



3 February 2023

Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee  
Department of the Senate  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

By electronic lodgement

Dear Madam / Sir

**Inquiry into adaptive sport programs for Australian Defence Force veterans– Australian Rugby League Commission / National Rugby League**

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the consultation process which forms part of the Inquiry into adaptive sport programs for Australian Defence Force veterans in addressing issues identified by the ongoing Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide. This submission focuses on the terms of reference most relevant to the Australian Rugby League Commission Limited (ARLC) and the National Rugby League Limited (NRL).

While rugby league is not listed as an adaptive sport under the Invictus Games model, our game embraces adaptability and presents opportunities for veterans of all ability to participate. Rugby league offers numerous versions of the sport including, touch, tag, tackle, wheelchair, and all abilities as well as roles in officiating, training and coaching and off field administration. While rugby league isn't necessarily an 'adaptive sport', we have several forms of the game and other opportunities that mean anyone can take part.

**1. Rugby league in Australia in 2023**

The ARLC is the controlling body of the game of rugby league in Australia. In addition to organising and conducting the elite NRL Premiership and the State of Origin series, the primary objects of the ARLC include,

*“...to foster, develop, extend and provide adequate funding for the Game from junior to elite levels and generally to act in the best interests of the Game;*

*...to promote and encourage either directly or indirectly the physical, cultural and intellectual welfare of young people in the community, in particular the rugby league community... (and)*

*...to promote and encourage either directly or indirectly sport and recreation, particularly rugby league football, in the interests of the social welfare of young persons.”*

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The ARLC is a not-for profit company limited by guarantee. All revenues generated by the ARLC (from the licensing of media rights and other sources) are directed back into the sport, either by way of distribution to its members (the 17 NRL Clubs, NSW Rugby League, Queensland Rugby League) or other investments in the game including grassroots participation and community programs. One of these programs is Battlefields to Footy fields, (B2F).

B2F is a program which connects veterans to community through rugby league. The program has been operational since 2018 and is partially funded via the Department of Veteran Affairs, Veteran and Community Grants.

The B2F objective is to create connection and inclusion of veterans within communities through rugby league. It provides purpose, connection, physical activity, and sharing of skills and experience. B2F offers free education, development and support to participants to achieve accreditation in courses such as Refereeing, Sport Trainers, Rugby League Coaching or Club Administration. The program aims to place the participant into an accredited B2F club at the completion of their training so they can put what they have learnt into practice in a supportive environment. In some cases, accreditation can result in sporting industry recognised Certificate 2 in Sport and Recreation and a Certificate in Sport Coaching.

Being connected with a sporting club and contributing as an accredited administrator, coach, official, or trainer enhances the veteran's quality of life, specifically from a health and social wellbeing perspective. In doing so, the program also builds the communities capacity for successfully delivering grassroots sport.

B2F was one of the first programs and partnerships established following the Invictus Games in 2018; a highly successful Games which led to the creation of Veteran Sport Australia, and more recently their transformation to become Invictus Australia. Our other principal partner is the Gallipoli Medical Research Foundation and together with Invictus Australia we continue to provide meaningful services, programs and support to veterans and their families.

## **2. Benefits of Adaptive Sports and Battlefields to Footy Fields**

Since its conception, B2F has had over 150 participants. As part of the program, a network of community clubs has been established that provide specific tailored support for program participants. They aim to create a healthy and welcoming environment as well as offering flexibility and adaptability to cater for veterans with specific needs. B2F also educates the local community rugby league club about the transient nature of the defence force and helps create a supportive network where veterans can come and go as they please without any repercussions for not being able to commit to a full rugby league season.

According to Jane O'Brien, COO of the Gallipoli Medical Research Foundation, their Veteran Reintegration Study "determined factors that lead to effective or problematic transition from the defence force into civilian society. The three key areas identified were:

1. Loss of culture and community
2. Loss of identify

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3. Loss of purpose.

The research highlighted that successful transition is unlikely if members are unable to resolve or mitigate these losses." The B2F program is designed to address these losses via connection to community through rugby league and in turn the cultural benefits of belonging, socialisation, and physical activity. The achievement of accreditation and placement into a rugby league club creates value, identity and recognition for the veteran.

The benefits of the program are illustrated by members of the program, set out below:

PTE Ishaan McNeill School of Infantry: Ishaan was close to being medically discharged. He was investigating ways in which he could remain in the forces, however, was starting to experience depression as he was unable to find a solution. He joined the program and became a rugby league trainer. This gave him the opportunity to meet with people in the local community. He found that they helped him maintain a positive attitude and encouraged him to pursue his career goals. He is now still serving and training to be a drone pilot.

*"To whom it may concern,*

*I started the Battlefields to Footy fields Program when I first joined the army, at the age of 18. At the start of my career I unfortunately ran into an unexpected dilemma, in which I experienced a lack of motivation and sense of passion. Unexpectedly, I was stuck in a rehabilitation process that lasted a year.*

*During that time there was a significant moment in which I was given the opportunity through the Army to participate in a Battlefields to Footy fields program. Engaging with the local community while my military career was on hold really helped with my head space and decision making to move forward within the ADF.*

*Since then, Battlefields to Footy fields has been a real highlight and pushing factor with my motivation, and mental health throughout my career. I've been able to travel and participate in the ANZAC Australia vs Turkey NRL Match and have been given new skills and qualifications through Battlefields to Footy fields. As of today, I still participate and have been given many opportunities. I currently referee and do sports training in local community Rugby League games.*

*Regards,  
PTE Ishaan McNeill"*

Aaron Wallis ex 8/9 RAR: Aaron was diagnosed with cancer and was undergoing intensive chemotherapy. The uncertainty of this process became detrimental to his mental health. Additionally, due to his health, he was limited in terms of what he could do within rugby league. B2F was able to accommodate Aaron and assisted him in working towards his officiating goals whilst going through his cancer treatment.

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*"To whom it may concern,*

*I would like to say since I have been part of the NRL Battlefields to Footy fields this program has helped me to transition from being in a team environment as a soldier to become a referee in another complex environment by taking charge of a Rugby League match.*

*I have undergone chemotherapy to battle bowel cancer this year which was successful. In saying this, I couldn't get onto the field to referee a match, but I was able to help, support and remain part of a team. I was also invited by Tony Archer and Troy Burgess to the NRL Women's Championship to help and support the referees.*

*I couldn't be prouder to be involved in this program with help and support I have received from Tony Archer and Troy Burgess during my transition and my battle against bowel cancer. I'm looking forward to what the new year brings as a referee.*

*Thank you,  
Aaron Wallis"*

Josh McFarlane Transitioning 3 CSSB. Josh was discharging from the ADF after serving for over 15 years. Being involved in rugby league has enabled him to start preparing for the transition. It also enabled him to talk to other veterans about the stresses of transition from the defence force.

*"Good afternoon Troy,*

*I'm just writing this letter to you to express my thanks to you, the NRL and the Battlefields to Footy fields program. While I'm very new to the program it has helped myself in so many ways.*

*Firstly, getting into local Rugby league. As a member that's in the defence it's hard to get into local sport. But the B2F program eases the stress a lot and connects you with the club. It also allows me to talk with members from other clubs or districts within Australia that share similar stresses.*

*Secondly to be able to represent not only the program but our local area also is a nice opportunity to show case the program. It also helps the members continue their love for the sport and still have a mate ship there to support them.*

*This program has helped me grow as a referee on and off the field. It has also let me represent the defence force at the 2022 Anzac Day clash where the Australian Defence Force played Turkey. I got to meet the elite referee squad as well as the best referee of all time in my opinion.*

*As a member on the way out of defence, this program still is with me by my side. The friendships and people I have met along the way have been something that I will hold close to my heart and hope to continue with into the future.*

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*Thank you and kind regards,  
Josh McFarlane  
B2F Referee."*

Nic Willer Ex-Navy: Nic was medically discharged and was suffering from depression. After discovering the program, he found purpose again through giving back to his community through officiating. He now works for the NRL as a game development officer.

*"Dear Troy,*

*The Battlefields to Footy fields program is an amazing opportunity for both past and current serving members of the ADF to get involved with Rugby League. I was a referee before joining the Navy but joining this program has given me several opportunities that I thought I would never get. For example, I officiated in the ANZAC Day curtain raiser this year and have also got to referee a game before the Rabbitohs vs Cowboys game as well. Not many people get the opportunity to do things like that.*

*The Battlefields program is also a great way to meet new people and put yourself back out into the community by helping local associations with officials, sport trainers, etc. This program is a great steppingstone for those who have trouble stepping out and meeting new people as well. You get to meet new people with similar interests as well as other people in the community that you live in.*

*Kind regards,  
Nicholas Willer"*

Outside of the on-field roles, B2F also can connect veterans that wish to participate, to a number of modified options if they are unable to play the full contact version of the game. These include master's rugby league, wheelchair rugby league, touch football, league tag and all abilities rugby league. The NRL's is committed to helping veterans from all walks of life to be involved in our sport in whatever capacity they see fit. The above variations of our code enable veterans to participate at different stages of their journey whether that be from being abled body, playing full contact to helping a mate with a disability play wheelchair rugby league.



### **3. The Role of Battlefields to Footy Fields and Rugby League in Supporting individuals' Transition from the Australian Defence Force**

To ensure B2F is delivering on the needs of transitioning veterans and to develop a robust measurement and evaluation framework for the program, the NRL formed a partnership with the Gallipoli Medical Research Foundation. Gallipoli is an approved research institute. It is committed to enhancing the health and wellbeing of veterans, their families and the wider Australian community through innovative research. As mentioned previously, Gallipoli's Veteran Reintegration Study, which has been conducted over the past seven years, was developed to understand veterans' transition from military service to civilian life and determine the factors that lead to effective or problematic transition. Through this research, it was identified that the adjustment process (moving from military service to civilian life) is characterised by a profound sense of loss in three key areas;

1. Loss of Culture and Community
2. Loss of Identity
3. Loss of Purpose

Gallipoli's research also highlighted that successful transition is unlikely if members are unable to resolve or mitigate these losses. B2F aligns strongly to these research findings as the program helps veterans and their families create connections, learn new skills and create a sense of belonging to community.

Sport, and in particular rugby league, is a great activity to assist veterans who are transitioning into civilian life. It puts them in touch with people that have a common interest. It is a great way for people to meet on a regular basis, to keep active and check in on each other. It provides structure and community, which are important for veterans, but at times can be lost during this transition.

Sporting communities and clubs, especially in rugby league can have thousands of members. Being part of a large sporting club can increase a veteran's chance of social connection and even employment through socialising with other members.

Being connected to a sport that accommodates for injuries and capacity can negate negative effects on a veteran's welfare. Veterans that can maintain culture, community, their identity, and sense of purpose are more likely to have a successful transition. Rugby league clubs and referee associations provide for these essential elements. In addition, B2F identifies the community clubs and associations that are most appropriate to place veterans within. These clubs have an experienced veteran liaison officer whose role is to support and mentor the veteran in their new role in the club and the transition into civilian life.





### **The Australian Defence Force's Use of Adaptive Sport**

ADF Rugby League offers touch, tag and tackle versions of the sport to encourage continued involvement. Coupled with B2F, veterans have access to not only playing opportunities, but also roles in officiating, training and coaching as well as off field involvement in administration roles. These positions are essential to ensuring sport remain sustainable and creates a sense of purpose for all involved.

While the ADF uses adaptive sports to assist veterans to engage and participate in sport, greater focus seems to be given to sports involved in the Invictus Games. Other sporting communities within the ADF, such as rugby league, are just as valuable for recreational and rehabilitation purposes for veterans undergoing recovery or treatment, especially as different versions of the game are on offer.

### **4. Gaps in Services and Demand**

Due to lack of financial support, there are gaps in services for the veteran community who live in regional Australia and are interested in becoming involved in rugby league. These veterans have limited to no access to rugby league clubs and rugby league events, meaning they do not have a club to play at, a competition or event to officiate, or a team to coach.

The NRL and Invictus Australia are working together to minimize the impact by trying to reach these communities through other means, for example, organising rugby league events in regional areas for the defence community to attend. The frequency at which these events can be held, however are minimal due to the excessive cost to access and put on events in regional areas. It is not only a challenging to create these events, but also to ensure they have longevity and remain a constant and/or annual event in the calendar.

Currently the ADF and the Invictus Games do not offer wheelchair rugby league, however, Wheelchair Rugby League Australia competitions exist across Australia and provide active participation opportunities for veterans through state and regional competitions. These opportunities also offer state and national pathways for participants supported by state and national sporting organisations. There are currently several veterans participating in competitions across Queensland and New South Wales. Wheelchair rugby league is also truly a game for all, as it is not just a sport for people with disabilities. Wheelchair rugby league is an all - inclusive sport and allows athletes with disabilities to compete with and against people without disability.

While a gap currently exists, Wheelchair Rugby League Australia are eager to find a way to make their version of the game, more accessible for veterans. Following a successful world cup campaign in 2022, strategy and engagement discussions through Wheelchair Rugby League Australia have begun to form an official partnership with the ADF and expand on the current opportunities.

Lastly, the specialist training and equipment used for some versions of rugby league (and other adaptive sports) can come at cost and at times are a barrier to entry for some veterans. Often in rugby league communities, we find that volunteers from the clubs work together to raise funds or apply for grants that assist to cover these costs for veterans.

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## **5. The Equitability of Current Funding and Accessibility for Adaptive Sport**

Only certain adaptive sports are currently supported by the ADF. Additionally, funding and access appears to be skewed towards adaptive sports that are included in the Invictus Games, of which rugby league is not. Not all veterans that are capable or eligible wish to participate in the Invictus Games. Those that want to participate in rugby league, or a version of the game are met with limited options.

Veterans that qualify for the Invictus program should be able to play any sport of their choosing that accommodates their needs and abilities, not just those sports included in the Invictus Games. In making more sports available and accessible, more veterans will participate and experience the positive social, wellbeing and health outcomes that sport has to offer.

## **6. Eligibility for the Australian Sports Medal**

Within rugby league there are members of the current and ex-ADF who, in addition to serving, play the game at the elite level representing their clubs, states and country. Consideration should be given to the medal criteria being extended to include any veteran who achieves a great sporting feat, as well as veterans' teams representing Australia in international events. This would recognise the dedication, effort and resilience of those involved in all sport, not just a select number of sports.

## **7. Conclusion**

While rugby league isn't necessarily an 'adaptive sport' under the Invictus Games model, our game embraces adaptability and offers opportunities for veterans of all ability to participate. Rugby league has numerous versions of the sport including, touch, tag, tackle, wheelchair, and all abilities as well as programs that enable education and involvement in officiating, training and coaching and off field administration. It is a sport that any veteran can participate and thrive in, living up to the NRL's mission of rugby league truly being "the greatest game for all".

## **8. Further information**

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the consultation process. We are happy to provide further information or answer questions regarding any matters raised in this submission. Should you require any further information please contact:

Tony Archer - Senior Manager: Officiating Education and Development,

Or myself, Andrew Every: Executive General Manager – Strategy and Transformation

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Yours sincerely,

Andrew Every  
Executive General Manager – Strategy and Transformation  
National Rugby League

03/02/2023