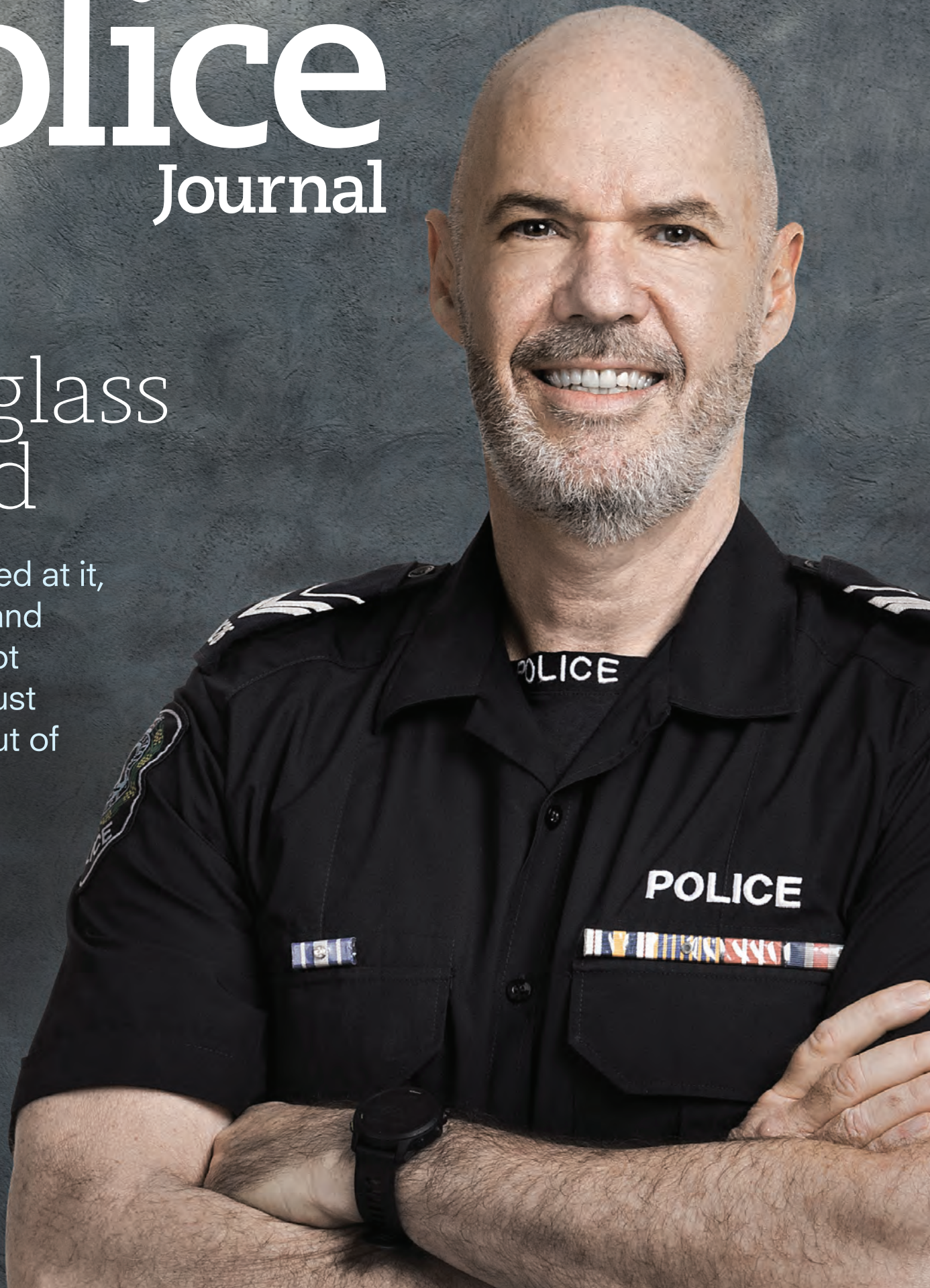


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The glass shard

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As a seasoned cop and accomplished martial arts fighter, Brett Harrison had an air of invincibility about him. It just never seemed possible that he would ever faint and end up horrifically injured.



By Brett Williams

BREVET SERGEANT BRETT

Harrison lay flat on his broken back on the tiled floor of the small bathroom in his suburban home. He was just now waking from unconsciousness. Dazed, vomiting and in pain, he had inexplicably passed out on that May morning in 2013.

His fall to the floor had left him with compression fractures to four of his vertebrae. His head had smashed into and shattered one of two closed glass doors in a vanity unit.

And he was not yet aware that a shard of glass, still firmly attached to that unit, had punctured, and penetrated deep into, the back of his head. In fear of passing out again and choking on vomit still in his mouth, Harrison thought to roll away from the vanity unit.

But that was a move with a serious risk. The vanity unit door – and the glass shard holding him to it – might simply move with and restrain him. Or the glass might break off and remain in his head.

Still, it was likely an even bigger risk to lie there on the floor and do nothing. So, in desperation, Harrison did try to roll away, to his right. And, sure enough, as he made his first slight move, the vanity unit door opened and did indeed restrain him.

He moved back to his original position and, as he did, the door closed. Harrison gave it a few more attempts but the door simply opened

and closed with each of his back-and-forth movements.

So, the glass had not only skewered but also trapped him. And, up to that point, Harrison had no grasp of what was happening. He simply thought: “Something’s stopping me (from rolling away)”; and he could feel that his back “would just not work”.

But Harrison was not short on mental strength or self-discipline. He was a karate master and former soldier who understood self-preservation. And, in a gutsy move, he decided to initiate the fiercest roll of his body and just break whatever had hold of him.

So, he braced himself, rolled, and snapped the glass shard. The move had worked – at least to an extent. It had freed him from the vanity unit door but a length of the shard remained buried in the back of his head.

“I just rolled into a foetal position but on my hands and knees,” he recalls. “Blood was just streaming from the back of my head.”

The pain in his back had risen to an excruciating off-the-chart level. And try as he did, Harrison could not yell out to his wife, Jane, or sons Kieran and Liam, for help. His ability to speak had abandoned him, at least temporarily.

“I tried to call to someone and I was doing the movements,” he says, “but there was no voice-box action.



“I just said to them: ‘Look, just stay out of here until the ambos come.’”

“And then I heard them getting ready to go to the car. They were all about to go off to school, and I thought: ‘If they get to the car (before I can alert them), I’m bugged.’”

But, with his broken back, bleeding head and sheer disorientation, Harrison somehow managed to bang his fist on the bathroom door. The sound alerted his son who responded. Kieran Harrison found his imperilled father, who exclaimed: “Call an ambulance! Call it now!”

His other instruction to Kieran, then 18, was not to let their wife and mother see inside the bathroom. Harrison feared that she would “freak”.

But Jane in any case found her way into the bathroom where she saw her battered, immobile husband in the fight of his life.

“She did a bit of screaming and lots of crying,” Harrison says. “She was trying to talk on the phone to the ambos but, in the end, she wasn’t getting the words out so Kieran took over.”

“I just said to them: ‘Look, just stay out of here (the bathroom) until the ambos come. I’m not moving. I’m just staying in the position I’m in.’”

Paramedics soon arrived but found the “tiny” bathroom instantly problematic. Getting the severely injured Harrison out of such a tight space seemed a near impossible task.

So, despite his suffering, Harrison got himself up on hands and knees, crawled

his way out of the bathroom, and lay on the paramedics’ spinal board.

And then came a 10-minute ambulance ride to the Flinders Medical Centre. Harrison would later describe it as “the most painful 10 minutes of my life”.

The paramedics had applied a brace to his neck but did not then know that deep in his skull sat a shard of glass.

“The neck brace was just pushing it further and further into my skull,” Harrison recalls. “I just said to him (one of the paramedics): ‘Mate, you have to take this off.’ He said: ‘No, no, we have to have it on.’”

“I said: ‘Mate, my neck’s fine. Trust me. You need to take this off. There’s something not right with the back of my head.’”

“And he was really good. He actually took it off and cupped my head in his hands the whole trip. But I vomited in excess of a dozen times on the way.”

The first issue once Harrison arrived at hospital was his low body temperature, which had come about from blood loss and shock. Hospital staff used air blankets to get his temperature back to normal. They also worked hard to stop him from lapsing back into unconsciousness.

1. The vanity unit with its smashed glass door after Harrison’s fall.

“I was getting (necessarily) slapped 24-7 to try to keep me awake,” he says. “I found it extremely hard to stay awake.”

And still to come to light was the embedded glass shard and the four fractured vertebrae. No one had yet twigged to them.

Harrison next wound up flat on his broken back on a CT scan table. The pressure from the weight of his body bearing down on his back and head wound was excruciating. And he had to hold himself perfectly still in that position for 20-odd minutes.

He courageously fought the pain but also continued to vomit, despite massive doses of anti-nausea medication.

Of course, the crash of his head into that vanity unit door had left Harrison with many small glass fragments lodged in his scalp. After the CT scan, a doctor set about removing them. But the glass shard jammed inside Harrison’s head was not about to come out easily.

The doctor got to draw it out, but only partially – before it broke. That left Harrison with a portion of the shard still stuck in the back of his head. He remembers the doctor saying: “This just isn’t coming out.”

“He said he was going to get some pliers and see if he could get it (the shard) out,” Harrison says. “He said: ‘I’ll give you a local anaesthetic.’”

“He went to get someone else to help and, when he came back to pull it out, it just kept coming. He just looked at it, went white, and said: ‘I cannot believe I’ve just pulled this out of your head!’”

“He called the whole neuro team down and I remember them saying: ‘That came out of where?!’ He just looked at me, shook his head, and said: ‘If it was just one or two mil lower and to the right, it would have been the perfect sniper kill. You would never have woken up.’”

The shard turned out to be six centimetres long. And it had been even longer before the other portion had broken off in the first attempt to extract it.

Today, it sits within a frame along with small separate plate which reads: “Whatever doesn’t kill you... Love Troy & Clae”.

AFTER a few days in hospital, Harrison left for home. Swelling of his brain, picked up by the earlier CT scan, had reduced enough to allow his discharge. But still no one had detected his fractured vertebrae.

That discovery came a week later when, barely able to walk, Harrison attended a medical centre to have stitches removed from his head. His wife, Jane, went with him. She was deeply concerned about the pain he was still suffering, and so asked for someone to X-ray his back.

One of the medical centre staff agreed to Jane's request and indeed took some X-rays, before something prompted her to take even more.

After she did just that, a doctor approached Harrison and struck fear into him.

He asserted that it was just not possible for anyone to walk into his surgery with spinal injuries like the ones the X-rays showed.

"He looked at me," Harrison recalls, "and said: 'Mate, all four of these vertebrae are displaced. They've all pushed to the left. You need to go straight to hospital. Don't go anywhere else and walk carefully.'"

The Harrisons went straight back to Flinders Medical Centre where, after more X-rays, there came confirmation of severe spinal damage.

Harrison appeared to have lost more than 50 per cent of his L1 (first lumbar vertebra) and up to 30 per cent of L2, L3 and L4.

A neurosurgeon assigned to his case advised him against surgery. His preference was to allow the body time to realign the vertebrae. He also assured Harrison that were it not for his size and back strength, he might well have ended up in a wheelchair.

And Harrison had not helped himself in the week between his discharge from hospital and the discovery of his spinal damage. He had been lugging nine-kilo watering cans around his home as he tended his beloved bonsai and other trees.

But now, he would stick to the advice of the neurosurgeon. That meant a two-kilo limit on anything he lifted and X-rays every three days to check on the realignment – or non-realignment – of his vertebrae.

"The body actually pushed the vertebrae back into line," Harrison says. "It was remarkable watching how the body mended itself. I was so lucky through the whole process."



"It's the unknown. If I got hit from the side, I'd be in a wheelchair. I've no doubt about that."

2. Lacerations from broken glass. 3. Harrison's head stitched up after the extraction of the glass shard. 4. An X-ray of the vertebrae damaged in the fall.

But, luck aside, Harrison still had to face up to certain downsides. The loss of so much of those four vertebrae meant the loss of a chunk of his physical height. It also meant that his lower internal organs now had less space in which to function.

And his surgeon warned him to expect incontinence and, within a few years, the inability to get in and out of a car. So far, neither of those neurological problems have beset him.

Harrison took six weeks off work to undergo his recovery. The first walk he took was just 80 metres with his wife holding his arm for support. "That was a big thing," he says.

"The surgeon said that, as the vertebrae repaired, I'd get some of my height back but I'd never get all of it.

"I'm a fairly positive person but I went into a bit of a dark place for a while, sitting at home thinking: 'Wow! I've had a lot of injuries through the martial arts and the military but nothing's ever stopped me. This stopped me dead in my tracks – for months."

But luck never abandoned Harrison. He got back to work after his six-week recovery and never had to undergo any surgery. And, in May 2017, the police medical officer cleared him to return to full operational duties.

However, knowing how vulnerable he would be on the street, he was content to remain attached to Southern District Intel.

"It's the unknown," he says. "If I got hit from the side, I'd be in a wheelchair. I've no doubt about that."



5 “He took me aside and said: ‘Mate, you’re not going to last. You’re just not going to make the distance.’ ”

PERHAPS mental toughness was the personal trait which best helped Harrison get through his ordeal. Standing up, as he did, to major challenges in his early childhood and teens was always likely to make him mentally tough.

He was just a three-year-old when his father, a singer and entertainer, walked out on him and his three brothers. The task of raising the four boys, all then under eight, fell to their mother, although she later remarried.

One job she took to support her sons was on the front gate of a public swimming pool.

“She did her best to support us,” Harrison says. “But she had a lot of health problems and there were times when she went to hospital

and we were left on our own.

“We were placed with other families and went to seven different schools. It was tough going.”

Later, as a 15-year-old who had not even finished Year 10, Harrison joined the Australian Army in 1982. There, too, he found life hard, at least at the outset.

He still remembers one night when he copped “a massive hiding”. It was a classic blanket bashing, and it came as he was suffering bronchitis.

“The whole place ran on bastardization,” he says.

The first two of his 10 years in the army were his toughest. He was around 188cm tall but weighed less than 60kgs.

But another member of the Army Apprentices School, a year or two older than Harrison, stepped in to help him.

5. Harrison as a 16-year-old corporal in 1983.

6. Graduation parade in 1983.

7. With 8 Platoon C Company at Balcombe in 1982.

8. In the bear pit at Cunungra training camp in 1982.

9. At Cunungra training camp in 1982.

“He took me aside,” Harrison recalls, “and said: ‘Mate, you’re not going to last. You’re just not going to make the distance.’”

“He’d done martial arts all his life. We trained seven days a week and he showed me everything, from how to eat properly to how to work out in the gym.

“In that second year I went home and walked straight past my mother at the airport. She didn’t even recognize me. I’d put on 20 kilos and was now six-foot-three (190cm).”

So, now a skilled fighter with a bulked-up frame, Harrison continued on in the army. He even rose to the rank of corporal at the age of 16 and took charge of a whole unit.

After his time with the Army Apprentices School in Victoria,



“... I went home and walked straight past my mother at the airport. She didn’t even recognize me. I’d put on 20 kilos and was now six-foot-three (190cm).”

he served with Adelaide Workshop Company, 101 Field Workshop Company (NSW), and Adelaide Logistics Battalion.

But, in his personal life, Harrison never reconnected with his father, despite an attempt he made by inviting him to his 21st birthday party. His father spoke of how he could not believe his son had invited him and insisted that he “wouldn’t miss it”.

“I watched that gate all day,” Harrison remembers, “and he never walked through. And that was it. That’s when I cut him off from there.”

HARRISON left the military in 1992. By then, he and Jane had married and started a family. He hoped not to work for a boss in civilian life and so took on a VIP franchise.

Later, however, he went to work for a local lawnmower business as a small-engines mechanic. So, he ended up with a boss after all but stuck with the job until he was 30. It was then 1997 and five years had passed since his separation from the military.

Policing was a job he had wanted since his childhood. Indeed, he had applied to join SAPOL a few years earlier and figured that now was the time to try again.

But his incomplete schooling would prove a major obstacle for him. Recruiters rejected Harrison “straight up” but he pleaded for at least a shot at the entrance exam – and got one.

He passed the exam but more discussion was to come about his suitability for the job. His then lack of writing skills was a concern but the recruiters recognized that he excelled when it came to reasoning, verbal communication, and learning ability.

So, the Recruiting Section gave him a chance and, in 1997, he and others formed Course 6 at the police academy. By the end of his training, he had achieved a high academic result, won several awards, taught drill, and re-choreographed the graduation parade.

After his 1998 graduation, he served with Sturt patrols and later joined a tac team focused essentially on drug crime. Then, after two years with Glenelg bicycle patrols, Harrison scored a Hindley St senior constable position.

- 10. Harrison (centre) with his AFP colleagues at Adelaide Airport.
- 11. Making an arrest with colleagues in Hindley St in 2005.
- 12. As a bicycle patrol member in 2003.
- 13. Harrison (far right) during the Adelaide round of the Supercars Championship in 2003.

“Investigations led me to arrest a man ... for the offence of threats against aviation.”

Sturt Intel became his next post in 2006 before he wound up seconded to the AFP in 2010. There, he was to serve as a team leader with the Aviation Security Enhancement Program.

And, on one occasion, at Adelaide Airport, he got word of bomb on a plane and a description of an offender. Harrison, backed up by a baggage handler on a tractor, charged onto the tarmac.

Ultimately, he stood in front of the suspect outbound plane and called on the pilot to shut down his engines. And to deal with a critical incident like this, Harrison had only weeks earlier undertaken his training at the AFP College in Canberra.

After a subsequent check of the passengers against the description of the offender, the plane was on its way.

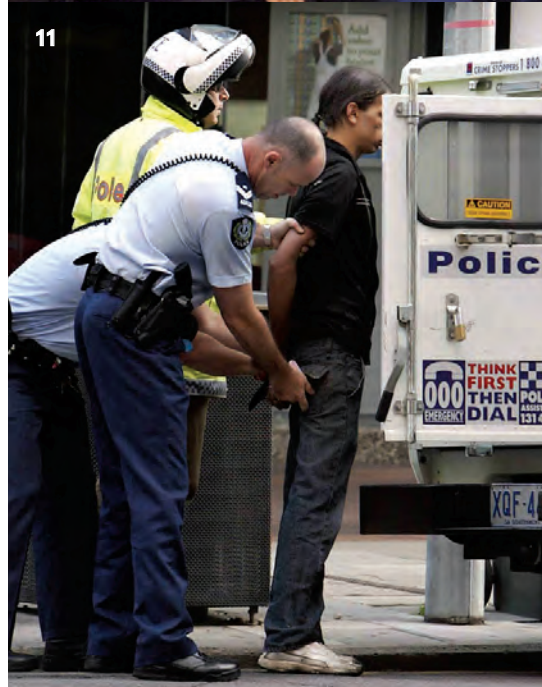
“I was very relieved when the flight landed safely at its destination,” Harrison says. “Investigations led me to arrest a man later that day for the offence of threats against aviation.”

As he moved through his police career, Harrison never lost touch with his karate. He competed in the art, won heavyweight and other titles, established his own school, and rose to the teaching rank of kyoshi.

As the co-founder and chief instructor of Zanshin Freestyle Karate, he taught thousands of students, many of whom won state and national titles. He ran his school, which continues to this day, for 29 years.



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14. Teaching self-defence to international students at Blackwood. 15. Harrison executing a martial arts throw. 16. Harrison (left) with Gima Tetsu Sensei, Kinjo Tsuneo Sensei and brother Justin Harrison at the Jundokan Okinawa.

NO ONE ever established for certain why Harrison collapsed in his bathroom back in 2013. One suggestion was that he had suffered a bout of vasovagal syncope, a sharp drop in blood pressure which leads to fainting. Among its triggers is stress.

And daily life for Harrison had been extremely intense just ahead of his collapse. He was visiting and teaching at other karate schools connected with his own school.

There were the home renovations he was undertaking, his three sons living at home, the care of his bonsai trees, a training schedule he was preparing for his godson.

There was an ear infection he kept ignoring, and his insufficient sleep of just five-odd hours per night. His days were lasting 18-plus hours owing to 5am starts with the AFP and evenings at his school instructing students.

It was clear to his wife that, despite his ability to stand up to pressure, his lifestyle would come at a cost.

"It would only have been a month or two before (my collapse)," he explains. "She just said: 'You cannot keep running at this pace. You just can't sustain that.'"

"I just kept saying to her: 'I haven't got time.' I was trying to cram everything I wanted to do into a day, and the body just shut down."

And Harrison was to suffer a second collapse a few weeks after his first. Again, he fainted in the bathroom and "opened up" the front of his head.

"But I felt this one coming and got lower to the ground," he says. "I woke up, was vomiting into a bucket, and went back down to Flinders Medical Centre.

"They still couldn't find anything wrong. Nothing to tell why I should be fainting. So, no one's really got to the bottom of it."



"I was trying to cram everything I

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wanted to do into a day, and the body just shut down."

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Harrison well understood that he could end up paralysed were he to cop any further damage to his back. And that understanding compelled him to step away from his involvement with the karate schools.

"I was never the same fighter again," he says. "I could only fight in a straight line, and I thought: 'It only takes one fall. If I fall over, or fall on the floor...'"

But stepping away from his great passion came with an upside. Harrison had never known the joy of overseas travel. So, with his life schedule eased, he and his wife took multiple trips through Europe and Japan.

Now 56, he expects to do more travelling after he retires at around age 60. Until then, he intends to remain at Southern District Intel.

He accepts that spinal surgery might one day become necessary. Indeed, his last CT scan showed six bulging discs.

"There's nothing you can do about that," he says. "The space where those discs used to live, between the vertebrae, is gone.

"I won't ever stop doing martial arts, to the extent that I can. I can train on days when I feel good but I can't train on days when I don't.

"I'll definitely be into the world of bonsai, I want to speak Japanese, and I might end up doing self-defence sessions. I won't be bored." PJ