

Heartland

Your Community News

An inspiration

Shannon Dann

BEING first to arrive on the scene after a car bomb exploded in a busy market place filled with hundreds of women and children is a memory that will haunt him for the rest of his life.

Feelings of guilt and anger manifested in the depths of his soul after losing 10 of his men during the war against terror waged on Afghan soil in 2010.

A further 64 Australian soldiers were wounded and, in his eyes, he was to blame.

"I was responsible for their welfare."

When Major-General (Retd) John Cantwell returned to Australia after serving in three distinct wars for his own survival, this courageous and decorated soldier had to surrender to an old enemy.

An enemy he could not see or fully understand but a formidable foe that caused him great anxiety, disturbing flashbacks and "all the other classic symptoms".

John will soon be sharing his story with those attending a dinner on October 11 at Singleton Diggers on York Street. Tickets are \$60.

Hosted by an organisation known as AFOM (Australian Families of the Military Research - Foundation), the event is themed a "celebration of our military history" and is an opportunity for military families and non-military families to mix and meet.

Major-General Cantwell "was a brilliant soldier", serving in the Gulf War in 1991, Iraq in 2006 and commanding the Australian forces in Afghanistan.

The many accolades he received during his 38-year career are testament to this and include the Distinguished Service Cross



SINGLETON BOUND: Major-General John Cantwell.

THE driving force behind the dinner and the foundation is Broke resident, nurse, psychologist and lecturer, Gail McDonnell.

Motivated by her own life experiences she would like to see AFOM become the foremost organisation of its kind in Australia; researching the health and wellbeing of military families and assisting their family members with higher education in this field.

Her husband is a Vietnam Veteran; she has three children and 11 grandchildren.

However, he can trace the beginnings of his illness to the First Gulf war.

"I did not know what it was, I was ashamed, so I just fumbled along and kept it a secret," John says.

For the next 20 years with the help of his wife, he did just that until returning home from a 12-month stint commanding Australian troops in Afghanistan in 2010.

"It was an amazing job but a difficult and complex one," he said.

"During that time 10 guys were killed and 64 wounded.

"I felt terribly responsible for this. I was the one responsible for their welfare.

"My emotions were much more intense than ever before; I felt guilt for the losses and I was angry about the

could no longer keep the fact he had been suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) a secret, he told *The Argus*.

"I was in a very bad place and had all sorts of dark thoughts.

"I could not pretend anymore, I had to find the courage to put my hand up and get the help I needed."

John describes the 10 days he spent in a psychiatric facility being medicated and finally getting some sleep as "horrible" and "worse than being in a combat zone".

"It was unpleasant but it is what I needed to start my recovery," he says.

"My recovery is an ongoing journey; I still take medication and speak to psychologists however I am considerably better than I was."

Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, describes its importance.

"It is significant in that it places the issue of PTSD firmly in the central spotlight for Defence planners, managers and commanders and for the Australian community as a whole," it states.

"The fact that John Cantwell – a major general – could write this account continues to be of enormous assistance to those affected by PTSD both directly and indirectly. A last someone of high rank has publicly described his personal battle in an attempt to demystify the condition. This groundbreaking book has opened the door for people who are hurting to deal with the pain and the consequences of this disorder."

We all owe him a debt of gratitude for having the courage and temerity to write this book, Dr Blaxland wrote.

PTSD is mental illness caused by exposure to a situation of extreme danger and stress and the symptoms include recurrent dreams or recollections of the event, feelings that the traumatic event is recurring (flashbacks) and intense psychological distress.

According to experts these symptoms lead to sufferers avoiding thinking about the traumatic event which often results in a diminished interest in social activities, feelings of detachment from others and a sense that the future is empty and bleak.

John hopes telling his story will inspire others to get the help they need; including those outside of the defence force who are constantly exposed to danger and trauma in the line of duty.

"It is quite ironic that the very qualities individuals need to work in stressful situations like strength and