

Photography Jonathan Cami

By Ricky French

tracks of



tears

**THEY'RE ON THE FRONT LINE OF TRAGEDY.
HOW DO TRAIN DRIVERS DEAL WITH
THE HORRORS THEY WITNESS WEEK IN,
WEEK OUT ON OUR RAILWAYS?**



It's late December 2012, a few days before Christmas. Len Gaut parks his car and grabs what he needs from the back seat. He walks across the busy suburban Sydney street to a bridge that spans the train tracks seven metres below and stops halfway. The girl who jumped from this spot where Gaut now stands, who landed on the tracks in front of Gaut's train an hour before sunrise, was only 17. There were two drivers in the cabin. His mate had never had a fatality before but for Gaut, 55, it was all too common. The NSW TrainLink driver speaks of time slowing down; of the long walk back along the tracks to confirm what he already knew. As he watched the girl's last seconds of life, the only thought that had flashed through his mind was, *Here we go again.*

They're the unseen faces that see too much. Forced to bear graphic witness to incidents far outside their job description, train drivers are joining the call to urgently address what Lifeline's Alan Woodward calls a national emergency: this country's suicide rate. Suicide accounted for more than 2800 Australian deaths in 2014, the last reported year: around eight a day, more than double the national road toll. About 150 of those suicides occur in the rail corridor each year. They are the most horrific deaths you could imagine.

Like most suicides, they go unreported to the public, but within the rail industry it's an issue that's always bubbled below the surface. In recent years, the industry has made a point of addressing the trauma faced by its employees and is trying to change a culture that expected workers to just carry on. By telling their stories, train drivers hope to spark conversations about how we can reduce the number of lives lost through suicide and the ripple effect that ruins so many more.

A lot happened to Len Gaut in the three days between the girl's fatal leap and his return to that spot on the bridge. The mandatory blood and urine tests. The police interview, reliving every detail. The trip to the mall the day after, trying to keep his mind off it; running into a fellow driver and his teenage daughter there. His colleague's daughter had started talking about the girl who died, not knowing that Gaut was in the train. Before he could say anything she thrust her phone in his face, showing him a photo of the smiling girl in her school uniform, making Gaut recoil and avert his eyes. Then there was the barbecue at his 10ha hobby farm north of Gosford, on the NSW central coast; mates gathering to talk about anything other than the railways, until someone burst in and delivered the barbecue-stopper: "You were on the train that killed that girl, weren't you?"

Haunted:
Len Gaut witnessed his
first fatality on the tracks
when he was 16

Gaut's family and workmates know he suffers. He's been working on the railways for more than 40 years in a job that involves dealing with so much more than just signal failures. Despite appearing in control, he has been seeing medical specialists for the past 13 years. He witnessed his first fatality in 1974 when he was just 16. Two freight trains collided at Lithgow, west of Sydney, and one of the drivers was crushed to death. Gaut, the only person small enough to squeeze into the mangled cabin, was first to see the body. He was at the coalface of the Granville disaster of 1977. Faces would haunt him, like that of the girl in the mohair jumper, looking for a short cut across the tracks in 1982. She dodged Gaut's train but didn't see the other one. Horror scenes would keep repeating in his mind, like sitting in the cabin with the headlights on a decapitated head on the tracks so the police would know where to find it. Every time he climbed into the driver's seat he would ask himself the same question: *Am I going to kill anyone today?*

They asked Gary Tower a lot of questions when the Sydney train driver took the witness box at a Sydney coroner's inquest in October 2014. They asked him how fast he was going that awful night in December 2013. They asked him if anyone told him a man had been sighted on the tracks minutes before the train Tower was driving struck him. But there was one question they didn't ask. "No one in that court ever asked me how it affected me, and how I am," says Tower, 67. He left the court crying. "People say to get over it, it's happened, it's done. But it's something you never get over."

Tower says that after working for the railways for 40 years, he just couldn't do it anymore. A lifetime of trains, following in the steps of his grandfather. All those proud moments: testing and commissioning the Millennium and Oscar trains, working the first Waratah into revenue, delivering the last one to the premier. And all those times along the way, "dropping the dead man." "If someone is on the tracks, the only thing you can do is drop the dead man. It dumps the air in the train, puts the brakes on. If you see someone in front of you, there's no time to think. You drop the dead man and throw your brake handle into automatic at the same time. Then you wait." Tower says a typical suburban train can take up to a kilometre to stop even with the emergency brakes applied.

After the 2013 fatality, Tower took three months' annual leave – all the leave he had. At the end of it he turned to his wife and said, "That's it, I can't do it anymore." He put his paperwork in the next day.

You wouldn't expect Rob Maher to be driving either, considering what he's been through. Maher grew up in Cootamundra in the NSW Riverina, joining the rail industry in 1978 at age 18, working at the Junee depot. For him, the best part of train driving is watching the countryside flash by and getting a backstage pass into the lives of ordinary Australians. He sees the rusting cars, the goats chomping on the grass, the plants growing behind the shed that the owner thought were out of sight. Travelling from Parkes to Broken Hill, 810km of red desert, watching the sun rise and the animals stir. It's fixing things on the run; bunging up an air hose with a 20 cent coin. It's kids running up to you on the platform and asking their wide-eyed questions: "Have you ever run over a cow? Have you ever run over an elephant?" It's following in your father's footsteps and taking the Indian Pacific out of Sydney, winding your way through the Blue Mountains, easing the speed back so the passengers won't spill their meals, cruising down through the curves – no bumps, no jolts – then making up time so the passengers can get to Broken Hill in time for their bus tour.

It's also all those things it shouldn't be. It's breaking down in the hallway with a paint brush in your hand as your wife watches you and wonders who you are and an Adele song comes on the radio and she cries as you sing *Make You Feel My Love*, and you embrace her and you know you're going to get through this and you're going to do it together.

Over the years Maher, 56, has had his near misses. The bloke pulled off the tracks by a mate seconds before Maher's train roared past. The crashed car that his train clipped, lying on its side. He stopped the train, ran back and saw a bassinet and a car seat lying on the ground, babies' clothes and toys strewn everywhere. He thought: "Oh God, you've just killed a family." But there was no one in the car. The police arrived and told him the car was stolen from a motel and the family was still there, safe. "It's stuff that builds up," says Maher, "stuff you don't realise at the time."

When recounting his first suicide, Maher talks slowly, methodically, with an elegant precision. It's something he's replayed in his head a thousand times, though not through choice. "It was about 1.40am and we were coming into Culcairn from the Albury end. The other driver looks up and says, 'It looks like there's something on the line – it looks like a garbage bin.' So I put the brakes on.

And he hadn't even finished speaking when he corrected himself. "It's a person." Maher's voice cracks and his hands begin to shake as he continues. "Everything that happens in that cab is in slow motion. My mate's screaming his head off: 'Stop! Stop! Stop!' And the guy just stood there. And you're thinking to yourself, 'Just take one step, one step. I'll only clip you. Doesn't matter which way, just one step.' The brakes are coming on but you don't feel any resistance in the train. And you wait for the impact and there's an impact. There's no *bang*. Just an impact, like you've hit a ghost. You come to a standstill and there's silence."

The man who died was around the same age as Maher's son: early 20s. For that age group, suicide is now the leading cause of death in Australia.

Maher recalls his immediate reaction to his first fatality, speaking as though he's detached from his body, hovering above himself, watching someone else dissolve into blackness. "Every noise you hear, everything you see, everything that goes on, is on a little video in your mind, playing and replaying. You're thinking of everything: the person you've



just killed, their family. And you don't see it as a suicide; you see it as a person you've killed."

After the incident, Maher took time off work. He wasn't coping. "It was like jumping out of a 30-storey building and not hitting the ground. The depressive states you go through are huge. Junee is a really close depot. My co-workers could see what I was going through, and that upset me, because I had brought them into my bucket of pain."

Maher went to church for the first time in his life and prayed for forgiveness. "I had killed someone. I knew it was irrational. But you use anything you can to survive, you feed off people's energy. I didn't want to miss out on something that might save me. I was drowning. I was like a fire that was slowly dying, I was just further and further away."

Maher says his employer, Pacific National, was exemplary in the support it offered him: an employees' counsellor, a rehab worker, flying him to Sydney to see a psychiatrist. After a month off, he finally felt ready to return to his train. As broken as he was, he says the cabin was the only place he felt he belonged. He called it his "safe

space". But was it? On his first shift back, Maher took his train out of Junee, through Bomen, then Wagga Wagga. He was feeling OK. Maybe he could do this, after all. They approached a small tunnel, nicknamed the rat hole. Maher resumes his trance-like retelling. "We get a bit closer and I see a man standing up on the embankment. And I know what's coming. My mate just says, 'Oh, God no.'" It was 38 minutes into his first shift back.

The routine. The radio calls, the ambulance, the relief drivers arriving. The kettle going on. "We'll have a cup of tea, mate." The blood and urine tests, the police interview, the unscheduled drive home through the black night. "My wife hears the car pull up but I can't go in. My wife – she's my life support. I sit in the car. I sit in the lounge room. I sit everywhere. And she knows. She comes out of the bedroom and she's heartbroken."

Maher says suicide prevention should be Australia's number one priority. "We don't appear to be any closer to helping these people than we were 10 years ago. That upsets me. We're losing all these beautiful people. They could be the people who improve our mental health in the future, and all of a sudden they're not here." He says suicide crossed his own mind, but he knew it wasn't the answer. "I realised suicide was the reason I was in this dark place. Because people wanted to be dead."

Time passed, and the counselling continued. To occupy his mind, Maher decided to paint the house. "I love painting, but I did a shit job." He gives a stifled snort of a laugh, but is suffocated by an embattled face welling with tears. "I'm in the hallway and my wife's watching me, because she knows to watch me. My wife... she's my life support. I don't know whether she's waiting for a sign or waiting for me to break down... Then a song comes on the radio... and I sing the song and she starts crying. That's the moment I knew I'd be OK."

TrackSAFE is a registered charity formed in 2012 by the rail industry. The initiative, a world first, aims to help provide a better workplace and equip employees to deal with the traumas they face. Executive director Naomi Frauenfelder says peer support for drivers is essential. "We're trying to foster a climate of looking out for your co-workers and letting them know that it's OK to not be OK." All Australian rail organisations now offer free, confidential counselling for employees and their families.

Andrea Phelps, deputy director of

Phoenix Australia – Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health, worked closely with the rail industry to develop guidelines to help rail employees cope. She says train drivers often display all four of the tell-tale symptoms of PTSD: re-experiencing the trauma, avoidance of things, people or places that remind them of it, hypervigilance and depression. For many, it's a debilitating disorder. One effective treatment, says Phelps, is trauma-focused cognitive behaviour therapy. "The thing with trauma," she says, "is that it's so distressing, people don't want to think about it, so they push it out of their minds. It just remains encapsulated in a bubble and doesn't get integrated with the rest of your memory. So the idea is you help them to unpack what's in that memory. You try to shift that memory so it's not psychologically overwhelming." She says the trauma train drivers experience is comparable to the worst she's seen with war veterans.

One of the medical professionals Len Gaut sought help from would describe Gaut's career as a 40-year tour of duty. He would remind Gaut he was untrained to deal with any of this stuff; he wasn't even trained in first aid. Gaut would speak of the three stages he would witness: person alive, person being killed, person dead. He would tell them of people he had hit who he went back to help, finding them still alive and begging him to save them – people who realised they had gone over the edge and decided they wanted to come back, but it was too late.

The psychiatrists, the counsellors, the mental health experts, none has to see the final act of a person's life, and here train drivers are, dealing with the horrific end result of an overwhelmed and under-resourced mental health system. Emergency services workers, greatly respected by train drivers, sign up to the job knowing what to expect. Train drivers sign up to drive trains.

The girl who took her life in front of Len Gaut's train a week before Christmas left behind a heartbroken family who did everything they could to save her. Gaut made one stop on his drive to the bridge that morning three days after she died. He picked up his mate, the other train driver. They stood together on the spot where the girl had jumped. Gaut placed what he had grabbed from his car on the ground. It was a bunch of flowers he had picked from his garden. They stayed for a few minutes, silent in their own thoughts, then walked back to the car, ready to get back to the job that, despite it all, they love. Back to what should always be their safe space. ●

Lifeline crisis support: 13 11 14



Facing the traumas:
clockwise from above,
Rob Maher, Gary Tower,
Len Gaut