

"For a while at Westmead, he was awake and responding but wasn't there," says Renee. "Even when we had him eating, he was completely vacant. Soon the neurological agitation started to fade. When that settled, he started to calm down and come out of it. Once I gave him a kiss at Westmead and he pushed back, and that was good – he knew who I was."

Wilson threw himself into rehabilitation in the same way he'd launched himself at Special Forces selection. He hated the hospital – its cloying, cloistered life. The goal was getting back to Afghanistan. Faced with the realisation he'd never again be in battle, Wilson's mood darkened.

"When he didn't get better as quickly as he liked, Gary started saying, 'Nothing's working, I've had enough,'" says Renee. "He'd get angry and wouldn't let anyone help him."

Renee tried everything she could to support her broken fiancé. She brought in friends and family but that only improved his mood for a few hours.

Says Wilson of that time: "I was just so angry. I was thinking, 'Living or dying, what's the point?'"

Before landing in Afghanistan, Australian soldiers are given a psychological briefing. Once there, Psychology Support Teams are available to counsel soldiers demonstrating symptoms of PTSD. There are also post-operation psychology screenings – though most soldiers say they know how to pass these, regardless of their actual mental state.

What's more, the take up of such support networks is low and it's been suggested these can only be effectual if coupled with a military culture that recognises combat stress, depression and PTSD as legitimate injuries.

According to a 2010 study on the Mental Health Prevalence and Wellbeing of Australian Defence Force (ADF) members, "data suggests that less than two per cent of Australian soldiers have developed PTSD following operational deployment."

Given that PTSD among civilians runs at more than double that number, the ADF report suggests a serious lack of solid diagnosis.

Dion Pretorius, Head of Communications for Soldier On, an independent charity supporting Australian veterans of modern wars, says it's likely there are far more soldiers and ex-soldiers with psychological issues than being reported.

"With PTSD, there's a lot of depression, and anger towards Defence – fair or not – and

that means a lot of soldiers simply won't come forward and ask for help," says Pretorius.

One reason for such reluctance is soldiers not wanting to identify as suffering PTSD symptoms. A quarter of the study's respondents said they wouldn't ask for help if they were suffering mental health issues, due to fear of being treated differently, or that it might negatively impact their career in the ADF.

Asked how they monitor the psychological health of returned servicemen and women who have cleared post-operational screenings, the ADF media department claimed the military "encourages individuals to monitor their own mental health and that of their colleagues and subordinates, and provide information on the various support services available to ADF personnel and their families."

This, essentially, places the onus on soldiers and their families to make sure they themselves ask for psychological help.

That's exactly what Renee did when Wilson's anger and despair reached an unmanageable level, when the soldier would no longer accept help from those trying to rehabilitate him.

"I started to worry when Gary stopped doing the work the doctors were trying to get him to do. Instead, he'd just get angry," says Renee. It was at this point she resolved to have her husband see a counsellor.

"Pre-crash, I wouldn't have any faith in psychologists," says Wilson. "But Renee kept saying to people, 'Gary needs a psych.' I didn't want to though. I didn't think I needed help."

For Wilson to agree, Renee had to show an example of someone who'd come through the darkness, someone who'd made it to the other side. She first approached another of the crash survivors, organising for him to visit Gary in hospital, but, again, it only lifted his mood in the short-term.

"I needed someone a little further along," says Renee. So through a friend of Gary's in the same unit, she approached former Special Forces and fellow wounded soldier, Damien Thomlinson, who was carving a rather legendary path of recovery.

"The deeper we got into Afghanistan, the more acceptable it became to talk about depression and anger, but still the hardest guy to convince that you have combat stress, is the guy with combat stress," says Thomlinson, who many say has the dubious distinction of being the most injured Australian soldier since Vietnam.

In 2009, a vehicle he was in drove over a roadside bomb, the explosion shredding his legs, breaking both arms and leading to reconstructive facial surgery. He also sustained brain damage and has little



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memory of the incident, despite being awake for much of it.

"Maybe the memories are locked in there somewhere, not yet ready to come out," says Thomlinson.

After the accident, he too felt anger about the hand he'd been dealt. It quickly turned to a vengeful resolve. Despite being told he had no chance of further deployment, Thomlinson was convinced he'd become the first double-amputee to re-enter a war zone.

"It's especially tough with the Special Forces because you have a lot of driven, goal-oriented alpha males, and you're going to have a tough time getting them off their targets, which is usually being the best soldier they can be.

"I felt I had to go back there, as soon as I could. I didn't love it – if you love war, you're a psychopath – but I wanted to get back to work because I loved the boys. When you're deployed, the bond between the guys shows the characteristics of a family, and I couldn't just leave them behind."

It took more than two years, without legs, for Thomlinson to realise he had to move on from the military and start a civilian life.

Today, he's part of the Paralympic squad training for this year's Sochi Winter Olympics, where he hopes to compete in the snowboarding events. He's also penned a memoir regarding his traumatic experiences, *Without Warning*.

When Renee called Thomlinson to explain her husband's situation, he was immediately keen to help.

"Visiting Gary, it all felt pretty familiar – the way he wouldn't accept things that people were telling him. I clashed with a lot of the rehab staff, and I think that happened with Gary, too," says Thomlinson. "We both love Defence, but I told him he had to do something outside the Defence mindset. I told him he had to do whatever was best for him. 'Choose your own staff. If your medical people aren't working, get new ones,' I said. 'You have to be in control now.'"

That conversation helped Wilson agree

to counselling – even though, internally, he remained resistant.

"He hated it when we started," recalls Renee. "He wouldn't talk to me afterwards." And she wasn't the only one Wilson was giving the silent treatment.

"The first session, they'd ask how I was, and I'd say 'fine'. I'd give one-word answers," says Wilson. "I wasn't going to give them anything. It was in the second session that something clicked, and I thought, 'There's something seriously wrong with me.' I saw what other people saw in me, nothing else – I was refusing treatment, and my attitude had become an obstacle to my own rehabilitation."

At the end of that session, Wilson thanked his wife for her patience and persistence.

"Seeing the improvement in Gary has been inspiring," says Thomlinson. "When I met him, he was pretty broken. It was hard to understand what he was saying. Now you see him and he's someone else."

In the three days *GQ* spent with Wilson and his wife, he was irrepressibly positive, confident and energetic.

"The doctor says he'll keep recovering for as long as he continues putting in the work," says Renee. "It's all about repetition."

"Repetition," echoes Wilson.

"Repetition," Renee reiterates, smiling in his direction.

Wilson remains with the ADF, set to transition to civilian life some point this year.

Gary Wilson (far right) and comrades from the Life Changing Train for Heroes in Alberta, Canada.



The pair then plan to settle down and start a family. Before that, Wilson's final, important piece of military work is to help devise and perform a collaborative theatre project with the Sydney Theatre Company (STC) and the ADF.

Based on successful British play *The Two Worlds of Charlie F* (which starred wounded Commonwealth servicemen and ran across Britain in 2012), *The Long Way Home* is currently in rehearsal and will debut as part of the STC's 2014 season.

Following the play, Wilson will study a Bachelor of Exercise and Rehabilitation in Canberra, to "work for guys who've been broken overseas."

"I was looking at doing psychology, until I realised how much maths was required," he says, laughing. "I always hated maths, and that's never going to change!"

A couple of hours before the train's arrival into Lake Louise in Alberta, we're drinking malty Canadian beer when Leverkusen starts talking sports. Hobbs joins in, conversation framed by the relative merits of the Argentine footballer Lionel Messi and American NFL player Peyton Manning. Soon, Leverkusen is discussing his sport of choice, sled hockey, gradually revealing some details of the incident that robbed him of his leg, and how luck played a role in his survival. Due to his position in the truck, Leverkusen lived. His co-driver was not as lucky. A rocket-propelled grenade that followed the initial IED explosion splashed lit fuel into the cabin, miraculously helping cauterise Leverkusen's leg wound.

Hobbs, perhaps reassured by his comrade's story, slowly, gently shares his own. He's midway through when his dad comes in and quietly sits down. Hobbs was in an armoured vehicle that was blown up. The explosion killed two of his mates. He survived by being thrown free from the gunner's position. It turns out he knew this was a possibility – he'd heard that gunners were often catapulted to safety.

Tears flow from all listening. More come when we arrive at our destination and again Lowe stands, on behalf of the soldiers and their families, to thank the Mountaineer staff.

"PTSD robs you of all the happiness in your life," says Lowe, self-consciously fiddling with the brim of his baseball cap. "But today, it felt like it all came rushing back." ■