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Military's Gay Subculture: Off Limits but Flourishing

By ERIC SCHMITT

Special to The New York Times

JACKSONVILLE, N.C. — Every Friday and Saturday night, scores of off-duty marines flock to a small bar here to shoot a game of pool, cure a bout of loneliness or dance until the wee hours.

By the book, they are risking stiff fines or even jail time, since Camp Lejeune, the largest Marine Corps base on the East Coast, has declared the bar, Friends Lounge, off limits to the installation's 43,000 marines and sailors. It is a gay bar and conflicts with the military's ban on homosexual behavior.

But for many of the gay marines here who keep their sexual orientation secret, Friends Lounge is one of the few public places in this conservative military town where homosexuals — once they are safely past the locked front door and inside — can temporarily set aside their fears of being discovered and drummed out of the Marine Corps they proudly serve.

Adapting to the Forbidden

"Straight people know this as a place that's off-limits, but for gays it's a safe haven," said Alan D., a 23-year-old lance corporal who, like all the homosexuals on active duty interviewed for this article, spoke only on the condition that his full name not be published.

The bar at Camp Lejeune, and the many others like it, demonstrate that there is a flourishing gay subculture in the military,

despite the official ban on homosexuals in uniform. It underscores the way the military has already adapted to something its leaders say is impossible even to contemplate.

Senior military leaders loudly protested when President-elect Bill Clinton said he would lift the ban on homosexuals, arguing that it would lead to severe morale problems and weaken combat effectiveness. They said heterosexual soldiers, sailors and marines cannot coexist with gay ones.

But at Camp Lejeune and many other military bases, they already coexist. Individual base commanders vary widely in how strictly they enforce the ban on the thousands of gay men and lesbians in the services, particularly when it involves gay bars and organizations that are situated off base.

The commanders of Camp Lejeune are clearly aware of the bar's existence but have not done anything to shut it down or round up its patrons for years. "We don't sit and stake out these places and harass people," said Maj. Jay Farrar, a camp spokesman.

This does not mean that being a gay marine at Camp Lejeune is entirely without risk. Gay marines here must still keep their sexual orientation officially secret, since if they are exposed, they face discharge under the Ma-

Continued on Page A11, Column 2

U.N. LEADER SEEKS LARGE NEW EFFORT TO ASSIST SOMALIS

WANTS RIGHT TO USE FORCE

Boutros-Ghali Urges Immediate Military Effort to Disarm Those Blocking Relief

By PAUL LEWIS

Special to The New York Times

UNITED NATIONS, Nov. 30 — Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali called today for the immediate launching of a major new military operation to assure that relief workers can safely bring supplies of food and medicine to Somalia. The operation would be empowered to disarm the factions in the famine- and war-ravaged country, by force if necessary.

But Mr. Boutros-Ghali left it to the Security Council to decide whether to authorize the United Nations to assemble and command the multi-national operation or to accept an American offer to organize the operation and make a substantial military contribution to it, provided that the United States was allowed full control of its troops.

The Secretary General made clear that he preferred an operation led by the United Nations, but he noted the practical circumstances favoring the American proposal and suggested compromises that would give the world organization a limited role in an essentially American-run operation.

Room for Discussion

Gen. Colin L. Powell, Chairman of the United States Staff, has insisted on



Life Sentence in Murder of Exxo

Arthur D. Seale, left, was sentenced to life in kidnapping, extortion and murder of Sidney J. official. He was escorted to Federal court in T

Court Again Takes Up Of Big Awards for Sor

By LINDA GREENHOUSE

Special to The New York Times

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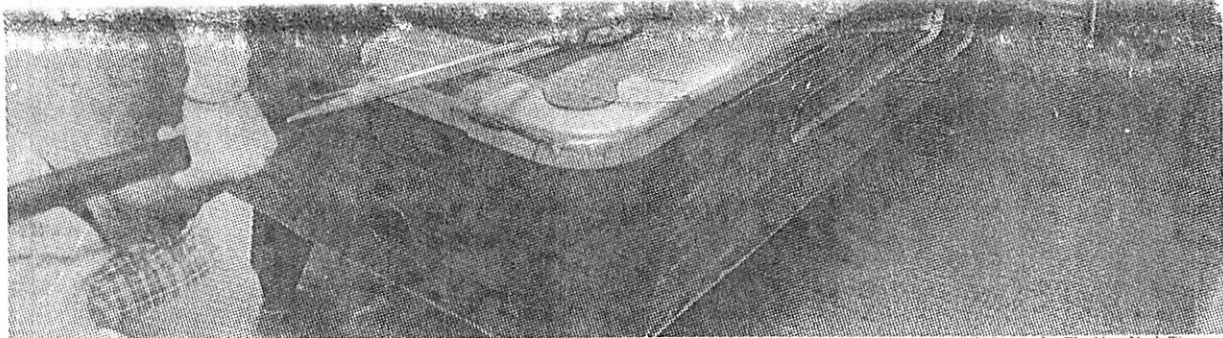
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Randy Davey for The New York Times

An off-duty marine playing pool at Friends Lounge, a gay bar that Camp Lejeune, the largest Marine Corps base on the East Coast, has declared off limits to the installation's 43,000 marines and sailors.

Gay Subculture Thriving in Military

Continued From Page A1

...ine Corps rules.

Because the rules against homosexuals are still in force, gay service members say they are forced to live a stealthy life style. And in an effort to help them deal with the hostility they face, an underground network of gay military groups, as well as a string of bars and clubs, has sprung up to lend support and provide contacts to gay men and lesbians at bases around the country.

The network has evolved in a variety of ways, from exchanging telephone numbers on computer bulletin boards to working together at AIDS-prevention clinics. A few years ago, 20 junior Navy officers formed the San Diego Gay Naval Officers Association, an informal social club. A West Point graduate in Falls Church, Va., Michael W. Gary, recently started an association of gay alumni from the service academy.

Big-City Advantages

In large metropolitan areas, like Washington or Atlanta, gay soldiers say it is easier to blend in and tap gay civilian advocacy and support groups. The majority of the 125 members of American Legion Post 448 in San Francisco, for example, are homosexual and helped support Petty Officer Keith Meinhold of the Navy when he declared his homosexuality on national television earlier this year.

But many installations, particularly Army bases, are in small, rural towns hours from a big city. In these cases, gay soldiers say that dinner parties at friends' houses become the center of their social lives, with occasional trips out of town to clubs where they will not be recognized.

Even in larger cities, gay soldiers must be extremely discreet. "When I was at Fort Bliss in El Paso, I drove six hours to a gay bar in Tucson because I was so paranoid of being seen in town," said Mr. Gary, 29, who served five years in the Army.

Loneliness a Companion

Loneliness can be a constant companion for young service members, struggling to come to terms with their sexual identity. Tim Rump, a 26-year-old former Air Force radio-intercept analyst, was stationed at Wheeler Air Force Base in Hawaii for three years. Mr. Rump said that when he joined the

service he was not sure if he was gay and felt isolated.

"While I associated with people in the office, I was very secretive about what was going on in my own life and didn't make that many close friends," said Mr. Rump, who was discharged from the Air Force when an acquaintance turned him in.

Other gay soldiers and sailors say that tight-knit circles of friends reach out when a member transfers to a new base.

Aid From National Groups

"When I went to San Diego from Norfolk, my friends here called their friends there, and I had a ready-made network when I arrived," said a 34-

The military partially adapts to what it forbids.

year-old Navy lieutenant commander who is now in the Washington area.

In addition, an array of large national organizations, from the American Civil Liberties Union to the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, offer advice and legal counseling to gay members of the military who are threatened with being discharged for homosexuality.

"Don't tattle," advises one pamphlet distributed by the Gay and Lesbian Military Freedom Project, an umbrella group of gay rights organizations. "Giving names may actually make things worse for you. Investigators may try to bluff you into thinking that giving names will help you, when in truth, they may have nothing against you unless you give names."

'We're All a Family'

Other groups, like the Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual Veterans of America, which has 30 chapters around the country, lobby to change national and state laws to gain more rights for homosexuals.

Here in Jacksonville, gay men and lesbians say there are several small groups of gay enlisted personnel and officers. Military regulations prohibit fraternization between enlisted personnel and officers, whether they are homosexual or heterosexual.

One social group of about 30 gay

marines and civilians, called Oasis, serves as a social anchor and a fund-raising organization for some of the area's gay men. New members are closely screened to prevent military investigators posing as gay service members from infiltrating the group. "There's a camaraderie here," said one 30-year-old sergeant who belongs to Oasis. "It's like we're all a family, and we can understand what each other is going through."

Three miles from Camp Lejeune's main gate, Friends Lounge is another social hub for many gay marines. A single-story, white cinder block building emblazoned with a pink triangle and Lambda symbol, both signs of gay pride, the bar is set back from the main road, just behind a service station.

Patrons are checked before a locked door is opened. Inside, Friends Lounge looks like your average bar: two pool tables, a long wooden bar and bar stools, several tables and a dance floor. By 1:30 A.M., the music is rocking, and male and female couples are dancing, embracing or sharing a drink at the bar.

"People come here to meet the crowd," said Gary Hendricks, 25, a homosexual who left the Marine Corps in August 1991 after six years. "If it weren't for this bar, it'd be hard for other gays to know who the community is."

Unofficial Toleration

In the mid-1980's, military investigators and the sheriff would park across from the bar and pull people over when they left, said Danny Leonard, 47, the bar's owner for 10 years.

But since then, as long as Friends Lounge keeps a low profile, he said the Marine Corps had unofficially tolerated its existence and not prosecuted the bar's military clientele.

Mr. Leonard, who does a female impersonator act on Friday nights, said that for the last four years neither the police nor the Marine authorities had bothered him or his patrons. "They can be themselves here and then go back to the base and do their jobs," said Mr. Leonard, who added that 70 percent of his 200 patrons on weekends are in the military.

Still, many homosexuals said that frequenting gay bars was too risky. Tanya Domi, a former Army captain who is a lesbian, said: "Enlisted personnel may go to bars, but it's really dangerous for officers. What if a subordinate sees you there?"