

# The war within

PHOTOGRAPHY by NIC WALKER

Gwen Cherne (front) and Rhondda Vanzella know from their own experiences how isolated war widows can feel.



Returned servicemen and women know the trauma of armed conflict can last long after soldiers are back from battle. **Sue Smethurst** meets the war widows fighting for better mental health support for our diggers and their families.

**T**wo months after her husband died, Gwen Cherne was sitting in the front pew of Sydney's Town Hall Chapel steeling herself for her first War Widows Guild Field of Remembrance service.

The loss of her adored husband, decorated commando Sgt Peter Cafe, was still crippling raw, as was the worry that his death by suicide on home soil would not be as accepted among the congregation of widows as that of a soldier who died in active combat.

To be honest, Gwen, 45, really didn't want to be there and had only attended because another war widow she had met soon after Pete's death insisted, and practically carried her broken soul into the church.

But then it happened.

In the moment of silence and solemnity, an arm gently wrapped around her shoulders and hugged her tight. It was a simple gesture that offered more comfort than any words.

The hug came from NSW War Widows Guild President Rhondda Vanzella, a widow herself who has shared hundreds of such hugs with heartbroken wives, mothers, grandmothers and sisters.

"The empathy and compassion showed to me in that moment was a blessing," Gwen says. "I was among complete strangers but they all seemed to know and understand me in a way that my family and closest friends could not. Sometimes a hug can be more powerful than any words."

Rhondda and a small army of war widows from around Australia have unwittingly formed a silent flying squad that swoops in and wraps veteran families up in love when they need it most, and she has not only enlisted Gwen in her emotional strike force, but inspired the widow to step out of the shadows and become a champion for veterans and their families.

"I don't want to be seen as the grieving widow," says Gwen. "I want to educate people about the impact service has on our society and I want to push boundaries. If I can do that others will follow."

Gwen Cherne will never forget the moment she fell for Pete Cafe.

A highly credentialed American developmental worker, Gwen had just landed in Afghanistan where she was working on a project for the US government when a strapping former soldier

introduced himself as the man heading up her security team.

Pete was working as a private security contractor, taking time out of the armed forces after service in Cambodia and East Timor with the elite 2nd Commando Regiment. He was charged with Gwen's care.

"Pete walked in wearing these very short shorts with his muscular legs," she says with a sparkle in her brilliant turquoise eyes. "He was wearing a blue rugby jumper with a VB logo and he was so tall and handsome, he struck me right away. Pete was in charge of operations and logistics so he knew everyone's movements and I was in and out of his office all the time. We just clicked. It was a friendship that turned into love very quickly and I knew I wasn't going home anytime soon."

When Pete's contract ended in early 2009 he came back to Australia and Gwen came with him to see if the romance that blossomed in a war zone could survive in the real world.

"Life outside is very different and that's when a lot of relationships fall apart, but we had such a beautiful time here together that I knew it was meant to be."

A year later they married and the special forces soldier was lured back into service.

"Pete never formally discharged," Gwen says. "He stepped away from the army twice but both times he was disappointed with civilian life. It just wasn't exciting and didn't bring him the same purpose active service did. His identity was wrapped up in military life and I understood that totally. I've been to those war zones, I understand the pull and the great sense of purpose and passion the work brings."

On Valentine's Day 2012, pregnant with their first child, Gwen waved goodbye to Pete who was headed back to Afghanistan with his regiment. Baby Emily was born a few months later. Pete was home between deployments and a son, Lachlan, arrived in 2014, but when he was sent back to Iraq in 2016, tragedy happened.

"I got a call one evening, I recognised the number as Baghdad. Pete always used Skype so it was strange to get a landline call. It was a woman's voice calling from a hospital. All I can remember her saying was: 'Are you Gwen Cherne? Your husband has had a stroke.'" →

Pete returned home but struggled to regain his health. He was anxious and very depressed and Gwen recalls his frustration that his cognition wasn't coming back. "It took him a week to write something which was a page long – his brain wasn't putting sentences back together the way they should've been. He never really recovered," she says.

Although Pete went back to work supporting other injured and wounded soldiers, it wasn't the same adrenalin rush and challenge he'd thrived on in active duty, and at home, he was becoming increasingly depressed and, at times, violent.

"Pete didn't think for a million years he was intimidating and yet I was terrified of him when he was angry. He could stand in a doorway and with his big muscular frame, there was no way I could escape. His moods were up and down and I learnt to navigate that and I learnt how to calm situations with him. I'm a strong woman, yet I found myself in this very challenging and controlling relationship. He was so talented and he could master anything he set his mind to. This wasn't the Pete I knew."

Less than a year after his stroke, Peter took his own life at the couple's Sydney home.

"Before he died we had an argument and I knew he was struggling. I reached out to his unit who rallied around him. They called him in and offered support, but he put on a mask and declared he was fine. The day before he died, he'd gone to Bunnings and potted around the house and he seemed okay to everyone but us; he obviously wasn't."

"On our wedding day I told my best friend that I wasn't worried about losing Pete in war, I was worried about him dying out of a military zone," she adds. "Sadly, that was right."

Bad news travels fast through the defence forces and within a few days of Pete's death, Gwen got a call from Bree Till, whose husband Sgt Brett Till died during an explosion in Southern Afghanistan in 2009. Bree, a mother of four, asked to come and visit Gwen. Around Gwen's kitchen table, Bree

helped the new widow work through the "spaghetti" of support services that were available.

"Bree is a force of nature," Gwen says. "She was the first person I'd spoken with who truly understood what I was going through."

Bree virtually dragged Gwen to the Field of Remembrance service and into the arms of Rhondda Vanzella OAM. All three have become lifelong friends, and share a passion for 'paying it forward', dropping everything, day or night, to be by the side of women enduring the same heartbreak.

"Wherever, whenever," Rhondda says. "It's constant and you never know where the calls come from but you do whatever you can to help. The younger women are so good at wrapping their arms around one another. They

take time off work to be with one another, it's amazing what they do.

"We don't hug enough these days," she adds. "I've just had a widow on my front door step this morning, we hugged and cried together. I said to her, 'You don't have to feel alone, I'll just wrap my arms around you and you'll know we are always there.'"

After Bree knocked on Gwen's door, Gwen began knocking on doors too. But not just widows'. She has knocked on the doors of Ministers, Army Command and anyone who will listen to her call for improved resources for veterans and their families. She joined the War Widows Guild and has since delivered dozens of speeches calling for greater mental health resources before, during and after defence service.



Gwen worried she would lose Pete out of combat. From top right: Gwen and Pete; Rhondda and Bruce; Pete in Afghanistan; Gwen and Rhondda.

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STYLING AND HAIR: NATALIE PEREIRA



"It's about prevention and preparing people for the reality they're going to be impacted by their service in some way, today or 10 years from now. When I was pregnant, the idea of postnatal depression was something I was expecting and I knew support services were available. If our serving men and women understand they'll

come out affected by their service, and we provide them with consistent support, we can change the culture. It's perfectly normal to be affected by service, not something to be ashamed of," she says.

In the months after

Pete's death, Gwen addressed Army Command staff and the wounded diggers conference. In 2018 she became an Ambassador for the Invictus Games, notably receiving a hug from Prince Harry on top of the Sydney Harbour Bridge; she was appointed widows and families advisor to the Department for Veterans Affairs, and recently she became a Council Member of the Australian War Memorial.

"After Pete's death I wanted to do something to make sure we weren't losing more people unnecessarily. These men and women go into battle with a variety of resources but they don't approach their own mental health the same way – they need resources to support that journey too. They are given training and weapons for combat but not for the personal combat they'll endure both in war and afterwards.

"It's about supporting families and getting the message out about prevention, during and afterwards."

For Rhondda, who lost her husband, Bruce, 10 years ago, women like Gwen and Bree are the future face of the War Widows Guild. Bruce, a World War II veteran, suffered depression throughout their 42-year marriage. With Australian forces currently serving in conflicts around the world, the War Widows Guild is arguably more relevant than ever before and her mantra as President of the Guild is to ensure the organisation is "fit for purpose" for the future.

"We're not even scratching the surface with mental health issues," Rhondda says. "We need to get involved and step up not just when it's too late. The veteran needs the family and the family needs the veteran. The more support the serving member gets, the better they'll be able to deal with the issues they've got and the better the outcome is.

"I know if we don't take care of the people we're sending into these terrible situations we're going to see a real impact at society level, and we haven't even begun that conversation yet.

"We're here for women and families at every age and every stage," she adds. "Some women come to us very soon after a death, but some women don't get in touch until many years later, they've had their loss and got on with their lives and may not realise what is available to them, or why their voice, their experience, is important."

In the wake of Pete's death, Gwen unwittingly found a new purpose in life, a light she says was shone in her direction by women like Rhondda Vanzella and Bree Till. She is now determined make that light even brighter for others to follow.

"I don't raise my voice on behalf of others, I raise my voice so other's voices can be heard when they're ready to be." **AWW**

Visit [warwidows.org.au](http://warwidows.org.au) for more information. If you or someone you know is struggling, help is available through Lifeline 13 11 14, Beyond Blue 1300 22 4636 and the Defence all hours support line, 1800 628 036.

