

National News

The few, the proud, the Gay

Sgt. Justin Elzie talks about his four years as a Gay Marine

by Viet Dinh

Marine Sgt. Justin Elzie once overheard a staff sergeant say, "All fags should be shot." So when Elzie, a few days later, identified himself as Gay before a national television audience, he was justifiably concerned with what that sergeant's reaction would be to his announcement.

"I worried about it all weekend long," says Elzie. "When I got back to work on Monday, he came up to me and smiled. He said, 'I'm so sorry about that statement.' I think my coming out opened his eyes."

That was the first week in Elzie's four years of serving as an openly Gay Marine at Camp Lejeune, N.C.

Elzie came out as a Gay soldier on Friday, Jan. 29, 1993, when he appeared on the *ABC Nightly News*. He had originally planned to take part in an early retirement program and leave the military that spring. But after announcing his sexual orientation on national television, the Marine Corps removed him from the program and began immediate discharge procedures that would have left him without pension benefits.

He filed a lawsuit in U.S. District Court challenging the discharge, and the court issued an order that kept him on active duty for the duration of his lawsuit.

On Feb. 20 of this year, Elzie settled his lawsuit with the U.S. Justice Department. The openly Gay Marine has been discharged with full pension benefits and a \$30,000 early retirement bonus — the one he had qualified for before he came out as Gay.

Of his four years of service as an openly Gay Marine, Elzie recalled only a few anti-Gay incidents — shouted slurs here and there, and the time his barracks windows were smeared with excrement.

"I've never had my life threatened," says Elzie. "Harassment was subtle, in people's attitudes."

He says the most hostility came in an investigation, when base commanders interrogated his roommate and co-workers.

"That was the worst form of harassment I encountered," he says.

But there were triumphs, too, including the time a lance corporal — a "big Rush Limbaugh fan," as Elzie describes him — approached him to say, "You really changed my view on the subject" of Gays in the military. Or the time another Marine wished him luck in the presence of other Marines.

"It's one of those boosts you need when you're feeling down," says Elzie.

But Elzie's overall struggle against the military's policy and attitudes toward Gays cannot be easily gauged as win or lose.

"There were a lot of emotions involved [with being openly Gay]. I knew that I had to be better or people would use it against me. That caused a lot of pressure."

Elzie, 1989 winner of Marine of the Year award for his battalion, says he knew what he was doing all along when he decided to come out publicly.

"I was trying to make a difference," says Elzie, looking back on why he came out. "I wanted to show that Gays can do and are doing quality work in the military."

Elzie came out on the same day that President Clinton promised to lift the ban on Gays in the military, but heard Clinton's announcement only after the show had been taped.

"So," says Elzie, "I thought that my coming out wasn't going to be that big of a deal." He didn't foresee, however, the president backing down on his promise, instead implementing the compromise policy known as "don't ask, don't tell."

Elzie says coming out made a difference for him in personal terms. Before coming out, he felt frustrated.

"At work, I couldn't discuss where I went out or I couldn't talk about my friends," he says.

"It's a detriment to the [armed] forces that people

have to stay in the closet. [Closeted servicemembers] expend themselves to make sure that no one finds out; it uses up too much time and energy. I noticed that when I came out, a weight was lifted off my shoulders and my work improved considerably."

Being openly Gay didn't affect his daily routine at all, he says.

"It wasn't an issue," says Elzie. "Once people got to know who I was, they ignored my sexual orientation."

Elzie acknowledges that because of the court order, his situation was unique.

"I had an advantage over closeted people, because I had no stress to look over my shoulder — I had freedom."

"It was cool. Some people called me 'the token



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Gay person.' As younger people come up through the Corps, they realize that it doesn't matter."

Reactions from his superiors, however, were mixed. "Some couldn't deal with it at all. [The commanding officer] told me he had a 'whole laundry list' of people who he thought was Gay, and after I was reinstated he told me, 'You'll never make it.'"

Elzie says some commanders avoided him; others adopted a "don't care, don't pursue" attitude toward him.

"After the hoopla died down, a lot of people just accepted it. The attitude in command was 'He's going to be here; might as well get used to it.'"

Not all officers looked upon him unfavorably; his fitness reports often recommended him for promotion — only to have his promotion rejected by reviews higher up in the chain of command.

"I'd hit a glass ceiling," he says. "Even though I was still in the Corps, they were going to make sure I wasn't promoted."

On his final fitness report, an officer noted that Elzie "demonstrated the leadership abilities that are needed to lead the Marine Corps into the 21st century."

"The most ironic part," Elzie laughs, "is that I won't be there for the 21st century."▼

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by Clint Steib

by Wendy Johnson

Candidate loses race for county executive post

MADISON, Wis. — Mark Wagner lost his bid to become the nation's first openly Gay county executive when he placed second among six candidates who ran in Dane County's primary election on Feb. 18.

Wagner in 1982 became Wisconsin's first openly Gay elected official (and one of the first openly Gay elected officials in the country) when he came out while serving as the Dane County Board of Supervisors. Wagner was later re-elected.

Anti-Gay group loses bid for recognition

UNIVERSITY PARK, Pa. — Pennsylvania State University's student supreme court on Feb. 16 denied official recognition to an anti-Gay group, the *Philadelphia Gay News* reported.

The board ruled 5-0 that the group, Students Reinforcing Adherence in General Heterosexual Tradition (STRAIGHT), would likely be "detrimental to the university community." STRAIGHT has appealed to the student organization appeals board.

Teacher in trouble for 'het test'

NORTHBOROUGH, Mass. — School officials are investigating high school teacher Doug Matthews after a parent complained that the "heterosexuality questionnaire" he gave to a first-year high school history class was not appropriate, *Bay Windows* reported.

Matthews said the survey was meant to challenge students' assumptions about sexual orientation. One question was, "What do you think caused your heterosexuality?"

Library moves exhibit after complaints

LANCASTER, Pa. — After two months of debate, an exhibit featuring Gay artists, writers, and activists will be displayed at Lancaster County Library this month.

Library officials removed the display from a street-level window in De-

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