

ADVOCACY, ENTITLEMENTS AND SUPPORT (AES) SPOT¹

Introduction

In this article I'd like to outline for you my thoughts about affiliation, the latest news about the Advocacy Training and Development Program (ATDP) and the perceptions of RAAF veterans of post-1990 conflicts, contemporary RAAF men and women, and their families.

AFFILIATION?

National Council is aware from web and Facebook searches that there are around 30 ex-RAAF organisations and groups that are not affiliated with RAAFA. As some appear to have small memberships, Council is concerned that they are probably not able to have their needs and concerns heard in the 'corridors of power'. It is therefore keen to make contact to offer affiliation on mutually agreeable terms.

To put an obvious concern to rest: Council doesn't want to absorb these organisations. From discussions with some interested organisations already, it acknowledges that their autonomy is a crucial issue for their members. Affiliation with preserved autonomy has several key advantages, however:

- Council increases the power of its voice when issues are being considered by Government and in Departments.
- Council becomes aware of issues to advocate that are currently unknown by it.
- Affiliated organisations gain a voice in forums they would otherwise not be able to access.
- Affiliated organisations gain access to support by RAAFA pension and welfare officer and advocates.

ENHANCING ADVOCACY QUALITY

You'll recall that, as a result of the ESO Round Table's support for the ATDP Blueprint, an early task for the Strategic Governance Board (SGB) was to invite Expressions of Interest (EOI) for membership of the next level of the ATDP structure – the Capability Framework Management Group (CFMG).

The CFMG has now formed, comprising 14 experienced advocates and trainers as well as DVA and Defence representatives. As you can imagine, it has a very substantial body of work ahead of it. Achieving the ATDP objective - the veteran community receiving high quality, nationally-consistent advocacy services – cannot be rushed. Implementation will take time. (Please note: '*veteran community*' means all who are serving/have served in the ADF and their dependants; '*advocacy*' includes pension/compensation, welfare/well-being, and VRB/AAT advocacy services; and '*advocate*' means a practitioner providing any of those services.)

¹ This article was prepared by R.N. (Dick) Kelloway, National VP AES, Member of the Strategic Governance Board, and practicing Advocate for RAAFA, APPVA and VCMNC.

Inevitably, the 'rumour-mill' has been active, so let me put a few shibboleths about ATDP to rest:

- Its creation doesn't suggest TIP wasn't working – TIP was a training platform and served its purpose well.
- ATDP is the next evolution of TIP – a contemporary response to current and future trends in veteran community needs.
- A key difference is adoption of a much broader, integrated, adult-learning and competency-assurance framework.
- Improved support of ESOs' mentoring and OJT will be another key change.

And, to ensure the immediate situation is clear:

- The ATDP will be rolled-out progressively.
- In the interim, ESOs will continue to enrol trainees on scheduled TIP courses.
- Delivery will be targeted, possibly impacting course timing, location and nature.
- Current advocates will be supported during the transition from TIP to ATDP.
- ATDP will include recognition of current advocates' prior learning (RPL).

Finally, to put a tight noose on a key 'bolter', ATDP is being implemented within an appropriate frame of reference:

Advocates are volunteers and their time is valuable. It is therefore committed to supporting and empowering them to focus on their core business - providing high quality, nationally consistent advocacy services.

In future articles, I'll keep you posted on ATDP implementation issues that may affect you as a potential advocacy-service recipient, or active advocacy-service provider, or person who wants to support his/her mates. Which brings me to the next subject.

CONTEMPORARY VETERANS

An ear to the ground around any traditional ESO office, or group of Vietnam or older veterans, will burn from anger or frustrated criticism about veterans from post-1990 conflicts. A 'robust' exchange at a recent Pension and Welfare Officers Network meeting illustrates some aspects of the problem:

- Advocate (in her late 30s): *'I'm in contact with ten vets in my area that are sleeping rough. They need more help than I can give by myself.'*
- ESO President (florid face, substantial beer-gut, leaning back in chair, surrounded by his ESO Secretary and Vice-President, harshly and loudly): *'Yeah. Well, we 'aven't heard of 'em. So, how come you're the expert?'*
- Advocate (gently): *'They don't feel comfortable around pokies and booze.'*
- ESO President: *'If they want f@#ing help, they can f@#ing well come to us.'*

And then there was another outburst at a State-level meeting by very senior ESO representative of the Vietnam era:

- Younger Veterans Representative: *'We've got a couple of young vets looking for help to get to the disabled games.'*

- Senior ESO Rep: ‘*They can get f@#ed. Tell’em to wait their turn like we had to.*’

RAAFA National Council has long been concerned to support contemporary RAAF personnel, veterans of the post-1990 era and their dependants. It has funded visits by small teams to east-coast RAAF bases to meet serving personnel and to facilitate mixed-rank/mixed-gender workshops to understand the perceptions and needs of the current cohort. It also tapped into the findings of a workshop conducted by TIP that also sought to gain insights into how the advocacy-needs of the cohort could be better met. Some of the comments that we’ve heard follow.

Younger Veterans’ Community

Younger veterans and their families want to stay connected. Many ex-ADF members lose their way when they separate from the ADF - a community that *understands and doesn’t judge*. So, keeping connected is very important within the cohort. How to do so varies. Most use social media (sms or Facebook) for initial contact, followed by ad hoc or organised get-togethers such as camping. Others prefer coffee groups and dinner every 3-4 months. Activities involving the whole family are, however, of primary importance.

It is also relevant to remember that, generally, the contemporary cohort is more highly educated than previous generations. Typically, they enter the ADF with at least Year 12 education and often with university degrees. Their values and ambitions are therefore significantly different to their predecessors’. In this respect, they are deeply critical of the beer and pokies focus of the Vietnam era veteran.

Younger Veterans Caring for Younger Veterans

Younger veterans are highly motivated to help their mates and use social media to great effect when are in crisis. The cohort sees three levels and timing of care as necessary. Typically, they *text before they talk* to provide immediate support (*crisis care and information sharing*), which they call *triage*. Then, in the *golden hour*, they seek referral to a more highly-trained person. And, finally, look for ongoing care by a professional. Throughout, face-to-face contact is *paramount - it could be the difference between life and death*.

Homelessness, alcoholism and suicide are the cohort’s greatest concerns. They describe the plight of homeless veterans as *dire*. If a veteran is arrested for vagrancy, he/she can’t be granted bail as they do not have an address. The plight of young widows is a special concern – and especially where they need mental health support if their spouse had suicided.

A typical support sequence (gives insight into the number of support groups) is: form a social (eg, coffee) group, transition into a network, start to help mates, then strengthen group cohesion and trust with social activities. Although the balance between social media and face-to-face contact is probably about 50-50, *a friendly face and a person right in front of you* is irreplaceable when you’re in need.

They also acknowledge the key importance of dealing with mental health issues. Taking it slow, avoiding pressure, backing off when appropriate, *walking with the wounded* and identifying when the time is right to help are all critical skills.

Ex Service Organisations

Validating the ATDP concept, the cohort expects advocates to demonstrate a high level of professionalism. Advocates must be highly regarded and their support must be credible. Age difference is not, of itself, a deterrent. If an advocate is competent and approachable, younger veterans will rely on their support. An almost universal realisation is that the best way to find a good advocate is by word of mouth from mates.

In this respect, the experience of many young veterans is unsatisfactory. The poor culture evidenced by some advocates draws particularly harsh criticism. Many see traditional ESOs as being populated by *old men who don't care - they just don't (or won't) 'get' the tradition of mates caring for mates*. Some are openly disinterested in helping younger veterans: *they don't do MRCA or multi-Act claims*.

There is room for significant reflection by older generations of veterans in the preceding comments. If there can be any doubt about the way forward it has to be dispelled by reality. The impression of too many in the contemporary cohort is that the Vietnam era is behaving no differently than the treatment it received from the veterans that preceded it. Which brings me back to the ATDP.

Conclusions

We, the older members of RAAFA – one of the traditional ESOs – are the beneficiaries of our predecessors' efforts. We are obligated to ensure that current and future veteran cohorts are no less well cared for than we were.

The traditional ESOs, which formed after WWI to fight for legislation that compensated those who had been disabled, initiated the tradition of mates helping mates. The compensation-focus of veterans legislation that they fought for was reinforced by their successor cohorts' experiences in WWII and through to Vietnam.

Compensation is, however, no longer the primary focus of veterans' legislation. MRCA (and, presumably, the forthcoming military-SRCA) provides for compensation where a disability is stable, but its primary focus is rehabilitation and getting the disabled back to work.

Notwithstanding that advocates are volunteers, their obligation necessitates a totally professional approach to advocacy. One unambiguous characteristic of a profession is continuous learning and skill development. It is this level of commitment that ATDP intends to call forth.

To fulfil our obligation we have no option but to rise to the ATDP challenge. Failure to do so would not only validate the impressions of us held by too many of the current cohort,

but we would deserve the trenchant condemnation of future generations for taking but having given in return. As many unaffiliated ex-RAAF groups have young veterans as members, we hope you will help us rise to the challenge and join us in fighting to ensure legislation meets the needs of the future generations.

The wisdom and experience of ex-RAAF personnel is much needed to support serving personnel and their families. I encourage all interested in any of these issues to email me at richard.kelloway@bigpond.com .

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