

# ONE MAN'S STRUGGLE WITH PTSD

## THE GEOFFREY EVANS STORY



**Geoffrey Evans first served overseas as a reservist in 2001, when he was posted to East Timor for six months. He now looks back on that period and recognises the first symptoms of PTSD – returning with a heightened sense of paranoia, on his first night home he barricaded his door. He returned to East Timor in 2006 as the leader of a Commando team. Deployment to the war in Afghanistan, with the rank of corporal, was to follow two years later. Here is his story:**

In 2008, for the first time since WWII, they mobilised my Reserve Unit and sent us to war. The Army didn't publicise it; they didn't have to tell anyone because we were Special Forces. The only difference between us and the full time Commando Unit is that the regular unit would spend about three to five months in pre-deployment training. We took eight.

How quickly I discovered that there is a world of difference between being trained and being experienced. Training will tell you not to walk on roads or tracks, but only experience will help you when there is nothing but tracks and roads to move on. We were thrown into the deep end. It was often up to the team leaders to choose the route, and

we walked it out front. Where are the bombs you know are there? Many times in those first weeks I would literally grit my teeth, straining to detect disturbances in the earth through the green haze of my night vision goggles, while I led my team down into the villages in the dead of night to conduct raids on the Taliban.

We were conducting successive missions, night after night, with very little rest during the day. Typically we would drive our vehicles out into the desert, circle the wagons, and then walk (about 6km across rock covered mountain) to a target compound. We would aim to get there at around 2 or 3

in the morning, raid the target, then try to get back to our vehicles as the sun was coming up. Get in our vehicles, drive away somewhere else, park, try and sleep for a few hours and then at about 12 or 1 in the afternoon a new target pack would come in and we'd do it all again the next night.

On the night of 27 November 2008, after five nights in a row, we were on a fairly typical mission to kill or capture a known bomb maker in the Mirabad Valley, north-east of Tarin Kowt. That night was very rushed. Our intelligence staff had trouble locating the target, and had us driving back and forth across the desert until midnight. Orders were rushed; the four team commanders and the platoon commander hashed out a quick plan in the back of a Bushmaster under a red penlight.

I remember being struck by what a dark night it was. I was walking down a ridge line where I could see the line of the Company walking ahead of me as we moved toward the target, and I saw a huge explosion accompanied by "boom" in front. Just for a second I thought, we're under mortar fire, and then as I watched the shape of the blast develop, I thought, no, that's an IED; someone has stepped on an IED. Clods of dirt rained down around me.

There was no panic, no rush. Like clockwork the engineers at the front of the column came back and cleared around us all with mine detectors. I was fine. There was a guy 30 metres in front of me who was a metre away from a bomb. The next morning we would find three more IEDs that we had all walked past in the night.

One of our men had stepped on a 20kg IED rigged to a pressure plate, killing him instantly. The blast had blown off both of his legs and one arm as well as doing awful damage to the rest of his body. He was unrecognisable. His body

armour looked as though someone had neatly cut through the shoulder straps with scissors. Behind him was Captain (now Major) Bronson Horan, had been blown through the air by the blast and suffered a broken neck. Despite his terrible and lasting injuries, he continued to stay at his post and command the Company. In any other army that would have earned him a medal, Major Horan is the finest combat officer I have ever known, and now runs the Soldier On Reintegration Centre in Adelaide.

Once the engineers had cleared a path we went down and put the body on a stretcher. We started walking out of there. I was carrying the stretcher on the downward side of the slope as we walked back along the top of the ridgeline, when we suddenly slipped out down the hill. We both dropped at the same time and the dead soldier fell on top of me. I could feel his face against my face, and it was warm. I remember thinking (it was perhaps minus 20 degrees), how can his face still be warm? I never thought for a second that he was alive; there was no way he could be. As always when anything went wrong our CSM -WO2 A, despite being wounded in the blast himself, was there and he said, "Fellas, just calm down." We calmed down.

Shortly after that someone walked up to me and said, "Geoff, can you nav us back to the VDO (vehicle drop off)." Remember that when we stepped off on the raid we were in such a hurry that I hadn't even looked at the map. I didn't know where we were, let alone how to get us back through a minefield to the VDO. "Yep, no worries."

I quickly figured a route out of there. I took us straight down the side of the hill and onto the worst possible route. I knew there would be no IEDs on the side of the hill and in the rough and rocky areas. The guys struggled on through the night with the stretcher. It was the hardest night of

my life.

One of the engineers clearing the route in front of me couldn't walk in a straight line, it was the fourth time he'd been blown up, and he kept drifting to the left. Occasionally I had to hold him, drag him back over to where I needed him and say, "I need you to go straight up here [the hill]." I had four guys carrying

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a stretcher; if one of them stepped on a mine it would kill the lot. I had to push him. Those engineers had continued on from the previous rotation and were already burnt out, but they saved us many times on that night and others. I cannot praise them highly enough.

We'd had to leave part of the platoon at the incident site until the morning. We went back to meet them as soon as the sun came up. Eventually we left and drove back to Tarin Kowt. I was completely exhausted, but strangely unable to connect with the emotion I wanted to feel. I kept thinking, I wish I could cry and just, let it all out. But I couldn't. I was tired – numb. It was our first combat death.

When we got back to Tarin Kowt it was after midnight. Exhausted, I rang my wife. She was busy with the kids and other banalities of life, and I remember thinking, I don't know how to even begin to tell you what I've just been through. So I didn't. She was lucky she hadn't been watching the television. What happened to many wives and families



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is that the news flashed: “Member of Special Operations Task Group Killed In Action.” Remember we are a small group, so they were straight on the phone to each other: “Have you heard who it is? Have you heard anything? Who is it?” It was a terrible burden for them to bear so early in our tour.

I remember at the time being angry at how little it meant to suffer a casualty; nothing stopped. We didn’t skip a beat. I don’t know what I was expecting; we had a funeral and it was a good send-off. I’m glad we did that, but by the morning after we were back into mission planning.

We changed after that death. Partly it was the realisation that we were in a ruthless life and death struggle, but also because we continued to conduct many more missions, and we got better. We became clinical and efficient.

There is an area in Afghanistan called the Baluchi Valley, where Australia has taken many of its casualties.

Back in 2008 a young and aggressive Taliban commander had taken charge of operations in the area. The Dutch drove through there with 20 armoured

vehicles and he ambushed them. One of their snipers was killed. The situation was so bad the Dutch refused to go back there. The decision was taken to send SOTG, dismounted, to target the Taliban commander.

The plan was that we would drive to the patrol base at the start of the Baluchi Valley looking like the Mentoring Task Force. We didn’t take our outrider bikes, we stayed in the vehicles, covered our beards and wore normal uniforms as we drove to the patrol base. We got there at about 7pm. I remember that night being very tired. The plan called for us to step off straight away, walk into the Baluchi Valley, raid the Commander’s house and then stay there and fight. But the weather closed in, we lost our drone support and Aero Medical Evacuation. The mission was postponed until the next night. I found a shipping container and slept.

The next morning I moved my swag out into the sun on top of an embankment that dropped away to the wall of the base. At about 1pm I was lying on my swag listening to my iPod when my platoon commander walked over. He stopped at

the base of the slope: “Hey, Geoff, I’ve got to talk to you about tonight.” I got up, but just as I started to walk towards him, there was a big bang, which sounded like a sledge hammer hitting metal. I knew it was enemy fire.

Instinctively I started to run down the slope, but movement caught my attention out of the corner of my eye. As I turned I saw my friend, Private S, rolling lifelessly down the embankment. As he came to a stop I was looking at his face, I could tell he was already dead. Our medic, dived on top of him yelling, “Get my med kit!” I grabbed it, dropped to my knees and started frantically tearing open wound dressings. It was only then that I realised Private S had been hit in the left shoulder blade region of his back (with a 107mm rocket). The missile exited his right lower chest and half his chest was missing. I started stuffing the dressings into him; as always WO 2 A, appeared from nowhere to help. When I looked at our Private L, our medic, his hands were inside the darkened bloody that was once Private S’s chest, blood pooled and congealed on the ground at our knees. We kept stuffing in

dressings, and then Pte L looked at me and said: “Just stop. My hands go all the way through; he’s dead.”

I stood up and walked back to my team: “He’s dead, fellas.” They just looked at me and nodded blankly: “Yeah, we know.” I looked down at myself: I had sticky blood and other gore on my hands and uniform. We’d only been about a metre apart when he was hit and much of it had sprayed on to me. I have read about the stench of death many times, but it wasn’t until that moment that I experienced it for myself; it hung over us like a pall. And that is when I knew we had changed. All of the intense emotion and feelings that should have been there just weren’t. We were numb, we had been blooded.

The concept of bleeding is well known in war. It happens because the expression of grief or fear on the battlefield will endanger your life. So you suppress all of your feelings, you push them down, put a lid on them, and feel nothing. It allows you to kill, and it allows you to have your friends killed, and still get on with the job. The problem is that later in life all the powerful emotions and feelings that were associated with those incidents are still there, and they want to come out. That’s when veterans turn to drinking, drugs, work (as in workaholic), or whatever it takes to hold the lid on. The fear is that to let even one emotion out, is to be overwhelmed by them all. That’s what PTSD is – one half of it anyway.

A helicopter came in to get our fallen mate. We formed lines either side of his stretcher, and after a brief service, his Team-mates carried him to a Bushmaster which drove him to the waiting chopper. Someone had found an Australian flag to cover his body bag. It was a poignant touch.

I looked at Pte L; he was covered in blood. I said to him, “Mate, you’ve got to go and wash your clothes.” Being a

patrol base there were washing machines there. “I don’t care about blood,” he shrugged. “I know, but it’s not for you. It’s for everybody else.” By this time it was 5 or 6 o’clock at night, and we were due to step off on the mission as soon as it was dark, around 7pm. I remember the OC came around asking, “What do you want to do?” To a man we said, “We want to go and get these guys.” We wanted to inflict the heaviest price possible for the loss of our friends.

As soon as it got dark we infiltrated by foot into the Baluchi Valley. We raided the Taliban Commander’s house and although he wasn’t there we captured two foreigners, who had been sent there to train the Taliban on how to fire rockets. Once the Commander’s compound was clear, the plan was to stay and occupy his house. This would draw him into battle where he would be targeted. As soon as the sun came up, the new OC, a brilliant combat officer, Major W, walked around to inspect our position. Overlooking our position was a small hill about 100 meters away. If the Taliban were to occupy it they would be able to fire directly into our compound. Major W said: “I need a team up there right now; who’s ready?” So up we went to defend the hill.

There were six of us, plus an engineer to clear the top of the hill of IEDs. On top of that hill was an old trench the Mujahedeen had used to ambush the Russians; no doubt the Taliban used it too. By 0900 we had been watching women and children stream out of the village for two hours, an obvious combat indicator. Recognising that we were exposed and likely to be under fire I had asked for another team to bring up an 84mm rocket launcher. Delayed by the need to fortify their own position, they finally arrived at the back of the hill at around 0930. I stopped them there by radio; we had found a likely IED on the

hill earlier and I needed to lead them across the top to be safe.

I got out of the trench and walked over the top of the hill to meet them. It was then, standing crouched but in the open, that the Taliban opened up on us. I had always thought that a bullet fired at you made a crack-thump sound as it passed. But I now know that when they are really close you can actually feel the round pushing the air as it flies by your head. I turned and ran back to the trench. As I jumped in I turned and looked up to see an RPG round fly over my head and into my line of sight. It detonated in the air (airburst) a hundred metres beyond. I would find out later that it exploded above a family that had stayed in their compound, wounding nine women and children.

Heavily pinned down and receiving fire from three sides and without the rocket launcher, I had little option but to call in mortar fire from our mortar section stationed back at the patrol base. The main enemy machinegun position was 504 metres away, according to my laser range finder. I began a process known as “adjusting”, where by the mortars drop one bomb at a time and I call in corrections over the radio until we are on the target. We listened to the Taliban communications constantly. When that first mortar round landed they got on the radio saying, “They’re trying to mortar us but they’re miles away.”

I called the first correction and the round landed about 100 metres from where I wanted it to. The next thing I hear is the Taliban saying, “They’re getting closer.” I made a double correction and then the next round landed right on the top of the hill. This time the Taliban reported, “They’re very close to us now but they haven’t hit us yet.” I made my final adjustment and called “Fire for effect”, which saw 20 mortar rounds obliterate the hill. The machine

gun fire from that position stopped immediately and we were never fired on from that position again.

The fighting continued all day. At one stage we had Apache gunships doing gun runs around us, we had F16s dropping air strikes one after the other, our snipers engaged multiple insurgents, there were several more mortar missions. Small arms crackled all day. At around midday a British Sea King helicopter brought us a critical ammunition resupply. It took 17 hits and crash landed on the tip of the runway back at Tarin Kowt. The cable to the tail rotor was shot through and hanging by one strand. The pilot was awarded the Flying Cross. It went on like that all day and the next, though with far less intensity the second day due to Taliban attrition. The purpose of the mission was to target the Taliban Commander; he was killed on the second day.

We went back and held a very sombre ramp ceremony for our fallen comrade.

With his death my wife really started to feel the strain. It was a real war, people were dying and I was in the thick of it. After the media reported another SOTG KIA we remained on the mission for the next four days; we couldn't get back to tell anybody we were alright. Wives and families were really struggling.

Our third last mission was into a place we called Death Valley. Only Special Forces could go in there and only at night. It was called Death Valley because the Taliban would place IEDs around their own compounds in that area. Normally they wouldn't do that because of the risk of blowing up their neighbours. The Taliban were very strong in that area and would stand and fight anyone caught there during daylight. We raided their target compound looking for a bomb maker but he wasn't there. Subsequent intelligence led us to the compound next door.

We would learn later that the insurgent had heard us in the neighbouring compound. He grabbed his gun and barricaded himself in a room to wait for us. The Team coming down the left hand side of the compound came to the door and started to make entry on the room. Lance Corporal W, who had come around the right side of the compound and stopped at the window to the room, was looking through when he saw the insurgent walk up to the back of the door and raise his AK74 to shoot through the door. L/Cpl W shot him three times through the window, twice in the arm and once in the side, but instead of dying, the insurgent spun and fired a big burst of AK fire through the window. L/Cpl W, who was hit in the face with flying masonry dropped to the ground. We all thought he was dead.

Rounds from the insurgents' fire were splashing down at the only entrance or exit to the compound. With nowhere to go and no other choice, the next operator moved to cover the window. Another team member moved up inside him and grenaded the room. It was a surprisingly muffled thud. To everyone's surprise, the grenade was answered by a long burst of fire. Another grenade was thrown in. There was no more shooting. After a while entry was made on the room. Unbeknown to anyone, there were 12 women and children in the room with the insurgent: four already dead, two dying and all wounded. Everyone handled it well, calm and methodical, but deep down we were all thinking, Oh My God!

It's a well-known tactic of the Taliban. Unfortunately, we didn't know they were in there. I remember a friend hurrying past me carrying a baby wrapped up in a blanket. I could see a blood smear on its cheek. We stayed there until we had put the wounded on a helicopter and we walked out into the desert. As we arrived back at our vehicles in the desert

a vicious dust storm blew up, and I kept thinking, the Gods are angry with us. We couldn't go anywhere in that, so we stayed there exhausted, unable to sleep, in shock. Two missions after that, we were home.

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I came home and started on a permanent welcome home party. I was jacked up all the time. Everything seemed trivial to me. I couldn't listen to the radio. My wife would ask me to do the dishes, and I would just stand there looking at them, it all seemed so unimportant. I wasn't at that stage having trouble dealing with the bad stuff that I had been through. I was addicted to the high of combat. I could not come down, which is the other half of PTSD. Eventually my wife took me to VVCS to have "couples counselling". She left, I stayed for 18 months. The first time I told the story of my first combat experience to my counsellor, he threw down his pen and said, "Geoff, I used to counsel heroin addicts, and you sound exactly like a junkie who's just had his first hit." It was true – I was hooked on the adrenaline.

It wasn't until I met the families of our fallen friends that I started to struggle with what happened. One of the mothers had suffered such bad anxiety when her son went to East Timor in 2006, that he didn't tell her he went to Afghanistan. The first that poor woman knew that he was in Afghanistan was when someone knocked on her door to tell her that her son was dead.

It started with nightmares and flashbacks. I suffered anxiety and depression and started drinking again. It was my wonderful wife who dragged me out of it and sent me back to VVCS. Once I started and was able to see I had a problem, I was prepared to do whatever was required in counselling. It was a

process of talking through things and trying to calm down. I learned to talk about events without reliving them. I really am one of the few lucky ones. I had a strong wife who forced me to get help and I recovered. There are thousands of young men and women out there right now with war caused mental wounds, they are suffering, and no one is helping them.

By the time 2010 came about and my unit was redeploying to Afghanistan I did not want to go. But every single one of my friends was the same, they were married, they had jobs, they had kids. I could not let them go and face the danger alone. It wasn't easy on Lisa either. She definitely didn't want me to go, and she became very anxious. In November 2010, I deployed back to Afghanistan.

I was about six weeks into my second tour when we were returning from a patrol in the Charmasten Valley. I was working as a mentor to an Afghan militia. I would live with, train and lead in combat up to 20 militiamen. Often there was just me and one other Aussie. I was sitting on the roof of the Bushmaster when we drove over an IED. The blast gave me a traumatic brain injury, and damaged my back, among other damage. When I came home I couldn't read any better than my seven year old. I had trouble writing my own name. I would lose my car, it wasn't a case of: "what level did I leave it on?" Rather: "how did I get here?" I live in constant pain and still experience the effects of Traumatic Brain Injury.

I came back and it was a very long process. The Army gave me almost three years to recover and it took all of that. I was working with an occupational therapist at the Ryde Brain Injury Centre for a long time. I don't retain information the way I used to, and I can't compute complex numbers any more. I did a lot of rehabilitation, at the end of it the Army (to their credit), said they may be able to find me a job counting paper clips somewhere (figuratively speaking). Eventually I accepted that I was never going to be a Commando again; I was never going to be a fire-fighter again. Once I did that, and with a lot of help from Defence Care and Soldier On, I was able to move on.

I would definitely be an alcoholic if it wasn't for my wife. It has been really tough on her and our kids. All PTSD sufferers can have a real negative effect on their family, and I was no exception. When you suppress your emotions, the only one you can feel is anger, and I know in the past I was very hard to live with. But they are resilient and I am better. I believe I am living proof that you can recover from mental wounds if you get the right treatment.



My story is not unusual. It is a very common story. The sort of events I have talked about is a normal day over there. The only unusual part of my story is that I was lucky to get good treatment and good family support. Most of the young Diggers out there now are in their early 20s and they don't have that support. Nobody is helping them.

