

## **Ex Forces personnel**

### **A hidden population**

#### **"Between Iraq and a hard place.....Civvy Street !"**

It is said that every year an estimated 8,000-16,000 people leave the Armed Forces and return to live and work in the civilian community. For many the transition is seamless, yet for a significant number the journey is made difficult by an inability to re-establish themselves and settle back into in a society they no longer identify with. This process may lead to relationship difficulties, alcohol and drug misuse, unemployment, homelessness, involvement with the Criminal Justice System, and for those suffering from diagnosed or undiagnosed PTSD, self imposed isolation, self harm or suicide. An increasing number may find that they become marginalised and disenfranchised from main stream services and support and as a result experience chronic social exclusion.

In the summer of 2009 I worked as a Development manager for an organization that provided substitute prescribing for problematic drug users. During the assessment process, it transpired that many of the people accessing support from that service came from an ex forces background. Moreover many reported that their problematic alcohol or drug misuse began during service life and was exacerbated when they left the services.

In many ways I could identify with the stories I heard as I had served in the Armed forces in the late 70's and I was more than aware of the difficulties I faced trying to readjust to living in a community with whom I had no previous association or connection. However, having re-invented myself following my transition back to civilian life as a registered Social Worker and Probation Officer, I was alarmed and concerned with the numbers of ex forces men and women I encountered as part of my working day. Many had ended up failing to have their basic needs met by both the statutory or third sector social welfare providers and had 'fallen through the net'. A great number had become homeless or were 'rough sleeping' and had all the associated physical and mental health problems that go with that lifestyle, or were involved in the Criminal Justice System. Others that I encountered were in menial low paid positions that did not reflect their ability or potential; neither did those positions offer any real career prospects in the long term.

Research initiated by the National Association of Probation Officers (Napo) in 2008 indicated that:

*"..... up to 8,500 former veterans are currently in prison, and another 3,000 are on parole. There are also likely to be thousands on community supervision. Most of the veterans have seen recent active service. The majority on discharge or leave are convicted of violent offences associated with alcohol or drugs. A large, but unknown, number have symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder. Research by Napo shows that many former soldiers are facing chronic exclusion and have very complex needs "*

In response I established a 'not for profit' social enterprise called About Turn CIC. During this process and whilst looking for funding streams I was constantly asked to prove that not only was there a need for my service but indeed a demand. NAPO under the inspirational leadership of Harry Fletcher had recognized that something was clearly amiss and initiated a 'self report' survey amongst serving

probation officers who then identified offenders with an ex forces background that were currently being supervised in both custodial and community settings. The results and themes in relation to the commonalities in offending were both shocking and deeply concerning for all concerned in the rehabilitation and resettlement process of ex forces personnel. Despite this information coming into the public domain, proving that a 'need' existed was initially harder than I expected.

In desperation and in the closing months of 2009 I instigated a freedom of information request to all the local authorities in the North East of England. These included Darlington, Durham, Gateshead, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, Newcastle upon Tyne, North Tyneside, Northumberland, Redcar and Cleveland, Stockton on Tees, South Tyneside and Sunderland. I asked them to tell me how many ex forces Veterans were accessing support from the homeless sector, mental health services, social services, drug and alcohol treatment services, accident and emergency services, police and probation services and the Courts. After some deliberation as to the difficulty they faced in answering the question it transpired that only 20 ex forces personnel had accessed support across the whole region. Whilst I acknowledge that the North East is one of the smallest of the English regions it does cover 8,593 square km and has a population of 2.6 million. Similarly, the Ministry of Defence in its promotional literature states that;

*"The North East's Links with the Armed Forces are very strong and its roots with the military date back to Roman Times. It is one of the UK's top recruiting areas for the three armed forces and is home to tens of thousands of service personnel and their families."*

Clearly this was and is not reflective of the true picture but due to the fact that almost all the services delivered or commissioned to deliver services to the general populace did not ask the most basic question; ".....have you served in the Armed Forces?"

This omission effectively means services cannot be commissioned to meet need simply because they do not know what level of demand currently exists. Armed with a dossier that indicated the ex forces community did not technically exist in the North East of England I approached Kevan Jones , (MP for Durham North) and also the current Veterans Minister. I asked if he could do something about this anomaly and at his request copies of all the correspondence was sent to his constituency office. Some weeks later I was told that a research project was about to be commissioned that would look at the 12 regional authorities collaborating for the first time in history to assess the needs of the ex forces population in relation to the health care and social welfare needs of the ex forces population in the North East. The findings of which would be available at the end of 2010.

In June 2009 I founded and started running peer led support groups for ex forces men and women outside office hours. This was necessary as no other service existed that facilitated the 'face to face' contact to physically connect the ex forces community. On the first session we had 13 individuals turn up and since that time we have regularly had a core group 10-13 individuals attending on a weekly basis.

The Forces for Good group is now legally constituted with its own bank account and members have developed a group identity that is all about utilising the skills they acquired during their time in the military to do good deeds in and for the community. If any group member has issues that need to be addressed then access to mainstream or specialist services is facilitated by peers or committee members. This refer and chaperone/self help approach has proved to be extremely successful as it

allows group members to navigate/ advocate and broker services on the personal recommendation of those that have already experienced the services for themselves. If the service required is not available in our geographic location then we lobby for support via the democratic process with constituent MPs and councillors.

We now have groups running in Sunderland, Newcastle upon Tyne, a North East Prison and North Wales. We also plan to expand this service across the region. Given that these 'face to face' initiatives clearly meet demand and in many ways complement and enhance the work of the numerous internet networking sites developed specifically for ex forces men and women to communicate with one another.

The civilian community and indeed many service providers have difficulty understanding the unique needs of the ex forces community. Part of the problem lies in the misconception that the Armed Forces continue to provide holistic support for its members after they have left the services.

Many Regimental Associations provide hardship funds for ex serving soldiers and the support provided from many of the community based ex forces organizations is very much financially driven and welfare orientated. There is also a misconception that everyone who leaves the forces has a sound knowledge base of what is available, unfortunately this is not true and even if they did many would not ask for charity. In my experience reunions and regimental dinners facilitate the maintenance of lasting friendships and sociability but invariably involve the consumption of a great deal of alcohol .This is fine if the transition has been made successfully but alcohol and drug misuse are at the heart of much of the offending that leads to the incarceration of ex forces personnel. Again it is worth pointing out that those that were dishonourably discharged would not normally be invited and those that were medically discharged may not want to maintain contact with the regiments they were attached to. This may happen for a host of reasons not least because the relationship with colleagues may have fundamentally changed on many different levels.

Pensions are available for those that serve full terms but many people leave the employ of the services with no support whatsoever. There are many reasons for discharge from the Armed Forces and they fall into the following categories: Completion of service time, this can range from 3 years, to 22 years or more, dependent upon rank and individual circumstances. Medical discharge due to a medical problem or physical injury that impedes or restricts the soldier's ability to carry out any tasks that is associated with their role and responsibilities. Dishonourable or administrative discharge (known colloquially as an 'Admin discharge') following any act or activity that is so serious that it cannot be dealt with in any way other than the serving of a custodial sentence in a Military or Civilian Prison, or both, and/ or at the command of a Court Marshall or at the discretion of a senior officer, or failure to complete basic training to the standard requirement so that services are no longer required. Similarly, many soldiers exercise the right to buy themselves out after serving a minimum of four years service.

All of the above exit routes carry with them a myriad of complex transitional glitches .It can be argued that those serving 12-22 years may become institutionalized and struggle with a loss of identity and find themselves in a civilian community that is alien to them. Others successfully use their service time to re-engage with the civilian community and enrol on leadership/managerial courses in Universities or Colleges of Higher Education in the pursuit of career advancement. Those that are medically discharged must cope with the restrictions their disability/impairment has on

future employment opportunities and on their ability to function in a civilian community whilst also trying to deal with a change in circumstances and life plans that was not expected.

It is my view that those individuals that complete 6 weeks training or four years service or less should in many ways be more able to re-integrate themselves back into the community from which they left. However, it would appear that there is growing evidence to suggest that many within this category end up in a life categorized by failure and disappointment. Many individuals are recruited into the Armed Forces from areas of multiple deprivation and join the Armed Forces as a way to escape poverty and improve limited life chances, failing to make it in the Army is viewed negatively by family members and society alike and in many cases is viewed as the 'last chance saloon' for many disenfranchised youths.

Dishonourable discharge brings with it an impact on life chances that can only be described as catastrophic. The ex soldier needs to adapt to his or her status within the civilian community as 'soiled goods' and the real or perceived disadvantage this label brings with it. If a dishonourably discharged ex soldier subsequently becomes involved with the Criminal Justice system he/she also acquires a new label, i.e. prisoner or offender dependant upon if they are incarcerated or living in the community. If that person has mental health problems they then become a mentally unstable prisoner or offender. If they have misused alcohol or drugs and its related to their offending they then become a mentally unstable offender or prisoner who is also a problematic drug or alcohol user. Add to this homelessness and recent combat experience/or past/current violent offending and two things happen: the risk assessment used by prison and probation staff will indicate a very high level of risk of harm to both the public and the individual, and a greater likelihood to re-offend. If we add to the equation a lack of specific services to meet the needs of the ex forces community then the negativity level associated with these state imposed labels become toxic. It is then extremely difficult for ex service men and women who have acquired these derogatory titles to re-establish themselves back into the civilian community or job market without experiencing significant disadvantage and embarrassment associated with a professional career /reputation destroyed.

In the North East of England homeless ex forces personnel are 'begging for change' in more ways than one, several members of the Forces for Good group are technically homeless and are excluded from local authority housing provision either by default or by choice. Sadly many individuals return to the civilian community ill prepared for civilian life. Many are homeless at the point of exit from the Armed Forces and are not prioritized for accommodation and subsequently end up 'Sofa surfing' or sleeping rough. We have several members of the Forces for Good groups who have lived in trenches, shell scrapes or constructed elaborate 'bashes' in inner city woodland areas, rather than sleep rough in the doorways of shops in public view. They also tell of being redirected to the homeless sector and told by well meaning housing workers that the only available housing on offer is within the temporary accommodation sector, which more often than not are multi-occupancy dwellings. I have met many ex soldiers who have been given the impression that housing managers believe that ex forces personnel would prefer to live in temporary homeless hostels. As one ex soldier prophetically said;

*'You go in clean but come out with a drug habit, in a box or in handcuffs after battering a resident'*

Multiple occupancy dwellings in the homeless sector are the last place a veteran should be placed.

The hidden population that is the ex forces population currently has no political voice and has no vehicle to express or channel any dissatisfaction with the services currently on offer. The current system is a 'one size fits all' or 'not at all'

It is only in recent years that the Government has acknowledged the requirements of women in the Criminal Justice System are different to that of men and appropriate resources and funding has been made available to meet those distinct and unique needs. With this enlightenment in mind it will be interesting to see how long it takes for the Government to accept and realize it has a duty of care to look after those that have made the second greatest sacrifice on behalf of their country..... They survived and live in the civilian community!

The complexity of the issues facing the ex forces personnel returning to live in the civilian world is only going to increase as our involvement in wars, campaigns, peacekeeping duties and the need to be ever vigilant places huge pressure on individual soldiers and their families through their continued active service and management of the asymmetric threat whether that be at home or abroad. It is my view that the answer to this current and ongoing problem will come from and be driven by the ex service community. They understand the issues their comrade's face when they slip through the net and fail to engage with mainstream services and they also know why it happens and how to re-engage them when it does. They will in the grand tradition of the Armed Forces continue to look after their own. In our experience if the support is given by former soldiers 'at the right time, in the right place' then it is accepted without prejudice. The civilian community's greatest asset, is its ex forces community; the problem is nobody has made either party aware of this fact.

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About Turn C IC

Founder of the 'Forces for Good' Group network.