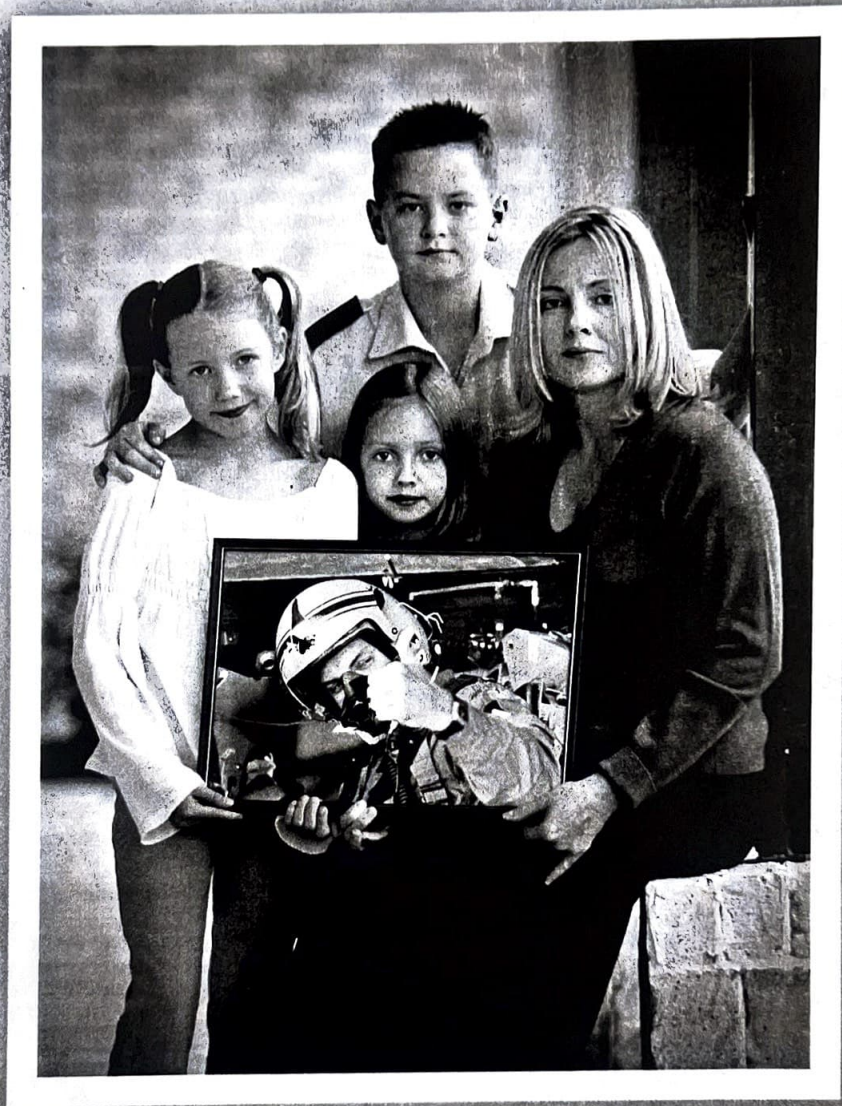


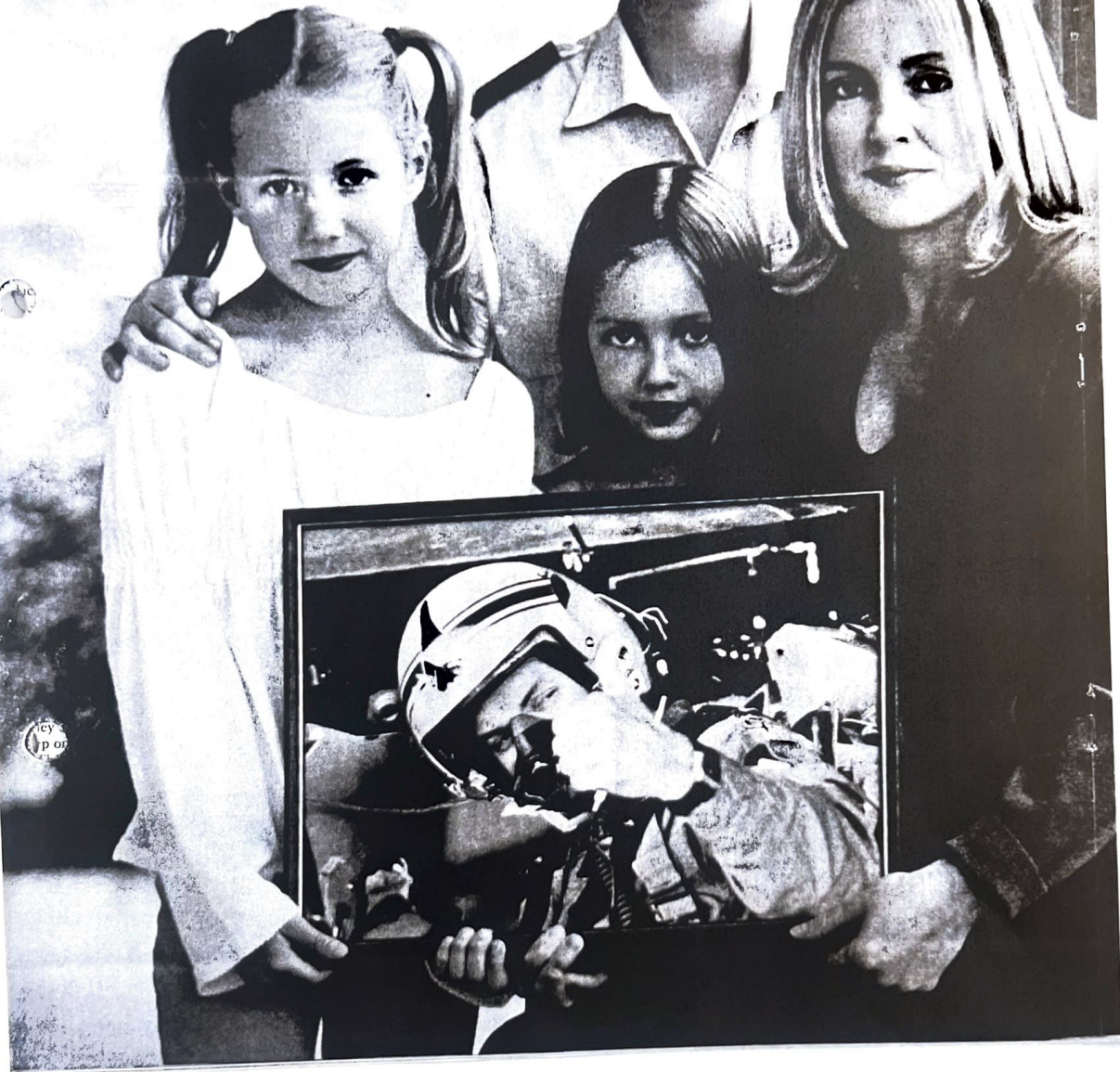
MAGAZINE



When a soldier dies

Kim Short lost her pilot husband – and then her faith in the defence forces. For Australia's military widows it's an all-too-familiar tale

...important for them
...their father as a
...says widow Kim
...with her children
...Sophie, 9 (left), Ben, 13,
...and Abbey, 7, holding a
...photograph of her late
...husband, Anthony.
Opposite: Kellie Pardoel
embraces her father-in-law
John as the remains of her
husband, Paul, arrive in
Canberra from Iraq.





LEFT BEHIND

As families grieve following this month's helicopter crash, the experiences of other young military widows suggest that for the bereaved, the ordeal is only just beginning. *Cameron Stewart reports.*

Kim Short was studying amid the cloisters of England's Cambridge University when she first heard the news. A military plane carrying Australian Flight Lieutenant Paul Pardoel and nine others had fallen from the sky, plunging into the Iraqi desert. It was January 30 and Pardoel, a married father of three, was killed instantly, becoming the first Australian serviceman to die in Iraq.

Short didn't know Pardoel, but she knew too well the tortured journey that was about to befall his Australian widow, Kellie. Five years earlier, an F-111 strike bomber carrying her own husband, Anthony, had slammed into a Malaysian

mountain. The fight to recover from his death and to clear her husband's name consumed the next four years of her life and nearly destroyed her.

So, on hearing of Pardoel's death, the 40-year-old Brisbane mother of three was reminded of the "living hell" suffered by so many Australian widows of servicemen killed in the line of duty. "I went out and bought a silver locket for this girl I never met," she says by telephone from an English air force base. "I just wanted to help. This also happened to me and I know how it feels."

Short says she has no idea how she will give the locket to Kellie - she doesn't know where she lives. But she doesn't need to - the "widows' network" will do that for her. ▸

JAMIE HANSON, AEP / ALAN FORBETT

that eventually in the future we
up," she says.

That is how it is with Australia's young
military widows. There is a kinship forged in
the blood of their dead husbands. Yet it is a
bond created as much out of anger as it is from
grief. For far too many of them, the sight of
their husbands' flag-draped coffins being
lowered into the ground is only the start of their
nightmare. Then come the inquests, the closing
of the ranks and the sickening realisation that
blame for accidents is more easily attached to
the dead than it is to the living.

"A disproportionately high number of
Australian Defence Force families feel com-
pelled to take either legal action against the
Commonwealth or else choose to air their
grievances in the media," says lawyer Kirstin
Ferguson, who has written a report based on
the experiences of more than 50 widows or
family members of dead Australian servicemen
and women over the past 30 years.

Those left behind have become the victims
of a faceless bureaucracy which not only failed
to understand their grief, but also thwarted
their healing through incompetence and even
callousness. They soon find themselves fighting
a war to salvage the reputation and honour of
their dead husbands in the face of a cold and
inflexible military system. They are Australia's
black widows and they are now fighting back,
forcing the top brass to re-examine the way
Australia's military deal with death in the ranks.

This issue is sharply in focus this month
with the death of nine servicemen and women
when their Sea King helicopter crashed on the
Indonesian island of Nias while on an aid
mission. The hope is that the bereaved will not
have to face the same ordeal as those whose
partners died in previous tragedies.

WHEN JEREMY'S PLANE CRASHED
I had ultimate faith that the military
would do the right thing by us," says
Colleen McNess, whose husband
died when his F-111 plunged into the ground
in northern NSW in 1993. That was until she
found bits of her dead husband's body strewn
across the crash site after the Air Force had told
her that the site had been completely cleared up.

"I turned up there with a metal detector
to try to find Jeremy's wedding ring. Instead,
I found parts of his body," she says. "It will stay
in my head for the rest of my life - it is just
horrific to pick up pieces of your husband's
body. When I confronted the Air Force about
it they said it must have been part of a dead
pilot or something - but it wasn't."

This was the start of a five-year ordeal
for Colleen and for Jeremy's family. Several
months later, their lives collapsed further when
an initial RAAF investigation wrongly blamed
the crash on pilot error. "Until then I had
expected that their behaviour would be noble
- that they would look after the families of their
own," says Jeremy's mother, Jan McNess, who
later wrote a book about her son's life and
death called *The Thirteenth Night*. "But that
was rubbish. What really mattered was the
reputation of the living, not loyalty to the dead."

For years Jan fought against the RAAF
system to find out more about what happened
on that fateful night and to clear Jeremy's
name. "For five years I lived with an anger that

just about destroyed me," she says. "I would write
a letter [to the RAAF] and ask four questions
and a month later they would write back and
answer only one question. I felt so helpless -
it was the worst time of my life."

The nightmare of the McNess family is
sadly familiar to many widows and relatives who
have lost a loved one in the line of duty. "The
problems often start after the funeral is finished,
when everyone in Defence goes back to normal
duties but the family is still grieving," says
Ferguson. "The families are left wanting to
know what happened and why, and the speed
of military inquiries is not fast enough for them.
There is a lack of communication, and then
the widows get frustrated and they speak out."

For some widows, such as Kay Ellis and Kate
Brooks, the problems began much earlier. For

**Rescue workers
inspect the crash site
in the Malaysian
jungle where F-111
pilot Anthony Short
(above) died in 1999.**



Ellis, it was the clinical manner in which she was
told of her husband's death that remains
frozen in her memory.

On a spring day in 1991, an RAAF Boeing
707 carrying her husband, Tim, and four other
crew plunged into the ocean off eastern Victoria.
Kay, who was also in the RAAF, was taken along
with the other wives of those missing to an
RAAF base briefing room. But they were given
no indication of what had happened or how
serious the accident was.

"I did not automatically assume that the
crew was dead," she recalls. "But then the base
commanders suddenly walked in and announced,
'Ladies, I am sorry to inform you that there
are no survivors.' It was like he was giving us
a military briefing. There was no explanation
about what had happened, no details, nothing
to prepare us for that statement. The impact
was devastating."

Brooks's experience was no less shocking.
In 1995, her husband, Geoff, a Navy pilot, plunged
to his death when a winch hook malfunctioned
during an exercise near Nowra on the NSW
coast. On hearing of the accident, she raced
to the hospital. She was waiting for news when
a navy doctor walked in, spattered with her
husband's blood. "His white overalls were
covered in blood and he told me, 'He's gone,
he's dead.' Then they told me to go home."

For most widows, the problems do not occur
before the funerals. They occur after the grand
eulogies about military heroes and the ANZAC
ethos have been given and the media spotlight
has moved on. Widows say one of the hardest
moments is when their husbands' units close
ranks - a common occurrence when soldiers
are instructed not to talk to families until after
the accident is investigated. "This is a terrible ▶

◀ thing to do to families and it was devastating for us," says Jan McNess, mother of F-111 crash victim Jeremy. "We were cut off from the very people who could tell us anecdotes about him, which meant so much to us. You want to talk about the person who dies, because having a cone of silence around them is like making out that they never existed."

Kim Short says she couldn't believe that the RAAF had cut her adrift by issuing orders to her husband's colleagues not to speak to her after his death. "I was furious at the time," she recalls. "But then my counsellor said, 'Why were you thinking that a group of men were going to give you emotional support? That's not the way it is.' But being taken away from that [military] world is like saying goodbye all over again."

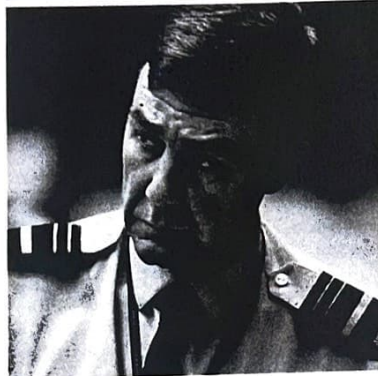
In their search for ways to cope with their grief, widows often turn to counsellors provided by the military, but for some this has also backfired. Kate Brooks recalls a harrowing encounter with a navy counsellor: "It was within only two or three weeks of Geoff dying and I remember him saying to me, 'Really, you are just going to have to accept the fact that he is dead and get over it.' I just asked him to leave ... and then later the Navy said I was being uncooperative."

Brooks says there was an expectation among some of the top brass that she should have coped better with his death. "I will never forget it being said to me that because he was in the military he should have expected that he could die and that is the way it goes."

For most widows, however, the single issue that most galls them is the perceived assault on the reputations of their dead husbands during the investigations and inquests into their deaths.

Brooks, wife of navy winch victim Geoff, recalls her horror when during the Coroner's inquest a barrister accused her husband of having deliberately jumped to his death. "He actually accused Geoff of being suicidal - that he had jumped off. It was at this point that I said, 'The gloves are off - you have picked the wrong girl.'" Brooks fought for four years before the Navy belatedly accepted that an equipment malfunction had caused her husband's death.

Colleen McNess had a similar experience when the RAAF's initial report into the crash



Clockwise from above left: Colleen McNess with husband Jeremy, who died in an F-111 crash in northern NSW in 1993; Navy pilot Geoff Brooks died after a winch accident near Nowra, NSW, 1995; Air Force chief Angus Houston.

that killed her husband, Jeremy, effectively blamed pilot error for the tragedy. The report implied that Jeremy McNess had been overconfident and unable to recognise danger signs.

"By the time the crash report came out I expected they were not going to find anything other than pilot error because that is the easiest thing for them to handle," Colleen says. "Those boys have to fly those aircraft every day. They can't be reminded of their own fallibility."

Adds Jeremy's mother, Jan: "From the Air Force's point of view, it is far better not to blame the aircraft."

It was not until years later - after a journey

to hell and back - that the McNess family received a letter from the RAAF concluding that there were systemic problems that contributed to the crash which killed Jeremy.

CONTRARY TO POPULAR BELIEF, MOST widows who take legal action against the government do so to protect the reputation of their dead husbands, rather than for money. "It is all about honouring the dead," says widow Kim Short. "Money has nothing to do with it. For my son - for my children - it is so important for them to see their father as a hero."

"When they [the military] don't back you, you feel that the rest of Australia and the powers that be are not proud. I'm still proud of him - really proud," she says, bursting into sobs. "But I felt his reputation was tarnished."

Faced with this sense of "us versus them", military widows from around the country have created an informal network to support each other and to campaign for better treatment from the military. When Kim Short's husband, Anthony, was killed, widow Kay Ellis - who had never met Kim - attended the funeral and quietly left her contact number with a mutual friend. About a year later, Kim finally called. "I stayed up half the night talking and drinking and laughing and crying," recalls Ellis. ▶

COURTESY JAN McNESS, KAY STRANGE



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Crew aboard HMAS *Kanimbla* honour the nine service personnel killed in the helicopter crash on Nias, Indonesia, this month.

Together, they decided to fight back against the system they believed had mistreated them and others. Fearing the military wouldn't listen to her, Short persuaded a friend, Kirstin Ferguson, to apply for a Churchill Fellowship to investigate ways to provide better support to widows. Ferguson's studies took her around the world. She even visited Australian astronaut Andy Thomas in Texas to discuss how families were cared for by NASA after the loss of the Space Shuttle *Columbia*.

But Ferguson, who is a lawyer and a wife of an F-111 navigator, soon realised that she had opened a Pandora's box. As word spread about her project, she became inundated with calls from widows and families around Australia.

"I was shocked," she says. "I knew Kim's story well, but I didn't think I would hear it 30 or 40 times over from other widows and families about accidents going back to the 1970s. I started off with two or three people and ended up speaking to more than 50."

At the same time, an unlikely white knight emerged for the widows in the form of new Air Force chief Angus Houston. "I first met him at a memorial service in Canberra shortly after he became air chief," says Short. "While I was there he saw me burst into tears - I was just so angry about everything that had happened." Houston was moved by her grief.

Short says that when Houston next flew to Queensland, he requested a meeting with her to hear her story. "Then he flew me to Canberra and apologised to my face - he covered it all on the chin."

At the same time, Ellis was also making inroads into the bureaucracy. She posted a heart-wrenching e-mail from Short about her mistreatment onto an internal military electronic noticeboard. The message had an immediate effect, with one senior officer contacting Ellis to ask for advice on how the

DEATH BY NUMBERS

● According to the Department of Veterans' Affairs, a wholly dependent partner who loses a spouse in the line of duty is entitled to a weekly pension of \$250.65 plus an aged-based lump sum of \$105,472 (based on a 30-year-old spouse), or may take a lump sum of \$383,569. In addition, those left behind are entitled to a lump sum payment of \$63,283 for each wholly dependent child under 16.

RAAF could be more responsive and sensitive to the needs of widows. Luckily for Ellis, the suggestion fell into the in-tray of Air Force chief Houston. "I had worked with Angus 20 years ago when he was a chopper pilot and he was very supportive of the project," says Ellis.

With Houston's backing, Ellis began penning a 40-page guide for RAAF commanders on how to look after widows and families after a service death. The guide was introduced into the force last year and Ellis now gives lectures to young officers on how to deal with grieving families.

Churchill Fellowship winner Ferguson, who completed her report last year, also says things are changing for the better. When she met Defence Force chief General Peter Cosgrove and the three service chiefs, she found them contrite and receptive to the problem. "I think they genuinely accept that things haven't been done well in the past and I think they are genuinely committed to improving the situation for widows. But in a large bureaucracy it is not so easy to fit these things into a neat policy."

Houston, who has now appointed an officer on his personal staff to look after widows' needs, says the first thing the military needed to do was to open its ears to what widows were saying. "We have learnt a great deal from our experiences of the past, but mostly we have learnt how important it is for us to listen," he says. "This is something that we have not always done very well."

Jan McNess, mother of F-111 pilot Jeremy, says that when she first tried to contact other families who had lost loved ones, she was told by one senior officer that he "couldn't think of a worse thing than to get these unhappy people together". The Air Force wouldn't give her contact numbers - "I had to do sneaky things to get [them]".

Despite the official roadblocks, nearly all of the widows and families of those Australian

servicemen and women killed in the line of duty are linked by e-mail or telephone. They keep a close eye on each other, especially around the anniversaries of their husbands' deaths.

"Kay Ellis has become one of my best friends," says Short of the woman who turned up anonymously at her husband's funeral all those years ago. "She [Kay] rang me on the anniversary of her husband's death at three in the morning, having drunk copious quantities of wine - those anniversaries are so tough."

Short, who moved to England several years ago and is now married to a British fighter pilot, says that the widows' grapevine goes beyond national boundaries. "I was at Tornado [fighter] base recently and saw the widow of an English Tornado pilot who had been shot down and killed. We had heard about each other through the grapevine and took one look at each other and burst into tears. We wiped away our tears and had a coffee and became great friends."

This informal network now kicks into action whenever a serviceman or woman dies in the line of duty. When Australian SAS soldier Andrew Russell was killed by a landmine in Afghanistan in 2002, his widow, Kylie, soon received an e-mail from Short. "I said to her there is somebody out here who knows what you are going through... you have friends on your side," says Short.

A GAINST THE ODDS, AUSTRALIA'S BLACK widows have made the top brass take notice of their plight. Perhaps nothing epitomises this sea change as much as the note that spluttered through the fax at Royal Air Force Base Marham in England last year. It was a letter, handwritten by Air Force chief Angus Houston and addressed to Kim Short. Houston had tracked her down, halfway across the world, to send a message of support on the fifth anniversary of the death of her husband, Anthony, known as "Shorty".

"The letter said that Shorty was still a part of the Air Force family and so was I," recalls Short, her voice cracking with emotion. "That letter is the kind of thing that you so desperately want - to know that you are still part of the team and [the military] honours and values your husband's sacrifice."

When asked about this letter, Houston says: "I wanted her to know that we in the Air Force have not forgotten the tragic death of her husband, Anthony, and that we have not forgotten her."

Short says that for most widows it has been a long, hard road to eke compassion out of the military and to make it better understand the aftermath of death. It is also a job that is only half done. But Short is no longer a pessimist. When she finally gives the silver locket to the newly widowed Australian Kellie Pardoel, she will do so with the hope that Kellie's journey will be easier than hers. "I know that Angus Houston has listened to what I and the other RAAF widows have had to say, and I remain optimistic that things have improved," she says.

"I believe that I and all the other widows who spoke out have managed to force change upon the system. That gives me some peace and I hope it gives some peace to my Shorty in heaven." ☺

Staff writer Cameron Stewart's last story concerned Australian terrorist Jack Roche (Sept 25-26, 2004).