

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Who Do You Know

Posted: 19 April 2012, 10:04AM

My friend Bob Bauman asked me if I knew the name "Archibald Butt." It sounded familiar, and since Bob and I are from the same gay civil rights era, I said, "I think so." I was wrong. Butt was the confirmed bachelor military advisor to President William Howard Taft. The president wept when it was confirmed that Butt and Frank Millet, the "artist friend who lives with me," had died when the Titanic cast its passengers into the icy Atlantic Ocean.

When Bob dropped off the book, *Voyagers of the Titanic*, and the research he had done on housemates Butt and Millet, who had nearby, but separate, rooms on the doomed ship, he, Ray, and I reminisced about Bob's time in Washington, and the night he had Harvey Milk's ashes in his closet. Lenny Matlovich, who was staying with Bob, wanted them buried in the historic Congressional Cemetery near Capitol Hill.

That same morning, I had two lesbian neighbors and their friend in a small boat, slowly touring the canals of Ft. Lauderdale. I explained that I was a bit late because Bob had dropped off materials he thought might make a good column. I asked one of the women, a lesbian in her early forties, if she knew who Bob Bauman was. "No," she said. I explained that he was the conservative, Republican Congressman from Maryland who lost re-election because he was "outed" in 1980. It was really big news in the national press, but my neighbor would have been only 10 at the time.

My guess is that my lesbian shipmates and their visiting guest from Ohio would have known the name "Harvey Milk" because of the recent award-winning film about him, but not the name Lenny Matlovich, whose face was on the September 8, 1975 *Time* magazine cover with the headline, "I am a Homosexual." It was the first time any national periodical featured a gay person. Leonard was discharged from the U.S. Air Force for being gay, and was as famous as Harvey Milk as a gay activist in the 1970s. His tombstone epitaph is, "When I was in the military, they gave me a medal for killing two men and a discharge for loving one."

My friend Bruce Presley, who spent his life creating textbooks, and is now creating educational videos, wants to capture on film for the Stonewall National Museum all of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender civil rights pioneers who are still living. He, and many of our generation, fears that younger people have no awareness of what life was like for those of us who fought the battle for equality. Recently, when Bruce was speaking to a college audience about the conditions endured by gay people when he was in school, a lesbian student announced, "I wouldn't have put up with that!" Indeed.

If Bruce had been alive in 1912, and had the ability to interview Major Archibald Butt and his lover, Frank Millet, what story might he have been able to save for us, so that YouTube- and Facebook-oriented young people might know about the lives of those who paved the way for zero-tolerance

policies on bullying in schools, marriage equality, and the end of sexual orientation discrimination in the military?

It may be that Butt and Millet would not have agreed to be on camera. Though they shared a home and were constant companions—despite Millet being married—no one spoke at the time of them being "lovers," only of their great affection. But if they had agreed to be videotaped, we might have heard Major Butt disclose that the only argument the two of them ever had was over the rose wallpaper in their bedroom. Each man was considered manly and attractive, and each had achieved notable success in his career. It's likely that Butt accompanied President Taft when he sailed into Provincetown, Massachusetts to dedicate the completion of the Pilgrim Monument. He may have done the same with President Teddy Roosevelt, with whom he also worked, when Roosevelt came to Provincetown for the laying of the cornerstone of the monument in 1907.

Butt and Millet would have had lots of stories to tell, had they dared. Decorum at the time required discretion. Their house was staffed by Filipino boys, and they had a "very delightful" young tenant, Archie Clark Kerr, who worked for the British Embassy, and was described as "high-spirited and mischievous." Years later, as the British ambassador, Kerr went to Iowa to stay with a strapping farm boy he met at a bus station in Washington.

There are stories of Butt's heroism on the Titanic, acting as an officer to help women and children into the lifeboats. One woman, who had given music lessons to the Roosevelt children, recalled Butt tucking a blanket around her. Butt was seen standing at the railing when the ocean liner sank swiftly, killing 1,517 passengers and crew. It was assumed that Millet was standing with him.

When news of Butt's death reached the White House, one reporter wrote, "...the name of Maj. Archie Butt, once synonymous of laughter and jest, now symbolic of heroism, was repeated while eyes blurred and voices became queerly strained." Shortly thereafter, by Joint Resolution of Congress, a memorial fountain was erected on Executive Avenue in Washington, D.C., and named the Butt-Millet Fountain.

If young, gay high-school boys, on a field trip to the Nation's Capital, knew these names in advance of their travel, they might stop at the fountain and feel more at home. But unless we make the effort to learn and tell the stories, no lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender youth will know the names or the heroic stories of Archibald Butt, Frank Millet, Bob Bauman, Lenny Matlovich, or even Harvey Milk.