



## **Royal Commission Update - Sydney Day 11 - 14 February 2022**

### **RSL References**

#### Positive:

- 12:25pm - Ms Sillett mentioned becoming a member of RSL Victoria

#### Negative:

NA

### **General Summary**

- Summary of this hearing block and the overall direction of the Royal Commission
- Focus on lived experience testimony

### **10:00am - Opening Addresses**

#### General summary

- 1100 submissions made, 250 requests for private hearings
- 36 proposed topics, with each topic to be explored, researched, witnesses proposed and testimony taken for each topic
- Will continue to issue Notices to Give Information based on topics, especially to the ADF, State & Territory Governments, Federal Government Departments
- Will be using in-depth inquiries aka Case Studies
- Application of Zero Suicide framework
- Will examine coronial systems
- Focus on appropriate language - Mindframe
- Continued emphasis on importance of lived experience
- Foundational themes of the RC include achieving a deep understanding of the phenomenon of Defence and Veteran Suicide, achieve a lifelong view of ADF personnel wellbeing, and gather all available and relevant data, including exploring new sources

#### Key Themes to be explored throughout RC:

- ADF Themes:
  - Demands of service, operational models, relations between DVA, CommCare and CSC

- Deployment, rehab, family relationships, and support available
- Governance, leadership & accountability
- Service life, culture, abuse, training, recruitment, women
- Justice & oversight:
  - ADF rules & standards, deterrence of poor behaviour, both in Defence and outside
  - Military justice & chain of command
  - Efficacy of IGADF & SENPRO
  - Coronial processes
  - Commonwealth/Defence ombudsman
- After Service:
  - Different paths of leaving and transition
  - Family role
- DVA - 7 topics:
  - Healthcare & Mental Health service including Open Arms
  - Reform of compensation and rehabilitation
  - Governance structures
  - Claims processes and processing time
  - Reviews and appeals
  - Privacy and information sharing
  - Monitoring including reviews, performance and data
- Engagement between NGOs, ESOs and Government Services:
  - Including police and corrections, mental health services, homelessness
- System-wide changes

Issues for urgent attention:

- Next public hearing blocks to focus on issues for urgent attention

Sydney Block Summary:

- Lived experience - 1 to 2 a day
- Claims processing:
  - Reference to the Collie Report into Claims processing
  - Delays and processing times
  - Data insufficiencies
  - Complexity of legislation
  - Staff turnover
  - Backlog of claims
  - Client experience issues
  - Communications with veterans
  - Thursday and Friday - McKinsey and DVA witnesses

**10:45am - Ms Yvonne Sillett - Former Serving Member (Army)**

- First female corporal responsible for training recruits at Kapooka
- In 1983, met and fell in love with a woman - but had to hide, as homosexuality was not accepted in the ADF - would lose security clearance required to work in Signals, and possibly be discharged

- Official policy for reasons of command & morale, national security, health and protection of minors
- Chain of command became aware Ms Sillett was a homosexual, and commenced 'witch hunt' - security concerns interview, which became interrogation - asked to sign a statutory declaration that would have 'confessed' to homosexuality, and effectively ended her career - initially declined
- Chain of command linked homosexuality with coercion and assaults - demeaning
- Was given 7 days to prove why security clearance should be maintained - listed as suspected cannabis user (had never used) - fought against the removal of clearance
- Once it was removed, had already applied for honourable discharge - did not want to transfer as Signals was dream role
- Felt she couldn't tell anyone - career was over - couldn't tell anyone - led to suicidal thoughts
- Lost pension, didn't get to serve OS
- Received no transition report and had no job several months after transition
- ADF lifted ban on homosexuality in 1992
- Asked for investigation by ADF - found there was no case to answer and that they had done nothing wrong - no apology was necessary - close ending life
- Has since been part of a history of LGBTQI members serving in the ADF, *Serving in Silence*, and has set up the an association for discharged gay and lesbian veterans
- Has continued to fight for an apology from Defence and the highest levels of the Australian Government - Commonwealth Ombudsman has denied this as it says no bullying occurred - no reference to discrimination
- Sexuality is part of identity - when taken away, excluded, or forced to hide, takes heavy toll on mental health
- Culture within the ADF is still not equal

### **1:15pm - SY1 - Anonymised Witness**

- Wife of service member deployed to Afghanistan - job stress and isolation in Afghanistan led to mental health issues - husband was isolated from his unit and presented with 30-day notice of termination
- Felt this implied he should take his life on deployment rather than face returning home - once returned, met immediately with warrant officer - taken to a hearing on base where he was told he would be terminated because he 'pissed people off'
- Exhibited signs of stress, anger, road rage, alcoholism - engaged in persistent domestic violence (DV)
- No support was provided to family or SY1 - through duty room or DCO - Army said 'he's your problem, not ours' - told not to contact civilian police, padres would pick him up
- Medically retired in 2012 - no Army diagnosis, no support (some financial)
- Family in contact with DVA - no support, lots of fighting for recognition - also reported the DV, but received no support
- Husband was removed from home and separated from family for consistent DV - finally diagnosed with PTSD, alcoholism, agoraphobia
- Husband moved to Perth and died from alcoholism
- Coroner's report did not ask any questions of SY1 - not linked to suicide
- Continuing impact on the family and children in particular

- SY1 found free counselling for children 7 months after husband's death - no support from DVA, Gold Card fees not enough to see psychiatrists
- CSC has made it so that SY1 cannot access husband's pension due to separation - DV not recognised as a reason for separation - has had to provide multiple affidavits, evidence of AVOs were not enough, bills, receipts etc.
- DVA and Defence need training to support complex cases and people
- Also need empathy for families
- Should be assistance pre, during and post-service for ADF members and families, including education on domestic violence, red flags for mental health issues, and access to supports for families, such as on base or centrally-located support