

Daily Mail

My very personal battle, by the soldier who came out while serving in Afghanistan

By [Ian Drury](#) 12th December 2009

Trooper Ben Rakestrow completed a six-month tour in Afghanistan yesterday

Fighting the Taliban on the dusty battlefields of Afghanistan is one of the toughest challenges a soldier can face. But Trooper Ben Rakestrow had to summon up his courage for a different reason—to tell his comrades that he was homosexual. Now the 21-year-old has spoken about the support and acceptance he has received since coming out.



Open: In his digs Ben Rakestrow sleeps under a pink quilt adorned with images of Hollywood star Zac Efron.

Only ten years ago he would have been booted out of the Army under rules banning gay personnel. Today though, Trooper Rakestrow—who was in the same convoy as Lieutenant Colonel Rupert Thorneloe when the commanding officer was killed in an explosion—experiences nothing more than harmless banter from his fellow soldiers.



Banter: Trooper Rakestrow (right) sits at his bedspace with friends in transit accommodation at Camp Bastion in Helmand Province, Afghanistan

Yesterday he completed a gruelling six-month operational tour in the war zone with Egypt squadron, the 2nd Royal Tank Regiment, and said the decision to come out was not easy. He said: 'It was difficult to start with. I didn't know how they'd react. Trooper Rakestrow decided to reveal his sexuality during the middle of a military exercise on Salisbury Plain last year.



He said: 'I had been out at a nightclub and the next morning the lads all asked if I'd had any luck. I just said "His name was Ryan". 'Some of their faces dropped, and they asked if I was serious. They couldn't believe it.'

But Trooper Rakestrow, from Exeter, said it was the best decision of his life, adding that he was accepted and treated as an equal. He said: 'I get banter from them all the time, but it's good banter. They all want to know about my life, they ask a lot of questions. I don't find it hard to talk about it.'

He insisted he would never look to start a relationship with another soldier. He said: 'I wouldn't let my personal life clash with my professional life.'

In 1999, the year before the ban on gay personnel was lifted, 298 people were discharged from the Army for their sexuality.

In 2000 a legal victory for three gay men and a lesbian who had been kicked out of the Royal Navy and RAF brought a change.

Earlier this year the then head of the British army, *General Sir Richard Dannatt, became the first military chief to address a lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender conference.

*"One of the Army's six Core Values is 'Respect for Others' and it is therefore our absolute duty to treat our fellow soldiers as we would wish to be treated ourselves. Discrimination against those in the Army who are lesbian, gay and bisexual does not give them a chance to contribute or to play a full part in the teams that are vital for our success on operations. Respecting others is therefore part of the trust that has to exist between soldiers, and the nation's values of tolerance, decency and quality must be reflected in the Army." - General Sir Richard Dannatt, quoted by *Pink News*.