

Warning message: [\(00:00\)](#)

This podcast series will share personal moments of connection and deeply felt experiences. If anything you hear has a triggering effect, please reach out to someone who can help keep you safe. Or remember you can call lifeline at any time. On 13 11 14

Ben: [\(00:19\)](#)

I was totally in disbelief that it could actually happen to me. An army officer, a CEO, a board director. I had a house. I have three beautiful, healthy children. My life look good.

Beverley: [\(00:31\)](#)

At just 25, soldier Ben Farinazzo was sent to East Timor as assistant to the forces commander. It was 1999 and the country had just voted for independence. Fluent in Indonesian, Ben formed an exceptional bond with the locals and the triumphs and tragedies affected him deeply. Now living in Canberra, he recalls the effect that had on him and his devoted wife Jody.

Ben: [\(00:56\)](#)

In the military I was really fortunate to study politics and terrorism whilst at university and then I went on to be trained as an Indonesian linguist at the school of languages in Melbourne. The highlight of my military career was my deployment as part of international force in East Timor or INTERFET. I was a young 25 year old who felt well trained and well prepared, ready to go on that deployment and doing something that I believed was right and I still believe it was right. My role in East Timor was wonderful. I got to experience so much, so many different levels all across the country. I got to see people returning to their homes after being taken away. I got to see families reunited, brought back together. I saw people with a light of hope in their eyes again. On the flip side, I also got to see the depths of humanity and the horrors that man, women could inflict on themselves. Of particular significance to me though, was the events surrounding the Suai Church massacre, which had a profound impact on me and affected me for many years to come. I'll never forget the image of when I first arrived at the Suai church where people had been forced to huddle and wait in fear whilst their families were being shot and hacked to pieces outside and they sought refuge in the church and whilst they were in the church, the church was set on fire and as people tried to escape, they were hacked to pieces. Others remained inside until it was burnt down. I remember arriving at the church and there standing in the middle of the burnt out remains was this young boy, the side of his face burnt off, and he ran straight up to me and gave me a hug. He asked me to please help him to try to find his mother and his sister. As we search through all the remains, lifted up the burnt pieces of corrugated iron that had fallen down from the roof, we found the charred remains of his Mum and his sister. And he just hugged me. He didn't

want to let go to. And it tore my heart out and he was only one of many, many stories that were to come after that. I felt like I could detach and remove myself from that, but I guess time would tell that I was on able to.

Ben: [\(03:32\)](#)

It wasn't long after that moment that I returned back to Australia. I remember that morning, the commander letting me know that we were scaling down troops. I thought about staying on longer but was told that wasn't an option, and so I walked down to the airstrip and I hitched a ride. I arrived back in Darwin, no one was there except my wife standing in the foyer. I handed over my equipment, went home, had a shower and went out for lunch. While I was physically home. Mentally I was still back in East Timor with my mates. When I came home from East Timor, something inside me had changed. I wasn't sure what. I just knew that I was a bit detached from day to day life back at home. My wife noticed it, but we weren't really sure what it was or whether it was just a normal way of readjusting back into life. By the following year, the feeling was still there, but perhaps got even worse to the point where I was unable to control my emotional outbursts, be it sadness, anger, and little things would tip me over the edge. Up until Easter 2001 I'd always wanted to be in the military for my whole life. My aspiration was to stay there as long as I could and enjoy a full military career. But I came home one day and said to my wife, I'm getting out, and within three months I left and taken long service leave and become, began disconnecting from the military environment, military world, and was looking forward to a new career.

Ben: [\(05:21\)](#)

I was really fortunate after I left the military to transition into a wonderful civilian career, did some wonderful jobs, both in Australia and offshore, but I do remember in those early days of that career, I guess that civilian career, I did notice my behaviors weren't what we'd like them to be. I was drinking too much, I was smoking too much. I mean, I could say I was trying to kill myself as cigarettes and alcohol. I mean to put it politely, we'd call it self medication, but I was not in a good place. I reached to a GP. I even went so far as to see a psychiatrist and we sat down, had a lengthy conversation about what was going on and it was the first time that I had opened up and revealed what was truly happening inside me. I put it all out there. It was a cry for help. I needed help. I didn't know what was going on. I remember the end of that conversation.

Psychiatrist: [\(06:24\)](#)

I've looked at all the tests Ben, and I don't think really that you are suffering anything other than to just normal day to day stress.

Ben: [\(06:31\)](#)

Psychiatrists thought that I was making it up. He thought that I was making it up in order to rot the system and that in fact the sort of behaviors that I was displaying were'nt anything to do with a mental illness.

Psychiatrist: (06:45)

There's no other reason that you're coming to see me is there Ben?

Ben: (06:49)

It totally shut me down. Here I was, I can't remember how many years it was after the operation and I returned home when I'd finally stepped out of my comfort zone and to seek help and it felt like the door is closed in my face. Funny thing about it, is that at the time I was quite happy with that diagnosis. Because I didn't want to accept that anything was wrong with me. And I actually remember going home with a skip in my step and saying to my wife, there isn't anything wrong with me. I'm fine. It's just the normal pressures of daily life. And if that's what it is, then I can deal with that. We'll sort it out. And at that time it was really only the Vietnam veterans that suffered from post traumatic stress disorder, not the young fellows. Not the young men and women who'd been on deployment overseas. So it was a relatively new conversation and one that took many, many years to come to the front of people's minds and in our country.

Ben: (07:50)

So for many years after that, I looked for ways to keep myself healthy and to manage my work life balance as I saw it at the time and it was a constant rollercoaster of highs and lows. Times when I'd find myself totally isolated in my backyard, smoking a Havana Cigar, drinking my whiskey and not wanting to talk to anyone. Then having had enough of that committing myself to a regime of exercise and fitness and non drinking, healthy eating and getting back on top of it again and I was able to sustain that for a while. But then gradually like an insidious cancer, it would just eat away at me until I found myself at the bottom of the roller coaster again. It was just after my birthday in 2011 and I'd stormed out of our home following a minor issue, might have been to do with packing the dishwasher and I stormed out of the house and wanted to get away. But didn't know where to, so I did what I guess most blokes do and headed straight to the office. I arrived here, it was a Sunday and I walked out onto the corner of Northbourne Avenue in Civic at the Novotel over to my right, jumped on my phone and Googled Beyond Blue and completed their anxiety and depression questionnaires. I looked at the results and they were off the scale. I thought that was a bit strange and thought perhaps they were wrong because that couldn't be right. Um, I really wasn't ready to accept that at the time. And it said at the bottom to call lifeline or your GP. Being a Sunday, the GP was unavailable. And I thought, oh, well I guess I will follow the bouncing ball and give lifeline a call. Going through my

head though was why am I calling lifeline? Isn't it only for people who are about to kill themselves. On the edge of suicide? I'm not like that. I'm perfectly fine, but I dialed 13 11 14 anyway.

Ben: ([10:10](#))

Some wonderful woman picked up the phone.

Lifeline: ([10:13](#))

Welcome to lifeline. May We help you?

Ben: ([10:15](#))

And introduced myself and said, look, I'm sorry. I don't really know I'm calling. She said,

Lifeline: ([10:20](#))

that's fine then that's fine. That's usually how the conversation begins.

Ben: ([10:27](#))

I just drop down to the ground and just burst out into tears. I just shut down. I don't, I don't really remember much of what we spoke about next or how long the conversation went for. All I remember I was at first time in so many years, someone had listened to me. Someone cared enough to take the time to listen to my story and to want to help me. I felt like I wasn't alone. I don't know who that woman was, but whoever, whoever she was, she set into place a course of events, which ended up saving my life. I'm very grateful for that.

Lifeline: ([11:20](#))

No one should ever have to face their darkest moments alone. Lifeline is here to help. Please call 13 11 14 or visit lifeline.org.au

Ben: ([11:33](#))

I came away from that conversation knowing that I had to speak to my GP. We organized to see my GP and I couldn't get in for a few days, so I got nice and busy back at work again. Then scheduled my GP appointment in between other meetings. I didn't have much time to spare, so I said, look, I just need some sleeping tablets because I'm not sleeping anymore. The GP said:

GP: ([11:55](#))

Ben let's just stop for a sec. I think we need to talk about this and what's going on and why you're not sleeping anymore and why you think you need these tablets.

Ben: ([12:05](#))

I was checking my watch thinking, okay, what do you want to know? I was very fortunate that GP I spoke to, knew me as a cadet prior to my deployment

to East Timor. I was also very fortunate that that GP had a lot of experience in mental health. We had this lengthy conversation. I remember her pausing and suggesting to me that

GP: ([12:28](#))

Ben, I think you might have PTSD

Ben: ([12:32](#))

For the second time in a week I was on the floor just in a blubbering mess. Again, I don't know how long I was there for, but I remember straightening myself up, fixing my jacket up, my tie apologizing saying Sorry about that. Ah, right. Okay. PTSD. Just tell me what I need to do to treat this thing so I can get back to my family and get back to work. It's okay. I'll just see it like a broken arm and just look after it until it gets better. She says,

GP: ([13:03](#))

Stop Ben, It's not like a broken arm, it's more like cancer. If you don't treat this thing properly, you'll die from it.

Ben: ([13:10](#))

And she was right. I was then referred to a psychiatrist and was formally diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety. And I put into place whole range of treatments to help me from medication, to counseling, to ongoing appointments with my GP, uh, to help keep me in check. I guess at the time though, I still didn't fully accept that I had anything wrong with me. I was totally in disbelief that it could actually happen to me. An army officer, a CEO, a board director, I had a house. I have three beautiful healthy children. My life looked good and I was of the mindset that I was going to conquer this thing. I was going to overcome it. I went through this process for about a year until I reached a point when I felt like I did conquer it. I had overcome it. I even remember singing all the way home in the car and rocking into the house and you know, saying to Jody: you know what? I've overcome this thing. I, finally conquered the PTSD. Geez, that was a pain in the ass. Let's move on with life. But the story didn't finish there. I was still on the rollercoaster at that time, and slowly, gradually over the next two years, my health continued to deteriorate.

Ben: ([14:30](#))

It was October, 2014 I think it was. There was a series of events happening in my life and I became overwhelmed. Not overnight, just slowly, slowly. I got to a point where my body would not stop shaking continuously. I couldn't stop it. My mind kept freezing up and jumping. Through my counseling, I'd become aware of suicidal ideation. It started off with thoughts of just wanting to get away, and those thoughts kept escalating. But I'd just push them away until I

realized that I was planning all these different ways how to kill myself. and I was losing control of my ability to stop those thoughts from taking over. I'd been in bed for about a day and a half, unable to sleep, unable to stop my body and my mind shaking and all I could think about was how to kill myself. I crawled into the shower and put the hot shower on. Just to try to get some relief. What stopped me was the thought of my wife and my children in the other room and what would happen to them if I was gone. And although I'd lost the ability to love myself, I still felt love for them. I remember just screaming out. My wife ran to the bathroom. I said, I've got to go to emergency. Went to the Canberra Hospital, by which time I was non compos, so my wife had to do all the talking and I was really happy they didn't turn me away.

Ben: ([16:01](#))

Noone knew how bad life was, except for my wife.

Ben: ([16:09](#))

I was very fortunate that soldier on help my wife to get me into a mental health facility up in Sydney, a specialist PTSD unit, at Saint John of God hospital in Richmond. And for the first time since I'd come back from deployment, I really felt like I could talk about what was going on and felt that it was okay to talk about it.

Beverley: ([16:31](#))

After being diagnosed with PTSD, Ben went about the difficult task of filling in the paperwork for veterans affairs. To his distress, his application was rejected three times and he was told his condition was not related to his military service. Fortunately, a representative of the RSL stepped in.

Ben: ([16:51](#))

I was lucky that that gentleman from the RSL continued with my case and that decision was overruled in my favor. My PTSD and anxiety and depression were linked back to my military service. It's funny because at that point it felt like it was real at that point.

Ben: ([17:09](#))

It was at that time at Saint John of God hospital in Richmond when I came across a Padre. I'd seen him around and used my, uh, best and most well trained escape and evasion techniques to avoid him. On the way to the art room he found me. He said,

Padre: ([17:25](#))

Giddy Ben. Do you mind if we take a seat under this tree, it'll only take a couple of minutes. I've been watching you for a few weeks and you seem to be

pretty hard on yourself pushing yourself. You know, you, you go to all the physical rehab sessions, the pool aerobics, the art class, and you seem to be doing everything you can to overcome this.

Ben: ([17:44](#))

I said, yeah, I want to conquer it. He said,

Padre: ([17:48](#))

I've noticed that, but let me suggest to you, what if this takes longer than you think? What if, what if it never went away? How would you think about yourself? What would you do?

Ben: ([18:00](#))

It really stunned me into silence. I'd never thought that far before. I'd never opened my mind to those concepts. He continued. He said,

Padre: ([18:09](#))

Look Ben, may I suggest perhaps you take a softer approach. Then rather than conquer this thing, you set yourself a goal of waking up each day and learning how to better manage yourself and understand what mental illness is. And that way every day presents itself as an opportunity for you to learn more about yourself and life. Do you think that's something you could work with?

Ben: ([18:34](#))

And it was like a revelation to me. It really felt good and as soon as he said it, I thought regardless of whether I deem myself at overcoming this thing or conquering it or not, I'm going to remain unconquered and I'm going to continue to move forward and see life as a learning experience and every day as an opportunity to learn more about myself and how to better manage myself to fully experience life. It was quite profound at the time and I'm really glad he did sit me down in that chair that day.

Ben: ([19:08](#))

Yeah, it was at that time that I started forming a, a bit of a vision of what my life might look like. I started keeping a diary and notes on my thoughts so that I could reflect back on where my thoughts were on a previous day and then extract any lessons learned that I could take forward into the next day. It became quite a deliberate process. Also did that with my artwork just to see where my thoughts fell creatively on one particular day and how they shifted throughout my process of recovery. It taught me a lot about where I was and allowed me an opportunity to reflect on something quite concrete in order to allow me to continue to take essentially baby steps forward in this process. All in all, I spent three months in hospital and achieved my goal of coming home to spend Christmas with my family. It was such a wonderful moment stepping

through those doors and seeing my kids and being able to sleep in my own bed and sharing Christmas with them.

Ben: ([20:10](#))

I'd attended a number of sessions during the three months at hospital, become well aware of the mind body relationship and how essential it was to maintain my physical health in order to maintain my mental health. With that in mind. I asked for a mountain bike.

Ben: ([20:26](#))

It was a day before Australia, day 2015. It was a beautiful day in Canberra and I met up with my brother in law to go for a mountain bike ride in the trials up behind our house in Jerrabomberra, in Queanbeyan. It was a wonderful ride. We'd gone through the trials chasing down the shadows between the gumtrees, and as we came down the final hill, you hit a series of foot bridges. As I came over that last footbridge. My front tire slipped off the plank, I catapulted myself over the handlebars down into the creek line, face first into a rock. I don't remember much of that next period. I do remember the doctor coming out and saying to me.

Doctor: ([21:09](#))

Mate, you've dodged a bullet. Do not move, if you move you could become a quadraplegic or die. You fractured your neck in two places and your back in three places,

Ben: ([21:22](#))

I was in a full body cast and headset. My wife and children were there and helped me take my first steps, literally. Until I was able to go home. We then set up regular counseling, physio appointments, appointments with my psychiatrist and a range of professionals to wrap around me and my family to help us in managing the next step of the process. I ended up spending about another year all in all in and out of mental health hospitals. Every time I thought I was doing well, I'd come out, but then find myself not in a good place and having to go back. I went to Physio, learned how to lift the stick, learnt how to bend over and do all those things that for many years my whole life had taken for granted. Then we started adding a kilo of weight to that stick, kilo by Kilo until I could actually feel some strength coming back and I was able to walk upstairs without puffing. And my brain was able to cope with leaving my bedroom and leaving my house and venturing into the shops and step by step, kilo by kilo started venturing back into the world.

Ben: ([22:37](#))

The most glorious day though, was that moment when I jumped back into that rowing boat. And I pushed myself off the dock, not very far because I wasn't

sure if I could swim anymore. But I do remember sitting there, I don't know how long. Just looking at the sunrise, and all I can do is cry. I just allowed myself to enjoy it. I really appreciate everyone and everything that he'd got me to that point.

Ben: ([23:07](#))

It was at some point during that recovery, probably at the two year mark when I eventually got to the point where I was able to go further than a meter in my rowing boat and found myself rowing the length of like Burley Griffin, that a wonderful woman by the name of Alison Cray asked if I'd be interested in this thing called Invictus games and training with other veterans. My primary sport was indoor rowing and one that I'd like to say I hate. It really takes you back into that place of darkness. That first selection camp was extremely challenging because it was the first time in three years I'd actually spent a night away from my home, with the exception of going to hospital. So after a weekend away I came home and crashed. So I set up a range of counseling sessions, consists, that consisted of a whole range of health professionals that would help me to get to where I wanted to go, realizing that I couldn't do this alone. I also realized I needed to be careful. So I used meditation. And I've found ways on breathing techniques, how to relax myself. I did whatever I needed to do to be able to continue through the experience, but the experience also made me stronger. I've found was that by listening to the stories of those around me, it revealed hidden gems of truths, and I could see their sparks. And I was touched by their stories and felt inspired just being around these incredible human beings and I felt like I belonged. And I was part of something bigger than myself again. As an athlete at Invictus games. It was a wonderful experience that I can only describe in terms of tears, goosebumps, and hugs.

Ben: ([25:01](#))

The Invictus games experience was so surreal. I remember arriving into Sydney to get onto the ferry and seeing all the different countries competitors around, and it just caught me totally off guard. I had no idea that this was Invictus games. We got onto the ferry. The Australians were together with the Kiwis. So it was quite apt to be called the Anzac ferry. And we took the ferry down from Manly underneath the harbor bridge towards the Opera House where the opening ceremony was to be held. As we came down towards the harbor bridge on the ferry, there was a trailing storm encroaching on us quite fast. And there was a level of excitement and the anticipation as at storm gained weight and moved closer towards us until the moment when it finally struck. And for me, that was a perfect Invictus moment. Here we were on the Anzac ferry out on Sydney harbor with a thundering storm above us. I thought this is the most brilliant way to arrive at Invictus. And we, uh, convinced the guys to play thunderstruck through the PA system. And here we were rocking

the thunder struck on the front deck of the ferry as only Aussies know how to. We were fortunate that there was a break in the storm. The ferry pulled up to the Opera House. Walking out of the ferry, the Path was lined with personnel from the Australian Defense Force and with our families. And I just noticed tears just rolling down my face. I didn't know why, a couple of my mates put their arms around me. He said,

Digger: ([26:47](#))

You all right big fella?

Ben: ([26:49](#))

I said, I'm good. Yeah. I think these are actually tears of joy. And I sat down and thought about it and the words that came to my mind where I'm finally home, I finally come home.

Ben: ([27:05](#))

I had a game, a set game plan of listening to calming music whilst I did my warm up. And then immediately prior to walking out, I'd save one last song, which was a Gallipoli soundtrack. And I would listen to that soundtrack and picture those Anzacs at Gallipoli and all that have served our country since. The loss of lives, the families, the communities the Anzac days, the marches. I picture Mel Gibson running through the trenches trying to stop his mates from going over into the barrage of machine gun bullets, legs like springs I wanted to do it for my family, for all of them, for everyone that had been, but they've lost their lives as a result, of their service for the country, doing what they believe is right. That was the last song I listened to before I took my headphones off and stood up.

Ben: ([28:21](#))

And I had that feeling and sense we were like gladiators about to walk into the coliseum, with the noise coming through the tunnel and that we're going into battle. But for me the battle wasn't with the others, it was with myself. The only thing I had left to do to remind myself, was to breathe. So that's what I did. I just concentrated on breathing and somehow at the end of it, I managed to pull a good result. And achieve my personal best. It was such a wonderful moment to know that I'd done my best, on the day. And that I was, able to go over and see my family. I was quite surprised then to find out that I'd won gold medal for the endurance event. But we still had one more race to go.

Ben: ([29:15](#))

The one minute sprint was quite a different race from the four minute endurance. There's no room for error. I went into that knowing that it was an all or nothing moment.

Ben: ([29:28](#))

I'd stuck to my plan of switching between the muscles in my back and my legs, so just didn't fatigue my legs and then I got the shock of my life and I found out that there's only about 10 seconds left and I saw that I was in six place. And I knew I had five strokes left. I just thought about my family. I thought about this being the moment where it was all or nothing. And I pulled on that handle like a rusty victor mower, with every sinew in my body. And I was lucky to not only achieve, again my personal best, but for that to be enough to get me an equal Gold. It took me a long time to comprehend what had actually happened. In fact, to this day, I still don't really understand what had happened. I thank whoever gods may be for that moment. For so many reasons. I thank everyone that got me there, and everyone who supported me since. It was quite an amazing experience returning home from the Invictus games after having achieved personal bests in the rowing and the power lifting. The first realization that I had that others had perhaps been interested or watched the event was when I walked into our chemist to pick up my medication for the week. And all the good ladies started crying. Here we were in a big huddle crying and I said, what are we crying about? The Invictus, the Invictus games. Yeah, I was there. They said, yeah, we know we saw you there.

Ben: ([31:20](#))

That's when I first started become aware that this was something that really touched people in a way that I couldn't understand or comprehend. It's been a wonderful experience since that. I kind of thought I'd go back to my wheat field, you know, back to my home, back to my grapes, back to my garden, back to my family, my dogs, my garage, my cats, but the momentum of Invictus is kept going. What Invictus did to me, that has not only helped with my mental and physical rehabilitation, is it reconnected me to the world. I realized that I don't want others to experience what it is that I went through in my life. My life has been a gift. I've learned so much and I continue to learn so much, but in doing so, I want to reach out and help others who may find themselves alone, isolated in the darkness, and to let them know that there are people who care, who are out there, that loves sill exists in the world.

Ben: ([32:23](#))

A single call to lifeline changed my life. It was that thread of hope in the darkness that put a whole chain of events into a place, that led me to Invictus and now to being an ambassador for Lifeline. It hasn't been an easy journey, but hopefully through this experience and by sharing this experience, I can help others by letting them know that there are people there walking by their side. And that if they're out there still searching for that spark in the darkness, that all have to do is pick up the phone or take another breath.

Beverley: ([33:04](#))

Thank you for listening to holding onto hope. Lifeline Australia is grateful to all our interviewees. Who share their stories in the hope of inspiring others. We also acknowledge all of you who provide support to people in crisis and those on the journey to recovery. If you found this podcast helpful or inspiring, please share it, rate it, write a review or subscribe wherever you download your favorite podcasts. If this story has affected you, and you require crisis support, please contact lifeline on 13 11 14. You can do this at any time or visit lifeline.com.au to access web chat every night from 7:00 PM to midnight. If it's inspired you to be a lifeline volunteer or to donate, please visit lifeline.org.au. With thanks to Wahoo! Creative for interviews, editing and production and the voice of lived experience, which is essential in the development of our work.