



**Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References
Committee Inquiry into:**

‘Management of Defence Estate Assets’

**Navy League of Australia - Submission and Proposal
TS *Sheehan*, 66 River Rd, Ambleside, Devonport TAS**

April 2026



Executive Summary

Defence's recent Estate Audit has unexpectedly identified the Navy League of Australia's long-held Devonport property—home to Training Ship (TS) *Sheean*—for divestment, despite over 50 years of stable leasing arrangements and no prior indication of concern. This decision disregards more than a half century of partnership between the Navy League and Defence, the site's deep cultural and symbolic significance, and its critical role in supporting youth development through the Australian Navy Cadets. The property is not only a functional training facility but a living memorial to Tasmania's naval heritage, including its connection to Ordinary Seaman Edward "Teddy" Sheean VC and the service of Chief Petty Officer Eugene "Blue" Richards, who drowned while serving TS *Mersey* in 1986.

The Audit's claim that the site lacks heritage value is incorrect; its long-standing use, community identity, and cadet legacy constitute substantial intangible heritage. Defence's proposed alternatives—relocating cadets to a non-existent new facility or to civilian shared spaces—pose significant risks to youth safety, participation, and compliance with Commonwealth and Tasmanian child-safety laws. These options would also undermine community confidence and threaten the viability of cadet programs in Northern Tasmania.

The Navy League of Australia believes this proposal echoes the structural failures of the Robodebt scandal, where automated, consultant-driven metrics and savings targets were prioritised over the lives and lived Service of citizens.

The Navy League proposes a superior, low-risk, value-for-money solution: co-locating Devonport's Navy, Army and Air Force Cadets at the existing Devonport site, with Defence funding any new buildings identified as required, and that would transfer to the League upon completion. This model eliminates Defence's long-term maintenance burden, enhances youth safety, strengthens community ties, and aligns fully with the Defence Estate Audit's Terms of Reference. A 50-year exclusive arrangement would secure a stable, cost-effective, centrally located cadet precinct that preserves heritage, supports Defence youth capability, and ensures uninterrupted training for future generations. It can also provide a vital 'aid to the civil authority' capability to Northern Tasmania and Bass Strait for the ADF in times of emergency.



Introduction

On 4 February, I was advised by the Federal Treasurer of the Navy League of Australia that the just released Defence Estate Audit had a significant implication for our organisation. The Audit identified the property TS *Sheean* in Devonport Tasmania that we lease to Defence, at a discounted rate for the exclusive use of the Australian Navy Cadets, for divestment. This announcement came without any warning, consultation, or indication that the site was under review. For an organisation that has supported Defence and the cadet movement for more than a century, the manner and substance of this decision were both unexpected and deeply disappointing.

Only months earlier, in November, Defence's estate agents for Tasmania contacted the League to discuss terms for a renewed lease, 12 months out from the renewal date. That current lease has operated for 15 years without alteration. When we asked whether there were any concerns or issues prompting the early discussion, we were told there was "nothing to worry about". Acting in good faith, and in recognition of our longstanding partnership with Defence, we proposed a very modest increase in the lease, well below the rise in local property values over the past decade and a half. Our position was consistent with the League's long-held view: that TS *Sheean* (formerly TS *Mersey*) should be provided to the Australian Navy Cadets at a discounted, value-for-money rate to ensure they have access to the best possible training environment.

The Navy League of Australia has owned the Devonport property since 1969 for the purpose of cadet training. For more than a half a century, our commitment has been unwavering: to provide young Australians with opportunities for leadership, maritime skills and community service, and to do so in partnership with Defence.

It is therefore difficult to reconcile our demonstrated loyalty, our provision of a strategically located and cost-effective site, and our willingness to continue supporting cadets at our own expense, with a divestment decision made without engagement or explanation. The outcome is not only a disservice to the Navy League, which has acted consistently in Defence's interests, but more importantly, a disservice to the cadets who rely on this facility for their development, safety, and sense of belonging.

The Navy League

The Navy League was established in Australia in 1900, initially in the form of small branches of the United Kingdom Navy League (established in 1897). In 1950 it reformed as an autonomous national body headed by a Federal Council consisting of a Federal President and representatives of the six States, the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory.

The Navy League of Australia is now one of a number of independent Navy Leagues formed in many countries of the free world to influence public thinking on maritime matters and create interest in the sea.

The Navy League is intent upon keeping before the Australian people the fact that we are a maritime nation and that a strong Navy and capable maritime industry are elements of our national wellbeing and vital to the freedom of Australia. Control of our Sea Lanes of Communication is vital to our very survival, a fact some people are only realising now with high fuel prices. The League seeks to promote Defence self-reliance by actively supporting defence manufacturing, and the shipping and transport industries.

The Navy League started establishing sea cadet units in 1920 to teach Australia's youth about a life at sea and how it was vital to never take it for granted. Though the Naval Defence Act of the time

limited what the Navy could offer, it provided uniforms, training, activities and equipment. The League, ever resourceful, handled everything else, from drill halls, personal to administration and everything in between. In 1947 the Naval Board recognised the sea cadets, and granted funding for their activities as well as a name change to the Australian Sea Cadet Corps.

In 1973 cadets became the responsibility of the Department of Defence. This was in recognition of the valuable service they can provide to the nation as well as a valuable source of recruitment into the services.

It is believed that approximately 20-25% of all ADF members were once cadets. Given this significant figure, we must do all we can to support the cadet movement as a sustainment measure for the wider ADF and the nation's national security.

Submission

TS *Sheean*'s significance

The cadet unit now known as Training Ship *Sheean* was formerly Training Ship *Mersey*. The renaming was undertaken to honour Ordinary Seaman Edward “Teddy” Sheean VC, Tasmania’s first and only recipient of the Victoria Cross (VC). Teddy Sheean’s name carries profound meaning for the Tasmanian community, the Royal Australian Navy and the Australian Navy Cadets. His courage, sacrifice and devotion to his shipmates embody the very values that the cadet movement seeks to instil in young Australians.

On 1 December 1942, aboard HMAS *Armidale*, Teddy Sheean displayed extraordinary bravery. As his ship was sinking under enemy attack, he remained at his post, manning the aft Oerlikon gun to defend his comrades in the water. He continued firing until the vessel slipped beneath the waves, ensuring the survival of others at the cost of his own life. His posthumous award of the Victoria Cross in 2020 recognised not only his heroism but also Tasmania’s enduring contribution to Australia’s naval heritage.

The decision to rename TS *Mersey* as TS *Sheean* was therefore not merely administrative, it was symbolic. It linked the cadet unit directly to Tasmania’s most revered naval figure, embedding his legacy in the training and character development of future generations. The site at Devonport, from which TS *Sheean/Mersey* has operated since 1969, stands as a living memorial to that legacy, a place where young Tasmanians learn service, discipline and courage in the shadow of one of their own.

Against this backdrop, the Government’s plan to divest the TS *Sheean* property is deeply disappointing. It risks being perceived as disrespectful, not only to Teddy Sheean and his family, but also to the cadets who bear his name and to the wider Tasmanian veteran community that holds his story as a source of pride and identity.

The Navy League of Australia respectfully submits that any consideration of divestment must recognise the symbolic, cultural and moral significance of TS *Sheean*. This is not simply a parcel of land - it is a place of remembrance, mentorship, and continuity, a cornerstone of Tasmania’s maritime and Defence heritage.

Missed Heritage

The Estate Audit hastily claimed that the TS *Sheean* site had no Heritage considerations. This is false!

Heritage significance extends well beyond the physical fabric of a building. Contemporary heritage practice recognises that the enduring value of a place is also shaped by the continuity of its use, the activities it has supported, and the role it has played in community identity over time.

Long-standing occupation by a particular organisation, especially one engaged in youth development, civic service, or defence-related training, creates an intangible heritage layer.

These patterns of use form a living record of social history: the traditions maintained on the site, the skills passed between generations, and the community relationships built through repeated, meaningful activity. When assessing heritage considerations, it is therefore necessary to account for both the physical structure and the accumulated cultural value created by sustained presence and

purpose. Protecting this continuity ensures that the site’s contribution to public life is not diminished, even if the buildings themselves are modest.

TS *Mersey*/TS *Sheean*, has built a distinguished and enduring presence within the Devonport community. Over decades of continuous operation, the unit has accumulated a remarkable record of achievement, reflected in the many awards, trophies and formal recognitions earned by its cadets and staff. This sustained pattern of service, accomplishment and community engagement forms what heritage practitioners describe as *living heritage*: the ongoing traditions, values and contributions that give a place meaning far beyond its physical structures.

This heritage is also marked by moments of profound sacrifice. On 20 August 1986, Chief Petty Officer Eugene “Blue” Richards tragically drowned while serving TS *Mersey*. His death, felt deeply by the cadet community and the wider Navy family, forms an enduring part of the site’s story. It stands as a solemn reminder of the commitment, service and personal investment that generations of volunteers and naval personnel have given to the young people of Northern Tasmania.

Together, these elements—achievement, continuity, community identity and sacrifice—demonstrate that the TS *Mersey*/TS *Sheean* site embodies far more than a simple training facility. It is a place where history is lived, remembered and passed on.



TS *Mersey*/TS *Sheean*’s numerous awards and tribute to CPO ‘Blue’ Richards

The Committee must ask: How did the Department’s consultants miss these obvious heritage considerations?

Proposal to Defence

SEG’s stated option for all three cadet units in Devonport is either to collocate at a costly new facility, that does not exist, or lease civilian facilities such as council halls or school premises. These options may also be a significant journey from Devonport, which will spell the end of the cadet movement in Devonport given that the cadets are not of the age to drive their own vehicles. The League believes we have a better option.

The Navy League’s Devonport property is large and centrally located, long-established and already supports the successful operation of the naval cadet unit TS *Sheean*. It is accessible, well-known to

families and embedded in the community. Co-locating all three cadet services on this site provides Defence with a cost-effective, low-risk and community-supported solution.



TS Sheean depot to the left of the image and the open green space to the right make up the lease to Defence. The TS Sheean site is very large and can easily accommodate the other two cadet units in Devonport and still have significant room for activities, operations and future expansion.

By contrast, constructing a new multi-user cadet facility on a greenfield site outside Devonport would impose significant capital costs, Development Application fees, ongoing maintenance obligations and significant risks to youth participation, particularly due to reduced accessibility for families who rely on central locations for safe drop-off and pick-up.

The League proposes, and offers its site, for re-development to a multi-user cadet training depot.

This proposal aligns strongly with the Defence Estate Audit Terms of Reference (ToR), especially in the areas of value for money, risk reduction, youth safety and stakeholder impact.

Accountability for Bad Advice

If the savings projected by audit fail to materialise—or if the cost of relocating cadets to non-existent facilities results in the collapse of the movement in Northern Tasmania—there must be accountability. Decisions must be tracked, and those officials (both corporate and Departmental) who prioritise spreadsheet metrics over the Commonwealth's best interests should be held accountable.

The committee may wish to ask: who is going to be held accountable?

Alignment with the Defence Estate Audit Terms of Reference

Value for Money

This option delivers exceptional value for Defence:

- Defence funds construction once, with no ongoing maintenance liability
- Ownership of new buildings transfers to the Navy League, eliminating long-term estate risk
- Co-location reduces duplication of facilities, security, training spaces and storage of valuable assets
- The site is already serviced, zoned and operational, avoiding the high cost of greenfield development

Compared to a new multi-user facility outside Devonport, this option avoids:

- Land acquisition or long-term leasing costs
- Development application fees
- Roadworks, utilities installation and site preparation
- Ongoing Defence maintenance obligations
- The risk of under-utilisation due to poor accessibility

Supporting Defence Youth Capability

Co-location strengthens Defence's youth development programs:

- Shared facilities encourage tri-service cooperation and efficiency
- A central, familiar location increases participation and retention
- The site's maritime heritage enhances Navy Cadet identity while supporting Army and Air Force Cadet activities
- A Unified Cadet Precinct strengthens Defence's presence and thus the perception of commitment to northern Tasmania.

Minimising Estate Risk

This proposal significantly reduces Defence's estate burden:

- The Navy League becomes the long-term owner and maintainer
- The League's proven track record at Devonport demonstrates reliability and stewardship
- The site is already compliant and operational, reducing transition risk.

Optimising the Estate for Current and Future Needs

The Devonport site is uniquely suited to multi-service cadet use:

- It is centrally located, accessible and well-connected to public transport
- It already supports cadet training and can be expanded efficiently
- Allows for the safe and secure storage of cadet and Defence assets
- It avoids the delays and uncertainties associated with greenfield development
- It provides a scalable platform for future cadet growth
- Is located water-side for all cadets to benefit, especially Navy cadets

Community and Stakeholder Impact

The Defence Estate Audit ToR emphasise the importance of community effects and stakeholder engagement. This option:

- Maintains cadet activities in a central, safe and familiar location
- Supports parents who rely on proximity and accessibility for youth activities
- Avoids the well-documented decline in participation that occurs when youth programs are moved to remote or civilian multi-user facilities
- Aligns with the Tasmanian Government's strong support for retaining cadet facilities in established community locations

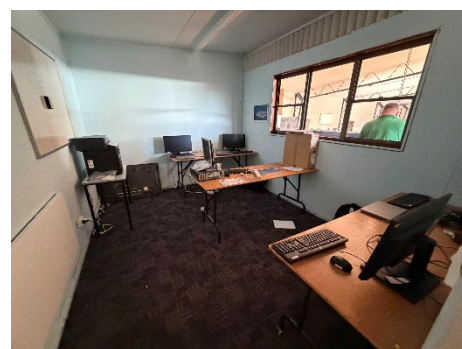
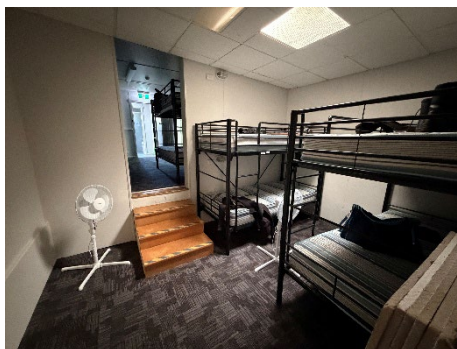
- Reinforces the legacy of Teddy Sheean VC and the region's naval heritage

We ask the Committee to reject the "Robodebt-style" divestment of TS Sheean and instead champion a Defence Estate that values its people, its heroes and its future.

Defence Aid to the Civil Community

Retention of the TS *Sheean* site provides the only secure base of operations in Northern Tasmania for Defence Aid to the Civil Community tasks. Assets such as this were proven to be invaluable to Defence during the Black Summer Bushfires in NSW and Flooding emergencies in the North of NSW where ADF personal by the 100s were billeted in community-based cadet facilities.

The current facility also has accommodation spaces with bunks and a commercial kitchen. These facilities enable the depot to be used as an evacuation centre for state and federal authorities.



Inside TS *Sheean* -Commercial grade kitchen, accommodation and ablutions for over 16 live in personal and office facilities can provide the ADF and state and federal authorities a safe place for operations and/or evacuations.

Duty of Care and Youth Safety

A central theme of this proposal is the enhanced duty of care Defence owes to young people.

Central Location = Safety

Parents in the Devonport region consistently report that they will not drive their children to remote or out of area facilities, especially after dark. A greenfield site outside Devonport would:

- Reduce participation
- Increase dropout rates
- Create transport and safety risks
- Disadvantage families without private transport
- Undermine Defence's youth engagement objectives

By contrast, the current Devonport site:

- Is centrally located and easy to reach
- Is familiar and trusted by families
- Provides safe, well-lit access
- Is close to emergency services and public transport
- Supports safe, supervised arrival and departure
- Provides 24/7 controlled access

Co-location Enhances Supervision

A multi-service precinct allows:

- Shared adult supervision
- Better WHS oversight
- More efficient use of qualified instructors
- A safer environment for all cadets

Risks to Cadets When Sharing Facilities with Unrelated Community Groups

Protecting young people is a core responsibility for Defence and for any organisation entrusted with youth development. When cadet units are required to share facilities with unrelated community groups, particularly groups made up of adults who are not vetted, supervised, or connected to Defence, several significant risks arise. These risks are well-recognised in youth-safety frameworks across Australia and are directly relevant to Defence's duty of care enshrined in Federal Law, Tasmanian Law, Defence policy and regulations.

Defence must comply with the following laws and regulations regarding duty of care with cadets. A shared civilian facility could/will impact Defence's ability to adhere to these laws:

Commonwealth (Federal) Laws

- Commonwealth Child Safety Framework (CCSF)
- Work Health and Safety Act 2011 (Cth)
- Criminal Code Act 1995 (Cth)
- Privacy Act 1988 (Cth)
- Defence Act 1903
- Defence Regulation 2016
- Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013 (PGPA Act)

Tasmanian Laws

- Child Care Act 2001 (Tas)
- Education and Care Services National Law (Applied Law – Tasmania)
- Education and Care Services National Regulations
- Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act 1997 (Tas)
- Registration to Work with Vulnerable People Act 2013 (Tas)
- Civil Liability Act 2002 (Tas)
- Criminal Code Act 1924 (Tas)
- Work Health and Safety Act 2012 (Tas)

Exposure to Adults Who Have Not Been Screened or Vetted

Cadets, all of whom are 18 years or younger, operate under strict child-safety requirements, including Working With Children Checks, Defence youth-safety training and structured supervision. Community groups using shared facilities may include adults who:

- have not undergone any form of background screening
- have no obligation to comply with Defence youth-safety standards
- may not understand or respect the boundaries required in a youth environment

This creates an environment where cadets could inadvertently encounter adults who have not been assessed as safe to be around minors.

Inability to Control Who Enters the Facility

Shared civilian facilities typically involve:

- open access
- overlapping booking times
- shared entrances, corridors, toilets and car parks

This makes it difficult to maintain a secure perimeter or ensure that only authorised, child-safe adults are present. Uncontrolled access increases the risk of inappropriate interactions, accidental or otherwise.

Increased Risk of Confrontation or Hostility

While most community groups are respectful, Defence cannot assume that all adults using a shared civilian facility will be supportive of cadets or Defence-related activities. Some individuals may:

- hold strong political or ideological objections to Defence
- express hostility toward uniformed youth
- engage in confrontational behaviour
- present child-exploitation and sexual-offending risk tendencies

Even a single incident of verbal aggression or intimidation can have a lasting impact on young people and their families.

Reduced Ability to Supervise and Protect Cadets

Cadet staff are responsible for maintaining a safe, controlled environment. Shared community facilities undermine this by:

- creating blind spots where adults and cadets mix unsupervised
- increasing the number of people cadet staff must monitor
- making it harder to enforce Defence's strict youth-safety protocols

This dilutes the effectiveness of supervision and increases the likelihood of incidents.

Privacy and Security Concerns

Cadet units often store:

- uniforms
- training equipment
- personal information
- personal equipment
- IT systems
- ceremonial items
- expensive assets
- sensitive materials relating to Defence youth programs



TS Sheean's boat storage

Shared facilities increase the risk of:

- unauthorised access
- theft or damage
- exposure of cadet information to unrelated adults

This is inconsistent with Defence's security expectations.

Reputational and Parental Confidence Risks

Parents expect Defence-supported youth programs to operate in safe, controlled, child-appropriate environments. Shared civilian community facilities can undermine parental confidence because:

- parents cannot be assured that all adults present are appropriately vetted
- the environment appears less professional and less secure
- families may withdraw their children if they feel uncomfortable

This directly affects recruitment, retention, and the long-term viability of cadet units.

Increased WHS and Behavioural Risks

Unrelated adult groups may engage in activities that:

- involve alcohol
- involve equipment or behaviours unsuitable for a youth environment
- create hazards (noise, vehicles, tools, chemicals, etc.)
- Cadets should not be placed in environments where adult activities create additional risks.

The committee may wish to ask Defence why it believes it does not have to comply with these legal ethical and community expectations for youth protection.

6. Comparative Cost and Risk Analysis

The following table demonstrates the stark contrast between the Navy League’s community-focused proposal and the audit-driven Greenfield model. It highlights that the current Departmental trajectory is a repeat of the Robodebt failure: prioritising theoretical savings while incurring massive, hidden long-term costs and social damage.

Factor	Co-Location at TS Sheean site Devonport	New Greenfield Multi-User Facility
Capital Cost	Moderate (buildings only)	Very high (land + services + buildings + approvals)
Maintenance Cost	\$0 to Defence	High, ongoing Defence liability
Estate Risk	Minimal	Significant (WHS, compliance, maintenance)
Youth Participation	High (central location)	Low (parents unlikely to travel)
Community Impact	Strongly positive	Negative (loss of central access)
Time to Operational Readiness	Short	Long (planning, approvals, construction)
Long-Term Ownership	Navy League	Defence (ongoing burden)

Proposal

The Navy League of Australia proposes:

- Divest the TS *Sheean* lease in favour of a new lease
- Co-location of Navy, Army and Air Force Cadets at the current Devonport site given the very large unused space
- Defence to fund construction of required additional buildings and infrastructure
- Name the Facility the ‘Blue Richards Multi-User Cadet Depot’
- Ownership of all new buildings to transfer to the Navy League upon completion
- A 50-year exclusive contractual arrangement, under which:
 - The League maintains the property
 - Defence retains exclusive cadet use
- A jointly developed site plan ensuring fit-for-purpose facilities for all three cadet services
- A transition plan ensuring uninterrupted cadet training and community engagement.

The Committee may wish to suggest to government to accept, in principle, this proposal.

Conclusion

This proposal offers Defence a rare combination of:

- Lower capital cost
- Reduced long-term maintenance cost (when compared to a new facility)
- Reduced estate risk
- Enhanced youth safety and participation
- Stronger community support
- Alignment with the Defence Estate Audit ToR
- A 50-year, low-risk partnership with a proven and trusted organisation
- Overwhelming community support

Co-locating all three cadet services at the Navy League’s Devonport site is the most financially responsible, operationally sound and socially responsible option available to Defence.

The Committee must ask: If the Department rejects a proposal that costs less, removes maintenance risk, and satisfies all child safety and heritage requirements, who is being served?

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