

WILLING AND ABLE

The Invictus Games start today in Sydney, but many of the sick or injured military personnel and veterans ready to compete already feel like winners. The Games, created by Prince Harry, have helped save their lives

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Mateship. Working together. Serving your country. These are the things that give Australian soldiers purpose; the ethos that keeps them going when lives are on the line. Take that ethos away, though, and the result can be disastrous.

Today *SAWeekend* speaks with three former members of the Australian military who explain just how catastrophic the sudden loss of your armed forces career can be. No more common goal, sense of order, mates, direction.

Each of them suffered physical injuries and mental trauma, which led them to question their worth and their future. And each, when they thought hope had gone, found it in a renewed sense of purpose through training for the Invictus Games starting today in Sydney, running to October 27.

The Games are an international adaptive sports competition for disabled veterans, a creation of veteran Prince Harry who will attend with his new wife Meghan, Duchess of Sussex. There will be nine SA athletes among the 72 Australians competing against 500 competitors from 18 nations.

BRENDAN HARDMAN

Wheelchair basketball and sitting volleyball

Invictus means unconquerable, a concept Adelaide veteran Brendan Hardman understands very well.

One night in April 2017, Hardman had a bottle of pills beside his bed ready to swallow. He looked over at his wife, Monique, sleeping beside him and wondered what her life would be like if he ended his. His love for her brought him back from the brink.

The 30-year-old from Nairne is a former Artillery Officer with the 16 Air Land Regiment, the Army's ground-based air defence unit. No doubt influenced by his mother's time in the Army Reserve, he attended the Royal Military College in Duntroon, graduating as an officer in 2010.

After two years of training, he was deployed to Afghanistan in 2012, where he was troop commander. Hardman was in charge of up to 30 soldiers at a time.

"There was no greater feeling than having soldiers under your command and being able to shape and develop them," he says proudly.

For the demanding role, Hardman kept himself at peak fitness, playing football and working out until a game of squash led him to suffer a prolapsed disc in 2011. His back never

recovered, requiring several surgeries including a spinal fusion.

Hardman could no longer play football and keeping fit was a challenge. By April 2016, he was medically discharged from the Army, assessed as unable to undertake basic duties. It was a shock.

"I felt isolated," he says. "My wife was going to work every day and I was in the house on my own with no idea about what I was going to do."

In severe pain, Hardman was also on a cocktail of prescribed drugs – highly addictive opioids – and his reliance on them was affecting his already deteriorating mental health. Diagnosed with depression in late 2015, it continued to take its toll until it culminated in the night he considered taking his life in April 2017.

"I felt like I was failing at everything I was doing," he recalls. "I really wanted to get back into work but I was in a lot of pain and I wasn't mentally able to do it."

Although he hit his lowest ebb that night, it was also the turning point. Recognising he was addicted to opioids, on medical advice he stopped the tablets. The immediate impact was terrible: he suffered symptoms of restless legs and a constant crawling sensation under his skin to the point where he was punching his own arms to try to put an end to the pain.

But by mid-2017, Hardman was getting his life back. Off the drugs, but overweight and unfit, he was thrown another lifeline, this time from an old friend, veteran Mark Reidy, who is CEO of veteran health and wellbeing charity, The Road Home. Reidy suggested to him that he should join their Invictus Pathways Program and try out wheelchair basketball. Hardman went along for a trial.

"I was really slow around the court," he recalls. "The skin on my hands was split open where the wheels were constantly rubbing and I'd ripped off the tops off my fingernails but as soon as I finished, I asked when I could come back!"

He couldn't have been too slow, because he was soon training with the national league in which his team won bronze at the national competition held in Brisbane earlier this year.

Hardman has now been selected to compete in this year's Invictus Games in Sydney, in the adaptive sports of wheelchair basketball and sitting volleyball – and, to cap it off, he's been made captain of the Australian wheelchair basketball team.

Most people would assume that wheelchair basketball is a sport only available to those that don't have the use of their legs but being in a chair puts everyone at the same level.

"Ninety per cent of it is being able to manipulate the chair well," he explains. "In wheelchair basketball, ball skills and shooting are the least important."

Hardman was once asked how it feels to be in a wheelchair. He recalls his answer: "It feels like you're superman."

What does that mean? "I can't really run anymore, I will never be able to run again. I can't jump or play able-bodied sport anymore, I can't play able-bodied basketball if I wanted to, but if I get in a chair I can do anything I want. It's freedom."

Hardman trains every day, sometimes twice, with a mix of gym and cardiovascular exercise including swimming, basketball chair work and volleyball. In the lead up to the Games, Hardman enjoyed the camaraderie of the military world he left behind.

"You get all the great stuff of being part of a team environment and, for me, being able to lead again, to captain a team, is fantastic."

Getting involved in adaptive sports has given Hardman a new focus which has spilt over into other parts of his life. He has recently started a new job as Relationship Officer with the Hospital Research Foundation working with the Foundation's donors to support medical research. As an Ambassador for The Road Home, he speaks to veterans about depression and mental health. His purpose now is to offer hope to others.

Hardman sees the Invictus Games as a chance to do that. Although it is obviously a thrill for competitors, it goes beyond that.

"It's about demonstrating and delivering hope to other veterans, and show them that anything is possible, to inspire them to get off the couch and get involved in sport in some way."

Will he get to meet Harry? "Others have told me he wanders around a fair bit and that he's a really open person to meet. I'm hoping I'll get that chance."

EMILEA MYSKO

Cycling and indoor rowing

As a little girl, Emilea Mysko liked to watch her father press his RAAF uniform and polish his shoes before attending a RAAF mess. Pride in his appearance was not something she and



MEGHAN & HARRY





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EMILEA MYSKO

her two sisters would otherwise notice about their dad. It said a lot about how he felt about his military life.

All three girls ended up following in his footsteps, the oldest joining the RAAF while Mysko and her younger sister chose the Navy.

A year out of school, Mysko enlisted in 2007 as a medic, serving in naval bases on land and at sea, providing nursing care to navy and other military personnel. Mysko and her colleagues would also help provide emergency care to civilians. At sea, she was one of two or three medics treating up to 30 of the ship’s company on a busy day.

Mysko thrived on challenges at work. It was the challenges to her health and personal life that nearly overwhelmed the 30-year-old, who lives at Salisbury North.

It was during Mysko’s first and only deployment at sea in 2009, on a four-month peacekeeping mission in South-East Asia, that she suffered a serious injury to her shoulder at work, requiring a reconstruction 18 months later. In the midst of chronic physical pain, she also had to deal with serious issues in her relationship. By March 2011, she was considering taking her own life and was admitted to a private hospital in Sydney for eight weeks to recover. A week after returning home, she fell pregnant.

Four months later, Mysko had separated from her partner and got a naval posting at Edinburgh RAAF base.

But her problems got worse. In late 2014, she suffered a serious infection in her leg

nearly leading to its amputation. Still working, and with the extra pressure of carrying heavy loads while compensating for her infected leg, she broke the other ankle. That needed a reconstruction in early 2015 and two years later, that foot was fused.

The avid netballer and regular runner was no longer able to participate in activities that had been an important salve for her mental health. But the final straw came when she was given her medical discharge in April 2015. Directionless, injured and depressed – and as a single mum with a young daughter – Mysko was frightened for her future.

“When you have such a strong network where they literally do everything for you, to going out on your own into civilian life with all these medical problems, it is difficult to know how to move forward,” she says.

Sometimes you only need one person to help you do that. For Mysko, as with Brendan Hardman, that was veteran Mark Reidy, of The Road Home, who suggested the Invictus Pathways Program for her.

Mysko’s psychologist put her in touch with Reidy late last year after she’d had a horror year of three hospital admissions for depression. Reluctantly, she attended an information session.

“I took a chance and it was probably the best chance I’ve taken in my life,” she says.

The first thing that Reidy did was present her with a bike that The Road Home purchased for her. Surprised, she told Reidy that she hadn’t ridden a bike since school >



BENJAMIN YEOMANS

A NEW DIRECTION

■ The Invictus Pathways Program is a collaboration between the peer support program of veteran charity The Road Home and the tertiary health and science department of the University of South Australia. It is the first program in Australia providing support and tailored facilities for veterans aspiring to compete in the Invictus Games.

■ The Program provides struggling veterans with something to work towards and a purpose to give them direction, aid their mental health and encourage them to be active and participate within society.

theroadhome.com.au

Still learning about his brain injury, Yeomans wasn't sure what he was going to be able to do. He went from job to job until several months ago a friend with a gym supplies firm offered him an apprenticeship in mechanical engineering, helping build the equipment. Yeomans welcomed the opportunity. Trade school is accommodating with his injuries and, as a family man with two young children, it has eased some of his stress.

Mentally though, Yeomans has struggled with the sense of disappointment in himself that he had been injured before he ever managed to see active service.

"I felt like my injury wasn't really justified," he explains. "It was such a dramatic injury for never having served overseas."

Yeomans shared his thoughts with fellow veteran and friend, Luke Adamson, who had also been medically discharged and is now CEO of the veterans' charity, Heroes on the Home Front. Adamson knew what might help. Recognising his friend's competitive spirit and his love of sport, Adamson suggested that Yeomans apply to compete in the Invictus Games.

Yeomans was accepted and he has been training hard for the past 10 months for the 100m and 200m athletics events as well as long jump and the 4 x 100m relay. For the first time since the accident, Yeomans has started setting goals for himself.

"I was just cruising before the Games came into my life; it's been really good to have a goal again," he says. "It's the kick in the backside you need to get out of bed and do something."

Yeomans is aiming for a personal best of completing the 100m in 10 seconds. He knows though that the true benefit of the Invictus Games is not to win or even get selected – it is what the process of training gives back to a veteran like himself.

It involves all those elements that a person seeks when enlisting in the military – the mental toughness, resilience, training habits and self-discipline, just in a different capacity. For veterans who are no longer in the forces, they get a lot of what they loved back into their lives.

And then there's the comradeship. For Yeomans, it was significant to his recovery to meet people worse off than him, some missing limbs not just through deployment overseas but through training exercises within Australia, just like himself. It is also about getting back a network of people who have seen a life outside civilian life, something that only veterans understand. The highlight of the Games for Yeomans?

"Just to see that whole universe of veterans coming together from all over the world, who have all been down a similar path, doing the best they can, regardless of their injuries." ●

If you need help: Lifeline 131 114, Beyond Blue 1300 224 636, Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service 1800 011 046

days. She recalls his response: "You might not be able to run or play netball, but you can ride a bike."

Reidy took her on group rides so she could meet new people and learn how to cycle again. She discovered she had a talent for it.

"Cycling has given me that sense of accomplishment and that sense of success that I never thought I'd have again," she says.

In April this year, Mysko also began indoor rowing (using a rowing machine). As with cycling, she showed natural ability. Again, with her self-esteem so low, she questioned whether she was good at the sport or whether the coaches were just telling her that.

By June, it was clear. Mysko was selected to compete in the US's Warrior Games held in Colorado this year, the first South Australian veteran to do so. She went on to win a gold and bronze medal for indoor rowing and a silver medal in cycling. Her selection for the Invictus Games to compete in cycling and indoor rowing is the cherry on top.

What has her selection for the Games meant to her? "If I could only choose one thing, I would say it's given me hope. Twelve months ago I couldn't see a future for myself, not only in physical activity but in anything at all."

Currently in her fourth year studying a double degree in education and health

sciences at the University of South Australia, Mysko plans to be a physical education teacher. Before her involvement in the Invictus program she was having serious doubts about her intended career. How could she be a PE teacher when she was unable to run or jump or even exercise? Now that she has an understanding of adaptive sports, Mysko believes she'll be a better PE teacher.

"We learn about inclusion at university but there's nothing like the real thing to teach you," she says.

"Meeting people like amputees or people with decreased motor functions but still giving their sport their all is inspirational."

BENJAMIN YEOMANS

Athletics

Ben Yeomans grew up in a family that was deeply committed to public service. His mother, father, stepfather and brother are all in the police force and his sister serves in the Royal Australian Navy. Yeomans was intrigued by the fact that his family members would wake up each morning not knowing what challenges they would face that day.

It was what he sought for his own career. So in 2011 he enlisted with the Infantry Corps of the Australian Army, after spending a few years playing semi-professional football in

the SANFL and working as a concreter. The 27-year-old, from Walkley Heights, spent the next three years training as a soldier within Australia, learning the skills he would need to be deployed overseas.

He never made it. On a training exercise in 2014, Yeomans fell four metres down an embankment and landed head first on a rock in the middle of a dry creek bed. He suffered a torn ACL requiring a full knee reconstruction and 18 months later was diagnosed with an associated traumatic brain injury, resulting in issues with memory, speech, mood swings and some cognitive function.

Then, in 2015, Yeomans was diagnosed with an eye dysfunction known as strabismus, a condition where the eyes don't work together. The associated vision problems meant he was never going to be able to operate a firearm again – so he was medically discharged.

Initially, he was in denial.

"After all, as a soldier you're trained to walk into oncoming fire, so feeling bulletproof comes with the territory," he says. But the change to civilian life hit hard. "In the army you have structure, you get told what you are doing and when you are doing it. Once you are out, you are left to your own devices overnight. It feels like you have lost your identity in the space of one sleep."

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