

**‘INTEGRATION OF WOMEN
INTO THE AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE FORCE’**

**Transcript of the opening speech given by
the Chief of the Defence Force, Admiral Chris Barrie
Wednesday, 12 May 99**

Thanks for that introduction, Rob. Thank you, Kathryn. I would also like to express my own appreciation to all those who have worked so hard to make this event happen. It's a very important event, I think, particularly when you consider the topic of the conference, and I think it deserves our earnest attention and consideration.

For those reasons, I would like to thank you for inviting me come today and speak on this topic because it represents a major cultural challenge for the Australian Defence Force and other Western military organisations as we approach the 21st century.

And for my part, here in Australia at least, that particular debate has added piquancy. The piquancy that appeals to me is the consideration that much of our Australian military tradition has been based on the original ANZAC's spirit of equality, tolerance and a fair go for all.

And it is my belief that this culture of a fair go, however we've seen it applied in the past, is a uniquely Australian concept, and one on which we still have a great deal of work to do yet.

When combined with the current social expectations in our community that women will be able to make genuine choices about their roles and the range of contributions they want to make, as well as the cold hard realities of the demographics of our modern Australian society, then the integration of women into our Australian Defence Force is a very important priority.

However, when we reflect on our own experience over the last ten years, this social necessity requires a difficult and a long-term cultural change within our Defence organisation, particularly in our Australian Defence Force, and it's going to take a lot of very hard, very focussed work if we are going to be confident of success.

The difficulty of making these internal cultural changes, I think are also reflected in our wider community. It seems to me that we're hearing the last gasp in some senses, where community resistance to the changing roles of women in our Defence Force appears to me and the media, at least earlier in this year, to be the concept of women 'coming home in bodybags', either from conflict or from suffering POW experiences.

And the fact there's little else in the public commentary about that issue other than that particular focus, it seems to me, that if that's the last gasp, then we're on the road to success.

So the argument, then, turns on how, and when, and what roles women ought to be able to play in the future security of Australia. And by that, I mean play a full part in sharing our future security.

And in considering the choices facing young women today and the difference between their expectations and our leaders who must make decisions about what roles we will allow women to play, I personally look back on the struggle I had with my own father years ago when we were arguing about my choice of career.

My father expected me to take up banking: that's what he did and was confident that it to be a very secure career. He was equally confident that a career in the Defence Force was a ruinous road to a very insecure future. He was very annoyed about it to say the least, and put a lot of effort into trying to talk me out of joining the Navy. Especially important when you are only 14 years of age. I suspect, of course, that his view's quite different today but I wonder how many others have had similar experiences.

And I particularly want to recognise in saying that, those women whose early service in our Defence Force would have been so difficult. So difficult a choice to make in

the first instance, so difficult a path to row in the reality of it. We owe them a great deal.

Let me now turn to what I see as some of the over arching strategic necessities about the challenges that face us in Australia and the consequences for the integration of women in the Australian Defence Force.

At the outset, I think it's important to understand that we are focussing on our people as the centre of our excellence to expand our intellectual capital, and applying intellectual capital effectively to the task of maintaining and maximising our operational capability.

The reality in Australia is that we are a small country. We have a very small population. We have an even smaller Defence Organisation. But, we have a huge task. We need to protect Australia, a landmass the size of continental United States, from armed attack by delivering the maximum combat capability from all the resources we have available.

And as I look forward into the future, let's say to the year 2050, it's still my belief that the scarcest resource in our country will be our people. I think the acceptable prediction right now, our population in the year 2050 will be some 22 million people.

So the only way we can maximise our combat capability is to rely on what we now call the "knowledge edge" – and the knowledge edge comes directly from the skills and intellect of the people in our organisation. This means we need to get the maximum contribution that we can from all of our people, and in turn, we need to offer our people as much challenge as we can. But more than that, we need to access all the skills available in our small population if we are to develop the capabilities we need for the future.

So we must be able to attract into our Defence Force and to our Defence Organisation the right sort of people, and then we must make sure we can give them rewarding and attractive careers for as long as they want to go on serving their country.

Secondly, we need to recognise that as the nature of our work changes, that in turn the composition of our workforce will change as well. We need to become better educated, more adaptable, more innovative – and more inclusive.

This is not just a matter of blindly incorporating equity and diversity principles and policies, it is also a matter of strategic necessity.

And there is a very practical reason for creating a workplace in which every person is valued for their diverse skills and experience. A workplace in which we have a more cohesive workforce with improved team performances and high morale. So from my point of view, equity and diversity are not an end unto themselves but they are important components of operational capability and effectiveness.

So let me turn to what we're doing about these issues in the Australian Defence Force.

Consistent with our operational requirements, the Defence Force is committed to policies and practices that allow **all** members, irrespective of religion, race or gender, to participate fully in achieving our primary role of protecting Australia.

Women are integral to our aim of retaining high quality people and the Australian Defence Force does not seek to become in any way divorced, or different or separate from the social, economic, organisational and industrial trends occurring in this country.

The reality of the increased involvement of women in all aspects of Australian society and Australian life simply cannot be ignored. It is a reality today that we must confront. To deny our women the opportunity to participate as full members of our Defence Force would be to deny both the Defence Force and our community access to their very considerable talents.

In fact, it would be exceedingly foolish for us to ignore that there are currently 20 per cent more women than men undertaking advanced education in our country, and the recent higher school certificate results in New South Wales demonstrated once again that a greater percentage of girls are doing better than the boys in this important point in their lives.

This is also reflected in the intake here at the Australian Defence Force Academy, where this year over 31 per cent of the intake are women, as well as making up 36 per cent of this year's graduation class. It is salutary also to note that the recent results at the Academy here show that women dominate the top 10 per cent in academic and military achievement. And there has also been an 8 per cent increase in women joining the Academy over the past five years.

The way I look back and reflect on the struggle over the last ten years, it seems to me that we are certainly moving in the right direction. We're moving in the right direction if you consider that Navy has now its first Commanding Officer of a ship, and women have been serving on our warships for some time and are now training for service in the Collins Class submarines. All three of our Services have qualified women pilots, as well as navigators in the Air Force, although I suspect we still have some way to go to emulate the American women fighter pilots who recently flew bombing missions over Iraq, and are now participating in NATO forces in Europe.

In fact of course, women are excelling in many areas of our Defence Force. They are employed as principal warfare officers on our ships, pilots, intelligence officers, electrical, mechanical and civil engineers, aircraft technicians, radar operators, air traffic controllers, as well as information technology and information systems related employment.

My focus as the Chief of the Defence Force of course, is that the operational capability and combat effectiveness of the Australian Defence Force cannot be compromised. It is, of course, our core business, and in seeking the outcomes we require, will continue to involve all qualified Australians in the defence of the nation.

To this end, the review of the employment of women in the Australian Defence Force is part of an ongoing review of all our policies.

The review is under consideration by the Chiefs of Staff Committee, and it is an ongoing process. And in due course, if any change are considered to be needed to our current policy, the recommendations from Chiefs of Staff Committee will be put before the Government.

I would like to emphasise that our combat effectiveness and performance in the field relates to the physical and mental competencies of our people – our men and our women. If there are to be significant changes, then we have to take into account current competencies, management and other imperatives. And again at the heart of that issue, when the physical characteristics we require are carefully defined, I can think that there will be a lot of men that would not qualify to serve in the front line, as well as some women.

But properly defining the qualifications we require for combat units will take sophistication, it will take a lot of hard work, and it will take time.

Nonetheless, I am absolutely certain no-one can take issue with the mental and the physical qualifications of the women medical and nursing officers, for example, who were decorated following their performance under pressure during some horrific massacres in Rwanda; or the Special Air Services medical officer who served with the Gulf deployment last year; or indeed closer to home, the women sailors who fought the fire on HMAS Westralia and who played their part in helping to prevent a much greater tragedy.

It is also interesting to note I think that initial investigations by military psychologists is tending to show us that women have higher levels of comprehension and perceptual speed skills, while men have higher numeracy and information recall skills. And this is an area of diversity that we need to explore further if we are serious about building the operational teams that make the best use of our people.

So for all these reasons, and I hope over the next few days for a whole bunch more that I haven't even thought about yet - I believe that the process of getting everybody into combat units should be focussed on the capabilities and the competencies of the individual. It should not be focussed on their gender, and it must take into account community expectations as well as combat capability requirements.

To ensure that we can build the Australian Defence Force we need in the future, we are focussing on gender integration initiatives and putting in a lot of hard work to make these initiatives successful.

It is instructive to note just how far we have come. Only 30 years ago, a woman who was married was compelled to leave the Service. It was 10 years later that women members received equal pay to that of their male counterparts. And in 1979, 20 years ago, just under half of all military positions were opened to women in competition with men.

Today, the 'playing field' if you like, has been leveled even more dramatically in a traditionally male-dominated Defence Force. Since 1992, 85 per cent of all employment categories have been opened to women. The only positions from which women are currently excluded are artillery, combat engineers, infantry, and airfield defence.

Of 477 employment categories currently open to women in the Australian Defence Force, only 284, or 60 per cent, are actually filled by women. The question may well be, why don't they occupy more of these jobs? Is it the macho/blokey culture that deters them from trying? In some cases of course it may be, however a comprehensive Equity and Diversity education campaign aimed at all Australian Defence Force members is changing this type of culture, albeit more slowly than any of us would like.

It's because these sorts of changes do not happen overnight, and making cultural change is indeed a very long term task. Of necessity, such a task involves incremental change by encouraging leadership, getting commitment and role modelling from the very top of the organisation, complemented by embedding of the training necessary throughout the organisation and the training mechanisms we have in place for all our people, to make sure that difference and diversity is welcomed and understood right down to the basic unit level.

We've started on this important work and we are addressing it with the courage and innovation that the Australian Defence Force is well known for, but of course we still have a long way to go.

Because when we look to Australian industry, there are a number of challenging benchmarks for us to think about. We can think about some other organisations in Australia such as AMP. In AMP for instance, they ensure that equity and diversity is built into the performance appraisal system. In AMP they go to the trouble of ensuring that when one partner is posted overseas, the other partner is either found a job or funded for study. And as a consequence of course, that company has very few morale problems, with that sort of behaviour.

But I think we are doing a reasonable job so far and we have put in place good support mechanisms, and I look forward very much to hearing your contributions, your thoughts, your ideas, your concerns about how to achieve our aims.

You might be interested to know that others in the world take a lot of interest in what we do here in Australia. For example, the United States military has just adopted our record keeping system. The ACT Government is very interested in our initiatives. And the Italians are impressed with the hard work we are doing on the integration of women into the Australian Defence Force, and the SA Correctional Services organisation has requested a lot of information about our schemes. Indeed, it is very important that we share experience, our ideas and concepts for the future as we move forward.

Let me wind up by saying what a great pleasure it is to be here to open this conference. We now need to concentrate on getting the message and the role models entrenched throughout our Defence Organisation. It pleases me to see so many friends amongst this audience today and I look forward to hearing the results of your work. There are very few organisations that have the range of initiatives we have in place today, but to make the best of this will require time, your efforts, your commitment and your dedication.

I open this conference – let me thank you all for your participation.