

ADVOCACY, ENTITLEMENTS AND SUPPORT (AES) SPOT¹

Introduction

In my last two articles, I have introduced some of the influences that are impacting on the delivery of advocacy services to veterans and their families/dependents. I would like to continue this theme in this article. The views I express are my own and do not necessarily have the approval of the National Council.

Overview

Indisputably, the pressures are mounting. Apart from the specific pressure that has resulted from the Senate Inquiry into Suicide by Veterans, there is the wider pressures arising from the ACNC scrutiny of the way in which ESOs are using their assets and moneys to support veterans' welfare.

Also relevant, are changes in DVA calculations on how BEST funds are disbursed to ESOs to support the delivery of welfare services. And then, more widely again, is younger veterans' disinterest in seeking the support of traditional ESOs, and the concomitant preference to create their own self-help groups. Reasonably, no traditional ESO – of which the Air Force Association is one – can ignore the clamour that is growing around it.

In a nutshell, the situation facing traditional ESOs – and other community service clubs like Rotary, Lions, etc - is 'survival'. The \$64 question is, therefore: What can AFA do about it? What follows are observations on past human and organisational behaviours, and some options that might 'brighten' the future.

Organisational Behaviour

More than one Minister for Veterans Affairs has bemoaned the fractiousness of ESOs. Not only do different ESOs speak with different voices and 'fight to the death' for their 'rightful' share of Government funds, but they also dissent internecinally over 'turf'. Sub-Branches defend their autonomy from State Branches/Division, and Branches/Divisions their right to self-determine in the face of National Office 'ignorance of the real issues'. Some reflections:

I remember reading a tome on human dynamics a few years ago. The book was the product of 20 years of research by two lead social scientists supported by 44 co-researchers who engaged 40,000 people from 25 different cultures. In other words, it employed a sound research methodology and robust research team. Its findings were worthy of consideration. If my memory serves me well, the researchers found that, across all those people and all those cultures, 85% of people's immediate response when confronted with a challenge was purely emotional. Only 5% responded purely calmly or rationally. The other 10% populate the continuum between these poles. In short, those 'very few of us that are rational' are surrounded by a 'bunch of hot-heads'!!!

This recollection was contextualised when I recently listened to Payam Akhavan's 2017 Third Massey Lecture on the genocide in Rwanda. At Payam was the youngest-ever UN War Crimes Prosecutor (former Yugoslavia and, in 1995, Rwanda), Member of the Permanent

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Court of Arbitration at The Hague and Professor of International Law at McGill University. His words still ring in my ears. He said:

“Looking at our brutish past, we may well conclude that despite some progress, we remain territorial mammals with an insatiable appetite for aggression. Indeed, human kind is unique in mastering the destruction of its own kind.”

Of course, I am not intimating that antipathy between the hierarchical levels of an ESO will end in bloodshed. Metaphorically, however, that contest is draining the lifeblood from any ESO that allows it to continue – or worse, promotes it.

From a rhetorical vantage point, we must ask the question: Why would an ADF member or ex-service man or woman want to join an organisation that is run by (mostly) old men, who are still behaving like rutting bulls? Contesting each other over ephemera – ego, local power, who’s entitled to the last sausage. Typically, the younger veteran will have rendered six or more years’ service, will have deployed several times, will have seen enough fighting to last a lifetime, may have a number of mental health and musculo-skeletal conditions, may be struggling to find employment, and is trying to settle down from the adrenaline-packed mateship of the military into life with a family. Why would they not find the support of their mates more attractive than the beer and pokies of our generation?

Then there are the stories they post on Facebook about their contact with an ESO pension or welfare officer who doesn’t ‘do’ MRCA or DRCA, or more ‘sympathetically’ says: “get TPI and a Gold Card mate and you’ll be set for life”. It would be great if such posts could be discounted as myths. Whether they are factual mythical is immaterial. Regrettably, they are the perceived reality for too many younger veterans. In the absence of positive experiences and favourable posts, the negative experiences of the few become the wider expectations of the many. So, what can we do? How do we change expectations? How do ESOs survive in an inconducive social and demanding regulatory environment.

Culture Change

I submit that wholesale culture change is the fundamental need. Despite some instances to the contrary, without a total change of culture, traditional ESOs will simply ‘fade away’ as it their aging warriors die out. Vietnam-era veterans fitted into the culture bequeathed by their predecessors: obligatory attendance at interminable meetings that debated inconsequentials. The beer and sausage at the end of the meeting validated attendance.

This model will not attract younger veterans to traditional ESOs. Accepting that my contact is by no means exhaustive and certainly not scientific research, some observations follow.

All my contact with younger veterans underscores their disinterest in our generation’s interests. They do not want to attend meetings. They are averse to ‘beer and pokies’. They want family activities. And they want to meet informally over a coffee when they can. Their interest is captured by mateship, they are attuned to their mates’ needs, they highly value spontaneity. These observations indicate a diametric relationship between their and our culture.

Too many times I have heard ‘aging warriors’ declare with agitation: “They (young veterans) are grasping. They want everything now. They ’d better wait their turn. If they want help, they can come to us.” The reality is that, our predecessors bequeathed a culture to us with which we (still) feel comfortable. Active Mess life, living on base (including when married), very few women in uniform (those that were in clerical-type roles), few wives working (time to support their husband), relatively long-term postings in stable peacetime units, and a strong rank-based hierarchical structure, shaped a type of companionship and human interrelationships that is no longer valid.

My service in Vietnam as a FAC and more generally in fighter aircraft undoubtedly provides atypical experience. As a FAC, once the fighters were on station, the ground commander turned over tactical control to me. As a fighter pilot, I was on my own but flew in support of lead. In other words, my service experience when ‘on the job’ was a-hierarchical. I was part of a highly networked team. Rank was irrelevant.

From conversation with young veterans, this is the situation they face not only when in combat in the intensely networked battle space. Now, in daily service experience, while the (traditional) rank structure remains and rank is respected, the ‘subject matter expert’ is the person to whom all turn, irrespective of rank relativities. The underlying culture is therefore grounded in knowledge, and functions on the basis of the free flow of information within a network. Add to this the immediacy inculcated by cycles of combat experience, and the subtle changes of brain function by use of smart phones, touch screens and access to the web.

No wonder, the pace of our generation’s life and our hierarchically-ingrained responses are foreign to the young veteran and his/her family. So, to return to the point: the need for fundamental culture change.

Put bluntly: if we want young veterans to join our ESOs – to rescue from extinction the traditions that formed them – it is the culture of our institutions that we must change. The view that ‘they have to come to us’ is self-defeating. It is up to us to show the young veteran community that Payam Akhavan’s bleak observation does not apply to us. As ESO Members, it behoves us all to prove that we are not ‘insatiably aggressive, territorial mammals’ who will sacrifice our institutions for a momentarily-snatched personal glory, as leaders, or for a beer and a sausage as ordinary members. And, we need to show that when confronted by a challenge – especially a challenge to our institutions’ survival – that can act rationally.

The Way Forward

Culture change needs a ‘vision’ – a compelling mental picture of the desired future. In so doing, we need to remember that we are the current custodians of the traditions that were bequeathed to us by our predecessors. If the ‘founding fathers’ could come back now to see what has become of their vision, what would they say? I warrant that it would be something along the lines of: “Well that wasn’t what we had in mind’.

Fortunately, our institution, the Australian Flying Corps and Royal Australian Air Force Association Inc has started a transformation process. We are now the Air Force Association Ltd – a fundamental change of legal structure that should enable us to squarely meet

regulators' scrutiny. Critically, we have also begun a fundamental reconsideration of our vision. Like all traditional ESOs, we are struggling to engage younger veterans in defining AFA's vision. National Council has released a draft vision strategy for Division and Branch responses. From a strategic planning and change facilitation perspective it is a lovely piece of thinking and drafting – a document we can take proudly, but respectfully, to the serving and ex-RAAF service personnel that will continue the traditions of old but mould them to they remain relevant to future generations.

But National and State Councils cannot by themselves energise the cohort of young veterans and their family/dependents. Every member has a critical part to play in canvassing the vision to young Air Force veterans. A quick glance at DVA statistics will show how many veterans live in your Local Government Area. Some of them will be ex-Air Force. Your local radio station or local paper, your Branch's newsletter or contacts in local information sharing bodies, your children's or grandchildren's friends may be or know ex-Air Force personnel, some may be 'friends' on Facebook with others who may in turn 'like' a post that canvasses the availability of the vision strategy and AFA's need for feedback. Those of us who are advocates are especially well-placed to canvass the document.

A century ago, personnel returning from WW I were incensed by the lack of support their incapacitated colleagues, and widows and orphaned children were receiving from government. The tradition of 'mates helping mates' was founded. The intense caring that young veterans demonstrate for their mates, indicates how strongly ingrained and how fresh that tradition is. In other words, the foundations for AFA's continuance are in place. We just need to build the bridges on which our generation and the young generation of veterans can meet. There they can decide the future – together.

If there were a rationale, Payam Akhavan evokes it: *"Feeling injustice is an emotional and spiritual connection with the suffering others. The problem with the world is the lack of empathy."* AFA's tradition of 'mates helping mates' is founded in empathy. To start building the bridge from our side we need to imagine the injustice that a young veteran must feel when turned away by – metaphorically or actually – by a culture that is unresponsive to his/her need. We all have a part to play in ensuring that such a culture is eliminated.

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