

Lesbian charge ruins navy career

Woman says false accusation ended string of advancements

By PEYER HAYS
The Daily News

Keitha Coates is waiting out the last days of a once-promising military career she says was shattered by a false accusation of lesbianism.

Rather than fight the blot on her military record, the 26-year-old Belleville, Ont., native will spend the next two weeks at CFB Halifax while her honorable release is processed.

Coates has agreed to leave the Forces on the condition she not rejoin the service or enter the Forces reserves — conditions that upset her.

But Coates is more angry about the process of investigation that concluded she was a lesbian.

A string of promotions and commendations that marked her five-year military career abruptly ended Oct. 2, when she was given written notice that a special career review board had found her "unacceptable for service in the Canadian Forces."

Under "administrative order 19-20 and the interim policy on homosexuality" she would not be forced out of the military, but was deemed ineligible for training, courses or promotion.

'Retaliated'

Coates said she is not a lesbian, and the Canadian military never asked her if she was homosexual.

Accusations against her arose while she served at a U.S. submarine tracking station at Oak Harbor, Washington, in June 1990. She said a demoted male U.S. navy co-worker accused his former female U.S. navy commanding officer of having sex with Coates at a party.

"This guy got fired from our section, and decided to retaliate," Coates said. A U.S. navy investigation followed, during which Coates was interviewed.

"(The investigators) weren't very nice, and I walked out of the interview, and nobody ever

asked me anything more," she said. "All of a sudden I was just being shipped back to Canada for administrative reasons."

Charges against the female U.S. commanding officer were later dismissed, but Coates' U.S. work permit was withdrawn. She returned to CFS Shelburne in August 1990.

Glowing reviews

A check of her Canadian Forces file at the time showed no record of the incident, but the transfer was a blow to her career.

This despite glowing reviews of her performance during her term at Oak Harbor, including her March 1990 nomination as the U.S. base's "Junior Sailor of the Quarter," on grounds she was a "talented, enthusiastic and motivated individual" who "possesses an uncommon ability to adapt to any situation and consistently produce 'First Rate' results."

Once back at the Canadian submarine tracking facility in southeast Nova Scotia, Coates' career resumed its upward glide. She was promoted twice, to the rank of leading seaman.

In her 1990 year-end assessment, CFS Shelburne's commanding officer Lt.-Cmdr. Philip Kenny rated her performance as "beyond reproach. She has been a consummate professional who has shown outstanding dedication and concern . . . (Her) leadership potential combined with her initiative and dedication ensure her an excellent future."

When contacted yesterday, Kenny would only say he understood Coates had left the military voluntarily.

That's true, Coates agreed — but only because it didn't seem possible to battle the military and win.

"At first I thought I'd fight it, but then I thought, 'I'm tired of having my life constantly scrutinized; I have this label on me that I'm a homosexual,' and so I just decided not to put up with this anymore."

She is aware current military policy on homosexuality is



Keitha Coates: ineligible for training, courses or promotion.

under severe criticism and ministerial review. In 1990, the independent Security Intelligence Review Committee ruled the policy unconstitutional.

But the rules haven't yet been changed, so Coates has consented to leave the Forces under terms that are supposed to leave "no stigma of any sort." They state she is "unable

to adapt to military life," resulting in "an unacceptable administrative burden."

Said Coates: "They're basically saying I'm unable to adapt to military life, but as you can see, I can adapt to military life quite fine."

After her time at CFB Halifax, Coates says she'll study at a Vancouver university.

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