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Subject: RSL CLUBS NO LONGER FOCUS ON VETERANS

Article from 'The Business Insider Australia' by a former Army officer.

The Club With Cheap Beer And Pokies No Longer Focuses On The War Veterans Whose Names It Invokes.

JAMES BROWN Wednesday, March 5th, 2014, author of Anzac's Long Shadow.

**RSL Clubs now
march to a different a different beat.**

At 6.00 pm precisely and at more than 270 RSL clubs across New South Wales the staggered scraping backwards of chairs echoes as the room heaves to its feet.

Heads bow to reflect on the sacrifice of veterans who have fought in so many wars, old and new. Scattered across the walls are military memorabilia and faded photos of men fighting in far off lands. Some clubs have entrances graced by artillery guns, tanks and in one case a

fighter jet.

All point to their deep origins in support for the returned soldiers of world wars and an ongoing concern for the veteran's community. Some are little more than tin and fibro shacks in country hamlets, unlocked every now and then so that old companions can gather, remember and share. Some are giant sparkling casinos with bowling alleys, multi-storey car parks and vast marketing budgets.

Today the service clubs are a multi-billion dollar industry employing thousands, with a 40 per cent share of NSW's \$3.2 billion of annual gaming machine profits. The RSL and clubs network brings together thousands of unselfish volunteers dedicated to helping one another and bound by the ideal of community. All are linked by the shared sacred rites of Anzac and Anzac Day, the imagery of military service and a mutual commitment to care for the veterans of Australia's wars. Except that they're often not linked, and often not following through on their commitments.

What was once a symbiotic relationship between registered RSL clubs and veterans has become poisonous in some cases? RSL clubs, originally a grand idea to grant special privileges in return for a promise to support veterans, have become tangled thickets of vested interests and multi-million dollar property deals.

Someone walking into an RSL club, ordering a beer and tucking into a chicken parmigiana might think that they are helping support veterans. After all, one of the pillars of the campaign against poker machine reform was 'clubs support our diggers'. But in many cases clubs are doing little more than offering an annual Anzac Day commemorative service. Three days before Anzac Day last year, Don Rowe, the president of the NSW RSL, made an uncharacteristically critical and detailed media intervention. "We want nothing to do with the clubs and the poker machines and the drinking. The clubs aren't serving our members," he said. "The clubs don't contribute to us or the welfare of veterans. They are trading off the Anzac traditions and the Anzac legend. Let's divorce

ourselves, if you like, of the family tree. Let's call it quits and we'll get on with our business." The reply from Clubs NSW was equally direct. "To say that there is no contribution made by RSL clubs to the RSL is just flatout wrong," said the CEO, Anthony Ball. "RSL clubs have made and continue to make an enormous contribution to our veterans to the tune of millions of dollars each year ... money that they've generated from the general community that has allowed them to assist veterans and support the ideals of the RSL." The chairman of the RSL and Service Clubs Association, Bryn Miller, also leapt to the defence, saying, "There are many examples of RSL clubs assisting and helping veterans," and denying that clubs were exploiting the Anzac spirit. The average beer-drinking, parma-polishing New South Welshman may well have been confused to see something he had long considered one and the same dividing and attacking itself in public.

It's a common and understandable misconception that RSL Clubs and the Returned and Services League are the same thing, but a little history is helpful in understanding what has now become a complex web existing under the banner of 'the RSL'. Returned servicemen's organisations arose from private efforts to look after the welfare of troops in 1917. Local clubs were formed to host soldiers on their disembarkation from troopships and benefit them and their families.

In return, these organisations were given the right to claim the sacred word Anzac as their own and to use it in their fundraising. As the associations became more established, they acquired their own clubhouses - in some cases gifted by wealthy families or state governments, or purchased from fundraising efforts. Over time these clubs consolidated in the Returned and Services League, separately incorporated in each state of Australia. In NSW, the RSL is incorporated under an act of state parliament. It has hundreds of semi-autonomous local organisations called sub-branches, each with its own president and board of directors.

Until 2013 military service was a prerequisite to join these sub-branches, although the threshold was set low - a few months as a reservist was enough to get you across the line to full membership. The sub-branches

report to a state council and president but largely set their own priorities and conduct their own operations. In the 1970s the NSW government passed the Registered Clubs Act, which effectively meant that RSL sub-branches big and small could no longer govern the operation of their own clubhouse bars and poker machines. The Act created new legal entities: registered clubs limited by guarantee and governed by a new board, responsible for operating the clubhouse. These were called RSL Clubs, and in many cases you did not need to have served in the military to be a director of an RSL Club.

In each case the relationship between RSL sub-branch and RSL Club was different. In some cases the two entities had the same board members or were closely linked. I'm lucky enough to work on the executive of the North Bondi RSL sub-branch in Sydney, which has one of the largest memberships of serving military members in the state. We maintain a separate board from the small registered club that runs our clubhouse, but we have excellent relations with them and they are full partners in our efforts to help veterans. In other cases, the two entities have grown apart. Graeme Carroll, the CEO of the RSL and Services Clubs in NSW, is right when he says, "clubs and the RSL are inextricably linked". But Don Rowe is equally right in his criticism that "A lot of clubs have gone completely away from the ideals and aims of [when] they were founded 50 or 60 years ago by the RSL sub-branch guys, and they've now become big business." Though there might be military memorabilia on the walls, fewer than one in 20 of the members of RSL Clubs state-wide have been in the military, and even fewer have ever been to war. And, over time, RSL Clubs have become a very big business.

So colossally does the Rooty Hill RSL Club loom over Western Sydney that for the past several years it has waged a campaign demanding its own postcode. Within its grounds are a full Novotel and bowling alley. Its gaming floor is a sea of hundreds of poker machines. The then prime minister decamped her entourage to the club in 2013 and it has played host to prime ministerial debates in the last two federal election campaigns.

The 'Last Post' is played every night, governors have paid tribute at the club's war memorial and the NSW RSL held its conference there in 2012 - but this suburban casino is no veterans organisation.

In 2012, the Rooty Hill RSL Club brought in \$71.5 million in revenue from its operations, with \$46.1 million of this coming from gambling activities alone. Donations to charity and community groups, including in-kind donations of venue space and hospitality, amounted to just \$900,000 and Rooty Hill will not divulge whether this included veteran's charities. The Castle Hill and Parramatta RSL Clubs combined brought in \$52 million of revenue, yet less than half of a per cent of this (\$250,000) went towards 'veteran support and welfare'. In 2013, the Dee Why RSL Club won the Clubs NSW award for making the greatest contribution to the community of all RSL and Service Clubs in NSW - in other words, its donation rate was the highest in the state. From total revenue of \$54 million and post tax profits of \$9.3 million, it found just \$1.2 million to donate to more than 120 community and charity groups. Among these 120 groups, only two had links to the veteran's community.

The issue is not that RSL Clubs aren't doing charitable work. The issue is that they are not doing nearly enough charitable work given the extraordinarily privileged position they occupy in society. From the rivers of gold that flow into the clubs, barely a trickle reaches veterans. Most of the money is ploughed into clubhouse renovations. Rooty Hill now boasts more than \$110 million of assets, Castle Hill \$96 million and Dee Why a whopping \$145 million. The social compact to look after veterans has been broken. And there's limited transparency. Put up a war memorial, play the 'Last Post', leverage the symbolism of Anzac and no one will hold you to your promise of looking after veterans.

Many RSL Clubs no longer even refer to veterans in their mission statement, instead proclaiming their support of sporting clubs and social members.

Extract from *Anzac's Long Shadow: The Cost of our National Obsession* by James Brown, published by Redback, \$19.99. Available in bookshops

now.

<http://www.businessinsider.com.au/the-club-with-cheap-beer-and-pokies-no-longer-focusses-on-the-war-veterans-whose-names-it-invokes-2014-3>