

Abbott, Quick to Obey Washington but Ignores Plight of Returned Diggers

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The disgrace of our military veterans dying on our streets

DIGGERS now represent almost 1 in 10 of the homeless people who are at risk of death on Melbourne's streets.



Heartless US lackey, Tony Abbott

Surveys of Melbourne's most desperate homeless people have found that alarming numbers of those who are most vulnerable are veterans.

The Herald Sun can reveal there has been a heartbreaking increase in the numbers of people who served overseas in dangerous trouble spots, only to find themselves forgotten at home.

The military veterans slowly dying on our streets include young men from recent theatres of war in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The surveys of hundreds of people sleeping rough were compiled under a vulnerability index, which identifies demographic and clinical factors linked to a "significant risk of dying".

A survey by the Melbourne Street to Home organisation has put the number of veterans at the upper end of this category, at 8 per cent.

The head of HomeGround Services, which runs Street To Home, said that the number was still hovering about 10 per cent.

Home Ground chief executive officer Heather Holst said it was a dreadful situation.

"Everyone needs a roof over their head," she said. "You get your dignity stripped away."

She said there was virtually no public awareness of what was happening.

"The more people know about this, the better."

Ms Holst said she expected the rate of homeless veterans to increase as soldiers return from Iraq

and Afghanistan.

Factors linked to a risk of death included a history of recent emergency department visits, a background of cold weather injuries, and kidney or liver disease. Mental illness and substance abuse were also part of the measure.

Former commando Geoff Evans, who has been helping homeless former defence force personnel to find housing for years, said parallels could be drawn with the treatment of Vietnam veterans.

"The only reason they're in that situation is that they've served our nation. It's not good enough," he said.

Mr Evans, the young veterans adviser for RSL LifeCare, said every one of those sleeping rough would be suffering from mental illness.

Many would have a substance abuse problem and have suffered a relationship breakdown. A greater commitment from authorities to remedy the situation was necessary.

"People think things have changed since the Vietnam generation, but they haven't.

"People have no idea this is going on. I guarantee you'll have young veterans on the street, floors, in cars tonight."

Latest figures show 22,773 Victorians are homeless. A recent count showed more than 140 sleeping rough in the CBD.

From Foreign Fields to Streets of Pain

MIKE joined the army at 17 and served his country for 14 years, including overseas.

After leaving in 1996, the Melbourne-born infantryman, like many other veterans, suffered chronically "itchy feet" and worked in everything from shearing to hospitality.

But his life eventually lost direction and until recently he spent years homeless, sleeping everywhere from city railway stations to beaches as far afield as Queensland - a pillow and a blanket his only possessions.

He bitterly recalls being shooed away from shopping centres by security guards.

"You don't even think about it (homelessness). You think it'll be mum and dad and the kids," Mike says.

For a time he made his home under the same busy rail bridge by the Yarra where Wayne "Mousey" Perry was stabbed to death last January.

That awakened the public to the dangers of sleeping rough.

But Mike says anyone who has lived on the street is already acutely aware of that.

"I've seen blokes get bashings for nothing — have all their stuff stolen," he says.

Mike, 185cm and over 100kg, tried to make it clear to others that he would not be subjected to that kind of treatment.

"I had to pursue a few to set an example," he says.

He says figures showing a shameful number of homeless veterans are spot-on.

He says he often met fellow ex-Diggers doing it tough on the streets, dogged by bad memories of their service and, later, relationship breakdowns and substance abuse.

"A lot of them are f..... from alcohol and drugs. They rattle like a pill bottle," he says.

"There's a few out there lost. You get pensioned off and that's the end of it."

"The poor blokes out there, they've got no direction."

Mike, now 50, says he feels for the younger men returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

"You can't come home from a war zone then sit down and have dinner with everyone," he says. "You've got itchy feet all the time. In the end, you don't give a f... No one else does, so why should you?"

It is a restlessness he knows many won't understand: "All I can say is that when you walk in someone's shoes, you'll see it through their eyes. Until that day, do not pass judgment."

Mike walked into the Melbourne Street to Home service in October and was offered temporary accommodation in a share house.

The Returned Services League has arranged for a more permanent dwelling in a southeastern suburb, which he moved into recently.

"We need to be highlighting that there are these kinds of organisations. Lovely people," he says. Life on the street is tough, but it was not a wasted experience: "There are solid people. They'd stick by you."

"There's good and bad everywhere. It's like anywhere — you adapt."

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Jungle Drum Prose/Poetry. <http://jungledrum.lingama.net/news/story-1419.html>