

Veterans suicide royal commission avoids the main question: Why does Australia go to war?

"To initiate a war of aggression ... is the supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole."

—Robert H. Jackson, Chief US Prosecutor at the International Military Tribunal, Nuremberg, Germany, 1945


The final report of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide is a detailed and damning indictment of the Defence establishment and successive federal governments, for their decades of callous disregard for the wellbeing of the men and women who put their lives on the line in the nation's service. Veterans, their survivors and advocates have by and large expressed satisfaction that its 122 recommendations, if implemented, would indeed redress (insofar as it were possible) the wrongs done to the generations of servicemen effectively thrown upon the scrapheap once they had outlived their usefulness, and greatly reduce the likelihood that their current and future counterparts will be likewise mistreated.

But for all that, the Royal Commission has nonetheless failed to face up to the fundamental issue: the question of where, why and at whose behest Australia sends its "defence" forces to war in the first place. The commissioners acknowledge as a major contributing factor to the suicide rate among veterans the "moral injury" soldiers suffer when forced to follow illegal or immoral orders. Left unsaid is that almost every war Australia has sent soldiers to kill and die in has itself been immoral, and most of them illegal too; nor, with the exception of World War II, have they had anything to do with defending the nation, its people or their vital interests. Instead, Australia throughout its history has fought almost all its wars on the side, and for the benefit, of the aggressors, namely our imperial "allies" Britain and the USA—absent whose malign influence over our country's so-called leaders, none of the moral, psychological or physical wounds that have driven so many veterans to suicide would ever have happened in the first place.

The Royal Commission, led by former Deputy Commissioner of the New South Wales Police Nick Kaldas, issued its final report—the product of over three years' work, and comprising 3,142 pages in seven volumes—on 9 September. Its tone is set, and the main driver of the issues it deals with encapsulated, at the outset of its Executive Summary by a quote from an unnamed ex-Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) serviceman: "[N]othing will take away what it does to a person to literally sign a piece of paper to say they will go anywhere at any time and do anything—including sacrificing their own life—in the defence of our country. And then for that country to turn around and say to them they are not worth anything to them broken. Not worth anything to them injured. That they see me as nothing." The vast body of evidence that follows— from official figures (or lack thereof), to the personal testimony of serving and former Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel and their family members, to the issues raised over and over again by previous inquiries but left unaddressed for decades—paints a picture of an Australia which, its trappings of modern democracy notwithstanding, continues at its core to be an imperial colony that values its citizens only insofar as they are useful to the empire's ends.

Used up and thrown away

 Julie-Ann Finney - Veteran's mum  
@JulieAnnFinney2

Last week, @mattkeogh was brave enough to face angry and grieving families, I thanked him. My thanks was genuine. Many greens Libnat and independent politicians supported us. Watch out for me this week and show your support in Geelong. (Photo Dave Jenkins)   DON'T ENLIST.



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Julie-Ann Finney, the mother of an ADF suicide victim, tweeted this tribute to suicided ADF personnel the day the royal commission released its report.

As the Report notes: “The work of this Royal Commission rests on a body of more than 50 inquiries and reviews relevant to suicide and suicidality among serving and ex-serving ADF members. Previous inquiries and reviews have examined the legislative frameworks, structures, policies, practices, culture and operational dimensions of the ADF, the Department of Defence, and the Department of Veterans’ Affairs (DVA). ... Actions taken in response to more than 750 recommendations of previous inquiries and reviews have resulted in some changes and improvements, but not the level of reform envisaged or needed. Importantly, there has been no sustained reduction in the high rates of suicide and suicidality among serving and ex-serving ADF members over the last 20 years.”

Officially there were 2,007 suicides among serving and former ADF personnel in the years 1985-2021, including an average of 78 per annum—or three a fortnight—over the last 10 years, the Report notes. But as “large as these numbers are”, it continues, “they underestimate the scale of the problem. These figures do not include deaths by suicide of veterans who separated from the ADF before 1985, thereby excluding many Vietnam veterans. In addition, these figures underreport suicide deaths before 1997, as death records from this time were not as comprehensive. These figures also ... exclude deaths where the intent of the deceased could not be determined.” And just to make matters worse, “DVA has not historically recorded the suicide deaths of DVA clients in a systematic way”, with records kept in so many different formats across so many different “data assets”—including paper-only files for some classes of documents, right up until 2016—that it “is unable to identify how many suicide deaths of veterans it was notified of prior to 2018” (emphasis added). Defence has had a Suicide Prevention Program in place since 2001, “but its effectiveness at improving mental health outcomes has not been evaluated due to limitations with Defence’s data collection and surveillance systems”, to which multiple reviews beginning in 2011 have recommended improvements but been ignored. Oversight of Defence “agencies, programs, or issues that contribute to suicide and suicidality” thus remains fragmented across multiple external statutory commissions and Ombudsmen’s offices, such that “The existing oversight infrastructure does not support a systems-level monitoring of suicide and suicidality, nor does it enable system-wide visibility over what is and is not working across suicide prevention initiatives.”

The Report implies that things may have been left this way to “[make] it possible to shift blame and responsibility within and between agencies, rather than emphasising collective responsibility for addressing risk factors”, but that seems rather too charitable. The more likely explanation is that the people in charge simply don’t care, and the oversight mechanisms exist only for show. Be that as it may, the Final Report cites research showing that even on the official numbers the suicide rates among ex- and serving male ADF personnel are “unacceptably high” at 30 and 40 per cent above those of their civilian counterparts; and a whopping 110 per cent (that is, 2.1 times) higher among female current and ex-service members combined. And for former members discharged involuntarily via so-called “administrative termination”, whose retention has been deemed “not-in-service-interest” by their superiors—an often arbitrary designation, which is all but impossible to appeal—the statistical likelihood of suicide compared to the general population rises to 2.97 and 3.45 times for men and women respectively.

Moral injury



Julie-Ann Finney, with a photo of her son David, is a big supporter of unjustly jailed ADF whistleblower David McBride.

Some of the factors the Royal Commission has identified as contributing to the suicide crisis are universal to military service during both peace and war, though always exacerbated during the latter. These include the strain on relationships with spouses and children caused by frequent and/or lengthy deployments, which often lead to failed marriages and broken homes; and the social dislocation and purposelessness that people often feel when they leave the service, are effectively ostracised (by base security and operational secrecy rules) from meaningful social interaction with their former comrades-in-arms, and are left to try to re-integrate into civilian life, often with very little support. The Report also identifies numerous severe shortcomings of the military justice system, especially around the investigation of and punishment for sexual offences (which disproportionately affect women, and are a major contributor to their relatively high suicide rate). And of course there will always be incidents and accidents during training, peacekeeping operations and civil emergency responses which may leave servicemen physically or psychologically injured, and in need of the kind of long-term care and support which at present many do not get.

All else being equal, however, the vast majority of the issues the Final Report identifies would never have arisen, had Australian governments used the ADF only for its stated purpose of defending this country, instead of sending it around the world to attack others with which Australia had no quarrel, as an auxiliary of the Anglo-American empire. Sadly the Royal Commission never acknowledges this—despite dedicating an entire chapter of its Final Report to the subject of “moral injury” as a contributor to the suicide crisis. “The term ‘moral injury’ was coined by clinical psychiatrist Dr Jonathan Shay in the mid-1990s”, it states, “during his 20 years as the sole psychiatrist of a United States Department of Veterans Affairs outpatient clinic in Boston. It is a relatively new concept for an age-old experience.... According to Dr Shay, ‘moral injury is present when there has been (a) a betrayal of “what’s right”; (b) either by a person in legitimate authority ... or by one’s self ...; (c) in a high stakes situation.’ Other researchers in the field have described moral injury as what can happen when a person perpetrates, fails to prevent or bears witness to acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations. ... [It] is likely to be intense and long lasting, with emotional, psychological, behaviour and spiritual effects.”

The Report then quotes an unnamed former serviceman, who said: “I don’t see many people with suicidal ideation that want to kill themselves because of their post-traumatic stress. It’s been described by people: ‘I feel like I have a wounded soul, that *I’ve done something really wrong or I witnessed something that was really wrong and I didn’t do anything about it.*’ And this is my life experience: these are the things that lead to veterans’ suicide.” (Emphasis added.) Among the conditions the Report lists in which moral injury may arise are “lack of leadership accountability; ... lack of procedural fairness in military justice processes; [and] a perceived gap between what a policy says and what ‘actually occurs’”.

All of which, sad to say, is par for the course where the Australian government and defence establishment are concerned. The case of war crimes whistleblower Major David McBride is exemplary. A military lawyer assigned to represent Special Forces contingents in Afghanistan, McBride became aware that upstanding and conscientious soldiers were being unjustly accused of and even prosecuted for war crimes, for the prosecutors’ career advantage or sundry “political bullshit” (as he

put it), even as a chosen few actual war criminals rampaged about murdering civilians at will and having their crimes covered up by their superiors. McBride has explained in interviews how he exhausted all official avenues of complaint, and became suicidal himself for a time in despair at being made unwillingly complicit in the cover-up, before making up his mind to go public via the media. The subsequent Brereton Inquiry vindicated McBride, in spades; yet it is he who now sits in jail, after the Court found that *a soldier's sole duty is to follow orders no matter if they are illegal or immoral*, while the corrupt and complicit generals—and the politicians who sent them there—continue to get off scot-free.

As for the gap between stated policy and what “actually occurs”, that description applies to every one of Australia’s wars post-1945—all supposedly fought for “freedom” and “democracy”; to forestall an imaginary “domino effect” of Communist conquest in the Cold War in the case of Vietnam, or in response to fictional atrocities and the supposed threat of non-existent “weapons of mass destruction” in Iraq; but in reality all based on lies and Anglo-American geopolitical machinations. (As for Afghanistan, the initial 2001 invasion might have been UN-authorized and therefore legal, but the subsequent 20-year occupation and “counterinsurgency” certainly was not.) So if, as its recommendation no. 78 says, the Royal Commission believes that the government should work to prevent and minimise moral (and indeed all other) injury as a risk factor for suicide among ADF members; and if, as its Final Report states elsewhere, “The core duty of the ADF is to protect Australian land, air, and sea, and the citizens who live within Australia”; then its first recommendation should have been that the Government never waste Australian blood and treasure as tribute to the empire again.

By Richard Bardon, Australian Alert Service, 25 September 2024