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The RSL and the veteran community – future challenges



an address¹ to the Institution on 29 August 2006 by
Major General W. J. Crews, AO (Retd)²
National President, The Returned & Services League of Australia Ltd.

The Returned & Services League of Australia (RSL), which was established as the Returned Soldiers and Sailors Imperial League of Australia in June 1916 (six months after the Gallipoli Campaign ended and just as the first great Somme offensive of World War I was starting), no longer enjoys either the political power of its early years or the full support of all veterans. Yet it continues to be highly effective in representing the interests and providing for the welfare of veterans. In this paper, its national president, Bill Crews, briefly traces the events that have brought the RSL to this point and outlines the challenges that it and the wider veteran community now face.

Reflecting back on my more than 20 years of membership of various constituent bodies of the Royal United Services Institute of Australia, including time as editor of the Institute's national journal and as President of the United Service Institution of the Australian Capital Territory, I cannot recall having previously been a guest speaker. There is a first time for everything and you do me an honour by asking me to speak today.

The RSL is 90 years young this year. So perhaps I should firstly reflect back over those 90 years; then speak briefly about our 90th anniversary gift to the nation; and finally, in the context of the wider veteran community, discuss some of our contemporary issues as we move forward.

The League's History

It is no coincidence that the League's first meeting in Melbourne took place as Australians were engaged on the Western Front – in France and Belgium. It was in this period that Australia lost a large part of a generation of our youth – tens of thousands of our young people would never realise their dreams and their graves dot the countryside of Europe. By any measure, our losses between 1916 and 1918 were greater than in any period of conflict since – including World War II. Men returning from Gallipoli or France joined together to do some quite specific things:

- remember those who did not return;
- maintain the bonds of friendship forged in adversity;
- take care of those who needed help – whether it be because their bodies or minds were broken or because they could not find work or accommodation (such help was provided directly and personally, as well as through representations to government);

- to argue for a strong Defence Force and in a broader sense to comment on important social issues affecting the nation – they felt that having fought for their nation they were entitled to comment on how it was being run; and
- to inculcate in our community, particularly our young people, a sense of pride in our nation and an awareness of the responsibilities of citizenship and service.

These objectives have endured to this day and continue to define our purpose in 2006. Over the 90 years, though, it has not all been plain sailing. Only 20 years after the end of World War I came World War II, another global conflagration in which Australia itself came directly under attack. And in the wake of World War II came Korea, Vietnam, and since 1975, a range of commitments to peacekeeping, combat operations in the Middle East and Africa, and humanitarian relief missions.

I note, in hindsight with regret, that the League showed some reluctance to embrace each successive generation in the mistaken belief that later veterans had not been to a 'real war'. Of course we have shifted our policy positions, notwithstanding the entrenched and in some respects undeserved reputation we had for being excessively conservative – our positions on "white Australia", "Empire", conscription and communism have all changed to reflect contemporary reality. Significantly, our name has changed a few times as we have expanded our membership, the biggest change occurring some 16 years ago when we made all who have served in any branch of the Defence Force for at least 6 months eligible to join the League.

We have been variously described as: a spiritual home for returned servicemen; the conscience of the nation; and the guardian of the ANZAC traditions. We have contributed to the development of a world-class repatriation system and have become one of Australia's largest community volunteer organisations – well known if not always well

¹ Attended by 95 members and guests.

² national.president@rsl.org.au

understood. The network of licensed clubs bearing our name, while not actually a part of the League, provide us with a presence in most regional centres and gives us visibility in the community which our 1340 sub-branches would otherwise lack. Our views and our help are still sought regularly on a range of matters, but, of course, we also are a large target for often unreasonable criticism.

The League's 90th Anniversary Gift to the Nation

Rather than engage in an orgy of self-congratulation, we decided to mark our 90th anniversary with a gift to the nation – particularly our 900,000 secondary school students. In June, we launched a Civics and Citizenship Youth Education Program. This is a web-based interactive program, supported by CDs and printed material. These are intended to highlight the contribution our servicemen and women have made to Australia over 90 years and why veterans are special people in our society. It capitalises on the curiosity and desire to learn of our younger people. The program has been well received, and anyone with internet access can see it.

One might ask why a veterans' welfare organisation is focusing so much on youth. My reply:

- youth are the future leadership of the nation;
- they must carry forward the memory and awareness as we move further away from major conflict;
- it is they who must appreciate the special contribution veterans have made and the special needs which arise from the consequent suffering;
- veterans' welfare, as always, will be underpinned by community awareness and appreciation; and
- we also want to continue our long term objective of building a better nation through our people.

Future Challenges

So – where to from here? As we move forward to our centenary and beyond, we, as others in the community, face many challenges. But we should also recognise that we have opportunities upon which we can capitalise. Our survival and growth depend, as always, on our relevance to both our own members and the community.

Commemorative activities

One opportunity we have grasped is the growth in community participation in commemoration. Of course, we would claim some credit for this heightened awareness. But, in addition to our efforts at local and national levels, I put this down to several factors:

- the high community standing of the Australian Defence Force;
- better educational materials – provided by the Department of Veterans' Affairs and through Education Departments – and natural curiosity;
- family connections being explored;
- perhaps a heightened awareness of our national insecurity;
- an emerging sense of nationalism and a recognition that nationhood was born of sacrifice; and
- an awareness also, brought home to us each day, of how fortunate we are to live a country such as Australia.

Our broad commemorative efforts are inclusive. We join with all Australians in honouring those who suffered and in giving thanks for the lifestyle we enjoy. We join with other ex-Service organisations, in particular, in marking days of significance to them.

Social and welfare activities

We have always had a broad social agenda. Now is the time to bring that back to centre stage as we quite deliberately engage with the wider community, at the same time as we conduct our core business of welfare. I have already suggested we have a world class repatriation system, but it is not perfect. Anomalies and inequities remain to be resolved and our focus will continue to be on:

- maintaining the value of veterans' benefits hard won in the areas of medical, dental, allied health and home care support;
- recognising and responding to the significant mental health issues which arise through Defence service – our National Veterans Mental Health and Wellbeing Forum, with its emphasis on wellness, is a vehicle to do this; and
- expanding aged care support both in health and lifestyle programs and accommodation options.

Each year we develop our budget submission to Government providing both a context and a focus for the issues we see as most necessary for those in greatest need, together with other issues we would like addressed in due course.

Membership

Maintaining our membership numbers is a real challenge, with World War II (our dominant group) numbers declining. There are some 600,000 people eligible for membership but only 177,000 as Service members. Younger people, however, are now less inclined to join organisations. In our recruiting, we have focused on explaining benefits, and have had some localised successes. But we are not obsessed with numbers. It is the quality of our members and our efforts which are important. If we meet our objectives well, we will present as a more attractive organisation and membership value should become evident. Hopefully, satisfied members will bring in new members.

Other ex-service organisations

Another challenge for us is the growth in other ex-service organisations. We respect the right of any ex-service people to form associations which are relevant to their interests and needs and are independent of the RSL. At the same time, though, we recognise that this can fragment our efforts in working with government, so we endeavour to establish good relationships and work together with them where possible and we do not publicly criticise them. Our concern, though, is: why they are necessary? Perhaps we have fallen short on their expectations, particularly in relation to younger veterans' issues.

Let me introduce a concern I have about the cohesion of the wider veteran community. As a general rule, the ex-

service organisations get on with one another. Certainly the leadership teams do. We all, however, seem to have members who, to put it politely, are their own people and we have some veterans who do not belong to any ex-service organisation. Periodically, assorted individuals and groups rise up and express their concerns about their benefits and entitlements. They do so either as individuals, or as collectives such as the recent 'Sea of Orange' campaign. These dissenters are a small minority, but in recent times they have become highly emotional and offensive. In their largely cyberspace tirades, there are several casualties:

- the first is the truth – misinformation abounds, and several individuals simply feed off each other's negativity;
- the second casualty is good manners – individuals from the Governor-General down are pilloried [I have been personally vilified so many times I no longer pay attention and while I am not perfect, neither am I, to quote one letter writer last week, 'a murderer']; and
- the third casualty is public and political support – I cannot comprehend people who believe that abusing those who can best help them will get the outcomes they seek.

My concern is that those of us who try to deal reasonably and rationally with government for a better deal for veterans will have the shutters close down because of the behaviour of a few. If this were to happen, public sympathy and respect would also evaporate, and we would all lose.

A few of you may have seen some of the communications to which I am referring. I am more than disappointed that veterans felt this was the only way to be heard. The League is often targeted by these malcontents in their abusive tirades, and that concerns me greatly because most of the benefits they already enjoy are the result of the League's efforts over 90 years. Ironically, many, while criticising the RSL, still depend on us to argue their case. At the heart of all this discontent is a concern about both the value and the basis of indexation of the Special Rate Pension – the TPI pension. Consequently, I have requested the League's Project Officer to conduct further research, exploring such issues as:

- what is the Special Rate Pension intended to achieve;
- what is a special rate pensioner actually entitled to, taking account of family circumstances, and historically, how has this changed;
- recognising that benefits could be indexed against either the CPI (consumer price index) or MTAW (male total average weekly earnings), how have these indices changed over the last, say, 30-odd years;
- how does a special rate pensioner's circumstances compare to others of similar circumstances (age/family makeup); and
- is the Special Rate Pension a fair response or otherwise in meeting the Government's obligations to these veterans?

I am anxious that we do not all sink into an abyss over the bitterness surrounding these issues. The League will go forward with the most politically sustainable position we can develop, but if we cannot support all demands, we will say so, and why.

Political support

A further challenge is that of retaining political empathy. There are few politicians with service experience now and even fewer with operational experience. Access to politicians, however, remains good and there is a general acknowledgement that those who put our troops in harm's way must be prepared to assist those who suffer the consequences. We work with politicians on the basis of cooperation rather than confrontation; and we build relationships through mutual respect and understanding. In doing so, we have to recognise political imperatives and other demands on the social agenda; and our arguments must be logical and compelling, and they must remain within the bounds of public acceptance.

Conclusion

The RSL has had a good first 90 years, although not without its moments, trials and tribulations. We now look forward with renewed vigour to our next decade and beyond. We are not going away – the Vietnam veterans are now in charge. Three themes will continue to encapsulate our enduring objectives:

- reaching out – relevance;
- quality welfare – our core business; and
- committed members – the means.

In spite of my expression of concern a short time ago, the overwhelming majority in the veteran community are wonderful people who have served their nation with distinction. It is a pleasure to be able to work with so many committed staff and volunteers in assisting those who deserve and depend upon our help. That is why we take on these roles, and I know many who read this are making their own substantial contributions. Thank you all for that.

The Author: Major General Bill Crews graduated from the Royal Military College, Duntroon, in 1965 into the Royal Australian Engineers. His 37½ years' service included appointments as: Commanding Officer of the School of Military Engineering; Head of the Defence Centre, Brisbane; Assistant Chief of the Defence Force for Policy and Strategic Guidance; and Director of the Defence Intelligence Organisation. His military service was recognised by appointment as an Officer in the Military Division of the Order of Australia. Bill's subsequent employment was with Tenix Defence Systems, followed by three years as Deputy Chief Executive of Engineers Australia. He is an Honorary Fellow of the Institution of Engineers Australia. Bill has been National President of the RSL since September 2003; and is a member of Legacy and the Committee of the Commonwealth Club in Canberra. He has been a member of constituent bodies of the Royal United Services Institute of Australia for more than 20 years. Photo of General Crews: Colonel J M Hutcheson MC.