

Manhood on Trial: Homosexuality, *Conduct Unbecoming*, and the Military

"The lifeblood of a soldier is masculinity, bravery and gallantry. The battlefield soldier is inspired to risk all by fighting with comrades whose attributes conform to his view of manhood. . . . And it is inarguable that the majority of a fighting force would be psychologically and emotionally deflated by the close presence of homosexuals who evoke effeminate or repugnant but not manly visions." [Bruce Fein, "Keep the military's ban on homosexuals," *USA Today*, September 1990]

***Conduct Unbecoming: Gays and Lesbians in the U.S. Military, Vietnam to the Persian Gulf* by Randy Shilts. St. Martin's Press, 1993. \$27.95**

By Brenton Arthur

Rarely has a book planned so long ago come to fruition at the precise moment when it is most needed. No doubt, the publishers pushed Randy Shilts to finish *Conduct Unbecoming* when they realised what a hot issue homosexuality and the military was rapidly becoming. Indeed, Shilts is quick to mention how he had initially envisioned taking the book up through to the end of the Gulf War with Iraq (a section that will appear with the next edition).

Even without its planned ending, however, *Conduct Unbecoming* is truly a tour de force: 784 pages, 1,110 interviews, 5 years of research, and 15,000 pages of classified U.S. government documents obtained primarily through the freedom of information act. Beginning with George Washington's Continental army, Shilts interweaves the moving stories of dozens of gay and lesbian soldiers, sailors and flyers. They are a group so varied in background and personality that only their sexuality remains in common.

Shilts binds these disparate personal histories (most of which are in print for the first time) with deftly applied thematic glue. The story of homosexuals in the military is a story that transcends the boundaries of the armed forces and

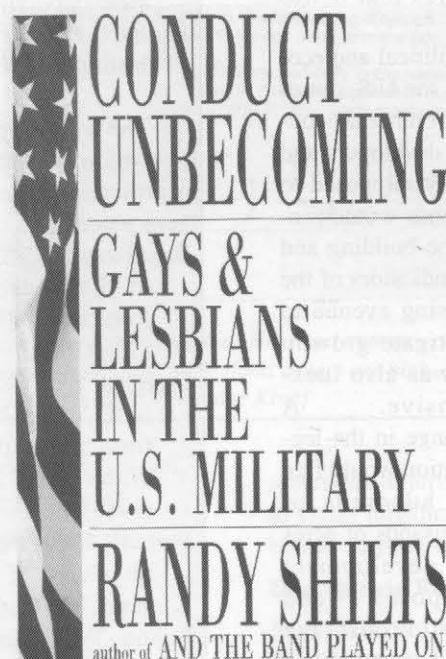
speaks about American society as a whole. It is the story of changing definitions of masculinity and a story about the fixation of the military with appearances at the expense of reality.

although this does lie at the heart. The debate concerns the vast changes that have come at the very essence of American life; the new ways of thinking that have directly confronted established structures.

The Changing World of Masculinity

"For both women and men, the story of gays in the military is a story about manhood. For generations, after all, the military has been an institution that has promised to do one thing, if nothing else, and that is to take a boy and make him a man. The military's gay policy crisis in the past decade reflects the turmoil of a nation thrust into conflict over our society's changing definition of manhood."

Service in the military has long been considered a male rite of passage. Like many other world cultures, the American male has been defined by his ability to provide and protect. That concepts of strength, force and courage remain entrenched in the American psyche is clearly seen in muscleman heroes like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone and in the widespread use of steroids by male teenagers hoping to bulk up to impress the girls. "...[C]alling recruits faggots, sissies, pussies and girls had been a time-honored stratagem for drill instructors throughout the armed forces. The context was clear: there was



The book is a study of a culture and society in the throws of change. Shilts reminds us that the question of the legal status of homosexuals in the military is not simply about issues of acceptable versus non-acceptable sexual orientations—

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not much worse you could call a man.”

One hundred years ago, the image of ‘manhood’ was seen as male, heterosexual and also white. The first, in what would become a series of challenges to this definition, came to a head in the late 1940s with the call for the integration of blacks into the armed forces. Then, as now, opposition to integration argued that military efficiency would be undermined. No white soldier would want to share a foxhole with a black soldier and, certainly, no self-respecting white man would take orders from a black. Nevertheless, military integration was pushed through and American society had, for the first time, to re-think how they conceived of manhood. If the army produced “men” and blacks were successfully conducting themselves in the military, then black males could no longer be considered simply “boys.”

Twenty years later, a further challenge came from women—a challenge that continues to this day as servicewomen struggle to be allowed to fly combat missions. In the mid-1960s, traditionally held notions of masculinity and femininity were rocked by rapid forces of change. Gender roles were increasingly confused as women and men moved across once sacred boundaries and into jobs traditionally held only by the other. The more that women moved into military jobs, the more the traditional axiom of ‘military maketh man’ became redundant.

Shilts regales us with tragic, almost comic, vignettes of the military reaction to this challenge to “manhood.” In the beginning of the 1970s, Airman Penny Rand, only recently joined up, became increasingly frustrated with the lack of opportunity for women in the armed forces (and pay 40% less than men). While the recruiting poster offered a selection of some 150 jobs for women to choose from, they were almost without exception clerical and secretarial. As well, she was dismayed by the sexual harassment of her male peers, who began to call her ‘dyke’ because she refused their repeated entreaties. She and her barracks’ mates jammed their doors shut with broom handles every night to avoid rape.

At one point, fed up with the whole proceedings—and especially with the young ROTC cadet who gave their troop weekly lessons in applying makeup—Rand stopped shaving her legs. She was

repeatedly counseled that it was simply not “feminine” to leave legs hairy. In fact, she was even given a direct order to shave her legs. She refused to comply. “No sooner had she gotten her promotion to airman first class, even before she had sewn on her stripes, than she was busted back to airman—for not shaving her legs.”

The old concepts of masculinity have been challenged and in many cases overturned, yet a new vision of manhood has not arisen to take its place. Shilts repeatedly asserts: “The ideology of masculinity had remained a strong cultural imperative in the United States despite the best efforts of the gay and women’s movements, perhaps because nothing had come along to replace the psychological anchor that imperative provided young males. The old ways were receding, but new ways to assert manhood, or more accurately, personhood, had not yet taken shape, and many young men were lost, clinging to the old as if to a life preserver.”

The debate over the acceptance of homosexuals into the military is but the latest act in an ongoing drama. Since the definition of what defines “male” characteristics now includes non-whites as well as women, the heterosexual component of the original tripartite definition of “manhood” is all that remains unchanged over the course of this century.

Hypocrisy

“... the military is far less concerned with having no homosexuals in the service than with having people think there are no homosexuals in the service.... More than one general and admiral in the armed forces’ medical branches have commented privately that if they really went after all the gay doctors and medics, the military would have to close down its medical centers.”

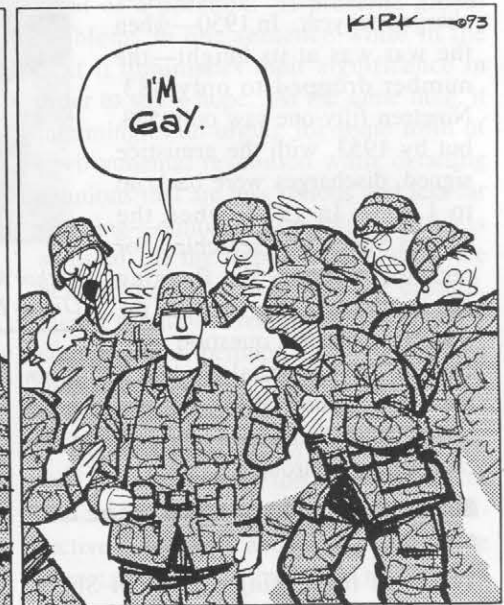
Shilts goes to great lengths in *Conduct Unbecoming* to demonstrate that homosexuals are part of the military now, and have been so from the outset (Baron von Steuben the most celebrated from the armies at Valley Forge). It is not a question, then, of whether or not to let homosexuals into the military. They are already there.

In fact, most estimates would indicate that the military holds a relatively larger percentage of homosexuals than society as a whole. The very regulations of the military assured that there would be an above average number of lesbians. Until recently, women could not serve in the armed forces if they were married or became pregnant. Lesbians were often the only ones left. The military also attracted great numbers of male homosex-



THE PRESENCE OF GAYS IN THE MILITARY, AND HOW IT AFFECTS MORALE AND DISCIPLINE.

[Kirk Anderson]



THE PREJUDICE TOWARD GAYS IN THE MILITARY, AND HOW IT AFFECTS MORALE AND DISCIPLINE.

uals who hoped that the experience would turn them into "real" men.

If Shilts' interviewees can be taken as a fair cross-section, by far the majority are outstanding soldiers. They have received medals and commendations and often hold high security clearances. Some, like Tom Dooley, were nationally famous heroes. Shilts stresses again and again that homosexuals have proved themselves in the military. They are not security risks, as once charged, nor incompetent and inefficient. The problem with integrating homosexuals lies not in them, per se, but in the reaction of the rest of the military. As long as homosexuals "don't say anything," the military machine chugs along unhindered.

It seems clear that the military also knows what good soldiers homosexuals are. As Shilts points out, there is no time when discipline and competence are more important than during war. Yet, from the initial implementation of the ban in 1943 to today, it is exactly at times of war that the military has rapidly increased the number of homosexuals in the forces and decreased the enforcement of the ban. Before the Korean war, for instance, the navy gave out an average 1,100 gay-related undesirable discharges per year. In 1950—when the war was at its height—the number dropped to only 483. Nineteen fifty-one saw only 533, but by 1953, with the armistice signed, discharges were back up to 1,353. In 1971, when the United States was searching for recruits to supply the flagging war in Vietnam, they dropped the standard entrance question concerning "homosexual tendencies" from the questionnaire. Homosexuals, even the most blatant, had a hard time pushing discharge papers through.

Big Brother could not have done better

The most frightening aspects of Shilts' account are the "Orwellian" methods by which the armed forces came to track down and survey homosexuals. Phones were tapped, rooms bugged, mail intercepted and opened and conversations eavesdropped. When a soldier was

accused of being homosexual, as Sergeant Rich McGuire quickly found out, there were no boundaries to what the Office of Special Investigation might do to extract names of other suspected homosexuals.

McGuire was threatened physically and mentally, told that his parents would suffer (their home confiscated) if he did not tell them what they wanted, denied legal representation, subjected to seemingly endless interrogations in the windowless basement of a warehouse bunker, forced to look at pornographic material, asked detailed questions about his sexual life, and informed that he would receive a \$25,000 fine and life imprisonment. All this because McGuire had in his posses-



Author Randy Shilts and friend
[James D. Wilson]

sion magazines with photographs of naked men. He did not know any other homosexuals. The interrogations went on and on as the investigators did not believe him.

Under a totalitarian system such extremes are perhaps expected, but they are intolerable moral outrages in a country that claimed to be the leader of the "free" world.

Who Are Homosexuals?

One facet lacking in *Conduct Unbecoming* is a look into the meaning of words such as 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual'.

In Shilts' usage there is rarely any ambiguity—people are either gay or they are straight. Yet, the lines of demarcation are not always so clear. What defines sexuality? Is it who you love or who you have sex with? Can one have sex with a member of the same sex and still be considered heterosexual? If one has never had a sexual encounter, can one be defined one way or the other?

Recent investigations show that sexual orientation is as much as 70% biologically determined. A slew of recent studies of twins further demonstrates, at least tentatively, that sexual orientation is genetically based. Identical twins, who share identical genes, are more likely to have the same sexual preference than fraternal twins, and they more than siblings, who in turn are more likely to have the same orientation than adopted siblings who have grown up in the same household.

These investigations point to a reasonably definable line between heterosexual and homosexual. But at the same time, Shilts relates scenes of the soldiers in Vietnam who, clearly heterosexual, engaged in sex with members of the same gender, in the absence of their first choice: Should these men and women be considered homosexual?

Only the Beginning

The title *Conduct Unbecoming* is pregnant with a dual meaning. While the military establishment uses the term to describe its homosexual troops, Shilts appears to be using it to tag the military complex: the conduct of the military towards homosexuals

has itself been unbecoming and it is conduct that is deeply ingrained.

As Shilts ends: "It seemed clear, watching these University of Minnesota cadets earnestly debate whether they should serve with gays, that whatever happened to the military's antihomosexual policy, even a presidential order to allow gays into the military would not mark the end of the campaign for acceptance of homosexuals in the armed forces; it would only be the beginning."