

Striding into the coffee shop on the ground floor of New South Wales Police Headquarters in a bright blue dress and four-inch heels, Detective Superintendent Deb Wallace challenges the stereotype that female police feel obliged to act masculine. She strikes a feminine figure in the sea of charcoal suits and bulky uniforms – a figure Deb has never had any fear of embracing, despite her position at the head of the NSW Gang Crime unit. It is a position that has never before been held by a woman. That isn't to say she hasn't fought her own battles since joining the police in 1984. "Women were just trying to work out where we fit. There was no blueprint for us – we had to figure it out on our own."



Whilst nowadays women make up 34% of the New South Wales police force, when Deb enlisted she was one of eight women in a class of 100. Prior to 1984 women took the back seat– lecturing, teaching – and were not classified as police.

"Then, I was trying to figure out how to approach a male-dominated force." Thrust straight in as a general officer in Mount Druitt, she was given some useful advice. "It was from a crusty, old-but-wise- Sergeant and he said to me 'girlie, if you sleep with one cop, you've got to sleep with the lot'."

Bemused at first, she realised that he was saying - in his own way- never to compromise her integrity. While she doesn't see herself as a role model, she strongly believes in being authentic and resilient. Nothing much fazes her.

"I'm very average," she laughs. "I grew up out west – a close family, but no frills. I never had a holiday in my life, but I never missed an Eels match." A tradition that hasn't faltered – having chosen her demanding career over the expectation to start a family, the games are her way of unwinding after twelve-hour working days.

Throughout her childhood, Deb harboured no burning passion to join law enforcement. The police force was not her first choice- she wanted to be a travel agent. "My father always told

me, ‘you’ll either join the cops or get locked up by the cops.’” She joined the force after giving up her job as a clerical typist - wanting a career, not just a job.

Her break into the detectives came in the infamous Anita Cobby murder trial. The same height and weight as Cobby - a Sydney nurse gang-raped and tortured by four men in 1986 - she was selected by the detectives department to don similar clothing and re-enact Cobby’s final actions the night of her murder. Afterwards, she was asked to hang around and in 1989 she was sworn in as a detective. “It was the most defining moment of my career – I knew then what I wanted.”

After working in local police stations, with a long stretch in the Cabramatta region, she went on to head the South-East Asian Crime Squad, followed by the Middle Eastern Organized Crime unit (MEOC) and most recently, head of the NSW Gang Crime Squad.

Since becoming superintendent, her time is spent mostly indoors, overseeing operations of the officers who deal with everything from street-level crime to the investigation of organised crime networks. Since starting in the MEOC unit, her media profile has soared. But she describes it as a “here and now thing”, and refuses to let it greatly impact her life.

“A façade,” she says, sipping her now-cold latte. “The media still have stereotypes, and constantly ask me, ‘what’s it like to be a *woman* in charge?’ And I tell them - exactly the same as being a man in charge. As women, we have to be more careful not to stereotype ourselves.”

Inspector of NSW Police Gregory Edwards agrees. “Deb is very well-known for her motivational approach. She’s extremely hands-on. I remember they said she’d be ideal for admin – but she sure showed them.”

Inspector Edwards has known Deb for over a decade. “No one can launch an investigation like Deb can – it’s the general idea that women aren’t as strong as men in authoritative positions, but women are more likely to get into the nuts and bolts of things. They can see the bigger picture – a useful aspect when it comes to investigating.”

However, Deb’s investigations are often susceptible interference. Especially when it comes to the media - when they get it wrong, it can cause catastrophe. Take the difficult and emotionally draining trial against the Ibrahim brothers in 2011, with tricky circumstantial evidence and timid informants. “But, despite the roadblocks, we were winning”, says Deb.

“We all know the Ibrahims are based on three things: guns, money, and revenge, and that’s what the trial was based on.” But in pursuit of sensationalism, the media reported and linked the trial to a completely unassociated crime, resulting in the entire case being thrown out and hundreds of thousands of dollars wasted. “Because the journalists didn’t *think*,” says Deb, tapping her temple. “They just wanted their five-minute headline.”

But it wasn’t until she headed Middle Eastern Organized Crime that she caught the eye of 2GB’s Alan Jones. Politics at the police force in Cabramatta were at boiling point, and Deb was feeling the heat from her previous co-workers at her promotion and her newfound authority.

“It was about bullying. They had an informal power structure under weak management. It was about their own agendas, and when we peeled it back and installed better leaders, they went on the attack of the person responsible, which was me.”

And apparently the best way to do that was through the public figure of Alan Jones. Over the course of several months, he slighted her on his morning talk show, claiming she’d never even seen a gang member and that she ought to be sacked immediately, as “clearly they’d trained her well to be a corrupt cop”.

She ignored the comments until a young constable approached her at work. He asked her if her job was in jeopardy, after claims Jones made of her tampering with evidence reached her department. After reminding him she was being accused of a crime that was physically impossible on their database, she realised that if you throw enough mud, it sticks.

“It came down to personal insult. It’s his job to report factual information. Not this.”

She took action when Stuart Littlemore – the barrister who opposes her at every trial and attacks the integrity of testifying police officers – called to ask why she was standing idly by. “He told me [about Jones], ‘he’s destroying your integrity by perception, and I’m going to have to use it against you in the next trial. If it’s not true, why didn’t you defend your honour?’”

“At that point I knew it was time to take him on.”

And she emerged triumphant. Littlemore had barely taken a seat in the courtroom when the matter was settled at terms unable to be disclosed. The case was closed, and Deb bought a new car.

Could she ever see herself as the first female NSW Police Commissioner? She waves away the question. “No, no. I’m very comfortable where I am. To be commissioner you have to be diplomatic, and I’m not. I live through the experience from the action, and every time you go higher you get further away from it all.”

She prefers to be remembered for her good humour, integrity, and ability to take hard knocks. A woman with operational credibility.

“I just want to know I did the job, and that all that work wasn’t for nothing.”

Caitlin Morahan - 30th May 2018 – The QUO