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Call of duty

When policing gets personal. P10

CALL OF DUTY
WHEN POLICING GETS PERSONAL

Country coppers know more than most about the emotional toll the job can take when policing gets up close and personal. Three of this city's – and this state's – finest, opened up to JEN COWLEY about how community ties can make or break a career balancing on a thin blue line.

WORDS Jen Cowley
PHOTOS Firefly Pictures/ Alexandra Meyer

"It's not the sights, none of that stuff – it's the emotional attachment to things. And crimes involving kids are particularly tough."

– Detective Superintendent Michael "Mick" Willing

WITH the late Spring day dimming towards evening and the sun casting the city in a shawl of golden light, the Macquarie River at Dubbo has rarely looked more peaceful. The water is flowing gently, there's a chorus of cockatoos and a steady stream of cyclists and joggers is taking advantage of the mild temperature.

Standing on its banks are Mark Meredith and Sue-Ellen Scott – born and bred locals who grew up with the Macquarie as their back-drop. But as long-time detectives, neither will ever again see this river in a benign light.

It's the river of their childhood, but over the years it's also been the focus, and the cause, of so much tragedy. It's also the keeper of some of this city's most terrible secrets – among them, the whereabouts of murder victim Lateesha Nolan's remains.

The pair has worked together for nearly two decades, including from the awful outset of the eight year saga of fugitive murderer Malcolm Naden, and together with former local boy and now head of NSW Homicide, Mick Willing, know more than most about the emotional fee that's exacted when the job of policing gets up close and personal.

For the three bush-bred coppers, policing is more than a job – it's a way of life. The ability to connect with a community and its people is both a blessing and a curse, and can either make or break a career balancing on a thin blue line.

DETECTIVE Sergeant Mark Meredith – widely and affectionately known as Merro – unbuttons his jacket and tugs at his tie.

The Orana Local Area Command's investigations manager is a particularly genial and – for a senior copper – remarkably cheery bloke, with a quick and infectious grin and a cheeky larrikin streak that's served him well for many years on the job in his home town.

But some days there's just not much to laugh at.

After 26 years as a police officer, Meredith knows his emotional survival depends on being able to compartmentalise his work – the good, the bad, the ugly – and mostly he has that down to a fine art. Mostly.

As we look out over the river, the father of three admits it's a bittersweet scene for him.

"The river has so much tragedy in my mind as a cop – right along the stretch of it that aligns with the city, and of course Butler's Falls," he says, referring to the reserve on the edge of town where Naden says he murdered and dumped the body of his cousin Lateesha, whose remains have never been found. "Different locations have different stories for me – different tragedies. Growing up in Dubbo, every kid used to go to Butler's, they still do. But it all has a different feel to it now."

Meredith shrugs.

"Can I share something with you? When you asked that question, there was a memory that came flooding back. As a kid, I used to go down to the river to the north Dubbo swing with a mate. That mate committed suicide a few years ago, and I had to attend the scene."

It's a particularly poignant, if sadly not isolated, example of the lot of the bush police officer and detective – the unavoidable eventuality that, more often than not, the people involved with an incident will be known in some capacity to the officers attending or investigating.

It's one of the things that at once makes the job easier and harder, but vastly different from its metropolitan equivalent.

"Yeah, it's different," says Meredith. "Always has been, always will be. Bush cops get to see things right through, and they're dealing with every aspect, which is often just a simple case of resources. The bush cop starts it and finishes it, and in between there are a lot of people and families and a community, and your decisions and involvement weigh on every aspect.

"But the make-up of who you are doesn't change when you become a cop. Police have a job to do, but they still have emotions and feelings."

That Dubbo has been Meredith's community since long before he became a police officer is a double edged sword. He knows the community well, and his job is made easier for the insight into that community's idiosyncrasies. He has access to relevant intelligence that blow-ins couldn't dream of tapping into.

But those ties can chafe, all the same.

"It's a blessing and a curse, yes. January next year makes 26 years for me in Dubbo. It's been good and bad. You can't buy that local knowledge, but, yeah," he says, swallowing hard and dropping his gaze. "There have been some really tough times."

He cites the example of running across childhood mates in his capacity as a police officer. "All my mates I went to school with and grew up with here – we weren't a bad bunch of kids, but like all kids, you can tip them either way. I think my class was tipped the "other" way – drug addictions, alcoholism, matters of violence… and a lot of mates, well, I've had to go to their suicides. I had to do my job. And I've had to arrest and charge mates over various offences.

"But every time, I've believed I was making a difference and doing the right thing. I've often thought, well, if I didn't arrest you, I might have been burying you. I've buried mates, I know them all, and those faces come back."

MEREDITH is one of the state's 16,385 serving police officers, and among the highest ranked of the OLAC's 139. He's aware of the increasing number of police taking stress leave, and of the number of his colleagues leaving the force due to the mounting pressure of public and political expectation. But he's determined to use both his experience, and the support of an extensive network of friends, family and colleagues to avoid joining those ranks.

"I went through a really bad phase not so long ago," he admits. "I guess it was a culmination of things after the Naden saga – there was something that pulled a trigger. Cops being cops we put things in little boxes and close the lids. But some of those boxes busted open."

The seasoned detective sought help and says the admission something was wrong was a significant part of the healing process. "If you bottle things up it's like a balloon, it's going to bust. But the cops' culture is to talk things out, particularly because we deal with tragedy and trauma. Cops are family."

That might be hard for "real" family to hear, I venture, and Meredith admits that spouses and loved ones go through the tough times too, particularly in a regional town.

"You feel selfish. It's a weird emotion, but you don't want to unload on or burden them although they worry anyway. The biggest thing is they don't understand. That's not their fault, but they don't get it. But I've realised that you have to be honest, so I've started to talk to my wife about things, and


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I'd never done that before. I just thought I'm cop, I'll do it my way and talk to my mates. But my wife saw those cracks appear, and it taught me that police shouldn't sell their partners short."

Still, when you have 22 police under your supervision, and a senior role to play in both the force and the community, admitting you're struggling can itself be a challenge. "You're supposed to be 10 foot tall and bullet proof, and you fix things – it's the same when you see the signs of something wrong in yourself."

What are those signs?

Meredith says a relatively minor incident with a car hitting his wife while she was riding her push bike drove a wedge into a small crack in his emotions. The small crack soon broke clean open when he began to think about worst case scenarios.

"Then I started having flashbacks to incidents I'd been involved with – motor vehicle incidents and that sort of thing. And I remembered each and every one. I allowed the lids to open on those boxes I'd put everything in in my mind. It became a stream of bad flashbacks in chronological order."

With the benefit of restored perspective, Meredith sees the close call as a reality check. "I'm still human. I'm a father. I'm a husband. I just happen to be a cop," he says, pausing to consider whether having little control over fate and what happens to his own family is a constant worry.

"That's a good point. I think you can become very sensitive to what is going on; hypersensitive to society and yes, you do become protective. I try not to be that over protective cop dad and cop husband. You're thinking about it all the time but you want them to grow up normally.

"I'm actually an accredited negotiator. But can I negotiate with my kids? My wife? No," he laughs. "I fail dismally."

AT 5'3" and with not a hair out of place, Sue-Ellen Scott doesn't look like a text-book police investigator. But what the Detective Senior Constable lacks in stature, she makes up for with steely professionalism.

A serving officer for 16 years, Scott is a single mum who counts herself lucky to have found a career about which she's even more passionate now than when she first donned the 'suit of blue' at the age of 20.

That's she's lost none of that fire, despite an increasing attrition rate elsewhere within the ranks, is the result of a hard fought determination to strike what she says is a "balance" between personal and professional lives.

"It's a real challenge. I love what I do. I enjoy going to work every day but yes, there are days when it's impossible to switch off. Anyone who can switch off completely is robotic – I don't think it's human nature."

While it makes her a better cop because of her immersion in the job, Scott admits that makes her work "incredibly personal".

"It's the nature of the job that we don't necessarily deal with the best of society... we deal with the worst of the worst. We do that so you don't have to. So for me it has to be personal, because that's the best way I can do my job. Our interactions with people are longer lasting than in other lines of work. We rock up in the midst of chaos and grief and shock and trauma, and we have to help people make sense of that. We're more effective in our jobs if we can connect on a personal level."

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The downside of this quest for personal connection is the danger of ongoing emotional impact even after the badge hits the home dresser at the end of the day, and the matter-of-fact detective admits there are some cases that are harder to leave behind the thin blue line than others.

"Death certainly," she says. "And sexual assault victims. It's an incredibly difficult time for those people to disclose to anyone, let alone a complete stranger and a police officer. I find it challenging to keep those horrific ordeals and incidents in perspective."

Scott is characteristically brutal in her honesty – there's no false bravado with this Dubbo born and raised detective – and she readily admits there are elements of the job that keep her up at night.

"But you just file away those bad thoughts and the constant second guessing yourself – you file until you can deal with it. That may be for just a night, or the day. You focus on the task at hand, and mostly that's my children. Then you find time to manage and deal with that horrible stuff – the faces of the dead kids."

As if on cue, Scott's pre-school daughter decides the biscuit she's been promised can't wait, and the seasoned professional switches effortlessly between mother and cop.

"The lines do get a bit blurred," she laughs. "But each of those roles makes me better in the other. I'm not just a mum on days off and I'm not just a cop when I'm

at work. And there's been times where I've been dead set completely unprofessional – I've been in an interview room with a victim and I'm grabbing the tissues as well. You just say 'excuse me' and run up the hall to compose yourself. It can be tough, particularly because these people need to know they can depend on you to be strong."

Scott says that when it comes to seeing the world through the prism of the evil that often pervades the working life of a police detective, it's vital to have perspective.

"It's tempting let that colour your view, but I can be removed from that by my kids, by my family, by my friends. When you do a job in a troubled area, for instance, you know you can escape. But still, it's a small town, so I know how many convicted sex offenders we have living in our community, and I know where they live. You have to pull yourself up from worrying about your own kids, otherwise you'd go crazy."

According to Scott, policing is a "contact sport". "It affects you physically, mentally, emotionally – and in the bush, it's not six degrees of separation from the people you're dealing with, it's one or two, if that.

"Everyone knows someone who knows you or knows of you, and that can be a bit tricky."

It's something they don't teach you at the academy to deal with, she says with a smile. "It's instinctive and you get better at it as you go along. I will always be running into a victim or an offender at the supermarket. Then there's wondering if the next job you go to will involve people you know. That can happen anywhere, but the chances of it in a small or regional community are a lot greater."

And it's not just the added emotional pressure of knowing the people involved, sometimes the punch to the professional gut comes simply through empathy –

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that one small thing with which a police officer can identify.

"I worked last Christmas and it was the very first Christmas I had spent without my children, which was a tough time anyway," says Scott. "But I spent the afternoon with a dead child. There was a motorbike accident and a child was killed. It was horrific. You have to be clinical and do what you need to do at the scene, but I lost it when I went home."

It's not the sort of thing one can casually share with even the most understanding of friends over a glass of wine.

"No, it's a bit tricky, because how do you dump that on someone who knows less about how to deal with it than you do?"

Like her colleague, superior and friend Mark Meredith, Scott says she's blessed with "an incredible bunch of work colleagues" with whom she can "download".

"There's counselling available and I do take it up and have certainly done more so in recent times. There used to be a culture of just toughening up and dealing with it but I think, I hope, that's changing.

"But my colleagues – they're my first port of call, because I know they get it."

LIKE his best mate Mark "Merro" Meredith and his good friend and colleague Sue-Ellen Scott, Detective Superintendent Michael "Mick" Willing is a home grown Dubbo boy and longtime police officer. Now the NSW Homicide Squad's Commander, Willing no longer lives in his home town, but the roots run as deep as ever.

As crime manager of the Orana Local Area Command in the early part of this decade, Willing helped oversee some of the most turbulent periods of the city's history, which will record his leadership at the time as visionary.

In a bizarre twist of fate, he was on hand for both the beginning and the end of the Naden saga which had its genesis in a house not 500 metres from where Willing grew up and its conclusion eight years later with him at the helm of the state homicide squad.

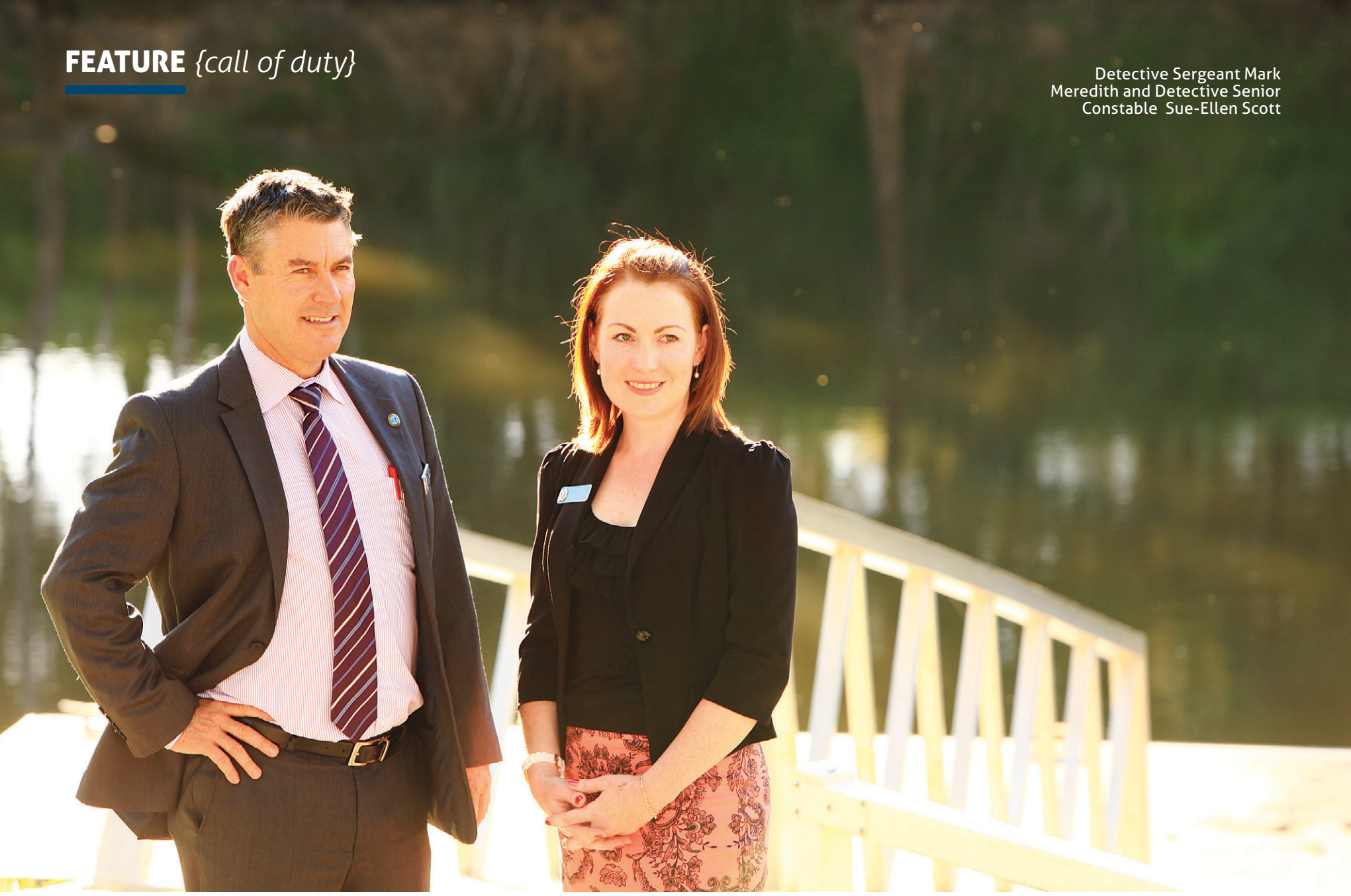
Like Meredith and Scott, he counts the Naden case among his most ultimately satisfying and infinitely most haunting. But the near-decade hunt for a killer from his home town is just one of the cases to have proved for Willing that the monsters under the bed are real.

As the father of two young daughters, he's conscious of not letting the evils he's confronted with on a daily basis follow him home.

"It's something you learn to do over the years as a policeman. And you have to be honest and as open as you can. My kids, for instance, both know who Malcolm Naden is, and my eldest proudly says "my daddy helped put him in gaol".

Willing says he's hyper-vigilant for his girls, but is still optimistic enough to believe the world is essentially "a good place".

"Yes, bad things happen, but you can't let that overwhelm your view of the world."



Detective Sergeant Mark Meredith and Detective Senior Constable Sue-Ellen Scott

He agrees wholeheartedly with Scott's assertion that it's about learning to "compartmentalise".

"I do the same. Lots of coppers could walk off the point with the things they've seen and experienced, but you have to block it away somewhere."

Putting up those barriers is getting harder and harder, though, given the swell of public expectation and the constant 24-hour news cycle, says Willing.

"Everyone wants to know what's going on, and policing has become very public. I think it's harder – much more demanding."

Having worked his way up to within spitting distance of the top of the policing heap in NSW, he's seen more than his fair share of the darker underbelly of the human condition. He's seen it all. And for all his experience in dealing with the kinds of crimes and tragedies that occur only in most people's nightmares, Willing admits there are cases that reach him down deep in his heart more than others.

"It's not the sights, none of that stuff – it's the emotional attachment to things. And crimes involving kids are particularly tough."

It's self-preservation, he says, to learn to detach, adding that by definition, all homicides have an emotional element.

"That's why they're so much different to any other crime. It doesn't get any rawer or more soul destroying than having someone taken from you under those kinds of circumstances. Missing persons is the same."

Apart from the gravitas that goes with heading up arguably the most high profile of police squads, Willing is motivated by the honour and weighty responsibility of speaking for those who can no longer speak for themselves.

Willing tells of a seminal moment that came while he was leading the renewed investigation into the Janine Vaughan murder case.

"We'd gone up to talk to the family of Janine (who was missing, presumed murdered), to tell them we were going to have another crack at the case. We sat down and there was this bloody big photo of Janine behind us and we spoke for three hours with this family.

"When we got back in the car, my investigator turned to me and said, "You know, that's why we do what we do. That family is so important," and I said, you're right, they deserve something better.

"That's what keeps me going. Knowing I'm part of being a voice for people who deserve justice."

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NEXT WEEK:

The three Dubbo born and bred police officers talk about eight years on the trail of fugitive killer and fellow local Malcolm Naden – how the case that captured the imagination of a nation and the hearts of a community came to be so personal and why the tragic saga isn't over yet.