

Congress of Older People's Voices from the Margins

This story was documented for the #Embolden2023 Congress of Older People's Voices from the Margins. A full report on Congress is available at celebrateageing.com/margins

Congress is an initiative of Celebrate Ageing Ltd. Thankyou to our 2023 Congress Principal Partner, Elder Rights Advocacy and our other partners, the Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care, Older Person's Advocacy Network (OPAN), Australian Association of Gerontology, ADA Australia, The Older Women's Network NSW, QueerSpace Drummond St and Council on the Ageing.

Defense and LGBTIQ+ Veterans Suicide Royal Commission, by Yvonne Sillett

DLVA (Discharged Lesbian and Gay veterans Assoc), Advocate for veterans and their families.

Email: yvonesillett@hotmail.com

Phone: 0400996212

Website: DLVAinfo.com

My paper is referring to those ADF (Australian Defence force) veterans who have been discharged /downgraded due to their sexuality whilst serving their country.

Prior to 1992 there was an archaic policy in place banning 'homosexuals' in the ADF. This meant that if it was discovered that members were 'gay' some would be tolerated (just) whilst others were discharged immediately, generally, after being psych tested.

In my own situation in 1989, after being interviewed (interrogated) for 3 hours on 2 separate occasions I was given the option to take an honourable discharge after my security clearance was downgraded from Top Secret to Confidential making me unemployable in the Corps of Signals, where I had been employed in for 10 years.

However, there are other situations, where members were marched off base after being interviewed (interrogated) with no option what so ever; it did not matter that they had nowhere to go and no communication with friends or families (other than public phone boxes).

These were young adults who had put up their hands to serve their country and they were treated as if they were criminals purely because of their sexuality. The depth of the mental health that has impacted these people is only now coming to fruition through the Royal Commission into Defence and Veterans Suicide.

It was in 2018 when Noah Riseman (historian for marginalised people in the ADF) and Shirleene Robinson (LGBTIQA+ historian) released the book titled *Serving in Silence?* It seemed that finally, after 26 years after the ban was lifted, someone was interested in bringing our stories to the attention of the public.

Noah and Shirleene interviewed approx. 150 ex and current serving members around Australia, they wanted to hear from individuals who had been treated in a similar vane to both myself and Danny Liversidge.

Noah and Shirleene released the book with 14 stories from 1944 to 2018, mine is one of these stories, which falls under the chapter of Bans and witch-hunts.

The number of members/veterans who came forward to be interviewed was quite over whelming, there were many of us who thought, 'we were the only ones,' many people were happy to sweep it under the carpet and move on with their lives in the civilian world but many, like myself were still very angry and found the process to be extremely cathartic.

This book was followed up two years later, in 2020, with a second book from the same authors, titled *Pride in Defence*.

It has been a snowball effect for me, since the release of the first book, I have been involved in exhibitions, seminars and have told my story on many podcasts, which the majority of the population find quite disgusting, for the want of a better word.

On the 8th July 2021 it was announced that there would be a Royal Commission into Defence and Veterans suicide. This opened the door for many ex-members that had been suffering in silence with mental health issues for many years after they served in silence.

It was February 14th 2022, when my life changed, I gave evidence in person to the Royal Commission, this was the most courageous, yet daunting experience of my life. I believe that both myself and Danny Liversidge have been the voice for many others who were discharged and inappropriately treated simply for being themselves.

The Royal Commission has been accepting private hearings in addition to public hearings and are extremely supportive of each and every individual that wishes to tell their story at this level.

Bron 'Richo' Richardson who is a member of DLVA is giving evidence at a private hearing on Thursday 24th August, another veteran that was treated with little regard purely due to their sexuality.

During the past year, the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne held an exhibition titled *Defending with Pride*. I was a one of four ex/current serving members who was part of this 12-month exhibition, one of the highlights of this exhibition was that the Shrine won an award for the best temporary or travelling exhibition in Australia! It was also the first war memorial within Australia's history to recognise our community.

Later this year the Australian War memorial will be writing an article in their magazine once again acknowledging the LGBTIQ+ community who served their country.

In all aspects of our community there needs to be more respect and understanding, however, in having said that, some aspects of our society are slowly moving forward. Only last week (August) the Vietnam Veterans received an apology from the Government and the RSL for the way in which they were treated when they returned to Australia after fighting in a war, that once again, had little to do with our country.

It is with great hope that at the conclusion of the Royal Commission and when it comes to the final report in 2024 that the LGBTIQ+ veterans finally receive the apology that they deserve, just as the UK has done in recent months. I believe that it would also be appropriate if those members that lost their careers prematurely are given some form of reparation for loss of earnings and potentially a pension for life.

If you are an ex serving member of our community that was mistreated due to your sexuality or in fact in other regard, for example bullying and harassment, I implore you to reach out to DAVLS (Defence and Veterans Legal Service) who will guide you on the journey to tell your story to the Royal Commission.

I am a member of the DAVLS committee based on me giving evidence at the RC and also the conduit for the LGBTIQ+ community.

It is a free legal service that has been created purely to aide veterans in submitting their evidence, as this will be the only time that we can be truly honest and tell our stories to those who will listen and hopefully act against the Department of Defence and the Government.

Just as a final note if you wish to hear either myself or Danny give our evidence refer to the Royal Commission website and go to hearings (14th and 15th Feb 2022 Sydney).

If you are interested in hearing my story there are several podcasts that are available on Spotify.

Yvonne Sillett (EX Army CPL)