

Report on First Ombudsman Advisory Committee Meeting 29 September 2011

by Joseph E. L. Gollner

I attended our Veterans Ombudsman's Advisory Committee and found the session most interesting and informative. The committee consists of ten members who do not represent any parent association or group. The members were selected by the Ombudsman based on their individual experience, expertise, and background in veterans activities. Part of the Committee's mandate is to help provide the veterans community with information related to the Veterans ombudsman.

This was the first Advisory meeting with Guy Parent the new VO. The VO pointed out that he has a non renewable five year contract. His approach to his role is one of applying the principles of collaboration and cooperation with the Minister of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Veterans Affairs staff all the while ensuring that he meets his mandate and maintains the independence of the VO. His relationship with the Minister is that of a Special Advisor. The VO meets routinely with the Minister and the Minister's Chief of Staff on issues of concern to Canada's veterans community. His advice to the Minister is always based on credible, transparent, and balanced information.

The Office of the Veterans Ombudsman [OVO] has its own budget but relies on Veterans Affairs for a fair measure of administrative and resource support. The OVO has thirty-seven staff members plus a few staff vacancies. However, the VO expects to see them filled shortly. Like VAC the OVO staff is split between Ottawa and Charlottetown.

The VO has an interesting and informative web site which is well worth visiting to get timely both SITREPs on what the VO and his team is doing and topical issues. I have put in a number of statistics in this report to help us understand the scope of VAC and the OVO current activities.

The VO stressed that he and his team operate on the one veteran principle. Thus, all veterans regardless of their category in various organizations are treated with equal respect and regard. The Veterans Bill of Rights provides the foundation for their service.

The VO has been in office less than a year. In large measure his time has been building and stabilizing the OVO team with a view to ensuring that the OVO has the capacity to provide the level of service expected by the veterans' community and the Minister of Veterans Affairs. The VO Advisory Committee has also been restructured. Tom Hoppe, former President of CPVA, is the Chair. The Committee is also smaller. The VO emphasized that this Committee is an integral part of the OVO and that he is looking forward to the Committee playing an active role with the OVO.

A series of informative briefings provided by the Director General of OVO and his Directors gave the committee an understanding of how the OVO operates. Here are some points that may interest you and provide a better understanding of the scope and complexity of VAC's operations.

1. 73% of first level claims for disability from serving and retired CF members to VAC receive favourable consideration. Of the remaining 27% claims that go on to appeal before the Veterans Review and Appeal Board [VRAB] a further 60% are approved so all up 89% of claims are approved.
2. Both the British and American governments have vowed notwithstanding their concerted efforts to reduce national budgets and spending that their veterans' benefits will not be reduced.
3. VAC is undergoing a major review with a view making better use of existing resources.

4. Agent Orange, of the 265 application claims only 16 have been approved and paid compensation.

5. 30% of serving CF members receive disability compensation from VAC.

6. Currently these are the OVO priorities. Namely:

a. Veterans Independence Programme,

b. Long Term Care,

c. Mental Health,

d. Families,

e. Benefits Adjudication,

f. Agent Orange,

g. Funeral and Burial Programme; and

h. New Veterans Charter Parliamentary Review Project

7. VAC has many statistics but is deemed by many as Fact rich and Information poor. VAC is not making the best use of its existing data to its own and to Canada's veterans best advantage.

8. The OVO works at three levels, Information, Facilitation, and Intervention. The latter level breaks down into Mediation, Observation, Investigation, and Reporting.

9. Since 2007, when the Government established the OVO, there have been 4,716 complaints received. Of this number 264 have been referred to other agencies or departments for action, 634 were referred to VAC for resolution, and 3,818 addressed by mediation.

10. The complaints break down in this manner, former CF regular members 39%, still serving regular and reserve CF Members 5%, WWII and Korean War veterans 15%, RCMP 3%, CF Reserve Members 4%, Survivors 14% and Civilians 2%, Others 18%.for a total of 4,716.

11. Currently there are 91,300 serving CF members and 593,700 CF veterans with about 6,000 being added yearly to the CF veterans category, of whom 66,554 are VAC clients. Plus there are 155,700 WWII and Korean War veterans of which 64,968 are VAC clients, and VAC has 78,183 survivors as clients. And there are 22,161 serving RCMP members and 13,371 RCMP veterans of which 8,733 are VAC clients. All up VAC currently has about 210,578 clients.

All up a very useful meeting and I am looking forward to contributing to the OVO efforts to support Canadian veterans.

J. Gollner