

When Guardians Become Gatekeepers: The Crisis of Inquiry Officer Suppression

An Editorial by Dr Kay Danes, OAM, Human Rights Advocate

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Vedran Maslic, host of the acclaimed podcast "The Voices of War," has recently spotlighted a deeply troubling phenomenon within Australia's Defence institutions—one that the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide aptly termed 'weaponised injustice.' This powerful phrase encapsulates a dark reality: inquiry processes designed to deliver justice and accountability have been systematically corrupted into instruments of suppression, silencing service members who dare to speak truth about their experiences.

In compelling interviews with Special Air Service Regiment members Brett and Vando (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AQRBQZWGm30>), Maslic exposes a disturbing pattern: soldiers who served our nation with distinction are now being victimised through Defence-led inquiries that operate without basic fairness or due process. These service members—many already carrying the psychological scars of combat—are subjected to inquiry panels that deny them adequate legal representation and medical support. They face hostile questioning designed to retraumatise rather than investigate, are confronted with graphic battlefield imagery without psychological safeguards, and are systematically denied the same level of legal resources afforded to the Department of Defence itself. This is not justice. This is institutional abuse masquerading as accountability—a betrayal of those who have sacrificed for our country, and a corruption of the very inquiry processes meant to protect them.

In any institution that values justice, the inquiry process serves as a critical safeguard—a mechanism through which those who have been wronged can seek accountability and redress. But what happens when the very individuals entrusted with investigating complaints become instruments of their suppression? The phenomenon of inquiry officers actively shutting down legitimate complaints from defence personnel represents more than administrative failure—it is a fundamental betrayal of institutional trust that corrodes the very foundation of military justice and transforms those sworn to protect into predators who silence the vulnerable.

In all the years I have been advocating for defence inquiry reforms, I have documented some of the most disturbing patterns that show how some inquiry officers conduct their investigations:

They arrive with verdicts already written. Before a single witness is heard or document reviewed, certain inquiry officers operate under instructions—explicit or implicit—to dismiss complaints regardless of merit. This is not investigation; it is theatre designed to create the appearance of due process while delivering predetermined outcomes.

They weaponise procedure against justice. Technical grounds become tools of dismissal. Rather than examining whether a service member has been wronged, these officers search for any procedural misstep that allows them to reject complaints without confronting uncomfortable truths.

They create climates of fear. Through hostile questioning and intimidating interview environments, some inquiry officers discourage complainants from fully presenting their grievances. The message is clear: speaking up will bring more pain than silence.

They cherry-pick reality. Evidence that supports complainants mysteriously goes unexamined. Witnesses who might corroborate allegations remain uninterviewed. Meanwhile, any information that undermines credibility receives disproportionate attention and emphasis.

They protect their own. Conflicts of interest pervade investigations when inquiry officers have relationships with those implicated or institutional incentives to shield certain individuals or units from accountability.

They operate without consequences. Perhaps most troubling is the absence of meaningful oversight. Inquiry officers who fail to conduct fair and thorough investigations face no repercussions, creating a system where suppression becomes routine rather than scandalous.

Let me be absolutely clear about what this represents: when inquiry officers are specifically engaged to shut down complaints, we are witnessing potential criminal conduct—obstruction of justice, abuse of office, and conspiracy to pervert the course of justice. All paid for by Government through taxpayer funding. This is not a series of isolated failures. It is systemic corruption that undermines the entire military justice system and strips defence personnel of their fundamental right to have grievances properly heard and addressed.

Those who wear the uniform deserve better. They deserve inquiry officers and an IGADF who approach their duty with integrity, who understand that their role is to uncover truth—not bury it. They deserve a system where speaking up is met with serious investigation, not sophisticated suppression.

Until we demand accountability from those who conduct inquiries, until we establish meaningful oversight of these processes, and until we create real consequences for officers who betray their investigative mandate, we perpetuate an injustice that corrodes the very foundations of military justice.

The question before us is simple: Will we continue to tolerate a system where guardians of justice have become gatekeepers of silence?

About Dr Kay Danes

For decades, Dr. Danes has been a steadfast advocate for Australian Defence Force members facing workplace grievances. Her longstanding mission has been to champion essential workplace reforms that address these problems before they persist into post-service life, where they historically complicated legal claims and contributed to the alarming rates of suicide and self-harm within the Defence and Veteran community. Through years of respectful dialogue with successive Australian Governments, Dr. Danes' submissions—frequently requested by officials—have provided valuable insights that advanced research, deepened understanding, supported workplace reforms, and driven positive change to help the ADF evolve into an employer of choice.

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Resources:

Defence Lives Matter | www.defencelivesmatter.com

The Voices of War - <https://youtu.be/Haqfei9AAd0?si=xnyCQzbn8UsR5pvn>

Betrayed: Brigadier Dan Fortune, DSC and Bar, Exposes Military Hypocrisy

<https://youtu.be/K1-h88tElkQ?si=u5M8NNov91LpO5j0>

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