

ADDRESS TO COMMUNITY

ANZAC ASSEMBLY

They say you can't be what you can't see. I'm sure you've all heard this - I know I have. It was a headline in an article in the Canberra Times just a couple of weeks ago. What I would like to do is to challenge that paradigm, and show you, through the real life examples of women serving in the Defence Force today, that you can be anything you want to be. These women were not constrained by what they could see, they were brave enough to believe that they could be more than that, and in doing so, have become the examples for those who followed.

Good afternoon staff and students of Merici College, and a special welcome to those parents who have joined us today - to those who have served, those who continue to serve, and especially to those who love and support us who serve. Thank you - we could not do what we do without you.

Today's theme is Honouring Women in Defence. Throughout the rich and colourful history of the Australian Defence Force, there have been women in many areas of service, as Hanna has shown us in the reflection. From those nurses who served with distinction in terrible conditions in WW1, to the women in the auxiliary and paramilitary arms of the Army, Navy, and Air Force performing key supporting roles to assist the war effort in the 1940s, to those women at the cutting edge of combat roles in 2019 - flying fighter aircraft, manning armoured tanks and commanding warships on operations in the Persian Gulf and the Northern approaches to Australia. They are forging a new path, for themselves and for those who will follow.

Today, women make up 18% of the Australian Defence Workforce. This figure represents 14,000 women across all job areas including a number at the senior leadership levels of all three services. But statistics are just that, merely numbers on a page. Behind every one of those numbers is a story, each individual and unique, that forms a piece of the history of the women who have served and who continue to serve in our Defence Force.

We have three hats on our Merici cross signifying the three arms of the Australian Defence Force - one each for Navy, Army and Air Force. Each one of these represents the service of but one of the women who make up the statistics we have heard today. Each one has a story and I'd like to share just a little of that story with you...

The khaki hat belongs to an Army officer, who joined the Australian Defence Force Academy in 2003 and graduated from the Royal Military College in 2006, one of 11 women in a class of 158 officers. She served on exchange with British Army in 2008, deploying to Kenya in support of humanitarian medical taskings, and has also deployed to Afghanistan supporting the Australian military efforts in that region. She now juggles a successful career with her husband, who is also a serving Army officer and their young family.

The blue hat belongs to a Warrant Officer who joined the Air Force when she graduated from high school in 1986. She has served through a period of significant change and was one of two females posted to a tactical communications unit in the 1990s laying the foundations for an integrated workforce within that unit. She also spent a number of years on leave without pay accompanying her service spouse while raising a family. She has also deployed to Afghanistan and worked in Air Force units around Australia in a number of diverse roles.

And then there is me. I have chosen to share with you the monogrammed ball cap that I wore with my working dress while in Command of HMAS HARMAN, the base supporting the more than 2000 Navy personnel in the Canberra region. It is a little faded from 2 years of constant wear. In this role, I was privileged to share career and personal successes and failures with many of our Navy members and their families. I saw it all, up close and personal. From enlistments and appointments, where apprehensive parents farewelled their sons and daughters as we promised to take good care of them, to promotions and career milestones - 20, 30 and even 40 years of dedicated service to our nation, to retirements, resignations and even deaths. Ceremonial events included ANZAC Days, Freedom of Entry marches and the 2013 International Fleet Review Combined Navies Parade in Sydney in front of a crowd estimated in the 100s of thousands. It truly was an incredible experience.

When I joined Defence in the late 1980's, there were limited career options for women. With Government policy changing and the recently opened Australian Defence Force Academy committed to providing equal training opportunities for women in all three services, my classmates and I were on the cusp of change. I am not sure we fully appreciated it at the time, but we did know that we had no one to look at and think, that could be me one day. In fact, sometimes we just wondered if we'd make it through the next week.

When I joined, women wore white dresses and gloves. They handed out pay envelopes and managed stores and administration functions. And maybe, just maybe, if you were really lucky, you might get to sea on a survey boat out of Cairns, Navy having changed their policies to allow women to serve at sea in 1985. So, did I know where my career could take me? Honestly, I had no idea.

Fast forward four years and I got lucky - really lucky. It was 1992, and Navy had embarked on an active campaign of posting women to serve at sea in warships. It was, quite frankly, all a little experimental. But I was in the right place, at the right time, and found myself joining a guided missile frigate, heading into work ups in preparation for deployment to the Red Sea to enforce United Nations sanctions post the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

I was one of three women onboard - all officers. We moved into a converted boat gear storage locker, hastily fitted out as a cabin with a triple bunk and three small lockers. I shared this tiny space with a junior warfare officer and a doctor. We became firm friends very quickly - no choice really when you have to play scissors, paper, rock for who gets out of bed first because there's only enough floor space for one person to get dressed at a time.

Check out the ship's company photo from that trip - it's a bit like a Where's Wally book trying to spot the three of us amongst the 230 odd crew. No striped shirt or glasses, but our hats are different.

Fast forward to 2001 when once again, I found myself onboard another guided missile frigate. This time, as a Head of Department doing a short notice workup to deploy to the Persian Gulf in the

aftermath of 9/11. We had about 35 women onboard - sailors and officers of all ranks, working across every department in the ship - logistics, engineering and seamanship. Actually, I'm not sure exactly how many because we didn't think to count them - by then, it didn't matter. I had nine women in my logistics Department out of about 30 people.

I have friends and classmates who have been those firsts - the first female Commanding Officer of a warship, - they couldn't see it, but somehow, they managed to be it, and in most cases, be it very successfully.

There are women serving in every arm of the Australian Defence Forces - any job you imagine, you can do. There are young women who are second and third generation embarking on service careers - experiencing adventures that their mothers and grandmothers only dreamed of.

Every now and then I pause to reflect on the sheer determination of those who came before us - those who defiantly pushed back against the boundaries of social and family expectation, those who refused to take no for an answer, who quietly (and sometimes not so quietly) lobbied for the changes to policy that opened those doors that we have walked through since. I have been privileged to meet some of these trailblazers – some now elderly women who are well into their twilight years, but whose steely determination, unwavering commitment to their service and pride in their individual and collective achievements is still evident.

These are but a few of the many stories of service that make up the rich tapestry of women serving in Defence over the past century. It is not an easy path - sometimes it's hard to see where the path is taking you, and sometimes you don't feel like you're making much progress. But if you hang in there, it really will take you to places you never imagined. My world has been enriched by those I have met and what I have experienced through a career that has been often challenging, full of uncertainty, sometimes even a little scary, but never dull. I have been constantly inspired by those who have been the first, who backed themselves to be what they could only dream of, despite not being able to see it.

So, next time you hear the line 'you can't be what you can't see', be the one to challenge it – Don't let yourself be held back just because you can't see something – the world is bigger than that, and you are braver than you think. Someone has to be the first, so why not you?

Lest We Forget.

Captain Lisa Batchler