

# Leaving Forces Life: The issue of transition

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## the **Howard League** for **Penal Reform**

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### Introduction

*'No I never had any help when I left. I just left, I walked out of the front gate with me kit bag with all me civvy stuff in, me two medals, me book, me army book, the red book, my personnel possessions out of my room and that was it. I walked straight out of the gate, called a taxi and then went to the train station and got the train back home, that was it, done.'* (Julian, served nine and a half years)

Military service is a unique form of employment and way of life, engendering a strong culture and camaraderie amongst personnel, which for some may have a lasting impact even after they have returned to civilian life. While Julian's quote reflects the views of our interviewees, the evidence is clear that most people reintegrate effectively.

The Howard League for Penal Reform launched an independent inquiry into former armed service personnel in prison in November 2009. The inquiry aims to discover why some veterans find themselves caught up in the criminal justice system after they have left the armed forces. It is recognised that this can be sometime after discharge.

Our researchers interviewed 29 ex-service personnel in two local and one high security English prisons to hear about their experiences of the resettlement process. Their service was verified. This short briefing paper explores the points raised in our conversations with these individuals.

## The statistics

The trained strength of the UK armed forces was 178,470 at 1 October 2010, with the size of the forces roughly 100,000 army, 40,000 RAF and 40,000 royal navy (Defence Analytical Services and Advice (DASA) 2010a). Of that number, 18,060 were women (9.6 per cent of the total UK regular forces) and 12,160 identified their ethnicity as Black and Minority Ethnic (6.6 per cent of the regular force). These figures therefore demonstrate that the vast majority of the UK regular force personnel, much like the prison population, are white and male.

In October 2010, DASA figures state that in the 12 months prior to 30 September 2010, 18,240 people left the regular forces (DASA, 2010a).

Estimates on the proportion of English and Welsh prisoners who are veterans vary. The UK government estimates that 3.5 per cent of English and Welsh prisoners have served in the armed forces (DASA, 2010b). This was based on the verification of military service numbers. The DASA study has also suggested that veterans are less likely to end up in prison than the civilian population.

## The unique nature of military service

- The military is a unique employer in many ways. The armed forces make unique demands on those who serve in it, and serving in the forces is more than just a job:
- Armed forces personnel are under a liability to implement government policy anywhere, at any time, regardless of personal circumstances or individual wishes. However, every member of the armed forces is a volunteer. Refusal could result in being sentenced to military detention for refusing to obey a lawful order or not turning up for work (or going absent without leave).
- The military has its own culture (or more specifically, in the context of the UK, each part of the tripartite of Army, Royal Navy and Royal Air Force (RAF) have their own cultures). The formation and structure of each service branch of the armed forces underpins how individuals are trained, how they perform their roles, how they relate to each other and how they operate as organisations. Each branch recruits very different people, for very different functions and from diverse social backgrounds;
- Although not uniquely related to military

service, service personnel sometimes form lifelong friendships with one another because of a common sense of identity, threat and destiny. Camaraderie is often seen as being far more than just friendship, but is instead built upon shared hardships, a sense of uniformity and common purpose, and a shared dependency on one another;

- The typical length of service for the majority of regular personnel means that many individuals will still seek employment following completion of military service. The military tends to recruit the majority of its personnel at a relatively young age, and retire them before standard retirement age. However, some serve for a very short time and leave on completion of contract.

## The problem with resettlement

Making the transition from the armed forces into civilian life may be daunting for some, but most personnel who leave in any year will fare reasonably well post-service.

Leaving the military also means having to re-locate, move home, find new employment, and undergo a shift in lifestyle. Service leavers entering civilian life also leave behind the familiar trappings of the forces.

For some, the experience of leaving the forces will be difficult, and a small proportion will find transition problematic. Any discussion of the role of the armed forces in society recognises that, frequently, the military is a vehicle for improving individuals' life opportunities, and that evidence suggests veterans are less likely to be in prison than the general population (DASA, 2010b).

## Military resettlement provision

There is significant provision for transition, probably unlike that of any other employer. Under the auspices of joint service publications 575 (early service leavers) and 534 (tri-service resettlement manual), the career transition partnership (CTP) is employed to provide these services.

The military resettlement process is geared to assisting individuals to make a successful transition back into civilian life. It is a phased process that can include advice, information and training. It is user directed, and can involve the service-leaver making decisions about housing, education (both for the individual and potentially for individual's children or dependants), finances and employment.

Provision for resettlement is based on a system where access to services is earned and graduated on the basis of the amount of time that the individual has served, so that longer servers are eligible for greater resettlement provision.

Preparation for leaving the armed forces is now handled by the career transition partnership (CTP), the name given to a partnering agreement between the Ministry of Defence and Right Management, a global career development and outplacement specialist private company contracted by the MoD. The CTP was established in October 1998 and currently employs around 120 civilian staff, including consultants, trainers and administrators. They have nine regional resettlement centres (RRCs) in the UK, and one in Germany, with headquarters in London, and a resettlement training centre (RTC) situated in Aldershot. There is also support from the joint service housing advice office (JSHAO), the officers' association, and the regular forces employment association (RFEA), who are part of the CTP.

The CTP delivers free resettlement services to all ranks of the British armed forces, and aims to make the transition from military to civilian life as smooth and successful as possible, specifically providing assistance with regards to employment. The services that they provide include teaching individuals the skills needed to produce a CV; assisting them with learning interview techniques, and helping individuals to research the employment market and apply for jobs. CTP staff aim to meet the needs of the individual service leaver, and exist to provide flexible, free of charge support. They can provide this support from two years prior to discharge, and up until two years after discharge to eligible individuals who have served in the armed forces. Equally, there is provision for those who have been out of service for over two years or have just left and were not eligible for resettlement support. In addition to this, many regimental associations have their own informal recruitment systems.

Whilst early service leavers (who have typically served less than four years or been compulsorily discharged) are not entitled to the full level of support, as of 2004 they have been provided with a resettlement brief which should signpost assistance available to them from ex-service welfare organisations and provides information on access to housing. Under the new programme,

mandatory one-to-one interviews should be employed to assess early service leavers' vulnerability to social exclusion, and individuals who are assessed as vulnerable are offered additional resettlement support (National Audit Office, 2007).

Personnel who have served six years or more are eligible for the CTP full support programme, which includes 50 job-related courses at the resettlement training centre. They are also assigned a personal career consultant from the start who is accessible to the individual throughout the resettlement process. They work with the individual to develop a personal resettlement plan, which sets out and timetables activities designed to help the service leaver find a job or pursue another chosen path. They also offer support to those who are not eligible for the MoD resettlement service through the career transition partnership because they have been subject to premature voluntary release with less than four years of service, have been compulsorily discharged, or they are a reservist who has completed an operational tour, though this provision is more limited.

The regular forces employment association provides extra support in assisting servicemen and women of all ranks who are leaving the armed forces to find employment, and they have been in existence since 1885. It has the remit to assist those leaving the forces to find employment from the day of discharge and without a time limit on supporting the individual post service. This is offered as part of the career transition partnership and thereafter is done on behalf of the service benevolence funds. Their mission is to deliver an effective and responsive job-finding service through the provision of quality employment guidance, education and information.

Our interviewees alleged that they received little by way of formal resettlement provision, but it was unlikely that they would have engaged or been enthused by the prospect of getting more assistance:

*'They gave me some forms and stuff, some bits of paper to read and that, but I didn't bother. I just binned them'* (Liam, served six years)

*'I wasn't interested really, I was never that bothered. I had done me time and I just wanted out really, I couldn't be arsed with all that [resettlement provision] really, just give me my compo check'* (Christopher, served four and a half years)

Even if individuals leaving the services did engage with the resettlement provision on offer, both UK and US studies of veterans in prison reveal that the majority are likely to be incarcerated at least ten years after leaving the forces (Howard League 2010b). In other words, there is the problem that help and information is, rightly, offered on leaving the services, but, practically, it is not until many years later that many incarcerated veterans will actually need that help. There is a great deal of help available via the service charitable community and through the CTP in the years after service, and yet our interviewees seemed to be relatively unaware of this.

### **Pathways to prison: myth and reality**

Early in the inquiry we heard a number of views as to why veterans end up in custody. Indeed, there are broadly speaking three factors that have been suggested as explaining the link between service personnel and crime, and often these views also speculate on the reasons why veterans leave the forces.

*'20,000 people leave the Forces every year; 8,000 will have served less than four years and are likely to be predominantly drawn from the infantry. Many of these people will have joined the army in the first place in order to escape difficult backgrounds; the Army will then act as a brake on offending behaviour. Some may have a history of mental health problems, such as depression.'* (Air Vice-Marshal Tony Stables, in Howard League 2010a)

### **The relevance of combat**

It is difficult to link combat exposure and subsequent post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to criminality, yet that has not prevented exposure to combat being popularly referenced as a factor which may explain the incarceration of former armed forces personnel. PTSD is not a uniquely military disorder. Many veterans have had exposure to combat and do not get PTSD and do not end up in the criminal justice system.

There are differences between the reported rates of PTSD in the UK armed forces and those in the USA, with recorded rates of PTSD running far higher in the United States (Howard League, 2010b). In the USA the number of veterans reporting PTSD has continued to rise, creating mounting public concern over post-deployment health care issues. Indeed, in the US there have now been several task forces, independent review groups, and a Presidential Commission convened

in order to examine the care of recently war-wounded veterans. Perhaps in part that has fed into the routine association between PTSD and the issue of veterans in prison by the media who have regularly linked veterans in custody with combat.

While some interviewees claimed combat experience, only one felt there was a link to criminality and subsequent imprisonment. Interviewees' claims of combat exposure were unable to be verified, as was their length of service. It must not be assumed that veterans in the criminal justice system have all served for some time and had exposure to combat.

### **The pre-forces background of service personnel**

Some veterans who end up involved with the criminal justice system could well have ended up there anyway because they are drawn from a demographic which is not that different from the mainstream offender population. It is recognised that those who are involved in the criminal justice system generally tend to be young and male, and are disproportionately drawn from some of the poorest communities in the country, particularly urban and disadvantaged communities where educational standards and attainment are low. For example, during the first full inspection of the Military Corrective Training Centre in 2004, it was found that about 70 per cent of detainees, roughly the same percentage as prisoners, had a reading age of about 11, suggesting a similarity of background across institutions (HMIP, 2004).

Despite a poor start for some, military service can act to avert, interrupt or divert individuals from offending and from a criminal lifestyle.

### **The vulnerability of early service leavers**

There is much discussion about the vulnerability of early service leavers. These numbers represent a tiny percentage of those discharged on an annual basis. A number of those recruited into the armed forces fail to make progress and are discharged for disciplinary violations, medical reasons or being unsuited to service. They are termed early service leavers, or ESLs. However, there is specific transition advice for this group.

Early service leavers (ESLs) are eligible for a reduced resettlement provision. Historically, personnel who are discharged prematurely often left the military on very short notice without

having had much time to plan their transition back into civilian life, and the military offer little specific resettlement provision for those leaving prior to completing four years of service. After four years of service, provision for resettlement is based on a system where access to services is earned and graduated on the basis of the amount of time that the individual has served, so that longer servers are eligible for greater resettlement provision.

## **Life after the forces**

It would certainly appear to the inquiry team that when it comes to transition and the involvement of veterans in the criminal justice system, there are few easy answers. While some individuals we interviewed did fit within the vulnerable and early service leaver categories, the majority did not. Similarly, while some individuals left the forces for disciplinary reasons, the majority did not. While some individuals reported problems with accommodation and periods of homelessness, this again was a small proportion of interviewees, and none left the forces without some form of accommodation in the first instance. Many of those we spoke to would, on a short term basis, be regarded as doing well after the forces, as the majority of our interviewees found work and were not in custody within a short space of time after leaving. They did, however, find themselves in custody a decade later. Of course, this also begs the question as to whether there is any link whatsoever between military service and the individual offender.

However, while many of the interviewees did well after leaving the military, an issue that was encountered as a frequent and recurring theme from our interviews was the difficulty in mentally and emotionally making an adjustment to life after the military, and coping with a sense of social isolation after the forces. Most interviewees contrasted positive experiences within their military service with negative experiences of post service life.

## **Conclusion**

Many of the veterans we interviewed committed offences some ten years after leaving the forces, and, as we have seen, this seems to confirm research done by DASA. While the military has improved resettlement over recent years, there remains the problem that help and information is, rightly, offered on leaving the services, but, practically, it is not until many years later that many incarcerated veterans will actually need that help. There is a great deal of help available via the service charitable community, but it is clear that a few still

fall through the net. The real question is what is to be done, if anything, for those veterans who find themselves involved in the criminal justice system and if something is to be done, what is it and who should do it?

Finally, there is a clear danger of over apportionment of post-service dysfunction to military service, e.g. involvement in the criminal justice system many years after discharge. There are other much larger issues at play in veterans' lives after service. Poverty, addictions with a lack of detox facilities, general mental health/health problems in society, marital breakdown and poor educational attainment all contribute to involvement with the criminal justice system. Singling out transition as a root cause of subsequent post-service dysfunction leading to, in this case, prison, is problematic. What is done about those within the system is a different question entirely.

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## Appendix

### Inquiry into former armed service personnel in prison

The Howard League for Penal Reform launched an independent inquiry into former armed service personnel in prison in November 2009.

The inquiry aims to discover why so many veterans find themselves caught up in the criminal justice system after they have left the services. It is vital that the complex needs of armed forces personnel are adequately addressed and that we do everything we can to help those who serve their country adjust to civilian life.

The inquiry will make detailed recommendations on its findings. It will review the support offered by the various voluntary sector organisations and that provided by the armed services. It will consider more structured approaches following active service.

The inquiry is chaired by Sir John Nutting QC, one of the country's leading barristers. The inquiry's advisory group comprises:

- Admiral the Lord Boyce GCB OBE DL
- General the Lord Guthrie of Craigiebank GCB LVO OBE DL

- Major General David Jenkins
- Wing Commander Dr Hugh Milroy, Chief Executive of Veterans Aid
- Chris Sheffield, former governor of Liverpool and Manchester prisons
- Elfyn Llwyd MP

Since its launch in November 2009, the inquiry has:

- Held oral evidence sessions with experts and key stakeholders;
- Issued a call for written evidence;
- Conducted qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 29 prisoners in three prisons in England;
- Visited Grendon and Everthorpe prisons in England, pioneers in the national Veterans in Custody Support programme;
- Visited the Military Corrective Training Centre in Colchester;
- Attended the Veterans Aid hostel for homeless veterans in London;
- Met with key stakeholders and practitioners in Scotland;
- Travelled to the United States of America to visit a veterans court, a prison and meet with policymakers;
- Published 'Leave No Veteran Behind', a briefing paper outlining the findings from our visit to the US.

## the **Howard League** for **Penal Reform**

1 Ardleigh Road  
London  
N1 4HS

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**f**  
**e**  
**w**

020 7249 7373  
020 7249 7788  
info@howardleague.org  
www.howardleague.org

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ISBN 978-1-905994-27-4



9 781905 994274 >  
ISBN 978-1-905994-27-4

**2011**