Spring 2025

Shrapnel In The Soul

DECORATED EX-AUSTRALIAN ARMY HELICOPTER PILOT, COMBAT VETERAN AND MENTAL HEALTH AMBASSADOR KEVIN HUMPHREYS' DISCUSSION ON MENTAL HEALTH

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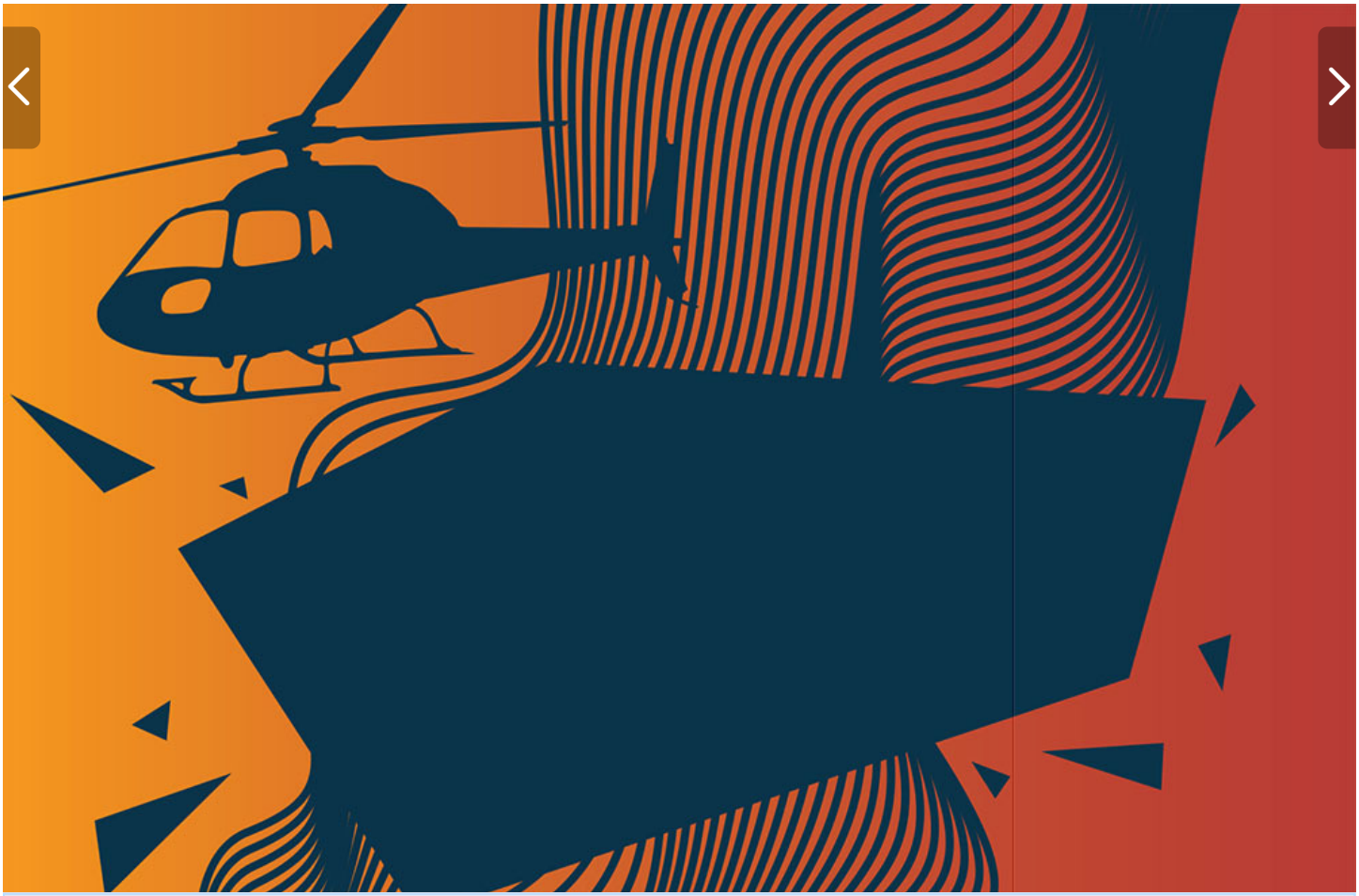
Featured | Health and Safety



[Taken from Kevin Humphreys' talk at the NAAA Ag Aviation Expo in Fort Worth, Texas, November 18, 2024]

HEALTH & SAFETY ISSUE

Kevin Humphreys lay sobbing and convulsing uncontrollably on the front veranda of his home in Australia on a quiet Monday in 2008. He'd recently returned home from his second deployment to Afghanistan as a pilot flying CH-47D Chinook helicopters with the Australian Army Aviation Corps, his third combat tour counting an earlier stint in Iraq.

He'd survived a mid-air collision, flown through rocket and gunfire, left his living quarters in Afghanistan moments before a rocket destroyed it and earned a Distinguished Service Cross for command and courageous leadership under fire.

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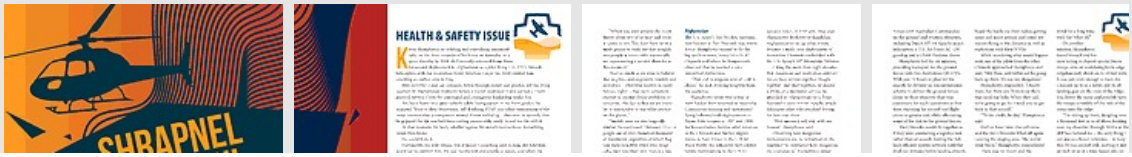
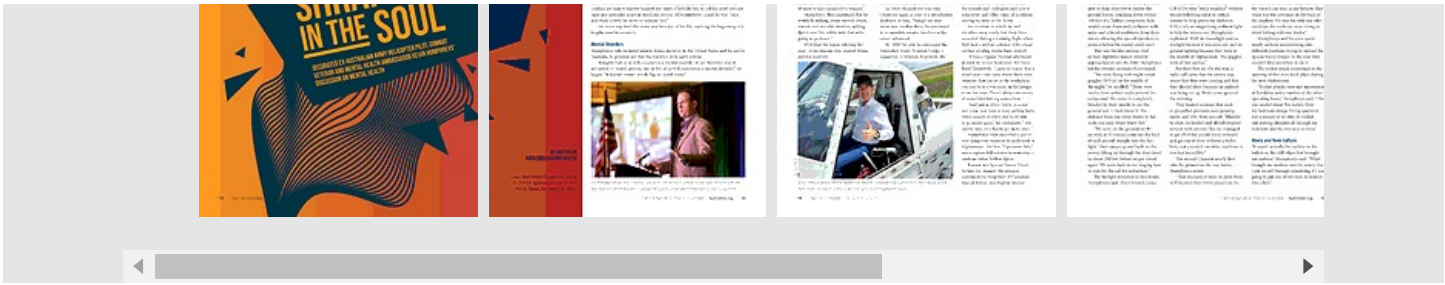




Yet, back home in a quiet suburb, while laying pavers in his front garden, he snapped. Years of deep depression, self-loathing, PTSD and silent suppression of the inner torment that accompanies mental illness welled up – this time so severely that he gripped the tile saw he'd been cutting pavers with, ready to end his life with it.

At that moment, his body rebelled against his mind's instructions. Something inside him broke.

He couldn't do it.

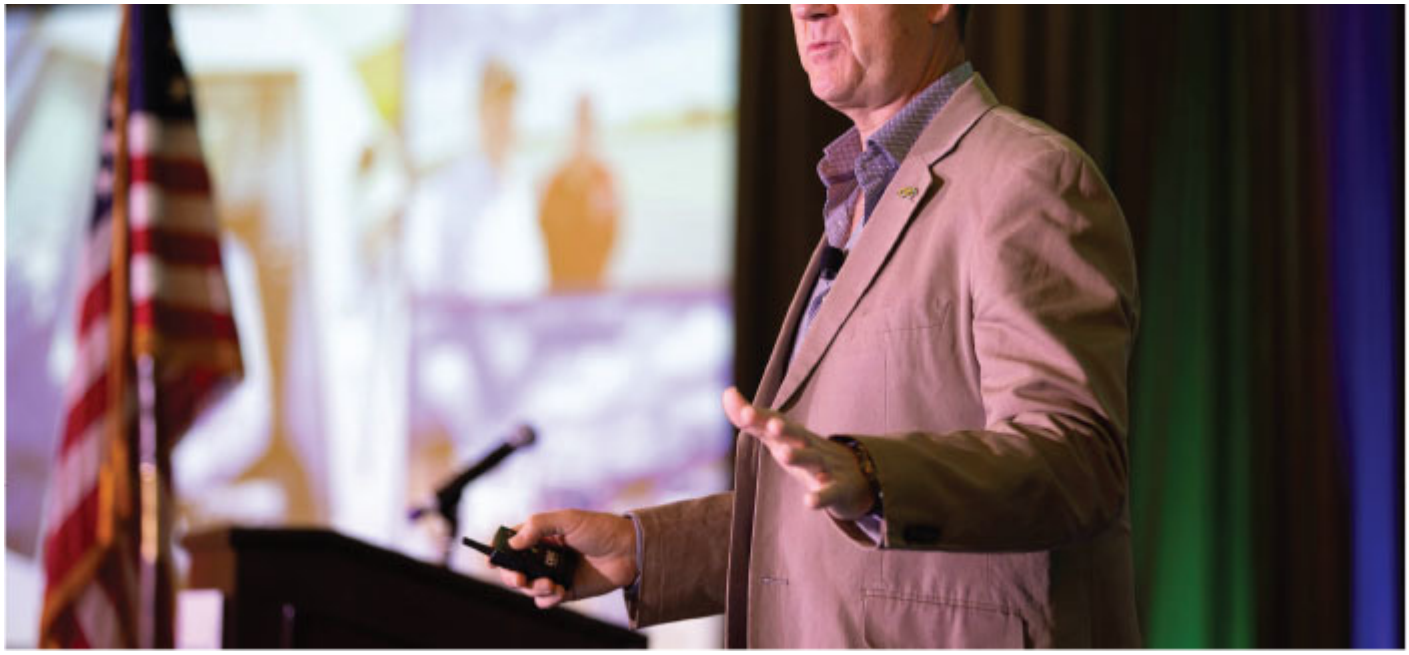
Fortunately, his wife Megan was at home. Crouching next to him, she held him and tried to comfort him. He was incoherent and unable to speak, and when she couldn't get him to express himself she asked if he'd like her to call his unit's psychologist and specialist aviation medicine doctor. All Humphreys could do was "rock and shake a little bit more to indicate 'yes'."

The event was both the worst and best day of his life, marking the beginning of a lengthy road to recovery.

Mental Disorders

Humphreys' talk included mental illness statistics in the United States and his native Australia; he pointed out that the statistics were sadly similar.

"Roughly half of us will experience a mental disorder in our lifetimes and in any given 12-month period, one in five of us will experience a mental disorder," he began. "It doesn't matter which flag we stand under."



Kickoff Breakfast speaker Kevin Humphreys, who served in the Australian Army for 20 years flying combat missions with Black Hawk and Chinook helicopters, encouraged the audience to think about mental health, anxiety and depression.

"When you look around the room there's about 450 of us here and we're at tables of ten. You don't have to be a math genius to work out that roughly two people at every table statistically are experiencing a mental disorder at this moment."

"And as much as we want to believe that as pilots and engineers, loaders and operators – otherwise known as superheroes, right? – that we're somehow exempt to mental illness problems or concerns. The fact is that we are every bit as susceptible as any other person on the planet."

"Suicide rates are also tragically similar," he continued. "Between 12 to 14 people out of every hundred-thousand of population, regardless of which flag, take their own lives every year. Tragically, men take their own lives at a rate of three to one compared to women."

Humphreys then explained that he would be talking about mental illness, suicide and suicidal ideation, adding that it was "his rabbit hole that we're going to go down."

With that, he began relaying the story of his descent into mental illness and his

recovery.

Before coming to speak to NAAA Ag Aviation Expo attendees, Humphreys visited with his friend and Australian ag pilot Frank Drinan of Keyland Air Services to learn more about the aerial application industry. KEVIN HUMPHREYS

Afghanistan

The U.S. Army's Fort Rucker, Alabama, now known as Fort Novosel, was where Kevin Humphreys trained to fly the big tandem-rotor, heavy-lift CH-47 Chinook and where he humorously observed that he learned a very important distinction.

"That y'all is singular and all-y'all is plural," he said, drawing laughter from the audience.

Humphreys spent over a year at Fort Rucker then returned to Australia.

Continuous training and operational flying followed with deployments to Papua New Guinea in 1997 and 1998 for humanitarian famine relief missions in the Chinook and further deployments to East Timor in the UH-60 Black Hawk, the helicopter he'd piloted before transitioning to the CH-47.

In 2003, Humphreys was with Chinooks again as part of a detachment deployed to Iraq. Though his unit never saw combat there, he continued to accumulate mental burdens as his career advanced.

By 2005, he rose to command the Australian Army Aviation Corps' C Squadron, 5 Aviation Regiment, the service's sole CH-47D unit. That year, Humphreys deployed to Kandahar, Afghanistan to set up what would become a multi-year deployment of Australian Chinooks embedded with the U.S. Army's 10th Mountain Division.

Citing the more than eight decades that American and Australian military forces have served together, fought together and died together, he shared a photo of a memorial service he attended in Afghanistan for a Texas National Guard AH-64 Apache attack helicopter pilot who perished during his first tour there.

"That memory will stay with me forever," Humphreys said.

Observing how dangerous deployments are, he remarked on the tendency to "downplay how dangerous the everyday is." Humphreys noted the friends and colleagues he'd lost to helicopter and other types of accidents during his time in the Army.

An incident in which he and six other men nearly lost their lives occurred during a training flight when they had a midair collision with a boat carried on sling under their aircraft.

"It was a regular Tuesday afternoon at work in [Royal Australian Air Force Base] Townsville. I came to realize that it wasn't just a war zone where there were enemies. You can be in the workplace, you can be in a war zone, in the hangar or on the road. There's always an enemy of some kind lurking somewhere."

"And just as when you're in a real war zone, you have to keep getting lucky every minute of every day to be able to go home again," he continued. "The enemy

only ever has to get lucky once."

Humphreys then described a pair of very dangerous missions he undertook in Afghanistan. The first, "Operation Nile," was a capture-kill mission to neutralize a medium-value Taliban figure.

Known as a Special Forces Direct Action Air Assault, the mission combined the firepower of Canadian Special Forces and Afghan Special Forces with Australian Commandos on the ground and aviation elements, including Dutch AH-64 Apache attack helicopters, a U.S. Air Force AC-130 gunship and a USAF Predator drone.

Humphreys led the air mission, providing transport for the ground forces with two Australian CH-47Ds. With just 72 hours to plan for the assault, he devised an unconventional scheme to deliver the ground forces closer to their objective than was customary for such operations at that time, exposing his aircraft and flight crews to greater risk while alleviating some of the risk to the ground forces.

The Chinooks would fly together as if they were conducting a logistics task rather than an assault, fooling the Taliban's efficient spotter network until the final two minutes before landing directly next to their objective to deploy the ground forces. Touching down within 100 feet of a Taliban compound, they would create chaos and confusion with noise and a literal sandstorm from their rotors, allowing the special operators to pounce before the enemy could react.

That was the idea anyway. And as their nighttime launch window approached on July 10, 2006, Humphreys felt the extreme pressure of command.

"We were flying with night vision goggles (NVGs) in the middle of the night," he recalled. "There were twelve-foot earthen walls around the compound. We came in completely blinded by dust, unable to see the ground just 15 feet above it. The distance from our rotor blades to the walls was only about thirty feet."

"We were on the ground for 40 seconds as 35 troops came out the back of each aircraft straight into the firefight. Then ramps up and back on the power, lifting up through the dust cloud to about 200 feet before we got visual again. We went

back to our staging base to wait for the call for extraction."

The firefight stretched to two hours, Humphreys said. The Chinook crews heard the battle via their radios getting more and more intense and could see tracers flying in the distance as well as explosions with their NVGs.

While wondering what would happen next, one of the pilots from the other Chinook approached Humphreys and said, "Hey Boss, we'd better not be going back up there. It's way too dangerous."

Humphreys responded, "I know mate, but there are 70 men up there that need our help. When they call, we're going to go. So I need you to get back in that aircraft."

"To his credit, he did," Humphreys said.

Half an hour later, the call came and the two Chinooks lifted off again. Leaving the staging area, "the world went black," Humphreys remembered.

There was no moon and the CH-47Ds were "stock standard" without terrain following radar or optical sensors to help pierce the darkness. NVGs rely on magnifying ambient light to help the wearer see, Humphreys explained. With no moonlight and no starlight because it was overcast, and no ground lighting because they were in the middle of Afghanistan, "the goggles were all but useless."

But they flew on. On the way, a radio call came that the enemy was aware that they were coming and that they should abort because an ambush was being set up. Both crews ignored the warning.

They landed unaware that rocket-propelled grenades were passing under and over their aircraft. "Blinded by dust, we landed and all hell erupted around both aircraft. But we managed to get all of the assault force onboard and get out of there without a bullet hole, not a scratch on either machine. It was just incredible."

The second Chinook nearly flew into the ground on the way home, Humphreys noted.

"That decision of mine to push them well beyond their limits played on my mind for a long time with the ‘what-ifs’."

On another mission, Humphreys found himself and his crew trying to deposit special forces troops onto an undulating knife-edge ridgeline only about six to 10 feet wide. It was just wide enough to back the Chinook up to in a hover, put its aft landing gear on the crest of the ridgeline, lower the ramp and possibly have the troops scramble off the side of the ramp onto the ridge.

"I’m sitting up front, dangling over a thousand feet or so of abyss, looking over my shoulder through NVGs at the cliff face behind me – the only thing I can use as a hover reference – to keep this 20-ton aircraft still, moving it just an inch or so at a time based only on the voice I can hear in my helmet. That voice was the crewman in the back of the airplane. He was the only one who could see the rocks we were trying to avoid hitting with our blades."

Humphreys and his crew spent nearly an hour maneuvering into different positions trying to unload the special forces troops. In the end, they couldn’t find anywhere to do it.

The rocket attack mentioned in the opening of this story took place during his next deployment.

"Rocket attacks were not uncommon at Kandahar and a number of the other operating bases," Humphreys said. "This one landed about five meters from my bedroom donga (living quarters) just a minute or so after I’d walked out, putting shrapnel all through my bedroom and the two next to mine."

Worry and Toxic Culture

"It wasn’t actually the rockets or the bullets or the cliff edges that brought me undone," Humphreys said. "What brought me undone was the worry that I put myself through wondering if I was going to put one of my men or women into a box."

He had complete faith in the ability of those under his command to perform but knew luck would have to be on their side.

Even more significant, Humphreys said, was the fact that he was prepared for warfighting but not for "mind fighting." The toxic culture he experienced during his military service was the real undoing he observed.

Six different bosses in six different cities and peers and superiors in other places made his life "a living hell," he said.

But the start of his mental illness journey stretched back to the year 2000, Humphreys explained, shortly after his first operational deployment to East Timor "where nothing happened."

Back home in Australia, he walked into a supermarket through large sliding glass doors to buy a loaf of bread "and what seemed like a flood people came toward me."

"I flattened myself against the glass shop front. I remember almost looking at myself, thinking, ‘What is up with you?’ And not being able to answer. As the flood of people eventually turned to a trickle, I peeled myself off the glass, went in and bought the loaf of bread and got out of there."

Humphreys told no one about the experience, not even his wife. He said he didn’t tell his wife or friends about it because he was confused and embarrassed, and he had no idea why it had happened.

"I now know that was a panic attack. But to this day, I still don’t know what my body sensed that made me do it. It just did."

In 2003, during his deployment to Iraq, a drive through the streets of Baghdad in a convoy with Australian special forces members brought on PTSD. "I put on a brave face at the time but a brave face wasn’t enough. My hands had been shaking like crazy and I now know that those were my first physiological symptoms."

A month later he was back home in Sydney waking up next to his wife crying and screaming, wondering what was wrong with him. His wife was now aware of his mental issue, but he didn’t tell anyone else. "Being messed in the head was career termination," he stressed.

Fast-forward to another deployment in Afghanistan in 2007, commanding the Australian Chinook unit. He was continually angry and frustrated.

"Nothing anyone was doing was ever good enough," Humphreys said he'd set standards so high he couldn't reach them, let alone anyone else.

"My lowest point was when I was in my office with a young female officer, giving her a talking to about some ridiculous misdemeanor. I'm ashamed to say I can't remember the lady's name or what it was all about to be able to apologize to her. All I remember is realizing she wasn't looking at my face anymore. She was looking at my hands. I looked down and they were going crazy. I tried to stop them, but I couldn't. That's when I knew the game was up for me."

Returning to Australia following the deployment, Humphreys went through a psychological screening, telling the psychologist who interviewed him everything that was going on and that he needed help. Three months passed before he got to see another psychologist. And when he met with the psychologist, "the two of us just didn't gel," he said.

"I thought if this is the best the Army can do and the best psychology can do, I'll do it myself."

He added that he now understands that psychologists and therapists are people too and if at first you don't get along with one, try again. "Sooner or later you will find one you gel with and it will be gold."

But at the time, Humphreys didn't see the point in pursuing further help. Unfortunately, he turned to alcohol and abused it "pretty badly."

"Bullying at work was getting worse and worse and my night terrors were coming back. I had three children under eight years of age, and I had a short, short fuse. The noise and mess of three little kids was the last thing I wanted to be around," he admitted.

"I didn't want to be at work, and I didn't want to be at home. I didn't want to be awake, and I didn't want to be asleep. I just didn't want to be anymore. So I started working out ways to end my life."

Humphreys depression deepened and his feeling of being a failure accelerated, culminating in the story that opens this article.

Fortunately, his unit's psychologist and aviation medicine specialist were able to visit him the same day he'd come closest to suicide. They brought him to the realization eventually that he'd unconsciously had a plan to kill himself.

"I just didn't see it for what it was. And when the time is right or wrong, all of a sudden those thoughts can turn into actions pretty quickly."

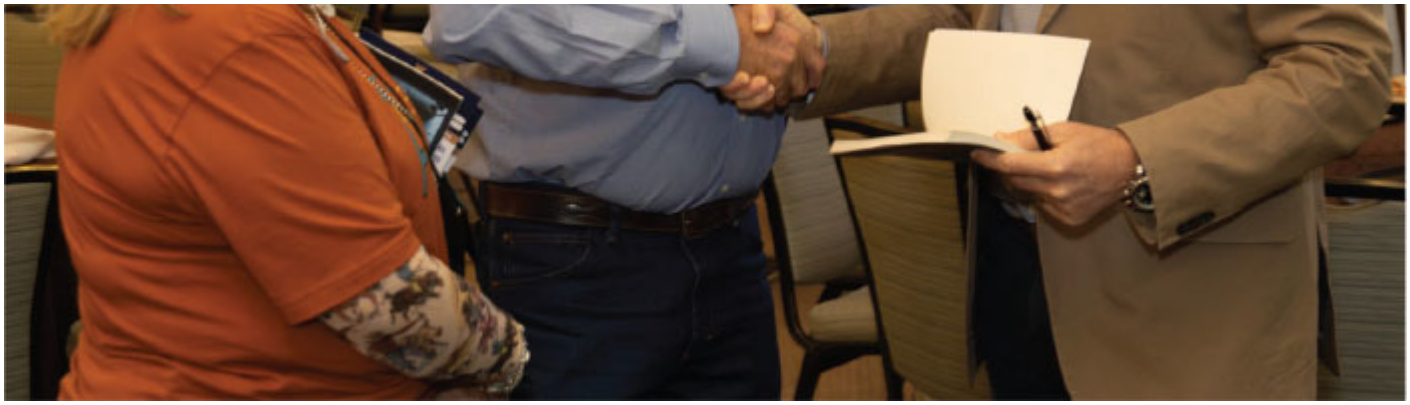
The Six Million Dollar Man

Humphreys could not understand what had happened to him, morphing from a warrior who performed under pressure to a man unable to function.

"I honestly thought I'd failed my country, the Army, my unit, my mates, my parents, my wife, my children. That was how total my sense of failure was. With that sense of failure was an equally deep sense of self-loathing and shame."

He now realizes that day was the last day of that chapter of his life and the first day of the next chapter.

Humphreys embarked on treatment from psychiatrists, psychologists, general practitioners and counselors. He described his recovery as a rollercoaster with "good days and horrible days, days where I thought everything was on track and had a smile on my face, and then days where I was upside down crying in a corner abusing alcohol again and thinking of ending my life."



Humphreys spent several days visiting with attendees at the annual convention, including Dewayne Phillips and Sue Stewart of D & S Aerial, LLC in Haskell, TX.

Little by little he learned how to "ride the rollercoaster" and how to know when he was about to "flip" and put things in place to deal with it and maintain a smile.

"At some stage during my recovery, I came up with the phrase, my mind got me into this, my mind will get me out of it."

Humphreys said it started to make a difference, as did the mental work he did to change his image of himself, rebuilding it step-by-step in a manner that he said could be jokingly compared to the 1970s hit TV show, "The Six Million Dollar Man" and its mantra: "We have the technology. We can rebuild him. We can make him better, stronger, faster than he was.' I absolutely loved that TV show as a kid and I decided that I was going to become The Six Million Dollar Man. So that's what I did."

"I saw myself as him and him as me, no matter what situation I was in. I'd say to myself, I have the technology. I can rebuild me. I'm going to make me better, stronger, faster than I was before. I'm going to rebuild my brain. I lost count of the hundreds of times I said that to myself and slowly I started to believe it."

Humphreys returned to work and learned how to fulfill his responsibilities without doubting himself or yielding to paranoia about what he imagined others might think of him. He had terrific support from his boss who gave him empathy but not sympathy, gradually helping to rebuild his confidence.

"He demonstrated a textbook example of how supervisors, managers or leaders have conversations with their people coming back into the workplace after an extended absence regardless of the reason why."

His career in the Army, however, was effectively over. He begrudgingly left the Army and went to work as a civilian search and rescue pilot and flight instructor never telling anyone beyond those already aware of his struggles.

"I was functional again but I certainly wasn't thriving."

Humphreys still had feelings of failure, shame, anger and bitterness at having succumbed to mental illness. Years later, a business coach helped him realize that he had not accepted his mental illness but that if he did and discarded the notions of blame and guilt, it would become irrelevant.

"I could work with that. And now I'm very happy to say that I not only accept everything about my mental illness and suicidal ideation once upon a time, I take full responsibility for every action and response that I had, then and now.

Lessons Learned

Today, Kevin Humphreys is a Mental Health Ambassador for Airbus Australia Pacific, a contributor to international media, and a regular podcast guest and speaker.

He rounded out his talk by elaborating on the lessons he'd learned.

"The stories we tell ourselves about ourselves are the most powerful, most potent weapons we encounter on a daily basis bar none. They will either motivate and propel you forward or they will cripple you before you even start."

"The power in the stories comes from the words we use and in particular, the meaning we give certain words," he continued. "I thought I knew what acceptance was. I thought I knew what a plan was until I realized I had it wrong. A different understanding of those words opened up the world to me."

He reflected on having almost no compassion while in uniform. But he came to realize that the magic of compassion is not just when you offer it to other people but "when you offer it to yourself."

For more on Kevin Humphreys, visit his website at www.kevinhumphreys.com.au and order a copy of his book titled Shrapnel in the Soul.

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