

Last week's [overwhelming 'yes' vote](#) represents another step in progress towards LGBTI equality. It built on the activism of LGBTI elders and the reforms of previous governments that have, since the 1970s, been affirming the rights of LGBTI people to participate in all walks of Australian life.

With so much focus on marriage equality, one significant anniversary has arrived without the fanfare it deserves: this week marks 25 years since [Australia lifted its ban](#) on gays, lesbians and bisexuals serving in the Australian Defence Force.

Australia had longstanding bans against LGB service dating back to the Boer War. For most of that history, the bans were covered under rules against “unnatural offences” or “conduct prejudicial to good order and discipline.” It was actually at the behest of the Americans during the [second world war](#), complaining about Australian men's homosexual behaviour in Papua New Guinea, that the Australian Army adopted a policy specifically targeting homosexuality.

During and especially after the war, military police particularly targeted the women's services to expel [lesbians](#). The policing of men's homosexuality was less consistent; commanders would often turn a blind eye to men who were discreet, especially if they were officers.

In 1974, the three services for the first time adopted consistent rules for dealing with suspected gays and lesbians. These rules remained in place relatively unchanged until 1992. While the policy required homosexuals to be treated “sympathetically and with discretion”, the 18 years from 1974-92 were marked by witch-hunts, surveillance, intimidating interviews that could go for hours, and secret searches. At the conclusion of the investigation, gays and lesbians could either request their own honourable discharge, or would be dismissed dishonourably. Not surprisingly, the majority chose the former.

Read more: [*The road to same-sex marriage support has been long – and the fight isn't over yet*](#)

The ban and investigations had detrimental effects on the mental health of LGB armed forces personnel. They often lived in fear, had to keep their relationships secret, and when caught often experienced significant emotional trauma. The pressure even drove some LGB members to suicide.

Of course, LGBTI people continued to enlist in the defence forces, motivated by the same sense of patriotism or employment opportunities as others. They were in Korea, Malaya, Vietnam and on peacekeeping missions. Men and women found ways to express themselves in [secret](#), away from the watchful eye of the military police. Lesbians formed secret relationships within the women's services. Men would visit bars and saunas, and among officers there was a gay subculture who protected one another. The RAAF Academy was even scandalised in 1982 when an investigation, reported in Truth newspaper, exposed several cadets engaged in homosexual acts.

By the late 1980s, as homosexual law reform gained momentum in most states, politicians started questioning the LGB ban. It would take the [intervention of the Human Rights Commission](#), investigating the dismissal of a lesbian, to force the ADF and the Keating Government to reconsider gay and lesbian military service.

The main champion of lifting the ban was Attorney-General Michael Duffy, who argued that it contravened Australia's obligations under the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#). Duffy passionately argued the case, and on [November 23, 1992](#), the Cabinet voted to overturn Australia's ban on LGB service. This was more than six months before New Zealand lifted its ban, eight years before the United Kingdom, and 19 years before the US repealed its infamous "don't ask, don't tell" policy in 2011.

But this change did not mean the ADF was now an accepting institution. Gays and lesbians who served in the 1990s remember a mix of acceptance, tolerance and derision from their fellow servicemen and women. Many stayed in the closet, especially gay men, for fear of bullying. The ADF refused to recognise [same-sex de facto relationships](#) until December 2005, and the Department of Veterans' Affairs did not do so until 2009.

[Transgender](#) service continued to be banned until September 2010 (again lifted after the Human Rights Commission's intervention).

In the last ten years, though, the ADF has done a complete about-face in relation to LGBTI military service. Twenty-five years ago, the ADF argued that gays and lesbians would hurt troop morale. Now, [the service chiefs argue](#) that LGBTI inclusion expands the force's diversity, bringing different life experiences, and thus increase the ADF's capabilities.

Read more: [Witch-hunts and surveillance: the hidden lives of queer people in the military](#)

Since 2013, the ADF has permitted members to march in uniform in [Sydney's Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras](#); the ADF supports events like Wear it Purple Day, sends Defence Force Recruiting to major LGBTI events and has created LGBTI advisory roles. LGBTI members today report a generally positive experience, where they can serve openly with pride. The organisation DEFGLIS (Defence LGBTI Information Service) even hosts an annual Military Pride Ball.

Of course, there are ongoing challenges as conservative forces attack the ADF, especially around its support for [transgender](#) and [non-binary](#) members.

Yet, 25 years on, the ADF has grown to embrace LGBTI Australians in uniform. From 2018 we will start seeing brides and grooms wearing those uniforms at same-sex weddings.

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