

Dark reality for troops caught up in conflict

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Frank Walker



Happier times: Geoff Evans, who has post-traumatic stress disorder, with his wife Lisa and children Emily and Monash. *Photo: Danielle Smith*

Every serviceman knows the moment they go to a defence force psychologist their military career is over, says Afghanistan veteran Geoff Evans.

"It shouldn't be that way, and Defence has worked hard to turn this attitude around, but it's the reality," said Mr Evans, who was medically discharged after being wounded during his second tour in 2011.

Mr Evans has post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a mental illness brought on by exposure to trauma and stress.

It came from seeing two of his mates killed in front of him. Lieutenant Michael Fussell stepped on a mine and Private Greg Sher was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade just a few metres from him.

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He has physical wounds from being blown into the air when his Bushmaster-armoured vehicle ran over a road mine. His brain suffered a severe traumatic injury from his head being violently shaken. It led him to be medically discharged - the day after he was promoted to lieutenant.

Mr Evans now realises he went on his second tour to Afghanistan already suffering PTSD.

As a civilian, he was a fireman but when his reservist unit, the First Commando Regiment, was sent for a second tour in 2011 he went without hesitation. He even gave up his spot

in officer school to go as a corporal and stay with his mates.

"I didn't admit it to anyone but when I returned from that first tour of Afghanistan I was a mess," he said in his eastern Sydney home - his wife Lisa and children Emily, 9, and Monash, 6, in another room.

"I was really affected by seeing my mates killed. I went on a permanent welcome home party. Lisa asked me when I would get back to normal life. I didn't."

He eventually went to a private counsellor organised by the Vietnam veterans. "They recognised something in me that they had gone through after Vietnam. They turned my life around."

When he returned from the second tour and was medically discharged from the army, the RSL welfare unit DefenceCare stepped in to help him with adapting to civilian life and getting his pension entitlements from the Veterans Affairs Department.

"I have trouble remembering things; I'll set out to pick the kids up from school and I'll forget where I'm going and why I'm on the street," Mr Evans said.

The effect of his PTSD and brain injury cause enormous strain on relationships.

"There is going to be a wave of trouble from returning soldiers. I see it on Anzac Day. I see the PTSD creeping in with the guys who have been to Afghanistan and Iraq. Every year you have a few beers together and start chatting, and it slowly comes out they are having flashbacks and nightmares, and struggling to adjust.

"No matter how much training you have had you are never prepared to pick up the remains of a five-year-old that's been blown apart by an [improvised explosive device]. You can't prepare yourself for that sort of thing.

"You are constantly on high alert because anybody could be the enemy about to shoot at you ... Nothing prepares you for that."