

The fear soldiers can't face

Look at these pictures. They are of soldiers, sailors, Marines, guardsmen and airmen, the best and bravest of us, the ones who stand post on the front lines between America and an often threatening world. They are pictures of isolation — one figure usually, two sometimes, but even

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when paired, there is a solitariness to them, an elemental aloneness as the camera captures them lying on beds or climbing stairs, sitting in chairs or facing mirrors, watching television or staring out on an eternal sea.

Look at these pictures.

Look at what isn't there, at what the images withhold. You see the figures. But always, a hand is raised, a shadow intervenes, a head is turned, the top of the body is cropped away, and you are denied what you instinctively seek: identity. You are denied their faces.

What's going on here? Don't ask, don't tell.

That is, of course, the dying, archaic policy that prohibits gay and lesbian military personnel from serving openly. It is also the name of a portfolio by Jeff Sheng, a 30-year-old L.A. photographer, documenting the presence of, and the pressures upon, this sexual minority in the U.S. military. There is something sharply poignant in these images of those who do dangerous work most of us never have, make sacrifices most of us

never will, yet are forced to hide their faces for fear of what it would mean if we knew who they are.

Look at these pictures. It's as easy as clicking jeffsheng.com. Or you can buy the portfolio in book form at dadtbook.com. Look at the pictures, and ask yourself: What would "you" be without your face?

It is a pregnant question in light of the fact that one often hears opponents of gay rights advise gay people to withhold their true faces. They'd have nothing against homosexuals, they say, if gays would just stop "flaunting" it. They never take into account that a heterosexual "flaunts" her identity whenever she leans in close to her boyfriend on a street corner or puts his picture on her desk. It is these small liberties, these tiny ways of saying, "I am," that we deny gay and lesbian service personnel. And then, having done so, we send them out to risk their lives fighting. For freedom.

Sheng says this project grows out of an earlier portfolio called Fearless — photos of "out" gay and lesbian student athletes. "Service members who were closeted had seen this project online. A lot of them were athletes in high school. I would get these e-mails saying, 'I used to be a closeted football player, baseball player. Now I'm in the military. Now is a time in my life when I would like to come out, but I can't, because of Don't Ask, Don't Tell.'"

They asked if he had ever considered doing a portfolio of people like them. The result was this stirring work that has been featured everywhere from the *New York Times* to the

Los Angeles Times to CNN to the BBC.

Sheng, who describes himself as "a part of" the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) community, says, "I think oftentimes the voices of people who we hear about on this policy have all been discharged. A lot of times, there is a silence from those who are still in the military. They have no voice and they can't speak out. I've been able to give them this strange outlet in which they can still speak but not be seen. ... It's empowering to many of them. They won't lose their jobs by doing this, but they're still showing the world, 'I exist' and I am a person to be reckoned with.'"

It is, you would think, an elemental thing every human being has a right to say. But to look at these pictures is to realize that not every human being does. And that should break your heart.

After all, the answer to the question is obvious. What would you be without your face?

Unwhole.

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