



**The Hon Tanya Plibersek MP  
Minister for Housing  
Minister for the Status of Women**

**Speech at launch of the Defence action plan for the recruitment and  
retention of women**

**Senate Courtyard, Parliament House, Canberra**

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**\*\*\*\*Check against delivery\*\*\*\***

Thanks Greg (Combet) and the Chief of the Defence Force, Angus Houston, for inviting me to today's event.

There is a telling and wistful footnote on page 137 of Charles Bean's concluding work *From Anzac to Amiens*.

He was writing of the white hospital ship anchored off Anzac Cove in 1915, and noted:

“It was on her decks that women made their only approach to Anzac.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Anzac to Amiens*, C.E.W. Bean, AWM, Canberra, 1968, p 137.

The range of areas of service available to Australian women during World War One was very limited.

Yet nearly 2,700 Australian women served as service nurses – in permanent or semi-permanent hospitals, hospital ships, casualty clearing stations, and temporary field hospitals.

They served in England, France, Egypt, Italy, India, Salonika, Lemnos, Belgium, New Guinea, Palestine, Russia, Mesopotamia, Malta and Greece.

Seven Australian servicewomen won military medals for bravery in the field in World War One.

One of them – nurse Pearl Corkhill from Tilba Tilba on the south coast – received the award:

“For courage and devotion on the occasion of an enemy air-raid. She continued to attend to the wounded without any regard to her own safety, though enemy aircraft were overhead. Her example was of the greatest value in allaying the alarm of the patients.”

Pearl Corkhill’s medal was apparently more heavily celebrated by the men, as she described in a letter to her mother:

“Today word came that I had been awarded the MM. Well the C.O. sent over a bottle of champagne and they all drank my health

and now the medical officers are giving me a dinner in honour of the event. I can't see what I've done to deserve it but the part I don't like is having to face old George and Mary to get the medal. It will cost me a new mess dress, but I suppose I should not grumble at that – I'm still wearing the one I left Australia in."

We have come a very long way since then.

Women are now serving in command positions and on military operations overseas, and more are reaching senior star-rank levels.

Around 180 women are deployed overseas on operations, in the Solomon Islands, East Timor, Afghanistan and Iraq.

As I hardly need to remind this audience, the Commander-in-Chief of the Australian Defence Force is now a woman – Governor-General Quentin Bryce.

I congratulate Angus Houston and his service chiefs – as well as rank and file ADF members – for the openness with which they are now handling issues such as the recruitment and retention and women.

This Action Plan is about attracting more women to the ADF, and retaining them.

I was interested to read that one aim of the Plan is to provide a workplace that accommodates career flexibility and difference.

This would be implemented by the ADF supporting career breaks as a viable option, supporting job sharing, allowing the purchase of additional annual leave and the right to work part time within two years after the birth or adoption of a child.

All of these flexible conditions have traditionally assisted women to undertake both caring and work responsibilities.

I would also like to see them more widely taken up by men.

Men's views on the type of husband and father they want to be has changed over recent decades – and offering family friendly conditions is important for all employers if they want to retain their highly skilled workforce.

The ADF makes an enormous investment in its workforce.

As a nation we need to continue to attract our best and brightest to serve their country – at home and abroad.

We need to assure all personnel – men and women – that their talents, commitment and achievements will be recognised and rewarded.

And that we will do whatever we can to support them to have a long and rewarding ADF career – as well as the opportunity to be an active and involved parent, carer, son or daughter.

I congratulate Defence for this initiative – and hope it will succeed in attracting and retaining women in all aspects of your work.

**ENDS**