

Speech by Ray James – RSL NSW Congress 2022

Distinguished guest, delegates, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to Newcastle for our 2022 RSL New South Wales State Congress.

I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we now meet. I pay my respect to their elders past, present and emerging.

I wish to acknowledge all veterans who have served our nation and to those who have paid the ultimate sacrifice. I pay my respect to veterans past and present. I also commend those who are serving in our Australian Defence Force today and wish them all well in their duties in serving this great nation of ours.

We gather here today, face to face, for the first time since Congress 2019 in Albury. We have had to meet virtually for the past two years due to the Covid 19 pandemic. Since Congress 2021 a lot has happened. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, who served as our sovereign for so long, has passed.

Her Majesty was a well-respected Monarch who provided stability, calm and leadership to the Commonwealth. His Majesty King Charles III has now begun his reign over us, and we wish him all the best. We have a new Prime Minister of Australia and a new Premier of this great State. We also have a

new Board that is facing challenges like all Ex-Service Organisations that have an ageing and dwindling membership base.

The Australian Defence Force has also experienced challenges over the past few years. The ADF has had to adapt to a changing world. Our ADF has been deployed at record numbers within Australia in assisting during the Bushfires of 2019 and 2020 that impacted on our community in New South Wales and impacted many of our members. The ADF has had to deal with the floods of 2021 and 2022 that have devastated regional communities, including impacting on many of our members and sub-Branches. Finally, the Covid 19 pandemic saw our ADF being deployed to provide support to State and Federal Governments and our communities, seeing them deployed to our nursing homes and on the frontlines of our healthcare services.

Our ADF is also undertaking technological reform and upgrades that will see over \$200 billion spent on Defence over the coming decades. New threats have emerged, and what we have seen in the War in the Ukraine is that we need to ensure our Defence Force is prepared for traditional peer on peer warfare once again. Our Navy, Army and Air Force are required to prepare for more advanced and better equipped adversaries. It will see our ADF

developing advanced War Ships; advanced Nuclear-powered Submarines; Long range missile systems; advanced mobile lethal artillery and advanced armour capabilities; advanced fighter and bomber aircraft; advanced autonomous remote controlled weapon systems and advanced drones. Our cyber and electronic warfare capabilities are also being improved to combat new threats. We are also seeing new positions within the ADF being created to drive, support, use and maintain future weapons systems and platforms.

Our ADF, veterans and the ex-service community are monitoring the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide. The Royal Commission commenced in late 2021 and will continue into 2024.

Already the Interim Findings released by the Royal Commission indicate issues with claim processing times and the urgent need to get veterans access to health services, care services, wellbeing services and compensation.

We have heard evidence from veterans and their families at the Royal Commission that have been heart breaking and devastating. There has been evidenced of suicide, suicide attempts, sexual and physical abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, family violence, weaponisation of administrative processes, misuse of the military justice system, failure in transition services, failure by Ex-Service Organisations and failings by the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

We made a submission to the Royal Commission which highlighted the important role that your League can play in supporting veterans and their families. But to do that we need you all to support RSL NSW and work together as One League.

Your RSL is committed to ensuring we achieve our charitable objects and therefore by doing so we can help veterans and their families. We can only do that by providing funding and support to our veteran services division. Our service delivery is undertaken by Veteran Services that now sits under RSL LifeCare. In the past year we have had 88 RSL NSW sub-Branches and Auxiliaries provide funds along with RSL NSW to Veteran Services. We donated \$3.1 million to RSL LifeCare Veteran Services this year. This significant donation was boosted by sub-Branches such as Maroubra RSL sub-Branch, Canterbury-Hurlstone Park RSL sub-Branch, Doyalson-Wyee RSL sub-Branch, City of Bankstown RSL sub-Branch and Five Dock RSL sub-Branch, who were all able to provide over \$100,000 each as part of this collective donation.

The funds donated to Veteran Services resulted in over \$800,000 in financial assistance, including \$485,000 in disaster assistance, being given to assist

veterans and their families in crisis. It assisted 177 homeless veterans; helped lodge 3106 DVA claims for 944 veterans; support 188 new Veterans' Review Board appeals and representation of 39 veterans at full VRB hearings; 279 Alternate Dispute Resolution mediations held; assisted 57 veterans and their partners with employment assistance; and guided 60 veterans through horse handling and riding courses facilitated by the SPUR Equine Program near Picton. We also received \$122,244 from Woolworths via our Poppy Appeal token sales program. Every dollar counts and has been used to help veterans and their families.

On behalf of the Board, I wish to thank all of those 88 sub-Branches and Auxiliaries that decided to help all veterans and show the true ethos of 'One RSL, One League' that was what our organisation was founded on.

In money and property assets RSL New South Wales has over \$718 million.

With 85% of that held and controlled by individual sub-Branches. There is \$37 million held by sub-Branches in Cash Accounts. \$110 million held by sub-Branches in Term Deposit Accounts. \$298 million held by sub-Branches in Investment Accounts and \$165 million worth of sub-Branch property assets.

This is a significant amount of capital. Is it being used effectively? Do we have

sub-Branches with ageing property assets that will need significant repair and some that are losing value? Is an ageing building really the best way to tie up RSL members assets? Does \$718 million across various investment portfolios or in multiple ageing property the best way to hold funds for the benefit of veterans and their families?

Can we seriously look in the eye of a homeless veteran, a jobless veteran, a veteran in serious need of care, or a veterans family living below the poverty line and say “Well we can’t help you financially or give you any support. But hey you can come to our monthly meeting on a Monday at 10am and have a feed and a beer”.

The League did not begin in 1916 as an organisation that sits back and does nothing. It was not created to be a once-a-month place for formal meetings and for people to argue over internal RSL Constitutional issues. It began to help veterans returning from the Great War. It began so that Government policy that helps injured veterans could be created. It began as a way to link veterans to support and services.

Somehow and somewhere along our path we have become an organisation running properties and holding formal meetings that provide no support or assistance to veterans. Sure, many of our members enjoy the meetings and are able to catch up with friends and have a decent meal once a month. But can we do social engagement better? Is the Australian Barbeque a better way of reducing social isolation and having a yarn with your members? Is undertaking physical activities, such as a simple walk along the beach, or down the main street of your country town a better way to help veterans? Maybe it's a day at the Country Races? Or catching up at a local footy derby?

We have had over 1600 people join our RSL via the new online system this year. I have spoken to many of those younger veterans who have attended a sub-Branch meeting. Many are not going to return. Some of the reasons are to do with how our sub-Branches conduct meetings, the time and day and also the lack of focus on broader veteran community issues. Some have said they were disappointed that sub-Branches have had no motions or discussion about the most significant Royal Commission in the past 100 years. The Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide is a significant opportunity for our membership and sub-Branches to get involved. I note that the motions

for Congress 2022 have little to no mention of the urgent crisis of veteran suicide.

More serving members and veterans have died from suicide in the last 20 years, than have any of the conflicts our ADF has fought in during that time. Yet no delegate has come to Congress 2022 with a motion aimed at helping our young men and women who are taking their own lives. Whilst we sit on \$718 million, we have serving and former serving members attempting suicide and sadly many passing away. It is not too late as the Royal Commission into Defence, and Veteran Suicide has extended public submissions to October 2023 and the Commission will continue to 2024.

It should be no surprise that the ADF and DVA are a focus of the Royal Commission. But also, Ex-Service Organisations are as well. The Royal Commission, like the 2019 Productivity Commission Report into Veterans, will likely recommend a new independent Statutory Oversight Body that will not only look at the ADF and DVA, but also at ESOs, including sub-Branches. RSL NSW and your Board has undertaken the necessary reforms and governance restructure that ensures we are prepared. But what about sub-Branches? Are your Executives and Trustees doing the right thing? Are they ensuring that your assets are being spent and allocated in accordance with

the RSL NSW Constitution and relevant Standard Operating Procedures? Can you keep up with the regulation and compliance that will only get tougher once the Royal Commission delivers its recommendations.

The Board and RSL New South Wales are committed to the Strategic Plan and during Congress you will be provided an update of what we have achieved and what we are planning to achieve. The Strategic Plan is about RSL NSW ensuring it is achieving its charitable purpose and obligations. We know that the League is the largest ESO in New South Wales and so we have a greater responsibility to look after veterans and their families. Other ESOs are starting to dwindle and have requested to join the League. We saw the Legion in 2022 come across to us. We have smaller ESOs such as local Vietnam Veteran Groups and National Serviceman Groups seeking out mergers with local sub-Branches. We are also seeing sub-Branches unable to fill positions and having to become Chapters of a larger sub-Branch. Mergers are a reality of the world we live in. Within the next few years, we will see sub-Branches having to come together and form super sub-Branches. A Chapter can still conduct local commemorative services and events, but you can hand over administration to a larger sub-Branch. We have to put aside our pride and old regional clashes and work together as one.

Our Constitution states that to form a sub-Branch their must be at least ten service members. How many sub-Branches still have at least ten service members? If you cannot maintain ten service members or more than perhaps you should become a Chapter of a nearby sub-Branch or merger with another small sub-Branch.

Failure to merge and failure by sub-Branches becoming Chapters will see many sub-Branches cease to exist. You cannot hope that a recruitment drive will save your sub-Branch. Current serving ADF members and veterans today have to work longer and do not have the time to fill positions on a sub-Branch and attend monthly meetings. Other State RSLs like Tasmania have realised this. Yes, we are a membership-based organisation, but our membership is falling, and newer members will not stop this. People today engage ESOs and charities differently. Yes, they may become old like us and come along to a sub-Branch meeting when they can retire at the age of 70. But by then many sub-Branches will cease to exist.

Numerous surveys and discussions with younger members and veterans is that they join or support organisations that do something, not just having a meeting. As human beings we are fundamentally driven to do what is good.

We need to look at modern ways in which we can do good for veterans and their families. Some sub-Branches have started to invite family members along to meetings or the meal afterwards. For members with young families this is good. By including veterans and their families we can ensure that the League is front and centre in family life. Many Legatees I spoke to say they support Legacy because they came in to help when their father died. Well, that father was a member of a sub-Branch before they died. So where is the RSL or sub-Branch? Does it stop a Poppy Service at the funeral or the payment of a funeral? Or should we continue to support the former members family?

The District Councils also need to take a more active role. You are in the regions and have close access and oversight of our sub-Branches. The District Council Executives need to be more active and engage their sub-Branches.

The District Council is there to support sub-Branches. RSL NSW has employed a District Council Support Person and it is hoped that more will be employed to help all Districts.

From the Board to the individual member, we need to remember why we are here. We owe it to our founders and those who walked in our shoes before. We all want the League to last beyond our lifetime.

Since I was born in 1949 the League has been part of my life. My father was a Life Member of the RSL, I am a Life Member of the RSL, my son, son-in-law and grandson are also members of the RSL. My wife, daughter and granddaughter are also now members of the RSL. You could say that the RSL is in my DNA, and it will be carried on by my family.

We need to all work together to ensure that the League will continue to flourish, provide support to veterans and their families and to be the primary voice of veterans. We have a significant membership base still and with over \$718 million in assets gives us the ability to do amazing things to actually help veterans and their families.

As the community has opened up in the post-Covid world, we need to get back out into our communities. We need to conduct commemorative services, run events, engage with veterans and families and also fundraise. Regardless, if your sub-Branch has \$30 million or \$10,000, we need to be

undertaking fundraising. What is stopping us from growing our asset pool bigger and ensuring we can fund more Veteran Services? We cannot just sit back and say, “Oh we can just run our sub-Branch off our investment portfolio”. We need to be out doing more, because getting out in the community and fundraising shows the community that the RSL sub-Branches actually care. It tells the community that we are still here and helping those veterans and families in need. It is about getting the RSL brand out there and showing what we can do and how we can help. I also ask that sub-Branches without an RSL Auxiliary consider forming one. The Auxiliaries were established as the fundraising arm of the League. Auxiliaries are open to both women and men. We should be encouraging non-service members in our community to join the Auxiliaries as they can support the sub-Branches in many ways. The Auxiliaries should be larger than our sub-Branches. The Auxiliaries are for people who want to support the RSL and to ensure that veterans and their families are being provided support. The future of our League will rely upon the great work and fundraising of our Auxiliaries. If your sub-Branch does not have an Auxiliary than it should consider starting one now. Having a strong, active and healthy Auxiliary will ensure the sub-Branches continue to survive. My challenge to those who don’t fundraise and have large assets, is to think how can we grow what we have? Can we give

more to Veteran Services to ensure we are actually helping as many veterans and their families as we can?

We need to show all levels of Government what we can do and how we can help. How can we as RSL NSW go to Government and say, “Please Minister can we have some more money?”. Is it right that taxpayers should have to pay \$5 million towards a veterans hub? Couldn’t we as one fund multiple veterans hubs around New South Wales? What is stopping sub-Branches investing along with RSL NSW in developments that will house a veteran hub and also generate returns of investment via commercial or residential leases? Which sub-Branch out there wants to stand beside RSL NSW and start having an impact on saving the lives of veterans?

We would like to have at least ten veteran hubs across New South Wales.

That can be places for veterans and their families to come and access services. It can be a meeting place for sub-Branches to undertake meetings, activities and events. It would cost at least \$50 million to have these ten veteran hubs. RSL NSW and RSL LifeCare can support and sustain these hubs with the assistance of our sub-Branches. These hubs would be your hubs and together we would be delivering on what our founders wanted for the

League. \$50 million out of \$718 million is not that much to ask for. But to achieve that we must all work together and we require courage, leadership, and teamwork from our larger asset sub-Branches to put these vision into reality. Help us, to help veterans and their families.

Using a military analogy, it is like the Board and RSL NSW are in the trenches with limited resources and the sub-Branches are thousands of miles away and refusing to fund our fight against the enemy. Some sub-Branches do give great support, but there are many more that can assist in this effort. We cannot continue to sit in isolated castles across NSW and hope that RSL NSW and the Board carry all the weight and load. We should all be putting into this “war” effort”.

I am calling you all to arms. I am calling you to stand beside me, the Board and RSL NSW to support us in our efforts to deliver better services and support to all veterans and their families. I am calling you all in this time of crisis for veterans across Australia to make an impact and to do more with what we have. As One RSL, as One League we can make a difference.

The 2021 Census reported that there were 581,139 people in Australia who were serving in the military or who had served. In New South Wales there were over 174,000 people that identified as having served or still serving. Yet RSL NSW has just over 20,000 members. That means there are at least over 150,000 veterans living within our communities. That is 150,000 veterans who need our support and assistance. There may be many reasons why they will not join. But our charitable purpose is not for “members of the RSL” but for veterans and families in our communities. If we do more in supporting veterans in our communities, then they will join or at least come along to events and activities. We need veterans, their families and community to know what the RSL stands for and what we are about.

I have enjoyed serving as your first ‘one member, one vote’ President. I have another year to go in my current term. I have visited many of you over the past year and have been welcomed with open arms. You have shown me and my wife, Pauline, great support, compassion, warmth and laughter. Pauline and I thank all of you for your gratitude and we both look forward to seeing many of you again in 2023.

I want all members who volunteer to know that without you we would not exist. Unlike other ESOs we are a member-based organisation, a grassroots community that exists to help veterans and their families. We should never forget that this League is about you. The members are the life and blood of this organisation. Many of you volunteer long hours to ensure your sub-Branch is functioning and supporting your members and veterans and their families in our communities. We have amazing volunteers who make our organisation better than any other ESO. We volunteer to give and help, not to take or benefit. We volunteer to help veterans and their families. We volunteer so that others do not go without. We volunteer because we still want to serve. We volunteer because we care about others and want to help.

At times it may appear that the Board or RSL NSW is against you, we are not. We are trying to help you all and make sure that we do not fail in our mission.

Finally, I wish to conclude by reminding all what the RSL is here for.

Our Purpose – is to 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 to them to their local community, through camaraderie, mateship, recreation, and commemorating service.

Our Vision – is that By 2026 every veteran in NSW knows what the RSL stands for, what it does, and wants to be involved as a member.

Our motto is One RSL—working together, delivering locally.

Our Mission is to respect, support and remember our veterans and their families. This mission is delivered through a number of bodies, including:

- **The RSL NSW network of sub-branches, housing local services and welcoming spaces in nearly 350 small towns and suburbs right across New South Wales.**
- **Veterans Services, our partner charity, responsible for direct welfare to veterans and their families in times of injury, illness, or crisis. All of its services are free of charge.**
- **RSL LifeCare, our partner charity, providing aged care and retirement services to veterans and their families.**

- **Australian Forces Overseas Fund (AFOF), offering services to currently serving Defence personnel overseas.**

In conclusion, I hope all Delegates will participate in this Congress in a respectful and professional manner. It is your Congress, and we encourage you all to participate. I want you all to think about how we can do more to help veterans and their families. I want you to think about those veterans who are living below the poverty line; those veterans who are in crisis; and those veterans who are contemplating suicide as we meet here at Congress.

I have caught up with many delegates already and I will certainly catch up with many more delegates during the remainder of Congress.

Lest We Forget.