

A walking contradiction

Introduction

Tolerance is about being able to cope with pain. The military exposes soldiers to deprivation, discomfort and pain as part of its conditioning process. It knows that combat is confronting and difficult so it acclimatizes soldiers in advance through training exercises with increasing levels of deprivation, discomfort and pain so that soldiers will continue to function in combat even when it gets really hard. This can be expressed by the Army expression "Keep putting one foot in front of the other" which is the saying used to keep you marching on route marches when your feet are blistered and your pack and rifle feels like ten tonnes towards the end of a long route march.

I knew when I joined the Army Reserve in April of 1977 in the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam war that I was joining an unpopular institution. I had seen the huge and popular Vietnam Moratorium Marches on Television and I had heard my dad discussing some of his staff members taking the day off work to attend the march. However I had enjoyed being in the scouts and had been invited to join the Army Reserve by a fellow scout who had joined and who said it was in many ways just like scouts and that I would enjoy it. Also since it is rare that there is only just one motivation for doing things, other motivations supporting why I joined include: I thought I could get the army to train me for free to get a truck driving license (spoiler it didn't and I left the army twenty years later without one) and two that I figured that as the army was "On the nose" I could join now when it was "cheap" and raise with it as it was restored to its former historical position in society in a form of buy low sell high strategy. I am prone to taking a long term approach to things.

I didn't have the impression that my family had a strong opinion on the War or Military Service although I do recall that when I came home with a short haircut that I had requested as I was thinking of joining the Army Reserve my mother had exclaimed "Good, God what have you done!" but this was more of surprise at my fashion choice than a comment on my perhaps joining the Army Reserve. Very few people had short hair in those days. I do know that some of my fellow reservists would say they were policemen to explain their short hair rather than say they were reservists.

My parents were very community minded, law abiding Catholic, DLP voters. They weren't very political but were good Catholics because of a deep spirituality rather than a strong attachment to Catholic Dogma being essentially pragmatic communitarians. Indeed my parents were described by one priest as "the most Buddhist Catholics he had ever met!" I on the other hand now regard myself as an estranged post Vatican II Catholic with moderate knowledge of all the other major faiths.

In the Army I joined besides it struggling to absorb the lessons of Vietnam, there was a clear divide between Reservists and Regulars. The Regulars would often speak in disparaging terms about reservists. Some of the terms used included: "Cut Lunch Commandos; SAS meaning Saturdays and Sunday Soldiers and WOFTAM Waste of F**king Time and Money." This animosity was returned with remarks like: "We do one and a half jobs, you do half a job!" and the calling of the Regular Army a "Sheltered Workshop".

I reasoned the animosity was due to Reservists being "Civilians" in the eyes of Regulars but I have since discovered that some of the animosity grew out of the Second World War when conditions of service were different and there was what was in effect two Army Tribes.

There was no doubt that for the early part of my service there was also a lack of understanding and regard between the Army and the Civilian population it served. This in my view had arisen due to different positions regarding the Vietnam War were the civilian population had in effect repudiated the army. The Regular Army in my view sometimes treated Reservists as representing the ungrateful civilians who had turned on them over the Vietnam War. The general population on the other hand disdained Reservists as Representatives of the Warmongering, War Criminals who they had just demanded stop the "Illegal" War in Vietnam.

Because reservists were part-time soldiers with full-time civilian jobs this could lead to unpleasant work situations. I can remember going to a work party where I revealed I was studying to be an officer in the Army Reserve. "Kevin. How could you!" Was the response before I was immediately asked "What is it like to kill a baby?" and then asked "Would you fight in an unjust war?" I remember saying no without any real understanding of what an unjust war actually was at the time.

Later my boss and work colleagues put up Soviet and Radical Propaganda posters on the walls of our open plan office the Soviet one behind my desk. These were work colleagues I socialized with and I think they thought it was funny. I have frequently in both the army and in my civilian career had people say or do things that they suggested was funny but which from my perspective had the capacity to cut. Things that were exclusionary to an aspect of my identity. I didn't feel comfortable or supported enough to ask for the posters to be removed and they remained on the walls for many months silently repudiating me.

Later in my civilian work I was employed on a temporary assignment that was responding to a parliamentary inquiry into the pricing of telecommunications. This was a revelation to me as I was exposed to the political decision making processes. I asked myself is this "really" how the process works that would lead to soldiers such as myself being deployed overseas to fight a war? It seemed so venal and shallow. I for example learnt that boundaries would sometimes be drawn to advantage powerful people. For example I had always wondered why the local call boundary had a straight line in the south after being a consistent 40km from Melbourne everywhere else. I learnt that the line was drawn so the Victoria's then richest man Reg Ansett who lived in Mount Eliza would have local call access to Melbourne.

I thought that the process was all quite venal and that the submissions to the inquiry could be distilled into "I am a special case and I want more!" or "If I can't have a benefit then I don't want my competition to have any benefit either!" To add a further degree of complication to my military service the woman I married grew up in Lebanon, speaks fluent Arabic and has family and friends dotted throughout the world. As a result I sometimes find that I have relatives living in countries that post 9/11 are regarded with some suspicion by Australia and sometimes get the other side of the story but not always from them. This is because being traders by nature Lebanese people can be found living all over the world. Australia by contrast is a nation of immigrants and we have people from all over the world living here.

I left the army shortly before the end of the old millennium with the rank of Major. It is fair to say the Army I joined had transformed during the period of my service from a slightly shell shocked state post Vietnam to the effective force it became as demonstrated during the successful East Timor operation. At the turn of the millennium I was elected to my local council and served for two terms as a councilor and served as Mayor of the City of Greater Dandenong during the period when the Iraq invasion took place. Given I had studied at the request of my Commander during my military service Islam and the

Arabic culture I did not support the Iraq war or the Afghan War which proceeded it. I attended the anti-war protests at the time. I was on crutches at the time and found with the huge crowds that it to impossible to get to the podium to speak. I found the rationale for the war deeply flawed, lacked an understanding of the Muslim and Arabic culture and was shallow and unconvincing. Having an Arabic speaking wife and being surrounded by people from all over the globe who live in my area and with having had the Muslims vote for me I tend to look at the globe from the point of view that it is in some ways something of an extension of my neighborhood. Indeed I tended to refer to multicultural, multi-faith Greater Dandenong as the world in a city.

On council I learnt to understand some of the pressures that cause politicians to do the things they do. I also learnt how hard it is to effect worthwhile change, how you can only do what you can do, how you can be sure you are right and still lose and how brutal and personal the process can be. I survived this process physically and my sense of self worth intact but bearing several deep scars some of which I explore in these writings. My scars are my gift. They say you learn by you're mistakes. I believe this very much to be true. Pain is a powerful teacher but in my view it is better and a great deal safer to learn from the mistakes of others. To learn from their pain even if understandably you don't learn the lesson quite so thoroughly.

Today I find myself to be deemed a veteran even though I have never left Australia to fight overseas and my country is still engaged in wars that I do not support. I do think I am a veteran however and I have been in a war. That is the war of being a soldier in Australia in these confusing times. Times which I call the period of great disruption. The war I fought in is the war of trying to make sense of it all and at the same time trying to do the best I can. As an officer my war is not just the war of a warrior. The warrior part of me is satisfied with the philosophy of martial arts as described in the following story: A student asks his master; "Master you teach me to fight but you constantly talk about peace. How do you reconcile the two?" to which the master relies "It is better to be a warrior in a garden, than a gardener in a war!" I am retired now and able to enjoy my garden. However my war hasn't finished. It is a war that didn't stop when I took off my boots. It is a war that can begin anew each day when I read the news. In many ways this war is an attempt to square the circle of the frequently contradictory and competing influences that have shaped my service both in the military and in politics. I have found my journey confusing, confronting and at times bruising and also unrelenting. I therefore once again put one foot in front of the other in my war, my struggle to make sense of it all. This journey finds its expression in the writings below.