

Serving their country, keeping their secret

Gay sailors at area bases say that even if Clinton lifts the ban, they'll never divulge their homosexuality.

By **Kerry DeRochi**

Staff writer

As a gay sailor, he leads a double life.

He laughs uneasily when his shipmates joke about "faggots" in the showers. He looks the other way whenever he walks by a known homosexual.

On the night Bill Clinton was elected president, he sat with 30 other sailors in a lounge on board his ship, his unease growing with each gay-bashing remark.

"When they started talking, I just sat back, I didn't say a word," he said. "I thought, 'Oh God.'"

"I felt like scum. All my friends were telling me how they hated me, basically. They just didn't know it."

The 22-year-old petty officer is only one in a network of thousands of gay service men and women believed to be stationed in Hampton Roads.

Like the others, he is pleased that Clinton has promised to lift the ban barring homosexuals from serving. But he cautions against overestimating the action's effect.

For him, little would change.

"Lift the ban, so I don't get persecuted, but I'm not going to come out," he said, referring to the term that means being open about one's homosexuality.

"I wouldn't get anywhere. I have had some of the best jobs in my division. I wouldn't have the posts I have had they known I was gay."

GAYS IN THE GULF



Sex among gays and lesbians didn't pose nearly the discipline problem that old-fashioned harassment by heterosexual men did, Army documents show/**C1; Commentary**

His opinion is shared by other gay service members who fear that discrimination will persist even if gays are permitted in the military. Only one out of six interviewed this week said he would openly admit he was gay once the ban was lifted.

"There's going to be a lot of discrimination against gays, still," said a 23-year-old sailor at Norfolk Naval Base. "There's going to be a lot of anger. If there are gays that come out of the closet and say, 'I'm here, I'm queer,' it's going to be tough for them.

"I couldn't do it. I would be too scared."

Still, a sense of optimism pervades the

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close-knit communities at each of the military installations. Gone are the days of witch hunts when Naval Investigative Service agents hid in the parking lots of gay bars or went inside, undercover.

"There's a sense that something good is going to happen in the very near future," said Jorge Sague, 33, who served in the Navy for 8½ years before getting out in 1986.

"Once (Clinton) does it, there's going to be this very big sense of safety. I think it's sort of like the ground floor will be set."

On Tuesday night, hundreds of gays and lesbians crowded the smoke-filled Oar House on Colley Avenue, a gay bar located less than two miles from Norfolk Naval Base.

Men with military-style haircuts danced together on a black-and-white checkerboard floor as videos blared from televisions above them. Stacks of *Our Own*, a monthly newspaper, were piled on a table in the back bar, the headline: "Clinton vows to end military ban."

Bar manager Frank Belcher estimated that more than half of his clientele was military.

"It's very important at our club that we treat all of them like they're home," Belcher said. "They all feel that way. I think we probably bring more military guys in than anybody. We treat them good. We appreciate their business."

Nightclubs such as the Oar House are a large part of the network used by gay service members in Hampton Roads. The clubs are a safe haven from the military world, where gays hide their secret daily.

The presence of gays in the service challenges the argument by military leaders that homosexuals would disrupt the nation's defense.

"We're here already," said one gay service member. "If it's going to disrupt it, it's going to be through straight people thinking they can't deal with us."

"I'm comfortable with myself. If they're not comfortable with it, that's their problem. It's not going to stop me from being gay and it's not going to stop me from being in the Navy."

For years, the sailors have lived a lie, pretending to be part of the military machismo while at the same time cringing at jokes aimed at "fags."

Their rules are simple: Don't stare at someone too long, even if it's completely innocent. Keep a distance from others who seem gay. And never, never, get angry.

"There were always jokes around. You just blew it off," said Jason Frank, a cook on board the amphibious transport dock Austin who was investigated for being gay.

"If you made a scene about it. Guilt. Right now. You were saying you were guilty of this heinous crime of being gay."

Frank, 21, was caught moonlighting as a waiter and bartender at the Oar House and was turned in by a shipmate in October.

A native of Illinois, Frank said he had joined the Navy in 1990 to es-

to hide.

He was assigned to the Austin, used as a troop and landing craft carrier. Within six weeks, he had tapped into the gay network.

There were about 15 sailors who at night would drive to the Oar House, the Late Show or the Garage in Norfolk. Gay bars are not considered off limits by the Navy brass.

At first, he took a woman along as a cover.

"You have to pretend you like females when the guys are talking about them," Frank said. "People are always curious — 'Why don't you go out with us?' — You're continually making up excuses, excuses for your life, basically."

Over time, he got bolder. Earlier this fall, he took the job at the Oar House. He decided to resign after being caught and is now awaiting his discharge.

"It was really a relief for me, you know," Frank said. "I was tired of the acting. Now I can really find myself and just go on."

But life remains difficult for those who remain.

The 23-year-old sailor at Norfolk Naval Base, a petty officer third class, plans to stay in the military. He signed up at age 18, right out of high school. The military was his only option, he said. He had no money for college.

When asked by the Navy recruiter whether he was a homosexual, he said no.

"I didn't see how they could find out," he said. "It was so easy to fake I play the game. That's what it amounted to, playing a game."

His first assignment was on an aircraft carrier based in Alameda, Calif., with 5,000 other sailors. At least 50 were gay.

The men slept in berths that held 150, stacked three high and end to end. They shared a bathroom, but they showered behind curtains.

"What it boils down to is everybody wants their privacy," he said. "I wouldn't go invading someone's privacy because I wouldn't want mine invaded."

His six-month cruise went without incident, except for one afternoon in the Caribbean when some shipmates started throwing bottles into a gay bar. He was inside.

"It just never faced me as being a big deal," he said. "I was so confident with it. I wasn't really that worried about it."

"I'm sure people have suspected me," he said. "As far as I know, they haven't said anything. It's just like I have my work life and my personal life. They should be totally separate."

The sailor now works at Norfolk Naval Base in a shop of about 20 sailors. None of them know he is gay. He will not tell them, even if the ban is lifted.

In the past few weeks, gay jokes have dominated his workplace: The Navy will soon be wearing pink pastel uniforms. Gays will be lurking in every shower.

"I laugh because it's so ludicrous; it's so naive," he said. "They think we just want to change the military. They don't realize we are the military."