

# Equal treatment of male, female homosexuals urged

Vice adm.'s letter draws fire, said to promote stereotypes

By Elizabeth P. Donovan  
Times staff writer

WASHINGTON — Female homosexuals in the Navy tend to be hard workers and top professionals, but they should be treated no different from homosexual male sailors, the commander of the Navy's Atlantic surface fleet said.

In a message to commanders dated July 24, Vice Adm. Joseph B. Donnell urged them to demonstrate equality in the treatment of male and female homosexuals, because, "for sailors in their berthing and work spaces, overt or covert homosexual activity impacts in a very negative way on morale."

Greater attention to the problem is needed, Donnell said, given "the influx of women on our ships and throughout the Navy in general." Donnell's command includes 185 ships and 40 shore installations.

Although the message was private, a copy reached Rep. Gerry E. Studds, D-Mass., a homosexual, who condemned it as "an alarming display of naval sexism as well as homophobia" and distributed it to the news media.

"It seems to me," Studds said, "that the Navy has better things to do, especially at the moment, than go after its own top performers." The message also drew fire from some women who said it uses unfair stereotypes that hurt all women.

Lt. Cmdr. Ryland Dodge, a spokesman for Donnell, said the message was not intended to levy any special enforcement against women homosexuals but to create awareness of an issue that has been raised by both men and women in the Navy.

Officials at the Naval Military Personnel Command said they applauded Donnell's decision to bring attention to a difficult issue. Capt. Kathleen Bruyere, the Navy's special assistant for women's policy, said virtually the same type of instruction is given to incoming commanders of mixed crew ships, as well as major shore commanders as part of a training package on women's issues. Two months ago, force master chiefs also began getting the training.

The heart of the issue, Donnell said, is that a perception exists that female homosexuality is "somewhat tolerated, while male homosexuality is dealt with swiftly and sternly."

He is not the first commander to learn of the perception. In 1987, the commander of the training aircraft carrier Lexington discussed the issue with crewmembers after a survey showed some sailors believed women homosexuals were given special treatment.

Donnell listed several possible reasons for the perception, the first being that unless a woman "admits to being a homosexual, it is often very difficult to prove."

Since male homosexuality has long been unacceptable, the incidents usually are reported quickly and those in question admit to the behavior and are discharged administratively.

In the case of women, however, "experience has shown that the stereotypical female homosexual in the Navy is more aggressive than her male counterpart, intimidating those women who might turn her in to the chain of command," Donnell said.

In turn, efforts to find credible evidence to use in an investigation is often "stymied," Donnell said, leaving "unsubstantiated rumors leading to accusations of a 'witch hunt' as investigators unsuccessfully search for evidence."

"Experience has also shown that the stereotypical female homosexual in the Navy is hardworking, career-oriented, willing to put in long hours on the job and among the command's top professionals," Donnell said. "As such, allegations that this woman is a homosexual, particularly if made by a young and junior female sailor with no track record, may be dismissed out of hand or pursued halfheartedly."

The bottom line, however, is that whatever the reason for "this perception that female homosexuality is tolerated in the Navy, it is wrong," Donnell said. Statistics show that, based on the relatively small proportion of women in the Navy, from 1985 to 1989 females were discharged for homosexuality at nearly twice the rate of men as a percentage of end strength.

In 1985, 653 enlisted men were discharged, compared with 134 women. The numbers have decreased steadily, however, and in 1989, there were 360 discharges for men versus 92 for women.

More important than the misperception, however, Donnell said, is the impact homosexual activity of any kind affects crewmembers, particularly women, who are in a unique situation.

"Particularly for our young, often vulnerable, female sailors, subtle coercion or outright sexual advances by more senior and aggressive female sailors can be intimidating and intolerable, impacting negatively on work performance and mental state," Donnell said.

"We must recognize that women who are targets for female homosexuals experience a unique form of sexual harassment which can be even more devastating and difficult to cope with than the more traditional harassment from men," he said. "We must do everything we can to put a stop to sexual harassment of any type."

Leaders must do more than pledge support, Donnell said, because words are "empty without an open and accessible chain of command."

He called on commanders to scrutinize their commands to ensure that information flows freely up and down the chain. He advised them to review the "sexual make-up" of the chain of command "with an eye towards the type of problems" he discussed, and used indoctrination division classes as a forum for discussion.

"Be up front and open about the issues," Donnell said. "The problem won't just go away, so we must deal with it sensibly, and fairly, with due regard for the privacy interests of all."

The message drew criticism from some women, including Sandra Lowe, a staff attorney for the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund in New York City, who questions the military's ban on homosexuals. Lowe said the message unfairly characterizes homosexual women as bullies, and does a disservice to hard working professional women who will be increasingly accused of lesbianism.

Mary Harrison, who was discharged from the Navy last year on charges of homosexual activity, said the message essentially tells crewmembers it is OK to harass women they suspect of lesbianism.

"Women I know who've read this message are terrified that if they perform their jobs well and work hard, they'll become targets," said Harrison, who was a personnelman first class aboard salvage ship Grapple when homosexuality charges were brought against her.

Another critic is Kathy Gifford, who serves with Military Law Task Force in San Diego, a liberal oriented committee comprised of civilian attorneys and legal workers who represent military members.

Stereotypical attitudes such as Donnell's are not uncommon in the Navy, Gifford said, and they seem to cause particular problems for single women serving in non-traditional jobs.

"We've seen lots of [lesbian] allegations made against women simply because men felt rebuffed" after the men have made sexual advances, Gifford said.

The message presents a dilemma for women doing traditional male jobs over whether they should be aggressive, hard-working, and give orders to their male colleagues, Gifford said.

But Capt. Bruyere said women should be careful not to view portions of the message out of context and "maintain a perspective" on the issue. She said hopefully the message and surrounding publicity will help women speak up about harassment they experience of all kinds.

The service will benefit from learning that "someone on high is concerned about the issue, not that we're out there trying to stir up trouble and witch hunts," Bruyere said.

ble //

this crim-  
Kinsley's  
evidence  
quality

Academy

used further.  
People who nev-  
sexual conduct  
... she asked  
... would have  
... said. "But  
him (Steffan) if  
sexual activity or  
to commit homo-  
... are expected  
... ruling on the  
... if the lawsuit is  
... an could appeal