

VETERANS SPEAK OUT: A
COLLECTION OF ESSAYS FROM THE
DOCUMENTING COURAGE PROJECT[†]

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[†] The *Hofstra Labor & Employment Law Journal* is pleased to publish this collection of essays in this Symposium issue. This Symposium issue was inspired by Hofstra University's *Don't Ask, Don't Tell: 10 Years Later* Conference held on September 18-20, 2003 at Hofstra University. Some of the essays appearing in this section, first appeared as part of *Documenting Courage: Veteran Speak Out*. This project is designed to educate the Executive branch, members of Congress, and the public on the contributions of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender veterans. *Documenting Courage: Veterans Speak Out*, Human Rights Campaign, at www.hrc.org/Content/ContentGroups/Documenting_Courage/Stories2/Documenting_Courage_Veterans_Speak_Out2.htm (last visited April 12, 2004). The *Hofstra Labor & Employment Law Journal* would like to thank the authors, the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network and James A. Garland for supporting our efforts to assemble these essays for inclusion in this Volume.

*Phil Adams**

I grew up in San Francisco and lived in the Castro before it became known as a gay neighborhood. I entered the U.S. Naval Academy in the summer of 1979 and excelled there. My grades were excellent, and I was busy as captain of my battalion's crew team. I embraced Christianity as my excuse for why I wasn't dating girls—further delaying issues regarding my sexuality. I was conflicted about my sexual orientation, my religion, and the military's and society's homophobic norms.

I was a second lieutenant at the Marine Basic School in Quantico, Va., when the first significant terrorist attack on Americans took place late in 1983. In just a few months, we would be taking up the torch of freedom from our fellow officers—many of whom died in Beirut. In what must have seemed at the time like an act of complete insanity, I volunteered for duty with the Marine infantry. It was tough training but the beginning of a great challenge.

I was assigned to the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines and met 3rd Platoon, Company A at the Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center. There are few greater challenges for a young second lieutenant than to meet his rifle platoon for the first time in the field. I was very demanding—perhaps too demanding—at first. We were living in snow caves and traversing mountains with snow shoes. Over time, my Marines learned that I demanded more of myself than I required of them.

At this early point in my career, a young Hispanic marine from another platoon “came out” as gay to a chaplain. I watched the chain of events that took place very carefully. It confirmed my views about Marine leadership. This young man was afraid that if his peers found out

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that he was gay they would beat him up—maybe even kill him. Nothing was further from the truth. The first sergeant took time to speak with the young man and find out what he was all about. His company mates looked out for him and took care of him until he was discharged. There was never any discussion about his shower or living arrangements. We Marines were all brothers and the first sergeant made sure everyone understood that. Leadership creates the mindset of an organization, and the leadership in my unit set the standard.

Back at Camp Pendleton, I worked with my Marines to improve their performance as individuals and our performance as a platoon. Whenever we had “down” time in the field, I had available a number of prepared training topics. Sometimes I would use little green plastic soldiers I purchased from a toy store to coach my marines on infantry tactics. I added toy helicopters and tanks for combined-arms lessons. I even had a supply of cotton balls to simulate mortar or artillery shell impact points and gave my Marines a chance to develop “call for fire” skills. The “toys” kept the Marines entertained as we trained in blistering heat, rough field conditions, or crowded barracks.

Unlike other platoons, we rarely brought sleeping bags to the field. We did most of our training at night and slept during the day when it was warm. My Marines’ skills rivaled those of their peers in other platoons, and promotions were the rule for my platoon members. We prepared privates and lance corporals to become non-commissioned officers, and they learned skills they would need to serve at the staff level.

At one point during our training at the amphibious base in Coronado, California, my marines played a joke on me. At mail call, I received a plain manila envelope and opened it—revealing the contents to all present. Inside was a gay erotic magazine, which my Marines admitted they had sent. It was certainly funny to them, and it was their way of communicating to me their sense that they knew I was gay. It never affected our relationship.

In fact, everything we seemed to touch turned to gold. We were chosen to lead the battalion on tactical operations for dessert warfare training in 29 Palms, California. We practiced hostage evacuation operations, amphibious assaults, and chemical warfare exercises. I took numerous correspondence courses and challenged my Marines to improve their skills too. We led the 7th Marine Regiment in barracks inspections and were asked by our battalion commander to represent the battalion as the drilling platoon for the general inspection.

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I was selected to lead our company on the advance party to the 3rd Marine Division in Okinawa, arriving a month prior to the battalion's deployment overseas. I was selected to become the executive officer of Company A as a second lieutenant.

Just after my promotion to first lieutenant, I took command of a company. I took my Marines as the lead company of a battalion-level exercise to the Republic of Korea. We conducted live fire operations in Korea, where I was now in charge of a reinforced rifle company. I was awarded the Navy Achievement Medal for my performance on this exercise.

In 1986, I became the headquarters company commander for the Weapons Field Training Battalion, Edson Range, at Camp Pendleton. We trained Marine recruits on small arms marksmanship, and I enjoyed another successful command—this time having the privilege to lead women Marines too.

I know I have made a lasting difference in the lives of those who protect our national interests at home and abroad. I am proud to be an openly gay American, a graduate of Annapolis and a Marine for life—"once a Marine, always a Marine." I will never forget both who I am and where I come from, or elude my responsibility to make my community a better place for all people.