

VIETNAM VETERANS' FEDERATION

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'Lest we forget'.

Too late, they've already forgotten.

You would think the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry would look kindly on disabled war veterans. After all, they were disabled helping to keep Australia safe for commerce and industry to prosper. And we can't help noticing Commerce and Industry have indeed prospered.

And it goes further than that, doesn't it.

While our troops have died and been wounded on the battlefield, Commerce and Industry have profited supplying the nation's war needs.

Take the Korean War for instance. While Australian troops were fighting the numerically superior, ferocious Chinese army in minus 20 degree Centigrade temperatures with death and amputations from frost bite a daily reality, Australian farmers were buying Mercedes and Pontiacs as the war pushed up the wool price to record highs.

Vietnam veterans are still suffering thirty years after the war's end. Worse, their families are suffering. It is a sad fact that the children of Vietnam veterans have a 300% higher suicide rate than their equivalent in the general community and their wives have a high rate of psychological distress¹. But during that ten year war, Commerce and Industry did very well, thank you very much.

Currently, there is a lot of talk about Australian Commerce and Industry gaining preferential access to reconstruction and primary produce contracts in Iraq because our troops were part of the invasion and are now part of the occupation. In other words, Australian Commerce and Industry hopes to slide into lucrative contracts in Iraq on the backs of our troops risking death, wounding and shattered lives.

Not that Commerce and Industry should not make profits supplying Australia's war needs. It's just that, under the circumstances, you'd expect the Chamber to favour our

disabled war veterans and war widows being granted generous compensation and being given the best care.

In fact they are advocating the opposite.

They are advocating that the Service pension, War Widows pension and the TPI pension be reduced in value and that the Department of Veterans Affairs be disbanded with disabled war veterans and war widows administered by various departments such as Welfare and Health.

It seems it suits the Chamber to categorise us as unworthy welfare cases rather than veterans being compensated for war caused death, injuries and illnesses.

'Gratitude' is not a strong contender against 'greed' in the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

The Chamber lays it all out in a document titled *Commonwealth Spending (and Taxes) Can Be Cut --- And Should Be* which can be found on web-site

http://www.acci.asn.au/text_files/Discussion%20Papers/Cutting%20Government%20Spending.pdf

Look at the end of page 19 and the beginning of page 20 for the Chamber's attack on the pensions and care of disabled veterans and war widows.

You see, the Chamber understands that wages increase over time at a higher rate than the cost of living. Presently, the Service and War Widows pensions are increased as wages increase. These pensions were moved onto wage based indexation in 1997 when it became only too evident that they were falling behind community income standards. Most recently this wage based indexation was applied to part of the TPI pension.

So what is the Chamber advocating? It is advocating that war veterans' and war widows' pensions presently indexed to increases in wages be reduced by being indexed, as in the dark past, to increases in the cost of living. The Chamber doesn't seem to care that such a change would cause the standard of living of disabled war veterans and their families as well as war widows, to continually slide backwards compared with the standard of living of the general community. In fact, it seems the Chamber would welcome such an outcome.

The Chamber is also advocating the closing down of the Department of Veterans Affairs with disabled war veterans and widows thrown to the mercy of a variety of other departments including Welfare and Health.

The Department of Veterans Affairs administers legislation which is described as 'beneficial'. The law requires that war veterans be treated in a 'beneficial' manner, that they be given, for instance, 'the benefit of the doubt'. This makes the way the Department of Veterans Affairs administers war veterans very different indeed from the way Welfare and Health administer their clients. Further, the Department of Veterans Affairs, as a matter of long standing practice, consults with and is advised by representatives of the war veteran community. To a far greater degree than in any other government department, this consultation with client representatives is built into the

Repatriation committee structure. Indeed, cooperation extends to the Department financially assisting the main ex-service organizations and training their volunteer members to help run the claims application and appeals advocacy system.

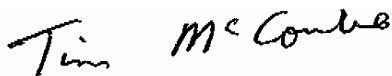
It seems the Chamber thinks this arrangement 'spoils' disabled war veterans. We are, it would seem, not worthy of such a cooperative system. We note, however, that the Chamber did not judge us unworthy to fight and die on the battlefield while its members made wartime profits.

The Chamber is an influential organisation. Its attack on war veterans' compensation and care is designed to convince the government to act. This is worrying, as the government is already involved in downgrading the special place war service has in the areas of compensation and care. Who can forget, for instance, the departmental proposal to reduce the number and quality of artificial limbs given to war veterans who had lost limbs on the battlefield. The bureaucrats' excuse was that the reduction would align limbless war veterans' entitlement with the parsimonious civilian welfare entitlement. Perhaps the Chamber supports that proposal too.

The attack by the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry on disabled war veterans and war widows is a great disappointment to us.

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Too late, they've already forgotten.



Tim McCombe

President

ⁱ *Morbidity of Vietnam Veterans, Supplementary Report, Suicide of Vietnam Veterans' Children*, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Commonwealth Department of Veterans Affairs, 2000.

Morbidity of Vietnam Veterans: A Study of the Health of Australia's Vietnam Veteran Community, Volume I, Survey and Community Comparison Outcomes, Male Vietnam Veterans, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Commonwealth Department of Veterans Affairs, 1998.

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