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Tale of a witch hunt

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Abstract (Summary)

Despite his feelings of isolation, [Herbert Sutcliffe] was not alone in his misfortune. Between 1959 and 1968, the Security Panel -- a committee of RCMP officers and representatives from the Privy Council, National Defence and External Affairs -- investigated 9,000 men and women suspected of homosexuality.

Full Text (1489 words)

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Homosexuality constitutes a security threat. Certain homosexual characteristics -- instability, willing self-deceit, defiance towards society and a tendency to surround himself with other homosexuals -- do not inspire confidence. Conclusions of federal Security Panel document (SP-199), May 12, 1959

At the time this document was circulating, Herbert Sutcliffe was a 42-year-old major in the Canadian army. By then a career soldier, Sutcliffe had begun his military career in the Second World War, fighting in France and Germany. Afterward, he returned to his home town to pursue a history degree from the University of Toronto. But in 1950, he passed up graduate school at Yale in order to make the military his professional life. After rising through the ranks for the next dozen years, the ground beneath him fell away on June 1, 1962, leaving his career and personal life in shambles.

Sutcliffe was in Ottawa that day readying himself for a prestigious post at the Pentagon in Washington when his commanding officer delivered the blow: the army had confirmed that he was a homosexual and, on that basis, was discharging him. Shocked and scared, Sutcliffe went home, had a drink and contemplated suicide. There was "nobody I dared to confide in," he recalls 40 years later in his modest downtown Toronto apartment. "Nobody at all."

Despite his feelings of isolation, Sutcliffe was not alone in his misfortune. Between 1959 and 1968, the Security Panel -- a committee of RCMP officers and representatives from the Privy Council, National Defence and External Affairs -- investigated 9,000 men and women suspected of homosexuality. The panel targeted the civil service, the military and the Mounties, spending millions of dollars in the process -- some of them on such bizarre measures as the "fruit machine," a device designed to differentiate gays from straights. Like Sutcliffe, at least 395 people lost their jobs. Those nine years, says Gary Kinsman, a sociology professor at Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ont., and co-author of the forthcoming book *The Canadian War on "Queers,"* forced Canadian gays and lesbians further into the closet.

The lost jobs were sacrificed to national security, or so said the governments of the day. At the height of the Cold War, Ottawa expressed concern that gays in its employ were a weak link in national defence. The RCMP formed a "character weakness" unit in 1956 to scrutinize civil servants' backgrounds for evidence of alcoholism, extramarital affairs or anything else that might make them vulnerable to blackmail. Within a few short years, says Kinsman, "character weakness had become a code word for homosexual," and sexual practices became the primary area of investigation.

The idea that homosexuality was a character weakness fit in with the day's popular views. But hard evidence that gays and lesbians actually constituted a threat to national security was difficult to establish. Once, in the mid-1950s, the KGB had tried to coerce information from a Canadian clerk stationed in Moscow with photos depicting his involvement in a homosexual encounter. The clerk refused to co-operate. Instead, he dutifully reported the coercion to his superiors, and was promptly fired despite -- indeed, because of -- his unassailable loyalty. Nonetheless, that incident was widely cited at the time as a portent of what might have been.

Sutcliffe's exposure followed the predictable pattern. While a 24-year-old lance-corporal posted to Britain, he had his first sexual encounter -- with a Canadian Army sergeant -- on New Year's Eve, 1941. As he moved through the ranks, he took care to avoid sex with military men, fearing it could compromise his authority. "I thought," he recalls, "the time might come when I'd be in control of them and they'd say, 'You can't order me around. I know you're a queer.' " One evening in 1962, he went home with a civil servant whom the RCMP had already identified as a suspected homosexual. Soon afterward, a police agent pressured the man for names. "He broke down," says Sutcliffe, "and told them he had slept with me."

Sutcliffe's name was now on the dreaded "alleged" list. It was a Washington undercover policeman who, he believes, sealed his fate. While in the city preparing for his job at the Pentagon, he accepted an invitation to the policeman's apartment. "After I had let out that I was homosexual," recalls Sutcliffe, "he said, 'I'm a police officer. You're under arrest.' " The army major spent the night in jail, and, denying everything, was released without charges before returning to Ottawa.

The elaborate informant network that snagged Sutcliffe and others required substantial manpower and funds. In an attempt to lend a scientific veneer to the proceedings, the Security Panel in 1961 turned to Robert Wake, former psychology department chairman at Carleton University in Ottawa. Wake set up an array of clinical tests aimed at distinguishing gays from straights. Monitors hooked subjects up to various contraptions measuring perspiration, pupil dilation and finger blood flow, and gauged their reaction to words such as fish, flute, fruit, mother, punk and queer, and photos of scantily clad people. The "fruit machine," however, never moved beyond the pilot stage, and the project's funding was cut off in the late 1960s.

But the investigations continued. In fact, says Kinsman, "the security campaign was never officially called off. It simply became less tenable." Not only were civil servants forming unions and asserting broader rights and freedoms, the personnel needs of an expanding bureaucracy and changing social attitudes combined to gradually increase tolerance. By the late 1960s, says Kinsman, homosexuals in jobs with lower security clearance levels would tend to be denied promotion rather than face discharge. Still, purges of lesbians and gays from the military, and policies prohibiting their employment in the RCMP, continued until 1988. Four years later, the military officially ended its discriminatory policies. The Canadian Security Intelligence Service remains the only holdout. While sexuality is not, in itself, a security issue, CSIS may recommend against granting high-level clearance to homosexuals who are not open about their sexuality if it believes this fact makes them vulnerable to blackmail.

Kinsman believes Ottawa should grant victims of the security campaign an apology and compensation, and knows of at least one person who is pursuing the matter through the courts. Sutcliffe, meanwhile, doesn't hold a grudge. After being drummed out of the military, he returned to Toronto and enrolled in teacher's college, later landing a job teaching history in a high school. In this, he sees more than a little irony: "The military had thrown me out because I'm a homosexual, and here I am teaching 18-, 19-, 20-year-old males." In his post-army life, Sutcliffe chose to keep his sexuality private until he retired in 1979. Finally, he says, "I reached the point where I wouldn't apologize for being gay. That's the way I am, and I'm comfortable with it."

THE MAJOR'S LAST DAY

On June 1, 1962, Maj. Herbert Sutcliffe, now 84, was given an honourable discharge from the Canadian Army because he was gay. Sutcliffe recalls that day in Ottawa when the army nearly drove him to suicide:

When I left my apartment, the movers were there packing everything to go to Washington. I had got the plum of army postings, the Pentagon. I drove to the office and was to have lunch at the officer's mess and then drive to Washington. When I arrived, someone said: "The colonel wants to see you." I went into his office, and he was standing there and said: "You're not having a luncheon. You're not going to Washington. You'll be out of the army tomorrow. The RCMP have proved to us that you are a homosexual."

It was just, pow, just like that. I was in shell shock. The military was my life. I came home and the movers were still there and I said: "Take everything out of your truck and put it back in the apartment." When they left, I poured myself a scotch and soda. I went in the bedroom, I got a Luger out of the drawer and put the bullets in it. Came into the living room, put the gun on top of the television and thought: "No, I'm not going to let those bastards do it." So I put the gun away and I learned to live with it.

But what do I tell my friends? My family? None of them knew [about my homosexuality]. What I told them was that they gave the Pentagon post to someone else and that I wasn't going to have anything more to do with the army. They bought it. When I finally came home to Toronto, I told my brother-in-law and sister [the true story]. They never put their arms around me and said: "We love you anyway, don't worry." They just went on as if this was nothing at all and they had their work to do and not to bother them. You live through these things. *** END OF DOCUMENT ***

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