



ORDINARY PEOPLE

“Telling my story, I felt 20kg lighter and 20cm taller, like the weight of the world had been lifted off my shoulders”



Picture: Peter Wallis

KEVIN HUMPHREYS

**HELICOPTER PILOT, 45
ASHGROVE**

As a little tacker, I saw an army ad on TV with guys in green suits running around and I thought that looked pretty good. As a teenager, I was impressed by a rescue helicopter flying overhead and landing in a nearby park. Then I found out the army had helicopters.

I was born in Katoomba in the Blue Mountains [110km west of Sydney]. My father [John, who died aged 72 in 2012] was a butcher and Mum [Lyn, 71] was an accounts clerk. I lived there until I was 18, when I joined the army.

After my training, I was based in Townsville and had keys to a Blackhawk when I was 21 years old. I later flew Chinooks and was in the army for 20 years, completing nine tours of duty including two major operational tours to Afghanistan.

But in 2008, I had a psychological breakdown. I had been carrying undiagnosed PTSD since an Iraq tour in 2003 and it all fell apart. I was abusing alcohol. I was thinking about how and where and when I could end it. I knew exactly which two trees on which bend of which road I would drive between to go over a cliff edge. I'd done some pretty wild and woolly missions in Afghanistan and there were some really close calls. But I didn't feel worthy of help. The guys in Vietnam and World War II had it harder than me. I honestly felt I'd failed my country as well as my family [wife Megan, 48, kids Olivia, 18, Dean, 16, Brent, 13], my parents, everyone.

I'd gone from the top of the pile – I'd led 100 people on operations – to not even being able to put a nail in the wall to hang a picture. I'd be on the floor sobbing inconsolably. I had a very deep sense of

shame. When Megan would arrive home she'd leave the kids in the car, she'd come inside and search through the house to find me before she let the kids inside. She didn't want them to find me dead. That's how worried she was.

After the breakdown, it took me nine

months to get back to work and I got to the point of functioning and flying again.

I kept my breakdown a secret for seven years and I asked Megan to keep it a secret too. We didn't invite people around, we didn't go to social functions, I was very guarded with my conversations.

In mid-2009, I accepted a civilian job to fly as a search and rescue pilot in Darwin with CareFlight, and I'm now the chief pilot of Queensland Government Air Rescue.

It was June 2015 when I finally had the courage to talk about my breakdown. It was to a group of about 150 fellow property investors at a conference at Melbourne.

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Then, on R U OK? Day in 2015, as a chief pilot, I told everyone at work. You could almost hear a pin drop. In aviation circles, someone talking about that is basically unheard of. From there, I've presented at various conferences and I'm now a community ambassador for [Australian Defence Force support charity] Mates4Mates and [suicide prevention charity] R U OK? Day, and a state speaker for Beyond Blue. Megan and I also have a property development business [I PLUS I Developments]. We have recently partnered with a disability agency to provide new high-quality, purpose-built facilities for disabled clients.

I firmly believe I was put on this planet to serve and while I have a passion for veterans, aviation and emergency services, the disability community is another area that needs help.

For 20 years I only thought with my head, not my heart. I've realised that the longest journey you'll take is the 18 inches between your head and your heart. Happiness is the journey, not the destination. Keep sight of that, and you can't help but be happy and content.

ELISSA LAWRENCE

**mates4mates.org / lifeline.org.au ph 13 11 14
suicidecallbackservice.org.au ph 1300 659 467**