

**SENATE FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE  
REFERENCES COMMITTEE**

**INQUIRY INTO RECRUITMENT & RETENTION  
OF DEFENCE PERSONNEL**

**SUBMISSION**

**Submission No:** 80

**Submittor:** Ms Patricia Collie

**Address:** PO Box 815  
HAMILTON NSW 2303

**Telephone No:** (02) 4955 8788  
0402 144 204 (Mobile)

**Fax:**

**E-Mail:** [plcollie@hotmail.com](mailto:plcollie@hotmail.com)

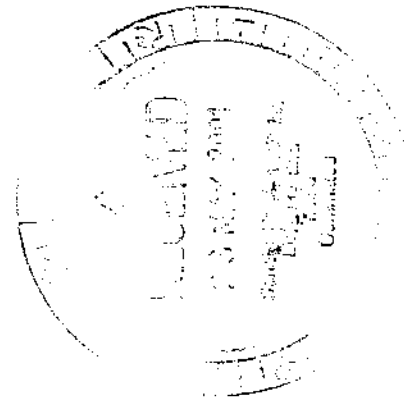
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PO Box 815  
HAMILTON NSW 2303

20 May, 2001

The Secretary  
Senate Foreign Affairs  
Defence and Trade References Committee  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600



Dear Sir or Madam,

I am writing in response to your advertisement in "The Australian" on 15 April 2001 requesting submissions as part of the Inquiry into the Recruitment and Retention of Defence Personnel.

I welcome the opportunity to express my views regarding the problems of recruitment and retention and hope that I can provide valuable examples and suggested improvements/solutions regarding my recent experiences.

I commenced my career in the Royal Australian Air Force when I was accepted at the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA) in 1990. I successfully graduated three years later and spent a further 4 years working as an Administrative Officer in various positions, culminating with a position as the Protocol Officer to the Chief of Air Force.

It was at this time that I felt I needed to change my career stream and decided on pursuing entry to a degree in Medicine. To achieve this goal my only option, at that time (1997), was to resign from the Permanent Air Force. I did, however, wish to continue my ties with the military so transferred directly to the Active Reserve, and have continued to serve with the Active Reserve to date.

I gained entry to medicine at the University of Newcastle in 1999. In my second year of study, I became aware of the introduction of the Graduate Medical

Scheme (a scheme designed to sponsor current military personnel who gained entry to medicine in a bid to ease the shortage of medical personnel in the Defence Force). In March 2000, I commenced enquiries regarding sponsorship that culminated in February of this year with a letter from the Royal Australian Air Force rejecting my application.

I would like to highlight some of the difficulties I faced during my negotiations with the Defence Force and its recruiting branches. I feel that I am in the unique position where I have not only been a recent applicant, but also have some knowledge of the recruiting process as I was selected in 1995 and 1996 to be part of a Career Lecture Team promoting careers to school children and worked in a recruiting office for three months during these periods.

I have chronologically listed the problems I encountered as far as possible, and included some suggestions I felt would have made the process more positive for both the applicant and those staffing the application.

1) March 2000 – initial enquiries with Defence Recruiting in Brisbane:

Problems:

- I visited Defence Recruiting in Brisbane with the intention of speaking with the RAAF, RAN and ARA regarding my options for sponsorship. The RAAF member spoke to me while I was standing at the counter (he did not offer to speak with me in an interview room) and answered phones and directed other applicants within the center whilst discussing my application. The RAN and ARA members were not interested in speaking with me – they redirected a message through the RAAF member that they were not currently recruiting medical applicants.
- My overall impression as a new applicant was that of disinterest. This would not have prompted me to enquire at a later stage “when they were recruiting”.

Solutions:

- When I was involved in recruiting the policy was that if you weren't recruiting for a particular position, you did not speak with any potential applicants for that area or take their details. I believe that this is detrimental to the recruiting process – if an applicant is interested enough to enquire, then the recruiting centre should at the least take their details and contact them when the positions become available. Through this approach, you would not miss out on applicants who were interested, but at the wrong time.
- If an applicant wishes to speak with a representative from the RAAF, RAN or ARA, a person should be available to speak with them exclusively (and not answer phones etc.), during business hours. I believe that a face-to-face approach is extremely important when dealing with potential applicants.

## 2) April/May 2000 – Inquiries with Recruiting Office in Newcastle

### Problems:

- I visited this centre to pick up an application form for sponsorship for the medical course. The RAAF member seemed uncertain what a medical degree qualified me for, constantly referring to me as a nursing student. The RAAF member also stated that I had to have an interview with a career adviser to determine my eligibility to receive an application form to fill out. I explained that I was a former RAAF Officer and currently in the RAAF Reserve, but was told that was irrelevant and that a RAAF careers adviser would have to determine my suitability. The earliest I could have this interview was in five weeks and it was not possible to process my application further until this had been completed.
- After waiting five weeks, I was told at the interview that it was not necessary and I should go through my Reserve Squadron administrative process to apply.

### Solutions:

- There appears to be a strict adherence to process, which is suitable in most cases, but a degree of flexibility in certain circumstances is important. I believe that, in my case, it should have been deemed appropriate to be given the opportunity to fill out an application form without an interview. I would assume that there are similar circumstances where an applicant may be deemed suitable to at least be given an application and then interviewed at a later date, particularly for specialized areas such as University sponsorship.
- I was extremely frustrated that I had waited (and wasted) five weeks for my interview to be told that it was unnecessary. The recruiting center had my contact details and neglected to inform me, which I see as a lack of professionalism and foresight. Consideration for the time of applicants would ensure a positive experience for the applicant.
- The RAAF member appeared to have little knowledge of qualifications for certain positions within the Defence Force. This does not give an impression of competence. Greater training for careers advisers in some areas would be warranted. I also found during conversation with some careers advisers that if unsure of the answer to a question, they made a "best guess" which was often wrong (I was only able to ascertain this as a result of my previous recruiting knowledge). Most applicants would be happy with the answer "I don't know, but I will find out and let you know." I think that it is essential that careers advisers are well informed when dealing with entrance criteria as some applicants may be unnecessarily turned away.

3) June – August 2000 Negotiations with Directorate of General Personnel – Air Force, and other Defence Force agencies.

Problems:

- I spoke with numerous personnel from the Directorate of Reserves (as I was a serving member of the Reserve), the Directorate of Health Services, the Senior Medical Officer for the RAAF, and Directorate of Posting Officers (DPO). Most were supportive of my interest to join as a graduate sponsored student and felt that my qualifications were in line with the Defence Instruction relating to the Graduate Medical Scheme, however all referred me back to the recruiting process. I eventually submitted a standard application, after which I received no feedback on it's progress despite numerous phone calls. After a period of approximately two months I received a phone call from Recruiting in Sydney requesting that I attend for testing.

Solutions:

- A streamlined process for a previous member to reapply from the RAAF Reserve to be sponsored would avoid delays in the processing of applications. From my experience, I was enthusiastic when I initially decided to apply for the graduate medical scheme, however over a period of six months, I had lost significant interest.
- There was no consultation at the stage of the application. If recruiting were to keep applicants constantly informed of their progress, I believe that more applicants would continue with their application.
- As a previous member of the permanent Air Force and a current member of the RAAF Active Reserve as an officer, I felt that the initial officer testing was a wasteful use of resources as well as a needless imposition on the time of applicants who are mostly full time university students. I objected to the requirement for the initial officer testing, however I felt that I was being considered "difficult" by this stage. Again I believe that the strict adherence to instructions in some cases is a waste of resources and this time could have been used more effectively elsewhere.

4) November 2000 – Officer Interview Board RAAF Recruiting Sydney

Problems:

- I attended an Officer Interview Board on 21 November 2000. The board consisted of the Chairperson – an acting Squadron Leader Administration Officer, along with a Medical Officer and a psychologist. The focus of the Board appeared to be the issue of my request to be sponsored at my current rank of Flight Lieutenant. DPO had previously advised me that I would most likely have to resign my commission and revert to the rank of OFFCDT if I was to be accepted for sponsorship

(as I was no longer in the permanent Air Force). As I was aware of other Reserve members who had been sponsored at the Flight Lieutenant level, I did not think that this would be a major issue at the interview. Furthermore, the Medical Officer on the board was an Officer Cadet when I was in the Permanent Air Force and was a student I worked with when I managed the administration of Undergraduate sponsored students, which I felt was a conflict of interest.

Solutions:

- Although the Chairperson had the acting rank of Squadron Leader, she was a fellow administrative officer with the same actual rank as myself. I see this as a conflict and would have felt it more appropriate if the Chairperson was of a substantially higher rank. The Squadron Leader Chairperson was also the person with whom I had been dealing with regarding the particular requests in my application and I felt there may have been some conflict of interest. I also felt that the choice of Medical Officer was not appropriate as we had previous contact whilst I was a Flying Officer and she was an Officer Cadet.

5) 28 February 2001 - Letter re unsuccessful application.

Problems:

- I received a letter from the chairperson regarding my Officer Interview Board 3 months after the interview, which I regard as an entirely unacceptable delay in notification. The letter stated that the Defence Instructions relating to the Graduate Medical Scheme precluded me from being sponsored at the rank of FLTLT as I was not currently in the Permanent Air Force, but the RAAF Reserve. The chairperson also questioned whether the course I was enrolled in met the guidelines with respect to the Defence Instructions. I felt that this letter was incorrect regarding both the graduate status of the course and the issue of sponsorship at FLTLT rank. A previous member of my Reserve squadron has been sponsored at the rank of Flight Lieutenant (from Jun 2000), and has never served in the Permanent Air Force at this rank, which contradicts certain comments in the letter. A fellow medical student is currently being sponsored by the RAN as a graduate student and attends the same University, showing that it meets the guidelines as a graduate course.

Solutions:

- Providing constant feedback and prompt responses is extremely important when dealing with potential applicants. In my case, three months for a final reply and twelve months to complete the process seems to suggest that there is room for improvement. I would like to suggest that this is the most important factor in the recruitment problem – without effective communication and feedback people become disinterested at

worst, and angry and frustrated at best. I believe that this affects the image of the Defence Force as disgruntled applicants tell others about their problems.

- Consistent guidelines regarding sponsorship need to be outlined for all three Services in the Defence Force – there are major inconsistencies in the eligibility for sponsorship. My view is that in the current climate, with an acknowledged shortage of medical personnel, any previous or current serving member of the Defence Force including Reserves, should be considered for sponsorship.

As a previously enthusiastic member of the Defence Force, who promoted Defence careers during 1995 and 1996 on the Career Lecture Team, I am finding it increasingly difficult to be a supportive member of the Defence Force. Although I have enjoyed my four years as a member of a RAAF Reserve Squadron, I feel that there is still a significant rift between the Permanent Air Force and the Reserve, which has only been further highlighted by my failed attempts to have my rank recognized with respect to my application. For the past four years I have maintained my operational readiness to Permanent Air Force standards (ie Physical Fitness Test, Ground Combat Course, Steyr Training etc) and have worked as a Flight Lieutenant Administrative Officer at different Units at RAAF Williamtown. In my case, I feel that if I was acceptable to the Permanent Air Force for seven years, and the Reserve for four years as a Flight Lieutenant, it is nearly impossible to suggest that I am unsuitable for sponsorship as a Flight Lieutenant.

It is with regret that I have currently taken six months leave from my Reserve Squadron at RAAF Williamtown with a view to resigning my commission at the end of the year. Although I have had enormous amounts of support from both Permanent Air Force and Reserve members at my Reserve Unit and RAAF Williamtown, I have become increasingly frustrated by the obstructive bureaucracy of the Defence Force. My partner (who has also recently resigned from the RAAF) and myself both intend to pursue careers which, unfortunately, do not include involvement with the Defence Force.

I would hope that some of my concerns and suggestions are applicable to your inquiry. I have welcomed the opportunity to make a submission, and would be open to discussing these issues with you further should you wish.

Sincerely,

Patricia Collie

