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Gary L. Ackerman, M.C.
Washington Office

28 November 2009

The Hon. Gary Ackerman
Member of the House of Representatives (NY-05)
2243 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Ackerman:

I am a captain in the United States Army Reserve, and am presently deployed to Afghanistan. I am writing to you with regard to the military's so-called "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (DADT) policy. As you may know, there is currently a strong push in Congress to overturn DADT—under which otherwise qualified gay men and women are still being involuntarily dismissed from service—and replace it with a policy of nondiscrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. I strongly support this proposed policy change. I would like to explain the basis for my judgment.

I am a veteran of both the U. S. Navy Reserve and the U. S. Army Reserve. In the latter I have served as both a sergeant and [REDACTED] as a commissioned officer. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 I have completed tours of duty in Afghanistan [REDACTED], Iraq [REDACTED] and Kuwait [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] I was informed that I had completed twenty good years of Reserve military service, and had thus earned the right to retire. But I did not want to retire with my country still at war. So I volunteered for another combat zone deployment, and am serving once again in Afghanistan. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I have been at my current duty station

[REDACTED] I recite this brief resume to let you know that I am no mere observer of the military, but rather someone who has dedicated much of my life to our national defense.

Congressman Ackerman, I am also one of the many gay military personnel who have served our country faithfully in these times of terrorism and war. I want to give you my personal perspective on why DADT is so wrong. First of all, it is widely recognized that a married service member's relationship with his or her spouse has a profound impact on that service member's fitness for duty. Thus, straight married service members are free, within the limits of resource availability and operational constraints, to maintain communications with their spouses. In fact, such communication is actively encouraged. Regular phone calls, e-mail, and postal letters really help both the service member and spouse get through the strain of combat zone deployments in particular.

Many gay service members have committed partners who, every day, face the same stress and make the same sacrifices as do their straight counterparts. But because of DADT, gay service members and their partners have to constantly worry that an overheard telephone call, an intercepted e-mail message, or other type of compromised communication could lead to a degrading, career-destroying investigation. It is wrong, I believe, to place such additional burdens on the back of American patriots.

I write of these matters from personal experience. When the 9/11 terrorist attacks occurred I was in a serious long-term relationship. But the extensive post-9/11 active duty I performed—including [REDACTED]—put a serious strain on this relationship. The relationship finally fell completely apart during my first Afghanistan deployment in [REDACTED].

As you may know, the military has seen a troubling increase in the service member suicide rate since 9/11. Furthermore, the loss of a serious relationship is one of the critical risk factors that may contribute to such suicides. I experienced this particular risk factor and my situation was compounded by its occurrence in a war zone. Six years later, I can still vividly remember cradling my government-issue pistol in my hands and fighting the urge to blow my own brains out.

I made it through that crisis. I completed my mission in Afghanistan successfully, and in fact was decorated with a Bronze Star Medal at the conclusion of that tour. I went on to earn a second Bronze Star Medal in Iraq two years later, and was promoted to [REDACTED] shortly after that.

What made that crisis particularly difficult was the isolation imposed on me as a result of DADT. A straight Soldier in a comparable crisis could turn to his commander, his first sergeant, or a “battle buddy” for help and advice. But such avenues are legally closed to gay troops. If I, for example, had shared the details of my situation with my commander—a decent and honorable man—he would have been legally obligated to have initiated an investigation that would have heaped even more stress upon me, disrupted my unit’s mission, and ultimately destroyed my career.

I know that many would say that a gay service member in such a situation could go to a chaplain in confidentiality. I have great respect for our military chaplains and for all the good work that they do. But I also believe that no service member should feel forced to see a chaplain as his or her only option. Every service member should have the right to speak freely with a commander, a trusted noncommissioned officer, or a battle buddy. I assert this not only as an individual Soldier, but also as an officer with extensive experience as a platoon leader and company commander. When I have been in these command positions, I have had Soldiers share with me some very personal information about their families and home lives. I was glad that these Soldiers trusted me, and this bond of trust and openness enabled me to give each individual the counsel or moral support that was needed. But what about gay troops? They are legally deprived of such a relationship with a commander, a senior noncommissioned officer, or a battle buddy. This is wrong. These gay troops—especially those experiencing the stress of combat zone duty—deserve access to such relationships. The DADT policy shackles the hands of leaders like myself and prevents us from properly supporting all our troops. This policy puts service members and their loved ones at risk. DADT is a shameful blot on our national honor.

I know that many are wary of a repeal of DADT. Perhaps some—particularly those who oppose homosexual conduct on religious grounds—see such a policy change as the equivalent of governmental approval of homosexual conduct. But this is not so. Let me strike an analogy. Many religious individuals are opposed, on biblical grounds, to divorce and remarriage. But persons who have divorced and remarried are plentiful in the armed services, and many serve alongside very conservative religious persons every day. Respecting divorced-and-remarried persons as military professionals does not mean one agrees with their personal life choices, or that the government is advocating such choices. To me, the main issue is that we respect personnel who serve their country honorably and who act with responsibility and integrity in

their personal lives. For example, in the military we will punish a “deadbeat dad” who neglects to pay his child support, but we support and respect the divorced father who stays committed to his parental responsibilities. I believe that we need to take a comparable stance towards gay service members.

There are also some who claim that repealing DADT will negatively impact morale and discipline in our armed services. But I have never seen a single shred of empirical evidence to support such assertions. In fact, the available evidence suggests that treating gay and straight troops equally has no negative impact on military forces. Consider the fact that many of our key allies in current combat and security operations—nations such as the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia—do not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation in their armed services. These fighting forces continue to perform admirably. Furthermore, troops from these and other nondiscriminatory nations live and serve side by side every day with U. S. troops in war zones. On this current tour, for example, I personally have shared living and bathing facilities with uniformed personnel from Australia, Canada, Denmark, Spain, and the United Kingdom—never have I seen a U. S. serviceman run shrieking from the showers because he feared that he might encounter an openly gay individual from one of these allied nations. Last year I met an openly gay chief petty officer from the Australian navy. He had served as part of a U. S.-led multinational team in Iraq. He told me that not only was his presence no problem for the Americans, but they decorated him with a U.S. medal at the end of his tour! Surely if Americans can accept a gay Australian, they can also accept gay fellow Americans. People who claim that the U. S. military cannot manage a policy of sexual orientation nondiscrimination are not only ignoring the realities of current operations, but they are also essentially saying that American service personnel are less professional than those of the U. K., Canada, and other nondiscriminatory nations—I consider such an assertion to be a highly offensive insult.

Of course, my argument ultimately leads to a logical—and fair—question: How do we manage this change in policy? The answer is simple. Hold gay service members to exactly the same standards we hold straight service members. If gay individuals were to commit acts of sexual harassment, or engage in any other type of activity that goes contrary to military order, we would discipline them appropriately—and separate them from the service if necessary. This happens to straight service members when necessary; I myself once had to discipline a straight male noncommissioned officer for his inappropriate behavior towards a junior female Soldier.

This NCO accepted my counsel, corrected his behavior, and completed his tour of duty successfully. On the other hand, those gay individuals who conduct themselves with honor and dignity, and who demonstrate respect for their fellow service members, would continue to do their jobs. This is exactly the policy that coalition militaries, many U. S. police departments, and dozens of civilian corporations have been following successfully for years. Are we really to believe that this course of action is beyond the capability of the U. S. military?

In fact, I believe that the demise of DADT will happen as smoothly and quietly as did similar policy changes in the militaries of allied nations. Gay troops who have been behaving in a professional manner prior to the demise of DADT are not suddenly going to begin engaging in outrageous or disruptive behavior. Today's gay troops, despite the burdens of DADT, are putting their lives on the line every day to defend this country; many of us have been tested in Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, and other challenging locations. If the military gets rid of DADT, we will continue to do our jobs and take care of our battle buddies; we and our commanders will simply have a terrible burden lifted from our shoulders.

Congressman, after more than two decades of military service—at sea and on land, from the Cold War era to the Global War on Terror, in joint service and multinational environments—I think I know the women and men of our armed forces pretty well. I can tell you that every day U. S. service members overcome barriers of difference—difference in race, ethnic heritage, religion, regional origin, gender, socioeconomic class, and other areas. Sexual orientation is just another element in this complex equation. We are able to overcome all these types of difference and form cohesive teams by focusing on the basics: mutual respect, a solid work ethic, personal integrity, and commitment to our common missions. We are also able to recognize that a person whose difference may initially unsettle us may also possess a critical skill, a body of knowledge, or a depth of experience that we need to accomplish these common missions. Can we afford to lose a fluent Arabic linguist because she is a lesbian? Can we afford to discard a combat seasoned infantryman because he is gay?

I have enclosed with this letter some documentation from my combat zone service. My contributions have been modest compared to the heroism shown by many of my sisters and brothers in arms. Still, I am proud of what I have achieved. I leave it to you to look at my record and determine whether or not the military would be better off if I—and, for that matter, thousands of people like me—were to be involuntarily dismissed from duty.

I am an ordinary guy who grew up in [REDACTED] New York, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] My dad is a retired New York City cop who was deeply impacted by the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Like any other deployed Soldier, I call my folks at least once a week, and they worry about me just like the parents of any Soldier. I don't want to turn the military into some sort of gay utopia. I just want gay Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, and Coast Guardsmen—together with our loved ones—to have the sort of peace of mind that our straight sisters and brothers take for granted.

Congressman Ackerman, I read on your website about how you stood up for Soldiers who were not getting their combat zone tax exemption in Iraq. So I know you are a leader who believes in taking care of the troops. Sir, I believe that now is the time to give troops like me relief from the injustice of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." If and when this issue comes up for debate, and even for a vote, in Congress, I respectfully ask you to remember all the gay military personnel who are right now risking our lives to defend the United States and its values. If you have any questions or comments about anything I have written, you may contact me via email [REDACTED] And please feel free to share this letter and its enclosures, including my contact information, with any individuals or organizations whom you deem appropriate.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]