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ARMY



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**Interview: Joe Clapson**  
**Picture: Steve Dock**

**J**UST ten years ago it was illegal to be gay in the UK Armed Forces.

But since 2000, following a ruling by the European Court of Human Rights, homosexual men and woman have been able to proudly serve – without hiding their sexuality.

In an interview with *Soldier*, Tpr James Wharton (The Household Cavalry Regiment) explained that instead of being oppressed, gay and lesbian Army personnel are now given full support.

"I came out to the Army before I told my parents, so that says a lot for the Armed Forces," said the 22-year-old.

"I told the Army in March 2003, after all my initial training was over – I was 18. I have always known I was gay but it wasn't until then that I told anyone."

The decision to lift the ban on gays in the Army came after two landmark cases heard at the European Court of Human Rights, which found that the MoD's policy was not sustainable.

Despite the change, the other half of the UK's "special relationship" – the United States – has not relaxed its attitude towards homosexuals in the Forces.

"I still can't get my head round the US 'don't ask, don't tell' policy," said Tpr Wharton, who has served Queen and country for six years.

"Luckily I don't have to deal with it, but clearly there will be gay soldiers in the US Army who are not being themselves – they aren't allowed to be."

Tpr Wharton was deployed to Iraq on OpTelic 10 in 2007 on long-range desert patrols and he says the idea of a "pansy" serving in a conflict zone is a flawed one.

"I would say whoever goes on a tour to a place like Iraq can't really be described as a pansy – so the gay stereotype doesn't really apply," he said.

The Liverpool FC fan, who met his boyfriend Ryan during last year's London Gay Pride march – the first time members of the Armed Forces were allowed to march in uniform – went on to say that although he can find himself on the wrong end of "banter", it is not a problem.

The hard image and stories from Iraq ensure Tpr Wharton, based at Combermere Barracks, Windsor, does not fall into any gay stereotype, but by his own admission he can make himself a target for abuse.

"I can't be late, I'm off to see Britney tonight," he casually told *Soldier* before realising the potential implications of his comment.

"That doesn't exactly sound the most macho thing to say does it? I've got quite a bit of ribbing for going to the concert, but to be fair a few of the lads have also got tickets."

The very fact that Tpr Wharton – soon to be promoted to lance corporal – feels able to tell his colleagues that he is gay, likes Britney Spears and recently attended a Pink concert speaks volumes for

**"I haven't got any personal problems. My problems are like every other soldier's – bombs and bullets"**

the strides in equality and diversity made by the Army.

In the past Tpr Wharton and soldiers like him would have been turned away at the door or forced out of the Army for their sexuality. In 1999 alone, 298 people were discharged because of their sexual orientation.

"A friend of mine who is gay was not allowed to be open about it and had the Royal Military Police following him around because of their suspicions – he wasn't allowed to be gay," said Tpr Wharton.

"Some soldiers had to leave and others just remained quiet, so were not themselves. Now it's completely different. I imagine it's like being in a different Army."

"Obviously there are people who are set in their ways and aren't in favour of the changed policy, but the whole attitude is different."

Although he acknowledges the Army's significant progress in diversity issues, Wharton explained that the current situation is not perfect, with potential recruits sometimes put off signing up by ill-informed personnel.

"I think there is room for improvement as far as the Army is concerned because there are still people who can't accept the changes – but it's 1,000 times better than ten years ago," said Tpr Wharton.

"There could definitely be improvements in the first stages of recruitment because I know people who have been given bad advice."

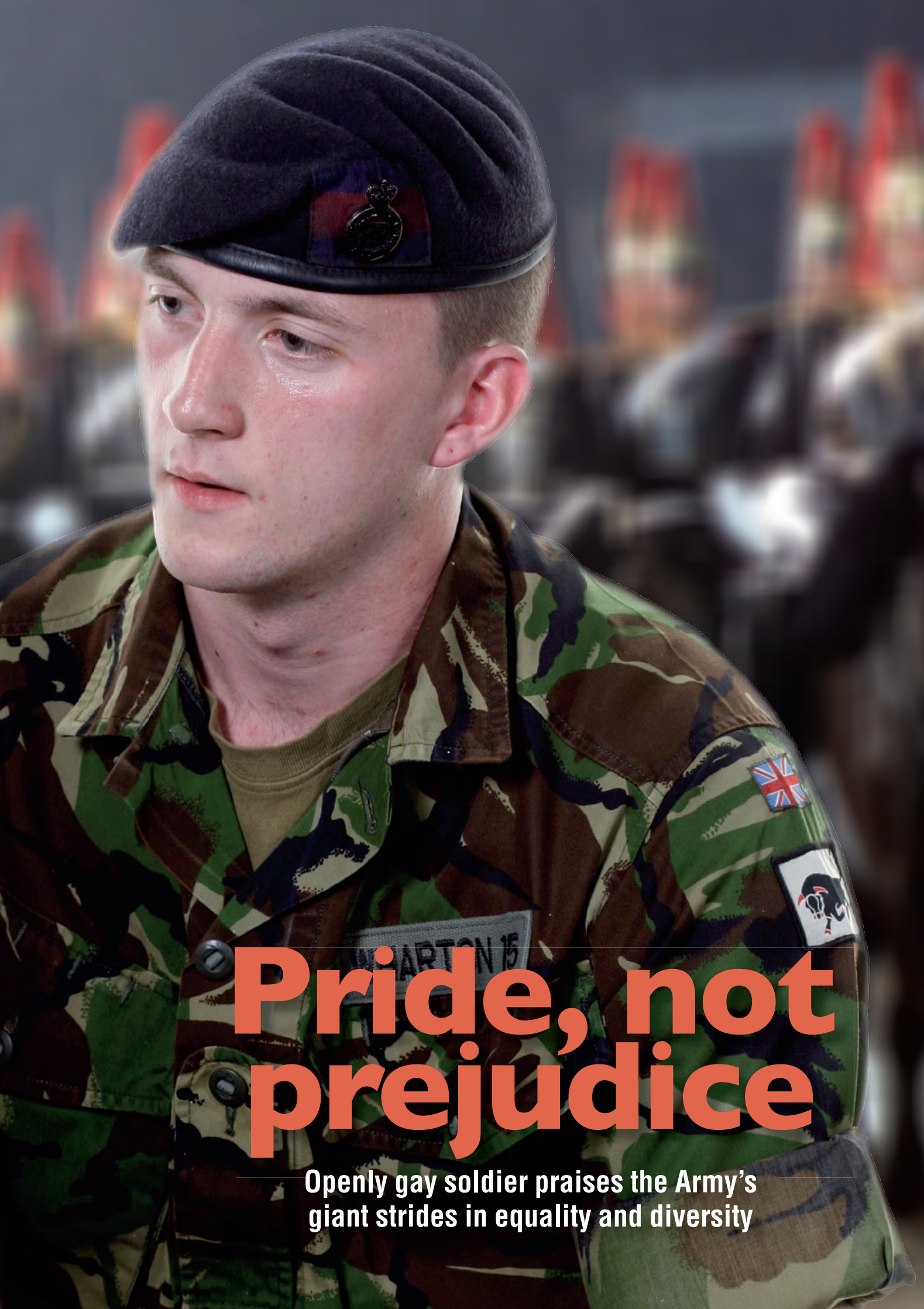
"A lot of people express their worries about being gay at recruitment and some awful things have been said to them, like 'you're not allowed to be gay in Army time' or 'you shouldn't be gay'."

In his six-year Army career Tpr Wharton can recall just two unwanted incidents as a result of his sexuality, but neither were serious enough for him to question his career.

"Considering some people have general problems every week I'm not complaining," he said "I haven't got any personal problems. My problems are like every other soldier's – bombs and bullets."

The trooper was also keen to elaborate on the general misconceptions people have about homosexual men and women. "People tend to think gay people don't like sport and that they just sit and file their nails – that is not the case," he said. "I love playing and watching sport – I'm a massive Liverpool fan and I don't own a nail file." ■





# Pride, not prejudice

Openly gay soldier praises the Army's giant strides in equality and diversity



# Mrs and Mrs

Army offers  
outstanding  
opportunities  
for married  
medical team

Happy couple: Helen  
(seated) and Elspeth  
De Montes-Davis are  
full of praise for the  
Army's acceptance of  
their sexuality

Picture: Steve Dock



## Interview: Cliff Caswell

**T**HE pressures of military life have never discriminated against Helen and Elspeth De Montes-Davis – the reality of deployments, risk to life and limb and long periods of separation are as real to them as they are to anyone in the Army.

Based in Catterick, Yorkshire, the two captains have been unfailingly successful in their careers as health professionals. Moving from the ranks to earn a commission as an officer at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, nurse Helen has seen action on two busy Op Telic tours. Elspeth, a recruit from the NHS, is studying to be a GP.

The only aspect of life that sets the pair, both aged 30, aside from their colleagues is the fact that they are a gay couple. Married in a civil partnership in February, they now have the right to be posted together and are entitled to their own quarter. And they are both delighted with the respect they have been shown by colleagues.

"I think the fact that we are both completely open about our sexuality does make life a lot easier," Helen admitted. "We don't try to hide it at all and people are very accepting. At the end of the day, we're just another Army couple."

"Life is really no easier or harder than it is for a straight partnership – we've been married for 18 months now and often go out to each other's functions together. The Army Medical Services is great and we've had no negative backchat."

As ordinary as it may sound for a gay couple to go through a civil partnership and share their lives together, this situation would have been unthinkable in the Army just a decade ago. Until the turn of the millennium, homosexuality was outlawed in the military, punishable by an administrative discharge.

It was not until 1999 that judges in Europe ruled the policy of dismissing gay soldiers amounted to an infringement of their human rights to a private family life. In January the following year, the Defence Secretary announced

the rules would be changed, with sexuality becoming a private matter for individuals.

Fast forward to 2005 and the introduction of civil partnerships, however, and the Army immediately took the new legislation on board, offering gay married couples the full rights of their straight colleagues and heralding a new era of openness.

For Helen and Elspeth, the military's commitment to full equality has given them new opportunities and both maintain that they are better soldiers as a result. Now settled and with a wide circle of friends, they are backing each other in their careers.

"I first met my partner four years ago during the entry officers course at Sandhurst and we discovered that we both got on very well although our paths didn't cross properly for another 12 months," recalled Helen.

"Soon after I deployed to Iraq on Op Telic 9 and Elspeth was then serving in Germany. But we've now settled into life at Catterick after being posted together."

For Elspeth, sexuality was something she had never discussed with colleagues. While openly gay, she had only spoken about the private side of her life with friends. But having married, she admitted to being far more confident and pleased with the warmth shown by fellow troops.

"When I first joined the Army I was in an Infantry regiment and was the only female officer around," she told *Soldier*. "Nobody asked me if I was gay and I didn't say anything – you feel you are protecting yourself by keeping quiet."

"But I'm more confident now I'm married."

**'We don't try to hide it at all and people are very accepting. At the end of the day we are just another Army couple'**

Helen also speaks up for the Army's Equality and Diversity initiative, and I have to say that I am very proud of her. I talk about her to others in the same way as you would any wife or partner."

Elspeth also believed that sharing military life together was key to their role as professional soldiers, and helped them deal with aspects of the job such as extreme stress and the short notice with which they could be deployed to theatre.

"I think there are two aspects to our careers – the first is the medical aspect, the fact that we both have vocational jobs and that we understand that some days can bring serious pressure. And then there is the military aspect of our lives, where it helps that we both understand that things can happen very quickly. But for

me the key thing about our marriage is normality – the same things apply to any couple, whether they are Mr and Mrs, Mr and Mr or Mrs and Mrs."

It may have taken the Army longer than the civilian sector to recognise that full equality pays, but in a relatively short space of time the Service has become one of the leading champions of tolerance and respect, and has been setting the pace for change.

With the strong backing of a partner, a happy and contented home life and the benefit of emotional stability, soldiers are more likely to be effective and prepared when it comes to operations. Against a backdrop where every man and woman in theatre counts, this has to be a cornerstone of success in the field. ■