

*Lara Ballard**

My name is Lara Ballard, and I am a lesbian former Army officer. I used to find it hard to introduce myself to people that way, marrying these two very central aspects of my identity. These days I do it frequently, and it makes me feel better every time I say it.

I went into the Army for the same reason a lot of folks do—to pay for college. I attended Georgetown University on a full-tuition Army ROTC scholarship. I thought I wanted to be a foreign service officer, and the ROTC scholarship was the only way I could pay for my education.

The scholarship and the Army were also a way out of the small Tennessee town where I grew up. It brought me to Washington, D.C., where, naturally, it was only a matter of time before I encountered a vibrant and active gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community. Ironically, it was the Army that helped me come out of the closet, and I suspect that the military has served this purpose for a lot of people; getting us out of small homophobic towns and sending us to places like Washington, Berlin and the Netherlands—cosmopolitan places where we learn more about ourselves than ever before.

In 1992, I was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the air defense artillery, one of the few Army combat specialties open to women. I was assigned as the only woman in a leadership position in a ninety-person PATRIOT battery on an emergency deployment to Kuwait. That was the fall of 1992, when Bill Clinton was running for

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president and already talking about lifting the ban. The first time the subject of the ban came up, my battery commander joked about how everyone was going to have to be issued soap-on-a-rope, since it would no longer be safe to bend over in the shower. I suppose he thought this was funny, since every time Clinton was mentioned in conversation, he would exclaim, "Soap-on-a-rope!" I love the non-politically correct humor of the military, but in some cases it can create a command climate that is not only oppressive but also downright dangerous.

I remember once at about 2 a.m. while deployed to Kuwait, when a couple of infantry soldiers stopped by our command post (CP) as they were coming off their shifts. I was the officer in charge that night, and the only other person present was an enlisted soldier who manned the radios. The two infantry soldiers started up with the "soap-on-a-rope" jokes, and kept it up until their comments were beyond the point of decency. I finally shooed them out of the CP. I didn't criticize the jokes, but I told them the CP was not their hangout and they needed to go elsewhere. They left with a scowl. Even that, I knew, would raise suspicions—that I didn't think their jokes were funny could mean I was a lesbian. The enlisted soldier said nothing. I returned to the Upton Sinclair novel I was reading, and the CP was silent for several moments except for the quiet din of the generators outside.

"Thanks," the soldier said suddenly.

"Nothing to thank me for," I said, defensively. "The CP is not the damned water cooler." I was thinking, "I do not want to talk about this. I do not want to talk about what just happened with this soldier." I returned to my book.

"You know," he tried again, "there aren't many folks around here who read Upton Sinclair."

Aha! Now I was marked as both a faggot-lover and a socialist. I really did not want to have this conversation. I turned the book over and stared at the cover. "It's just something I picked up off the free stack on the bookshelf," I said nonchalantly.

Long silence. He stared at the door, again breaking in on my attempt to read. "Yeah," he sighed, "those guys . . ."

By now I had read the same paragraph five times. "The thing is," he said finally, "I have a gay cousin."

I put the book down. "OK," I said. I was trying my best to convey calm acceptance, but my heart was racing. I was thinking, "I do not want to have this conversation. I do not want to out myself to a soldier. And I do not want to have to lie to him."

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But his mind was not on me. A look of fear came over his face, as he realized what he had just said to me. “PLEASE don’t tell the guys about this,” he said, “They’ll think I’m ‘that way,’ too.”

I assured him, with a chuckle, that I would not tell a soul. Looking back, I think that moment was my first indication of how bad things were going to be under “don’t ask, don’t tell.” The policy was not only going to keep gays and lesbians in the closet, but also silence anyone who was heterosexual but knew better than to support such a policy. If you knew how many senior officers have said to me, “Strictly off the record, I think the ban should be lifted,” you’d wonder who it is that is supporting the policy. Yet no one thinks they can speak out.

The memory of that night has always struck me as so ironic—me, a closeted lesbian officer hearing true confessions in the middle of the night from a soldier who had committed the unpardonable sin of having a gay cousin.