



Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee
Australia's Engagement in Afghanistan

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Submission by: **Veteran Support Force LTD.**

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Veteran Support Force (VSF) LTD is an ACNC registered charity which seeks to provide support to Veterans and Families during the conduct of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide.

Veteran Support Force, formerly Voice Of A Veteran, was at the forefront of campaigning for the current Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide and completed an independent consultation to support the development of the Terms of Reference for the Royal Commission, providing over 840 independent submissions to the Attorney General's Department in 2021.

Since the establishment of VSF in July 2021, we have conducted extensive surveying and engagement primarily with younger veteran groups and individuals in order to identify gaps within the current veteran support and engagement architecture.

A significant portion of our findings speak directly to Reference (d) of this Inquiry: *Whether there are any gaps in services and demand for adaptive sport by the veteran community, and, if so, how these gaps can be addressed.* This ongoing line of discovery and development has seen us spend nearly the last two years developing a concept to target exactly this with the below findings framing our actions:

Background information and framework for 'gaps' identification:

During the past two years, VSF have conducted extensive consultation throughout the Veteran community, identifying the need for initiatives that better support community connection and cohesion, through purposeful collaboration.

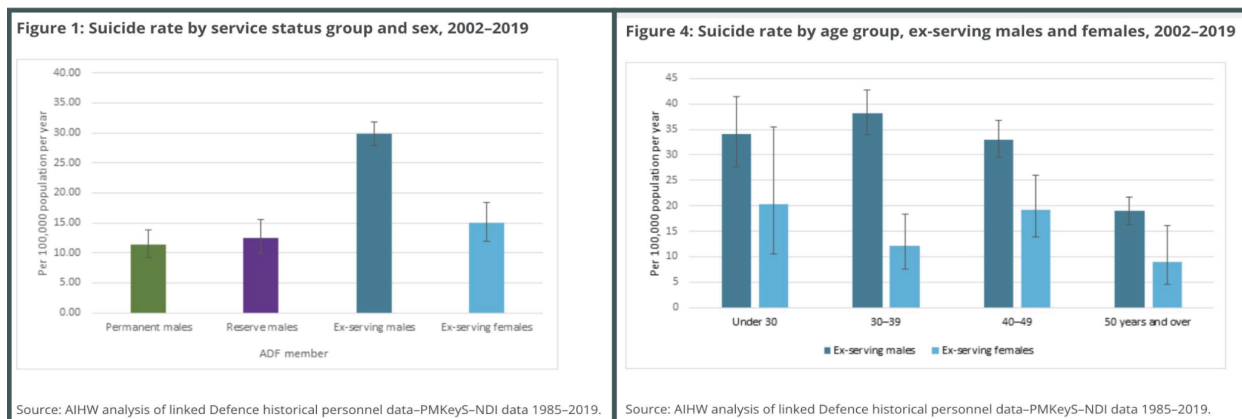
In September 2021, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare published its most recent annual report of the rates of suicide among serving and ex-serving ADF members. The report identified 1,273 deaths by suicide that occurred between 1 January 2001 and 31 December 2019 in those who had served at least one day since 1 January 1985. Of these 1,273, a total of 211 were serving (permanent and reserve) and 1,062 were ex-serving ADF members.



Rates of suicidality are higher among those who no longer serve fulltime in the ADF. A study of regular ADF members and members who transitioned out of the ADF or to the reserves found that:

- 13.2% of regular ADF members and 28.9% of transitioned ADF members felt life was not worth living.
- 8.6% of regular ADF members and 21.2% of transitioned ADF members felt so low that they thought about suicide.
- 1.8% of regular ADF members and 7.9% of transitioned ADF members had made a suicide plan.
- 0.6% of regular ADF members and 2.0% of transitioned ADF members had attempted suicide.

The tables below depict the highest risk by respective age groups and have again supported the focus for VSF's ongoing work, with specific note of the high-risk age groups identified:



The below key findings from the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide Interim Report draw additional specific focus to the key conditions identified that contribute to mental health issues and suicidality - those which we have again taken as key focus for our ongoing development targeted through proactive health initiatives:



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ROYAL COMMISSION INTO DEFENCE & VETERAN SUICIDE INTERIM REPORT

IDENTITY AFTER SERVICE

- 73.** In submissions, people with lived experience expressed a loss of identity following transition to civilian life, regardless of the reason for discharge.⁹⁹ One submission said:

Myself and hundreds of other veterans deal with a key problem when we leave the Defence Force. We lose everything. Our identity, our families, and our belongings.¹⁰⁰

- 74.** Ex-serving members expressed a sense of worthlessness when leaving the ADF because they saw their purpose, self-worth and success as tied to their job.¹⁰¹ One submission said:

When you join the Army you are aware it isn't just a 9-5 job. After years and years of hard work, dedication and sacrifice the uniform becomes part of your identity ... I remember telling my psychologist the Army is my life'. My job was my everything, and to lose that made me feel like I was going to lose myself, and that life was no longer worth living. This challenge is still ongoing ... since separating I often think that my life is complete after my military career - no other jobs are going to compare ...¹⁰²

- 75.** Some ex-serving members experienced difficulty with creating a new purpose after their ADF career.¹⁰³ One serving member attributed this to the AD's lack of assistance in 'deconstructing that identity and helping them on the path towards a new one',¹⁰⁴ Some ex-serving members said they believe re-conditioning for civilian life is as important as preparation for service and warfare.¹⁰⁵

Royal Commission Interim Report - Pages 44-45

TRANSITION IS A PERIOD OF PSYCHOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION

- 343.** A National Mental Health Commission report recognised that a key component of making a successful transition is undergoing a psychological transformation from being a warrior to becoming a civilian.⁴⁶¹ But this psychological transformation can be very challenging, as it is characterised by extensive and multiple losses – loss of purpose, loss of identity, and loss of culture and community.

PURPOSE

- 344.** Serving in the military gives members a strong sense of purpose, and the satisfaction that comes from contributing to something greater than themselves. This purpose is often sorely missed by veterans during and after their transition.

IDENTITY

- 347.** When veterans are serving, their roles and ranks in the military are so intrinsic to their sense of self that it becomes a key component of their identity.⁴⁶⁴ The loss of this identity at transition can be troubling.

- 348.** In her Preliminary Interim Report (the Boss report), the interim National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention, Dr Bernadette Boss CSC, found that because a collective identity and 'service before self' are so strongly embedded in ADF culture, transitioning members do not always have a strong individual identity to fall back on.⁴⁶⁵ Instead, they need to construct a new identity:

After leaving it was necessary to construct a new identity within which I could perceive myself in the world, separate from rank and uniform. This was more difficult than I thought, even though I was considered less 'military' than others in the ADF. I am still continuing this process four years on and only now feel I am 80% of the way there. I am not surprised that the more regimentally-inclined people struggle to self-validate outside of the ADF's society (which is a separate society from Australia).⁴⁶⁶

Royal Commission Interim Report - Pages 133-134



- 349.** One submission that we received told us that 'loss of self-worth when leaving defence' was one of the major reasons for suicide among his veteran peers.⁴⁶⁷ Another said:

When you join the Army you are aware it isn't just a 9-5 job. After years and years of hard work, dedication and sacrifice the uniform becomes part of your identity. When I was admitted to a health centre ... I remember telling my psychologist 'the Army is my life'.⁴⁶⁸

- 350.** Even those who served for only a short period of time have a distinctive perspective on life that significantly influences how they live after they have transitioned from the ADF.⁴⁶⁹

Royal Commission Interim Report - Pages 44-45

CULTURE AND COMMUNITY

- 351.** Many veterans told the Royal Commission about the profound challenges associated with losing the culture and community they had had with their ADF mates and peers. For example, one submission said that ADF members:

are used to having superiors that we can talk to, to get us through the tougher times and peers that are around our ages, experiencing the same things we are, that we know we can turn to for help.⁴⁷⁰

- 352.** According to another submission:

A real difficulty with the process of transition is that a member is often removed from his last unit locality and thus deprived of the support from his fellow soldiers and mates.⁴⁷¹

Royal Commission Interim Report - Pages 134-135

Key findings from 'gaps' identification:

1. Within military service, sports and competition provide a key opportunity for Veteran groups to come together with purpose, in competition and pursuing excellence in team events. As it stands, the only national scale opportunity for this to occur outside of the ADF, is through the Invictus Games – an initiative designed to provide purpose and community for wounded and injured Veterans through adaptive sports competitions and activities.
2. Many able-bodied Veterans who do not qualify to participate in the Invictus Games are voicing the need for a competitive initiative that caters to all Veterans. This would directly support Veteran mental health improvement opportunities, help those who no longer serve regain purpose, and support Veteran employment opportunities.
3. There presents the opportunity to attract and engage competitive 'sports' participation from the highest risk demographic of mental health issues and suicidality otherwise not engaged, through the development of a proactive health initiative at the national scale that specifically addresses the key findings from all the aforementioned studies, reports and findings.
4. Any such initiative must be designed and implemented to be conducted on a regular (preferably) annual basis from the outset so as to avoid the 'falling off a cliff' experience a number of Veterans communicated in our working groups -



experienced at the conclusion of infrequent or prolonged years between competitions.

5. Any such initiative must include 'self-help' mechanisms that naturally develop the structures and routine to support and sustain the ongoing proactive health initiatives. Eg. Veterans to form their own teams as opposed to being placed together - ongoing solutions against isolation and loss of community.
6. More initiatives are required to better represent Positive Veteran Narratives and celebrate the skills, experience and personalities of our Veterans, particularly those still physically capable, before they degrade.

Proposed initiative to address identified 'gaps' (Term of Reference - d) - Veteran Games:

The Veteran Games is focussed on deliverables across 5 key areas:

1. Improving Veteran mental health through an annual national event,
2. Improving Veteran physical health by providing a competitive, teamwork-focussed event space,
3. Developing positive Veteran recognition in the wider community,
4. Creating a safe, inclusive space for Veterans to showcase their unique skill-sets to the public,
5. Reshaping the Veteran "victim" narrative with a progressive project that demonstrates this through actions.

The Veteran Games is an initiative from within the veteran community. We have developed a proactive approach to veteran suicide prevention and community care.

The Veterans Games will be an Australian-first annual team competition including events that replicate activities conducted within active military service and combat, including team tug-of-war, obstacle courses, and other problem-solving military skills events.

In order to compete, Veterans (current and former serving) will be required to form a team of eight (8) and pass a basic fitness test. There is also scope to conduct tryouts at Military base locations dependent upon support from the ADF.

Veteran Games will be designed to focus on the development and conduct of in-person community engagements and events. With the need to facilitate what we term as an increase in



‘mental fitness’ activities, to enable Veterans and family members to get together, connect, decompress, problem solve and better enable resolution and support before the need for more qualified services or clinical interventions.

This is recognising the ‘unique nature of service’ and placing high priority on supporting the establishment and strengthening of community, Veteran culture, individual identity and collective values through shared experiences and mateship.

Veteran Games will celebrate & showcase the skills & excellence of our Veteran Community in a format that is exciting & engaging for the wider public. The preparations & conduct will provide proactive physical & mental health outcomes for all involved, while working to shape a positive & aspirational contemporary Veteran narrative & addressing key recommendations from the Royal Commission into Defence & Veteran Suicide Interim Report.

The below tables outline these with specific focus in the development of this initiative:

VETERAN GAMES’ UNIQUE POINT OF DIFFERENCE & KEY OPPORTUNITIES

- 01** Designed to particularly attract ‘younger’ or ‘contemporary’ Veterans (aged 18-40) who the highest ‘at-risk’ demographic for mental health issues and suicidality per the research and key statistics highlighted by the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide Interim Report,
- 02** Addresses key findings and recommendations pertinent to the ongoing mental health and suicide crisis within the current and former serving Veteran community, through innovative and enjoyable direct and indirect approaches,
- 03** Promotes and requires Veterans to connect and form their team of 8 (proactive mental health) [Community],
- 04** Promotes and requires Veterans to train with a purpose - to compete in the Veteran Games (proactive physical and mental health) [Purpose],
- 05** Promotes and requires Veterans to compete in events that celebrate their military identity (proactive physical and mental health) [Identity],
- 06** Provides and promotes opportunities for Veteran families and friends to attend, be involved and share through an experience focused event plan, also creating opportunities for greater community interaction including family connections,
- 07** Provides opportunities for wider Veteran business community, Ex-Service Organisations, Defence sector, Defence Recruiting and Australian Defence Force to collaborate and gain amplified exposure for other organisational / stakeholder objectives within a confined and focused period of time,
- 08** Annual scheduling will provide year-round community connection and training purpose for all current and former serving Veterans, further supporting Veteran self and community identity benefits (proactive mental and physical health),
- 09** Promotes and provides a positive Veteran narrative - celebrating the skills and experience of Veterans in a competitive forum that will be enjoyed and peak interest from the wider public,
- 10** Provides a year-round training & connection focus for Veterans, in particular during the period After ANZAC Day & prior to Remembrance Day,
- 11** Can be achieved at minimum or no cost to the Veteran competitors (dependent upon funding success eg. sponsorships, grants, year-on-year reinvestment),
- 12** Provides an opportunity for bi-partisan political support across all levels of government - focusing on purpose and the outcomes of the event throughout all phases,
- 13** Provides a catalyst for shifting Veteran Culture within Australia, that can also expand to reinforce this in-kind with our global allies.



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Thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission to the Senate Committee Inquiry. Our organisation stands ready to provide any further information or support in clarifying any of the information provided within or attached to this submission at any time.

Please see below for the relevant contact details.

Yours in Service,



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Enclosure: Veteran Games overview