

# Past Student Spotlight

## Ken Roberts (1983)

My name is Ken Roberts and I was born in St George 15 Aug 1966 to parents Luke and Jan Roberts. My Father Luke was a Panel Beater who started working with Dependable Motors, then with Roberts garage and eventually for himself. Mum, Jan was a Nurse who moved to St George one year after completing nursing training in Brisbane around 1964, met Dad and never left town. I grew up initially on Alfred Street before moving to Andrew Street around 1971. We lived in Andrew Street through my primary school years 1971-1978. My brother David was born 1970 and sister Karen was born 1974.

We moved to The Terrace when I started High School 1979, which at the time could not have been further from the, then new high School location, which I believe was opened the year before.

I attended St George High School from 1979-1983, completing Years 8-12. Coming from a small town, I have fond memories of attending school with a cohort largely made up of kids that had known each other since Primary School. To be fair, I never really applied myself to study at the time; I looked forward to going to school for the social interaction and hanging around with my mates.

I did not have any career aspirations upon leaving school, I had opportunities to do a trade, but at the time I saw that as a continuation of study and school. During school, like most kids of that era, we did cotton chipping to earn some money. I stacked shelves at Kingston's Store a couple of afternoons a week. Back then the going rate was \$4 per hour.

My first fulltime job was on the property "Karee" operating a tractor with a stick rake, working with Jack Buchanan clearing scrub. After six months on the farm, I started work with Neil Mansell/Dyball Transport, regularly doing the run from St George to Thallon, picking up/dropping off freight to the train. Wednesday and Friday included continuing onto Mungindi, occasionally returning via Dirranbandi. The regular run to Thallon, included collecting coins from the pay phone at Nindigully and picking up mail bags for the properties along the road, dropping off to the Thallon Post Office for sorting and returning the bags with new mail.

I finished driving after 18 months, and without a clear life plan or direction, I enlisted into the Regular Army in 1986. At the time, Recruiting informed me the process would take about two weeks. This was before the internet and mobile phones, so two weeks passed and I had not



heard from Recruiting and needing money, started work as a brickies labourer, which at the time what I thought would be a couple of weeks ended up being three months. Eventually Recruiting sent me a letter informing me of being successful in my application to enlist and I signed up 15 April 1986. The arduous work doing labouring would set me up for success with recruit training. After looking after seven brickies, the long days and physical endurance required for recruit training, I found easier than most, noting I was nearly 20 years old then and the majority of other recruits were straight out of school.

I attended recruit training at Kapooka, where you learn the basic needs of soldiering, how to march and conduct basic drill, how to survive and operate in the field, defensive and offensive minor Military tactics, many physical endurance activities to build resilience and multiple weapon systems. Of all the activities required at recruit training, I enjoyed the weapon component the most and was able to achieve high marks through training and into my career.

After recruit training, I moved onto Initial Employment Training (IET) at Puckapunyal, where I received training how to drive, operate and service the army light vehicles, and how to operate in a tactical environment. This training was six weeks and aimed at young inexperienced candidates; I was able to use my previous skills of driving four tonne trucks to road trains and had little difficulty passing this phase.

My first role or job within the army after Recruit and IET was as a Driver Artillery, at Enoggera in Brisbane from September 1986 to January 1990, which was driving a six tonne Unimog truck towing an artillery gun capable of firing a projectile approximately 14kms. This dynamic and fast-paced role gave me my first real exposure to the teamwork and comradery that the army requires of soldiers, to instinctively react to changing situations at a tactical level, follow orders and be disciplined as any errors could cause severe consequences and potentially loss of friendly lives.

In 1989 I successfully completed the Basic Recovery Course (BRC) which entailed three months of intense training both physical and theory to conduct battle field clearance of any vehicles that become disabled, blown up, bogged or roll over. Upon completion of the BRC I was Corp transferred to a new role as a recovery mechanic and posted to the School of Army Aviation at Oakey. I spent the next four years at Oakey where I was responsible for recovering army vehicles operating anywhere in the South and West of QLD, this included multiple aircraft including fatal crashes. During this time, playing rugby for Oakey, I would often travel home and play against former team mates before post celebrations at the Aussie.

In 1994 I relocated on posting to Townsville in support of a Mechanised Armoured Unit, this required supporting manoeuvre elements in a battle group setting. I married my Wife Gill in September 1996 and we welcomed our first child Rebekah in to the world in July 1997. I was posted to an Engineer Regiment in Townsville in 1997 and during this posting, deployed to East Timor in 1999. During this deployment, our Unit was responsible for maintaining roads, airfields, plumbing/ water supply and electrical power to infrastructure to support the tasks. This deployment was my first and gave me the experience to set me up for my progression for the remainder of my career. It was during this trip our second child, Luke was born and was two months old when I returned. In 2000 I was deployed to Timor for a second time in a

different role. It was during this trip my Father Luke passed away. I was fortunate to be returned to Australia for his funeral and returned to Timor for a further 4 months.

2002 saw our family relocate to Darwin where our third child Andrew was born. After 12 months we relocated to Army Logistic Training Centre (ALTC) at Wodonga in 2003. During this posting, I was promoted to Sergeant, was employed as a Recovery Mechanic Trade Instructor, and spent a further 12 months as a Career Progression Instructor for junior soldiers qualifying for promotion.

In 2006 our family returned to Townsville on posting. It was during this posting cycle in 2009 I was deployed to Afghanistan as the Senior Recovery Mechanic. This trip involved battle field clearance of Bushmaster protected vehicles that have become compromised by Improvised Explosive Devices (IED). This deployment was very intense, from the harsh environment and combatants to the ever present danger when manoeuvring. It was a relief to get home to Australia knowing how lucky we are as a nation.

Upon return to Australia, I was posted to Darwin as the Warrant Officer Recovery Mechanic (WORM) in 2010. Due to our children entering high school years, it was decided by myself and my wife they would remain in Townsville and I would post to Darwin unaccompanied. This role was as the Senior Advisor for Recovery and Battlefield Clearance to the Unit in support of brigade activities. In this position, I managed approximately 20 soldiers and over 10 recovery variants, from heavy wheeled vehicles to light armoured vehicles. As a WORM, it is very rewarding to career manage and mentor soldiers as they are at various stages of progression in their career.

I returned on posting to Townsville 2013 and reunited with my family again in a similar role as the WORM, which included a deployment to IRAQ in 2017 in a logistic role, supervising the in country welfare and training of the subordinates who provided the transport, maintenance and supply tasks.

Upon return to Australia in 2018, I posted to Melbourne to the Capability Acquisition and Sustainment Group (CASG) as the Senior Technical Advisor for all Defence Lift, Recovery and Tie Down Equipment (LRTE). After my initial tenure, I was fortunate to move across into the Acquisition Team for Project L400-2 Boxer Armoured Fighting Vehicle. This role is my current job until planned retirement in Jan 2027. This role is a subject matter expert position providing end user advice and guidance to engineers, doctors, lawyers and commercial team that design and develop a first of type wheeled armoured vehicle weighing approximately 39 tonne. It is and will be world class once completed and in service 2027-28.

It is not lost on me the opportunity I have been given to put nearly 40 years of service experience into developing a platform that will be in service for next 30 years. To shape a design that will be capable, safe and functional for future generation recovery mechanics is a highlight of a career that I did not plan. I originally enlisted for a three year tenure, but as time went by, I appreciated the access and opportunity to learn from and be mentored by some great leaders and innovators in an institution that rewards effort. Not bad for a bloke from a small country town. I didn't know what I wanted to do when school finished. The jobs I did

locally until I stumbled onto a career with Defence have grounded and shaped me and provided for my family.

As I reflect on not taking up the opportunity to do an apprenticeship straight out of school because I didn't want to study, I never would have known the study, research, writing and reviewing would have completed at every stage of promotion, trade and career progression in the army.

My advice to any school leaver without a solid plan, look into recruiting for the many and various opportunities in qualification, lifestyle and benefits across all defence services. Make the most of any opportunities that present to enhance and challenge yourself. The mateship, teamwork and camaraderie that is gained through giving back to the nation is highly rewarding, albeit demanding. If you have the aptitude and grades to enlist as a Commissioned Officer, look into that as a pathway to success also. Whatever you choose, go hard and dedicate yourself to it. Nothing easy is given, and you have to earn it.

I look back with fondness of growing up in St George, from playing rugby league with mates, learning to putt on sand greens at golf and water skiing on the river. It is over 40 years since I left St George, but I still call it home.