

Gays no threat to Australian military

Australia's 1992 decision to allow gays and lesbians to serve openly in its armed forces has had no impact on military readiness, according to a new University of California study.

Aaron Belkin, director of the Centre for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military at U.C.-Santa Barbara, said the Australian results confirmed similar findings on gays serving in the Israeli and Canadian armed forces.

"Our research shows again and again that when (gay) bans are lifted, military performance does not decline," Belkin said on Wednesday. The United States has refused to lift its ban on openly gay troops, citing a danger to combat readiness and unit cohesion.

The United States and Turkey are the only members of NATO that still ban people who are openly homosexual from serving in their armed forces. Britain ended its ban in January after the European Court of Human Rights ruled that it was a violation of European human rights treaties to discharge military personnel because of sexual orientation.

Canada, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and the Scandinavian countries do not consider the sexual orientation of recruits or of military personnel on active duty.

The new California study, co-authored by Jason McNichol, a doctoral candidate at U.C.-Berkeley, involved interviews with Australian soldiers, academics and Defence Ministry representatives as well as reviews of all published material on the topic.

It concluded that despite initial concern among military leaders that ending the ban on gay soldiers would jeopardise recruitment, troop cohesion and combat effectiveness, the integration of openly homosexual soldiers since 1992 had proceeded smoothly and had virtually no widespread impact.

Indeed, the study concluded that many senior Australian military commanders believed the policy change had been a success that had helped to build "greater equity and effective working relationships within the ranks."

Senior officials, commanders and scholars report that there has been no overall pattern of disruption to the Australian military, and the study noted that the new policy had been put to the combat test as openly gay and lesbian soldiers served in recent active deployments in East Timor.

Recruitment and retention rates had not suffered as a result of the policy change, the study concluded. Belkin said that his institute did not take any official position in the U.S. debate over gays in the military, but added that it had sent copies of all its studies to the Pentagon for review.

"People who oppose lifting the ban almost always make the same arguments, and once the ban is lifted, they almost always change their minds," he said.



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