

JULY 2006

# VETERANS' AFFAIRS NEWSLETTER

From the Federal Shadow Minister for Veterans' Affairs



This year has seen several changes in the Howard Government Ministry, including another change of guard for the Minister for Veterans' Affairs with Bruce Billson being appointed in late January.

I join many others in the veterans' community in passing on my congratulations to Mr Billson.

The job of Minister for Veterans' Affairs is a challenging one which requires an in-depth understanding on a broad range of complex issues.

Real and tangible results will require more than the usual fare of platitudes, speeches and ribbon cutting.

The new Minister must pass the test that his predecessors failed. He must go into the cabinet room and fight for the changes needed for our veterans' community.

The new Minister has started out well and I welcome Mr Billson's sensible decision in following Labor's policy of declaring service in Rwanda 'warlike'. There are, however, many more challenges ahead and we wait to see if the Minister can deliver results.

## Alan Griffin MP

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## Rwanda – our ADF members get recognition

More than 630 members of the Australian Defence Force members in Rwanda (1994 – 1995) will now have their service classified as "warlike".

Australia deployed more than 630 ADF members to Rwanda in 1994 and 1995 in Operation Tamar. The Australian personnel were largely a medical team whose task was to provide care to those who survived massacres which led to the death of over one million Tutsis and moderate Hutus.

The soldiers were at risk and experienced horrible circumstances including life threatening events during the massacre of up to 8,000 men, women and children at the Kibeyo refugee camp in April 1995. Preceding the Australian contingent's arrival ten Belgian soldiers were captured, tortured and then hacked to death.

Prior to all deployments of the ADF overseas, Cabinet on the recommendation of the Minister for Defence determines a classification of

risk for the purposes of benefits under the Veterans' Entitlements Act.

The reclassification means that members of the ADF that served in Rwanda will have their service classified as "warlike". This means that under the Veterans Entitlements Act they will have access to the service pension at 60 and the Gold Card at age 70.

The ALP announced its policy earlier this year to reclassify the service and called on the government to do the same. On the day that Labor introduced a motion in Parliament to debate the issue, the government agreed to reclassify their service as warlike.

The government announced \$2.0 million in the 2006-07 Budget to facilitate this reclassification.

These men and women of the Australian Defence Forces who served so gallantly through unimaginable horror, deserve the support of a grateful nation.



*Gitarama, Rwanda. 29/09/1994. Local inhabitants line up outdoors, possibly to receive medical treatment from a couple of members of the Australian Medical Support Force. One of the young boys takes something, possibly a sweet, from the hand of an Australian who is kneeling down. The Australian Medical Support Force was in Rwanda as part of UNAMIR (United Nations Assistance Mission in Rwanda) (peacekeeping). It provided medical treatment for UN troops deployed to repatriate refugees affected by the civil war, and to provide humanitarian assistance to local people. Australian War Memorial MSU/94/0014/31*

# Federal Budget 2006

This year's federal budget, presented by the government in May, was on the whole a non-event for the veterans' community.

The major announcements in the Veterans' Affairs portfolio included:

- \$20 million extra funding for mental health initiatives;
- funding for activities to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan;
- funding for memorials in France;
- an increase in the scheduled fees for community nurses;
- increase in funeral benefits under the Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act;
- funding for the introduction of the Smart Card; and
- \$1,000 bonus payment for veterans' carers.

## Memorial reconstruction at Le Hamel

Labor questioning revealed the announcement of \$7.9 million for the reconstruction of the Australian Corps Memorial at Le Hamel in France was being provided because the current memorial (built in 1998 at a cost of \$1.3 million) needed to be bulldozed due to faulty construction. The failed attempts at fixing the problem have resulted in its deterioration to the point it is now covered in netting to ensure the safety of tourists.

## DVA Smart Card

Labor questioned the Government on the \$15.5 million in the budget being used to introduce the new



Smart Card to DVA. The DVA health cards will change in their appearance but will retain a unique DVA branding. While there are no concrete details on these changes as yet, department officials did confirm that they will be consulting with the veterans' community on these changes.

## Mental health

The \$20 million extra funding in mental health will be spread over a wide range of projects, many as yet unannounced or undecided. When questioned on the details, a departmental official told Labor that the funds would go to "a long list of largely small initiatives that go to a number of different categories". These included mental health education programs for GPs, self help tools for the Right Mix website and extensions to lifestyle management programs.

## Funeral benefits

Funeral benefits payable under the Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act and the Safety Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 1988 were increased to an

upper limit of \$9,000, a total cost in the budget of \$152,000 over 4 years.

When asked why these extensions did not flow onto the VEA, the Secretary of DVA replied "the increase in the funeral benefit allowed under the MRCA followed a decision by the Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations to improve the funeral benefit available under the Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation Act. The funeral allowance under the VEA was more a repatriation based benefit, which was a contribution towards funeral expenses".

## \$10 million unexplained

There was also \$10 million in the budget listed as "Decision taken but not yet announced". When questioned by Labor on what this was for and why the Government would not specify to the Australian public what it was doing with \$10 million of their money, the Secretary of DVA finally responded with "I am not even going to get into why Governments do this; they can".

## VVCS for children of Vietnam veterans

The ALP has announced its policy intention to ensure that counselling services currently available to the children of Vietnam veterans over the age of 36 remain available.

At the Vietnam Veterans Federation of Australia's National Executive Meeting held on 5 April 2006, Alan Griffin announced Labor's policy to fund the extension of the service.

The VVCS has traditionally been available to the sons and daughters of Vietnam Veterans up to the age of 36. In 2001 however, the Minister for Veterans' Affairs announced that for a five year period all children of Vietnam veterans, regardless of age, would be eligible to receive assistance from the VVCS.

The then Minister stated in 2001 that DVA would review the extension before it ended in June 2006 to see if it was still needed.

There were more than 460 Vietnam veterans' children over the age of 36 using the service in 2005, making a total of 2,403 Vietnam veterans' children using the service across Australia.

While the Government has indicated it will follow Labor's lead, it has yet to formalise the new arrangements. In Senate Estimates on 1 June 2006, the Secretary of DVA in answer to questions from Labor stated that "the Repatriation Commission will make a new determination" and "it is a matter of process now to go through".

## No explanation for missing medals



*Australian Defence Force Personnel in Iraq. Photo: Department of Defence*

Continuing unexplained Government delays on issuing medals still rob current and ex-servicemen and women of the opportunity to wear medals honouring their service.

The government's promises on medal issues have been left unfulfilled and no feasible explanations have been given as to why these medals are still missing in action.

"Whatever the reason for these offensive delays, the truth is that recognition delayed is recognition denied," Labor's spokesman on medals, Graham Edwards said.

Campaign medals for some Australian Defence Force troops, who faced the enemy in Afghanistan and Iraq still encounter continued delays in having their service recognised.

In August 2005, the former Minister assisting the Minister for Defence, De-Anne Kelly promised that

"campaign medals for Australian Defence Force personnel who served in Afghanistan and Iraq are set to be issued by year's end" and that "the first issue of these campaign medals should occur before the end of 2005."

The campaign medals were formally approved by the Queen and confirmed in October 2004 and a contract for the manufacture of the campaign medals was signed on 26 April 2005, yet the medals are being denied to ADF personnel.

The continuing fiasco surrounding the newly created Australian Defence Medal (ADM) has once again shown the Government wanting when it comes to these issues and veterans issues in general.

Mr Edwards said that past and present defence force members were entitled to be treated with a great deal more respect than the Government is giving them.

## Graham Edwards to retire

Graham Edwards, one of the most respected advocates for veterans in the Commonwealth Parliament, will be retiring at the next election. He is heading off to spend more time with his wife and children.

Graham served in Vietnam. In 1970 he was injured when an M16 landmine exploded resulting in the loss of both his legs.

Graham has had a long and distinguished political career. He was first elected to the Western Australian Legislative Council and held a variety of Ministerial positions (including Police and Emergency Services, Sport and Recreation, Racing and Gambling, and the Aged).

In 1998 Graham was first elected as the Federal Member for Cowan, then re-elected in 2001 and 2004. He is currently the Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Defence and Veterans' Affairs.

Throughout his career Graham has been a tireless advocate for veterans from all conflicts. He will continue to play a pivotal role in determining and drafting Labor's veterans' policy.



Graham Edwards – Shadow Parliamentary Secretary (Defence and Veterans' Affairs)

## Air Force Medic on crashed Sea King asked for proof

Air Force Medic Scott Nichols was travelling aboard the Sea King helicopter that was assisting residents of the earthquake devastated island of Nias.

The helicopter crashed killing nine of the eleven ADF personnel on board.

When Mr Nichols first applied to DVA under the MCRS, he was asked for proof that he was there and involved in the crash. This happened despite his story of survival and courage having been highlighted in newspapers and television reports across Australia.

It has taken DVA over a year to recognise many of the injuries suffered by Mr Nichols.

Liability has been accepted for injuries to his leg, teeth and bruising, PTSD, knee and ankle



Sea King helicopter. Photo: Department of Defence

damage but no responsibility has been accepted for inhalation of toxic fumes.

The Howard government promised they would be taken care of without delay. But Mr Nichols has not seen one cent of compensation.

The government must do more to ensure the timely and efficient processing of the claims by injured ADF personnel.

## F-111 deseal/reseal compensation update

In response to questions from Senator Mark Bishop (Shadow Minister for Defence Industry, Procurement and Personnel) to the Minister for Veterans' Affairs it was revealed that after six months only half the number of claims under the F-111 ex-gratia compensation scheme have been processed. 10% of claims have been rejected and almost 600 claims have yet to be determined.

522 victims have lodged claims for disability compensation under the Veterans Entitlements Act 1986 with

a further 499 victims claiming compensation under the Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 1988.

The scheme does not provide for civilians or public servants employed on the project prior to 11 November 1991 and no provision is made for widows or deceased estates for any death before 8 September 2001.

The Minister has confirmed that one claim was rejected because the victim died before September 2001.

# Health study updates

## Children of Vietnam Veterans Health Study

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs has stated that the feasibility study on the Children of Vietnam Veterans Health Study has been completed and the scientific advisory committee's recommendations are being considered by the government.

The Minister said "although the report proposes a pilot study that will take some years to complete, I am keen to pursue a staged approach to see work commence this year over a much shorter research period."

In response to Labor's questions in Senate Estimates, the Secretary of DVA revealed the pilot study will look at the possible methodologies on how to conduct the main study and if there is an actual basis for a further study. The Secretary said that the pilot study could take three years to complete and they are looking at ways to shorten that time.

The Secretary stated that:

- the Minister has made announcements that he intends to pursue a continuing study of the international research and Australian research on intergenerational effects of

warfare to alert him as to whether any new evidence emerges;

- there is some concern as to whether the study can cover all arms of the service and these have yet to be addressed; and
- they do not believe they can cover women veterans in Vietnam and the children of women veterans.

We await the formal response from the Minister, the release on of the feasibility report and further announcements on the "staged approach".

Labor was committed at the last election to fund such a study and remains committed to action on this issue.

## Atomic Test Veterans Health Study

All surviving Australians who took part in British nuclear tests in Australia between 1952 and 1963 will be eligible for cancer treatment under a policy announced by the federal government at the release of the Australian Participants in British Nuclear Tests in Australia Cancer Incidence and Mortality Study on 28 June 2006.

The report found that while cancer rates were higher in atomic test

veterans it could find no connection between exposure to radiation in the tests and the rate of cancer in those who took part.

Labor will be consulting with veterans' groups in the coming months to examine the reports and the adequacy of the government's response. A more detailed analysis of the report and the government's response will be included in the next edition of the newsletter.

## Vietnam Veterans Cancer Incidence and Mortality Study

In February the Secretary of DVA stated the studies "will be with government in the first quarter of this year".

In the Herald Sun on 20 March a spokesman for the Minister said the Minister expected the report to be released "in the next four weeks".

On the 31 May, almost six weeks after that deadline, the Minister stated "the first three reports – covering cancer incidence, mortality and national servicemen, will be received shortly".

In Senate Estimates on 1 June 2006, the Secretary of DVA said "we will be having the commission look at that report as early as tomorrow".

## Update on auctioned Changi flag

**In the previous newsletter it was revealed that one of the Changi Prison Camp flags was up for auction on E-Bay.**

We can now reveal that the flag was purchased for \$28,500 by sisters Mary-Ann and Sally McKenzie who intend to have it displayed in their family run nursing home in Murwillumbah NSW.

The sisters, who bought the flag to prevent it going overseas, stated they would eventually like to see the flag back in Melbourne.

## Anzac Cove construction problems still not fixed

Alan Griffin congratulated those involved in the organisation of the ANZAC Day ceremonies at Anzac Cove this year. The event was both successful and well run. However, there is no doubt the roads are still a mess.

Evidence given in Senate Estimates has shown that the problems which plagued the constructions at Anzac Cove last year have failed to be resolved and continue to multiply.

The Minister announced before Anzac Day this year that temporary repairs would be required. The road had deteriorated over winter and DVA had significant concerns about the capacity of the road to support the commemoration.

But the Secretary of DVA Mr Sullivan said before the Senate recently that the road had also suffered some distress as a result of Anzac Day, and whilst there were temporary repairs, the road has deteriorated since. Mr Sullivan said "I think it would be

fair to say that the current state of the road is fair to poor".

Yet still one year on the Government will be sending more representatives to Turkey to meet with the Turkish Government to discuss the road and if necessary, initiate further design and re-design work, repair and construction work and Cove protection work.

This work should have been done over a year ago to ensure that any work undertaken not only respected the importance of the military historical site, but was also sustainable beyond a twelve month period.

Questions still remain unanswered by the Government over a number of other issues:

- the Archaeological and Historical surveys have not begun despite the Prime Minister's assurances in April 2005 that they were "going to be done quickly" nor what the scope and the criteria are for the survey; and
- the government has still failed to provide a response to the Senate Majority report on the Gallipoli constructions.

It's time the Government acted to ensure that no further damage is done to Anzac Cove.

## Anzac Day and industrial relations laws

The Anzac Day public holiday and penalty rates paid to employees who have to work on Anzac Day remain under threat from the Howard Government's extreme industrial relations laws.

As part of his industrial relations changes, Mr Howard has given employers the power to treat Anzac Day like any other working day.

And if Australian employees want to take the day off, they will have to justify to their employer why they should be allowed to do so.

Labor believes that Anzac Day is a unique day, crucial to the Australian identity.

In June this year, Kim Beazley stated "I give this oath: As Prime Minister I will restore penalty rates for public holidays".

Labor believes that Australian families have a right to enjoy and observe public holidays such as Anzac Day.



Road works at Gallipoli.  
Photos: Bill Sellars

# Dioxins on RAN ships in Vietnam

Research conducted by the National Research Centre on Environmental Toxicology (NRCET) has shown that Royal Australian Navy and some Australian Army personnel serving in the Vietnam War could have been exposed to dioxins in contaminated drinking water.

In 1997 the Vietnam Veteran Mortality Study showed elevated mortality rates among RAN personnel, particularly RAN Logistic Support personnel. Exposure to herbicides through the evaporative water distillation processes on RAN ships was thought to be one of the causes.

The tests conducted by NRCET found that dioxins could pass through the evaporative distillation process and thus remain in the drinking water resulting in the possible consumption of dioxin levels exceeding the safety levels proposed by the National Health and Medical Research Council.

In Senate Estimates on 15 February this year, Labor Senator Annette Hurley questioned the government on its response to the NRCET report and on its intention to inform the veteran community of possible effects.

The Secretary of DVA, Mr Mark Sullivan stated in response to the NRCET report that the Repatriation Medical Authority (RMA) has been reviewing various Statement of Principles (SoP's) and had amended a number of SoP's covering non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, myeloma, Hodgkin's lymphoma and malignant neoplasm of the prostate.



*Members of the Royal Australian Navy transferring cargo from one ship to another. Australian War Memorial P01492.003*

Mr Sullivan stated that the RMA had also considered potable water factors in the SoP's for diabetes, myelitis, chronic lymphoid leukaemia or chronic myeloid leukaemia but has not included those in the statements of principles. And that the RMA is still considering the medical and scientific evidence for the inclusion of a potable water factor in the investigations for malignant neoplasm of the lung, soft tissue, sarcoma, malignant neoplasm of the larynx and acute myeloid leukaemia.

When asked if DVA was aware of which RAN ships and veterans could be at risk, Mr Sullivan stated "we are not the people to know where defence ships took water. We get involved in that if a claim is made. On the basis of their military service we will then investigate whether that illness may have been caused by water, and then we will rely on the RMA in respect of its statements of principles for an assessment to determine the

linkage. But we do not hold records of what naval ships did where."

In response to Senator Hurley's question if DVA was planning to mount an information campaign on this issue Mr Sullivan replied "The information campaign to veterans is the same one. Whatever issue we talk about, we do not ever require a veteran to know that their condition is the result of an intake of water on a ship. What we encourage all veterans to do, if they are unwell or have a condition or disease and they have any suspicion that that condition is related to their service, is to put in a claim. We will investigate it."

Mr Sullivan stated that if veterans or war widows had previously applied for DVA benefits and were refused, and they believe that the new research provided by the NRCET study could see an acceptance of a disease or condition, then they should be encouraged to resubmit their claim.

## Dedication of memorial plaque by the Malaya and Borneo Veterans Association of Victoria

Commencing with the arrival of RAAF aircraft and personnel into Singapore in 1950 and ending with the last tour of duty of 2RAR in 1963 the Malayan Emergency was the longest continuous military commitment in Australia's history.

Across the 13 years, 39 Australian servicemen were killed in Malaya and 29 were wounded.

Their primary objective was to squash communist insurgencies in Malaya by the Malayan Communist Party – a by-product of the anti Japanese guerrilla movement during the Second World War.

Because of the sensitivities of the operations at the time very little was reported by the Australian press about the Indonesian Confrontation.

Starting in 1962 and ending in 1966, the confrontation between Commonwealth countries under British command and on behalf of Malaya against Indonesia, 23 Australians were killed and eight wounded.

The Australian Armed Forces service to our nation and region was recently honoured with the dedication of a Memorial Plaque by the Malaya and Borneo Veterans Association in Victoria.

The memory of their service and for those who gave the ultimate sacrifice will be forever honoured by this plaque unveiled by their comrades at the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne – Lest We Forget.



*Dedication of Malaya and Borneo Memorial Plaque at the Shrine of Remembrance.  
Hank Seys, Alan Griffin and Colin Quinn*



*Kim Beazley and Federal Member for Ballarat Catherine King at the Ballarat POW Memorial*

## Ballarat POW Memorial

Opposition Leader Kim Beazley has stated that a Labor Government would declare the Prisoner of War Memorial in Ballarat a national memorial.

Mr Beazley said during a recent visit to the memorial "I think it's a marvellous memorial. I have a small personal stake in it, a tiny personal stake in that my uncle, whom I never knew because I was born after the war, was killed on the Montevideo Maru and his experience is reflected in that memorial. So, I think it should be a national memorial".

This comes after repeated refusals by the government and Veterans' Affairs Ministers, including the current Minister, to act to declare the memorial a national memorial.

At the last election, Labor promised to contribute \$150,000 to Ballarat City Council towards the cost of maintaining the POW memorial. This new commitment comes as part of Labor's renewal of policy and a sign of its continuing commitment to honour and commemorate Australia's veterans.