



Submission No 28

**Inquiry into the Care of ADF Personnel Wounded and Injured
on Operations**

Organisation: Centori Pty Ltd



11 January 2013

Proof Committee Hansard

PARLIAMENTARY JOINT COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE

For Information: Mr. Angus Houston

CARE OF AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE FORCE PERSONNEL WOUNDED AND INJURED ON OPERATIONS

I would like to take this opportunity to highlight that some of the areas raised in the interview of 27 November with Mr Peter Leahy, in his position as the Chairman of Soldier On, to the Parliamentary Joint Committee, require some clarification. This letter is not intended to offend or detract from the good work being undertaken by many organisations, individuals and charities in the endeavour to care for our wounded and the families of our fallen. It is in fact quite the opposite. The aim of this letter is to outline the work undertaken by Centori (previously Adventure1000) for our wounded since early 2006, all of which Mr Leahy did not acknowledge (despite Centori and Soldier On having had no less than six face to face meetings in Canberra over the previous six months) and, in my opinion, gave the impression during the interview that these programs were in fact Soldier On initiatives. Generally, I would not object to things I see or read although, after working very hard (and quietly) on programs with the intent of looking after the wounded, at high personal financial cost and time since March 2006, I think it is inappropriate for an entity that was only launched in April of last year to give the impression to claim the successes of these undertakings.

It is misleading and morally wrong for Mr Leahy to say *"we have had Soldiers walk the Kokoda Trail"*. It would have been more correct to say that Soldier On were invited to participate and support an initiative by Brisbane based company Centori, such as walking the Kokoda Trail. It is also incorrect when Mr Leahy stated *"So it is the extras. It is giving the wounded soldiers the opportunity to paddle a canoe from Sydney to Brisbane, to do a Sydney-to-Hobart yacht race, to walk up Kilimanjaro."* These programs are Centori initiatives and will be delivered in 2013 by Centori. They are not Soldier On programs nor are they Soldier On initiatives. The programs are selected to suit the injuries of the wounded and specifically designed to ensure their individual success. An example is the Kayak program from Sydney to Brisbane is designed for our leg amputees and those soldiers with severe lower leg injuries. Mount Kilimanjaro is a requisite for our ongoing mountaineering programs culminating with a Mount Everest ascent in 2016. Our plan, our business, our safety and success record on global adventure programs is unmatched. Our Brisbane based facilities are well equipped and purposely designed for our undertakings. Our offices and gym are visited every day of every week by wounded and the families of our fallen. We are currently looking after more than 100 relationships of wounded Soldiers and the Families of most recently fallen. Our programs can be viewed at www.centori.com.au

In addition, on the 27th of November, Mr Leahy had never met nor even spoken to anyone from the White Cloud Foundation. White Cloud is not part of the Heart Foundation, nor are Soldier On *"tied up with the White Cloud Foundation"* nor did Soldier On *'flood the place with leaflets'* at the 1 December function at the War Memorial. I was present. White Cloud are friends and a relationship of Centori.



To date, I have now led no less than 49 wounded Australian Soldiers and 8 Mums and Dads of our Soldiers killed in Afghanistan across the Kokoda Trail as part of their physical and mental rehabilitation. Every Soldier and Parent has attended absolutely free of charge. Our normal cost for attendance on the Kokoda Trail is \$6250 per person. This exercise was undertaken for the sole purpose of giving something back to Defence following my own 20-year career in the Australian Army.

In March 2006, I travelled to Innisvale in North Queensland to brief General Peter Cosgrove and to explain my intent of running adventure programs to assist our wounded. These programs have been borne out of that initiative. Our small business has worked very hard on securing the sponsorship for each of the wounded and the parents to attend; however, a significant proportion of the cost was absorbed by me personally. General Cosgrove attended the first program in 2011 and Air Chief Marshal Houston the second in July of this year. The two Soldiers Kokoda programs of 2011 and 2012 (both attended by over 70 trekkers on each) have been incredibly successful. The relationships between the corporate supporters trekking with the wounded and the parents is incredible to witness. The success and benefits of the programs have led to us committing to providing further programs, once again free of charge, in 2013 and beyond.

In summary, it is not my intent to discredit Mr Leahy; only to point out that some of the interview required clarification. Our endeavour is to work closely with anyone or any entity, inclusive of Soldier On, that is sincere in bettering the livelihood of our wounded and the families of our lost. I have attached only a few of the testimonials and words of our wounded following their experiences with us.

I would certainly like the opportunity to be interviewed personally by Proof Committee Hansard as I believe I have much to offer, as per the below extract.

“Brian’s outstanding quality is his vision. Rehabilitation of returned service personnel is traditionally a function of government. Brian has now made it also a function of the civil community. I am a returned serviceman and know of no other single person in any organisation who has helped and encouraged returned service personnel to assimilate back into the routine of civilian life to the extent that Brian has”.

Brigadier Hector Macdonald RFD (Rtd) Patron Sapper Association of Queensland Inc.

Yours Sincerely

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Attachment: Centori letter to our sponsors and testimonials



Attachment: Copy of Centori letter to Sponsors (2012) and Testimonials

Dear....

It is with sincere appreciation that we extend our thanks for your support of the 2012 RSL Soldier's Kokoda trip. We were able, with the assistance of sponsorship to take 27 wounded soldiers and 8 parents of the fallen over the Kokoda Trail. We believe the program is achieving its goals of assisting our returned services personnel.

For many soldiers the trip provides an opportunity to talk with both civilians and other returned soldiers on the difficulties they face re-integrating back into society after war and the physical and psychological consequences of their service time. It provides them with a chance to learn that they are not alone in their struggles and that people in the wider community do care about them and the sacrifices they made. We believe one soldier put it very well when he said: "Thankyou for helping me achieve what was not only a lifelong dream, but for making me feel I still have more than enough purpose and support in my life".

We asked only a few of the soldiers to tell us what your financial support and the RSL Soldiers Kokoda trip meant for them; below we share these responses with you:

"Whilst conducting the walk I had plenty of time to think about my life and my experiences in the army and in Afghanistan. I took the opportunity to do some personal healing and address some personal issues. I must say however this was done through the assistance and support of the people I was trekking with. The different people who I met on the trek came from different walks of life and had their own experiences of loss and pain. I was humbled to hear of their stories and came to realise that just about everyone had been through some form of hardship and hurt. Communicating with the different people provided me with a new outlook to life and a new appreciation of humanity". Tom

"Truthfully, it wasn't until I had the opportunity to do Kokoda, that I started to again learn to open up to people emotionally. Kokoda has kick started a wave of good thought, that I only wish to improve and continue with. Without your financial support, Kokoda may not have been possible for me and I would have missed out on the huge emotional benefit of participating in the event. I am certainly not fully healed but I am heading in the right direction now and draw a lot of strength from the time on the track". Dwayne

"Through your support I was able to spend 10 days with a mixed group of beautiful people, some soldiers, some family who lost sons and some random people from all over Australia. It was through these people and your support that I was able find some solace within. To realize that where I was in the grieving process was ok, to have support when feeling low on the trek and to give support when the shoe was on the other foot. So to you, the sponsors I THANK YOU from the very bottom of my heart and ask that you please don't stop giving and encouraging others to give. Spread the story and help those that gave their lives and souls to the protection of us". Rob (Father of Soldier killed in Afghanistan)



“Since the accident, I have carried a range of emotions, which left me feeling jaded and confused about the abrupt cessation of my military career and direction of my future one, as well as life in general. Trekking Kokoda made me realise that the community as a whole does care about the plight of Servicemen who are either wounded or killed. What I would like to focus on in the future is to create a greater awareness of these programs, so that other families of fallen and injured soldiers may also benefit as I have. Personally, this is how I believe I could give something back to the community”. Andrew

“There were several aspects that stood out for me. Firstly it was the commitment shown by the trek staff in coming up and developing the whole program in the first place. Secondly the sheer level of generosity and support demonstrated by the sponsors was fantastic and lastly the participation in the trek from parents and family members of the young men who have lost their lives in Afghanistan was a very rewarding and humbling experience. I feel the fact that makes this trek unique is that it is simply not just for family members or just for soldiers everyone walks it together so that everyone learns something from each other”. Nick

We would like to share the names of all of our supporters who sponsored a soldier. Firstly, though a special thanks to the RSL Queensland and Insurance Advisernet Australia - the major sponsors of the program.

- Hotfrog Australia
- QBE Australia
- Redcliffe RSL
- Aspen Medical Centre
- Ian George
- Maroochydore RSL
- Peter Kedwell
- Gatton RSL
- Cairns RSL
- Point Trading Group
- Kevin Perkins
- Ray & Pam Palmer (Parents of fallen soldier)
- Robert Moerland (Father of fallen soldier)
- Norths Leagues & Services Club
- Jennifer & David Jones (Parents of fallen soldier)
- Peter Thompson
- Darren Alps

As a special thankyou we have included, with this letter, a framed certificate of appreciation with a copy of the poem written by Rupert McCall for the Soldiers Kokoda Program.

It is with great pleasure that we present the Lost Battlefield of Kokoda by Brian Freeman, Director of Centori. We hope you enjoy the read about this amazing area of the world and the remains of a war where Australia experienced such heavy losses.

Centori plans to expand on the success of the Kokoda trips and 2013 will see three new programs added to our “Soldier’s Adventures” calendar, in addition to our 2013 Soldiers Kokoda. In August, we will be organising a paddle from Brisbane to Sydney, which will highlight the cause of our most recent diggers and provide an opportunity for soldiers with lower leg injuries to participate in the program. In October, the soldiers will ascend the lofty peaks of Africa’s tallest mountain, Mt Kilimanjaro. In December, the soldiers will have the opportunity to participate in the Sydney to Hobart Yacht race. If you would like to be involved in the 2013 programs in any way, please do not hesitate to contact us.

With sincere thanks and warmest regards,

Team Centori

Other Testimonials

“Although my time spent with Brian was relatively short, I found him to be an inspiring and compassionate man who possesses extraordinary leadership qualities. His empathy shown, not only to the Wounded Soldiers but to the entire group was extraordinary.

Brian epitomizes the words inscribed on the Isurava Memorials – Courage, Endurance, Mateship and Sacrifice: the manner in which he assisted those who were seriously wounded in Afghanistan was incredible to witness.

Brian has not only raised the awareness of those injured and paid tribute to their fellow Soldiers killed on Active Service by conducting this amazing trek but he has also made a significant contribution to their rehabilitation both physically and mentally.

Brian has made a contribution to the Veteran community which will be long remembered.”

Terry Meehan President of the RSL, Queensland

“I know that the other Soldiers and myself have taken a huge experience and knowledge from being a part of the RSL Soldiers Kokoda. We learnt a hell of a lot and importantly enjoyed every minute of it, even the training days. It definitely helped a lot of the boys in the process of recovery both physically and mentally. A huge thanks to Brian.”

SPR Sean Mulqueen Australian Defence Force

“And what can I say about Brian? His support, all his endless work and his experience on this trip certainly made it a great memory for me.”

Ray Palmer, father of Commando Scott Palmer

“Brian Freeman has promoted the need for all members of the community to be aware of the beauty and challenges of the natural environment, and has provided the opportunity for everyone, whatever their physical or financial circumstances, to participate in activities exploring and appreciating the wonders of nature.

Brian is a pioneer and leader in his specialised field. He has organised adventure programs worldwide. His tours have an unblemished safety record. His performance record is unmatched anywhere in Australia and, in fact the world.

He has the skill of being able to fit voluntary programs into his business activities. He has the special ability of being able to engage with prominent members of the civil community and to arrange financial sponsorships for those with disabilities to participate in his personal development programs. His activities allow all Australians, both young and old, to learn more about the history of their country as well as its present day features. This man thrives on challenges and adversities. One booklet on the Kokoda Trail which I have read contains the following statement.



“The 1976 Kokoda Track record has been broken by Australian Brian Freeman. He left Kokoda at 12.30 pm on Tuesday 31st August 2004 and arrived at Owers Corner 24 hours, 59 minutes and 26 seconds later – no stopping, no sleeping. Sleep deprivation and banana-and- hydration diet along with staring at a flashlight shining on the ground for 24 hours did not deter Brian from celebrating his unforgettable 40th birthday. “

Over the period 13 to 22 July 2011, I attended a walk along the Kokoda Trail with a large number of other participants and also a number of local porters. The group included 21 soldiers who had been wounded in Afghanistan and who were undergoing rehabilitation in Australia. One soldier had lost both legs. Brian organised an activity that allowed everyone of these 21 wounded soldiers to complete the walk over the Kokoda Trail in six and a half days. The cost for each soldier was \$6250. Brian organised financial sponsorship from within the civil community for each soldier. This task requires inspiration, creativity and leadership. It is a unique achievement by a single person in the rehabilitation of Australia’s returned service personnel.

Brian Freeman has set an example for all Australians in showing his appreciation for the work done by members of the Australian Defence Force while on operations in Afghanistan. Fellow Australians would feel proud to have had the privilege to be part of his programs. I feel sure that I speak for all participants on the walk of the Kokoda Trail that we were privileged and proud to be part of his team.

The man exudes enthusiasm, determination, courage and above all, leadership by inspiration and example.

He demonstrates his commitment to helping others in a personal and practical way. He is the quintessential role model.

The clients he has taken on his adventure activities come from all walks of life. They include the young and the old, parents and their children, national and international sportspersons, businessmen and tradesmen, members of the media and members of parliament. They all find him inspirational.

Brian’s outstanding quality is his vision. Rehabilitation of returned service personnel is traditionally a function of government. Brian has now made it also a function of the civil community. I am a returned serviceman and know of no other single person in any organisation who has helped and encouraged returned service personnel to assimilate back into the routine of civilian life to the extent that Brian has”.

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