

Chair's foreword

Lest We Forget. But let us remember and meet our obligations.

- The Hon Jeff Kennett AC, 11 November 2016

At the inquiry's public hearing in Perth, a witness underlined the importance of the primary topic of the inquiry. He noted that the dead cannot speak for themselves, but he felt the presence of those veterans lost to suicide in the room observing the proceedings. Members of the committee also feel the burden of that responsibility. At the outset, the committee wishes to acknowledge the service of those current and former members of the Australian Defence Force who have taken their own lives and the sorrow of their families and loved ones. In particular, the committee extends its deepest condolences to those families who lost serving or ex-serving members to suicide during the course of the inquiry.

The committee has chosen to title its report *The Constant Battle* which reflects the problematic nature of the issue of suicide by veterans and ex-service personnel. For modern veterans, it is likely that suicide and self-harm will cause more deaths and injuries for their contemporaries than overseas operational service. Some affected veterans characterised their post-service life as being the most difficult and challenging period of their lives. The effort to prevent suicide by veterans is a series of hidden personal conflicts, cloaked by stigma, unreliable information and the inherent reluctance of members of the defence community to request assistance. Unfortunately, the effort to address suicide in the veteran community is likely to be a struggle that has no end-point.

However, it is also important to recognise that the majority of ADF members will leave their service enriched by the experience and will go on to be successful in their civilian endeavours. The members of ADF receive some of the best training in the world and leave service with valuable skills and experience that can be transferred to benefit the Australian society in a broad field of endeavours. Veterans are an essential part of the fabric of our society. The inquiry has highlighted the number of persons with military experience contributing in politics, business, health services, public service, charities and civil society.

Not all the examples provided to the committee have been negatives ones. There have been many instances of veterans pulled back from the brink by partners, friends, advocates and health professionals. DVA clients have expressed their gratitude with the assistance they have received from DVA and other agencies. Other veterans have charted their own paths to recovery and have gone on to support and guide others. In Brisbane, the committee was pleased to meet one of the groups arranging for veterans with PTSD and other conditions to receive assistance dogs. It was clear this had become an invaluable part of their lives and they were passionate about making this assistance available to other veterans in similar circumstances.

A unique aspect of this inquiry has been examining the framework of military compensation arrangements and their administration through the lens of the issue of suicide by veterans. This focus has highlighted the burden of legislative complexity

and administrative hurdles on veterans who are often seeking support at a vulnerable period of their lives. The committee's inquiry has been conducted in a dynamic policy environment where there have been major developments in relation to several issues including suicide by veterans, the legislative framework in the Veterans' Affairs portfolio and the administration of claims by DVA as well as several other related issues. Community alarm and media attention regarding the number of veteran deaths by suicide has continued to increase. The broad scope of the terms of reference and their interrelated nature has been challenging. An extremely wide range of relevant matters were raised with the committee, particularly in relation to the reasons why Australian veterans are taking their own lives. The committee has been forced to focus its consideration on a limited number of key issues.

Every death by suicide is tragic loss with impacts for family, friends, colleagues and broader community. The committee agrees with the position put by some during the inquiry that the aspirational target rate for suicide by veterans and ex-service personnel should be zero. However, it would be misleading to represent that the recommendations in this report will achieve that goal. Any effective measures to decrease the rate of suicide by veterans and ex-service personnel will require a long-term multifaceted approach involving government, business, non-government and ex-service organisations and the wider Australian community. Change is likely take a substantial period of time.

The incidence of suicide by veterans will continue to be an issue demanding attention. While there is no easy solution, this does not mean that improvements are impossible and should not be attempted. The committee has made a series of recommendations. If adopted, some of these recommendations may involve substantial change. Nonetheless, the impression of the committee is there an appetite for reform in the support provided for veterans. Throughout the inquiry, an overwhelming public concern for the welfare of veterans has been evident. Translating that goodwill into effective measures to assist veterans who need support will be the continuing challenge.

While it was not a focus during the inquiry, the committee wishes to note its support for the proposed memorial on the grounds of the Australian War Memorial (AWM) as a dedicated place of remembrance for those who served and took their own lives.¹ While there are likely to be a range of opinions about this proposal, in the view of the committee a memorial could serve as an important marker to indicate progress in community awareness regarding suicide by veterans, an acknowledgement of the service of those lost and a commemorative area for bereaved families. The committee commends the sensitive and consultative approach that the AWM has indicated it will adopt in relation to this proposal.²

The committee has received evidence from current and former service members who have frankly described their own mental health challenges, suicidal ideation, self-harm

1 RSL, 'RSL National and the Australian War Memorial Partner in Veteran Suicide Memorial', *Media Release*, 1 May 2017.

2 Dr Brendan Nelson, *Committee Hansard*, Budget Estimates, 30 May 2017, p. 91.

and suicide attempts. Bereaved widows, partners, parents, friends and advocates have shared stories which have often ended in tragic loss. In some cases, submitters provided the committee with information which they have not even disclosed to close family members. Some of these personal stories have been hard to read. It is difficult to imagine the trauma of living through the experiences described. However, this evidence has played an important role in assisting the committee's understanding of the topics in the terms of reference. As Chair, I wish to record the committee's gratitude to all those who contributed to the inquiry.

