

The Honorable Ronald B. Leighton

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
WESTERN DISTRICT OF WASHINGTON
AT TACOMA

MAJOR MARGARET WITT,

Plaintiff,

vs.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF
THE AIR FORCE; et al.,

Defendants.

NO. C06-5195 RBL

PLAINTIFF'S REPLY BRIEF IN
SUPPORT OF MOTION FOR
PRELIMINARY INJUNCTION

PLTF'S REPLY IN SUPP MTN FOR
PRELIMINARY INJUNCTION
NO. C06-5195 RBL

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Defendants seek to discharge Major Witt from military service under a policy that says, in a nutshell, that gay men and lesbians may serve in the armed forces so long as they pretend to be either heterosexual or asexual, refrain from any sexual activity, and make no truthful statements about their sexual orientation. Any homosexual conduct by these service members is mandatory grounds for discharge with no exceptions. At the same time, homosexual conduct is not grounds for mandatory discharge if performed by persons with a predominantly heterosexual orientation. *See Plaintiff's Opening Brief* at 42-44; 10 U.S.C. § 654. Defendants' opposition ignores these realities as it ignores the facts of the case. Major Witt is entitled to a preliminary injunction on her due process theories. (Other arguments related to Defendants' motion to dismiss will be presented separately.)

I. Plaintiff Has A Likelihood of Success On Her Substantive Due Process Claim

a. Defendants Misconstrue Lawrence.

Defendants argue that the majority opinion in Lawrence v. Texas, 539 U.S. 558 (2003), did not identify a right meriting heightened scrutiny. *Defendants' Brief* at 10. The Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces disagrees. United States v. Marcum, 60 M.J. 198 (C.A.A.F. 2004), held that service members retain the right to form intimate sexual relationships under Lawrence, and that any military incursion on that right must be justified by a strong governmental interest in military readiness, combat effectiveness, or national security *and* that the rule be "narrowly tailored to accomplish these interests." *Id.* at 204-05. Marcum read Lawrence correctly.

At virtually every turn, the majority opinion in Lawrence explains that the right to form intimate sexual relationships – even with persons of the same sex – is of the highest

1 order. The opening paragraph of the opinion explains that the intimate sexual conduct is
2 premised on “an autonomy of self that includes freedom of thought, belief, [and] expression.”
3 539 U.S. at 562. These freedoms are unquestionably fundamental. The terms used by the
4 majority to describe the right to intimate sexual conduct are stirring: it is a “liberty” of
5 “transcendent dimensions,” id., and an “integral part of human freedom,” id. at 577, affording
6 “substantial protection to adult persons in deciding how to conduct their private lives in
7 matters pertaining to sex,” id. at 572. Quoting Planned Parenthood v. Casey, 505 U.S. 833,
8 851 (1992), Lawrence described the right as “central to the liberty protected by the [due
9 process clauses],” and “at the heart of liberty.” 539 U.S. at 574.

10 Throughout, Lawrence relied on reproductive freedom cases like Griswold v.
11 Connecticut, 381 U.S. 479 (1965); Roe v. Wade, 410 U.S. 113 (1973); and Carey v.
12 Population Services International, 431 U.S. 678 (1977), all of which recognize that the right
13 to autonomy in forming intimate sexual relationships is afforded heightened scrutiny for
14 purposes of substantive due process. Griswold – which Lawrence considered “the most
15 pertinent beginning point” for its analysis, id. at 564 – involved a “zone of privacy created by
16 several fundamental constitutional guarantees,” 381 U.S. at 485. Justice Goldberg’s
17 concurrence in Griswold used the term “fundamental” over thirty times. Roe v. Wade spoke
18 of “fundamental rights,” 410 U.S. at 153, 155, as did Carey, 431 U.S. at 686-88.

19 To avoid this explicit language and reasoning, Defendants would rely on a word
20 game: Lawrence did not use word “fundamental” in precisely the way Defendants would
21 have liked, so it is irrelevant that the opinion used equally potent words like “integral”,
“central”, “transcendent,” and “at the heart of liberty.” Even if this semantic game was the

1 right inquiry (which it is not), Defendants ignore Lawrence's statement that the substantive
2 due process right to autonomy in forming intimate sexual relationships is a "fundamental
3 human right." 539 U.S. at 565, citing Eisenstadt v. Baird, 405 U.S. 438, 453 (1972).

4 **b. Lawrence Applies to the Military**

5 Defendants do not contest the holding of United States v. Marcum, 60 M.J. 198
6 (C.A.A.F. 2004), which called for application of Lawrence to military service members on an
7 as-applied basis. In reaching this conclusion, Marcum was consistent with the line of Ninth
8 Circuit cases protecting the right of gay service members not to be discharged merely because
9 of their status as homosexuals. In a series of decisions nowhere discussed by Defendants, the
10 Ninth Circuit has repeatedly found as-applied constitutional violations where military
11 discharge rules were applied to force out gay service members based solely on their sexual
12 orientation. Pruitt v. Cheney, 963 F.2d 1160, 1164 (9th Cir. 1991); Meinhold v. United States
13 Department of Defense, 34 F.3d 1469 (9th Cir. 1994); Cammermeyer v. Perry, 97 F.3d 1235,
14 1237 (9th Cir. 1996). See Plaintiff's Brief at 37-38. This sensitivity to unconstitutional
15 applications of military policy can only be stronger after Lawrence and Marcum.

16 **c. Major Witt's Discharge Cannot Survive The Requisite "Searching
17 Constitutional Scrutiny"**

18 Defendants offer no reason to conclude that discharging Major Witt can survive the
19 "searching constitutional inquiry," Marcum, 60 M.J. at 205, that is required under Lawrence.
20 There is no attempt to justify the discharge on the theory that homosexual conduct could be
21 criminalized. This was the principal argument from Schowengerdt v. United States, 944 F.2d
483 (9th Cir. 1991) (relying on Bowers v. Hardwick), a subsidiary argument in Beller v.

1 Middendorf, 632 F.2d 788 (9th Cir. 1980), and one of Congress's stated reasons for adopting
2 the statutory ban on gays in the military, 10 U.S.C. § 654(10). This argument cannot survive
3 Lawrence, and defendants do not claim that it does.

4 Defendants do not expressly argue that the military may discharge gay service
5 members because their (presumed) unpopularity among straight service members interferes
6 with unit cohesion. As explained in Plaintiff's opening brief and not challenged by
7 Defendants, this argument was the essence of Beller v. Middendorf, 632 F.2d 788 (9th Cir.
8 1980), but it was rejected by Pruitt and Meinhold and made even less tenable by Lawrence.
9 Nonetheless, Defendants cling to this argument in a truncated form when they assert that
10 homosexual soldiers inhibit "bonds of trust" within the unit. *Defendants' Brief* at 12.
11 Acquiescence to prejudice is inescapably the government's leading argument, but this is a
12 constitutionally forbidden consideration.

13 Defendants next argue that discharging Major Witt relieves "sexual tension" within her
14 unit. But it is undisputed that there is no such tension here. Major Witt's sexual relationship
15 was with a civilian woman and occurred entirely off of Air Force premises in Major Witt's home
16 across the state from McChord Air Force Base. The unrebutted evidence is that colleagues who
17 have roomed with her felt no sexual tension whatsoever. *Decl. Julia Scott*, ¶ 9 (shared sleeping
18 quarters with Major Witt); *Decl. Sue Schindler*, ¶ 9 (has shared shower and toilet facilities with
19 Major Witt allowing for minimal privacy). Other colleagues state that they would have no
20 problems rooming with her in the future, even with knowledge of her sexual orientation. *Decl.*
21 *Jill Brinks*, ¶ 9; *Decl. Ann Thomas*, ¶ 10; *Decl. Faith Mueller*, ¶ 10.

1 **II. Plaintiff Has a Likelihood of Success On Her Procedural Due Process Claim**
2 **Relating to the Irrebuttable Presumption of Unfitness for Service Based Upon**
3 **The Exercise of A Constitutional Right of Bodily Autonomy**

4 Defendants' arguments in opposition to Major Witt's first procedural due process
5 claim are unpersuasive. First, Defendants argue that she has no liberty interest in avoiding
6 discharge. *Defendants' Brief* at 18-19. This claim is rebutted below. Second, Defendants
7 argue that § 654 does not create an irrebuttable presumption, because its scope does not
8 extend to heterosexual service members. *Id.* at 17. Actually, the exception in § 654(b)(1) for
9 heterosexuals does not allow a gay person who engages in homosexual conduct to rebut the
10 presumption that she is unfit for service. *Plaintiff's Brief* at 42-46.

11 Third, Defendants argue that the irrebuttable presumption doctrine of Cleveland Board
12 of Education v. LaFleur, 414 U.S. 632 (1974) has been limited to its facts. *Defendants' Brief*
13 at 15-16. After diligent Westlaw searches, counsel found no published opinion that says this.
14 The case cited by Defendants, Gilbert v. Homar, 520 U.S. 924 (1997), never mentions
15 LaFleur and nowhere discusses the validity of statutory presumptions, be they rebuttable or
16 irrebuttable.¹ Even if LaFleur is limited to its facts, Major Witt has the same facts. Like the
17 pregnant teacher in LaFleur, Major Witt is being discharged from her job because of an
18 irrebuttable presumption that she is unfit for further employment as a result of intimate sexual
19 conduct protected by substantive due process. Defendants must make an individualized
20 determination, not rely on an immovable presumption.

21

¹ Gilbert did, however, note the constitutional necessity of a reasonably prompt post-deprivation hearing, and remanded for the lower courts to consider whether a 23-day delay between suspension without pay and a hearing violated due process. 520 U.S. at 935-36. This doctrine is discussed more fully below.

1 Fourth, Burlington Northern Railroad Co. v. Department of Public Services, 763 F.2d
2 1106, 1113 (9th Cir. 1985), stated that “a statutorily defined irrebutable presumption ... is not
3 unconstitutional in statutes which regulate economic matters.” (emphasis added). In cases
4 involving individual rights protected by substantive due process, LaFleur remains good law.
5 Lawrence Tribe, *Constitutional Law* § 16-34 at 1622-24 (2nd Ed. 1988). Lawrence erases any
6 doubt that this is such a case.

7 **III. Plaintiff Has A Likelihood of Success On Her Procedural Due Process**
8 **Claim For Denial of a Reasonably Prompt Post-Suspension Hearing**

9 **A. The Air Force Has Offered No Justification for its Unreasonable**
10 **Delay in Providing a Hearing, in violation of Barchi.**

11 Defendants do not deny that due process requires a reasonably prompt post-deprivation
12 hearing if a pre-deprivation hearing is not held. Barry v. Barchi, 443 U.S. 55, 56 (1979).
13 Major Witt was informed that she would be deprived of a liberty interest, she was suspended,
14 and then she was left to wonder, indefinitely, when or if a hearing would become available to
15 contest the threatened loss. Defendants imply that Major Witt is seeking two separate hearings:
16 one for the suspension and another for the discharge. The two events cannot be distinguished.
17 In November 2004, Defendants announced their plan to discharge Major Witt from all military
18 service, and made her removal from service effective immediately. The deprivation began then,
19 entitling her to a prompt hearing to determine whether the deprivation would be made
20 permanent. None has occurred, and none is scheduled.

21 Defendants have made no effort to justify the more than 17 month delay that has elapsed
so far in this case. AFI 36-3209, § 4.7 states that separation hearings are to be conducted “as
expeditiously as possible” and “without undue delay.” As in Barchi, 443 U.S. at 66, “once

1 suspension has been imposed” the plaintiff’s “interest in a speedy resolution of the controversy
2 becomes paramount.” “In these circumstances, it [is] necessary that [the suspended person] be
3 assured a prompt hearing, one that would proceed without appreciable delay.” Id. Here, as in
4 Barchi, there is no such assurance, and no prompt hearing has been forthcoming. At this point,
5 the constitutional violation is complete, and no future hearing can “cure” the violation. Fuentes
6 v. Shevin, 407 U.S. 67, 82 (1972). Major Witt’s due process interest in a speedy resolution has
7 been violated. Here, as in Fuentes, the remedy is to preclude the government from going forward
8 with the deprivation at all.

9 **B. Major Witt Has Cannot Now Appeal to the Air Force Board for**
10 **Correction of Military Records.**

11 Major Witt could not have obtained a reasonably prompt post-deprivation from the Air
12 Force Board for Corrections of Military Records (“AFBCMR”) immediately upon receiving the
13 November 9, 2004 document confirming that administrative separation proceedings would occur
14 and that Major Witt “may not participate in any pay or point activity pending resolution of
15 separation action.”

16 First, relief from a Board for Correction of Military Records is “generally available only
17 after discharge.” Correa v. Clayton, 563 F.2d 396, 399 (9th Cir. 1977). The authorities cited by
18 Defendants (AFI 36-2603; 32 C.F.R. § 865.3; and Air Force Pamphlet 36-2607) confirm that
19 Major Witt *cannot* appeal to the AFBCMR at this time because she has not yet gone through a
20 discharge board hearing (the scheduling of which is wholly controlled by Defendants). AFI 36-
21 2603, § 4.6 states that the AFBCMR will determine “[w]hether the applicant has exhausted all
available and effective administrative remedies. If the applicant has not, the application will be

1 denied on that basis.” See also AFI 36-2603, § 3.3; Air Force Pamphlet 36-2607, § 2.1 Federal
2 regulations say the same thing: “Before applying, applicants should . . . [e]xhaust other available
3 administrative remedies (otherwise the Board may return the request without considering it).”
4 32 C.F.R. § 865.3. AFBCMR jurisdiction cannot be invoked until after Major Witt has a
5 discharge hearing, and after the discharge authority makes a final decision based on the
6 recommendations of the officers at that hearing.

7 Second, the AFBCMR does not conduct hearings of the sort required by Barchi. As the
8 regulations makes clear, the AFBCMR normally functions as an appellate body that considers
9 briefs (see AFI 36-2603, § 3.8) and reviews a decision made by some other Air Force decision
10 maker by examining the record made below. AFI 36-2603, § 2.3. Accord 32 C.F.R. § 865.2(c).
11 In the present case, there has been no administrative discharge board hearing, and thus there is
12 no evidentiary record that anyone can review.

13 Defendants may contend that the AFBCMR has the discretion to order a hearing if it
14 wishes to do so. However, the regulation and the parallel CFR make clear that Major Witt has
15 no *right* to a hearing before the AFBCMR: “The Board in its sole discretion determines
16 whether to grant a hearing. Applicants do not have a right to a hearing before the Board.”
17 AFI 36-2603, § 4.4. Accord 32 C.F.R. 865.4. Under the Due Process Clause she is entitled to a
18 meaningful hearing. Yet she has no entitlement to such a hearing before the AFBCMR.

19 Finally, even if Major Witt could have appealed to the AFBCMR at some point during
20 the last 17 months, and even if she had requested and the AFBCMR had granted her a
21 discretionary hearing, there is absolutely nothing to guarantee that such a hearing would be held

1 promptly. Absent some assurance that a hearing will in fact be held “without appreciable
2 delay,” Barchi, 443 U.S. at 56, there is a procedural due process violation.

3 **C. Major Witt Has A Protectible Liberty Interest In Avoiding Less-
4 Than-Honorable Discharge.**

5 Major Witt agrees with Defendants that there is no property interest in a position as a
6 commissioned reserve officer. However, Major Witt *does* have a liberty interest in avoiding less
7 than Honorable discharge. Under the line of “stigma-plus” cases stemming from Board of
8 Regents v. Roth, 408 U.S. 564 (1972), it well established that a party who suffers from public
9 disclosure of a stigmatizing statement by government and who suffers the concomitant denial of
10 some more tangible interest such as employment, has a liberty interest which the due process
11 clause protects. Cox v. Roskelley, 359 F.3d 1105 (9th Cir. 2004); Ulrich v. City and County of
12 San Francisco, 308 F.3d 968, 982 (9th Cir. 2002).

13 In the present case, the Air Force has given Major Witt notice of its intent to give her a
14 General Discharge under Honorable Conditions, which is one level below an Honorable
15 Discharge. *Decl. Witt*, ¶ 26. Moreover, discharge of a reserve officer for homosexual conduct
16 falls within the class of discharges for “substandard performance of duty.” AFI 36-3209,
17 § 2.26.1. Defendants stigmatize Major Witt when they proclaim that her service to her country
18 has been substandard, and that her presence in the Air Force poses an unacceptable risk to
19 military preparedness. Defendants, inadvertently revealing their hostility to gays and lesbians,
20 assume that the stigma involved in her discharge is the fact of her sexual orientation.
21 *Defendants’ Brief* at 3, 19. To the contrary, her sexual orientation is not shameful. Instead, the
government’s message of unfitness for job performance creates the stigma.

1 Three types of discharges may result from administrative proceedings: Honorable,
2 General, or Undesirable. A general discharge is appropriate “when a member’s military record is
3 not sufficiently meritorious to warrant an Honorable characterization.” 32 C.F.R. § 41.9(a)(2).
4 “Because the vast majority of servicemen receive honorable discharges, a general discharge
5 severely stigmatizes its recipient and significantly disadvantages him in the job market.” Correa,
6 563 F.2d at 397, n.1.

7 The Court of Claims has distinguished between military discharges to which the
8 government attaches some stigma, and those to which no stigma attaches:

9 [C]ourts have held that an enlisted member has a liberty interest in his
10 employment.

11 This liberty interest prevents the military from discharging a service member
12 without due process – but only in cases where a “stigma” would attach to the
13 discharge. [Citations]. In this case, plaintiff was forced to retire based on the
14 number of years he served. ***Because there is no stigma attached to this type of
mandatory retirement, plaintiff’s due process rights were not implicated.***

15 Canonica v. United States, 41 Fed.Cl. 516, 524 (1998) (bold italics added). “These principles
16 also apply to officers.” Golding v. United States, 48 Fed.Cl. 697, 726 (2001).

17 Because anything less than an Honorable discharge is severely stigmatizing, a proceeding
18 at which a service member may receive a less than Honorable discharge must satisfy the
19 requirements of procedural due process:

20 ***This court . . . has reviewed with scrupulous care cases of less than honorable
discharges effected by administrative fiat*** without court martial convictions; we
21 have done so ***because of the stigma thereby inflicted***. The military are not
permitted to return persons to civil life with an unfair and derogatory
characterization of their military service, attached without strict conformity to
law, and ***full due process protection***.

1 Midgett v. United States, 221 Ct. Cl. 171, 603 F.2d 835, 848 (1979) (bold italics added). Accord
2 Weaver v. United States, 46 Ct. Cl. 69, (2000) (“The court recognizes Mr. Weaver was
3 stigmatized by the Other Than Honorable administrative discharge for reasons of sexual
4 misconduct and therefore, was entitled to due process,” *citing* Correa, 563 F.2d at 397, n.1); Cf.
5 Kidwell v. Department of the Army, 56 F.3d 279, 285 (D.C. Cir. 1995). In fact, if the certificate
6 of military discharge lists a stigmatizing reason for the discharge, it triggers due process
7 protections even if the discharge is characterized as Honorable. See, e.g., Rogers v. United
8 States, 24 Cl. Ct. 676, 684 (1991).

9 In this case the Air Force seeks to give Major Witt a General Discharge. Because such a
10 discharge would be severely stigmatizing, and it is accompanied by a concrete change in her
11 legal status (inability to earn pay and points or to continue towards promotion or pension), Major
12 Witt meets the stigma-plus test and is entitled to “full due process protection.” Midgett, 603 F.2d
13 at 848.

14 **IV. Major Witt Meets The Criteria for Preliminary Injunctive Relief**

15 Major Witt is suffering irreparable harm, and the balance hardships tips strongly in her
16 favor. In McVeigh v. Cohen, 983 F.Supp. 215 (D.D.C. 1998), another case involving an attempt
17 to discharge a military officer who had served his country for 17 years on grounds of homosexual
18 conduct, the District Court granted a preliminary injunction with these comments:

19 Without this Court’s immediate intervention, the plaintiff will lose his job,
20 income, pension, health, and life insurance, and all the other benefitd attendant
21 with being a naval officer. Having served honorably for the last seventeen years,
Plaintiff will be separated from a position which is central to his life on the sole
ground that he has been labeled a “homosexual” and thus by definition unfit for
service. The stigma that attaches to such an accusation without substantiation is
significant enough that this Court believes it must grant the injunctive relief

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sought. In cases nearly identical to this courts have accordingly granted a preliminary injunction, [citations].

In contrast to the serious injury that Plaintiff immediately faces if discharged, there is no appreciable harm to the Navy if Senior Chief McVeigh is permitted to remain in active service. Indeed, the Navy will only be enhanced by being able to retain the Plaintiff's seventeen years of service experience.

McVeigh, 983 F. Supp. at 221.

The facts of this case are as strong or stronger than those in McVeigh. Major Witt has been repeatedly decorated for her exceptional service, and the Air Force itself made her the official "poster child" for recruitment of nurses. *Decl. Witt*, ¶¶ 5-10. There is a grave shortage of flight nurses at the present time. *Id.* at ¶ 29. The record demonstrates that discharging Major Witt will hurt morale and cohesiveness. *Plaintiff's Brief* at 10-12. And finally, the Court has undisputed evidence that if she were to be discharged, and then later reinstated by a final judgment of this Court, the resulting gap in her service record would make it impossible for her to ever obtain any future promotion. *Id.* at ¶ 24.

In a similar case the Ninth Circuit affirmed the granting of preliminary injunctive relief to a gay sergeant who was resisting discharge. Watkins v. United States Army, 837 F.2d 1428, 1431 (9th Cir. 1987), *aff'd on other grounds* 875 F.2d 699 (9th Cir. 1989) (en banc). Here, as in Watkins and McVeigh, preliminary injunctive relief should be granted.

III. CONCLUSION

For the reasons stated above, Major Witt asks this Court to grant her motion and to preliminarily enjoin the defendants from continuing her suspension and from discharging her.

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