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The Advertiser

APRIL 22-23, 2023

# SAWEEKEND



**PICK OF THE BUNCH**  
THE ADELAIDE COUPLE  
DEMYSTIFYING WINE

**WHEN THE WAR IS OVER**  
SOLDIERS STRUGGLING  
TO FIND PEACE

## FLOWER POWER

Why Restaurant Botanic head chef Justin James thinks his Adelaide eatery can stand alongside the best in the world

STORY JESSICA GALLETTY





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# THE WAR THAT NEVER ENDS

The battlefield is a dangerous place, but the danger for Australian soldiers doesn't end when the shooting stops. In this edited extract from his book *The Home Front*, Patrick Lindsay looks at the struggles of adjusting to life after war

**E**ach year, on Anzac Day, Australians solemnly honour their fallen war heroes and promise never to let their memories fade. But what of those who served our nation in uniform, then returned home to fight a never-ending war within themselves? What of them, and what of their families?

Around two million Australians have served in their nation's military forces. About 100,000 have given their lives doing it. The great majority of those who experienced active service, in an endless variety of ways, have been damaged to some extent by that service. We often hear that old soldiers live in the past. Some have no choice: they are inexorably drawn there by flashbacks or nightmares. Others only return on Anzac Day or at unit reunions. A few choose the past to escape the present. Most simply honour the past and will never forget their mates' sacrifices.

Over 20-odd years of fighting in Afghanistan, Australia lost 41 soldiers killed in action. We now know that, over that same period, at least 1400 serving and ex-serving veterans took their own lives.

Interviewing hundreds of veterans over more than 40 years – elderly men from the Great War through to young men and women of the Afghanistan War – has taught me some universal truths. Old men start wars, but young men do the fighting and the dying. Every war is fought internally as well as externally. Individuals are insignificant – they lack power. All wars (and the reasons for which they're fought) are random. Soldiers often lose their identity after leaving service. Society is oblivious to what soldiers actually endure. And many warfighters live with death for so long that they lose touch with life.

Another universal truth is that veterans often experience "moral injuries" or "moral



trauma" – experiences that fundamentally challenge what they believed to be right and true. Some spend years, even lifetimes, trying to outrun or avoid the resultant shame. But the vast majority of our veterans, having experienced horrors that civilians can scarcely imagine, nevertheless seek to make peace, especially within themselves. The extent to which they succeed varies greatly.

The staggering turnover in leadership, both political and military, during Australia's 20-year war in Afghanistan and our involvement in the Iraq War contributed to policies that have inflicted lasting damage on our veterans, the extent of which is only now becoming evident.

**SAS operator Harry Moffitt, above, rolls his arm over during a rare break for a game in the Khod Valley; and Moffitt, right, in readiness for a combat mission during his deployments to Afghanistan.**

During those two decades, Australia had seven prime ministers, 11 defence ministers and 11 ministers for veterans' affairs, while the Australian Defence Force (ADF) had six chiefs, six heads of the army and eight commanders of special forces. This passing parade of leaders at all levels discouraged individual responsibility and camouflaged the long-term damage resulting from their decision-making.

To truly understand the experiences of our modern veterans – by which I mean those who served in Timor-Leste, Iraq and Afghanistan, and in a wide range of peacekeeping duties since the Vietnam War – and to appreciate the impact of that service on their lives and those of their families, we must examine the conflicts in which they served and consider the rationale for Australia's involvement in them.

Doing so reveals some stark differences in expectations and challenges, and casts light on the suite of problems with which today's veterans must contend.

Every conflict has its own cultural heritage, internal politics, international history, alliances and imperatives. Each nation's commitment is made for a complex web of reasons. The inevitable result is that those who serve are affected in a complex variety of ways and some suffer devastating and lingering impacts.

The way governments and populations treat and care for their returned veterans also varies according to historical and modern expectations. Not surprisingly, veterans who served in wars in which large sections of Australia's population were directly involved – primarily World War I and World War II – were treated differently to those who took part in the modern "niche" wars. Unlike those who served in the two world wars, our modern veterans represent a tiny proportion of our population. And an even smaller group of special forces did most of the heavy lifting in Afghanistan, some being redeployed up to a dozen times. The average Australian barely





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FEATURE



Australian author, broadcaster and speaker Patrick Lindsay's latest book is *The Home Front*.

noticed them as they came and went and has little understanding of what they experienced.

As army and RAAF veteran Catherine McGregor observes:

"If you ask most Australians what a veteran is, they think of an old fella with a chest full of medals who was in the AIF, the First or Second AIF. A veteran these days is more likely to be someone whose family knew that he or she had deployed on operations overseas, but most of their neighbours or their post-Defence employers wouldn't even know that they'd been in the military."

While our modern veterans – now both men and women – carry with them the heritage of their Anzac forebears, in so many ways their training, backgrounds, culture and rules of engagement are light years apart. The Anzacs of WWI – and those who followed them in WWII – waged what we'd now call traditional wars, with uniformed, opposing armies fighting massive battles over vast areas on land and sea and in the air. They were largely volunteer armies with clear political objectives. Our modern veterans, by contrast, are full-time professional soldiers, using state of the art weaponry and training, who have been fighting with confused political aims and no clear end game.

As are the battlefields on which they have fought, with today's conflicts described as "war amongst the people" where the fighting is deeply political, there are no front lines or rear echelons, and the opponents are phantoms who live within the civilian population. Yet today's Anzacs are still measured against the mythology and, often, the values of those in whose footsteps they follow. Unless we examine the backstories of the modern conflicts, we will compound the errors and the inequity of these comparisons and we will neither understand nor respond properly to the needs of our veterans.

We must also take a close look at the structures and the organisations that have grown up over more than a century to care for returned Australian veterans. Too many of







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**FEATURE**

them have stubbornly resisted adapting to the different needs of modern veterans. The Department of Veterans' Affairs and the RSL, for instance, have been unable to shake themselves free of their entrenched systems, opaque legislation and outdated organisational architecture, attitudes and leadership. While in recent years both organisations have attempted to make changes, they are well behind the curve. The disconnect between the RSL and modern ex-service personnel, for instance, is dramatically illustrated by the fact that of around 85,000 modern veterans qualified to join an RSL sub-branch, just 1500 have done so. Similarly, the antiquated legislative system under which the DVA operates was a major contributing factor in the backlog in veterans' claims exploding from 12,000 in 2018 to more than 60,000 in 2022.

As a result of this institutional stagnation, more than 4000 ex-service organisations (ESOs) have sprung up across the nation to fill the vacuum. The vast majority have been created by veterans themselves, as they strive to take control of their and their mates' recoveries. They desperately need it. Recent studies reveal that eight out of every 10 veterans who took their own lives had mental and behavioural disorders, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and substance abuse.

There can be no excuse that Australia's leaders and those within the ADF lack knowledge of the problems and the steps



needed to address them. Some experts, like Adelaide's Professor Sandy McFarlane, have been sounding warnings for years. McFarlane is a much-decorated, world-renowned expert on the impact of trauma and PTSD and has been Senior Advisor in Psychiatry to the ADF and DVA and is a Group Captain in the RAAF Reserve. He has reported for the UN on the Iraq invasion and has researched the traumatic impact of disasters like the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires, the 1996 Port Arthur massacre, the 2002 Bali bombings, the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami and the 2017 London Grenfell Tower fire.

McFarlane established studies into our modern veterans' health consequences which were world-leading research. But soon after these studies showed that one in two veterans suffered from a diagnosable mental illness and

one in four suffered from PTSD, they were de-funded by government. McFarlane told me that he believes the results of his studies were "too confronting".

The fact that this astonishing research has not led to urgent action only reinforces just how much veterans have been let down by the institutions that are meant to support them.

In its Interim Report, released in August 2022, the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide noted that, since 2000, there had been more than 50 reports and over 750 recommendations relating to veterans' and serving ADF members' suicide and suicidality.

"We have been dismayed to come to understand the limited ways that Australian Governments have responded to these previous inquiries and reports," the commissioners said. The "lack of response and progress from June 2019 to mid-May 2022 ... amounted to a dereliction of the Australian Government's duty to veterans.

Former foreign correspondent Dean Yates summed the situation up: "I think this country is sitting on a really brewing mental health crisis amongst its veteran population that is only going to get worse."

Most Australians believe we treat our veterans as returning heroes and we honour our promise to provide for their medical, financial and social needs. But is that true? ■

**This is an edited extract from The Home Front: The never-ending war within our veterans, Affirm Press**



An Australian medic treats an injured Aghan. Credit: Chris Robertson