, the US Articles of War categorized sodomy as a felony for the first time, and it was in this context that Roosevelt authorized naval investigators to go undercover soliciting sex from sailors in Newport, specifically at the YMCA. The investigation led to the court-martial of seventeen sailors, many of whom

¹² Sharon M. Harris, *Dr. Mary Walker: An American Radical, 1832-1919* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 31-74.

¹³ The YMCA, now known as the Old Army and Navy YMCA, is located at 50 Washington Square, Newport, Rhode Island. It was listed on the NRHP on December 29, 1988.

¹⁴ Shilts, *Conduct Unbecoming*, 15-16; and Mark Arsenault, “Gay Evolution: 1919 Newport Sting,” *Providence Journal*, January 20, 2008.

were sentenced to several years in the brig. According to journalist Randy Shilts, the Newport investigation was the first recorded “attempt to purge an installation of homosexuals.”¹⁵

In contrast to World War I, the Second World War has come to be seen as a largely positive turning point in modern queer history. Official military policy continued to demonize queer individuals and further articulated why they were “unfit” for service, but the uneven application of these policies as a result of personnel needs allowed for the recruitment and retention of many queer troops. Historian Allan Bérubé wrote that during World War II, thousands of queer service personnel were “coming out under fire,” as they left their small towns, saw the wider world, met new comrades, and sometimes fell in love. Gay-friendly (or tolerant) establishments like San Francisco’s Top of the Mark, Black Cat Café, and Mona’s, became meeting spots for queer service personnel, as did New York City’s Astor Bar, Howdy Club, and Sloane House YMCA.¹⁶ As Bérubé argues, the US military often treated homosexuality as a medical problem instead of a criminal one during World War II, a shift that allowed the military to retain thousands, if not tens of thousands, of queer troops whose skills were needed during wartime. This was particularly true of lesbians in the Women’s Army Corps (WACs), a military auxiliary service that restricted married women’s participation, and thus became something of a haven for lesbian and bisexual women looking to serve their country. After the war, queer service personnel returned to big cities (particularly debarkation points like New

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Addresses: Top of the Mark, 999 California Street, San Francisco, California; the Black Cat Club, 710 Montgomery Street, San Francisco, California; the Black Cat Club is a contributing property (though not for its LGBTQ history) to the Jackson Square NRHP District, listed November 18, 1971; Mona’s Club 440, 440 Broadway, San Francisco, California; Astor Bar, Broadway between Forty-Fourth and Forty-Fifth Streets, New York City, now demolished; Howdy Club, known as a predominantly lesbian bar, 17 West Third Street, New York City, now demolished; and the Sloane House YMCA, 356 West Thirty-Fourth Street, now demolished. See also Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 56-62, 68-83 and Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (New York: The Free Press, 1990).

Steve Estes

York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles) where they created or built upon urban queer communities.¹⁷

After World War II, the military and the US government once again cracked down on queer service personnel not only with legal and medical arguments, but also based on national security concerns during the Cold War. Ironically, what historian David K. Johnson has called the “lavender scare” was primarily a domestic phenomenon during the Cold War. When the United States engaged in military actions abroad during this period, as in Korea, gay male soldiers were often allowed to serve. “It was a nightmare here in the States,” Korean War veteran Ric Mendoza-Gleeson recalled. “I mean if you were gay here, it was over, Grover... but once you got overseas, the commanders looked the other way.” One gay sailor who served honorably during the Korean War era was New York native Harvey Milk, who would go on to be one of the first openly-gay elected officials in the United States when he joined the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in the late 1970s (Figure 2).¹⁸



Figure 2: Harvey Milk, the second openly LGBTQ elected official in the United States, served in the Navy during the Korean War. Photo courtesy of the San Francisco Public Library.

During the Korean War, the number of gay service personnel discharged because of their sexuality was relatively small, but by the mid-

¹⁷ Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire*; and Leisa D. Meyer, *Creating GI Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women's Army Corps During World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

¹⁸ David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); and Steve Estes, *Ask & Tell: Gay & Lesbian Veterans Speak Out* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 36. Harvey Milk lived, worked, and organized out of his apartment and camera shop at 573-575 Castro Street, San Francisco, California.



Figure 3: Washington, DC recognized pioneering gay rights activist and military veteran, Dr. Franklin Kameny, decades after Kameny was fired from the federal government during the "Lavender Scare" of the 1950s. Photo by Kyle Flood, June 2010.¹⁹

to-late 1950s, the government was firing thousands of gay troops and civilian defense workers every year under the assumption that their sexuality placed them at risk of being blackmailed by communist agents during the Cold War. Annual discharges of queer troops doubled over the course of the 1950s, and David K. Johnson estimated that approximately five thousand gay and lesbian civilian employees of the federal government lost their jobs during

what he dubs the “lavender scare.”²⁰ Frank Kameny was one of those gay civilian employees that lost his job because of his sexuality. A veteran of the US Army in World War II, Kameny earned a PhD from Harvard and then worked for the US Army Map Service in Washington, DC, as a civilian. In 1957 the government fired Kameny because he was gay, inspiring his lifelong fight against discrimination. He co-founded the Washington branch of the gay rights organization known as the Mattachine Society in 1961 and picketed various government buildings, demanding “First Class

¹⁹ Photo in the public domain. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Frank_kameny.jpg

²⁰ John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 293-294; and Johnson, *The Lavender Scare*, 166.

Citizenship for Homosexuals” from the 1960s until the 2000s.²¹ Before Kameny died in 2011, he had become a gay rights hero in Washington, with a street named in his honor and his protest signs accessioned as part of the permanent collections at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History (Figure 3).²²

By the time Frank Kameny was demanding equal rights for gay citizens, the United States was getting involved in another Cold War military conflict in Vietnam. The Vietnam War divided gay communities just as it divided America. While many queer Americans volunteered for service or answered the call of the draft, others vehemently opposed the war. For instance, Sylvia Rivera (born “Ray” and of Puerto Rican and Venezuelan descent) was a transgender New Yorker active in the antiwar movement. When Rivera was drafted in 1969, she showed up dressed as a woman and proclaimed that although she had been born a man, she identified as a woman and loved men. After the military rejected her, Rivera continued her antiwar activism and was also a participant in the Stonewall Riots and the gay liberation movement.²³ Even though gay liberation and antiwar activism were often intertwined, military service and gay rights activism during the Vietnam era also came together in LGBTQ veterans who followed in Frank Kameny’s footsteps to demand the freedoms and rights that they had fought to defend in the military.

²¹ The Washington, DC, branch of the Mattachine Society was run largely out of Kameny’s home in the northwest of the District. It was listed on the NRHP on November 2, 2011.

²² Kameny was actually fired for refusing to answer questions about his sexuality after the government learned he had been arrested on sex-related charges in San Francisco years earlier. For more on the Kameny’s life and political struggles, see Johnson, *Lavender Scare*, 179-208. See also Martin Weil and Emily Langer’s obituary: “Kameny Dies” *Washington Post*, October 11, 2011.

²³ Rivera was later an active member in the Gay Liberation Front and Gay Activists Alliance, as well as the Street Transvestite (later Transgender) Action Revolutionaries (STAR), which she co-founded in 1970 with Marsha P. Johnson. STAR worked to help homeless young drag queens and transgender women of color. In November 2005, New York City named a Greenwich Village street in honor of Sylvia Rivera. Stonewall was the first NHL designated for its association with LGBTQ history (February 16, 2000) and the first National Monument dedicated to recognizing LGBTQ history (June 24, 2016). For more on Rivera, see Susan M. Glisson, *The Human Tradition in the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 323-325 and Tim Retzliff, “Eliding Trans Latino/a Queer Experience in U.S. LGBT History: José Sarria and Sylvia Rivera Reexamined,” *CENTRO Journal* 19 (1): 141-161.

Perhaps no single veteran represents this struggle better than Air Force Sergeant Leonard Matlovich. The son of a veteran, Matlovich was born in Savannah, Georgia. He volunteered for three tours of duty in Vietnam and won two Air Force Commendations for Bravery, the Bronze Star, and a Purple Heart among other awards and citations. In 1975 the Air Force discharged Matlovich when he came out publicly as a gay man to challenge the military's ban on homosexual service. After several years of court challenges, Matlovich agreed to an out-of-court settlement, but he never stopped fighting for gay rights. He spent his final years living mostly in the San Francisco Bay Area, where he fought to raise awareness of HIV/AIDS and ultimately succumbed to the disease himself.²⁴ Matlovich's fight to lift the ban on gay service personnel in the 1970s landed him on the cover of *Time* magazine and made him an icon of the gay rights movement. Both San Francisco and Chicago have small memorial plaques



Figure 4: Leonard Matlovich wanted his grave in the Congressional Cemetery (Washington, DC) to become a monument to gay and lesbian military service. Gay veterans and activists gather at the grave on Veteran's Day to commemorate Matlovich's service and the service of all LGBTQ veterans. Photo courtesy of Patsy Lynch, photographer.

²⁴ Matlovich lived on Eighteenth Street in San Francisco, California.

dedicated to Matlovich. The most significant memorial by far, however, is his grave in Washington, DC's Congressional Cemetery, which has become a site of demonstrations and Veteran's Day celebrations by gay rights groups. "When I was in the military," Matlovich's epitaph reads, "they gave me a medal for killing two men and a discharge for loving one" (Figure 4).²⁵

Partly in response to Matlovich's challenge, the US military tightened restrictions on gay service in 1981 with a new policy that bluntly stated: "Homosexuality is incompatible with military service." One of the first challenges to this policy came from another Vietnam veteran named Perry Watkins, who was discharged from the army in 1984. As Perry Watkins argued in court, he had never lied to the army about who he was. When Watkins had been drafted in 1968, he answered the question about whether he was homosexual in the affirmative. The army inducted him anyway and sent him to serve in Vietnam. Watkins made the military a career and would later perform drag shows for his army buddies under the name Simone. After the military strengthened the gay ban in the early 1980s and with a growing conservative backlash as a result of the AIDS crisis, the army decided Watkins was no longer fit for duty. Although the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco ordered the army to reinstate Watkins, his case, like Matlovich's, did not overturn the wider ban on gay service. From 1984 until his death in 1996, Watkins lived and worked in Tacoma, Washington. He continued to speak out against the military ban. As an African American, he was also a vocal critic of racism within the gay rights movement, arguing that white veterans were often asked to testify and speak instead of minority veterans.²⁶

²⁵ "I am a Homosexual," *Time*, September 8, 1975; Leonard Matlovich Papers, GLBT Historical Society (housed in the San Francisco Public Library Special Collections); and <http://leonardmatlovich.com>, accessed May 26, 2015. Congressional Cemetery was listed on the NRHP on June 23, 1969 and designated an NHL on June 14, 2011. Several LGBTQ pioneers are buried there, particularly in the "gay corner" anchored by Matlovich's grave.

²⁶ Wilbur J. Scott and Sandra Carson Stanley, *Gays and Lesbians in the Military: Issues, Concerns, and Contrasts* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1994), 19, 123, 221; Department of Defense Directive 1332.14, 46 Fed. Reg. 9571-9578 (July 29, 1981); and David Dunlap, "Perry Watkins, 48, Gay Sergeant Won Court Battle With Army," *New York Times*, March 21, 1996.

From the 1970s through the 1990s, a dedicated cohort of gay and lesbian veterans sought to end the ban through legal challenges and public demonstrations at the same time that the politics of gay rights were gaining steam. Vernon Berg, Miriam Ben-Shalom, Dusty Pruitt, Joe Steffan, Keith Meinhold, Zoe Dunning, and Grethe Cammermeyer all chipped away at the ban without overturning it outright. Like Perry Watkins, many of these activists won individual courtroom victories, gaining reinstatement in the military. However, the courts limited the scope of these decisions to remedies for the individual plaintiffs, continuing to defer to the military on the broader personnel policies restricting LGBTQ service.²⁷ The election of Bill Clinton as president in 1992 seemed a harbinger of real change as the Democratic candidate had promised to lift the ban. Once in office, however, Clinton faced stiff opposition from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Congress, and the religious right. The compromise that emerged in 1993 was “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” a policy that was supposed to end inquiries into troops’ sexual orientation, while



Figure 5: Grethe Cammermeyer’s career in the military included a fourteen-month deployment as an army nurse in Vietnam, during which she was awarded the Bronze Star in 1968 (Pictured: LTC Robert Lever MC gives then CPT Margarethe Hawken, now and nee Cammermeyer, the award). In 1988, Cammermeyer told the Washington National Guard that she was a lesbian. They immediately discharged her, and she sued to get her job back. In 1994 the court ordered her reinstated. When she retired in 1997, she had served for thirty-one years. Department of Defense photo, courtesy of Grethe Cammermeyer.

²⁷ Vernon E. Berg III v. Secretary of the Navy 591 F.2d 849 (U.S.App.D.C. 1978); Miriam Ben-Shalom v. Secretary of the Army 826 F.2d 722 (7th Cir. 1987); Dusty Pruitt v. Secretary of Defense 963 F.2d 1160 (9th Cir., 1991); Joseph C. Steffan v. Secretary of Defense 8 F.3d 57 (DC Cir. 1994); Volker Keith Meinhold v. Secretary of Defense 34 F.3d 1469 (9th Cir. 1994); Margaret Cammermeyer v. Secretary of Defense 850 F. Supp 910 (W.D. Wash 1994); and Cynthia Laird, “Out Navy Commander Retires,” *Bay Area Reporter*, June 7, 2007.

continuing the discharge process for service members whose same-sex attractions or activities became known (Figure 5).²⁸

The “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy (1993-2011) ironically amplified the debate on LGBTQ military service. The compromise, which was intended to silence critics of the ban, ended up generating more publicity about gays and lesbians (although not bisexuals and transgender people) in the military than ever before. On the one hand, media scrutiny and political controversy heightened tensions over sexuality within the military that accompanied increased anti-gay violence in the forces.²⁹ On the other hand, the mainstream media finally began to acknowledge LGBTQ heroism as part of the story of American military history, and the hypocrisy of the policy brought new focus to its inconsistencies and unfairness.³⁰

While the tension within the military about sexuality boiled over into violence in the 1990s, violence involving homosexuality and military personnel was nothing new. On Halloween night in 1958, a young airman named John Mahon, who was stationed in Charleston, South Carolina, went home with Jack Dobbins after meeting at a local gay bar called Club 49.³¹ The next morning, Dobbins was found brutally murdered. Mahon had used a candlestick to bludgeon the Charleston man to death. The airman did not deny killing Dobbins. Instead, he claimed self-defense and was acquitted of all charges. As the local paper explained, Mahon was a “normal,” patriotic young serviceman, simply fending off the aggressive

²⁸ For a critical analysis and history of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” see Nathaniel Frank, *Unfriendly Fire: How the Gay Ban Undermines the Military and Weakens America* (New York: Macmillan, 2010), xiii-xxi, *passim*.

²⁹ In testimony before Congress, Marine Colonel Fred Peck spoke emotionally about not wanting his gay son to join the military where his life “would be hell” and where the colonel would have been “very fearful” for his son’s safety because of homophobia in the ranks. See Melissa Healy, “Schwarzkopf: ‘A 2nd-Class Force’ If Gay Ban Ends,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 12, 1993; and “Abuse of Gays in Military Increases,” *CBS News*, March 9, 2000, accessed August 3, 2015, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/abuse-of-gays-in-military-increases>.

³⁰ For examples of increasingly positive media coverage of queer veterans and growing criticism of the ban, see Philip Shenon, “New Study Faults Pentagon’s Gay Policy,” *New York Times*, February 26, 1997; Jack Tapper, “Gay War Veteran Confronts ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ Policy,” *ABC News*, August 9, 2005; and Associated Press, “Ban on Openly Gay Soldiers Under Fire,” *NBC News*, June 15, 2005, accessed August 3, 2015, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/8218961/ns/us_news/t/efforts-grow-end-ban-openly-gay-soldiers/#.Vb-987ekc14.

³¹ Before it was demolished, Club 49 was located at 368 King Street, Charleston, South Carolina. Dobbins’s home still stands.

advances of Dobbins, who was euphemistically described as “artistic” by the local paper.³²

By the 1990s, the so-called “gay panic” defense was rarely successful in court, but violence against LGBTQ individuals spiked as gay visibility in politics and popular culture increased. This was, in part, the context for the murder of Barry Winchell. A nineteen-year-old private stationed at Fort Campbell, which straddles the border between Kentucky and Tennessee, Winchell was beginning to explore gay life in nearby Nashville in 1999. Rumors circulated that he had a transsexual girlfriend and went to gay bars on the weekends. “Pretty much everybody called him derogatory names,” Sergeant Michael Kleifgen later told a reporter. “They called him a faggot, I would say, on a daily basis.” As a friend, Kleifgen even filed a formal complaint about the harassment, and Winchell told his superior officer about the rumors and slurs. “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” actually suppressed such reports of harassment, because such claims could lead the military to investigate the sexuality of the people being harassed or doing the reporting. In Winchell’s case, even the formal complaints of the harassment by a heterosexual buddy had no effect. The captain just told the young men harassing Winchell to “knock that shit off.” At a keg party outside the barracks on the Fourth of July, Winchell and another private named Calvin Glover got into a fistfight, which Winchell won. Other guys teased Glover mercilessly for losing to “a fucking faggot.” Later that night, Glover beat Winchell with a baseball bat as the gay private slept in the Fort Campbell barracks. Winchell died at Vanderbilt Hospital in Nashville the following day.³³

Yet gay bashing was not the only problem with “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” As Melissa Herbert argued in her book, *Camouflage Isn’t Only for Combat*, lesbians and bisexual military women had to camouflage their sexuality

³² Paul Bowers, “A Map of Charleston’s Gay History,” *Charleston City Paper*, July 30, 2014.

³³ Thomas Hackett, “The Execution of Private Barry Winchell: The Real Story Behind the ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ Murder,” *Rolling Stone*, March 2, 2002; and Frank, *Unfriendly Fire*, 194-196, 276. For more on the negative effects of DADT on harassment complaints, see Stacey L. Sobel et al., “Conduct Unbecoming: The Sixth Annual Report on “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, Don’t Harass, Don’t Pursue,” Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, March 9, 2000, accessed August 3, 2015, http://sldn.3cdn.net/bc84613306fbdcf69d_gkm6iyfnf.pdf

just as men did.³⁴ Even before “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell,” the ban on homosexual service placed *all* military women in a Catch-22, leaving them open to (hetero)sexual harassment in order to “prove” that they were not gay to peers and superior officers. Like anti-gay violence, sexual blackmail was particularly problematic in the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” era as lesbianism became more visible in popular culture. Lifting the ban would not end sexual harassment, of course, but it would eliminate a regulation that exacerbated the problem.

A resurgence of gay-related discharges in the late 1990s also suggested that there were serious problems underlying the military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy. Liberals pushed to add anti-harassment regulations and diversity workshops to official military training in order to deal with homophobia in the ranks. Meanwhile, LGBTQ activists in Washington, DC—particularly the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network (SLDN), but also American Veterans for Equal Rights (AVER), Transgender American Veterans Association (TAVA), and ultimately, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC)—fought to lift the ban entirely in the 2000s. As this activist campaign began to pick up steam, the political environment surrounding military policy changed once again in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and subsequent military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. As the armed forces struggled to meet recruitment targets during these military conflicts and as more queer veterans began to come out, politicians and military leaders began to reconsider the ban on queer service.³⁵

After Eric Alva became the first American serviceman seriously wounded in Iraq, the thing that scared him most about the deluge of media coverage was the potential public revelation that he was gay. “To be honest,” Alva wrote, “each time I was commended on my courage, I couldn’t help but remember how scared I was that I would be found out as

³⁴ Melissa S. Herbert, *Camouflage Isn’t Only for Combat: Gender, Sexuality, and Women in the Military* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

³⁵ Dave Moniz, “Opportunities, Opposition to Iraq War Cut into Recruiting,” *USA Today*, November 4, 2005; John M. Shalikashvili, “Second Thoughts on Gays in the Military,” *New York Times*, January 2, 2007; and Karen DeYoung, “Colin Powell Now Says Gays Should Be Able to Serve Openly in Military,” *Washington Post*, February 4, 2010.



Figure 6: Major General Christopher Cortez (left), Commanding General, Marine Corps Recruiting Command, honors Staff Sergeant Eric Alva, the recipient of the Heroes and Heritage Award at the 2003 National Council of La Raza meeting in Austin, Texas. Alva would later join the staff of the Human Rights Campaign, fighting to lift the ban on openly gay military servicemen and women. Photo by US Marine Corps Sgt. Matt Griffin.³⁷

gay and kicked out of the military.” In 2006, Alva joined the staff of the HRC and became their spokesperson in the campaign to lift the ban on openly gay service personnel. Alva testified before Congress in 2008, telling the Congressional Committee members that although he was not publicly out to the Marine Corps, several of his straight comrades knew that he was gay, and did not care. Their response to finding out was, “So what?” Contrary to the arguments of military policy makers that open acknowledgement of sexuality would undermine unit cohesion, knowing that Alva was gay did not break

the connection he made to the band of brothers in his unit. In fact, Alva became the godfather to three of his buddies’ kids. “My experiences in the military demonstrate that ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ is a solution looking for a problem,” Alva concluded (Figure 6).³⁶

Alva was not alone in coming home from Iraq to challenge the ban. In the 2000s, a flood of veterans from flag officers to enlisted personnel, came out publicly as gays and lesbians, arguing that “Don’t Ask, Don’t

³⁶ Eric Alva, “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell: From the Inside Out,” *Huffington Post*, February 28, 2007, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eric-alva/dont-ask-dont-tell-from-t_b_42310.html.

³⁷ Photo in the public domain.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Staff_Sergeant_Eric_Alva_2003-06-13.jpg

Tell” was hurting military effectiveness. Decorated combat veterans spoke out. Brian Hughes, a Yale-educated army ranger from California, who served in both Iraq and Afghanistan, came out after he left the military in 2004. Robert Stout, an army sergeant from rural Ohio who had been wounded in Iraq, did so in 2005. Along with Alva’s testimony, the stories of gay servicemen and women suggested what the military had long known, but been unwilling to acknowledge—namely, that queer Americans had served honorably for more than two centuries of US military history.³⁸

Finally, the political opportunity to repeal “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” caught up with polls suggesting that the majority of Americans no longer supported banning gays and lesbians from the military. As one of Congress’ last acts in 2010, it voted to repeal “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” President Barack Obama, who had promised during his campaign to lift the ban, quickly signed the Military Readiness Enhancement Act into law. Since 2011 gay, lesbian, and bisexual military personnel have been able to serve openly alongside their straight comrades. The ban on transgender Americans serving in the military was lifted on June 30, 2016. Military personnel were no longer discharged for being transgender, and by the end of 2017, all branches of the US military accepted transgender recruits.³⁹ As this essay illustrates, queer servicemen and women have long defended liberty, justice, and equality for all Americans.

³⁸ Estes, *Ask & Tell*, 210-254.

³⁹ Sunnive Brydum, “Pentagon on Trans Troops: ‘These are the Kind of People We Want,’” *Advocate*, June 30, 2016.