



Public Death, Private Life: Army Major Alan Rogers and the *Washington Post* Epilogue

The discussion in Executive Editor Leonard Downie Jr.'s office did not take very long. Indeed, reporter Donna St. George and Assistant Metro Managing Editor Robert McCartney did not even have a chance to sit down before Downie announced his decision: The *Post* would not identify Army Major Alan Rogers as gay.

"First of all, we were not able to ascertain for certain that he was gay," Downie says. "People who knew him fairly well, they said that he was gay. But family members seemed to be ignorant of that. So how would we be able to determine for sure that he was gay?"¹ Though Downie was aware that Rogers' friends insisted he had been gay, Downie also knew that they had a political agenda. It was an agenda he understood, but he felt it also tainted their testimony. As a result, their words "didn't constitute proof that that's what he was."

Furthermore, even if Rogers had been gay, Downie felt that St. George had no evidence that Rogers wanted this to be publicly known. Downie needed Rogers' explicit consent to reveal his sexual orientation in a mainstream, widely-circulated newspaper, and St. George had been unable to find such a statement. Without some kind of expression of his wishes—whether verbal or written—Downie was unwilling to identify Rogers as a gay man in the *Post*.

Downie ruled that Rogers' obituary could not reveal his sexual orientation. Nor did Downie approve a suggestion—floated by a few of the editors in his office that afternoon—that the article mention Rogers' leadership role in AVER, but without identifying him as gay. Printing one without the other, Downie said, would raise more questions than it answered. Moreover, readers might interpret Rogers' AVER affiliation to mean that Rogers was gay. To Downie's mind, that was not a proven fact.

¹ Author's interview with Leonard Downie Jr., October 1, 2008, in Washington, DC. All further quotes from Downie, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

Clean-up. Downie's decision was final. St. George returned to her desk and excised all mention of Rogers' sexual orientation and involvement with AVER from her article. Titled "Army Officer Remembered as Hero," the story was published on Saturday, March 22, 2008, over a week after Rogers' Arlington Cemetery burial. In the piece, St. George quoted Rogers' Army colleagues and superiors, as well as some of his friends. They praised Rogers' bravery, intelligence and magnetic personality. There was no mention that he had been gay.² The story ran on Page 3 of the B (Metro) section.

Outrage

Tony Smith, Rogers' friend and fellow AVER member, was appalled on seeing St. George's story. St. George had interviewed him extensively. Based on their conversations, he expected a full portrayal of his friend's life. Yet St. George had left out a central, if controversial, element of Alan Rogers' life: his sexuality. "It felt like a slap in the face, and it felt like a dishonor to Alan," says Smith.³

Smith was at a loss. Should he take the story elsewhere, or make his peace with the *Post's* obituary? If he let the story die, Smith, himself a gay veteran, felt he would be guilty of failing to defend his friend's honor. On the other hand, if he took the story to another news outlet, would he dishonor his friend by politicizing his death?

After much thought and consultation with friends, Smith decided to tip off another publication to the *Post's* omission. "It was about honoring Alan, and not to do that was dishonoring him and his memory and what he stood for," says Smith. "But there was also another piece... Knowing Alan and how he lived his life, not telling that whole story would also be robbing our community—the military and veteran community, our entire society—of a positive role model of a gay patriot." On Tuesday, March 25, Smith contacted the *Washington Blade*, a local gay weekly, and told an editor there about the details missing from the *Post's* obituary of Rogers.

The *Blade* jumped on the story. "This problem is very common in mainstream media," says *Blade* Editor Kevin Naff. "In cases when famous gay people die, routinely their obits are 'straightwashed' and any reference to sexual orientation is omitted... They're doing a better job of reporting stories that are sort of overtly gay... but when the gay angle is not obvious, or the source's sexual orientation isn't obvious or deemed pertinent, then it's the 1950s treatment."⁴ To the staff of the *Blade*, the Rogers obituary was a prime example of this. Because it involved the controversial question of gays in the military, and the obit was written by one of the most respected newspapers in the country, Naff felt it was an important and newsworthy story.

² Donna St. George, "Army Officer Remembered As Hero: Friends, Fellow Soldiers Mourn Loss of 'Extraordinary' Man," *Washington Post*, March 22, 2008, p. B3.

³ Author's interview with Tony Smith, October 1, 2008, in Pentagon City, VA. All further quotes from Smith, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

⁴ Author's interview with Kevin Naff, September 29, 2008, in Washington, DC. All further quotes from Naff, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

On Friday, March 28, less than a week after the publication of St. George's story, the *Blade* printed a scathing piece on the *Post*'s treatment under the headline "Media, Military Kept Soldier in Closet after Death." The *Blade* chose to identify Rogers as gay in its lede: "Maj. Alan Rogers, 40, a gay intelligence officer who served on a military transition team that trained Iraqi soldiers, died Jan. 27 in Baghdad from wounds caused by an improvised explosive device that detonated near him while he was conducting a patrol on his Humvee."⁵

That same day, gay, conservative blogger Andrew Sullivan linked to the *Blade* story on his blog. He expressed his strong disapproval of the *Post*'s decision not to reveal Rogers' homosexuality. Though he acknowledged that this was not a malicious omission, he felt that the paper's extreme caution was a prime example of "well-intentioned homophobia." "In the light of the US military's continuing discrimination against gay service members, it seems very relevant to me that Rogers' sexual orientation—about which there is no doubt—be included in coverage of his death and obituaries," Sullivan wrote.

And yet the mainstream media decided to enforce that closet—and perpetuate the military's policy—even after Rogers's ultimate sacrifice... I can see why outing someone who is alive and closeted is unethical; *inning* someone who is dead and was out is a function of utterly misplaced sensitivity, rooted in well-intentioned but incontrovertible homophobia.⁶

The *Post*'s omission of Rogers' sexuality was now a national story and the paper stood accused of discrimination—the very thing Downie had tried to avoid.

The Ombudsman

Meanwhile, in the days immediately following the publication of St. George's story, Rogers' friends had been emailing Deborah Howell, the *Post*'s ombudsman, to express their disappointment. Like Smith, they were angry that the *Post* had written what to them seemed a glaringly incomplete story.

Howell, whose late brother had been gay, was sympathetic to gay issues and the frustration of Rogers' friends. She thought she might deal with the controversy in her weekly column about the *Post*'s coverage. "I am the paper's internal critic," she explains.⁷ After some preliminary research and speaking to St. George and the editors, she decided to write about the Rogers obituary for her March 30 column.

Gathering string. Howell was able to track down Rogers' executor, Shay Hill, and Cathy Long, Rogers' closest surviving relative. Long had not known that Rogers was gay until his death. The two

⁵ Chris Johnson, "Media, Military Kept Soldier in Closet After Death," *Washington Blade*, March 28, 2008.

⁶ Andrew Sullivan, "The Washington Post's Well-Meant Homophobia," *The Daily Dish via Atlantic Monthly*. http://andrewsullivan.theatlantic.com/the_daily_dish/2008/03/the-washington.html Accessed March 26, 2009.

⁷ Author's interview with Deborah Howell, October 1, 2008, in Washington, DC. All further quotes from Howell, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

expressed their satisfaction with the *Post*'s omission, saying that Rogers' life story was bigger than his homosexuality.

They did not, however, deny Rogers' sexual orientation. "Personally, as far as the family is concerned, we really didn't know about this until after his death," Long told Howell. "It was in the back of our minds, but we didn't discuss it."⁸ After speaking to Rogers' friends, Howell concluded that Rogers had in fact been gay. Howell spoke to Tami Sadowski, a close friend of Rogers, who told her that "being gay was a huge and very defining part of his life."

Based on these confirmations that Rogers was gay, Howell concluded that his orientation should have been included in St. George's obituary. "I became convinced that, while he didn't announce it to his superiors because of 'don't ask, don't tell,' that he had been a relatively out gay man, and that it should have been in the story about his funeral," says Howell. "I thought [Downie's] was a very good argument" — and one which Howell felt was in line with the *Post*'s stylebook. "I just disagreed with it. I thought that there was ample evidence that he was gay and that he wasn't trying to hide it in his private life, and so I wrote a column saying that."

At first, Howell was hesitant to write about St. George's story. From speaking to St. George and the editors, she knew how difficult the decision had been. Moreover, she understood that their uncertainty came not from a discriminatory impulse, but a desire to be respectful to the wishes of the dead. This made Howell reluctant to revive the issue and air the paper's decision-making process in public. But then the *Blade* published its story, identifying Rogers' sexual orientation, the day before her column was due. This, Howell says, made her decision easier.

Public Death, Private Life. Howell's column, titled "Public Death, Private Life," was published on Sunday, March 30, two days after the *Blade* story. In it, she explained the *Post*'s dilemma as an "agonizing" one. Howell also revealed that St. George's original draft contained information about Rogers' sexuality, which was later omitted. In the end, Howell wrote, the *Post* had erred in deleting that information. "The *Post* was right to be cautious, but there was enough evidence — particularly of Rogers' feelings about 'don't ask, don't tell' — to warrant quoting his friends and adding that dimension to the story of his life," Howell wrote. "The story would have been richer for it."

The *Post* staffers who had had to grapple with the question were unhappy with Howell's column. "It was, frankly, irritating," says Assistant Managing Editor McCartney. He had advocated identifying Rogers as gay, but been overruled by Downie. "We'd gone to all this trouble to not put it in the paper, and then it was in the paper like a week later. I've got to say that left a bad taste in my mouth."⁹

⁸ Deborah Howell, "Public Death, Private Life," *Washington Post*, March 30, 2009.

⁹ Author's interview with Robert McCartney, October 1, 2008, in Washington, DC. All further quotes from McCartney, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.