

## **A Message to Vietnam Veterans Who is a Veteran? Who should be a Veteran?**

[Although this piece was initially aimed at Vietnam Veterans it has since received fairly wide coverage. It has been posted into Facebook groups – NZ Vietnam Veterans, NZ Vietnam Veterans and Families, The Red Diamond Club, Onward Bar, South East Asia Veterans Association and NZDFW New Zealand Defence Force Whanau. It has generated a lot of feedback from the post-Vietnam generations, mostly supportive – RNH]

Post-Vietnam ex-service people, the next generations, are asking for all who attested and served in NZDF to be defined as Veterans, and more importantly to be eligible for entitlements through Veterans Affairs. That's the important bit, not whether or not someone is called a veteran. Trouble is, you have to be called a veteran to be eligible.

The Veterans' Advisory Board recommended to the previous ministers that all who attested and served be defined as Veterans, and eligible.

RNZRSA National Council has passed a remit to actively support that proposal.

But I hear on the kūmara vine that some Vietnam veterans are opposed.

Let's look at the facts then.

Who is presently defined as Veteran by the Veterans Support Act 2014 (VSA 2014)?

*“**veteran** means a member of the armed forces who took part in qualifying operational service at the direction of the New Zealand Government; or a member of the armed forces who took part in qualifying routine service before 1 April 1974”* (the date the Accident Compensation Act came into force).

So, service before 1 April 1974:

All of us who served before 1 April 1974 are defined as Veterans, whether we deployed on operational service, or whether we just had routine service in New Zealand or overseas. And all of us before 1 April 1974 are eligible for entitlements through Veterans Affairs.

Should those who were on operational deployments be treated more generously than those with routine service? We are already.

*The standard of proof to receive benefits for those with qualifying operational service is benevolent, and grants us the benefit of the doubt (presumption). The standard of proof is higher for those with qualifying routine service only, but it is still benevolent (and definitely more benevolent than ACC). We use the Australian Statements of Principles that differentiate between the two types of service. They cover 360+ different conditions that we can claim.*

### And service after 1 April 1974:

All of those who had qualifying operational service after 1 April 1974 are also defined as Veterans, and are eligible for entitlements. But their entitlements are not as generous as ours.

Those with routine service only (in New Zealand or overseas) after 1 April 1974 are not covered by VSA 2014 and have to apply to ACC. Those ex-service people have great difficulty having their service related conditions accepted by ACC. Some of the stories are horrendous.

It's not about what you did. It's about when you did it. That's what the Act is about.  
It's not about what you did. It's about when you did it.

### BV (Before "Veteran")

Before VSA 2014 was enacted (in 2014) if we were all defined as "Members". What did that mean?

*"member of the forces means any person who is or has at any time been a member of any of Her Majesty's forces established in New Zealand, whether before or after the commencement of this Act (War Pensions Act 1954)."*

War pensions were payable whether the member served in any war or emergency, and entitlements were available when the member's non-warlike service was in New Zealand or overseas. All who served.

### Consider this:

All those who served in 1 NZEF and 2 NZEF in the world wars were defined as having war service and were eligible under the War Pensions Act 1954, then under VSA 2014. More than 50% of them served in administration, logistics, communication zone and base units. Never heard a shot fired in anger. But they were considered to have war service (now called qualifying operational service). All were defined as "Members", and eligible for war pensions (War Pensions Act Sect 19(1)(a)).

So too were those without war service (War Pensions Act Sect 19(1)(b))

A couple of years ago I instigated an application to Veterans Affairs for a 100 year old who served during World War 2 but never left New Zealand, medically. It was approved because he served before 1 April 1974. Despite never serving overseas he was defined in VSA 2014 as a Veteran. Because of when he did it, not where he did it, or what he did. And like more than 50% of those who did serve overseas in 2 NZEF, he too never heard a shot fired in anger.

In the previous WW1 and WW2 generations operational or war service was not a requirement to be eligible for a war pension. It is now for the post-Vietnam generations to be eligible for the disablement pension and other entitlements. How inequitable is that.

## Our Generations:

In Korea, Malaya, Borneo and Vietnam we plugged into British or Australian logistics systems and communication zone units, so unlike 1 NZEF and 2 NZEF, most of us were front line troops. Not all of us though, but all of us are defined as Veteran, because of where we did it, and when we did it, not what we did. Not what we did. We'll forget for the moment the entertainers who got the NZOSM. Thankfully they don't qualify for entitlements. Yet. Just joking.

Should we tell the next generations that they should not be eligible for the same entitlements as us, whether or not they have operational or routine service, just because of when they served? Do you not agree that the difference is inequitable? Should they be treated the same and as generously as our generation?

And it's their world now. By comparison our generation is really well looked after, experienced advocates say the best looked after generation ever. Took us a while to get there though. Let's get behind them. Let's help them get there a bit sooner than it took us.

What about the cost? Treasury and Veterans Affairs will argue that the cost will be prohibitive. But that's a totally specious argument. We're eligible for support from VANZ, ACC, WINZ, Te Whatu Ora/Health NZ and others. The taxpayer foots the bill anyway, regardless.

Personally, I really don't care whether I'm called a veteran or not. The medals tell my story. Would you believe I got the NZ Armed Forces Award for 15 years unblemished service! Don't answer that. It's my service record that decides what level of support I'm entitled to, not the label.

I think a big part of the problem with the definition of "Veteran" is caused by our adoption of the American term "Veteran". Bad move. Probably too late to ditch it now. Mind you, in the US and Australia everyone who serves is a veteran. Long ago I was a returned member and a veteran athlete (cross country, roads & track). Then in 2014 I became a veteran soldier. By an Act of Parliament. How ridiculous is that. Personally I think I'm just an old soldier, and an octogenarian. Also a veteran vegetarian turned vegan.

Ross Himona  
Senior Advocate RNZRSA