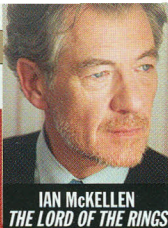


The Hollywood The ISSUE



IAN MCKELLEN
THE LORD OF THE RINGS



KATE WINSLET
IRIS



BAZ LUHRMANN
MOULIN ROUGE



RYAN PHILLIPPE
GOSFORD PARK

Advocate

www.advocate.com | APRIL 2, 2002

**GAY GUIDE
TO THE OSCARS**

**LESBIAN DIRECTORS
HIT THE BIG TIME**

**A BRAND-NEW
BOY-MEETS-BOY
LOVE STORY**

OSCAR'S HOTTEST CONTROVERSY

THE DE-GAYING OF A BEAUTIFUL MIND

**RUSSELL CROWE PLAYS IT
STRAIGHT AS JOHN NASH
AND IGNITES A FIERY DEBATE**

Plus! AN OUT CADET IN TEXAS & GAY PENGUINS IN NEW YORK

#660

\$3.99 USA • \$5.99 CAN • £2.99 UK

0 7



M I L I T A R Y

Out and still on duty

A member of the Corps of Cadets at Texas A&M comes out without ruining “unit cohesion,” so why can’t he serve in the military?

BY MUBARAK DAHIR

When Noel Freeman walked into the lounge where members of the Corps of Cadets hang out at Texas A&M University, the anxiety was palpable. Everyone—including Freeman himself—was apprehensive about how Freeman’s return as the first openly gay cadet in the organization’s 125-year history would play out.

“No one said anything to me,” Freeman says, remembering that day last fall when he returned to the cadets after a year’s absence. “It was very awkward. I felt uncomfortable and out of place.”

In the weeks and months that have followed, however, Freeman has worked hard to win himself a respected place in the ultramacho, militarylike ranks of the university group. While the Corps of Cadets is a school-run organization not directly linked to the United States military, it parallels much of the basic structure and atmosphere



© BRIAN BLAKE

of military life. The group also has a long history with the military. Formed in 1876 at the same time as Texas A&M, which was then a military institution, the school's Corps of Cadets has been a primary feeding source for top military officers ever since.

Today, despite a few rough moments and a few skeptical cadets who remain uneasy about Freeman's sexual orientation, he is confident he will be able to serve out the remaining year and a half of his university career in the corps without incident.

"It's been about five months now, and things are pretty good," the 25-year-old says. "We've achieved a balance. I'm conscious of the comfort level of the other guys, and they've come to respect me as well."

Freeman enrolled at Texas A&M University in August 2000 on a military scholarship. Having just completed four years in the Air Force, he joined the Air Force ROTC. He pinned his future on a military career, and his degree from Texas A&M—where he is now a junior in political science—was going to be his ticket to becoming an officer.

But six weeks after starting classes, Freeman came to a decision that would alter his life and make Corps of Cadets history.

Freeman had joined the Air Force in September 1996, two years after high school, as "the fastest way out of my hometown" of Fontana, Calif., a small city of about 120,000. He was openly gay before joining the military and knew that enlisting would force him back in the closet. But he was willing to do it, he says, because it seemed his best bet for a job with a future.

At first Freeman was stationed outside Washington, D.C., and "had nothing resembling gay life at all," because he was too frightened of the consequences. But when he was transferred to San Antonio, Tex., in 1998 he started to explore the local gay bars to make personal contacts again. Back at the base, "I simply refused to talk about my private life," he says. "It was like I had an alter ego."

Once on campus at Texas A&M, Freeman sought out the university gay and lesbian organization and a student-run gay support group. With their help, he began to reflect on his dual

life. It wasn't long before he knew what he had to do. "I finally decided I had to stop living in fear and living a lie," he says. Besides, "I figured [I would come out] sooner or later and I might as well be in control of it."

When Freeman handed his ROTC commanding officer a memo announcing his sexual orientation, he was immediately discharged and lost his military scholarship. However, he was not required to leave the Corps of Cadets, which does not follow the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy. And initially Freeman intended to stay with the group.

But he didn't give up. He sent E-mails to everyone in his former unit, explaining his side of the story. And, most important, he made an appointment with Maj. Gen. Ted Hopgood, the retired two-star general and 31-year veteran of the Marines who now serves as commandant of the Corps of Cadets at Texas A&M.

"I don't see any reason why you can't be a cadet," Hopgood told Freeman when they met.

"Our door is wide-open to all young people," Hopgood tells *The Advocate* of his welcoming back Freeman. "I really believe diversity is part of education

"This confirms what we've known for a long time: With firm leadership you can get rid of the effects of homophobia in the military."

—Aaron Belkin
*Director of the Center
for the Study of Sexual
Minorities in the Military*

But after word of Freeman's sexual orientation spread, a group of fellow cadets confronted him in the lounge. "People were yelling at me, calling me an embarrassment," he says. "I felt totally unwelcome." Unnerved, he quit the cadets in October 2000.

But by the following fall, he had reconsidered. "The Corps of Cadets is really the main reason for me to be at Texas A&M," he says. "Without the cadets, it's a completely different experience."

When classes resumed in September 2001, Freeman contacted the student commander of his former cadet unit, asking him to "feel out the climate for me coming back." The word was that Freeman was not welcome.

and there shouldn't be any problem with people being different. It's part of education, and it's just part of life."

Hopgood does admit, however, that Freeman's return as the first openly gay cadet in the organization's history was a particularly sensitive topic: "But my whole approach as a leader is that you have to be open to all kinds of situations. I believe grappling with [the fact that Freeman is openly gay] will make the others better leaders."

In addition, he says, his job as commandant was "to convey a positive attitude toward Noel and to encourage the cadets to keep an open mind. I think it set the stage."

Advocates against the U.S. mili- ►



Freeman on campus: His commandant says the gay cadet could "be a success anywhere."

tary's antigay policies agree that Hopgood's leadership role was key to Freeman's successful return to the Corps of Cadets, and they say the same could be achieved in the U.S. military if the Department of Defense would adopt a similar attitude. They note that Freeman returned to the cadets without disrupting "unit cohesion," the argument military officials use to defend "don't ask, don't tell."

"This confirms what we've known for a long time: With firm leadership you can get rid of the effects of homophobia in the military," says Aaron Belkin, director of the Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military, a think tank at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Belkin concedes that ridding the military of homophobia is a different—and much more difficult—task than quashing the outward manifestations of it. "But Freeman's case exemplifies that all of the military's claims about lifting the ban—that discipline and cohesion would fall apart—are simply not true," Belkin adds.

While acknowledging that Freeman's experience in the cadets "is not a perfect parallel" to the military, Steve Ralls, spokesman for the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, a Wash-

ington, D.C.-based advocacy group that works on behalf of gays and lesbians in the military, insists it is "a valid comparison. In a very compelling way, it demonstrates that ['don't ask, don't tell'] is unreasonable."

Hopgood, though, refuses to draw a similar analogy between Freeman's experience in the cadets and being out in the military. "The Corps of Cadets is a student organization run in a military fashion," he says. "But I'll tell you this: It is not like active service. There are big differences." Hopgood declined to give his opinion on the "don't ask, don't tell" policy. But he did say that "Noel has significant talents, and I think he could be a success anywhere."

Freeman has no doubts that gay men and lesbians can and should be able to serve openly in the military. "If ever there was a test case, I'm it," he says, pointing to his four years in the Air Force and his experience in the cadets.

Though he has no regrets about coming out, he says, "every day I still wish I could be in the military. I loved military life, and it was very important to me. I'd do anything to be able to get back in—anything except go back in the closet." ■

Dahir has written for Time, Redbook, Men's Fitness, and other magazines.

© BRIAN BLAKE