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THE SATURDAY PAPER

THE OTHER FACE OF ANZAC DAY



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Mandy cannot forgive Defence for the lack of support she and her family received after war left her partner violent, abusive and finally homeless.



Mandy, who suffered her own breakdown after her partner's abuse. TAMMY LAW

The letter Mandy finally wrote to the prime minister's advisory council was not angry. Nor was it desperate. Weighted in each sentence is the raw-boned language of resignation.

She wrote of her partner's night sweats and restless legs. How he returned from his first deployment to Iraq withdrawn and violent. How the army forced him into hospital for alcoholism, only to send him on two further tours of Afghanistan.

She writes of how he would disappear for days on end, how he would experience flashbacks and blackouts. Twice he attempted suicide, and when she telephoned for help he beat her. "I tried to remain supportive and encouraging," she wrote, "despite, at times, living in fear for my life."

“The First World War diggers would be turning in their graves if they could see the way our modern-day soldiers are treated.”

The support from army and veterans’ affairs was wildly inadequate, she wrote. She knew nothing of post-traumatic stress or where to turn for help. Her partner, Tim, began to use drugs and gamble. He went on compulsive spending binges. At one point he choked her on the floor as their young daughter watched. The night terrors became so bad he would run screaming down midnight streets naked, before falling into an inconsolable, crumpled heap on the footpath.

“On one occasion he completely destroyed our family car,” she wrote in her letter. “He slashed the seats and tyres, ruined the dashboard, jumped up and down on the bonnet and the roof, and kicked in every side panel. The following morning he reported the destruction to the police, having no recollection of his involvement in the matter.”

Mandy and Tim were 14 when they met. By the time he enlisted in the army, they had one child together. The day Tim left for basic training, Mandy found out she was pregnant with their second. Eventually, they had a third. At times, Tim tried to repair his family, but the trauma was too much. “He would often say that he couldn’t see how he could regain control, because all he could see was fear in our eyes.”

The couple’s eldest child began acting out as their home life disintegrated. His grades deteriorated and he was suspended from school. Their nine-year-old daughter sees a psychiatrist weekly, having started to self-harm and become suicidal.

Over the edge

When Tim finally left – he disappeared, leaving Mandy and the children stranded in Queensland on a family holiday – he slept rough for five months. He received a compensation payment from veterans’ affairs and spent it on a high-powered motorcycle, which he wrote off in a police chase, high on drugs with his mistress riding pillion. Finally, Mandy was found in a catatonic state and admitted to hospital suffering a nervous breakdown. She was diagnosed with vicarious post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a major depressive disorder and severe anxiety with panic attacks.

“If you’d have got me two days ago I might not have been able to even talk about this,” she says when we meet for the first time. “Today is a numb day.” Reflecting on her final years with Tim, the man she had loved since she was 14, she says, simply and without malice: “It was like living with a demon.”

Mandy, whose name has been changed, speaks with a voice that trembles at times. She tells her story of combat-related PTSD that manifested itself as domestic violence, suicide attempts, drug and alcohol addiction, and wild spending sprees followed by crippling debt and, ultimately, utter despair.

“Looking back,” she says, “the first thing I should have noticed was he didn’t want us to come to the airport when he came back from Iraq.”

Mandy says the defence force and veterans’ affairs discarded and forgot about Tim and failed to provide adequate support to her family. There are gaps in the system, she says, and soldiers and their families are falling through them.

Mandy says her story is much too common across Australia. Indeed, multiple sources interviewed by *The Saturday Paper* believe Australia, through the Australian Defence Force's repeated, high-tempo missions in the Middle East since 2001, is sitting on a mental health time bomb.

Mandy sees a therapist once a week, attends a weekly anxiety workshop and has a monthly appointment with a psychiatrist. She relies on her parents and brother for financial and emotional support and feels herself a burden or inconvenience. "I have medication to go to sleep and to wake me up," she tells me, "to calm me down, for depression, and anti-psychotics for night sweats." Her pale blue eyes have the gaze of someone under sedation. It is not uncommon for PTSD to spread, like a virus, through a household.

When Michael Burge, director of the Australian College of Trauma Treatment, considers the escalating numbers of modern veterans against the Vietnam experience, his forecast is bleak. "The psychosocial and community implications are just horrible."

The ADF states the incidence of PTSD in active members is 8.4 per cent. Burge, who has worked extensively with Vietnam veterans and their families, finds that figure implausibly low. "Usually with war veterans it's consistently around 30 per cent."

Ending up homeless

Homelessness is one guide to the toll felt by service people returning from the war on terror. This year, Homelessness NSW estimated as much as 12 per cent of the NSW homeless population were veterans. Melbourne Street to Home put the Victorian figure at 8 to 10 per cent.

Geoff Evans, a former lieutenant in the First Commando Regiment, explains away the statistical discrepancy as a simple case of soldiers not declaring mental health issues. "If you're in the ADF and you put your hand up and say, 'I've got a mental health problem', then your career is finished. It is finished."

Evans was medically discharged after being seriously wounded during a second tour of Afghanistan, and was later diagnosed with PTSD. He now leads RSL LifeCare's Homes for Heroes program in Sydney's Narrabeen, which provides shelter and support services to homeless veterans of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Tim is one of those veterans.

Evans, who is in constant chronic pain from vertebrae crushed when his Bushmaster was blown over by an improvised explosive device, twists and stretches his back throughout the interview. On his wrist is a black metal band inscribed with the names of two mates killed alongside him in Afghanistan.

He says every veteran who comes into his shelter is suffering from some kind of mental illness. There are only 30 beds in the facility, and the initiative is hopelessly overwhelmed and underfunded. He describes excruciating phone calls where he has to turn away a desperate homeless veteran who is on the slippery slope to suicide.

"One hundred years after the First World War the diggers would be turning in their graves if they could see the way our modern-day soldiers are treated," he says. "It's a national disgrace, and it is going to get worse."

A big part of the problem, says Evans, is what he describes as a veterans' affairs system constrained by a combative legislation. The Department of Veterans' Affairs says housing is an issue for the Department of Social Services, and therefore contributes nothing to the Narrabeen homeless program, which is funded entirely by the RSL and a small number of donations.

Norbert Keough is director of the East Sydney RSL Veterans' Centre and also an advocate for veterans who need to lodge claims with the DVA for compensation and treatment of physical and mental health issues. "I view putting in claims like going through a meat grinder," he says. "It grinds you up."

Keough argues Australia's "web-like" veterans' entitlement legislation is probably the most complex in the world. Moreover, unlike in the United States, Britain, Canada and New Zealand, there are no statutory timelines for veterans' affairs to process and finalise claims. As a result, veterans in the system can suffer, unsupported, waiting months or years for assistance from a country they served courageously and without question.

A departmental spokesperson acknowledged the claims process is sometimes arduous, but said the department is focused on reducing wait times, and had implemented streamlining initiatives that were resulting in gradual improvements. Last financial year, the department spent \$179 million on veteran mental health services and the spokesman emphasised there was no cap on funding in this area. A 2014 report tabled in parliament recommended against introducing legislated time frames to process claims "because they increase the risk of poor, incomplete or incorrect outcomes".

Former commando Evans doesn't buy it. "When the system is fighting you like that, what the system is really saying is, 'We don't believe you.'" He says the department is trying to weed out a minority of false claims through a process that also prolongs the suffering of the vast majority who need help and need it quickly.

Feeling let down

Mandy remains aggrieved that when Tim left for combat she was not told what to look for on his return and what support programs were available. The what-ifs and hypotheticals still pain her. "That's where the defence community gets let down," she says. "Because Tim turned to the person he trusted most for support and I let him down because I didn't know what I was doing."

Her letter to the advisory council on veterans' mental health concluded with the same gentle dignity it carried throughout its five pages, the stoicism with which she has faced a life ripped apart by distant wars.

"My partner committed to doing his job within the defence force with the utmost dedication. He completed his service to the highest of his ability and that was only made possible by the commitment and dedication of his supportive spouse and children who have been left behind and forgotten by the very people dependent on our support," she wrote.

"The children and I are doing the best we can, taking one day at a time. I cannot think what the future holds for us."

Home for Heroes: rslifecare.org.au/young-veterans; Lifeline: 13 11 14.