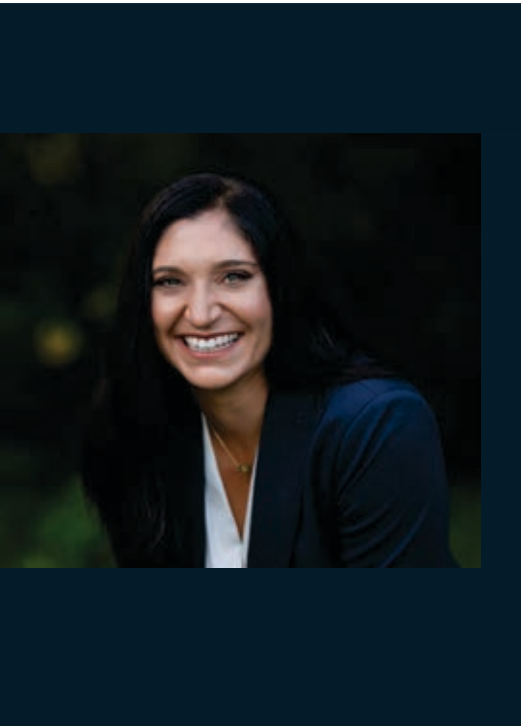




VETERAN FAMILY ADVOCATE



A Word From Gwen

As 2024 draws to a close, I reflect on a year filled with meaningful connections and purposeful endeavours. Traveling across the country, I've had the privilege of engaging with veteran families, veterans, service providers, and Ex-Service Organisations (ESOs). Each interaction has been both inspiring and humbling, highlighting the resilience and dedication within our community as we collectively support those who serve and veteran families.

A standout moment was co-presenting a webinar on Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) in Military and Veteran Families with Dr. Sean Cowlshaw, part of the Families Guild's Our Space series. The candid discussions underscored the importance of addressing these challenges directly to ensure veteran families receive the support they need.

Looking ahead, our focus turns to implementing the recommendations from the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide. This pivotal opportunity allows us to drive meaningful change for veterans and veteran families. Significant progress has been made, such as enhancing family supports like the Acute Support Package and ensuring veteran families are central to policies and reforms. However, real change requires time, persistence, and what I call "aggressive patience."

Since beginning this journey in 2017, we've seen a shift from veteran families being rarely considered to being recognised as integral to our veteran community. Milestones like the establishment of a Commissioner for Families and the inclusion of veteran families in the Royal Commission's recommendations are testaments to this progress. Yet, the road ahead remains long, with much work to be done.

I extend my heartfelt thanks to every veteran, family member, ESO, and service provider who has shared their story, time, and insights this year. Your courage and dedication inspire our efforts. As we gather with loved ones this season, let's reflect on the strength of our community and the difference we've made together.

With the progress achieved and the passion we share, I'm optimistic about what we can accomplish together in 2025.

With love and light,
Gwen



Australian Government
The Repatriation Commission

SIGNIFICANT EVENTS

Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide: The Final Report

A Turning Point for Defence Families: Reflections and the Road Ahead

On July 8, 2024, we reflected on three years of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide—a journey of exposing painful truths and amplifying unheard voices. On September 9, its final report delivered a blueprint for change, and on December 2, the Government responded with plan. Accepting most of the 122 recommendations, the Government committed to tackling cultural failings in the ADF and fixing critical gaps in DVA services. Key reforms include creating a statutory oversight body, launching a Prime Minister’s Taskforce, co-designing a wellbeing agency with veterans, and supporting a national ex-service peak body. Together with the National Defence Strategy, this is a crucial opportunity to change to prevent suicide and improve the lives of Defence personnel, veterans, and families.

For me, this is more than professional. It’s personal. As Veteran Family Advocate Commissioner, and someone who has lived these challenges, I’ve walked alongside veteran families, felt their struggles, and witnessed their quiet strength. I’ve stood in their shoes, navigating the weight of service life, feeling its ripple effects in every corner of family life. Every story shared; every tear shed has left an indelible mark on me. These veteran families, who carry the unseen weight of service, deserve more than recognition. They deserve action.

Military families are the unheralded heroes of Defence life. They endure deployments that stretch on endlessly, the upheaval of constant relocations, and the lingering uncertainty that shadows every decision. They are the first to notice when something shifts in their loved ones—the sleepless nights, the distant stares, the silent battles fought within. Yet, for years, their voices have been drowned out, their struggles sidelined. The Royal Commission changed that. It confirmed what we, as advocates, veteran families, and communities, have always known: veteran families are the lifeline for Defence personnel and veterans.

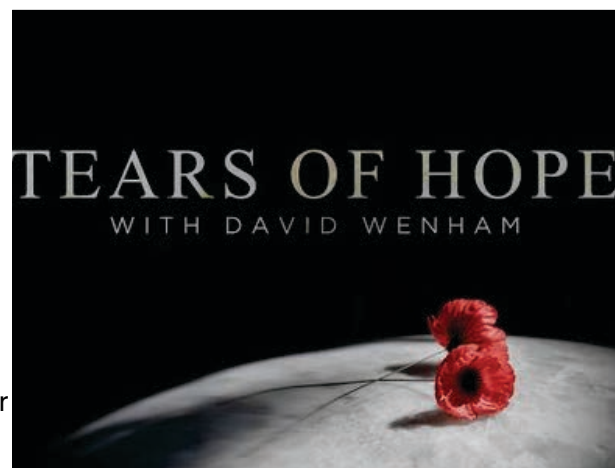
One family member’s words encapsulate it perfectly: “A soldier may receive the paycheck, but the whole family is enlisted.” This reality is felt deeply by every partner, child, and extended family member who sacrifices so much in service to this nation. The Commission’s final report did more than acknowledge this truth—it demanded action, calling for systemic reforms that put veteran families at the heart of care.

This poignant publication brought to life the voices of those who bravely shared their experiences. Through these stories, we gained a deeper understanding of the struggles faced by Defence personnel, veterans, and families. It fostered empathy and compelled us toward meaningful action. Each story was a stark reminder of the human cost of inaction—and a call to ensure those costs are never borne in silence again.

Over the past three years, nearly 900 private sessions were held with families and veterans, shining a light on systemic failures. Every one of those sessions represents a life touched by trauma—a life that could have been different with the right support. The stakes couldn’t be higher: veteran suicide rates remain tragically above the national average. These sessions, filled with raw honesty and heartbreak, were not just opportunities for participants to be heard. They were critical in shaping the Royal Commission’s understanding of what needs to change, ensuring the final recommendations are grounded in lived experience.

Transitioning from military to civilian life is one of the most precarious periods for Defence families. It’s not just the service member who feels the void—the loss of structure, meaning, identity, and purpose.

Families feel it too. Suddenly, the foundations of their lives shift, leaving them to navigate uncharted waters, often without a map. As Veteran Family Advocate Commissioner, and someone who has faced these transitions, I’ve heard countless stories of families barely holding on. They’ve shared with me the sleepless nights spent comforting a partner struggling to find their place, the overwhelming financial burdens, and the sheer emotional toll of keeping it all together.



Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide: The Final Report

The report's call for family-inclusive transition services isn't just a recommendation—it's a lifeline. Imagine a world where no family is left to face these challenges alone, where tailored support helps them rebuild and thrive. The Royal Commission also highlighted the urgent need for trauma-informed care within Defence and DVA. Too often, veteran families are left to navigate complex systems alone, retelling their stories to countless people, reliving trauma without support. Trauma-informed care means creating spaces where veteran families feel safe, heard, and respected. It means providing a single, consistent point of contact—a steady hand to guide them through their journey. Veteran families are the first responders in a veteran's life. They see the warning signs, often before the veteran themselves. But without the right tools and support, they're left powerless to help.

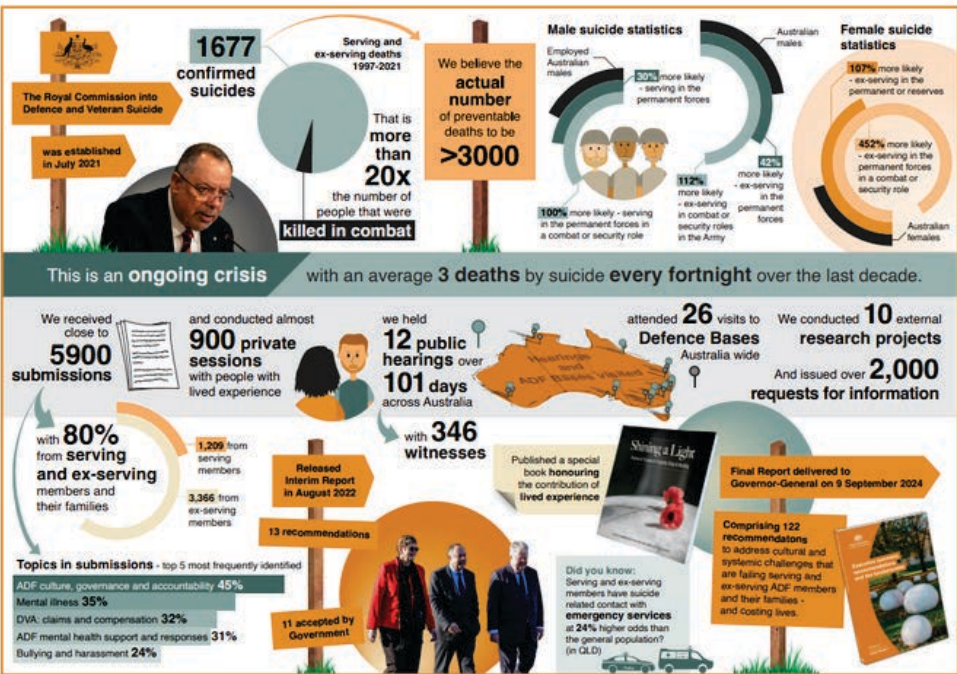


Behind every Defence member and veteran stands a family. They've held the line for us. Now it's our turn to hold theirs. Let's make sure their sacrifices are met with the care, respect, and support they deserve. Together, we can turn hope into action and promises into lasting change.

This isn't just a Defence community issue—it's an Australian issue. Every one of us has a role to play in ensuring our veterans and veteran families receive the care they deserve. Whether through advocating for change, supporting local veteran organisations, or simply listening and learning, we all have a part in this journey.

The final report is more than a set of recommendations—it's a testament to the courage of every individual who shared their story, a rallying cry for us all. Now, as we wait for the Government's response, our commitment must not falter. As Veteran Family Advocate Commissioner, and as someone with lived experience, I am determined to ensure these recommendations don't fade into the background. This is our chance—our once-in-a-generation opportunity—to create a future where no family feels forgotten or unsupported.

Behind every Defence member and veteran stands a family. They've held the line for us. Now it's our turn to hold theirs. Let's make sure their sacrifices are met with the care, respect, and support they deserve. Together, we can turn hope into action and promises into lasting change.



INTERVIEWS

This year, I've had the incredible opportunity to sit down for a number of interviews, sharing insights from my role as the Veteran Family Advocate Commissioner to shine a light on the challenges veteran families face every day. They've given me a platform to advocate for meaningful change, open up important discussions about mental health and family well being, and raise awareness about issues like postvention. It's been a privilege to use both my professional journey and lived experience to amplify the voices of veteran families and build greater understanding and support within our community.

St George & Sutherland Shire Leader News Article

I had the honour of being interviewed by Murray Trembath for an article in the St George & Sutherland Shire Leader. It was an incredible opportunity to share my story with the local community and to highlight my work. The interview allowed me to reflect on my journey, the challenges faced, and the successes achieved. Being featured in my local paper is truly a privilege, and I'm grateful for the chance to connect with readers and help them better understand veterans and families.



ABC: The Enemy Within: Blasts from Australian Soldiers' Own Weapons May Be Causing Brain Injury

Earlier in the year I was interviewed by the ABC for a series highlighting the hidden dangers faced by soldiers, particularly the risk of brain injury from blast exposure, even during training. In *The Enemy Within: Blasts from Australian Soldiers' Own Weapons May Be Causing Brain Injury*, I shared the story of my late husband, Peter Cafe a decorated commando who tragically took his own life in 2017. Peter's struggles with severe headaches, memory loss, and disconnection may have been the result of blast-induced brain injury, shedding light on the unseen challenges many veterans face. Through this interview, I hoped to raise awareness about the need for

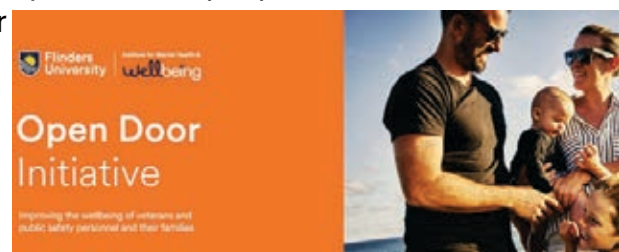


more research into these invisible injuries, which are often mistaken for PTSD. I encourage support for the Australian Veterans' Brain Bank (AVBB), which is leading research into brain health, particularly for veterans. By pledging your brain for research or donating, you can help advance understanding and improve the lives of veterans and veteran families. I am encouraged that there have been more than 200 brain donations made since this program aired compared to only one brain donation prior. To read more, visit *The Enemy Within* on ABC News.

Flinders University: Veteran Suicide Study

During my interview with Professor Ben Wadham, Lead Chief Investigator and Director of Open Door at Flinders University, for their veteran suicide study, I opened up about my deeply personal journey, starting with my childhood. I shared the challenges and defining moments that shaped who I am today, offering a glimpse into the values, relationships, and circumstances that brought me to meet and marry my late husband —a dedicated member of the military. I talked about our life together, the joy and struggles we faced, and the profound heartbreak of his death by suicide. It was an emotional yet meaningful reflection on how my personal story has been deeply intertwined with military life, its unique pressures, and how these experiences shaped my path as a widow and advocate for veteran families, mental health and suicide prevention.

If you'd like to learn more about this important study, please visit: https://www.flinders.edu.au/institute-mental-health-wellbeing/open-door/research-impact/veteran_suicide_study.



ENGAGEMENTS

Since stepping into this role, I've been privileged to connect with veterans and families in all states and territories across Australia, gathering insights and strengthening community bonds. It's been a meaningful journey, listening, learning, and engaging with those at the heart of our work. In my tenure, I have engaged with more than 32,000 individuals and organisations, attended 2,500 meetings, and responded to thousands of letters and calls. These connections are creating real, positive change for veterans and veteran families. The following is a snapshot of some of the engagements and events where I've had the opportunity to connect with the veteran and family community.

A Powerful New Tribute Unveiled at the Australian War Memorial

On February 22, 2024, I had the honour of joining others in the dedication of For Every Drop Shed in Anguish—a deeply moving new sculpture at the Australian War Memorial. Dedicated by the Hon Matt Thistlethwaite MP, Assistant Minister for Defence and Assistant Minister for Veterans' Affairs, this work by renowned artist Alex Seton is far more than just art—it's a profound symbol of the blood, sweat, and tears shed by veterans and veteran families in service to our country.

As a founding member of the committee that proposed and guided this project, I witnessed the immense thought and care that went into creating this meaningful tribute. Each droplet in the sculpture, fragile yet resilient, embodies the sacrifices and strength of those who have served. Touching the sculpture, you can feel the depth of those stories, making it a place for connection, healing, and reflection. Adding even more depth to the story behind the sculpture is Tears of Hope with David Wenham, a compelling documentary that shares the personal experiences of Australian veterans and families. It captures their emotional responses to the creation of For Every Drop Shed in Anguish and the impact it has had on their lives.

You can watch Tears of Hope on 7Plus and gain even greater insight into the making of this extraordinary piece and the lives it represents. If you haven't yet, I encourage you to visit the sculpture in person—it's an experience that will leave a lasting impression.



Here's What Went Down at the Veteran Families and Female Veterans Forums!

This year, I've been front and centre at some amazing policy forums, and two of the most powerful were the Veteran Families Policy Forum and the Female Veterans Forum. Both events brought people together, focused on different and vital issues in our community.

At the Veteran Families Policy Forum veteran families and policymakers rolled up their sleeves to tackle the big issues: mental health, employment, transition support, and more. The message? Veteran families need more than basic services—it's about building a strong, supportive community around them. This forum was all about providing DVA with practical solutions that can make a real difference in the everyday lives of veteran families. Then, the Female Veterans Forum focused on empowering the women who've served in uniform. Women veterans shared their unique stories and challenges directly with policymakers, making sure their voices were heard loud and clear. The goal of this forum was to drive real change for women veterans by ensuring their needs are front and centre in future policies.

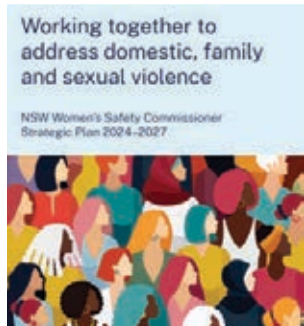
Both forums had incredible energy, and everyone walked away ready to keep pushing for better outcomes. Whether it is making sure veteran families get the holistic support they deserve or advocating for the recognition and resources women veterans need, these events were a huge step forward.

NSW Women's Safety Commissioner Unveils Bold Strategic Plan 2024-2027

On March 14, I had the privilege of attending a truly transformative event at Parliament House—the launch of the NSW Women's Safety Commissioner's Strategic Plan 2024-2027.

The NSW Women's Safety Commissioner's Strategic Plan 2024-2027 outlines six key priorities to address domestic, family, and sexual violence (DFSV). These include centering lived experiences in policymaking, enhancing oversight and accountability, promoting safe and integrated trauma-informed responses, emphasising primary prevention to tackle the root causes of

Plan on a Page					
Vision			Guiding Principles		
All women in NSW enjoy safe homes and communities where they are respected and their children can thrive			Person-centred Collaborative Accountable Evidence-informed Innovative		
Priority 1	Priority 2	Priority 3	Priority 4	Priority 5	Priority 6
Ensure that people with lived experience are at the centre	Enhance oversight, monitoring and accountability for delivery of the NSW Plans	Promote safe, accessible and integrated responses	Champion a greater focus on primary prevention	Strengthen workforces and informal support networks	Support women's economic safety and security
Objective Amplify the diverse voices of people with lived experience of DFSV and ensure that their expertise informs policies, programs and public discourse	Objective Oversee and monitor the implementation of the NSW Plans and strengthen government accountability for their delivery	Objective Advocate for safe, accessible and integrated responses to DFSV that meet individual needs, ensure accountability and do not perpetuate trauma	Objective Advocate for a greater focus on, and investment in, primary prevention to address the underlying drivers of violence against women	Objective Build the capacity of specialist and general workforces as well as informal support networks to identify, prevent and respond to DFSV	Objective Promote initiatives that improve women's economic safety in relationships and recognise the centrality of economic security in escaping and recovering from DFSV
Actions Champion mechanisms for incorporating lived expertise into the design of policy programs and public education, including by establishing a lived experience advisory body for NSW Encourage research on victim-survivor experiences, including their interactions with the justice system, to build the evidence base and identify emerging trends Amplify the voices of children and young people who have experienced or are at risk of experiencing DFSV, and promote greater recognition of their unique needs	Actions Strengthen governance mechanisms to facilitate effective implementation of the NSW Plans, enhance accountability and better utilise the DFSV sector's expertise Provide evidence based advice to the NSW Government to inform and influence policy, regulation, legislation and investment in line with the strategic direction of the NSW Plans Promote effective monitoring of the NSW Plans, including by overseeing the development and implementation of an Outcomes Framework and publishing an annual Report Card	Actions Improve collaboration and coordination across government and communities so that services are joined up, timely and easy to engage, and systems are better equipped to intervene early Advocate for holistic, integrated and trauma-informed justice and community responses to DFSV that support accountability and behaviour change for men who use violence Partner with First Nations women and organisations to promote community-driven, strengths-based and culturally safe responses to DFSV	Actions Collaborate with partners to strengthen understanding of, and commitment to addressing, the primary drivers of DFSV using a long-term, whole-of-population approach Promote education and awareness raising, particularly among children and young people, aimed at changing attitudes, norms, structures and practices that drive violence against women Engage men and boys in primary prevention and early intervention, including by challenging rigid gender stereotypes and promoting healthy models of masculinity	Actions Support the flow of skilled workers into the specialist DFSV sector Advocate for ongoing training and capacity building, both for workers in the specialist DFSV sector and for other workers who regularly respond to DFSV but are not specialists Raise awareness and strengthen the capacity of informal networks and communities to identify, prevent and respond to DFSV	Actions Improve awareness and understanding of economic and financial abuse, including in the context of coercive control Promote initiatives to strengthen DFSV victim-survivors' economic security and empowerment, both during and after abuse, including housing, employment and financial services Engage with businesses and the corporate sector to strengthen their capacity to identify, prevent and respond to DFSV among employees and customers



violence strengthening workforces and community support networks, and improving women's economic safety and security through initiatives in housing, employment, and financial services. The plan aims to create safer homes and communities, fostering respect and opportunities for women and ensuring children can thrive.

The NSW Women's Safety Commissioner's Strategic Plan is poised to ignite lasting change, and I'm thrilled to be part of the movement working toward a safer, more equitable future for all women in New South Wales.

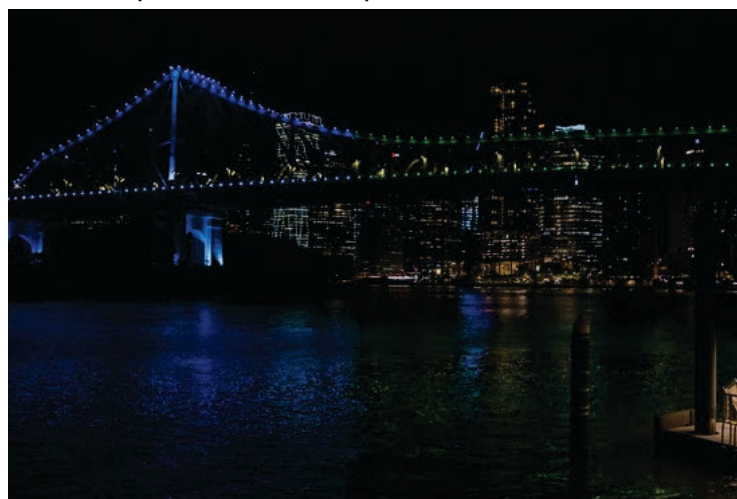
The Soldier On 2024 Balls: A Year of Celebration and Community



This year, Soldier On hosted two significant Gala Ball events, each a vital opportunity to recognise and support our veterans and veteran families. These gatherings brought people together from all walks of life, united by a shared commitment to those who have served our nation. The Soldier On 2024 National Gala Ball, held on 5 April, saw nearly 500 guests come together in support of life-changing—and often lifesaving—services for current and ex-serving ADF members and families. Ukrainian Ambassador Vasyl Myroshnychenko spoke, highlighting that nearly one-third of Ukraine's population has been displaced – a stark reminder of the impact of the ongoing conflicts that exist across the globe. The funds raised will allow Soldier On to continue delivering essential programs that empower veterans and their loved ones to thrive beyond their service.

On 24 October, the Brisbane Gala Ball carried the same mission forward, raising crucial funds for the veteran and family community. A highlight of the evening was the powerful keynote address by Soldier On Ambassador David Savage. As Australia's first civilian casualty of the Afghanistan war, David shared his personal story of resilience and the strength of the human spirit in overcoming unimaginable adversity. His words reminded all in attendance of the sacrifices made by those who serve and the importance of supporting them and veteran families.

These events are a testament to the unwavering dedication of the veteran and family community—advocates, supporters, and sponsors—who ensure that veterans and veteran families receive the recognition, care, and opportunities they deserve. Together, we continue to honour their service and commitment to our nation.



68th Annual Newcastle & Hunter Combined Schools ANZAC Commemorative Service

On 9 April, I had the privilege of attending the 68th Annual Newcastle & Hunter Combined Schools Anzac Service, a powerful, student-led event that highlighted the importance of courage, mateship, and remembrance for young Australians. This event stands as a vital reminder of the significance of passing down the values of service and sacrifice to future generations. A standout moment was when Mike Williams shared his experiences from Operation Hermit Park (1971), where New Zealand servicemen courageously rescued wounded Australians under fire. His moving account, which earned a standing ovation, deeply resonated with the students, emphasising the enduring lessons of bravery and selflessness. By involving youth in these commemorations, we ensure that the spirit of the ANZACs continues to inspire and shape the values of tomorrow's leaders. Well done to all the students and organisers for keeping this important tradition alive and ensuring the legacy of service lives on in the hearts of young Australians.



Families of the Fallen Lunch



On May 5, Admiralty House was a place of heartfelt honour and connection. His Excellency General the Honourable David Hurley AC DSC (Retd) and Her Excellency Mrs. Linda Hurley warmly welcomed veteran families to the Families of the Fallen Lunch, creating a space where we could come together to remember and celebrate the courage of those who gave everything for our country. One moment that truly touched me was seeing Mrs. Hurley take the time to connect with my daughter. She didn't just make polite conversation—she listened, asked questions, and shared kind words with such genuine interest and warmth.

This gathering is a testament to how our nation's conversation about the impacts of service has evolved. We are beginning to truly understand that there is a need to focus not only not only on those who served, but also those who fought battles long after coming home and the families who have borne the weight of their loss. This event underscores a growing recognition: their courage does not end with their service, and their families' strength in the face of heartbreak is a legacy we must never forget.

Graphic Novel Book Launch

On May 10th, we celebrated the launch of Operation Snakebite Cove, an impactful graphic novel at RSL Maroochy, created in partnership with Defence Kidz. This vibrant series is much more than just a form of entertainment—it's an essential resource for the children of Defence and veteran families who face unique and often unseen challenges. Through relatable characters and engaging visuals, the novel helps these young heroes feel understood, connected, and supported in their experiences of growing up in military families. The event was filled with joy and laughter, but the deeper significance lies in how it empowers these children to see their own stories reflected in the pages, building courage, confidence, and a sense of community. Initiatives like this are vital in ensuring that the next generation of Defence and veteran families feel recognised, supported, and strong in navigating their own paths. A heartfelt thanks to Defence Kidz for helping these children thrive and fostering a sense of connection and resilience.



Hills Community Aid Domestic Violence Awareness Event 2024

On May 16, even though COVID-19 kept me from attending in person, I had the profound honour of virtually addressing the Hills Community Domestic Violence Awareness event. The energy was palpable—even through our screens—as passionate community members came together with a shared mission: to learn, understand, confront and combat the pressing issue of domestic and family violence.

I spoke about how abuse isn't just a private matter—it ripples through our communities, affecting everyone. We discussed real stories that highlighted the pervasive impact of violence behind closed doors. Emphasizing the power of community support, I delved into how each of us can play a role in empowering survivors through education and accessible resources.

But this event was more than just speeches and presentations; it was a unifying moment. Together, we pledged to fight for a society where compassion triumphs over fear, and where every individual has the right to live without violence. The collective commitment and enthusiasm underscored just how powerful we can be when we stand together.

Events like these are crucial because they not only raise awareness but also inspire action. They remind us that change is possible when we refuse to stay silent and choose to support one another. This experience reaffirmed my belief in our collective strength to foster meaningful change, and I left feeling more hopeful than ever that a safer future is within our grasp.

Our Space Webinar: Intimate Partner Violence in Military and Veteran Families

On May 20, I had the privilege of co-presenting a deeply impactful Families of Veterans Guild webinar with Dr. Sean Cowlshaw, as part of the Guild's Our Space series. We tackled an often-overlooked issue: Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) in Military and Veteran Families.

The graphic is a promotional poster for an 'EXCLUSIVE Webinar' titled 'Our Space online'. It features the 'Our Space' logo, which includes a stylized figure holding a flower. The text 'Meet our speakers:' is followed by two circular portraits. The first portrait is of Gwen Cherne, identified as a 'Veteran Family Advocate Commissioner'. The second portrait is of Sean Cowlshaw PhD, identified as an 'Associate Professor, Monash University'. The event is scheduled for '20 May 2024' from '4.30PM - 6PM'. A 'REGISTER NOW' button is present, along with the website 'welfareofveterans.org.au' and the phone number '02 9267 6577'. The logo for 'FAMILIES OF VETERANS GUILD' is at the bottom.

This wasn't just about sharing information—it was about addressing the unique struggles these veteran families face, from deployment stress and reintegration to the powerful influence of military culture. One of the most memorable moments was our "Behind the Statistics: Expertise from Experience" segment, where community voices gave a human face to the data. Hearing personal stories brought an undeniable depth to the discussion, reminding us that every statistic is someone's reality, and that each story deserves empathy and tailored support.

We also dove into policy responses and ongoing programs, highlighting both the progress and the gaps that still need to be addressed. Our discussion turned to the future, where we emphasized the need for stronger, more compassionate support systems for military and veteran families.

For anyone interested in learning more about the Guild's mission or upcoming events, visit www.familiesofveterans.org.au.

Celebrating Milestones and honouring Veterans at St John of God Richmond Hospital

Over the past few months, St John of God Richmond Hospital has marked two key events, each highlighting its dedication to exceptional care and community connection.

A Transformative Milestone: \$64.7 Million Redevelopment

On May 28, the hospital celebrated the opening of its \$64.7 million redevelopment with a Smoking Ceremony led by Darug elder Shane Laws, who shared the area's rich history. The redevelopment includes 112 single bedrooms, a Wellness Centre with a heated pool and yoga room, and expanded therapy and medical facilities, all designed to foster healing and trust.

Honouring Veterans: Veterans' Day Commemoration

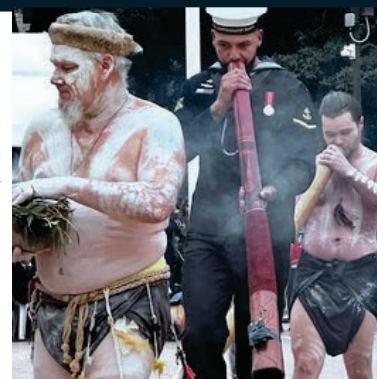
On August 8, the hospital hosted its annual Veterans' Day Commemoration Service. The day featured a heartfelt Welcome to Country by Shane Laws and a stirring speech by Dr. Luis Prado, who called for improved care for veterans and veteran families. Tomas "Paddy" Hamilton's reading of his poem Face in the Mirror left a lasting impression on attendees.

Both events reaffirm the hospital's role as a sanctuary of healing, honouring its past while shaping a brighter future.



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Veterans Commemoration

On Friday, May 31st, our office attended the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Veterans Commemoration. This annual event pays tribute to the service and sacrifice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander veterans from WWI to the present. Since its inception in 2007, the Indigenous Veterans Commemoration Service has grown significantly, bringing Australians together in remembrance and respect. The ceremony included a traditional smoking ceremony to cleanse and protect against negative spirits.



Uncle Allen Madden, a respected Gadigal elder, delivered a heartfelt welcome to country, followed by a captivating welcome dance by 'Walanbaa,' members of the NSW Public Schools Aboriginal Dance Company.

A standout moment was the reading of the 1942 poem 'The Coloured Digger' by Sapper H.E. 'Bert' Beros, composed during his service at Donadabu Rest Camp on the Kokoda Track in Papua New Guinea. The poem movingly recounts the story of Private West, an Aboriginal soldier known for his exceptional bravery.

82nd Anniversary Defence of Sydney Commemoration

On June 7, I attended the 82nd Anniversary of the Defence of Sydney Commemoration at North Head, Manly—a solemn reminder of the night WWII arrived on our doorstep. On May 31, 1942, three Japanese midget submarines slipped into Sydney Harbour, targeting allied ships. One torpedo struck HMAS Kuttabul, a converted ferry, killing 21 Australian and British sailors as they slept.

General Sir Peter Cosgrove, the keynote speaker, captivated the audience as he wove together tales of Sydney's past with warnings for the present and future. From the arrival of the First Fleet to the surprise visit of American warships in 1839, Cosgrove highlighted Australia's longstanding exposure to external threats. But his message was clear: today's challenges—cyberattacks, missile threats, and economic warfare—are just as real and demand greater national preparedness.

Standing inside a historic artillery hangar, surrounded by the echoes of Sydney's military past, it was hard not to feel the weight of Sir Peter's Cosgrove's words. James Griffin MP closed the service with a call to action: remember the past, but don't let complacency jeopardise our future. For those who weren't there, this commemoration was more than a history lesson; it was a wake-up call. The events of 1942 remind us that even the most distant conflicts can strike close to home, and the best defence is one that's ready.

2024 AIFS Conference

At the AIFS 2024 Conference in Melbourne, I was deeply honoured to be a panellist with a diverse group of experts and an audience of policymakers, researchers, and advocates passionate about family wellbeing. My talk centred on the urgent need for robust policy development to enhance family welfare, highlighting both the pressing priorities and the formidable challenges we face in this endeavour.

Drawing from my own journey as an advocate and community leader, I underscored the pivotal role of policies in shaping the fabric of family life. From access to healthcare and education to the promotion of mental wellness and economic stability, effective policies serve as the cornerstone of a thriving family ecosystem.

My points emphasised the importance of adopting a holistic approach to policy formulation, one that transcends mere band-aid solutions to address the root causes of familial distress. By prioritising initiatives that bolster resilience, foster inclusion, and empower veteran families to navigate life's complexities, we can lay the groundwork for enduring positive change.

Yet, I also candidly acknowledged the myriad challenges that beset the path to effective policy implementation. From entrenched political interests to systemic inequalities and cultural barriers, the road ahead is fraught with obstacles that demand our collective resolve and ingenuity. However, amidst these challenges lies boundless opportunity for innovation and collaboration. By harnessing the power of data, amplifying diverse voices, and fostering genuine partnerships between policymakers, practitioners, and communities, we can chart a course towards a future where every family has the opportunity to thrive.



2024 Defence Connect Industry Awards

On 18 July I had the privilege of being a guest of Bravery Trust at the 2023 Defence Connect Industry Awards. It was an inspiring evening, celebrating the outstanding achievements of individuals and organisations in the defence community. The night was a great opportunity to connect with key leaders in the industry and recognise the innovative work that continues to strengthen our defence sector.



Veterans Afternoon Tea with Matt Keogh MP & Tanya Plibersek MP

On 6 August, I had the pleasure of attending a Veterans Afternoon Tea at the Alexandria Erskineville Bowling Club, hosted by Matt Thistlethwaite MP and Tanya Plibersek MP. It was a fantastic opportunity to engage with local veterans, share experiences, and discuss important issues facing the veteran community. The event fostered meaningful conversations about ongoing support and how we can continue to improve services for veterans and veteran families. It was a privilege to be part of such an important gathering.

Legacy Australia National Advocacy

The Legacy Australia National Advocacy Forum was held on 8 August at the DVA office in Sydney. The forum brought together passionate advocates dedicated to improving the lives of veterans and veteran families. It was a valuable opportunity to engage in meaningful discussions about current challenges and future priorities in veteran support, ensuring that their needs remain a top priority. The collaboration and insights shared during the forum were truly inspiring, reinforcing the importance of ongoing advocacy for our veteran community.

Victory in the Pacific Day



Every year on 15 August, Australians commemorate Victory in the Pacific (VP) Day, marking the end of the Second World War in 1945. It's a day to honour those who served and reflect on the sacrifices made to secure peace.

This year's 79th anniversary was marked with a special service at the Martin Place Cenotaph in Sydney. The event, hosted by the RSL, brought together veterans, veteran families, and community members to remember this pivotal moment in history.

The service began with a powerful Welcome to Country by Air Force veteran Harry Allie AM, BEM, who shared his own Defence journey. The highlight was hearing from Don Kennedy OAM, a Merchant Navy veteran who enlisted at just 16. His firsthand account of life during the war was a poignant reminder of the bravery and resilience of those who lived through it. For those who couldn't be there, VP Day is a chance to reflect on the incredible sacrifices made for our freedom and to ensure their legacy continues to inspire future generations.

Vietnam Veterans Day Commemoration Service

On 18 August, I attended the Vietnam Veterans Day Commemoration Service at Martin Place in Sydney. It was a deeply moving tribute to the Australians who served in the Vietnam War, a conflict that remains our nation's longest military engagement of the 20th century. Nearly 60,000 Australians served in Vietnam between 1962 and 1972. Of those, 523 gave their lives, and more than 3,000 were wounded. The service was a powerful reminder of their courage and sacrifice, and of the enduring impact their service has had on veterans and veteran families.

The day also marks the anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan. On 18 August 1966, in a rain-soaked rubber plantation, just over 100 Australians from Delta Company, 6th Battalion Royal Australian Regiment faced an enemy force of 2,000 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops. Against overwhelming odds, they fought with extraordinary courage. By the end of the battle, 18 Australians had fallen. Attending the service was a humbling experience. It highlighted not only the bravery of those who served but also the strength of veteran families, who've supported them through the years. To all our Vietnam veterans and their loved ones: thank you. Your service and sacrifice will always be remembered.

Ceremonial Closing - Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide

On 28 August, the veteran community gathered for an emotional closing ceremony of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide. The ceremony, guided by Peter Overton AM, was described as "Raw, Real, & Emotional." It began with Darren Williams playing the didgeridoo, followed by Uncle Allan Madden's Welcome to Country, fostering warmth and connection. Speakers included Patrick Lindsay, who reflected on the profound impact of the stories he encountered, and Senator Jacqui Lambie, who passionately shared her struggles after leaving the ADF and called for real change following the Royal Commission Report. The three Royal Commissioners—Mr. Nick Kaldas APM, Dr. Peggy Brown AO, and The Hon. James Douglas KC—expressed gratitude to those who shared their stories and emphasized the need to fight for veterans.

The Royal Commission's message was clear: it's time to take action to honour the sacrifices of service members and prevent further tragedies. With 1,677 suicides among serving and ex-serving Defence personnel from 1997 to 2021, the need for systemic change is urgent. As Commissioner Brown stated, "Our service personnel & veterans have fought for you; it's now time to fight for them."



2024 Legacy Week Launch

On 2 September, I had the privilege of attending the 2024 Legacy Week Launch at The Cenotaph in Martin Place. The event brought together veterans, veteran families, and community members, all united in their support for Legacy's vital work—assisting the veteran families of deceased and incapacitated veterans. The ceremony was filled with heartfelt speeches and reflections on the sacrifices made by our service members and veteran families. It was a powerful reminder of the importance of continuing to support those who've given so much. Later, at the airport, I was lucky enough to meet some incredible people selling Legacy Bears for Legacy Week. Their energy and dedication were infectious, and it was inspiring to see them out there raising awareness for such a worthy cause.



Out of the Shows Walk 2024



On 10 September, I participated in the Out of the Shadows Walk 2024 at North Bondi RSL. This impactful event aimed to raise awareness about mental health and suicide prevention, bringing together community members to support those affected by these issues.

Participants walked in solidarity, sharing stories and fostering connections that highlight the importance of mental health awareness. It was a powerful reminder of the strength of community and the ongoing need for support and open conversations about mental health challenges.

RSL LifeCare Central Coast Veteran and Family Hub Grand Opening

On 13 September, I attended the grand opening of the RSL LifeCare Central Coast Veteran and Family Hub in Wyong. The event celebrated the launch of this important facility, designed to provide comprehensive support services to veterans and families.

Attendees included community leaders, veterans and veteran families, all coming together to mark this significant milestone. The Hub aims to be a vital resource, offering a range of services to enhance the wellbeing and quality of life for our veterans and families. It was inspiring to see the community's commitment to supporting those who have served our country and are living on the Central Coast.



Seminar: The Pathway to Peace and Solidarity: Australian Service in Peace Operations

On 17 September, I attended the seminar titled The Pathway to Peace and Solidarity: Australian Service in Peace Operations at the Australian Defence Force Academy in Canberra. The event featured insightful discussions on Australia's role in international peacekeeping missions and the contributions of Australian servicemen and women to global stability.

Experts and veterans shared their experiences and reflections, highlighting the importance of solidarity and cooperation in peace operations. It was a valuable opportunity to deepen our understanding of the impact of peacekeeping efforts and the ongoing commitment of our Defence personnel to fostering peace worldwide.

25th Anniversary of Australian Service in Timor-Leste

On 20 September, the 25th Anniversary of Australian Service in Timor-Leste at the Australian Peacekeeping Memorial was held in Canberra. This significant event honoured the contributions and sacrifices of Australian servicemen and women who served in peacekeeping missions in Timor-Leste since 1999.

The ceremony featured heartfelt speeches from veterans and dignitaries, highlighting the importance of courage and commitment to international peace. The event celebrated the strong bond between the two nations and reinforced our collective responsibility to support veterans and advocate for ongoing peacekeeping efforts. It was a powerful reminder of the sacrifices made by our service members in the pursuit of global stability.

Gallipoli Medical Research Foundation Awards Night

To cap off the day, I attended the Gallipoli Medical Research Foundation Awards Night, where I learned about groundbreaking research that is making a significant impact both locally and globally.

Congratulations to all the award winners for their transformative work, including:

- Dr. Tina Liang: Thorsen Researcher of the Year
- Dr. Rebecca Mellor: Veteran Researcher of the Year
- Elizabeth Dennison: Davies Star of the Year
- Dr Nicholas Gilson, UQ Associate Professor in Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour, Professor Lauren Ball, Chair of Community Health & Wellbeing at Springfield, & Dr Rebecca Mellor, Principal Research Fellow at Gallipoli Medical Research, GMR Collaboration Grant



War Widows Day Ceremony



On Saturday, 19 October, I had the honour of attending the War Widows Day service at the Cenotaph in Martin Place, Sydney. This deeply moving event was a powerful tribute to the immense strength and sacrifice of war widows who have endured the loss of their loved ones in service to our nation.

War Widows Day is not just a date on the calendar—it is a solemn acknowledgment of the sacrifices made by these remarkable individuals, whose courage and resilience exemplify the highest ideals of our community. Their loss is a reminder of the true cost of service, and their stories deserve a place in the national consciousness.

As we reflect on their contributions, it is time to elevate this recognition. Australia should establish a National War Widows Day—a day to honour all war widows and widowers across the country. Furthermore, a National Defence and Family Day could celebrate the unwavering strength and support provided by veteran families, who stand by their loved ones through every challenge. By championing these initiatives, we ensure their sacrifices are not only remembered but deeply respected and appreciated by all Australians.

2024 DEFGLIS Military Pride Ball

On 19 October, I attended the 2024 DEFGLIS Military Pride Ball at the Crown in Sydney. The event was a vibrant celebration of diversity and inclusion within the Defence community, bringing together service members, veterans, and allies to foster a sense of belonging. The evening featured inspiring speeches, live entertainment, and a chance to connect with others who share a commitment to supporting LGBTQIA+ inclusion in the military. It was a remarkable occasion that underscored the importance of acceptance and unity within our armed forces, highlighting the strides made toward a more inclusive environment for all service personnel.



Official Opening of Service - The Exhibition

On November 1st, Victoria Barracks hosted the official opening of Service, a powerful exhibition of photographic portraits and videos that explore the deep impact of service on veterans and veteran families. The event was a moving tribute to the sacrifices made by servicemen, servicewomen, and their loved ones, brought to life through compelling displays and an emotional opening ceremony. Artist Richard Wiesel masterfully conveyed Damien Thomlinson's vision, infusing the exhibition with profound depth and meaning. Service is a must-see for anyone wishing to connect with our nation's defence legacy, offering an unforgettable opportunity to reflect on the strength, resilience, and dedication of those who serve and veteran families. This exhibition will be a permanent fixture at the Australian War Memorial.

MESHA's 17th Annual Remembrance Day Breakfast

Spending Remembrance Day in Adelaide is always a privilege, and this year began with the deeply moving 17th Annual MESHA Remembrance Day Breakfast. The event brought together hundreds from across South Australia to honour the service and sacrifice of our veterans.

Among the distinguished attendees were Her Excellency the Honourable Frances Adamson AC, the Honourable Peter Malinauskas MP, Premier of South Australia; the Honourable Chris Picton MP, Minister for Health and Wellbeing; the Honourable Joe Szakacs MP, Minister for Veterans Affairs; and the Honourable Nicola Centofanti MLC, Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council and Shadow Minister for Veterans Affairs.

The keynote speaker, Commodore Peter Scott, CSC, RAN (Ret'd), captivated the audience with reflections from his 34-year career as a submariner. He shared powerful stories of resilience, setbacks, and triumphs, including the challenges of completing the UTMB. His message of perseverance and honouring those who served before us left an indelible mark on everyone present. This breakfast was a fitting way to begin a day dedicated to remembrance, bringing together people from all walks of life to reflect on the sacrifices made by so many.



Remembrance Day Service

I attended the solemn Remembrance Day Service at the SA National War Memorial. The ceremony brought together veterans, serving ADF personnel, veteran families, and the wider community to pause and honour the sacrifices of those who served.

Master of Ceremonies Ian Smith led the service, which included a Scripture Reading and Prayer by Chaplain David Davis and the Ode of Remembrance, delivered by RSL Acting President Meredith Burgess. The Australian Defence Force Navy Band SA provided stirring musical performances that added to the ceremony's poignancy.

Special thanks to Her Excellency the Honourable Frances Adamson AC, DVA Deputy Commissioner Janice Silby, Dr. Karen May, Dr. Ben Wadham, and the many schools and dignitaries who contributed to the day. Their efforts ensured this was a heartfelt and fitting tribute to those who served. Lest we forget.



Legacy Remembrance Day Lunch

On 15 November, I was honoured to speak at Sydney Legacy's annual Remembrance Day Lunch, an event that paid tribute to those who gave their lives in service while highlighting Legacy's vital role in supporting veteran families.

During my address, I reflected on my role as the Veteran Family Advocate Commissioner, sharing insights into the challenges faced by veteran families and the importance of providing them with ongoing care and recognition. I also spoke about the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide, which has now concluded with the release of its final report. This landmark inquiry has brought to light critical issues and recommendations that must drive meaningful change for the wellbeing of veterans and their loved ones. The lunch was a deeply poignant occasion, underscoring the enduring impact of Legacy's mission to honour and support those left behind.



The Krait Foundation (TKF) Networking Event



Also on the 15 November, I attended an inspiring event hosted by The Krait Foundation (TKF). Focused on supporting Australian Special Forces veterans transitioning to civilian careers, the initiative connects these skilled individuals with organisations seeking exceptional talent.

The event showcased the unique value veterans bring to the workplace—unmatched leadership, resilience, and strategic thinking. For businesses looking to harness top-tier talent, partnering with TKF offers a direct link to professionals ready to excel in any corporate environment.

Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission : Engaging Men and Boys - what's next?

On November 12, the Domestic, Family, and Sexual Violence Commission hosted the Engaging Men and Boys - What's Next?, a key gathering designed to advance strategies for involving men and boys in the prevention of domestic, family, and sexual violence (DFSV).

This initiative aligns with a priority outlined in the Commission's First Yearly Report to Parliament, which emphasized the critical role of engaging men and boys in creating cultural and systemic change to reduce violence. Recognising their unique influence within veteran families, workplaces, and communities, the meeting brought together stakeholders to collaborate on shaping future policy directions.

Attendees, including policymakers, community leaders, and advocates, were invited to contribute strategic advice to the Department of Social Services (DSS) and the Commission. Discussions centered on innovative approaches, barriers to engagement, and practical measures to inspire accountability and leadership among men and boys.

This dialogue reflects a growing commitment to inclusive and holistic strategies in addressing DFSV. By involving men as allies and agents of change, the Commission aims to foster safer communities and ensure sustainable progress in eliminating violence.

Invictus Annual Corporate Partners Function



On 22 November, I attended an inspiring event hosted by Invictus, was nothing short of extraordinary— a gathering of champions united in purpose and passion to celebrate Invictus Australia and the remarkable impact it has on veterans and veteran families. The room buzzed with energy as supporters, ambassadors, corporate partners, and friends came together to honour achievements, share stories, and unveil bold visions for the future.

The evening began with the legendary Sir Peter Cosgrove, who brought his trademark wisdom, warmth, and charm. His presence lit up the room, a reminder of the unwavering support for the veteran community. The night's inspiration continued to soar with Curtis McGrath OAM PLY, who joined us straight from a long flight. Despite the journey, his story of resilience and triumph captivated every person in the

room—his commitment to the Invictus cause was palpable.

Equally awe-inspiring was Rodney Cottam's incredible achievement of running over 500 kilometres in a single week. His feat epitomises the Invictus spirit, pushing boundaries and showing what is possible when determination meets heart.

Adding to the celebration, Vestia was recognised for its groundbreaking work in veteran and family employment, earning a well-deserved nomination for the Prime Minister's Awards. Their innovative approach continues to change lives and strengthen communities. The Clemenger Group Limited provided the perfect setting for this unforgettable evening, hosting us in style and ensuring every detail reflected the significance of the occasion. As we look ahead to the Whistler Games in February, the excitement in the room was tangible. The event was a powerful reminder of what can be achieved when passionate people come together with a shared purpose. The Invictus Australia community, with its steadfast partners and supporters, is truly unstoppable. To everyone who contributes to this incredible movement—thank you. Together, we're building stronger, more connected communities and transforming lives through the power of sport. The future is bright, and the Invictus spirit shines ever brighter.



2024 Prime Minister's National Veteran Employment Awards

What an extraordinary evening celebrating the unwavering passion, dedication, and transformative contributions of veterans, veteran families, and the organisations that champion their success. The 2024 Prime Minister's National Veteran Employment Awards highlighted businesses and initiatives that embody innovation, resilience, and a commitment to creating lasting impact. From tech startups to construction companies, health and wellness enterprises, and consultancies specialising in defence or leadership training, the nominees and winners showcased the remarkable breadth of skills veterans and veteran families bring to the workforce. These awards are more than recognition—they are a testament to the transformative work these businesses do, shaping not only individual lives but the broader veteran community. Their efforts drive employment opportunities, promote veteran-owned businesses, and shine a light on the unique contributions veterans and veteran families make to Australia's economy and society.



It was an immense privilege to be part of this celebration and present the Partner Entrepreneur of the Year Award. To all the nominees, winners, and supporters: thank you for your commitment to building a brighter future for the veteran community. Your creativity, determination, and dedication make a profound difference, and we are endlessly grateful for all you do.



INTERSTATE VISITS

Perth Community Engagement Visit

Looking back on my first trip to Perth since COVID, it was an absolute whirlwind of inspiration, connection, and a few fun surprises! Over several action-packed days, I reconnected with the DVA crew, the veteran community, and key partners. Every moment was filled with heartfelt conversations, moving tributes, and exciting collaborations that left me buzzing with excitement for what's ahead.

Day 1 started off with a bang! I caught up with Shannon Hennessy from VESPIIA, and wow—this organisation is a powerhouse for veterans and emergency service heroes. Their advocacy and events are next level. Then I met the unstoppable John Crosby, whose passion for the Veterans' Chaplaincy Program was beyond inspiring. His work providing spiritual support for veterans as they transition to civilian life is truly life changing. Later, I had a great chat with Prof. Kylie Russell and Michelle Fyfe from RAAFA WA about their Andrew Russell Veteran Living (ARVL) initiative—16 new homes for veterans in Cannington! It's going to be a game-changer.

Day 2 was pure emotion and reflection. I had the honour of attending the Remembrance Matinee at Perth's Town Hall, led by the incredible jazz singer Simone Craddock. Her tribute to her grandfather, who fought in WWI, was so moving. The combination of music and family stories had everyone captivated. Later, I visited Government House, where over 40,000 hand-crocheted poppies covered the grounds—a stunning tribute to fallen soldiers and even service animals. It was a breathtaking display of love and respect. The day didn't stop there—I also had some key meetings with local Ministers to talk about how we can improve support for veteran families, followed by a great discussion with the Open Arms & Lived Experience Workforce about mental health services for veterans. And let's not forget the fun fact from the community event at DVA—this crowd is all about dogs over cats!

Day 3 was all about building connections. I met the dynamic duo Karyn Hinder and Sherry Baxter from Working Spirit, who are doing amazing work helping veterans transition into civilian careers. Their passion is contagious! Then I headed over to the 13th Brigade and got an inside look at ANZAC House with CEO Vince Connelly—the range of services they provide for veterans is seriously impressive. The day ended with an exciting conversation with Brigadier Brett Chaloner about his work with the Defence Reserves and how they're teaming up with industry and academia to create even stronger ties. His dedication to making it all happen was truly inspiring!

Looking back, Perth didn't just impress me—it reinvigorated me! The veterans, the energy, the passion—everything about this trip reminded me of why we do what we do. I'm already looking forward to seeing how these amazing initiatives continue to grow and support our veterans in WA and beyond!



Hobart



Hobart is a city that never fails to inspire. During my recent visit, I was reminded of the incredible dedication and collaborative spirit that defines this community. Over three action-packed days, I had the privilege of meeting passionate individuals, witnessing transformative initiatives, and gaining fresh insights into the lives of veterans and veteran families in Tasmania.

One of the highlights of my trip was meeting Luke Brown, the new First Assistant Secretary of Policy and Deputy Commissioner of Tasmania. Luke's deep commitment to legislative reform and harmonization is nothing short of commendable. He brings a sharp focus and a collaborative approach that promise great strides for Tasmania's veteran community.

At the heart of my visit was the AVCAT Long Tan Bursary Presentation, a ceremony that left a lasting impression. This bursary supports children of veterans in pursuing higher education, and meeting the recipients was truly uplifting. Each student embodies resilience and ambition, carrying forward veteran families' legacies with pride. Their stories are a powerful reminder of the potential that lies within our veteran families.

Equally inspiring was the chance to connect with the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) staff. Behind the scenes, the VAN team works tirelessly on quality assurance and workforce management. Their efforts ensure that veterans receive the high standard of care and support they deserve. It was fascinating to gain a deeper understanding of the processes that keep the wheels turning smoothly.

Mental health took centre stage at the Mental Health Forum, where I learned about two groundbreaking programs: the Veteran Focused Stress Resilience and Functioning (SRF) Program pilot and the PTSD Trauma Recovery Program (TRP). These initiatives are a game-changer, combining the expertise of practitioners with the lived experiences of peers. The focus on mood regulation, interpersonal communication, and relationship skills is making a tangible difference in the lives of participants, offering them tools to navigate life's challenges more effectively.

Another important topic of discussion was family and domestic violence. In conversations with the Secretary and department members, we delved into strategies for addressing this pressing issue. Supporting veteran families impacted by intimate partner violence remains a top priority, and it's encouraging to see a growing commitment to trauma-informed interventions tailored to veteran families. Improving the claims process was also on the agenda. During a session with DVA delegates and advocates, we explored ways to streamline this crucial aspect of veteran support. With positive outcomes already evident in Perth, Brisbane, and Townsville, there's much hope for continued progress in Tasmania as well.

No visit to Hobart would be complete without a moment of reflection at the Hobart Cenotaph. Standing before its solemn beauty, I was struck by the weight of history and the stories etched into its walls. It's a place that invites quiet contemplation and a renewed sense of purpose.

Hobart's unwavering dedication to its veteran community is truly remarkable. The people I met and the programs I witnessed reaffirm my belief that, together, we can create a brighter future for veterans and veteran families. I'm already looking forward to my next visit and continuing this vital work.



Townsville and Cairns

This was an incredible opportunity to connect with the people and organisations that make such a meaningful difference in the lives of our veterans and veteran families. From Townsville to Cairns, the week was packed with conversations, visits, and engagements with a shared goal—supporting those who have served.

Throughout the week, I had the privilege of listening to veterans, veteran families, and the dedicated professionals working to improve their lives. Your voices and experiences drive us to continually refine and strengthen the support available.

Day 1 – I met with Phillip Thompson OAM MP, Federal Member for Herbert, followed by a Meet and Greet with Commissioners, DVA, and DFMS. The day concluded with a Defence Engagement Base Visit at RAAF Base Townsville.

Day 2 – started with a Defence Engagement Base Visit at Lavarack Barracks, followed by engaging with Townsville staff and a Meet and Greet with the Open Arms team. I ended the evening with a dinner alongside Brigadier David McCammon and Mrs. Annaliese McCammon.

Day 3 – commenced with a tour of Townsville War Cemetery, followed by an ESO Leadership Engagement at The Oasis in Oonoonba. Later, I met with the Townsville RSL, had a meeting with the Townsville Legacy CEO, and visited the Vietnam Veterans Association and Veteran Family Wellbeing Centre. The day wrapped up with the Career Connections Showcase at The Oasis Townsville.



Day 4 – I landed in Cairns, I visited the Veteran Family Wellbeing Centre and had a Meet and Greet with Mates4Mates. I also met with TPI Far North QLD and visited the Cairns RSL Sub-Branch.

A big thank you to everyone who made time to meet and share their insights. I deeply value the connections formed and the stories shared during these engagements.

Brisbane

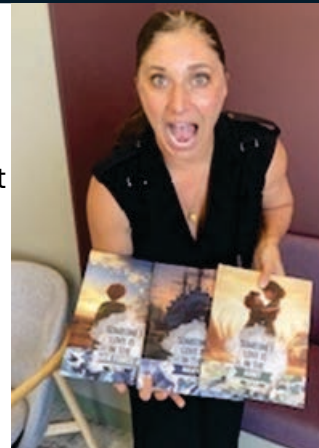


On Thursday, 18 August, I had the privilege of visiting Open Arms – Veterans & Veteran Families Counselling in Stafford and Ipswich, where I connected with their dedicated teams who work tirelessly to support veterans and veteran families. Hearing firsthand about their experiences, insights, and challenges was incredibly valuable, deepening my understanding of the vital role they play. At the Stafford location, I was pleased to see the “Someone I Love is in Defence” books, a thoughtful resource aimed at supporting the unique needs of Defence children and veteran

families. These materials are essential in helping young people navigate the complexities of Defence life, fostering resilience and understanding.

Following this, I toured the RSL Queensland Veteran & Family Wellbeing Centre in Brisbane, a state-of-the-art facility designed to provide holistic support to current and ex-serving ADF members and veteran families. The centre features family counselling rooms, physical rehabilitation spaces, and mental health services—all tailored to meet the diverse needs of the veteran community.

It's exciting to see the centre's potential as it grows to host more events and initiatives. This facility represents a significant step forward in ensuring our veterans and veteran families have access to the support and services they need to thrive. I look forward to witnessing the positive impact these efforts will have across the community.



Advocacy Priorities

As the Veteran Family Advocate Commissioner, my current priorities and advocacy efforts are deeply aligned with enhancing the wellbeing of Defence and veteran families. A key focus for me is the implementation of the Defence & Veteran Family Wellbeing Strategy & Action Plan, recently released by Minister Keogh. This strategy serves as a roadmap for improving the lives of military families, providing targeted support to those who make significant sacrifices in support of the nation's defence.

Central to this advocacy is the importance of addressing the complex and often under-recognised challenges faced by Defence and veteran families. These challenges range from family and domestic violence—which affects a significant proportion of both current and transitioned ADF personnel and their intimate partners—to the long-term effects of bereavement and the need for better postvention support for families grieving the loss of a veteran. We are actively collaborating on the development of a comprehensive Postvention Framework, as well as initiatives aimed at reducing family and domestic violence within the veteran community.

The Defence & Veteran Family Wellbeing Strategy is foundational to my work, guiding engagement with Defence and veteran families, and ensuring the recommendations from the Royal Commission Report are incorporated into actionable reforms. This strategy will help improve access to services, enhance support mechanisms, and drive better outcomes for families across Australia.

Another area of priority is family engagement in transition support. Veterans' transitions back to civilian life have a direct impact on their families, and ensuring families are integrated into transition planning is crucial for long-term success. Through the Veteran Employment Program, VetPaths, and other career initiatives, we aim to facilitate smoother transitions for veterans and their families, while addressing employment challenges that can arise due to the unique circumstances of service.

Additionally, legislative changes are a critical part of my advocacy, particularly with the Veterans' Entitlements, Treatment, and Support (Simplification & Harmonisation) Bill 2024. The ongoing dialogue surrounding definitions of "family" within veteran legislation is essential for ensuring our laws and support systems reflect the evolving realities of modern families, such as the shift towards more inclusive terminology like "Bereaved Family Member."

As part of this work, I'm also focused on supporting mental health initiatives, such as those addressing suicide prevention, which are crucial for both veterans and their families. With the tragic reality that children who lose a parent to suicide are three times more likely to take their own lives, this advocacy is vital for breaking the cycle of trauma.

The Defence & Veteran Family Wellbeing Strategy provides a comprehensive framework for creating a healthier, more resilient future for veteran families, with a focus on mental health, domestic violence, suicide prevention, and postvention services. It is part of an ongoing effort to ensure that the families who support our veterans are given the same level of care and respect that we provide to the veterans themselves.

Through my advocacy and the initiatives I'm involved with, I am committed to ensuring that the voices of Defence and veteran families are heard, their challenges understood, and that tangible steps are taken to improve their quality of life. This is a shared responsibility, and together, we can make a meaningful difference in the lives of these important, often-overlooked, contributors to our nation's security and wellbeing.



Happy Holiday's

🎄 A Heartfelt Christmas Message 🎄

As the festive season approaches, I want to extend my warmest wishes to all veterans, veteran families, and the incredible communities who stand by their side. Christmas is a time to reflect, connect, and find hope—but I know it can also bring challenges. Whether this season is filled with celebration or quiet resilience, I hope you find moments of peace, love, and comfort.

Looking back on 2024, it's been a year of significant milestones for the veteran community. One of the most profound moments came on September 9, with the release of the Royal Commission's final report.

This sobering yet powerful blueprint for reform has set the stage for transformative change. I look forward to working with Defence, DVA and the veteran and family community to ensure the Royal Commission's Final Report creates lasting change for all of us.

For those for whom this season feels heavy—whether you are grieving, separated from loved ones, or navigating challenges—you are in my thoughts and in the hearts of many who care deeply for you. May this season bring small moments of solace and remind you that you are not alone.

Looking ahead to 2025, I am filled with hope and determination for the positive change we can achieve together.

With heartfelt gratitude and warmest wishes, from, My Family to Yours



"I am very cognisant of the responsibility I have to ensure that work continues and that the voices of veterans' families are heard"

If you don't already, please feel free to follow me on my social media platforms:



Veteran Family Advocate Commissioner



Veteran Family Advocate Commissioner



vfaausgov