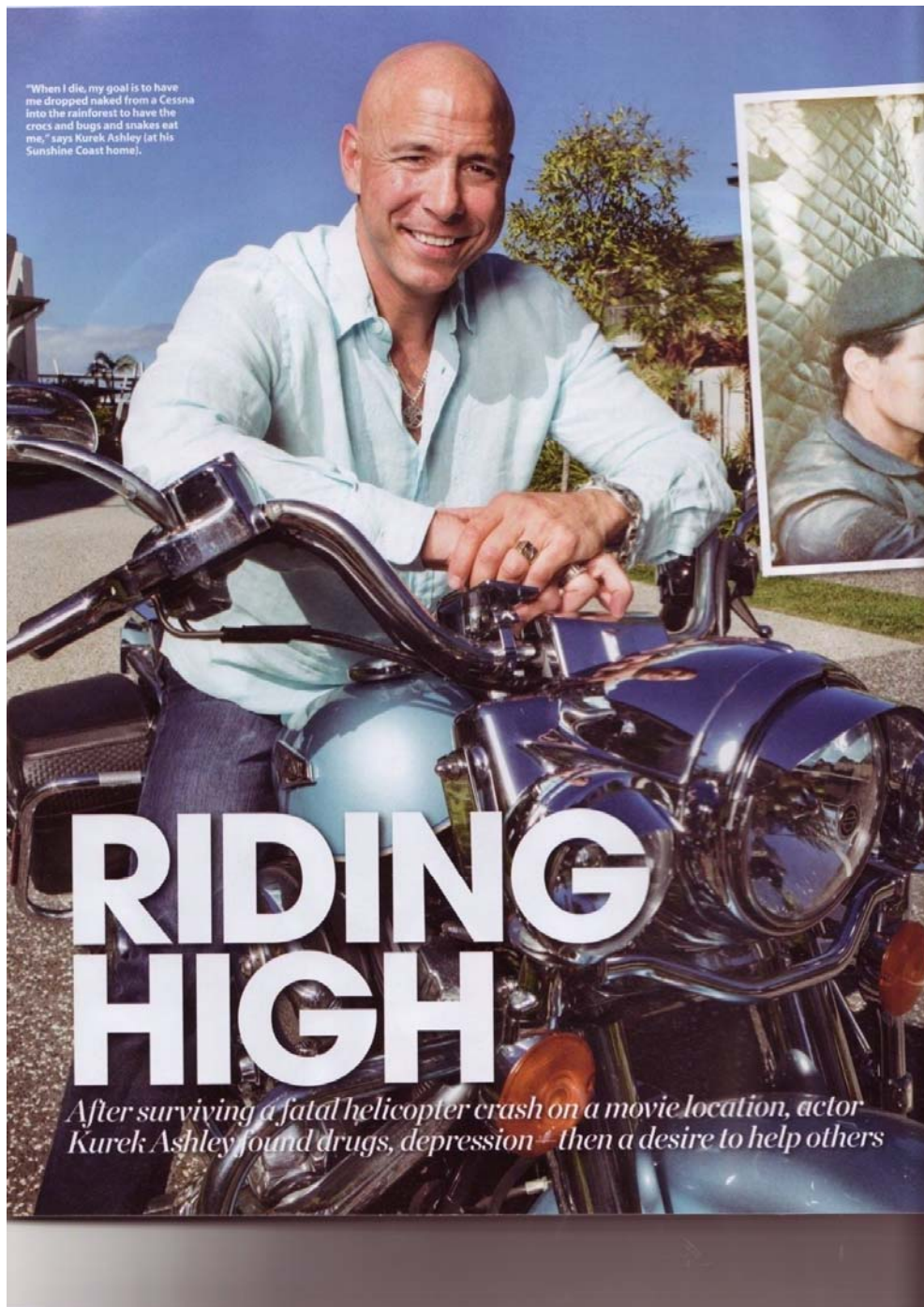


Who *FIRST* for celebrity news

14/07/2008

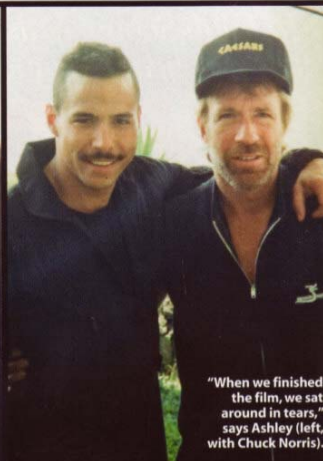




"I would have flashbacks of all their faces," says Ashley (centre, on the doomed chopper in 1989).



Mike Graham (left) died hours after he and Ashley posed for the camera: "The guy always smiled."



"When we finished the film, we sat around in tears," says Ashley (left, with Chuck Norris).

THE CRASH THAT CHANGED HIS WORLD

After the helicopter accident on the set of *Delta Force 2*, injured survivors were taken to a local Philippines hospital. "They were going to cut one of the stunt actors' eyes out because his head had cracked and was hugely swollen, and the stunt guys said, 'No, not here.' Then we went to Clark Air Base," recalls Ashley. "Chuck [Norris] gave blood twice in one day and Aaron [Norris, Chuck's brother and the film's director] three times. After everyone had died ... I was like a walking zombie."

The worst moment—but perhaps the most pivotal—of Kurek Ashley's life was on May 15, 1989, when the then-actor was filming the action flick *Delta Force 2* with Chuck Norris. Moments after Ashley, then 27, stepped off an on-location helicopter, it crashed down the side of a dormant volcano, killing five crewmen, including Ashley's friend Mike Graham, who died in his arms. The tragedy was almost his undoing. "I isolated myself. No-one wanted to be around me because I was such a downer. I had that thousand-mile stare you see from guys who'd been in Vietnam."

For years, he punished himself. "I was focusing on the worst part of the story—what a failure I was and how guilty I felt that I couldn't save them. I felt like I was going insane," says Chicago-born Ashley, whose flashbacks of the accident sent his career crashing and his life into a downward spiral of depression, suicidal thoughts and drug abuse. "For the next two years I had a gun in my mouth and cocaine up my nose. I thought the best part of my life was over." Director John Herzfeld (*2 Days in the Valley*), a close friend, says: "If someone looked into his eyes, they would see he'd been through hell. I saw him burn up inside. He was on a path and was going to go one way or another."

The path that Ashley, 47, chose was survival. Nineteen years after the accident, he's relaxing at his two-level apartment in the Sunshine Coast's Kawana Waters, looking healthy and

calm. "One day, I realised I had a purpose and I had to live it," says Ashley, who gave up drugs and movies and found his passion in motivational speaking and life coaching. "He has a special gift," says Australian beach volleyball Olympic gold medalist Natalie Cook, who Ashley worked with before her 2000 victory with partner Kerri Pottharst. "I don't believe we would have won without him."

Ashley counts himself as his own biggest success story. He has written an autobiography and self-help book, *How Would Love Respond?*, set the world record for an 81-metre "fire walk" in 1998 and in January will marry his Swedish fiancée, Johanna Armstrong, on Hamilton Island. "I believe so strongly that it was meant to happen," says Armstrong, 23, a life coach who met Ashley 13 months ago and now works for his company, Success International. At first, she concedes, "I was a little unsure about him [having been] in the movie industry and travelling the world."

Granted, Ashley's story seems like a stranger-than-fiction script. One of seven children raised by his four-time-married alcoholic mother, Phyllis, before she lost custody, Ashley dreamed of being famous, "like Elvis." His father, John, a construction boss, squashed his dreams: "He told me, 'You have no drive, no talent,'" recalls Ashley, who at 18 moved to Los Angeles and

lived in a Cadillac while working his way up from a movie-set gopher and grip to actor with minor roles in 38 films.

Herzfeld met the "rough-and-tumble" Ashley at a gym and saw something "special" in him, casting him in his 1983 movie *Two of a Kind* with John Travolta. The star became a good friend, personally delivering groceries to Ashley after he had a motorcycle accident. He worked on Sylvester Stallone's *Lock Up* before the *Delta Force 2* disaster. "I was in such a dark place," says Ashley, whose self-propelled recovery led him to work with US motivational speaker Anthony Robbins until an offer to coach a sales team brought him to Australia.

Unpaid for nine months and "\$20 away from being homeless," he began his self-help seminars, drawing on his own life experiences. Cook was in the audience for one, and says her one-time mentor has "the secrets in his hands." Since then, the adrenaline junkie (he loves scuba and sky diving) has worked with the Brisbane Broncos rugby league club, other professional teams and high-paying private clients. Says Herzfeld: "Now he's like a watering can that nourishes thousands of people's goals." Ashley's secret to success? "Pain can be your best friend. I use fear to propel me forward."

■ Reported by Louise Gee in Brisbane

"I had a gun in my mouth and cocaine up my nose"

—Kurek Ashley