



Sending Our Women to War: The Role of Women in the Australian Army from 2000 to Today

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Executive summary

- The roles of women in the Australian Army have undergone significant changes since the 1980s, and have led to more employment opportunities for women.
- This article outlines the changing nature of female employment opportunities in the Australian Army, and the Australian policy changes that have guided these developments. It argues that their employment has been progressively shaped by strategic Australian policy and the nature of both domestic and overseas operations.
- Traditional definitions of combat-related duties and combat roles are made redundant in modern day asymmetrical warfare.
- This article considers the potential future for female employment in combat roles. It proposes that Defence policy should consider that the nature of current operations and the current roles undertaken by women are complex, and thus should review policy changes on a tactical and *value for policy* basis, rather than in the pursuit of female equality and political correctness.

After nearly five years of service in the Australian Army, both in Australia and on multiple deployments overseas, upon reflection it has become clear to me that women are in combat roles. Since the beginning of my career, I have been taught to shoot and hit a target, patrol as part of a section that is attacking an enemy, and do my job in a combat environment. As an Administration Clerk I have been taught the essentials of soldiering, and in my role as a Junior Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) I am expected to be able to lead a section of soldiers under fire. Without this first-hand experience, I might have accepted the argument that women have been excluded from combat related duties. If that is true, however, then please remove my weapons qualifications, take away my field kit, and leave me to be a uniformed receptionist!

On a daily basis, serving men and women alike make great personal sacrifices. The Australian public, however, sees little of this. Much of the information that is publicly released by the ADF is highly sanitised (often because of operational and secrecy requirements) and in response to accusations, investigations or for recruiting purposes. Accordingly, the media has highly criticised the working conditions for women in the Australian Army, due to a perceived lack of equality. Yet, the role performed by women in the modern day Army is no less dangerous than their male counterparts. In light of the recent investigations into sexual harassment and the announcement by former Defence Minister Stephen Smith to commence the full integration of women into combat roles by 2016, it is timely to shed some light on what women actually do in the Army. By drawing on publicly released Defence sources, I argue that combat duties are inherent to all categories of employment within the Army and that policymakers should develop and review defence policy with regards to the complex tactical and operational requirements that women have been working amongst. I believe that the pursuit of equality should not be the basis for policy reform, especially not for an organisation that requires capability and performance in order to protect Australia's interests.

Integration – pushing the boundaries for equality

Defence statistics from 1 June 2012 showed that, from current overseas defence operations, 307 ADF women (including Army) made up a total of 9 per cent of the total deployed force, whilst within the Army alone women make up approximately 10 per cent of the force. These percentages have shown a minimal growth of less than 5 per cent over recent decades, suggesting that both the Army and ADF have not increased in attractiveness for women. The revolution in female employment in the Army began in the mid-1980s, with the disbanding of the Women's Royal Australian Army Corps (WRAAC). This pathway reflected a change in Australian society and led to the integration of women into previously male-only roles. It was accompanied, for instance, by the removal of automatic discharge upon pregnancy and equal working conditions.

The Army was officially exempted from the *Sex Discrimination Act, 1984* with regards to combat duties and combat roles. These are defined as: '*Those requiring a person to commit, or participate directly in the commission of, an act of violence against an adversary in time of war*'. Consequently, women were excluded from employment in frontline combat roles and units. *Regulation 3* of the *Sex Discrimination Regulation* defines combat-related duties as '*duties requiring a person to work in support of, and in close proximity to, a person performing combat duties, in circumstances in which the person may be killed or injured by an act of violence by an adversary*'. Both of these definitions (for which the Army still is exempt), however, do not account for modern instances of self-defence or acts committed in times of asymmetric warfare, where direct engagement with the enemy is equally likely in combat support roles. An example of this is when a female medic was attached to an Infantry section for an 'outside the wire' patrol in Afghanistan; she was chosen for the task due to her qualifications rather than her gender and was required to be able to actively engage with the enemy. Ironically, the *Sex Discrimination Act* was aimed at eliminating

discrimination against females, yet the *Act* prevented women, who were once employed in combat related duties, from continuing in these roles (for example in the Royal Australian Engineers and also Royal Australian Corps of Transport).

As Melanie Oppenheimer notes, policy was amended in May 1990 to allow women to serve in combat-related positions (a trial of three years where the combat-related duties exemption was removed). This opened up more career opportunities for women, raising the number of positions available for women in the Army to 55 per cent. Also in 1990, women were allowed to serve in combat-related positions in the Gulf War, in the roles of medics, nurses, logistics and supplies operators, military police, intelligence analysts, drivers and movement operators. During this Operation, all personnel, regardless of rank or gender, were at risk of chemical and biological weapons attack. As unbiased as the threat of NBC (Nuclear, Biological and Chemical) attacks so, too, was the training and protective standards that were applied throughout the operation, women also had to work in severe environmental conditions whilst donning NBC protective equipment. It seemed for the first time that the nature of warfare had rendered as redundant the traditional definitions of combat roles and combat duties.

In December 1992, women finally were allowed to serve in all units, albeit in combat-related support roles. For previously male-only Infantry units that only employed male support staff (such as Operator Administration and Operator Supply), this change saw women being able to 'post in' to these units for the first time. Moreover, it allowed females to work within combat units, and also participate in training and deployments with the unit. Although women were posted in support roles to these units, if that unit was raised as a combat unit, then consequently women could be attached to frontline units and therefore exposed to direct contact with the enemy. There remained only Special Forces, Infantry, Artillery, Armoured and Combat Engineers roles from which women were excluded.

Debates over the combat-inclusion of females in the Army have emerged numerous times over the past two decades. In 1991 and again in 1992, in response to allowing women to serve in combat units the Army created a Women Evaluation Team to examine the Combat Related Employment of females within the Army. In 2000, the Australian government again reviewed the policy of combat exclusion and subsequently removed reservations that were put in place by the Keating government that would have led to all employment categories of the Army being open to women. A National Interest Analysis review proved that the Australian public was not ready to send their daughters, sisters and mothers into frontline roles. Although trials were held where females could participate in combat duty initial employment training and in Special Forces selection programs on the basis of research, the issue of women in combat roles lay dormant until 2011. In September of that year, due to mounting public pressure from the ADFA Skype scandal, the Australian government 're-reviewed' the policy and removed the gender restrictions for combat employment categories. Pragmatically, they placed the caveat of selection on the basis of job merit over gender, and advocated that this policy would improve

overall ADF capability, even though this cannot be proven until after the full integration of women is completed in 2016.

In June 2012, the government approved a five-year implementation plan for females into combat related roles, and on the 27 September 2012 the Defence Minister announced that all gender restrictions would be removed. Consequently, upon graduation female Staff Cadets now are able to elect combat duty postings, including: Infantry Officer; Artillery Officer; Armoured Corps Officer; and Combat Engineer Officer. Following this, the in-service transfers for currently serving Non-Commissioned Officers and Other Ranks will be offered in January 2013, and these transfers will be successful upon meeting requirements such as the Physical Employment Standards Testing. This strategy of filling the combat ranks with women 'from the top down' is intended to help the transition for 'off-the-street' female recruits by 2016. The review recommended that no less than two females per combat section (a section can consist of up to 12 people) should make a 'critical mass' to reduce the risk of sexual harassment and to provide a peer support network within the section. Yet, this overlooks critical questions often asked by commanders in the Army. For instance, will there be enough females willing to transfer or enlist into those roles to make up that critical mass? Also, will those numbers and the change of policy bring about a significant tactical advantage on the ground? Keeping in mind the relatively small numbers of women within Defence, and the potential for even smaller numbers within combat roles, it is understandable that most combat sections will not have females because of the 'critical mass' requirement.

All Army members are required at some stage of their career to undertake Extra Regimental duties and Appointments, which are professional duties that are not gender specific and are provided at all units and in most cases sub-unit level. Some of these positions include: Fire Warden; Work Health and Safety Officer; Equity and Diversity Officer; Stocktaking Officer; and Duty Officer. Alongside these roles, personnel can elect to take on specific positions within their posted unit, such as Training Officer or Recruiting Officer. Such positions often are nominated to personnel on the basis of merit. In regards to the position of Training Officer, a female would be expected to impart their knowledge on Infantry Tactics and Operational Briefings. Similarly, an instructor at the Recruit Training Battalion (Kapooka) would have the same training outcome and performance expectations as her fellow instructors.

The overseas experience

Since the Gulf War, roles that Australian Army women have undertaken overseas whilst on deployment and on exercise have been diverse and as equally dangerous as their male counterparts. In recent deployments, women have been tasked within high threat areas fulfilling jobs that often are outside of their job description. A female driver, for example, could be transformed from a Heavy-Rigid Driver into a section member engaging with the enemy in order to fight through an ambush. This is the reality that the soldier and officer must adhere to regardless of gender. A common attitude of 'soldiers first' and then the job second has been a key training point for deployments and throughout Initial

Employment Training, again disputing the traditional definition of combat roles. The Australian Army has been in a state of constant deployment since the Gulf War and as a result of the unbiased nature of asymmetrical warfare, females have been in the firing line and taking on roles such as patrolling, community engagement, and security piquets that traditionally were in the domain of combat-related corps such as Infantry.

In Afghanistan and Iraq, deployed units required all members regardless of gender to carry out their employed job roles as well as security procedures relevant to the deployment. These could include the wearing of Combat Body Armour, performing security piquets and maintaining the base's fortification. Regardless of gender or rank, all Army members deployed to the Middle East need to be aware of the threat of Indirect Fire (and NBC attacks) and be prepared to take up arms if called upon. In Afghanistan, however, female Army members have used their gender to a cultural advantage. Coalition forces have actively engaged with the female half of the Afghani population as part of Female Search Teams (FST), Female Engagement Teams (FET) and also Female Human Intelligence Exploitation Teams (FHET). The use of these Teams in engaging with the local Afghani female population has been proven to be a great boon to coalition forces, yet, in order to actively engage with this population, female members were required to operate in high risk areas. In the case of FSTs and FETs, women were required to carry out these tasks as well as their normal duties. One of the main functions of the FETs is in support of education programs, economic development and to provide basic healthcare services. The focus on their roles has been of a non-combatant nature, although the tasks have been in areas where the risk of direct confrontation with the enemy is likely. Even while women were gender restricted in these war-like operations, all personnel were equally at risk. As one female corporal deployed to Afghanistan points out, whereas women did not actively assist with day patrols outside of the Forward Operating Bases, their male counterparts (i.e. equally qualified in the same Combat Service Support category) were permitted to do so.

Female clerks were never given the opportunity to patrol with other forces but there were instances where the male clerks were given the opportunity to assist with day patrols. I believe the opportunity is restricted for females as it would be a greater issue with media etc. Not to say that a males life is less valuable. I just believe Australian politicians may not be ready for the backlash from society if a female were to die on operations.

Corporal, Australian Army

Along with deployments to war-like operations, women have been taking part in Humanitarian or Stabilisation Operations and Regional Operations. These roles have been just as complex and varied according to the mission tasks and force requirements. At times, Army females have been required to take on jobs throughout the operation that are out of corps job roles (where they are working in areas not defined by their employed trade). One example of this is in Sinai (Operation MAZURKA) where Army members

contributed to the Multinational Force and Observers, this organisation was established in 1981 and is still in force today. Women have contributed to this operation, in both out of corps job roles and also in support of the headquarter element. Similarly, women have also contributed to the ADF contribution to the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (Operation ASLAN), which is overseeing the development and nation-building for South Sudan. Throughout this operation, Army women have been engaged in aviation and logistics support roles (such as drivers and petroleum operators), out of corps military liaison officers and also in headquarters positions.

In the Asia-Pacific region, Army women also have engaged in civil and military regional operations and exercises that support the maintenance of peace and stabilisation. In Operation BEL ISI in Bougainville, Operation HELPEM FREN in the Solomon Islands and Operation ASTUTE in East Timor, women have actively engaged in the range of support programs and monitoring teams. In these operations, women have been required to monitor and support the civilian population as part of Civil Military Co-operation teams (CIMIC). These teams were used in similar ways to that of FETs in the Middle East and are good examples of how deployed women have been tasked with traditionally unconventional roles. During these operations women have experienced unconventional employment as part of the CIMIC, civilian monitoring teams, Headquarters staff, police liaison teams and as interpreters. They have also operated in their traditional roles such as radio operators, drivers and logistics staff. This use of females to engage with the local populace in non-warlike operations highlights the problems surrounding the traditional definition of combat-related duties. How can this definition of 'combat-related duties' be applied to the roles taken on by modern Army women that are working in battle spaces where the threat is undefined, and likewise so is the nature of their duties and roles?

On the home front

Domestically, the Australian Army has contributed to the protection of Australia throughout times of hardship and uncertainty. Both male and female Army members were employed as part of Search Teams and in support of security teams, which worked closely with federal and state police to ensure that these events were safely and securely accomplished. These types of operations are further examples of where gender has not been an operational concern, and as such the likelihood of threat exposure has been the same for every member. Key contributions for the Australian Army in terms of recent support and ceremonial duties are the Sydney Olympics (Operation GOLD), the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), the aftermath of the Queensland Floods (2011), the Victorian Bushfires (2009) and Cyclone Yasi (2011). During these types of operations women have taken on even more unconventional roles, providing emergency assistance to local communities throughout Australia, in the aid of rebuilding, participating in search teams, and in support of police forces. A great majority of the roles that women engaged in during these domestic operations were out of corps roles, but they contributed in their conventional employment categories, too.

Currently, one of the biggest efforts to protect Australia's offshore maritime interests and in border security is the ADF domestic operation, Operation RESOLUTE. The Transit Security Element (TSE), comprised of both males and females, was tasked between both the Australian Army and Navy, operating in the Northern Australian Waters (it is supported by Headquarters Northern Command and the Regional Force Surveillance Units). The role of TSE is to assist in providing security in Australian and International Waters and undertake the safe apprehension and transfer of potential irregular immigrants. The Transit Security Element personnel are tasked aboard the Navy's Armidale Class Patrol Boats and also Australia's Customs and Border Protection Vessels. As part of their duties the TSE can be expected to participate in Boarding Parties, securing and searching vessels and potential irregular immigrants (known to the majority of Australians as asylum seekers) as well as daily sea-faring duties. These kinds of domestic operations demonstrate females' ability to work in out of corps roles and engaging in tasks that are of the same nature as males from combat corps. Interestingly, although women did not need to be in a combat corps to be able to do the job, like the FETs and FSTs they simply did the job and returned to their original employment category.

Support services and culture

Australian Army women have a number of formal welfare and support services available to them, however, the popular motivation towards peer support still has been identified in Defence and government reviews as the most commonly used support system. Army women have readily available access to support services ranging from fairness and equity networks to housing support services including: the Defence Community Organisation; Padre support; the Defence Equity Organisation; the Defence Women's Network; and rank hierarchy. *The Review into the Treatment of Women in The ADF* revealed that most ADF members were happy within Defence, but it also brought to light many complaints that females are given preferential treatment. This report implied that women in the Army are treated 'more fairly' than their male counterparts and that if women served in certain roles this may affect the capability of those employment categories, therefore reducing the overall performance of the unit.

The nature of the ADF's war-fighting mission and emphasis on its 'warrior culture' perpetuates this belief, as has, until recently, the policy restriction on the employment of women in direct combat roles. The removal of this restriction means this formal policy barrier is gone, but the practical impact on women's participation is less clear.

The Review into the Treatment of Women in The ADF

This review also noted that the support services currently in place for both males and females are inadequate, and this places extra strain on the effective integration of women into Army combat roles. More importantly, while this review was comprehensive, it failed to address the overriding aspect that the Army is trained to be an Offensive and Defensive force. The 'civilianisation' of support mechanisms and the introduction of Equity and Diversity policy does not increase tactical capability. What, then, is the

application of these mechanisms and policy in a tactical sense for the strategic commander whose decisions are based upon the considerations of the battle space and mission rather than the ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation of their soldiers and officers? The five-year integration plan for females into combat roles will foster more equality for Army women, but will the tactical advantage for commanders be as equally significant as the costs to review and implement the reform?

Right now our soldiers are at war. It might not be a war of national mobilisation but, nevertheless, we are defending our national interests and our young men and women are in mortal danger right now. There is a real live enemy out there trying to kill our soldiers. The decision we make about supporting current operations and shaping of the Army in the future are not esoteric decisions. They are real and vital and lives depend on our conclusions.

LT GEN (ret.) Peter Leahy, AC

In the last two decades, Australian Army women have experienced significant change in employment opportunity and equality of working conditions and with the ever changing nature of Defence policy and the strategic concerns of the Australian government, there will no doubt be more opportunity for Army women to exhibit their 'mettle'. But in today's terms the Army has planned to withdraw from Afghanistan in 2014 and the full integration of trained women in combat roles will not be until late 2013, which may be too late for women to 'earn their desert guernsey' in roles such as Infantry in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, changes to this policy must consider the future implications of women serving in war-like operations. How will Australia respond when a female soldier is taken hostage? How will Defence compensate women with hip injuries and who are unable to bear children due to long-term load carrying stresses? If a female Rifleman is killed overseas, will policy change back to the way it was? All soldiers, male and female are prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice, however we must first ask ourselves, is it necessary to put women even further in harm's way? Will putting women in these roles increase tactical capability? From my experiences, I can honestly say that women in roles such as Infantry will not increase capability, since women are already employed in combat roles and where gender is a necessity for the task then women are used, they do not need to be in a combat role (like Rifleman) to be able to march with an Infantry section. While these final steps towards full integration of Army women are great strides towards equality, policy should not be changed purely in the pursuit of fairness or for political correctness. It is clear that more consideration is required by policy makers to implement changes on a tactical and *value for policy* basis, and consider the bigger picture effects of putting women on the 'so called' frontline.

****The views expressed in this article are not necessarily the views of the Department of Defence or the Australian Army, or any other organisation. Responsibility rests with the author alone.***

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