



*"I DON'T CARE IF YOU
SUPPORT THE WAR OR
NOT – JUST GIVE A FUCK
[ABOUT THE SOLDIERS]"*

The words of former US Army Lieutenant Matt Gallagher from his acclaimed book *'Kaboom - embracing the suck in a savage little war'*, so resonated with portrait artist **Caroline McGregor** that she immortalised the speaker by naming an entire collection of heart-felt Australian-soldier portraits...

JUST GIVE A F#*K!

WORDS AND PICS BRIAN HARTIGAN

South-African-born Caroline McGregor grew up in a country where war and conscription were part of the landscape and fellow university students suffering the mental anguishes of their involvement in an unpopular and un-talked-about war were largely ignored.

"We didn't know or realise what they were going through," she told me at her Sydney studio.

"When you saw them sleeping in the gutter in pools of their own vomit, you just stepped over them and went about your business. No one stopped. No one cared. No one gave a fuck about those boys or what they might be going through.

"And now, that makes me angry – and I don't want to see the same thing happen to Aussie boys when they come home."

But, Aussies know about and care about our soldiers – don't they?

Caroline thinks not – at least not in the suburbs and not in the everyday.

"Sure, we all say 'that's terrible' when we hear that another soldier is killed or wounded, but it's only a fleeting thought for most people who have no connection to the ADF.

"I had another reporter come here to talk to me and take pictures one day and he said something like, 'these paintings are really good – I wonder how I can link them to ANZAC Day?'"

"And I said, 'Are you kidding? Don't you know these boys are in Afghanistan right now fighting a war on our behalf? How more ANZAC can they be?'"

"It was only when I rammed it down his throat that he got it – and his story made the front page!"

"So, what I'm saying is, most Aussies out here in the suburbs don't really know – and that makes me angry. I want to shake them and say, 'Please just give a fuck about our boys.'"

One of the boys who knows that Caroline McGregor gives a fuck is Trooper David Nicolson – familiar to CONTACT fans as the man who told us in issue #33 how he survived four IEDs.

Trooper Nicolson is also a subject who has been immortalised on canvas by Caroline McGregor – and is forever grateful that Caroline McGregor cares so passionately about Aussie soldiers.

"I first saw Caroline's work when a random painting showed up on my news feed on Facebook," Trooper Nicolson said.

"I was surprised at how amazing it was and knew straight away it was my mate Corporal Michael Byron.

"I sent Caroline a message asking how she came about doing his painting, and told her about Byron and the incredibly ballsy job he and the engineers did for us in Afghanistan.

"I felt in a way this would give her a better understanding of the soldier she painted and thought it would be nice for her to have a story behind it."

Trooper Nicolson said that after 'chatting' via Facebook for a couple of weeks he realised Caroline McGregor wanted to do a whole exhibition dedicated to our deployed troops.

"I was amazed to see that someone with no military background was putting so much time and effort into such amazing artworks just to show support to the young vets of today's war.

"Yes, we get a massive amount of support from our loved ones and friends. We/I can't thank them enough for putting up a brave face and staying positive while a loved one is deployed. Whether or not they agree with us being over there, they are as proud of us as we are of them.

"But, while we do get 'thank you's' from strangers – and it's a great feeling of support – it's a shame it's only usually on occasions like Anzac Day!

"All we want is for people to support us, the soldiers, even if they don't believe in the reasons we were sent there. I can sometimes see people judge us just because we were in Afghanistan."

Trooper Nicolson said he felt diggers today owed a great deal of thanks to the Vietnam vets for their hard work over many years in changing the way people treat returning vets and the ADF in general.

"That said, it is very different to see a complete outsider like Caroline McGregor do something like this for us – it is very special.

"Caroline shows her support in a very different and special way. No words need to be said. Just look and admire her paintings and her support jumps out from her art – and that's what I love about what she's doing!"

Caroline McGregor eventually included a portrait of Trooper Nicolson in her collection [top-left photo and background] – and he was more than happy to consent.

"She sent me a photo of the finished piece and I was deeply thankful for her great work.

"She has now completed several paintings of the guys from Alpha Company MTF-3 and others, and I'm still gobsmacked by what she has done.

"I just don't have the right words to express how much her work means to me. I really can't thank her enough!"

"I look at the paintings and remember the good and bad times I had over there with the best bunch of guys, who I'm so proud to have served with.

"In thanks for her support, I want the whole world to see what Caroline McGregor did for us – so now I'm grateful to CONTACT too for helping me to show Caroline that all her new fans in the ADF – and Townsville in particular – appreciate the wonderful thing she is doing for our vets."

