



## THE SUB BRANCH SIGNAL



### RSL NATIONAL CONGRESS 2009 ADDRESS BY NATIONAL PRESIDENT

It was six years ago here in Adelaide that I accepted the nomination to serve as RSL National President. It is here in Adelaide that I relinquish that role. I trust that you will allow me a few brief moments of reflection and perhaps some philosophical musing in presenting my report to the Congress this year. League members will remember that, at the outset, I adopted three themes which I felt best encapsulated the League's enduring objectives as the basis for our continuing endeavours. Let me speak to each in turn.

*It was important that we reached out to our communities, building on our commemorative endeavours, because we are all from and part of our broader communities.*

We have witnessed a profound change in the community's appreciation of commemoration over the last 15 years, and particularly against the background of the observance in 2005 of the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the end of World War II, in 2006 of the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan in Vietnam, and most recently last year, the 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the end of World War I. It was my great privilege to have represented the RSL at the 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Gallipoli landing at ANZAC Cove in 2005, and in delivering the Commemorative Address at Villers-Bretonneux in France on the 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the end of World War I

The community's growing appreciation of our military heritage can be attributed to several factors including:

- \* The commitment of the Government, through the Department of Veterans' Affairs, to financially support commemoration both in Australia and elsewhere;
- \* The work by State Governments to support memorial refurbishment, encourage military history as a component of the school curriculum, and provide incentives for young Australians to venture overseas as a reward for achievement in writing or citizenship; and
- \* The high profile of our men and women serving today in the Australian Defence Force.

Importantly, the personal engagement at local level by our Sub-Branch members throughout Australia has reinforced these measures and added enormously to the personal awareness of young Australians. Countless students have responded so positively to the opportunities made available to them.

Our Sub-Branches are the heart and soul of the League, and it has been a great pleasure for me to have been able to share some time with many of them over the last six years. Rapport between the Sub-Branch members and their community leaders and other community organisations remains particularly strong. This is vital in our rural and regional communities where that sense of interdependence is greatest, particularly in responding to flood, fire, or other natural disaster as occurred earlier this year in Victoria and Queensland. Indeed it was in the wake of these two concurrent crises that League members exemplified the true spirit of mateship, not just in looking out for our own but in practical responses to broader community needs. I congratulate members, Sub-Branches and State Branches who responded so positively in a time of need.

Why is all of this important? Let me suggest that it is about:

- \* Strengthening the communities which those of us who have served in the Defence Force committed ourselves to protect;
- \* Giving back to the people who have supported us;
- \* Encouraging young Australians, our future leaders, to better appreciate their emerging responsibilities as citizens, and to strive to achieve their full potential;
- \* Reaching out to those in need as an act of human decency; and
- \* Epitomising the spirit of mateship which lies at the heart of the ANZAC traditions we are committed to uphold.

I have been fortunate to observe in all of the Sub-Branches I have visited, a strong sense of purpose, and awareness of our community obligation. But it is not seen as a chore – rather it is an involvement which offers rich rewards in personal well-being and satisfaction for those engaged.

Only when fellow Australians experience personally that spirit of community service by our members and fellow Ex-Servicemen and Women will they truly appreciate why our Service and Ex-Servicemen and Women hold a special place in Australian society.

*My second major theme was Quality Welfare.*

Concurrent with our energetic community and youth programs, Sub-Branch members provide on-going advice with pension claims and advocacy, and offer the range of welfare support including hospital visits, bereavement counselling, conduct of funerals, and facilitating access to the full range of home care, health, mental health, and related programs.

Day clubs have become an effective means of overcoming social isolation, but even a friendly phone call just to stay in touch can make a profound difference to those who may not be as active as they might prefer.

I commend our State Branches for their support to all of these endeavours, in many practical ways including funding, training and liaison with State authorities. Our veterans are at least as entitled as others in the community to the many services now in place, but one often needs some expert assistance to know how to access what is out there.

As I look at the great strides being made in all States to enhance our provision of high quality aged care facilities, I take great comfort that the League remains at the forefront in responding to the community's growing needs and expectations in this vital area.

At the national level we have valued the relationship we have with Ministers, Shadow Ministers, the Department of Veterans' Affairs and other relevant Departments, including the Department of Health and Ageing. This is a constructive relationship built on trust, mutual respect, and a shared objective to do what is needed and practicable for those in the Service and Ex-Service communities. We see no value in name calling, or adopting a destructive adversarial position on such important matters. It may have worked years ago – it doesn't in 2009.

We have seen considerable enhancement in recent years of our repatriation arrangements, in large measure due to our annual Budget Submission, our representations on individual issues, and on-going dialogue. We recognise that other Ex-Service Organisations have also played a role in areas dear to the heart of their constituents. But we in the League have always assumed a broader responsibility for comprehending the needs across all Ex-Service members, and we make no apologies for focussing on those areas where we believe the need is greatest.

Our recent moves to bring forward issues from our members to the quarterly Veterans' Affairs Committee and National Executive meetings, rather than waiting for National Congress, also enhances the timeliness of our representations.

The Minister this morning has addressed some recent enhancements. We often focus on the financial benefits. But let us recognise that, at least as important, are the programs which allow our Ex-Servicemen and Women to enrich their lives in terms of their physical and mental health and general wellbeing, and the management by the Department of the claims and administrative framework.

Following the release of reports early this year by Professor Dunt into mental health in the Defence Force and Suicide in the veteran community, and parallel work by the Secretary of DVA to review the *OneDVA* structural arrangements, we now see enormous scope to further improve the Department's procedures and, importantly, its empathy with the cause. But let us again give notice that resource constraints in departmental staffing remain an obstacle in realising service delivery expectations.

I have often said that Australia has a world class repatriation system. But it can always be improved, and such improvements continue to be in evidence with each Federal Budget. The significant steps taken since our 2007 National Congress to more adequately index disability pensions, and this year's Budget enhancements to income support pensions, provide a solid foundation of compensation and income support for many Ex-Servicemen and Women.

We in the League remain mindful that, while we expect the Australian community to provide a range of benefits to Servicemen and Women damaged in the course of Defence Service, and that such benefits should be more generous than community standards, there will always be an understandable limit to how much more generous such benefits should be. The community should not be expected to respond to every fantasy which we might have.

One of our Queensland members recently reflected this sentiment in a letter to his State Branch and, if I may quote his comment *'In my opinion we are very near the summit of 'Mount Benefit'!*

However, one seemingly intractable issue remains and it impacts on tens of thousands of Ex-Servicemen and Women – military superannuation.

While recognising that this is not a DVA issue, nor the responsibility of Minister Griffin, I place on record, again, our significant concern that, following numerous reviews and cogent argument, the reasonable request by military superannuants to have their pensions indexed at least in the same way as income support pensioners, has been categorically rejected.

The recently released Matthews Report, used as the justification for this decision, is now the subject of close study. We give fair notice that this issue has not gone away. Clearly, our arguments about fairness and equity have not won the day, and a new approach is required. It is unfortunate that this particular issue detracts from an otherwise solid enhancement of Ex-Service benefits over recent years.

*I turn now to my third major theme – committed membership.*

That we have in abundance, although there is scope for improvement.

Our members, and those who decide to join us, have reasonable and natural expectations. These are common to most voluntary organisations. We expect in particular that:

- \* The League will have a favourable reputation; and we will be proud to belong;
- \* We have an opportunity to participate in ways that draw on our skills and interests;
- \* We have a sense of belonging, and of being valued for what we do; and
- \* We gain a sense of achievement through our involvement and contribution.

My observations have supported my view that such expectations are being met in all but a few areas.

Some members give enormously of their time and their skill, and I for one have drawn a huge measure of enjoyment and satisfaction from the belief that I can work with these people, offer encouragement and support, and on special occasions, see them recognised with League or Australian awards. On some recent occasions, I have presented Meritorious Medals to members who have served the League for as long as I have been alive. These people are the salt of the earth and the mainstay of this great institution.

It would be my wish that all of our members enjoy good social and working relationships with one another. We do, after all, share the common experience of service in our, or an allied nation's Defence Force. So I have been deeply troubled where circumstances are brought to notice that relationships in Sub-Branches have broken down: generally through misunderstanding or a clash of personality. Differences will always occur, but we should be able to debate rationally the issues of difference rather than attack personalities.

Beyond my three themes, there have been many lessons which I have learnt over the years. May I mention but one.

In 2003, six Servicemen remained *Missing in Action* in Vietnam. The probability of locating them remained remote, and, sensing a lack of resolve beyond the small band of members in the group 'Operation Aussies Home', I held out little hope. In 2009, they are all home.

In 2003, the then Shadow Minister for Veterans' Affairs was calling for action on the missing at Fromelles. It seemed a cry in the wilderness. In 2009, all of the remains have been exhumed.

The lesson is clear – a strong conviction, sense of purpose, and sheer determination will achieve against seemingly overwhelming odds.

These outcomes are a tribute to Operation Aussies Home, in the first instance, and Lambis Englezos in the latter. They generated the political will and subsequent support to bring about such fantastic outcomes. We pay a tribute to them, and have been pleased to offer our recognition through ANZAC of the Year Awards.

It is not my right to set the future agenda of the League. But I cannot miss the opportunity to suggest what I see are some of the challenges we still face.

*Firstly* (and foremost), we must strengthen our developing relationship with, and understanding of, the men and women serving in today's Defence Force, and those with recent service. Many of the building blocks are in place:

- \* Our Australian Forces Overseas Fund parcels to our deployed forces and Federal Police: now numbering more than 3500;
- \* Our engagement in Operation Care, offering assistance to wounded Servicemen and Women and their families to recuperate.
- \* The RSL Legal Aid Program
- \* Our leadership of the Ex-Service support to transition management of those leaving the Service.
- \* An on-base presence in some areas, and the provision, as we saw in Townsville last year, of facilities for the families of those deployed.
- \* Our direct involvement at National and State level in the Defence Reserves Support Council.
- \* An effective relationship between Reserve units and proximate Sub-Branches
- \* Joint commemorative endeavours; and
- \* Our on-going representations on Conditions of Service and Defence Capability issues.

It must be our clear intent to engage with and actively support those who follow in our footsteps, and to be seen to them to be relevant to their lives, within and beyond the Service. Their experiences are different to veterans of earlier conflicts, and their expectations also differ.



Secondly, we must engage directly on the implementation of Professor Dunt's two groundbreaking reports on mental health because here is where we can prevent or control much of the psychological damage that is a consequence of military service.

Thirdly, the future of our nation is our youth. We have a Youth Charter, and we have many effective programs to encourage our young people to understand how our nation was born of sacrifice and our freedom is preserved through the on-going commitment of those in uniform. I am not suggesting a direct commitment to Defence Force recruiting, but rather a strong appreciation in our young people of the value to our nation of those who serve or have served. Of course, beyond this, we want our future leaders to understand fully the responsibilities of citizenship and the huge benefits of a cohesive nation and strong communities. If we can imbue them with a strong sense of community service, then so much the better.

Fourthly, I must mention communications. Facebook, Twitter, Flickr and Blogs might have their place but all leaders within the League need to continue to tell our people what is being done on their behalf – by electronic means, our publications, and in person. In turn, we must listen to our members' expectations and concern – and by the same means. As we have seen all too clearly, an information vacuum will be too willingly filled by those who are not well informed and have personal agendas.

Fifthly, we still have more work to do in recalibrating our focus away from illness and compensation to wellness and rehabilitation.

My last key point would be to continue to pay our debt to our senior citizens who have given so much to our nation over the years and now are entitled to age with dignity. Our delivery of aged care facilities and programs for the elderly needs to be complemented with a range of other measures to enhance their quality of life, and that of their carers.

Let me now draw these remarks to a close.

In doing so, I express my admiration for all of those people with whom I have had the privilege of working over the past six or so years, and my gratitude for their tolerance and forbearance with my many inadequacies and idiosyncrasies. I have valued the warmth of the friendships, the loyalty and support I have been fortunate to receive throughout the League and, most directly, from my National Executive colleagues, the National Headquarters staff, and National Officers.

Derek Robson deserves special mention. As National Secretary he has now worked closely with three National Presidents, all of whom would speak most highly of his commitment and dedication to the League. I have certainly valued enormously his wise counsel and guidance, and appreciated his support and friendship.

Beyond the League I must recognise particularly Minister Griffin and Mr Campbell. I have had the pleasure of working with four Ministers, four Shadow Ministers, and three Secretaries. Unfailingly, they have all shown me and the League strong support; they have offered us valued access; and worked closely with us in fulfilling our mutually supportive roles.

Minister, you have served the veteran community for the last four years, both as Shadow Minister and Minister, and I thank you for the enormous contribution you have made. More directly, I have valued your confidence and willingness to explore initiatives which enhance the lives of Ex-Servicemen and Women.

Mr Campbell, your fellow Commissioners and the wider Department have been a great pleasure to work with – I thank you most sincerely.

If I may, and in the interests of time, I will speak further at dinner this evening to express my thanks to another very special group of people: our wives, husbands and partners in the wider League family.

It has been a great privilege to have served in this capacity. There have been many unique experiences, and many great friendships along the way. Australia has a vast number of fantastic people in our veteran community – I have been most fortunate to have met many of them.

Ours is an iconic national institution. Our forefathers in 1916 were most perceptive in setting our objectives which largely endure to this day. We will all be judged by those who follow; questions will be asked - have we kept the faith? have we advanced the cause? have we adapted to our changing circumstances? or have we fallen short of expectations? My sense is that together, we have made a fair fist of it.

Thank you all.