



# Defence Force Remuneration Tribunal

## DECISION

*Defence Act 1903*  
s.58H—Functions and powers of Tribunal

### **MILITARY PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICER – SALARY STRUCTURE** (Matter 13 of 2024)

MS B O’NEILL, PRESIDENT

MR A MORRIS, MEMBER

CANBERRA, 8 NOVEMBER 2024

MAJGEN G FOGARTY AO RETD, MEMBER

[1] This decision arises from a listing application from the Australian Defence Force (ADF) for a determination to be made under Section 58H of the *Defence Act 1903* (the Act). The listing application<sup>1</sup> seeks to provide a contemporised and professionalised career path for Navy and Air Force Military Public Affairs Officers (MPAO).

#### **Background**

[2] Military Public Affairs is the ADF’s professional media and strategic communications capability to improve public awareness of ADF activities and support strategic objectives. The duties of MPAOs are to inform, educate and persuade target audiences about Defence and its activities. The MPAO has a key role in aligning and amplifying key themes and messages in line with Australia’s national interests and, when required, countering the actions and messages of competitors.

[3] We considered this matter in a hearing at Gallipoli Barracks, Enoggera on 23 October 2024 where Ms K Hagan appeared for the ADF and Mr K Wong for the Commonwealth. Commander K Lunt RAN, Head of Professional Requirements for Navy Military Public Affairs, and Squadron Leader J Aldred, 464 Squadron, appeared as witnesses for the ADF.

## Submissions

### ADF

[4] The ADF states from the outset that the *‘current Navy and Air Force MPAO related structures are not fit for purpose’* adding that *‘supply of suitably qualified and experienced MPAO personnel is not meeting the increasing demands of single Service and joint mission requirements’*. It therefore submits that *‘establishing a mature and sustainable career continuum with aligned professional skills and mastery will enable the Services to provide appropriate salary recognition for increasing skill, provides additional surety for career managers and workforce designers and underpins an effective ADF Information Related Capability’*.<sup>2</sup>

[5] The ADF notes that Army does not wish to seek changes or amendments to the salary structure or for its Public Relations Officer (PRO) category. As a result the ADF specifically seeks to:

- a. For Navy:
  - i. establish a new employment category called the MPAO with salary placements between pay grade 2 to 6 and comprising a continuum of 6 skill grades;
  - ii. transfer eligible Officers from the Management Executive (MX) and Public Relations (PREL) categories to Navy’s MPAO employment category; and
  - iii. disestablish the MX Navy Information Effects (MX-NIE) and PREL employment categories.
- b. For Air Force:
  - i. establish a new employment category called the MPAO with salary placement for SERCAT 3-5 members only, between pay grades 2 to 5 comprising a continuum of 4 skill grades; and
  - ii. transfer eligible Officers to Air Force’s MPAO employment category.<sup>3</sup>

[6] The ADF states non-reduction provisions are required for a 5 year period for both Navy and Air Force so as to provide *‘sufficient time for individuals to meet the revised MPAO employment category requirements’*.<sup>4</sup>

## Commonwealth

[7] The Commonwealth does not oppose the ADF submission and states it *‘recognises the extant remuneration structure is not conducive to developing the MPA workforce and capabilities required by the changing strategic environment and increasing ADF focus upon integration and joint capability’*.<sup>5</sup>

[8] The Commonwealth did question *‘whether a work value assessment has been conducted to inform the development of the proposed MPAO categories, or if there would be a benefit to conducting one’*.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, it sought advice on *‘what key performance indicators and reporting measures are in place to ensure success of the proposal is monitored, value for money is realised and attraction/retention effects are evaluated’*.<sup>7</sup>

## Witness Evidence

[9] Commander (CMDR) K Lunt RAN and Squadron Leader (SQNLDR) J Aldred provided written and oral evidence in support of the proposal.

[10] CMDR Lunt outlined how the MPAO role in Navy *‘provides deployed capability in both maritime and joint operational environments’* explaining that Navy *‘requires MPAO to fill approximately 22 trained force positions as well as joint rotational and dynamic operational roles at full operational readiness’*. She expanded on this, describing that MPAO have *‘assigned deployable billets at Fleet locations requiring incumbents to be available for at sea duties and short notice deployments’*.<sup>8</sup>

[11] CMDR Lunt also gave evidence that, at the operational headquarters level, Navy’s MPAO are responsible for *‘the development of Public Affairs estimates, communications plans, policies, reports and briefings that convey the key themes and messages through complex, attributable information activities’*. Adding that officers must be able to *‘research, analyse, and interpret military-strategic level information, ideas, policies, legislation and stakeholder advice or subject matter expertise and work within a joint communication/information environment’*.<sup>9</sup>

[12] She outlined that in Navy the pay grade range will span from pay grade 2 for under training to 8 (including Command), with the introduction of a new pay grade 3 to *‘consolidate initial employment training and develop competencies operating in the maritime domain’*.<sup>10</sup>

[13] SQNLDR Aldred gave evidence that the Air Force currently employs 54 specialist Reserve-only PAOs.<sup>11</sup> She explained that Air Force Officers performing MPAO roles are primarily employed in a centralised model *‘within No 464 Squadron and Air Force Headquarters, as well as a small number of roles in Joint Capabilities Group, Headquarters Joint Operations Command and other Defence Groups’*. She expanded on this, detailing that Air Force PAOs *‘participate in multiple joint operations, short notice humanitarian assistance and disaster relief missions, exercises and activities’* conducting *‘public affairs leadership roles, military camera team leading, media management’* and *‘as a key advisor to command at all levels, both in Australia and overseas, in the air, land and maritime domains’*.<sup>12</sup>

[14] SQNLDR Aldred outlined the current structure where *'Air Force has conducted public affairs through two separate mechanisms with Specialist Reserve PAOs being considered the leading subject matter experts'* but with Permanent Personnel Capability Officers *'responsible for providing public affairs support when a Specialist Reserve PAO is not available'*.<sup>13</sup>

[15] SQNLDR Aldred explained how a lack of dedicated category has meant Air Force PAOs are only able to be remunerated at pay grade 2. She states this represents *'significant disadvantage to their Army and Navy counterparts, particularly when working side-by-side in joint postings, and on operations and exercises'*.<sup>14</sup> She explained the proposed changes will see a structure consisting of 4 skill grades with placement in the Graded Officer Pay Structure at pay grades 2 to 5 with the possibility of some members progressing beyond to pay grades 6 and 8 if they meet certain career milestones in line with the existing Command placements for Air Force officers.<sup>15</sup>

### **Consideration**

[16] We note the evidence that, on 3 May 2023, the Vice Chief of Defence Force (VCDF) published a Joint MPA Doctrine which *'highlights the organisation intent to deliver an effective joint public affairs capability'*<sup>16</sup> and, we consider, demonstrates a high-level focus on the evolution of this workforce.

[17] We note that Navy presently has two employment categories delivering MPAO capability: the PREL and MX-NIE both of which *'do not address contemporary requirements or allow for building and retaining a sustainable workforce with career progression'*.<sup>17</sup> Navy is now seeking to establish a single employment category to *'streamline workforce management, force generation and trade training'*.<sup>18</sup>

[18] We are aware that Navy PREL can only be remunerated at pay grade 2. We considered the evidence that the MX-NIE category provides for some pay grade progression through transfer from PREL however accept this *'no longer provides the depth of control and professionalism for efficient and effect MPA capability'*.<sup>19</sup>

[19] We considered the evidence of CMDR Lunt that Navy effectively has two employment categories delivering the same result with neither providing a *'sustainable, rewarding career recognising the work value our people bring in delivering information effects'*.<sup>20</sup> We accept her evidence that establishing one employment category will, among other capability benefits, provide personnel with *'a greater sense of identity as a cohort and with this wider Navy'*.<sup>21</sup>

[20] Air Force has no Permanent Force MPAOs and instead employs specialist Reserve Officers in continuous full time service SERCAT 7 roles with no scope for pay progression above pay grade 2 regardless of rank attained. We accept this limitation provides *'insufficient incentive to generate and maintain the depth of skill required'* and is also *'inconsistent with the Navy proposition and the Army PRO remuneration'*.<sup>22</sup>

[21] We accept that Air Force has no immediate intention of placing Permanent Force members into the MPAO category and accept *'this position may be revisited according to capability needs'* in the future.<sup>23</sup>

[22] In the hearing we sought to be apprised of the considerations given to external relativities for the workforce. In response, both witnesses addressed comparators made to civilian counterpart journalists and marketers. CMDR Lunt stated Navy had *'done research on job advertising areas, as well as some of the people in our own employment categories who have external work'* with the aim to *'make sure that we are not more than, or significantly less than'* those roles.<sup>24</sup>

[23] SQNLDR Aldred described how the main issue for Air Force is actually internal relativities, rather than external, with no scope to move beyond pay grade 2. For her the prime concern was *'people on pay grade 2 working alongside pay grades 3, 4 and 5'*. We acknowledge the challenges of the current situation particularly, as she stated, *'especially as our role in the joint environment increases'*.<sup>25</sup> We also note her concerns that personnel may be attracted to the other Services as a result of this inequity.

[24] We contemplated the Commonwealth concerns regarding any additional effect of a work value assessment and consider that work value has been addressed adequately by both Services. We accept that *'for Navy this has included reference to Navy's existing Mastery system'* and *'salary placements for the MX-NIE category'* as well as alignment with Army PRO and the *'recognition of existing relativities with similar Navy workgroups'*. For Air Force, we accept this has encompassed consideration to existing relativities to the PCO workforces who hold *'similar skill, responsibility and working conditions'*.<sup>26</sup>

[25] We considered the evidence in relation to workforce engagement by both Services and note the evidence that *'in terms of communicating this proposed change to the workforce, Navy has been holding monthly Total Workforce System staff forums, updating members on workforce developments, with additional communications provided by ForceNet<sup>27</sup> updates, emails, town halls and supporting intranet content to inform affected personnel'*. For Air Force, it continues to *'communicate regularly to the PAO workforce about the modernisation and the development'*.<sup>28</sup>

## **Conclusion**

[26] We accept this proposal seeks to better align and reflect a contemporary Navy and Air Force MPAO framework, with the Army PRO category used as a benchmark. We agree the proposed structure provides a contemporised career continuum that allows appropriate and contemporary remunerative and structural recognition of skill.

[27] We considered the current structural differences in the Tri-Service MPAO salary placements and agree it is *'not conducive to attraction and retention of qualified public affairs candidates for Defence'*.<sup>29</sup> We agree a closer alignment of pay grades will ensure more appropriate and equitable remuneration, particularly when officers are employed in the joint operational environment in the same or similar roles. We agree this will also enable delivery of suitably qualified and experienced members providing a high-level of employability across the Total

Workforce System and across the ADF. We agree the changes to career pathways and Service MPAO employment categories will contemporise MPAO joint capabilities, provide appropriate salary structures and attract suitably qualified and experienced candidates.

[28] We accept all workforces have been engaged throughout the development of the new structure and have had the opportunity to engage and provide ideas and feedback through virtual sessions, conferences and in email communications. We are encouraged by the evidence of both CMDR Lunt and SQNLDR Aldred that each workforce is extremely positive about the expected changes and that the responses have been highly supportive.

[29] We note the ADF will provide for a non-reduction period of 5 years and accept individuals will be provided guidance and training to achieve revised category requirements within that timeframe. In keeping with the proposal of the Commonwealth, we ask the ADF to report back to us on the progress of these provisions, and the success or otherwise of this revised structure with a focus on attraction/retention effects, at the end of 2027, and again at the conclusion of the provisions in December 2029.

[30] Determination 13 of 2024 gives effect to our decision from 19 December 2024.

MS B O'NEILL, PRESIDENT  
MR A MORRIS, MEMBER  
MAJGEN G FOGARTY AO RETD, MEMBER

*Appearances:*

*Ms K Hagan for the ADF assisted by Flight Lieutenant L Hawkett*

*Mr K Wong for the Commonwealth assisted by Mr C Johnston*

*Witnesses:*

*Commander K Lunt RAN, Joint Cyber and Influence Projects, Joint Capabilities Group and Head of Professional Requirements for Navy Military Public Affairs.*

*Squadron Leader J Aldred, 464 Squadron.*

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<sup>1</sup> DMR BN88183949 Listing Application – Military Public Affairs Officer – Salary Structure dated 29 August 2024.

<sup>2</sup> ADF Submission Matter 13 of 2024 – Military Public Affairs Officer – Salary Structure dated 10 October 2024 (ADF1) page 1 paragraph 1.4.

<sup>3</sup> ADF1 page 4 paragraphs 1.14 and 1.15.

<sup>4</sup> ADF1 page 30 paragraph 6.13

<sup>5</sup> Commonwealth Submission Matter 13 of 2024 – Military Public Affairs – Salary Structure dated 11 October 2024 (CWLTH 1) page 8 paragraphs 33 and 34.

<sup>6</sup> CWLTH1 page 8 paragraph 38.

<sup>7</sup> CWLTH page 9 paragraph 42.

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- <sup>8</sup> Affidavit of Commander K Lunt RAN dated 23 October 2024 (ADF2) page 6 paragraph 20.
- <sup>9</sup> ADF2 page 7 paragraph 23.
- <sup>10</sup> ADF2 page 9 paragraph 29.
- <sup>11</sup> Affidavit of Squadron Leader J Aldred dated 18 October 2024 (ADF3) page 4 paragraph 20.
- <sup>12</sup> ADF3 page 5 paragraph 24.
- <sup>13</sup> ADF3 page 6 paragraph 29.
- <sup>14</sup> ADF3 page 6 paragraph 30.
- <sup>15</sup> ADF3 pages 6 and 7 paragraph 32.
- <sup>16</sup> ADF1 page 12 paragraph 4.2
- <sup>17</sup> ADF1 page 5 paragraph 2.4
- <sup>18</sup> ADF1 page 14 paragraph 4.11
- <sup>19</sup> ibid
- <sup>20</sup> ADF2 page 8 paragraph 26.
- <sup>21</sup> ADF2 page 10 paragraph 34.
- <sup>22</sup> ADF1 page 15 paragraph 4.13.
- <sup>23</sup> ADF1 page 15 paragraph 4.14.
- <sup>24</sup> Transcript 23 October 2024 page 20 lines 12 to 19.
- <sup>25</sup> Transcript page 34 lines 30 to 33.
- <sup>26</sup> Transcript page 4 lines 25 to 33.
- <sup>27</sup> ForceNet (forcenet.gov.au) is a Defence e-communications platform used to connect registered users within secure online communities. ForceNet registration is available to current Defence members, sponsored Defence family members and other approved users.
- <sup>28</sup> Transcript page 7 lines 36 to 40.
- <sup>29</sup> ADF1 page 14 paragraph 4.10