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WHEN AUSTRALIAN SPECIAL FORCES SIGNALLER GARY WILSON AWOKE IN A DARKENED ROOM, BOUND TO A CHAIR, HE ASSUMED THE TALIBAN HAD TAKEN HIM PRISONER.

His last memory was being in the field, running for a Black Hawk helicopter. He remembered the operational planning – a short action at the tail end of the violent Shah Wali Kot Offensive – though he couldn't recall the operation itself. Or the flight.

Sig Wilson heard movement behind him – people working in the shadows. He didn't care to wait for whatever they had in mind. He untied the binds that held him and tried to run, but his legs failed. He put out his arms to arrest the fall, but they couldn't keep his face from smashing against the floor.

His mouth began filling with blood, and he tried to summon a string of expletives, though all words were lost. The only thing he could manage was a whimpering, mumbled "Ow".

The commotion drew the attention of one of the people working behind him – a diminutive woman in a nurse's uniform. In one easy motion she scooped the Special Forces soldier off the floor and onto a bed, as if he were a child.

No longer strongly built – a result of his usual physical training and high calorie rations – Wilson was a shadow of his former self, at a meagre 38kg. Nor was he in Afghanistan, rather, Sydney's Westmead Hospital. He'd been in a coma for more than two months – first at a coalition base in Kandahar, then at Germany's Landstuhl Regional Medical Centre, and then, finally, Sydney.

He'd been drifting in and out of consciousness for weeks. The muscles of his body and face agitated involuntarily, and when he did come to a point of sentience, Wilson's speech was largely non-existent, as was his strength. He'd sustained life-threatening head injuries and breaks to almost every part of the left side of his body.

As Wilson regained his strength, details of what occurred were slowly revealed. Whatever the military operation was – he's not at liberty to discuss it – it was over before it began.

As the Special Forces team flew out of Tarin Kot towards their objective, Afghanistan struck – not insurgent forces, but the country itself. The mission had ended in a helicopter crash, later deemed to be a pilot error.

Despite being momentarily awake after the accident before lapsing into a coma, Wilson has no memory of that flight, nor the moments immediately afterwards.

"It was my brain telling me I didn't want to know," he recalls.

If he could remember, he'd have observed a scene of both horror and bravery. Australian Privates Tim Aplin, Scott Palmer and Ben Chuck, alongside an American soldier – men Wilson calls "brothers by choice" – were lying dead or dying. Seven other Australians were wounded. Those able to, gave medical assistance, using a torn off helicopter panel as a makeshift stretcher.

While it would be months before he'd realise it, when machine met ground that day, north of Kandahar, Wilson was en route to what some soldiers label the "new normal".

Wilson's war was behind him. Now hot out of the kiln of battle, the months to follow would shape the rest of his young life.

There are mentions of post-combat mental maladies as far back as Ancient Grecian scripts, but it wasn't until the 20th century that such symptoms were collectively grouped and given a name.

During World War I, mental incapacity due to combat experiences became known as "shell shock", something many at the time thought was due to physical suffering and not psychological trauma.

In World War II, "shell shock" became "post-trauma concussion state", but again, it was barely understood. Only after the start of the Vietnam War did the modern understanding of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) begin to form.

The far-reaching problems of PTSD are now well-known. It's been more than 40 years since the last Australian soldiers left Vietnam, but the mental health issues from that war remain. Men who fought in Vietnam are far more likely to encounter mental issues and the related illnesses of alcoholism and drug addiction. Meanwhile, a report from the American Centre for Disease Control last year found that Vietnam veterans are the most likely American subgroup to commit suicide.

We first meet Gary Wilson in Vancouver, at the start of the Life Changing Train for Heroes – a charity journey for wounded soldiers and families sponsored by the luxurious Rocky Mountaineer rail company. Arriving at the Vancouver departure point via police-escorted motorcade, the public attention is overwhelming, hundreds of Canadians, Americans, Brits and Aussies turning out in the misty dawn to cheer the departure of the train. Then there's the local press, who queue for grabs from the soldiers, footage of the children's choir, the bagpipers, and the effortlessly quotable Rocky Mountaineer CEO, Randy Powell.

"As a company that creates life-changing experiences," says Powell, "we thought this could be an opportunity to give back to those whose lives have been so affected by war."

It's a rousing speech but not everyone's OK with such praise and glory.

"I'm just not comfortable with the word 'hero'," says Canadian infantryman John Lowe. "When I was in Afghanistan, a lot of the guys were just there to fuck shit up, and… I don't know… I have mixed feelings about some of the things people say about us."

Listening to the men's stories once the train starts rolling paints a fairly complete story of modern warfare. Lowe suffered PTSD after witnessing the deaths of a number of comrades. Fellow Canadian Paul Bornn's PTSD came after he served as part of the UN Protection Force that failed to prevent massacres in Bosnia. Texan Chris Leverkuhn lost a leg when his insufficiently-armoured fuel truck was attacked in Fallujah, Iraq. Aaron Hobbs, a 22-year-old Essex lad and former Queens Lancer, was blown up in an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) attack in the Afghan province of Helmand.

"You'll never get him talking about what happened," says Hobbs's father, Terry, over lunch on the first day. "Get him chatting about football and he'll talk your head off, but not what happened over there. Not ever."

As the train slowly works its way north-east towards Alberta, the families start to swap stories – not of war, but of the everyday, conversations intermittently interrupted by the train staff's tales of prospectors, tyrants, bears and salmon.

Australian Special Forces Signaller Gary Wilson.

We cross into Alberta the next day and by lunchtime start to see the first of the Rocky Mountains. American writer John Muir once wrote, "Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilised people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is necessity." It's hard to argue that there's not a calming and restorative effect in being in the mountains – especially majestic ones the size of these.

More than 29,000 male and female Australian soldiers have been deployed to Afghanistan since 2001. They landed in a myriad of difficult roles, though the most violent and extreme work fell to the 300-strong Special Operations Task Group (SOTG), Wilson's group, operating in Urozgan province.

According to Raspal Khosa, Research Fellow at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, the SOTG (raised from the Special Air Service Regiment, the 1st and 2nd Commando Regiments and the Special Operations Engineer Regiment) specialise in offensive missions, such as attacking Taliban transport and re-supply routes, destroying command and control capabilities, disruption and controversial "capture or kill" operations.

"If the Australian Special Forces had pulled out of Urozgan – which is a hugely important area, hinging three separate operational commands – there just wouldn't have been anyone to do that kind of work," says Khosa. "At this point, they're uniquely specialised and battle-hardened."

For much of the Afghan deployment, the two Commando Regiments were mostly used as regular infantry elements. When they transitioned to full-blown Special Forces work in 2007, it meant Australia had one of the largest "tribes" (as the Special Forces are widely known) in Afghanistan.

The men who served as part of the SOTG experienced a life-and-death battle for ascendancy in the Taliban heartland. More than 100 Special Forces soldiers have returned home injured, and nearly half the total Australian deaths in Afghanistan have come from the Task Group during the past six years.

Wilson walks with a limp, and his speech is slurred, to the point you could mistakenly assume he's been drinking. While the damage to his brain affects delivery, the content is fine.

Initially reluctant to talk to a journalist (he was once misrepresented in a tabloid article) Wilson eventually opens up over pancakes, bacon and coffee. His wit is obvious, and the only sign that something's amiss is when he occasionally forgets a fact, usually to have it picked up by wife Renee.

"I'm maybe 80 per cent," says Wilson, "My memory isn't great. Pre-accident is fine, but my memory post-accident is foggy."

Under-age at 17 when he enlisted, Wilson required a letter of approval from his mother. A restless kid from the northern Queensland town of Bundaberg, he signed up out of a sense of patriotic responsibility. Having had a few run-ins with the law, he was also keen to steer his future in a better direction.

In 2000, he was deployed to East Timor as a paratrooper. That experience – morphing his training to practical experience – prompted Wilson to be a better soldier, and to ultimately strive for Special Forces selection. A tremendous sense of pride was attached to the 2009 announcement that he was going to be deployed to Afghanistan as a commando.

"This was what I'd been training for. This is what I was working towards for years. As soon as we hit the ground [in Afghanistan], it was an eye-opener. The Afghan deployment is unlike any Australia has been involved in since Vietnam. It was cold and dusty, and I was thinking, 'When are we coming home?'" recalls Wilson. "I'd think about my goals: Do my job to the best of my abilities, help bring the guys home, come home, marry Renee."

Wilson met Renee in a Canberra pub in 2007, the pair arguing about tattoos. Renee thought they were for "dickheads"; Wilson was covered in them.

He proposed a week later. Renee assumed he was joking. He wasn't, and they married in 2011.

After the accident, and as soon as he was capable of such cognition, Wilson became desperate to return to Afghanistan. Doctors told him he'd never again be deployed as a soldier, but he refused to believe them.

"I was thinking, 'Fuck, I just lost four brothers,'" he says. "I wanted to go back, avenge their deaths, and finish their work."

Of all his injuries, the most concerning were to Wilson's head. Bruising to the brain threatened to kill him a number of times. When eventually he woke from his coma, the usually upbeat man suffered bouts of anger, confusion and despair. It lasted months.

Nor was his awakening what romantic comedies would have us believe. Rather than coming around with a jolt and a smile, he lived for weeks in a twilight state of consciousness and emptiness.