



# Friendly shots

**Craig Rohse's** photography project is giving the former paratrooper sergeant a new sense of purpose and renewed appreciation for those who served our country

words **GABRIELLE RISH** portrait **KIM EISZELE**

**M**ary Cook poses for her photo in a little black dress, service medals pinned to her chest. By her side is assistance dog Roxy, teamed with Cook a year ago to pick things up off the floor for her. "I've got a neck full of metal," the 55-year-old Margate resident says.

Roxy is also there to calm Cook when the post-traumatic stress disorder resulting from her military service gives her nightmares or moments of waking anxiety and depression.

The photographer taking Cook's portrait is an army veteran with depression, former paratrooper sergeant Craig Rohse.

Rohse, 43, of Claremont, embarked on a project to shoot portraits of 100 ex-service personnel for his TAFE photography course. The veteran community was quick to show its enthusiasm: within three months of seeking subjects on social media, Rohse had photographed 76 people and gained the support of the RSL.

RSL Tasmania will publish a book of the portraits and hold an exhibition of 30 of them in Hobart in April to coincide with its 100th anniversary. Rohse has photographed defence force reservists and

veterans from the army, navy and airforce, including a 98-year-old who served in World War II.

Federal Member for Denison Andrew Wilkie, a former lieutenant colonel of army intelligence, got wind of the project and posed for a portrait. Tasmanian senator Jacqui Lambie, formerly of the army transport corps and military police, is also scheduled to be photographed. Rohse poses all his subjects in the same way, with the same lighting set-up and black studio backdrop.

"I loved old First World War and World War II photos of guys posing in their uniforms, very proud, before they went off to war, with those lovely hand-painted studio backdrops," Rohse says.

"I couldn't find an old painted backdrop anywhere but I'm trying to replicate the style of pose. I also got the idea for the look of my portraits from that very famous painting of [Australian World War I] General John Monash in uniform, holding his hat and swagger stick.

"I don't tell the people I'm shooting what to wear. Dressing up is the norm but I had one very high-ranking officer who didn't want to wear his medals. I'm happy with that: what I'm after is the person themselves. Their length of service, rank, where they've served

- it doesn't matter what they've done, they've served, they've signed their life away to the military. My project is really about the emotional side after your service and the continuing attachment to your service on an individual level."

Rohse, who was born in Melbourne but grew up in Germany, is an imposing figure, with his height and upright bearing. It takes a while to notice he wears hearing aids in both ears, a legacy of what he says is from "being around too many loud bangs".

The father of four was unsure what to do with his life after he was medically discharged from the army in May.

He was a soldier for 12 years, with deployments overseas to the Solomon Islands, East Timor and Afghanistan. He spent 12 years in a highly disciplined, focused and demanding environment, a world of total dedication of time and effort. He considered returning to his earlier trade as a cabinet maker but ankle and back injuries sustained in Afghanistan made standing all day in a workshop too hard on his body.

Inquiring about doing Design in Wood at TAFE, he ended up being accepted into the photography diploma on the basis of images he

**PORTRAIT PROJECT:** Clockwise from left, photographer and former paratrooper sergeant Craig Rohse, of Claremont; Mary Cook, of Margate, with her assistance dog Roxy; former artillery warrant officer Rob McDowell, of the Huon Valley; veteran Michaela; and father and son Dave and Noel. Participants are generally identified only by their first names, without reference to rank or title.

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took as operational support photographer for his regiment, 3RAR, in East Timor.

As well as the physical injuries, Rohse was suffering from losing his sense of identity and purpose after the end of his military career. He admits a sense of futility about the effectiveness of Australia's mission in Afghanistan contributed to his mental state.

"The portrait project has been very therapeutic for me. It has given me more sense of direction, more focus," he says.

His subjects have also been moved by the project, enjoying the feeling of having their experience as veterans acknowledged.

Rob McDowell, 51, from the Huon Valley, shows up punctually for his photo shoot with Rohse.

He is intelligent, articulate and perfectly turned out. A former warrant officer in the artillery, he signed up as a 17-year-old in 1982 and served until his medical discharge in 1998. He has struggled to adjust to civilian life and employment ever since.

"I did not go overseas, I did not face an angry bullet, Australia wasn't involved in any overseas conflicts during the time I served," McDowell says. "But I was still highly trained and expected to perform at the highest level possible. You get trained to handle certain things and react in certain ways when the going gets tough, but the army doesn't de-train you."

McDowell says participating in the photo shoot was the first time he felt anyone had taken a real interest in his military service since his discharge.

"It's very poignant. It's saying, 'I'm proud, I served, these are my achievements'," he says. "It's an opportunity I haven't had since I got out of the service. Craig is taking an interest. A lot of veterans just sit in a dark hole - when someone takes an interest it makes you feel good."

For Cook, posing with Roxy by her side has been a great opportunity to fly the flag for Operation Canine, the RSL Adelaide initiative that teamed her with her support dog.

"I also wanted to do it for Craig, a fellow soldier with depression who is doing something with his life - getting behind the camera and getting himself out of bed every day to go to classes," she says.

Cook, originally from Strahan, on Tasmania's West Coast, was persuaded to join the army by an SAS officer she met while working for an NGO in East Timor in 1999-2000.

She ended up driving trucks and armoured vehicles for the Royal Corps of Transport. Her service included deployment to central Iraq in 2006-07.

The best thing she can say about that experience is that she developed an affection for camels, through having to chase them off the firing range.

"Every soldier who goes overseas on deployment comes back a different person," Cook says. "I came back with a different mindset and a different perspective on war."

"I came back to speak my mind because I live in a democracy and I'd just come from a country where women didn't have a voice, so I was going to stand up for myself."

It was while she was running around a training course in Adelaide in 2008 that the PTSD kicked in. "I couldn't go over a wall I'd normally fly over - I looked at the wall and just started crying," she says.

Now, going full circle to where her military career began, Cook will be returning to East Timor early next year for the veteran support group Mates4Mates, where she will spend a month engaging with Timorese veterans who have PTSD.



Three of the images from Craig Rohse's photographic series Tasmania's Own will be on display during the TAFE Tasmania exhibition from Friday until Thursday, December 22, in the foyer of the UTAS College of the Arts, Hunter St, Hobart, with a major exhibition slated for April next year. Works from the exhibition will also be shown at the Head On Photo Festival in Sydney next May. To support the project, phone RSL Tasmania CEO Noeleen Lincoln on 6242 8900