

LECTURE



MAIN: Retired major Matina Jewell will share stories from her military career at the Border Trust's On The Couch presentation.

BELOW: Among her eight military service medals are two Republic of Lebanon war medals. Pictures: TARA GOONAN

# WAR AND PEACE

Join Matina Jewell On the Couch for stories of 15 years in military service and her missions for change to save lives, writes **JANET HOWIE.**

**S**ITTING in Matina Jewell's Wodonga home on a beautiful sunny morning, it's hard to reconcile the scene with war zones and bomb blasts.

But while the retired major's present may be filled by a busy toddler, her past comprises 15 years of an active army life most of us could barely imagine.

Her story of service will be shared in the Border Trust's annual On The Couch presentation in Albury later this month.

Growing up in northern NSW, Mrs Jewell played a great deal of sport and visited China when 16 as part of a volleyball tour.

To her surprise, Chinese opponents asked if she could see the night stars at home, something unknown to them because of pollution.

"I came back from that overseas trip wanting to follow a career where I could travel," she says.

"I'd got the travel bug, wanting to go and help disadvantaged communities that hadn't had the privileged lifestyle that I had."

Working in teams, leadership and something that combined the academic and physical appealed to her and the military provided the answer.

Mrs Jewell completed a science degree and training at the Australian De-

fence Force Academy, then attended the Royal Military College, Duntroon.

Her defence career included five overseas missions and a number of firsts as she rose to the rank of major.

These achievements included commanding the ship's army department aboard HMAS Kanimbla at the age of 24; being the first female in the army to complete the navy diver course; serving as the only Australian and only female at PB Khiam, the United Nations patrol base at the border junction of Israel, Syria and Lebanon; and becoming the only Australian to receive two Republic of Lebanon war medals among her eight military service medals.

Mrs Jewell says developing her skills and making the most of opportunities contributed to her success.

"Often in any career there's a bit of luck too, being in the right place at the right time," she says.

"But also having that courage to just have a go, have a crack at something new, something that you may not be completely confident about."

Her last mission as a UN peacekeeper with the United Nations Truce Supervision Organisation saw her posted to Syria and then Lebanon in 2005-06.

Mrs Jewell says the local people responded well to her, although there was an element of intrigue.

"Given my appearance — blue-eyed, blonde-haired, relatively young Australian woman, a woman serving in the military," she says.

"Many of the locals hadn't seen women in uniform previously."

Completing an intensive course in Arabic before starting her posting — a course not compulsory but something she wanted to do — proved a valuable asset when interacting in marketplaces and meeting with village leaders.

"You know, as a white woman I would never have been invited into the room, let alone to actually sit at the table alongside the mayor had it not been for that language skill," she says.

Just weeks before the 13-month tour ended, war broke out between Israeli and Hezbollah forces and Mrs Jewell and her team found themselves in the middle of a battlefield.

While commanding a UN convoy, she then captain was thrown into the bulletproof windscreen of her armoured vehicle, crushing two vertebrae, fracturing three others, rupturing her diaphragm and suffering internal injuries.

Meanwhile, her colleagues were killed when their base was bombed.

The UN medical evacuation procedures failed Mrs Jewell; she spent two days lying on tiled floors without pain relief before being evacuated to Cyprus via a 20-hour boat trip.

Alongside her was now-husband Clent, who had been in the region for a planned holiday together that never eventuated.

A long period of hospital treatment and rehabilitation followed, where Mrs Jewell had to learn to walk again.

And her injuries weren't just physical.

"In a split second I lost everything I'd worked so hard for over my entire career," she says.

"I'd lost teammates, guys that I thought of like brothers, and so I was suffering survival guilt really strongly."

"To the point that I actually resented the fact that I was still alive, because I felt it was unfair that teammates who had families, who had children that they'd failed to make it home to, had died, yet I was single, I had no dependants."

"It took many years, dark depressive days, to get back on my feet."

"To come through that process and

“ Many of the locals hadn't seen women in uniform previously. ”



then come out the other side with that drive and determination to fix the processes for other people and for the benefit of other veterans."

The support of Clent, whom she married in 2008, family and friends proved pivotal, as did writing a book, *Caught in the Crossfire*, about her experiences.

"I think reliving them, going through it and actually writing about them was a very important cathartic process," she says.

Through her work on the Prime Minister's advisory council, Mrs Jewell has campaigned to protect injured veterans and she has also met with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to discuss what happened in Lebanon.

"And the processes within the United Nations that I felt had let myself and my teammates who were killed down," she says.

"Actually getting that effective change, changes in place that I know will save lives on UN missions right around the world."

These days Mrs Jewell is a working mother to Sierra, 2, with the family's second child due in December.

Despite the injuries that ended her military career and still require ongoing management, she considers herself fortunate in many ways.

"Prior to injury my life was very structured, I'd set myself milestones," she says. "All these things I've done that were never part of my plan of where I was heading in the military have been amazing experiences that I wouldn't have had, if those events in Lebanon hadn't occurred."

• The Border Trust's third annual On The Couch presentation will be held on Wednesday, October 22, 5.30pm to 8.30pm at Regent Cinemas Albury. Visit [bordertrust.org.au](http://bordertrust.org.au) or phone (02) 6051 3349.