

INTRODUCTION

Robert Stout peered through his night vision goggles at the road ahead. He was manning the m-2 Browning machine gun atop a u.s. Army Humvee. The Tigris River was not far off, and neither was the safety of his base. It had been a long night already. Stout's platoon of army engineers had been sent to investigate an abandoned truck by the side of the road. They were checking for IEDs—Improvised Explosive Devices—which have caused many of the casualties in the Iraq War. But this time, it was just an abandoned truck. On the way back to base, as they passed the high walls lining the narrow road, Stout's unit was ambushed. "The only thing I really remember is a loud flash off to my left side, pretty much the loudest noise I've ever heard in my life," Stout recalls. "After that, I was blinded by the explosion, which in the night vision goggles was insane." Wounded in the ambush, Stout received a Purple Heart and eventually a promotion to sergeant. After he returned to Iraq, Stout had a new set of priorities. First, he wanted to make sure that "his guys"—the young men he now led—made it home safe and sound. Second, he was no longer going to hide the fact that he was gay.

When "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was implemented as a political compromise in 1993 and 1994, it legislated the silence of gay and lesbian soldiers like Robert Stout who served on active duty and in the reserves.¹ Though gays and lesbians have long served this country in the military, their official exclusion mandated silence and secrecy about their sexuality. In one sense, the debates about "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" shattered this silence, making public discussions about sexuality central to considerations of military policy in the 1990s. Gay rights advocates welcomed such public debates, but the focus on sexuality in the service created frustrating and frightening situations for many gays and lesbians in uniform. Because military policies before and after the implementation of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" necessitated silence, the men and women most directly affected by these policies were unable to testify openly about their impact. Yet this was more than political silence; it was personal. In day-to-day interactions with friends, superiors, and even family members, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" required a skillful navigation of silence (and often deception) to hide homosexuality. "What did you do last weekend?" or "Are you seeing anyone?" might seem like innocent questions, but for gay and lesbian military personnel, they took on the weight of interrogation even in friendly conversa-

tion. Obviously, such conversations called for more than silence. They often required the creation of fake heterosexual identities—the picture of the “boy-friend” on an office desk or the female “companion” to attend base dances and dinners. Given the political and personal consequences of the policy, the legal scholar Tobias Wolff believes that the silence imposed by the law should raise questions about the First Amendment right to free speech. “Indeed,” Wolff argues, “the striking bluntness of the policy in restricting the speech of gay servicemembers renders the principles associated with the First Amendment exceptionally visible.”²

I argue that, historically, the silence concerning gays in the military has led to a collective amnesia about the patriotic service and courageous sacrifices of homosexual troops. In this case, the politics of military service are also the politics of memory. If we forget that gay and lesbian Americans have served their country, then we as a nation are much less likely to view them as full citizens, deserving of civil rights and equal protection of the law. Oral history provides one way to break this silence, to “ask and tell” about the military careers of gay and lesbian soldiers and to allow these veterans to speak for themselves about the current military policy.

In 2000 the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress launched the Veterans History Project (VHP), one of the most ambitious volunteer oral history projects this country has ever seen, rivaling even the massive interview project with ex-slaves undertaken by the Works Progress Administration during the Great Depression. To date, the VHP has collected more than 25,000 personal narratives of veterans who served from World War I to the Iraq War. Interviews for the project have led to a book titled *Voices of War*, a Library of Congress exhibit called *From the Home Front to the Front Lines*, and even a play at the American Place Theater in New York.³

Gay veterans groups have partnered with the Library of Congress to document the stories of veterans who have long been denied recognition in other forums, but interviews with gay and lesbian veterans have not yet been placed in a historical context.⁴ Interviewers working with American Veterans for Equal Rights (AVER) have recorded the stories of dozens of gay and lesbian veterans, but this only scratches the surface of the estimated 1 million homosexual veterans in this country. Of course, the estimated 65,000 gay and lesbian personnel serving on active duty and in the reserves are unable to share their stories and their identities as a result of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.”⁵

As one of the volunteer interviewers for the Veterans History Project, I spoke with more than fifty veterans, and about half of them tell their stories in this book. These interviewees—among whom are white, Latino, African

American, and Native American veterans—offer a wide spectrum of perspectives on gay and lesbian experiences in the military. Some of these individuals were drafted and served only during wartime. Others were volunteers who made the military their career. There are privates and petty officers, generals and admirals. There are combat heroes recognized with Bronze Stars and Purple Hearts, and there are soldiers who faced dishonorable discharges simply because of their sexuality. After leaving the military, these men and women became teachers, doctors, computer technicians, lawyers, preachers, and construction workers. The range and diversity of these stories reveals that the experiences of gay and lesbian soldiers are as varied and valorous as those of their straight comrades.

In the research for *Ask and Tell*, I found that I was standing on the shoulders of some passionate scholars, journalists, and activists who did pioneering work in this field. Most instructive and inspirational for my own research was the work of Allan Bérubé, whose *Coming Out under Fire* was the seminal book on gays in the military during World War II, and of Randy Shilts, who covered gays in the military from the 1950s to the early 1990s in *Conduct Unbecoming*. Mary Ann Humphrey, Steve Zeeland, and Zsa Zsa Gershick compiled powerful earlier volumes of interviews. Sociologists, political scientists, and legal theorists have produced most of the remaining scholarship on gays in the military. The best of this recent academic work has come from Aaron Belkin and other fellows at the Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Their writing and research has laid an excellent foundation for the interviews in this book.⁶

Although this book has benefited greatly from earlier works on gays in the military, it aims to fill several gaps in the existing literature. First, this is the only oral history project to include the stories of veterans from World War II to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Second, with so many combat veterans involved in this project, it will be difficult for critics to disparage these veterans by saying that they were not battle-tested or that they are somehow atypical American soldiers. Third, this book is the first to include interviews with both service academy alumni and flag officers. These gay officers rose to the highest ranks of the U.S. armed forces by keeping their identities secret (sometimes for decades). They have finally broken their long silence to talk about their service, their sexuality, and the evolution of military policy. Because of who these men and women are it was important that every single one of the interviews in this book be on the record. Anonymity in previous studies and oral history collections has undercut the credibility of the sources and, ironically, reinforced the hidden nature of gay service and sacrifice. Finally, and most important, this

book provides a forum for the interviewees to give their own testimony about the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy and its legacies for the u.s. military.

Though it may not have been the original intention of Congress in establishing this undertaking, the Veterans History Project is allowing gay veterans to speak out. In their interviews, these veterans talk about the sacrifices that they made to defend this country and about the discrimination they faced in uniform and out. As an oral historian, I feel an obligation to “ask and tell,” to uncover the hidden transcripts that are left out of recorded history. In this case, the stories are not simply left out; they are silenced by official federal policy. How wonderful then that an oral history project supported by the federal government has provided the impetus to collect these personal narratives.

It is my hope that this book provides evidence that may someday help lift the ban on the military service of openly gay and lesbian Americans. At the very least, this volume documents courage that should not be forgotten. These interviews are extraordinary stories, but I hope that readers will come to realize that they are stories told by ordinary Americans, men and women who simply did their duty and served their country.