

OUT OF THE BLUE

A former cop who served in the state's west is on a mission to help other police officers avoid Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). ANGELA CLUTTERBUCK spoke with Paul Horner about his new book "Jack Knife – The Crashing of a Policeman".

ON the darkest day of his life, Senior Constable Paul Horner sat on the toilet inside Byron Bay Police Station with a gun in his mouth, finger on the trigger. It was a striking vision of his mates discovering his dead body that stopped him from pulling that trigger.

The year was 2006. A transfer to Byron Bay Police Station was supposed to be a dream come true for Paul 'Little Jack' Horner. But "too much baggage", dragged with him from his previous stint in Bourke, made it impossible for him to enjoy his new post. In fact, Paul says that posting to Bourke between 2001 and 2004 was most certainly "the beginning of the end".

What began as a childhood dream to "grow up and ride a police motorcycle" ended in Paul's medical discharge from the force in 2008 after he was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and hospitalised.

Now based on the Gold Coast, the 38-year-old cop-turned-author wants something positive to come out of the experience. Paul's goal is to help police officers to cope with the physical and mental trauma that dissolved his own career.

Paul's book "Jack Knife – The Crashing of a Policeman", details his career at Mount Druitt, Cabramatta, Bourke and Byron Bay police stations, and the toll it took on both his physical and mental health. It is dedicated to his mate, Greg Jackson, a fellow police officer who died in Bourke in 2001.

AFTER graduating from the Police Academy in 1997, Paul was stationed at Mount Druitt and Cabramatta. Four years later he and his then-fiancé, also a police officer, were posted to Bourke.

Paul says the relative anonymity he enjoyed at Mount Druitt sharply contrasted with his experience in Bourke, where he lived in stifling proximity to the criminals he dealt with on a daily basis. In his book, he describes Bourke as a town that could be "very violent", with "an extremely high crime rate", a high rate of unemployment and "extensive drug and alcohol problems".

Paul recounts an incident in which he was watering his front lawn in Bourke when would-be crooks went past his house, screamed out his name, told him they would poison his dogs, rape his wife, burn his house down and kill him.

He says it also wasn't uncommon to exit the local supermarket and have 20-30 juveniles surround him and his car, swearing at him and throwing rocks and bottles at him as he took off. Both kids and adults alike would stalk Paul before turning up at his house late

Even though I've gone through a lot of crap, it doesn't mean I've forgotten all the good stuff. I never wanted to do anything but be a cop, and if someone reads my book and learns about some of the warning signs through my own experience, then it's all worth it.'

at night to challenge him to a fight.

"It was a difficult three years," says Paul. "I became hyper-vigilant and uncomfortable to the point that I didn't want to leave my home."

"Whenever I went out I was thinking, when am I going to be called 'a dog'? When am I going to be threatened or have something thrown at me? I was always on edge. It was extremely draining."

Paul says he became increasingly frustrated in Bourke as visiting magistrates handed down one lenient sentence after another to criminals he'd put his life on the line to arrest.

"I sent the crooks a message that they could do whatever they liked in the town," he says. "Because they were 'untouchable'."

"Sometimes the only way we (police) got through it was to almost laugh at it. We'd say, okay let's go lock up 'old mate' for breaching his bail, even though we know we'll be locking him up again this time tomorrow because he'll be allowed out on bail this arvo. Deep down, we just hoped and waited for a magistrate that wouldn't just keep letting the crooks go."

A major challenge for Bourke police, Paul says, was a hotspot known as Alice Edwards Village. Back then, the public housing estate was Bourke's own version of Dubbo's notorious former Gordon Estate.

It was in Alice Edwards Village in 2003 that an incident took place that put Bourke on the map for all the wrong reasons, and changed Paul's life forever. Paul was among police who'd made an arrest in the village when he was hit in the face by a full stubby of beer thrown by a teenager as the officers departed. It smashed his nose, knocked a tooth out and left a hole in Paul's upper lip that a doctor was able to put his finger through.

As well as having to recuperate from his physical injuries, Paul was also left to deal with the fact that the youth who "had a full page of criminal history for every year of his life" received a sentence of 80 hours of community service for his part in the attack. Paul recalls being so angry at the sentence he kicked the chair he was sitting on, stormed out of the courtroom, marched into the police station across the road and began throwing things around his office. The youth was later sentenced to six months in custody following a police and Department of Public Prosecutions Appeal.

In 2004, Paul received a transfer to Byron Bay, but his dramas were far from over. Another matter that had emerged in Bourke, just as he had been preparing to leave, still hung over his head.

While sorting through his things prior to leaving for his new post, Paul found an old



Author Senior Constable Paul Horner

printed copy of an email that had been circulated around the police email system four years earlier with the tongue-in-cheek suggestion that western Sydney suburbs should bid for the Olympics. Noting similarities with the type of criminal behaviour he was used to dealing with in Bourke, Paul says he made several changes to the email to 'localise' it and sent it as a light-hearted joke to some people he knew. He says some forwarded it to others who took offence to his comments.

Paul says what became known as the "Bourke Olympics" email suddenly became national news, with the Assistant Commissioner of Police appearing on television saying its author would be sacked. He says while it was in no way intended to be racist, parties who saw it that way launched a civil suit against him three years later.

In the meantime, Paul received internal discipline for misuse of the police email system. The day before he was due to start at Byron Bay, Paul heard a news story on the radio regarding complaints made to the Tweed/Byron Local Area Commander about a 'racist' police officer being transferred to the area. In his book he describes the awkward moment when his new workmates showed him an article about the same subject in the paper and he had to confirm that it was about him.

PAUL doesn't use his book to blame everyone else for what happened to him. Indeed, he accepts responsibility for many of the decisions he made which, in hindsight, were bad. By the time he was in Byron Bay, Paul's reliance on alcohol to relieve stress led to him becoming involved in a string of



arguments and fights at the local tavern. He cracked his head open while fishing during a thunderstorm after a 12-hour drinking session. And he was caught drink driving.

"Even though I'd physically left Bourke behind me, I was a mess when I got to Byron Bay," he says. "I didn't know anyone and couldn't trust anyone."

"The only way I could deal with it was to drink alcohol. It worked immediately, and made me feel good. But of course the issues were still there the next day, and worse."

In 2006, Paul's marriage ended.

Paul says at his lowest point, his drinking binges typically involved him downing a dozen schooners of beer at the local bowling club, another six-pack of beer upon returning home then "quite possibly a bottle of rum – it was ludicrous".

Paul says he was never a stranger to alcohol. He liked a drink, and had managed a liquor store before his policing days. But he says it was police culture that drinking was an "expected practice to be part of the team" and that "a man that doesn't drink is a man not to be trusted" – a culture that made him feel he'd be ostracised if he didn't join fellow officers at the pub after a block of night shifts back when he started at Mount Druitt.

"I formed the opinion that you needed to have a drink to be accepted into the police 'family,'" says Paul. "At that time, as long as it wasn't illegal, I wanted to do well and would have done almost anything to be accepted."

WELL and truly after his final shift as a police officer, Paul continued to experience nightmares and PTSD flashbacks. His book describes three flashbacks in detail. In the first, a near-collision while in traffic brought to mind the first fatal crash he attended as a police officer. He got out of his car and vomited uncontrollably at the memory.

In the second, his decision to use an angle grinder to slough some dead skin from his foot brought back the smell of the burning skin of a man who had fallen into a campfire in Bourke years earlier. Again, Paul was

physically sick.

In the third flashback, which also made him vomit, a murder scene in a film brought back the "smell of more than half a dozen bodies" from the Westmead Mortuary some 11 years earlier, and visions of dead children who laid there.

In 2009, Paul drew upon his experience to write letters to the NSW Police Commissioner and Police Minister containing a series of recommendations about what the force could do to help preserve the physical and mental health of its officers. The recommendations include mandatory debriefings after traumatic incidents, block deployments in office duties to give frontline officers respite from long periods on the streets, tighter screening of prospective officers and breath testing officers prior to shifts. He also highlighted the importance of using physical trainers and dieticians to promote exercise as a means of combating stress, rather than alternatives such as alcohol.

Paul says that in all of his 11 years on the Force he received just one debriefing following a traumatic incident. And while he feels greater access to debriefing would be of immense assistance to officers all the counselling in the world will be useless, he believes, until there's a change to the culture within the force that makes officers reluctant to seek help.

"They feel obliged to say 'no' to therapy, even when it's offered to them. There is a perception that they have to be 'tough and strong', but we need to make sure officers get therapy when they need it."

"That might mean making counselling mandatory. After a while, people will accept that it's good for you."

Paul says one of the most devastating things about leaving the police force was the feeling that he had lost his identity.

"You just got used to people referring to you as 'a copper', whether it be good or bad," he says. "It was what I had always wanted to be and done for so long, and when I left, I just didn't know what to do or who I was."

Despite a seemingly endless succession of

harrowing incidents in his own career, Paul maintains policing is a rewarding occupation that he will continue to recommend to those who have the commitment to undertake it.

"On one hand you can be in a frontline role, kicking doors in and disarming high-risk offenders. But there are other areas such as gathering intelligence and a range of areas in between."

"Shift work has both its positives and negatives. But even though I've gone through a lot of crap, it doesn't mean I've forgotten all the good stuff. I never wanted to do anything but be a cop, and if someone reads my book and learns about some of the warning signs through my own experience, then it's all worth it. What I have written is unique and is something you won't learn at the academy."

PAUL says one thing that helped him through his ordeal was exercise, something he'd like to see more officers turn to instead of the bottle.

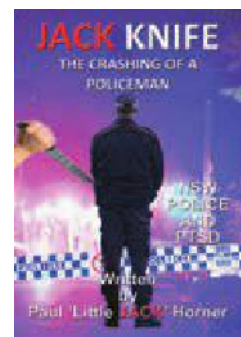
"When you're in the right mindset, physical activity can be a great benefit," he says.

"When I got out of hospital and played footy the following season, it helped a lot. Exercise releases all of those feel-good endorphins. I started to feel alive again. My confidence began to increase. I began to lose weight and my skin cleared up."

He says meeting new people and making friends outside the police force was also a healthy step.

Recognising his experience and what can be learned from it, the Queensland Police Service has engaged Paul to deliver presentations on PTSD. Paul says he is also in negotiations with the NSW Police Force to do the same thing.

"I want to work side-by-side with management to talk with junior police and make them aware of what they need to do to look after themselves so they don't end up like me," he says. "I'm hopeful that will happen."



Paul's book "Jack Knife – The Crashing of a Policeman", details his career at Mount Druitt, Cabramatta, Bourke and Byron Bay police stations, and the toll it took on both his physical and mental health.

The only way I could deal with it was to drink alcohol. It worked immediately, and made me feel good. But of course the issues were still there the next day, and worse.'