



Chief of Personnel

Lieutenant General Natasha Fox, AO, CSC

Order of Australia Foundation Oration by Lieutenant General Natasha Fox, AO, CSC

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Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

I would like to acknowledge the traditional Custodians of the land on which we gather; the *Ngunnawal* people and other people and families with connection to land in the ACT region. I pay my respect to their Elders past and present and thank them for the care of the land, waterways and stories of the stars, from which the Australian Defence Force deploys on and from.

Thank you for the opportunity to address you all tonight.

As I begin this oration, I would like you all to consider the concept of:

“Who you are now has no bearing on who you could be.”

We all know that there are moments in time throughout your career, your life, where you make decisions and you reflect on who you are and where you have come from.

When I was appointed to the role of Chief of Personnel, I reflected on my service, why I joined and why I stayed. My journey started as a 17-year-

old and never in my wildest dreams did I think I would be a General in the Army or the Chief of Personnel.

The Defence people system that I've been given responsibility for enables and supports our people as they move through different stages and are presented with options for their service.

When I think about this, the ADF enables potential and this is needed in our environment. This is needed for Australia.

Today, your Australian Defence Force is faced with the challenge of designing, recruiting and generating the military people capability required now and into the future.

The National Defence Strategy requires Defence to transition to an integrated, focused force and in the context of the complex and challenging strategic environment; it requires our people to adapt and reskill for capabilities and new concepts. While we have done this in our history, the speed at which we have to do this and continually reskill and adjust is different.

The Australian Defence Force has around 57,000 people in the permanent force, 32,000 people providing reserve service, with almost another 10,000 people in a category where they can be called on to provide service.

Women make up just over 20 per cent, First Nations people 3.9 per cent, and culturally and linguistically diverse 27.8 per cent; or just under 28 per cent.

There are more millennials, born 1981-96, than any other generation with 41.5 per cent. Gen Z, born in the decade beginning 1997, is on the rise with 32 per cent, 20.8 per cent are gen X, born 1965-1980 and the boomers, born 1946-1964, are a minority, with just 5.6 per cent remaining in service.

Twenty-seven per cent of ADF personnel have a higher education qualification recorded.

These demographic characteristics are important, not just because of who the ADF represents, our Australian community, but because of the diversity of thought that comes with this. I think about the power of combining the intellect, energy and entrepreneurial nature of our youth with the sage advice and experience of our more mature members of the ADF. This gives rise to a synergy that ensures our relatively small ADF is highly capable and adaptable for the circumstances we find ourselves in.

We are campaigning in competition. Competition presents a situation where we are faced with different concurrent challenges. Because of this, we must invest in our people, in their training and professional military education, and in leadership. These foundations are needed within our teams and we need our people to be the best that they can be so that they can realise their potential. We know that who they are now, has no bearing on who they could be in the future.

We must recruit, retain and grow the highly specialised and skilled workforce required to meet Defence's capability needs and achieve the objectives of the National Defence Strategy.

As part of meeting the challenges of the National Defence Strategy, I have been given the responsibility to redesign our people system, with my colleagues, to bring an integrated approach.

In the Defence People System I am working closely with the Vice Chief of the Defence Force who is designing and planning the priorities of the ADF and with the Deputy Secretary Defence People who leads the enterprise system (such as policy, corporate learning, work health and safety and strategy) and more importantly, development of the capability of the APS workforce, while the Service Chiefs and Chief of Joint Capabilities remain in charge of training and preparing which is professional mastery and job design for our personnel.

As the Chief of Personnel, the mission of the Military Personnel Organisation is to provide, manage and prepare ADF personnel in order to enable the integrated force in competition and conflict. This means I am responsible for ADF recruiting, enabling careers, professional education and military learning, health support, support services, military justice, support to families, different pathways to service and transition from service. In my role, I am bringing these facets of a military lifecycle together.

This has not been done before. We are one year into substantial change, also a substantial cultural change to enable the ADF. I will mention some of these in more detail later. My time with you today will

focus on the areas I am responsible for, all of which, is enabling potential of people to achieve a focused and integrated ADF.

In our Nation's history, more than two million Australians have volunteered to serve in your Australian Defence Force.

Service is not intuitive to all, and what service means to you on day one is not necessarily the same as what it means on day 100, or year 10, or after decades of service.

I believe we grow into service through our journey in the ADF.

For me, I joined the Australian Defence Force at the age of 17, growing up on the West Coast of Tasmania in a small mining town, and not knowing what life in the Army, in the ADF, would be like. I was then a different version of who I am now and I didn't know who I wanted to be, or what I could be or what I was capable of.

For others, their growth and pathway to service could begin in a Defence family or family with military history, at the recruiting centre, viewing an ADF Careers campaign online, seeing members of the ADF supporting their community during good times or hard times, being a school cadet, providing reserve service, or after working alongside our partners in another capacity, such as an employer or industry partner.

The pathways to service are varied and they are all valued. Some young Australians know as a child that the ADF, or the Navy, Army or Air Force is what they want to do and where they want to be. For many others, the pathway to service lights up later in life.

What motivates people to contribute to the concept and activation of National Defence or service may not be the same as what motivated people to serve in World War One, or during the Vietnam War, or over the decades where Australia was in the Middle East.

What motivates people to serve today still includes the altruistic driver of making a difference and helping people; as well as what our younger generations are telling us they will serve because of good pay and additional benefits, an active lifestyle, opportunities for lifelong friendships, adventure and travel; and good training, specialist capabilities and transferable skills in a variety of roles. These are the reasons people are joining the ADF.

People tell us they stay for these reasons too, but then add teamwork, mateship and purpose – the purpose is service - and many who return to the ADF for these reasons.

We recruit into the ADF in over 270 different roles, across the domains of maritime, land, air, space and cyber.

We have the challenge to grow our Defence Force and Department of Defence by more than 18,500 by 2040, adding thousands of people to the force that we have, at the same time pivoting to new capabilities, ensuring the foundation workforce is in place for when the new capabilities arrive. Be it in the next year or 15 years - from HIMARS, aviation system, new maritime vessels, to nuclear submarines, unscrewed vehicles and new weaponry / missiles including how to

maintain them and integrate through sophisticated command and control systems.

This is a workforce challenge being addressed through a range of approaches.

Over the past year, we have focused our efforts on retention and recruitment in four key areas.

We are:

- widening the aperture to increase the opportunity for potentially suitable applicants to join the ADF;
- streamlining the recruiting system to increase the number of people joining the ADF;
- improving processes to enable faster recruiting; and
- encouraging people to stay and serve longer through retention initiatives.

There are many things happening concurrently, some of which are not well known, some are generational changes that require us to adapt to the Australian population or Australia citizens we have, who volunteer to serve in our ADF.

We have made policy changes to allow more people to serve in the ADF - including eligible New Zealand citizens who have lived in Australia for at least one year and who have not served in a foreign military for the last two years, adjusting medical entry requirements that would previously have been denied based on diagnosis rather than functional assessment.

The recruitment system is adopting more digital options and gamification, taking the Mobile ADF Careers Centre on tour across regional areas taking recruiting to people, using pop-up centres, and releasing targeted recruitment campaigns to people to appeal to the gen Z audience to attract them. There are annually over 50,000 applications in the pipeline and we are working through them to enlist and appoint into the ADF for service.

We are seen positive results from our efforts to keep people serving for longer. Our separation rates are down - the ADF 12 month rolling separation rate as at 1 June this year was 9.6 per cent, a decrease from 12 months ago where it was sitting at 11.2 per cent.

Initiatives including modernising our salaries, implementing a continuation bonus, improving our housing offer for home loans, support to families such as health benefit, education, leave and entitlements. All aimed to present an attractive offer to keep those who are serving and those considering serving.

We need people in areas of expertise where skills shortages exist and we are in competition for this talent with employers across Australia and internationally. It would not be a shock to you that these roles require technical skills.

What sets the ADF apart from many competitors are the values that bind us. No matter where you serve, or how you serve, or in what role, there are unifying values and behaviours that bring us together. The Defence values of service, courage, respect, initiative and excellence.

The Defence values define service as ‘the selflessness of character to place the security and interests of our nation and its people ahead of my own’.

As I alluded to previously, service means and feels differently to all of us – for me it is about the greater good; putting others, your nation and your community before yourself; it is more than a job, it is about supporting and lifting others, it is about providing hope.

Conceptually, this is why I believe as well, that through service we enable potential and why who you are now has no bearing on who you could be when you join the ADF.

We are leading people through change as we deliver all of these changes to an integrated Defence People System, one that looks after all of our people and enables them to serve.

We support our people to serve well, live well and age well we are taking a lifetime view of wellbeing in service.

A key change is our approach to mental health and wellbeing. We now have a dedicated branch to lead Defence's enduring commitment to strengthen its approach to workplace mental health and wellbeing. It will deliver the policies and strategies that improve the mental health and wellbeing of personnel across the Defence enterprise.

There are many factors as well that contribute to the wellbeing of individuals and their families – the individual themselves and within the

eco-system that we function in Defence, with the Department of Veterans' Affairs, and with a range of other ex-service organisations and the community. The wellbeing factors include health, social support and connection, education and skills, employment and meaningful activity, meaning and spirituality, home and housing, income and finance, justice and safety, recognition and respect.

The current focus areas where Defence can adjust its approach include areas around assessing promotion, education and training; access to healthcare, counselling and specialist support; enabling more preparation for difficult periods; and enhancing the sense of community through events and recognition. New approaches and improving the protective factors support and strengthen individual and collective workforce mental health and wellbeing.

Our mental health and wellbeing approach complements the clinical health capability that I am responsible for. It provides a wellbeing lens to Defence activities, putting people first, before clinical intervention is required.

Defence continues to support the work of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide. As we turn to the second half of 2024 we will have significant work to do in support of the Royal Commission's report and recommendations, which is scheduled for release in September. The recommendations will be thoroughly considered to ensure that we learn and when we implement them, we improve based on the courageous lived experiences and testimonials provided to the Royal Commission over the past years.

As at June this year, Defence has received 712 notices to provide information to the Royal Commission to assist it in its work. Responses to these notices have resulted in the production of approximately 192,000 documents, consisting of approximately 3.2 million pages. Over 4,200 written answers to notices have also been provided to the Royal Commission.

We have been leaning into the Royal Commission to use this generational opportunity to find resolutions to the national tragedy of suicide, because we know if we can make a difference, we might find a pathway for the civilian community to be assisted as well.

A comprehensive and well-equipped health care system for our people remains a critical enabler, but to ensure the ADF's warfighting preparedness. We are adapting to the significant changes across Defence and this requires ongoing commitment to improving our approach to health care.

We have a health workforce of uniformed and contracted capabilities, supporting both current personnel and the recruitment function, we work with our allies, we have partnerships with external providers and key health networks, and we work with Defence Science and Technology Group to find scientific innovations for health capabilities. People don't realise that the uniformed ADF health workforce across roles including nurses, dentists, psychologists and doctors is approximately 2000 full-time and 1700 reserve personnel. Our health networks are key to supporting the lifetime service and enabling potential of our people.

When a person embarks on their Australian Defence Force career, it is often the case that their family experiences both the challenges and the opportunities that come with military life.

Defence families come in different make-ups. In 2023, 68 per cent of all ADF personnel indicated that they were in a relationship, over one third have dependent children, and 12 per cent have dependents other than dependent children. We know this means our people require our help and policy settings to balance the needs of their families and the needs of service.

All families have challenges and we know that ADF families face additional pressure due to the nature of the ADF service. Family challenges come with balancing the disruption of exercises and deployments, relocation, childcare needs and employment opportunities, alongside the needs of the family. In recognition of this, we have made a series of practical enhancements to family health benefits, pay and conditions, leave entitlements and housing.

The ADF Family Health Program is an important defence family initiative that supports access to affordable healthcare and services. Based on feedback, we doubled the ADF Family Health annual benefit per dependant and increased the eligible services to support healthy diets, increasing physical activity and cancer screening. We are committed to reviewing and evolving the ADF Family Health programme to ensure it continues to support the ongoing health and wellbeing of our families. Families enable service.

These initiatives build on the suite of services, supports and resources provided by the Defence Member and Family Support Branch. Some of the key ways we help Defence families are through the Partner Employment Assistance Program, delivery of resilience programs, family financial advice and grants, assistance with childcare and changing schools, the Defence School Mentor Program, community group coordination, and the vital 24 hours a day 7 days a week emergency support call line.

Posting cycles have an impact on families and we aim to reduce the disruptive effects on family life, particularly in relation to a child's education and the employment prospects for partners.

While the nature of military service inevitably places expectations on families to adapt to new locations and manage times of separation, we are striving to achieve a balance between their personal commitments and service responsibilities.

While the ADF has 27 per cent of people with higher education, we continue to focus on learning for all our people. We are adjusting how we deliver education and training through working with industry partners. For example, UNSW and Deakin University.

Wodonga TAFE provides technical training for Navy and Army, and it supports the ADF School of Health to deliver the ADF Medics Course.

We are creating a cyber college and an intelligence college.

We conduct a combination of learning opportunities online and still in traditional face-to-face environments.

To date, this year has seen the commencement of or continuation of studies for more than 1,100 Australian Defence Force Academy Undergraduate and Advanced students; and more than 2,100 students have completed courses at the Defence Force Chaplains College, ADF Peace Operations Training Centre, ADF Warfare Training Centre, and the School of Languages and International Training Centre.

We continue to improve the Defence and Strategic Studies Course, Australian Command and Staff Course and have implemented a remote version of the course, for the approximately 500 students, and we conduct a range of short courses in which Other Government Agencies and partner nations' students and chaplains are participating.

We are a registered training organisation and can issue civilian course equivalents. This supports people gaining skills that may be transferable if they transition from the ADF.

We have issued this year around 10,000 qualifications for people transitioning from the ADF – recognising the valuable skills they obtain in the ADF.

Managing people includes not only providing them with the education, and the mastery to deliver Defence capabilities, at a time when those capabilities are evolving and our priorities are changing is challenging. It requires managing their ongoing development through postings.

Being responsible for the career management of a workforce as large as the ADF is no simple feat. It is a careful balance between ADF and Service requirements, and an individual's career development, along with considering personal aspirations and family circumstances.

Each year we post around one third of our people, sometimes with no change of location (33%), sometimes within locations (10%), other times around the country and sometimes the world (combined 32%).

We post to Navy's 52 deployable ships, submarines, aviation squadrons and clearance diving teams from 14 shore bases across 10 dispersed locations; Army has 147 units geographically dispersed across 157 locations and 41 training areas; and Air Force has 128 units geographically dispersed across 28 locations. In addition, at any one time we have thousands of people deployed overseas.

The scale of what we are managing is significant, and the opportunities now presented to us, such as growing a career management team focused on space and cyber people and in time, a nuclear career management team, provide options to keep our people in service and allow them to explore another version of themselves that they may not have seen on entry. Creating the person that they could be.

An essential part of all careers is a plan for transition, from the moment you join through to the moment it is your time to move on from ADF service. This includes the conversations that need to be had about leaving to support all ADF veterans. Improving the experience and valuing the contribution of our people continues to be prioritised. We must thank our people for their service, for volunteering to join the ADF.

Through the deliberate workforce design and preparedness, training and education to ensure preparedness, continuously improving and policy, and support to our people through career lifecycle and widening the aperture to enable people to service, we building the future ADF.

In this moment in time, it is my responsibility, and it is a privilege, to steward the people system - to support the force in being, to grow the force and build the force that we need for the future to bring all of the facets I have just mentioned together, to enable people to serve their country.

I work with an incredible team committed to enabling people to be the best version of themselves and to see that who they were or who they are now, has no bearing on who they could be. This is what the ADF does for people, this is what service does for people, and this is why we are committed to reforming and growing the ADF to ensure a highly capable professional military for Australia.

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