



MARGARETHE CAMMERMEYER

SILENCE WAS NOT GOLDEN: COLONEL CAMMERMEYER'S WAR

When Army Colonel Margarethe Cammermeyer, 47, a decorated Vietnam veteran, applied for a top-secret clearance in 1989, in hopes of becoming a general, the special agent assigned to her case asked a standard question about sexual orientation. "I am a lesbian," she said, a small clutch in her throat.

With one question and one four-word answer, the military she had loved for 26 years became her adversary. The routine interview was now an interrogation.

During Cammermeyer's childhood in Norway, a Bible study lesson focused on Christ's promise that "the truth will set you free." If that had come to mind when the special agent suddenly looked up from his notepad, it probably wouldn't have dispelled the dread radiating from the pit of her stomach.

Cammermeyer, mother of four, recipient of the Bronze Star as a combat-hospital nurse, was about to become the highest-ranking officer to ever challenge the Pentagon's view that homosexuality was "incompatible" with military service. The military's Cold War stance that gay soldiers, sailors and airmen posed security risks had evolved in the 1980s to a declaration that they were detrimental to "unit cohesion."

Over the next five years, as she fought to be reinstated as chief nurse of the Washington National Guard, Cammermeyer was surprised to become "one of the most famous lesbians in America," portrayed by Glenn Close in an award-winning TV movie and sought after for speeches and rallies nationwide.

In the middle of her battle with the Army, the colonel acquired a seemingly improbable ally. Former U.S. Senator Barry Goldwater, the flinty godfather of the modern conservative movement, wrote an op-ed column that made headlines in 1993. "You don't need to be 'straight' to fight and die for your country," the retired

Facing page: Glenn Close and Col. Cammermeyer in a 1995 publicity photo for *Serving in Silence*, which aired on NBC-TV. Close won an Emmy for her performance. NBC-TV

Air Force general said. “You just need to shoot straight.” Cammermeyer was a veteran healer—literally and figuratively—rather than a shooter. But she had seen war up close and as personal as it gets during her 14 months in Vietnam. Her skill and patriotism underscored that the military’s ban on gays was “a senseless attempt to stall the inevitable,” Goldwater wrote, adding:

After more than 50 years in the military and politics, I am still amazed to see how upset people can get over nothing. Lifting the ban on gays in the military isn’t exactly nothing, but it’s pretty damned close.

Everyone knows that gays have served honorably in the military since at least the time of Julius Caesar. They’ll still be serving long after we’re all dead and buried. That should not surprise anyone. But most Americans should be shocked to know that the military has wasted half a billion dollars over the past decade chasing down gays and running them out of the armed services.

It’s no great secret that military studies have proved again and again that there’s no valid reason for keeping the ban on gays. Some thought gays were crazy, but then found that wasn’t true. Then they decided that gays were a security risk, but again the Department of Defense decided that wasn’t so—in fact, one study by the Navy in 1956 that was never made public found gays to be good security risks. ...*

When the facts lead to one conclusion, I say it’s time to act, not to hide. The country and the military know that eventually the ban will be lifted. The only remaining questions are how much muck we will all be dragged through, and how many brave Americans like ... Margarethe Cammermeyer will have their lives and careers destroyed in a senseless attempt to stall the inevitable?

Victorious in federal court in 1994, Cammermeyer returned to duty and set out to help repeal the Clinton-era “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy that created a new moral quandary for LGBTQ service members: Ostensibly, they could stay in the

* The Crittenden Report, which summarized a 1957 investigation by a U.S. Navy Board of Inquiry, concluded there was “no sound basis” for the belief that homosexuals—characterized earlier as “sex perverts”—posed a military security risk.

trenches as long as they didn't come out of the closet. Yet between 1993 and 2011, when “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” was repealed, more than 13,000 gays and lesbians were forced out of the military.

During the 17-year battle to repeal the policy, Cammermeyer was one of its most influential foes. At the ceremony where President Obama revoked it, she was asked to lead the Pledge of Allegiance.

“Patriotic Americans in uniform will no longer have to lie about who they are in order to serve the country they love,” the president said.

Today, Cammermeyer, her spouse Diane Divelbess and their two rescue dogs live on Whidbey Island. Cammermeyer received a Ph.D. from the University of Washington in 1991 and serves on Whidbey's hospital commission. She's proud to be addressed as “Doctor.”

Inducted into the Washington State Nurses' Association Hall of Fame in 2014, the former candidate for Congress uses her web site as a platform to discuss current affairs. She writes inspirational songs and plays the guitar. With 11 grandkids, she's troubled by the state of the world, the “hypocrisy and hate-mongering,” and worried about the safety of schoolchildren across America, Vladimir Putin's lethal impunity, and a U.S. Supreme Court dominated by conservatives. If Americans who oppose bigotry are not vigilant, hard-won gay rights victories could be reversed, Cammermeyer says. Voter suppression efforts designed to disenfranchise minority blocs are part of the same agenda, she adds. “How can pro-life mean pro-gun?” she asks on her web page, <https://www.cammermeyer.com> “How does killing Asians or Blacks make a white shooter bigger, better, stronger?”

“We are at a stage of going around in a circle,” Cammermeyer warns. “They said *Roe v. Wade* was ‘settled law.’ Is marriage equality their next target? Once you've dispensed with precedent all bets are off.”



Awarded the Bronze Star by the hospital commander at Long Binh, Vietnam, in 1968. *Margarethe Cammermeyer*

CAMMERMEYER'S journey of self-discovery included shedding the vestiges of her own homophobia. After her divorce from her ex-tank commander husband in 1980, she recoiled at "the idea of being a member of a despised and stigmatized minority." In the fight of her life when she came out, she also worked to combat stereotypes about gays and lesbians: The notion that being LGBTQ is a "lifestyle" choice. Or a mental illness, as her bright, resilient mother nevertheless believed. Or, worse yet, that child molestation is an innate proclivity among gay people. Myths abound, Cammermeyer says. Even smart people are susceptible. Cammermeyer's father, a brilliant scientist, refrained from hugging her two brothers, believing such intimacy could make them gay. "The chains of prejudice are made of igno-



Grethe with her brother, Jan Wilhelm, in traditional Norwegian dress in 1947.
Margarethe Cammermeyer



Grethe with her parents and brothers in Washington, D.C., in 1959. *Margarethe Cammermeyer*

rance and fear," Cammermeyer says, more resolute than ever at 80, three decades after the courts ordered her reinstatement as a military officer.

"Grethe" (pronounced "Greta") Cammermeyer was born in Nazi-occupied Norway in 1942. Her parents were part of the underground war, sheltering resistance forces. "My very first military operation was a stunning success by all accounts," she wrote in her autobiography, *Serving in Silence*. "My mother smuggled guns past Nazi headquarters in Oslo to a rendezvous with Norwegian resistance fighters. The method of transporta-

tion was my baby carriage with, of course, me in it. Apparently I performed my role well.”

Her grandfathers were physicians; her father a neuropathologist, her mother a former nurse. Unsurprisingly, Grethe’s childhood goal was to become a doctor. The family moved to America in 1951 when her father landed a post at The Armed Forces Institute of Pathology. Later, he joined the National Institutes of Health. Grethe and her kid brothers ended up in five different schools, struggling to learn English. She enrolled at the University of Maryland at 17, finding herself “too tall, too shy, and too Norwegian” to fit in. “I was really struggling,” she remembers. “But I couldn’t put a name on it. I was trying to have somebody else come down and tell me what I ought to do with my life.” She floundered in premed, taking an array

of grueling courses while partying with new friends. With lousy grades and no scholarship, she reluctantly decided instead to pursue a degree in nursing. In many ways, she says, it’s “the crummiest job in the world,” replete with “blood, barf and bodily fluids,” and subservient to doctors. With time, she would come to understand nursing is “the most important job in the world.” Nurses on the front lines of the Covid pandemic personify the perseverance she learned in Vietnam, she says. “Finally, when healing is no longer possible, you’re the eyes that say goodbye.”

IN THE SPRING of 1961, a few months after becoming a U.S. citizen, Cammermeyer told her parents she was applying for the Army’s Student Nurse Program. The silence was deafening. American friends told them the only women who joined the American military were lesbians, “whores” or husband hunt-



Grethe at 15 in 1957 as a member of a semi-professional fast-pitch softball team. *Margarethe Cammermeyer*



Sworn in as a Women’s Army Corps recruit in 1961. *Margarethe Cammermeyer*

ers. Taken aback, Cammermeyer remembers “completely rejecting” the idea she might be gay. Sexually naïve at 19, she was anything but promiscuous. And she had no interest in marriage. Her goal, even back then, was a career culminating in a general’s star. Her parents nodded their approval. She set out to become an exemplary soldier.

At an Army post in Germany in 1964, Cammermeyer went on a blind date with a spit-shined, six-foot-six lieutenant from an armor battalion, Harvey Hawken. In high heels, she could nearly look him in the eye. “I think he was as shocked as I to meet someone so tall,” she remembers. Eight months later, when he proposed, she was “absolutely dumbfounded.” She vacillated before saying “yes,” realizing she was sacrificing her career, her hopes and dreams, for the role of wife and, surely before long, mother. Marriage meant children. The military’s rule then was that female soldiers with children under 16 would be discharged. “If the Army had wanted you to have a baby,” the saying went, “it would have issued you one.”

In 1966, after her husband’s unit was ordered to prepare for deployment to Vietnam, Grethe volunteered to go, too. When his orders were canceled, they both knew she had to go alone. It would have been unthinkable to shirk her duty as a military nurse to care for soldiers injured in combat.

The war games in which young nurses participated at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, had featured mock casualties. Still, the simulated wounds were so realistic that Grethe remembers being at first “immobilized by the horror.” However, it wasn’t until she arrived in Vietnam that what war does to people—invisible wounds included—became real.

She visited Special Forces camps to practice firing the M1 carbine with Green Beret medics before settling in at the 24th Evacuation Hospital at Long Binh. Her tour of duty in Vietnam—from February 1967 to May 1968—coincided with a rapid buildup of U.S. forces and the highest casualties of the war. When the North Vietnamese staged their surprise Tet Offensive, mortar and artillery shells often



Grethe and a friend at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, in 1963. *Margarethe Cammermeyer*



Grethe receives an award outside the Neuro Intensive Care Ward in Vietnam, 1967. *Margarethe Cammermeyer*

fell near the hospital compound. On the medical ward, she cared for sick teenagers caught up in a war she says “none of us really understood.” Sixty-one percent of the casualties were younger than 21.

For a nurse, the hardest part was the Catch 22 of “helping them get well and looking forward to their discharge from the hospital, only to then suddenly realize they were better off being sick and in a safe place. ...I hate to think of how many we had

‘cured’ only to die at a later time, in combat.” Later, she became head nurse for the hospital’s neurosurgical unit, learning profound lessons about advances in battlefield medicine—and hope: “The flicker of an eyelid, or the squeeze of a hand from a young man who had been motionless before,” she wrote in *Serving in Silence*. “The long struggle to finally say a single syllable meant that this soldier might learn to speak again.”

Today, reflecting on those tumultuous months in Vietnam, she believes “the resilience of the human spirit exceeds all possible expectations.” On Memorial Day weekend 2022, she was contacted by her first patient in Vietnam. “He thanked me for my care and caring. I remembered him because he was the one who made me want to send my patient home rather than back to combat and possible death. He survived and I am humbled.

“Looking back over my life—my childhood in Norway during World War II; my service in Vietnam, and now watching the annihilation of Ukraine—one can only ask: *What for?* Regardless of circumstances NO ONE EVER WINS IN WAR.” Those are her capital letters.

In 1987, newly promoted to full colonel, Cammermeyer visited the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. Architect Maya Lin’s powerfully stark black granite walls are engraved with the names of the 58,220 Americans who died in Vietnam. Nearby that day was a POW/MIA tent manned by “a hardened, grungy old sergeant.” He came around the table and stood before her. “Welcome home,” he said. As her eyes welled up, he said, “It’s OK. Colonels can cry, too.”

They embraced and wept together.

GRETHE'S HUSBAND made it to Vietnam, but they were miles apart for the first four months. Later they were stationed together at Long Binh. Rather than remaining on active duty, Harvey resolved to leave the military and attend grad school in forestry at the University of Washington in his home state. As they made plans to build a dream home at Maple Valley, in the foothills of the Cascades, she was pregnant with the first of her four sons. Instead of becoming head nurse of the intensive-care unit at Madigan Army Medical Center at Fort Lewis, she was forced to take a temporary assignment before leaving the Army in the fall of 1968, just before her son was born. Four years later, when the policy changed, she joined the Army Reserves and became nursing supervisor at the 50th General Hospital out of Fort Lawton in Seattle.

Next came graduate school at the UW School of Nursing on the GI Bill, followed by work with the Veterans Administration. All the while she was juggling her role as mom to three young boys—and, in 1976, a fourth. Grethe resolved that her sons would learn Norwegian, shoring up an important part of her heritage—their heritage. “My parents always spoke Norwegian to us at home. But my brothers and I got lazy. We didn’t switch over to respond in Norwegian. When I was a senior in high school I suddenly realized it was not going to be as easy for me to speak Norwegian. I decided, ‘I have to change this!’ So I began always speaking Norwegian to my parents again. When the time came that I had kids, I knew that if they were ever going to learn Norwegian it would have to be the mother language.”

That her husband, who had become a State Patrol trooper, was not conversational in Norwegian may have contributed to a growing rift. Slowly, subtly at first, the marriage began to unravel. After Grethe was accepted into the UW’s doctoral program in nursing, she says he began to resent her professional ambitions. He blew up one day when she and a group of friends were campaigning for passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. It was out of character. Whatever physical attraction she had for him was withering. That was confusing, too.

As the stress metastasized, Grethe grew suicidal. A wise psychotherapist urged her to look back on her life for clues to her despair. She confessed that as a teenager she had felt different from her peers and wondered if she might be gay. The doctor counseled that an individual’s sexuality is often “on a continuum.” He said there was no cause for shame.

Looking back, Grethe says her resistance to seeing herself as homosexual was

partly denial, partly despair at the state of her marriage.

The divorce proceedings turned ugly. A judge awarded her estranged spouse primary custody of their sons. Grethe was devastated.

The divorce became final in 1980. One of the first things she did was reclaim her maiden name. That she was no longer Mrs. Hawken symbolized the fresh start. “I read an article in the paper that said, ‘Why do they call it *maiden* names? Why don’t they call it *birth* names?’ I like that. As conflicted as I was, it was good to be ‘Major or Ms. Cammermeyer.’ ”

With a lovely soft smile, Grethe says the circle was complete in 2022 when she regained her Norwegian citizenship. “For years there was this part of me that felt as though I had essentially betrayed my Norwegian heritage by relinquishing my citizenship. When the policy changed so that Norwegians could regain their Norwegian citizenship, as a dual citizen, I started that process immediately. I’m Norwegian by birth and temperament, though in my



With her sons at Matt’s wedding in 1990. *Margarethe Cammermeyer*

mind I’m also an American—proud of the uniform I wore and proud of what I did serving in the military and fighting the military’s ban on lesbians and other gay people. And I won’t stop fighting.”

HER AGONIZED decision to move to California in the wake of the divorce was an attempt to insert more distance between her and her ex, though she felt like a mother abandoning her children.

Cammermeyer became a neuro-oncology specialist at the Veterans Administration Medical Center in San Francisco and transferred to an Army Reserve hospital there. By 1985, as a lieutenant colonel, she became chief nurse of the 352nd Evacuation Hospital at Oakland. It was a challenging, stimulating job, in contrast to the exhaustion she felt after a long day at the VA hospital. Despite the staff’s heroic efforts, most brain tumor patients died.

There were accolades, too. Among 34,000 Veterans Administration nurses nationwide, she was chosen VA national Nurse of the Year.

Awards and promotions couldn't offset how much she missed her sons. In 1985, she accepted a job as a night-duty staff nurse at the VA's American Lake Medical Center in Tacoma. Before long, she was regaining her old confidence and ambition. She became the Clinical Nurse Specialist in Epilepsy and Sleep Apnea. In 1987, she was readmitted to the UW's Ph.D. program in nursing. A year later she became chief nurse of the Washington National Guard, back on track to achieve her goal of becoming a general.

If love is all you really need, Cammermeyer's life changed irrevocably in 1988 when she met Diane Divelbess. A widely-exhibited painter and printmaker, Divelbess was on the faculty of the Art Department at California State Polytechnic University at Pomona for 29 years, eight as the department chair. Mutual friends engineered their meeting at a Fourth of July outing on the Oregon coast. If not instant, the attraction was apparent and soon irresistible. Grethe was impressed at how easily Diane interacted with her boys. She had never met a better listener. Or anyone with such a disarming laugh. There was mirth in her voice. Her intelligence was apparent, yet down to earth. Diane was "the last, connecting piece" to the puzzle of Margarethe Cammermeyer's identity: She was in love with another woman.

A year later, she was in trouble for telling the truth.



Diane Divelbess. *Outwords Archive*

WHEN THE Army's special agent asked the question about "sexual orientation," Cammermeyer says she never considering lying. The thought that her military career might be over flashed through her mind. "And yet, I still continued not to believe it because I had a good military record," she told reporters in 1991, understating her achievements. "This was me telling a security clearance investigator the

truth. And how could that possibly be used against me by the people I had served for so many years?” After all, the military’s long-stated rationale for rooting out closeted gays was that they were susceptible to being blackmailed to divulge secrets to enemy agents. Lately, the argument was that allowing homosexuals—and women in general—in combat-ready units would disrupt “unit cohesion.” Soldiers lived in close, often unpleasant quarters, including foxholes, Pentagon spokesmen said. Clashes between gay and straight soldiers could impact morale. “This is the same argument used in every other discriminatory regulation that the military has had,” Cammermeyer said. “It was used with women in the military, and it was used with blacks in the military. It’s almost the identical wording.”

Leonard Matlovich, an Air Force sergeant who served three tours of duty in Vietnam and received the Purple Heart and Bronze Star, was dying of AIDS in

1988 when he designed his own gravestone as a memorial to all gay veterans. It reads: “When I was in the military, they gave me a medal for killing two men and a discharge for loving one.”

On July 15, 1991, a four-member board of high-ranking Army and National Guard officers met to review Cammermeyer’s case. “I truly believe that you are one of the great Americans, Margarethe,” said Colonel Pat “Patsy” Thompson, the board’s president. “I’ve admired you for a long time and the work you’ve done, and all that you’ve done for the Army National Guard.” Then she revealed the board’s decision: Colonel Cammermeyer should be honorably discharged.

The wrenchingly ironic footnote to that story would be revealed 22 years later

when Colonel Thompson came out as a lesbian. In *Surviving the Silence*, a documentary about Thompson’s own journey of self-discovery, the decorated Army nurse remembers how awful it was to preside over Cammermeyer’s discharge proceedings. “Oh no! I can’t do this to her,” she said to herself. “But I wasn’t ready to come out.” In 1991, Cammermeyer had no inkling Thompson was also a lesbian. When they met again in 2014, Thompson told Cammermeyer, “I’m sorry I had to



Grethe’s activism made her a celebrity. Margarethe Cammermeyer

do that to you.” The revelation was met with no hard feelings, Cammermeyer says, only empathy. “She had carried that burden for all those years. There was also my gratitude because Patsy had given us what amounted to two years of breathing space between the time I revealed I was a lesbian and the discharge hearing. That allowed us to collect the crucial depositions that led to an appeal in civilian courts and draw national attention for my case.”

Cammermeyer had served notice immediately that she would appeal the decision through the federal courts. The reluctant provocateur became an activist. Nor was she alone. Dusty Pruitt, a lesbian who served in the regular Army and Reserves as a chemical weapons expert for 13 years, had come out in 1983. The former captain, also an ordained minister, took her case to the U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals. It ruled in August 1991 that the Army had to reconsider her dismissal. Cammermeyer’s spirits were buoyed. A few months later, Thomas Pan-iccia, a decorated U.S. Air Force staff sergeant, made national headlines when he came out as gay on ABC-TV’s “Good Morning America.” He too was promptly discharged, one of a thousand LGBTQ soldiers reportedly sacked after *Operation Desert Storm*, notwithstanding that many had served with distinction. Joe Steffan, an exemplary midshipman, was expelled from Annapolis shortly before his graduation in 1987 after he was outed by a fellow cadet as being gay. “To gay and lesbian soldiers, the Pentagon prohibition [on gays in uniform] reflects only deep-seated prejudice,” Steffan said. “It’s based on the assumption that all homosexuals are sex maniacs and somehow incapable of acting maturely.”

Bill Clinton met Cammermeyer in the summer of 1992 on a campaign stop in Seattle, promising, if elected president, to overturn the military’s ban on gay soldiers. She was busy writing *Serving in Silence*, with help from Chris Fisher, an award-winning Seattle writer. Fisher immediately grasped that Cammermeyer’s life story could inspire courage and conviction in millions of others.

When Barbra Streisand wanted to produce Cammermeyer’s story as a made-for-television movie with Glenn Close, Cammermeyer was not thrilled. She consented when Streisand said she believed gay rights “was the most important



Campaigning for reinstatement in 1993.
Margarethe Cammermeyer

social issue of the decade.”

In 1993, Cammermeyer and Tom Panicia testified before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee. They said homophobia was more detrimental to the military than gay soldiers. General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, the Gulf War commander, insisted that homosexuals would damage military morale to the point that America would have “a second-class armed force for quite some time in the future.”

AS PRESIDENT, Clinton quickly discovered the Pentagon was a more formidable adversary than he had imagined. When he rolled out “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” in 1993, the Democrat declared, “Under this policy, a person can say, ‘I am a homosexual.’” The very next day, Defense Secretary Les Aspin told reporters the Commander in Chief had misspoken. “People are not allowed under this regulation to say ‘I am gay,’” Aspin made clear. The Joint Chiefs of Staff had negotiated the terms of surrender.

Clinton insisted “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” a new twist on serving in silence, was “a substantial advance.” Cammermeyer viewed it as better-than-nothing incrementalism, perhaps “the beginning of an exoneration.” She was frustrated, too. The new policy allowed gays to take their uniforms—but not their sexual identities—out of the closet. “We should scream in outrage at still being classified as second-class citizens,” she said. “To essentially have the military looking into the private behaviors of consenting adults is ludicrous, and a little bit sick.”

There was another catch: If soldiers declared their homosexuality, they could remain in the military only if they could produce “convincing evidence that they have not engaged in homosexual acts,” Aspin said. That, of course, meant proving a negative. “Nobody’s ever tried this defense,” he acknowledged. “It’s a very tough standard to meet.” The Defense Secretary noted that under “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” Cammermeyer would not have been asked the question that led to her expulsion from the Army. However, now that she was out, in more ways than one, he felt she would have a tough time getting back in. Cammermeyer shot back, “They have to prove that I’m unfit in some way.”

ON JUNE 1, 1994, U.S. District Judge Thomas Zilly ordered the National Guard to reinstate Cammermeyer. “The rationales offered by the government to justify its exclusion of homosexual service members are grounded solely in prejudice,” he said. “The government has discriminated against Colonel Cammermeyer solely on the basis of her status as a homosexual.” The Justice Department said it was

weighing an appeal. The bigger fight was far from over. But Zilly's ruling—the latest in a succession of similar legal victories for LGBTQ service members nationwide—was transparently definitive.* Cammermeyer remembers being “absolutely ecstatic.” She let out a jubilant whoop so everyone at the clinic where she was working knew the news was wonderful. She told reporters it all felt “so powerful and so vindicating, not just of my own struggle but thousands of others. It's not the military that's wrong, but policies within the system,” she said. “It's been a wonderful career, and now I'm looking forward to finishing it.”

She happily returned to the Washington State National Guard. And when she retired from active duty in 1997, she redoubled her campaign to repeal “Don't Ask, Don't Tell.” It would take another 15 years. Another Washingtonian played a key role. Air Force Major Margaret “Margie” Witt, a decorated operating room nurse from Tacoma, was suspended from duty in 2004 for being a lesbian. She fought back with a federal lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of “Don't Ask, Don't Tell.” And in 2008 won a key decision in the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals. Late in 2010, momentum for change undeniable, the U.S. Senate overturned the policy on a 65-31 vote.

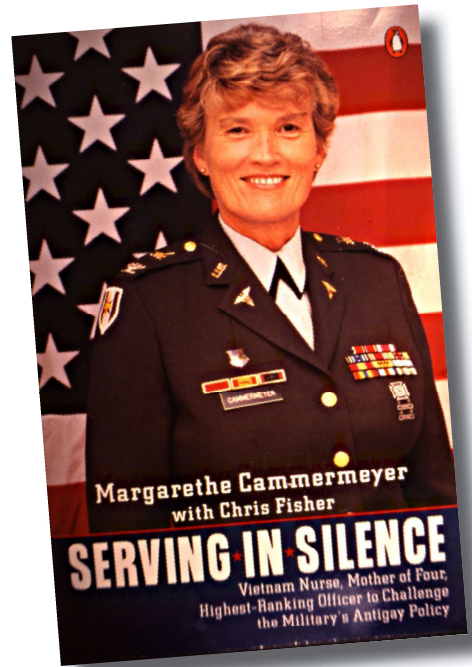
Certification and implementation took another nine months. On September 20, 2011, President Obama signed the repeal into law. LGBTQ service members previously discharged were offered re-enlistment. Margaret Witt and Margarethe Cammermeyer were on hand. Grethe led the Pledge of Allegiance.

THE 1995 television adaptation of *Serving in Silence* that aired on NBC had propelled Cammermeyer to even more national prominence. Glenn Close won the 1995 Emmy for outstanding lead actress in a miniseries or movie, and Judy Davis, who portrayed Diane, Grethe's spouse, received the award for best supporting actress. Alison Cross, who wrote the screenplay, won an Emmy as well. Cammermeyer was on the set for virtually the entire shoot. Though seven inches shorter, Close has Cammermeyer's chin and complexion. Her concern for attention to military detail and deportment impressed Grethe from day one. “I like to say that she became a colonel in a week, and it took me 20 years to get there,” Grethe says.

“The day we arrived in Vancouver, Glenn came right over, introduced herself and said, ‘My father wants to talk to you!’ She handed me her cell phone and I had a wonderful conversation with her father, who was a physician. We ended up talking about military hospital issues. So I immediately felt like I had con-

*After dickering with Cammermeyer's attorneys over stipulations for her reinstatement, the Pentagon's legal eagles retreated. In 1997, the Justice Department denied a motion to vacate Zilly's decision.

nected with Glenn and her family. I had immense respect for the work she had done as one of our greatest actors. Now, I felt as if I immediately knew her. My role was to make sure her salute was just right, and that she could walk and talk like a soldier, and not like Glenn Close. At one point during the filming they were doing a scene in Volunteer Park. It was a Gay Pride event. Glenn was portraying me being introduced. Just before the shooting was set to begin, she took me aside and said, ‘I’m trying to get a real sense of how you were feeling at the time.’ And I said, ‘Imagine you have just been stripped of your identity. The Army you love has thrown you out. Imagine being totally lost in the world and then coming to a place where you are absolutely embraced by 20,000 people. For me, it was a moment that touched me tremendously.’ Well, she went out and did that scene as though she had been in my shoes. She nailed it. Judy Davis was an extraordinary actress as well. So we were very pleased with the end product.”



The cover of *Serving in Silence*, Grethe’s autobiography. Margarethe Cammermeyer

DESPITE THE POSITIVE response to her book and the televised movie, Cammermeyer’s speeches sometimes caused vociferous debate. When she spoke to a Women’s History Month assembly at Olympia High School in the spring of 1995—at the invitation of Attorney General Chris Gregoire’s daughter Courtney and other leaders of the Student Activist Club—50 students boycotted the event. A hundred others had been kept home by parents outraged that the school board would not cancel the event.

Cammermeyer’s talk emphasized the changing roles of women in the military. But the students moderating the program prodded her to say whether she had any regrets about coming out. “I’ve had a loss of privacy,” she said, “but it would be hard to say that you would ever regret being honest. ...You are the leaders of tomorrow. You are more sexually active and more sexually wise than my generation. That’s not a value judgment—just a statement of fact.” The 600 students on

hand accorded her a standing ovation. Nineteen state legislators signed a letter chastising the school board. Public schools shouldn't be "platforms to educate youth on the virtues of standing up for one's homosexuality," they said. Letters praising the board's support for free speech—and Cammermeyer's patriotism—dominated the response on *The Olympian's* opinion page.

Cammermeyer was back two weeks later after a hate crime that would lead to tragedy. She joined Olympia Mayor Bob Jacobs at a rally in support of two students called "fags" and assaulted on the school grounds during spring break by teenagers from Rochester, a nearby town. One of the victims was 17-year-old Bill Clayton, an openly bisexual Olympia High School junior who had advocated for Cammermeyer's appearance at the assembly. To cope with an earlier assault, Clayton had just completed two years of therapy. "For this to happen threw him back to a place he didn't feel safe at all," said his mother, Gabrielle Clayton. "It threw him into a severe depression." Bill took his own life a month later, a few days after being released from a Seattle hospital.

"It was just a terrible time," Cammermeyer remembers. "My appearance at the school generated such an uproar that you would have thought I was going to pollute the world—a military nurse. There were police all over the place, with cordoned-off areas like they were expecting a major upheaval. What I emphasized was the progressive role of women in the military. Afterwards there was a backlash at the students who had helped organize the events. Then came the heart-break of losing Bill Clayton. He was just a charming, fragile young man. I reached out to him at the hospital by phone and told him I was there for him."

CAMMERMEYER'S public events, notably her appearances before congressional committees, gave her a "bully pulpit"—one of her favorite Theodore Rooseveltisms—to run for Congress in 1998. Three other lesbians, Tammy Baldwin, a Wisconsin state legislator; Christine Kehoe, a San Diego councilwoman, and Susan Tracy, a former Massachusetts state legislator, also ran for Congress that year, boosted by the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund. All four Democrats would win nomination in swing districts represented by Republicans but carried by Clinton in 1996. They were out and proud, to be sure, Cammermeyer remembers, yet "anything but" one-dimensional candidates. Baldwin, now a U.S. Senator, became the first openly gay woman elected to Congress.

Cammermeyer's opponent in the 2nd Congressional District north of Seattle was two-term Congressman Jack Metcalf, a veteran politician long opposed to gay civil rights. Billing himself as "Jack the Giant Killer," the 70-year-old for-

mer Everett teacher had twice challenged U.S. Senator Warren G. Magnuson. Trounced both times, he went on to win an open seat in Congress in 1994, and cultivated the support of building trades unions, including Boeing’s machinists.

Endorsed by *The Seattle Times* as a “compelling” candidate with “extraordinary gifts,” Cammermeyer easily won the Democratic primary. Early on, Metcalf styled her as “a spokesperson for the lesbian lifestyle.” He sent 47,000 conservatives a letter asking for donations if they shared “values like honoring the traditional family structure.” By September, however, sharp blowback prompted Metcalf to declare she was “a smart, honorable” person with an “exemplary” military record. They signed what amounted to a nonaggression

pact—a Pew Foundation Clean Campaign agreement—promising there would be no personal attacks. “Jack, candidly, was slipping,” she remembers. “It was his chief of staff who spoke at most of the debates and appearances. But he kept his word. From then on he was gentlemanly. It was actually really classy. I think it was the only, or at least one of the few, congressional races in the country where both candidates had agreed to the Pew agreement to campaign with civility.”

Candidate Cammermeyer never felt the need to repeat the four words that changed her life: “I am a lesbian.” Her stump speech invariably began like this:

I am not a politician. I’m an everyday person who has a health-care background. I am a mother, a grandmother and a nurse who served in Vietnam. I have had the best and worst of social experience. My passions are education, health care and fighting discrimination.

A few days before the General Election, Metcalf’s campaign manager said their latest polls gave him a 20-point lead. Cammermeyer knew better, but realized she was still the underdog.

He won a third term with 55 percent of the vote.



Grethe and Diane on a trip to Norway in 1991. *Margarethe Cammermeyer*



Grethe and Diane with the Obamas in 2015. *Margarethe Cammermeyer*

“Homophobia was an issue, of course,” Cammermeyer says, noting that nearly 60 percent of Washington voters had rejected a sexual orientation anti-discrimination initiative the year before. “I also didn’t have 40 years of political savvy, entrenched fundraising and his union support. Yet I lost by essentially five percentage points. Pretty good for a beginner. But I had the wisdom not to run again, because what you learn is what political campaigning is really all about. It’s about money—raising funds to get your propaganda out there—not so much about the issues, which are what should be of relevance to society as a whole. Complacency is what concerns me now. The fact that there is no sense of vision. Remember when Barack Obama announced

his candidacy with a new burst of idealism and commitment? It was a little bit like John F. Kennedy in 1960. It was this infusion of fresh hope for the future. Things are now so polarized, right and left, that we have lost the centrists. We need change agents! I tell people to become informed. Vote. Run for public office. Live your truth.”

CAMMERMEYER says two dates only six years apart prove that change agents can shift the tectonic plates of social history in record time. On July 26, 2006, the Washington Supreme Court—which today has two lesbian justices—issued a deeply conflicted 5-4 decision that the Legislature’s 1998 Defense of Marriage Act was constitutional. Then, on November 6, 2012, the script flipped: Nearly 54 percent of Washington voters endorsed same-sex marriage. Opponents had attempted to overturn a legislative mandate signed into law by Governor Chris Gregoire.

The vote on Referendum 74 nevertheless reflected a still-widening divide between conservative counties east of the Cascades, as well as many rural counties on the west side. Marriage equality, crucially, was backed by 67 percent of King County voters, yet overall by only 10 of the state’s 39 counties. Backsliding worries



Grethe and Diane Divelbess are married in 2012. *Margarethe Cammermeyer*

Dr. Cammermeyer.

The first same-sex marriages in Washington took place on December 9. Grethe and Diane converted their annual Christmas party into a nuptial-fest. Nine other couples happily accepted their invitation to be married that night. “The mayor of Coupeville, Nancy Conard, was the presiding officer. Each of us went into the downstairs library of our home and had our private wedding. I had made Norwegian wedding cake for each couple and ordered some wine glasses engraved with the date. And then we celebrated together.”

Grethe finds it curious that homophobes and others who buy into stereotypes about LGBTQ people are so fixated on what happens in the bedroom that they can’t grasp that most married gay couples are just like straight married couples. When the novelty of new intimacy wears off, they read books, pop popcorn and watch *Jeopardy!*. “At least early on, my embarrassment was that I thought if somebody was homosexual all you thought about was sex,” Grethe says. “Diane and I aren’t clingy. We’re just married. If I’m at home I’m either working outside or in my office. She sits in her reading chair and reads poetry and pays attention to the news. You couldn’t have two more opposite people. You’ve got a right brain person and a left brain person. Diane is an artist. She is also a religious scholar. Personality wise, what we have in common is that we have our values. We have our respect for one another. We have our professions.” Grethe, who has a mellifluous, folksy singing voice, plays guitar and writes songs. Some are inspirational, some whim-



Grethe happy at home in 2022. She was the first woman and first nurse to receive the UW's Distinguished Veteran Award. *Margarethe Cammermeyer*

sical. One, *The Tortoise and the Hare*, examines all the ways they're different. "I write that I love the smell of formaldehyde and ammonia and her mentholatum makes me barf!"

Love apparently conquers all. *Love equally.*

Well into their relationship, Grethe and Diane were at a reunion of family and friends. Her father had long since come to admire Diane. Grethe worried he still harbored misgivings about her being gay. Now, standing "as if to make a toast," he declared to the group that he found their household "perfectly normal."

"Diane's eyes twinkled," Grethe remembers. "I was amazed." Then, using the Norwegian word for "papa," Grethe said, 'Far, please pass the salt.'

"I felt nothing more needed to be said by anyone—and Father seemed to agree."

Which seems like a perfect ending.

John C. Hughes