

MIRIAM BEN-SHALOM

b. May 3, 1948

SOLDIER

“A reporter asked me how it felt to be a gay person in the military, and I couldn’t see any reason to lie.”

In 1993 she chained herself to the White House fence to protest “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (DADT).

Miriam Ben-Shalom is the first openly lesbian service member to be reinstated by the U.S. Army after she was discharged in 1976 for being gay.

Ben-Shalom took the Army to court over the matter. In 1980 a judge with the U.S. District Court in Chicago ruled that her dismissal violated the First, Fifth and Ninth Amendments of the Constitution. The Army refused to honor the ruling, resulting in a seven-year court battle that ultimately forced her reinstatement. The former staff sergeant—one of only two female drill sergeants in the 84th Division of the U.S. Army Reserve—then returned to service until 1990.

Ben-Shalom was one of six openly LGBT veterans who cofounded the Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Veterans of America (GLBVA), known today as the American Veterans for Equal Rights. She spent many years advocating against the military’s LGBT ban. In 1993 she chained herself to the White House fence to protest “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (DADT), the military policy that required soldiers to remain closeted in order to serve. In 2010 Ben-Shalom was arrested for again chaining herself to the fence, along with fellow activist Dan Choi, to urge President Barack Obama to end DADT. The president signed the repeal of DADT later that year.

“I hope my community will take time to remember those who came before and those who fought recently and lost,” she said when the act was repealed. “Remember, too, and remain watchful. Merely because something ends does not mean it will end well. Ask any of us who helped to make history about that.”

Born in Wisconsin, Ben-Shalom also became an Israeli citizen when she was 19 and served in the Israeli Army during the War of Attrition. She is now a member of the New England Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Veterans and the California Alexander Hamilton American Legion. She lives in Milwaukee with her partner, Karen Weiss.



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