

My name is Benjamin Lee, and I served for 18 years in the Australian Army.

I joined the Army in 2003 and after completing my Recruit training and Initial Employment training, I was posted to 110 Signal Squadron. In 2006, after a year at 110 Signal Squadron, I was posted to 152 Signal Squadron. In 2008 I completed the SASR Selection Course and was selected for the reinforcement cycle. I successfully completed the reinforcement cycle at the end of 2009 and was posted to 3 SAS Squadron. I deployed numerous times with 3 SAS SQN, and in 2017 I posted to Operational Support Squadron. In 2018 I posted to 4 SAS SQN where I spent the remainder of my service and discharged in 2021.

During my service in the Special Air Service Regiment, I was fortunate enough to serve alongside some exceptional soldiers. Whilst deployed I witnessed numerous acts of bravery and heroism when in contact with the enemy. I only recall a couple of those people being awarded for their actions, but never to the level that they were deserving of. I also worked alongside soldiers who developed and improved capability, not only for the Regiment or SOCOMD, but for the whole of Defence. Every year on Australia Day and the Queen's Birthday, when honours and awards were announced, I was left shocked and disappointed that these people weren't recognised for their contributions to the advancement of the military capability and international standing of the Australian Defence Force.

It became a running joke amongst my friends and I that every year we would read the citations to find the most ridiculous of the awards. Officers were regularly being highly awarded for doing what can only be described as their designated jobs. Each new CO of a unit or task group/ force was awarded a Distinguished Service Cross and the OC's and, often the troop/ platoon commanders would be awarded a Distinguished Service Medal. I fully recognise that some of these individuals deserved their awards but if their predecessor had been awarded for distinguished service, wouldn't that mean that the bar had risen and they would have had to have done something exceptional beyond that? It was obvious to the whole of Defence that these appointments automatically came with the expected post nominals.

This had a huge impact on morale. We knew that no matter how badly one of these officers performed, their tenure would be touted as being worthy of recognition and award. As soldiers, we also knew that there would be a pivot from what was a clearly defined trajectory of improvement, just so these officers could claim to have done something new and different, even if their ideas were just recycled from previous, untenable systems.

I have personal experience of having an award downgraded by someone in either Canberra, or the Honours and Awards system. In 2012 I was involved in an action that resulted in the death in action of an Australian soldier. This was devastating to the whole of the Regiment, and everyone who knew and loved this man. He was fortunately awarded a gallantry decoration posthumously. I personally believe his actions deemed the award of a higher award. I do not know if his award was downgraded, but the actions I witnessed him perform that day should have been recognised to the highest degree. I was also awarded a decoration for my actions that day. Seven years after the action. While I do not necessarily believe that I

did anything outside of what any other soldier would have done, I was quite shocked and disappointed with how it all unfolded.

In 2019 I received word that I would be awarded a gallantry decoration for the events in 2012. I was deployed at the time and due to operational requirements, I had little to no contact with Defence. Over a very rushed time frame I was requested to complete the required paperwork so that it could be announced at that year's Queen's Birthday Honours. I consulted with some people who were in my unit at the time to confirm that I was deserving of this honour. They assured me I was, so I completed the paperwork. I was very anxious and somewhat embarrassed as I still didn't believe my actions were anything above or beyond. I truly believe that it is an unwritten contract that brothers in arms have that if someone is wounded, then everyone must do everything they can to retrieve them or assist them in any way possible. I believe I fulfilled that contract that day. The Queen's Birthday Honours were announced and to my surprise I wasn't mentioned. I didn't think much of this beyond being confused as that's when I was told the award would be published. I assumed that it would then be announced at the following year's Australia Day Honours. When they were announced I was again slightly surprised that the award wasn't mentioned. A senior in my unit contacted me and ensured me that they would call Honours and Awards to find out what had happened. They were informed that the award was still going to be made. Months later I was encouraged to go through my hierarchy to get some clarity on the situation. After some time, I was informed that the award had been gazetted and directed to a legislation website. This was the only formal announcement that I had, in fact, been awarded. I have included the link to the gazette: [Federal Register of Legislation - Medal for Gallantry](#)

So that I could explain to friends and family in detail what I was awarded for (I don't like to talk about that day or my actions too much), I requested a copy of the citation. What I was provided with was confusing and shocking to me. I received a citation for a higher decoration, that apparently had been approved but then subsequently downgraded without any explanation to the people who nominated me or to anyone in my direct chain of command. I have attached both citations to my submission.

While I don't need any fanfare to be proud of what I did, it does make me wonder how many other recipients have had what should have been a proud day for them, quietly washed over.

It was soldiers who were there on the day and who witnessed my actions who nominated me. These are veterans of multiple combat tours, who have experienced more action than anyone in Honours and Awards. If they believed my actions were deserving of the award that they nominated me for, I would like to know why the award was downgraded by someone in Honours and Awards without informing any of those people, and why it was only announced as, what felt like, an afterthought and a minimum requirement.

The events of that day left me with lasting self-doubt and mental anguish, as I always believed I should have done more. When I was notified that I would be decorated for my actions it alleviated some of this. The decision by some unknown person in Honours and Awards to subsequently downgrade the nominated award brought back a lot of these feelings as it felt that this person decided that the people on the ground were wrong in their

assessment of what my actions were worthy of. To have people who have no idea or understanding of what it means to be in contact with the enemy to decide, seemingly at whim, as to the degree of the decoration without any consultation with the people who were on the ground at the time seems preposterous to me. How can any soldier, sailor, or airman have faith in this system if these people can modify, lower, or outright cancel a decoration with little to no accountability to the people who witness and nominate others for their actions?

I have no faith that I will receive an explanation for any of this, but I will continue to wear my decoration in honour of the actions of everyone there that day, and many previous days, who were not recognised for their own actions.

Thank you for taking my submission.

Benjamin Lee