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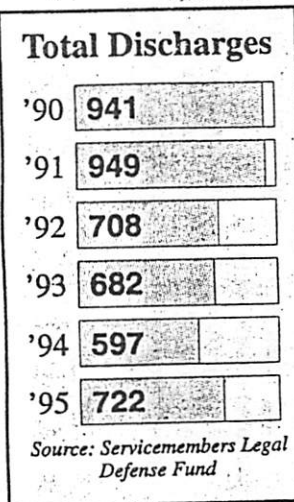
## Secretary of Defense asks for probe of policy abuse

by Wendy Johnson

Defense Secretary William Perry ordered the Pentagon Tuesday to investigate possible abuses of the so-called "don't ask, don't tell" policy on

Gays in the military after a new report revealed a rise in the number of Gay-related discharges, witch-hunts, and harassment in the U.S. military.

The report, compiled by the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network (SLDN), a civilian watchdog group which tracks abuses under the policy, states that overall



Gay-related discharges in 1995 numbered 722—up from 597 (or 21 percent) in 1994. This, the group said, indicates that the current policy, dubbed "don't ask, don't tell, don't pursue, don't harass" in its long form, is "as bad as, if not worse than, its predecessors." SLDN noted the figure of 722 is a four-year high.

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# Defense Secretary orders probe of military policy

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The report, which was released Feb. 27, also counted the number of instances in which military commanders violated the policy while investigating servicemembers under "don't ask, don't tell," a policy which was instituted two years ago. For the period between March 1, 1995, and Feb. 27, 1996, the U.S. military violated the policy 363 times, said the group. In 1994-95, there were 340 violations.

"I have asked my staff to investigate the report very carefully," Perry told reporters, according to wire reports. "We do not accept harassment of any individual in the military. But it's very difficult to deal with anecdotal accounts of harassment."

Michelle M. Benecke, co-executive director of SLDN, said she "welcomes [Perry's] concern and any inquiry he makes based on the report."

"It's exactly what we've recommended," said Benecke. "We'll be pushing our hardest to make sure that the inquiry is taken seriously" by top commanders.

Pentagon spokesperson Kenneth Bacon, who spoke at the regular Pentagon briefing of Tuesday, said DOD does not "have an explanation for this increase" in discharge numbers for Gays but said it may be due to a "technical change" in how the Air Force tabulates such dismissals.

Said Benecke: "Does that mean that they were under-reporting them before? Or were they over-counting? Which is the truth? Even if you take the Air Force dis-

charges out, there is still an increase in discharges. That is very troubling. It in no way gets the Air Force off the hook for wide-ranging fishing expeditions."

At the time the so-called "new" policy on Gays in the military was enacted in February 1994, President Clinton and military leaders hailed it as a way for Gay people to serve in the military—they could serve as long as they didn't divulge their sexual orientation to anyone or engage in sex with a person of the same gender. The SLDN report details four types of violations to that policy, dubbed "don't ask, don't tell, don't pursue, don't harass" in its long form. The violation categories include cases where servicemembers have been asked about their sexual orientation ("don't ask"); cases where servicemembers have been punished for making statements about sexual orientation that are permissible ("don't tell"); cases where servicemembers have been subject to witchhunts or criminal prosecution because of their suspected sexual orientation ("don't pursue"); and cases where harassment is allowed to go on based on perceived sexual orientation ("don't harass").

Under "don't ask," the report documented 77 violations; under "don't tell" 18 were documented; under "don't pursue," 141 were documented; under "don't harass," it documented 127 violations.

The SLDN report said that women, who make up 13 percent of the military's force, were disproportionately targeted for dis-

charge (21 percent of the 722 people discharged were women).

Thirty percent of the 363 military violations of the "don't ask, don't tell" policy involved women. Often, SLDN noted, female servicemembers who reported sexual harassment, rape, or assault ended up having their own sexual behavior investigated instead of their complaints.

Debbie Emery of Spokane, Wash., at a press conference held by SLDN on Tuesday, recounted how her daughter Shannon ended up being investigated for allegedly engaging in same-sex sexual activity after she told her commanding officer that a fellow Army servicemember had threatened to rape her. The military investigated Shannon's sexual behavior after male servicemembers falsely accused her of being a Lesbian, Emery said.

"She was told that if she wrote down a list of 10 to 15 other women who she thought might be Lesbians, her commander would show her leniency and give her an honorable discharge," she said.

Other violations have included physical abuse and death threats, such as a note which read "Die Fag!" and the beating of a soldier who also had a plastic bag placed over his head and was reportedly told, "We don't need queers around here."

## Other findings

The SLDN report also noted:

- A total of 28 documented "witch-

hunts" for service personnel who are Gay.

- Of the 363 total documented violations to the policy, the Navy committed 126; the Air Force, 114; the Army, 101; and the Marine Corps, 22.

- The Navy discharged 260 servicemembers under the Gay policy in 1995; the Air Force 234; the Army 182; and the Marine Corps 46.

- An alarming increase in the number of discharges from the Air Force, which now accounts for 32 percent of all Gay discharges, even though Air Force personnel account for only 26 percent of all active troops. In 1992, it accounted for 16 percent of Gay-related discharges.

- Internal memoranda from the DOD, Navy, and Air Force that "gut the original intent of of the new policy not to pursue Gay servicemembers." An Air Force memo dated Nov. 3, 1994, for example, encourages investigators to interview the family, friends, and even school counselors about the sexual orientation of a servicemember. The Air Force conducted 46 percent of the documented witchhunts last year.

SLDN attorneys document discharges and policy violations that are gathered from servicemembers who contacted the group. SLDN is a legal aid organization for people who are targeted under the policy on Gays in the military. The group advises that servicemembers who come under investigation say nothing before consulting a lawyer. ▼