

Female soldiers make

The walls will come down in the next five years but women soldiers are already doing a remarkable job in Afghanistan



Wing Commander Catie Williams
Poised to take over as Base Commander at Tarin Kot from another woman

WHEN Private Anita Lewis's friends question her about the scar on her hand, she's quick to admit – with a laugh – that it's not a pistol-firing injury but the result of a nasty hair straightener burn.

But it would be wrong to underestimate the ambitious young soldier who plans to become one of the first Australian women to apply for a role previously considered too dangerous for her gender.

The aspiring combat engineer joined the army at just 17, has been based in Townsville with 3rd Combat Service Support Battalion since last year and is on her first deployment to Afghanistan.

Of the 29 Australians killed in action in Afghanistan, five have been combat engineers. While females can become combat engineers, they cannot be in direct combat roles and so are limited to construction squadrons and topographical units.

For the men, however, the role includes finding and destroying Improvised Explosive Devices – the Taliban's covert weapon of choice – which can blow off limbs and reduce vehicles to piles of twisted metal.

It's unsurprising that while Pte Lewis's family have supported her decision, her partner, a fellow soldier, is unwilling for her to make the move.

"I joined the army for a reason, not just to sit behind a computer desk," she said.

"I've already passed the fitness tests required unofficially, so I think I could make it for real.

"Because you're one of the first, there is that pressure and the guys will probably test you out.

"If you can do the job and expectations and standards don't drop, then why not?"

"It's when they drop that people get killed."

Other roles that will soon be opened up to anyone able to meet the physical and mental requirements, regardless of gender, will include mine clearance divers, commandos, SAS, infantry and artillery.

Combined Team Uruzgan senior female officer Major Vicci Young shares the concern about the stringent physical and mental standards being relaxed after the small percentage of restricted roles is opened to both genders.

Maj Young's job is to deal with equity issues for the Australian women deployed to Uruzgan and she is adamant the remarkable and often dangerous job women are already doing is not overlooked in the hype.

"The biggest concern most females I've spoken to have isn't that it's going to be



Sergeant Charmaine Hass
Only Aussie female terminal operator

opened up. It's that the requirements will be lowered to let them in. If that happens, we've failed," she said.

"If you want to do it, you have to be able to do it right. There can't be a girl door and a boy door. But if the woman can do it at the level required, then give her a crack."

Sergeant Charmaine Hass knows what it's like to be in the minority.

But as the only Australian female terminal operator (logistics worker) in Afghanistan, she doesn't see it as a negative.

"It doesn't bother me at all. The boys are all legends and we've got a really good crew," she said.

"I think if they integrate the new roles well and only have women who can do the jobs well then they will get the guys' respect."

The Australian Defence Force already has

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their mark

Story by **Emily Macdonald**, photos by **Evan Morgan** in Tarin Kot



'Packing heat' in Green Beans coffee shop

by **Evan Morgan** in Tarin Kot



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TARIN Kot is a frontier town. Everyone is packing. But instead of saloons with swinging doors you would walk through - spurs jangling and Colt .45 slung in your holster - to get a shot of whisky, there is the Green Beans coffee shop.

It's open 24 hours a day and run by Indians with a ready smile. So lining up to get a latte, chocolate smoothie or a double or triple shot short black, there is always an assortment of weapons. Some wear uniforms.

There are US Army, Slovakian, Singaporeans and Diggers all carrying, not a pistol or a rifle, but what is called their own personal weapon systems which is either a rifle or a pistol.

And uniforms are not mandatory. Someone in front of you in the queue may be wearing a tropical Friday shirt and then you notice the 9mm pistol slung on his right hip.

I'm packing a Nikon D53 on one shoulder and a D700 on the other but think I will be keeping quiet. But we are at threat-level green which means no one has to wear their body armour all the time. But everyone is packing for a reason.

Yesterday at the freight distribution centre a siren sounded with a voice, "incoming", incoming, incoming" so everyone, everywhere on base just dived to the ground and covered their eyes with their hands. Then we had to rush to a concrete bunker and stay put until given the all clear. Sometimes you can sit in the bunker for a while so games of trivia start. Or small talk.

One major sitting opposite a private noted a scar near the thumb of her right hand and asked if it was from hammer strike from firing a pistol. The private quickly replied, "no sir, from a curling wand before I was deployed." It brought the house (bunker) down with laughter.

Five minutes after getting the all clear there was another warning siren followed by "ground attack, ground attack". Everybody quickly put on their body armour and rushed to their accommodation block for a lock-down. This time it was only a drill.

The weather is perfect . . . right in between the 45C extreme of summer and the big freeze of winter. On the first day in Tarin Kot we were taken on a drive around the perimeter of the base. Coming around one corner, there was a large, tranquil lake with a watchtower reflected in the water. I thought, "Well it would be great to do a few laps every morning". Then our four-wheel-drive went around another bend and there was a change in the wind. It was the pool and due to a healthy appetite among personnel it was struggling to contain the overflow.



high-ranking women making significant contributions.

Wing-Commander Catie Williams is poised to take over as Base Commander at Tarin Kot from another woman, Wg-Cdr Barbara Courtney. With 30 years of experience in the RAAF to her name, Wg-Cdr Williams will have more than 350 people reporting to her to do what she describes as "running the hotel" and providing everything the personnel at the base need.

"I absolutely support the changes, they're for the best. When I first joined I was one of the first female air traffic controllers . . . we paved a lot of roads," she said.

"I originally wanted to be a fighter pilot but they weren't taking women in those days at first. When they did open it up, I decided to apply and the guys were encouraging me

all the way. The year after I became too old to reapply, they took the first woman. But I'm happy. This deployment is going to be quite challenging and I'm looking forward to it."

The man in charge of all Australian forces in the Middle East Area of Operations, Commander Joint Task Force 633 Major-General Angus Campbell, believed when it came to doing a good job, gender shouldn't come into it.

"All jobs will be open to all persons able to meet the specifications for those jobs and on that basis, why wouldn't anyone who wished to serve in different roles be able to serve?" he said.

"Women are making a great contribution and have done so and will continue to do so. More important than a gender-specific

comment is that all of the people here, regardless of gender, are making a very strong contribution."

The removal of gender discrimination from the seven per cent of roles closed to women in the Australian Defence Force has a five-year implementation period.

It remains to be seen how successful the transition will be and how many women will actually take up the opportunity once available.

"Thinking about applying and actually being willing to put your name to the paperwork are very different," Pte Lewis said.

"Many women say they want to be given an equal chance, but if you ask them to come for a run with you or carry some jerry cans, they don't want to actually do it. But I will be there."

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