La Cage Air Force

For this positive senior airman, military life became a real drag.

July 1, 2006 By Lucile Scott

Every Tuesday night, while Joshua Coleman was stationed at Lackland Air Force Base, in San Antonio, he would warily pack a small duffel bag in his dorm room and hide it beneath his arm as he walked to his car and drove away from the base. After a scramble in the dimly lit bathroom of the Saint, a bar in downtown San Antonio, the five-foot-ten lanky senior airman, now 24, would strut onstage as Shanelle Milano, a.k.a. "Army Girl," and perform a repertoire ranging from pop diva Celine Dion to hip-hop queen Missy Elliot. Josh, who served at Lackland from late 2004 to 2006, says, in his bubbly Southern twang, "I'm actually really well known as Shanelle in this city. But I would do my show and then change, put on my hat and head back to the base." He concealed his nighttime alter ego to prevent the U.S. military from investigating him under its "Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Pursue, Don't Harass" policy, which former President Bill Clinton signed into law in 1993. It allows gay men and women to enlist only if they closet their sexual orientation and abstain from same-sex sexual activity while in service. From 1993 to 2003, the military estimates, it discharged 9,500 service members under "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." Researchers at the University of California at Santa Barbara report that during the policy's first decade, it cost the government at least $364 million in recruitment, training and other related expenses to replace those removed from service. (An additional 653 gay service people were combat-booted in 2004.)

Josh had dropped out of college, quit his job as manager at Wal-Mart and joined the Air Force in 2002 to escape Jonesboro—which he calls a "one-horse Arkansas town"—and a life that he says "was starting to get really into drugs, especially crystal meth." In March 2003, he was shipped to Germany to work as an Air Force photographer and shoot portraits of service members and car wrecks and autopsies for coroner reports. Just one year later, in 2004, he tested positive and was shipped stateside to the Lackland medical center—a move that eventually resulted in his honorable discharge.

Air Force members are screened for HIV every other year, but Josh tested positive during blood screenings after he was diagnosed with non-HIV-related colon cancer. "I kind of felt like everything was coming at me all at once," he says. Positive people are banned from enlisting, but those who test positive after they join can stay in service and are returned to the U.S. for medical care and prohibited from future foreign deployment. Medical information gathered when positive service people discuss treatment options and disclose past sexual partners cannot legally be used as

evidence that they (or any enlisted partners) are gay. Kathi Westcott, the deputy director for law at the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, a watchdog group dedicated to protecting those affected by "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," says she has no knowledge of the military outing someone specifically because they tested positive. "[The military] abides by the rule that medical reports can't be used adversely against service members," she says, adding that positive service members can be court-martialed for not disclosing their HIV positive status to partners.

Josh says the Air Force gave him quality confidential health care. After his hospitalization, Josh adds, he told many people on the base about his HIV status and says that fellow service members and superiors did not stigmatize or react negatively to him. He does object, however, to the automatic-transfer policy for people living with the virus. "In Germany, they had a big hospital with an excellent infectious disease unit where I could have been treated and had my friends around," Josh says. "Instead, they shipped me halfway across the world to a hospital where I didn't know anyone." The best therapy for him, he says, was doing drag. "I started doing Shanelle when I got to Texas because it kept me from blowing my head off. I was incredibly depressed, had no friends and needed to find a support network." Soon after his arrival, he met Scott (last name withheld by request), a 25-year-old civilian nephew of an Air Force lieutenant colonel.

"The first time I saw Josh he was in his military uniform," says Scott. "He was very attractive and carried himself in an upbeat way, like he wanted to live life to the fullest. He was my first love." A few months into what became a six-month relationship, Scott introduced Josh to his uncle as his boyfriend. Josh says he was hesitant to meet the uncle but agreed after Scott assured him that they would conceal that he was an active Air Force member. After the meeting, according to Josh and Scott, the uncle performed a background check on Josh and discovered that he was in the Air Force and HIV positive. The uncle, who did not respond to *POZ*'s numerous requests for comment, submitted an e-mail to Air Force officials reporting that Josh was dating a man. Josh gave *POZ* copies of the uncle's e-mail communications with Air Force brass, who had presented them to Josh before his dismissal. "Scott arrived and introduced me to his friend Joshua Coleman," the uncle's e-mail reads. "Over refreshments, Joshua and Scott talked about their homosexual relationship.... He took a multitude of pills and was very concerned about taking his pills at exactly the right time.... I was worried that these meds could be an 'HIV cocktail,' and this caused concern for my nephew's safety." Scott says he understands why his uncle used his professional privilege for a personal reason: "He wanted to protect me when he found out Josh was positive. After we broke up, I was angry with my uncle, but we had a long talk, and I told him I was positive too," says Scott, who tested positive shortly after meeting Josh. "I could see fear in my uncle's eyes, but he told me I could count on him for anything that I needed." (Josh maintains that Scott was infected before they met.) Josh says, "I felt manipulated, but, more than that, I was furious because I felt like Scott had been betrayed."

Meanwhile, Josh was summoned by his commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Stephen Greentree, who, Josh says, told him that he was recommending him for discharge due to his relationship with Scott. Josh says Greentree handed him a memorandum to sign, obtained by *POZ*, stating, "I understand that you are recommending that I be discharged from the United States Air Force for Homosexual Conduct and Commission of a Serious Offense." Greentree would not

comment to *POZ*, but Air Force public affairs officer Susan Campbell confirms that Coleman served under Greentree.

After his meeting with Greentree, “Josh seemed very lost,” says Scott, whom Josh called just after he got the news. “He had a lot of goals, a lot he wanted to achieve. And all of a sudden, he had no idea where his life would take him.” Josh and Scott are no longer in contact.

On March 3, 2006, Senior Airman Joshua Coleman received an honorable discharge, which qualifies him to receive full Veteran Affairs medical benefits for life. Major Michael Shavers says of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” “It’s not a Department of Defense policy. It’s a law, passed by Congress, signed by the president. The department is only carrying out the law of the land.” To which Josh answers, “I don’t think it’s fair that they can ask you to die for your country but tell you that you can’t be who you are.” He is still in San Antonio performing regularly at the Saint and other area bars and picking up gigs as a photographer. He reports that he remains asymptomatic for HIV and that his cancer is in remission. So is his anger at the Air Force. “I was very angry, but if I was allowed to, I’d go back. I loved everything about the Air Force: the structure, being off at 4:30, my job, my friends, being able to travel,” he says. “But I’m happier now. I don’t have to worry about hiding or watching my back.”

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