



# Serving Out Loud

Kevin Cathcart catches up with **Col. Margarethe Cammermeyer (Ret.)**, discussing the end of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” years after the groundbreaking suit Lambda Legal led on her behalf, as well as the critical work that remains to establish full equality in the military.

**KEVIN CATHCART:** This may sound like a silly question, but I guess I would just ask how you feel about the end of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” and the beginning of open service?

**COL. MARGARETHE CAMMERMEYER:** Well, what took them so long? In 1989, when I sought help from you at Lambda Legal, it seemed like we would just fight it, then it would change and it would all go away. Instead, it’s been years of struggle for lesbian, gay and bisexual service members. To see it all come to an end is a little unbelievable. But at the same time, it’s tragic too, because of all the careers sacrificed in the process of getting to this point.

**CATHCART:** Discrimination is never good, but when the government discriminates, it’s worse. The military is the country’s largest employer. To have the largest employer make this policy change, that automatically affects an incredible number of people. Organizations like Lambda Legal,

Servicemembers Legal Defense Network and Log Cabin Republicans toiled for years to see this day. I hope repeal will have an impact down the road on other employers, because if the military can finally end outright discrimination, then what’s the rationale for any other employer to continue to discriminate?

Because this policy had been in effect for so long, some people think that the ban started with “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” People have lost sight that this policy replaced other policies, which replaced other policies, and none of them were good.

**CAMMERMEYER:** I don’t think any time that you have a policy—especially a government policy—that discriminates against one group of people, it’s ever good. The military thought they were doing gay people a favor when they banned us from serving after World War II because, before that, many who served ended up in jail for violating the military’s sodomy law or were committed to a psychiatric hospital. It certainly perpetuated the notion that

**“IF THE MILITARY CAN END OUTRIGHT DISCRIMINATION, WHAT’S THE RATIONAL FOR ANY OTHER EMPLOYER TO CONTINUE TO DISCRIMINATE?”**

there was something wrong with being homosexual. It wasn’t until the ’70s that people started thinking that maybe there’s nothing wrong with being gay.

I was discharged prior to “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” but there’s a long history of sacrifice—people who came before and fought, even though they didn’t have the legal support that I ended up getting. Without them, we wouldn’t be here.

**CATHCART:** Yes, but on the other hand, a lot of people didn't fight back. A lot of people took the hit, and thousands were discharged. You chose to stand up and fight, which really made a difference. You played an enormous role, putting a human face on this policy. How did you decide to fight back?

**CAMMERMEYER:** I think what might have made a difference in my case was that I had already served for 25 years. All of those statements about why it was so dangerous for someone to be gay and serve in the military made no sense. Not only had I served in Vietnam, I had a family, I had kids, and I was your regular old grandmother. How dangerous could I be?

And then the fact that Barbara Streisand and Glenn Close became involved and wanted to tell the story of a service member and I happened to be it. That allowed for a picture of what our lives were like and what it meant to be dedicated to the American military and want to serve this country and the cost of pushing us out.

When I first came out, it was part of a top-secret security investigation because I wanted to go to the war college and be a general. Then six months later, I was told that they were going to be discharging me because of my honest statement. I felt that that was unfair, and I was not going to stand for it if there was any option.

It was very frightening, because I didn't have money to hire a legal team. I was ecstatic and felt such relief when Lambda Legal accepted my case. We fought the law, we fought my discharge. I lost in the military court, but because of Lambda Legal, and with the collaborative efforts of the Northwest Women's Law Center (now Legal Voice) and the Military Law Task Force, we won in federal court. And I was able to go back in the military. It would not have happened had it not been for Lambda Legal.

That's how it all began and, over these past 17 years, there have been remarkable opportunities to speak out on behalf of those who continued to serve and had to do so in silence.

**CATHCART:** What a change for them and for people coming in. Now, just recently, in 2010, you were appointed to the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services, right?

**CAMMERMEYER:** Yes—that committee helps evaluate the status of women in the military. We celebrated its 60th anniversary the same week "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was repealed. The appointment has

## "FOR THOSE SERVING IN THE MILITARY CURRENTLY, THEY ARE NOT NECESSARILY GOING TO TRUST THE PROCESS."

culminated my career in the military. When I first started, women couldn't be married, they couldn't have children, they had to wear dresses. This organization that I am now a part of is continuing to look at issues for women in the service and working to make that a better and more egalitarian work opportunity. I am the lowest ranking officer on that committee, as a retired colonel. It is made up of four general officers plus undersecretaries and movers and shakers committed to equality for women throughout the country. It's exciting, because that's what got me into trouble to begin with, wanting to be a general.

**13,000+  
SERVICE  
MEMBERS  
WERE DISCHARGED FROM  
THE MILITARY UNDER DADT**

**CATHCART:** Is there anything that you would want to say to lesbian, gay and bisexual people who are currently serving in the military or who are just starting their careers?

**CAMMERMEYER:** First, I would like to thank Lambda Legal for all of the work you did on my behalf and all of the other cases that you have taken on.

For those serving in the military currently, they are not necessarily going to trust the process, that people will still love them even though they now know that they are gay—because that internalized homophobia has been part of their military career all along. But what they *will* have is the relief not to worry about whether or not they are going to lose their careers because of their sexual orientation. It is a wonderful opportunity for them to move on with their careers and excel, and for us in America not to lose service members just because they happen to be gay. And for those coming in, they are going to be the movers and shakers, and society will continue to change and get better because of them.

**CATHCART:** The people who join the services this year and in years ahead, in many cases, are

going to be joining as out people, and they are never going to have to worry. It is the irony of our movement that it's designed to ensure that people younger than us, who are just coming up in the world, will never even have to think about the things that we had to think about.

Of course, there are still plenty of loose ends that need to be dealt with—benefit issues, partner issues. The government has not yet taken steps to address the widespread and lasting harm that DADT continues to inflict upon previously-discharged service members—including a disproportionate number of African-American women who were discharged at three times the rate at which they are represented in the armed services. Many received less-than-honorable discharges or have records noting that their discharge was based on DADT, outing them and adversely affecting their job opportunities. And we still need to address discrimination on the basis of gender identity and expression, as well as HIV.

**CAMMERMEYER:** If DOMA (the so-called Defense of Marriage Act) were repealed, the military would be forced to provide fully equal benefits for lesbian, gay and bisexual servicemembers who are married.

**CATHCART:** That's something Lambda Legal has been working on. We have the *Golinski* case in the federal district court in California that's a challenge to DOMA. The Justice Department filed a brief in the case, the first brief after the Attorney General announced that the administration was no longer going to defend DOMA. It reads like the sort of brief Lambda Legal has been filing for years. That's how strong the arguments are as to why DOMA is unconstitutional.

It's a multi-pronged effort. There are efforts in Congress to repeal DOMA, and there are efforts in the courts by Lambda Legal and all our sister legal organizations, and I will say I'm more confident about the courts than I am about Congress right now. I think the courts will find it unconstitutional first. But whether it happens legislatively, or in our case, or in another case, it will be an enormous moment to celebrate, just like the end of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." **L**