
The Washington Post Spotlights 90-Year-Old Veteran and WilmerHale Client's Long Quest for Justice

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Updated on Jan. 18, 2018: The US military approved the request of firm client Helen Grace James to have her 1955 discharge from the Air Force upgraded to “honorable” after finding that her separation from the service was more than likely solely due to her being a lesbian.

The Air Force Board for Correction of Military Records said in its decision dated Jan. 11, 2018: “... We believe that it was more likely than not the applicant was discharged for her sexual orientation and there were no aggravating factors in the record that could, in and of themselves, form the basis of an adverse discharge... Therefore, in the interest of justice, we believe it is appropriate to recommend that her records be corrected...”

(Original news below)

The Washington Post [prominently featured](#) the quest for justice of a WilmerHale client, a 90-year-old who was expelled from the Air Force in the 1950s with an “undesirable” discharge for being a lesbian.

The article related the effort by Helen Grace James, a California resident, to have her discharge upgraded to “honorable.” WilmerHale partner [Jonathan Cedarbaum](#) and associates [Chris Megaw](#) and [Nicholas Simons](#) and are part of her legal team, which also includes lawyers from the nonprofit [Legal Aid at Work](#). Her lawyers [filed a complaint](#) on Jan. 2, 2018, in US District Court for the Eastern District of California.

As the story sets out in some detail, Ms. James endured a harsh military investigation and harassment as part of the US military's effort to purge gays and lesbians from its ranks. She was coerced into signing a confession of her gender orientation after an interrogator threatened to cut her off from her dairy-farming family in rural Pennsylvania. While she was still on the base after signing the discharge papers, she discovered someone had cut the buttons off her uniform.

“That’s how they disgrace you, so you can’t wear your uniform, so you can’t belong to the United States military,” she told *Post* reporter Kyle Swenson.

The circumstances of Ms. James' separation from the military have caused her significant difficulty through much of her life. For instance, unlike most other veterans, she was ineligible to use the GI Bill to pay for her graduate schooling because of the nature of her discharge.

Even so, she earned degrees in physical therapy from the University of Pennsylvania and Stanford University and later had a successful academic career as a professor of physical therapy at California State University at Fresno.

But the passage of many years has not diminished her desire for an honorable discharge, which would, among other benefits, allow her to be “buried with a color guard or interred in a national cemetery,” the *Post* reported.

An honorable discharge would also have its psychological benefits for her. “I need to do as much as I can to prove I'm a good person,” Ms. James told the *Post*.