

Serving in silence? Australian LGBTI military service since World War II

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Mitchell Naughton reviews a [museum exhibition](#) on Australia's history of LGBTI military service, running at the Melbourne City Library until 3 February 2018.

"I don't know where all these gays and poofters have come from, I don't remember a single one from World War Two."

[These were the words](#) of Bruce Ruxton, head of the Victorian Returned Serviceman's League during the 1980's. However as *Serving in silence?* shows, this was in fact far from true.



Royal Australian Air Force members, Sydney Mardi Gras parade, 2013. Photograph by Vick Gwyn, courtesy of the Australian War Memorial.

This exhibit at the Melbourne City Library commemorates not only the 25th anniversary of open services in the Australian military but also the achievements, sacrifices and contributions that members of the LGBTI community have made to the Australian Defence Force since the Second World War. Curated and researched by historians Noah Riseman, Shirleene Robinson and Graham Willet, this exhibit is part of both a [larger research project](#) and a forthcoming book by the trio set to be published in September this year.

The exhibition itself starts with a bright colourful panel that quips how this is the "the war history they didn't teach you at school" and indeed it is. From military drag artists performing for their fellow troops at the camps, to gay men dedicating love

songs to each other over radio, these are stories that many of us have never been told. Beginning with the crack down on homosexual acts in Port Moresby, *Serving in silence?* then explores the invasive medical examinations against suspected gays and lesbians through to the 1950s and 1960s, the “witch hunts” by military police in the 1970s and 1980s and finally the ban on transgender soldiers in the early 2000s.

While at times questioning the narrative that homosexuality was always hidden in the armed forces, this exhibit does not shy away from the darker elements of these stories. One of the exhibit’s strengths lies in its collection of firsthand accounts, with various letters, medical reports and military police interrogation transcripts on display for people to see and read, often displayed near photos of their authors or subjects. In fact, the entire exhibition was made using over 100 interviews with past and present LGBTI members of the ADF. These elements of *Serving in silence?*, especially when joined with the projected images of these service personnel put together by the [Gay and Lesbian Archives](#), help drive home the reality of these accounts.



Members of the Defence Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex Information Service, Sydney Mardi Gras, 2013. Photograph by Vick Gwyn, courtesy of the Australian War Memorial.

The exhibit’s other great strength is its attempts to engage its audience to investigate further. As soon as you finish the exhibition, you are greeted with a bookcase filled with further reading on sexuality in Australia, all of which can be borrowed from the City Library. Even when you sit down for a rest in front of the displays there are copies of the *ADF Staff LGBTI Guide* and the *Air Force Diversity Handbook* on display for you to browse. These are not only displays showing how and when certain attitudes in the ADF changed but also further reading for visitors about sexuality and

gender, discussing such topics as the difference between gender identity and biological sex. There is even a copy of Noah Riseman's journal article [*Outmanoeuvring Defence: The Australian Debates over Gay and Lesbian Military Service, 1992*](#) which offers a more in depth discussion on the later period of the exhibit than could be displayed in the small number of panels.

The exhibit does well in discussing both the sadder parts of this history and the achievements of LGBTI members, as well as highlighting current inequalities in the ADF, such as the ban on HIV positive people enlisting and the difficulties for transgender members to access surgery. However, while *Serving in silence?* does a brilliant job of giving an equal amount of space between gay and lesbian stories, the exhibit would have benefited greatly from more stories of LGBTI people of colour, of which it is severely lacking.

As this exhibit comes hot on the heels of the legalisation of Same Sex Marriage in Australia, right in the middle of the [Midsumma Festival](#) in Melbourne and indeed only days after the first same sex weddings, it reminds us all how important and hard fought such victories and celebrations are. The stories of these men and women are important for all Australians, especially younger LGBTI Australians, as they teach us our own history, a history of those who suffered and fought injustice in the past so that we can celebrate equality today. However, it also shows us that we still have some way to go.

Serving in silence? Australian military service since World War II is on display in The Gallery at City Library from January 11 to February 3 2018 and is a free event. Following this it will be moving to [Sydney](#), where it will be on display at the TAP Gallery, Surry Hills, from 27 February to 4 March 2018.



Mitchell Naughton has recently completed a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in History and has research interests in both criminal and queer history. His thesis "The Royal Highwaymen" explored highway robbery committed by soldiers in eighteenth-

century London and he has also recently completed research on behalf of the National Trust of Australia into female prisoners at Melbourne Gaol during the late nineteenth-century.

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