

Part Four of the interview with Michael von Berg

SPEAKERS

Michael von Berg, Megan Spencer

This is the fourth and final part of the interview with Michael von Berg, conducted by Megan Spencer on behalf of the Virtual War Memorial Australia on the 25th of August 2020, in Sellicks Beach, South Australia.

Megan Spencer 00:15

Back in your day, they conditioned you mentally to go to war and do the job, but they didn't warn you about what that might be like and what it might do to you, did they?

Michael von Berg 00:26

No, well, there's a thing now, which is called 'Resilience Training'. They've actually introduced Resilience Training. And I've spoken a bit about it to units. It's what to expect. And we never really had that.

Personally I think resilience is a self-imposed condition: you're either tough or you're not. And also, the ability to 'shut down', and this has been a big problem with Vietnam veterans in particular. Because we could not mourn, you know.

The soldier's killed: body bag; choppered out through the jungle canopy, "See you later". You're back on patrol. No time to mourn, no time to contemplate anything about that young fellow who's just been killed. And I think... that lack of mourning if you like for one of your mates - and you get very close in that environment - that lack of mourning brings the shutters down. So that when you come home, the shutters are still down.

You're not very tactile. You're very standoffish. You don't want people to get into your space. You're not necessarily too friendly because you might not be there tomorrow, you know? All those sorts of things definitely play on your mind, no question about it.

But I don't think they're conscious things that you do; they're subconscious things that you do because of what you've been through in Vietnam or any [other] active service, like Afghanistan. You're no different.

I mean, the only thing that we had as part of - if you could call it resilience, or 'reality training', if you like - is that we used to have some really bad leg wounds. A bit of plastic and a guy would be squeezing the arterial thing here and say, "Go in and treat it", and all that sort of stuff.

But I can tell you that sort of "make it up" wound is nothing compared to seeing a smashed femur from an M16 mine, totally different.

And I think what has to happen - I think it is happening, certainly a lot of the battalions are doing it now - is talking more to their battalions as to 'what to expect'. You know, what can you expect to see after an IED? The smell of cordite, people screaming people with limbs gone, etc. And not that words will ever, if you like, replace 'the actual' that's there, but it conditions the brain to be more - not accepting, that's the wrong word - but to be more prepared for what they may see in an act of service 'in area'.

Megan Spencer 02:53

So how do we go from 'surviving' to 'thriving' when you come out of the ADF? Like [with] resilience, a big part of that is emotional stuff too... They prepare your mind and your body, but [it] sounds like they didn't prepare you emotionally [back] then?

Michael von Berg 03:44

No.

Megan Spencer 03:45

Is that changing? And how could we do it better, these days?

Michael von Berg 03:48

When we came home, I mean, it was quite funny. [Laughs] When we came home, we got off "the Sydney" [HMAS Sydney] in Sydney. We were all dressed up ready to march, which we did. There was no paint thrown [at us] or anything like that. I mean, it was a pretty good march I've got to say, for us. The bad stuff didn't happen till much later.

We marched. We surrendered our weapons, somewhere, I recall. Then about, I'd say, half a dozen of my platoon and myself, we went off to the Paddington RSL Club. And that's where we got hammered. We just hammered ourselves there. And then from there we went to wherever we were going home. No debrief, no nothing. It was just - it's just a relief, firstly, to get onto the boat - or the ship! [Laughs] I better not call it a boat! - the ship. And then it was a relief to suddenly have 'terra firma' back there in Sydney. And then march. And then again that comradeship, that part of your family. Get together with your mates and have a really good piss up at the Paddington RSL!

And then from there, that was it! We were all on leave. I was on leave for six to eight weeks. And that's where you get into a lot of trouble. You know, you're on leave, and you know, "Where are we going to drink today?" type of thing, you know.

And alcohol was very much - I think it was also self-medication, at that time. Although alcohol relaxes, if it's overdone it's also a depressant, you know. And that's where I think a lot of the problems started.

Now of course, all of our units that deploy have pretty extensive debriefing. Now whether it's adequate, or whether they can do it better, I can't judge, I'm not in that chain of command. But all I know is they're now debriefing. And it's a lot better than what it was during my time.

Megan Spencer 05:50

So Mike... Defence personnel don't operate in a vacuum. They've got families – [for example] I'm related to some from my past, my grandfather, others...

Those soldiers who go off and serving in Australia's name now, also have - you know, it's the ripple effect -

Michael von Berg 06:13

- Yes

Megan Spencer 06:13

- They've also got people around them, we are part of them, they are part of us. We're all part of this culture and society, here.

Michael von Berg 06:19

Yes.

Megan Spencer 06:20

So what could we do better do you think? What could we do better in terms of understanding how service and deployment affects people - the impact it has, how it changes them - how can we support them better? And how can we understand this better?

Michael von Berg 06:35

I think one of the things that we've managed to do - see I've been on the E.S.O.R.T in Canberra for 10 years... [The Ex-Service Organization Round Table] at the Department of Veterans Affairs. One of the things that we've been able to push very hard - and it's now legislated - is The Military Covenant.

The country has a debt - the country as a whole as a debt. I mean the reason we have the ADF is to keep us safe. You know? That that's the whole reason for being. I mean if we didn't have an Army, Navy and Air Force - and now a Border Force - we would be at risk. Potentially at risk.

Although the nature of warfare is changing we still must recognize that we have an ADF to keep us safe. That's why we sleep well at night.

I think what we need to do more [of] - both Defence and society as a whole - I think we need to understand that we're not 'jungle-green clad killers from the sky' trained to a peak of 'mental deficiency'. We're not all 'damaged goods'. We are worthwhile members of society.

And not only worthwhile members of society overall, we're good solid citizens. You know? We've been through what we've been through. We're disciplined. We're responsible. We respond well to training. And a lot of us volunteer! I mean a lot of us are in the CFS [Country Fire Service], emergency services, Legacy, Red Cross, BlazeAid, you know - there are so many ex-veterans are in that sort of space.

And I think perhaps what should happen in the future, there needs to be - rather than just have stories about the 'latest weaponry', and the latest soldier done up in camouflage gear and 'peering through the weeds' in Papua New Guinea or somewhere - there needs to be more human interest stories.

There needs to be more, "Hey, these are fathers". "These are grandfathers". "They've got real wives!", you know? When they're not doing their 'army thing' they're down at the Surf Lifesaving Club - and things like that -

Megan Spencer 09:07

- There [are some] "chicks" [women involved] in there too? [Laughs]

Michael von Berg 09:08

Absolutely, absolutely!

So there needs to be - not needs to be, but I would very strongly recommend... We need to have more of a conversation about how the ADF fits into society as a whole. And importantly... not just veterans, but veterans and families - how they fit into society as a whole.

Culturally, we may be different, culturally. But I think in terms of national pride and national being and self-esteem and, and national sovereignty and security, we're one big family. Not, "here is society over here", and "Defence is over here, on their own".

I mean, if we went to war, every member of this society in the little area where I live would be supporting us. They'd have to! Whether it's food or vegetables, or whether it's ammunition, or making guns, or keeping the fuel-lines going...

Because, if you go to war - in the old days, in the major wars, it was a national effort - in the wars, the way they've been fought since Korea, they've been if you like, 'regional efforts'. And we've been fighting in other people's backyards. We haven't been defending our own patch.

If we were defending our own patch here, the way that we did in Darwin when the Japanese bombed us, I think you'd find society as a whole would have a totally different attitude to the ADF.

And there is this thing, which is called 'recognition for the uniqueness of military service': I mean, yes, we're public servants in theory, but we work 24/7... Saturday, Sundays.. And if they're 'on exercise', they're separated from their families. I mean all the people who rotate through Afghanistan or [who rotated through] Iraq for 12 months, they're away from their families already anyway! And then they're away for another 9 months. And it's that sort of sacrifice of families which is not understood.

I mean sailors - you know, married with little kids - and either the mum or the hubby's away on a ship in the Middle East, you know, stopping the pirates in Somalia for 9 months. And people don't realize the sacrifices that families actually go through.

And I've got to say, ADF is not all about money: if it was about money you'd have another job. It's about something that's innate, something that's in us where we're proud to be part of the ADF. We're proud of what we do. We're very proud of our service. We're very proud of our unit. And it's not all about money.

Although we expect fair pay for what we do - and we get good allowances in terms of when we're overseas, and certainly tax benefits - but it's very much I think a profession of arms. And I think people do it because they really want to do it, not for a job or money. There is that pride in being a member of the Defence Force. And there's nothing wrong with pride. I think if more people were proud in terms of what they did, well, we'd probably have a better society.

But for society to accept the ADF for what they do, I think there needs to be more integration, more good stories, not bad stories. More good stories about families, more good stories about kids of Defence families, [like] a scholarship won somewhere, or a wonderful young footballer who comes from a Defence family, or something like that. To realize that we're not 'mean killing machines', we're human beings.

We've got families, we've got a heart, we've got spirit and we've got a soul.

Megan Spencer 12:59

For an ex-Vietnam veteran like yourself listening to this, or a young person returning from Afghanistan, or even just somebody on service anywhere really within the ADF, who's struggling, who felt cut off, who felt like they weren't being valued from within or without...

As a member of society and our culture struggling with their own self worth, what might you say to them right now?

Michael von Berg 13:33

Give me a call. Seriously! One-on-one, give me a call.

I mean, there's that, there's that.

In terms of broadly speaking? Don't undervalue yourself. There is that real danger, I think, where veterans - unless [there's], you know, some chap from the Navy who's an astrophysicist, or some chap from the Air Force who is a pilot - although there are a lots of pilots unemployed at the moment - who has a skill, a professional skill? Those chaps, no problem, generally speaking.

It's the 'arms... You say, "Oh, who's going to employ an infantryman who's just been taught to 'close with and kill'?" Or, "Who's going to employ a 'tanky'?" Or, "Who's going to employ a 'gunner'" you know? An artillery gunner? "There's not a real call out there at Woolworths for an artilleryman", you know?

What I say to those [people] is, do not underestimate yourself! Do not undersell yourself. Don't oversell - but do not undersell yourself.

They've got incredible 'soft skills' which the community needs: leadership decision-making, punctuality, turnout, empathy... You know, all those soft skills that that society needs! And you don't learn that at university. You learn that in the 'university of life', and in particular, military life.

Megan Spencer 15:05

Last question: what is the one greatest thing that you learned being a soldier?

Michael von Berg 15:16

You can't do it yourself. Teamwork.

There are many things in life [where] you can make the decisions as an individual, but to implement that decision or those decisions - whether it's in military life or the corporate life - you need a strong team around you to implement them. And I mean a strong loyal team.

The thing that it's taught me in life, is that you might have a vision for something but you've got to sell that vision. And whilst you're selling that vision other people buy into it. And before you know it, they've got ownership of it. So there's that whole team [who's] developed the vision - I might have been the capital - the catalyst and 'the capitalist' [laughs] - who's created the vision... But, getting input from everybody - I mean from the shop floor, and whatever the case might be - getting that input from everybody, and all of them having ownership of that vision, then when you put together the implementation plan, everybody's got ownership, and it will not fail. It will succeed.

And I just find that in terms of the military in particular, because it's so team oriented, it is simply so team oriented... And not only team oriented in a psychological sense, in a practical sense: all of your training is involved with other members of the team. In a section you've got 10 - or we used to - we had 10 in a platoon. We used to have 'one and thirty-three': one officer and 33 other ranks, you know? In a company, you'd have five officers and you'd have 108 other ranks... Now, they're all part of a team...

And in private enterprise, I think sometimes individuals - and I've seen it firsthand - they don't really... They either don't trust their team or they don't want to share things with their team, or they just want the thing to be their idea and they just want them to get on the road and implement it... And I just don't think that works. I think people have to say, "Hey, my idea was this part of it! Or, "My idea was that part of it!" And, "He hadn't thought of this! and, "He hadn't thought of that!" you know? So they've all got ownership, so that there's almost this energy - this enthusiasm and energy - that's generated, where everybody's got some 'buy in', you know?

And I think that really, is what [the] military did for me.

Megan Spencer 17:53

[Lastly, I asked Mike, if there was anything else he'd like to add, before we finished up the interview].

Michael von Berg 17:59

Yeah. I talk to a lot of young people about 'mental toughness', and also in talks I give around the battalions.

I have the utmost respect and admiration for young people today. No question about it. And the only thing that I think is missing with many young people today in society - which we tend to drive a bit harder in the ADF - is mental toughness. The ability to find fuel when the tank's empty.

[To] believe in self-talk, you know? Talking to yourself: *"I can do this, I can do this"*. Self-belief: *"I can do this"*. And if it doesn't work out, don't toss the bundle in or blame somebody else.

Resilience in terms of warfare is one thing; mental toughness in terms of the human condition is another.

And although, as I say, I admire young people today, I'll just question whether they are as mentally tough as what they should be? I think it's a problem with society as a whole. And that whole mental toughness aspect is right through the ADF. It's right through the ADF.

I mean, our sailors [who] go through all of their training - and a lot of emergency training - especially when they're at sea [with] long periods of lockdown, you know, in terms of operational sailing... You know, our Air Force, and certainly all of the services - or the arms and services in the Army in particular... There is a big emphasis on mental toughness.

I think it's a condition. You can't sort of get out of bed in the morning, say, "I'm mentally tough." It's a condition. It's a condition [where] you say to yourself, "I'm not going to give up. I'm going to keep going", you know?

That's why all of those things that I've managed to do - SAS, Commandos, Infantry, Reconnaissance Platoon - all those sort of things, I did it as hard as what the diggers did, you know?

I mean, on the Reconnaissance Course, our bonding was alcohol the night before, but I had them all up at five o'clock, and we'd run through the sand hills until we all dropped - me included, you know? So that mental toughness is something that I think is more required in the ADF than society as a whole.

But I think young people today should be more resilient and more mentally tough in not giving up, in not giving up, because, the whole world is there for them.

They should basically harden up and say, *"I can do this. I'm gonna get through this. I'm gonna win this"*.

20:52 End of the fourth and final part of the interview with Michael von Berg.