

Exhibit 5

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Discharged gay sailor is called back to active duty

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Stars and Stripes

Published: May 6, 2007

On his wedding night in July 2004, then-Petty Officer 3rd Class Jason Knight finally accepted a truth he had been hiding: He was gay.

Almost immediately, he moved to get his marriage annulled. He apologized to the woman he'd married. And because of his changing circumstances to the Navy, he left nothing out. Under the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy, he was discharged from the service.

But now — whether through a clerical oversight or what some claim is an unwritten change in policy to keep the ranks at a time of war — Jason Knight is back on active duty.

Since promoted to petty officer second class, Knight is finishing a scheduled one-year tour in Kuwait with Naval Air Station. And, already kicked out of the Navy once, he sees no need to hide his sexual orientation.

"I thought it was a joke at first," he said, remembering the day he received his recall orders. "It was the ultimate irony. I thought, there isn't much they can do to me they haven't done the first time."

It was comments by Marine Gen. Peter Pace, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that spurred Knight to return to active duty. In defending the military's policy, Pace called homosexual acts immoral and contrary to military values.

"Though I respect [Pace] as a leader, it made me so mad," Knight said.

"I spent four years in the Navy, buried fallen servicemembers as part of the Ceremonial Guard, served as a Helicopter Pilot, worked in Intelligence, and received awards for exemplary service," he wrote in a letter to Stripes. "However, because I was discharged, I lost my 13k sign-on bonus and recouped my 13k sign-on bonus. Nine months later, the Navy recalled me to active duty. Did I accept? Of course I did, and I would do it again. Because I love the Navy and I love my country. And despite what happened, my shipmates support me."

Those shipmates include his direct supervisors in the customs battalion.

"He's better than the average sailor at his job," said Bill Driver, the leading petty officer of Knight's 15-person detail. "It's not at all a strange situation. As open as he is now, it was under wraps for quite a while. It wasn't an issue at all."

Another sailor with the detail, Petty Officer 1st Class Tisha Hanson, works in admin and has had to process discharges for other sailors before.

"I've obviously never heard of something like this happening before," she said of Knight's return to active duty. "The Navy tends to keep people who don't want to be here, but Jason does."

In Knight's case, he was given an honorable discharge when booted from the Navy on April 4, 2005. Though the military's policy on discharging gays allows commanders discretion on what form of discharge to give a sailor, Knight's case is not unique.

In many cases, a legal expert at an advocacy group working to repeal the policy said, that's exactly what happens.

“The vast majority of [discharge papers] give the narrative reason as ‘homosexual conduct,’” said Kathi Westcott at the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network in Washington, D.C.

But, “individual commanders sometimes think the servicemember is a good troop, and they don’t want them ‘black mark,’” she said.

Westcott said that Pace’s comments — and a study showing declining numbers of discharges for gay servicemembers — have reignited the debate about the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy.

The renewed debate includes suggestions that the Pentagon is less interested in kicking out gay servicemembers. Data shows that discharges of gay servicemembers dropped to 612 in 2006. The peak of such discharges was in 2002.

The numbers have fallen steadily each year — from 906 in 2002 to 787 in 2003, and on down. At a time when the military is meeting recruiting goals, many point to the numbers as a wartime trend. Others reject that claim. And the majority of those opposed to openly serving gay troops.

Defenders of the policy say even, or especially, during war, the harm outdoes the good.

“I believe polarization of personnel and breakdown of unit effectiveness is too high a price to pay for well-intentioned efforts to elevate the interests of a minority of homosexual servicemembers above those of their units,” Sen. John McCain and former Navy officer, wrote in an April 16 letter explaining his support of the policy.

“Most importantly, the national security of the United States, not to mention the lives of our men and women in uniform, are at risk by policies detrimental to the good order and discipline which so distinguish America’s armed services.”

Still, Pentagon stats show that only .3 percent of all discharges are for homosexual conduct.

Navy personnel officials declined to comment on personnel cases in particular. But one official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said the policy wouldn’t preclude a second discharge for Knight. Though, the source said, it was more likely the Navy would recall Knight to short-term active-duty recall to expire.

Knight’s current orders, issued on June 6, 2006, call for him to be on active duty for 365 days. Knight said he is on active duty and is even looking for ways to return to active duty full time, perhaps through the officers candidate school.

Brandy Jackson has known Knight since they served in the Ceremonial Guard in 2001. Later, both were sent to the Navy as a linguist and she as a Mandarin Chinese specialist. When she washed out of the program, she was sent to the University of California, San Diego, but soon made her way out of the Navy.

Jackson is also gay and “never looked back. I no longer wanted to live in hiding, and saw the opportunity to go back to active duty.” She calls Knight’s situation “horrible,” but finds an odd justice in his recall to active duty.

“He is such an honest person with so much integrity, I could not believe when he told me he was going back in the service,” said Jackson, a 25-year-old now studying to be a game programmer. “There are outstanding sailors out there like Jason, that contribute a great deal to the United States military and the cause we fight for.”

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