



HUMAN RIGHTS AT SEA

Maritime LGBT Case Study



Out at Sea and Land: My experiences of life before and after the ban was lifted – Cadet Sarah Stevens (X) RFA

Sixteen years ago the ban was lifted on gay and lesbian people serving in the UK Armed Forces. At the time I was an Army Bursar, meaning that the Army was paying towards my University education and in return I had committed to serving 5 years after I graduated. Amongst the piles of paperwork I had to sign was the line that said 'I understood that homosexuality was incompatible with service life'. I was aware of the policy on gay and lesbian people in the forces so this didn't come as a surprise to me and as a straight woman, signing it didn't cause me any problems. It was only once I'd signed on the dotted line and went to University, that I realised I was gay. Being an Officer in the Army had been my dream since I was a teenager and I suddenly had the very real prospect of being discharged before my career had even begun. I was then faced with not only coming to terms with my sexuality, but also hiding it from the Army. The ban was overturned within 18 months of my signing the dotted line but things didn't change overnight. As an Officer Cadet in the University's Officer Training Corps (similar to the Army Reserves), I can vividly recall walking into the mess and having everyone's head turn to look at me while whispers of "That's the lesbian" drifted through the air. It was not an overly comfortable situation to be in, however times were definitely changing.

As it happened, it wasn't my sexuality that led to me being released from my commitment to join the Army, but a weak ankle and a healthy dose of asthma. Both of which made me medically unfit for service in any of the armed forces - funny old thing. Luckily, life has a way of working out just the way it's meant to and in my very late twenties I heard of an organisation called The Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA). The RFA is a Ministry of Defence owned, civilian manned fleet that provides logistical support to the Royal Navy. As such the RFA is part of the Naval Service, the sailors wear Naval uniform and their ships are painted battleship grey: in fact, to the untrained eye it's hard to tell the difference between an RFA ship and a Royal Navy one. So after having spent the best part of ten years flitting from one thing to another, including a stint as a secondary school Chemistry teacher, I applied to join the RFA as an Officer Cadet. I opted to specialise in navigation and warfare but I could've picked electrical or mechanical engineering. At 33 years old I reported for RFA initial Officer Training at



HUMAN RIGHTS AT SEA

Britannia Royal Naval College: despite my sexuality and my weak ankle/lungs I'd finally made it to initial Officer Training.

Being back in a military environment more than a decade after the ban was lifted was extremely interesting, it's easy to think that all that had changed was policy but the reality couldn't be further from the truth. As RFA officer cadets we trained alongside our Royal Navy colleagues: one day whilst marching to our accommodation after some training, one of the girls casually mentioned her girlfriend in conversation. No-one batted an eyelid, made a comment or reacted in a negative way at all, in fact the conversation was as it should be: about two people dating, irrelevant of anything else. This exchange told me all I needed to know about how the forces had changed since the ban was lifted: being a lesbian is a complete non-issue. It was me who struggled to take on board how different it was, having gone from being pointed at and whispered about, to suddenly being treated no differently was huge change. I initially found myself being wary about being open about my sexuality for fear of not being accepted or of being made to feel different: old habits die hard. This has changed significantly in the last two years, and I've become very public about my sexuality within the workplace. I feel it's important to stand up and be counted, you never know the effect that seeing 'out' LGBT people at work can have. I was the only 'out' person I knew in my army unit and it was a lonely place to be – I choose not to live like that anymore. Having been closeted at work in the past, it's empowering to be able to be who I am with no questions or issues. I marched in full uniform with the Royal Navy at London Pride last summer, something I never thought I would do when I started out with the Army back in the day. In all fairness I never thought I'd be a sailor, let alone be able to march openly with the Armed Forces at a Pride event and I'm not entirely sure which of those two things I'm more surprised about! I met my girlfriend through being an openly LGBT member of the Royal Navy's Compass Network. She's a reservist and is as proud of who she is and of being in the Naval Service as I am, in fact perhaps more so.

The armed forces are unrecognisable from the organisation I joined in 1998 and despite all the arguments about homosexuals affecting team cohesion and morale, the opposite has proved to be true. The Royal Navy came 10th in the 2016 Stonewall Workplace Equality Index, meaning it fosters a work environment that celebrates diversity: people work better when they can be themselves. In the brief time that I've been in the RFA, I've certainly found that to be true. That's not to say that there isn't the odd eyebrow raised when I tell people I'm dating a woman but it's out of curiosity rather than derision. Being able to be yourself at work is key to a happy, productive team and I'd say the RFA, and the Naval Service, have got that about right. Ultimately, no one cares who you call at night to whisper sweet nothings to – they care that you do your job well.

Provided to Human Rights at Sea by HRAS LGBT Adviser, Lieutenant-Commander Sam Truelove MBE Royal Navy