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This article has been placed on the North Beach RSL Sub-Branch webpage to support the Jarrahdale Recovery and Restoration Veteran Transition Centre

# Steve Butler's Bush Legends: Jarrahdale's Recovery and Restoration Veteran Transition Centre helping our broken diggers



Sitting out in the middle of the serene, green Jarrahdale bushland, Peta Connolly briefly drifts away from the pain of a former life that will never fully leave her.

Mrs Connolly, once a major in the Australian Army Intelligence Corps, says she has never quite got to the point where she needed residency at the purpose-built Recovery & Restoration Veteran Transition Centre in Jarrahdale. But a couple of overnight stays proved its healing power to her.

The setting, less than 7km inland from the South Western Highway and just 45km south-east of Perth, brings great emotional solace.

But she has often had to confront the reality of a physical ordeal largely of her own doing from her time with Australia's armed forces.

And it was more the fighting for her physical health in later life than fighting battles on the ground in service that have left the indelible marks in her mind. Her determination to keep up with the boys ultimately broke her body down.

By the early 2000s — with her husband Vince, now the Federal Member for Stirling, serving in East Timor and the Solomon Islands and with their three children under four — Mrs Connolly had hit the wall.

“My health started to go downhill very rapidly because of some physical injuries that occurred in my time in the military,” she said.

“My back is broken in a couple of places from the wear and tear and even though I was physically fit, it just couldn’t handle the pace and I couldn’t control the pain. I had a knee replacement before I was 40.

“I asked for help and I didn’t get it. I was even being treated for postnatal depression, which it wasn’t.

“I’d given my life to the army since I was 17 and was told the army wasn’t a place for a mother with children.”



Fremantle-raised Mrs Connolly joined the Army Reserves at 17 “because someone told me there was cheap beer”.

She later joined the Royal Military College, Duntroon and became a lieutenant after being posted at Campbell Barracks in Swanbourne.

She also was part of an intelligence team scouring the top end of Australia for illegal arrivals. To her later detriment, she was always trying to be at the front of the pack.

“I was a runner and played basketball and netball and liked the physical nature of life, but that ultimately ruined me,” she said.

“To do well as a female in the army, you’ve got to be better than most men ... you have to be better and faster than the average woman would be. I made sure I was the fastest in the running and tried to do as many push-ups as the blokes because in order to be accepted, you have to be like them.”

Mrs Connolly said the support of a husband who understood — and also meeting an ex-navy psychiatrist who suggested dealing with her physical pain rather than emotional stress — helped turn her life around for the better.

“Once I got the care I actually needed, I’ve been a different person,” she said with more than a hint of relief.



Former soldier Peta Connolly during a training exercise.



Former soldier Peta Connolly’s graduation from The Royal Military College Duntroon in 1999. Her parents pin her commission on her shoulders.

She also believed it was places like RSL branches and more particularly the transitional centre, gave “like-minded” people the important chance to sit and talk to each other in a safe, idyllic setting that had the power to heal.

“We’ve all been together, or we’ve gone through the same processes, the same training and the same discipline,” she said.

“You can hate each other, but you still know you’ve got each other’s back when it matters and you don’t get that anywhere else in life.

“Also, in particular for the army, the bush creates a sense of safety and quietness and brings an ability to zone everything out to help you cope with the world.

“It feels homely.”

There is a palpable sense of knowing without talking as Mrs Connolly meets former Special Air Service Regiment soldiers Tony Wills and Ric Gloede, who are both members of the SAS Resources Fund committee and board members for the Transition Centre, in Jarrahdale.

Melbourne-raised Mr Wills was just 18 when he joined the armed forces in 1978. One of his grandfathers was part of the Gallipoli landing in World War I and the other was part of the nation's anti-aircraft team in Borneo and New Guinea in World War II.



SAS soldier Tony Wills at the top of a temple near Battambang with some local children

He came to Perth in 1987 after being encouraged to try out in the SAS selection course, passed it and has been in WA ever since.

His duties included operational service with the counterterrorist squadron and active service with the United Nations in Cambodia.

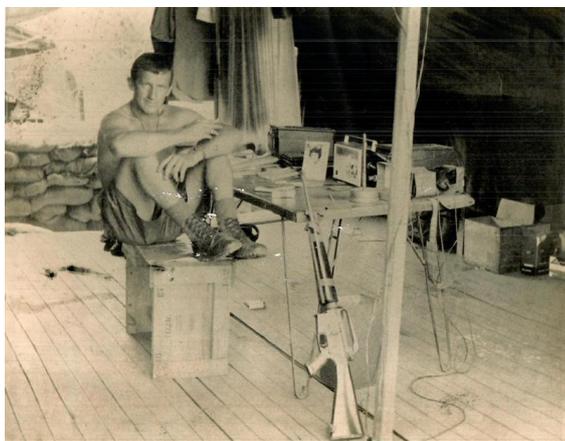
“It was pretty dangerous back then in some of the areas,” he said.

“There were quite a few rebellious Khmer Rouge troops and there were a lot of landmines there as well. At one stage, there were 400 locals losing limbs every month.”

Guildford-born Mr Gloede, a well-known WA football administrator, joined the army when he was 17, three years after he had left John Curtin High School to work in his father's Fremantle bakery.

“My first job in life was delivering his bread on a horse and cart, believe it or not,” he said.

Before long he found himself at infantry school and then to the Royal Australian Regiment before making his way to the SAS, where future Australian governor-general Michael Jeffery was in charge of his selection course.



Ric Gloede, a well-known WA football administrator, joined the army when he was 17, three years after he had left John Curtin High School to work in his father's Fremantle bakery.

He served in Vietnam in 1967 and 1968 in long-range reconnaissance patrols and ambush work. He even once crashed down in a helicopter in the middle of the Phuoc Tuy Province jungle.

“If anyone ever asks me again to go on a picnic and put a tent up in the bush ... no,” he said.

The Transition Centre had its beginnings in the early 1970s, helping people suffering hardship and operating under the banner of the Institute of Human Development.

But for the past three years, it has become a place to help army, navy and air force veterans fend off deep-rooted issues that often end with post-traumatic stress disorder or suicide.

Mr Gloede said the centre ran in partnership with the RSL, which had bought the facility and rented it back for an almost non-existent fee.

The board had also secured a \$1 million grant from the Federal Government to improve the facilities, which include 20 chalets and 10 family duplexes.



Former SAS soldiers Ric Gloede and Tony Wills have been instrumental in setting up and securing funding for the facility. Credit: Michael Wilson/The West Australian

“The biggest thing that made us think about doing it was the number of suicides ... at that time we identified there had been about 400 over a period of five or six years,” Mr Gloede said.

“All of us are different, but I suppose you put yourself in their position.

“We recognised that someone spends a lot of years in say, the SAS regiment, and walks out the front gate.

“When he walks out the front gate, he’s left the camaraderie and his friends behind and he has to make new friends. None of them have any idea or may not care less about what they’ve done or what they represent.

“A lot of the problems come because they have no transition period.”

Mr Wills said the unique bond built between returned service men and women meant it was not an option to just sit around and watch people suffer, and he wanted veterans to feel like they were cared for in any circumstance.

“Quite often during the week, you’ll have a dozen or so ex-veterans here just to talk to each other ... to express your story is actually healing,” he said.

“It’s an urban dwelling, but it’s in the bush and as soon as you drive off Jarrahdale road, you feel relaxed.

“Call it spiritual or whatever ... you might have stresses, but you come into this camp and you just go, ‘Ahhhhh’.

“It’s got a bit of magic to it.”