

NATION

## Former defence minister Joel Fitzgibbon to fight for veterans' welfare in the name of his son

Former defence minister Joel Fitzgibbon has been appointed as a patron of the Commando Welfare Trust, vowing to build on his son Jack's legacy after his death in a special forces training accident.

**BEN PACKHAM** @bennpackham 2 min read September 26, 2024 - 8:30PM

Former defence minister Joel Fitzgibbon at his home in Cessnock, NSW, with a photograph of his son Jack, a special forces soldier who died in a training accident....

Former defence minister [Joel Fitzgibbon](#) has been appointed as a patron of the Commando Welfare Trust, vowing to build on [his son Jack's legacy](#) after his death in a special forces training accident.

Mr Fitzgibbon said he would use the role to press the government to act on the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide, which called for major changes to support former personnel amid an epidemic of preventable deaths.

"I think a person in my position and with my experience has an obligation to speak on behalf of those who don't have such a loud voice, and I will certainly use every opportunity for the rest of my lifetime to promote the cause of those who have served our country," Mr Fitzgibbon told The Australian.

Mr Fitzgibbon said former special forces soldiers faced unique challenges when they returned to civilian life, including blast--induced brain injuries that are increasingly being diagnosed in veterans. "It's an emerging and an additional issue, and I suspect that like (concussion-related brain injury) CTE in footballers, we're going to be seeing a lot more of it," he said.

[Lance Corporal Jack Fitzgibbon](#), who served with the elite 2nd Commando Regiment, died in March during routine parachute training. Multiple inquiries are underway into his death, including a high-powered probe by the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force.

Mr Fitzgibbon said he developed a love and respect for the nation's special forces soldiers as defence minister, and was "so proud" when his son became a commando.

"My role with the trust is an opportunity to do something in Jack's name, to build on his legacy, and to give thanks for the efforts and sacrifices of both those who keep us safe, and their families. It's about trying to build something positive out of tragedy," he said.

"We owe our special forces members past and present, and their families, our full support, and that's what the CWT is here to provide."

As defence minister during the Rudd government, Mr Fitzgibbon sent Australian soldiers to war in Afghanistan. Seven were killed on his watch, including three - commandos.

"It impacts you permanently," he said. "It's the most difficult part of what was a very difficult job."

Mr Fitzgibbon will serve as patron alongside Major General Tim McOwan, representing the trust as it provides emergency and long-term support to soldiers, veterans, and their families.

Trust chair Brigadier Mark Smethurst said Mr Fitzgibbon's advocacy for veterans would be invaluable following the three-year royal commission, which concluded earlier this month with recommendations for a new agency to transition ADF personnel into civilian life, and a new measures to tie command promotions to cultures and wellbeing targets.

"His appointment could not be timelier. We believe his connection to CWT's cause and his wealth of experience in politics and Defence make him an ideal figure to help drive positive change and overcome the contemporary challenges special forces now face," Brigadier Smethurst said.

The trust was established in 2010 to provide a welfare safety net for commandos who train under dangerous conditions and, like their SAS counterparts, have been disproportionately deployed in combat and face heightened risks of injury or death.