

Conduct Unbecoming: A Review and a Question

David Landers

Randy Shilts' latest tome is entitled *Conduct Unbecoming: Gays and Lesbians in the U.S. Military*. Over the last five years, he interviewed 1,100 people for his book. He takes us on an amazing journey of personal pain, frustration, strength and power as he walks us through the lives of men and women who have chosen, for a variety of reasons, to serve the United States of America through military service. He employs the same style I personally found intriguing and helpful in his best seller *And the Band Played On*.

Shilts starts with a prologue covering the years 1778-1954 and then begins to reveal the personal struggles of gay and lesbian military service personnel. The title of his first chapter is *What Tom Dooley Really Wanted: A Prologue to Vietnam*. This title struck me because as a young high school student I became intrigued with the actions of a young doctor who had been in the Navy and then who left military service to dedicate his life to helping heal the children of Laos. In all of the studying I did of that man in my youth, there was never a mention that he was gay. There was no mention that he had been set up by the military in one of their witch hunts for gays in the military and that he had been discharged from the Navy because he had committed the crime of being gay. There was no mention that he had received an undesirable discharge in spite of having been named by the Gallup Poll in 1959 as the seventh most admired man in the United States. To me he was someone I admired, looked up to, (probably was attracted to but didn't realize it at the time) and whose selflessness represented the best in giving to others.

Shilts presents us with story after story, all documented carefully "because of the military's exhaustive record keeping". We come to know Leonard Mat-

lovich, Vernon Berg, the outrageous "Simone" Perry Watkins, our own Gene Barfield and his infamous tupperware party, and we learn of the unique difficulties women faced through the chapter entitled *Dykes and Whores*. Penny Rand, Carole Brock, Carolyn "Dusty" Pruitt, Barbara Baum and dozens of women whose struggles for justice in an unjust military are detailed and their struggles become very personal to the reader. Perhaps one of the most disturbing things for me is the overwhelming evidence presented of the absolute discrimination all women in the military faced. A woman who was propositioned by a male peer or superior and who chose, for whatever reason, to rebuke that proposition could be accused of being a lesbian and the investigation would immediately begin - not an investigation of the male's inappropriate conduct, not the male's harassment, but the woman was immediately suspect and investigated.

As if Shilts' reports on the military and its unconscienceable and unforgivable treatment of gay men and lesbians in the military were not disturbing enough, he then presents us with documentation of how our government abused, used and mistreated military personnel with AIDS. "When it finally acknowledged the problem, the Navy responded to its early AIDS cases just as the Air Force had, by seeking to discharge AIDS sufferers for being gay."

If you want to be better informed about this issue I strongly suggest *Conduct Unbecoming*. It will cause you pain, but it is very much worth while investing the time and energy it takes to read. Randy Shilts has provided our community with yet another gift and I, for one, am grateful to him for this. His own battle with AIDS prevented him from including everything he wanted to in this book. He had material from the

Persian Gulf War but recent hospitalizations and deadlines prevented that material from being covered.

One issue continues to disturb me about this book and the entire discussion of gays and lesbians in the military. Randy Shilts documents personal struggles in his book but also raises a disturbing political issue for our community. He presents the additional difficulties many gays and lesbians in the military faced because our community did not see their struggles with the military as a priority in our struggles for safety and acceptance and justice. Many things became possible for people of color after the military was integrated. Truman's courage in integrating the military paved the way for other integrations to occur in America. I was disturbed that Gene Barfield was not asked to speak at this year's Gay Pride rally at Battery Park. He is President of Gay Lesbian Bisexual Veterans of America and could have provided us with information, motivation to write letters and a more accurate picture of what the ban really means to all of us. Have we as a community supported our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters in the military or have we dismissed their needs and struggles? There is enough fighting against us going on in this country right now and we are all vulnerable. I suspect it would be helpful if we became educated around this issue, wrote letters, made phone calls and showed our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters in the military that they have our support. Most people I know who enter the military do so because it can provide economic security (at least it used to), they can gain valuable skills they could otherwise not get or they are genuinely interested in serving their country. We can challenge their motives and exclude them or we can understand and support. It is our choice whether or not we too are willing to participate in *Conduct Unbecoming*. ▼

Questions?

Call the
Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual Youth Info-Line
1 800-GLB-CHAT

Outright VT
Youth Group Meeting
Friday 7-9 pm

Stephanie Buck, M.A.
Psychotherapist

Elm Street Feminist Counseling

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