

***A CENTURY OF SERVICE:  
100 YEARS OF THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY***

***'WHY WOULD A WOMAN WANT A JOB LIKE THAT?'***

***A Personal Reflection***

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I would first seek to acknowledge the history of women's services in the Australian Army. The women who serve in the Army today continue a lineage that dates back to the forming of the Australian Women's Army Service—which this year celebrates its Diamond Jubilee. During World War II 25,000 women in the AWAS and provided a major contribution to the war effort, enabling many men to be released for service in fighting units. That war-time experience fundamentally changed Australian women's expectations of employment, but despite the fact that the AWAS was the only nonmedical women's service to send personnel overseas during the war (to both Dutch and Australian New Guinea in 1944-45), it was not regarded as central to the Army's needs, and by June 1947 all its members had been demobilised. Again in the Korean War, when full employment and the demands of the national service scheme placed great strains on the Army, the Women's Royal Australian Army Corps began to enlist members. From the 1970s on women were gradually integrated into the mainstream of the Army to such an extent that in early 1984 the WRAAC was disbanded, the perception being that there was no longer a need for an exclusively female organisation within the Army.

I speak as someone who has had 25 years service in an Army that has changed along with society from the immediate post-Vietnam era to the present. In 1976 when I enlisted, the demand for equality and opportunity in employment was strong and increasing. While we can now reflect on how far we have come, let us recall some of the steps along the way:

- the marriage bar for women the public service was removed only in 1966;
- equal pay for equal work was only enacted in 1969;
- women's rights were strengthened through family law reforms in the early seventies; and
- by 1976 the mood was that no impediments remained to realisation of all opportunities for women.

My perspective is that of one who has been both a participant in the military and an observer of it from a different employment and career model.

I enlisted direct to a unit but my corps was the WRAAC. Women at that time had a career structure that was different from that of male enlistees and the greatest threat was Ma'am WRAAC approaching—usually a very formidable looking Major. Although the WRAAC was not disbanded until 1984, the structures underpinning it were being dismantled from 1976 onwards and by 1979, women were being commissioned to the non-combat corps. Regular Army training was integrated in the early 1980s.

I offer a number of observations and conclusions I have drawn from that experience—this is not a report of in-depth research—but a commentary from someone who remains actively involved and as someone who has recently commanded soldiers born in the year Bob Hawke was elected (1983), and officers born in the year Ronald Reagan was elected (1980)—or far more importantly—the year John Lennon was murdered. Among these soldiers and officers are young women who cannot comprehend that barriers can exist to their realisation of career and life aspirations. While it is great that we have created that belief, I consider that we have a responsibility to deliver that reality and that we have some way yet to go.

There are three major areas where the military still has hidden barriers to full employment opportunity for women:

- employment policy—where the increase in women's expectations for opportunities and equality is faster than ADF policy development which in turn is ahead of the outcomes driven by devolved practices.
- career progression—where the rubber hits the road for building a career, and where are the women who did so well at the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA)?
- women in command—issues with few gender role models, lack of accepted authority.

### **Employment Policy and Practice**

Employment policy in Australia underwent major reforms in the late 1960s and 1970s but longitudinal studies showed that women were not well represented at senior levels in industry or private sector companies and were not represented in decision-making forums.

In 1994 Cabinet decided that all public sector boards and committees were to have fifty percent women as a goal. Analysis showed that Defence did not look good in this area—the National Consultative Group of Service Families and the Defence Special Needs Group raised the average—but most Defence decision-making bodies drew their membership from ex-officio representatives. Even where an external appointment was to be made, it was generally from Defence Industry.

This prompted a review of the necessity for ex-officio members always to be tied to particular employment positions and it was considered that greater diversity in decision making bodies would be a good thing. A change of government diverted attention from this area.

But the concerns should remain. Today senior Defence decision-making is limited by the consistency of view of its senior officers (both military and civilian)—all white anglo-saxon males of a certain age with only Defence or public sector experience. The fact that for the past several years the Defence Executive has had two external members—both white anglo-saxon males of a certain age—is considered by many women in Defence as a missed opportunity. In the Defence Senior Executive Service—total, including reservists, of about 230—there are less than fifteen women and only one of those is military. By contrast, in the department for which I work as a civilian, the Department of Finance & Administration, has forty per cent of its SES as women, and twenty-five per cent of its management board. In fairness they are all white anglo-saxons of a certain age. But the issues are not far different: many would say that the qualities sought in a warrior are also necessary in Finance officers, particularly at budget time!

Why is diversity in the members at senior levels of an organisation important? How do you get that diversity? If it is not being grown internally should it be brought in laterally, at least for a time? These groups make decisions on running the business—whatever that business may be. It should concern them that they are making decisions from a very narrow collective set of values and understandings of available Australian society.

In particular, when the Military sit down to make decisions on how their workforces want to be managed and what motivates people to join and stay in the military they should be conscious of their limitations. The expectations of women, generation X-ers, people with non-traditional family compositions, for example, are quite different from those with more traditional family compositions approaching the latter half of their career. In an organisation which is team based and the strength of the team lies in having and harnessing differing strengths of the team, playing with a full side of front rowers necessarily limits performance.

### **Employment**

In 1992 a major review of employment of women in the ADF was conducted. Restrictions remained on employment areas directly linked to combat. The impetus was not from the Military; rather at the political level it was considered that Australia was in breach of its international agreements.

Some women have made it through the processes but not in the numbers that represent the talent that is recruited. Women have dominated the graduating classes from ADFA for a number of years but five and ten years down the track their numbers have declined more rapidly than the men in their cohort. This is not due to the comfortable reasons such as they are getting married and settling down; rather that they keep seeing other apparently less-qualified and competent men getting key postings.

Looking at early career patterns of those who are successful, a pattern emerges of the types of jobs for which they are selected, jobs that are an indicator of future success—the SO3 Ops on Headquarters, the Adjutant positions in units, the squadron and company commands, and of course unit commands. Unfortunately, some inherent characteristics of the military structure will mean that for the foreseeable future the numbers will not be representative. Although women can be fully employed in all but the combat arms of the Army—allowing them into some sixty-five per cent of categories available in the Army, senior ranks are drawn almost exclusively from the remaining thirty-five per cent. This becomes rapidly apparent to ambitious and capable women who, having had what they see as the best opportunities they are likely to get in the service, will get out early and establish themselves in a career where there are fewer observable barriers.

It is important to ask at this time who makes the decisions to post well-reported men into those key early positions and to post equally well-reported women into other positions. I would contend that such decisions are generally made by relatively junior staff who do not consciously understand the through-career effect for those whose careers they manage.

What is the downstream impact of these decisions?

A number of women at the LTCOMD/MAJ/SQNLDRank have resigned after being offered what they saw as the leavings from the table of more favoured sons of their services. These have been women who have moved quickly through the early years of their career, being highly reported, ticking all the boxes that were said to be important for future success. Outside of the military, their options broaden rapidly and many have become very senior very quickly using in their new profession the mix of skills they gained in the military. It is good for Australian industry and the public sectors—and a loss for the military.

Let us skip to 1994—two years after a large number of the restrictions on women's services were lifted. In one case in particular, a woman who had a key appointment as an escort officer for a Minister sought to further her career by an overseas posting. The language aptitude tests were passed with flying colours—even the tests for tonal languages, the most difficult. Her poster said that postings for women as Assistant Defence Attaches would be inappropriate, in particular in Asia, as the Asian countries would not accept women. This was said with confidence—six years after Benazir Bhutto became President of Pakistan and eight years after Corazon Aquino became President of the Philippines. Not surprisingly, the officer left the service the next year. Her only satisfaction was that she had managed to get the Page 3 girl removed from the Navy Newspaper.

The Assistant Chief of Personnel of the time attempted to translate the policy of the government into practice by requesting of the service offices that each panel for overseas posts would contain at least one woman. The silence was deafening. After several followup calls to relevant posting areas a response was forthcoming: 'No-one in HQADF is going to tell us in the services what to do'.

You may be thinking—we have moved passed that point now; our policies are operationalised, we can measure performance etc etc.

Skip again to the year 2000. A similar situation to the aspiring attache—a young and highly competent RAAF officer—two operational tours in Somalia and Papua New Guinea behind her. When discussing options for follow-on postings she finds that all the interesting ones are gone: her reward for performing to a high standard in a high-risk high-profile position is to be

offered, on promotion, a position she held five years earlier on Higher Duties. When actively canvassing possibilities with her poster she is informed that as she now has a child she cannot expect to get key positions. Yet another high performer is about to be lost to the service.

It is examples such as this that cause one to reflect on where we are going wrong. Why is there a disconnect between the intent of the policy and the effect? Why, with the best will in the world, can lots of small decisions by relatively junior posters invalidate policy?

Many people sincerely believe that there is no glass ceiling for women in the military but only a pipeline problem: when women have been in the pipeline long enough to work their way up some will reach positions at the top. ADFA has been producing graduates for some fifteen years and yet the numbers of women flowing through the system are not in proportion to those graduating.

As late as 1995, a two star officer responsible for personnel policy was not concerned about the lack of progress in increasing numbers of women in allowable employments. In his view the policy was flawed— *'but women just don't want to be pilots'*. His deeply held belief about employment expectations wound back efforts to better understand why highly achieving women were leaving the three services or why their careers were behind lesser performing men in their cohort.

Those implementing the policy on an every day basis are generally not aware of the big picture and make local decisions—not always the best way of achieving change. Without a more planned, measured and evaluated approach to job descriptions, job competencies and a more strategic approach to the posting and promotion cycle, women will not be represented at higher ranks in proportion to expertise, talent and potential and the military will continue to lose access to fifty per cent of the Australian workforce.

### **Career Progression**

A weapon's instructor offered the following comment as an explanation of a woman top scoring on a range practice: 'Women don't try to out think the weapon.' Instructors and assessors in the Army are usually male, and judgements about performance and relative worth are made in that framework. Sometime you do feel it is Christians versus lions—round sixteen, last quarter. I paraphrase it as 'women are assumed to be incapable until they prove themselves capable, men are assumed (by other men) to be capable until proven otherwise'.

The styles of leadership considered appropriate in the military appear to be fewer than those that prevail in other fields. We all look for role models to help us understand and develop our own leadership style and characteristics. A behaviour that is rewarded in military promotion courses and general workplace is being heard in syndicate or group discussion: you know the context—give a group a topic and see who speaks the most. There is seldom allowance for differing styles of interaction or learning.

While in command over the last two years I was reading course reports of recruits and those on promotion courses. There were many instances where comments were made (and the context was not favourable) that certain students, especially women, lacked confidence and did not speak up in class. This judgement has a strong bias. Confidence is not linked necessarily to so-called speaking up. Some students may be more interested in learning from the views of others. They may have gender or cultural inhibitors to how long a pause in a conversation there must be before they feel they have an opening to speak.

This view of dominance of conversation as confidence in knowledge base is generally a wrong judgement but one that permeates assessments not only promotion course reports but also of annual reports. 'Quiet' is often used in a pejorative sense in women's reports. The converse of this is that if a woman interrupts or speaks over another person, it will be seen as aggressive, not a demonstration of confidence. Is this a no-win situation? These comments

and judgements become an enduring marker on annual reports and course reports file of a person's perceived self-confidence and therefore suitability for promotion and higher rank. Women in the military are given strongly conflicting messages: you need to be assertive to the point of aggression to be considered the right stuff for promotion, but that very behaviour is considered inappropriate or immature in a woman.

For at least fifteen years, the public service has recognised that there is value in seeking diversity of views when selecting people for appointment or promotion, and that where necessary someone from outside should be brought in to assist with the process and to give professional advice. One could almost wish that this diversity on an Army promotion board meant that not everyone is Infantry! More seriously, as for the reporting of soldiers on recruit courses, it takes considerable natural insight and self awareness or a great degree of training to resist the urge to affirm one's own strengths by selecting for promotion someone in your own image. Senior selection processes for the military are almost, if not exclusively, male dominated.

One way of breaking the cycle and viewing objectively the data on which career and promotions decisions are made—and thereby helping to make more strategic decisions—would be to bring in routinely a more diverse range of decision makers, and not to rely solely on the generals and colonels that are now on the boards. Industry and the rest of the public sector has moved greatly over the last ten years to getting professional advice for key staffing decisions. The military could gain much from adopting a similar model.

### **In Command**

Going into command as a woman is interesting experience, to say the least. The best preparation is having had command at more junior levels and having had excellent senior NCOs to assist that learning process. As a woman, a more difficult issue is the finding of a 'suitable' role model, someone who has a style that you consider both effective and achievable.

The Army recognises the difficulties that unit commanders face by gathering them all together for a period where they focus on command issues. During the week of the pre-command course there was overt encouragement to acknowledge the strain that the demands of command would put on your wife and family. Needless to say, the two women and the single men were feeling a little isolated at about this time.

A more difficult area for women is in the direct command of men. A young Major on assuming her command here in Canberra last year was confronted by her Company Sergeant Major who felt quite confident in saying to her that he could not work for a woman. She agreed that was a dilemma for him and offered him a discharge! He was re-posted but it demonstrates that the acceptance of women in the ADF, particularly in positions of authority, has some way to go.

The particular area of how men and women communicate that can cause confusion. Women as leaders will often have to work harder to give clear, direct messages to those under their command. It is most difficult where the person under command is strongly steeped in a culture where age or bulk is an indicator of authority.

A robust sense of humour is necessary. The conflict in messages sent and received became particularly clear when I was head of the Defence regional office in Darwin during 1995-96. I could not understand the frustration and anger of a relatively junior but very aggressive male in some discussions as part of the management team (of which he was the most junior member). We were busy reallocating resources as we approached support to Kangaroo 95, when during one outburst he said, 'Don't bother asking me what I think unless you are going to do what I say'. He considered that the only reason I could be seeking input from my staff was because I didn't know what to do. Therefore, if one of my staff (him) had all the answers, I should go along with his solution. Simple in his view.

It emerged that he had not previously worked for a manager who actually consulted staff. His view was that by asking for ideas or views I was ceding authority for decision-making to the group and therefore to whomever was loudest in that group. Other women in command have commented on this behaviour; it takes real self discipline not to take the easier approach and default to a directive, autocratic model.

How many women is enough in the Army before it is not a matter worthy of comment, particularly for women in command? Again, going from local observations, once a unit gets above about twenty per cent of women in it there appears to be enough critical mass to approximate the more common external workforce mix. When I was in subunit command, one young soldier obviously was feeling overwhelmed and said there were more women than men in the unit and they were outnumbered. On checking the data, the ratio of women to men was only one in three. But he was quite correct in noting that women were present in the unit in much higher proportions than other units.

### **Conclusion**

The real and continuing risks for the ADF are in its ability not only to pursue good personnel policy as a way to meet the expectations of those it wants in its ranks, but to ensure that everyone in the ADF truly understands and is committed to those policies.

We all like to say the devil is in the detail, but in the management of people it is in the consistent implementation of good policies.

To come to the title of my presentation, 'why would a woman want a job like that?' This was asked of me when I worked in a force development area; after assuring the caller that I was not an assistant but an analyst in my own right, he asked the question. How do you answer that? The interest in and love of the military is not genetically encoded. The complexities and challenges of a career in such an environment are as appealing to a woman as a man.

It remains a little harder for some of us to enjoy it as fully as others. To be able to meet the challenges of a changing world environment, the ADF needs a diverse and flexible workforce that can adapt rapidly to emerging demands and changing needs.