

Vince Chong and Ellen Zyla

Vince Chong, a gay male officer in the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), and Ellen Zyla, a gay female other rank in the Navy, exemplify the new generation of LGBT personnel rising through the ranks of the ADF. They are witnesses to the changes in ADF culture and attitudes and have seen the progress in the 25 plus years since the LGB ban was lifted, and the work that still needs to be done to support LGBT inclusion. They also highlight the ways that many LGBT Defence members support each other and no longer have to serve in silence.

Vince Chong

In March 2017, *Cosmopolitan* magazine named two currently serving RAAF members among its list of the 50 most influential lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer and allied Australians: Vince Chong, and transgender member Cate Humphries.

Wing Commander Vince Chong has been president of DEFGLIS since 2012 and was awarded an Australian Defence Force Gold commendation the following year for services delivered to improve diversity and inclusion. Under Chong's leadership, DEFGLIS was able to secure Defence support for participation in the Mardi Gras parade and he continues to ensure an inclusive environment for LGBTQI personnel.

The Vince of 2017 is starkly different from the closeted 17-year-old who commenced at [the Australian Defence Force Academy \(ADFA\)](#) in 1997. Over 20 years, Vince has grown to represent a new generation of leadership in today's ADF. His personal journey also mirrors the ADF's changing approach to LGBT service from mere tolerance to genuine inclusion.

Vince was born in 1979 in western Sydney, the son of immigrants from Malaysia and Brunei. Vince remembers experiencing no racism or ever feeling anything but accepted in primary school, but by secondary school the demographics of Asian

immigration were reshaping his local community. Vince did not identify with the recently arrived migrants, who had different backgrounds and upbringings from his Australian childhood. Vince describes these early years of high school as ‘not alienated, but very alone and very unsure’. Over time, Vince did make friends and forged his own path as a Chinese-Australian. His parents forced him to take up the piano and swimming, and he did extremely well at both. Vince was also an excellent student, obtaining a tertiary entrance score of 98, opening up any career pathway he wanted to follow.

Vince’s parents wanted him to enrol in a business, information technology or do a medicine degree. Instead, he made the unexpected decision to apply to ~~Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA)~~. Vince thought that joining the ADF would be an opportunity to graduate into a role trained specifically for leadership. He chose the RAAF because that service had a higher entry standard. He also suspects there were some subconscious rationales linked to his sexuality.

I look back on it in retrospect, and I can’t understand the rationale for my decision-making, it doesn’t seem rational at all. We knew about bastardisation, we knew that people weren’t treated well, we knew that you could be abused in multiple ways because of the news articles, and yet my decision was absolutely I want to be pushed through that. I kind of think back and I don’t really understand how I could have come to that decision, other than maybe I’m trying to hide something or maybe I’m trying to prove myself. So, what I’m going to do is try and do something that is tough, because it’s going to toughen me up and I’m finally going to be straight.

Vince had first begun to question his sexuality around Grade 6 during sexual education class. The students watched a video about HIV/AIDS and it discussed themes of homosexuality, including showing two men kissing. Vince remembers the majority of students were grossed out, but he had a slightly different reaction: ‘I knew what I liked to look at, so, that kind of confused me a lot, because back then no one said it was okay to actually be attracted to men. That was wrong, because you had to be attracted to women’. During high school Vince never discussed his sexuality; he remembers every year thinking: ‘[this] will be the Christmas where I start getting attracted to girls, and it’s going to magically happen, and if not by Christmas, then maybe by New Year, and it’ll be my New Year’s resolution this year to be attracted to girls’. Vince was ‘terrified’ of

other kids thinking he was gay, showing the continuing stigma attached to homosexuality in the 1990s. He would maintain this attitude as he commenced his Bachelor of Electronics Engineering at ADFA in 1997.

The first six weeks at ADFA are an intensive period known as initial military training, where the officer cadets learn weapons handling, marching drill and physical training. This was a challenging period for Vince because he was more accustomed to working as a quiet leader and did not mesh with some of the alpha males. The new social paradigm was also emotionally challenging: ‘~~if~~If you were to rank everyone in terms of how their performance goes, and you know I’m middle of the field, I’m middle to the back of the field, it’s a really uncomfortable feeling’. After the first six weeks, ADFA cadets fall into a routine: reveille at dawn, then a parade practice or similar activity in the morning, then academic classes, then time for extracurricular activities and study before sleep. There would also be physical training sessions scheduled throughout the week, so it often felt like there was little free time. During semester breaks and in December, cadets would complete their service officer training modules, which for RAAF cadets like Vince was at the Air Force Officer Training School at RAAF Base Williams, Point Cook.

Since at least the mid 1980s, every few years the media has reported scandals about bastardisation and/or sexual harassment in the ADF, with several reports focusing on ADFA. These news stories have regularly sparked inquiries, the most recent high profile example being the 2011 Australian Human Rights Commission’s *Review into the Treatment of Women at the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA Report)*. Vince happened to be studying at ADFA during a major inquiry into bastardisation at ADFA, colloquially known as the Grey Report. The review, published in 1998, found a significant culture of staff tolerating bastardisation and sexual harassment, and the very structural operation of ADFA encouraged this behaviour. Third-year cadets were given almost free reign over the first years. Yet, as the Grey Report found, ‘Unfortunately, some cadets at the defence academy are dishonest, emotionally stunted, insensitive bullies and cheats.’

Vince's memories of bastardisation and sexual harassment at ADFA align significantly with the Grey Report. He recalls that women were probably only 5 to 8 per cent of the cadets. When women could not keep up physically, they were taunted to the point that some were injuring themselves. While he was personally never subjected to some of the extreme physical or sexual abuse, he had to undergo several embarrassing activities as part of 'traditional' hazing rituals. Vince was not personally aware of examples of extreme abuse, but he has no doubt that they happened because the culture gave rise to third-year cadets going unchecked. As he describes it: 'that kind of perpetual institutional behaviours ... weren't really okay ever, but because no one had really put too much thought into it, they just kept going until somebody got injured or some embarrassing situation happened'. ADFA did make concrete changes during Vince's third year in response to the Grey [Review's Report's](#) 97 recommendations. Most prominently, reforms removed the power from third-year cadets, segregated male and female cadets and ensured that daily management of cadets was the responsibility of trained personnel and officers.

While the Grey Report and other inquiries have focused heavily on the abuse of women, the bastardisation and harassment has also targeted gay men. Vince was also well aware of this, hearing jokes such as homosexuality is 'legal but not compulsory'. Other jokes at ADFA reinforced a particular martial masculinity, where comments such as 'That's not very manly' or 'Why are you crying? You a woman?' were common. Vince remembers one lecture where an Army officer said that if a homosexual was discovered, they would be encouraged to discharge. This particular comment struck Vince hard.

That probably set me back quite a bit, because I was like: 'Well, I'm never, definitely, ever admitting that I might be gay now, because I might lose my job as a result of it. I've got to prove myself first, prove my worth to the organisation, and I'm already behind because I didn't do well in initial training, so people don't like me, or people don't think I'm doing well, so if I'm gay, I'm done for, **totally.**'

Vince tried to avoid situations where the other male cadets would talk about sex. In fact, Vince was terrified before his eighteenth birthday that, because he was still a virgin, the other cadets would embark on a tradition of taking him to Fyshwick and paying for a sex

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worker. Fortunately they did not do this and Vince's eighteenth birthday was a calm, sexless affair. Vince stayed in the closet his entire three years at ADFA, though in his final year he did start to explore gay chat rooms on the internet.

Vince's first posting was at RAAF Base Richmond in western Sydney. He also began to explore his sexuality, though he was still secretive about his private life. Vince says of the years 2000–03:

I used to throw myself into work, I used to work ridiculous hours, in order to not have to deal with it. But then when I did deal with it, I went out to Oxford Street, and then started to explore, and started to meet people and then started to become part of the community.

There were no openly gay men in Vince's squadron, and ridiculing gay men was common. This did not extend to lesbians. As Vince puts it, 'lesbians were cool – gay guys, no, don't know why – but because the lesbians could come out to work-organised functions to strip clubs'. Vince would not go along to the strip clubs, making his work colleagues suspicious of his sexuality and further fuelling Vince's paranoia about being talked about behind his back. Vince started dating someone for the first time, but that relationship was interrupted in 2003 when he was deployed to the Middle East.

On short notice Vince was sent as communications engineer supporting the P3 Squadron in Iraq. This was only a four-month deployment because the RAAF was intentionally trying to cycle through as many people as possible to obtain combat experience. As officer responsible for communications, Vince oversaw the systems that allowed RAAF members to talk to one another – whether that be information technology, on restricted networks, or ensuring data flows from the coalition forces. This was a new role for Vince, which was a bit daunting, but he also appreciated the opportunity to learn. He describes the job as 'a very steep uphill learning curve, but at the same point in time, that was also a little bit of why I joined the military, for that excitement and that challenge'.

Vince's time overseas was also an opportunity to re-evaluate his life, and he started to become more open about his sexuality. He remembers: 'I did come out because a girl asked me when I was over there ... I didn't say I was gay; I said, "I'm bisexual" –

don't know why, but anyway, that was the most I was willing to do, in a private conversation, out the back in a shed somewhere.' The Middle East deployment changed Vince in other ways when he came back. First, even though he had by no means been serving on the frontline, still returning to Australia was a shocking adjustment.

You had gone suddenly from this intense, seven day a week, focused environment where you knew the mission of the aircraft – where everyone was focused on enemy movements and that's what everyone was monitoring. So you kind of had this heightened sense of awareness. And I kind of seem to recall coming back to Australia, it didn't go away very quickly ... it's not the sense that you felt like you were in danger, but the sense that you needed to be alert and ready to deal with whatever new contingency or new disaster was going to arise.

The other change was that Vince was more willing to take risks, particularly in relation to his sexuality. Vince broke up with the man he had been dating. To deal with both the adjustment back to Australia and to be more confident about his sexuality, he spent about two months of annual leave partying on Oxford Street, frequenting the many **gay**-venues, and enjoying the life of a young, single gay man.

When Vince returned to work in early 2004, he again threw himself into the job while continuing to be secretive about his sexuality. A new posting in 2006 represented the next turning point for Vince. Vince served as the aide-de-camp to the Air Commander at RAAF Base Glenbrook, also in western Sydney. The Air Commander is the senior officer who oversees all operational capabilities for the RAAF. Vince describes the role of aide-de-camp as like one of the assistants in *The Devil Wears Prada*; the executive assistant works in the office while the aide-de-camp is responsible for running everything outside the office. One challenge that Vince found was that the Air Commander, Air Vice-Marshal John Quaife, was so adept at handling himself that Vince had to come up with ways to value-add, focusing on trimmings and other details at functions and meetings.

During that posting, a gay doctor serving as a Group Captain brought his partner to the Glenbrook Officer's Mess Ball. Vince was pleasantly surprised to see both the Air Commander and his wife warmly receive the couple. The Air Commander was one position below the Chief of Air Force, and seeing that such a high-ranking officer had no

problem with gay servicemen was an eye-opener. That same year, Vince met Harley, an editor at the *Star Observer*. Vince made the decision to bring Harley to one of the mess functions – almost like a coming-out ball for Vince. He was nervous, but it was an anti-climactic event. Vince is fairly certain the Air Commander and Mrs Quaipe suspected he was gay, and no one blinked when Harley was introduced. In fact, the only outcome was that the then-Chief of Air Force's wife later jovially scolded Vince for not having told her earlier. Since that public coming out in 2006, Vince has always had the support of his peers in and out of the ADF, and he has never looked back. Twelve years later, he is still with Harley.

The main challenges that Vince and Harley have had to overcome as a couple have not so much been related to their status as a same-sex couple, but rather being a Defence couple in general. They have had to endure Vince's postings taking him from Sydney to Canberra, the United States, Melbourne, Canberra again, and now Adelaide. The first significant challenge to their relationship was in 2009 when, after three years travelling between Sydney and Canberra, Harley made the decision to resign from the *Star Observer* and move to Canberra. The same day that Harley gave notice and terminated his lease, the RAAF advised Vince that they wanted him to post him to the United States within 30 days. This was a significant problem because under the rules of de facto recognition, extended to same-sex couples in December 2005, they needed to live together for 90 days. Heterosexual couples had an easy solution: they could marry and Defence would instantly recognise their relationship. That solution was not available for Vince and Harley. Luckily, in the end, there were delays to Vince's posting, and he and Harley had time to live together for the required 90 days.

Harley accompanied Vince on his postings to the United States, Melbourne and Canberra. Defence partners essentially give up their career trajectory with their first relocation, as part of the sacrifice of staying together as an ADF family. Harley also had stops and starts, finding work in Washington, volunteering where work was scarce, and then picking up his career again in Canberra as the editor of *The Mandarin*. Vince reflects on the challenges facing contemporary Defence families, both same-sex and heterosexual.

I think there's a bit of an expectation, well, maybe your spouse can just knit, look after kids, or join the community clubs or volunteer their time. I mean, it would define meaningful engagement. And of course, that's not true across the board.

There are a range of professional spouses. And I think Defence is actually starting to recognise that it is important that you can't expect people to just volunteer their time for community organisations.

Other same-sex couples with a civilian partner have expressed similar views: the support system for Defence families assumes that the ADF member is a male breadwinner, with children and a wife who are not working. While some of the housing, health and travel allowance benefits can be generous, they tend to assume that the partner is not working and is able to uproot their life when the ADF member is posted.

The numerous postings showcase the growth of Vince's career in the past ten years. His posting in the United States from 2009–~~20~~11 was as the Air Force technical liaison officer at US Navy Project Management Agency 265 for the F/A-18F Super Hornet. He was essentially the primary interface between the Australian and American project offices, managing the aircraft through all aspects of delivery and certification. 'Don't ask, don't tell' was still in place, and Vince and Harley witnessed American debates over its repeal unfold in 2010–11. Since returning to Australia in 2012, Vince has served in Directorate General of Technical Airworthiness (the military equivalent of the Civil Aviation Safety Authority), then the Capability Development Group in the Aerospace Development Branch, and in 2016 he undertook a Masters in Military and Defence Studies at the Australian Command and Staff College (Joint) and Australian National University. That course is designed for officers across the three services seeking future command opportunities. They learn critical analysis, staff and military planning, and ways to enhance officers' technical expertise and knowledge for joint force operations. In 2017 Vince was promoted to Wing Commander and posted to Adelaide as the commanding officer for the Surveillance and Response Systems Program Office in the Defence Capability, Acquisition and Sustainment Group. They provide sustainment of platforms to support the aircraft weapons systems, overseeing everything from spare parts to maintenance to complex repairs.

On top of these busy day jobs, Vince has also taken an active role in the LGBTI inclusion and support group for current Defence members. The Defence LGBTI Information Service (DEFGLIS) had been set up by then Petty Officer Stuart O'Brien in 2002 as an email distribution network to share information among serving gays, lesbians and bisexuals. The only visible presence was a Geocities webpage that posted information about LGBT support organisations in each state. By 2006, having just won the right to same-sex partner recognition, DEFGLIS was keen to increase the visibility of LGB service members. It was around this time that Vince was at a Sydney gay bar and met a Navy member who first mentioned DEFGLIS, which at that time was almost exclusively sailors. Vince then met Stuart O'Brien and offered to run communications for the group, thus beginning his long association with the organisation.

A desire of many LGBT service members was to march in the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras to show their pride in their own diversity as service personnel. Vince met with members of the ADF public affairs people and, not surprisingly, learned that there was external criticism against the idea of Defence members marching in Mardi Gras. Working behind the scenes was a savvy move, as Vince and the public affairs people together developed a public relations strategy and talking points. DEFGLIS received permission to march in the 2008 Mardi Gras in civilian attire, and they were amazed at the response: almost 200 people signed up to march. Vince recalls of 2008:

That phenomenal experience that people have today, they experienced back on that first march, with the roars and the cheers. But I think the biggest thing that we got out of it was that we brought an entire sector of the community together for the first time, for them to all see each other and actually network with one another.

Somewhat dampening the euphoria of participating in Mardi Gras were the harassing comments posted to online forums and discussion boards. Vince distinctly remembers one particular comment: 'Not only are fags marching, we've got an Asian leading the charge.' This was the first time Vince had experienced such blatant racism and homophobia during his ADF career, and it stung. He says, 'Someone's just made a horrible comment about me on this news article. And then not being able to do anything about it ... and I remember, I was a little bit disturbed. And then I got over it'. Over the years, Vince has regularly had to tolerate bigoted comments, mostly from online trolls,

whenever DEFGLIS or LGBT-related Defence matters have featured in mainstream or social media. He has developed a thick skin, but at times the online bullying has taken a toll on his and also the other members of DEFGLIS's mental health.

Vince took a hiatus from DEFGLIS while he was in the United States, but when he returned in 2012 he jumped back into a leadership role. Stuart O'Brien had been leading the group since its founding, and the time had come to set up a more formal structure to spread the workload. Vince became interim president in 2012, and over the next two years DEFGLIS underwent a consultative process to establish a new board structure, write a constitution, and incorporate. Its board now includes five elected office bearers; there are four additional elected board positions for a gay or bisexual male, lesbian or bisexual female, transgender or intersex person and opposite-sex attracted person. The board can co-opt up to another nine people. Each board member serves a two-year term, with half of the positions up for election each year. The president is limited to two terms – and having first been elected under the new constitution in 2014, that means Vince's presidency finishes at the end of 2018.

DEFGLIS functions as both an advocacy and social group. Volunteers have organised dinners in the various cities, and other social outings have included winery tours and an annual ski trip. Mardi Gras has consistently been the largest event and garnered more support from the ADF over the years. Numerous DEFGLIS members and representatives of the ADF and Department of Defence worked together behind the scenes, culminating in a decision to allow members to march in uniform from 2013. Marching in uniform has been a source of significant pride for LGBT Defence members. As Vince describes: 'It completely eliminated any doubt in people's mind that their service was valued. It was recognised that LGBTI people did contribute just like any other soldier, sailor and airman. Being LGBTI was not or should not be a source of detriment to their career, because they were able to contribute just as well as any other person'. In 2013, the Army also issued a rainbow pride lapel pin and cufflinks ~~so~~ that its members may wear ~~them~~ in the week before Mardi Gras. In 2015, the service warrant officers, the three most senior non-commissioned officers of the respective services, volunteered to lead the ADF contingent at Mardi Gras.

On the advocacy front, DEFGLIS has mostly worked within Defence in its development of education programs relating to diversity and inclusion. In one extraordinary case, in 2012, DEFGLIS was invited to present a submission and testify before the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee about how Australian marriage law affected same-sex couples in the ADF. As there are strict rules about Defence members' participation in political activity, Vince checked with the RAAF about whether he could testify. The advice was that Vince could appear as a private citizen, speaking on behalf of DEFGLIS and same-sex couples in Defence, but he had to be explicit that his views did not represent the Department of Defence or the ADF. Vince consulted with other members of DEFGLIS and spoke to the committee not only about his and Harley's experience, but also other challenges LGBT Defence members had when applying for de facto recognition. Several had their applications rejected for 'strange and varying reasons', with one couple even being told they were not allowed to apply. Marriage equality would remove this systemic form of discrimination.

The final major DEFGLIS initiative has been the annual Military Pride Ball, first organised in 2015. The DEFGLIS board felt that they needed a second major event each year to bring together members from across Australia to celebrate diversity and inclusion in the ADF. One of the strengths of the Pride Ball has been the mixing of people across ages, services and ranks. Just as Vince was only comfortable enough to come out when he saw the Group Captain and his partner at a mess ball, Pride Ball is an opportunity for LGBT Defence members to see how the ADF openly embraces their inclusion. Vince also believes that 'it gives people hope that there is no glass ceiling. There's certainly no pink ceiling. You can be what you want to be, so long as you're willing to play, work hard and be part of a team'. Keynote speakers at the Military Pride Balls have included Human Rights Commissioners, the Surgeon-General of the ADF (the highest ranked openly LGBT member) and even the Vice Chief of the Defence Force, Vice Admiral Ray Griggs. In his inspiring speech in 2016, Griggs declared: 'We're not going to budge on the [inclusive] direction that we're on because we know it's the right direction, and we know it's the right thing to do, and it results in a fairer and at the same time more capable ADF.'

Vince is proud of his two decades of service, where he has grown both personally and professionally ~~into~~as a capable officer. Interestingly, when referred to as a career officer in an interview question, Vince rejected that label. In an insightful statement about the importance of career choices for all ADF members, Vince remarks:

I actually encourage everyone that they should always keep their options open and consider where they feel that they can bring their most value and what they think they're going to enjoy the most. And in each of those circumstances, I did consider getting out earlier on in my career. It seemed like a good opportunity at the time. It didn't pan out, and I stayed in. And Air Force continued to give me challenging jobs, and I've loved every one of those jobs and the great people and teams that I have been a part of ... I would love to continue to stay within Air Force. Our challenge is to remain attractive as an employer to our own workforce and those seeking employment for the first time.

Reflecting on the role of the ADF in general today, Vince says:

Defence is learning how we need to compete in the labour market, while continuing to deliver complex military effects in a chaotic environment. The character of what makes up warfare is different. We need to modify our approaches from training to how we deliver those effects. And I think we can only do that through having diversity of thought, having as many smart minds contribute to solutions for the future.

This nuanced understanding of the challenges, needs and vision for the ADF echoes why *Cosmopolitan* judge Annamarie Jagose sees Vince as such an influential LGBTI Australian. 'Vince offers a refreshing counter to the predictably conservative cast to some institutions – the church, for example, the police, the military: Ask; tell.'

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Ellen Zyla

We first met Ellen at the 2015 Military Pride Ball. She was one of the co-emcees, and her wit and candour set a fantastic tone for the event. She co-hosted the annual event again in 2016 and 2017, demonstrating a keen ability to relate to a diverse audience with guests including the Vice Chief of the Defence Force, members of the NSW parliament,

corporate sponsors, and even a few academic historians. Ellen invited us to her home in inner western Sydney for an interview. Her story reveals much about the changing status of women and LGBT members of today's ADF, showing both how far the organisation has come in the past 25 years, and areas for further improvement. Ellen's story is one of overcoming barriers and obstacles with determination, common sense and a large dollop of good humour.

Ellen was born in Toowoomba in 1982. The family moved around for the first ten years of her life because her father served in the Army. After that, her parents divorced, her mother remarried, and a blended family was formed. From as early as the age of eight, Ellen showed a keen interest in music. She began playing the saxophone and performed in multiple school bands and ensembles. She remembers 'exchanging private lessons for babysitting and teaching', and 18 she also picked up the clarinet.

When Ellen heard a recording of the Navy Band around the age of 15, she knew she wanted to join when she grew up because she could combine the three things she loved: ocean, music and ships. The Navy Band would let her honour her family tradition of military service and do something for her country, bringing together worthwhile service with something she treasured. The Navy has Australia's oldest military band tradition dating back to before Federation. For most of its history there were even ship-based bands, but since the 1980s it has been primarily shore-based. Currently there are two full-time and four part-time Navy Bands in Australia.¹

By Ellen's era, the need for formal qualifications was on the rise and the level of education required to join the Navy Band was edging towards a university bachelor's degree. Ellen had commenced a degree at University of Southern Queensland in Toowoomba, working in her mother's hair salon to pay the bills. Even though she had not yet finished the degree, she still managed to get into the band – due to her 'amazing ability', she laughs. In 2003, when Ellen was 20, the ADF announced an application period which included openings for clarinet and saxophone. The audition pack turned up and she sorted her application to join the ADF, which was a separate process to joining the band. There were no openings in the Navy Band – just the Army Band – but Ellen was okay with that. Ellen impressed the assessors at her first audition, but she needed to

decide which instrument to apply with. She went with the saxophone at the second audition, and the assessor said yes.

There were more hurdles for Ellen to overcome to secure her career as a Defence musician. Even though Ellen had a long history playing sport, she still found the running aspect of the Army physical to be challenging. Army standards were very high, and after 18 attempts, she still had not passed the so-called 'beep test'. As Ellen was coming up to her last chance, word came down that there was an opening in the Navy Band, and fortunately for Ellen, the Navy physical was considerably less demanding. The timing could not have been more serendipitous; as she puts it: 'So I ran my nineteenth beep test and they went, "Congratulations, well done, you're joining the Navy."'"

Musicians undertake the same basic training as all other recruits, so Ellen commenced Navy recruit school at HMAS Cerberus in Victoria. Just a week before graduation, someone from the band approached Ellen. It turned out that they had only just discovered she was there! She says that this was 'quite a common story back then for our branch'. Still, they were pleased to have her because they definitely needed an oboe player ... except Ellen's instrument was the baritone saxophone. After a series of phone calls, the Navy Director of Music decided she could stay at Cerberus with her sax. Then there were discussions about Ellen playing the clarinet in Sydney. This confusion moved back and forth until finally, on graduation day, Ellen received word that she was off to Sydney as a clarinetist. When she finally made it to Sydney she was introduced to the Director of Music, who promptly told her: 'You're not supposed to be in the Navy.' Years later Ellen and the director had a laugh about this when he told her, 'You are one of my most valued members of my team'. At the time, though, his comment shattered her. Back at her apartment she bawled her eyes out, rang her mother and discussed her future. Her mother could see the bigger picture and knew Ellen's toughness: 'She went, "It's not fair, it's not good, but you now have a choice. Pull your socks up, get on and do your job, prove them wrong, or pull the pin."'"

Ellen stayed and took to military life pretty well, never regretting her decision. She had participated in numerous team sports in her youth and was a Queen's Scout. She understood the importance of rules and regulations, and the need for everybody to abide

by them and work as a team. Even if she were uncomfortable with a senior rank's tone or attitude, that would not affect her respect for rank and the need to obey. Being able to think like that was important because it helped her mental stability and to see challenging behaviour for what it was, not letting it get to her. She compared herself as a 21 year old with many of her fellow recruits, 17 or 18 years old, and saw the advantages that came with a bit more maturity.

At the time that Ellen was beginning her naval career, she was also grappling with her sexuality. Even as a child Ellen could sense that she was a bit different, though she did not understand it as a sexual orientation per se. All through high school and even at university she had boyfriends. Internally, though, Ellen was questioning her sexuality, and it was while she was at university that she began to think of herself as a gay woman. One event that prompted Ellen along was her younger sister coming out. When their mother asked Ellen to tell her sister it was just a phase, she responded: "I can't do that. I can't blatantly lie to her." I looked at my little sister and I gave her a wink.' Watching her sister's confidence, along with her sister's partner and some of her own gay friends, made Ellen think a lot about her own identity.

It was at Cerberus that Ellen felt free to be herself and to explore her sexuality with a new sense of comfort. She had her first relationship with a woman, which lasted 12 to 18 months. It was after recruit graduation that Ellen's girlfriend outed her to her mother. Ellen remembers having to explain it as: "Hi, Mum, I'm gay. Here's my first girlfriend." It was that, all in one moment. She was like: "Okay, that's great. I don't have any issues with that." Got a big cuddle, big kiss – but then the comment of "I'll tell your stepfather."

Though Ellen was out to her family and was more comfortable with herself as a gay woman, she still was not ready to be out to her work colleagues. As the relationship continued, Ellen concocted stories to explain about who the woman was, and when and where they met. The backpedalling and covering up made Ellen feel bad, but she felt it important to check out the lay of the land before coming out. She remembers that when discussing her partner, she would give 'false names, even false gender identity'. It is fascinating that Ellen was using the same strategies that LGB members had been utilising

a generation earlier to hide their sexualities under the ban. It was a horrible six months before Ellen decided to come out, and it turned out to be quite easy. The band was full of 'flamboyant', 'fabulous' people, most of whom were not at all surprised to hear she was gay.

This was in 2003, a decade since the LGB ban had been repealed. Yet, at the grassroots level, and in the minds of many LGB service members, not everything had changed. LGB members often assumed that straight colleagues did not want to know, though the experience of coming out often wound up better than they expected. Ellen's experience in her early Navy career was that members' sexuality genuinely did not matter to recruits of her generation, as long as everyone did their job. It is a telling indication of the cultural change that the command and so many service personnel were working for, and which was well underway in wider Australian society from which recruits were drawn. There was a degree of sexism at the recruit school, but Ellen is also cautious to note that there was (and is) a clear but important distinction between outright sexism and jovial banter amongst mates.

Ellen threw herself into her new life in the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) Band in Sydney. There was a lot of on-the-job-training: 'to learn the stock standard marches by memory, all of the official military musical salutes, your side drumming, your parade drill'. There were also deployments at sea, as was the case for all sailors after recruit training. Ellen's first was to the Pacific: Vanuatu, Norfolk Island, Lord Howe Island. The band's job was to play music for the ship crew, international dignitaries and the people at the ports. Ceremonial sunsets were popular, as were school concerts and on-board barbecues. Over the years, she has participated in performances such as:

... memorial services at Martin Place. Our education program is pretty huge, so we go into schools and workshop and put on concerts in schools. Playing for royalty, playing for troops deployed, playing at sea, going to Scotland and doing the Edinburgh Military Tattoo, going to Brunei and doing a Tattoo for the Sultan of Brunei's sixtieth birthday. The scope of what we do is so huge and so varied and that keeps it exciting.

These activities might be best described as the ‘soft diplomacy’ aspect of the ADF’s operations. One of Ellen’s colleagues calls military bands ‘the frontline of peacetime defence’. She describes it as ‘that happy, shiny, look-how-amazing-Defence-is’ work.

Other sailors did not always regard the band highly, referring to musicians as ‘oxygen thieves’. Fighting sailors imagined that the band crew were more highly paid and did not work much between performances. Often sailors assumed that band members ought to be doing other sailors’ jobs, not realising that band members *do* undertake other roles while on deployment. Ellen explains, ‘If there’s a whole of ship evolution, of course you get in, you muck in. You store ship, you ditch gash, you do all the dirty work. But then we work with the café party and the scullery guys so that at the end of meals, you go and you wash the dishes’. For at least a decade, commanders have made an effort to ensure the fleet sees the band as an actual unit, doing the duty set for it, just as the rest of the sailors do. Social media has been important, and being featured in the military newspapers as a serious part of the ADF has helped with the three service bands’ profiles.

Ellen worked in her own way to break down barriers on board, stepping outside the cosy group of band members (which might be as few as eight on a ship), making friends and proving that she and her mates were sailors too. In East Timor and the Middle East, she and the rest of the band showed that they were proper military people, often to the surprise of the Army soldiers. They were putting on shows, but with weapons on their backs. They were offering protection to civilian artists and displaying technical skills with the light, sound and staging of the shows. Ellen feels that exposure and interpersonal interactions have been having an effect, as sailors are now adopting more positive attitudes towards the band members. Of course, their fantastic performances help as well.

Attitudes towards women, too, seem to be changing. Military sociologists regularly argue that Defence forces reflect the values of wider society, so it is not surprising that members’ attitudes are diverse. Older men, in particular, who might have signed up as 16-year-olds in the 1970s, sometimes find it difficult to accept the ADF’s evolving culture. Ever since the gradual introduction of women on ships since 1985, some servicemen (and many ex-sailors) believe women have no place at sea, or argue that women are soft and have to be protected and helped. Lesbians are often objects of

titillation for straight men, and some sailors expect lesbian sailors to share in this. Alternatively, lesbians should be big and butch and be able to hoist heavy objects. That said, at least one other currently serving gay female sailor believes that gay women can sometimes deflect sexual harassment on ships: 'the second they found out I was gay and I wouldn't sleep with them, they stopped talking to me entirely'.²

Occasionally, Ellen would witness stupid or insensitive remarks about what a lesbian would or would not know about something, or references to her as a 'fucking dyke'. In certain contexts, Ellen has been brave enough to chat with higher ranks when she felt uncomfortable with their language. In these situations, she has always been respectful of their rank, ensuring to discuss the matters politely, beginning conversations with expressions such as 'with all due respect, Sir...'.

Ellen was also dismayed to discover that women could treat other women as badly as men did. Having made their way up the hierarchy, some female commanders were not supportive of others. Even so, at the broader policy level, change is well and truly underway. For example, in areas such as pregnancy, which would once have ended a servicewoman's career, they have a right to return to their positions after maternity leave. There are flexible working arrangements that can be sorted for new parents, including fathers. In the RAAF, there is even a Diversity Handbook on breastfeeding in the workplace. The shift towards the idea that the military is a workplace, rather than some world set apart for warriors, is one of the most striking changes of recent decades.

Ellen's observation of the experiences of male sailors is also enlightening. There's an old saying, she recounts: 'It's not gay when you're underway'. She watches straight men who, as soon as the ship passes through the Sydney Heads, 'kind of change [snaps her fingers]. They're not at home anymore'. The homoeroticism is so obvious to her, even if it is not to most of those men, and she finds it amusing. For gay men, the experiences are just as diverse as they are for straight and gay women. Ellen describes one dear friend.

The most flamboyant gay man you would ever come across. He was valet to the commanding officer (CO). He was amazing at his job. The CO loved him. He copped some pretty big stick from a lot of the guys about his sexuality. You knew

when it was getting to him because he'd really retreat inward, but most of the time, he could rise above it or he'd throw it back at them ... Just little, flick off comments that were enough to say, 'Oi! Buddy! Jog on, pull your head in! You've overstepped.'

Commented [NR2]: End of the quote beginning with Oi!

One of the more horrifying stories Ellen tells is of five days that she spent on board a US Navy vessel. It was an all-male crew, with only two women officers who lived in the ward room and seemed oblivious to what was happening below decks. Ellen and three other Australian women had to be housed, despite their junior rank, in the ward room for their safety. Ellen was a smoker back then, and if she needed to go for a cigarette after lights out (or really anytime), a man would need to escort her through the male accommodation and living space which sailors openly referred to as the 'rape dungeon'. Her thoughts went to the gay men on board. She could be given protection, but as there were no women crew members: who was being raped?

Commented [NR3]: New paragraph?

This brief posting reinforced Ellen's sense of just how far the ADF has come as a social institution that values diversity. She saw the rigid racial divisions onboard the US ship, with African-Americans and Latinos each with their own social areas. She also saw the casual acceptance of a term like 'rape dungeon' and what that said about the place of women and gays in the US military. The infamous 'don't ask, don't tell policy' was in place from 1993 until 2011. Some scholars argue that the policy sent attitudes and practices backwards. The expulsion of highly skilled LGB members reinforced the idea that homosexuals were a threat to the military, service members and national security. In contrast, by the time Ellen was aboard that US ship, it was ADF policy to promote diversity and inclusion of race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality. Ellen notes that Australia's was a top-down shift, but she also recognises the importance of the grassroots. Policy, developed and promulgated by the ADF top brass, had to be instilled in the rank and file. She sees the training instructors as key to this because they explain what is and is not acceptable behaviour to new recruits.

During her Navy career, Ellen has had a few relationships with other ADF members and civilians. In the Royal Australian Navy there are no limitations on consensual relationships other than if both partners are on the same ship. The commander has a right to separate them if they believe that the relationship might compromise the

sailors' performance. Partners also cannot be posted to the same warzone, and these rules apply both to heterosexual and same-sex couples. Being in the band involves meeting lots of new people and ample opportunities to develop romantic attachments. It also means that couples are often apart for extended periods, and more than one of Ellen's relationships has ended because she met someone new. Over time, Ellen shied away from relationships with other ADF members because, as she put it: 'I sleep with this person, but this person's slept with that person and that person and that person. The incestuousness of Defence lesbians is out of this world!'

There were also the problems that had roots outside the strains of the job. In one relationship Ellen became the victim of domestic violence at the hands of her civilian partner who had spiralled into alcoholism, depression and increasingly unreasonable demands. Family violence is a silent epidemic among LGBT communities, partly because of popular perceptions of domestic violence as straight male perpetrators targeting straight female partners. Victoria's 2016 Royal Commission into Family Violence noted: 'Existing research suggests that intimate partner violence may be as prevalent in LGBTI communities as it is in the general population. The level of violence against transgender and intersex people, including from parents and other family members, appears to be particularly high.'³ While many of the reasons behind LGBT partner violence may be the same as for heterosexual or cisgender people, there are also distinct reasons and barriers to accessing support services. Some LGBT people may fear being outed, have less family support, face discrimination from religious support providers or ethnic communities, or fear homophobia or transphobia if they go to the police.

Ellen is not the only LGBT Defence member interviewed for this project who has experienced partner violence either during or after their ADF career. These men and women were fortunate to get out of those situations, even if often at great physical, emotional and financial cost. The final straw for Ellen came when her partner hit her for the second time and tried to force herself on her. Ellen reported to her superior what had happened, and within minutes she was in a meeting with several men, including her divisional officer. They took her for medical treatment, where they recorded details about the violence and organised treatment. Ellen describes it all as 'very compassionate and understanding'. Doctors assessed her mental state, and she was given ten days' leave and

advised about available resources. Whether her colleagues were following a formal policy is not clear, but regardless, the management team were really implementing best practice to support colleagues experiencing family violence.

Given her strong character, it is not surprising that Ellen found herself involved in DEFGLIS. Vince Chong and his partner were in Sydney for Mardi Gras, preparing for the first Defence march in uniform in 2013. Chatting on the hotel balcony, Ellen impressed Vince with her attitude, and she quickly found herself marching in uniform with her side-drum, leading the DEFGLIS contingent. Not long after, she was co-opted onto the organisation's board. Ellen's first leadership role was to set up a women's network. It was clear to her that DEFGLIS was not adequately engaging with its women members, and she set out to remedy that. She says it was 'a hard slog' because the group was very much a gay man's zone, but through the 'amazingness' of social media she started to reach out. Any female member of DEFGLIS – gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex – is welcome to join this online network, and members are encouraged to share experiences, raise problems, and to explore solutions. Like the broader organisation, the DEFGLIS women's network is both social and informative.

Like all activists, Ellen occasionally found herself feeling like she was bashing her head against a wall, 'because you try and engage and you get absolutely nothing back'. Oddly enough, most of the resistance to the network came from women, with comments like: Why do we need this? What about inclusiveness? Why not do this work within the main group? Yet, Ellen found the male members of DEFGLIS to be supportive of the women's network. What worked, Ellen discovered, was having small events targeting particular member groups, such as inviting women with families to a picnic, hosting small sit-down dinners, or inviting speakers to events. The network now has about 40 or 50 members. Ellen thinks the main area that needs effort nowadays is around transgender issues. Gay men and women have made amazing progress over the past 25 years, but transgender issues are just starting to take off. DEFGLIS is already working in this space, facilitating an online transgender network which has approximately 25 members.

Another area where Ellen sees scope for improvement within Defence is in the relationships between higher and lower ranks, and civilian and military people. This has

been a challenge for DEFGLIS as well, as almost the entire board is consistently officers (Vince recognises this as a problem, and it is one reason he was so keen to recruit Ellen). When the Defence Department was starting its Defence Pride Network in 2015, Ellen was invited to the planning meetings. As an Able Seaman, she was the only non-officer present apart from civilian members of the Australian Public Service. Ellen was worried that the program was appearing like managerial-speak, and recruits and lower ranks would dismiss the network. Her idea was that Defence Pride ‘champions’ needed to be appointed at every level of Defence, rather than just the top ranks. Ellen believes there are significant opportunities if the hierarchic structure of the ADF, so often an obstacle to change, could instead be harnessed to transform the organisation’s culture.

Ellen is still a proud serving member of the Navy. She is still a musician, and she has no plans to quit. There are new fields that interest her such as policing or physical training instruction, and Defence is nothing if not diverse in its career options. Given the change she has witnessed and helped bring about over 15 years of service, she hopes to see more of it in the future: ‘Change is a good thing. Change is great. And I would hope that Australia can do that – and we can. The general populace – we can move forward and we can get all the amazing things that we want.’

¹ LCDR Phillip Anderson, OAM RAN, ‘RAN Band History’, <<http://www.navy.gov.au/about/organisation/navy-band/history>>, accessed 29 January 2018.

² ‘Lexa’, interview with Noah Riseman, 19 September 2016.

³ State of Victoria, *Royal Commission into Family Violence: Summary and recommendations*, Parliamentary Paper No 132 (March 2016), 35.