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**OUR SERVICE MEN AND WOMEN MUST STILL FEEL VALUED AFTER
THEY LEAVE THE MILITARY**

When Bradley Carr enlisted in the Australian Army as an enthusiastic 22 year old from Charters Towers, could anyone have imagined it would end like this? Not Private Paul Warren, who served alongside Brad in Afghanistan, and certainly not his proud parents, Glenda Weston and Wayne Carr as they watched him don the khaki for the first time. Yet the tragic suicide of Bradley as reported in this paper is sadly far from an isolated occurrence amongst our vets.

Bradley spent five years in the Army wearing our nation's uniform. He saw active service in Afghanistan in 2009 for eight months and witnessed the explosion which killed his friend, Private Benjamin Ranaudo and he was there when Private Paul Warren lost his leg. Having left the Army, Bradley experienced Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and then wrestled with the Department of Veterans Affairs for six years seeking access to a Gold Card.

Having been finally granted the Gold Card in 2018, Bradley took his own life on Anzac Day this year.

Bradley's story is desperately sad. It speaks to an acute pain that can only be understood by the families of the victims of suicide. It is a deafening statement of the manifest wrong that those who are willing to make the ultimate sacrifice

are dying in greater numbers by their own hand than on the battlefield. And, it ought to be deeply troubling to any fair minded Australian who stands with a solemn gratitude to all those who have served in the Australian Defence Force.

In the aftermath of World War I, hundreds of thousands of Australians returned from the War in Europe permanently and deeply scarred by the horrors of Gallipoli and the Western Front. How they coped – or didn't – and how that in turn profoundly impacted their families and children and shaped the generations to come remains one of the great untold stories of our nation. The level of understanding about PTSD was rudimentary.

The support for their mental health provided by government was non-existent. This happened right through to the Vietnam War; veterans struggled to process their own exposure to the trauma of war and help was severely limited.

Today we know much more.

And yet it is still not enough. The rates at which those who have served take their lives is 2.2 times higher compared to Australian men of the same age. Knowing that one veteran's suicide is one too many, it is incumbent on the nation to find an answer.

Over the last three years I have been privileged in my role as the Shadow Minister for Defence to witness at close quarters the way our Defence Force operates. Every single task a soldier, sailor or aviator undertakes is done with complete and total competence. All our service men and women act out of a commitment to an ideal bigger than themselves, namely Australia. And it is the place which exhibits the greatest expression of team that I have ever seen.

From day one it is instilled into every soldier the critical importance of the individual submitting to the collective. And at the end of the day all soldiers stand ready to lay down their lives for their comrades in arms.

There is a dignified beauty in this ethos which gives all those who serve an unusually strong sense of belonging and identity.

In addition to having witnessed the trials of war, when veterans cease to be members of the Australian Defence Force to what extent do they lose this sense of identity and belonging? These are needs which are central to the human condition. Their denial must be profound. And so in turn the question must be asked as to the extent to which the ADF continues to view veterans as part of the family.

In the United States veterans are able to continue to enjoy many of the facilities on base from the gym to commissaries. It's a small gesture but an important one. American society embraces veterans as they do serving military in a very different way than we do in Australia. Yet in Australia when people leave the ADF they leave much of the life which goes with it.

Whether this forms part of the answer or the causes of veterans' suicide lie elsewhere, we must solve the problem. Be it the Productivity Commission, or even something more, every option needs to be on the table.

But equally it is incumbent on all Australians to do more than simply express their gratitude on ANZAC Day to those who have served, and instead let veterans know whenever we encounter them, that they have permanently earned the respect and thanks of a grateful nation.

Lifeline 13 11 14

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