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MILITARY

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# Canada's policy on gay troops seems to work

By ANNE SWARDSON  
The Washington Post

**TORONTO** — Master Cpl. Mike Simic has no doubts about whether gays should be allowed to serve in the Canadian armed forces. They should not, he says, because they may disrupt the teamwork on which the military depends.

But the mechanic also knows his career would be torpedoed if he hassled a gay comrade. When the Canadian military decided to fully accept gays last fall, the top brass decreed that harassment or discrimination of any kind would be punished. Therefore, Simic said he will keep his opinions to himself.

"My attitude is, grin and bear it," he said. "There's a lot of the military that's out of your hands. The policy is very clear."

The nine months that have passed since a court case prompted Canada's military leaders to lift all restrictions against gays have been virtually casualty-free. No resignations, violence or harassment have been reported. Gay servicemembers, while still remaining discreet about their private lives, said they feel more comfortable now. And straight servicemembers — not only those who have concerns about gays, but also those who do not — said they have accepted the new regime.

The ease of this transition may stem in part from Canada's tradition of tolerance. Canadians are told from childhood that their nation accepts all colors, creeds and cultures. Polls around the time the ban was

repealed showed that a majority of Canadians favored admission of gays, while most Americans remain opposed.

As the U.S. military and President Clinton wrap up six months of political warfare with an effort to compromise on admitting gays, it is apparent there is another reason for Canada's success: The highest leadership of Canada's armed forces has made clear that any recruit who has a problem with the new policy will face the consequences.

"It does take a commitment from the top," said John de Chastelain, who was chief of the Canadian Defense Staff at the time of the policy change and now is Canada's ambassador to the United States. Under him, the military revised all its harassment guidelines, began attitudinal training programs, set up new mechanisms to handle complaints and directed supervising officers down the line to follow the new rules.

At Canadian Forces Base Toronto, 300 men and women recently completed training sessions in recognizing and dealing with harassment. Although the meetings did not focus on gay issues any more than on others requiring sensitivity, the base commander said the sessions were just one more way of making the new policy take hold.

"It allows people to see that this is the military program, that it's not just a nice thing to do. We have zero tolerance for harassment, whether it's sexual, gender or ethnic," said Col. Edward Nurse, commander of the Toronto base.

It was this base of 1,000 personnel that spawned the court case that led Canada to overturn its ban. In 1988, 2nd Lt. Michelle Douglas, then 23, was taken by superiors to a hotel and grilled for two days about whether she was a lesbian. Further interrogation went on for weeks. In addition to being asked about herself, Douglas said, she was asked to name other lesbians in the military.

Douglas subsequently was given the equivalent of an honorable discharge on the grounds that she was "not advantageously employable." She got a civilian government job and took the military to court. Last fall, just before her case was to go to trial, a settlement was reached that granted Douglas an \$80,000 payment, not to mention a public about-face from her former employers.

Even before that, the armed forces had been easing toward a more open policy. Gays were allowed to join beginning in 1988, but until last October they could not be promoted or transferred.

"The best thing about ending the ban in Canada is that the element of fear has been taken away," said Douglas, who still has gay friends in the military. "There will be no knock at the door."

Among the issues military leaders wrestled with as they debated ending the ban was privacy. Could heterosexual and homosexual troops knowingly share quarters and remain comfortable? The decision was that they could. No accommodation exceptions were included in the new policy.

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