

EDITORIAL

Reports on the inaugural Paralympic Sports Program (PSP) and Wounded Digger Forum in ARMY newspaper highlight a welcome and sensible development on the Army ethos of old – looking after our own.

Before the efficiency reviews of the 1990s, when it became official policy to discharge any member who was not front-line fit, there were many old soldiers who could not be deployed, but could still contribute to the team.

It was always a comfort to know that if you did a knee or your ankles were shot or you put your back out, you could always 'count blankets' in a rear-echelon warehouse somewhere – but still have a job.

Then came AIRN (Army individual readiness notice) and MEC (medical employment classification) and, if you didn't meet the grade, you were out. It didn't matter that your job didn't require you to deploy to the front lines – but if you weren't deployable you couldn't be kept.

Soldiers who have been around for a while know plenty of otherwise capable soldiers who were forced to leave before their time. It wasn't in the individual's best interests and it cost the Army years of experience and corporate knowledge.

Today we have soldiers maimed in action or missing limbs because of an after-hours vehicle accident who are being retrained to ensure they can still fill a role within the ADF. And it makes perfect sense.

These soldiers not only have full function in every other area – especially their brains – but they have valuable knowledge, skills and experience. It would be silly to cast all that skill and experience aside simply because some bureaucratic, inflexible rule stipulates it.

Chief of Army Lieutenant General Ken Gillespie visited participants on the inaugural PSP and sat cross-legged with them for a considerable time on a mat at the RMC gym in Canberra. In an informal two-way chat, he admitted that the new approach to looking after wounded and injured diggers did have its teething problems.

One example of this was highlighted during the PSP when participants voiced concerns about their prosthetic legs; while Army HQ and Joint Health Command were sure they were sourcing the best prosthetics.

As it turned out, the prosthetic legs were the best available – but were then fitted with regular shoes.

As the Chief of Army admitted, it was a good example of how important information could become less clear as it travelled from the soldier on the ground, up the chain of command, to his desk – and it was frustrating for him that bureaucracy could sometimes get in the way of simple fixes.

Being a witness to the conversation, you couldn't help but feel the Chief of Army's genuine concern for 'his family'. Indeed, he even described feeling like a grandfather to all his soldiers.

If it is the way of the future that the Army will continue to look after wounded and injured soldiers who in the past would have been discharged, we are genuinely glad to be a part of it.



Looking after our own

WORDS AND PICS
SERGEANT BRIAN HARTIGAN,
ARMY NEWSPAPER

FORUM A FIRST FOR WOUNDED DIGGERS

Wounded and seriously injured diggers from across Australia brought family and carers to Canberra on March 29 to discuss issues surrounding their care.

Chief of Army Lieutenant General Ken Gillespie convened the first Wounded Diggers' Forum to gain feedback from affected Army personnel, their spouses and parents.

Ministers John Faulkner and Greg Combet addressed the forum and fielded at times emotion-charged questions.

Lieutenant General Gillespie told the soldiers their rehabilitation and welfare was a high priority for Defence's leaders. He said the advent of rehabilitation for wounded and seriously injured members within Defence was not new, but over the past few years Army had been re-learning how best to manage it, and mistakes and oversights were inevitable.

"What we're dealing with here are pretty monumental changes for all of us and, if you look at how big, old and staid the Army is, it is a very big deal for all concerned," he said.

"Two years ago, all of you diggers here today would have been processed, patched up and handed over to the Department of Veterans' Affairs – but gone. Today, there's a huge wave of change in this area and, while it hasn't hit the beach yet, when it does crash down, many people will have to take notice."

In the meantime, Army is getting on with looking after its own.

Director General Personnel-Army Brigadier Gerard Fogarty said that because the Chief of Army was so far forward with his thinking, policy areas were trying hard to catch up.



"There are some disconnects because we don't yet have an actual policy in many areas," Brigadier Fogarty said.

"The Chief can't actually change the policy on medical classifications overnight. It is a joint process and what the Chief wants to achieve will take time, but we have to move forward in Army as if the policy has already been changed."

Lieutenant General Gillespie said he saw rehabilitation for wounded and injured troops as a moral responsibility.

"We are putting our troops in 21st century harm and I think it's time our policies caught up with that," he said.

Defence Minister John Faulkner agreed, saying "it isn't good enough for us to simply say that we owe you a debt of gratitude for the things that happened to you because of the things we asked you to do."

"I don't think there's a higher priority for any government of any political colour at the moment than to see you get the rehab and care you need," he said.

Sergeant Michael Lyddiard, wounded in an IED blast in Afghanistan, pointed

out that while he and many others desperately wanted to remain in service with the Army, doing so was actually hurting his family.

"For my sake, I want to prove to myself and to everyone else that I am still a proud and capable soldier," Sergeant Lyddiard said.

"But the reality is, my family would be far better off if I took medical discharge and took all the entitlements I would qualify for under Vet Affairs. To do that, however, makes no sense for me and makes no sense for either Army or the Australian taxpayer."

Brigadier Fogarty said he recognised there was a gap in the conditions available to serving members and those available through Veterans' Affairs. "We will take that on board and sort it out," he said.

Deputy Chief of Army Major General Paul Symon said the ADF had started the wounded-digger program from a system that had members discharged almost as soon as they were wounded, and it would take time and require patience to get it right.

"This forum has been nine hours of intense discussion and emotive issues that I know were draining on all of you," Major General Symon said.

"While we recognised that that was a danger in running this forum, not running it was not an option. We simply had to hear about the issues from the people most affected by those issues."

Warrant Officer Class Two Dennis Ramsay, who lost both legs to illness, said that while deep emotion was inevitable at such a forum and while there was a lot of discussion around specific shortcomings, the overwhelming consensus was that the new direction in looking after wounded and injured soldiers was much appreciated.

