

Army veteran Phil Hodgskiss faces PTSD after the death of fellow Afghanistan veteran Jesse Bird

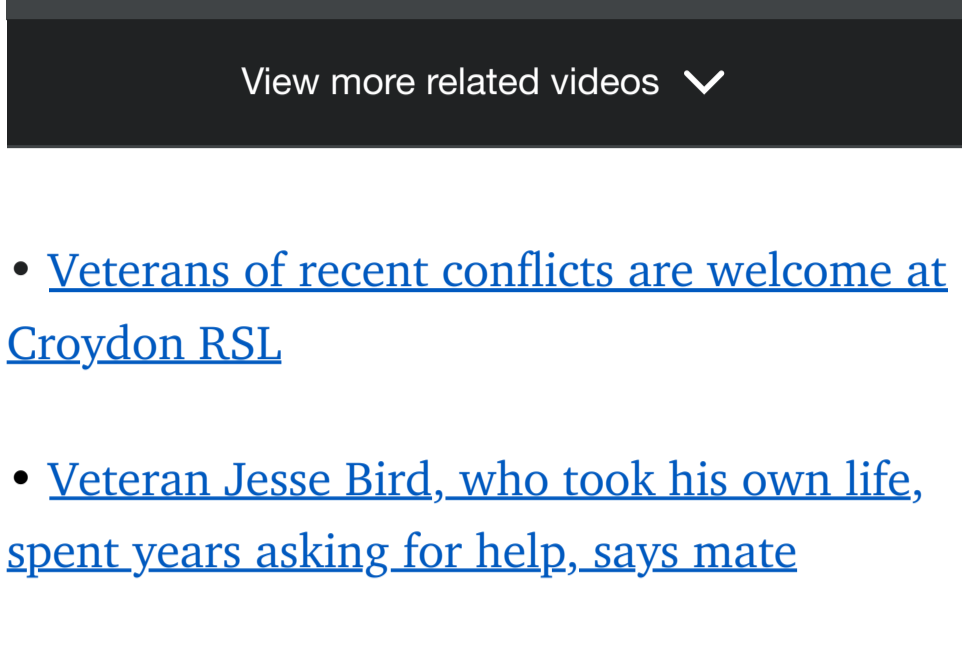
AFGHANISTAN veteran Phil Hodgskiss shares his story of dealing with PTSD, after his mental health took a dive following the death of a mate.

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2 min read May 2, 2018 - 1:05PM

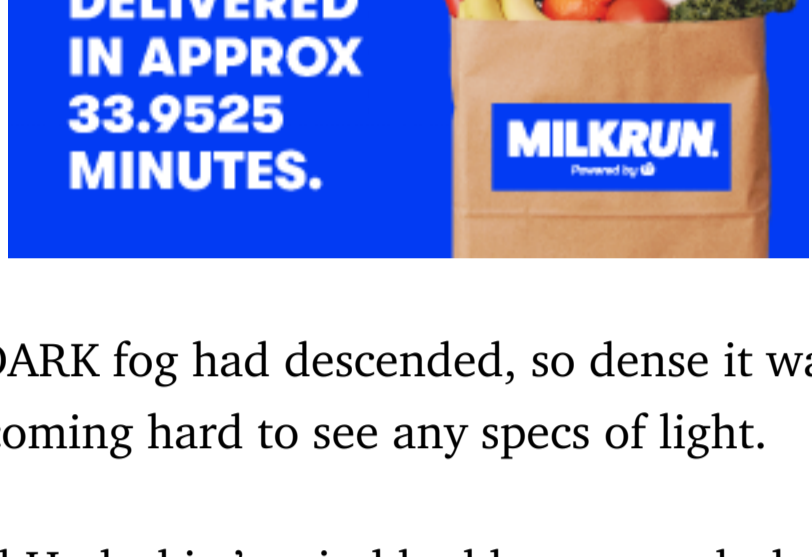
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A DARK fog had descended, so dense it was becoming hard to see any specs of light.

Phil Hodgskiss’s mind had become a dark jungle, where restful sleep was impossible, filled with nightmares he tried to hold at bay with the blackout effects of alcohol.

For years the Afghanistan veteran, who served in the heavy weapons and anti armour platoon, had suppressed and denied the increasing symptoms of post traumatic stress, which began to creep and snake to the surface after the death of his mate and fellow digger Jesse Bird.

On June 27 last year — National PTSD Awareness Day — the 32-year-old took his life, a result his friends and family believe was directly connected to a seven-year fight, which ended in the Department of Veterans Affairs rejecting Mr Bird’s permanent impairment claim.



Jesse Bird committed suicide after Department of Veterans Affairs denied his request for help.

Phil spoke to *Lilydale & Yarra Valley Leader* last year, desperate to hold the government accountable for its treatment of military veterans who were dying in droves as a result of the trauma they had suffered while serving.

He said Jesse had tried for years to get the Department of Veterans Affairs to recognise his mental scars from battle.

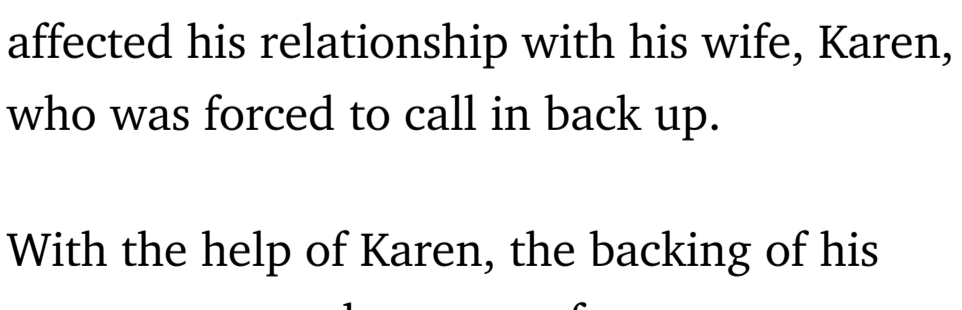
But months after his mate of 10 years took his own life, Phil came to realise, he too had been affected by his time overseas.

“My best friend Robbo and me have always said everyone has a breaking point. Eventually everyone will get there, it’s just a matter of how and when,” he said.

“For me Jesse’s suicide was that catalyst where the coping mechanisms I had used in the past and what I’d done to deal with things in the past, weren’t working anymore.”

Phil also suffers chronic back pain after he was shot twice during an attack in Afghanistan’s Oruzgan province, in what he says at the time was one of the biggest fire fights conventional forces had been involved in since Vietnam.

“They’d already surrounded us and I got shot by two machine guns at the same time. Two bullets in the back, from two different machine guns at the same time,” he said.



Veteran Phil Hodgskiss

Progressively vivid dreams had become all the more real and a re-occurring nightmare where he could not convince his fellow diggers not to kill themselves had him in tears.

It led to an increasingly short temper, and affected his relationship with his wife, Karen, who was forced to call in back up.

With the help of Karen, the backing of his army mates, and support of a veteran advocate Phil has started his journey for department compensation.

Phil spent four weeks as an inpatient in the Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital diagnosed with PTSD and major depressive disorder from his time overseas.

He also launched a claim for compensation with the DVA, which he said was coming up against bureaucratic roadblocks until a phone call from his dead friend’s mother, Karen Bird, seemed to fast track payments.

Earlier this year the Australian Government launched a major study to improve advocacy and access services for veterans and their families.