

An (extra)Ordinary Woman
Elana Mabrito

Words have power. Very few people know that better than Margarethe Cammermeyer who, in 1989, said one simple word: yes.

From a young age, Cammermeyer viewed the military with admiration. Growing up in Norway during the Nazi Occupation, Cammermeyer came to see the men and women in the resistance as her heroes because of the way they “were willing to sacrifice their own lives for the freedom they believed in” (Cammermeyer). In 1961, one year after becoming a U.S. citizen, Cammermeyer heard about the Army Student Nurse Program and joined the military. In the early 1970’s, she joined the Army Reserves, later spending fourteen months in Vietnam during the Tet offensive. She quickly worked her way up the ranks, becoming the Chief Nurse of the Washington Army National Guard a decade later. In 1989, Cammermeyer applied to the Army War College. During a College interview, a Pentagon official asked Cammermeyer if she was a lesbian. She said yes. Three years later, in 1992, Margarethe Cammermeyer was honorably discharged from the military because of her sexuality. Instead of going along with this decision, Cammermeyer decided to fight back.

Cammermeyer had a lot of courage to be public about her sexuality, and she risked many things in the process. In 1992, the year that Cammermeyer was discharged, 44% of American adults thought that same sex relationships should be illegal (Gay and Lesbian Rights). By coming out as a lesbian, Cammermeyer not only risked her career in the military, but she also risked losing her friends, family, and colleagues. More than that, Cammermeyer risked her life, as violence against gay and lesbians (hate crimes) were a threat that she faced. Even though Cammermeyer risked being socially ostracized and risked being targeted by violence because of her sexual orientation, Cammermeyer decided to take her decision to court.

Cammermeyer's case was not one of a kind, nor was the issue of homosexuals in the military out of the spotlight. In 1992, President Bill Clinton said that he would allow gays and lesbians to serve openly in the military, but, upon receiving serious push back from Congress, later amended this by saying that gays and lesbians could serve in the military, as long as they did not reveal their sexual orientation. This rule, which took effect in 1993, was called Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT). Though better than the previous legislature, which banned homosexuals from serving in the military, DADT was a homophobic ruling that suggested that homosexuality was something that needed to stay hidden.

The judge who presided over the proceedings for Cammermeyer's case, Thomas Zilly, ruled that the decision to discharge Cammermeyer was unconstitutional. In his

ruling, Zilly stated that Cammermeyer was discharged because of homophobic prejudices; discharging someone based on prejudices, he argued, violated the equal protection clause of the U.S. constitution. However, the same conclusion that Zilly reached regarding the discharge of Colonel Cammermeyer could have been used to discredit DADT, as it too violated the equal protection clause of the constitution, which prohibits all states from denying any person equal protection under the law. Court cases such as Cammermeyer's, which highlighted the prejudice and bigotry that was inherent in rules such as Don't Ask, Don't Tell, were essential because they moved the gay rights conversation forward and did not allow the issue of gay rights to be swept under the carpet, as many members of Congress wanted to do.

Cammermeyer's case emphasized the hypocrisy that was, and is, at play in our government. In 1993, The Hate Crimes Sentencing Enhancement Act was added as an amendment to the Violent Crime and Law Enforcement Act. This provision required penalties for offenders to increase if the crime was motivated by the victim's skin color, gender, or sexual orientation. In a year where a provision was enacted that increased the severity of the punishment if a crime was thought to be based upon prejudices, a law was passed that allowed gays and lesbians to be dismissed from the military, should their sexual orientation be discovered. Cammermeyer's case helped to illuminate this hypocrisy, leading many people to ask the question, "How can our legal system be held to one standard and our military to another?"

Many people in the military disagreed with Cammermeyer's discharge. Major General Gregory P. Barlow, Cammermeyer's commanding officer, wept as he read aloud her discharge notice; many of Cammermeyer's higher-ups agreed that it was a shame that the military had lost such a wonderful soldier. Cammermeyer's discharge led many people within the military to reexamine their personal beliefs. Though many people in the military thought homosexuality was wrong, many of those people believed that Cammermeyer shouldn't have been discharged. It was cases such as Cammermeyer's that led the military, and ultimately the government, to rethink their policies towards gays and lesbians.

In 1995, the movie *Serving in Silence*, was released. *Serving in Silence*, based off of Cammermeyer's book of that same name, tells the story of Margarethe Cammermeyer and her journey of discovery. *Serving in Silence* helped to give homosexuality a very human, and accessible, face; the movie is not as much about a lesbian as it is about a woman who is discovering a new part of herself.

Cammermeyer could have lived the rest of her life out of the public eye, but she chose not to; she ran for Congress in 1998 because she "wanted to get involved, to see things get done" (Lesbian in Uphill Race). Again, Cammermeyer's sexuality was an issue that voters found difficult to overlook and her opponent, Republican incumbent Jack Metcalf, capitalized on voters' uneasiness. But Cammermeyer had ideas that people liked: as a former nurse, Cammermeyer's platform focused on health care reforms. And

voters liked that Cammermeyer wasn't easily stopped. "She represents someone who took on the Government and won," said Mary Ann Harris, a veteran and supporter of Cammermeyer, who admired Cammermeyer's stick-to-itiveness.

The Republican incumbent, Jack Metcalf, won the Congressional seat but Cammermeyer did not lose by much: of the 224,901 votes that were cast in Washington's second congressional district, 100,776 were in favor of Cammermeyer. In 1998, the year that Cammermeyer ran, there were three other lesbians running for office. Of the representatives already in Congress, only two, Barney Frank of Massachusetts and Jim Kolbe of Arizona, had publicly come out as gay. Cammermeyer demonstrated strength and courage by purposefully putting herself into the spotlight. She knew that she would be questioned because of her sexuality, but she did so anyway in the hope of helping others.

Cammermeyer continues to fight for what she believes in, regardless of the fact that she is retired from the military. Cammermeyer spoke out against, and fought to end, Don't Ask, Don't Tell. "If this law is overturned" Cammermeyer said in 2010, referencing DADT, "it will feel like a bit of a vindication. On a very gut level, it's extremely important to me" (Muhlstein). Don't Ask, Don't Tell was repealed by President Obama in 2011, thanks to the strength and courage of people like Margarethe Cammermeyer, people who weren't afraid to "tell" even though they were fully aware of the repercussions.

Margarethe Cammermeyer was everything that a soldier is supposed to be: empathetic and courageous, she won a Bronze Star and was named the Veterans Administration Nurse of the Year in 1985. And yet, she was fired from a job that she loved and excelled at because of her sexuality. Aware of the possible repercussions, Cammermeyer fought back, helping to illuminate the hypocrisies of the United States Justice System. After retiring from the military, Cammermeyer continued to advocate for her community, running for Congress on a platform that pursued issues that she was passionate about. She has continued to work for gay rights and was a vocal opponent of DADT.

The most interesting thing about Margarethe Cammermeyer is that she was not “a crusader” (Lesbian in Uphill Race). She fought for equal rights because it was something that was important to her. Margarethe Cammermeyer lived an exemplary life: she was a mother of four, a nurse, a Colonel; she tried to become a Congresswoman. She accomplished things that people looked up to, and she accomplished them with strength and courage. Cammermeyer is the perfect advocate for equal rights because she is so utterly normal. Her track record is clean; she did not deviate from the straight and narrow. In a conversation that so often dissolves into talk of “us” and “them” (“We’re straight; they’re gay” or “We’re black; they’re white”) Cammermeyer is a formidable “them” because she doesn’t fit the stereotypes. In her run for Congress, Cammermeyer’s opponent, Jack Metcalf, warned voters of the

dangers of the “lesbian lifestyle” (Lesbian in Uphill Race). Yet, look at Cammermeyer.

Which dangers are these? The danger of being a mother and grandmother? The danger of being a devoted wife and, later, partner? The danger of devoting your life to your country for almost thirty years? Cammermeyer has had a large impact on the country and on our state, but I think her biggest legacy was that she helped to make the gap between “us” and “them” a little smaller. She did this by giving a face to the gay rights movement, a face that was so similar to everyone else’s that it was hard to tell the difference.

Works Cited

Cammermeyer, Margarethe. "Biography." *Breaking the Silence...Grethe Cammermeyer*.

Margarethe Cammermeyer, n.d. Web. 28 Feb. 2014.

Egan, Timothy. "Dismissed From Army as Lesbian, Colonel Will Fight Homosexual

Ban." *The New York Times* [New York] 31 May 1992: n. pag. *Proquest*. Web. 28

Feb. 2014.

- - -. "Lesbian in Uphill Race for Congress: Despite Past Success, the Candidate

Finds That She Is the Issue." *The New York Times* [New York] 22 July 1998:

n. pag. *Proquest*. Web. 28 Feb. 2014.

Gay and Lesbian Rights. N.p.: Gallup, n.d. *Gallup*. Web. 28 Feb. 2014.

"Hate Crimes Timeline." *Human Rights Campaign*. The Human Rights Campaign, n.d.

Web. 28 Feb. 2014.

Muhlstein, Julie. "Retired officer, Grethe Cammermeyer lauds talk to end 'don't

ask, don't tell.'" *The Herald* [Everett, WA] 5 Feb. 2010: n. pag.

Proquest. Web. 28 Feb. 2014.

Kier, Elizabeth. "Homosexuals in the U.S. Military: Open Integration and Combat Effectiveness." *International Security* 23.2 (1998): n. pag. JSTOR. Web. 28 Feb. 2014.

Schmitt, Eric. "Pentagon Must Reinstate Nurse Who Declared She Is a Lesbian: Ruling Finds Old Policy Was Unconstitutional Military Told To Reinstate Lesbian Nurse." *The New York Times* [New York] 2 June 1994: n. pag. Proquest. Web. 28 Feb. 2014.

United States. Cong. House. *Statistics of the Congressional Election of November 3, 1998*. Washington: GPO, 1998. *Office of the Clerk: U.S. House of Representatives*. Web. 28 Feb. 2014.