

Marriage of convenience a way to survive for many gays in military

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 • New York Times News Service

WASHINGTON — When anyone asks, the 23-year-old Marine Corps corporal says she met her husband at college, they fell in love and were married by a justice of the peace in North Carolina with a dozen office colleagues as witnesses.

What she never says is that the story, as well as the marriage itself, is all a sham.

"It's all a game to stay alive," said the corporal, who has been in the Marines for three years, hiding the fact that she and her civilian husband are gay.

It is a game that hundreds, perhaps thousands, of service members across the country play to protect their privacy and to avoid being drummed out of a military career.

In a culture that is often openly hostile to homosexuals, marriages of convenience with partners of the opposite sex, who may also be gay, have become a survival technique considered worth the emotional strain.

"I'm so afraid of someone finding out that I'm a lesbian, getting a dishonorable discharge and ruining the rest of my life," said the corporal, who, like a dozen gay troops interviewed, spoke on the condition of anonymity.

Homosexuals say the practice is common at military bases across the country, especially among younger enlistees who would otherwise live in crowded barracks and be subject to searches that could produce incriminating evidence in the form of letters or pictures. But top military officials seem only dimly aware of the practice.

Although President Clinton is scheduled this week to carry out some form of his campaign promise to lift the ban on gays and lesbians

in the military, any change is expected to fall far short of many hopes. Thus, convenience marriages may continue to be popular.

Most of those interviewed live separately from their legal partner, and often not even in the same city.

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A married lesbian Marine

To keep up appearances, though, the couples attend military functions together or drop by each other's office for lunch. Birthdays and anniversary dates are observed. Husband and wife concoct and rehearse elaborate courtship histories.

"It's a charade and I hate it," said a 27-year-old lesbian Marine Corps sergeant in North Carolina who married a gay civilian man three years ago. "But if you look at the big picture, maybe I'm breaking the rules a little bit to accomplish something I really want to do."

Convenience marriages are not unique to gays and lesbians. Some heterosexual troops do it for the extra housing pay married couples receive.

Military lawyers say it is difficult to prosecute such marriages. But if a couple drawing a housing allowance is caught living apart, they can be charged with fraud.

For gays and lesbians in the armed forces, disguising their sex-

uality behind a gold band and a marriage certificate is a draining daily drill punctuated by the constant fear of being discovered.

And the convenience marriages sometimes lead to situations bordering on the absurd.

Keri Ackerman, 24, a lesbian who was a Marine corporal for four years, said that when she joined the service, she married her best friend, a Marine corporal who is gay, to give her an alibi.

At their wedding, Ackerman's maid of honor was her girlfriend. Her husband's best man was his boyfriend. When Ackerman decided not to re-enlist 14 months ago, she no longer needed the marriage and divorced her husband.

Picking the right partner is important. "You need to make sure you know that person and trust them," said a 22-year-old Army clerk at Fort Bragg, N.C. "It's hard for the government or anyone else to say you're married only for the benefits unless one of the spouses admits it."

A 22-year-old aircraft mechanic at Pope Air Force Base, N.C., said she met her husband one night playing pool at a bar.

The couple, who worked out a strict prenuptial agreement separating their finances, married in February at a quickie-wedding chapel in Dillon, S.C. "I freaked out when the pastor turned to him and said, 'You may kiss the bride,' but for \$400 more a month, I thought, what the hell," she said.

While they may have learned to endure their false lifestyles, spouses in convenience marriages still hold out hopes the ban will be lifted completely.

"The day they say it's OK to be gay in the military, my divorce papers will be in," said the Marine sergeant in North Carolina.