



SERVING WITH HONOUR

KNIGHT HOOSON ASKS YOU TO PAUSE TO REMEMBER THE THOUSANDS OF GAY SOLDIERS WHO HAVE FOUGHT FOR THEIR COUNTRY...

Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's ass. It's right there in the Ten Commandments. Yet we all do it. How many times have you had a crush on your neighbour or someone at your office? How about the straight guy at work with the machine gun wit and ready smile?

Now, imagine that the guy you have a crush on is not just working in the next cubicle but beside you night and day – showering together, sleeping together, eating together, and taking shelter from enemy fire together. What if you are both away from home and scared shitless because there are people in close proximity whose job it is to kill you.

This November we should stop to remember all the soldiers, both current and past, who have served our country in war. As we reflect on those men and women who have given of themselves for our freedom, we might pause to consider the gay soldier and his particular struggle.

Until 1999, there was an official ban on gay and lesbian soldiers in the Armed Forces. If caught, they faced dismissal and/or harsh prison sentences. But that doesn't mean they weren't there, fighting alongside their fellow men. During WW1 and WW2 there was a need for soldiers (five million of them in WW2) so there weren't really a lot of questions asked about sexuality. One estimate puts the number of gay and lesbian soldiers in the two world wars to be about half a million.

I recently came across an account, as told by Peter Tatchell, of Private Dudley Cave, who served in WW2.

Private Cave says there weren't too many questions asked by the recruiting officers. "People were put in the army regardless of whether they were gay or not. It didn't seem to bother the military authorities. There was none of the later homophobic uproar about gays undermining military discipline and effectiveness. With Britain seriously threatened by the Nazis, the forces weren't fussy about who they accepted."

Cave mostly experienced cohesion within the forces, and like today, there were some gay soldiers more visible than others. "The visible gays were mostly drag performers in concert teams. Regarded with considerable affection, their camp humour helped lift the men's spirits." Whether in a dress or in fatigues, they fought together. "All the gays and straights worked together as a team. We had to because our lives might have depended on it."

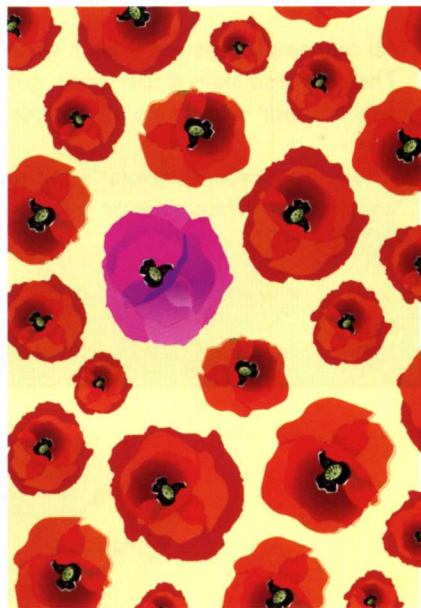
And boys being boys, they sometimes found an outlet for their sexual feelings. Private Cave remembers one who served his country in his own way. "One was renowned for [providing sexual favours] in the mangrove swamps. He was well liked. Even supposedly straight men made use of his services. You could say he did a lot to maintain the unit's morale. When a zealous sergeant attempted to charge him with being out of barracks after lights out, the commanding officer, who knew exactly what went on in the swamps, dismissed the charges. He had the wisdom to know that it was all harmless fun and a useful relief from the stress of war."

Perhaps more well-known were the WW1 soldier/poets Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, both of whom were gay and wrote of the tortured experience of war. Owen joined the forces in 1915, at the age of 22, and in 1917 was sent to the front line as an Officer with the Manchester Regiment. There he experienced firsthand the horrors of trench warfare. Injured, he spent time recovering back in England where he met Sassoon who encouraged him to write more. I haven't seen any indication that they were lovers, but they must have helped each other come to terms with their peculiar situation of being soldiers who love men. While not necessarily voiced, their longing comes through their work. Owen died in the final days of battle. His family were informed on November 11, 1918 – the day the war ended.

While today our armed forces march in Gay Pride parades, it is important to remember that only ten years ago they were still being discharged from service if they revealed their sexual orientation. Duncan Lustig-Prean, John Beckett, Graeme Grady and Jeanette Smith were all dismissed from their military positions when they came out to their commanding officers. With the support of Stonewall, and other gay rights groups, they took their case to the European Court of Human Rights. It was only after the European

Court voted in favour of the gay and lesbian soldiers that the Ministry of Defence changed their discriminatory policy.

So this year, pause for two minutes on the 11th day of the 11th month at the 11th hour to reflect on all the soldiers who have served this country – both gay and straight – and their contribution to the freedom we enjoy today. ●



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