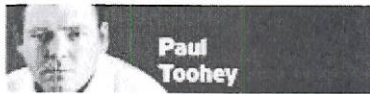




War widows fighting not to be forgotten



SPECIAL INVESTIGATION

THE Defence Department talks of a "womb to the tomb" philosophy of caring for Diggers and their families. It is make believe.

When a Digger dies, distraught widows are dumped with a mountain of paperwork and left to fight their way through a minefield of bureaucratic entanglement.

John Burrows, a former lieutenant-colonel in the SAS, wants Australians to know how Defence treats widows.

"They do not care to make sure these kids can get on with life. They bury the soldier, say 'Here are the forms, see you later,'" Burrows says.

Naomi Nary's husband Dave, an SAS warrant officer, was killed in 2005 in Kuwait — run over while training to escort John Howard on a tour through Iraq.

In angry moments, Nary, 44, feels her husband died while rehearsing for a politician's photo opportunity.

But this woman, an army reservist, is more cynical about Defence's claim it is a caring organisation.

"Defence believes that it's doing these things, but it's not," she says.

"They've not come a long way. Short of providing the immediate stuff the funeral within a month they've wiped their hands."

Is Defence a family?

"It's fairly superficial, generally speaking. Coming from me, being someone who is in Defence, that is

strong statement," she said.

Nary lives in Perth, the home of the SAS. She was lucky to come across Burrows, an advocate with the Australian SAS Association, to help her through her paperwork.

There is no one to help young widows negotiate the most difficult times in their lives. Burrows, 61, has filled that void.

Over the past decade he has helped more war or service widows than any other individual or organisation.

Burrows is being increasingly called to the east coast to assist widows with the paperwork.

This, says Nary, is a telling

observation on the paucity of national Defence widow care.

Burrows describes seeing a Digger's young widow lying in the foetal position, unable to get on her feet and find some birth and marriage certificates. She needed them to fill out forms to claim compensation for her husband's death.

"It's somewhere in there," she said, pointing to the study, "but I can't go in there."

Burrows went into the study.

"I almost broke down," he says. The study was a shrine, with photos of the Digger in his combat gear.

"There's a lot of vitality in a young marriage and all of a sudden the light is gone," says Burrows.

"You see the look in their eyes and see absolute desperation."

A Digger's death is public and

stressful. The whole country wants to know everything about him and, nowadays, the prime minister and the opposition leader of the day insist on attending funerals.

Beneath this charade is a woman crying for a bloke she considered quite ordinary, albeit in his own special way. He's a hero, according to the newspapers. Is she proud? Yes.

But he's dead. It's not hard to imagine her confusion. And then she must start filling out forms for compensation and military super.

Defence and its agencies are reluctant to help. All are frightened of the potential conflict of interest in assisting someone make claims against their own departments.

"Defence don't take the courtesy of finding out for themselves how these young kids are living, or asking them what they can do to make their life liveable over the next few months," says Burrows.

A new widow is in no state to fill out long forms or make rational decisions on the multiple choices of available benefits. They hit the wall, or make bad decisions.

They are in no condition to brawl with government when rights are challenged.

The SAS Association is furious it has been fighting for six years to get widows better care.

"These young girls are in a high state of turmoil and terribly

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distraught about the whole situation," says Burrows.

Some unmarried women have been forced to prove they were in a relationship with the man for whom they are grieving. They have not always succeeded in this.

The bereavement entitlement is the most immediate payment made by Defence. It is crucial to tide the widow through the grieving period until the bigger compensation payments are arranged. The money normally goes automatically to the dead soldier's account.

The payment is 12-weeks pay, plus all the dead soldiers' leave entitlements, which can be up to

\$70,000. The records of one Digger killed in Afghanistan this year showed he was single even though he was engaged to be married to his girlfriend and had been living with her for two years.

"Defence did not grant her a bereavement payment," says Burrows. "The irony is that the DVA [Veterans Affairs] did recognise the relationship and paid her other entitlements."

Another Digger who was killed in Afghanistan last year had his own bank account, and gave his young wife money each week. The bereavement payment — \$50,000 — was paid into the soldier's account,

which Defence then closed. The widow was unable to access it. Burrows and his mates moved in, fast, made some calls and had the money sent to the woman.

The SAS Association offers practical help.

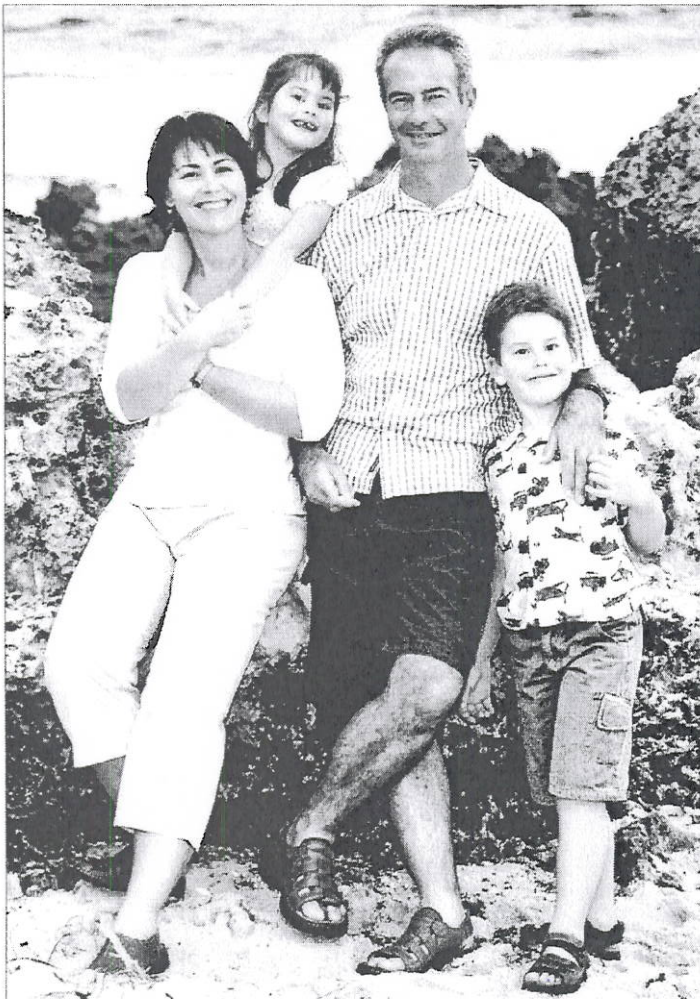
They provide support in making claims, selling cars, visiting financial advisers, returning military gear, visiting banks. There are mortgages, hire purchase and insurance. Overseas death certificates may need

to be recognised by state coroners.

The association derives satisfaction from looking after its own and feels a need to help non-SAS widows. The work is draining.

But it will continue until Defence recognises it has a moral requirement to create an authority to give all widows maximum help.

It is the Department of Veterans Affairs that has overall control of handling of benefits. It says it is working with Defence, other Government agencies, ex-service organisations and service provider on "better co-ordination of the support services provided". "The project improves support to younger widows," it said.



Abandoned to survive alone in a harsh world: Naomi Nary with husband Dave and children Hayley and Joshua

