

Dr Brendan Nelson
Director



17 September 2019
MC19-002380

Mr Brendan Kelson
PO Box 1553
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Dear Mr Kelson,

Thank you for your correspondence of 30 August 2019 to Minister Chester. Given the detail in your correspondence the Minister has asked me to reply directly to your concerns.

The interpretation of history is, as you will agree, a complex, nuanced and multi-layered affair that evolves and changes over time. The interpretation of history is not a static affair, John Treloar and Charles Bean knew this when the Memorial was established and it continues to be understood by the Memorial's current management.

In line with the precepts set by Treloar and Bean the Memorial will use the new galleries as only the first stage of historical evaluation of recent conflicts. In time this will be followed by the Official Histories of these conflicts, by unit histories and then by further academic and individual publications from the wider history community as documents are de-classified and more veterans' stories captured and told. Such work then helps inform the thinking behind Memorial's refurbishment of galleries and re-interpreting the evolving experience and impact of a conflict over the decades that follow.

Importantly each of these elements of historical analysis serves a different purpose; a gallery cannot replace an Official History any more than the personal recollections of one man or woman can replace a unit history. Together however they form a cohesive exploration of military history and one in which the Memorial is, importantly, not the only voice.

This pattern, and the success of it, can be seen throughout the Memorial's lifetime from the then Australian War Museum's first displays opening in 1922 – some twenty years before the completion of the *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918* - through to the opening of Second World War, Korean and Vietnam galleries prior to completion of their Official Histories too.

So too is the Memorial's recent refurbishment of the First World War galleries an example of how modern historical analysis influences how the Australian experience of war is told. Take for example the current galleries and the manner in which they handle issues such as Indigenous service, the experience of women in the First World War or the society wide grief that followed it. It is difficult to see the Australia of 1922 developing a gallery with these stories thoroughly explored and carefully curated as they are now.

Here is their spirit, in the heart of the land they loved; and here we guard the record which they themselves made. C.E.W. Bean

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As such the Memorial's planned new galleries should be considered only the 'first word' and by no means the 'last word' in the interpretation and understanding of the recent Australian experience of war.

The need to tell these stories now and not decades into the future is also reinforced by the experience of our Vietnam veterans as outlined in Mr Curtin's reply to you. It is also important to note that there is an expectation in a world that grows more connected, with a greater volume of communication, media and commentary than ever before that institutions such as the Memorial will be part of that conversation and indeed a leading voice in exploring our history in a more contemporaneous manner.

The Memorial is doing so but I emphasise we are doing so carefully, in close consultation with the Australian Defence Force and those veterans who made this history, and in the knowledge that this, often controversial, period in our military history must be explored with great skill and care.

I would also refute your claim that because the number of Australians who have been killed on active service in the past 70 years is relatively small compared to the World Wars that this means the Memorial should have lesser displays on these conflicts.

Whilst deaths in those conflicts may have been empirically low, nonetheless hundreds of thousands of Australians have worn the uniform of our nation in war, on operations, in peacekeeping and peacemaking over that time.

They served in the belief that their actions would protect the freedoms and rights we exercise here in Australia each and every day. All have been changed by their service and a significant minority carry physical and psychological traumas. Their service and sacrifice must be given equal dignity as that of those who came before them, and those who will come after regardless of the number of names all too sadly added to the Rolls.

On your third point, the option of expanding the Mitchell campus was studied carefully during the development of the Initial Business Case for the Memorial's expansion. The Options Assessment paper covering the 19 options considered was released to the public by the Memorial in May 2019 and is available on our website:

www.awm.gov.au/system/files/documents/Options%20Assessment%20Report_0.pdf

The Options Assessment paper provides detailed reasoning on why this option was deemed unsuitable. Most notably when examined closely this 'IWM' style dispersed model was rejected because the unlike the IWM the Memorial also serves as a shrine.

To separate modern stories of service and sacrifice from heart of the Memorial - the Hall of Memory and the Tomb of the Unknown Australian Soldier - would dilute the Memorial's unique combined role as archive, shrine and museum that you yourself have pointed out in your correspondence. Indeed to do so would be to reduce the service of the current generation of servicemen and women a 'second class' representation at the national institution meant to tell their stories.

In that context, there is no intent as you state, to turn the Memorial into military hardware museum focused on Large Technology Objects (LTOs) today any more than there was when my predecessor MAJGEN Gower placed G for George and the Japanese midget submarines on display in 2001.

The use of LTOs as a physical representation of service and history is well established practice at the Memorial and museums around the world. The longest serving Director-General of the Imperial War Museum (IWM), Dr Noble Frankland, encapsulated this philosophy in relationship to the acquisition and display of the Second World War era *HMS Belfast* by the IWM, which he considered capable of representing 'a whole generation of [historical evidence and service]'.

The display of a limited number of carefully selected LTOs from recent and current conflicts and operations will provide the same sense of representation to this generation. This was demonstrated eloquently to me in a letter received from a serving RAAF Warrant Officer who attended the handover ceremony of an RAAF RF-111C, an aircraft with an operational history spanning decades and including vital reconnaissance flights over East Timor in 1999, to the Memorial earlier this year,

'In your letter to the Chief of Air Force, AIRMSHL Davies (dated 26 Feb 18), in which you accepted A8-134 into the National Collection you made the following statement; 'More significantly it represents an entire generation of service to this nation by aircrews, ground crews and families - much loved and admired aircraft'. Your words are powerful and emotive and mean more to my Team, and the greater F-111 community, than you will ever know. While this aircraft represents a particular military action, we see it as so much more.

We believe this aircraft is a fitting memorial to all the F-111 Aircrew we have lost, and the countless aircraft maintainers who have passed due to the F-111's unique 'occupational' hazards that were faced during the maintenance of the aircraft. For the families left behind, and those of us still dealing with this 'legacy' your heart felt words give us great comfort and inspiration.'

This aircraft and a small number of other LTOs will speak to the experience of entire generations of our servicemen and women in the same way the Memorial's Devanha Gallipoli landing boat, 'G for George', the HMAS Brisbane bridge and the UH-1 'Huey' helicopter have come to speak to the experience of their generations.

As with those venerated objects, these new LTOs will do so in conjunction with the other, more personal displays the Memorial has, and continues, to execute so well - from dioramas to artworks to photos and physical artefacts - to tell our continuing story.

The Warrant Officer's words also speak clearly to the healing role of the Memorial, one that is has always held. Your own tenure as Director in installing the Tomb of the Unknown Australian Soldier must have demonstrated this to you countless times. I read your 2018 Canberra Day Oration and noted these words,

"Major Ray Curtis, supporting Bob Coombes, alone heard him whisper, you're home, mate."

That sense of peace, of closure, is but one example of healing. The story of Jason Safaric that Mr Curtin asked you to view on our website is another. Or consider this quote from a letter sent to me by a serving naval officer,

"Thank you for telling my 11-year-old son in words I never could why his father has spent so such time away from home".

Will such healing cure a soldier, sailor or airman of PTSD? Of course not, and it is disingenuous of critics of the Memorial's development program to claim that I, or the Memorial, have said that this is the case or that our intent is to somehow replace the professional service and care provided by the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA).

I understand however, as does the Memorial's Council and Government, that the Memorial has always and continues to have a role to play in this regard for some, even many, veterans and for their families too.

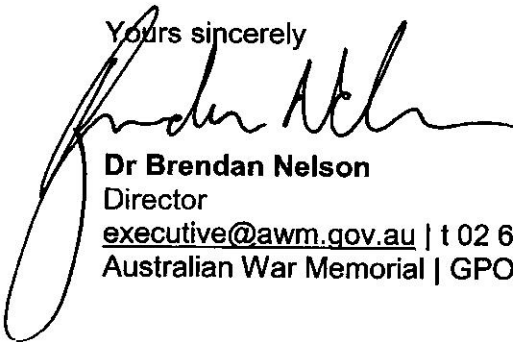
It is with this understanding that the Memorial has decided to formally recognise and support this role through the creation of dedicated spaces for reflection and contemplation for veterans and their families. These spaces, from their look and feel to how they are staffed or served, will be developed in close co-ordination with DVA, ex-service organisations such as the RSL, Mates4Mates and Soldier On and veterans themselves. Most importantly however their design and use will be informed by medical professionals and experts in mental health.

I hope this response answer the questions you have raised and provides you with a greater understanding of the need for this project.

As I have offered the other public critics of the development program, I would be happy to meet with you and discuss these matters in person, to provide a tour of the current facilities and point out the necessary improvements or to facilitate an introduction to some of the many veterans whose stories we are seeking to tell to help you better understand their need for this development.

Thank you for your continuing passion for the Memorial and your dedication to its mission, one which I assure you that I, and all the staff and volunteers, here continue to share.

Yours sincerely



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