



The Impact of the Historic Policy to Ban Homosexuality in the UK Armed Forces: The Lived Experience of LGBT + Veterans

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Abstract

Introduction Until 12 January 2000, the UK Armed Forces retained a policy of discharging all gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender personnel under exemptive military laws. The so-called ‘gay ban’ was enforced with the rationale that homosexuality was incompatible with military service. Little research has explored the experiences of LGBT + veterans or the impact of the ‘gay ban’ policy.

Methods In 2021, 15 LGBT + veterans who had been affected by the ‘gay ban’ participated in semi-structured interviews lasting around 90 minutes. Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis.

Results Five overarching themes were identified in exploring the experiences and impact of the ‘gay ban’ policy: LGBT + identity struggle; camouflage; intense investigative process; extraction, exclusion and loss; and the personal impact.

Conclusions Serving in the UK Armed Forces during this homosexuality ban policy affected the social, health and well-being of LGBT + veterans. The necessity for LGBT + veterans to hide their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, the impact of investigations, loss of careers and alienation have led to long-term experiences of social isolation, loneliness due to barriers to connecting to others and difficulties around health and well-being.

Policy Implications LGBT + veteran vulnerability and traumatic experiences need to be understood in the context of help-seeking behaviour and service provision. The implications for policy change include achieving health and social care equity in relation to access to support services. Support services need to ensure that there is an awareness of the impact of serving under the discriminatory ‘gay ban’ policy.

Keywords LGBT · Veteran · Armed Forces · Camouflage · Isolation · Loneliness · Well-being

Introduction

The research that is the subject of this paper is the first empirical study in the UK to explore the lived experience of Armed Forces personnel serving under the so-called ‘gay ban’. The debate around the policy claim that homosexuals in the military threaten heterosexual serving personnel by causing offence, inducing ill-discipline, and compromising

security has been the topic of much international literature (e.g. Anderson & Smith, 2018; Belkin, 2003; Belkin & Levitt, 2001; Belkin & McNichol, 2001; Sundevall & Persson, 2016). However, few studies have focused on those individuals most affected by the ban and the long-term consequence of a policy that excluded homosexuals from the Armed Forces in the UK.

Official bans on homosexuality in the military first appeared in the early twentieth century. In the UK, the first prohibition of homosexuality was enforced as part of the Army and Air Forces Acts in 1955, followed by the Naval Discipline Act in 1957 (Harries-Jenkins & Dandeker, 1994). Among the Five Eyes (FVEY) alliance countries, the UK was one of the last to repeal the Armed Forces gay ban with Australia and Canada lifting the ban in 1992, New Zealand in 1993. The policy and procedure that regulated the exclusion of gay and lesbian military personnel ended in

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the United States (US) in 1993 when legislation was introduced to end the ban on homosexuals, commonly called ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ (Borch, 2010). This repeal began to shed light both on the discrimination and ill-treatment that LGBT + service personnel faced.

Prior to the ‘gay ban’ policy being redacted, Armed Forces personnel in the UK who were thought to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender were arrested and questioned by a section of the military police known as the Special Investigation Branch (SIB). Being ‘homosexual’ was cited as the criminal offence despite the fact that homosexuality was decriminalised in the UK in 1967 (Harries-Jenkins & Dandeker, 1994).

Despite the different routes that led to policy change in the US, Canada and in Europe, all had in common a belief that ‘the ban’ was a violation of Human Rights and Freedoms (Belkin, 2003). In Canada, federal courts instructed the lifting of the ban in October 1992 stating that it was a violation of Canada’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms. In the UK, the repeal was prompted by a ruling by the European Court of Human Rights that the UK policy that excluded homosexuals from the Armed Forces, solely based on their sexual status, violated Article 8 of the European Convention of Human Rights involving protection of an individual’s right to a family and private life (Edel, 2015). As a result, on 12 January 2000, the UK eliminated all restrictions on homosexuality in the military (Belkin & Evans, 2000; Oakes, 2001).

On 22 June 2022, the UK Government announced their intention to carry out a review to examine the experiences of LGBT veterans affected by the pre-2000 ban on homosexuality in the Armed Forces. For decades, prior to the rulings to end the ban, Armed Forces personnel faced significant challenges because of the ever-present threat of a policy that discharged all known gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender personnel. Evidence demonstrating the negative impact of the institutional silence and discrimination imposed on LGBT + service personnel by the discriminatory policy enacted by the Armed Forces is beginning to emerge both anecdotally and in academic literature (Paige et al., 2021).

International literature has indicated the negative impact of these policies on LGBT + veterans’ mental health (Cochran et al., 2013; Holloway et al., 2021; Ramirez & Sterzing, 2017). Specifically, a recent narrative review by Mark et al. (2019) highlighted the poor mental health and well-being of LGBT + active-duty service members and veterans including increased suicidality, substance use, poor physical health, vulnerability to sexual assault, and a lack of emotional and social support. Exposure to minority stressors such as stigma and discrimination within military and healthcare settings were additionally identified, which exacerbated mental health difficulties.

A more recent literature review by Paige et al. (2021) acknowledged the dearth of research investigating the impact of the UK Armed Forces ‘gay ban’ and provided preliminary evidence of the negative treatment British LGBT + military personnel were subjected to. This included traumatic investigations to uncover evidence of homosexuality and subsequent dishonourable discharges, forced resignations, and alienation from the military family without access to social, financial, or mental health support, which reduced overall well-being (Paige et al., 2021). However, the authors highlighted that much more research is needed to uncover the lived experiences of UK LGBT + military personnel to help identify areas of need and develop effective strategies to help them reconnect with the Armed Forces community and recover from the negative long-term impact of the ban, including feelings of social isolation and poor mental health (Paige et al., 2021).

The aim of this empirical research study was to examine the impact serving in the UK Armed Forces under the ‘gay ban’ policy through the lens of narratives as told by those affected, with specific consideration to the impact during and after service.

Methods

This paper is based on Phase One of an exploratory two-phase mixed methods research project aiming to examine the impact of the LGBT + Armed Forces ban on LGBT + veterans and, in turn, better understand their lived experience of social isolation and loneliness (Osborne & McGill, 2023). The aim of this Phase One was to understand the lived experience of the UK LGBT + Armed Forces ban; the findings were analysed independently informing the development of Phase Two.

To effectively meet the aims of the study, a peer-informed approach was implemented to actively recruit peer researchers from the LGBT + veterans community to support participation in the study (see Barker et al., 2022). This community engagement set out to create an atmosphere of inclusion and to foster a feeling of community trust and recognition of the ‘seldom heard’ voices through participating in the research (Horowitz et al., 2009).

Peer researchers also helped the research team to better understand the needs of the study population and take any sensitivities into account in the research process from data collection to dissemination. This ‘lived experience’ perspective was particularly beneficial in the recruitment process itself. The shared experiences and shared understanding between the peer researchers and potential participants were perceived as a positive influence on recruitment, providing reassurance, reducing, and removing barriers.

Table 1 Participant demographics ($N=15$)

Age	
Range	49–79 years
Mean (SD)	59.3 years (9.07)
Gender identity	
Man	40.0%
Woman	60.0%
Transgender history	20.0%
Armed Forces branch	
Royal Navy and Royal Marines	13.4%
British Army	53.3%
Royal Air Force	33.3%
Length of service	
Range	3–14 years
Mean (SD)	5.9 years (2.99)

Fifteen LGBT + veterans were recruited, from across the UK, through peer-led participant recruitment. This sample reflected a heterogeneous sample of LGBT + veterans that enlisted in the UK Armed Forces between 1955 and 2000 to capture the diversity of experience. All participants self-identified as being LGBT + and as having been affected by the ban (see Table 1 for participant demographics).

This project was approved through Northumbria University's Ethical Approval System. Before taking part, participants were given study information and asked to sign a consent form.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out by peer researchers with participants over the telephone and Zoom. The interview schedule was developed in consultation with Fighting With Pride (an LGBT + veterans charity) utilising open-ended style questions. The interviews lasted around 90 minutes and were recorded using a digital recorder and then transcribed and uploaded into NVivo 12 for analysis. All identifiable data was removed from the data at the point of transcription.

Transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis, enabling a methodological analysis of the data to identify themes and patterns of meaning (Costa et al., 2016). There are multiple approaches to thematic analysis; the authors adopted the six-phase framework set out by Braun and Clarke (2006) because it provides an accessible inductive approach to analyse complex data as it emerges organically through the coding process (Finlay, 2021). The six steps included familiarisation of the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes before a narrative was produced that best described the themes. Direct quotes from participants were used as an essential component to aid understanding of specific points of interpretation and demonstrate the prevalence of themes. The quotes also provide validity and merit and go beyond a description of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results

Five overarching themes with sub-themes were generated from participant interviews: LGBT + identity struggle; camouflage; intense investigative process; extraction, exclusion and loss; and the personal impact (see Table 2).

LGBT + Identity Struggle

Many participants struggled with their LGBT + identity before joining the Armed Forces. This struggle was compounded by a general sense of the prevailing prejudice towards the LGBT + community in the UK, which existed for decades and prior to their military service. The lack of social acceptance by society continued, for some, during military service because there was also a lack of acceptance in the military. This led to a struggle with a sense of belonging to both the LGBT + community and the military.

Table 2 Summary of overarching themes and sub-themes

Overarching themes	Sub-themes
LGBT + identity struggle	Environmental influences and societal prejudice Identity challenges during military service
Camouflage	Service before self: living a double life Chaff and flares: decoy behaviour
Intense investigative process	Privacy and intrusion Fear and scare tactics
Extraction, exclusion and loss	Social isolation Feelings of loss
The personal impact	Emotional health and well-being Connection and acceptance

This LGBT + identity struggle theme considers pre-military service and military life.

Environmental Influences and Societal Prejudice There were several pre-military service experiences that contributed to participants' struggle with their sexuality and/or gender identity from childhood through adolescence to early adulthood: environmental influences, societal prejudice, familial reactions, and early strategies to 'fit in'.

For many participants, questioning and discovery of their LGBT + identity began in the 1980s, during the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and at a time where wider society was not inclusive nor positive towards LGBT + people. References were made to societal prejudice, harassment and the language often used to discriminate against LGBT + individuals. Experiencing and witnessing this prior to military service contributed to their early difficulties reconciling their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

'We had everyone that was completely against people being gay'

'It really wasn't fashionable to be gay, if anything, you would have been singled out and harassed and all the rest of it'

'It just wasn't a word that was used as a... no one wanted to talk about it as a nice thing, you know, you were a bum bandit, or you know'

In addition to society's response, several participants referenced their family's reactions to their sexuality and/or gender identity which were mixed although primarily negative or dismissive.

'He said to me, it's a disease and it can be cured and those were his exact words'

'I did again try and tell my mum on various occasions and again each time it was a phase I was going through'

Often due to a lack of support and prejudice, participants felt they had to hide their true self from others. Participants often felt the pressure to conform to societal and familial expectations. This change in outward identity was a direct result of environmental influences.

'Now I have to start hiding myself'

'I just wanted to be the same as everybody else, I didn't want to be gay'

'It was trying to fit in to societal... and my family's, expectations and also because I knew it's easier, it's easier, if you're not gay'

The personal experiences that informed this theme are echoed in the quotes and illustrate personal struggles throughout the life course.

Identity Challenges During Military Service Identity challenges during military service began from the point of enlistment for some participants; however, it was clear in the transcripts that for many, the Armed Forces 'gay ban' was not discussed at this point. This meant that the level of awareness of the ban varied for participants, although the majority were unaware of the ban before they joined the military:

'I got in touch with the Careers Information Office, went and did my aptitude test and it was never really spoke about the fact of it being illegal to be gay, you know people just sort of, it wasn't spoke about'

Serving in the military during the ban was described as a hostile work environment where participants were exposed to a range of discriminatory and derogatory attitudes and behaviours, living under the threat of investigations. This made life more difficult for the participants and, for some, there was anger regarding an increasing incongruence between views of sexuality and their ability to do their job.

'It just made my life uncomfortable here on the station with the investigations, the police work, the odd word, the sort of threat to violence from other people'

'There was this increasing anger that why should my life be so offensive and so incongruous with being able to be an army nurse, it didn't make sense'

This led to questions as to why their LGBT + identity should be considered to impact their work. Challenges around their identity arose when they felt they had no choice but to hide this part of themselves from their colleagues and the military more broadly in order to protect their career.

'If I talked to anyone about it. God I'm going to lose my job'

As with pre-military service, there were a number of reactions to participants' LGBT + identity, this time from senior members of the military, creating further challenges.

*'I just said to him, I'm gay and he just went... He just hit the roof... there's no f***** room for you poofers in this man's army'*

'I went and saw the Brigadier and that was awful. She told me I was an utter disgrace to the corps, and I'd let the corps down and she hated me'

Identity challenges that were difficult to deal with were acute for participants during their military service. This had a long-lasting impact and contributed to personal conflict about identity and sexuality for the participants.

Camouflage

Camouflage techniques help military personnel to blend into the surrounding landscape by using patterns that break up the background and foreground, so they become blurred (Hansson, 2005). In the context of this current study, cultural camouflage is understood as a description of identity management strategies allowing participants to conceal perceived differences whilst protecting their cultural membership and identity investments in the military (see also Rome et al., 2022). This theme focusses on participants' camouflage behaviours that they engaged in to conceal their LGBT+ identity, which afforded participants a degree of perceived protection and safety.

Service Before Self: Living a Double Life Military values such as obedience, loyalty, and courage are highly important and are recognised characteristics of Armed Forces concept of 'service before self'. These symbolise the change from self-identity to military identity and culture (Buckman et al., 2013). Participants' military service was central to their identity, and therefore, their sexuality and/or gender identity (at least at first) came second to their job roles and careers. For those that were already aware of their LGBT+ identity, they began to hide this aspect of themselves.

'You're having to do and think and achieve all of the time and I think your sexuality falls away from you at that point, you know, you are too busy focused on what you need to do to get through to pass out'

'I was now in the job, so I'm going to lose the job if I don't hide everything'

Participants reported living a double life throughout their military service, behaving differently when in uniform and when not. This led to a lot of secrecy, hiding their sexuality from their colleagues and friends, not being able to be completely themselves.

'I was having to live a double life, sometimes triple life. What I mean by that is that when I was in the (MILITARY) trying to be someone I am not because society said this is what you are supposed to be but then coming back to (anon) and then living a completely different life again ... it was literally living sort of on a knife edge'

'It was like you were living this double life and that, you had to be careful who you told and just keep things under cover really'

'Fabrication in the gay community and then fabrication in your work'

Living a double life meant that participants were unable to live their lives fully in the military or when they were in

civilian society. This created barriers to connecting to others, potentially affecting the development and maintenance of friendships and relationships.

'We certainly wouldn't be holding hands or showing any affection towards each other. You just learned to adapt, and you learn to keep secrets. You learn to have a special language'

'I was always worried about when I met other gay people. I never used to tell people I was in the military because I was always worried about being shopped'

Maintaining this level of secrecy placed a significant demand on participants, and consequently, negative feelings began to arise regarding their military service. Several participants explained how this led to questions and thoughts of leaving military service, contradicting their 'service before self' ethos.

'As far as being gay in the military, it was always about having to keep the balls in the air without being found out'

'What was so difficult about it I think was, after a fantastic weekend and the thought of having to go and do that again on a Monday morning and just not be me anymore'

Chaff and Flares: Decoy Behaviour Living a double life also led to many exhibiting decoy behaviours. Chaff and flares are used by the military as defensive aid systems for aircraft to act as decoys to incoming missiles. In the context of this sub-theme, chaff and flares encompass participants' descriptions of adjusting outward behaviours and maintaining heterosexual relationships to divert attention away from their LGBT+ identity. The actions and behaviour of the participants were influenced by 'coping techniques' adopted to cover up for the perceived/enforced 'inadequacies' brought about by the ban.

Navigating non-heterosexual identities was complex whilst serving in the military. Participants' reflections on this highlighted, the sometimes elaborate, concealment of their stigmatised LGBT+ identity through over-compensating or deflecting. During interactions with others, some changed their behaviour to avoid people getting close to them.

'Styling it in this way where you're kind of, not aggressive, but you become unapproachable, so you throw up boundaries, you've got that attraction, inside me I had that attraction, but I was trying to throw everyone off the scent... you don't want people to get too close'
'To keep myself safe I would say if someone, like say a guy was attracted to me and sort of made moves, I

would say to myself, I'm gay, no, go away and then sometimes, if a woman did and I was really... I would think, no, I'm straight and go away sort of thing'

A number of participants reflected on their decision to maintain heterosexual relationships as a decoy and to shut down any question of their sexuality. This varied from being seen to date those of the opposite sex to following through to marriage. For some this was an attempt to avoid their own questions around their sexuality but what was prominent throughout transcripts was the desire to feel safe and deflect.

'We decided to get married so that nobody could even ever question us ever again – we got married in a registry office... You know it was a funny thing to do but we felt safe'

'I was always going out with men, going on dates with men, trying to be... not so much trying to be straight but trying to be not gay'

When questioned during investigations or as a result of rumours, participants would lie, diverting attention away from themselves. This constant need to hide a large part of their life and identity often put further strain on participants and was reinforced through witnessing colleagues being charged and losing their careers for being LGBT+.

*'You were always lying, always on the edge I suppose'
'You had to be really clever and on the edge of always being prepared to explain yourself in some way'
'A friend of mine came out as, well probably didn't even have a word for it, as transexual. She went to tell the Officer in Charge that she thought she was in the wrong gender – end of career'*

Leading a 'double life' and feeling unable to be open and honest about their sexuality lead to significant difficulties and challenges for participants.

Intense Investigative Process

Whilst serving in the military under the ban, personnel were exposed to military investigations into their sexuality by the Special Investigations Branch (SIB), often with criminal consequences. Participants reported these investigations as being intense, recalling intrusive questioning and breaches of privacy. During this time, there was heightened fear of what might happen to them, how they would be treated, the consequences and the backlash from these investigations. Several participants also noted how their experience of the investigative process impacted their mental health.

Privacy and Intrusion The very nature of the investigations into participants sexual orientation and/or gender identity resulted in recounts of violations and intrusions into their

personal lives. Special investigators were reported to have invaded their privacy, going through all of their possessions in addition to asking invasive questions about their social life and dating choices. For many, this occurred in front of their colleagues, nothing was kept private and confidential which had a wide, lasting impact on participants' careers, professional and personal relationships, and their ability to live their lives fully regardless of the outcome of investigations. Being investigated or being the subject of a rumour surrounding their LGBT+ identity drastically changed the way they could live their life.

'It was a complete violation of everything and that, you know, to watch your world been got through was... that's kind of a fairly inexplicable feeling as well'

'The questions that I was asked was just horrendous, they were absolutely horrendous'

'One was quite horrible, sort of shouting questions... They showed my photos, so they showed a photo of like seeing me sat on the bed with about 4 other women with our cuddly toys and just said, why are you sat on the bed? What were you doing? Were you having an orgy? What do you do when you have sex with a woman? Do you use clitoral stimulation? Do you use sex toys?'

'They took me, marched me down to my room, in full view, again of everyone and I had to stand in my room while they totally went through everything'

The questioning process during investigations was also found to be extensive. One participant in particular reflected on the length of time they were questioned and the emotional strain of this:

'I was taken into a room and these same two SIB women were there and they interrogated me for 6 hours without a break... I was just totally overwhelmed after 6 hours. I didn't have a break, wasn't offered any refreshments or toilet or anything. I was just broken down really'

Beyond the immediate investigations, participants reported that those carrying out the investigations were often found spending time around places and locations where they suspected the LGBT+ community socialised, with the goal to identify any serving military personnel. Participants felt their right to a private social life was violated. This extended into the investigations themselves, where the investigators would question them regarding these locations.

'They had people stationed outside the pub here investigating me. They had; they had the local civilian police here'

'My Officer in Charge kept grilling me. She wanted to know where we went for entertainment. What we

did with our time. She was always hoping that I would confess and give up the ghost of everybody that I knew. Give our secret places away'

Participants reported being sent to see a psychiatrist after admitting their sexuality—this was before they were discharged from the military and during the investigation. Questions from the psychiatrists were also very intrusive and one participant reported being sent for a medical check as well.

'I admitted I was a lesbian, but they sent me to see a psychiatrist. I still remember the psychiatrist. I don't remember anything else except he asked me if I masturbated. I am still trying to figure that out... I did lie, of course. But apparently that was how he assessed I was a lesbian'

'Various further interviews, various obscene, offensive questions. Sent to a psychiatrist to see if I was nuts. See if I was trying to just say that I was even though I wasn't. Sent for a medical examination of my nether regions to see if that would confirm it'

Fear and Scare Tactics Witnessing and experiencing the investigative process left participants fearing for themselves whilst serving in military during the ban. Reports of the investigations were unanimously negative, participants felt singled out and the behaviours of others often left them feeling fear and terror.

'They wanted to punish me, that's how I felt, that they wanted their pound of flesh'

'It was horrendous, it was shocking, it was scary. It was terrifying. The actual experience was horrific... When it started off, I wasn't quite sure how it would end'

Threats and intimidation by investigators were consistently described, with references to violence and being made to feel uncomfortable. These scare tactics were often used in an attempt to gain more information and to isolate participants from their colleagues, although at times the threats and intimidation also came from their colleagues as well.

'But it just made my life uncomfortable here on the station with the investigations, the police work, the odd word, the sort of threat to violence from other people'

'They beasted me, unmerciful, they were just, they could not have been any worse. There was no physical violence, they didn't need to be able to punch you'

These scare tactics went further for some, who were told that their family and friends would be involved and interrogated in a search for incriminating evidence:

'There's the SIB... You know, them twats got involved for two days. Complete intimidation, you know, it was about, we are going to go and talk to every single person that you know. We are going to turn your family's home upside down. We want to find any piece of evidence'

'Threats to send me to the medical block to be strip searched because they said they thought I had love bites on my back and then they said, they knew about my twin, that she was gay and that if I didn't sign then, you know, it was likely that they would get her. They said they'd contact my widowed mum and just tell her what was going on'

The fear and shame that affected participants resulted in numerous encounters with discrimination and intimidating behaviour from those in positions of authority. The impact of this was profound.

Extraction, Exclusion and Loss

Extraction refers to an action of removing something, especially using force, and is used in this context to reflect the forced isolation participants experienced upon being investigated and after dismissal. This theme also reflects on the sense of exclusion from peers, a loss of identity, networks and community and participants' mental health.

Social Isolation Throughout military service, feelings of exclusion were prominent leading to social isolation. This was particularly evident for those who experienced rumours or specific investigations into their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, where the camaraderie and sense of belonging they found through the military were broken. Many reported being treated differently as result:

'There's nobody I can go to. Just nobody, completely isolated'

'I was vilified. I was treated like a criminal'

'I mean I was like a social leper'

Physical isolation was reported during investigations, with participants being removed from their place of work and separated from their colleagues:

'It didn't matter that literally I've lost all of my friends... I was literally given 10 minutes, marched by RAF police to my room, given 3 big boxes and told to put everything in it and it would be shipped back to an address back in the UK or back here'

As a result of the treatment they experienced and the physical isolation from colleagues, participants felt

isolated from any support. They did not feel they could safely talk to any colleagues or even family and friends about what they were going through. There was also uncertainty around returning home upon discharge due to the difficulties of sharing what had happened.

‘Feeling all too often that there was nobody I could go to. Nobody who would understand it. Nobody who would get where I was coming from’

‘There were only a few people that I felt really close to in there, but I would never disclose anything, never ever disclose anything to them. As close as I was, you know, I just didn’t feel confident enough to be able to have that conversation’

‘I hadn’t declared it to them, and you know, I couldn’t say anything. I couldn’t go back home’

Feelings of Loss Experiences of being an LGBT + veteran were characterised by loss, loss of careers, camaraderie, friendships, stability, and support networks. These feelings of loss were exacerbated by dismissive treatment from colleagues and senior staff, with participants highlighting issues receiving promotions due to rumours around their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Once their LGBT + identity was revealed, successful and promising careers were lost.

‘It took away my career, it took away my pension, it took away my future. It just, it just utterly destroyed it and it took away a job I know I was good at... it just took away my home, my livelihood, my future, career, pension. It doesn’t really get much worse than that, does it?’

‘He’s right for promotion, but my unit said, we’re not going to promote him’

This dismissive treatment went beyond their experiences serving in the military and was reflected in the wording used on participants’ certificate of discharge. This is a document that details the date and reasoning for discharge or dismissal from the Armed Forces. For some, the wording of the explanations for discharge included ‘service is terminated’ or ‘services no longer required’. The consequences of this specific wording left many participants feeling as though they had nothing to show for their service or that what they had contributed to the Armed Forces in their career was not valued.

‘You’ve got your red book and it says, services no longer required’

‘Getting absolutely nothing out of it apart from a piece of paper that says you’re worthless’

This was more difficult to reconcile as many participants did not want to leave the military, regardless of their

experiences of poor treatment from colleagues and through the investigative process. The values of the Armed Forces were integral to how they lived their life—by honour bravery and sacrifice. They joined to do a job they believed in only for this to be terminated due to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity that had no bearing on their ability to do their job (despite the Ministry of Defence Policy stating otherwise). The impact of this on participants was wide reaching, with a stark contrast between life in the military and life post discharge. A loss of career came with a loss of finances, accommodation, relationships, and support networks.

‘I had done really well in my career, and I had all the best accolades, and I was due to get what we call our buttons, shortly after and there I was going off to a grotty little bedsit with no pension, no money... I had a few civilian clothes and a few personal possessions, but really nothing much at all and I wasn’t out to my parents’
‘I plummeted to depths that I didn’t believe were possible. Obviously, I’d lost my career, I’d lost my friends. I’d lost my livelihood, and this is a funny thing to say, but you’re kind of, you’re almost somebody when you’re in the military and you’re not, out here, you’re just nobody. You know, you’re Joe Soap out here’

The desperation for one participant in particular to delay the final verdict on their investigation to remain with the Armed Forces was clear:

‘I thought, that if I could fail my medical then it would give time for this solicitor to go through, you know, explore things. So, I came up with the idea that if I could break my wrist, you know, I wouldn’t be medically fit to be discharged... It just shows you the desperation. I just didn’t want to leave. I loved the Army’

The Personal Impact

There was a significant personal impact of the homosexuality ban, specifically regarding emotional health and well-being, their ability to cope with the consequences of the treatment they received as a result of the policy, the enduring impact on their perception of self and their desire to find acceptance.

Emotional Health and Well-Being Serving in the Armed Forces during the homosexuality ban had a major impact on participants’ emotional health and well-being. They were deeply affected by the consequences of rumours and investigations into their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

‘I got through that process and was discharged and that destroyed me’

‘Feeling a lack of worth, feeling unworthy... for a long time and it still affects me to an extent, that feeling of self-worth’

Participants reported a ‘just got on with it’ approach to their emotional health and well-being. There was an acknowledgement that no one discussed thoughts, feelings, or emotions and this was especially true for a number of participants. This attitude to emotional and mental health is characteristic of Armed Forces personnel and veterans’ response to a need for support (Blais et al., 2015; Iversen et al., 2010; Kiernan et al., 2018). For many this left them with feelings of loneliness that endured through military service into life post discharge.

‘I mean no one to talk about these emotions, being told by everyone on earth that you’re a bad person for having these emotions and you know, what do you do? People internalise things and things break out, you know, it’s just... eventually that will explode’

‘At that point I just felt completely alone. I didn’t know anyone else who’d been through this’

‘I do remember feeling incredibly lonely at times, but I didn’t see that as being particularly unusual and we kind of, I think we never even discussed it either, you know, my generation just got on with it really. You know we weren’t supposed to talk about loneliness or anything like that’

In an attempt to cope with the consequences of discharge and dismissal from the Armed Forces, participants referenced a number of maladaptive coping mechanisms. Several participants highlighted their use of compartmentalisation regarding their time in the Armed Forces, their experiences of investigations and hiding their LGBT+ identity. Their experiences, thoughts and feelings were often ‘put away’, and ignored, with some references to alcohol misuse.

‘Learn to live with it. Put it away in a little box somewhere... I can tell you that is not a very healthy coping strategy’

‘I’ve been able to put it in a box. I can lock that door on that box, and I can throw away the key’

‘Keeping this secret, obviously I took to drinking, but there was a heavy drinking culture anyway’

The consequences of their treatment in the Armed Forces under the homosexuality ban policy and subsequent difficulties in coping led to participants seeking medical intervention for their emotional and mental health. References were made to medication and clinical diagnoses as a result of their experiences.

‘Most people associate PTSD and the military with bombs, bullets, and everything else that goes with it,

because of what happened to me I have a diagnosis of PTSD’

‘After I had been out of the services, yeah, I went to psychotherapy. I just picked somebody out of the yellow pages... I was on anti-depressants for a while, just to get me through’

‘I’ve been in intensive care because of overdoses. Self-harm, my self-harm has got so severe that I’ve had skin grafts because I’d used caustic soda’

‘I was getting very depressed. I was sitting all day not being able to eat. I went down to about 8 stone. I eventually found a therapist and I realise, with hindsight, it is like that knock on effect. You know, I dealt with what I dealt with when I was 27, but by the time I was coming up to 40 and all those things happened, it just had that knock on effect’

Suicidal ideation as a result of their time serving during the homosexuality ban and subsequent intense investigations was reported in several participants’ transcripts. Discharge from the military itself was highlighted as a specific trigger for some participants, particularly due to the swift transition from military to civilian life.

‘It was deeply painful, and the actual investigation is the only time in my life that I very seriously, well I was about to kill myself because I just felt I had nothing left’

‘I suffered some big mental health issues when I left and you know, deep dark depressions and almost suicidal at points. Low mood, constant low mood’

The enduring impact on emotional health and well-being was vast, with specific reflections on participants’ perception of self. Self-perception is an image we hold about our self and traits (self-concept) and how we see these (self-esteem). Our perception of self influences how we choose to present ourselves to those around us. Experiences of discrimination both before enlisting and challenges during military service affected the way in which participants continued to live their lives. Specifically, this was evident in the way they continued to outwardly identify themselves to a certain extent, but also the enduring impact of what others had said about them.

‘I’ve just sort of felt this inner shame and I just can’t get rid of it’

‘I mean I was a really, what I consider a very, eventually, I was pretty confident and happy and outgoing and then just when I left it was like, I don’t know, I was just left with this shell of a person and I’ve stayed with it... it’s like I’m not the me I’m meant to be, if that makes sense’

‘I think the impact of it is almost like a shock to the system, you’re told, you know nobody, like you’ll

never get a job, you're you know, a pariah and you just believe it'

The impact on how participants viewed themselves exacerbated their reluctance to disclose the nature of their discharge or dismissal from the Armed Forces to prospective employers and resulted in participants continuing to hide their LGBT+ identity from others, former colleagues, family, friends, and any new people they met.

'There was many people I didn't tell really. I just kept it hidden, it was just inner shame that I carried internally for so many years'

'The thing that I found really hard and again it was a cause of great shame for us, going for jobs. I could always feel myself sweating and face going but I can always remember myself sweating and thinking, shit what do I say? Eventually I learned how to lie. I'd say, oh done my 6 years and I decided I didn't want to stay in'

'You start living your lie at a very early age and it becomes a pattern, you just lie all the time. It doesn't feel like a lie, it seems more avoiding the truth and playing a game, to belong, to feel the peer pressure of whatever that is, whatever your difference is, you want to comply, you want to be with your peers, you want to be like everybody else, so you adapt, and you keep on adapting nearly all your life'

Connection and Acceptance As a consequence of their time in the Armed Forces during the policy ban on homosexuality, some participants struggled to 'fit in' or find their place outside of the Armed Forces. There were a number of reasons for these difficulties including the immediate loss of structures established in the military, loss of camaraderie, support networks, problems finding a job, experiencing prison time and holding a criminal record.

'Not being able to fit in and constantly moving from job, to job, to job, to job, to job, because I just, I just couldn't hold it down. I found it really, really difficult, there's the structure and I think that's the other thing about what's unique to military people... The structure of the military really helps you to operate'

'I mean I have an honourable discharge and yet still have a criminal record for it'

After leaving military service, and having had to hide their LGBT+ identity, participants wanted to find true acceptance. There was a desire to be seen for who they were without the need to camouflage their thoughts, behaviours, or potential relationships.

'If you can't be who you are, you are not living, even if it is all your warts and spots and everything else, but you are not living'

'There is a world, there's a life, there's a scene where I can actually explore who I really am spatially and really find out who I am. I knew deep down who I was. I knew deep down I was gay, of course I did, but there was always this, you know, trying to fight it. I really began to enjoy life'

Peer support was a specific avenue that participants explored to find acceptance and a new sense of belonging that was once fostered in the military. It was felt that connecting with the LGBT+ veteran community would give them a safe space to be back in a military environment.

'I mean I would like to, where I can meet other people that have maybe been kicked out... I think it would be nice to be part of a group where there's other people there that know and you know, what I sort of went through. it would be nice to be around ex-military maybe and have that banter again'

'You felt so isolated for so long, just sort of like being in touch with other veterans that, not necessarily definitely had a similar experience, but although that does help greatly, but just to sort of get back into that sort of military family and have that camaraderie and not feel so isolated'

This was supported by those who had already accessed this peer community, reflecting on their positive experiences. Reconnecting with the Armed Forces Community, specifically LGBT+ veterans, gave them a connection, a sense of belonging and acceptance, thus improving their self-esteem and confidence.

'That accelerated everything, because it finally felt, I knew some gay people'

'Talking to other female veterans in Snowdonia and hearing their stories, it sort of really helped and we gelled so quickly, and we're sort of going to be lifelong friends and it's really helped my self-esteem and also helped my confidence'

The experiences described by the participants highlighted struggles to foster a sense of belonging whilst serving, difficulties in rebuilding their lives and obstacles in connecting with the military veteran population as civilians.

Discussion

This study explored the lived experience of LGBT+ veterans serving under the 'gay ban' policy and the impact following transition from the UK Armed Forces to civilian life. Prior to

lifting of the ban, the Ministry of Defence took the view that homosexuality was not compatible with serving in the Armed Forces because it was seen to undermine the ‘good order’ and ‘discipline’ necessary for military effectiveness (Dean Sinclair, 2009; Ministry of Defence, 1996). It was claimed that this was not about making a moral judgement but a practical response to the fact that service personnel are required to live and work together, and homosexual behaviour should be excluded from this way of life (Armed Forces Bill, 1995–96).

The findings from this study highlight the life-long challenges faced by the participants as a direct result of the discriminatory practice that accompanied the policy to exclude homosexuality. Whilst there were distinct, individual descriptions of hostile experiences, the culmination of these resulted in trauma for the majority of those who took part. In broad terms, the trauma related to concealment of their LGBT+ identity to conform to normative, prescribed heterosexual ways of being whilst serving in the military. This necessary protective strategy was not about erasing LGBT+ status but was steeped in fear of being found out. Given that concealment is an inherent invisible act, its social and organisational costs are difficult to correct. The identity concealment for participants was associated with detrimental outcomes and the loss of a sense of belonging to the Armed Forces community and, later to the veteran community.

It is recognised that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people experience considerable scrutiny, regulation, and violence as a result of living in societies that are shaped by normative ideologies in relation to sexuality and gender (Peel et al., 2021). The relationship between military masculinities and military service is well documented (Hale, 2012), where identity within military culture centres on physical and emotional toughness, stoicism, self-reliance, aggressiveness, and a robust sense of heterosexual identity (Bulmer, 2013). Arguably, the Armed Forces have relied on gender constructs that are underpinned by male, heterosexual gender constructs and the discriminatory policy to exclude homosexuals prior to 12 January 2000. The result of this manifested itself in the extreme for participants who masked their behaviour as service personnel. Some married in order to be seen and known as heterosexual, adopted behaviours that would be perceived as heterosexual and, essentially, lived a double life. In essence, this ‘decoy’ behaviour served to symbolise military identity and culture and ensured that their sexuality during service in the Armed Forces did not take precedence over their military career (see also Van Gilder, 2017). During interviews with UK military personnel in 2010, Bulmer (2013) uncovered enduring contradictions regarding perceptions of LGBT+ personnel despite the lifting of the ban. There were voiced commitments to equality but concerns that military personnel at Pride would be with or be men looking stereotypically ‘gay’ (Bulmer, 2013, pp. 143–144).

For participants in the study, concealment, despite being employed to gain acceptance and belonging, served to reduce feelings of belonging and led to negative, life-changing outcomes. The pervasiveness of the discriminatory policy and practices resulted in fewer employment options for LGBT+ veterans compounded by stigma and prejudice that also exposed participants to mental ill health. These findings are in line with US studies exploring the mental health consequences of the ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ policy and the psychological effects associated with identity disclosure and concealment, indicating a significant emotional cost, feelings of discomfort and shame as a result of a lack of acceptance (Alt, 2015; Barber, 2012; Tuomi, 2014).

For participants who were ‘outed’ or could no longer hide their LGBT+ identity, the military investigations were intrusive and intense. The process was described as terrifying, violent, and abusive. Similar experiences were found for military personnel serving in other countries under a ‘gay ban’. Participants in a US study by Mount et al. (2015) referred to LGBT+ military personnel as ‘a hunted group’ with long-term consequences on feelings of isolation and insecurity. As a result of investigations into participants’ sexual orientation and/or gender identity and resultant dismissal from the UK Armed Forces, some participants left with a criminal record, had their medals removed and lost their pensions. It is now becoming more widely recognised that a significant proportion of those who served during the ban were forced to resign and were, consequently, alienated from the military and left without access to financial support and were not able to access help for mental health-related issues (Paige et al., 2021).

This study also highlighted the prevalence of social isolation and loneliness as a result of the lack of social networks, mistrust, exclusion and loss. Experiences of social isolation and loneliness included the lack of transitional support, the loss of structure and the denial of any resettlement package. Participants also experienced a breakdown in relationships with their significant others because of the circumstances of their dismissal from the Armed Forces and this exacerbated their feelings of isolation. Experiencing social isolation and loneliness accelerated the need for access to peer-support and a connection with the LGBT+ veteran community. Research considering sexual orientation disclosure has reported a strong association with veterans’ sense of support and belonging, those whom experienced negative disclosure events described feelings of isolation and resentment (Tuomi, 2014).

It is important to consider the strengths and limitations of this study. Participants were recruited using peer researchers; the shared experiences and understanding of LGBT+ veterans had a positive influence on recruitment, providing reassurances and reducing potential barriers

‘outsiders’ may have encountered. However, it is worth noting that those that engaged with this study were primarily connected through existing LGBT + veteran networks. Considerations need to be given to potential participants from the wider LGBT + veteran community who may be hard to reach, with potentially little support to tell their stories.

Once the policy to exclude and dismiss LGBT + personnel from the British military was ruled as unlawful and the ban was lifted in 2000, sexual orientation became a ‘private matter’ (Basham, 2009). Whether or not this helped to ensure LGBT + serving personnel have the same respect afforded to heterosexual males is uncertain. There is an extensive body of literature available on the subject of diversity and inclusion and the Armed Forces community both in the UK and in the US recognising and fostering the contributions of diversity to military readiness and other elements of organisation effectiveness. The outcomes for LGBT + veterans who live with the harm caused by the discriminatory policy are still resulting in significant difficulties. The impact of the harms, for some, will be impossible to reverse and making amends will need to acknowledge this and the life-long harm that has been inflicted.

The findings and the main points raised in this discussion arose from Phase One of the wider project on LGBT + experiences of the UK Armed Forces gay ban policy. Phase Two, an online survey, was developed from these findings, focusing on LGBT + veterans’ experiences of serving in the UK Armed forces during the gay ban, support needs and connections to others and making amends. Triangulated results from Phase One and Phase Two are currently being prepared for publication.

Conclusions

Despite the redaction of the UK Armed Forces policy ban on homosexual more than two decades ago, little research has been undertaken to understand the experiences of serving during this ban or the lasting impact. International research has provided some indication as to the experiences of such policies, strategies used to conceal LGBT + identities and this impact of these and policies on mental health and social support. However, this is the first UK empirical research paper to address the gap in existing literature. Findings from this study highlight the importance of LGBT + veterans’ voices being heard and have allowed new insights into the lives of UK LGBT + military personnel prior to 2000. Serving during the homosexuality ban policy affected social, health and well-being of LGBT + veterans with long-term consequences for social isolation and loneliness. These findings are supported by those from international literature on similar exemptive policies and provide the basis for future research into this area.

Policy Implications

Leading opponents of recruiting LGBT + personnel in the Armed Forces purported that lifting of the ‘gay ban’ policy did not have a negative impact, despite their reservations (Belkin, 2003). This historic rhetoric demonstrates that it is clear that the impact on individuals who served under the ban had not been considered. It is now over 20 years since the ban was lifted and only relatively recently the voices of those impacted are being heard.

Following the release of the UK Government’s Veterans’ Strategy Action Plan, on 22 June 2022, it was announced that an independent review would take place to examine the experience of LGBT veterans who served under the ‘gay ban’ policy (Office for Veterans’ Affairs, 2022). This marked the formal acceptance by the Government that the policy to ban homosexuals from the Armed Forces was wrong and that the impact is far reaching. The Armed Forces deemed sexual minorities as a threat to operational effectiveness and national security (Ministry of Defence, 1994, 1996). Excluding sexual minorities from their ranks, the Armed Forces have produced prevalent notions of heteronormativity that has caused significant distress and long-lasting harm to the LGBT + veteran community in the UK.

In November 2022, the Armed Forces Covenant¹ was amended to include a statutory duty to have regard to the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant and ensure that support services (healthcare, education, and housing) give conscious consideration to the needs of the Armed Forces community. It is hoped that this research will contribute to raising awareness of the issues faced by LGBT + veterans who served under prior to 12 January 2000. As the legislation has now been designed around a duty to give regard to maximising the impact of the Armed Forces Covenant, it is also hoped that the voices of the participants will be heard and that they will provide an evidence base for building connections with peer-support organisations.

The UK Government-led independent review ended in June 2023 and a report was released on the 19 July 2023 revealing the full impact of the unjust policy to ban LGBT + military personnel prior to 2000 (The Rt. Hon Lord Etherton Kt KC PC, 2023). The report contains quotes from testimonials submitted to the call for evidence illustrating how the policy was enacted in practice and the effects of this on those who served in the military during this time. Forty-nine recommendations are made to the Government to demonstrate what needs to be done to acknowledge the

¹ Armed Forces Covenant is a pledge that together we acknowledge and understand that those who serve or who have served in the armed forces, and their families, should be treated with fairness and respect in the communities, economy, and society they serve with their lives.

wrong and unjust policy that has had lifelong consequences. In the research section of the report, it is acknowledged that the findings in this paper contributed to the development of these recommendations.

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Declarations

Ethics Approval This study was approved through the appropriate institutional ethical approval system and carried out in accordance with the ethical standards in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

Consent to Participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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