



The Military Experience and Mental Health: Understanding the nexus

Tom's story – Part one

Tom (38 years old) has been married to Sonia for 13 years and they have been in a relationship since secondary school. They live in a small regional town close to Townsville, Queensland, with their two young children, Jack, six years, and Stacey, 18 months.

Tom's father drank heavily and died of liver failure when Tom was 15 years old. His mother died of breast cancer three years later. Tom always felt that Sonia's family was 'his family'; he'd always had way more respect for Sonia's father, Bruce, than he ever had for his own father. Bruce spent his career in the Army and Tom wanted to follow in his footsteps. So, upon completing Year 12 in 1995, Tom joined the Army as an infantry soldier and deployed to East Timor. He enjoyed this initial deployment and felt vindicated that he'd made the right career choice: *"I really felt part of a team, on a mission for the country. I felt proud, real proud. A purpose is good, and we sure had one"*. Tom forged some strong friendships during this deployment. He found mates who made him feel good and inspired him to be a better man. They were *"mates for life"*.

Tom's next two deployments were to the Middle East with the last one being in late 2014. Tom missed Sonia and the kids when he was deployed. Coming home was always *"just brilliant at first. It'd be real intense with Sonia for the first week or so, in a good way. She'd never ask what I had been through. Or seen. And I sure didn't want to talk about any of it. It must have been the same for her with her Dad so I figured she understood. But after I'd been home a couple of days things would always go downhill . . . I dunno, I just couldn't seem to find a place in my family anymore"*.

Tom sustained a severe ligamentous ankle injury during his last deployment for which he was medically downgraded. He has spent the last year doing administrative work on the base but finds this work

frustrating and surprisingly exhausting. Since the medical downgrade, Tom has been maintaining his fitness by going regularly to the local gym. The gym gives him respite from the kids: *"I love them, I really do, but sometimes they just drive me crazy. When Stacey cries, it takes me back to Afghanistan. I can't tell Sonia 'cos she'd get so upset, but I've heard that crying before and it wasn't good"*.

Tom's Australian Defence Force doctor says he is unlikely to get any more functional improvement from rehabilitation as the ankle injury has led to secondary impacts to his knee and back and that it may be time to think about a medical discharge. Tom felt shattered by this. He couldn't fathom a life outside of the military. He couldn't talk to his mates about it because they were being regularly deployed. Tom had never felt as alone and useless as he did now. If he kept busy during the day, he could hold the irritability and nervousness at bay, but at night he couldn't shake it. Occasionally, he'd take one of Sonia's sleeping pills. On other nights he'd have just one too many drinks to help calm him. Nothing to worry about he'd tell himself: *"I'm not going to end up like my old man"*.

Tom and Sonia have been spending less and less time together: *"All Sonia wants to do is talk about things. She calls it negotiation; I call it a waste of time"*. Sonia has been spending more time with her family in the house she grew up in. Tom avoids going with her because he feels ashamed of himself and can't make eye contact with Bruce. Despite Bruce not saying anything, Tom is convinced that he has disappointed him.

As the weeks progressed, Tom had a strong sense that he was in a bubble and that bubble was going to burst. He didn't know how or why or when, but he felt ready to explode. And one day Sonia suggested: *"If you won't speak to me, why don't you make an appointment with an Open Arms counsellor who specialises in military personnel?"*, and Tom thought, *"What have I got to lose?"*