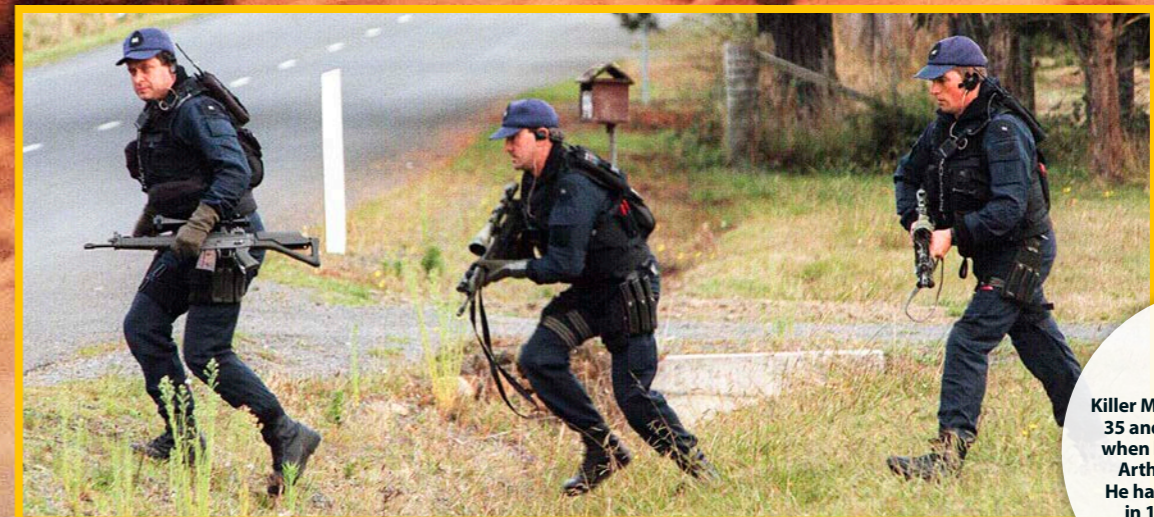


Port Arthur massacre: 25 years on

'THIS CAN NEVER HAPPEN AGAIN'

SURVIVORS OF AUSTRALIA'S WORST MASS SHOOTING RECALL THE HORROR OF A DAY THAT SAW 35 PEOPLE MURDERED AND A NATION LOSE ITS INNOCENCE



DARK DAY
Killer Martin Bryant murdered 35 and wounded 23 people when he opened fire at Port Arthur on Apr. 28, 1996. He had inherited \$570,000 in 1992 and later used the money to travel extensively - and purchase rifles.





Carolyn Loughton's friend Geoff, her personal care worker Jamiee and her social worker Jodie have helped her on her ongoing journey of recovery after Sarah's loss.

When the young man with long blond hair began firing a high-powered rifle inside the bustling Broad Arrow Cafe, Carolyn Loughton's only thought was to get her daughter on the ground. The Commonwealth Government public servant from Melbourne and her daughter, Sarah, 15, had been lunching at the cafe during a visit to Port Arthur's Historic Site in Tasmania on April 28, 1996, when, without warning, the male customer pulled out a Colt AR-15 semi-automatic assault rifle from a large sports bag and began shooting the seated patrons.

"It was so quick, it was so loud," Loughton, now 65, tells WHO. "I looked up and I saw people slumped dead. The look on Sarah's face was of absolute sheer horror. I grabbed her and she fell flat down, and I threw myself over her." As the gunman approached the pair, he fired twice. "He shot me in the back," recalls Loughton, quietly. "And Sarah was shot in the back of the head."

Time has not faded the terror of the Port Arthur massacre. Twenty-five years ago, 28-year-old local man Martin Bryant went on an indiscriminate shooting spree that claimed the lives of 35 people, including Sarah, and changed Australia's gun laws forever. Bryant, a misfit with an intellectual disability who was living off an inheritance, pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 35 life terms for the murders, 12 of which took place within 15 seconds in the eatery. A further 23 people suffered injuries, and those who survived continue to be haunted



After eating on the deck of the Broad Arrow Cafe, Bryant re-entered the venue and killed 20 people.

by what was then the worst mass shooting in the world.

"Sometimes I feel guilty that I survived," says Pauline Grenfell, a Melbourne mother-of-two who witnessed the deaths of local mum Nanette Mikac and her two children. "But I'm thankful for every day. In Australia, we don't expect things like this to happen."

No-one could have foreseen the unspeakable horror that unfolded that day. By the time Bryant arrived at 1.10pm at Port Arthur, which is the site of a notorious convict jail, a 90-minute drive from Hobart, he had already killed two people at the nearby Seascapes guesthouse, which Bryant's father had once tried to buy. They were the owners, David and Sally Martin. When Bryant finished his killing spree inside the Broad Arrow and its adjoining gift shop, leaving 20 murdered souls in his wake, he continued to fire at the fleeing people outside.

"Bullets were still coming through the windows," says Loughton, who with Sarah had been on a Tasmanian getaway for the

Anzac Day long weekend. "You didn't want to stand up. There was a woman there, she was a nurse, and she grabbed a man and said, 'Have you been hit?' And he said, 'No, but my wife's dead.' He was in shock. And she got him to get towels from the kitchen to put down my back. I was losing so much blood."

Outside, Grenfell and her husband Peter, who were on a Tasmanian holiday with friends, had just left the cafe when they heard the "explosions" of gunfire. They fled to a nearby road where they met local woman Nanette Mikac, who was desperately trying to shepherd her two little girls Alannah, 6, and Madeline, 3,

from the area. "Cars were speeding past," Grenfell, 67, tells WHO. "And then one car stopped. We were about 50 metres behind the mother and the girls at that stage. We stepped back because we thought the driver was going to help them. But then my husband saw the driver – it was him."

Bryant, who had arrived in his car – a yellow Volvo, in which he had stashed a cache of weapons and ammunition – had

been making his way out of the tourist site when he saw the family.

"He was standing with his gun and Nanette was talking to him, pleading, 'Don't hurt my girls,'" recalls Grenfell. "But he shot her." Bryant then murdered the children. She adds, "How anyone could do that is beyond me."

Yet Bryant wasn't finished. At the site's toll booth, he killed four people in a BMW, took the car and drove to a nearby service station. There he forced Melbourne lawyer Glenn Pears into the boot of the BMW and murdered his partner, Zoe Hall. Bryant then drove the car to the Seascapes guesthouse, where he remained holed up for the next 18 hours as local police and Special Operations Groups from Tasmania and Victoria surrounded the building.

By then, police and paramedics had swarmed to the tourist site, and the most seriously wounded, including Loughton, were airlifted to the Royal Hobart Hospital. Dr Stephen Wilkinson, who was chief of surgery at the hospital, had serendipitously just completed running a course on "emergency management of severe trauma" for 16 surgeons from around Australia.

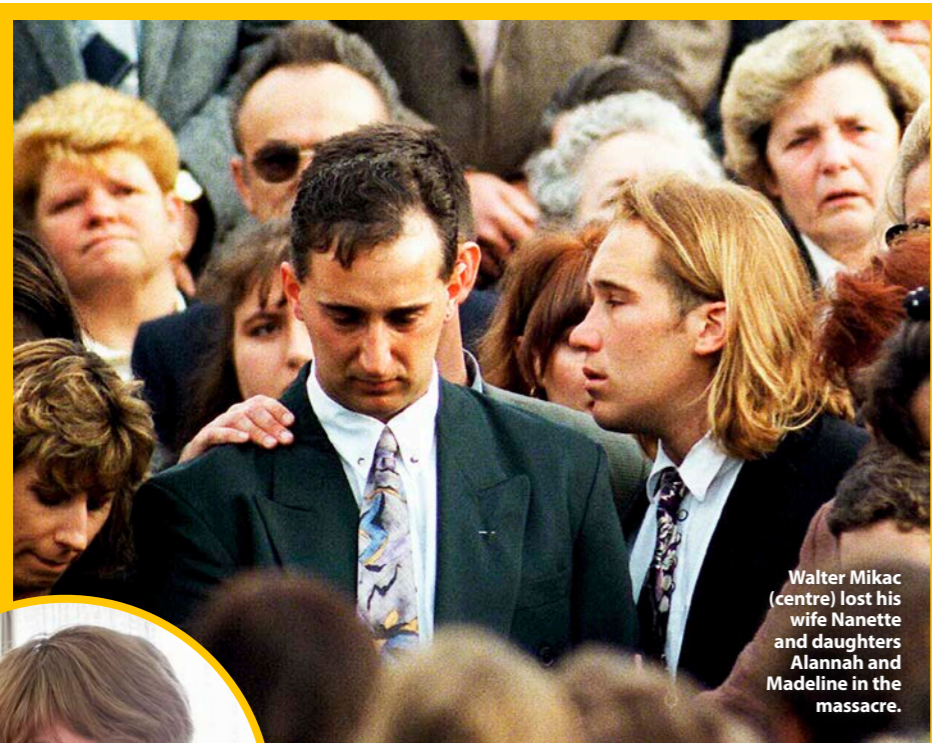
"How could anyone do this?"
- GRENFELL



Bryant filled his yellow Volvo with ammunition and strapped a surfboard to the roof before the massacre.



Bryant, now 53, is locked up in Risdon Prison's maximum security wing, which is located outside of Hobart.



Walter Mikac (centre) lost his wife Nanette and daughters Alannah and Madeline in the massacre.



Survivor Pauline Grenfell (left) bore witness to the Mikac murders and later met with the bereaved Walter.



for the survivors and those who lost loved ones, it was the beginning of a lifetime of pain and anguish. “It’s more mental issues,” says Tasmanian Peter Crosswell, now 71, who was in the cafe and suffered a gunshot wound to his buttocks. “Afterwards, every time I heard a car backfire I was diving underneath the nearest table. Even at night, catching my own reflection in a window used to make me jump. That went on for a long, long time.”

Feelings of guilt and regret still haunt Grenfell. “Sometimes it pops into your head, and you think about what you could have done,” she says from her home in Melbourne. “You wish you could have been brave like you see on TV – be a hero and dive in and get him, but that’s not the reality. But I try not to dwell on it.”

What she did do was attempt to bring some peace to the grieving Walter Mikac, the Melbourne pharmacist whose family was slain before her eyes. Not long after the massacre, Grenfell met with Walter, who later became an advocate for gun control and would create the Alannah and Madeline Foundation, a charity that aims to protect children from violence. “We commiserated together,” she says. “I don’t know if it helped him. I don’t know how he coped.”

For Loughton, not only does she continue to suffer the loss of her child but her journey of recovery is one that never ends. The bullet that tore into her shoulder caused a severe bone infection called osteomyelitis, which meant part of her scapula bone had to be replaced using bone from her hip. A reinfection led doctors to remove her fibula (calf bone) to serve as bone graft for her scapula.

“I had to learn to walk again,” says Loughton, who also required two skin grafts to mend her ear drum – which was blown out by a gunshot blast in the cafe. “I’ve been in 13 different hospitals, I’ve had more than 30 operations. This is how one bullet affects the rest of your life.”

That is why she remains committed to advocating for gun control in Australia. In the wake of the massacre, the then-Prime Minister John Howard overhauled

Australia’s gun laws, restricting the legal ownership of high-powered weapons and launching a buyback scheme of thousands of guns. But

Loughton warns that those laws are in danger of being “whittled away”, citing a 2017 report by Gun Control Australia that details how non-compliance of the laws at a

“The teamwork really stood out”
- DR WILKINSON

was Bryant himself, who was finally apprehended early the next morning at the Seascope. After smoke was seen coming from an upstairs window, Bryant fled the guesthouse in flames. His hostage, Pears, and the Martins, were found dead inside. “I made it a point of asking for volunteers to treat him,” recalls Dr Wilkinson. “But I can’t recall anyone refusing their professional duties.”

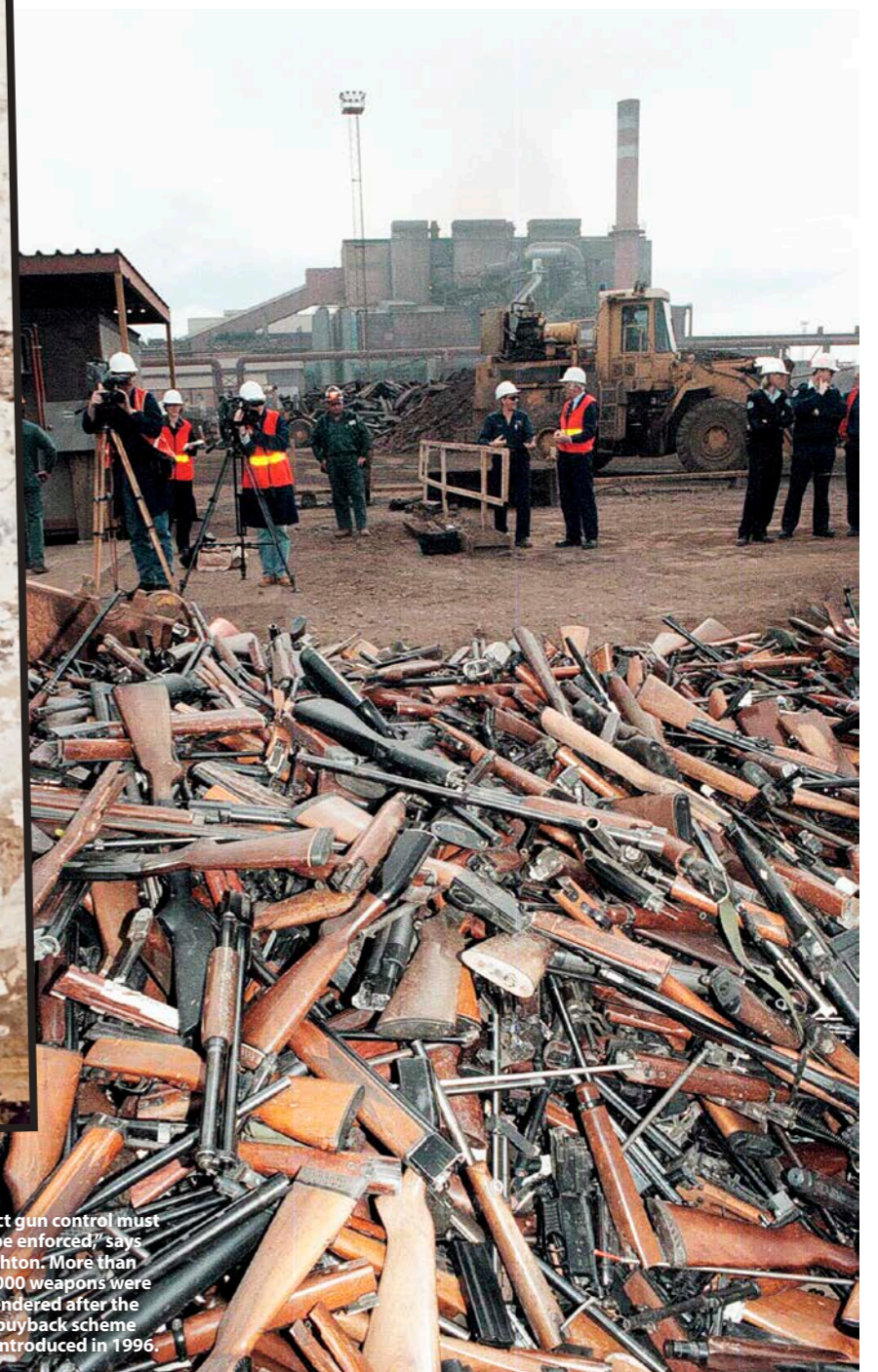
Bryant’s 19-hour rampage was over, but

“One of the first things we did was to get some of the people we just trained,” Wilkinson, now 68, tells WHO. “Some of them were at the airport waiting to fly out.” Of all the patients who were brought to the Royal that day, not one was lost. “The teamwork and the cooperation is one thing that really stood out,” says Dr Wilkinson, a married father of two adult sons who still performs surgery at the Royal. “It was the staff around me that made it all happen.”

In an unsettling moment for all at the hospital, the last patient to be admitted



Dr Stephen Wilkinson oversaw the treatment of the many wounded, including Bryant, at Royal Hobart Hospital.



“Strict gun control must still be enforced,” says Loughton. More than 700,000 weapons were surrendered after the gun buyback scheme was introduced in 1996.

state level has “steadily reduced restrictions” of guns across the country.

And in 2015, Loughton petitioned against the sale of the Adler A110, a weapon that is capable of rapid fire but was classified as a shotgun, making it relatively easy to buy. “I couldn’t not speak up and potentially see this happen to somebody else,” she says.

It’s a crusade inspired by the memory of her lost child, a talented swimmer who had just turned 15 when she was murdered by Bryant. Sarah’s high school, Boronia Heights College, now gives out an annual literary award in her name to a Year 9 student. The monetary award is inspired by a poem Sarah wrote one week before she died. And there is also a dedicated “Sarah’s Walk” in a public garden near Loughton’s home in Melbourne’s eastern suburbs.

“She was an absolutely delightful child,”

says Loughton. “She was a horse rider, an artist, a poet. She was born with a cleft palate, so she had a lot of surgeries in her life, and I think that made her very compassionate to other people.”

Life without Sarah often led her toward a dark choice. “But I made a decision many years ago that there is not going to be another victim,” says Loughton, who became a close friend of the nurse, Lynne, who helped save her life in the cafe. “And I have also come to realise that I am the embodiment of my daughter. Years ago, a friend of Sarah’s said, ‘I love looking at

you, Carolyn, because when I look at you, I see Sarah.’ And I thought, ‘That’s why I have to stay here.’ This horror has to stop.” In its place, a hope for a safer country. “When I’m with families, seeing my friends having grandchildren, I think that can all be ruined so quickly by somebody,” she says. “We can never let it happen again.”

• By Michael Crooks

If you or someone you know needs help, contact Lifeline on 131114 or lifeline.org.au