

On an image of Cleopatra, in the proud and mystical language of the Ptolemaic creed of Isis, was written: "I am she who rises in the Dog Star. She who is called Goddess by women... I am the queen of war. I am the queen of the thunderbolt."

Two images follow me from the background work I did for this article. One was of a woman officer sitting in the rest room adjoining the women's toilets at the Oakey Air Base. She had her camouflage tunic open to the waist, and was using a breast pump to extract milk for her child at home. The other is of the amazement and awe expressed by a young male Timorese: "Aduh! Sopir betul betulnya cewek??" (Wow! Are the drivers really women?), as Australian women in full battle dress steered huge water trucks though the streets of Dili. When they stopped, the trucks were guarded by other young women in crouch position, wearing flak jackets and carrying Styr rifles. The scale and scene were somewhat surreal.

Femme Fatale:

Women in Military Service

by Melody Kemp



Ambushed

"I bet you harbour the usual prejudices and thoughts about... you know, soldiers and the military," said Mary gazing steadily at me with wide blue eyes.

"I guess I do" I responded, looking down against her earnestness. I felt lame, and sort of guilty in the presence of her gentleness and hospitality. Mary, very pregnant and pretty in her elegant home, had agreed to begin my exploration of the very controversial issue of women in the armed services.

"Why did I join?" Mary went on. "Because of the intense personal challenge of officer training. Because of the need to prove to myself that I could do it. God, it was hard. The physical stuff, the intense physical nature of soldier's training. At officer training school, we were given a broad academic education. So it was all the time moving between the brain and the body. Then, the opportunities to travel and to experience a huge variety of cultures and environ-

ments. We have exchange and specialised training programmes in many parts of the world. It has all been marvellous, but not what I want to do all my life."

Mary recently resigned from the army after achieving the rank of captain to raise a family and to search for alternatives. In another swipe at stereotypes, she intends to set up a bushland refuge and meditation center.

"The army gave me so much confidence," she went on, "and skills that are proving to be so valuable. I use all the management and accounting skills to build this business. I left because I felt that I needed to change.

"Some women do need to be in the services. Just like there are some men who are totally unsuited to the military, some women are perfect. They thrive on the structure; the discipline, if you will. They need a challenge and maybe a safe and controlled outlet for aggression. It's not a gender thing. It's simply that all humans can't be typecast. On the whole, the service treats its men and women equally. You succeed or fail in meeting the demands. It's not to do with gender as much as competence, tenacity and toughness."

Is that what I wanted to hear?

This article in no way should be seen as supporting war or the military industrial complex that threatens world security and human rights. Rather, it should be seen as a dispassionate argument within which to analyse the role of women warriors, both past and present. There are alternatives to war which Elkins outlines in his book *A New World Order: Grassroots Movements for Global Change* such as creating social or knowledge advantages by which nations become inviolate. But this involves sharing and giving which seems to run contrary to the fashionable but questionable notion of comparative advantage, and the American-led ideals of individualism and privatisation. There are also economic methods of restricting outbreaks of war, but they are largely distasteful to nations such as the USA, Italy, Sweden, Russia, France and China that produce weapons. This article in many ways admits defeat in the light of economic and political realities. I say that if the bloody thing is going to continue, why should women be excluded? In many ways, it is cynical but in that way it is also *real politik* for which I make no apology.



An Australian Medic returned from the border out of the helicopter in the background with a Timorese mother and child

Tough Tittle: Women Warriors

Tough is a good way to describe some of the women warriors whose names have become synonymous with strength, and who are evoked in comparison to modern leaders such as Margaret Thatcher. Toughness of spirit and purpose has become equated with male behaviour rather than identified as a necessary and desirable part of women's repertoire of coping and being. Thus (Britain's former) Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was given the title Iron Lady.

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Women disowned her as being an "oestrogen free zone." Her hardened approach to welfare and economic theory indicated to feminist women that she had become androgenised and thus not really a woman. Dennis Healey of the British Labour Party, going further, compared Margaret to Catherine the Great because, in a denigration of two strong women, her imperiousness was "allied to a temperament which in many ways is quite masculine."

In this violent present, feminists seem to want to define women as socially nurturing peace keepers or, using Zeldin's words when discussing Viking women, "peaceweavers."¹ The contemporary model is more reminiscent of Hester than Athena. The military and the women in it are characterised as violent aggressors, killers, mindless conformists, and tools of oppressors. The mass media highlights this side of military activity. A recent front-page photograph taken in East Timor showed an Australian soldier with his rifle aimed at the back of a captured militiaman's head—the Full Monty of stereotypic military images. None of the greater number of soldiers—many of them women²—administering medical and food aid or rebuilding shattered water supplies was featured. It is the women

soldiers in East Timor who have embraced crying women refugees and farmers, who have watched anxiously as children are reunited with parents or have lifted crying children high on their shoulders so they can be seen by returning parents. Women service personnel also monitor and direct aircraft movements, maintain supplies of food and water and conduct street patrols.

The feminised idealising of women has done little to reduce the upsurge in global violence, or rape—of women, environments or local economies. Those who vilify women in the military are largely educated, middle-class women in safe Western nations where their safety is assured and who entertain narrowly defined versions of what the services entail. On the other hand, a large number of military women see the opportunities in the services to rise from working class or lower middle class origins by the acquisition of skills (see box on next page). They also clearly see themselves as being on equal footing with men.

In an ideal world there would be no wars. But history and genetics have shown that conflict is inevitable. If we shrug aside ideals and instead face reality, then the questions to ask are what role do women have in our possibly volatile future, and is it fair to exclude or vilify women if they participate? Is it indeed fair to expect men to continue to be at the forefront of warfare, and if so why? Does that make a mockery of women's quest for equality and equity? Can women in the armed services mitigate the worst excesses of war? Do we, by vilifying women in the military, deny women's innate strength and tenacity, or their capacity for politically incorrect aggression? Are we denying our own dark side by rejecting women's participation in violence, or are we simply in despair that men, and now women, are used by the state in repression of others or as tools of capitalism? And how do those beliefs accord with the rise in the humanitarian use of the armed services? Are we not seeing the reality of the armed services—the everyday humdrum of work? Do we believe it is all *Rambo* with tampons?

Boadicea or Bulldike

Antonia Fraser in her book *Boadicea's Chariot: The Warrior Queens* writes about the women who provide the source of inspiration for films such as *Jean D'Arc*. These women are not simply the creations of celluloid but women

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Women warriors

The following are responses from active women serving in both East Timor and in Australian army air bases. They are the voices of soldiers and are presented in order (that is, all remarks numbered 1 come from the same woman).

(Editor's note: Cognisant that some of the views expressed below might be contentious, we invite the readers to share their own thoughts on the matter).

Why did you choose the military as a career?

1. I believed that it would give me the opportunity to work in a team environment where I would receive professionally recognised training in my field of interest. I also believed a military career would be secure, with progression prospects. I also thought it would be an exciting job that would offer the opportunity for travel and personal growth.
2. Job stability, room for advancement, promotion. More money than my last employment.
3. Security of employment, interesting lifestyle, secure wages, with the benefits included, e.g. medical, dental etc.
4. Employment prospects for ex-service personnel in "civvie street" are easier to come by particularly for those coming from officer ranks. Service time shows characteristics such as discipline and integrity are increasingly sought after by civilian organisations.
5. I had a military background.
6. Male to female ratio was better than in any other career, making any good thing that you do stand out better.
7. My family is military oriented (UK and Australia) and I had always been encouraged as a child to look as high as I wanted as far as a career was concerned. The military offered excellent opportunities for career satisfaction and achievement.
8. I was "burnt out" as a primary school teacher and this was a different option, yet with teaching still a part of it.

What has it given you that you value the most?

1. A secure job with a secure income
2. Self-confidence and life experience
3. All of the above. The travelling around Australia has been interesting with different posting locations.
4. Self-discipline and assertiveness as well as the knowledge that I can endure pretty much anything they throw at me and somehow I will get through.
5. A career
6. A six-month old baby
7. Team spirit and a sense of knowing I have the ability to learn more things fairly quickly.
8. Further tertiary qualifications, opportunity to make new friends, and be employed in various jobs.

How do you regard women who may see your role as one of destruction and violence and thus against the ethos of feminism?

1. Feminists would be the first ones to whine if no one was there to defend the country if it was being invaded. I remember feminists whining about women in the front line about

nine months ago in the media. I didn't hear them carry on once when 10 percent of the force in Timor were women, especially when the initial situation over there could have been a "front line" situation.

2. Load of crap. Live it for a week. Then get back to me.
3. I think they don't really understand what we actually do. We work for a living. It's just a job.
4. Such regard is quite antiquated and I have not yet met anyone who thinks this way. The modern army is different to what these so-called feminists think is actually the case.
5. They have their opinion. I have mine.
6. Any woman worth a dollar can do anything she wants to alone these days. Feminism is a sixties left over.
7. I don't believe the majority of women in the ADF (Australian Defence Forces) see their role as destructive or violent. I feel the role we play in the modern ADF is one of "keeping the peace," not peacekeeping as in Timor but as one who prepares in peacetime to keep the peace. At the end of the day though I would be prepared to fire that weapon to defend my country and that ethos is still one of "feminism"—the lioness dying to defend her cubs.
8. Narrow minded and uninformed.

Would you call yourself a feminist? Why? (To either a yes or no response)

1. No.
2. No. Just equal opportunity awareness.
3. No. Whether we like it or not, women are different to males. There are certain things that we just can't physically do.
4. No. Although I believe in the value of equality of women, my time in the service has proven to me that there are some areas which should remain male-dominated because females are not physically capable of performing the task. Feminism is too narrow-minded and negative to be of use today.
5. I agree with females doing the same amount of work as males but I still believe that if women think that they can't do the job they should ask for help.
6. No. Any group, be it female or male, that forces the other to conform to their thinking is oppressing the free will of the common good.
7. Not in the strictest sense. I believe there is very little women can't do in today's ADF. Some women are more suited to the more male-oriented roles than others. However our genetic differences mean very little at the end of the day.
8. Not really, no. Women have come a long way since the 1960s, although where there's inequality in the workplace, I believe it should be fought against. Where women should be able to do the same job for the same pay, etc. Men, conversely, should receive many of the benefits women receive, e.g., paternity leave to look after children.

What are some of the special hardships that you have endured because you are a woman? (i.e. ballistic vests incompatible to the female form; feminine hygiene in the field, etc).

1. Lack of upper body strength in comparison to the majority of males. Poor fitting field equipment. Difficulty getting

clothing such as boots due to small feet. Lack of opportunities for adequate hygiene in the field. Getting periods out bush. Doing well in a job without stepping on toes or being accused of sleeping with my superior.

2. Of course there will always be some sort of hardship in the field especially if you are in a male-dominated unit but they try to accommodate as best as possible. I think the main problem is the weight that we have to carry in our packs whilst out in the field.

3. I don't believe I have suffered "special hardships" because I am a woman. During training I saw as many males as females enduring personal hardships of their own.

4. Each individual within the service, whether they are male or female, has personal limitations, weaknesses and strengths. The service quickly exploits these—it's up to the individual to overcome them individually or by getting assistance.

5. Being physically fit to keep up with the high expectations of a male.

6. Feminine hygiene in the field has always been at a high level. I have been in for nine years and never seen or heard a female denied a shower! The hardest hardships are things that force us to be different, like this paper.

7. The only problem I've ever encountered has been feminine hygiene whilst on exercises. Bathing was difficult because of privacy and eventually the CO (Commanding Officer) decided to allow us to put up an 11'x11' tent which was used as the girls' ablution area.

8. Coming up against (still) the opinions of males who don't see women as part of the army. Competing against other women who see another female as a "threat." Ill-fitting field dress (Camouflage uniforms) made for men.

Describe the relationships and how you see yourself in relation to the male soldiers.

1. Males in my job in the Defence Force have found it difficult to adjust to women doing the same job and, as a result, in many cases have treated me and other women like dirt. As soon as a lot of the men in the Defence force grow up and become accountable for their pathetic immature behaviour, the Defence Force will be a much better place for women to find a rewarding career.

2. Although most would rather women aren't in the army, almost all are respectful, helpful and treat you almost as an equal.

3. I think that I have a positive relationship with male soldiers. It is the same everywhere. If you deserve respect and earn respect, then you will get it.

4. Training is an important aspect of the service. Everybody receives the same training relative to their trade, corps, etc. As long as you use that training to do your job at a competent and professional level it should not matter whether you are male or female and how you are seen by your peers. I have a mutual respect for those males or females who do their job to the best of their ability.

5. Fair, as long as I give things a go. Males are not generally a problem.

6. I always do PT, drill, parades and any other thing that are asked of the men I work with. They see me as an equal. I

see other females that don't do these things the same as males. They are not equal.

7. I believe I do the same tasks with basically the same training, ability and gripes as the male soldiers. I have male friends as well as female friends and each brings something special into my life.

8. I have a good working relationship once each person knows or identifies where they "stand," e.g. identify *early on* forms of unacceptable behaviour

Do you find that women in the military are generally relegated to stereotyped female roles such as catering and office work?

1. Generally, women undertake typically stereotyped roles such as clerks, pay reps, etc. However women are being channelled into predominately male-oriented areas such as pilots, loadmasters, aircraft technicians. Entry into these areas can be accompanied by harassment and discrimination in some cases, which makes women in these areas less likely to undertake a long-term military career.

2. No, but have the stereotype of being a lesbian.

3. Not necessary. They are put into different and wide range of corps (branches related to function, e.g., armour) now but office work is what some women choose.

4. The *Sunday Telegraph* had an article about a female CPL MP (Corporal Military Policewoman) who does close protection for the PM while in Dili. Females have opportunities to do any job they are capable of within the service. They are not merely relegated to office work. Of my close female friends, one is a Kiowa (light helicopter) pilot and the other an Army ATC (Air Traffic Controller), both jobs away from a desk.

5. A female only limits her own opportunities. If she feels she can do the job equivalent to a male then she should go for it.

6. No. I am now an AVTECH (Aviation Technician). I was a driver and medic beforehand. You get the job that you want as long as you are mentally able.

7. A lot of women in the ADF choose these roles because they doubt their ability to perform and succeed at the more male-oriented roles. As our ADF recruits the new generation of women, I feel we will see more and more women in these roles.

8. Not so much today; but even five years ago, yes. Men I work with now accept me as a fellow person, not as a woman.

How do you feel about the prospect of a combat role? Would you relish or enjoy that part of the military activity?

1. I fully recognised on enlistment of my requirement to partake in a combat role should it be necessary. I would be unlikely to relish or enjoy being a combatant but would carry out my task as a soldier as I am required to do.

2. Not myself personally, except for being a peacekeeper and not frontline. But women should have a choice.

3. I don't think I would be too happy. I don't think that the women would be suited to the conditions, e.g. carrying packs etc.

4. On joining the army I was aware that there were moves or

Women warriors

talk to have women in combat roles. Having a woman in a combat role is not the best use of their abilities; rather the planning, organisation and support of an operation are where women will demonstrate their effectiveness.

5. I believe a female should only be in the background; never in a combat role.

6. Yes. I think any further move toward full equality is good. If a female wants to fight and die for her country, she should be able to.

7. Women are currently serving in all aspects of a combat role in Timor. I don't believe I would relish the role, but I would die before I let my fellow team members down.

8. Not really for me as it wasn't why I joined. But it's part of the job.

Do you see any innate contradiction between women's contribution to the military and their supposed role as peacekeepers (family nurturers, etc.)?

1. Left blank

2. Not at all except when we are away for a long period of time.

3. Every one is different. If they can do the job, so be it!

4. Load of crap. Threaten a mother's children and I'll bet you'll see her killer instinct rise to the fore as she protects her flesh and blood!

5. No. You have to put the family nurturer's title to female peacekeepers. Not any man before has said that. These are some of the larger problems that filter down on us.

6. No. As expressed before, I am basically defending my country, my family and my right to live freely. Still a basic "nurturing" role.

7. No, not me but some may.

What has been your greatest moment, the one that sticks in your mind as the point of joy/accomplishment/usefulness?

1. I don't feel I have accomplished a great deal in my Army career and up until recently enjoyed very little about my work.

2. Being the only female to go through my Recruit course at Kapooka with 40 guys who were grunts (basic infantry).

3. My greatest moment was marching out of Kapooka after recruit course. I felt so proud. I thought if I could accomplish that, I could do anything.

4. Graduation from RMC (Dunroon) after 18 months of training. It wasn't easy and I had a lot of people who believed I couldn't do it and that the army is no place for a woman. I've proven them wrong.

5. Completing Basic Training

6. Completion of my AVIONICS CSE (course) this year. If females were allowed to get on with their jobs and did them to the best of their ability without interference from well-meaning groups, they would be taken as seriously as any male.

7. I was part of a team at a flying squadron and over a period of four years I was able to help with obtaining some essential flying equipment and ensure procedures were well in place to keep the equipment serviceable and in good supply whenever required.

8. Changing the mindset of instructors/fellow officers/senior officers towards the Programming cell and it's operation at RMC Dunroon.

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inspired by love of God and *patria*. In recent years, Vietnamese women, like their revered ancestors, fought savagely and violently alongside the men to liberate their country from the last foreign invaders. One male veteran of Vietnam confided that he was far more scared of the women than the men. Why? Because they were more intelligent, ruthless and savage. In the battle of Dahomey in Africa, French Legionnaires encountered women warriors. The Legionnaires hesitated momentarily, long enough to be slaughtered by the African women.

So how does that accord with our modern notions of the peaceful women of Greenham Common? We as women are hard on other women who don't fit our expectations. Later we shall see that the women's movement is losing its relevance to those women who take the risks.

Tacitus once wrote of the ferocious German tribes that "renown is easiest won amongst the perils," meaning that in the crucible of war, in the scorching process which hardens and stirs and in which survival becomes the singular goal, women can enter and take their place in the world of men.

Boadicea herself through the ages has become a symbol of female freedom and even sexual liberation. The lesbian movement claimed her; the poet Judy Grahn insisting that the name Boadicea (in its original form as Boudica) provided the origin of the word *bulldike*. Grahn wrote that Boadicea was a barbarian and a Celt, "her pudenda active and unashamed, radiating with female power all her life...." Customs at that time dictated that it would have been very *unnatural* for Boadicea to *not* have been a lesbian! Women in the services still have to deal with this stereotype (see box). The other emerging theme is that women warriors, like powerful men have voracious sexual appetites. Catherine the Great was known as a sexual conquistador in addition to a leader of men.

Who were the women warriors?

History is full of fighting women. Besides Boadicea, Penthesilea, Judith, Semiramis, Zenobia, Russian Women's Death Battalions who fought against the Bolsheviks, Theunta, Catherine the Great, Cartimandua, Artemisa, Cleopatra, Medb of Connacht, Tomyris, Jean D'Arc, Tamara of Turkey, The Rani of Jhansi who was killed at the battle of Gwalior in 1858, Tunisian women who met in *hammams* (baths) and religious shrines to plot acts of sabotage

and murder in the war of independence in the 1930s, and Trung Trac and Trung Nhi, Vietnamese women who led the people against the Chinese in AD 39 whose model was followed by Trieu Au who, in 248, raised 1,000 troops to again liberate Vietnam. The Philippines has

Australian male soldiers are reluctant to take women on reconnaissance or special operations, as they fear that in the case of combat or discovery, their priority will be to save the women and not to complete the mission.

Gabriela Silang who joined the revolt against the tyranny of the Spanish colonisers, Indonesia had Rasuna Said who, with other women, fought with bamboo spears to liberate Indonesia from a succession of colonisers.

Scattered in the histories of the world wars are memories of women like Odette who spied for the British, risking her life to ferry intelligence from occupied Europe. La Passionaria with fury and upraised fist called for resistance to Franco and fascism in Spain. Despite the formation of the Women's International League for Permanent Peace in 1915, women (captured in the film *Rosie the Rivetter*) moved out of their houses and into the armaments factories, wielding power tools and heavy equipment in a display of women's competence. Their aim was to make fighting instruments that would kill others, and that is the bottom line. The armed services are trained to kill and be killed. They are given licence to do what is punishable in mainstream society. So how does that feel?

Retribution

"The real fear of soldiers carrying out military operations is not personal injury or death,

but the sure knowledge of what they will have to endure... the sights and sounds of it all, without the freedom or at most times ability to prevent or help. Soldiers are trained to manage their own intense pain, psychological and physical weaknesses and total humiliation (like drinking our own urine when nothing else is possible). After that kind of experience, nothing in life is ever the same. Nothing is hard or difficult. We feel above and beyond life's everyday hassles. But we suffer those sights and sounds at night when there is nothing else around. They come back."

-Interview with a soldier who chose not to be named

Grossman³ in his brave book tells us that soldiers do not like or want to kill. Instead, in battle there is a lot of posturing (making lots of noise, firing over heads), submission (surrender), flight (running or melting away) and, in some cases, active fighting. He and other historians estimate that only 20 per cent of fire in battle are aimed at the enemy. Distance and the presence of encouraging authority figures tend to improve that rate. Interviews with women soldiers tend to support these observations that combat itself is not the primary objective and is somewhat feared.

Soft and Hard

One observer thought that the positive aspect to women's increasing participation in the armed services is that women could change the organisation from the inside. I believe this to be a rather silly and naive notion. What use is a castrated military? Why should women be interested in changing it and not in fact enjoying (yes, that word is meant) the power, the skills, the adrenaline trip that most women admit to when jumping from planes or racing over valleys in a helicopter. The thing to remember is that most soldiers, men and women, never see battle. They are engineers, administrators, medics, clerks, refuellers. They represent in fact a parallel society in uniform and one where the citizens are skilled in using weapons along with bookkeeping. The reality is that the military can also be boring.

Grossman, one of the few prepared to deal with the issue of killing because that for many is where the fascination and horror lies, recounts the revulsion of male soldiers called upon to kill women combat troops in Vietnam. Grossman, a military historian and psychologist,

believes that the presence of women and children in battle tends to reduce aggression if the women and children are not threatened. If they become threatened however, Grossman notes that “the psychology of battle changes from one of carefully constrained ceremonial combat amongst males to the unconstrained ferocity of an animal... defending its den.” The Israelis have refused to accept women into combat since 1948. Then the officers could not cool uncontrolled violence amongst male Israeli soldiers who had their fellow women combatants killed or injured in battle. Muslim soldiers are highly unlikely to surrender to women.

Australian male soldiers have similar feelings. They are reluctant to take women on reconnaissance or special operations, as they fear that in the case of combat or discovery, their priority will be to save the

women and not to complete the mission. Thus while men might be able to be programmed to kill, it's not as easy to program men to neglect women.

East Timorese and Indonesian women may beg to differ. Their men are known to abandon them in times of trouble. I was not able to determine if the participation of women in military services had any impact on rape as a weapon of war.

So where does all this leave us? If feminism strives for or insinuates a political role for women in a society that is permeated with women's values (whatever they are in an international context), then the armed services would seem to be part of that reflection. The women soldiers interviewed shared a pride, a feeling of accomplishment at meeting men head on. But they also know their frailties and have moved beyond the idealising into reality.

Yes, soldiers are trained killers and women do range practice, but soldiers are trained within strictly enforced confines of combat and within equally strict rules of engagement. On the other hand, Grossman reveals that the same methods used by the military to desensitise soldiers to



courtesy of Timor Times

On the frontline. An Australian soldier sets up a radio direction-finding antenna array to protect ground troops in Dili, East Timor.

kill—that is to overcome natural reticence to harm another human—are now used by the entertainment and video game industry. Through violent combat films and games, they instruct all adults and children using a process known as *operant conditioning*: how to kill with no ethical, moral or political framework. Note the use of life-like weapons in video arcades and the rise in violent crime in all parts of the world. His new book is a plea to end that type of “entertainment.” So, maybe, women in the military are the wrong targets if we are concerned about violence.

Getting back to the woman that opened this article: the quintessential womanliness of the breast-feeding officer is

concealed in her camouflaged tunic, a far cry from our warrior ancestors. Their enemies were in no doubt that the bare breasted soldier with upraised spear was a woman. The women truck drivers were equally an awe-inspiring model of what women can do in a culture where women are traditionally oppressed. The East Timorese men, used to seeing women in the kitchen, in bed or in the fields, were forced to confront their prejudices at that point.

Maybe it's time women critics also confronted theirs. ☺

Footnotes:

¹ Zeldin T. *An Intimate History of Humanity*. Minerva, 1995.

² Approximately 10 percent of Australian troops in East Timor are women.

³ Grossman, Lt. Col. D. *On Killing The Psychology of Learning to Kill in War and Society*. Back Bay Books, 1996

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