

Yvonne Sillett

In 2013, Yvonne Sillett watched as members of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) marched in uniform in Sydney's Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras for the first time. While she was 'very happy' to see LGBT service personnel finally able to reconcile their pride with their military service, it was also a 'bittersweet' moment for her. Yvonne was discharged from the Army in 1989 after ten years of service, just three years before the ban on open gay, lesbian and bisexual service was removed. Yvonne was a pioneer who had been one of the first women to train platoons at Kapooka, south-west of Wagga Wagga in New South Wales, so the military had been a central part of her life. Once her sexuality was revealed she was informed that she would no longer be able to keep her top-secret security clearance and make a contribution to the Army. Despite the challenges, with the resilience and tenacity that saw her lead when she served, she has maintained a connection to the ADF and is determined to ensure that the experiences and contribution of those who served before the ban was lifted in 1992 are acknowledged.

From as far back as she can remember, Yvonne was interested in the military. She was born in Melbourne in 1960 to parents who had both served in the Navy. Yvonne's mother had been something of a trailblazer, joining the Women's Royal Australian Naval Service (WRANS) in Perth as a cook at 18 years of age during an era when very few women signed up. She met and fell in love with Yvonne's father, who was also in the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) in a communications role and had served in Korea. Until 1968, women had to leave the WRANS upon marriage, so Yvonne's mother's stint was relatively short.

Yvonne remembers her childhood as being a happy one; growing up with two older brothers, she was not particularly interested in academic pursuits, and was at her most content playing with her siblings and friends and enjoying sport. Reflecting, she says, 'I wasn't aware that I was gay. I mean I'd always been a tomboy growing up. I was always

in the street playing cricket and rollerskating and all sorts of things with my brothers. So I certainly wasn't the little girl that Mum probably thought she would have.'

Her father's ten-year military career made a strong impact on her at a young age. After he left the Navy, he went on to work for the Defence Signals Directorate. Yvonne remembers: 'I wanted to follow in his footsteps because growing up as children, we'd be sitting around the dining table and we'd say to Dad, "What is it you do?"' The role at Defence Signals Directorate involved top-secret work involving coded messages; even to this day LGBT and other Defence members who serve in Signals do not describe their jobs beyond vague 'intelligence analysts'. The secret job intrigued Yvonne and provided a window into a more exotic world than the occupations she heard about in the school yard.

Just like so many of the lesbian women we spoke to, Yvonne was determined to join the military at a young age. After completing Year 10, Yvonne left high school, prepared to wait until she was old enough to enlist. While she was yet to realise her sexuality, she knew a military career required physical fitness and would allow her to continue to pursue her interest in sports and move outside of the narrow range of occupations available to women in the 1970s. She says that her time in the military did mean that 'I did so much more in ten years than I would ever have had done in that era as a [civilian] female, for sure.' First, she had to reach the age of 18, the age of enlistment. Biding her time, she got a job at a Safeway supermarket 'as a cashier on the big clunky cash registers' for around six months. She then tried to apply to the Navy, who were not recruiting at the time.

Undeterred, recalling the experiences of an uncle who had served in Vietnam in the Army, Yvonne lodged an application for the Women's Royal Australian Army Corps (WRAAC). Her application was successful and she went off to WRAAC School at St George's Heights in Sydney on 22 January 1979 for six weeks of training. Perhaps as a sign that the ADF was starting to reflect broader social changes towards the treatment of women, this was the first year that women in the services received equal pay.

Although Yvonne had only been away from home once before, on a holiday with her grandfather, she instantly felt at ease: 'I just fitted in, like a hand into a glove really.'

The military life was everything Yvonne had always hoped it would be: 'I got there and thought, this is me.' She states emphatically, 'I loved it. I loved it so much that I thought I'm going to come back here and be an instructor one day.' For her, it was not just going to be a short stint in the WRAAC: 'It was what I wanted; it was my passion. I knew that that was my life and I was going to do 20 years plus. That was always going to be my goal.'

Yvonne is a self-described tomboy 'since the day I was born'. It took Yvonne some time to work out her sexuality. In the late 1970s and early 1980s there were very few public representations of lesbian women from which to draw, and homosexuality carried considerable stigma. For the first four years of her service, Yvonne dated men and did not examine her sexuality. Women in various branches of the military were aware that, although lesbianism was never a crime in civilian society (even if it were often treated as such), homosexual conduct between women in the military could lead to their discharge. By 1979, the year Yvonne enlisted, the ADF's policy on homosexuality had been formalised for several years. In 1974, the Department of Defence had circulated a formal 'Policy on Homosexuality in the Services'. This had been, in part, prompted by the publicity generated in 1973 when two women who were discharged from the WRAAF on the grounds of their sexuality requested their cases be investigated further.

In 1976, Sir James Killen, then the Minister of Defence, approved a statement which asserted that 'the policy reflects that, although homosexual behaviour is not a frequent occurrence in the services, it is not acceptable. It is however necessary to differentiate between different levels of behaviour.' Such a statement appears to distinguish between women or men whose sexuality was considered 'untreatable' and that of those who might be considered to be 'situational' lesbians or gay men. The policy also departed somewhat from earlier approaches, which seemed to involve the immediate dismissal of women considered to be homosexual. The statement stated that individuals should be given 'the opportunity to apply for discharge at own request. If this is inappropriate, then action should be taken to obtain approval for discharge "retention not in the interest of the Army" or "not suited to be a soldier"'. As historian Janette Bomford has pointed out, this policy from the WRAAF that subsequently expanded across all three

services, was justified on the supposed grounds that service life was a unique environment:

Including shared accommodation with a wide diverge of ages; problems of morale, rumour, and gossip in an enclosed community; vulnerability of the young or 'socially inadequate' to sexual persuasion and the possibility that it could lead to favouritism or misuse of rank; the service's responsibility as loco parentis; and the argument that lesbians would lower respect [for the services]; reduce recruiting, be responsible for the loss of respect from [servicemen] and seriously affect morale.¹

For Yvonne, in the first four years of her service, ADF policy towards homosexuality was not an immediate concern. She loved her work and her career progressed well. After completing her initial training in Sydney, her first posting was to her hometown back in Melbourne. She laughs, 'So my first posting out of WRAAC School, after my training at Watsonia Barracks, where the School of Signals is, was Melbourne. I was like, "I've joined the Army to see the world and here I am, back in my hometown. Oh well, Mum and Dad are here." It was all cool.' Her career within the WRAAC progressed exceptionally well and she was considered a servicewoman with considerable talent in Signals. She keenly represented the Army in sport: 'I started playing touch in the Army and I represented the Army and I represented the Army in athletics and softball and everything ... we travelled around Australia playing sport. That's what I wanted to do.'

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In 1983, at the age of 23, Yvonne had a life-changing experience when she fell in love with another servicewoman. At first, she felt incredibly isolated: 'No one else in the world is like this. That's how you think.' The other woman returned her feelings and the two embarked on a relationship that lasted about 12 months until they were posted apart. Initially Yvonne compartmentalised her feelings: 'I thought, "oh, we can't tell anyone. This is really weird. I'm not gay. I'm just in love with you."' She also knew the relationship carried a substantial degree of risk: 'I realised this is now me. I'm in the military and I'm a gay lady in the military. "Hmm, we're not allowed to be gay in the military." So [it was] constantly looking over your shoulder, making sure you weren't doing anything that was going to get you booted out.'

Not only was it against Army regulations to be homosexual; Yvonne also had a 'top secret clearance because I was in Signal Corps'. This meant she 'had completed security clearances for that top-secret access, the highest classification you can have'. She was all too aware that any rumours about her sexuality could impact on her security clearance and her ability to perform her job. LGB personnel were particularly vulnerable to losing their security clearances if their sexuality were suspected, as it was argued they were vulnerable to blackmail from foreign powers. Yvonne emphasises: 'When they say you're in the closet, I literally was living in the closet for many years.' It was difficult to open up to fellow servicewomen because 'You couldn't really trust anybody because you knew if it got out, that's the end of my career. Because I knew pretty much their policy if you like, was that they do not have homosexuals in the military. So you couldn't really trust anybody just in case that did get out.' Furthermore, casual homophobia dogged the military, just as it did many other parts of Australian society during this era. Yvonne remembers: 'You had to put on a brave face – because you'd hear the comments but you couldn't defend the comments.'

While her initial relationship did not endure, Yvonne's career went from strength to strength. In 1984, she decided that she wanted to return to WRAAC School in Sydney to be an instructor 'because I knew that I wanted to be a soldier ... not just sitting in a communications centre or cooking or something. I wanted to make a difference'. She successfully applied to undertake a Recruit Instructors Course. Instead of being sent back to WRAAC School in Sydney, Yvonne was sent to Kapooka. Unbeknown to Yvonne, WRAAC School was in the process of being closed down as female soldiers were being integrated with men into the Army at large. As historian John Blaxland has noted, 'former WRAAC members were integrated into a number of corps but not the combat arms corps of infantry, artillery and armour'.² Over the next three decades more positions would open up to women, culminating in the final Army combat roles in January 2013.

Yvonne successfully passed the course at Kapooka in 1984 and was informed: 'You'll be raising the first female platoon here at Kapooka in February next year.' In January 1985, she was posted to 1 Recruit Training Battalion and became a female instructor. She shared a room with a friend, Leonie, whom she had met back at WRAAC School in 1979. She remembers: 'At that stage, there were no female instructors. They

were all males. It was male recruits, male instructors, male everything. You might have had females in the mess or doing admin, but not female instructors.’ Leonie and Yvonne raised the first platoon together. She comments: ‘So it was very ironic. We were recruits together and then first female trainers together.’ This was a remarkable and pioneering achievement. Yvonne was and still is justifiably ‘very proud of that’. Being the first women to work in such a male-dominated arena meant that ‘we were under the microscope. We had the media there. We were on the news. I’ve got a scrapbook with all the cuttings and everything. It was just amazing’. Bomford has stated that ‘the entry of women into the armed services is a story of women’s negotiation for a place within the most traditionally male profession, and their fight for equality of opportunity and outcome.’³ This was most certainly the case for Yvonne and Leonie.

Yvonne recalls a particularly evocative moment that occurred when she was at Kapooka on Anzac Day:

They wanted us to march down the main street of Wagga. Females at the front of the parade. So my recruits and the corporals and the sergeants and officer, we all marched down the main street of Wagga. That was just unheard of that there would be females marching in an Anzac parade in Wagga. So we did that and we have photos of that to prove that and we were out the front and we were very proud.

Given the centrality of Anzac Day to Australian national identity and Australian military heritage, there is no question that these women publicly marching in this way provided a quiet challenge to public attitudes about the diversity of who was serving the country in the ADF.

While at Kapooka, Yvonne managed to avoid the advances of men and to keep her sexuality private by focusing on her work. She emphasises:

You’re doing pretty much a 15-hour day, seven days a week. You’ve got to be there spick and span to wake the recruits up. Looking like you’ve just ironed your [clothes] and spit polished [boots]. Then at the end of the day you’re still there, putting them to bed and everything between. They go, ‘Do you ever sleep?’ and you go, ‘No I don’t.’ Left right, left right.

Yvonne stayed at Kapooka for two years, raising eight platoons in total. She remembers training the first two platoons as being ‘challenging, because the men didn’t really want us there’. Sexism was rife, though female instructors ‘still had to get these recruits through as well as [men] did’. Blaxland has noted the ‘misogynistic tendencies’, which ran through the Regular Army in this era. By the third platoon, with the results speaking for themselves, she feels the men had come to accept that the female instructors ‘know what they’re doing’. Yvonne served at a particularly significant time when gendered ideas surrounding military capability were slowly being challenged and women who were given opportunities were proving themselves to be highly capable.

It is very clear from our interview that Yvonne’s time at Kapooka was a steep learning curve, but a challenge she excelled at and one she enjoyed immensely. She looks back on this time as a highlight of her military experience:

When they told me I was raising the first female platoon I thought, ‘Well they must think that I’m alright.’ So I taught drill. I taught weapons. I taught bushcraft. I taught everything that you need to be, to be a soldier. That course then, when mine, was six weeks, this course was a 12-week course. Of course I had to teach weapons. I’d never held a weapon in my life. All of a sudden, I had to learn how to strip, how to assemble, how to fire, how to do drill. All with a weapon. After being in the Army for five years I’d never done it. All of a sudden, I had to be teaching this.

She particularly enjoyed mentoring the recruits and seeing them transform from civilians into trained soldiers, who were confident and highly skilled. There is more than a slight element of wistfulness in her assertion that ‘I will never find anything that is so rewarding, so satisfying than to have 30 girls get off a bus, hair down, having no idea – high heel shoes, their big bag, hopping along like this, make-up – to marching out as soldiers 12 weeks later.’

The intense training the women undertook bonded them together: ‘You’d be in the bush for a week, living in the bush for a week and you were just there. You were with them ... so I did that eight times, with eight different recruit courses’. Yvonne mentions the unique relationship that develops between trainers and the recruits. Even today, she remains in contact with the instructor who trained her originally when she was an 18-year-old recruit. The process of gaining unique skills, learning techniques very rarely

considered by most in the civilian world and becoming part of an institution was a unique undertaking.

While training women at Kapooka, Yvonne knew she had to be discreet about her sexuality: 'I had to be again, very mindful of my behaviour', being not only a female instructor, but instructing female recruits. She trails off as she states: 'If it got out that I was gay...'. There is no need for her to spell out the consequences of such a revelation; they would have been immediate and career-ending. While Yvonne kept her 'head down', she was fully aware that 'male instructors were fraternising with the female recruits'. The double-standard grated, but she focused on her job and seeing the women she trained progress.

Gradually the numbers of women at Kapooka increased and Yvonne became aware of other gay women who were serving.

By the second platoon, obviously I raised the first platoon and then 32 Platoon, 33 Platoon came on board. So they had female corporals. So I was by that stage one of the senior female corporals. Then a few more gay corporals, female corporals came through and you get to know them, because you're the minority. So you'd go out and have a drink with them and stuff.

As there were so few women, a sense of trust developed among those at Kapooka: 'Because we were the minority, there were only a few of us, you really knew who you could trust. You could pretty much trust all of them.' Yvonne became really good friends with another corporal who joined with the second platoon and ended up sharing a flat with her. Although the other woman was heterosexual, she knew about Yvonne's sexuality and accepted it without question: 'She'd have boys over and I'd have girls over and we just – it just worked.'

After two years at Kapooka as instructor, Yvonne was posted to Perth, back into Signals, in 1987. She notes that the work at Kapooka was so physically and intellectually demanding that 'they don't like you staying too long because you burn out'. In Perth, she was the Corporal at the communications Centre there, as well as a Cipher Operator. In late 1987, she was posted back to the 6 Sig Regiment in Melbourne working in the Communications Centre. By this stage, she knew a considerable number of gay women in

the Army and socialised with them: ‘We would do stuff. We would go out.’ Instead of the discreet gay and lesbian world that had existed in previous decades, there was a public and well-developed scene for LGBT people in Melbourne to enjoy by the 1980s.

While her life was proceeding well at this stage, in early 1988, Yvonne remembers hearing whispers going around that ‘there was a witch-hunt going on for lesbians in the Army. I was like: “Oh God no; got to keep my head down...”’. While Yvonne maintained discretion, she kept up her contact with trusted friends: ‘We just continued in our little group to go out and do our things.’ At this time, Yvonne was in a relationship with another servicewoman, Katrina, who was also in the 2nd Sig Regiment based in Watsonia. Soon, it became clear that she had been swept up in the witch-hunt. She says, ‘Now, how it unfolded, still to this day, I do not know. How my name was mentioned, I do not know.’

Later in our conversation, Yvonne returns to this topic and elaborates a little further. She believes that the names of suspected lesbians may have been mentioned after a failed drug raid where her partner was based. Yvonne notes, ‘She was never into drugs, never had been.’ However, Yvonne suspects that some of the men who may have been involved with drugs perhaps deflected attention away from themselves by saying ‘well, what about the lesbians, there’s this one and this one and this one.’ As Mark’s chapter on pXX reveals, this sort of deflecting tactic, uncovering homosexuals during a drugs investigation, is certainly recorded in at least one document from 1989. Yvonne’s Army police file, which she obtained in 2017 but had never seen before, did indeed state: ‘Suspected user – cannabis – hashish’, and indicated that another member reported Yvonne as being ‘involved in homosexual activities since 1983’. Yvonne was never a drug user – indeed her physical health was paramount to her – and she remains puzzled as to how this statement ended up on her police record. Perhaps someone with a grudge made a false statement.

Yvonne first realised that she had been named by someone as a suspected lesbian when she received a phone call, asking her to come down to the Victoria Barracks in Melbourne to see the Special Investigations Branch (SIB), ‘which is like the detectives of the military police’. Immediately suspecting that her relationship had been reported,

Yvonne called her partner and said, 'I don't know what's going on but I just got a call'. Her partner responded with, 'So have I.' Yvonne reported to the Barracks as requested and: 'was pretty much interrogated ... "We know you're a homosexual... we know this, we know that." They just started throwing things at me: 'Your name's been mentioned, that you're a lesbian. We have been following you. We've got this, this, this'". The scene she describes is brutal and very much in line with the experiences described by other women (and men) who were interrogated as suspected lesbians (and gays) in the 1970s and 1980s.

Aware of the potential consequences of exposure, Yvonne attempted to deny the allegations. As her interrogation continued:

I felt like I was a criminal. I felt like I had the big light on me, saying, 'Where were you on the ...?' And I was in there for several hours. Just so frightened. How old was I then? Twenty-seven. I was so frightened. I thought, 'This is my career, I'm gone.' I remember sitting in Vic Barracks and just feeling like a criminal. It went on and on and on. In the end, I think I came out and said, 'Well, I have been with a female but I am not a gay woman.' I knew that I was, but I thought if I expose everything, I'm gone.

The choice of being forced to deny who she was or to lose everything she had spent her entire military career working for was an agonising one. Yvonne's police record does not include a transcript of a police interview; instead, it says 'On 14 Jul 88, CPL Sillett was interviewed, however, she declined to answer any questions in relation to the allegation.' As Richard Gratton's story also highlights, this sort of record was not necessarily an accurate reflection of the intense, intimidating encounter with the SIB.

In the meantime, while Yvonne was experiencing this, Katrina was also being interrogated. The two women had not even had a chance to speak properly before they were put through this process. Yvonne was able to work out that women suspected of being homosexual in Signal Corps were being targeted. The witch-hunts could have been occurring across the Army, but for Yvonne, it was Signal Corps that she saw most impacted. She remembers: 'There was myself, who as a Corporal, my partner, Katrina, who was a Corporal' and 'about half a dozen' other servicewomen: 'I recall that we were all pretty much tarred with the same brush.' This was also the same time and likely the

same witch-hunt and investigation that caught 'Mark' (see pXX), who was also in the same Signal Corps.

While the interrogation had been deeply unsettling, when it finished, Yvonne felt an obligation to return to her duties back in the Communications Centre. The Centre was a major conduit for communication across Defence, with service personnel dealing with the incoming and outgoing material. Incredibly, as Yvonne relieved another serviceperson by receiving incoming signals to the Centre, she received a message that was about her. She remembers: 'It just so happened that I happened to see [that message] and my heart just sank. It started talking about downgrading of my security clearance. Straight away, I think, downgrading security – that's my job. That's what I do.' Devastated, Yvonne, 'just had to leave and go home'.

After taking some time to regroup at home, she thought: 'No, this is rubbish.' She sought the opportunity to put in a redress of grievance and did so: 'I wrote my redress of grievance pretty much explaining why I shouldn't be discharged and my passion and what I've given to them so far.' Her response was so detailed that it ran to three pages. Yvonne even sought advice from a military lawyer, 'which when you think about it, you think, well they're going to be on the Army's side'. She feels he 'was supportive but said, "It's policy. I'm really sorry, but it's policy"'. Her redress of grievance got knocked back: 'I thought, they've just gone bang. Just destroyed my world.' At the time this happened, she felt 'you don't have an option at all really. It's their way or the highway pretty much'.

On reflection, Yvonne now feels that she might have had a case to push to remain in the military.

When I look back now, how many years on, I look back and I think, hang on a minute, [they] were just saying, 'Your security clearance will be downgraded', not that you will be discharged. The policy states, 'We do not accept homosexual behaviour in here', so we've got really a contradiction.

Whether pushing harder would have helped is difficult to predict. Other accounts from this era show that men and women suspected of being homosexual had to deal with enormous prejudice, even if they were able to evade official sanctions. Only in

exceptional circumstances, such as the Richard Gration case, were these men or women able to retain their roles and have successful ongoing careers. For Yvonne, the rationale that homosexual women should not serve or have security clearance as they might be susceptible to blackmail still flummoxes her. She notes, with a degree of bewilderment, 'What are you going to do, tell the Russians? What do they care? I couldn't see the logic behind their thinking.'

Yvonne's discharge from the Army in January 1989, exactly ten years after she joined up, is still painful to reflect on. She emphasises all she gave to the military. Interestingly, she slips into the present tense when describing herself. It is clear that her military identity has never left her.

I'm a professional soldier. I've just raised eight female platoons. Eight and in each platoon, there's 30 women and I that whole time maintained professionalism and I was one of the very first female instructors. Respect me for that. Give me credit for that. Bang! Gone! It's like hmm, how did that work?

For Yvonne, being a soldier was so much a core part of her being that even today, she still thinks in these terms. She wishes she had questioned her treatment more at the time, 'but I was so shattered. I wasn't thinking clearly'. This is also a common sentiment among LGB service members caught unexpectedly and put through the intimidating investigation. During our interview, she told us that her mother died, not knowing why she was discharged because 'I didn't want to break her heart'. This was a considerable burden for Yvonne, from a military family, to carry. Much of what happened at the time of her discharge is still 'just a blur for me because it was just such a traumatic time'.

Yvonne was not dishonourably discharged; she was given an honourable discharge in January 1989. Still, for someone who had given so much energy and commitment to the military, knowing that her future would be compromised and that she would not be able to keep her top-secret clearance, this was still a terrible blow.

Yvonne emphasises just how structured military life is and how establishing a civilian life post-military can be challenging, particularly for those who join up when they are young.

You've joined straight from school, straight from home. You've never paid a medical bill, a dental bill. You've never done anything like that. Then you join the Army. You still don't pay any medical or dental. That's all covered for you. You've always got a roof over your head. You don't have to go and look for a place unless you choose to live off base. You don't have to go and find a meal; it's there for you at the mess. So you do this for ten years – for me – 20 to 30 for others. All of a sudden you come out into the civilian world, you've got to get Medicare. You've got to find – get a bond, but you can't – you don't have any references to get accommodation because you've always – if you've lived on base. It's like you've been on another planet for a period of time and now you've come back into the real world. When I was in it was definitely like that. Yeah.

In the aftermath, Yvonne sat down at home with a piece of paper and wrote down the number of the lesbian women she knew who served. This was a document just for her. Its primary purpose was to show just how many lesbian women were serving their country in the Army. By the time she finished, in just five minutes, she had noted more than 20 gay women. In our interview, she told us that many of these women continued to serve, managing to conceal their sexuality from officials and survive the witch-hunts until the ban on LGB service was lifted in 1992.

Katrina, her partner at the time of her discharge, was discharged at the same time, and the two women 'went and lived in Perth, because that's where she was from'. As it happened, Yvonne's parents had also made a decision to move to Perth, as that was where Yvonne's mother was originally from and she wanted to look after her ageing mother. After two years in Western Australia, Yvonne fell in love with a woman from Melbourne and moved back there with her: 'We were together probably about only three years but that got me back to Melbourne.' Later, Yvonne's parents also returned to Melbourne.

After leaving, Yvonne undertook a variety of different jobs: 'Did ten years in the Army. Got out angry. Did lots of different things. Went more into local government.' She had two sons with a former partner (not Katrina), Jack and Max, who are now in their teenage years. Her face lights up as she says that she 'just adores them' and the joy they've brought into her life. She also acknowledges that she would not have her sons in

her life had she not been discharged from the Army. The boys were conceived through IVF at a time when reproductive technologies were nowhere near as accessible for lesbians as they are today. She says, 'I was a pioneer at Kapooka. I was a pioneer with the boys. So there are good things in my life for sure. Absolutely. My current partner is just wonderful and very supportive.'

Understandably, for a considerable part of her post-military life, she has been publicly reserved about her sexuality in the workforce. Over the past few years, this has changed.

But now I'm getting older and nearing retirement, it's like, 'Oh look, I don't care.'

With what they – not what they put me through, but my experience at the time and now I'm older, it's like, 'Well what are they going to do to me?' But there's nothing they can do to me. So yeah, I'm out.

She also came out to her mother before she passed away. Her mother's unconditional acceptance was significant. Noting that her mother was from a different generation, Yvonne says, 'I was expecting more, "Oh dear, oh dear; what have we done wrong?" But no, she was great.'

In 2007, Yvonne came back to work for the Department of Defence in a civilian capacity. Her decision to return to Defence prompts surprise from those who know what happened to her:

So many people that know what happened to me in the Army, are going: 'Why on earth are you working for them?' I said, 'Well it's public service.' But I still love what I do and I still love the fact that I'm working for the military and helping them. It's the archaic policy that they had. But I really enjoy what I do and I'm dealing now with senior ranking officers: Major Generals, Air Vice Marshals. I'm dealing with very high ranking officers that get posted to North America and Canada. So I have to deal with and talk to them. They're just Joe and Bob. They're not Sir to me anymore. Whereas, when I was in, it would have been saluting and 'Sir' and 'Yes, Sir; no, Sir.' Now it's just, 'G'day how are you going?'

Yvonne did balk at applying for top-secret security clearance again. The process itself brought back the residual trauma she had endured when serving. When she started her

civilian job at Defence, ‘They started asking me – you know. I thought “No, I’m not going to tell them that I did have one once, and this is why I don’t have it” because it’s none of their business. So I said, “No, I’m not doing it.”’

Yvonne has been with Defence for over ten years. Part of her current role involves paying members posted overseas: ‘To this day, in however many years forward, we’ve got senior officers with the same classification getting posted overseas with their [same-sex] partners, which is awesome. But yeah, it’s like, how things change.’ While Yvonne was pleased to be able to see same-sex couples treated equally by the military, it naturally made her reflect on how her life might have been if the ban on open LGB service had been lifted earlier.

Over the years, Yvonne has done her best to cope with what happened. One of the particular challenges has been knowing how unfortunate she was to be named and how unlucky she was to be exposed before the ban was lifted. Had she been named just four years later, perhaps she would have been able to stay and see out her full 20 years. ‘There were so many ifs’, she says. Therapy helped and she believes the ongoing support and love of her partner and sons has helped her enormously. She has since revisited Kapooka for a reunion with the recruits she trained. About five years ago, they went into their original building. She saw: ‘On the wall, there is a photo of the inaugural 31 Platoon and there’s a photo of me still in the hallway with my recruits from January 1985. So that’s pretty amazing.’ At the time of the interview she was enthusiastically making plans to attend a WRAAC reunion.

Yvonne talked about her plans for retirement. She and her current partner were relocating to a rural location in Victoria known for its LGBT culture. This means they will be ‘living our dreams a little bit earlier than what we thought we would’. She notes that she has stayed in her current position for a substantial amount of time: ‘The only other job that I stayed at for that long was in uniform ten years. So I’ve done ten years – so pretty much 20 years of my life has been with the Defence, yeah. But not the way I wanted it. I wanted 20 years in uniform.’

The strong and resilient personality traits that enabled Yvonne to excel in the military have provided her with the strength she has needed to cope with what happened

to her. Her story is one of hundreds that highlight the deep personal toll that the military ban on homosexuality had on individuals. More than this, it also shows what the military lost when it discharged highly capable individuals as a result of pointless discrimination. While she once had to keep silent about her sexuality, Yvonne is open about sharing her past experience. She once proudly led an Anzac march at Kapooka, telling us that with enough time, in the future, she thinks she will 'march again'.

¹ Bomford, *Soldiers of the Queen*, 1.

² John Blaxland, *The Australian Army: From Whitlam to Howard* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 58.

³ Bomford, *Soldiers of the Queen*, 1.