



THE
FORWARD **O**BSERVER

THE NATIONAL NEWSLETTER OF AMERICAN VETERANS FOR EQUAL RIGHTS, INC.
VOLUME 4 ISSUE 2 JANUARY 2010

New Officers



AVER National Convention

National Equality March on Washington

AVER Veterans March Across America on Veterans Day



Albuquerque



New York



Chicago



Palm Springs

AVER 20th Anniversary—May 2010

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FROM THE PRESIDENT'S CORNER

It is my honor to have been elected as the new national president of American Veterans for Equal Rights. Your additional national officers are Julz Carey as VP, Nick Jackman as Secretary, and Mark LaFontaine who was reelected to another term as Treasurer. I am sure I join all my fellow officers in thanking everyone who supported us in this election. We are here to serve you, and I mean that. In the past you may have felt that your voice was not heard and your wishes were disrespected. We are here to listen to each of you as together we face the upcoming second battle of the ban and the transition of AVER to a true veterans service organization.

Don't Ask, Don't Tell is a moral evil that jeopardizes national security and the lives of our soldiers by removing qualified service members as we fight the war on terror. The policy undermines the very mission of the military which is to defend the constitution and uphold America's vision of a just and free society. Each of us took an oath to defend the constitution. Black, white, Asian, Latino, straight, gay, bisexual, lesbian and transgender, young and old, the oath we took to defend our freedom is what brings us together and unites us in this cause. Each of us in time received the torch of freedom and passed it along to those who came after us, but no one ever withdrew their oath of service to defend the constitution. You are needed now. Your country is calling again. Our freedom is under attack, and I call upon each of you to remember your oath. We are tired. We are old. Many of us are broken and wounded. Still, we are called, and we must do what soldiers do.

In Ft. Lauderdale we performed a taps ceremony and I invited each of the participants to remember. I invite you all to do the same. Remember our fallen. Remember those we have lost along the way. Weep for them. Honor them. Miss them. Rage for them.

Later that evening we celebrated. We celebrated who we are, where we have been. What we have accomplished. We celebrated our heritage, our honor. We wore our uniforms and proudly displayed our flags and battle streamers. We feasted. We laughed and drank together.

Tomorrow comes the trumpet call. Tomorrow comes the muster. Tomorrow we draw the battle lines and we prepare to do what soldiers do. I promise to be there with you and help hold that line to the best of my abilities. I do not promise I will be perfect. I do promise I will do all that I can. A people who love freedom and value justice will not long suffer the guardians of their liberty to discriminate. I believe the people of America are with us, and I believe we will prevail.

The ban will fall whether AVER is in the battle or not. It is the time. My goal is that we will fight this battle with heartfelt compassion and respect for each other both as people and as the honored warriors of our great nation. If we do not accomplish that then we have accomplished nothing. I have met many of you and talked with others on the phone. I care for each of you, and with all the imperfection of my human heart I promise to listen and respect your concerns. Be patient with me. I will need all the help that you can give me.

We are a special lot of people. We have stood fast and held the line. Now we are called upon to do so again. Let us do so with courage, conviction, and respect for one another. Prepare. "Keep calm and carry on." I look forward to the coming campaign. Together we will help defend what must be defended. We will restore honor to that which must be honored. And we will return to America a wondrous dream once dreamt and a vision never beyond the sight of those who have kept faithful watch for the promise of the dawn.

Respectfully,
Danny Ingram, National President
American Veterans for Equal Rights
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FROM THE MANAGING EDITOR

Greetings,

First, let me thank all the loyal members of AVER who have renewed their memberships. Some of you are new, but most of you have been around since the mid 90's. I'm sure that none of us expected this to be such a long journey. But we are still here, and we all know that this is the year that the ban will be lifted and anyone who wants to serve this country will be able to do so, openly and honestly.

This year GLBVA/AVER will celebrate its 20th Anniversary. GLBVA was founded in 1990 by six gay, lesbian and bisexual veterans. One of the original founders, Bill Lake, First Officer of Veterans C.A.R.E, L.A., has passed on. But we are fortunate that the other five are still with us. Plans are underway to celebrate this historic Anniversary in Washington, DC this year. Information will be posted on the website and also the spring issue of *The Forward Observer*.

Please continue to forward to us the stories and photos of what you and your chapter are doing. This is your newsletter and we want to share this information, not only with other chapters but with as many people in this country as we can.

Thank you for continuing to serve your country.

Respectfully,

Jim Darby

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A Victory For LGBT Veterans

In a major ruling that benefits LGBTI veterans and their domestic partners, The California Attorney General has ruled that LGBTI veterans who reside in California, and their domestic partners are eligible for all the same veteran's benefits (that are provided by the state of California) that are available to heterosexual veterans and their spouses.

The ruling came as the result of a request for a ruling sent to the Attorney General by the California Commission on the Status of Women.

The ruling said the benefits would be available to LGBT veterans who had been given an honorable discharge, or

who were discharged under honorable conditions. The Attorney General's opinion goes on to state that the benefits may even be available to some who had been discharged from the military because of their sexual orientation. It says that "Discharge for homosexual conduct is characterized as other than honorable only when there are aggravating circumstances in connection with one or more completed, attempted, or solicited homosexual acts." The ruling then went on to say "A discharge premised solely on the member's sexual orientation or gender would not disqualify him or her for state funded veterans' benefits."

The ruling also specifically says that transgender veterans can receive state

funded veterans' benefits as well.

Here is a summary of some of the benefits available to LGBTI veterans and their domestic partners.

- Direct low cost loans to acquire homes and farms.
- Rehabilitative and medical care at the California Veterans' Homes.
- Veterans' preferences in state civil service examinations.
- College tuition fee waivers for veterans and their dependents.
- Disabled veterans' business enterprise opportunities.
- Waived or reduced fees for hunting and sport fishing licenses/permits for disabled veterans.

Boyce Hinman

AVER 15th National Convention Ft. Lauderdale, Florida October 14 - 18, 2009

This is my 15th Annual Convention of GLBVA/AVER. My first was in Baltimore in 1992, and I haven't missed one since. Always exciting and always invigorating, this year's Convention was one of the best. My only regret is that I only got into the pool once and the ocean once.

The Florida Gold Coast Chapter truly worked very hard to make this event such a success and I know that all attendees left fully charged to do whatever it takes to end the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy.

We will only cover some of the highlights of the Convention.

There were four days of workshops, presentations, lectures, personal stories, visits from a number of local politicians and VA Representatives. That is not to say that we didn't enjoy ourselves and have some fun like all conventioners.

The first night there was a Welcoming Cocktail Reception and Dinner at Rosie's, a local Wilton Manors gathering place, and guests received a warm welcome from Mayor Gary Resnick and Commissioner Tom Green.

On Thursday morning a wonderful breakfast was hosted by the Courtyard Café, another local LGBT establishment.

The Chicago Chapter gave a slide presentation on The History of the Gay Veterans Movement going back to 1776 when Baron Von Steuben came to the U.S. to help found the Continental Army. And, as we all know, the Baron brought his young Frenchman for com-

panionship.

Julz Carey from the Seattle Chapter introduced a new fund-raising project—the AVER Chocolate Soldier. The Soldier was designed and is produced by Julz, and this is a fundraiser for AVER. The Soldiers are available for \$5.00 from www.aver.us

Two carloads of attendees headed out for an afternoon at “Billie's Swamp Safari.” (Isn't that what everyone does when they go to Florida?) This adventure included a buggy and an air boat ride on the Seminole Indian Reservation in the Everglades National Park. And, yes, we did see plenty of alligators.

There were booksignings by both Nathaniel Frank, *Unfriendly Fire* and Fr. John McNeil, *The Church and the Homosexual* at the Stonewall Library.

On Saturday evening the Military Ball was held at the local American Legion Post. Numerous awards were given out at the ball. LT. LeAnna Bradley finally received her two Purple Hearts. Dinner, dancing and a great deal of camaraderie was enjoyed by all.

The new officers of AVER are: President Danny Ingram, Atlanta, GA, Vice President Julz Carey, Seattle, WA, Secretary, Nick Jackman, Seattle, WA and Treasurer, Mark LaFontaine, Ft. Lauderdale, FL. The voting was unanimous. I must add that I am extremely pleased with the newly elected officers, and we can look forward to great things happening for AVER.

Danny Ingram and Julz Carey were sworn in by Fr. John McNeill. Fr. McNeill is a WWII Veteran who served in General George Patton's Third Army, a Purple Heart recipient, a former Catholic Priest, a Prisoner of War captured in the Battle of the Bulge, and a member of AVER. Fr. McNeil is the author of a number of books dealing with gays and the church.

Don't Ask, Don't Tell

Don't Ask, Don't Tell is a moral evil that jeopardizes national security and the lives of our soldiers by removing qualified service members as we fight the war on terror. The policy undermines the very mission of the military which is to defend the Constitution and uphold America's vision of a just and free society. Each of us took an oath to defend the Constitution. Black, white, Asian, Latino, straight, gay, bisexual, lesbian and transgender, young and old, the oath we took to defend our freedom is what brings us together and unites us in this cause. Each of us in time received the torch of freedom and passed it along to those who came after us, but no one ever withdrew from their oath of service to defend the Constitution. You are needed now. Your country is calling again. Our freedom is under attack, and I call upon each of you to remember your oath. We are tired. We are old. Many of us are broken and wounded. Still, we are called and we must do what soldiers do.

Tomorrow comes the trumpet call. Tomorrow comes the muster. Tomorrow we draw the battle lines and we prepare to do what soldiers do. I promise to be there with you and to help hold that line to the best of my abilities. I do not promise that I will be perfect. I do promise that I will do all that I can. I believe that the people of America are with us and I believe that we will prevail.

Danny Ingram, President, AVER, October 21, 2009, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, AVER National Convention.

National Equality March in Washington, DC on October 10 and 11, 2009

The younger generation descended on the nation's capital October 11 to demand *Equal rights in all matters governed by civil law in all 50 states —NOW!*

The National Equality March lead organizer Cleve Jones estimated the turnout at 200,000 to 250,000. The police gave the same estimate, unlike much lower police estimates at past marches.

No matter the number, this was a big march. Veterans were very close to the front of the 2.3 mile route. When we arrived at the Capitol building, the area in front was already filled. Turning around you could still see thousands of people along Pennsylvania Avenue and the Mall. And they just came streaming in for hours.

Chicago AVER, San Diego AVER and Albuquerque AVER were there with their banners. Other vets and veterans groups joined us. Knights Out also had a banner and the three banners stretched across Pennsylvania Ave. It was an impressive sight.

Some of the veterans started singing the National Anthem, and everyone joined in. Then they sang "America, the Beautiful" amid shouts of "Written by a lesbian" from many in the crowd. Then they sang "This Land is Your Land." This was repeated many times throughout the march.

Calling cadence was absolutely wild. I will have to check my video for some of them, but I do remember "Join the Army and go to Iraq/As soon as they find out you're gay they send you back/ Sound off."

The March for Equality in Washington, DC, meant many things to many people. Having attended the Marches in 1987, 1993 and 2000, I can see the differences and the similarities.

This March was organized by young people who probably weren't old enough to attend any of the previous marches.

Along the way we were joined by Lt. Dan Choi, who recently left the military. He also spoke at several events during the weekend.

We were also joined by Sgt. Joseph Rocha, who also recently left the military. The Washington Post ran an article on Sgt. Rocha the day of the parade. Sgt. Rocha was a dog trainer in Bahrain. During his time there he was repeatedly hazed and abused because he was perceived to be gay. He couldn't respond to the accusations because of the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy. Eventually Sgt. Rocha left the military. Like so many others, this was such a great loss to this country.

Arlington Cemetery Wreathlaying Ceremony on Saturday, October 10, 2009

HERE RESTS
IN HONORED GLORY
AN AMERICAN SOLDIER
KNOWN BUT TO GOD

Two major events for veterans were held the day before the March. On Saturday, October 10, at noon, there was a classic changing of the honor guard who protect the Tomb of the Unknowns 24 hours a day, every day of the year.

A light rain was falling when Lt. Dan Choi, Retired Navy Captain Mike Rankin, former Army Major Andrea Hollen, and former Army Lt. Anthony Woods joined the guard host to bring the wreath down the stairs to be placed at the Tomb of the Unknowns. I have seen this event countless times, and I am always transfixed by the solemnity of the occasion. This day, the participants truly made up a cross section of our community—Asian, Caucasian, African-American, Jewish, Baptist, male and

female. I felt frozen in time—a precious moment in history.

Congressional Cemetery Wreathlaying at Sgt. Leonard Matlovich's Grave on October 10, 2009

Immediately following that ceremony, we hopped on the Metro to the Congressional Cemetery for two more events. Many of the same attendees and same emotions joined a larger crowd. A series of speakers spoke about Sgt. Leonard Matlovich, who came out in 1975 with the hope of ending the discrimination against gay people serving in the military. Too many names to mention here, but the list included Lt. Choi, Capt. Mike Rankin, David Mixner, Frank Kameny, Sgt. Jose Zuniga, Rev. Troy Perry, Cleve Jones, Lt. Tracy Thorne and Alex Nicholson.

After the event, along with a color guard, everyone proceeded down the hill to Sgt. Matlovich's grave. Capt. Rankin and Lt. Choi placed a wreath at Leonard's grave.

Carved on Sgt. Leonard Matlovich's Tombstone are the following words

WHEN I WAS IN THE MILITARY THEY GAVE ME A MEDAL FOR KILLING TWO MEN AND A DISCHARGE FOR LOVING ONE.

Attention Readers!

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Simply send an e-mail with "My E-mail Address" in the subject line to editor@aver.us

News from AVER's National Committees

Public Affairs

AVER Public Affairs sits on the Right To Serve Roundtable (a monthly telecon, hosted by SLDN, in which all organizations dealing with DADT repeal advocacy provide input and receive updates on congressional action), the SAGE Roundtable (a telecon and egroup, and annual convention, hosted by national SAGE and The Task Force, dealing with issues affecting LGBT seniors, to which AVER Public Affairs provides input on issues affecting senior LGBT veterans), and is regularly interviewed by national and international media regarding DADT and its effect on LGBT service members and veterans (most recently by French and German news media). We also are asked to provide input and interviewees for planned documentaries about DADT and LGBT service (most recently we worked with HBO on details of a planned production). The AVER Public Affairs officer also is editor of the independent Gay Military Signal monthly webzine (GayMilitarySignal.com), featuring Profiles in Patriotism about LGBT veterans, commentary by senior out gay retired military personnel, and interviews with senators and representatives in congress. AVER and TAVA (Transgender American Veterans Association) work

closely and the AVER Public Affairs officer is also the TAVA Media Director.

Denny Meyer, AVER Public Affairs

Veterans Affairs

AVER Veterans Affairs receives a steady stream of inquiries by phone and e mail about veterans benefits from both LGBT and straight veterans across the country. We also file complaints with the VA and work to resolve serious issues of discrimination and misinformation regarding LGBT Veterans eligibility for benefits. AVER Veterans Affairs works closely with TAVA on similar issues.

Several recent episodes exemplify the need for AVER as a veterans service organization representing the needs of our LGBT veterans and service members. A college veterans organization in the Midwest, serving returning Iraq and Afghan combat vets who have returned to school, was recently falsely told by a Veterans Center Team Leader that if veterans comes out as gay they will lose all VA benefits. This statement is entirely wrong. It appeared as if the VA employee was imposing her own prejudices onto VA policy, with the potential of actually denying benefits to gay combat veterans seeking help at a Vet Center. After correcting the information and making it clear that the benefits a veteran has earned may not be denied due to sexual orientation, AVER Public Affairs contacted the office of Vet Center Programs at VA headquarters in

Washington DC, filed a complaint, and asked for resolution.

We receive inquiries from VA counselors regarding assuring the confidentiality of client records for LGBT active duty personnel and have coordinated with VA personnel to prevent disclosure from being recorded and resulting in involuntary discharge. Our courageous volunteers should be able to receive viable counseling for PTSD without their confidentiality being compromised.

AVER Veterans Affairs also mentors LGBT active duty enlisted and officer personnel and ROTC students, providing support, encouragement, and referral for legal (SLDN) and guidance issues. For example, a lesbian ROTC officer candidate was recently referred to a former female officer for guidance on the sacrifices and personal life rewards of accepting a commission versus coming out and leaving the program.

For the past year, AVER Veterans Affairs has served as a conduit helping to coordinate contact between VA psychologists and counselors around the country who are working with LGBT veterans suffering from PTSD and similar traumatic wounds from their service.

Denny Meyer, AVER Veterans Affairs

Chocolate Soldiers

Julz Carey, National Vice President for AVER has designed a chocolate AVER Soldier as a fundraiser for AVER. This is a very unique item. It sells for \$5.00 a bar, and the chocolate is delicious. Order some for yourselves and also for your friends. <http://www.zippyfish.com>

Chapter Reports

Albuquerque

Our thanks to all those who participated in a great Albuquerque Veterans Day Parade on the 11th. It was our Bataan chapter of AVER's very first time to march in the parade and we were very well received. There were a lot of "thank you" salutes to our American flag and applause and not one bad word the entire parade route.

Our Color Guard members were Steven Scaff, Ron Freeney, Penn Baker and Gary Smith, who carried our gold-trimmed rainbow, New Mexico and



Chapter flags alongside our national colors. Their pride shown through and with the help of the Naval ROTC Sea Cadet band just ahead of us, we managed to stay mostly in step. Right on! With our banner in front carried by Dorothee Baker and Jon Arnold, other gay vets joined behind the Color Guard for a memorable morning. See photos to see just how much gays add to military service and "pageantry." Our banner said it all, "From Valley Forge to Baghdad, We Proudly Serve!"

Jimmy James followed with his new bright red Mustang tricked out to recognize the "Wounded Warrior" project.

We were joined by a dozen mostly straight veterans who asked if they could march along just behind us. Prominent news coverage was given by KOAT-



TV ABC, who reported that we were the first openly gay veterans' group to march in the parade, and KOB-TV NBC and the local Alibi paper.

—Steve Loomis, President, Bataan Chapter

Chicago Chapter



As usual, it has been an extremely busy fall for the Chicago Chapter. In September all three officers of the Chicago Chapter were re-elected—President Jim Darby, VP/Treasurer Travis and VP/Secretary Bill Beaman. A number of members participated in the Annual AIDS Walk, remembering the many veterans who have passed on.

In October, several Chicago members drove to Washington, DC to meet up with other members and other chapters for the March on Washington. Three LGBT veterans groups stretched their banners across Pennsylvania Avenue—AVER Chicago, AVER Albuquerque and Knights Out. It was quite an impressive sight. All members also attended the wreathlaying ceremony

at Arlington Cemetery by four LGBT veterans and then proceeded to the Congressional Cemetery for two more ceremonies. One ceremony was held at the Cemetery Chapel with a line-up of stellar speakers, and then everyone proceeded down the avenue to Sgt. Leonard Matlovich's grave for another wreathlaying ceremony. It was quite an historic day.

Chicago veterans then drove on to Ft. Lauderdale for AVER's 15th National Convention. We will not mention anything here about the Convention because there is enough coverage throughout the newsletter—except to say that it was one of best conventions ever.

Veterans Day in Chicago has become Veterans Month because of all the activities that take place. We are very fortunate that Mayor Daley has been so supportive of all Veterans causes. On Tuesday, November 10, many members of AVER attended the Mayor's Reception for all veterans groups. On Wednesday, November 11, members attended the City of Chicago's Annual Veterans Day Ceremony which was held at 11:00 a.m. at Soldier Field. As always, it is great a patriotic celebration with military bands, choruses and dozens of brass from every branch of the military.

Also on Veterans Day the Chicago Chapter held its 17th Annual Veterans Day Dinner at Ann Sathers Restaurant. There was a great turnout for all the festivities. An open bar, a great Silent Auction and over 60 guests were in attendance. But the highlight of the evening was our guest speaker, Lt. LeAnna



Bradley, who served this country in the U.S. Navy for 37 years. LeAnna served as a male, and transitioned to become a female after leaving the military. With nine rows of ribbons, including two Purple Hearts, LeAnna completely wowed the audience with her tales of her experiences while serving this country. She received a standing ovation as the Chicago Chapter honored her with the "Happy Warriors Award." She is truly one of our heroes.

The Chicago Chapter ended the year by attending the Mayor's Annual Pearl Harbor Ceremony at Navy Pier, and then on to an annual Holiday Party on the south side.

—Jim Darby, President, Chicago Chapter

Still recovering from Convention fever, it's been a busy time for the Florida Gold Coast Chapter.

Florida



Broward Veterans' Council Meetings Nov 16 and Dec 14

As part of its continued outreach and educational efforts, AVER representatives attended the Broward Veterans Council Meetings. The meetings were held at the VA Outpatient Clinic, 2009 Commercial Blvd. Dr. Greenberg, CMO of the VA Clinic was the moderator. Some items on the agenda included: National and State Legislation, AFA Seeing Eye Dog Presentations, State Veterans Nursing Home Discussions, Homeless coalitions and more. AVER members were very pleased to be included.

December Holidays with AVER Vets and Friends

The Florida Gold Coast Chapter had three wonderful items of interest

posted on their calendar for the upcoming December Yule-Tide Season.

On Tuesday, December 8th, Board member Richard Crowner arranged for Chapter members and friends to socially gather for dinner and some holiday excitement at the Pompano Golden Corral Restaurant. Each participant chooses what they would enjoy eating and pays for their own meal. The Restaurant has been very supportive of veterans, is reasonably priced, and it's not out of reach for those members living on a fixed income. It is located at 2100 West Atlantic Blvd., Pompano Beach.

On Wednesday, Dec, 2nd Dan Murphy and Marshall Belmaine made arrangements for AVER volunteers to visit the Ninninger Vets Home. Our volunteers escorted 20 homebound vets on a bus trip to the Pompano Isles Casino in vans supplied by the adult living facility. The volunteers assisted some of those who are physically challenged and made the trip an outstanding and pleasant experience for all. AVER picked up the tab for the dinner and also gave each vet \$5.00 for a quick spin at the penny slots after lunch.

Thanks to member Clay Drexler, the Florida Gold Coast AVER Chapter, in cooperation with American Moms supporting our troops overseas, has funded the shipment of gift boxes to the men and women serving in distant lands. This season's outreach effort hopefully demonstrates to those who have served and are serving that they have not been forgotten.

AVER's Board of Directors wishes each and every member, their family, all our friends and generous benefactors a joyous and bountiful holiday season



with peace and good health to all in the coming New Year.

—Andy Eddy, Secretary, Florida Gold Coast Chapter

On November 11, 2009, AVER-NY marched in the New York City Veterans Day Parade as we have since 2002. Joining us this year were out gay New York City Councilmember Rosie Mendez and Councilmember-elect Danny

New York



Dromm. Our Disabled Veterans Vehicle was provided by Matthew Bissell who braved driving in the city despite his preference for never leaving suburbia. As usual, we had to contend with discrimination from the parade organizers. We had requested to be separated from an extremely hostile anti-war group that is aggressively opposed to AVER's advocacy of the Right to Serve. As no other veterans group wants to be near them either, the bigoted parade committee put them right behind us at the last moment after having promised not to do so. Because I have 49 years of experience as an activist, and the presence of our two City Council members, the parade organizers backed down when faced with my ballistic protest behavior in front of a TV camera that we had with us for that purpose. But, we should not have to deal with this discrimination year after year.

The New York chapter hopes to have a university sociology intern with us, starting in January 2010, helping with organizing and fundraising. He

is a straight-A student (yes, a double entendre) determined to work for the repeal of DADT.

The chapter has continued to engage in endorsing LGBT rights, particularly Marriage in New York State, at rallies and forums in the New York metropolitan region.

—Denny Meyer, President, AVER-NY

Palm Springs

The local chapter of AVER now meets the second Friday of every month at 1:00 p.m. at the Golden Rainbow Senior Center, 700 E. Tahquitz Canyon Way.

On September 29th members of Palm Springs AVER attended and met with members of the Human Rights Campaign at a showing of the film *Ask Not* at the Camelot Theater.

On November 8th, 2009, the Palm Springs Gay Veterans and AMVETS Post 66 marched in the Gay Pride Parade. Some of the local participants included Mel Tips, Mel Reiser, Charlie Sharples, Randy Schecher, James Sweetney, Michael Dowd and Janet Potts. They received cheering and applause from the thousands of spectators along the parade route.

A few days later, on November 11th both groups marched again in the Veterans Day Parade. Three reviewing stands reported a resounding welcome and tremendous applause.

On Sunday, November 15th, most members of AVER attended the SLDN Reception at the Tropicale. Seaman Joseph Rocha, Col. Robert Barnes, Tom Carpenter, Zoe Dunning and many others spoke at the event. Seaman Rocha recently left the Navy under the DADT policy.

—Mel Tips, President, Palm Springs Chapter



20-Year Anniversary of AVER: 1990–2010

Although the history of the gay veterans movement in this country goes all the way back to 1776 when Lt. Gottfried Enslin was kicked out of the Army at Valley Forge, we are going to concentrate on what is generally referred to as the modern gay veterans movement.

We know that there were local gay veterans organizations forming around this country at about the same time that gay organizations were coming into existence. But it was during WWII that many gay servicemembers began to meet each other and to form friendships and organizations.

Most of these groups were local.

At the first GLBT March on Washington in 1987, GLBT veterans who were meeting other GLBT veterans began to realize the need for and the value of having a national GLBT veterans organization. Members from across California's Veterans C.A.R.E. were the largest group at that March. Returning home from the March on Washington, some of these groups began communicating about forming a national group.

In 1989 Cliff Arnesen and Stan Berry from New England Gay, Lesbian

and Bisexual Veterans of America traveled to Washington, DC to give oral testimony at the U.S. House Subcommittee on Oversight and Veterans Affairs.

In 1990 six veterans who were in attendance at the NGLTF Creating Change Conference in Minneapolis in February gathered together to form a national GLBT veterans organization. Most of these veterans came from local GLBT veterans groups.

On Thursday, May 17, 1990, the National Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Veterans of America was founded in Washington, DC by the lesbian veteran activist and former US Army SSgt. Miriam Ben-Shalom, along with the assistance of four gay veterans and a bisexual veteran. Those co-founder military veterans included: Former Navy Ensign, Jim Woodward, President, San Diego Veterans Association; Bill Lake, First Officer, Veterans Council for Equal Rights and Equality (C.A.R.E.), Los Angeles, CA; Ken Huntington (AKA Ron Rasmussen, Jr.), President, Texas Gay Veterans Association; former Navy Chief Petty Officer, Chuck Schoen, Public Affairs Officer representing Veterans C.A.R.E. Redwood Empire, CA, and the predominantly gay, American Legion Alexander Hamilton Post 448, San Francisco, CA; and bisexual US Army veteran Cliff Arnesen, President, New England Gay Lesbian and Bisexual Veterans, Boston, MA. GLBVA was officially incorporated in the State of Wisconsin.

Former Army SGT Miriam Ben Shalom, Milwaukee, WI was elected as the first President. Groundwork was laid for the creation of a National Constitution and By-Laws. Miriam traveled the country creating new chapters. By 1992 GLBVA had 44 chapters across the country.

It will soon be 2010 and GLBVA/AVER will be celebrating its 20th Anniversary as the oldest National LGBT Veterans group in America.

Miriam Ben Shalom

Miriam Ben Shalom is a longtime activist in the LGBT community. She is the recipient of several awards for her community activism and has published poetry, short stories and other writings. She is currently an Adjunct Teacher with MATC, MIAD and Bryant and Stratton Business College and works with at risk youth. She is a member of the New England Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Veterans, of the California Alexander Hamilton American Legion Post 448 and a life member of AVER.

Miriam Ben Shalom was the first gay or lesbian service member to be reinstated to her position in the United States military after being discharged for her sexual orientation. Even though the army eventually forced her out, she was able to serve successfully in the U.S. Army Reserves as an open lesbian, undermining the U.S. military's argument that open gays and lesbians pose a threat to military effectiveness. Miriam Ben Shalom is a lifelong resident of Wisconsin having been born in Waukesha, WI in 1948, and continues to reside in Milwaukee.

In 1974, Miriam began serving with the 84th Training Division of the Army Reserves. She also completed drill instructor's school, and became one of the two first female drill sergeants in the division. In 1976, she was officially discharged from the Army Reserves for declaring and admitting she was a lesbian. However, she decided to challenge the policy and sue for reinstatement. In May 1980, Judge Terence Evans of the U.S. District Court in Chicago ruled that Ben Shalom's discharge violated the First, Fifth, and Ninth amendments of the Constitution. He added that sexual orientation should be protected from governmental regulation, including that of the military. The right to freedom of speech was central to Ben Shalom's case. The Army Reserves did not discharge her because of homosexual conduct,

but rather for her statement that she was a lesbian. Through his ruling, Judge Evans made clear that the First Amendment applied to gay and lesbian service members. The U.S. Army appealed this decision, but withdrew its appeal shortly thereafter. And even though Judge Evans had ordered Ben Shalom's reinstatement, the army simply refused to comply with the order.

Ben Shalom continued to fight the Army, and in 1987, the U.S. Court of Appeals in Chicago supported the lower court's previous ruling. Still the Army balked. Only when the court threatened the Army with serious contempt of court fines did it relent. In September 1988, Ben Shalom successfully reenlisted and became the first openly gay or lesbian service member to be reinstated. However, the Army appealed the decision. In August 1989, a federal appeals court ruled against Ben Shalom. Judge Harlington Wood, Jr., did not see the case as solely about freedom of speech. He concluded that since the military banned homosexuals, her admission regardless of her sexual conduct justified her discharge. In response, Ben Shalom appealed the case to the United States Supreme Court. On February 26, 1990, the Supreme Court refused to hear her case, thereby upholding the previous ruling of her discharge.

Although the supreme Court's refusal to hear her case ended Ben-Shalom's military career, her LGBT activism continued. She founded the Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Veterans of America, Inc. (GLBVA) in 1990 serving as its first president. That organization is now known as the American Veterans for Equal Rights (AVER). She also served as one of the Vice Presidents of the organization that has come to be known as PrideFest, and she also continues to be a voice for LGBT equality and social justice.

Information gathered from various sources.

Taps

Georgia Chapter Ed Scruggs

The Georgia Chapter lost one of our brothers on November, Korean War Veteran Ed Scruggs. We will miss him dearly. Several of our members attended his Memorial Service on November 18 and had the honor of meeting his family. National President Danny Ingram spoke at the ceremony. The new Commander of the Georgia Chapter, Alex Lopez, and our Treasurer, Sherri Boucher, presented the American flag to Ed's sister, which was followed by the playing of Taps by Danny Ingram. We are very thankful to have known Ed Scruggs.

Florida Chapter Mary O'Connor

Mary O'Connor passed away on Tuesday, December 1st, of heart failure.

Mary helped start SAGE of South Florida, a Friendly Visitors program, the newly reorganized Florida Gold Coast Chapter of AVER, and many other organizations. There is a planned Celebration of Mary's Life at 1:00 p.m. on Sat, February 27th at the Fort Lauderdale MCC Sunshine Cathedral. All arrangements have been coordinated through the offices of Rev. Durell Watson, Pastor. A church hall reception is being planned by Eileen for Mary's friends and will take place immediately after the Cathedral service.

For additional information contact Eileen at elansa7@aol.com.



National Equality March - Florida AVER Convention - Washington, DC Wreathlaying Ceremonies

