

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

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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