

**Address to 92<sup>nd</sup> National Congress  
Melbourne, 11 September 2007  
by the National President**

Your Excellencies  
Minister  
Shadow Minister  
Eminent Guests  
League Members  
Ladies & Gentlemen

At our Congress in Perth last year, we reflected back on 90 years of achievement, but focussed on the contemporary needs of the League and the veterans and their families whom we exist to serve.

For four years now I have been stressing that our enduring objectives may be drawn together into three broad themes:

- Reaching Out to the Community
- Quality Welfare
- Committed Membership

More recently, I have endeavoured to define some more immediate goals within this broad framework. These were:

- To endeavour to resolve many of the historical issues which have been around for some time and were tending to distract us from our main purpose.
- To endeavour to reach some conclusions concerning the Special Rate Pension, arguably one of the most volatile areas of debate in the veteran community, and
- To turn our focus strongly onto the emerging needs of our younger veterans.

We have made substantial progress on all of these fronts, but of course more is needed. I will touch on this further as I speak this morning about key events of the past year, the circumstances we now face, and the opportunities presented to us.

### **Commemoration and Community**

Commemoration has always been a key role of the League. 2007 takes us further through the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of some of the most horrific engagements on the Western Front: Passchendaele – described by one commentator as a by-word for the monstrous futility of war – 36,000 of the dead and wounded being Australian. This was, like Gallipoli, an engagement marked by great courage, and unspeakable suffering, but ultimately achieved little. The Battles of Bullecourt were also remembered this year – another 10,000 lives lost or harmed.

Australians have come to realise that World War I was a lot more than Gallipoli – without undermining the iconic status that campaign has. Building upon the significant volumes of material now available, including on-line records, the fine travelling exhibitions and displays developed by the Australian War Memorial, and the desire of our younger people to take a closer interest in our military history, the League has seen increasing numbers of Australians participating in commemorative services and events.

It is our duty to preserve the memory, to raise awareness, and to ensure that the wider Australian community, many of who may have no direct family connection to these events, appreciate the sacrifices made at that time and subsequently. In honouring those who died and suffered, we maintain the public foundations of respect for those who serve, and support for the special needs of all veterans who commit their lives in the service of our nation. The League has a most substantial record of achievement in this field, and I would hope that all who are the beneficiaries of this community recognition might pause briefly to recognise that.

This year, indeed this week, marks the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Australia's involvement in peacekeeping: a significant milestone. Peacekeepers, peace makers, and peace enforcers have served Australia with distinction in many corners of the world – they continue doing so today. This anniversary, given prominence by the Peacekeeping Conference being held this week at the Australian War Memorial, the ongoing production of the History of Peacekeeping, and fundraising for the Peacekeeping Memorial to be built on ANZAC Parade in Canberra, appropriately highlights this more recent dimension of our Defence and Police Forces' engagement in pursuing our national interests and security.

The League is in every sense a part of our community beyond our commemorations. We have engaged this year with the Macular Degeneration Foundation in raising awareness of this debilitating condition. The League has also come out in strong support of Drug Free Australia, and most of our State Congresses received presentations from the Executive Officer of Drug Free Australia to explain further the dimensions of this major social and health issue. Past National President, Peter Phillips, serves on the Board of this organisation, and our National Secretary represented the League at their Annual Conference.

Such community engagement is not new. This year is the 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the formation of the Australian Cancer Research Foundation, now engaged in funding vital work to better understand the nature of this insidious condition affecting so many Australians. The League played a large role back in 1986 in launching the Foundation, and we remain willing to continue assisting in whatever way we are able.

We value our many community links – both national and local. They reflect our strong desire to give back what we can to our community, to be of great support in times of adversity, and to encourage selfless service within our community in the spirit of mateship.

### **Veterans' Welfare**

Through the active engagement by and representations of Minister Billson, and the sterling efforts of the Department of Veterans' Affairs, the past twelve months have seen substantial advances in veteran welfare support.

This is not just about the cash value of pensions and disability payments. It is particularly about enhanced service delivery and removing the anomalies which cause great consternation and inequity.

Since the announcement made by the Minister at our 2006 National Congress, which restored the value of our health care and support regime by providing more realistic reimbursement for service providers, advances have been made particularly in respect of aged care, and mental health. The Prisoners-of-War from the European Theatre have at last received the benefit of the \$25,000 ex-gratia payment, and a welcome adjustment has been made to the value of the Special Rate and Immediate Rate Pensions.

From time to time, claims are made that the RSL has been sitting on its hands; it is alleged that we have not put enough pressure on the Government; or we do not speak out on matters of concern. The record proves otherwise.

The \$1.3billion additional funding introduced this past 12 months into the Veterans' Affairs budget addresses the League's top budget priority from 2006, and in whole or in part, all five budget priorities in our 2007 submission.

Our measured, considered representations, our relationship and confidence building, our strong reputation for community engagement and up-front welfare support and aged care, establishes the necessary environment in which our concerns will be discussed and addressed. Both the Minister and Shadow Minister have been most willing to seek our views and to discuss options. We may have some differences of opinion on some matters but let me assure you that the Government, the League and the Opposition at least share a sense of common purpose in meeting the reasonable needs of Australia's veterans and families. The League does not engage in name calling, vilification, or megaphone lobbying. The pursuit of veterans' concerns in 2007 has to be more constructive than that.

It is appropriate at this point to acknowledge the splendid access we are fortunate to enjoy with Government Ministers and the Opposition, and of course with Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs. In warmly welcoming those recent announcements by Government, which enhance the lot of our

most needy and deserving veterans, we also acknowledge that there is more to be done. We have a world class repatriation system, but we strive to make it even better. And of course we remain sensitive to the need to retain the value of those benefits established, and not see veterans' benefits be regarded as just another component of community welfare.

Three particular initiatives this year deserve special mention. Encouragingly, two of these involve the relatively recently established Centre for Military and Veterans' Health in Queensland.

The first is the Defence Deployment Health Surveillance Program – intended to more closely monitor the ongoing exposure to hazards, and adverse health effects on those servicemen and women deployed on operations around the world or even closer to home. This is about prevention and early diagnosis, with a view to rapid response to any adverse trends. We all well realise that military operations bring with them huge risks. This is about promoting wellness through enhanced resilience and minimising the longer term impacts by rapid response to physical or psychological damage.

We would encourage all servicemen and women to participate in this Health Surveillance Program when requested.

The second major development is quite recent – the publication of Research Protocols for studies into The Intergenerational Health Effects of Service in the Military. This comprehensive report by the Centre for Military and Veterans' Health is a world leader in this field. It arose through the veteran community's collective urging to conduct a study into the health of the children of Vietnam veterans. But it is much more than that – providing a model for a much broader undertaking in examining the impact of deployments on families from more recent conflicts.

This approach has received and deserved bi-partisan support and the Centre for Military and Veterans' Health has done an outstanding job of developing these protocols. Some \$13.5m has been allocated by Government to this work, which will go to tender in the near future. Initial results are expected in 2009-2010.

The third initiative came to fruition yesterday, World Suicide Awareness Day. Some of us participated in the launch here in Melbourne of Operation Life, a suicide prevention strategy for the veteran community; responding to an area of great concern to us all. This initiative brings together a number of programs aimed at promoting our own mental wellbeing, and identifying others around us who may be at risk. It offers us tools to help ourselves and our mates. I commend this program to all.

### **Younger Veterans**

As I indicated at the outset, younger veterans now deserve more attention than perhaps they have been given. I am referring particularly to those who have served after 1975: the Post Vietnam generation.

Younger veterans increasingly experience multiple deployments across a wide range of operational scenarios – from humanitarian relief operations, through peacekeeping, to high level conflict as in the Middle East. They are, like their predecessors, exposed to physical, environmental, and psychological harm.

There is absolutely no doubt that the men and women now serving in the Australian Defence Force, and who have recently served, have done so with great commitment and dedication. They have brought enormous credit on themselves and our nation, not just for their professionalism but their humanity and compassion.

The RSL has a strong and effective relationship with the ADF and we value greatly the cooperation we enjoy.

- Our Australian Forces Overseas Fund parcels are warmly received and acknowledged by those on deployments.
- Our National Secretary's competent facilitation of Operation CARE, a program funded by the RSL and Services Clubs Association for the benefit of the families of those wounded during deployment, directly helps the recuperation of those who suffer the consequences of their service.

- Our National Defence Committee engages directly with Defence and the Government to offer sound advice on issues of force structure, capability, and deployment, while our National Conditions of Service Committee is closely involved in representations on the full range of pay and service condition issues.
- Our Cadet of the Year program fosters excellence in cadet training, while other awards which the League makes to Service Colleges and courses are highly regarded.
- The ADF assists greatly with nearly all of our commemorative events, and many of our sub-branches enjoy a close relationship with proximate ADF units and bases.

It is on this base of engagement that the RSL has recently accepted a key role in supporting the ADF Integrated People Support Strategy. In this way, we will be able to lend our considerable experience and skills to offer social or more direct support to servicemen and women and their families, particularly during that critical phase of their separation from the Service. Clearly, this is a most stressful time and historically, many of the problems arising in the ex-service community have their origins in the way in which that separation occurred.

Through our extensive network of some 1360 sub-branches, our depth of experience in pensions and advocacy work, and our understanding of the exigencies of Service life, the RSL is well placed to provide support, encouragement and advice at this critical time.

To face up squarely to this challenge, we in the League must recognise that these younger veterans came largely from a generation brought up with different expectations; a generation more inclined to question than to accept at face value; a generation which communicates largely electronically; and is generally even less aware of their entitlements than some of us may have been. But thankfully, this generation is also anxious to seek help to restore their quality of life, and they are conscious of the need to find the right work/life balance for their families.

Since the League's inception in 1916, one of our objectives has been to ensure that Australia retains a credible and effective defence capability. Our commitment to this recent initiative complements and builds on our existing relationship. It is fundamental to our ideals that we become so engaged, and critical to our future.

### **The Federal Election**

A Federal Election is expected to be called in the near future. Australians will decide who they want to form the next government, based on our individual circumstances, views and outlook.

On behalf of our members, the RSL has recently made a submission to all parliamentary parties setting out what we would expect of the next government, and what issues we consider deserve further attention in enhancing our present repatriation and defence service arrangements.

This submission seeks responses on both the principles of veterans' support, and some specific proposals.

It is our view that the major issues now needing to be addressed include:

- A more equitable and rational basis of indexation of disability payments, compensation and superannuation.
- Enhancements to assist those totally and permanently incapacitated veterans with young families.
- Enhancements in the management of transition from the Service – as proposed in the Integrated People Support Strategy.
- Accommodation assistance for younger veterans unable, because of their condition, to live at home.
- A positive response to the range of issues raised with the recent Military Superannuation Review.
- Further enhancements to enable our older veterans and their families to age with dignity and choice.

Responses by all parliamentary parties to these issues may influence veterans and our families in determining how we may cast our vote.

The sacrifices made by many over the years have bestowed upon us the benefits of peace, security, and democracy. May we cherish them all, and meet our responsibilities wisely.

### **Conclusion**

We look forward with renewed vigour and sense of purpose in the year ahead. The League is blessed with many fine volunteers and staff who give most generously of their time and skills. Let me record publicly now our deep appreciation of the contributions made by so many of our members across the nation. Many efforts go unheralded, and possibly even unnoticed. But they are all valuable contributions and greatly valued. Our communities are better places as a consequence.