

## PILOD ESSAY: Dads' Association

A small paragraph in the Powlett Express of 13 November 1942 headed "Efforts to re-form Fathers' Association" suggested that this organisation must have existed prior to the Second World War – maybe to assist returning soldiers from "the great war"? Further investigation on the internet reveals: "The Sailors and Soldiers Fathers' Association was established in the First World War and appears to have had branches in most states. The group was active (and often outspoken), involving themselves with hospital visits, repatriation issues, employment of returned servicemen and the establishment of returned servicemen's rights relating to principles such as pensions and housing. There appears to be a close co-operation between this group and the Returned Sailors and Soldiers Imperial League of Australia in forming a group with strong lobbying abilities. Similarly, they were active in raising funds to build Memorials after the war. The Association remained active after the First World War in pursuing returned soldiers' rights. They appear under a slightly different name during the Second World War (Sailors, Soldiers and Airmen's Fathers' Association) but their goals were identical."

Commonly called the Dads' Association, the Powlett Express reports in December 1942 that a small group (12 Dads at the first meeting) was established in Wonthaggi and a charter applied for from the parent body in the name of the Wonthaggi and District S.S.A.F.A. Local office bearers were Mr. W.G. McKenzie, President (in later years Mr. J. McVicars); Mr. Tom Veal, Treasurer; and Mr. Bill Poole, Secretary. At a meeting in February 1943 delegates were appointed to attend the annual meeting at headquarters in Melbourne, and a meeting was called for all mothers, wives, daughters and sisters of servicemen and women with a view to forming a Women's Auxiliary to the Dads' Association.

By April 1943 the Women's Auxiliary was already starting to raise funds "to help the boys on their discharge from the services". The Powlett Express reports "A delightful evening was held in the Soldiers' Club Rooms on Saturday last when the Dads' Association held their first social evening, over sixty ladies and gents being present." Bearing in mind that World War II was in progress at the time, the community showed generosity in supporting the fund raising efforts, for example a Fair in May 1943 raised £32/8/-; in February 1944 the Women's Auxiliary handed a cheque for £142/12/9 to the Dads' Association at a social evening in The Butterfly cafe - the evening included community singing, dancing, vocal items and piano performances; £70/-/- profit from an amateur boxing tournament held at the Union Theatre in July 1944 was shared between the Wonthaggi S.S.A.F.A. and the Youth Club; £200 was raised by a Pin-Up Girl competition in May 1945.

By 1944 the term "Dad" was being used as a title for members of the Association with newspaper reports referring to "Dad McKenzie" or "Dad Griffiths" when commenting on the Association's activities. An attractive enamel lapel pin was worn by members of the Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen's Fathers' Association (both WWI and WWII), and examples of these pins are still available for sale on line.

In 1944, at a meeting in Leongatha, Gippsland branches of the S.S.A.F.A. formed a group council. Four delegates from Wonthaggi joined representatives from Bass, Foster, Drouin, Korumburra, Mirboo North, Trafalgar and Leongatha, and President of the Leongatha branch, Mr. C.L. Brumley, was elected chairman. The Powlett Express of 30 June 1944 reported on the group gathering and the following points emerged:

- Mr. Brumley "said he hoped that the visitors would, as a result of their deliberations, at least feel that they had accomplished something worth while in their efforts to obtain the complete and satisfactory rehabilitation of service men on their discharge from the forces. The Repatriation Department was rather tardy in its dealings in this direction, and it should be the Dads' endeavour to see that they obtain their just reward."

- “Mr. Allchin said that the difficulties imposed by wartime conditions should not be taken into consideration. The war must end, but the work of the Dads' Association must of necessity continue for some time after the cessation of hostilities. We must look ahead to the return of normal times.”
- An affiliation fee was fixed at £1/1/- with quarterly meetings being felt sufficient to continue the work of the combined Gippsland group.
- Mr. Hansen, also a State councillor of the association, reported: “the executive had decided to increase the staff at head office. The work of the association was increasing enormously with the addition of about 400 members monthly.”
- “In response to a query, Mr. McKenzie said that at present there was no policy of land settlement emanating from the State Government. The speaker said he was in favour of the scheme being laid down by the States. By this means all service men desiring to take up land would be on an equal footing.”
- “Mr. Allchin explained that at the last association conference a resolution was carried suggesting that three Dads and three returned soldiers from each district be selected to act as advisory committees when land was purchased by the Government to enable demobilised men to engage in farming pursuits.”
- “Suspension of land settlement in Victoria had been brought about to safeguard the interests of returned men. The State Government had enacted legislation by which it could immediately make farms available to returned men when the Commonwealth scheme was introduced.”
- “A motion was passed urging district parliamentary representatives to ask the Federal Government to institute a land settlement scheme for ex-service men. The resolution will be forwarded to the State executive.”
- “Special valuers were appointed responsible to the Federal authorities in recommending that properties be sold at certain prices. Land values had been pegged at rates ruling in 1942. A large number of service men taking up land when they came home could not economically carry on if placed on areas bought at prices beyond their productive capacity.”

In December 1944, at the usual quarterly meeting of the Dads' Association, it was advised that a new eligibility clause had been introduced in that “fathers of members of the Australian Military Forces are now eligible for membership providing that their sons or daughters have served in a theatre of war as defined by the Federal Executive of the RSSAILA (Returned Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen's Imperial League of Australia – now the RSL). The new clause should greatly add to the membership of the branch, which is already large.” All newspaper reports on the Dads' Association over the years 1942 – 1945 call for dads to join the association – most likely because it was understood that the huge demands on the organisation would come once the war was over. An article in the Powlett Express dated 1 February 1946 reported “‘The membership of the Dads Association is not half what it should be’ said Secretary Bill Poole at the Annual meeting. ‘Today the membership stands at seventy. We should have at least another hundred members.’”

By 1945 thoughts were turning to the granting of pensions to returned service personnel. The Powlett Express of 9 February 1945 reported: “One of the cardinal policies of the Association is to assist in obtaining and retaining pension rights. The secretary W. Poole, stated he was desirous of seeing the branch funds built up to five hundred or one thousand pounds, so as the boys on their return could be given help when they unsuccessfully applied for pensions.” “Any returned soldier had the right to present his case to three separate boards.” “Considerable discussion followed the raising of the pension question, and no doubt the Dads will watch carefully the treatment of all boys all over the Commonwealth when they return with injuries that will mitigate against their earning ability.”

Members of the Dads' Association visited war wounded in hospital ... “The hospital has been visited every Sunday throughout the year, mainly by Dad Veal and myself (W. Poole) and the wants of Returned Servicemen from this and the last war attended to – this service being greatly appreciated by the patients.” The February 1945 article continued “During the year 1944, the

members of the (State) Association have visited no less than 22,464 Diggers and Servicewomen at Heidelberg, Caulfield, Mount Royal, Austin, Cheltenham and Rockingham Hospitals.”

In February 1945 the Wonthaggi Dads' Association held a “return social” to the Ladies' Auxiliary in appreciation of their good work during 1944 in raising funds to assist men and women of the Forces when they return. “The chairman briefly explained the many ways in which our boys and girls could be assisted, such as assisting them in obtaining suitable employment for those requiring it; to advocate legislation for the suitable rehabilitation, and also vocational training for them where necessary; and to help and advise soldiers, sailors and airmen and their dependants in time of need.”

A Welcome Home message from the Dads' Association was sent to returning members of the Forces: *“Dear Son or Daughter – We Dads bid you Welcome Home. We are proud of you and your mates who so gallantly and courageously performed your duty to King, Country and Home. The Fathers' Association's objective is to watch, guard and forward the interests of all who are and have been on service for their country. We feel it our duty and privilege to offer assistance in any and every way we are able, particularly in the period of Rehabilitation to ensure that you receive Justice and a rightful place in the civic life of Australia. We have appointed the following Dads in your district to give assistance by advice and direction to all ex-service personnel needing such. Call and have a personal and confidential talk with any of the Dads who will understand your problems. We are gladly at your service – Yours fraternally, J. McVicars, President; W. Poole, Secretary”*

At the end of the war a representative of a local organisation who was hoping to get more access to the Town Hall which had been greatly used by the Ladies Auxiliary for fund raising, made the unfortunate statement “Now that the war is over, the Dads' Association will not require so much money”, which elicited a sharp response from W. Poole of the Wonthaggi Dads' Association in the Powlett Express of 28 September 1945: “That statement, Sir, has made me wonder if (name) has read in the papers the reports that are coming through concerning the condition of most of the boys and girls coming home, or if he has seen, as I have seen, some of the boys back from New Guinea, stricken with Malaria and other tropical diseases. If so, surely he would realize that the main work of the 'Dads' is just commencing.”

Indeed the work of the Dads' Associations throughout the state was dedicated and varied. It targeted the immediate welfare of the returning servicemen and women in helping them settle back into a productive life in a peaceful community, or to obtain the necessary support if their war service rendered them disadvantaged. The Association's realistic approach to one of the unspoken side effects of war is covered in the “Sexuality and Morality” chapter of Kate Darian-Smith's book “On the Home Front, Melbourne in Wartime 1939 – 1945” which mentions, in relation to the government's Anti-VD campaign: “Various community groups, including the Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen's Fathers Association demanded that sex education be introduced to the school syllabus.”

A short article in the Powlett Express of 17 October 1947 honoured the organisation. Headed “Dads' Memorial Service” it reported: “Very impressive was the Memorial Service, conducted at St. George's Church of England on Sunday afternoon. Wonthaggi Dads' Association president, Mr. J. McVicars, briefly outlined the nature of the service, the Last Post was sounded, and an address given by the Rev. Childs. Mrs. Haughton was the organist.”

Carol Cox September 2022