

READER'S DIGEST

ADRIAN HUMPHRIES



SHAUN BARRY



PRODUCTION

ROLL

SCENE

SHOT

TAKE

DIRECTOR

CAMERAMAN

DATE



Some of the finest ex-military heroes are forging new careers as movie extras, and turning their expertise into first-rate entertainment

EXTRAS WITH A DIFFERENCE

BY Cath Johnsen

When Australian Army veteran Adrian Humphries found himself working as an extra on the set of the long-running Australian soap opera, *Home and Away*, it was a far cry from the treacherous battlegrounds and arid deserts of Afghanistan, where he had recently completed four tours working within Special Operations.

“There were about 12 of us veterans on television playing police officers, including people I’d known since I was a teenager in the army,” Adrian explains. “It was like this weird scenario where we were having a reunion, but it was on the set of *Home and Away*, as opposed to a Returned Services League club.”

It was another veteran, Shaun Barry, who cast Adrian and other retired

PHOTO: KRISTOPHER BOS



The ex-military extras bring authenticity and safety to film and TV sets

military personnel for the show through his casting agency – Ex-TRA Specialists Group. The niche agency finds the film and television industry highly skilled extras who are trained in how to use weapons safely, as well as other specialised military or medical procedures.

With almost 1000 extras on his books, representing not only the military but also veterans from fire, police and ambulance services, Shaun, 41, has secured a plethora of work in blockbusters such as *Godzilla vs. Kong*, *Thor*, *Aquaman*, and *Dora and the Lost City of Gold*.

For many of the veterans, like Adrian, the work has been life-changing.

After being medically discharged

from the army following 15 years of service and seven deployments, in May 2017 Adrian was in a dark place. His marriage had broken down, and the 37 year old found himself sleeping on Shaun’s couch, wondering how he would get through the next hour, let alone the rest of his life.

Adrian’s impressive military career in Special Operations as a signaller had left him with countless spine-tingling stories to tell – like the time he was ambushed in the mountains of Afghanistan, or when he contracted malaria in the Solomon Islands while on a peace-keeping mission. But by the time he left the army, he was unable to even look at his military equipment:

PHOTOS: COURTESY ADRIAN HUMPHRIES AND SHAUN BARRY

Extras With a Difference

traumatised, he donated the lot to the Australian War Memorial.

“2018 wasn’t a good year for me,” Adrian explains. “I was actually well on my way downhill with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).”

It was the complex grief he experienced following the mates he lost in action, as well as the loss of his mother from cancer, that ultimately led to Adrian being hospitalised and diagnosed with PTSD.

“During my third tour to Afghanistan in 2011, a young cousin of mine was killed in a car accident. He was a really good kid. And there was just

a sense of pointlessness or emptiness – like, a senselessness about it,” he says.

“Then my mother was terminally ill, so I had to return to Australia for compassionate reasons, and quickly.”

While packing to return to Australia, Adrian spent time talking to a good mate. Forty-eight hours later, while sitting in hospital with his dying mother, Adrian learnt his friend had been killed on the mission that he should also have been on. Not long afterwards, Adrian lost two more friends in action.

“There is no Hollywood goodbye moment,” he says, reflectively. “You might have just been talking to them

about something inconsequential, or you’ve walked past each other and exchanged a few words. And then, that’s it. Next you hear, they’ve been killed.”

As part of the healing process, Adrian immersed himself in art, music and writing. He also reached out to Shaun and was soon being cast in movies like those made by Marvel Studios, an experience he describes as “a form of therapy”.

Shaun passionately agrees that for the veterans, being able to repurpose their skills for the film and television industry is helpful in their recovery.

“The art of acting and stunt work is so good for soldiers because they’re like, ‘Well hey, I’ve got all these skills. I’ve got all this training. What am I going to do now?’ And they don’t watch a lot of army

movies because they see holes in the story. But at the same time, they’re like, ‘I want to be doing that. I used to do that for real.’” “But then I ring them and say, ‘Hey, grab your gear, do you want to be a soldier on *Godzilla vs. Kong*?’ And they’re like, ‘Yes!’”

But it doesn’t end there, as the consistently positive feedback from the film directors leaves these highly-trained veterans feeling valued for

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their skills. But as much as Shaun recognises that this work can be helpful to those who are struggling, he also points out that not all veterans are going through a breakdown or PTSD. Many, he says, are simply looking for a career change or a new challenge.

"We're trying to change the narratives about veterans now. We're not all broken and needing help. There's a lot of highly qualified, highly motivated ex-military men and women out there."

Shaun could well be talking about himself. A former soldier, he spent 15 years in the Australian Army as a Corporal Combat Engineer and a Lieutenant Infantry Platoon Commander. After leaving, he worked in mining and explosives before undertaking stunt training in 2016.

In February 2017, Shaun launched Ex-TRA Specialists Talent Agency, barely a month after Gold Coast-based stunt performer Johann Ofner was tragically killed on the set of a music video when a prop gun loaded with blanks was fired at him at close range.

For Shaun, this preventable death reiterated the importance of using stunt actors and extras that are well versed in safe weapon use, and who better than ex-military personnel or police officers?

Ever passionate about safety, in 2020 Shaun launched a combat safety course for actors, based at Screen Queensland Studios in Hemmant. The only course of its kind in Australia, it primarily equips actors to handle stunts, weapons and action scenes that portray dangerous or life-threatening situations, and ensures they perform with authenticity. For the veterans that run the course, it's yet another way to utilise their skills.

Head of Screen Queensland Studios, Derek Hall, also ex-military, says that Ex-TRA Specialists are bringing a new perspective to the art of

creating dramatic, yet realistic, high-stakes film and TV scenarios that "pass the plausibility test".

"For these veterans to redirect their combat skills and abilities to the art of storytelling helps to enhance any project

they work on, bringing depth, nuance and realism to the production," he says.

"They're also just a great group of people to be working with on the lot here at Screen Queensland Studios."

Despite starring in multiple Hollywood hits, it was Shaun and his crew's work in the 2019 Australian film *Danger Close* that created some of his most memorable moments.

When Shaun first heard about the

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Dangerous action scenes require high-level training and precise timing

production of *Danger Close*, which recounts Australian troops' involvement in the Battle of Long Tan in Vietnam, his interest was immediately piqued. The storyline centres around the Delta Company from the Sixth Battalion Royal Australian Regiment (6 RAR). Shaun had also served with 6 RAR in 2000 as an engineer in East Timor.

He then transferred over to become an officer and attended the Royal Military College in Duntroon. Here, by chance, he was placed in the Long Tan Company and met many of the veteran officers from the famed battle.

After graduating, he was commissioned as an Infantry Platoon Commander and posted to Delta Company 6 RAR, where he served for two

years with his team but narrowly missed out on a deployment to Afghanistan.

"That was kind of the demise of me," Shaun shares. "I had PTSD, depression, all that, before. But that just sent me over the edge because I had trained them but didn't get to go with them."

So when he found out that *Danger Close* was being filmed, he thought, *I have to be part of this*.

"I knew it was going to be good for my mental health," he says. "It was going to give me that sense of achievement that I hadn't really felt. Because I did 15 years in the army, and I did deploy a couple times, but I left on a down. And it gave other

PHOTO: KRISTOPHER BOS



veterans who were not in the best shape a bit of purpose and identity back again, too.”

In addition to 25 former soldiers starring in the film, Shaun was able to arrange for 40 veterans to build the sets and move 25,000 sandbags. This successful experience became the springboard for his talent agency. It was also a watershed moment for Adrian who, although he

only completed a day on the set of *Danger Close*, discovered a love for the film and television industry, leading him to try some script and memoir writing.

“I once asked the head of nursing at the hospital I was at: ‘Does anyone ever get better?’ She told me, ‘Yes. I’ve seen people that’ve been as bad as you, Adrian, doing all this treatment that you’re doing. And now they’re thriving.’ I trusted her, but I was incapable of believing her at the time.”

Today, Adrian has proved that nurse’s words to be true.

“It took a long time to get out the other side. But to have come back and have all these ideas... it’s small steps but we’d love to make something special: our generation’s *The Lighthorsemen* or the next *Gallipoli* of our experience in Iraq, Afghanistan and Timor. And the authenticity in it will just bleed through.”

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PHOTO: KRISTOPHER BOS

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Grooving Granny Takes on TikTok

When Germany went into lockdown following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic last year, Erika Rischko, now 81 years old, posted her first 12-second video on TikTok in which she danced the popular Cha-Cha Slide line dance with her husband. Since then, Erika has uploaded over 100 videos of herself doing exercises like pull-ups, as well as dancing and fitness challenges.

She has amassed around 125,000 followers and more than 2.4 million likes on the TikTok app, which is hugely popular among teenagers and is known for dance and lip-syncing routines and viral challenges. REUTERS