



Media Release

The Hon Warren Snowdon MP

Minister for Veterans' Affairs

Minister for Defence Science and Personnel

Minister for Indigenous Health

Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on the Centenary of Anzac

Tuesday, 20 September 2011

Speech

ADDRESS TO RSL NATIONAL CONGRESS

Thank you for the opportunity to address you today, the Prime Minister has asked me to apologise that she is unable to be here.

She has asked that I pass on to you her best wishes and is looking forward to speaking to you at the next available opportunity.

Like me, she regards the RSL as a unique organisation which has a special place in our nation's story and a continuing important role in representing, advocating and caring for our veterans and their families.

Today of course that role is as crucial as it was when the RSL was established, now almost a century ago.

We can reflect with gratitude on the sacrifice of all who have worn the Australian uniform, and have in so many ways provided the opportunity for us to be who we are.

And we say that in the full knowledge, that this great tradition of service lives on with those men and women who today proudly wear that uniform.

STRATEGIC OVERVIEW

The Australian Defence Force is currently operating at a high tempo and has been operating at this tempo since the late 1990s.

There are currently 3,300 Australian Defence Force personnel deployed to 11 operations overseas, including those as far flung as Afghanistan, East Timor, Solomon Islands and Sudan.

Some 400 ADF members are actively protecting Australia's borders and offshore maritime interests.

The tempo of our boarder protection patrols remain high and places ongoing heavy demands on our surface assets and their crews.

Their work is dangerous and difficult and too often unheralded.

The ADF has also been heavily engaged in assisting Australians at home during times of emergency.

Its work during the Queensland Floods and Cyclone Yasi was critical in supporting affected communities.

As it was during the Victorian bushfires.

These men and women are doing an outstanding job to protect Australia and its national interests.

And sadly not without its toll – in Afghanistan, 29 of our finest soldiers have been killed in action with a further 192 wounded.

Let me for a moment just give you an indication of some of our current commitments.

Afghanistan

The largest of the ADF's operations is Australia's contribution to Afghanistan.

And we remain committed to the international effort in Afghanistan.

We are engaged in an important mission and we must complete it.

But our commitment in Uruzgan is not open-ended.

We will not keep Australian service personnel in Afghanistan any longer than is necessary.

Our mission remains unchanged.

Our efforts are focused on training and mentoring the Afghan National Army 4th Brigade so that it can take responsibility for security in Uruzgan province.

We expect to be able to transition security responsibility for the province to the Afghan National Army in the 2012-2014 period.

On completion of our mission, I expect that we will begin to draw down our force levels commensurate with a supporting role.

These commitments coincide with our intentions in Uruzgan, and demonstrate strong continuing international resolve to get the job done.

East Timor

The Australian Defence Force contribution to the International Stabilisation Force is currently around 380 personnel.

At the invitation of the Government of East Timor, our commitment remains.

The tragic death of Craftsman Beau Pridue, a Reservist, in a vehicle accident only a few days ago highlights the inherent dangers for our military personnel operation overseas, regardless of where they are.

While Australia has always planned for an eventual drawdown of our contribution to the International Stabilisation Force, this is not tied to any specific date.

Any future force reductions will be based on the security situation and occur in close consultation with East Timor and the UN.

Solomons

The Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands – RAMSI – consists of approximately 160 personnel, of which around 110 are Australian.

RAMSI has made significant progress in Solomon Islands since it began.

This is reflected in Solomon Islands' sustained economic recovery and the orderly and peaceful national elections held in 2010.

Significantly, our troops in both the Solomons and East Timor are drawn largely from our reservists.

South Sudan

The independence of South Sudan in July was a significant milestone.

The Australian Government's offer of up to 25 Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel represents a continuation of Australia's longstanding commitment to United Nations peacekeeping missions and our support to the people of Sudan and South Sudan.

We have deployed over 65,000 peacekeepers to more than 50 operations since 1947.

We continue that commitment today with deployments to five UN peacekeeping missions.

TRANSITION AND OUR VETERAN COMMUNITY

Today, our veteran population ranges from soldiers, sailors, airmen and women in their late teens and early 20s right through to World War Two veterans over 100.

They comprise three main cohorts:

our World War Two and Korea Veterans;

our Vietnam veterans; and

our younger veterans and serving members.

And of course the families of veterans, regardless of age.

Each of these cohorts have their own special requirements.

And over the years the repatriation system has evolved to meet those needs and inevitably will continue to do so.

I believe that broadly speaking the system has done a good job.

But the nature of warfare is changing, and the system needs to keep up.

Since 2006, our total veteran client population has dropped from over 450,000 to around 350,000 – over 20 per cent.

This is a staggering drop.

This year, our last known allied First World War veteran died.

And the average age of our Second World War veterans is 89 and sadly we are losing these brave souls at a rapid rate.

We require programs that contribute to their quality of life in the later years.

Programs such as Co-ordinated Veterans' Care.

This will help to manage chronic conditions and provide holistic health and nursing support and reduce hospitalisation.

And Government commissioned reviews such as the Productivity Commission's Report on Aged Care.

Reforms in this sector are needed to meet the health and care needs of Australians as they age.

Whilst we continue to look after our oldest generation, we must also be aware of the circumstances faced by our Vietnam veterans, now that they are approaching their 70s.

We know that about 20,000 are on the Special Rate (TPI) of pension, most of whom have mental health conditions.

We are conducting the Vietnam Veterans' Family Study which is looking at the intergeneration effects of those who served in Vietnam compared to those who didn't.

But whilst we continue to look after our older generations, we must also understand the challenges and how to respond to the current generation of veterans.

Both those who have served and those who continue to serve.

Today's Defence figures highlight why we need to change our thinking.

The average age for other ranks across the ADF is 28 years of age.

The average age of separation last year was 27.

The average length of service for other ranks is 5 years.

For Officers, the figures are 34 years of age and 9 years respectively.

This data gives us a clear picture of who we need to develop our support programs for.

The group we must engage with are, on average, men and women in their 20s.

Over half are married or in a long term relationship.

A similar number have children.

More than likely they have been deployed to Middle East, or on other overseas operations such as East Timor or the Solomon Islands.

Many have been deployed more than once.

They don't spend their whole life in the Defence Force.

Almost all will pursue other careers.

Today's generation seek out information in different ways.

Accessing information independently, shopping around for the right advice or right service, seeking small grabs of information at a time when they want it.

Prepared and responsive because when they do come to us and need our services, we should be on the front foot and engage early.

An atypical group are our Special Forces Personnel.

They will generally be older, have spent longer periods in service and may have had multiple deployments.

And arguably as a result of their service, may have particular needs.

And so a significant part of our challenge, particularly as we deal with ADF personnel as they prepare to transition out the ADF, is to understand precisely who we are dealing with.

To be prepared we must know the hot spots, the key points of engagement:

Deployment – preparedness and looking after families;

Post-deployment – adjustment and support;

Injury or illness – early support and rehabilitation – holistic care;

Discharge – retraining, compensation and medical care, transition to DVA;

Later life – health and aged care; income support.

These are matters for both Defence and Veterans' Affairs.

THE US APPROACH – GENERAL SHINSEKI

In August, I attended the International Veterans' Affairs Ministerial Summit in Canada.

There, I spoke with among others the United States Secretary for Veterans' Affairs, the Honourable Eric Shinseki.

Secretary Shinseki was appointed to the position by President Obama in 2008.

As many of you may know, General Shinseki was the Chief of Staff, United States Army for some years until his retirement in 2003.

After the September 11th attacks, General Shinseki led the Army during Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom.

He is well placed to understand the contemporary issues of today's Defence Forces, particularly the impacts of modern conflicts on our personnel.

General Shinseki said the impact of today's modern conflict is an issue for Defence, with Veterans' Affairs there to help.

And I agree.

Increasingly, we are seeing the importance of early intervention and Defence rehabilitation programs.

These aim to get the individual back to work as soon as possible.

It is also about immediate care in the battlefield and on return:

Giving troops rest after being exposed to blast pressure from an IED explosion.

Providing immediate and longer term medical and psychological care.

And providing decompression support when the troops finish their rotations in theatre.

These are all Defence issues, with Veterans' Affairs there to help.

Our current statistics indicate that there have been over 50,000 ADF personnel deployed across the globe, since 1999.

This is comparable to the number associated with the Vietnam War.

We have a responsibility to meet the unique demands of these men and women who have recently retired or remain as serving veterans.

That responsibility will be with us for the next seventy years and beyond.

So it is imperative that we don't repeat the mistakes of the past but rather show that we have learnt from them.

To meet these challenges - I am dual hatted, that as well as having responsibility for Veterans, I also have responsibility in the Defence portfolio, for Personnel matters.

And what is clear to me that the leadership in both organisations understand the need for collaboration and integration in servicing the needs of our current serving veterans.

Particularly those in transition.

INITIATIVES SINCE COMING INTO THE JOB

And that's why since I took the job, now just on twelve months ago I have worked hard to bring the Defence and Veterans Departments closer together.

And there are initiatives such as the new Joint eHealth Data and Information system – JeHDI – will eventually ensure that the transfer of health information between agencies will considerably help speed up the assessment of claims.

And the Review of Military Compensation Arrangements has provided a number of recommendations to ensure better transition and support to our younger serving and ex-service members.

I thank the RSL for it's feedback on the report;

We are currently considering all the feedback received.

Those recommendations of the review that have budgetary implications will be considered as part of the 2012-13 Budget.

Some recommendations may be dealt with in a shorter timeframe.

And we will keep organisations informed as we progress.

You will know from my addresses to the State RSL Congresses around the country this year that as well as transition I have focussed my efforts on four key areas:

Looking after our younger wounded, injured and ill;
Supporting families;
De-stigmatising mental health issues; and

Supporting women in the ADF.

This is where real reform must happen.

1. Supporting Wounded, Injured and Ill

We have developed the Support to Wounded, Injured and Ill Program – or SWIIP.

SWIIP reaches across Defence and Veterans' Affairs to assist wounded, injured and ill from early injury to transition and beyond.

It is a major cultural reform for the Defence Force.

SWIIP also links DVA with Defence.

From October, 57 Veterans' Affairs staff will have an on-base presence across 25 Defence establishments.

We are developing IT systems that allow for individuals to claim online and track the progress of their claims.

And we are developing targeted veterans' affairs resources for serving personnel.

This generation has told us they want short grabs of information, often.

At their fingertips.

And that's what we're doing.

2. Supporting Families

Whilst we need to provide support to our servicemen and women, we mustn't forget their families.

The high tempo of operational service places unique burdens on families.

That's why we are developing programs to build on families wellbeing, psychological health and training.

In August, I launched Family SMART.

FamilySMART will involve 26 Defence social workers delivering small group programs to the partners of ADF members, from September 2011.

And we know that the Defence Community Organisation and the Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service provides vital support to families.

And we are in the process of doing more in this regard.

3. De-stigmatising mental health issues

Mental health has been a priority of mine in the Defence portfolio for several years now.

In 2008 as Minister for Defence Personnel, I jointly initiated with the then Minister for Veterans' Affairs Alan Griffin an independent review into:

Mental Health Care in the ADF and Transition through Discharge, and

Suicide in the Ex-Service Community.

These independent reviews were conducted by Professor David Dunt.

Professor Dunt's comprehensive report gave govt an opportunity to evaluate and enhance mental health care systems.

The Government accepted all of the recommendations of Professor Dunt's reports.

We provided an extra \$92 million in Federal Budget funding over four years.

Prevention and early intervention is at the heart of the Government's strategy.

These reforms are seeing:

more mental health staff in the Australian Defence Force – an additional 56 positions have been created since 2009

increased mental health training for Australian Defence Force personnel and providers;

enhanced prevention strategies, including better research, improved mental health rehabilitation and transition services in both Defence and DVA;

and better facilities for mental health services.

The mental health 'lifecycle' package is delivering enhanced psychological resilience among serving personnel, early intervention and successful rehabilitation.

And a decompression trial has been undertaken, it provided a four day period of readjustment, and socialization whilst going through BattleSMART sessions and is currently being evaluated.

The feedback from troops has been resoundingly positive.

4. Supporting Women in the ADF

The Government is also making progress to support women in the ADF.

Currently women comprise 13.8% of the ADF.

Navy has the highest participation at 18%.

In the last five years, the numbers of women has steadily increased from around 7,000 to 8000 personnel.

And I hope to see these numbers increase further.

That's because I believe that the nation's defence forces should be representative of the community it serves.

We want to ensure that female military personnel have equal opportunities for career progression and development.

The Minister for Defence and I also recently announced that the ADF will bring forward to the Government recommendations to open up all roles in the ADF to women, including combat related trades.

Women will be able to work in any position in which they meet the demands of the job.

We are also reviewing the Physical Employment Standards for employment categories in Defence.

The research will identify the essential tasks of a trade and the physical standards required to achieve them, regardless of age or gender.

The aim is that in future, career choices will only be restricted by an individual's physical and intellectual competence, not their gender.

The Physical Employment Standards review is due to be completed by the end of 2012.

On a similar theme it is worth noting that 55% or some 180k of DVA clients are women and some 100k of those are war widows.

CONCLUSION

We are doing a lot of work.

But we can do more.

We must have fully seamless transition from Defence to Veterans' Affairs.

SWIIP will help drive this.

And I want to know that we are looking after families.

This includes the Defence Community Organisation and the VVCS – Veterans' and Veterans' Families Counselling Service.

Support to our wounded, injured and ill and their families is my top priority.

I believe that we are more responsive and better prepared to deal with these issues than we were five years ago.

And the plans we put in place now enables us to be better prepared for the future.

This is an absolute priority of Government.

For the RSL and all Ex-Service Organisations, the priority is the same.

We must look after our ageing veteran community and our younger serving men and women and their families.

These tasks are not the same.

They require a change in how we collectively do business.

What will the RSL of the future look like?

There is a lot of good discussion around maintaining relevance to today's generation.

And a lot of good work to engage our younger serving men and women.

From my conversations with international colleagues, it is clear that their ex service organizations face very similar challenges to yours.

Principally, ensuring your relevance to our current serving men and women; and particularly those veterans who have recently left the ADF or are in transition.

CENTENARY OF ANZAC BOARD

Let me now turn briefly to the centenary of ANZAC.

You will know that previously there was a commission in place that included former PMs Hawke and Fraser as well as your national President and three others; Martina Jewell, Warren Brown and Kylie Russell.

The commission made a series of recommendations to Government, included among them was the setting up of an Advisory Board.

This recommendation has been accepted and the Chair has already been announced and it is Retired Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston.

The first meeting of the Board is planned for mid October.

Finally, let me say that I very much enjoy engaging with the RSL.

There will be issues about which we may not always agree upon, and there are one or two of those currently around.

However, regardless of these it is always important to treat each other with respect whilst being prepared to engage in vigorous discussion, and to understand that there will be times when agreement may not be reached.

In any event, I'm sure the next two days will be an enlightening and engaging experience.

And I look forward to hearing the ideas generated from those discussions and wish you all the best with your Congress.

[ENDS]