

From Major General Paul Irving AM, PSM, RFD (Ret'd)



Defence Reserves
Association

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Terms of Reference – Royal Commission into Defence and Veterans' Suicides

The Defence Reserves Association (DRA), which is a joint organisation, is the only advocacy group specifically representing Defence Reservists. The major objectives of the DRA are to:

- foster and assist the Australian Defence Force (ADF) in developing and implementing effective conditions of service, with particular emphasis on the Defence Reserves;
- engage with other Ex-Service Organisations in improving the welfare and betterment of serving and former ADF members, with specific attention to Defence Reservists;
- consider and where appropriate seek improvements to the amenities and equipment relating to the Defence Reserves; and
- represent the interests of Defence Reserves in the promotion of an effective ADF.

Within the ADF, active Defence Reservists, that is those Reservists with training/serving obligations, together with Reservists undertaking full time service, comprise an additional 50% of the total number of permanent ADF members¹.

On 30 October 2019, the Australian Government's *Australian Veterans' Recognition (Putting Veterans and their Families First) Act 2019* received Royal Assent. The object of this Act is to acknowledge the unique nature of military service and the sacrifice demanded of those who commit to defending our nation. "Veteran" is defined as a person who has served, or is serving, as a member of the Permanent Forces or as a member of the Reserves.

On 30 November 2019, the Minister for Veterans and Defence Personnel launched the *Veterans' Recognition Program*, that included, inter alia, the provision of a Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) White Card to all former serving members of the Permanent Forces of the ADF **with one day's permanent service**.

¹ APS/ADF Monthly Strength Summary as at – 1 April -21

Reservists who had rendered any period of continuous full-time service, Reservists with a condition accepted by DVA and Reservists who due to their service with border protection, disaster relief and /or involvement in a serious accident could also apply for a White Card. Reservists who do not meet these criteria, regardless of their length of service in the ADF, are excluded from applying for a White Card.

The provision of a White Card provides the holder access to DVA-funded mental health treatment, regardless of whether the condition was related to their ADF service.

While the Australia Government has publicised how it is looking after the mental health of veterans, the reality is that there is a sizeable number of former and current serving Reservists who are not eligible to DVA-funded mental treatment simply because they have not completed **one day's permanent service**. Many of these Reservists have had lengthy periods of service in the ADF, sometimes over 30 years, but have not been required or given an opportunity to undertake any period of permanent service.

It is the DRA's position, therefore, that the Australian Government has failed to take appropriate measures to enhance the health and wellbeing of all Reservists.

Many Reservists discharge from the ADF without any connection to DVA. A similar situation arose when National Servicemen from the 1964-1972 scheme were discharged from the ADF.

For this reason, the DRA suspects that the statistics on the suicides of Reservists understates the true situation, as the fact that a person who dies by suicide was a former serving Reservist may not be known to DVA, coronial courts or other institutions.

It is only recently that the ADF'S Military Personnel Policy Manual was amended to authorise the Department of Defence to provide information on Reservists to DVA. As a result, the Department of Defence now advises DVA, via a fortnightly emailed spreadsheet, when a Reservist enlists/or is appointed, transitions or separates from the ADF.

In relation to transition from the ADF, the DRA strongly supports actions being taken by the ADF and the DVA in supporting veterans after they have completed their service in the ADF by assisting their integration into society and civilian employment.

These programs need to be readily available for all veterans, regardless of their pattern of service, when they discharge from the ADF. The DRA points out, however, that most Reservists have little difficulty in obtaining civilian employment or in integrating with society when discharging from the ADF.

In relation to this submission on the Terms of Reference for the proposed Royal Commission, the DRA supports the Terms of Reference to establish the independent National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention (the National Commissioner) and the ongoing role of the National Commissioner.

The DRA considers that the Terms of Reference of the proposed Royal Commission should examine:

1. findings of inquiries and reports about the suicide deaths of veterans over say the last 20 years to determine what system failures that may have occurred in the care of those who have suicided; to identify what steps could have been taken to minimise the risk of such failures; and to make recommendations about actions that need to be taken to correct these failings;
2. access to DVA-funded mental health treatment for all former and serving members of the ADF, regardless of whether they have undertaken any period of full-time service;
3. research that has been conducted into the suicide and suicidal behaviours of current and former serving Permanent and Reserve veterans, and the relationship between their service in the ADF and their health and treatment services whilst in the ADF and after they discharge from the ADF;
4. how suicide and suicidal behaviour data is collected across jurisdictions and collated, particularly in relation to Reservists and former serving veterans who are not clients of DVA;
5. how the ADF, DVA and other agencies achieve best practice in encouraging the reporting of, and responding to reports or information about incidents or risks of suicide or suicidal behaviours by veterans within ADF workplaces and post their ADF service when they are clients of DVA;
6. how to eliminate or reduce any impediments for responding appropriately to veteran suicide or suicidal behaviours when in the ADF and in any dealings by veterans and their families with DVA;
7. what Governments, government agencies and Ex Service Organisations could do to address, or alleviate the impact of, veteran suicide and suicidal behaviours;
8. the experience of those people directly or indirectly affected by veteran suicide and suicidal behaviours;
9. recruitment standards, pre-deployment preparedness and post deployment mental health assessments to ensure that veterans are resilient, well prepared for the rigours of ADF service and any identified mental health issues are diagnosed and treated;
10. reviewing the adequacy and appropriateness of the responses by the Department of Defence, DVA and other agencies, and their officials, to reports and information about incidents or risks of veteran suicide and suicidal behaviours;

- 11.actions that have been taken by governments and government agencies, including the Department of Defence and DVA, to better protect against and respond to veterans' suicide and suicidal behaviours; and
- 12.the foundation of ongoing work of the National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention.

Finally, the DRA also endorses the submission on the Terms of Reference by the Alliance of Defence Service Organisations.

Yours sincerely

Paul Irving
National President
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