The important things
Bell

I had no photo training or anything. I just went to see the Commanding Officer and I said, ‘Boss, can I be the unit photographer?’ And he went, ‘Can you take a photo?’ And I said, ‘Well, I’ve got a new camera!’

I’d seen some photographers in uniform getting around East Timor and the photos that were coming out were so powerful – images of these soldiers walking the streets with little, tiny kids in their hands. And I thought, ‘Wow, that would be an awesome job. That’s really saying something. That’s really showing families back home what it’s like for us here.’ I aspired to get into the Army Public Relations Service but it wasn’t going to be easy. The culture for army photographers at that time was ‘infantry male’. And you had to be a corporal. I was female and a private and I’d been in the army for all of twelve months…

I was born in Tenterfield, New South Wales. My family were Salvation Army and we lived in lots of different places. I was nineteen when I joined up. Dad said, ‘Don’t join the army, that’s crazy. What about the wars?’ And I said, ‘Australia hasn’t gone anywhere since Vietnam, don’t worry about it.’ Six months later I was in East Timor when the big conflict occurred in ’99. It was mind-boggling. Everyone was unprepared for it and I was so young and so new and I’d never left Australia before.

We were peacekeepers but we were deployed under war-like circumstances. It was a very fine line between peace enforcing and peace keeping, especially in the beginning. How do I explain it? You carry a fully loaded weapon at all times. There’s always, you know, two people together. There’s a whole kind of armed defence around everything.

I was with Ammunition Platoon. We had boxes and boxes of rockets and grenades and bullets and our job was to basically keep it safe, catalogue it, and send it out. We also took control of all the confiscated weapons. We had shipping containers lined up in our compound just chockers full of militia contraband. Really horrific, brutal homemade weaponry. It was pretty tense. In Australia, the ammunition magazines which hold your ammo are kept far away in empty spaces and bunkers. In Timor, we were inside the same compound as the ammo; we were sleeping on boxes of grenades. And it’s so hot there and the ammo shouldn’t be exposed to heat like that, so it was very stressful. But – and this probably sounds strange – it was kind of boring too. You’re on alert, the ‘enemy’s’ out the gates, but you’re sitting in the same spot day after day. It’s ordinary and huge, both at the same time.

Six months later, you come home and you’re trying to keep the experience real but you’re also trying to merge in again with everybody back home. It’s hard. You’ve been with these poor people in this Third World country who don’t have anything; who’ve lost everything and it makes you want to appreciate the things you have. You don’t want to waste your life or feel that you’re selfish: you’ve got cold beer in the fridge; you’ve got hot water. But when you come home, it feels like everyone takes things for granted. It’s almost like people are naive or totally out of touch with what’s really going on. I know it’s not fair to impose our experiences onto their nice, peaceful little world back here in Australia, but you get impatient. It drove me ‘round the bend to hear Australians complain about their life, particularly older people. It just drove me bonkers and I thought, ‘You’ve got no idea of what life is for other people.’ The frustration level can be
so high at times – you go to the shops and get so annoyed with people dawdling along and carrying on like wombats. Then you have a beer with a mate who was in East Timor with you and you go, ‘Jeez, I hate going to the shops: I hate the crowds.’ And they would understand exactly, ‘Yeah, tell me about it.’ And you find out it’s been the same for them. And then, I’d drink more beer and so it goes.

I wasn’t a drinker until I joined the army. After the first couple of months in Dili, you’d get two beers per day, per man, mostly. Dili was the ‘safe area’ and that’s what you were allowed. So, every day I wasn’t on duty, I’d be thinking, ‘I can have two beers tonight.’ It’s your reward basically. And after a while some of us would be doing anything to make those two beers, four beers. You’re swapping tickets and stuff like that. It’s like you’ve earned it or something.

I came back to Australia with the idea that drinking was the way to do business and everybody does it, right? It isn’t that you’re an alcoholic but to not have a couple of beers a day annoys you. You don’t realise that you’re putting it first above everything else. I see it as more of an addiction but to not have a couple of beers a day annoys you. You don’t realise that you’re putting it first above everything else. I see it as more of an addiction now and that’s what you were allowed. So, every day I wasn’t on duty, I’d be thinking, ‘I can have two beers tonight.’ It’s your reward basically. And after a while some of us would be doing anything to make those two beers, four beers. You’re swapping tickets and stuff like that. It’s like you’ve earned it or something.

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I was very focused on becoming a photographer. I set my mind to that, got my skills up and started writing some articles for the army newspaper. Eventually after some work experience with them, I got a position, got my promotion and then went into the Public Relations Service, which was just phenomenal; it’s the best job in the defence force. You deploy around the world chasing soldiers, taking photos, telling people what it’s really like and all the time you’re thinking, ‘Wow, in twenty years time, these pictures will be on the wall in the War Memorial and people will be coming in and going, “Oh, this is what the troopers were like then”…’ Pretty cool stuff.

Over the next four years I went back to Timor once and to places like Bougainville and the Solomon Islands. And then on Boxing Day 2004, I got a call from the boss.

I was standing in the Canberra Zoo with Kerry, my partner, looking at Sumatran tigers. At that stage I wasn’t deploying anywhere because I only had another six weeks to serve – I had decided to go for a discharge so I could do a graphic design course. The boss told me that there’d been a tsunami and he couldn’t find anyone else to go. We didn’t know much at that stage but we thought it would be a short trip: I’d jump into a Herc, fly over to Colombo, drop a pallet of aid, take pictures of it, get back to Darwin and continue with my plans. I packed enough for a couple of days: my toothbrush, my camera kit and I was out the door.

From the time we took off in the Herc it was clear that things were developing quickly. We’d gone from a team of five and a pallet of medical supplies, to picking up a whole medical team and all their stores in Brisbane. In Darwin, there was more news. The tsunami was much, much bigger than anyone had thought.

...your family are now the friends who were with you when you were away. And your real family have got no idea what’s going on for you anyway. You’re back, so they think you’re okay.
We were now heading for Medan in Sumatra. By the time we got there for the briefing, the footage of the tsunami was everywhere.

I’m in the foyer of this big five star hotel and there are these big screens all around us, with images of people getting washed away by water: dead people, houses, dogs. This wasn’t one town or something: this was eleven countries; the whole Indian Ocean. By the time we take off for Banda Aceh, it’s a crisis response. It’s huge. People need our help. The videographer and I would be doing reconnaissance imagery to help brief Canberra as well as following our PR brief to capture Australian personnel working with the Indonesians.

As we fly towards Aceh, I’m strapped to the doors of the C130 Herc looking through the window. The water’s nice and crystal clear and then all of a sudden, it turns to chaos. You’ve got dark water; you’ve got debris all through it. You can see trees and bodies in trees and this is still the ocean. We haven’t even got over land yet.

I’m zoomed in on my lens, watching the seascape go by with one eye and then, picking things out with the other. The bodies are face down in the water, their arms and legs splayed out like they’re a frog on the cutting table. And I’m thinking, ‘Oh that’s not on a television. That’s really people in the water.’ And then all of a sudden, there’s land below but there’s nothing on it. There’s a house here and a house there but everything’s gone: silent, empty mud. There’s nothing. It’s just all gone. It’s so empty and it’s so still and then I see that it’s not just this little bit below us. It’s all the way down the coast: the magnitude is revealing itself. And we keep going lower, lower and lower and the next minute we’re over rice fields and we’re landing on an airfield.

You’re out the back door of the Hercules and no one is sure what to do. ‘Guys just get off and wait for further instruction.’ So the door comes down and that kind of tropical smell hits you. It’s that musky, sweet tropics smell and you’ve smelt this before...

Normally what would happen now is you’d be carrying a weapon with you because you’re landing in a situation that might require some security. So you’d normally be checking your weapons, making sure everything’s right, getting all your kit together. You’d be busy. But we were doing nothing; we’ve got nothing with us anyway. And there was no other aircraft at that point. Looking out across the airfield, we can see that we’re the first ones to get in there. We’re in Banda Aceh.

The only other people are the thousands of locals sitting on the grass over near this little regional terminal building. I see them and I know, all those people, they think we’ve come for them. They want a rescue right out of there. They start talking amongst themselves and getting up to come over and see if they can get on our plane.

Next minute, the Indonesian military and Indonesian police appear out of nowhere and head them off at the pass. They say, ‘It’s not for you. Go away, go and sit back on your grass.’ I started to get a real sense of the emotion in the place and it was scary stuff.

That’s when this little lady from the International Organisation for Migration rocked up in a ute with this local bloke. She spoke English, which was good because at that point no one we’d found had spoken English. She’s come to take us down to crisis headquarters and she’s handing out these facemasks, surgical facemasks to stop the stench and she doesn’t have enough so the videographer and I being soldiers and not officers, and being the hardened PR corporals that we are, we said, ‘Oh, don’t worry about us. We’ll be fine, you know.’ But she said, ‘You need it; in town it’s indescribable.’
She just looked so tired. She had gumboots on that were huge and she looked completely worn out and I asked her how she was doing and she said, ‘I’m exhausted, but I’m alive.’ And then she says that she’d just been down to the morgue and I hear her saying, ‘We’ve got no space but we’re trying to find people before they move them out to the mass graves; before they bloat too much so we can recognise them.’ And I say, ‘Oh yeah, cool, no worries...’ It’s like all this information’s coming in but the reality isn’t sinking in. I’m hearing it and my head’s spinning and I’m thinking that this is really heavy. And how can I go in there and expose myself to those things? I’m thinking, ‘I’ve got a life to go on with in Australia. This is going to hurt me.’ It was like I was being given a big challenge and a chance to change my life and I just did not know if I wanted to take it.

About six or seven of us piled into this little 800cc Mazda ute. It’s burning hot; there’s nowhere to stand. I’ve got my feet perched up on the top near the roof and I’m up front so I can take the pictures because, you know, that’s what I’m there to do. And everyone’s got their nice facemasks on and the mood was... brace yourself. And we start to move off and I’m thinking, ‘Here we go.’

We drove past the mass graves and the bodies, mostly wrapped in sheets, bloating on the side of the road and the bulldozers rolling the bodies forward into ditches and the terrible smell that was everywhere. And the little woman keeps warning us of what’s ahead. And then there’s smoke over the trees, not too far in front and the woman says, ‘They’re burning the children.’ And I said, ‘Oh yeah, right, no worries.’ So I get the camera ready and we turn a corner and there’s piles of bodies: smaller kids, bigger kids and they’re trying to sort them out and there are adults, possibly relatives, looking amongst them.

And so it went on like that. It was chaos. More and more: debris and bodies and traumatised people. I tried to take it day by day, muddle through...
I should take my two weeks leave but complete my discharge first, ‘And before you go, make sure you see the psych.’

The session with the psych was a tick and flick questionnaire. Did anything over there disturb you? Yes. Did at any time you feel your life was in danger? Yes. Is there anything you want to talk about? Yes. But there was no real talking or debriefing. He didn’t ask if anything had happened since I left that would make me worry about myself. Or if I’d done anything that was weird. If he had, I could’ve told him something and I’m sure he would’ve gone, ‘Oh, that’s something that’s probably going to need some attention.’ But he didn’t ask.

I would have told him that on the plane home, somebody gave me a steak for a meal and I just lost it. Like I saw burnt kids straight away, smelt them, the whole bit like a flashback. It’s not abnormal to have vivid reminders after a big trauma, I know, but I think it’s probably a good sign that maybe some follow-up could help. I went ahead with my discharge and looking back, this was not such a clever idea. I should have delayed and stayed in the army for six months just to process the trauma in a familiar environment. I was losing a big piece of my identity and struggling with a trauma. All at once. It might be that Aceh on its own was enough for me to struggle on my return to Australia. But it’s also possible that Timor set me up for it and Aceh was the straw that broke the camel’s back.

My partner Kerry and I had only been together for a year and, you know, our relationship was pretty sweet for the first year. She noticed the differences in me when I came back: the depression and the edginess. I was jumpy, sometimes aggressive, withdrawn and with a kind of numbness. A lot of numbness. I found it really hard to connect even with the person I loved the most. Like, rightly so, Kerry’s going, ‘Hang on, this isn’t nice. I don’t like where this is going.’ And I’m saying, ‘I don’t like it either but I don’t know what to do about it.’

There were nightmares and dreams. Constantly stressed, constantly wired, constantly depressed. Just always battling with life. I think that after something like Aceh, nothing else can get you excited anymore. Nothing else is interesting anymore; nothing else feels as intense and therefore it’s not as meaningful. But everything feels so hard. You just want a normal life and you don’t know what the problem is; you don’t realise how much energy is going into fighting to have a normal day.

I started the design course but it didn’t go so well. Coming off an experience like Aceh and going into a classroom with young people was frustrating. I’m used to the army and in the army you’re there on time: you don’t wander in late; you respect your teacher; you don’t use your mobile in class; you don’t rock out whenever you feel like it. I was going home every day and saying, ‘People are just f***ing stupid… they have no idea.’ Absolute frustration. And then I would start drinking. I was self-medicating, I know that now. You dull off emotions that you should probably be feeling and learning how to deal with – that’s nearly verbatim from my counsellor anyway!
About four months after I started my course, Kerry got offered a job in Melbourne and we decided to move. That was huge: a new city; our relationship still quite new; leaving the army; walking away from the course I’d discharged specifically to do. And things got very, very bad. She’s been loving me, and supporting me but she got to the point where she’d say, ‘I can’t do this. I can’t live with you like this anymore. I want out. If you can’t turn this around, I have to leave you because it’s too hard.’ And that would scare me. I’d say to her that it wasn’t my fault. I’d say, ‘I didn’t ask for this, I don’t want this. But for some reason I can’t stop it.’ You feel like an idiot that you’re not coping… You feel stupid because it’s not like you went to war and someone shot at you. For goodness sake, I wasn’t even in Aceh when the wave came in. And so you think that you shouldn’t really complain. Almost a year after I left the army, I was referred to VVCS and that’s been instrumental in helping me process the experiences in Aceh and put it in a positive place.

I think the hardest thing is mostly linked to feeling so isolated by what you’ve experienced: isolated from friends, family and the community. But for anyone in the forces, that isolation starts early, right from the first day. Way before you ever go away...

There are things that families don’t understand about what soldier training does to you. You’re a normal kid off the street – and most of us are kids – and they line you up and they say, ‘Right, you’re no longer a civilian. You’re now a soldier in the Australian Army.’ And in that minute on, you are different to everybody else. You end up thinking you’re somehow better than people who haven’t trained like you. You’re not conscious of it but in your mind you’re going, ‘Oh you’re just a civvy, what would you know?’

It’s not so much an elitist thing as a ‘separate’ thing. It’s such a typical trait of defence people. It’s a tone, not arrogance but an undercurrent: ‘How could you possibly understand – you’re a civvy?’ We don’t realise that it started the day we got off the bus and they said, ‘Recruit, form up.’ That’s the day we start thinking that being a recruit is more important than being anyone else. And that’s kind of ridiculous in terms of how that can affect your ongoing relationships with other people.

I don’t knock the defence system. I still think it was the best thing I ever did but I just think that we need better education for people in the forces and their families. My family would benefit so much by having someone sit down and explain to them what a soldier is trained to think. How they are now a different person. That they’re taught how to deal with aggression differently, taught how to deal with leadership and control differently, taught different ways of getting esteem. Families need to know: ‘This person doesn’t use the same tools that you do anymore to feel okay about their existence. We’ve changed all that. We’ve given them a structure, a ladder to climb on and this is how they’re thinking now.’ I believe it would help families to know it, but nobody tells them.

My family leads a very different life to me and they have a different way of viewing the world. Anything bad generally happens close in their community like a bushfire or to someone’s kid driving off the highway at night. Their kinds of tragedies are not like the ones I’ve seen. I’ve been with people that they know nothing about. So why should I expect them to understand me? Just because they’re family? Who am I to say, ‘You need to switch on and get the idea of what it’s like to be me?’ It’s only this year that I’ve been able to let go of that expectation.

Disconnection is inevitable, physically and emotionally. It’s rare that you’re posted to the same town as your family. You’re all over Australia and you have these competing priorities and when you do, your service comes first. It’s as simple as that. Time to spend with your family is reduced a lot and before you know it, they’ve moved on to other areas of their lives. They’ve missed things that you’ve experienced but you’ve missed things of theirs too.

While you’ve been away, they’ve gone through life-changing events too: maybe it’s getting pregnant or having a miscarriage or maybe someone died. Our life takes us to very different places yet we still want to have the same closeness that we had when we lived under the same roof.

The best bet for me was to get formal counselling. I learnt there was no way that Kerry could possibly be the support that I needed. As much as she wanted to be or I wanted her to be, she couldn’t. It takes more than love to work somebody through what I’ve been through: it takes a totally different set of skills. She’s
loving me and supporting me but it would be like a podiatrist trying to help someone with diabetes.

We’re doing some couples counselling at the moment because communication is a big issue and there’s also an age gap so we’ve got different experiences and we’re at different stages of our lives. Throw PTSD and the military service into that mix and it becomes a whole new ballgame.

There have been so many stressors over the past couple of years but it is starting to pan out now. I got into uni down here and the course I ended up doing was better and at a higher level than the one I left. I got my degree, Kerry got her job and because I couldn’t cope with a normal nine to five job, I’ve started a photographic business. And it’s going really well. It’s got me out of the house, it’s got me to reconnect with people and I wouldn’t give it up for quids. I’m doing some cognitive thinking work with my counsellor too. I’m trying to change my structure and my self-talk. I’ve cut my drinking down by half and I’m trying to get motivated about nutrition and fitness, though I still struggle with that immensely. I’ve learnt now to try and give myself a break and say, ‘I don’t have to be perfect. I don’t have to make every decision the right decision. I’ll do my best, that’s all.’

I honestly don’t know why Kerry has stayed with me. It’s been a long, hard road and it’s not over yet. Kerry knows that PTSD can flare up any time. She’s looking into the future and asking herself, ‘Do I want to be with someone who may go down this road again? I can’t do that again. This has cost us too much.’ So, I guess she’s got some pretty big choices to make when you look at it like that.

I’m grateful that it has made things important that should be important. I’ll be drawing from it for the rest of my life.

Kerry (partner)

I’m not saying I’m perfect and you do learn to deal with it but you also think, ‘When is this going to end?’

When I met Bell, I met this vivacious, this energised, creative bundle of energy who was in the zone with her photography. And what attracted me to her was the creativity coming out of her; the work she was doing at that time was just amazing.

I met her at Fairday; that’s a gay and lesbian event, like a giant fetes. I was there on a stall helping out a friend and I spotted Bell, standing with her camera. I couldn’t stop staring at her. I thought she was so cute. I’d been single for five years at that stage and I am extremely shy when it comes to meeting people and particularly someone I’m attracted to. So I got friends to help and they coached me in what to say because you know, I was so completely out of my depth and tongue-tied and stuttery and we met up at a dance that night and we hooked up after that.

It was a few months after she left the army, when we moved to Melbourne, that the PTSD behaviour really manifested. It was the way she would speak to me. She was very hard. And very angry. And she would often say to me, ‘Oh just harden up.’ That’s a typical military term really. And I would just say to her, ‘Please don’t say that to me, it hurts my feelings. I don’t like it.’ But she would keep repeating it and repeating it and we were going around in circles.

I noticed the drinking at that time too. Before then, I hadn’t really seen it as a problem. But then we bought this house together and so there was also the stress of the financial burden and then the new business and it all came down. I think the move to Melbourne hastened the PTSD. It might have lain dormant in Bell for years but because we put all these other stressors in there, it came out. And if you think about it from a positive perspective, it’s actually a good thing that it happened then; that it happened so soon after the tsunami.

Bell would often bring information home: pamphlets and videos and things for me; counselling had mainly been her thing. I was
working these big jobs and I wasn’t really available. I wasn’t there for Bell and I feel really guilty about that. Last year, I went on my own for some counselling with VVCS. I only went for six sessions and the counsellor told me, ‘I think we’re done here’ and I’m like, ‘Oh no, I don’t think so.’ I think she didn’t know what to do with me. There’s often a lack of understanding around gay couples; things aren’t addressed because they don’t know how to address them. They don’t have the resources. But I have a great counsellor now and we have her as long as we need her. I go for a weekly session and Bell and I go as a couple fortnightly as well. The counsellor is amazing.

Bell is a person who needs to talk things through and it’s part of her healing. She’s an awesome communicator; she verbalises whereas I’m probably on the other end of the spectrum. I have an auditory processing disorder. I was born hearing but I was deaf by the time I was six and even though it was repaired, it means that I learnt how to process things differently. So while Bell is really quick and moves on, I take a bit longer. I tend to think about things in my head and talk to myself in my head. She might ask me a question and I’ll answer it inside and think she’s heard it. So now we’ve learnt to say: ‘Say it out loud.’

For a long time it was so tough and very dark and we were both asking ourselves, ‘Why are we doing this? We’re fighting all the time.’ It would have been so easy to walk away because neither of us understood the behaviour. Now I can understand more. I can recognise a PTSD moment.

We have always tried to talk and we can be brutally honest with each other. I might say, ‘I didn’t sign up for this’ – but then, obviously neither did Bell. We take it day by day. I just keep going back to the Bell I met. We often talk about the ‘Bell Before’ and the ‘Bell Afterwards’ and I know that person is still in there. I also know that I’ve been lost along the way as well.

We catch a glimpse sometimes. Recently, it happened. We looked at each other and it was like... ‘Oh, there you are!’