

Opening Statement – Budget Estimates 2 June 2021
Matt Anderson PSM, Director of the Australian War Memorial

Thank you for the opportunity to provide an opening statement, Chair.

I would like to provide the Committee with a brief update on major developments since our last appearance.

Firstly, the Memorial was able to deliver a ‘COVID safe’ Anzac Day at the Memorial.

To welcome, in the midst of a global pandemic, some 6,500 veterans, defence force personnel, their families, members of the public and dignitaries across both the Dawn Service and National Ceremony here at the Australian War Memorial is a powerful reminder to what matters to us as a nation.

In addition to the Dawn Service speech given by the Prime Minister, this year was an important opportunity to recognise the contribution of the Royal Australian Air Force to our defence, and to our country, in its 100th year, and was marked by the delivery of the Commemorative Address at the National Ceremony by Air Marshal Mel Hupfeld, Chief of Air Force.

I would also like to provide an update on the Memorial’s ‘Heritage Management Plan’ which we continue to work on in consultation with the Department of Agriculture, Water & the Environment. The plan has been updated and now includes in principle agreement from all sides on how the plan will address the changes that will be brought by the Memorial’s development project and how the new facilities delivered by the plan will be managed from a heritage perspective.

This is an important step to agreeing the final draft plan with the Department’s Historic Heritage Section before we submit it to the Australian Heritage Council for approval in coming months. As the Council has a number of new members incoming in July this year, we expect the Council to consider our updated plan in September or October year.

Finally I would like to read, and table for the Committee, a letter I received from a veteran just a few days ago about our Development Project. Each week I speak to veterans in attendance at the Last Post Ceremony, or receive emails and letters from them like this one, that demonstrate the need for the changes the project will bring, and why it is vital we do so now.

“Good morning,

I visited the AWM yesterday mainly to place a poppy next to the names of two relatives killed in WW1. I haven’t visited the AWM for many years.

My Army service began in 1981 and finished in 2005 and I was interested to see what was displayed that related to my experiences in Rwanda, Bougainville, Solomon Islands, East Timor and the Tsunami of 2004-5.

Its understandable that there is relatively small space dedicated to these deployments given their size, and I may have missed parts of the display, but there was substantial risk, a number of deaths and gallantry decorations earned on these deployments.

In Rwanda there were three MGs [Medals of Gallantry] awarded for actions at Kibeho including one doctor. I did not see any mention of this. The deployment of a military hospital for a year was the first since Vietnam and there was little if anything I could see about that.

Operation Sumatra Assist may have been represented but if so I must have missed it. Nevertheless it was recognised as operational service with the Humanitarian Operational Service Medal. During this deployment I lost several colleagues in the Sea King crash on Nias Island. Nine died including all the helicopter crew who I knew well. Given this deployment occurred 15 years ago there would have been plenty of time for the AWM to recognise it.

Compared to my grandfather and father, my time in the army has focussed on keeping the peace which is a good thing. If I am wrong and have missed exhibits I do apologise, However it seems to me that there should be more about the gallantry shown by ADF members in Rwanda, and Op Sumatra Assist must be recognised. Nine deaths on operational service is a significant loss and theirs are the faces I see on Remembrance Day.”

I would note for the Hansard that there were in fact four Medals of Gallantry awarded to ADF personnel in Rwanda - Corporal Andy Miller, Warrant Officer Rod Scott, Lieutenant Steve Tillbrook and Captain Carol Vaughan-Evans – and that this marked the first time Australian soldiers had been awarded gallantry medals since the Vietnam War.

Beyond these four individuals I would note that all of those deployed to Rwanda in 1994 gave extraordinary service in even more extraordinary times – a 2015 Centre for Australian Military and Veterans’ Health study on Rwanda deployments showed that 31% of those deployed have a recognised claim for post-traumatic stress from these operations. For reference the average, if such a thing can be said, rate of PTSD for what are described as ‘traumatic peacekeeping missions’ in places such as the former Yugoslavia or Somalia is around 10%.

As those of you have visited the Memorial recently for yourselves will know, this veteran didn’t ‘miss’ displays on Operation Sumatra Assist, on the fatal crash of the Navy helicopter “Shark 02” off Nias Island or material on the ADF’s medical and security contributions in Rwanda at Kigali Central Hospital in 1994 and the terrible impact it has had on many of the men and women in our uniform who were there.

There simply isn't space to tell those stories in the Memorial currently.

Thank you, Chair.