

Homosexuality in the military during world war ii

[Government](#), [Military](#)



Military has a long history with the allegations of homosexuality. They both have always made strange bedfellows. The leadership of armed forces all over the world, usually traditionalists, has in general seen homosexuals as morally wrong, and a threat to solidity. At the start of a war the enormous task of mobilizing thousands of soldiers surpassed concerns about the sexual behavior of troops.

But in the case of prolonged war those military men who are found in disgraceful conducts such as homosexuality become a problems for the senior military leadership and they become increasingly determined to rid the services of these types of military men. Paul Jackson's book - One of the Boys: Homosexuality in the Military during World War II - has discussed this problem in very excellent literary style. In 1990, Allan Berube in his study -- Coming out under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two - discussed experiences of gays and lesbians in the military of the United States during the World War II.

(Berube 1990, 1-22) The reading of Berube's book had a great excitement and compelled me to read Paul Jackson's book on the World War II experiences of surprising Canadian servicemen (and women). Jackson's book -- One of the Boys -- is a deeply researched study of homosexuality in the Canadian military during the years of the World War II. The book contains the result of hours of pouring over court-martial transcripts, police reports, psychiatric assessments, and dozens of interviews.

One of the Boys is one of the deeply research researched peaces of writings on the issue as the literature about any feature of gay and lesbian history from the pre-Stonewall period (or to use the Canadian equivalent, before <https://assignbuster.com/homosexuality-in-the-military-during-world-war-ii/>

Trudeau's Omnibus bill) requires widespread investigative literary work. No doubt it was not an easy task to discuss the coded disguising of homosexuality and Jackson has done a wonderful job while deciphering the coded phrases that were used to disguise homosexuality.

In the hypermasculine, heteronormative world of the Armed Forces, Jackson has exposed a rich tapestry of homosexual experiences, and thus has made a considerable contribution both to queer history and to the social history of the World War II. In *One of the Boys*, Jackson seems very careful in choosing words. He avoided using the term gay, which was rarely used in its modern sense during the World War II. He used those terms that were familiar at the time of World War II such as homosexual, queer, fairy or fruit.

It seems that Jackson intentionally addressed the subject of homosexuality that he broadly defined to be "the ability to derive sexual pleasure from members of one's own sex" (Jackson 148). By this way in fact Jackson refused to narrowly limit homosexuality to those who self-identified as such, or to exclude those who engaged in homosexual sex for bodily pleasure, rather than emotional love. Jackson has not included in the book the controversial debates over whether homosexuality is innate or learned behavior.

For the reasons of this work, he casts a wide net to cover the very diverse personifications of homosexuality in the Canadian military during Second World War. To be sure, as Jackson points out, military psychiatrists often decided that a person was not a "homosexual," despite overwhelming proof that the person had engaged in same-sex sexual activities, and often

regardless of the claims of the man himself that he was homosexual (Jackson 145).

While the analysis in *One of the Boys* of the queer experience of World War II is inspiring, there are a few areas in which Jackson's work might have been stronger. Unlike Allan Berube's work, Jackson has a very small portion in his book about female homosexuality. However, he seems justified in this omission partly on methodological grounds, since the Canadian military did not target women for courts martial or psychiatric evaluation on this basis. Given that these are Jackson's main primary sources, one can see how this could pose a major challenge.

In terms of oral history, he asserts that lesbians could not be found to be interviewed because the *Canadian Legion Magazine* would not allow the word "sexuality" in his advertisements, and that as a gay man he found it difficult to find lesbians to interview (Jackson 22). However, it can be said that this is a rather unsatisfying basis for not including lesbians in the book. Certainly, it might have been better to simply argue that the experience of homosexual women in the World War II is likely to have been qualitatively different from that of men, and consequently out of the range of the book.

Jackson included the occasional reference to the experiences of lesbians in the *Wrens*. It can be little disappointment for those hoping Jackson's book will provide the comprehensive examination of lesbianism in World War II called for in Ruth Roach Pierson's "*They're Still Women After All*". (Pierson 1986, 219) Although the works of Berube and Jackson are good analyses of the subject, but they differ on many occasion.

As the Canadian experience of the World War II was clearly different from that of the United States, and Jackson clearly indicates why and how his methodology is different from that of Berube, it is likely that many readers of Jackson's book will be well known with that of Berube. In some respects, the differences and similarities between the two countries are well addressed. For instance, the Canadian regimental system, organized by region, is different against the US buddy system that in views of Berube provided cover for homosexual relationships, and certainly fostered them.

On the other hand, Jackson also is of the view that contrary to the American experience found by Berube and John d'Emilio, discharges for homosexuality did not lead to postwar gay activism among Canadian old boys. (d'Emilio 1983, 1-7) However, it would have been useful to test some of the other conclusions of the American experience. For example, to what amount did Canadian veterans who had homosexual experiences during the World War II stay in urban centers where queer networks survived after demobilization?

How did the fight between psychiatrists and military police for authority over the issue of homosexuality play out and what were the larger impacts of this for the psychiatric profession? Berube seems arguing in his book that US psychiatrists went far towards setting up their professional credentials during the World War II; it would be attractive to know if the same held true for their Canadian counterparts and the degree to which identifying homosexuality was important for this.

Jackson's book reads almost as if it is two books merged together: one a policy analysis, the other a social history. The first three chapters of "One of the Boys" deal with how the different sections of the Canadian military tried

to regulate homosexuality. Chapter I looks at the quite confused efforts of the military to describe its policy on homosexuality. Chapter II looks at the court martial proceedings of those accused with homosexuality-related legal offences, while Chapter III discusses how military psychiatrists attempted to declare their authority over homosexuality as a medical issue.

The latter two chapters are oriented around a systematic reading of their respective primary sources: court martial transcripts and psychiatric evaluations. Jackson methodically attracts the attentions of his readers and takes them through the various phases of the court martial and psychiatric assessment processes, providing detailed and personalized accounts of how these two sections of the military dealt with the issue of homosexuality, the first as a moral and legal issue, and the second is trying to make it a medical issue.

Jackson's arguments in his book make it clear that there was a serious unwillingness on the part of authorities to discharge homosexuals from military service. Courts martial were used primarily to discourage homosexual activity, but rarely led to the discharge of noncommissioned servicemen. More commonly, the soldiers would be sentenced to serve time in a custody, after which they would be allowed to return to service. Officers were more likely to be discharged if guilty was established, but were conversely much less likely to be convicted.

Jackson's book suggests that the reason here matches the reason as to why psychiatrists were so unwilling, more so than the courts martial, to state that a man was homosexual. The medical model of homosexuality constructed a homosexual as an antisocial individual, a standpoint reflected in the moral

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standards of the court martial officers. Yet it was hard to settle this conception with the productive, healthy men who stood under examination; so, many were released, especially when they had fellow officers and servicemen keen to vouch for their good character and innocence.

The first chapter of *One of the Boys* discusses in detail this contrast between official military policy denouncing homosexuality on the one hand and the routine leniency towards homosexual behavior on the other. This attitude of military examines the various facets of the military's policy on homosexuality as crafted by the medical services, the National Film Board, the military police, and the RCAF. Generally the first chapter presents a rather random and inconsistent approach to homosexual behavior in the Canadian military: ruthless investigations on the one hand, routine denials on the other.

The chapter highlights amusingly in Jackson's satirical "Routine Order" on homosexuality, in which he describes the de facto military policy on homosexuality, in the absence of an official one. Boiled down to essentials, the de facto policy was to ignore or reject homosexual behavior unless the performer was otherwise a misfit or a behavioral problem. Any punishment should be light for men in combat units, and heavy for noncombatants, unless they were well liked.

Again and again, Jackson discovers that the Canadian military attempted to ignore homosexuality unless individuals were otherwise problematic or were flaunting their sexuality. This silent policy followed from 1940s beginnings of sexuality: all military men were supposed to be male, masculine, and heterosexual, and in the absence of overwhelming proof to the contrary, <https://assignbuster.com/homosexuality-in-the-military-during-world-war-ii/>

would be treated as such. In the second half of *One of the Boys*, Jackson focuses on the social history of homosexuality in the military during the World War II.

Chapters IV and V look at the experiences of queer servicemen in Canada and overseas, and chapter VI looks at the impact of homosexuality on esprit de corps, unity, and confidence. The chapters of the second half of the book rely a lot on oral histories and war diaries in addition to the sources used for the earlier chapters, and paint bright pictures of the wartime experience for queer servicemen. Certainly, these sections bring to mind Desmond Morton's excellent work on the experience of Canadian soldiers in the World War I.

(Morton 1993, 7-15) In conclusion it can be said that an inspiring amount of research has gone into Jackson's book, and it would be a remiss if one neglected to mention the visual component of *One of the Boys*. The book presents an impressive array of war art, including many works by gay war artists that demonstrate aspects of homosexuality and the homosocial bonds that formed during the war. Many of these pieces illustrate homoeroticism and same-sex emotional bonds in the armed forces more clearly than a chapter of text can.

Combined with images from drag shows, stills from NFB films, and photos of young military men together, these pictures add a rich visual element to the text. Jackson should be praised also for his use of frank, open language in unfolding cases of homosexuality during the World War II. Not only does this reflect the actual language used in the records he found, but it is appropriate to the sexually charged material he is dealing with. The book tells the story with frankness and humor. Works Cited Berube, Allan. , *Coming out under*
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