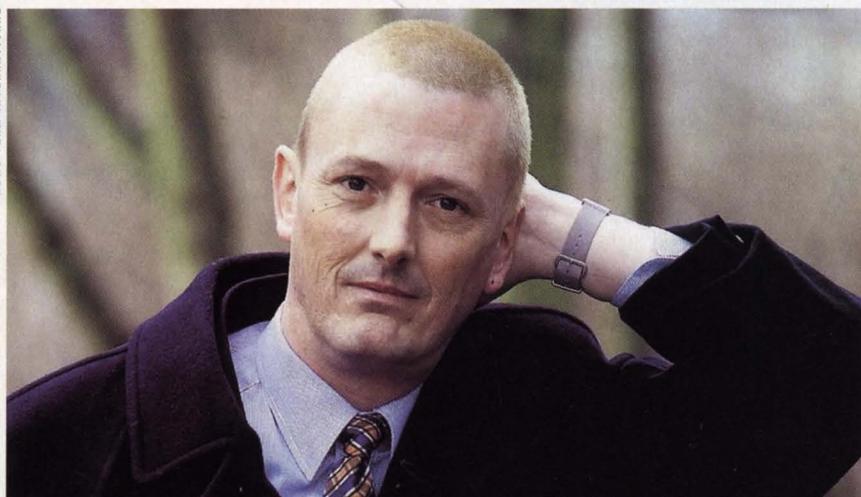




The battle of Britain

After years of fighting the U.K.'s ban on gay soldiers, British activists celebrate its sudden elimination BY MICHAEL GILTZ

NEWS TEAM INTERNATIONAL



Activist and veteran Simon Langley says gays in the British military still face a host of issues.

Simon Langley was at a BBC television studio in London one day last September when the European Court of Human Rights delivered a death blow to the United Kingdom's ban on gays and lesbians in the military. The vice chairman of Rank Outsiders, the British equivalent of the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, Langley was at the station to give interviews about the impending ruling, not knowing whether it would be a triumph or a setback.

"When the fax came through with the decision from the court," Langley remembers, "it was a feeling of pure elation."

The court decision, which held that the ban violated the rights of gay and lesbian personnel, led Defense Minister Geoffrey Hoon to order new guidelines that allow lesbians and gays to serve openly in the military. The move made the United Kingdom the latest addition to a long

list of countries, including Australia and Israel, that do so, even as the United States still grapples with the issue.

Langley had signed up with the navy at 18, knowing he was gay but being so gung ho to serve that giving up a private life seemed a small price to pay. "The way I'd stop it from being an issue was that I'd basically be celibate," he says. "I said I'd cope with it, but in fact I couldn't. After about six years I realized I had my own emotional needs, and I wasn't able to satisfy them."

Langley reluctantly resigned from the navy in 1993 and joined Rank Outsiders. He ticks off the group's accomplishments, including getting chaplains and doctors to provide confidentiality to people who seek advice from them.

Of course, the battle is far from over for Rank Outsiders. "We've always been careful to focus on the one goal of ending the ban," says Langley. "But now

that it's happened, it raises all sorts of other issues: pensions, housing for partners, and so on. We've got a lot more work to do."

Still, it is a major triumph, one that Duncan Lustig-Prean, a former navy lieutenant commander, savors. As one of the four plaintiffs in the lawsuit brought before the European Court of Human Rights, Lustig-Prean has been consumed for five years with the case.

The exhaustion shows, though his military bearing and appearance (he still has the buzz cut of a man in uniform) belie the toll the case has taken on him. "I'm glad it's over," he admits, sitting comfortably in his apartment near two photos: one of his great-grandfather, a general, and another of himself in uniform standing with his partner.

Lustig-Prean's journey has been filled with contrasts. A gay man, he compiled the brief that first urged the military to recruit women. An officer from the upper class, Lustig-Prean now lives in Tottenham, one of the poorest London suburbs. A great respecter of military tradition, he has also emphasized a certain eccentricity—even greeting the men who served under him with a cheery "Hello, girls!" every morning.

The day Lustig-Prean left the military, he told his men why. He took comfort in one officer's reaction. "He pointed at a picture of me greeting the queen and said, 'I always thought there was more than one queen in that photo.'"

A high-profile spokesman for ending the ban, Lustig-Prean says he's received almost no hate letters but later allows that he did once receive a bullet in the mail. He too was at the BBC the day the court ruling was announced. Lustig-Prean was giving interviews till 1 in the morning but did make sure he took care of one bit of personal business.

"My main thing was my parents," he says. "I wanted to tell them the results before they heard it on the news." One press report he loathed described them as dripping with champagne by the end of the evening, but the truth is, "I haven't actually gone out to celebrate yet. I've been too busy." ■

Giltz contributes regularly to the New York Post and other periodicals.