

Action this day

'Veterans Aid works like an Accident and Emergency unit – it admits veterans in crisis, identifies their problems and looks for the most appropriate treatment'— says Viola Dabrowska in a *Polish Daily* interview with Piotr Gulbicki.

Veterans Aid looks after veterans. Can you explain who is a Veteran?

Unfortunately many people do not understand who qualifies to use the title 'veteran'; consequently the word often conjures up images of either old ex-servicemen with several medals or young, highly decorated male 'heroes' just back from frontline service. In fact the word 'veteran' describes any man or woman, of any age, who has served in the armed forces for at least one day.

What support they can get?

The NHS (National Health Service) entitles veterans to priority access to hospital care for any condition related to their service, regardless of whether or not they receive a war pension. They are also given the 'golden card' that, in theory, gives them priority when trying to get access to social housing.

At the same time there's a paradox – on the one hand veterans in UK can be seen as 'citizens plus' due to the range of support that is available. On the other hand the 'one size fits all' system isn't flexible enough to respond to individual needs or ward off crises.

And Veterans Aid understands that one size does not fit all...

Veterans Aid works like an Accident and Emergency unit – it admits veterans in crisis, identifies their problems and looks for the most appropriate treatment. Holistic help is tailored to individual needs which is crucial to break the cycle of crisis. Every client is different so help often has to be bespoke and multidimensional. The charity's objective is to restore, and provide the means of sustaining, individual wellbeing, not simply provide short-term welfare props.

Problems can be solved in simple ways, by dealing with debt or providing clothing – a new suit for a job can make all the difference. Other interventions are longer term and more complex; they can involve advocacy, admission to detox and rehab facilities or personal sessions with outreach workers and issue-specific experts. In recent years Veterans Aid has received more and more calls for help from Foreign and Commonwealth veterans – and even serving personnel - seeking advice on settlement and UK citizenship issues.

Unlike some other charities Veterans Aid provides *new* clothing – one of the very symbolic but crucial gestures that brings back dignity. When clients are admitted to its hostel, or moved on to a new home of their own, accommodation is freshly decorated. Hostel residents receive new bed-linen, underwear and toiletries. When veterans are ready for training the charity ensures that the course will not only develop their skills but also enhance their prospects of employment.

What's your success rate?

The cases of relapse into homelessness or addictions after these veterans leave our care, are almost unknown. Veterans Aid has always believed in Winston Churchill's maxim 'Action this day'. It intervenes immediately, doing the best it can to avoid un-necessary delays and support individuals until they are back on their feet. The charity's fascinating archives include brochures, drawings, letters and photographs that bring its history to life and confirm that it has never strayed away from its core values. These records reveal that veterans struggled with the same difficulties over the decades as they do today.

Are these difficulties determined by the service?

A great myth about transition is that it is often hindered by service-related mental health problems. Some who founder in civilian life blame PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). In fact very few of those who claim the condition have been clinically diagnosed as sufferers and over-attribution of failure and/or bad behaviour to military service is not uncommon. It is worth noting that PTSD is a condition also experienced by *non-military* personnel for a variety of reasons and it is surprising to learn how many people are unaware of this! Veterans Aid has been caring for veterans in crisis for more than 80 years and very rarely sees genuine PTSD sufferers. Of course the condition exists and is distressing; but it is also treatable and VA has access to the services of a highly qualified Professor of Military Psychiatry.

Some VA clients have criminal records and a few have come to the charity straight from prison, but overall veterans are under-represented in both the homeless and the prison fraternity.

Veterans Aid believes that transition to civilian life is not in itself traumatic, and that veterans adapt well to reintegration. It laments the media tendency to portray them as either saints or sinner, heroes or monsters, but is sanguine about why this happens.

How many Veterans are in the UK?

There are around 4.5 million veterans in the UK. Every year a further 20,000 men and women leave the Armed Forces and become veterans. In spite of media scare stories the majority of them transit easily to civilian life. Problems like addiction or homelessness are mistakenly perceived as a result of service. Only a small number of veterans require help, usually several years after deployment, and very few end up in crisis. The average age of a VA client is around 40 but the charity receives calls for help from men and women of all ages.

VA knows that media over-emphasis of post-discharge problems can be damaging. It obscures the fact that military service develops skills that are essential in civilian life. Even clients who come to VA with problems can demonstrate – and build upon - qualities like reliability, resilience, adaptability, discipline, selflessness, acceptance of authority, courage and confidence.

How many people do you help?

Last year Veterans Aid took around 3,000 calls for help. The callers are ex-servicemen and women, serving personnel, families and people coming straight from prison. Some are teenagers, others are octogenarians. Some are former officers, others are drawn from the ranks or the Reserve Forces. Some are homeless or facing homelessness. Veterans Aid favours prevention where possible and does its best to prevent from evictions, but when this is not an option accommodation is provided

immediately - either in its New Belvedere House hostel (which is home to 55 men and always full!), a hotel or another suitable facility.

Poverty is the key factor in determining the extent of demand for VA's services. The economic climate has a significant impact on what happens to Veterans after service. There are very few instances providing a correlation between deployment and addiction, homelessness or PTSD.

The charity has got a long history...

Veterans Aid was established in 1931 by the wife of Major Gilbert Huggins in gratitude for his 'miraculous' escape from drowning in Malta's Grand Harbour. The Charity has been helping veterans in crisis ever since by providing accommodation, financial assistance, advice and advocacy as well as food and new clothing.

Problems may be dealt with in different ways due to developments in technology and communication, but the structures that were in place at Veterans Aid 80 years ago are still evident today. Unacceptable behaviour is not tolerated but those in its hostel have access to personal mentoring, computer suites, leisure and learning facilities. Morning fitness classes three times a week provide residents and members of staff with a fun experience which is great not only for physical health but also for trust-building.

In 2007 the name was changed to Veterans Aid?

Originally it was known as the Embankment Fellowship Centre. Initially a canteen and recreation room for destitute ex-servicemen, it was located at Belvedere Road in south-west London. The Charity grew very fast and during the winter of 1934-1935 it provided 23,091 nights of accommodation and 53,382 meals for Veterans. In 2012 it provided 20,697 nights of accommodation and while it no longer runs a canteen it is committed to breaking the cycle of crisis by involving those it helps in everyday activities. Breakfast is not provided to its hostel residents because they are encouraged to get up and go out.

In 1939 iconic director Michael Powell made 'Smith' for the Embankment Fellowship Centre – this first film is available on the Veterans Aid website (<http://www.veterans-aid.net/videos/>). The film, starring Ralph Richardson and Flora Robson, was intended to raise awareness of the help available to veterans in crisis and generate support. It has been followed by many others. The clothes have changed over the years but the films show how similar the problems are that bring veterans to the charity's door. Not military service, but poverty, unemployment, homelessness and the difficulties everyone encounters in dealing with life.

What cities do you operate from?

Veterans Aid is London-based but receives calls for help from all over the UK and from overseas. Last year Veterans Aid was heavily involved in the case of a Fijian veteran, who was refused permission to live and work in the UK despite his years of honourable service in British Army. The charity's dedicated team took on his case and eventually won him Leave to Remain. The family also received the 'golden card' which (in theory) fast tracks veterans applying for social housing. In fact this translated to an unacceptable seven year wait. Veterans Aid stepped in and paid for their deposit and first month's rent so they could move into to a safe, clean flat.

How big is Veterans Aid's office?

Eleven core people work in VA's HQ which is also a Drop-in Centre and first point of contact with those seeking help. A further nine are based at its New Belvedere House hostel in East London. These numbers are small but the charity's expertise, energy and flexibility make it highly effective.

Bureaucracy is minimal and the only qualification for receiving help is evidence of one day's service in Her Majesty's Armed Forces.

The team is augmented by specialist volunteers who share VA's commitment to immediate action and creative solutions. A veteran in crisis can get in touch via email, Freephone or by calling in without any appointment to the Drop-In Centre. The team is very 'hands on' and, under the leadership of its highly experienced CEO Dr Hugh Milroy, everyone has good understanding of the relevant issues and wider context. On a busy day a client is as likely to be seen by the CEO as a member of the outreach team!

Do you receive any calls for help from Polish veterans?

Yes, we do receive occasional calls for help, but they are not regular. We also get letters or emails from active personnel planning to leave as well as veterans from Missions Outside the Country seeking advice about what to do after deployment. Unfortunately we only help ex-servicemen from the British Armed Forces and signpost non-nationals seeking help to the relevant organisations in their home country.

However, a few decades ago veterans from Poland were entitled to special support. Polish troops who fought alongside the western allies during the Second World War were allowed to stay in the UK under The Polish Resettlement Act that was passed in 1947. The Act placed upon the Assistance Board (falling now to MOD) the responsibility for meeting the needs, either by cash allowance or maintenance in camps or hostels, of certain classes of Poles and their dependants. Resettlement camps were opened across UK. The last one that still operates is located in Ilford Park, Devon, and is known as 'Little Poland'.

In Poland there is a kind of a disunion between veterans from the Second World War and modern missions to Iraq or Afghanistan. Only last year Polish President Bronislaw Komorowski signed the Act for Veterans Actions Outside the Country which regulates status of veterans and recognises ex-servicemen and women from foreign missions under the auspices of NATO or the UN. There is also Veteran's House in Ładków Zdrój, in south-western Poland.