

TRANSADVOCATE

Transgender Soldier Meets the President

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Published June 6, 2013 | Updated March 31, 2026

https://www.transadvocate.com/transgender-soldier-meets-the-president_n_9586.htm

Abstract

Crossposted with permission from OutServe Magazine, the magazine of OutServe-SLDN. By Anonymous Memorial Day weekend is, first and foremost, about remembering those who have made the ultimate sacrifice. It honors the many sacrifices of those who served and who are currently serving. It lifts up families and friends who have lost loved ones to combat [...]

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By Anonymous

Memorial Day weekend is, first and foremost, about remembering those who have made the ultimate sacrifice. It honors the many sacrifices of those who served and who are currently serving. It lifts up families and friends who have lost loved ones to combat and in the line of duty. It recognizes the best our nation had and has to offer.

Last week, as I have on every Memorial Day spent in D.C., I joined thousands of people who visited Arlington National Cemetery to honor our fallen brothers and sisters by putting some flowers on graves and placing flags. [pullquote]I know how President Obama feels about lesbian, gay, and bisexual service members. He's been very clear about that. But I wonder what he thinks about the policies that bar transgender people from serving openly. For now, I can only hope that one day the President will say the words "transgender" and "service" in the same sentence, just like I hope that one all day service members will be able to serve honorably and openly and be judged by their capabilities, dedication, and honor, rather than their gender identity.[/pullquote]This year I visited a fallen brother from my home state of North Carolina. He was member of the U.S. Army Military Police Corps, just like I am. I've never had the honor of deploying. He did, though, and never made it back.

He lost his life to an IED blast in Iraq, and I attended his funeral back in July of 2011. Last week, I returned to his plot in Section 60 of Arlington National Cemetery during the early afternoon hours to pay my respects.

As I approached Section 60, I noticed a large crowd of people gathering and several black SUV's. I wasn't really paying attention to what was going on around me; I was focused on visiting my fallen comrade. The crowd grew as I got closer to his plot. I noticed security officers were present and quickly realized something was going on. Finally, I saw him.

President Barack Obama. Standing less than five feet away from me.

Flashbulbs were going off all around me. Cries of, “Mr. President! Mr. President!” clamored for his attention. Eventually I couldn’t go any further - the crowd and the security were too thick. And then I realized I was face to face with my Commander-in-Chief.

I was wearing my ACU uniform. My nametape, D.C. National Guard unit patch, rank, and American flag were proudly displayed where he could see them. The President looked me in the eye, shook my hand, and thanked me for my service. He called me “sir” and “young man.” My hand was shaking afterward, and to be honest, my eyes got a bit teary. I thought to myself, I will remember this, as long as I live, as one of the most profoundly meaningful moments of my life. It only lasted a moment, but even now it’s hard to believe it happened.

I eventually made it to my comrade’s grave site. I spent some time there praying. I prayed for his family, for his unit members. I wished his family could have been there to get that handshake from the President, and so much more.

Now, with LGBT Pride Month upon us I can’t help but think about something else. The President shook my hand and thanked me for my service. He called me “sir” and “young man.” I wonder what he would say or do if he knew I was transgender. How would he react if he knew that when I enlisted in the Army just over 4 years ago, I had not enlisted as the “young man” that I had always known myself to be. What if he knew that during basic training a thick bun of curly hair rested under my combat helmet and beret, or that during Advanced Individual Training in September 2010 I came out as transgender and decided to live my life authentically, full time as man. What would he say then? What would he do?

Despite the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (DADT) in December, 2010, nothing has changed for me. The repeal allowed lesbian, gay, and bisexual service members to serve with integrity. However, transgender service members still face discharge if they come out or are outed. I am one of them.

I have served honorably for four years. I’ve always gotten along with my chain of command, never failed a PT test, and when I first enlisted, planned on dedicating 20 years of service to this great country. Being a soldier was all I ever wanted to do, since I was a kid.

When Pentagon leaders released a statement on May 31 to commemorate LGBT Pride Month, they noted the service, accomplishments, and devotion to duty of transgender Department of Defense civilians. They clearly and purposefully left out transgender service members - service members like me.

What would President Obama have said when he shook my hand if he had known that very day could have been my last in uniform, my last as a Soldier? How would the President have responded if I had told him I wanted to serve 20 years, or that I dreamt of re-classing to become a helicopter mechanic and a crew chief - but those dreams were being taken from me just because of who I am?

And what would he do if he knew I wasn’t alone? That there are so many of us, all hoping and praying together that we can serve openly before time runs out for us, one way or another. What if I’d said, “This isn’t just my story Mr. President. It is my friends’ story, my brothers’ story, and my sisters’ story.”

I know how President Obama feels about lesbian, gay, and bisexual service members. He’s been very clear about that. But I wonder what he thinks about the policies that bar transgender people from serving

openly. For now, I can only hope that one day the President will say the words “transgender” and “service” in the same sentence, just like I hope that one all day service members will be able to serve honorably and openly and be judged by their capabilities, dedication, and honor, rather than their gender identity.

If I had gotten another 15 seconds with the President, maybe I would have asked him. Maybe then I would know what he would say to Soldiers like me.

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The author of this blog must remain anonymous, since transgender service members are prohibited from serving openly in America’s military.

Suggested citation

Autumn Sandeen. "Transgender Soldier Meets the President." TransAdvocate, June 6, 2013.
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