




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR BONNEY

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QUEENSLAND VETERANS' COUNCIL BILL 2021

 **Mr O'CONNOR** (Bonney—LNP) (2.09 pm): I will begin, as other members have, by acknowledging and thanking all those who have served, and in particular the members in this House who have served. Growing up in Ipswich, the Australian Defence Force was never too far away from my childhood. Teachers used to have to regularly pause lessons when an F-111 or a C-17 flew over. We got to see more dump and burns than anyone else in Queensland.

I owe my very existence to the RAAF base at Amberley. My father, Rod, was posted there as an airframe fitter. He met my mum at a disco held on the base. I do not want to know any further details about that. I am exceptionally proud of his service. He spent 23 years in the Royal Australian Air Force. He is currently an active reservist. He has worked for the last decade or so as a Commonwealth public servant with the 16th Aviation Brigade in Enoggera.

As all members have noted, we are so thankful to the men and women who have consistently put themselves forward to protect our way of life, to allow us to live in peace. There is no greater example of what to be thankful for than the parliament we are speaking in today. We take our freedom for granted every day, but we only have it because of that very special group of Australians who chose to put themselves quite literally on the line to defend our values. To say we owe it to our veterans to ensure we best care for them is an understatement.

The horror of wars and conflict is something most of us would never want to and will never face. Because of our service men and women and because of our veterans, none of us are likely to ever have to do so. Because of the nature of that service, we need to do all we can to support this group of people. One of the best ways we can do that is to listen to what they need. The establishment of the Queensland Veterans' Council should be about that. That is why it was surprising to see the original make-up of this council was not proposed to be predominantly of veterans and that the veterans reference group was not mandated.

Disappointingly, the first draft before the amendment only allowed for two veterans on the council. I understand one of the difficulties of this council is the wideranging scope they will cover. Therefore, certain expertise in heritage conservation, financial management and so forth is needed. However, surely the prime role of the Queensland Veterans' Council should be to represent veterans and their views. That is how their stories will be told. That is how they will be heard. That is how we will best respect our veterans. This was shared by many stakeholders. RSL Queensland put it plainly—

It is important that the members of the council clearly understand veterans' issues and the views of veterans. Having two veterans in a membership of eight does not allow for this.

I welcome the committee's recommendation and the government's subsequent amendment to ensure 50 per cent of the council will be veterans. I, of course, support the amendment to be moved by the member for Southern Downs to ensure the chair is a veteran.

This bill must provide a genuine space for veterans to represent their communities. The veterans reference group is another avenue for this to happen. I support the view that this should be mandatory. It allows for more veterans to be represented and works directly with the QVC. It allows for more veterans groups to be able to take part and will aid the council well in their decision-making.

Queenslanders want to honour their veterans. The continued development of Anzac Square will provide a central space for residents to come to, to learn and to pay their respects to those who have done so well to protect our way of life. In my electorate, I have seen the importance of remembering our fallen soldiers. Ken Golden, the President of the North Gold Coast RSL Sub Branch, which is actually in the electorate of Theodore, led the incredible project of painting a mural on Brisbane Road. It has the faces of 24 soldiers over both sides of the road who lost their lives during World War I from the now Gold Coast region as well as the names of an additional six. This is one of our busiest roads, with thousands of cars passing along there every day as people come in and out of our city. It pays respect to what those young soldiers gave their lives for—for us to enjoy the standard of living we have today. There is no better standard than on the Gold Coast.

The response we have to our local veterans groups demonstrates the desire of Queenslanders to honour their service. Whether it is the North Gold Coast RSL Sub Branch at Helensvale, the Southport Sub Branch with Rodney Tagg or the Runaway Bay Sub Branch led by Bruce Main and his team, including Graham Gordon and Barry Medlin, all these groups work hard to honour their members and those no longer with us and to educate young and old alike about the different conflicts our nation has been part of. This education is so important and we must ensure it continues.

In Labrador and Biggera Waters we have the names of local soldiers on our street signs. Sydney Henry Turpin, George Henry Parr, Norman David Freeman, Percival George Burrows and Bertie James Taylor all served and died in the First World War and all were honoured by our council in the 1930s by having local streets renamed after them. These young men gave their lives before the Gold Coast was even a city. They did not have a concept of what it would look like today, but it is through their sacrifice that we all enjoy living there.

I have shared some of that history locally. Once again, we have seen a massive response. People want to know more. They want to understand their local history and what happened to get us where we are today. They also want our veterans to be honoured, to be respected and to be heard. We know the terrible rates of suicide amongst this community, amongst many other issues. More needs to be done. I hope through the establishment of the Queensland Veterans' Council we will see a dramatic improvement for all who have served.