



**AFTERNOON TEA FOR TASMANIAN MEMBERS
OF THE WOMEN VETERANS NETWORK AUSTRALIA
REMARKS BY
HER EXCELLENCY THE HONOURABLE CAROLINE WELLS
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
GOVERNMENT HOUSE, FRIDAY 7 AUGUST 2026**

Good afternoon, everyone.

Welcome to Government House, it is wonderful to have you all here and to celebrate and honour the women of the Women Veterans Network Australia here in Tasmania. I would also like to extend a very warm welcome to National President, Melanie Annand, who has travelled from Queensland to be here. I hope you are enjoying our crisp weather! Thank you for joining us today.

Before we begin, I would like to acknowledge the Palawa people as the First Peoples of lutruwita/Tasmania and the Traditional Custodians of this land. For countless generations, they have cared for and nurtured this remarkable island, its landscapes, waterways and communities.

I pay my respects to Elders past and present and recognise the enduring contribution of Aboriginal Tasmanians to the cultural, social and spiritual life of our State.

When I came into this Office, I said I wanted to lead with compassion, kindness and purpose. It is wonderful to be here this afternoon, because there are few gatherings that reflect those ideals more fully than one with the women of WVNA-TAS.

For much of our history, when we said the word "veteran", the image that came to mind was a man in uniform. Yet women have served Australia in uniform for well over a century: as nurses, codebreakers, engineers and sailors.

Since the last restrictions preventing women from serving in combat roles in the Australian Defence Force were removed, as recently as 2016, the opportunities available to women have expanded beyond anything earlier generations could have imagined.

Today, women serve as infantry officers, clearance divers and fast jet pilots, alongside the many other vital roles they have always performed. The women of WVNA bring together an extraordinary breadth of experience: from administration and medicine to logistics, engineering, and increasingly, front-line and combat roles. Yet what unites you is not the uniform you wore, nor the role you performed. It is the fact that you served—or continue to serve—and that you have all experienced something most Tasmanians never will: the transition from military to civilian life.

That is where WVNA steps in.

Founded in 2013 and now the largest network of its kind in Australia, WVNA exists for a simple but important reason: to ensure that no woman who has served, or is still serving, has to navigate that journey alone. It offers practical guidance, but above all, peer support grounded in shared experience.

Here in Tasmania, that mission is carried forward by Melissa Foale as the regional coordinator, along with Natalie Sankey in Launceston and Sharlene Meldrum in Devonport, giving WVNA a presence spanning the entirety of our State. Together, you support twenty-three paid members, stay connected with another fifty-four women, and provide an online community of more than two hundred and thirty members through the Women Veterans Network Tasmania Facebook group. Many may never make it to a lunch or a

workshop, but they know this network is there for them. Melissa also organises monthly social events, from high teas to workshops and gatherings around Veterans' Health Week and Anzac Day. It is thanks to Melissa's invitation that I have the privilege of meeting you all today.

There is real and important power in this kind of connection. Isolation is one of the greatest challenges facing anyone who leaves the structure and camaraderie of military life, and the antidote is rarely a program or a policy. More often, it is something much simpler: a phone call, a shared cup of tea, or someone who does not need the story explained because they have lived it too. Every gathering organised by WVNA-TAS reminds women that they are not alone.

Leadership is one of the defining qualities of military service, but we sometimes imagine it belongs only to those in uniform, or that it ends when the uniform comes off. It does not. Every woman here has continued to lead since leaving the ADF, whether as a mother, a mentor, a volunteer, a colleague, or simply as the person others turn to when life becomes difficult. Those qualities do not disappear; they simply find a new uniform. Tasmania is stronger because of where that leadership has gone.

It matters, too, for those who come after you. Somewhere in Tasmania today, there is a girl who does not yet know there is a place for her in the Australian Defence Force, in whatever role she chooses. She will discover that, in part, because women like you made that path visible. Every time you tell your story, you broaden what the next generation of Tasmanian women believe is possible for themselves. That, too, is leadership, and perhaps one of its most enduring forms.

It reminds me of an afternoon tea we held here recently to mark the return of the Rajah Quilt: a remarkable work stitched nearly two centuries ago by women whose lives had been marked by hardship, yet who created something enduring because they chose to work alongside one another. No

single woman created that quilt, just as no single woman has built this network. It has taken many hands, generous hearts, and countless acts of quiet kindness to make WVNA-TAS what it is today.

So today, I simply want to say thank you. Thank you for your service to Australia and thank you for the way you continue to serve one another. To the volunteers and regional coordinators who make WVNA-TAS possible, thank you for work that rarely attracts headlines, but changes lives all the same.

Please enjoy this afternoon tea and the company of women who understand, better than most, what it means to wear the uniform of this country, what it means to come home, and what it means to keep leading long after that uniform has been put away.

I look forward to meeting each of you this afternoon.

Thank you.