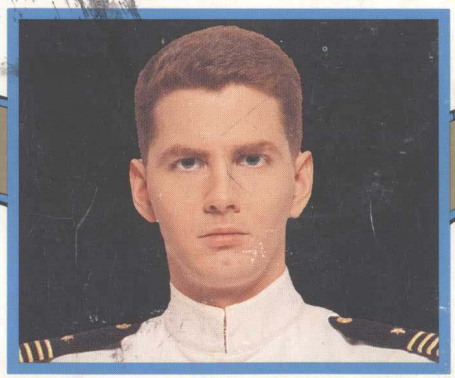
HONOR BOUND

A Gay Naval Midshipman Fights to Serve His Country



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AVON BOOKS NEW YORK

For my parents, Charles and Margaret Steffan, and for three great friends and role models: Howard Bragman, Sandra Lowe, and Marc Wolinsky

Unless otherwise noted, all photos appear courtesy of Joe Steffan.

AVON BOOKS
A division of
The Hearst Corporation
1350 Avenue of the Americas
New York, New York 10019

Front and back cover photos by Michael Britto
Published by arrangement with the author
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 92-53654
ISBN: 0-380-71501-5

Published in hardcover by Villard Books; for information address Villard Books, a division of Random House, Inc., 201 East 50th Street, New York, New York 10022.

The Villard Books edition contains the following Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data:

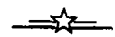
Steffan, Joseph
Honor Bound / Joseph Steffan, III
p. cm.
1. United States. Navy—Gays. 2. Steffan, Joseph, 1964-
3. United States Naval Academy—Biography. 4. Seaman—United States—Biography. I. Title
VB324.G38S74 1992
359'.008'6642—dc20 92-53654
[B]

First Avon Books Trade Printing: August 1993

AVON TRADEMARK REG. U.S. PAT. OFF. AND IN OTHER COUNTRIES, MARCA REGISTRADA, HECHO EN U.S.A.

Printed in the U.S.A.

OPM 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



Author's Note

Out of respect for the privacy of certain individuals mentioned in this book, the following pseudonyms have been used: Dan Sorenson, Jennifer Olsen, Kevin Johnson, Mr. Lyndstrom, Mrs. Jarvis, Mr. Pancio, Miss Stewart, Scott Davis, Miss Sanders, John and Anne Morrow, Rob Connor, Keith Stuart, Chaplain Owen, Tim Carson, Greg Brooks, Sarah, Pete Corcoran, Alan Kinney, Laura, Jack McCauley, Tom Olton, Brad Schmidt, and Christene.

Additionally, minor factual alterations have been made to some descriptions and events in order to protect the identities of gay midshipmen who have graduated and continue to serve in the military.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge Tom Stoddard, Paula Ettelbrick, Cal Steinmetz, Greg Craig, Leona Perreault, and the many other attorneys and staff members who have worked on our legal challenge to the military's policy, especially those at Lambda Legal Defense and Wachtell Lipton; Congressman Gerry Studds, Kate Dyer, and the public officials, advocates, and activists who have done so much to increase public awareness of the military's treatment of gay and lesbian service members; Copy Berg, for his encouragement and insight; Brad, Dorothy, and Phil Kimmelman, for their special friendship and support through the conception and writing of this book; my literary agent, Jed Mattes, and my editors, Doug Stumpf and David Highfill, for believing in me and for their invaluable guidance; my sisters, Cheryl, Cindy, and Connie, who have always been there for me; and Jerl Surratt, Barry Skovgaard, and John Strand, whose friendship and thoughtful advice have helped me to stay on an even keel.

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HONOR BOUND

1

Warren

I sat at the kitchen table, pulling on my running shoes as I looked out the window onto a sunny July morning. This was going to be a great run, I thought, a great run on one of those rare northern Minnesota days when the temperature is actually above freezing. It seems that most of my memories of growing up in Warren are white ones: white Christmases, white Thanksgivings, white Halloweens, and an occasional white Easter. Summer in Minnesota is a strange time of year, that little hiccup of warmth between late winter and early winter. Today, I could enjoy my run without having to wear multiple layers of sweats, gloves, and hats.

As I began stretching, my mom walked in.

"So, how far are you running today?" she asked, pouring herself a cup of coffee.

"I run out to Luna and back on Saturdays," I answered. "It's about nine miles."

"You be careful out there on that highway," she said, taking her first sip. "Those semitrucks are dangerous, especially when they're passing."

It was a frequent motherly warning.

"Yes, Mother," I responded, using my best I'm-not-an-infant-anymore voice.

"I mean it, Joe," she answered in a stern but concerned voice. "You be careful out there."

"Yes, Mother," I echoed again, smirking at her until she finally smiled and sat down to read the paper.

If only she knew how many times I had almost been hit, I thought. Like most mothers, my mom had her overprotective streak. I remember one Christmas I begged myself blue in the face for a BB gun. She would answer me only with an endless litany of its inevitable harms, beginning with that parental classic: shooting my eye out. And although I was older now, practically a senior in high school, Mom still made a point of telling me to be careful about one thing or another. I guess it was her way of reminding me that she was still my mother. It was just frustrating that she so often turned out to be right.

Having finished stretching, I said good-bye and set out across our front lawn and down the street. Our house is on a street that dead-ends before the Snake River, a small stream that slowly winds its way through Warren and has a tendency to dry up during the summer. The beginning of my jog brought me through most of town, which was a diversion of only a few minutes.

Warren is the classic example of a rural midwestern farming community—a fast-disappearing piece of Americana. It was founded before the turn of the century by immigrants, primarily from Scandinavia, who were too poor to live anywhere else and too stubborn to give in to the brutality of winter. A century later, their descendants and those few crazy people who had joined them numbered nearly two thousand. Warren had grown to become the county seat and the largest town within nearly thirty miles.

Running through town, I could name most of the people who lived in the houses I passed along the way—a schoolteacher, the basketball coach, the newspaper editor. Each house was a reminder of someone or something. In a small town like ours, everything is interconnected. This level of familiarity has its benefits. People know and greet you on the street, and nearly every time you pass a car the driver waves. Sometimes, as you pass by, you realize it's someone you haven't seen for a while, so you both put on your brakes and back up to chat for a while. In an area with more traffic this might present a problem, but Warren doesn't have much traffic. In fact, Warren doesn't even have any traffic lights except for a couple of flashing yellow ones. Other drivers just drive around you, wave, or stop to join

in. Honking your horn at someone would be considered the apex of rudeness.

Of course, familiarity can have its drawbacks as well. In any close-knit group, gossip is the mainstay of conversation. Any worthwhile small-town discussion is replete with various hushed and enticing tidbits. But even gossip in Warren is limited by politeness. Particularly juicy or shocking gossip is usually reserved for private conversation or the telephone. Still, it was certain that within a few hours of any significant event, everyone in town had heard about it from at least three people. I often wondered that the local telephone-switching station didn't overload and burst into flames under the burden of these rumor-feeding frenzies. But the telephone office never did ignite, and as I jogged through town, life in Warren moved along at its usual, leisurely pace.

Our town had a post office, two grocery stores, a couple of grain elevators, and seven churches. We also had a drugstore, where my father had started his first job as a pharmacist over thirty years earlier. He eventually became a partner in the business, later taking over the store when his partner retired. As the only pharmacy in our entire county, it enjoyed a limited monopoly. But in recent years, it was struggling, like most local businesses, to survive between the crunch of a perpetually depressed farm economy and increasing competition from chain stores in larger towns.

My mom worked as a secretary at one of the banks in town when she wasn't busy taking care of my sisters and me. I was the third of four children, and the only boy, which meant I got the luxury of my own room and never had to wear dreaded hand-me-downs. I think my youngest sister, Connie, was in her early teens before she actually got her first piece of new clothing.

Growing up in Warren was a pleasant and uncomplicated experience. My family was stable and loving, and my sisters and I never wondered if there would be food on the table when we got home. We grew up isolated from the pressures of drug use and violence that so many American children face daily, too young and naïve to consider our isolation or worry about what lay beyond the prairies. Even Minneapolis and Saint Paul were more than five hours away. It seemed as though our lives would

always remain unchanged, with the "outside world" nothing more than a figment of our television's imagination.

As I continued to jog, I crossed a bridge over the river and made my way toward the edge of town and the stretch of highway pointing toward Canada, sixty miles north.

When people think of Minnesota, they usually envision thousands of crystal-clear lakes teeming with fish, and rivers intertwining beautiful pine-covered terrain. Although that's pretty much true of most of the state, Warren is, unfortunately, not in that part. It lies on the northwestern edge of the state, which marks the beginning of the Great Plains of the west. In other words, Warren is flat. Extremely flat. Everything around Warren is flat for as far as the eye can see in every direction, ground down by centuries of glaciation during the ice age. The terrain is broken only by an occasional row of trees or patch of forest between vast fields of wheat, sunflowers, and sugar beets. Which is not to say that the land doesn't have its own unique beauty; it just might look a little desolate to the untrained eye.

Of course, this made choosing jogging routes quite simple. I was not burdened with having to determine the relative scenic value of each route. Nor did I have to worry about annoying hills or other geographical features. I just picked a direction and ran.

Today's direction was north, and I passed the Laundromat and drive-in restaurant as I headed up Highway 75 toward the bowling alley just outside town. Warren's bowling alley was the town hangout for us high school kids. Not many of us liked to bowl; it was just the only place big enough to hold us all, and someplace where we could be fairly sure our parents wouldn't show up. After any home football or basketball game, it was packed to the rafters.

The highway started with a slow curve out of town and then lay perfectly straight to the horizon. My destination was a group of grain bins four and a half miles away. The pace of my movements and breathing was smooth and steady, and I could feel myself entering that trance-like state that would carry me through the distance.

I thought about how many times I had made this run over the past four years, ever since I began running with Dan Soren-

son back in eighth grade. Although Dan was two years ahead of me in school, we had gotten to know each other through the student council and working on projects for the annual science fair. Aside from being extremely intelligent, he was a remarkable athlete. He was also completely dedicated, practically to the point of obsession. When he wasn't working on one of his many projects, Dan was either running or lifting weights to keep himself in peak physical condition. He was the quintessential wrestler, with a short, muscular frame and lightning reflexes.

My own athletic career to that point had been remarkably unimpressive, much to the chagrin of my father. From an early age, it was obvious that he wanted me to be good at sports. Around the time I started kindergarten, he also started me in Little League baseball. I begrudgingly endured eight years of baseball with little to show for my efforts besides an occasional bloody lip from not quite managing to catch the ball before it hit my face.

In elementary school, I attempted to play basketball, amassing a three-year-career scoring total of eight points. Through this time and into high school, my dad was always there to cheer me on, no matter how pitiful my performance or how long I sat on the bench. There were times when he would spend hours watching our games, just to see me play for a few minutes. But he was never discouraging, even after I dropped my first football kickoff return in junior high, and then managed to kick it back to the other team for their first touchdown of the game.

I had always been an excellent student, and it was never as though I felt my parents weren't proud of me. I was involved in many other activities, from choirs and band to student government. But as the years passed, no matter how well I did in school, I couldn't escape the feeling that I had somehow let my dad down.

By the time Dan and I got to know each other, I had pretty much given up on the idea of ever being good at sports. In fact, I had come to despise sports as the one thing that made me feel bad about myself. Even my father had seemingly come to accept the reality that he would never have an athlete son.

Later that year, Dan actually persuaded me to join him on one of his daily runs—a four-mile trip around the section of land

south of town. The run proved far more difficult than I had anticipated. It especially wasn't helped by Dan's insistence that we stop at every telephone pole to do ten push-ups. I never realized just how many telephone poles could be crammed onto four miles of road.

By the time we neared the end, I was completely, utterly, and totally exhausted, and pissed off at Dan, the telephone company, and myself. I finally had to stop, walking the last half-mile into town and trying not to puke my guts out. Perhaps four miles was a bit ambitious for my first distance run, but I was still humiliated. More than anything, I didn't want Dan to think I was a wimp. He was not just a friend to me; he had also become a hero, a role model who I looked up to and was determined to emulate. This first run had shown me just how difficult that was going to be. But the more I thought and fumed about it, the more determined I was to finally overcome my athletic limitations.

Two days later, I got up early in the morning and set out alone for the same stretch of road. Now, for me, getting up in the morning is an accomplishment in itself. I had always hated getting up early—i.e., before ten o'clock. But humiliation is a great motivation, and I was feeling particularly motivated. This time I ran a little more slowly and skipped the push-ups, concentrating on my pace, the sound of my feet, anything to keep going. I simply wanted to make the distance without having to stop.

At the time, making it all the way home seemed like a small victory, but I look back on that morning as a real turning point in my life. It was the first time that I had proved something, not to please my father, or even Dan, but for myself. It was a powerful lesson. I had succeeded at something physical, and I had done it because I wanted to.

Through that summer and the following year, I continued to run, most of the time with Dan. After a while, I could keep up with him easily. We ran all over, sometimes for four miles, sometimes six or more, around sections of land, the town reservoir, or out to the airport and back. We even made a workout of running the grandstand stairs at the fair grounds—one hundred trips up the stairs and down, until our legs were practically

numb. We would run at all hours, in the cold or rain, dodging skunks on gravel country roads at night, coming home soaked to the skin and covered with mud.

After a summer of running and working out, I was in good shape and thinking about taking one last shot at sports. Before the start of the school year, Dan convinced me to try out for the wrestling team, a decision that was especially surprising to my father. He was justifiably skeptical, but nonetheless encouraging as always.

Although my performance as a wrestler was not magnificent, I did manage to win a few matches, and wrestling practice was an incredible way to keep in shape. I had never worked so hard, run so much, or been as completely exhausted as after wrestling practice. In fact, I did so much running, both during the season and the summers, that I decided to try out as a distance runner for the track team the following year. It turned out to be the last step in my long search for an athletic niche.

After our first few practices, my track coach suggested that I compete in the mile run. My first race was against some tough competitors, but I actually managed to place third, much to the astonishment of everyone, including myself. At the next meet, I not only finished second, but also ran the mile in under five minutes (4:56.07), a time that was considered unusual for a sophomore in our part of the state.

Soon, I was not only placing in races but winning them—gold medals and all! I had finally stumbled onto something I was good at, and no one was more surprised or pleased than my dad. Whenever I won a race, his usual comment was "Not too bad," and a smile that revealed his pride. But as much as I enjoyed the fact that he was happy, it was also gratifying to know that I had taken up running on my own, and that my success was the result of self-motivation instead of subtle or overt pressure. I understood that if I had simply done it to please him, it wouldn't have been nearly as satisfying.

After my first few races, my coach asked me to expand my running to include the two-mile race as well. I was a little skeptical about the possibility of running the mile and two-mile back to back, but our team was small and we needed whatever points we could get. Even if I just managed to place, it would help out.

As it turned out, running both events wasn't as difficult as I imagined. There was enough time between them to relax, and I actually tended to do better in the two-mile, probably because few of the good milers were insane enough to run the two-mile as well.

By the end of the season, our team had managed to capture the district track championship. I had placed first in the two-mile and second in the mile, advancing in both events to the regional meet, one level below the state meet.

The regional meet was held that year in Walker, Minnesota, and my finishing times during the season put me about eighth in the mile, and about sixth in the two-mile going into the meet. I needed an unlikely first- or second-place finish in either event to make it to the state meet.

Before every race, I would settle back in the grass off to the side of the field away from everyone else, close my eyes, and listen to the *Chariots of Fire* sound track on my Walkman. I know it sounds corny, but no matter what the setting or competition, listening to the same music before each race relaxed me and cleared my mind.

I tried to think as little as possible about the other runners in the race, concentrating rather on the real opponents: time and pain. Our minds are remarkably effective at convincing us to avoid pain, which is usually a good thing. But any type of physical exertion involves a certain amount of pain, and winning required more than simply being in good physical shape; it meant recognizing and overcoming illusory pain in order to run faster than my body wanted to.

The mile race came first in the meet, and after a few warm-up sprints, I joined the other runners at the starting line. We all became silent as the starter poised his gun in the vacuum-like second before it shot us into the race.

As usual, I was not at the front of the pack out of the start. I never was a sprinter, so I didn't worry about jumping to the lead right away. Usually, the guys who sprinted the first lap of the mile were the ones who died well before the end. The strategy my coach and I had developed was to avoid the initial panic and simply run a consistent, even pace for the duration of the race.

By the end of the first lap, things had calmed down a little, and the other runners started slowing down. As they did, I began to move up in the pack. But this was not just another race. These runners had made it to the regional meet—they were the best milers in our part of the state, and it was obvious that they were not slowing down a great deal.

I continued to push through the second and third laps, trying to keep up my pace while slowly gaining on the small cluster of runners who had broken away to take the lead. By the time the gun sounded again to mark the final lap, I had moved up to sixth place.

With only one lap left, everyone began to pick up the pace as we pushed for the finish line. About halfway around the track, I passed the fifth runner as we broke into the final sprint. My legs were numb as I rounded the last curve and moved past the fourth runner. But the three lead runners were too far ahead, and I realized they could not be caught. I sprinted toward them, but crossed the finish line in fourth place.

In a way, I was happy to have done better than expected, but I couldn't help feeling disappointed. I had miscalculated my competition, and a slightly faster pace might have given me a better chance at the end. But I had done well, and the team points awarded for my fourth-place finish meant Warren was that much closer to winning the entire meet.

With the mile over, only one chance at the state meet remained. I began to rationalize to myself why I shouldn't expect to make it this year. The competition was tough, it was only my first year out, and several runners had significantly better times than I did. Even to come close to first or second place and a trip to the state meet, I would have to cut nearly fifteen seconds off my best time of the year, an unlikely accomplishment.

I tried to put these thoughts out of my mind as I recovered from the mile run and contemplated my strategy for the two-mile, only an hour away. If I was going to have a chance, I had to stick tighter to the leaders at the beginning of the race, push myself for a faster pace overall, and hope I had something left for the sprint to the line. After warming down, I sat back in the grass and started up my Walkman once again.

My parents were there, as they had been for almost all the