



Real Life

Heather Anderson is a heroic former RAF Officer, who served with the Royal Air Force Nursing Service on the frontline in both Iraq and Afghanistan. She spoke with Live 24 Seven how the experiences she witnessed led to her being diagnosed with PTSD.

Born in Malta in 1962, Heather Anderson was the daughter of a submariner who spent much of his time at sea. Like all forces families, the Andersons moved around frequently and Heather and her brother both attended boarding school. But, when school closed for the summer, Heather, her mother and brother, packed up and headed to the idyllic village of Corse Lawn, just north of Gloucester, to spend the holidays with her great aunt and uncle who owned a farm called Little Dunshill. Heather's great-uncle, John Nind, was well-known in the area and Heather has many fond memories of her summers with him and his wife. Probably her fondest is of lying under a blanket with her brother while the cows licked her feet!

As an adult, Heather had no immediate plans to join the armed forces. Instead, she trained as a midwife in London and spent some time backpacking around Australia. It was during these travels that she met her husband and decided to settle in Australia permanently. While out there, Heather continued her studies, gaining additional qualifications in emergency nursing care and aviation medicine. At that time, Heather had no idea just how important these qualifications would later become.

After the breakdown of her marriage, Heather returned to the UK in search of a new challenge. Given her father's history, the armed forces seemed the natural choice and in 1999, she joined The Princess Mary's Royal Air Force Nursing Service, or PMRAFNS, a regiment committed to providing the highest quality nursing to soldiers wounded on the frontline. The next step for Heather was to complete her RAF officer training which she found to be a tough, but thoroughly enjoyable experience.

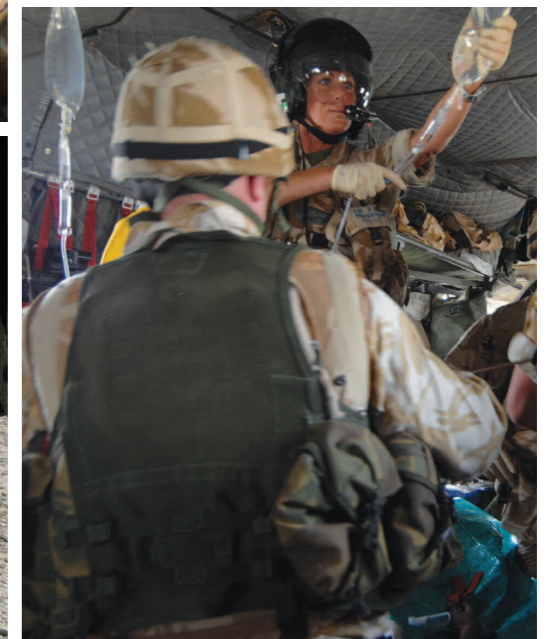
It was during her first posting in Cyprus, however, that Heather experienced her first trauma in the military. While working as a midwife, Heather was involved in a serious accident when the ambulance that she, her team, and a five-day-old baby, were travelling in, blew a tyre and overturned. While Heather hung upside down, the team realised that the baby was missing and had, in fact, been thrown from the ambulance and across several lanes of the motorway. Miraculously, Heather was able to resuscitate the baby, an act which saw her nominated for the Sir Andrew Humphrey Memorial Medal but the events of that day would haunt her for some time.

Over the next few years, Heather saw frontline action in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

In Iraq, she worked as part of an IRT, an Incident Response Team which comprised of two people and depending on the severity of injuries, also included a doctor. The IRT delivered emergency medical aid to wounded soldiers on the frontline and had evolved significantly by the time of Heather's arrival in Afghanistan in the winter of 2006. As part of the Medical Emergency Response Team, or MERT, Heather, as an emergency-trained nurse, worked alongside a specialist doctor, a paramedic and a combat medic, delivering medical aid via chinook, with the additional support of an Apache.

During these experiences, Heather witnessed a number of traumatic experiences but had to keep up with the heavy demands of working in such a fast-paced environment. On one day alone, for example, Heather and her team responded to an Afghan compound that had been mortared, injuring dozens of local children. As two members of her team treated the children, Heather responded to an incident in which a South African military contractor had been shot in the chest and was in a critical condition.

Under the terms of the Geneva Convention, Heather also came face to face with the enemy. On two occasions, for



instance, she resuscitated members of the Taliban. Under such intense pressure, Heather had little time to process the traumatic events that she had witnessed.

Heather left the PMRAFNS in 2008 but maintained her connection to the military. As a civilian matron, she has worked on a number of bases in England and Wales, including Bovington in Dorset and the Brecon Beacons. She has also worked as part of the nursing staff on cruise ships, traveling across the world.

The year 2016, however, proved to be the most challenging for Heather. In one two-week period, she moved to Gosport in Hampshire, started a new job and lost her father. Not long after, Heather began to experience the symptoms of PTSD, including insomnia and nightmares. In addition, for the first time in her life, she began to question the medical decisions that she had made during her military career, even though her colleagues agreed that she had done the right things at the right times. Consumed by stress and anxiety, Heather's mental health began to rapidly deteriorate.

Shortly after, Heather admitted to her work colleagues that she was displaying the signs and symptoms of PTSD and they referred her to the occupational mental health team. Heather admits, however, that this team wasn't very good at helping her. With no understanding of military life or of the realities of frontline service, they failed to grasp the pressures that Heather had faced. Instead of helping Heather to feel better, her experience with the mental health team actually made her feel even worse. Having to describe in

detail the events she had witnessed and having to justify her medical decisions only caused further distress and anxiety.

Heather did, eventually, find the right people to help. After searching Google for details of military PTSD services, she found the charity, PTSD Resolution. She called them and described her symptoms and state of mind. The next day, she was contacted by a local therapist and her treatment began.

After talking with Heather, the Resolution therapist explained that her reactions were completely normal, given the nature of the situations she had witnessed. She informed Heather that trauma affects the mind in a cumulative manner. Just like a bathtub, trauma can build and build until it overflows and becomes unmanageable. As a result, Heather felt a wave of relief sweep over her. For the first time, she realised that these symptoms were, in fact, a completely normal response to the events she had experienced and that, more importantly, it was possible to make a full recovery.

Heather saw her therapist three more times over the next few weeks. Together, they completed the Rewind Technique, a non-

intrusive and highly-effective method of dealing with the negative emotions which arise from trauma. Heather recalls that it was a mutual decision to end her treatment. Both Heather and her therapist knew that she had turned a corner and was now equipped with the necessary knowledge and tools to get her life back on track.

The treatment that Heather received from PTSD Resolution was provided free of charge but Heather felt so much gratitude towards the charity that she fundraised £1000 in a charity bike ride as a way of giving something back. In February 2017, Heather also spoke in praise of PTSD Resolution and their work in the House of Lords.

Today, Heather remains free from PTSD and speaks highly of PTSD Resolution. Speaking on the Rewind Technique, she credits this method as being the key to her recovery because, in her words, "It put to bed all of the events which haunted me."

If you require further information or help please ring 0300 302 0551 or email contact@ptsdresolution.org