

PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION INQUIRY INTO VETERANS' AFFAIRS' LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK AND SUPPORTING ARCHITECTURE FOR COMPENSATION AND REHABILITATION FOR VETERANS (SERVING AND EX-SERVING AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE FORCE MEMBERS).

Introduction:

My name is David Harrison and I served in the Royal Australian Navy from 1968 to 1989, becoming a qualified Submariner in 1974. During my submarine service, I was awarded the Australian Service Medal (ASM) with the 'Special Ops' clasp. With that award, I was deemed to have 'Qualifying Service', which allowed me to access DVA services. I am currently a DVA Gold Card recipient, with a disability pension.

Submission:

I first approached the Department for Veterans Affairs (DVA) with a personal visit to the Adelaide office. I was received with politeness and respect and was provided with a range of information that may have been of use to me, then and in the future; subsequent visits to the Adelaide office were met with similar impressions. When I first applied for a Service Pension in 2016, the Adelaide office personnel continued to be helpful, and seemed happy to help me with completion of the large number of forms.

As it transpired, that personal service seemed to be limited to my local office, as future contact with 'central' DVA, either by telephone or through written communication, was lacking - I felt like just another number in a queue. I had not felt so second-rated since the early 1990s when I was a client of the (then) Commonwealth Employment Service.

When I first enquired about making a disability claim, I was told simply to complete Forms x, y, and z. No explanation on how, or what information would support my claim. Luckily, I was put in touch with an Advocate who was also an ex-Submariner, and who understood both the DVA claims processes and the special afflictions suffered by Submariners.

In the past two years I have had three claims approved, with varying differences in their approval process. I also have another claim pending. My experience with DVA in each of those claims (specific nature of conditions not included in each case) is as follows:

Claim 1 - a simple and common claim. This claim was approved following one medical test and report.

Claim 2 - a claim specific to Submariners with ASM (Spec Ops). Due to the environment in which this condition manifested, this claim was initially rejected. There was nothing wrong with the completion of the claim, which provided details of the applicable SOP. It went to a DVA staff member who was using a superseded version of the SOP. A claim was made to the VRB for a review; however, another DVA staff member received that review claim and

recognised the problem, which resulted in the original claim being approved, and the VRB review claim being cancelled.

Claim three - this was a musculo-skeletal claim that was clearly identifiable through my RAN medical records and subsequent civilian medical records. The claim was supported through provision of xrays, scans, and specialist reports. That information was apparently insufficient for DVA to approve my claim, and I was required to complete a range of data-centric information, dating back many years. I was also required to undergo further medical scans, identical to those already supplied - why? This claim was approved.

Claim 4 - this is a current musculo-skeletal claim. This was submitted to DVA in the same way as the previous claim. Again, I was required to undertake further scans, and to complete data-centric forms. This claim was submitted to DVA on 19 March 2018 and was acknowledged as being received by DVA in the Department's letter of 20 March 2018. I have nothing further from DVA as of today 24 July 2018.

I would like to make the following observations with respect to my dealings with DVA.

- a. It can sometimes be a bit of a lottery when you submit a claim or a request; it depends on which staff member receives it. Sometimes it is simple, sometimes it seems obstructive. Let's fix that by having all DVA staff members treat Veterans with respect and recognise that the health conditions being claimed were caused by their service to Australia's defence.
- b. As Veterans we sometimes communicate with a DVA staff member who just doesn't seem to care; they would rather be doing something else. That is not our problem. If you don't like helping those people who made, and continue to make, Australia the country that it is, ask for a transfer to another Department.
- c. As I noted with respect to Claim 4, I have heard nothing for the past four months. Now, I am faced with a bit of a predicament. I can seek clarification or update on my claim, but I could just get a staff member who falls into the previously noted category and get nowhere - or have my claim delayed further. The alternate option is to sit and wait and check the mail box each day. Could we please have a process where claimants are notified of the progress of their claim.

Thank you for considering my submission