

Senate to seek views on gay ban



NATIONAL

NORFOLK, Va. (AP) — The Senate committee pondering the ban on gays in the military takes its inquiry to the decks of U.S. warships Monday, seeking the views of rank-and-file sailors out of earshot of Navy brass.

The senators have guaranteed confidentiality, but some crew members clearly regard the arriving Washington delegation as a minefield to negotiate with the utmost care.

"If they ask me, I'll tell them," said one veteran submariner whose boat is in port at the 130-ship Norfolk Naval Base, headquarters of the Navy's Atlantic Fleet. "But I'm not going looking for them." The submariner declined to share his opinions with a reporter.

Members of the Armed Forces Committee will visit the base for the first of two field hearings on the Pentagon's ban on gays serving openly, which President Bill Clinton wants to lift. The second hearing is scheduled for May 17 at an as yet unannounced military base.

After the morning shipboard tours and interviews at Norfolk, the senators will have a more traditional afternoon hearing, complete with facing tables, microphones and television cameras, open to all military members and their families.

Far from encouraging openness, however, that session in a Naval Air Station auditorium is stacked against anyone who opposes the ban, said Lt. j.g. Tracy Thorne, a Navy flier until he disclosed his homosexuality on national television a year ago.

"I'm disappointed they've chosen this setting. It makes it very difficult for anyone to come out and testify to overturn the ban," said Thorne, who last week learned he was to be placed on inactive reserve while his case is reviewed.

"The environment is completely hostile to someone who would move from the status quo," he said. "It's difficult for any straight member to come out and testify against the ban without being implicated as being gay."

Last week, other details of the hearings provoked angry words between two committee members. Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., argued with Sen. Sam Nunn, D-Ga., the committee chairman, about the expertise of witnesses testifying about gays in foreign military forces, all of whom were American.

Tempers have also flared at hearings of the House Armed Services Committee.

The shipboard interviews were arranged to permit more private conversations away from superior officers, who will likely attend the afternoon hearing. Any crew member may call a special telephone number to request time with a senator. The panel has promised confidentiality, saying names and information provided in those interviews won't be disclosed to superiors.

But sailors who spoke to The Associated Press after the field hearing was announced last Tuesday expressed concern about the event. All requested anonymity for this story, and many lamented the recent intrusion of politics into their lives.

The Navy has been coping with assorted economic and social changes, from plans to cut fleet strength and permit combat training for women to fallout from sexual misconduct at the Tailhook convention.

"I'd like to go, but I'm not getting in the middle of that mess," one sailor said of the hearing. "It won't make any difference. They're going to do what they want."

A two-year Navy man assigned to a shore unit said he plans to make a career of the service and didn't want to hurt his chances for advancement. "My command might not like me talking," he said.

With varying degrees of reluctance, most sailors said they were willing to accept homosexuals at base jobs. But none wanted to serve with gays at sea.

"They shouldn't have gay people on a ship," said the shore-based sailor. "If they're in a shore command, I don't see anything wrong with it. But for their personal safety, I think they shouldn't go in at all."

"I've got no problem with it as long as they can do their job," said a five-and-a-half-year veteran assigned to a cruiser. "But a ship is close quarters. I don't like the idea of getting undressed and having eyes on me all the time."

"When you're in the middle of the ocean sharing a bed with someone, alternating 12 hours on and 12 hours off, you want to know who you can trust," said an aircraft carrier crewman, an 11-year veteran.

None of the sailors said they would quit the Navy if the ban were lifted.

Slain man's daughter urges abortion rights

PENSACOLA, Fla. (AP) — The teen-age daughter of a slain abortion clinic doctor came to the city where her father was murdered and urged activists to stand up for abortion rights.

"My father lost his life to the hands of a civil rights opponent who decided to abort a 47-year-old man," Wendy Gunn told the crowd Saturday. "We must prove to the anti-choice movement that we will not be intimidated by their terrorism."

Michael F. Griffin, 31, a former Pensacola chemical plant worker, is accused of shooting Dr. David Gunn as he arrived at Pensacola Women's Medical Services March 10 in the midst of an anti-abortion demonstration. Griffin is scheduled to go on trial for murder June 21.

More than 1,000 people participated in Saturday's rally for abortion rights, police estimated.

The 18-year-old Ms. Gunn said she was inspired by her father, who performed abortions at several clinics, long before his death. "I wanted to be just like him," she said.

Meanwhile, 16 abortion opponents across town prayed around a vandalized memorial to women who have had abortions. The bronze statue of a woman kneeling in prayer had been smashed overnight.

At the abortion rights rally sponsored by the National Organization for Women, marchers carried signs that read "Former Fetus for Choice" and "We Won't Back Down — Stand up for Justice."

They chanted "Pro-life bigots feel the heat" and "Hitler would have loved you, Operation Rescue."

The march was greeted with two anti-abortion signs on the downtown route. A Knights of Columbus hall was adorned with a sign reading "Adoption, Not Abortion," and an airplane overhead pulled an anti-abortion banner that read: "Male Doctors Hide Behind NOW's Pants."

A counterdemonstration aimed at directly confronting the abortion rights marchers was called off a couple of weeks ago by its organizer, John Burt. A local representative of Houston-based Rescue America, Burt was leading the demonstration taking place when Gunn was shot.

'My father lost his life to the hands of a civil rights opponent who decided to abort a 47-year-old man.'

— Wendy Gunn, daughter of slain doctor

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