

By CHRISTOPHER MARQUIS

WASHINGTON, April 17 — Forget the lavish hugs dockside, the bands and cameras and teary-eyed spouses. This couple's reunion will be different.

They will meet at the end of the month in an Asian port and seclude themselves at a hotel away from most other sailors. After five months separated by the buildup to war and then the conflict itself, they will have the moment they have ached for, but it will be one of caution.

"I do have some concerns about it," said a San Diego woman whose lesbian partner has been on a ship in the Persian Gulf. "The rest of the crew will be in the area."

At a time when thousands of Americans are planning for the return of their loved ones from the Middle East, there is a subset that remains largely invisible. The government's "don't ask, don't tell" policy, which forbids gays in the military to be open about their sexual orientation, has caused an unknown number of couples to have their farewells behind closed doors, to plan similarly discreet homecomings and, in the time between, to resort to sterile or anonymous messages as a way of staying in touch.

With their hearts and lives in upheaval, the gay partners of troops in the gulf voice frustration that they have not received the benefits that married couples get, or the same level of emotional support. Several such people — male and female, who

agreed to be interviewed only if their names were withheld, out of concern that their partners in uniform could be traced to them — also complained about a lack of support among other gay civilians, many of them skeptical about the armed forces.

A chief concern of gay service members is that they will confide unwisely, fall prey to overzealous superiors or simply feel compelled to tell the truth and, having run afoul of "don't ask, don't tell," find themselves in discharge proceedings.

"The paranoia is justified," said Sharra E. Greer, legal director of the gay advocacy Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, whose current clients include five who were just months short of 20 years' service, and resulting pensions, when discharge proceedings were brought against them. Gays in the military, Ms. Greer said, "have to be invisible to keep their jobs."

The number of discharges for homosexuality declined last year, as it typically does in a military preoccupied by war. Across all branches, there were 906 such discharges, down from 1,273 in 2001. Some drew criticism from advocates of a more liberal policy on the ground that they compromised readiness; the Army, for instance, discharged seven linguists trained in Arabic despite a critical shortage of such specialists.

The partners of troops at war say the need for secrecy strains their ties. "It's hard to maintain a relationship unless you're talking to each other in an open way," said the San Diego woman, a former Navy officer, who was discharged last year after informing her commanding officer that she is a lesbian. Her partner, who has not declared her sexual orientation, is due to end her tour later this month when her ship reaches port in Asia.

The two women communicate each day by e-mail, taking care to use an account that does not reveal their names. They write about everything — the monotony of drills at sea,

Gay Partners Too Are Separated by

War, and by Their Need for Secrecy



the travails of refurbishing a house in California, their love — but the partner left behind does not close with her name. Sometimes they talk by satellite phone, but the two-second delay and a lack of privacy aboard ship make those calls more frustrating than comforting.

Before her discharge, the woman, who is 27 and a Naval Academy graduate, was the legal officer on her ship. As such, she shared responsibility for enforcing “don’t ask, don’t tell.”

“I was being put in a situation where I was being forced to lie,” she said, “and I didn’t want to do it anymore.”

Still, she is determined that her

partner of 17 months — the funny, charismatic one, whom all their friends like best, she says — remain in a career the partner loves. “Everyone should be able to serve, and serve openly,” she said. “She’s out there doing the same job, but she’s pretty much a second-class citizen.”

The partners left behind are not eligible for benefits that the services provide spouses, including access to the base store and to support groups for couples separated by deployment. “I do feel a little bit left out,” said the San Diego woman.

A woman in the Northeast, whose lesbian partner of eight years is an officer on a ship that has been at war, does not have access to family brief-

ings offered at the nearby base on the status of the ship’s crew. But even if she did, “I wouldn’t be comfortable going there: I’d be worried about what questions would be asked of me.”

She is also troubled by the thought that if her partner was incapacitated, she would not be the first person contacted by the military. “We’ve got to navigate through this crazy system virtually alone,” she said.

In the Washington area, a lawyer in his 30’s and the soldier who has been his partner for five years prepared for the soldier’s deployment to the gulf by completing their wills and giving each other power of attorney. They planned far ahead, knowing

that birthdays and anniversaries would be missed. The soldier ordered a box of candy well in advance so that his partner would have something on Valentine's Day. They spent a quiet last weekend together and said goodbye in February.

"It wasn't a goodbye kiss at the base like I saw on TV for so many other people," the lawyer said. "We've learned to make adjustments."

When they are both at home, those concessions are easy enough. They do not hold hands in the street, and are careful about discussing the soldier's profession. But they share a one-bedroom house, go out on weekends and vacation together. They have a network of gay friends, some in the military.

Yet since the soldier departed for the gulf, where he is in a noncombat role, the lawyer has felt left out. At his law firm, people whose spouses are overseas receive supportive e-mail messages, and packages for those spouses are prepared.

"It's been really amazing," the lawyer said, "to see how they've rallied around straight people."

He is also critical of some gay friends and acquaintances, who either avoid asking about his partner or are remiss. He thinks this may have to do with their opposition to the war or a suspicion of things military.

"Once you get outside the sphere of your closest friends," he said, "I think there's a real absence of support within the gay community."

The lawyer was plainly eager to tell his story, but spent several minutes making sure that any account he gave a reporter would be scrubbed of details that could identify the partner.

In daily e-mail messages, the lawyer said, he must choose his words carefully, and avoid gender references. He does not end those messages with his name.

"I write it and I censor it as I go along," he said. "But I say 'I love you.'"