

Board Members and Members,

Bujari gamarruwa

Diyn Babana Gamarada Gadigal Ngura

In the language of the Gadigal, traditional owners of this land on which Government House stands, I convey my greetings as I acknowledge Gadigal Elders, past, present and emerging. And I pay my respects to the traditional owners of the Country from which you join this 104th RSL Congress.

I trust that as, hopefully, we are putting the worst of the pandemic behind us you are enjoying that first cup of coffee sitting down in a café and a wonderful sit-down meal with family and friends. Last year, when the pandemic first hit, I was not a proponent of using the word 'unprecedented'.

It was a difficult year and this year I feel has been more so, but to say it was unprecedented fails to give due thought or respect to what others had endured, particularly our defence personnel, veterans and those still serving, along with their families. What they have done and you have done, was not for themselves but for the nation, for all of us.

But there have been sadnesses, frustrations, loneliness, and as I have already said, difficulties and the impact is not to be underestimated. Indeed, the last two years can be seen as another time in our national and personal histories when we have needed to look outwards to see who needs help and how we can help.

It has also been a time when, to use another overused word, adaptability, has meant that the lockdown did not become a shut down and in that regard, the RSL did it so well as we look back with great pride on the many events and achievements of the year:

- The celebration of the Centenary of Air Force service at the ANZAC Memorial, the rededication of the RAAF Memorial Book and the flyover ... meeting in the words of Flight Lieutenant Mike Keaney 'TOT' - Time on Target;
- The resumption of the ANZAC Day Dawn service and the traditional march through city streets. It was a very proud moment for me to lead this parade;
- The respectful commemorative services: the Battle of the Coral and Java Seas; the Indigenous Veterans Commemoration Service; the Centenary Memorial Service of the Naval Association of Australia, and the quiet dignity of the Cenotaph on Remembrance Day;
- The phone and video calls and food parcels delivered by sub-Branches to vulnerable members during the pandemic and the support of the ADF in delivering care packages and other logistics support to communities, including in far western NSW;
- The work of RSL Auxiliaries to engage in fundraising, including mask making, at a most difficult time;
- RSL's support of the RAAF evacuation of Australian personnel and Afghan visa-holders from Afghanistan, and the follow up call for help to re-settle Afghan evacuees; and
- The generous \$2.1 million donation by RSL sub-Branches to RSL LifeCare, which will provide vital ongoing support to veterans.

Each of these speaks to the advocacy mission of RSL: “to stand for the interests of veterans and their families ... to maximise veteran wellness.” Together, they demonstrate what more than 340 RSL NSW sub-Branches can achieve together.

Wellness and wellbeing ... are not new concepts. Embedded within the RSL Charter, it is what the RSL has spent a century and more upholding ... whether of nation, State and community, of veterans or serving ADF and their families.

In September this year, President, Major-General Greg Melick couched it in national terms, saying: “For well over 100 years, the RSL has served its members, our nation’s veterans and their families and strongly supported the defence and wellbeing of Australia.”

Wellbeing has been a particular focus this year.

In a recent webinar for Veteran Health Week, former Army and RAAF officer Catherine McGregor shared a piece of advice about wellbeing that stood her in good stead in transitioning out of the defence force. She said, “I was very fortunate twice in my career to be a direct report to Sir Peter Cosgrove, who had a lovely pearl of wisdom, He said, ‘If you can, make your last day a good one, because you’ll probably carry it with you for the rest of your life’.

“If it is a bad one, there’s a way of actually making peace with that as well. It doesn’t have to be the miserable ghost at your table”

That wisdom is universal.

As we turn the page to a new year, the Afghanistan Inquiry, Australia’s withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide, may impact you. Take a moment to remember those words. Be conscious of recognising when you or someone near you needs help. To do so is a strength not a weakness.

Turn to your support network for help. RSL NSW has established a Royal Commission Office at ANZAC House to provide ongoing support to veterans in their engagement with the Royal Commission. I thank the President for RSL’s recent submission to the Commission, which incorporates input from you, the members.

How else do we move forward? One of the best ways is to look forward. The RSL NSW Strategic Plan 2021-2026 provides that forward-looking focus. Indeed, the purpose of the RSL as defined in the Plan is to, and I quote: “Support veterans and their families by connecting them to services to improve their wellbeing and assist former Australian and allied veterans and families by connecting them to their local community, through camaraderie, mateship, recreation, and commemorating service.”

With the sub-Branch at the centre of the RSL network, linking members to veteran and veteran family support services, including to other ex-service organisations, ultimately, the Plan’s success will be measured in the connectivity and wellbeing that follows.

In progressing these goals, a network of veteran health and wellbeing support is in the process of being established. Joining the new Veteran Wellbeing Centre in Nowra, will be another one in Wagga Wagga, with partner charity RSL LifeCare. Wellbeing Support Officers will be

trained across NSW, including on ADF bases, an outstanding new initiative that should be fully supported.

There was one other significant event this year, which goes to the heart of RSL - and that is its legacy of service. The life of the Duke of Edinburgh, a former Commander in the Royal Navy, highlights breadth of service ... to The Queen, whose Platinum Jubilee we celebrate next year, to Country and Commonwealth, to community, and to young people, through the Duke of Edinburgh International Awards.

Currently, 16% of RSL NSW members are aged 20-55 years. Less than 3% are under 39 years. Only 10% of members are women, yet 19.2 % of serving members of the Australian Defence Force are women.

So, there are opportunities here. Reaching out through your channels and new channels - social, digital, educational, cultural, and recreational - to younger veterans, to women and to young people generally; to invest in those relationships will be critical to the wellbeing and to the growth and invigoration of RSL into the future.

The community, the camaraderie and the commemoration that is so much a part of RSL is cherished by members and is part of our national story. Its strength and pride have enabled the RSL to flourish through nearly 105 years of service to veterans and their families.

To build on that strength and advocacy, to meet the needs of this and new generations of Australians, of veterans of conflicts and campaigns not yet foreseen; of ways of serving, living and communicating not yet imagined, that's each of our responsibilities and our task.

As I wish you a productive and successful RSL Congress, I will conclude by introducing our recording of the presentation of the Meritorious Service Medals at Government House. Please enjoy the presentation.