

## GAY SOLDIERS: THEY WATCHED THEIR STEP

By DORIS KERNS GOODWIN

Review of :

COMING OUT UNDER FIRE

The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two.

By Allan Berube.

In recent weeks, the Supreme Court refused to consider two constitutional challenges to the military's policy of barring homosexuals from service. The first case involved a male Navy officer, the second a female Army sergeant, both of whom were discharged for displaying "a propensity to engage in homosexual conduct." In neither case did the military present evidence of such conduct; the "propensity" alone was considered sufficient grounds for discharge. In the wake of the passions generated by this controversial issue, Allan Berube's historical account of gay soldiers in World War II, "Coming Out Under Fire," provides a timely and valuable perspective.

In theory, during the war, homosexuals were supposed to be screened out at induction centers on the grounds that they would make poor combat soldiers and that their presence would threaten discipline and morale. (The same rationale was applied at the outset against blacks as well.) The screening devices typically used with male inductees included observation of female bodily characteristics and mannerisms, answers to questions regarding occupational choice (men who checked off interior decorator or dancer were immediately suspect) and responses to the question: How do you like girls?

But in practice, Mr. Berube argues, since the pressure to meet unfilled quotas was so great, the examinations were often perfunctory. As a result, hundreds of thousands of homosexuals, perhaps a million or more, made their way into the armed forces, serving in all branches of the military - as tank drivers and clerks, riflemen and bombardiers, messmen and gunnery officers.

"Coming Out Under Fire," the product of more than 10 years of research, of digging into archives and interviewing scores of veterans, is the story of how - out of necessity - the military coped with this large influx of homosexuals, and how gay men and women coped with the military. It is the contention of Mr. Berube, a historian of homosexuals in the United States, that the majority of gay male soldiers experienced an unexpected, if somewhat uneasy, acceptance by fellow soldiers so long as they refrained from aggressively pursuing uninterested men. Inspired by the necessity of living together in close quarters, heterosexuals developed "their own pragmatic ethic of tolerance: 'I won't bother you if you don't bother me.'" To be sure, some gay soldiers were harassed and abused by straight soldiers, but if a homosexual performed a useful function in his unit, that generally took precedence over the suspicion or even the knowledge that he was gay.

Necessity also played a role in relaxing the policy of discharging homosexual soldiers if they were caught having sex. Whereas in World War I, solely on the discovery of a love letter written by another soldier, a young Navy man was convicted of sodomy and sentenced to 15 years in prison, the more common practice in World War II was to send offenders to sick bay, where psychiatrists and other doctors attempted to distinguish "experimenters" from "confirmed perverts." Since the long public trials of the type conducted during World War I were considered too costly in time and energy, a simpler procedure was adopted: the "experimenters" were generally returned to duty, while the "perverts" were subjected to administrative discharge. "There was a war on," said Ted Allenby, a gay Marine who fought at Iwo Jima. "Who in the hell is going to worry about this . . .?"

The book is at its best in describing the experience of gay soldiers who had never admitted, perhaps even to themselves, that they were gay. Thrown together with their buddies in secluded places, with the constraints of small-town mores and family life left behind, many homosexual soldiers came to terms for the first time in their lives with their sexual

inclinations. (Interestingly, the recruits who had acknowledged they were gay before entering the service were often the most reluctant to have sex; their fear of exposure was more finely tuned.) Although Mr. Berube's main focus is on gay men, he also deals provocatively with the experience of homosexuals in the Women's Army Corps. He makes the assertion that "butch" women - identified by mannish builds, close-cropped hair and the absence of makeup - occupied a more respected status within the armed forces than did effeminate men, since aggressive, masculine traits more comfortably fit the stereotype of the good soldier. Indeed, he says, such women were more likely to assume responsibility and become the leaders of their units.

Mr. Berube vividly portrays the painful choices many veterans had to confront, once the war was over, in deciding whether to commit themselves to heterosexual marriage and children or to follow a homosexual life. A great many veterans who had formed their first gay relationships during the war chose marriage and raised families. Others, believing their identity as homosexuals to be integral to their lives, continued their gay existence and settled in the cities. A handful began to speak out. Organizations formed. The early sounds of opposition to discrimination and persecution against homosexuals began to be heard not long after the war was over.

Mr. Berube tells his story with a clear and remarkably evenhanded voice. At times the absence of modern social science techniques left this reader wishing for more conclusive evidence, and at times I wished the author had opted to look in depth at the life stories of five or six veterans instead of painting a broad canvas. Nevertheless, particularly in the context of today's debate over who has the right to fight and die for his or her country, "Coming Out Under Fire" is well worth reading.

## QUEER AMERICA

A People's GLBT History of the United States

Vicki L. Eaklor

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A major development of postwar GLBT history will be the application of identity politics to the situation of homosexuals. In the first half of the 20th century there were certainly queer Americans, and though driven from public spaces they had once been a noticeable presence in urban culture, at least entertaining if not completely accepted. After the First World War Henry Gerber tried to do what was possible only after the Second: organize homosexuals in order to fight prejudice against them and claim their place in society. No sooner had World War II ended, in fact, than the "first major gay membership organization in the United States" was formed in New York City, the Veterans' Benevolent Association (1945-1954).<sup>41</sup> A half-dozen years later momentum seemed to be building: the idea of homosexuals as a persecuted group similar to ethnic minorities was the guiding principle of both *The Homosexual in America* by "Donald Webster Cory" (Edward Sagarin) and a fledgling organization for homosexuals, the Mattachine Society. The potential of such an argument was enormous and eventually bore fruit. In the meantime the idea, born earlier, experienced a difficult development against the backdrop of the Cold War and the Red and Lavender Scares, leading many GLBT people, then and since, to regard the fifties as the darkest days for gays, ever.