

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

Remembering the Dead, but forgetting the living

I am writing to you in terms of my dealings with DVA and recognition of deployment UNTAG 1989 and Namibian Silver Jubilee anniversary 2015.

Background to my service

I joined in 1980 at Army Apprentice school Balcombe as an apprentice Carpentry at the age of 16 and served with the Royal Australian Engineers (RAE) as a Carpenter and as an Architectural Draftsman and had an operational UN deployment to Namibia in 1989.

I completed just over 14 years military service before joining the Defence Public service in a Technical Officers APS role in 1994 in Defence Facilities Management and leaving Defence in Jan 2001.

Let me cover the UNTAG mission with a some background and discuss the importance of government/DVA recognition of what we as Australian Defence force personnel undertake around the world.

UNTAG

In March/April 1989, I left Australian shores with approximately 300 other Australian Defence force personnel with 17 Construction Squadron (UNTAG) to deploy to South West Africa (now known as Namibia) to be part of the UN force under UN Resolution 435.

We deployed into Namibia and wedged ourselves between the South Africa Defence Force (SADF) and the Angolans, Cubans, SWAPO and aligned forces on the Namibian/Angolan Border.

I recall being sent off by the Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke in 1989 at a military parade at Holsworthy Barracks and a few days later landing in Namibia.

When we returned there was no welcome back by politicians, DVA , no debriefing and no Australian Service Medal that took about 2 years to be awarded. The Navy from Gulf

War 1 (deployed well after us) were given a ticket tape parade down George Street Sydney with the Australian Service Medal earned from that deployment that should have been issued to us for service some 2 years previously.

In May 2013, 17 Construction Sqn (UNTAG) was awarded the Honor Distinction, by the Governor General Ms Quentin Bryce AC CVO in Sydney. It was there for the first time we had UNTAG Veterans from Australia and NZ veterans as well as wives, children and the notable outcome from that day was the collective sigh of recognition from the Australian Government for our deployment some 23 years earlier.

This was a significant part of the return from the operation that has assisted in mental healing from some of the deployment experiences that was sadly overlooked in 1989/90. We saw things that we were not prepared for nor debriefed at all on post operation but the award presentation day was a day to catch up and talk amongst ourselves about our Namibian experiences.

A recap prepared by Chargé d'Affaires, Mr Chris Munn speech at UNTAG presentation in Windhoek Namibia on Friday 20 March 2015 outlines what the Australians did and how instrumental our deployment was to the mission and to Namibia.

“Deputy Minister of Veterans Affairs, the Hon Hilma Nicanor Resident and non-resident diplomatic representatives Australia’s Honorary Consul to Namibia, Mr Ed Humphreys and his wonderful wife Aino who have been fantastic hosts to us this weekend Gathered Australian UNTAG representatives here today Australian Volunteers in Namibia Our friends the people of Namibia who I congratulate on their first peaceful and constructive twenty five years as a sovereign country and I wish them many, many more other nationalities represented here tonight and fellow Australians not already mentioned .

Welcome

As Australia’s current Charge d’Affaires in Pretoria, I am delighted to be in Windhoek for the first time this weekend. As we all know, it is a very exciting weekend for the people of Namibia celebrating this milestone Anniversary of Independence and to participate actively in the inauguration ceremonies and festivities for Namibia’s third President, HE Dr Hage Geingob, continuing the efforts of Presidents Nujoma and Pohamba who have steered Namibia over the past 25 years of peace and growing prosperity.

While this weekend belongs to Namibia, it is also a very special time for a select group of Australians here for this occasion. They are a group of UNTAG peacekeepers who have returned to Namibia after more than 25 years. They are just some of the 613 defence force engineers Australia proudly sent, under the aegis of the United Nations in the lead up to Independence in 1989 and 1990 to help ensure that the people of Namibia could set up an independent and peaceful country following the many years of occupation and war.

The diggers are here for their pilgrimages to the Namibia they remember and to see the new Namibia. I am sure that they are proud to see the signs of development in Windhoek and other parts of the country and they can rightly claim to have made a significant contribution to this progress.

I want to spend a few minutes to recall a little of what those 613 men saw and experienced in Namibia over twenty five years ago. I then want to tie that in briefly to the proud history of Australia's contributions to United Nations and other peacekeeping efforts and reconstruction activities as a result of war and natural disasters.

On 11 May 2013, former Governor-General, Her Excellency, Ms Quentin Bryce AC CVO presented the Australian Army's first Honour Distinction to 17 Construction Squadron at a ceremonial parade at Steele Barracks, Holsworthy. The citation for that well-deserved honour sums up the sense of duty and achievement of the Australian UNTAG engineers and I would like to repeat that now:

Despite being deployed to provide engineering support, when the ceasefire broke down at the start of the mission, members of the squadron helped establish Assembly Points, which enabled the mission to continue.

This activity was conducted in the face of hostility from elements of the former colonial power and personal danger arising from the breakdown of the cease fire. Later, 17 Construction Squadron became involved in the election process itself, providing security, transport and logistic support to election officials, monitors, other UN personnel, voters and polling stations.

Members of 17 Construction Squadron ensured that, as much as possible, the election was able to proceed without interruption or interference and ensured that all parties were free from intimidation or duress. With the selfless support of individuals from other units of the Australian Defence Force, 17 Construction Squadron played a key role in the smooth and effective transition of Namibia from colonial rule to independence.

The Squadron performed a role well beyond what was expected and brought great credit on itself, the Australian Army and Australia. Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, Secretary-General of the United Nations, wrote to Gareth Evans (Australia's Foreign Minister) about the "remarkable contribution made by the Australian military and electoral personnel", saying that their "dedication and professionalism had been widely and deservedly praised". Although a total of 19 UN personnel lost their lives in Namibia, the two Australian contingents achieved their mission without sustaining any fatalities – one of the few military units in UNTAG to do so. The Australian UNTAG mission in 1989 and 1990 was the largest deployment of Australian troops since the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s.

Australia's very proud history in this field began long before the 1960s and Australians were the first peacekeepers to serve under United Nations auspices when the Australian Government sent military observers to Indonesia in 1947 during the independence struggle.

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Today, on this occasion we should remember the selfless spirit of all of those 4493 men and women who comprised UNTAG from 50 countries in addition to the 613 Australian engineers.

The following list of contributing countries is not exhaustive but illustrative of the fact that UNTAG was a genuine commitment on behalf of the world, at the end of the cold

war, to ensure that Namibian Independence was nurtured, sustained and where necessary defended hard against those who did not wish this to occur.

UNTAG troops came from as far a field as Fiji and New Zealand, Trinidad and Tobago, Peru, Costa Rica, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany and the United Kingdom. Aside from our Oceania neighbours, there were also many of our Asian partners including Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Bangladesh, Pakistan and India.

The result of UNTAG's work and legacy is modern Namibia – a strong, vibrant, free, proud and democratic country with a bright future.

Let me conclude by specifically mentioning and thanking those Australian UNTAG engineers here with us today. As we approach the centenary of the first ANZAC DAY next month, I honour and thank you and all Australian defence men and women for your contributions over the years in helping to bring peace and order in many parts of the world where harmony and cooperation have broken down and where communities require major assistance to recover from major natural and manmade disasters.

Many of you here today will know that the latest region where the Australian Defence Force has been sent to assist was to our South Pacific neighbour Vanuatu devastated by Cyclone Pam less than a week ago.

*To those Australian UNTAG engineers here today, you embodied and continue to embody the indomitable ANZAC spirit and you should be forever proud of your achievements. Australia is.
Thank you “*



Chargé d'Affaires, Mr Chris Munn & Deputy Minister of Veterans Affairs, Namibia the Hon Hilma Nicanor

What I am getting at with this, is under the “other” category, is that in 2015 the Australian Government spent millions on memorials and events commemorating the ANZACs of 1915 which have all passed, but what was missed in Australia was the commemorating those living veterans from many deployments that are still with us today, like UNTAG Veterans.

I wrote to the DVA Minister prior to our reunion trip in Oct 2014 and received a reply that DVA had allocated \$3000 for the Honor Distinction presentation in May 2013 and there would be nothing for the 2015 25th anniversary reunion trip to Namibia. A major milestone especially for post 75 deployment Veterans.

We left Australia with no material or financial support from DVA to attend the 25th Anniversary of Independence of Namibia and the 3rd presidential inauguration, unlike many other Vietnam and prior deployments that keep being recognised today.

A simple blazer, Akubra hat or gift from DVA to give to their counterparts in Namibia to remember our role in Namibians independence. Instead the Veterans dug deep into their own pockets, to present a framed board seen in the background of the picture as a commemorative gesture between the two countries.

The support in Namibia was amazing from the Australia’s Honorary Consul to Namibia, Mr Ed Humphreys, Chris Munn from Pretoria and the Government officials from VA in Namibia, the media as well as locals that we encountered as we travelled in the Northern border areas that the Australians had deployed

It would seem that seem that the post 75 Veterans (less Afghanistan) are being overlooked time and time again both by DVA and the RSL, as in this example and also on Anzac Day as is evident by the order of march each year.

So why is this important to have closure?

For many that deploy on one or many operations, it is the closure that we need to have upon return. It is not always a parade, more informal DVA supported group get together that involves veterans and partners from those smaller scattered missions.

Veterans will keep many things to themselves or their mates and let it out on ANZAC Day etc but it is partners that are crucial in feeding back and detecting problems and are often looking for support for their veteran partner.

The Government happily sends us off overseas with the PM and a handshake, then at least recognise us when we return, in a timely manner with ongoing support as a collective whether it is a an Akubra hat for a reunion in country or a BBQ in Melbourne etc and pickup the ones that start to slip through and become so become suicide statistics. A small outlay for what I envisage would be a large return.

This needs to be done regularly I believe i.e. yearly in the first 5 years then 5 yearly after that. Yes some of the veteran groups do that, but with DVA support like information desks at conferences etc. it can be done better with obvious support by DVA staff/psych to offer counselling on those days etc and connect with these scattered pockets of Veterans from post 75 deployments. WW1 and WW2 Veterans typically they came from the same towns ie Alburys Own 39th battalion etc. but veterans of post WW2 come from all scattered locations and backgrounds all over Australia.

When we leave the military, we are scattered and rarely see another veteran from the same deployment to debrief i.e. Anzac Day. My experience is that typically in Melbourne on Anzac Day there will be 4-5 UNTAG Veterans from 613 Veterans that deployed to have larger ongoing get together support by DVA with updates, new initiatives would be a connection to mates but also the support system that I and other UNTAG veterans have been looking for since our return all those years ago.

Then of course an ale or two to cement mateships between veterans away from DVA etc. with the operational stories freely flowing

Regards

Ex Sergeant Mark "Jack" Horner

UNTAG Veteran