This exhibition commemorates not just the 25th anniversary of open service, but also the contributions that LGBTI service personnel have been making since the Second World War.

ON 23 NOVEMBER 1992, THE KEATING LABOR GOVERNMENT made a momentous decision: to lift the ban on gays, lesbians and bisexuals serving in the Australian Defence Force (ADF). This was before traditional alliance partners New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States, and it represented a significant step in Australia’s march towards LGBTI equality. It was not an end, though; gays and lesbians still experienced discrimination in the ADF, and there would continue to be a transgender ban until September 2010. Intersex people never had an explicit policy and, depending on their intersex variation, may be allowed to serve. Even before these milestones, LGBTI people were serving in Australia’s defence forces, fighting in wars overseas, participating in peacekeeping missions and serving within Australia. For over a century their stories have been silent; it is time to hear their voices.

THIS EXHIBITION DERIVES FROM RESEARCH BEING CONDUCTED AS PART OF AN AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH COUNCIL DISCOVERY PROJECT ON THE HISTORY OF LGBTI MILITARY SERVICE. WE HAVE EXAMINED ARCHIVAL RECORDS, MEDIA REPORTS, PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES AND INTERVIEWED MORE THAN 100 LAND MILITARY SERVICE MEMBERS, PAST AND PRESENT. THOUGH WE COULDN’T INCLUDE EVERYONE’S STORIES IN THIS EXHIBITION, WE ARE GRATEFUL TO ALL OUR INTERVIEWEES FOR SHARING THEIR LIFE STORIES. ALL EFFORTS HAVE BEEN MADE TO OBTAIN COPYRIGHT PERMISSIONS FOR PHOTOGRAPHS AND DOCUMENTS.
In 1943, Australia’s military headquarters in Melbourne received some disturbing news from US Army investigators in Port Moresby, Papua. They had discovered that Australian soldiers were engaging in sex with American soldiers and, even worse perhaps, were practising ‘the female side of homosexual intercourse’. (This adds weight to the American novelist Gore Vidal’s assertion that ‘During World War II, the Australian soldiers had a reputation for rolling over on their stomachs most obediently’.) While the brass investigated, the Chief Medical Officer struck out on his own, interviewing 18 soldiers who had either been caught by the investigators, or who came forward voluntarily. The deal seems to have been that if they shared their stories with the Medical Officer, they would be given medical (as opposed to dishonourable) discharges, and sent home.

Their stories reveal a vibrant homosexual life among the soldiers stationed in New Guinea – days and nights full of pleasures and conviviality. Many of them referred to themselves as ‘the girls’, who, having found each other, proceeded to become close friends, partying together and sharing sexual adventures. Neil declared that since arriving in Port Moresby and ‘getting in with the Kamp crowd’ he had been out every night. Morrie said the same. The American Red Cross canteen was a popular place to gather, to cruise and to pick up and it was here that Gerald first got to be part of the Kamp scene. Jack added the troops’ canteen and the sergeants’ club as popular cruising spots. The beaches and the dense, encroaching bush provided privacy, as did air-raid shelters and trucks. The scene provided a variety of sexual and romantic opportunities, from casual pickups, to short passionate flings, to long-term love affairs.

The War History They Don’t Teach You at School

CAPTION: Cyril Howe, a later figure on Melbourne’s Kamp scene, photographed here performing in drag. This was a common form of troop entertainment and, for Kamp service members, a way to express themselves.

CAPTION: The Second World War cartoon evokes some of the humour attached to cross-dressing servicemen.

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... getting in with the Kamp crowd...
Women in the Services During World War II

WOMEN PLAYED AN ACTIVE ROLE DURING WORLD WAR II not only on the home front, but also about 70,000 served in the women’s auxiliary services. Life in the services meant that women who were attracted to other women were able to live in an environment dominated by women. The services also provided an opportunity to break away from social expectations around marriage and family. Recruitmennt material produced by the services emphasised the femininity of women who served, perhaps in order to address social concerns that military service would produce ‘masculine’ women. Women who were attracted to other women did manage to find each other in the services, although the consequences of being caught were severe. Historian Ruth Ford interviewed one woman, Betty, who described two women in the Women’s Royal Australian Naval Service (WRANS) who were discharged after they were caught kissing in the boiler room.

Gay men also served in the Korean War and Malayan Emergency. TOM GOLDSBY, who served in both conflicts, even had a relationship with a Chinese-Malay man. When the man dedicated a love song to Tom over the radio, his platoon heard it with amusement.

Military police rarely targeted gay men unless their behaviour became visible – witnessed most dramatically when five soldiers were discharged from the national service training base at Puckapunyal in Victoria.

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WHILE MANY WOMEN were discharged from the Services after their sexuality was exposed, CAROLE POPTHAM and CHRISTINA DENNIS opted to leave the WRAAF on their own choice in 1968 after falling in love. They knew that there was a possibility that they would be posted separately or face other consequences if their relationship was discovered. They are still happily together today.

SERVING IN SILENCE?
Australian LGBTI Military Service since World War II

BETWEEN 1951 AND 1984, EACH SERVICE operated separate female-only branches. Once again, lesbian and bisexual women made a significant contribution. These women had to carefully guard their sexuality as they faced persecution, punishment and discharge if it became known to officials. Witch-hunts loomed frequently. Women suspected of being lesbians were interrogated – often for long periods of time, asked to name others and were quickly discharged. These practices primarily targeted only the women’s services until the mid-1970s.

NOLA STRAWBRIDGE, who managed to avoid detection by officials, remembers a “big purge” of lesbians in the Women’s Royal Australian Army Corps (WRAAC) between 1964-65. Six women she knew were discharged.

CAPTION (TOP): A Christmas play at the WRAAF barracks at Richmond, 1960s. Courtesy Carole Popham and Christina Dennis.

CAPTION (ABOVE): Sports proved a popular way to meet other broken women in the services. This photograph was taken in the 1960s and includes Nola Strawbridge (second from left) and Julie Hendy (second from right). Courtesy of Julie Hendy.


CAPTION (BOTTOM): Julie Hendy, who had been previously identified as a servicewoman with exceptional talent and had undertaken a rare overseas posting, was discharged in 1968 after her sexuality was discovered. Courtesy of Julie Hendy.
The Vietnam War and the 1960s

THOUGH HOMOSEXUAL CONDUCT WAS still illegal in the 1960s and '70s, authorities often turned a blind eye to men who were discreet. This was particularly the case for officers.

Numerous gay men served in Vietnam, though many either did not yet realise that they were gay or did not participate in homosexual activity while in Vietnam. Of course, some did – Dr David Bradford recalls an occasion when his regimental sergeant major brought an American private back to his tent for some very loud sex.

From the Navy, gay sailors recall numerous sexual encounters on ships, and there was even a homosexual subculture at the base HMAS Creswell. The Navy still had specific rules against “Unnatural Offences” and “Abnormal Sexual Behaviour”. Contained within these regulations were provisions to differentiate the “confirmed homosexual” from those who were experimenting, or those claiming to be homosexual only to secure a discharge. Enforcement of these rules against homosexuality would step up in all three services after 1974.
ALIX BLUNDELL was involved in CAMP while a University of Queensland student in the 1970s. She joined the Army Reserve as an officer in 1976 and became full-time in 1987. In 1989 she underwent an excruciating interrogation and was dismissed for being a lesbian. In 2015, as part of the Defence Abuse Response Taskforce (DART), Alix received compensation and a personal apology from the Chief of Army for the mistreatment that ended her career.

Speaking Out

IN 1973, THE GAY RIGHTS ORGANISATION THE Campaign Against Moral Persecution (CAMP) published a story titled “So You Want to be a WRAAF” (Women’s Royal Australian Air Force), detailing the intimidating surveillance and interview conducted against a lesbian WRAAF member. When the story reached the mainstream media, the Defence Minister ordered the services to come up with a consistent policy that “should be liberal, understanding, and designed to cause the least embarrassment in such situations whilst safeguarding the interests of the Service.” The new policy in place from 1974 remained relatively unchanged for the next eighteen years. Any suspected case of homosexuality was to be referred to the service police to investigate. Unless there was a crime involved, they were to be dealt with administratively. Gays and lesbians either could request their own honourable discharge, or would be discharged dishonourably. The policy said that suspects should be dealt with “sympathetically and with discretion”, though this was rarely the case.
**Witch-hunts in the 1980s**

The 1980s witnessed an escalation in the number of witch-hunts. This was due to the growing public awareness of homosexuality and the stigma that surrounded gay men and HIV/AIDS.

Men who served during the 1980s describe the stress of having to compartmentalise their lives, serving in secret during the day and trying to maintain a personal life in the evenings. Women tell similar stories.

Anna van Netten remembers “going out to the bars in Sydney, they used to send undercover female MPs, military police, and they’d find out who the lesbians were. Then they’d call them in.”

Yvonne Sillett joined the Women’s Royal Australian Army Corps in 1979. Rising rapidly through the ranks, she ended up with a top security clearance and eventually trained eight platoons at Kapooka. She remembers “you couldn’t really trust anybody because you knew if it got out that’s the end of my career.” Yvonne’s sexuality was eventually exposed and she was subjected to interrogation. After this, her military career came to an end after ten years of service.

Jennifer Jeffries (left) signed up to the WRAAC in 1979 and became a driver. She came to realise her sexuality shortly after joining. She believes rumours of her sexuality dogged her throughout her time in the military and ultimately she only served three years. Although she was not formally discharged, she believed knowledge of her sexuality “killed any chance of promotion, decent postings.”

Delia Quigley joined the RAAF at 17 but left after completing her 3-year sign on period after a work colleague outed her to her Warrant Officer. She remembers “I begged him to let me leave quietly rather than report me to the Service Police.” The stress of having to constantly be vigilant was too high a price for many to pay.
A scandal rocked the RAAF Academy in 1982 when one cadet attacked another who had tried to seduce him. The police investigation uncovered several men who had sexual relations with the cadet, including RICHARD GRATION – the son of an Army general who later became Chief of the Defence Force.

The RAAF Police investigation followed the usual tactics of intimidating interviews, where Richard and others confessed. Authorities pressured to discharge the cadets, but Richard received legal advice from the head of Army Legal Services that the evidence may not be admissible because it was coerced. The Brigadier convinced the Defence Minister to set up a Court of Inquiry investigating the RAAF Police practices. The Court of Inquiry found that while the evidence was generally accurate, minor procedural errors collectively disadvantaged Richard and the other cadets. They were not discharged, and instead received written warnings.

IN LATE 1981, SHANE Duniam realised that he was under surveillance by RAAF Police at Point Cook. One night, as he passed the not-so-inconspicuous police car parked outside his house, he pulled up next to them: “I just put my brakes on, wound down my window, ‘Hey fellas, I’m going to Mandate tonight, I’m probably home about 3:00 in the morning. You can have the night off.’” A few days later, Shane was summoned to an interview that lasted most of the day. Police questioned him about his sex life and about other men they were investigating. They also searched Shane’s house, where they uncovered letters from another airman in Canberra. Shane was one of five men discharged in December 1981, and he returned to Tasmania feeling “shell-shocked” and “shattered.”

Surveillance and Scandal in the 1980s
In 2015, DEFGLIS began the annual tradition of laying rainbow wreaths on Anzac Day in Melbourne, Sydney, Canberra, Townsville and Brisbane. At Melbourne’s Shrine of Remembrance, Max Campbell, surviving member of GESA, had the honour of laying the wreath followed by currently serving LGBTI members.

THE GAY EX-SERVICES ASSOCIATION

GESA, the Gay Ex-Services Association, was founded by a group of five men who knew each other because they worked or partied at Mandate, a gay bar in St Kilda. As they got to know each other, they inevitably shared their stories, discovering that all but one of them had been in the Air Force and all but one of them had been kicked out as a result of anti-gay policies. Maybe, they decided, it was time to ‘get a little bit political’.

A group was formed, a name was dreamt up, badges made and they decided to lay a wreath on Anzac Day in 1982 during that part of the day when members of the public were invited to participate. As they climbed the steps to the Shrine, they were turned away by police, under the direction of Bruce Ruxton.

ON ANZAC DAY 1982, A SMALL GROUP OF ex-servicemen approached the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne to lay a wreath in memory of the mates they had served with. Bruce Ruxton, then Victorian state president of the Returned Services League, intercepted them. There is ‘no way you can lay a wreath’ he declared, summoning a nearby police officer to escort the men away.

The problem was that these soldiers were members of the Gay Ex-Services Association and ‘poofters’ were not the sort of people that Ruxton wanted to see included in a day of remembrance that was starting to take on a sacred aura.

He went further, telling the Weekend Australian the next day that ‘I don’t know where all these queers and poofters have come from, I don’t remember a single poofter from World War Two’. Buzz Kennedy, a columnist for the same paper surveyed his mates from the 2/32, 2/28 and 2/43 Battalions and reported that they had all agreed: ‘ours was an entirely heterosexual mob’, Kennedy declared. He went on to snidely to question the gay veterans’ credentials: ‘With the visual evidence of the size of the gay community in 1982, the question has to be: where were they then?’

Almost immediately, others wrote to the papers to correct the memories of these two war-horses. A doctor reported that ‘while the recorded number was small, they did in fact exist’. Another noted that the batman (personal attendant) to no fewer than three of the most famous Allied generals was ‘one of the gayest fellas I have ever met: “gay as a Christmas tree” in fact’. A third declared that there had been ‘quite a few who were tolerated as long as they took no for an answer’.

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SERVING IN SILENCE?

Australian LGBTI Military Service 1945 to Now
Defending the Ban 1985-92

This fake memo was left on a RAAF airwoman's desk in 1992, while politicians were debating the ban. The document, probably written by a policeman who knew quite a bit (or too much) about gay lifestyles, is indicative of the homophobic attitudes of many service members in the 1980s and '90s.

Courtesy Lucy Kardas.

AS LATE AS 1985 THE ADF RENEWED ITS BAN ON GAY and lesbian service in D(G)PERS 15-3. It listed four justifications: 1. Homosexuals would threaten troop morale and therefore operational readiness; 2. They were national security threats because they could be subjected to blackmail; 3. Health risks (which was an allusion to HIV/AIDS); 4. To protect minors who were serving in the ADF.

Critics would point to the lack of logic behind these reasons. If there were no ban, then gays and lesbians would not be at risk of blackmail. The health and minors arguments played on false stereotypes about gay men as sexual predators and all having HIV/AIDS. A 1988 Melbourne Star Observer article argued, "Obviously, somebody forgot to tell the policy makers that all the drama described above is not caused by homosexuality itself, but by the irrational homophobic reactions of straight (normal) people which the defence 'thinkers' evidently desire to enshrine for the maintenance of the fragile military (and male?) ego." There were few options to challenge the ban, though. The Defence Force Ombudsman could not compel the ADF to lift the ban, but rather could only ensure that proper investigation procedures were followed. In 1989 the Ombudsman wrote: "In general I have few problems with the ADF's stated policy, although I believe much of the statement is conjectural rather than evidential."
IN 1990, A DISMISSED LESBIAN servicewoman lodged a complaint against the ADF in the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission (HREOC). The HREOC entered into negotiations with the ADF over this particular case and in the hopes of convincing the ADF to repeal the ban. In June 1992, though, the Defence Minister, Senator Robert Ray, announced that the ban would remain.

The HREOC then turned to Attorney-General Michael Duffy, arguing that the ban contravened Australia’s obligations under the International Labour Organization and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Fearing a split in the ALP, Prime Minister Paul Keating assigned backbencher Senator Terry Aulich to chair a Caucus Joint Working Group on Homosexual Policy in the Australian Defence Force. They interviewed gay rights advocates and service chiefs, examined the arguments about international law, and recommended, in a 4-2 split, lifting the ban.

The ban finally went on the Cabinet agenda on 23 November. Duffy argued the international law case to lift the ban, while Ray argued that the military was exempt because of the “inherent requirements of the job”. The majority of Cabinet sided with Duffy, making the decision to lift the ban. Prime Minister Paul Keating put out a press release declaring: “This decision reflects broad support in the Australian community for the removal of employment discrimination of any kind, including discrimination on grounds of sexual preference. The decision brings ADF policy into line with the tolerant attitudes of Australians generally.”

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Lifting the Ban

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What he discovered as he was coming out was that lots of his comrades were less keen to follow his lead. Over and above the official policies tolerating gay, lesbian and bisexual service, there was still a lot of fear. Some gays and lesbians told Mitchell that they feared getting ‘their head smashed in’. What Defence needed, he decided, was an ‘organised presence’, a club that could take up the issues, but also provide a place to meet, relax and talk. And so, in 1994 G-Force was born. The group held regular meetings, published a newsletter and talked comfortably with the forces’ newspapers.

THE FIRST TIME THAT DEFENCE PERSONNEL MARCHED in Mardi Gras was in 1996 in a contingent organised by David Mitchell and G-Force. Mitchell approached the ADF leadership in mid-1995 about having a G-Force float. In November 1995 he received word that the ADF opposed the float, and a senior officer even threatened Mitchell’s career if he went ahead with it.

However, G-Force persisted because they knew that the ADF could not stop them so long as they did not march in uniform. In January 1996 the ADF changed its position to permit a ‘non-military-looking’ float, and in March 1996 between 10 and 20 members of G-Force marched in Mardi Gras.

G-Force

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Group Captain MIKE SEAH was one member who unsuccessfully applied for recognition of his de facto partner, appealing all the way to the Chief of the Defence Force.

G-Force vs Discrimination

ONE FOCUS OF G-FORCE’S ACTIVISM WAS FIGHTING FOR recognition of same-sex de facto partners. As early as 1993 the Army rejected a lesbian couple’s application to have their relationship recognised because the policy on de facto relationships explicitly defined them as members of the opposite sex. Same-sex couples therefore could not access benefits such as financial assistance during base transfers, travel allowances, married quarters, compassionate leave, education programs and even pensions. Despite G-Force’s lobbying, the ADF steadfastly refused to change its policy. Chief of the Defence Force, General John Baker, wrote in one letter: “While you argue that the common [social] standard requires that the discrimination you complain of should be removed, I do not believe that common standards make such a demand.” The only entitlements G-Force successfully secured were access to Defence Health, base entry rights and the right to be notified as next-of-kin in case of death.

In late 2005, though, the ADF unexpectedly released a new policy on de facto recognition that was gender neutral, thus including same-sex partners. It would not be until 2009, under a wider set of reforms by the Rudd Government, that the Department of Veterans’ Affairs would also recognise same-sex partners.

Serving in Silence?

Australian LGBT Military Service since World War II

Caption: G-Force newsletter, the Gayzette, 1996, cover story about the Mardi Gras.
Leading Aircraftman Jesse Kane, serves as a RAAF photographer.

Flying Officer Dana Pham is one of the first transgender members to join the ADF after the repeal of DI(G)PERS 16-16. She ran into significant obstacles with Defence Force Recruiting, but successfully enlisted in 2014 and now serves as an officer at RAAF Base Fairbairn in Canberra.

Alex Pollock served in the RAAF in the 1960s and 70s as Wing Commander Neil Pollock (front row, second from left), a navigator flying test flights on the F-111s. Alex quietly discharged from the RAAF around the year 1980 to transition. She passed away in June 2005.

Before 2000 there was no specific policy on transgender service, though it was considered unacceptable under rules such as “conduct to the prejudice of good order”. Studies from the US have shown that pre-transition MtF people often join militaries as a place where they can “prove” their masculinity to themselves. They often put themselves in dangerous situations, preferring to die in combat rather than live with gender dysphoria. Pre-transition FtM people often find the military a place where they can safely exhibit “masculine” behaviours.

In the year 2000, after hearing news of a British pilot allowed to transition, the ADF adopted DI(G)PERS 16-16, the first policy explicitly banning transgender service. The summative statement said: “a person undergoing or contemplating gender reassignment cannot be considered suitable for service in the ADF because of the need for ongoing treatment and/or the presence of a psychiatric disorder.” Transgender people thus had to serve in secret or face dismissal. It would not be until 2010, after two transgender members challenged the policy, that the ADF repealed DI(G)PERS 16-16, permitting transgender people to serve and transition.

There has never been a policy on intersex service, and intersex variations have been treated as a medical condition. Some intersex variations have been allowed, while others have precluded people from serving on medical grounds. Intersex people required to medically discharge were often viewed as “innocents”, unlike homosexuals or transgender people whose “behaviour” led to their discharges.

Alex Pollock served in the RAAF in the 1960s and 70s as Wing Commander Neil Pollock (front row, second from left), a navigator flying test flights on the F-111s. Alex quietly discharged from the RAAF around the year 1980 to transition. She passed away in June 2005.
BRIDGET CLINCH joined the Australian Army Reserve in 1997 straight after high school and enlisted full-time in 1999. She was a decorated infantry captain who served two tours to East Timor. In early 2009, she was diagnosed with gender dysphoria and announced her intention to transition. In doing so, she challenged ADF policy that had effectively banned transgender service. The ADF attempted to discharge Bridget in line with DI(G)PERS 16-16, however she appealed within the ADF and to the Human Rights Commission. After a conciliation process, the ADF withdrew her termination and repeated DI(G)PERS 16-16 in September 2010, thus permitting transgender people to serve and transition. The process of working for reform took a personal toll, and Bridget left the Army in 2013.

AMY HAMBLIN enlisted in the RAAF in 2001, working in logistics transporting aircraft and other equipment, and even doing a four month tour in Iraq in 2006. Amy did not come out voluntarily, but rather in 2009 a mate caught her in a nightgown in her private residence and reported her. Amy recalls confessing, “Yes, Sir, after hours I live as a woman.” She subsequently challenged DI(G)PERS 16-16 through the RAAF chain of command and even prepared a potential legal case. She never needed to lodge that case, though, as the transgender ban was lifted in 2010. Amy continued to serve until 2014 and then, tired of the institutional discrimination she faced, became a reservist. She continued in that role until November 2017.

AMY HAMBLIN transitioned in 2010 and also contributed to the first Air Force Diversity Handbook: Transitioning Gender in the Air Force in 2013. Based on consultation with Amy and other transgender members, the guide provides advice that transgender members can apply to their personal transition journeys.

Courtesy Amy Hamblin

SERVING IN SILENCE?
Australian LGBTI Military Service since World War II

BRIDGET CLINCH in 2016 with her service medals. Courtesy Bridget Clinch
DEFGLIS

IN 2002, THEN-PETTY OFFICER STUART O’BRIEN commenced the challenging task of providing gay and lesbian “information and referral services to members of the ADF.” The network began as an e-mail distribution list and a Geocities webpage. The network eventually became the Defence Gay and Lesbian Information Service: DEFGLIS (renamed Defence LGBTI Information Service in 2011).

DEFGLIS has served as both an advocacy group for LGBTI Defence members, as well as a social group. Since 2008 they have marched in Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, and since 2013 the Chief of the Defence Force has approved them marching in uniform. DEFGLIS also organises events such as a ski trip, meet-ups in the various Australian cities, and has made submissions to inquiries on LGBTI rights and veterans’ issues.

In 2015, DEFGLIS organised the first annual Military Pride Ball. This formal event brings together service members past and present, representatives from the ADF and the public service and allies for an evening to celebrate diversity and inclusion in the ADF. Since 2015, DEFGLIS has also organised wreath-layings on Anzac Day to commemorate LGBTI service members.
What stands out now, though, is the support LGBTI members provide each other – and provide each other openly – to advocate for a better ADF. They are no longer serving in silence.

THE ADF HAS COME A LONG WAY IN 25+ years, moving from merely tolerating gays and lesbians to actively embracing LGBTI service for the diversity and capabilities they provide to the organisation.

Of course, there are still challenges for LGBTI service personnel. Not everyone in the ADF has embraced the inclusion agenda, though importantly the service chiefs have been vocal in their support for LGBTI members.

HIV positive people still cannot enlist, and those who seroconvert (contract HIV) while serving face restrictions on their opportunities for promotion, transfer and deployment.

Transgender and non-binary members have been particularly targeted by conservative media and politicians. A policy implemented in 2015 ensured transgender health care while concurrently making it more difficult to access surgeries.

In 2016 the ADF adopted rules allowing members to identify their gender as “Indeterminate / Intersex / Unspecified (X),” but still they must identify their sex as male or female. The Australian Defence Force Academy has been the main site where non-binary members have come out, and the services have had to grapple with non-binary members’ lodging, fitness standards, and uniforms.