

**House Committee on Armed Services  
Subcommittee on Military Personnel  
Testimony of Captain Joan E. Darrah, U.S. Navy (Ret)  
July 23, 2008**

Good afternoon. Chairwoman Davis and Committee Members, thank you for the opportunity to testify during this review of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” law.

My name is Joan Darrah. I joined the Navy in 1972 and served 29 ½ years. I retired in June 2002 as a Captain. Throughout my career, as a Naval Intelligence officer, I had many different assignments ranging from operational to administrative in focus. I am a graduate of the Navy War College and served as the Aide to the President of the War College. During my career, my assignments included serving as the senior Intelligence officer for all East Coast P-3 squadrons. I was also the Deputy Commander and Chief of Staff of the Naval Intelligence Command. My final tour of duty was on the staff of the Director of Naval Intelligence where I was the Officer and Enlisted Community Manager and was responsible for all policies that impacted recruiting and retention for the Intelligence community. Thus, I fully understand and appreciate the importance of being able to recruit and retain the highest quality people.

In all of these assignments, I was the first women to hold the position. During my career, I was awarded numerous medals and personal decorations, including three Legion of Merit and three Meritorious Service medals.

When I joined the Navy, I didn’t know I was gay. By the time I realized it, I was well into my Navy career and, according to my promotion record and fitness reports, I was making a difference.

It is only now that I have been retired for six years that I fully realize how incredibly stressful it was to live under “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” For the last many years of my career, whenever the Admiral would call me to his office, I would be 99.9% certain it was to discuss an operational issue, but there was always that fear in the back of my mind that somehow I had been outed and the Admiral was calling me in to tell me I was fired. The constant fear of being outed and fired even though your performance is exceptional, is hard to quantify.

“Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” discourages thousands of talented and patriotic citizens from joining the military because, rightly so, they refuse to live a lie. This is a tremendous loss to our military. When a smart, energetic, young person, who happens to be gay, asks me about joining the service, I strongly recommend that they do not join. I love the Navy. It is painful to me to recommend to someone, who could contribute so much, to take their talents elsewhere.

In my opinion, gay kids are no longer willing to pretend to be straight and straight kids don't expect them to pretend. Rather than join the military, young gay people will seek out an employer who values them for all that they are. Times have changed; young people today have clearly demonstrated that they are able to work in harmony with all kinds of people.

When I was assigned as the Deputy Commander and Chief of Staff at the Naval Intelligence Command, I supervised almost 1500 people and had several openly gay civilians in my command. The morale and productivity of the command was extremely high and these gay employees were judged, like everyone else, on their demonstrated ability and performance.

During my career, I watched helplessly as several highly-trained and experienced intelligence specialists were forced to leave the Navy because they were gay. I have met many gay service members, who upon separating, were immediately hired by other employers who were eager to have such highly-trained and motivated subject matter experts. Military readiness is achieved by attracting and retaining the best and the brightest; "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" clearly undermines the military readiness of our country.

In September of 2001, the true impact of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" on me personally came into sharp focus. On Tuesday, September 11, I was at the Pentagon attending the weekly 8:30 intelligence briefing. During the briefing, we watched on CNN as the planes hit the Twin Towers. Finally at 9:30 my meeting was adjourned. When American Flight 77 slammed into the Pentagon, I was at the Pentagon bus stop. As it turned out, the space I had been in seven minutes earlier was completely destroyed. Seven of my co-workers were killed. The reality is that if I had been killed, my partner then of 11 years, would have been the last to know as I had not dared to list her in my emergency contact information. It was the events of Sept 11 that made me realize that "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was taking a much greater toll than I had ever admitted. It caused me to refocus my priorities, and on 1 June, 2002, one year earlier than I had originally planned, I retired.

Since I have retired, I have come out to many people with whom I served – seniors, juniors, and co-workers. Many said they already knew that I was gay, and without exception, everyone has said they were pleased that I had continued to serve in spite of the extra stress I had to endure.

I care so much about the Navy and want our military to be the best it can be. Twenty-four countries who also care about the quality of their military, have determined that allowing gays to serve openly is the right policy. I am certain that this is also the right policy for the U.S. military. There is no empirical data showing that gays serving openly are in any way disruptive to good order and discipline. The homophobia of a few is the only explanation for keeping "Don't Ask, Don't All."

We didn't let racism prevent us from integrating Blacks. We didn't let sexism prevent us from fully integrating women. We cannot let homophobia continue to prevent us from doing what is right now.

When "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" is repealed and replaced with a policy of non-discrimination, many highly-qualified young gay people who refuse to live a lie will be much more inclined to join the military. Other people, especially younger ones, who are likely already out to some of their shipmates, will be much more inclined to reenlist. While more senior/older personnel might opt to keep their sexual orientation private, at least they will finally be able to go to work each day without the fear of being fired because someone has discovered they are gay.

In summary, if we want to have the most capable and ready military, we must be able to recruit and retain the best and the brightest. Don't Ask, Don't Tell stands in the way of that goal.