



KEYNOTE SPEAKER – RACH RANTON
Prime Minister's Veteran Employee of the Year 2018
Tuesday, 11 September 2018

Thank you Susan and thank you Honouring Women United by Defence Service for inviting me to speak tonight.

Thank you to those women who shared their stories with me as I worked on this speech. These women were open and generous. They shared details that help us glimpse into the world that they have lived in through their personal connection to Defence Service.

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She the mother

The palliative care ward in the small town I grew up in is a single room in our tiny country hospital. One bed.

A few days earlier we'd all been watching the cricket together on the tiny TV screen in dad's hospital room. All of us were crowded around his bed watching Australia play South Africa. The game gave dad a chance to bag Michael Bevan again, a favoured whipping boy who failed with both the bat and the ball that game.

We all share stories and try to get a laugh in that room.

I start talking about the posting to the School of Languages my partner Damo and I are headed on next year in Melbourne. I get half way through and stop myself.

Dad isn't going to be here next year.

He isn't going to be here next month.

I stop because at 22, I am about to lose my dad.

The Army has been awesome to us. Me and Damo are both serving members and they've let us fly down from Queensland for the last few days of Dad's life. But we've only got five days compassionate leave so Damo's phone rings and he steps outside.

It is our LT.

After a few shuffling 'how are things?' questions the young Lewie tries to move the conversation awkwardly towards when we'd be back at work. The 2IC of the unit is gathering names and they want Damo for an exercise.

Damo and he dance around the words until Damo realises that the euphemisms are not getting through.

"Terry's not dead yet' he says bluntly.

They back off for a few days after that.

As dad deteriorates the nurses that have known our family for our whole lives move carefully in and around us. Rosemary, the mum of a boy I went to school with is one of these nurses. That son of hers had joined the Navy and had been sent to Timor around the same time I had. Her son is living far away from her, just as I am living far from my family. He has a new life that she doesn't really understand, just as I have a new life disconnected from my family.

Rosemary's empathy is palpable. She sometimes shares a quiet word about her son and our common experiences. At other times she completes her tasks soundlessly, giving us space.

When dad's breathing finally stops, none of us want to leave the room. Rosemary comes in and sits me down near the edge of dad's bed. She has a monitor with her, a doppler. She straps the device across my widening belly and turns up the volume. The sound of my son's beating heart fills the room where my dad's heart has just stopped.

Two days later we fly back to the barracks.

I am still doing PT with the unit as I am only four months pregnant. I don my PT gear and stride out onto the parade ground with everyone else at 7:30 the next morning.

We get marked off and jog down to the oval for one of my last games of touch footy with the regiment.

Our baby is the whole unit's baby and they are all starting to feel weird about trying to run me down now that my bump is showing.

Damo leaves on exercise later that week.

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She the wife

When Mary met Alan, he wasn't in the Army.

They were high school sweethearts who spent their days going to the movies and driving to the beach. They hung out with her sisters in the city, met friends for dinner, were social.

They got married after Alan returned from Vietnam; had two kids, and settled into their new Army lives.

Alan went on exercise, and Mary gave up her job.

Alan went on exercise, and Mary raised their children.

Alan went on exercise, and Mary stayed at home.

Then, they posted away from Mary's family.

Alan went on exercise, and Mary kept the home fires burning.

Alan went on exercise, and Mary continued to raise their kids.

Alan went on exercise, and Mary became isolated by her loneliness.

For twenty years, over and over again Alan went on exercise, on promotion courses, on exciting adventures.

Mary was bound to the house.

To Alan, Mary was all he expected of her. She was the wife, the mother, the stability at home.

But this was not all that Mary had expected for herself.

Military wives like Mary are painted as supporters all the time, but support is not really the right description for role Mary and others like her play.

Support implies that someone else did the main role, and the 'supporter' helps out.

In reality Mary was the mother and the father.
She did the washing and coached the softball team. She worked at tuckshop and taught their eldest to drive. She helped her daughter with homework, and showed her son how to shave. Time and time again, there was no second team member, no other adult around. Just Mary.

Mary didn't ask for this.
She didn't want to be third or fourth in the list of her husband's priorities.

For the Army to always come first.

When they posted to Townsville, Mary left behind her parents.

Her brother.

Her sisters.

And their relationships were never the same again.

Mary says
"I don't know if he promised or not,
But we agreed that when the children started high school, he would get out of the Army.

He didn't get out of the Army.
He got a promotion."

Their life of adventures was soon a life of adventures for Alan only.
He told her about the beauty of the island he was detached to, promising to take her there one day, but never delivering. At home he was addicted to the couch, the house, to no surprises. She begged for them to go out, and whilst he didn't stop her, he never went with her either.

Mary recalls:
"He didn't realise that he was out having adventures whilst I was at home. There was no adventure for me. I wanted to go and do things with him when he got home. But he didn't want to do anything with me.

Sometimes I still get angry about it.
And sometimes I just sit here and cry by myself."

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She the worker

Before World War II, job opportunities for women existed only for the middle class who became nurses or teachers. These women were obliged to cease paid work after marriage.
This bar on the employment of married women was only abolished in 1966 – 52 years ago.

I'm going to say that again.
Just over 50 years ago, if you were a women, you had to stop work when you got married.

For some of you in this room, this is not news – this is your lived experience.
But for those of you around my age, this is unbelievable!
It never occurred to me once in my life that I couldn't work, go to Uni, hell – even join the Army. We have come so far that I never comprehended that choosing to work was not an option that was open for my grandmother.

Understanding this has helped me understand more about the completely different lives women before me have lived. Women often weren't in a 'support' role because they chose to be, they had no independence because it was stripped from them the moment they were married.

But World War II played a huge role in this shift towards women's right to work.

When Hilda joined the war effort in 1943 her brother had been serving overseas for 6 months already.

She and her sister started working in a munitions factory in Footscray producing .303 rifle ammunition. In the Maribyrnong complex where she worked, Hilda and her sister lived in the women's hostel across the street from the factory and worked alongside 20,000 men and women for 12 hour shifts, six days a week. More than half that workforce at Footscray was women - many 'grandmas' joined the cause and began working outside the home for the first time in their lives. The number of women employed in industry exploded from 1000 to 145,000.

Hilda said:

"You've got to put out a perfect bullet for the simple reason that they use them in the aeroplanes. And if it jams their guns, well it could kill all the men. After all, if you've got a jammed gun, you lose your aeroplane. But more importantly, you lose somebody's brother, husband or son."

Hilda and her sister were in their early twenties when they volunteered.

When the war ended, Hilda gave up her job and married a man returning from the war. She became the quintessential 1950's housewife, an image cultivated and reinforced by society to encourage women back towards the traditional roles of wives and mothers.

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She the widow

Julie and Dave had married in their late 20s before Dave decided he wanted to join the Airforce. They'd been battlers, living in a housing commission house out west of Sydney and Dave saw the military as a way to break the cycle. Julie quit her job to follow him and to move their family onto the married patch for his first posting to Amberley Airbase.

Back then, Amberley was really out in the bush – and it was before the internet, before mobile phones. Julie found herself 60 kms from Brisbane with no car, three kids and a fridge that wouldn't make it through the summer.

It was a Tuesday morning when Julie decided to take the kids into the city. She packed them all up, pushing their second-hand stroller and walking at her toddler's pace through the married patch. Julie felt the eyes of the other mothers on her, judging her with their blow-dried hair and perfect children. They wore their husband's ranks as if they were their own, one telling her the week before that she was a Warrant Officer's wife so wouldn't be spending time with Julie, a lowly AC.

In the stinking Queensland heat Julie and her kids trudged the 2kms to the front gate to catch the bus into town. Julie stood sweating, waiting with her increasingly impatient brood. After an hour her 7 year old sat on the ground and began drawing in the dirt. Her baby began to bawl. She gave up, and began the slow walk back to their married quarters.

The WOFs wife took great pleasure in sauntering down when Julie arrived home to tell her “there’s no bus on Tuesday’s love”.

Within a few months Dave went on exercise.

Julie noticed a box of laundry powder appear in the window of the WOFs house.

On a convoy within the exercise area, the truck that Dave was in rolled. He was in the back of a TCV Unimog, lying along the benches with his head propped on his pack. The impact snapped his neck.

The Chaplin arrived at Julie’s house with an officer she’d never met.

In shock, she accepted the overwhelming support of Dave’s friends and workmates as the military rushed to surround her. They organised the funeral, mowed her lawn, fixed up the fence that had been falling down.

But Julie didn’t know how to grieve.

Was she a war widow? But Dave didn’t die at war?

Aren’t widows supposed to be old?

Should she feel proud of his service? Even though he’d been in less than a year?

Would she ever be anything other than a widow ever again?

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She the veteran

My job in the Army was an Electronic Warfare operator. For most of my career, I was posted to the tactical unit for my trade, and so my role was to embed with the frontline to intercept and analyse enemy communications, and provide advice on the battlefield.

I did this in East Timor in 1999, and again in Afghanistan in 2006.

I have lived on both sides of this military experience.

As a partner:

- Damo went on his first promotion course when our son Will was only two weeks old
- He went on four deployments in 7 years, two whilst I was in, two after I got out

As a veteran myself I missed Will’s first day of school.

In the lead up to our deployment to Afghanistan, I spent 3 months away from my family learning a language and then months in and out of force prep with 5/7 RAR and 2 Cav. In that final year in the Army, I was away for 11 out of 12 months.

It is these unseen sacrifices that all veterans and their families endure.

Despite this, my time in the Army as a female veteran offered me incredible experiences.

I embedded with infantry, joined overwatch, and I made big calls.

I was valued, requested and included, and I told and learned the dirtiest jokes.

I hid from the media in Afghanistan, as they didn’t know our women were already on the frontlines of this modern battlefield.

I was one of the boys, part of the gang, supported and respected.

My work was appreciated, my knowledge deemed mission critical, and my contribution recognised.

I was enormously lucky to spend my military career surrounded by men and women who encouraged me to be nothing but my best.

But this is not the case for everyone who served.
Much time served has been hard time.
Not everyone worked with those that valued them and respected them.

It's never easy being different – and women still are 'different' in the military. It takes a certain type of personality to be attracted to that type of work and that type of environment.

A sense of adventure, a tough-ness, a determination to prove yourself.
I've seen that in nearly every female veteran I've met.

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She who is united with others by Defence Service

Women play so many roles in service to Defence.

They are veterans.
They are wives.
They are daughters.
They are mothers.

They are friends, mentors, sisters, aunts, grandmothers, leaders, colleagues and role models.

We honour them all tonight.

In terms of support for our women, there is much more to do.
And I don't know if we've ever been more ready to do it well than we are right now.

Tonight, DVA, Legacy, the RSL, War Widows, TPI Federation, the Australian Defence Force and the Australian Women's Veterans Network are all in this room together for the first time ever.

People young and old with every connection to Defence share tables here tonight.

We are united by the women we are, the women that support us, and the women that we support.

We have a unique opportunity in the history of Australia to work together going forward from here.
Not just for women, but for all who serve.
Let's move forward together.

Thank you