

SENATE INQUIRY INTO THE DEFENCE HONOURS AND AWARDS SYSTEM – SUBMISSION OF THE FAMILIES OF VETERANS GUILD

The Families of Veterans Guild (The Guild) previously the War Widows Guild of NSW, is grateful for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate's Inquiry into the Defence Honours and Awards System. In preparation of this submission, we asked the community of veterans and their families what they thought about the state of the Defence Honours and Awards System ('DHAS'). A total of 38 people responded to our consultation, 78% of respondents were male veterans, aged 31-50 years. We also heard from widows and families of veterans as part of this survey. A total of 5 families responded, 30 veterans and 3 members of the public. Throughout this submission this consultation is referred to as the '**2024 consultation.**'

In 2021, the Guild also undertook a consultation ahead of making a submission to a Defence Honours and Awards Tribunal Inquiry into recognising veterans and their families who had been wounded, injured, or killed in service. That consultation heard from 22 people the majority of whom were widows and families of veterans, 90% of those respondents were women. Throughout this submission this consultation is referred to as the '**2021 consultation.**'

Role of recognition

Recognition is about not only acknowledging the validity of something, appreciation and acclaim for achievement doing extraordinary things. It also facilitates identifying those with like experiences. It is a positive and powerful influence in the veteran community. It enables acceptance, conversations, community identification and help seeking. Honours and awards specifically in the veteran community play an important role in morale, mental health and wellbeing of veterans and their families. Honours and awards are intended to inspire others, bring people together in celebration of achievement and create a legacy. Honours and awards provide tangible recognition of service and sacrifice which otherwise goes unnoticed by everyday Australians.

Given the pivotal role of recognition and in the context of the evidence presented at Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide the review into this system couldn't be timelier. Central themes identified by the Royal Commission to date are all relevant to this inquiry as well and include a lack of accountability and transparency; issues in appropriate recognition of service and sacrifice; issues of integrity; issues with leadership; and issues with the sacrifices of families of veterans.

The DHAS is part of the very system that the Royal Commission has found has been failing veterans and their families, in particular non-commissioned officers/ other ranks. However, through this inquiry changes can be made to the DHAS to bring back the integrity and confidence in the system. Restoring the role of honours and awards. Recognition in the Defence and veteran community and the powerful role it plays in positive wellbeing and transition outcomes for veterans is significant.

Views on the DHAS

The 2024 consultation revealed key themes on the current state of the DHAS. The most significant of which was that the system lacks integrity. For respondents to this consultation, they saw the system as one which:

- Is used to provide "medals to mates"

- Lacks transparency; and
- Doesn't reflect the expectations of the Australian community.

Medals for mates

The DHAS is seen by those that offered their views as a self-perpetuating cycle of officers awarding officers medals, honours and awards for "*doing what they are paid to do*" at the expense of "*extraordinary acts or exemplary service*" by non-commissioned officers/ other ranks. One experience shared on this point demonstrates well what several respondents were communicating:

"I have seen and been part of recommendations for honours and awards to soldiers that have continually been not awarded or downgraded after performing extraordinary acts or exemplary service. While senior officers seem to be awarded medals for doing nothing other than the role, they are paid to do..."

There was a lot of commentary within the survey responses regarding the high levels of inequity in the volumes of honours and awards provided to those with rank and without. One powerful experience of a wounded Afghanistan Soldier was shared and demonstrates the sentiments of many throughout the consultation:

"There is a disproportionate level of military honours being passed to senior leadership who do not see combat and sleep in comfort. The previous CDF's abhorrent attempt to strip a citation earned while how was DSC was 'earned' in a different county is a disgrace. The fact his successor had his name on the form also brings the 'gongs for the boys' question to the forefront..."

Others speak of the system being used by those with rank to nominate themselves and peers. One respondent spoke of a perception that in order to progress in careers Officers ought to have post nominals and the DHAS is one way to get them.

Lack of transparency

"The current system is designed to facilitate senior staff awarding other senior staff without merit or oversight"

Respondents to the consultation noted a key driver of the system relates to the lack of transparency and external oversight. One respondent reflected that there are rules in place to give the system a level of integrity and if they were applied properly "*we wouldn't be in this mess.*"

Respondents were clear that they wanted to see greater transparency in how decisions were made and the nomination process. Some identified solutions involving elements of the Australian Honours and Awards System.

Expectations of the Australia Community

“All those who served deserve every ounce of recognition even the wounded. They served their country, let them have what they deserve and serve it on a platter, don’t fight them for it like the current situation.” 2021 consultation respondent

By far a very consistent theme throughout the 2024 Consultation was the perceptions of conflicts of interest within the system because it is so insulated and opaque. The lack of proper independent oversight and the ability of those from within the chain of command to affect whether or not people are even nominated is at odds with the broader system of Honours and Awards. The power of those of rank in this system needs to be reviewed and processes put in place to balance the differential if there is indeed found to be one. Australians value fairness and respect honours well earned. When fairness appears missing (perhaps because of a lack of transparency in the system) it devalues the honour or award. As one respondent noted:

“If senior personnel are able to nominate mates for awards as a favour, then there are problems with the system, awards should go those who are entitled to them and a review system needs to be put in place to ensure it.”

Further to this, how can the Australian public to value the contribution and the sacrifices of our Australian Defence Force personnel and their families when internally (within the Defence and Veteran system) there are levels of inconsistencies within the system. Further, there are things that matter to the many which are not being recognised. For example, rarely in our system is sacrifice recognised – even when those who have sacrificed ask for it.

In 2021, the Defence Honours and Awards Tribunal conducted an inquiry into whether veterans and their families who had died or were wounded or injured in service ought to be recognised by the DHAS. This inquiry was the culmination of years of advocacy and campaigning by many in the community to introduce these honours following the sacrifices made during the Afghanistan War.

The tribunal investigated the matter in detail and consulted widely making findings including the following three key recommendations:

“Recommendation 1 - The institution of the following new forms of medallic and emblematic recognition:

- a) a Memorial Clasp – to be posthumously awarded to a member of the ADF or a veteran who dies in or as a result of service. The Clasp is to be attached to the Australian campaign or service medal most relevant to the circumstances in which the death occurred and bearing, at the discretion of the veteran’s family:
 - the date of death; or
 - the date of the incident leading to death; or
 - no date.
- b) a Gratitude Clasp – to be awarded to a member of the ADF or veteran who is seriously wounded, seriously injured or suffers a serious injury in or as a result of



service. The Clasp is to be attached to the Australian campaign or service medal most relevant to the circumstances in which wounding, or injury occurred and bearing, at the discretion of the veteran (or family where posthumous recognition is sought):

- the date of wounding or injury; or
 - where multiple dates of wounds or injuries have been recognised, the number of such events recognised; or
 - no date.
- c) a Memorial Star – A full size brooch-like emblem of a uniquely Australian design that recognises the sacrifice of the family of a member of the ADF or veteran who dies in service or whose death is service related.
- d) a Gratitude Star – A full size brooch-like emblem of uniquely Australian design to recognise the sacrifice of the family of the member or veteran who has suffered a serious wound, serious injury or serious disease in or as a result of service; and
- e) for veterans awarded the Gratitude Clasp, a lapel pin of separate and appropriate design for everyday wear at the discretion of the veteran.

Recommendation 2 - the Memorial Clasp, the Gratitude Clasp, the Memorial Star and the Gratitude Star be accompanied by a scroll, issued under the authority of the Governor General, to commemorate the sacrifice of the member, veteran or the family, as applicable.

Recommendation 3 - the proposed new forms of recognition be available retrospectively, to recognise death, serious wounding, serious injury or serious disease that is or was brought about in or as a result of service after 2 September 1945."¹

However, nothing has happened, and decisions are not being made on these recommendations by this Government or the previous Government. In 2021 we conducted a small consultation to collect views on this matter. The views of the veteran community and the Australian public were clear – they wanted to see this recognition afforded.

We have been told of families inquiring about the recognition of their wounded family member being told in the mid 2010s that there was no "*need to do that here [in Australia], people don't want it and it would create a culture of soldiers seeking injury to get a medal.*" Incredibly offensive for so many reasons. Further to this, another wounded soldier from the Afghanistan War shared their views on this in our 2024 consultation, he said:

¹ <https://defence-honours-tribunal.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/The-Report-of-the-Inquiry-into-recognition-for-members-and-families-of-members-who-are-injured-wounded-or-killed-in-or-as-a-result-of-service.pdf>

"I was injured quite severely in Afghanistan though rarely wear my medals. There was talk of recognition of injury similar to a purple heart though again from my understanding blocked by officers that have little or no chance to get injured from the safety of Dubai or wherever they are based. In my opinion a medal for injured in combat is rewarding an act of valour not awarding an injury. I look down and the vacant space my legs once held and wonder about service, sacrifice and the only thing that keeps my head up is Theodore Roosevelt's famous speech about the man in the arena. Unfortunately, the man standing in the safety of the stands walks out with the recognition."

Of the 38 respondents in our 2024 consultation, 65% wanted to see veterans and their families wounded, injured or kill in action recognised. 15% supported this recognition as well with conditions; and only 7% did not support it. This builds off the data we collected in 2021 which saw 86% of those engaged supporting this form of recognition. With one respondent from the 2024 consultation noting:

"Fully supported but needs to be expanded to cover all service-related deaths and injuries. A death or injury during training, essential to prepare for operations, is no less traumatic..."

Others said:

- *"Great idea similar to purple heart a lot gave all and some lost a lot and have no recognition for that sacrifice..."*
- *"I have witnessed, first hand acts of extraordinary courage, seen wounded soldiers continue to perform with professionalism, courage and dedication not be recognised for their actions, while senior officer who never were involved in anything warlike, apart from command from afar are, nearly by virtue of their position, are bestowed awards. Our wounded and fallen should receive recognition of their sacrifice and dedication."*
- *"Defence continues a legacy for its nation and the family's that bear the ultimate burden and sacrifice."*
- *"Families in general are just as deserving of recognition as the veterans for the sacrifices that are required of them."*
- *"When any family loses a member in service, recognition should be given to their grief and that they have given up a son or daughter in service of the nation."*

These comments also build of similarly powerful comments provided during our 2021 consultation where some respondents said:

- *"As the spouse and the carer of a veteran with a lifelong mental illness as a result of service, I would love to see the families recognised for the service they provide. Support for the serving member has been excellent but my family have struggled to find adequate support or indeed any form of recognition..."*
- *"Parents and spouses carry a lot of responsibilities alongside their veterans. Be sensitive to that sacrifice of worrying for months on end while they are deployed."*
- *"Families should be recognised with the respect and honour for their loss and for the service they have provided on the home front. The term family needs to include parents in its meaning..."*

During our 2024 consultation we asked those that agreed with this form of recognition to tell us what they thought this form of recognition would mean for both veterans and their families. There were some powerful thoughts shared:

- *"It would vindicate their loved one's sacrifice."*
- *"That their country acknowledges their loss."*
- *"It will fill them with great sadness but pride for their loved one and a small token to hold in their hand for their life time."*
- *"That their service was valued."*
- *"I think it would be a great comfort to know that their family member was appreciated and that their service counted."*
- *"They mattered."*

Potential Solutions

The DHAS has noble and inspiring intentions. A return to its core purpose and reviewing the processes in place within this light will assist in finding solutions to the challenges and issues within the current system. Some other things that could change the system for the better including the following:

- Including more external involvement or oversight.
- Ensure greater diversity on the committees or groups that review award nominations.
- Implement a strong conflicts and related party policy that is monitored and publicly reported showing the relationships between those nominating and making decisions (if any).
- Increase transparency within the award nominations and decision-making processes to provide greater objective confidence in the system.
- Add limits to the numbers of honours and awards that can be given to those with and without rank on an annual basis.
- Apply a test of reasonableness to the allocation of honours and awards, would a member of the public think the giving of the honour and/ or award was reasonable in the circumstances?

Further, and most importantly for families, the Guild maintains its position noted in this submission and in the attached submission, that the service and sacrifices of veterans and their families wounded, injured or killed in or as a result of their service to Australia ought to be formally recognised either by the Australian Honours and Awards system or the Defence Honours and Awards System.

Conclusion

The 2024 consultation and experiences shared since 2021 indicate there is a lot of hurt and pain in the veteran community in the way the current DHAS is or is being perceived to be operating.

Fundamentally what is happening within the DHAS is that it isn't operating in line with best practice and not mitigating real or perceived conflicts of interest which undermine the credibility of the system. This, coupled with inconsistency in decision making and perceptions of the system only rewarding those with rank is causing the system to lose its positive impact and is devaluing the honours and awards themselves.

In Australia we often compare our Defence Force and Veteran population to that of the United States. While we have different histories as countries which has led to different cultural appreciation of armed forces and veterans, Australia can learn a lot about the way veterans are recognised in the community in the United States. In the United States service to the country is a core value which is practiced through the honours and awards system which sets the tone for the population to value service. In Australia, defence service is rarely seen, spoken of nor shared. Rather the system keeps as much as it can to itself.

As a result, Australia doesn't know what is done and given every day by veterans and their families to keep this incredible country the safe, stable and peaceful country that it is. It is time we started to show some leadership and tell them – it is time we recognise service and sacrifices. Because in the words of the Chair of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide, Nick Kaldas:

"The men and women of the ADF have done all we ever asked of them. They have worn the uniform, many have gone where angels fear to tread, and too many have paid a very dear price, up to the ultimate sacrifice. Our nation is indebted to them and that debt must now be repaid."

Attachment

- Submission to the Defence Honours and Awards Tribunal Inquiry, 2021

Questions and enquiries on this submission can be directed to Renee Wilson, CEO at ceo@fov.org.au

SUBMISSION TO DEFENCE HONOURS AND AWARDS TRIBUNAL

INQUIRY INTO RECOGNITION FOR AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE FORCE MEMBERS AND FAMILIES INJURED, WOUNDED OR KILLED AS A RESULT OF SERVICE

Introduction

The Australian War Widows NSW (AWW NSW) is a 75-year-old organisation that has represented the interests of women impacted by Defence Service for more than seven decades. With a recently expanded charter, the AWW NSW provides support to all women and family members related to the veteran community. AWW NSW defines family in a broad and inclusive manner. For the purposes of AWW NSW, a family member of a veteran may include;

- current or former spouses/ partners of veterans
- biological or stepparents of veterans
- biological/step/adopted grandparents of veterans
- biological/ step/ adopted children of veterans; and
- biological/step/adopted siblings of veterans.

As a key voice for women and families united by Defence Service, AWWNSW is well placed to support the Tribunal's inquiry into the appropriateness of recognising Australian Defence Force (ADF) members who are injured, wounded or killed in or as a result of service and their families.

In preparation of this submission, AWW NSW canvassed the views of interested members within its broader community. Their views are included in this submission.

Recognising Veterans

AWWNSW supports the recognition of both ADF members and their families in all the circumstances the Tribunal is Inquiring into. This matter, while complex and emotive has been in the hearts and minds of many within our community for at least the last 10 years. AWW NSW is grateful that the Tribunal is conducting this inquiry and having this important conversation, despite its complexity and sensitivity for many.

There is support within the Australian community, the Defence and Veteran community for the recognition of veterans and their families where a veteran dies in service or has suffered wounds and injuries as a result of their service. Of those who indicated to AWW NSW that they were unsupportive of recognition the main reasons included;

- veterans already receive recognition through the repatriation system
- a lot of veterans are injured in service and the value of medallic recognition is lost when it is available to many veterans; and
- a view that families don't serve therefore there was no need for them to be recognised.

However, of those AWW NSW engaged, there was overwhelming support for the recognition (86%), one respondent noted *"All those whom served deserve every ounce of recognition even the wounded. They served their country, let them have what they deserve and serve it on a platter, don't fight them for it like the current situation."*

In terms of the circumstances which should attract the recognition, the majority of respondents noted that there should be no differentiation between the circumstances that gave rise to the death, injury or wounding during Service. In terms of the criteria for the award of this recognition for veterans, AWW NSW points the Tribunal toward the United States, and in particular their criteria for the award of a Purple Heart, with one point of clarification. The Purple Heart isn't awarded in cases of mental injury. Given what is now known about mental and moral injury, AWW NSW considers this criteria outdated and should Australia choose to also include non-physical injuries in the criteria it would provide an opportunity for Australia to lead the world in reducing the stigma associated with these injuries and illnesses.

AWWNSW considers that the recognition for veterans, including deceased veterans ought to be medallic in nature. Through either the issue of a new medal or clasp worn on the Australian Defence Medal or relevant Campaign Medal. In the case of wounding/ injury a separate medal is considered appropriate, particularly where those injuries result in life altering circumstances for that veteran and their family. In both cases, this recognition should be provided retrospectively from the date of introduction and cover significant periods of Australian Defence Force service domestically and internationally.

The award of these medals/ clasps ought to be incorporated in the Honours and Awards system administered by the Office of the Governor-General; and awarded by the Governor-General in his/her role of Commander-in-Chief of the Australian Defence Force.

Recognising Families

Turning now to the recognition for families, AWW NSW supports the formal recognition of the families of those who have died in and as a result of service. AWW NSW also supports the formal recognition of those families who have been impacted by wounds, injuries and illness.

These families bare an enormous burden for Australia and that burden should be recognised and respected. It is well known that the role of families is critical when it comes to supporting the ADF and their operations. A lifelong role and does not end when that member is no longer in service due to death, wounding, injury or illness.

These families are incredibly humble and often don't see the value of the service and sacrifices they make daily. Service in the ADF involves the whole family and AWW NSW firmly believes that recognition for families is a significant gap in the Honours and Awards system and indeed the broader veteran policy and support system. The Tribunal has a unique opportunity to commence closing that gap.

In terms of the views provided during AWWNSW consultation, respondents were very clear that those left behind following the death of veterans, i.e., the immediate family ought to be recognised. With respect to the families of those wounded/ injured the responses were once again mixed. With just over half (55%) supportive of the recognition. Some of the dissenting views questioned why these families should be recognised. This question was answered by other respondents who made the case for recognising families very well as noted below:

"As the spouse and the carer of a veteran with a lifelong mental illness as a result of service, I would love to see the families recognised for the service they provide. Support for the serving member has been excellent but my family have struggled to find adequate support or indeed any form of recognition..."

“Parents and spouses carry a lot of responsibilities alongside their veterans. Be sensitive to that sacrifice of worrying for months on end while they are deployed.”

“Families should be recognised with the respect and honour for their loss and for the service they have provided on the home front. The term family needs to include parents in its meaning...”

AWWNSW notes the simplicity in the word family is in fact deceiving when it comes to identifying and defining a family, particularly for the purpose of recognition. However, this ought not deter the Tribunal. Complexity around this matter has been used for a long time a reason for not engaging, recognising or supporting families. The Tribunal will note how AWW NSW has chosen to define family – in the broadest manner possible. AWW NSW has erred on the side of generosity as opposed to exclusivity and would advocate that the Tribunal consider at doing the same.

In terms of what the consultation revealed, there was support for recognising the whole family, immediate and extended. As the Tribunal would be aware, during World Wars One and Two, Australia issued a Mothers and Widows badge to those who lost a child or spouse in action. This system has since lapsed, in Australia but has continued in the United Kingdom.

AWWNSW would like to see a lapel pin introduced that recognises the service and sacrifices defence families awarded to them formally (i.e., not through the mail). For many years, AWW NSW has provided its members with a lapel pin which they have worn with pride. It is something that enables them to identify with each other and signifies the bonds they share. While this pin is well respected by War Widows, the reality is it isn't well recognised by the general community and it is not a form of official recognition. Based on many years of experience, AWW NSW considers there is significant merit in providing a lapel pin to the families of those who have died in service as well as the families of those who have been wounded or injured in service. AWW NSW would also like to see the role and sacrifices of women and families in support of and indeed within the ADF be more broadly recognised. AWWNSW is currently working on a number of projects which seek to do just that.

Veteran Suicide

The matter of veteran suicide is complex and one that involves all segments of the veteran support ecosystem. All organisations, government and non-government have a role to play in reducing the instances of suicide and in equipping veterans and their families with the skills that they need to manage their mental health, the impacts of trauma and Service.

The impacts of both suicide and ill mental health on veteran's families are significant. We must do all we can to support them to limit the instances and effects of suicide, and mental illness on the whole family unit. We must also walk carefully when it comes to recognising death in this manner. An inherently vexed matter and one that requires close examination by the Tribunal.

AWW NSW's position in this matter focuses solely on the families left behind and would like to see those families recognised. Some forms of "like" informal recognition already exist. For example Battlefield Blue is an initiative which was started by Ron Davis. A royal blue poppy that seeks to recognise the personal suffering caused by PTSD. AWW NSW commends this option to the Tribunal. Another form of "like" recognition is provided in the United States. Families of those who are killed in service or as a result of suicide are recognised with a White Star.

AWW NSW is happy to work with the Tribunal to develop an option for these families.

Summary

AWW NSW supports the recognition of both ADF members and their families in all the circumstances the Tribunal is Inquiring into. This position is reflective of the views within the broader community.

The Australian Government, through the Veterans' Covenant has sought to enhance the recognition provided to veterans and their families. The award of medallic and other forms of recognition outlined in this submission, supports the Governments efforts in implementing the Covenant. AWWNSW believes the Covenant and indeed the 'Thank You For Your Service' campaigns being run by the Ministers in this portfolio would be strengthened by recognising those that have been impacted by ADF Service.

There is yet another and potentially very significant benefit to this recognition, and that is contributing to healing wounds left behind by ADF Service. Formal recognition will help to reinforce the value of service and provide a sense of deep meaning to the veterans and families who are the subject of this Inquiry. During its consultation, AWWNSW asked what people thought recognising this group would mean to them, here is what some of them said:

- *"That their service meant something."*
- *"Pride in their loved ones"*
- *"Thank you for giving your life for your country"*
- *"Recognising their service to their country and that their choice to serve meant something"*
- *"Acknowledgement and recognition of sever injury and ultimate sacrifice of their commitment and dedication for serving Australia"*
- *"That no matter what the sacrifice, they are being recognised, help break the stigma – sacrifice is sacrifice."*
- *"Means everything when they have lost so much"*
- *"Recognition, remembrance, honouring service, effects of service, in many cases the interruption of a life"*
- *"Recognising and respecting the wounds, physical and emotional for veterans and their families."*

On behalf of our current and future members, AWWNSW thanks the Tribunal for Inquiring into this matter and for accepting this submission. AWWNSW is available for further comment and consultation.