



RSA

100 YEARS OF SERVICE

*“Ka maumahara tonu tātou ki a rātou.
We will remember them.”*

25 years ago, in 1991, when as a history student at the University of Otago, I attended my first Anzac Day dawn service in Queens Gardens, Dunedin. As it has been for so many New Zealanders in recent years I vividly remember the emotion of gathering under the darkness, calm and chill of the early morning and the power of the Ode and Last Post. Afterwards the returned servicemen and a few women, and back in those days even a few World War One veterans, disappeared up Burlington Street to the old RSA clubrooms in Moray Place, donated by the citizens of Dunedin after the Great War. I wanted to follow them in, to meet these ‘living Anzac relics’ and to hear their stories, but something held me back. The RSA was ‘their place’ so I left them alone on this, ‘the one day of the year’.

‘Ka maumahara tonu tātou ki a rātou. We will remember them.’ This dedication is so much louder on Anzac Day today than it was a quarter of a

century ago, thanks to the continued resurgence of interest among New Zealanders in honouring the memory of the 30,000 countrymen and women who have died serving their nation overseas since the South African War, through two World Wars and several post-war conflicts, most recently in Afghanistan. Losses that are marked by the hundreds of war memorials on the New Zealand landscape that permanently represent the scars on the hearts of generations of Kiwi families.

Lest we forget, however, the overwhelming majority of service personnel actually returned home. Throughout New Zealand’s history generations of young men and women have returned from war and operational deployments – in all more than 250,000 New Zealanders. While the rhythm of return has sped up over time – from a sea voyage of many weeks to a flight home – the challenges faced by service personnel returning to a country untouched by conflict have not changed dramatically. Most significantly, the experience of war continues to both shine as well as cast a shadow for the rest of their lives.



LEFT: Remembrance plays a special part in the life of the RSA. It sought early protection of the words ‘Anzac’ and Anzac Day, and its role as the guardian of remembrance has continued with the national day of commemoration.



The Royal New Zealand Returned and Services' Association (RSA) was founded by wounded soldiers returning from the Gallipoli campaign, recognising a need to welcome and provide care for those returned soldiers who would follow as well as to honour the memory of those who would never return. Welcome, support and remembrance have been at the heart of the RSA for 100 years.

On 28 April 1916 - only three days after the first Anzac Day commemorations - Captain Donald Simson oversaw a national meeting of returned soldiers in Wellington that founded the New Zealand Returned Soldiers' Association (the early name of the RSA). It was Captain Simson who also first floated the idea of a universal badge that would become one of the most recognisable symbols in New Zealand. The proud heritage of the badge continues to be honoured in the RSA brand today, with its new commitment to be at the heart of the community. From the outset the badge signalled "one of a comradeship banded together for the aiding of all who need assistance".

The RSA quickly became an advocate for veterans, as well as providing its own welfare services with the introduction of the first Poppy Day on 24 April 1922. Few charitable appeals can claim the history and public recognition associated with the RSA's Poppy Day Appeal. The design of the poppy has changed over the years; indeed today the poppy can be digitally downloaded. What has not changed is that the poppy continues to be the main source of funding for the RSA's extensive programme of advocacy, support and care to the serving and ex-service community. As the national symbol of remembrance, the poppy is worn on Anzac Day and also laid at New Zealand war graves and memorials around the world.

Remembrance has always played a special part in the life of the RSA and is still exemplified by the 'Ode' ceremony conducted at its clubrooms. From 1916 it successfully sought protection of the word 'Anzac' from commercialisation as well as to legislate Anzac Day as a public holiday, achieved in 1920. Its role as the guardian of remembrance continues in connection with local Anzac Day services and with war memorials, both the hundreds of local memorials and the National War Memorial.

At the same time as memorials were erected to the memory of the war dead, so the public supported the building of RSA clubrooms for the living. The successful rehabilitation of the majority of returned soldiers was a double-edged sword for the RSA, with membership dramatically dropping from a post-World War I peak of 56,000 to a mere 7,000 by the mid-1920s. During the 1930s, however, latent war injuries and the Great Depression brought about a revival as returned soldiers looked again to the RSA for comradeship and support. The recovery was exemplified by a 1,500-strong RSA delegation to Sydney for Anzac Day 1938, bringing back with them the concept of the dawn service introduced in 1939.

World War Two resulted in 30,000 members of the RSA mobilising for another war. The RSA, together with its newly formed Women's Sections, assisted with fundraising to support the forces overseas, from mobile canteens and cinemas to sending forces gift parcels (a proud tradition that continues to this day). It knew too well that on their return they would need a world-class rehabilitation system, which it made happen. The RSA embraced a new generation of returned servicemen and women, reaching an all-time peak of 136,000 members by 1947.

During the 1950s the RSA was at its zenith in terms of membership and influence - a cornerstone of

RIGHT: Poppy Day outside Wellington Railway Station, 1975. The RSA is famous for its advocacy and support services to assist the veteran and ex-service community - whether it be raising funds on Poppy Day, sending parcels to New Zealand Defence Force personnel posted overseas at Christmas, or lending a hand in the community.





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post-war society. There was a building boom and, with the issue of the first liquor licences and ‘beer on tap’, the development of the now famous RSA club atmosphere. From the outset the clubrooms had been intended “to keep intact the bond of comradeship” for members but they also provided much-needed local facilities – for Plunket meetings, youth groups and balls and birthdays, weddings and funerals – that underpinned the RSA’s place in the community.

From its support for New Zealand’s involvement in the Vietnam War in the 1960s to its pro-alliance stance during the ANZUS crisis of the 1980s and beyond, the RSA increasingly seemed out of touch to the post-war generation, even to service personnel returning from war zones in Vietnam and on to Afghanistan. Nonetheless, there was still an ongoing

need to support those who had served their nation in Korea, Malaya, Thailand, Borneo and Vietnam, even if the initial welcome to some of these returned servicemen had been at best patchy, as well as those men and women who served in United Nations and allied coalition operations, including in Angola, Sinai, Bosnia, East Timor and Afghanistan. With the loss of the majority of its original World War I members and the steady decline of its World War II stalwarts, the RSA was forced to consider its future role and the opening up of membership to the wider community, which by 2005 had seen associate members, with no military experience, outnumber returned and service members.

Today, 100 years on, the RSA is undergoing a transformation to be an open, welcoming



TOP: Original RSA badge. ABOVE: On 28 April 1916 - only three days after the first Anzac Day commemorations - Captain Donald Simson (centre in second row) oversaw a national meeting of returned soldiers in Wellington that established the New Zealand Returned Soldiers’ Association.



organisation actively supporting current service personnel as well as the ex-service community and, in turn, to be supported by everyday Kiwis. With 100,000 members, it remains one of the country’s largest organisations. Local RSAs are making efforts to transform their clubrooms into modern, family-friendly hospitality and community hubs, seen in the new modern Christchurch RSA opened in 2015, while for the digital generation the RSA is only a click away via the national online membership. The new Veterans’ Support Act 2014 was the culmination of many years’ work by the RSA and a continuation of 100 years of advocacy on behalf of current and former service personnel. With the number of veterans growing smaller, however, remembrance for the RSA remains a way of carrying forward their stories and spirit. The Cyril Bassett VC Speech Competition in schools and the Anzac of the Year are two such initiatives. Its recent stance on the national flag reveals its ongoing role as the champion of

ABOVE: Christchurch RSA building, 2015. The Christchurch RSA was formed on 14 December 1915 as ‘The Returned Soldiers Club’ by wounded veterans from Gallipoli. It is the first and oldest (and now newest) RSA in New Zealand.



AUTHOR: DR STEPHEN CLARKE

Stephen did finally make it into the Dunedin RSA while researching the history of Anzac Day, and a decade later was working at the Royal New Zealand RSA, finishing as the first non-serviceman to be appointed Chief Executive (2008-13). After a year in London working on the First World War centenary and at Gallipoli for Anzac Day 2015, he returned to New Zealand to finish the RSA’s centenary history *After the War* (2016). Stephen continues to assist with both the RSA and Anzac Day commemorations in his new home town of Auckland.



DESIGNER: RICHARD PAYNE

Richard is a design specialist for New Zealand Post and has a strong background in graphic design, having completed an honours degree at the design school at Massey University, Wellington. He has more than seven years experience with New Zealand Post and in that time he has been actively involved with the design of many stamp and coin issues in addition to a variety of supporting marketing collateral.



New Zealand’s heritage and national identity, most visibly experienced each Anzac Day. With a re-energised brand and purpose, the RSA now looks forward to its next century and new ways to serve at the heart of its communities.

The RSA is rightly proud of its history, its service to the community and its place in New Zealand society for 100 years. The RSA deserves a salute for its century of service. Its quintessential Kiwi character means it would never ask for nor bask in this attention. There is still work to be done. For those who are serving our nation today, and in the future, it is important that the RSA continues to serve – to welcome, to support and to remember – at the RSA.

So unlike myself 25 years ago, don’t be shy; get online or walk into your local RSA to become a part of the future by making it ‘your place’.