

(The Gender Centre advise that this article may not be current and as such certain content, including but not limited to persons, contact details and dates may not apply. Where legal authority or medical related matters are cited, responsibility lies with the reader to obtain the most current relevant legal authority and/or medical publication.)

# Cate McGregor

## Woman and Warrior

by Katherine Cummings

Article appeared in Polare magazine: January 2014 Last Update: January 2014 Last Reviewed: September 2015



As chief speechwriter for the Chief of the Army, Cate had the writing skills and contacts to ensure that her story was well-told, and in the right places.

**L**ieutenant-Colonel Cate McGregor has been much in the news for the past few months, as she emerged from her previous persona as Malcolm and became known to the public as the highest ranking transgender in the Australian military. As chief speechwriter for the Chief of the Army, Cate had the necessary writing skills and contacts to ensure that her story was well-told, and in the right places.

*Cate has many influential and well-known friends, including the Prime Minister, and her reception in her new persona has been generally accepting to the point of being affectionate.*

She has appeared on the *A.B.C.s One Plus One* and in a variety of other media, and recently the *Australian Women's Weekly's* January 2014 issue devoted eight pages to re-telling her story and providing some background to the transgender phenomenon in general.

Cate has many influential and well-known friends, including the Prime Minister, and her reception in her new persona has been generally accepting to the point of being affectionate.

There have, of course, been exceptions and she has been the recipient of hate mail and abuse via the so-called social networks, networks which all too often turn out to be anti-social or just plain vicious. Patrick Lyon from News Limited records an assertion that Cate was "counselled" for having gone outside the permissible limits of response. Personally, I applaud her refusal to be made the punching bag for ignorant bigots in the armed forces and elsewhere.

Her invective may not have been ladylike, but the attack that impelled her response was not gentlemanly, and, if quoted accurately, came close to infringing the Anti-Discrimination Act that bars vilification of transgenders.

As I said to her in a recent email, her conduct provides an excellent example of the French saying "This animal is dangerous. When attacked it will defend itself."

Cate comes from a military family so it was not surprising she chose the Army as her profession, although her progression through her career has not been without changes of mood and direction. Having graduated from Duntroon, Cate's predecessor-person, Malcolm, left the army after having attained the rank of Captain. Cate now says she did so in a fit of pique because there were no wars in progress and promotion was slow.

The *Women's Weekly* article (by Caroline Overington) states that in 1985 Malcolm found himself consulting a counsellor who diagnosed him as transgendered (sorry about the changing pronouns ... I am trying to be consistent with the gender being presented at any given time).

Malcolm joined a law firm in 1990 and then entered the world of politics, as a political adviser and speech writer for both major parties in turn. During this time his employers included Bob Carr (Labor) and John Hewson (Liberal).

The next stage saw a period as political correspondent but by 2000 Malcolm had rejoined the Army and was taking part in military operations in East Timor.

Sometime in the period between entering politics and rejoining the Army, Malcolm visited me a few times to talk about gender issues. At this time Malcolm was considering joining the Naval Reserve so that we had more to talk about than gender, as I had done my National Service in the Navy and had by then spent several years in the Naval Reserve.

Malcolm, however, decided to return to the Army, and during this period also met the love of his life and married.

When Cate finally decided she had to be Cate her wife was the first to be told and Cate rightly refuses to reveal what went on between them at this point. Many of us sympathise with this and remember with great sadness the irresistible compulsion that caused us to break the bonds with our spouses, for fear of being pushed into suicide or madness.

But Cate has preserved the friendship of her wife, and that is a wonderful and enviable situation, a situation that is becoming more common as time passes, and will, I hope, become the norm rather than the exception.

Cate is an attractive woman and belies her 57 years, both in her personal appearance and in the stylish fashions she wears (in uniform she is also very attractive).

In her interview Cate talked of leaving the Army in the middle of 2014 and said she would like to be trained as an air hostess. I assume this was said tongue-in-cheek as I can't imagine her wanting to move from a career of decision making and leadership to being the woman (however well-groomed) who 'makes cups of tea for people on aeroplanes'.

Whatever Cate chooses to do, I believe she will do it with dedication and skill and she will always be a role model for transgenders, in the armed forces and elsewhere, who need to reconcile their inner life with service to the nation.

Leaving the topic of Cate and concentrating more on the *Women's Weekly* piece by Ms. Overington, I would like to take issue with some of the peripheral material in the article. I do not know if she did her own research or if she used background material gathered for her by some junior journalist, but some of the material was poorly researched and even misleading.

Overington brings up a foolish phenomenon referred to as 'sex change regret'. This is probably the brainchild of those who want to prevent people from having gender reassignment and makes about as much sense as they ever do. It is stated that people who suffer from sex change regret "have the operation [and] desperately wish they hadn't". No authority is given for this furphy, and no references are provided. I understand that the *Women's Weekly* is not an academic journal but a little fact-checking would not have gone amiss.

In 2009 the Monash Gender Dysphoria Clinic was in trouble because some malcontents accused the staff of the clinic of rushing people into gender reassignment rather than exposing them to extended rounds of psychotherapy intended to return them to sanity. These critics suggested that the process of psychotherapy should have gone on until the 'right' decision was reached (no prizes for guessing what the 'right' decision was). An article by Jill Stark in the *Sun-Herald* of 31 May 2009 mentions three dissatisfied clients of Monash (out of some 600). Follow-up comments on the Internet raised the number to eight. Even if the number had been increased to twenty this would still mean a dissatisfaction rate of less than four percent.

There are many medical procedures that have a much higher dissatisfaction rate than this. Check stomach banding and breast enhancement. Academic surveys of satisfaction rates for gender reassignment (or, as it is sometimes called, gender affirmation), carried out over more than thirty years, show an almost uniform satisfaction rate of around 86 percent. A recent study at Leicester University Hospital gave an even higher satisfaction rate of 95 percent. So much for 'sex change regret'.

The only example given for this phenomenon is that of Alan Finch, who went through reassignment, then decided he had made an error and went back to living as a male, and has devoted a lot of his time since then to attacking the Monash centre and trying to have authorities intervene to prevent gender reassignment.

Alan, in fact, confessed that he cheated on the assessment tests to gain admission to the Monash Medical Centre programme, and when I first read of his conversion to "Helen" in an article in *Woman's Day* (19 December 1989), Helen was ecstatically telling the world how happy she was to be a woman at last, having spent so much of her life desperately wanting to be female.

She also contracted a marriage, which was illegal at the time, and protested bitterly when it was expunged. "I will fight for the law to be changed!" he (or she) is quoted as saying. By 2004 Alan had changed course 180 degrees and was in full flight trying to sue the Monash Centre for malpractice and saying he should have been forced to have more psychotherapy.

In the 2009 version of his story Alan claims to have had doubts and misgivings about going forward and that he mentioned these doubts to the surgeon moments before the operation was about to begin. He then, he claims, blacked out and was devastated to find when he awoke that his wishes had been ignored and he was the horrified possessor of a neo-vagina. A fine dramatic touch was added to the 2009 account ... a younger sister who sobbed and primally wailed as she pleaded with Alan not to go forward to surgery. In the earlier version she did not get a guernsey.

It appears, then, that Alan Finch is not a reliable witness (the 'Weekly' apparently tried to find him and could not, lucky them) and the concept of 'sex change regret' is a shaky one, unless one is prepared to allow that almost any medical procedure (or social one, for that matter ... consider the failure rate of marriages) is liable to involve a subset of cases who wish they hadn't done whatever it was they did, and are prepared to find someone else to blame for a decision they made, as adults, having, one hopes, informed themselves of the possible consequences beforehand.

Another case cited by Ms Overington is that of Mike Penner, an American sports writer who transitioned from Mike to Christine in 2007, then reverted to Mike and eventually committed suicide in 2009. This may be a case of sex change regret but no hard facts have emerged in the case of Penner and we have no way of knowing what other pressures may have caused him to act in this way. I have a friend in the U.S.A. who has gone from male to female to male and back to female and seems perfectly happy. I have another friend who

went from female to male and back to female and is now considering a return to male. And why not? There are no hard and fast rules about how a human being should act in these circumstances, and human behaviour is almost infinitely variable. It is true that there is a high suicide rate among transgenders, but a recent study has shown that the rate is forty times higher among pre-operative transgenders than it is among post-operative.

I also think it is demonstrable that many of those who suicide do so because of the way they are treated by society before, during or after the event, frequently losing their employment or being denied employment and education, and all-too-often losing the support of those nearest and dearest to them. To suggest that those who suicide do so because they are suffering from regret at having transitioned is superficial and unsupported by any studies I know.

The concept of 'sex change regret' smacks of prejudice, ignorance and bias rather than any real attempt to research the situation. There is a wealth of published material on the history and current status of the transgender phenomenon.

Leaving aside the instances of sex change in mythology and the unproven cases of historical characters such as the Chevalier d'Eon and the Abbe de Choisy, who may have been transgendered or may have been transvestites, our knowledge of the transgender situation, and our consideration of the legal, social and medical rights of transgenders dates effectively from the early 1950s with the 'outing' of Christine Jorgensen late in 1952.

The 'nature or nurture' argument rages on in this area as in many others and a number of researchers, in Australia and elsewhere, are working on the aetiology of transgender. Until we know more, much of what we believe is bound to be based on conflicting evidence, much of it anecdotal.

It does not help however, for this evidence to be cited uncritically in articles intended for the lay reader who has no knowledge of, and little interest in, the deeper concerns of those who are trying to persuade society to accept them as people who have not sought to be different, and who do no harm in their difference.

Transgender is not a hobby, nor a whim, nor a perversion.

It is a medical condition, treated by medical professionals, and should be treated with the kind of respect and empathy one would expect for any other human condition.

## References

1. Green, R. and Fleming, D. (1990) 'Transsexual surgery follow-up status in the 1990s' *Annual Review of Sex Research*. 7:351-369
2. Pfafflin, Friedmann and Junge, Astrid. 'Sex Reassignment. Thirty years of international follow-up studies after sex reassignment surgery: a comprehensive review'. 1961-1991 (trans. from German by Roberta B. Jacobson and Alf. B. Meier)
3. Lobato, M.I., Koff, W.J., Manenti, C. et al. (2006) 'Follow-up of sex reassignment surgery in transsexuals: a Brazilian cohort'. *Archives of Sexual Behaviour*. 35 (6): 711-15

---

Polare Magazine is published quarterly in Australia by The Gender Centre Inc., which is funded by the Department of Family & Community Services under the S.A.A.P. program and supported by the N.S.W. Health Department through the AIDS and Infectious Diseases Branch. Polare provides a forum for discussion and debate on gender issues. Unsolicited contributions are welcome, the editor reserves the right to edit such contributions without notification. Any submission which appears in Polare may be published on our internet site. Opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the Editor, The Gender Centre Inc., the Department of Family & Community Services or the N.S.W. Department of Health.

---

The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities, which enhance the ability of people with gender issues to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to people with gender issues, their partners, family members and friends in New South Wales. We are an accommodation service and also act as an education, support, training and referral resource centre to other organisations and service providers. The Gender Centre is committed to educating the public and service providers about the needs of people with gender issues. We specifically aim to provide a high quality service, which acknowledges human rights and ensures respect and confidentiality.