



Cammermeyer, Margarethe (b. 1942)

by Geoffrey W. Bateman

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2004, glbtq, inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

The highest-ranking official in the United States military to acknowledge her homosexuality while in the service, Colonel Margarethe Cammermeyer successfully challenged the military's policy banning homosexuals prior to the implementation of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." She served a number of years in the Washington State National Guard as an open lesbian.

Cammermeyer was born in Oslo, Norway on March 24, 1943, while the country was under Nazi occupation. Both active in the resistance movement, her parents sheltered resistance fighters and smuggled weapons to the underground. She credits their actions, specifically that of her mother and other women, for laying the foundation of her later interest in defending democratic ideals as a woman in the military.

Cammermeyer's parents also inspired her interest in medicine. Her father was a doctor who became a well-respected neuroanatomist and neuropathologist in Norway and later in the United States; her mother had worked as a Red Cross nurse prior to her marriage.

Soon after the end of World War II, Cammermeyer's father received a Rockefeller Fellowship, which allowed him and his family to live for nine months in Boston. In 1951, the family immigrated to the United States in order for her father to take a position with the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology. Nine years old at the time, Cammermeyer found the adjustments in language and culture difficult. This difficulty may have been exacerbated by the fact that she was very tall for her age and had already developed interests in science and sports, pursuits that were not considered "feminine."

Although Cammermeyer was interested in pursuing her father's profession, he refrained from encouraging or even supporting her in her academic pursuits, believing that women should be subservient to men. He placed much greater value on the goals and accomplishments of his three sons than he did on his daughter's aspirations.

Consequently, even though Cammermeyer entered the University of Maryland in the fall of 1959 in hopes of becoming a doctor, she was unable to follow through on this dream. The pressures of taking pre-med courses, the strain of working to support herself, and the difficulty of adjusting to the freedoms that college life afforded her all took their toll. After her first semester, she was placed on academic probation. She dropped out of the pre-med curriculum and decided to pursue a nursing career.

In 1960, Cammermeyer became an American citizen. In 1961, to help pay for her education, she joined the U.S. Army and signed up for the Army Student Nurse Program. She received her B. S. in Nursing from the University of Maryland in 1963.

After college, Cammermeyer reported for active duty and completed basic training at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, following which she spent an additional six months at Martin Army Hospital at Fort Benning, Georgia. Once trained, she was stationed in Nuremburg, Germany.



Margarethe Cammermeyer at a SLDN (Servicemembers Legal Defense Network) function in Los Angeles in 2001. Photograph by Angela Brinskele. Image courtesy Angela Brinskele. Copyright © Angela Brinskele.

Throughout college and her early years in the military, Cammermeyer often felt different and out of place. As a high school student, she had ascribed these feelings to her height and to her status as an immigrant. In college, she experienced serious bouts of depression, confusion, and self-alienation. Her responses ranged from cutting herself and drinking heavily to refocusing her energy on her courses or career and further repressing these difficult emotions.

Cammermeyer also felt very little interest in dating or having sexual relationships with men. Although she went on blind dates that her friends set up, she never felt inclined to pursue these liaisons.

In August 1964, however, while she was stationed in Germany, friends of hers set her up with a serviceman, Harvey Hawken, a Second Lieutenant in an armor battalion in the United States Army. Not only did he match her in height, but he also shared many other values with her. The two soon became a couple, and in spite of her ambivalence and subtle sense of losing her independence, Cammermeyer agreed to marry him.

In August 1965, the soldiers were married. In 1966, they requested transfers to Fort Lee, Virginia, a request that the Army approved.

The couple returned to the United States just as its involvement in Vietnam was escalating. They both decided to volunteer to serve in the conflict. Even though the Army canceled Hawken's orders at the last minute, Cammermeyer decided to complete her tour of duty, hoping he would soon join her.

Cammermeyer spent fourteen months in Vietnam working at the 24th Evacuation Hospital at Long Binh. During her tour of duty, she served as head nurse of a medical unit and then as head nurse of the neurosurgical intensive care unit. Eventually her husband arrived in Vietnam and after a few months of being stationed far apart, the couple secured housing together.

After their service in Vietnam, the couple moved to a small rural community south of Seattle. Cammermeyer had become pregnant in Vietnam, which according to military regulations at the time meant that she had to leave the military. Both she and her husband settled into civilian life. They built a home and farm on their property in Washington and began a family. They had four children in all: Matt, David, Andy, and Tom.

Yet life for Cammermeyer was not ideal. Although she enjoyed her role as mother, she felt compelled to return to her profession. In 1969 she began working part-time as a night-duty nurse, and in 1971, she took a similar position with more responsibilities at the veterans hospital in Seattle.

In 1972 the military changed the regulations barring women with children from serving in the armed forces, which allowed Cammermeyer to resume her military career. She decided to join the Army Reserves, and in 1973, she started a graduate program in nursing. Over the next few years, she balanced her various roles as mother, nurse, student, and officer in the Army Reserves.

All of these responsibilities took a toll on her marriage, as her husband began to resent her attempts to have both a career and family. This tension at once reflected and exacerbated the ambivalence Cammermeyer continued to feel about her relationship with him. Through counseling she began to re-evaluate her life with Hawken, and in July 1980 she filed for divorce.

The ensuing family crisis was extremely difficult on Cammermeyer. Her husband was awarded custody of the children, which made it difficult for her to fulfill her role as mother to her four sons.

During this time, Cammermeyer also gained a clearer sense of herself, both in terms of her career priorities and also in terms of her sexuality. Although she did not identify herself as a lesbian, she did realize that she lacked any sexual interest in men.

After a difficult year, Cammermeyer decided to take a position in San Francisco to work at the Veterans Administration Medical Center. Here she continued her work in neurology, focusing on veterans struggling to survive brain tumors.

In 1986, Cammermeyer returned to the Seattle area to be closer to family. During her time in San Francisco, she had continued in the Army Reserves. Her move back to Seattle prompted her to transfer to the Washington State National Guard.

In 1987 Cammermeyer was promoted to the rank of Colonel. In 1988 she became the Chief Nurse for the Washington State National Guard. She also returned to graduate school at the University of Washington to complete her Ph.D. in nursing.

In 1989 a routine interview for a security clearance prompted her to respond to a question about homosexuality by saying, "I am a lesbian." In the past year, a developing relationship with a woman named Diane, who is now her life-partner, helped her fully accept her sexual orientation.

Unaware of the precise policy regarding gays and lesbians in the military, Cammermeyer answered honestly. In so doing, she inadvertently set in motion an investigation and discharge proceedings.

The investigation moved slowly, and during this time, Cammermeyer continued to serve, with many of her colleagues and commanders fully aware of her sexual orientation. The administrative discharge hearing did not occur until June 11, 1992, when she was honorably discharged from the military, in spite of the board's recognition that she was "one of the great Americans."

Cammermeyer and her attorney filed suit in civil court challenging the decision. In June 1994, Judge Thomas Zilly of the Federal District Court in Seattle ruled the policy banning gays and lesbians from the military unconstitutional and ordered Cammermeyer's reinstatement.

Pentagon officials appealed the ruling and requested a stay of the decision, initially blocking Cammermeyer's return to uniform. Ultimately Judge Zilly and the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals denied these requests, and Cammermeyer returned to her position in the National Guard. In March 1997, she retired with full military privileges after thirty-one years of service in the U.S. military.

In 1994, Cammermeyer published her autobiography, *Serving in Silence*, which was well received. Subsequently, it was made into a television movie starring Glenn Close. The movie won three Emmy awards.

Since retirement, Cammermeyer has remained busy. She ran for Congress in the Second Congressional District in Washington State. Even though she lost the election, her spirit of public service remained active. For two years she hosted an internet talk show. She recently returned to law school.

Bibliography

Cammermeyer, Margarethe, with Chris Fisher. *Serving in Silence*. New York: Viking, 1994.

Miller, Diane Helene. "And the Ban Played On: Politics and Prejudice in the Cammermeyer Case." *Freedom to Differ: The Shaping of the Gay and Lesbian Struggle for Civil Rights*. New York: New York University Press, 1998. 83-138.

Vida, Ginny. "A Conversation with Colonel Margarethe Cammermeyer." *The New Our Right to Love: A Lesbian Resource Book*. Ginny Vida, ed. New York: Touchstone, 1996. 209-211.

www.cammermeyer.com

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.