



BRINGING VETERANS TOGETHER



ESSAY

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BRINGING VETERANS TOGETHER

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Veteran's Groups	03
The Veteran Defined	03
The Veteran Community	03
Our Challenge	03

THE MODERN VETERANS ASSOCIATION

Introduction	04
Fraternity	04
Equality	04
Honour	05
Leadership	06
Our Mission	06
Our Objects	07
Our Nature	08
Our Motto	08
Our March	08
Our Insignia	08
Our Flags	08
Our Awareness Ribbon	08
Conclusion	08

THE OLD VETERANS SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS

Introduction	09
The Proliferation of Veterans' Groups	09
The Old VSO's are not viable	09
The Shortcomings	09
Conclusion	11

INTEGRATING MODERN VETERANS GROUPS

Introduction	12
Definition of a Veterans Association	12
The Veteran's Identity	12
A Three Step Process	12
A Partnership Alliance	13
A Federation	14
Full Integration	15

CONCLUSION

United We Stand	16
The New Veterans	16
Bringing Veterans Together	16

BRINGING VETERANS TOGETHER

INTRODUCTION

Veteran's Groups

There are more veterans groups in existence today than ever before. If we are going to bring all of these groups under a so-called “umbrella organization”, we need to understand why this is so. I shall examine this phenomenon and offer solutions grouped around the following three themes:

1. What a modern-day veterans association should be
2. Why the older veterans service organizations are not a viable option
3. How to integrate the modern-day veterans associations

The Veteran

Before we examine these three themes, it is important to establish what a veteran in the modern-day context means. The following is a modern definition of a veteran:

“A Veteran is a person who has served under arms in war or peace whose service is officially recognized by the award of a national or international service decoration”

This definition is intended to set clear parameters as to whom we are seeking to bring together. This is explained below according to certain principles.

The Veteran Community

Our modern veterans are both war-fighters and peacekeepers who have served in various peace support operations. Their average age is 36 (not 60). They are mostly former and serving military personnel, but increasingly RCMP, police and other peace officers. They have seen service with NATO, the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU) and other international organizations or with multinational missions. Over 125,000 Canadian veterans have served on peacekeeping or peace enforcement operations. Many have experienced conflict in Korea, Congo, Cyprus, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf, Somalia, Rwanda, Bosnia, Croatia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and the Middle East.

Our Challenge

Veterans have done their duty. We Veterans must now –

BRING VETERANS TOGETHER!

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THE MODERN VETERANS ASSOCIATION

Introduction

A veterans association should reflect present and future membership, and be focused on the conditions and the times they serve in. Here are identified four principles upon which to build a modern post-1947 veterans association, these are: *Fraternity, Equality, Honour, and Leadership.*

Fraternity

- The primary purpose of a veterans association must be to bring veterans together in comradeship. We should create a social focus to promote unity among ourselves and see to the welfare of all veterans.
- Veterans must govern a modern veterans' association.
- Membership in a veterans association must be primarily for veterans.
- Only Veterans shall have the right to vote and to hold elected office.
- There ought to be only three types of membership: Veteran, Associate, and Honorary. There are to be no life members.
- Veterans are the voting members who must form the absolute majority in order to preserve the nature and credibility of the modern veterans' association.
- Associate members are to be non-voting but might hold certain appointed offices ex-officio in a strictly administrative capacity.
- The Parade Marshall and Sergeant-at-Arms are non-elected appointments, which are reserved for qualified veterans.
- Honorary members should be restricted to a very few prominent, honourable and distinguished persons who are able to substantially contribute to the interests of the veteran's community.
- We should have a patron who is a veteran.

Equality

- All veterans must have equal status among fellow veterans.
- A veteran is a veteran is a veteran, whether they are military or police, regular or reserve, man or woman, young or old, active or retired, French or English, Canadian or foreign, war-fighters, law enforcers or peacekeepers, or whether they served as sharp-enders or not.
- There is no rank among veterans, only honour and respect.
- The defining factor for veterans is service under arms in a life-threatening environment.

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Honour

- Only veterans may wear a veterans' uniform. Modern veterans should wear the veteran's uniform and the insignia of their choice appropriate for the occasion and the nature of their service.
- Parade Marshalls and Sergeants-at-Arms shall wear a crimson red sash without badges or devices of any kind attached to it and shall carry a pace-stick or drill cane as a sign of their authority.
- Civilians should never dress or wear insignia and decorations in our image, for they did not serve, therefore do not deserve to wear our uniform.
- Only veterans may carry the flags under which they served. Veterans served under their flags with honour and it therefore follows that veterans know how to proudly carry the flags in the correct order of precedence with honour and decorum.
- Civic flags with no relevance to veterans shall not be carried in a veteran's parade or other commemorative occasion. They may not form part of a veterans' flag party in a public parade or ceremony.
- Only veterans may salute. All other members and civilians shall remove headdress and stand at attention or give a short bow as befits the occasion.
- Only a qualified veteran, never a civilian, may lead a commemorative parade or command a veteran's contingent on parade.
- Veterans shall march in their own contingents only with, and among, veterans. They are not to march mixed in with other civilian groups of any kind. Veterans should be clearly identifiable by the public.
- On commemorative days, veterans shall exercise their right to keep their place of honour in front of a parade or official gathering.
- All Canadian Post-1947, United Nations, and NATO commemorative days shall be observed along with all other established days.
- Veterans shall appropriately honour Silver Cross recipients.
- Only official service medals recognized by the government of Canada shall be worn over the left breast.
- Certain unofficial medals may be worn over the right breast but under very strict conditions subject to the context and with official approval.
- No old civilianized veteran's service organization medals may be worn, as they have no relevance to commemorative ceremonies.
- Official and unofficial decorations may not be juxtaposed.
- No person may wear other than their own decorations, not even those of a relative, as this is a criminal offence.
- A veteran's funeral should be conducted with honour and decorum.

BRINGING VETERANS TOGETHER

Leadership

- Veterans shall only be led by veterans.
- We shall constantly strive to bring veterans together. No veteran in need shall be left alone or helpless whether a member or not.
- Only veterans may represent veterans at any disciplinary hearing, official meeting or gathering held in the name of veterans or for veterans as civilians are not qualified to judge or apt to lead veterans.
- A veteran's association shall not engage in any political, religious or commercial activity for profit.
- The governing structure of the organization should be simple, two-tiered, and based upon the essential functions.
- Communications must be accurate, timely, relevant and transparent.
- Veterans have a moral right and patriotic duty to protect and perpetuate the symbols, customs and traditions of the service and of the nation. We are the guardians of these sacred symbols.
- Ceremonial and protocol shall be decided and carried out by experienced veterans, not civilians unless they are advised by veterans.
- Veterans shall perpetuate remembrance, and honour veterans past, present and future: *Lest We Forget / Je me Souviens*.
- We shall advocate in favour of the interests, and watch over the rights of all veterans, whether they are members or not.
- We shall collaborate in partnership with other legitimate national and international veteran's organizations, with similar missions and objects as our own.
- We shall cooperate with government authorities such as VAC and DND/CF in order to advocate for veterans.

Our Mission

The mission statement of a veterans association must be the sum of its nature, purpose and objects. Here is an example of a mission statement:

“The Veterans Association is a democratic, not-for-profit, apolitical, and non-sectarian organization, whose purpose is to unite veterans in comradeship and to promote their interests”

Simply put, the mission of a veterans association is to ***“unite veterans in comradeship and to promote their interests”***. A short slogan may also be used, such as:

“Bringing Veterans Together”

BRINGING VETERANS TOGETHER

Our Objects

The objects of the modern veteran's association should be as follows:

- To regroup into the association those Canadian veterans who have served or are still serving under arms whose service has been recognized by the award of national or international service decorations;
- To establish and to maintain chapters of the association in order to serve as a social focus for Canadian veterans and to permit them to manifest their pride, uphold their dignity, and to obtain the recognition which they deserve;
- To encourage unity, comradeship, self-assistance, and to promote the welfare of its members by commemorative, community and social activities;
- To advocate and speak on behalf of, or otherwise represent before government authorities, in favour of the defence of the rights of veterans and to watch over and promote the interests of those that are on active service or in retirement who are in need of professional help or financial aid;
- To perpetuate remembrance and to venerate the brave exploits of those who have sacrificed themselves in the defence of the country, for freedom and democracy, for law and order, and in the service of peace, and to erect and maintain commemorative monuments in their honour;
- To collaborate in partnership with other veteran's associations which have similar aims and objects;
- To support the commitment of Canada in the service of peace and to obtain the favour of the Canadian public by providing public and private organizations with expert counsel, discussions or eyewitness accounts, speeches, literature and other information regarding the service and the sacrifice of Canadian veterans during war and peace support operations;
- To assist the humanitarian services of the United Nations and other apolitical and non-sectarian charitable organizations at home and abroad; and
- To obtain donations and to collect dues in order to gather funds for the accomplishment of the mission and the objects of the association.

BRINGING VETERANS TOGETHER

Our Nature

The modern veteran's association is an exclusive fraternity of veterans, which shall be a registered corporate body with a constitutional charter and by-laws reflecting its nature, principles, purpose, and objects. Its purpose must be to ***bring veterans together.***

Our Motto

The motto of the modern veteran might be: ***“Proud to serve, proud to have served”***. The motto should be voiced after every speech and appear at the bottom of every document of the association. Peacekeepers might add the words ***“in the service of peace”***, war-fighters might add the words ***“for freedom and democracy”***, or ***“against terror”***, police might add the words ***“on the thin blue line”***, ***“in law enforcement”***, or ***“community and country”***, and other veterans might simply add ***“Canada”***. The motto also stands well on its own.

Our March

Veterans must have their own martial music to promote their unity. The March ***“Mon Ami”*** is suggested as this is already the unofficial Peacekeeper's March and is identified with no particular unit or corps.

Our Insignia

The crest and badge of a post-1947 veteran's association should include certain Cold War and Peacekeeping symbols. The UN and NATO symbols and the Maple Leaf shall therefore be reflected in the design of the insignia.

Our Flags

Veterans of the post-1947 era are best represented by three flags: the National Flag of Canada, the Flag of the United Nations and the NATO Flag. The association could be identified with a flag bearing two horizontal shades of light blue above and dark blue below, divided by a thin white stripe, bearing the association insignia, or simply a red maple leaf in the centre superimposed. The light blue would represent the UN and the Air Force, the dark blue NATO, the police, and the Navy, the Red for Canada, the Army and the RCMP, and the white for peace. White and red are the colours of Canada, white and blue of the United Nations and NATO.

Our Awareness Ribbon

We should also consider creating an awareness ribbon. A light blue and dark blue ribbon would seem appropriate.

Conclusion

The criterion of what a modern-day post-1947 veterans association should be; the definition of a modern veteran, the principles of operation, the mission statement, the objects and symbols may be used to reinforce existing veterans' associations, create new ones or to unite existing organizations. The

advantages of integration seem obvious. We should perhaps inspire ourselves by the example and the integrity of the KVA.

BRINGING VETERANS TOGETHER

THE OLD VETERANS SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS

The Proliferation of Veteran's Groups

If there are so many veterans' associations today, it is in large part due to the attitude of our old veterans' service organizations (VSO's). Had these venerable pre-1947 veterans' organizations been more flexible, forthcoming and in tune with the times and had not allowed the civilians to take control of them, the modern veteran's organizations of today would not exist. Hereunder, are some of the reasons why.

The old VSO's are not viable

The old veterans service organizations and some regimental associations are no longer a viable option for the modern veteran.

These associations have failed us; they have failed to recognize most of us as veterans for over sixty years, they have failed to bring us together. They have become civilianized and they have lost their credibility in the eyes of all veterans including many of their own members. They have failed to unite together. These organizations have become something else entirely; they are more similar to a civic charity organization or a social club than a true veterans association. Moreover, they are too old to change because they perpetuate a war veteran's culture, scorn the modern veteran and live in the past.

The Shortcomings

The old VSO's are not viable for today's veterans. They no longer appeals to modern veterans because:

- They are practically and entirely civilian-managed. Their governance structure is top heavy. The membership dues are far too high.
- The civilian membership overrules their veterans with their majority vote at all levels of the organization with the result that veterans must submit to the civilian majority on all decisions. They are imposing an incompatible civilian attitude in an organization which supposedly exists for veterans who have a military or paramilitary attitude;
- Their veteran membership has fallen below 15% and is mostly composed of residual Second World War and Korean War veterans who often do not consider us as "real veterans".
- These older veterans and civilians do not always make the younger veterans welcome. They have become an "old mans' association";
- The VSO representatives sent to the various veterans' councils of Veterans Affairs Canada are rarely veterans. Civilians are not apt to represent veterans at these meetings;
- They monopolize our commemorations and will not share their place with other veterans' groups. They jealously guard their influence and predominance on these occasions. We have to fall-in on their terms;

BRINGING VETERANS TOGETHER

- The civilians do not truly understand the veteran's needs because they have not served under arms in dangerous conditions. They cannot understand the veteran sub-culture and therefore misinterpret our behaviour, especially those of us who suffer from PTSD;
- They have poor decorum, are more often improperly dressed and do not respect or understand our service customs;
- They wear far too many meaningless medals to denote their associate service, which diminishes the honour of the service decorations of veterans. Their facsimile uniform and imitation medals bring them to pass themselves off as veterans in the eyes of the public;
- Veterans are made to march with civilians under the command of civilians with the result that they just don't participate any longer;
- The VSO'S will not allow the veteran to identify with his former service unit or insignia as they insist on their dress and insignia. The veteran did not serve under the flags or crests of these organizations;
- Their recruiting campaign is based on enrolling civilians rather than veterans and puts emphasis on community activities rather than focus on veterans, who are thereby relegated to last place;
- There is no real effort to educate the members on how to relate to veterans and to explain the customs of the service and the nation;
- They perpetuate a "war veteran" culture, which alienates the modern veteran. Their definition of a veteran is based on their perception that a "real" veteran is a "War Veteran" ("Ancien Combattant") and thereby ignore thousands of modern veterans;
- They do not follow proper flag protocol and precedence and carry them without proper decorum. Their flag precedence is incorrect or non-existent as it does not follow international flag protocol for the UN and NATO flags and they refuse to let our veterans carry our flags if we do not dress in a VSO uniform;
- Their practice of dipping flags is outdated, misguided and contrary to the official policy of the Government of Canada and the UN Flag Code, yet they continue to perpetuate and impose this anachronistic practice upon us and the Canadian public;
- Their tradition of massed flag parties is now carried on by well-meaning civilians who have no skill at drill and ceremonial and this is regarded by modern veterans with great dismay and frustration;
- The French language does not have equal status in these VSO's. French is made to take second-place or is non-existent in the francophone areas of the country and more particularly in VSO publications. They are run by an Anglophone oligarchy. French documentation technically badly written.

BRINGING VETERANS TOGETHER

Conclusion

Our traditions are being eroded or simply carried on without meaning or relevance by the old VSO's. Civilians blindly command our veterans, carry our flags without decorum, march in our parades without knowing how, wear our uniforms and display private or commemorative VSO medals in our image, and to add insult to injury, are applauded by a public who can no longer tell the difference between a veteran and a civilian member of a VSO. Because of this shameful spectacle, they diminish the worth and status of our veterans. They hurt our pride and ridicule our honour. This is contrary to their very own objects!

These venerable old VSO's can, regardless of their shortcomings, adopt a more positive role towards the modern veterans' organizations and for their own veteran members. Here are some positive aspects of our old VSO's:

- Their purpose and objects are similar to the modern veteran's associations;
- They possess an organized, national infrastructure. They are blessed with meeting halls equipped with games and meeting rooms, bars and kitchens;
- They have established solid and lasting contacts with the media, community, religious and public services;
- They are able to hold many official and social activities;
- They have a veteran membership;
- They possess financial autonomy;
- They advocate for the care of veterans and their families;
- Their procedural manuals are for the most part well-written and tested;
- Their websites are excellent;
- They are well-known by the public;
- They conduct a national campaigns to perpetuate remembrance; and
- They are well-connected with most government bodies.

The VSO's host many chapters of our modern veteran's associations. Most of our members are members of these VSO's and are often the most active participants and leaders. The VSO's can encourage our participation and support by:

- Providing host units for our chapters;
- Educating their members about modern veterans and PTSD;
- Combining official and social activities with our chapters;
- Appointing veterans to represent veterans;
- Share headquarters and other facilities;
- Allowing our veterans to take the lead during commemorations; and
- ***Bringing veterans together.***

BRINGING VETERANS TOGETHER

INTEGRATING MODERN VETERANS' GROUPS

Introduction

The integration of the modern veteran's associations is a feasible proposition because they have a great deal in common. The older VSO's who do not meet the definition outlined below are not readily adaptable to integration. For them, the best scenario we can reasonably aim for is cooperation within an umbrella organization. For an old civilianized VSO to lead such an organization however, is out of the question because they can no longer be considered true veterans organizations because their leadership is almost totally civilianized at all levels.

Definition of a Veterans' Association

A true modern veteran's organization may be best described as follows:

“A chartered, corporate, not-for-profit, apolitical, non-sectarian, organization whose voting membership is exclusive to veterans and whose mission is to bring veterans together for comradeship, mutual support and to advocate in their interest”

The Veteran's Identity

To integrate the modern veteran's groups we will have to keep in mind certain factors to be successful. It is important to respect the service identity of the veteran membership and the accomplishments of each association. Although there are many identities among modern veterans, most have more than one identity and this should help them to overcome their qualms. Integration should be accomplished progressively by stages to allow time for the members accept the idea of eventually uniting into one strong association with multiple identities.

A Three-Step Process

The successful integration of the modern veteran's groups would involve three distinct steps. These are:

1. Partnership / Alliance;
2. Federation; and
3. Full Integration.

It must be noted that some veteran's groups do not have chapters but are virtual organizations, for example; the *NATO Veterans Association* the *Canadian Army Veterans* and the *Gulf War Veterans Association* (GWVA) have no physical location, and they come together through the Internet. Those associations which have chapters also have virtual headquarters and rarely own real estate. An existing defence establishment such as an Armoury or more often by the older VSO branches or units harbours them. The older VSO's are advantaged by a nation-wide infrastructure, a large membership base and financial autonomy. These factors shall have to be taken into consideration.

BRINGING VETERANS TOGETHER

A Partnership Alliance

The initial first step will be a partnership of veteran's associations. This so-called "umbrella organization" should include the modern veteran's groups as well as the older VSO's. We must ensure that all veterans are involved and not to alienate the VSO host, especially at the chapter level. We must insist however, that the representatives of the civilianized VSO's negotiate only through their veteran members, not the civilians. Veterans are to be cast in the leadership role, civilians in the support role only. It is important to send a clear message as to the nature of the partnership and to ensure that this message is passed to veteran members of each organization. The following steps are recommended to form a "Partnership Alliance" of both the old and modern veteran's groups:

- The formation of a *Canadian Veteran's Council (CVC) Conseil des Vétérans Canadiens* who will create a "Ways and Means" committee;
- The CVC leadership may be composed of a senior veteran representative from each organization;
- A contract or letter of understanding will need to be drawn up in order to set the parameters and conditions of the *Partnership Alliance*;
- The appointment of a common Communications Officer is recommended to ensure that the CVC has its own voice;
- A public statement or press communiqué announcing the formation of an alliance should be distributed at large;
- Coordination meetings are to be set up at regional and/or provincial levels to ensure mutual cooperation at commemorative ceremonies and other common events;
- An integration timetable for the following two stages (Federation and Integration) of the process shall be drawn up by the Ways & Means Committee composed of veterans;
- The sharing of officers and directors to attend VAC conferences and represent each organization by proxy;
- All representatives shall be veterans only;
- The sharing of information within and between each association shall be encouraged in order to promote confidence and transparency;
- The membership categories and membership dues are maintained as they exist until the next stage;
- The uniforms and symbols of each organization are maintained;
- Each website is maintained but shall exchange and share information of common interest and to cross-link electronically;
- The Association Newsletters begin to share articles and information;
- Poppy sales shall be fully undertaken by all organizations in support of the Remembrance and Poppy campaigns.

BRINGING VETERANS TOGETHER

A Federation

This second stage concerns only the modern veteran's associations. The older VSO'S are not included but remain as members of the CVC, which remains unchanged as the common forum for all the old and modern veteran's organizations. The federation excludes the old VSO's because of their civilianized leadership. The following measures are recommended to form a federation of modern veteran's groups:

- The integration of the corporate governing bodies of each member organization into a single and unified governing body called the **Canadian Veterans Federation / Fédération des Vétérans Canadiens**;
- The various regional and provincial structures are also integrated as six new federal regions;
- The chapters, branches, or units of each association maintain their autonomy and identity but report to an Executive Committee through the six common Regional Directors (Vice-Presidents);
- The chief executive officers (presidents) of each veteran's association become members of the Executive Committee;
- The Director-General (President) and the Executive Director (Vice-President) of the Federation are nominated by the members of the Executive Committee every two years;
- Each of the six regions shall be directed by a Regional Director and assisted by a Regional Commissioner elected by the membership or appointed by all the member associations in each region;
- The financial resources of the member organizations are not integrated;
- The administrative personnel and resources of the member organizations are shared but not integrated;
- The membership categories and membership dues are gradually changed to attain a common standard;
- The uniforms and symbols of each organization are maintained;
- Each organization website is integrated into a single website except for regional, veterans group, language, chapter, branch or unit websites which remain the same;
- The various newsletters are integrated into one called the **"Bulletin du VETERAN Newsletter"**
- A Federal Charter comes into effect and the various associations modify their existing Constitution & By-Laws as required.

BRINGING VETERANS TOGETHER

Full Integration

The third and final stage concerns only the modern veteran's associations. The older VSO'S are not included because of their civilian majority voting membership and civilianized leadership. The CVC continues to operate as the common forum. Only one representative for the former federation members is now required. The following measures are recommended to form a fully integrated modern veterans association:

- The complete integration of the Federation into a single and unified corporate entity comes into effect with the new association Constitution & By-Laws modeled on the preceding federal charter;
- The chapters, branches, or units of each association continue to maintain their autonomy and identity and report to an Executive Council through the six Regional Directors (Vice-Presidents);
- The former chief executive officers (presidents) of each veteran's association remain as members of the Executive Council and become the Regional Directors (Vice-Presidents) or sub-committee chairpersons;
- The Director-General (President), the Executive Director (Vice-President) and the Adjutant-General (Secretary-Treasurer) of the Association are nominated by the members (Regional Directors) of the Executive Council every two years;
- Each of the six regions shall be directed by a Regional Director and a Regional Commissioner nominated by the Executive Council from volunteers;
- The Regional Directors shall comprise the Executive Council;
- The Regional Directors and Regional Commissioners also serve by appointment in the various committees of the association;
- The financial resources of the former associations are fully integrated;
- The administrative personnel and resources of the member organizations are fully integrated;
- The membership categories and membership dues are standardized;
- The uniforms and symbols of each organization may be maintained with the addition of common symbols (Crest and Flag);
- Each website is integrated into a single website except for chapter, websites which remain the same;
- The Association Constitution and By-Laws come into effect and the various chapters modify their Constitution & By-Laws as required.

BRINGING VETERANS TOGETHER

CONCLUSION

United We Stand

Our modern veterans associations must eventually unite together. The old venerable veteran's service organizations are too civilianized, too far gone to unite with us. A new partnership must be created, if not, veterans will have no real voice and veteran's organizations no real credibility, to advocate for them. We have all the good reasons to integrate our modern veterans associations, for united we stand, divided we fall.

The New Veterans

The generation of our fathers and grandfathers who fought in the great conflicts of the first half of the twentieth century are dying off rapidly. These war veterans have since the early 1950's been succeeded by a different generation of veterans who were exposed to life-threatening situations, but did not necessarily engage in combat. Moreover, we are witnessing today, the birth of yet another generation, the post-Cold War veterans, those who are fighting terrorists and other armed groups. All these veterans deserve to be recognized as equals by the public and the veterans' community.

Bringing Veterans Together

Finding a modern twenty-first century way to bring these veterans together is our challenge. We must define whom we are and where we are going, today and in the future, for ourselves and for those veteran's who will follow us. This document is an outline for the road ahead. Veteran's associations have historically been founded by veterans for veterans. The older veteran's service organizations have failed us. They have not kept us together and have lost their credibility in the face of the modern, post-1947 veteran because they have not recognized us as veterans. Now led by a majority civilian membership, they have become something other than a true veterans association. Too slow to change, they are too far-gone to change. ***It is not we, the veterans, who must go to them to find unity, it is they that must come to us, to lead and bring all our veterans together!***

The older veteran's organizations are not up to the task of bringing veterans together because their aging and diminishing veteran membership have unfortunately handed the torch to well-meaning, but woefully inept civilians. These civilians have dropped the torch; it is lying there, on the field of honour, still flickering. It is therefore up to us, the post-1947 veterans, not the civilians whom we defend, to take up the torch and light the way ahead. This is our urgent duty and our destiny. We must once again –

BRING VETERANS TOGETHER!