

## Behind every good man ...

'Behind every good man is an even better woman.'

To paraphrase and add a little literary licence to a 2003 American discussion paper (Flannery O'Connor et al) on this subject. 'When we used to think about a woman, we envision a pale wisp of a lady who swoons if it gets too hot. She is delicate and beautiful and must be taken care of by a man.'

A century ago, this was the image that males adopted when it came to the way in which one perceived members of the fairer sex. However, within the last century in Australia, factors such as two world wars, the Great Depression, flower power, the liberation of women and the changing role of women in the workforce have generated tough and capable women who are willing to take on any role a man can do. Within them there is none stronger than the woman who stands behind her soldier.

This may seem a rather strange introduction for the editorial of 'Tiger Rag', but the calendar flipped over to 2008 and as I entered the downhill slope of my 65<sup>th</sup> year, I began contemplating the strength of the women who had stood behind us when, heads down and blinkers on, we charged through our military careers. They are a very particular breed of women and today I will pay them a long overdue tribute.

When we first entered the Army, very few of us were married. The work-hard-play-hard syndrome was a way of life. With a fortnight's pay burning a hole in the pocket and feeling invincible, one could blow the whole wad in a single night of boozing and/or trying to impress the local lasses, be carried home by one's mates, and then face 13 days of free food and a roof over one's head till the next pay day.

But sooner or later, there was a particular woman who became more than good company on nights out and someone who you really wanted to be with. She could even curb your drinking, guide your dress sense, and prove to you that there was more to life than work, pay and spending. With her, you even began to save and a whole new world of hitherto unobtainable assets became possible.

Suddenly, you realised that, despite the mateship and camaraderie of your fellow soldiers, there was a need for another side to life, a side which included this particular woman. Of course, not all of your mates thought you were right in the head about this because you began talking about living out of barracks, getting married and buying a house—even having children! Eventually, however, and despite your mates' earnest counselling, you became engaged and then married.

I can recall a wise old warrant officer telling us during training as officer cadets that soldiers should marry nurses, teachers or air hostesses because they were used to a nomadic lifestyle and could tolerate the turbulence of military life. The upheavals caused by the Army's posting cycles did not seem terribly important or relevant when one is young, but some of this advice must have stuck—I married a nurse.

In the 1950s and the '60s, one of the things that often happened after marriage (or in some cases led to marriage) was an overseas posting. Now, whilst Korea was no cup of tea because memories of the Second World War were still very fresh in everyone's minds, Malaya and then Malaysia were a little bit of the British Raj—an accompanied posting with house help, overseas allowances and a relatively cheaper cost of living.

The downside of this Raj was, of course, that the menfolk spent most of their time away from home with only four days of leave each month and a Christmas break. This strongly impinged upon family life and, though lonely for a wife with no children, frequently brought strong challenges to the others. Though there were house help and wives' groups overseen by rear detail personnel, the woman of the house was obliged to assume all the absent husband's roles including finance manager, disciplinarian, bill disputer and home maintainer.

Back in Australia in the 1960s, the trials of new organisations, equipments and operational concepts led to long (several months at a time) training exercises. These led to family circumstances which were not unlike the days of the Raj, but minus the advantages of house help, baby sitters and

sometimes the wives groups. Under these circumstances, the woman of the house suffered a much more tedious existence and the bonds of marriage were really tested.

Then the Vietnam War began. Not only were the wives of Regular Army servicemen subjected to 12 months of spouse deprivation, but the younger married partners of the 20-year-old National Servicemen suddenly found that the drop of a lottery ball had hurled them into this melee of sudden separation. Worse still, this was the first time in which the television media brought the frightening detail of war into the lounge room of every home. The casualties in Vietnam were also many times those suffered in Malaya, Malaysia and Borneo operations so a new dimension of fear was added to the burden of the women at home.

The last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was comparatively peaceful as far as the Australian Army was concerned with only the occasional Rwanda, New Guinea, Somalia, Gulf or Cambodia experiences providing challenges to the soldier's wife left at home. In some way, however, these sudden absences had a more devastating effect than, say, during the Vietnam War because there were few family welfare systems established. Those that existed were sorely untested, so again the soldiers' women were where the family buck stopped.

Since 1999, the troubles in East Timor, the Solomons, Iraq and Afghanistan have led to a plethora of six-month overseas operational postings. Whilst this may not seem as trying for the womenfolk, new factors are causing fresh problems: rotations back overseas are becoming more frequent; more women are in the workforce, some in quite demanding jobs; and the media frenzy is bringing operations into homes almost as they are occurring—and in graphic detail.

Throughout all these times, women have not only stood behind their men's decisions to serve operationally, but have in fact stood in their men's places on the home front. It is they who have brought up the children and they who have been the lonely face at sports' finals, at parent-teacher evenings, and at school concerts. These women have been the ones who had to put on the extra jolly faces on Christmas days when fathers were serving overseas.

Eventually there comes a time when the soldier stops soldiering—for money that is. Nevertheless, he still maintains contact with his old service mates, he still relives the old nightmare demons of the past and he often becomes a cranky old bugger. Without dependant children, these have been the final straws that have broken the back of numerous marriages. Within others, there has been a new pulling together to defeat new enemies—old ghosts, old injuries and old age.

When we originally took those alter oaths to 'love, honour and obey', 'in sickness and in health', no soldier's woman ever expected she would be tested to the very limit of these words. The pair were supposed to be a team, helping each other and heading for the same goals. The military took the 'we' out of the team and the woman was left to steer the ship of the home, family and marriage all by herself. This is surely a task above and beyond that original oath.

Behind every good man is an even better woman. This is more than a popular quote and the soldier should accept it as a truth. In the case of a soldier's woman who has survived these tests of time and is still with her man, no accolade can be sufficient to recognise her worth, no man can every fully understand what she has sacrificed to keep their union working, and no amount of thanks or gifts will ever recompense her.

I doubt there is a greater sacrifice that a woman makes than to stay married to her soldier 'till death us do part'. Nevertheless, there are many women who continue to make this sacrifice. To these ladies and on behalf of all soldiers, I offer two inadequate, but heartfelt words—thank you.

*Ubique*

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*January 2008*