

# **WE LIKE OUR QUEERS OUT OF UNIFORM**

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## **I Was A Teenage Draft Dodger**

*by Tede Mathews*

In 1970 I passed over a threshold that marked my departure from the ranks of the politically clueless. The year commenced with my folks and me glued to the TV, watching the obscene life-and-death game of the draft lottery unfold before our panic stricken eyes. It as a lottery with no winners except the military-industrial complex. My birthdate was selected in fourth place, i.e. young men born on my birthdate would be swept up in the first call to service of the new year. Before the first spring blossoms had budded, I travelled northward to begin my underground life as a draft dodger.

Up to that point, I had been one of the few young men in West Palm Beach, Florida to be publicly, actively opposed to the Vietnam War. I had stood in front of the courthouse reading the litany of the war dead, joining the elders of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. I was writing a draft advisory column for our underground hippie rag "The Different Drummer." I had been known to enter the local Selective Service offices to lecture the receptionists on why they should refuse to work for a death machine.

All this time, I was profoundly closeted, both to the world and to myself. Many of my straight hippie friends had opted out of the draft by declaring themselves homosexuals. Ironically, I chose not to take this option.

My folks were very supportive of me throughout my ordeal. They helped me pack up my belongings and my mutt Karma one late January night. I had been advised by local Quakers to utilize their underground railroad to Canada. Instead, I decided to settle in Boston, adamant in my justification that my refusal to be a murderer should not deny me my right to live in (and change) the land of my birth.

Once in Boston, I began working in a Xmas ornament factory run by a Scrooge-like foreman in South Boston (Southie). I assumed an alias and resolved to keep a safe distance from other human beings and their prying questions. I found it increasingly difficult to maintain my safe distance. After all, the "Revolution" was erupting all around me. Actually, it seemed to be centered mostly in the area university campuses and the periphery communes of white upper-middle class kids dropping in and out of their class identities. The front line of the struggle had not made it Southie. On weekends I would attend teach-ins at Harvard or love-ins on the Boston Commons. I'd read the Black Panther paper in the factory lunchroom, thereby earning the ire of my Southie co-workers, generally a militantly racist crew.

I was also becoming increasingly aware of the gay liberation movement's flaming faggots. My first close encounter of the queer kind was when I was solicited to purchase a copy of Fag Rag near Harvard Square. After I recovered from my heart tremor, I did buy one.

About that time, I was finding my isolation to be both personally and politically confining. I answered the call to go to Washington D.C. on Mayday to "shut down the government." I found the spectacle of thousands of like-minded radicals running wild past the symbols of war and repression to be an empowering experience. It was the stuff of great (anti)war stories. For the first time in my life, I felt connected to something that might be considered "a community."

When I returned to Boston I jumped head first into activism. I volunteered at The Red Book Bookstore and the People's Media Center. I helped to organize rent strikes through the Cambridge Tenants' Organizing Committee. I joined a "men's group." I got food stamps as a revolutionary act. Then I slipped into my first meeting of Gay Male Liberation.

The next period of time sped by at a dizzying pace. I left the Red Book and started to work with Fag Rag and the Gay Hot Line. Our men's group transformed into a gay rap group. I was Janis Joplin at the Halloween dance. I started living in drag, passing as a "woman" in the eyes of the straight world. I had started the year with an assumed identity and ended it with an assumed gender. I tell you, it was one hell of a year!

About that time an individual came to live at our Gay Liberation Front commune. He seemed to have not past but, then again, neither did I. The Freaking Fag Revolution accepted all refugees from Amerika with open arms. At one point his camera, containing photos of all of us, mysteriously disappeared. Also, at house meetings he subtly sowed discontent between the various housemates. The commune eventually disintegrated and he moved on, his work in Boston accomplished.

Throughout this whole period, my folks had refused to speak to the FBI men haunting their house. To maintain contact, I would periodically hitch to various surrounding towns and states to call them. Although my right-wing siblings wanted them to turn me in ("country before family"), they remained steadfast in their support.

One hellish night I was up with an underage gay runaway who I had befriended. He had attempted an overdose, and we spent the entire night giving him hot and cold baths, and walking the hallway of my apartment. We finally dozed off in my bed at the crack of dawn.

A couple of hours later a loud knock came at the front door, followed by a very butch "Open up, this is the FBI." My roommate squawked at them to leave us alone, but they eventually convinced him to open up. They barged into my room, pointed at me and pulled me naked from my bed, and handcuffed me between two of the three agents present. The whole time they were letting loose with every antigay remark



they could think of. I retorted that if they hated fags so much, why did they have a naked one handcuffed between them.

They whisked me off to the Boston FBI headquarters. By the time they paraded me through a large office full of secretaries, my teeth had stopped chattering. I was put in a small dark room with a single white light glaring in my eyes. It was the hour of my interrogation. An FBI agent threatened me, threatened to arrest my folks, offered me mercy, etc. if only I'd cooperate with them. I only said that I refused to say anything until I spoke with my lawyer. I was hoping that my dizzy roommate had heard my departing plea to call my friend, the professor. The professor had contacts with local pacifist groups who aided draft dodgers.

When I proved to be too discreet for mon agent, they tossed me in a holding tank with several unsavory mafioso types who began a litany of what should be done to faggots. I promptly took off one of my clogs and set to clanging it across the cell's bars. I refused to stop until they moved me and allowed me my phone calls.

That night I was removed to the Charles Street Jail. I had heard too many horror stories about gay men being picked up for cruising in the parks and thrown into the drunk tank to be repeatedly raped. My ravishingly feminine appearance set off quite a ruckus with prisoners banging the bars, yelling for "her" to be thrown to them for a little "pussy." I prayed for an army of amazons to rescue me, but instead I had to suffer through several strip searches by several obnoxious cops as they searched my ass for "contraband." Finally I was led to my cell. I was relieved to find out that federal prisoners had a separate wing. I ignored my cell mate and quickly went to sleep, throwing my maxi-coat over my henna-red tresses.

The next day, several of my Gay Liberation Front friends showed up with a lawyer. The FBI tried to get my bail raised to some ridiculous level, but the judge refused their arguments of my danger to society. I felt like blowing him a kiss!

So I was out on the streets again, thanks to the Quakers who fronted my bail money. The FBI and the State of Florida wanted to extradite me back to the Sunshine State, so that they could have a show trial. My lawyer finally worked out an agreement that they would drop all charges against me if I would go through another physical and comply with the results. I readily agreed and soon I was on the South Boston bus on my way to the Army base. I can safely wager that the South Boston Army Base had not seen the likes of me before. After removing 90% of my body hair (use your imagination as to what hair I left), I put on my best black lace garter belt and fishnet hose with matching panties. Over that I wore a fetching coral crepe pantsuit, my black fur coat (what becomes a legend most?) and every rhinestone I could borrow. To add to the effect, I applied long fake fingernails, and had my hair done up like a Dolly Parton wig.

As I sashayed into the waiting room full of fresh cannon fodder, all eyes were upon me. The prudent military decided to put me through my physical alone. After a lavish strip tease, I teetered about on my lavender pumps, refusing to go barefoot unless the Army replaced my fishnets. Finally, I was led to a bench in the hallway to wait my turn with the psychiatrist. I could see into the changing room and it was full of men taking their clothes off. To ensure my classification, I flew into the room and took hold of a very shocked young man's "member." I blurted out that it was the most beautiful cock in God's creation, and could I please kiss it? Before my blushing suitor could respond, two burly MPs carried me into the psychiatrist's office.

Suffice to say that the poor shrink had trouble maintaining his composure. He was the last act in my performance piece, and I planned to leave that army base in a blaze of glory. I flirted with him shamelessly. When he asked me if I had ever had homosexual fantasies, I laughed out loud and exclaimed, "Dahling, I am a homosexual fantasy!" With that note, the curtain dropped and I was escorted back to my drag and shown to the bus stop.

Thus ended my divorce from Uncle Sam. Although I feel in my heart that being gay was linked with my refusal to be a murderer in a racist war, that obviously is not true for all lesbians and gay men.

Now, more than ever, gays are fighting to stay in the military. There are many reasons, economic, political and psychological, why this is so. If that's what they want to do, so be it. I know that I can never align myself with any move to support the existence of the murderous military machine. I remain proud, to this day, of my resistance to that machine.