

**Speech by Chief of the Defence Force
Air Chief Marshal M. D. Binskin, AC,
Women and National Security
Conference,
Canberra, 5 April 2017**

Good morning ladies and gentlemen, it is pleasing to see so many participants here today. You represent an impressive array of agencies and nations and I extend a warm welcome to you all—particularly those of you who have travelled a great distance to join us here today.

Like many nations, Australia has a long, proud military history stretching over more than a century and women have always formed an integral part of that story. During World War One, around 3,000 civilian nurses volunteered for active service, joining the 2,000 enlisted members of the Australian Army Nursing Service. They worked in clearing stations close to the front line in Britain, France and Belgium as well as hospitals in the Middle East and India, and on allied hospital ships and trains.

Sadly, twenty-five Australian women died in service during World War One. Many more were awarded military honours, including eight women who received the Military Medal for Bravery for their actions during the conflict. Our Diggers are renowned for their courage and ingenuity and our nurses were no different. During heavy artillery shelling in France, Sister Alicia Kelly shielded her patients' heads with enamel bedpans and basins. While in Antwerp, Sister Clair Trestrail and her colleagues carried 130 badly wounded patients, one by one to the cave-like cellar hidden beneath the basement of a concert hall in the city; flagging down a British ammunition bus the following morning to escape with their patients to safety.

In World War Two, additional opportunities opened to women who wanted to contribute to the nation's war effort. The Australian Womens' Army Service; the Womens' Royal Australian Navy Service, and the Womens' Auxillary Australian Air Force all formed in 1941. Accepting women into non-medical military roles increased the number of men available for front-line duties. Women continued to serve, predominantly in medical or support roles, during the Vietnam War and the three womens' service organisations remained separate entities until the early 1980s when each was subsumed into the Royal Australian Navy, the Australian Army and the Royal Australian Air Force.

When I look at the Australian Defence Force today, I am encouraged by how far we have come, even over the course of my own military career. In 2017, no job is off limits to women. We have female personnel performing critical roles on all our current operations and there are an increasing number of female commanders leading at all levels across the organisation. I was privileged to meet one of them in Proserpine on Monday—LtCol Jennifer Harris, Commanding Officer of No. 3 Combat Engineering Regiment, who is doing a magnificent job leading the main ADF engineering response to Cyclone Debbie in northern Queensland.

I know the Defence Minister spoke at length yesterday about Australia's commitment to the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and our recognition that men and women experience conflict and disaster quite differently. This morning, I would like to focus on two contemporary tactical level experiences where applying the principles outlined in UNSCR 1325 has enhanced our operational effectiveness.

The first is from combat operations in Afghanistan; and the second, from Fiji last year, when helping the nation respond to the devastation caused by Cyclone Winston.

At the height of combat operations in Afghanistan in 2009, the International Security Assistance Force began to recognise the important role and influence of women in the Afghan social hierarchy. The women, who gathered regularly at the community well to collect water and gather firewood, conveyed and received the local news which also made them attentive observers and, in a military sense, a useful source of intelligence. However, cultural practices meant that male dominated security forces were prohibited from engaging with the female population and this source of information remained inaccessible.

In an effort to address the information gap and bridge the cultural divide, ISAF [International Security Assistance Force], including Australian personnel based in Uruzgan province, formed Female Engagement Teams. Based largely around education and health care, the Female Engagement Teams were able to interact with the Afghan women in a manner not previously available to the security forces.

Female engagement was not without its challenges, but the benefits were profound.

Earning their trust gave the Afghan women confidence to openly discuss concerns for their families, community issues and other problems arising in their villages. In return, the Australian women were able to gain valuable insights on local personalities and economics, to understand community grievances and gather critical intelligence on enemy activity.

As an aside, the Pashtun men came to see female military personnel as a type of 'hybrid-gender'. Women in the security forces were afforded the same respect shown to their male colleagues, yet they were still permitted to interact with local women and afforded access to the family home.

So what did experience in Afghanistan teach us?

Women in the Afghan communities where we operated consistently demonstrated their ability to read the atmospherics and provide a valuable source of information that enhanced our overall situational awareness. However, the women who formed our Female Engagement Teams performed this task in addition to their primary duties. There was no dedicated role. Female engagement was more opportunistic than deliberate and activities were conducted around a unit's operational tempo and tasking. Had we seen female engagement as a necessary part of our operations and included it in our planning up front, we may well have seen greater benefit sooner.

In fact, even more basic than that—if our ADF units had more women in them, we would never have needed to form dedicated Female Engagement Teams.

The other major lesson arising from our experience in Afghanistan was the need for professional training to apply the four principles outlined in the Women Peace and Security policy. That is to encourage:

- Participation of women at all levels
- Protection of women
- Prevention of violence against women, and
- Incorporating a gender perspective in policy and planning.

Fast forward seven years to February 2016 when Tropical Cyclone Winston struck Fiji. At that time, organisationally, we felt we were better prepared to incorporate the gender perspective into a major ADF operation. For the first time, two gender advisers were assigned to the taskforce deployed on Operation FIJI ASSIST—Lieutenant Commander Jacqui Swinton embarked in HMAS *Canberra* and Major Jo Richards who was based in Suva.

As with most Humanitarian and Disaster Relief operations, FIJI ASSIST was stood up rapidly. The initial notice to move was issued around 8am Sunday and the first deployment of ADF personnel was on the ground in Fiji by 6pm Monday.

Like the evolving situation on the ground, our operational planning matured as FIJI ASSIST progressed and we worked closely with the Fijian authorities

to access real-time information in order to best respond to the population's needs. Joint Task Force Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Scott Hill recognised that as a very proud people, the Fijian men appeared reluctant to ask for assistance—in fact, they are probably no different to men in communities all around the world. As a consequence, it was difficult to initially determine how best to help, or where to direct our resources.

It became apparent that one of best sources of information on where help was most needed would come from the women who were, in military terms, the family 'logisticians'. Lieutenant Colonel Hill did two things. First, he looked to the women within his team; assessing their individual skills and the expertise each woman brought to the mission to determine how to capitalise on their talent.

Second, the taskforce actively sought out key women in high profile positions within the local population to establish a rapport and open a line of communication. This engagement ran across the full spectrum of the population—from the village matriarchs to those working in the Republic of Fiji Military Forces and the Fijian Police, with Major Richards representing the ADF at United Nations' coordination meetings.

The engagement strategy also extended beyond the ADF taskforce to non-government organisations and other Australian government agencies, all the way to the Australian High Commissioner in Fiji, Margaret Twomey. By seeking out the female population, the taskforce, working with the local authorities, gained access to tangible, accurate information about the communities' needs. That insight proved to be a turning point for the mission. Where the taskforce had previously been working on assumptions early in the mission, this maturing local engagement allowed the taskforce to plan and make decisions based on the situation on the ground. Let me give you an example. The local women influenced the decision for ADF engineers and trades people to help local authorities rebuild a number of schools.

Remember TC Winston was a Category 5 cyclone—the strongest known to have crossed land anywhere in the southern hemisphere. Forty-four people were killed and up to 350,000 people were directly affected including around 55,000 people who lost their homes. In that context, rebuilding the local school may not seem like a high priority, but the Fijian women highlighted the importance of getting the kids back to school.

On an emotional level it was, in part, about instilling a sense of normality after such a distressing event but there was also a significant practical element to their request. Getting the children back to school released the women from their caring responsibilities during the day and allowed them to focus their time and attention to assist with the recovery.

Engaging women in all aspects of the recovery process was critical to the operational success of our close partnership with the Fijian authorities. Equally important though was ensuring the women remain engaged once the taskforce departed. Since our engagement in Fiji, the Australian High Commissioner and the Department of Foreign Affairs have put strategies in place to ensure Australia sustains more active engagement with the Fijian women, providing support through education and church programs—while the Fijian–Australian military-to-military links that flourished during the operation have also proven enduring, and last month the ADF delivered ten Bushmasters to the Republic of Fiji Military Forces observers deployed on the UN peacekeeping missions in the Golan Heights and Syria. That agreement was underpinned by the friendship and goodwill established through our cooperation during Operation FIJI ASSIST.

Perhaps the greatest lesson arising from FIJI ASSIST is for future taskforce commanders to actively seek to establish a specific line of communication with the local female population as a priority. The first week of our operations in Fiji involved gaining the best on-ground situational awareness. We could have expedited this if we had made a more concerted effort to engage the local women from the outset.

The principles demonstrated through our interaction with the female population in Fiji are indicative of the way diversity improves our capability. Women in the communities where we operate consistently demonstrate their ability to read the situation and provide a valuable source of information and enhanced situational awareness. The same is true of the ADF.

I am fully aware of comments that arise from time-to-time about this being '*a great time to be a woman in the ADF*'. I know some of you here today are convinced about our drive toward increasing gender diversity. It is true that many women in our organisation; and indeed in the audience today, have succeeded despite the previous 'male bias' that existed in our organisation, but the fact is—diversity improves capability.

A diverse workforce is all about capability. The greater our diversity the greater the range of ideas and insights to challenge the accepted norm, assess risks and develop creative solutions. I have seen this on operations, and I see it every day in my own office.

Right now, 57 per cent of my own staff are women. This is no mistake. They are a diverse and extremely capable group of non-commissioned and commissioned military personnel, as well as a number of APS staff. Collectively, they represent a good cross-section of the Defence organisation in both a professional and a personal sense. From Corporal to Colonel and equivalent, each person brings their own view of the organisation to the table. They are the first people to tell me how it really is, and their candour on behalf of their peers combined with the mix of unique insights helps me

see issues from a different point of view—and in my experience, our differences make us a stronger team.

You have all seen the stats I'm sure. Women make up 51 per cent of the Australian population and more than 40 per cent of the Defence Public Service workforce, yet female members account for just 16.1 per cent of the ADF population. We are often criticised for the relatively small number of women in senior leadership positions in the ADF. That criticism ignores the fact that it takes time to grow a senior officer. I'm confident female representation will increase proportionately over time but, in my view, we cannot claim we're recruiting the best if we're only choosing from half the population.

While there are more than 500 additional women serving in the ADF today, than there were, more than a year ago; if we want to attract and retain the top talent, we have to change the way we do business. We need to continue to drive out unacceptable behaviour. We must empower people to adopt flexible working arrangements where appropriate and we must consider their family needs, and importantly, we need to ensure we have a common understanding about what a diverse, inclusive and capable ADF looks like—and how to achieve it.

As an example, since 2012, my Gender Equality Advisory Board has helped shape and drive the strategic direction of our gender equality priorities in the context of our broader cultural reform program. While this Board includes Defence members, its real benefit to me are the number of external members who bring experience and expertise from other large public and private sector organisations. Since it was established, the board has provided advice on a range of policies and processes to better support women through a long and rewarding military career. A significant component includes expanding our approach to flexible work arrangements for all Defence personnel.

Working with the board, we have also taken a detailed look at the way women experience the recruitment process, leading to significant changes in the way we enlist and appoint female candidates. In reality, it has helped us assess how we recruit both male and female candidates. It is an important step in reaching the recruiting targets we have set for ourselves. Navy and Air Force are working toward a 25 per cent female workforce 2023, while Army has set its sights on achieving 15 per cent female participation within the next six years.

Unfortunately, the notion of 'targets' is not well understood. It is often misinterpreted as counter to merit based recruitment or promotion. This is wrong. Selection should always be based on the best person for the job but the idea of increasing diversity without introducing a target is like saying you want to be an Olympic champion without setting some goals along the way—

it's an admirable ambition but you will never achieve it if you don't have a plan with strategic milestones to accomplish along the way. In the same way, we will never reach our goal to increase the number of women in the ADF if we don't set ourselves realistic targets and put programs in place to help us achieve them.

As part of our efforts to increase the number of women in the ADF, each of the services has implemented a range of mentoring and leadership programs designed to develop confidence and professional skills in a female workforce. Navy is focused on mentoring women in the fields of engineering and project management, Army is working to develop future leaders and Air Force has established a network to support women working in non-traditional roles. Diversifying our demographic base and increasing the number of women in the ADF correlates directly to what we are trying to achieve in support of UNSCR 1325. Our goal must be to reach the point where applying the principles outlined in the Women Peace and Security agenda is no longer considered special. It needs to be accepted, not as an adjunct duty, but as a primary element of all our operations.

Based on our valuable experiences in Afghanistan and the critical contribution applying the gender perspective provided during FIJI ASSIST, the Chief of Joint Operations has directed that at least one gender adviser must be deployed on all future humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations and we are taking steps to ensure the Women Peace and Security principles are incorporated into all future operations.

In order to achieve this and, in turn enhance our overall capability, we are currently developing Australia's first Gender Advisor training course and we will contribute to a new, comprehensive study on the contribution of Australian women to peace and security operations. These are just a number of the many initiatives in train at the moment. There are many more across the ADF. Importantly, they will all play a part in us continuing to evolve as a capable and modern fighting force.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Australian Defence Force has come a long way since the days of World War One, when women were restricted to medical roles.

While we have done much, there is still work ahead of us to ensure the gender perspective is embedded in everything we do—only then will be able to fully maximise our operational effectiveness.

Air Chief Marshal Binskin was Chief of the Air Force from 2008-2011, Vice Chief of the Defence Force from 2011-14 and was appointed as Chief of the Defence Force on 30 June 2014.