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Committee Secretariat  
Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee  
Department of the Senate  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

**Submission to: The Role of Adaptive Sport for Defence Force Veterans in addressing issues identified by the ongoing Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide.**

Summary of Submission

This submission is made on behalf of Horse Aid. We are a registered not-for-profit organisation providing valuable equine assisted programs for military veterans and first responders. Our submission addresses the Terms of Reference, focusing on points (a), (b), (d) and (e), which are most relevant to the work of Horse Aid.

Veterans entering our programs are a combination of current serving personnel experiencing mental health challenges and those who have been medically discharged, often finding themselves homeless and suicidal. An evaluation of Horse Aid's five-day residential program grounded in the experiences of ex-serving ADF participants, found it built a strong foundation for stability and functionality, and lowered depression, anxiety and stress. Participants also reported a reduction in suicidal thoughts. Similar results are reported in recent research studies of other equine assisted programs with veterans. Based on the findings of the valuable role Horse Aid (and other) equine assisted programs provide to military veterans in helping address emotional trauma, and PTSD, and assisting in settling into civilian life – as outlined within – we conclude our submission with five key recommendations.

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## Submission to: The Role of Adaptive Sport for Defence Force Veterans in addressing issues identified by the ongoing Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide

### Introduction

This submission is made on behalf of Horse Aid, a not-for-profit organisation that provides valuable equine assisted programs for military veterans and first responders helping to address emotional trauma symptoms such as including PTSD and assisting in settling into civilian life. Over the past nine years more than 190 veterans have completed our programs either under the Thoroughbred & Veterans Welfare Alliance or registered charity Horse Aid formed in 2021. At completion of their program many participants stay on, to work as volunteers with Scott Brodie (co-founder and Director of Horse Aid).

Assisting Horse Aid to write this submission in a voluntary capacity is Associate Professor Kathy Arthurson, College of Medicine and Public Health, Flinders University of SA. A/Professor Arthurson is a retired academic with Full Academic Status providing independent research.

This submission addresses the Terms of Reference, with specific reference to points (a), (b), (d) and (e). These are most relevant to the work of Horse Aid and reflect our perspective on a successful equine assisted program that leads to positive changes for veterans affected by trauma from their service.

### Addressed Terms of Reference

#### ***(a) Current evidence on the benefits adaptive sport can provide to those with physical and/or mental health impairments, particularly those who have also served or trained in national defence***

Recent studies suggest that adaptable sports programs can assist in meeting the psychological needs of veterans suffering from physical and emotional trauma and provide significant increases in their mental health wellbeing.<sup>i</sup>

Horse Aid equine assisted programs are a form of adaptive sports. Our programs are adapted to work with veterans using groundwork and physical activity with ex-thoroughbred racehorses to explore and develop horsemanship skills, while outdoors, which fosters awareness of behaviour, forms of communication and increases 'mind fitness'.

In recognition of the important role equine assisted programs can play for veterans receiving treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental health conditions, the US House of Representatives passed an amendment in 2018 to expand equine-assisted therapy



programs under the Veterans Affairs Adaptive Sports Program<sup>ii</sup>. In Australia the Department of Veterans Affairs have not funded any equine programs.

**Recommendation 1:** That consideration be given to recognising equine assisted programs for veterans with physical and/or mental health impairments as a form of adaptive sport under the Australian Defence Forces Adaptive Sports Programs.

***(b) The role of sport in supporting individuals' transition from the Australian Defence Force into civilian life, especially how sport may assist veterans who meet criteria identifying them as being most at risk of suicide***

#### *Veterans Voices*

Veterans who enter Horse Aid Programs are a combination of current serving personnel experiencing mental health challenges and those who have been medically discharged, often finding themselves homeless (until assisted by Homes for Heroes) and suicidal. An internal evaluation of Horse Aid's five-day residential program grounded in the experiences of ex-serving ADF members who participated in the program, found it built a strong foundation for stability and functionality, and lowered depression, anxiety and stress. Participants also reported a reduction in suicidal thoughts. <sup>iii</sup>

"In that moment, [attuning to the horse] I am not screaming my internal pain or relieving my haunting experiences from the ship; I am recognizing my strengths and drawn to his.....The experience moved me in ways that it is hard to describe." (Mel - participant)

"I am tired of hearing people say being mentally unwell is permanent, that you can never overcome it. Seeing how far I've come in working with my horses and volunteering... This is what life is all about for me, helping people help themselves with thoroughbred horses." (Isaac - participant)

"Being around the horses out in nature has been special. I don't feel the pain so much." (Sam - participant)

Similar results have been found in research studies of equine therapy programs with veterans including Columbia University studies of the US based Man O'War programs. No adverse effects have been recorded and the data shows decreases in clinically measured and self-reported PTSD and depressive symptoms<sup>iv</sup>.



We recommend watching the trailer for 'The Healing' <https://thehealing.com.au/> This award winning film by Nick Barkla, outlines the work of Scott Brodie and Horse Aid, and gives a voice to veterans who were at risk of suicide as they describe how the program has been life changing in assisting their transition to civilian life. The documentary won the Beyond Blue Award for Best Film about Hope and Resilience at the Veterans Film Festival in Sydney.

The documentary has also been highly commended by the Royal Commission, who intend to screen it for their entire staff. The full documentary is available on further request, with general release expected in 2023.

*Aspects of Horse Aid Programs that assist veterans transitioning from ADF to civilian life and how it assists those at risk of suicide*

"All the steps of Scott's horsemanship program progress onto another level of development physically, mentally and emotionally for both the horse and rider. Working together with the horse, we develop a bond and trust...With this method of progressively developing our being, we can start to apply these steps to ourselves." (Isaac - participant)

No previous experience with horses is required to participate in Horse Aid programs. Activities involve groundwork, (working with the horse with the person on the ground as opposed to riding) as this allows the horses to act more naturally than when they are controlled by a rider. Skills are developed in understanding nonverbal communication, confidence, teamwork, assertiveness, creative thinking, problem solving, leadership, responsibility, and relationship building. The steps in the program are as follows:

*1. Education and learning (equine skills, respecting, communication between horse/participant)*

Merely spending time with horses calms the nervous system and improves self-efficacy and self-esteem.<sup>v</sup> Actual physical contact with horses, such as touching, grooming, or leading a horse can help lower physiological arousal:<sup>vi</sup> The latter is a necessary precursor, for veterans with PTSD, before new learning and behaviour patterns can occur.

*2. Establishing social connection (use of 5 senses, problem solving, confidence building, assertiveness, relationship building, rhythmic movement, breathing, mindfulness)*

Working one-on-one with horses improves 'mind fitness' and enhances the capacity to manage stress, and PTSD and integrate trauma as:

- Horses are herd animals – to communicate effectively veterans must be assertive without being aggressive and show confidence to gain the horse's respect. This develops consciousness and awareness, which can reduce PTSD and anxiety symptoms.<sup>vii</sup>
- It requires mindfulness, i.e., focusing on tasks at hand, being in the present moment, and not allowing the mind to be distracted, which provides a rest from disturbing thoughts.<sup>viii</sup>

Furthermore, equine therapy can positively affect functional and structural changes in the brain of people with PTSD supporting symptom reduction.<sup>ix</sup>

### *3. Being self-aware (body language, emotions), leadership*

Horses, unlike some other animals, require humans to work with them to gain trust. As herd animals they look to the veterans for leadership. Veterans with PTSD (and because of their own hypervigilance) can relate to and understand the hypervigilance in a horse and trust required to develop an effective working relationship.

Horses understand communication primarily through body language and respond immediately to moods, emotions and body language of the person interacting with them. This enables veterans with PTSD to become more aware of their bodies, body language and expressions of emotions through their bodies.<sup>x</sup>

### *4. Developing mind skills (focus, self-observation, other observation in group, self-support, supporting others in group (team work), motivation to bring mind + brain + body into action for both horse and participant)*

The skills gained can be used to foster new patterns of behaviour to maintain a working relationship with the horse (and can broaden out to other relationships) as:

- Horses are larger than humans and provide instant responses, which give veterans and trainer valuable information about current behaviour patterns. The horses provide a non-judgemental but honest reflection of behaviour.
- Restoring control of impulses is fundamental to addressing PTSD.<sup>xi</sup> Veterans who have trouble controlling impulses will soon realise:
  - if they express anger violently or make unexpected motions the horse is unlikely to respond in the required or positive manner; and
  - new patterns of behaviour are needed to work with the horse, which increases the ability to control anger and anxiety; and
  - they can function in different ways in broader relationships with family and friends, reducing feelings of isolation.

### *5. Strengthening and regaining confidence, meaning and purpose*

Key difficulties in transitioning from military to civilian life are losing confidence and a sense of identity and purpose. The programs help veterans regain this through:



- The veteran making decisions, being accountable for outcomes, and trying to develop a relationship with the horse, with strict safety guidelines to follow.
- Recognition of the huge benefit to the horse's welfare from the relationship (retraining and eventually rehomed):
  - Like veterans, Horse Aid's ex-racehorses are highly trained often leaving their careers carrying physical and mental trauma. Both are offered a second chance to health through connection with a fellow being who may have been forced to leave their career path from a very structured and controlled environment and struggling to adjust to life afterwards
- Further opportunities to build horsemanship skills, and reconnection with self, others and community are available if participants decide to volunteer to assist with subsequent programs.

**Recommendation 2:** Recognition be given to the important role equine assisted programs provide for veterans leading to the funding of such programs whether that be via Government grants, assistance from the Department of Veteran Affairs or for equine assisted programs to be included in care packages available to veterans.

***(d) whether there are any gaps in services and demand for adaptive sport by the veteran community, and, if so, how these gaps can be addressed;***

It is well recognised that within the veteran population there are barriers to seeking traditional treatments for PTSD and related issues because of the stigma associated with psychological conditions. Equine programs, such as those operated by Horse Aid, surpass these barriers, and address such a gap in option available to the veteran community. There is no stigma associated with working with horses.

Veterans experience trauma differently, and yet are offered the same services year after year. There must be variety of service offered to the veteran community that fits the Fifth National Mental Health Plan and National Framework for Recovery-Oriented Mental Health Services. These include priorities in achieving integrated regional planning and service delivery, suicide prevention, coordinating treatment and supports, improving the physical health of people living with mental illness, reducing stigma, making safety and quality central to the mental health service, and enabling effective system performance and improvement. Horse Aid's programs offers all of these and more such as social inclusion and recovery. One of the main issues is access to services such as Horse Aid because DVA does not fund programs such as this.

Furthermore, as the Australian Defence Force recognises<sup>xiii</sup> adaptive sport can take many forms and this creates an environment for all to participate. Equine activities are an alternative form of



adaptive sport which provides another opportunity for veterans who do not wish to partake in a

competitive sport. Such programs offer a low pressure environment providing support to those at the beginning of their journey to recover who can simply only cope with 'being' with a horse.

**Recommendation 3:** Equine assisted programs provide a valuable service to military veterans in helping address emotional trauma, and PTSD, and assisting in settling into civilian life. This will address the gap in the variety of services offered to the veteran community. As such we suggest that equine assisted activities should be included as part of the Defence Adaptive Sports program.

As the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide recognises family support has a huge impact on the health and wellbeing of ex-serving members treatment outcomes (and vice versa). The commission has heard numerous stories of children and families affected by the suicide or deterioration in the health of their loved one.

A longitudinal Australian study of equine therapy programs with individuals and couples found (pre, post, 3 months) significantly fewer psychological symptoms and greater levels of happiness and quality of life, and reduced psychological symptoms (depression anxiety, stress).<sup>xiii</sup>

**Recommendation 4:** Consideration be given to extending equine assisted programs to families of veterans. It is beneficial for families to work together so all those affected can benefit.

***(e) the equitability of current funding for adaptive sport, and how the accessibility of adaptive sport can be improved for veterans who are not a part of Invictus programs;***

The Commission also states transition to civilian life for veterans can be particularly challenging 'if they are without financial means'.<sup>xiv</sup> Cost determines ability to afford the programs. If the veteran needs to pay a portion it needs to be affordable and not a financial burden. They are already coping with trauma so do not need any added stress.

Additionally, those who cannot maintain a high level of fitness due to physical injury and/or severe trauma, cannot play a part in the Invictus programs, and often feel left out having achieved a high level of fitness whilst service. Offering adaptive sport such as working with horses helps these veterans to feel part of something special like an Invictus program.

Currently Horse Aid programs are provided to veterans at no cost due to the generosity of individuals and one corporate partner who donate funds to Horse Aid. The Horse Aid Board and volunteers provide their time freely to work with the veterans. The programs are currently only available in NSW. Our vision is for veterans in every state of Australia to be able to access our programs. We have plans to make this happen in the ACT and Queensland but without funding it will be challenging to execute.



The US House of Representatives passed an amendment in 2018 that transferred \$5 million from the Department of Veterans' Affairs General Administration account to the Veterans Affairs' Adaptive Sports Grant Program to expand equine-assisted therapy programs.

**Recommendation 5:** That the Australian Department of Veterans Affairs considers broader funding for equine assisted programs which includes those with limited physical fitness.

#### Summary of Recommendations:

**Recommendation 1:** That consideration be given to recognising equine therapy programs for veterans with physical and/or mental health impairments as a form of adaptive sport under the Australian Defence Forces Adaptive Sports Programs.

**Recommendation 2:** Recognition be given to the important role equine assisted programs provide for veterans leading to the funding of such programs whether that be via Government grants, assistance from the Department of Veteran Affairs or for equine assisted programs to be included in care packages available to veterans.

**Recommendation 3:** Equine assisted programs provide a valuable service to military veterans in helping address emotional trauma, and PTSD, and assisting in settling into civilian life. As such we suggest that equine assisted activities should be included as part of the Defence Adaptive Sports program.

**Recommendation 4:** Consideration be given to extending equine assisted programs to families of veterans. It is beneficial for families to work together so all those affected can benefit.

**Recommendation 5:** That the Australian Department of Veterans Affairs considers broader funding for equine assisted programs which includes those with limited physical fitness.

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## References/Notes

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- <sup>xii</sup> <https://www.defence.gov.au/adf-members-families/health-well-being/adf-sport#:~:text=The%20ADF%20Adaptive%20Sport%20Program,both%20domestic%20and%20international%20events.>
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