



Honest tale of family's war



DWAYNE GRANT
dwayne.grant@news.com.au

TALLAI'S Andy Cullen has a story to tell – even though the initial thought of sharing it scared the hell out of him.

“I couldn't think of anything worse,” the ex-soldier said of his reaction when wife

Zoe suggested the journals they kept during the most harrowing period of their lives could form the basis of a book about the reality of war and the effect it can have on a marriage and family.

“I was struggling to show my face publicly. I didn't want to go to the shops or be in crowded places so the last thing I wanted to do was put my life on display for the ridicule of others.

“It's a pretty raw account. It highlights a lot of not so positive things ... things I'm not proud of ... we're quite open about our relationship, my drinking, some violence.

“It took over a year to decide to do this but I ended up getting sick of people doing what I had done – hiding, burying themselves in a bottle, leading to severe depression and even suicide.

“I thought even if it helps just one person, I want to tell my story.”

Andy and Zoe's story is *Resurrected*, a heartbreaking and ultimately uplifting tale of one veteran's battle with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and how the mother of his four young children refused to walk away when she had every reason to.

Having spent 17 years serving with the Australian Army, including two tours of Afghanistan, the bomb disposal expert retired to the Gold Coast in 2012 a broken man.

He had seen things he couldn't un-see.

Within six months, he had been admitted to the Currumbin Clinic. In his own words, he spent three years in a “drug-induced coma”. At his lowest ebb, he didn't have an empathetic bone in his body.

“I had no love in me at all, even for my kids and saying that as a father is devastating. It defies comprehension but that's how I felt in the depths of my depression.”

Zoe added: “Protecting the kids is probably the thing that drained me most. Truth be told, it was impossible at times. They did witness more than they should have.”

Andy's road to recovery began in mid-2015 when his psychologist suggested he write his experiences on paper “to get them out of my head”. Zoe started to do the same and little by little he started to heal, as did their marriage.

“I'm not completely cured or living a life free of PTSD,” Andy said.

“I still suffer nightmares, panic attacks and anger issues, but it's less intrusive now. The good days are starting to outweigh the bad.”

So much so the couple are using their story to show other people – and their suffering partners – battling mental illness, there can be light at the end of the tunnel.

On that note, they will speak at tonight's Symbolic Sleep-Out at Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary, an Anzac Day-eve event where their story will truly resonate.

“I was your quintessential tough guy and that made it quite difficult when I started to suffer (from PTSD),” Andy said.

“I viewed mental illness as a weakness but that's such an incorrect view. No one is immune. You can't get a jab from the doctor and say ‘now I won't get depression.’”

Resurrected will be launched at Hillcrest Christian College on Thursday. Visit www.ptsdresurrected.com

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ANDY CULLEN



24 Apr 2017
Gold Coast Bulletin, Gold Coast QLD

Author: Dwayne Grant • Section: General News • Article type : News Item
Audience : 24,753 • Page: 2 • Printed Size: 1200.00cm² • Market: QLD
Country: Australia • ASR: AUD 7,574 • Words: 637 • Item ID: 763109693

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PTSD sufferer and former bomb disposal expert Andy Cullen, 39, with wife Zoe and their children Joseph, 11, Charlie, 9, Eden, 6, and Ireland, 3.
Picture: DAVID KELLY





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Andy Cullen with former prime minister Tony Abbott, top, and in the field as a bomb disposal expert with the Australian Army in Afghanistan.