

Memorial Day complicated for transgender vet

When she was a child, Veronika Fimbres recalls observing Memorial Day with reverence, flags and parades. She was filled with pride and gratitude to honor those who had lost their lives during times of war.

But her feelings about the national holiday, which has been observed since the years following the Civil War, have evolved over time.

Fimbres was born in 1952 and grew up knowing that something was not right. It never made sense to her that she was considered a boy. She told her family that she was not the person she presented as, but no one understood at that time.

When Fimbres was 15, her then-boyfriend died in the Vietnam War. Fimbres believed she might be drafted and die in Vietnam, too. So she enlisted in the Navy in 1972 in hopes that she would remain stateside.

She enlisted as a man, per U.S. military regulations.

During her years in the military (in 1973 she was transferred to the Marines), Fimbres says she was harassed and bullied because of her race (black) and perceived sexual orientation. She did not claim any sexual identity or orientation; rather, she just “felt like a girl.”

After getting guidance from a local LGBT center, Fimbres and two other enlistees wrote a letter requesting to leave the military because they were gay. They jokingly referred to themselves as the “Three Muskaqueers.”

The contents of the letter leaked and Fimbres says she was physically and sexually assaulted. In 1974, she was incorrectly labeled a “latent homosexual” and expelled from the military with a less-than-honorable discharge. It was later changed to honorable.

Fimbres remained stateside during her time in the military, but describes her time at Marine Corps base Camp Pendleton as her “own personal Vietnam.” She has PTSD as a result of the traumas she experienced.

Today, 45 years later, the Trump administration has succeeded in imposing a ban on transgender people serving in the military. The policy was announced by Trump via Twitter in July 2017: “After consultation with my Generals and military experts please be advised that the United States Government will not accept or allow ... Transgender individuals to serve in any capacity in the U.S. Military.”

The policy was initially blocked by the courts, but in January a retooled version was upheld by a federal appeals court. The policy excluding transgender people from serving in the military took effect in April.

Ultimately, Fimbres went on to become the first transgender commissioner of veteran affairs for the city and county of San Francisco. She has always been anti-war and first learned the term gender dysphoria after leaving the military and beginning her transition.

Fimbres abhors Trump and his ban on transgender folks in the military, saying he knows nothing about

the military and is destroying the best parts of the service with his bigotry.

And that is why, for Veronika Fimbres and others, Memorial Day 2019 is more complicated than it used to be. She would not be able to enlist today as an out and proud transgender woman.

Fimbres says she will continue to honor and celebrate Veterans Day and is “honored to be a veteran” but will not participate in Memorial Day activities this or any other year.

She respects those who have died during wars, but is hopeful for no more war and no more deaths to commemorate on Memorial Day in the future.

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