

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.