

## A Comparison between Women in the Australian Military 1914-18 and 1975-2000

### Background

This project was started with an exhaustive literature review. This review aimed to develop a "sense of place".<sup>1</sup> In other words the review will establish the type of society which women faced in the two time periods identified in the title. However, this ethnographic aspect of the study will be complemented by the review's efforts to identify omissions or oversights within the literature. This dual objective will provide a basis from which women in the military within the respective societies may be studied.

The review adopted a thematic approach to an investigation of the available literature. Kellehear has stated that the validity of this approach is tied to "how well a researcher's understanding of a culture parallels that culture's view of itself."<sup>2</sup> Thus, this initial analysis will be emic in nature, although it is intended to extend the investigation beyond these initial findings in order to ensure a balanced report.

### 1914-1918

One of the major themes identified in the literature of this period was the strength of the patriarchy within Australian society. Such a claim appears inconsistent with the progressive nature of post Federation Australian society. Indeed, this nation of "independent Australian Britons" possessed a dynamism seemingly unmatched by their British forebears.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, social experimentation had provided almost universal suffrage (less Aborigines - 1902), the introduction of a Basic Wage (1907), and an Immigration Restriction Act (1901).<sup>4</sup> This Australian Social Darwinism was designed to fortify a society which viewed itself as an improved version of its British ancestors.

Despite the impressive legislative progress the patriarchy remained entrenched in power. Federal enfranchisement for women did not translate into electoral representation until 1943.<sup>5</sup> The Basic wage law only applied to men. Thus, women received under half the wage entitled to a man.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, legislation forced women, once married to resign. This lack of political and economic power for women reinforced the patriarchal nature of society in two ways. Firstly, women unable to compete with men on an equal basis remained powerless in a man's world. Thus, the women were relegated either by marriage or necessity to operate in the social arena. In this area women resumed their 'natural' place as wives and mothers.<sup>7</sup>

Nor did the absence of a high proportion of the male population during the First World War provide women with the opportunity to make economic or political inroads against the patriarchy. The employment of women remained tightly regulated by governments anxious to preserve the natural order of society where possible. Thus, women were denied access to employment traditionally labelled man's work such as manufacturing or heavy industry. Instead women found themselves absorbed into the lowest paid and lowest status occupations: typists, teachers, social work, clothing and textile industry.<sup>8</sup> The only civilian alternative employment was in joining one of the multitude of volunteer organisations which formed to help the war effort.<sup>9</sup> The final avenue women could pursue in their patriotic efforts was to enlist in the military. Nursing was the only occupation available to them.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, restrictive military

regulations limited women's authority and usefulness in a man's world.

Another major theme to emerge from the review was the formation of the ANZAC myth. The glorious failure of Gallipoli represented "the supreme test of courage and endurance of Australia's manhood."<sup>11</sup> This celebration defined both manhood and nationhood as the same concept. This masculinity defined both men and women. Both Carmel Shute and Katie Holmes indicate women were defined by their lack of masculinity.<sup>12</sup> Thus, women were prevented from producing their own images, instead relying on the male to define and therefore appropriate them. As Michael McKernan points out "the war experience of women confirmed rather than challenged their place in society."<sup>13</sup>

### 1975-2000

Henrik Ibsen once said "Modern society is not human society; it is a society of males."<sup>14</sup> Indeed, many of the issues facing women in the first period of the project were still prevalent in the modern society of the late 1960s and early 1970s; economic inequality, limited political power to name a few. In 1969 Germaine Greer instituted a more militant approach in redressing the balance through the formation of women's liberation groups.<sup>15</sup> This was followed in 1972 by the creation of the Women's Electoral Lobby which aimed at putting its demands on the public agenda. Other initiatives and successes followed: 1973 - paid maternity leave for Commonwealth public servants, 1983 - Senator Susan Ryan first minister on the status of women, 1984 - Federal Sex Discrimination Act, 1986 - Mary Gaudron becomes the first woman judge in the High Court.<sup>16</sup>

Each of these steps represented not only an incremental improvement in the battle for political and legal equality but also confirmed that women and society was embarking on a re-evaluation of women and their place within that society. This reconsideration of the position, value and role of women also impacted upon the military.

Since 1918 women have continued to expand their employment opportunities within the military. By 1975 women fulfilled a range of duties within the military albeit mostly of clerical, administrative and non combat orientated in nature.<sup>17</sup> However, as the women formed part of their own service they did not train nor compete on an equal basis with men.<sup>18</sup> Thus, an internal report was still commissioned to investigate the role of women within the forces.<sup>19</sup> This report recommended a raft of amendments to existing policies in order to achieve equality of opportunity. Recommendations included were that Servicewoman should be considered for active service but not on combat duties, that the same powers of command be vested in Servicewomen as are in servicemen and that the women train and compete with men.

Reports concerning the role and status of women within the military have appeared at regular intervals. One of the most recent is Dr Clare Burton's Women in the ADF. Burton concluded that the military is lagging behind society in its handling of women and women's issues. Her recommendations indicate that the ADF requires the leadership to provide the necessary legislative and attitudinal shift required to revitalise the ADF as a prospective employer to women.<sup>20</sup>

### The Design

The literature review revealed both omissions within society and the literature that was a reflection of that society. For example, official histories such as Scott's and Bean's reflected the

achievement of ANZAC and thus the war was the achievement of the Australian male.<sup>22</sup> Women were superfluous to the stereotypical even mythological figure of the egalitarian mate orientated bushman which these accounts enshrined. More recent 'histories' have taken the form of reports such as Burton's or Quinn's analysis of today's women in the military.<sup>23</sup> However, whilst authors such as Shute, Holmes, Damousi and Lake have re-examined gender and the military of the past, no similar account exists for the present.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, there has been no longitudinal studies conducted to examine whether women of today's military remain as undervalued and mistreated as their forerunners.

In order to address these omissions this project has adopted a multifaceted methodology using the disciplines of Feminism, History and Sociology. The combination of these disciplines would provide a range of quantitative and qualitative data collection tools such as documentary analysis and surveys. This triangulation of approaches is designed to compensate for the shortcomings in each method and validate the results by analysing them from alternative perspectives.<sup>25</sup> Each discipline will provide its own unique contribution to the study by its approach and the sources it accesses. The first discipline to be examined is Feminism.

Feminism itself is recognised as a multimethod interdisciplinary technique. That is, the discipline is capable of accessing a range of sources in a variety of ways. Feminism is not restricted by methodological, national or disciplinary boundaries. Consequently, feminist revisions of the First World War have re-evaluated women; their place and portrayal, both in the society of the time and its literature and imagery.

Again, writers such as Holmes have incorporated analysis of stained glass windows from the Australian War Memorial, fund raising posters from the War, popular songs of the era and personal diaries and letters in an effort to access her subject more effectively.<sup>26</sup> Others such as McCallum have collected data from Germany and Britain to provide a more balanced account of the war's impact on Australian women.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, all feminist writers covered by this study highlighted the dominance of the patriarchy and the suppression or appropriation of the female.

Feminist criticism outlined in this study has revised the views presented by the official histories. These histories characterise the Australian war effort as a united front against a common foe. Fisher's rallying call that Australia would support Britain to "the last man and last shilling" indicated the unity that Australia espoused.<sup>28</sup> However, some feminist writers contend that such a view is phallacy in that it portrays the monolithic patriarchal interpretation of a nation at war.<sup>29</sup> These writers point to the issue of conscription in countering the official histories.

The debate over the intended introduction of conscription was both acerbic and acrimonious. The debate broke the Labour party as a political force and almost split the nation asunder. Moreover, the absence of a large number of the voting men recast the importance of the recent federal enfranchisement of women. Consequently, both pro and anti conscription factions appealed to women to support their argument. Patsy Adam Smith in Australian Women and the War in a chapter titled "The White Feather" demonstrates the caustic nature of the propaganda used by both sides to state their respective cases.<sup>30</sup>

The rhetoric and imagery of the campaigns targeted women's vote. The anti-conscription organisations such as the Women's Peace Army (WPA) and the Sisterhood for International Peace sought to appropriate motherhood; the image of women as life-givers and providers of peace. Vida Goldstein, President of the WPA, argued that it was a woman's duty to protect her own:

The time has come when the women, the mothers of the world shall refuse to give their sons as material for shot and shell.<sup>31</sup>

The pro conscription faction was equally vociferous and merciless in its appropriation of women for its own ends. Organisations such as the Women's Compulsory and All Loyal League, the Women's Compulsory Service League and the Australian Women's National League were all strident in their criticisms of the peace groups. The flagship of the AWNL, *The Woman*, appealed to women voting "No" to conscription to reconsider their decision on the basis of their honour and the duty and loyalty owed to their men:

To those of you who intend to vote "NO" I ask you. . . think of the husband, son, brother, or sweetheart, who is fighting for your honour. . . would he not turn to you with reproachful looks, and his pleading voice sound in your ears: 'Why desert me in my hour of trial?'<sup>62</sup>

Consequently, women were appealed to in the context of their duty within the patriarchal system rather than as women. Therefore, the appeal tended to reinforce the dominance of men at the expense of women.

Feminism has also sought to re-examine the most powerful and enduring myth of the Great War, that of ANZAC. This potent myth was founded on the shores of Gallipoli. The veneration of Australian masculinity and confirmation of Australian nationhood became inextricably linked by the tremendous volume of literature which was generated by the campaign.<sup>33</sup> Peter Dennis and Jeff Grey have recognised that Australian historiography covering this period has been generally unbalanced.<sup>34</sup> They attribute this to the domination of the subject by the monumental and influential official history produced by C.E.W. Bean in the 1920s and 1930s.

Katie Holmes highlighted how the 2229 nurses of the Australian Army Nursing Service challenged the conception of masculinity by their very presence within the military.<sup>35</sup> The military considered the proximity of the nurses to the soldiers/men a threat to the concepts of mateship and maleness the military engendered. Thus, in theory, nurses were restricted from operating too close to the frontlines. Although many female nurses eventually were employed in Casualty Clearing Stations, which were the first medical facility a wounded soldier was brought to for treatment.

Holmes has also noted the imposition of other regulations such as the lack of authority granted to the matron, the austere even gender neutral uniforms, and the titles of 'sister' and 'matron' which the nurses were to be addressed as. Each of these regulations was the military's attempt to negotiate, marginalise and subjugate the sexuality of the woman behind the nurse. The military aimed to equate the women or nurses to the mothers or sisters the men had left behind. Consequently, men would be less likely to consider the nurses as sexually available. Thus, the masculinity and discipline of the military would be preserved by denying women access to the feminine aspect of their nature and hence denying men access to their feminine aspects.

In summary, Feminism has confirmed its willingness to employ a variety of disciplines and a multitude of sources in order to balance or counter patriarchal claims. In this study Feminism has embraced sources from art and propaganda to personal diaries and newspapers. Disciplines involved include politics, sociology and military and social history. Consequently, elements of historical analysis have already appeared within the study. These include the examination of official histories, past newspapers, personal memorabilia and other documentary analysis.

History has traditionally favoured this documentary analysis as the most reliable method of establishing past reality. New Historicism questions whether the past is accessible or simply remains a series of subjective interpretations masquerading as the 'truth'. Practitioners such as Stephen Greenblatt and Jonathan Dollimore suggest that History is more fragmented than the monolithic version presented by traditionalists.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, History is not one but a multiplicity of voices or interpretations each equally valid. Hence, official histories would be riven by class, ethnic and ideological divisions. Feminism is equally susceptible to such analysis. New Historicism would view Feminism as matriarchal. That is, the critics and their subjects are as white, urban, middle class and Western as the patriarchy they challenge. The only difference between the two areas is gender. The theory highlights that the matriarchy excludes a variety of women from analysis including those from lower class backgrounds, Aborigines and those in the country.

Part of these omissions is attributable to the lack of history or documentation available for examination. Feminist reassessment relied extensively on personal sources such as letters and diaries. These documents are generally recognised as productions of the better educated. Thus, many of the omitted women were either illiterate or illegible.

Finally, New Historicism is a method that accepts its own subjectivity and historicity. Practitioners of the method argue that by acknowledging their personal circumstances individual prejudice may be circumvented.<sup>37</sup>

Sociology is the third and final discipline used as part of the methodology of this report. Like history, sociology has been tarred with the brush of feminism. Katie Holmes' work on nurses of the First World War was an emic piece of research into the real and perceived role of women in the military.<sup>38</sup> Many of her insights were produced from research into the nurses own stories through their diaries and letters. Such research would appear to fit the archetypal view of sociology as expressed by Peter Worsley. He states that:

the aim of research is still to explain how society works and how, despite differences of interest and outlook between various social groups, order comes about or is achieved.<sup>39</sup>

Sociology has also proved a useful methodology for examining more recent societies. This is because one of the main sources of data for the discipline is society and the people within that society. Clearly, modern societies and the people which make them are generally alive, accessible and hopefully available. Reports on gender in the military are plentiful. Some of the most recent include the role of women within the forces and the pressures faced by military women in balancing career goals against family expectations.<sup>40</sup>

Moreover, surveys and interviews may be considered the favoured technique of the sociologist. These methods require people. The use of quantitative techniques provides a counterweight to balance the ethnographic feminist concerns.<sup>41</sup> For these reasons a questionnaire was enlisted by this report in order to establish any modern concerns with the role of women in the military.

In summary, each discipline selected is designed to balance the weaknesses of the other two. This triangulation brings an armoury of quantitative and qualitative techniques to bear on the subject. Emic and etic bias is also minimised and the report produced more accurate and precise. The disciplines selected are both scientifically and ethically appropriate.

## Ethics

The American Sociological Association code of ethics highlights the ethical requirement for sociologists to present their work free of personal, methodological and ideological prejudice.<sup>42</sup> The acknowledgment of such bias prevents the misrepresentation of work. The British Social Research Association is even more specific in stating social researchers should:

not engage or collude in selecting methods designed to produce misleading results, or in misrepresenting findings by commission or omission.<sup>43</sup>

One of the major ethical concerns contained in the report has been termed "ethics in the library."<sup>44</sup> This consideration relates directly to the source material accessed by the report. Most of this material including documents, posters and audio-visual was located in the library. Original authors may have living relatives and researchers must remain sensitive to preventing any misrepresentations or inaccuracies to undermine the report and effect the relatives. This remains important even though the sources were available through public libraries. Thus, where researchers believe confidentiality and privacy will be effected they must make every effort secure consent for the use of the material.

Another ethical consideration was raised by the use of a questionnaire as part of the data collection tools. Ethical concerns revolve around the question of informed consent. Homan contributes a detailed discussion on this phrase. The key to the phrase centres on the participant volunteering assistance and that the volunteer comprehends the nature of what is to occur and what might occur. However, informed consent does not preclude the researcher from maintaining the privacy of the participant and the confidentiality of the data collected. Researchers must appreciate that informed consent is designed to protect their subjects and not the researchers.<sup>45</sup>

The distributor of the questionnaire used in this report failed to fully inform all participants as to the specific aim of the report. However, it was not the researchers aim to deceitfully gain consent. Although it is acknowledged, but considered unlikely, that some participants may have withdrawn consent had full disclosure been provided. Nonetheless, participants anonymity and privacy has been provided.

## The Questionnaire

The attached questionnaire was accepted by four Army personnel from the rank of Corporal to Captain. Two of each gender were approached. One male did not complete the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was prepared as a limited pilot study into the attitudes and role of women within the military. Consequently, the questions appear slanted towards female respondents. Such a bias may prove disconcerting to male respondents, although neither male sampled mentioned this as a problem.

The questionnaire aimed to address issues that had been identified in the literature review and research design. These issues concentrated on the attitudinal and leadership dynamics and problems between males and females. The questions reflected the researchers perception that a conflict may have existed between the genders. The respondents indicated that reality might not match perception as none of the respondents identified gender dynamics as a problem. Indeed,

one female stated she had problems with female superiors.

These answers may have been a product of both the workplace environment and limited participants involved. A broader survey analysing personnel from the three services across a range of ranks and work places would provide more quantitative data.

The questions provided were both quantitative and qualitative in nature. Again, this was designed to elicit both quantifiable evidence and ethnographic detail from respondents. The majority of the answers could be tabularised in order to form a general impression from the answers. Whilst the short answer type questions would provide commentary to flesh out the bones of the quantitative data.

Overall, the questionnaire was relatively effective. None of the respondents identified any questions as either misleading or poorly structured. The male who returned an incomplete questionnaire commented that the questions he had failed to answer required him to think and that a lack of time meant he was unable to complete the questionnaire. Nevertheless all questions resulted in appropriate answers, in that they answered the question. Moreover, none of the common forms of response bias appear in the answers.<sup>46</sup> In this respect, the questionnaire could be considered effective. However, the effectiveness of the questionnaire could have been improved by reducing the amount of open-ended questions such as Q9-16. This may have enabled all questionnaires to be completed despite work pressures.

Note for Readers:

My apologies to readers as the questionnaire and footnotes for this research were corrupted when converting the files from previous word processing software.

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