

A Solid Partner

An Australian Point of View

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I thought I would write an article similar to "the Old Screw" to tell what 20 years in Australian Corrections has done to me, my wife and family. She has been a solid partner. Unfortunately, I cannot say I have been the same to her or my children.

I have just retired prematurely, diagnosed with PTSD from an incident 12 years ago that, if recognized at the time, I could have sought help for. I now know it can grab anyone at any time at any place. No one is shielded from this horrific illness. Those who survive are those who seek help as soon as possible and work with the helpers. It is those who cannot or choose not to access that help that I now read as headline news in the Press. Admitting my illness and then taking the decision to ask for help is the hardest thing I have ever done. It is also one of the best decisions I have ever made. It takes a strong man (or woman) to recognize and admit to themselves that they need help instead of blaming others. I do not feel lesser of a man for asking for help. In fact I think it has made me a stronger person and definitely a happier person.

The summer day was bright, crisp and cloudless. Although the Parade Ground looked so small, I stood there with pride as my wife of 10 years watched on with our two small children as I was presented with the Dux of Course award on the final day of training at the South Australian Academy for Corrections. No thought entered my mind about how strenuous it was going to be for my family over the next 20 years wondering if I was going to come home safe and well; if I was going to ignore them because I had a crappy day; if I was going to retreat into a bottle of beer for the night feeling sorry for myself at having a prisoner win one over me; or if I was going to snap at every remark my wife or kids made because the daily exposure of working "behind the wire" made me more and more act like an inmate.

No. This was one of the best days of my life. I was the best. I was top of the class of 1990!!

Now, 20 years later, I sit here in early retirement, ashamed of myself for being a harsh partner and father. For being self-centered. For being secretive about my worries and not confiding in them for support. For keeping them at arm's length and keeping them out of my inner world. I feel no sense of pride for coming home in a bad mood, sometimes injured, often tired, occasionally feeling unappreciated for doing a solid day's work, angry because a roster was changed by a Supervisor who favoured a "mate" to a softer post, scared and distant towards them after being treated as a perpetrator and not as a justice administrator. Sometimes I felt like I had done something wrong, when in fact all I did was go to work, putting in my 12 hours at 100% (and some).

On days like these I'd go home expecting a champagne reception each time. Did I ever ask

about their worries? No. I was too set in the “grizzly old Screw” mentality. Me first, second and always.

But now I have just completed 20 years working in a negative industry that gave me no skills whatsoever to cope with the emotional strain I was to put my family through. I have other skills, other knowledge, but none to make me a better person outside the wire, or to my family. I now have to be “re-programmed.” Luckily I have found the means.

Not once did I ask my family what they thought of my chosen career. Not once did I listen when my wife said, “Don’t talk to us like one of your prisoners” or “Do you know how badly you speak to us lately?” or “Why won’t you listen to us?”

Through this, I am still married to a great wife, who gave me two fantastic boys and who has stood by me through thick and thin. This is what I call a solid partner. Yes, we have had our disagreements (let’s not pull punches. . . they were loud verbal fights) and hours of a strained atmosphere in the house. But 29 years of marriage has beaten 20 years of Corrections.

I am an Australian-born British Army veteran who served in the finest regiment in the British Army, the Coldstream Guards; who was once a leader of fighting men in action; a respected non-commissioned officer; a Queen’s Guard who shone on duty at the palaces for the tourists to photograph; someone who always looked after his men and always sided with the underdog; the one who always came out of battle smiling, ready to go do it again the next day and the next and the next, whenever asked. Never complaining; never questioning. But today I feel beaten. Not by an adversary in physical battle or in a battle of whits, but beaten by a system that has failed me. A system that needs new direction and one which needs to listen to more people like “The old Screw” instead of “bean counters.” In the end, Staff are a more valuable asset than the financial “bottom line.”

And yet, although feeling beaten in some aspects, I feel a sense of achievement for what I have gained in the past, both in the military and in Corrections. Attaining the positions of leadership. Making hard decisions that have saved subordinates from injury. Making myself available for anyone who wanted a shoulder to cry on. Starting initiatives that have forged the birth of an organization that helps Correctional Staff in times of crisis. The awards and letters of recognition for bravery, courage and dedication are nice to reflect on, but really are hollow compared to a colleague who just says, “Thank you for just being you, mate.”

But as much as I cherish those thoughts, I feel that I am responsible for letting my family down. It was my choice to enter the world of Corrections, not theirs. It was my choice to let myself be dragged down to a lower level of caring when I should have separated work from home. I just was never shown that there was an alternative choice to make apart from the one I took in those 20 years.

This first week in retirement has not given me a sense of joy at what lies ahead. Instead, it is

giving me joy to know that I am responding to help from others. Help to learn how to leave the negatives behind. Help to think more positively. Help to leave my poor attitude behind. Help to leave the withdrawal from my family behind. Help to regain the unquestionable love and devotion I once had for my family.

Now I have to learn how to treat my wife and family like I should have done long ago. Now is not too late to ask for forgiveness and for me to give back **to** them what I had so many times demanded **from** them. The one thing above all unconditional love and respect. Now in retirement I have some "firsts" to achieve.

- My first goal ... "To revert to the past person who my wife married and who my kids first called Dad."
- My first lesson to learn ... "The glass is now always half full, not half empty."
- My first observation to make... "It doesn't matter how tough you think you are, it is not a sign of weakness to ask for help."
- My first promise to make ... "To realize that there are always people far worse off than I thought I ever was."
- My first hope to wish for... "That I be forgiven for my past failures and be remembered for trying my best."