



Private Mental Health Consumer Carer Network (Australia) Limited

engage, empower, enable choice in private mental health

National Secretariat,

PO Box 542, Marden S.A. 5070

Phone: 1300 620 042

Email: admin@pmhccn.com.au

www.pmhccn.com.au

Patrons:

Professor Alan Fels AO

Ms Barbara Hocking OAM

Mr John McGrath AM

SUBMISSION

Suicide by veterans and ex-service personnel

To: Parliament of Australia,
Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade.

Sent via email: fadt.sen@aph.gov.au

1 Introduction

We thank the Parliament of Australia, Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade for the opportunity to provide input into this Inquiry.

The *Private Mental Health Consumer Carer Network (Australia)* (hereafter Network) represents Australians who have private health insurance and/or who receive their treatment and care from private sector settings for their mental illnesses or disorders and also represent their carers. As our title implies, the Network is the authoritative voice for consumers and carers in private mental health settings.

The Network is committed to working with the Parliament of Australia and relevant others in addressing the needs of people with a mental illness including veterans and their family or carers. We bring to this Submission, a mental health consumer and carer perspective.

2 Comments

This Submission from our Network is different from most you will receive. A member of our Board is a Vietnam Veteran and we have relied on his response and input. These are his views based on his own experiences.

We would like to comment on the specifics of the Inquiry and also at the conclusion of this Submission are some personal thoughts and a poem from him which appear as Appendices.

This Submission provides to the Committee a lived experience insight into the horrors of war and the repercussions on lives which are never the same again. As a National Serviceman, he was plucked from his life at 20 years of age and thrown into a situation which was not of his choosing. He has the diagnosis of Post Traumatic Disorder and suffers repeatedly even today by flashbacks, nightmares, anxiety and depression on a far too often basis. He has had many thoughts of suicide throughout his life. He did return to employment after Vietnam and was a very well respected counsellor to young people.

He has and continues to receive, psychiatrist's support and care through regular and frequent consultations. However his main supports has been his wife of over 30 years who assists him through the tough times. Her part in providing a stable and most importantly supportive and loving relationship is by his own admission, the one

thing which has kept him alive. His children and grandchildren play a very important part in keeping him grounded in the here and now.

He has lost a number of mates by suicide over the years, one close mate in the last 18 months even though this veteran returned from Vietnam many years ago. It illustrates that many veterans struggle with suicidal thoughts on an ongoing basis, despite being home for some 30 odd years. We are immensely proud of him and his achievements. We are pleased to call him our friend and colleague.

He has been struggling for many, many years and we are honoured to be able to provide to the Committee his experiences, personal thoughts and insight.

Ex-service personnel:

In the past, the treatment and handling of claims by veterans to the Department of Veterans' Affairs for injuries and conditions was appalling. The processes saw many veterans undergoing several demeaning appeals with their honest brought into question before claims were accepted. This lengthy and trying process did not assist veterans in dealing with their undiagnosed mental health issues in many cases.

In recent years, we are told, veterans have found the Department of Veterans' Affairs very approachable and humane in their dealings with it, and this should be applauded.

Possible reasons suicide by veterans and ex-service personnel:

Exposure to violence and traumatic experiences in theatres of war are a precursor to mental ill-health. Few soldiers, whether regular army or National Servicemen, have been adequately prepared for the reality of armed conflict, with its horrors and the actuality of mates dying or being wounded.

Army Training prepares soldiers to make immediate, violent responses to crises, such as coming under enemy fire. This is unfortunately necessary, but it can also lead to those returning from war zones with very short tempers, and insufficient safeguards from outbursts of anger towards themselves and others. This can lead to relationship and family breakdowns, and leave the veteran with a heavy sense of guilt.

Coming home from war to Australia requires difficult mental and physical adjustments for veterans. Firstly, the world of those who are not in the services has moved on for one or two years from where the veteran left it. The veteran expects to return to the world he/she left, but everyone else, family and friends, have moved on to another place. This was the experience of our Board member who found this extremely hard to deal with after his two years of National Service – his family disowned him for accepting his call-up, and the few friends he had prior to his two years in the army were different people on his return.

There is still stigma associated with those who participate in wars – on his return home he found many people who blamed the soldiers, rather than the politicians, for their involvement in Vietnam. Nowadays there are many voices which were against the sending of troops to Iraq and, to a lesser degree, to Afghanistan. This adds to the mental stresses placed on returned veterans.

Compensation Payments:

The Network is unaware of what current compensation arrangements are made available to those returning from Iraq or Afghanistan.

Anecdotally, we understand from informal responses, that Afghanistan veterans receive a lump sum in the vicinity of AU\$50,000 for each completed tour of duty. This could be true, and it seems like a worthwhile initiative by the Department. Our Board member has also been told that the Department of Veterans' Affairs offers injured veterans lump sum payments which vary in relation to the severity of their condition, and this could be as much as \$200,000 for those suffering Post Traumatic Stress, as well as free medical treatment of accepted conditions. If this is true, he believes in these cases it may well be inappropriate, given that young

people would not, in many cases, have the financial expertise to manage large sums carefully. This could have the repercussions of leaving them without much of a financial future. If this scenario is true, then financial assistance should be provided to the affected veterans in managing these funds.

As mentioned, both of these scenarios were provided quite informally, and we have been unable to substantiate these claims successfully.

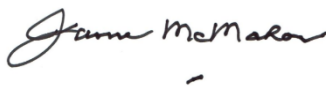
Conclusion:

In our Network's opinion and based on a lived experience of our Board member, we believe that suicide by veterans and ex-service personnel are mostly to be attributed to:

- The trauma of war experiences
- Coming home to a different world
- Stresses on relationships with partners, families and friends
- Difficulty in accepting mental health issues
- Difficulty in obtaining appropriate treatment for injuries and conditions, especially mental health conditions
- Training which focuses on developing immediate angry physical responses
- A sense of failure as a human being, and also, in that they participated in wars in which Australia does not win.

We would be pleased to provide further clarification to any points made within this Submission. Please contact me in the first instance either by phone or email to: jmcmahon@senet.com.au

Yours faithfully,



Ms Janne McMahon OAM
Chair and Executive Officer
7th October, 2016

APPENDIX I

The following story was written in 1974. It describes an actual event our Board member's life shortly after his return from Vietnam.

Tomorrow Isn't Yesterday

The guest of honour, swaying slightly, spilled beer down his shirtfront. Both bloodshot eyes surveyed the dampened shirt, and a ripple of concentration worried round his forehead. It was a warm night, and the beer was cool. So, he was lucky to be sprinkled with cool beer. The ripple vanished, reappearing immediately as a lopsided grin.

Somewhere in the throng a familiar voice talked about him. As the words floated to him through the haze the smile reached up and touched his eyes. Bruvver Bert was being concerned again.

Broken phrases filtered through.

"Thin? A mere matchstick! Gee, lost weight. Been through a terrible lot. Quiet, isn't he? Strain – hard to adjust. Isn't he thin?"

A question, seeping through from a blurred form beside him, wiped his face blank. After a long moment, the blur shrugged, flashed solemn teeth in an understanding smile, patted his shoulder, and drifted aimlessly away.

Bastards! He fumed beneath the emptied face. What was it like to be there, they ask. But that isn't what they want to know. They want blood. Did you kill anyone? What did it feel like, to kill someone? Then why the hell don't they ask me what it was like to kill someone?

Another shadow, another smile, another innocuous question. He blinked rapidly to clear away the mist and push away the anger.

"Oh, it's not such a bad place, but I wouldn't go there for a holiday, hahaha."

That wouldn't hold 'em, too bloody tired and worn. Now come the knives, digging for blood.

"But, did you see any action at all?"

Can't avoid that one. Always, they wanted the blood, and always, it hurt to remember. Why, for Christ's sake, can't I keep it bottled away from the world? Why must they always try to unscrew the bottle? Hey, that wasn't bad – keep the blood bottled, and your blood's worth bottling. Dad would've loved it.

"Sorry, just something funny I thought of: Action? Yeah, we spent a fair bit of time out in the field."

The vague shapes clustered close. This was what they wanted. Authentic war stories. The meat of the evening fresh from the butcher. Bastards! I won't give 'em anything – not a bloody morsel! Be resolute. Grim and granite-jawed rock of iron resolution. Tell 'em bloody nothing.

The grim and granite-jawed rock spilled his beer. A kindly hand with an ice-cold bottle topped up his glass.

Bruver Bert came whispering through again. "All his friends, nice – yes, beaut surprise; has been a bit moody. Can't blame."

Yes, Bertie, it was a nice welcome home party.

With the same cast as the nice going away party – mostly Bruver Bert's friends. But it wasn't the same, not the same at all. He summoned up the half-recalled memory. There had been beer. Lashings of beer, And cigarettes. Far, far too many cigarettes. And people. These same people, swept up in the false gaiety of a sad farewell. And there had been a cake. Right at the climax of the evening, a bloody great, icing-covered, sweet and sickly cake. And he had laughed and thanked Bruver Bert for the surprise party and the surprise cake, as he washed a choking slice down with beer, hoping it would stay settled in his gut, It hadn't. Please, Bertie, he pleaded silently, no bloody cake. I hate cake.

He came back with a start and an off-guard apology. "Sorry, I was years away."

"Were any of your friends hurt at all?"

Friends! Not friends! Mates! That's what you get in the army. Like relatives, you take what you bloody well get, all chucked together in adversity. You live in each others' pockets, bound by a fear much tighter than friendship. And then, when it's over, you drift away and apart. Friends are personal choices. But that doesn't matter. All they want is blood. Well, give 'em blood. NO! I won't. Stuff 'em.

"Yes, a few mates were hurt."

That won't hold 'em. Nowhere near enough. Think!

"One of the blokes in our company was the first in the battalion to get killed."

Why in hell did you say that? That's what they're after. Too clever, you silly bastard. They're still thinking friendship: they reckon we were closer than arses to underpants. All clucking and whispering in a joyous orgasm of sympathy.

"How does the loss of a mate affect you?"

Tell the truth. Shock 'em stupid. Bloody won't believe me.

"Well, you have to joke about it, to stay sane. If you brood on it, you crack up."

That hit home, all right. Soon, they'd really get into it.

Where was the Joe who went away, smiling Joe of the weak pun and the gentle poem? No one wanted laughter now, when blood was in the offing. They thirsted for blood, for strong men and heavy drama. Everyone wanted visions of hate filled faces over snipers' sights, of tracer bullets ripping brightly through night-black jungle and slant-eyed bodies, tearing, shredding: the twisted flesh jerking in oceans of technicolour blood. Tell us, they begged, let us live it all through as you recall the painful memories. Only the veneer of civilised behaviour held them to their round-about questions.

It would come. They don't know how to ask it yet, but they're working on it.

Now the group is dissolving, the murmurs are melting away. Someone, as eager as the rest, has interpreted silent blankness as stoic strongman tragedy. Watch the misty shapes fade away.

The strong, silent stoic stood alone, drinking his beer. Some of it dribbled down his chin. His eyes were glazed with memory. Or with alcohol.

“Very lucky,” averred Bruvver Bert, somewhere, to someone. “Could’ve lost the leg – went straight through, missed the bone. Wastage: inch lower, kneecap gone. Gee, certainly lucky.”

There was a thought which ebbed and flowed at the corners of his consciousness. With agonised effort, he concentrated, trying to pin it down. He felt it hammering importantly for release. Triumphantly, he seized it, and set it in his mind.

“Do you know,” he stated firmly to no one in particular, “Do you really know what I looked forward to most on coming home?” the words slurred as he repeated them emphatically. He tongued his lips to wipe away the furriness.

He had them now. The silence clamoured expectantly. The shapes watched and waited. The pause lengthened. This was desperately important, but he couldn’t quite remember why.

“What I would have given quids for,” heavily underlining each word, “was a pint of good old full cream milk. Plain old cow juice.”

The hush dissembled into uncomprehending murmurs. The hazy listeners didn’t understand. What the hell was so funny about it, anyway? Milk. Of course! He remembered vividly that driving, half-crazed, raging thirst for milk – and yet, here he was, drunk as a skunk, and not one drop of pasteurised had passed his lips all night. Para-bloody-doxical! Simple enough to work out, however. When you have the little luxuries of everyday life, you don’t want ‘em, but when they’re missing, you want them, oh, so much.

It was like friends. The people who aren’t here tonight. Friends. I only ever had a few, and they don’t want to know me, now. The ones you almost wept over when they did write or because they didn’t. Who meant so much when they weren’t there and who mean so little now. And these people tonight, they don’t know. They are whispers and I want statements. They are questions and I am seeking answers. And they don’t know how to approach me. Because I am alien. I am a mongrel mixture of big words and little words, an uneven blend of commonness and refinement. I no longer fit in where I once did. I should, yet I can’t.

Why am I drinking so much beer? There is so much beer, so why should I want it? If I liked it, I wouldn’t be spilling so much. Ah! Beer fits the image of the rough, tough man of action. I can’t step out of character. But, who cast me as that? I am only me. Yes, but this is what my public wants, here, now, tonight. Hard, bloody, uncouth.

The rough, tough, rugged man of action dropped his glass. It hit the floor but did not break, and beer sprinkled his shoes and splashed the floor. Lithely, he swooped down to pick up the glass. Unexpectedly, he landed heavily on the worn lino. Slowly, awkwardly, he stumbled to his feet. At least he had the glass. And a wet arse. The situation called for another cigarette. He fumbled one somehow from the packet and accepted a light from a hand which stretched down from a smiling cloud. He mumbled thanks, and retreated into his fuzzy mind.

Another voice was pounding at the curtain. What was the question? What WAS the question? Search and recall. Search and destroy. That’s more like it. You are tearing me down with your questions and you are tearing yourselves down too. Think. Hold hard. Regroup. Smile, be nice. What did he say? The bastard. This is the start of the big ones. Did I ever have to shoot at anyone? Not, ‘did I’, but ‘did I have to’. Cunning. How do I approach this? The track is treacherous; the way is fraught with booby traps. Control your shattered, scattered self-control. It is hard to be funny, when you are drunk, and self-pitying.

“Well, I WAS in the infantry, and we WERE taught to obey orders immediately, without asking questions. So, on some occasions, I did shoot. Mind you, I was always a lousy shot.”

Too stilted. Have to pad it out, get them off that one. Make it clear.

“Actually, I don’t think I ever shot anyone, and I hope to never find out that I did.”

That might shut ‘em up. Doubt it. They haven’t had their blood yet. Why don’t they let me forget it? Hell, why forget? You are a momentary hero. This is centre stage and you’re right there, in the middle of it. Isn’t that what you’ve always craved? Adulation. Here it is. You can feel them, hanging on words. NO! Not like this, Of course I want to be admired and esteemed and befriended – doesn’t everyone? But, not like this. For something else. Not for this. Not for talking death and blood and glory, for slashing bare the memory of maimed flesh and sightless eyes, for vomiting out the horror of a bullet-riddled, maggot-eaten, fly-infested, seven day dead body.

The momentary hero shivered. The ghostly half-seen faces shimmered close around him. An invisible hand refilled his glass from a visible, tilted bottle.

People hurt. He only wanted yesterday back, the happy warmth of friendship. And they only wanted the war. To shoot and be shot at. The fear came back, the soul-wrenching feelings of dying, violently, so far from home. His fingers locked tightly round the glass as the dread flowed back into his churning gut. He heard clearly the whine of bullets through bamboo, and he saw himself clutching at the hard dirt, sweating and waiting for eternity. He peered again through the sight of the black Armalite, but he couldn’t see anyone out there. But they were there. They were shooting. Little Bill lay pale and shaking, cracking weak and painful jokes as his blood soaked into the dry grey dust from his shattered, severed arm, torn off at the shoulder. Joe was glad he couldn’t see them, and he set his Armalite on single shot instead of automatic. It was justified, you can’t shoot what you can’t see, and he never wanted, ever, to see anyone. The feeling ate deep into his mind again, of wishing to die himself, almost, rather than to kill another. And wanting so utterly to live.

A friendly arm draped itself around his shoulders, jostling him, startled, back to the party. They had gathered close again, and expectancy and settled heavily on the room. Something was Going To Happen! It happened. Yesterday returned. The out-of-focus Bruvver Bert, with due pomp and self-importance, placed a bloody great icing-covered cake before him! He loathed cake. Particularly iced cake. Especially iced cake with a red flower and a blue map of Queensland on it. This cake. Yet, here it was again. The nightmare as before.

“Oo, lovely, cut it, isn’t it gorgeous? Almost a shame to cut it”, babbled the blurs, arranged haphazardly around the room.

A knife was placed in his reluctant hand. He raised it high and contorted his face into its most grotesque setting, held the pose. Someone clicked a shutter, and the knife plunged savagely down through Queensland, embedding itself somewhere near Emerald.

A camera! Why would anyone want to take a photograph? Photographs brought back the past. And he had sought the future in them. All of them, flat black and white snaps, and glorious three-dimensional mental pictures in living colour. He had fed his memory on these people. Beautiful was the tapestry he had woven about them, dreaming happily by recalling the past. Now he knew. Tomorrow could not be built on yesterday.

Because it was tomorrow, and they were here, but unrecognisable in their stuttering, vague and merging shapes, so totally different from the sharp, clear pictures he had carried for twelve months. Grand illusion crumbling to empty disillusionment. They were the right people, but it was the wrong time. The only part salvaged from the past had been the cake. Perhaps, it was always going to be like this.

The guest of honour stood beside his cake, a huge and heartless hammer crushing his dreams, relentlessly pounding at his caved-in mind, forcing the silent tears out into the corners of his eyes. What a bastard! What a bloody, rotten bastard!

APPENDIX II

This poem was written in the early 2000s. It relates to our Board member's continuing struggle with his memories and his Post Traumatic Stress.

Forbidden Thoughts, Unbidden, Come

*Death often comes to visit me,
And asks if I would like to take his hand;
He says he'll set my demons free,
And we will go together from this tortured, crippled land.
Insistent, like a beating drum,
Forbidden thoughts, unbidden, come.*

*Sometimes I find I really want to go,
To where my troubled soul might find release;
Without the pain and memories that bring me low;
To lie in quiet darkness and the nothingness of peace.*

*I care too much for others, yet I do not care for me,
It would hurt them if I chose to seek that dreamless, endless sleep.
Almost every day I long for Death to set me free,
But the chains of love are anchored far too deep.*

*But, should the loved ones in my life all walk away,
And leave me here, alone, without a friend,
Then there would be no reasons left for me to stay;
I could walk the lonely back road to that sudden, long-sought end.
Insistent, like a beating drum,
Forbidden thoughts, unbidden, come.*