



## **Royal Commission Update - Townsville Day 40 - 30 June 2022**

### **RSL References**

Positive:

NA

Negative:

NA

### **General summary**

- There will be no disadvantage for any person, including Defence members, for giving evidence to the Royal Commission – CDF has guaranteed this
- Interim Report will be handed down on August 11
- Next hearings:
  - Hobart August 1-10
  - Darwin October 17-28
  - Wagga Wagga from November 28 onwards
  - Further public hearings in Perth and Adelaide first half of 2023, with further hearings in Melbourne, Brisbane and Sydney in the second half of 2023

### **Counsel Assisting Closing Address**

- Summary of the witness's testimony
- Defence members are highly motivated to deploy, but may incentivise hiding of health problems – Command needs to ensure people come forward early as prevention
- Hazing is completely unacceptable
- Importance of culture – good culture fosters capability, bad culture erodes it – waiting for cultural change on paper and at the organisational level to impact on the everyday on the ground
- Long lasting effects of abuse
- Delayed access to medical services – long processes for Defence investigations – reduction of stigma for help-seeking
- Need better qualitative analysis in the ADF regarding suicide and suicidality
- Issues with the effectiveness of ADF systems and processes in identifying members, particularly officers, who engaged in patterns of unacceptable behaviour, and the response in promotion processes
- Raised current difficulties in recruitment as it relates to suicide risk factors
- Legislative reform – no change following Productivity Commission report and development of the roadmap

- Backlog - inadequate work by previous Government, inadequate resources
- Examination of deployment - screenings, critical incidents and support, information and support provided upon return
- Heard from First Nations members of Defence for the first time - risks and protective factors, mechanisms for support, cultural competency
- ESOs and others have seen gaps and services and gone on to establish organisations to fill these gaps

### **8:30am - 9:45pm - Kylie James Director, Veteran's Retreat**

#### Discharge

- Difficult process, was in one day and out the next - felt replaceable - needed to find purpose
- Lonely and isolating at discharge - grief and loss - felt useless - felt disconnected from family, community, veterans

#### Veterans' retreat

- Started Veterans' Retreat at this point - made it to give herself purpose - mates coming and camping on the property
- Started as Facebook Page - got some 7News coverage - inundated with messages of support
- Realised this was bigger than her - people said they understood - helped to give purpose
- PTSD and anxiety meant that she would not go somewhere on her own - forced the interaction with the veterans' community - forced mental health help for herself because she wouldn't have gone and got it otherwise
- Organised the charity with the assistance of a company that sets up charities - got advice from other people who had run charities - specialist not-for-profit lawyer
- 700 visitors per year
- ADF skills were transferrable - is a doer - figured out processes and worked out plan of attack to get to the end state - ADF skills can definitely be translated into life upon leaving service
- Can attend the farm without doing the Wellness Weekends, can just come to get a time out - generally camping for accommodation - showers, kitchenette, and full gym
- Converted a RAAF donger into a couple of bedrooms
- Funding:
  - No funding support at the beginning, completely self-funded for the first 18 months
  - Eventually got a grant - never received funding for operational costs
  - Got some funding from local businesses and veteran-owned businesses
  - Failed at a lot of grant applications - found this space really difficult
  - Unsure if there are workshops for veterans to fill in local grants - usually you have to pay

#### ESOs

- Didn't know of ESOs in her area until she started her own - didn't know where to look or find them
- Major factor is that there is no one-stop register - transitions seminars didn't provide this information - at a loss of where to look and find the info in one central place
- Organisation and access
  - Lots of ESOs - don't have a problem with how many there are, but they need to be regulated by a government organisation - there are some organisations that aren't as savoury as others or as unsafe i.e. charging for claims - happy to report to let veterans' and other know that they are a safe organisation
  - Should be 'veterans' supporting organisation' - encompasses current serving members, veterans, families, children etc.
  - Coordination - don't want to overcomplicate it - could be a Peak Body
  - Seems remarkable there is no veteran representation before the Royal Commission

### Wellness Weekends

- Separate weekends for male and female veteran retreats - different needs for mental health
- Working in the holistic wellness space - Sharing Circles - combines mindfulness with sharing experiences wherever they are comfortable - do one at the start of the weekend and one at the end
  - People tend to open up and realise they're not alone
  - Allows for connection with others post-weekend
  - Mental health benefits - have seen it stop suicidality - can be lifechanging
- Open Arms peer support workers come for the weekends - usually one or two people who run the weekends
- 'Happiness is your responsibility' - gives the person choice and control on the healing process, taking away some of the blame
- Putting yourself first - a lot of veterans struggle with this

### Men's weekends

- Loss of masculinity - lost job, so not man enough - struggle when they're not the protector/hunter - don't feel worthy
- Have conversations about being emotional - talking about the scientific reasons that testosterone block emotions
- Sharing circles are quite intense - weekends are alcohol-free as a safety thing - don't want them to hide behind anything - getting raw and ready
- Have peer support workers and qualified people supporting the group

### Partners weekend

- Separate from veterans' weekends - unique set of challenges for partners
- Looking at how they support themselves while still supporting the veteran - supporting themselves
- Many were struggling emotionally - helped them to support themselves

### Factors contributing to mental illness and suicidality

- Way members leave ADF and the treatment of them during transition
  - Once on medical discharge route, quickly discharged by the organisation - administrative burden - ADF maintains operational focus
  - Didn't get a thank you for your service from CO after 20 years - felt discarded
  - Need to say thank you for your service - this will change so many things
  - Can be mission-focussed, but can do that with respect and treating people well - 'hearts and minds' on ops, but not when people leave - can talk about emotions in ADF, but still be mission-focussed - can be better about looking after those in the organisation
  - Those who administratively discharge get out as quickly as possible - don't identify red flags for mental health issues
- First five years post-service - this is a critical period
  - After leaving, many go and try and do something completely different - don't want anything to do with DVA or Defence - when this doesn't work, they have to come back later and start this whole transition process again - sometimes they succeed, but when they fail, there is a crash
  - When transition is quick, need better support
  - Suggests mandatory mental health-specific day for all members who are discharging - what to expect on the outside, where you can go for help, how to stay connected, veterans talks
- Navigating transition and services
  - Found it really difficult to navigate available support - this was particularly true during transition - had nowhere to move, so put stuff in storage - trying to find property and do a rental application with no rental references - made me feel useless about myself
  - Medicare and Centrelink is a difficult system - need this at the Transition seminars
  - Minefield of Defence transition support guidelines and documents i.e. Study money - could use it

- 12 months after transition
- Stigma of help-seeking
  - Whilst serving, is a career killer if you seek mental health support - treated as a problem child - stigma of being weak
  - Defence members are born to serve - have similar psychological traits - but also more susceptible to PTSD
  - If you ask for help, don't expect a deployment - That's a key part of why we join - we train, do admin etc. to play the game - deployment is also financially beneficial
    - Don't even want to say too much at post-op psych screen
  - You will find yourself subject to differentiated treatment
- Homelessness
  - Usually have 1-2 homeless veterans living with us at any one time
  - Assist veterans who cannot be helped by the RSL program i.e. animals with dogs
- Bullying and harassment within the ADF
  - Common across the ADF - Boys club mentality - wolf pack mentality that eats the weak
- Women's experience in ADF
  - Many horror stories - shockingly common -

#### Joint Transition Authority

- Buddy checking veterans post-discharge - having someone check in with a veteran after they've discharged
  - JTA suggested that ESOs do this - raised point it would not be possible without funding for ESOs
  - JTA contact at 6 and 12 months - but this should continue indefinitely - need to ask them, because they won't do it themselves - won't help-see

**10:00am - 2:00pm - Warrant Officer Class 1 Ken Nelliman, Senior Instructor of Land Warfare Centre, Soldier Training Wing (North QLD) - Lee Smallwood, Cultural Advisor, Regional Indigenous Liaison Officer Network - Major Joseph West Assistant Chair, Indigenous Cultural Advisory Group**

#### Challenges for First Nations service members

- Racism - Mostly internal within the unit issues - not systemic
  - Racism - usually one-on-one - experienced mainly in the early years of service
  - Pockets of racism can pop up - but this is in any organisation in Australia - in Defence, reflects the wider community - Defence's racism may even be lower -
    - Racism in Defence has a bigger consequence because you are forced into teams together - especially on exercise
    - Hierarchical nature of Defence can add to that - don't usually see it from higher-ranking people - mostly only in one-on-one peer situations
    - Need chain of command to deal with racism and to provide supports when there is an issue
  - Comments about only doing well because of special considerations
  - Much racism comes from an uneducated place, rather than maliciousness - comes from those who don't know the person, or how to serve next to an Indigenous person
  - Need to equip ATSI personnel with tools to address racism, and equip non-ATSI members with ways to better interact with ATSI members - education for both for appropriate communication
- Feelings of isolation - might often be the only ATSI member in training or in a unit
  - Difference to how a person has grown up on country - difficult to discuss these issues - can be 'culture shock' - there is an added layer for ATSI members - different to what you used to do
  - Don't see many people you see yourself in
  - Tough for recruit process when being separated from family for so long
  - Now shares those experiences with younger trainees

- Spiritual connection to country - creates need for alternative spiritual support
  - Believe mental health issues or suicidality is a spiritual attack on us as individuals
  - Need to speak to elders, padres etc. - possibility of smoking ceremonies
  - Could be useful additional support in Defence
- Cultural insensitivity - room for more detail in education and policy for COs
  - Indigenous people and Indigenous service are not homogenous
- Support for decision to join the military, including discussion with family and elders
  - Perception that as Government organisation, Defence may not be appropriate - perception among the Indigenous community of military as punitive organisation
  - Do not understand what you're trying to do - creates extra tension
  - Memory of non-recognition of Indigenous soldiers in the past
  - Can impact mental health - makes things harder - if something goes wrong, it's harder to find family support
- Defence could listen to ATSI personnel more and introduce education to make Defence a safer place for Indigenous service - make Defence the place of choice for Indigenous people
- BAU should look like Indigenous culture being present and visible in all parts of the ADF

#### Nature of support provided

- Mostly seek support from elders in the community, referral to health services outside of Defence
- Already established network of support
- Mental health and support for Indigenous members
  - Needs to be more culturally appropriate -reluctance to speak no-First Nations psychologist - need special psychologist with cultural competence or Indigenous - lived experience here is so useful - understanding of intergenerational trauma - not available at Lavarack, is available at Kapooka
- Elders could come on to base and meeting and greeting new ATSI recruits - should be explored
- Want more involvement from padres - improved presence - would be beneficial - want to make it known that spiritual guidance or support is there if needed

#### Changes for ATSI personnel

- Specialist recruiting and assistance teams for ATSI personnel
- Mentors in training establishments
- Additional supporting programs and supports including Regional Indigenous Officers and Army Aboriginal Community Assistance Program (AACAP)
  - ATSI elders select the chief of this group
  - Elders are available at regional bases

#### Suicide or suicidality

- Risk factors include
  - Not being able to talk to someone - need culturally competent support - access to Indigenous health professionals
  - Important to have some cultural competency for other Indigenous members serving i.e. Regional Indigenous Liaison Officers (RILOs)
- Protective factors
  - Maintaining community link while serving, with support mechanisms to allow that
- Support mechanisms to address the thought process of suicidality is needed - early intervention process
  - Greater cultural knowledge
  - Instant access to a pastor or padre - rather than slow internal/external process
  - Culturally appropriate centres - spiritual centres with access for families - such as the type available in hospitals i.e. Townsville Hospital
  - Capacity to return to family is also important for short periods to get spiritual and community

strength

- Cultural needs for family members when there is a death by suicide
  - Defence is good at notifying – DMFS is good at this too – might have a system where we indicate, as members, who the member wants to do the notifying – agency to individuals – once a serious incident occurs, it is too late to be making these decisions
  - Should have Indigenous members or RILOs talk to the family, as a trust aspect – this is an element of cultural competency
    - Need to note that each Indigenous person is different and there needs to be awareness of where that soldier came from to ensure appropriate response
    - Can be a non-Indigenous RILO – about the knowledge of whom to speak to get advice
  - Better training on procedures for COs to inform people

#### Army Aboriginal Community Assistance Program (AACAP)

- Advises Army on cultural issues – informs but does not create or implement policy – Army can bring forward a policy for consideration
- Members can raise issues if they have concerns or considerations
- Supports Army Indigenous Action Plan and Reconciliation Plan
- Membership is diverse in terms of rank and experience – 10 members – open circle with basically no rank – come to consensus or vote – don't just reject, try to propose solutions
- Don't recall AACAP dealing with above issues – could be more of this
- Also have Indigenous Cultural Advisory Group (ICAG) for whole of Defence

#### Other issues

- Want to get better Indigenous representation at the Officer ranks – difficult, because you can't lower the standard – have to help people up to the standard – provides an example for other ATSI members
  - Will help Army to be more organically culturally appropriate
  - Could help bring more Indigenous recruits into Defence
  - Challenge to Officer entry is that finishing year 12 is lower among Indigenous population
    - Possibility of using bridging problems – some of these are in place, including at RMC
  - Challenge is greater for Indigenous women
- Don't have an appropriately organised Indigenous veterans' body – some informal veterans groups aren't supportive of cultural diversity in military – some vocal ex-veterans about Indigenous-specific service matters
- Community cultural diversity needs to be reflected in Defence
- Need to be better incorporation of Indigenous women in Defence – need representation
- NORFORCE – mostly part-time or Reserves – high percentage of ATSI personnel (40-50%) –
  - Units rely heavily on locals in community for information on terrain and environment
  - Effective for recruitment into these units among ATSI communities
- Army has an ethos of using people for service – in WW1, service helped break down perceptions
  - Need truth telling about what was wrong in the path
  - Need appropriate recognition about service of ATSI
- Family support
  - This is critical – opportunities for information about mental health issues would be appreciated – additional communication with families

**2:15pm – 3:45pm – Rachel Baker, Area Manager, Defence Member and Family Support – Group Captain Karen Braden, Director of Personnel, Joint Operations Command – Kate Ambler Director, Regional Engagement, Defence Member and Family Support Branch – Commander Michael Harris OAM, Director, General Maritime Operations**

#### Deployments

- Deployment warning order - JOC will list requirements of any deployment in terms of training, medical etc. - deployments are voluntary
  - 6-12 months before the deployment date
  - Each unit has a welfare officer assigned to it to help in this process
  - Can issue warning orders in circumstances where members infringe the respite policy
  - Must make a welfare plan for a family before deployment
- Force preparation training
  - This is deployment specific
  - Medical, physical, welfare, spiritual, financial and cultural briefs for preparation
  - Very rare occasions where this does not take place
- 14 days before deployment - Will issue deployment order with all details of how deployment will operate
- Member must confirm member readiness statement before deployment
  - Deployment is voluntary - if a member requests an inability to deploy, this is almost never deployed
- Sharing of members' private information with families before they are deployed - family welfare section i.e. contact by CO, DFMS
  - This is consenting to DFMS to contact next of kin to do welfare support calls
  - This will include guides, information, and contact information if they require more support while member is away
  - Call after 6 weeks of deployment, email with additional resources
  - Families can attend pre-deployment briefings - relies on members informing families
- Defence Deployment Guide - sets out cycles of what members may experience before deployment
  - Pre, during and post-deployment cycles, including summaries of what emotions a member may experience during these times
  - Command can ask Defence Member and Family Support to deliver this emotional cycle education during force preparation training
- End of Deployment
  - Dates will be in the warning order, and reconfirmed in the deployment order
  - For Navy, come back through various ports for around 3 weeks
  - For other services, come back through UAE or Sydney for minimum time needed to do administrative processes - up to 48 hours
  - COs can provide information to families
  - Defence does not do third location decompression - guidance says period of 2-7 days on homebase, where the member 'goes back to work' - opportunity to get the member back into the rhythm of normal life - Navy gets normalisation on return to home port, with 2-week post-deployment leave period to integrate with family mandatory
  - If member or family is struggling post-deployment, they can see a social through DMFS - requires member or family to get in contact
    - Families are not provided information post-deployment to provide information on how the member is faring
    - If there is an incident, a CO may get in contact
  - Respite period only applies if you've been deployed longer than 4 months - this is a period of 12 months of respite from another period
    - Respite policy is evolving
    - Designed to provide recovery from previous deployment, stop onset of chronic conditions, prepare for next force preparation