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Mental health and well-being of LGBT+ Veterans dismissed from the British Armed Forces before January 2000

Caroline Paige^a, Christina Dodds^a and Craig Jones^a

LAY SUMMARY

Between 1955 and January 2000, the UK Armed Forces and Ministry of Defence enforced a ban on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and related (LGBT+) service, dismissing or forcing the immediate retirement of thousands of personnel because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. They fell on hard times and were left isolated and unsupported by the nation they had proudly stood to defend. Although more than 21 years has elapsed since the ban was lifted, little academic literature has explored the ban's impact on the mental health and well-being of the United Kingdom's LGBT+ Veteran community. Anecdotal evidence suggests many still endure consequential hardship and mental health struggles and remain isolated from the military family and traditional support services. Fighting With Pride, an LGBT+ military charity launched in January 2020, and Northumbria University's Veterans and Military Families Research Hub joined in partnership to remedy this by determining mental health and well-being impacts and consequences and identifying recovery pathways. Lived experience narratives must be used to help build support ahead of the publication of any formal findings. Research-based evidence is vital in helping to develop recovery and support policy and in further shaping support services to develop the best possible impact-related outcomes.

Key words: Fighting with Pride, gay ban, gender, gender identity, LGBT+, LGBT+ personnel, mental health, military, Northern Hub for Veterans and Military Families Research, Northumbria University, sex, Sexual Offences Act 1967, sexual orientation, transgender, UK, UK Armed Forces, Veterans, VMFR, well-being

Mots-clés : bannissement des homosexuels, bien-être, carrefour nordique de la recherche sur les familles de vétérans et des militaires, Fighting with Pride, genre, forces armées britanniques, identité de genre, LGBT+, militaire, orientation sexuelle, personnel LGBT+, R.-U., santé mentale, sexe, Sexual Offences Act 1967, transgenre, Université de Northumbria, vétéran(e)s, VMFR

INTRODUCTION

Between 1955 and January 2000, the UK Armed Forces (AF) and Ministry of Defence (MOD) enforced a ban on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and related (LGBT+) service, dismissing or forcing the immediate retirement of thousands of personnel because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Although the *Sexual Offences Act* of 1967 (SOA 1967) had “decriminalised homosexual acts, in private between two men, both of whom had to have attained the age of 21,”¹ it provided the Armed Forces with an exemption through their own single-service discipline Acts of 1955 and 1957.^{2,3,4} Known informally as the gay ban, it was an LGBT+ ban, having no regard for sexual orientation, gender,

or gender identity. Although more than 21 years have elapsed since the ban was lifted, little academic literature has explored the impact of the ban on the mental health and well-being of the United Kingdom's LGBT+ Veteran community. The authors therefore explored a broad range of source material for this article.

Gay and transgender people have served in militaries since time immemorial, albeit covertly. Although colleagues might sometimes be understandingly — but discreetly — accepting, especially in times of war,⁵ it would take just one person to decide otherwise — an insensitive colleague, anonymous phone call, or discovered letter — to summon investigation by the military police Special Investigations Branch (SIB).⁶ The SIB

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had a team specifically tasked with hunting down those military personnel suspected, rumoured, or outed as being gay. Once a formal investigation began, no quarter was given to the privacy, confidentiality, or security of or consequences to the individual, family, friends, or unit. Personnel were fined, assaulted, mocked, persecuted, and even imprisoned.⁷ Medals, awards, and commissions were taken, pensions and gratuities disregarded or degraded, association with the AF was barred, and, at the point of discharge, these Veterans were left unsupported. Everything that represented being a Veteran was taken away from them, other than service time. Many faced homelessness, unemployment, and estrangement from family and friends, hardships that, even in isolation, would present a challenge to an individual's mental health and well-being.

FINDING AND REBUILDING THE LGBT+ VETERAN COMMUNITY

How many service careers were ended because of the gay ban is unknown. Records held by the MOD are known to be incomplete and not specific, although the number is estimated to be in the thousands. Some were dismissed for the military criminal offence of homosexuality, and others received less-specific charges through the convenience of the catchalls services no longer required or conduct prejudicial (to the services). Others left of their own accord, coerced to resign during interviews or interrogations when the alternative was punishment, including imprisonment, or to escape an unbearably hostile environment.

Veterans are known to be reticent when it comes to seeking support,⁸ and service charities of the time acknowledge they were not welcoming to those they regarded as undeserving of Veteran status. Veteran-facing charities often recruited retired senior officers and personnel who commonly took discriminatory attitudes from military service into the charity sector. LGBT+ Veterans were turned away, or stayed away, reinforcing their isolation from the military family and service support.⁸ Shamed and isolated by their experience, this community of Veterans has fragmented and strayed from the more traditional Veteran resettlement areas of military population centres or family surroundings. Some have settled in LGBT+-friendly communities, but others have separated even from these potential sanctuaries, and life-changing convictions have further isolated them by preventing successful resettlement,⁷ making connections within the community a challenge.

RESTORING THE AF COVENANT

The ban on LGBT+ service was finally lifted on Jan. 12, 2000,⁹ with open transgender service occurring from January 1999. Although the military gradually transformed to become the proud exemplar employer of LGBT+ people that it is today, no coincident attempt has been made to carry the duty of the AF Covenant to the LGBT+ Veterans community.¹⁰ Although the United Kingdom wants to become a global leader in LGBT+ rights,¹¹ it has a responsibility to look inward first and not step over a recent past that sits awkwardly.

In January 2020, Fighting With Pride (FWP) was formed as the United Kingdom's first charity for LGBT+ Veterans, serving personnel and their families, and it was launched at a Westminster commemoration marking the 20th anniversary of the ban finally being lifted. In his keynote address at the commemoration, Member of Parliament Johnny Mercer apologized for the ban, saying, "It was unacceptable then and it is unacceptable now, and as the Minister for Defence, People and Veterans, I wanted to personally apologize to you today for those experiences."¹² Since then, as a charity run by LGBT+ Veterans and serving personnel, FWP has successfully driven forward discussions with government offices, MOD, the Office for Veterans Affairs, National Health Services, Mental Health Trusts, and senior leaders across the Veteran charity sector, raising awareness of the suffering this community has endured.

Evidence-based research on UK LGBT+ Veterans' health and well-being is scarce. A search of the literature revealed mostly international research consisting of Canadian and U.S. military LGBT+ resources, with just two UK studies. One study focused on the contrasting perspectives of one lesbian and two straight colleagues regarding military personnel participating in a Pride march.¹³ Although this was a small study, it did offer some insight into the opinions on how LGBT+ personnel construct their identity in the UK military. The other study is considerably wider ranging and provides valuable research on the experiences of lesbians in the British Army since the 1950s.¹⁴ Emma Vickers explored identity and gay service during the Second World War and suggests that queer history has failed to tackle the subject in the context of UK military service.⁵ Lack of UK literature was also highlighted in a recent narrative review,¹⁵ which focused on U.S. and Canadian resources. The review found that:

LGBTQ military personnel and veterans have poorer mental health and well-being; report more

stigma and barriers to mental healthcare, which reduces uptake of accessed healthcare services; experience more sexual trauma; and have poorer physical health than heterosexual military personnel and veterans.^{15(p. 1)}

Evidence derived from military records has been requested from government offices; however, lived experience narratives indicate that such evidence will be obscured by a lack of detail, particularly because significant numbers of LGBT+ personnel were dismissed with non-specific or inappropriate sentences or without courts martial proceedings.

Although the consequences of prejudice and dismissal on long-term psychological, physical, and social health described in international literature would be familiar to LGBT+ personnel of all nationalities,^{16,17} the differences in geography, military history, culture, ethics, health and welfare services, policies and laws, means own-nation research is essential to establish local community impacts, needs, and recovery pathways. National research does, however, bring significant international value; nations — seeking answers for their own LGBT+ Veteran communities and support organizations — are beginning to connect and compare impacts, outcomes, and best practices.

ADVANCING THE FIELD: ESTABLISHING THE EVIDENCE BASE

On Feb. 23, 2021, FWP and Northumbria University's Northern Hub for Veterans and Military Families Research formally announced a strategic partnership,¹⁸ intending to revolutionize support for LGBT+ Veterans by working collaboratively on research and consultancy projects that can influence national policy and service delivery of support for the LGBT+ Veteran community, a UK first. Until the findings of this research are published in 2023, the evidence rests with those LGBT+ Veterans who have already stepped forward with their lived experiences, through autobiographies such as *This Queer Angel* (lesbian),¹⁹ *We Can't Even March Straight* (gay),⁶ and *True Colours* (transgender)²⁰ and anthologies such as FWP's own book of the same name (LGBTQ),²¹ as well as recorded written or oral narratives and surveys.^{5,7} These datasets are quickly growing in number as Veterans become aware of the charity's existence. In *Coming Out in Camouflage*,²² the authors observe the value of unidentified and under-explored examples of resilience in personal accounts leading to

strength-based models, but they equally open the door to capturing a wider understanding of ordeals and impacts. Stories revealed to FWP already tell that community history, prejudice, and pride disconnect LGBT+ Veterans from the unique close camaraderie often enjoyed by Veterans more generally and still prevent them from approaching service social groups, charities, and support services for help, whereas disclosure of service and LGBT+ status is often withheld in fear of contempt.

When, on Feb. 16, 2021, the MOD announced a policy for the return of medals taken from LGBT+ personnel on dismissal,²³ it also committed to examining and understanding the wider ranging pre-2000 impacts. Although a pathway to community recovery has never been closer, the delivery of support cannot simply wait until the research evidence is reported in 2023. The lived experience accounts helping to inform research data can be used concurrently to raise an awareness and understanding within support organisations, creating the building blocks of positive partnerships and social prescribing that also foster trust within the community. This approach enables support to be created ahead of research findings that will provide validated evidence essential to inform policy and better shape service delivery.

Conclusion

LGBT+ Veterans dismissed or forced from UK military service before the ban was finally lifted in 2000 were dismissed without notice and offered no employment, housing, or financial support. The welfare and well-being impacts have never been researched. Service charities of the time reflected the discriminatory attitudes of the military, and LGBT+ Veterans were turned away or stayed away, increasing their isolation from service support. FWP, a new LGBT+ military charity, and Northumbria University's Veterans and Military Families Research Hub joined in partnership to determine mental health and well-being impacts and consequences and help to identify recovery pathways. It is important that evidence is used to help determine methods of support as the research develops and not to wait two years until the outcomes are reported. The development and consequences of this research will be of considerable value to nations examining their own LGBT+ Veteran community requirements.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have nothing to disclose.

CONTRIBUTORS

Caroline Paige conceived, researched, and drafted the manuscript with Christina Dodds. All authors contributed to critically revising the manuscript and approved the final version submitted for publication.

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