

Gays mull path in military of future

By Brian McGrory
GLOBE STAFF

Lt. (j.g.) Karen Stupski uttered the words after years of wondering, months of fright and a long night of tears. "I am gay," she hesitantly told her superior officer aboard a Navy supply ship. Six months later, she was discharged.

Now Stupski, and thousands of other gays and lesbians who have been ousted from the military, ponder their fate. They wonder whether they should apply for reinstatement to an institution that not only highlighted, but denigrated, their

homosexuality, or bask from afar in what they believe is a wrong made right.

But for many gays in the armed forces, and the gay community in general, President-elect Bill Clinton's announcement that he would remove the military ban against homosexuals represents far more than vindication and job opportunity. Its removal, they say, would mark the end of blatant discrimination in one of the largest, most influential institutions in the country, the crumbling of a hulking barrier to social acceptance.

"This is going to have a lot of impact in small-town America, where they really look to the mili-

tary as the heart of Americanism and patriotism," said Robb Bettiker, who was ousted from the ROTC program at Harvard in 1989 after he told a superior he was gay. "Allowing gays to serve is to allow gays to be patriotic and American again."

Said David Zeni, a retired Navy lieutenant from Boston who had kept his homosexuality a secret while in the service: "It represents one of the last areas of institutionalized homophobia. If this is overturned, you will see broader acceptance."

Clinton indicated this week that he plans to follow up on a campaign

promise to remove the ban, saying that "the issue ought to be conduct."

Most military experts say that any such order is expected to have virtually no impact on the armed services. Any backlash, they said, would occur only if it is encouraged by military leaders.

"There won't be much of an impact, particularly if military leaders act as leaders," said Lawrence J. Korb, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington and a former assistant secretary of defense under President Reagan. "They are already there. When they are thrown out, it's usually not because of behavior. Their records are stellar."

One issue being debated by the committee drafting the executive order is whether to allow ousted gays to apply for immediate reinstatement.

Stupski and Bettiker said they would consider applying for reinstatement to the military, this time knowing that they need not hide their sexual preferences or fear an abrupt discharge. Other ousted gays around the country have expressed ambivalence.

"If there is an opportunity, I certainly will apply for reinstatement," said Stupski, who works as an environmental and gay activist in Washington. "Finally, our government is going to treat us as equals and not as second-class citizens."

Bettiker, 24, a first-year medical student at Georgetown University, said he foresees reentering the Navy as a physician, but added, "I have to make sure I'm doing it for the right reasons."

Bettiker and Stupski are among approximately 1,500 gays and lesbians ousted from the military each year. Some are investigated for

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I've got only three years in, and I've got my whole life ahead of me."

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Soldier battles the ban on gays Fort Gordon MP facing discharge

By Rebecca McCarthy
STAFF WRITER

When he announced at a September press conference that he was a gay soldier, Spec. Jason Sherik hoped to focus the spotlight not on himself but on the policy that bans gay men and women from the military.

"It says gays can't function in

the military and I knew that just wasn't true," said Specialist Sherik, 22, a California native stationed at Augusta's Fort Gordon. "I've been functioning as an MP for three years, and I went to Saudi and did fine, and I wanted to show publicly that the policy isn't true."

Despite Specialist Sherik's claim of competence and supportive testimony from fellow soldiers — as well as President-elect Bill Clinton's vow to rescind the ban — U.S. Army officers recommended Thursday that Specialist Sherik be honorably discharged.

"I really wasn't surprised," Specialist Sherik said. "Chapter 15 is a set of orders, and it says they must discharge me for saying that I'm gay."

Since his public declaration two months ago, Specialist Sherik has talked often with Keith Meinhold, a sailor dismissed from the Navy for being a homosexual, who returned to duty in California on Thursday. A court ruled Petty Officer Meinhold could continue serving

while his civil suit against the discharge is pending.

"He's real supportive, and he sees the ban ending soon," said Specialist Sherik. The American Civil Liberties Union will file suit for Specialist Sherik if his discharge goes through.

Following in dad's footsteps

He has turned in his weapon and gone from working as an MP to folding linen and logging paperwork in a supply room. Following in his father's footsteps and becoming a military policeman was an ambition Specialist Sherik nurtured from childhood, he said, and giving up law enforcement work was difficult.

"But my parents and my family are behind me 100 percent," he said. Also supporting his decision to go public, he added, is his wife of five months, a longtime friend living near Sacramento, Calif.

"Our marriage is on hold until this is resolved. The reason I got married was to pretend to be something I wasn't," he said, adding that he never met a gay person until two years ago.

"I thought I could lead a straight life. ... Then I began to understand myself and knew these feelings wouldn't go away."

Specialist Sherik said that after his public admission he was a little nervous about returning to Fort Gordon, where he lives in barracks. But the soldiers in his platoon were supportive.

"I've also met some people who tell me I'm crazy for doing this," Specialist Sherik said. "These are people who have spent 15 or 20 years in the military, and it's too much for them to give up to admit they're gay."

are not expected to place personal rights above all. They have always been allowed (particularly when there was a draft) to put military effectiveness above individual needs. To introduce openly gay men and women without serious regard for the consequences is to put what is desirable above what is vital. And once the policy is in place, there is almost no chance it will ever be repealed.

It's tempting to think of Mr. Clinton's plan as a grand experiment from which we will all learn. But unlike with most experiments, the people who want this one don't much care how it turns out.

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practical sense.

Unfortunately, everyone knows that isn't how these things are done, because gay-rights advocates don't see this as a practical issue to be resolved through trial and error, like testing a new tank. They see it as an issue of simple right and wrong. Denying opportunities to homosexuals, in this view, is always intolerable, regardless of whether it fosters military effectiveness. (Of course, there are homophobes who are equally indifferent to practical consequences, arguing that gays should be kept out purely on "moral" grounds.)

But the armed forces, unlike other institutions of government,