



Veterans helping an overseas mate in distress

Abalinx 17 July 2018 Peter Adamis

This article is a true story which is yet to be completed. It is also a joint effort with most of the information being provided by an old mate, Ron Llewellyn, from our days spent in the 6th Battalion the Royal Australian Regiment under the leadership of Tony "Harry the Hat" Hammett. Ron is no stranger to dander and is a compassionate man. (Pic: Ron Llewellyn on his yacht far from Australia.)

My role in all of this was merely as a communicator not a conductor and an example of what can be achieved by blokes who have served living many thousands of kilometres apart. In fact one living in Brazil, the other in Greece and both communicating to help a bloke in Columbia South America. I write this because it's a great example of mateship and another as a lesson that no matter the expression of any request for help, it should be taken seriously. There are lessons to be learnt here by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), Social Media, Veterans and the wider community.

It all unravelled on the 20th May 2018 at 8.25 pm and here I am in Pellana, Lakonia, Greece on top of the bed watching a movie on the television. Mind you it was not off the Greek television stations as I found that they are so tied up with advertisements that one loses an appetite for watching anything local. Luckily I had brought with me many movies in an external hard drive and was happily watching the movie whatever it was. For reasons unknown, I looked at my mobile and saw a message from Ron Llewellyn the mate who was an officer in the Battalion many years ago.

Ron: *"Hi Pete, I see you are/were following the thread on "Joe Boggs" (Not his real name) on the International Veterans site. This is a genuine RUOK situation. Could you please ring Joe's parents and see if they are doing anything. 04123456789, Mr and Mrs Blogs (Not their real names). Regards."*

My first thoughts were: How could I help, what was the nature of the problem and what could I do from where I was in Greece. I knew that Ron was living in Brazil and found it odd that he would be contacting me in my place of birth. I thought that maybe the bloke in question was here in Greece or in Europe somewhere. So I fired back a quick response as follows:

Peter: *"Ron I am in Greece working on my ANZAC Gardens project. Sorry cobber. The message should be placed on the 6 RAR or RAR site Ron. You will get a swift response for help"*

After sending the initial response I thought more about it and could not get it out of my mind that a bloke was asking for help and Ron from my memory was not the type of bloke to be mucking around. Therefore I sent him a follow up message still not knowing what was going on.

Peter: *"However I will see what I can do"*

Ron: *"OK, you get around so much I wasn't sure where you were. Hope you are enjoying it all. I've looked at the RUOK site but you need to be in Australia to contact them....total run around."*

I thought about Ron and the bloke that he was talking about and said that I would not forgive myself, if when called upon to help a mate that I did not do everything I could. Call it guilt, misgivings and/or second thoughts I cannot rightly say. What I do know is that I placed myself in Ron's shoes and realised that whatever the case may be, Ron was trying to help a mate out. A bloke that I did not know at all. I therefore used the home telephone and contacted the parents in Australia. I introduced myself and explained the reasons for my call. I could hear the deep breathing in the background and the anxiety in the voice of the father and his speech was broken between inhaling as if he was controlling his emotions.

He (the father) advised me that Ron had contacted him and that he had not received a response from his son. He said that he and his wife are hoping to hear from their son soon and hoped for the best. I left the parents with the hope that their son must be in good hands if Ron Llewellyn was involved and said that I would make further enquiries on their behalf. On the assumptions that the issue had now become a serious one, I sent a message back to Ron using Messenger as the communication device with the following Responses.

Peter: *"Hello Ron I rang Gary and Shirley (NSW) from Greece. Apparently you had spoken to them earlier at 3 am their time. Gary sounded upset but optimistic. They have tried numerous ways of contacting Matthew. They received a one word response from him but that is all. They asked for my details as I explained who I was and my relationship with you. They are hoping for the best. Sorry mate that is all that I can do from Greece. Let me know if all turns out well. Pete"*

Ron: *"Thanks for that, Peter. I am hoping someone in OZ will offer some assistance to them - there doesn't seem to be any takers on the Veterans group. I'll keep monitoring it and talking to Bloggs. Again, thanks for your help. Regards"*

Peter: *"In situations like this, it matters little where we are. My mobile was out of funds but I used the home phone to get through. Good luck with it all. If you need my help again while I am over here let me know. I am here for roughly another 17 days."*

Well, I thought I had done my bit to help another bloke and I could not see if I could be of any use anymore. I left the matter there after Ron's last message and assumed that it was being handled by Ron and others closer to the bloke in distress.

Upon my return, I thought about the matter but took no action to follow it up and I was busy trying to acclimatise back into the Australian environment. A quick trip to Uluru, Northern Territory with my lovely wife only made the acclimatisation a little longer than I envisaged. One night on a Saturday, the 7 July 2018, my mind went back to that message from Ron and I was curious what the end result was. I sent Ron a message making enquiries on the end result

Peter. *Ron as I am back in Oz can you tell me the results of the young bloke you asked to contact his parents when I was in Greece. I hope the lad is ok."*

Ron's response shocked me when I realised the severity of the initial call for help back in May 2018.

Ron: *Hi Peter, after, I suspect, intervention from the AFP (Australian Federal Police), DFAT (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade) eventually responded and contacted Joe. The follow up saw the woman who had assaulted him (I saw photos of his knife wounds) arrested and DFAT offered to repatriate him to Australia. Joe's main concern then became finding homes for his three dogs before he could leave. Last time I spoke with him, about a week ago, he had found homes for two of the dogs.*

The time limit for him to accept DFAT repatriation has run out so it is now up to him to make his own arrangements. He gives the impression of being very disillusioned with life in Australia and I don't see him hurrying back. He makes comments on FACE BOOK and seems to be in a much better place now.

I have asked DFAT to explain their disgraceful initial response and have threatened them with Ministerial action if they fail to respond but as I am occupied at present with my own return to Australia

Never, in all the time I have spent overseas have I found DFAT staff to be anything but a bunch of self-serving "XXXXXXX". So, I guess the story ended well. Thanks for the part you played in it. Best regards. Give me a call on WhatsApp (free download free calls) my number +6123456789."

I rang Ron who was still in Brazil who then gave me a greater understanding of what had transpired, his role in it and his disgust and revulsion at the poor handling by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

I must say in closing that I was always under the impression that DFAT would always look after the interests of Australian citizens, no matter where they were located and render assistance. I too after hearing Ron's version of events have put me in a state of disbelief, anger and loss of confidence in DFAT.

RON LEWELLYN'S ACCOUNT

I'm not sure just how I ended up in the Facebook group, 'International Veterans and Service Personnel Affaires', but after reading some of the posts it seemed to be well administered so I stayed on board. It was a particular post from another member that caught my eye, something along the lines of, **"I've had enough, you won't be hearing from me anymore."** To me it registered as a cry for help but to others on the site it was an excuse to denigrate and question the legitimacy and motives of the poster.

Reading back through his previous posts it appeared he, (Joe Blogs), had become the victim of an abusive female in Columbia. He had repeatedly been seriously assaulted and beaten. (I saw photos of the knife wounds and severe bruising).

In desperation Blogs had contacted the Australian Embassy in Columbia asking for help. The end result of this was that the Columbian police turned up at his apartment where the female told them that it was him who was being abusive – the normal response for women in Latam (Latin American) countries. It was then he who was not only abused and threatened by the police but they also tried to steal his property from his apartment – normal response for police in Latam countries.

I currently live in Brazil, another Latam Country, and I have been the victim of domestic violence and police abuse, so Blog's story rang totally credible for me. I advised the members of the group to hold up on their negative comments and told them I believed his situation might be legitimate.

I then contacted Blogs by PM (Private Message) where I commenced a dialog with him that lasted for many hours. (In fact days.) I asked for details of his past military, AFP and Corrective Services time and what assistance DFAT had given. I obtained further contact details including his parents in Australia.

I determined that Blogs was in a very fragile and erratic state of mind, threatening to kill, his landlord, police and the abusive woman. He was desperate. The visit from the police, I assumed at the behest of The Embassy, was the last straw. The result of his call for help had resulted in him now being the one threatened and further abused. This demonstrated that the Australian DFAT staff had absolutely no understanding of the cultural and judicial forces being brought into play. I was concerned that Blogs was potentially suicidal.

At around 3 am, Australian time, I phoned, via SKYPE to his parents and told them that their son was very distressed and needed support. I also confirmed his service details – his story had been true.

I then attempted to contact the Australian Embassy in Columbia. There was no direct contact details on their web site, everything was referred back through DFAT in Australia. Neither Blogs nor myself had phone communications available. Blog's phone had been broken and he was now communicating by e-mail, Facebook. I do not have a phone server and use WhatsApp or SKYPE to make phone calls.

Frustrated by being unable to contact the Embassy I sent 3 e-mails to various Consular and Embassy addresses notifying them of this 'urgent' situation.

With myself in Brazil, and Blogs in Columbia I wanted someone in Australia to take the reins and contact the appropriate authorities. Not knowing Peter Adamis was in Greece, but knowing he was also a member of the Group, I contacted him. Peter also contacted Blog's parents.

Being very early on Saturday morning I didn't expect any response to my urgent e-mails to DFAT and I wasn't disappointed. I continued to talk with Blogs via Facebook for many more hours in the hope of defusing his mental state.

Throughout the weekend I maintained contact with Blogs, relieved to notice a change in his demeanour and a cessation of threats against the Colombian police.

On Saturday I made contact with the founder/administrator of the Facebook Group and apparently he made further representations to the Australian Federal Police.

On the Monday, nearly three days after the commencement of this incident, DFAT in Colombia made contact with Blogs and at about the same time the Colombian police again visited his apartment. This time, according to Blogs, their behaviour was courteous and professional and resulted in removal of the woman who had been assaulting him. Apparently the word had finally got through to the DFAT staff in Columbia, I suspect via the Australian AFP. Blogs was offered consular assistance and repatriation to Australia – something that should have been offered 5 days previously.

I continued to talk to Blogs and follow through on his, optional, repatriation. With the removal of the prime antagonist his situation was now greatly improved.

I received an answer to one of my 3 e-mails on the Monday with the anticipated, standard, 'holier than though' response telling me how ready DFAT was to help and giving me the phone numbers listed on their site.

I have attached my final e-mail to DFAT asking for certain explanations. I have received no reply. This highlights the unprofessional, bordering on arrogant, attitude I have found while dealing with DFAT in the past.

I believe that the DFAT staff in Columbia should be taken to account for their totally inappropriate response to Blog's initial call for assistance and in their failure to personally monitor the police response that they, apparently, initiated. This matter should be assessed for a Ministerial investigation.

From: Hill, Tracey Tracey.Hill@dfat.gov.au on behalf of Consular Operations & Emergency Centre
Centre.Conops@dfat.gov.au

Sent: 30 May 2018 12:17 AM

To: Ron Llewellyn

Subject: RE: Consular Assistance Query [DLM=Sensitive: Personal]

SENSITIVE: PERSONAL

Ms Hill Thank you for your e-mails. Currently we do not have a WhatsApp account (a service which requires the user to have a data connection) but it is possible to SMS our 24 hour Consular Emergency Centre (CEC) on +61 421 269 080, as advertised in our consular Services Charter which I have attached.

Ron Llewellyn. "Currently". Does this mean that you will be activating this service in the near future? If not, why not?

Ms Hill. Our experience is that contact by phone or SMS is the most immediate and effective means of dealing with consular emergencies.

Ron Llewellyn. And how does one contact you in the event of not having/or access to a phone - in the possible advent of it having been stolen or damaged, out of cellular range, out of credit or for whatever other reason? This question has, so far, not been answered. This was my position, as previously mentioned.

What other methods of contact have you tried in order to establish the 'experience' that phone is the most immediate and effective? When were these other methods tested? My past experience has shown me that consular staff have little idea of life in the regional areas of the countries they are posted to.

Ms Hill. In the majority of cases consular assistance can be provided out of hours by the CEC. Duty Officers are contacted out of hours by the CEC specifically to contact/assist travellers when in-country assistance is required.

Ron Llewellyn. By 'Duty Officers' do you mean that Embassies actually have a dedicated staff member manning the consular communications system outside of normal working hours? Of course you don't.....but I would still like your answer to this question.

In the matter relating to Mr ****, to which I am endeavouring to find out why it took 3 days for my urgent e-mails to be answered, it is understood that the matter may be subject to investigation by Australian Federal authorities.

Your detailed answers to these questions will be far more appreciated than your condescending "Annoying person 101" standard responses.

Ms Hill. We appreciate your suggestions on how we can improve our services.

Ron Llewellyn. I am prepared to follow this through to whatever level is required to get a satisfactory explanation for what would appear to be a very poor initial response by the Embassy in Columbia. Yours faithfully, R. Llewellyn JP, . M.R.I.N.

Ms Hill . Kind Regards Tracey

Conclusion. The above has been provided by Ron and it should be seen as an example of what one may expect should they find themselves in a foreign country and in need of Australian Consular support. I am not passing judgement on any Australian Department but I will advise anyone travelling overseas or contemplating a lengthy stay to take precautions and to look after their interests by ensuring Australian officials are aware of your stay in a country where democracy is but a byword.

The article based on information which is available but may not be complete because we do not know the full story. I think at this stage, in any event it is fair to say that this young man has suffered considerably and honestly believes that the Australian and its agencies, and by implication, the Australian people have failed him miserably. What I think should be loud and clear is that this young man should be assured that there are more Australians than he believes who would whole heartedly support him.

Last but not the least, take seriously any call for help and don't laugh it off or consider it not your problem. Listen and do what you can in a person's hour of need. We have lost far too many to suicide in this country.



Peter Adamis is a Journalist/Social Media Commentator and writer. He is a retired Australian military serviceman and an Industry organisational & Occupational (OHS) & Training Consultant whose interests are within the parameters of domestic and international political spectrum. He is an avid blogger and contributes to domestic and international community news media outlets as well as to local and Ethnic News. He holds a Bachelor of Adult Learning & Development (Monash), Grad Dip Occupational Health & Safety, (Monash), and Dip. Training & Assessment, Dip Public Administration, and Dip Frontline Management. Website: abalinx.com Contact via Email: abalinx@gmail.com