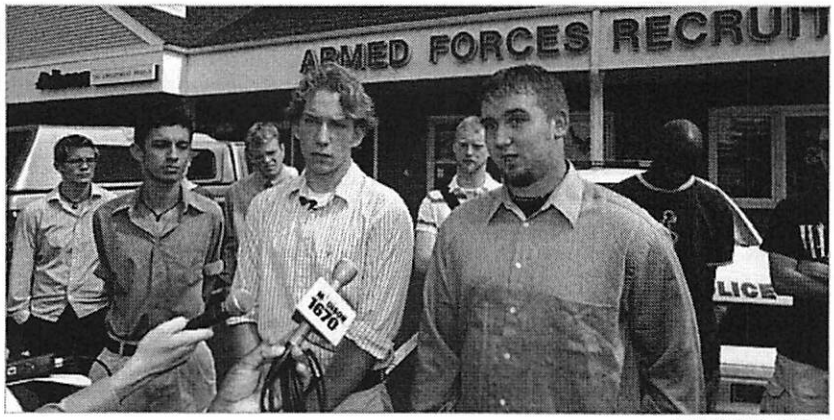
Gay Groups Renew Drive Against 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell'



Erol Reyal for The New York Times

From left, John Alaniz, Derek House and Justin Hager all showed up at a recruiting center but were turned away because they are openly gay.

By LIZETTE ALVAREZ
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Correction Appended

Readers' Opinions

Forum: Gay Rights

Should the U.S. military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy be repealed?

MADISON, Wis. — The three young men who tried to enlist at an Army recruiting station here appeared to be first-rate military material.

Two were college students, and the other was a college graduate. They had no criminal records. They were fit and eager to serve at a time when wars on two fronts have put a strain on American troops and the need for qualified recruits is great.

But the recruiter was forced to turn them away, for one reason: they are gay and unwilling to conceal it.

"Don't judge me because of my sexuality," said one of the three, Justin Hager, 20, a self-described Republican from a military family who has "a driving desire to join" the armed forces. "Judge me because of my character and drive."

As the Pentagon's search for soldiers grows more urgent, gay rights groups are making the biggest push in nearly a decade to win repeal of a compromise policy, encoded in a 1993 law and dubbed "don't ask, don't tell," that bars openly gay people from serving in the military.

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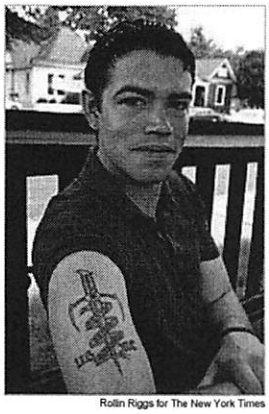

Rollin Riggs for The New York Times

Tim Smith, who is gay, is also a former marine.

The policy, grounded in a belief that open homosexuality is damaging to unit morale and cohesion, stipulates that gay men and lesbians must serve in silence and refrain from homosexual activity, and that recruiters and commanders may not ask them about their sexual orientation in the absence of compelling evidence that homosexual acts have occurred.

The push for repeal follows years of legal setbacks, as well as discord among gay rights groups about how, or even whether, to address the issue. Now, rather than rely on the courts, advocates are focusing on drumming up support in towns across the nation, spotlighting the personal stories of gay former service members and pushing a Democratic bill in the House that would do away with the policy.

In August the gay rights group Soulforce opened a national campaign by recruiting openly gay people, including the three young men in Madison, who would have enlisted in the military if not for "don't ask, don't tell." [As part of that campaign, two young people who were rejected as applicants on Tuesday at a recruitment center in Chicago returned there on Wednesday and engaged in a sit-in. They were arrested but later released without charges.]

The move to change the policy faces stiff resistance from the Pentagon and Republicans in Congress, who, in a time of war during a tough election year, have no longing for another contentious debate about gay troops. The House bill, introduced last year by Representative Martin T. Meehan, Democrat of Massachusetts, has picked up 119 supporters, but only five of them Republicans.

"In the near term, it has zero chance," said Daniel Gouré, a vice president at the centrist Lexington Institute. "It's hard to see how anyone would want to give potential opponents any ammunition to knock them off."

A 2004 report by the Urban Institute concluded that at least 60,000 gay people were serving in the armed forces, including the Reserves and the National Guard. But since 1993, at least 11,000 members have been discharged for being openly gay, among them 800 in highly crucial jobs, according to the Government Accountability Office, Congress's investigative arm.

For all of that, gay rights groups, gay veterans and some analysts say much has changed since the policy was adopted. A Gallup poll in 2004 found that 63 percent of respondents favored allowing gay troops to serve openly, and a similar survey, by the Pew Research Center this year, put the number at 60 percent; those majorities did not exist in 1993. Young people in particular now have more tolerant views about homosexuality.

In addition, 24 foreign armies, most notably those of Britain and Israel, have integrated openly gay people into their ranks with little impact on effectiveness and recruitment. In Britain, where the military was initially forced to accept gay troops by the European Court of Human Rights, gay partners are now afforded full benefits, and the Royal Navy has called on a gay rights group to help recruit gay sailors.

The new debate on "don't ask, don't tell" also coincides with multiple deployments that are being required of many American troops by a military that has lowered its standards to allow more high school dropouts and some convicted criminals to enlist.

"Would you rather have a felon than a gay soldier?" said Capt. Scott Stanford, a heterosexual National Guard commander of a headquarters company who returned from Iraq in June. "I wouldn't."

Lt. Gen. Daniel W. Christman, retired, former superintendent at West Point and onetime assistant to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said both the British experience and the shifts in attitudes at home would cause the American armed forces to change, though slowly.

"It is clear that national attitudes toward this issue have evolved considerably in the last decade," said General Christman, now a senior vice president at the United States Chamber of Commerce. "This has been led by a new generation of service members who take a more relaxed and tolerant view toward homosexuality."

In fact, a growing number of gay service members have told advocacy groups that fewer heterosexual troops are making homosexuality an issue. In some cases, they say, commanders look the other way when someone is suspected of being gay or even avows it, especially if that service member is valuable. Since the war in Afghanistan began in 2001, discharges of openly gay members have fallen by 40 percent.

"People are really blasé about the issue," said Tim Smith, 24, a former marine who was discharged

last year after a civilian chaplain, told of Mr. Smith's homosexuality by congregants, alerted his commander.

Mr. Smith, who was married when he entered the Marine Corps in 2001, hopes to dispel a stereotype of the "promiscuous, night-going, street-dancing" gay man by telling his story and sharing the reaction that disclosure of his orientation elicited. That reaction was largely favorable. At the end, he said, his commander even told the commanding general in a letter that Mr. Smith would be impossible to replace.

On the other side of the divide, Elaine Donnelly, president of the conservative Center for Military Readiness, said permitting gay men and lesbians to serve openly would prompt recruitment rates to drop and disrupt unit cohesion, a linchpin in the decision to allow gay troops to serve only in silence.

"People in the military live in conditions of little or no privacy," said Ms. Donnelly, who advocates a full ban on gay troops. "In conditions of forced intimacy, people should not have to expose themselves to other persons who are sexually attracted to them."

Further, the policy lets unhappy troops, straight or gay, ditch the military service to which they have committed. About 85 percent of those discharged under the policy had declared a homosexual orientation, according to the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, a gay rights watchdog; roughly half that number had volunteered the information simply to get out of the military.

"It lets people kind of get out of jail free," said Aaron Belkin, director of the Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military, a research group at the University of California, Santa Barbara, that has sided with the effort to eliminate "don't ask, don't tell."

Mr. Hager, the young man rejected at the recruiting center here in August along with John Alaniz, 25, and Derek House, 19, had expected that outcome. Joining the Soulforce campaign, he said, was about making a point.

He had tried to enlist in the Navy in high school, when his sexual orientation was still hidden, and had scored high in his aptitude test. His father had served in Vietnam, and his grandfather, a concentration camp survivor, had instilled in him a drive to safeguard America. But a broken ankle dashed his plans then.

This time it was his own words that sidelined him.

"I am openly homosexual," he said, "and that opportunity won't be there for me."

Correction: Sept. 23, 2006

A picture caption with an article on Sept. 14 about efforts by gay groups to repeal the "don't ask, don't tell" policy in the military misidentified the tattoo on the arm of Tim Smith, a gay former marine. Although the tattoo featuring a dagger and the initials USMC was inspired by Mr. Smith's service in the Marines, it was not the official Marine Corps symbol of an eagle, a globe and an anchor. The article also misstated the timing of Mr. Smith's marriage, which ended in divorce. He and his wife were married after he joined the corps, not before.

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