



DIRTY DEEDS DONE CHEAP

Finally, an inquest opens into soldier's mysterious death

PAOLA TOTARO



On May 13, 2016, fewer than 12 hours after elite former soldier Christopher Betts, 34, died of a gunshot wound to his head at the Australian embassy compound, an email arrived in my inbox. "I'm guessing you've heard the latest from Baghdad. It's a tragedy that certainly could have been avoided. Staysafe, Mick."

Michael (Mick) Schipp is a straight-talking type, a former police officer who spent 22 years with the Northern Territory force, including the NT special operations and tactical group, before turning to private security work.

He joined Unity Resources Group, the company responsible for security at Australia's Baghdad embassy, in October 2007, just days after two of its operatives made international headlines when they opened fire on a car, killing two civilian Iraqi women.

The incident created a local furore. Iraqi officials accused the guards of "firing randomly" at the women, who were members of a small Armenian Christian church.

URG management issued a statement of "deep regret" at the time, but no information about an investigation has been revealed in the public domain.

Schipp weathered the storm that briefly enveloped his new employer. As a respected senior manager and 2IC team leader, he headed close-knit security teams (working with Betts) until May 2015 when, worn down by unprecedented cost-cutting and worried by increasingly dangerous lapses of safety and security protocols, he quietly left URG.

The security veteran, who has not spoken publicly until this week, soon found out he was not alone in his concerns. Just six months after he left URG, The Australian reported that 67 of his former colleagues, many of them former military or police, had taken the unprecedented step of accusing their employer of risking lives by slashing costs, scrimping on medical equipment, providing personnel with ageing and inferior weapons and refusing protective equipment and insurance and accident cover.

So fearful were the personnel of their employer they collectively signed a deposition that warned their grievances had become "so great and the possible consequences for the Australian embassy considered so egregious" they were considering strike action.

Breach of procedure

The drive to cut costs had begun in earnest when the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade made the decision to award URG a new four-year contract, worth nearly \$51m, to provide personal protection for embassy staff until 2020. Tender documents obtained by



The Australian showed URG had won the new tender by undercutting itself by 50 per cent when compared with the \$101m it was paid to provide security for the four years between 2011 and 2015.

In the first week of January 2016, when the new contract began, more than 40 Australian

'Weapons are often left lying around unsecured'

TANYA FERRAI
FORMER HEAD NURSE, URG

protection specialists — nearly two-thirds of the total team — were flown out of Iraq after refusing to work with URG. This forced the company to embark on an 11th-hour emergency recruitment drive in Britain.

As URG struggled to fill security and medical positions, The Australian made contact with operative after operative who, always on the condition of anonymity, outlined increasing anxiety, anger and frustration about questionable internal work procedures,

providing evidence and documentation of protocol lapses they feared would impinge not only on their own safety but those they were charged to protect.

Starting with a front-page story on December 28, 2015, The Australian began publishing a series of 17 articles reporting serious allegations against URG.

Despite mounting evidence of professional misconduct, URG and DFAT refused to answer questions or investigate, dismissing claims as the "grievances of disgruntled former contractors".

Then on May 12 came the mysterious gunshot death of Betts. An Australian Federal Police report dated July 2016 ruled the death was self-inflicted but Betts's parents, Rae and Colin, refused to accept their son had committed suicide. Eventually, after a three year wait, Queensland Coroner Terry Ryan agreed to hold an inquest into the Queenslanders' death and began hearing evidence in Brisbane this week.

A URG security project manager admitted to the coroner that at the time of Betts's death, he had directed staff to keep weapons in their room — a clear breach of

standard operating procedures. Schipp could no longer maintain his silence.

"He suggested this was because there was an increased threat to the embassy," he said this week.

"What is the threat? They had a force of armed, Chilean guards around them at night and CCTV cameras. What do you need arms in your room for?"

"In the very beginning of the contract, I had brackets made, with locks and chains for weapons. Rifles could stand on it or a Glock would sit on it and a chain welded on would go through the trigger guard and it was padlocked.

"Weapons were unloaded and stored ... the unloading bins were outside the accommodation block. But you have to enforce their use otherwise blokes just put them on the bed, under the bed, on the floor."

DFAT in denial

The AFP's report into Betts's death confirmed the brackets were still there. Behind the scenes, Schipp was one of at least three senior URG staff who were so frustrated by what they increasingly

STAYING ON THE STORY

FIRM TOLERATED ILLEGAL DRINKING

Colleague 'had habit of playing with gun'

November 6, 2019

Embassy shooting: staff were warned

November 7, 2019

Embassy shooting witness 'reckless' with weapons

November 5, 2019

Insecurity, trauma and denial in Baghdad

May 21-22, 2016

DFAT head honcho sent to sort Baghdad security

EXCLUSIVE

PAOLA TOTARO

January 18, 2016

Embassy death witness flies out

May 19, 2016



Left, Rae and Colin Betts arrive at the Coroner's Court in Brisbane on Thursday; above, clockwise from left, Chris and Angela Betts; colleague Sun McKay; AFP lead investigator Detective Sergeant Bill Freeman

AAP



felt was a cover-up over Betts's death that they turned whistleblower, outlining their allegations in writing and providing them formally to DFAT, the federal government and the opposition.

Again, none was followed up.

One of the earliest formal complaints was filed by Tanya Ferrai, the former head nurse at URG who gave evidence to the coroner on Thursday. On January 28, 2016, Ferrai provided a detailed statement to DFAT's regional security adviser, Tony Hughes.

The former NSW police officer's allegations included that the medical clinic was uninsured, paramedic staff were unqualified and "potent and life-threatening" drugs such as opioids, anaesthetic agents and painkillers such as morphine, fentanyl and ketamine had to be removed from URG armed personnel by nursing staff.

A fortnight later, during an appearance before the Senate estimates committee, then DFAT secretary Peter Varghese made no mention of the internal allegations, instead turning his sights on The Australian. "In my view, the media coverage of this issue has been not only a beat-up, it's

been misleading, inaccurate and unbalanced," Varghese said.

"Patently, the department puts the highest priority on the safety and welfare of its employees and the suggestion that we would run a cut-price security system is frankly quite offensive.

"Indeed, the only additional risk that has arisen in this case has been the placing on the public record of security details by the journalist in question, which does raise issues of risk to our staff."

Furiated by Varghese's comments, Ferrai emailed Hughes the following day asking what had happened to her complaints and was told, in writing on February 17, that "the papers you passed to me have been forwarded to Canberra. If you require any information on this matter, (DFAT official) Paul Molloy is the appropriate contact in this case."

Politicians sit on hands

In a second document, sent after Betts's death, Ferrai — who by then was the third head nurse who had quit URG in protest — reiterated her concerns, adding claims of serious weapons-handling

breaches and safe storage rules ignored by URG security staff.

"Weapons are often left lying around unsecured with ammunition unlocked and lying in the open nearby. Management was continually made aware that a serious incident or death would occur if all the above issues were

'What do you need arms in your room for?'

MICHAEL SCHIPP
PRIVATE SECURITY OPERATOR

not addressed immediately. Nothing was done to rectify or address these issues," she wrote.

Schipp, too, was so distressed when he heard of Betts's death in May 2016 that he wrote a detailed letter outlining his concerns about URG, including the breach of alcohol and weapons safety protocols, and sent them to Julie Bishop, then foreign minister, and her Labor counterpart, Tanya Plibersek. Neither office responded, nor followed up.

Only independent senator

Nick Xenophon stuck his head above the parapet and called publicly for an inquiry.

AFP ticks boxes

The harsh reality is that we may never know exactly how Betts died. We know he was in colleague Sun McKay's bedroom in the early hours of that tragic May morning. We know Betts was due to go on holiday that day and he was happy and upbeat, looking forward to the break and to getting back to Australia to see his family and spend time with his young wife, Angela, who, devastated by grief, took her own life just a few weeks later.

Betts left no suicide note. There was no history of depression. Friends and colleagues describe him as quiet, easy-going with a good sense of humour. He liked a drink but was always professional and circumspect in his handling of firearms.

We also know that in the crucial minutes, hours and days after the shooting, McKay was allowed to shower before any forensic tests could take place and was not breathalysed despite earlier evidence that the company conducted such tests regularly.

The AFP report confirmed the Glock handgun that killed Betts was cleared of ammunition after his death. "Unfortunately, the person who cleared the Glock pistol has not been identified."

In the aftermath, URG security managers told operatives they were not to speculate about the death, although guard Patrick O'Keefe told the coroner this week that URG began describing the death "as a suicide before Australian Federal Police arrived in Iraq to investigate".

In the days that followed, The Australian was told by a source close to events that within hours of his arrival in Baghdad, AFP lead investigator Detective Sergeant Bill Freeman expressed the view the death was "self-inflicted". He told the coroner this week he could not conclude whether it was suicide or misadventure.

According to Schipp, Ferrai and other former colleagues, URG management handled the hours after Betts's death in the same way they managed the long crisis over safety and protocols: "by covering up". The AFP investigation, they say, should have been open-minded as well as rigorous but at best was perfunctory and at worst "was covering DFAT's arse".

Schipp, who was also a specialist weapons instructor on Glock pistols for the NT police, told The Australian this week the firearm cannot "accidentally go off".

"When it is loaded, the magazine containing rounds is in the weapon. The action is not cocked: (if there are) no rounds in the chamber, three safeties are engaged. To action the weapon, which is the next stage, you pull the slide back and as it moves to the front again, under tension, it fixes a round and loads into the chamber," he said.

"It doesn't have manual safeties. It's a passive safety ... it can't just accidentally go off — you have to pull that trigger."

The coroner is unlikely to deliver a final report until early next year. For now, based on what was said in court this week, all we can be sure of is that the now-defunct URG — and potentially its employer, the federal government — failed in their duty of care.

Brothers on the long road to redemption and understanding

A Weekend Australian Magazine story inspired Mike Young to reach out to a long-lost sibling

CAROLINE OVERINGTON
ASSOCIATE EDITOR



They have a bit of a routine at Mike Young's house. He gets up early and puts on the coffee grinder. The dog, in a Pavlovian response, comes into the kitchen. They both go outside, on to the lawn.

"She has a pee, and I pick up the paper," says Mike. "Every single morning, same thing."

A few Saturdays ago, on October 26, The Weekend Australian Magazine fell out. Inside was a story about a Sunshine Coast lifesaver who had gone to the assist-

ance of his stepson, who was on drug charges in Bali. "It was a story of forgiveness," says Mike. "It got me thinking about our family."

Mike is a geologist and a successful mining executive. He was born in Canada but moved to Western Australia many decades ago. He is married to a girl he met on Rottnest Island, and they have a 16-year-old daughter. Mike had great parents but family life in Canada was challenging.

"Where I grew up, most people were working class. All my friends smoked. A lot drank from the age of 15. It was like a Bruce Springsteen song. But there were four of us boys, and three of us ended up doing well for ourselves, and so did other people.

"But when I was nine my brother Stewart (Skip) went to prison.

He had a drug problem. And I saw what that did to our parents. They were heartbroken. They could not understand it at all. And it made me ferociously anti-drugs. I was just so determined not to let them down the way he let them down.

"They thought he could be rehabilitated. And he was for a while. He came out, and got married and had kids, and it all fell apart because of drugs, and that became the pattern: Skip drifting in and out of our lives, hurting my parents.

"Back in the 90s, he didn't have a mobile. We didn't know his friends, and once he decided to go off the grid we had no way of finding him. So there would be long periods when we didn't know where he was. Just radio silence.

"Then he'd reappear, making promises he couldn't keep. It's emotionally exhausting and there comes a point — and I probably shouldn't say this — but after a while, you just stop giving a stuff. You think, he doesn't care about us. Why am I caring about him?"

The break point came at their



Mike, left, and Skip Young, who hadn't seen each other for more than 20 years; right, the Weekend Australian Magazine story that got Mike Young thinking about family

father's funeral in 1998. "That was the last time I saw him," says Mike.

"Twenty-one years ago. He was making promises about how he was going to help Mum. Things he couldn't possibly do. And I believe that Dad went to an early grave because of the stress Skip put him under.

"So we just fell out of contact after that. A few weeks went by, then a few months, then a few years. It wasn't that alarming at first, but I suppose after five years of nobody hearing anything — we literally heard nothing — I guess we just assumed he was dead.

"But then one day my younger

brother called and said: 'Guess who's alive?' And joking around, I said: 'Jesus?' And he said: 'It's an even bigger miracle. It's Stewart.'

He had been in touch with their mum, who by then was in her 80s, to say: "I'm clean." Of course she believed him. Mike was wary.

But let's hear from Skip, shall we? "Mike was only nine when I went to prison," he says on the phone from Canada. "He had to live through that with my parents. I wasn't here to see it. And then when my marriage ended, I was living on the streets, no money even for a bus ticket. That was hard on them, too."



Skip says he never meant to disappear from the lives of those who loved him.

"I was a drug addict," he says. "I used to work when I could, on rigs off Canada. That's very remote. I didn't always have the internet."

He also felt a sense of shame about the way his life had turned out, and he couldn't find a way to tell anyone why he had started to spiral in the first place.

"I got molested when I was a teenager," he says. "Old guy on my paper round. I didn't say anything and that became a problem. People know you're hiding something, and they don't know what, and

you can't tell them, and they want to get close to you, and you won't let them, and you end up losing everything."

Then one Christmas morning, about 10 years ago, he found himself alone in a hotel room with nothing but a suitcase. He was 59 and there was nobody around.

He walked out the front door, into the Hope Mission across the road and asked for help.

He found God. He got sober. They gave him a job, and then one day he was on his way to the post office — he has always been a bit of a hippie and doesn't drive but rides a bike everywhere — and found stamps on the ground and figured it was a sign.

He wrote to his mother and told her: "I'm clean." She believed him and wanted to see him.

But Mike?

"Look, I was raised Catholic, and I'm an atheist now," he says. "I'm not cynical about it. I just have to be an atheist because I'm a scientist. But I think religion is a good thing overall, and it was really important for him to have that support. But I wasn't that interested in seeing him because what would we even say to each other? We hadn't seen each other for 21 years."

But then, on November 1, it was their mum's 90th birthday. Skip lives a three-day bus ride away. He

promised to get himself there. Mike was a bit "and where have we heard that before?"

But by chance he was due to be in North America on business around that time, attending a nuclear conference in Tennessee.

"The article in the magazine got me thinking," he says. "Maybe there should be some forgiveness."

And so, how did they go, these brothers in arms?

Well, Skip experienced the weekend as he does everything these days: with a sense of wonder. "I'll be 70 in January," he says. "I hurt a lot of people. When I can repair a relationship, I am grateful, and when I can't, I accept that."

And Mike? "It was every bit as weird as you might think," he says, laughing, from his home in Perth.

"He looked different. He's really aged. But he was always the arty one, and he's still the arty one. He was always the mellow one, and he's still mellow."

"He didn't apologise, but you know what was strange? I found I didn't need an apology. We sat up late talking, and do you know what else was strange?"

"I thought I had no memories of him, but the incantation of his voice ... sitting there, listening to him, I thought, God, I'd know that voice anywhere. That is my brother."