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I Was Only 19 songwriter John Schumann pens Graduation Day song to encourage police with PTSD to seek help

Hit song 'I Was Only 19' landmark national commemorative drive Veteran John Schumann hopes his new song 'Graduation Day' can do the same for police with PTSD.

Kathy McLean National music writer
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JOHN SCHUMANN

John Schumann has penned Graduation Day to spotlight police mental health. Picture: AAP Image/Bryan Dodd.

'Graduation Day' details the kind of incidents which can cause psychological damage to police, from car accidents and shootings to the heartbreaking task of telling family members a loved one has been killed.

"I've got to tell you talking to these officers was heartbreaking, what are we doing to these people?" Schumann said.

"We send them out there to hold the thin blue line, ordinary men and women who have a service ethic, and we send it up to them you are not on your own brothers and sisters."

Schumann hopes the song encourages police who may be suffering PTSD to seek treatment quickly as he did for his own mental health.

"The lesson here is if you stop in early, it doesn't have to ruin your life; it could have ruined my life because I am still a hunter," he said.

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"A lot of the officers I spoke to didn't, and when they eventually fell over and got to a psychologist with their partner and could see the patterns, they all say if they had done so years before, they wouldn't have got into a mess, their families wouldn't have been in a mess and their career wouldn't have been in a mess."

Ex-Top Gear driver was one of the officers who was helped by the song. Picture: Supplied via Facebook

One of the officers Schumann spent time with to research the intricate and intimate details which make 'Graduation Day' so powerful was Queensland Senior Sergeant David Green who was shot at close range in the face and shoulder when ambushed with two other police in their car in 2000.

The song's opening lines reference a BP service station, which was where Green and his colleagues were when they called in a disturbance in a nearby cul-de-sac.

Green, like others Schumann has already shared the song with, said he believed every police officer would relate to its story.

"When he sings about the BP station, we were at one at Inna trying to have a coffee when we heard one call sign come over the police radio and we went to that cul-de-sac," Sgt Green said.

"It takes you right back ... and the lyrics about the road fatality. I saw my first one when I was a cadet, an old man crossing the road just trying to make his way home."

Green said he had been shocked by the lack of understanding of PTSD as he battled depression during his long recovery from the shooting.

"Hopefully this song will help officers to seek help, to realise that is just being human," he said.

"And I would like to to create understanding from the community so they don't just remember the last speeding ticket they got but that police are risking their lives to protect them and their families."

Police Federation of Australia President Mark Carroll and Schumann with launch in Bay Rocks. Picture: MATT LOFTUS

Police Federation of Australia president Mark Carroll said a survey of 20,000 police found 30 per cent suffered or could disrupt among police officers are now a consensus than in the general population and police and other emergency services workers are three times more likely to have a suicide plan.

Those disturbing findings pilloried the PFA resolve to put mental health of police on the national agenda.

He said shift work and the hyperviglance required by the job could have a psychological as well as physical effect.

The idea of having a song to spotlight PTSD came after the PFA commissioned a telemovie called Dark Blue, to eradicate stigma around mental health in the future.

It was handed via the proceeds of crime accounts and is expected to screen later this year.

"I am hoping Graduation Day, a song about cops for cops, will become a cathartic anthem for those struggling with issues of mental health because of their work and (or through to the community and help them understand that this work can be challenging for some," Mr Carroll said.

"For officers with PTSD, this song says no one is leaving you behind. They come to us as whole humans and should expect to retain them."

Graduation Day is available via iTunes and the digital version Schumann's latest record Ghost and Memories, with proceeds directed to supporting police and their families affected by PTSD.

For more information, visit the Police Federation of Australia's website.

LYRICS TO 'GRADUATION DAY' BY JOHN SCHUMANN

We were out on the highway, up on the ridge

down past the BP, under the bridge

out of the darkness and into the light

we hit the red and blues on a hot March night

Kids in a Camry, both on the run

both got an attitude, one's got a gun

sometimes it seems I'm just marking time

waiting for the call to the thin blue line

They were way too fast, so we slowed down

they hit a family going to town

now I'm standing on the road with a kid in my arms

a tiny little girl I just pulled from the car

Someone spoke — I just didn't hear,

someone else tried — I just wasn't there

I'd gone walkabout — God knows where ...

Schumann's 'Graduation Day' has spotlighted impact of police mental health and other psychological damage to police. Picture: MATT LOFTUS

The radio was alive that night

red and blues flashing on a hot March night

your head says run but your heart says stay

but I made a promise — on Graduation Day ...

Dad was a copper, general patrol

45 years before he got too old

Mum said, "You've never quite as tough as people think you are ...

... you'll be living on your nerves and living on a prayer ..."

There's a shadow on the corner, shadow with a gun

standing in the doorway there's a broken-hearted mum

fear is a phantom in the corner of your mind

when you're waiting for the call to the thin blue line

He gave me a warrant card, I gave him a saline

I turned round smartly on my heel and marched back to the group

Mum and Dad were there in the stands,

we cheered and threw our caps

that's how everybody starts in the job -and there was no way back ...

but nights like this, on the side of the road,

I'd give it all away

no one ever told me it would be like this ... on Graduation Day ...

Rough, tough, bullet-proof, 10-foot tall

Serve and protect, answer the call

Out on afternoon shift, eating in the car

crumbs on my uniform, crumbs on the floor

Out of the safety into the fray

run to the trouble when they're running away

your heart says go but your head says stay

your heart says go but your head says stay

Sometimes I think it's just a matter of time

till my number comes up on the thin blue line

Fear's just a phantom in the corner of my mind

The radio was alive that night

red and blues flashing on a hot March night

your head says run but your heart says stay

but I made a promise — on Graduation Day

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