

# NIGHTLINE

ABC Nightline  
August 9, 2005

WASHINGTON, Aug. 9, 2005

Sgt. Robert Stout of Utica, Ohio, an Iraq war veteran and Purple Heart recipient, visited Capitol Hill a few weeks ago to meet with his state's senators.

Although Stout, 23, says the senators were called in advance of his visit - something the senators' aides dispute - neither Republican Sens. George Voinovich nor Mike Dewine would speak with him.

"I just said I wanted to introduce myself to my senator and discuss my state with him," Stout said.

But the fact that Stout is gay is the ultimate reason for his visit.

He wants to lobby Congress to change the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy, which prohibits homosexuals from disclosing their sexual orientation or speaking about homosexual relationships, while serving in the armed forces.

Stout was in the Army for five years and served in Iraq as a combat engineer for about 10 months. In May 2004, he was patrolling an area about an hour southeast of Samarra when he was injured by a grenade blast.

"The only thing I remember is I heard a loud bang," Stout said, "and it felt like somebody poured water all over my face."

The "water" was actually blood, and after two months of rehabilitation, Stout returned to Iraq with some shrapnel left in his body.

"A couple pieces are still in the arm," Stout said. "Couple pieces in the neck, and I got a couple scrapes on my face and legs."

Stout says he was already sick of living a lie, and in April 2005, his wounds prompted him to out himself to The Associated Press.

"The fact that I can fight, I can bleed, I can die just as good as every other straight man or woman in that military should not bar me from enlistment," he said.

Even though his admission violated "don't ask, don't tell," he quite literally and publicly "told". Stout was permitted to remain in the military until his normal discharge seven weeks later, as long as he signed a document.

"I would go ahead and sign a paper saying I would not engage in homosexual acts, make homosexual comments, or engage in homosexual marriage, and they would let me discharge naturally," Stout said.

In fact, discharging soldiers for being gay is on the wane. What the military calls "homosexual separations" were at a high until 2001, the year the first of two U.S. wars began.

By 2004, the number was about half that, from 1,227 "separations" in 2001 to 653 three years later.

"The Pentagon, of course, has a great need for bodies to fight, a great need for manpower," said Aaron Belkin, director of the Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military. "And in this war, just as was the case in Vietnam, and Korea, and Persian Gulf I, and World War II, the Pentagon is ceasing to discharge gay service members because it needs gays to serve in combat."

Belkin points to a military memo from March 1945. In the thick of World War II, the secretary of war changed the policy so that "the mere confession... (of) homosexual tendencies" no longer merited a discharge.

According to regulations from 1999 regarding soldiers in the Reserves, if a discharge for "homosexual conduct is not requested prior to the unit's receipt of alert notification, discharge is not authorized." In other words, gays stay in the military once their unit has been mobilized for action.

The Pentagon says declarations of being gay have never been enough for a discharge; it is gay actions that constitute proof. It has no explanation as to why the number of homosexual discharges has declined since 2001 and says the policy is still in effect.

"The policy is the policy that everybody feels is the most effective for this issue, which is not an easy issue. But the policy is not under review," said Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Lawrence Di Rita.

When he announced "don't ask, don't tell" in 1993, President Bill Clinton called it an imperfect solution for allowing gays to serve in the military while satisfying the concerns of generals.

While testifying in 1992 before the House Budget Committee, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell said, "To introduce a group of individuals and put them in with heterosexuals, put them in close proximity, ask them to share the most private of their facilities together - the bedroom, the barracks, the latrines, the showers - I think that's a very difficult problem to give the military."

But Stout disagrees.

"We had quite a number of gay soldiers in my battalion that were open with their fellow soldiers," he said. "And cohesion was not affected, morale was not affected, discipline was not affected."

The Army's recent recruiting struggles, as well as other issues, have a few conservative Republicans on Capitol Hill rethinking the "don't ask, don't tell" policy, like Rep. Wayne Gilchrest, R-Md., whose brother is gay.

Gilchrest, who served as a marine in Vietnam, is supporting legislation to allow gays and lesbians to serve openly in the military.

"I don't care if you are 18, 16, 25, whatever age is when you are in combat, you are not thinking about sex," he said. "You are thinking about staying alive, about keeping your buddy alive."

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld recently celebrated the Army's 230th birthday with these words: "The Army story is America's story, where anyone with a desire to serve and anyone with the drive and talent can excel."

Stout says that not just "anyone" can serve the country.

"I loved my job, my soldiers were great," Stout said. "The military is a wonderful institution, and if it wasn't for the 'don't ask, don't tell' policy, I'd be more than happy to stay in."