

Views: Losing the Wild Blue Yonder

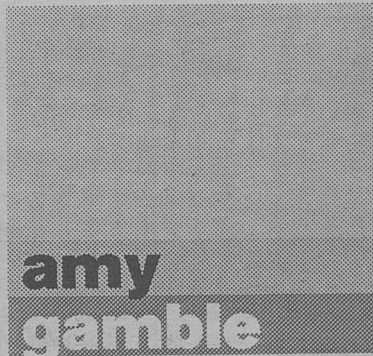
It's been nearly 20 years since I was forced to resign from the United States Air Force Academy for being queer. Since then I've graduated from UVM, worked as an engineering consultant in Seattle, and built a career as an engineer with the State of Vermont. I've been out, loud, and proud. I've marched on Washington, flown the rainbow flag, and made the evening news during the Civil Union debates. This year my partner and I celebrated the second anniversary of our Civil Union.

But for all that, I still carry the hurt and shame of that unfathomable experience. It's hard to describe what my time as a cadet at the Academy means to me. It had a lot to do with patriotism, but that's been so perverted and mixed up, and in these days of George W. has almost become a curse, a bludgeon used by the right wing to subdue the doubters.

I grew up an Air Force brat, with the deeply held conviction that our country, for all its faults and foibles, is the best there is. In sixth grade I discovered the Academy, and decided that was where I wanted to go, to prove myself, and to serve my nation. Early in my senior year of high school I accepted my appointment to USAFA, and two weeks after graduation I joined the elite youth of our nation, the cream of the crop, at one of the nation's finest institutions.

A little over a year later, I was back in Vermont, my future and my faith in my country snatched away.

I can tell you stories about all the rules that we had to follow when we were eating, and about helping my roommate with German in exchange for getting her to shine my shoes. Wearing shirt garters to hold my socks up and my shirt down, the elastic and clips rubbing a permanent hairless spot on my upper thigh. The thrill of marching in step with 4,000 other cadets, the sound of John Phillip Sousa on the air, the tourists gaping and clapping on the



chapel wall as we marched to lunch. Taking swim class in the pool where Greg Louganis had trained on the high platform, where he jumped so high they had to make a special bay in the ceiling to accommodate him. Ironing and starching the hospital corners of my sheets, and rolling my socks so they had perfect smiles lined up the drawer. Losing my period to weight loss and stress. Standing in the back of the classroom rocking on my heels to stay awake, because it was a military offense to fall asleep in class. Showing my little brother how I could disassemble and reassemble my M-1 rifle with my eyes closed in under a minute ... and how they'd plugged the barrel because too many cadets had committed suicide with them.

We had to greet everyone: Good morning sir, good afternoon ma'am. I can tell you the story of blanking on my favorite firstie's name right in front of her parents, the dry tongue, blank mind, heart-pounding fear and beseeching eyes hoping to be able to read her nametag in time to prevent her from having to embarrass the both of us by dressing me down, knowing she couldn't let it go but really didn't want to be in a position of having to yell at me in front of her parents, this brilliant amazon who was triple-majoring in electrical engineering, mechanical engineering, and history and was the first woman to be number one in her class. I can tell you that we were both relieved when I

managed to spit it out. But can I tell you why it mattered, or why I still remember so vividly?

I can tell you that the day we were "liberated" from our "POW" camp during our survival training, they raised the American flag and played Lee Greenwood's "I'm proud to be an American," and it brought tears to our eyes. But when we doolies were finally recognized as full members of the Corps of Cadets, in May, after 10 months of grueling mental and physical stress, I can't begin to tell you what it meant to have those shoulder boards pinned on by our upperclassmen, to again hear Lee Greenwood, the anthem of our pride.

I can tell you that when, at my older brother's police academy graduation, they played the song, I had to leave, in rib-wracking tears ... no longer a source of pride, but a mocking weapon to tear me apart - "and I'd gladly stand up, next to you, and defend her still today" (yeah, sure ... that was before you knew I was queer). That after 9/11, it received so much airplay, it didn't hurt anymore, it just made me angry. I can tell you that I no longer salute our flag for the national anthem, but that over the years I have gotten to the point where I will stand and not make a public point of remaining seated. I haven't forgotten, and I haven't yet completely forgiven either.

I can tell you what they took from me, and how long it took me to regain some semblance of pride in my country. But I can't take you there with me. The words will never be enough. ▼

Amy Gamble is an engineer for the State of Vermont. She lives in Montpelier with her partner.

vidually in *Out in the Mountains* over the last two years. I have greatly enjoyed writing them. The essays have been reprinted on the web in various forms as far away as Australia, and it has been wonderful to be able to write about the relevance of these holidays to queer people. Sometime this summer, I will be creating a chapbook containing all eight essays. If you are interested in

receiving a copy when it is available, email me at Pippin@sover.net. ▼

Pippin is a Radical Faerie who tries hard not to count his eggs before they are hatched; sometimes he is successful. He is also known as Christopher Kaufman, Executive Director of R.U.1.2? Queer Community Center.

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named Ostara and remember, everything changes.

Note: This column is the last of eight in a series on the pagan sabbats: Beltaine, Litha, Lammas, Mabon, Samhain, Yule, Imbolc and Ostara. The columns appeared indi-