

26th April 2023

Volunteers

“One volunteer is worth ten pressed men.”

Proverb, *Early 18th Century*

My father served in the RAF during World War II. He didn't talk much about his experiences, apart from sharing with his young son a couple of things he'd learned. "Lesson No. 1: If it moves, shoot it; if it doesn't move, paint it." "Lesson No. 2: Never volunteer." I've never sought to practice the first of these lessons, and, as for the second, I totally disagree.

The proverb quoted above is clearly gender specific. It comes from the age of sail, when ships' crews – all male, of course – would be "pressed" into service, often forcibly. What that created, therefore, was a spirit of reluctance, leading occasionally to mutinous rebellion, because the expected service was founded on an unwillingness to be there in the first place. Compare that to the willing volunteer, who goes into an enterprise – a ship's crew or anywhere else – with a commitment to the task. Here is someone who *wants* to serve – worth *much* more than ten who don't.

I expect my father's reluctance to volunteer in the RAF was understandable. For there were many service personnel who wanted an easy time. Volunteer, even to paint things that don't move, and you not only have to be busy, but you run the risk of alienating yourself from your mates for being a "toady", someone who wants to curry favour with the officers. Don't volunteer, and you're still one of the lads!

I'm pleased that the thousands who volunteer in our society aren't influenced by my dad's RAF mantra. Churches, community groups, charities, clubs, all benefit from a veritable army of volunteers. You'll know who they are in your circles of service. You might be one of those who benefits from the commitment volunteers give. You may even be a volunteer yourself. For all of them, and for all of you, I thank God today.

It's suggested that volunteers aren't offered payment, not because they're worthless, but because they're priceless. That's not far from the truth. Our late Queen Elizabeth said: "Volunteering is a universal feature of human society, independent of wealth, status, language or culture." Sorry dad! I'll be listening to the Queen on this one rather than you.

A prayer for today

"Love must be genuine and show itself in action," St John said. I'll volunteer for that!

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