

Response by the Representatives of the Defence Community to the Ministerial Statement on 14th August 2017 Concerning Veterans and their Families

Introduction

Many in the veterans' community read with keen interest the Minister for Veterans' Affairs statement to Parliament on 14 August 2017, particularly when he opened by stating that ***'we best honour the diggers of the First World War by supporting the service men and women, the veterans and the families of today. It is important that all Australians understand the unique nature of service'***.

Those words immediately resonated, given that they re-affirmed the prevailing thinking of today's veterans and their families far and wide. Much else was of interest in that Ministerial Statement but none more than the 'challenge' by the Minister for the veterans' community to not only respond to what he had said but to do so 'with a single voice'.

The following represents acceptance of that challenge and looks to articulate the broad thinking of the veterans community as a whole, accepting always that that community is made up of many ex Service organisations each of which hold dear their capability to make their own submissions or voice their own statements on specific matters.

The Australian Defence Community

The Australian Defence Community (ADC) is multi faceted and comprises serving ADF members, Veterans and their families and is estimated to be in excess of three million in total. The organisations that represent them are equally multi faceted and diverse, ranging from tri service organisations such as the Defence Force Welfare Association, Service, Ship, Corps, and Squadron based entities nearly all of which have strong ties to both serving and former ADF members. Other organisations such as War Widows, Partners of Veterans, conflict and single-interest based associations all actively represent their constituencies. We also note the plethora of social media based groups (mainly veterans from more recent conflicts) that are providing much-needed services especially to veterans and families in distress. It is pertinent to note also that ESOs are independent legal entities with their own right to make decisions/submissions and enter into arrangements that meet their purpose. As such any ESO entity purporting to be a "peak body" cannot enforce its will on its "affiliates" or stifle the freedom of speech of their members but must rather exercise influence and persuasion to achieve common objectives.

Because of the diverse nature of organisations, messages and personalities involved in relevant issues, at times they fail to get the focused attention of officialdom, never mind from relevant Ministers or from all sides of politics.

This situation is referred to as a 'wicked problem'. With such a diverse range of entities developing a national confederation, or any other entity looking to represent the views of the Defence Community, it is in no small measure a straightforward or easy task to corral a unified voice. Nevertheless, there is a

developing desire by all major ex-service organisations (ESOs) and defence service organisations (DSO) to more closely collaborate, and to more effectively represent the interests of the serving and former ADF members and their families. Drawing in some of the single-issue and Facebook-based groups is a specific challenge, as some of them view with disdain the traditional ESOs.

Some Background

These moves began back on 13 August 2007 with the convening of a meeting of the **National Presidents' Forum of Organisations of Serving and Former Members of the Australian Defence Force** at the RSL National Headquarters. The meeting published a combined Statement outlining the major policy issues impacting the Australian Defence Community. Following this initiative, a group of five national Associations¹ who were committed to work together formed the Alliance of Defence Service Organisations (ADSO). Since that time ADSO has grown to embrace seventeen associations².

Following on from this, with the increased desire to more effectively represent the Australian Defence Community, a meeting of all major national associations was held at the Ringwood RSL Sub Branch in October 2016. The intent was to explore a more collaborative approach to representing and serving the Defence community. The attendees included the RSL, ADSO member organizations, Legacy and the Australian Veterans' Alliance; the latter having strong ties to many veteran social media based support groups. There was a unanimous agreement to work together based on four Principles:

- A common vision for the future: *“To promote the wellbeing of the Australian Defence Community”*;
- To present a united voice in advocating on behalf of the Defence Community;
- To recognize that each veteran³ and each veteran's family is unique; and
- To commit to collaborating together based on mutual respect and trust.

An ESO Collaborative Initiative Underway

Work on the collaborative initiative is continuing, the objective being to form 'confederation like' support structures to give effect to the commitment by defence and ex-service organisations to collaborate for the benefit of serving and former ADF members and their families. A concomitant objective is to deliver a more unified message to the Parliament and to the general public. Achieving this as sought by the Government will not be an easy task. As acknowledged in the Ministerial Statement, it

¹ Defence Force Welfare Association, the Naval Association of Australia, the RAAF Association, the Royal Australian Regiment and SAS Associations.

² The Defence Force Welfare Association (DFWA), Naval Association of Australia (NAA), RAAF Association (RAAFA), Royal Australian Regiment Corporation (RARAC), Australian Special Air Service Association (ASASA), Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia (VVAA), the Australian Federation of Totally and Permanently Incapacitated Ex-Service Men and Women, the Fleet Air Arm Association of Australia, Partners of Veterans Association of Australia, Royal Australian Armoured Corps Corporation (RAAC), the National Malaya & Borneo Veterans Association Australia (NMBVAA), the Defence Reserves Association (DRS), War Widows Guild, the Australian Gulf War Veterans Association, the Australian Commando Association, Military Police Association Australia (MPAA), Australian Army Apprentices Association and Quinoline Veterans and Families Association .

³ The ADF regards anyone who has served in the ADF even for a day qualifies as a veteran (RADM B Wolski HPC at the National Collaboration Meeting 1 Nov 16)

will need the active partnership and support of both the ex-service community and the Government. The most recent meeting of major ESOs addressing collaboration in Canberra on the 9th August 2017 adopted the Belief Statement and Vision stated below to provide guidance on the direction to be taken by a “Reference Group” commissioned to progress towards the goal of achieving effective collaboration at the national leadership level.

Belief Statement

“We believe that the interests of the Defence Family⁴ are best served by ESOs taking responsibility to act collectively to ensure the well-being and protect the entitlements of those they are privileged to serve”

A Clear Vision

“By November 2018 the ESO/VSO Community will deliver to Government its key recommendations for a co-ordinated approach that meets the needs of the Defence Family.”

Not to be overlooked within the context of the initiatives under way for the ESO community to collaborate more closely is the well-established ESO Round Table forum. That forum has been successfully operating for a number of years as a well-structured peak consultative body that has facilitated regular dialogue between the leadership of the ESO/Defence communities and the Department of Veterans’ Affairs. It should continue to do so going forward.

In addition to the work specifically fostering the wellbeing and interests of the members of the Australian Defence Community, those involved in the collaborative process will have a responsibility to ‘carry the torch’ passed on by those veterans of previous eras who suffered and even paid the ultimate sacrifice defending the Nation and preserving our freedoms and way of life. It is thus incumbent on the ex-service organisations to engage in the public policy discussions on these topics as and when they arise, lest our defence capability is let diminish under the financial pressures of the day, or our freedoms become restricted under the guise of ensuring that minority rights are protected. In this aspect the ex-service community has perhaps not been as active as it should have been.

Department of Veteran Affairs – Meeting Challenges Ahead

There is a general positive appreciation within most of the veteran community of the support provided by the Department of Veteran Affairs. However, this is not universal with many of those recently discharged from the ADF, including veterans of more recent conflicts, strongly critical of what they see as being adversarial processes for claiming support for health conditions, rigid practices and lengthy timelines. Underlying this is the continuing numbers of suicides and self harm episodes that seem not to be diminishing.

Not yet fully understood within many of the traditional ESOs is the welfare and well-being support needed by younger veterans. Those that present a special challenge are in severe distress because of

⁴ In this context “Defence Family” is synonymous with “Defence Community”.

mental ill-health, homelessness, substance abuse, alienation from peers and/or family, or convicted of criminality. Younger veterans are terming this 'first responder' or 'triage' support. Welfare Advocates need skills and knowledge that have not been needed by older TIP-trained Welfare Officers. The magnitude of the issues and the long-term support needed to facilitate recovery appear likely to transform the nature of veteran support services from compensation to welfare.

The Department's cultural change and procedural streamlining projects elements within Veteran-Centric Reform are particularly welcome. But fundamental problems, from the Defence Community's point of view, are the premature discharge of personnel before liability has been accepted for their conditions. Thus leaving them at risk of no MSBS invalidity benefits or DRCA/MCRA disability compensation payments.

Some 300 personnel are known to have been left destitute and 'living rough' as a result. Additionally, while the average time to determine stable and permanent is understood to be around 150 days, the provision is known to be delaying determinations into periods of years. The ramifications for veterans' social, financial and emotional well-being is, in our view, unacceptable. Adding to this is the confusing and complex legislative basis underpinning the relationship between the Government and its serving and former ADF members but also on which rehabilitation and compensation support is provided. Unless these issues are addressed in a positive manner, it is felt that there will be continuing tensions between governments and the veteran community into the future.

The Government's initiatives in expanding 'non liability' health care, improving the transition process, veterans' employment and its commitment to improving mental health support for both serving and former ADF members are very welcome. Its recognition of the role of families in its overall policies supporting veterans is also a very positive outcome. Nevertheless, there are areas where improvement is sought. While we are aware of the Younger Veterans Forum, the consultation process between the Department and ex-service organisations has a significant gap. Younger veterans are not represented at ESORT which in effect means their views and ideas of struggle to be heard. As well, there is a general feeling within the network of ex-service organisations that their views are at all times subordinated to those of departmental and government officials. These are a source of continuing frustration and in the view of many within the veteran community have led to barriers in the legitimate acceptance of conditions some veterans suffer as a result of their service.

Contemporary examples of this are the difficulties faced by veterans exposed to toxic chemicals in the maintenance of RAAF aircraft, fire fighters, aircraft and Army refuellers. Also the recent finding by the Repatriation Medical Authority that 'there is insufficient sound medical-scientific evidence that exposure to mefloquine, tafenoquine or primaquine causes chronic brain injury' and has erected a serious barrier to veterans trying to claim for the significant neurocognitive and neuropsychiatric issues they allege are caused by taking these drugs for service, or as part of clinical trials; adding to the institutional stigma already experienced by this group.

Then there are the long standing issues which ex-service organisations have been asking successive governments to address such as the level of the above general rate Veteran’s Disability Pension, inequities inherent in the military superannuation scheme, offsetting of incapacity payments against superannuation payments and taxation implications for invalidity military superannuation benefits and service conditions designed to ameliorate service in the more remote areas of the country.

Many of these issues would most likely have been addressed to the mutual satisfaction of the Government and serving and former ADF members if there was a “Military Covenant” in place spelling out the obligations of the Nation through its parliament to its service personnel and veterans and in turn the obligations of ADF members to Australia and its people. Such an instrument would have provided a basis to evaluate the implications of legislation for serving and former ADF members in much the same way as the various UN Conventions Australia has signed up to do.

Conclusion

The Minister in his statement of 14 August 2017 expressed the need for the veteran community to speak with one voice. This is a noble expectation that the major ex-service organisations are working hard to achieve. For this to evolve there will have to be active government support and resources to bolster the ability of ex-service organisations that are predominately volunteer in nature relying on membership subscriptions and donations from the general public to sustain their operations.

Signed on behalf of the Defence Community speaking as one voice.



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