

Chapter 10

Managing the RAAF: a Traditionally Male Environment

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As a member of a minority group working in one of the most traditionally male environments, my experiences over the years and the way I have operated may be of interest. You may even hear the odd bell ringing in your mind and find that the environment is not so different after all.

The workplace today is a very different one to that which I joined in the 1970s. When I graduated from the University of Queensland in 1976 as a physicist, I was hard pressed to find anybody who could even pronounce the word, let alone employ one. When the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) expressed some interest in these skills, I joined, thinking that this would be a good stop-gap until proper employment prospects appeared. Well, that was over 20 years ago. What happened?

Progress

The RAAF, in the late 1970s, had just opened its doors to allow women into some of the more traditional male employment areas. There was a dawning realisation throughout Australian society that women's brains had progressed to the stage where they were not so remarkably different from men's and, in the Air Force, it was feasible that women could now undertake such complex duties as air traffic control, logistics management and technical training. Evolution was working at lightning speed!

Of course, there was still no place for women to become engineers, pilots and navigators in the military. It took a further 10 years for the RAAF to graduate its first female pilots. But it was a start and the recruitment of women did attract strong support from some of the more enlightened male senior officers.

I joined in 1977 as an education officer. I was recruited into the RAAF, at a time when the WRAAF, the Women's Royal Australian Air Force, still existed. So, actually, I was a bloke. I had a different rank to the WRAAF officers. They were called section officers; I was a flying officer, just like the other blokes. It was all terribly confusing, especially for the old and bold who discussed and viewed me with some interest, maybe even trepidation, to see just how exotic I really was. I was posted to a man's job and did a man's work. I was equal to the blokes I worked with in every way — except for pay. I was paid WRAAF wages even though

I was in the RAAF, and that was only 80 per cent equality. Happily, that situation only lasted for the first couple of years of my service before the two organisations amalgamated and equality in pay was introduced.

Also in those couple of years, the lightning pace of female intellectual evolution had continued and, in 1980, it became possible for women to be engineers. Again, some enlightened male, senior officers encouraged me and supported my application to transfer to this specialisation and, since then, I've never looked back.

Challenging

The air force is particularly good at throwing challenges at its members. Every two to three years, we move from one job to the next, learning new skills and building experience as we go. In some ways, I guess it's like moving between organisations as you climb the corporate ladder; we just don't have to change employers, or necessarily get a choice in where or when we go.

I've been lucky enough to have had some of the most diverse and fascinating jobs during my years in the RAAF. I've taught electronics, radar and navigation systems to trainee technicians in Melbourne. At Amberley, west of Brisbane, I supervised a staff of 65 technicians doing major depot level servicings on F-111, Iroquois, Chinook and Canberra aircraft. I've headed a section of 35 engineers and technicians coordinating the engineering management of all the radios, radars, navigation systems and electronic warfare equipment in half the RAAF fleet. I was offered the rare opportunity of a posting to the U.K., where I studied with the Royal Air Force to get my Masters Degree in Aerosystems Engineering.

On return to Australia, I spent two years as a technical intelligence analyst in our Defence Intelligence Organisation in Canberra, a whole new world for an, up until then, traditional engineer. Another world with its own set of challenges opened when I became the project engineer and then the project manager for a \$200 million project involving the design, development and installation of new electronic warfare equipment in our maritime patrol aircraft, with my own staff and contractor personnel spread between Canberra, Adelaide, Melbourne and Tel Aviv.

The specialised knowledge I gained in electronic warfare led to my selection as the commanding officer of the Electronic Warfare Squadron, the operational RAAF unit where we produce the smart electronic warfare software and tactics for all our combat aircraft to protect them from being shot down by enemy aircraft and missiles, and to allow them to jam enemy radars. I had a staff of about 120 highly trained and motivated personnel — aircrew, engineers, intelligence staff, technicians and analysts. It was new, it was high-tech, it was fascinating, and above all, it was very rewarding, both personally and professionally.

I am now back in the world of projects, responsible for another \$100 million project which is introducing the Australia-wide secret computer network and software applications for the command and control of military operations for the whole department of defence.

Looking Back

Looking back over my career, I guess you would say I've been in management since 1982, when I first confronted the challenge of supervising a sizeable staff. Like many women of my generation, I have tended to be the first woman in whatever environment I've been working. I was the first and still the only woman to have commanded an operational squadron in the RAAF, a significant milestone in the history of women in our organisation. I am now the most senior woman in the Royal Australian Air Force, the only woman holding the rank of group captain. The most significant aspect of my promotion was that it was the first time a woman had achieved that rank in direct competition with men.

In the male-dominated environment of the Air Force, being a woman in management means that, irrespective of whether you are a star, mediocre, or a tragedy, you are, above all else, visible. You are a subject of observation, a topic of conversation, and very much open game.

Now this can be to your advantage or disadvantage depending on which of the groups you fall into. If you are a star, you are clearly a freak and not normal, maybe you are even an honorary man! If you are mediocre, or heaven forbid, not even that good, you will be the single example that proves the generalisation that women can't hack the pace.

For those who have what it takes, you will find enthusiastic champions among your more enlightened superiors, and strong supporters among your compe-

tent peers and subordinates. Those of your peer group whom you blatantly outperform will view you with varying degrees of resentment and terror. Why would you even want to subject yourself to this? Why would

any woman want to climb the management ladder?

Well, you should want to be a woman in management because you have the intellect, the talent, the imagination and the ambition. It will challenge you, take you out of your comfort zone, give you confidence, develop in you new skills and abilities. The further you go in management, the more you can achieve,

the more you can influence, the more you can contribute and importantly, the more you can empower others to improve and achieve.

Rewards

The rewards are huge. The most satisfying rewards are the least tangible. Rewards can range from public recognition to a very private feeling of a job well done. Some of the most precious rewards come from seeing your staff blossom under your guidance and encouragement, developing their own skills, increasing their confidence, giving them more and more responsibility, welcoming their ideas and opinions, valuing their contribution, taking pride in their achievements, and not being surprised when they outperform their own expectations. Finally, being a manager is fun. You can make it fun. You have a huge capacity to inject humour and harmony into the workplace. You can introduce laughter, you can make it a pleasure for your staff to come to work.

I have always thought it vital to keep a good sense of humour and a good sense of perspective. My diminutive stature over the years has often given occasion for mirth. I'm only 5 foot, but I sound a lot taller. The inevitable cartoonist on one of the apprentice courses I instructed years ago depicted me in each of his cartoons as a small moving dot from which a trail of perfume emanated. My fellow instructors would take delight in tying a loop in the antiquated light cord in my office so that it was out of my reach. They'd then lie in wait for me to arrive and watch from behind doors and around corners as I'd either try some athletic jumping or scramble around inelegantly on a chair. I was reknowned when I worked at the aircraft depot at Amberley for being the only person on the hangar floor to be able to walk under an F-111 horizontal stabilizer without having to duck and I took great delight in doing this as often as possible. And in

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Adelaide at the electronic warfare squadron, my staff car has the reputation of being able to get itself around with no driver in evidence, a tawdry reference to my eye level in relation to the steering wheel. I should have just told them it was a high-tech remotely piloted vehicle that we'd developed.

Humour is a great tension-breaker, a wonderful team builder, and the ability to laugh with your staff, sometimes even at yourself, is an essential tool for a good manager. This is just as important for the female manager as it is for the male.

The military is by no means unique in having very few women at high level. In some ways, the RAAF has merely been a reflection of the society which it serves, perhaps no more or less prejudiced than any other large, male-dominated group.

It seems incredible looking back to realise that discrimination was so widely accepted as the norm such a short time ago. Despite the fact in 1994, we celebrated the centenary of women's suffrage in South Australia, the first place in the world to give women the vote as well as the right to stand for parliament, we still have a long way to go before we fully utilise 50 per cent of the brain power we have at society's disposal — that of our women. In many organisations, the initial breakthrough of women into management and executive levels in the 1980s has slowed, even gone backwards, in the 1990s.

Changing Society

So what is it that we have to do to achieve full female representation at all levels, in all fields? We have to change the face of society itself. Society is still primarily structured on the assumption that there will be one main breadwinner, who will be supported behind the scenes by a partner who maintains a home and raises children. The work undertaken by the breadwinner has always been more highly valued than the work done by the homemaker and child raiser. Of course, we all know which of those roles has been traditionally borne by women. However, that is becoming less and less true in the society of the 1990s. The majority of families today have two breadwinners, although the sharing of the homemaker and child-raiser roles has not been quite so equitable. These are still seen as women's issues rather than family issues. Governments and institutions are structured to revolve around, to value the things that men have traditionally done, the things that men think are important. To this framework we have to also bring the things that women have traditionally done, the things that women

think are important. More than that, we need to make the attainment of true female equality a men's issue as well as a women's issue. It can only benefit us all by tapping into the full resources at society's disposal.

There is no denying that men and women are different and there is a great debate over whether the reasons are inherent genetic characteristics or conditioned behaviour and attitudes. I suggest that it is impossible to design an experiment to prove either hypothesis. But, in any case, we don't want to be the same. To succeed in a man's world doesn't mean you have to behave like a man. It doesn't mean a battle or a confrontation. We women have to bring to the workplace

those traditionally conditioned characteristics of women which are our strengths — our compassion, our insight, our ability to engender cooperation and teamwork. We must teach these skills to our male colleagues, and we must learn from them and add to our bag of skills those traditionally conditioned characteristics of

men which are their strengths — their assertiveness, their leadership qualities, their ability to delegate and inspire.

Role Model

To get to this goal, it will be important for more senior women and men in the workplace to nurture those coming along behind them. Women in particular need to consciously look back down the corporate ladder and act as a mentor to more junior women, to teach them the ropes, point out the pitfalls, to offer a shoulder to lean on or to give an encouraging pat on the back. You would know as well as I that this is not new. It has been happening in the male corporate world for a long time. It will be important not to just have role models who are on a pedestal, in seemingly unattainable positions, but to have role models whom you know personally. You must be able to see that they are not freaks, that they are just like you and me, that we too can achieve what they have achieved.

It is important to set your goals high. You should aim to become the person that young women look up to and say "she's my role model". But even more, you should aim to become the person that young men look up to and say "she's my role model too."

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