

*Just a girl from the mill*





### *Mary (wife)*

I was seventeen when I met Ken. I lived in a little shipbuilding town in Scotland and I was working at the sugar mill. In that town, you just grew up to work in the mills; the boys all went to the shipyards and the girls all went to the mill, and if the teachers saw any spark in you, you'd be a nurse or an accountant.

All the girls, we had our hair in the turbans like you see in the movies. And we'd get on the buses after work and go home and do our hair up lovely and then meet to go out dancing. I met Ken at a pub called The Locker, after Davy Jones's Locker. He was twenty-one and he'd been on loan to the English navy for two years. He was stationed in the town waiting for a submarine to be built. When he walked me home, we had a pash in the little lane between the houses and he said, 'I'm going to have to marry you.' And I laughed because my mother always said 'Never believe what a sailor tells you. They have a girl in every port.'

He was very gorgeous, very gentle and he had a beautiful nature with women. I'd see him only about once a month because he was doing sea trials. One night after the Submarine's Commissioning Ball, I got home very late. I was the eldest of nine children and my parents were so strict with me. They were waiting up and they said things that they shouldn't have, terrible things about what they thought I'd been up to with Ken. I got very upset and I ran out of the house to find him. He said, 'You're coming back

to Australia with me.' He was a lovely man, he looked after you. When we married I was in white and I was justified to wear white.

So I left my family behind and travelled by ship to Sydney while Ken travelled around the world with his submarine to bring it home. We'd only been here in Australia a few weeks when he came back to the flat with some Military Police; they said he had to report to Concord Hospital.

I didn't know what was happening. I was only eighteen and my Scottish accent was so strong that no one could understand what I was saying. I didn't know what to do. Everything was strange; I didn't even understand the money yet. I was given directions to the hospital: 'You go on that bus and that train and that next train and eventually you'll get there.'

The doctor came out and he said, 'So what do you think has caused Ken's condition?' I said, 'Well I don't know. I don't know what's wrong with him to start with.' I told him that whatever it was, the navy had obviously caused it so maybe if he wasn't in the navy, I could look after him and he might be all right. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Ken walking towards me and I just looked at him; he was a totally different person. And I just cried and cried and cried. The doctor left and I was just left there crying. I said to Ken, 'I don't know what's happening to you.' He looked like a broken man. He didn't even look like *him*.

A few days later, there's a knock on the door. It's about seven o'clock at night and it's Ken and he says, 'I'm out of the navy, I'm out of the hospital and I'm home.' He looked like he'd been taking something. He told me, 'Well, they gave me this little bottle of pills for if I got nervous. And I got very nervous, so I took the lot.' I said, 'Oh my God.'

And that's how it started. He couldn't cope with noise; he had a stutter and this violent shaking and claustrophobia. At night

with his nightmares, he would sweat so much it would go right through to the mattress and Ken would wake up and he'd say, 'That's not funny Mary, throwing a bucket of water over me!'

Looking back, he obviously had post traumatic stress disorder. I know that now, but we didn't know it then. I didn't know what it was. I thought it must have been something to do with the hospital. I know they had him in a padded cell and I know now that they gave him ECT [electric shock treatment] but Ken couldn't talk about it; he didn't tell me anything at all. I thought, 'Well, I'll just have to work with what I have.' I was absolutely devoted to him and he was absolutely devoted to me and that was all we had.

We tried to put all those traumas behind us and live in a little cocoon – just me and him. It was hard because we didn't have any money. He got no discharge papers and no counselling or re-training and it was only years later, when we accessed all his medical records, we found out they'd given him only a ten per cent chance of working in civilian life. So he was obviously very sick but apparently he was 'too well' to receive a proper pension. He got a pension called DFRDB [Defence Force Retirement and Death Benefits Scheme]– it was never enough to live on; never enough for him not to work. I think the most it ever got up to was \$150 a fortnight. So he had to work. Our first daughter came along when I was twenty-one.

We were so poor I used to take a cup of one-cent coins up to the corner store to get a loaf of bread and a carton of milk, because that's all we'd be eating that day. And I remember one day going to the bank, because that DFRDB money would go straight to the bank, and we just didn't have any food. And I remember the girl said, 'The money's not here, it hasn't come in,' and she looked at me and then she went and spoke quietly to the bank manager. The bank manager comes out and sees me there, and I hear him

say, 'Just give her the money.' We were so poor. I know it makes you better people but we were so ridiculously poor.

He must have gone for hundreds of interviews. From working down the mines to moving furniture. Jobs never lasted long because once people got to know him, they knew something wasn't right and when it got to that point, that's when he knew it was time to leave and get a job somewhere else. He didn't like his work being scrutinised and he couldn't stand making mistakes and by that time, he would not have been coping. He's always been hard on himself. For so many years he'd say, 'I'm really dumb, I'm really stupid', yet he was so good at everything. When we had our second child he knew he needed to make better money for us, to make a better life.

At that stage he was working for a printing place, helping this fellow do the boilers and this fellow knew Ken was clever, even though he was pretending he wasn't. He knew Ken was on the submarines and had been an electrician and diver, even though he could never do electrics again because he was too shaky. And he said to Ken, 'If you spent one hundred hours here with me on this, you could go and do your boiler certificate and you could run big boilers.' And Ken said, 'I could do that.' And so he did.

He had to do like tech drawing; these diagrams of the boilers. He knew how they worked and he just had it all in his head. He did that course that was supposed to take three years, in three months and after he got that certificate, he ran the powerhouse at a big food company for twelve years. He was able to do it because he was on his own. He worked by himself and he worked shift work. I worked and then he worked: I would be getting out of bed and he would be getting into bed.

It was good for him because he wasn't there in the house with the children all the time; he was able to get away on his own. He

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needed to be isolated. During that time, Ken was really good on the surface. If I had to leave at 5:30 in the morning for my shift, he would make the girls' lunches and their breakfast, do their hair and get them off to school. Or if they had a recorder recital or their Physical Culture, we'd go as a family because I would just say, 'You have to do that, we have to go.' So he would come along to all those things.

Our girls were gorgeous little girls and they were never ratty or all over the place. I was a fairly strict mother and I've apologised to my girls for that. When I look back, I'm sorry, but they've said to me, 'The way you brought us up didn't do us any harm; we never did without, ever.' And they know their father's really ill. But for many, many years I knew they were angry with me for putting up with it.

They grew up in a house where everything was placed exactly where it should be. Like all perfectionists, Ken needed things to be run his way. A lot of the time we'd be walking on eggshells. I mean, you had to be so quiet say, when the news was on and I'd be always trying to contain things, to foresee what could happen or where things were heading. You're all the time trying to keep to the plan because as soon as you divert from the plan, you know you're going to suffer the consequences. He was a good dad and a fun dad too and he would always, always say to the girls, 'I love you' or 'I'm proud of you'. But there were those moments when he just didn't cope. We'd be sitting there having a meal and even though everyone was trying so hard, the atmosphere would suddenly change.

The kids had to live up to a standard and they knew how they had to behave. I did the discipline; Ken didn't do any of it with the girls. He felt that he couldn't do it because he might not be able to stay in control so he always said it was better that I did it.

His moods could change out of nowhere. I remember some nights, I'd get the kids in bed and we'd be sitting there just the two of us; I might be having a glass of wine, he might be having a beer and we might be having a really interesting conversation; nice talk about life and stuff. And then he'd go to the toilet and he'd come out and it was like Jekyll and Hyde. He'd come out and he'd be cranky and talking about something completely out of the air that wasn't even in our conversation.

Ken argued a lot. He ranted and raved but I never argued back. Something unbeknownst to me told me how to react for my safety and protection; I somehow knew that to raise my voice would be an attack on him. I had grown up with a physically violent relationship between my parents. My father was an alcoholic and when I grew up I knew I did not want to be a part of that. And so if that means me not saying anything until he has run out of words, if that keeps us safe then it's the best way to go.

He would be angry at the whole world and he would be yelling. It would feel like he was the headmaster of the school giving you a lecture and you'd feel so small. I mean, he's dreadfully sorry after the fact but I know now that that was emotional abuse. It's definitely emotional abuse and it's every bit as painful as being hit. Ken never hit me. I never felt frightened. And he never swore; that was something I always appreciated. It was part of all those nice things about the Ken I knew.

But it's been a struggle, a real struggle and probably the worst part of it is the loneliness. I mean, we met some lovely people but Ken was such an isolated person. Shift work was great for him because it was always an excuse not to go out to parties or go to someone's house. And you didn't want to tell people that 'Ken's a bit strange', you know. Or what life was like for us because no one would understand. People just say, 'Well, why are you still with



him? Why don't you leave him?' And that's what you don't want to hear.

Our life was a secret really. I had no one to tell my secrets to. I couldn't say how I was feeling. Not even to Ken. I cried a lot but I couldn't cry to Ken. And we've talked about that. He said that he couldn't cope with my sadness because he has his own sadness. He said, 'You're going to have to go and talk to somebody else because I can't cope with it.' And I think that's so sad because none of your feelings or emotions are taken into consideration. I know myself that I've been affected and sometimes I have to have quite a few glasses of wine. It's my only saving grace.

I couldn't even be sick because he was sick. He was the one who needed all the attention so if I had a migraine headache, I couldn't tell him because he'd be devastated and emotionally distraught, not knowing what to do. It's like, 'Oh my God, here is my rock falling. What will happen to me?' He'd fall to pieces, so it was pointless me being sick. I know I have actually become his mother in a sense and his counsellor. Even today he'll say, 'I wish you'd been my mother.' He's thinking about the little caring things you do for your kids; the things I did for mine.

We had no support from family, absolutely none. I didn't share what was happening here with my family because I didn't think they'd understand. They understand now. They love and respect Ken and they really know he's not well. Ken's own parents, they weren't loving people. His father was an officer in the navy. He was a true officer and Ken's stepmother was the true officer's wife:

you know, the mink stoles and the diamonds and the officers to dinner and the cocktail parties. So his father couldn't accept this abject failure of a son who was put out of the navy with a mental illness. No, he didn't want any of his people knowing that. Only now, after thirty years are they coming to terms with it, thinking, 'Well, maybe there *is* something wrong with him.' And they're grateful to me for staying and sticking by him. But I say, 'Well, why wouldn't I be here? That's the person I love more than anyone in the world.'

During all this time, we had our ways of coping. We had our three daughters and things were going okay. Ken was happy at work. He knew every nook and cranny of that boiler house and everybody knew he knew his job. When the talk started about a re-structuring, it made him unsettled. They offered him either another position or a redundancy and we'd always spoken about moving up north and so we left Sydney for Queensland. We thought it would be cheaper too. We were still renting of course and even though I was working two jobs, we never seemed to have any money.

We took our youngest girl and put her straight into high school and we started to look for jobs but we couldn't get any work anywhere; there just wasn't the work. We had to draw on our super and that's when his depression started to set in. Ken decided he'd have to go away and look for work. So he got in the car and started driving; he was looking for anything, he would do anything. But he couldn't find it and he'd ring me at three in the morning and he'd be crying and I'd say, 'Just get in the car, just come home, come home.'



After that, he was crying every day and I got a job in a chicken shop outside of Coles and it was damn hard work but at least I was working, I was doing something. And I said to Ken, 'You can look after me: you can clean the house and do the cooking.' And he did, but the post traumatic stress disorder was really kicking in by then and I knew there was something really seriously wrong. He started seeing a wonderful GP who he still sees now and who has a real connection with Ken and an empathy with him. He tried with medication to keep Ken at a level that we could cope with and he listened to Ken. We never thought we could afford a psychiatrist.

Ken talked about suicide every day and I never knew what I was coming home to. One day he'd be good and the next day he'd be bad and poor Trisha, I'd say to her, 'If you get home from school and your dad's killed himself, it's not your fault. It's where he wants to be and there's nothing you could have done about it.'

I was able to get a better job by then, in a department store. I'd been there for about two years and Ken was getting worse when one day, out of the blue, I got this big envelope in the mail and it was from the Department of Veterans' Affairs. It was a survey for Vietnam veterans and their families. I said to Ken, 'You didn't tell me you were in Vietnam.' And he said, 'No, that's ridiculous tear it up, throw it out, that's rubbish, I wasn't there.' But he had been. He was on the Vietnam Roll. He was up in Vietnam at seventeen-and-a-half just after he joined the navy. We'd been

married thirty-four years and after all we'd been through, I never even knew.

I didn't throw that letter out. I decided to just put it away because I knew one night something would happen on the TV and he'd get on his soapbox and when he did I'd give him the form and I'd say, 'Fill it out for me: let the government know just how angry you are.' And that's exactly what happened.

I sent it away and then I got a phone call. Somebody who'd opened that letter up, knew Ken needed help and they'd contacted Peter who is a Vietnam veteran and he rings and says, 'Mary, I believe your husband's not very well. I'd like to come around and visit.' And I said, 'Pete that would be wonderful because he is a mess and I didn't know what to do.' I asked him if I should have the day off work and he said he'd call me if he needed me. He arrived at ten o'clock at our place and I got a phone call about ten-thirty at work: 'You're going to have to come home. He can't even get the words out, he's just sobbing so hard.' And when I got home Pete told me he was trying to get Ken into the hospital because he really wasn't well. And I said, 'But what happened? What did you say to him?' And he said, 'I didn't say anything; I got here, he opened the door and I said, "Welcome home mate." I put my arms around him and he hasn't stop crying since.'

Pete got him in to see a psychologist first and only a few days later he was in the hospital. By that point, he was so sick and the stutter was so bad he couldn't speak. His whole body was shaking; he was walking like this little old man all hunched up and couldn't hold a cup.

Ken was in hospital for five months; that's how sick he was. He got a wonderful psychiatrist who said he knew immediately that



this was a classic case of post traumatic stress disorder. 'If I was teaching someone about PTSD, Ken would be my subject.' It was all such a relief to me. It was a burden taken off, just that peace of mind that he was being looked after by somebody else.

I felt I was able to breathe. I didn't have to worry all the time about how he was feeling. Or be thinking, is he going to eat today? Because there's lots of days when he just won't eat. So yes, for the first time I didn't even have to think about that. I could go out and not worry when I had to be home and I could make as much noise as I wanted in the house – even though that's not much because I'm so used to being quiet anyway.

When he was in hospital, we started work on getting him his TPI and that's huge. Pete put us in touch with Harry who was ex-navy and he was going to help us with our case. He helped Ken talk about his trauma without taking him back there. He and I went to the Board when Ken was still in hospital, and Harry did all the talking but at the end they asked me, 'Well, how do you feel about this?' And I said, 'Well I just feel very sad. My husband's in hospital; he's been in there for five months. I don't know if he'll ever get out, that's how sick he is and it's just so sad he's had to wait all this time to get help.' That's all I said and without raising my voice, and they said to me, 'Well we hope everything goes well for you' – and that was all. You had to wait six weeks for the results and I remember Harry running into my work: 'We've got it, we've got it,' and I thought that at last Ken had the acknowledgment that he needed.

He was still in hospital when I wrote away for his medals. They came in a brown paper bag and I thought, 'How do you give a hero his medals in a paper bag?' So I rang Harry and I asked him if he could present them. And he said, 'No, I couldn't do that.' And I said, 'Have you got other plans for today?' And he said, 'No... I'd just be crying like an idiot.' So I said that we'd all be crying and we agreed to meet later. I rang Shelley, the head nurse – the

nurses are like family to me now, I know every one of them – and she organised this big room for us and about fifteen Vietnam vets who were in the hospital at the time, and they all sat around in a big, big circle. And Ken came in, thinking it was just a normal meeting and Shelley announced it was for him and she had the letter from the Governor-General thanking Ken for his service and da de da de da. We're all crying and Ken's crying. He went around and every veteran gave him a hug and welcomed him home and it was just wonderful.

I'm a very healthy person normally but about this time I got very sick. Terrible pain in my back and the doctor said it was shingles. He says, 'Are you suffering stress at the moment?' And I just laughed and said, 'Well, you could say that!' And that's when I decided I'd done enough.

I went straight to the store and said that I wanted to leave that day. They were shocked. They had no idea that I'd been going through this. I hadn't told anyone what I was living with. 'But what's happened? Why?' I told them all about Ken and the suicide attempts and the hospitals and about him being a veteran and they couldn't believe it. They were really supportive when they understood and the boss came down and said, 'Mary, you are a valued person to this company, your job is open any time, any hours you want.' But I said I wouldn't be back. Now that Ken had been acknowledged for what he did, now he's been gratified, now it's time to look after me.

We'd heard that the Vietnam veterans here were going to have a drop-in centre and the wives could come in too. I didn't know anybody. There was five ladies in the beginning and one of these ladies said that we should organise some sort of a meeting with Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service and try and have something just for the wives. And so they'd organised for one of the counsellors to facilitate a meeting for the wives. There'd been nothing before that and when we got there, there

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must have been forty ladies in this tiny lounge room. And we're all crying and we're not knowing why we're crying but we are.

And so we went around the circle introducing ourselves one at a time. I was first. I just got up and said, 'I'm here because I'm lonely. I don't know anyone that's going through what I'm going through and I just want to meet veterans' wives who understand.' And then I sat down and the person next to me was crying, she couldn't even say her name. And it went around to the next woman who couldn't even stand up, 'You'll have to come back to me.' And it went on and on. And we were all saying exactly the same thing: we're lonely. The facilitator said we should make up our own group; decide what we wanted out of it. None of us wanted to have a president or anyone organising it. We did not want to be making sandwiches for the men. This was a group to look after us. We came up with the name POSH which was 'Partners Offering Support and Hope'. The men reckon it stands for Partners of Super Heroes. Or on bad days, Partners of S\*\*t Heads!

We got VVCS on board to access speakers and courses for us. The first thing we did was to go to a Lifestyle Program. It's for couples, usually about twenty couples and you go away for a week's residential program and it's everything to do with PTSD. It's diet, it's exercise, it's chemists talking on medication, GPs on alcohol and drug abuse and you'll have psychiatrists talk about how families are and it's a whole week-intense course. I tell everyone that it's the one thing you must do. You hear stories and you think, 'That's me!' Because they're all the same. You're all living the same; some behaviour might be a little bit different here or there, but basically you're all going through the same stuff.

Understanding my co-dependency was huge for me. I started off by saying, 'I'm not co-dependent. I'm not co-dependent.' But soon I was going, 'I'm soooo co-dependent!' I realised I was always watching what I said and thinking, 'Is he going to agree with that?' It was all about keeping the peace.

I've learnt so many wonderful, wonderful lessons through our POSH group. One big one was not to take things personally. So if Ken's pouting around the corner somewhere I don't think, 'Did I say something? Was it me?' Now I don't even go there. I used to think maybe I shouldn't be out so much. I'm always busy and I'm always out, but that's because I *have* to be out. Because Ken's always at home and he *never* goes out. You know, I love Ken to death and I can understand where he is at; that he's depressed



and needs to stay away from people, but I can't do that. I can't just sit there with him sitting there and then he gets up and has a cigarette and comes back and has a coffee and sits and sits. I'd go mad going mad – I have to get out! So my personal space is out there and that makes me sad sometimes because I'd like some personal space at home. Even when Ken goes to the shop to get some milk I go, 'Ahhh, personal space!' And then the dogs are barking and he's home.

But I can cope with all that now; I really can cope with that. And Ken realises that when he gets angry, I won't sit and take it anymore. Once I would have sat in front of his face and taken it. Now I just go, 'Talk to the hand'. And I just pick up the dogs and the car keys and I'm out the door. It completely stops the whole situation, pulls him back in and he knows he's gone too far. It happened the other night: he actually walked to hospital. He rang the psychiatrist and said, 'I am out of control, Mary has left with the dogs and I need to be in hospital.' Which is amazing because he hates the hospital. He hates it but he needs to go.

There are signs when he's getting very, very sick. The first thing he'll do is shave his head. That's him preparing to go to hospital. Now he doesn't tell anybody that, but that's what it is. He won't eat for three days, and he'll shave his head and he'll speak more about suicide. Normally I go with Ken to all his psychiatry visits so the doctor can ask, 'So what's he really been like this week?' But when Ken is really not travelling well, he won't take me on those visits. So I ring the doctor's mobile number and before he gets to the appointment, I can say, 'Well, he's not travelling too well...'

My overview on my life is: it was tragic to start off with but I'm at a place now where I'm educated, I know how to cope with myself and I have dear friends. I never had any friends and now I've got lots. I can call them at any time or go to the support group. Some days I just say, 'Don't even talk to me today, I just need to cry.' Any one of us might be like that. Twice a year we go on a retreat and when I do, my daughters look out for Ken. They'll say, 'Dad, what have you eaten, what are you up to? Mum will be very disappointed if you get drunk all the time.' They're fantastic with him and he listens to them. They know him as a lovely man. Sometimes they still get angry with him and he can still sulk or get offended by something they never intended. And then I will find myself with him again, after they've gone, explaining everyone to him and what was really meant.

So this journey is taking a long time for us but there's light at the end of the tunnel. Our life is much better and he is getting better slowly. We went to Europe on a cruise. Who would have thought the man around the side of the garage who says, 'You go, I'm not going, you go...' would travel through Europe, go to Barcelona, travel on the cable car up the Pyrenees Mountains to the Montserrat Monastery and ohhh... Venice? He was so romantic the whole time and my daughter said, 'I've never seen this side of Dad, never known him like this.'

I wish I could have got the help sooner. I wish I'd known sooner; I wish there'd been the information. But there's definitely hope for us. As we say at POSH, we don't make sandwiches for the men. We don't make sandwiches for ourselves. These days, we order in!

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