

# AIR FARCE WON

The military's thinly veiled war on lesbians and gay men continues, and the Air Force leads the pack with 414 discharges by Bob Roehr

The number of lesbians and gay men kicked out of the U.S. military in 1998 climbed to 1,145—even as the overall size of the military continued to shrink. It is the largest number of discharges in more than a decade.

The "don't ask, don't tell, don't pursue" policy was adopted in 1994. President Clinton pitched it as a compromise that would allow gay men and lesbians to serve in the military. However, the number of discharges has grown each year since the policy was put in place.

The policy is supposed to allow lesbians and gay men to serve if they keep their sexual orientation private. It punishes those who engage in homosexual acts or are open about their sexual

orientation. If a service member voluntarily states his or her homosexuality, discharge is automatic. In the case of a recruit still in basic training, a voluntary declaration of homosexuality means an administrative discharge that does not carry a bad-conduct stigma.

In the Air Force, discharges soared from 309 in 1997 to 414 in 1998—an Air Force record, according to the *San Antonio Express-News*; in the Army, discharges jumped from 197 to 310 during the same period. The Navy, meanwhile, showed a decrease from 413 in 1997 to 345 in 1998, while the Marines dipped from 78 to 76.

The Pentagon made the figures public Jan. 22, three days after Reps. Marty Meehan, D-Mass., and Connie Morella, R-Md.—as well as 22 other House members—sent a missive to Secretary of Defense Bill Cohen. Continued increases in discharges "should set off alarm bells as to whether 'don't ask, don't tell' is working properly," the group said.

"These numbers are shameful," blasts Dixon Osburn, co-executive director of the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network. "Military leaders have turned a blind eye to the continued asking, pursuit, and harassment of gays, lesbians and bisexuals serving our country."

Lackland Air Force Base, a training facility near San Antonio, accounted for 65 percent, or 271, of the Air Force's 414 discharges in 1998. An Air Force review concluded that most of the discharges were "unsolicited and voluntary." It suggested that young service members were using the policy to get out without blemishing their record.

But Michelle Benecke isn't buying it. "There is something terribly wrong at Lack-

land Air Force Base," says Benecke, SLDN's other co-executive director.

Her group is calling for "an impartial investigation...something the Pentagon itself admitted that it has no mechanism to do."

SLDN is also requesting a meeting with Lackland military officials.

"Our concern is to get to the bottom of this as quickly as possible," says Osburn, "but also [to] make sure that we are being thorough and accurate about it."

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Dixon Osburn (left) of the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network and Timothy McVeigh (center) at a January 1998 press conference regarding McVeigh's case against the Navy

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