Lieutenant General Morrison’s 36 years of service has spanned the long peace and the longest war.

PHOTO: PETER BREW-BEVAN
The Education of David Morrison

The head of the Army did not think women soldiers had a problem. That was before he’d sat down and heard their stories of abuse. Anne Summers profiles the General who made the famous YouTube video telling the men who could not behave to “get out” of his Army.

It’s early 2012 and Lieutenant General David Morrison, Chief of the Australian Army, is sitting in an anonymous office in Sydney listening to two women.

“I gave you the person I love most in the world and this is how you have treated her,” one of the women tells him. She is the mother of the other woman, a young soldier who has just told Morrison her story of sexual abuse by a superior.

He is shattered.

“If I could stand in your shoes and absorb your pain, I would,” Morrison told her.

Also in the room is Elizabeth Broderick, Australia’s Sex Discrimination Commissioner, who initiated this, the first of three such meetings with young women who had suffered abuse while in the Army.

“He is shattered.

“If I could stand in your shoes and absorb your pain, I would,” Morrison told her.

Also in the room is Elizabeth Broderick, Australia’s Sex Discrimination Commissioner, who initiated this, the first of three such meetings with young women who had suffered abuse while in the Army.

“I wanted him to feel the case for change,” Broderick said later. She wanted him to have a similar experience to hers, to hear first-hand the stories, to “move the case for change from his head to his heart”.

So she put to him that he should meet one on one—away from Canberra, on neutral territory and out of uniform—some women who had suffered terribly from being in the Army.

By this time Broderick and Morrison had had what she describes as several “robust conversations”. He did not think the problem was that bad; he thought women could advance in the Army if they really wanted to.

Morrison agreed, he says, “not reluctantly but with some trepidation”. In the end, he found himself, as Broderick describes it, “sitting uncomfortably in his chair, the mother nervously escorting her daughter to the chair beside, a box of tissues in the middle”.

“Sir, I’m so nervous,” the young woman said.

“Believe me, I’m scared too,” replied the Army Chief.

“In that moment I knew we had a chance at change,” Broderick said in a speech in late 2014. “It takes an authentic and a compassionate military leader to admit that he fears what he’s about to be told.”

I spoke with “Karen”, one of the three young
women, who told me she had been on the point of “separation”—Army-speak for resigning—when she agreed to meet with Morrison. She’d been on exercises with her unit for two months, during which time not a single person spoke to her.

When the government announced in April 2011, after the so-called “Skype scandal”, that it had asked Broderick to review the treatment of women in the military, Karen was one of many serving women who sought out the Sex Discrimination Commissioner to tell her story.

Karen told me that people at her level were used to seeing Morrison as “reserved and stern-looking”, but there she was in faraway Sydney with her best friend—another soldier who’d been abused—telling her story.

“He was certainly shocked, by the look on his face,” Karen told me by phone in late January. “He was very apologetic. He made a promise to us that he’d enact change. He did renew my faith in the organization,” she said.

She is still serving.

Morrison tells me about the third conversation. She was a young soldier who, after a night of drinking, had woken up to find her instructor in her bed, sexually assaulting her. She reported it and, Morrison says, the system responded appropriately—he was convicted in a civilian court of a sexual offence.

“But then we made a decision that, despite his suspended sentence of eighteen months, we would continue to employ him.”

Morrison’s anger is still palpable three years on. “And then we compounded that by keeping him in the Army, eventually promoting him again and then posting her to the same unit he was in.”

“My disbelief gave way to shame,” Morrison said in a speech to a United Nations International Women’s Day Conference in 2013. “This was not the Army that I had loved and thought I knew.” As Morrison told the boys at The King’s School, a posh private school in Sydney, in a remarkable speech delivered last November on White Ribbon Day, his shame “morphed into an implacable resolve to do something about it”.

It was eight years since the initial crime, and the man had had no blemish on his career since, but Morrison discharged him because, he told me, at the time of the conviction, “We made the wrong decisions”.

The young soldier who’d been raped “left us”, Morrison told me. “But I am still in touch with her and we are supporting her in her studies.”

He feels deeply that he owes the people who were hurt by the institution that had been his life.

“It changed him,” Brigadier Adam Findlay, who commands the Seventh Brigade, told me. “He thought the Army was in better shape than it was.”

Just how bad it was has been documented in any number of reports (there has been a major report virtually every year for the past two decades) but perhaps none sets out better the brutal culture of the entire military than the Report on Abuse in Defence, released by the Defence Abuse Response Taskforce last November.

“Sixty years of sins,” says Morrison, handing me his copy to borrow.

The report was commissioned by the former government and was conducted by the Hon. Len Roberts-Smith QC (who is the father of Victoria Cross winner, Ben Roberts-Smith). It lays out in stark detail the hazing, sexual assaults and other forms of almost unbelievable brutality that have been ritually inflicted on both male and female members of the military (although disproportionately on women) by their colleagues in
Three generations of soldiering, clockwise from above left: Morrison’s grandfather and great-uncle in World War One; his father Alan Morrison in Korea 1951; David in Papua New Guinea in 1990.

a long-standing tradition that, to date, it seems, no one has seriously taken on.

David Morrison’s momentous mission to transform the way the Army operates and to change its often-brutal underlying culture has evolved over a lifetime, but even before he read the Abuse report he understood, from the conversations with the three young soldiers, his task was more herculean than he had previously assumed.

IN APRIL 2011, just three months before Morrison became Chief of Army, a young female cadet at the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA) went to the media after she discovered she had been filmed, without her knowledge, having consensual sex with another cadet who had beamed the activity via Skype to a group of his friends in an adjoining room.

Defence Minister Stephen Smith described what
became known as the Skype scandal as “very much an NRL or an AFL moment” for Defence. He meant that the boys’ actions, and the way ADFA failed to respond adequately, was a defining moment in highlighting a similar systemic lack of respect for women in the military that various sex scandals had exposed in the football codes.

Smith ordered a number of inquiries, including asking Elizabeth Broderick to investigate the overall treatment of women in the Defence force, and to report separately on how women fared at ADFA.

Morrison was in his first month of being Chief of Army when Broderick came to see him.

They had been in the military for fewer than ten weeks when they did what they did ... Those cadets were attracted to our culture.

“He sat in here and she asked me some questions that I was neither expecting nor could I answer,” he told me. “That was a life-changing moment.”

He told me that after talking with Broderick and other women like journalist Catherine Fox and consultant Avril Henry, working his way through “a pile of reading written from a feminist perspective” and “after thinking on this issue more deeply than I have ever thought on any other big issue I am now 100 per cent changed in my view”.

“I had thought that the actions of those young men at ADFA was more indicative of their upbringing or just who they were as individuals than anything to do with the military,” Morrison told me. “They had been in the military for fewer than ten weeks when they did what they did.”

He was not convinced, in other words, that the military was in any way to blame.

He has now changed his mind.

Those cadets, he says, “were attracted to our culture”.

Morrison is man of ideas who has thought deeply about how the Army needs to prepare for the future. When he first became Chief of Army, he established three priorities. First, and most basic, was to deliver combat-ready units and forces and individuals for current operations. Second was to deliver a “robust and capable army in the third decade of this century” and third was “people”, which he initially thought was “primarily about care of the wounded, both physical and mentally wounded”.

He developed a new force structure that replaced the previous multiple “silos of excellence” with three rotating combat brigades that, in official language, “provides both the utility of an immediately deployable force for the most likely scenarios and a strategic hedge against the uncertainty of the future”. Plan Beersheba—named for a famous World War I battle in the Middle East—was launched in December 2012. Although it is not widely known outside the Army, it was a major change, reflecting what the Army has learned both from the long peace and the past sixteen continuous years of war, the longest in its history.

“For anyone, that would be a wonderful legacy,” say Brigadier Adam Findlay, from whose Seventh Brigade the next contingent of soldiers going to Afghanistan is being drawn.

Morrison has also told the Army that it needs an “intellectual pivot” to reach beyond traditional analyses, to rely less on “the god of technology” to deliver weapons that will fight future wars and to instead understand how a “digital Army” will transform everything.

His initial plan to focus on wounded soldiers, while not abandoned, quickly became overshadowed by the urgent need to address the Army’s culture.

He had arrived at the view that “despite all the equipment and despite all the great performance of
the Australian Army throughout its 114-year history, we’ve been failing because we haven’t been making best use of 51 per cent of the Australian population in terms of talent”, he said during our interview.

He had to increase the numbers of women in the Army and to vastly improve their experiences once they were there. He was driven in part by pragmatism: the changing (and ageing) demography of Australia was shrinking the recruitment pool. For the most part Gen Y wasn’t interested in being ordered around and the Army was not appealing to multicultural Australia.

“Many Australians have an idealized image of the Australian soldier as a rough-hewn country lad—a larrikin who fights best with a hangover and who never salutes an officer, especially the Poms,” Morrison told the UN Women’s Conference in March 2013. “This is a pantomime caricature. Every soldier is Mel Gibson in Gallipoli and frankly it undermines our recruitment.”

The Anzac mythology might be attractive to the young people who flock to Turkey each April but it was not translating into recruits.

Morrison ordered more money to be spent on recruiting women. Whereas the Navy and the Air Force ads “had smart women in smart uniforms doing smart things”, the Army’s showed a woman bayonetting something. Policies on childcare and maternity leave were reviewed.

In 2013 Morrison set “specific recruiting targets” for the first time, saying these made him “personally accountable” for success or failure. He promised to recruit 660 women that year, up from 300 the previous year.

It was ambitious, but it needed to be.

The Army, with just 10 per cent women, had fewer women than the Navy (18.5 per cent) and Air Force (17.1 per cent) in 2011, reported the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Recruitment was made easier in September 2012 when the Gillard government removed most of the remaining limitations on women serving in combat roles. These are the key Army jobs, essential for credibility and for promotion, and until 2012 women could not do them.

“It is impossible to overstate the importance of
this,” Morrison told the UN International Women’s Day Conference in 2013. “This is the last citadel for women in our Army. Close combat is the core business of the Army.”

Removing the barriers to women serving in close combat also removed “the last defence of those who are resistant to the widest employment of women in the Army and, by extension, their promotion to the most senior ranks”.

As a result, Morrison now believes a woman could service as Chief of the Army within a decade.

After his UN speech, Broderick insisted that he join her for dinner with some of the delegates to the conference.

“It’s part of your training,” she’d joked.

Soon General Morrison was sitting down with nine women, all of them pacifists, several of them Indian, and one a woman from PNG who protects women accused of witchcraft.

“It was just a hoot of an evening,” he told me at our interview. “It was just fantastic.”

But if General Morrison was on something of a high after being feted at the UN, he very soon fell back to earth.

Within weeks of returning to Canberra he discovered that a group of his men had created and shared, in some cases on the Defence Department’s internal email system, explicit and lewd images and videos of a number of women, some of them soldiers. The women had been filmed without their knowledge. It had been happening for some years and more than 100 soldiers were involved.

This was far worse than the Skype incident and implicated many more men. Nor were they raw cadets—these perpetrators were long-serving, many quite senior, soldiers, eleven of them officers. They identified themselves as the Jedi Council, though without “the shared noble purpose” of the Star Wars saga. In seeming defiance of their Chief, these men were intent on perpetuating the worst of the Army’s sexist culture.

Within a day of learning about this, Morrison had discharged six men, suspended a number of others and referred the matter to police.

He then spoke on 13 June by video link to the 40,000-plus people under his command. We could all see what one of his colleagues refers to as “the steel in his gaze”. Another described his anger that day as “red-hot glowing”. The legendary temper of General Morrison, for so long restrained, was unleashed.

His powerful message, telling people who could not conform to the values of the Army to “get out”, quickly became a YouTube sensation. It has since been viewed 1.5 million times, and brought Morrison international fame. In Australia, the Army Chief became instantly recognizable—and extremely popular, especially among women.

“The double-edged sword that I got served through the Skype and Jedi Council issues is that I had a great public interest in what we were doing,” he tells me. “And the old adage is to never waste a crisis, and I don’t think we have.”

Clearly not.

“A 36-year career has been crystallized in the public mind by a three-minute YouTube clip,” he says.

They identified themselves as the Jedi Council, though without the ‘shared noble purpose’ of the Star Wars saga.

We meet in his office on the first floor of a building in the Defence complex at Russell Hill in Canberra in late January. It is hardly a lavish space for the man who commands the largest of the three forces. He has some nice art on the walls—a Septimus Power of World War I gunners and a William Dargie depicting World War II, on loan from
the Australian War Memorial—and some striking large photographs of soldiers. But the room looks out over the carpark.

He strides out to greet me. The General is trim and compact, with reddish hair, piercing blue eyes and a straightforward, friendly and informal manner, shorter than he seems on television. We sit on brown chesterfields and talk for an hour and a half.

I find David Morrison easy and engaging. He makes strong eye contact. He is well prepared and he has also done his research.

Morrison was born in Cairns in 1956 but because his father, Major General Alan Morrison, or Alby, as everyone called him, was in the military the family moved a lot, to the UK, Adelaide and finally to Canberra. Alby served in Korea and Vietnam, and from 1977 to 1981 was Commandant of the Royal Military College, Duntroon.

Morrison has described how upset he was as a thirteen-year-old to see his father being booed on his return from Vietnam as he led the Ninth Battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment through the streets of Adelaide.

“He had all these soldiers killed in his unit, over 30, from one battalion. We lost over 41 in ten, twelve years in Afghanistan. And there they were, being booed.”

I have a ghastly feeling that I might have been among those who booed back in 1969.

“I know you protested against the war in Vietnam,” he says. Rather than reprimanding me, he just asks if I am still as “judgemental” now. I tell him that I am not.

He says his father did not condemn the hecklers. “This is a democracy,” he told his son. “People have got the right to express their views.”

Despite his father being “the number one role model in my life”, Morrison enrolled in an Arts/Law degree at the Australian National University. There he developed his abiding love for literature and the arts. But after uni he was “broke”, had no clue what to do with his Arts degree and, without telling his father, at the age of 22, David Morrison joined the military.

In 1979, the Army was entering what would be known as “the long peace” after Vietnam and before East Timor.

“The Army was not viewed as an essential tool of statecraft by the government or the nation,” Morrison says. “Our budget was cut and so was our strength. Too many of our brightest and best left the Army to find a more rewarding life outside.”

Morrison would not serve overseas until 1999, when he went to East Timor as Chief of Staff for Major Peter Cosgrove.

Morrison was promoted to three-star General—outranking his two-star father—in 2011, just before he was made Chief of the Army. During his 36-year military career, Morrison has held a number of regimental positions, been Australian instructor at Sandhurst in the UK, commanded the Second Battalion and the Third Brigade, and occupied the position of Director-General Preparedness and Plans (Army). He has been commander of the Australian Defence College, Deputy Chief of Army and in 2009 became the Army’s first Forces Commander, based at Victoria Barracks in Sydney.

Major General Craig Orme, just returned as Australia’s Commander in the Middle East, and a
friend of Morrison’s, was at Duntroon when Alby was in charge. Alby was “a well-loved man”, and a remarkable orator whose farewell address to the cadets, Orme tells me, is still remembered.

His son David is “respected” rather than loved, says Orme. “There’s a toughness there that means he would not be loved in the way his father was, but a senior leader would always choose to be respected.”

It is how he has been able to take on the Army and force through change. And having inherited his father’s eloquence means he is able to communicate what he’s doing to audiences at home and internationally.

Morrison says that changing culture is “the hardest thing you can ever do”. And it’s a pretty lonely job: “You don’t have many peers when you’re chief of the Army.”

So Morrison swaps experiences with leaders outside the military. He has benefitted greatly from being one of Elizabeth Broderick’s Male Champions of Change, a group of 25 CEOs who have signed on to accelerate the pace of improving gender equality in their organizations.

He is especially close to fellow MCC, David Thodey, the CEO of Telstra, describing him as “a pretty amazing guy. I’ve learned a lot from him”.

“He’s given the Army a voice on a stage we didn’t have,” General Orme says. And while there’s a fair amount of envy at Morrison getting to share that stage in London last year with actor and UNHCR ambassador Angelina Jolie, there is also the bonus that what he says on these international platforms “resonates inside the Army”.

This ability to “package and communicate a message” is admired by his peers and adds to his stature. His “eloquence, authority and integrity makes him a powerful communicator and leader”, says Orme.

Morrison’s eloquence was on display at a dinner he hosted in 2012 at the RSL Club in Melbourne. Those invited included the ABC’s Barrie Cassidy and Heather Ewart, Greg Sheridan from The Australian, John Roskam from the Institute of Public Affairs and journalist Gideon Haigh.

At some point, Morrison told the group he’d like to say a few words.

“For fifteen minutes he gave one of the most brilliant extemporaneous speeches I’ve ever heard—fluent, frank, logical, persuasive,” Haigh told me. “There was no rhetoric … there was not a single umm or ahhh. It was serious without being earnest, smart without being know-all.”

Haigh was impressed not just by the content of Morrison’s speech but at the way he “spoke, not just in complete sentences but complete paragraphs”.

He would have been even more impressed had he known that, despite his apparent composure, Morrison’s head was still spinning from a conversation he’d had on the plane on the way down. His speechwriter and long-time friend Malcolm McGregor, who’d served with him in the infantry, had started a conversation around “transgendered people”.

Morrison responded: “Is this going where I think it’s going?”

Yes, it was. There are around fifteen transgendered people in the Defence forces so it was not a new issue but, as Morrison told me, “I wasn’t expecting someone who I had known for 30-plus years to sit on a plane with me to Melbourne ...”

As they left the dinner, Morrison clutched McGregor on the elbow and said, “I’m with you. I don’t understand how this is going to play out, I don’t know what is happening in your life, I can’t empathize with you on that point, but I can assure you that you are my mate and I will stay absolutely rock solid with you.”

Malcolm’s transition to Cate was very public because of the media and political circles she moves in and she received a huge amount of understanding and support. Including from her boss.

“She was very well looked after, and not just by me,” Morrison told me. “I think I have created a workplace environment where people feel safer to declare differences from the norm.”

That feeling of safety should extend to women in the military who have endured domestic violence, he says, and he is encouraging every soldier in the Australian Army to take the White Ribbon oath.
“to never commit, excuse or remain silent” about violence against women.

As Morrison said in his YouTube video, in a phrase that has reverberated widely, “the standard you walk past is the standard you accept”.

DAVID MORRISON WANTS his legacy to be “not just gender and not just military capability, it’s about recognizing our history as well”.

He wants the contribution of ordinary soldiers to be recognized. Late last year he launched Cassidy’s book, Private Bill: In Love and War, the story of his father, who was a prisoner of war in Crete during World War I. He also recently launched Not for Glory by Susan Newhouse, the story of the nursing corps. As you might expect, he has read widely on war, including Pat Barker’s Regeneration trilogy, Richard Flanagan’s Narrow Road to the Deep North, David Malouf’s The Great World and George Johnston’s books.

This is a man who has thought deeply about what it means to be a warrior. He talks of the men of the First AIF whose “battles never stopped” and of “the domestic and societal cost that must have been wrought not just for the immediate families but across generations.

“This is why Army has worked so hard with White Ribbon and other like organizations to try in some way to make it easier for our contemporary veterans to face their demons.”

Morrison has also grappled with how to reconcile having a large female presence within an Army whose basic purpose is, where necessary, to kill.

“There’s no prettying up what the Army exists for,” says Morrison. “Under our constitution, it’s to protect the nation and its interests up to and including the use of sanctioned appropriate levels of violence should that be required. That’s what we train for.”

None of the changes he has introduced “should be misunderstood as watering down our capacity to wield force”, he says.

But force should be confined to the battlefield.

“If a warrior can’t turn it off then you have nothing to distinguish the soldier from the brute,”

Morrison said famously last year at the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence, where 155 nations signed a declaration to end impunity for rape in war.

Rape of women has always been a weapon of war, Morrison acknowledges. But not in his Army.

“Any nexus between an Army such as the one I aspire to lead and sexual assault is absolutely unacceptable,” he has said. At the heart of this sexual violence stands the soldier, he says, “and the choice that he will make ... to be a protector or a perpetrator”.

The same goes for bullying, harassment or other forms of intimidation of comrades: “No one has ever explained to me how a coward in barracks is a hero in operations,” says Morrison. “And bullies who humiliate their comrades are cowards.”

AFTER THE JEDI COUNCIL scandal, Morrison said to his leadership team, “We are missing the point here. We are seeing a series of incidents and the strand that connects them all is a lack of respect—respect for your mates, male or female.”

On 4 July 2013, just three weeks after the YouTube video, in another hard-hitting speech, General Morrison added “respect” to initiative, courage and teamwork as the values that form the basis for the cultural and ethical foundation of the service. Pointing to the Army’s “treatment of recruits, women, minorities, the abuse of alcohol
“If a warrior can’t turn it off then you have nothing to distinguish the soldier from the brute.”
PHOTO: PETER BREW-BEVAN
and the way bullying emerges from our attempts to build small teams” he concluded there was a “systemic problem” in the Army’s culture.

“To pretend otherwise, after so many repeated scandals and so much adverse scrutiny, is simply dishonest and self-delusional.”

Morrison gave the grim statistics of some 180 soldiers being charged or under investigation for sexual harassment, bullying, sexual and other forms of assault and drunkenness.

“Launching respect was one of the key things I’ve done,” Morrison told me in our interview. “I was stunned that it wasn’t picked up.” But it has had a huge impact inside the Army.

“People embraced it, are held to account for it, and are sacked because they don’t show it.”

In all, 200 men have been discharged in the past two years for unacceptable behaviour, many of them directly because of the Jedi Council.

Everyone knows the new rules.

“They’re not doing things,” Karen told me of conduct on her base in Queensland, “not because they’re wrong but because they’re scared of getting caught.” In the past, there was no such fear.

The number of women recruits has increased. “We were below 10 and we got to 12. Won’t get to 13. We are 20 short of 12 per cent,” he says. “We’ve stalled a bit but we’re trying.”

Women are now in Army corps, artillery and engineers. “We’ve never had women in those areas before”. We have women commanding units of 600 or 700 people. No woman has yet applied to join the infantry. “But, look, I am an infantry soldier,” says Morrison. “It’s not for most men in the Army, so I don’t think we should be too concerned about it.”

The big question is whether these changes will continue once Morrison retires on 15 May this year.

“No chance in my view that any of this momentum for change will slacken,” Morrison tells me.

It is widely expected that he will be succeeded by Lieutenant General Angus Campbell, who headed Operation Sovereign Borders, designed to stop maritime asylum-seekers. Colleagues say Campbell shares Morrison’s commitment to change.