



# Ian's story

Ian is a member of The Department of Defence's Defence Lived Experience Advisory Forum (LEAF).

**CONTENT WARNING:** This story features content that some people may find distressing. If you or someone you know needs support, please reach out to [Lifeline](#) (13 11 14) or one of the services listed [here](#).

Defence has shaped my life since I was sixteen years old. Even now, thirty years later, the uniform is still such a significant part of my identity.

I'm a husband and a father. I've also been a skydiver, a musician, a swimming teacher, and a competitor in triathlons and marathons. Who I am today is an amalgamation of all those experiences and the people who've supported me along the way.

I've worked in aerial logistics for almost my entire military career between the British and Australian forces, and I'm currently the Executive Officer and second-in-command of the Air Mobility Training and Development Unit at RAAF Base Richmond. I've also studied counselling and people management.

**From a personal perspective, I try to be honest and open about my own life experiences to show people that there is no shame in talking about mental health challenges or getting support.**

When someone's normal patterns change, even slightly, – that's when you know something's going on.

It might just be a different tone, a different word, or a shift in how they respond to the usual banter.

Ian, Army

RUOK?

A conversation could change a life.

Working in Defence can be chaotic. It has taught me that you can walk out of the office for lunch, come back an hour later, and the world has completely changed.

Even when you're off duty, what's happening on the other side of the world can change the course of your life and create the next period of uncertainty and chaos. You learn to live with your life being extremely unpredictable and accept that you may see the very worst of humankind, then return home to your loved ones and shield them from the realities and trauma you've experienced.

**In an environment like that, the people around you matter. To really understand what someone has been through, it helps to have shared lived experience.**

When I think about the people who made the biggest difference to me, I immediately think of two leaders who were an incredible support during some very tough times. They didn't try to be psychologists; they were just decent human beings. Sometimes I didn't need them to say anything, but they sat with me when I needed to be around people, which was a great comfort to me. I genuinely believe that if it wasn't for them, I wouldn't be wearing the uniform today.



Ian with Defence colleagues

I remember a time when someone walked into my office looking stressed and exhausted, took off their rank slide, threw it on my desk and said, "I'm just another human being. I need your help right now." That moment was phenomenal for me. It made me realise just because I'd felt broken before, didn't mean that I couldn't help others and be that next step in someone else's journey to recovery.

I've learned that support isn't about forcing help onto somebody. It's about asking a simple question, "What do you need from me?". I like to offer people options. If I see someone struggling, I'll say, "Do you want to come and have a chat at some point? We can chat in my office, we can go for a coffee, we can head down to the mess, or we can have lunch together".

**It's also about paying attention to body language, tone, voice patterns and other visual signs. People are good at masking, but if you know what their normal looks like, those little changes are telling.**

When it comes to approaching someone who is struggling, be honest with them. Say, "Hey, you've just said something that's a concern for me. That's not your usual behaviour. Do you want me to help make an appointment?".

Offering genuine care, practical support and checking back in with them demonstrates that you're empathetic and engaged in their recovery

**One of the most important things that I can share is: never underestimate the importance of listening or being heard.**

Most of the time, you just need to be a good colleague and a good friend. Even the strongest people in the world rely on those around them.

In my darkest times, the people who supported me, who reached out and asked, 'are you OK?' or 'how can I help?' - are the reason I didn't end up in a very dark place and why I'm still here today. Here, and encouraging everyone to recognise the power of an R U OK? Conversation.

CONVERSATION GUIDE

The way to make checking in feel natural - is for it to already be natural.

You can't just show up when something is wrong, people notice that. It has to be something you do all the time.

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