

Conduct Unbecoming: Gays and Lesbians in the Us Military

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The bestselling author of *And the Band Played On* follows with a book of even greater power and sweep as he investigates the situation of gays in the military over the past three decades, revealing for the first time that some of the most celebrated soldiers in American history were homosexual (including the Father of the United States Army).

Conduct Unbecoming: Gays and Lesbians in the Us Military Details

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From Reader Review Conduct Unbecoming: Gays and Lesbians in the Us Military for online ebook

Peggy says

This is a big book--almost 750 pages--that shows the impact of anti-gay military policies upon the lives and careers of men and women who served our country honorably, some heroically. This book is an excellent argument for the repeal of "don't ask, don't tell" and the right for service members to be open about their sexual orientation. The evidence gathering against men and women (who need only be friends with a gay person to be removed from service) resemble the way intelligence was gathered against members of the French Resistance during German occupation. The interrogation methods were uncannily similar to those listed in the medieval witch-hunters manual *Maleus Maleficarum*. How could our country be so stupid? Thank you, President Obama, for strengthening our country's security by repealing DADT.

Anne says

This is an "old" book, first published in 1993, but I'm in no position to say if things have improved in the US military in the intervening years. Shilts' brings a journalist's eye to the investigation and history of how homosexuals have been treated in the various branches of the services but a storyteller's heart. And what stories these are. The book is heart breaking. Men and women who have taken an oath and are prepared to die for their country being harassed and subjected to appalling treatment. And – as Shilts states – “The point of the military’s regulations was not to actually rid the armed forces of all gays, but to allow the military to say they ejected all gays.”

The double standards are well captured here about who was targeted and how unjust the practices were – and in some cases bizarre. Women who had copies of *Vogue* magazine were asked if they “ogled” the models... The use of intimidation and coercion was widespread and women were unlikely to succeed... “If they are successful, they are suspect for not being womanly enough; if they fail they are harassed for not being man enough to do the job.”

Shilts clearly shows that “the presence of gay men – especially so many who are thoroughly competent for military service – calls into question everything that manhood is supposed to mean.”

This is a book full of heroes and will be useful to anyone studying LGBTI history and anyone who knew a gay service man or women who served during the period. The stories are part of a strong book told in chronological order through a sad time in American history. As I say, I don't know if things have improved that much.

I was given a free copy of this book via Netgalley in return for an honest review.

Alan says

With the political season (i.e. U.S. presidential campaign) in full swing and annoying the hell out of me I

thought I should deviate from my usual fiction reading to something more challenging and political. Ergo Randy Shilts excellent history of gays and lesbians in the U.S. military.

For those of us who want to believe in the ideals of the country I was born and live in this book will challenge those beliefs. Shilts chronicles nearly 60 years of military excess and witch hunts to kick gays and lesbians out of the military. In most of these cases there is no misconduct or security risk. All these people are guilty of is being different.

Instead they are subjected to interrogation techniques that the military says is approved, but would be 100% illegal if conducted by a police officer. The approved interrogation techniques show a path that would lead to the current abuses in Iraq. The Navy Investigative Service is portrayed as bunglers who spend more time going after gays and lesbians than criminals and drug dealers within the Navy. And, the NIS admits this they specialize in going after gays and lesbians.

The cost to taxpayers goes into the millions, and careers and lives are ruined. Just the mere accusation of being gay derails a career. Many of the soldiers had outstanding ratings. I wanted to believe, albeit naively, that the U.S. military promoted and believed in being a meritocracy. To say the least this book dashed those beliefs.

To argue that it is the military's stated policy and written regulations that up to 1990 (the book's ending) that gays and lesbians are barred from service is a farce. The policy had a history of being selectively enforced, especially during times of war.

As he showed in *And the Band Played On* the late Shilts is an excellent journalist. I think *And the Band Played On* is better written and more engrossing. *Conduct Unbecoming* is more like some of the history texts I read in university and can be a bit of a slog at times.

Beth says

So I read this book not necessarily because the topic particularly interests me, but because I read *And the Band Played On* and fell in love with Shilt's journalistic style. He is one of the many people our society lost because of AIDS and working my way through his three books has brought to my mind again and again that it is a damn shame he wasn't able to continue his work. At the time of his death, he was working on a book about homosexuality in the Catholic church. Which I think would probably have been really interesting, not to mention prescient considering some of the issues regarding priest celibacy that have come about in the past decade or so.

When I started reading *Conduct Unbecoming*, I wrongly assumed that the whole gays-in-the-military issue was pretty minor as far as how many service people had been affected by the draconian policies of the U.S. military. Shilts disabused me of that notion early on. As many as 2000 people per year were discharged because of homosexuality. This, of course, doesn't count the many more thousands "outed" by the gay purges who took other discharges so they wouldn't have dishonorable on their permanent record.

The stories Shilts tells about the gay purges are some of the most frightening and call to mind not necessarily the McCarthy era, but the Arthur Miller play *The Crucible*, which of course is an allegory for McCarthyism. But many of the stories are reminiscent of *The Crucible* because the military seemed to have a habit of bringing in people suspected of being homosexuals and then forcing them or coercing them to reveal the

names of other homosexuals in order to avoid or lessen punishment. Basically, it's the method of "if you say this person is X, then we will leave you alone about also being X." I kept thinking of Abigail screaming about seeing other girls in Salem "with the devil" as a way to avoid her own uncomfortable punishment.

I was impressed and enthralled by how Shilts contextualized the lesbian purges as essentially being about gender. As more and more women chose to enter the military, the more men had major problems with serving alongside women. In retaliation, some segments of the military population, because they couldn't evict women from being in the military simply for being women, instead tried and succeeded in evicting quite a lot of women for being lesbians. Some were lesbians, some actually weren't, but one gets the definite impression that it really didn't matter as long as the women were being "separated" (the military's euphemistic term for firing someone).

Some other wow-I-would-never-have-known-this moments:

The Navy has historically been the least accommodating and least understanding about including women and homosexuals. The Navy has carried out the military's gay policies with the most fervor of any branch and they are also the most reluctant to allow women to join and achieve promotion.

The Army and Air Force developed, sort of by fluke, some really forward thinking policies on HIV/AIDS. They decided that no one could be fired because they had HIV or AIDS and that the military would provide them health care. This was in 1987, when it wasn't even until 1992 when civilians were assured they would not be fired for the disease.

There are (were) some incredibly honorable and brave people in the military. Some of the women Shilts writes about, in particular, who were threatened with losing their jobs, children, families, everything, still would not turn on the other lesbians they knew in the military and refused to "name names." Or Copy Berg's father, who also served but came to his son's defense when the army began proceedings to throw Copy out. Copy's father, who was a retired higher-up type guy, lost his own military retirement because of his support for his son. This is the kind of thing that always gets me in stories like this -- even though humans have some major flaws, occasionally we can do some pretty awesome and superhuman things.

AndPeggy says

Thorough, engaging, and well-researched. The book examines the hurdles and persecution faced by lesbian, gay, and bisexual members of the armed forces prior to the implementation of Don't Ask, Don't Tell.

Christopher Sutch says

Another book that causes me to question the ability of portions of the government to abide by their own laws, regulations, and institutions. Since, evidently, the armed forces have a fine history of suborning perjury and engaging in dishonorable tactics for personal reasons, this book calls into question the wisdom of allowing military tribunals to have jurisdiction over anything, let alone over military matters.

Jill Mackin says

Excellent history. I was investigated when I was in the US Army in 1986. A horrid experience. I was

honorably discharged in 1987.

Ian Wood says

This is the complete review as it appears at my blog dedicated to reading, writing (no 'rithmetic!), movies, & TV. Blog reviews often contain links which are not reproduced here, nor will updates or modifications to the blog review be replicated here. Graphic and children's reviews on the blog typically feature two or three images from the book's interior, which are not reproduced here.

Note that I don't really do stars. To me a book is either worth reading or it isn't. I can't rate it three-fifths worth reading! The only reason I've relented and started putting stars up there is to credit the good ones, which were being unfairly uncredited. So, all you'll ever see from me is a five-star or a one-star (since no stars isn't a rating, unfortunately).

I rated this book WORTHY!

This, another success from the author of *And the Band Played On* is not a very original title. B&N lists over thirty books with this same title, but this is undoubtedly the fattest of them all, weighing in at 969 pages in Bluefire Reader on the iPad. Ninety of these are notes, references, and so on, because this book is researched with the precision of the crease in Marine dress uniform pants, and like those pants, it stands out sharply despite being over twenty years old. The fear and retribution depicted in this book still goes on today, although not necessarily in the same places it went on in these stories.

The beautifully written story follows a host of different people, men and women, and the most outstanding thing that they have in common isn't the military or the fact that they are homosexuals, but the fact that there was nothing short of a witch hunt arrayed against them - a witch hunt which was in many ways more terrifying than anything conducted by the church in the Middle Ages. It was terrifying most of all because this happened within the last forty years.

The Conduct Unbecoming of the title has nothing to do with the fact that there were gays and lesbians in the military. It's the fact of what the military did to these people who served their country and had exemplary records - exemplary that is, so the armed forces would have it, save for the fact that they loved someone of their own gender. The military is a boys' club. Always has been. Even today the stranglehold that MENTality has on it is fighting tunic and nail to maintain its death grip. These men who are trained to bond with other men and to fear nothing actually fear two things and two things only: other men who are not like them, and women, who are completely alien to their way of thinking.

Shilts walks us through a brief history of gays in the military, including dipping into stories from the revolutionary war, although he doesn't seem to have understood that the word 'intercourse' had an entirely different meaning in 1779 than it commonly bore in 1979!

That aside, the way these stories would, if you'll pardon the phrase, drag me in and hold my attention was remarkable. I'd tell myself I would just read a couple of pages before bedtime and an hour later I'd still be reading, wide awake, my eyes opened by what had been going on. I don't doubt that there are terrorists who have received better treatment than the gay and lesbian community in the military got during the seventies and eighties.

If everyone loves a parade, then these stories are a parade of one name after another who first stood up for their country and then were forced to stand up for their rights or have their lives ruined by yet another paranoid military pogrom where full-blown McCarthyism resurrected its ugly head and this time had nothing to do with any communist threat - or any threat at all for that matter. Some reviewers have argued that this book is way too long, but the truth is that it isn't long enough to do justice to these people. However, it will do for now. I recommend it.

Jess Candela says

I remember this as an intense and painful book. I read it around 1993 or 1994, at a time when I knew several gays and straights in (or formerly in) the military and DADT had just become law. I imagine it would be very different to read it now, post-DADT, but probably still intense and painful.

George Seaton says

This fascinating, disturbing journey into the institutionalized discrimination against gay men and lesbian women in the American military is significant because it was written before DADT was instituted in 1993. Although the book was published that same year, 1993, the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy had yet to become a reality. This is significant because there are some who view DADT as the particular watershed in our history that defines discrimination against gay/lesbian Soldiers, Marines and Sailors. As Shilts chronicles--largely through the words of those affected--this insidious practice began a very, very long time before the advent of DADT. This is a good read, especially now that there is the possibility gay/lesbian folk who wish to serve their country with honor, will be able to do so without the fear their sexuality will preclude that honorable service.

Simon Fletcher says

I am sad, in many ways to finish this book because of the realisation that this is the last book Shilts wrote before his own untimely death and that it was sadly in many ways an unfinished project. Only in recent years has the policy on gays serving in the military been rightly cast down. I have to wonder therefore what Shilts would have made of the fact that it still took another 20 years for it to happen. I would heartily recommend this book though I have to say it does wonder a little from its own brief.

Freyja Vanadis says

This book is simply way too long. Shilts could've written a hard-hitting, effective book at half the size of this 700+ page book that was grueling to get through. It's almost as if he was determined to write about every single case of military person who was tossed out for being gay. Information overload.

Anne says

An exhausting look at the mistreatment of gays in the military. You will never trust the government again.

Erik says

I was certainly impressed with Shilts's reportorial and narrative skills when I read his biography of iconic gay political pioneer Harvey Milk a few short years back, but I had little idea just how massively well-researched and near flawlessly penned his history of gays in the military was until I spent several weeks recently devouring every single one of its seven hundred-plus pages. For those who complain about gays serving in the U.S. military, and especially for those who argue gays never really have, they need to be forced to read this and finally admit that the world is not flat, and that the Earth does not revolve around the sun.

Shilts starts out his narrative detailing the lives of Major General Stueben and Stephen Decatur, both of whom served in the U.S. Army during the American Revolution and in the Union during the Civil War, respectively. And both of whom were gay. Needless to say, rumors of their sexuality surfaced and effectively cut them off from the honor and respect that they deservedly earned for their patriotic efforts. All of which sets the stage for the remainder of his book, as Shilts recounts dozens of other patriotic gays and lesbians who willingly and honorably served their country, only to be gossiped about, harassed, and outright rejected for often imagined gross indecencies. He also reveals the systemic hypocrisy of the powers-that-be (i.e. "Do as I say, not as I do"), as they hide behind and perpetuate the pseudoscience and false assumptions regarding homosexuality and its supposed detriment to unit cohesion and their twisted, hypocritical sense of morality.

If you've ever wondered if the supposed justification that unit cohesion is endangered by gays serving in the military, consider Shilts summative observation:

"In conflict after conflict – from World War II to Desert Storm – the paradox has persisted: during World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and a generation after Vietnam, when the United States went to war again in 1991. The gay exclusion policies were enacted ostensibly to ensure good order and discipline in the military. At no time is order and discipline more essential than in combat. History also demonstrates that at no time are the regulations banning homosexuality more routinely sidestepped."

In short, more gays serve in the military (tens of thousands, for all you who have no idea just how many do) during war time than in peacetime. So all arguments supporting a ban against gays in the military is yet again without any reasonably justification.

Further proof of the ridiculously assumption and failure to ensure due process in the military is found in the double-standard applied to anyone suspected of being homosexual (real or perceived):

"...normal rules of justice did not apply; that homosexuals had no rights, only punishments; that no expense was too great to deter the enforcement of the ban on homosexuals; that merely "associating with a known homosexual" could be grounds for punishment; that it was the natural order of things that homosexuals just disappeared."

Sadly, the recent reporting of the continuing rate of gay teen suicides – which has been around since way

before even I was a teenager two decades ago – has shown that this sentiment is still alive and well, not just in the U.S. military, but also in our society at large. Thankfully, there is an equally as strong backlash against targeting gays and lesbians that is finally standing up to this destructive form of bullying, scape-goating, fear-mongering, and outright hatred. (Nazi Germany would have welcomed the efforts of Clint McCance and his ilk.)

And if you're still in doubt about gays serving in the military, but you are conservative/fiscally-minded, consider the billions of dollars that have been spent (tabulated by the Government Accountability Office) over the entire course of the gay exclusion policy since the early part of the twentieth-century up until the publication of Shilts's book, all of which was spent to investigate real and/or perceived homosexuals. I cannot think of a more pathetic and useless waste of tax-payer dollars. Think of all the infrastructure investments and services that could have been provided instead.

Facts are facts, and Shilts provides them in minute detail, and they are all backed up by nearly forty pages of footnoted references. History cannot be denied, no matter how much the bigoted homophobes close their eyes, ears, and mouths to the truth. History is not, and never has been, on their side. Here's hoping that this current lame-duck Congress can delegate Don't Ask, Don't Tell to the dustbin of history before the Republican majority, with their select Tea Party colleagues, vote to waste more Government time and money defending a pointless and unconstitutional policy.

Kat says

Randy Shilts's non-fiction has a very personal tinge to it, making the people he talks about as real to the reader as any fictional character. (If you know what I mean.) This book highlights the unfairness of American military policy on gays and lesbians, and there were several times I had to put the book down and pet some kittens just to recover. It was depressing, even more so because of its veracity, but extremely interesting. I learned a lot of things about the military, not even connected to gays, and a lot of things about AIDS, not connected to the military. And a lot of things about people.

Good stuff.
