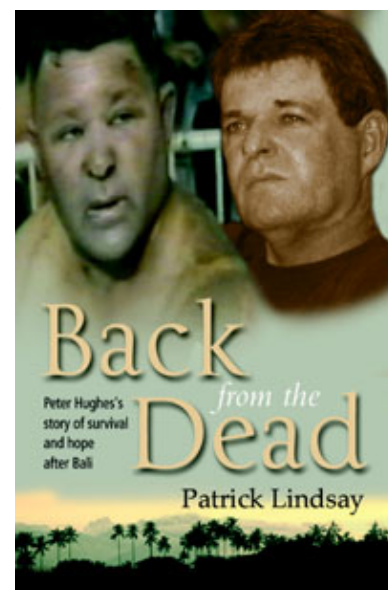


Back from the dead by Patrick Lindsay

One of the defining images of the bombing in Bali on October 12 2002 was survivor Peter Hughes telling interviewers that he was okay and there were worse people than him. He was in fact slowly dying as the horrific burns and shrapnel injuries started to take effect. Patrick Lindsay documents Peter's courageous battle in 'Back from the dead: Peter Hughes story of hope and survival after Bali' published by Random House Australia.



Therese Scott: Looking back, many journalists have said Bali was a story they wish they didn't have to cover. How hard was it for you to document survivor Peter Hughes' story and others in your new book 'Back from the dead'?

Patrick Lindsay: Difficult, but I learnt a lot about the other side. We tend to see people who are involved in disasters like this at the beginning and if they survive we see them at the end and we don't realise what goes on in between. So I learnt an enormous amount about the courage and determination that was necessary to get through, to get well, to inch their way back to health. I also learnt an enormous amount about the incredible medical miracle makers who helped Pete get back. Dr Fiona Wood in Perth and Dr John Greenwood in Adelaide who are burns plastic surgeons, unbelievable characters with the most extraordinary ability—they blew me away. I had no idea how bad Pete had got and of course he was an example of how bad most had got before they were able to be brought back.

There are some pictures in the book that show how bad Pete had got and you just can't believe that he stopped being recognisable as a person almost and yet the doctors were able to tweak this lifeforce back in there and keep it alive and built him up and eventually get him through. So it was very hard but incredibly rewarding.

TS: How did you cope with the fine line between reporting a story and intruding on tragedy?

PL: Well, I see myself as an author now and I'm certainly reporting the story but I'm telling the story which I've tried to tell through Pete's eyes and the eyes of his mates, so I tried to be a witness and a recorder, if you like. I didn't feel like I was really trespassing into their personal life because I'd spoken to them about that to start with. I think it would be a bit different if I was reporting it without knowing them, as you often do as a reporter and then reporting it to the public. You do feel sometimes that you run the risk of moving into their personal space and you're aware of that most of the time and you're very wary about doing that.

In this case Pete felt that he wanted the story to come out for the other survivors, for the other families and even for the other families of those who were the victims. In the end it's just it's such a triumphant story but it really is a positive thing. We've already had people who lost loved ones in Bali while we were doing some signings and they said it's an inspiration to them so that gave Pete huge heart.

TS: I found that Peter Hughes' experiences highlighted the 'what if' factor in life. His survival partly rested with various guardian angels, including Australian nurse Chrissie Lincoln in the hours immediately after the bombing. What were your impressions of Chrissie?

PL: Chrissie was a classic Australian girl who had a wonderful, open nature. She was a former nurse, she lived in Bali with her husband who was working up there as an architect, they'd been there for five years. She had rushed into the hospital and said "I'll help anyway I can" and they said, could you look after this guy and she just assumed Pete was a Maori footballer and didn't think anything of it because Pete was so puffed up, burnt, he was just unrecognisable even to his friends and to Leigh his son who saw him on television and didn't recognise it was his Dad.

Chrissie was a fantastic girl, salt of the earth, open hearted and Pete said from the start he doesn't think he would have made it without her just being there and willing him on. He felt she acted as his gatekeeper too, she looked after him because he was trying so hard to stay awake and alert until he got back to Australia and she was the one he could rely on to be his eyes and ears.

TS: When I read the book I found Leigh's diary extracts provided an immediate and personal sense of the impact. Was their inclusion part of the general map of the book when you started writing it?

PL: Yes, absolutely. As soon as Leigh told me he had made those diary notes at the time, he basically wrote them each night, I said send me some. When I read the first one I thought, it's got to be incorporated into the narrative because it's an eyewitness snapshot of what the loved ones were going through all around Australia as they saw this person they hardly recognised anymore fighting for life.

Pete's always said he felt that Leigh was willing him on. He felt even when he was in the coma he had a strange awareness that Leigh was there. I think Leigh spent his time trying to draw energy and transfer it to Pete and draw the positive along all the time. He captures it so beautifully in his diary and amazingky too for a young kid who's a real footy boy, not extremely well read or anything like that. He spoke exactly from the heart, just wonderful, magnificent stuff. That's the secret with Pete too, he speaks straight from the heart.

TS: The diaries were both angry and perceptive.

PL: There was a lot of anger there at the time and it's very understandable anger. I think it helped him cope in some way, that he had a mental target. He was just like any young feisty Australian bloke whose father was threatening to be taken from him by those he didn't know, had no idea what their real motivation was. All he knew was his Dad was being put through hell. It's amazing to get an inkling of what people have to go through, the pain barriers that they have to push themselves through just to make the tiniest improvement in movement or flexibility or having their scar tissue debrided, it's just unbelievable pain. As I realised, getting burnt was the easy part, when you compare it to recovery.

TS: Your other books, 'Spirit of the digger' and 'Spirit of Kokoda' document heroic Australians from our past. 'Back from the dead' I feel does the same thing for our recent history. Did you find a common thread linking these past and present heroes?

PL: Yes I did. I saw that before I even thought about doing a book on Pete. I was writing 'Spirit of the digger' which is a book to try and understand the essence of that spirit which enabled all of our diggers to perform so remarkably and so out of proportion to their numbers over so many years. While I was doing that, and I'd really only just started to get into writing it, Bali happened and I found myself looking at these pictures and seeing in them the spirit of the digger right before my eyes. I saw Pete and thought, what an unbelievable character. When I heard Pete was recovering I went over to Perth because I wanted to interview him for 'The spirit of the digger'. That's how I started 'The spirit of the digger'. Pete was the first chapter.

As a result of meeting Pete and Leigh and their mates I thought, there's got to be a book in this too. All these books I've been writing I see as little pieces of the jigsaw puzzle of what it means to be Australian. Pete, Leigh, Nashie, Red Eye and all their mates are just so typically Australian characters. They rise to the occasion as so often happens.

In 'The Spirit of the digger' I wanted to know whether the digger spirit was still alive and I went out on patrol with our young blokes in East Timor and they were exactly the same as they would have been in Gallipoli, Kokoda or Vietnam. The same kind of characters with the same attitudes, same spirit and initiative and

humour and larrikin approach. And there's Pete, the same, exactly the same. Peter Cosgrove said when I was interviewing him for the digger book, 'you don't have to have the uniform on to have the spirit. We've all got it.' All Australians have this spirit and it comes out particularly in times of crisis, like bushfires, droughts and Bali.

TS: You have written books about heroic figures from our past. Is this different to writing about heroes like Peter Hughes and others in Bali because it is less immediate?

PL: Yes, it is different. I find that I get inspired a lot more if I go to the place. I went to Gallipoli, for example, and I was really carried away by the aura of the place. I've been to Kokoda lots of times and I went to the Western Front in France and felt the same thing and Bali was the same. When I went to Bali with Pete, we relived a lot of it at the spot, then you get a surge of inspiration. I find it easier to write it that way because I can smell it and feel it and see it and get a vision in my mind that helps place things much better than if I tried to do it from a bar.

TS: What do you think Peter Hughes' message would be to all of the readers of this book?

PL: That's a good point. I believe in many lands with many other people, what happened in Bali would have been the start of generations of vendettas and vengeance. But that's not the Australian way and it's not Pete's way. Pete sees these guys as criminals and needing to be brought to justice and that's it.

I think his message to people is: "Let's just get on with our lives, live good lives, positive lives, let's not blame the Balinese people. Bali remains one of his favourite places and it means a lot to him and Leigh so he wants to draw positive energy and approaches out of the whole thing. I think it has changed his life, strangely, for the better. I think he thinks that too. He's now leading a life which has direction and power and he wants to help people and he wants to make certain that all of his experiences and those of the other families who were involved and lost loved ones or had loved ones injured are positive experiences from now on.

That's the impression I got from dealing with him. We're great mates now. The book has been a great exercise for him in lots of ways because it got rid of a lot of demons. The end result is a triumph. It's a triumph of his spirit and will and of the Australian approach to live and let live. He wants to show people who were affected and most of us were in some way, even if we were affected by watching it, that we want to come out of it as better people and as positive people. He has defeated terrorism by coming back and leading a good life.

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Interview by Therese Scott, Reader Services Librarian, Ashfield Municipal Library on Friday October 3 2003.