

Silenced Stories

GRADES 9-12



Overview

This activity is geared toward participants in grades 9-12. The estimated amount of time to deliver this lesson is 60 minutes.

Military policy concerning LGBTQ+ service members has changed several times in the last 50 years. After an outright ban and an ill-fated compromise, gay and lesbian service members are now permitted to serve openly in all branches of the military. However, it has been a struggle to get here, and LGBTQ+ veterans still feel the effects.

In this lesson, participants will gain insight into the effects of changing policies on LGBTQ+ individuals who volunteered to serve the United States through Naval service.



Objective

Participants will be able to compare different military policies regarding LGBTQ+ service and determine the importance of identity in their lives and the lives of service members.



Materials

- Photos of sailors in communal spaces
- Identity Wheel worksheet
- Oral history compilation of Cristina Frisby, Nathaniel Butler and Robert Robledo



Inquiry

Display photos of groups of crew members spending time on board their vessels. They may be eating, playing cards, or hanging out. Ask participants: **what identities can you see in these photos?** List some identities you may be able to tell from the photos, such as race, age and gender. Next, ask participants: **what identities are not visible in these photos?** Discuss identities such as sexuality, religion and (dis)ability.

Provide an overview of the hostile military policy toward LGBTQ+ service members. Discuss the following questions with participants:

- What reasons could the U.S. military have for restricting the service of LGBTQ+ service members?
- How did it make members of the LGBTQ+ community feel to have their military service restricted?



Investigation

Provide background information on the restrictions and policy surrounding LGBTQ+ service in the military. Listen to or read transcripts of the [oral histories](#) from Nat Butler, Robert Robledo and Cristina Frisby. Nat, Robert and Cristina are Navy veterans who served during the second half of the twentieth century, but at different times in policy. Discharge policies, “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” and the repeal of DADT impacted each person in different ways. Discuss or have participants write responses to the following questions:

- Nat Butler served from 1961–1975. Robert Robledo served from 1981–2005. Cristina Frisby entered the Naval Academy in summer 1987 and left in spring 1988. What policies around sexuality impacted each of them as they entered, served in, and left the Navy?
- Both Nat and Cristina mention marking “no” to questions about homosexuality on their initial paperwork when entering the Navy. Why was this a question on the forms? How might it have felt to have to lie in order to enter the service?
- Robert Robledo says that it took him a year after he left the Navy until he was no longer “looking over his shoulder” everywhere he went. Why was he constantly on high alert? What was the “monkey on his back?”
- Nat Butler describes “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” as “despicable.” What were the negative consequences of DADT?

After 9/11, Cristina went on to serve in the California National Guard. She had heard that the California State Guard did not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation, but had not realized that the State Guard was part of the National Guard, which was still under “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” She was discharged several years later as a sergeant.

- What assumptions does “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” make about LGBTQ+ service members?
- How was the experience different for LGBTQ+ service members throughout the three main policy time periods: pre-DADT, DADT, and post-DADT?



Identity Wheel

Participants will complete the Identity Wheel, which includes identities such as race, ethnicity and sexual orientation. Make it clear to participants that any writing or sharing they do is voluntary, and they are not required to make any of their identities public. Allow them to fill out the wheel, and then discuss the following questions:

- Are there any identities not on this wheel that affect how you perceive yourself?
- What identities do you think about the most?
- What identities do you think about the least?
- What identities have the greatest effect on how you perceive yourself?
- What identities have the greatest effect on how others perceive you?

Review content on the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, and discuss the following question:

- What effect did “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” have on LGBTQ+ service members being able to express their identities?



For more content on the fight for equal rights for LGBTQ+ service members, please see our lesson: **Fight to Serve Openly for LGBTQ+ Servicemembers.**



Background

During World War II, new military recruits underwent psychiatric screening for homosexuality. This was in an effort to exclude gay men, and eventually lesbians, from serving. They invented reasons to keep gay recruits out, calling them troublemakers and saying they would not adapt. The Navy in particular explicitly rejected anyone who was reported to be or confessed to being gay. “Habitual homosexuals,” or people with “homosexual tendencies” and not just those who had committed a crime while in the service, were to be discharged without trial, and were required to sign a confession if they wanted to avoid a trial.

In the years following the war, the U.S. Congress established the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ), which united military law across all of the armed forces. The military used the UCMJ to court-martial gay and lesbian service members. These policies were based on the idea that gay people were physically and mentally unfit to serve in the military.

By 1981, any service members found to engage in homosexual acts faced a mandatory discharge. This policy was based on the belief that gay service members threatened military cohesion and effectiveness.

“Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”

In 1993, the Clinton Administration issued a policy known as “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” It was a compromise between Clinton’s initial goal of ending discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in the military and the resistance he faced from military leaders. Under “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” gay and lesbian people could serve in the military, but they could not be open about their sexuality. The “Don’t Ask” provision stated that members of the military were not permitted to ask others about their sexuality. The “Don’t Tell” provision stated that LGBTQ+ service members who disclosed their sexuality faced discharge. Many LGBTQ+ veterans were discharged under DADT, and many others suffered in silence. Ambiguous language in the policy also meant that there were many competing ideas on how to apply it.

During his 2008 campaign, President Barack Obama advocated for a repeal of all bans against gay and lesbian service members. This commitment, along with many years of pressure from activist groups, led to the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” in 2010.



Additional Resources/References

National Trends in Public Opinion on LGBT Rights in the United States:

<https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Public-Opinion-LGBT-US-Nov-2014.pdf>

The Repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”:

<https://www.hrc.org/our-work/stories/repeal-of-dont-ask-dont-tell>

Naval Service of LGBTQ+ Personnel:

<https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/diversity/lgbt.html>



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Documents and Images

Images of sailors on *Intrepid* spending time together



Credit: Collection of the Intrepid Museum, 1970 USS *Intrepid* cruise book



Credit: Collection of the Intrepid Museum, 1970 USS *Intrepid* cruise book



Credit: Collection of the Intrepid Museum, 1970 USS *Intrepid* cruise book



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ACTIVITY: IDENTITY WHEEL

