

Mrs and Mrs

Army offers
outstanding
opportunities
for married
medical team

Happy couple: Helen (seated) and Elspeth De Montes-Davis are full of praise for the Army's acceptance of their sexuality

Picture: Steve Dock

Interview: Cliff Caswell

THE pressures of military life have never discriminated against Helen and Elspeth De Montes-Davis – the reality of deployments, risk to life and limb and long periods of separation are as real to them as they are to anyone in the Army.

Based in Catterick, Yorkshire, the two captains have been unfailingly successful in their careers as health professionals. Moving from the ranks to earn a commission as an officer at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, nurse Helen has seen action on two busy Op Telic tours. Elspeth, a recruit from the NHS, is studying to be a GP.

The only aspect of life that sets the pair, both aged 30, aside from their colleagues is the fact that they are a gay couple. Married in a civil partnership in February, they now have the right to be posted together and are entitled to their own quarter. And they are both delighted with the respect they have been shown by colleagues.

"I think the fact that we are both completely open about our sexuality does make life a lot easier," Helen admitted. "We don't try to hide it at all and people are very accepting. At the end of the day, we're just another Army couple."

"Life is really no easier or harder than it is for a straight partnership – we've been married for 18 months now and often go out to each other's functions together. The Army Medical Services is great and we've had no negative backchat."

As ordinary as it may sound for a gay couple to go through a civil partnership and share their lives together, this situation would have been unthinkable in the Army just a decade ago. Until the turn of the millennium, homosexuality was outlawed in the military, punishable by an administrative discharge.

It was not until 1999 that judges in Europe ruled the policy of dismissing gay soldiers amounted to an infringement of their human rights to a private family life. In January the following year, the Defence Secretary announced

the rules would be changed, with sexuality becoming a private matter for individuals.

Fast forward to 2005 and the introduction of civil partnerships, however, and the Army immediately took the new legislation on board, offering gay married couples the full rights of their straight colleagues and heralding a new era of openness.

For Helen and Elspeth, the military's commitment to full equality has given them new opportunities and both maintain that they are better soldiers as a result. Now settled and with a wide circle of friends, they are backing each other in their careers.

"I first met my partner four years ago during the entry officers course at Sandhurst and we discovered that we both got on very well although our paths didn't cross properly for another 12 months," recalled Helen.

"Soon after I deployed to Iraq on Op Telic 9 and Elspeth was then serving in Germany. But we've now settled into life at Catterick after being posted together."

For Elspeth, sexuality was something she had never discussed with colleagues. While openly gay, she had only spoken about the private side of her life with friends. But having married, she admitted to being far more confident and pleased with the warmth shown by fellow troops.

"When I first joined the Army I was in an Infantry regiment and was the only female officer around," she told *Soldier*. "Nobody asked me if I was gay and I didn't say anything – you feel you are protecting yourself by keeping quiet."

"But I'm more confident now I'm married."

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Helen also speaks up for the Army's Equality and Diversity initiative, and I have to say that I am very proud of her. I talk about her to others in the same way as you would any wife or partner."

Elspeth also believed that sharing military life together was key to their role as professional soldiers, and helped them deal with aspects of the job such as extreme stress and the short notice with which they could be deployed to theatre.

"I think there are two aspects to our careers – the first is the medical aspect, the fact that we both have vocational jobs and that we understand that some days can bring serious pressure. And then there is the military aspect of our lives, where it helps that we both understand that things can happen very quickly. But for

me the key thing about our marriage is normality – the same things apply to any couple, whether they are Mr and Mrs, Mr and Mr or Mrs and Mrs."

It may have taken the Army longer than the civilian sector to recognise that full equality pays, but in a relatively short space of time the Service has become one of the leading champions of tolerance and respect, and has been setting the pace for change.

With the strong backing of a partner, a happy and contented home life and the benefit of emotional stability, soldiers are more likely to be effective and prepared when it comes to operations. Against a backdrop where every man and woman in theatre counts, this has to be a cornerstone of success in the field. ■