

**VETERANS AID (FORMALLY THE EX SERVICES FELLOWSHIP)**  
**THE LEADING CHARITY FOR HOMELESS VETERANS IN THE UK**

Veterans Aid (VA) is an independent registered charity, with its joint offices and drop-in centre in Buckingham Palace Road, close to Victoria. This is in the centre of the Charity's "front line" in London. They also run New Belvedere House, a hostel in Limehouse. VA exists to help those who are homeless, or fear they are about to become homeless. Their aim is to provide **Immediate Action** for those who contact them, and this contrasts with most of the larger and more familiar charities who can take days or weeks over initial administration before delivering anything.

There are apparently 5.5 million Veterans currently living in the UK. Most of them have retired to a full and successful future career and life, so contrary to the impression given in the media the number who develop serious problems is actually quite small, but within that group problems can become very severe, and it is this acute group who desperately need the support only VA provides.

Case histories reveal that those who do not settle after discharge begin to feel an increasing sense of social isolation. They find that "nobody understands" and this can quickly lead to some level of chemical dependency, primarily alcohol. This in turn can lead quickly to severe financial problems that threaten the structure of the individual's life, with rapid alienation from friends and family. Typically, this isolation will trigger or increase physiological problems, which will bring the individual into contact with "Mental Health", the weakest part of the NHS system. There they describe being "fobbed off with the minimum that they can get away with". The NHS cannot provide residential care for mental health patients until they are sectioned, and this is rare at this stage; so the individual will exist in a no-mans land, in which there seems nobody to turn to, and they will begin to live rough on the streets, begging for the occasional charity meal and overnight hostel place. They are now very vulnerable, and every ounce of effort will be directed simply to day to day survival. Degraded, ashamed and miserable, the downward spiral increases until they hear of VA, (usually via the "spotters" that cheap hotels, homeless refuges etc have), and can be persuaded to present themselves at Buckingham Palace Road.

Once they arrive at the Office, Veterans will be welcomed with a friendly but firm attitude. They will be cleaned up, issued with an appropriate set of new fitted clothes, and interviewed with respect by one of the team. Veterans have remarked on the recognisable military style of the office, the fact that they are interviewed by an ex Officer, or Warrant officer, who recognise them and their problems, understands, offers them hope and a rapid feeling of comfort, warmth and well-being within a familiar brisk organisation. The VA axioms are "**Immediate Action**", designed to move them "**From Welfare to Well being**" in as short a time as possible. From Buckingham Palace Road they will be offered a place at the Hostel; and once stabilised, the specialised help for their particular problems can begin. The average Hostel stay is eight months, and the results remarkable.

VA receives income from several of the traditional service charities, either directly as an annual Grant, or indirectly, eg SSAFA funds one of the two Social workers. Other Service Benevolent Funds and Charities also contribute, and further sums come from other minor trusts and individual contributions. The current budget calls for £1M per year. About 50% will be required to cover specialist help, staff and office costs. The hostel, which sleeps 56, costs £5K per head, or £280K pa overall to fund.

VA aspires to continue to offer this level of immediate care. In the medium term they are keen to shift office, within the same general area, to a location that has a more open and friendly

appearance; anything that will make it easier to get the veterans to walk in the door. In the longer term they aspire to establish a National Centre for Homeless Veterans.

The Chairman has proposed to the Committee that Veterans Aid be promoted as the Club Charity during his tenure as Chairman, and you will have already seen the reference to this in his introduction to the Newsletter. After some consideration, and despite the urgency of the problem of Homeless Veterans, the Committee decided that it was not appropriate to directly allocate Club Funds to the Charity, rather to appeal to the membership to support this worthy cause as individuals. It is, however, the intention to offer VA rent-free use of Club facilities for an annual event (Website launch, lecture, Reception, or a combination of these), with catering at cost.

Any financial contribution to the Charity would, of course, be worth while, but it needs to be significant, and to reach into the future for it to make any real difference to Homeless Veterans. There are several alternative ways in which RAG members can certainly help:

- An annual cash donation by the individual, ideally accompanied by Gift Aid authorisation. (VA Standing order form can be downloaded from the RAG Website)
- Individuals, or organisations, sponsoring a room or a floor at the Hostel
- Dedicate a specific Social event or Sport sponsorship that you are organising to VA
- Attend the annual Carol Service in St James' Square co-sponsored by the RAG and the In & Out, which will directly support VA.
- Any further ideas would be most welcome

Finally, it would be very valuable to VA if RAG Members could take every opportunity that presents itself in their local communities to raise the profile of the Charity; bringing it to public attention everywhere from the House of Lords to the far corners of the Land. It is without doubt a very worthy cause, and one that must be close to the hearts of every one of us.

**Andrew Gordon Lennox**

**General Committee member and the Chairman's appointed liaison Officer to VA.**