“Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”: A Personal Journey to Activism

By Beth F. Coye ’59

On Saturday, Dec. 18, 2010, I awoke at 5:45 A.M. with great anticipation, knowing the Senate would take a cloture vote on repeal of “don’t ask, don’t tell” (DADT). An hour later, I listened to my senator, Ron Wyden, D-Ore., speak with great passion from the Senate floor, telling his colleagues, “I don’t care who you love . . . if you love your country enough to risk your life, you shouldn’t have to hide who you are.” After many more speakers pro and con, a vote to end debate took place. We won, with 63 voting in favor of cloture.

After the cloture vote, Senator Wyden phoned me. The call was emotional for both of us. I cried. He told me how important repeal was to him and to all Americans. Several friends and I watched the final vote (65–31, with eight Republicans voting “yes”), filled champagne glasses in our hands, tears streaming. For me and others in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) community, as well as for our straight allies, it was the culmination of many years of work. Our time had come!

Launching a Navy Career

My own path to becoming an activist for military minorities has been rocky, filled with personal challenges. The daughter of a career naval officer (my father) and a liberal-minded New Englander (my mother), I decided to join the Navy in 1960. My wise mother counseled, “You’re too independent to become a career naval officer without incurring a great deal of personal angst.” As usual, she was right. She knew her daughter, who more often than not spoke and acted upon her liberal values; she knew the Navy to be conservative by nature. I listened, but decided to follow my dream of becoming a WAVE anyway.

Upon graduation as an ensign, I fell in love with the Navy—and with another officer, a woman. The Navy was just right; so too was the officer, who became my partner for several years and remains a best friend. Although I fought against it, falling in love with a woman was surprisingly natural. Being as clueless about homosexuality as most Americans were in the 1960s, I certainly did not give much thought to self-identifying as a “queer,” as my mother referred to homosexuals back then.

In the late ’60s and early ’70s, I was assigned to a demanding job at the Naval War College, as well as an after-hours project that would help rectify the lack of opportunities offered to Navy women. I had been tapped by the chief of naval personnel to author a study that would become a benchmark regarding the status of military women and a conceptual framework for opening up military women’s opportunities, as directed by the secretary of defense.

Being an outspoken feminist was unacceptable behavior to most members of our Navy, both male and female. Something about speaking up for those women who were more silent, more junior, more threatened, and less cerebral, motivated me to take to the library and analyze and present a solid case to the admirals for Navy women’s equality. Wellesley’s motto had kicked in: Non ministrari sed ministrare. Besides, condoning or forgiving the Navy’s unjust personnel policies toward its women was not my style.

Command—and a Turning Point

The goal of every line officer is to become a commanding officer. Despite my reputation as a vocal “feminist,” my career continued to flourish and on March 17, 1977, I took command of a new shore activity (women were just beginning to be allowed to serve at sea). What a thrilling day! The ceremony inside the flag-decorated
To be one of the Navy’s first women commanding officers was, and continues to be, a great honor. But my sexual orientation kept obstructing my job satisfaction, my hopes, and dreams. During that 2½-year command tour, I discharged at least eight young, competent men and women “for cause of homosexuality.” Each discharge tore at my heart.

Almost two years into the assignment, a stunning event occurred. I learned that my commander, suspicious of my living with two other women, wished to force me out of command. He put a tail on me for several weeks to prove his suspicion. Fear and a sense of betrayal bubbled within me. Pure outrage toward my boss, the Navy, and my country roiled below the surface. After this breach of trust, the next discharge of two young lesbians was a pivotal turning point.

I had come out to my parents the year before. I told my dad, an admiral, that I was contemplating early resignation. Even knowing my sexual orientation, he counseled me to stay in the Navy. “You’ll make captain, Beth, and who knows, perhaps be our first lady admiral.” To make captain would fulfill a long-held goal for my naval career. My assignment officer told me he was sending me to the Pentagon to a captain’s billet, and he expected me to be selected for promotion at the next selection board.

But my integrity, my belief in providing justice for myself and other gays who simply wished to serve our country with honor,
won out over serving my beloved Navy, which rigidly enforced senseless regulations about being gay. I could no longer live the lie of being a closeted lesbian naval officer. I retired, with regret, in 1980.

OUTRAGE REKINDLED

I joined the efforts to repeal DADT in the mid-1990s and quickly witnessed a clash in political values playing out through our often-messy democratic process. A key to understanding any law or policy starts with the core values that its stakeholders uphold. In the case of DADT, security, freedom, and equality were the primary values behind the arguments for and against gays serving openly in the military.

Opponents raised the specter that repeal would seriously damage morale and unit cohesion, thereby impacting the military’s ability to accomplish its mission, especially within combat units. And a number of very conservative religious groups feared that repeal would open the floodgates of “homosexual activity” in the military and would force their chaplains to make difficult choices about whether and how they would serve. Proponents believed that the military would be stronger by not requiring gays to hide and lie, and also that the DADT law violated constitutional rights, including privacy, freedom of speech, and due process.

Over the years the numbers of advocates of repeal grew exponentially, with 70 percent of Americans with diverse backgrounds ultimately in favor of repeal.

In 2006, while I was lobbying the Congress for DADT repeal with colleagues from the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network (SLDN), Rep. Eleanor Holmes Norton, D-D.C., spoke powerfully about gays in the military. Referring to Congress, she raised the question, “Who do they think they are? Who are they to draw the line? . . . I am outraged . . . that the number of gay discharges under ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ goes up or down according to the needs of the services. The services are being crassly pragmatic. They are using you but don’t give you your basic rights.”

Norton concluded her remarks to our group by saying, “I salute
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A LIFE STORY MADE PUBLIC

Political cries to repeal DADT began to increase early in 2010. Senior military officers, such as the commandant of the Marine Corps and a retired Air Force chief of staff, went public against repeal. I felt the urge to fight back, to defend those 65,000 or more LGB service members who were serving in silence and in fear of losing their careers. When the website www.military.com published my story (“Lesbian Vet Decries Living a Lie”), along with many online comments from readers, I flinched. But my internalized values as instilled by my parents, Wellesley, my former shipmates, and my Unitarian Universalist friends helped me to withstand the less-than-complimentary comments that attended the article.

When opponents of justice and equality for the LGBT community became rancorous, I remembered what I learned from the ’70s and feminism: The turtle never gets ahead without sticking her neck out. I also would reread John Stuart Mill’s On Liberty, or Thomas Paine’s On Common Sense, and other political thinkers whom I first encountered at Wellesley.

I learned many years ago the pen can be mightier than the sword, though the writer must be prepared to receive wounds just as soldiers and sailors do. Indeed, one endures a form of combat in responding to the attacks to justice, freedom, and equality on radio and television, in the halls of Congress or in cyberspace. Ironically, my freshman English professor, Miss Helen Storm Corsa, who was horrified by the quality of my compositions, would be surprised that I chose to take up the pen.

2010: A ROLLER-COASTER YEAR FOR REPEAL

In early spring 2010, votes for or against repeal in the House of Representatives were about to be counted, and a Pentagon study group on military gays was under way. (It ultimately reported that a majority of troops were comfortable with repealing the legislation.) As a member of the Military Outreach Committee, a group of LGB veterans, I originated the idea of sending letters to key officials at the Pentagon, Capitol Hill, and the White House from LGB veterans. As the letters streamed across my monitor, I held back tears of sadness, anger, and outrage that our military had lost the service of these outstanding individuals. To read the letters from women who had graduated from West Point was particularly poignant and bittersweet, for I had worked in the ’70s to allow them to become cadets. This book of letters, We Are Family Too, written by 37 LGB veterans from all services, is an eloquent, powerful statement of why DADT needed to be repealed. The Outreach Committee made certain the package landed on the desks of many influential politico-military people. Our voices were heard. The congressional votes in both chambers favored repeal.

With the votes to repeal DADT, our politico-military leaders are taking deliberate steps toward implementation of a new era for the LGB military community. There may be a few bumps in the road, for that’s the nature of implementing a civil-rights program. The program, which will transform how military members view their LGB peers, subordinates, and seniors, will be similar to the integration of African-Americans and women into our armed forces. It will be significant, bringing about more positive attitudes and behaviors toward the LGBT community in our country.

When the president signed the bill on Dec. 22, 2010, a wrongful societal mandate was finally dismantled, crumbling against democratic forces. I am proud of us Americans, gay and straight, who worked to bring equality and justice to the lives of LGB military members. These members will soon no longer be required to serve in silence, with an ongoing sense of non-acceptance by their military family, as well as their country. Thank you!

And now I am able to close the chapter of 50 years of my life and truly feel that it’s my Navy too.