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Sex and War – A Conversation Army Has to Have

Is there anything morally or legally wrong with giving ADF members (both male and female) the opportunity to have consensual sex during a deployment on a warlike operation?

Whilst you ponder this question, I want to take a walk back through history to 1954 and the French-Indochina War. During the establishment of the French defensive position around the airfields at Dien Bien Phu, the decision was made to deploy two *Bordel Militaire de Campagne (BMC)* or Field Mobile Brothels to the battlefield to service the French forces.[1] The first BMC contained seven Vietnamese prostitutes, the second contained 11 Algerian prostitutes, and these women were employed under the control of the Medical Officer of 1/2 Foreign Legion Infantry Regiment.[2] The BMCs were a well-established, highly regulated, strictly supervised and logistically and medically supported entity throughout the French occupation of Indochina.[3] They were introduced predominantly to help reverse the high rates of venereal disease amongst French forces but were also reported to keep morale high, inhibit clandestine prostitution which was said to 'distract the forces'[4], and provide 'a natural outlet for masculine needs'.[5] According to a French soldier, the prostitutes at Dien Bien Phu shared a complex relationship with the French forces, 'acting not only as sex workers and lovers to soldiers, but also in tactical roles as nurses and or as companions to keep up the spirits of the troops'.[6] Whilst, the BMCs in Dien Bien Phu were largely employed assisting medical staff[7], the deployment of prostitutes to a combat military zone raises some key questions about the legality and morality of organised sex during war.

There are plenty of aspects about the employment of BMCs at Dien Bien Phu which can be considered immoral and illegal from a human rights perspective. After a quick read of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and the Australian National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, you will soon realise that these women were actually victims of a war crime. It is likely they were taken from their homes, employed as prostitutes for their own or their families' economic survival, and knowingly flown into a besieged defensive position where, as non-combatants, they were subjected to indirect and direct fire. By the end of the Battle, four of the women had been killed in a shelling attack and the remainder had been captured and were later 're-educated by the Viet Minh'.[8] As Boczar writes in her very detailed thesis on the subject, the use of BMCs exacerbated both colonial and gender power relationships as the French Military and French Foreign Legion bought with them money and physical strength against which the colonial women could not compete.[9] Whilst these important issues of morality and legality are further discussed in academic discourse[10], I want to put them aside to consider two issues which might be relevant to the modern Australian Defence Force. Firstly, were the French right to acknowledge complete abstinence from sex as an 'unrealistic utopia'[11] and secondly were they were right to try and provide a healthy and safe sexual outlet for their soldiers during combat.

According to the Australian Study of Health and Relationships, adults between 16-69 years of age have sex 1.44 times per week on average.[12] Deployment lengths vary in the ADF, but the majority are between 16-37 weeks in duration. There is a vast array of medical and scientific research demonstrating that regular sexual intercourse is good for the physical and mental wellbeing of young and middle-aged adults.[13] According to the previous US Surgeon General, sex helps satisfy personal, social and physical needs, reduces stress and is inextricably linked to physical and mental wellbeing.[14] One study has even suggested that improved intimacy and sexual interaction can help combat veterans with PTSD recovery.[15] Deployments to a combat environment are often characterised with a large number of frequent and prolonged stressors including, but not limited to; exposure to IEDs, killing an enemy, seeing a fellow soldier and friend dead or injured, having to handle human remains, witnessing human degradation and suffering, and helplessness associated with not being able to stop violent situations. Furthermore, one of the main sources of stress on deployment comes from loneliness or prolonged absence from family, friends, partners and spouses.[16] For some soldiers, sexual abstinence can compound combat and family related stress as it increases their sense of loneliness and represents the eradication of a normal source of enjoyment or relief.

As Byers writes for, 'just as many individual soldiers have been interested in, perhaps even occasionally obsessed with, sex, so too have almost all militaries been concerned to one degree or another about the host of issues surrounding human sexuality'.[17] ADF policies on sex during operational deployments vary between theatres and military commands, with most prohibiting fraternisation amongst serving members but few, if any, providing specific guidance on sexual satisfaction through other means such as the use of sex toys, masturbation, and the use of prostitutes during rest and relief. There are three key aspects of combat effectiveness that might lead a military to try and regulate sexuality; with the primary one being the health and well-being of soldiers. By creating an environment where sex can occur safely, fewer members are likely to contract sexually-transmitted illnesses which reduces the burden on the medical system and increases manpower.[18] Secondly, it is believed that regulating soldiers' sexual activities helps prevent instances of non-consensual sex and fraternisation. Fraternisation amongst serving members and non-consensual sex can generate considerable ill will, resentment, and active resistance from both within and external to a military unit.[19] Studies on sexual assault and harassment amongst US combat veterans suggest that up to 41 percent of women and 4 percent of men experienced sexual harassment, with 70% of those incidences occurring during military deployments.[20] Unregulated sexual partners on deployment can also serve as sources of intelligence for enemy troops and foreign intelligence agencies which creates a broader security risk for the entire force.[21] Whilst there are many different pre-existing notions about sexuality in its various forms, the ADF must consider its role in the regulation of sex from a workplace health and safety, security and gender perspective.

So, thinking back to the original question – is there anything wrong with the ADF providing the opportunity for its forces to have consensual sex on combat operations – I now want to start a conversation. Initially I considered whether the Army could contract Australian male and female sex workers to service troops in forward operating bases and air bases however after some research, I quickly realised there are too many moral, legal, practical, medical and logistical barriers for this concept to be entertained. Perhaps, the solution is to change the way the Army considers fraternisation in operational theatres and enable consenting adults to have sexual relations in a safe, secure and controlled environment. Another option the ADF could consider is facilitating safe and regulated sexual satisfaction through other means such as providing masturbation facilities or issuing sex toys. Or maybe it should be stricter in enforcing abstinence.

Opinions on the subject will undoubtedly vary, but the conversation about sexual activism and regulation on deployment is worth having. Unfortunately, the actions of a small minority, and the subsequent Pathway to Change process have made the ADF nervous when it comes to issues of a sexual nature, however as Major Boulton [mentioned](#) in her recent work on teaming, 'there is now a chance for Army to reflect more deeply and strategically about how it approaches gender issues'[22].

Engagement on difficult issues, she argues, can help generate 'genuine equitable workplaces' and a 'formidably stronger team culture'[23], and as sex is an issue that affects everyone, I would suggest it is a pretty good place to start.

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[1] Windrow, M. (2004). *The Last Valley*. Cassell Military Paperbacks; London, p. 328.

[2] Ibid, p. 673.

[3] Boczar, A. (2015). *Foreign Affairs: Policy, Culture, and the Making of Love and War in Vietnam*. Theses and Dissertations-History, 27, University of Kentucky, pp 69-70.

[4] Ibid, p. 69

[5] Tracol-Huynh, I. (2010). Between stigmatisation and regulation: prostitution in colonial Northern Vietnam. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 12(S1), p. S80.

[6] Boczar, A. (2015). *Foreign Affairs: Policy, Culture, and the Making of Love and War in Vietnam*. Theses and Dissertations-History, 27, University of Kentucky, p. 64.

[7] Windrow, op cit., p. 328.

[8] Ibid, p. 673.

[9] Boczar, op cit., ch 1-3.

[10] Ibid; McDougall, G. (1998). Contemporary Forms of Slavery: Systematic rape, sexual slavery and slavery-like practices during armed conflict. *United Nations Economic and Social Council, Commission on Human Rights, E/CN.4Sub2/1998/13*, 21; Henriot, C., (2012). Supplying female bodies: Labor migration, sex work, and the commoditization of women in colonial Indochina and contemporary Vietnam. *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 7(1), pp.1-9; Trnka, S. (1995). Living a life of sex and danger: Women, warfare, and sex in military folk rhymes. *Western Folklore*, 54(3), pp.232-241; UNIFEM Press Release, (2009). Preventing Wartime Rape from Becoming a Peacetime Reality, 24 Jun, http://www.unifem.org/news_events/story_detail.php?StoryID=894 (http://www.unifem.org/news_events/story_detail.php?StoryID=894).

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[17] Byers, J. (2012). *The Sexual Economy of War: Regulation of Sexuality and the US Army 1898-1940*, Phd Dissertation, Duke University, p. 2.

[18] Ibid, pp 11-12.

[19] Ibid, p. 13

[20] LeardMann, C. et al. (2013). Combat Deployment Is Associated with Sexual Harassment or Sexual Assault in a Large, Female Military Cohort. *Women's Health Issues*, 23(4), pp 215-223 and Barth, S. et al. (2015). Military Sexual Trauma Among Recent Veterans. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 50(1), pp 77 - 86

[21] Byers, op cit., p. 6

[22] Boulton, E. (2017). *Teaming, optimising military capability for the coming era of equality : 2020 to 2050*. Australian Army Research Centre, Commonwealth of Australia, p. 21.

[23] ibid



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