

SGT. LEONARD MATLOVICH

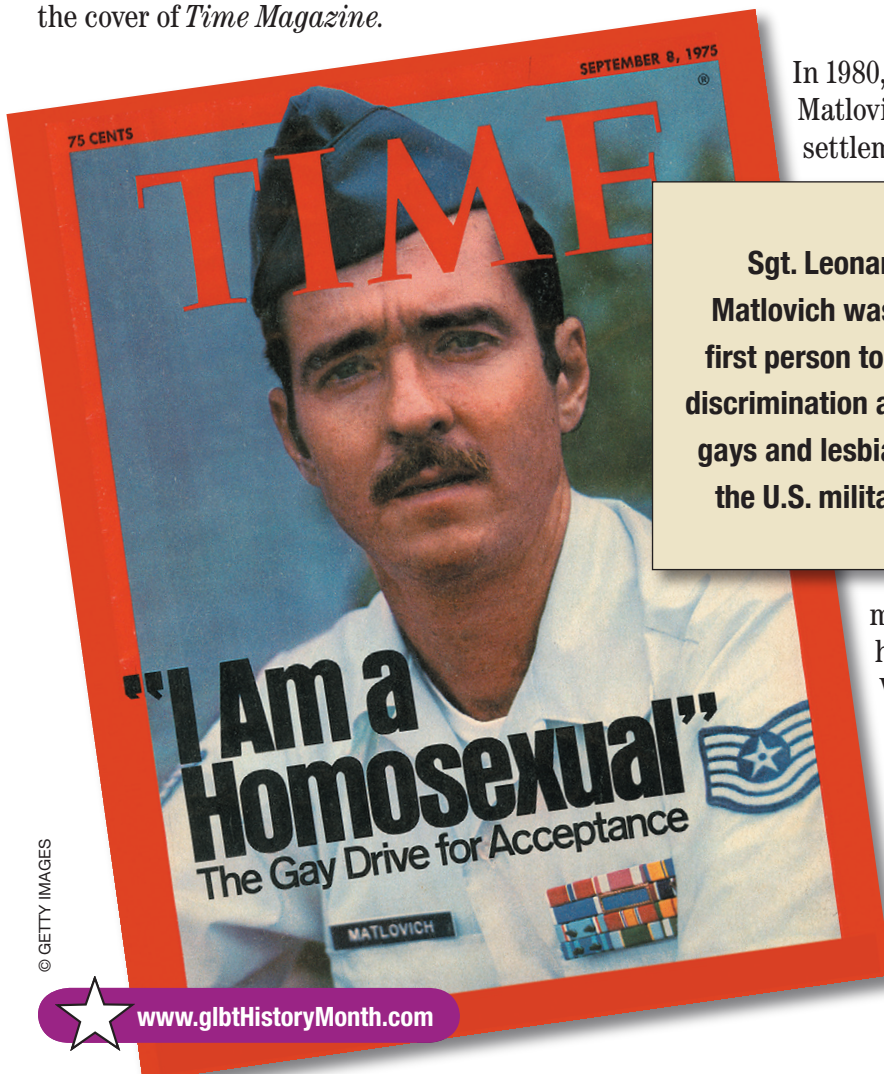
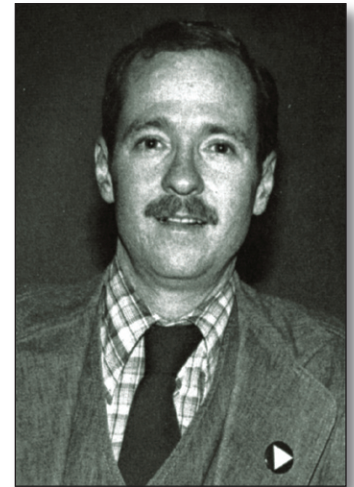
7/6/1943 – 6/22/1988

A self-described “Air Force brat,” Leonard Matlovich wanted to follow in the footsteps of his father, an Air Force master sergeant. At age 19, Matlovich enlisted and volunteered for Vietnam. He served three tours of duty, earning the Bronze Star for bravery, the Purple Heart, and an Air Force commendation.

Matlovich was an unlikely champion of gay rights. Religiously and politically conservative, he was brought up in a Catholic family and converted to Mormonism as he attempted to control his homosexual inclinations through strict religious beliefs.

Sgt. Matlovich remained closeted in the military. But in March 1975, the decorated 12-year veteran handed his commanding officer a letter stating “my sexual preferences are homosexual as opposed to heterosexual” and requesting a waiver of the military’s anti-gay policies because of his exemplary service record.

The Office of Special Investigations declared Sgt. Leonard Matlovich unfit for military service and recommended that he be discharged. Matlovich’s challenge to the ruling thrust him into the headlines. *The New York Times* wrote about him, NBC made a television movie about him, and in 1975, Matlovich became the first openly gay person to appear on the cover of *Time Magazine*.



Sgt. Leonard Matlovich was the first person to fight discrimination against gays and lesbians in the U.S. military.

In 1980, a federal judge ordered the Air Force to reinstate Matlovich with back pay. The Air Force negotiated a settlement with Matlovich and the federal court’s ruling was vacated when Matlovich agreed to drop the case in exchange for a tax-free payment of \$160,000.

After his case passed from the headlines, Matlovich became active in gay rights and AIDS organizations. In 1986, he was diagnosed with AIDS. When he died in June 1988, he was buried at the Congressional Cemetery in Washington, D.C., with full military honors. His headstone does not bear his name; it reads simply, “A Gay Vietnam Veteran.” The words “Never Again” and “Never Forget” are chiseled beneath two triangles. Below them it reads, “When I was in the military they gave me a medal for killing two men and a discharge for loving one.”

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