

Address to the 2009 RNZRSA National Council

Michael Fowler Auditorium, Wellington Convention Centre, 111 Wakefield Street
4pm, 13 October

National President, Robin Klitscher
Members of the National Executive Committee

Good afternoon, and thank you very much for your invitation to address you here today at the RNZRSA 2009 National Council meeting.

It is indeed a privilege to be here today as Minister of Veteran's Affairs.

I would like to begin by acknowledging the hard work of the RNZRSA in advocating for the concerns of veterans, and for helping keep the memory of their service and sacrifice alive.

The RNZRSA has 250 clubs and branches up and down the country and around 130,000 members.

That is a great force for good in our communities, and it's wonderful to see the RSA movement continuing to go from strength to strength.

That it remains such a trusted institution in our society is testament to the many staff and volunteers who are committed to ensuring our veterans enjoy companionship, respect and a high quality of life.

Thank you to you all.

As we meet here today, I would like us to take a moment to think of the New Zealand men and women of the Defence Force who are currently serving overseas in a variety of locations.

It is clear that the need for the RSA has not ended.

There is an ongoing need to support our service personnel; both those whose service ended many years ago, and those still currently serving.

I'm very proud of the work done by Veterans' Affairs New Zealand and of the good relationship it enjoys with the RNSRSA and other veterans groups.

I think that is very important that we have a good working relationship and one that's built on respect.

This is why I meet with the RSA and the Chief of Defence Force every few weeks to make sure we're talking about the same things and we're listening.

VANZ has gone through some big changes in the past year, including moving from the Ministry of Social Development and into the Defence Force.

It's been a big cultural change. The Ministry of Social Development is very much set up around pensions and entitlements and deals with \$18 billion of taxpayers' money which is the biggest spender in Government.

They have very set structures and under the last government it was felt that it would be best for VANZ to come under the NZDF which is more attuned to the needs of ex-service people and that veterans were a case apart from other people who received state pensions.

At the time I expressed some concern that it was a big ask for the Defence Force to take VANZ on board.

However, that is exactly what they have done, they have learned a lot and they are revelling in the relationship.

Case Management in the Community

One of the central messages I heard from the RNZRSA when I first assumed the position of Minister of Veterans' Affairs was the need for Veterans' Affairs New Zealand to engage directly with the veterans they serve.

I agreed with this call, and I made this a priority.

Case Management in the Community is an initiative for veterans to meet and have face-to-face contact with Veterans' Affairs case managers and services staff.

The first Case Management in the Community meeting took place in Mt Maunganui in September 2009, followed by another presentation in Paraparaumu on the 6th of October.

The feedback I have had is that the Case Management in the Community days have been a great success, and very informative to veterans.

I know that the case managers involved very much enjoyed the experience and appreciated the chance to meet some of their veterans personally.

After the success of the first Case Management in the Community sessions, Veterans' Affairs is looking at moving out into the regions and also holding meetings in some rural locations.

I'd invite you all to keep a lookout and see when a session will be held near you.

VANZ Inquiry Line

Another way VANZ is improving contact with veterans and improving service is a dedicated inquiry line, launched on 23rd June.

Veterans can now call one free phone number from anywhere in New Zealand to reach a single point of contact for all services and advice offered by Veterans' Affairs.

The line has been immensely popular, averaging almost 2,000 calls per week since it started operation.

The inquiry line team are able to give advice on all sorts of things relevant to veterans, from information on the Veterans' SuperGold Card and funding for commemorations, to how to get a case manager and how the case management system works.

It's particularly pleasing that 98 percent of calls in the first month were responded to and resolved at the first contact with the caller.

I think that this is a great indicator of Veterans' Affairs' resolve to improve the delivery of services to veterans and increase responsiveness to veterans' needs.

Expert Panel on Veterans' Health

In April of this year, the Expert Panel on Veterans' Health was appointed.

The establishment of the Panel was one of the commitments made under the Memorandum of Understanding which was signed by the Crown with the RNZRSA and the Ex-Vietnam Services Association to address the concerns of Vietnam veterans and their families.

Ensuring the health and well being of our veterans is a priority for this government.

I believe the work of the Panel will be an important step to better understanding the service-related health issues of New Zealand veterans and how these issues can be best addressed within our war pensions and veterans' support systems.

The Expert Panel is now up and running, having met three times so far this year. One of the first tasks for the Panel will be to consider the impact of nuclear test service on the New Zealand veterans who were present during nuclear testing in the Pacific.

I have asked the Expert Panel to look into the research which has been done regarding the health effects of this service, and to recommend how the outcomes of this research would be best be applied to the New Zealand context.

It is my intention that the Expert Panel will continue to operate as a long-term initiative, with the ability to consider issues arising from any theatre in which New Zealand forces have served.

Travel concessions

I am aware that some confusion has recently come to a head regarding the War Pensions travel concessions, and about what veterans can expect when applying for assistance under their concession.

The Travel Concessions as outlined in the War Pensions Regulations of 1956 were not envisaged to deal with the travel needs of veterans in 2009.

Over the years, the concessions as originally written have been changed in an attempt to make them fit veterans' changing travel needs.

Unfortunately, these changes have in some cases been made in a piecemeal manner which has created confusion and inconsistency.

As a result, when I became Minister of Veterans' Affairs, this is an area which was inherited in a state that was less than ideal.

Travel concessions are one of the areas which are being considered as part of the rewrite of the War Pensions Act currently being carried out by the Law Commission.

In the interim, however, I am working on creating a fair and sensible solution to the travel concessions issues, which will see the concession administered in a way which is equitable and which corresponds with the intention, if not the outdated form of the original 1956 regulations.

Gallipoli 2010

2010 will be a special year at Gallipoli, marking the 95th anniversary of the ANZAC landings.

Every year, a lot of work goes on behind the scenes to arrange the ANZAC Day commemorations at Gallipoli and to ensure that the Kiwi voice is heard as part of the larger commemorations.

VANZ puts in a lot of work, with a small staff, to make sure that the New Zealand story is heard at Gallipoli and that New Zealand visitors to the commemorations are catered for.

Unfortunately, there are no longer any surviving veterans of the Great War to represent New Zealand, and their fallen Kiwi comrades, at the ANZAC Day ceremonies at Gallipoli.

However it is my intention on this 95th anniversary to send a veteran contingent from New Zealand to Turkey for the commemoration ceremonies.

The contingent will be a representative group made up of veterans from the different theatres where New Zealand forces have served since the Second World War.

It is likely that NZDF will be providing logistical support to the veteran contingent, and that the veterans' group will be accompanied by a group of serving NZDF personnel.

It is also important to remember that a number of these serving personnel will be veterans in their own right, representing our Defence Force's deployments of the last few years.

I think that the opportunity for these younger veterans to travel to ANZAC Cove in the company of their elders, and role models, will make for a very special occasion for all parties.

Anniversary of Korean conflict

Of course the year 2010 will also be of exceptional significance to South Korea, as veterans of the Korean War from around the world gather with the Korean people in order to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the beginning of the Korean War on the 25th of June.

The Government of the Republic of Korea has already started assembling a programme with a wide range of events to commemorate this very special anniversary, with the intent of honouring and expressing gratitude to the Korean War veterans.

Around 4,700 New Zealanders served as part of Kayforce, along with a further 1,300 naval personnel who served on New Zealand frigates.

Forty-five of those New Zealanders fell during the conflict and many more were injured.

Korea in 2010 will be a special anniversary for New Zealanders too.

We are in discussion with the Government of the Republic of Korea regarding the commemorative programme and our nation's involvement.

Honouring service

It's very important to me personally, as I'm sure it is for all of you, that we as a nation continue to remember and honour the service and sacrifice of our veterans of all conflicts.

I was very interested to see that the theme of this year's RNZRSA National Council is 'Carrying the Flag to All Generations'.

I believe that 2010 will prove to be a vital opportunity for New Zealand to reflect on our proud history of service.

I am looking forward to the opportunity to share the New Zealand story of Gallipoli and Korea, along with all other theatres of New Zealanders' service, with younger generations.

By giving young New Zealanders an understanding of this history we will ensure that the lessons of courage and commitment exemplified by our service personnel continue to inspire new generations.

Poland visit

Last month, I had the honour of representing New Zealand at the international commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the outbreak of World War II in the city of Gdansk in Poland where, 70 years earlier, the Nazi invasion of Poland began.

It was a poignant place to recall the millions of lives lost, and hundreds of millions of lives impacted, by the nearly six years of conflict.

It truly was touching for me to experience first hand the enduring gratitude and appreciation of the Polish government and people, for the huge contribution made by New Zealand to their struggle.

The respect engendered by the sacrifices of the Second Expeditionary Force, like the First Expeditionary Force before them, has created international bonds which endure to this day.

Over 140,000 New Zealanders served overseas during the Second World War, more than 11,000 of whom became fatalities and many thousands more of whom were injured.

Those men and women paid the highest price for the peace and freedom of others.

Their courage and sacrifice has stood as an inspiration for the subsequent generations.

I know that your delegates here today represent the many instances in our country's history when New Zealanders have taken that stand.

Thank you, again, for inviting me to join you today.

It is always a pleasure to have the opportunity to meet those who are working hard for the benefit of our former servicemen and servicewomen.

The majority of the veterans population is ageing and it is important that we recognise their special needs.

It is vitally important that we continue to focus on improving the delivery of services and support.

I know that over the course of this conference there will be many issues and ideas for you discuss.

I'm also sure that your focus will remain, as it always has been, the exemplification of that wonderful grass roots RSA motto, "People helping people".

I wish you all the best for the rest of the conference.

Thank you all.