MURDER IN THE WOMEN'S ARMY CORPS

an interview with actress Pat Bond

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On December 24, 1990, Pat Bond, one of the most prominent openly lesbian actresses in the United States, died in Larkspur, California, of lung cancer at the age of sixty-five. Pat was best known for her appearance in the 1978 documentary film *Word Is Out*, in which she described her life in the Women's Army Corps and in San Francisco's North Beach gay nightspots. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, she wrote and performed in four one-woman shows: *Conversations With Pat Bond, Gerty Gerty Stein Is Back Back Back, Murder in the WAC,* and *Lorena Hickock and Eleanor Roosevelt: A Love Story.* In 1990 she was among a group of lesbian, gay, and bisexual veterans who were honored by the San Francisco Board of Supervisors for their service during World War II. Pat never saw an end to a military policy that tormented her until her death.

I first met Pat when I interviewed her for my book *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two.* We quickly became friends and supporters of each other's work. In these excerpts from the interview we did exactly one decade ago (May 1981), Pat tells the story of her life in the army that was the basis for her one-woman show *Murder in the WAC.*

[When Pearl Harbor was bombed in December, 1941, Pat Bond was a high school senior in Davenport, Iowa. This excerpt begins when she was in a nearby college, where she pursued her love of the theater and another student.]

I fell in love with a woman who was not in love with me. I told her and she was horrified. And so what to do? How to get away from home? I knew there were other queers out there, but where? So I joined the army, fool that I was. But that's why young women are still joining the army: to get away from home. I just knew that there were a lot of gays in the army. I could hardly wait to get my haircut and look like everybody else!

When we got to [the WAC Training Center, Fort Oglethorpe] Georgia, as I walked in, I heard a woman from one of the barracks windows saying, "Good God, Elizabeth, here comes another one." I thought, "Well, at least they recognize that I am another one!" And we went in the mess hall and there were all these dykes sitting around with their feet up on the table in fatigues, you know, with Lil Abner boots, saying in a deep voice, "Hey Henry, pass the salt." Because those were the days of role playing. When women had men's haircuts and wore men's underwear and you could only wear men's cologne. Two kinds: Old Spice After Shave lotion and there was another tacky one, Tweed, that you had to use. I would sneak and put on perfume because I liked it a lot!

I really had nothing in common with most of the women. I was an intellectual. I was reading, and reading and reading and reading. Those were the things that interested me—theater, books, poetry. They were into baseball, football. That was it. Anyone who wasn't into those things was to be looked on with suspicion. So again I was separated, and again not really liked, not part of a group. Then for a while there in basic training, a group of women who were college graduates, or college people like I was, came through and that was glorious. They were only there for a short time, but I was in heaven. Because we understood each other exactly.

So there were all these dykes; it was just unbelievable. For some reason the army attracts gay women. I don't know exactly why. Then I thought it was because of the uniform. We wore what amounted to men's uniforms except we wore a skirt. We wore a tie, and we wore the Eisenhower jacket. Your hair had to be off your collar, it had to be that short. We got sideburns shaved over the ears—my dear, we really carried on! I couldn't believe it.

After basic training in Georgia I was sent to Shick General Hospital in Clinton, Iowa. They tell you they're going to train you. Well, they're not. It's a lot of lies. They trained me to be a medical technician, which meant that you were a nurse's aide.

We were working terribly hard. Fourteen hours a day. They would bring in convoys of men that were coming back from Corregidor, Guadalcanal. I saw six-feet-four men who weighed eighty-nine pounds. I mean, they'd been prisoners for years, some of them. And they never thought they would get out. So they were joyful.

Of course, I met a faggot there, thank God. A wild faggot! He had jungle rot. He couldn't walk around, because then it would flare up again. I used to get on the back of his wheelchair and I sailed down this hospital with him screaming "Bonzai!" And we went to a Hallowe'en party and he got in full drag and everyone loved it. He was done up as Mae West, or somebody. We had a ball. The other guys thought it was neat.

My first sergeant—the company commander—was a lesbian. They called her "Tick." My dear, she looked like a man! She'd been a gym teacher—what else!—before she came in. And she would come in to do bed check at night and some of the women would scream. They thought a man was loose in the barracks!

[After the war, Pat was transferred to Letterman Hospital at the Presidio Army Base in San Francisco. Then she was assigned to a WAC company that was shipped to Tokyo to join the occupation forces in Japan.] We were all anxious to go because we thought we could help—sacrifice for our country. We got there, and they had a band meeting us at Yokohama playing the WAC marching song. It surprised us because we were coming over there to sacrifice. Then they put us all in trucks and took us to Tokyo. And where did we stay but the Mitsubishi Main, which was this big hotel. A maid for every two women, two women to a room. We couldn't believe it. We giggled for a full two weeks.

Later we found out MacArthur brought us over to show the Japanese women what free American women looked like—he was not prepared for 450 bulldykes! His theory was that women didn't like war. He wanted to get Japanese women the vote [as part of the post-war pacification plan]. That's why we were there. We didn't even have any jobs to do.

I had a friend—Helen. She had been going with a woman and she'd gotten attracted to this guy. It was tearing her to pieces and she didn't know what to do. She talked to me and we were trying to figure out what she could do, how she could make it easy on her lover. But she really wanted to be with this man. My lover was interested in a man at the same time, so it was hard on both of us, trying to figure out what to do.

One day Helen came to me and said that they had called her in, and that they had letters that she had written to her lover, they had listened in on phone conversations. They had told her that unless she gave them the names of ten of her friends,

they would dishonorably discharge her.

Well, she went up to her room, the tenth floor, and jumped. She was dead, and she was twenty. Then they had the unmitigated nerve to give her a military funeral! And we were all—they had to give us phenobarb to keep us quiet. We just sat and drank for three or four days after that. One of the dykes got hold of one of the officers and beat the shit out of her and we were all very pleased. It was a terrible, terrible thing.

Then one by one we heard there were more until they called up everybody in the company. Your best friend would be testifying against you, saying "Yes, I saw her dancing with another woman." "Yes, I saw her holding hands with another woman." None of the evidence was direct evidence. No one had ever seen you sleeping with anyone. "Yes, I saw her crying over somebody." That kind of testimony. Everybody was terrified. And we were so divided against each other, which is one of their skills. You suspected everyone. That's when they put us under guard so that we couldn't get out to get to anyone. They read our mail, they followed us around. We were powerless, totally.

The woman we all loved the best was our first sergeant—and she turned out to rat on every one of us. And she was gay herself. She was one of those people who had charisma, that everyone liked. Those officers, they even had men's haircuts. There was no mistaking they were gay. And they turned against us.

I went to one of the officers that I trusted, Captain ——*. I didn't know then that she was gay, that she had an affair with one of our women. And I put my head on her shoulder and I said, "Captain ——, they're going to kill us, I know they are." And I was crying. I can still see the Pallas Athene [WAC insignia] on her collar with my tears splashing on it. And the feel of that winter woolen uniform. Saying, "What have we done? Why are we so bad? If I fuck a man in front of them, would that change things?" Or "What would they do if I had children, would they kill them too?" You know, just terror. And drinking and drinking and drinking until your tears mixed with your snot. No place to go, no place to turn. And the bastards knew it. Of course, you even thought you were a monster. You even thought you were strange and weird.

It was the enlisted people that got it. Captain Martha ——, remember that name. She was one of the worst. She had a man's haircut, she walked like a man, she talked like a man, and she did us in. She was, I think, one of the most responsible people for Helen's death. I have fantasies still about finding her someday. Colonel —— was another one. Mildred ——. I have fantasies about finding them—they're in an audience, is my fantasy, and to get the whole audience to turn on them, or kill them, or beat them up just to get even.

Not everybody was given discharges for homosexuality. A lot of them were let out on medical. Some were kept in. Some that were alcoholics were thrown out for that. It was then that I said, "Aha! I am married, am I not?" [While in San Francisco, Pat had agreed to marry a gay man.] And I knew they couldn't get my lover without me. So I went to my CO and said, "I'm married. I want to go home." She said, "You're what!" So I got sent back to San Francisco. And I felt guilty like they tell me survivors of the concentration camps feel. It happened at the age when we were all just feeling our sexuality. I know women who went through that who didn't have orgasms until they were forty.

They're still at it now. Women are being transferred around, being thrown out. It has not changed. And it won't. They hate us. In World War II you went into the military because you wanted to do your duty for your country, and you also wanted to get away from home—lots of reasons. And the men—it was disastrous for some men. We're very useful and tolerated in battle, aren't we? But God help all of us when they get their filthy claws into us.

*OUT/LOOK has deleted the names of these officers for legal reasons.