

Signal Watch

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Until the repeal of “don’t ask, don’t tell,” U.S. military policy stated that homosexuality was incompatible with military service. A gay military member’s presence, policymakers argued, “adversely affects the ability of the Military Services to maintain discipline, good order and morale.”¹ Military commanders and top brass feared that same sex relations would undermine unit performance.

While the military actively interviewed and screened recruits looking for telltale indicators of homosexuality, including physical characteristics, behavior, and vocabulary, enlisting was easy. Before Pearl Harbor, military policy and practice explicitly forbade homosexuals, but after the attack, few able-bodied Americans were turned away from the war effort. In total, over 16 million Americans served in World War II. While it’s not clear how many homosexuals participated in the war effort, it is certainly a significant number.

My recent work focuses on those men who served silently. The military group photos document the hundreds of fresh-faced young men before they went off to war. Hidden among the sea of faces and matching uniforms are gay men.

These brave men not only faced dangers of the battlefield, but also those of an intolerant society. While WWII marked a period of leniency towards queer behavior in the military, servicemen who were found out faced what was known as ‘blue discharge,’ an ambiguous middle ground between honorable and dishonorable. These ‘blue discharges’ would be labeled as HS or some non-explicit code for homosexual. They would be stripped of their pensions and other GI benefits. After the war, they would struggle to find jobs.

The military employs a unique language – verbal, written, visual – to describe their rituals, routines and traditions. This is true within each branch, each division, and each unit. Queer servicemen likewise, used a coded language to seek one another out and develop their community under the surface of strict military order.

I hand paint various military phrases with adhesive and gold leaf, selecting each for its coded double-meaning, to call attention to this unique and groundbreaking network of Americans. Phrases like “*one of the boys*” and “*deep cover*” hint at their presence and the fine line between sexual and non-sexual friendship, camaraderie, and brotherly love.

I see this work as a way to re-queer the history of military service. It is a tribute to all LGBT service members who have defended our nation’s freedom.

¹ Department of Defense. (1982, January 28). Enlisted Administrative Separations (DOD Directive 1332.14). Washington, DC.