

“I WAS 23, THIS CENTURY’S YOUNGEST WAR WIDOW”

In the wake of recent casualties, we talk to one young mum who lost her new husband in Afghanistan. Here’s how her story unfolded after that dreaded knock on the door

STORY SANDRA LEE

Since our nation's armed forces have been deployed to Afghanistan, 16 Australian soldiers have lost their lives there. Corporal Mathew Hopkins was our ninth casualty. He was only 21 when he was killed by Taliban fire. He'd been married for a little more than a month and his son was five weeks old. His wife, Victoria, was at home when she was told the news every army wife, girlfriend and mother dreads.

I was typing an email to Mat when there was a knock on the door. It was after 11pm on a Monday night and three officers stood there, wearing uniforms and medals. They said,



Victoria Hopkins and her son, Alex. (below left) Corporal Mathew Hopkins on duty in Afghanistan.

“Are you Victoria Hopkins? Is there anyone at home with you? Can we come in?”

I ran and woke up Mum and she came out to the lounge room. That’s when they told me the news: There’d been a serious engagement with the Taliban while Mat was out on patrol. He’d been fatally shot.

The officers stayed until 5am. I was in shock, crying and pacing. I felt angry, frustrated and sad. What should have been a happy time in my life had been taken away by one bullet.

Mat and I met in Newcastle in August 2007. He was visiting from Darwin [where he was based with the 7th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment] and had recently returned from his first stint in Afghanistan. It was special; how do you explain it – our eyes met, I guess. How can you resist big green eyes? I loved his eyes.

I went to Darwin to see him after we’d been together for about two months, and that was when he said his first ‘I love you’. Then, in February 2008, he asked me to visit. It was the wet season and we’d been stuck inside all day. He said, “I have a surprise for you,” and got down on one knee. He said, “I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you marry me?” and pulled out a beautiful diamond ring. I started crying and laughing. Of course, I said yes.

I moved to be with him in Darwin and three months later, in May, we found out I was pregnant. I showed Mat the pregnancy test and he couldn’t get the smile off his face.

Mat had joined the army at 17, straight out of high school. His mum says it was something he’d always wanted to do. He was promoted to full corporal before his 21st birthday. He had the brains for it and he was a natural leader.

Mat’s mum says he was excited about going to Afghanistan. It’s pretty much what all the guys in the army want to do, because that’s what they’re trained for.

The first time he went after meeting me was in October 2008. I was five months pregnant and he had to leave for an eight-month deployment. We had an emotional goodbye. I didn’t want to let him go. I flew back to NSW to stay with my family.

In February 2009, Mat organised to fly back for the baby’s birth.

Mat and Victoria wanted to marry before their baby was born, and had a simple ceremony with their families present.

I carried red roses and wore a maxi dress over my baby bump. Mat wore an ivory shirt and gray pinstriped pants. He looked so handsome. Afterwards, we had a quick drink to celebrate, >



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then Mat and I went to the hospital for me to be induced.

Our son, Alex, was born at 4.36am the next day, on February 7. Mat cut the umbilical cord and spent the first two hours of Alex’s life with him while I was in recovery. He even changed the first nappy.

The midwives had arranged for us to have a private room so Mat could stay overnight. We spent three nights in the hospital. On the last morning, Mat was still asleep with Alex, so I went out and got him breakfast, and I bought him a Valentine’s Day card.

We had one night together as a family at home before Mat went away again. We stayed up late because Alex wouldn’t settle, so he came into the bed with us. I ended up sleeping with Alex on my chest and Mat lying beside me with his arms around me. It was lovely, all of us together. The next day, Mat left for Afghanistan.

Mat rang me every day and we emailed each other every night. He signed off all of his emails with, “I love you so much, Vicki. Tell Alex I love him, too. You and Alex mean everything to me.”

On March 16, 35 days after saying goodbye to his wife and four-day-old son, Corporal Mathew Hopkins was killed by a single gunshot to the head. His body arrived home a week later.

One of Mat’s best mates, [Corporal] Leon Gray, flew home with Mat and brought his wedding ring. I’ve kept it for Alex. Leon also brought letters from the guys overseas. It was special reading the things they said, knowing Mat meant so much to a lot of other people, too.

I never thought I’d have to do something so heavy at that time in my life – to choose a casket. I was 23; ‘this century’s youngest [war] widow’ wasn’t exactly the title I wanted.

Defence chief Angus Houston gave his condolences at the funeral and said Mat was a true Australian hero. Julia Gillard introduced herself and asked if there was anything she could do. It was hard talking to people. Walking up the aisle to the front of the cathedral and seeing Mat’s casket was heartbreaking.

Mat’s mum spoke at the service, as did Major Ben Toyne of the 7th Battalion, my sister and aunt, and some of Mat’s mates. I felt I’d said everything that needed to be said in my public announcement about Mat’s death. I’d said he had the most important job – he was a father to our son, my husband and my best friend.

Alex was with me at the funeral. I cried at the beginning of the service and at the end, and again at the burial, when Mat’s casket was lowered into the ground. He was buried in his army uniform, wearing his medals.

Afterwards, it was really hard to accept what had happened. That was when I was able to finally sit down and cry by myself. I still cry. Certain things set me off, like looking at photos of us when Alex was born, or going to other people’s weddings.

Four months after Mat passed away, I bought a house, and Alex and I moved in the day before Mat’s birthday.

These days, the most important thing is to be strong. I keep Mat’s slouch hat out, with a ‘Silent Soldier’ statue on each side. One of his mates made a frame that displays replicas of all his medals and badges, next to photos of him in Afghanistan.

I show photos of Mat to Alex and say, “Dad, dad, dad”. Now he says, “Dad, dad, dad”, too. When he starts asking questions, I’ll tell him things from my point of view, and hopefully some of Mat’s mates will tell him that side of the story, as well.

I keep in contact with a lot of the guys from Mat’s unit. Talking to them helps. I also talk a fair bit to Bree Till, whose husband, Sergeant Brett Till, was killed in Afghanistan three days after Mat. She was pregnant at the time.

I know Mat was over there to do a job, which was to make the world a safer place. For that, I am very, very proud of him. People say this isn’t our war, but to pull out our troops now – when the job isn’t finished – would mean all those men have died in vain.

Even though Mat and I only had 18 months together, we crammed so much into them. For that, I’m happy. Plus, I have my Mini Mat; a little part of him lives on, and that helps to make it easier for all of us. **SM**

SPAGHETTI WITH TOMATO, GARLIC & RED WINE.



INGREDIENTS

- SPAGHETTI
- LEGGO'S STIR THROUGH

METHOD

1. ADD SAUCE TO SPAGHETTI
2. STIR

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