



Northumbria  
University  
NEWCASTLE



# An exploratory study of the experiences of LGBT+ veterans affected by 'the ban'

Dr Gill McGill and Dr Alison Osborne



# Conceptualisation

---

The Armed Forces in the UK implemented a policy of discharging all known gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender personnel up until 12 January 2000 – known as the 'gay ban'.

Although it is believed that many may be isolated and lonely, have poor health and have endured trauma, there is no academic evidence base to support this hypothesis.

Because of the lack of robust evidence, there is a risk of well-meaning initiative being based on assumption and not supported by lived experience to better identify support needs.





# Research Aim

---

Funded by The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust (Tackling Loneliness Programme)

The aim is to:

- Examine the personal impact of the ban upon LGBT+ veterans
- Inform the development of Fighting With Pride by providing a robust evidence base to prevent and respond to social isolation / loneliness



# Research Design

---

Mixed method approach over two phases:

Phase One - qualitative exploratory study to examine the personal impact of the ban upon the lives of a small cohort of LGBT+ veterans by facilitating individual participants to tell their story and talk about their experiences

Phase Two - quantitative survey informed by data collection from Phase One. The survey asked a number of closed and open questions. Specifically, the survey explored details of the impact of serving under the ban as well as access to support networks



# Data Collection – Phase One

---

- 15 participants were recruited from across the UK
- Before taking part, all participants were provided with study information and provided consent (in line with Ethical Approval)
- Peer-researchers from FWP carried out telephone interviews using a semi-structured interview schedule
- All three service branches of the UK Armed Forces were represented
- Interviews lasted circa 90 minutes and all identifiable data was removed
- Transcripts were analysed using Thematic Analysis





# Data Collection – Phase Two

---

- A survey was developed for dissemination to a wider participant cohort
- The survey was completed on-line to participants known to FWP
- Jisc Online Survey tool was used
- 101 surveys were completed and uploaded for analysis

# Phase 1 Findings

Thematic Analysis  
*(Braun & Clarke, 2006)*

Seven overarching themes and sub-themes

Overarching Themes	Sub-Themes
LGBT+ Identity Struggle	Pre-enlistment environmental influences and societal prejudice Identity challenges during 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 Impact on emotional health and well-being
Access to Support	No transitional support Family and friends' support Poor treatment and a reluctance to access support
Long-Term Impact of Serving During the Ban	Perception of self Finding a sense of connection and acceptance Criminal records
Making Amends	More complicated than an apology Finances - pensions



# LGBT+ Identity Struggles

PRE-ENLISTMENT ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIETAL PREJUDICE | IDENTITY CHALLENGES DURING SERVICE

*“We had everyone that was completely against people being gay”*

*“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”*

*“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”*

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





# Camouflage

SERVICE BEFORE SELF: LIVING A DOUBLE LIFE | CHAFF AND FLARES: DECOY BEHAVIOUR

*“This hidden culture that you just... 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””*

*“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”*

*“You were always lying, always on the edge I suppose”*



# Intense Investigative Process

---

## PRIVACY AND INTRUSION | FEAR AND SCARE TACTICS

*“It was a complete violation of everything and that, you know, to watch your world been go 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”*

*“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”*

*“Various further interviews, various obscene, offensive questions. Sent to a psychiatrist to see if I was nuts... Sent for a medical examination of my nether regions to see if that would confirm it”*

*“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”*





# Extraction, Exclusion, and Loss

SOCIAL ISOLATION | FEELINGS OF LOSS | IMPACT ON EMOTIONAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

*“There’s nobody I can go to. Just nobody, completely isolated”*      *“I was vilified. I was treated like a criminal”*

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

*“I mean I was like a social leper”*

*“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?”*

*“You’ve got your red book and it says, services no longer required”*

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

*“Even now, when I talk about it, I get this big well up of emotions and this anger inside”*





# Access to Support

---

NO TRANSITIONAL SUPPORT | FAMILY AND FRIENDS' SUPPORT  
POOR TREATMENTS & RELUCTANCE TO ACCESS SUPPORT

*"I was given no support, just had to find your own feet... There's no sort of like debriefing, you're supposed to get on with it"*

*"Other people, who had served however many years would have some resettlement, guidance as to what to do, how to do it, what things are out there and whatever. Whereas because I was thrown out and thrown out for that reason, there was nothing"*

*"He said to me, it's a disease and it can be cured"*

*"They were very supportive these new friends"*

*"I've never sought any help from any veterans' groups, any army support groups, because I thought, as soon as I go there, they're just going to point the finger... judge me and make me feel guilty for being who I am and what I am"*

*"Taking drugs is more acceptable than being gay. It's almost like it's more acceptable to get kicked out for taking drugs than it is for being gay"*



# Long-Term Impact of Serving During the Ban

PERCEPTION OF SELF | FINDING A SENSE OF CONNECTION & ACCEPTANCE | CRIMINAL RECORDS

*"I became really resentful at being gay. Again, I reverted back to that person who almost didn't want to be gay"*

*"Even now at my age, I still don't go around, because it was so ingrained in you that you just do not speak about being gay"*

*"You spend such a long time adapting your personality in there that when you come out, you just look around and you think how do I fit in here? How? I am so different from these people. You know, I think differently. I act differently. "*

*"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"*

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





# Making Amends

MORE COMPLICATED THAN AN APOLOGY | FINANCES - PENSIONS

*"I'm sick of apologies, I don't want apologies, I want proper recompense. I want proper action"*

*"So can anything help? No, I don't believe. No, how can a ruined life be righted?"*

*"The apology was great in 2020, 20 years late, you know. Oh, you can wear your medals, you know, no one really cares"*

*"That's the big thing now. I'm short for my pension... Nothing can make a difference when I'm 60"*

*"It is a principal thing and I suppose it's about looking at people's pensions but then looking at some sort of compensation. "*





# Phase 2 Demographics

---

101 completed responses

Age: mean = 61.2 years, SD=6.82

Gender Identity: 46.5% Male, 52.5% Female, 1% DNA

10.9% Transgender History

UK-Wide

32.7% RNRM, 40.6% Army, 27.7% RAF

Service Length: 1 to 44 years, mean=10.4, SD=9.49



# Descriptions of Serving Under the Ban

traumatic  
 double-life  
 threatened  
 broken  
 outcast  
 oppressive  
 embarrassed  
 afraid  
 hide  
 stigma  
 scared  
 terrifying  
 anxiety  
 paranoid  
 innuendo  
 humiliated  
 snooping  
 awful  
 fear  
 isolated  
 stressful  
 depressed  
 lonely  
 confusing  
 homophobic  
 scary  
 fearful  
 terrified  
 lying  
 frightening  
 abuse  
 isolating  
 lack-of  
 humiliating  
 confidence  
 demeaning  
 hiding  
 difficult  
 secretive  
 worrying  
 ashamed  
 bullied  
 confused  
 frightened  
 suicidal  
 shame  
 denial  
 depressing  
 intimidating  
 guilt



68% had no knowledge of the ban before joining the Armed Forces

60% said the ban was not mentioned or discussed during enlistment or during initial training, 16% could not recall

99% felt they had to hide their sexuality or gender identity during service





# Next Steps

---

- Robust Analysis will be carried out and completed
- Phase One and Phase Two will be triangulated
- A comprehensive report will be made available including recommendations based on findings
- We hope that the conference today will give us an opportunity to share our findings to date with you and consider, through the table exercise and the panel discussion, look at how we use research as an evidence base for shaping services and improving access to help and support



Northumbria  
University  
NEWCASTLE



# THANK YOU!


---

Thank you to all the participants who gave their time and who took part in the study

Thank you to the peer-researchers and the wider research team

Thank you to The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust for funding the research project through their Tackling Loneliness Programme

[gill.mcgill@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:gill.mcgill@northumbria.ac.uk)  
[alison.osborne2@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:alison.osborne2@northumbria.ac.uk)

 [@Northern\\_Hub](https://twitter.com/Northern_Hub)