

Written Statement of  
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To the  
Subcommittee on Military Personnel  
House Armed Services Committee  
U.S. House of Representatives

June 23, 2008

Madam Chairman, Members of the Committee and my fellow witnesses,

During my more than 30 years of service to the United States, I have seen and experienced what happens when our armed forces treat some service personnel as second-class citizens and, conversely, what we can achieve when we reverse those views and embrace all of our troops as first-class patriots with an important contribution to make.

I enlisted in the Army when I was 17 – in the days before we desegregated our fighting units or our park fountains. My father was a laborer, and my mother was a domestic worker. And there was, quite simply, no way I was headed to college. So I decided to head to the military instead.

I served in segregated units in both the United States and Europe before being selected to attend an integrated Leadership Academy and then Officers Candidate School. After Officers Candidate School, I was assigned to a combat arms unit. When I reported for duty, however, I was promptly reassigned to a service unit that was all-black.

The message was clear: It did not matter that I was a qualified Field Artillery Officer who was qualified to serve in the all-white combat arms unit. It only mattered that I was black.

Madam Chairman, I know what it is like to be thought of as second-class, and I know what it is like to have your hard work dismissed because of who you are or what you look like. I also know what a difference it made when we placed qualification ahead of discrimination and tore down the walls of racial prejudice in our fighting forces.

As an Army commander, I also know how disruptive it would be to remove a trained, skilled service member from a unit. It is bewildering, and counter-intuitive, to me that we maintain a federal law that says, no matter how well a person does his or her job . . . no matter how integral to their unit they are . . . they must be removed, disrespected and dismissed because of who they happen to be, or who they happen to love.

That is why I am grateful to have the opportunity today to urge Congress to repeal “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” The military has shown it excels at blending people together from different backgrounds and beliefs, putting the mission first. I ask Congress to repeal “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” and allow the military to benefit from having the best and the brightest serve regardless of sexual orientation.

In Korea, I was assigned to a Field Artillery Unit that was totally integrated. The unit consisted of individuals from all walks of life who were white, black and brown. There was never a problem of unit morale or unit cohesion. The only thing that the soldiers were interested in was your ability to perform, and whether you could be depended upon when the going got tough.

One thing that I learned from serving in the Korean conflict is that in a 24 hour combat situation, the troops are not concerned about who you are or what you believe, but whether you can perform. Performance would mean the difference between winning or losing, life or death. I soon learned from the Senior NCO’s that the key to success was performance. That is true fifty years later and it will be true one hundred years into the future.

As Battery Executive Officer in Korea, I supervised a Sergeant First Class, a communication Chief, who happened to be gay.

The Sergeant was in charge of the unit’s communication system, including maintenance, organization and design. He was, to put it plainly, essential to the unit’s performance, and he was damn good at his job, too. Having to remove him from that position, and from the Army entirely, would have harmed our unit’s ability to get our job done.

There are some who say that removing a few gay troops won’t make a difference. But to commanders who need an Arabic linguist on the ground in Iraq, it can make a very big difference, indeed. And to a parent whose son is bleeding on the battlefield, and being saved by a lesbian nurse, it makes quite a difference, too. Our armed services have always believed in, and promoted, the very true idea that one person can make a real difference in our country and our military.

This committee should be concerned, first and foremost, about the readiness of armed forces, and the personnel policies that best serve that readiness. And all of us here today know that, when the federal government gives the order, commanders re-iterate it and service members salute and follow it.

As a combat leader, I learned to constantly train my troops to adapt to changing combat conditions, to changing weapons systems, to changing terrain. In the 1980’s, I was Division Commander of the 84<sup>th</sup> Reserve Training Division, testing our mobilization planning by establishing new training models. Military leadership, indeed, is about being able to constantly adapt to change. That is why we are the best military in the world and that is why we are better than the outdated arguments that some still use to prop up “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.”

Because of this law, five dozen Arabic language experts have been dismissed. Nearly 800 people with skills the DoD admits are ‘mission-critical’ have been sent home. And, according to sound research,

another 41,000 lesbian and gay Americans who want to serve have been reluctant to sign up. That's the equivalent of 15 to 20 brigades. And it's unacceptable that we have said we do not want them.

"Don't Ask, Don't Tell" hurts our military readiness. It undermines our commitment to being a nation where we are all equal in the eyes of the law. And it ties the hands of commanders who want to welcome and retain America's best and brightest into the military fold.

It's time, for the sake of our military, to end this modern-day prejudice and embrace all of our troops as first-class patriots with an important contribution to make.