



Matlovich, Leonard P., Jr. (1943-1988)

by Geoffrey W. Bateman

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2004, glbtq, inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Although considered by many to have been an unlikely spokesperson for gay and lesbian civil rights, Leonard Matlovich became one of the glbtq community's most visible activists in the 1970s after he challenged the United States Air Force's ban on gay and lesbian service members.

Born on July 6, 1943 in Savannah, Georgia, Matlovich grew up in a conservative, religious family. He became accustomed to military life as a child. His father served for 32 years in the Air Force and retired as a chief master sergeant in 1971. Moreover, his parents' strict Catholicism deeply influenced his personal and political values.

In 1963 Matlovich enlisted in the Air Force, hoping to serve in Vietnam. Yet after his initial training, he was assigned to Travis Air Force Base in Fairfield, California. There, in spite of his Southern Democratic roots, he became involved in Republican Party politics, campaigning for Barry Goldwater in the 1964 presidential election.

Determined to serve his country in the controversial conflict in Vietnam, Matlovich continued to press for a tour of duty. Eventually the Air Force approved his request, and Matlovich arrived in Vietnam on Thanksgiving 1965.

All told, Matlovich served three tours of duty in Vietnam. Among other medals and commendations, he earned both a Bronze Star for meritorious service and a Purple Heart for being seriously wounded in a mine explosion during his second tour.

During his service in Vietnam, Matlovich also became much more aware of, if not exactly comfortable with, his homosexuality. Through his working relationships and friendships with African Americans, he also found himself unlearning many of the racial prejudices he had inherited from his upbringing in the South. Yet he remained conflicted. He even converted to Mormonism in an attempt to reconcile his conservative values with his need for a new direction in his life.

Matlovich's third tour of duty ended in 1971. He returned to the United States and was assigned to head an electric shop at Eglin Air Force Base in Ft. Walton Beach, Florida. He also began working as an alcohol and drug abuse counselor, and this training ultimately led him to become a race-relations instructor.

Teaching race relations courses to Air Force service members not only transformed Matlovich politically, but also helped him develop greater self-acceptance. Applying the lessons of equality and social acceptance of racial minorities to his own experience as a gay man, Matlovich began to explore local gay culture and take the initial steps of coming out to himself and accepting himself as a homosexual.

After four years of teaching racial equality in the classroom, Matlovich could no longer bear the hypocrisy and injustice of living in the closet. He decided to come out publicly, even though he knew it meant his likely dismissal from the military.

Matlovich's excellent service record convinced gay activist Frank Kameny that he might make the perfect candidate to challenge the military's anti-gay policy on constitutional grounds. Kameny invited ACLU attorney David Addlestone to help them mount a legal battle with the hope of ending the exclusion of homosexuals from service in the United States military.

To do so, Kameny and Addlestone built their challenge to Matlovich's likely dismissal around an exception rule included in the Air Force's policy on homosexuality, which stated that the Air Force could retain a homosexual service member under unusual circumstances. In addition to arguing that the exclusionary policy was unconstitutional, Addlestone planned to argue that Matlovich's exemplary record itself constituted the unusual circumstance that should permit him to remain in the Air Force.

In March 1975, Matlovich wrote a letter to his commander revealing his homosexuality. This letter initiated an investigation and discharge proceedings against him. His case began to generate a great deal of media attention, and in September of that year, he found himself in uniform on the cover of *Time* magazine, the poster boy for an article on the emergent gay rights movement.

Matlovich's administrative hearing was held a week later. On September 16, 1975, the members of the Administrative Discharge Board recommended a general, or less than honorable, discharge. His commander upgraded it to an honorable discharge, and on October 21, Matlovich's discharge became official.

Addlestone filed for a temporary restraining order to bar the discharge, but Judge Gerhard Gesell of the U. S. District Court in Washington, D. C. declined to issue one. He initially seemed sympathetic to Matlovich, but on July 16, 1976, after reviewing the case, upheld the administrative board's decision. Yet his decision contained within it language that gave many gay activists some hope that change might be forthcoming.

Judge Gesell wrote, "This is a distressing case. It is a bad case. It may be that bad cases will make bad law . . . it is impossible to escape the feeling that the time has arrived or may be imminent when branches of the Armed Forces need to reappraise the problem which homosexuality unquestionably presents in the military context."

But fearing further legal disappointment and bad precedent, Addlestone decided not to appeal the case to the U. S. Court of Appeals. Matlovich, however, was determined to fight on. Attorney Carrington Bogan took on the case in 1976 and combined it with another gay service member's case, that of sailor Vernon Berg, yet the court did not reach a decision until 1978.

Meanwhile, the Matlovich case continued to attract much media attention. In 1978, NBC broadcast *Sgt. Matlovitch vs. the Air Force*, one of the first gay rights feature stories aired on national television.

When the Court of Appeals did rule, it overturned the lower court's decision, but not on constitutional grounds. Rather, the higher court required the Air Force to clarify its exception rule. It was not the victory that Matlovich or Bogan had hoped for, but it was a limited success.

Two years later, Judge Gesell issued a new ruling in the case. Because the Air Force had failed to respond appropriately to the court's order, Gesell ordered Matlovich reinstated in the Air Force, with \$62,000 in back pay. The Air Force, in turn, offered him a tax-free settlement of \$160,000 to drop his case and accept an honorable discharge.

At this point, Matlovich faced a difficult decision: either he could return to the Air Force and face a hostile environment and likely dismissal in the future, or he could accept the settlement and continue in his new civilian life as a gay activist and aspiring politician.

Matlovich accepted the settlement and returned to San Francisco, where he had been living the previous

few years. Shortly thereafter, he moved to Guerneville on the Russian River and opened a restaurant. He was elected to the Board of Directors of the Russian River Chamber of Commerce. After three years of working to make the restaurant succeed, Matlovich decided that his business was untenable because of the stigma associated with the AIDS epidemic, which had begun to devastate the gay community. In 1984 he returned to San Francisco.

Alarmed by the AIDS epidemic, Matlovich attacked the bathhouse culture of San Francisco and worked tirelessly to close down the baths. He then moved to Washington, D. C. to help form a gay conservative organization. When the gay conservative group failed in 1985, he returned to San Francisco.

In 1986 Matlovich was diagnosed with AIDS. In the last few years of his life, he devoted himself to AIDS activism. A few months prior to his death, he moved to Los Angeles, where he died from complications related to AIDS on June 22, 1988.

With full military honors and a twenty-one gun salute, Matlovich was interred in the Congressional Cemetery in Washington, D. C. He intended his grave to serve as a memorial for all gay and lesbian veterans. Hence, rather than recording his name, the headstone reads simply "A Gay Vietnam Veteran."

Also inscribed on the stone are the words "Never Again" and "Never Forget," chiseled beneath two triangles, and the words that he made famous through his many speeches: "When I was in the military they gave me a medal for killing two men and a discharge for loving one."

Bibliography

Duberman, Martin. "Sex and the Military: The Matlovich Case (1976)." *Left Outside: The Politics of Exclusion / Essays / 1964-1999*. New York: Basic Books, 1999.

"Gays on the March." *Time* (September 8, 1975): 32-43.

Hippler, Mike. *Matlovich: The Good Soldier*. Boston: Alyson, 1989.

Shilts, Randy. *Conduct Unbecoming: Gays and Lesbians in the U.S. Military*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993.

About the Author

Geoffrey W. Bateman is the Assistant Director for the Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military, a research center based at the University of California, Santa Barbara, that promotes the study of gays and lesbians in the military. He is co-editor of *Don't Ask, Don't Tell: Debating the Gay Ban in the Military*, as well as author of a study on gay personnel and multinational units. He earned his M.A. in English literature at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in eighteenth-century British literature and theories of genders and sexuality, but now lives in Denver, Colorado, where he is co-parenting two sons with his partner and a lesbian couple.