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CHIEF OF THE DEFENCE FORCE**

**Opening Statement
Budget Estimates Hearing**

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Good morning Chair and Senators,

Last month I travelled to the Middle East Area of Operations for the final time as the Chief of the Defence Force. During my visit I spoke with many of the 400 Australians currently deployed in Afghanistan as part of our training and advisory support mission. I also met with Commander ISAF, General Joe Dunford, to discuss the state of the operation and the international community's ongoing contribution to Afghanistan.

When I consider the situation on my first visit to Afghanistan in 2007, the progress to date is evident. It is evident in the infrastructure - the schools, hospitals and roads Australian military and civilian personnel have helped to build. It's evident in the Afghan National Security Forces and their ability to support the April 5 Presidential elections and it's evident in the significant increase in the number of Afghans who embraced the democratic process and voted in the first round of the Presidential elections.

While we remain cautious about the second round run off next weekend, I am immensely proud of the Defence personnel who have contributed to Australia's mission in Afghanistan since 2002. Together with our civilian partners, their service and sacrifice has made a difference.

Apart from our commitments in Afghanistan, Australian Defence Force personnel assisted the Solomon Islands community in April following severe flooding in Honiara and Guadalcanal. An engineering reconnaissance team provided a vital engineering solution that enabled Honiara's main bridge to reopen to heavy vehicle traffic while a planning assistance team conducted rapid damage assessments and specialist planning support to assist the thousands of affected residents in and around Honiara.

Much of our operational focus since the last Estimates hearing has centered on the tragedy of MH370 in the Southern Indian Ocean. Senators, I would like to acknowledge formally the extraordinary multi-national effort undertaken in search of flight MH370. The Australian Defence Force contribution began on the 9th of March, the day after the flight disappeared, when we deployed two AP-C3 Orion aircraft to search an area west of Malaysia and it concluded last week when the Australian Defence Vessel *Ocean Shield* conducted her final sub-surface search.

A multi-national search and rescue operation of this size and scale is unprecedented in our region. Existing relationships such as the Five Power Defence Arrangement allowed signatory nations, already familiar with each other's command and control structures and capability, to rapidly establish them as part of the Joint Task Force. For others, like China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea, this operation provided an opportunity to build on the progress in these relationships in recent years and to further refine cooperative practices and procedures.

The search exemplifies a truly multi-national response and demonstrates the strength of cooperation among the participating nations. At its peak, Operation Southern Indian Ocean involved eight nations, 21 military aircraft and 19 ships covering a search area of more than 4.5 million square kilometres - that's an area approximately 1.3 times the size of India. Over 42 days, participating nations flew 345 military missions totalling more than 3,000 hours - Australian aircraft alone accounted for more than one third of those flying hours.

Conventional capabilities were adapted and supplemented with emerging capabilities specifically designed to address the unique complexities of the operation. The Royal Australian Air Force and the Defence Science and Technology Organisation rapidly developed a specialist acoustic processor to assist in the sub-surface search. In what is believed to be a world first, the Australian designed and tested *passive hydrophones* were fitted to sonobouys deployed by AP-3C Orion aircraft in the search area.

While our thoughts remain with all those affected by this incident, I would like to thank the 1200 Australian Defence Force personnel who were directly involved in the search and the hundreds of others who supported them. Although the search continues, we have an opportunity to build on what we have learned from MH370, while the momentum exists and the lessons are still fresh.

Senators, given this will be my final appearance before this committee, I would like to provide a brief update on the Cultural Reform Program which began quite early in my tenure as CDF. As you are aware, the ADF has worked very closely with the Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Elizabeth Broderick, since 2011. Ms Broderick and her team have provided independent, and at all times very frank, advice and assessments about our culture and our change program. Her fourth and final audit report, tabled in Parliament in March, cited evidence of real progress and the momentum for change accelerating across all three services. Ms Broderick applauded the newly established Sexual Misconduct, Prevention and Response Office and the implementation of a restricted or confidential disclosure system. An example of our progress is that the Royal Australian Navy has very recently achieved full White Ribbon accreditation as an institution, the first organisation of this size to do so in Australia. Ms Broderick also acknowledged the shift in our senior leadership selection to extend beyond the previously accepted combat or operational pathways to further expand the talent pool. Her report also noted that new and innovative recruitment models aimed at increasing the number of women in the ADF are already producing promising results and forecast continued growth in line with our work to improve access to flexible work arrangements for all ADF members.

I also recently appointed Ms Julie McKay from UN Women Australia as the first Gender Adviser to the Chief of the Defence Force. Ms McKay is a well known advocate for women and is assisting us as we continue to work towards a more inclusive organisation.

As I have said on numerous occasions, Australians rate their Defence Force as the most trusted organisation in the country. We are proud to accept this trust and proud of our international reputation for excellence. But no organisation can maintain such a place of respect if it fails to maintain its standards and behaviours as high as humanly possible. In acknowledging the strong progress we have made, we must also accept that it will take continued vigilance to ensure we do not regress. I know Air Marshal Binskin and his new Command Team will continue to vigorously pursue the outcomes we desire.

That leads me to another priority area that I know the new Command Team is also committed to addressing. Mental health is one of the most important issues facing the Australian Defence Force today and I can assure you that we are not shying away from our duty to care for our veterans. One of the biggest obstacles we face is the perceived stigma associated with seeking help. In that regard, I believe the ADF Theatre Project has been an important catalyst for change. *The Long Way Home* played across the nation to sell-out crowds over a nine week season and more than 30 thousand people saw the production. That's 30 thousand people who, I am confident, have now had a conversation about mental health or post traumatic stress. Thanks to the extraordinary cast of serving members and their courage, I hope the Australian community also has a better understanding of the personal battles many of our veterans face when they return from deployment.

Finally Senators, I will be absent from the hearing for a short period this afternoon. Vice Admiral Ray Griggs, the Chief of Navy and Vice Chief of the Defence Force Designate will represent at that time. The Secretary and I will also be absent from 6.30 this evening.

Thank you.