

ADVOCACY, ENTITLEMENTS AND SUPPORT (AES) SPOT¹

INTRODUCTION

This quarter, I'd like to take a very different tack and outline some of the issues that are currently occupying the National (and some Division) Councils. I'll outline some of them in this article, with the intention of giving you some facts and ideas with which to encourage others to join RAAFA.

I admit, that the relationship may seem a little tenuous between some of the issues and the provision of advocacy, entitlements and support (AES). But, viewed from another perspective, sustaining membership is central to the Association's future. AES is an essential service.

Therefore, anything that facilitates service provision is central to the Association's future. This article identifies a range of issues that, within a wide interpretation, will facilitate the provision of services to members.

Finally, I should add the caveat that, while the initiatives in this article have National Council endorsement, the observations and analysis are my own. I take full responsibility for any errors and the views expressed.

SITUATION

Like most other "traditional" ex-service organisations, as WWII and Korean veterans and ex-RAAF personnel of those eras pass away, the Air Force Association is suffering a declining membership.

In parallel, veterans of contemporary conflicts and recently separated ex-RAAF servicemen and servicewomen appear to prefer to keep alive the friendships they formed in their squadrons or musterings than join RAAFA.

Our research has identified around thirty squadron or mustering-related groups or associations formed by contemporary serving and ex-RAAF personnel, which have no affiliation with the Air Force Association.

This should not surprise. The pervasive bond within squadron and mustering-based RAAFA Branches from the WWII, Korea and Vietnam eras attests to the strength of the friendships forged in adversity or nature of service, and sustained by comradeship and reciprocated support.

On another tack, the Association has maintained a hierarchical structure that, enshrined in the Constitution, practices "command and control" from National Council through the Divisions and on to the Branches. Formal initiatives start at the top, and grassroots members are expected to "hook in".

Earlier attempts to make the Association "more attractive" to contemporary veterans and personnel have been thwarted by the perception that RAAFA sees itself as being "by tradition" the only "real" organisation that ex-RAAF personnel should join.

¹ This article was prepared by R.N. (Dick) Kelloway, National and NSW VP AES, NSW-ACT Chair of TIP, practicing advocate and pension officer for RAAFA, the RSL and APPVA.

A corollary has been the view (sometimes overt, sometimes implicit) that, if “you want to receive the benefits of membership”, you “join on our terms and play to our rules”.

A long-standing misapprehension is that RAAFA is an officers’ (especially ex-senior officers) “club”. The membership in many Branches puts a lie to the view; however, the stories are retold too many times of someone receiving “the cold shoulder” because he or she had not been commissioned.

On the other hand, Branches that are thriving offer comradeship, enjoyable activities for Branch members and their families, easy access to proficient pension and welfare support, and are typically “rank-less” and “post-nominal-less”.

From another perspective, by its operational doctrine and support activities, the contemporary RAAF is a “network organisation”. Systems complexity necessitates, and information and communications technology (ICT) enables, high levels of functional autonomy across the full range of activities from technical support to force application.

Finally, contact with contemporary veterans, RAAF and ex-RAAF personnel reinforces the importance of family orientated activities and, especially, the penetration of social media into their community. The group’s use of social media has facilitated, indeed strengthened, their mutual caring and support.

INTERPRETATION

The preceding considerations suggest that there is a mismatch between what the Air Force Association “is” and what it “needs to be”. If our Association is to have a place in the future lives of contemporary and future generations of veterans, RAAF and ex-RAAF members and their families, we must change.

This deduction suggests that, to have a future, the Association must address three essential needs:

- inclusiveness
- companionship
- support

To be “inclusive”, we must accept that rank and decorations are irrelevant to the majority of Association members. **But**, respectively, **have their place** in facilitating access to senior ADF staff and in lobbying government and departments, and as proud adjuncts to commemoration.

To provide true “companionship” we must accept that squadron and function-related groupings satisfy a strong “tribal” need. To view such groups as inimical to the Association’s survivability is self-fulfilling. Sensibly, we will actively promote the groups and seek mutually beneficial accord with them.

“Support” necessitates a wide range of activities, from representing members’ needs to Government, through facilitating pension claims and appeals, to helping members and their families navigate social support programs.

I believe the National Council acknowledges the preceding needs.

It is taking steps to identify what may influence the Association's future. It is exploring the options that will put "meat on the 'needs' bones". It recognises it must redirect and reinvigorate the Association. And, it is starting the transition into an organisation that is relevant to the future.

Some of Council's key developments are addressed below.

ADSO MEMBERSHIP

Successful lobbying of Government is essential to ensuring the full beneficial entitlements in rehabilitation and compensation legislation, retirement benefit and military superannuation schemes, and the various support programs is achieved. To maximise the effectiveness of its lobbying, RAAFA is a founding member of the Alliance of Defence Services Organisations (ADSO) - one of whose recent successes is the "Fair Go" defence superannuation campaign.

There are a range of other representational and lobbying needs to be progressed both by RAAFA alone and through ADSO. These include wider interpretation of the *VEA 1986* "incurred danger" test to facilitate access to currently unavailable benefits for WWII escapers and evaders and Berlin Airlift crews, and exposure to toxic materials and contaminants in warlike, non-warlike and peacetime service.

Ultimately, lobbying is a critical function for RAAFA. As Budgets are limited, allocations for benefits and programs are the end-product of a political process. Because of its nation-wide membership and representational power independently as well as through ADSO, the Association has a lobbying capacity that it would not have were it smaller or of less geographic scope. This is a significant value-add for members.

WORKSHOPS

Value-adding is, however, not an absolute. It does not exist in isolation. Rather, it is relational. To achieve its full potential, people must recognise, want, support and pursue its potential. In other words, to be valuable, its value must be eked out and exploited.

In essence, existing National and Division strategic and business plans have assumed (either specifically, or implicitly) that the value added to members' lives by their membership is self-evident. Declining membership suggests that this assumption is not well founded.

Consequently, under National auspices, the first day of the 2013 New South Wales Division's AGM was devoted to five workshops followed by a plenary session. The aim was to focus delegates' attention on five key issues that seemed to be key to the future. The "key issues" had emerged from two workshops that were attended by committee members of NSW north coast and Sydney metropolitan and Newcastle area branches.

As this article goes to press, a workshop series is beginning with serving personnel from various RAAF Groups. Open questions and free-ranging discussion are intended with the objective of identifying the perceptions, needs and wants of contemporary veterans, serving personnel and their families. These will then, along with the views of current members, become the foundations and "way points" for the Association's transition.

AFFILIATION

If we accept the historical and contemporary lesson from the strength of squadron and function-related affiliations, we would not expect these groups' members to forsake their friendships and transfer to the Air Force Association. Rather, the Association would encourage (virtually) any form of affiliation that these groups found in their interests.

This approach does not, however, suggest a one-way street. All parties are the beneficiaries. RAAFA gains the additional lobbying power of a wider and deeper membership and the mandate to represent a wider range of interests than it currently has. And, the currently unaffiliated groups acquire a voice at the level of government and department that they currently do not have.

Clearly, to be implementable, the potential mutual benefits of affiliation will have to be, and have to be accepted to be, stronger than organisational autonomy. As discussed next, serving and ex-RAAF members access to an ICT-facilitated, nation-wide welfare, pensions and advocacy support service is one of the benefits that may be influential.

NATIONAL VETERANS E-CENTRE

Around 15 years ago, Victorian ESOs began to amalgamate their practitioners into "veterans centres". Amalgamation enabled longer service hours and a wider range of support services in one location. In the last four years the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) has been encouraging ESOs in the other States to form similar centres. The Veterans e-Centre is a result of the Association's interest in improving access to and the quality of services provided by its practitioners.

The rationale for creating an e-Centre is that an ex-RAAF practitioner will understand the RAAF working environment better than a non-RAAF practitioner and is better equipped to apply the legislated instruments (SOPs and GARP) to an RAAF/ex-RAAF claimant or appellant. If this rationale is valid, connecting RAAF/ex-RAAF claimants with an ex-RAAF practitioner should improve the quality of their claim or appeal.

Currently, the many thousands of ex-RAAF members and their families can access one of only 4 trained Advocates, 14 Pension Officers or 14 Welfare Officers across Australia who are authorised by the Association to support members. There are, of course, many more ex-RAAF, trained and authorised practitioners working from the branches or sub-branches of other ESOs (Ex-Service Organisations). But, there is no central location for finding these practitioners.

National Council has successfully put this argument to the Department of Veterans' Affairs, and has received \$10,000 this financial year to create an ICT-based nation-wide welfare, pension and advocacy referral service. Fortuitously, the Association's Victoria Division had joined with other ADSO-member ESOs in Victoria to create an almost identical system (ACNet). The project is being driven by the Victorian Branch of the Defence Force Welfare Association (DFWA). Its President and our project officer are already progressing a cooperative approach.

Potentially, implementation of a nation-wide RAAFA referral service can greatly facilitate development of the ACNet. DFWA is understood to be itself interested in developing a nation-wide ACNet. Were our cooperation to lead to a RAAFA nation-wide module within the ACNet server, or a separate server linked to ACNet, we would effectively be developing a model for DFWA's national roll-out. This would be further facilitated were we to invite ex-RAAF practitioners in other ESOs across Australia to list with the e-Veterans Centre.

A potentially very significant value-add is inherent in the e-Centre concept and cooperation with DFWA.

ADVOCACY

Earlier in this article I have used the term lobbying. A more “politically-correct” term is advocacy, although this term is also applied to the advocate’s role in appeals to the Veterans Review Board and Administrative Appeals Tribunal. Use of the term therefore needs to be contextually clear. In the following discussion I am using the term in the sense of lobbying for a desired outcome.

In the past twelve months National Council has taken a lead role, both within ADSO and also independently, in progressing serving RAAF and Association members’ interests. Some of the issues in which we have been active include responding to the Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade Committee’s reference on the DLA Piper Report and the creation of a cell within DVA’s Melbourne office to process compensation claims arising from abuse in ADF service, the Review of Round 15 BEST Grant guidelines and assessment criteria, and the DVA-ESO workshop to review the Legislation Draft of the Veterans’ Affairs Review Bill 2013.

Two other activities, each which has potentially fundamental implications for the future provision of welfare, pension and advocacy support, are discussed in more detail next. Our active advocacy on behalf of our members, and potential members’ interests represent a very substantive value-add.

ESO Round Table Working Party

In their December 2010 Review of DVA-Funded ESO Advocacy and Welfare Services, the consultants recommended that TIP (Training and Information Program) volunteer presenters should be “accredited” in accordance with Vocational Education and Training standards, and ESOs should mentor and provide on-the-job training for TIP-trained people before they are authorised as practitioners. Neither recommendation has yet been implemented, although TIP is well into transitioning to competency-based training methods.

In March 2013, the ESO Round Table (ESORT) and the Secretary DVA collaborated in a review of the current preparation of practitioners. The TOR for the review focused on improving the quality of primary claims and reducing the number of VRB and AAT appeals, consistent with the recommendations of the 2010 report. A working party of four ESO representatives (WP) was formed, supported by a DVA secretariat. Our representative led the report writing task and presented the WP report to the August ESORT.

The WP deduced that the outcomes sought in the 2010 Review were not achievable unless ESOs, TIP and DVA acted on their joint and individual responsibilities within a selection, training, and claims/appeals system. The report noted that DVA has been endeavouring for some time to engage ESOs and TIP in a “partnership”, and concluded that changes of habitual attitudes were essential to its formation. The WP recommended that the TIP Ten-Year Rolling Plan translate into a Ten-Year Partnership Transition Program.

The WP report was accepted as is by the members of the ESORT and DVA. If it is implemented, the Association will have played a strong and vital role in enhancing the likelihood of success of veterans’ and ex-ADF members and their families’ claims and appeals.

DVA Discussion Papers on “Advocacy” and “Single Path Appeal”

Under the ongoing effects of restricted budgets and efficiency dividends, DVA claims assessors currently have backlogs of as many as 200 claims. The time being taken to process claims is also significantly beyond the targets DVA has established. The VRB and AAT are encountering similar difficulties. Inferior and incomplete claims and appeals add significantly to delegates' workload as well as frustrating claimants and appellants. Establishing and maintaining harmonious working relationships within the partnership is unacceptably difficult in such a situation.

Concurrently with the Working Party's deliberations, DVA therefore released two discussion papers to elicit ESOs' responses to possible changes in the way in which claims are processed and claimants/appellants are represented. The discussion papers were released with the caveat that they were neither exclusive of other options nor represented the Department's intentions. Be that as it may, there appeared to be a strong underlying theme that claims would be better prepared and claimants better represented if practitioners were legally qualified.

Without over-focusing on the implicit theme, the Association lodged a strong representation on the merits of the discussion papers and an equally strong representation on its weaknesses. Senior DVA officers commented on the quality of the submission and its synergy with the WP Report. The implication is that the two inputs are seen by DVA to represent robust foundations for its future development of the claims and appeals system. Better prepared claims and appeals not only are more likely to be successful, but will also reduce the stress on already severely overworked delegates.

By its advocacy, the Association has therefore advanced the interests of its current and future members. Equally importantly, the quality and success of its representations have been noted. This augurs well for the reception and power of the Association's future lobbying on behalf of its members.

CONCLUSION

At a time when the Air Force Association's membership roll is under stress, the National (and Division) Council is actively seeking, and indeed implementing, ways of adding value to membership:

- We are inverting our decision-making structure so that members' needs are the focus at the National level.
- We are embedding modern ICT technology to facilitate transition from a hierarchical to a network organisation.
- We are re-orientating our relationship with other ex-RAAF organisations.
- We are seeking to strengthen access to and the quality of the support services we are providing.
- We are actively advocating changes in legislation and policy to maximise their benefit for our members.

INVITATION

If you would like to contribute to, or participate in the reinvigoration and redirection of RAAFA, or have any queries or comments on any AES matter, I'd like to hear from you either through Lance Halvorson, the Wings Editor, or direct to me at: <richard.kelloway@bigpond.com>

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