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books

Fighting to Serve

Military literature highlights queers defending stars and stripes

by Karen Kudej

Conduct Unbecoming: Gays and Lesbians in the U.S. Military

by Randy Shilts; St. Martin's Griffin edition, 2005;
\$19.95 softcover

Beginning with Baron von Frederick Wilhelm Steuben, the first inspector general of the U.S. Army, whose training drills helped turn the tide of the Revolutionary War, homosexuals have been an integral part of the U.S. military. In *Conduct Unbecoming*, Randy Shilts traces the complex history of gays and lesbians who have had to fight in order to serve.

The strength of this text lies in its depth. Shilts interviewed more than 1,000 people and used the Freedom of Information Act to access documents pertaining to investigations of homosexuals in the military. He pays careful attention to the context in which the military's policies have evolved. He examines the history of discrimination against African Americans and women, addresses the social context under which women were first allowed to enlist and visits the early days of the movement when most gay rights activists were also anti-war activists with no compassion for queer servicemembers.

A blend of fact and narrative creates a compelling and often heartbreaking drama of those who have battled against military policy. Shilts touches on the stories of so many people that at times one may need to take a moment to remember whom he is writing about.

From large-scale purges involving Kafka-esque interrogations to elaborate cover-ups to hide scapegoating, Shilts uncovers the desperate lengths the military has taken to humiliate and discharge soldiers who have often had outstanding records of service. He uncovers double standards that have made activists out of otherwise passive individuals. He reveals that discharges for homosexuality drop significantly during times of war, even though the official military stance is that homosexuals compromise security and lower the morale of other troops. Sadly, when the wars end, many soldiers who would be happy to make a career out of service to their country are discharged for their sexual orientation. Thanks for your risking your life, don't let the door hit you on your way out.

Despite the hefty page count—the book weighs in at 752 pages not including the notes and index—Shilts has the right balance of anecdote, fact and exposi-

tion. Originally published in 1993, this reprinted edition is just as important now as it was a decade ago.

Secrets of a Gay Marine Porn Star

by Rich Merritt; Kensington Books, 2005;
\$15 softcover

Had space allowed, the title of Rich Merritt's engaging memoir could have been *Secrets of a Fundamentalist Gay Marine*

Cover Boy Porn Star Drug Addict Turned Lawyer. How does the president of the senior class at Bob Jones Academy, the country's most conservative fundamentalist Christian school, wind up as a gay Marine officer with eight porn movies to his name who makes the cover of *The New York Times Magazine* as a gay military poster boy? With honesty and much self-reflection, Merritt traces the threads that hold together the seemingly disparate elements of his life.

In the Marines, he found a camaraderie that had been

missing in his life as a self-proclaimed "super-good Christian." Off-duty, he and his gay military friends supported each other and socialized together; for military functions, they found what they called "stunt babes" to serve as their dates. In time, the stress of hiding his identity at work contributed to Merritt's move to porn.

"My country was telling my friends and me that we didn't belong where we were and that we had no right to be who we were." He adds: "I resolved to be the best Marine I could possibly be. But I was also going to be as gay as I could possibly be, and I was going to do it where the whole world could see."

His porn career became another secret for him to bear. After his service, Merritt attended law school and took on stress in a new form. He turned to drugs to help him get through his days, a move that ultimately drove a wedge between him and his partner and forced him to re-examine the things he values.

At times, Merritt's writing seems self-indulgent, but his apparent sincerity and his willingness to scrutinize himself on the page wins out in the end. In the book's epilogue, he writes: "When I started writing this book, I expected it to be a story

about me.... Instead, it turned out to be a story about many, many people." In the end, it is a story about a person with all his strengths and flaws, trying to find his place in a complicated world.

Secret Service: Untold Stories of Lesbians in the Military

by Zsa Zsa Gershick; Alyson Books, 2005;
\$14.95 softcover

Ever since women were first admitted to the military, they've had to struggle for acceptance. A 22-year Navy veteran who was among the first group of women to serve on a ship summed up men's attitudes toward military women by saying: "There's whores or queers. Take your pick."

While military personnel cannot be discharged for being female, they can be discharged, and at times have been imprisoned, for being lesbians. In *Secret Service: Untold Stories of Lesbians in the Military*, Zsa Zsa Gershick, who served in the Army Reserve from 1978 to 1983, gives voice to more than 20 women from all branches, including the U.S. Coast Guard. Some women were career officers whose service began in the '60s. Others are young enlistees who joined to give themselves new opportunities. All have had to tolerate a climate of secrecy and harassment where something as innocent as sitting on a fellow soldier's bunk can be grounds for suspicion.

Some women are defiant. A woman identified as A.G. Flynn recalls the day she enlisted in the Army. The recruiter convinced her to rethink her admission of homosexuality and signed her up. Flynn says, "After dinner I smoked a doob and scoped for girls headed to Fort Dix."

Some women cut short their careers. Barbara Owens married her co-worker to avoid a dishonorable discharge.

Others were forced out of service. Vicki Wagner was threatened with prison and ultimately discharged from the Air Force because she was seen kissing another woman.

While the stories are compelling, the format bogs down the reading. Gershick structures the book around interviews and includes her questions, which become repetitive. At times it seems as if she is trying to steer the subjects to particular answers. By the end of the book, Gershick is making the same point that she's made at the beginning. 10

MARIONBERRY SALON meets for a potluck discussion of Randy Shilts' *Conduct Unbecoming: Gays and Lesbians in the U.S. Military* at 6:30 p.m. Dec. 3 in Salem. For location contact Cary at 503-363-6036 or marionberrysalon@aol.com.

KAREN KUDEJ is a Portland free-lance writer.

