

## Jury Acquits Air Force Major Accused of Lesbian Affair

By The New York Times

AUSTIN, Tex., Aug. 16 — A seven-member jury at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio has acquitted a female Air Force major charged with sodomy and conduct unbecoming an officer.

The sodomy charges against the officer, Maj. Debra L. Meeks, 41, were based on an accusation that she had had a homosexual relationship over two years with Pamela J. Dillard, a civilian. Ms. Dillard, the military's main witness, also accused the major of threatening her with a gun in 1994, the basis for the unbecoming-conduct charge. The five-man, two-woman jury deliberated for seven hours before reaching their decision on Thursday evening.

Major Meeks, who enlisted in the Air Force in 1974, has not said whether she is gay. Had she been convicted, she faced eight years in military prison and loss of her pension, estimated at \$1,800 per month.

Telephone calls to Major Meeks's residence in San Antonio were not returned. She was quoted by The Associated Press as saying, "I'm

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just glad this nightmare is over."

Major Meeks was prosecuted under the sodomy provision of the Uniform Code of Military Justice, which has been on the books since 1951. The sodomy provision applies to both heterosexual and homosexual sex, but critics say the Air Force and other branches of the military focus only on gay men and lesbians.

The defense sought to place the court-martial, which began on Monday, into the context of the Clinton Administration's "don't ask, don't tell" policy, which the military instituted in 1993 and under which homosexuals are allowed to serve in the military but must keep their sexual orientation private.

Dixon Osburn of the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network said that the military had failed to adhere to its own new policy on homosexuality and that "if the Air Force had followed its own regulations, there would never have been a court-martial."

The network provides legal aid to military personnel who are harassed or prosecuted because of their perceived sexual orientation.

During the court-martial, Air Force prosecutors presented five witnesses. The defense team, headed by Michael Tigar, a University of Texas Law School professor who is also a lead defense lawyer in the Oklahoma City bombing case, did not call any witnesses. The defense repeatedly attacked Ms. Dillard's credibility and argued that Ms. Dillard had made up her assertions about a romance with Major Meeks.

Interviewed after the verdict, Mr. Tigar said, "I hope it encourages other people who may be the victim of charges to stand up and fight."

Asked why he chose to represent Major Meeks, he said, "I was of-

fended by what had happened to her and how she had been treated. It seemed to me that having a pajama police force was a waste of money."

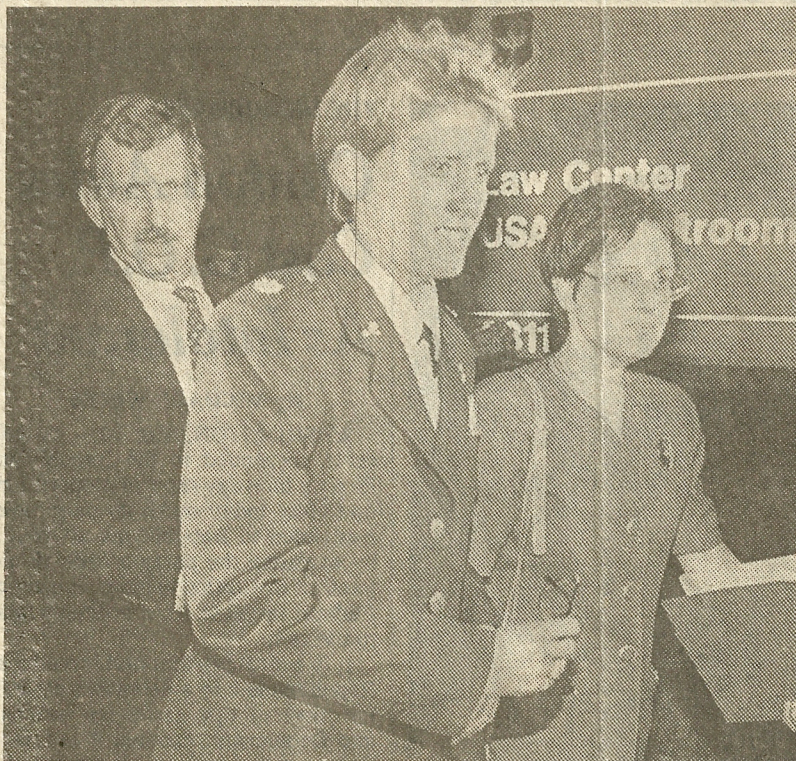
Irene Witt, a spokeswoman for Lackland said: "The military justice system worked. The matters charged were given full and careful consideration by the court members before they reached a verdict. We respect and abide by their decision." Ms. Witt could not provide an estimate of the cost of the case.

Mr. Osburn pointed out that none of the officers held responsible for the April 3 crash of Commerce Secretary Ron Brown's plane in Croatia had been court-martialed, even though Mr. Brown and 34 others were killed.

"Why in the world is our military spending millions of dollars trying to throw people suspected of being gay in jail rather than insuring our airplanes are safe to fly?" he asked.

Mr. Osburn's group estimates that the Pentagon spent more than \$21 million in 1995 to train replacements for personnel discharged because of their sexual orientation.





Associated Press

Maj. Debra L. Meeks was acquitted of charges of sodomy and conduct unbecoming to an officer on Thursday. Major Weeks left the courtroom at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio with two of her lawyers.