

The Singing Soldier

Years after returning from peacekeeping duty in Iran, former soldier Luke Carroll returned to music to carry him through another difficult life experience.

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ying in a hospital bed, facing a long and painful recuperation after an horrific car crash, former 6RAR company commander and ex-regular Lieutenant Colonel Luke Carroll struck up what was to prove a lasting friendship with a hospital chaplain. It was not a friendship based on religion or ministering, but, as it turned out, one rooted in music.

The chaplain suggested it was all well and good to rest up, healing bones and body, but the mind and the person needed attention too.

"What hobbies or interests do you have? What do you do that is creative?" the chaplain asked.

"Nothing – anymore," came a tentative reply. "But, I used to play guitar."

With his left shoulder broken and elbow injured, the left-handed Luke was forced to learn to play the guitar again – adding to the brain stimulation the chaplain was after.

"Anyway, one thing led to another and I got back into playing guitar for the therapeutic benefit," Luke says.

"Then, some time later, another friend told me about the National Folk Fellowship sponsored by the National Library.

"That might give me something to focus on, I thought, but I didn't quite know how at first."

"Music in war" sprang to mind and a labour of love was born.

Pulling together songs of war as sung by Australian soldiers since the Boer War, Luke went to great lengths to research and finally package the songs and their history into a sort of singing lecture which he eventually delivered for the first time at the National Folk Festival in Canberra over the Easter weekend 2009 – a little more than two years after the crash that nearly ended his life.

"It was good to have that to focus on because, as part of the injury, I easily got



fatigued and lost concentration – so focusing on something like this was exercise for the mind," Luke says.

"It was also easier because it was about something I was interested and experienced in."

As an officer in the Army, Luke Carroll was deployed in 1989 to patrol the ceasefire line between Iran and Iraq following the war between those countries.

With Iraq refusing to accept Australian soldiers on their side of the line, Luke and 14 colleagues were dispersed along the Iranian side of what was still a very fluid border.

Following the UN philosophy of 'national balance', soldiers were dispersed to work in teams of mixed nationality, in a very dangerous environment.

"On one patrol in my sector, whilst making our way through a minefield, an Iranian officer activated a mine behind me. He was seriously wounded and died later," Luke says.

"I would describe that as a somewhat less-than-average day – in fact, that was 20 years ago in just the past few days.

"Just a couple of days after that, the Ayatollah died.

"So, in a normally tense situation anyway, our team was pretty shaken."

The medical evacuation system was pretty poor too, adding to the danger and trepidation in an already precarious situation.

Luke says mines and near misses were pretty common. In another incident on the Iraqi side a short time later, an Iraqi soldier stepped on a mine, a Malaysian UNMO (United Nations military officer) was blown off his feet but otherwise was unhurt – but a Canadian UNMO was hit in the neck by shrapnel and nearly died.

"Remember also, this was 1989, so the Australian Army had hardly been anywhere in years – and I think we were so far removed

from the business end of operations, there was a pretty poor understanding of what could be achieved.

"It was an intense time – a defining period you might say.

"I can smile now, but I often mentally thanked every sergeant and warrant officer who ever kicked my arse as a cadet or junior officer.

"Those voices in my head – 'stay calm, think straight, watch where you're going' – kept me going.

"But, it was basically good training and good luck that got us through."

And music.

"Unless you were one of the two guys based in Tehran, you didn't see another Aussie for weeks – so, when we did get together in Tehran, we were a very close bunch of mates and provided a lot of support to each other.

"And every time we got together, music played a big part.

"It was a really simple pleasure and was very important to us."

Music went back even further for Luke Carroll and his cohorts, however.

"When I was in 3RAR years ago, music was always an important part of life in that unit at that time.

– and there probably wouldn't be too many of them.

"Half way through the first performance, though, I became aware – but couldn't really see because of the lights – that there were quite a lot of people out there in the audience.

"Then it struck me – because I'd been to the festival before and know that people wander in and out of gigs all the time – that, 'hey, shit, there's a lot of people out there, and they're not leaving'.

"I think that's probably the moment I thought I must be doing OK, so I relaxed and enjoyed it a lot more."

So what now?

"Another performer at the folk festival was an unbelievable guitarist and, according to his web site, he conducts workshops just outside Paris. So I'm thinking workshop – battlefield tour.

"As far as this war-music project goes, though, I have to keep doing something with it, otherwise what's the point?

"There's this fuzzy goal in my head – how can I turn this project into something for the social good?

"I'd like to think I could generate something that could light a spark of hope for someone going through tough times like I did after the crash, but I don't quite know

how that will come about just yet.

"I also think that after digging up these stories, they deserve to be heard."

Luke Carroll was out of action for almost two years following his car crash and says there's no other word for the support he received from family, friends and his work colleagues other than 'outstanding'.

"Everyone has their own story, but I can't speak in anything other than glowing terms about the support I have received in terms of management, understanding and assistance.

"So, if I can give a little of that back, I certainly will.

"I think my background lends a good deal of authenticity to this project – I know these people and I know these stories; I know the history and I have a very long military heritage in my family and, while my experience may not have been warlike service, I certainly saw enough unpleasantness to feel I know exactly how they felt.

"So, as long as my strings don't break, I can perform this story.

"I am completely unshakable in my belief that I am the right person or the right sort of person to tell this story in a compelling way.

"I think that's why people responded so warmly at each of the performances.

"I'm very proud of that."



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"Almost every night at the mess we would sing – often quite badly – but it was a very important part of unit life then."

So, when he started researching 'music in war', Luke Carroll found himself in comfortable territory.

"I began to realise that music has been important all through the years – usually just the popular music of the day or the tunes of the day with their own, usually bawdy, words written to those tunes, to draw attention to the situation the soldiers faced."

For whatever reason Luke Carroll took on this project, once he decided he was going to do it, nothing was going to stop him. And so it was in a cow shed at Exhibition Park in Canberra that the singing soldier presented his 'lecture' on songs through Australia's military ages.

"I didn't think anyone would come but, if they did come, they'd come because they were keenly interested in the subject

