

Starting the day with a ration pack for breakfast and donning camouflage gear before diving into the 'bear pit', the preface to the punishing scramble over, around and under obstacles in a bayonet course that is routine training for Reservist infantry is not the usual way the 47 employers on Wagga Wagga's Exercise Executive Stretch (EES) spend their weekends.



**Clockwise from top left:** Adrian Lindner, Head of Campus, Charles Sturt University Wagga Campus; Janette Tucker, Janette Tucker Finance and president of Wagga Wagga Chamber of Commerce; Rebekah Holliday, Wagga Daily Advertiser reporter. **This pic Steven Spinks – all other pics Leah Ilyod Photography.** Julie Bradley, solicitor with Wagga Wagga's Cummins Hendrik Solicitors: The high-ropes confidence course.

"Exercise Executive Stretch was a great name for this weekend because it really stretched us outside our comfort zones," Hayley said.

Both Hayley and Julie said they were impressed by the level of professionalism of the soldiers guiding them through the program.

"I'm 5-foot-2, 49 years old and weigh 47kg and I was thinking 'my legs are never going to reach those pegs on the high-wire confidence course'. It was tricky. Terrifying! And I thought 'There's just no way'.

"For most average people, an active weekend might be a bit of walking or cycling or a jog or whatever, but Exercise Executive Stretch was a different order of magnitude altogether.

"Who'd bother with a theme park when the Kapooka Executive Stretch would have to be the best gig going?

"With the encouragement from the Kapooka people, I did all the stuff that I just wasn't expecting I'd be able to do.

"They were so patient, knowledgeable and encouraging that I always felt safe and well looked-after.

"I'd never even picked up a rifle before and was a bit dismayed when my weapons training marks came up on the screen seemed lower than most. Then the guy who was supervising the shoot explained that lower scores are best.

"There were so many highlights of this weekend for me that it's really difficult just to single one out. "We all felt a huge sense of achievement as well as gaining an incredible insight, admiration and respect towards the Defence Reserves.

"My dad, who died earlier this year, was an Army Reservist for a long time and he would've been so proud to know that I went on this weekend and managed to do all the activities they organised for us."

Almost 40,000 Australians are Defence Reservists in the Navy, Army and Air Force. As the operational tempo of the Australian Defence Force has increased over the past few years, reliance on Reservists has also increased. Activities such as Exercise Executive Stretch seek to further develop community and employer support for Defence Reservists, leading to an enhanced availability of personnel for Reserve service in support of Australia's national and international interests.

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# Stretching it

**B**ut, getting down and dirty with a weapon at their shoulders gave these managers, solicitors, journalists and others from a variety of industries a first-hand look at the rigours of Defence Force training. This, and the other exercises throughout the weekend – sleeping rough in a hoochie, abseiling, braving the high wire, weapons training and keeping watch on patrol – contributed to a memorable event that expanded the knowledge base and experiences of all who took part.

Solicitor Julie Bradley hadn't known quite what to expect when she signed up.

"I knew David Coates from the gym we both go to and he suggested that someone from the practise might like to come along," Julie said.

"This was my first experience with Defence and the Reserves in particular. I

had no idea how well integrated Reserves were in the Defence Force. I had thought it was just a weekend a month and Tuesday night training sessions and that was about it. But I found out that Reservists helped out a lot after the Victorian bushfires and that they actually serve overseas along with the regular forces in peacekeeping and even in wars.

"It was fascinating to see the level of training they go through. They really do it tough.

"The weekend as a whole was challenging, well-disciplined and superbly well-organised and it gave me a much better idea about the Reserves.

"My aching muscles certainly appreciated a hot bath on Monday night but after what I found out on the weekend I'm going to recommend Reserve Service to our junior clerks.

"The skills they learn in the Army such as respecting their superiors, and being prompt and self-disciplined team players are valuable things for their civilian jobs as well."

Like Julie, many of the participants on EES had no previous experience with the Defence Force Reserves.

And, like Julie, after the weekend, the employers' knowledge of the skills and experience that a Defence Reservist has, often results in the participating employer holding a much more informed and positive view of hiring a Defence Reservist if the opportunity arose in the future.

"It was the most wonderful 48 hours I've ever spent," Wagga Daily Advertiser photographer Hayley Hillis said.

"I haven't stopped talking to people about it. It far exceeded any expectations I had and was a really uplifting experience.

