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MILITARY FIRES THREE MORE GAY ARABIC LINGUISTS AS SHORTFALL CONTINUES

Iraq Combat Units Losing Their Translators from Frontlines

SANTA BARBARA, CA, May 24 2007 - The Associated Press reported yesterday that more Arabic linguists have been fired by the military under the "don't ask, don't tell" policy that requires separation when a commander learns a service member is gay or lesbian. The linguists were investigated after military officials listened in on conversations conducted on a high-level government computer system which allows intelligence personnel to communicate with troops on the frontlines.

One linguist was serving in Iraq with a Marine combat unit when he was discharged. A military source reported that he was known to be gay but was allowed to serve and was only formally investigated after an Inspector General audit obtained language from the computer chat rooms that apparently suggested he might be gay. Enlisted with the Navy, he was serving with the Marines in the "individual augmentation" program, which allows the military to pull talent from whatever branch they need to, in order to fill shortfalls such as that of the highly trained Arabic linguists. Under "don't ask, don't tell," the military has fired at least fifty-eight Arabic linguists.

Stephen Benjamin, who agreed to talk to researchers at the Michael D. Palm Center, a think tank at the University of California, Santa Barbara, was discharged from the Army this March from Ft. Gordon, Georgia. Benjamin, 23, attended the Defense Language Institute, the military's premiere training school for foreign linguists. Graduating in the top ten percent of his class, he scored a 3.3 on his Defense Language Proficiency Test, well above average. He then became a Cryptologic interpreter, responsible for collecting and analyzing signals and assigned targets to support combatant commanders and other tactical units. Arabic interpreters work with intelligence agencies to translate target cables from stateside and foreign military bases as well as providing critical translation for combat and logistics units on the frontlines. Benjamin was first introduced to Palm Center researchers by the leaders of the Call-to-Duty Tour (www.calltodutytour.org).

In October 2006, the Army Inspector General conducted an audit of a government communications system and investigated seventy service members for abusing the system. Benjamin said he was called in for questioning, and was asked about a comment he made in which he said, "That was so gay -- the good gay, not the bad one." Out of the seventy people, a small number, including Benjamin, were eventually investigated for violations of the "don't ask, don't tell" policy. Although he is not sure which comments prompted the investigation that led to his discharge, he said he had passingly referred to social plans that would have revealed he is gay.

He said that some of the worst violations of the government computer system involved people having cyber sex on the system, but those people retained their jobs.

Benjamin was aware of the risk of being monitored, but assumed the military would be focused on other issues. "The risk was always there," he said, but in some cases, this system "was our only means of communicating," especially for those stationed in Iraq.

Dr. Nathaniel Frank, senior research fellow at the Palm Center, who is writing a book on "don't ask, don't tell," said the loss of people like Benjamin highlights the hidden costs of the current gay exclusion policy.

"The military often suggests that it fires people only when they make 'statements,' as though they are willful and flagrant violations of the law," he said. "This is a facile misunderstanding of military life. The reality is that surviving combat, working efficiently, and bonding with peers are all dependent on this human element of military life, where people talk about their lives with one another. It's hard to see how cybersex on a government communications network is not considered a career-ending offense while mentioning that you had a date last week is such a large threat to unit cohesion that the individual must be fired."

Benjamin said he was out to many of his peers, and "out entirely" in his office. In nearly every case, no one cared that he was gay, and those who did care did nothing about it. "The only harm to unit cohesion that was caused was because I was leaving," he said. "That's where the real harm is, when they pull valuable members out of a team."

During his investigation, Benjamin was given the chance to rebut the charge that he was gay. His Navy supervisor and a civilian supervisor suggested he write a statement insisting he was not gay, but lawyers at the Service Members Legal Defense Network advised him that if he lied and was later found to be gay, he could face a less-than-honorable discharge and even fraud charges for writing false statements.

His JAG officer told him the gay exclusion policy is "politically unpopular," and that military attorneys don't like enforcing the policy, an assertion reinforced when his commanding officers told him they were sorry they had to lose him. His Captain's evaluation read, in part: "EXCEPTIONAL LEADER. Extremely focused on mission accomplishment. Dedicated to his personal development and that of his sailors. takes pride in his work and promotes professionalism in his subordinates."

When he was discharged, Benjamin was preparing to re-enlist for another six years. He volunteered to deploy, hoping to serve in Iraq so he could work in the environment -- and with the soldiers -- he had directly assisted as an Arabic translator at Ft. Gordon. "I wanted to go to Iraq so I could be in the environment with the soldiers I was protecting," he said. Though he could not discuss the details of his intelligence work because many were classified, he said it involved sending reports with critical information out to the frontlines, and he knew that in his work, he "made a difference."

Benjamin is now working in Atlanta at a computer company. When his military discharge became real, he recalled: "I was kind of in disbelief. I kind of expected someone to go, ha ha, we're just kidding." But no one did. While he's enjoying his new job, it doesn't compare to what he did in the military. "I'm happy where I am now," he said "but I'd be happier in the military, doing something that mattered a little bit more."

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The Michael D. Palm Center, formerly the Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military, is a research institute at the University of California, Santa Barbara. The Center uses rigorous social science to inform public discussions of controversial social issues, enabling policy outcomes to be informed more by evidence than by emotion. Its data-driven approach is premised on the notion that the public makes wise choices on social issues when high-quality information is available. For more information, visit www.palmcenter.org.