

# UNDEFEATED

The story of Bali bombing survivor

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*To my mum for giving me life.  
To Mira, Tansen and Sai for saving my life.  
And to my wife, Rebecca, and our children  
for showing me the meaning of life.*

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## **PREFACE**

### *A moment in time*

THAT'S ME, BLOODIED AND COMPLETELY BEWILDERED, perched up there on that wall. I was escaping from the Sari Club in Bali, which had just been blown apart by terrorists on October 12, 2002.

That photo was running nationally in an Australian magazine while I was in intensive care in Adelaide, South Australia. The story of the Bali bombing was being told everywhere, on television and radio news, in the daily papers and in every magazine. Someone somehow realised it was me and, partly in shock, showed me the photo.

It was too much. Looking at that photo, the memory of what had happened just a few days earlier,

took me right back to that place and I couldn't take it. I passed out.

That was the first time I'd ever seen myself in a magazine. Looking back, I realise how that photo captured an exact moment that defined my life so clearly between "past" and "future". My past is "before Bali" and my future is everything "after Bali".

Before Bali, I was sailing along comfortably in life, heading towards a pretty predictable future of being a tradie and chasing a footy dream. That moment in time, captured in this photo, shows the exact point at which it all changed and I now had to take a new path, one I had to create for myself. The easy road was gone.

Another thing that comes to mind when I see that photo is how on September 11, 2001, I sat, safely in my living room, watching TV with the world as the World Trade Center in New York collapsed, how Americans had been murdered by terrorists while going about their everyday lives.

I remember thinking: "Thank God, I live here in Perth, in Australia, where that type of thing just doesn't happen."

I had no idea that exactly one year, one month and one day later I too would be caught up in a terrorist attack.

## PREFACE

For me to tell you where I went to from here, from being stuck on that wall, I need first to explain where I'd come from and the life I'd led until that point, the life I now had to leave behind.

## INTRODUCTION

I WAS FLAT ON MY ARSE. I lay there for a split second, pushed up hard against the bar. It was pitch black and there were bits of the wall, pieces of roof and, I started to realise with horror, body parts all over me. It felt as if I'd been hit by a bulldozer.

For an instant, I didn't hear anything, and then there was a ringing in my ears but no other sound. Just silence. I must've been one of the first to come to, because it was quiet for what seemed like ages, but was probably no more than a few seconds. I'd been walking towards the back of the club when the bomb exploded, but something had knocked me right around and now I was disoriented, facing the front.

I pulled myself up off my back, up onto my knees and grabbed my mouth. The pain was intense. I didn't know what had caused it. I just knew my mouth had been smashed in, and when I took my hands away from my face and looked down at them I saw they were covered in blood. I reached up to touch my head and noticed what felt like a dent in my skull, with my hair already warm and sticky with blood.

October 12, 2002 – a night that changed everything for me. It was a long time before I could stop letting it define me and instead grow to accept what happened as just a part of my journey in life.

I've lost count of the number of times people have asked me: "What happened to you?"

I've realised that I don't want what happened to me, my family, and so many other families to be forgotten.

I want people to understand what happened, not only to me but also to my friends, and many others.

I want them to be able to understand the physical and mental impact, and how, in a split second, life could never be the same.

I've noticed that when I talk about my journey and how I've chosen to deal with it, people are able to draw some inspiration, which perhaps they can apply

to their own lives. They're often moved to race home and tell their loved ones how much they mean to them. Sometimes, if just for a moment, they change their outlook on life. And at other times, that new outlook may last just that little bit longer.

So a book is the next step.

If I can reach more people by writing a book, if I can inspire more people to be better human beings, to reach more goals, to treasure their loved ones more, then I will have achieved something real and powerful and positive. And maybe that's why I survived.

So here is my story.

# 1

## *A life-changing decision*

I ENJOYED A REALLY FREE-SPIRITED CHILDHOOD. My earliest memories of growing up revolve around being outdoors in the sun, the surf and hanging out with my friends. I was always pretty active and fit, and I loved playing sport. And it was this boundless energy that probably helped me years later, when I needed it most, when I needed all the strength I could find just to stay alive.

I moved around a lot when I was young, which helped build a freewheeling attitude to life. I was born in Adelaide and named after my dad, Phil Britten Snr, and was still young when we all moved to Donnybrook, in the south-west of Western Australia.

Not long afterwards my mum and dad broke up, and Mum and I moved to Exmouth, in the north of WA, to be with my grandma and pops, where he was stationed with the US Navy. I was about six years old.

I loved Exmouth and still do. Mum ran a deli and café and we lived in a caravan park for a while. No doors or cars were ever locked and you'd stay out for as long as you wanted. It was summer all year round; life was easy and full of fun. We went camping and fishing and I remember it as such a carefree time. I wasn't the most academic person but was really talented at sport, and in a country town, if you're good at sport, you focus on that. And so that's what I did, day and night. I lived to play sport.

I was lucky enough to be good at just about anything I tried: basketball, tennis, surfing. I loved anything that gave me a physical challenge. But it was Australian Rules football that quickly became my biggest passion.

When I was about eight years old, we moved from the caravan park into town, and this was when I first started playing football seriously and never really looked back. We used to play matches against schools from other towns such as Carnarvon and Tom Price. I started to win a lot of fairest and best trophies, and as

I got a little bit older I was asked to play up the grades with older guys. Everyone used to tell me: “You’ll make it one day, you’re a talented footballer. You’ve got to make sure you have a go at it.”

Around this time, my mum met Wim, and my brother Ash was born. Wim came into my life when I really needed a father figure, and we became a really close family. Mum and Wim eventually decided to move on from Exmouth, and I think the main reason was that they wanted to give me more opportunities than I could get in the country. We moved to the Perth suburb of Greenwood when I was in Year 9 in high school.

At Greenwood High, I went into footy straight away and started with our local club, Northern Districts. I was used to playing against guys much bigger than me in Exmouth and must have made an impression because it wasn’t long before the West Perth Football Club, which plays in the WA Football League, the main semi-professional competition in Perth, noticed me. The WAFL is an important stepping-stone towards making it into the big time, the Australian Football League.

West Perth invited me to join their development squad and I felt that I was on my way. From this

moment on, top-class football wasn't just a distant dream any more, but a goal I was working towards, and making significant progress. After that year, Northern Districts folded so I went to Warwick Football Club but continued with the West Perth development squad as well. Footy was my life and I just loved it. I was still at school, but I was playing football six days a week and still couldn't get enough. I was invited to try out for the WA State Schoolboys team, which is the best under -18s in the State. I was selected in the first 60, and kept my place when the squad was cut to 40, and then down to 30.

But probably because I was playing so much football, and giving it everything I had, my knees started to play up and I couldn't go any further with the State team. It was a massive blow to my confidence.

I rested my knees and they slowly recovered, and I couldn't wait to get back on the ground. I was determined to go hard again at football. About this time West Perth showed they thought I had a future. Changes to the WAFL residential qualification rules meant that I might end up tied to a different club because of where we lived. But under the rules of the zone changes West Perth could pick two players to keep. One of the two they wanted was me!

A West Perth football manager came to our home and sat down with my mum and me. We signed an agreement that even though the zones were changing, I would commit to play with West Perth. It was a huge moment in my life and I felt really important. I was signed and locked in to play with West Perth. It was like you read about or watch in the movies; it was like a dream coming true.

Before too long I had my first opportunity with West Perth reserves. I was only 15 going on 16 and was about to play against WAFL adults for the first time. I waited for some time on the interchange bench and didn't think I was going to get a run, but then one of the smaller guys in our team was injured.

The coaches looked down the line at who was on the bench and called to me to get out there. They were actually going to give me a go! I ran onto the ground to the half-forward line, where straight away the ball was kicked to me.

I marked it about 50 metres from the goals, bounced the ball and ran on. There was a teammate on the goal line and an opposition player between him and me. I had two options: I could have a go at kicking a goal or handball it to my teammate who could possibly kick it. In a split second, I just decided

to go for it. In the first minute of playing WAFL reserves football, I ran on and kicked a goal. All my teammates ran down the field and picked me up to congratulate me: it was such an unbelievable feeling! I ended up kicking three goals that day and felt on top of the world; it was as if nothing could stop me now. If I could kick three goals in my first WAFL reserves game at just 15, surely I could make it to the next level, the West Perth league side, and then the next level, the AFL. The big time.

But the dream was cut short again. And once again it was my knees that let me down. After just a few more reserves games I pulled up sore. The doctor said I had flat feet, which were rolling my legs inwards and putting pressure on my joints. This time it was more serious.

I had to stop football. I was devastated. I was still in school, but football was my whole life and it felt as if I'd just reached the point where I could have made a go of it. I was really disheartened by it all. I didn't want to go on to do my final year at school. I'd never had any thoughts of going to university and so I left school and got a pre-apprenticeship at Carlisle TAFE, doing refrigeration air-conditioning. After a year of study, I got an apprenticeship with Direct Engineering Services.

It was at this time that I also took up martial arts. I'd always wanted to learn karate as I'd loved it in the movies when I was growing up and always wanted to know that if anything ever happened to me I'd be able to look after myself. I actually started just before I stopped playing football because I'd wanted to do something that would give me the edge on the field, something to get me ahead of the rest who were all trying to make it as well. When football stopped, I focused on my martial arts because I could work around my knee injury and it was actually helping me to get better.

I found a school in Woodvale, which did Zen Do Kai karate, a reality-based martial arts that I found unique. I put all my efforts into becoming a black belt.

I also moved out of home and into a house with four other guys in Karrinyup. It was a typical guys' house: chaotic and messy all the time. We were partying non-stop, and I was surfing, skating and living the life of an 18-year-old. I was having a ball.

I thought I'd put football behind me and that was it, I was done. But after two years of not playing and doing martial arts instead, I'd found that my knees had improved. The guys I lived with played for Kingsley Amateur Football Club, just a local suburban club, not

in the WAFL, but it was footy again nonetheless. They kept saying: “Come on, Britts, you used to play footy. Come down and have a kick.” So one day I thought “What the hell ... ” and went along to start training.

I started playing in the Colts team for Kingsley but it wasn't long before I was noticed by the coach of the top team and started playing a few games for their league side. Before long, it was as if I'd never stopped. I won the Association Fairest and Best award, which was the top award for that level, and by 2001, at the age of 20, I was captain of the Kingsley Football Club's league side.

At the beginning of the following season, in 2002, the club decided to go to Bali for the end-of-season trip. At the same time, I saw an advertisement for Camp America and decided to apply. Amazingly, my application was accepted and I was really excited, but it meant I'd be away for three months and would miss the end-of-year footy trip. I discussed America with my girlfriend at the time and she said: “Well, if you do that, I can't guarantee that I'll be here when you get back.” So I changed my mind and said to her: “OK, I won't do the three months of Camp America but I'm going on the end-of-year footy trip to Bali.”

It was a life-changing decision.