



VIETNAM VETERANS ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA

VICTORIAN BRANCH INCORPORATED

WELFARE BEGINS WITH YOU

Dear Fellow Veteran

What This Letter is all About

1. This is quite a long letter, written as a result of an experience late last year that affected me profoundly, and made me question how we really are going with delivering effective welfare and what we are really achieving at the grass roots level. Please take the time to read and absorb the content of the letter, then share it with your partner/family.
2. Don't get me wrong, there is already a large amount of welfare done across the state every day, by well trained and willing volunteers. I acknowledge and thank all those who are involved; but by its very nature, a lot of welfare is reactive and often only swings into action when a welfare problem is identified. I think we can do much better if we all take a more proactive approach to our own welfare and the welfare of our mates. If we really begin to care for each other in a genuine way and not simply rely on overworked welfare officers to do all the heavy lifting, who knows, a little practical intervention now might just prevent a serious welfare issue later on.

Welfare: A Message too Important to Ignore

3. I thought long and hard about writing this letter, concerned about how members might react to it. Eventually I decided that the message was far more important than the odd negative reaction. You might find some parts of this letter confronting, challenging and perhaps close to the bone. Perhaps you might feel like telling me to nick off (or similar!) and mind my own business, well so be it. I personally believe that the matter of grass roots welfare is too important to tip toe around or to ignore; besides, if a Vet can't encourage or challenge another Vet to take action on the important matter of personal welfare and the welfare of his family and Vet mates, then who can? I reckon we are resilient enough to handle the truth and that we should be ready and willing to accept and to administer a dose of "tough love" if that is what is needed.
4. For those Vets who have got their affairs in order and are ticking along nicely, congratulations. For you, I might be going over old ground, perhaps even telling you how to suck eggs-sorry for that, but a review of your circumstances never hurts, and maybe, just maybe there are still some things you can still attend to, like your mates. If this letter strikes a chord with you and there are things you need to address, please consider your future and that of your family carefully and take action now. If this letter pricks your conscience about a Vet mate, then please act for his sake.

Why this Welfare Message Now?

5. With the Government making the right noises about fixing compensation payments, looking at pharmaceuticals and talking to the ex-service community, some of our previous big concerns have eased: there is still much more to do, and we will need to keep up the pressure on the Government to deliver on its promises and to address other issues that we have. However, we now have some breathing space in which to have a closer look at how well our basic grass roots welfare is going. I believe that we need to know more about our members and their needs, and take steps to re-connect with lost vets and vets who have never been “on our radar”.

Some Confronting Questions - Have We Dropped the Ball?

6. In the lead up to the federal election, we pounded Victorian based politicians with our big ticket issues, and we became rightfully excited about some of the breakthroughs-especially in relation to compensation. However, I can't help but think that we might have put basic welfare on the back burner and became so absorbed by the hip pocket nerve that we have stopped really caring about each other. Have we become so comfortable (or is that lazy) in our cosy sub-branch environments that we are more interested in a few beers than the mates we are drinking with or the mates we haven't seen for a while? Are we happy to leave welfare to a few hard working volunteers and hope that they get it right when the shit hits the fan and a mate is in real trouble?

A Proposed Approach to Improving Grass Roots Welfare

7. Across the state, I am proposing that we take a three tiered approach to improve welfare at the basic level. Your sub-branch will be encouraged to take actions to better support you, chase up former members and be more active in seeking Vets who have never been members. We will be conducting presentations across the state-hitting black spots where we currently have little or no presence, and working cross-border areas. And now to you: I am asking you to seriously review your personal circumstances, and to take a greater interest in your own welfare and the welfare of your mates.

What a Bloody Waste!

8. I mentioned earlier that this letter came from an experience that touched me deeply, let me explain.....

I was sitting in a funeral a while back – Vietnam Veteran, unknown to me. The Vet was separated-but starting to think about re-uniting with his wife, the Vet was receiving a below general rate disability payment, had been for years-but was thinking about having a review, the Vet was not a member, had been once-but was thinking about re-joining. Are you getting the drift?

9. *The autopsy showed the Vet died of a condition recognised by DVA as war caused, and thus potentially compensable, but the condition was not one for which he was getting a disability payment! What finally floored me was to find out later that his Vet mates knew of his situation.*

10. *So, we have a dead Vet, who left a hell of a mess for his family-and it need not have been so! My immediate thoughts were:*

**He was not on our radar, so there was no visibility of him or his circumstances, could we have done better?*

** The Vet, his family and his mates had not addressed his circumstances; they all could have done better.*

**No apparent follow up/review of his disability claim/current state of health, could the system be better?*

11. If my comments sound harsh I do not apologise, after all, we are talking about a Vet here. I can't help but think that: *If he had been a member it is highly likely that his circumstances would have been reviewed and the illness that killed him may have been identified, and as a result his compensation may have been adjusted accordingly (perhaps Special Rate?) He may have been informed of the potential impact on DVA payments of his separation plus more. If only WE had acted, if only the VET had acted, if only his FAMILY had acted, if only his MATES had acted, if only the system was better.*

12. After the funeral I was full of anger, guilt and sadness - still am. What a bloody waste! I decided then that I have had a gutful of attending funerals where the Vet has died without getting his house in order. So I am asking you to try to ensure that this unhappy scenario is not played out again, it's time to take responsibility for getting your life in order and looking after your mates. The alternative is sitting next to me at future funerals and thinking *what a bloody waste, could I have done something, should I have done something?*

Welfare Starts at Home and With You

13. In my travels around the state, I get to listen to Vets talk about their own circumstances. Despite encouragement it still staggers me that many Vets don't have their personal affairs in order and don't take proper care of themselves, How about you? Where are you at with the following?

*A CURRENT will

*Power of Attorney arrangements-especially important if you live alone or separated.

*A family Dr who you visit REGULARLY.

* Do you Dr shop?

*REGULAR health tests, including blood tests and PROSTATE examinations.

*Proper and safe medication management. When was the last time you had your prescriptions reviewed to see if current doses are still suitable-do you still need all of your medications? Are you failing to take prescribed medicines? Are you hoarding out of date medicines?

*A personal fitness/health regime-a sensible approach to things in moderation, including diet, smoking and alcohol.

*An active DVA file: if you are not classified as TPI or EDA, when was the last time you had a review of your file? When was the last time you sought a change to your disability compensation payment as a result of new medical conditions and/or increased level of illness?

*If you do not have an active DVA file, have you considered making an appointment with your local pension officer to discuss your current circumstances?

*UP TO DATE personal contact information - address, telephone, email, emergency contact details – lodged with family/friends AND with your sub-branch.

*Are you “on the radar”? Do you maintain membership (it costs 50 cents a week). Do you keep in touch with mates and attend your sub-branch activities

*Are you sitting on issues that need to be addressed?

TPI Drop Out?

14. I am aware that there are a significant number of TPI Vets who for whatever reason, do not maintain contact with other Vets or a sub-branch once the gold card is in; therefore, they are “not on the radar”. Are you a TPI drop out? The main problem here as I see it, is that these Vets who have dropped out still have the same health issues that led to their TPI classification, and may not be looking after themselves properly. It is worth noting that DVA is aware of TPI’s who do not use health services, so this supports my concerns.

Social Drop Out?

15. Are you a Vet that does not get out and about in the community? Do you isolate yourself? Isolation is a serious problem that can lead to other health issues. If this profile fits you, I urge and encourage you to re-connect and get back “on the radar”, develop a circle of Vet mates and friends you can talk to. Also, there are many things you can get involved in through your sub-branch that will benefit you personally and will also help other Vets.

What About Our Mates?

16. Do we really know our mates? Do we really care about our mates? I often hear Vets talking about us being a unique group that has been through a unique experience that binds us together unlike many other parts of the community. As I see it, it follows then that if we are unique then we have a unique opportunity and responsibility to look after each other in a special way. After all, no one knows Vet problems better than another Vet. Vets will trust another Vet before trusting anyone else.

17. Now I am not asking you to pry, and I am not asking you to rush out and become a trained Welfare Officer, although that would be great. What I am asking is that you to take more interest in the well being of your Vet mates: consider again the circumstances surrounding the death of the Vet mentioned earlier. Are you one of those “mates” that is content to sit back, even if you know that a mate is struggling, or not looking after himself? Do you know of Vets who are “off the radar”? Are you afraid that your mate might tell you to piss off if you ask him is he OK, are there any problems? So what, have a crack! Isn’t that exactly what you would be hoping your mates would do for you if you were struggling? Your personal interest and

involvement might be just what is needed to get a Vet mate up and about again. Talking about the contents of this letter with your mates might be a good place to start.

Tough Love

17. I have had Vets tell me that a certain Vet mate is difficult to deal with and won't listen to them so they prefer to leave the matter alone-sorry, that's a crock and a cop out! How about a bit of "Tough Love"? In my opinion it might have been OK to be a big tough independent digger at the height of our powers, but those days are gone for most if not all of us. We all like to feel independent and think that we can cope, but we are not getting any younger and with age the impact of our service magnifies itself, so the time for acting the tough guy is gone. If your mate won't address his issues for himself then put it on him to do something for his family and loved ones. And don't just try once! If you know of a problem that you cannot handle, by all means seek out a trained Welfare Officer, just don't ignore the problem. I don't want to attend another wake and listen to "mates" talking about what a silly bugger so and so was, and that he wouldn't do anything to help himself. Sure there will still be silly buggers out there-but we must try.

Do You Know Any Vets Who Are Not Members?

18. I am sure that many of us know Vets who are not "on our radar". Please share this letter with them and stress the importance of them becoming known and the advantages of membership.

One Last Thing

19. I am sure we can all take a more active role in practical welfare. Part of our Association motto is: "Fight Like Hell for the Living". I ask that we all live the motto by attending to our own affairs as a matter of urgency and then ensuring that our mates are doing the same. Never underestimate the power of a phone call or a simple "How are you going mate"? The other option is to continue to sit in sad funerals and wonder "What if"?

Regards,

Bob Elworthy