

MORAL COURAGE

The 2016 Australian of the Year, General David Morrison AO, will deliver the Tristan Jepson Memorial Foundation Lecture on 13 October. George and Marie Jepson set up the foundation to promote psychological health and safety within the legal community, after their son, Tristan, a young lawyer, experienced depression and took his own life. Morrison, who studied arts and law at the Australian National University before he joined the army, will talk about leadership and creating a culture in which people can speak up and get help without losing their place in the legal community. Morrison has considerable experience in changing long-standing, entrenched cultural values that are no longer useful in the diverse, contemporary world. What can the world of the law learn from the battlegrounds of the military? **JULIE MCCROSSIN** speaks to David Morrison to find out.

David Morrison burst onto the international stage when he circulated a blunt and blistering three-minute speech to the men and women of the Australian Army in June 2013. The speech has had more than 1,726,000 hits on YouTube. At the time, Morrison was Chief of Army. Civilian police and defence investigators were examining allegations that a group of officers and NCOs had produced and distributed material demeaning to women across the internet and email.

The speech is remarkable for its brevity and bluntness. Morrison outlines the valuable contribution of women in the defence force and then says simply: “If that does not suit you, then get out.”

But it isn’t just the unvarnished clarity of the message that has attracted so many viewers. It is the intensity of

the delivery. Morrison looks straight down the barrel of the camera. He speaks with barely contained fury. No-one watching the video can be left in any doubt about his sincerity. He is affirming and defending the core ethical values of an organisation he has served for more than three and a half decades. An organisation he loves.

In 2014, while still Chief of Army, Lieutenant General David Morrison was invited to speak with actor Angelina Jolie, former British Conservative politician William Hague, and US Secretary of State John Kerry at the closing session of the Global Summit to Prevent Sexual Violence in Military Conflict in London.

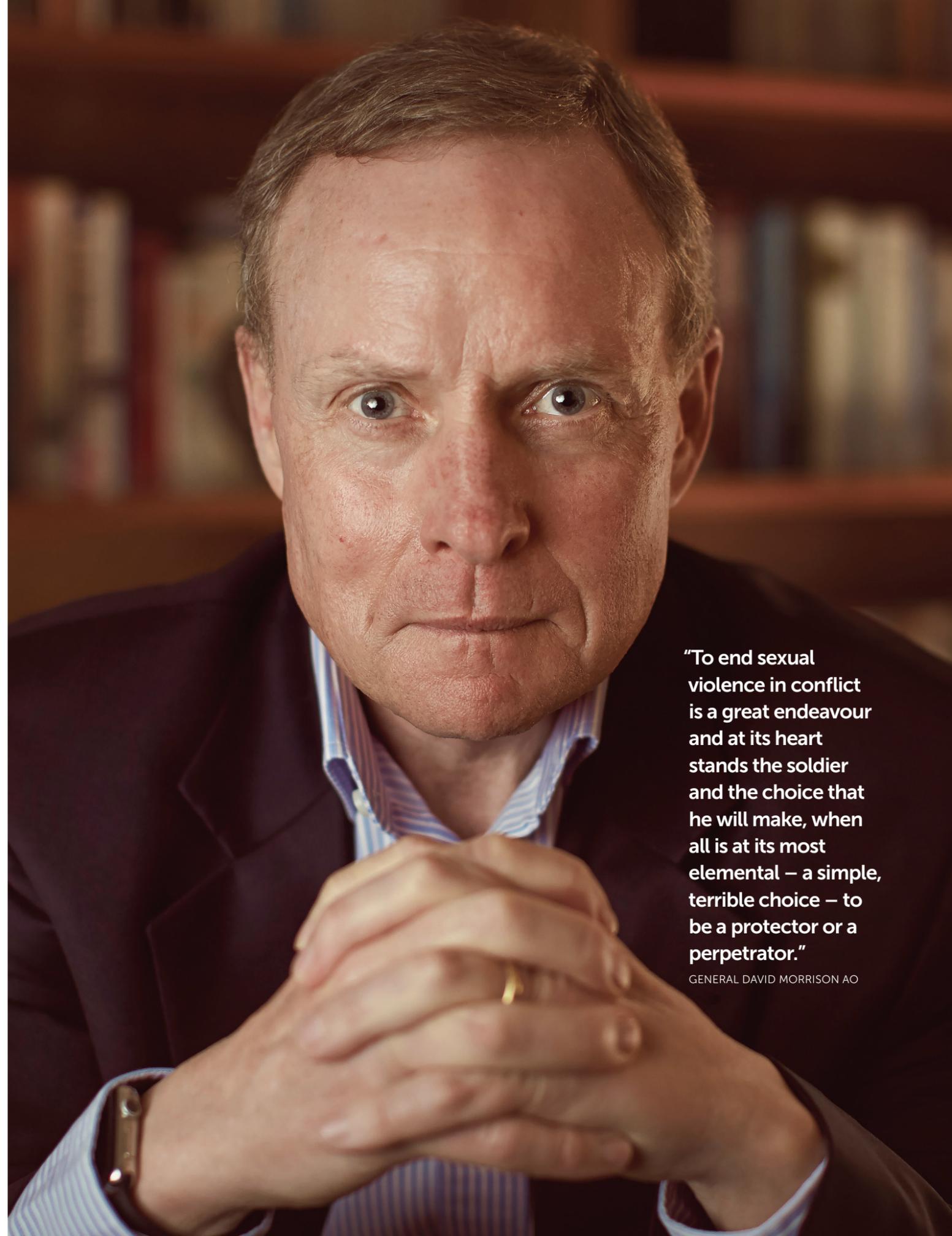
Again, Morrison spoke with great moral force and reiterated a core principle. There is no place for bystanders when you are striving to be a force for good: “To end sexual violence in conflict is a great endeavour

and at its heart stands the soldier and the choice that he will make, when all is at its most elemental – a simple, terrible choice – to be a protector or a perpetrator. I have said ‘he’ deliberately, for the world’s armies are overwhelmingly male institutions. I have deliberately excluded a third choice – to be a bystander while others commit sexual violence. There are no bystanders – the standard you walk past is the standard you accept.”

Morrison left the army in May 2015 after 36 years as a soldier. When we arrange to speak, I am keen to hear what he is doing now. He responds with a slightly rueful laugh and describes himself as “wonderfully busy”. Aside from a number of corporate engagements, much of his time is now taken up “making a contribution to try to combat the scourge of violence against women, particularly domestic violence.” ▶▶▶

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GENERAL DAVID MORRISON AO

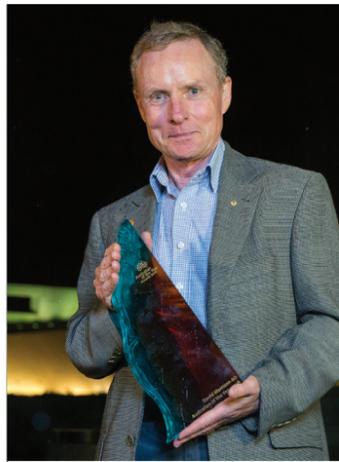


He is Chair of the Diversity Council of Australia, an independent not-for-profit that advises business on building a diverse workforce. He is on the board of Our Watch, a national organisation that strives to “change the story that currently sees a woman murdered every week by a current and former partner”. He is a long-term ambassador for White Ribbon, a male-led campaign to prevent violence against women. And he is a patron for the Tara Costigan Foundation, which was formed after the murder of Costigan in a terrible case of domestic violence. It raises funds for caseworker services to support women escaping violence.

By any standards, this is a major commitment of time and intellectual energy towards changing a deeply entrenched culture of violence towards women. It is his experience of working to change culture in the army and the community that makes his views on how to change the culture of the legal profession, regarding psychological health, so useful.

The law and the military share some core cultural values and expectations. In both professions, a proportion of people are expected, at times, to work in teams under 24/7 pressure to achieve high-performance goals to rigid deadlines. Individual members of the team are relied upon to deliver their contribution to the common goal, and to not let other team members down.

While the law does not involve a life-threatening dimension, there are certainly times – for example, in litigation or the negotiation of international agreements – when people are expected to work as hard as is necessary for as long as it takes. Normal patterns of eating, sleeping and family contact are disrupted. In such an environment and culture, it is hard for an individual who is experiencing psychological distress to speak up and ask for help and time out. It is natural to fear you will lose



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GENERAL DAVID MORRISON AO

SAVE THE DATE

The 2016 Tristan Jepson Memorial Foundation Annual Lecture

6pm, Thursday 13 October
Ceremonial Court of the Federal Court of Australia,
Queens Square, Sydney.

Visit tjmf.org.au for details

your reputation, your place in the team, or even your job.

Morrison’s view is characteristically blunt and clear. He says it is possible for leaders to create a culture in which a person can speak up without losing their place. “We spent a lot of time in the army doing just that,” says Morrison. “The military is not a perfect organisation and there have been people whose experience has not been ideal. But there have been many soldiers who have been listened to. I like to characterise it as being listened to with compassion and without judgment. This is what contributes to people’s recovery.

“We put in place Soldier Recovery Centres in our major bases, which are entirely focused on giving soldiers who aren’t travelling well the confidence to put their hand up and ask for help. They are given professional help to regain that sense of balance in their lives and to feel they can continue to make a contribution.”

What, then, are the steps a senior manager needs to take to offer real help that gets people back to the frontline?

“My experience in the last four years of my military life was that it keeps coming back to culture,” he says. “I define culture as the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. These stories need to be inclusive. The organisation needs to grow its levels of inclusivity to include men and women, people who are not of Anglo-Saxon heritage, and people who are not travelling well because of what is happening to them internally. There are means by which we can be of assistance.”

Morrison believes this inclusivity is not simply about altruism. “By creating a more inclusive culture, you are increasing diversity and you are giving everybody a chance to make a contribution,” he says. “A diversity of thinking has been shown in countless studies to build a more capable workforce. This is true whether you are in a law firm, an army, or an emergency service.”

Morrison says it is possible, in many circumstances, to return a person who has asked for help to frontline action.

“The fact is we did exactly that,” he says. “We redeployed soldiers who had to contend with issues in their personal lives. Through assistance from the medical fraternity and through more enlightened leaders, at all levels, we brought them back into the teams. In many cases, they redeployed.”

Throughout our conversation, Morrison returned to the theme of “moral courage” as crucial in changing culture and being a force for good.

“A fellow called Thucydides wrote a history of the Peloponnesian War over 400 years before the birth of Christ,” he tells me. “It was about a war between Sparta and Athens. Thucydides determined that there are three things that drive human nature: fear, self-interest, and honour. And my definition of ‘moral courage’ is when honour outweighs fear and self-interest. It is when we are prepared to take the harder road and to stand up for an ideal. Or to speak out against an injustice. Or, in the words of Robert Kennedy, to move to improve the lot of a fellow human being. When we do that we demonstrate that we are part of a community that lives and breathes as a whole, not just as individual. It also says something deeply personal about our sense of humanity.”

Morrison believes that in contemporary times the sense of “honour” could be changed to “values”. Moral courage is on display when we put our personal values ahead of fear and self-interest. The most important value, he says, is “respect”. Both at a personal and professional level, we should respect the different contributions people make to a team.

“There are times, at the moment, in

our challenged world, where you have to go looking hard for community leaders, or elected leaders, who are showing the necessary respect to other human beings,” he concludes.

Morrison has personal experience of leading to change culture in the army in relation to violence towards women and also the practice of “bastardisation” that has recurred for decades in military training organisations. The army took part in a Defence-led Abuse Restorative Engagement Program that involved senior officers hearing stories of abuse and responding to them. He believes change is possible.

“There can be a rebalancing of the appreciation of how men and women go through their lives when there is a greater appreciation of gender equality,” he says.

“Change happens where men’s stories are not celebrated, in a very particular way, over women’s stories, and where women’s voices aren’t muted and given no relevance.

“We also had an intense focus on trying to rid the organisation of people who thought bullying and harassment, and the types of sexual predation we’ve been discussing, could build a soldier who was able to be resilient and follow orders. It is a nonsense. You don’t build armies by tearing people down. You build armies by building people up. By making people feel part of a team and they can make a contribution.”

If culture is all about the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, let’s hope Morrison’s speech for the Tristan Jepson Foundation is the catalyst for new stories of leadership in the legal community. What should partners be saying in three-minute videos to the lawyers in their firms about speaking up and getting support in times of distress? **LSJ**



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