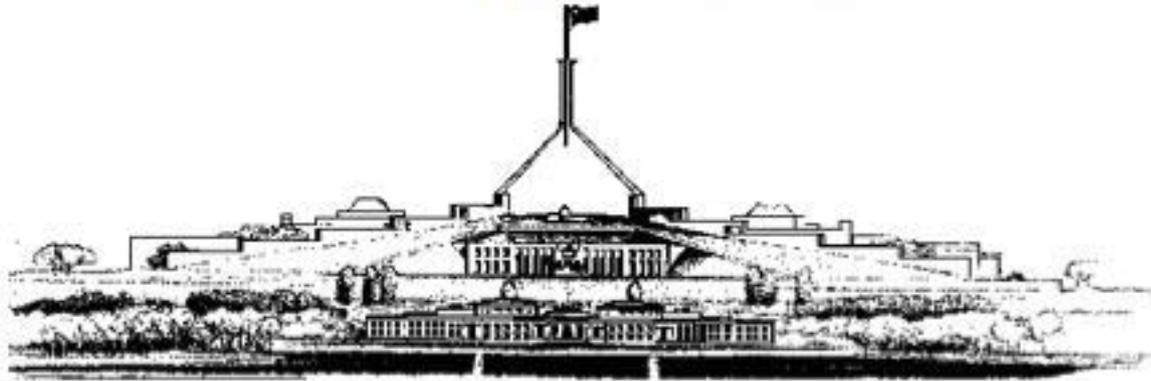




COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**THE SENATE**

**COMMITTEES**

**Foreign Affairs, Defence and  
Trade References Committee**

**Report**

**SPEECH**

**Tuesday, 15 August 2017**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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## SPEECH

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| <p><b>Date</b> Tuesday, 15 August 2017<br/> <b>Page</b> 5679<br/> <b>Questioner</b><br/> <b>Speaker</b> Kitching, Sen Kimberley</p> | <p><b>Source</b> Senate<br/> <b>Proof</b> No<br/> <b>Responder</b><br/> <b>Question No.</b></p> |
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**Senator KITCHING** (Victoria) (17:30): I would like to pay tribute to the remarks made by Senator Gallacher, Senator McKenzie and Senator Hinch in relation to this report, *The constant battle : suicide by veterans*. Often people only see the conflict that goes on during question time, and perhaps during estimates. But I can assure them that the bipartisanship—in fact, more than bipartisanship—displayed by this committee working on this issue was exemplary. So I would also like to pay tribute to Senator Lambie and Senator Kakoschke-Moore.

I would like to acknowledge the service of former ADF members who have taken their own lives and the sorrow of their families. I wish to give special acknowledgement to those who have lost family members to suicide during the course of the inquiry.

The burden of responsibility to do justice to those ex-service personnel who have been lost to suicide has been keenly felt by all members of the committee. We don't have exact figures for the number of suicides and attempted suicides among former ADF members, but a recent Australian Institute of Health and Welfare study found that between 2001 and 2015 there were 325 certified suicides amongst ADF veterans. But the real figure may well be higher. The reason that it is sometimes difficult to know these statistics exactly is that some veterans become very isolated, and in fact it is not known by their comrades that they have committed suicide. This was evidence that was tendered during the committee inquiry.

The suicide rate among veterans who have seen operational service does not seem to be significantly higher than the rate among other veterans, and this would suggest that the common stereotype of veteran suicide resulting from the trauma of combat needs to be treated with caution. Post-traumatic stress is obviously a factor in some suicides amongst former ADF members, but it is far from being the sole cause. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare study found that the group most at risk were young veterans involuntarily discharged due to physical or mental injury. This group exhibited suicide rates double that of the comparable national population and this suggests that our attention needs to be focused on the transition from service to civilian life, particularly among young men who have been involuntarily discharged for whatever reason. These men may suffer from a variety of psychological factors that may well then dispose them to suicide. We must never forget of course that behind every statistic there is a human story, and often a tragic and heartbreaking one. Of course, this is not only a tragedy that affects veterans and the Defence community but also their families and friends. Indeed, we are all affected.

For our veterans and ex-service personnel who are frequently required to spend an extremely long and difficult time on deployment, it is clear that the return to civilian life is not a simple proposition. The experiences of active duty can leave an indelible mark on some of our veterans. But I think that it's important that we not see our ADF veterans as victims. The vast majority of former ADF members, all of whom are volunteers, are justly proud of their military service and we are proud of them. They have made successful transitions to productive roles in Australian society and rightly believe that military service has contributed to their growth as humans and to their postservice roles.

It would be a mistake to accept the common stereotype that the trauma of operational service always leads to psychological difficulties, let alone to suicide. In fact, a senator from another place, US Senator John McCain, says in his memoir, *Faith of My Fathers*, that he often feels that he's most comfortable amongst those men with whom he served; those friendships that were formed and the support that they gave to each other while he was on service in the US Navy—particularly those he spent 'time' with, if I can put it that way, in the 'Hanoi Hilton'.

The key finding of this report is not that a disproportionate number of ADF veterans are at risk of suicide; it is that we currently have an inadequate infrastructure of support for those who are at risk. An accurate assessment of the impact of military service on the mental health of our veterans and the provision of appropriate services for them is a pressing issue. It is something that we need to address, and now. The report shows that we can do a much better job of fulfilling our responsibilities to our veterans. Every suicide among former ADF members, whatever its cause, is a reminder of our obligation to protect those who have protected us.

The committee heard about the sense of futility that faces some veterans upon being discharged. We heard about the trauma that can arise from living and working in a war zone. Perhaps most tellingly, we heard about the sense of abandonment felt by some veterans and their families upon their return. We heard veterans characterise their postservice life as being the most difficult and challenging period of their lives. We heard from Jason Burgess, who spent a combined total of 14 years in the ADF and was deployed twice to Timor and once to Iraq. Upon his return from Iraq, he attempted twice to take his life. He said to the committee:

To be told that you will never be able to work again due to your physical or mental illness, and then to have your pay cut, and so to not be able to afford to support yourself or your family, is enough to break people, and will lead them to suicide.

We also heard from a widow, Bonny Perry, whose husband took his own life, and we heard of her sense of frustration as she spoke of her husband's seven previous suicide attempts.

Mental health treatment is now available free of charge to all veterans and ex-service personnel, unlimited by budget. The Commonwealth has allocated \$192 million over the next four years in addition to the \$187 million DVA spends each year providing mental health support to veterans and their families. The committee's report presents a number of recommendations which we hope will go some way to addressing the current shortfalls in the system.

In the short term, we recommend that the government continue to support and fund the Veteran Centric Reform program in DVA. Much of the evidence that we heard over the course of the inquiry was related to veterans' experiences with DVA. We were saddened to hear veterans say that they would rather fight the Taliban than DVA. Our recommendations concern the streamlining of administration in the DVA, reducing the backlog of clients, and increasing the capability and training of staff at DVA to deal with mental health conditions and complex health concerns. Our recommendations also address the need to improve engagement with younger veterans.

Other short-term recommendations include targeted programs addressing issues in the transition of veterans to civilian life, and more appropriate interactions with both mental health service providers and alternative therapies for veterans with mental health conditions, including some very compelling reasoning around the benefit that therapy animals bring. I would like to pay tribute to the organisation Ruff Love Assistance Dogs, who came to the Brisbane hearings earlier this year with their very beautiful dogs and whom it is impossible to forget. We also recommend that all transitioning ADF members should be provided with a DVA white card to facilitate access to non-liability health care, to provide identification as a veteran and to aid in data collection.

In the medium term, we recommend that a national veteran suicide register be established and that the government commission an independent study into the mental health impact of the claims process. We also make some recommendations about the transition to civilian life, and we recommend supporting the Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service to create and maintain a public database of support services. In the longer term, we believe and recommended that a review by the Productivity Commission, which may look at simplifying the system, would be advisable.

The committee has also recognised the substantial support that the Australian government has shown for the reform of the DVA and legislative frameworks to improve the experience of veterans. But it's evident that there are significant improvements that must be made to the system before we can really aspire to address the problem of suicide among our ex-service personnel.

I am reminded once again of how fortunate we are to have the Australian Defence Force, and I am reminded especially in this week, when I am participating in the ADF Parliamentary Program and am hosting an intern. I would like to thank him and the organisers of that program. It's a privilege afforded to parliamentarians to have these opportunities. So I would like to say thank you, and I commend this report to the Senate.