

## FEATURE

# Out of darkness into light

The squaddie way is to have a beer and forget about it. But sometimes you just can't. Glenn Owen tells **LIZ NICE** how he came back from a breakdown and now helps others do the same

One of the first things Glenn Owen did when he joined the army as an 18 year old was stand in for the fire brigade during the strike in 1978.

"We hadn't been there five minutes when they had us going into a house and bringing out bodies in bags," he says, carefully.

There is a slight pause.

"At the time you don't think about it so much, but later, well..."

The 'well' hangs in the air.

Sitting in his bright, friendly kitchen while his partner, Karen, whom he is due to marry in two weeks, potters about in the background, Glenn seems to have life all worked out.

But it was not always like this.

"I've been to the darkest places," Glenn says. "But I want people to know that you can come back."

He pauses again. "And if I can come back..."

I first met Glenn, from Beccles, when he was named Suffolk Volunteer of the Year at the High Sheriff Awards in March.

He had emerged, blinking, with his trophy into the interview room, still incredulous that anything he had done might be worthy of such celebration. But he was also determined for people to know of the help he and the organisation he works for, SSAFA, can offer to those who need it.

SSAFA is the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association which provides lifelong support for servicemen and their families and Glenn is divisional secretary for Waveney SSAFA.

The former pupil of Sir John Leman School in Beccles served with the Queen's Own Hussars (a heavy tank regiment) in Germany and Northern Ireland.

"When you're a squaddie,



■ Pictures of Glenn Owen during his days in the military and (out of uniform) just before he joined up Photos: CONTRIBUTED

whatever happens, you have a few beers and you push it all to the back of your mind. It's the squaddie way," he says. "But later it comes back. One of our patrol was shot in Northern Ireland and it sort of hits you that you are a target. I remember coming home on leave and having a night out with my brother, Micky. We were just

walking down the street and

Micky was talking to me and a car must have backfired.

Glenn turned around and found me. I'd jumped into a skip."

"What are you doing in there?" Micky said.

Glenn married in 1990 and had a daughter, who is now 21, but his experiences both in the army, and later as a serving prison officer, have cost him

dearly.

His marriage broke down in 2008 and he hasn't seen his daughter since she was 14.

"She is at university now," he says proudly. But his efforts to build a relationship with her have foundered so far. "It's understandable,"

“I realised that after the incident at the prison, I'd been left with a sense of someone always looking over my shoulder

he says. "Mentally, I reached just about the lowest point there is."

After completing his army service, Glenn had joined the prison service in 1986 and stayed until he was medically retired in 2004, starting out at Pentonville and then working at Long Lartin high security prison near Evesham.

Along with his time in the army, it was an incident at Long Lartin which precipitated his breakdown.

"A prisoner was attacked, then I was attacked from behind when I was trying to revive him," Glenn recalls. "I was saved by two of the cons who stepped in to help me and at the time I didn't think I had been affected. My wife was pregnant at the time and we moved to another prison in Wales with the new baby... But one day, I was at work and it

suddenly hit me. I felt like I was in a cupboard, everything shrunk in on me and I had a complete mental collapse at the doctor's surgery."

Glenn was eventually diagnosed with PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and given tablets and counselling but nothing really helped.

"I was trained in anti interrogation procedures," Glenn says. "I couldn't open up or trust anyone. I was trained not to."

This all changed however when he recognised one day that his counsellor was wearing a royal navy tie.

"He was an ex-commander. It all started to come out then," he says. "So much so that he stopped me and told me he was going to refer me to a PTSD Resolution therapist. That was the turning point. By then I had been drinking 160 units of alcohol a week. I was drinking myself to sleep which of course had a hugely detrimental effect on my family. Some organisations won't help you if you are drinking but PTSD Resolution and Jayne, my counsellor, were brilliant.

"She used a memory rewind technique where you go back through your story and the bits where you slow down, which for me

## Factfile

■ For more information about the help offered by SSAFA, the Soliders, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association which provides lifelong support for our Forces and their families, contact [ssafa Suffolk Branch, Unit 3, Stour Valley Business Centre, Brunton Lane, Sudbury, CO10 7GB](mailto:ssafa@suffolk.org.uk), call 01787377850 or email [Suffolk@ssafa.org.uk](mailto:Suffolk@ssafa.org.uk).

■ For more information about PTSD Resolution, contact [www.ptsdresolution.org](http://www.ptsdresolution.org) or call 0845 0217873

were the firefighting at the beginning of my service, Northern Ireland and the prison incident, are the bits you work on.

"I realised that after the incident at the prison, I'd been left with a sense of someone always looking over my shoulder but with Jayne's help I was able to work through those experiences and I was eventually able to play the tape back at normal speed.

"I don't feel anyone on my shoulder any more...But it was a long process."

Glenn describes his divorce as





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FEATURE



■ Glenn Owen looks forward to a brighter future with his new wife Karen, left.

Photos: CONTRIBUTED/  
SU ANDERSON



'horrendous' and still finds it difficult to talk about.

Moving back home to Beccles and meeting Karen, whom he married in May, two weeks after I interviewed him, has been the turning point for Glenn, while his work for SSAFA is his mainstay.

"We do prison in reach, as there are a surprising number of ex-service personnel who end up in prison. We also help people with welfare issues and fundraise."

As well as Glenn's SSAFA work, he is also a first port of call for PTSD Resolution which is the other military PTSD charity he works for.

Glenn hasn't given up hope of building a relationship with his daughter again. He shows me a collection of photographs of her, displayed in his living room.

"She's lovely," I say.

"Yes." He nods.

We walk back into the kitchen.

"I can't do anything about what has gone before," he says. "I wasn't able to be her father, not the father she deserved. But I hope, maybe... when she has children of her own," his voice trails away and I realise that the calm, thoughtful man in this sunny room still has a lot more on his shoulders than I can begin to imagine. But then he rallies and it is SSAFA which lifts him.

"I wanted to give something back," he says. "I can't work, I was medically retired but I can't sit around and do nothing, it's not in my make up. And the work we do, it makes me feel worthwhile. I could have withdrawn into my shell. I wanted to but then I realised I could help other people to come out the other side," he says. "If there is someone reading this thinking, 'there's isn't any hope for me,'" he smiles for the first time and looks right at me: 'Well, there is.'

■ [www.ssafa.org.uk](http://www.ssafa.org.uk)