



# Metis

## Interview

*“Women make unique contributions all the time.”*

Lieutenant General Chris Whitecross  
and Ret. Major General Simone Wilkie  
on female leaders in armed forces

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Institute for  
Strategy & Foresight





# Interview

Lieutenant General Chris Whitecross (CAN)  
 and Ret. Major General Simone Wilkie (AUS)  
 on female leaders in armed forces

**Fig. 1** The first German female medical officers on 1 October 1975 with Minister of Defence Georg Leber

**I**n a landmark ruling in 2000 the German armed forces were opened for women to serve in all branches. As of today, the proportion of women is at a good 12 per cent. This interview offers future female military leaders in the Bundeswehr encouragement and some perspective from two highly distinguished senior female military leaders, Retired Australian Major General Simone Wilkie and Canadian Lieutenant General Chris Whitecross. The interview was conducted online by Metis Director Prof. Dr. Carlo Masala in July 2020. A video recording is available on the Metis website. This transcript was slightly redacted.

## **Masala**

***What was your personal motivation for joining the armed forces and what is your experience overall?***

## **Whitecross**

First of all, I just finished 38 years of service. I joined the military really right from University. So, I pretty much grew up in the military, from the age of 19 right to today. But my motivation for joining military right at the beginning was that my father was military, my uncle was military, my grandfather had seen service, all of my brothers were in the reserves, and I liked what they personified. I joined the Cadet Movement, which

is an international youth movement that you're probably aware of and it resonated with me. It resonated with me in terms of the lifestyle, the culture, the background, the structure and the hierarchical way that they did business, and I just really wanted to give it a go. I was at Queens University and I was walking down the street, literally, I saw the recruiting centre and I walked in. And that was 38 years ago.

## **Wilkie**

To be really frank, I was incredibly naive when I joined the army. I didn't have a particularly good understanding of what was involved. I

had been at University studying to be a physical education teacher and someone had spoken to me about it, so I went along to the recruiting agency. And like quite a lot of people I joined for the sort of patriotic reasons, for something that I thought that I could contribute not only to the nation, but also to help people. But if I was to suggest it was a long and detailed search and that I had landed on my feet that would be totally incorrect. Indeed, after about three months in training to be an officer I disliked it so much that I tried to resign and return to University. I hadn't told my parents, and when the commanding officer rang my



father, he said: "Look we can leave her here or send her back to Ballarat." To which my father said: "Leave her there, she will like it eventually." He was right, and I was completely wrong. So it took me a little while to enjoy it. But my experiences were: it was incredibly challenging, physically and mentally, so you really get to understand your own personal boundaries. You have an amazing opportunity to learn about people and about leadership. And particularly to learn through example, in both trying and not so trying circumstances. I'm a bit of an extrovert, so I really enjoy being with people and you certainly have plenty of opportunities for do that in the military.

The last point I would make is that I think you'll find your experiences at the different rank levels can be quite different. What you do as a young officer versus what you do at the operational level to what you can do at the strategic level are quite different. Sometimes you're actually better in one level of leadership than you are in others. Fortunately, I must have been OK to get to be a major general. But it's a long way from where I started. You know: I thought I would be lucky to be a captain! So, my experiences were generally very good.

**Whitecross**

*"I think a diversity of opinion leads to a better series of solutions to a problem."*

**Masala**

*Do you consider female military leadership to be different in any way from male military leadership? Are there contributions that women are better suited to make?*

**Whitecross**

I think it would be naive to say that men and women are the same. I mean, ideally we would like to think that we all do the same things and I think we probably come to the same decisions in many ways, but we come to them from different vantage points. Men's and women's strengths and weaknesses are fundamentally different in many ways. We may not be as physically strong but we are tremendously talented when it comes to team building and doing things and

thinking outside the box and the like. But I think the strength here is a military force of men and women, and it's not just men and women, right, because gender is no longer binary, it's all about diversity and inclusiveness. Because what it does for you in the grander scheme of things in the utopian society is, it offers people a far better solution set. Since now you have a number of people with different backgrounds, different languages, different cultures, different ethnicities and they are coming together to solve a problem. I think a diversity of opinion leads to a better series of solutions to a problem. So, are the leadership attributes different? I think in many, many ways, they are the same, such as the ability to communicate, intellectual, cognitive ability

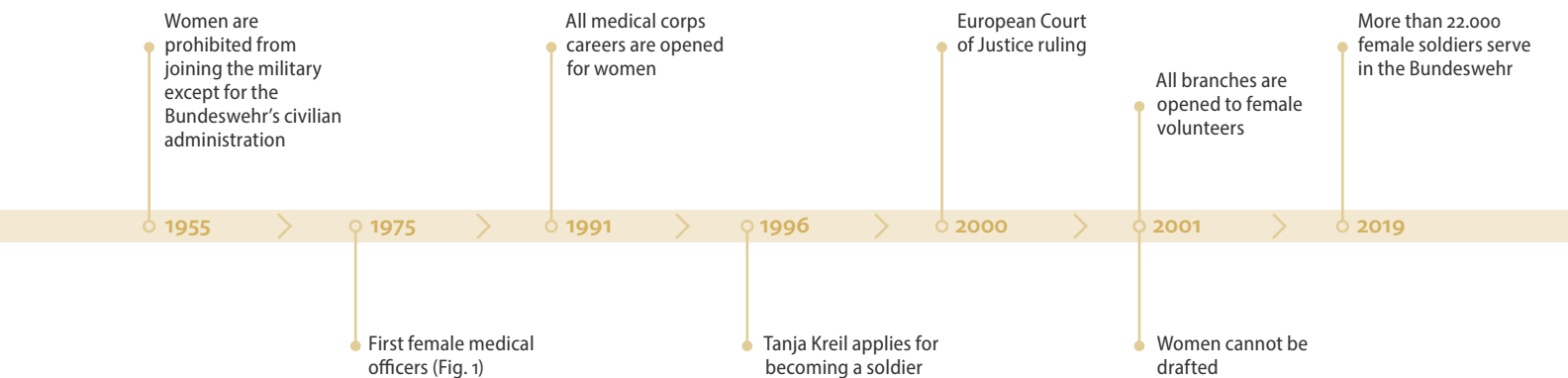


Fig. 2 The path to equality. | Data source: Bundeswehr



and all those sorts of things. But ultimately it's about bringing a disparate group of people together and then having them come to a shared value system and a shared common goal and then moving toward that. I think men and women may come about that in different ways, but by putting women and men together you are going to get a far better solution.

### **Wilkie**

I think part of that goes to the theory around leadership. There are certainly different leadership styles and different leadership attributes. I would suggest that leadership 101 remains the same. For me that's about three things which is setting the direction, setting the expectations and setting the environment.

I think a lot of women can lead somewhat differently to men. Even said, there are different approaches to leadership amongst women as well. Like one of my best friends, who is a Brigadier, has a completely different leadership style to mine, but still a very effective one. What I would say is that women are much better at the C-words. They're good at compassion and consensus and collaboration and cooperation. There tends to be a little more empathy. So perhaps what they can bring to leadership roles sometimes that not all men do, and I'm not suggesting that men aren't good listeners, but it's perhaps a more democratic style of leadership with people being more inclusive.

And of course, one of the things that you can't see is cognitive diversity. You can see gender diversity and race diversity. And perhaps if women are being socialised differently, they think about things differently and potentially lead in different ways. I think if you look across business, most boards in Australia that have women are more successful than the ones that only include men. There's a lot of research out there that suggests that some of those leadership traits,

that women can have more than men make them more effective.

The last point I would make is that I think sometimes women, when they start out as young leaders, can tend to follow the rules a little too prescriptively. I used to be a bit like that and now I subscribe to the "rules are for fools and the guidance of wise old chicks." Which means you work out when the rules are appropriate and when they're not appropriate. And the more rank you get, the more chance you have to stand next to the big, hairy, difficult questions and so, if you've learned to be more adaptable and not always follow those rules, then potentially your leadership style will be highly effective in the different environments that you could be finding yourself in.

### **Masala**

*In your deployments abroad, did your gender make a difference? I mean for instance regarding your contact with the local population?*

### **Whitecross**

I would say absolutely, and I would say even to the units as well. Let me break that down a little bit. I think to have men and women in the units, it lends a different personality to that units' structure. Let me use an example: In a unit you have mothers and fathers, of course, and I can remember going to Afghanistan or even Bosnia and somebody saying to me: "It must be terrible to leave your children behind as a mother." And my comment was: "You know what: It is terrible as a parent to leave your

children behind." And I had the impression that I was almost allowed to express that opinion, whereas my male counterparts were not.

But by increasing the number of men and women in a group, the conversations change and I think the personality changes. And it's not any different in terms of the military capability but what it does is it brings people closer together and it shows real sympathy for what you have left behind and all that kind of stuff. That's certainly on a personal note.

But in terms of our engagement with the local population, absolutely. When I was in Afghanistan, the culture didn't necessarily encourage women speaking to men in terms of strangers, but in the Canadian context where we had female combat team leaders, female infantry officers, artillery and armoured officers, they could actually go into a community and speak to the men and the women. They could speak to the men, because the men didn't feel necessarily that the women were all that much more different. But they certainly had an avenue to speak to the women in the community. And so they were getting a sense of the human cost, of the decisions that were being made. They could get human intelligence, they could understand the social fabric of the communities and they could really get a sense of where the battle is going. They could embrace the community a lot more I think in many ways. And it's no different than if someone in your unit speaks the local language. So, having men and women in an organisation I think, it's such a force enabler.

### **Wilkie**

*“A lot of the locals felt far less threatened by having women coming to talk to them and finding out what their issues were.”*



Fig. 3 Germany 2020: Female soldiers in uniform have become a common sight.





**Wilkie**

It was different in each of the locations that I went to. When I was in Cambodia in the early 90s for example, the Pakistani battalion was providing defensive support to the signallers. I was the adjutant in one of the remote locations and went to visit our signallers. They had been having some problems with the Pakistani soldiers. So they asked me to go and represent them and have a discussion. I said sure. I turned up with a male sergeant and they were not interested in listening to me even though I was a captain. So I learned pretty quickly that I needed to pass on my points through the male sergeant. Now that's a cultural issue, and this is one of the key areas I think that we need to be cognisant of when you go on deployments. What is the environment that you are going into? It could be very different to the country that you come from. How much culturally aware are you, how do you adapt your style and your processes?

Certainly, when I was in Afghanistan as the National Commander for all of our Australian troops, I was regularly meeting with the Minister for Defence and a raft of male leaders from governments and from other countries and I didn't have any issues at that stage. So, I suppose it depends, quite frankly, on the circumstances. That said, in the local area, the female engagement teams, which we employed from Australia, they were highly effective with the locals. And I think part of the secret sauce for that is that a lot of the locals felt far less threatened by having women coming to talk to them and finding out what their issues were. They were more forthcoming in discussing or even having the opportunity to engage with military members. And of course, in some countries where you go to, they are war-torn, people have been terrified. The last thing they really want to do is sit down and talk with male soldiers. So I think there can be some really interesting opportunities from that perspective.

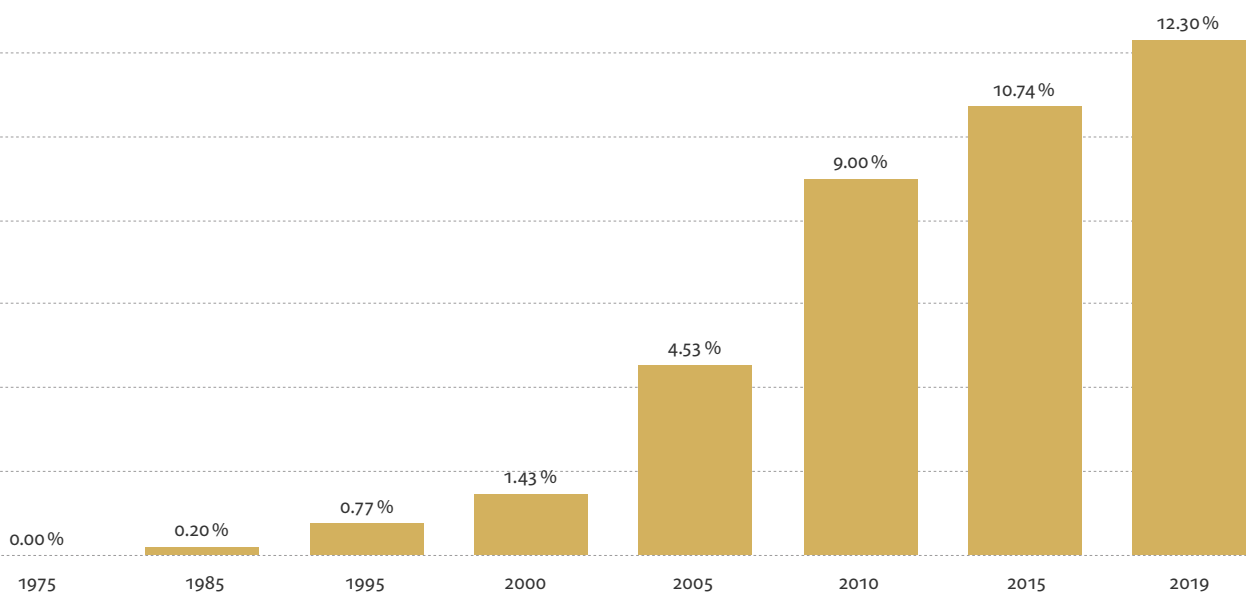
**Masala**

*According to your experience abroad, is there a unique contribution that only women can make to peacekeeping operations?*

**Whitecross**

I mean for a whole bunch of reasons, I am sure that you're aware of, the obvious one is that the non-military, the people on the ground that are affected by the hostilities: the vulnerable people – predominantly women, children and the elderly – are more apt to go see a woman in uniform than a man. They could be frightened, they could be embarrassed and a whole slew of other reasons. So, it's about having that ability to be able to speak to someone in uniform and to know that their concerns are coming into the decision-making construct of the operational planning.

Let me use an example: I am an engineer, right. Engineers and bridges is a great example. Say there is a freedom of movement issue in the local



**Fig. 4** Percentage of female Bundeswehr soldiers from 1975–2019 as of 1/2020 (values rounded). | Data source: SOWI; Bundeswehr; Deutscher Bundestag





community. If we only dealt with the operational necessities of being able to create a bridge in an area that would allow the military forces to go do what they needed to do, that would not necessarily meet the needs of the community. So by being able to engage with the community, being able to speak to the vulnerable populations, to the women, to the mothers, to the children even and to understand where they need that particular bridge to be built so that they can go to the medical clinics, they can go to do the shopping, they can go to the mosque or to their churches, the schools, all those sort of things, that can be put into the operational planning. That actually leads to better engagement with the local population, better relationships with them. A whole slew of positive attributes come out just from that one little decision-making because we engage the local community.

I would say that in many ways women who are afraid, having that ability to go speak to another woman, particularly a woman in uniform, or even a woman in uniform who has some authority, I think will give them the ability to feel as though their voices are being heard and that they are going to be taken care of.

**Wilkie**

I think women make unique contributions all the time. But of course, there are factors that sit around that socialisation piece that I was talking about before. To the best of my knowledge, we have had two female generals running UN Peacekeeping missions,

we currently have an Australian military policewoman in Cyprus. Sometimes I think those less assertive leadership styles can be very valu-

ably useful. But sometimes those styles have to be evaluated differently. When is the most appropriate time to be a caretaker or taking

**Whitecross**

“Personally, I joined the military because I wanted to do something that was above me, I like to say: “service before self.”

able in an environment where people have been traumatised. Or living through incredibly difficult circumstances. Some of those democratic leadership styles and tendencies I talked about before, I think can be

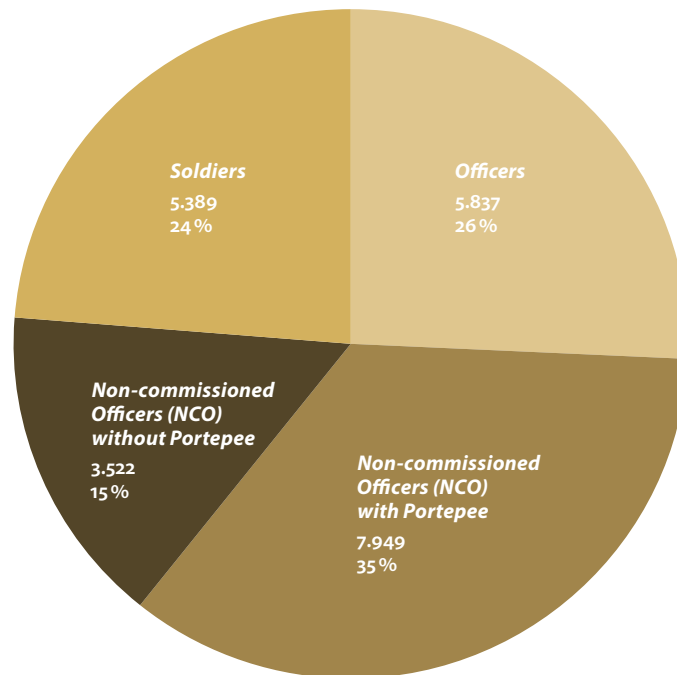
charge? In the toxic environment of peacekeeping operations, you need to lead with empathy. Perhaps there is a natural advantage for women. It’s difficult because you cannot generalise. I know some women who have no empathy whatsoever. So, each to their own circumstances.

**Masala**

*Based on your experience, how can the military inspire young women to join and to serve?*

**Whitecross**

Inspiring is an interesting word, because in many ways it’s self-motivating, right? Personally, I joined the military because I wanted to do something that was above me, I like to say: “service before self.” This might sound a little bit trite, but I wanted



**Fig. 5** Distribution of ranks amongst female Bundeswehr soldiers (including candidates) as of 1/2020. | Data source: Bundeswehr



to serve my county, I wanted to do good. I wanted to go into areas of the world where I knew that I could effect change or act as a sort of positive influence. Inspiration, it comes from the person. To inspire people to join the military, first of all you have to have

women. Now that wasn't necessarily the case when I first joined. But I knew that I could do something that would make me feel good about myself and about my country in the construct that I was at. Now, militaries all over the world are opening up more

think they "can't be what they can't see". I personally dislike that saying. I think if that was the case we wouldn't have Angela Merkel and a raft of other wonderful women who have led across all sorts of different areas because they have been the trailblazers. But it needs to be visible. Great campaigns, by advertising, excellent recruiting campaigns. We've tried all sorts of different campaigns in Australia. Look, it is more difficult to attract women compared to men because it's a very physical role, particularly in the army and it does include combat, which doesn't appeal to a lot of girls. They certainly haven't been socialised at home to be brought up like that. And it can be quite competitive. Part of it is breaking down the stigma and the sort of, what I would call the "Hollywood B-grade movie versions" of what people think military service is and how that impacts women.

So I would advise to send people around to the schools, share your stories, be transparent about what the opportunities are. Particularly so that you can get those experienced leading at a much earlier age. Once you become an officer or an NCO<sup>1</sup>, then you can succeed in just about any other organisation, certainly in Australia, and I know that to be true in many other countries. If we are talking about leadership, why not use that as one of the real TICE tests<sup>2</sup> for people. If you want to have a career this is a great opportunity for you to start. Invariably, if you can get people to join much like myself, they will stay. And then, if you're fortunate, the ones who really were not suited because they hadn't done enough research or they just realised later on it wasn't what they thought it would be, they will self-select not to be there.

**Wilkie**

***"What normally happens is:***

***We design the system for men and then we try and retrofit it for women as opposed to design it specifically for women. We're only just starting to do that in the Australian Army for some of our combat equipment. And we've had women in roles like the one I did in Cambodia for nearly 30 years. So hopefully you'll be faster than us."***

strong leadership, you need to be able to go out there, you need to be able to communicate: What does the military do for the construct of society? What would that give you in terms of personal satisfaction and personal awareness? And also, to really speak about the opportunities that being a military member will give you. And from that you hope that you garner enough that the people feel inspired themselves to be able to actually take that one step to learn a little bit more about it and to possibly sign up for it. I think there is a fallacy out there around the world, particularly in western nations, where women don't really understand where they fit in the military construct. And that's unfortunate. In the Canadian construct, of course, all occupations are open to

and more occupations to women. And we need to get that message out. It's not just about being an infanteer or being a fighter pilot, it's also about being a dentist or a lawyer or an engineer or a vehicle tech. The options are numerous. So it's education, it's inspiring leadership and it's engagement at all levels of society.

**Wilkie**

I think there's plenty of ways we can do that. I would start with simple things like sending role models to schools. Some young women

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<sup>1</sup> NCO = non-commissioned officer.

<sup>2</sup> TICE test = test of interpersonal competence for employment.



The final point I would make is I think it's great if you can mentor people through that recruiting process and also talk about the systems that you have in place to assist people to succeed once they have enlisted. Get rid of some of those terrible views that people have about what the initial training is because that puts a lot of people off. You have about 12 per cent women in the armed forces in Germany, I think, and the Australian Army had 12 per cent for a long time. We had to do a concerted recruitment campaign and a lot of work on retention programmes to get up over the 16 or 17 per cent. Yes, it takes a lot of effort

**Whitecross**

“Absolutely the number one is humility, is knowing that you're just a part of a very large organisation that is meant to be doing good.”

but the rewards are amazing. – So it's attractive or a bit more sexy for people to come and join the army. worth making ourselves a little more

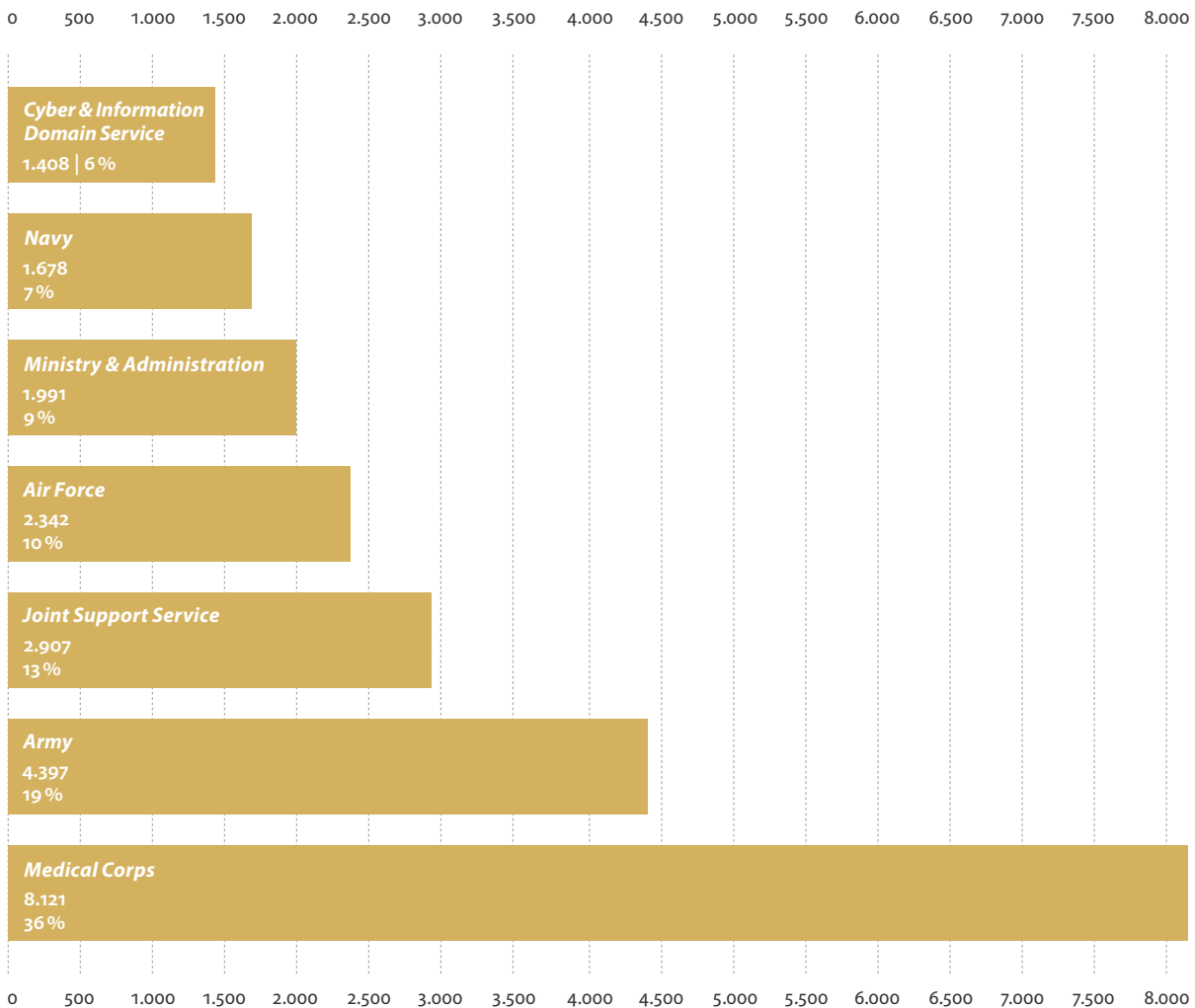


Fig. 6 German female soldiers categorized by service/organisational area as of 1/2020. | Data source: Bundeswehr

**Masala**

*What is the single most important advice you would share with young female officers and soldiers today?*

**Whitecross**

I like to think that there are a couple of attributes that, regardless if you're a man or a woman, that will do you well in a military environment, and in fact any environment. I would say that number one, absolutely the number one is humility, is knowing that you're just a part of a very large organisation that is meant to be doing good. And your part is important, it's fundamental to the success of the mission, but you are really a small part of the greater whole. I think humility is particularly underrated and that we really need to impress that upon many of our young leaders and young members not just at the military but other organisations as well. Humility is a big one.

But I think the ability to communicate and I'm not just talking about reading or writing or social networks and all that, but the ability to listen to people in a very rigorous way so that you truly get the sense of what they are saying. And that you are able to mirror that back. And then you are able to address the issues on a very fundamental and personal basis. The ability to communicate, to understand who your audience is and to really be able to interpret whether or not your message is getting out. Because it is one thing to tell people to do something but if they don't believe it, they don't understand it and they can't back it, it's very difficult for them to rise to the occasion that you need as a military leader. I would say

communication and humility are two of the biggest traits that I would really impress upon people going into military service.

respect you as a leader. It's a tricky thing to find out where your natural position is as a woman leader in what is generally a masculine sort of aggressive leadership environment. There has certainly been research by a lot of different organisations, including the British Psychological Society that goes to this issue. If you are hard-nosed like that you are less likeable and generally less successful. Not that leadership is about being liked, but it is about setting standards, maintaining discipline and leading from the front. I think those characteristics need to

be at balance. For women this sometimes is potentially more difficult than for men.

And then the last point I would make is: there is nothing more beautiful than a confident woman. As a leader, learn to accept that you are going to make mistakes. Deal with when things don't go right. Don't overthink them. And crack on, because I can tell you: plenty of other blokes are faking it until they make it. So I think women can do the same.

**Masala**

*Thank you so much for taking your time to do this interview with us. It was really informative. I wish you a very pleasant day, thank you very much!*

**Whitecross**

Thank you, my pleasure.

**Wilkie**

Thank you and I hope I didn't speak too fast. 🐣

**Wilkie**

*“Plenty of blokes are faking it until they make it. So I think women can do the same.”*

**Wilkie**

Ah look, I'm a redhead so I cannot just have one single piece of advice. How about I have one with three parts?

**Masala**

*Okay, fine.*

**Wilkie**

The first part would be: You have got to be professionally competent. And you need to understand your profession. You need to understand all of the aspects, the operational combat part. You can't just be a communicator and not understand the broader workings of the army, if you intend to be promoted.

I think as a female officer, I like to call it: "maintaining the femininity tightrope". You are sort of balancing between being a woman but being accepted as a leader, and that can be really difficult when you first start out. But for those women who think it's a good idea to act like a man and talk like a man and swear and whatever, they will probably do what you have asked people to do, but they will not



## Interviewees



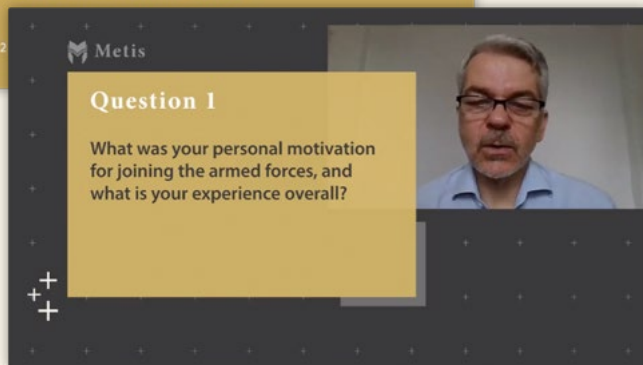
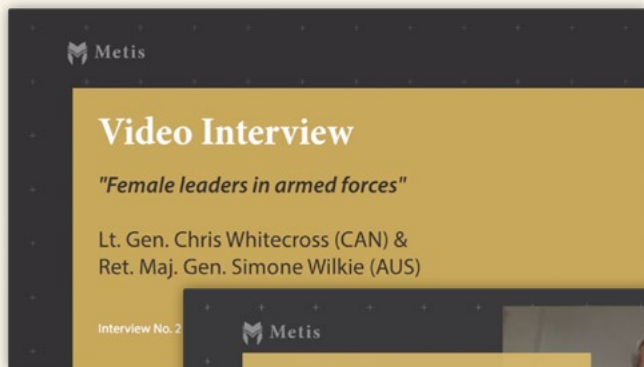
**Lieutenant General Chris Whitecross (CAN)** entered service in 1982. Her career took her around the globe, including postings in former Yugoslavia, where she performed duties for the United Nations Protection Force, and in Afghanistan, where she was awarded the United States Defense Meritorious Service Medal for her service at ISAF headquarters. She assumed her current duties, as Commandant of the NATO Defense College in Rome, in November 2016.



**Ret. Major General Simone Louise Wilkie (AUS)** entered service in 1983. Notable highlights of her long career include a posting as Assistant Chief of Staff to United States General David Petraeus during the Iraq War 2007 and as Australian Deputy National Commander in the War in Afghanistan in 2011 and 2012. She served as Commander of the Australian Defence College from 2013 to the end of her service in 2018.

# Video Interview

This interview is also available as a video on the Metis website at [metis.unibw.de](https://metis.unibw.de)



**Watch the interview** <https://metis.unibw.de/en/videos/02-women-make-unique-contributions-all-the-time>



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*"Sgt. Lia Ricathalia, UNIFIL's Indonesian  
peacekeeper, at a Blue Line patrol post near  
Fatima Gate in Kafer Kela, South Lebanon.  
October 9th, 2012."*

Photo by Pasqual Gorriz/UNIFIL

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