

TAKING MATESHIP



Main picture: Brett Costello

A sniper's cowardly act changed the life of Damien Thomlinson but he's forever grateful for what happened next and the different perspective the ordeal has given him, writes **PAUL KENT**

SOMETIME this morning, still in darkness, Damien Thomlinson swung what was left of his legs over the side of the bed.

Waiting there beside him were carbon fibre legs, and Thomlinson stepped into them and started dressing for what is not only going to be a long day, but the most important day.

He will be still on somewhat of a high after last night.

The Sydney Roosters were in camp ahead of this afternoon's Anzac Day game against St George Illawarra and last night after dinner Thomlinson got up and spoke to the players.

"I'm one of those rare people," he says, "that can say the only reason I'm still on planet earth is because the guys

around them could step out of their comfort zone and come to the plate when it came to saving my life."

Thomlinson was patrolling with his commando regiment near Tarin Kowt, in Afghanistan in April 2009, when he drove over an improvised explosive device (IED) and a Taliban fighter nearby, a coward in the shadows, pressed the button.

The explosion blew the soldier in the passenger seat out the side of the truck. The soldier in the back blew through the rear window.

Soldiers in other trucks quickly started working on them when they heard the gurgle of a man choking on blood coming from the wreck in the driver's seat.

That mass of flesh was a man, Private Thomlinson.

Thomlinson has no memory of the incident.

But he knows his right leg disappeared forever in the explosion, and that his left leg was just a ragged collection of skin below his knee.

His right elbow came out of a hole in his arm, his left elbow turned the wrong way. His left shoulder was dislocated, his nose was broken and his lip was torn open and the blood from both was running into his lungs.

The man should have been dead.

Yet, and let's think about this, here is the uncommon bravery of the soldier. Not just Thomlinson, who really had no idea what was going on, but of his regiment. They rushed to his aid with no other thought but to keep not just a man together, but a friend.

Body pieces were everywhere, and quickly they worked to stabilise him.

So last night he spoke to the Roosters about mateship.

He has been a Roosters member since 2011 and is a friend of many players after running into them time and again at the Skinny Dip Cafe in Bondi.

Hellos led to conversations, which led to friendship.

Then it really took off last year, when he explained his best mate was a Manly fan, and while he wanted them to have a good season what he really needed was for them to beat Manly.

"For bragging rights," he says.

When he came out of his coma in a German hospital Thomlinson's concern was not for his injuries but for his mates still in Afghanistan.

"It could have been confronting enough to drop their bundle," he says.

"One leg was blown off and one was damaged beyond repair."

The more he thought about it the more he thought about mateship,

which is nothing else but a love that goes both ways.

He realised that there on a dusty roadside and choking in blood and chaos, his mates went to work on a memory they knew would haunt them, but which they refused to consider.

When the time came, they did not question it.

"I still feel guilty about that," he says.

"There's some guys that are going to have that



The Ashton Collier medal.

Second year in and medal already 'huge honour'

SAM ALEXANDER

BOYD Cordner became the first Roosters player to win the Spirit of Anzac medal last year and his captain Anthony Minichiello wants more of the same today.

The medal, awarded to the player judged best on field in the Roosters-Dragons Anzac Day clash, is growing in stature from a players' perspective.

Minichiello says playing on Anzac Day is emotional enough, but winning the medal would be a "huge honour".

"Every Anzac Day is always a

tough battle; it's not hard to get up for this game. It's such a privilege to play on this day," he said. "The medal, I think it was created last year for the man of the match, is a huge honour for anyone who picks (it) up."

The award centres around the two former players after which it is

named. Ferris Ashton was a member of the Australian Royal Navy during World War II.

He was only a young man when he served on the HMAS Quickmatch, and was in Tokyo Harbour when the Japanese surrendered, September 2, 1945. Ashton played for Eastern Sub-