HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

VETERANS' ENTITLEMENTS
AMENDMENT (DIRECT DEDUCTIONS
AND OTHER MEASURES) BILL 2004

Second Reading

SPEECH

Monday, 21 June 2004

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
Mr HUNT (Flinders) (7.47 pm)—I am delighted to rise this evening to support the Veterans' Entitlements Amendment (Direct Deductions and Other Measures) Bill 2004. This bill carries out a series of steps and brings them into being, which will assist veterans. I want to begin with two preliminary points that flow from the role, care and action of veterans within my electorate of Flinders. As with every electorate, there are people who served Australia in times of war and times of peace within the military who now live in that area. In particular, we have a group of veterans, whether from Rye, Rosebud, Dromana or Mount Martha, who have retired to the area and made a commitment in the course of their lives and served this country.

I bring a little personal history to this debate having lost a great-uncle in the First World War. As a custodian of his legacy, almost 90 years on now, it is something that sits with my own family as I know it sits with every family. Having paid tribute to the veterans in my electorate, I want to raise a specific issue which one of them has asked me to bring before the House. Dennis Gist, who was a naval seaman aboard HMAS *Sydney* in Vietnam in 1965, has been the custodian of a legacy: he has been working with many of his fellow seamen and others who were aboard HMAS *Sydney*, a troop carrier, to achieve for themselves positive consideration for the South Vietnam campaign medal. I know that this has been considered by the government, and I gently but genuinely urge them to consider this situation in the light of all the newest evidence which is available.

In essence, looking back over the history, we know that, in May 1965 in Vung Tau harbour, HMAS *Sydney* was a troop carrier for the Australian Navy, along with other ships, RAAF No. 10 maritime squadron and certain military units. Although they were not seen as directly being engaged in action, the history is nevertheless very clear: they were in an area of enemy activity, which involved hostile fire from the island of Long Son. There was Vietnamese mortar, mines in the water—both fixed and floating—and also divers with hostile intent. Against that background, previous governments have not agreed to the award of the South Vietnamese campaign medal for the crew of HMAS *Sydney*, the accompanying ships and RAAF No. 10 maritime squadron. I realise that these are difficult issues; all of balance and all of judgment. On behalf of Dennis Gist, former naval seaman, I urge the government, the Prime Minister and the Minister for Veterans' Affairs to give consideration to the circumstances surrounding the crew of the HMAS *Sydney* and to do all they can to assist in the award of the South Vietnamese campaign medal. I realise that these are difficult issues; nevertheless, I place these matters clearly before the House.

The Veterans' Entitlements Amendment (Direct Deductions and Other Measures) Bill 2004 seeks to do three things. Firstly, it expands options and support for disabled veterans, war widows and veterans' partners; secondly, it aligns the Veterans' Entitlements Act 1986 with the social security law in relation to the deeming of certain income and assets, including the treatment of superannuation benefits and compensation recovery provisions; and, thirdly, with changes to the direct deduction arrangements contained within this bill, it gives assistance to persons receiving service pension or income support supplements, to persons receiving the disability pension, to those receiving the war widow or widowers pension and to those who receive other pecuniary benefits under the Veterans' Entitlements Act.

Those are important steps. They come against a particular background. I pay special tribute to the work of the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, who has had a Herculean task in the last year to respond to the Clarke review. Against that background, the government's response to the Clarke review, and in particular the Minister for Veterans' Affairs' response, basically deals with the core areas of service eligibility, access to the gold card, benefits for totally and permanently incapacitated and disability benefit recipients, and rehabilitation measures. Looking at all of those things, the total package which has come out of the response to the Clarke review is an additional $267 million to assist our veterans over the next five years. That is a significant figure.

Of course, any government always wants to do more. But, given the available resources, this is a very significant step forward. What we see is an increase in funding, which is already evident with the rise in pension rates from 20 March this year, by $11.40 to $464.20 a fortnight, with the maximum rate for couples to increase by $9.60. The TPI pension rose by $8.40 to $771 a fortnight. Of course we want to do more, but within the available
resources this is a significant step forward. In addition to that, what we find is that more than 19,000 disability pensioners who receive their income support from Centrelink will benefit from the change. On average, they will receive an additional $40 a fortnight. That is a significant and important step forward. Furthermore, there is an increase in the extreme disablement adjustment, which will be increased by $4.80 to $438.45 a fortnight. Last, but by no means least, the government also accepted the Clarke committee's recommendation to extend an ex gratia payment of $25,000 to all surviving prisoners of war held captive during the Korean War and to their widows or widowers. This is in recognition of the extraordinarily inhumane and difficult conditions they endured as a consequence of their service to Australia in the most hostile environment.

The Clarke review and the changes made build on the back of a series of other packages over the course of the life of the government. Perhaps most significantly, since coming into office in 1996 this government, through its successive ministers, has increased spending on veterans affairs from $6.4 billion to $10 billion in the federal budget for 2003-04. Why is that important? It represents an increase of over 50 per cent in the period of a few short years. That is an increase which is far and away above rises in the consumer price index. It is a significant and real increase in the value of that which is paid to those who have served Australia. It is a very important step forward.

So when you look at the full range of initiatives, what you see is that we are making real progress on the conditions which are offered to our veterans—people who have either placed themselves in harm's way or offered to place themselves in harm's way. In the world in which we live today, we perhaps recognise better than at any other time over the last 30 years the magnitude of the debt we owe our veterans, wherever they may be around Australia—or, in my case, from the Mornington Peninsula.

As I said at the outset, I come to this speech and this topic with not a direct connection but a familial connection. My own great-uncle was lost in the First World War. That had an impact throughout the ages throughout the family. There is recognition, understanding and remembrance. I think most Australians can say that they have a direct connection in some way or a connection to people who have served Australia, because it has been a national responsibility over the course of the last century. In that context, I am delighted to commend the measures set out in this bill. I thank people such as Dennis Gist who have kept alight the flame for any particular part of the service community. Whilst we may not be able to satisfy everyone, we work towards recognising their legacy, treating it appropriately and thanking them for their work. In that context, I commend the bill to the House and I urge its speedy passage.