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The Voice of New South Wales Serving and Ex-Service Men and Women



Questions We Can't Avoid A CHAPLAIN'S VIEW



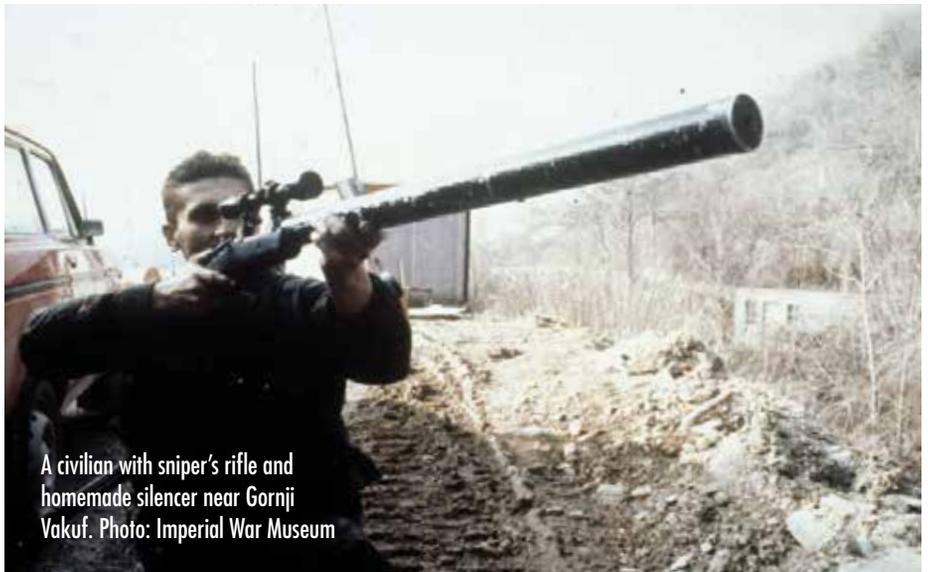
“Lest We Forget”

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NEGOTIATING MINEFIELDS IN BOSNIA 1997

An Australian's assignment with British forces in a war zone

The break-up of the former Republic of Yugoslavia in 1992 resulted in a massive social and political upheaval in its territories of Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia and Montenegro. War was inevitable as old political, ethnic and religious rivalries resurfaced. The United Nations stepped in and Australia agreed to contribute specialist officers and personnel to the NATO-led Yugoslav Stabilisation Force and Kosovo Force. Scott Seccombe, recently elected as an RSL State Councillor, was one of those soldiers assigned to assist in clearing mines and monitoring the ceasefire.



A civilian with sniper's rifle and homemade silencer near Gornji Vakuf. Photo: Imperial War Museum

I served in the ADF for 8 ½ years as a Combat Engineer and was lucky enough to be one of around 180 Australian soldiers deployed to the former Yugoslavia or Bosnia Herzegovina. My story isn't necessarily uncommon for the 90s, but for me it is certainly a memorable one!

I joined the army in 1991. After completing my training I was posted to 3rd Field Troop 1 FD SQN 2/3 FER Holsworthy, Sydney. That later changed to 1 CER. I was fortunate enough to go overseas a number of times. My first was to Rifle Company Butterworth Malaysia in 1994 with C COY 3 RAR where we spent many nights sleeping in hammocks under our hoochies in the jungle, dodging mosquitos, snakes and scorpions and having orangutans swinging above us.

A year later I was on exchange to the UK for five weeks with B COY 5/7 RAR. I was given the privilege of standing guard on the front gate of Edinburgh Castle, which I will always consider a personal highlight, and was able to work with other British Engineers on Salisbury Plains where I had my first introduction to

Copehill Down, a FIBUA Training Village (Fighting In Built Up Areas).

In 1997 I was selected to go on exchange again, on Long Look. I couldn't believe my luck, I was the only one from my unit. It was another great opportunity to work with the British Forces. I was also informed that during my six month post to 22 Engineer Regiment I was to deploy to Bosnia Herzegovina with SFOR (Stabilisation Force) to work with the mine monitoring teams and conduct other engineer tasks like demolitions and minor construction. This required clearance from the Australian High Commission. The hardest task I faced was telling my wife that I was heading to a war zone that had seen some of the worst genocide since World War II. My wife was very understanding and her response was that of an army wife who accepted my job as a soldier. She simply said "that's what you do for a living, Scott".

I flew into Brize Norton with the Australian contingent in early July 1997 and the following day joined the unit. I remember thinking 'god what am I in for?' During my first week I was on the range getting acquainted and qualified with

their weapons. I think I fired more rounds from more weapons there than I had in 12 months in Australia. It really showed that the British Army was an operational army, and they trained accordingly.

We headed to Pembroke in Wales for a week of live fire. My training in Australia included unarmed combat so they decided to get me to run a stand during our first part of training. I took up the task with gusto and put together some nasty training techniques for the crew which they all loved. I even got to strangle the CO by his own request!

We got back to the unit and I was able to get to Edinburgh for a couple of days leave to see the Edinburgh Military Tattoo then back to Tidworth to continue training. I was loving it. My next task was pre-deployment training for Bosnia held at Copehill Down where I had been two years prior. The initial thrill of seeing Stonehenge soon passed as I got to see it every day, twice a day, for four days. The training was intense and challenging, everything from first aid to patrolling, mine drills and working with interpreters. We covered the mine threat in detail as well as intelligence briefs.

Shortly after returning from the pre-deployment training, 8 troop headed off to Canada to a place called BATUS (British Army Training Unit Suffield) on the prairie approximately 40 miles out of Medicine Hat. This place was as barren as anything I had ever seen, with rolling plains of nothing. We were here to conduct an exercise called Medicine Man 5, an all arms exercise culminating in a live fire activity. Now this was no ordinary unit, this was an actual British Army posting to what was known as OPFOR (Opposing Force). It was an actual battle group with tanks, engineers and infantry as well as every other corp. During the training phase we were let loose on the demolitions ranges.... again, no expense spared.

From there we then went into the highly anticipated battle group exercises against the OPFOR. The troop commander put me in with the recon sergeant as his signaller; now anyone who knows me and radios would know that I'm crap at ratel and hate codes. So now I had only two days to learn their code system and get up to speed on my ratel. The next week was spent with the mad Australian entertaining the battle group on the radio and the poor sergeant pulling his hair out and laughing at the same time. The last phase was the highlight of Canada, being part of the live fire with the battle group: Challenger tanks, Warriors, live bridge demolitions and the giant Viper 1000 kg of explosives used to create a lane in minefields. I was given the option to be in the tank that fired it or on the hill 1.5 km away. I realised I would probably never see this again in real time so I opted for the hill. The blast, shockwave and heat could be felt where I was standing at the observations point.

From Canada, I had a quick three days' turn-around in the UK where I got my admin sorted and changed desert gear back to DPM camo and was packed for deployment to Bosnia.

I spent a day at the base in Split, getting issued rounds and morphine that was



A house riddled with bullet holes and destroyed in the war

carried in my map pocket in case I hit a mine, and my flak jacket had chest and back plates installed. Things were starting to get very real. We were briefed and given our ID cards. During the briefs we were given up-to-date information on the threats that we could encounter. Something that still resonates in my mind was the statement, "If you are captured you will be considered a hostage, not a POW. They don't play by the Geneva convention here!" Hearing that was a bit of a wake-up call and reality check.

The following day we were off to Mrkonjić Grad. As we approached the Bosnian border it hit home that I was actually doing this. I had only ever seen news reports and heard stories from other soldiers, but now I had arrived and was doing this for real. I was being deployed to a war zone!

We travelled all day through villages and countryside that had been ravaged by war. Everywhere we looked was covered either by bullet holes or rubble, and land mine indicators were everywhere. Indicators varied from proper mine signs to mere empty plastic bottles on sticks.

We finally reached our destination. A heavily fortified camp with armed soldiers, barbed wire, rock gabions and armoured walls. Now this is what I envisaged a fortified camp to look like! During my



time there I stayed in a corimec, which is a prefabricated building similar to the containers they use in Afghanistan. They were heated and comfortable. The camp had a mess hall and well fitted out gym with a boozier upstairs where they sold a selection of imported beers or the local drop. The local beer was called 'Pevo'. I was told to buy two, scull the first one and then drink the next one as normal. With two beers in hand I had a sip and it was so vile I quickly realised what they meant, so I sculled the first one, and then had a sip of the next. It didn't taste too bad after that. I think the first one killed all my taste buds.

The next part of my adventure was In Gornji Vakuf, south east of Mrkonjić

Grad. The base there had a mounted infantry battalion and all their Warrior armoured personnel carriers were lined up and covered in case it snowed. It was a hive of activity. I worked with the mine monitoring teams for a week or so, depending on the weather. One thing that stayed in my mind was the state of devastation this town was in. It was literally annihilated. Everywhere we looked, buildings were demolished and debris and rubble remained strewn on the ground. Even the local nightclub had been gutted and god knows how many innocent people had lost their lives. This town had seen some terrible fighting and had some horrific human rights violated. A memory I will never forget.

Next, we were off to meet the EOD technicians and Croatian Army representatives at one of their forward positions. The area was riddled with land mines and we didn't dare step off the road for fear of losing a foot or hitting something.

Our interpreter relayed our task. The Croats just nodded and pointed into the bush and off we went. The language barrier only added to the general unease and to say I was a bit nervous would be an understatement. We moved past a couple of makeshift bunkers through two anti-personnel minefields to the

next area to be cleared. I was stepping in the footsteps of the bloke in front, taking no chances. There were trip wires all over the place, and at one stage one of the mad Croats pulled one then just started laughing; I was looking in disbelief! The Croats went into the minefield then returned a couple of minutes later indicating that there were no mines and that they had been moved to another spot, which was common practice. The sergeant looked at me and said 'you coming?' and off we went into the minefield that apparently had been moved. As we moved forward with the sergeant in front, I caught sight out of the corner of my eye a trip wire and yelled STOP. It had just caught on the sergeant's boot. We had a look and traced it; finding nothing we moved on till the sergeant was happy. It doesn't sound like much but we were both a bit tense because only a few months earlier there had been an incident where one of the clearance teams hit a missed mine, so a trip wire was a reason for concern.

That night it snowed and this halted any clearing operations for the next few days. This was because the ice and melting snow could move the mines and make them unstable. So I met up with the EOD Techs and was able to head to a make-shift range and help dispose of a heap of captured

munitions. Nothing like blowing things up!

I then moved back up to Mrkonjić Grad for a couple of days, then headed north through Banja Luka where the main British HQ was. One thing I remember was driving through places and seeing mine indicators in people's front yards. This proved to me just how desperate people can be to protect what's theirs. We headed further north, climbing so high the cloud settled below us. It was where a radio retransmission site was and we had called into an operational one on our way up to drop off mail.

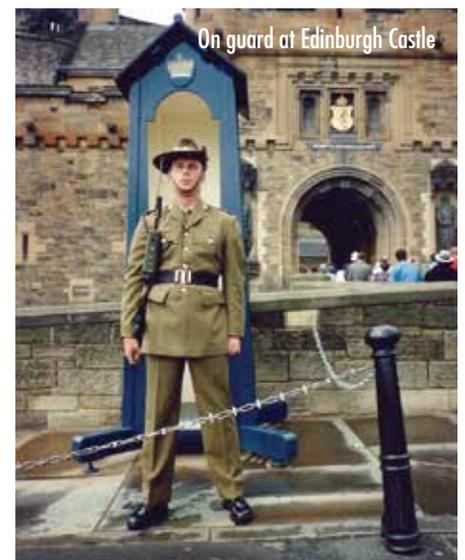
I returned to Mrkonjić Grad and shortly after headed down to the city of Mostar to have a look about and then back to Split. I returned all my rounds and the plate carrier and morphine that thankfully wasn't needed and spent a couple of days unwinding and checking out the PX store.

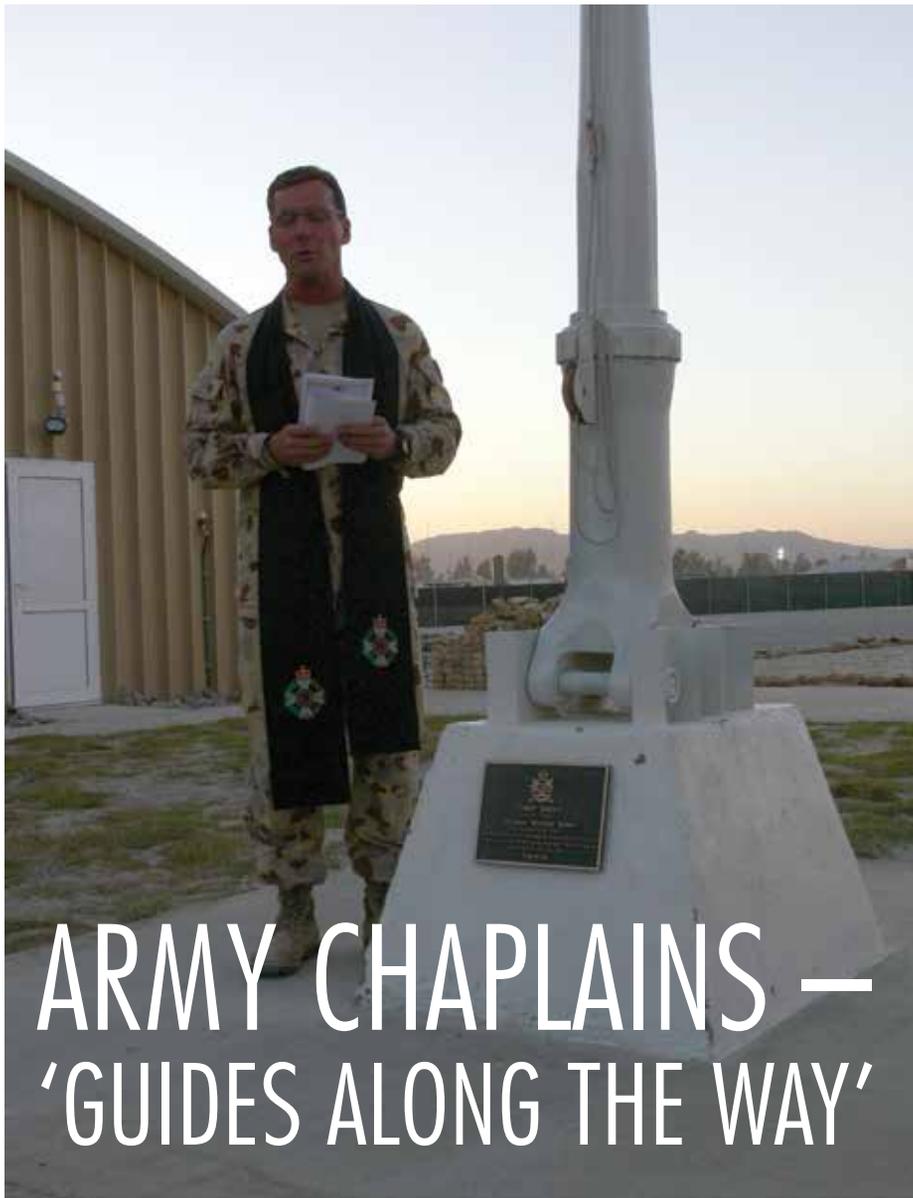
I got back to the UK and had 24 hours to be back in London where I was able to meet up with my wife for a few days before returning to base, then back to Brize Norton and home.

It's now been 20 years since this adventure. The one thing that I do remember was my wife and young son meeting me at Richmond RAAF Base, the best thing after being away from my family for nearly 7 months and in some pretty hairy areas.



Warrior armoured personnel carriers covered against snow at Gornji Vakuf





ARMY CHAPLAINS — 'GUIDES ALONG THE WAY'

By Rev'd Rob Sutherland

Chaplaincy is about much more important things than religion. It's about meaning and purpose and life and death and joy and hope and feeling good about ourselves and grief and peace and guilt and eternity. Chaplaincy is about life, life in all its fullness, light and hope in darkness and sadness and lots in between. I have had two great Army careers, 20 years as an Infantry Officer and 20 years as a Chaplain. I often get asked what an Army Chaplain does.

Hey, Padre, if the Bible says 'thou shalt not kill,' how can you be in the Army?

People somehow have the idea that chaplains spend our time preaching or Bible bashing. My theory is if you are going to try bashing someone with a Bible then use a really big heavy one with a really hard cover so they take notice – the little camouflaged ADF Bibles are way too light and soft for effective Bible bashing. Bible bashing doesn't work for most soldiers. I need to be confident in my own relationship with God (including the Bible) but my

role isn't to tell soldiers what they should believe. I have no right to tell anyone else what to believe and Australian soldiers wouldn't accept it if I tried.

So, Padre, why don't you carry a weapon when you come out with us?

Some soldiers see the chaplain as a good luck charm – 'always good to have the Padre on your helicopter.' Some see us a safety valve – I get lots of people coming into my office just letting off steam, venting, shouting, crying, drinking coffee, eating chocolate. Some see us as a waste of time, money, rations and resources yet every unit in the Brigade in which I work wants more chaplaincy support.

The first thing a chaplain has to do is 'be there.' My children describe this as my excuse for not growing up; my grandchildren are jealous of me being allowed to play in the mud and to paint my own face. Chaplains don't have to do everything that soldiers do; I can't be a sniper, loadmaster, JTAC, crew commander, pilot, nurse, legal officer, interrogator, diver or any sort of operator. My job is to be with all these people when they do what they do or when they train for it. I have to get cold and wet and hot and dusty and tired. I have to carry my pack and put up my hutchie, dig a shell scrape. Chaplains need to be with soldiers when they want to ask their questions. Sometimes, 'being there' is beside a hospital bed or in court.

Being there is no good if we aren't open. I don't have the answers to most of the questions or issues but I can usually help clarify the question or help define the problem. If people just need to let off steam then I don't need to have answers; if people just need to see things from a different perspective then I don't need answers; most people have the answers to their own questions within them, they just need help refining the question.

Trust is important. Medical Officers have been moved out of units and

Psychologists work at Brigade or Garrison level; the chaplain is perhaps the last source of support or wisdom or guidance within the unit but outside the chain of command. We also work with both members and families. Trust is hard-won and easily lost. Reporting everything I hear to the RSM or CO would probably be the quickest way to lose trust; I often help soldiers get the system to work.

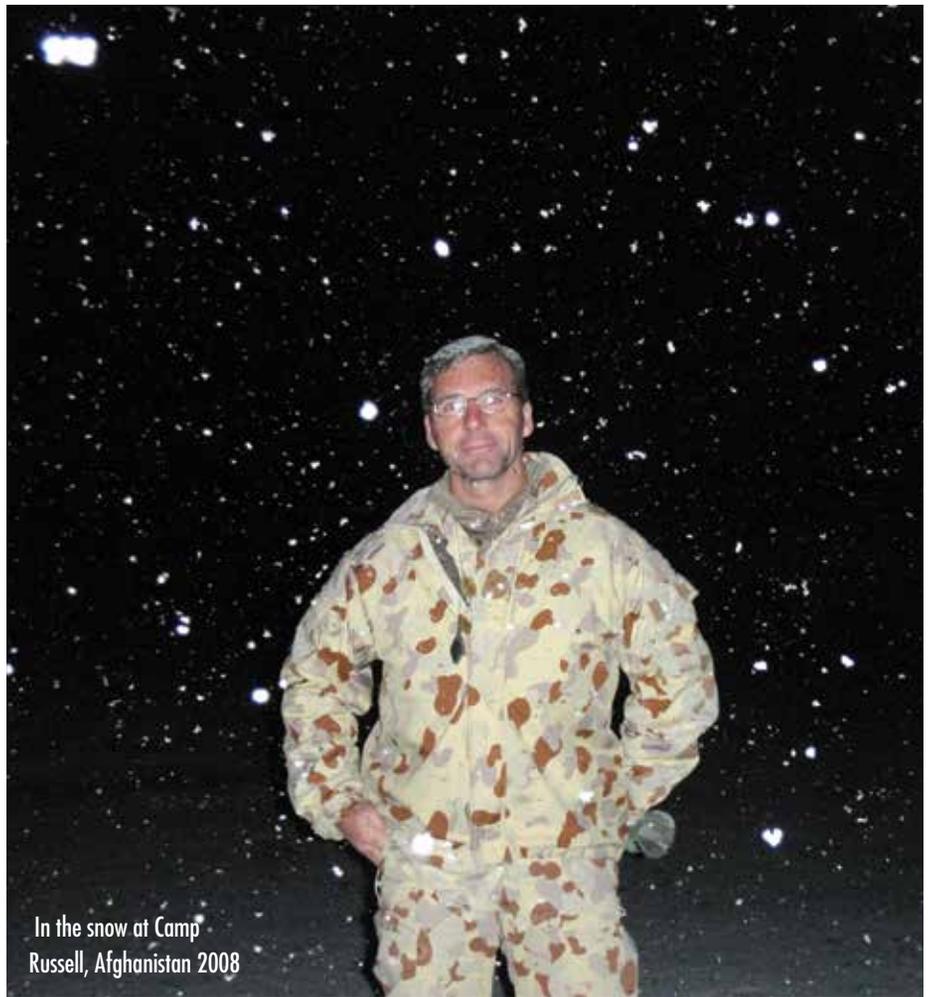
Chaplains need to know their own stuff. I need to know about health and mental health and DFDA and DVA and VVCS and DCO and JHC. Often the chaplain is the guide to help soldiers choose the right resources. I also need to know what these organisations can't do and where what I can offer fits in.

So, Padre, I'm seeing my doctor and psychiatrist and psychologist and I'm taking all the pills; why do I still want to kill myself?

Chaplains get invited into the darkness of people's lives. Most of the time this isn't an invitation to tell people about my god. Usually people are looking for someone who can explain their god. Effective suicide prevention needs physical, mental and spiritual care. I help with all three but I have to be the expert on spirit soul or character health. Chaplains help people look at their reasons for dying and to see and to move towards their reasons for living. Most of this comes from our personal belief structure.

Chaplains have all studied theology; this includes study of Holy Books like the Bible but we learn how to talk with people about what they believe and how this affects their lives. Ours is the field of meaning making and helping people find answers to the questions, 'Why?' I help soldiers find their own answers which always come from their own beliefs.

Going to war or deploying on operations or training or just being in the Army can hurt. We can get physically



In the snow at Camp Russell, Afghanistan 2008

and mentally and spiritually damaged. Brigadier Mick Moon said, "We all come home with dents in the Soul." Chaplains deal with these. Psychiatrists and psychologists have defined these dents as Moral Injuries. Chaplains are the ones who can help when we feel betrayed and abandoned or guilty and ashamed or unloved, unlovable or that there is no point to life, life is not worth living.

"So, Padre, I have to go meet with a local village Mullah, should I ask him about Islam?" – "Why don't you try asking him about his children?" Understanding our own beliefs is the key to understanding other people's beliefs. Chaplains have the privilege of doing both of these. The Army has a responsibility for defining how we should act and behave or perform; many groups and people will tell us what they expect our values to be; chaplains can talk

about how we choose which of our many and often competing values to apply in particular circumstances through looking at our belief structures.

They shall grow not old as we that are left grow old.

Some words are special but sometimes words aren't enough. Things like funerals and ramp ceremonies and memorial services help us to remember and honour people in ways that have spiritual meaning. We might say different prayers or have different beliefs, thoughts and memories in the silence or when the bugle plays but Chaplains get to lead and to speak into this sacred space. We don't always get it right but sometimes there is no right; sometimes there are no right words and no ceremony or ritual which can fix things.

I also get to ask questions, questions that others don't often ask.

Where do you go to refresh your soul?

This isn't a discussion about having a soul; it's about knowing what refreshes us and of course doing it. It could be a place like a beach or an activity like riding or being with certain people. It could be with thousands at the football or a concert; could be alone with a book or a great view; could be on a bike or a board. It could be playing with children or snuggling with a partner; might involve coffee or a beer or a BBQ. It is how we uniquely connect with what we believe makes us good in a good world. We all need to be able to refresh our soul.

What happens to you or your mates or to the enemy when they get killed?

Chaplains help people find answers to questions that we can't avoid. To be resilient, soldiers need answers about death and dying; it is our business; too late to think about it when you already have a sight picture. Chaplains

explain the mechanics of funerals and repatriation and family care but we also help people understand the implications of their beliefs.

So, Padre, who can I talk to when I get out?
Perhaps our biggest chaplaincy weakness is lack of equivalent support from the community or within DVA or VVCS. During our previous wars civilian priests, ministers and pastors joined the Army as chaplains and at the end of the war or their tour of duty went back to the community just as the soldiers did. In their home towns, they joined the RSL or other groups. They had been there; they understood and they cared for veterans. We no longer have this network. Veterans serve within or discharge into communities where local churches and ministers don't understand their issues. There are some terrible stories of, probably well meaning, clergy

and churches who have treated veterans and their families appallingly. DVA and VVCS and Medicare might provide great health and mental health care but at their time of greatest need for meaning and purpose and healing we have no civilian chaplains for veterans' dents in the soul.

Chaplain Rob Sutherland, CSC joined the ARA in 1974 and graduated from OCS Portsea as an Infantry Officer in 1976. After great postings, particularly in Battalions in Brisbane he studied theology over seven years while still serving. In 1998, he became an Anglican chaplain. He has deployed as a chaplain on operations overseas seven times. Rob currently works in an Anglican parish in Sydney and leads Warrior Welcome Home a church based program for veterans and families stjohnsgordon.org.au/warrior-welcome-home/ or contact revrob@ozemail.com.au