

# Sex-change soldier forces army to scrap transgender policy

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Bridget, left, and Tammy Clinch at home in Queensland one year after Bridget began gender reassignment therapy. *Photo: Heather Faulkner*

WHEN Captain Matthew Clinch said he wanted to become a woman, the army told him he wasn't the first.

There had been others before him and there would be more.

"When I heard that, it was a bit of a relief. I thought they'd have a precedent and know what to do," says Matthew - who now lives as a woman, Bridget.

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"But they meant, 'we will get rid of you like we got rid of everyone else'."

Clinch, 31, loved the army - still does. As a young teenager, joining the military was one of his dreams; the other was becoming a girl.

At the age of 30, Clinch finally decided he could no longer ignore it. Instead of finding peace, he found himself in the battle of his life.

Bridget now recalls standing in her commander's office shaking, almost speechless as she was told she would not be allowed to come to work dressed as a woman.

After 11 years in the army, uprooting the family every two years and serving two active tours in East Timor, the army no longer had a place for Captain Clinch. They told her she could reapply for her job when she had an F on her birth certificate, but there were no guarantees.

"I'm in uniform, with clipped hair, just thinking 'what the hell'? This shouldn't be that big a deal," Clinch says.

"It's 2010, this is Australia. We don't do this to our people - or we shouldn't. It's not equitable. It's not fair. We don't make gay people in Defence be closeted."

But the army had its policy: "Consistent with the current ADF medical and recruiting policy, a person undergoing or contemplating gender reassignment cannot be considered suitable for service in the ADF because of the need for ongoing treatment and/or the presence of a psychiatric disorder."

Clinch - who is planning on having sex reassignment surgery next year - was not going to walk away without a fight.

One year on, after striving to keep her job against intimidation and prejudice from the top echelons of the military, Bridget Clinch is still in the army.

And because of her, the transgender policy is now gone.

It is a significant victory in Clinch's life-long battle to become herself.

Some of her earliest memories are of blowing out birthday candles and wishing she was a girl. "I didn't want to be a different person. I wanted to be me - but a girl me."

Clinch's teenage years, at Melbourne High School, were awkward. "I didn't want the body I had. I wanted a girl's body. That was just the way it had always been.

"But society and parents and all sorts of influences tell you that's crazy, you can't be thinking like that. You can't be acting on those thoughts. You can't resolve that thing that eats you up."

For years, Matthew Clinch hid his longing to be a woman. He joined the reserves straight out of school and the army two years later, burying himself in the all-male infantry, pumping iron at the gym and fathering two daughters with wife Tammy.

"But your head and your heart are how they are and you can't get away from yourself," Bridget says.

The legacy of the past is still there in Clinch's bulging biceps and 90-kilogram frame, but the hormone treatment has kicked in and there are now breasts where once there were pecs.

Bridget Clinch is pretty, with steady, true-blue eyes and light red hair that curls softly around her face.

She was handsome as a man, too. And when Matthew met Tammy at the Royal Military College, Duntroon, there was an immediate attraction: physically, intellectually and emotionally.

Suddenly, it seemed everything was falling into place. Clinch was a specialist in combat and helped train soldiers to develop resilience in environments of fear and stress.

In a 2003 tour in East Timor, he led an infantry unit. During a second tour in 2008, he was a logistics officer in the parachute battalion. A friend from the army, who asked not to be identified, describes Matthew Clinch as "a good guy, a good officer and a good, smart soldier".

Clinch thrived under the structure of army life - where gender seemed less important than rank - and eventually became a captain.

But the feeling that he did not fit in his own body was always there. "In quieter times ... it was starting to chew up too much head space."

Tammy, who long ago left the army, recalls that Matt's smile never reached all the way to his eyes. She thought he was depressed, had something on his mind. She never dreamed it was this.

Clinch finally decided to see a psychiatrist in August last year.

When Matthew told his wife of eight years that he needed to live as a woman, Tammy says "the earth stopped spinning".

After the initial shock, came the grief. She mourned her husband and the body he would lose. But, she says, she "realised that the person I loved and built my life with is still there. All the good things I loved are still there. I just have to adjust to what's on the outside now."

They now live as a same-sex couple in Queensland, raising their 5-year-old and 16-month-old daughters, who have both adjusted fairly well.

The family's trials, however, are far from over. The couple will have to divorce next year before Bridget's operation, so she can become legally recognised as a woman.

In the meantime, despite almost single-handedly forcing Defence to throw out its transgender policy, Clinch's struggle to stay in the military continues.

She has the support of Transgender Victoria spokeswoman Sally Goldner, who says her success in challenging the policy and having it abolished, will now help others.

Ms Goldner says the policy practically, if not explicitly, gave Defence the right to sack employees who were undergoing sex change treatments. Under the World Professional Association for Transgender Health's standards of care, people wanting a sex change operation must first live continuously as the opposite gender for at least 12 months, during which time they usually receive hormone therapy.

According to the Australian Defence Force's head of people capability, Major-General Craig Orme, the force's medical policy stipulated that anyone receiving medical treatment for 12 months or more would be discharged.

After being told in December last year that she could not dress as a woman at work, Clinch had no option but to go on leave to begin her transition. Her termination notice was signed in February, just weeks after Defence joined the Pride in Diversity employer program, which a Defence newsletter says aims "to make workplaces more responsive to the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people".

After lodging a Human Rights Commission complaint in March, which is yet to be heard, and appealing her sacking - with her doctor's support - through Defence's own channels, the termination was suspended in May. Defence cancelled its transgender policy in June and Clinch's termination was withdrawn a month later.

Although she has worked intermittently, Clinch has remained on sick leave for most of the year due, she says, to ongoing stress caused by her superiors in Canberra.

She remains upset that Defence has downgraded her psychological and medical ratings to below the level required for active service, despite, she says, positive assessments.

Her psychiatrist, Dr John Parkinson, wrote to the army in her defence, attesting to her good physical and mental health and "emotional stability".

Major-General Orme says "there has never been a ban on being transgender in the ADF".

But he says: "It may have been interpreted that way - that is why we withdrew that particular piece of policy."

The ADF is now handling transgender personnel - sources say several others have come forward - under its "equity and diversity" policy.

He says a review of how transgender personnel are treated would be completed by the middle of next year. Under the new policy, he says cases would be assessed individually, but it was unlikely people in transition would be allowed to do operations with their units or be deployed overseas.

Ms Goldner says it is reasonable that people not be deployed during transition treatments but she stresses that having a sex change "doesn't incapacitate you because you are moving towards the body that you've always wanted ... you are a lot happier - a lot more productive".

Gay and Lesbian Health Victoria director, Associate Professor Anne Mitchell from Latrobe University, says a sex change should not prevent someone from participating in active service. "The person is the same. They have the same skills, experience, understanding," she says.

Sources say at least two members of the British military undergoing gender reassignment have remained in active service, with one in a position of senior command in a war zone.

Human Rights Commissioner Catherine Branson says anti-discrimination principles would prevent employers from singling out people who were going through a gender transition.

Bridget Clinch still has to clear some hurdles in her journey to womanhood. But now she feels more comfortable in her own skin. Best of all, when she tells people she used to be a man, some don't care at all.

She hopes one day soon the top brass will feel the same way.

Until then, she says: "It takes more than the military to sort me out."

Bridget and Tammy Clinch's website is [justlikeyou.com.au](http://justlikeyou.com.au)