

The Committee for the Inquiry into Defence Honours and Awards System

Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Committee Members,

I am writing to express my support for the inquiry into the awarding of medals in Defence and to share my personal experiences regarding the inequities in the Defence honours and awards system during my 15-year career in the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF). I joined the RAAF in 2008 and discharged in 2022. Throughout my service, I witnessed firsthand how senior officers frequently received recognition and awards that enlisted personnel, who perform the majority of the work, are denied. While in the Air Force, I couldn't speak freely about these issues without fear of repercussions. Serving meant having no voice. Despite using every available channel, my requests for recognition went unanswered. After discharging, I reached out to Defence Honours and Awards multiple times, only to face endless roadblocks, a lack of understanding and rigid responses. They failed to grasp the complexities of service, where maintaining accurate records during short notice deployments and natural disasters is nearly impossible. Their inflexible requirements ignore the realities we faced.

Example 1: Ipswich Floods 2010-2011

During the 2010-2011 floods in Ipswich, Queensland, my house was directly affected, cutting me off for several days whilst posted to RAAF Base Amberley. Despite this, I was ordered to serve the people of Ipswich, helping clean their houses and removing water-damaged items. This effort lasted for approximately 5-6 weeks, cleaning various locations in Ipswich to assist in the clean-up.

One particularly disheartening experience was when uniformed ADF personnel were tasked with cleaning out a Coles store in Ipswich, while many residents still needed help. The senior ADF personnel prioritised the publicity from cleaning a private corporation's site over assisting the Australian people. Despite my continuous efforts, even outside work hours, I'd wear my uniform to show my community that as a member of the ADF I genuinely cared. We were told we were ineligible for any medal, as we were "just doing our job." However, several officers involved received the National Emergency Medal, even though they mostly only participated in strategic photo opportunities. I remember being told by No 395 Expeditionary Combat Support Wing senior officers that we were no longer officially required for clean up duties just prior to the 4 week mark despite still helping the community in uniform for several weeks after this in uniform.

Example 2: Operation Augury 2017

In 2017, I was part of Operation Augury in the Philippines, where several AP-3C Orions operated over Mindanao to gather intelligence for Filipino forces engaged in the Marawi crisis against ISIS forces which were brutally killing locals and Christians. I was part of a small contingent of RAAF personnel operating the AP-3C Orion aircraft that were already on operation in the Philippines at the time the Australian government offered assistance to the Philippine government, which was accepted. We then transitioned immediately to Operation Augury and continued our work in the war against ISIS there.

Despite serving long enough to qualify for a medal and actively participating in dangerous missions, Air Force personnel have been unjustly denied any recognition. This stark example of the ADF hierarchy's selective and unfair awarding practices is deeply troubling. While Army personnel received the Operation Augury medal, we in the RAAF, who carried out the same critical operations in the same country, were dismissed as being on "peacetime" duty. This clear favouritism and disregard for our service and sacrifices is both disheartening and unacceptable, highlighting a significant flaw in the current system.

I reached out to Honours and Awards regarding medallic recognition for members who participated in Operation Augury. I was informed that only service in Zones A and B are eligible for the award of the Australian Operational Service Medal – Greater Middle East Operation. Service in Zone C (the Philippines) is not eligible for the award, as it is considered a peacetime operation. This classification does not reflect the reality of our situation, where we were actively engaged in supporting the war effort against ISIS forces. The official response I received from Defence Honours and Awards is attached.

Example 3: Operation Gateway

Operation Gateway is Australia's longest-running operation, yet it still receives no medallic recognition despite the significant risks and extended periods away from home. During my deployment, we were often ordered to fly missions over the South China Sea, where the Chinese navy and air force regularly issued threats against us. On one occasion, armed Chinese fighter jets flew alongside us and issued direct threats while ABC reporters were on board, as detailed in this [ABC News article](#).

Being placed in such perilous situations for what felt like political posturing, and then being denied recognition in the form of a medal, is utterly unacceptable. This issue demands urgent re-evaluation. Efforts were made in 2011 to have Operation Gateway recognised as worthy of a medal, but Defence Honours and Awards and the tribunal have consistently failed the dedicated personnel involved. Their decisions reflect a profound disconnect and highlight the systemic issues plaguing the current system. The circumstances have dramatically evolved, and the increased dangers make it essential to revisit and rigorously investigate this matter.

The Defence Honours and Awards Appeals Tribunal report on Operation Gateway concluded that it did not support a medal for ADF members on this operation. The main reasons cited were the lack of a specific qualifying area for the operation, its routine and long-standing nature, and the perception that it did not meet the threshold of risk or operational intensity compared to other recognised operations. The full report can be found [here](#).

Example 4: Operation Solomon Island Election Assistance 2019

In 2019, I participated in Operation Solomon Island Election Assistance, yet was not awarded anything. This should be covered under the Australian Service Medal, similar to previous deployments like the International Peace Monitoring Team in the Solomon Islands. During our deployment, I became particularly well-acquainted with the Army Detachment Commander, a down-to-earth and candid officer. One morning, while driving to the airport together, we discussed the operation, which had started as an Air Force-run mission and evolved into a larger, joint operation managed by Joint Operations Command in Canberra. The detachment commander candidly informed me that he was instructed to ensure no members, particularly from the RAAF, accumulated more than 30 days, thus preventing anyone from qualifying for a medal if one were authorised. It was clear to RAAF members that once again, the Army was using their control to prevent Air Force personnel from receiving recognition. He further mentioned that this practice was standard from higher up, rooted in the belief that medals should be for Army troops only. The Army Detachment Commander shared that it was his experience in the Army that the most senior top brass believed that medals should be reserved for Special Forces and Commandos and despised other ADF members wearing them, which is why they were hardly ever awarded. This systemic bias and the refusal to award medals to deserving RAAF members, despite existing medals that could be awarded, are indicative of the attitude within the Honours and Awards department and the active attempts by senior Army officers to enforce this.

Example 5: Operation COVID-19 Assist

During the COVID-19 lockdowns, I and many others served on Operation COVID-19 Assist. As the ADF, we were responsible for locking down borders, securing hotels, assisting in nursing homes, and restricting the free movement of people within their own country, a majority of which the ADF disagreed with. Nearly every ADF member serves to protect the freedoms we have in this country, and to this day, we have still not been recognised for these efforts in the form of at least medallic recognition. It is absolutely appalling that the ADF was used by the government for such acts against its own people and then simply refuses to acknowledge the efforts of those it tasked with doing this work.

Example 6: 2020 Bushfires

During some of the worst bushfires this country has seen, the Air Force was called upon to provide direct support to many parts of Australia. At that time, 35 SQN was called upon to help people across the country and in the towns like Mallacoota in Victoria with the assistance of C-27J Spartan. This natural disaster unfolded quickly, and the ADF was required to respond immediately. Many of us dropped everything to answer the call to help at a moment's notice. Despite the extreme lack of troops, we managed to launch the aircraft and perform many missions, with personnel operating all over the country from Kangaroo Island to Victoria, NSW, and out of Amberley. Our rosters were completely thrown out of whack and no longer reflected the true location of personnel from 35 SQN, who were spread all over the country. Many months after things returned to normal, there was talk of the Government offering a medal for our efforts. However, the only data they had to go off was the rosters that did not reflect the actual nature of our deployments. Due to this, I was overlooked for being put forward for the National Emergency Medal Bushfires 2019-2020 clasp.

General Consensus

Throughout my service, every single fellow ADF member I spoke with was utterly disillusioned with the honours and awards system and its requirements. The lack of recognition of the hard work by the hardest working Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen was demoralising especially when senior officers were constantly getting recognised for honours and awards for simply having buddies to write each others nomination form. The qualification periods were not in the favour of the front line personnel yet somehow senior officers who often spent less time in location than the troops were eligible.

The timeframes for qualifying for a medal are outdated and need to be reviewed. There were countless deployments and operations where I and many others fell just shy of the classification period. It's difficult to meet this requirement when you're constantly flying in and out or stationed in international waters or just outside the Area of Operation. This must be addressed to ensure that Air Force and Navy are not disadvantaged as any seasoned enlisted member will tell you.

On several occasion throughout my career I nominated exceptionally performing Airmen who deserved recognition but every time the nomination made it to the officers it was squashed. The feedback I received was that the senior officers did not agree despite the generally consensus being in favour of support among the enlisted ranks. How can this be the case when senior ADF officers are writing each others nominations?

The nomination and awarding of Angus Campbell's DSC exposes the corruption in the honours and awards system. Under his so-called leadership, discharge rates have soared, and morale has plummeted, leaving the organisation in shambles. Ignoring the hard work and risks taken by enlisted personnel is not just disappointing—it's

disgraceful. That CDF David Johnston nominated Campbell's DSC proves the system rewards the least deserving while ignoring those who truly serve. It's time for all ADF senior leadership star ranks and above to have their medal nominations reviewed and scrutinised to uncover the extent of this corruption.

Defence Honours and Awards must be free from ADF influence. To restore confidence, no medals, except long service clasps, should be awarded to senior ADF leadership star ranks and above without independent and transparent justification.

References:

1. [Eligibility Criteria for National Emergency Medal](#)
2. **Operation Augury Context:**
 - o [Griffith University Blog on Philippine-Australian Security Partnership](#)
 - o [Minister for Defence Media Release](#)
 - o [ABC News Article](#)
 - o [Defence.gov.au on Operation Augury](#)
3. **Operation Gateway Context:**
 - o [ABC News Article on Chinese Threats](#)
 - o [Defence Honours and Awards Appeals Tribunal Report](#)

I believe all the examples I mentioned should be reviewed, and rightful medallic recognition awarded. What we are asking for only costs a few dollars per award, and I am perplexed as to why the system is so allergic to giving them. This recognition means more to those who genuinely serve and their families than can be summarised by words. I hope my experiences provide additional insight into the issues surrounding the Defence honours and awards system. I am grateful for the efforts in establishing this inquiry and trust it will lead to a fair and equitable recognition system for all Defence personnel, particularly the enlisted ranks. If you need any more details, I am happy to assist.

Sincerely,

Stephen Domagalski

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