

# **What are the experiences of peer support for Veterans within a military-style motorcycle club?**

Submitted By

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirement of the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

27 September 2025

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Ryan (Fozzy) Foster. Fozzy served his country for over 10 years. He joined the Australian Defence Force at just 17 years old. He was a war veteran serving in Iraq. His first deployment was in 2006, where he celebrated his 21st birthday with his mates, and his second deployment was in 2007. On 2nd June 2023, at the age of 37, Fozzy died tragically in a motorcycle accident in the Adelaide Hills of South Australia. He was wearing his Veterans Motorcycle Club (VMC) vest. Sadly, his VMC vest was destroyed along with his other clothing. It can only be assumed the emergency services would not have understood the significance of the VMC vest, also known as *Colours*. Like Fozzy, it is irreplaceable, and would have been cherished by family, including his VMC family.

Throughout 2022 - 2023 Fozzy had been instrumental in raising a chapter of the VMC in the Adelaide Hills. The approval notice from the National Council was received on 4th June 2023, just two days after his death. The VMC chapters from around the nation voted, with 86% in support of the formation of the new Adelaide Hills chapter. Fozzy would have held the Sergeant at Arms position. This position is selected by the President, not by general vote, as with the other committee positions. As a mark of respect, the position was not filled for six months. I had the pleasure of knowing Fozzy; he was a gentleman, kind and caring. He was keen to participate in my research as he had himself studied psychology and was keen to follow the study. I am truly honoured that he would have trusted me to interview him, and I will always be curious about what would have been learned from his interview. The VMC men do not readily discuss their feelings or share their stories. They are a closed group who are humble, simply did their duty for their country whilst never expecting glory or thanks. I will be eternally grateful to all the VMC participants, and to all those who paid the ultimate price and those who now struggle daily to make sense of it.

## ABSTRACT

**Aim:** This study aimed to understand the experience of peer support within a unique closed group of war veterans who are members of the Veterans Motorcycle Club (VMC). Furthermore, what protective factors for wellbeing may be derived from their experience within their club.

**Background:** Many Defence Force members return from war a different person. Devastatingly, a high number of veterans' lives are cut short by suicide in the aftermath of service. When veterans are no longer serving, they lose their military identity and for some the very essence of who they are. Camaraderie, structure and connection to others who shared a similar experience has gone. This can leave them in a precarious position with their mental health.

Previous research has shown that veterans experience a range of mental health issues such as anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidality and substance misuse. Peer support programs have proved to be helpful for some. However, the suicide figures leave no doubt, veterans continue to be a high-risk category. The published evidence for peer support and the potential protective factors for war veterans' mental health is lacking in current empirical research. Potentially this is because veterans do not readily trust the health care system and do not engage or adhere to recommended treatment programs. This research offers an original contribution to knowledge by exploring the lived experiences of peer support of the members of the VMC.

**Methods:** Eleven VMC members were recruited through the National Secretary of the VMC. They each participated with an in-depth interview. A qualitative phenomenological methodology was used as the framework. The data was thematically analysed to explore and identify key themes from the interview transcripts.

**Findings:** Three major themes emerged; trust, identity and connection. The themes indicate that being a member of the VMC provides protective factors for their mental health and wellbeing. The first theme: trust, describes how they are bound together and maintain a strong fraternal bond. The second theme: is about image and identity. Their unique patches sewn on their vests (colours), rough exterior and roaring motorcycles keep outsiders out. The final theme: is the connection to each other through peer support. These themes reveal the altruistic desire of the members' motivation to protect their unique sub-culture and each other, they are '*brothers*' by choice.

**Conclusion:** The findings demonstrate the significance of the VMC members fraternal bond, which is akin to their experience within the military. It is because of this bond that their peer support provides major protective factors for their mental health. The VMC has its own unique hierarchy, processes of joining and accepted behaviours. For veterans who are disillusioned and not engaging with mental health services, the club could represent a positive alternative to traditional treatment interventions. These findings have important implications for community-based clinicians working with at-risk veterans and first responders. The members of the VMC are altruistically motivated to help their like-peers move forward with their lives. Their motivation stems from experiencing the same support from the group and a desire to give back and continue the cycle of helping and supporting their fellow brothers.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To the research participants, the men of the Veterans Motorcycle Club (VMC): I offer my heartfelt thanks to you all for your frankness, time, and trust in me. You have given me the privileged opportunity to learn about your unique group, allowing me into your world for a brief period. I did not underestimate my obligation to thoughtfully convey your stories, nor did I not consider the potential of your vulnerability at the time of interviews, especially as one of your own brothers had just succumbed to the road. This research would not have been possible without your invaluable information and willingness to share both happy stories and the worst memories. You are the most resilient and courageous people I have ever had the privilege to meet.

No professional editing services have been used in the formation of this thesis.

I would like to thank my supervisors, Dr Louise Roberts and Professor Sharon Lawn, for believing in this research and my ability, and providing sound guidance when I needed it. I would like to acknowledge the Commonwealth Government for the Research Training Program contribution that afforded me the opportunity to complete this thesis. I would also like to thank Tara Brabazon – a brilliant scholar and talented educator, for the weekly Friday morning groups Write Club and Digital Office Hours. This was truly an invaluable community. Tara's indefatigable generosity of time, love, and kindness permeates throughout the group and carried me through this journey. My last thank you is to a very dear friend, Pat Wilson. Pat spent several hours discussing, guiding, and encouraging me throughout this journey. I am truly grateful for having you in my life Pat W.

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## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ADFV	Australian Defence Force Veterans
ARC	Australian Royal Commission
ASM	Australian Service Medal
AASM	Australian Active Service Medal
Bikie/Biker	Motorcycle club rider
Colours/ Vest	Motorcycle vest with club patches
Darsein	Heideggerian term for 'Being there'
DVA	Department of Veterans' Affairs
DFV	Defence Force Veterans
DFV-ACW	Defence Force Veteran - Active Conflict or Warlike
Epochè	Bracketing – suspending biases
Hang-a-round	Applicant to be a prospect in motorcycle club
Mateship	Peer support
Nom/prospect	Nominated veteran to provisional member
One-percenters /1%	Motorcycle clubs (often termed outlaws)
OSM	Operational Service Medal
PTSD	Post-Traumatic stress disorder
PTSS	Post-Traumatic stress symptoms
RSL	Returned Soldiers League of Australia
Stands Up	Briefing details or orders
Scunge	Vest with patches
VMC	Veterans Motorcycle Club
V.V.M.C.	Vietnam Veterans Motorcycle club

## DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis:

1. does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university
2. and the research within will not be submitted for any other future degree or diploma without the permission of Flinders University; and
3. to the best of my knowledge and belief, does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.
4. has been completed without the use of generative artificial intelligence tools.
5. Images of tattoos have been shared with the consent of all participants.
6. Permission was granted to use the copyrighted image of Casper, VMC Colours, prospect handbook and associated paraphernalia.

Loraine Dawn House  
27/09/2025

## PROLOGUE

In Loving Memory of Ryan (Fozzy) Foster  
[07.10.1985 - 02.06.2023]

Lynette Foster, Fozzy's mother and next of kin, has kindly given me permission for the inclusion of this prologue. The written events of the day are entirely based on my observations and opinions. This introductory section helps to frame this thesis. I hope it begins to convey an understanding of the uniqueness of the deep bond and peer support among the members of the Veteran Motorcycle Club (VMC).

The funeral began at 10 am in a chapel at Mount Barker in the Adelaide Hills, South Australia. One by one the sound of the motorcycles arriving echoed through the quiet hills. A few exclusively invited VMC members were given the rendezvous details. Fozzy's coffin lay in a silver hearse in the driveway. A videographer floated around the hearse and the brothers of the VMC, capturing the group in their distinctive black and gold patched vests. A single member stood looking at the hearse for a few minutes, deep in thought, his face reflecting profound sadness. There are questions that can never be answered. In typical military fashion the VMC members were there on time for 'stands up' (Figure 1), waiting in silence for further briefing of instructions or duties. For example, members could be assigned as an 'Outrider.' Their job will be to ride out before the pack at different points to block the oncoming traffic so that the procession can proceed unbroken. The Road Captain will ride near the front of the pack, having researched the exact directions to the destination. He will also provide hand signals, such as warnings to slow down or obstacles to avoid.

**Figure 1**

*Lone VMC Member and 'Stands Up' Group Waiting for Orders*



The author took the photographs permission was given to use.

The procession lined up behind the hearse for the first leg of the journey. Their destination was the Monastery at Urrbrae (a suburb in the Adelaide foothills). The riders manoeuvred their motorcycles to take their positions. An 'Outrider' proceeded to block the traffic. He then took his position at the back of the pack. The convoy made its way down the Southern Expressway, the motorcycles in deliberately formed staggered positions, with the VMC Road Captain at the helm leading the riders' hand signalling directions that passed through the pack. As the group hit the Expressway's Heysen Tunnel (carved into the rugged hill-face), the motorcycles made a deafening sound, roaring thunder that sent emotive shivers down my spine.

At the monastery, six chosen VMC brothers carried Fozzy's coffin onto a motorcycle hearse (a specially designed motorcycle with a side platform for a coffin) for his last ride to Centennial Park, Adelaide. The members formed a guard of honour, two lines either side of the coffin, brothers standing side by side. A member stepped forward to place a VMC sticker on top of the coffin, gently massaging the air bubbles away (Figure 2). Another VMC brother leaned in and softly helped to pull off the backing. This small gesture was conveying their love and respect for their VMC brother.

**Figure 2**

*VMC Sticker Placed on Fozzy's Coffin and Fozzy's Last Ride*



The author took the photographs permission was given to use.

The VMC group were then joined by dozens more motorcyclists, from Adelaide and interstate VMC Chapters. A few other invited motorcycle clubs also attended. The procession once again was given their orders, and they dutifully took their place. One by one they joined the pack, VMC members first, other clubs behind. Once again, an Outrider blocked the road and together, in staggered formation, they made their way to Centennial Park Cemetery. As the roaring motorcycles made their way, onlookers stopped to watch as the group paid respects to an Australian digger. When the procession reached the cemetery, the motorcycle with hearse parked in the middle of a path. The riders parked their bikes diagonally in rows, then formed another honour guard, standing in two

lines either side of the coffin. The ensign national flag was draped across the coffin, the canton (a rectangular emblem) placed at the top left of the shoulder, representing the heart. It fell silent for a few moments, the clouds parted, and the chilly air lifted as the sun came out and shone down. A member from an invited motorcycle club stepped forward to perform a ceremonial haka (Figure 3). A funeral haka represents the venting of anger that a loved one has passed. It also is a sign of love and compassion to the bereaved. The loud chant and body slapping accompanying the stomping of the foot, again sent emotive shivers through my body.

### Figure 3

*Haka Being Performed and Ensign Draped Coffin*



The author took the photographs permission was given to use.

The motorcycle with draped coffin proceeded to the chapel; only the single hum of the bike's engine could be heard. Following the coffin, a sea of black and gold VMC vests as far as the eye could see - war veterans with their medals adorning their vests. The VMC brothers marched the 100-metre stretch toward the chapel; on both sides of path stood approximately another 400 mourners with their head bowed. The estimated attendance was 600 people. One can only imagine how the numbers would have increased if attendance was not by invitation only.

The entrance to the chapel covered by a porch was where the motorcycle with coffin stopped. Standing tall directly behind the coffin, ready to carry their brother into the chapel were four of the newly formed members of the Adelaide Hills Chapter of the VMC. The founding members of the Hills Chapter were jokingly but affectionately known as the 'Famous five,' so called because together they had lots of adventures like the characters in the novels by English author Enid Blyton. Their vests were already sewn with their new rocker on the side, proudly displaying their new Chapter's name. Fozzy was instrumental in the raising of the Hills Chapter and was one of the 'Famous Five.' Official approval notice was only received a few days after his passing; he never knew their wish for Hills Chapter was formally granted by the VMC National Council. The four brothers carried his coffin



and placed him on the catafalque. Still draped with the Australian ensign, Fozzy's Light Horse slouch hat with emu plume was placed on top; in front, on a velvet red cushion, lay his service medals. The service began by hearing from Fozzy's cousin, who gave a eulogy of Fozzy's life. This included his military service that began at the age of just 17. Fozzy served his country for 10 years, during this time he had two trips to Iraq, resulting in him experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) when discharged. For several years, he withdrew from society living a reclusive lifestyle. In 2019 he joined the VMC and there found a group of like-minded veterans with whom he could relate. Strong bonds formed, especially among the 'Famous Five.' I was told the 'Famous Five' spent many hours conversing face to face at rides, private lunches, dinners, arranged shoots and camping trips. They connected daily via a Messenger app, sending funny memes and jokes. Hours could be spent on phone calls discussing club business or generally checking in with each other and just being there.

The arrangements of the funeral service were organised by the members of the Adelaide Hills Chapter of the VMC. The members of the VMC community around the nation gave generous donations that paid for the service. Fozzy's mother handed the entire management of the funeral to her son's brothers by choice. These men could be trusted, and her son would want them to take charge of the proceedings. From the day of Fozzy's tragic accident, through to the organisation of the service and wake, the emotional and financial support for his family, the brotherly love shared among the VMC members from the Adelaide Chapter and VMC interstate Chapters, it was truly a magnificent display of humans at their best. Love, respect and honour for an Australian veteran of war taken too soon and who will not be forgotten. Lest We Forget

**Figure 4**

*Ryan Forster*



Ryan (Fozzy) Foster 07.10.1985 - 02.06.23

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# 1 CHAPTER INTRODUCTION



1989 - 2010

## Ode To The Colours

*The slouch hat says to one and all,  
Serviceman man stands here, proud and tall.  
Letter of gold on a field of black,  
Reminds us of those that didn't come back.  
Honour, courage, mateship and pride,  
Are on our backs whenever we ride.*

*To the Colours*

VMC Poem Author Unknown

The poem reproduced with permission by VMC.



2010 - Present

## 1.1 Introduction

Australian Defence Force members are required to take an Oath of Allegiance to serve the Commonwealth monarch, heirs, and successors. Resisting enemies and faithfully discharging their duty according to law (Defence (Personnel) Regulations 2002 - Schedule 2, 2023). Over 103,000 Australian armed forces members have died since World War II as a result of warlike, non-warlike, and certain peacetime service (Australian war memorial, 2024). Alas, in recent years more service personnel have died by their own volition than in conflict or war. The Department of Defence and Australian War Memorial (DDAW) data show that since the end of Vietnam War (1962 – 1975) the number of ADF members who have died because of conflict-related operations is approximately 85. The Australian Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide (RCDVS) 2021-2024 was the culmination of increasing concerns that were raised about issues facing Defence Force serving members and Defence Force veterans (Australian Government Department of Veteran Affairs, 2024). Protective factors for veterans' mental health and wellbeing were not well understood. The incidence of suicidal behaviours in Australian Defence Force (ADF) veteran populations has historically been difficult to establish (McKay et al., 2012). Data collected from institutional-based and military intervention programs such as Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) indicate that programs are effective at recording the level of satisfaction and perceived benefit by attendees, but not at reducing incidence of suicide or suicide attempts. Evaluations often have restricted information that does not capture figures of any reduction in suicide trends or suicide attempts (Dunt, 2009). In recent years, advancements have been made in the reporting and capturing of data on death by suicide and suicidal ideation among the serving and ex-serving Defence Force population. Statistics drawn from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Report (September 2021), identified 1,273 deaths by suicide that occurred between 1 January 2001

and 31 December 2019. Of these 1,273 deaths, a total of 211 were serving (permanent or reservists) and 1,062 were ex-serving ADF members (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021b). The vast discrepancy between these two figures suggests that being connected to the military service is a protective factor for the prevention of suicide. Disturbingly these statistics do not capture the full extent of death by suicide in veterans (Kaldas et al., 2022).

To understand the nature and reasons behind the rates of suicide in the veteran community and the role of peer support on veteran mental health, this research had privileged access to members of the Veterans Motorcycle Club (VMC). The VMC is a unique '*closed*' club that has distinctive visual symbols and characteristics. There is the preference to ride a Harley Davidson motorcycle, have a black leather vest that is worn over the individuals' clothes, with the vest displaying the club patches (colours). Some of the club's characteristics resemble and even replicate certain aspects of the military, such as rank structure, discipline, and honour of the colours. It could be viewed that the colours are a form of 'uniform,' a garment worn by members of the same organisation. The colours hold a deep symbolic meaning to the members of the VMC and signal to all that the wearer has gone through the process of the club's initiation and enculturation.

The VMC have a few minor similarities with other military motorcycle clubs or social motorcycle clubs, i.e. they ride a motorcycle, they ride together and many wear a vest with sewn club patches. There are also notable differences from which the original contribution to knowledge is derived. The commonalities with other motorcycle groups are fundamental, such as the joy of riding a motorcycle, being a part of a club, and some groups wearing a vest with patches that show the group they ride with. For the VMC members the vest is more than a symbol of belonging to a group; it denotes a deeply held bond and brotherhood. It confers status; signifying that the member is worthy and has earned the right to wear the patches. The vest is so highly regarded by the members, it is considered equal to the national Australian flag. For example, it is never to be put on the floor, no other person should touch or wear the vest, and it must be always respected. The significance of being a member of the VMC is distinct and intriguing; this will be discussed in depth in the following chapters.

## **1.2 The Research question**

The research question forms the basis of this qualitative study. I sought to explore the role of peer support within the VMC club and how that relates to providing protective factors for their mental health and wellbeing. This research explores the lived experience of the members. This group is a distinctive closed group who have never previously participated in research. They do not readily trust civilians and/or outsiders. The potential benefits of this study include, assisting with the development of future intervention treatment programs, broadening community understanding, implications for policy makers, transitioning programs and support systems (these benefits potentially extend to other groups with similar hierarchical structures like those who serve in first responder occupations such as, firefighters, paramedics, and police).

## **1.3 Aims of research**

The intent of this research was to explore if membership of this unique closed group of veterans (VMC) provides protective factors for mental health and general wellbeing, and how is peer support constructed and experienced within the group. I found the club offers its members unconditional support, encouragement of help-seeking behaviours and furthermore protective mechanisms to minimise and prevent suicide.

The broad aim of this phenomenological study was to gain an understanding of peer support engagement with the members of the VMC. Focus within the research areas were:

1. The nature of the peer support and the participants' lived experience of being involved in this specific type of support. How does this peer support provide protective factors for their mental health and wellbeing?
2. Does peer support change the way the veterans in the VMC engaged with professional treatment service providers? If so, what were the benefits and/or drawbacks?
3. Can professional services be designed better to engage veterans and improve interventions, potentially alleviating the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder and related mental health concerns or illness, and substance use disorders?

4. Can improvements in service provision and design ultimately prevent deaths by suicide in the veteran community?

This study uses the members' narratives to understand the characteristics of this unique peer support environment and how peer support functions within this closed societal group. Additionally, if peer support is preferable to evidenced-based treatment services, what can be learned from this study to improve veterans' engagement with traditional treatment services?

1. Investigate the efficacy of peer support and if the nature of that peer support influences the way veterans engage.
2. Explore the implications of this type of peer support for the management of mental health challenges faced by members of the VMC.
3. Why this type of peer support may be preferable to current evidence-based treatment programs and interventions for some veterans.

This research does not focus on the participants' specific military experience or data relating to any clinical diagnostic mental illness, or the effects from post-traumatic stress disorder and/or substance misuse.

## **1.4 Veteran issues: Those at risk**

Separation from the military has been shown to be a time of particularly high risk for depression and suicidality in war veterans (Warrener et al., 2021). Statistical evidence of the rate of mental health issues and substance misuse in Australian Defence Force veterans is alarming. Every death caused by suicide is tragic and each one directly or indirectly affects approximately 135 people (Kaldas et al., 2022). The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Report, conducted between 1 January 2001 and 31 December 2019, reported that 83.4% of veteran deaths by suicide were by ex-serving ADF members. This equates to 1,273 unnecessary deaths (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021a).

Warrener et al. (2021) hypothesized that veterans who were more regularly in contact with their comrades would experience fewer symptoms of depression and suicidality. Their cross-sectional study of male veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan wars ( $n = 86$ ), undertook a series of mental health

questionnaires and interviews. In addition, they provided blood and urine samples for peripheral oxytocin (OT) levels. Notably, OT is implicated in various aspects of social behaviour and can positively or negatively modulate how an individual interacts. This neuropeptide is synthesised in the hypothalamus, which has a wide range of actions both in the brain and in the body. The veterans reported feeling very close to their comrades during war and missing them greatly upon returning home. Veterans who socialised with comrades more frequently had less depressive symptomology. When social connectedness was infrequent, a strong positive predictor of symptoms of both depression and suicidality was evident. These results suggest that it is the lack of social connectedness that impacts a veteran's mental health rather than the separation from close comrades per se. To alleviate the burden of depression and suicidality in returning war veterans, the findings suggest that efforts should be aimed on re-integrating veterans into society and establishing a feeling of social connectedness. Furthermore, focus should be given to treating anxiety disorders and sleep problems.

Definitions of key terms throughout this study:

There are a few terms used repeatedly that are relevant to the study. It is important that these terms are defined for clarity and understanding of how they are used in this study to avoid misinterpretation.

### **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**

Post-Traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a trauma related disorder. The Fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) outlines the diagnostic criteria for PTSD. The DSM-V conceptualises a traumatic event as:

Psychological distress following exposure to a traumatic or stressful event. Event(s) can be quite variable. The trauma(s) can be sudden or have an accumulative effect; it may be caused by a first-hand experience, or witnessing the trauma of someone close such as a family member or friend. (*Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM-V-TR*, 2022, p. 274).

Trauma – and Stressor-Related Disorders:

The clinical presentation of PTSD varies. In some individuals, fear-based re-experiencing, emotional and behavioural symptoms may predominate. In others, anhedonia or dysphoric mood states and negative cognition may be most distressing. In some other individuals, arousal and reactive-externalising symptoms are prominent, while in others, dissociative symptoms predominate. Finally, some individuals exhibit combinations of these symptom patterns. In some cases, symptoms can be well understood within an anxiety or fear-based context. It is clear, however, that many individuals who have been exposed to a traumatic or stressful event exhibit a phenotype in which, rather than anxiety or fear-based symptoms, the most prominent clinical characteristics are anhedonia and dysphoric symptoms, externalising angry and aggressive symptoms, or dissociative symptoms. Because of these variable expressions of clinical distress following exposure to catastrophic or aversive events, individuals with PTSD may be quick tempered and may even engage in aggressive verbal and/or physical behaviour with little or no provocation (e.g., yelling at people, getting into fights, destroying objects. (*Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM-V-TR*, 2022, p. 274)

### **“Bikie and Biker”**

A “bikie” is a colloquial term for a person who is a member of a motorcycle gang. They are also referred to as “Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs” (Lynch, 2009). They wear “patched” vests and usually display two additional smaller patches, one with 1%, the other a cube with the letters MC. These identify that they are a member of a motorcycle club - MC. Outlaw MCs are typically associated with organised crime. *One-percent* MCs are not necessarily outlaws or involved in crime. All MC clubs have a specific staged process of joining that is unique.

A biker is a person who rides a motorcycle. They are not necessarily a member of a motorcycle club. If they are a member of a motorcycle club, it will be a social motorcycle club, Christian motorcycle club, or a military motorcycle club. They usually also wear patched vests to show their affiliation. However, they must not wear a 1% patch or the MC cube, as they are not an MC - they are strictly a social, Christian or military motorcycle club. The patches displaying the club acronym must therefore have at the end of the club’s name either a MMC, CMC or SMC. For example, The Military Brotherhood Motorcycle Club (MBMMC), (Military Brotherhood Military Motorcycle Club, 2024),

Longriders Christan Motorcycle Club (CMC), (Longriders Christan Motorcycle Club, 2024) or Red Dog Riders Social Motorcycle Club (RDRSMC), (Red Dog Riders Social Motorcycle Club Inc, 2024). The VMC are a motorcycle Club - MC and therefore do wear the MC cube patch. However, the VMC are not an outlaw club and therefore do not wear a 1% patch.

The staged process joining an MC is specific. Terms are used to describe the stages, these are:

1. friend of the club
2. hang-around
3. prospect or nom
4. full-patched member

A 'friend' of the club is the first stage to indicate the person is interested in joining. After a period, they then need to 'hang-around' for another length of time. The next stage is a prospect or nom (nominal) which has the same meaning, it is the stage where the member proves they are worthy and trusted to become a full-patched member. Final stage is becoming a full-patched member. The timing of each stage differs depending on the club. A glossary of terms can also be found on page xiii. This is a useful reference guide.

## **1.5 Motivation for the study**

The motivation to undertake this study was threefold. Firstly, I approached this research with a deep commitment to social justice and a belief in the therapeutic relationship as central to healing. My professional experience as a counsellor for 20+ years has always been a calling, assisting those in need of an empathic therapeutic relationship. I am registered with the two leading Australian professional peak bodies for counselling and psychotherapy: Clinical membership with the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA) and level four with the Australian Counselling Association (ACA).

My clinical orientation has always leaned towards relational, integrative approaches, and while I acknowledge the empirical strength of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) as the prevailing 'gold standard' in mental health treatment, my lived professional experience has taught me that CBT does not serve all clients equally, particularly those with complex trauma histories, such as Defence Force veterans. For over two decades, it has increasingly been my understanding that for many Defence



Force veterans who have been deployed in active operations, the current treatment options available are not helpful for all. The high rate of deaths by suicide and other mental health issues and/or substance misuse in this group demonstrate that an alternative is much needed. This drew me to wanting to one day create or at least contribute towards an effective treatment intervention for this specific cohort. My social conscience leaves me wanting my legacy to be an achievement in the advancement of effective support and treatment for veterans. For this to occur, it was apparent I needed the evidence to support this venture. As someone whose therapeutic work has included non-directive, person-centred, and somatic-based approaches, I reflexively acknowledge my bias toward therapies that honour individual narrative and emotional complexity beyond what CBT may offer.

Veteran treatment services provided by psychologists typically use CBT as their mode of therapy. My scepticism of CBT stems not from rejection of its principals but from witnessing the limitations of its structured, cognitively focused model in practice. Traditional treatment options such as CBT are not suited to all veterans because they presume a level of emotional regulation, insight, and engagement. Some veterans, especially those with deep moral injury (MI), neurological impacts of trauma, or relational distrust, find it difficult to access the necessary level of emotional regulation. I believe this research will help service providers understand what is important to the war veteran community and how appropriate adaptations to current programs or the establishment of innovative programs could potentially assist these Defence Force veterans. One example is the setting up of 'bike sheds,' working from the model of the popular men's shed. Another consideration is the Medicare Benefit Scheme (MBS), the national scheme that provides free or subsidised health services to Australians. Doctors, mental health specialists, and other health professional services are available to veterans under the MBS. The list of providers covered under the MBS does not extend to counsellors, family therapist or psychotherapists. The ACA has over 13,000 members, many of these like me are highly qualified and experienced in counselling. However, veterans cannot access a counsellor under the MBS or through other veteran-specific services such as the Department of Veteran Affairs (DVA) or Open Arms. The reason for this is the counselling industry is not government regulated. This study has the potential to assist with government policy makers revisiting eligibility of counsellors being added to the MBS.

On 2 August 2024, The Department of Veteran's Affairs advertised employment opportunities for various clinical roles with a veterans and families counselling service - Open Arms (*Open arms veterans and families counselling*, 2024). Under the eligibility to apply - mandatory requirements,

for the first-time candidates with a: Masters-level counselling qualification and registration with PACFA as a Registered Clinical Counsellor or with ACA at Level three or Level four can apply (Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2024a). This is a huge breakthrough for the counselling industry. It acknowledges that counsellors and psychotherapists are a highly trained and skilled workforce who can assist the community and reduce the burden of mental illnesses on the health care system.

The second motivating factor for the study was my 26-year marriage to a member of the Veteran Motorcycle Club (VMC). During the 1990's my ex-husband was deployed to Bosnia during the breakup of former Yugoslavia. The war spanned from 1992 – 1995 and saw over 100,000 Bosnians killed. The international courts were unanimous in declaring that certain massacres that took place were tantamount to genocide (Hoare, 2014). My ex-husband said it was a life-changing experience, and he would say openly he has never adjusted to civilian life. However, to navigate through this society with a wife and family, it was and is necessary for him to find a way to function in a world where every day he felt he must pretend to be a 'normal' citizen. It is only in the VMC club he said he can be his authentic self without reprisal or judgement of aberrant behaviour that would undoubtedly be frowned upon in the civilian domain. Prior to joining the VMC, for a short while both my ex-husband and I were members of the Military Brotherhood Military Motorcycle Club (MBMMC). The only prerequisite for joining the MBMMC was having a motorcycle and being a veteran or serving member of defence. To my ex-husband's mind they were an entirely different group and one where he could not form brotherhood bonds; they have not been to war. The MBMMC is a military motorcycle club who the VMC members view as having a 'squeaky-clean' image. However, the VMC are more 'rough around the edges' and view themselves as a real motorbike club. They are markedly different from other peer groups or social clubs; this will be fully explained in the coming chapters.

Lastly, I was motivated by my own service in South Australia's 6Wing - Australian Air Force Cadets (AAFC). I am a Squadron Leader and Regional Executive Officer for the southern area of South Australia. I have a deep personal interest in the Defence Force and an admiration for all those who have served and continue to protect our nation and privileged lifestyle. The AAFC are not officially a recruitment conduit for defence, however, each year young people who have been through the AAFC (youths can join in the year they turn thirteen and exit at the end of the year they turned eighteen years of age) do transition into defence.

It is important to note that my reflexivity extends to recognising that my research lens may privilege alternative, narrative-driven interventions over those that are narrowly symptom-focused. I further acknowledge that I may be influenced in how I interpreted participant accounts. To address this, I employed strategies such as journaling, and ongoing consultation with peers and my supervisory team to check for bias in my data collection and analysis.

## **1.6 Theoretical Perspective**

The phenomenological paradigm informs both the method design itself and a theoretical framework which states that humans know and perceive the world through their lived experiences. It is for this reason hermeneutic phenomenology has been chosen to frame and guide this study. There are numerous theories from various disciplines, including the fields of psychology and social work that peer support has its theoretical constructs. Evidence by empirical grounding for these psychological initiatives and effectiveness lag (Douglas., 2019). Rich narratives were provided by the participants during semi-structured interviews. The narratives were thematically analysed using the framework of Braun and Clarke (2020). From the interview transcripts, four main themes were gleaned to form the following chapter headings: Chapter 7 - Trust, Chapter 8 - Symbolic shields: Casper, tattoos and Harley Davidsons, Chapter 9 – Functions of peer support and Chapter 10 – Peer support protects mental health.

The life stories of eleven participants are woven throughout these chapters. My interpretation of the results followed an iterative approach using a process of hermeneutic circling and self-reflection by journaling. Outcomes were focused on mental health protective factors by being a member of the VMC.

## **1.7 Organisation of the Thesis**

This thesis consists of 11 chapters as shown in Figure 5. The introduction provides an overview of the background theoretical framework and relevance of the study. I have included a detailed preface to provide understanding of the significance of the VMC and its historical beginnings.

*Chapter 1: Introduction.* This section outlines the relevance and originality of this research. The chapter discusses the incidence of veteran suicide and recent Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide. This leads to an explanation and reason why this unique peer support research is important. The aims of the research are discussed and identification of the veterans at risk. Key terms are described that will be used throughout the thesis. Finally, theoretical perspectives and structure and organisation of the thesis is provided.

*Chapter 2: Background of the VMC.* This section provides a detailed historical overview of the VMC and its origins. From the Vietnam veterans, Hells Angels and low budget Australian cult film called *Stone*. The VMC history is steeped in deeply held grievances, ignited by the rejection of the Returned Soldiers League (RSL) and general society. Society (the Australian nation) ‘turned’ its back on the Vietnam veterans, and this perceived treachery is repeating with our contemporary veterans who served in the Afghanistan war. There is a unique lengthy process of being invited to join the VMC, rules how patches can be sewn on leather vests know as colours. The hierarchy and rules mirror the familiar setting found in the military. This chapter demonstrates the uniqueness of this closed group of veterans and furthermore highlights the privilege I was afforded to be able to engage with, interview and tell their story.

*Chapter 3: Literature Review.* This section examines the range of literature included in the search parameters. Five popular databases were included in the search covering a specific time frame of veteran structured and unstructured peer support programs. No studies of the VMC or similar veteran motorcycle club could be found. The aim of the search was to reflect the experiences of Australian Defence Force veterans who have participated in peer support programs. The narrative review highlights the gaps in the literature and critically synthesises the available evidence to identify the efficacy of veteran peer support and how they differ in structure and provide associated protective factors for mental health issues.

*Chapter 4: Methodology.* This chapter reports on the methodological framework – hermeneutic phenomenology - why it was chosen and used to guide the research and answer the research question (What are the experiences of peer support for veterans within a closed Military-style Motorcycle Club?). Hermeneutic phenomenology was specifically selected as it allows for a thorough exploration of the lived experience and allows for the researcher’s position and interpretation of the narrative to be presented.

*Chapter 5: Methods.* This section explains the qualitative methods used to gather and analyse the data. A timeline of the research process is included, and details of the participants, the sample size, and recruitment process. I discuss the interview process including the development of the semi-structured interview questions and the tools used for data collection (and storage). The way the collected data was thematically analysed. I also present the ethical considerations and ethics approval to conduct the research.

*Chapter 6: Biographical Portraits.* This chapter contains biographical portraits of the participants. Table (3) (Participants profile) presents their demographic data, such as age, service type (Army, Air Force or Navy), length of service, deployment/s, number of years in the VMC, marital and employment status. Details are further provided for example, the motivation to join the Defence Force, transition back to civilian life and reason for joining the VMC. The profile of the participant is essential to understanding them as a person, before and after their military service. This chapter respectfully shows who they are and provides rich textured narratives that gives context and lays the foundations for the discussion in following result chapters.

*Chapter 7: Trust.* This chapter begins reporting on the themes identified in the data. This first theme investigates trust and how this underpins the true essence of the meaning of the VMC members' fraternal bond. Trust provides security, reliance, and shared understanding of grief, including a collective grieving triggered by passed on trauma from the rejection of the Vietnam war veterans from the nation and the Returned Soldiers League (RSL). The nation, and RSL, biased behaviour has left lasting psychological scars for the veterans of the Vietnam war. These scars have not healed; contemporary veterans in the VMC carry this historical pain on behalf of their brothers. They stand united and can be trusted to never turn their back on their 'brothers by choice.'

*Chapter 8: Symbolic shields: Casper, tattoos and Harley Davidsons.* This results chapter examines symbolic images. This chapter conveys the importance of Casper (the grinning skull with the Australian military slouch hat). This embodied image is central to the identity of the VMC members. The three-piece patched vest known as their colours is more than just an image. Casper signifies solidarity in their brotherhood enshrouding the very essence of their being. Trust, respect, earned rights and worthiness are enveloped in Casper's image.

*Chapter 9: The function of peer support.* This chapter examines what constitutes peer support. I argue that in recent years, the term has become synonymous with clinical terminology. Mental

health services and some medical professions have adopted its use and increasingly applied it in various forms within and out of clinical settings. Outside of a clinical setting, it is often viewed in a stereotypical way as with Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). However, peer support takes place in several ways and in a variety of settings, as within the VMC. Although it resonates that this closed motorcycle club has a strong and unique peer support network, it offers much more than the preconceived ideas and stereotypical image of what represents peer support. The members' narratives demonstrate that for this group, support of peers happens by way of a chosen VMC lifestyle.

*Chapter 10: Peer support protects mental health.* This chapter follows the VMC members' narratives offering insights into their perceptions of their own mental health, mental health services and the role the club plays in providing peer support. It is the peer support found here that demonstrates there are protective factors for their wellbeing by being in the club. The section discusses how the VMC members regard their motorcycle rides as 'wind therapy' and choose to be visible to each other, closed off from society, blocking out civilians who they do not trust. Some discussed their alcohol misuse, help seeking and the barriers they faced accessing services. There is no stigma about mental illness, they encourage and support each other through their hierarchical network. Without the club, it was clear they would be isolated. Some spoke about their struggles with various anxieties, panic attacks, post-traumatic stress disorder and transitioning from the military. Civilian life means the loss of identity, camaraderie and military structure. It is this familiarity that the club provides and reason they gravitate to the VMC.

*Chapter 11: Reflections and Discussion.* In this chapter I capture my own thoughts and experience while conducting this research. I discuss my gained knowledge presenting this with an inward focus to provide my interpretation of the data. I maintained a personal diary throughout the research process. My thoughts allowed me to view my position and examine my own biases. For example, the positive factors for the members being in the club. The club allows them to be who they are without having to consider societal accepted norms, they write their own rules of engagement. However, I came to acknowledge that whilst the club seems to provide protective factors for their mental health, I argue that this is not without consequences for them and their loved ones who potentially suffer around them.

*Conclusion:* This chapter brings the thesis to a close. I discuss and reflect on the key findings of the research project. Limitations of the study and implications for future research are provided. The

potential benefits of peer support programs being implemented by service providers such as the Department of Veterans Affairs and Open Arms are discussed. Findings of this research are examined in the light of current needs in the field of post-conflict veterans in Australia, with particular regard to their mental health and social reintegration. Results will also be of practical use to other groups outside the specialist echelon which is the subject of this study.

**Figure 5**

*Overview of Thesis Chapters*





## 1.8 Conclusion

This introduction chapter outlined the alarming high rates of suicide of Defence Force veterans and identified those at risk. This provided the rationale for the research question (What are the experiences of peer support for Veterans within a military-style motorcycle club?). The broad aims of the research were detailed; the nature of peer support, does peer support change engagement with treatment services, can services be better designed to engage veterans and can improvements in service provision and design prevent deaths by suicide in the veteran community. These specific aims were to investigate the efficacy of peer support, explore the implications of this type of peer support and why this type of peer support may be preferable to current evidence-based treatment programs.

I discussed my motivation for the study and provided a justification for the theoretical perspective. The structure, organisation and relevance of the study were outlined. Namely, to explore the protective factors of peer support, and how this is experienced by a unique closed group of war veterans, the members of an exclusive motorcycle club, the VMC. In so doing, the study also sought to respond to the urgent questions raised by the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide (2021-2024) (RCDVS), which highlighted that traditional institutional responses, including Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and pharmacological treatments, often fall short in preventing suicide or meeting veterans' deeply felt needs for belonging, meaning, and post-service identity.

Scouring the literature offered no similar studies of peer support within a military-style motorcycle club previously being investigated or evaluated. My research revealed that among documented interventions or treatment programs there was also a lack of literature of veteran peer support, other than officially led veteran entities such as, the Department of Veteran Affairs. This gap is critical, as it mirrors the broader disconnect between institutional services and the lived realities of many ex-serving personnel who feel isolated, disillusioned, or unserved by existing frameworks. The findings presented here offer a response to the troubling reality that, in recent decades, more Australian Defence Force members and veterans have died by suicide than in active combat. While service members take an oath to defend the nation, their sacrifices, especially after discharge, often go unseen and unsupported. This study sheds light on a community-driven initiative that may represent a vital, if unofficial, form of continuing allegiance, structure and brotherhood.

I envisage that the outcome of this study will be two-fold. Firstly, it will provide evidence to answer the research question and secondly, it has the potential to validate an untapped, invaluable peer

support resource that is readily available, accessible, and acceptable to war veterans within the community. In illuminating their narratives, the study not only offers a significant contribution to knowledge, but it also honours the enduring commitment and cultural identity that many veterans carry beyond the battlefield - embodied in the colours they wear, the brotherhood they sustain, and the lives they seek to rebuild.

## 2 CHAPTER: BACKGROUND OF THE VETERANS MOTORCYCLE CLUB (VMC)

To think of the Veterans Motorcycle Club (VMC) as just a motorcycle club for veterans would be an enormous understatement of its significance not just to the members, but their families and supporters. This club is more than a group of people with a shared interest in riding motorcycles who are veterans of the Defence Force. It is a sub-culture with a fraternity that displays masculine homosociality. Ward et al., (2014) describes fraternal bonding as one that generates and sustains a totalising masculinist economy. The Australian military is predominantly a white male institution. In 2024, 82% of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) were made up by men. In 2014, that figure was 87% and around 90% of those men were from Australia-born backgrounds. (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024; Wadham, 2013, p. 214). In 2022, women still only account for approximately 20% of the ADF (Australian Army, 2024). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up 3.7% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024). The VMC is an exclusive motorcycle club, only for men, and with the majority who are white Australian-born. The VMC is an Australia-wide organisation with 36 chapters around the nation covering each Australian state and territory. There is a governing VMC National Council that provides governance to the chapters. They hold a National Annual General Meeting (NAGM) whereby hundreds of members ride from all over to join, embrace brotherhood, and celebrate the club. Appointed committee members conduct their official meeting as dictated by their constitution. NAGMs rotate around the states and territories. South Australia was the host state for 2024 (Veterans Motorcycle Club, 2024a).

To appreciate the uniqueness of this research, it is first necessary to understand the history of the VMC and comprehend the way it orders and conducts itself as a collective sub-cultural group. There are distinctive features of this club, such as the replication of a military-style hierarchical structure and motorcycle club culture (which is unlike a social motorcycle club). The following sections outline the rich history of the VMC, from American veterans of World War II who started one-percent motorcycle clubs such as the Hells Angels, through to the veterans of the Vietnam War in America and Australia who started motorcycle clubs for Vietnam Veterans (V.V.M.C.). Finally, with the club's history, the VMC ties to an Australian low-budget feature film, *Stone*. The film *Stone* released in 1974, written and directed by Sandy Harbutt (1941 – 2020) has a huge cult-type following in Australia. I will then discuss the VMCs committee positions along with the process of eligibility to join the club. Lastly, I will examine the significance of the distinctive VMC vest depicting the club's

black and yellow patches featuring the emblem, the copyrighted image of *Casper*, the grinning skull with the Australian military slouch hat that sits at the centre of the back of the vest (Veterans Motorcycle Club, 2024b).

Despite rigorous data-base searches for scholarly articles and grey literature during 2022, during the process of this thesis literature review (Chapter 3), no published literature could be found of previous studies of the VMC or a similar type of military motorcycle group. However, during the following year one of the interviewed participants contacted me to ask if I knew of a book called *Leather Bred Heroes* by John Pigot. The book was published in 2000 and is an exploration of the social structures that underpin the life of the Vietnam Veterans Motorcycle Club (V.V.M.C.) (Pigot, 2000). I did not know of the book and was delighted when he offered me his personal copy to use for this study. The book is no longer in circulation, which explains the reason it was not detected during my initial searches. It has been an invaluable historical source, providing details where otherwise there could have been scepticism. The VMC origins can now be discussed and cited without shedding any doubts on its beginnings. John Pigot (1941 - 2022) was an art historian and curator with a keen interest in subcultural style. At the time of writing *Leather Bred Heroes* he was the Macgeorge Fellow in the School of Fine Arts, Classical Studies, and Archaeology at the University of Melbourne. The book has a radical memorialising style with six chapters covering; Initiation Rites, The Shaping of the Club, Together Forever, ANZAC Bikers, Riding to Remember and Members' Stories. The book was published by the Vietnam Veterans Motorcycle Club, Hastings, Victoria, with support from the Victorian Government, Arts Victoria, Community Support Fund and Public Record Office Victoria – National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication (Pigot, 2000). There are several black-and-white images throughout the book; they include photographs of the Veterans on rides, an Anzac Day march, over a dozen images of club members, tattoos, bike lineup, individual members. In Chapter 8 of the book, members share biographical accounts of their defence journey and return from the Vietnam War. The photographs, taken between 1994 – 1997, were by Janet Hawkins OAM, who was at the time a student at the Photography Studies College in Melbourne. Janet Hawkins OAM, in later years donated her photographic prints, negatives, publications and ephemera to the National Library Australia. Janet Hawkins' career centred around themes documenting marginalised groups and protest movements that included biker groups, Vietnam Veterans, conflicts between anti-immigration and anti-racism groups, and the female ordination movement (National Library Australia, 2023).

## 2.1 The V.V.M.C.'s Origins

At the end of World War II, young American men returning home from the war found a complacent society; some found it difficult to settle back into civilian life. Some of these men used their severance pay to purchase a Harley Davidson motorcycle and their weekly veteran benefit to buy alcohol and petrol. The links between one-percent style motorcycle clubs and the American armed services are well documented. Clubs with names like Boozefighters and POBOBS (Pissed Off Bastards of Bloomington) soon earned the reputation of being anti-social. Their behaviour was seen as violent, and this frightened mainstream American society (Pigot, 2000, p. 21). On the Fourth of July weekend in 1947 in the town of Hollister, California, the American Motorcyclist Association (AMA) reported that the town was rioted by 500 bikers. However, some accounts state this was a vastly inflated number and in fact there was only a handful of bikers who ransacked the town. From this event and a bitter feud with a rival gang member, a new motorcycle club was formed in 1948 by veteran Otto Friedli, (Friedli had broken away from POBOBS). This new motorcycle club called themselves The Hells Angels (James, 2009). The Hells Angels were viewed as potentially being a destructive force deemed as 'one-percenters' or outlaws (Drewery, 2003). Not long after the riot in Hollister, the AMA stated that 99% of motorcyclists are decent American citizens and it is only 1% who are outlaws. From this AMA statement the term 'one-percenter bikers' was coined to categorise motorcycle clubs like the Hells Angels. Clubs such as the Hells Angels prefer to call themselves one-percenter motorcycle clubs rather than outlaws or gangs (Anand et al., 2014). Life Magazine covered the Hollister town events with a short film; the media followed suit adding fuel to the negative portrayal of bike-riding leather-wearing riders. Frank Rooney wrote a short story, *Cyclist Raid*, based on the Hollister riot. Published in 1951, this short story then formed the basis of the film *The Wild One* starring Marlon Brando and produced by Stanley Kramer in 1953. The negative stereotyping of one-percent motorcycle clubs continued with Richard Rush who directed a film in 1967 called *Hell on Wheels* and Mike Normen's 1973 book called *Angels From Hell*. The films and books all elaborated on the theme that one-percent bikers were menacing (Pigot, 2000, p. 23). The style of the one-percent biker was an ideal metaphor for the Vietnam veterans; they too were marginalised by society. Films such as *Taxi Driver* (1976) starring Robert De Niro and directed by Martin Scorsese. The film negatively portrayed Vietnam veterans as psychotic dangerous men who were so troubled they were incapable of holding a responsible position in society.

## 2.2 Lottery of Death

In 1964, the Menzies Government, citing the threat of communism in Asia and confrontation with Indonesia, reintroduced the National Service Act (previously abolished in 1959), a scheme of selective conscription in Australia, designed to create an army of 40,000 full-time soldiers. Arthur Caldwell (1896 - 1973), leader of the opposition, had campaigned against conscription during the First World War. He described the National Service ballot system as a 'lottery of death,' so-called because men were called up by a ballot based on their date of birth. Numbered wooden marbles, each representing two birthdates were placed in a barrel, names were called out on national radio. About 50,000 Australian men and women took part in the war in Vietnam; 521 Australians died and approximately 3,000 were wounded. Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War spanned from mid - 1962 to the end of 1972, with the war continuing for three more years until 1975.

The Vietnam anti-war movement began in Australia in 1967. For returning soldiers the homecoming receptions by the nation were not welcoming; there are reports that the veterans were spat upon and called despicable names such as baby killers (Vlieg, 2019). They felt shunned by the public and even by the Returned Soldiers League (RSL) who closed their doors on the Vietnam veterans adding insult to the injury, a national rejection. Senior RSL figures commented in the 1970s that the Vietnam conflict had not been a real war (Shand, 2016). Pigot (2000, p. 2) explains, that the Vietnam veterans, a generation of young Australian men, were subjected to a long, painful ritual that has been long lasting and, for some, never-ending. In the noise and chaos of battle, men lost their youth along with their innocence and emerged from the fray as soldiers. In the process their former lives and identities were brutally stripped from them and lost in transition.

50 years on, attempts to acknowledge Vietnam veterans continue to this day. On August 19th, 2023, I attended the unveiling of a Vietnam veterans memorial organised by the Macclesfield branch of RSL in the Adelaide Hills, South Australia. There were a handful of Vietnam veterans who attended, along with approximately 60 people from the local community and two groups of young cadets from the Australian Air Force and Army Cadets who performed the armed guard in a catafalque party. During the service, a member from the VMC read aloud a poem written by a Vietnam veteran and member of the VMC. The poem was written some years after the veteran's return to civilian life (Figure 6).

**Figure 6**

*Memorial for Vietnam Veterans*

**The Battle Within**

*Many years have come and gone since I became a man,  
That was back in sixty-seven, I did my time in Vietnam.  
There we were told, we were men not boys,  
The guns we used were real, they weren't bloody toys.  
Twelve months there, then a few weeks more,  
I finally got home from that dirty Asian war.  
Returning to Australia they had to sneak us in,  
That's when to fight for our country, became bloody sin.  
Caught a plane out of Sydney, and was happy to be home,  
But my friends didn't know me, so I began to roam,  
To the far north coast, to east and the west  
I wandered here, I wandered there, I couldn't seem to rest.  
Had thirty-seven jobs, I've worked in every state,  
The welcome home march was twenty years too late,  
We were treated like strangers in a foreign land,  
They called us baby killers, they refused to understand.  
I have seen all our country, or that's how it seems,  
Thirty years of wandering, but still can't shed the dreams.  
Back in sixty-seven, when I became a man,  
I left my youth in the jungles of Vietnam.*

Skip (Telford, 2023)



The photograph was taken by the author. The poem reproduced with permission by the author.

Australian Vietnam veterans were cast as outsiders, returning deeply traumatised and adrift from society. They were virtually asked to disappear as there was no legitimate place for them as citizens in Australian society, especially among the community celebrating other war heroes such as the ANZACs. Taking a position in tradition of the country, a place in history was denied and non-existent

(Pigot, 2000, p. 3). It was rejections like this that forced the Vietnam veterans to form their own support networks. Like the one-percent bikers, they were forced to live on the margins of the Australian cultural pantheon. With their lives not clearly defined, they sought to create their own identity and so hijacked one of society's antiheroic stereotypes and applied it to the group of returned servicemen. The one-percenter stereotype biker image suited the returned veterans who were bitter and confused about the war they had fought, as well as the nation's rejection. It also provided them with a social network and camaraderie.

One-percent biking clubs became prominent in Australia in the early 1970s. In Australia colloquially, one-percenter motorcycle groups are more often called "bikie gangs" or "motorcycle gangs" rather than "bikers." There were clubs like the Hells Angels, Road Rebels and the Vigilantes but activities were quieter, and their image linked to British Rock 'n' Roll culture. Unlike the American Hells Angels motorcycle choice of Harley Davidson, the Australian clubs in the 1970s were riding British manufactured motorcycles such as Triumphs and Nortons. By mid 1970s the American prototype sub-culture of a one-percenter became established in Australia. Links had been formed with the most powerful international one-percent club the American Hells Angels (Pigot, 2000, p. 24).

Sometime during the 1980s, the American Vietnam veterans sought to construct a new nationwide supportive structure for veterans of the Vietnam War. The Vietnam Veterans Motorcycle Club (American) (VVMC-A) was formed. One of the aims of the club was to raise public awareness of the servicemen who were still missing in action (MIA) and those who had lost their life in the war. Rolling Thunder is the most important annual motorcycle event for the VVMC-A. The ride, established in 1987, was formed to educate the public and never let the politicians forget the 58,000 American servicemen and women killed and 2,200 MIA, and the prisoners of war left behind when the war ended in Vietnam. Many of America's military remains were not returned home or respectfully buried. The first Rolling Thunder run, named after President Johnson, was held the following year in 1988 with roughly 2,500 motorcycles, this number rising to 250,000 in 1999 (Pigot, 2000, p. 24). The annual ride continues to this day. The three day event begins its route travelling from the Pentagon, Washington D.C. to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall located at the National Mall Washington D.C. (AMVETS, 2023). The National Memorial Wall for Vietnam Veterans lists the names of the 58,000 American service members who were killed. The wall is the most visited memorial, attracting five million people each year (United States Government, 2023). Australian Vietnam veterans soon followed the American Vietnam veterans' lead in creating a motorcycle club for returned veterans. In 1989 an advertisement placed in a Melbourne newspaper sought Vietnam



veterans who were motorcyclist and who would be interested in starting a motorcycle club. The first V.V.M.C. began in Victoria with many other like-minded veterans across Australia coming together forming chapters all over the nation. Just as the American public had rejected their veterans, so it seemed that the Australian public had done the same. In turn, the American and Australian V.V.M.Cs. shunned their respective societies. The motorcycle club provided an opportunity for the Vietnam veterans to find an identity and position in society.

Over many decades since the end of the Vietnam war there have been ongoing events that attempt to remind the public of the war and the veterans' sacrifice, such as the theatrical concert production for *Rolling Thunder Vietnam*. In 2023, the rock drama toured Adelaide, Brisbane, Caloundra, Gold Coast, Maryborough, Newcastle, Perth, Sydney, Sydney West, Toowoomba and Wollongong (Entertainment, 2022). Heroes are people who stand out from the crowd, recognised for their achievements and actions that challenge the barriers of everyday society at large. The hero stereotype is rarely a rigid concept in the popular imagination; it is always open to cultural negotiation and re-definition (Pigot, 2000, p. 4).

### **2.3 *Stone* - The Film ties with V.V.M.C.**

The Australian low-budget film *Stone*, was written, directed and featured Sandy Harbutt (1941 - 2020). Harbutt was a theatre actor born in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. *Stone* was a box office sensation among those who were anti-establishment. His film broke box office records on its release in 1974, although movie critics at the time ripped the film to shreds. *Stone* was the only film Sandy Harbutt wrote and directed. In it he played the role of a Vietnam war veteran, the 'Undertaker,' and leader of the Sydney, NSW Chapter of the fictitious one-percenter bikie gang the 'Grave Diggers.' Billy Green wrote and recorded the soundtrack titled *Stone*, for the film in Melbourne in 1974. Harbutt wrote the lyrics for one of the songs titled *Cosmic Flash*. The song is played during a scene of the funeral of one of the Grave Digger members. The first line of the song is, "Satan! Sweet prince of darkness, here comes one of your own" (Green, 1974). The film makes references to the socially crippling experiences of Vietnam veterans, who upon return to their homeland were regularly disparaged by the public. The iconic grinning skull with the Australian military slouch hat (known as Casper) was designed by Sandy Harbutt and appeared as the back patch worn on the vest by the members of the Grave Diggers in the film.

### **2.3.1 A short synopsis of the film *Stone*:**

In Sydney an undercover police officer, *Stone* (played by Ken Shorter) (1946) joins the Grave Diggers Motorcycle Club to investigate who is killing their members off one by one. The murder mystery plot reveals the reason; a member of the Grave Diggers witnessed the assassination of a politician. The hitman caught sight of the vest with the Grave Digger backpatch and was then assigned to kill all the members of the Grave Diggers, thereby protecting the assassin from not being identified. The film begins with 400 bikers in a funeral procession, riding along the (then newly completed) Gosford expressway NSW (Harbutt, 1974). The song *Cosmic Flash* is the first song featured in the movie; it plays for the duration of the ride, with an orchestral instrumental piece at the start that conveys the sombre emotions associated with a funeral (Kuipers, 1999). Harbutt was the patron of the Veterans MC Federal Chapter. In 1999, when Sandy Harbutt put out a call to riders for the 25th anniversary of the filming of that scene, a staggering 35,000 motorcycle riders turned out to recreate the ride.

In 2009 Sandy Harbutt handed over the ownership of the fictitious Grave Diggers MC colours to the Vietnam Veterans Motorcycle Club (V.V.M.C.). The Grave Diggers wore red and white however, these are the exclusive colours of the one-percent club, the Hells Angels, and therefore the V.V.M.C. selected black and yellow for their vest and patches. The original Grave Diggers colours were escorted by 12,000 riders led by the V.V.M.C., to a ceremonial burning. The colours represent the soul of the club and the day of the burning, the Grave Diggers died and the V.V.M.C. was properly recognised, with Casper becoming their emblem (Shand, 2016).

## **2.4 V.V.M.C. - to - VMC**

The V.V.M.C was the alternative to the RSL Clubs for the Vietnam veterans. During the 1990s, it became apparent that the Vietnam veterans were an aging population. The average age then of the members was over 65 years, and more members dropped out due to ill-health or death. The V.V.M.C. once boasted 1,000 members, that number reported in the late 1990's by Shand (2016) had reduced to 500. With the numbers reducing year on year new talks began with the idea of allowing contemporary veterans from recent conflicts to join the V.V.M.C. as full members. Previously, military veterans who were not Vietnam war veterans could join the V.V.M.C. but as associated supporters and they were not permitted to wear Casper. In 2000, the first Veterans Motorcycle Club (VMC) was formed in Western Australia, the club being allowed to operate within

the V.V.M.C. Each state adopted the changes amending their constitution to reflect the new name of the club. To date most state chapters have changed to be just VMC, a few maintain V.V.M.C & VMC. The VMC also have associated supporters known as the 22 Crew (Figure 8). They are called the 22's, because the letter V of the alphabet is the 22nd letter, and 'V' is for veteran.

## 2.5 Anti-War Movement

While V.V.M.C. members were not a one-percent club they shared the one-percenter/outlaws' disaffection for authority and a misanthropic view of society. There were reports that upon returning from war the veterans had been called baby killers and were spat upon by anti-war protesters; it was these painful experiences that solidified the new motorcycle club. On the wall of a bunker sits a poem that depicts the lingering rage of many Vietnam veterans. It also resonates with the newer veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars who are dealing with their own sense of alienation from mainstream society (Drewery, 2003; Shand, 2024).

When I came home my neighbours shout,  
Your service and your wounds don't count.  
Your presence here we do not need,  
Your type this country should not breed.

Author unknown

It was as early as 1967 that disturbing opinions regarding the activities of the anti-war movement were reported. Speaking strictly of the veterans of the Vietnam War, many returning veterans were spat upon and treated with disdain by the general public and traditional support groups for veterans (Vlieg, 2019). Jane Fonda was an activist in the Vietnam anti-war movement and earned the nickname Hanoi Jane after she travelled to Hanoi in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) in July 1972. She was and is still to this day considered a traitor by many veterans in the United States of America (USA) and Australia. Fonda was apparently angered that her involvement in the anti-war movement was seen as an act of treason (Pritzker Military Museum & Library, 2024). Figure 7 is an image taken in one of the VMC club houses in 2023. It is a sticker of Jane Fonder depicted as target practice on the urinal. Some of the members of the V.V.M.C. also wore patches on their vests that were accusatory. Phrases like 'Vietnam Veteran Sprayed and Betrayed' or 'Fuck Jane Fonda' (Pigot, 2000, p. 31).

**Figure 7**

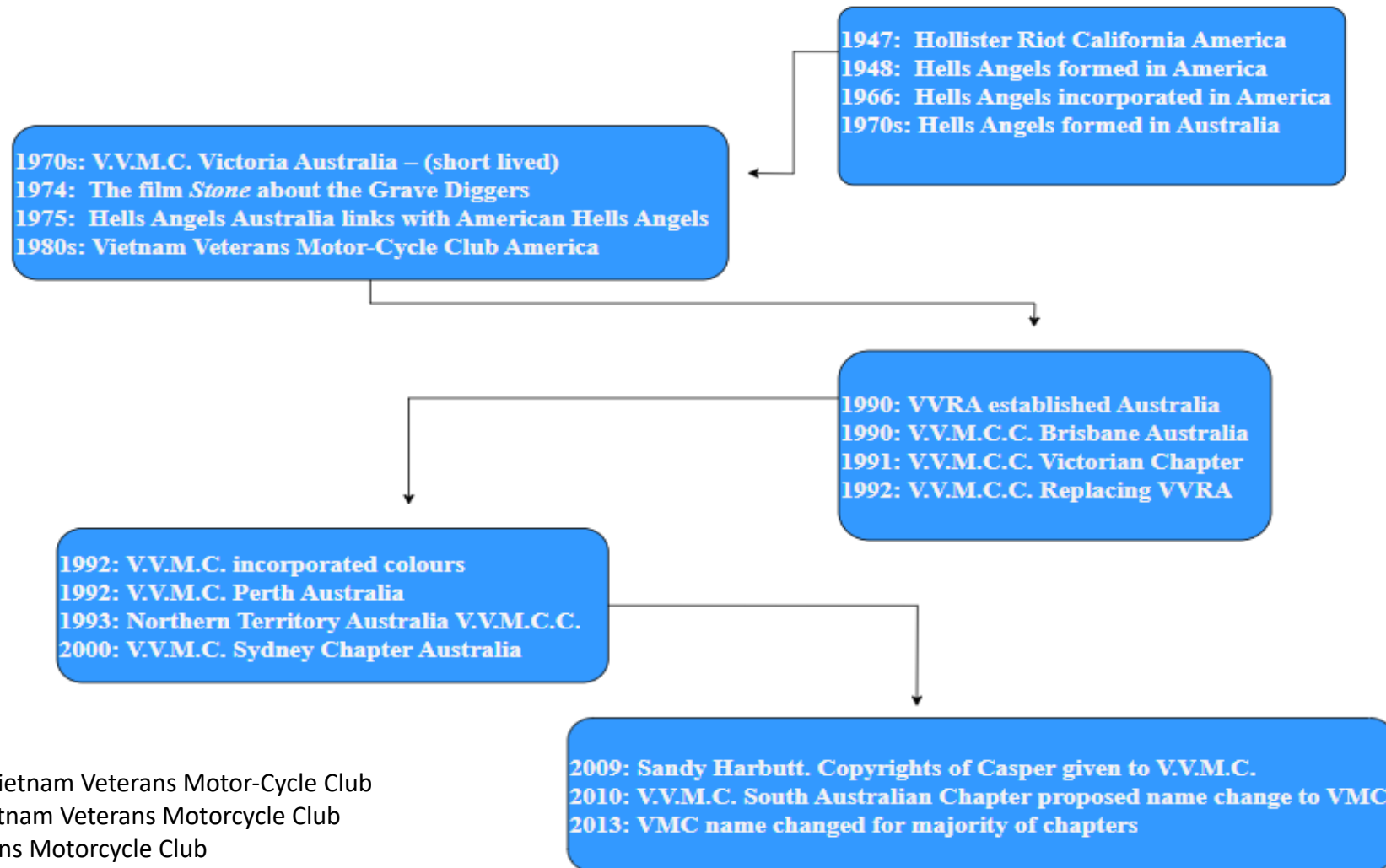
*Urinal Target - Jane Fonda - VMC Club House*



The author took the photographs permission was given to use.

**Figure 8**

*Timeline History of the Veterans Motorcycle Club*



V.V.M.C.C. - Vietnam Veterans Motor-Cycle Club  
V.V.M.C. - Vietnam Veterans Motorcycle Club  
VMC - Veterans Motorcycle Club  
VVRA - Vietnam Veterans Riders Association

## 2.6 Defining a Veteran

According to the 2021 Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide, Letters Patent, a veteran:

Means a person who has served, or is serving, as a member of the Permanent Forces (within the meaning of the Defence Act 1903) or as a member of the Reserves (within the meaning of the Defence Act of 1903). (Kaldas et al., 2022)

The VMC defines a veteran:

Any male person who is serving or has served as a member of the Australian Defence Force and has been awarded either,

- (a) an Australian Active Service Medal (AASM), and or
- (b) an Australian Service Medal (ASM), and or
- (c) an Operational Service Medal (OSM) and
- (d) and includes a male member of an allied Defence Force who is entitled to an award that is the equivalent to either (a), (b) or (c) above. (Amended 7th March 2015) (VV & VMC, 2019)

Being decorated with one (or more) of the aforementioned awards ensures that during military service the veteran was deployed in active combat (war-like operations and/or peace-keeping missions).

According to the Vietnam Veterans and Veterans Motorcycle Club – Australia National Council Incorporated Constitution, the definition of a Vietnam veteran is:

Vietnam veteran means any male person who served in South Vietnam between 31st July 1962 and 11th January 1973 inclusive as a member of the Australian Defence Force and includes any other person who served in South Vietnam between 1962 and 1975 as a member of an allied Defence Force. Only members who served in Vietnam are entitled to wear the Vietnam Veteran top rocker on their colours. (Amended 25th March, 2023)(VVMC/VMC, 2024a)

## **2.7 VMC Committee**

The VMC is an incorporated body and therefore has a constitution and bylaws that govern the management, running, structure, and delegated appointed roles of its committee members. These positions are as follows in descending in order of authority:

- President: responsible for representing the chapter, compliance, and chairing meetings.
- Vice president: responsible for standing in for the president in his absence, welfare overwatch, liaison with external service providers, and clubhouse cleanliness (assigning duties).
- Secretary: representing the Chapter, correspondence, applications, membership, safekeeping, and booking accommodations for chapter rides and events.
- Treasurer: receipt of all monies, payment of financial liabilities, keeping accurate financial records, and budgets, finalising annual records for audit, allocating working allotments to the quartermaster and bar manager on turnover and mark-up percentages.
- Sergeant at Arms: appointed by the president. Member/prospect and guest accepted behaviour, recovery of the club and chapter property (vest/patches), overwatch and security of members, clubhouse and chapter property, task, monitor, and report on prospects.
- Quartermaster: tabling of new products and designs for clothing and regalia, timely provision of all orders, budget including pre-selling of stock, setting of profit margins, liaison with other chapter quartermasters to increase inventory range, and buying power.
- Road captain: planning and safe conduct of all official chapter rides, tabling ride plans, notification and a reminder to members, compiling lists for all ride attendees, engaging junior members and prospects to assist with ride organisation, including acting as 'outriders' and recording attendance at ride events for all members, prospects and supporters. (VV & VMC, 2019)

## **2.8 Process of club membership**

There is a unique process of being able to join the VMC; becoming a member is seen as a privilege and acceptance into their fraternity. It is important to understand the process as it dictates who is invited to join the VMC. Likewise, it is crucial to understand the meaning of being 'invited' to join the VMC. This is a selective process, not a democratic membership. Members-based organisations

usually have people who share a similar interest or pursuit. There is the formality of completing an application form and paying a membership fee to become a member. The VMC differs markedly with entry requirements, and this process is quite rare. The steps are firstly; the prospective member finds the chapter they wish to join and checks that they meet the prerequisite definition of a veteran according to the VMC's criteria. Note: apparently a small number of chapters have different entry requirements based on their definition of a veteran. If agreed by all members of the chapter the applicant will be called a 'hang-a-round' for approximately three months, and they must do exactly that, hang around before being considered for the position of a Prospect (previously called a "nom," a term used in one-percent clubs). This is the opportunity for them to show who they are and prove themselves worthy to be a prospect and potential to be a member of the club. If during the hang-a-round time, the applicant has proved themselves worthy of fitting in with the ethos of the club, they serve a nomination period of not less than 12 months. They will receive two patches which are to be sewn on their vest; this includes the bottom rocker and MC cube. Casper, top and bottom rockers and the MC cube are only awarded to those known as fully patched members (bottom rocker displays the location of the country; see Figure 9). The significance of the patches is discussed below under the heading, VMC Colours.

During the trial period the prospect will be judged by all members, based on their attitude and character. The usual places to meet will be organised rides, clubhouses, and/or general gatherings; they are not permitted to attend formal club meetings or voice an opinion on the running of the club. They need to attend all organised club rides, they serve the needs of the club's president, vice president, and other committee members if required. For example, one VMC chapter leases premises that form its clubhouse. Inside the building is a bar licenced to sell alcohol, and a stage for various events such as local music bands. The Prospect could be given the job of a bartender, this would mean they serve, clean, and stock the bar as well as clean the clubhouse at the end of the evening and they must be the last to leave the building so members can drink late into the evening. At the end of the minimum 12 months, a vote is put forward to the committee members and the prospect must receive a 100% vote from all other VMC members that they are suitable to join. If this is not achieved, they will be told they are not to attend anymore. If they do achieve a 100% vote, they will be eligible to be accepted as a member.



### **2.8.1 Patching up**

Following 100% agreement of the members to allow the Prospect to become a member, they receive the honour of the 'patching up' ceremony. This ritual process of patching up has been a long-standing process stemming from the one-percent clubs and the V.V.M.C. Long gone are the days of reported ruckuses and violent initiation rites that had taken place within the one-percent clubs. Desecration of the uniform with members urinating, vomiting and pouring excrement over the initiate and giving them a bashing (Pigot, 2000, p. 9). Although the V.V.M.C. never participated in that sort of behaviour, they did instigate a practice that continues to this day in the VMC. The executive members hold the time and venue of the ceremony as a closely guarded secret, the initiate to be surprised by the club. One V.V.M.C. member stated his patching up ceremony was a dreamlike moment for him (Pigot, 2000, p. 10). Members of the VMC have a much tamer version of patching up which usually involves a heavy drinking session; but this is not enforced. Once the official notifies the Prospect, he is a fully patched member at a suitable location (such as a clubhouse), his remaining patches are handed to him (Casper and MC cube). A speech follows, welcoming him to the club. Patches are usually sewn on the vest at the club during the patching up ceremony if the facilities are there. The patches are sewn exactly so they conform to the specifics as stated in the club rules (a pattern with exact measurements of placement of the patches, see Figures 9, 10 and 11). The final requirement is the payment of their membership fee (VV & VMC, 2019).

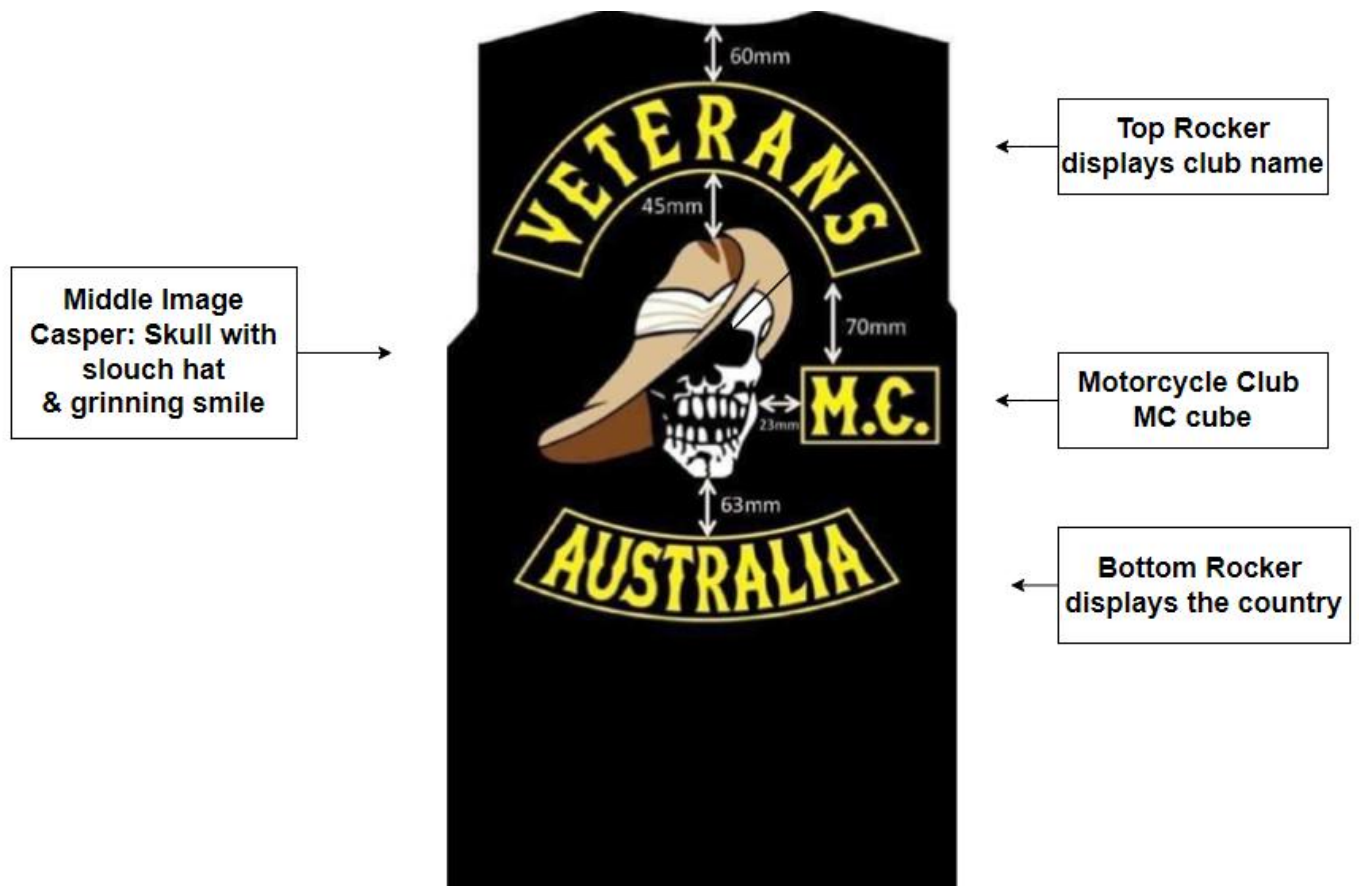
## **2.9 VMC Colours**

Cultural groups wearing distinctive clothing to show their connection to identity is not a new phenomenon. It is understood to be a part of symbol that can explain a person's identity and have hidden meanings and messages. Clothes no longer only function as protectors but also can show their social status in society. For example, Hijab is a headscarf used in Islamic culture to convey obedience or devotion. The one-percent clubs' identity, along with many other sub-cultural groups including the VMC, is bound up in their colours. These are distinctive and exclusive forms of identification that are highly valued emblems. (Pigot, 2000, p. 29). The colours are like medieval coats of arms, allowing each member to declare their allegiance and affiliations, while at the same time letting the public know the status of the wearer. For the members of the VMC there is a deep connection and significant meaning to the colours; and this will be thoroughly explored in Chapter

8 (Symbolic Shields: Casper, Tattoos and Harley Davidsons). When the biking community began to wear colours in the 1940's and 1950's, they were hand-stencilled images on denim jackets, these have not been commonplace for many years. Currently it is more usual for members to wear a black leather vest with bright embroidered patches that display the club's colours. The back patch typically contains the club's name, emblem, and country of origin. There are many variations around the world but to this day the one-percent club that is most prominent in that country or state, dictate what the other motorcycle clubs wear. This also includes a 'firm message' to all social motorcycle clubs (SMC) and military motorcycle clubs (MMC) that their rules should be obeyed. There are styles, colours, and layout of patches they cannot wear. For example, the Hells Angels (HAs') colours are red and white, and patches containing a 1% in a diamond, (the numbers 81 stands for the HAs' and / or a number 13; see Figure 12) or the three-piece patch that includes the MC (Motorcycle Club) cube (Anand et al., 2014; Gryder, 2023). The number 13 has three different definitions according to the website, The Cheap Place.Com. The most common is being associated with the sale of drugs and narcotics. The letter M, being the 13th letter of the alphabet, often is said to stand for marijuana or methamphetamine. The M is also known to stand for motorcycle and lastly, the wearer is his own judge and jury – this is due to 13 standing for 12 jurors and the additional number being the judge (The cheap place.com, 2024).

**Figure 9**

*Back Patch Placement - VMC Colours*



*Patch distance is provided: Top rocker to be placed 60mm from the top; the gap between top rocker and Casper's hat is 45mm; MC cube is to be placed 70mm from the edge of the top rocker and 23mm from the side of Casper's face and Australia patch is 63mm from Casper's chin.*

Permission was granted to use the copyrighted image of Casper and VMC Colours.

**Figure 10**

*Front of the VMC Vest*



*Patches on the left side of the vest: include awarded medals, club chapter, office position and rocker chapter.  
Right side of the vest: includes the ensign, club name and rocker showing country where deployed.*

Permission was granted to use the copyrighted image of Casper and VMC Colours.

## **2.10 MC Cube - three-piece patch**

MC and MCC are abbreviations used to mean "motorcycle club." They have a particular social meaning in the world of the one-percenter motorcycling subculture. The MC cube is largely reserved for those clubs that are mutually recognised by other MCs or one-percenter motorcycle clubs. The colours worn by members of some motorcycle clubs will sometimes follow a convention of using either a one-piece patch, (signifying a family club or social motorcycle clubs), two-piece patch (indicating a support role or affiliated role), or a three-piece patch, (for one-percent clubs). The three-piece patch normally means that the club is a traditional MC club (reference is sometimes made to the three-piece patch being a four-piece patch, however the centre image and MC cube are considered one-piece, therefore making it a three-piece set). The patches consist of the club logo - the top rocker, bottom rocker the country of origin, usually these are crescent shaped and called rockers. The middle patch is the club's emblem or image. The VMC emblem is Casper. Additionally, a "MC" cubed patch accompanies Casper and will be on the back of the vest. The

number and arrangement of patches is somewhat indicative of the nature of the club. Though many motorcycle clubs wear the three-piece patch arrangement, this is not necessarily an indication that a club is a one-percent motorcycle club as is the case with the VMC (Gryder, 2023). The VMC is not a one-percent motorcycle club but is the only club permitted by the one-percent clubs to wear a three-piece patch with the MC cube (Shand, 2024). Generally, only dominant one-percenter clubs (such as the Hells Angels) or their major support clubs may wear a small diamond with 1% or number 13 patch (Gryder, 2023). The Hells Angels are also known as the 81s – the letter H is the 8th letter of the alphabet and A is the first = 81 (James, 2009). The VMC are 22s; V is the 22nd letter of the alphabet.

It was by formal agreement of a handshake with the Hells Angels, that the V.V.M.C. could wear a three-piece patch and the MC cube (see heading “MC Cube - three-piece patch”) however, the colours and image from the Grave Diggers (fictitious motorcycle club in the film *Stone*) were red and white, and these are exclusively the colours of the Hells Angels; because of this the V.V.M.C./VMC colours were agreed to be black and yellow. The V.V.M.C./VMC also agreed to not wear the 1% small diamond shaped patch as this distinguishes one-percenter-clubs. More significantly there was a sunset clause that specified that when the last V.V.M.C. member died, the club (V.V.M.C.) would also cease to exist. “When they buried the last Vietnam veteran in the V.V.M.C., the club colours would go in the hole too”(Shand, 2024). That was the only way the club could get the ‘nod’ to become a motorcycle club (MC) and not a social or military motorcycle club. No Australian motorcycle club has since been allowed to have a three-piece patch. Any motorcycle group who attempts to ‘break these rules can expect a stern “please explain” from the one-percent clubs; if not, they possibly meet the threat of violence (Shand, 2016).

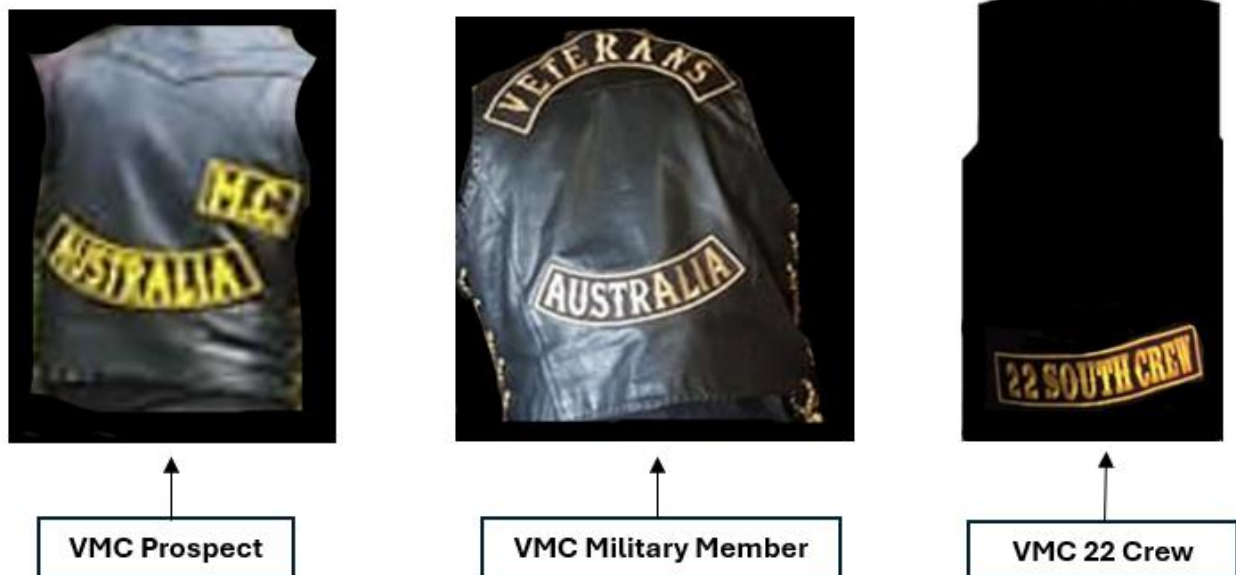
Several of the VMC chapters have support riders or associates. There are variations across the states and within chapters. Typically, they are called a Military Members or the 22 Crew. A military member may be affiliate of the club, by being either a veteran or serving Defence member. As they have not been deployed in active combat operations (war or conflicts), they do not meet the joining criteria to be a full-patched member, e.g. AASM, ASM, OSM or equivalent in country of origin (VV & VMC, 2019). They can wear a vest with two patches (Figure 11, middle image) on the back: the top rocker (Veterans) and bottom rocker (Australia). They are not permitted to wear the three-piece patch (Casper and MC cube) Prospects wear the bottom rocker and MC cube, but do not wear the top rocker and Casper until ‘patched up’ (Figure 11, left). They can attend official club meetings but have

no voting rights on club matters. However, they are bound by decisions that affect their respective chapters (VV & VMC, 2019).

A person who is an official supporter of the VMC is known as a '22 Crew.' They may be affiliated but not a member of the club (Figure 11, right). They can wear a patch stating, '22 Crew' on the back of their vest, this is known as a 'numberplate.' They are not permitted to wear any part in any formation of the three-piece patch. They do not attend official club meetings and do not have voting privileges. They are also bound by decisions that affect the respective chapters (VV & VMC, 2019).

**Figure 11**

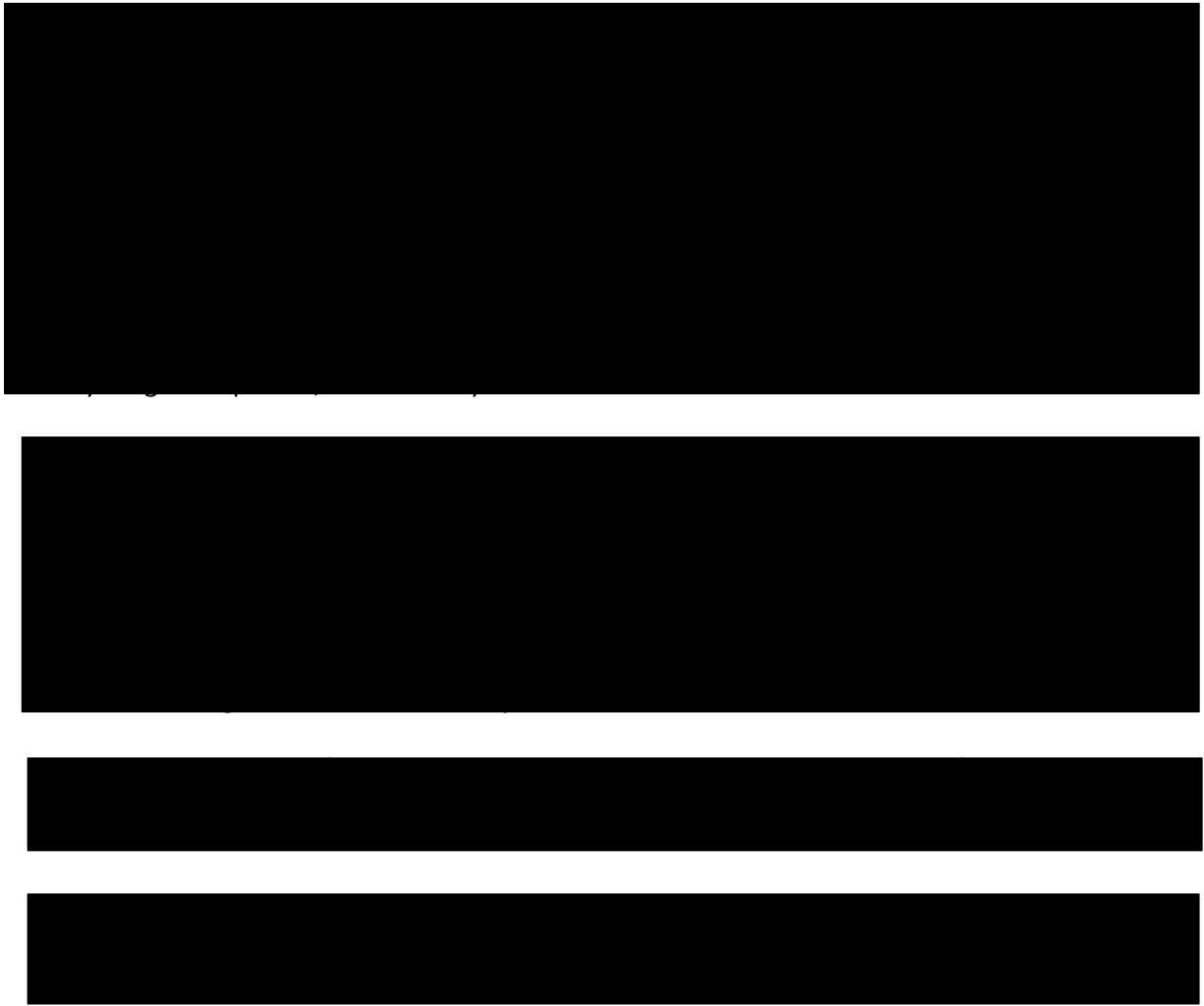
*VMC Variations of Patched Vests*



Permission was granted to use the copyrighted images of VMC Colours.

Members of a one-percent motorcycle club (1%) would typically wear a patch in the shape of a diamond, with 1% sewn on their vest (Figure 12). Due to posting guidelines on a Hells Angels (HA's) website (see below) and the fact the iconic Death Head image is a copyrighted image, it would not be legal or wise to include photographs of their colours or patches. Interestingly, the post refers to civilians; this is clearly differentiating the HA members from the rest of society. The VMC shares the same attitude; these are unique subcultures who make and live by their own rules.

## ***POSTING GUIDELINES***



**Figure 12**

*One-Percent Patch and Number 13 Patch*

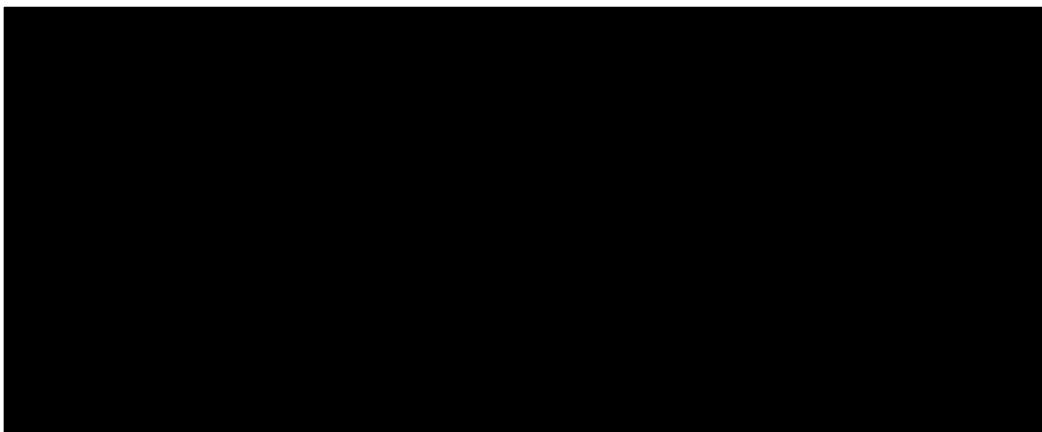


Image and posting guidelines removed due to copyright restrictions. Original available online at Dr Dave <https://www.hellsangelswales.com/>

## 2.11 Conclusion

This section explored the Veterans Motorcycle Club (VMC) as a complex sub-cultural group that transcends the typical image of a motorcycle club. It provides the social and historical context and background information about the VMC, setting the scene for this thesis. It reveals the clubs' rich history that began with the American Vietnam war veterans and the one-percent motorcycle club - the Hells Angels. The contents also provide a deep understanding about the clubs' ethos, hierarchical military-style structure, eligibility to become a member and the unique process to be invited to join the club. Details about the uniqueness of their colours and the specific unlegislated rules about wearing the three-piece patch were also discussed. Furthermore, the ties with a low budget Australian iconic motorcycle movie *Stone* and the resurrection of Casper, the emblem at the centre of their three-piece back patch. The exploration of the VMC's distinctive regalia, such as the iconic Casper emblem and historical roots of the Vietnam Veterans Motorcycle Club (V.V.M.C), deepens our understanding of how the club has positioned itself as both a tribute to the veteran's service and a counter-cultural entity.

The VMC is a closed entity to outsiders and in particular - civilians. They are more than a mere gathering of like-minded veterans, the VMC represents a unique brotherhood steeped in military tradition, masculine homosociality, and the creation of a fraternity that fosters both solidarity and belonging. The VMC, like its American counterparts, draws on the traditions of post-World War II motorcycle clubs but is distinct in its military heritage and the incorporation of military-style hierarchies. This alignment with military structures, particularly its adherence to strict codes of conduct, loyalty, and brotherhood, is central to understanding the VMC's appeal and its role in the lives of its members. This demonstrates the exclusivity of this study and the privilege that was afforded to me to carry out the research. There are no other investigations of military-style motorcycle clubs among documented programs. The outcome of this study provides a unique understanding of how peer support is constructed within this sub-cultural group. This research sought to substantiate knowledge of a non-traditional structured peer support system. Moreover, how can the gleaned insights be utilised, potentially being incorporated into existing mental health service models.

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There are colossal tragic losses of Australian veterans and first responders to suicide every year (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021a, 2021b; Boss, 2021a; Kaldas et al., 2022). Many battle daily with mental health issues impacting not only their life, but the lives of their loved ones, communities and the whole of our society. The support provided among the VMC peer group has far more intricacies that would be apparent to an outsider. Only by conducting this research has it been possible to peer into their world as they see it; it is not just a brotherhood - but a way of life. I asked a participant to 'sum up' what the club means to them; in an earnest reply he stated, "It's just... being there."

No other investigations of military-style motorcycle clubs at the time of conducting this research could be found. The lack of scholarly literature underscores the need for further exploration of military motorcycle clubs like the VMC, and their functioning as products of veterans' experiences, particularly in the context of post-conflict reintegration. This furthermore demonstrates the exclusivity of this study and the privilege that was afforded to me to carry out the research. The historical context of the VMC's formation, rooted in the struggles and experiences of veterans, particularly from the Vietnam War, has revealed the club's cultural significance in providing a space for men who have felt marginalized by society.

The personal accounts provide invaluable insight into the lived experiences of veterans and the critical role these motorcycle clubs play in offering a sense of purpose, identity, and camaraderie.

The outcome of this study provides a unique lens through which to examine not only the sociocultural impact of veteran' subculture but also the broader implications of their historical and ongoing struggles for recognition, respect, and a place in civilian society. As this thesis continues, a deeper understanding of how peer support is constructed within this sub-cultural group will emerge.

### 3 CHAPTER: LITERATURE REVIEW

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"The Road Goes On Forever And The Party Never Ends!!"  
(VV & VMC, 2019).

Permission was granted to use the poem.

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#### 3.1 Introduction

The Introduction and background chapters established the impetus for this research and highlighted its distinctive contribution to the field. These chapters also articulated the research aims, key questions, and provided a comprehensive overview of the thesis structure, content, and theoretical underpinnings. This chapter presents a narrative review of the literature, identifying existing gaps in current scholarly knowledge and examining a range of structured and unstructured peer support programs developed for Defence Force veterans.

The literature search encompassed publications from 1st January 1990 – 31st December 2022 and includes all forms of peer support accessed or utilised by veterans. These dates were deliberately selected, as this period marks the increasing formal recognition of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) which has become explicitly acknowledged within health and welfare systems as a condition commonly experienced by veterans. It also reflects a growing acknowledgement by treatment service providers of the therapeutic value of peer support in veteran care.

The articles captured literature focusing on Vietnam Veterans to Contemporary Veterans (contemporary veterans are defined as service personnel who have seen operational service from 1999 onwards). Veterans who served in the Vietnam War (1962 – 1975), are now an aging group of veterans who remain prominent within peer and ex-service organisations. The Vietnam anti-war movement began in 1967 and for returning soldiers the homecoming reception by the nation was not a welcoming one. There are reports that the veterans were spat upon (Vlieg, 2019) and the Returned Soldiers League (RSL) closed their doors on them. This review sourced literature that centred around peer support for veterans aimed at helping their general wellbeing, substance misuse, violence, depression, anxiety, sleep disturbances, interpersonal relationships, isolation, PTSD, and reducing suicide and/or suicidal ideation.

Peer support can be structured or unstructured and take place in a variety of settings. For this literature review, the types of peer support have been organised into four distinct groupings listed below. The groupings were informed by the literature sourced:

1. Formally structured programs led by a government organisation such as the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA).
2. Informal veteran peer social group settings such as coffee meetups.
3. Recreational sports and leisure veteran peer support activities.
4. Online web-based veteran peer support programs.

Peer support is defined as: “A system of giving and receiving help founded on key principles of respect, shared responsibility, and mutual agreement of what is helpful” (Horan et al., 2021, p. 3). Globally, peer support is recognised as being an important part of recovery for people with mental health conditions (Fortuna et al., 2020). Peer support groups are typically known as having some sort of structure and involve a group of individuals or people who support one another based on their lived and shared experiences, also known as a “peer-to-peer network,” or commonly referred to in the medical community as a “patient-facilitated network.” (Fortuna et al., 2020). Three broad types of peer support are recognised in the mental health field:

1. Formally employed Peer Support Workers (PSWs) who usually have some form of training. Some healthcare facilities have frameworks with guiding principles, for example, the ENRICH handbook (Gillard et al., 2017).
2. Peers participating in consumer or peer-run programs, usually with no formal study or training.
3. Informal (naturally occurring) peer support (Repper & Carter, 2011).

The concept of and use of peer support dates back several centuries but it is only in the last few decades that recognition and inclusion of these principles into service design and delivery has formally grown (Shalaby & Agyapong, 2020). In recent years, formal peer support services have become an accepted part of the support and treatment for substance use disorder. Gillard et al. (2017) discuss five guiding principles of peer support which are relationships based on shared lived experience; reciprocity and mutuality; validating experiential knowledge; leadership, choice, and control; discovering strengths and making connections - and it is these principles that underpin the ethos of peer support. In some settings healthcare professionals work alongside peer support

workers and lived experience advocates as they have been used to improve engagement, quality of life, and self-confidence; in addition to reducing the burden on the healthcare system (Shalaby & Agyapong, 2020). Organisational trends have changed in recent years and there is a growing use of both paid and informal unpaid peer support (Roennfeldt & Byrne, 2021). People attend support groups for all manner of topics such as illness or a medical condition; grief and loss; victim of domestic violence; parent support; or men's sheds. Not all members of peer groups overtly express mental health challenges or engage in structured organised programs. For mental health concerns, however they form a group of people with a lived experience that connects with those of that same lived experience. This environment provides group support for their life struggles with shared knowledge and understanding that echo the guiding principles as discussed by Gillard et al. (2017).

The specific peer support cohort that is the focus of this research is the Veterans Motorcycle Club (VMC). Despite extensive searches, no research literature could be found that explicitly targets this group or a similar motorcycle group. The VMC is a community member-based motorcycle club that is situated in all states and territories of Australia. This is a unique closed group with a military-style hierarchical structure. Exploring the lived experience of the VMC members benefits the public, health professions and other peer support groups. Understanding the uniqueness of this group and how their peer support functions for them, provides insight into the protective factors for their mental health and wellbeing. Information gained from this study will add to the evidence to help shape the structure of future peer support groups and potentially value-add to existing programs.

### **3.2 Context of the research**

It is well documented that a high number of Defence Force Veterans (DFV) experience psychological disorders and concerns with their mental health, more specifically the development of combat-related post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and self-reported post-traumatic stress symptoms (PTSS) (Nichols et al., 2022). Among veterans, the prevalence rates of PTSD and PTSS are higher than the general population and this has been shown to be a risk factor of suicidality (Thompson et al., 2016). Veterans also have a significantly higher risk of suicide compared to non-veterans (McKay et al., 2012). Research indicates a clear linkage between combat, military service, and PTSD. The incidence of PTSD was higher in veterans exposed to active combat than in those who were not deployed or had not experienced direct active duty (Koven, 2017). In his literature review, Koven

(2017) found that rates of PTSD differed markedly by the branch of service and combat-related experiences. PTSD rates were generally higher among veterans serving in infantry or combat teams.

The Commonwealth of Australia commenced a Royal Commission (RCDVS) in Brisbane in November 2021 about suicide and suicidality among serving and ex-serving ADF members. The final RCDVS report was released in 2024. Statistics from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare reported that between December 2019 and January 2021, there were 1,273 deaths by suicide among serving ADF members and ADFVs (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021a). Of these deaths, 83.4% (1,062) were ADFVs. Alarming these statistics do not capture the full extent of death by suicide in veterans (Kaldas et al., 2022). An average of 78 serving or ex-serving ADF members have died by suicide each year for the past 10 years. This equates to an average of three deaths every fortnight (Australian Government Department of Veteran Affairs, 2024).. Hence the importance of improved research and the continued development of effective programs that is needed to boost existing evidence-based intervention programs to prevent veterans' deaths by suicide and to increase help-seeking in this vulnerable population.

### **3.3 Background**

The DVA has increasingly funded and promoted the establishment of peer support programs to complement existing care and outreach programs for DFVs (Hundt et al., 2015). Before the 1990s, research on the effectiveness of peer support for veterans with PTSD was limited and little was known about what type of formal and informal support veterans sought and engaged with (Keller et al., 2005). Evidence-based treatments are readily available and are shown to improve PTSD symptoms, however historically, few veterans participate in intervention programs (Seal et al., 2010). Hence, the recent RCDVS. Another potential hypothesis for the lack of engagement in treatment services, which forms part of the basis for this research, is that the fundamental structure of conventional interventions does not replicate a military-style environment such as those DFV who have been deployed in active service involving a conflict or war (DFV-ACW) are accustomed to.

### **3.4 Aim**

This review, which explores veterans lived experiences of peer support, is organised into four thematic categories: Formal peer support programs; informal peer support initiatives; leisure and recreational-based peer support; and online web-based peer support.

The aim of the review was to examine the efficacy of various peer support programs, explore differences in their structure, and identify associated protective factors for mental health among veterans.

### **3.5 Design**

A narrative review was undertaken to synthesise the available evidence regarding peer support for DFV. Of particular interest was the structure and efficacy of peer support programs.

### **3.6 Search Strategy**

The literature search included several data bases accessed through the Flinders University library (Table 1). Figure 13 shows a flowchart of the search strategy. The databases included in the search were all written in English and only peer-reviewed papers that were published between 1 January 1990 to the 31 December 2022 were included. Specific search terms, filters for exclusions and inclusion criteria are also outlined. The search was conducted periodically from 12 October 2022 to 20 October 2022. Papers that did not specifically discuss peer support for veterans were not included. In November 2024, I applied the same name search filters into the same data bases as the original search. I expanded the search years from 1 January 1990 to November 2024 where permitted; some databases did not extend to 2024 using the selected key search terms. I assumed this was because there are not anymore current studies within these specific search terms. The main purpose of the additional search was to find if any new studies had been conducted since I began my research. There were a few additional peer reviewed journal articles for peer support programs for veterans. Upon reviewing the articles there were none that specifically addressed peer support within a veteran motorcycle club or added any additional insights to the original search. Therefore, they are not included in these results. A total of 29 articles met the inclusion criteria.

**Table 1***Databases for Literature searches*

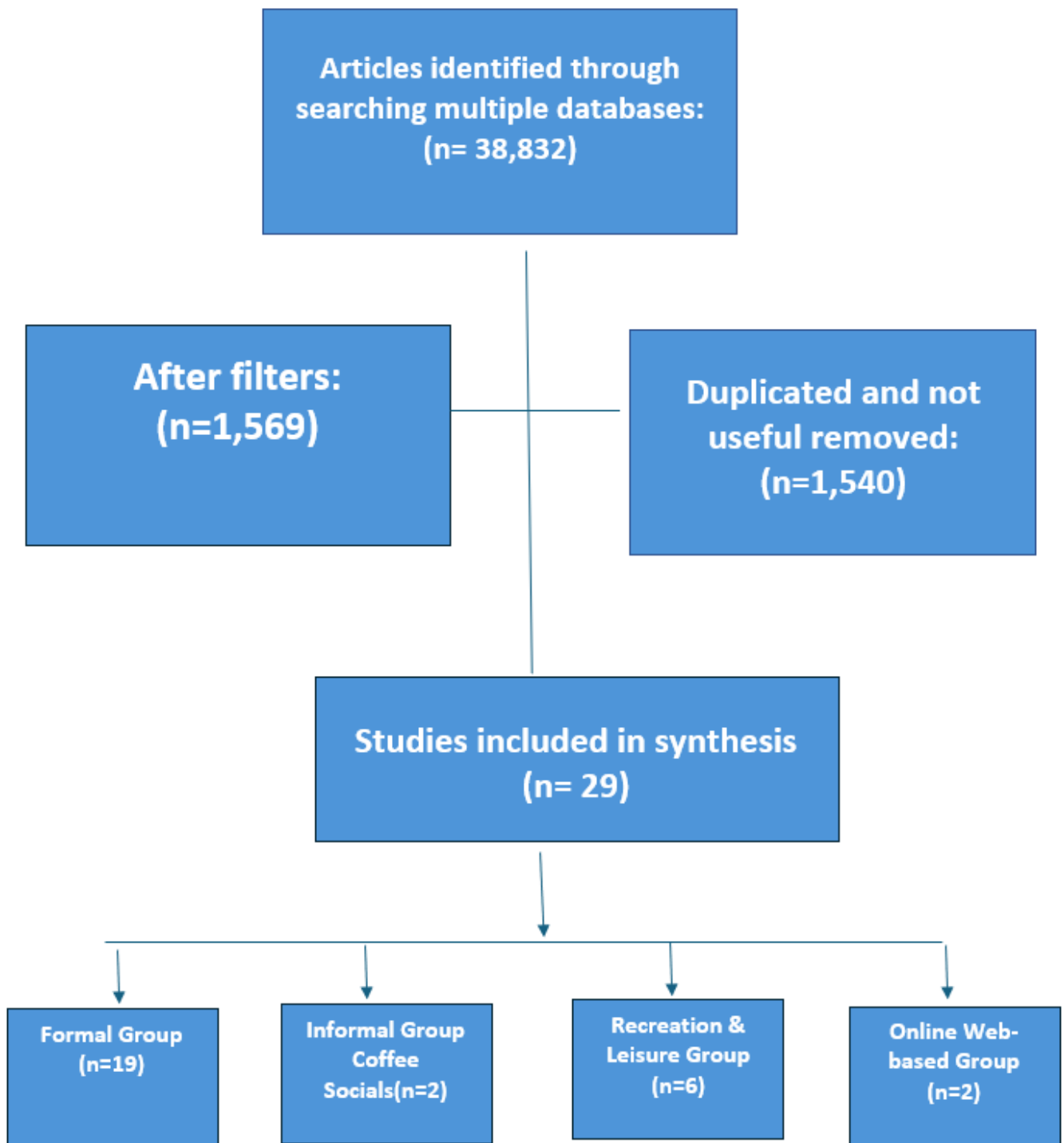
<b>Databases Searched:</b> 12 October 2022 - 20 October 2022
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Informit (Title/Abstract) Filters: Peer Reviewed.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• OVID (Title/Abstract) Filters: Review articles, Ovid full text, original articles and Articles with abstracts.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ProQuest (Title/Abstract) Filters: Article, Veterans, Military Medicine.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sage (Title/Abstract) Filters: Social Sciences &amp; Humanities, Psychology &amp; Counselling, Research Article.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Web of Science (Title/Abstract) Filters: Psychiatry &amp; Psychology, Psychiatry and Social Psychology.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Further search from existing reference lists.</li> </ul>

<b>Key Search Terms</b>
Veterans peer support, Veterans PTSD peer support programs, Combat veterans peer support and Australian veteran peer support programs.
<b>Inclusion Criteria:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peer-reviewed papers published between 01 January 1990 - 31 November 2024. These dates were chosen as PTSD became more acknowledged and researched and peer support recognised for assisting people with mental health issues.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Articles related to veterans' peer support programs.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• English language, peer reviewed articles.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grey literature/reports/editorials.</li> </ul>
<b>Exclusion Criteria:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If the publication did not discuss peer support for veterans.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Efficacy of peer support not discussed.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If the publication did not discuss veterans or peer support.</li> </ul>



**Figure 13**

*Flowchart Search Strategy*



### **3.7 Review Process**

Four key search terms were used to elicit relevant articles (Veterans peer support, Veterans PTSD peer support programs, Combat veterans peer support and Australian veteran peer support programs). All search titles were entered individually in each of the databases. The selected studies were then examined to ensure they included programs or a review of programs involving peer support that had been designed to support military Defence Force veterans. Any articles that were duplicates or not directly related to peer support and the veteran population were not included in the review.

### **3.8 Results**

Following removal of duplicated articles, 29 articles were determined to meet the inclusion criteria. These 29 articles were then grouped into four areas; formal structure peer support (such as government led programs); informal peer support groups (such as coffee socials); leisure and recreational programs; and online web-based programs.

The articles were grouped in their distinct themes assisted with synthesis. Returning with 19, was the highest number of papers in the formal structured peer support programs, recreation and leisure returned 6, and there were 2 in each of the informal and online web-based programs.

#### **3.8.1 Formally Structured Peer Support Programs**

The articles in the formally structured program group have been further grouped by era of service:

- Eight articles covered Vietnam veterans through to contemporary veterans
- Seven did not state the era of veteran service
- Two articles covered a period of contemporary veterans
- One article focused specifically on Vietnam veterans
- One article stated it was aimed at older veterans.

The eight articles that focused on Vietnam veterans through to contemporary veterans were all based in the United States of America (USA). These included, Azevedo et al. (2020), Beehler et al. (2021), Hernandez-Tejada et al. (2017), Hernandez-Tejada et al. (2021), Hundt et al. (2015), Jain et al. (2012), Kumar et al. (2019) and Turner et al. (2022). Seven of these articles had small participant number ranging from seventeen to twenty-nine ( $n = 17 - 29$ ) veterans. Although at first glance small participant numbers can appear to be a limitation, six of these studies involved semi-structured interviews; consequently, to reach thematic or data saturation large numbers are not necessary, especially when using a methodical framework such as phenomenology.

One article used a qualitative phenomenological design that interviewed one-hundred fifty four ( $n = 154$ ) individuals over a 24-month period. Over 59% of those participants reported they had combat experience. Eight thematic categories were produced from the central findings. Of particular interest were the themes that identified, 'dissatisfaction with other services.' These themes showed that DVA programs and other programs conducted from outpatient mental health clinics related to stigma or sitting down with a counsellor "who is going to tell you what you need to do." Under the theme 'psychological or emotional needs,' veterans described struggling with psychological issues after leaving the military; commonly shared feelings were isolation, loneliness and depression. The theme 'Internal motivating factors' described how veterans convey their difficulty being around civilians and noted they were markedly changed by their military service and entered civilian life feeling distant from friends who did not have the same shared experience. They described the lack of strong bonds and emphasised the importance of trust and interdependence; these was clearly lost when they left the military (Turner et al., 2022, pp. 3-4). All eight of the articles involved interviews with veterans, by either semi-structured weekly meeting at an outpatient mental health clinic, focus groups, weekly support groups, recorded telehealth and one article was a one-time qualitative interview.

Key themes were found from several studies where veterans were more likely to engage in programs that foster feelings of belonging and shared community. Veterans believe that civilians do not understand them whereas veteran peers do (Beehler et al., 2021; Hundt et al., 2015; Turner et al., 2022). The importance of trust was another theme identified across multiple studies by many of the veterans who participated in the research. The veterans trusted peer support veterans more than the DVA or health professionals. Direct quotes from veterans support this; for example, "veterans are more willing to open-up to other veterans" (Beehler et al., 2021) and "when I was first diagnosed with PTSD if you had told me I had a group of guys who had PTSD to go to talk to I might've

done that, even back when I wasn't ready to come to therapy" (male Vietnam veteran). Veterans reported when recommendations by fellow veterans were given, they were more likely to initiate engagement with providers of evidence-based psychotherapy. Additionally, peer support during psychotherapy possibly encouraged continued engagement in treatment (Hundt et al., 2015).

The two studies by Greden et al. (2010) and Pfeiffer et al. (2012), (both USA based studies) focused solely on contemporary veterans. Both studies focused on National Guards who are citizen soldiers (reservist) who represent approximately 40% of the two-million armed forces deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq. Twenty to forty percent (25%-40%) of the returned soldiers developed PTSD, clinical depression, sleep disturbance or suicidal thoughts (Greden et al., 2010). Greden et al. (2010) evaluated a peer-to-peer (Buddy-to-Buddy) outreach program that was a private-public partnership formed under the auspices of *The Welcome Back Veterans Initiative*. In the USA about 18 veterans die by suicide every day. The program was aimed at citizen soldiers to counteract stigma, PTSD, depression, and suicide. The goals were to improve treatment entry, adherence, clinical outcomes and reduce suicides. A survey tool was administered to understand the scope of problems experienced by veterans. Nine hundred twenty six (n=926) surveys were completed by returning soldiers and their spouses, and 40% screened positive for mental health problems, with 8% having suicidal thoughts. Less than half of these 47% received help. Upon returning home, many encountered additional stresses with relationships, jobs, and the loss of contact with military peers.

The program was a two-tier program where the selected buddies were trained. Buddy one (within National Guard unit chain of command) was trained for three hours in the rationale and philosophy of the program, communication skills including what to do in a case of emergency. A manual and quick reference cards were prepared and distributed to buddy one personnel. Buddy two was an outside volunteer veteran and backup for buddy one. The program's team hypothesised by using culture to change culture they would see an enhanced entry and adherence with the program as many of the soldiers conveyed, that "If you haven't been there, you don't get it," "We believe in taking care of our own" and "Other veterans can be trusted." This commentary elucidates the deep-seated veterans' cultural beliefs and attitudes towards the need to take care of their own and the bonds gained in military service.

The results of this study provide the unique opportunity to inform how we delve deeper into the cultural beliefs and attitudes of the VMC veterans. By gaining knowledge of the essence of their experiences with their peers, we begin to understand their silent injuries such as moral injury (MI).

MI, was not well captured in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM V), being described as psychological trauma (Cahill et al., 2022; Moser, 1995; Shay, 2014). However, this is an oversimplification of MI which is a trauma related syndrome ('moral trauma') as defined in relation to the experiences of veterans which is existential, psychological, emotional and or spiritual trauma arising from a conflict. Individuals who witness, or learning about inhumane acts resulting in pain, suffering or death of others fundamentally challenges the individual's moral integrity, and one's deeply held moral beliefs and/or ethical standards or code(s) (Jamieson et al., 2023; Jamieson, Maple, et al., 2020).

### **3.8.2 Informal Peer Support**

From the literature search, two peer-reviewed papers focused on peer support using informal coffee socials as the basis for their gatherings; these were, Gorman et al. (2018) and Drebing et al. (2018). Both studies used either coffee shops or restaurants to hold their weekly meetings. The goal of the meetings was to create an environment allowing veterans to access a wide variety of formal and informal support. In the study by Gorman et al. (2018) the attendance data reported; 2,236 veteran engagements over a nine-month period. In the Drebing et al. (2018) study, they served seventy two (n = 72) veterans per week at various locations. Both studies reported an average attendance of between eight and nine veterans at the venues per week. Similar findings were evident from both studies, for example the veterans reported feeling a loss of 'military family' and said they believed that non-veterans do not understand them and their military subculture. This loss of connection is often associated with feelings of isolation and lack of support with emotional needs.

The results from these studies suggest that the coffee socials are positively received by the veteran community. Reportedly one of the most common activities involved veterans receiving information from the certified peer specialist and directions for enrolment into needed healthcare support and local community resources. It was also noted that fellow veterans are possibly more effective than civilians at validating a veteran's experiences and struggles. Being part of a 'military family' there is an assumption that the veteran peer has had similar lived experiences during service in seeking support.

### 3.8.3 Leisure and Recreational Peer Support

Six peer-reviewed papers were included that focused on leisure and recreation for veterans and the role of peer support. Activities were varied: there was one study on each of the following activities; fly fishing (Vella et al., 2013), a literature review on an outdoor support therapy program (Bird, 2014), surfing (Caddick et al., 2015), yoga (Cushing et al., 2018) and camping (Bettmann et al., 2021) with the final one an online survey evaluating the effects of participation in a sports program (Lewis, 2022).

Being among nature has long been associated with having positive health benefits. A study by Vella et al. (2013) reported on nineteen ( $n = 19$ ) individual retreats that lasted for two days and three nights in an outdoor recreation intervention study involving 16 hours of fly-fishing. The final report included seventy four ( $n = 74$ ) combat veterans, including Vietnam through to contemporary veterans, who participated. The results indicated improvements in sleep quality, attentiveness and positive mood states, reduction in negative mood states, anxiety, depression, and somatic symptoms of stress. A reduction in intrusive thoughts of combat-related trauma was attributed to the focus and attentiveness needed for fishing and this assisted the veterans in reclaiming a sense of self.

Similar positive outcomes could be seen in the Cushing et al. (2018) study; in which PTSD symptomatology was shown to decrease, and improved mindfulness scores reported with decreased insomnia, depression, and anxiety symptoms. A study by Bettmann et al. (2021) comprised of fifty six ( $n = 56$ ) veterans in a program run by the *Sierra Club Military Outdoors*. Participants camped for three days and two nights and engaged in activities such as white-water rafting, canoeing, backpacking, kayaking, and rock climbing. The results showed a significant reduction in alcohol use at the one-year post-trip assessment, a reduction in mental health symptomatology from pre-trip to post-trip but showed few longer-term changes in mental health symptomatology. The veterans placed high importance on trust and camaraderie. Caddick et al. (2015) studied a program titled *Rivers of Recovery*, the program consisted of weekly surf camps for combat veterans. The study aimed at understanding peer relationships among combat veterans experiencing PTSD. There were fifteen ( $n = 15$ ) veteran participants, and all spoke of a sense of felt acceptance when among other veterans. This felt sense of acceptance was typically absent during interactions with civilian members. It was noted that a cultural gap exists between ex-military and military members and civilians.

Bird (2014) conducted a literature review on *Peer Outdoor Support Therapy* (POST) for contemporary returned post-deployed (CRPD) veterans. Qualitative, quantitative and longitudinal studies in both mutual support groups and consumer-run programs were included in the review. Due to the low numbers of peer-reviewed research in Australia, the scope of the review included Canada, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA). Several areas of veteran psychological treatment were discussed, highlighting veterans' reluctance to seek therapy as well as the potentially low responsiveness to some treatments. The focus of the review was the effectiveness of peer support, and outdoor and POST approaches for non-veteran populations and CRPD veterans experiencing mental illness. Bird (2014) concluded that veterans believed peer relationships are highly valued because the reciprocity allows for that sharing of experiences as giving and receiving support benefits both parties.

There was only one evaluated Australian based program available and included in the review, the title of which is *Trojans Trek* (TT). In that article the TT program was not subject to peer review and there was not a standard journal publication. Upon further web-based research there is an organisation report by Australian Centre for Post-traumatic Mental Health (ACPMH) (Lloyd et al., 2010). In the Bird (2014) literature review, the coverage of TT amounted to a small paragraph, but the contents were intriguing and led me to the ACPMH report, which provided a thorough evaluation of the program. The TT results indicated very good outcomes for non-therapist interventions and established new benchmarks for peer support programs of this nature. Participant numbers were low ( $n = 10$ ), and with their partners each participant completed self-report questionnaires and interviews before the camp and at a two-month follow-up. The statistical analysis was limited as only five ( $n = 5$ ) participants completed post-intervention questionnaires. The outcomes from those who completed showed a trend in mental health improvement. Of particular interest is the way in which the TT replicates a military style structure in the running of the program. For example, the use of military terms, such as 'stores and equipment,' and 'rations and quarters,' for food and sleeping arrangements (which were three nights in the bush sleeping in a swag). Assigned staffing positions used titles such as, 'commander,' '2IC' (second in command), 'quartermaster' and 'commandant.' Bird (2014) concluded that social support for veterans can act as a protective factor and TT may be effective for initial mental health care access and act as a supplementary treatment to empirically supported therapies. The TT research suggests that POST is a promising program for returning and returned veterans (Bird, 2014).

The participants felt a sense of camaraderie and similarity of experience and this in turn afforded deeper connections among the group. Collective stories and the use of 'black humour' was also recognised as a bonding component to the relationships. It is of interest to note that the same meaning and behaviour relating to 'black humour' is evident within the members of the VMC.

#### **3.8.4 Web-based Peer Support**

In recent years there has been an increase in the development, availability, and use of mental health technology-based or eHealth interventions (Possemato et al., 2019; Romaniuk et al., 2019). Keeping veterans engaged with these programs without human support has shown that users are unlikely to follow through on engagement with services (Possemato et al., 2019). Possemato et al. (2019) conducted a structured web-based designed pilot study titled '*Thinking Forward*,' for thirty (n = 30) veterans using certified peer specialists. The study compared peer support using web-based CBT for veterans with a diagnosis of PTSD and hazardous alcohol use. Veterans were required to complete 24 online 20-minute modules twice per week. Overall, the veterans and peers reported a good level of satisfaction with the program. The veterans found it particularly useful to learn how to apply module content in real-life situations and setting personal life goals. They also liked reporting to peers and feeling cared for. In Romaniuk et al. (2019) evaluation of an online peer-delivered program titled '*Survive to Thrive*,' veterans with a symptom of PTSD reported that there was a strong engagement with peer presenters and peer-developed content. A comparison of results showed from pre-intervention to post-intervention positive beneficial trend for reduction in symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress, and PTSD. Self-reported happiness and wellbeing also significantly improved between pre-and post-intervention and maintained at follow-up. There was a 100% completion rate of the program (Romaniuk et al., 2019). Both web-based studies had small sample sizes and there could have been biases with self-report measures as there can be a risk of under-or over-reporting symptom severity.

### **3.9 Outcomes**

Three key outcomes related to veteran peer support were identified from the reviewed publications. One, higher trust with peer veterans was reported in most studies; two, fellow combat veterans 'get' each other, whereas civilians do not understand. Three, improvements in mental



health and general wellbeing and perceptions of peer support favourably influence attitudes toward recovery from PTSD symptoms. Whilst these findings will now be discussed separately, it is important to remember they influence and interact with each other.

### **3.9.1 Trust: Brothers in arms**

One of the strongest reported themes was trust. Over half of the articles made reference to the importance of the trust held between the peer veterans. And this trust was made possible because the peer is a veteran; "They don't want to talk to a young college student that just got out of college study and they tell them all this stuff they probably have only read in history books" (Azevedo et al., 2020, p. 270).

Veterans trust fellow veterans in a way they are unable to trust civilians ('civs' or 'civies'). The poignant title of Garcia (2017) article, "If you've never been there, you wouldn't understand" echoed the findings from this review calling attention to the fact that when veterans return from war their everyday capacity to trust other human beings has often shifted from its pre-war frame. Those suffering from PTSD particularly experience difficulties with interpersonal trust. Disruptive social problems, family strain and reluctance to leave the home are all issues that are central to trust, and it is mistrust that can lead to arguments and even fights that often leave family, friends and co-workers perplexed. It is understandable how many veterans withdraw from society altogether to avoid their perception that human interaction carries a high probability of danger (Garcia, 2017). In combat, one could not deny the necessity of relying on one's comrades is critical. In traditional military professionalism there are a set of values opposing those held by liberal civilian society. It is these values that are vital to combat operations (Wadham, 2013).

### **3.9.2 We 'get' each other; 'Civies,' you don't understand**

Families play a vital role in supporting the wellbeing of veterans (Lawn et al., 2022). However, veterans do not typically disclose details of their service, especially when their service was in combat. Veterans who have been deployed in combat or war-like operations (peacekeeping missions) are even less likely to disclose any psychological struggles with their family or friends when they return from their service because they feel civilians do not understand (Caddick et al., 2015; McCormick et al., 2019). First responders' groups also echo these thoughts. Ambulance, police, and

fire service personnel believe there is a lack of understanding by healthcare providers, government, and emergency services organisations (Waddell et al., 2020). Peers can offer competitive interactions that encourage a group dynamic interpreted as esprit de corps, this replicating military training that is understood by both the peer and the veteran (Jamalulhak et al., 2022).

Veterans are often dealing with silent and moral injuries by themselves (Cahill et al., 2022). These are often associated with PTSD and can manifest as shame, guilt, loss of trust, anger, demoralisation, self-handicapping behaviours, and desire for self-harm (Forbes et al., 2015). Cahill et al. (2022, p. 3) describe “Military personnel are often confronted with situations whereby under extreme conditions, they make decisions, take action or exposed to event that challenge their ethical and moral beliefs.”

Kumar et al. (2019) pointed out that there is a lack of trust in the Australian Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA). This could indicate a reason for lack of psychological treatment engagement and program participation by veterans. Beehler et al. (2021) noted that veterans were more willing to ‘open-up’ to other veterans because civilians just simply cannot understand.

### **3.9.3 Improvements in mental health and wellbeing**

Most of the studies included in this narrative review demonstrated that veterans had improved mental health and general wellbeing outcomes. Regardless of the type of activity, whether that was fishing, catching up for coffee or talking online, they all had one thing in common, peer support from another veteran in whom they have more trust and shared culture.

## **3.10 Discussion**

The 2021 - 2024 RCDVS outlined the current rates of deaths by suicide in the veteran community. The major concern raised is that these figures do not capture the true number of deaths by suicide as these can be difficult to establish. In some cases, there is the subjectivity of coroners’ reports, when evidence is not clear as to the true cause of death (for example, road traffic accidents could sometimes be more aptly called road traffic intentions). In Australia from 2001 - 2006 there were 1,323 motorcycle fatalities (Bambach et al., 2012) and from 2011 - 2022 there were a total of 2,081 such fatalities (Department of Infrastructure, 2023). Intent in these accidents cannot often be

determined, and it would be worth considering the potential for a percentage of motorcycle fatalities to be suicides. Phenomena associated with the motorcyclists' riding experience are not well understood despite the fact that in America alone, there are over 10 million riders (Rand, 2014). I believe the VMC, by using their motorcycles, are providing themselves with 'Wind Therapy,' a concept that will be discussed in a later chapter.

The VMC are an Australian wide members-based group of veterans who ride motorcycles, operate within a military-style hierarchical structure and follow a distinct set of entry criteria and initiation processes to become a 'brother-in-arms' or, as they refer to it, 'brothers-by-choice.' Motorcyclist groups such as the VMC who wear their colours, (the vest that display their affiliation to a club) can be misinterpreted as one-percenter motorcycle clubs. These one-percenter motorcycle clubs are also known as bikies or outlaw clubs, such as the Hells Angels, Bandidos and Comancheros. There is an unlegislated rule in the motorcycle world that is governed by the one-percenter clubs, that is, the wearing of the three-piece-patch and more specifically the small, cubed patch with the lettering MC (denoting a motorcycle club opposed to a social motorcycle club) and the small diamond patch with 1% (Gryder, 2023). The three-piece-patch is extremely integral to the cultural identity of the VMC members, and its significance will be more thoroughly discussed in a later chapter.

From this literature review, it was evident how important peer support for this cohort. There is a distinct lack of trust with the DVA as it does not tolerate aberrant behaviour or 'black humour' (Bird, 2014; Kumar et al., 2019). There were many examples of how peer support has shown to be a protective factor in the wellbeing of veterans. Ultimately, peer support could potentially be a key mechanism in the prevention of suicide and improvement in the mental health and general wellbeing of the DFV population.

### **3.11 Limitations of this review**

Literature reviews can be broadly classified as either "systematic" or "narrative". Narrative reviews may be broader in scope than systematic reviews but have been criticised for lacking synthesis and rigour (Byrne, 2016). This narrative literature review used specific search terms to a specific set. Using this strategy yielded a manageable number of documents that were focused to the research question. Whilst it can be argued that narrative reviews are a limitation, they are used to describe and critically analyse data ensuring best practice or consensus statements. There were a limited

number of original papers identified that met the essential criteria for inclusion. The heterogeneity of the study designs and samples did not allow further analysis. The review was also limited to papers published in peer reviewed journals; it excluded grey literature and reports. Consideration was not given to different socio-cultural experiences of veterans across non-English speaking countries. As such, this places limits on the scope of articles that can be reviewed and included. Likewise, the date range included peer support limited to work that had been conducted since 1990 through to 2022. Therefore, it is possible that some early instructive work has not been reviewed. Despite these limits, this review has focused on some important outcomes.

### **3.12 Conclusion**

This narrative literature review explored formal and informal peer support programs conducted in the UK, the USA and Australia, targeted at DFV who served their country across different eras. The range spanned four decades, from Vietnam war veterans through to contemporary veterans who served in Afghanistan and/or the War in Iraq. This review demonstrates how limited is the number of Australian war veteran peer support studies in existence. Moreover, the studies were simplistic and narrow when compared to the in-depth research of this study. Narrative reviews have been criticised for rarely employing peer-reviewed methodologies, or duplicate curation of evidence, and for often failing to disclose study inclusion criteria. However, because narrative reviews offer breadth of literature coverage, they remain frequent within the literature (Byrne, 2016).

Whilst there are a limited number of evaluations conducted that specifically focus on peer support for veterans, this narrative review found that peer support showed positive outcomes for veterans experiencing PTSD, comorbidity and social functioning with reported significant improvements and gains that were maintained (Creamer et al., 1999). Veterans valued peers who have previously been combat serving veterans (Clark et al., 2016), as peer support contributes to a feeling of social connectedness that is, in itself, a valuable component for healing from PTSD (Jain et al., 2016).

Globally, peer support has been recognised as a vital recovery service for individuals with mental health conditions (Fortuna et al., 2020). This review indicated that veterans possess both the capability and potential to support their peers – often referred to as brothers-in-arms – through the strong bonds of trust and shared experiences inherent in military service. In general, many veterans report feeling misunderstood by civilians and experience significant challenges in transitioning back

to civilian life. Consequently, peer support may serve as a valuable adjunct to traditional mental health care, helping to bridge critical gaps in treatment.

## 4 CHAPTER: METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Chapter Overview

Chapter 3 reviewed the available published literature on the role of peer support for Defence Force Veterans (DFVs). This chapter details the methodological framework, hermeneutic phenomenology, used to guide this research and answer the research question, a qualitative investigation of Veterans' experience of peer support within a closed military-style motorcycle club. The thesis title (What are the experiences of peer support for veterans within a closed military-style motorcycle club), encapsulates the lived experience of the bond that exists within this closed group. This narrative phenomenological study examines the lived experience of peer support in the Veterans Motorcycle Club (VMC). Findings from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Report (AIHW) "Serving and ex-serving Australian Defence Force members who have served since 1985: suicide monitoring 2001 to 2019" showed that 83.4% of the deaths by suicide were by veterans and not currently serving defence personnel (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021b). These figures suggest that being in service is itself a protective factor. As previously discussed in the introduction and literature review, there are psychological and social aspects of a veteran's life can be adversely affected by their service in the forces, especially when that service has been combat-related (Koven, 2017). The members of the Veterans Motorcycle Club (VMC) have never previously 'opened their doors,' allowing an 'outsider' in, to conduct interviews with members of the club. My intent was to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences as viewed by them. This research question is of vital importance because it provides insights into peer support within the club, the protective factors of brotherhood, and the role played in the replication of a military-style environment.

Phenomenology takes a specific approach to understanding lived experience in context, giving primacy to the lived experience and uniquely how that lived experience provides a basis for understanding the individual in context. Using this framework to explore the research question attempts to not merely describe but to explore and understand the how and why, their intentions, their thoughts and emotions, reactions, perceptions and how they identify and interact from a personal and individual voice. The data was thematically analysed to generate themes that show how peer support is used and understood within this group and how that influences their mental wellbeing.

The themes from this study have the potential to contribute to shaping future mental health interventions and peer support programs for DFVs and the broader veteran community and their families. Furthermore, it may assist other groups that are accustomed to a similar hierarchical structure, such as emergency first responders, (paramedics, police, and firefighters). Overall, the aim was to understand what helps protect against the negative psychological impacts of their service and ultimately reduce the incidence of suicidal thoughts, attempts, and premature deaths by suicide.

I begin by broadly explaining the philosophical origins of phenomenology that underpin and support this method of inquiry. Phenomenology endeavours to understand the lived world at a conscious level. To understand the position and assumptions of phenomenology I discuss the epistemological and theoretical orientation of hermeneutic phenomenology, the framework used to direct this study. I introduce and discuss prominent thinkers in phenomenology, the phenomenological philosophers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These thinkers created new words to convey concepts and meanings when there were no previous words. This chapter explores the rationale for the use of phenomenology, how it is conducted, and why it fits this particular research question and cohort. The discussion delves into the use of phenomenology to understand the individual and their lived experiences as opposed to using empirical research that focuses on concrete answers to research questions that are repeatable, measure defined variables with deductive reasoning. I then address the strengths and limitations of using this methodology to answer the research question. A glossary containing featured terms for ease of translation is provided on page xii.

## **4.2 Phenomenology as a Theoretical Framework**

Phenomenology forms one specific field in philosophy; it is related to but distinct from other well-established fields within philosophy. The 4 core fields or disciplines of philosophy are listed below with phenomenology listed as the 5th field:

1. Ontology is the study of beings or their being—what is.
2. Epistemology is the study of knowledge—how we know.
3. Logic is the study of valid reasoning—how to reason.
4. Ethics is the study of right and wrong—how we should act.

5. Phenomenology is the study of our experience—how we experience.

Phenomenology is the study of the structures of our consciousness as viewed in the first person. Phenomenology operates by analysing the experience as consciousness without presumption e.g. the experience is generated and influenced by the person's engagement with the people, environment, history and events that surround them (their life world) without imposing beliefs and values and understandings (presumptions). Phenomenology not only progresses a complex interpretation of bodily awareness, embodied action, and social activity, it also encompasses perception, emotions, thoughts, imagination, desire, memory and volition to including conversation. These can all be studied using a phenomenological framework (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2022). Consciousness is neither static nor confined to space or time. It has directionality, and it is this principal feature of consciousness that phenomenology takes as its point of departure for the analysis of phenomena known as intentionality. Intentionality is the "aboutness" or "directedness" of mental states and refers to the notion that consciousness is always the consciousness of something. The goal is not to learn about the world outside of the phenomena, but to begin with the phenomena (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010).

There are several branches of phenomenological study. The first 7 within Table 2 are the major branches (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2022). The illustrations in Table 2 feature the different foci of phenomenology. A brief description of the study area and the prominent philosophers associated with their given fields is provided.



**Table 2***Phenomenological Branches, Description, and Associated Philosophers*

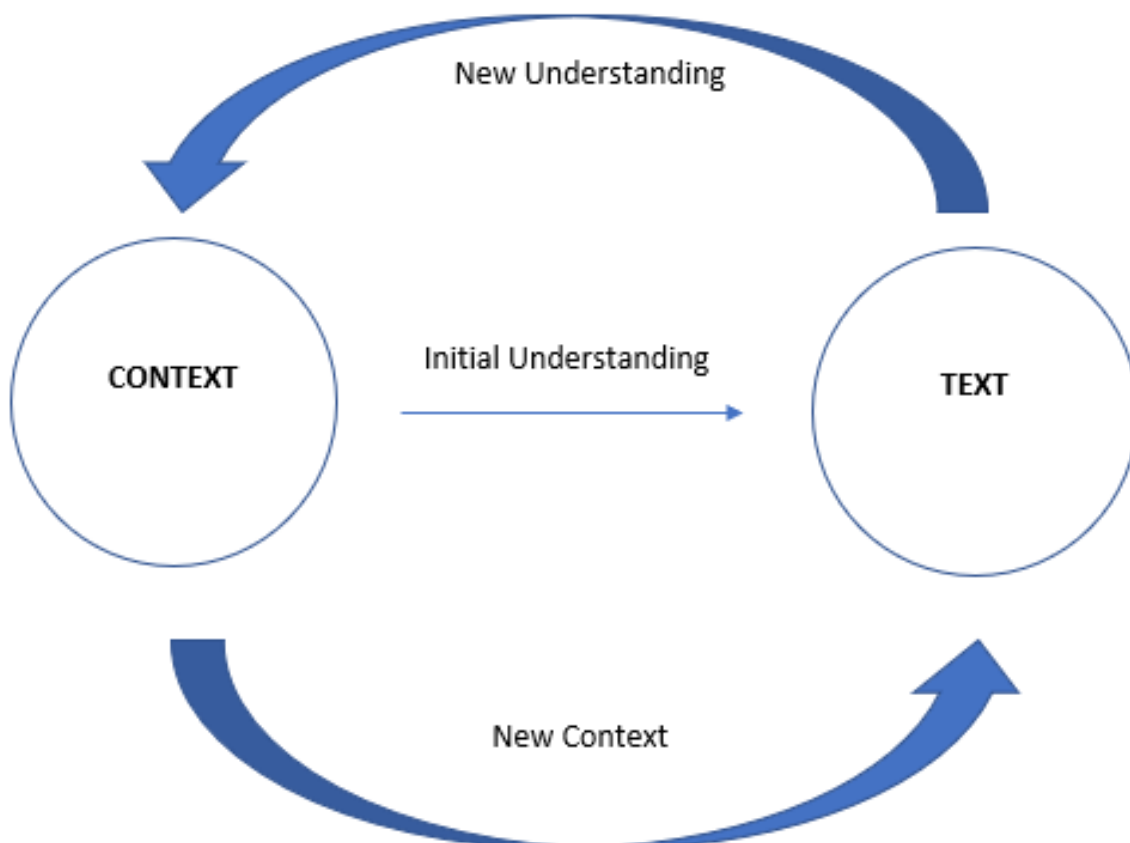
	Phenomenological area	Description	Philosopher/s most Associated	Cited in
1	Transcendental Constitutive Phenomenology	Studies how objects are constituted in pure or transcendental consciousness setting aside questions of any relation to the natural world	Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) Oscar Becker (1889-1964) Aron Gurwitsch (1901-1973)	(Brough, 2009) (Ophälders, 2009) (Haywood et al., 2021)
2	Naturalistic Constitutive Phenomenology	How consciousness takes in the world of nature, assuming with the natural attitude that consciousness is part of nature	Emile Zola (1840-1902) George Santayana (1863-1952) Ernest Nagel (1901-1985) Willard Van Orman Quine (1908-2000)	(Conti & Conti, 2003) (Skowronski, 2010) (Richards, 1986) (Popper & Quine, 2022)
3	Existential phenomenology	Studies concrete human existence, including the experience of free choice.	Karl Jaspers (1883–1969) Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973) Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005)	(Schlimme, 2009) (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010) (Swartz & Zolberg, 2007) (Papadimos, 2009) (Petrilli, 2022) (Moreira, 2012) (Massiere, 2015)
4	Generative Historicist Phenomenology	Studies how meaning is generated in historical processes of collective experience over time	Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) Karl Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1772-1829)	(Wildenauer, 2001) (Hudson, 2006)
5	Genetic phenomenology	Studies the genesis of meanings of things within one's own stream of experience	Edmund Husserl (1859-1938)	(Brough, 2009)
6	Hermeneutic phenomenology studies	Interpretive structures of experience	Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002)	(Heidegger, 1927/1962) (Grondin, 2015)
7	Realistic phenomenology	Studies the structure of consciousness and intentionality, assuming a real world where it is external to consciousness.	Adolf Reinach (1883-1917)  Max Scheler (1874-1928) Johannes Daubert [de] (1877-1947) Dietrich Von Hildebrand (1889-1977)	(Camilleri, 2014; Reinach, 2009) (Ozar, 2016) (Schuhmann & Smith, 1987) (Kitzinger, 2011)
8	Embodied phenomenology	is the theory that many features of cognition, whether human or otherwise, are shaped by aspects of an organism's entire body.	Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) Antonio Damasio (1944- )	(James, 2018) (Cavanna & Nani, 2014)
9	Material phenomenology	The world is not limited to any existing world but includes in itself the possibility of creating new fields of experience for the human.	Michel Henry (1922–2002)	(Formisano, 2021; Puyou & Faÿ, 2015)
10	Neurophenomenology	Developed the basis for experimental phenomenology and neurophenomenology. Tends to be more "descriptive" than "prescriptive."	Francisco Varela (1946–2001)	(Lanfranco et al., 2022)
11	Linguistic phenomenology	All speech and all utterance is the doing of something with words and signs, challenging a metaphysics of language that would posit denotative, propositional assertion as the essence of language and meaning.	Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) John Langshaw Austin (1911-1960)	(Higgins, 2023) (Emike, 2013)
12	Post-analytic phenomenology	technological mediation to systematically analysing the influence of technology on human behaviour in terms of the role technology plays in human-world relations	Don Ihde (1943- ) Peter-Paul Verbeek (1970- )	(Vardouli, 2015) (Kroes & Verbeek, 2014)

When using a hermeneutic phenomenological framework to study a group, it is essential that the researcher engages in a comprehensive journal-writing process of self-reflection. This is known as the 'hermeneutic circle.' The hermeneutic circle is a metaphor, as it is not an actual circle, but a way

to allow external phenomena to be interpreted in a preliminary way (Grondin, 2015). A circle suggests that something goes around, start to finish, and joins at these points. This is not the key process of the hermeneutic circle. Figure 14 depicts how initial understanding of a given phenomenon is given in context, accompanied by reflection from which new contexts are formed, leading to a new understanding. The purpose is to encourage ongoing conversations that will bring to life the experiences being explored by integrating them into a new semantic context (Lavery, 2003). The hermeneutic circle refers to the idea that one's understanding of the text as a whole is established by reference to the individual parts and one's understanding of each individual part by reference to the whole. In Heidegger's opinion, it is all understanding that is connected to a given set of fore-structures, including one's history, that cannot be eliminated (Blattner, 2006; Heidegger, 1927/1962 ). This active reflection and search for a new context was embraced and embedded in the study and assisted with interpretation and results. The data include my captured reflections, and they are woven throughout the methods in Chapter 4. My pre-conceptions or biases are an important factor, as they demonstrate how my life journey, military knowledge, and cultural awareness shape the themes and interpretations.

**Figure 14**

*Hermeneutic Circle*



### 4.3 Rationale

The rationale for using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach in this study was to elicit narratives from members of the VMC. This group of DFVs who, until now, had not shared their stories in any formal research context. Hermeneutic phenomenology aims to uncover the meaning embedded in lived experiences by acknowledging the intentionality behind individuals' actions, reactions, and interpretations. By linking their narratives, it has been possible to explore how the participants think about, engage with and make sense of peer support within a unique cultural and relational setting. The aim was not simply to describe, but to understand their world as they experience it and to explore how such understanding could inform my own interpretative and reflexive engagement with the data. To understand the essence of experience through a hermeneutic lens, the interview process was guided by open-ended questions specifically designed to elicit rich textured narratives of each participant's experience.

The thematic analysis was based upon the framework of Braun and Clarke (2020) which provided a rigorous yet flexible structure to identify and analyse patterns of meaning across the data. This approach allowed me to understand the contextual worldview of each participant, acknowledging the situatedness of their meaning making (Braun & Clarke, 2020; Holmes & Gary, 2020). This interpretive framework is especially important when contrasted with empirical or positivist approaches, which often prioritise measurable trends over personal context. While empirical research can generate valuable data, it lacks the capacity to engage with the deeply personal subjective meanings that individuals assign to their lived experience.

Hermeneutics is the theory and methodology of interpretation originally applied to the interpretation or exegesis of scriptures. In modern terms, this has broadened to include questions on general interpretations of phenomena. In research, this includes both verbal and non-verbal communication, semiosis, pre-understanding, and presupposition (Shockey, 2010). Phenomenology focuses on illuminating details to create meaning and achieve a sense of understanding, making the invisible visible. This research lens was selected specifically because of its step-by-step cyclical approach. This approach assisted by providing an in-depth understanding of the cohorts' experience within their unique cultural environment. It is a highly suitable methodology for exploring phenomena for groups that are closed, where little is known about them (Laverty, 2003).

Reflexivity involves critical examination of potential biases and or preconceptions that researchers bring to a study. Both professional and personal experiences shape a researcher's pre-existing beliefs about the subject of inquiry and influences decisions regarding what is investigated and how.

Additionally, various factors can affect the interpretation of qualitative data, including the researcher's level of investment and motivation, field-related skills and qualifications, and the theoretical and educational perspectives that inform their approach (Holmes & Gary, 2020). Hermeneutical thinkers such as Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) view the hermeneutical circle favourably. We understand because we are guided by questions, anticipations and expectations. The circle provides a positive element of understanding that is inescapable and as finite as historical beings (Grondin, 2015).

The following paragraphs provide a brief overview of Transcendental Phenomenology and Hermeneutic Phenomenology, highlighting key differences in how philosophers such as Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger conceptualised the phenomenological approach. This comparison provides a foundation for justifying the selection of a hermeneutic phenomenological lens as the most appropriate methodological framework for this research.

#### **4.4 Hermeneutic vs Transcendental Phenomenology**

Although phenomenology has been routinely used in research, this was not the intention when it was originally conceptualised by Husserl and Heidegger. Epistemology is concerned with the nature of knowledge and how knowledge is obtained. In contrast, ontology is concerned with investigating the "science of being." Edmund Husserl is most associated with transcendental phenomenology which studies how objects are constituted in transcendental consciousness, setting aside questions of any relation to the natural world. In contrast, Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on interpretation and developed meaning from "being" (existing in the natural world and how we relate and interact in that world). Heidegger was a student of Husserl; both philosophers focused on human experience, but each looked through a different lens. Husserl, primarily on epistemology, was interested in raising awareness, while Heidegger focused on ontology and was interested in revealing the meaning of being (Giorgi, 2014). Husserl's notions of phenomenological and natural attitude can be used to illustrate how, in everyday life, we typically endorse the natural attitude, focusing on external objects instead of their experiences (Jylkka & Railo, 2019). Husserl proposed

that one needed to bracket (epoché) out the outer world as well as individual biases in order to successfully achieve contact with the essence of the phenomena (Laverty, 2003). The process of suspending one's judgement or bracketing certain beliefs about the phenomena in order to see it clearly was rejected by Heidegger as he claimed that interpretation is needed before understanding. I agree with Heidegger's viewpoint; my knowledge, history and connection with the defence culture shapes my understanding and is intrinsic to what I bring to the reflective and reflexive process and data analysis.

## **4.5 Advantages and Limitations of Phenomenology**

Descriptive phenomenology is a powerful way to capture people's conscious experiences through their actions and motivations to gain a deeper understanding of their subjective experiences. Using phenomenology in research allows assumptions and long-held beliefs to be scrutinised and challenged, which has the potential to influence the development of new theories, adaptations to interventions and therapies, and changes in policies. One advantage of using qualitative methodology is that for people's uniqueness to be understood, they should be explored in the society in which they live. Another advantage is that phenomenological research is oriented toward discovery, and the methods are far less restrictive than those used in other sciences.

The limitations of hermeneutic phenomenology should also be mentioned. For example, we know that researcher biases influence the interpretation of results. Using the hermeneutic circle assists the reflexive approach necessary to extract rich meanings from the data. Equally, we must consider that if biases are too rigid, and reflexivity does not take place, this could generate themes directed by the researcher to 'fit' a given agenda.

### **4.5.1 My stance as a researcher in the middle**

The VMC is a unique military-style motorcycle club that cannot be likened to any other military group or motorcycle club. Just meeting the prerequisites to join is not enough to be considered trusted and worthy of wearing their colours (The application process is outlined fully in Chapter 1). The same ethos applies to my permission to gain access to the group to conduct this research. Outsiders are usually rejected. I am not and never could be a member of their club. Although I am not an 'insider' I am not a complete 'outsider' for I am in a privileged position of being "vouched for." I had been married for over 26 years to a valued member of the club, and on occasion have

met other members at social events. Because of my trusted connection, I was granted permission to access the members of the club and invite them to participate in this research. The notion of insider and outsider perspectives should be considered when conducting qualitative research. An insider recognises and understands the nuances of the culture and can represent the participants.

It was essential that the interview process be conducted in an environment of safety and trust, whereby the participants were supported in a caring relationship. I maintained their voice through the process and primacy of their conscious experiences. From the literature review (Chapter 3), trust was identified in multiple studies as essential for the success of any peer support intervention or program (Beehler et al., 2021; Hundt et al., 2015; Turner et al., 2022).

## **4.6 Conclusion**

To address the research question and study aims, a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology was used to understand how peer support is experienced by members of the VMC. A qualitative methodology was thought to be the most appropriate for this study, as it allowed for an in-depth exploration of an individual's everyday life. It also allowed me to interpret how individuals positioned themselves within their own experiences. The findings were presented in a literary format that was rich in descriptions and expressions.

The collected narratives or life stories have the potential to shape future interventions and services for mental health support programs. Defence Force veterans and other similar professional organisations configured with similar hierarchical structures, such as first responders (paramedics, police, and firefighters) may also benefit from these findings.

## **5 CHAPTER: METHODS**

### **5.1 Chapter Overview**

Chapter 4 outlined the rationale for the use of hermeneutic phenomenology as the methodological framework guiding this research. This chapter describes the formulation and sequence of the research project methods used to answer the research question.

The following sections discuss the details of the participants, the sample size, and the recruitment process. I then discuss how the interviews took place and how data analysis was conducted, which incorporates ethical considerations, particularly how steps were taken to uphold confidentiality and participants' human rights. The final section of this chapter discusses how the study aimed to understand the experience and role of peer support for members of the Veterans Motorcycle Club (VMC).

### **5.2 Sample and Recruitment**

The research team agreed that the desired sample size should range between 10 and 15 participants. Although there is no right answer to the question of sample size, it should be small when using a qualitative phenomenological research design as the aim is not to generalise the lived experience but that each experience can be examined in depth (Bartholomew et al., 2021; Mapp, 2008). The final number of participants included was 11. Key themes were being repeated, at that point saturation occurred as nothing new was being added (Tight, 2023). Further sampling would not provide a clearer understanding of the experience, nor would further discussion with the participants (Lavery, 2003; Mapp, 2008). The 11 interviews provided rich data and an in-depth exploration of the individuals within the group's experiences.

To begin recruitment, an introductory email was sent on 26 April 2023 to the National Secretary of the VMC (Appendix E). The purpose was firstly to introduce myself and outline the research project. The participant information sheet, consent form (PIC) (Appendix E) and a recruitment flyer (Appendix G) were sent as attachments which outlined the research purpose, inclusion criteria, what was involved in the research and contact details. As a respectful gesture, I wanted to obtain permission from the national committee to approach the members of the VMC to conduct this research. This was, so to speak, following the chain of command. One would expect to abide by this

courtesy within a military-style environment; therefore, this was applicable in this research space. Following my email request, permission was granted by the national secretary. Together with the flyer, the PIC form was disseminated to the presidents of each state-based affiliated group. These include the: Australian Capital Territory (ACT), New South Wales, Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, and Victoria. The VMC group in Western Australia (WA) are not affiliated with the national council, therefore, I emailed the WA president directly with the PIC and flyer attachments. The presidents representing each state then disseminated the flyer and the PIC via email to their members and some also on club Facebook pages.

As guided by the instructions on the PIC, I was initially contacted via email by eleven ( $n = 11$ ) VMC members who expressed interest in the study. A suitable time was arranged to discuss the study and interview requirements. I provided a clear explanation of the inclusion/exclusion criteria, process including de-identification, interview duration and possible follow-up interview, and options for location; when and how the interview could be conducted, face-to-face or via an online platform being either Microsoft Teams or Zoom. From the initial expressions of interest all the participants were interviewed. This was based on their understanding that participation was voluntary, consent would need to be obtained, and that they met the inclusion criteria as per the PIC.

I maintained a password-protected Excel spreadsheet for the dates, times, and modes of each interview. Care was taken when using and storing the digital records of the participants in this research to maintain confidentiality and protect the data. Each participant's details were coded using a split method note-taking system. This was performed by assigning a four-digit number to each person's initials. Their contact information and returned consent forms were stored in a password-protected folder in a separate location. This was to minimise risks of potential harm that could flow in the rare event of cyber hacking.

### **5.3 Data Collection – Semi-structured interview**

On receiving completed consent forms from eligible participants, suitable dates, and times for the interview to take place were arranged according to the participant's preferences. The interviews took place between 19 May 2023 and 3 August 2023. The research team (primary and secondary supervisor) were notified and kept informed of meeting times, and the method in which the interview would take place (online or face-to-face). In the case of face-to-face meetings to ensure



safety, location was also provided to the research team. Regular communication before and after each interview was provided through SMS or telephone calls.

All interviews were audio recorded with six ( $n = 6$ ) face-to-face and five ( $n = 5$ ) conducted online over Microsoft Teams. The participants were informed that the interview would last approximately 60 minutes. The average interview length was 61 minutes, the shortest being 31 minutes and the longest 1 hour, 7 minutes. This length of time allowed participants to provide in-depth accounts of their experiences as they shared their stories. The interviews were facilitated by using the interview guide (Appendix I). There was a request by a participant ( $n = 1$ ) for a follow-up interview one week later. He is a Vietnam veteran in his late seventies. He contacted me via email and requested to meet again as he had remembered some examples of what he deemed as significant peer support within the club. The follow-up interview lasted just under 30 minutes and was scheduled within two weeks of the initial interview. The participant stated that the gap between the first and follow-up interview allowed him time for further reflection.

All conversations during the interviews were clear and generally because of my background I had no difficulty in understanding specific expressions and terms. Where I thought perhaps a transcriber would not understand an acronym or a term, I clarified the meaning. For example, Nasho, I asked if this meant national service. There were a few instances of talking over the top of each other, these were highlighted in the transcript's details and were added from notes taken during the interviews. As I had taken notes, I was able to fill in any gaps from the notes and my memory of the conversation.

I did not request any follow-up interviews as I believed there was not any need for further clarification of the given information or missing gaps in the data. All demographic data was captured at the beginning of the session. After just three or four interviews it seemed already possible to identify key themes.

To protect anonymity, each participant was asked to select a pseudonym or a nickname. They were informed that this was to ensure that they were not identifiable in the audio recordings, written data, and write-up analysis. Five participants readily chose a pseudonym, five wanted to use their club nickname, one being quite insistent stating: *"I have nothing to hide."* I assumed this was an important aspect of his identity so did not press the matter. The remaining participant wanted to use an abbreviation of his real name. He confirmed this was because he is only ever called or known by his club nickname. I realised the significance and again did not press the matter. This might seem

unusual to typical societal norms, using your real name as a nickname as your nickname has become who you are. The participants were also informed that the audio recordings would be professionally transcribed. Before the interview commenced, each participant was informed that they had the right to cease the interview at any time. They were also able to withdraw their participation at any time until the thematic analysis began.

This qualitative research is viewed through the theory of hermeneutic phenomenology and has an explicit focus on the lived experience of peer support and engagement as a member of VMC. During the interview, I discreetly took field notes (on a password-protected E Ink device, an electronic note taking device rather than paper); this was to avoid interrupting the conversational flow. The notes helped me return to key points that were raised and needed further discussion or clarification. The interviews were conducted from 19 May 2023 to 3 August 2023. I ensured regular checks on the wellbeing of each participant throughout the interviews. This was accomplished by being mindful in observing their body language, vocal tone, or other visible signs of distress, rather than merely focusing on what they said from the perspective of the research. Each participant was provided with a list of support services, containing the appropriate contact details for those services. Additionally, each participant was reminded of these services at the beginning and at the end of the interview. This information was also detailed in the participant information sheet and consent form (Appendix F). These services included veteran-focused support services and general wellbeing support services.

### **5.3.1 Data Collection as a Midliner**

It is essential that as a researcher, I have an awareness of my own position, knowledge, and familiarity with the people and group being researched in this study. It is not a question of having intimate or extensive knowledge of their individual or collective experiences but just knowing the intricacies of a culture that can influence interpretation. My worldview shapes my ontological and epistemological assumptions, and my individual values and beliefs are shaped by historical, geographical, social class, and status (Holmes & Gary, 2020). My involvement as a Squadron Leader with the Australian Air Force Cadets coupled with being an ex-wife of a British Army Veteran who is a member of the VMC positions me as 'neither an insider nor outsider' and therefore I consider myself to be a midliner (Breen, 2007; Douglas et al., 2019). My position as a person who has experience of the broader culture but is not an insider enables me to potentially understand the

meaning within the data that may not be obvious or apparent to others. Throughout the process, I maintained a journal that captured my thoughts and identified my preconceptions, which aided in data analysis. Reflecting on the process of my research by trying to understand how my own experiences, values and views add not only credibility to the research findings, but how this may influence the findings, should form part of any method of qualitative inquiry (Jootun et al., 2009).

The participants' demographic data is presented in Table 3. This will be discussed in their biographical portraits in Chapter 6, which highlights the key characteristics and significance of the data.

## **5.4 Data Analysis**

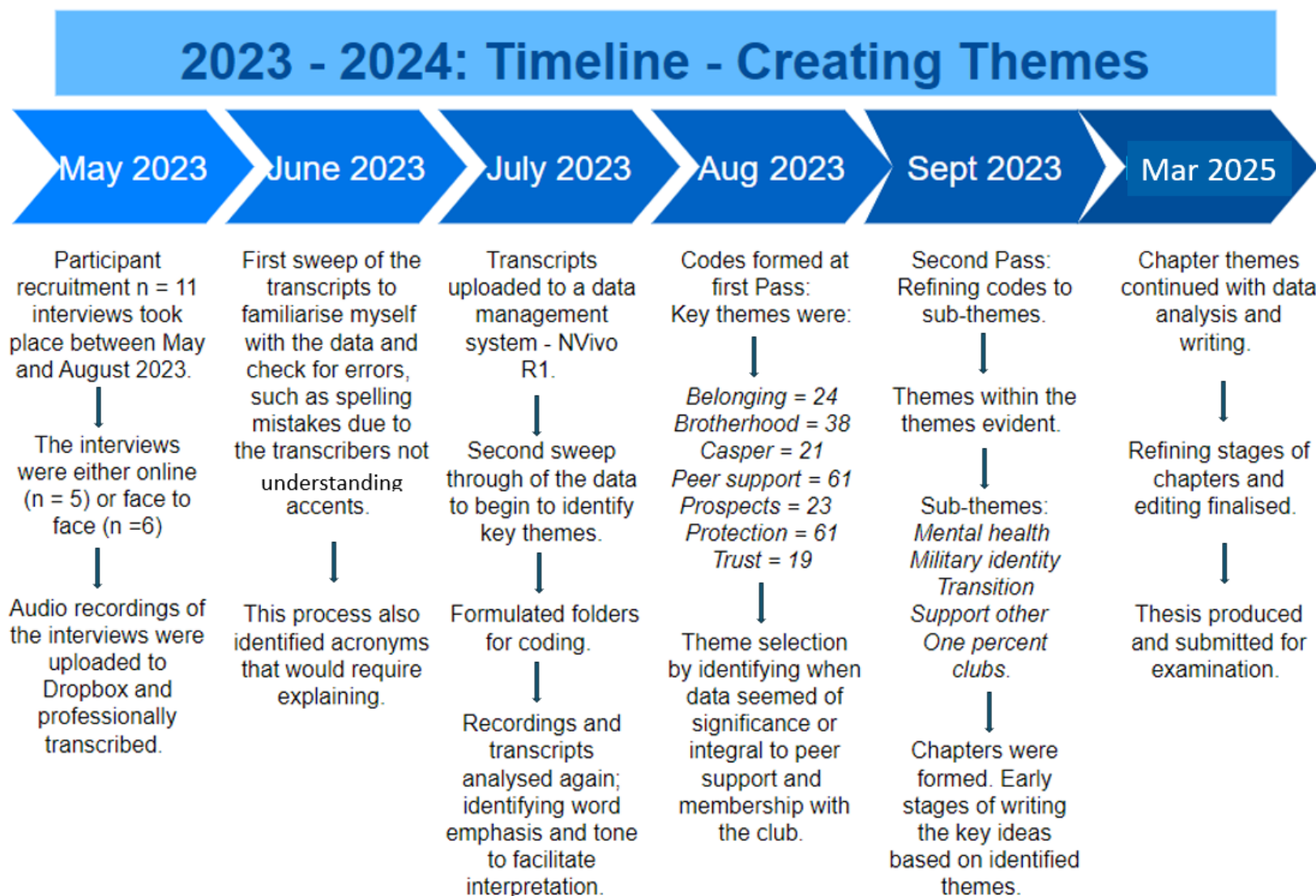
The interview analyses were conducted using a qualitative analysis tool called NVivo-Version R1. The tool helped in organising relevant code arrangements and provided a visualisation of important themes. Figure 15 depicts the timeline for the thematic framework. Braun and Clarke (2019) guide to thematic analysis (TA) was used to steer the data analysis process. This is a six-step process, a systematic way of seeing as well as processing qualitative information.

1. Familiarisation: This was the first step in the process. It involved getting to know the data. The transcripts were initially read to produce an overall understanding of the descriptions and key messages coming from the participants. I called this my first sweep. The second step involved rereading the transcripts to start to refine and join codes and generate initial meaning and themes. The third reading of the transcripts brought together deeper meanings, and relationships between themes and major ideas were written down for each transcript (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87).
2. Using this version of TA provides a robust, systematic framework for coding qualitative data and then uses that coding to identify patterns across the dataset in relation to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2014, p. 1). The codes were discussed and developed by the research team after analysing the transcribed interviews. Throughout the process, the research team discussed and highlighted the features that generated specific ideas, which were then coded as small phrases or keywords. Notes were written to keep track of the consolidated information.

3. Generating initial themes: This involved gathering all the data relevant to each potential theme. By examining the codes and collated data, I identified initial themes and patterns of meaning in the first detailed reading of the data and tentative themes. The extracted initial themes were then grouped into broader patterns of meanings and narrowed down by grouping them into themes. In the second sweep the themes were clustered as a number of codes. The codes were then categorised into central themes by reading and rereading the data, and this cycle was repeated several times (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88).

Figure 15

Thematic Framework Timeline

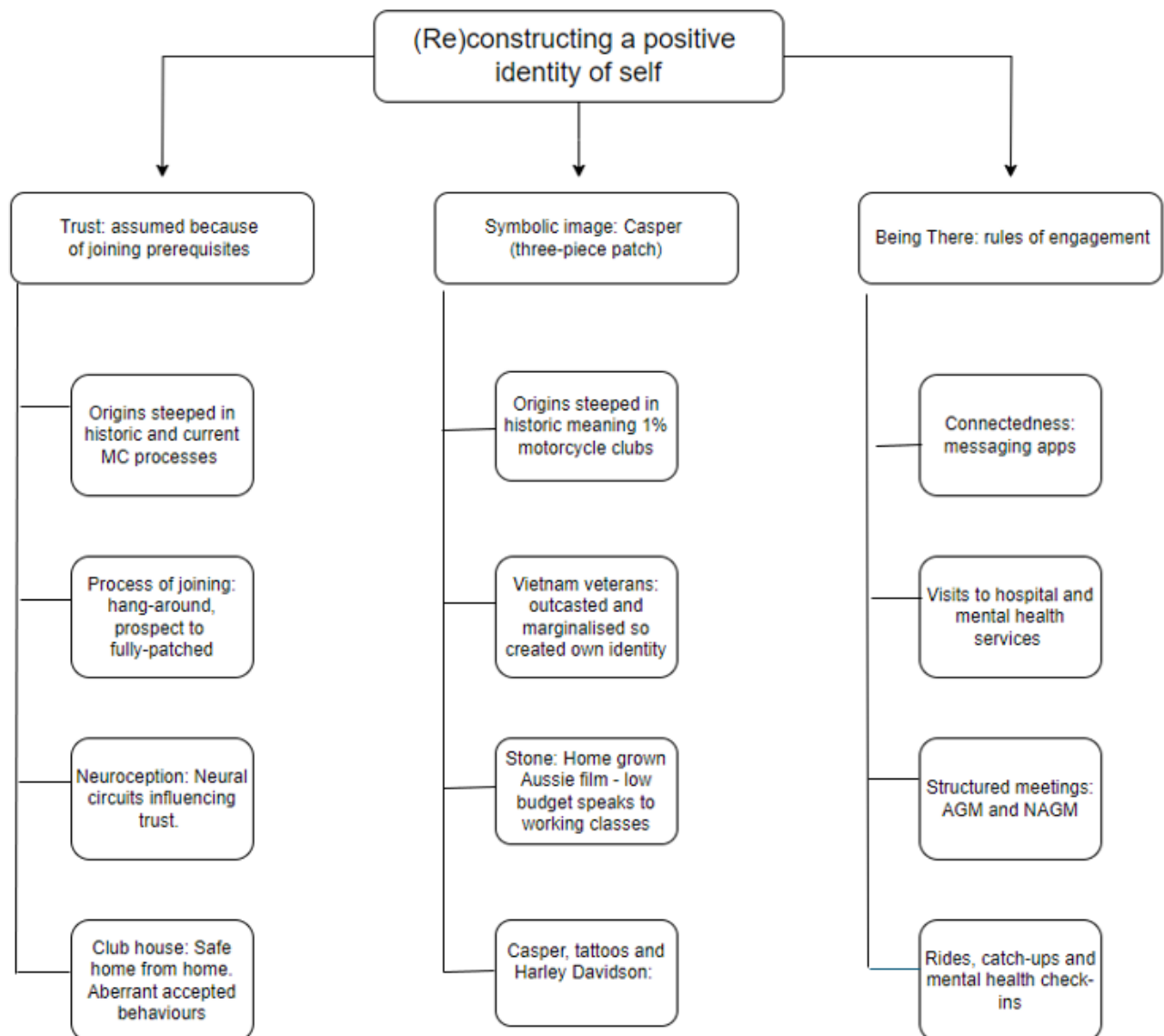


4. Reviewing themes: A thematic map was developed by refining and actively generating the themes from the previous step to ensure that they accurately represented the data. (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91). The built-in tools using NVivo version R1 was used to see patterns within the data, and these were used to draw thematic maps.
5. Define and name the themes: Detailed analysis of the themes and description of the experiential theme, namely what the theme is about, capturing the meaning in the participants' lives.
6. Writing up the results: This final step included selecting compelling extract examples and producing several vital statements that showcased the features represented by the data.

This final step involved categorising and coding the data descriptively. Following this, to best find defined patterns or themes in the categories of responses, the codes were named. To ensure precision and accuracy of the data the process was facilitated by re-reading the transcripts. This was an iterative process whereby three major themes were identified within the data. Each major theme can stand alone with the richness and depth of meaning provided through the interviews. Brought together, they provide a wholistic picture of the motivations exhibited by the research participants to join and incorporate the VMC as a way of life (Figure 16).

**Figure 16**

*Thematic Framework*



## 5.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations adhered to the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007; updated 2018 (The National Health and Medical Research Council, 2007/2018). The participants are all ex-serving members of the Defence Force who have been involved in combat or war-like operations. Care was taken to acknowledge that their experiences may bring up past traumatic events; therefore, it is important to ensure their psychological safety by conducting the interview in a trauma-informed way. When undertaking sensitive research, it is essential to consider

the psychological risks that may present, such as re-traumatisation, depression, and suicidal ideation. This section will explain the way in which I approached participants and data collection, interpreted what was shared, navigated ethical boundaries and how I distinguished between my therapeutic role and researcher role.

My professional identity as a counsellor and clinical supervisor positioned me to be particularly sensitive to signs of psychological distress. I remained vigilant of any signs of discomfort or distress such as changes in emotions detected by voice tone, pitch, and rate of speech. I observed body language, such as shifting posture or hand wringing, and leg tapping.

The exclusion criteria stated that those experiencing acute symptoms of mental distress were advised not to participate due to this potential risk. The interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online (Microsoft Teams), and one-on-one. This allowed me to develop rapport and the ability to observe nonverbal communication through facial expressions, body language, or hand gestures. Having a visual cue was advantageous as it allowed me to detect signs of psychological distress. None of the participants indicated that they were distressed; therefore, there was no need to halt interviews at any stage. If this had occurred, I would have stopped the interview immediately and provided an intervention strategy to assist the participant, such as grounding techniques and gently refocusing their awareness using deep breathing. I would have reiterated the contact numbers from veteran supporting organisations and general wellbeing support services. This information was provided to the participants in the information package before commencement and at the conclusion of the interviews (Appendix B). My own knowledge of cultural attitudes within the military that pervades the VMC, coupled with my professional counselling background, assisted in identifying times during the interviews when support may be required to potentially mitigate any adverse effects.

My professional background in counselling, with clinical focus on trauma-informed practice, shaped how I approached both the research questions and the interpersonal dynamics of the interview setting. This background sensitised me to the possible psychological impacts of discussing war-related experiences, including re-traumatisation or emotional vulnerability. While this training supported the ethical conduct of the research, especially in observing signs of distress and ensuring participant safety. I remained aware of the fine line between therapeutic presence and research neutrality. At the same time, I had to remain reflexively aware of how my professional lens may risk pathologising or over-interpreting participants' experiences through a clinical framework. My



interpretive work required a constant negotiation between empathic engagement and disciplined phenomenological analysis, honouring participants' meaning making without imposing therapeutic assumptions. This positioning, as someone with deep experiences in trauma-informed care, but outside the military institution, brought both advantages and limitations. It enabled a respectful and ethically attuned interview environment, but it also required vigilance in ensuring that the interpretations remained grounded in the participants lived experience rather than my own professional worldview. My intention was to cultivate a stance of openness, where understanding emerged not from presupposition, but from dialogue, encounter and the fusion of horizons between researcher and participant.

## **5.6 Emotional safety for the participants**

Asking participants to recount stories that may include traumatic events is of particular concern to ethical review panels. There is a potential risk of distress among vulnerable individuals. To ensure that participants maintain a sense of control during research, they have the right to refuse to answer a question or to tell only what they wish to be heard by others (Corbin & Morse, 2003). Before the session began, I informed the participants of their right to end the session at any time as it was completely voluntary. During the interviews, I monitored each participant's body language and voice tone to gauge their emotional wellbeing. A handout was also provided with a list of veteran specific and general support services with contact numbers.

## **5.7 The potential for researcher trauma**

Researcher trauma can be underestimated, unlike acknowledging the potential impact that is recognised for research participants. Researchers rarely debrief once they return from the field or complete a project (Coles et al., 2014; Loyle & Simoni, 2017). Shared stories of trauma may remain with the researcher after the interview; once heard, they can be difficult to dismiss or forget. Senior researchers may have developed a tolerance when hearing stories with violent content or distressing life events. They may have a greater contextual understanding of subject material over time. New researchers may be overwhelmed by descriptions of first-hand accounts of violence and other human rights abuse (Loyle & Simoni, 2017). Hearing sensitive stories that contain traumatic experiences can be distressing, resulting in emotional exhaustion, anger, hopelessness, sadness and distress (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009).

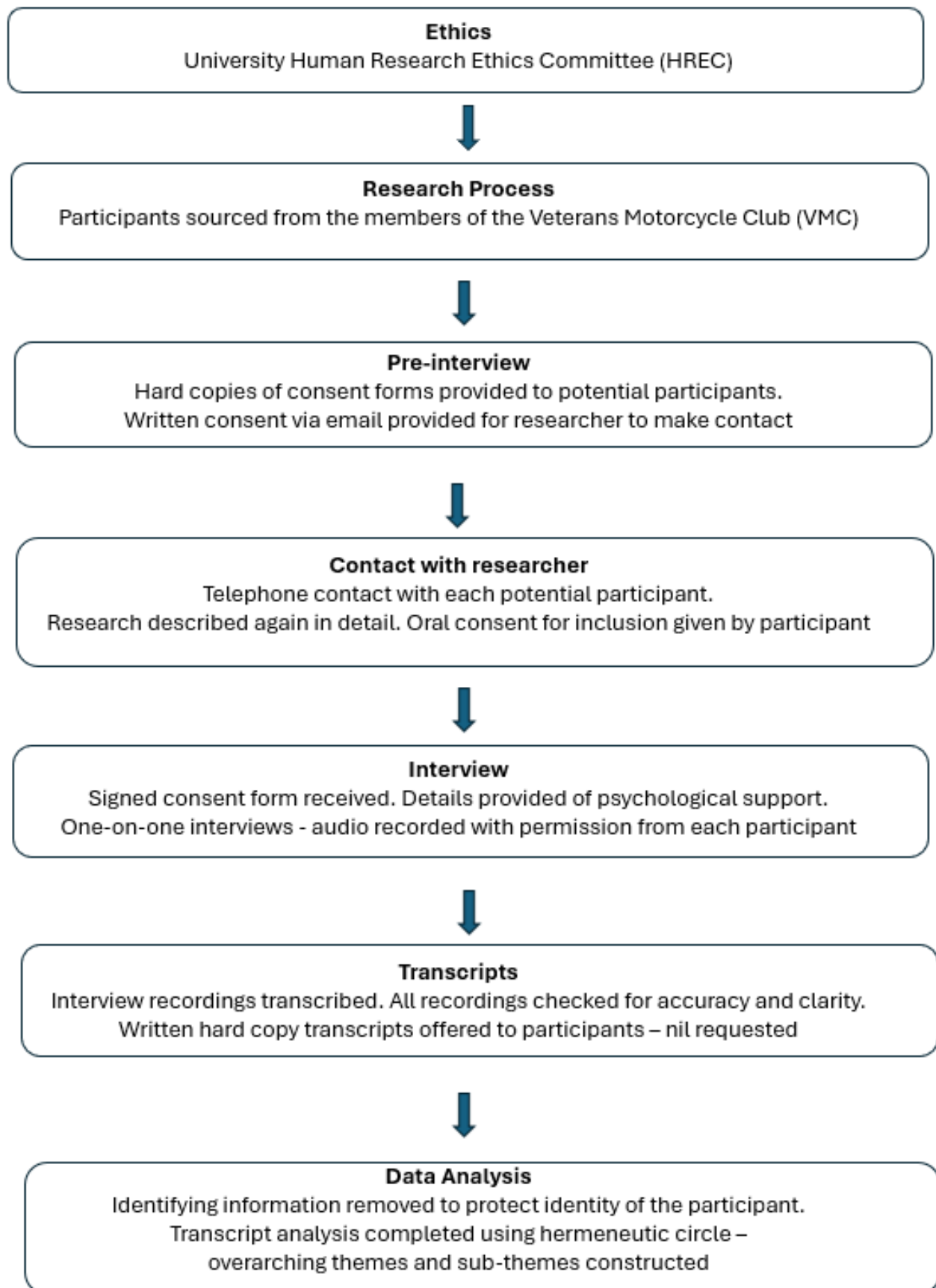
After each interview, I reflected on the process and content as the researcher who conducted the interviews. I considered any slight adjustments to the interview questions to make improvements that would be beneficial. My written journals captured personal thoughts and feelings during the interviews. Regular communication with my primary and secondary supervisors allowed for reflection and facilitated the debriefing process. As a normal process of my professional working role, I debrief regularly with a professional clinical supervisor. These sessions extended to include my experience as a researcher during this study. I found the employed techniques and processes used ensured my own mental and physical wellbeing throughout the research journey.

#### **5.7.1 Ethics Approval**

Ethics approval was granted from the Flinders University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) (reference number 5447). All ethical principles from the National Health and Medical Research Councils' conditions for ethical conduct for human research were upheld. Written and oral informed consent was gained from each participant. The participants were informed that the study was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any stage from the interview. Appendix H contains a copy of ethics approval. This process is positioned in Figure 17.

**Figure 17**

*Research Process*



### **5.7.2 Establishing quality within the research**

By embracing the reflexivity of process, I ensured transparency throughout, and was able to account for how this may have influenced my interpretation of the data and report of the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Jootun et al., 2009). This is consistent with the use of hermeneutic circle which recognises the ongoing movement between understanding parts of the narrative and the whole context in which that narrative is situated (Grondin, 2015). Ultimately, my goal was to foreground my positionality through making visible the lens with which I viewed and interpreted the participants' stories. Hermeneutic phenomenology acknowledges that understanding is always situated and influenced by the interpreter's historical, cultural, and social standpoint.

By engaging in the processes of the hermeneutic circle, I was able to clearly and critically reflect on how my prior understanding shaped by my familiarity with Defence Force discourse, counselling background, and social values might influence my interpretation and meaning making. I noted how my perceptions are also 'coloured' by my nature, personality, gender, cultural orientation, professional identity, social status, and political views. For example, my therapeutic orientation toward relational and humanistic models may have initially predisposed me to interpret peer support interactions more positively than an entirely neutral observer might. To mitigate this, I committed to ongoing reflexive journaling, interrogating my assumptions throughout the analysis process. Continual discussions during regular meetings with the research team (my primary and secondary supervisors) helped me maintain accountability while the process of double coding supported consistency also ensured that rigor was maintained in the analysis process. This collaborative, critical engagement functioned as a form of peer debriefing, furthermore, supporting the trustworthiness and quality of the study.

## **5.8 Data Management and Storage**

NVivo is a premier software program for qualitative data analysis. It is used to describe, evaluate, and interpret social phenomena. Version R1 (release 1) was used to house the transcripts from the interviews. The program allows the data to be organised into cases and codes (formerly theme nodes and case nodes) for analysis. This provided a visual representation whereby patterns were established to create themes. The program is password-protected, and care was taken when using and storing the digital records of the participants in this research to maintain confidentiality and

protect the data. NVivo has the ability for teams to work on the same project by Collaboration Cloud. This allowed the team to share the project via the internet in a secure manner (Lumivero, 2023).

## **5.9 Conclusion**

When conducting qualitative research such as hermeneutic phenomenology, consideration must be given to the potential challenges that may arise, especially when interviewing Defence Force veterans (DFVs) who have experienced combat or participated in wars or conflict in active operations. The literature highlighted that little attention has previously been given to researching this cohort. Phenomenology is considered an effective approach for seeking the storied accounts of experiences from military veterans because it provides the opportunity for their voices to be heard.

As a researcher, to avoid harm being caused it is essential to think carefully and pre-plan before conducting research with potentially vulnerable participants. Equally, the safety of the researcher needs to be considered. My reflective journal allowed me to keep check on my wellbeing. My experience as a counsellor and knowledge of this group ensured the participants trusted me and felt safe. Trust is key when engaging with this group and it is a vital foundational aspect for the members of the VMC. A generally accepted definition of trust is: "The mutual confidence that no party to an exchange will exploit the other's vulnerability" (Ward et al., 2014). I posit that for the men who are invited into the VMC brotherhood, trust holds much more than the general definition, and they display this with symbolic meaning through the wearing of their colours.

## 6 CHAPTER: BIOGRAPHICAL PORTRAITS

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"You point a finger at someone,  
you've got three pointing back at you."  
Bear VMC

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### 6.1 Chapter Preface

Chapters 4 and 5 outlined the methodology and methods employed in this study. In this chapter, the personal stories of the 11 participants are presented as short stories. These stories position each of them individually and uncover their story through their own narratives. These 11 narratives are representative of the participant group.

The summary of the transcripts and demographic data provides a thoughtful explanation that assists with contextualising the lived experience of the participants and situates the data in respect to answering the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Limited encouragement was needed for the participants to share their stories, which seemed to inspire each to disclose more than was asked, speaking not only to answer the research question but also to reveal deeply personal journeys. The participants' personal stories are offered as vignettes and provide the framework and settings for the data analysis.

Underlying the interpretation of this data is a constructivist and interpretivist philosophical stance. Being grounded in this framework recognises that meaning is not fixed or objective but is co-constructed through human interaction. Influenced by the hermeneutic philosophy of Hans-Georg (Gadamer, 1975). I approached the interview process as a dialogical exchange, where understanding emerges and interpreted through my own situated perspective. The act of narrative interpretation also draws upon the work of Paul Ricoeur (1984), particularly his view that narrative identity is constructed through the telling of life stories. I approached this stage of the research with the understanding that reality is socially constructed and deeply subjective. There are multiple realities, not one single "truth." The participants' experiences are not seen as objective truths to be uncovered, but as co-constructed narratives shaped through the interview process and influenced by the relational dynamic between researcher and participant. I acknowledged my role in this dynamic process and ensured I used active listening, engaged ethically and interpreted responsively. My philosophical approach values the richness and complexity of human experience, and seeks to

honour the participants' voices, allowing their voices to be respectfully and authentically heard. As the researcher, I acted as an interpreter of the participant's worldview, not as a detached observer. Furthermore, the existential phenomenology of Martin Heidegger (1962) (Blattner, 2006), reminds us that understanding is always situated, participants' accounts are embedded in their being-in-the-world as veterans, as bikers and as men navigating the transition from military to civilian life.

These vignettes and provide the framework and setting for the data analysis and reflect both the uniqueness of individual lives and common threads that bind them in context of military service and veteran peer support. This approach allows the reader to appreciate the participants not merely as data sources but as complex, meaning-making individuals whose narratives offer deep insight into their social worlds.

## **6.2 Profiles of Participants**

This section provides a brief overview of the participants' demographic data in table form, along with vignettes that profile each participant's background and life story. The details include: The participants' age at time of interview, service role and deployments in the Defence Force, length of time in the Defence Force and length of time in the VMC. Pseudonyms have been used to protect their identity.

Table 3 is arranged in alphabetical order and provides an overview of each participant's involvement with the Defence Force and the Veterans Motorcycle Club (VMC).

**Table 3***Participants Profile*

Pseudonym	Age	Employment status	Deployment tours	Service type	Years in the VMC	Approx. Age when joining VMC	Years served in Defence Force
<b>Bear</b>	53	Student full-time	2 x Afghanistan 2 x Iraq	Air Force: Electronics communications specialist	8	45	25
<b>Bob</b>	58	Employed full-time	Bosnia	Army: Infantry	5	53	8
<b>H</b>	60	Medically separated	4 x East Timor Solomon Islands Afghanistan	Army: Infantry Paratrooper	8	52	40
<b>Jay</b>	45	Unemployed	2 x Afghanistan East Timor	Army: Combat engineer	10	35	24
<b>Kel</b>	77	Retired	Vietnam	Army: Combat engineer	30	47	3
<b>Marksy</b>	41	Semi-retired	Afghanistan East Timor	Army: Infantry	9	32	6
<b>Nugget</b>	78	Retired	Vietnam	Army: Infantry	23	55	2
<b>Pablo</b>	40	Employed full-time	2 x Afghanistan East Timor	Army: Infantry	10	30	22
<b>Pottsy</b>	37	Self-employed full-time	Afghanistan Iraq	Army: Combat Engineer High risk searcher	8	31	6.5
<b>Raider</b>	53	Medically retired	3 x East Timor 1 x Solomon Islands 3 x South-East Asia 2 x Border patrol	Army: Special Investigation Branch. Military Police	15	38	Approx. 14
<b>Skelly</b>	70	Retired	Vietnam	Navy Clerk	14	56	2



### 6.2.1 Bear's Story

Bear is a 53-year-old Tasmanian Aboriginal man. He is married has two children and is retired. He joined the Air Force when he was 26 years old and referred to himself as being a *"late starter."* After a 25-year career in the Defence Force he was medically discharged in 2021. Bear told me of his 'claim to fame.' Before joining the Defence Force, he used to be a marine spray painter. He once sprayed the winning yacht in the Sydney to Hobart Yacht race. It was while working on a huge motor yacht where he had sprayed 50 – 60 coats of paint, the captain started the engine, and the yacht burst into flames. Bear was engulfed and threw himself into the freezing river. He said, *"It was testicular cold, and I instantly became a female."* The owner was not admitting culpability or supportive and feeling let down Bear decided to go to Defence recruiting. He sat the exam and psychiatric test, successfully passing both. Two weeks later he received his acceptance to join the Defence Force. With this news, he went straight to his boss and said to him, *"Stick it up your arse."* Although when conveying this story he had a disappointed expression, this soon turned into a smile when he continued with his story, telling me that he went back to see his former boss 10-years later, and said to him, *"It was the best thing you ever did, not supporting me."*

Bear's role in Defence was an Electronic Communications Specialist. He managed everything from a telephone through to radar satellite communications. He said he held the rank of a Warrant Officer and was very respected. He stated, *"The best parts of my life was being a tech, that's for sure."*

From Bear's opening commentary, one of his core beliefs stands out - being supported by those in a position of authority. Potentially his motivation to join the Defence Force was to provide support to other men, as this was something he did not receive himself. Such was his disappointment with his boss, he made a life changing decision. The VMC offers an extension of the military whereby the brotherhood provides support; it is both given and received. There are parallels that stand out between the military culture and the culture of the VMC. They are both male dominated environments where gender, shared interests, and militarism converge with strategies of masculine dominance (Byrd., 2017; Reddin, 2003). Evidently, masculinity is another core value Bear holds. I make this assumption based on his comment of becoming 'a female' when jumping into the cold water. My interpretation is that it indicates he views females as a more fragile gender (Reddin, 2003); by his tone this was not meant to be derogatory in any way and I certainly did not take offence.

I invited Bear to discuss his deployments, two were to Afghanistan and two to Iraq:

*“First one was in 2005, and I was in Iraq in Baghdad, and I was in charge of what they call the rear link which is the satellite link back to Australia. So, I was in charge of that, that was quite stressful especially as, so we’re only, I think it was two years into the deployment at that stage and there was a fair bit of, I think we were there when Saddam was caught and there was an Australian citizen that was captured and was being held for ransom. So, there was a fair bit of rear communication to the Embassies in ... whatever, that needed to be up, so it was quite a stressful thing. Then the second one was in 2008, and I went to Afghanistan, and we were in charge of all the radar systems in Afghanistan. So, all the air traffic control. So, there was radar, radios, computer systems, switching systems, satellite and computer systems, satellite, and generators and all that kind of stuff that we were involved in that as well. Then in 2011 went, did a – between Afghanistan and Dubai and in that time, it was, I was then a manager so it was managing the troops that, for the computer systems right the way through the .... And so we had, you can imagine the computer systems that are around, so we were in charge of all that. And then in 2016 I was attached to 101st air borne and was in between Bagdad and a place called Erbil in Iraq in the battle of, against Daesh or Isis. And that was it, that was my last one.”*

I noted throughout much of Bear’s commentary a certain use of language; he switched between using ‘I’ when referring to protecting the troops, this seemed to be instinctively tied to his job role and strong sense of responsibility to keep personnel safe. He uses ‘we’ when discussing the actual logistics of using the radar equipment systems. Bear’s values place the troops or boys as he calls them, over objects or systems. He has an admirable sense of responsibility and accountability stating, *“If they do wrong it is my fault, and the troops were always the top of my mind.”* Throughout his narrative Bear also made several references that conveyed his moral compass and core beliefs. Having respect, earning trust and maintain the values and ethics of the club were high on his list:

*“The troops were always the top of my mind, I was very, I had, I was very approachable, troops liked me, or they didn’t say that they didn’t like me, so well they would. But from others I believe I had a pretty good relationship with the boys. Never charged, I never charged anyone. I infringed a few but I tried to keep away, I kept, my philosophy was that if you start with a charge then you’ve lost the, your management so it’s an old Japanese, I’m not sure if you’ve heard it. You point a finger at someone, ... your hand over, you’ve got three pointing back at you. So, I always ran if I had to charge someone then obviously, I’d done the wrong thing. So, I was pretty well respected, but you had to deal with senior command. There was decisions that were made that you, even though you didn’t agree with you just had to sell it. So, you had the top and you had the bottom, and you were right in the middle. So, you never formed any true, since leaving different. I’ve got a myriad of Corporals, Sergeants, Flight Sergeants that still to this day do contact me and ask me for advice. And some of*

*them are really close friends now. So, because you have to have earned Casper, it kind of says that you've earned that trust, if you know what I mean."*

After spending half of his life in the Defence Force, he did not want to leave. His discharge was unwanted, he felt he had lost his sense of identity. Bear attempted to end his life, this resulted in him being admitted to a mental health clinic. During therapy he enjoyed painting and was encouraged by his psychiatrist to pursue this further. He is currently studying a contemporary arts degree at university. Bear was 45 years old when he joined the VMC and has been a member for eight years, since 2015:

### **6.2.2 Bob's Story**

Bob is a 58-year-old Caucasian man. He is married and has been employed as a trainer in the construction industry for the past 18 years. Bob began his interview by stating, *"We moved a lot as kids, Invariably I don't think we lived in the same place for more than a couple of years."* When asked what his motivation was to join the military, he said it was born out of not having any prospects for the future. He believed his career choices were very limited and one of the options was going to jail. Reflecting more, he added, *"I think that when I grew up in [name], cos I lived in [name] for a number of years, there was the last Civil War going on and you see the troops arrive, so I just saw, yeah so, a bit of that as well."* His recollections of that Civil War were from a time when he was aged six or seven years old which would have had a major formative impact on his life. He was a migrant to that country, returning to his homeland some years later as a teenager:

*"I think the, I was going nowhere at the time, was one thing, I was, yeah I was going nowhere, no prospects, it was ... during a particularly negative time, so there's not much work about, not much money, no prospects, and coming from [name] you was never going to get a job, like you was never going to get a job if you lived in a certain way. [name] was really, it was always said you're either a footballer or a boxer or you go to jail; there's your career choices as a kid, so. Realistically I think that my family were like fucking wasters, so, and I just didn't want to be another waster."*

Recalling more childhood memories, Bob explained the reasons he does not become attached to things or places. He stated, *"Realistically where you sleep is where you sleep; you move, you move, it's no big one."* He continued relaying his experience as a young boy:

*"And I remember like being friends, we moved and then being friends with someone for even like a couple of weeks on a boat, and then we'd get to the other end and it's like well you're going that way, we're going this way, so I think after that it was a case of just people, invariably people you know passing through, rather than this deep meaningful attachment to anything, so yeah. So, I think right from just a ridiculously early age it was the case of you're just moving on, moving on all the time so."*

Bob discusses forming brief relationships with friends he met on the boat, (during travel as a migrant) both going separate ways when reaching the destination. This leaving a lasting impression that in relationships you do not form deep meaningful attachments:

*"Yeah I think, like when the Mrs ... about, and I think she's the same as well, when we talk about stuff, like she talks about the house and I don't really get attached to it, it's just like ... somewhere you sleep rather than like this big home that you can't move away from, it's just like where you're living at the moment rather than the home sort of thing."*

Assumedly, as a child he had no control over the decision to change the family lifestyle. His father later abandoned the family to run away with another women. What was clear from Bob's tone, this was a painful memory that was confounded with a deep sense of shame being deported, the lasting memory of having your passport cut:

*"I think, I don't know primarily, like I don't know why we moved as a, when I was really young, the real reasons why we moved. I think that then, like when we moved initially, went to Africa in the first place I don't know, I know that when we was in Africa me dad fucked off with another bird, we basically, well we basically got deported which was interesting, yeah we got deported. And I remember, cos they cut the passport, they cut the corner of your passport off when you get deported."*

Bob was an infantry soldier in the Territorial Army (TA) for approximately eight years. The TA was a reservist part-time unit of the military. When asked when he joined the service (meaning the Defence Force) he replied, *"Actually, quite late, I was 25."* I wondered why this seemed to be considered a late age. Perhaps because of popular songs such as '19' released in 1985 by Paul Hardcastle suggests the right age (Hardcastle, 1985). Bob continued the conversation with a description of the rank he achieved, *"Sergeant, I ended up as a sergeant."* Furthermore, how he interprets the role of an infantry soldier, *"So, I always describe it as basically a bullet catcher for the government."* During his time in the TA Bob volunteered to participate in military operations. He joined a special attachment order to the regular army and for six months served in Bosnia in 1995. He describes the intenseness of the living environment:

*"I remember we was in a house, like one of the places that we were staying was out in the middle of nowhere, and it was a very intense, you had like three or four rooms and we had like twenty odd people in them three or four rooms, and it was quite an intense, I would liken it to like a Big Brother sort of environment. And you don't, it makes you reassess, well you've got to learn to live with yourself, you've got to be able to live with yourself as well as other people, so it was a very different experience, and it's the sort of experience that you can't get without doing it, and that's it, you can't."*

Bob described himself as a person who must spend all of his life tempering his attitude and the way he has to behave and speak to people. He finds lots of things irritating and stated, *"I feel that I've got a temper."* This is not obvious to outsiders he believes because he receives comments from people saying things such as he handled that situation very well. He will reply to them with, *"I'm putting on an act all the time."* Bob has found a place in the VMC where he can be himself, without judgement:

*"I think one of the good things about the club is that I don't feel that I don't need to, I don't need to manage, I don't need to manage it, I think some people or whatever or that's it, I'll say it and that's it, and but, as I say no one will sit there and judge it the day after for what you said at the time, it's fair enough, like on you go sort of thing."*

Bob was 52 years old when he joined the VMC and has been a member since 2018.

### **6.2.3 H's Story**

H (Aitch) is a 60-year-old Caucasian man. Like Bob (the previous participant) he joined the VMC when he was 52 years old. H (Aitch) stated he is divorced and stated he was medically 'separated' (rather than discharged) from the military after a 40-year career in the Defence Force, leaving in 2021. He began his military career in the New Zealand Army serving there for 23 years, transferring to the Australian Army for another 17 years. He was 18 years old when he first joined the military as an infantry soldier. Just as with all the participants, he was asked his motivation for joining the service:

*"I grew up on a farm on the [name]. Most people around where I grew up that a lot of them had never even left that district in their lives, so there wasn't many choices. There was either shepherding or I don't know – I always had some sort of fascination with military, I mean even as a kid going through school, like all my drawings and that they were war drawings and that sort of stuff. I've got family*

*that were in the force. I mean my old man was in the WWII in the Airforce. He never ever spoke about it. I've got a couple of uncles that were in the WWII, they never ever spoke about it. It was nothing like that, it just seemed to be the natural thing to do."*

It would seem he was following in the 'silent' footsteps of his forefathers. During H's (Aitch's) long army career he was, airborne in 3RAR (Royal Australian Regiment) for a good while with rival take ups as a paratrooper. He stated his specialty was sniping. I asked if he enjoyed what he did and he replied loved it, loved it yeah, had a good time:

*"Just something I was good at you know, plus there was just always a home no matter where you are and basically, I lived out of the pack my whole life, and I got married later on in my career. So basically, lived out of my pack. I found no matter where you dropped that pack there was always a bed, there was always people around you that do the same sort of stuff, and you can relate to. Not a care in the bloody world to be honest."*

I noticed both H (Aitch) and Bob (the previous participant) were infantry soldiers, describing similar sentiments regarding the short-lived relationships they form with friends:

*"To be honest I'm probably a bit different to most people in the fact that I've always worked in very small groups, and honestly, I don't make friendships that easily and then once I'm not around those people it's like cut off, don't ring them, don't talk to them, don't see them. We are posting all of the place so for me relationships with people have been pretty short, sharp and to the point, if I'm not there it's done and dusted. For me it's obviously you are posted back into an area again and some of those same people are around, yeah cool, but I guess it's the friendships you form when you're in an area, you know they are fairly tight, you look after each other, you watch out for each other, you help each other out. Once I've moved on that's it, close onto the door and move onto the next bloody room pretty much."*

During military deployments H (Aitch) served in East Timor four times, the Solomon Islands and Afghanistan. Stating that, *"20 years of my career was that dull period where nothing was happening. So, most of my deployments have been in the last half of my career."* He continued to explain the importance of the mentality and quality of the team around him. I noted this provided him with faith, trust and feeling protected:

*"Oh yeah definitely, especially in the same team or some of the teams that have the same sort of mentality towards the job. I don't know if you know too much, but if you are looking after your battalion there's, depending on what part of the battalion you're looking at, and not trying to sound*

*big-headed, but the quality of the soldiers in it and the way they approach the job and the way they do the job and they're still at the job changes dramatically. You know when you're looking at teams of two or four or five in there, guys that have got skills and they've actually got a focus and are passionate about what they do because I think at the end of the day in a group that small you can't rely on the guy sitting behind you. It just doesn't function. I mean you can get away with that to a degree when you're surrounded by 30 people to a degree, but when it's you and one other guy or you and four other guys then you're literally watching each other's backs, you you've got to have that faith in them otherwise it just doesn't work."*

Trust, teamwork, and putting in effort, are all attributes H (Aitch) values. I asked him how he came to join the VMC:

*"Okay well I guess I was in [name] at the time and [name] is a military town in [name]. You know I was living in the sergeant's mess there. I would go for months without even leaving the barracks, didn't need to and I can't remember who it was, somebody was sitting there going you need to get a life. I said I've got a freakin' life in the Army. No, no, you need to get something outside of this rah rah rah. When's the last time you left the barracks? I said hmm hmm four months ago. Where did you go? I went and bought some milk and came back. Somebody, I don't know who it was, told me you need to find some interests outside of that, so I did. I joined the Veterans MC Motorcycle Club. That's basically how it kicked off. I actually just ran into a guy at the supermarket in the car park and started talking to him, a patch member. He explained about it and said because before that it had just been, Vietnam Veterans. So, it hadn't long changed over to the Veterans MC. So pretty much just met up with someone else who put me onto a chapter nearby and just started hanging out with them and then yeah that was it."*

H (Aitch) explained his decision for joining the club was not just because of the bikes, it was just more appropriate. They are the same sort of people in that chapter and were the same sort of generation and some even younger. This was not the only appealing aspect of the club. Again, themes in relation to held core beliefs were evident:

*"Well pretty much it's just putting in the effort, at the club putting in the time and energy so that guys can actually see that you're worth holding onto, but you can actually put in and help out, that you've got the right mentality, and you are actually going to be a valuable member of a club or chapter. It's basically a case of turning up to everything that's running; helping out to anyone who needs help. Just planting that seed that you are actually going to be a brother, not just a person who's hanging around."*

Joining the VMC in 2016, H (Aitch) has been a member of the club for eight years. It is a place where his values are met by likeminded people.

#### 6.2.4 Jay's Story

Jay is a 45-year-old Caucasian man who is currently unemployed. He served in the Defence Force for 24 years as a Combat Engineer. Jay's motivation to join the service at the age of 18 years is analogous to the previous participants, Bob and H (Aitch). Jay also believed his life was going nowhere:

*"So, my dad was in the Navy when I was a child and he was never home, I never had any interest in joining defence because I hated the fact that he was never home and that you know basically seen it that I didn't really have a dad. And then my brother joined the Army in years later yeah, that's something that he always wanted to do I still had no interest at all. And yeah, I don't know just out of the blue one day just went ... my life was, I thought that was going nowhere, I didn't have any real meaning in life I thought you know what, I'm going to do something for myself and joined up."*

Jay continued to recount the military history of his family, *"Later-on I found out that my Great-Granddad was actually, he was in the Army, World War I and then and then joined the Air Force in World War II."* He said this was something to be proud of. He further stated:

**Jay:** *"Being a typical teenage boy, I decided to change from, instead of following my dad's footsteps and going in the Navy, where I decided to go Army because it was quite a little bit of rebellious."*

After a few years of struggling to adapt to the military ways of life Jay said, *"I found that it was really for me, and I basically absorbed every minute of it and loved it."*

During 1999, Jay was deployed to East Timor and then did a lot of local deployments in between then and 2009. In 2009 he was deployed to Afghanistan and again in 2012. Upon leaving the military, Jay moved to be near his ex-wife's family. He felt unsupported, isolated from networks and struggled to make friends in the civilian world. He said, *"It was like well basically, it was very alien."* To this day he feels that everything is still alien in civilian world:

*"Yeah, so obviously so I came out of the military and moved to where my ex-wife's family were and I found that I didn't have any support network at all, so I relied upon her and then whilst trying to make friends in the civilian world it was like well basically it was very alien. I couldn't, I couldn't find a*



*common ground, or yeah, I couldn't relate to them, they couldn't relate to me, everything they considered to be normal was like an alien to me, and until I met other military or ex-military members, I basically had no one. And even now that you know I've got a lot of ex-military friends, I've only got two civilian friends you know because yeah that's everything still just alien."*

During his last Afghanistan deployment, Jay's attentions turned to looking for connections. In preparation for discharging from the military he knew he needed to be with likeminded people:

*"The sense of brotherhood. So, I was actually doing some research when I was on my last deployment over in Afghanistan about trying to find like-minded people, I guess. You know, so and at the time when I was over in Afghanistan there was there was no such thing as a VMC, it was still a Vietnam veterans motorcycle club. There were other military motorcycle clubs, but I think that drew me to the VMC over other military clubs once they dropped the Vietnam part off, was the fact one, you know the deep history of the VMC in Australia. And you know the whole idea at the time is that this was a unique ex-military club that was designed for ex-war fighters as such, I say that as an attempt at people that have served overseas with a country, not somebody that has just served in the military."*

Jay makes the distinction between personnel who have just served in the military and a Defence Force member who has served overseas. This separation is key to the respect and value they have for each other in the club. Jay joined the VMC in 2013, when he was 35 years old. He is one of the younger members that participated in this research. He provided a detailed account of the history of the club. He spoke with pride as he told me that he was historically raised by from ex-military members who didn't fit into society anymore *"You know I needed that that contingent bond that they had"*.

Connectedness is vitally important for mental health and wellbeing (Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2020; Scanlan et al., 2017). Jay stated: *"I would not want anyone else to have to go through a similar sort of mental, mental hardship."* Having a shared experience brings a sense of understanding. Jay continued to explain, *"I find it very rare, very rarely I find another VMC member who is in some sort of mental struggle."*

This is where the VMC brotherhood, the peer support and shared understanding holds most value and provides protective factors for mental health and wellbeing:

*"Well once again, it's that, it's that like mindedness it's a few forms of networking now, so you know we we're drawn to people that through life ... or the same, or similar experiences as us. So you know the biggest thing that I reckon that often the VMC is the realisation that I'm not alone, you know,*

*I'm not the only one going through, there's these things that are controlling my mind, when I close my eyes at night to go to sleep, you know, every single night several things come back to me, you know, I'm not the only person going through that that's good to know."*

Jay commented that, *"Things come back when I close my eyes to sleep."* It sounded very much like he is relaying well-known symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (*Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM-V-TR*, 2022). It is important to mention that I am not qualified to make a diagnosis as I am not medically trained to do so. My comments are an observation and not a diagnosis. Jay was quite open about his struggles with his mental health and keen to share details of a charity he started. The charity is for veterans, to give them a sense of purpose:

*"Me and a couple of the other boys you know friends that I've made that are veterans, we've started up our own charity because of the high suicide rate you know and the charities designed off of the whole men's shed concept, but purely for war veterans, you know, so there's obviously veterans out there that aren't interested in motorcycles but they still lost, they don't have that sense of purpose that they used to have when we're in the military, so they need somewhere to go on a daily basis, and the worst thing that you can have it's too much time up your sleeve. So, whilst we don't make - those of us that are suffering with mental health issues that make the greatest employees as such for as far as reliability goes. It's good to be able to remain busy and do things and find something that you're interested in, so I can go through my contacts list and I've got so many friends on there and their phone numbers who are no longer around, they've committed suicide because they haven't found that sense of purpose in their life anymore and they struggle that it is to run to get help through the Department of Veterans Affairs, or Commonwealth Super but so our charity that we've raised with [name] veterans garages designed to, to offer them that place where they can go, they can do something. They can build whatever they want to build it's basically a garage but it's got a consultation room, so they can get assistance with doing their claims you know if they need clinical support but that won't go anywhere we can get somebody to come in, and then there's a veterans retreat there as well you know so they can just, just chill out if things aren't good at home they can just come up there and just chill, you know no expectations to do anything. But once they're at the charity you know if they want to build something and then form a rapport with somebody that they're working with, you know that way it works out perfectly and they tend to open up, and then you know they've got somebody there that they can keep an eye on and help them out if they need to."*

### 6.2.5 Kel's Story

Kel is a 77-year-old Caucasian man. He is the first of three Vietnam veterans who participated in this study. Kel is retired and divorced. Serving as a Combat Engineer for three years, his reason to join the army he explains:

**Kel:** *"Maybe a bit of peer pressure from my father because my – grandparents and my – and my father were in the army and, and my father said to me, you'll never be a man until you join the army."*

When recruiting began for the war in Vietnam, Kel volunteered to go. He proudly stated:

**Kel:** *"My grandfather was in World War I and World War II, and my father was in World War II, in New Guinea and Solomon Islands. So, so, I'm the third generation."*

When Kel returned to home from the war, he explained the experience with a saddened expression: "Lots and lots of discrimination and employment was extremely difficult to find" he explained:

**Kel:** *"It became normal life because when we come home from Vietnam it was really difficult to get jobs and all that sort of stuff because they didn't want to employ a Vietnam veteran because we'd been over there killing babies and stuff, so."*

Kel was not confirming that he had been killing babies, this is untrue. Interpreting his body language and tone in his voice, it was clear he felt insulted. As he leaned in, he gently shook his head in disbelief expressing his deep hurt and disgust at the accusations the nation had made against him. Keeping in mind, Kel was 18 years old when he went to war in Vietnam to defend his nation. He was 21 years old when he returned to no homecoming and a hostile nation. Kel continued to describe his returning home experience:

**Kel:** *"Vietnam veterans were treated much differently to anybody else because all the people in Australian were against the Vietnam War and they were taking it out on the soldiers rather than the government, you know, so-."*

The public did not cheer and honour the Vietnam veterans as they returned, the nation turned their backs:

*"First job I went for, I went for a job as ... as a bulldozer driver because that's what I – I was ... of that in Vietnam and yeah, they said, oh, where have you been working, mate? I said, I haven't, I just got back from Vietnam, and he said, ah, sorry mate – we don't, don't need you. But the job was there, somebody else go the job, they just didn't want to employ me. So, And I found that in a couple of*

*places and then I went to Alice Springs and went up there and tried to get a job with this guy and, yeah, ... he didn't want to employ me and – because I couldn't prove where I'd been. I told him I'd do a day's work for him, if he wasn't happy with me – I'd leave on mutual agreement. So, anyway I did a couple of days work for him and he – he didn't treat me very well so – took off, went to Darwin. So, when I got out of the army, I had 36 jobs in six states of Australia."*

Kel explained he moved around:

**Kel:** *"Because you can't settle, can't settle. That was part of PTSD and stuff, you just can't settle anywhere, you're just on the go all the time, yeah. Coming home, that was worse than deploying in Vietnam, was coming home, Yeah, you ask any Vietnam veteran, they'll – probably tell you the same. It was – well, it's where all the PTSD comes from virtually."*

I asked Kel when he joined the VMC. At this point his voice and body language completely changed. No longer was he reliving the hurt of the nation, he sat up straight with a sense of real pride and exclaimed, *"I started the VMC, foundation member."* He continued to tell me the history of how he started the club:

*"So, yeah, it was – six of us got together and decided that all of us Vietnam veterans are having a lot of problems. We need to get together and we all – the common thing we had – all had together was we all rode motorbikes. So, we started riding together and then I went up to [name]. I was up in, up in ... a place called – just out of [name] is was anyway and they had a big concert up there, three day concert, so I went to that and, and I met three other Vietnam veterans from [name], and they had the, the Vietnam Veterans motorcycle club written on their back and I – so, I went up to them and said, ay, what's this all about? And they said, oh, we're trying to form this bloody – this Vietnam – so, I said, can we stay in contact. I said, we're trying to do the same down in [name]. So, eventually it become Australia-wide."*

The club has been a lifeline for Kel for over 30 years. His voice lowered and his eyes were slightly filling, as he made eye contact with me, with utter sincerity he said, "You know, we're just all brothers." Kel seemed to shake off his emotions after a few short minutes, a learned coping mechanism no doubt. He then shared a funny story, almost to counter the deep rollercoaster of feelings he was experiencing during the interview when discussing his life story:

*"We had Tim Fisher who was a – one of the head – when it was Labour – the Labour Party representative. He – he was a Vietnam veteran, Tim Fisher- Normie Rowe came, Normie Rowe was like Elvis Presley. Well, they did the same to Normie Rowe. Normie Rowe was a pop star, like – he's*

*got all his songs out and they drafted him. He, he got called up to National Service. So, he went into the army, and he became a tank – a tankie. So, so, he was over there and – so, he came to the thing as well and yeah, a lot of – yeah. So, we had a funny thing with Normie Rowe because we had a guy in our club called [name], he was – not Russian, he was – one of those towns – countries near Russia – I can't even pronounce his second name but, yeah, [name] was his name. [name]. And he come over one day and, and – I don't – I can't understand people who don't know of Normie Rowe. And so, [name], joined our club, and he was a tank commander and one day he's just – and he's a guy that didn't brag about much and one day he said, ah something – we were talking about Normie Rowe, he said, yeah, he's – I was his bloody tank commander. Oh, bullshit, everybody wants to be Normie Rowe's tank commander, you know, and everybody's saying, oh yeah, I saw Normie Rowe in Vietnam. Oh, you know, this – I spoke to him, blah, blah. That was the big thing - And [name], just comes through, and he says, yeah, well, I – you know, I, I was his tank commander. We said, 'bullshit! [name].' 'Bullshit! Just another story, [name].' So, we went to [name] for the – a big – one of our national runs in [name] and – actually, Normie Rowe was – joined the club in the [name] chapter he had joined the club. So, he rode a Harley and – with our colours on. And anyway, we go over there, and we all get there and then [name] and then we're all standing there talking and next minute bloody Normie Rowe comes – walks over to [name], 'boss, g'day boss, how ya going' And we're like, 'You're kidding us- It was true!'*

### **6.2.6 Marksy's Story**

Marksy is a 41-year-old Caucasian man. He describes himself as being semi-retired, who is involved with helping his De facto partner in her business. I asked him why he joined the military and what his role was while serving:

*"I guess why I joined, I was a young fella, not sure which path to take in life and it was something I always wanted to do as a teenager, but I didn't. And so, I – it wasn't until I was 23, I decided that I'd join, so – and I thought if I don't do it now, I'll never do it. I didn't want to have the regret. So, yeah, didn't do it – I was ... then I was 17, but didn't, and then 23 years old is when I did it. Main reason is I guess to represent my country and fight for my country if need be. That was the main reasons back then. I was infantry, rifleman. And I served in [name] which is an infantry unit."*

Serving his country for six years, Marksy discussed his military tours to Afghanistan and East Timor, his relationships with mates, and the living arrangements while on deployments:

*"Yeah, yeah, a few close mates that moved around a lot, sort of there was always guys coming and going to different states and different units. So, I wouldn't say I got – ever got too attached to one set of mates because you knew that you probably are going somewhere else soon. For overseas service it was a little bit different, you get pretty close because you're in each other's space for six months or nine months. I lived in a 20-foot container – shipping container, four guys, for nine months. So, yeah, everything in there, had our work ... in there, our computers in there, four beds, just in a 20-foot area. So, it's just always on top of each other. And the area is bomb proof, and it's not bomb proof but has hesco walls (Hesci bastion –semi-permanent levee or blast wall that is made of collapsible wire mesh container and heavy-duty fabric) up around all the accommodation area. So, it's to provide their cover, yeah. So, from any sort of mortar attacks or stuff like that."*

I asked about his transition back to civilian life. He replied, *"Yeah, it was hard. It was- very hard."* He continued to explain that his, *"Life went from going out with the boys Friday nights to when we came back not many of us would really go out. It'd just be to mainly a quiet pub or something or not out-out."* Probing a little bit more, he discussed the life changing effects of his service:

*"From – well, from East Timor they said it was not as full on as Afghanistan, but you had to sleep near your gun for the whole time because we were – we slept in – well not in, we slept outside pretty much for the whole three or four months, just in random locations. So, had to keep your weapon on you at all times in your sleeping bag. So, every time you wake up, you just sort of feel for it because it gets drummed into your head daily, don't leave your weapon! Don't leave your weapon! Don't lose your weapon! So, yeah, ... lot of times waking up at home and you go straight for your – go straight for your weapon. And that's sort of worn off, that's sort of worn off after a few months. But Afghanistan was – yeah – you didn't have to sleep with your weapon, but it was always in the room on the gun rack. But I guess one of the things I did that notice which wasn't until the patrol base generator broke down was that the silence out there, the silence out there at the patrol base there, the generator running 24/7 you always hear this zzz sound and then when it cuts – when it cut out it was just eerie because you sit on top of a hill and it doesn't sound right. So, sometimes serving in complete silence is really hard. I found you – because if it's a real still night I'd rather we got winds. If it was a real still night, I was struggling to sleep because of that feeling."*

Marksy continued to clarify how he noticed how his views about the world changed. He avoids conversations around certain topics:

*"I think my views of the world changed a lot. I was probably more in line with their views [family] before I went, so certain matters become pretty heated at times. So, you don't feel like you can really be yourself around certain people in life with family. So, you sort of avoid – you avoid topics basically,*

*yeah topics. Yeah, political topics, yeah, anything that's going on in the world. People's, I guess, opinions they change as their life gets – as their lives evolve. Mine definitely changed after Afghanistan and I've noticed their opinions will evolve and – yeah – to get along there has been times where it's just they won't even talk to me about certain things anymore either because they don't want to ... the discussion, they don't want to – you know. So, yeah, it's awkward sometimes."*

He has noticed, post-service, how he now questions, everything before he believes, wanting the facts before he can trust what is being told to him:

*"Oh yeah, yeah, big change. Big change. Yeah. Some of the – I guess if you think how did I not see this before. And you think what else have I not noticed in life, and you can – just things became so much more clearer after a short amount of time. So – and I guess now you sort of think of things, and you don't want to – need a lot of facts behind things that you see. I guess of an example is the COVID thing, the – I want to see facts why they were doing what they were doing to society. The government I guess, just in general too, someone says something, you can't take their word for it – I feel you can't take their word for it until you see it for yourself."*

*Q: Is it about trust?*

*"Yeah, trust. Because everything we got told before Afghan, got told what it would be like ... it wasn't. It was just – the environment was different, people were different, the rules of engagement were the same but you just – you felt that there was a real thin line there. Because we had rules of engagement, and the Taliban didn't. So, you put a lot of trust in them preparing you, but I don't think we were – we were prepared as in to fight, but all the other stuff I don't think we were prepared for."*

Trust - was one of the first key themes identified during the analysis of this research. Each participant gave varying reasons how they had lost trust or why it is important to them:

*"But where I got moved to was basically, I got moved to mortars and within the first week I went to put my discharge in, which I hadn't planned, hadn't even thought about it that week before. And it was mainly the boss – the new boss there, he was – he used to be a clerk as a digger, he didn't want to become an officer. So, he already done maybe six, seven years in the Army but then he became an officer, but he absolutely smashed us physically. After the three months off, took us on this massive run first day, first day in mortars, which would have been our third day back at work. And obviously he'd been there running the – probably running that track for months. It was up and down hills, it was – I think I worked it out it was probably maybe seven to ten kilometres. Guys were dropping out, spewing up. He was saying basically leave them, if they can't finish it, leave them here, just leave them, they can walk back to the – it was like that. It was like after what we'd just experienced, I*

*thought, ... people got killed so I'm not – I don't want to deploy with this guy to Afghanistan where we just came back from, he hadn't been there, he's too dangerous. He was saying to leave the troops behind on a run, yeah and for an officer he was trying to hand down a lot of discipline and I think he forgot his place and maybe the rank went to his head. So, that was some of the first – I guess when I think back that was the first – it could have been the guy – not trusting that guy, I think he's going to get people killed. I was rocking up to the gates feeling sick, which was probably anxiety. I probably didn't know what it was. And I put a discharge in, it's normally six months but I had ... within eight weeks, so I fast-tracked it to get out."*

Marksy has been in the VMC for nine years. He joined when he was 32-years old. At the end of the interview, his last comment was, *"I feel more supported in the VMC than any other organisation I've been involved in."*

#### **6.2.7 Nugget's Story**

Nugget served in the Army as an infantry soldier. He is the second of the three Vietnam veterans interviewed for this research. He is a 78-year-old Caucasian man. Married and retired. Unlike Kel, Nugget did not volunteer to go to Vietnam. During 1951 to 1972 Australia had The National Service Scheme (TNSS) (Maclean, 2006). This left him with no real option other than to be enlisted. In Nugget's words, *"Well, I was unlucky enough for my birthday to be drawn out of the barrel in 1965, so I had to do two years of national service. national service! If we refused to do it, it was two years in jail!"*

Nugget was resentful, his voice rising and tone becoming firm. He explained:

*"There was no choice. So, begrudgingly I did the two years in the Army, never, ever thought about joining the services, Navy, Army, or Air Force because I was quite happy in my own little life, I was! I had a good group of mates, I had a good family, I had a job, I had all these sorts of things that everybody had. And the last thing was the army that I wanted to do for two years! So, anyway finally it did happen, and I got – went into the army in September '65 to Puckapunyal. I did my ten weeks basic training at Puckapunyal; I was then allocated to infantry, and we just had to walk across the road more or less to join 7 battalion which had just formed in 1965 just formed. I was in 7 battalion for I don't know, maybe eight or ten months or something like that. And then I was transferred out of 7 battalion and sent to the reinforcement wing in – at Ingleburn in New South Wales where I just – won't say I, we just sat there. There was probably 40 or 50 of us at different times, were just hanging*



*around waiting for someone to get sick, someone to get killed, someone to whatever in Vietnam. And then we would be sent to the reinforcement wing in Vietnam and then from there we would be dispersed to either 6th battalion or 5 battalion who – we only had two battalions then. And when my time came to me, I got moved into 6 battalion, 6 battalion, it's sort of been there for about nine months. So, I was in 6 battalion for probably three or four months, and they went home and left me behind because I still had time to go in my two years. And 2 battalion then took over 6 battalion's lines or their area. So, I became a member of 2 battalion where I served there for probably another four months. I did about seven or eight months, I'm never sure when I came home, I know the day I went, but I can't remember the day I came home. So, I served with 6 battalion and 5 battalion in 1967. And that was it and then I came home and I – we lived happily ever after."*

When stating, *"lived happily ever after,"* his tone changed dramatically becoming more sarcastic. Appearing to feel aggrieved, he continued reliving the experience as he shared the memories:

*"And the other thing that annoys me is the fact that it was far as I could see anyway, it was the ballot was corrupt, in the sense that, and I've just made meself a little poem:"*

*"If you're in the know, you didn't have to go!"*

*"I played football where that club, and another club there was seven of us called up, six of which served in Vietnam. Now another club the Prime Minister at the time was the number one ticket holder, he was their number one supporter at this one club. Not one of them got called up. Now I'll never – I've only ever checked on one bloke because all the ballot dates are still on the computers, you can check up which I have done from time to time. But it just seemed a bit suspicious that the club I was in lost seven to national service, and the club that he was mixed up with, lost none! And Normie Rowe, are you familiar with Normie Rowe? Well, he was the king of the pop or something or other back in the late '60s or early '70s. He was always on TV and 'It ain't necessarily so' and songs that he sang. And he, he and I checked it and what he said was right, he claimed that he got picked up one day for speeding by the cop. And the copper said to him, 'You're born the same, same day as me?' And he said to the copper, 'Did you get called up?' And he said, 'No.' And I think it was about the 7th of January I reckon Normie Rowe was born. And I looked up on those records and sure enough his birthday didn't come out. So, they just wanted to get a celebrity - anyway are we digressing from the subject?"*

Kel had also mentioned Normie Rowe in his interview. I concluded he must have been quite the star. This detail was important to Nugget, it seemed to reinforce how aggrieved he felt. He once had a promising professional football career that ended, because of the national service scheme. He stated, *"I couldn't get*

out fast enough along with about 99.9% of the other nashos (national servicemen), they all felt exactly the same as I did. overall, I hated it. I hated it, every minute of it.”

He continued by recollecting and conveying his sadness of the whole experience:

*“We were treated like garbage, like garbage. And did I expect to be treated like a hero? No but I just expected to be treated with some sort of dignity, someone at the end of our time to say, thank you. I know they’ve said it 50 years later, but at the time nothing. I was happy, mum was really happy, everybody else was happy when the time was up. And I just really lost interest, it wasn’t until probably 30 years later that I found out that a bloke that I served with in my platoon got killed. I didn’t know, I just deleted all reference of Vietnam, I shouldn’t have, because there was still a lot of blokes, I knew over there. But I just deleted all reference and showed no interest whatever.”*

Nugget was 55-years old when he joined the VMC and has been in the club for 23 years. He said he had been riding motorbikes on and off for a long time since he was ten years old. I asked how he came to join the club. His voice changed; this time he seemed enthusiastic to share this part of his story:

*“I was at the newsagents in [name], and I was standing there at the motorbike section where there’s, I don’t know, a couple of dozen, dozen of the motorbike books. And this bloke standing alongside me said, ‘What are you riding?’ I said, ‘Well I’m not at the moment, but in about two weeks I’m picking up a Heritage.’ He said, ‘Oh, are you?’ And I said, ‘Yeah what do you ride?’ He said, ‘Oh,’ he said, ‘I’ve got a Harley,’ he said, ‘I’m the President of the Vietnam Veterans Motorcycle Club.’ I said, ‘I’m one of them?’ He said, ‘What?’ I said, ‘I’m a Vietnam Veteran?’ He said, ‘Are you?’ I said, ‘Yeah.’ And we yacked on who do you serve with and all that sort of jazz. And that was, I guess it was meant to be.”*

Nugget said he is not a very social person. However, he feels comfortable in the club, and he just likes it. He said it is the only night of the week that he goes out. And he looks forward to going down to the club and having a yarn with the blokes:

#### **6.2.8 Pablo’s Story**

Pablo is a married, 40-year-old Caucasian. He is currently still employed full-time serving in the Army. He began his career as an Infantry Soldier and later joined the RAEME (Royal Australian Mechanical and Electrical Engineers). Pablo has been in the service for 22 years. He told me about his motivation to join the Defence Force:

*"I think I always wanted to be in the Army, I think. I started out with Army Cadets as a young guy, and I think it was always – I'm not really sure what drew me to it, but I think part of it was leaving home and leaving [name] and doing something different and starting a new life. So, I applied when I was 17, and it took me two years to get in. And I foolishly quit my apprenticeship when I applied and had to bum around for two years doing shit jobs until I was able to go, but yeah, pretty much for as long as I can think, I've wanted to join the Army. So, I joined in the infantry, so did four years in the infantry and got sick and tired of walking around in the bush and changed over to RAEME, so vehicle mechanic, so that's the apprenticeship that I was doing before I quit it. So, went- as a heavy diesel mechanic, and now ... to running a workshop."*

Pablo's operational deployments included a trip to East Timor in 2007, Afghanistan in 2009 and again in 2011. While on deployment Pablo sustained a broken leg and needed to return home a few weeks early. He said, *"It was a struggle, to go from having that close knit friendship to back into the shit realities of normal life."* He continued to explain, *"It was strange that in the space of about two to three days you go from one country and one environment to a completely different one."* Once he was fit for duty, he was posted to an Australian base. He said he hated it there and didn't like the job:

*"My mental health was starting to take a nosedive, and I sought out the club (VMC), because one of the guys that I was working with was in it, and he invited me to come along, but I was looking at discharging, but because I liked the military so much, I wasn't – I knew that I couldn't go from having served all this time in the military to then having nothing. So, one of the big things the club was going to be was, I guess like a continuation of that military family, so not being able to, not be having that completely taken away from me. So, that was my reason for joining. And then through the first sort of year, the year and a half that I was with the club up there, a few things changed and turned around, and then I got offered a good posting to go back to Special Forces again, and that's what changed me staying in. But by that stage, the club had – I was involved with the club, and it had helped me, so I stuck with it, but yeah, that was the main reason was to not go cold turkey on Defence, basically."*

Going 'cold turkey' on Defence is a powerful statement. The impact of losing one's identity and close group of mates it almost too much to cope with. It is impossible to understand the experience of being in a war zone unless you have been there:

**Pablo:** *"Myself and just about everyone I've ever spoken to has said that they'd go back in a heartbeat. I think that's probably one of the big drawcards for things like the bike club for guys that are no longer serving, that's sort of the closest that you can get to being back in that environment."*

Not all war veterans find the transition home easy. Some find adjusting to everyday life a struggle:

*“Yeah, well I think when you come home, you try and do, you’re constantly on the go, go-go-go-go-go, doing things to, I suppose stay in that type of frame of mind, and it’s not until you get to a point – I said, with my wife now, because I started, I guess having issues, mental health type stuff when I was with her, and the way I would have worded it was probably completely wrong, but I said that I didn’t have the issues with mental health, or I didn’t see that I had them, until I was with her. But what I was trying to say was, up until that point I hadn’t gotten to a point where I’d relaxed enough and could sort of put my shields down, and that’s where it sort of opens up that exposure and lets you start to see those sorts of things emerge. So, I suppose for some people, if they live their entire lives keeping those shields up and not ever allowing themselves to be vulnerable, then you don’t really figure out that there’s issues that you need to be addressing until you get to that point. You need to allow yourself to feel vulnerable, you need to feel that you’re in a safe environment.”*

Pablo has been in the VMC for ten years joining when he was 30-years old. The club is a place where he can trust those around him and discuss mental health issues and allow himself to be vulnerable. He stated, *“It’s a funny thing to be surrounded by people yet feel isolated and alone.”* I noted a change in his demeanour as he made that impactful statement:

*“One of the, I guess benefits was the ability, once you got to know the guys, to have open conversations about your mental health, your feelings of inadequacy, and within your job, things that to this day very much feel like you can’t discuss with your peers (Defence Force peers), because you – it’s kind of a bit of an isolated lonely feeling, I guess when, particularly if you’re going through mental health type things, as much as they tell you over and over again, we’ve got all these services, it’s a myth that ... looks at your career, so on, and so forth, we all know that’s a crock of shit. So, you can be surrounded by people but you feel like you can’t tell any one of them anything, because you sort of get to the point where I’d think, well if I tell someone that I work with or who’s serving and it came down to me getting or not getting a posting or a promotion, whether or not they could use that against me, what I’d told them to further their career or to jeopardise mine, so it’s sort of, it’s a funny thing to be surrounded by people yet feel isolated and alone, but that’s pretty much sort of what it was. Whereas within that, the club, I could speak to people who were still serving, people who had served, people who’d served over different decades, they’d been to different wars, they’d been to the same wars, they’d gone through all these things, and I guess because you’re all part of that club it’s, I guess you’ve got that sense of safety and security and you can be that bit more vulnerable.”*

### 6.2.9 Pottsy's Story

Now a self-employed Cattle Grazier, Pottsy is 37-year-old Caucasian man, who is married. He is a former Combat Engineer in the Army, and a High-Risk Searcher. He served in the Defence Force for six and a half years, joining in November 2011, and then flew to Afghanistan the following year. I asked what his motivation was to join the military:

*"Well, I've got military history in my family, so yeah, my uncle, my grandad, my great grandad, World War I, World War 2 and Vietnam. I hit 17 and I either wanted to join the army or become a carpenter. So, I had my papers, it's a bit cliché ... so I had my papers ready to go, but I just didn't do it. But yeah, I had my application filled out for the army, and then I got offered an apprenticeship, so I decided to do my apprenticeship in carpentry. And then a good mate of mine ended up joining up full-time and he was deployed to Afghanistan, and I was running my carpentry business at that point. But I wasn't really happy in life, I didn't really have much direction, and they didn't, yeah that's when a lot of the boys started getting killed over there, and I just thought well you know if I hit retirement and look back and I haven't served I'm going to regret it. So yeah, I signed, I put my papers in when I was 25 and when I was 26, yeah, I got, yeah. I've always been pretty patriotic for sure, yeah so that was the big driver; I always just wanted to serve."*

Pottsy spoke with a sense of pride when discussing his patriotism and service for his country. He continued to explain his military job role:

*"The risk of IED (Improvised Explosive Device) strike and mines and unconventional warfare was really the biggest threat, so yeah, we were very sought after. We had a busy year, like lots and lots of training; they had to get us right up to speed. So, our posting orders came through when I was still at my initial employment training over in [name], and our posting orders were saying that we were going to go to [name]. And then about two weeks later they called us in and said that all our posted orders have been cancelled, and we're now post to [name], cos they've got an Afghanistan rotation coming up, so they needed extra. So even though we ticked and flicked all and did all the training that we were meant to do, they started training, doing extra training and different training to start preparing if we did deploy. But we still had to go through all the ... testing as any other soldier in my field, so we still had to pass certification. And then I literally spent my 12-month anniversary with my feet on Afghan soil."*

Leaving the Defence Force did not seem to have an effect Pottsy, he was quite matter of fact as he explained he did his time, and *"They posted me to [name] just to sort of see my time out."* Pottsy knew of the VMC before joining the Defence Force service. He discussed the long history and

involvement. Perhaps his transition out of the Defence Force was not an issue for him, because he knew he had the club to go to once he left the service:

*"I started hanging out around the VMC in 2016, I've got a pretty interesting; I had an interesting connection with the VMC or the V.V.M.C (Vietnam Veterans Motorcycle Club) from childhood. So, my uncle, not my blood uncle but my uncle was the founding president of the original [name] chapter, and I still have all these memories of being, how old ..., don't quote me but I wouldn't have been maybe seven or ten. I'd have to look at the dates and the timeline, but yeah me and my brother used to go to my auntie's place and all the boys would be there, as ... talking about the Vietnam veteran members. And it's really funny cos some of them still remember me like 30 years later, so yeah I sort of grew up around it. Just having all these big, burly blokes that I was actually quite scared of at the start. I'd like walk in and there was just so many of them, and they're all wearing the Casper patch, I vividly remember the Casper, and yeah look it was just, like from what, looking back from what I saw it's a real sense of brotherhood and you know they had their parties and that. My brother and I used to love it when they had a party cos we'd go to my auntie's place, and like and would pick up all the empty beer bottles and, yeah be able to; it was like months of lollies from the corner store. So, when I was in Afghan, I remember sort of, well yeah when I was in Afghan, I'd heard that they'd opened the doors to veterans around that time, cos that was 2012, so that would have sort of thought about joining. And then one of the other boys I was serving with, so one of the other boys that I was serving with. Yeah, so one of the other guys that I met in the reserve unit, [name] he was ... or going through his prospect time out at the [name] chapter and invited me out and I was like yeah alright, so I just sort of started hanging around and that was yeah 20, end of 2015, and then started going to their sort of functions."*

Although Pottsy knew of the V.V.M.C. before and during his service, it was the opening of the club to contemporary war veterans that provided him with the opportunity to join. When discussing the VMC I noted a change in his voice and energy. It indicated that he was very happy and excited at the prospect of being able to join the club. Pottsy has been a member of the VMC for eight years. He was one of the younger members being only 31 years old when he joined. He talked of how he had a bad experience with the Department of Veteran Affairs' (DVA) when seeking treatment for mental health issues, *"I stuck my hand out, I was just completely crushed and brushed away"* he said. The experience with the VMC was completely different, they showed a caring side:

*"Definitely, yeah, especially the Vietnam boys. I mean the younger veterans of course, like were all going through all different paths, but you know you start talking to the Vietnam veterans especially, they've already walked the walk, they've been through DVA fight of, you know they've had family*

*breakdowns or they've been around a lot of, you know their mates are committing suicide, and yeah it's like they've already walked the path and they openly reach out and help, especially in those younger days of coming to the club."*

Pottsy feels safe with members of the club to discuss any mental health and general life concerns. He said, *"You talk quite deeply and openly about troubles."* The reason he can do this he stated, *"It is because you end up forming a really strong bonds."* The peer support, in the club is reciprocal, it is not structured as peer support; it happens naturally.

Towards the end of the interview, I asked if there was anything else he would like to say. His reply indicated being a member of the club represents his core values, pride, patriotism, and brotherhood. On top of that a dash of 'seasoning' - thrill and adrenaline:

*"That pride, yeah absolutely it's pride, and you know when you're riding, I mean I've ridden with 200 members before - it's huge you know, and it's all, you're all wearing the same patch which is massive, massive brotherhood. It's amazing, it's like, you know we ride hard, we ride close, by hard I mean like when you ride in a big pack, like it's, yeah, it's kind of like rolling the dice a bit sometimes. And that can sort of then, you know it does date back to what we did, for example over in Afghanistan, that, I wouldn't say it's reckless danger or anything like that, but you know it's not exactly the safe, like riding a motorbike's not the safest thing, and you get that sort of adrenaline and you're doing it with all your brothers, like that's, yeah."*

#### **6.2.10 Raider's Story**

Raider is a 53-year-old Caucasian man. He is married and medically retired from the army. He had a fourteen-year career in the Defence Force. When first joining he worked as a store person but moved into the Military Police (MP). Then moving across to the Special Investigations Branch (SIB). I asked Raider what his motivation was to join the Defence Force:

*"Was when East Timor started off. Lots of reasons. I was – I owned my own company in [name] for a franchise, and I was just not really going anywhere, I wasn't happy, I was working fourteen-hour days, and I came home and had a couple of beers, and seen an ad in the paper, and applied, and that was it. Oh, yeah, yeah, my dad, my grandfather, my great-grandfather."*

During his service there were several deployments: three to East Timor, three to South-East Asia (Malaysia), one to the Solomon Islands and two on border patrol. He explained what it was like coming back from deployments:

**Raider:** *"It was, hard coming back, and just being so angry and stuff, that was hard, and I mean I've been dealing with that, and you know, for quite a few years now but I'm getting better, slowly. I think the biggest bugbear I had from my first trip, well I came back, and they sent me straight out bush. So, I'd just been overseas for six months, and then I come back, and I done bloody four months out bush."*

Discussing leaving the Defence Force, I asked what transitioning back to civilian life was like:

*"I didn't fit into the army anymore, I was too angry, I wouldn't take orders, drank a lot, fought a lot. So, yeah, I thought it was – got to the stage where I needed – I went up to my boss and I said to him I wanted 12 months leave without pay, and he said 'yeah,' I could take it, so I took some long service leave, I took a month off. And then I went over to Papua New Guinea (PNG) to see a mate, and he got me a job over there, and I came back, and I spoke to the boss, and he said, 'I can't give you a year off, because we're short-staffed.' I said, 'well I month ago, you told me you would.' And he said, 'well I'm – because my boss used to answer to the Senate, and he said, how can I go into Senate and say I'm understaffed, and yet I let you have a year off.' And I said, 'well that's not my problem, I said, you told me I could, I've made arrangements,' so the next day I handed him my discharge. Then after that, going over to PNG was quite easy, but it didn't help my mental state at all, because of the violence. And yeah, I got really, really bad, and that's when I realised, I had to come home."*

Raider had joined the VMC in 2008 when he was 38-years old, while still serving in the Defence Force. Then, the club was still the Vietnam Veterans Motorcycle Club (V.V.M.C.). He discussed how he came to join the club as a military member:

*"Well, I'd ridden bikes for years, and then when I went to [name] – what happened – oh, I met a couple of boys down the local bike shop, and they introduced me, and it was just, you know, like-minded people that were – you know, and some of them a lot worse, some of them nothing wrong with them, but yeah – yeah, so that's, I joined back when it was still Vietnam Vet's. I used to come back every three months (From deployments) and I'd spend a month at home, so that's how I stayed associated."*

When the V.V.M.C. changed to the VMC, Raider became a full-patched member, first serving prospect time. Describing himself as feeling frustrated if the club's values are not upheld by current club supporters - the 22 crew, he stated, *"These blokes think, you know, they're on equal par, no*



*you're not."* Raider mentioned how upholding respect for Casper (three-piece patch) and keeping the club in high regard was important to him. He would like the vest (patches) to be standardised across Australia. I assume this stems from his military experience of a uniform:

*"My biggest problem with the vests is the lack of standardisation across Australia. In [name] they have different stuff on the front and they – well, if we had it standardised it'd look so much better. But anyway, it's not about looks really, it's more about the respect and knowing where Casper came from."*

I asked Raider if the club was a brotherhood and he replied, *"Yeah, I agree. But it's, yeah, it's – yeah, actually that nails it really, that nails it."* Being thoughtful for a few moments, mulling over the essence of the club, he continued:

*"We support each other very well, and not just within the chapter, you know, like within the club, like I've got a couple of mates up here, who I went and seen while I was up here, and so, that's just the sort of thing we do, you know, we look out for each other, that's the biggest thing about this club it's supposed to be about. They'll look after you, even if you've done something wrong. They'll clip you over the back of the head later, but at least when you – you know, if you make a stupid decision, they'll stick by you with the decision or help you get out of it, and they'll clip you up the back of the head and say, you're a fucking idiot yeah."*

My interpretation of *"they'll stick by you"* infers the club gives unconditional acceptance to behaviours which society may misinterpret or not accept. Raider struck me as a man with a moral compass that is guided by his values, and these centre around respect. This extends to members of the club, the general population and women:

*"Yeah, some are acceptable, some aren't. Depends on who you are, I guess. Like I, years ago with some of the older guys, we used to go on rides and stuff, and the way they would carry on around young ladies and stuff, you know, I used to tell them to pull their heads in and stop being arseholes. But you know, when you've got 60- and 70-year-old men doing it, it's just, I think it's disgusting."*

Raider closed the interview by saying, *"As a rule, you know, we look after each other and that's something I really love about the boys they're a great bunch of lads, crack me up, so, but anyway – anyway, all good."*

### 6.2.11 Skelly's Story

Skelly is now retired from the workforce; he was born in 1954. He is a Vietnam War veteran. Married and identifies as a Caucasian man. I asked Skelly what his motivation was to join the Defence Force:

*"I always felt like I wanted to go into the Navy, always did. Yeah, I don't know why, I just did. I was in, you know I was in Cubs and then Scouts and then Sea Scouts and then Air Training Corp ever since I was like eight or nine."*

I invited Skelly to talk about his service:

*"Yeah, so I left school at fifteen and joined the Navy. I joined up at fifteen, did my basic training in Western Australia. When I got, I turned, I finished my basic training, I was sixteen when I finished my basic training, and I was told I was going to Vietnam at sixteen. I was seventeen and the second time I was nineteen. And people, people say you couldn't, but we did, and I know my mate [name] was sixteen when he went and I kind of Googled that we, Googled the, whether the Government don't want people to know."*

It was astonishing to hear that Skelly was sent off to war at seventeen. I am aware that in previous wars teenagers have served. My own grandfather during WWI was sent to France as a teenager. Skelly continued to describe his role in the service:

*"The first time I was on the HMAS Sydney which was a transport ship and we took the, I think the 6th Battalion men and in the morning I was on the flight deck unloading the stuff onto barges and in the afternoon I was on landing craft taking the troops in on the landing craft and then the second time we escorted, I was on a destroyer, escort destroyer and we took the troops in and then we went on the gunner line with the Yanks on the 7th, ... bombarding."*

I asked about his transition back to civilian life:

*"I got kicked out in the Navy. Service unsuitable. I just drunk too much and ended up getting kicked out and then I couldn't handle it being in civie street you know, I just drunk all the time. Ended up getting locked up and my wife left, and I just couldn't handle it. I was unemployed for a long time and, and then I just couldn't be employed. I was just drunk all the time, couldn't care less. I had a marriage that she didn't want me to work so I didn't work, just lived on the dole in a Housing Trust house and kept having kids, as you do because that'll make life better, but they didn't work either and, and then we bought a house. I stayed sober for a period of time and my Mum and Dad lent us the deposit for the house. So, we bought a house and I stayed sober for about seven years, I think. I was going to night school trying to get myself better. I was doing my Diploma in Business*

*Management, but I had to give that up, my wife left me and then I started drinking again and life just spiralled down and then one day on the 1st of January 1997, I just had enough so I went to AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) again and I stayed with AA for 21 years, and my life picked up."*

Skelly explained how he was spat on and rejected by the RSL, he said, *"Because we had short hair, we were just easy targets, and we used to have paint thrown over us."* He continued stating that he feels that - the Department of Veteran Affairs' (DVA) just wait for you to die. Several years after leaving the Defence Force, Skelly applied for a service allowance from the DVA. He said that he was called a liar and could not have gone to Vietnam underage. He stated, *"I said you've got all my forms you fucken idiots. Born 53 went 1970 that makes me seventeen."* He said the discussion continued insisting he could not have gone to Vietnam. He again said, *"You just told me I went in the first sentence, you told me yes, we recognise your service in Vietnam, but you're not recognising that I was seventeen. (Laughing) we go on - there's my birth certificate."*

Our conversation moved to discussing the VMC and his motivation to join the club when he was 56 years old:

*"I went on a ride. I saw these blokes running around with Vietnam Veterans on their back and I thought wow this is what I want to be, I want to be one of them, but I can't even spell motor bike let alone ride one. I had no idea. So, I thought no, I want to, I want to, this is what I want to do. I really did so I went to get my bike license and I said to the bloke you know I said, 'how do you do your helmet up' and he said 'are you serious?' I said 'yeah,' he said 'you're never going to pass this mate you can't even do up your helmet,' I said 'you can't say that,' but I got my Ls, and I got my license, got a bike I went down and they bought me my papers down and they said 'yeah that's fine' they treated me really, really nice and being a Vietnam Veteran and it was just the process in them days."*

I asked Skelly what it was he wanted from joining the club. He replied, *"belonging to something."*

He elaborated:

*"They were all good, they were good because they knew my wife was dying and they supported me, and that kind of thing and they'd phone up and make sure I was alright, and it was just like the mateship again you know the brotherhood that I missed from the Navy."*

### **6.3 Conclusion**

The brief life stories in this chapter provide the background profiles of the participants. It was important that I tell their individual stories. They wanted to tell me of their life, and I wanted to be respectful when listening and translating their narratives. My philosophical commitment to constructivist paradigm shaped how I engaged with and represented these stories. I understood the act of storytelling as both expressive and interpretive. Guided by the hermeneutic philosophy of Gadamer, I treated each narrative as an encounter, a moment of shared meaning-making shaped by both participant and researcher. The shared stories give context to the analysis phase of this thesis and lays the foundations of our understanding. My interpretive responsibility was not to extract facts, but to understand experience as lived, through the lens of the participant and my own reflexive position.

Over half of the participants said the reasons for joining the military was because they had no direction, and their life was going nowhere. Nine of the eleven joined the Army. Of those five were infantry soldiers and three were combat engineers. Many if not all the participants stated or alluded to the same reason for joining the club – trust, united in the colours (vest – three-piece patch) and being joined with and committed to the brotherhood.

The subsequent chapters are grounded in the narratives of the participants and interpreted through a hermeneutic phenomenological framework. The themes emerging from their stories allow us to appreciate the standpoint form which these war veterans engage with peer support. Through my philosophical lens, their narratives are not only sources of data but windows into the shared and individual processes of meaning-making, identity and belonging. These narratives are reflections of being, trust and belonging. In honouring their complexity, I hope to do justice to the stories that were entrusted to me.

## 7 CHAPTER: TRUST

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" Never ahead, Never Behind, Always by my Side"

VMC

Permission was granted to use the poem.

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### 7.1 Chapter Preface

The Veterans Motorcycle Club (VMC) members' biographical portraits in the previous chapter provided the personal context and rationale for joining the Defence Force and joining the club. This chapter explores the theoretical concept of trust and how that is experienced by the members. Trust was shown to be a major and vital theme that is central to their brotherhood. Trust cements the bonds between members of the club and is of particular significance when building and maintaining their close interfamilial ties. Trust plays a central and underpinning role in the peer support experienced by the members and provides protective factors for their mental health and wellbeing.

The focus for this chapter is on exploring the concept of trust, the significance of trust, how the meaning and shared understanding of trust is unique for this sub-cultural group. Excerpts from participant interviews are woven through the chapter to facilitate the discourse and ground the narratives. The participants spoke frankly, at times using profanities or 'colourful' language. Each person displaying a varied range of emotions. At times some of the participants' voices fluctuated in tone, pitch, and pace for example, becoming elevated when conveying feelings such as frustration or disbelief. At other times there was a sullenness and a subduedness as they recalled memories that were hurtful or senseless. They all spoke with honesty and seemingly from the heart.

To understand the concept of trust; I briefly define the typical Western societal interpretation and meaning of trust and then delve into how the significance of trust relates to the members of the VMC and fundamentally the ethos of the club. I examine the potential of how this specific type of trust is a key component for functioning within this peer group (a particular, unique type of fraternal bonding) that supports the members of the club and provides protection that alleviates mental health challenges that are a consequence of their service. Fraternity, or the plural fraternities, are a social system in which power is held by 'brothers,' a power structure in which a fraternal group of men is dominant.

The social system of patriarchy has been referred to since the late 20th Century. This term describes how power is regarded to be primarily held by adult men placed in a position of dominance and privilege. This historical term literally means 'the rule of the father' and is used to refer to the autocratic rule by the male head of a family. Feelings of fear and reverence hold groups together who follow the 'father idea' with each member being directed towards acknowledgment of their superior. By contrast, fratriarchy, although evolved from the same primal social cell, the family; they are dominated by the 'brother idea' (fratriarchy) and these groups coalesce through a sense of mutual dependence and responsibility (Schevill, 1929). The participants expressed a need to belong to the club as it gives them a brotherhood. This brotherhood forms a replication of the male bonding that is similar to the experience of their military service. The club enables them to feel safe and express a male sense of power and control that is associated within a male gendered Western society and is integral to their identity.

As a woman conducting interviews within a veteran only motorcycle club, which is an environment steeped in military and biker cultures, both traditionally male-dominated – I was acutely aware of my position as an outsider and a female. Gender, in particular, shaped both how I experienced the research setting and how I was likely perceived by the participants. My encounter exemplifies the layered dynamics of gender, power and access in this research. As a female researcher, I was navigating a space marked by masculine codes of loyalty, control and earned belonging. My being vouched for by my ex-husband was the only reason I was able to conduct this research. I further believe that it was an advantage being female as I would not have been perceived as so much of a threat. I approached each interview not only with academic curiosity, but with the humility that comes from being an outsider in a deeply insular and symbolic environment. I was extremely aware that the participants were allowing me into their world, a world that is strictly for males, where trust, respect and unspoken codes mattered deeply. From a philosophical perspective, my interpretation of the interactions is grounded in hermeneutic reflexivity. I acknowledge that my understanding was shaped not only by what participant said, but by how those words were situated in a larger, gendered context and symbolic meaning.

## **7.2 Westernised interpretation of trust**

As a Western democracy the symbolic power and structure of the relationship between the military, the state and civil Australian society cannot be overstated (Wadham, 2013). Largely this is built on

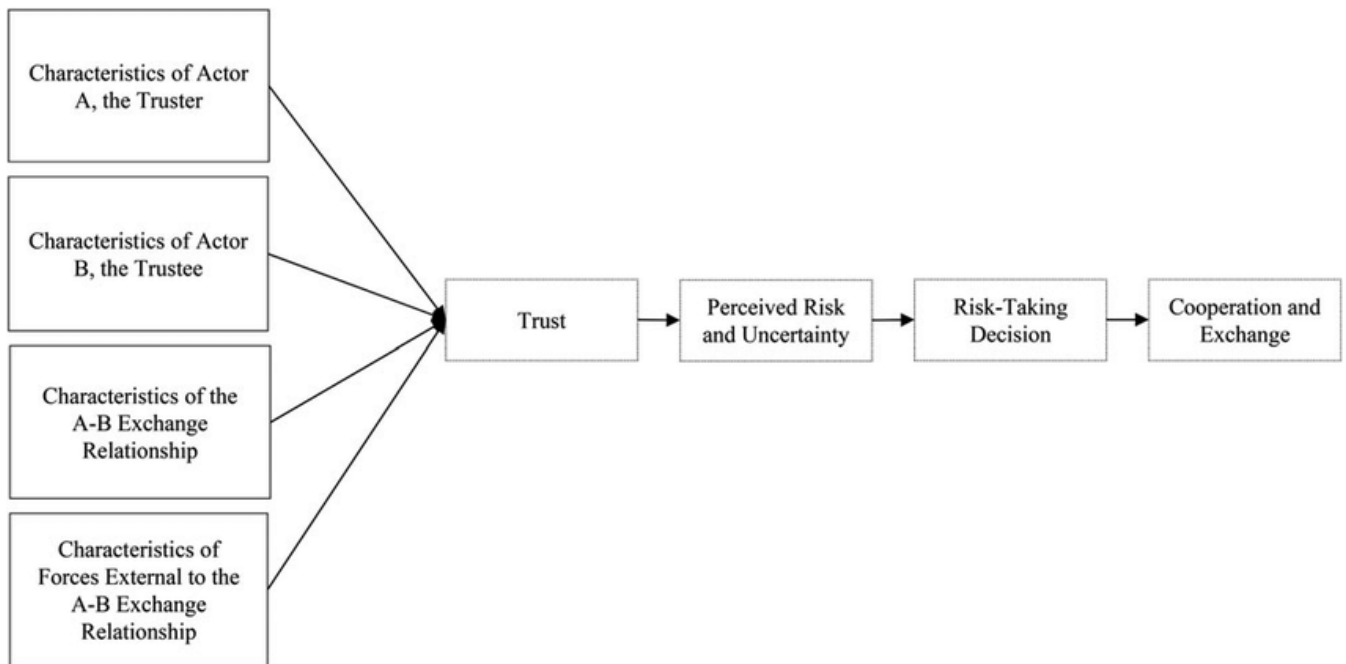
the nation's trust; if the need arises to defend the country, the government will send in its armed forces. Citizens need to trust in the government itself and society needs a government in order to maintain the order that enables its citizens to invest effort in their own wellbeing, and to deal with others in the expectation that we will not be violated (Warren, 1999). Trust also is considered to be the 'glue' that holds society together and an essential component for society to run smoothly. Everyday people experience trust as it is an emergent part of social life that is embedded in social relations. A generally accepted definition of trust is 'the mutual confidence that no party to an exchange will exploit the other's vulnerability' (Ward et al., 2014). Individuals appreciate and understand the importance of trustworthiness as being a reciprocal exchange. Scholars from varying disciplines, such as sociology, political science and philosophy have attempted to define, conceptualise, and operationalise trust. Trust matters for interpersonal relationships, group dynamics, civic engagement, and society at large. No single psychological or social element shares the same principles of trust nor, despite decades of interdisciplinary research, is there a common conceptual understanding of what constitutes trust (Robbins, 2016). In trust literature *varieties of trust* can be categorised along three analytically distinct dimensions. These being; *how* to trust, *whom* to trust and *what* to trust another to do. Robbins (2016) in a review of what trust is and how it is conceptualised in literature argued that fundamentally trust is reductive (e.g. when providing an explanation of trust to give context we simplify and apply to specific circumstances) relational, and belief based. Robbins in their evaluation proposed that scholars should adopt *relational conceptions of trust* and abandon *varieties of trust* in order for the accumulation of knowledge about trust to move forward. Indeed Robbins (2016), explains conceptually *relational trust* is tripartite:

*"Trust is a reductive and relational concept composed of two parties and a matter at hand. Without these three basic elements, trust is not present. For instance, I might trust a friend to keep a secret but to not repay a loan, while I would trust a different friend to repay a loan but to not keep a secret. Note that in this instance there are various parties (the truster and the trustee) and the matters at hand (to keep a secret or to repay a loan)—actor A trusts actor B with respect to matter Y. If trust, on the other hand, is merely a one-part relation, then actor A simply trusts everyone with respect to everything (i.e., general multiplex trust)."*

(Robbins, p. 981) proposed a structural-cognitive model of trust (Figure 18), where trust is conceptualised as a belief about another person's trustworthiness with respect to a particular matter at hand that emerges under conditions of unknown outcomes:

**Figure 18**

*Structural-Cognitive Model of Trust*



Robbins (2016) views are not necessarily an incorrect account, more too simplistic, and incomplete when considering the VMC members. One could argue that if Robbins suggest that trust is a three-part relationship, then environment and context would play a part and influence the construction of trust. Therefore, the history and context of veterans would be taken into consideration in the development of their mental schemas (cognitive structures) around trust. Schemas refer to underlying beliefs, assumptions and perspective about the world and oneself. These mental models are a framework that help individuals organise, process and store information in their long-term memory about their environment and circumstances. For the members of the VMC, there are additional dimensions to their understanding of what it means to trust. Veterans of war have usually experienced situations that are life threatening and dependent on others' actions or inactions to remain safe, and this is reciprocal. Therefore, the concept of trust has more complexity than civilians would understand. The world as experienced by the VMC members is unsafe, they have stored memories that have left them feeling vulnerable as they navigate through civilian life. Within the VMC brotherhood, they feel safe because of their trust in and of each other. This shared understanding means they can rely on and be relied upon. Their military experiences encountering war zones demonstrates that trust does not necessarily form because of a long duration. Deployments can vary from weeks, months and years:



**Jay:** *"You know you and you're trained from day dot, but yeah it's when you're in that predicament that's when you are you know, but it's sort of totally different level of trust in bonding again you know what I mean? You know like there's nothing, there's nothing else in this world where you rely on somebody next to you to support you in the sense of remaining alive, yeah you know what I mean like you know also might be a support network, it's, I've never come across anything other, being in a war zone where you've actually trusting the guy for your life. And not even questioning what he's going to do because you already know you've come so hard already, that you know what he's going to do and you know, and you don't give up the simple fact that, they say purely to save his life, not for your own, and at the time you don't give a shit about your own, it's more about saving the man around you."*

Jay provides a compelling example of the deep held level of trust while serving in the military; he stated, *"You don't give a shit about your own life, it's more about saving the man around you."* This kind of experience can only be gained in a war zone. It is a reciprocal understanding that each person trusts those around them with their life. Civilians would not understand this unique experience. H (Aitch) explains how the members of the club have a shared understanding and are there for each other:

**H:** *"The fact that in this particular club everyone has been through operations of deployment, so they've actually been in harm's way, some more than others, so they understand, and we've all got that in common, and we understand so we're there for each other."*

Those in the Defence Force are thrown into unique circumstances where they must suspend or expedite the building of trust with strangers that usually takes time or other social cues within the bounds of social norms and public understanding. Trust is enforced in the military; this leads Defence Force members to develop schemas where they feel safe with their peers. When the member leaves the military, where they were habituated to the structure and formation of trust, it becomes difficult to adjust to civilian life. They feel adrift until they find a similar specific understanding of identity and bonding they experienced while in the military. Ward et al. (2014) in their cross-sectional survey spanning six Asia-Pacific countries sampled over 6,000 participants. Their paper identified Australia is a 'high trust society,' however, Australian males had lower trust in strangers and their study concluded there must be social or cultural norms underpinning the decision for a person to decide whether to trust a stranger. Mostly one might expect that it is normal in Western society to not immediately trust another unless they are a professional person such as a police officer or doctor. Universally, a police officer's uniform conveys power and authority that

embodies a stereotype that citizens across many nations have come to recognise. Powerful clues to the wearer's authority, capability and status are represented in the police uniform (Johnson, 2001).

In a Western culture an official uniform, such as one vested with the powers of the state, identifies the person as part of a recognised group and makes a statement that the wearer can be trusted as they have gone through a rigorous process and been deemed as competent, able to uphold the organisations/states values and are trustworthy (Johnson, 2001). However, depending on the society, a uniform, clothing, or symbols can hold different context and meaning depending on the group. For example, in countries where there is perceived or real oppression by, and fear of government or authoritarian groups or in relation to race and colour of your skin. The rise of Neo-Nazi or white supremacy ideology and history of the Ku Klux Klan are pertinent examples (Jaeger, 2021). The same applies for the members of the VMC who have deep connection to the colours worn, its meaning and marks them as part of the group. In addition to the recognition of the uniform there is a deep interpersonal trust between the members that is evident through their narratives.

The VMC members instantly recognise a patched fellow member of the club, and a certain trust is there regardless of the Territory, State or Chapter they are from. Research has suggested that clothing has a powerful impact on how people perceive each other, a psychological influence (Johnson, 2001). The three-piece patched VMC members are instantly recognisable to each other, viewed as trustworthy and regarded as a brother because of what the club stands for. The patches are symbolic, a statement that the member has been through the Defence Force, served in active operations and passed the club's lengthy initiation and therefore deemed trustworthy in every aspect, they can be relied upon 24 hours a day seven days a week, without question. Just as they were willing to lay down their life for duty to their country, they will be trusted to lay down their life to protect a fellow VMC member. This is potentially the major reason they look inward; it influences their help seeking and why they flip the concept of trauma as a part of deployment. The trauma is almost a nonentity, they assume (we are all fucked up!) they are 'damaged' and therefore shift the peer support to a different focus of brotherhood and trust rather than engaging in treatment services.

### 7.2.1 The lack of trust in “outsiders”: “Civilians don’t get it”

The VMC members do not readily trust outsiders, serving Defence Force members, veterans of the Defence Force or civilians. Indeed, a high number of the participants in this study stated they have a distrust and dislike for civilians:

**Bear:** *“I don’t do public, people are dicks, they’re arseholes, so I don’t deal with them.”*

**Jay:** *“They’ll fuck you any chance they can, you know which then I suppose leads to that ex-military total lack of trust to civilians.”*

Pottsy and Jay discuss thoughts on civilian environments with regards to mates and fellow employees. Pottsy distinguishes his relationship with civilian school mates to those in the club. He describes his bond with his VMC brothers as a different relationship, a bond, so strong he would put his life on the line to preserve a brother’s life. Jay has developed a distinct distrust for civilians after encountering a hard lesson that civilians are not there for anyone else but themselves:

**Pottsy:** *“I guess it’s everything, like it’s a bond that you’re not going to find in civilian world, I mean I have, like I have my civilian mates that I’m really, really close with, especially like I’ve got a couple that I’m still mates to this day, and I met them in primary school, and we still talk and catch up all the time. But you know I’m close with them but I’m not, I don’t share that bond. It’s a different relationship, so, I would put my life on the line to save yours at the drop of a hat. Call your brothers and everything and they’re there.”*

**Jay:** *“I cannot, yeah, I can’t basically settle into civilian life. You know, I made a critical mistake when I first got out of the army of seeking civil employment and basically treating my fellow employees as the same way as I treated my military brethren, and where you put total trust and as a denouncing to them and unfortunately realising the hard way that they’re not in it for to help everyone else, they were looking at themselves, so you just - yeah, basically that they they’ll fuck you any chance they can, you know which then I suppose leads to that ex-military total lack of trust to civilians.”*

The comment by Jay is significant in the sense of how his identity has been shaped by his military experience. The club is the only safe space as he cannot relate to “outsiders.” The club is unique and the only familiar space, this is where and how they interact in terms of peer support.

### 7.3 Significance of trust in the VMC

The shared understanding of a VMC member as being trustworthy is markedly different from the typical sense of the experience and understanding of trustworthiness that civilians might hold. Indeed, Fukuyama (1995) argues that 'trust arises when a community shares a set of moral values in such a way as to create expectation of regular and honest behaviour' (Fukuyama, 1995, p. 153). This general kind of trust is, for example, that I can trust you will not steal from me and be truthful or you will carry out a set task as expected. For the VMC members, the meaning of trust is more significant than Fukuyama states. The trust that exists between them, is a deep bond and key to the success of the shared peer support. It is here that homosociality is also considered, females are not permitted to join the VMC; this, on the face of it strengthens the bond between the members. However, they still must exist in the world around them. They may have partners, families, and other people they must interact with. The strengthening of the bond within the club is where they can 'be themselves' but this has complex implications and it makes connection with others difficult, including help seeking. Wadham (2013 as cited in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick 1985, p. 25), in their examination of the concept of Brotherhood among military veterans, argues that along the continuum of male sexuality, from homosexuality to heterosexuality, there is a separation, a break. The separation makes it appropriate, indeed essential, for men to form close ties - homosocial nods - without straying into gay love and without diffusing male power that forms the basis of patriarchal culture (Wadham, 2013).

Throughout the participant interviews I noted differences in voice tones, all clearly displaying their conviction of their belief in the meaning of their words as they were spoken and thoughtfully discussed. There was a genuine deep emotion from several of the men, eyes slightly filling with tears as they thought about what trust between the men in the club means to them. A few commented with a firm tone, hand gesturing casting away doubt, this conveying no hesitation or question of a sacred bond existing on the foundational basis of trust:

*H: "knowing that you can rely on a brother that if no matter where, what, when you need something they're there, you don't get that in social clubs. The only place I've felt any kind of respect and help is from the VMC."*

Bear discusses social clubs and how they differ from the VMC. He states he can rely on a brother, and you do not get that in other social clubs. He also commented about other organisations that are designed to support veterans such as the Returned Soldiers League (RSL) and Soldier On (Soldier On

Australia, 2024), (Soldier On; is an organisation providing a range of support services for health and wellbeing, programs for learning and education and activities for connection to a community of ex-serving Defence personnel and their families across Australia):

**Bear:** *“RSL can go eat a bag of dicks. The RSL as far as and this is my own personal opinion, the RSL has gone outside of what they were intended for, and it has become a money-making concern. It’s all on keeping the bar open, it’s in Sydney, Victoria, sorry New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland it’s all about the coin with pokie machines and stuff like that. Any civilian can go in there, sign in, they’re fine. Soldier-On started off with the right intent and again now it’s just become a money-making scheme, there’s more people employed than they do help, if you know what I mean. So that kind of respect has gone as well. The soldier on thing, I don’t say that their intent was not good, however like they rang me not long before my determination came through and at that stage, I just wasn’t in the right frame of mind to be involved with them. I told them to by all means please get back to me in six months and when things have settled down. They’ve never contacted me again. And the way it came across is that they were out there just to get the number to do this specific course so they could get paid by the government because they’ve maxed out with their courses, government pays them. And it sounded like to me that they were low on numbers, and they needed somebody to fucking come and because I wasn’t in the right frame I said “No” ipso facto they never rang me again.”*

Bear was disappointed by the actions of the organisation Soldier On, clearly feeling there was a lack of care. This lack of follow-up and sustained connection engender the feeling of being disrespected. Whereas, with the VMC the network of members ensures that brothers are checked on and regularly contacted:

**Bear:** *“that’s how the VMC has been able to attribute it to that structure, that brotherhood, that sense of belonging. That’s where that came from. And I ... through myself a lot, I was in the clinic, I know I’m going off subject, but I was in the clinic and certain friends that would contact me, but the VMC were contacting me, all the guys for south, I was in southwest New South Wales at the time. And all the boys, I mean they’re all over in New South Wales but there wasn’t a day that, sorry the first two weeks I was there I have no fucking idea who called me or anything, I was that drugged up. I had no idea who was calling me. But after I started coming down it was just guys ringing me up every day, emails, Facebook. It was, I spent most of my days in the clinic just replying to guys that were contacting me.”*

**Skelly:** *“if you give your word, you give your word. Down here if you give your word that’s it you know. Thing is because if you, if people lose that trust with you then yeah you want to be that person that people can confide in.”*

The above statement by Skelly is quite profound; if you give your word, you give your word. If you break your word, then you cannot be trusted, and people (club members) will not confide in you. It is an absolute non-negotiable aspect of being in the brotherhood. There is a further dimension, the fact that being able to confide is without fear of judgement or rejection. Even when a mistake is made the brotherhood will support and stick by each other. This is articulated well by Raider:

**Raider:** *"They'll look after you, even if you've done something wrong. They'll clip you over the back of the head later, but at least when you – you know, if you make a stupid decision, they'll stick by you with the decision or help you get out of it, and they'll clip you up the back of the head and say, you're a fucking idiot ... yeah."*

Jay conveys his deep reliance on trust, it literally was a matter of life and death. He believes that the closest feeling of this is by being in the VMC:

**Jay:** *"Because you know like there's nothing, there's nothing else in this world where you rely on somebody next to you to support you in the sense of remaining alive, yeah you know what I mean like you know also might be a support network, it's, I've never come across anything other, being in a war zone where you've actually trusting the guy for your life. I've been out now I think four years and I struggle every single day. You know we lay our life down we open up to the point where we're quite vulnerable knowing that the guy next to ya is gonna have you back, and then when you're out no one's no one cares about you, no one gives a shit. Yeah yeah, it would never be the same you'll never get that same sort of bond that you had in a war zone, like not to talk stories but you know when things go south overseas that level of reliance and trust that you've got in the guy next to you, and thankfully you never have to, but you don't like you know until that time comes I guess, you don't, you're close, you love them as brothers you know but there's that special thing that that he's all survived that one, one incident or multiple incidents I guess. But as close as you can possibly get to that experience is yeah, it's what, what I feel being part of the club. Yep."*

It was evident that being there for each other, and the giving of their word is of utmost importance. One participant explained if he dislikes a person this should not be the reason that they cannot be a prospect of the club or become a member. However, if he does not trust him, then he will say he cannot join. The validation of the bond between them is the most important aspect of their relationship. Whereas in civilian society one would not expect to accept and socialise with a person they did not like:

**Bob:** *"People, they've got to be able to trust ya, but yeah realistically if you don't trust someone, they're not good. "Yeah, join the club," I said I would, he should do that, I'd have no problem with - do I particularly like him? Not really. That shouldn't be the basis of me saying no, like he should ... but if I don't trust him then the answer is no, I can like him and not trust him."*

**Marksy:** *"You find the people that you can lean on and stuff, so it's - I wouldn't say a whole club as a - as a general ... supportive but there is always a handful of guys you know that you can rely on and it's always you can rely on 24/7. It's not just Friday night."*

**Nugget:** *"They wouldn't, they wouldn't mislead you in anyway if they thought they had the answer to your problem that they'd been through, they'd tell you how they got over it and who they went and saw. And so, in that respect we don't sort of knock around together seven days a week or something, which is probably good that we don't."*

**Kel:** *"I trust them with, with anything, you know, most of them. There's - you get, you get bad eggs in every, in everything, you know, but most of the guys in the club I'd trust with anything, you know."*

**Bear:** *"if there is somebody you don't trust in the club, then they shouldn't have been in it so or you shouldn't have voted for them to come in."*

The next quote from Raider discusses how he sees trust as the key thing. He adds at the end of the sentence that, he can relax in the group as he is not in danger because there are many members:

**Raider:** *"I enjoy the rides with people I trust. All got each other's back. We look after each other. That trust is a key thing that I've seen, and I've read lots of papers on different studies that have been conducted, and that's like one of the top priorities that's spoken about, it's having that trust. But if I - I don't go out anymore unless I'm with the club guys, because I know that we've all - everybody's got each other's back, you know, and that's - so, I can go out and I can relax. You can relax when you're in that group, and it doesn't matter whether you're at a pub or someone's house, it's just, yeah, it's just you can relax around people like that, because there's that many, you know, you're not in danger."*

Raider's comment is significant in terms of the concept of danger and how the club mitigates the feeling of danger or a sense of a space that is safe. Because they trust one another and they are together they are safe.

## **7.4 Meaning of trust: Historical club context**

As discussed in the preface and introduction, the process to join the club and the club origins are integral to the shared construction of trust. The meaning of trust is multifactorial with the need for stepped layers over several months in which they must prove themselves trustworthy to become a member of the club (Figure 19).

In order to provide a sense of the members' perspective of the vetting and joining process, this section is written in the second person:

Step 1: as a potential invitee and potential member you are at baseline; you possibly can be trusted because you are a defence approved person (either a veteran or currently serving). If you meet the VMC's definition of a veteran, we will provide you with opportunity to prove we can trust you more. However, just because there seems to be a shared experience within the military purely because you were deployed in an active war or conflict does not mean you will be invited to join our club. For example, females cannot join even if they have this shared experience of serving in a war and have been awarded service medals.

Moving to the next step (step 2), assuming all is going well, you now will be invited as a prospect, the members of the club believe you are trustworthy enough, but only time will tell, and this will take at least a year as more evidence is required about your character and if you can share our cultural values. At the last step (step 3) assuming all has gone well, you have passed the lengthy initiation process and are invited to be a fully patched member. As such, the expectation is reciprocal, trust is 100%, we all uphold the club's rules and our values. And now as part of the club, you understand and honour the history; we now trust you and give you the privilege to wear Casper and the MC Cube (three-piece patch).

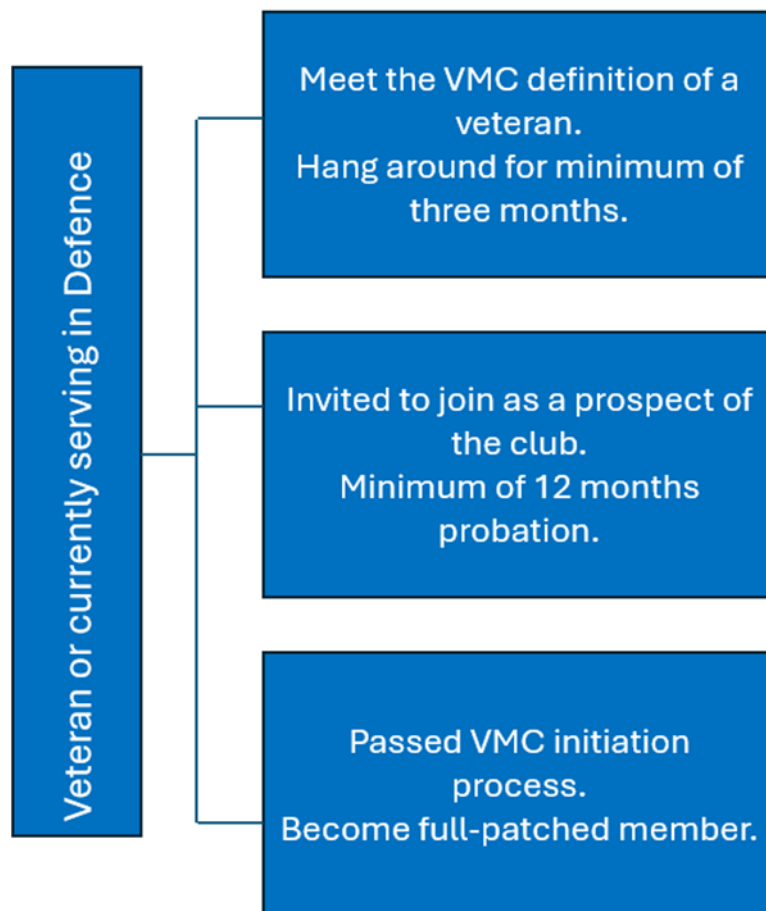
Gender is crucial to the way they structure and construct their patriarchal bond, reinforcing patriarchal norms and power dynamics within the group. While this is not standard phrase across all disciplines, a patriarchal system typically refers to a connection-emotional, social or structurally formed within or because of a patriarchal system. This implies that their peer support cannot take place in the presence of females, even if a female has served in the same war and conditions that meet the assumed definition of life threatening and require the same reliance. This demonstrates that there is a shift of acceptance from the situation and trauma based to brotherhood. Female



presence would constrain and change their sense of safe space. They would not want to modify their behaviour to what would be deemed 'acceptable' to females.

**Figure 19**

*Process and Timeline to Become a VMC Patched Member*



The VMC club provides an unconditional safe space for its members, which has been constructed because of the history of the Vietnam veterans' negative experience when they returned to their nation from the war. There was a dislocation from society that ultimately forced the veterans to create their own attachment to each other. These attachments then provide a trusted supportive culture and acceptance of each other. The interviewed participants for this study were unwavering on strict eligibility and processes to join the club. Govier (1998 as cited in Ward et al., 2014) cites Gandhi's philosophy, which was based on a person being 'trustworthy unless they proved otherwise' – if a stranger has not shown themselves to be untrustworthy, we should trust them. The reverse of

this would seem to be the case with the VMC; rather, the veteran needs to prove themselves not only trustworthy, but worthy to wear the colours of the club:

**Bear:** *"If you are wearing a Casper then obviously you've been determined as a decent dude, if you know what I mean. I'm not saying everyone is but from my point of view, how can you say it, it's ....trust it's not ..., if you know what I mean. So, because you have to have earned Casper it kind of says that you've earned that trust, if you know what I mean."*

**Pablo:** *"There's lots of arguments about making the club more accessible to people, but then the flip-side is that that then, I guess takes away from it being that core group of people that have truly experienced the same sorts of things that you've experienced, and then it would, I guess erode that real tight circle of security and trust in the guys around you that you develop because of the way that it runs. So, on one hand it would make it bigger, but not necessarily better, so that those people are, I think overlooking what the true essence of the club is, it's not – the essence isn't to be the biggest military club, and grow beyond our britches, it's to be there to support veterans who have deployed to war, basically. Any other, a mutual like for motorbikes."*

## **7.5 The essence of the club**

Pablo discussed the real tight circle of security and trust and the true essence of the club, which upon reflection was not my first impressions and understanding of the club and its members. My initial thoughts about the members were that these are a group of men who deemed themselves above other social motorcycle clubs, elitists with a tough exterior to ward off outsiders, and closed to the ordinary veteran. However, this evidently is not the full picture. There is a deep history, the basis of which is respect and about protecting each other, being there for a brother especially if the nation turns its back. The contemporary VMC members vicariously experience the rejection of the Vietnam veterans 50 years on, and to this day promise to protect that heritage. As stated by the participant Bear, *"And because if you understand the history of it and what the boys did to get it. Then once you've delivered it, once you've been given it yourself, then you own that heritage as well."*

Trust being regarded as an essential component in any group is not a new phenomenon. My prior understanding of the VMC influenced my interpretation of the meaning of trust to the members. Through this study my understanding of this concept for this group changed. Instinctively, when

interviewing the participants and analysing the data, I felt that there was more to the identified theme of trust than I had first recognised. Govier (1998 cited in Ward et al., 2014) argues philosophically for trust to be the default position, “The fact that things seem all right” or that we “Have a good feeling about that person” is simply not an adequate basis for trust. I was not convinced that the essence of the trust between the members of the VMC was solely based on the prerequisites to join and the initiation process. Through the process of reflection, the concept of neuroception became a possible explanation for the depth and uniqueness of the sense of trust between members of the VMC.

Neuroception describes how neural circuits distinguish whether situations or people are safe, dangerous or indeed life threatening. Taken from Polyvagal Theory, neuroception explains a model of social engagement. It gives an understanding of the behavioural and neurophysiological mechanisms that allow individuals to reduce psychological and physical distance (Porges, 2003). Porges (2003) states this model of social engagement emphasises phylogeny (the evolutionary history of a kind of organism or a genetically related group of organisms) as an organising principle. There are well-defined neural circuits to support social engagement behaviours and the defensive strategies of flight, fight, or freeze (flight, fight, or freeze; a process where the neurotransmitter and hormone norepinephrine has been triggered in the body to increase alertness and arousal). These circuits are not dependent on conscious awareness, the nervous system evaluates risk in the environment and regulates the expression of adaptive behaviour to match the neuroception of a safe, dangerous, or life-threatening environment. The fear and freeze response are mediated through the co-opting of the neural circuit that regulates this defensive / survival behaviour and includes the involvement of oxytocin (OT), a neuropeptide in mammals involved in the formation of social bonds. Oxytocin (OT) has been shown to modulate behaviour and brain activity and plays a significant part in the way social bonds are formed in men (Warrener et al., 2021).

An all-male veteran study by Warrener et al. (2021) looked at OT levels of veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. During the war the veterans reported they had formed very strong bonds with their comrades. Interestingly, their distress was separation-induced upon transitioning home. The study concluded that this does not seem to be the most important contributor to negative impacts on their mental health. Rather, their mental health is reliant more so on their broader connection to peers and society. This implies that connectedness is key and not necessarily being totally reliant on brotherhood. The veterans in that study most often listed “loss of brotherhood” as their most challenging experience to cope with since returning home from war.

Revisiting the demographic data from this VMC study, 82% of participants were in the army with jobs that required hypervigilance to carry out their role:

**Pottsy:** *“I was a, my job role was a high-risk searcher, and being over in Iraq and Afghanistan, the risk of IED (Improvised Explosive Device) strike and mines and unconventional warfare was really the biggest threat. So, we, it's called the threat assessment, so it's, now I won't tell you what it is exactly because I spent probably three years in therapy unlearning it, cos yeah that was a lot of, hypervigilance was one of my really big stresses with PTSD. But yeah, it's a series of questions that you ask yourself, but like all the time, to the point that it just becomes second nature that it's going on, and it's all about like your, where would I put a device, ... this and that, blah, blah, blah, yeah. So, my job, really it wasn't so much getting, it wasn't to find IED's or mines, it was to get the convoy or the foot patrol from point A to B without hitting one, so.”*

Upon hearing the statement above, a scene from the film *The Bourne Identity* starring Matt Damon came to mind. Filmed in a bar, the character Jason Bourne played by Matt Damon, is confused by his extraordinary ability to detect danger, all exits and to identify license plates of cars. In the scenario Jason Bourne has amnesia and no idea who he is or why he can scan his environment with such accuracy without being consciously aware of why or how this is possible (Liman., 2002).

For the members of the VMC, who were highly trained to be hypervigilant of threats and danger from outsiders, turning off visceral feelings would be tremendously difficult. Ward et al. (2014) describes a soldier as a kind of palimpsest, something altered but still bearing visible traces of its earlier form; he is from civil society, and his civilian identity remains a marker of what came before his militarisation. I do not believe these veterans can ever return to the person they were before their military war experience.

#### **7.5.1 Civilian life: I am not the person I once was**

During the interviews I asked each participant about their transition back to civilian life, and if people around them noticed a difference in them, from the person they were prior to entering the military:

**Pottsy:** *“Oh absolutely, yeah, I lost a lot of mates as well, yeah, my circle got pretty small. And that was everything from, you know people constantly, well not constantly but trying to catch up with me and then I find an excuse just, you know on the day when I'm meant to be leaving, and it's oh look this has*

*happened or that's happened, or yeah, just major avoidance problem. So over time sort of friends just fell away really."*

**Nugget:** *"Yeah and now I'm tense, I didn't know it, but when were at smoko and lunch at work, I always used to sit in this same place. And I didn't think anything of it, know anything about it, why I did it or anything. But I always sit right on the corner. And when I went and went and applied for TPI (Totally and Permanently Incapacitated payments) and all that jazz I, I went and saw this psychiatrist, I think he was a psychiatrist. And he said, "Do you sit with your back to the wall, or do you keep your eye on the front door or anything?" And I said, "I always sit with me back to the wall." This is in 1973 or '4 some probably later than that, it might have been 1980. But yeah 10 years later and I didn't know I did it, I didn't know I was doing it. But then he told me why I was doing it and I; I didn't know. So, I suppose there was subtle changes in my behaviour I didn't know why, I know that I'm a bit nervy with noises that I don't know about."*

**Marksy:** *"Family, I think my views of the world changed a lot. I was probably more in line with their views before I went, so certain matters become pretty heated at times. So, you don't feel like you can really be yourself around certain people in life with family. So, you sort of avoid – you avoid topics basically, yeah topics, political topics, yeah, anything that's going on in the world. People's, I guess, opinions they change as their life gets – as their lives evolve. Mine definitely changed after Afghanistan and I've noticed their opinions will evolve and – yeah – to get along there has been times where it's just they won't even talk to me about certain things anymore either because they don't want to ... the discussion, they don't want to – you know. So, yeah, it's awkward sometimes."*

Each participant shared their individual experience with the transitioning process from the military and 'fitting' into civilian life. For Pottsy he withdrew and avoided contact with friends, making excuses for not being available. Nugget was unaware for 10 years post his military service that his behaviour had changed. Changes such as sitting in the same corner spot on work breaks or with his back to a wall to keep an eye the door. He also feels nervy and tense when he hears noises he does not recognise. Keeping in mind this is 50 years on from his service, the effects of war haunt him to this day. For Marksy, he stated his world views changed, he believes he cannot be himself around family and certain people. Conversations are monitored and certain topics avoided as they can become 'heated,' so he too avoids people and conversations, and feels awkward. These narratives indicate that the members struggle or completely avoid being authentic in society or the civilian world. However, in the club the 'rules of engagement' are more suited to the person their military experience has changed them to be. The VMC members do not feel pressure to be 'normal' or feel the need to avoid topics of conversation, they are accepted, recognised, and understood. Their

behaviour not questioned, blinked at, or raised because they are not judged and are in a trusted environment.

Some of the behaviours described by the participants align with symptomology of PTSD (*Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM-V-TR, 2022*) this will be discussed in Chapter 10 which focuses on peer support protective factors for mental health.

## **7.6 The club house: Home away from home**

For this group, it appears that trust is fundamental to their fratriarchal bonding, coupled with a deep respect for what the club stands for, the history of being shunned by civilian society and accepted by the one-percent clubs such as the Hells Angels (HAs). These aspects stand out as being among the most important factors in their culture. Fratriarchal bonding provides the foundation of protective factors for their mental health.

Chapters are sub-groups who are all members of the VMC but are specific to a location within a state or territory. For example, in South Australia the VMC have four chapters, South Australia chapter, Adelaide chapter, Mid-North chapter and Adelaide Hills chapter. Some of the VMC chapters have a physical club house; a meeting place that is tangible, normally decorated with relics from the army and other military themed wall hangings. This offers an almost de-facto home. In the pictures below, the importance of the connection to the military is evident. In that chapter's club house, which is contained within a large lockup garage on an industrial estate, there is a bedroom with two sets of bunk beds, toilets and shower, full kitchen, playroom for the members' children with television and video games. There is also a fully licenced bar called Casper's Bar which is usually run by the assigned bar manager (a club prospect), heaters, a stage for bands to play during social nights and board meeting rooms upstairs for the officer bearers who hold executive positions on the board of management (Figure 20).

I conducted five of the interviews upstairs in one of the club house meeting rooms. As I entered, I noticed a large timber boardroom table, approximately ten feet long by four feet wide. In the centre of the table was a carved image of Casper and the lettering VMC. One of the participants told me it had been hand made by a couple of the members. I then noticed hanging on three of the walls, several leather vests (colours) covered patches belonging to other motorcycle clubs. The vests were

all different, they clearly did not belong to any of the VMC patched members. As I drew closer, I could see they were hanging upside down. This looked intriguing and I wanted to know more about them. They seemed out of place, as I was figuring out if they were hanging upside down intentionally or if it was a mistake. I asked the participant why they were hanging that way, ensuring I did not have a tone in my voice that signalled I thought they looked strange, more just curious. I was conscious not to offend in any way, given that it was a privilege to be allowed in the clubhouse conducting an interview. Not only am I an outsider, but I am also female accessing a boardroom strictly held for the office bearers of the club. He glanced at the vests, cleared his throat and with a slight inward huff stated, *“Them, oh they have all been literally taken off the backs of people who should not have been wearing them.”* By the tone in his voice, I got the feeling I should leave it at that and not ask about any of the circumstances that led to the removal of the vests. It seemed obvious he would not have explained anyway.

The clubhouse I visited seems to be a haven that conveys a sense of belonging, a home away from home. High on the wall is an image of Casper with the lettering V F F V – Veterans Forever, Forever Veterans. All patched members have a set of keys to the clubhouse; there is no question that they are trusted. No member would take from the bar or misuse the premises. This is a substantial difference from any other members-based group I have come across. For example, the Returned Soldiers League (RSL) have bars but usually with a sign for staff only areas, and certainly no member would have keys to the premises or go behind the bar and serve themselves a drink or have access to the cash register and stock. The last item I remember taking notice of was a large timber board in the shape of a coffin (Figure 21). I stopped to admire and read the plaques either side. These were the names of the club’s members who have died; names engraved that are honoured every Friday night when the members play a recording of the last post and The Ode (Binyon, 2023) is recited at the end of the evening.

*“They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:  
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.  
At the going down of the sun and in the morning  
We will remember them.”*

The Ode by (Robert) Laurence Binyon (1869-1943).

**Figure 20**

*Inside a VMC Club House*



**Figure 21**

*VMC Club House Honour Board*



The author took the photographs permission was given to use.

The members of the VVMC & VMC Gippsland chapter in Victoria have had a club house since 2004. Originally in Rosedale. In 2006 a new club house was formed in a disused and dilapidated hall in Longwarry North in Victoria. The State Government Department, local council, and local residents granted a permit and license to use the premises. They offer a drop-in-centre and pension office for all veterans and their families. They have raised \$24,500 for children's cancer charities and donated to Country Fire Association and State Emergency Services (VVMC/VMC, 2024b). Not all VMC



chapters have a club house as leasing premises comes at a high cost. Membership fees, club nights and profits from the bar pay for the running costs of clubhouses. For other chapters, they must make do with public places. Depending on what they are doing for example, catching up and going for a ride, a usual meeting place is a carpark or a petrol station. Sometimes, the members will organise a meal in a public house, but this can be met with hostility from publicans. On August 26, 2023, two VMC members went to a local public house in South Australia. The members wanted to have something to eat and, in their words, “*A mental health check-in.*” However, they were refused service and asked to leave, and the police were called to have them removed (Veterans Motorcycle Club South Australia Chapter, 2023). The two members spoke out on social media conveying their feelings, once again veterans feeling the brunt of rejection by society.

Apparently, the VMC members were asked to leave the public house because they did not meet the dress code. The public message must be confusing, on one hand members are greeted by the public with “thank you for your service” and on the other hand they can be told they are not welcome in some public places, because of their patched vest. Considering the vest displays their service ribbon (cloth representation of awarded medals) and knowing the process and the honour they feel to be able to wear the vest it would appear to be a deep insult and disrespectful to not just the individuals but to the whole fraternity past and present.

***Bear:** “No and so that’s why I suppose a worry for me is that as the years go on, those certain little things that the club is around, similar to the RSL I suppose, is that that’s slowly eroded. I mean you only have to look at [name] that it’s all about the club and how much piss they drink or sell over the pub and keep the clubhouse afloat. I’d be quite happy not have ever having a fucking club house or running a fucking club house purely because all that does is it takes away what the real reason that you’re in the club for. It’s got nothing to do with coin, it’s got nothing to do with what you ride, it’s got nothing to do with any kind of fucking politics. Just as soon as you get these boys into fucking politics, the, I kid you not they grow a vagina every time they start being a bunch of whinging little bitches and we’re going for fucks sake, just get on the bike and ride, just fuck off.”*

## **7.7 Conclusion**

This chapter sought to convey the enormity of the theme of trust that emerged from the data. Reflecting on my role as a female researcher, my gender may have softened certain interactions or, conversely, rendered some topics inaccessible. Either way, it contributed to the relational dynamic through which these narratives were co-constructed. My gender and cultural positioning did not

diminish the richness of the data, rather, it deepened my responsibility as a researcher to interpret with care and integrity. Listening and interpreting their deeply emotive stories, I presented these narratives with an appreciation of the context in which they were shared, and with respect for the trust that was extended to me.

Interpreting the members' experiences brought the true essence of the meaning of trust for the VMC members. Emphasising the importance of the fraternal bond they share; it was apparent that this is key to providing feelings of security. However, there is more to this than feeling safe; there is a traumatic history of the nation's rejection of the Vietnam veterans that is present and lived out vicariously by these contemporary veterans. There is a deep respect for each other, and they not only merely trust each other, but they rely on each other almost daily. These are contributing factors that protect their mental health and general wellbeing. The clubhouse environment clearly shows how they can share a welcoming home away from home. Trust was not necessarily or simply about safety in numbers, or threats from the outside. It is about knowing they respect and rely on their brother 24 hours a day seven days a week.

Furthermore, neuroception cannot be overlooked as this provides an interesting addition that must be considered as an important mechanism that bonds this group. Instant recognition of the club colours identify that this person can be trusted, a sharing symbolism through a patched vest. It is to the symbolic representation of the iconic grinning skull with the Australian military slouch hat – *Casper*, and the three-piece patch - I now turn.

## 8 CHAPTER: SYMBOLIC SHIELDS: CASPER, TATTOOS AND HARLEY DAVIDSONS



Poem removed due to copyright restrictions. Permission was granted to use the copyrighted image of Casper and VMC Colours.

### 8.1 Chapter preface

This chapter explores the relevance and significance of symbols worn and used by the members of the Veterans Motorcycle Club (VMC). As identified in Chapter 7 that focused on trust, essential to trust being given and received between members and chapters of the club is the ability to recognise fellow members. This is achieved by the patched vests they wear, tattoos that adorn their body and the brand of motorcycles they ride - Harley Davidsons. Trust has been identified as a central theme of the clubs' fraternal bonding. The clubs' visual symbols provide immediate recognition of who is a member, thus instant trust is assured. Due to the strict joining criteria and lengthy initiation process before becoming a full patched member the club's ethos is 'I trust you unless you prove otherwise,' rather than, 'you prove you are trustworthy.'

The focus of this chapter is the three-piece back patch, the embodied image of 'Casper', and how this symbolic image contributes to a sense of brotherhood, belonging, and cultural connectedness. These are all aspects that contribute to the foundations of providing protective factors for their mental health and general wellbeing. Their support is unique for this sub-cultural closed group. Recognition of patches (Casper) is a symbolism that embeds membership and their sense of belonging, creating a peer connectedness and providing protection for general wellbeing and mental health. It also serves to keep those who are 'outsiders' - out.

The history and importance of Casper's image and the unique rules and regulations surrounding gaining and wearing the club's patches are explored. The participants spoke extensively of their experience of 'earning' and having the right to wear the club's three-piece patch (top and bottom rocker, Casper, and MC (Motorcycle Club) cube). Furthermore, I discuss what the symbolic image of

Casper and the three-piece patch means to them, and how they experience wearing the patches and being a full patched member of the club.

The symbolic emblem of Casper embodies the values of brotherhood, belonging and cultural connectedness. Drawing from Ricoeur (1984) concept of narrative identity, I understood that the meanings participants assigned to their patches, and their sense of belonging within the club, are deeply individual and contextual. Ultimately, my research position served both as a limitation and a strength. It shaped the data I collected and the interpretations I made, but it also enabled me to approach the participants' stories with a heightened sense of awareness and reflexivity. By acknowledging and reflecting upon my positionality, I aimed to honour the participants' narratives while ensuring the integrity and depth of the analysis.

The participants' narratives heavily emphasised how the history of Casper unites the members with a shared purpose in the value of being deemed worthy and the process of earning the right to wear the club's patches. This process also provides the members with a sense of belonging, social connectedness, and brotherhood. These are all factors that have been shown to provide protection and alleviate symptoms of depression, anxiety and PTSD and provide positive mental health outcomes (Beehler et al., 2021; Boss, 2021b; Cruwys et al., 2013). Their narratives also explored other ways the members displayed images of Casper and related symbols of the club and the military. The connection with this seminal image was displayed through their tattoos, that come in a range of many shapes and sizes, all showing affiliation to the club, military and some that are scenes of the service that tell a story of their past that they do not want to forget. Lastly, I describe how the motorcycle brand Harley Davidson is the preferred motorcycle for the members of the VMC. Although the Harley Davidson motorcycle has a well-recognised cultural image of the 'one-percenter motorcycle clubs,' members of the VMC as a subculture are distinctly different both in values and purpose (Gryder, 2023; Yates, 1999). This difference also delineates this group from other social motorcycle clubs. They are a unique club, a group of men with a shared purpose of being there to support a brother and who are absolutely committed to the club and its welfare. They are shared outcasts from society but accepted by 1% clubs through the historical link to the Vietnam Veterans. They needed a haven when they came back from war. The more recent conflicts are not clear cut or delineated (no clear enemy or purpose to the conflict) and the culture of the military continues to contribute to the veterans' sense of not being accepted for their service.

Although this chapter does not focus on the detailed history of insignias of the one-percenter motorcycle clubs, it is relevant to note the connection and the permission granted to the VMC to use the three-piece patch. Drewery (2003) provides an interesting article on the cultural identity of motorcycle clubs and refers to the Australian outlaw clubs, namely the Hells Angels. There was an exception made allowing only the Vietnam Veterans Motorcycle Club (V.V.M.C.) now extended to include the VMC, to wear a three-piece patch (some references call it a four-piece patch, however the MC cube is considered to be part of the centre image making it a three-piece) (Drewery, 2003, p. 32).

## **8.2 Helping health professionals' understanding**

Knowledge of motorcycle clubs is important for health professionals who may come in contact with members of a club (Anand et al., 2014). As discussed in the dedication section of this thesis, when Ryan Foster (Fozzy) died in a motorcycle accident in 2023, it is believed that his VMC vest was removed by hospital staff and destroyed. To the family and members of the club this was a significant blow on top of their tragic loss, and it is assumed that whoever decided to destroy the vest had no comprehension of its significance. It is understood by the family, friends and the club that multiple medical professionals may have needed to access Fozzy's chest cavity to provide emergency care. However, regardless of the vest's condition (ripped, blood soaked or cut away from the body) the vest would have been cleaned and/or repaired and returned to the family or followed Fozzy's wishes of where the vest was to be laid. The VMC members were left feeling bitter and resentful that the vest was destroyed. To them it was disrespectful, and they felt marginalised. These actions potentially could adversely affect their process of grief and healing. During the coming days and weeks of Fozzy passing I personally heard several conversations among the members about his vest being 'gone.' I saw the looks on the members' faces, clearly shocked, disbelieving and hurt, most saying "but why?" The lack of understanding by the medical staff and enforcement personnel reinforces and perpetuates the VMC members' beliefs that they do not align with civilians and society does not understand or respect them.

Understanding the significance of their colours is another reason that this research offers insight into the world of this closed group of veterans. If our health and medical professionals begin to understand the culture of motorcycle clubs, and particularly those who are veterans or serving Defence Force personnel, then interventions and treatment programs will be more effective. To be

able to address the different health needs of men, you need to understand the values that underpin the cohort you are trying to assist (McCormick et al., 2019; Reddin, 2003). There is an article in the Western Journal of Emergency Medicine by Anand et al. (2014), titled “Outlaw motorcycle gangs: aspects of the one-percent culture for emergency department personnel to consider.” Their paper discusses one-percent motorcycle clubs, their hierarchy and most importantly their insignias. As previously stated, the VMC are not an outlaw motorcycle gang (OMG) or one-percenters motorcyclists, but there are distinct similarities in their culture and especially as it relates to the ethos of the insignias of these clubs. Anand et al. (2014, p. 525) writes:

A biker’s colors are integral to his identity as a member of the club. Should a biker’s colors be removed during the course of his care in the ED, physicians and staff would be prudent to treat his colors with respect or otherwise risk a hostile reaction from the biker and his associates. Knowledge of color schemes is consequently more important for recognizing members of OMGs. Outlaw bikers should always be treated with respect, regardless of whether their behavior warrants it. If an injured member arrives at the ED, other members of his club will often arrive to protect him or inquire into his welfare. OMGs are an amalgam of a tribe, family, and corporation, and an ethos of “one on all, all on one” prevails, meaning that to assault or injure one member is to attack the entire club, and restoring the club’s honor is a sacred duty to which all members are bound. Knowledge of the OMG’s symbols, values, and hierarchy can help ED personnel understand the mentality of the outlaw biker.

This study explores the in-depth meaning of symbols and colours and can aid future mental health intervention programs for specific veterans of war, especially those such as the VMC who have a culture that replicates aspects of the one-percenter motorcycle clubs. As discussed in the literature review (Chapter 3), there has not previously been any research on any Australian social military motorcycle groups or the VMC. The VMC are the only group permitted to wear a three-piece patch as sanctioned by the dominant one-percent motorcycle club of that state or territory (e.g. Hells Angels, Comancheros or Rebels).

### **8.3 Symbolic Images**

Images and designs are often symbolic of something about a country, society, or sub-cultural group. For example, the Australian flag has the Union flag in the upper left corner to represent Australia’s history as six British colonies and its loyalty to the British Empire. In the lower right corner is a large seven-pointed star representing the federation of the states and territories and five smaller stars

that represent the Southern Cross constellation (Albisson, 2016). Clothing is also used to display connection to a group or used as a symbol of power or self-protection; this is not a new concept or research area. For example, in ancient Rome, only senators could wear garments dyed with Tyrian purple. Their clothing indicated their control over all areas of public life. Knights of the Middle Ages, who were considered elite soldiers, when in battles, wore a coat of mail called a hauberk (metal rings linked tightly together to protect their body) helmets and suits of armour for protection and to convey power to the enemy. Of all the ways in which design can influence the way we think, the only one to have been acknowledged widely has been its use to express the identity of organisations. From modern corporations, armies, navies and religious groups to historical empires, all have conveyed ideas by using clothing design of what they are like to both insiders and to the outside world (Drewery, 2003 as cited in Forty, 1986, p.222). Clothing behaviour, however, is an understudied research area in social psychology (Gruber et al., 2023). Gruber et al. (2023) report that clothing may offer symbolic protection from negative psychological consequences via in-group prototypical clothing. Objects and environments can be used by people to construct a sense of who they are, to express their sense of identity (Drewery, 2003).

During Kel's interview (a veteran of the Vietnam war) he spoke with a real sense of pride. Indicating with his right hand over his left shoulder he patted, referencing the patch on his back (Casper), then slipping his hand down to his left side of his chest, covering his heart then mentioned medals. Returning his hand to his shoulder, all this in quick succession. Kel's gestures clearly indicated a strong linkage between his military service and connectedness to the VMC. This really set the stage for my understanding of the powerfulness and meaningfulness of the club:

*Kel: "We've found brothers that we could, could talk to each other, you know, so that's why we wear a patch upon our back. Medals, medals on our chest and patches on our back."*

## **8.4 Ghost soldiers - Casper**

Casper is the VMC's, and in some states, Vietnam Veterans Motorcycle Club (V.V.M.C) and VMC, copyrighted image. It is the emblem that sits as the centre piece of the VMC three-piece patch. The image designed by Sandy Harbutt depicting a grinning skull with the Australian military slouch hat. The introduction chapter of this thesis page 19 offers a detailed account of the history and significance of the film *Stone* to the V.V.M.C. and VMC.

The rights to using the image of Casper extended to the VMC in the 1990's when the club was renamed due to the dwindling number of Vietnam veterans (Harbutt, 1974). How the name Casper was given to the VMC image is not known. Casper the Friendly Ghost is a fictional cartoon character who is a translucent ghost. He is pleasant and personable but often criticised by three wicked uncles. The character was created by Seymour Reit (1918 – 2001). Reit served in WWII, and later in Europe after D-Day (Holland, 2001). During my research I was unable to find any links between Reit and motorcycle clubs. However, I can't help but romanticise the fact Reit was himself a veteran of war; perhaps his creation of Casper the translucent ghost, who is unjustly criticised, resembles the experience of returning veterans. The name is an ideal metaphor for the returned veterans who were in many ways ghosts to society, transparent soldiers whose pain and suffering was ignored. In his book titled *Leather Bred Heroes* published in 2000, Pigot writes solely about the V.V.M.C. His book was a tribute to the veterans' achievements. He provides a description about the image of Casper wearing the Australian military slouch hat. Pigot gives his account of how Casper portrays the Australian diggers' commitment to the nation. 25 years on, the description remains relevant, accurate and associated with shared meaning:

The slouched hat has great resonance in Australian society. It signifies Anzac and the ill-fated Gallipoli campaign of World War I, as well as the armed forces in general. In popular imagination the slouch hat stands for physical endurance, courage, heroism, and commitment to the nation. Worn by a grinning skull, the slouch hat acquires a new and contentious meaning-the grim reality of war as well as the soldiers' willingness to lay down their lives is spelled out with great clarity. As a memorialising symbol the V.V.M.C. colours make it clear that pain, anguish and death are as much a part of war as are the traditional ideals of heroism and courage. (Pigot, 2000, p. 31)

For the members of the VMC, their attire is 'socially loaded,' communicating a clear message to society. It signifies to onlookers the group's affiliation and identity as Defence Force veterans and bikers. Although the average person would not know the intricacies of the prerequisites and process of joining the club, the history of the organisation or maintenance of club membership, they would immediately identify and recognise the slouch hat as iconically Australian and distinctly associated with current or past serving Defence Force members. Undoubtedly, people outside the biker world would gather by the clothing (colours), tattoos and roaring motorcycles, these are not a group of men to approach uninvited. Attire can shape outward appearances. Group membership can be communicated by the wearing of garments and serve as visual cues. Social identification affirms



intergroup membership for those in the group and rejects others who are not (Gruber et al., 2023). The VMC have a Quartermaster, he is the designated person who is responsible for ordering patches, tee shirts and club regalia. Only approved members of the club can access embroidery/printing shops or online stores. These are approved clothing/embroidery suppliers such as, Last Stand Clothing Company (LSCC, 2024). The requirement for approval is to control purchases ensuring members of the public do not acquire patches or clothing with any of the V.V.M.C./VMC images. Email verification from a legitimate VMC club is required by the clothing stores to purchase items. The club's quartermaster keeps a log of the members' patches, who has what, where and when. Kel explained the origins of the VMC's back patch. When the producer of the film *Stone*, Sandy Harbutt handed over the rights of the image of Casper he was there to witness the historical event:

*Kel: "Well – see, that's – I don't know whether you know about the movie, Stone? Yeah, 70's movie and that was about Vietnam veterans that come back from Vietnam and formed a, a club called the Grave Diggers and that's where the skull and slouch hat come in. So, that's where our patch is from- it's from that, from that movie. A guy called Sandy Harbutt, he, he made the movie. So, he had the rights to the skull and the slouch hat. So, we – we started off with a different skull and slouch hat because we couldn't – we wanted to use that one because that was perfect but we – we couldn't use it but in 1990, I think it was, we had a thing called the Stone Run and it was a run from Sydney to Newcastle and there was probably three kilometres of motorbikes - That went on it. And, yeah, it was '92 or '93, I think. So, Sandy Harbutt went up there and he – when we got up there it was, it was called – it was a, a burial service. So, they had a coffin on a motorbike, like we have here, a coffin on a motorbike who rode all the way, and it had the skull and slouch hat in the coffin, like the, the Grave Diggers – it was called the Grave Digger. So, it had the grave diggers in the coffin. And we got up to – got up to Newcastle and we camped up there for three days and then we had a ceremony of the grave diggers have gone. The Vietnam veterans have risen - Yeah. Very emotional, very emotional. we don't allow other people to wear the skulls, you know, because yeah, skull and ..., yeah."*

Kel continued expressing his loyalty to Casper origins and the film *Stone*. In 1998 at the 25th Anniversary *Stone Run* (Kuipers, 1999), Kel rode his motorcycle for many hours crossing Australian states to be one of the 35,000 motorcyclists who took part in the recreation of the winding opening bike scene.

Within the VMC, each member understands what Casper represents. It signals that each full patched member has worked hard to earn their patches, and they protect their vest emphatically.

Membership of the VMC, just as with their predecessors (members of the V.V.M.C.), involves much more than riding motorcycles. Each member is encouraged to become part of a close-knit and cohesive group that is underpinned by strong and binding interpersonal relationships (Pigot, 2000, p. 41). Wearing the back patch places the member in this unique brotherhood with all the recognition and meaning that comes with the entry into the club. They are now part of a bigger national and international framework linking all states across the nation. The patch is an acknowledgement of like-mindedness and understanding, which crosses geographical and national barriers and unites the wearer with an elite group of patch-wearing bikers worldwide (Pigot, 2000, p. 47). The VMC colours provide each man with a source of pride and identity and a supportive network of friends who are committed to his on-going welfare. A military uniform gives connection to identity. The feeling of wearing a recognised uniform is membership to a group, a belonging. When they leave the military, they have lost part of their identity. Casper is another uniform, and they reassign their service to the VMC as they are lost without it.

## **8.5 VMC Patch rules and regulations**

From the moment a 'hang around' has been voted to become a prospect of the club (a veteran seeking to join the club) he enters the unique world of the VMC. Although there are some variations in process and rules of becoming a member between chapters, states, and territories there are key features and similarities across all. The South Australian Adelaide Hills Chapter conventions and rules are used as an exemplar and basis for this thesis which provides a foundation for understanding the protocols and key features for membership. A prospect is given a copy of the VMC Prospect Handbook (see Appendix J) and assigned a sponsor. The VMC Prospect Handbook clearly lays out the rules of the club; under point 5.2 in the handbook it is explained how the prospect's sponsor has the responsibility as a full patched member to make sure the prospect is aware of the VMC protocols. The sponsor will steer the prospect, informing him on the ways of the club to allow him the best possible chance of being accepted within the club (Veterans Motorcycle Club, 2024b, p. 7).

Page one of the handbook begins with the title 'Club Colours.' The primacy of the section on 'club colours' as the very first thing the prospects must read and understand suggests and demonstrates the order of priority within the rules of the club, and there seems to be nothing more important than the clubs' colours. Being affiliated to the club brings a similar essence to being within the

military. For example, they are both national organisations with clear identifiers. A member of VMC has swapped one structure for another that pays homage to and uses a familiar structure (Veterans Motorcycle Club, 2024b, p. 1).

The handbook begins with point 1. Stating the club colours are the property of the VMC, under the license of the National Council V.V.M.C./VMC. There are 36 VMC chapters across Australia's states and territories. Only five chapters around the nation include in their title V.V.M.C. and VMC. In South Australia, the prominent one-percenter motorcycle club Hells Angels permitted the club to wear only one version of the three-piece patch. Therefore, the South Australian chapters decided on VMC. The decision was driven by the inevitable fact that the numbers of Vietnam veterans has declined due to their age; without members the club would be lost forever. The change of name and a change in the rules of joining enables the club to be able to continue and recruit more veterans. The Vietnam veterans understood how needed the club is especially as soldiers and veterans who participated in Iraq and Afghanistan wars were experiencing similar feelings of a nation's rejection, albeit to a lesser degree.

As the media released stories of war crimes in Afghanistan, public debate began whether Australia should have been involved in military action in these wars; again, veterans felt they were undervalued and that their service was being tarnished. Australia's most decorated soldier and very public figure, Ben Roberts-Smith, was found, after lengthy court proceedings, complicit and responsible for the murder of three unarmed Afghan men and bullying his fellow soldiers (MacKenzie et al., 2023). The negative public discourse and rumours of medals being stripped of all those who served in Iraq and Afghanistan which surfaced after the ruling sent shockwaves through many of the members of the VMC. This led to 'closing in of the ranks' so to speak. Regular long phone calls and meet ups between the members of the VMC took place, providing support through the brotherhood to all that needed it. Shand (2024) writes, "Younger veterans feel angry when they hear the public comments that Australia's mission in Afghanistan was futile and worthless." He records comments from veterans such as, "I believe they have no right to be talking about it if they weren't there. If it's futile, then why did we lose 38 lives doing the job that the government asked us to do? Why did we go in the first place?" Another veteran commented, "I fear that Afghanistan will be ticked off in the history books as a loss and the job that we did will be forgotten." A poem on the wall of The Bunker captures the lingering rage that many V.V.M.C. members still maintain. It also resonates with the new veterans dealing with their own sense of alienation (Shand, 2024).



Author unknown

Poem removed due to copyright restrictions. Original can be found at <https://adamsh.wordpress.com/2012/12/13/the-skull-and-the-slouch-hat/>

### **8.5.1 The VMC Prospect Handbook**

Point 1.1 in the VMC Prospect Handbook, informs the prospect that the patches are leased to him and remain the property of the Chapter (Veterans Motorcycle Club, 2024b, p. 1). Point 1.2 states that: Colours can be removed by the committee under constitution rules and/or by-laws if/when it may be required. Point 2.3, states the patches must be returned to the chapter, this is in the event of the member leaving or is suspended or expelled from the club.

The patches, given in two distinct stages, are to be sewn on a leather (denim can be used but this is less common) vest. Point 2.4 in the VMC Prospect Handbook states that patches will be allocated at various stages of membership and the prospect is not to wear patches unless approved by the club's president (Veterans Motorcycle Club, 2024b, p. 1). During the first stage, they are given the bottom rocker only (Australia). After the prospect has successfully moved through his probation period (a minimum of 12 months) he will move to stage two whereby a patching up ceremony will take place. Following the clubs' traditions the prospect will never be told the date he will be patched; it remains a closely guarded secret so there is an opportunity to surprise him. The club's full regalia is formally exchanged and at the end the initiate emerges as a fully patched member and entitled to wear the club full colours on his back. This includes the top rocker, Casper which includes the MC cube patch which completes the full three patch set. The VMC Prospect Handbook, points 2. 1 – 2.4 details the names of the patches and positioning to the millimetre they are to be sewn on a vest (Veterans Motorcycle Club, 2024b, p. 1). Following the club's etiquette, point 6.6 in the VMC Prospect Handbook, the VMC patched vest is never to be worn when in a vehicle or when driving a car. If the member is seen doing this he is at risk of having his vest removed from him for a period of time (Veterans Motorcycle Club, 2024b, p. 5). The reason for this rule is because it would be covering the image; this is considered disrespectful as it is defacing the patch. The same standard of respect and care is given as with the national flag. Equally the members are never to wear clothing with a hood

under their vest, as this would cover part of the back patch. If a bag is carried when riding a motorcycle (like a postman's bag) it must go under the vest, never on top across the body, as again it would cover patches.

Point 8.4 in the VMC Prospect Handbook states:

8.4: NEVER remove your vest or leave it unattended unless getting changed. Once you remove it, hand it to another member of your Club until you can place it back on. (Veterans Motorcycle Club, 2024b, p. 7)

## **8.6 Understanding their experience with Casper**

Reflecting on my journaling and the assumptions around the symbolism of the patches and the colours worn by the VMC, it appeared that they are a way of upholding and defining group norms and boundaries. People use apparel to mark and uphold group boundaries (Gruber et al., 2023). Of Casper, who sits at the centre of the back of full patched members vest, Pigot (2000) writes:

The level of commitment required by this kind of brotherhood is uncommon today. Mainstream sporting clubs and other organisations, for example, rarely demand this kind of devotion. The strong sense of group solidarity the brotherhood constructs creates a framework that is socially and culturally independent; it ties one member to another in a kind of tribal and self-supportive network that also enables the V.V.M.C. to occupy and maintain a position outside the boundaries of conventional life, The average citizen, looking at the club from the sidelines, may only see what appears to be a group of characters who ride loud motorbikes, the inner ties of club life are not easily discernible from outside. This kind of distance is advantageous; it means that the club is able to keep society at arm's length, although the outside world can also be invited into the club's physical and emotional precinct on important occasions. Any encounter with the general public, however, is always at the club's discretion, the maintenance of exclusiveness is an essential component of the club's special status as a subcultural group (Pigot, 2000, p. 47).

The media paints a certain bad image of "bikers" as they are often confused with outlaw motorcycle gangs who are colloquially known as "bikies." One-percent clubs do not like to be referred to as bikies or outlaws. The media often associates negative connotations to motorcycle clubs, sensationalising criminal activities. The public see motorcycle groups wearing leather vests with patches and it is difficult to differentiate between bikies and biker clubs. Drewery (2003) identified

36 Australian outlaw motorcycle clubs in his paper: "Skulls, Wings & Outlaws – Motorcycle Club Insignia & Cultural Identity." Drewery sought to trace the roots of infamous one-percent motorcycle clubs designs. He soon discovered that motorcycle clubs do not like to be questioned by civilians. Drewery writes:

At the beginning of this research project, I made a direct approach to motorcycle clubs for information about their background and membership. I contacted the Director of the Australian Bureau of Criminal Intelligence, for the addresses of outlaw club clubhouses. However, due to legal constraints he was unable to give me the information. I next approached the editor of Live to Ride magazine, an Australian magazine that caters to Outlaw clubs. The editor was very supportive and suggested I write a letter to the magazine in which I requested information from the clubs. This was duly done but I soon realized that I had adopted a very naïve approach to finding information about a closed culture of which I was not a member. Assuming that members of such cultures will have respect for 'academic' status and reveal everything about their culture is a mistake made by many researchers. I received a total of three replies, none of which was from a club. Two replies were from individuals containing some very useful information, and the other was a threatening letter written in red ink suggesting I cease my research forthwith. (Drewery, 2003).

Misinformation is also seen on websites, for example, an online article written in The Who by McKay (2024) lists the VMC as number eight in the top ten bikie gangs. McKay writes:

There are many outlaw motorcycle gangs in Australia, some of which are chapters of international bikie clubs such as Bandidos, Hells Angels, and Gypsy Jokers. Gang violence has become prominent among these clubs, and state governments have amended laws to address the problem. In South Australia alone, bikie gangs have been involved in various criminal activities, including extortion, murder, violence, and illegal drug trade. Below is a rundown of some well-known Australian biker gangs. All motorcycle clubs have patches embroidered on their jackets to distinguish them from one another. Each outlaw motorcycle club has a territory map they control depending on the location where they were founded (McKay, 2024).

1. Comanchero: founded between the late 60's and early 70's.

2. Bandidos: identified as among the “Big Four” bikie gangs in Australia.
3. Rebels: considered the largest outlaw bikie gang in the country.
4. Odin’s Warriors: founded in Brisbane in 1971 by military veteran.
5. Hells Angels: considered as one of the “Big Four.”
6. Life and Death: founded in 1978.
7. Gypsy Jokers: originated from the US in the late 1960’s and later merged with South Australia’s Mandamas Motorcycle Club.
8. Veterans MC: founded on July 10th, 1992, by a group of military veterans from the Vietnam war. The group was inaugurated in Perth, Western Australia and in 1995, obtained Lord Street East Perth as their first clubhouse. They eventually moved their clubhouse to Nollamara in 1997 and changed the organization’s name to “Veterans MC” to cater to all servicemen.
9. Error in numbering both listed as number 9s. Gladiators: founded in 1960 & Infidels: founded by veterans and contractors in 2011.
10. Outcasts: formed in Sydney during the late 60’s.

I asked the participant Pottsy his thoughts about how he believes the group are viewed by outsiders, by ‘the average citizen’ as Pigot (2000) puts it:

**Pottsy:** *“I’ll often joke with people cos they ask; you know are we 1%, are we criminals as per se what they say, or they’ve seen like the 1% ... and they just immediately associate that if you’ve got a thing on your back then you’re part of that 1% ... in the world, but we never have been. And yeah I’ve often joked that like, you know if you’ve got 30 bikes, people, you know they already think oh yeah this is a bikie gang or something, and you can tell that they’re intimidated, but then often laughed at, you know when we park our bikes and it takes us 30 seconds to be able to get off them cos we’ve all got back, knee, hip, like every other frickin, you know takes us a good minute to then stagger up to then get upright, and sort of changes a bit, so, (\*mimicking and laughing as he acted out older man with a walking stick) hobble to the....yeah.”*

The VMC members do not claim to wear their vests and ride loud motorcycles to intimidate or impress anyone. However, their colours do convey a bikie image that keeps people away. To the members, the patch is a symbol of their connectedness to each other. This is a vital element of their peer-support that protects their mental health and wellbeing. Pottsy continued our conversation with an example of the recent death of a member of the club. His tone completely changed, the

smile left his face, and his head lowered. He recalled that painful memory and the events of that morning. It seemed that the enormity of effort made by the members, the logistics of where they travelled from within a short timeframe was evidence of their commitment to supporting each other. The call to action is heeded, an instilled cultural norm:

**Pottsy:** *“Yeah, it's more so just being, like for me now, it's being a part of the club, being there for each other and support, and the good times, like or the shit times as well. You know we've had a mate that was killed, he was a member of the chapter not too long ago, you know I made, I got the phone call a quarter to five in the morning, managed to get myself together into his house, I was making phone calls with other presidents in [name] to let them know what was going on. I started finally being able to raise everyone around 6:30am, and they by, you know I reckon by the time I got there one of the boys was already meeting me at the house, and he was ... from [name], give it two more hours and everyone was there. Like so there's that thing of support, like you can make one phone call and everyone's there.”*

## **8.7 Mental health: the vest provides protective factors**

At times some of the members have needed support from an inpatient mental health service. The Jamie Larcombe Centre, based here in South Australia, is a purpose-built facility situated at Glenside Health Service Campus. Built in 2017, the veterans' mental health precinct provides mental health and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) services to veterans (Government of South Australia, 2024). The Centre includes: An ambulatory service incorporating outpatient treatment and a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) service, 24 single rooms with ensuites, outpatient rooms, a gymnasium, research spaces and a garden and children's playground for families.

While spending some weeks in the Jamie Larcombe Centre due to mental ill health Kel, a Vietnam veteran, explains how not being able to wear his original Vietnam Veteran patched vest had affected his mental health. When the V.V.M.C. became the VMC, the top rocker part of the three-piece patch displaying Vietnam Veteran, was changed to Veteran. Kel explained that upon leaving the Jamie Larcombe centre in mid-2023, he decided when he got out, he would wear his original scunge (vest) with Vietnam Veteran. When stating this in the interview, I noticed the increase in rate of Kel's speech and how it slightly raised in volume, expressing a firm and proud decision and taking back ownership of his identity. He said it made him feel better and he attributed the wearing of his original vest to his more positive current wellbeing:



**Kel:** *"Yeah, the pride of wearing it, you know, that's why I wear my Vietnam veteran things. I'm pissed off that I'm a proud Vietnam veteran and I can't show it. So, I said to [name], well, said to [name], he was in there too. I said to [name], when I go out, I'm dragging my bloody Vietnam veteran vest out and I'll be wearing that everywhere. He said, "good on ya, mate. Do it." You know, so, so, I did, soon as I come out, hung the other one up, dragged me old one out. Fortunately, I'd kept it. Dragged – and I've been wearing it ever since and I have not had one person say anything about it. Most of them have said, good on ya, [name], good to see yeah. Even, I was a bit concerned about, I said to [name] about it. I said what will the bloody [name] the other clubs like the Hells Angels MC because they were the reason, we couldn't wear it in the first place because those guys told us that we're the, we have, we only had one club in [name], like it's either going to be the veterans or the Vietnam veterans, you pick, which one? I said, well can't we just say Vietnam veterans and the other guys join us and, no, you'll be wearing one colours. And this is what I got told. I'm not sure whether that actually happened or not. It's what I got told. So, yeah, I started thinking about that when I was in the Jamie Larcombe centre and I was like, no, stuff em. Soon as I come out, my Vietnam veteran is going on. I feel a lot better now. I've, I've been doing really quite well lately because I do wear that. And it's – I think it's a lot to do with it."*

Abundantly clear in Kel's answer was the personal sense of value, pride, and importance of wearing not only Casper but his Vietnam veterans' vest. He is proud of his service to the country during the war in Vietnam.

Casper is a symbol that represents the coming together as one and never forgetting fellow diggers who lost their life in battle. In a broader context, Casper is also associated with the club's regulations and that recognition has a shared understanding of the historical precedence that still meets with the agreed rules and service to the club, other veterans and replicates service to the country. There is a priority in their need to belong and serve in some way, to remain connected to a familiar structure that is their norm. I asked each participant what the patch means to them, below are some of the answers:

**Kel:** *"What does the patch mean? It means that – unites the, the veterans, you know..., united with each other, you know. So, and yeah, also the skull means the guys that didn't come home, you know, .... Yeah, that's what the skull's about. The skulls for the guys that didn't come home. That's why we, we don't, we don't allow other people to wear the skulls. It's not just a patch, it's a, you know, a very special and unique bond that you've got within the club."*

The sentiments Kel discussed were echoed by other participants. A clear theme shone through that centred on respect, honour and earning the right to wear Casper. Each of these aspects is related to a set of shared ethics and values that provide a shield within this sub-cultural group:

*H: "I mean to me the whole patch itself, the whole back patch itself is obviously just, it's a mark of belonging you know, and that Casper itself that stands out to me, that's just recognition of everyone and everything that's gone on beforehand. So, it's a mark of respect there and it's a mark of belonging to something that's bloody well worth belonging too. To be honest, that's what the back patch is to me."*

Having a sense of belonging is vital to the members and belonging to something they deem as being worthy that shows the outside world they are part of a wider group:

*Pablo: "I suppose it's just the kind of like when you're serving, you have a uniform which shows that one, (to those outside) outside that you're a part of that collective group, and it's really just that in itself, I guess. And it's a uniform, and I suppose unlike social clubs that you can join and not have to prove or do anything, you've got to earn Casper and earn the right to wear the vest in the same way that you have to earn the right to wear your military uniform, you can't just rock up and say I want to do this, and they hand you one, you've got to go through the process to prove yourself, so I think it's just- yeah, it's just an extension really. I guess it's different for guys ... well, not really different, but guys who are still serving, but very much so, I think for guys that have gotten out, it's that ability to continue to openly show and display that they're part of a collective group and that they've got mates around them and got each other's backs so that they don't feel alone, I guess."*

Pablo reiterates the sentiment of earned right, not a given right. This is synonymous with earning a uniform in the military. Recruits go through a stepped process to join the military and acquire a uniform. The military uniform provides a familiar trust in its symbols, and this is replicated within the VMC process of earning Casper. Casper emulates the sense of service, structure, and culture of the military. For many of the long serving veterans and especially those who joined during their teenage years, this is where their identity was shaped, it is where they grew up, somewhere to belong and gain a sense of group validation and role purpose:

*Marksy: "One reason is I guess you've been accepted by the club because you can't get – unless the club – whole club agrees. So, any tasks they ask you to do obviously they thought you did them well. Yeah, and you feel like you've achieved something, I guess. Yeah."*

*Jay: "Due to the fact and respect that we received from all other clubs for our service to Australia, we earned the respect and the honour to wear the MC patch, which means a lot to us, and you know the MC world is a very unique world. We are technically one-percenters, we don't wear the one-percent patch and we're not outlaws, there's a big difference between outlaws and one-percenters. We're one-percent because one-percent of the population is eligible to become [one] of our members, you know, I don't think that we are a very statistic number, but you know in a sense that we're not the same as everybody else, we're different, we're not the typical 99%. Well, it means it means a lot in the sense that all the people that have sacrificed, you know all the things that have been sacrificed for that patch, you know. Yeah 100% we are unique we're not we're not the part of the populace, we feel cut from the rest of the world as far as who we are, you know, and like I said before we lost the network after discharge, so that make that military network that I said, you know ... and you know have other than with each other, that's what makes us different, we're not a social club, we're a military, oh we're an MC."*

Jay discusses the respect that is received for the sacrifice and service to Australia from the other clubs. By 'other clubs,' he means the one-percent dominant clubs in South Australia (the Hells Angels and the Rebels). This recognition is highly valued by the VMC members. Conventional society may not necessarily agree that respect from one-percent motorcycle clubs is virtuous. However, respect from these clubs is highly valued by the VMC. This is explained under Point 10.3 in the VMC Prospect Handbook "10.3: We are not a 1% Club, but we do live in that world, and hold a well-established position, which works both ways, with mutual respect with other MC's and Social Clubs." (Veterans Motorcycle Club, 2024b, p. 7)

It is a recognition of the specific joint experience of the nation's rejection of the returned Vietnam veterans and those who do not conform to mainstream rules. Jay has a different meaning when he says the VMC are 'one-percent,' he means of the population who can join the club. He clearly distinguishes that the VMC are neither an outlaw nor a typical one-percenter (wear a diamond patch with 1%.) club (Gryder, 2023). The VMC do however display their cultural identity by wearing Casper, symbolising that they belong to a unique group.

It was clear by Jay's response that the loss of a military network when discharged, is being replaced by the peer support within VMC. They ensure a connectedness to a network that replicates a military environment but with the sole purpose of looking out for and supporting each other in the brotherhood. There is a strict criteria and process to get in, but once you are in, you are in. Jay feels

they (VMC) are not part of society, they have been cut from the rest of the world, not the other way around:

**Nugget:** *“I’ve had the same one since I started, 23 years. So, it’s still in pretty good nick actually unlike me, but it’s, I like it, I like it.”*

**Pottsy:** *“That, it means everything, I mean I’ve got it tattooed on me, yeah it’s a symbol of brotherhood and a symbol of the bond I share with other members, yeah.”*

Pottsy mentions proudly that Casper means everything, further stating that the symbol has been tattooed on him to reflect the bond he shares with the other members. His tattoos indicate the sense of permanence with his commitment to the brotherhood (Appendix K, first and second image).

## **8.8 Behaviour, reinforcement of bonds**

In many of the statements the participants acknowledge the history of Casper (the three-piece patch), earning the right to wear it and feeling a sense of honour when wearing it. Bear discusses how the symbol of Casper dictates behaviour and ensures a following and maintenance of the club rules. The Prospect Handbook reinforces the rules. Point 9.1 states that actions over a long period is how respect is earned. Point 9.2 clearly warns that the colours can be removed easily if rules are not followed (Veterans Motorcycle Club, 2024b, p. 7):

Point 9.1: Respect is earned and not given: therefore, your actions and being true to your convictions over a long period of time is how it is built and gained.

Point 9.2: Your behaviour and the time you put into the club is also what earns you credibility and respect within the club. However, these same actions can also lead to your colours being removed just as easily.

The hard work can be to actually keep them!

**Bear:** *“And there’s also repercussions. So, you can’t just get it and then be a prick at the end of it. You’ve got to still maintain those ethics, those values, those so it keeps the fuckheads in check. So, if you want to be a fuckhead that’s fine, you can be a fuckhead, but you can get the fuck out, that’s it. So, it keeps that in check if you know.”*

Some of the clubs' rules are unspoken, unwritten and just known. For example, not disrespecting a member by attempting to contact their significant other or making any form of comment that could be misconstrued. Bear stated, *"It is about maintaining ethics and values to keep members in check."* Casper is a powerful influence of behaviour and serves to remind members there are consequences to actions, such as being expelled from the club. If bad behaviour or actions have been deemed a sufficiently serious matter for a member to be expelled, then they are unable to join any other chapter, including any other state. Their name is added to the national expulsion list. The club rules govern interactions between members, the public (civilians) and the provisions of brotherhood. It provides a framework whereby peer support can operate in consensus of a mutual understanding that is synonymous with not only military culture but motorcyclist culture.

When Skelly was asked what the patch meant to him, he replied earnestly:

**Skelly:** *"Oh it's everything."*

This was a very short simple answer, but with a definitive 'no question about it' tone in his voice. The quote below, the participant referring to his vest states: *"They'd have to kill me to get mine."*

**Raider:** *"They disrespected it, and you know, we've had vests taken off us by other clubs, and the guys just hand it over, you know, fuck that, and they'd have to kill me to get mine. I guess it's an unwritten code that you treat it like a flag, don't put it on the ground, you don't, don't mess with it."*

Raider discusses how he would literally have to be killed to have his vest taken from him. The significance of the three-piece patch reinforces accepted behaviour within the club, this bonds the members together. They have a shared understanding and respect of their role, giving a sense of safety and mutual trust. This peer behaviour supports the ethos of the club and in turn provides peer support to the members. The Prospect Handbook under point 6 titled 'Club Etiquette,' lays out some of the rules 6.1, 6.2, 6.4, 6.5 (Veterans Motorcycle Club, 2024b, p. 5):

#### 6. Club Etiquette:

6.1 Look after and respect your brother/s.

6.2 At a gathering, always make it a point to circulate and greet every Full Member (VMC) that is there. (common courtesy is that you say G'day on arrival, and Goodbye on departure).

6.4 NEVER approach two (2) Patch Members from another MC when they are in conversation. Wait a respectful distance then wait for an invite, or approach a Full Member (VMC), or the Sergeant at Arms of your own Club.

6.5 Show respect to Members from another MC. When speaking with them, keep it short and sweet.

Kel stated in his interview that he feels a sense of pride when wearing his vest and it gives him confidence. He found it somewhat difficult to fully explain but he alluded to the protective factors of having a visual motorcycle vest that sends a message that he belongs to a group. Kel and Nugget, who are both Vietnam veterans, stated clearly, that they hate being in the spotlight or being the centre of attention. The three-piece patch is not necessarily for onlookers' adoration but to keep them at arm's length and for the experience of being shrouded in a vest like a suit of armour:

**Kel:** *"I hate the spotlight. I, I actually – I find myself, I actually change a bit when I put my, like, my vest on. Yeah, because I – how do I say? I've always been very shy – yeah, just a shy sort of person. I don't come forward and speak to people unless they speak to me. And when I put that on it changes. It sort of gives me confidence or something, yeah, it does and I, I know that for a fact that it does. You know that it gives me confidence, like, you know, yeah. No, it's just – I don't know what it is. It's hard to say, it's just a – yeah, I just feel more confident when I've got that on, so, I don't know ... I think, well, people will say, well, this guys in a bike club, we won't hassle him or something like – I don't know whether it's that or what it is. Yeah, the pride of wearing it, you know, that's why I wear my Vietnam veteran things."*

**Nugget:** *"I, only ever rode, wore it when I rode the bike, if it's in the – if I'm in the car I just put it on when I get out. But which is what you're supposed to do by the law, by the laws. But no, I tend not wear it as much as some other blokes. it's probably just something about my personality that I don't like being the centre of attention."*

Nugget refers to the laws, by this he means the VMC rules and not state government legislation. It does however demonstrate how seriously the rules are taken, it is their lore and the one-percenter motorcycle clubs' lore.

## 8.9 Who is worthy of Casper?

The word 'worth' can have different meanings depending on the context in which it is used and how value of something is gauged. For example, an inanimate object such as a house or car has monetary worth - what someone is willing to pay for it. The amount of effort to exert in a project or challenge may be worth the rewards such as a qualification or medal. Or it could be something not tangible

but has a shared moral based value or rating such as with the VMC's - earning the right and being worthy of wearing the three-piece patch with the image of Casper. Several of the participants referred to 'earning the right to wear Casper.' Feeling worthy deemed by peers who are highly valued and share a sub-cultural identity is central to a sense of community and need fulfilment (Reddin, 2003).

Bear discusses being given the honour of owning the heritage of the club. He also comments, it was the biggest thing to happen for him since being made a Warrant Officer. Receiving a high rank in the Defence Force is prestigious and an important part of any military member's service. This gives some indication of the enormity of the experience of having the right to wear Casper (three-piece patch):

**Bear:** *"Casper was an honour to get because you have to work for it, you didn't, well it wasn't a give me, you rock up at the club and you're given it. Just because you were a Warrant Officer, it doesn't mean that you've earnt, that you earn the right to wear Casper. And so, I got very deep into the history of how Casper came to existence, like went into the Hell's Angels movie Stone and how [name] and [name] went to all the HA's (Hells Angels) and Rebel's and all that kind of stuff and asked for whether they could get the rights to use it and stuff like that. So, it, I think the fact that you have to earn it, you can't just be given it. I did probably six, seven months of hanging around and then got told to go by yourself a vest and they gave me the Australian Rocker and I think it was say eight, nine months after that they handed me Casper. And that was probably the biggest thing that happened to me since being made the Warrant Officer I reckon. That was pretty big, up there. And because if you understand the history of it and what the boys did to get it. Then once you've delivered it, once you've been given it yourself, then you own that heritage as well."*

**H:** *"It's got to be earned. It's not just given away, it's got to be earned and I mean the fact that you know anybody who is wearing it has earned the right to wear it or should have earned the right to wear it. I know okay so in this state I know for a fact anyone wearing that has earned the right, and the symbolism behind it to me as I said it's an acknowledgement of everyone else who has earned the right, and it's a symbol of something that's worth belonging to."*

**Jay:** *"Well it means it means a lot in the sense that all the people that have sacrificed, you know all the things that have been sacrificed for that patch, you know, the fact that you need to need to be or first of all you need to be a military member, you need to have gone to a, well, not so much these days, it seems to have changed I guess, but you need to have gone to a serve overseas at least anyway, you know, to have received, to even be eligible, to even apply for that patch you know I've had many a one-percenters and the outworld motorcycle clubs tell us that we, we actually started out non nom-*

*period which is you know the process of becoming a member of the motorcycle club. We actually started our nom-period the day that we signed the dotted line, you know yeah, I'm not sure if that makes too much sense to you but it means the world to us, in that sense that you know we've had a to jump through a lot of hoops and not with the intent of becoming a military, not with the intent of becoming a member of the VMC but you know these hoops that we had to jump through before, we can even be considered. Yeah, and what if the significance.... if it's just handed out to? You know, you might as well go on eBay and buy it, and then it means nothing."*

Jay makes an interesting comment about *"the day we signed on the dotted line"* – (meaning signing on papers declaring military allegiance to the nation), this is the day nom period started for becoming a member of the VMC, without perhaps even being aware of the VMC or knowing this was possibly something in the future they would consider joining. Jay also stated, *"I'm not sure if that makes too much sense to you but it means the world to us."* He further comments about the 'hoops' needed to jump through, implying earning the right to share the identity and access the group. There is a subcultural need to have control over who is deemed worthy that is based on the military 'play book.' For example, the premise of what they have known is an earned position or connection to the Defence Force (service) and all that entails, such as their role, identity, culture, responsibilities, behaviour and norms:

**Marksy:** *"Yeah, and you feel like you've achieved something, I guess. it's not hard to get the patch, you just have to just be I guess a decent person and just follow their rules which are pretty reasonably rules."*

Pablo draws the comparison of earning the right to wear Casper to that of a military uniform. The need to prove oneself, and Casper is an extension of that. Their identity shifts from one subculture (cultural group – Defence Force) to another subculture - the VMC. Both groups have established social parameters that the members connect with and understand. For example, a deep held trust, behaviours such as 'dark' humour or banter and alcohol consumption. These social norms and rules are familiar – hence the understanding of the iconography, it is familiar as well as earned. Hence the peer support in this club must be prefaced on their shared communal identity:

**Pablo:** *"You've got to earn Casper and earn the right to wear the vest in the same way that you have to earn the right to wear your military uniform, you can't just rock up and say I want to do this, and they hand you one, you've got to go through the process to prove yourself, so I think it's just... yeah, it's just an extension really."*



Pottsy explains how earning the right to wear Casper does not mean you have the right to keep Casper if you retire or are expelled from the club. The caveat to this: when you retire it must be on good terms:

**Pottsy:** *"Technically I don't, I mean you don't own the patch; the club does, so you've earned the right to wear it. Well cos it's an, it's an honour and a privilege to wear it. So, I mean there are instances where, you know if you retire after a certain length of time then, and you retire on good terms and all that, then there will be times where you'll be able to keep your colours. And then you can wear them at club events when you're invited, all that sort of thing. But if you retire then you don't wear, you wouldn't wear them if your, if you just go for a ride on your own cos you're not a member of, yeah of the chapter anymore."*

The distinction and meaning of non-ownership or temporary ownership of the patches is of importance when understanding how the symbol embodies the individual and the club. There is a dual representation of the individual's worth and permission to wear the patches. Earning the right to wear Casper begs the question, how do the VMC members judge when determining who is or who is not worthy of Casper and allowed into their closed circle. How does one earn Casper? The base criteria for eligibility to join the club has already been discussed, but then there is a long process where character is judged. Skelly refers to this as 'measuring up' and Bob states he has a lot more time for military people but even then, within five minutes he will determine if he does or does not 'fancy' (willing to accept) them:

**Skelly:** *"Oh you have to earn it yeah, yeah and we've had people walk in the door and they just don't measure up and you say it's not going to work for you mate or others suddenly thought oh I just thought I'd get the back patch here. No, you earn it mate. One bloke said oh I heard it's a \$100 joining fee, where he heard that I don't know, but you know he said apparently if I pay 100 bucks, I get a back patch, and they said no. Oh I don't want to come to the club I just want the back patch. Well, no mate, you don't."*

**Bob:** *"Yeah, I would say a lot of the time like I will talk to, if I talk to someone, I will change my opinion if they ... on that person. Cos I was somewhere the other week as part of my work, and I was chatting to someone and they said, oh yeah, I was in the air force or I was in the army, and my opinion of them changed straight away, ... I've got a lot more time, and they could turn around, like after like five minutes could go, I don't particularly fancy you anyway, but I will, like my opinion usually changes ... that. So, I would say yeah that nine times out of ten that the only people that I've ever got on with have been like military based."*

The VMC just like the military have their unique way of doing and being, from their uniform to their core values that each service has (Army, Air Force and Navy), they have their own traditions, language, heritage, and ways of doing things (McCormick et al., 2019).

Intergroup communication occurs when either a person in a social interaction defines self or others in terms of their social identity (i.e., as a group member) rather than their personal identity (i.e., as a unique individual). Social identities are marked, established, and negotiated communicatively through various verbal (e.g., language, topic) and nonverbal (e.g., clothing, makeup) cues (Dragojevic & Giles, 2014, p. 30).

The relevance of intergroup communication in relation to the VMC and how this forms part of the structure of peer support will be discussed in Chapter 9.

We all have introjected values, internalised ways of behaving based on the expectations of others. These are usually learned in childhood; we quickly learn what behaviours please parents, caregivers, teachers, friendship groups and society in general (Rogers., 1959). Tolan et al. (2012) describe the transmission of values as, *conditions of worth* are transmitted to the child, who learns that they are acceptable or lovable if they behave, think and feel in certain ways (Tolan et al., 2012, p. 4). Carl Rogers (1902 – 1987) is considered the father of Person-Centred Therapy (PCT), this style of therapy is used widely in counselling and underpins other counselling frameworks (Rogers., 1959, p. 209). Rogers coined the theory *Conditions of Worth*; these are explained as follows:

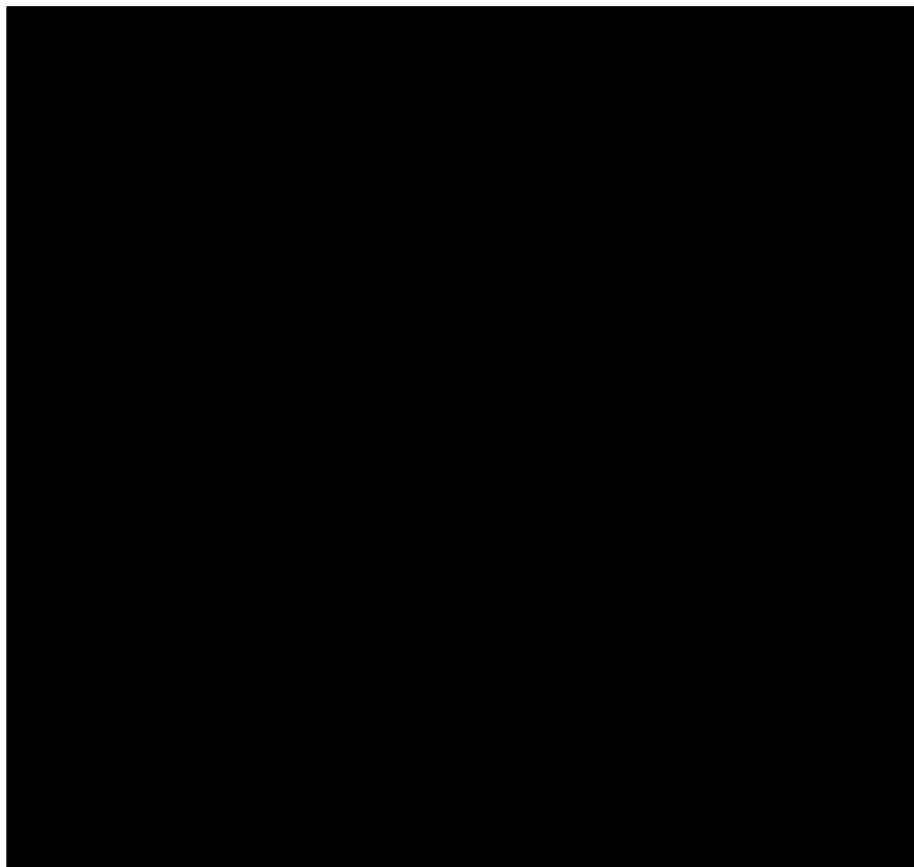
The self-structure is characterized by a condition of worth when a self-experience or set of related self-experiences is either avoided or sought solely because of the individuals discriminated it as being less or more worthy of self-regard. A condition of worth arises when the positive regard of a significant other is conditional, when the individual feels that in some respects he is prized and in other not. Gradually this same attitude is assimilated into his own self-regard complex, and he values an experience positively or negatively solely because of these conditions of worth which he has taken over from others, not because the experience enhances or fails to enhance his organism.

In other words, based on this theory of conditional love, conditions of our own self-worth are the learned messages one adopts about what we must do for other people to value us. The introjected values adopted from those we connect with function to enable us to gain their approval. Conditions

of worth are a result of receiving conditional positive regard from others i.e., from what we experience others wanting us to be and do to be seen by them as worthy (Rogers., 1959, p. 209).

In counselling, conditions of worth are conditions we believe we must meet to gain acceptance, love, or positive regard from others. There are too many to mention, but there are a few such as ‘work hard to be successful’ and ‘men do not cry and do not show any weakness’; these are familiar concepts that people living in Australian culture will understand. Eventually expectations may clash with the world views of the individual. Unhappiness, anxiety or depression can be the outcome of the experience (Lees-Oakes, 2023).

The VMC Prospect Handbook provides the beginner seeking to join the club with guidelines to follow to be able to be worthy of earning Casper. As stated at the beginning of the chapter, this thesis will not include details of specific one-percenter motorcycle clubs. However, although the VMC is not a one-percenter club, their fraternity does model itself on the same basis, a sub-cultural pseudo-deviance (Thompson, 2008). I came across an online Hells Angels video during my research. It is a poem read by one of the members, although the author calls it is ‘knowledge that rhymes’. Within the poem you can see the same ethos echoing in the VMC, such as earning brotherhood, being watched, respect, pride and to love the man, you also have to love the patch:





(Unknown author Hells Angels, 2024)

Poem removed due to copyright restrictions. Original available online at <https://hellsangels.com/media/>

### **8.10 Tattoos, rings and belt buckles: Identity construction**

Since ancient times inscribing skin with permanent patterns and designs has taken place. Cultures across the globe have been tattooing throughout recorded history. The South American Chinchorro mummy and the Tyrolean Iceman named Ötzi, are the world's oldest known human remains to have preserved tattoos. Ötzi the international archaeological sensation discovered in 1991, is believed to be from around 3250 B.C. and had a total of 61 tattoos across his body (Deter-Wolf et al., 2016). Tattooing processes have acted to negotiate relationships between individuals and their culture. For example, tattoos can signal entry into adulthood, reflect social status, document martial achievement, demonstrate lineage and group affiliation (Deter-Wolf et al., 2016). In more recent times, Western societies have seen a surge in cosmetic new tattoo wearers, and they have become commonplace adorning the body. The practice of 'getting inked' is now considered body art and etching identity on the body has become very popular regardless of gender or social status (Tobar-Dupres, 1999 as cited in Hewitt., 1997). By the late 1990's there was a spectacular growth of tattoo shops. In the United States of America (USA) tattoo shops were ranked among the six fastest growing industries in the nation (Halnon & Cohen, 2006, p. 40). Where previous stereotypes of tattoos and their wearers as being of "low-class" or a "biker" nowadays there is a new culture of tattooing, one that does not just include bikers but also middleclass, educated and professional people who consider tattooing as fine art. They chose to be tattooed to display aspects of their spirituality, or for self-help or personal empowerment (DeMello, 1995) DeMello (2000, p. 51) states:

Tattoos done by working-class tattooists with no artistic training were, from the Civil War through the Korean War, a way by which sailors (drawn primarily from the lower classes) could 'establish their patriotism (military insignias, battle commemorations)' and could 'remind them of loved ones back home' (with vow tattoos such as 'Mom' or the name of

one's 'girl'). Similar to the traditional function of the motorcycle shop, the subculture of tattoo shops also provided social supports for marginalized lower-class men, and were typically located alongside barber shops, in dirty corners of arcades, under circus tents, or on carnival midways. For lower-class men, tattoos were a valued means of expressing cultural values and personal sentiments. Although hidden away at the margins of society, the shops were nevertheless a home away from home for many men: sailors, carnies, drunks, labourers, as well as young boys who hoped to learn the trade. Inside the tattoo shop was a unique world where ex-sailors swapped sea stories, young servicemen attempted to outdo each other with the grandeur of their tattoos, and others told stories about their travels and experiences.

Tattooing expressed individual self-stylisation, rebellion and non-conformity, and/or ornamentation and eroticism (Sanders & Vail, 1989). Tattoos are bodily markings that communicate one or more of the following: (1) personal identity, (2) cultural values and practices, and (3) membership in sub-groups within societies that are rebellious, peripheral, marginalized, or otherwise set apart from the "mainstream" (Phelan & Hunt, 1998 as cited in Grumet 1983, Hambly 1925, Mead 1928, Sanders 1988). Not surprisingly, many of the members of the VMC have tattoos. I observed the participants during the interviews and noted several tattooed images of Casper, military cap badges, numerals, VMC and VFFV (Veteran Forever Forever Veteran) on necks, hands, legs, and arms (see Appendix K). The VMC have associate members who are supporters of the club but not full patched members. These are usually referred to as the 22 Crew (the 22nd letter of the alphabet is V and V is for veteran). Associate members do wear patches but are distinctively different from the full patched members of the club. They are not permitted to wear the three-piece patch. Associate members are there to support the members of the club however they can. For example, one associate member is a tattooist and has a tattoo parlour. Many of the VMC members go to his parlour for their tattoos. The associate member is familiar with the VMC tattoos, he provides advice on styles and placement and greatly reduces the cost.

Anand et al. (2014, p. 526) paper which aims to educate health professionals in the emergency department coming into contact with outlaw bikers state:

Some tattoos are immediately visible, but others will be covered by clothing or lost in a maze of body art. Any biker who is not in good standing with the club must burn off club-related

tattoos, usually by heating a butter knife and applying it repeatedly onto his skin. Alternatively, he may have them covered with other tattoos.

For the members of the VMC, they are not required to burn off tattoos related to the club. However, if they leave in good standing, for example retiring, then they add the retirement date to the tattoo/s. If they are expelled from the club, this is a different matter, and they then need to have any VMC tattoo/s covered over, such as Casper, 22 diamond, veteran motorcycle club, MC or VMC.

### 8.10.1 Identity construction and identity work

Identity construction has two approaches, one is talk and the other is presented by dress, appearance and other non-verbal means. Taken together, these two approaches form identity construction. “Identity work” is “an interactional accomplishment that is socially constructed, interpreted, and communicated via words, deeds, and images” (Phelan & Hunt, 1998).

Identity work involves the announcement of “moral careers” (Phelan & Hunt, 1998 as cited in Goffman, 1961). Personal identity claims, whether in “talk” or non-verbal forms, are embedded in collective moral understandings of “appropriate” words, deeds, and images. Tattooing indicates a long history of expression of moral career in the military and announces membership.

When interviewing the participant identified as Pottsy, I asked what Casper means to him. He firmly clasped his leg with both hands, holding either side of his thigh. He cleared his throat momentarily pausing and stated:

**Pottsy:** *“That.....it means everything, I mean I've got it tattooed on me, yeah it's a symbol of brotherhood and a symbol of the bond I share with other members, yeah.”*

He continued explaining that the large tattoo covering his thigh, which is a scene, is a snapshot of his story of his time serving in the Afghanistan war (see Appendix K). The conversation evoking his memory, his voice slightly deepened and slowed, he continued by gripping and pushing down on his thigh and explained how on difficult days, holding onto his leg, he reminds himself:

**Pottsy:** *“That was then, [pause] and this is now.”*

I interpreted by this as a lasting memorial to his service while not wanting this to allow it to negatively impact on the life he has now. The tattoo is a visual representation that appears to be

healing psychological wounds and connecting him to the peer support, through the brotherhood that is here and now in the VMC.

Bear discussed being given the honour of wearing Casper and owning the heritage of the club. He stated, *"It was the biggest thing to happen to me since being made a warrant officer."* Achieving the military rank of a warrant officer can take many years and requires significant ability and necessary skills and is a highly respected rank. For Bear being a warrant officer was his identity for a large portion of his life, and it was an achievement he felt incredibly proud of. I could hear pride in his voice and watched as he pushed back to straighten his shoulders, almost coming to attention in his seat. However, being a former warrant officer did not give him an instant entitlement to wear Casper. He also had to earn that right, and he values that right because it was not just given. Bear lost his Warrant Officer identity when leaving the service, which was a crushing blow. Replacing this identity outside of the military would be impossible anywhere other than the VMC. This connection to his former identity is in and of itself a protective factor for his mental health and wellbeing. Being in the club means he is cared for, respected, valued and accepted. Accepting and feeling a part of the joining process is another example of support by peers and a protective factor for their wellbeing. They are connected, supported and achieving membership and club recognition is also a link to a familiar military cultural framing:

Some members of the VMC also display their membership to the club by wearing rings, belt buckles and clothing. Usually displaying Casper's image, the numerals 22 and/or VFFV (Veteran Forever Forever Veteran) (Sir yes sir global, 2024). Drewery (2003 as cited in Heskett, 2002, p.125), states:

"Objects and environments can be used by people to construct a sense of who they are, to express their sense of identity." The construction of identity, however, goes much further than an expression of who someone is for it 'can be a deliberate attempt by individuals and organisations, even nations, to create a particular image and meaning intended to shape, even pre-empt, what others perceive and understand."

## **8.11 Harley Davidson**

As discussed in the introduction section (p19) the VMC roots are historically connected to the 'outlaw' one-percenter motorcycle clubs that formed in the aftermath of World War II. The Korean

and Vietnam veterans while searching for the camaraderie, found themselves addicted to the thrills of violence and conflict. This was not dissimilar to what they had experienced while serving in war (Piano, 2018; Rand, 2014; Reddin, 2003). Thousands of veterans were attracted to the biker lifestyle.

It was the closest replacement to military life. They despised Japanese vehicles and chose highly customised, loud, and heavy American bikes that were almost always Harley-Davidsons. The biker lifestyle revolves around values such as rebellion, brotherhood, hyper-masculinity, independence and mechanical skills (Piano, 2018). Harley-Davidson is the totem of the biker's secular religion. In the one-percenter clubs, what was not permitted was the ownership of what bikers refer to as a 'riceburner', that is, any bike that was produced or even contained pieces made by Japanese companies. Piano (2018) explains that in the 1960's Japanese makers rapidly established themselves as the main players in the US market for motorcycles. Their bikes were cheaper, more reliable and offered a more pleasant riding experience which attracted the middle-classes. Harley-Davidsons were bigger, heavier, louder and more expensive than their Japanese counterparts. Devoted Harley riders assume an attitude of bloated potency and importance embodied in the motorcycle itself (Yates, 1999, p. 62).

In the 1980's Harley-Davidson rebounded from near-bankruptcy (Yates, 1999, p. 167). Levins (1999) writes:

On 1 July 1987, Harley was anointed with great fanfare, amid hundreds of razor-cut Armani-suited, gold-rolexed, wing-tipped, hot-shot traders for its elevated listing on the New York Stock Exchange. By 1992, Harley's earnings were up to \$54 US million dollars. Harley emerged as a multi-billion-dollar business, with growing annual revenue of US\$4.192 billion in 2002; of US\$4.766 billion in 2003; and US\$5.095 billion in 2004 (Levins, 1999 as cited in moneycentral.msn.com, 2005).

In recent years the company has seen 17 straight quarters of bad news, and the decline accelerates every quarter (Layer, 2024). The most stigmatised and marginalised bikers were the 'bad biker' associated with the one-percenter clubs. Members wore that label as a badge, proudly and defiantly distinguishing themselves from the remaining 99 percent of mainstream society.

Motorcycling is viewed by many as a personal experience and art and an opportunity to experience something more real and exciting. Riding brings feelings of freedom, adventure, rebellion, control and independence; a means of escaping everyday restrictions and repressions (Yates, 1999). Despite



the shortcomings of Harley-Davidsons bikes, they are the number one choice for the members of the VMC.

The motorcycle is an essential aspect of the VMC members' identity, after all it is a motorcycle club. Club rides and charity runs are organised with military precision. In the VMC Prospect Handbook (see Appendix J) point 3.1 explains the protocol of the order in which the rides take place. The wording is militarised, for example, "All gear is on, and the club is formed up," meaning riders are in their position as dictated by the rules. Point 3.1e, states, "NEVER OVERTAKE THE PRESIDENT!" and point 3.1f "Never overtake a Full Member unless directed!" Each member's position is laid out and instructions provided such as, point 4e, "The pack rides as a disciplined group" (Veterans Motorcycle Club, 2024b, p. 3):

**Bear:** *"I love my bike pristine all the time. For me it is. For me, the bike, I can ... the bike and hit the road and I can ride a thousand, like I, after I got out of the clinic, the year, so I was in there August, September, October, something like that. And I got out and I organised my, obviously as I said, I'm from [name], so a lot of things that have happened to me like blown up and shit like that, I've lost my long-term memory. And there's a lot of things that I can't flipping remember. So, I organised a bike trip to [name]. So, on the bike I can just disappear into the road and there's not a thought, there's not, I've got the music pumping, got the road in front of me. I'm thinking where the next stop's going to be, you're watching people come and pass and every now and then you'll get a wave, you'll get a fucking whatever and you're just in that moment. You're not looking back, you're not looking forward, you're just in the moment. So, for me on a psychological sense, the bike is my out and there'll be times where my wife [name] will get there and go "I'm over this weather, I wish you could just get out on the bike."*

As Bear explained his emotions while riding his motorcycle, his eyes drifted slightly up seemingly looking into the distance. With a slight smile it appeared he was reliving those feelings as he discussed how there is nothing better and it is just beautiful. His words expressed a sense of control and being able to dictate and not be dictated to. There is an immediacy of the need to focus and be in the present with the road and motorcycle. After all it is a powerful machine where your life could end with one wrong move. On a bike there is control over making decisions, autonomy and sense of being able to exist without the negative thoughts and emotions:

**Bear:** *"You're looking at that as okay tank high, take it sharp, out high. Do you know what I mean? It's, there's nothing better, there is nothing better when you come to a real cool corner and you get that perfect line and you wipe the speed off and then hoick it up again, it's just- beautiful."*

The 25th anniversary *Stone Run*, an event commemorating the film based on the fictitious biker gang Grave Diggers, attracted over 35,000 motorcycles. It is believed to be the largest number of motorcycles on a motorcycle run in Australia. Spectators lined the roads and stood on bridges waving and cheering as the riders passed and roared through tunnels. Pillions and riders waved back to the men, women and children who came to witness the ride. A helicopter flew overhead filming, capturing the miles of riders. During the ride there was an accident and sadly one rider, Craig Witherspoon was killed, and 14 others were injured. Sandy Harbutt (the actor, writer, and director of *Stone*, 1974) was there and had this to say:

In that 24 hour period my feelings covered every emotion you could possibly imagine, everything from mutual bliss to complete loss, to complete failure, feelings of having killed somebody and yet the culture dictates that, that tragedy must be overcome by celebration of life and if you ever know a friend of yours who is a motorcyclist who's died and you go to that funeral or the wake, all you do is tell jokes all you do is get drunk, all you do is have a good time, you know, and celebrate that person's life and fortunately there are eight of ten thousand of us to celebrate that life and we did it (Kuipers, 1999).

Harbutt points out one aspect of the culture of motorcyclists. Through tragedy they bond through laughter and celebration. Eight to ten thousand riders could not have personally known Craig Witherspoon, but they joined together by their shared identity as motorcyclists. The members of the VMC have a shared cultural identity that goes beyond and deeper than that of a typical motorcyclist, they have a way of life where they have been enculturated to handle tragedy. Their experiences within the Defence Force means they were deployed to war and this prepared them to accept that trauma and loss could/will happen. They have successfully returned from dangerous missions over enemy territory (Drewery, 2003). The concept of trauma is familiar and almost expected as a baseline if you are a member of the club. Their peer support is framed around this assumption and the club holds that frame.

## **8.12 Conclusion**

In this chapter I sought to convey the importance of the VMC's image, and how individually the members experience wearing their colours. Furthermore, how their image protects their mental health and wellbeing by feeling connected and safe. Casper is the embodied image that unites the

members as a collective. I outlined the history of Casper, the process of acquiring the rights to wear the three-piece patch and provided insight into the VMC's rules and regulations regarding the wearing of the colours that are unique to this club. The VMC rules state the vest (colours) can only be worn when riding a motorcycle. When wearing their colours they feel a 'somebody.' However, there would be many hours of the day when a member is not wearing their protective 'armour,' perhaps then they may feel a loss of an important identity. This information is useful for health professionals to understand insignia, and how for some it is an integral part of their identity.

To understand how peer support functions within the VMC, it is first necessary to comprehend the multifaceted distinctions of their culture. These are displayed by their clothing, tattoos, and motorcycles. As a midliner, (neither an 'insider – nor – outsider') my once held understanding and preconceived ideas of bikers who are covered in tattoos and riding roaring Harley-Davidson motorcycles deepened. They claim they do not want attention, the noise of the bike, the bad boy tattooed image is not to be in the spotlight but rather keep others outside of their world. The members of the VMC allowed me into their world for a short time, discussing their history and personal journeys in the military and the club. I came to see in each of them a gentle side that was charged with deep emotions. At times I saw their vulnerabilities but above all I noted their sense of pride, connectedness, and love for Casper and their brothers by choice. Without doubt these are among some of the factors that provide protective factors for the members' wellbeing and overall mental health, potentially saving lives through the peer support the club provides. It is for this reason it makes sense for the next chapter to discuss the uniqueness of peer support within the VMC.

## 9 CHAPTER: THE FUNCTION OF PEER SUPPORT

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'Together Forever  
Our Blood Your Freedom'  
VMC insignia ring

Permission was granted to use the poem.

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### 9.1 Chapter Preface

The broad aim of this study as outlined in the introduction chapter, was to gain an in depth understanding of the experiences of peer support within a unique closed group of war veterans - the members of the Veterans Motorcycle Club (VMC). Previous discussion in the literature chapter contrasted and evaluated outcomes from various peer support programs. As discussed, the high number of deaths by suicide within the Defence Force veteran population is one of the primary reasons that understanding protective factors for veterans is so imperative. Veterans have a significantly higher risk of suicide compared to non-veterans (Kerr et al., 2021; McKay et al., 2012; Nelson et al., 2017). Thompson et al. (2016) report that psychological disorders, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are higher among veterans compared to the general population. PTSD has been shown to be a risk factor of suicidality (Caddick et al., 2015; Greden et al., 2010; MacEachron & Gustavsson, 2012). Depression and substance use disorders are also reported to be high within this cohort (Kaldas et al., 2022; Lawrence-Wood et al., 2019; Stanojlović & Davidson, 2021). Peer support may ameliorate suicide rates in veterans, and it has been proposed as a protective factor for their mental health (Beehler et al., 2021; Greden et al., 2010; Hall et al., 2020).

This chapter begins with providing a brief definition of how peer support is typically constructed within the mental health care setting. In a response to over-medicalised treatment and rights violations of people with a mental illness, peer support grew. The civil/human rights movement saw people aligned around the experience of negative mental health treatment and peer support offered a different relationship from traditional hegemonic providers (Mead & MacNeil, 2006). Often referred to as Peer Support Services (PSSs) they are integrated into long-term recovery management plans. One reason PSSs are utilised is to address the care gap that exists in many healthcare institutions. Treatment models are often not structured in ways that facilitate treatment engagement and linkages to services that can support long-term care. Primarily this helps initiate and maintain patients' engagement with treatment and other recovery support services. PSSs also

assist with mitigating relapse risk and help reduce the burden on the health care system (Eddie et al., 2019; Leamy et al., 2011; Shalaby & Agyapong, 2020). Using PSSs in the health care system has become an integral component to instil hope; to improve engagement with programs, improve the quality of life and build self-confidence (Shalaby & Agyapong, 2020).

Peer support is characterised by several underlying key principals, empowerment, and connection to community, choice and control, relationship building, mutuality and reciprocity and application of experiential knowledge (Nguyen et al., 2022 as cited in Gillard et al., 2017). People with similar lived experiences assisting and supporting others in their recovery is an important part of the mental health and psychosocial rehabilitation movement. The concept of peer specialists are people in recovery who provide peer support focusing on aspects such as self-determination, choice, health and wellness, illness management, mitigating stigma, and hope for recovery. These principles are important because the management of symptoms benefits from a holistic approach to behavioural health conditions (Clark et al., 2016 as cited in Solomon, 2010). The importance of a peer support role in person-centred mental health care is supported by a body of research that demonstrates its effectiveness (Clark et al., 2016 as cited in Doughty & Tse, 2011; Miyamoto & Sono, 2012). A model of support based on the lived experience means that peers can provide personal examples of alternative forms of care and non-clinical mental health services that have helped them (Zisman-Ilani & Byrne, 2023). This topic is explored further in the following sections.

The focus of this chapter is the way peer support is constructed and experienced by members of the VMC. Through conversation, the participants were able to share their personal stories that included both positive and negative aspects of the club. I also explored the preference for being in the VMC over other military motorcycle clubs, social motorcycle clubs or general social groups or clubs, or the Returned Soldiers League (RSL).

The VMCs support structure, hierarchy and rules do not follow a stereotypical peer support model such as a 12-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) (Ferri et al., 2006). Nor does it follow commonly used peer support models or medicalised frameworks such as those used in mental health service systems and psychosocial support services (Klee et al., 2019; Kumar et al., 2019; Shalaby & Agyapong, 2020). It is a unique system based on brotherhood, trust, masculine identity, and respect. The VMC's model is all underpinned by historical marginalisation and rejection by the nation; that, in turn, has seen this group tactically retreat from mainstream society. However, they may share several underlying values and principles of those commonly present in other peer support

models. As discussed by Gillard et al. (2017, p. 138), peer support principles should support the building of safe and trusting relationships. These peer support relationships are based on shared lived experience. Furthermore, underpinning these relationships are similar values of mutuality and reciprocity.

The participant Bob was asked to describe what peer support looks like for the members and for himself:

**Bob:** *“Yeah, it's just the, it's actually just listening to people, just understanding people, not judging people. I wouldn't really know where most of the people, if they have had like the ... on their vests I probably wouldn't know where they've been, I wouldn't know ..., I wouldn't know ..., I've never asked them.”*

Bob is referring to the front of the vest, the colours. On the front panels on either side, located by the rib cage, are patches known as rockers. There are variations between the VMC chapters and placement of the rockers, to the left of the vest; these may have ‘Brothers in Arms’ or the chapters name e.g. “Adelaide Hills” (see the introduction chapter for images of the vest). The rocker on the right has the name of the country where they were deployed. The rockers demonstrate how they recognise each other and have a sense of a shared experience with their military service. These can be conversation starters between chapter members when first meeting. For example, noting the country of service and the military corps can open dialogue such as, what year did you go? It is evident from Bob's statement that peer support is bound by the shared identity of the club. Bob is stating that it doesn't matter what country you served in, this isn't what connects them or how he perceives the peer support within the club. It is being non-judgemental when listening and being listened to that is key. There is also implicit trust that does not need to be spoken, justified, or explained. He further summed up what peer support in the club means to him; he stated, “It's just being there.”

Separation from the military has been shown to be a time of particularly high risk for depression and suicidality in war veterans (Warrener et al., 2021), especially when that service has been combat-related (Koven, 2017). The VMC members have all served in combat. The VMC have a unique hierarchy that mirrors the military. This has proved to be an effective and necessary component of their peer support structure. This is markedly different from the familiar settings and functions of other peer support programs or models which are non-hierarchical, emphasise mutuality, and which consciously attend to the concept of power in relationships. For the VMC,

structure is integral, and hierarchy and authority are very much played out within the group. It is this familiar military experience that drives their connection and need for structure, replicating and transposing for those with familiarity of the military system. The rules establish the relationship without them having to work at it or build it themselves. From various ages, and some we saw were very young (Table 3) when they joined the military, they were “forced” to fit in to prescribed roles and relationships through their services. Establishing new relationships when leaving the military, particularly if it suggests an aspect of vulnerability, is daunting. The VMC offers safety in the peer support because of the familiarity of its structure.

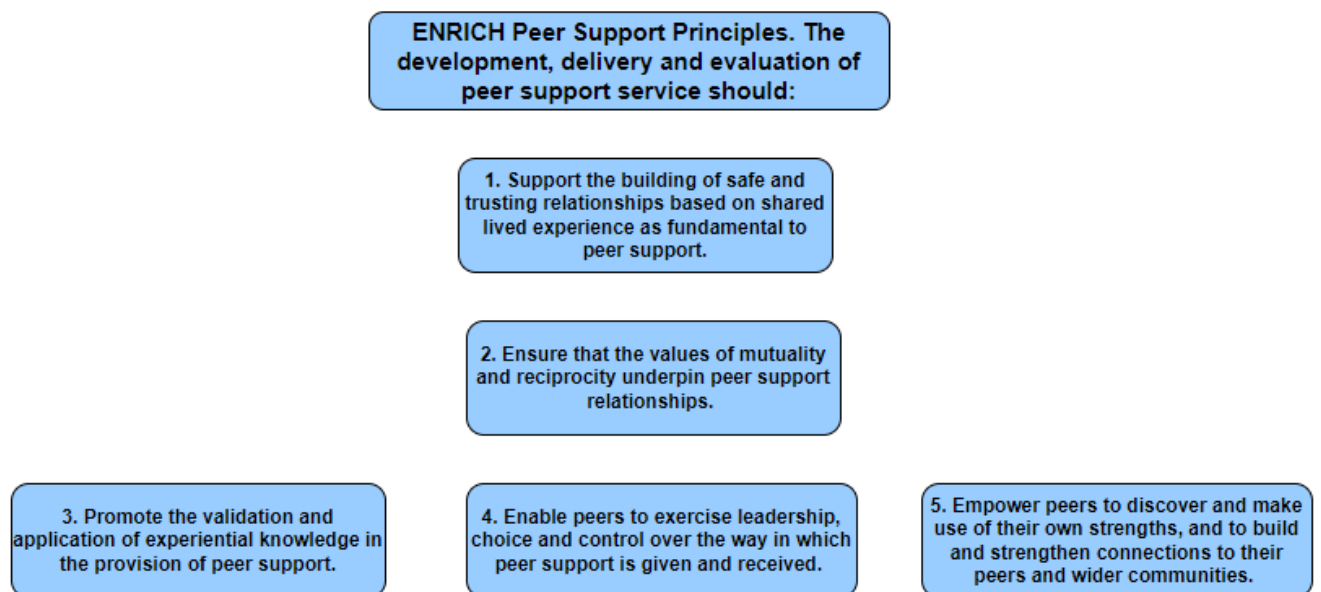
## **9.2 What is peer support?**

In recent years peer support has gained significant attention in the mental health sector. The use of peer support dates back several centuries but it is only in the last few decades that recognition and inclusion of these principles into service design and delivery has formally grown (Shalaby & Agyapong, 2020). The benefits of having people with similar life experiences to participate in groups or act as individual peer mentors has been encouraging. People who have experienced similar difficulties can better relate. Consequently, more authentic empathy and validation is seen in peer support (Hundt et al., 2015; Kumar et al., 2019; Mead & MacNeil, 2006; Repper & Carter, 2011; Stanojlović & Davidson, 2021). Peers appear to connect better, but it is the reciprocity in the relationship where learning from each other builds that deeper sense of connection and not only because of shared experiences (Gillard et al., 2021). Horan et al. (2021, p. 3), that defines peer support as a system of giving and receiving help founded on key principles of respect, shared responsibility, and mutual agreement of what is helpful. In general, peer support groups have some form of structure that involves individuals who support one another based on their lived and shared experiences. Three broad types of peer support are recognised in the mental health field (Repper & Carter, 2011):

1. Formally employed Peer Support Workers (PSWs) who usually have some form of training. Some healthcare facilities have frameworks with guiding principles for example, the ENRICH handbook (Gillard et al., 2017) (Figure 22).

**Figure 22**

*The ENRICH Peer Support Principles*



2. Peers participating in consumer or peer-run programs, usually with no formal study or training for the peer role (Repper & Carter, 2011).
3. Informal (naturally occurring) peer support (Repper & Carter, 2011).

Healthcare professionals are known to work alongside peer support workers (PSWs) and peer specialists (PS) in a variety of settings. For example, clinical services, non-government organisations in the community, National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) providers and hospitals (Eddie et al., 2019; Klee et al., 2019; Mackay et al., 2019; Reddin, 2003; Shalaby & Agyapong, 2020). PSWs have been used to improve engagement with services such as substance use disorder programs, psychological intervention, and suicide prevention programs (Beehler et al., 2021). Peer support workers can act as an example of living well, assisting others with increasing their ability to live independently. Furthermore, reduce loneliness and social disability, and potentially facilitate functional recovery in peers (Nguyen et al., 2022).

Consumers can learn self-management strategies, develop increased social support networks and reduce barriers between services and peers. One of the many benefits of peer support is that it offers peers a sense of meaningful connection to others and the community through interpersonal



interaction with others who shared the same source of distress (Nguyen et al., 2022 as cited in Gillard, 2019).

It is well-identified in international literature, that some people with mental health conditions can experience a cycle of hospital re-admissions (Lawn et al., 2008). Evaluations of transitional and post-discharge peer support programs have demonstrated positive outcomes for people who have had psychiatric hospitalisation. The evaluations have shown a reduction in hospital re-admission in some cases and increased engagement and connection with community-based services (Scanlan et al., 2017). Peer support programs offer consumers an approach where non-medicalised language is used, an environment where there is mutual understanding and trust that symptoms are actually understood, and where they perceive they are genuinely being heard (Lawn et al., 2008; Nguyen et al., 2022). PSWs and PS roles include working with people to improve their quality of life and self-confidence, reduce the burden on the healthcare system, and support recovery and reduce hospital avoidance and illness relapse. Peer support services have become accepted in many health care settings for a wide range of issues such as, substance use disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression (Hundt et al., 2015; Stanojlović & Davidson, 2021).

Peer support within the health care system has come to be seen through a particular medical and professional lens. Medical language has been adopted to express what it means to ‘help’ people with mental health issues. Mead and MacNeil (2006) explain that critical learning does not assume a medical definition of the problem, it opens us to exploring other ways of thinking about the experience rather than trying to deal with the ‘it.’ Using different language supports conversations that are medically decoded. Medical language can be traditional and can keep people stuck. If medical language continues to be used in this way, assumptions are often made about a person’s experiences as they have been interpreted by a traditional system. When people have had a disconnecting kind of experience, it is crucial when rebuilding their sense of community to maintain a non-professional distance (Mead & MacNeil, 2006). Mead and MacNeil (2006, p. 4) write:

Peer support in mental health however has a more political frame of reference. Whereas some support groups form around the shared experience of illness, peer support grew out of a civil/human rights movement in which people affiliated around the experience of negative mental health treatment. (e.g. coercion, over-medication, rights violations, as well as an over-medicalized version of their “story”). In other words, the shared experience has

had more to do with responses to treatment than the shared experience of mental illness. The Independent Living Movement has been the quintessential guide to this way of thinking.

Peer support is experienced in many ways, by many people of all ages and for a vast array of reasons. Peer support can take place in a variety of settings. Whether conducted one-on-one or in groups, meetings can be held in specific locations such as community or church buildings or outside at the beach, bush, park and indeed on motorcycles. Programs can also be organised by health care providers, church groups or non-government organisations.

### **9.2.1 Personal recovery: The CHIME framework**

The CHIME framework is a well-known model used in peer support settings. The acronym CHIME (Figure 23) represents a conceptual framework that identifies five key recovery processes. Connectedness, Hope and optimism about the future, Identity, Meaning in life and Empowerment (Dekkers et al., 2020; Leamy et al., 2011; Slade et al., 2013).

**Figure 23**

*The CHIME Framework*

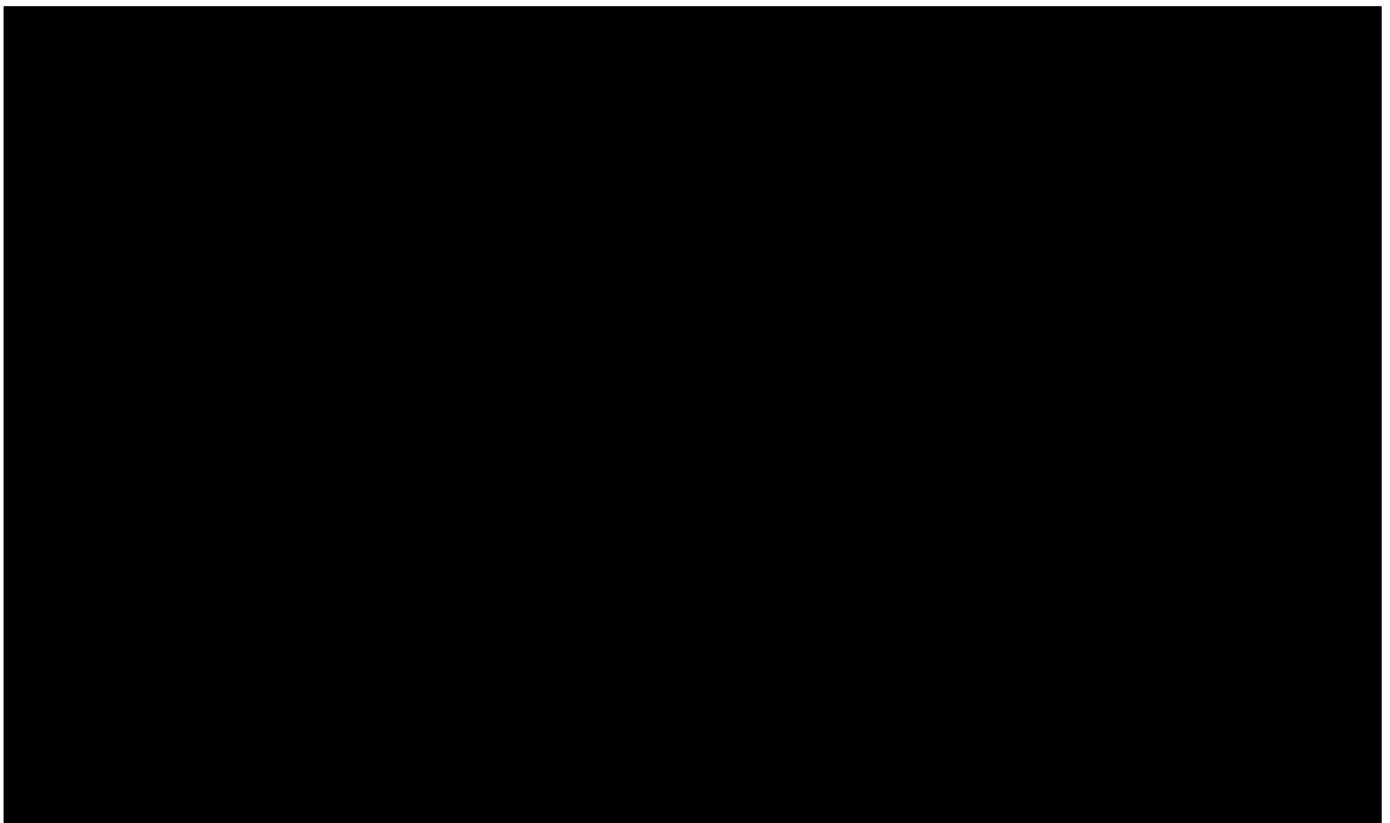


Image removed due to copyright restrictions. Original available online at <https://www.therecoveryplace.co.uk/chime-framework/>

Mental illness can limit personal journeys making it difficult to live a satisfying life. Challenging one's attitudes, values, feelings, goals, skills or roles in the hope of living a more satisfying or happier life can be difficult (Leamy et al., 2011). Recovery is a unique process, and the term has become widely used in mental health systems. Slade et al. (2013) writes:

Recovery has at least two meanings: clinical recovery meaning recovery from mental illness, and personal recovery meaning recovery with a mental illness. Both meanings are underpinned by a set of values and create role expectations for mental health professionals. The distinction between the two meanings reflects a debate about the core purpose of mental health systems.

All the participants in this study described experiencing issues with their mental health at various times. Stereotypical perceptions of mental illness often portray individuals as passive. Common language, such as "suffering from" or "debilitated by," while not disputing the validity of individuals experiences, reinforces passive attitudes toward mental illness. However, this does not appear to reflect the experience of the participants in this study.

Culturally, attitudes about mental illness differ; even in groups from a similar culture, sub-cultural views can be very different. If we take for example, people who experience psychosis, they also experience internalised stigma as a result of their symptoms (Nguyen et al., 2022 as cited in Payne et al., 2006 Sartorius & Aichenberger, 2005). A study by Li et al. (2023) found that in Chinese culture, menopause is considered a mental illness. Menopausal women are often subjected to verbal and physical violence by family members and labelled as "mentally ill." They often suffer unbearable negative effects caused by shame of being menopausal.

During his doctoral research Grey (2016), came to describe a phenomenon he called 'benevolent othering.' In the context of contemporary mental health discourses, 'benevolent othering,' refers to a way in which others are spoken of in ways that are ostensibly positive, and it offers a framework for understanding those discourses. In mental health service settings more umbrella terms are being used, such as "consumer", "survivor" and "ex-user;" this reflects the diversity of people's self-identifications without trying to impose a unifying term (Grey, 2016). However, terms such as "sufferer" or "suffering" from... are often still used to describe the experience of having a mental illness.

For the members of the VMC, it would appear their attitude to having a mental illness is that it – “just is”. This will be discussed more thoroughly in the following chapter that focuses on mental health. The following quote by the participant Pottsy discusses his experience with PTSD. The comment demonstrates that the feelings of shame relate to not feeling justified to have PTSD, not the fact that he had/has PTSD:

**Pottsy:** *“I was ashamed and these feelings of PTSD and that, you know really at the time I felt like I hadn't done enough to warrant, like you're always thinking oh yeah but this guy got killed or this guy saw his mate die, or this was never, you know you got to special forces and watching them operate, and it's like yeah it's intense what they do and I'm like yeah I never thought I'd done enough to warrant having PTSD.”*

A framework such as CHIME would not be effective, and engagement would possibly not even be considered by the members of the VMC. Out of the five core principles conceptualised in the CHIME framework, only certain aspects of two of the core principles would be applicable to the VMC members. These are Connectedness and Identity (Leamy et al., 2011). Even these two aspects have their own unique meaning for the VMC members. Their identity is enveloped in Casper (three-piece patch discussed in Chapter 8). The VMC members are exceptionally connected via the peer support structure within the club. However, as with the CHIME model, their peer support does not incorporate other social groups or the general community. In fact, it is precisely the opposite. As stated by one of the participants (Bear) *“And I don't do public.”* Many of the other participants relayed the similar sentiments about not wanting to engage with civilians.

### 9.2.2 Identity

Identity is an essential aspect for the VMC members; the loss of their military identity is what appears to draw them to this club. The replication of military structure, rules, and ethos of camaraderie are what they lost when leaving the military and something they endeavour to regain:

**Pablo:** *“I was involved with the club, and it had helped me, so I stuck with it, but yeah, that was the main reason was to not go cold turkey on Defence, basically.”*

Pablo's statement is powerful when he describes to not go ‘cold turkey’ on Defence. The term cold turkey is often used to describe unassisted withdrawal from drug addiction such as cocaine or heroin, or for quitting smoking cigarettes, or withdrawal from alcohol addiction (Smith et al., 2017;

Veltman, 2007). His comment demonstrates how integral the Defence Force is to his sense of identity, belonging and essence of being. Bear also explained how his identity was enveloped in the uniform; something he did not recognise until leaving the service. He made a powerful declaration, *"You lose who you are, you lose what makes your heartbeat."* An interesting dichotomy exists, his pride in his military uniform, being seen by others as a senior serving member of the Defence Force serving his country, and the VMC colours and symbols on the vest as another crucial part of his identity. It would appear there is an external and internal identity construction bound up in both uniforms. The colours potentially convey a different message to the public, as they are seen more as bikers. In recent years the public have begun thanking the armed forces for their service; this has become quite popular and meant to show appreciation for their service to the country. However, I would assume the public would not thank someone for being a biker:

**Bear:** *"Well, that's where the belonging came. So, you felt that, you get, you leave, and you've worked so hard to get to where you are and you're very, the uniform, the rank and I used to always say that the rank never defined me on who I am, it was the person that I would be. And it never did but when you lost it, didn't realise how much it actually meant to you, and it was your identity. Anybody that saw you out in the public and you were dressed in your uniform, and you were a senior, everybody, you were respected just for that. And then losing all that, you lose your identity, you lose who you are, you lose what makes your heartbeat."*

The participants spoke of the 'losses' of the military when leaving Defence. Jay discussed the loss of his military identity and how the VMC has literally saved his life. His comment below is referring to suicide. The club provides the spirit of military, something the veterans yearn for and need:

**Jay:** *"I lost the military, which is a massive part of my identity okay, and if I didn't have the VMC, I wouldn't be here, and yeah and, hand on heart all day long I'd say that."*

Referring again to the CHIME framework and the identity concept, reference is made to overcoming stigma of mental illness. Again, there is a markedly different viewpoint by the interviewed members of the VMC. There categorically is no stigma within the club around mental health issues. This was mentioned emphatically by each participant, and it will also be discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 10, which explores their concept of mental health. Bob relayed his thoughts on the collective club viewpoint of stigma of mental illness:

**Bob:** *"No fucking stigma whatsoever, no, there's no, ... go and see a counsellor, you go and talk about, it's, we, like people actually fucking encourage it."*

The three remaining CHIME principles have the headings; hope & optimism, meaning, and empowerment (Leamy et al., 2011). The members of the VMC would find these terms annoying, even demasculinising, and therefore would likely dismiss this as 'do-gooder' language by a group of people who have no idea of their sub-cultural identity. Numerous peer support studies have findings that highlight the importance of connections with peers who have had a similar experience (Drebing et al., 2018; Lawrence-Wood et al., 2019; Turner et al., 2022). Using correct language and terms is of great importance if veterans of war are to engage with peer support programs or treatment services (Azevedo et al., 2020; Dragojevic & Giles, 2014). If the 'doors' are to be opened for this group of closed veterans, then the correct understanding of what they value, how they operate and communicate needs to be conveyed. Consideration can then be given to future designs of intervention programs and treatment services.

The members of the VMC are the epitome of a Westernised masculine image. Leather jackets, roaring Harley Davidson motorcycles, tattoos and for many long beards. Reddin (2003 as cited in Buchbinder, 1994) writes:

There are distinctions between what is perceived as masculine and unmasculine, it has become blurred, resulting in confusion and gender-role conflict. 30 years from this viewpoint the members of the VMC do not appear confused about their masculine identity. In fact, I would say the hegemonic masculinity, described as 'macho' is typical of Australian culture, and is very much a part of their identity.

Bear made a comment when describing members who are not acting in a macho manner. I did not get the impression he was being derogatory to females, although it is a derogatory comment casting females as "whining bitches." I believe his comment was more to convey they were not acting as a macho Westernised stereotypical man, because they had "grown a vagina:"

**Bear:** *"I kid you not they grow a vagina every time they start being a bunch of whining little bitches and we're going for fucks sake, just get on the bike and ride, just fuck off."*

As stated, it is essential that service providers and program designers attempting to engage with veterans of war use language and terminology that is aligned to their sub-cultural identity. Otherwise, they will not engage with treatment services, peer support groups or intervention programs. The participant Bob describes an encounter of another member with a health professional; the discussion was around sleep deprivation:

**Bob:** *“One turned around, and they said oh yeah, they were saying to them about like fucking sit there and scrunch up your toes and imagine you're in a forest, and it's like mate can you fuck off, do you know what I mean.”*

Upon further clarification, I believe the health professional was describing progressive muscle relaxation and mindfulness practice. Clearly, the health professional did not have any understanding of what this war veteran may have experienced in combat, nor the significant effects of PTSD. The veteran would not have found this helpful or responded well to being advised to scrunch up his toes and imagine he is in a forest. This type of generalising treatment potentially is harmful inasmuch as it will prevent war veterans from engaging with treatment providers and services.

### 9.2.3 Connectedness and Safety

Research suggests that a lack of social connectedness is strongly related to the experience of depression and potentially increases vulnerability for future incidents of depression (Cruwys et al., 2013). Peer support has been recognised in a growing body of research to be tremendously important towards helping many individuals through difficult situations. People with a similar lived experience offer each other advice and suggestions for strategies that many professionals do not offer or even know about (Klee et al., 2019; Kumar et al., 2019; Mead & MacNeil, 2006 as cited in Reissman, 1989; Roberts & Rappaport, 1998; Shalaby & Agyapong, 2020). Social group membership furnishes individuals with a sense of shared identity and regardless of the source, it has proven beneficial for mental health outcomes (Cruwys et al., 2013 as cited in Dingle et al., 2012). Pablo discussed not being able to discuss mental health concerns within the military for fear of jeopardising a promotion or posting:

**Pablo:** *“They tell you over and over again, we've got all these services, it's a myth that ... looks at your career, so on, and so forth, we all know that's a crock of shit. So, you can be surrounded by people, but you feel like you can't tell any one of them anything.”*

Health-care avoidance in the military and with veterans are both linked to having mistrust of services. Engagement with health-care services is perceived to negatively impact career and deployment opportunities (Dabovich et al., 2021). Pablo discussed having a very different experience within the club. Regardless of age and service history of the other members, he feels safe and secure, and he describes the ability to allow himself to be more vulnerable:

**Pablo:** *“It’s a funny thing to be surrounded by people yet feel isolated and alone, but that’s pretty much sort of what it was. Whereas within that, the club, I could speak to people who were still serving, people who had served, people who’d served over different decades, they’d been to different wars, they’d been to the same wars, they’d gone through all these things, and I guess because you’re all part of that club it’s, I guess you’ve got that sense of safety and security and you can be that bit more vulnerable.”*

The Department of Veteran Affairs (DVA) tender specific programs for organisations with a focus on veterans and veteran families. Regardless of where and how peer support takes place, we have seen there are essential ingredients that are integral to its success; components such as mutuality and reciprocity, implicit trust, empowerment, identity, safety, hope, choice and control and connection to community (Cruwys et al., 2013; Leamy et al., 2011; Slade et al., 2013). For the members of the VMC a critical factor is their connectedness to each other. Jamieson et al. (2021) comment that individuals are fused by potent feeling of connectedness that allows reciprocal strength to be derived from group membership. The quotes from the participants below reveal just how important their connectedness is. It is akin to a familial bond but not because they are blood related, they consider themselves ‘brothers,’ but not because they are genetically linked, but because they choose to be brothers, and they belong with and to each other:

**Bear:** *“That brotherhood, that sense of belonging.”*

**H:** *“There are a couple of other guys in my chapter that I would be able to get on the phone to any time and have done from time to time.”*

**Marksy:** *“I guess you’re struggling with something or you’re having a bad week mental health wise or something, you feel more comfortable calling someone from the club.”*

### **9.3 Origins of peer support for the VMC**

In their paper titled “Peer Support: What Makes It Unique?” Mead and MacNeil (2006) write: Maintaining its non-professional vantage point is crucial in helping people rebuild their sense of community when they’ve had a disconnecting kind of experience. This distinction of having a disconnecting kind of experience, resonates for many veterans who left their homes and family when on deployment. Transitioning back to civilian life they need to rebuild their sense of community and indeed identity. The members of the VMC (and the former Vietnam Veterans



Motorcycle Club (V.V.M.C.)) achieve this by rebuilding a sense of identity by joining the club, rather than through family and/or significant others. Intimate partners play a critical role in supporting veterans (Waddell et al., 2020). However, for the members of the VMC, the club drives the help seeking and not family, who for a lot of veterans (other than those in the VMC) are the ones advocating for support of treatment services. Whilst this seems helpful, potentially there could be negative implications. For example, the closed nature of the group could be a barrier to gaining access to other professional help that the veterans and/or their loved ones are unaware of. It could also hide the extent or need for help from the family.

The catalyst for the forming of the motorcycle club was born not out of a shared experience of mental ill-health but from a response to the dispossession from society. The negative experience in treatment identified by Mead & McNeil is not in the same context as the VMC. However, it does show that it is not necessarily the experience of a mental illness where peer support is helpful and indeed needed. The rejection the Vietnam veterans experienced from their Australian nation coupled with the Returned Soldiers League (RSLs) left them feeling marginalised, angry, and full of despair. The struggle for recognition has taken a great toll on many veterans (Hiddlestone, 2004; Pigot, 2000; Shand, 2016). Contemporary veterans are not 'immune' from feeling that same rejection. As stated by the participant Bear, *"Because if you understand the history of it, you own that heritage as well."*

In an address to the nation, the Honourable Matt Keogh MP, Minister for Defence Personnel and Minister for Veterans' Affairs, during the commemoration service on 18 August 2023 for the 50th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War, announced:

Prime Minister Albanese said earlier this year, we honour you and thank you and we are so sorry it took us so long as a nation to do so; you deserve better. You were given an impossible job, and you did it well. You looked out for you mates every step of the way. Then you had to fight the RSL and other ex-service organisation leadership for recognition and support. Now, you look out for the next generation, with many of you now leaders of our ex-service organisations with veteran organisations, veteran advocates, or welfare officers working to make sure that the mistakes of the past are not repeated. Today we honour your service so that 50 years from now generations yet unborn will see this memorial they will see those names enshrined on our national memorial and they will know your story. They will know

what you endured and what you did for our nation. On behalf of all Australians thank you for your service, Lest We Forget. (ABC Australia, 2023)

Five decades on from the Vietnam war, many of the veterans still have not recovered from the experience of rejection; they still carry the psychological pain. To them, Vietnam is not a country, nor merely a war, but rather a state of mind. Mirroring the feelings of the returned Vietnam veterans, are the current veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. The scandalous revelations of alleged war crimes in November 2020 has led to public reckoning about the root cause of military abuse and what might be done to address it (Duriesmith, 2023). We potentially will have decades of emotionally injured veterans as reports of war crimes continue. This potentially could lead to those veterans feeling they should hold a sense of responsibility for the atrocities. The media has reported that the Australian nation has questioned why this country was involved in these wars (Gareth, 2014; MacKenzie et al., 2023). If contemporary war veterans truly believe the nation is against them, we could see a repeat of the Vietnam veterans' hurt and rejection and decades of psychological pain. For the veterans of the Vietnam war, the VMC was the only place where they felt comfortable and supported among their peers. Eight of the eleven interviewed participants, veterans of the Iraq, Afghanistan, and Bosnian wars, stated a similar experience of being in the VMC. It is the only place where they feel safe, not judged, and connected to likeminded men. The participant Jay comments that as a contemporary veteran, he believes they too are being pushed aside, and even by Vietnam veterans who are not in the club. The generational trauma of dislocation from society that was seen with the Vietnam veterans, appears to be repeating the pattern with contemporary veterans:

***Jay:** "So it's very common that they call us contemporary veterans, basically under 65 yeah, and you know it's funny I listened to and I've heard from a lot of Vietnam veterans about the treatment they received from Korean war veterans, and, and World War II veterans who may return you know how they were sort of pushed aside and weren't considered a veteran or true veteran by them, and then for them to do the exact same to us it's very hypocritical."*

Vietnam war veteran Kel describes the experience when returning home from the war. His statement revealed that even more than the battles of war, the worst part for him was coming home. This was a significant statement and reinforcing understanding of the depth of that hurt was the visible choking back of his emotions, lowered voice and head down shaking in disbelief. His eyes had filled, this is over 50 years on, but the pain visibly still raw:

**Kel:** *"Like when we got back, you know, they marched down the street and we got pelted with rotten eggs and tomatoes and stuff ..., whereas when my father come home, they marched down the street and everyone ... you beauty, you know. And when we come back, we got pelted with tomatoes and ... called baby killers and stuff. So, yeah, it was - It was – well, it's where all the PTSD comes from virtually. Yeah. And, you know, I've been – I was, I was involved in fights over there, or in battles, so – but even that, you know, the worst part about it was coming home."*

Kel continued to discuss the origins of the VMC. As a founding member with five other Vietnam veterans, he told the simple reason the club began, because of the way the returned veterans were mistreated when they came home. The veterans needed support from peers, people who understood them not from a medical team who have no understanding of their experiences. They wanted and needed to recreate their lost identity, companionship and security as their military involvement ceased (Garcia, 2017):

**Kel:** *"Yeah, it's just – it – it's basically just – it has been a support. It was started off – the six of us started off originally as supports to each other because, you know, we were saying, well, how'd you – how did you get treated when you got back from Vietnam? Oh, I got treated like shit. Yeah, yeah, so did I. Yeah, one of the guys, oh yeah, the bastards treated me like shit and... So, yeah, so we got together and formed it."*

### **9.3.1 Peer support - critical ingredients**

Academics have compiled a list of what they term 'critical ingredients' of peer support. These form the basic rules and how the group is constructed (Gillard et al., 2017; Mead & MacNeil, 2006 ; Slade et al., 2013). These include:

1. free from coercion (e.g. voluntary)
2. consumer run and directed (both governmentally and programmatically)
3. an informal setting with flexibility
4. non-hierarchical
5. non-medical approach (e.g. not diagnosing, etc).

The members of the VMC have their own very strict processes and rules as discussed in Chapter 8. The VMC appear to have three of the five listed critical ingredients for peer support; numbers one, two and five. However, by contrast they do have formal settings and a hierarchical structure that is

not common in other peer support programs or systems. The VMC have a very strict structure that is essential to their functioning as a peer group of war veterans. The structure is based on respect and recognition of authority, likened to rank in the military and position of office held. Interestingly, the parameters of that structure changes once a member has been fully initiated into the club. For example, the veterans who want to join the club and are 'serving' their time as a prospect of the club (i.e. those who are not fully patched) obey the authority of all members, particularly the president. This does not apply to full patched members, who are equals regardless of their position, and some just carry out different roles. This is exemplified in Point 6.3 in the Prospect Handbook, which states:

5.3 - NEVER approach the Club President (Particularly as a Prospect). If you want to speak to the President, ask a Full Member (VMC/Committee Member) if you can approach him. Otherwise, at some stage he will move around the area and talk to as many people as possible (Veterans Motorcycle Club, 2024b, p. 5).

The rules maintain control for themselves and dictate the interactions and how they can relate to each other. This is a unique peer support structure, once again replicating the military (ranks and hierarchy) which is familiar. The participant Bob explains how the president can in some respects have less credence than the other members, because he does not have voting rights on club matters:

**Bob:** *"like we were ... the president and this, that and everybody else, like they're only members doing a job, they're not above anyone, they're not higher than everyone, they are just still a member, they're just doing a job. And if anything, in some way they should have less of a credence than anybody else, because their, like the president doesn't get to vote."*

## 9.4 Language - hierarchy within the VMC

If mental health services are to engage with a cohort such as the VMC war veterans, it is of vital importance they understand the unique way in which this group operates and converses. The VMC is more than a club, it is their way of life. The following rules are laid out to demonstrate how integral the replication of a military structure is to the group. These are not just a set of rules for joining the club, they are an essential component that is non-negotiable. The rules set the boundaries for

acceptable behaviour set by their standards; these are not necessarily desirable in main-stream society.

The VMC distinctive structure replicates aspects of the military and authority, this forms the basis of their unique peer support. This is evident from the outset by the language that is used in their structure of office positions such as, President, Vice President, Sargent at Arms, Road Captain, and Quartermaster. Furthermore, this is demonstrated by their rules and particularly evident in how the rules are laid out in certain parts of the VMC Prospect Handbook (see Appendix J). For example, the Club's order of ride - under points C3.1, and 4 (Veterans Motorcycle Club, 2024b, p. 3):

3.1e - NEVER OVERTAKE THE PRESIDENT!

3.1f – **Never overtake a Full Member unless directed!**

4c – The Vice President and President ride at the front of the pack. NO ONE passes them unless specifically directed to do so.

4j - When the Club attends a specific function, particularly at another MC's Clubhouse, the Club arrives and leaves together. The President will decide at what time the Club is to arrive and leave. The Sergeant at Arms will notify all members and guests 30 minutes prior to departure. All members are to be ready to depart at the designated time. This is to allow a fast, and safe transit between points.

It is clear from the wording in the handbook that the hierarchical structure of importance begins with the head of the club, this is the president, then the full patched members and lastly prospects. Again, there is distinct military language used such as “use the chain of command” (point 7.3). It is evident that prospects of the club are to know their place within the pecking order. This hierarchical structure is further demonstrated under points 6 and 7 that are titled Club Etiquette ‘and’ Some Do's respectively (Veterans Motorcycle Club, 2024b, p. 5):

6.4 - NEVER approach two (2) Patch Members from another MC when they are in conversation. Wait a respectful distance then wait for an invite, or approach a Full Member (VMC), or the Sergeant at Arms of your own Club.

6.5 - Show respect to Members from another MC. When speaking with them, keep it short and sweet.

7.3 - Use the "Chain of Command." Everyone should be aware of it i.e. Prospects use their sponsor or the Sergeant at Arms. Full Members (VMC) use the Sergeant at Arms or a Committee Member. (This will allow any matter to be dealt with accordingly, and in a timely manner).

The club's hierarchy is such that prospects are not permitted to approach the VMC president directly. They must first approach a full patched member of the club who is an office bearer of the committee (vice president, treasurer, or secretary). The rules further extend to outside of the VMC as indicated in point 6.4 and the wording '*ALWAYS KNOW YOU ARE BEING OBSERVED.*' There is an emphasis on maintaining respect to each other and other motorcycle clubs (MCs). As previously discussed in the introduction and Chapter 8, MC clubs are one-percent motorcycle clubs such as the Hells Angels and Rebels. Prospects are reminded to keep a conversation *short and sweet*.

Behaviour is closely monitored and recorded as standards of behaviour that are expected to be upheld. This extends to interactions with the public or other motorcycle clubs (Veterans Motorcycle Club, 2024b, pp. 5-6):

6.8 - The Sergeant at Arms is responsible for all Prospects. He (or his representative) is the only one authorised to allocate tasks to these members. He also keeps a record of their behaviour and attendance.

8.5 NEVER allow other Clubs, or the public, to see a disagreement with another member of our own Club. Avoid it and deal with it at a later stage.

8.6 DO NOT wander around by yourself at a bike show or any function. Always have a 'Brother' with you. Furthermore, NEVER call a member from another club 'Brother.' This is offensive to 1% clubs.

#### **9.4.1 Secrecy of the Brotherhood**

The Freemasons are possibly the world's largest and oldest male only secret society. Estimates of its beginnings date back to 3000 BCE. Described as a house of many rooms, they once boasted many hundreds of lodges and thousands of members throughout the United Kingdom, Europe, and the United States of America (USA). The Freemasons committed to self-improvement and betterment of their communities (Oron et al., 2023). Similarities with the Freemasons and VMC can be seen by symbolic clothing, rituals, and separate lodges which are the equivalent to VMC chapters. Rules that

governed the Freemasons were known as 'charges.' One of these charges, as seen written in 14th Century document, states that no member is to reveal any secrets of any brother (Oron et al., 2023). They also share the idea of equality, tests of the characters of their members and are sworn in oaths of secrecy. Similarly point 8.3 of the VMC Prospect Handbook states (Veterans Motorcycle Club, 2024b, p. 6):

8.3 NEVER discuss membership numbers, or Club Business outside the Club. Club business is club business!!

As discussed in Chapter 7, it is trust in and of each other that provides the foundation for the VMC members' fraternal bond. Peer support is at the heart of this closed community and forms the essence of their brotherhood. Point 10.1 highlights that being a member of the VMC adds to your life and they are there for each other:

10.1 The Committee and Members of Adelaide Hills welcome your interest in becoming a Member of our Club and Brotherhood. We hope you enjoy the experience, and find our Club is what you have been looking for to add to your life. I use the word Life because that is what it's all about. As you know we are a Patch Club, and your fellow Member will become a Brother. We are here for each other. (Veterans Motorcycle Club, 2024b, p. 7).

## **9.5 Peer support - The members' voices**

Peer support groups are usually attended by likeminded individuals who have a shared experience of life. For the members of the VMC there are obvious distinguishable differences that are markedly unique such as the distinct patched vest, colours, discussed in Chapter 8 and a motorcycle (this must be over 750cc engine). There are also subtle nuances of the clubs' functioning that are of great interest and importance. During the interviews for this study, it was clearly communicated by several members that the club means everything to them and a few then stated the club has directly saved their life, or they knew of others where they believed the club had saved a member's life.

There is a strong and imperative commitment to regularly 'check in' on each other by using messaging phone apps such as Signal, directly calling, organised club rides and unorganised rides just to catch up, visiting at home or when admitted to hospital or inpatient mental health services such as the Jamie Larcombe Centre (an inpatient psychiatric treatment unit for veterans and first

responders). The group uses their network of members to check who is doing what, where and when; paying particular attention to those who are most in need of a watchful eye. The members stagger their visits to the Jamie Larcombe centre. This is for two reasons, the first to ensure the member is not overwhelmed by too many people and second, to ensure they are being visited every day. The participant Bob describes his visits and encounters at inpatient mental health care:

***Bob:** “I mean I’ve run into quite a number of people up at the Jamie Larcombe Centre, we’ve gone up there ..., to which some stage I was going in there, at one stage a couple of months every week and if the people were changing over, do you know what I mean, someone’s leaving, someone’s coming, someone’s leaving, someone’s coming, someone was coming back.”*

On one visiting occasion, I rode with my then husband on his motorbike to visit a member whose nickname was Digger (sadly, Digger has since passed away). When we approached the front counter, we were met by a nurse who indicated the visitors’ sign in book. My husband looked at me, he was puzzled; he turned the book so I could see why he was stuck. The question asked for the name of the person you are visiting. I shrugged my shoulders and gently shook my head; the nurse could obviously tell we were stuck with a question and looked down to see what it was. She looked up a little confused, “Who are you visiting?” she asked. We replied together “Digger.” She laughed and said, “They’re all diggers!” My ex-husband went outside to call other members to discover Digger’s real name. It took several calls to many of the members as they did not know his first name either. It was necessary for the club’s secretary, who obtained the information from the VMC application form, to pass that information along. Although an amusing story at the time, it has later resonated with me that these veterans are not concerned with your name or where you come from, just what you have been through and how you are committed to each other and/or preferred to be seen. As we sat down in the small garden, just next to the carpark, Digger had a beaming smile. He said how he loves to hear the bikes roaring up that path, he knows they are coming to see him, and he said he could not wait to ‘get out’ and be on his bike again with his vest on and his brothers at his side.

### **9.5.1 The VMC saves veterans’ lives**

Members will go to great lengths to care, protect, and support each other. Updates on the status of members are communicated to the group via Signal messaging application or if more details are needed or there is greater concern a phone call, this will ignite the communication tree, each member calling and updating. Or they will arrange a meet up to discuss what they can or should do



and who will do what, such as contact family members of the veteran in question. The participant Raider discussed a time where he was planning on ending his life and the distance some members travelled to check on him:

**Raider:** *"I wouldn't still be here if it wasn't for the club and my wife. I actually met my wife through the club. And yeah, I guarantee I wouldn't be here."*

Q: *"You mean alive?"*

**Raider:** *"Yeah. I've had, on two occasions that I can recall off the top of my head, once when I was in Canberra, we had a padre in the chapter, and he came over and spent the day with me, and because I was not in – and that's when I was still in the army, and that's when I went and seen a psyche and all that sort of stuff, and that was the – you know, starting the process of me discharging. But there was another time when I was up [name], my wife went away somewhere, and nobody could get hold of me, but she rung my mates, who lived two hours away. They rode down, and pinched all my grog, sobered me up and made sure I was alright, and yeah. So, I can honestly say I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for the club."*

Q: *"They rode two hours to come and check on you."*

**Raider:** *"Yep, yep. So, I lived in [name], and if I came – one of the guys came from [name], so it could be a bit further, but anyway, yeah. And that's – that's the good side, you know, and that's what we're supposed to do, and that's what we're supposed to be about."*

Jay discussed how the club has saved his life. The club has given him back an identity that he lost when leaving the military. The participant H (Aitch) also discusses how other veterans he knows have been close to ending their lives by suicide. The club provides a unique protective factor, it gives a familiar military identity that is so integral to who they are. This is why the specific military style structure of the club is essential to its success and explains why other social clubs are not desirable:

**Jay:** *"100%, yep and my, my life is my one of them- I can testify to that, yeah, I was when I first got in the VMC I was lost I and had nothing you know there was nothing that interested me in my life at that point in time. I had children, I had a wife, but I lost the military, which is a massive part of my identity okay, and if I didn't have the VMC, I wouldn't be here, and yeah and, hand on heart all day long I'd say that."*

**H:** *"I know for a fact there have been guys that have been on the fist of topping themselves and the club has actually pulled them back from that, so often hear people are on the ropes. Oh, they do."*

*They're always – quite often some will say that, you know, without, without you guys the club wouldn't be here, you know, yeah."*

Vietnam veteran Kel describes the sense of care he was shown by several other VMC members. He stated, *'it brings tears to my eyes thinking about it,'* and it did during the interview. With watery eyes and soft tone, it was visible what the support from his peers means to him. He also stated, *"Well, I'm, I'm closer to my club brothers than I am my own brother. My club brother would come probably before my own brother."* Clearly, blood family are not the primary advocate or support:

**Kel:** *"Yeah, like when I you know, I – they look after me when I – when we went to, when we went to [name] last year, I, I went up with [name] and [name] and – and [name] and, and I had a, a really bad anxiety panic attack on the way up there and I couldn't deal with it and [name], you know, [name]. Yeah, [name] bloody looked after me all the way, just, you know, you're okay bro. I got you brother, you know. Yeah, good. Brings tears to my eyes thinking about it. Yeah, yeah, he wouldn't let me out of his sight the whole trip. Like when we got up to [name], I'd left something on my bike and I walked out to [name] he said, where are you going bro? I said, I've left – yeah, I've left something on my bike. Yep, so, come on, we'll go over. So, he went over with me. Yeah, make sure I was alright, and he still does that to this day. He still, you, okay? He'll ring me every now and again, you doing alright brother?"*

### **9.5.2 Isolation and connectedness**

Returning from war can be a difficult experience. Those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can struggle with interpersonal trust. Their everyday capacity to trust other human beings has shifted from its pre-deployment frame. There is a tendency to withdraw from the community, even reluctance to leave their home (Garcia, 2017). Bob discusses members who would not leave their house, until they joined the VMC:

**Bob:** *"I mean there's a number of people that we've spoken to, and they've said that they wouldn't, like prior to going in the club they wouldn't leave their room, like they actually genuinely wouldn't leave their room, if people come round, they will just stay in their room, they wouldn't leave that house. And it's, it gives them a purpose to do something, yeah so it certainly gives you a structure and a purpose and a, being part of something, I think it's that part of yeah feeling that you're still part of the, the military or brotherhood, all that sort of thing, so yeah definitely."*

For the members of the VMC the connection and supportive network prevents them from being isolated. They forge loyalty, trust, and commitment with other members, traits and behaviours that are highly valued. These are qualities, that are highly valued in society, usually have begun development in childhood, and are reinforced by families and friends and other role models (Abraham et al., 2018). The club gives the members a sense of purpose, one member stated he would be back in the Jamie Larcombe Centre without the club. Another member stated they have only one other friend outside of the club, for others, it is a family, and more importantly a military family. For some, it is the only social connection they have or seem to want:

**Pablo:** *"For some of the guys, obviously they've – the club is what does that or gives them that sense of still being part of that military family."*

**Skelly:** *"Yeah, but no the club means absolutely everything to me. It gives me a sense of purpose, it gives me, I get fulfilled from it doing all the things for people and I don't never ask for accolades about it. some people know what I do here and others you know, you know just don't, yeah keep, keep, no it gives me a purpose it really does. I'd be, I'd be, I wouldn't be back in Jamie Larcombe Centre if you know what I mean, but it gives me a purpose. Not to get up every day, but it gives me a purpose and the self-satisfaction like you know on the 22nd when everything's, oh that was a really good night I know that my contribution to the club helped make it a success."*

**Bob:** *"So like relationships wise, I've got probably outside the club, well probably outside the club like one friend."*

**Nugget:** *"I'm not a sociable person. And I feel comfortable here, not only with the members but with the people that come here, the visitors and that. They're all tarred with the one brush; they've all got rough edges which I kind of like. I don't really like the bow tie set or the Lord Mayor's Ball that sort of stuff, I don't go for that at all. I'm rather, I'm sort of a BBQ in the backyard bloke and that's what you get when you come down here. And that's what you get when visitors come. So invariably I feel, feel comfortable here, and I just like it. It's the only, apart from in the summer when I go to the speedway on Saturday nights it's the only night of the week that I go out. And I quite look forward to coming down here and have a yarn with the blokes and stuff. So, the fact that I've been coming here for 23 years probably means something doesn't it?"*

### 9.5.3 Security conscious

When military personnel who have operated in high-risk situations transition to civilian life, adjustment is even more difficult. Neurocognitive function tests suggest that combat exposure in initial deployment can negatively affect the resting brain, memory processes and attentional functioning and these effects can be long lasting. Combat veterans have been shown to have elevated psychological distress and posttraumatic stress symptoms and attentional hypervigilance. Brain functioning appears to be acutely altered when people have been deployed (Lawrence-Wood et al., 2019; MacEachron & Gustavsson, 2012). While closed groups offer important psychological and social support, especially for marginalised or trauma-affected individuals, there are risks to prolonged or rigid group enclosure. For example, perpetual disengagement from broader society. This may lose opportunities for integration, economic participation or cross-cultural understanding. Furthermore, closed groups can foster homogeneity of thought, where dissent is discouraged or seen as disloyal. Exposure to diverse perspectives may be limiting and reinforce bias or unhelpful narratives stunting growth. ‘Them’ mentality can foster suspicion, fear or hostility toward outsiders, even when it is not warranted. This binary view can deepen social division and prevent reconciliation or healing as they remain rigid or outdated.

The participant Raider explains he feels he can relax when going out with the VMC group. He feels safe because of the numbers and the trust he has that everybody has got each other’s back. The image perceived by the public would most likely be that this group of burly men are aggressors. We hear from the participants individually, that in certain situations they feel quite vulnerable. The participant Marksy discusses how, before his deployment, he would socialise in a typical Australian manner by going to the pub on a Friday night with the boys. However, since leaving Defence, he avoids crowds as he does not want confrontation:

**Raider:** *“It’s about being with your friends and people you trust. I used to have – I used to go out a lot and get into fights and stuff like that, just because ... someone was looking. But if I – I don’t go out anymore unless I’m with the club guys, because I know that we’ve all – everybody’s got each other’s back, you know, and that’s – so, I can go out and I can relax. You can relax when you’re in that group, and it doesn’t matter whether you’re at a pub or someone’s house, it’s just, yeah, it’s just you can relax around people like that, because there’s that many, you know, you’re not in danger, so yeah.”*

**Marksy:** *“Yeah, life sort of went from going out with the boys Friday nights to when we came back not many of us would really go out. It’d just be to mainly a quiet pub or something or not out out. I*

*wouldn't go out – didn't like noise and crowds of people. Don't want to deal with drunk or violent people. Want to avoid confrontation."*

The club has a unique way of managing safety and limiting the risk for any member to be in an altercation alone. The VMC Prospect Handbook provides instructions on behaviour regarding security (7.1; 7.2 and 7.4) (Veterans Motorcycle Club, 2024b, p. 5):

7.1 - IMPORTANT: ALWAYS know where your President is at all times. The President is always accompanied by a Sergeant at Arms; however, if he is not available a Patched Member will escort the President.

Point 7.1 again clearly demonstrates the importance of hierarchy. The president's safety is of great importance and seemingly it is the responsibility of the whole chapter to know where he is always and furthermore, that he is to be always accompanied, presumably to ensure he does not come to any harm. Equally, point 7.2 the members are not to be un-escorted, and everyone must be vigilant:

7.2 - In public NEVER let a Chapter Member walk off un-escorted. Always have 'eyes on' and watch his back, this also includes if/when they go to the toilet, have a cigarette etc. Always make sure someone is there, especially in crowded areas and/or at another Club.

Point 7.4, states that members are to report suspicious behaviour and always be security conscious. These instructions are unusual for a civilian group and demonstrate their lasting attachment to their service in the Defence Force (Veterans Motorcycle Club, 2024b, p. 6):

7.4 Be security conscious at all times. No matter where you are, if you notice suspicious behaviour or receive information that may affect the Club and/ or its members, report it.

#### **9.5.4 In Death We Play Our Part**

Another unique feature of the VMC brotherhood is the ability for the club to arrange a member's funeral. Usually this is with permission from the member's next of kin or designated family member. The club has a form that members can complete (see Appendix L). In the event of death, the club can arrange the whole funeral or attend in a customary manner. They can arrange to escort the hearse, ride the motorcycle of the member who has died, or act as pall bearers. The participant Nugget discusses how the members respect the family and their wishes:

**Nugget:** *“All I can say is that those families that choose for us to be involved, and it’s their choice, we respect the families wishes of how they want to do it and if they want us involved then we will follow the hurst. We are here if they want or need anything. We just do what we can do.”*

During this part of the conversation, I noted a change in Nugget’s demeanour. He appeared thoughtful, recalling memories and for the first time considering what the club has meant to him over the past 23 years. He makes a distinction that age, service of war or years in the club bears no difference to the acceptance and overall support the member and their family will receive. He sums up what the club has meant for him, as he puts it ‘in a nutshell.’

**Nugget:** *“From the point of view of their service, they are members of the club, some have been involved together for 20 odd years, but It doesn’t make any difference if they have been in for couple of years, they and their families are treated the same. Some of us were Vietnam, but like some are like the one recently who was Iraq, he was half my age. In a nutshell we try to look after each other, we do look after each other, we would help one another as best we can, we will respect the families wishes depending on what they want to do, as they will with my family when I kick the bucket, um and I expect my family will be a bit like, some of the others, that just do it their way and the blokes will just be there, that what I suspect anyway. As far as I am concerned, the only thing that was good that came from my two years of service was this club, it came along just at the right time for me, I had been struggling with my health which was bought about through mental problems, and whilst it wasn’t an instant cure, it certainly helped being here and just being with other blokes that been through physically and mentally through stuff like I had, forget the army this was later, I was with blokes who had done it, been through it, got over it, got through it and love their bikes and the club. If you had said to me 23 years ago, do you think the club would be important to ya, I would have said, probably not but I’ll just go for a few rides here and there and stuff like that, but it’s been a bit more than that, a lot more than that! Everybody knows Friday night is club night, it has become part of my life.”*

## **9.6 Negative factors of being in the VMC**

Inter-chapter politics was the main theme when discussing if there were any negative aspects of the club. The drawbacks included standards not being maintained in joining criteria, losing sight of the purpose of the club, and the vest dress standards (not looking the same on the front) across the nation:

**Raider:** *“My biggest problem with the vests is the lack of standardisation across Australia.”*

**Pablo:** *"Yeah, well I guess it's – there's people within the club that want, I guess the eligibility criteria to be lessened, moving towards more - what you would see from Military Brotherhood, Patriots, Diggers, that sort of thing where the only qualifying element is that you've joined up and served. You could have served one day. And there's lots of arguments about making the club more accessible to people, but then the flip-side is that that then, I guess takes away from it being that core group of people that have truly experienced the same sorts of things that you've experienced, and then it would, I guess erode that real tight circle of security and trust in the guys around you that you develop because of the way that it runs. So, on one hand it would make it bigger, but not necessarily better, so that those people are, I think overlooking what the true essence of the club is, it's not – the essence isn't to be the biggest military club, and grow beyond our britches, it's to be there to support veterans who have deployed to war, basically."*

Both Pablo and H (Aitch) discussed how some chapters want the eligibility to join criteria lessened. For example, the eligibility criteria is different in other military motorcycle clubs such as the Military Brotherhood Military Motorcycle Club (Military Brotherhood Military Motorcycle Club, 2022), the Patriots Australia Military Motorcycle Club (PAMMC) (*Patriots Australia*, 2024) and the Diggers Military Motorcycle Club (DMMC) (*Diggers military motorcycle club*, 2024). These clubs do not require members to hold an Active Service Medal. The MBMMC allow females members and they have a Sierra Squad Member category for those who have no military service, and a junior members category for those who are from 0-17 years of age (Military Brotherhood Military Motorcycle Club, 2020). Pablo conveyed the *true essence* of the club as not being about member numbers, but about those who have a shared experience, and it is that true experience that breeds security, trust, and support among the group:

**H:** *"One of the big challenges and probably not everybody has to deal with it, but one of the big challenges is because of the size of the club, you know right across the country is dealing with the freakin' politics. That is just mind-boggling, and in saying that we're all freakin' veterans and we've all been dealing with it and there are elements that are trying to just - growing bigger and bigger. So, they want to try and bring in people that are, that don't meet the standards. So, you've always got those little mind games going on. There's always friction when you get large organisations there's always friction between groups and sometimes within groups, so you're not just dealing with all that sort of rubbish is probably the biggest drawback, which to be honest at times has made me think twice about staying in the club and just going off on my own again."*

H stated that the club's members have all been dealing with the politics of new veterans who want to join the club. But as he stated they do not meet the 'standards,' by this he means were deployed

to war (those they consider as having experienced the same or similar deployment). They need that recognition that they have experienced conflict. As there are fewer wars or conflicts which obviously is a positive thing, this means there are less veterans who will meet the joining criteria of the VMC. Just as when the club was only for the Vietnam Veterans, the club would have ended when the last Vietnam veteran member was no longer. Sometime in the future the VMC could face the same fate. The participant Bear commented how he also has concerns that the VMC core values are being eroded away and could become like the RSLs. His concern refers to needing money to operate the club, because the focus of those clubs who must pay rent for a clubhouse is likely to be ultimately changed. Kel stated he feels disappointed by the arguments:

**Bear:** *"I suppose a worry for me is that as the years go on, those certain little things that the club is around, similar to the RSL I suppose, is that that's slowly eroded. I mean you only have to look at [name], that it's all about the club and how much piss they drink or sell over the pub and keep the clubhouse afloat. I'd be quite happy not have ever having a fucking club house or running a fucking club house purely because all that does is it takes away what the real reason that you're in the club for. It's got nothing to do with coin, it's got nothing to do with what you ride, it's got nothing to do with any kind of fucking politics."*

**Kel:** *"I feel disappointed because – there – I don't know how to say it, you know, when we were the Vietnam Veterans Motorcycle Club, we had a really close knitted bond but now that, you know, there's – they're all having fights and squabbles and stuff all over the place, it, it's not the same."*

**Pablo:** *"Well, I suppose for all the benefits that it offers, it's got its drawbacks, I guess with all the inter-chapter politics and bullshit and all of that sort of stuff which goes on, which I guess makes it for some people, no longer beneficial. Guys will step away because it's doing more, causing them more grief or stress or anxiety, as opposed to providing the support that it's meant to provide. So, that's something that within the club itself really needs to be fixed, and I don't know if it will, as we've got so many different opinions across so many different chapters, across so many different generations from Vietnam era guys through to sort of modern-day veteran. So, that's probably the negative I'd see from the club is that in some ways it's hurting itself and taking away from what the true benefit that it provides."*

Pablo refers to the inter-chapter politics and draws attention to the difference of opinions across the generations and chapters. This is as he stated: *"The club is hurting itself and taking away the true benefit."*



## 9.7 Other social motorcycle clubs

The Motorcycle Alliance of South Australia (MASA) Facebook public group has over one and a half million (1.6K) members. MASA is a conglomerate of Social Motorcycle Clubs within South Australia who are there to educate and support the wider biker community as well as each other on runs and charity events. The VMC are not members of MASA but do attend the meetings. Bear discusses how he feels it is because of the shared experience of combat, that he can rely on a brother and this sense of unconditional support you do not get in social motorcycle clubs. Marksy states that he feels more supported in the VMC than any other organisation:

**Bear:** *“knowing that you can rely on a brother that if no matter where, what, when you need something they’re there. You don’t get that in social clubs. The fact that in this particular club everyone has been through operations of deployment, so they’ve actually been in harm’s way, some more than others, so they understand, and we’ve all got that in common, and we understand so we’re there for each other.”*

**Marksy:** *“But definitely the support is – I feel more supported in the VMC than any other organisation I’ve been involved in.”*

There is a myriad of social clubs for all manner of interests. It perhaps is understandable that the members of the VMC would choose to not join a social motorcycle club. The military aspect is missing; however, this then begs the question, why did they not join one of the other military motorcycle clubs?

### 9.7.1 Why not any other Military motorcycle clubs?

The DMMC, PAMMC, and MBMMC are all Australian military motorcycle clubs. The participant Bob explained the experience he had in another military motorcycle club. There is a clear distinction that the other club was ‘too sanitised’ for his liking. In his opinion, the focus of their ethos was aligned to a civilian mindset rather than the mindset of a combat veteran:

**Bob:** *“I think that cos there is other military base motorbike clubs right, but I think that they have a tendency to be, like too sanitised I would say for want of a better word, for, to my taste. Its I mean I was in one motorbike club initially, and it was, oh you can’t wear brown boots when you’re riding your bike, and it’s like mate fuck off, you know what I mean? If I want to sit there and wear a thong, and that, like when I’m riding my bike ... oh actually thongs are different things here they are on about*

*shoes, but if I were, if I want to wear a G-string right, I would wear a fucking G-string mate and you won't tell me what to do. And that's where I think that bit of the civilian bit comes back into it, but and that's, again there is rules and there aint rules, and we, I think it's, and that's right cos these places invariably wasn't, being active service wasn't a criteria."*

Bob contrasted the two motorcycle clubs: both clubs have rules, but Bob did not value or like the MBMMC rules. The VMC's rules apply to expectations of certain behaviours that ensures safety, respect, and trust within the club. Protecting the members and being there if needed. Whereas, the other military motorcycle club, Bob believed their rules were about public appearance and public perception. The public is not a priority for the members of the VMC. They isolate themselves from the public by choice. The lack of trust in civilians has the unfortunate result of limiting the connectedness and options for care and support. However, they feel that the support they need is being met by the members. The members often recommend that help is sought from psychiatrists or other helping professionals.

#### **9.7.2 RSL no thanks**

The RSL report they have 147,000 members across the seven states and territories of Australia, providing over 370,000 hours of advocacy services, 66,000 hours of support, community and wellbeing services, spending \$13,000,000 each year on veteran welfare services (Returned Soldiers League, 2024). The Vietnam veterans have a long history of feeling rejected by the Returned Soldiers League (RSL). In John Pigot's book, "Leather Bred Heroes" an example is provided of an attempt by the president of the Victorian RSL to exclude the Vietnam veterans from participating in the ANZAC Day memorial march in the 1995. ANZAC Day is for all people, from all walks of life who unite and honour those who served their country at war, paying tribute to their heroism and sacrifice. In 1991 the ANZAC Day march held in Queensland saw the V.V.M.C. march as a unique group wearing their colours, there was some opposition from the organisers of the march especially in relation to dress, but the crowd was enthusiastic which was important for the men involved. In 1994 about 30 members of the Western Australia (WA) V.V.M.C. chapter had taken part in the ANZAC Day march in Perth riding near the head of the procession. Their involvement met with some initial opposition from the president of the WA branch of the RSL, but these problems were soon resolved, and the procession went ahead without incident. On ANZAC Day in 1995, the Victorian branch of the V.V.M.C. rode their bikes to the centre of Melbourne, to the Shrine of Remembrance. It was a grand

and dramatic display, but as they rode their loud bikes their appearance bought resentment from the organisers, public opinion was divided. Crowds watched the returned servicemen and women march through the city streets, children waved flags, public applauded and the bands played. There were 12,000 returned service personnel who marched and 1,400 separate military units (Pigot, 2000, p. 53). Pigot, writes:

The V.V.M.C. had their Australian flags waving and engines revving, their highly polished machines glistening in the sunshine. The members of the V.V.M.C. loudly proclaimed their identity as veterans of a war which the nation tried to forget since it withdrew from Vietnam in 1972.

Participation in the 1995 ANZAC Day march bought about significant debate. The Melbourne chapter of the V.V.M.C. expected some opposition but did not expect the controversy that erupted. Negotiations with the RSL began in May 1994, with a letter to the Victorian State Secretary Brigadier John Deighton. The letter detailed the V.V.M.C. success in participating in three previous local ANZAC Day ceremonies, at Hastings, Albury, and Romsey. The benefits of the V.V.M.C. involvement was further outlined by explaining how the stirring thunder of the motorcycles in the early morning generated a sense of awe and excitement as spectators watched the veterans' riding in-formation. Chief Marshal, Brigadier Phil Davies, gave permission for a club representative to speak to kindred organisations and unit Association Meeting held at Anzac House 1994. The wishes of the V.V.M.C. were discussed, such as being in formation bringing up the end of the ANZAC Day march, equip each motorcycle with a flag or banner and, to ride past the Governor onto the forecourt. The council agreed with three provisions:

- They would be the last contingent in the march.
- They were not to ride on the shrine forecourt as it is holy ground.
- To park in an area outside the holy ground provided for them.

The decision then carried forward to the ANZAC commemoration Council on October 1994. The proposal was agreed to, and it was supported with an almost unanimous vote. In March 1995, a letter confirmed the club's involvement. At the time chief marshal, Bruce Ruxton, was an outspoken president of the Victoria RSL (Pigot, 2000, p. 55). During the ANZAC Day negotiations between the RSL and V.V.M.C. Ruxton was overseas. The Herald Sun newspaper reported in mid-April that a row had broken out between the RSL and the V.V.M.C. The state council had urged the ANZAC Day committee to review its decision to allow the club to take part in March. The V.V.M.C. sought

permission to address the council to defend its position and assure them that only veterans would be riding in the march along with pillion passengers who would be carrying the Australian flag. There was a no drinking alcohol rule for the day. The V.V.M.C. was not permitted to speak and Bruce Ruxton and the state secretary Brigadier Rossie were bitterly opposed to the club's involvement (Pigot, 2000, p. 56). Pigot writes:

They loudly expressed their disapproval and anger, "I am not denigrating the men said Ruxton, but I don't think the parade is an appropriate place for bikers." People all over the state are saying they don't think it the right thing for the parade. Brigadier Rossie expressed the stereotypical fears about bikers and how they could create a bad image for the Anzac march. However, no changes were made to the order of the march. On the day everything went well and although opinions about the V.V.M.C. were still sharply divided.

Public and associated group commentaries preceding the V.V.M.C involvement in the procession showed a division of opinion; some that did not support the involvement of the motorcycles while others did. Some said their inclusion was a magnificent success, as they did the spirit of ANZAC proud, and they gave their own special salute to the underlying memory and the valour of their comrades from the Vietnam war. Pigot (2000, p. 57) writes:

Magnus Clarke from Deakin University made the most telling observation of all. What the Melbourne crowd stayed to applaud was the true inheritors of the Anzac Day tradition, the V.V.M.C. bikers. On Harley Davidsons by the row, they roared up to the shrine with due disregard for all authority, including the regulation RSL. Short back and sides haircuts, The Anzacs of 1915 would have had far more in common with these social rebels than their clean shaven and well-suited colleagues. For in the crowd on Tuesday, their image was also the same. In the standard version of war these Vietnam vets were embarked on foreign shores and led to foreign generals in a campaign that could never be won, all that could emerge was a tale of futile sacrifice these were almost Australian knights in studded leather armour. Almost, not quite. On Anzac Day 1995 in Melbourne, they were treated only as one thing: heroes.

At the end of the march Bruce Ruxton smiled as he was photographed with members of the V.V.M.C. During an interview he had apparently stated that he agreed the V.V.M.C. were well received, the flags looked good on the bikes, they did their job magnificently and people appreciated them.

Despite his congratulations Ruxton had already moved to ensure that the V.V.M.C. would not be riding in Melbourne the following year, the issue was debated in conference 1995. It was agreed no motorcycles were allowed to participate in ANZAC Day marches in Melbourne (Pigot, 2000, p. 58). It is my understanding that to this day, the V.V.M.C. or VMC have not participated in Victoria's ANZAC Day march riding their motorcycles.

The VMC (and former V.V.M.C.) are a united brotherhood. It is evident by the testimonies from the participants in this study that it is only in the VMC that they find the peer support they connect with and that is beneficial to them. Naming a few of the key principles again that characterise peer support; safe trusting relationships, mutuality and reciprocity and connectedness, these are all aspects the members acknowledge as being present within their membership to the VMC. The members have no trust of or in the RSLs, it would seem any relationship with the RSL is broken beyond repair. It was clear during the interviews that members have neither forgotten nor forgiven the rejection from the RSLs. Nugget and Skelly are both Vietnam veterans:

**Nugget:** *"I have little or no respect for the RSL, probably have now, but certainly, when I, well when we, first got back from Vietnam they wouldn't let us join the RSL. They said, 'that wasn't a war!' so, I'll second WW blokes and probably Korean blokes and Korea was probably no different in lots of ways to Vietnam in terms numerically. They wouldn't let us join. I didn't particularly want to join anyway; I didn't want to be involved I wanted to get on with my life like the other nashos."*

**Skelly:** *"Yeah, I went to the RSL, but I didn't like that there. They treated us like shit when we came back from Vietnam. Yeah, you weren't allowed in RSLs. Yeah, that's part of, you know all the shit you hear from Vietnam Veterans when we came back. No, no I remember going to the Elizabeth RSL and they said what the hell are you doing here mate, and I said I'm a Vietnam Veteran, they said oh we don't recognise that. They said look mate you can have a beer but go stand in the corner and once you drunk that piss off. Yeah, I remember that and then when I Yeah and then when I went to the Salisbury RSL, I knocked on the door and the bloke said what are you after and I said I'm a Vietnam Veteran come down for a beer and they said well if you come in here, you're only a guest. You're not recognised Vietnam Veterans as Veterans."*

### 9.7.3 RSL Government funding commitment

In 2019, The Government committed \$30 million to develop a network of six Veterans and Families Hubs formally known as Veteran Wellbeing Centres, in Perth, Townsville, Adelaide, Wodonga,

Nowra and Darwin. In the 2021-22 Federal Budget, funding was provided to expand the veterans' and families' hubs network into Southeast Queensland and Tasmania, with \$5 million committed for each location. In December 2021, a further commitment of \$2.5 million was announced to support the provision of wellbeing services. October 2022, saw another increase of funding to \$46.7 million for ten new veterans' and families' Hubs across the country (Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2024e). In March 2024, three media releases provided details by the Department of Veterans' Affairs outlining further funding priorities. In the media releases they mention; A new hub in Queensland worth \$5.445 million grant was provided to the RSL and Mates4Mates (Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2024d). The hub will provide medical intervention and physical and mental health rehabilitation services. Another \$5.445 million grant to RSL and LifeCare in the Hunter region of New South Wales (NSW) (Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2024c). And lastly a further \$5.445 million to RSL LifeCare and RSL in the Tweed North Coast (NSW) (Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2024b). The media release stated:

The Albanese Government is committed to providing the best services and supports possible for Defence personnel, veterans and families and today we've reached a new milestone. More than 25,000 veterans and their families will be better off. Veterans who live just over the border will also benefit as RSL LifeCare and RSL NSW have established a firm relationship with RSL Queensland to best support veterans no matter which side of the border they are on. Following significant community consultation and demographics analysis, the services at the Tweed/North Coast Hub will focus on providing access to physical and mental health services, home care assistance, access to fee-free training, housing assistance, transition, social and family support.

The intent to provide services is admirable but misses the fact that it would not be engaged in by these veterans who have been alienated and rejected by the RSL. The distribution of funding and support appears to be very targeted to one service without the recognition of the historical context. It is essential that the government is aware several Vietnam and contemporary war veterans will not be willing to engage with services if operated by the RSLs. It is a challenge to engage war veterans to engage with traditional services and is most likely why the RSL have been chosen to provide services. The RSL claim to have supported many veterans since its establishment in 1916. They have over 149,000 members and each year provide over 66,000 hours of support, community and wellbeing services, over 370,500 hours advocating for veteran compensation and spent over \$13,300,000 on veteran welfare services each year (Returned Soldiers League, 2024). However, it is

crucial to understand the history and hostility toward the RSL for many Vietnam and contemporary war veterans and furthermore understand why peer support is so necessary. The participants were asked about engagement with other military organisations such as the RSL. When replying I noticed several displayed frustrations and became quite animated. It was very clear by their tone of voice they felt very strongly about the RSL being a money-making business, a social club that is not there to support them or provide a brotherhood. Below are some of the veterans' responses:

**Bear:** *"RSL can go eat a bag of dicks. The RSL has gone outside of what they were intended for, and it has become a money-making concern. It's all on keeping the bar open, it's in [name], sorry [name], [name], and [name], it's all about the coin with pokie machines and stuff like that. I have little real trust for the RSL. Soldier On started off with the right intent and again now it's just become a money-making scheme, there's more people employed than they do help, if you know what I mean. So that kind of respect has gone as well."*

**H:** *"I was on the committee at the RSL here for a while and I ended up stepping away from it because it was just, it's a social club – it's a social club and it's not a brotherhood. Sure, there's people that have been places and done stuff, but just not the same, you just don't have that same understanding and that bond of any one of those guys wearing that back patch was there. You just don't get that in an RSL, I don't know why. I mean they're running a social club; they're running a business, and to be honest there's things that the RSL as a whole has done that I just don't agree with. Some of it is just dumb stuff, some of it is simple, like they changed the definition of a veteran to anyone who's ever served a day in military. Really, that's not a veteran, that's an ex-serviceman. So just stuff like that it's all about getting membership; getting numbers; getting people through the door; making money because it's a business."*

**Marksy:** *"I had tried other organisations, RSL and stuff like that, and RAR Association but yeah never really felt a part of it."*

**Jay:** *"I went along to an RSL one ANZAC day and basically had the cold shoulder treatment, and which then just angered me more than anything else. But you know you're pulling to an RSL these days and it's either,... care about how much money's coming through the poker machine or I understand that they need a means of being able to fund RSL these days, which is back in the old days it used to be funded by the government, so now they've got to find their own money, but you know to find a club that's designed for return servicemen run by civilians and years of ... walking in as a return servicemen made to feel, I don't know like a third class citizen they wonder why there are why there's no membership there."*

**Pottsy:** *"I was a member of the RSL, like active, was there like every Friday night with another veteran mate of mine. But then, yeah, I've stopped going cos that was more, I mean there's some great guys there and I love chatting to the other veterans and all that, but there was very much an alcohol, real alcohol type place at that time. And alcohol at that time for me was, I was drinking too much and that just exacerbated it. And after probably three, I don't know, maybe four to six months of going to the RSL, I realised that even though they were amazing and they were supporting of each other per se or reaching out making sure that I was doing okay, I was having the same conversations every week, and I kind of realised at that time like actually you're all just a bunch of drunks and using alcohol to try and cope. And when I say a bunch of drunks, I don't mean anything ill towards them."*

## 9.8 Conclusion

This chapter began by outlining the importance of this research and how peer support plays a major role in mitigating the high numbers of deaths by suicide among veterans, and more specifically, combat veterans who have been deployed in war-like operations. Despite well-known high levels of veteran mental health conditions research suggests there is a high level of health-care avoidance in this population. The number and severity of conditions are known to be either preventable or reduced in severity through early primary healthcare intervention (Dabovich et al., 2021). By examining peer support services in and out of the health care system and the use of models such as CHIME, it was possible to contrast the peer support that is experienced by the members of the VMC. The narratives of the participants pointed to the centrality of their peer support in regaining their military identity which is lost when they transition back to civilian life. The VMC provides a replication of military-style rules, structure, and authority which provides a set of familiar boundaries ensuring the members feel connected and safe within their brotherhood.

The boundaries and familiar structures form the 'critical ingredients' for a unique supportive environment bringing a sense of brotherhood. The sense of belonging to a brotherhood is the foundational underpinning for the success of their unique peer support. These foundations encompass principles that give a holistic approach that includes mutuality and reciprocity within a familial surrounding. This reciprocity is shown by maintaining regular contact, supporting each other in life and even in death, honouring the past and present. The VMC is more a 'way of life' than a peer group who support each other.



This chapter closes with a last comment from Vietnam veteran Kel. In his comment Kel is referring to the other members of the club and the support he gets from being in the VMC. It is to the subject of care and mental health that will be the focus of the next chapter:

***Kel:** “Yeah, na, they’re great. I, I love those guys, you know, I’ve got a lot of respect for all of them. So, as I said, they’re all veterans, that’s what I like about it.”*

The following chapter, Chapter 10, explores further the idea of mental health, protective factors for psychological wellbeing and discusses riding motorcycles as a shared interest and how this is considered as ‘wind therapy’ by the members.

## 10 CHAPTER: PEER SUPPORT PROTECTS MENTAL HEALTH

### 10.1 Chapter preface

Combat is the prime cause of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in military veterans deployed to conflict zones or war, and symptoms may persist into old age (as cited in Hamilton & Workman, 1998; Hunt & Robbins, 2001, O'Toole & Catts, 2017). The members of the Veterans Motorcycle Club (VMC) have all been deployed to war or conflict zones, and for some multiple times. The intent of this research is to understand the function of their peer support and protective factors for their mental health and wellbeing by being a member of the club. The World Health Organisation (WHO) describe mental health as: "Mental health is a state of mental wellbeing that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community" (The World Health Organisation, 2024). This chapter focuses briefly on the participants' mental health challenges during their Defence Force service and post service. As with the other chapters, the main purpose is to report how members experience that support within the club. The areas that were of interest were how does being a member of the club help the member to cope with the stresses of life, what do they gain by being a member of the club and how does that aid their wellbeing and functioning.

One of the key messages from participants is that they not only feel worthy and supported by the military-style structure of the club, but they also feel seen and accepted by their brothers for who they truly are. Their experiences of deployment and transition back into civilian life are validated, they are equals, they are not negatively judged for having issues with their mental health and, above all else, they trust each other. In this chapter members' experiences with a range of mental health concerns such as PTSD, anxiety and substance misuse are explored, followed by their experience of transitioning from the military to civilian life. Contrary to Australian societal beliefs, there is not any stigma whatsoever within the club regarding issues with mental health. It is not seen as a weakness or abnormal in this group, in fact the opposite would appear to be more the case, as exemplified by Bob, as he stated laughingly: *"We will openly admit that we're all as fucked up as each other."*

The motorcycle club is intrinsically a protective factor for the members' wellbeing. We will hear from the members how riding these huge roaring machines provides not only a common interest and background but freedom. Riding brings relief from stress or unpleasant emotions, requires presence and mindfulness, connection to nature, admiration of others, and protection of the group. On their motorcycles they can escape from civilian living and share familiar elements of military culture (e.g.,

specific roles and responsibilities, precision, uniforms/vests, and organisational structure of the club) (Highfill et al., 2022). A term often used by the members to describe the benefits of riding a motorcycle, is Wind Therapy (WT). Lastly, other key findings pertinent to mental health and the participants' construction of it were the involvement of alcohol and drug use, barriers to seeking help from the traditional service providers and concealing mental health issues while in the military. Military members fear disclosure of mental health issues or seeking mental health treatment as it could result in being labelled as "crazy" and affect perceptions of one's leadership abilities, fitness to be deployed or likelihood of promotion (Pfeiffer et al., 2012).

This chapter does not focus or position mental health and wellbeing within a biomedical framework, nor does it engage with neurobiological explanations, such as neurotransmitters imbalances or deficits in dopamine, serotonin or noradrenaline, which have been scientifically associated with mental conditions including anxiety, affective disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Rather, the emphasis, instead, is understanding mental illness and wellbeing as shaped by the trust emerging from the group's fraternal bonding. This specific way of looking at trust deepens awareness and knowledge around how these veterans view the concept of brotherhood, peer support and mental wellbeing within the framework of a closed social group. These insights potentially assist with future design of peer support programs for military veterans by identifying what they value and gravitate towards when seeking social connectedness.

As a clinician with experience working in mental health and trauma-informed practice, I acknowledge that my professional background may have shaped the way I interpreted the participants' narratives, particularly in relation to psychological distress, identity reconstruction and difficulties with reintegration into civilian life. While I do assume a therapeutic role within this research, my clinical lens may have sensitised me to certain themes, such as social anxiety and PTSD – that may not have been as prominent through a different disciplinary lens. I also recognise that this lens may have influenced the relative weight I placed on transition-related challenges. I further acknowledge I may view the participants' experiences of being in the club more positively. This positionality likely contributed to the emergent focus on the complexity of identity, belonging and the search for meaning in post-service life, rather than anxiety, PTSD or substance misuse as standalone diagnostic categories. I have endeavoured to maintain reflexivity throughout, remaining aware of how my interpretations are co-constructed and shaped by both the participants' accounts and my own professional and experiential standpoint.

## 10.2 Mental health challenges: Visible to my brothers

Veterans often feel isolated and do not engage in mental healthcare services or function well in civilian society (Cruwys et al., 2013; Gillard et al., 2017; Lawn et al., 2022). They have left the military, and veterans feel a loss of identity, camaraderie and support systems (Gorman et al., 2018). The VMC provides a safe environment and support system where the members can be themselves without fear of judgement. They find the camaraderie they lost and regain their identity. Feeling safe, it is within the club they describe being able to 'open up' about their mental health. There is a recognition of and assumed understanding of the culture of trauma and problems are expected:

**Pablo:** *"The guys that had been in the club for a long time would openly be having conversations about issues that they'd had, or a good counsellor that they were seeing, so it was very much of an open – it wasn't like, well you keep that stuff to yourself type of environment. So, it was – they were displaying, I guess attitudes and characteristics towards looking after your mental health, like good traits I guess about it, openly within the club. So, that then made you feel more comfortable to, I guess start opening up and sharing without necessarily having to be directly asked."*

The club's replication of a military-style environment provides a sense of familiarity that is comforting e.g., the rules, hierarchy, and lengthy process of being accepted (patched up). It is in this space there is an opportunity for mental health issues to be detected by other members. The participant H talks about 'Shit' going on for him; by this he means his struggles with his mental health:

**H:** *"Well the fact that I mean on occasions that I have spoken about shit going on for me, the fact that people could actually understand, and in fact the only reason I'm going through some of the stuff I'm doing now is because one person actually pulled me aside one day and we had a bit of a chat. He said does this happen....., do you do this? Does that happen.....? Do you do that.....? And he is looking and he's going, "You do know that that's not normal?" I am like what? He's goes "mate, I've got the same shit, it's called this.....I suggest you get some help," and then after thinking about it for a while I was like yeah okay."*

H clearly conveyed that the other members understood his struggles. It is apparent that the members recognise patterns of behaviour that indicate their brother is not coping. They feel able to approach each other openly, discussing symptoms but not in a medicalised or clinical way. They use a language that is familiar to the group. Social identity occurs during intergroup communication. Social interactions define group members in terms of their social identity rather than their individual

or unique personal identity (Dragojevic & Giles, 2014). While intergroup communication is established over time or during the process of joining the club and learning the VMC ethos, it is changes in recognised behaviour that predominantly identifies when a member is struggling or being negatively affected by their mental health. This will then prompt one of the members to approach and pull that member aside and have a conversation that supports and encourages help seeking through treatment services. In relation to other veteran experience of mental health, it is usually a person, such as a significant other or family member who see and are affected by the veteran's mental health concerns. They are usually the ones to either prompt help seeking or get to a crisis point to enforce the care and carer advocate role (Lawn et al., 2022). However, it seems for the members of the club, this mantle is taken on by the other members.

The club environment with its familiar hierarchical structure ensures the members are not under threat of losing their sense of choice and control over their life (Gillard et al., 2017). This is a group of men who through their combat service have lived in fear of threat of losing their life. They also did not have the freedom of choice. In general, in the military and especially in war they do as they are instructed, facing the real fear of potential death. This then leaves them experiencing: (a) a constant presence of threat (real or perceived danger); (b) prolonged periods of autonomic arousal; (c) hyperarousal as a survival mechanism; (d) a threat appraisal system inappropriate in a noncombat environment; (e) witnessing of violence and death that challenges an individual's worldview; and (f) limited rules of engagement resulting in feelings of frustration, powerlessness, and a lack of control over circumstances (McGuire et al., 2011).

The members of the club normalise negative experiences of mental health issues and encourage help seeking. This allows the person to feel seen, acknowledged and validated. H did go on to say:

**H:** *"To be honest sometimes it can be a little bit too much, like some people in there are just 'oh you need to do this, you need to do that, you need to get this card, and this payment and get that payment blah blah blah.' At times it can be a little bit of a whinge fest."*

Raider describes a similar experience:

**Raider:** *"Now he's started telling me, you know, oh, you should get this, and you should get that, and you should do this, and you should do that, you know, trying to get me – you know, getting everything done on my DVA (Department of Veteran Affairs). But I found it was actually bringing me down and making me think there was something wrong, and I mean there was, but you know, it just amplifies the whole situation."*

The timing of encouragement for help seeking is important. It is far better when the person is ready to acknowledge they need help with seeking treatment, but if they are not ready then using Raider's words it is interpreted as a *whinge fest*. Both Raider and H convey that there is a right level or push to seek help.

Pottsy recalled being approached by a member when he was a "hang-around" (before being a full patched member):

**Pottsy:** *"I still remember an old Vietnam veteran came up to me and he pulled me aside, and he said, 'Mate you're not a, you're not alright,' and I was like what are you talking about? And I tried to lie, saying 'Nah, I'm fine,' and he said to me, he goes 'Mate I can see it in your eyes, you're not fine, you need to reach out.'"*

Pottsy continued to explain: *"After that, that sort of really drew me into the club, cos yeah he only met me that night."* The fact that the veteran who had approached him acknowledged he could see something in his eyes that indicated he need to seek help provided Pottsy with comfort. Bear also discussed feeling able to 'spit ball' and trust the advice from a fellow member; as he is, wearing Casper (three-piece patch) and therefore can be a trusted source.:

**Bear:** *"There was times when I'd get there and you'd go is it right to feel this way, you know what I mean? Some scenarios that I just got there, and I was losing myself and didn't know whether, so you just get to bring up and you go 'Hey have you ever had this sort of situation?,' 'Yep, what you need to do is you need to go talk to your psych about this, this and this and that's what's attributing to that, alright.' There was only recently they put me on a CBD (cannabidiol) and THC (medical cannabis) trial, it's working fantastic. But it was one of the boys at [name] that went '[name] have you tried this, this is flipping,' 'No I haven't.' So, I brought it up and the psych went 'Yeah absolutely, let's try that.' And so, there's certain things that you spit ball, and you go, you give to the boys and there's a lot of confidants in there and obviously if you are wearing a Casper then obviously you've been determined as a decent dude, if you know what I mean."*

\*note: the difference between THC and CBD is the different effects. THC is responsible for the 'high' associated with marijuana use, while CBD is not mind-altering.

Bear trusted treatment recommendations from a brother of the club. The member's prior experience with help seeking, what worked and what has not worked for him, is highly valued. Almost as if the treatment has been vetted. This advice supersedes the health professionals' recommendations, but the encouragement is there to seek out the help with a professional:

**Nugget:** *“Well I, sometimes, you can, you can just pick sometimes when somebody is struggling a bit. And you might just say, ‘What’s, what’s up? ‘I feel, feel shocked, I feel terrible.’ I said, ‘Have you been to the doctor?’ They said, ‘No.’ Well, I said, ‘That’s probably your first stop.’ I said, ‘They’ve got some terrific pills that make you feel so much better than you do now. And there’s people you can talk to and get referred to.”*

Nugget discussed being able “to pick it” when someone is struggling, and he had no hesitation in approaching and advising a fellow member to help support them. By “picking it” he meant visual cues. Nugget did not elaborate how he could “pick it” and on reflection I could have asked. I can only assume he senses body language and/or changes in behaviour. He continued to tell me about another member who recently indicated he was going to end his life; this was clearer as the member made a statement about ending his life:

**Nugget:** *“He just spent a couple of weeks out at Jamie Larcombe Centre. He was, he was telling me, he said, he said, oh, he said, ‘I was going to knock meself off.’ He said, ‘I’d had enough,’ he said, ‘I was going to knock meself off.’ And I’m not too sure who got in his ear or who helped him or but probably be someone from the club, because we do try and help one another because someone might have been through something that I’m going through now. And they said, ‘Oh go and Doctor so and so, or go and get a Thai massage,’ or whatever it – there’s always whatever I go through or whatever someone else goes through, someone else here has, has been through it before. So, you’ve only got to ask or mention it and someone’s, someone’s done it or yeah. So, all in all it’s, it is good, we’re good for one another.”*

Many of the members described and discussed a range of mental health issues they have experienced. Mainly, these centred on a form of an anxiety. The following sections group participants’ experiences under headings that seemed to best fit the problems they had narrated. The headings are: anxiety, social anxiety, death anxiety, panic attacks and PTSD.

### **10.2.1 Anxiety**

Anxiety is experience in response to threats that are distal or uncertain, involving changes in one’s subjective state, autonomic responses (structures that underlie emotional and physiological arousal), behaviour and physiology (Kenwood et al., 2022). Anxiety responses can become maladaptive when generalised, excessive and/or unregulated. Responses to anxiety typically serve as an adaptive purpose to keep one safe when potentially there is a threatening situation. For the

VMC veterans who have been in the most threatening of environments (namely war), it is essential they remain hypervigilant. However, when they leave the service and now live as a civilian, many continue to live in a state of hypervigilance and struggle to adapt back to civilian life and fit with societal norms:

**Bob:** *"I'll say operation areas; you know that what you do could result in you getting killed or somebody else getting killed. And you need, if you need to do something you do it, you don't sit there, you don't discuss, right if I live in an area and there was potentially going, a bomb was going to go off and you was in the area, I wouldn't ask you nicely, would you mind coming with me, I wouldn't, if you said would you mind, the answer's no, like you will do as you're told and that's it. And whereas I find that in civilian life I've got to sit there and explain every two minutes to somebody why I'm doing that, and I've got to make sure that I say it in a way that doesn't upset them, and ... it's so fucking difficult to do that. That's why I say I don't, whereas if I'm in the club it was like I'm doing this, I'm doing that, this, that and that's it, there's no, yeah so that's, I'd probably say the difference is."*

Hypervigilant scanning of the environment increases the likelihood of early threat detection. Based upon physiological alterations and accompanying behavioural responses, this can be an adaptive function of anxiety to serve and engage the appropriate defensive strategy based on the proximity of the threat (Grey, 2016). Certain maladaptive behaviours associated with hypervigilance such as, avoidance, threat bias (proposed as a key mechanism in the etiology and maintenance of anxiety disorders) and inability to downregulate emotional states, can be misinterpreted by outsiders of the club (Kenwood et al., 2022; Wieser & Keil, 2020). For example, seeing behaviour as aggressiveness rather than being protective through fear. Within the club aberrant behaviours are tolerated so long as the behaviour does not jeopardise the perceived image such as cause threat to lose the rights to wear Casper (three-piece patch) by the dominant one percent clubs. The members having trust of each other and shared understanding of military experiences leads way to an awareness of themselves and others who they consider 'brothers.' When behaviours such as hypervigilance become overwhelming and affects the individual and or the group, this is the time when a member of the club will intervene and encourage help seeking.

Throughout this study reference has been made to the research findings' potential for assisting other professions. Professions who share a similar structure to the VMC such as first responders. Interestingly, as previously discussed the VMC do not experience the social stigma barriers that often prevent first responders from seeking mental health treatment. Horan et al. (2021) report that first responders' resistance to treatment-seeking is the high value placed on mental toughness. In



Horan's paper, examining outcomes and process for a peer mental health support intervention for first responders, cites peer-directed interventions focused on social environment influences that target peers as a mechanism of change. Horan's study suggests for self-efficacy a floor effect may exist. For maximum intervention effectiveness there needs to be a foundational level of trust. The peer mental health support intervention that was delivered among the first responders measured trust prior to the intervention. The participants in Horan's study tended to trust their peers more than mental health professionals.

### 10.2.2 Social Anxiety

Some of the members gave accounts of their experience with social anxiety. Social anxiety is a marked fear or anxiety about one or more social situations in which the individual is exposed to possible scrutiny by others. Social situations can be avoided or endured with intense fear or anxiety. The anxiety or perceived fear is out of proportion to the actual threat posed by the given social situation and to the sociocultural context. When avoidance causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning this is social anxiety (*Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM-V-TR*, 2022). For veterans, there is an increased risk of isolation, disengagement with the general community and society because of social anxiety:

**Pottsy:** *"Yeah just major avoidance problem. So over time sort of friends just fell away really."*

**Marksy:** *"Noise and the crowd, a lot of people. Having to deal with anyone that's drunk or violent. You just – you're waiting for something – the worst to happen. So, I guess ... to avoid confrontation. Yeah, just – I don't know why, it didn't – I didn't know why I felt that way, I just didn't feel like going out, I didn't know why, not until later in the years down the track you start working it out."*

**Nugget:** *"I'm not a very social person. And I feel comfortable here. I mean it's probably just something about my personality that I don't like being the centre of attention."*

### 10.2.3 Death anxiety

Humankind began to dress over 170,000 years ago (Gruber et al., 2023 as cited in Toups et al., 2011). Clothing behaviour developed to protect humans by physically shielding their bodies from environmental influences. From an intergroup perspective, clothing communicates group membership and serves to mark and uphold group boundaries. Clothing also provides a protection

that expands to the psychological level. Gruber et al. (2023) state that this psychological protection is historically rooted and averts the incorporeal consequences of existential threats, namely mortality concerns or death anxiety. Furthermore, it has been shown that across many mental conditions such as social anxiety, depression, PTSD, and death anxiety, symbolic clothing provides protection against death anxiety (Gruber et al., 2023):

**Marksy:** *"It got to a point where I first started noticing it was, I felt sick arriving at the gates to enter. So, after putting my discharge in I would rock up to name call and I would leave. I would just leave, leave the base. So, that was some of the first – I guess when I think back that was the first – it could have been the guy – not trusting that guy, I think he's going to get people killed. Rocking up to the gates feeling sick, which was probably anxiety. I probably didn't know what it was. And I put a discharge in, it's normally six months but I had ... within eight weeks, so I fast-tracked it to get out. It was like after what we'd just experienced, I thought, people were killed so, I'm not – I don't want to deploy with this guy to Afghanistan where we just came back from. He hadn't been there, he's too dangerous."*

The scenario Marksy referred to was regarding an officer who was in Marksy's words, *"The boss."* The officer was preparing the troops for redeployment to Afghanistan and had taken them on a run between 7-10 kilometres. Men were dropping out and vomiting as this was the first 'big run' they had done in several months. The officer gave instructions to leave the men who were dropping out behind, he said, *'If they can't run, they can walk back,'* Marksy interpreted the officer's actions to be reckless and dangerous, he not only feared for his life, but the lives of all the men under that officer's command.

Marksy's experience demonstrates that although he was in Australia on home soil, he was anxious and feared death because he didn't feel supported or trust the officer in charge. Whereas when discussing the VMC he stated, *"I feel more supported in the VMC than any other organisation I've been involved in."*

Clothing (Casper - the three-piece patch) and affiliation to this group provides the members with psychological protection. This is not a new concept or difficult to understand; it makes sense. However, the point of noting this is that for this specific group of war veterans, the VMC is the only place where this group of veterans seem to find that psychological protection. However, the protection, support and safety they feel seems to extend to other aspects of their being; physical, emotional and psychological. Their peer support structure is vertical and horizontal (peers and hierarchy). Without a similar supportive structure there are consequences for veterans and serving

Defence members. While serving in Defence the uniform, per se, does not provide the protection for help seeking as seen within the VMC. Actions to guide members to seeking support are well tested and overtly messaged by the clothing and symbols – hence trust and feeling supported.

#### 10.2.4 Panic attacks

A panic attack is a brief episode of intense anxiety which causes the physical sensations of fear. The physiological symptoms are uncomfortable and quite distressing. Kel discussed a time during a club ride when he experienced a panic attack. The ride was over 3,000 kilometres to another state. Kel is a Vietnam veteran who is aged 77:

**Kel:** *“I had a, a really bad anxiety panic attack on the way up there and I couldn’t deal with it and [name], you know, [name] Yeah, [name] bloody looked after me all the way, just, you know, you’re okay bro. I got you brother, you know. Yeah, good.”*

Kel was able to feel vulnerable because he felt supported by another member of the club and further stated with tears in his eyes and choking back his emotions: *“Brings tears to my eyes thinking about it. Yeah. Yeah, he wouldn’t let me out of his sight the whole trip.”* Kel would most probably not allow himself to be vulnerable with an outsider regardless of who they were personally or professionally.

Pottsy discussed an experience with a panic attack while in the military:

**Pottsy:** *“I had, actually I had a panic attack on the way to work one day and yeah when I finally made it to work after seeing a psyche, and I was told I wasn’t fit for duty for that day or the following day, to come back and report on Monday, they just absolutely ripped me. Yeah saying, like just ripped me to shreds and saying I wasn’t upholding the army’s values of resilience and mateship and courage and all that, so yeah I had a real battle there where I was – and I will mention it cos it comes in out later of what this study really is about, I was, I felt alone and embarrassed and just, I wasn’t anything, I’ve lost my whole identity, yeah.”*

Pottsy stated he lost his military identity and felt alone and embarrassed. Not only did he experience a panic attack, embarrassment, shame and loneliness, he was traumatised by the way the army treated him. When he joined the VMC some years later he found somewhere he felt welcome and able to speak up about his feelings:

**Pottsy:** *"I felt welcome and started opening up, and by that time, around that time was when I did actually go yeah okay, I'm going to stick my hand out, again cos the first time I stuck my hand out I was just completely crushed and brushed away. Initially I reached out through the army, and that's what, that was just useless, and that's where all the extra trauma and stuff come in, with how they treated me."*

Being let down by the military when raising concerns or experiencing episodes of mental ill health is common and leads to the reluctance of help-seeking and often moves veterans to try and find that connection or manage the loss in different ways, hence the appeal of the VMC. Even with the long initiation to be accepted into the club, the monitoring of behaviour and assessing suitability to be a brother, it is worth obeying all the rules as the end goal is a level of trust and understanding. This can be even if at times behaviour and club internal ethics and morals might not be what they would generally accept or could cause issues in their other relationships such as their marriage or how they are viewed by their children and other family members. For example, visiting strip clubs or having topless young females at annual meet ups. Potentially if they do not engage in bike club masculine norms, it could be seen as a rejection of their historical cultural activities. Raider commented on behaviours he believes are not acceptable and he is personally disgusted by:

**Raider:** *"Yeah, some are acceptable, some aren't. Depends on who you are, I guess. Like I, years ago with some of the older guys, we used to go on rides and stuff, and the way they would carry on around young ladies and stuff, you know, I used to tell them to pull their heads in and stop being arseholes. But you know, when you've got 60- and 70-year-old men doing it, it's just, I think it's disgusting."*

#### **10.2.5 Post-Traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**

PTSD is the development of characteristic symptoms following exposure to one or more traumatic event/s. The clinical presentation of PTSD varies. In some individuals, fear-based re-experiencing, emotional and behavioural symptoms may predominate. In others, anhedonia or dysphoric mood states and negative cognition may be most distressing. The traumatic event can be re-experienced in various ways. Commonly, the individual has recurrent, involuntary and intrusive recollections of the event. These usually include sensory, emotional, or physiological behavioural components (*Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM-V-TR*, 2022). Kel discussed thoughtfully how he still cannot settle 50 plus years after his time in the war in Vietnam:

**Kel:** *"You can't, can't settle. That was part of PTSD and stuff, you just can't settle anywhere, you're just on the go all the time, yeah."*

I asked Kel how important it was for him to be able to talk about his mental health issues to the other members in the club:

**Kel:** *"Very important. I feel I can talk to my, I can talk to the – well – most of the guys in the club more freely than I can talk to my own family about my mental problems because my family don't really understand my mental problems whereas veterans do understand the mental problems because all – most of them went through the same thing. So, you know, most, most veterans have a – have PTSD, you know, so, yeah, and trying to describe PTSD to somebody else, it's – you can't. They don't understand, they just say, get on with it, mate, you know, get a life, go and do ... you know, you – I feel like smacking people in the mouth sometimes when they say that to me."*

I then asked Kel about his experiences with seeking help from mental health professionals:

**Kel:** *"I haven't had much to do with health professionals. Yeah, because I think they're stupider than I am. Yeah, a lot of – a lot of the psychiatrists I've seen I think, you're bloody sillier than I am. Yeah. Not, not the counsellors. I've got, I've got one – counsellor, [name], who I've been seeing for probably nearly 30 years and she's, she's fantastic, I can talk to anything – talk about her to – about anything, you know. But yeah, most of the psychiatrists I've seen, yeah, as I said, they're sillier than I am. And I refused – they put me on – the one I had at Jamie Larcombe; she was really nice. She was good. She understood and – but then I had to go – had to get a – had to go and see a psychiatrist, what do they call it, after, after I come out of Jamie Larcombe Centre I had an appointment and I walked into this guy's place – you know, he just – I don't know, he was – he ... - had this great, huge big table, like it was from here to the wall long, sitting behind it in a big room and he had a chair over in the corner and he told me to sit over in the corner. And I thought, I thought, what am I, the dunce at school or something? So, that didn't make me feel good to start with. And some of the questions he was asking me about I thought – I just got up. I said, see ya, mate. I'm out of here- I'm out of here. I'm done. I just – and I walked out, got on my Ducati and sat at 160 kilometres from [name] to my place. Nearly killed myself."*

Pottsy spoke with a sadness about his feelings of shame for experiencing PTSD. Not necessarily because he had PTSD, but because he felt he did not have the legitimacy of experience to have those symptoms:

**Pottsy:** *“There was a lot of, hypervigilance was one of my really big stresses with PTSD. I was ashamed and these feelings of PTSD and that, you know really at the time I felt like I hadn't done enough to warrant, like you're always thinking oh yeah but this guy got killed or this guy saw his mate die, or this was never, you know you got to special forces and watching them operate, and it's like yeah it's intense what they do and I'm like yeah I never thought I'd done enough to warrant having PTSD.”*

Bear's experience left him believing his whole command lost all trust in him. When discussing this, he was visibly disappointed. At the end of the sentence, his eyes looked down and voice quietened to a soft tone. I interpreted this as feeling a sense of shame:

**Bear:** *“So I was pretty well respected, I had to deal with senior command. The troops were always the top of my mind, I was very, I had, I was very approachable, troops liked me, or they didn't say that they didn't like me, so well they would. But from others I believe I had a pretty good relationship with the boys. I had to take two weeks off, stress leave. I came back and the whole of command had lost all trust in me.”*

Bear's disclosure to his senior command was met with a negative experience and loss of all sense of identity and trust in his ability. In combat the ability to rely on one's comrades is critical (Garcia, 2017) and for this to be lost would be insurmountable. This negative experience would again indicate why these veterans are pulled towards joining a group such as the VMC. For Bear it was about regaining his identity and a sense of respect and trust in his ability and judgement.

### 10.3 Transition to civilian life

The participants were each asked about their experience with transitioning from the military to civilian life. Some of the participants provided detailed accounts of the transition process. However, a few gave one-line answers. It was apparent for some that this was an area they did not want to discuss in detail as it was still hurtful. Being cognisant of the potential of placing them in a vulnerable position, I did not continue exploring their experience with certain individuals. Skelly explained how he engaged in drinking alcohol and eventually his marriage broke down:

**Skelly:** *“Ended up getting kicked out and then I couldn't handle it being in civie street you know, I just drunk all the time. Ended up getting locked up and my wife left, and I just couldn't handle it.”*

Pottsy replied with a one-word answer, with no hesitation and complete conviction and almost a disbelief of what he experienced: *"Shithouse."* Marksy also gave a short answer, with a lowered voice and very thoughtfully put, he swallowed and was seemingly recalling the disappointment and hurt. *"Yeah, it was hard. It was Yeah. Very hard."* Kel also conveyed his emotions with a deep sadness when answering this question:

**Kel:** *"Like when we got back, you know, they marched down the street and we got pelted with rotten eggs and tomatoes and stuff..., whereas when my father come home, they marched down the street and everyone ...you beauty, you know. And when we come back, we got pelted with tomatoes and... called baby killers and stuff, well, it's where all the PTSD comes from virtually."*

Kel's hurt and disbelief continues to this day, and he attributes his experience with PTSD to be a direct result of the way he and the other Vietnam veterans were treated when they returned from the war. Jay stated, *"I've been out now I think four years, I struggle every single day. I cannot, yeah, I can't basically settle into civilian life."* H also struggles to fit into civilian life:

**H:** *"I'm still actually trying to do it to be honest. It's been, I guess it's just over two and a half years now. So, I mean I'm still fighting with DVA to get everything settled. So, I haven't actually closed that door properly yet, but yeah, I don't know I find myself just closing down a lot. Stay in the house, don't go anywhere, don't do anything unless it's for a specific reason or to meet up with specific people i.e. club."*

H is still trying to assimilate into civilian life and his only reason to go out is to meet up with other VMC members. This demonstrates that transition is not something that truly seems to happen for many. However, Dabovich et al. (2019) state that individuation and separation from the military occurs when the person has a sense of direction, and when they envisaged themselves filling a new and valued role. Values are transmissible and can be applied across difference situations. Individuation and separation for those who transition from the military successfully, may still benefit from a social response that capitalises upon the values inculcated in veterans, in a way that benefits both them and society. Some veterans are no longer able to work; this could be due to medical reasons and perhaps why they were discharged from the military. Some are still young and are no longer able to find a role that is a valued and fulfilling. This research demonstrates there is a place for them in the VMC (subject to meeting the eligibility to join) where they have a role, identity and structure. Raider believes he is slowly getting better:

**Raider:** *"It was a hard coming back, and just being so angry and stuff, that was hard, and I mean I've been dealing with that, and you know, for quite a few years now, but I'm getting better, slowly."*

Nugget, a Vietnam veteran, who was conscripted during the years of National Service, didn't want to join the army. He felt he had no choice, prison or army. He was working as a bank clerk before being called up for National Service. When recalling his transition from the army back to civilian life, he seemed to not make sense of the whole time, those years of service and return. He appeared numbed by the experience, as if he was in a dream like state for several years:

**Nugget:** *"Well, I, I'm not sure whether it was my own thoughts or other people putting into my head, oh you'll have trouble when you go back to the bank after being in the army and outside in the bush doing, you'll have trouble. You probably won't like it, and I don't know, but anyway I didn't last long back in the bank. And I got out, now I don't know really why, whether it was just those thoughts that they had or that was really the way that I did feel, I'm, I'm not sure."*

Nugget expected the transition back to civilian life would be hard but was uncertain if this was because of his own thoughts or thoughts from others. When he returned from his service, after a short while he left the bank and moved states:

**Nugget:** *"But the upshot of it all is I'm glad I did I think in the end because I came over here and did alright, whereas stuck at a bank it would have – mightn't have liked it."*

There was one thing that puzzled him then and still does to this day. People did not ask him about his experience during the war. Almost like it did not happen, two years of his life almost wiped from peoples' memories:

**Nugget:** *"Main thing was, that I thought in retrospect was they didn't ask me any questions, I wonder why that – aren't they interested or aren't they inquisitive about?"*

Nugget felt people were not interested in his experience. For the past 15 years he has been going to local state schools:

**Nugget:** *"I've been going to the local state schools and taking over a few of the bits and pieces that have survived. And the – I don't know, I suppose they're about 9–10-year-old kids 4th and 5th grade or something. They ask the sort of the questions that I would have thought that people might ask who are my age when I was in the bank. But the kids ask, what did you have for food and what was your bed like and was it hot, cold, wet?"*



Nugget continued stating:

**Nugget:** *"50 odd years later the kids seem to have more interest in that now, than people did when I was straight out of the, straight out of the fire sort of thing. And the kids were more interested 50 years later than they were 5 minutes after. So, whether it was just considered not to be the done thing at the time to ask questions about it, because of all the protests and the moratoriums and all that stuff that was happening, I don't know. But to ask a few harmless questions."*

Perhaps if people had shown interest, the transition experience would have been better.

Pablo described his experience in detail. He appeared to not be deeply affected by the transition, more resigned to the fact that in "normal" life you do not have the feelings of security, family and friendship:

**Pablo:** *"It was shit. Because I came back – yeah, I came back a couple ... a couple of weeks early with my injury, and then pretty much went from having all those guys around you to being back at home in your own place with neighbours living next door that you sort of didn't know, and I was going through relationship issues with my then wife. So, to go from having that close knit friendship to back into the shit realities of normal life, it sort of, in the space of about two to three days you go from one country and one environment to a completely different one."*

Pablo continues to explain he didn't want to be isolated, cut off from his friends:

**Pablo:** *"I told them. No point – yeah, no point in sending me home when I'm going to be isolated in my apartment, I'm not going to be around anyone, I'm not going to have access to the gym, I'm not going to be around my friends. There's that feeling of security and family and friendship that you don't get in normal life."*

'Normal life' now seems different, and the commonality is harder to find. The unique type of bond has gone; however, other bonds and purposes can be found within the VMC. The VMC fills a void because the familiarity of hierarchy structure, the deep level of trust and the limitation of connection with others – outsiders.

Bear was very open to discussing his experiences with suicide attempts. He finished by saying that the VMC is the only place he has felt any respect and has been able to gain the help he needs:

**Bear:** *"It was shit, it was, I put my hand up in 2017. I'd, unbeknownst to them, I'd attempted suicide once and when I put my hand up, I'd attempted the second time. And I chose to put my hand up and*

*say I've got a problem. I started off having really good management, they supported me, it was all good for the first 12 months and then 12 months, I'd say 18 months it was alright, it was good, very well supported. I was doing really well in the first, I think it was the first three months and then I had two mates virtually in succession. One of them in the first week and then the other that topped themselves and spiralled, went down a little bit. I had to take two weeks off, stress leave. I came back and the whole of command had lost all trust in me. So, the transition was, because I didn't want to discharge, I didn't want to leave it. Within shit, I want to say 13 months, I attempted again and consequently this time I was put into the [name] clinic."*

Bear discussed not wanting to leave the military as this left him feeling he had nothing. The effects of this loss led him to attempt to end his life. He had unmet and ongoing needs that Defence did not recognise. Bear stated the club is the only place he has found solace:

**Bear:** *"The place I've found with time for support is the VMC.... and mind you I have looked, it's not as though I haven't looked. When you get into those ruts, in those darker places you definitely try everything fucking, everything that you can possibly do to get through it. And the only place I've felt any kind of respect and help is from the VMC."*

## 10.4 Stigma

Greden et al. (2010) conducted a survey to understand the scope of veterans' problems and mental health needs. Focusing on the barriers to treatment entry and adherence, they found a common barrier was inexorable stigma associated with help seeking. Stigma of mental health issues by the general public are commonplace in Australia. Social media platforms not only stigmatise people with mental health issues, the conditions are also trivialised (Robinson et al., 2019). The participants in this study were asked if they believed there is any stigma around mental health issues. Categorically the answer was no. None of the participants hesitated in saying there is not any stigma whatsoever within the club. This could be because the members share trauma and instinctively understand when and how to acknowledge that trauma. Trauma recognition is what they know and see in themselves and others. Therefore, there is no need to stigmatise:

**Bob:** *\*Laughing – "We will openly admit right, we will openly admit that we're all as fucked up as each other, so no fucking stigma whatsoever, no, there's no, ... go and see a counsellor, you go and talk about, it's, we, like people actually fucking encourage it. So yeah no, people being on medication, people going to see that - I mean I've run into quite a number of people up at the Jamie Larcombe*

*Centre, we've gone up there ..., to which some stage I was going in there, at one stage a couple of months every week and if the people were changing over, do you know what I mean, someone's leaving, someone's coming, someone's leaving, someone's coming, someone was coming back, so yeah no qualms whatsoever to do with that."*

For this group, the trauma experience is unique and there is a commonality. It is this unique commonality that binds the trust they have of each other and is foundational to their peer support. Kumar et al. (2019) study looking at peer support for veterans with PTSD noted there was a sense, among some, that trauma could not be resolved but was to be lived with. This would correlate with the sense I had when interviewing this study's participants. They just accept it is who they are and others in the club also accept it as just the way they are. Bear gave an assured response to my question of stigma within the club: *"Fucking nah, in actual fact it's, you have to be somewhat crazy to be in it."* There is a shared understanding and agreement they are all navigating the world as 'damaged' people. Marksy stated it is expected that everyone is receiving some kind of treatment:

**Marksy:** *"There's not really any stigma around anything. I mean, it's just expected that everyone in the club is talking to someone, psychologists, or psychiatrists. You just assume. Some – not everyone does, but you just assume everyone does."*

**H:** *"No I don't think so, not at all. I mean a lot of guys are going through their own things and pretty everyone is understanding, and people are from different places. No, it's pretty supportive. If you've got an issue and people can help they will."*

**Jay:** *"No, no they'll come up and see hey, are you alright? And obviously if you've formed that that rapport with them, you'll have someone to chat too about it. And that's the whole idea of it, is that now you form that rapport first and then, then you, and from then on you sort of, you know, you got that level of trust with them, and you know that you've talked to them and not be judged. They're going through the same deal. Yeah, you know, you tell a civilian that you're struggling mentally, and they'll sympathise with you, what does that mean? Fuck off, you know - chances are - like you know, even medication wise and things like that I refuse for a long time to go on meds, and then through encouragement from the boys in the club, they're encouraging to at least give it a go and that was something that has really worked for me. You tell a civilian that you're on meds and they think that you're a fucking nutcase. We joke about it we call ourselves, which we probably are you know but hey to us we're the normal ones, and everyone else...."*

I was curious about Jay's statement; to us we're the normal ones. He not only feels judged by civilians, stating they think you are a nutcase if you are on medication. He believes civilians pretend

to have sympathy but really, they do not care. He does not trust them if they do not care and will judge him for having issues with his mental health. Whereas within the club, again we hear the importance placed on trust of each other. It means they care, do not judge and accept the person for who they are. This leads into another inbuilt system within the club that Pottsy discussed. They know when to reach out and provide support for each other. This might not be a formal agreement, but it is an expectation and comes as part of the deal of being a member of the club:

**Pottsy:** *“Openly talk about it. Almost as if it's encouraged. It's that whole it's not weak to speak, like that's, yeah, we all can talk or make a phone call, and your boys are there. Definitely, yes, we've had guys, several members that you can tell that, you know they're really struggling, you know they might start falling off and not going to the club and not catching up, and if we haven't heard from a certain member we start reaching out. And then if that, yeah if, you know if they don't or, we'll ride down and go see them, and then because we know each other so well now, you can tell when someone isn't right. And then for example we had one member that was probably days away from committing suicide, and he was, another member called up the Jamie Larcombe Centre, called up the GP and just said like this guy needs help now, and yeah within 24 hours he was admitted, so.”*

## 10.5 Wind therapy

22Kill is a non-profit suicide prevention organisation based in the United States of America (USA). It is so called because in the USA, 22 veterans end their life by suicide every day. Predominantly, the organisation focusses on preventing US military veterans and first responders from suicide. Teaming up with a motorcycle product retailer J&P Cycles, a large amount of money was invested for Wind Therapy (WT) for the treatment of PTSD. This involved motorcycle rider training, maintenance classes, and peer group construction of custom motorcycles for veterans. They provided veterans with motorcycle experiences and peer interaction to stall the effects of PTSD (Laughlin, 2018). Veterans use WT to ease stress and help cope with their everyday life struggles. They enjoy the inherent freedom and friendships that follow (Wysocki, 2024). Jay discussed WT as group therapy and draws a comparison of how they are all in the same ‘boat.’ Jay describes how when riding the motorcycle there is not time to worry about the demons in his head and riding gives him freedom. This explains another pull to being in the club, it provides a place for a joint common goal of riding, taking them out of their headspace. They have shared enjoyment of a motorcycle and physical need to be out in nature's wind:

**Jay:** *"Yeah, yeah, we joke around we say that riding together as a club it's almost it's group therapy because we're all in the same boat together, now we're all getting that wind therapy together, but the best part about our group therapy nobody really says a word. There's no need to:"*

**Jay:** *"Until you actually do serve overseas, you think that you can understand the mindset of, of a war veteran but it's not until you've actually been through it yourself and then and then returned that that - you realise that you know what, when I was just I say just a military member, like good on for standing up and signing the dotted line, but till you served overseas you'll never really understand what's going on until you've been in that situation. So that's why I wanted, that's why I sort of was directed towards the VMC over any other ex-military club. And then obviously the joy in life that I have with motorbikes, the freedom the fact that you need to concentrate so hard on the on your surroundings that you don't have time to worry about the demons that you have in your head at the time if you know what I mean."*

Bear discussed riding his motorcycle as a mental release, bringing him peace and keeping him in the moment. It is wind therapy; the therapy is bringing them very much to the here and now. Bear also described riding as art. It would also appear that as they needed to act and be in the moment during their military service, this theme continues to be replicated in their post-military life. Although the difference is they now have control and set the pace as they have the choice:

**Bear:** *"So a bike for myself is a mental release. I don't know whether it's the danger factor, I don't know. I can attribute to anything, it's just for me you're looking at that corner and you're going "If I get that top right and I cut in perfectly there, oh that was beautiful. And you go around a corner and it's like an art, you just get there, and you go 'Ooh fucked that one up, oh well I've got to do that one a little bit better next time.' You know what I mean. So, you just, that's why I say you're in the moment, you're just at peace with everything, you're just looking at what's in front of you right there and really, I suppose in a sense, that's all that matters. Because at that specific period of time that's the most important thing, because you're on a bike, you're not protected. If you fuck up or if there's something you don't see, then you're a goner. So, that keeps me in my moment, it just, I can see that's probably the most important thing in my life at that particular time is a hundred metres in front of me or however far I can see."*

## 10.6 Alcohol and other drugs

The participants were asked about drug and alcohol consumption within the club. I was interested in differences with behaviours that are accepted in the club but would usually be unacceptable by society and generally frowned upon. There were varying responses. Raider stated his drinking alcohol began while in the military and this caused him to be involved in fights. He continued by discussing behaviours that he sees are unacceptable in the club, such as behaving in a disgusting manner of a sexual nature towards young ladies. It is not uncommon for some of the chapters to hold parties and have young female strippers, topless, mingling among the men, or for the men to visit strip clubs and topless bars. For Bear, the pressure to participate in that behaviour was too much and he decided to hand back his vest:

**Raider:** *"I didn't fit into the army anymore, I was too angry, I wouldn't take orders, drank a lot, fought a lot. Some behaviours in the club are acceptable, some aren't. Depends on who you are, I guess. Like I, years ago with some of the older guys, we used to go on rides and stuff, and the way they would carry on around young ladies and stuff, you know, I used to tell them to pull their heads in and stop being arseholes. But you know, when you've got 60- and 70-year-old men doing it, it's just, I think it's disgusting. There's a time and a place, and in a public place it's not the time or the place."*

**Bear:** *"So when the boys, sorry the VMC was good and bad at the same time. I was in a group, an [name] Chapter, so I had, [name] already spoken to you about that, each and every one of them, they were going through different psychological issues and stuff like that. What came out of that was no support. So, I'd come through the fog to find that my determination had come through for my discharge. I wanted to sit with the guys and discuss it and see where I go. They were meeting in pubs and clubs and strip joints and dah-dah-dah-dah. I can't, still to this day I can't be in crowded environments, it just sets me off. They refused to go outside of those strip clubs and pubs and stuff like that and there was always the expectation that you had to be there every Friday. And I said, "Look I can't keep this up" and so it was hand back your Casper. So, I had to hand back my vest, lucky [name] from [name] chapter said, "No this is bullshit man, come over to us." And the good thing was that I had a, got a, I think you've even seen it, a black cruiser, the Indian, perfect for the open road so virtually every 2nd month I head off to [name], good ride and join up with the boys there. And so that's where I've found my home, and I suppose."*

Bear took a stand against the club's chapter to protect his mental health and moral compass. Not only was it unhelpful for him to be in crowded environments, but his strongly held principles about going to strip clubs and pubs was tested. So much so, he was willing to remove himself from the

club and hand Casper back. Ethnographic and journalistic reports of the biker groups described them as radically out of step with mainstream society. Initiation ceremonies were used to perform deviant sexual practices. Non-bikers could expect violent attitudes towards them. A piratical (wearing bandanas) look communicated adherence to their values and alternative lifestyle (Piano, 2018). Certain members of the VMC do not want the image or practices of the outlaw biker gangs, and others want to participate. Marksy discussed how some members continue with bad lifestyle choices, but he surrounds himself with family people, positive people who add value to his life. This would indicate that he maintains a level of autonomy for self-protection. This would be hard to manage within such a closed group. Watching a brother behaving in a way that is challenging to their own ethics and values would be emotionally wearing and would require 'stepping back' and passing on responsibility to another member to provide support:

**Marksy:** *"Unfortunately seen a lot of people end up leaving the club, end up passing away, it's probably due to their lifestyle and they didn't want to continue their path of trying to get help or do it for themselves. You have to accept them for who they are and don't let them bring you down. They'll normally find someone else in the club who will support them ... through doing what they do, so drugs, alcohol. Bad lifestyle. And that'll be their go to. I like to surround myself with positive people and family people and people that can add more to life than just drinking and doing drugs and – yeah. They can't break that cycle."*

Jay gave an account of his experience with alcohol use. He stated, *"We don't know how to deal with the problems and issues – we draw on alcohol."* Although, he did state that the risk to drink and drive is too great, and he believed alcohol is an evil thing:

**Jay:** *"I haven't spoken about that but that that's exactly right you know we know from experience that one or two beers is the maximum you can have and still be on the road you know so because we need to ride our bikes as part of therapy and, yeah you wouldn't dare to risk, you know exceeding that and then hopping on the bike, so there's also no second chance generally on a bike you know, yeah but no you're exactly right and, one of the biggest problems that we have is because, because we don't know how to deal with the problems and issues that we've got now has been a, a return service man we tend to draw on the assistance of alcohol which, you know, maybe yeah have a couple of drinks and get something out of your system, but you know then put it away because as we all know it's an evil thing and it kills more people than any other drug in the world, you know, which yes and the reason it's legal is to say, they make so much money out of it. But you know, you're right exactly yeah, we refrain from - of course we party every now and then you know but, yeah, we refrain from, from hard and regular drinking because, oh and drug use because of that reason you know we need to stay on the bike."*

Bob discusses the unwritten rule of engaging with a woman while with the club members; he stated it is not acceptable to 'have a go' (by this he means act aggressively towards or use derogatory terms or profanities towards a woman). It is an interesting viewpoint of what is considered acceptable behaviour towards a woman who is not an intimate partner. When you are with the club you have an image to maintain. However, physical aggression, including domestic violence and/or abuse, including emotional abuse (i.e. verbally abusing a partner) by veterans is not uncommon. Gender-based violence in the military is an inherent part of the military institution (Wadham, 2017). Domestic violence perpetration is more strongly correlated to military members who experience PTSD than from other kinds of trauma. Abuse of substances, including alcohol, prescription drugs, and illicit drugs is another precipitating factor for violence. Even subthreshold PTSD may increase violence if hyperarousal is especially predominant (Dao, 2013). Bob further stated that if you drink alcohol until you fall over you will not be judged:

**Bob:** *"Yeah, I mean the thing is, as you say like ... the unwritten rules, I mean the thing is people at times may drink too much, people may do bits and pieces, but you wouldn't, I mean like ... turn around and have a go at, no one would sit there and have a go at a woman. Like you wouldn't sit there and be disrespectful to go out in public and be disrespectful to ... in your own right, ... but you wouldn't go out and be disrespectful to people, you wouldn't go out and go down the road and start swearing and chucking things at people or fighting with people. So, but so in some ways you've got no rule but, in some ways, you have, like you, it's unwritten that you just don't do that and that's the way that it goes. But if you were to go down the club and drink way to excess and just fall over, then that's, no one in the morning going to judge you for it so. But not a lot will actually do that, people are driving, riding their bikes, so in some ways that culture, people's possibly perceived perception of drinking is, the amount of people that I'd go and drink, like lemonade or something, and it's because they're going to be riding the next day."*

**Nugget:** *"Well I'm, I'm 78 years old, I didn't know what marijuana looked like or smelt like until about probably 20 years ago. And I found out at the bike club what it looked like and what it smelt like. That is the only - apart from alcohol and I suppose tobacco I suppose, but that is the only drug that I've seen in my 23 years and over the years probably 60 or 70 members all up and that's the only drug if marijuana's a drug, is it, I don't know whatever it's called, party drug or whatever they call it these days."*



## 10.7 Barriers to services

For a number of years the government has been working with stakeholders, including health professionals and representative bodies, in its examination of the veteran mental health system (Australian Government Department of Veteran Affairs, 2020). In 2020, The Hon Darren Chester MP, Minister for Veterans' Affairs commented:

For most, serving in the Australian Defence Force (ADF) is overwhelmingly a positive experience and they transition into civilian life successfully. However, almost three in four transitioned ADF members are estimated to have had a mental health disorder during their lifetime, either prior to, during or after their military career. Between 2015 and 2017, the suicide rate for ex-serving men was 1.18 times (18%) higher than Australian men. Over the same period, the suicide rate of ex-serving females was 2.15 times (115%) higher than Australian female (Australian Government Department of Veteran Affairs, 2020).

The government's Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing plan 2020 identified barriers for accessing care for veterans and their families. The participants discussed the barriers they faced. Pablo stated, there are enough supports, however the risk is the consequences of accessing those services. Therefore, the main barrier for him was the potential impact for his career. He finishes by saying that the VMC provides a place where you can release, feel safe and be seen for who you are. Whereas in the military, you must hide who you are. There is also an irony here to consider; Pablo talks about being 'kicked out' of the military, but he joins a club that has those same structures and concepts. The culture seems to be ingrained and necessary for this group, perhaps it is the only place they can let their guard down not because they are safe from being 'kicked out' but because they understand the rules to stay connected:

**Pablo:** *"I think, it's sort of gotten to the point now where if I was to discuss – I think there's enough stuff provided by Defence to give you the avenues, and the tools, and the workshops, and everything else to address your issues, and I think there is – I don't think there's not enough stuff there, the issue is what the consequence is of accessing those things. That's one of the biggest things that Defence do wrong, and I might be wrong, but I think, probably a lot of the guys who are out now, and who have issues and suicide and those sorts of things, is probably heavily driven by the fact that they have just been kicked out of Defence when they didn't want to be, like myself, I wanted to be in it my whole life, to have that ripped away from you, is a horrible thing. The club is what does that or gives them that sense of still being part of that military family. You don't feel safe to talk about your issues in*

*Defence, at the moment, unless you have accepted that the door to being kicked out is open and close. The club it gives you that breath of fresh air that you don't have to keep everything hidden to yourself all the time."*

### **10.7.1 Help seeking**

The participants were asked about seeking help for their mental health issues. More specifically where did they find that support and how did that support help. Bob stated that the club provides structure and purpose. He emphasised being part of something, then paused and thought more, elaborating *"It's the feeling you're still part of the military or brotherhood:"*

**Bob:** *"I mean there's a number of people that we've spoken to, and they've said that they wouldn't, like prior to going in the club they wouldn't leave their room, like they actually genuinely wouldn't leave their room, if people come round, they will just stay in their room, they wouldn't leave that house. And it's, it gives them a purpose to do something, yeah so it certainly gives you a structure and a purpose and a, being part of something. I think it's that part of yeah feeling that you're still part of the, the military or brotherhood, all that sort of thing, so yeah definitely."*

Bear stated, even though he did not know the 'boys' very well they maintained constant contact, and this was comforting. He also felt supported to reach out to mental health services and spent some time in a clinic:

**Bear:** *"So, each member and like when I went to [name], I didn't know these boys very well .... We went to it was a Vietnam Veterans' Day in [name] and we went to down to [name] and that was the first time I met the boys, and it wasn't long after that, that I was admitted. And these boys were just ringing me, messaging me left, right and centre."*

Prior to joining the VMC, H had not sought help for his mental health. The main reason was he was unaware he had issues with his mental health until another member pointed it out to him. He compared this encouragement to seek help with his time in the Returned Soldiers League (RSL) and elsewhere, *"I wouldn't get that anywhere else, not even at the RSL: "*

**H:** *"Oh yeah definitely, I know they will, yeah definitely and the same the other way. If any one of them did call I would be there for them, but apart from that yeah, it's just – I think to be honest it's kept me on a and it's sort of helped me kick back into a safe space kind of. There are things that I'm doing right now that if it wasn't for this club I wouldn't be doing, and that's stuff about looking after myself. I didn't*

*even know I had issues until someone pointed them out, and it was a case of I had people saying oh you know, and everyone said oh – what do you freakin' know but having a brother who's been through similar stuff to turn around and go bro you know do have dreams like this? When you go somewhere do you always sit with your back to a wall? Do you do this? Do you do that? Does that happen? Does this happen? Do you just get angry all the time? Yeah, yeah yeah, they will say that's not normal bro. So, if it wasn't for that I wouldn't even be looking down the mental health road, and I wouldn't get that anywhere else, not even at the RSL."*

Throughout this study it has been apparent and key that it is trust that binds this group together. H confirms that his experience with his brothers of having the recognition of shared experience, normalising that experience and the recognition of established signs and symptoms of mental ill health mean that they can receive the help they need. With the foundation of trust, the advice from their brothers is accepted.

## **10.8 Conclusion**

This chapter concentrated on mental wellbeing and protective factors of being in the VMC. The members discussed being 'visible' to their 'brothers' and not feeling negatively judged for having issues with their mental health. In fact, they feel understood, supported and encouraged to seek help from health professionals. The participants discussed a range of mental health issues they experienced such as: anxiety, social anxiety, death anxiety, panic attacks and PTSD.

The struggles they experienced with transitioning from the military to civilian life were explored. It was clear that the transition did not go well for most and to this day several of them stated they struggle still every day to fit in with society. Each participant discussed stigma around mental health and mental illness. The responses were surprising, each of them categorically stating there is no stigma. In fact, they openly talk about mental health issues, encourage talking about it and even expect that they are all experiencing some sort of issue with their mental health.

Wind Therapy is a central element of providing protective factors for their mental health. Group therapy was a term used to convey the collective experience of riding together, no need for conversation, just safety in the knowledge of being in the same 'boat' as it were. Alcohol and other drugs were discussed and while most of the participants did not believe these were an issue in the club, it was noted that some practices such as regularly going to topless bars, strip clubs and acts

that were considered disgusting behaviours towards young females had been observed. However, for the vast majority they do not condone or participate in these behaviours. This is the 'darker side' of the club where some members do participate in this type of behaviour. These deviant behaviours are not necessarily challenged by the other members who do not agree with them, they remove themselves, assumedly going home to the families. However, when the behaviour is too uncomfortable, they will call the behaviour out, but this is done in a specific way that maintains the trust and collective brotherhood.

The chapter ended by discussing the barriers to services and help seeking. Most of the participants believe there are a range of mental health services and in the main and are accessible. An identified barrier to accessing services was the fear of not gaining promotion or having their contract terminated within Defence. Encouragement for seeking help with professional services is greatly encouraged and one participant stated that if it wasn't for the club, he would not even have considered getting help for his mental health. I noted that whilst most of the participants mentioned one form or another of an anxiety related issue, none of them discussed experiencing depression even as part of the PTSD experience. Jay thoughtfully stated how sharing experiences and knowing you are not alone in that experience brings comfort:

*Jay: "Well once again, it's that, it's that like mindedness it's a few forms of networking now, so you know we we're drawn to people that through life ... or the same, or similar experiences as us. So you know the biggest thing that I reckon that often the VMC is the realisation that I'm not alone, you know, I'm not the only one going through, there's these things that are controlling my mind, when I close my eyes at night to go to sleep, you know, every single night several things come back to me, you know, I'm not the only person going through that that's good to know."*

Following on from this section is now the final chapter. My reflections of the study are captured in the concluding statements. Furthermore, I provide an in-depth discussion of the themes that were elicited from the gathered data – the participants' narratives.

## **11 CHAPTER: REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUDING DISCUSSION**

### **11.1 Chapter Preface**

This is the concluding chapter of the thesis. In this section I capture my own thoughts and experience while conducting this research. I discuss my gained knowledge presenting this with an inward focus to provide my interpretation of the data. I maintained a personal diary throughout the research process. My thoughts allowed me to view my positionality and examine my own biases. For example, the positive factors for the members being in the club. I cannot argue that the club does not replicate a military structure that they all seem to want and need; this does allow for them to be who they are without having to consider societal accepted norms, and they write their own rules of engagement. However, I came to acknowledge that whilst the club does seem to, and, in their view, provides protective factors for their mental health, I argue that this is not without consequences for them and the loved ones around them.

The findings of the study will provide insight for future designs of peer support programs for veterans and first responders (firefighters, paramedics, and police). It is hoped that this study will advance further research within this focussed peer support field.

### **11.2 Reflections of the Study**

I began this journey before the research study was formulated as the wife of a veteran who is a member of Veterans Motorcycle Club (VMC). For over five years, I watched the uniqueness of this group's peer support. They are very protective of each other and the club's solitude, and 'outsiders'-civilians ('civies') are not welcome. I listened to how structured they are for example, replicating military naming conventions such as Sergeant at Arms and Quartermaster. The rules they enforce such as the wearing of their colours and specific placement of their patches on their vests. I heard about their hierarchal structure with committee positions such as president, vice president, and road captain. Then the processes of being invited to join their club, lengthy joining process to prove one's worthiness and the final road to initiation, acceptance and enculturation.

There were many questions I wanted to answer before my research began. However, it was important to start with the basics. Therefore, the aim of this study was to examine this closed group by using a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology to structure the research. 11 veterans, all

of whom have served in a war or conflict participated in the study. Their personal stories were collected and analysed, and key themes presented.

I learned about the historical formation of the club by the returned Vietnam War veterans; they had been rejected by the Returned Soldiers League (RSL) and the nation. Because of this 'treachery' they formed their own support network, a motorcycle club. The VMC now exists in every Australian state and territory and serves hundreds of war veterans. Most significantly, through my PhD research journey, I learned that the VMC reignited a need in my husband to be engulfed in a macho military lifestyle (Reddin, 2003). This is not unique to him; others who were interviewed expressed this need for enculturation that emanates from an authoritarian, patriarchal and gendered male power dominance (Wadham, 2013). Their identity, formed in the military, is perpetuated in the club. The VMC is more than a motorcycle club for veterans of war; it is more than a peer support group; it is a brotherhood and for them, a way of life.

I have never been in the military or near a war or conflict and I have never been to Afghanistan. During my research I came across an album by Australian singer-songwriter Fred Smith called *The Dust of Uruzgan*. Fred did an 18-month tour of Uruzgan alongside Australian troops. This highly emotive album gives a glimpse of the harshness of the Afghanistan environment, the war and challenges faced by the service personnel (Smith., 2011). This album gave me more understanding of their experience and military identity.

The search for identity is an endless process and identity cannot be finished. Only the need to have purpose and a process of identification that is linked to the person's action. Furthermore, it is important to bear in mind that this process does not happen in isolation, rather through interpersonal relations (Massiere, 2015). We are constructed by the world while at the same time, we are constructing this world from our own interpretation of our background and experiences. It is in this transaction where we find meaning (Laverty, 2003 as cited in Munhall, 1989). Hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with the life world or human experience as it is lived (Laverty, 2003). For Heidegger 'Dasein,' that translates as mode of being, or possibility of human existence, and, indeed, one that is projective, oriented toward the interpretive possibilities available to us in the situated meaning of a human in the world (Heidegger, 1927/1962, pp. 31-32; Laverty, 2003). The sense of the being of human existence is enacted in our own attempts to understand our own being, as we may interpret our being through the course of our affairs.

Delving into the literature, I was not surprised to discover there were not any previous studies of this group or similar motorcycle clubs. I was however surprised by the lack of scholarly attention given to peer support groups for veterans of war. As evidenced by the completed literature review, scholarly information was lacking. In the past 30-plus years, peer support groups aimed at mental health recovery have flourished. For example, peer support groups for substance use disorders, gambling and eating disorders. These support groups have typically been structured by either formally employed peer support workers (PSWs), who are usually trained, consumer groups where the participants have no formal training and informal groups that naturally occur (Repper & Carter, 2011).

This study primarily focused on the extent of the positive aspects of being a member of the VMC, and how it occurs. The attention of the research was not placed on military culture or indeed the type of person who joins the Australian military. For example, questions of authoritarianism, patriarchy, hegemonic and gendered male power were not a consideration (Wadham, 2013) or the warrior model of masculinity (Byrd., 2017 as cited in Duncanson, 2009). Nor was the focus on secret society, homosocial enclaves or the power of the club over personal agency (for example, the bylaws dictating who can join and the lengthy initiation processes) but rather, through the identification of the members' experiences of the peer support and military identity they find for and from each other within this exclusive brotherhood. However, we cannot simply ignore the factors and reasons why the club was formed. The Returned Soldiers League (RSL) and much of the Australian nation viewed the Vietnam veterans as outcasts. This historical context underpins the sense of brotherhood and segregation from society. The acceptance by the one-percent motorcycle clubs coupled with military structures has shaped how they construct their club rules and live by their codes. This disconnection from society began with the Vietnam veterans' difficulties of settling back into civilian life. However, the VMC contemporary veterans choose to also carry that historical pain and shun societal norms. They too experience the struggle to adjust to civilian life when transitioning from the military. They turn to each other as peers for support with their mental health, because they understand each other far more than their loved ones, civilians or health professionals ever could. Heidegger states:

Our attempts to understand ourselves (or anything else) remain conditioned by pre-structures that determine in advance which possibilities of a situation we find significant, and by moods that determine in advance our attunement to a situation we are 'thrown' into,

that is, a situation that affects us even though we have not chosen to be in it. (Heidegger, 1927/1962, pp. 28-34)

In terms of the members in the VMC, their military service, deployment/s, and their formative experience foster a need to gravitate towards the club as the features are so like the organisational structure that is so connected with their trauma.

We cannot forget the veterans who leave the military feeling angry and bitter from their experiences. They leave with a lot of distrust of military systems and do not want anything to do with a group that replicates military structure. Likewise, not all personnel leave the service embittered. There are those who had a positive experience and transition well back to civilian life.

This study was not grounded in deficits or stories of adversity; it was not devised to examine the participants' military service, what they experienced whilst in service, if or why they have experienced mental health issues and what those issues may be. Veterans often face moral Injury (MI), this is when events of war and service experiences can deeply transgress veterans' moral codes (Jamieson, Usher, et al., 2020 as cited in Litz et al, 2009). MI is a concept that has been proposed to better understand factors that can contribute to suicide among military and veteran populations (Jamieson et al., 2023). More exposure to potentially morally injurious events (PMIE) and greater morally injurious symptom severity are related to increased risk for suicide-related outcomes, including suicidal ideation and suicide attempt[s].

The VMC members categorically stated they do not experience stigma of mental illness among themselves. However, we know stigma has existed for many years and does still exist amongst the public, health professionals and even in Defence Force itself (Ahmedani, 2011; Greden et al., 2010; Nichols et al., 2022; Robinson et al., 2019). This study did not explore any potential effects of MI with the participants. Although signs, symptoms and effects of mental ill health was not specifically sought after, in talking to the participants there was discussion from many participants about their experience with a mental illness and its effects. Through the discussion, their peer support was viewed as vital to their wellbeing. The regular 'check ins,' 'phone-trees' and scheduled visits to mental health facilities, provided the support they needed to get well and return home. Some participants stating they would not be here (alive) without the club. Heidegger argues, the structure of the world is shaped by the purposes we pursue, the network of referential relations that define situations where we seek to reject these purposes, and the objects we use to achieve them. The



world is a complex web of interconnected meanings, fundamentally rooted in familiarity, which ensures that the referential relations are readily understood (George & Churchill, 2022).

The study was planned and implemented with the focus firmly placed upon the support gained, resilience and protective factors for mental health that enabled the VMC members to connect with like-minded people whose shared experiences encourage them to believe that they alone will trust and understand them. Insight gained from this study about their peer support structure has given a deep understanding of their engagement with each other and encouragement to engage with treatment providers. This knowledge will help broaden and devise a more targeted support program to support serving Defence members, veterans and similar first responders, and working professionals.

The participants in this study, the VMC members, have taken charge of their life post their military service (one member is still serving in Defence). They have developed meaningful trusting relationships with their peers who provide a support network 24/7. The data was gathered through the semi-structure interview process. Participants were asked about their experiences as a member of the club; what the club means to them. Their stories were interpreted, and responses presented by grouped key themes: Chapter 7 - Trust, Chapter 8 – Symbolic shields: Casper, tattoos and Harley Davidsons, Chapter 9 – The function of peer support and Chapter 10 – Peer support protects mental health.

Peer support is a term commonly used as a label to describe a framework that provides protective factors for mental health and wellbeing. This research has identified that brotherhood sits as an overarching layer and a foundational building block of peer support within the VMC. Brotherhood identity is not unique to the VMC; many groups seek the loyalty of brotherhood (Bradley, 2022; Jackson, 2012; Wadham, 2013). Themes extrapolated from the data are further discussed in this chapter. Their group norms are interwoven in the framework of their peer support. Peer support is what happens within this group, but it is their bond of brotherhood that encapsulates it. Furthermore, I propose the VMC is not only a closed peer support network for the chosen few, nor just a brotherhood; it is a 'way of life' for many of the members.

### 11.3 Findings from this research

The findings from this study add another dimension to conventional peer support literature. As a consequence of this PhD research, scholarly recognition has now been given to understanding the experience and perspectives of the protective factors for the VMC members' mental health and wellbeing. Until the completion of this study, evidence was not available that described the motivating factors for joining the VMC or gains for being in the club. Now this presented evidence can be used and consideration given from the outcomes. This research data can now be used to inform future development of treatment services for veterans and serving Defence members, as traditional veterans' mental health services appear to have failed them. The most simplistic way of understanding the consensus of this group, is the quote below by Vietnam veteran Kel:

***Kel:** "I've never had a trust in the – in that – in the psychiatrists. I've never, never had faith in psychiatrists. We've found brothers that we could, could talk to each other, you know, so that's why we wear a patch upon our back. Medals, medals on our chest and patches on our back."*

**Figure 24**

*Casper - Protective Factors for Mental Health*



Key

Colour	Theme	Description
A	Light Blue	Trust
B	Teal	Worthiness
C	Orange	Military Structure
D	Red	Earned Rights
E	Purple	Respect

*Figure 24 illustrates how multiplicity aspects of the members' lives intertwine around Casper, the central focus on the representation of this closed group.*

This study highlighted the significance of the club in the members' everyday life. It became apparent that membership is more complex than I initially thought or understood. Central to the VMC members' identity is Casper (three-piece patch). The members take immense pride in having the symbolic image of Casper on their back (colours).

Identity is a psychosocial phenomenon that evolves continuously throughout life, shaped by an individual's unique experiences of the world. Its clarity emerges through an ongoing process of maturation, involving repeated cycles of meaning-making, reality-testing, refinement, and reassessment. Ideally, this process fosters a sense of stability over time and supports personal growth across the lifespan (Dabovich et al., 2019 as cited in Erikson, 1968; Freeney, 2008; Kroger, 2004). Dabovich et al. (2019) state the military places enormous demands on a person's sense of identity, which is actively shaped in relation to the needs of the collective. Furthermore, veterans' identity is once again challenged during the transition from military to civilian life, as the collective identity, forged during their military service to enable them to operate amidst danger and instability, is challenged and they must adapt to civil society and a new identity beyond service (Dabovich et al., 2019 as cited in Bursnall et al., 2001; Shields et al., 2016). Many of the participants gave accounts of the difficulties they experienced transitioning to civilian life, some stating they are still trying to adjust after many years or that they simply cannot adjust. The VMC replicates a military identity that they lost when they transitioned out of military. The VMC extends past replicating a military identity. It gives them a purpose, encouragement, connectedness, support, acceptance, and safety.

Figure 24 displays five large discs, each containing an identified value. Casper sits at the centre radiating out and encompassing a set of values the members hold in utmost regard. Some of the identified values formed the basis of themes in the chapter headings such as: Trust (Chapter 7) and Symbolic shields: Casper, tattoos and Harley Davidsons (Chapter 8). The remaining displayed values all fall and overlap within those headings: *Worthiness*, *Military structure*, *Earned right*, and *Respect*.

Four notable outcomes of the members' experiences were universality of shared experiences, trust of each other and worthiness to join and an identity that keeps insiders in and outsiders out.

Transitioning from the military to civilian life was traumatic for most of the participants interviewed for this study. Losing their identity, comradeship and previous military support system left many lost and suicidal. The VMC provides all they lost and gives them more. With the VMC, they now have ability to be open and honest about their mental health issues and gain advice and support, they

can feel worthy and protected by wearing Casper, they ride a motorcycle and experience group wind therapy and lastly, they are able to give back and continue the cycle of helping and healing.

I will now explore Figure 24 and explain each of the discs' central theme, and furthermore how the overlapping subheadings are related to the central theme. It is a web of intermeshed values, ethics and ideals that form the identity of a VMC member.

### **11.3.1 Trust**

The identified theme of trust captured the true essence of its meaning for the VMC members. I explored and contrasted the Westernised interpretation of trust, highlighting the fundamental aspects of how this is constructed. Trust is not just given; it is built over time during the prospect spending time, often several months, establishing themselves in the eyes of the other members. Prospects are assessed by all other members. They are tested and need to complete tasks, such as serving the other members. Trust is the brotherhood, upholding the values of Casper. If accepted, there is a patching up ceremony where the details of the time and place remain a closely held secret. This follows a long-held tradition by the one-percent clubs (such as the Hells Angels) (Pigot, 2000, p. 10). The historical construction of the meaning of trust is coupled to the reverence to the values signified in the image of Casper. It is part of the innate trust that they will act and be true to the ideals of "having their mates' back," these types of bonds originally formed in conflict zones.

### **11.3.2 Worthiness**

Being worthy of wearing Casper (three-piece patch) is considered an honour. It denotes the men gave service to the country in war or a conflict and were willing to lay down their life for the Australian colours (national flag). The participant Bear stated, *"They handed me Casper, and that was probably the biggest thing that happened to me since being made the Warrant Officer I reckon."* The historical beginnings of how Casper became the iconic emblem of the VMC is why it is valued so highly. Members need to understand the origins of Casper: from the one-percent motorcycle clubs such as the Hells Angels, who were considered 1% of the population and marginalised, deemed as deviants who do not fit decent societal norms, to the Australian cult film *Stone*, and the nation's, along with the RSLs, rejection of the returned Vietnam veterans. Being worthy of Casper means you not only understand all of this; you carry the historical hurt and anger of society's rejection of those who served in Vietnam. There is a sense in which the VMC continue to rebel against society for not

accepting the returned Vietnam veterans. They therefore maintain their own culture outside of society where they dictate the rules of what is and what is not acceptable. This lays the foundations of the construction of a familiar trust that has been bound by their historical beginnings. Knudsen (2023) argues that the core idea of Heidegger's social ontology is understanding others, collaborating with them, and forming lasting groups is only possible if we pre-reflectively align their behaviour with our own projects and the shared world between us.

### **11.3.3 Military structure**

The VMC construct themselves in a military-style structure, from their naming conventions to identifying the club executive positions, such as Sargent at Arms and Quartermaster - to positions of power and control (military rank). Specific exemplars of this structure are the president and vice president whom the other members always protect. This structure is familiar to the members and allows a deep sense of trust and thus allows for a supportive environment of peers. The replication of a military structure establishes their relationships and expectations of each other. Behaviour, interactions and rules stating who can talk to whom lay the foundations that support their peer scaffolding. This is a unique group that have a shared identity as veterans of war. Some veterans want nothing more to do with the military style of group structure, rules and commands. However, for the VMC members it is precisely the military-style and replication of rules and structure they want. Here it is familiar, and they feel safe and have that sense of trust. The members uphold the ethics of the club, the culture of brotherhood (secrecy to outsiders) but unlimited support and maintenance of the relationships within the club. They are still on active service to each other.

### **11.3.4 Earned right**

The earned right to wear Casper and to be enculturated into this club is not to be underestimated. Members give a great deal to be a part of the club. Once a member has earned the right to wear Casper they are placed in a position of responsibility and expectation. They are required to attend organised club rides and follow club rules. They must also follow the rules of the Vietnam Veterans and Veteran Motorcycle Club Australian National Council (VV & VMCANC), and the wider motorcycle community as dictated by the dominant one percent motorcycle club in their state, such as the Hells Angels here in South Australia. They are expected to uphold the ethics and values of the club and

protect and honour the history of Casper, or they risk having their vest removed and being expelled from the club. They are also committed to upholding the rules of the dominant one-percent club, such as very specific acceptable behaviour, ethics and showing respect. This is not something that is outwardly transparent. Failure to uphold the rules could result in removal of their rights to wear a three-piece patch (namely the MC cube). It is worth remembering that wearing a three-piece patch (MC Cube) is a specific privilege given to the VMC. All other motorcycle clubs must wear SMC Social Motorcycle Club or MMC Military Motorcycle Club patches and never wear a MC cube (Shand, 2016).

### **11.3.5 Respect**

The disc in Figure 24 that contains the word respect overlaps with several subheadings. Beginning with brotherhood, this is a deeply held bond within this sub-culture. It displays a masculine homosociality that generates and sustains a male only environment. This is a unique power structure in which men are dominant. The context of their respect is for each other as brothers and not the wider society. The majority of the participants in this study stated they have a total lack of trust of civilians and do not want to engage with them. To become a brother, it is necessary to be tested and assessed according to stringent rules. This is controlled by the lengthy joining process that is designed to observe whether the prospect can uphold the ethics and values and fit the culture of the club. If these sanctioned attributes are met, that person is accepted into the VMC fraternity.

## **11.4 Strengths of the Study**

Throughout the development of this research, I was given unique access to this closed cultural group. This allowed me to explore the experiences of that group in detail. As previously discussed, this group does not welcome outsiders into their world. However, because I was vouched for by my husband, and being female with a professional background as a counsellor, I believe this potentially was reassuring for the participants. I was not viewed as a threat and furthermore, would not harm the reputation of the club or cause any dispute that could result in the loss of the privilege to wear the three-piece patch with MC cube. Another strength of the study was the use of qualitative method; this was well suited to exploring topics where little is known or understood about the experiences of veterans in a motorcycle club.

## **11.5 Study Limitations**

Whilst the outcomes of this study have shown new and exciting insights, the study has recognised limitations:

1. There were no research studies located that could be referenced as a foundation prior to the commencement of this study. However, this identified a major gap in the literature.
2. The participants in the study all live in metropolitan cities where they have regular gatherings as this is easier for them to access. Those members who live in rural locations may not feel the same sense of brotherhood and connectedness.
3. As previously stated, being female could be considered a strength of the study, as I presented no threat. However, this could also have been a limitation as the participants may have held back on some aspects of the club culture and structures. The strength of the data would suggest that this was not necessarily an issue as many members spoke frankly.

## **11.6 Implications for future research**

The findings from this current study indicate that some veterans, and more specifically veterans of war, do not transition well into civilian society. Future studies should address the long-term effects of the VMC peer support structure and if there is an opportunity for the club to be utilised more formally through a transition to civilian life program.

This study highlighted other areas of interest for future research that were not examined within this thesis. What happens to those members who are expelled from the VMC? This requires further exploration and has not been addressed within the available literature or this PhD study. There are three other potential aspects for future research:

1. The partners and families of the VMC members.
2. A comparative study of deployed veterans; why some become VMC members and others do not.
3. A comparative study of the veteran's experience who are in a military motorcycle club or social motorcycle club. Such as the Military Brotherhood Military Motorcycle Club (MBMMC).



Finally, further research is needed to ascertain whether findings and experiences would be similar in other military motorcycle, religious, or social motorcycle clubs. It would also be beneficial for future research to be conducted on veteran motorcycle sheds - a peer support program like the popular men's sheds.

## **11.7 Final Reflections**

When I came into this study, I was a lecturer, counsellor and clinical supervisor working full-time. During the past three years, my study has taken me from being a novice researcher who spent hours, weeks and months reading and watching YouTube videos on how to do a PhD. I wondered how I would ever be able to complete a thesis that would convey the uniqueness of the VMC, and the privilege of being allowed into their world. Many times, feeling the effects of imposter syndrome, I continued to build my self-motivation and confidence, developing a study routine and embracing university life with the guidance of my university team and online academic peer group. As I became entrenched in my study, I resigned from my lecturing position to focus full-time on my research. I wanted to not only complete the study but to honour and validate the veterans who had so willingly been participants. Without them, there would be no thesis.

This privileged journey is only the beginning of my research career. I look forward to continuing within the research field and being in a position where I can share my new-found knowledge with other who are planning on venturing into the PhD journey. I intend to conduct further research to assist in building stronger evidenced base for vulnerable, complex, yet resilient and generous veterans who served their country and were willing to make the ultimate sacrifice of laying down their life, so civilians can live in a free society.

The specific aim of this study was to understand the unique environment of the VMC. I became interested in the motivating factors for wanting to join this motorcycle club over other social or other military motorcycle clubs. Furthermore, what are the protective factors for their mental wellbeing by being in the VMC? As discussed in the introduction section of this thesis, for a period of approximately 18 months, my ex-husband and I were both members of the MBMMC. The prerequisite for joining the MBMMC was having a motorcycle and being a veteran, serving member or support of the club. Supporters are not permitted to wear the full-patched MBMMC colours. There is a separate classification called the Sierra Squad Members and this includes junior members

(Military Brotherhood Military Motorcycle Club, 2020). Sierra Squad members also wear back patches on a vest. To the uninitiated, it would seem the person wearing the Sierra Squad Patches is in fact a military veteran or serving member of Defence. The MBMMC are a family inclusive club where women, children and family members are welcome.

There are distinct differences between the VMC and other military or social motorcycle clubs. The first is that women are not permitted to join the VMC. There is a culture of dominating masculinity, also seen in the military (Wadham, 2017). The “norms” of masculinity include restrictive emotionality, avoiding femininity, seeking status, aggression, fear of intimacy and homophobia (Reddin, 2003). This “macho” image of typical heterosexual masculinity in Australian culture is evident in the VMC. Membership to the VMC has boundaries of who belongs and those who do not. I have also considered how the members’ commitment to the club is detrimental to their other relationships. For example, the club can be time consuming, messaging, checking in with each other and visits to hospital or veteran mental health facilities such as the Jamie Larcombe centre (Government of South Australia, 2024). Often, there are organised rides that requires lengthy time away from family and work commitments. Rides can be interstate and take many days. Partners can feel neglected and void of an intimate connection, as the VMC member as is constantly distracted from everyday family and relationship maintenance. Partners do play a critical role in supporting veterans. Women in relationships with male veterans who have PTSD experience significant psychological distress, regardless of country or military cohort (Waddell et al., 2020 as cited in Dekel, Goldblatt, Keidar, Solomon, & Polliack, 2005; Franciskovic et al., 2007; Galovski & Lyons, 2004; Westerink & Giarratano, 1999). I have come to realise it is not so much about the people (brothers) or the colours per se, it is about a personified image and glorification in that image.

## **11.8 Concluding Comments**

This thesis began by dedicating the research to Ryan (Fozzy) Foster. Fozzy tragically lost his life riding his motorcycle while wearing his VMC colours. The prologue of his funeral service provided some background and a glimpse into the VMC brotherhood. Their fratriarchal bond is unique and something I have never encountered elsewhere. Understanding ‘insiders’ versus ‘outsiders’ groups is not difficult; I am sure we all can grasp this concept. However, the VMC is distinct from the norm. They are not an outlaw or one-percent motorcycle club, but due to historical factors, namely the nation, and Returned Soldiers League (RSL), rejection of the Vietnam veterans, they were and are

allowed to wear the motorcycle club (MC) cube three-piece patch. They continue to carry the wounds of their 'brothers.' They are not a social or military motorcycle club; they are a standalone group. The VMC is quite extraordinary and yet shares similarities to the military, with their hierarchy naming conventions 'ranks', and with the one-percent motorcycle clubs, in their processes to join. One foot in the MC world and the other in ex-military world. However, they are misfits of society. They do not trust civilians, yet it is necessary for them to navigate their life in this society for this is the world they live in. This research data is significant for policymakers and intervention peer support program developers. The aim is that this knowledge will assist with devising treatment programs that are practical; needs-based assistance that is tailored to all philosophies and unique sub-cultures of ex-service personnel. This study provides insight and understanding of a unique closed and never previously researched group.

Undoubtedly, the club has positively impacted many of the members' lives, and they may wish to complete the circle by giving back and helping other war veterans live a supported life.

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## Appendices

## Appendix A: Program Characteristics. Formal Peer Support Programs

Formal Peer Support Programs		Database search title: Veterans Peer Support Programs, Veterans PTSD peer support programs, Combat veterans peer support and Australian veteran peer support.						
Authors and title	Country Location Data base	Program title	Program type, duration	Program participant numbers	Analysis used	Benefits	Limitations	Era of veterans' service
(Azevedo et al., 2020). Rethinking violence prevention in rural and underserved communities: How veteran peer support groups help participants deal with sequelae from violent traumatic experiences.	USA.  Web of Science.	Peer Support Program (PSP).	Certified peer support specialist. Group sessions. Semi-structured interviews. Weekly meetings at outpatient mental health clinics.	29 group participants and 1 peer specialist.	Content and domain analysis of the interview transcripts. Codes and code categories were used to create a 'codebook.' A team of four trained researcher staff members coded transcripts using qualitative analysis software. Coding agreement was monitored.	4 key themes: 1) Violence in Military training not acceptable in civilian life. 2) Peer support created the trust to speak freely. 3) Skills are taught to defuse violence. 4) The veteran peer support specialist relationship is multidimensional.	Small sample size.	Vietnam Veterans through to Contemporary veterans.
(Barber et al., 2008). Monitoring the dissemination of peer support in the VA healthcare system.	USA.  ProQuest.	Monitoring the Dissemination of Peer Support in the VA Healthcare System.	Survey over 24 months.	1,847 surveys of 38 Veteran Peer Support Programs.	Analysis was conducted in several steps. Using intercorrelation, t-tests and analyses of variance (ANOVA). Anonymous, self-administered survey with two main foci: satisfaction with peer support and veteran recovery attitudes. Sociodemographic data was collected. Using 5-point Likert scales, peer support participation & leadership (number of groups attended and duration of participation). Satisfaction with peer support and satisfaction in leading peer support groups. Recovery-based concepts were assessed on a 7-point Likert scale.	The data suggests that frequency of participation is a valued addition to formal VA mental health services. Satisfaction measures also indicated that veterans typically view their groups participation as a positive experience.	The study was not designed to evaluate whether peer support adds to the efficacy of formal mental health treatment.	Not stated.
(Beehler et al., 2021). Veteran peer suicide prevention: A community-based peer prevention model.	USA.  Web of Science.	Not stated	Semi-structured qualitative interviews, followed by three focus groups. Community-based peer prevention model.	17 participants	Rigorous inductive thematic analysis of the transcripts. Coding by a team using emergent approach. Two coders independently grouped themes into like categories and named them subcomponents. This was an iterative process, and the team met regularly to resolve coding discrepancies through consensus.	The focus was on promoting whole health not just suicide prevention. Participants repeatedly emphasised that organisations have a critical role to play in the success of veteran peers.	Did not measure wellness-orientated or strengths-based outcomes (e.g., hope, community participation, sense of belonging/connection) or deficit-based outcomes (e.g., depression, suicidal ideation).	Vietnam Veterans through to Contemporary veterans.

Formal Peer Support Programs		Database search title: Veterans Peer Support Programs, Veterans PTSD peer support programs, Combat veterans peer support and Australian veteran peer support.						
Authors and title	Country Location Data base	Program title	Program type, duration	Program participant numbers	Analysis used	Benefits	Limitations	Era of veterans' service
(Burnell et al., 2017). Exploring the suitability and acceptability of peer support for older veterans	UK.  ProQuest  Web of Science.	Older veterans.	Scoping review. Focus groups to establish role of peer supporter, format of the service (one-to-one), length of engagement and peer support training.	10	Group discussions were analysed using inductive thematic analysis. Three themes emerged from the focus group discussions. These were: perceptions of peer support, developing a peer support service, and transition vs later life wellbeing.	Peer support was considered suitable, particularly in addressing loneliness and social isolation. Veteran-to-veteran interaction is essential as outsiders do not understand.	The study highlighted two areas of concern, peer support for transition in earlier life and peer support for wellbeing in later life. Some attendees were concerned with the latter; others were concerned with the former, this may have affected the finding.	Older veterans.
(Clark et al., 2016). What Makes a Peer a Peer?	USA.  Web of Science.	Prison inmates with combat experience.	Jail Diversion and Trauma Recovery (JDTR) program. Face-to-face interview.	41 Prison inmates. Military service. Separated by gender, combat, trauma. PP with combat experience were significantly more likely than those without to indicate this as an important characteristic.	Means and standard deviations were calculated for each peer characteristic. Combat exposure and magnitude of lifetime trauma history and ratings of the importance of experience with trauma.  Mental health treatment history for importance of mental health experience, by substance use treatment history for importance of substance use experience, and by combat exposure status for importance of this experience.	Highlighted that combat veterans valued peers who have previously been combat serving veterans.	Small sample size.	Not stated.
(Creamer et al., 1999). Treatment outcome in Australian veterans with combat-related posttraumatic stress disorder: A cause for cautious optimism.	Australia.  Web of Science.	12 Week hospital-based program.	12-week treatment program, inpatient stay 4 weeks followed by outpatient phase of 1 day per week for 8 weeks.	419 Vietnam Veterans	Questionnaires were completed on three occasions: admission, three- and nine-months posttreatment. Demographic characteristics, military history, and use of health services. Combat Exposure Scale measured exposure to trauma during Vietnam war. PTSD measures and alcohol instrument test.	PTSD, comorbidity and social functioning. At 3- & 9-months significant improvements. Gains maintained.	Small gains and high levels of psychosocial morbidity remained following treatment. The data set was missing some data.	

Formal Peer Support Programs		Database search title: Veterans Peer Support Programs, Veterans PTSD peer support programs, Combat veterans Peer support and Australian veteran peer support.						
Authors and title	Country Location Data base	Program title	Program type, duration	Program participant numbers	Analysis used	Benefits	Limitations	Era of veterans' service
(Deans, 2020). Benefits and employment and care for peer support staff in the veteran community: A rapid narrative review.	USA & Australia.  Informit.  Web of Science.	Narrative literature review.	The articles were categorised, case studies, single programs evaluation, descriptive pieces, literature reviews and employment.	117 articles.	Articles were categorised, case studies, single program evaluation, descriptive pieces, literature reviews and employment.	Looked at the benefits of employing peers and risks and protective factors relevant to their selection.	The rapid review restricted the scope of articles that could be obtained and reviewed. The review was limited to a description of single peer programs with no evaluative content.	Not stated.
(Greden et al., 2010). Buddy-to-Buddy, a citizen soldier peer support program to counteract stigma, PTSD, depression and suicide.	USA.  Web of Science.	Welcome Back Veterans Initiative.	Peer to peer.	926 National Guards.	Survey tool was used by 926 returning soldiers and spouses. Approximately 40% of the sample screened positive for a mental health problem of some kind. Approximately 8% of those assessed for a mental health problem reported suicidal thoughts. 47% with reported clinical problems had sought help. Categories were devised to capture for reasons given for not seeking help.	The buddy was trained via the outreach program, a two-tier program. Use of culture to change culture.	Does not give results or figures for who completed the program.	Contemporary
(Hall et al., 2020). Alcohol Use and Peer Mentorship in Veterans.	USA.  Sage.  Web of Science.	The Quick Reaction Force. Alcohol Peer Program.	12 Week peer mentorship program. Weekly meetings with peer mentor.	84 veterans.	Participants completed an initial questionnaire, and self-report surveys, including screening tool for alcohol consumption, drinking behaviours and alcohol-related problems. The participants were paired with a peer mentor who had 40 hours of training. Captured data was collected from weekly mentor meetings, face-to-face, phone calls, text messages or social media. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the sample on average at baseline/discharge and the number of drinks reported weekly throughout the program.	There was no significant change in drinking alcohol. PTSD symptoms were lower. Alcohol did not become worse over the duration of the program.	Peer mentorship program did not effectively address veterans' heavy alcohol use. High attrition.	Not stated.

Formal Peer Support Programs		Database search title: Veterans Peer Support Programs, Veterans PTSD peer support programs, Combat veterans peer support and Australian veteran peer support.						
Authors and title	Country Location Data base	Program title	Program type, duration	Program participant numbers	Analysis used	Benefits	Limitations	Era of veterans' service
(Hernandez-Tejada et al., 2017). Incorporating peer support during in vivo exposure to reverse dropout from prolonged exposure therapy for posttraumatic stress disorder: Clinical outcomes.	USA.  Sage	A program to reengage veterans who had prematurely dropped out of treatment.	Treatment via telehealth and vivo. Veterans with PTSD. Verbal support and encouragement during vivo exposure homework.	82 veterans who had previously prematurely terminated evidence-based treatment for PTSD.	Prolonged exposure dropout rates range from 25% to 40%. Measures of PTSD were collected every two weeks by Patient Health Questionnaires (PHQ-9).	Showed people want people. If peer support during vivo exposure assignments might have prevented their attrition from treatment. Treatment re-entry was effective, PTSD and depression were significantly reduced.	Lack of no-peer comparison group and subsequent random assignment to condition. A small sample size and use of a potentially atypical sample of veterans.	Vietnam Veterans through to Contemporary veterans.
(Hernandez-Tejada et al., 2021). Re-engaging dropouts of prolonged exposure for PTSD Delivered via home-based telemedicine or in person: satisfaction with veteran-to-veteran support.	USA.  ProQuest.  Web of Science.	A program to reverse PTSD treatment	Previous patients who disengaged from Prolonged Exposure (PE) therapy that was conducted via telehealth. Reintegration with a peer in vivo.	82 dropouts from Prolonged Exposure,	Tape-recorded transcribed verbatim interviews. Debriefing questions were analysed via content analysis. Common categories/topics were identified. Quantitative and qualitative measures were used.	Peers being offered was central to the decision by the veterans to reengage in treatment. 43 (52.4%) indicated their intention to return to treatment with a peer. 29 of the 82 (35.4%) reengaged in treatment.	Small sample size and limited number of feasibility measures.	Vietnam Veterans through to Contemporary veterans.
(Hundt et al., 2015). Veterans' Perspectives on Benefits and Drawbacks of Peer Support for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.	USA.  Journals at Ovid.  ProQuest.  Web of Science.	VA PTSD.	One-time qualitative interview limited to veterans treated for PTSD in VA clinics.	23.	Patients who were referred to a PTSD treatment program. Qualitative interview in-person or via telephone. Interviews were audio-recorded. Transcription of the interviews was conducted by a professional service. Grounded theory was used to develop categories based on emergent themes in the data. A 'codebook' with definition and examples, the first and second authors coded each transcript and resolved discrepancies through discussion.	Combat veterans are likely to feel greater understanding from fellow combat veterans and regard peers as more trustworthy. Interestingly, the more commonly cited potential benefit was that veterans understand each other in a way that civilians cannot, and veterans were more willing to open up to other veterans. A few of the participants expressed difficulty in trusting others and therefore had an unwillingness to engage in peer support.	Limited to veterans treated for PTSD in a VA clinic. Participants only completed 8 sessions. And unknown how these fit into existing treatment models.	Vietnam Veterans through to Contemporary veterans.

Formal Peer Support Programs		Database search title: Veterans Peer Support Programs, Veterans PTSD peer support programs, Combat veterans peer support and Australian veteran peer support.						
Authors and title	Country Location Data base	Program title	Program type, duration	Program participant numbers	Analysis used	Benefits	Limitations	Era of veterans' service
(Jain et al., 2016). Peer support and outcome for veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in a residential rehabilitation program.	USA.  ProQuest.  Web of Science.	Big brother – Little brother.	Observational study.	55 VA patients who were residents at a residential rehabilitation program for PTSD.	Self-reported demographic questionnaire. PTSD symptoms in the past two weeks were assessed using a PTSD scale. Big Brother relationships were measured using 23-item survey. And a 28-item survey measured the perceived support an individual received from their Big Brother.	Results of the study suggest that positive correlation with improvements and perceptions of peer support favourably influence attitudes toward recovery from PTSD in veterans.	Small sample size the analysis did not allow assessments on participants who left the program earlier than expected.	Not stated.
(Jain et al., 2012). Is there a role for peer support delivered interventions in the treatment of veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder.	USA.  ProQuest.  Web of Science.	Big brother/sister.	Conducted time-based (60-90 minutes) 3 times peer-led focus groups discussions that were guided by cognitive. behaviour treatment principle.	21.	Three separate structured focus groups collected data that revealed themes related to veteran and staff perceptions regarding an informal peer support intervention.	Peer support contributing to a feeling of social connectedness that is, in and of itself a valuable component for healing form PTSD. Potential for unique and valuable supplement to VA PTSD treatment.	Poor big brother/sister dyad relationships. Staff identified unhealthy brother/sister dyad.	Vietnam Veterans through to Contemporary veterans.
(Klee et al., 2019). Peer specialist services: New frontiers and new roles.	USA.  Web of Science.	Not stated.	Veterans Affairs special section of Psychological Services most recent work on services provided by peer specialists.	Discussion of papers in the field.	Meta-analysis review of programs looking at the work peer specialist are engaging in and how their roles are growing in complexity.	Peer specialists are a valuable clinical partner who have much to offer patients, in teams of systems of care.	Not stated.	Not stated.
(Kumar et al., 2019). Peer support in an Outpatient program for veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder. Translating participant experiences into a recovery model.	USA.  Web of Science	Support groups.	Semi-structured interviews. Weekly support groups.	29.	Qualitative analysis of narrative transcripts generated codes through a grounded theory method. Codes were organised into the thematic categories using a 'codebook': Coders met regularly to ensure a unified interpretation of the codes. 34 individual codes organised into 15 code domains. Thematic categories, themes, and subthemes. Distinguished peer support from clinical therapy.	Participants represented a wide range in age and era of service.	All participants being volunteers so could be a positive bias.	Vietnam Veterans through to Contemporary veterans.



Formal Peer Support Programs		Database search title: Veterans Peer Support Programs, Veterans PTSD peer support programs, Combat veterans peer support and Australian veteran peer support.						
Authors and title	Country Location Data base	Program title	Program type, duration	Program participant numbers	Analysis used	Benefits	Limitations	Era of veterans' service
(Pfeiffer et al., 2012). Peer and peer-based interventions in supporting reintegration and mental health among National Guard Soldiers: A qualitative study.	USA.  ProQuest.  Web of Science.	National Guard Soldiers.	Qualitative study. Series of focused groups. Semi-structured Interview transcripts analysed by multidisciplinary team tech from grounded theory.	30 National Guard Soldiers.	Digital recording of the focus groups and interviews were transcribed verbatim. Prominent themes from the interviews were captured by at least two team members and one of those had not conducted the interview or focus group. Two study team members independently coded three transcripts compared coding and achieved consensus on application of the codes to the data.	Tightly connected, supportive peer networks can decrease stigma related to mental health problems and encourage treatment, however, soldier in impoverished or conflicted peer networks are less likely to receive these benefits. Soldiers are generally positive about the idea of peer-based programs to improve treatment engagement. The peer-based program could be good especially if a respected perceived as a strong soldier discussed issues, not a sign of weakness, might then seek treatment.	Small sample size. The participants may not be representative of National Guard soldiers in general.	
(Shaw et al., 2021). Effectiveness of the Veteran X Peer-Led Mental Health Recovery Program: A Quasi-Experimental Study.	USA.  Journals at Ovid.	Veteran X.	Peer-led program developed by Veterans Affairs. Over 10 months veterans who self-selected in treatment as usual, or Treatment As Usual (TAU) plus Veteran X.	80 in mental health or residential treatment. Participants are self-selected.	A sample for the current study was collected from veterans admitted to a mental health residential rehabilitation program in a Department of Veterans Affairs medical centre. General background demographic information of the veterans was collected. A pre-test was conducted within two weeks of admission to the mental health residential rehabilitation program. Veterans were asked to complete the self-report measures again at the post-test 60–75 days later. Analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted to explore interaction effects between the groups and the pre-test and post-test variables.	Both groups improved on all measures of recovery, however, Veteran X participants improved significantly more than TAU participants on the measure of recovery wellbeing and symptoms and functioning.	Random assignment was not implemented and could have strengthened the study. Increased self-selection bias (e.g., motivation) may have confounded the results in ways that were not measured and could not be analysed.	Not stated.
(Turner et al., 2022). Pathways to program entry: Factors promoting entry and participation in veteran peer-support	USA.  Science Direct Journals.	Participation in Peer Programs.	Qualitative data analysed.	154 in veterans' peer support programs.	A qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach was chosen to explore factors promoting program service use for veterans from multiple service eras. Interviews were thematically categorised with eight central findings emerged.	The study was unique because the sample included a majority of veterans who were not connected with other veteran-specific services and captured veteran voices who may have otherwise been completely isolated. Veterans were more likely to engage in programs that foster feelings of belonging and shared community.	Study participants were voluntary, which may have led to selection bias. The study was limited to New York state.	WWII veterans, Vietnam Veterans to Contemporary veterans.

## Appendix B: Informal Peer Support Program

Informal Peer Support Programs: Coffee Socials		Database search title: Veterans Peer Support Programs, Veterans PTSD peer support programs, Combat veterans peer support and Australian veteran peer support.						
Authors and title	Country Location & Data base	Program title	Program type and duration	Program participant numbers	Analysis used	Benefits	Limitations	Era of veterans' service.
(Drebing et al., 2018). Using Peer Support Groups to Enhance Community Integration of Veterans in Transition	USA.  Web of Science.	Coffee Socials.	Review on types of peer support for veterans in a range of settings. Coffee socials in local restaurants and coffee shops.	Coffee socials Mean number of attendees 9 per group =72 veterans per week.	Peer specialists from Veterans Affairs initiated and facilitated weekly meetings. No formal documentation was required as the program was not considered to be a clinical intervention. Little structure to the meetings.	No fees. Veterans' who attend the group decide on the agenda, example of topics, socialising, resource sharing and connecting around common interests and goals. Group participant number grew.	No documentation of attendance. An embedded observer in the group reported on what work was being done.	Vietnam Veterans through to Contemporary veterans.
(Gorman et al., 2018). Veteran coffee socials: A community-building strategy for enhancing community reintegration of veterans.	USA.  Web of Science.	Coffee Socials.	Pilot project -coffee social. Period of nine months held in local coffee shop or restaurant.	2,236 engagements. Average of 8.5 veterans attended each meeting.	Peer specialists, in consultation with a clinical team. There was no gathered documentation as this was not considered a clinical meeting nor a Veteran Affairs meeting. Specific attendees chosen for case descriptions were selected to illustrate common aspects to how veterans participated in the groups and what benefits they appeared to derive from participation.	Veterans formed relationships with each other, representative from community organisation and the staff from local and VA healthcare. Impact was positive as it helped to build community and expand social support for returning veterans.	Lack of comprehensive tracking of individuals this could have led to inaccuracies in reporting.	Vietnam Veterans through to Contemporary veterans.

## Appendix C: Leisure and Recreational Peer Support Programs

Leisure and Recreational Peer Support Programs		Database search title: Veterans Peer Support Programs, Veterans PTSD peer support programs, Combat veterans peer support and Australian veteran peer support.						
Authors and title	Country Location & Data base	Program title	Program type and duration	Program participant numbers	Analysis used	Benefits	Limitations	Era of veterans' service
(Bettmann et al., 2021). Mental Health Outcomes of Peer-led Therapeutic Adventure for Military Veterans	USA. Sage.	Sierra Club Military Outdoors.	The study's Sierra Club Military Outdoors. 3 days and 2 nights camping.	56 Veterans.	Changes in symptomatology were assessed by fitting linear mixed models for each outcome (stress, anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress, alcohol misuse and suicidality) regressed on time (pre-trip, post-trip, one month follow-up, six-month follow-up and one-year follow-up). All linear models were conducted using SPSS version 25.	Significant reduction in alcohol use at the one-year post-trip assessment. significant reduction in mental health symptomatology from pre-trip to post-trip but showed few longer-term changes in mental health symptomatology.	Single group design. Further research is required to establish which kinds of therapeutic adventure trips are likely to be effective in reducing veterans' mental health symptoms, as well as what duration of trips is necessary to achieve lasting symptom reduction.	Not stated.
(Bird, 2014). Peer Outdoor support therapy (POST) for Australian contemporary veterans. A review of the Literature.	Australia. Informit. Web of Science.	Peer Outdoor Support Therapy (POST).	Review of the literature of veteran psychological therapeutic treatments.	Literature review.	Studies were sourced and grouped in four different tables headings as follows; Primary Veteran and Military Populations Treatment Studies, Peer Support Intervention Evaluation, Therapist-led Outdoor Therapy Intervention Evaluations and Non-evaluated POST Approaches for contemporary returned post-deployed veterans (CRPD) Veterans.	Qualitative, quantitative and longitudinal studies were reviewed.	Inclusion criteria. Paper written in 2014. Articles dates ranging from 1990's (30 years old).	Contemporary.
(Caddick et al., 2015). Collective stories and well-being: Using a dialogical narrative approach to understand peer relationships among combat veterans experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder	UK. Sage.	Surfing UK.	Interviews and observation. Purposeful sampling. Participants attended weekly surfing camps.	15 Veterans.	Semi-structured interviews enabling the researcher to hear multi-layered stories of how they lived their lives over time, thereby generating rich-storied data. Alongside the interviews, the method of participant observation was used to help build a more complex and nuanced account of the participants lives. Data collection spanned a period of 18 months. Interviews and participant observation were conducted at routine intervals.	Veterans all spoke of a sense of acceptance they felt among other veterans that was typically absent during interactions with civilian members. Collective stories as narrative care might be recognised as supported PTSD treatment.	Understanding how the communication of collective stories takes place may be a fruitful topic for future exploration.	Contemporary.

Leisure and Recreational Peer Support Programs		Database search title: Veterans Peer Support Programs, Veterans PTSD peer support programs, Combat veterans peer support and Australian veteran peer support.						
Authors and title	Country Location & Data base	Program title	Program type and duration	Program participant numbers	Analysis used	Benefits	Limitations	Era of veterans' service
(Cushing et al., 2018). Military-Tailored Yoga for Veterans with Post-traumatic stress disorder	USA.  ProQuest.	Yoga.	60-minute weekly yoga sessions for 6 weeks.	18 Veterans diagnosed with PTSD.	Baseline and post-intervention data were assessed for normal distribution and the assumption was considered satisfied. Scores on a primary and secondary (self-reported anxiety depression, insomnia and mindfulness) measures were compared before and after the intervention. Statistical analyses were performed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for Windows.	PTSD symptomatology was decreased. (PCLM) is the military version of the PTSD checklist. Improved mindfulness scores and reported decreased insomnia depression and anxiety symptoms.	Small sample size. 50% of the participants were female. Female military member equates to 15.5%. All well-educated with having college experience and 5 were officers. Median age was 43.	Post 9/11 veterans.
(Lewis, 2022). More important than winning a retrospective online research survey evaluating the effects of participating in an adaptive sports program for wounded, injured and ill Australian Defence Force Veterans.	Australia.  Informit.	Adaptive Sports Program.	Survey designed to evaluate effects of participation in the Adaptive Sports Program.	60 veterans.	The survey was designed to evaluate the effects of participation in the Adaptive Sports Program on health and wellbeing outcomes. 29% of the program participants provided responses in the survey. Part 1 consisted of 22 multiple-choice questions in a simple format. Part 2 invited free-text responses to two topics: "What impact if any, has the adaptive Sports Program has on your rehabilitation pathway?" and "Please provide suggestions on how the Adaptive Sports Program could assist with rehabilitation of wounded, ill and injured (WW2) veterans. Questions and responses are displayed in four different table formats with two sets of figures to accompany them.		Selection bias. The participants in the study were invited to participate retrospectively, and therefore the responses received may not be an accurate representation of all wounded, injured and ill veterans who participate in the AF Adaptive Sports Program.	Contemporary.
(Vella et al., 2013). Participation in Outdoor recreation program predicts improved psychological wellbeing among veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder: A piolet study.	USA.  ProQuest.	Rivers of Recovery 'Fly Fishing.'	2 day, 3-night outdoor recreation intervention involving fly-fishing.	74 veterans.	Participants completed repeated self-reported assessments of attentiveness, mood, depression, anxiety, and somatic stress across three time periods, corresponding to two weeks before the trip (baseline), the last day of the trip, and a six-week follow-up. Assessments of perceptual stress, PTSD symptoms, and sleep quality were also administered during the baseline and follow-up periods.	Improvements in sleep quality, attentiveness and positive mood states, reduction in negative mood states, anxiety, depression and somatic symptoms of stress.	Small, self-selected sample without a control group.	Vietnam Veterans through to Contemporary veterans.

## Appendix D: Online Peer Support Programs

Online Peer Support Programs		Database search title: Veterans Peer Support Programs, Veterans PTSD peer support programs, Combat veterans peer support and Australian veteran peer support.						
Authors and title	Country Location & Data base	Program title	Program type and duration	Program participant numbers	Analysis used	Benefits	Limitations	Era of veterans' service
(Possemato et al., 2019). A Pilot Study Comparing Peer Supported Web-Based CBT to Self-Managed Web CBT for Primary Care Veterans with PTSD and Hazardous Alcohol Use.	USA.  Web of Science.	Thinking Forward.	12-week structured web-based design. Certified peer specialists. Required to complete 24 online 20 minute modules 2 per week.	30 Veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan.	Sociodemographic and clinical characteristics of participants was collected. 40 patients screened in person. 30 participants were recruited over 11 months, averaging 2.7 eligible participants per month. Peer sessions were rated for fidelity to the peer guide. Participants were assessed at pre-treatment, post-treatment, and 24-week follow-up.	Good satisfaction for both participants and peers. Particularly useful to learn how to apply module content in real life situation and setting personal life goals. Participants liked reporting to peers and feeling cared for.	Low completing rates with peers. Small sample size.	Contemporary.
(Romaniuk et al., 2019) Evaluation of the Online, Peer Delivered 'Post War: Survive to Thrive Program' for Veterans with Symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.	Australia.  Web of Science.	Survive to Thrive Program.	Online peer program non-controlled, with-in subject designed to assist with management of commonly occurring mental health symptoms.	29 Veterans.	Demographic characteristics was collected. Participants self-reported on happiness and wellbeing. Online questionnaires were sent to participants at Pre-intervention, post-intervention, follow-up.	100% completion of the program. Strong engagement with peer presenter and peer-developed content. Results showed from pre – to post intervention positive beneficial trend for reduction in symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress and PTSD. Self-reported happiness and wellbeing also significantly improved between pre- and post-intervention and maintained at follow-up.	There was no control group, and the design was not blinded. Conclusion can now be drawn that the program mechanism of change led to reductions in symptoms. Small sample size. Biases with self-report measures as there is a risk of under or over reporting symptom severity.	Contemporary.

## Appendix E: Email to national secretary of the Veterans Motorcycle Club



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### EMAIL TO National Secretary of THE VETERANS MOTORCYCLE CLUB

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**RE: Research participation Veterans experiences in the Veterans Motorbike Club (VMC).**

Dear National Secretary of the VMC,

Allow me to introduce myself, my name is Loraine House (Flinders University Masters by Research Candidate), and I am one of the research team based at Flinders University. We are conducting research in the role peer support plays with defence veterans. I am writing to you to ask if it would be possible for you to circulate the attached flyer, participant information sheet and consent form to your members of the VMC.

We are seeking volunteers who would be willing to take part in this study.

The study focuses on the persons experience with peer support within the VMC. This will involve being audio-recorded in a 60-minute interview and potentially a follow-up 30-minute interview whereby participants will be invited to share additional information and view their professionally transcribe interview. The follow-up interview will take place within a three-week window. Interviews will be conducted in a sensitive manner, with respect and confidentiality.

All participants will have their privacy and confidentiality maintained throughout the research process; their identity will not be disclosed at any stage. Participants must be over the age of 18 years and not currently experiencing acute psychological distress, for example, suicide behaviours.

A brief overview of the study and the process will be explained at the beginning of the interview. A list of support services will be provided and a small reimbursement of \$15 for out-of-pocket expenses such as travel.

If you could please distribute the attached flyer to your members and place on your social platforms we would be grateful.

Participants will be asked to email me directly in the first instance. If you have any questions, please contact Loraine on 0450 131 964 or via my email [loraine.house@flinders.edu.au](mailto:loraine.house@flinders.edu.au) or you can contact my primary supervisor Dr Louise Roberts, College of Medicine & Public Health.

Thanking you in advance for your time.

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## Appendix F: Participant information sheet and consent form



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### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM

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**Title: Posttraumatic stress disorder: A qualitative investigation of Veterans' experience of peer support within a military-style motorbike club.**

**\*Please send any questions to Loraine House**

**Co-Investigator**

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My name is Loraine House, and I am a Flinders University Masters by Research candidate. I am undertaking this research as part of my degree. For further information, you are welcome to contact my primary supervisor, Dr Louise Roberts. Her details are listed above. We have gained ethics committee approval by Flinders University's Human Research Ethics Committee ID number 5477.

**Description of the study**

This project will investigate peer support within a military-style motorbike club (Veterans Motorbike Club (VMC)). This project is supported by Flinders University, College of Medicine and Public Health.

**Purpose of the study**

The broad aim of this study is to gain an understanding of the experiences of Defence force veterans' peer support who have participated in active conflicts or warlike operations as part of their military service and are members of the VMC. We are interested in the nature of peer support and your experiences of being involved in this specific type of support. The specific aim is to understand this unique environment and the role peers play in supporting their fellow members.

**Benefits of the study**

By sharing your experiences, you will help us to understand more about the nature of the peer support and if that peer support influences the way veterans engage. We hope this research will help our Defence force veterans and serving ADF members gain better mental health outcomes. We also hope this research will contribute to the understanding of how peer support can be better modelled to benefit and assist with reducing the burden of mental health concerns.

## **Participant involvement and potential risks**

If you agree to participate in the research study, you will be asked to:

- attend a one-on-one interview with a researcher that will be audio recorded.
- respond to questions regarding your views about your life experiences, pre-Defence, during your military service and post defence.
- your experience with peer support as a member of the VMC

The interview will take approximately 60 minutes and participation is entirely voluntary. Participants may be contacted and invited to participate in a 30-minute follow-up interview to share additional that may have been missed, clarify points covered in the interview or review their professionally transcribed interview.

I have a background in mental health and counselling, and this forms the background of my interest in the area of peer support. As a researcher, I have the awareness of the potential mental health concerns within this particular group. Both supervisors have current and past experience in working with veterans and emergency first responders. It is not anticipated that participating in this study will cause any risks to you.

I have in the past attended organised veteran functions within SA. If on the rare occurrence I see you at a future function, I will not acknowledge that you are known to me to protect your confidentiality of participation in the study.

If you agree to participating in this research, only the research team will be looking at and analysing the collected data to ensure rigour. Only de-identified data will be shared, and it is only for the expressed purpose of the oversight and data analysis and review.

The researchers do not expect the questions to cause any harm or discomfort to you. However, if you experience feelings of distress as a result of participation in this study, please let the research team know immediately. You can also contact the following services for support:

### Veteran-focused support services:

- 24/7 Mates for Mates National Helpline on 1300 642 111
- Open Arms - Veterans & Family Counselling 1800 011 046
- Soldier On - 1300 620 380
- The Jamie Larcombe Centre - 1300 043 175
- Plympton Veterans Centre - (08) 7117 5357
- Department of Veterans' Affairs - 1800 038 372 .
- RSL SA/NT - (08) 8100 7300

### General wellbeing support services

- Lifeline – 13 11 14 [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)
- Department of Health Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health program
- Beyond Blue – 1300 22 4636 [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au).
- MindSpot Clinic 1800 61 44 34
- SANE Australia 1800 18 7263
- Head to Health website

## **Withdrawal Rights**



You can withdraw from the study at any stage up until the analysis of the data (usually about three weeks post-interview). Withdrawal from the study will not result in any penalties or consequences. To withdraw, please contact the Chief Investigator or me and your data will be removed and securely destroyed. Notice of withdrawal needs to be received 3 weeks after the interview as after that time when the de-identified analysis is commenced your comments and story will be incorporated and may be difficult to remove at this stage. You can stop the interview at any point and choose not to answer any of the questions throughout the interview.

### **Confidentiality and Privacy**

No data that you provide, will be shared or used in future research projects. Only myself and my primary and secondary supervisor will have access to your data.

### **Data Storage**

The information collected will be stored securely on a password-protected computer and files throughout the study. Any identifiable data will be de-identified for data storage purposes unless indicated otherwise. All data will be securely transferred to and stored at Flinders University for at least five years after publication of the results. Following the required data storage period, all data will be securely destroyed according to university protocols.

### **Recognition of Contribution / Time / Travel costs**

If you would like to participate, in recognition of your contribution and participation time, you will be provided with a \$15.00 visa card voucher. This voucher will be provided to you face-to-face on completion of the interview.

### **How will I receive feedback?**

On project completion, a link will be provided to you where you will be able to access the published article.

### **Queries and Concerns**

Queries or concerns regarding the research can be directed to the research team. If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of this study, you may contact Flinders University's Research Ethics & Compliance Office team via telephone 08 8201 3116 or email [human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au](mailto:human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au).

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet which is yours to keep. If you accept our invitation to be involved, please sign the enclosed Consent Form.

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## CONSENT FORM

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### Consent Statement

- ☐ I have read and understood the information about the research, and I understand I am being asked to provide informed consent to participate in this research study. I understand that I can contact the research team if I have further questions about this research study.
- ☐ I am not aware of any condition that would prevent my participation, and I agree to participate in this project.
- ☐ I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time during the study.
- ☐ I understand that I can contact Flinders University's Research Ethics & Compliance Office if I have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this study.
- ☐ I understand that my involvement is confidential, and that the information collected may be published. I understand that I will not be identified in any research products.

I further consent to:

- ☐ participating in an interview
- ☐ having my information audio recorded
- ☐ sharing my de-identified data with other researchers
- ☐ my data and information being used in this project and other related projects for an extended period of time (no more than 5 years after publication of the data)
- ☐ being contacted about other research projects

**Signed:**

**Name:**

**Date:**

## Appendix G: Research flyer

OFFICIAL

### Volunteers wanted for research

Veterans' experience of peer support in the VMC



Loraine House & Dr Louise Roberts (Principal supervisor)

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## Veterans in the VMC

Flinders University is researching how the members of the Veterans Motorbike Club engage in peer support within the VMC club.

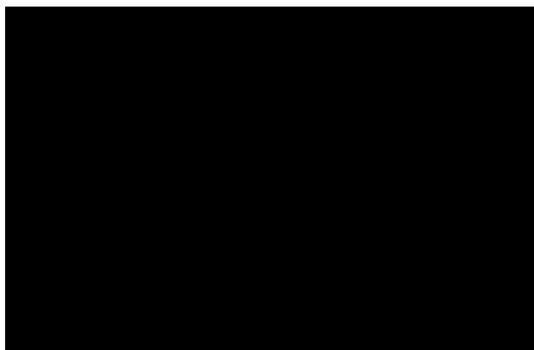
We are looking to interview 10-15 VMC members.

The interview will be completely voluntary and will take approximately 60 minutes, with the potential of a 30 minute follow-up interview within three weeks of the initial interview.

If you are a member of the VMC and can set aside some time to take part in an interview (The interview can take part in your preferred method – video conference, telephone or, if possible, in person) we ask you to contact Loraine via email [loraine.house@flinders.edu.au](mailto:loraine.house@flinders.edu.au)

This research has been approved by the Flinders University Human Research Ethics Committee  
Project Number 5447.

**Please share widely with your VMC networks!**



**Flinders.edu.au**

ABN 65 542 596 200, CRICOS No. 00114A

Image removed due to copyright restrictions.

## Appendix H: Ethics approval letter

13 December 2022



### HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE APPROVAL NOTICE

Dear DR Louise Roberts,

The below proposed project has been **approved** on the basis of the information contained in the application and its attachments.

**Project No:** 5447

**Project Title:** Posttraumatic stress disorder: A qualitative investigation of Veterans experience of peer support within a military style motorcycle club.

**Chief Investigator:** DR Louise Roberts

**Approval Date:** 13/12/2022

**Expiry Date:** 30/09/2025

**Approved Co-Investigator/s:** Mrs Loraine House, Professor Sharon Lawn

**Approved Personnel:** MS Nikki Jamieson , Mr Dion Cowdray

**Conditions of Approval:** None

**Please note:** Due to COVID-19, researchers should try to avoid face-to-face testing where possible and consider undertaking alternative distance/online data or interview collection means. For further information, please go to <https://staff.flinders.edu.au/coronavirus-information>.

**Please note:** For all research projects wishing to recruit Flinders University students as participants, approval needs to be sought from the Office to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Students). To seek approval, please provide a copy of the Ethics approval for the project and a copy of the project application (including Participant Information and Consent Forms, advertising materials and questionnaires etc.) to the Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Students) via [dvcsoffice@dl.flinders.edu.au](mailto:dvcsoffice@dl.flinders.edu.au).

#### RESPONSIBILITIES OF RESEARCHERS AND SUPERVISORS

##### Participant Documentation

Please note that it is the responsibility of researchers and supervisors, in the case of student projects, to ensure that:

- all participant documents are checked for spelling, grammatical, numbering and formatting errors. The Committee does not accept any responsibility for the above mentioned errors.
- the Flinders University logo is included on all participant documentation (e.g., letters of Introduction, information Sheets, consent forms, debriefing information and questionnaires – with the exception of purchased research tools) and the current Flinders University letterhead is included in the header of all letters of introduction. The Flinders University international logo/letterhead should be used and documentation should contain international dialling codes for all telephone and fax numbers listed for all research to be conducted overseas.
- the HREC contact details, listed below, are included in the footer of all letters of introduction and information sheets.

*This research project has been approved by Flinders University's Human Research Ethics Committee (Project ID 5447). If you have any*

complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this study, you may contact Flinders University's Research Ethics & Compliance Office via telephone on 08 8201 2543 or by email [human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au](mailto:human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au).

### Annual Progress / Final Reports

In order to comply with the monitoring requirements of the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007 (updated 2018)* an annual progress report must be submitted each year on the anniversary of the approval date for the duration of the ethics approval using the HREC Annual/Final Report Form available online via the ResearchNow Ethics & Biosafety system.

**Please note** that no data collection can be undertaken after the ethics approval expiry date listed at the top of this notice. If data is collected after expiry, it will not be covered in terms of ethics. It is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that annual progress reports are submitted on time; and that no data is collected after ethics has expired.

If the project is completed *before* ethics approval has expired please ensure a final report is submitted immediately. If ethics approval for your project expires please either submit (1) a final report; or (2) an extension of time request (using the HREC Modification Form). For student projects, the Low Risk Panel recommends that current ethics approval is maintained until a student's thesis has been submitted, assessed and finalised. This is to protect the student in the event that reviewers recommend that additional data be collected from participants.

### Modifications to Project

Modifications to the project must not proceed until approval has been obtained from the Ethics Committee. Such proposed changes / modifications include:

- change of project title;
- change to research team (e.g., additions, removals, researchers and supervisors) changes to research objectives; changes to research protocol; changes to participant recruitment methods; changes /
- additions to source(s) of participants; changes of procedures used to seek informed consent; changes to participant remuneration;
- changes to information / documents to be given to potential participants; changes to research instruments (e.g., survey, interview questions etc); extensions of time (i.e. to extend the period of ethics approval past current expiry date). To notify the Committee of any
- 

proposed modifications to the project please submit a Modification Request Form available online via the ResearchNow Ethics & Biosafety system. Please open the project, then select the 'Create Sub-Form' tile in the grey Action Menu, and then select the relevant Modification Request Form. Please note that extension of time requests should be submitted prior to the Ethics Approval Expiry Date listed on this notice.

### Adverse Events and/or Complaints

Researchers should advise the Executive Officer of the Human Ethics Research Committee on [human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au](mailto:human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au) immediately if:

- any
- complaints regarding the research are received; a serious or
  - unexpected adverse event occurs that effects participants; an
  - unforeseen event occurs that may affect the ethical acceptability

of the project. Yours sincerely,

Camilla Dorian

on behalf of Human Research Committee, Research Development and Support [humanresearchethics@flinders.edu.au](mailto:humanresearchethics@flinders.edu.au)  
Flinders University  
Sturt Road,  
Bedford Park, South Australia,  
5042 GPO Box 2100,  
Adelaide,  
South Australia,  
5001  
[http://www.flinders.edu.au/research/researcher-support/ebi/human-ethics/human-ethics\\_home.cfm](http://www.flinders.edu.au/research/researcher-support/ebi/human-ethics/human-ethics_home.cfm)

## **Appendix I: Interview guide**

**Interview guide:** Establish rapport; explain purpose of the study, opportunity for feedback on transcript and analysis and General demographic questions:

- a) What is your age?
- b) Do you identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?
- c) What is your marital status?
- d) How do you identify your gender and what pronoun shall I use, for example, he/him?
- e) Are you working, and if so what do you do for employment?

### **Topic area 1: EXPERIENCE OF YOUR SERVICE AND YOUR POST SERVICE.**

- a) Can you tell me why you joined the service and What the experience was like for you during your service?

**Prompts:**

- Age during service.
- Motivation to join, Family or others.
- Inspired or encouraged you to serve.
- What was your role during service?
- Where and when were you deployed?

- b) Can you describe the relationships you formed during your service and what did they mean to you?

**Prompts:**

- What was important about the experiences you had?
- Did you have good mates and what did they mean to you?
- Were there times when your mateship was made stronger – can you give examples.

- c) When you returned to civilian life, what was that transition like, can you give me examples?

**Prompts:**

- Impact on daily life.
- Adjusting to different routine.
- Identity.

- d) Can you tell me about your relationships when you got home - left the service?

**Prompts:**

- Partner, family, children, friends.
- Did you stay in contact with your service mates?

e) Did your service effect your mental health, if so, how did you manage?

**Prompts:**

- Changes in behaviour and social connectedness / personal relationships.
- work, social networks and interpersonal relationships.

**TOPIC AREA 2: PEER SUPPORT (ROLE OF THE VMC) AND HELP-SEEKING.**

f) Can you tell me why you joined the VMC, and what is it like of being involved in the club?

**Prompts:**

- What do you gain being in the club? – Examples of what it is like.
- The challenges of being in the club? – Examples of what it is like.

g) Can you tell me about your patches (colours), what is it like to wear them?

**Prompts:**

- How does it make you feel putting on your vest.
- What do your colours mean to you?

h) Do you get support from your peers within the club, and what does it means to you?

**Prompts:**

- Help-seeking from peers/mates in the club.
- What is the importance of having a shared lived experience for veterans and getting effective peer support.

i) What is unique or special about the type of support you get from the club?

**Prompts:**

- What is the nature of the peer support / what does it look like/ how does is feel?
- Does it provide emotional, functional, and informational support – e.g., what actually happens during the peer support.
- A ride, meeting. Social media or phone call.

j) How does the club help members who have issues with their mental health such as PTSD?

**Prompts:**

- Normalising and destigmatising the associated mental health concerns from trauma.
- Tell me about early intervention and any recovery journey where your peers have helped you or you helped them, does helping them help you?

**TOPIC AREA 3: OTHER PEER SUPPORT STRUCTURES - FORMAL TREATMENT PATHWAYS & HELP-SEEKING (COMPARING EXPERIENCE OF FORMAL & INFORMAL SUPPORT & TRADITIONAL TREATMENT MODALITIES).**

k) Have you experienced peer support from any other groups or other people?

**Prompts:**

- how does that experience compare with the experience of the club?
- What is different about the VMC in comparison to other informal peer support / social networks and clubs?

l) Have you or do you access more traditional mental health care and how would you describe your experience in comparison to the peer support you get from the club?

**Prompts:**

- What are the good and bad bits of the club?
- How do you know when other more formal treatment might be required? What do you do?

m) What does the idea of trust and respect to the effectiveness of peer support mean to you?

**Prompts:**

- Is it different to what you have experienced with others in a more formal/ structured treatment setting?
- How do you perceive the relationship / trust and respect in comparison to other groups and with formal treatment pathways?

**Support services:**

- Open Arms - Veterans & Family Counselling 1800 011 046
- Soldier On - 1300 620 380
- The Jamie Larcombe Centre - 1300 043 175
- Lifeline – 13 11 14 [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)

**To conclude the interview, thank the participant again for their time.**

**Finish time:**



# PROSPECT HANDBOOK

ADELAIDE HILLS CHAPTER  
SOUTH AUSTRALIA



Permission was granted to use the copyrighted image of Casper, VMC Colours and paraphernalia.



## Adelaide Hills Chapter South Australia

### CLUB COLOURS

1. The following is a list of Club Colours, which **are the property of the Adelaide Hills VMC**, under the License of The National Council VVMC/VMC.

1.1 These items **are Leased** to Members who may be approved by the Club Committee and the Vote of the Club Members for their use.

1.2 Colours can be removed by the Committee under Constitution Rules and/or By-Laws if/when it may be required.

### **2. ITEMS:**

#### **2.1 Back Patch consists of:**

Veterans Rocker, MC Rocker, Australia Rocker.

Skull and Slouch Hat {S&SH}

Centre Piece

#### **2.2 Front/other Patches:**

All Veterans MC Patches with S&SH Chapter Rocker

Position held in Chapter Bar (if applicable)

Chapter VFFV Patch

Diamond Patches (VMC 100%, Syr etc.)

Any Patch with the Clubs Name, Location or Colour|Location

Slash Rocker. (Vietnam etc.)

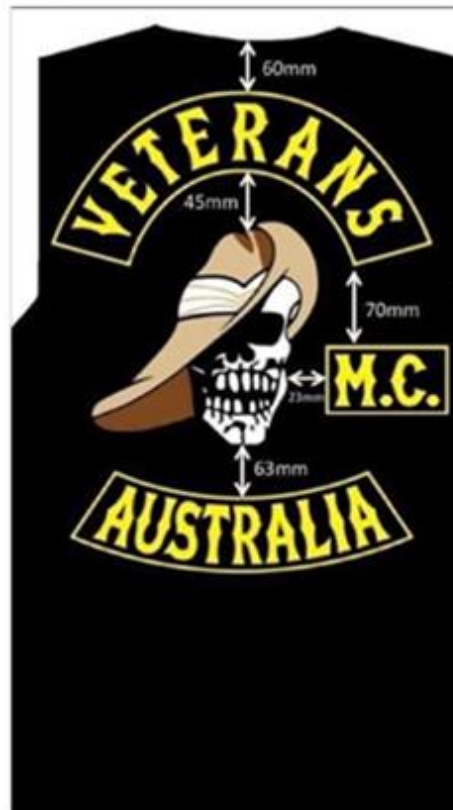
#### **2.3 All above patches must be returned to the Chapter.**

**2.4 NOTE:** All patches will only be allocated to you with the approval of the Club President at various stage of your membership. **DO NOT** wear any patches unless approved by the President.

By Order of:

**President  
Adelaide Hills  
VMC**

### Back Patch Placement



### 3. CLUB ORDER OF RIDE

3.1 When riding anywhere as a Club, protocol dictates that the following 'Order of Ride' and riding instructions **are to be** followed at *all* times. This ensures that we ride as a disciplined group. Prior to departure, you will be given at least 10 **minutes'** notice to move. This means *all gear* is on, and the Club is formed up ready to roll out *by* that time.

The **President** will dictate timings, and when we depart.  
The ride sequence is:

- |              |                                  |
|--------------|----------------------------------|
| • President  | • Vice President                 |
| • Committee  | • Committee                      |
| • VMC Member | • VMC Member                     |
| • VMC Member | • Prospects                      |
| • Guests     | • Bikes with sidecars and trikes |
|              | • Sgt at Arms                    |

**Note:**

- a. Riders will adopt a 'One out – one back' (Staggered) formation for safety reasons.
- b. The pack obeys the speed limits.
- c. Passing and turning signals will be instigated by the President.
- d. Changing your riding position within the group *is not* permitted.
- e. **NEVER OVERTAKE THE PRESIDENT!**
- f. **Never overtake a Full Member unless directed!**
- g. All road Laws are to be obeyed.
- h. Know the destination and directions. This is important if separated etc.
- i. **DO NOT** stop for any breakdowns, the recovery team will take care of that.
- j. Remember one small mistake can have catastrophic results.
- k. In the event of an accident, pull over safely and render assistance where possible.
- l. If the group is broken up by traffic (i.e. lights etc.) continue on until it is safe to re-join the group.
- m. If you are pulled *over* by the Police remove your helmet.
- n. All bikes are to be road registered and carry insurance (minimum 3<sup>rd</sup> party Property).
- o. All riders are to have a current license, or learners permit.

**4. ANY FINES ETC INCURRED UPON YOURSELF IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY: NOT THE CLUB'S**

- a. The President is responsible for the route, fuel stops and road speed.
- b. The Sergeant at Arms rides at the rear of the pack with one other Full Member. He notifies the President in case of breakdown or other problems.
- c. The Vice President and President ride at the front of the pack. **NO ONE** passes them unless specifically directed to do so.
- d. The pack rides in staggered formation (i.e. one out - one back). Each rider should be able to see the face in the mirror of the rider in front of them, and the rider behind you in your rear-view mirror. This is to allow room in case of an emergency.
- e. The pack rides as a disciplined group. The Road President indicates turns and overtaking. The President may delegate Members to block traffic at round-about, or at intersections in certain circumstances.
- f. **NOTE: Any member/s joining up with the pack along the designated route follow at the rear of the pack until the next stop. Once the group re-forms, they then take their place in the pack. (Breaking in from the sides whilst riding is unsafe).**
- g. Should the pack become separated (i.e. due to traffic) it will re-form as soon as it is **SAFE** to do so. Should the main pack become too separated then the Sergeant at Arms will notify the President and the pack will stop at the next safest point, and re-group.
- h. Each rider will practice safe riding techniques and ride within the legal limits at all times.
- i. When it is necessary to make a specific, but unfamiliar turn-off, then the President will delegate a member to indicate where to turn.
- j. When the Club attends a specific function, particularly at another MC's Clubhouse, the Club arrives and leaves together. The President will decide at what time the Club is to arrive and leave. The Sergeant at Arms will notify all members and guests 30 minutes prior to departure. All members are to be ready

to depart at the designated time. This is to allow a fast, and safe transit between points.

- k. If a member has difficulty riding within a group he may elect to ride at the back of the pack, or independently make his own way to the next agreed destination. Permission is to be sought from the President or Sergeant at Arms beforehand.
- l. If you lack confidence or experience in riding as a group, the Club will provide instruction in safe riding techniques as required.

#### **HINT 1: Riding in the pack in the 'one out one back' format.**

To maintain position on the bike in front and the bike behind you, constant use of your mirrors is required. If you are in the inside position, then you should be able to see the face of the rider in front of you in his left-hand mirror. You should also be able to see the face of the rider behind you in your right-hand mirror. Similarly, if you are in the outside position, you should be able to see the face of the rider in front of you in his right-hand mirror and the face of the rider behind you in your left-hand mirror. This general rule (which applies to all riders in the pack) will enable you to constantly, and consistently, maintain a safe position at all times. Using a sweeping scan allows you to maintain situational awareness whilst still enjoying a safe ride.

#### **HINT 2: Speed and spacing.**

You must attempt to maintain a constant speed at all times. This will stop the 'concertina' affect and will reduce becoming frustrated and/or separated from the pack.

At the start point of each ride, the President leads off and sets the cruising speed (usually 100kph). Once the pack is established on the road it is important that a constant speed is maintained at all times whenever the pack is in its cohesive form.

When separations occur, which they inevitably will, then the pack will reform and re-establish the constant speed and position format.

Changing speed and position within the pack format once it is established has a large effect on the rest of the pack and can be dangerous. Therefore, if a gap forms next to you **NEVER** change your position within the pack. Simply wave the rider to your left or right and they will then move forward and close that gap. If you see a gap to your front, then you simply move forward into that space in a safest possible manner.

#### **HINT 3: Other riders**

Not everyone has the same riding skills and experience as each other, nor is everyone used to riding in a large group or riding in a disciplined manner. Therefore, care always needs to be taken in order to make it safe for you and those around you.

Riders should be mindful of both the capabilities of themselves and other riders including the maneuverability of their machine. Large touring bikes do not respond like sports bikes and riders carrying a pillion passenger can also be restricted, or easily distracted than solo riders. Sidecars, Trikes and bikes with trailers are normally at the rear of the main pack for obvious reasons.

#### **HINT 4: Signaling**

When riding, use indicators to indicate a change of direction. When you have completed direction change turn indicator off if not automatic.

**The only time hand signals are used is when there is an imminent risk to the bikes following from a large pothole, or debris on the road that they may not see until it is too late. Pointing at the obstacle serves to warn any following rider/s of the danger and that you may maneuver to avoid it.**

#### **HINT 5: General**

Obey the road rules at all times. Ride safely and intelligently. Do not ride under the influence of any substance, this affects all riders' safety. Know the destination and fuel stops. Maintaining situational awareness is paramount.

## **5. BASIC CLUB PROTOCOL'S**

### **Introduction:**

- 5.1** Protocols are the rules and regulations in which we operate as a Club and have been in place since its inception. In short, protocols dictate the behavior and conduct of its members in and around the club, including at open events.
- 5.2** The following protocols are made up from some key points within some of the Adelaide Hills documents on how our members are to conduct themselves both within the club and at open events. In addition, your sponsor has the responsibility as a Full Member to make you are aware of our protocols and to allow you the best possible chance of being accepted within the Club.

### **6. Club Etiquette:**

- 6.1** Look after and respect your brother/s.
- 6.2** At a gathering, always make it a point to circulate and greet every Full Member (VMC) that is there. (common courtesy is that you say G'day on arrival, and Goodbye on departure).
- 6.3** NEVER approach the Club President (Particularly as a Prospect). If you want to speak to the President, ask a Full Member (VMC/Committee Member) if you can approach him. Otherwise, at some stage he will move around the area and talk to as many people as possible.
- 6.4** NEVER approach two (2) Patch Members from another MC when they are in conversation. Wait a respectful distance then wait for an invite, or approach a Full Member (VMC), or the Sergeant at Arms of your own Club.
- 6.5** Show respect to Members from another MC. When speaking with them, keep it short and sweet.
- 6.6** NEVER wear your vest in a vehicle, or when driving a car. You may lose your vest for a period of time.
- 6.7** Whenever unable to attend a gathering (i.e. meeting, or ride etc.) you are to place your apology to the Club Secretary at the earliest possible time.
- 6.8** The Sergeant at Arms is responsible for all Prospects. He (or his representative) is the only one authorised to allocate tasks to these members. He also keeps a record of their behaviour and attendance.
- 6.9** Use your initiative; if something needs to be done i.e. housekeeping, or helping another member, either ask if they require assistance, or do it yourself.

### **7. Some Do's**

- 7.1** **IMPORTANT: ALWAYS** know where your President is at all times. The President is always accompanied by a Sergeant at Arms; however, if he is not available a Patched Member will escort the President.
- 7.2** In public NEVER let a Chapter Member walk off un-escorted. Always have 'eyes on' and watch his back, this also includes if/when they go to the toilet, have a cigarette etc. Always make sure someone is there, especially in crowded areas and/or at another Club.

7.3 Use the 'Chain of Command'. Everyone should be aware of it i.e. Prospects use their sponsor or the Sergeant at Arms. Full Members (VMC) use the Sergeant at Arms or a Committee Member. (This will allow any matter to be dealt with accordingly, and in a timely manner).

7.4 Be security conscious at all times. No matter where you are, if you notice suspicious behaviour or receive information that may affect the Club and/ or its members, report it.

### **ALWAYS KNOW YOU ARE BEING OBSERVED**

7.5 understand what the patch represents and signifies, this is a significant part of understanding the Club and how it was formed.

## **8. Some Don'ts**

8.1 **NEVER** ask when you are going to get a patch or full membership. Becoming a Full Member is earned, not a given, and should not be taken for granted. If you do not meet the requirements, or demonstrate your commitment to the club i.e. rides, meetings etc., then this can affect you achieving membership status. In fact, this could be detrimental to your time taken to achieve membership status.

8.2 **NEVER** take for granted that once you become a Full Patch Member, that you can then rest on your laurels. You must still be just as committed, if not more so.

8.3 **NEVER** discuss membership numbers, or Club Business outside the Club.  
**Club business is club business!!**

8.4 **NEVER** remove your vest or leave it unattended unless getting changed. Once you remove it, hand it to another member of *your Club* until you can place it back on.

8.5 **NEVER** allow other Clubs, or the public, to see a disagreement with another member of our own Club. Avoid it, and deal with it at a later stage.

8.6 **DO NOT** wander around by yourself at a bike show or any function. Always have a 'Brother' with you. Furthermore, **NEVER** call a member from another club 'Brother'. This is offensive to 1% clubs.

8.7 **NEVER** leave the bikes unattended at any function. If you notice they are unattended, remain with them until you can get another member's attention, then make a senior member aware. He will then delegate someone to look after them (members looking after bikes will be on rotation).

8.8 **NEVER** give out a Full Member's name, phone number, address, or any other personal details to anyone outside the Club.

8.9 **NEVER** use the term "Outlaw Club" when speaking to a member from another club.



## 9. Conclusion

9.1 Respect is earned and not given: therefore, your actions and being true to your convictions over a long period of time is how it is built and gained.

9.2 Your behaviour and the time you put into the club is also what earns you credibility and respect within the club. However, these same actions can also lead to your colours being removed just as easily.

**The hard work can be to actually keep them!**

These are but a few of our club protocols but they are the key ones to abide by.

**FOLLOW THEM AND IT WILL HOLD YOU AND THE CLUB IN GOOD STEAD**

## **10. NEW PROSPECTIVE MEMBERS**

10.1 The Committee and Members of Adelaide Hills welcome your interest in becoming a Member of our Club and Brotherhood. We hope you enjoy the experience, and find our Club is what you have been looking for to add to your life. I use the word Life because that is what it's all about. As you know we are a Patch Club, and your fellow Member will become a Brother. We are here for each other.

10.2 When or if you decide to join the Club, you will be given information about the Clubs requirements. With all Clubs/Groups there are Rules and Protocol's. Being an MC, we are no different.

**10.3 We are not a 1% Club**, but we do live in that world, and hold a well-established position, which works both ways, with mutual respect with other MC's and Social Clubs.

10.4 During your hang around period, if you find you cannot make the level of commitment required, you will not lose any respect by withdrawing. You can still socialise and attend Functions. The saying, **(You are joining us, we're not joining you)** holds a lot of weight here.

10.5 When / if you are offered the opportunity and accepted to become a Prospect, you are making a commitment to become a member, whatever level may apply, your commitment will be expected, and may will be tested during your **minimum** 12-month Prospect period.

We look forward to getting to know you and sharing some good times, as you know **we are** firstly,  
**a Military Based Motorcycle Club, Male Only**, who form strong bond from shared experiences.

**President  
Adelaide Hills  
VMC**



## Appendix K: Images of members of the Veteran Motorcycle Club (VMC) tattoos

Left thigh side: VMC patch and military service story



Left thigh front: VMC patch with military service story.



Right calf: VMC patch.



Left hand: VMC patch.



Right hand: VV = Vietnam Veteran.



Right fingers: VFFV = Veteran Forever Forever Veteran.  
Left XXII = 22nd letter of the alphabet.



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Right side of neck: Casper in band around



Front neck: VFFV = Veteran Forever Forever Veteran.



Left side of neck: Casper at the other side.



Back of neck: Roman numerals XXII = 22.  
The 22nd letter of the alphabet is V – for veteran



Side of wrist: 22 in a diamond. Only  
MC members can have a diamond  
with numbers of their club.



Shin: Memorial to  
members who have died.



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## Appendix L: VMC Funeral Arrangements

Annex G to  
Chapter Bylaws



### FUNERAL ARRANGEMENTS

Applicants Full Name: .....

Applicants Nickname: .....

Chapter escort for hearse (circle): Yes / No

Own bike to be ridden in procession (circle): Yes / No

Nominated rider's name: .....

Chapter pall bearers (circle): Yes / No

Colours to be worn for burial or cremation (circle): Yes / No

Colours to be presented to nominated family member (circle): Yes / No

Nominated family member's name: .....

Nominated family members contact details:

Mobile: ..... Home: ..... Work: .....

Above details specified in will (circle): Yes / No

Will lodged with: .....

Relevant club emblem on tombstone or plaque (circle): Yes / No

NOK: .....

NOK: Mobile: ..... Home: ..... Work: .....

NOK E-mail Address: .....

Signed: Date:

..... (Applicant) Signed: Date:

..... (Witness) Signed: Date:

Proforma recorded Date:

..... (Secretary Veterans M.C. Adelaide Hills Inc.)

|

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