



Update on Provisions for All Veterans' and Current-Service Health & Welfare

Most of us are well aware of the long-fought battle to get adequate recognition of the issues and conditions faced and, in many cases, suffered by people who served in Vietnam. Focussed on this we may forget about other veterans in earlier conflicts and, for example, the 'unfortunate experiments' at Maralinga and at sea. And there are those who are yet to come.

The health and welfare issues faced by veterans are not limited to a 'moaning few' ex-Vietnam soldiers. This has, perhaps, distracted us from what has really happened.

The exposure of Vietnam vet's problems over the years has brought things to a head for all veterans and those who are in all Services today.

The Royal New Zealand Returned & Services Association and Ex-Vietnam Services Association have together gained recognition by the Government that urgent and positive action is needed to bring things both up-to-date and together, to head off the kind of issue we have faced in the past.

Three specific initiatives are now underway:

- A full review and probable change to the way VANZ and War Pensions Services (WPS) are set up and operate;
- Establishment of an Expert Panel (EP) similar to Australia's *Repatriation Medical Authority*, but retaining reverse onus of proof in favour of the veteran; and
- A complete review and rewrite of the War Pensions Act, last done in 1954.

VANZ is currently an agency within the Defence Force. Is it correctly placed?

Decisions made eventually by VANZ, within the Defence Force, are actioned eventually by WPS, which is an agency within the Ministry of Social Development.

This arrangement is confusing and daunting for vets who need answers or action but don't 'know' where to enquire (VANZ decides, WPS does, at the moment). It is also administratively clumsy, with conflicting considerations when decision-making.

The EP will deal with the known issues facing vets, but its greater value lies in its focus on all who are currently serving or will serve in the future. It will examine health issues well beyond the effects of direct exposure to 'shot and shell'.

The EP will be independent of existing Government bureaucracies and QUANGOs, such

These positive steps have come directly from long-term pressure by veterans, not just from Vietnam, but

Ministry of Health and ACC.

A team led RNZRSA is working with the Law Commission to rewrite the War Pensions Act. They have had their first meeting with Sir Geoffrey Palmer and the Law Commission.

Sir Geoffrey has described the Act as seriously outdated, administratively inefficient and difficult to understand. [*Sounds like the Electoral Finance Act comments.*] Everyone agrees it is high time it was rewritten.

New Zealand's war pensions legislation dates from 1866. In the ensuing 88 years to 1954 it was superseded six times and was subject to four additional Commissions of Inquiry. In the half-century since 1954 it has had no equivalent examination. So what is happening now is well overdue.

This will be no closed-shop process. The RNZRSA through the National Executive Committee and in parallel with the Affiliates Forum (comprising 20 other veteran and service organisations) has begun processes of internal consultation.

Consultation won't end there, however. The Law Commission is very determined indeed to include an active public consultation phase later this year. They will issue a comprehensive discussion document and invite submissions from any individual or group who wants to make one. They will also make themselves available for regional meetings with veterans to discuss the options.

While this is shaping up to be a good process there is a long way to go; it will certainly take time. Allowing for the need to incorporate the public consultation phase, the Law Commission expects to report to Cabinet in 2009. The rewritten Act will then enter the legislative programme 'as soon as feasible'.

Yes, that is some way ahead - but we should also remember that, had the project been retained by the standing bureaucracy, it would have taken twice as long. Giving the job to the Law Commission was a very smart move. All veterans are likely to see the results much more quickly.



from other conflicts and 'experiments'.

Apart from those longer-term events . . .

Free medical checks, Vietnam vets:

Preparations are almost complete for the Free Medical Checks for Vietnam veterans. The system will be trialled with a small number of veterans in each region during March 2008.

Register with VANZ!

Medical checks for Vietnam vets are only one reason for registering with VANZ.

Anyone with a service record, who needs service or support or simply wants information, needs to be registered with the agency so that they can locate - and maintain - your records.

We have just learnt that there are undisclosed benefits, which you may be entitled to. These include an annual grant from VANZ of \$10 per veteran attending our reunion, and special assistance from the Minister's discretionary fund in cases of real hardship.

OK, this may not be 'you', but there are people who die destitute, or whose lives are ruined by health

Medical checks will then be rolled out throughout New Zealand, and for New Zealand Vietnam veterans living in Australia.

Veterans can access their Free Medical Check by ensuring they are registered with VANZ.

or other issues beyond their control and resources. Do we stand by or step in? 'Welfare' is one of our Constitution's objectives.

A further reason to register is tracking living and deceased vets and their surviving family, a problem right now:

- Where are the Gunners we can't find? Living or dead? Not just Vietnam, but of any service;
- Families are distressed when mail arrives for a deceased vet - they did not know who to notify or how;
- How do we ensure people get the benefits they or, if deceased, their families are entitled to, unless they are in a current database.

It is in our best interests to ensure everyone is registered with VANZ.

Forms are available from www.veteransaffairs.mil.nz, or freephone 0800 4 VETERAN (0800 483 8372), or from overseas +64 4 495 2070.

I will pass on more information as it comes to hand.

Ubique

Mike Dakin

Secretary

18 February 2008