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Australia



Media Release

Veterans Condemn CDF Proposal to Strip Soldiers of Distinguished Service Medals awarded in the Afghanistan War

(Embargoed until Wednesday 24 May 2023)

Senior Veteran leaders are calling on the federal government to reject outright the Chief of the Defence Force (CDF) General Angus Campbell's second attempt to strip awards for distinguished and conspicuous service on warlike operations from soldiers who served the nation with honour and resolve in the Afghanistan war. We are advised that General Campbell wrote to at least seven officers in recent days telling them he has decided to go ahead with his effort to remove the awards, stating that.

".... I am.... referring the matter to the Minister for Defence (the Minister) for consideration. It is then for the Minister to independently determine whether he accepts the assessment in my letter after considering the relevant information including your response. If he is of the view that your award should be cancelled, the Minister will make a recommendation to the Governor General. The Governor-General will then make a decision. This is in accordance with the Letters Patent. My consideration of your command accountability is now closed."

In a joint statement in November 2022, the Australian Special Air Services Association (ASASA) and the Commando (CDO), with the support of the Returned and Services League (RSL) expressed the clear view that any administrative action against soldiers should cease until criminal charges were dealt with and the facts established, in accordance with due process. The SAS Association wrote to the CDF on 8 February 2023 repeating the request. General Campbell has ignored our advice. Mr Hamilton-Smith said.

"Whilst we respect the institution of the ADF and the appointment of CDF as part of that institution, we now recognise that General Campbell's actions necessitate a more prescient response. In our opinion this CDF has mishandled the yet to be proven war crime allegations from the outset and has in the view of many veterans, created an inference of guilt against those involved before the defendants account of events had been heard, in accordance with due process."

"The removal of awards for distinguished and conspicuous service from soldiers after a war in this way appears unprecedented in the history of ANZAC. This second attempt by CDF in effect impugns and humiliates dedicated young commanders who led brave soldiers in the fight against terror in Afghanistan with great distinction. It is in the opinion of veterans both

unjustified and a stunning demonstration of poor leadership from our top-ranking military officer.”

“SAS soldiers volunteered to get the job done but they were worn down and overused by their government in a lethal and under resourced workplace to minimize the government’s political risks and to fight the war on the cheap by avoiding the need to deploy and put at risk, larger conventional combat forces. Because they were so few, some soldiers were required to deploy on 9 to 10 rotations and spent up to three and a half years in combat. Our soldiers and their families paid physical, psychological, and moral price for their service. Each of them continues to carry a burden.

“General Campbell was commander of these soldiers as Commander Task Force 663 in 2011-12. He had oversight of all operations and reviewed after action reports. On the back of the efforts of Special Forces facing the enemy in the Afghan desert, General Campbell was awarded a Distinguished Service Cross (DSC), the same award he wants to take away from the soldiers. As the senior Australian commander General Campbell had a moral and command responsibility for Australian operations. He excludes himself from the standard he requires of others. The General should hand in his own medal, or he has no credibility. This is not the leadership example of Sir John Monash or Weary Dunlop.” Mr Hamilton-Smith said,

We are concerned first and foremost for each of the individual veterans who were ordered to fight the Afghanistan war, particularly former troopers, commandos and noncommissioned officers, officers, and their families. We are sensitive to the work of the Royal Commission into Veterans Suicide currently undertaking hearings in Perth. General Campbell’s actions this week follow the constructed dismissal of soldiers from their employment, a high rate of medical discharges and will further impact veterans’ mental health and that of their spouses and children. On behalf of the Commando Association Steve Pilmore said.

“Soldiers and veterans feel the system which sent them to war has turned its back on them. It feels to them like organisational betrayal.”

The suggestion that any soldier or officer not subject to any allegation within the Brereton Report is guilty by association of wrongdoing warranting punishment, is a very dangerous precedent with potential ramifications to the very top of the chain of command.

“Any punitive administrative action taken to remove awards or sanction veterans must be supported by evidence, it must be fair and considered, and individuals must be afforded due process. General Campbell has not made the case that awards should be removed from soldiers, and he has not held himself accountable as an SAS officer and as Commander of the Australians in Afghanistan in 2011-12.” Mr Pilmore said.

Ministers Dutton and Hastie in the former government dealt with general Campbell’s first attempt at this folly decisively. How Defence Ministers Marles, Conroy, Keogh, and Thistlethwaite deal with it and with the Governor General, will demonstrate to Australians whether they have a government which stands with veterans and their families, or with a General who is manifestly out of touch with Australian community sentiment.

“This action by CDF disparages our ANZAC legacy and the foundations of military leadership, it is putting at further risk soldiers’ mental health, it is delivering adverse publicity to Defence,

a drop in recruiting and an alarming separation rate. General Campbell should be focussed upon the future, upon lifting recruiting and retention, implementation of the Defence Strategic Review and unblocking defence procurement and capability. The General's preoccupation with events 10 years ago during the last war in Afghanistan, is a distraction" Mr Hamilton-Smith said.

Supporting the SAS and Commando veterans Associations, RSL national president Greg Melick said,

The RSL is concerned about this recent development from Defence to remove awards from commanders. Whilst the RSL believes that there must be command accountability for any wrongdoings on their watch the facts of allegations of wrongdoing in Afghanistan are untested and the truth not yet established by a court. It is expected that the legal processes underway at the moment may do that.

The RSL believes that until those processes are complete no further action against commanders, or anyone else, should be taken. In the meantime, all involved have a right to a presumption of innocence.

We remain very concerned about the breadth and depth of the impact that this is having on the mental health of our veterans. We call for the legal processes to be worked through fairly but also as quickly as possible. In the meantime, the RSL offers its support and services for the wellbeing of any veterans affected". Greg Melick said.

The ASASA and CDO Associations and the RSL will discuss these issues widely with Ex-Service Organisations and the Australian community to determine next steps. We ask no more than that expected of any capable Australian leader; we expect judgement guided by compassion, a deep respect for democratic and legal due process and the moral courage to support and respect the service of those placed in harm's way by Australian government and senior ADF commanders' decisions.

We look to the government to stand beside veterans and their families by rejecting General Campbell's recommendation and his advice on these matters.

Martin Hamilton-Smith

24 May 2023

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Further Comment

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