



## ACKNOWLEDGING



# A History of LGBTQIA+ Individuals in the Armed Forces

For much of U.S. history, LGBTQIA+ individuals in the military served in silence, navigating a system that often demanded concealment over authenticity. Yet their contributions were no less vital, their courage no less profound. As we reflect during Pride Month, it's important to honor not only the progress made—from "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" to open service—but also the resilience of those who paved the way, often at great personal cost. Their stories remind us that inclusion strengthens our institutions and that visibility is a form of service in itself.

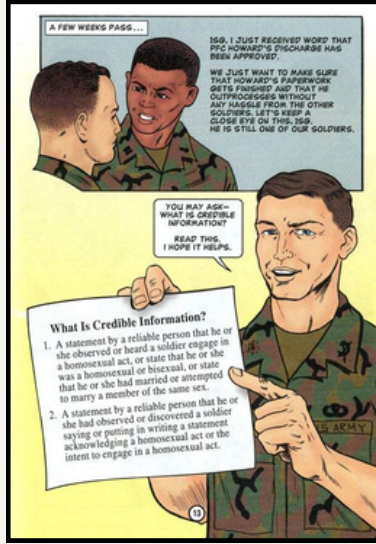
## Queer People have Always Existed in the Military

Queer history in the armed forces stretches further back than the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It's only in the modern era that service members are allowed to freely express their identities, but even before current times, the call to serve their nation reached all identities. One famous example is that of [Albert Cashier](#). Albert Cashier, born in 1843 in County Louth, Ireland, was one of the most widely known individuals assigned female at birth who lived as a man both during and after the Civil War. Enlisting in August 1862 under his chosen identity, Cashier served in Company G of the 95th Illinois Infantry, standing just 5'3" but gaining respect for his reliability and bravery across more than 40 engagements—including the [Siege of Vicksburg](#), [Red River](#) and [Nashville campaigns](#).



Albert Cashier photograph, source Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum

After the war ended in August 1865, Cashier returned to Illinois and continued life as a man—working various jobs, voting in elections, and drawing a veteran's pension. It wasn't until a leg fracture in 1910 that Cashier's assigned sex at birth became known. Though some officials attempted to compel him into wearing women's clothing, fellow soldiers vouched for his identity, preserving his pension. Cashier died in 1915 and was buried in uniform under the name Albert D.J. Cashier, recognized with full military honors



An excerpt from "Dignity and Respect", a military training guide on the homosexual conduct policy; image source wikipedia

## Serving During the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

While serving, LGBTQIA+ individuals were always conscious of the consequences of being outed. Since the Revolutionary War, homosexual behavior was grounds for discharge from the military. It wasn't until WWII that specific policies based on sexual orientation were drafted. When psychiatric screenings were introduced to the enlistment process, homosexuality was considered a disqualifying trait. The justification being that at the time, homosexuality was categorized [as a mental illness](#).

In the lead up to the War, service members found engaging in homosexual activity were court-martialed, imprisoned and dishonorably discharged. This process became inconvenient during open war, and so the infamous '[blue discharge](#)' became the standard method of purging gay and lesbian personnel. By 1944, policy dictated that homosexual individuals were to be committed to a military hospital under intensive psychiatric review before being discharged. This would evolve post war into two new classifications of discharge; 'general' and 'undesirable'. Under this system, men and women found to be gay but not having committed any homosexual acts were given the undesirable discharge, while those that had been found to engage in those activities were outright dishonorably discharged.

## 'Don't Ask Don't Tell'

In the fall of 1992, the murder of U.S. Navy Petty Officer Allen R. Schindler Jr.—a gay servicemember—sparked national outrage and became a flashpoint in the growing call to end the military's ban on gay personnel. The issue quickly rose to prominence during the 1992 presidential election, dividing opinion both inside and outside the armed forces. Some military leaders and policymakers argued that allowing homosexuals to serve posed a "physical and psychological" threat to unit cohesion. President-elect Bill Clinton expressed his intent to repeal the ban entirely, while members of Congress pushed instead to enshrine it in federal law. A compromise was eventually reached: the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy (DADT), officially titled "Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Pursue." Under DADT, military officials were prohibited from inquiring about a servicemember's sexual orientation, while servicemembers, in turn, were expected to remain silent or risk discharge if they disclosed being gay or engaged in same-sex relationships. The "Don't Pursue" clause required that a minimum evidentiary threshold be met before any investigation into a servicemember's orientation could begin.

## The Modern Era

Though framed at the time as a political compromise, Don't Ask, Don't Tell proved to be a deeply flawed and damaging policy. It forced LGBTQIA+ servicemembers into silence, requiring them to deny a core part of who they were in order to continue serving their country. Rather than offering protection, it legitimized discrimination and created a culture of fear and concealment. Over the course of its 17 years in effect, [more than 13,000 service members were discharged](#) under DADT—not for misconduct or failure to serve, but simply for being open about their identity. Countless others lived in daily fear of exposure, weighing the risks of authenticity against the careers and communities they had built. Yet out of that era of repression came resilience, advocacy, and growing public support. In 2010, the repeal of DADT signaled a turning point—not just in policy, but in the broader movement toward equity and dignity for LGBTQIA+ individuals in uniform. It was a reminder that progress, though often slow, is possible—and that the path toward a truly inclusive military continues with each voice raised and each story shared.