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LGBTQ Experiences in World War II and Their Impact on the Development of LGBTQ Culture

An often overlooked consequence of World War II in America is the effect it had on the expression of people's sexuality. World War II was an extreme disruption in gender roles and patterns of the twentieth century. Many men and women were taken from the overwhelmingly heterosexual environments of their families and small towns and were sent to single-gender environments in an attempt to help the wartime effort. For instance, Men were drafted or voluntarily enlisted in the military to help the wartime effort, placing themselves in a largely male environment. For women that enlisted in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) the results were similar, they were socialized solely with women. The WAAC also gave women the ability to exist outside of the strict gender stereotypes they experienced at home. These situations allowed for people to explore and pursue their sexuality. Experiences that LGBTQ people had as enlisted soldiers during World War II lead to the creation of visible gay culture and identities in 20th century America. After the war their experiences gave LGBTQ people the community, confidence, and knowledge of themselves to create visible gay culture in the sense of meeting places and organizations, effectively serving as a coming out experience. The blue discharges that many LGBTQ veterans received also effectively caused veterans to recognize themselves as a targeted minority and fight against discrimination publically.

Before World War II, many LGBTQ youth in America lived in sheltered, small communities that did not generally encourage the pursuit of relationships that were not

heterosexual.¹ LGBTQ people were never given the support to come out and live as themselves. There was minimal media to acknowledge them and no leaders or organizations to support them, and oftentimes because of this, LGBTQ people didn't know anybody else that was like them.² They lived lives in which they were never able to understand their sexuality because of a lack of support from society. They often felt alone, confused, and ashamed of who they were.³ One gay GI, named Chuck, described his motivation to leave his home town as follows, "I was 17, my home life wasn't that happy, and it was wartime- a way out for me. That's really why I went in the first place, as an enlisted soldier."⁴ For many young people who were unsure of their identities and knew they wouldn't be able to find the support they needed at home, enlisting in the military provided an opportunity to get out. The promise of new people and potential community away from the strict rules of their hometowns.

The women only environment of the newly established WAAC offered lesbian women the ability to pursue lesbian relationships and overcome isolation by finding community. The WAAC was established to enlist women soldiers in combat positions for the first time in American history.⁵ Lesbians in the WAAC found each other quickly and developed relationships and communities with each other.⁶ One lesbian GI, Pat Bond, described how the dating culture functioned at camp as follows, "Everybody was going with someone, or had a crush on

¹ D'emilio, John. "Capitalism and Gay Identity." Powers of Desire: "The Politics of Sexuality," by Ann Snitow et al., NYU Press, 1983, pp. 100-14. JSTOR.

² Bérubé Allan. *Coming Out Under Fire : The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two*. New York: Free Press, 1990.

³ Bérubé Allan. *Coming Out Under Fire*

⁴ Humphrey, Mary Ann. *My Country, my Right to Serve: Experiences of Gay Men and Women in the Military, World War II to the present*. 1990. 43.

⁵ Bérubé Allan. *Coming Out Under Fire*

⁶ Bérubé Allan. *Coming Out Under Fire*

somebody, or was getting ready to go with someone.”⁷ Before joining the WAAC, few women were given the social spaces to pursue relationships, especially lesbian ones.⁸ The WAAC created a strong social community through weekend trips to cities, common room activities, and dining halls.⁹ Women were constantly socialized only with other women, letting lesbian relationships start and grow. Another lesbian GI named Johnnie Phelps described the high quantity of lesbians in the WAAC as follows, “There were almost 900 women in that battalion. I could honestly say 95 percent of them were lesbians.”¹⁰ The living, dining, and working conditions women experienced while enlisted in the WAAC gave out lesbians the ability to find partners and gave questioning women the chance to explore their sexuality because of the constant socialization.

Joining the WAAC was also a gender-affirming and identity-affirming experience for lesbians and gender queer people because of the type of work they were able to pursue and uniform they had to wear. Before the war, women could only serve as nurses in the military and had very limited job opportunities in society.¹¹ The WAAC allowed women to do jobs that were considered much less feminine, like becoming pilots.¹² For some lesbians this was a very gender-affirming opportunity because they were finally given the chance to work outside of the strict, gendered expectations that had been placed on them. Johnnie Phelps described the manner in which they were trained, “...but the guys who trained us did not allow for the fact that we were

⁷ Bérubé Allan. *Coming Out Under Fire* 42.

⁸ D’emilio, John. "Capitalism and Gay Identity"

⁹ Bérubé Allan. *Coming Out Under Fire*

¹⁰ Humphrey, Mary Ann. *My Country* 40.

¹¹ Bérubé Allan. *Coming Out Under Fire*

¹² Meyer, Leisa D. “Creating G.I. Jane: The Regulation of Sexuality and Sexual Behavior in the Women’s Army Corps during World War II.” *Feminist Studies* 18, no. 3 (1992): 581–601. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178084>.

women at all. We trained exactly like any other military unit.”¹³ In the WAAC women were trained to work with the same expectations and methods as men were.¹⁴ The uniform that the WAAC women had to wear also deviated from societal norms of the time.¹⁵ Pat Bond described the uniforms as follows, “We wore what amounted to a men’s uniform except we wore a skirt. We wore a tie, and we wore an Eisenhower jacket. And your hair had to be off your collar- it had to be that short.”¹⁶ WAAC women were given the chance to exist outside of gender stereotypes that had been enforced upon them their whole lives. This served as a gender-affirming experience for many people, allowing them to become more comfortable with themselves and live according to their identity.

Gay men who enlisted in the military experienced a similar ability to pursue gay relationships and community unlike they had experienced before. The military brought large numbers of gay men together, allowing communities to form. Arch Wilson, a GI enlisted in the military, described his experience of finding other gay men and coming to terms with his sexuality because of the military, “...I began to look for more types like me. I was, of course, surrounded by men all the time, but having little opportunity to do anything about it. The attractions were, of course, very powerful. In fact, by the time I got out of the service, I was pretty sure that was the direction I was going to go.”¹⁷ Oftentimes gay men would form strong groups with each other.¹⁸ Allan Bérubé describes the motivation behind forming cliques and their function as follows, “To protect themselves from ostracization or ridicule gay men could band together in cliques...Cliques gave lonely trainees that chance...to belong to a group of like minded

¹³ Humphrey, Mary Ann. *My Country* 38.

¹⁴ Meyer, Leisa D. “Creating G.I. Jane”

¹⁵ Bérubé Allan. *Coming Out Under Fire*

¹⁶ Bérubé Allan. *Coming Out Under Fire* 56.

¹⁷ Humphrey, Mary Ann. *My Country* 55.

¹⁸ Bérubé Allan. *Coming Out Under Fire*

friends- a home away from home.”¹⁹ In the large male only environment the military offered, gay men were able to find each other, people they could connect with, who understood them. This offered the opportunity for gay men to overcome the isolation they may have felt and to recognize that their sexuality was not something to be ashamed of because so many other men had the same experiences.

Once gay men and women found each other and formed strong friendships and romantic relationships they started to socialize with other gay and lesbian people. On the weekends and when they went off bases, men and women went into cities and were introduced to other LGBTQ people and places.²⁰ They learned and became socialized into LGBTQ culture.²¹ One GI, Bert Getis, described the social events that his other gay friends would introduce him to, “There was this wonderful queen of gay society in Louisville. He had wonderful parties for gay men and women. That was the first time I ever went to parties where there were gay women also.”²² Gay men and lesbian women started to socialize with each other in large numbers because they were able to build communities and move past the shame and isolation they previously felt about their identities.

Unfortunately, the visibility that LGBTQ people in the military found also led to unjust backlash from the United States Government. While LGBTQ people became more confident in their identities and started create meaningful relationships with each other, the government enlisted anti-gay policies.²³ The government deemed homosexuality unnatural and deviant and

¹⁹ Bérubé Allan. *Coming Out Under Fire* 55.

²⁰ Bérubé Allan. *Coming Out Under Fire*

²¹ Bérubé Allan. *Coming Out Under Fire*

²² Bérubé Allan. *Coming Out Under Fire* 111.

²³ D'Emilio, John and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*. Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2012.

decided that LGBTQ soldiers had no place in the service.²⁴ To remove them from the service they asked screening questions and gave any suspected LGBTQ person a dishonorable discharge.²⁵ Dishonorable discharges, also known as blue discharges, prevented veterans from obtaining benefits provided by the government as well as jobs because of the negative connotations associated with blue discharges.²⁶ One lesbian woman named Pat described the fear she had surrounding her blue discharge, “I myself was discharged from the service because of being a homosexual. I was given a U.D. or what is known as a Gay discharge. I of course thought my life was ruined. I didn’t know how I was going to explain away my years on a job sheet.”²⁷ Blue discharges proved extremely harmful to people's lives and prevented LGBTQ veterans from living their lives freely.

In post World War Two America, veterans with blue discharges joined together to fight against their unjust treatment, making themselves visible to Americans. Veterans that received discharges from the military returned home angry that they were denied the benefits that other veterans received.²⁸ The discrimination against LGBTQ people further reinforced to LGBTQ veterans that being LGBTQ was a part of their identity that they could suffer for. They realized that they had large numbers and that being LGBTQ in America was something to fight for. The government had recognized them, though negatively, which affirmed to them that they were different, that their homosexuality was important and real. To protest their blue discharges and exclusion from veteran benefits, they organized political groups, held protests, and wrote letters

²⁴ D’Emilio, John and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters*

²⁵ Bérubé Allan. *Coming Out Under Fire*

²⁶ Bérubé Allan. *Coming Out Under Fire*

²⁷ Loftin, Craig M, ed. *Letters to One : Gay and Lesbian Voices from the 1950s and 1960s*. Suny Series in Queer Politics and Cultures. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012.

²⁸ Bérubé Allan. *Coming Out Under Fire*

urging the government to revoke their blue discharges.²⁹ All of this protesting was very public for the rest of America to see at the time.³⁰ One reporter summarized the public nature of the protests as follows, “For a person to make such a complaint in his own case implies that he feels a sense of injustice so great that he is willing to risk publicizing the stigma of having been discharged from the Army under circumstances which savor disgrace.”³¹ LGBTQ veterans had overcome the shame they might have felt in their identity to band together and protest the discrimination they experienced in a very public manner. Americans were unable to ignore the LGBTQ minority any longer and had to recognize the discrimination that they faced.

After the war, LGBTQ men and women who had found community and confidence because of the military went forth and pursued lives centered around their identity, forming a visible culture. Instead of returning back to their hometowns, LGBTQ veterans stayed together in cities. One GI wrote in a diary entry the following describing his desire to stay with the community he had found, “I can’t change, have no desire to do so, because it took me a long, long time to figure out how to enjoy life...I’m not going back to what I left.”³² In cities, physical places of meeting like bars started to show up.³³ Bars provided places for LGBTQ people to socialize unlike they had been able to before. With the availability of community and also physical meeting places, LGBTQ veterans could live lives centered around their identity. A lesbian living in New York right after the war described the phenomenon, “..my experience was that it gave me an identity, a self-identity and for the first time a community identity.”³⁴ People

²⁹ Bérubé Allan. *Coming Out Under Fire*

³⁰ Bérubé Allan. *Coming Out Under Fire*

³¹ Bérubé Allan. *Coming Out Under Fire* 240.

³² Bérubé Allan. *Coming Out Under Fire* 244.

³³ D’Emilio, John and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters*

³⁴ D’Emilio, John and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 291.

had large LGBTQ friendgroups and engaged in and created different parts of LGBTQ culture including slang terms. This subculture became increasingly visible to the rest of American society.³⁵ People recognized gay bars and interacted with gay subculture on a much more frequent basis than they had before the war because there was a much more distinct gay culture and identity. LGBTQ people had used the war as a way to explore their sexuality and come out and they had no intention of going back into the closet after the war.

Before World War II, many LGBTQ people and people who were questioning their sexuality were given very little opportunity to pursue romantic relationships that were not heterosexual. World War II gave people the opportunity to find, socialize, and love other people who identified in similar ways that they did. Gay men and lesbian women were socialized in single-gendered spaces when they enrolled as soldiers, which gave them the freedom to explore their sexuality. Lesbian women that enlisted in the WAAC were also given the opportunity to work in jobs that were outside of the rigid, stereotypical work that women could do before the war. Though the war was beneficial for LGBTQ people in creating a strong community, the United States Government also enacted unjust policies that harmed LGBTQ soldiers. Many LGBTQ soldiers received blue discharges from their position because they were found out to be homosexual. After the war, the confidence and community that LGBTQ soldiers had gained fueled the formation of a strong, visible gay culture. The persecution of LGBTQ soldiers also caused people to band together and fight against the oppression they were experiencing, again making LGBTQ people more visible in post-World War II society.

³⁵ Bérubé Allan. *Coming Out Under Fire*

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