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Richard Marles can't avoid VIP flight row forever | Samantha Maiden

Regardless of whether the Deputy PM tries to keep his VIP flights under wraps, Australians will soon learn more about the Air Force Uber service, writes Samantha Maiden.



Samantha Maiden

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The Senate has ordered Defence Minister Richard Marles to provide more details about his \$3 million taxpayer-funded travel bill. The Greens and Coalition teamed up to call on Mr Marles to provide a list of flights all politicians and officials have taken on the RAAF's special fleet of aircraft since 2021.

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It's no secret that Deputy Prime Minister Richard Marles is a golf tragic.

Generations of his family played the game and his late father Donald even won the University of Queensland golf championship in the late 1940s.

“Golf is a generational activity in my family,” he once wrote.

“It was a place he taught me the lessons of life: patience and the acceptance of fate.”

This week, his love of golf was yielding other treasures, including his reluctance to explain where [he's been flying on VIP aircraft to run up a \\$3.6 million bill](#).

In parliament, question time opened on Monday with questions over whether or not he's even been packing his beloved golf clubs on the aircraft.

Marles wasn't saying, attempting to deflect the questions back on the Coalition.

By mid-week, the [Senate was demanding that the government explain the “security advice”](#) it says prohibits explaining where Mr Marles has been flying.

And then there's his trip to visit the Baltusrol Golf Club in Springfield New Jersey, in December, widely regarded as one of the finest courses in the world.

Joining fees are rather pricey. US\$150,000 (A\$224,000) and annual membership dues US\$18,500 (A\$27,000).

But of course Marles didn't pay, he got a freebie.





Deputy Prime Minister Richard Marles.

Until the 1990s the club had what might be described as an interesting membership policy. It barred Black Americans, Jews, and women from being members.

But that was all ancient history when golf tragic Marles managed to organise a visit to the golf course on December 4, 2022.

He was in the US for talks with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III, who hosted Foreign Affairs Minister Penny Wong and Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Mr Marles on December 6 in Washington, D.C. to advance co-operation in the Indo-Pacific region and globally.

But before that he was in New York to do two things we are aware of: launching the Scale Facilitation® Global Office on December 3 and of course playing golf.

He was accompanied to the Scale launch by Liberal leader Peter Dutton, who had his flights covered by Scale founder David Collard.

Things have turned pear-shaped since then for Scale, with the workplace watchdog appealing for Australian employees with complaints of not being paid to come forward.

According to the Herald Sun, at least four law enforcement agencies across two countries have been contacted by [staff who have not been paid for months by the Australian entrepreneur's flailing start-up empire.](#)



ADMM-Plus friendly golf event during the Deputy Prime Minister Richard Marles during his visit to Cambodia and Vietnam from 22 to 25 November 2022.
Picture: Australian Defence Force

The Defence Minister declared his free golf game in New Jersey to the Register of Members' Interests on 30 January, but did not explore who he attended with or who organised the freebie.

Nobody followed that up for a while, until a little-known website Open Politics contacted Marles' office on three occasions to seek the name of the club member and received no response.

As the website observed, this raised a serious transparency issue.

"Whoever they were, Marles is now indebted to them," Open Politics stated.

"As we like to rant about at Open Politics, when someone accepts a gift it creates an obligation to return the favour.

"This is the societal norm of reciprocity, which rent seekers abuse by providing donations, gifts, free travel, and hospitality to try to extract a benefit for themselves.

"This could be a contract, grant, favourable regulation, board appointment, licence, or award. AO, anyone?"

"So the public deserves to know the member's name, Mr Marles."

The matter was followed up in May at Senate estimates by the Greens Senator David Shoebridge.

"It's perhaps the second most exclusive golf club in the United States. Who did the Deputy Prime Minister attend the golf with, and who paid?" he said.

"I am advised that the Deputy Prime Minister played the golf with the then Defence attache from the Australian embassy in Washington, DC," Labor's Jenny McAllister replied.

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"My understanding is that in the United States, to play at a private golf course it requires you to be sponsored by a member of that course. Major General Freeman facilitated sponsorship of that game by a Mr Bob Dwyer."

As it turns out, Major General Andrew Freeman then went to work with Scale, with Mr Marles singing his praises and David Collard's this year. Mr Bob Dwyer is an investment banker that Marles has never met.

“Dave’s newest recruit is retired Major General Andrew Freeman who recently served as Australia’s Defence Attaché to the US,” Mr Marles said.

“Last year I had the great honour with the Leader of the Opposition of opening Scale Facilitation’s office in its new home at New York’s One World Trade Centre.

“It was literally a night in which Geelong met New York. It was a joyous occasion, but also one which for me was filled with poignancy.

“The story of Scale Facilitation is the story of so many of you.”

Well, let’s hope not, as they seem to be in a spot of bother.

Further questions about that New Jersey golf game organised around the Scale launch followed but they were not answered until Mr Marles’ office rushed out an answer on Wednesday to avoid a Senate debate.

“Once again, the cult of secrecy in Canberra is in full force,” Senator Shoebridge said.

“Months ago, we asked these questions about VIP trips by the Minister of Defence and we have heard nothing, now when they were going to face an embarrassing debate they rushed a non-answer out.

“Minister Marles can keep stonewalling, but we will keep chipping away, putting the interests of transparency first.”

This week, I ran into Mr Marles outside parliament at 7am and tried to have a word about all of this but sadly he exclaimed he was “going for a run” and was last seen running away at a fast clip.

The good news is regardless of whether he tries to keep his VIP flights under wraps, the looming publication of his domestic flights should make it crystal clear how often he is really flying domestic and how frequently he is calling up the RAAF VIP Uber to Avalon.

He can run for a bit, but in the long run it will be difficult to hide.

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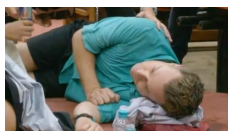
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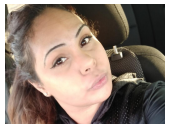


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