DUTYOF CARE

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The Weekend Australian
Saturday 6th March 2021
3093 words
Page 12,13,14,16 | Section: General
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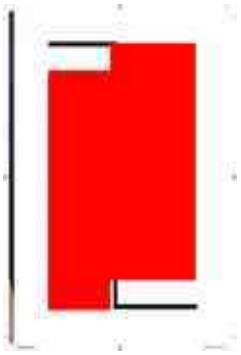

Gwen Cherne's home office is as bright, ordered and productive-looking as its occupant. She deliberately leaves the lounge room untidy at night after her two kids Emily and Lachlan have gone to bed because her therapist says it's healthier for family life to leave a few things undone, toys lying about. But she applies an almost military discipline to her work life in her office "because I needed to be able to control something".

That sense of discipline is reflected in a gilt-framed photograph on a shelf: a combat soldier in front of a tank in Afghanistan, a man at the peak of his power. Yet the man's green beret and medals in a box arranged around the picture hint that this is a family shrine to someone lost. "Sergeant Peter Jon Cafe, 2nd Commando Regiment, Died In Service 6 February 2017, Sydney, New South Wales" reads the tribute in his regiment newsletter *Commando News*. The journal's cover features the same "shrine" photo of the broad-shouldered soldier who caught US aid worker Gwen's eye when they met in Afghanistan. "That picture reminds me every day why I come to work," she says.

Nobody would wish for Cherne to be as qualified as she is for her job as the nation's first Commissioner for Veteran Family Advocacy. Her deep understanding of military service and the toll it takes on veterans and their families was gained in the most tragic fashion – when her husband Peter ended his life in the garage of their family home. "After Pete died, I was speaking to two of my friends who were with me in Afghanistan. I said, 'This is going to be my life now, helping defence members and veterans dealing with suicide prevention.' I felt that every single thing I had done in my life had brought me to this. This is why I'm here."

Cherne's intensity gives way at regular intervals to deep-throated laughter over lighter moments with Emily, 8, and Lachlan, 6. During our Covid-distanced conversations, conducted via Zoom, we are interrupted by the neighbours' kids clambering up the steps to play and our chats are slotted between conference calls with staff from Veterans Affairs and Defence. "I saw [prime minister's wife] Jenny Morrison at the swimming carnival the day after I got the job," she says. "Our kids go to the same school – and I couldn't even speak. I burst into tears and I said, 'Just thank Scott for me', because I found so much hope in the idea of this position."

It's an extraordinary turn of events for the 43-year-old war widow who, while raising her family alone, has taken on the duty of care more broadly for the families of 680,000 veterans, former and serving. Her job is to act as a sounding board and advocate for their welfare in every policy and service shaped by government. "You can't forget families anymore because 'Gwen's going to ask!'" she says, with a glint in her eye.

Her friend Jo Beavis, a retired army sergeant and former support staff with the Special Air Service Regiment, often drives Cherne from Sydney to Canberra for her meetings. "Gwen just doesn't stop. If I'm worried about someone, and think they need support, I'll email her. She won't rest until they have the support they need."

It's no surprise that top of Cherne's list is mental health. "The year Pete died was the year that 85 veterans died by suicide," she says. In October and November last year there were nine suicides, and two in August. Four of the nine deaths were in Townsville, home to Australia's largest military base. Tasmanian senator and veterans advocate Jacqui Lambie says military suicide should be treated as "one of Australia's most pressing problems".

Cherne stepped into the job barely 10 weeks before another traumatic event hit the headlines. On November 19, the Brereton inquiry released its findings into war crimes allegedly committed by Australian Special Forces in Afghanistan. Major General Paul Brereton's heavily redacted report of an investigation that took four and a half years to complete found evidence of 39 murders of Afghan civilians by Special Forces personnel. It described summary execution of unarmed civilians and the act of "blooding" – junior soldiers being ordered by superiors to shoot prisoners to achieve their first kill.

Twenty-five ADF personnel were alleged perpetrators or "accessories" to unlawful killings between 2009 and 2013. And while no charges have yet been laid by Federal Police, 13 soldiers have been issued notices to "show cause" why they shouldn't be thrown out of the defence force.

The Brereton report has had wider ripples, too. All Special Operations soldiers who served in Afghanistan – up to 3000 – could lose their

meritorious service medals in a move that has sparked outrage for appearing to punish the many for the sake of a few. It posthumously includes Peter Cafe and members of his Sydney-based 2 Commando unit, one that suffered more casualties in Afghanistan than any other unit. "To me it was group punishment of the worst kind and it disrespects the amazing service of 3000 special forces," says SAS Association chairman Peter Fitzpatrick, a former elite soldier. "Given the backlash from the families of the fallen, hopefully that measure [to remove medals] will not see the light of day."

Ahead of the Brereton report being made public, Cherne flew to Perth in mid-October last year to visit the Special Air Service Regiment, based at Campbell Barracks, where many of Australia's elite soldiers and their families live in the area. It was a harrowing trip; everyone in the tight SAS community, from commanding officers to veterans organisations and soldier relatives, had already heard a bombshell was about to go off. "I think the words I would use [about the families] are angry, disheartened, anxious and sad, all of those things," says Cherne, who doesn't seek to minimise the report's findings. "Children are worried about dad and whether people will take him away. And they are being bullied."

In less than three weeks, Cherne was in touch with more than 150 families across Australia. They rang for different reasons, she says, "but there wasn't one conversation I had where the inquiry didn't come up, where they weren't saddened by the whole thing even if they had nothing to do with it. My priority is supporting the ones directly affected no matter what happens – everyone is a father, a mother, a sister, a daughter, a son."

Fitzpatrick heard the bullying stories. "A kid who'd lost their father on operations in the Middle East was told, 'It's just as well your father died because we're told they're all killers'." He's grateful for Cherne's support. "When I pick up the phone and talk to Gwen you don't have to explain things. She knows what's involved. And she has access to some of the key decision-makers in the nation."

Cherne felt her own children needed an explanation about the Brereton report, not least because their beloved half-brother Tom – from an earlier relationship of Peter's – entered the army less than a year before his father died. Cherne, who rings 22-year-old Tom every day for a chat, says she made no excuses for the actions described by the report. "I told the kids even in war we should always do the right thing and protect civilians. But I also explained that these are alleged actions and that in our country people are innocent until proven guilty. I also told them that their late father served with great distinction and honour and they have no reason not to remain immensely proud of him and the men and women who served honourably with him. I was in Afghanistan and I know that amazing work was done by thousands of people, civilian or military. I hold on to that."

Cherne's elevation from war widow to national veterans' champion is a stunning trajectory for someone who came to live in Australia only seven years ago. Born in Cleveland, Ohio, she learnt firsthand about the impact of war service on families from her Vietnam veteran father, who medicated himself with alcohol. "He flew on the B52 bombers and was quite affected by the damage he did in that country. He would never talk about his service. He had a real zest for life and took us kids everywhere but I felt he was angry about everything – toys on the floor, dust on the shelf, never what he was really angry about. I remember I was five and I asked my mother why she didn't leave him... If we'd grown up understanding post-traumatic stress like we do now, he'd probably have got help."

The marriage ended when Gwen, the youngest child, left home. "When my parents drove back from dropping me off at Boston College, my mother told my father she was leaving him." Cherne turned to a psychology degree and four years of intensive group therapy "to learn about the distorted lens I had". Care and rescue was in her DNA; she became an aid worker in poor villages in Ecuador and Chile, then in New York she helped set up schools

in Brooklyn and the Bronx that helped struggling children to graduate.

After taking a masters' degree in international policy, Cherne's next big adventure was in Afghanistan, where the young idealist confronted life in a war zone, volunteering for an Afghan women's network and working on education and refugee programs. On her third visit in August 2008, she was working as a contractor to the US Agency for International Development. "I was in Chandigarh and Kabul and Jalalabad, living outside the wire [military compound] and flying all over the country." Soon after arriving, she was escorted into the project office to meet Peter Cafe, an ex-Australian soldier who had spent five years in Iraq and Afghanistan working for a contract security firm. "I'll never forget meeting Pete," she says, giggling at the memory of a striking-looking man who appeared "in very short Waratah rugby shorts" and a little blue hat. "And he had a very romantic Australian accent."

"Pete was informal, approachable, kind and tough and cranky, all you want in someone who's there to protect you. Six foot two, big muscly arms because he'd played rugby all his life."

Born in a NSW country town he felt was too small, Cafe had joined the Australian Army at 17, left for family reasons and rejoined in 1999 to serve in Cambodia and Timor with his Commando unit. Later, he resigned again to take up contract security work in the Middle East where he met Cherne, who was married but heading for an amicable divorce from her American lawyer husband.

When she took Pete back to visit her family in the US, the veteran father and son-in-law hit it off. Did she ever wonder about that shared military background and her attraction to Peter? Cherne laughs. "One hundred per cent! I couldn't save my dad so apparently I decided to save Pete!" She knew he'd struggled with childhood trauma, blaming his father for not protecting him against his mother's abuse. "Once he was 17, he didn't see or speak to her again."

"It created narcissistic tendencies in Pete, a sense that he was underappreciated by the world. But he got help and started to heal, and there was tenderness and love underneath this big scary exterior."

On their return to Australia, she supported him to go back into the army and an elite forces' role in

Striking: Cherne in Afghanistan; her husband Peter Cafe

2 Commando based in Sydney. By the time she was heavily pregnant with Emily in 2012 he had been deployed to Afghanistan. "He'd ring and say, 'Any news?' and I'd say, 'You're going out on a mission again, aren't you?' I could tell from the tone of his voice." Cherne had discovered a support network of army wives in Sydney and gave birth with two women friends in attendance. Peter first held Emily when she was four weeks old, after he had brought an injured soldier back to Australia.

But in 2016 the war warrior was struck down in Iraq. Cherne says she'd warned a unit officer that Peter had worked 189 days straight. "He was exhausted. He was standing in his office one day and felt an attack of vertigo." In reality, Peter had suffered a stroke and was medically evacuated back home. "There were no physical deficits but he struggled with his poor brain function in an environment with very high-functioning people

[redacted]

and hadn't liked it. He had been an exceptional leader, an exceptional motivator at work, and then at home all his insecurities would come out. He was just a father, just a husband and for him that wasn't enough." He was fast slipping into one of Australia's highest risk groups for suicide; between 2002 and 2018, the rate of suicide in ex-servicemen discharged on medical grounds was three times higher than those who left voluntarily.

He became depressed, sitting on the couch for a week, barely talking. "He'd want the kids to be quiet,

at times he frightened her enough for her to have a bag packed at the door. And the defence force was missing in action. "From the moment Pete touched down from Iraq until he died, I had no contact with his unit. They worked with him on his rehabilitation; he would go to welfare meetings that h
didn't tell me I was invited to. There was no recog
nition that he had a family, a carer who needed t
understand what the rehabilitation process was o
even know when his appointments were."

In January 2017, she told her husband to go t
golf and followed it with an ultimatum. If he didn
come back, she'd give him the divorce he claime
he wanted. But if he came home, "you must b
caring, present and invested". He came back an
the next few weeks were smooth, althoug
Cherne kept the bag by the door. "Then one da
he exploded at the kids because his brain wasn
functioning and he couldn't concentrate. We go
functioning and he couldn't concentrate. We got into an argument and I went outside to him and said, 'I love you and I want you to get help and fix this.' He flew at me – he threw Emily out of the way, he stepped over Lachlan and hit me in the back of the head. I grabbed my keys in the kitchen, picked the kids up and ran to my neighbour's house. I was praying that he'd get help again. I thought by not being there, it would end the cycle of violence. I knew I couldn't save him."

She called his unit and asked someone to go to the

family home. "The chaplain called him and Pete death. A couple of weeks later she was visited by the Commander of Special Operations Australia, Major General Jeff Sengelman. "When he was in my kitchen I knew immediately that things had to

said all the right things. He played golf on Saturday, and on Monday morning, after organising his things, he killed himself in our garage. A message he sent me at 4.32 in the morning said, 'How long would it take you to get here?' It was 'someone save me'. But Pete knew how to get help. On my shelf I have a whole lot of his books on depression, anxiety, living with the black dog. He knew all those things but he was unwilling to put his hand up." Post-traumatic stress is not caused by combat alone, she says. "Pete always struggled – it wasn't just one thing."

Cherne says she felt "blurry, cold" after Peter's death. A couple of weeks later she was visited by the

change. Tom was already in the army and I was not going to let the same thing happen to him." She joined the NSW War Widows Association and threw herself into veteran support work. She sensed policymakers were looking for urgent change, especially after so many suicides. "Families were starting to put their hand up with the courage to move past the shame and stigma. And mental health was becoming a national discussion point as well."

Since taking up her Commissioner's role last August, Cherne has become part of a powerful trio that includes Repatriation Commissioner Don Spinks and Defence Engagement Commissioner Stuart Smith. "The three of us sit here and say 'what are our priorities', and we put some real hard questions to the defence department about what's missing. We're in with the secretary twice a week and have regular contact with the minister."

Her workload has increased since she's been invited onto the Repatriation Commission and the Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Commission, but she's not complaining. "I was a bit apprehensive that I would become part of a big government machine and would have to toe the line. That isn't at all what happens. I have the ear of the decision-makers every single day.

"More veterans and families are getting support now than ever before," she adds. "There have been massive efforts within Defence, the Department of Veterans Affairs and ex-service organisations to break down that deep shame that comes with having mental health issues. But we're not doing enough in the prevention space."

An obvious question is how Cherne herself has survived the last few years. "There's a lot of us who reach out to Gwen to make sure she's taking care of herself," says her friend Jo Beavis. Cherne praises Open Arms, a free support group for veterans. "It's a fantastic service and they provide me with supervision. I see my therapist, I work out every day, I have hope and joy in my life and a gratitude journal that I write in every night." The entries include "walking on the beach with my children and learning about sea urchins, or going on bushwalks". The other joy comes from connecting with friends from Nairobi to New York, "including veteran families all over the world".

A few months ago, when work pressure mounted and the Covid lockdown left Cherne and the kids at a loose end, they painted a large, cheerful rainbow across the length of her office window. "And we've just left it there." ●

Support: Cherne with Emily, Tom and Lachlan; speaking on Anzac Day