

# Surfing the tsunami

*In 2007 Bryn Parry was an ex-army officer with a brilliant talent for cartoons. In 2016 he and his wife Emma are famous as co-founders of the most astonishingly successful charity, Help For Heroes. It's been one hell of a ride.*

**I** was teaching jungle warfare in Australia when I decided I might be able to make a living as a cartoonist; I must have been mad.” That’s the sort of sentence one couldn’t make up and it came from a remarkable man who has managed (so far) to have had three-and-a-half successful careers. Bryn Parry, OBE, is best known to the shooting world as the ace cartoonist who successfully encapsulates the multitude of moments that occur in our wonderfully social sport. But he has found fame in the world at large as the co-founder and chief executive of Help for Heroes, the charity that has done so much to help the recovery of those who have given so much for their country. He and his wife Emma were appointed OBEs in 2010 for voluntary service to the armed forces.

## HOPELESS AT HOCKEY

“I’ve drawn all my life,” Bryn told me as we sat in the garden of the home he and his wife Emma share in the Wiltshire village of Downton. “I was hopeless at everything else and terrible at sport, always the last to be picked, so I was one of the kids who hid in the art room to avoid playing hockey

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on a cold day. I just doodled – all my essays were covered in doodles, as well as rude remarks from my teachers, and I’ve never stopped. I’ve got pictures from when I was at Sandhurst, I did the regimental Christmas card, soldiers in uniform and then caricatures.”

Bryn, from a military family, served in the Royal Green Jackets for 10 years and completed three Northern Ireland tours. His father, who won the Military Cross while serving in Burma in WWII, died while on manoeuvres in Germany when Bryn was just four-and-a-half. Bryn’s son continues the tradition and is serving with the Rifles and has done two tours in Afghanistan.

“I think drawing is what I always wanted to do,” he explained, “that and the army. I was brought up on Bateman and Charles ‘Snaffles’ Payne, the great hunting artist.” So on leaving the army Bryn and Emma began their cartooning and picture framing business. Emma turned out to be a dab hand at picture framing and her organisational nous meant that that part grew at some speed. But towards the end of the 1990s, competition from



**Bryn Parry has a unique talent for capturing the comedy in shooting, but it's been on the backburner for eight years.**

the Far East had built to such a level that the pair decided to concentrate on the cartooning and using the images on mugs, placemats and so on. Bryn became the shooting cartoonist.

## SHOOTING IS LIKE THE ARMY

Although Bryn has ‘cartooned’ all sorts of subjects, it is shooting with which he feels most comfortable and in which he finds a rich vein of humour. “I thought from the start that I understood shooting because it was so like the army. You could see that

the guns were the officers, the keepers the Sergeant Majors, the pickers-up the NCOs and the beaters the squaddies. I was familiar with it, the banter is the same as the army, you’re outdoors getting cold and wet, even the kit is similar. And, of course, shooting is a great leveller. You’ve got your captain

of industry turning up on a shoot a quivering wreck because his bloody labrador is barking or picking someone else’s birds. And equally you could find the captain of industry in the beating line having his simple lunch while some city boy is having haute cuisine in the shooting lodge.” ➤



## Help for Heroes

So how did he get into shooting? “A local vet, Peter Dalton, asked me to do a commission for the Longford Shoot when the land agent, Peter Jenkins, was leaving. So I went along to take photographs and make notes. I immediately felt at home and could see the humour in it.

“The next year they invited me to shoot and Peter Dalton lent me a rather nice side-by-side but the stock was a little short and I shoot off the left shoulder and it was right handed. It was a bit of a nightmare – I couldn’t hit a thing, hadn’t had a lesson and everybody told me to relax, which is then the last thing you can do. So on the last drive a bird went all the way down the line and everyone had two barrels at it. By that stage I had lost the will to live and I just swung the gun and... killed it. It was the most fantastic crossing shot, astronomically high and I shot it stone dead. It came thumping down in the next field and Chris Whalley, the new land agent, came up and said: ‘That was a bath bird’. I thought I’d broken some sort of rule and had shot the Marquis of Bath’s bird or something. You know, you’ve been briefed about the white pheasant, the ‘no ground game’ rule and I thought I’d made a howler. But Chris was quick to explain: ‘No, no, it’s the sort of bird you lie in your bath and think about.’ So that was my first shoot.”

The bug had bitten and Bryn was soon part of a DIY shoot nearby. “I was a half gun there for years and my kids were all brought up being involved with the shoot, so I was able to give them the sort of rural upbringing that I didn’t have, which is amazing.”

### SURFING THE H4H TSUNAMI

If we roll on a few years, the Parrys’ life had a settled look to it. Every summer they’d come up with an idea for a new book, Bryn would begin work in September, and by the Game Fair of the following year it was ready to be launched. Meanwhile Emma was

“After shooting again I thought: ‘Wow, I’ve got to get back into that.’”

organising the Bryn Parry brand, and working hard at choosing the right image for the right product (and also being quality control for Bryn – his “critical friend”). Then we get to 2007 and it all changed. Bryn describes it as “like surfing on a tsunami”.

It went something like this. Bryn went on a charity bike ride with some mates to Paris in aid of Macmillan Cancer Support and then Emma, the real cyclist in the family, suggested they organise their own ride from Caen to Cannes. They then realised if they could get 300 riders they might raise half a million. Next they met General Sir Richard Dannatt, the head of the British army at the time, who suggested a suitable project might be a swimming pool at Headley Court Defence Medical Rehabilitation Centre in Surrey. Cost: £5m. The ante had been well and truly upped.

Then came a visit to Birmingham’s Selly Oak Hospital where they met some of the wounded from

Afghanistan. This sealed the deal. There was still no thought of starting a charity but it soon became evident that no military charity, understandably at this point, wanted to take on a capital project. What were the options? Give up or start your own charity. Bryn and Emma looked at each other: “How hard could it be?”

### £280M IN EIGHT YEARS

Well, the bike ride actually raised £1.4m and the charity reached the original target in just eight months. How do you do that with no previous experience of starting and running a charity? With complete dedication, an incredible work ethic and an ability to galvanise the generous spirit of the British public, that’s how. The name was a bit of a team effort but manages to be snappy, easy to remember and describe completely the charity’s aims.

The stretcher bearers symbol was sparked by a photograph Bryn had seen of a WWI Tommy and was re-enacted by serving soldiers in the heat of the Iraq desert – with Bryn art directing back home in Downton. “Could you just do it again with more movement this time?” And the poor soldiers had to take to the sands again in full combat gear. But what a result.

Then there are the bears. Emma said: “The bears are the things the



The H4H bears were just one of the many genius ideas that has helped the charity raise £280m in eight years.



Now Bryn is returning to shooting we can expect more of this...

public really took to in terms of products – they were a no-brainer.” The colours and their order have been copyrighted. Bryn said: “It amuses me when some General comes up to ask why we are using his colours and I say ‘actually General, you are using ours’. But we’re very diplomatic about it.”

The statistics are staggering. Take wrist bands. The idea of one of Emma and Bryn’s daughters, this little silicon band will set you back the princely sum of £2. Not much is it? They ordered 10,000 at first and had no idea if they’d get rid of so many. Then *The Sun* ran it on its front page with Prince William wearing one and the bands took off and flew. To date they have sold over six million little pieces of silicon. In total, in eight and a half years, they have raised something over £280m. Just think about that for a moment. As I said, staggering.

### A REASON TO GET OUT OF BED

But of course it’s not the money that’s important, it is what has been done with it. Bryn again: “There were hospitals doing really well, rehab was good but there wasn’t recovery. H4H is about helping people to rebuild lives. You are taking someone who can’t see the point of getting out of bed in the morning and is having suicidal thoughts and giving them a reason to go on living. At that point convalescence was ‘go home’, which makes you feel isolated. You’re not mixing with your mates, there’s no banter.”

The stories are many and humbling. The guy they met on that first day at the hospital who had just discovered he had no legs and five years later was representing the country at the 2012 Paralympics; the sailor who had survived the sinking of HMS Coventry in the Falklands conflict and has had

psychological problems ever since but was helped by doing a project with H4H some 30-odd years later; and courses like Shooting for Heroes, which was covered in these pages and make a real difference, giving the participants new skills, new interests and, above all, fellowship and peer to peer self-help.

### BACK TO THE DAY JOB

Now after almost eight years Bryn is about to step down as chief executive and he and Emma will be giving up the day-to-day stresses of running such a high-profile organisation. They are getting back the Bryn Parry licenses and returning to cartooning and shooting. “To be honest,” said Bryn, “with the end of the war in Afghanistan, the method of fundraising has changed and the chief executive needs a different skill set from mine.” ►



## Help for Heroes



**Bryn and Emma plan to restart their private lives now they are taking a back seat with Help For Heroes.**

I asked them if they had any regrets. Emma said: “The charity took over our life to such an extent that we didn’t see our friends for years. They stopped asking us to meet them at the pub because they knew the answer would be no. And there was a toll on our family who didn’t see us normally for all that time. You want to be there for them and sometimes we weren’t. Perhaps we should have been stricter about keeping up our connections.”

“But that would have meant doing something half-heartedly,” says Bryn. “In the early days we were doing everything ourselves and it’s only now that we’ve got all the key personnel in place so I feel the charity is in good hands and ready to be handed over.”

Many of the courses run by the charity highlight the need for balance in life, and both Emma and Bryn realise they need to practise what they preach and get their lives back in balance. This means getting the Bryn Parry brand back up and running, and for Bryn this also means a return to shooting, which has been so far on the back burner that he needs long arms to reach it. “At one stage I thought I’d never shoot again but then someone invited me and I came back saying ‘Wow, I’ve got to get back into that’.”

The reason Bryn’s cartoons are so loved by us huntin’, shootin’ and fishin’ types is because he not only understands his subject but loves it, too. “You know, you stand there

in the pouring rain hoping against hope that your dog won’t make a fool of herself and wondering why you are stupid enough to be doing this and then you go, hey, this would make a great cartoon. If you can enjoy something, laugh about it afterwards and then draw something, it is the perfect life.”

I’m sure Help for Heroes will go from strength but I for one am delighted that the Parrys are going back to the business of making me smile. 🐾

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Bryn Parry original cartoons, visit  
[brynparrystudios.com](http://brynparrystudios.com)