

The lid's off the box





PHOTO: AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL NEGATIVE MSU/94/009/17

Jane (wife)

When I first met him, Ben was completely different to how he is now. It's hard to say definitely what's caused the changes because, you know, it was fifteen odd years ago and all people change; when you're married you change, when you have children you change. But personality-wise, he was really laid back. He was always, 'Don't worry about it, forget about it, it's not a big deal.' I was the ranter and the raver, the one with the short fuse, the stress head, the one that will yell and scream to get it out of my system. Ben was so cool; I always laughed because he'd sit back and watch me and say, 'Are you finished yet?'

We met in the Public Relations Unit. He was the brand new photographer and I was on medical rehab because I'd had an accident at Duntroon. I always planned to be in the army. My parents used to say to me, 'Jane, what's your plan B?' And I'd say, 'I don't need one.' I've always been like that: 'This is what I want and I'm going to go get it.' Ben and I went out for about nine

months and in that time I'd been accepted back to Duntroon but my broken foot wouldn't hold up. I was discharged back home. Ben picked me up from the airport, and a week later we were engaged and I'd moved in. Our wedding plans were put on hold when he left for Rwanda.

I was jealous when he went – jealous that I'd been discharged and he got to pack his bag and bugger off to these great overseas countries. Because that's what you're trained for, that's what everything leads up to. He was over there for six months and the minute he stepped foot back in the door, I knew he had a problem. I got that otherworldly feeling from him. I think I recognised it because I'd lived it all with Dad. My father had been in the army for twenty-three years and he'd been in Vietnam.

In those first couple of years, Ben was trying to hold it together but there was an escalation of his symptoms. Anxiety, depression, flashbacks, dreams, social withdrawal, incredible night sweats, all those things. I was doing psychology at uni then and I'd say to him, 'We need to sort this. This is not going to get better.' But I hit a brick wall for years. He was absolutely mortified to think that people were going to find out he had an issue. In the Services, the fear is that you'll be put on medication and if that happens, you're un-deployable. They can't send you anywhere. And Ben loved his work, he loved his job. At one point I actually did get him to go and see an army psychologist but he wasn't happy with the person he saw and he refused point blank to see anyone else. And there were always issues of confidentiality. How confidential is it really?

Ben'll tell you East Timor was a walk in the park compared to Rwanda; that's what he'll say. But I've watched a video where bullets are flying over the top of his head and him taking off into the gutter. The operational rules for peacekeepers are to stand and watch it and clean up afterwards. They aren't on the offensive

but there are always things happening, you know. Like, fourteen-year-old kids walking around with AK47 weapons in Rwanda, pointing them at you and laughing. Or the minefields where you're taking a photo, taking a photo, step back, look around, just missed it. There would be so many instances of stress and trauma, even in just one deployment. Where would you start unpicking that mess?

It's impossible to fully understand what they go through. I'd always hoped that being a photographer might save him from what he saw; that standing behind the camera might make him a bit more detached? But obviously it didn't. It took him months to show me the photos from Rwanda. I didn't ask, I was waiting for him to be ready. One day, he just brought them out and said, 'That's the photos.' And to sit there and keep my face blank and go through them without getting upset or throwing them away or screaming... it was the hardest thing I've ever done. And that's just photos, that's me just looking at them. Not taking them, not being there, not the smells or the atmosphere or seeing every day what people can do to each other. It gave me an understanding and that was so helpful. I've got the photos now and they're hidden: they're put away. They're such a blatant reminder.

After our first child was born, that was when things started to go really pear shaped. Ben was in Timor for more than half of my pregnancy. I was only about ten weeks when he left and when he comes back, I'm huge. And of course I'm doing you know, the first mother thing and so he's only just got back and I'm dragging him off to all these antenatal classes to talk about babies and nappies which in hindsight probably wasn't very cool. But he did a good job, he got through it. And while he was definitely worse when he came back it's always hard to know... was it Timor? Was it the baby? How do you know? And for me, my focus had changed because now I've suddenly got a child and so maybe I'm

not as supportive. I'm trying to breastfeed, I've got a screaming baby who I find out later has got his own issues. And I was tired. You try to split yourself all these different ways to make everybody happy.

There was lots of arguing then and increasing rage. He could go from zero to one hundred in a split second. Sometimes you could see it building and sometimes you couldn't. And I'll be perfectly honest; I'm a bit of a button pusher. If I've had a bad day and I don't think that I'm getting the attention and love and support that I require, then I push. And let's face it, who knows better how to push your buttons than your partner? It sounds terrible doesn't it? And I feel awful afterwards. I know in my head that it's a dumb thing to do but it's just a human thing to want to be seen and listened to. I'm really just saying: 'I'm not a machine, I'm not a robot.'

Ben was battling to keep it together. He was starting to miss days at work. He'd go and then come home again because he couldn't cope. He'd have anxiety attacks. He would pick the baby up and he'd have these flashbacks, maybe because of Rwanda. I decided that he wasn't going to seek help on his own, that he didn't want to get the diagnosis. And so I did this really mean thing. I'll probably never forgive myself but I gave him an ultimatum. I said to him, 'I can put up with it and I can put up with you. I could do that forever but with kids we can't do it. The kids can't have fighting. That's it. So either you go and sort yourself out or I am going to pack my bags and leave.' It worked.

He went in to see a psychologist who was subcontracted to the army. He was a lovely guy, which was lucky because it's hard to find really good psychiatrists and doctors up here. It's not like the big cities, our services are pretty limited. So Ben saw him and he got some medication and finally we had a diagnosis. Once you've got a diagnosis, nobody can pretend anymore. When you've got

And that's just photos, that's me just looking at them. Not taking them, not being there, not the smells or the atmosphere or seeing every day what people can do to each other.





I try to keep everyone on an even keel and sometimes I do that very successfully and sometimes I lose the plot, but when I lose the plot everything goes downhill pretty quickly.

something on a bit of paper, there's no going back from that. The lid's off the box. It's out and it's big and you have to deal with it.

He was discharged on full TPI [Totally and Permanently Incapacitated] in 2002, just after our second child, Harry, was born and suddenly we've gone from him being away so much of the time to being home all the time. Every single day. 24/7. Where's my space gone? I'm on the toilet and he's talking to me. I clean up and then turn around and there's a mess again. Where's my space? When do I get a break? Suddenly there was never a time when there wasn't a whole extra body to think about.

I don't know what he'd be like without his medication. He's on fairly high doses for the anxiety and the depression and I think it definitely helps him maintain a more steady level. It's hard to imagine him ever going back to work. Things set him off and he gets really upset, really emotional. When we met he was a very extroverted guy; he got along with everybody and liked going out. Now he's a man who won't leave the house. I can't think of the last time we had a stack of people over, we just don't do it. I mean, we can but I've got to let him know in advance and he needs to know who's coming. Or where we're going. It's exactly like my dad. My dad is exactly the same. It goes like this...

You'll say, 'So and so has invited us over for a barbecue in three weeks.' And they go, 'Yeah, that sounds like a good idea.' And then a week before, they'll start to fester and you can see it coming. And then they get grumpy and they're short tempered and they don't want to go but they don't want to say they don't want to go because they've told you that they will. So they'll make everything so awful that on the day you'll say, 'Stuff you, I'm going by myself and you can just stay here! I'll take the kids.' And as soon as you do that, they're happy.

I've got a really good group of girlfriends, maybe four or five, who are fully aware of the situation. I used to ring up and lie to get out of things before: I'd say, 'You wouldn't believe it, Ben fell off a ladder this morning and hurt his back and he's laid up in bed.' I could really tell some porkers. I didn't have the same sort of friendships as I've got now and I suppose I wasn't comfortable telling everyone. That's the thing about mental health, people can't see it. People think, 'Well what's wrong with him? He's a big bloke and he looks all right and he sounds all right, so what's the problem?' People say, 'Christ, get over it mate. Get a life.'

I'm at the point now where I can say, 'We won't be coming today. Between Ben and Lachlan, it can't happen.' Because Lachlan hates going out too. Not long ago he was diagnosed with autism.

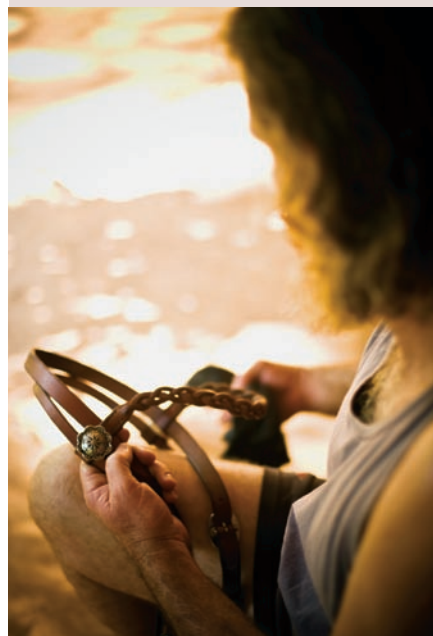
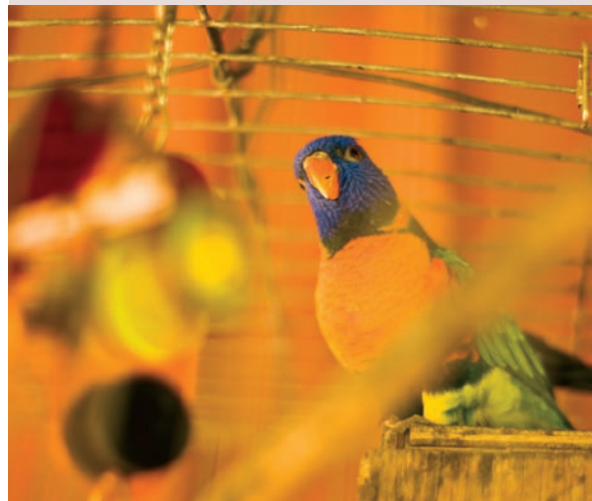
He was one of those children that you'd take to play group and within the space of five minutes he's hit five different kids. And you'd leave crying because all the other mothers were doing the 'What's wrong with this child?' and 'Don't let him hit my child.' I knew there was something wrong but Ben couldn't handle the idea. He'd say, 'I think he's just a boy and boys are a bit slower to develop. He'll be all right.' He *so* didn't want to go there.

So there was that lid on the box again until finally I can't go down to the school with a child who's kicking and screaming anymore. I say, 'Okay, I've had enough of the lid now. We'll take it off so we can do something with it.'

Between Ben and Lachlan we've got a lot going on and it's not easy to separate what's the autism spectrum sort of stuff, what's the post traumatic stress stuff and what's the normal, family, married relationship stuff. I try to keep everyone on an even keel and sometimes I do that very successfully and sometimes I lose the plot, but when I lose the plot everything goes downhill pretty quickly. It's a struggle managing his needs with my needs and the kids' needs. It's constant awareness. You're constantly looking out for where Ben is at. If he's good, you know it can't stay good, so you're thinking, 'What will the signs be? And how will I deal with it. And how do we try and get around it?'

Privacy is a big thing with Ben; it's a big reason we live here on five acres. There's a lot of veterans out here actually. They come out to escape. They've got their own block and if they don't want anybody coming onto it, they put a filthy big padlock and a chain on the front gate. Out here you don't have people looking for donations, people coming to sell you stuff. You don't get surprised. You've got your own space and it's quiet and you can make it like a haven. It's really a big safety zone and that's why we're all here. The thought of ever moving back to the suburbs makes me feel physically ill. Because of the ruckus that always goes on, you know? Lachlan can get quite upset, quite distraught. It's very loud; he'll scream and the tantrums can go on for an hour. And then there's Ben's issues. To put us all in a suburban house again? Honestly, I couldn't; I couldn't do it.

At the moment we're doing extensions and it's a big job. It's been a nightmare. I mean, Ben looks out of his window in the morning



and there's people and there's noise and there's cars and there's no escape. And Lachlan looks out his window and he wants to know exactly, specifically what's going on, and you explain precisely and hope that it happens like that. But the nature of a building site is not like the military where eight o'clock means eight o'clock, so it's very difficult.

Ben is intolerant of people who don't tow the line and he can get very uptight and these days it only takes a tiny bit extra stress to spill over. He's not very diplomatic and he'll tell people what he thinks straight off and I know it's going to upset them. I used to feel the need to jump in and smooth things over or explain 'He's a bit upset' and, you know, try to stop him from looking horrible basically. It's that protection thing. But now I don't. It might be because I'm too damn tired but I think it's more that I've learnt to be a little more laid back. I can look at the situation and understand why he did it and I'll take him aside later and talk about maybe there might have been a better way of going about it, but he was in the right to do it.

I guess the nature of our relationship is that I'm still learning to be the way Ben was. I'm still learning to step back because I have always been the fiery one. Now if I press the buttons, he doesn't just laugh it off like he would have fifteen years ago. Now he bites back, so basically it's a role swap and I've got to learn to take a deep breath and let it go.

He sees the psychiatrist once a month. I don't think he says too much. I often wonder if he goes just to keep me happy. He sees a psychologist at VVCS [Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service] but we haven't done family counselling yet. It was suggested at one point when things got a bit rocky. It came through another psychiatrist and to be perfectly honest at that stage it got my back up. She sent Ben home with a chapter on

'couples relationships' but she hadn't taken the time out to bring me into the office and meet me. The other psychiatrist, who had been so good, had me come in almost immediately to talk to him. The family and social aspects of PTSD [post traumatic stress disorder] are massive. It's not an individual thing, you can't take it in a little bubble, there's just so much else involved.

It's the logical thing to talk to the partners. If she gives him a strategy to use, I want to know what it is so that I can help implement that at home. So it can be generalised, so I can say to him, 'Don't forget...'. Whether I talk in front of Ben or by myself, that's fine. Whatever. It's how can we work together to fix this? Or make it bearable.

But in this case, I wasn't included and I felt left out and cut off and not trusted. It felt like I was being told that I was part of the problem. Am I part of the problem? I'll be honest, there's been times when I have not dealt with things appropriately but I can very quickly look at the situation and go, 'Oh God Jane, you know you shouldn't have said that. That was really uncool and that was not the way to manage it and you know better than that, you know?' I get upset with myself because it's true. I should know better. I've got four years of psychology. I've been managing this man for fifteen years with about twelve of those where he's had an issue. I grew up in a family where I saw my Mum and Dad handling these things. My mother has always managed so well, they've been married thirty-seven years. So I should know better.

A lot of my persona is wrapped around perfectionism. I'm the perfectionist control freak in this relationship and I'm trying to let go of that. My way of doing things has always been to find a way to fix things. If you tell me what it is, I can fix it, I can make it better. We can spend ten minutes talking and you'll go away and you'll feel much better, and it'll all be resolved!

I'm still learning to step back because I have always been the fiery one. Now if I press the buttons, he doesn't just laugh it off like he would have fifteen years ago. Now he bites back so basically it's a role swap and I've got to learn to take a deep breath and let it go.





It's my space and when things get too much I say, 'Just going to the shade house for ten minutes.' And I'll take my milk crate down there and I'll sit in my little shade house on my milk crate, gazing around until I've got myself back under control...

So I still try and fix this thing with Ben but I know I can't. I know I can't. I can try and provide that environment and support for getting through each down spot, but I can't fix it. Nobody can fix it. And that's when I get angry I suppose. I try not to get angry but I do get angry because I think, 'Well somebody broke him. I gave him to you and he was okay and you gave him back and you broke him. And you can't fix it, it's not fixable.' It doesn't matter how many drugs or treatments you've got, there's nothing you can throw at it and fix what we've got. And while he's fantastic, he is a really nice guy and I would never, never, never not be here, he's not who he was. I know this is a lot of 'what ifs' and I don't know how this sounds but... I could have had something else. I *did* have something else. Do you know what I mean?

I can't give Ben enough praise for how good he is with the kids. I know people with PTSD can be so detached and that the problems with children can be quite massive, but that's not the case in this family. He's really got a lot of love and support to give and he plays with them and he's just such a good dad. And they love him. There will come a time where things will have to be explained to them, when they'll start wondering why both their parents are at home and not at work. And Ben is horrified at the idea they won't learn a work ethic, and he won't be a good example for them, and what are they going to say when the other kids say, 'My father's a fireman, my father drives cranes.' So I say to Ben, 'You were in the army for eighteen years. You did heaps of jobs.' And I always say to the kids, 'Your dad used to fly all over the world and he took photos and a lot of his photos went in the newspaper and he did lots of cool stuff. He can drive a tank!' And all that boys' stuff. Because even though that's not what he's doing now, they want to be proud of their dad. And they've got to

have something concrete to say when someone asks, 'What does your dad do?'

For now, we're all close. Lachlan's quite happy in his own little world and what he's doing, but Harry is very, very sensitive and perceptive. He's only six but you can say to him, 'Dad's having a bit of a downer today, you just need to give him a little bit of space. If you've got an issue, come to me.'

In fact, one of the things I worry about is where does Harry fit into the picture? Because we're all so busy talking about how Ben is and how Lachlan is and everyone presumes Harry's okay because he doesn't have a problem like the rest of them. So I'm very conscious of making sure he gets the positive attention and it doesn't all go over there. So I step back and look at him, because I can't forget about him, you know? There was an incident at school where I had Lachlan with me when I went to pick Harry up and Lachlan got upset with all the kids streaming out and he started screaming and screaming and Harry comes out of the classroom and walks straight past us. He doesn't break stride, he doesn't look at us. He walks around the corner and waits where people won't see. And I just wanted to cry.

Ben is very good at looking and saying, 'Okay, you need a break or you need the day off.' At home, I have my shade house and my orchids. He made that for me. He built it just exactly like I wanted it and he's given me the money to slowly fill it up with things. It's my space and when things get too much I say, 'Just going to the shade house for ten minutes.' And I'll take my milk crate down there and I'll sit in my little shade house on my milk crate, gazing around until I've got myself back under control or whatever it is and then I come back.

Just before Lachlan was diagnosed Ben and I thought that a window was appearing for us. I love to ride and Ben is a horseman from way back – I call him ‘the Horse Whisperer’ – and so we got these horses. The whole plan was that once both kids were at school full time, we would ride together off into the sunset with our picnic and bottle of champagne! No, I’m joking. But we did think that we would be able to spend time together again. We could go out to lunch, go for a ride. Like normal people. But then Lachlan was diagnosed and sent to a special school which is a long drive away every day. So now I’m there, helping out at the autism office until it’s time for him to come home. Ben has joined a horseriding club though and he rides and loves it which is great.

I have just taken a small part-time job at the autism centre: it’s flexible and I can work from home and I don’t earn much money which is important for us. I know that sounds mad but if I became the primary breadwinner, where does that leave Ben? Self-esteem-wise? The money he gets from his entitlement, he’s earned. He doesn’t work but he still supports his family and if he’s cranky he can still turn around and say to me, ‘Well I bring in most of the money.’ And I can say, ‘Yes you do.’ But what sort of bloke does he feel like, what sort of father, what sort of husband when his wife’s off earning all the money because he’s incapable of holding a job?

Ben will say, ‘Go and do it Jane if you want that.’ But as much as he says it, I don’t want anything brewing under there. There may come a point where he’s one hundred per cent okay with that but so far, not working has been very difficult for him. At least now he’s more likely to say to people that he’s retired. Originally if he

was asked what he did, he’d say ‘Army’ and then take off. But I said to him, ‘Mate, you can only do that for so long. Six months? Maybe string it out to a year but soon you’re going to have to say, ‘I used to be. I used to be in the army.’

He does leatherwork now, makes bridles and things and as long as he doesn’t have a deadline, he’s fine. So we’re just taking it a little at a time.

Once a year we get away together when Mum and Dad come up and look after the kids for a few days. My girlfriends say, ‘Why don’t you go to the Casino or have a nice dinner in a nice hotel.’ But all we want to do is go fishing. I just want to sit in the middle of a river with my fishing rod in the water and just nothing. It’s the rocking, you know, the gentle slap of the waves on the side of the boat. And Ben and I load ourselves up with all really great little gourmet nibbly things that we never can afford, and a couple of bottles of wine and some nice expensive beer and we just sit there and that’s my recharge.

I’m looking forward. I’m always looking forward and I’m pretty sure that we’ll get through it. It’s just how we’re going to fare. I mean, I know that we’ll still be together, it’s just do we get through it whole? Or do we get through it in pieces?

But you’ve got to look forward. Even if it’s just the next ten minutes. Because what’s done is done. You’ve got to learn and move on. Some stuff you can’t change.

But all we want to do is go fishing. I just want to sit in the middle of a river with my fishing rod in the water and just nothing. It’s the rocking, you know, the gentle slap of the waves on the side of the boat.



Jane's mother

*J*ane could salute before she could talk. I mean it was just one of those funny little things. Her father Laurie was a drill instructor at that time and he would say to his recruits, 'I have a ten-month-old daughter who can salute better than you.' ¶ He was her hero and that was it, right from the start. ¶ Laurie did two tours of Vietnam, consecutive tours. We were married two weeks after he got back. I was twenty-two. There were the signs of PTSD right back then, I see that now. He tried to strangle me on our honeymoon for a start and that's got to be unusual! I rolled over in bed and touched him on the shoulder and he reacted instantly. It was a bit scary. I didn't do it again. ¶ Jane was always a really strong individual, very independent. Even as a child, I knew that I never had to worry about the other two kids if she was home. I never put her into that role, she adopted it for herself. She was the one who, while you were still drawing breath, would say to her brother, 'You haven't washed your hands!' She's still like it. She'll tell you herself that she's a Type A personality. ¶ I don't think the way she grew up would have any influence on what she's doing now apart from the fact that she saw me cope. You can't turn around to a six-year-old and say, 'You wait until your father gets back in fifty-six days!' It doesn't work. When Laurie was away, I was in control. I made the decisions; I paid the bills. When he retired then suddenly he was doing all that. He had nothing left to be in charge of but me. These days we like to have a peaceful life. We make the compromises we need to make because we want peace. ¶ Jane would have to be to the point of 'I can't cope' before she will ring and tell me. She will ring though: she will spend an hour going yap-yap-yap and then she'll go, 'I feel better now, thanks Mum.' She needs that about every tenth call. I regret that we don't live closer. I love Ben. He knows I love him dearly. All we can do is listen, be prepared to go up there at a minute's notice and visit a couple of times a year. ¶ I worry about Jane like any mother worries about a child, but maybe I worry about different things, like her own mental well-being. She's so busy looking after everybody else I worry that she may not last the distance. But I'm very proud of her. Of all of them. That's the bottom line. She's got her work cut out for her and I don't think it will get any easier. That's why we send her a lot of funny cards: just to make her smile when she picks up the mail. ¶