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EWAN MACKENNA

'I don't know if I'll be dead next year or in four years'

Phil Eaglesham knows he might not be alive for Tokyo 2020, but the paralympian who contracted a terminal illness serving in Afghanistan is happy to live for the present, writes Ewan MacKenna

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Eaglesham admitted he tried to take his own life as his illness took hold
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This is not an uplifting tale. It's not a feelgood fable. There will be no happy ending.

It simply is what it is, a story about what's given and what's taken away. How you deal with that is a personal choice but Phil Eaglesham has his own outlook on it. Carpe diem on the good days, get through the rest — for him triumph and disaster are anything but impostors. He's here now, representing Ireland at these Paralympics, but he may not be around for the next. In fact while he'll be 35 in October, talk of 36 is reckless as without so much as a judge or jury, his is still a death sentence.

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A decade ago, Eaglesham was a very different person. A powerful man on the outside, inside he couldn't even comprehend what real strength meant. "People judge with their eyes with a disability, here it gives you the chance to not judge," he says, looking at the array of all shapes and sizes that make their way around the village. "What's here, this body, is not the person."

He shifts slightly in his wheelchair, his face hidden behind what's become an iconic beard and a dark pair of sunglasses.

"When you're disabled, I think you try and hide yourself," he adds. "There's a shame."

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I don't know if I'll be dead next year or in four years, if it'll be multiple organ failure, what part will collapse. So I'm living day to day

In 2006 there was no shame, rather a chest forced out. A Royal Marine, he did his first tour of duty in Afghanistan and laughed at how he'd come full circle. Growing up in the North, he thought about how he was stopped at checkpoints every morning going to school and drew on that as he stopped the locals at regular intervals. "I learnt the language, I could interact more, it makes it a bit more friendly," he recalls. "Even here saying please and thank you, people realise you are trying; it has an impact."

That first tour was made up of firefights against what they called the 10-dollar Taliban, locals paid off to shoot at them. Iraq followed. "You know it's hard to adjust to family life, you are going from life or death to cradling your child," Eaglesham said.

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they are always there still. It doesn't haunt me, mind, it reminds me of why I'm here and what I can still do.

“If I can do something great here then that's not for me, it's for so many others that are struggling physically and mentally. That keeps me going, that knowledge I can make a difference. But obviously that life defined me.”

That's because of his final overseas mission in 2010. Back in Afghanistan, the battle had shifted to being focused on IEDs but they turned out not to be the danger and the sentence that was lurking and waiting for him.

He'd never heard of Helmand Fever, and two days before being shipped back to his wife Julie, and three children, he presumed he'd caught the flu and shrugged when being taken to a hospital in Cyprus. The diagnosis came a month or so later, as did the prognosis. Eaglesham wouldn't be around a whole lot longer. Life made suddenly and brutally simple.

“People know what anthrax does,” he explains. “This does essentially the same thing. There are different strains that do different things but I hit the jackpot. Traditionally you degrade, hit the bottom and improve a bit. I just keep degrading. I'd stuff in the blood, they didn't even know what it was.”

Strange how life works, though. Mo Morris is sitting beside him, hanging on his every word, and the two have become best friends through it all, and because of it all. A rehab physio, he quickly became much more than that to Eaglesham, and was with him at the wounded warriors competition in America a few years ago, when he borrowed a gun, won silver, and began a journey that's kept him going.

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Eaglesham said shooting has given him a new sense of purpose

“I think he realised that’s something I can do, at a time his life was taking a downward spiral,” says Morris. “He could compete, progress himself, the element of competition is there. If you take that away he starts getting bored and irritable and he’s not nice to be around. Shooting has provided the focus and one turn after another he’s ended up here. It’s pretty amazing.”

But he remembers too, how just five years ago, Eaglesham could still walk about and struggle through a shower by himself. These days such dignity has been taken away from him.

“I was getting frustrated, getting angry, not having the strength to stick two pieces of Lego together when playing with the kids,” he continues. “You have to pick and choose. You spend a lot of the day resting to have an hour with them in the evening.

“If I read them a book and concentrate for such a period, that could be me for a couple of days. Even a day out, the next few days are a no go. It’s a balance you’ve got to strike and Julie always has to take the brunt of it.

“As my condition gets worse and worse so it’s a lot to deal with. In terms of mental health, I’m dealing with the past and with now. I haven’t dealt with the future yet, or where I’ll be in a year or if I’ll be around in 2020.

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My teenage son said I was cool the other day because of the Paralympics, that's not something a teenage son tells you

“That’s one of the reasons being here was so important, I hope I can do this in Tokyo but the fact is I don’t know. There is no cure for this so it’s making the most of now.

“I’ve never really dealt with some aspects, there are parts I can’t deal with. I don’t know if I’ll be dead next year or in four years, if it’ll be multiple organ failure, what part will collapse. So I’m living day to day. But there’s anger.

“The nearest, and dearest, get the brunt of it when times are hard. But my wife is an absolute rock. The kids can struggle, especially the eldest who knew the person I was before, whereas the youngest never knew me walking or doing things. They are 13, nine and six, but the amount of moments I miss with them because of this, that makes you angry.

“I thought I was dealing with it pretty well, until then came the crash. I was overloading myself mentally, trying to help those that were helping my physically.”

If love is putting someone else’s happiness before your own, then his illness hasn’t taken that from him and never will. Sometimes when you’ve every reason to be selfish, it’s the selflessness that takes hold and that is the case here. For instance he talks about his father, how he lost his own dad in 1978 in the Troubles, and how he’s now seeing his son affected this way by the military too. It is that same attitude of thinking about others that came out a couple of years back, as well, as he felt a nuisance to his family, took stock of it all and then tried to end it all.

Deciding to take his own life, he says it was already shattered. Indeed, Morris notes that this, and other events in his life, are

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Eaglesham. “And get to the point I am here now, where I can talk about trying to commit suicide, that’s huge.

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I’m here because people have helped me but I also know time is endless and I’m aware of what is coming

“Back then I felt like I was a disturbance on everyone’s life, but now I can see how proud and happy they are here. My teenage son said I was cool the other day because of the Paralympics, that’s not something a teenage son tells you.

“Stuff like #PhilsBeard on Twitter [his handle is @pjeaglesham] and talking and stuff, I can make sure other people don’t have to suffer that way. And obviously shooting is huge, I think as everything else decreases, physically as I die, with shooting I could see a physical score that gets better. That makes being here important and after here I hope the crash isn’t as bad as they say.

“But there are so many other things I’ve left to do. I want to get into public speaking, try and get people up, and out, and make the most of what they have. I’m also designing a new wheelchair which I’ve been working on for four years, it’s in prototype production this year. It enables, rather than disables, people. So a lot is to do with helping people and giving back.

“I’m here because people have helped me but I also know time is endless and I’m aware of what is coming.”

You only lose what you cling to. Today, and every day, he’s clinging to his life.

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