

Walk the Talk Award Entrant: Wing Commander Bernadette Pothan, NZ Defence Force



Video link: <https://vimeo.com/album/4446506/video/229802866>

The military environment has been, and continues to be, male-dominated. Historically, this has presented numerous challenges for diversity and inclusion.

Within this environment, Wing Commander Bernadette Pothan, who was hand-selected by the Chief of Defence Force to lead "Operation RESPECT," has continuously demonstrated bravery and resilience.

"Operation RESPECT" is a programme addressing inappropriate and harmful sexual behaviours and is one of the most important confronting cultural awareness and change programmes ever undertaken by the NZDF.

While many understood and acknowledged there was an underlying problem that necessitated Operation RESPECT, NZDF Director Diversity and Inclusion Dr Denise Lievore says there were also many who resisted the programme, often feeling personally vilified by the confronting and uncomfortable topic and conversations that it sparked.

In a Defence Force that prides itself on its values of commitment, courage and comradeship, Operation RESPECT had the potential to polarise.

“The enormity of the task would faze many, but Berni always focused on the enormity of the impact that Operation RESPECT would have on the NZDF and its people,” Denise says.

“Her strength of conviction was unwavering. This particular quality was much needed to push through in the face of push-backs and to roll out a programme that has changed awareness and behaviour.”

Berni spearheaded:

- Establishing a strategy to challenge and change the NZDF’s culture and behaviours relating to persistent sexism, and to better integrate women into the NZDF.
- Developing and rolling out training, including holding “town halls” across military camps and bases to discuss inappropriate sexual behavior and a sexual ethics and healthy relationships training package.
- Implementing a restricted disclosure system to offer victim/survivors of sexual assault an alternative way to report incidents, which provides them with the support they need and also allows them to make the choice as to whether they want further action against the alleged perpetrator.
- Introducing a dedicated, professional sexual assault response team; and addressing issues associated with specific risk factors, including alcohol and unsafe environments and facilities.

“The impact of Berni’s role in leading Operation RESPECT cannot be understated,” says Denise. “With her at the forefront, Operation RESPECT has created a platform for all NZDF employees to call out bad behavior.

“It has given our people the ability to speak out about any person whose behaviour they believe is not in accordance with our organisational values.”

Denise says Operation RESPECT has empowered individuals to rise to a higher standard of personal and peer expectation and to foster diversity and inclusion within the NZDF. Berni’s work has also created an environment for others to walk the talk.

Berni will continue to create opportunities for people to shine through their differences.

She has recently been appointed to a significant leadership role as the Base Commander RNZAF Base Woodbourne – the first woman to hold this position.

Base Woodbourne, as the home of all recruit training, is where it all starts for RNZAF personnel. In this role, Berni is leading from the front, inspiring and influencing those around her, as she has done throughout her career.

With Berni at the helm, the scene has been set to produce our next generation of personnel who, from the very beginnings of their career, will have learned that the value they add to our organisation is through the differences they bring.

Prior to taking on her current role, Berni was also instrumental in overhauling the RNZAF's Office Leadership Training, which required fundamental philosophical and cultural change, not an easy task."

Bernie has championed diversity and led from the front from the earliest days of her military career, after joining the RNZAF following a successful career in the education sector.

She has been a key change agent for the new face of NZDF leadership development and a prominent driving force for the advancement of women and minority groups in the workplace.

Berni chaired the Air Force Women's Development Steering Group and represented the RNZAF on the NZDF Women's Development Steering Group.

Her work in both highlighting the issues within the organisation and encouraging proactive change has often been done in addition to her primary role, requiring high energy and significant amounts of her own time to move the organisation forward.

"Berni's motivations have always been about seeking a fair and level playing field for all," Denise says. "She is not one to seek the limelight or formal acknowledgement for her efforts; another reason why her influential voice and actions have cut through the barriers and status quo."