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INSPECTOR-GENERAL OF THE AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE FORCE

IGADF/BN21351623

Ms Lyn Beverley

Secretary

Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee

Department of the Senate

(By email: fadt.sen@aph.gov.au)

Dear Ms Beverley

**NATIONAL COMMISSIONER FOR DEFENCE AND VETERAN SUICIDE
PREVENTION BILL 2020 AND THE NATIONAL COMMISSIONER FOR DEFENCE
AND VETERAN SUICIDE PREVENTION (CONSEQUENTIAL AMENDMENTS)
BILL 2020**

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee regarding the *National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention Bill 2020* (the National Commissioner Bill) and the *National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention (Consequential Amendments) Bill 2020*. This submission relates primarily to the National Commissioner Bill.

My position as the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force (IGADF) is established under section 110B of the *Defence Act 1903*. As a statutory appointment, I am independent from the military chain of command. I perform an important governance and oversight role which includes inquiring into the death of all Defence Force members where it appears that the death has arisen out of, or in the course of, service in the Defence Force¹.

The death by suicide of a Defence member may appear to arise ‘out of’ or ‘in the course of’ their service where there is a possible causal connection between Defence service and the death. This includes circumstances in which the deceased may have suffered from mental illness which is attributable to their service, or they died while on duty or on Defence premises.

Suicide is the leading cause of death of Defence Force members between the ages of 18 and 44². Although the age-adjusted rate of suicide by Defence Force members is lower than that for the Australian population, the rate of suicide among veterans is higher.³ This reinforces the importance of appropriate mechanisms to examine the factors that may lead to such deaths, particularly in the lead up to and following transition from the Defence Force into civilian life.

¹ *Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force Regulation 2016*, section 5(a)

² Michael Evans, *Understanding Suicide: A Primer for Australian Defence Force Commanders*, 2018, Australian Army, page 1

³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *National suicide monitoring of serving and ex-serving Australian Defence Force personnel: 2019 update* (released 29 November 2018)

<<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/veterans/national-veteran-suicide-monitoring>>

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I do not have the jurisdiction to examine the deaths of former members of the Australian Defence Force. Therefore I welcome the creation of the National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention which will expand the examination of all deaths by suicide with a connection to service in the Australian Defence Force to include veterans who are no longer serving Defence Force members. This wider focus will be important in identifying relevant factors and supporting the prevention of future deaths by suicide.

The Commissioner's functions in Part 2 of the National Commissioner Bill provide a broad scope to survey across state and territory jurisdictions for the first time, and importantly will maintain a permanent national focus on Defence and Veteran suicides.

The Commissioner's information gathering and inquiry powers, equivalent to those of a Royal Commission, are complementary to mine in relation to death by suicide of Defence members. The Commissioner's powers will enable examination of circumstances of death by suicide of veterans more broadly. The Commissioner will be able to identify common trends and systemic issues in both Defence Force and veteran deaths.

General principles guiding the Commissioner's work will enable a trauma-informed and restorative approach. The Commissioner's guiding principles will assist to ensure that the families and loved ones affected by suicide are consulted in a respectful, compassionate, supported and dignified way.

Finally, the Bill promotes engagement with other Commonwealth, State and Territory government agencies and office holders. I am encouraged that it allows for wide scope of engagement to ensure consideration of all information relevant to the Commissioner's functions. This should enable collaborative work with State and Territory Coroners and other key stakeholders such as my office. The work that my office already does to inquire into service deaths will be a valuable resource to inform the National Commissioner's work and I look forward to establishing a constructive working relationship with the National Commissioner.

Yours sincerely

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Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force

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