

# INK

IN THE LINES



AUSTRALIAN  
WAR MEMORIAL

AN AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL  
TOURING EXHIBITION





From left to right:  
Newton; James; Tanya; Jamie; Brent.

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## THE TATTOO PROJECT

In 2018 the Australian War Memorial invited people with military-themed tattoos to share their stories. Some went on to participate in our tattoo project, and we spoke with current and recent serving ADF members, tattooists and, in one case, a military wife, who volunteered to be interviewed and photographed for the Memorial's National Collection. The Memorial would like to thank all those who contributed their time and shared their personal stories.

It's the fact that I am proud of having served.  
Why hide it?

Deb

## IDENTITY & BELONGING

Many veterans use tattoos to identify themselves as part of a group or community. Tattoos of Skippy badges, regimental mascots, service medals, and dog tags all mark their wearers' identity and demonstrate their allegiance to a unit, squadron, regiment or battalion. These tattoos act as a consolidation of service experiences, and express a sense of self and personal pride.



### DAVID N.

David deployed to Afghanistan in 2011, where he was hit by improvised explosive devices (IEDs) four times. He has tattoos representing his service – including the tank symbol of the Cavalry Regiment – and losses sustained by his unit and the army – particularly the death of Private Matthew Lambert of 2nd Battalion, the Royal Australia Regiment, whose name appears in dog tags. One of David's most striking tattoos is a scene of Mirabad Valley, a beautiful and dangerous place where he spent most of his Afghanistan deployment. David hopes that when people see his tattoos they will recognise him as a veteran and ask about his experiences.



### BRIAN

Brian felt such affinity for the army that when doctors told him he had cancer and did not have long to live, he got the insignia of the Royal Australian Regiment tattooed over his heart. Brian's other featured tattoo is a tribute to friends who died in a Blackhawk training accident in Townsville in 1996.



## DEB

Deb joined the Royal Australian Navy shortly after female sailors were allowed in the same mess hall as males. She is proud of the role the navy played in her personal and professional growth: *My tattoo represents my naval career, but the flowers represent the fact I was in a man's world ... It represents what I've been through ... It was a great life.*



## DAMIEN

*I'm always going to bleed army, it'll always be a big part of my life. I just wanted it to look like someone just ripped the skin off and that's what was underneath.*

Years after his 1993 deployment, Damien learnt that the anger and anxiety he experienced were symptoms of PTSD. He got his tattoo after accepting his diagnosis. The tattoo identifies him as an army veteran, and a veteran of Somalia. He thanks his wife for insisting that he seek psychological support, has owned and come to terms with his past, and is proud of his service: *That's how I wanted it to be, a reflection, not of bad stuff but the good that came out of it, and how it affected me as a person.*



## MARK

After 13 years in the Royal Australian Air Force as an air frame fitter, Mark is a steadfast advocate for the recognition and support of veterans, whatever their experience. His lifelong commitment to ensuring a job is well done stems from his time in the RAAF: *When I do a job, it's got to be perfect. If we stuffed up, and the plane went down, it comes back to us. That was always in my mind.* His compassion and empathy for the experiences of others is evident in his tattoo, which is dedicated to the Australian Defence Force. *I'm air force, but I work with the army, I know a lot of navy guys so rather than just one service emblem I got the ADF emblem. It's a mark of respect for all the services.*



## MILES

Miles was with the Royal Australian Corps of Transport during Operation Tamar in 1995, assisting in delivering food to Rwandans as part of Australia's contribution to UNAMIR II. Rwanda is known to veterans as a wellspring of traumatic experiences, but is not widely understood by the wider community. Miles sought to address this with his tattoos, which present him as a soldier (the fighting kangaroo) and a veteran of Rwanda (a custom designed shield and *miryango*, the Rwandan word for "family"), combined with the flags of Australia and Rwanda. His tattoos invite citizens of both countries to start a conversation with him.

## SEAN

Sean is an army veteran whose first deployment was with the 1st Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment, as part of Australia's contribution to United Nations operations in Somalia in 1993. Like many in his battalion, he was unprepared for what he saw in Somalia, and was shocked and saddened by the accidental shooting of Private Shannon McAliney. *I used my own dog tags as a template for the tattooist, but the actual name on there is "Shannon", one of our blokes who was killed over there in Somalia, so that's to pay tribute to him.* The tattooed crucifix that lies alongside Shannon's dog tags is a copy of a small crucifix Sean found in a ruined United Nations compound in Dili during his deployment to Timor in 2000.



## PAUL K.

Formerly a cargo specialist, Paul is an army veteran of 20 years, with deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, and humanitarian aid missions, including a posting with HMAS *Kanimbla* for Sumatra Assist. He looks back warmly on his deployment to East Timor, where he was befriended by the local community. His tattoos reflect happy memories of friendships formed and hard work done well.



They miss their families, their families are missing them. You don't know what they're seeing over there.

Christine

## MATESHIP & FAMILY

As well as recognising families consisting of parents, partners, children, and immediate relatives, tattooed veterans often have tattoos dedicated to their military family. Some have one collection of designs dedicated to family at home while another is dedicated to military family. Sometimes distinguishing between these types of tattoos is impossible, because the two are inseparable. Regardless, the importance of family, whether at home or away, can be vital.



### TANYA

Tanya joined the Royal Australian Navy in 1992 and hasn't looked back, building a skill set that took her to Afghanistan twice. Although she is from a military family, many are surprised to learn of her service, medals, tattoos and identity as a grandmother. Her love of the sea is demonstrated by tattoos of anchors and a "zombie mermaid and sailor" which pay tribute to a mythical history of sailing and to a time when drowning at sea was a genuine risk.

*The camaraderie of a ship's crew is important: You become a big family ... In one another's pockets 24/7. A group of you will get together ... Sometimes, we get tattoos!*

Tanya met her husband in the navy, and they share an interest in Gothic stories and imagery. Tanya's twin raven tattoos are good luck symbols that also reference the couple's shared love of *The Raven*, the poem by Edgar Allan Poe.



## SHAUN

*If it wasn't for my wife, I'd be dead.*

Shaun met his mate Miles in the transport corp, but the army sent them in different directions: Miles went to Rwanda in 1994, while Shaun went to East Timor in 1999. Tasked with clearing rubbish and transporting it to the dump, Shaun saw crowds of starving Timorese children ransacking the decomposing piles. While he desperately wanted to help by sharing his own rations, this could lead people to endanger themselves by crowding a moving vehicle.

Shaun struggled with PTSD in later years, and he credits his wife with getting him the help he needed. *It still grieves me ... I struggle to take the rubbish out because as soon as I smell [it], it's a direct link to these kids at the rubbish dump.*

Shaun and Miles recently reconnected through a veterans' network and shared their experiences. *We struck up a conversation like we hadn't seen each other in just a week ... I've done lots of civilian jobs in teams, and the comradery just is not there. I would take a bullet for Miles. It's that simple.*



## CHRISTINE

Christine met her husband Stephen when they were at school. He joined the army after they were married, and his service, particularly his 2012 deployment to Afghanistan, has had a profound effect on her. Christine felt compelled to design a tattoo that encapsulates her own experience, and that of all military families. She is proud to wear it and hopes it will start conversations. When asked if the female figure in the tattoo is herself, she replies that it is all wives and partners.

*What these servicemen and women do, and the huge sacrifice that they make ... they miss their families, their families are missing them, you don't know what they're seeing over there, you don't know what they experience.*



## KEV & TINA

Kevin and Tina met while serving in the army, and have since married. Kevin's service in Timor affected him strongly. He was getting a tattoo of the Timorese flag on the day the Memorial team met him and his wife Tina, whose poppy tattoo is a tribute to serving friends who died. Kevin's flag, and the flame tattoo which shows Dili burning, represents Kevin's pride in serving over three deployments and in his military family.

*Soldiers ... express our feelings in different ways. Most people get a tattoo for a game of footy. We get a tattoo to commemorate our service, our mates.*

The retired veterans keep each other strong. Their post-service adjustment involves volunteer work and veteran advocacy. Kevin enjoys his involvement in the veterans' community in Warwick, Queensland, raising money for local construction projects, and cutting firewood for older veterans and their families.





Every time you see it, it reminds you.

Adam

## LOSS, GRIEF & COMMEMORATION

Many veterans have experienced traumatic or life-changing events, some of which are followed by a difficult reintegration into society, dealing with challenges to mental and physical health, strained relationships with family and friends, and navigating various administrative and medical bureaucracies. These events and experiences can find positive expression through tattoos that embody profound experiences of loss or transformation, or memorialise lost friends.



## DAVE

During his 2011 deployment to Afghanistan, Dave befriended Corporal Ash Birt. Despite the difference in their jobs – Dave was managing Afghan interpreters while Ash was an engineer in the topographical section – they formed a close bond. In October 2011, Ash and two other soldiers, Bryce Duffy and Lloyd Gavin, were shot in a green-on-blue attack.

The stark reality of loss is reflected in his tattoo depicting the repatriation of the remains of the three soldiers, based on a photograph taken by a Defence photographer: *We put the three coffins on the Hercules [aircraft] ... You can see the padre standing up the front, giving a sermon.*

Dave takes his ink seriously. He's always wanted tattoos, but held off getting one until the time was right: when he felt he had the experiences he needed to immortalise on his skin.

*Ash will never be forgotten. People do see the tattoo and ask me, they say, "Oh, I shouldn't have asked." [I say,] "No, no. It's alright. I put it there." Helps heal the wound. Its stuff I get off my chest.*



## ADAM

The tattoo at the centre of Adam's chest depicts a Tarin Kot memorial to his friend, David "Poppy" Pearce, who was killed by an IED blast in Afghanistan in 2007. Adam and Poppy had deployed to the Solomon Islands together, and Adam helped Poppy to go from reservist to full time in the army. Adam welcomed the pain of being tattooed: *Every time it hurts, I'm here to say it hurts. I've got mates who aren't here. It sort of evens it out.*

Out of the army after 28 years – with his enlistment and discharge dates prominently tattooed on his hands – Adam assists others with their own transition to civilian life, advocating honesty with oneself as much as with others: *When you can, talk about things openly ... You got to learn to swallow your pride. It doesn't matter what people think about you, what you've done, or what you're going through, only you and your family know the real you. Your real mates, they'll be your mates regardless of what happens.*

## PAUL W

*Tattooing became almost like therapy.*

On 18 July 2009, Paul and his friend Private Benjamin Ranaudo were on an early morning tasking in Uruzgan province, Afghanistan, when an IED exploded. Paul lost the lower half of his right leg, and Ben died at the scene. As Paul recuperated, he struggled to deal with the loss of a limb, the loss of a friend, and a diagnosis of PTSD. Tattoos helped him through this time: *I could sit there for four or five hours no problem at all, I could feel something at least.* While the tattooist's needle broke through the numbness of PTSD, it also got Paul out of the house, helping him begin to re-engage with the world.

Paul's right arm, initially planned as a single piece, is dedicated to his mates. As war in Afghanistan continued and more Australians lost their lives, the design grew to encompass his increasing sense of loss. His arm shows a battle-torn soldier looking skywards to a deity to lift him from the battlefield. *I can't say I'm too much of a believer in religion ... but having a mate who went that way, and knowing what a good person he is, you want to know that he went to a good place.*



## DUANE

*Veterans got to look after veterans, no matter what group you're from.*

A Battlefield Cross sits on Duane's left shoulder, planted amidst a field of red poppies. Duane is a veteran of Somalia, a conflict less well known than Vietnam and Afghanistan, but with an ongoing impact nevertheless. Suicide is a recurring theme for Duane and his peers; his best friend, who deployed to Somalia with Duane, took his life not long after returning. The cross stands as an emblem for those who died as a result of their service.

Duane's current work with young veterans could only begin once he had overcome his own grief and anger in the wake of Somalia, and the attitudes of others who did not or could not understand the effects of service. His tattoo reflects his personal evolution, and his desire to pay tribute to friends and veterans:

*I been thinking on that [tattoo] for many years ... I got the Steyr 'cause that was my first deployed weapon. I got the honour guard, and the poppies. And I've got the crosses there to symbolise the guys we lost, the deployed and those to suicide.*



## KYLE

*We all got "infidel" tattooed on us [because] that's what they call us when they're speaking to each other on the intercoms; we take it as a compliment, I guess.*

Kyle received a Commendation of Gallantry in 2013 for his role in a firefight with Taliban forces in Afghanistan. Australian troops routinely listen in to the radio chatter of Taliban fighters. It was during one such exchange that Kyle and his section were referred to as "infidels" who were surrounded – though Kyle's section proved to be the victors in that fight.

The tattoo was the work of Chris, an American soldier teamed with Kyle's force. Although Chris had never tattooed before, he had been sent a tattoo machine from home. Chris took his own life after returning home, one of several friends – including Australian soldiers – Kyle has lost to suicide.

When I had this, it felt like armour

Elaine

## HEALING

While being tattooed can itself be therapeutic, some tattoos are only possible once their wearers have accepted the past and moved on. But moving on is not the same as forgetting: pride in service plays a big role, and important – even painful – memories may be acknowledged, honoured, and transformed. These tattoos represent goals, mantras, symbols of self, and records of experience. They start conversations, and talking about tattoos means talking about experiences; for many, this is an essential part of the healing process.



### TONY'S BUTTERFLIES

Tony served in Borneo as an assault pioneer where he received a traditional tattoo from Iban trackers assisting his unit. While his tattoo is a lasting reminder of that time, his later service in Vietnam made a different kind of mark, impacting on his mental health and well-being. He can now speak frankly about the PTSD incurred during his deployments, and enjoys donating his time to the community, crafting these delicate paper butterflies for hospitals and doctors' surgeries.



### TONY

*They said, a warrior ... should have a tattoo. So I said, 'Yeah ok, I'll get one.'*

Tony was given his striking tattoo, a traditional Iban design, while deployed to Borneo as an assault pioneer. The Iban men worked as trackers and border scouts with his platoon. Despite language difficulties, Tony got to know and trust them well. He describes being tattooed as a simple procedure: *They split a stick, put three needles in it, some charcoal, sugar and water, and just tapped it in. It didn't hurt. It got hot, that's all.*

Tony's later service in Vietnam affected him and his family. He can now speak frankly about his PTSD and credits his wife for getting him to a psychiatrist, enabling him to begin his healing journey. He finds benefit in donating his time to the community, and his tattoo is not unlike the delicate colourful paper butterflies he makes for hospitals and doctors' surgeries.

## KYLIE

*Whether you're black, red, white, female - you're a soldier.*

Diagnosed with PTSD after a deployment to Iraq and experiencing bullying within the army, Kylie's recovery has been challenging, but she is fully committed to moving on. The medals tattooed on her calf are a reminder that, while her service is an important part of her life story, it is now behind her. Kylie's other tattoos function as supportive tools as she moves forward into another phase of life, which includes working with local athletic groups. The tattoo on her left arm is a potent message about the qualities she possesses: *To me, they're engraved on my bones. I've got courage. I do love. I do have wisdom and I am strong.*



## ELAINE

*I feel like a Wonder Woman now.*

Elaine deployed to East Timor in 2000 and enjoyed mingling with locals: *"The East Timorese are just so generous, especially the children."* After leaving the army, she got her first tattoo: a tribute to her Kokoda Track trek and the *four pillars at its summit, which are engraved with the words "courage", "endurance", "mateship", and "sacrifice"*. Later, Elaine felt ready to make positive changes in her life, as expressed by more tattoos: *My mum's signature before she died ... The poppies [for] my 13 years of military service ... The snake represents the shedding of the skin, it's like saying, "Move on, Elaine!"*

Elaine's tattoos start conversations, express her positive life decisions, and give a sense of protection and strength. *A transformation's just happened after the tattoo got put on, and it's like an armour for me to say, "Wow. There is life after. You can recover. You just got to reach out and ask for help."*



## LUKE

*I feel blessed. I'm in a hell of a better place.*

Luke never wanted anything but to join the army, and was "stoked" to be deployed to East Timor and Iraq. During both deployments, events affected his well-being; the crunch came in 2011 when he was posted to the Pilbara Regiment, where the red soiled landscape reminded him of Iraq.

After leaving the army, Luke started a university degree, something he never thought he'd do. His tattoo of the Archangel Michael defeating Lucifer embodies his attitude: *It's defeating anything that's going to put you off ... You can beat it.*

His tattooist, childhood friend Tony, applied the slouch hat, poppies, and dog tags which cite the Biblical quotation John 15:13: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." As Luke says, in the army, as in life, *you help each other out.*





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