

## Lore of the Corps

### “Electric Ladyland”<sup>1</sup> in the Army:

#### The Story of Private First Class Jimi Hendrix in the 101st Airborne Division

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Despite the many years that have passed since the untimely death of musician James “Jimi” Hendrix in 1970, he is not forgotten by lovers of American music generally and rock-and-roll in particular. “Purple Haze,” “The Wind Cries Mary,” and “All Along the Watchtower” continue to get airplay. *Rolling Stone* considers him to be the greatest guitar player of all time.<sup>2</sup> But many who admire Hendrix’s skill with a guitar do not know that he served as a paratrooper in the 101st Airborne Division, and that he was able to cut short his three-year enlistment because of his knowledge of military law and regulation.

Born in Seattle, Washington the day after Thanksgiving in 1942, Jimi grew up poor and dropped out of high school. Some of his African-American male friends, who like Hendrix had few job opportunities, joined the armed forces.<sup>3</sup> Jimi also thought about enlisting—especially after he was arrested by the local police twice within four days for riding in a stolen car. Facing up to ten years in jail, Jimi learned that the Seattle prosecutors often accepted a stint in the service as part of a plea bargain.<sup>4</sup> As a result, Hendrix went to an Army recruiter in Seattle and asked if it was possible to join the 101st Airborne Division; he had read about the “Screaming Eagles” and wanted to be a paratrooper.<sup>5</sup>

Jimi’s instincts were good. On May 16, 1961, a public defender representing Hendrix struck a plea bargain with the local district attorney: Jimi would receive a two-year suspended prison sentence on the condition that he enlist in the Army. The following day, Hendrix enlisted for three years

as a supply clerk and shipped out to Fort Ord, California, for basic training.<sup>6</sup>

At first, Private Hendrix liked military life and, after two months at Fort Ord, he received orders to Fort Campbell, Kentucky. He arrived there on November 8, 1961, and immediately began airborne training. After earning his parachutist badge, now Private First Class Jimi Hendrix discovered that he liked the Army—and soldiering—less and less. This was because the military was interfering with his true love: rock-and-roll music. Hendrix had his guitar with him and he formed a band with his friends<sup>7</sup> and they “got weekend gigs in Nashville and at military bases as far away as North Carolina.”<sup>8</sup>



Jimi Hendrix

Private Hendrix was a high school dropout, but he was no fool. He knew that he could not simply quit the Army, and if he went AWOL, he might be court-martialed and go to prison. In April 1962, having finished just ten months of

his thirty-six-month enlistment, Jimi spoke to an Army psychiatrist at Fort Campbell. He told him that “he had developed homosexual tendencies and had begun fantasizing about his [male] bunkmates.”<sup>9</sup> On a subsequent visit, Hendrix told the doctor that he was “in love” with a member of his squad.<sup>10</sup>

While these were fabricated claims about his sexuality, Jimi knew that under existing Army regulations, this was an exit strategy that could get him out of uniform. Under Army Regulation (AR) 635-89, *Personnel Separations*—

<sup>1</sup> “Electric Ladyland” was the name of the critically acclaimed album released by Jimi Hendrix and his band, “The Jimi Hendrix Experience,” in 1968. It showcased Hendrix’ incredible talents with the guitar and contained the hit cover of Bob Dylan’s “All Along the Watchtower.” See *Jimi Hendrix: Electric Ladyland*, ROLLING STONE (Nov. 9, 1968), <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/albumreviews/electric-ladyland-19681109>.

<sup>2</sup> *100 Greatest Guitarists*, ROLLING STONE (Dec. 18, 2015), <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/100-greatest-guitarists-20111123>. After Jimi, the list names the next five greatest guitarists of all time as: Slash from Guns ‘N’ Roses, B.B. King, Keith Richards, Jimmy Page, and Eric Clapton. *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> CHARLES L. CROSS, ROOM FULL OF MIRRORS: A BIOGRAPHY OF JIMI HENDRIX 78 (2005).

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 82.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 82-83.

<sup>7</sup> One such friend was Billy Cox, also assigned to Fort Campbell, who later played with Jimi on the “Band of Gypsies” album. *Id.* at 290.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at 92.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 93.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

*Homosexuals*, a homosexual Soldier was subject to separation because his presence in the Army “impairs the morale and discipline of the Army.”<sup>11</sup> According to the regulation, this unfitness to serve resulted from the fact that “homosexuality is a manifestation of a severe personality defect which appreciably limits the ability of such individuals to function effectively in society.”<sup>12</sup>

Under AR 635-89, a Soldier who, demonstrated “by behavior a preference for sexual activity with persons of the same sex,” could be discharged with a general or an undesirable discharge—although an honorable discharge might be given in exceptional cases.<sup>13</sup> Private Hendrix was sufficiently familiar with the regulation that he knew what he needed to say and, as a result the Army finally gave in. In May 1962, Captain (Dr.) John Halbert administered a comprehensive medical examination to Hendrix. Halbert concluded that Jimi suffered from “homosexuality” and recommended that he be discharged because of his “homosexual tendencies.”<sup>14</sup>

Jimi Hendrix was discharged from the Army and began a red-hot career as a musician. He never admitted how he had used his knowledge of Army regulations to obtain an “early-out” and return to civilian life. On the contrary, he told his friends that he had broken his ankle on his twenty-sixth jump and had been discharged for this physical disability.<sup>15</sup> Private First Class Hendrix must have received at least a general discharge under honorable conditions, as his final paycheck included “a bonus for twenty-one days of unused leave.”<sup>16</sup>

Had he lived longer, Jimi Hendrix likely would have been surprised at the changing attitudes about the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community in America, and in the Army in which he had soldiered. Unfortunately for Hendrix, his “reckless mixing of drugs and alcohol” at age twenty-seven resulted in his death on September 18, 1970.<sup>17</sup>

Jimi Hendrix is not the only musician—or celebrity—to have served in the armed forces. Johnny Cash served in the Air Force from 1950 to 1954 and Elvis Presley was in the Army from 1958 to 1960. But only Jimi Hendrix was a paratrooper, and it seems that his knowledge of the law and regulations got him back into civilian life earlier than might have been expected.<sup>18</sup>

More historical information can be found at

The Judge Advocate General's Corps  
Regimental History Website  
<https://www.jagcnet.army.mil/8525736A005BE1BE>

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<sup>11</sup> U.S. DEP'T OF ARMY, REG. 635-89, PERSONNEL SEPARATIONS—HOMOSEXUALS para. 2.a. (8 Sept. 1958).

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* para. 3.a.

<sup>14</sup> Cross, *supra* note 3, at 94.

<sup>15</sup> The Jimi Hendrix website owned and operated by members of the Hendrix family perpetuates the false story of Hendrix being “discharged

due to an injury he received in a parachute jump.” *James Marshall Hendrix, JIMI HENDRIX*, <http://www.jimihendrix.com/biography> (last visited Aug. 1, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> Cross, *supra* note 3, at 94.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.* at 333.

<sup>18</sup> For more on celebrities in the armed forces, see Roger Di Silvestro, *Stars Who Served*, MILITARY HISTORY, Sept. 2016, at 40.