

DECEMBER 2006

# VETERANS' AFFAIRS NEWSLETTER

From the Federal Shadow Minister for Veterans' Affairs



It's been a busy period in the Veterans' calendar. With significant anniversaries including Long Tan, Fromelles, Maralinga and the Battle for Australia. Legacy Week also came and went and by all accounts was a great success.

The RSL held its 90th National Congress in WA.

I welcome the Government's long over due decision to address problems with the Gold and White Card Schemes. However much remains to be done. I remain particularly concerned with the continuing erosion of income payments, the lack of progress on the Children of Vietnam Veterans' Health Study and the increasing times taken to process claims by the Department. Labor will be working hard on all of these issues and many more in the coming year.

I'd like to take this opportunity to convey my warmest greetings for the approaching holiday season and my very best wishes for the New Year ahead.

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## Battle for Australia anniversary



*William Dargie painted RAAF Kittyhawk Squadron at Milne Bay, August-September 1942 in 1969. He was able to capture both the feeling and the physical details of the campaign. The painting can be found in Bradbury Aircraft Hall, beside a Kittyhawk aircraft that was flown during the Battle of Milne Bay. Image 27628\_2 Courtesy of the Australian War Memorial*

On 6th September veterans around the country gathered at events organised by the Battle for Australia Commemoration Committee to remember the sacrifices made by those who stemmed the Japanese invasion of our region from 1941 until the end of WW2.

Since 1998 the Battle for Australia Council has worked tirelessly to educate the Australian public on the long campaign that saved this country from invasion.

At Melbourne's Shrine of Remembrance more than 100 veterans joined event organiser Ted Lynes to commemorate this defining time in Australia's history.

In Sydney a service was held at the cenotaph in Martin Place and was

attended by two Papua New Guineans, or 'Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels', who helped care for wounded Australian soldiers along the Kokoda Track.

In Canberra the Governor-General, Major General Michael Jeffery, delivered a commemorative address at the Australian War Memorial.

Wartime Labor leader John Curtin perhaps best summed up the situation facing the nation, stating "It is now work or fight as we have never worked or fought before. On what we do now depends everything we hope to do when this bloody test has been survived".

Labor remains committed to an official Battle for Australia Day.

## Gold Card

According to a recent survey by Australia's peak medical body, the AMA, there has been a considerable decline in specialist services available to veterans. A recent article in their journal highlighted the continuing problem that veterans face when they are trying to access specialist medical health services.

Increased access to the Gold Card has been a priority for veterans' groups and the Minister's recent announcement of a major funding boost is to be welcomed. It should be rolled out quickly and comprehensively.

According to AMA president Dr Mukesh Haikerwal, the Gold Card scheme has not been properly indexed to rising medical costs for some time and those on similar schemes are getting better health care than veterans.

The AMA's survey of 1800 specialists revealed more than 40% of the respondents were unable to treat all veterans who hold a Gold Card. This figure has almost doubled within the past two years since the AMA conducted similar research in 2004.

The Government's announcement of a major cash injection will hopefully go a long way to ensure access to medical services for eligible Veterans.

## Merchant Navy Day

The Merchant Navy War Service League celebrated Merchant Navy Day with a service at Stella Maris Chapel, Melbourne with Father Luis Vergara presiding over the mass.

Merchant Navy Day is celebrated on the 3 September each year, three days prior to the Battle for Australia anniversary.

The MNWSL Committee has been elected for the coming year at the AGM. Office bearers include Lou Guihenneuc (National President), Peter Vaudry (Secretary), and Trevor Langford (Vice President).

## Writeway Research Services

A number of concerns regarding the operations and conduct of Writeway Research Services and its representatives have been raised with Labor by the veterans' community.

Writeway Research Services is a private company contracted by DVA to investigate historical facts relating to Veteran's claims for compensation.

The Shadow Minister is very concerned that the methods used by Writeway in their collection of data may be causing an unnecessary level of emotional distress. Veterans, when in the process of making a claim, are often in a vulnerable position and should be treated with a very high level of care and respect.

Labor believes that any historical researchers used by the Department should be properly trained to conduct specialised and sensitive

work. They should also be in full compliance with any relevant federal, state or territory laws.

Labor will continue to raise this issue with the Minister and in parliament until it is clear that veterans are being treated with the respect they deserve. If you have any concerns with the treatment of your own claim please do not hesitate to contact my office.

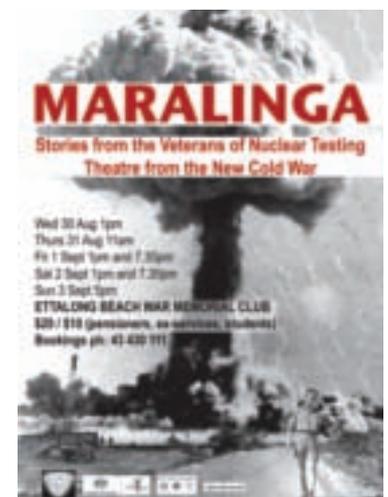
## Maralinga Play

Congratulations to the Australian Nuclear Veterans' Association (ANVA) on the launch of their new play *Maralinga*, a story of the British atomic tests in Australia.

The play is about the young healthy servicemen who embarked on an exciting secret mission in the 1950's. Now many of them are ill or have died young.

Writer/producer Paul Brown worked with Australian and British veterans and researchers for three years to create *Maralinga*. The release marked the 50th anniversary of the first atomic test and was launched at the new Ettalong Beach War Memorial Club.

By all accounts the play was very successful and there are plans for a national tour next year.



## Long Tan Anniversary



*Kim Beazley with Australian singer Patricia Thelma 'Little Pattie' Amphlett. Little Pattie at the age of 17, entertained troops during the Vietnam War. Performing in Nui Dat, Vietnam, Pattie was heard by soldiers before they embarked on the Battle of Long Tan. In belated recognition, she received medals in 1994 for her service to the Australian Defence Forces. In addition to her music career, Pattie was a member of the Council for the Australian War Memorial from 1995 until 1998, and received an Order of Australia Medal in 2003.*

The 40th anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan undoubtedly helped to raise public awareness of issues unique to Vietnam Veterans' and their families.

Largely a time for Vets to remember their fallen comrades, the media focus on the events at Nui Dat in August 1966 raised questions about how the nation views this chapter of our history.

Memorials held around the country celebrated the extraordinary efforts of the 108 Australian and New Zealand soldiers who successfully defended the base at Nui Dat against 2,500 Viet Cong troops. They also mourned the 18 who never returned from the battlefield.

While the focus of this year's ceremonies was on the Battle of Long Tan it should be remembered that commemorations were for all of our brave young men and women who went to Vietnam.

## From Graham Edwards' letter to Kim Beazley

**In a motion before parliament commemorating the 40th anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan, Kim Beazley read from a letter from Graham Edwards. Here are some excerpts from that letter.**

"...I noted that at the launch of the book *Vietnam Our War – Our Peace* the Minister for Veterans Affairs offered an apology to Vietnam Veterans' for the actions of all who opposed the war.

...many good Australians opposed that war and not all who opposed the war took it out on the troops. My father for instance strongly opposed the war. I remember too that Senator John Wheeldon, a former Labor Minister for Repatriation, was a bitter opponent of the war but he was incredibly compassionate toward the individual veterans and strongly supportive of their needs.

Equally it should be said that not all who supported the war supported the troops, and even to this day many Vietnam Veterans refuse to join the RSL because of the treatment they received on their return home.

...today is not a day to enter into the divisive issues surrounding Australia's involvement in that war. Today is a day when our Federal Parliament should honour our

Vietnam Veterans, recognise their service and say to them that they did a good job in the best tradition of the Anzacs.

It is also a time when we should remember the sacrifice of those who did not come home at all. It is a day when we should remember the Regulars and the National Service men who confronted their enemy on his home ground and who never took a backward step.

To say to them, our veterans, that we understand the difficulties of those who suffer Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and that we recognise and respect the love and loyalty of the families of veterans, particularly the wives, the partners and the children.

...I think it is also a time to reflect on the horror of war, the lasting trauma of those involved and the terror and suffering of innocent civilians caught in the devastation of war.

...I am proud to have served my nation and proud of all who served with me. I am proud of my mates and the contribution they made to Australia. I take pride in their mateship. I don't need anyone's apology for that."



# From Alan Griffin's Shadow Minister RSL National Congress

**Over the last year I've learnt a lot about the issues in the Veterans Affairs portfolio. I've done this by listening to representatives of ex-service organisations, as well as individual veterans and their families.**

## Health care

Health care issues are clearly an area of major concern. For older veterans, access to good quality aged care services continues to be a huge priority. I welcome the success of the Veterans' Home and Community Care program as a good practical measure taken by the Government, and fully supported by Labor.

We must continue to examine this area and make sure that we are adequately addressing what is fast becoming one of the most important areas for older veterans.

## Mental health

Mental health issues are a central part of the health concerns facing many veterans and certainly a major and growing area for the department in terms of dealing with the needs of veterans. The Government with respect to the broader community put forward a \$1.9 billion package for mental health in its last budget.

But in the context of the Veterans' Affairs portfolio only some \$20 million was put forward in new expenditure for dealing with mental health issues. I welcome that \$20 million but again I do not think that we can stand here today and say that it is enough to deal with the many issues facing the veterans' community.

## Health studies

Health studies, their establishment, conduct and response by Government to them continue to be an important focus. A number of studies have been concluded recently and there has been some controversy regarding both the results as well as the response by Government.

Serious concerns have been raised regarding aspects of the Nuclear Veterans' study and although the granting of white card access regarding any cancer related complaint is welcome, I note that the RSL's call for the granting of 'non-warlike hazardous' service to all participating ADF personnel as included in your last budget submission was ignored.

The most recent studies released relating to the health of Vietnam Veterans need to be carefully considered.

Some of the points made about lower mortality rates don't tell the real story about the results of service on a cohort of the population that really were our best and brightest.

## Income related issues

Ensuring the real value of payments over time is a major issue. To those of our veterans' community accessing support from government

there is a genuine concern about maintaining the value of any such payments.

Erosion of the capacity of payments to allow people to live their lives can impact severely on the quality of life of those affected.

One of the policy issues that I am very much aware of is a concern to the veterans' community is the indexation of the remaining portion of the TPI payment. This is an issue we are looking into and intend to examine over the coming year. In this, I hope to be able to liaise with the RSL to seek your views and tap into your collective wisdom and knowledge.

I cannot say now how these deliberations will end; there are many steps before we reach that point. But I would like you to know that I am aware of how seriously this issue resonates in the veterans' community and that we will approach our considerations bearing that in mind.

Income maintenance is important for all veterans, regardless of their age. However, I am particularly concerned about the circumstances of younger veterans. If someone has served their country and finds themselves as a result of that service severely disadvantaged while still trying to build and raise a family we should do all we can to give them a chance at a decent level of income.

# for Veterans' Affairs speech to

I am also aware that there are many policy issues that relate to entitlement or eligibility to benefits and compensation. I understand that this can be an incredibly complex and often controversial area and that governments do not always get it right. This is why after listening to the veterans' community I campaigned hard to have service in Rwanda re-classified as warlike and was very pleased when the Minister adopted this policy.

I am also pleased to see that the Minister has promised to reconsider the nature of service for submariners who were involved in covert operations from 1978 to 1992 and I look forward to a future announcement from him on this matter.

## Recognition

Recognition is also an important issue in Veterans' Affairs. It plays out in a number of ways. There's recognition of service and conditions faced to qualify for differing benefits.

There's recognition of what people have faced in order to rightly qualify for medals and other awards for gallantry or circumstances faced.

There's also the matter of commemorative activities which ensure there is recognition in the community of what our forces have been through.

Medal eligibility can be difficult but I don't think too many people would argue that recent sagas such as the Australian Defence Medal

have been handled well. If an issue clearly requires a review then this should take place.

You can't simply use the excuse that we won't correct or at least review a clear cut injustice simply because there might be others. That's not fair, reasonable or sensible.

## The Department

Decision making and the implementation of policy have a real impact on many veterans.

The Department of Veterans' Affairs is central to policy delivery in this area and I want to make it clear that I believe they do a good job in difficult circumstances. But they still get it wrong sometimes.

The question is what can we do to make them better? But we also need to remember, that often problems result from Government policy impacting on departmental delivery. We shouldn't blame the Department for implementing the Government's policy – we should blame the Government.

However, if policy imperatives are influencing the cultural development in sections of the Department we need to identify and address it.

I have some concerns about the time it takes to resolve different claims and some of the methods used in investigating these claims.

We should start simply by recognising that veterans who are making claims are often in a vulnerable position. Therefore they need to have the Department, or any of its contractors, treat them

with due respect and a heavy dose of empathy for their circumstances. I am not convinced that this always happens at this time.

## Independent reviews

Independent reviews are rarely an answer in themselves. You have to be prepared to accept their recommendations or have good and clear reasons not to.

And if you find yourself regularly rejecting the results of independent reviews you have to examine whether or not you've set them up properly in the first place.

At times governments have used independent reviews as a mechanism to divert criticism and try and put a hold on things while they cool off politically.

We've seen that occur with depressing regularity in Veterans' Affairs – Clarke is clearly the biggest example but not the only one.

A topical example in this area is the recent review of post armistice Korean War Service. If you're not comfortable about making a decision and you set up an independent review mechanism at a cost of over \$300,000 to the taxpayer to look at it, it's pretty rich then to only accept those recommendations that fit your existing position. In this case, Labor believes the substance of the independent review's recommendations should be accepted.

## Vietnam Veterans' Health Study

The release of the reports from the three studies into Vietnam Veterans' health has taken a long time.

The objective of the studies was to assess the mortality and cancer rates in Australian Vietnam Veterans across the Services compared to the rest of the Australian community.

The three studies included the Cancer Incidence in Australian Vietnam Veterans' Study, the Third Australian Vietnam Veteran Mortality Study and the Australian National Service Vietnam Veterans' Mortality and Cancer Incidence Study.

Among the findings were:

- Vietnam Veterans as a group generally had a lower mortality rate compared to the Australian community.
- National Service Veterans experienced a 23% higher death rate than those National Servicemen who did not serve in Vietnam.
- Specific causes of death that were significantly higher amongst National Service Vietnam Veterans include death from digestive system diseases, lung and pancreatic cancer. Notably, there was a higher rate of suicide and motor vehicle accidents (the latter often a method of suicide).
- National Service Vietnam Veterans had a significant 14% elevation in the rate of cancer, especially cancer of the lung, head, neck and pancreas.
- There were no causes of death analysed for which National Service Vietnam Veterans had a statistically significant lower death rate than National Servicemen who did not serve in Vietnam.
- Rates varied among services with Navy vets generally having higher

rates of mortality or cancer incidence, followed by Army and Air Force.

Labor will be carefully studying the reports and will respond in detail after discussions are held with veterans' groups. In the meantime our position is clear in terms of what we expect the Government to do from here.

"I do not want the Government to drop these reports and say everything is fine. There are real issues here that the Government needs to address," Alan Griffin said.

## Children of Vietnam Veterans' Health Study

The Minister has recently chosen to ignore independent advice that he received from his own feasibility study into a possible Children of Vietnam Veterans' Health Study. Vietnam Veterans have very real concerns regarding the health of their children.

An independent study found in 1999 that children of Vietnam Veterans have a suicide rate three times higher than the rest of the general population. The Veterans' community is entitled to ask why. They are also entitled to know more about the effects of their service upon their children.

It is clear that the independent advice the Minister received on this issue was that a study was feasible and very worthwhile and that a pilot study could work through a series of associated methodological issues.

The Minister chose to ignore this independent advice despite it being endorsed by both the independent Scientific Advisory Committee and the Consultative Forum, appointed by the then Minister.

## South Vietnamese flag

On the eve of the 40th anniversary of the battle of Long Tan Veterans' Affairs Minister, Bruce Billson, was forced into an embarrassing backdown by the veterans' community.

The Minister attempted to force veterans' groups in several states to accept unreasonable conditions regarding the provision of Federal funds to build Vietnam War memorials.

Mr Billson sought to stop the flying of the former South Vietnamese flag as part of those memorials. Veterans were rightly offended at this blatant political interference in the historical depiction of what occurred.

After the Prime Minister's intervention Mr Billson conceded that funding for the memorials would be provided as long as the South Vietnamese flag is not flown in the presence of an official government delegation.

Alan Griffin recently attended the opening of the South Australian Vietnam Veterans' Memorial on which the South Vietnamese Flag flies. It was a wonderful ceremony and everybody involved should be congratulated.



*The South Vietnam Flag flying at the South Australian Vietnam Veterans' Memorial. Photo courtesy of Kerry Seebom.*

## Half of F-111 claims rejected by the Government

The Government's decision to reject hundreds of claims by former F-111 workers for a one off, ex gratia payment is a matter serious concern. The Minister has to explain why this has happened.

Nearly half of the 1,130 claims from ex-personnel have been rejected, despite many of them being supported with statutory declarations and independent witness statements.

The criteria for the package was flawed from the outset because it failed to provide for civilians or public servants employed on the

projects before 1991; did not recognise workers who had been exposed to the chemicals for less than 10 days; and was not exempt from income taxation.

Senator Mark Bishop, who has spoken out on this issue for some time, points out that the Government's handling of this matter has been poor from the start.

"This package has always been arbitrary and ad hoc. For instance, while ground crews exposed to the chemicals for up to 29 days could make a claim of up to \$10,000,



Photo courtesy Department of Defence

those exposed for 30 days or more were offered \$40,000. A day's work means the difference of \$30,000," Senator Bishop said.

Labor will be pressing the Government to explain why so many claims have been rejected and why it has taken so long to arrive at this outcome.

## Post Armistice Korean Service Review



Then Shadow Minister for Defence, Robert McClelland and Alan Griffin meeting with the Korea War Veterans Recognition Committee.

After a delay of six months the Minister for Veterans' Affairs has finally responded to the findings of the Korean Working Party who conducted the Post Armistice Korean Service Review.

The Post Armistice Korean Service Review was established to examine the level of recognition that service in Korea from 1953 to 1956 should be given. The panel that delivered the review was chaired by Rear Admiral Ian Crawford AO, AM, RAN (Retd) and former National Party MP, Gary Nehl AM.

After a lengthy delay, the Minister has only agreed to implement two of

the six recommendations, one of which results in no change. He therefore has chosen to ignore the other four recommendations. One of the recommendations rejected was for greater transparency within the medal system's rule making.

This Government has unfortunately made an art of rejecting findings of its own independent reviews.

Members of the Korea War Veterans Recognition Committee obviously feel betrayed and let down by this decision. Many are not just worried for themselves but also for the memories of their fallen comrades who lost their lives during this period.

These veterans are not asking for greater entitlements or hand-outs, they simply want recognition of their active service as recorded on their discharge certificates.

Specific legal advice obtained by the Veterans' confirms that the recognition they are after, and the recognition that the independent review recommended, is consistent with legislation at the time of service.

It is very disappointing that the Minister has not accepted these recommendations or the impassioned pleas of these ageing veterans.

Labor in government will implement these recommendations and fully support the efforts of the Korea War Veterans Recognition Committee to gain the recognition and justice they deserve.

# Preservation of the Kokoda Track

Labor welcomes Mr Howard's recent intervention in regards to the Kokoda Track after Labor raised concerns about the possible impact of mining near the track.

Labor fully backs any steps that the Government will take to protect the Kokoda Track.

Alan Griffin first raised this issue in July this year. The issue was again raised in August with Simon Crean and Kevin Rudd.

The Government finally acknowledged these concerns in late September.

The Government already has a poor record of failing to protect sites that are historically important to Australia's military history.

The sort of destruction and bungled construction work that occurred at Gallipoli must not be repeated at Kokoda.

The Government should be monitoring all possible threats to the track including any proposed mining or logging operations.

Urgent action must be taken, in conjunction with the Government of Papua New Guinea, to protect the Kokoda Track, to ensure the safety and enhance the significance of the Track for visitors and walkers by improving the amenities and interpretive materials, and by protecting the memorials.



## Legacy Week

Melbourne Legacy President Bill Rogers announced that the annual Legacy Badge Appeal has again successfully raised vital funds to help Legacy's continued welfare work in the community.

The fundraising efforts of Legacy members (Legatees) and Legacy Widows was greatly assisted by the support received from ADF and RSL volunteer collectors and from other kindred organisations, public and private firms as well as students from a number of secondary schools.

Funds from the Commonwealth Bank towards the cost of promotional material for the Badge Appeal were also an important factor in the successful outcome.



At a recent conference of the National Association of Extremely Disabled War Veterans in Perth Alan Griffin was presented with a certificate of appreciation by Brian Fennell, the National Vice President.