

THE HISTORY BEHIND THE FAMOUS 'GAY VIETNAM' HEADSTONE

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Leonard Matlovich's gravestone is a fixture at the Congressional Cemetery

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In Southeast Washington there is a Congressional Cemetery that serves as the final resting place for nearly 70,000 “noteworthy citizens who left their mark on the city and the nation.”

And while many of the plot’s occupants were Founding Fathers or lawmakers from the Revolutionary War era, there is one more recently interred man whose tombstone is noteworthy because it doesn’t bear his name.

Air Force tech sergeant, LGBTQIA+ advocate, and HIV/AIDS activist Leonard Matlovich is buried in the Congressional Cemetery beneath a gravestone that simply reads, “A Gay Vietnam Veteran.”

For his service in Vietnam, Matlovich received a Purple Heart and Bronze Star. He published a memo in March 1975, after 12 years in the Air Force, announcing his coming out as a gay man.

“After some years of uncertainty I have concluded that my sexual preferences are homosexual as opposed to heterosexual,” Matlovich wrote to his commanding officer. “I have also concluded that my sexual preference will in no way interfere with my Air Force duties.”

Alas, the Air Force disagreed and held a subsequent hearing that led to Matlovich’s discharge despite his exemplary service record.

“During his administrative discharge hearing, Matlovich was asked by an attorney if he would be willing sign a document pledging to ‘never practice homosexuality again’ to remain in the military,” according to Air Force history. “Matlovich, protesting the ban, refused. The panel ultimately found him unfit for service and he was given a general, later upgraded to honorable, discharge.”

Coming out, however, made Matlovich into a major player in what would become the gay rights movement, even landing him — in uniform — on the cover of a September 1975 TIME magazine issue alongside a headline that read “I Am a Homosexual.”

Five years later, the Air Force was forced by a court order to reinstate him and offer back pay.

He did not, however, choose to return to service. Instead, Matlovich became a gay rights activist in the fight for equal treatment of the LGBTQIA+ community until his death.

Matlovich died in June 1988 of complications from AIDS. He was just 44.

“Never Again. Never Forget,” his gravestone reads. “When I was in the military, they gave me a medal for killing two men and a discharge for loving one.”