

Booted Gays Consider Service after DADT

Former Air Force Maj. Mike Almy was deployed to Iraq in early 2003 when he sent what he thought was an innocuous note to his partner back home using military e-mail. Months later, his chain of command deemed the content of that e-mail a violation of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," and he was administratively booted from the service.

But despite his humiliating ouster, Almy wants back into the Air Force when and if the politically charged DADT policy is lifted.

And he's not alone.

Nearly 4,000 men and women have been discharged from the services annually under the policy since Don't Ask, Don't Tell went into effect in 1994, according to a University of California study. Just how many of those discharged want to serve again is unknown, though attorneys and gay rights supporters say there's no question that potentially thousands booted under DADT are waiting to don the uniform once again.

Almy says he's ready to return to duty the day after the law is repealed.

The former communications officer had served about 13 years on active duty when an e-mail he sent to his partner was found on a government computer and turned over to his commander. Despite a career that included four deployments to the Middle East and being cited as an "outstanding field grade manager" just four months before his discharge, Almy was separated from the service and given a police escort from his office at Spangdahlem Air Base in Germany, "as if I were a common criminal or a threat to national security," he wrote in a March letter to President Obama.

"The Pentagon Working Group is working to address this [issue]," Almy said in an interview.

"They don't have the answer to that yet, but maybe it will be among the findings when they report on December 1st."

Aaron Belkin, director of the University of California-based Palm Center, which researches and advocates for gays in the military, said the Defense Department's working group has "provisionally ... decided that after the policy is repealed, gay troops discharged [under DADT] will be eligible to re-enlist exactly under the same criteria as anyone who left the military. They won't be penalized."

The exception would be in cases where the servicemember was also discharged for misconduct.

"They may have a problem," he added.

Belkin admits that even if those returning after a discharge for being gay are accepted back into the service, they may lose rank and pay they'd earned during their previous hitch.

"It's not a hundred percent fair, but it's not nothing, either," he said. "It's a compromise, I guess." While in recent years gays discharged under Don't Ask, Don't Tell have received an

honorable discharge, many had previously been given general discharges under honorable conditions or even bad-conduct discharges. Because of that, some gays interested in trying to re-enlist may have to petition the Board for the Correction of Military Records to have the characterization of their discharges changed.

Greg Rinckey, managing partner for the Washington law firm of Tully-Rinckey, said the firm already is getting e-mails for discharged gays who want back in. Even gays who got out with an honorable discharge, he points out, will have the reason noted on their DD-214.

"I think you're going to see a slew of issues with the BCMR," he said. "Depending on how many cases go to BCMR, there could be guidance put out by the Defense Department ... to change the DD-214 to reflect they were separated under secretarial authority and got an honorable discharge."

Rinckey said he doesn't know "how it will play out yet."

"We'll wait and see how many people reapply," he said, especially people who got less than honorable discharges.

Not everyone removed under Don't Ask, Don't Tell is eager to try again, however.

Robin Chaurasiya, who until this month was an Air Force first lieutenant serving as a communications officer, said she would have to be certain things had changed and been made fair in the military before she considered coming back in. Chaurasiya was discharged July 26 for being a lesbian.

"I don't think repeal of the policy will change everything overnight," she said. "There's always going to be some people who can be openly discriminatory."

"I think it's going to take years for that kind of change," she added. "I'm not interested in considering going back in until it is worked out."