

David Mitchell

David Mitchell was the first person we interviewed for this project. It was at a park in Southbank along the Brisbane River, where as the sun went down he shared his incredible life story. David was the president and founder of G-Force: the first organisation dedicated to supporting serving lesbian, gay and bisexual Defence members. G-Force existed at a particular moment in ADF history. The ban on LGB service had just been lifted, but this did not necessarily mean that LGB members were welcomed or even treated as equals. G-Force existed to challenge the discrimination still facing LGB servicemen and women, especially fighting to extend partnership rights to same-sex couples. While G-Force had only limited success and lasted only a few years, its presence showed the importance of LGB visibility to advocate and support each other.

David's road to reformer was a rocky one. He was born in Toowoomba in 1961. His father was an accountant and his mother was a section manager at Woolworths. Because his father worked for the Bowen Farmers Association, David moved around various parts of Queensland. David attended Catholic schools throughout his upbringing. Though his family was not overly observant, the Catholic background would play a significant role in David's prolonged denial of his sexuality, as well as his troubled coming out process.

When David was 12, his father died from a cerebral brain haemorrhage on Christmas Day. The sudden death affected David for years, and he has regularly reflected on how his father would view the later events in his life. David remembers him as a loving dad, very involved with his family. David's father taught him life lessons, like 'everyone in this world is entitled to happiness as long as it's not at the expense of someone else'. David is sure that his father would have been supportive of his son being gay.

David was good at school and generally got on well, although he had developed a respect for rules and order that got up the nose of some of his fellow students who saw him as a goody two-shoes. Fortunately David's ability to defend himself allowed him to fend off bullies. David's father had been opposed to fighting, but had been an amateur boxer and had taught David to fight. He was able to put this to good use on at least two occasions. David jokes that perhaps these incidents, as well as his adherence to rules and regulations, show that he was 'destined to be in the military'.

David was an adolescent in the 1970s who thought he was heterosexual. This is not uncommon among gay and bisexual men, and David has no memories of grappling with his sexuality during his youth. However, in a wider arena, homosexuality was becoming visible in places like Sydney, and law reform was gaining traction in South Australia and Victoria. Even in Queensland, a more conservative state, there was an activist presence in Brisbane through CAMP Queensland. Like its counterparts in other states, CAMP Queensland was involved in demonstrations and focused its advocacy primarily to push for law reform and to end discrimination in areas such as employment. ~~Indeed, the~~ The University of Queensland's Campus CAMP even sent a letter to members of the Whitlam Government in 1974 calling for an end to discrimination in the public service and 'especially in relation to the Armed Forces and employment in security and classified areas'. Acting Prime Minister Jim Cairns wrote back: 'the public view of the special character of the Services would be seriously eroded if open tolerance of homosexual behaviour was to be accepted policy.'¹ Of course, being a young teenager far removed from the small gay activist circles, David had no awareness of CAMP.

The possibility of a military career first came to David during a Defence recruiter's visit to his school. At first he and his mates were not interested, though during Grade 12 he pondered the possibility of joining the ADF. David thought the military could offer a good life, but he also considered enrolling in a Bachelor of Business Studies at university. In the end he let fate (or perhaps the wheels of the bureaucracy) decide for him: the ADF got back to him first. David ruled out Navy because he was not able to swim well. He opted for the Air Force because he thought it would be more high-tech than Army. Reflecting on the decision to enlist, David says: 'I wanted to join for patriotic reasons because I wanted to do something for my country. And as I say, that hopefully shows

through in my life to other people too is that I've always wanted to sort of do something and make a difference in this world.'

David commenced recruit training in 1979 as a fresh-faced 17-year-old at RAAF Base Edinburgh in Adelaide. It was a culture shock to enter this new world of discipline, regimentation and hierarchy. David did not see, nor was he the victim of, any bastardisation rituals so often reported ~~during from~~ this era, ~~often normally~~ in the form of assaults against new recruits or those who did not quite fit in. Yet, he does remember that the language and treatment dealt out by the instructors would be unacceptable by today's standards. David also missed his mum, who had been his best mate since his father died, and he gave serious consideration to taking advantage of the get-out option available during the first six weeks. She encouraged him to stick it out, which turned out to be a smart decision: David served for another 24 years!

David entered the Communication Operator Mustering (Comms Op), a field he describes as a Defence version of Telstra. The technology developed rapidly during his service years from typing and telephones through to more sophisticated equipment and ever more challenging tasks. Before emails and internet, it was their role to operate communications equipment, sending and receiving messages across the globe. The mustering went through several amalgamations and name changes, eventually becoming Communications and Information Systems Controllers. David remembers the communications work varied from 'the most boring seemingly mundane stuff like, okay this person's got to go this ... transfer or a posting, or it could be communicating plans for a military exercise or it could be communicating information to do with an actual operational event, or it could be one of the places I worked out we'd be typing up flight plans for aircraft movements'.

David's career took him up the ranks within the communications musterings to Flight Sergeant in postings all over Australia. These included significant leadership roles, such as 2IC of the communications centre at the Russell Offices (ADF Headquarters) in Canberra. Eventually, David ended up in Strategic Communications at RAAF Base Amberley in Brisbane. The work was sensitive and even today he cannot be forthcoming

about it. He also moved into the information systems area where he showed a particular aptitude.

The ban on LGB service was still in place in the first half of David's career, but interestingly this had no effect on him. David remembers there were other RAAF members who were homophobic, but he personally never had a problem with gays, lesbians or bisexuals. David still had no inkling of any difference in his sexuality for the first decade of his RAAF service. He was even engaged to a woman at one stage. When thinking about his own attitude before realising his homosexuality, David says: 'some people either have admitted to themselves or have been observed as being outwardly uncomfortable and phobic because they're struggling with their own sexuality, but that wasn't the case for me. I was just thinking, oh well, that's those people, that's them'. It was not until the 1990s that David started to have 'realisations'. This was coincidentally around the time of the lifting of the ban. David protests that 'I can honestly hold my hand on my heart and say that my coming out was not timed around this. Even so, he does acknowledge that the public discussion about LGB military service might have triggered him to think about his personal circumstances.

There were real obstacles David faced coming to terms with his sexuality. His family's faith was strong, and at one point he had considered resigning from the Air Force to become a priest. Coming out involved a lot of soul-searching. While the exact timing is a bit fuzzy in David's memory, he remembers being posted in Canberra; that was in 1992, before the ban was lifted in November. David did not know any other LGB people, and he genuinely worried 'that I was going to lose my friends, my family, if I was gay I'd lose my job'. He likens the inner turmoil to being pushed to a precipice of realisation – 'the lowest point of despair' – but he decided to act. He broke off his engagement. He went to see a civilian priest, not a military 'padre' as the chaplains are colloquially known. He was crying on the phone and not in much better shape when they finally met. He could barely say the words, but got it out eventually: 'I think I might be gay'. The priest reached over – and grabbed his crotch! With remarkable restraint, David threw his cup of tea across the room and stormed out.

At home David got out his rifle, stuck the barrel in his mouth ... and decided to ring his mum. David describes how this suicide attempt played out:

And just some safety mechanism in me made me ring my mum and I didn't tell her what I was upset about, but it was just ringing her to say goodbye basically. And then I'd say, 'Look I've got to go now; I've got to go and do something,' and I'd hang up, and then she just kept ringing me back because she wasn't going to let me finish a conversation crying and upset. So she just kept ringing me back until I'd got past that point.

He never did tell her that she saved his life that day. The theme of suicide – either contemplating or attempting – is present in several other oral history interviews. This is not surprising given the high rates of suicide within the LGBT community. ~~There were no Australian studies on gay men and suicide around the time of David's attempt, but~~ Literature from the United States and Canada during the 1990s suggested that: gay and lesbian young people accounted for about 30 per cent of completed suicides; gay and bisexual men were 13.9 times more at risk of genuinely attempting suicide; and gay men accounted for 62.5 per cent of those who attempted suicide.² Australia's National LGBTI Health Alliance reported as recently as 2013 that same-sex attracted Australians had up to 14 times higher rates of suicide attempts, and 15.7 per cent of LGB Australians reported thoughts of suicide.³ Among interview participants, suicidal thoughts were common in transgender stories, and some LGB members such as David mentioned contemplating or attempting suicide at some time. David's story as a survivor provides a window into the experience of LGBT Defence suicides.

David remained angry with life for a while and then suppressed it all again, thinking 'if this sort of thing's going to happen when you turn to someone to talk about it to try and work out whether you are or you aren't ... I just didn't want to go there'. Isolation can be a huge barrier to LGBT people accepting themselves. Isolation can mean lack of social support, no contact with the LGBT community, social withdrawal and ignorance about what it 'means' to be gay.⁴ What changed David's outlook was his transfer to Perth later in 1992, where he started to meet gay civilians as well as supportive ~~straight~~ allies, including a fabulously supportive straight housemate. She said things like: 'there's no rush; no one's going to be forcing you to make a decision one way or the

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other'. Over the next few months he started meeting gay and lesbian people and started to feel comfortable, even happy. Finding gay social networks proved, as psychology literature suggests, a vital tool to overcome his sense of shame and social isolation.⁵ David even wound up organising a group in the 1994 Perth Pride Parade known as the Marching Boys; they asked him to lead because of his military background.

David found a boyfriend and came out to his mum and his sister. They were all fine with it; he remembers his mother saying words to the effect of 'Well, you're the same son that I've always had, and you're my son and I love you'. His extended Catholic family, including his aunt the nun, were all fine too. She even asked about his partner, Albert, whom the family embraced.

Because David came out in his thirties and had no real inkling of his sexuality in his early years, he remembers what it was like to have straight attitudes. He always had an appreciation for diversity within the ADF, supporting other minority groups like Indigenous Australians and women. But he was aware that his views were not shared universally in the Air Force – and he remembers women, in particular, more likely to voice homophobic views than male colleagues. For this reason he was still uncertain about coming out in the workplace environment.

One night in Perth as David was heading into or out of Connections, one of Australia's oldest gay nightclubs, he ran into one of his junior ranks, a leading airman. A few days later there was a cautious conversation between David and the leading airman. There was never any discussion as explicit as 'oh are you gay?', but more a casual reference to the airman having seen David ~~going into~~ Connections. As David recalls: 'The statement was never sort of made "Oh I'm gay" or "Are you gay?" It was just, I don't know, assumed, or it was just no big deal to him and ... it just sort of happened and it just became known.'

Later conversations with colleagues about the Perth Pride Parade and increasingly honest discussions about what he did on the weekend brought David steadily out. This manner of outing himself through casual conversation places a different spin on critics who say one should be quiet about their (homo/bi)sexuality in the workplace. Americans who served under 'don't ask, don't tell' describe such casual conversations as one of the

ways the policy oppressed them. Even if military officials could not formally ask about members' sexuality, anytime someone asked 'What are you doing this weekend?' was another form of asking.⁶ For David and other LGB members to be truly comfortable, he needed to be able to talk about what he did outside of work.

By and large, people coped. David's superiors were often very supportive. He tells the story of one sergeant who would leave the room whenever he entered, sit at a desk as far away as possible, and even wipe the phone receiver if David had used it (suggesting a degree of AIDS-phobia, too). David did not even notice until his corporal pointed it out. The corporal took it up with the sergeant directly; ~~he~~ David says: 'She tore strips off him apparently and told him to grow up and then reported him to the officer in charge as well and the officer in charge had words with him as well. So yeah, that was the only sort of direct negative involvement that I had in the workplace.'

Having a supportive workplace also meant that, fortunately, David's career did not suffer as a result of coming out. LGB servicemen and women who were open in the 1990s report a mixture of acceptance, but also as the following chapter describes, serious bullying and career disruption. Among interview participants who were open about their sexuality in the 1990s, those who were accepted tended to be: in non-combat roles; longstanding members of the ADF with good relationships; specialist officers (e.g. doctor, pilot); or women. This is not to say that these men and women experienced no homophobia at all, but rather that they tended to have more support networks or resilience.

In 1993, David was selected to go to the United Kingdom to work with the Royal Air Force on Exercise Long Look – a professional development program which aimed to encourage a better knowledge and understanding between Australian and UK service members by posting them in each other's military. ~~While-Although~~ Australia allowed openly gay personnel, this was not the case in the United Kingdom, where the ban remained in place until 2000. While in the United Kingdom, David heard of at least one Royal Air Force member dismissed for homosexuality. David understood the sensitivities about sexuality, so he was inconspicuous while on base; when he was off base he lived an openly gay life.

As it happened, the *Independent* newspaper and the BBC were both taking an interest in the ‘gays in the military issue’. The dismissed airman being profiled was the friend of a friend. They thought that the fact David could serve openly was an example of what the United Kingdom might come to one day. Would David be prepared to speak? Would he appear in uniform? This was easier said than done. ADF authorities do not encourage their [people-members](#) to speak to the public about most matters – let alone about homosexuality in 1993 – so David knew he would need permission. The Defence Attaché at the Australian High Commission referred the question to the High Commissioner, who referred it to Defence Headquarters in Canberra, who referred it to the Prime Minister’s Department. David describes the bureaucratic buck-passing: ‘I think it was a classic hot potato because I think they were realising that this was a potential diplomatic incident in the making, because they [BBC] wanted me to appear in full uniform’. Back came the reply – it was a ‘yes’. The letter from the Australian High Commission cautioned:

While Sergeant Mitchell is quite at liberty to quote the official Defence Force position regarding homosexuals in the Australian Defence Force, any comments made by him during the interview must be considered as his personal views. Sergeant Mitchell was advised to think very carefully before agreeing to take part in the documentary, purely for the protection of his own privacy, but no restrictions were placed upon him.

The interview on the program *Taking Liberties* went pretty well (especially after the producer gave David a scotch and milk to calm his nerves). Afterwards, [the](#) United Kingdom Defence establishment advised the ADF that they would rather not have David back again in the future. Media contacts informed David that the United Kingdom Ministry of Defence regarded him as a radical gay activist.

The Australians seem not to have got the message because the issue flared up again more dramatically in 1995. The United Kingdom Ministry of Defence discovered that year’s RAAF member on exchange was also gay. The RAAF sergeant was two and a half months into his four-month posting. The [Royal Air Force](#) ordered him off the Shrewsbury Base on 24 hours’ notice. There had been no suggestion of ‘sexual impropriety’ on the airman’s part, or that his sexuality had affected his work or been objected to by his

British colleagues. They only became aware of his sexuality when he advised his superior, as a matter of courtesy, that he had been named in a Senate Inquiry as a gay member of the ADF. The Australians gave him a desk job at the High Commission in London to serve out his time and assured him that there would be no negative career consequences. In fact, the sergeant enjoyed the rest of his time in London; he saw a lot of musicals!

The story broke in the British media and followed in Australia. The press reports indicated that the British Ministry of Defence was unhappy that Australia rebuffed their request not to send service members whose presence contravened British policy. ADF spokesman, Brigadier Adrian D'Hage, advised that the Australian policy around such postings would be reviewed, but noted pointedly: 'Our difficulty is that we don't ask people, before they go away, what their sexual preference is.'⁷ From the British authorities' perspective it was inconvenient, coinciding with a looming court challenge to the British policy of excluding homosexuals. In the end that case went to the European Court of Human Rights, which in 2000 found for LGB rights, compelling the British government to lift their ban. Incidentally, yet another gay RAAF member was sent to the United Kingdom in 2000 to undertake a six month Diploma of Aviation Medicine. He was instructed not to make a fuss and to 'behave himself'; the UK ban was lifted one week after he arrived.

David spoke out about the case of the sergeant in the United Kingdom and was quoted in the Australian mainstream and gay and lesbian press. By this time, David was not just some random gay airman; he was the president of an organisation for LGB members of the ADF known as G-Force. The genesis of G-Force came from David's own traumatic coming out experience, combined with his brief stint as a 'radical gay activist' (to use the United Kingdom Ministry of Defence's misnomer). During his time in Britain, David found himself working closely with Rank Outsiders, a support group for LGB military personnel. David had shown a willingness to stand up and speak out; Rank Outsiders showed the value of organising and working with others. When David spoke to other Australian gay servicemen about their experiences coming out, he heard about challenges many faced in the workplace. He recalls men who were:

Still too frightened to come out at work because they were in such a macho or straight perceived area sort of thing. Like, there was a number of Army guys that just they said look they could never come out at work because they just felt that they would sort of get their head smashed in. So they just said, they just couldn't do it, but that was good to have someone that they could ring up and talk to, or meet for a social catch up when they might have been going home.

In June 1994, David and a few mates – most notably RAAF airman Stuie Watson – drafted a constitution and G-Force was born. Any LGB current or ex-service person could join G-Force, and its seven objectives were to:

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1. Provide support and guidance for gay service men and women – without infringing service laws.
2. Provide support and guidance for gay ex-service men and women – without infringing service laws.
3. Make contact with other national and international organisations involved in service life.
4. Collect information, from any source, that is relevant to the improvement of gay rights within the Australian Defence Force.
5. Encourage the Department of Defence to enhance its attitude towards homosexuality within the Defence Force.
6. Make contact with other national and international organisations, so as to encourage awareness and education regarding Gay lifestyle and their existence in the Australian Defence Forces.
7. Make contact with other national and international organisations, to participate and be involved in Gay community events.

G-Force operated in the days before internet, email and social media, so its existence mostly spread by word-of-mouth: through 'the few people that were out, and then they would have friends that they would know'. There were occasional features in the LGB press, and in June 1995 David published an announcement in *Air Force News*. Much of the media coverage focused on G-Force as a support network, with David writing that 'I hope that through this group, gay service personnel will band together to form a strong network of support to help lessen the trauma felt by others as they go through the journey

of coming out.’⁸ G-Force had a post office box, published a semi-regular newsletter called the *Gayzette*, and eventually had a membership of approximately 35 members.

The ADF hierarchy’s reaction to G-Force was initially supportive. A chaplain David consulted was encouraging, and all the way up the command level he found the same. This was all to change when David pitched a spectacular idea: G-Force wanted to march in the 1996 Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parade. There had once before been somewhat of a Defence presence when a small group called ‘Veterans Against Discrimination’ marched in 1993 with an effigy of Victorian RSL President Bruce Ruxton. This, though, would be the first ever Mardi Gras contingent of serving ADF members, and is often seen as a moment in the unfolding story of the LGBT march towards equality. G-Force’s presence would challenge ideas of gay men as weak or effeminate, showing LGB people who were serving in the ADF. David had another agenda as well, seeing Mardi Gras as a way to promote awareness of G-Force: ‘the reason why I wanted to do that was to basically get that free publicity, I suppose, and let Defence personnel know that there was a support network there’. On 30 August 1995 David sent a letter to Brigadier D’Hage, Head of Defence Public Relations, advising: ‘We are becoming a significant group within the Australian gay community and as such we feel we have the right to express ourselves in celebration of this position ... we are a group of individuals and as such we would like to be able to celebrate our community just as others celebrate theirs’.

The ADF hierarchy turned out to be not at all keen on the idea of G-Force marching in Mardi Gras. A senior officer rang David to ‘strongly advise’ him against marching in the parade. David explained that no one would be marching in uniform, as the ADF regulates public display of uniforms. Opposition was so strong that the senior officer said, ‘If you go ahead with this I will ruin you’; David hung up. Even so, D’Hage stated to the media:

When we look at the charter of the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Pty Ltd, it is not only a celebration of their sexuality, it is also a promotion ... The difficulty we have with that is that it is very doubtful as to whether an official defence force float is an appropriate vehicle to promote a particular lifestyle. We would make the same decision if they were participating in a heterosexual parade.⁹

It was quite clear to all involved, including David and D'Hage, that this really was a homophobic reaction rather than some nuanced understanding of the meaning behind Mardi Gras. Even so, David and the other G-Force members pushed ahead with the Mardi Gras float. They knew that as long as they did not march in uniform, the ADF could not legally stop them. In January 1996, the ADF changed its position and publicly announced that they would support a G-Force float in Mardi Gras so long as it was 'non-military looking' (in an oral history interview, D'Hage said they feared a 'huge pink cardboard bloody tank with a condom over the barrel and a bloody great slouch hat over the turret').

The contingent marched with maybe 10 or 20 people: some Defence personnel, some partners, some supportive friends. David remembers it as nerve-wracking, exciting and fun. Local and international media interviewed him, and the significance of what they were doing dawned on him. It had a personal resonance, for he realised how far he had come since his encounter with the abusive priest. He also was proud of the message G-Force sent to Australia and the world:

—We were able to be ... out and proud in front of the world's media and people in our own country and say that gay and lesbian people want to serve our country the same as straight people, the same as people from different other walks of life, nationalities that have come to Australia and become Australians and same as Indigenous people ... ~~#It~~ just sort of was a good way to, from a gay man's perspective, is to say look well we're here too and we can make a difference in a good way as well.

G-Force only marched the one time in 1996 (though one G-Force member organised a smaller contingent under the banner Defence in Unity in 1999). Participating in Mardi Gras is not for the faint-hearted. The parade itself is exhilarating, but the preparation can be, as David found, 'a logistical ... headache': the truck, lighting, sound system and generator took time and money to organise and, because G-Force was not large, much of the effort fell to David and his partner. In 2016, to commemorate 20 years since the G-Force march, David, his partner and another G-Force alum were special guests of DEFGLIS and led the civilian Defence contingent in the Mardi Gras parade.

While Mardi Gras was G-Force's most public event, they organised other smaller meet-ups and worked behind the scenes in an advocacy role for LGB rights in the ADF. Much of the discrimination that LGB service people encountered revolved around the (non)recognition of their relationships. As early as 1993 the Army rejected a lesbian couple's application for recognition as a de facto couple. This meant that members could not receive partner benefits including travel allowances, housing, carer's leave, education programs, counselling or veterans' pensions. Several G-Force members lodged applications to recognise their relationships and appealed the rejections as high as the Chief of the Defence Force (CDF). There was a personal element in this: David had a partner at the time. Unfortunately these appeals came to nought. The CDF, General John Baker, responded to one G-Force member's redress of grievance in October 1996: 'While you argue that the common [social] standard requires that the discrimination you complain of should be removed, I do not believe that common standards make such a demand.'

Under David's leadership, G-Force had success in a military health insurance scheme and spousal base access. The head of the insurance scheme (now Defence Health) worked with David, successfully arguing that denying benefits to same-sex partners violated provisions of the *National Health Act* as discrimination based on sex. This reform emphasises the important role of cultural change that had been going on in Australia more broadly, and the way in which it generated allies for LGB people. G-Force also successfully secured the spouse base passes, but by the end of the decade there was only other recognition for same-sex partners. Senator Jocelyn Newman, Minister Assisting the Minister of Defence, explained: 'A serving Australian Defence Force (ADF) member may nominate a same-sex partner as their next of kin for casualty notification purposes only. The same-sex partner would be notified in the event of the ADF member being the subject of a casualty report.'¹⁰

G-Force may have been small, but its operation was a lot of work for David and Vice President Stuie Watson. They were the organisation's public face both within the ADF and whenever there were media inquiries about LGB Defence issues. They also copped anonymous abuse – what we now call trolling – through their post office box. An August 1995 *Melbourne Star Observer* article quoted David saying:

The strange mail is just weird, rather than threatening. The police are investigating these postcards someone is sending me. One picture was of koalas, another was a picture of a military aircraft, another was a religious one. But the one that spooked me the most was a picture of a grave site. I feel like putting out a bulletin saying, 'please get to the point, I never was very good at cryptic crosswords'.¹¹

By about 1998 (David does not remember the exact time), the G-Force work was putting strain on David and Stuie. Without a new team to take over the leadership, G-Force disbanded. It would be up to the next generation of LGBT Defence leaders to continue the fight to end discrimination against same-sex partners, not to mention the restrictions prohibiting transgender service.

David left the RAAF in 2002 when the prospect of his being reclassified and posted back to Sydney came up. He and his partner had only recently moved to Brisbane and the thought of another relocation set David thinking: 'I'd been in the military then by that stage for roughly ... 24 years, so I'd served my country for long enough ... and so I thought, well I'll get out'. He had an interest in building, and had renovated his house, and he ended up working in the Australian Taxation Office. He had no particular training in tax, but the habits and skills he had developed in the RAAF prepared him well. His military training, reading orders, interpreting them and acting on them stood him in good stead. Above all, he was in a job helping his colleagues in the Australian Taxation Office navigate the vagaries of superannuation. David sees similarities in that both his military and civilian careers involved helping: 'Whether it's serving your country through Defence or helping people out with their superannuation concerns ... it's just something that flows on'.

David's connection to the gay community has remained strong. He got involved with a Brisbane leather pride group called BootCo, which organises social gatherings and raises money for LGBT charities. In 2009 he won the Mr Queensland Leather competition, observing that 'a key word there that people could pick up on is uniforms. You know how you say you can take the boy out of the military, but you can't take the military out of the boy'. He remains an enthusiast for the diversity of the LGBT community, whether that be religious, sexual, or anything else.

Though David did not deploy on active service, he has had some health problems related to his RAAF service. David has a number of skin cancers ('hundreds and hundreds') which he traces back to frequent exposure to the sun during outdoor activities, and a chemical warfare training that he did in Britain in which the participants were required to remove their protective gear. David had a decade-long struggle with the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) for compensation for the physical and psychological damage that he had suffered. He found the Veterans' Advocacy Service, a group of ex-service personnel who know their way around the rules and regulations and the inner workings of DVA, to be his best advocates. Many other LGBT ex-service members have also had difficulties dealing with DVA – a complaint common regardless of gender identity or sexuality – and found that organisations such as the Vietnam Veterans' Association of Australia, Mates4Mates and Soldier On have been effective at assisting ex-service members to navigate the DVA bureaucracy. These groups also provide services such as counselling where government programs fall short.

David is also one of several LGBT ex-service members who does not speak fondly of the RSL. For some, such as David, it is simply a dislike for how the organisation operates and consider it to be ineffective at supporting most ex-service personnel. Other LGBT ex-service members note the organisation's long homophobic history, dating back to the when Victorian RSL President Bruce Ruxton turned away a group of gay ex-servicemen from laying a wreath at Melbourne's Shrine of Remembrance on Anzac Day 1982.¹² When the Keating Government lifted the LGB ban, the RSL was a huge critic of the decision, and continued to oppose LGB service throughout the 1990s. In 2000, the RSL national president still spoke publicly against gays in the military. The organisation even sent a submission to a Senate Inquiry that: alleged gay men were paedophiles; presented misinformation about the spread of HIV; and even argued 'Homosexuals invite rejection and unfortunately occasional violent retaliation by deliberately engaging in public conduct which offends the sensibilities of many Australians.'¹³ At some stage in the mid 2000s the RSL changed its tune and stopped making noise about LGBT service. Even so, there are many ex-service members who are wary of the organisation because of its homophobic past.

David is proud of his time in the Air Force and of being one of those prepared to put their lives on the line for their country. He says, 'If you haven't served you just won't quite ever fully understand what it's like'. He believes that those who have served deserve the 'utmost respect', and he includes in that, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender service personnel. He is proud of the way the ADF continues to improve employment conditions for LGBT members and looks forward to a time when they do not have any special recognition, but rather that their service will be taken for granted within the ADF. If and when that time comes, it will be due in part to the work of David, G-Force and the other advocates like them.

¹ NAA A451, 1974/6782.

² Ron Macdonald and Trudi Cooper, 'Young Gay Men and Suicide: A Report of a Study Exploring the Reasons Which Young Men Give for Suicide Ideation', *Youth Studies Australia* 17, no. 4 (1998): 23-24.

³ Gabi Rosenstreich, 'LGBTI People Mental Health and Suicide', revised 2nd ed (Sydney: National LGBTI Health Alliance, 2013), 3

⁴ Michael J. Johnson and Elaine J. Amella, 'Isolation of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth: A dimensional concept analysis', *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 70, no. 3 (2014): 526-28.

⁵ John Olesen, Jean Campbell and Michael Gross, 'Using action methods to counter social isolation and shame among gay men', *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services* 29, no. 2 (2017): 91-108.

⁶ Stephen Snyder-Hill, *Soldier of Change: From the Closet to the Forefront of the Gay Rights Movement* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 58.

⁷ Sue Quinn, 'RAF expels gay Aussie sergeant', *Sunday Telegraph* (12 March 1995): 17; Ben Widdicombe, 'Gay flier's wings clipped', *The Australian* (13 March 1995): 3.

⁸ David Mitchell, 'Gay support group formed', *Air Force News* (June 1995).

⁹ 'Defence-Force Mardi Gras Float Inappropriate: Chiefs', *The Canberra Times* (9 November 1995): 3.

¹⁰ Senator Jocelyn Newman, Australia, The Senate Questions on Notice, 'Australian Defence Force: Same Sex Next of Kin', Question 1678, 10 May 2000, p. 14356.

¹¹ David Hannam, 'Fighting the Defence Forces', *Melbourne Star Observer* (4 August 1995): 9.

¹² Riseman, "'Just Another Start to the Denigration of Anzac Day'", 39-43.

¹³ Ron Bell, 'Lock up your sons: RSL says gays are a danger to society', *Melbourne Star Observer* (19 May 2000): 3.