

A young, lone, female veteran walked up to the bar. It may sound like the beginning of a joke, but for Sheree Symonds, it was the start of an incredible journey. "I went to get a drink at the Altona RSL and sort of said I'm ex-service looking to sign up, can you tell me about the RSL."

The response she got was a pleasant surprise. "The girl behind the bar told me she was ex-service too! That was really unique. I guess that shows the community that's there."



Sheree served for nine years in the Royal Australian Navy, from 2002 to 2011, as a Communications and Information's Systems Specialist. "That was everything from Morse Code to organising high speed manoeuvres, and on a range of different ships from Amphibious to Frigate to Hydrographic Surveyors and on a few different operations as well."

Those operations included RESOLUTE, which is the ADF's contribution to protect Australia's borders and offshore maritime interests. "We were intercepting boats with, you know, 75 plus people on board a boat that was fit for maybe, 20."

2006 saw her deployed to the Gulf on HMAS Ballarat. "Our role around that was protecting oil terminals, and we lost one while we were there, which was very sad."

Following her service, Sheree was bitten by the travel bug. She went overseas where she worked in a range of jobs. When she returned home, life was different. "I really started to feel a little bit isolated and you know, found it hard to connect."

After getting involved with an ex-service organisation, Sheree had a new perspective on life. "I really saw the impact of service on others, so to me, I feel lucky that I didn't experience what some other people experienced throughout their time and the effect that service has had on their lives."

What particularly resonated with her is the courage she saw in others. “The challenges that people overcome and the courage that they’ve held in the past and hold now. You just see that shine through people’s personality.” She humbly admits that courage is a trait of hers too. “I do believe in courage and courage comes in many forms, right? Sometimes, you have to work yourself up to have that courage. It’s always about that journey.”

Much like her passion to serve her country, she was spurred on to create opportunities for other returned service men and women. She approached the Altona RSL with her ideas. “They opened their arms and said come in, we’ll support you, you’ve got some great ideas and we’re 100% behind you. Let’s do this.”

With the RSL’s plans already underway for RSL Active, a now successful program providing a range of events and activities for the younger veteran community, Sheree jumped on board and collaborated. She was tasked with creating a program suited to veterans.

And the 36 year old was more determined than ever to keep veterans connected during the isolating weeks of COVID-19 restrictions. “I’ve been like the IT support because we put everything digital, for example, yoga and art.”

The time and effort she invests into her beloved Altona RSL Sub-Branch comes on top of an already demanding full-time job. But Sheree would not have it any other way. “I can walk in there any time and I know a heap of familiar faces. I can go and chat to anyone at any time. It’s my second home.”