

SOLDIER

MAGAZINE OF THE BRITISH ARMY

KOSOVO TOURS
25 YEARS ON

THE TRUTH ABOUT
FEMALE HEALTH
AND HORMONES

WHAT'S BOTHERING
RESERVISTS?

READY FOR TROUBLE

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unpredictable world of
public order training



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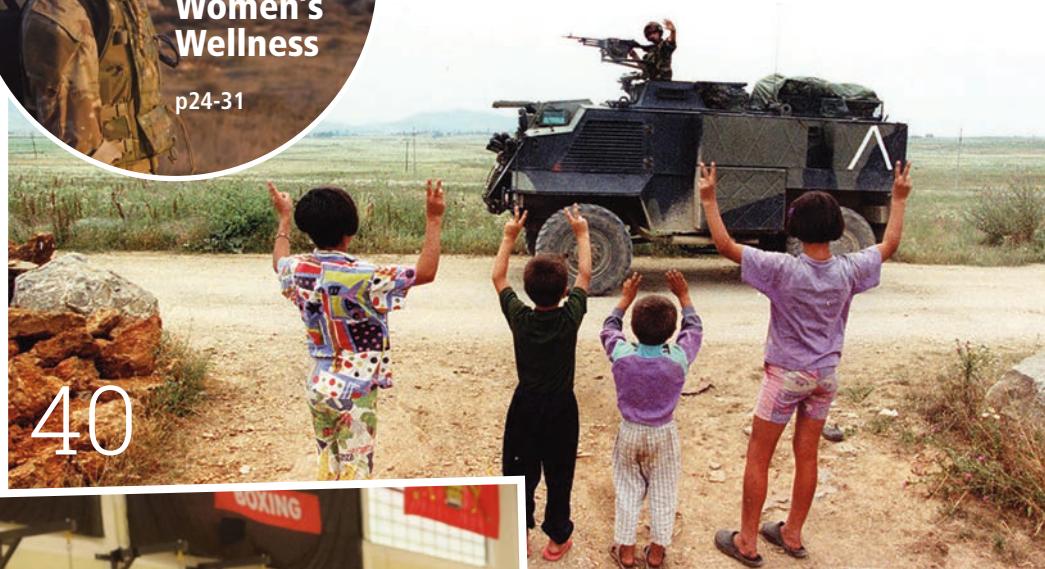


Medics showcase expertise – p36



Need to Know:
Women's Wellness

p24-31



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Helping females stay on form

THE truth about female health (if anyone was wondering what the line on our front cover refers to) is that, well, we don't actually know the truth.

Historic underinvestment – and under-interest – in how women's bodies work means that society is now playing catch-up to fully understand what makes them tick, and therefore how to maximise female performance.

It's just one example of the areas where women are required to work far harder for anything like the same sort of outcome as their male counterparts (more on that in the Army sergeant major's column on page 19).

Read this month's *Need to Know* section from page 24, which we have dedicated to this month's International Women's Day.

The sooner organisations start using this occasion to level the playing field practically, rather than simply celebrating the existence of women, the better off we will all be.

And to that end, find out more about the Army Health and Performance Research Team's pioneering study into the contraceptive pill on page 26 – the outcome of which is likely to support Servicewomen's musculoskeletal health for generations to come.

Enjoy the issue.

Sarah Goldthorpe • Editor

Where to find *Soldier*

➤ Printed copies

Sent to Army sites at the start of the month.

➤ Facebook, X and Instagram

ALONG with news and glimpses behind the scenes at *Soldier*, we publish a link to the latest magazine at facebook.com/soldiermagazine and on X (formerly known as Twitter) (@soldiermagazine).

➤ Online

DIGITAL versions of current and past editions are available on the Army website at soldiermagazine.co.uk. Just click on the "read it now" tab.

➤ Purchase

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Picture: Cpl Rob Kane, RLC

Steadfast soldiers

THE largest Nato exercise since the Cold War has kicked off.

Between now and June, some 20,000 British troops will be deployed across 11 countries, spanning Bardufoss in the Arctic Circle down to Georgia on the Black Sea.

Steadfast Defender, as the package is known, is testing Nato's ability to deploy forces across Europe when a member state is attacked by a near-peer enemy.

Some 16,000 soldiers are participating, plus a Royal Navy carrier strike group centred on a Queen Elizabeth-class aircraft carrier, 400 Royal Marines and Royal Air Force attack and surveillance aircraft.

Among the British Army contingent is the 7th Light Mechanised Brigade Combat Team (the Desert Rats), which recently assumed leadership of Nato's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force.

Its troops are taking part in two key stages, which include a wide wet gap crossing on the Vistula River, Poland.

"It is an honour and a great responsibility to be leading the VJTF at this time," Commander, Brig Guy Foden, told *Soldier*. "This provides the opportunity for us to practise a likely deployment to Nato's eastern flank."

"The training offered by the Land Warfare Centre has been first rate and the units' performance second to none."

In April, around 250 vehicles belonging to the 12th Armoured Brigade Combat Team will be loaded onto rail flatbeds in Folkestone for transit through the Channel Tunnel.

This will demonstrate this as a viable way of moving the Army's heavy

equipment into central Europe.

A month later, the 16 Air Assault Brigade Combat Team's Pathfinders (shown) will drop into Rapla, Estonia – the first time Brits will have tactically parachuted from an A400M aircraft.

Then 250 paratroopers from the battlegroup of 3rd Battalion, The Parachute Regiment deploy into Nurmsi, Estonia from three American C17s.

They will be joined by one US company and another from Poland.

In late May, personnel from the 12th Armoured BCT will head to Drawsko Pomorskie Training Area in Poland for combined arms manoeuvres and practice on British and US bridging equipment.

The US Army's Gen Christopher Cavoli, Nato's supreme allied commander Europe, said: "Steadfast Defender 2024 is a clear demonstration of our unity, strength and determination to protect each other, our values and the rules-based international order." ■

STEADFAST IN NUMBERS

90,000 personnel participating

31 Nato allies, plus Sweden

166 tanks

533 infantry fighting vehicles

417 armoured personnel carriers

80 air assets, including fast jets, helicopters and drones

“
The units' performance has been second to none
”

SOLDIER

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SOLDIER – Magazine of the British Army
Ordnance Barracks, Government Road,
Aldershot, Hampshire GU11 2DU.

SOLDIER is published by the Ministry of Defence and printed by Walstead (Roche) Ltd.
Print contract managed by CDS.
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GLOBAL SITREP

Picture: Lsgt Carl McClelland, Gren Gds



A TESTING seven-week stint in the Caribbean is drawing to a close for personnel from 1st Battalion, Grenadier Guards.

Having honed jungle, urban and live-firing skills throughout Exercise Red Stripe, members of Number 2 Company will be gearing up for a final assault as this issue hits bases.

Depending on weather conditions on the day, the troops will insert

by air or sea before attacking and holding an island.

"For some, this is their first exposure to working in the close country tropical environment," explained Capt Toby Cairns.

"We have also been strengthening our partnership with the Jamaica Defence Force, operating with their infantry, helicopters and inshore patrol boat teams."

2. FALKLAND ISLANDS

OVER TO YOU

MEANWHILE, Grenadier Guardsmen from Inkerman Company have taken the lead of the Army's rotational deployment to the South Atlantic.

Their three-month assignment as the Falkland Islands Roulement Infantry Company promises a packed programme of patrolling, ranges and other soldiering skills, as well as the chance to train with Royal Air Force and Royal Navy counterparts.

The regular tasking to the exposed outcrop offers a challenging test of military mettle, as predecessors the Welsh Guards found during a five-day exercise ahead of the handover.

The outgoing troops (pictured below) were put through their paces around Stanley Common, Mount Kent and Pleasant Peak.



Picture: BFAF



IN NUMBERS:

620

Troops deployed on Project Convergence in California and New Mexico, focusing on experimental technologies.

Read more in future editions of *Soldier*

2. FALKLAND ISLANDS



3. ANTIGUA

BACK ON DRY LAND

VETERANS raising money to boost military mental health support were among nearly 100 rowers to take on the latest Talisker Whisky Atlantic Challenge.

Team Marduk, made up of Adam Carrier (ex-RHG/D), George Dagnall and Jack Chapman (both ex-Rifles), plus civvy Alex Jackson, paddled from La Gomera in the Canary Islands to Antigua in just over 38 days.

Having trained for two years for the 3,000-mile voyage, they have so far raised more than £50,000 for Bowel



Cancer UK and the Head Up charity, which Carrier and Dagnall co-founded to fund a holistic retreat for former and serving personnel.

Their ultimate aim is to run seven-day residential courses for those struggling with their mental health – teaching them positive mindset techniques and wellbeing strategies, followed by some 18 months of aftercare.

To help them in their mission visit [gofundme.com/f/marduk-atlantic-challenge](https://www.gofundme.com/f/marduk-atlantic-challenge)



4. UK

NEW BEGINNINGS

MORE than 330 trainee Gurkhas have arrived at Infantry Training Centre Catterick to start life in the British military.

The gruelling 39-week course will transform them from raw recruits into capable soldiers, as well as teaching cultural and educational skills to help them settle into their adopted country.

Their Army careers got off to a memorable start when Chief of the General Staff, Gen Sir Patrick Sanders, attended their attestation parade in Pokhara prior to their departure from Nepal (pictured below).



5. BRUNEI

FEELING THE HEAT

A DOZEN troops from The Rifles took the chance to conduct a potential NCO cadre and sharpen up their jungle warfare skills at the same time.

Having missed out on the package in the UK, they joined some 70 soldiers from Brunei-based 1st Battalion, The Royal Gurkha Rifles on their junior leadership course at the Labi jungle training area.

The itinerary included instructional techniques, range management, urban tactics, navigation and command tasks, climaxing with a 19-day exercise deep in the bush.

"It has been enjoyable getting to know a new bunch of guys but also a real challenge learning to work in the heat and spending a tough stint in the jungle," said Rfn Robert Askew (Rifles).

2Lt Henry Johnson (RGR) described the tasks set for students as "a perfect opportunity to display critical thinking, concise briefing skills and leadership".

5. BRUNEI

INTELLIGENCE FOR THE ATLAS?

Brief the team now:



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'The downhill was the hardest it has ever been'

Skiers feel the heat in Meribel – page 64

6. SOUTH PACIFIC



6. SOUTH PACIFIC

NOTABLE TOUR

A GIFTED pipe major turned Army ambassador has taken his tunes thousands of miles from home.

CSgt James Muir (Scots) joined the US Navy Fleet Band for performances in venues including the Fijian capital Suva.

The senior NCO boarded aircraft carrier USS Pearl Harbor as part of a six-month stint with the American-led Pacific Partnership, which delivers assistance, training and culture to more than half-a-dozen nations.

CSgt Muir, who was also on deck to pipe the ship into Nuku'afola, Tonga, said the tour was proving the experience of a lifetime.

Troops had helped teach children music on the naval outing, but he added that the Great Highland Bagpipe had proved a challenge.

"Only one strong-lunged student managed to get a sound – met by great applause when successful and clapping and laughter when not," he added.



Picture: MC2 Deric Marsac, US Navy



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Picture: Graeme Main

A NEW AGE OF CONCEALMENT

Command points are proving more vulnerable in the digital age

TOOPS running military nerve centres must adapt to a fast-moving battlespace if they are to avoid their leadership being "decapitated" by the enemy, a senior Nato officer has said.

Maj Gen Mike Keating – chief of staff at the Gloucester-based HQ Allied Rapid Reaction Corps – said critical command points would prove vulnerable in an environment where new tech made camouflage and movement a challenge.

With drones providing a comprehensive tactical picture and data beamed digitally to attackers, a killer blow could rapidly be delivered.

But he stressed that Nato was well prepared. And a series of upcoming exercises would be a key opportunity to refine robust drills to conceal assets as well as packing up, shifting and striking back decisively at the enemy.

Maj Gen Keating explained to *Soldier* that speed to the trigger would ultimately prove decisive in a future conventional battle.

"Leaders will face a duel with an opponent determined to decapitate our command," he emphasised.

"Camouflage no longer just applies in the traditional sense – concealment is multi-domain and as much about the digital, even social media, footprint.

"Unfortunately, there are no magic

bullets to solve these problems – and a key issue will be how quickly our forces can absorb and act on information."

A former Army Air Corps officer, Maj Gen Keating – who was deputy commanding general at US III Armoured Corps before arriving in Gloucester – was speaking as Nato readied for its largest exercise in decades (page 7).

The Steadfast Defender package will see thousands of British troops join alliance colleagues in conventional conflict rehearsals.

Military planners with HQ ARRC – which currently heads up Nato's lead warfighting formation – will also face their own unique tests in the summer.

Maj Gen Keating said: "The US-led Exercise Avenger Triad is going to prove a real test of our capability – we will need to be on top of our game.

"As well as distributed command and control, we must pay attention to the logistics chain, which could also prove vulnerable in the new battlespace.

"Thankfully, our troops are proving highly capable and having different nations working together means that we have diversity of thought.

"This is important as there is a tangible feeling that the threat has moved on – and that there is a real purpose behind the current schedule of military exercises."

Q&A



SOLDIER grills HQ ARRC chief of staff, **Maj Gen Mike Keating...**

How real is the threat we face?

I don't want to be alarmist but the shift is certainly tangible. And it's vital that we do everything possible to deter that threat from materialising.

Does the current picture compare to anything else in your experience? I grew up in an Army family in the Cold War – so yes, there is a familiarity. But in my serving lifetime, the world has never felt a more uncertain place.

Do you think Nato is well prepared? Yes – at the HQ we have also had a focus on individual readiness. I've been impressed with how soldiers have responded.

How do your troops feel about the global picture? We are more distant from events in eastern Europe in the UK. But I think our colleagues from that part of the world feel the proximity of threat more keenly.

Is operating with so many nations a challenge? We have allies from some 21 nations working in HQ ARRC. But that unity of purpose and common bond also helps to unlock different ways of working and thinking.

“
A key issue will be how quickly our forces can absorb and act on information
”

DITS WANTED

■ ANECDOTES reflecting the lighter side of Forces life are being sought for a new book.

Authors Philip Ingram (ex-Int Corps) and Nikky Mitchinson (ex-RLC) are gathering amusing tales for inclusion in their forthcoming title *The Ditionary*.

Former loggie Mitchinson, who is now married to a serving soldier and runs the popular Army wife parody vlog *My Name is Sarah*, said sales of the title would help raise funds for several military charities.

Visit militarydits.co.uk to take part and for guidance on contact with the media read 2020DIN03-005

Q&A



Army
Benevolent
Fund

THE Service's national good cause – **The Army Benevolent Fund** – recently reverted back to its old name after rebranding as ABF The Soldiers' Charity some 13 years ago. We asked the organisation's boss Maj Gen (Retd) Tim Hyams about the reasons behind the move...

Why did you decide to go back to your former identity? There was a growing sense that our name had become a source of confusion and was not always understood. Research showed the Army Benevolent Fund remained a recognised brand, which most people had known us as since our foundation in 1944.

Any reason as to the timing?

Yes – it coincided with other improvements on how we communicate, develop relationships with our donors and grow our supporter base. This included a new website – armybenevolentfund.org

How important is it? For us, the change will bring greater clarity to our role as the Army's national charity and one of the largest in the sector.

Is the Army family in greater need given the tightening of belts? We have seen a significant increase in individual cases seeking our assistance since the beginning of the financial year. There are several factors driving this, economic conditions being one of them.

Off to a flying start



Course for officer cadets considering airborne careers enjoys promising results

“
It really gave us a chance to test ourselves
”

WITH recruitment woes affecting nearly every part of the Service, it's hoped an initiative to encourage more University Officers' Training Corps candidates to consider a career in airborne units proves fruitful.

The first Exercise Maroon Student recently concluded with a third of the intake – around 22 officer cadets – declared eligible for the preparation course Army Reserve (PCAR), which is the preliminary stage for the all-arms pre-parachute selection course.

The package was set up early last year and delivered by the Yorkshire Officers' Training Regiment over a number of months on behalf of the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst.

Structured around three assessment weekends, its aim is to expose candidates from across the UK to the physical and leadership standards expected at elite regiments.

"It provides them with training and guidance to help their entry into the airborne forces, whether commissioned or soldier, Regular or Reserve," one

of the course organisers, Maj Robert Sweeney (Para), told *Soldier*.

The first assessment weekend included P Coy events such as stretcher and log races, the steeplechase, trainasium and a loaded march (shown).

Subsequent weekends included teamwork, tactical awareness, planning and mental resilience activities, the soldier role fitness test and briefings from serving personnel.

The successful cadets are now able to apply for the PCAR, which is traditionally set aside for those already serving in Reserve airborne units.

"Maroon Student was a phenomenal opportunity to have a window into how airborne forces operate and live," said OCdt Zack Sadleir from East Midlands UOTC. "The exercise really gave us a chance to test ourselves physically and mentally which we wouldn't be able to do at our regular UOTC units."

Maj Chris Braithwaite (Para), officer commanding P Coy, added: "I hope this process has encouraged them to join the airborne forces." ■

FEARLESS FUNDRAISING



TIGERS ON TOUR TO CYPRUS

A MOTORBIKE-MAD veteran quartet is preparing to hit the road and head south in a mammoth ride to raise money for less fortunate colleagues.

Alan Sands, Fred Ball, Rupert "Dusty" Miller and Trevor Burden (L-R) – who all served with The Hampshire Regiment – are taking to the saddle

on the journey from Tidworth to Dhekelia, Cyprus and back again this summer.

The 5,000-mile Tigers on Tour trip will take the bikers – who are all in their 60s – across Germany, Bulgaria and Turkey.

They are riding to remember fallen and injured colleagues.

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Swedish pitfalls

Picture: Will Roberts

■ A SUPER-FIT Army doc is on top of the world after winning a gruelling race through the wilderness of northern Sweden – one of the world's most punishing extreme events. Lt Col Edward Sellon (RAMC) braved temperatures of -30 degrees Centigrade as he hauled himself 130 miles across the Klungsleden Trail in the Arctic Spine Challenger. He finished February's five-day endurance race – during which competitors trek and ski while pulling kit on a sled – alone after his two team colleagues were forced to withdraw due to cold weather injuries. "The experience was so much tougher than anyone expected," the 45-year-old admitted. "You really draw on your Army training for a race such as this."

RSM exits on wellbeing note

A RESPECTED regimental sergeant major, fitness guru and military mental health advocate opted for a novel sign-off from the Army to help spread a positive message to fellow troops.

WO1 Melita Jarvis (AAC, pictured) invited personnel to hit the gym with her at ATR Grantham – pushing themselves through three different workouts and a mindfulness event.

The senior soldier, pictured, is hanging up her boots after 22 years.

And having lost a close family member to suicide, the wellbeing of colleagues has been a deeply personal priority for her.

She told *Soldier*. "I wanted to do something a bit different as a leaving event – I've never liked alcohol but I love my phys, so I opted for the gym.

"We had a PTI running a mindfulness event too – it was great as



I have always been passionate about promoting mental health awareness.

"It hits home when somebody close to you takes their own life – you find yourself asking why.

"If there was a single piece of advice I could give to young soldiers about mental health, it would be to find people who you trust and have some frank conversations.

"Honesty is so important." ■

“Find people who you trust – honesty is so important”

COURSES FOR LEAVERS

■ SERVICE leavers are to benefit from more support finding jobs thanks to a new contract between the Career Transition Partnership (CTP) and recruitment company Reed.

Under the deal, the number of professional courses for soon-to-be veterans will more than double, with training geared towards sectors such as engineering, cyber security, healthcare and renewable energy.

The transition to the new provider will be complete in October, starting with a phased approach to ensure that the services offered by current contractor, Right Management Ltd, are not disrupted.

Figures published recently by the MoD reveal that of the 11,427 personnel who used the CTP in the period 2022-23, 89 per cent were in employment six months after leaving – up slightly on the previous year.

SPECIAL NEEDS STUDY

■ A STUDY has been launched into the state of play for Service children with special educational needs and disabilities.

The Supporting All to Thrive initiative will examine the experiences of youngsters and their families with the aim of improving life for them in the future.

Academics from Oxford Brookes University are carrying out the 18-month research programme with £60,000 of funding from the Armed Forces Covenant Trust.

■ A BACKLASH from Army officers has led the Service to hit pause on its plan to allocate quarters based on need rather than rank.

The new accommodation offer – renamed the modernised accommodation offer – was due to go live this month.

But a statement on Defnet as this issue went to press said:

"Defence is still committed to widening entitlement to those in established long-term relationships and parents with non-resident children, but we have listened to feedback and are therefore pausing the rollout of the elements related to SFA, including the move to needs-based allocation and in the short term the widening of entitlement."

TIME TO SPLASH £20,000?



AS the 80th anniversary of D-Day approaches, aviation enthusiasts with a cool £19,950 to spare can snap up a limited-edition timepiece paying homage to the heroic pilots of the Second World War.

Watchmaker Colin Andrews is crafting around 100 watches featuring dials, hands and crowns fashioned from parts of a Spitfire ML295, which crash-landed in Normandy in 1944 and is now being restored at Biggin Hill airfield.

Known as "The Few", the series will also be inscribed with the names of those who flew the plane, including Hal Kramer who survived its final sortie and narrowly evaded capture by German troops.

Each watch is made to order and for further information on the piece visit great-british-watch.co.uk

“
It's fit for
a new
generation
”



Picture: Cpl Aaron Stone, RLC

Colchester fuels future

A CUTTING-EDGE trial of hydrogen-fuelled kit to charge MoD electric vehicles is under way in Colchester.

The equipment, which is being tested at Merville Barracks, can deliver power to four white fleet cars at a time – with drinkable water the only by-product.

Housed in a shipping container, the charger works independently of the national grid. The trial is backed by the Defence Support Organisation.

Sandhurst for soldiers

Professionalisation of basic training gets the thumbs-up

THE Soldier Academy has been officially launched and will deliver a more joined up and consistent pathway for new recruits progressing through all the Service's phase one establishments, says Army Sergeant Major WO1 Paul Carney.

Despite admitting to being slightly sceptical at first that it may have just been a rebranding exercise, the Army's top soldier is convinced the changes that have been introduced will take the standard of basic training to a whole new level.

The overhaul includes investment in infrastructure, delivering the same initial 13-week course at all basic training centres for the first time and improved instructor development.

"There's a multitude of things the Army has got after rather than just putting a new badge on and saying it's something different," he told *Soldier*.

"I'm really chuffed we are professionalising our basic training in the same way it was done at Sandhurst.

"The Soldier Academy brings all the



Picture: Graeme Main

people who are delivering this together under one organisation, adapting the course so it's fit for the new generation.

"We can build resilience in our soldiers while keeping as many of them as we can."

Turn to **page 33** for a run-down of the new academy's role. ■

AFGHAN ASSISTANCE RAMPS UP

Troops use initiative to make life more comfortable for newcomers to the UK

RESOLUTE soldiers have been helping Afghans who worked with British forces to settle into the UK.

Troops have been looking after the new arrivals while they complete admin for the likes of health, state benefits, education and bank accounts.

But those deployed on **Op Lazurite** have also been using their own initiative to make life more comfortable for their civvy guests – many of whom deployed with Nato soldiers during the alliance's 20-year mission in Afghanistan – while they are in temporary accommodation at Army camps.

They have assisted with setting up welfare groups across the sites while forging links with local communities, good causes and other organisations.

"Personnel have taken the job to heart and are finding it worthwhile," said Lt Joe Wansbury (below, left), who has been heading up a platoon-sized team built around 1st Battalion, The Royal Anglian Regiment, at one site in Kent.

"Some served in Afghanistan on Op Toral but many of the younger generation have never been there – yet all of us here can see the difference we are making."

The network of UK reception camps provide the opportunity for arrivals to adjust to their new lives. First and foremost this means completing the paperwork needed to stay in the country.

They then move to more permanent accommodation once the basic admin is squared away.

Meanwhile, teams of interpreters are on hand to help them navigate through the whole process, which can take up to two months.

"We have helped, for example, by running a shop with basic necessities and we now have good links with local communities," Lt Wansbury added.

"The last team here left their mark, and we have taken things a step further."

The troops have also started all-female shuras, or meetings, enabling women on camp to open up frankly about personal issues. In Afghan culture these gatherings are normally led by the men.

LCpl Shannon Ramasso (AGC (SPS)), who set up the weekly forum, said the move had improved support to families.

"Pushchairs were needed and within 48 hours we had five donated, thanks to our relationship with a charity," she said. "The local residents here have been brilliant and helping out with our work."

Khalid Asghairi (below, right), a former Afghan army major who works as a linguist on Lazurite, said the work was hugely appreciated. "Our people can see that the soldiers go the extra mile to help them. The troops are very respectful and ensure the operation runs smoothly," he added.





The nature of today's handheld tech means that attacks can be more personalised

'Cyber expertise required'

A DEFENCE model in which the Army could call on a pool of civvy digital gurus might pay off in future crises, according to a former top Nato official.

Jamie Shea (pictured below), who briefed journalists during campaigns including the Kosovo conflict while later studying new threats to the alliance, believed capability could be beefed up with more social media and cyber security experts on board.

Fostering a series of strong relationships with senior executives in tech firms now could provide an immediate advantage if war broke out, he added.

Shea – who retired from Nato in 2019 after serving in his final role as deputy assistant secretary general for emerging security challenges – pointed out that the British military already had a decent level of in-house expertise.

But the former alliance boss, who is now a consultant and academic, maintained that constantly adapting to a fast-moving situation was crucial. He added: "The media space, for example, is now a weapon of war.

"In Ukraine, we have seen personnel sent threatening text messages in a more sophisticated version of Lord Haw Haw – the man the Nazis deployed to intimidate civilians over the radio during the Second World War.

"None of this is new, but technology



now allows personal messages to be created, targeted to the psyche of an individual and sent straight to a phone."

Cyber attacks had already shown that they could wreak havoc on critical infrastructure and states must be able to deal with them effectively, he added.

Highlighting that Chief of the General Staff, Gen Sir Patrick Sanders, had suggested that the wider UK population must be ready if there is an escalation in Europe, Shea asserted a pool of experts could be a sensible step.

Other countries – particularly in Scandinavia – were already tapping into niche abilities and fielding a well-organised defence against cyber attacks.

He pointed out that the game had changed, even since the relatively recent campaigns.

"Back when I was the Nato spokesman during the Kosovo crisis of 1999, traditional media with the likes of CNN and the BBC still ruled the airwaves," he said.

"With the proliferation of channels now, there would have been serious challenge to the campaign before you even got to misinformation and the social media space.

"Life is different, and the age of artificial intelligence is now enabling realistic fakes of leaders to be created – we need specialists to help out," he concluded. ■

“
We need
specialists to
help out
”

Mould misery continues

■ THE number of outstanding maintenance jobs on Service homes continues to fall, but mould remains a commonly reported issue, according to the Defence Infrastructure Organisation.

Phil Riley, the outfit's head of accommodation, said scheduled tasks were now at roughly a quarter of the peak figure (21,100) seen in late 2022 after Pinnacle took on the contract for family housing.

Unsurprisingly, complaints are also down – by more than 71 per cent.

Of the 979 active in January, around 15 per cent were about mould – second only in volume to dissatisfaction with the time taken to complete repairs.

Riley acknowledged damp and mould were a big concern to tenants, and said measures were being taken to address this.

"We're initially targeting the most serious cases, with nearly 1,400 homes having had work done so far, and a further 700 to be worked on early in the next financial year," he explained.

"On top of that, there are around 1,700 properties which need more minor interventions, such as treatment and repainting, the large majority of which have been completed.

"This work has been greatly helped by the establishment, a year ago, of a dedicated damp and mould task force with staff from DIO, Pinnacle, Amey and Vivo."

He added that a £400m upgrade to doors, windows, insulation and roofing on thousands of quarters over the next two years would further improve the situation.

Riley credited the reduction in complaints to extra personnel recruited by the contractors, including regional case handlers and customer solutions managers.

EX-TIGER UNLEASHES TOP FOOTY PRIZES



■ A FORMER infantryman has netted some Premier League prizes for a charity raffle at a Surrey pub. Russell Webb (ex-PWRR, shown) has secured signed shirts from clubs including Liverpool and Southampton, matchday tickets and high street vouchers. Troops are invited to buy tickets at The Crown Hotel in London Street, Chertsey on March 23 from 1800 to raise funds for Help for Heroes. Search "Crown Hotel Chertsey" for more info.



M62 attack remembered

CROWDS gathered to remember soldiers and their loved ones who were killed when terrorists bombed a coach 50 years ago. Relatives of the 12 who died in the M62 atrocity joined Army representatives, civic dignitaries, veterans and the public for a special service at a memorial garden in the Hartshead Moor service area. Nine troops from the Royal Artillery, Royal Signals and 2nd Battalion, The Royal Regiment of Fusiliers lost their lives when the Provisional IRA attacked the vehicle carrying them back from weekend leave to Catterick and Darlington. Among them was Cpl Clifford Haughton (RRF), who was killed alongside wife Linda and the couple's two young children. Some 38 people were also injured.



TRUCK IT AND SEE

A CHARITY that helps unemployed veterans train as lorry drivers is looking for new applicants.

Run by SW Scotland RnR, the scheme has so far funded HGV courses for 74 ex-military personnel. And it expects that number to climb to 100 by the end of the year.

It can also finance courses for those needing to convert their military HGV qualification into the civvy equivalent.

As founder and former Reservist Robin Hood (ex-Scots and RLC) pointed out, salaries for truckers can reach £50,000 around London and £35,000 elsewhere.

"Three people we have helped were living rough and now have well-paid jobs," he said.

Applicants can be based anywhere in the UK, must not be in employment and have no more than six points on their car licence.

Hood's charity also funds holidays in Dumfries and Galloway for injured troops.

Contact him on robinhoodswnr@gmail.com

“
There were actually significant casualties
”



THE HM Forces Veteran Card is now available to ex-personnel. It aims to make life easier by providing proof that they served when trying to access support and discounts. Sign up by searching "veteran card" on gov.uk

Call for Cold War medal

A PETITION calling for a medal to be issued to the thousands who served during the Cold War has been gaining traction online.

The document on the UK Parliament website had pulled in some 3,750 signatures as this issue went to press.

Supporters insist soldiers who helped deter conflict during the tense stand-off with the Soviet Union and its allies should be rewarded.

A government response will follow if the petition hits the 10,000 mark by the July 26 deadline, and the matter will be considered for Westminster debate with 100,000 backers.

Lodged by retired Royal Air Force group captain Alan Ferguson (shown), the request makes the case that Cold War troops were instrumental in preventing aggression as they stood toe-to-toe with Russian-led Warsaw Pact militaries.

However, the former fast-jet pilot is suggesting veterans contribute to the cost of their medal with the heavy burden the move would place on the public purse.

Ferguson told *Soldier*: "The idea of a medal came to me after I recently attended a service at the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire.

"It is only when you look at the names on the monuments that you realise how many people were lost during that era – there were actually significant casualties [in training].

"The award would be tri-Service, so



I am hoping we can gain support from across the Forces."

The proposal has received a mixed reception from former Cold War soldiers.

Steve Davies, who served with 3rd Battalion, The Royal Green Jackets during the 1970s, believes gongs should only be issued for specific deployments.

"I only have the UN medal for Cyprus and Op Banner award for Northern Ireland – but that was normal for my time in service.

"I can understand the reasons for wanting this decoration but it is not for me – medals should only be issued for campaigns, long service or gallantry."

However, ex-sapper Dereck Hardman – who served during the 1980s – believed the medal proposal might attract some support.

"Life expectancy of soldiers would have been very short if war had broken out," he concluded. "The era was not as easy as some now think." ■



Ground view

Army Sergeant Major, WO1 Paul Carney, offers his take on Service life...

INTERNATIONAL Women's Day falls on March 8 and the theme for this year's event is "inspire inclusion", which I think is a valuable message for us all to take on board.

I've always been clear that diversity makes the Army a stronger team – having different mindsets, perspectives and experiences within the workforce creates a more capable, effective organisation.

But I think it's useful to reflect on what we as individuals can do to drive that forward.

My wife served 23 years and I was taken aback by some of the attitudes she had to deal with, both as a soldier and officer.

I'm the first to admit I became a better soldier by meeting her and marrying her, but I also had my eyes opened to how she had to work twice as hard through her career to get to the same place I did.

For all the progress we've made, we need to keep in mind that we still work in a predominantly male environment.

In my whole time in the Service, I've only felt like a minority once – when I went to my wife's mess.

She was the only woman, which meant I was the only male guest.

The battery

commanders were obviously polite, the late-entry officers were welcoming but had their own club, the subalterns were wary of me as a sergeant major and the female guests saw me as a soldier, not a partner.

So for that short period of time I got a small insight into what it's like to feel different and segregated.

It may sound comparatively minor – but that's precisely the point.

Most of the time, men are in the majority, so the occasions when we find ourselves in the minority are few and far between.

We'll never genuinely understand what it's like, but we can be out there, as men, being curious.

International Women's Day allows you to do that and ask those questions.

And I hope our female colleagues feel able to open themselves up and forgive what might sometimes come across as quite clumsy questions. Education and personal development is the only way we'll get better.

Servicewomen contribute just as much as men do to the Army – let's recognise that and be good allies to build the best teams.

She had to work twice has hard to get to the same place I did



RESPIRATOR READINESS

WITH personnel deployed on one of the biggest exercises in 40 years – Exercise Steadfast Defender (page 7) – I'd like to come back to the topic of readiness.

I've previously talked about the importance of keeping yourself and your family prepared, however it's just as vital to stay on top of your individual kit.

It's something people often leave until the last minute and one item in

particular we tend to neglect is our respirators.

These are life-saving bits of equipment and the CBRN threat in Eastern Europe is still very real.

So I'd like everyone to get theirs out, check them and make sure they are within the correct parameters.

We all hope we never need them for real, but if that day comes it will be critical that they're in good working order.

TIME WILL TELL ON NEW HOUSING RULES

■ THE new accommodation offer is being rolled out this month (page 15) and I understand there is concern among some personnel about things such as entitlement, availability and increased costs.

My message is that we need to let this play out and avoid scaremongering. I want people to read up on it and inform themselves.

There are presentations and workshops happening to help troops and their families understand the new system – go and find one taking place near you.

I don't want soldiers or officers to be out of money or uncomfortable; I want them to feel they're getting the package they deserve.

There will be challenges but, overall, I think this will offer people more choice and be a good thing for many.



THE BIG PICTURE

Boden, Sweden

Frozen fireballs

BRITISH gunners have fired their newest bit of kit – the Archer mobile howitzer – for the first time.

The landmark moment saw troops from the Royal School of Artillery put into practice all the theory they had learnt in a 14-week “train the trainer” course from the Swedish Army.

The Larkhill-based soldiers faced some harsh Nordic weather conditions during the live-firing stint in Lapland, while also having to shift their mindsets from the tracked platform they are more familiar with.

The UK donated 32 AS90 self-propelled guns to Ukraine last year, with the Archer system bought from the Swedish Government as an interim solution for the gap that created in the 155mm close support capability.

Picture: Sgt Robert Weideman, RLC





HEAVY
WEAPONS

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The Aimpoint Fire Control System (FCS) is a Dynamic Universal Reflex Sight (DURS) for use on Multiple Weapon Platforms. The Aimpoint FCS sighting system consists of an eye safe 1550 nm Laser Range Finder, a ballistic computer with the capability to store more than 50 different ballistic algorithms, and a parallax free optical channel (DVO, Direct View Optic) with unlimited eye relief making it easy to transition between different targets.

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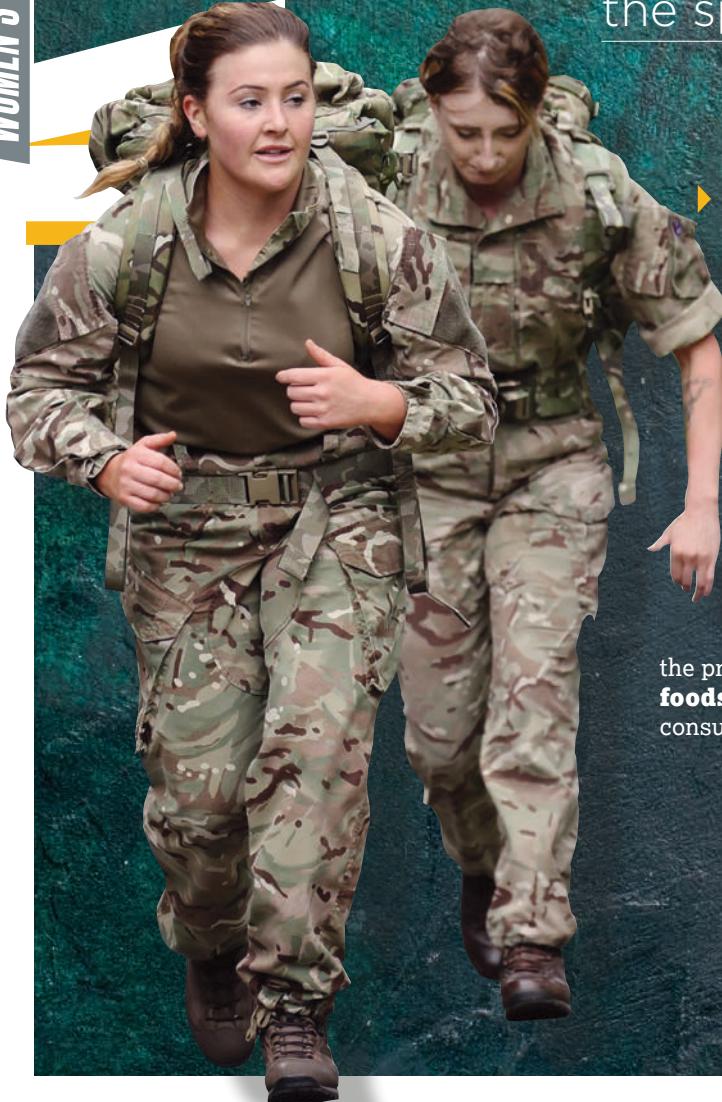
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WEED TO WIN

WOMEN'S WELLNESS: NUTRITION / HEALTH / FITNESS / 7 QUESTIONS

A girl's gotta eat...

What a healthy day's scoff looks like for the female of the species



► GOOD nutrition isn't just about achieving personal bests. It is fundamental to military capability – and therefore even a matter of life or death on the battlefield.

So if Servicewomen are to outperform the enemy on future ops, they need to be mindful of the fact their recommended daily intake is different to that of men.

The "military performance plate" is a set of guidelines developed by defence dietitians which reflects the food needs of different roles.

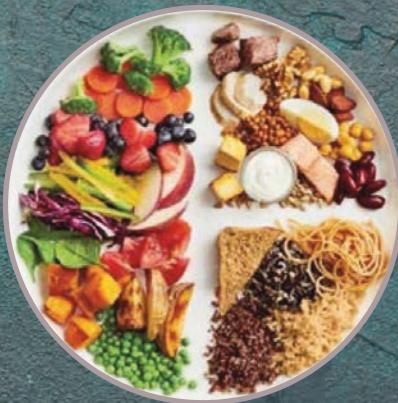
Here, we give a rundown of what it looks like for females – including the proportion of **fruit and veg**, **starchy foods** and **protein** they should aim to consume each day.



EVERYDAY PLATE

Ideal for: Desk jobs, weight management, Reservists who aren't mobilised

Energy need:
2,200 kcal/day
(2,000 for low activity)



ACTIVE SERVICE PLATE

Ideal for: Regulars and mobilised Reservists, those posted overseas or undertaking regular patrols

Energy need:
2,800kcal/day



MILITARY TRAINING PLATE

For: Military courses (initial and trade), PDT, personnel on exercise and operations

Energy need:
3,100-3,500kcal/day



+
Fruit, nuts, seeds, low-fat dairy and cereal bars all make good snacks whatever your level of activity

+
Drink at least **two litres of water** per day



3 MORE THINGS

IRON

Women aged 19-50 have higher requirements than men. This is because their periods can use up reserves, especially with heavy periods. It is thought more than a quarter of women may have inadequate intakes, increasing their risk of anaemia (symptoms of which include tiredness and lack of energy). Eat red meat, fish and shellfish (such as canned sardines, cockles and mussels), beans, pulses, nuts and seeds, quinoa, wholemeal bread and dried fruit to boost your levels.

CALCIUM

It maintains strong bones and teeth as well as supporting the normal functioning of nerves and muscles. And it is particularly important for females because they are at higher risk of osteoporosis (fragile bones) as they get older. Around 1 in 10 adult women have intakes which are likely to be inadequate. Try to consume at least two portions of milk or dairy per day. Calcium is also found in green leafy vegetables, dairy alternatives and bread.

VITAMIN D

This helps regulate the amount of calcium and phosphate in the body. Government advice is that everyone should consider taking a 10 microgram daily vitamin D supplement during the autumn and winter.

For more information search for the Defence Nutrition Advisory Service online

Testing times

Could the contraceptive pill be impacting your performance? Army scientists are trying to find out – and they need **YOUR** help

► THE female body has long been overlooked by medical research. Did you know, for example, that women are less likely than men to have their pain treated or their symptoms taken seriously?

This is probably because their bodies have been missing from many clinical trials over the years.

But with the government wanting females to account for 30 per cent of all new recruits by 2030, data on their health has never been more important to the Army.

Enter the Health and Performance Research Team in Army HQ, who are conducting their very own study into the impact of the menstrual cycle and hormone contraceptives on Servicewomen's bones and muscles.

Research technician Sarah Myers tells us more...

Why is the Army looking at this?

To help inform the contraceptive choices of Servicewomen. This research is vital to understanding how the birth control that many use for years are affecting musculoskeletal health. **It's important to know how performance may be impacted in the field.** But this is relevant to all women because we just don't know

the influence of oestrogen on muscle and bone health.

How are you doing it?

We are testing muscle strength and bone density alongside blood and urine samples to assess the levels of oestrogen against their performance. Volunteers attend our lab at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst between two and five times. On each visit they provide a blood sample, a urine sample and have a measurement of muscle and tendon properties taken in their leg. On the first visit they complete several questionnaires relating to lifestyle, diet and menstrual history. On the other occasions they complete a number of lab tests that relate to bone and muscle function.

What help do you need?

A crucial part of this research is the wonderful volunteers – military and civilian – who have already taken part.

We are looking for more, though, aged 18-40, who are either not using any hormonal contraceptives or are using the hormonal implant, injection, hormonal coil or combined oral

contraceptive pill. Military and civilian volunteers are welcome. Anyone interested can get in touch with me via sarah.myers105@mod.gov.uk to discuss eligibility and ask questions. The more volunteers we get, the more relevant the results become.

Do volunteers get paid?

They receive up to £296.82 if they are in the non-contraceptive group, and £226.44 in the contraceptive group, as compensation for time. Volunteers are paid differently due to differences in the number of tests. There are no travel expenses, but support may be available from units. If volunteers withdraw from the study, they are paid pro rata.





Strong effort

Marathon kicks off medic's bid to smash trio of physical challenges

► NEXT month Cpl Milly Williams (RAMC) will take on the London Marathon – the first of three fitness goals she set herself for 2024.

Back in January, the 26-year-old wrote her objectives on a bottle of champagne and if all goes to plan, by October she'll be able to pop the cork and toast her own success.

Here, she reveals which events lie in store and how she'll adapt her training and diet to ensure she hits each one in peak condition...

APRIL

1 London Marathon

It's my first time and I've been training for about 11 months now, doing two or three runs per week and one longer one of anything over 15 miles once a fortnight – as well as circuits, swimming and biking.

I've been fuelling my body properly, eating good carbs and protein – lots of chicken, veg and rice – but ahead of longer runs I up the carbs and sugary things.

I'm running for the Army Benevolent Fund, who do amazing work, so on the day I want to know I've given it everything I've got.

SEPTEMBER

2 PCA Bodybuilding and Fitness Federation competition

I did this a few years ago and came second. Since then I've focused on putting on a bit more muscle.

You need about four months to prepare. I'll be on a really strict low-carb, high-fat diet and training six to seven days a week. You do cardio every day, as well as abs, plus whatever other muscle group you're training.

OCTOBER

3 Hyrox fitness race

This is a functional movement circuit event, a bit like CrossFit. The diet will be very different – lots of carbohydrates and just eating a lot more generally.

My training will focus on faster runs, but for shorter distances, unlike the marathon, which is about going at a steady pace for longer.

I will definitely feel proud and also a sense of relief when I finish the last challenge – and I'll look forward to opening that champagne.



“

My motivation is that when I'm 70, I'd rather look back and be proud of all the things I've achieved than having regrets

”

Name: Cpl Milly Williams

Age: 26

Military career: Joined the Royal Army Medical Corps in 2016. Currently serving at Defence Medical Services Whittington



Follow the QR code to help her reach her £3,000 goal in aid of ABF



Feeling off form ladies?

Clues that your oestrogen levels may be dropping – and what to do about it



PERIMENOPAUSE SYMPTOMS

► HAVE your periods changed recently? Are you feeling a bit low? Memory problems? Dry eyes? Aches and pains?

With busy military lives, it can be easy for Servicewomen to overlook health niggles such as these.

But did you know they are all possible symptoms of the perimenopause – a time of life before the menopause when female oestrogen levels begin to tail off?

This can happen years before the menopause itself, affecting many women in their thirties and early forties.

And it can cause huge disruption because, as well as regulating periods, oestrogen is used to keep the brain and body in good working order.

Here are some signs that your hormone levels might be depleted... and what to do next if you are concerned.

TYPICALLY, THE FIRST SIGN IS A CHANGE TO THE DURATION, FREQUENCY OR FLOW OF YOUR PERIODS



LOW MOOD, ANXIETY

MEMORY PROBLEMS, BRAIN FOG

DRY MOUTH

MIGRAINES

FATIGUE OR DISTURBED SLEEP

POOR CONCENTRATION

HOT FLASHES

DRY, ITCHY
VAGINAMUSCLE AND JOINT PAIN
OR STIFFNESS

ITCHY, DRY SKIN

IN NUMBERS

45

Age perimenopause starts for most women. For many it is much younger, though

51

Average age of menopause in the UK

WHAT NEXT?

Speak to your GP if you think you are displaying perimenopause symptoms. Getting advice early can help to reduce the impact.

Take a list of your most troublesome symptoms and don't be afraid to ask for a double appointment.

During the chat you should expect to discuss the menopause stages, symptoms and diagnosis; benefits and risks of different treatments; lifestyle changes that could help and the impact of menopause on your long-term health.

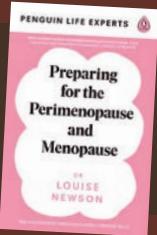
For most women, hormone replacement therapy (HRT) vastly improves symptoms and can offer a new lease of life.

It can be started during the perimenopause and menopause – and the earlier it is taken, the sooner it works to improve symptoms. It can also help to protect against the long-term risks of hormone deficiency including cardiovascular disease, osteoporosis, diabetes and dementia.

If you feel you would benefit from HRT and your healthcare professional refuses to prescribe it, ask if that decision is being made in line with current menopause guidelines.

Ask questions and don't be afraid to challenge treatment decisions or get a second opinion. It is important it is a two-way discussion.

- For more support check out the British Menopause Society (thebms.org.uk) or *The Doctor Louise Newson Podcast*



Information taken from *Preparing for the Perimenopause and Menopause* by Dr Louise Newson

Back with a BANG

Women's Inter-Services Alpine ski champion tells Soldier about her triumphant return to the piste

AFTER walking away from ski racing 20 years ago, Maj Tess Pirie (RAMC) saw the Army's quest for honours at the Inter-Services Snowsports Championships as the perfect platform for a competitive comeback.

The Reservist bagged five silver medals in five events on the slopes of Meribel in 2023 and went one better this season, claiming the women's individual title and helping the soldiers to team gold.

Here, she gives an insight into a sporting journey spanning four decades and reflects on a secondary career in uniform...



1 What is your background in skiing?

I was part of the British team that competed at the 1999 Alpine World Ski Championships in Vail, Colorado, and then finished third at the World Student Games in 2001. After that it was time to focus on my career and I spent 20 years doctoring. I joined the Reserves in 2021 and got on the Army team.

2 How hard was it to get back up to speed?

I had been on trips with friends and family and have done a lot of coaching with junior athletes, so I'd kept up with my skiing – just not the racing. I'm 45 and at my age the danger is a bigger risk factor. An injury now would not be good, so I had to weigh that up. But I've got enough experience to be smart on the slopes and it has gone really well.

3 Can you describe the challenge of competing at Meribel?

It is a world-class piste, with world-class risk – you have to be brave, especially in the downhill. It is super stressful at the top and you cannot be half-arsed; the safest way down is to attack and be aggressive. Then you have events like the slalom, which is fast and technical, and the giant slalom, which is exhausting over very long runs.

4 What attracted you to the Army team?

The fun and camaraderie. Part of my motivation was the fact I'm an experienced racer and I wanted to show other women what we can do. In

the past women have sometimes been seen as a nice add-on to the sport, but we can perform. I thought 'I'm going to up my game' and that gave me the push to be aggressive and fight for fast times. Attitudes have changed, and the climate in the Army team is fantastic.

5 After 20 years in medicine why did you decide to join the Reserves?

I was working as a civilian GP with The Black Watch at Fort George and the commanding officer there suggested I join as the Army was looking for doctors and GPs. My late brother-in-law, Col Rob Burley, was Defence Adviser General Practice at Defence Medical Services, so there was a family link as well. He inspired me and knew I would enjoy it.

6 Any highlights to date?

We did our annual camp at Altcar and faced a scenario where a village had been bombed – there was a tank on fire and 30-odd casualties wandering around. I was with the pre-hospital trauma team, giving initial triage, treating patients and getting ambulance crews in to take them away. We were working towards having less tentage and using different buildings and areas that are not highlighted with a big red cross. It was great experience.

7 What are your future aspirations in skiing?

I'm due to move units so I'm not sure if I'll be at Meribel next year. I think the coaching route is where I'll be going next and hopefully I can use my experience to help the Army. If this was my last competition, I'll be finishing on a high.



Don't boob the bra

How to ensure
your underwear
boosts – not
botches – your
workout



1 Get fitted properly. Like footwear, if you guess your size you can end up causing yourself all sorts of problems – from lack of support, chafing and overheating to general discomfort. All of this will distract you from your exercise.

2 Tailor it to your activity. If you are playing football or running you will need something for high impact sports. If you are lifting weights or taking a yoga class, however, you may only need a medium-to-light support bra as you will not be moving around as vigorously.

3 Remember that a large cup doesn't have to mean high support. Well-made sports bras are designed to function throughout the breast sizes. So there is no reason you can't enjoy light support if required. Likewise, it is a mistake to think smaller breasts don't need high support sometimes.

4 Maximum movement requires a high impact bra. This minimises bounce. These garments are crafted with advanced materials and strategic designs to ensure you can stay focused. As a general guide, look for one with adjustable straps as this will greatly improve the fit of the bra. This is especially important if you are between sizes or your weight fluctuates throughout the month. Remember to check the adjusters each time you wear the bra because they will likely move during workouts and washing. Wide padded straps for larger cup sizes help to reduce uncomfortable digging in the shoulders.

5 Choose fabric with advanced moisture-wicking technology. This can be a game changer as it draws sweat away from the skin,

► A GOOD sports bra can make all the difference to female fitness regimes. The experts at sportswear specialist Anita Active have these tips for making the right choices...

promoting breathability and preventing chafing. This not only enhances your overall comfort but supports your skin's health by keeping it dry and irritation-free.

6 Avoid the tumble dryer. This will damage the fibres. Instead, handwash and dry flat (not on a radiator) to make sure your kit stays in optimum condition for as long as possible.

● Visit boobydoo.co.uk to purchase an Anita Active sports bra. Look out for the "key worker" link at the bottom of the web page

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Kit & Personal Possessions Insurance gives you peace of mind knowing if your service kit is damaged or lost, whether home or away, it'll be taken care of.

What's available:

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DOING THINGS DIFFERENTLY

How is the new Soldier Academy transforming basic training? We spoke to its commandant, Brig Andrew Garner, to find out

How would you describe the Soldier Academy?

It was formed to modernise basic training under a single one-star command, which brings a refined and more efficient common purpose. Since 2021 the Army's Future Soldier reforms have seen a drive to ensure the Service is fit to fight and win wars on land with a rapidly growing and changing threat picture. That means the training of our recruits has had to change to meet those demands, so the new organisation sits alongside the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, which is responsible for officer basic training. Together, these deliver coordinated foundation courses for everyone who joins the British Army. Formerly the Initial Training Group, we are responsible for 15 units (see panel on page 34).

Report: Steve Muncley Pictures: Graeme Main

But is this just a rebrand of existing training?

No. The way we produce new soldiers for the Army has taken a revolutionary step forward. We are responsible for a broader span than just basic training, taking in infantry initial trade training and all-arms physical training instructors, as well as specialists in Army ceremonial and some musical requirements. For the first time, all Regular personnel will complete the same course because we've developed and introduced a standardised 13-week programme called the common military syllabus. There are structural variations to it between standard entry, junior entry, and the Reserves – who conduct a shortened version – but the content is largely the same. Having one syllabus for all means »





The Soldier Academy structure

Pirbright

- Headquarters Soldier Academy, HQ Regiment
- 1 and 2 Army Training Regiments
- Army Recruitment and Initial Training Command Staff and Leadership School

Aldershot

- Army School of Physical Training

Winchester

- Army Training Regiment

Soldier Academy (North)

- HQ Battalion Infantry Training Centre (Catterick) which also commands the Army School of Ceremony, and the Army School of Bagpipe Music and Highland Drumming in Edinburgh
- 1 and 2 Infantry Training Battalions (Catterick)
- Army Foundation College (Harrogate)

Soldier Academy (Reserves)

- Army Training Regiment (Grantham)
- Army Training Units: North (Strensall), Northern Ireland (Ballykinler), Scotland (Edinburgh), West (Cardiff and Exeter)

» we now know that when recruits leave phase one they are at the same baseline and prepared for the Field Army's requirements.

Are all basic training establishments now using it?

They will be soon. The syllabus went through a series of pilots. The Household Cavalry, Royal Armoured Corps, line Infantry, the Guards and the combat support and combat service support recruits have already adopted it. Junior entry courses will begin to deliver the new programme this month. By September of this year Reserve recruits will start to use it, with The Parachute Regiment and Gurkhas being the last to adopt the syllabus in 2025.

Why is the concept important to the Army?

Apart from the consistency in quality that I mentioned, we need a common approach across those first 13 weeks to provide more opportunity for recruits to transfer into different areas of the Army. Someone could join up wanting to be a Royal Engineer, for example, and find out they like the dismounted close combat aspects of training so much they want to join the Infantry instead. That person would have had to start over again, but now recruits are at the same standard at the end of phase one, so we can switch them over and not risk losing them. The Army has a recruiting challenge that everyone recognises, and early indications are this aspect of the new system is already helping retain people.

Has the academy introduced any other enhancements?

We're using digital platforms to boost training by employing the *MyTraining* app, the Defence Learning Environment, and other applications that we've designed. All recruits now receive their own



portable electronic device for the duration of their basic training, allowing their instructors to easily and accurately track progress and identify areas for improvement. In the evenings the trainees can also reflect on how they are doing. They've got revision lessons on the system so they can go over certain topics whenever they like. The recruit can also easily engage with the instructor through the device, which is another major benefit.

What other equipment do they get?

All our recruits are also issued with up-to-date kit such as Virtus body armour, helmet and webbing, and we are in the process of providing night vision systems so they become accustomed to operating in the dark before going on to their initial trade training. That's a significant change for recruits, to be using current kit. Up until four months ago they received old equipment. Now they have time to fit their gear properly and become accustomed to using it before moving to the next stage.

How has the teaching itself been updated?

We needed to ensure the syllabus was fit for current and future threats, so we've introduced more tuition on how the Field Army operates and is adapting to meet current challenges, such as the conflict in Ukraine and elsewhere. Obviously, their training at this stage is not as complex as it will become later, but we cover the main principles including drones, operating at night and how vulnerable we are through thermal signatures. Requirements such as returning to how important digging-in is in terms of defence is also covered.

Would you say the training is more progressive?

Yes. We've introduced an increase in mental resilience preparation through adventurous training – to the end of week four – to give them



an appreciation of their robustness before they embark on an extended tactical phase in the field. We've inserted long weekends so they can go home more frequently because we were finding that a lack of home time was one of the issues people cited when they chose to leave at this stage. It is all part of recognising that we need to manage the adjustment from civilian to military life with additional care. I think the package now gets this right. It is good for the Army and good for the recruit. It's still early days and we'll continue to refine and adjust where necessary.

Has all this meant changes to the way instructors are trained?

Yes, we ensure they are coached to a very high level as an instructor before they deliver in the phase one environment, where they will be role models and mentors to our recruits. We have introduced a standard pre-employment package, centred upon the all-arms initial training course for junior NCOs where they receive both military and civilian-recognised teaching qualifications (*Soldier*, January). Subject to their cap badge and experience, they will gain other competencies as well, for example in drill or CBRN. If you're in the Infantry, you may have gained some of these before, but in the Royal Army Medical Corps, for example, you might not. We want all our instructors to have those qualifications. That benefits the Field Army, too, in the long term as they will leave here as more rounded, empowered and capable individuals who, when they return to their units, are able to handle far more responsibility. ■

'Treated more like grown-ups'

CORPORAL Stephanie Carrick (AGC (SPS), pictured below) is an instructor at Pirbright who went through phase one training eight years ago. She believes the Soldier Academy set-up will appeal to the next generation of Service personnel...

"Phase one recruits are treated a lot more like grown-ups than they were when I came through," she says. "Before, you only had one long weekend away in the middle of the course and another towards the end but they are allowed out more now and are responsible for managing their time, which will help retention."

"Online learning is another positive change as the generations coming through love being on devices. The main practical modules are still delivered in person but the advantage of digital delivery is not just around lessons but revision as well. For example, recruits have access to every drill movement via a QR code where they can watch the video back as many times as they need to. It's great for visual learners."

"There's also a really good online portal for helping to learn battlefield casualty drills. For putting on a tourniquet, for example, they have a figure on screen and can click options to make decisions about what to do next."

"The recruits can revise the technique in their own time without needing the kit and each other to use as mock patients."

"Overall, I think these refinements will really help them reach the required standard, and the Army to retain more people at this crucial stage in their careers."



FREQUENT FLYER

Airborne medic gives first-hand view of fast-paced training

ARMY nurse Cpl Ash Brown (QARANC) swapped his cannula for a camera during a recent training stint on Salisbury Plain.

Alongside his challenging day job in critical care, the enthusiastic amateur stashed his photo kit in his back pocket to capture highlights of Exercise Winged Serpent.

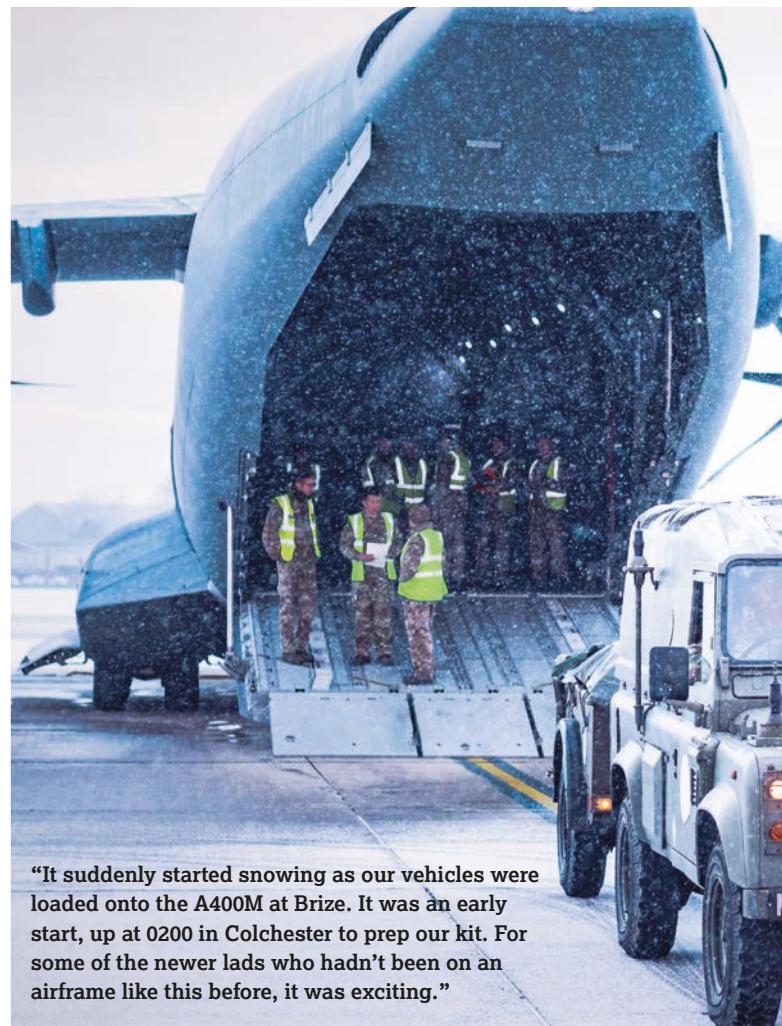
The result is a colourful ground view of the stern tests that 16 Medical Regiment personnel faced in readiness for future operations with 16 Air Assault Brigade Combat Team.

Surgeons, dentists, biomedical scientists and combat medical technicians were all put through their paces in the now almost-routine training scenario of a short-notice call to support an ally invaded by a hostile neighbour.

After flying into Boscombe Down on a Royal Air Force A400M, the troops were moved forward by helicopter to set up their treatment facilities. And from there they got to work dealing with everything from toothache to catastrophic blast injuries – with checks of their communications, supply management and camouflage skills all thrown in for good measure.

Having supported the 2021 Kabul evacuation on Op Pitting and last year's Turkey earthquake relief, these soldiers understand how fast the next call can come.

Report: Sarah Goldthorpe Pictures: Ash Brown (QARANC)



"It suddenly started snowing as our vehicles were loaded onto the A400M at Brize. It was an early start, up at 0200 in Colchester to prep our kit. For some of the newer lads who hadn't been on an airframe like this before, it was exciting."



Cpl Ash Brown



“On our arrival at Boscombe Down, the Wildcat landed 100m away to deliver medics on to the training area. Here are some of the Role 2 clinicians – doctors, nurses and radiographers – boarding the airframe.”



“This was taken just after the light surgical team had treated a casualty on the ‘battlefield’. The Wildcats dropped medical supplies and took a patient away.”



“The flight to Boscombe Down. You can see someone is almost asleep – everyone was pretty tired at this point. Half an hour on the plane was an opportunity to get some shut-eye ahead of the exercise.”



“The pre-hospital treatment team unload a casualty from the back of an ambulance.”



“An ambulance medic reads out a handover to a treatment team. The doctor can be seen in the background.”



“Inside the Role 2 resus facility. The soldier in the maroon beret is one of the testers from the Army Medical Services Training Centre. Another trauma team can also be seen preparing for the next casualty in the background. It’s very much controlled chaos at this point. Everyone working here has done it for real in NHS hospitals.”



“A moment mid-exercise. The barn there housed the light surgical team.”

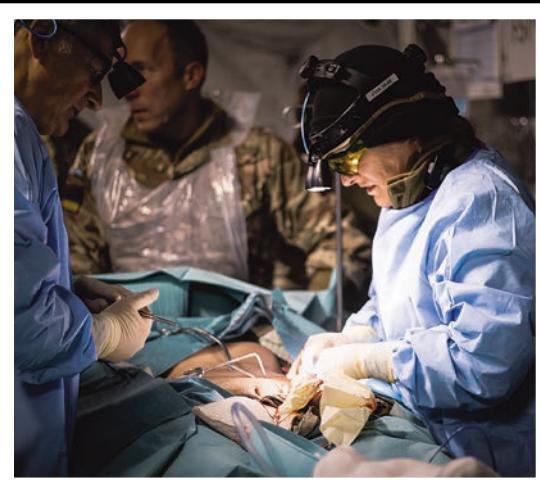


“Medics from 4th Battalion, The Parachute Regiment’s regimental aid post were also validated during the package. Here they can be seen attending to a patient with 60 per cent burns to the arms and legs.”



“Blood supplies ran out during the exercise, so we were replenished by an A400M.”





“Trauma surgeons prepare for surgery and the teams get to know each other. In the field you have to be mindful of how much stuff you use. Unlike hospitals, there are limited supplies.”



“The exercise culminated in us supporting an attack on Copehill Down by 4th Battalion, The Royal Regiment of Scotland. We wanted to test how they would cope if their medic got taken out, and that can be seen here. They did pretty well. In terms of the attached assets and 4 Scots being involved as well, Winged Serpent was probably the largest exercise I have been part of.”

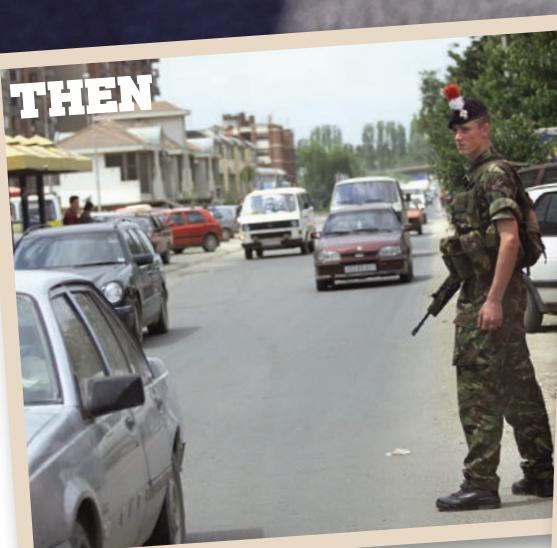
NOW



BACK TO THE FUTURE

British troops have been holding the line in Kosovo – 25 years after Nato first intervened in the Balkans flashpoint

THEN



THEN



THEN





Report: Cliff Caswell Pictures: Graeme Main; MoD



AMES Vanstone could not help noticing that Pristina had an unusual feeling after disembarking from his flight at the Kosovar capital's airport.

While the terminal seemed – at face value – to be the same as any other of its kind around the world, the rapid appearance of soldiers from different nations immediately dispelled any illusion that this was a conventional destination.

"You don't see many airports that have a dedicated military arrivals area," the lance corporal from 1st Battalion, The Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment, said. "And when you head through the city the scale of the Nato presence there does take you aback – there are still lots of troops around."

As he headed out of the capital and into the northern countryside, joining a Tigers battlegroup sent to bolster Nato forces following an upsurge in violence, he gazed out on a view familiar to British soldiers past.

The story that they began in the year after his birth, he realised, was still far from over.

Kosovo has long faded from the headlines – and it is no longer a regular destination on the British Army tour treadmill. But in March 1999 it led on every TV broadcast and newspaper front page as it became the focus of a huge military action.

Then part of neighbouring Serbia, the province had seen an uprising after its largely ethnic Albanian population had endured years of repression by their political masters.

The ruling country's president Slobodan Milosevic, who already had a reputation for brutality, responded with an unfettered campaign of violence and murder, the survivors of which joined a refugee exodus that was fast becoming a humanitarian crisis of biblical proportions.

Leading the international community in response, Nato intervened and an ensuing air campaign, dubbed Allied Force, led to Serbia's capitulation three months later.

Alliance ground troops who had been assembling in neighbouring Macedonia moved in as they convened the Kosovo Force – or Kfor – becoming the pioneers of today's ongoing peacekeeping action. Thousands of British personnel were involved in a string of tour rotations initially under the codename Op Agricola.

As the deployment wore on, however, attention as well as resources shifted to wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in the wake of al-Qaeda's US terror strikes in 2001.

But Kosovo remained volatile and while its local leaders declared independence, Serbia, Russia and other countries flatly refused to recognise the move.

And despite the Nato presence – some 3,800 personnel from 27 states remain – inter-ethnic violence has continued on the domestic front, with northern interface areas near Serbia the most volatile.

Last year was a particularly testing time in these communities, with contacts between gunmen and local security forces leaving a Kosovo Police Service officer dead and several others injured.

The trouble prompted alliance commanders to summon the 600 troops in the 1 PWRR battlegroup – then the theatre strategic reserve force on 14 days' notice to move – into play on Operation Elgin.

"Curiously, I had written a policy briefing paper on Kosovo »

YUGOSLAV FLASHBACK

BACK in 1999 – with the shockwaves of the Soviet Union's collapse still being felt – the Balkans area of southern Europe had become a tinder box.

With the established Cold War world gone, states once held together by leaders of the old order began to break up.

As civil wars raged, peacekeeping ops throughout the former Yugoslavia – notably in Bosnia – were standard fare.

But with Slobodan Milosevic seemingly determined to hold onto Kosovo at the barrel of a gun, a full-on warfighting campaign became a real possibility for troops massing with the Nato alliance in neighbouring Macedonia.

We asked two soldiers who were there in 1999 for their reflections...

WO1 Paul Carney

Joined up: 1997

Now: **Army Sergeant Major**

Then: **Sapper, 21 Engineer Regt**

“

I remember us all talking among ourselves – we couldn't quite believe we were going on the Kosovo deployment. It was an exciting time for us as soldiers.

Living off a vehicle day-to-day was something I had to learn to do on arrival in Skopje, Macedonia. There was every type of weather imaginable – snow, hail, you name it – so personal admin was very important.

I also remember seeing Nato soldiers from different nations for the first time and all the British Army's kit including AS90 and Challenger 2, relatively new in service back then.

You learn a lot from being on deployment – when the air campaign ended and we finally arrived in Kosovo, I quickly found out that building strong relationships with the local population on that type of operation is critical.

”



Maj Tony McGrane

Joined up: 1993

Now: **Company OC, ITC Catterick**

Then: **Corporal, 1 Para**

”

In terms of the operation in Kosovo, we had learnt a lot from our tenure in Northern Ireland – we applied these lessons to how we covered ground on arrival in Pristina.

It was hard work – we were doing 20-hour days at one point.

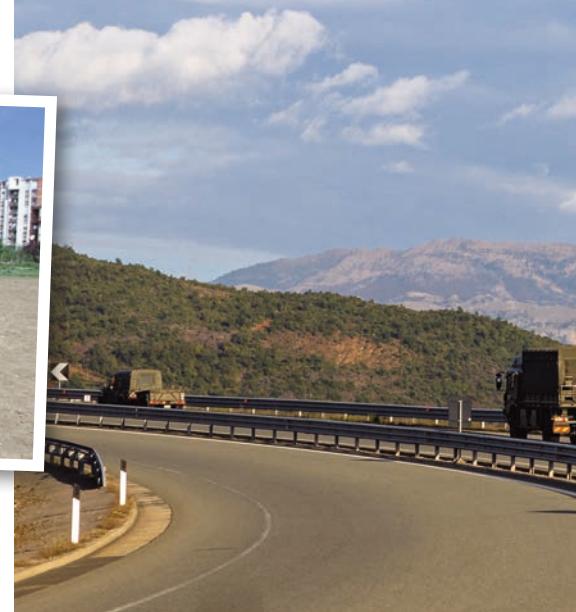
Your skills develop quickly on a deployment – even down to looking after your personal kit and equipment.

We were flown into theatre ahead of the rest of the Nato troops, who came in on a road move from Macedonia, and set up operations in the basement of a building in the city.

It struck us that the civilians did not have much – we lent a hand where we could and our job was to assist and protect everyone there, Serbs as well as Albanians.

Some lads went out of their way and parted with their own money to help.

”



IN NUMBERS KOSOVO 2024

3,800 Nato personnel in theatre

27 states involved





» while I was still at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst 12 months or so ago,” recalled 2Lt Max Cook (PWRR), who was one of the junior commanders deployed.

“My research gave me some understanding of all that had happened but the place has a strange feeling about it, even after all this time – I was two years old in 1999.

“In some areas you feel as if life is continuing as normal but then you get to the strategic boundary line with Serbia and you feel tension – the local police there in particular were on edge.”

Despite the demands of being plunged into an unexpected tour, the officer said the calm professionalism of a battle group – which also included Alma Company, 1st Battalion, The Royal Yorkshire Regiment – had paid off.



Pte Roland Baliunas, PWRR

“When the reserve force was called we actually had a lot of new kids from the battalion already in Kosovo on an exercise and the last thing they expected was a full-on deployment,” he pointed out.

“Other soldiers were also flown in from the UK and we had equipment including armoured vehicles that arrived via ships.

“In my experience the troops were great – we had responsibility for the entire strategic boundary line and it was a privilege to be out with them.”

Like the officer, Pte Roland Baliunas (PWRR) was new to the Army and deployed to Kosovo just months after finishing at the Infantry Training Centre Catterick.

He had not been born when Nato first intervened but rapidly became accustomed to theatre life – with a range of taskings familiar to past generations that included manning observation posts and patrolling communities.

He shared the commander’s feelings about the environment.

“The southern areas were fine, but there was definite tension in the north where you were close to that boundary line,” he explained. “But it was good to be straight out on an operation and I learned a great deal more about soldiering as a result.”



LCpl James Vanstone, PWRR

“Ultimately, there is only so much you can take from your training – I was definitely well prepared for the situation but being on deployment was different.”

Receiving his Nato medal at a parade after returning to Woolwich Barracks was also a high point for the 22-year-old, who said he had felt a greater empathy with soldiers who took part in early tours to the region.

Joining the young private at the presentation, LCpl Vanstone agreed, adding that Kosovo had left a lasting impression on him. But he felt there was still work to be done on the path towards peace.

“It’s difficult to get your head around it all,” he admitted. “There’s a feeling that tensions can overflow quickly.”

This is certainly true – the mission remains a work in progress. But it has already saved countless lives and stopped a crisis from escalating. It also heralded the downfall of Milosevic – who died in The Hague awaiting trial for genocide.

While the global picture is now very different to 1999, this is arguably a reason why the operation must endure.

With other less friendly countries undoubtedly wanting to see Kosovo’s path moulded to their own agendas, the Balkans region still has the potential to shape future events. ■

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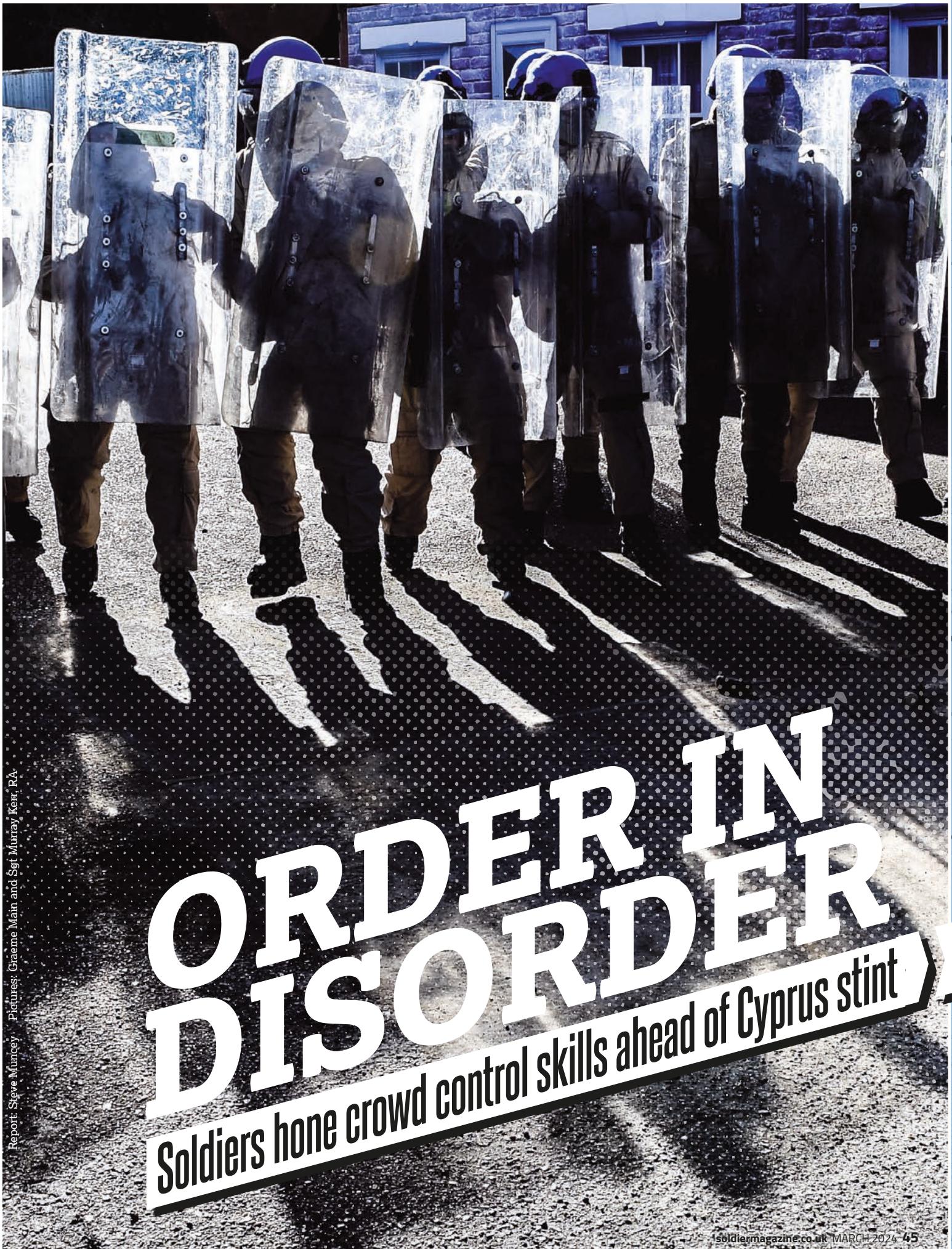
ISBN 978-1-80514-148-4 0 12 99

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PRINTED IN THE UK

THE SCANDALOUS TALES OF TWO YOUNG COLONIAL POLICEMEN



ORDER IN DISORDER

Soldiers hone crowd control skills ahead of Cyprus stint

Report: Steve Munney Pictures: Graeme Main and Sgt Murray Keir RA





“
One wrong word or action can result in the situation escalating
”

THE hail of bricks and stones becomes relentless and British Army troops react by forming small groups and pressing their shields together into protective box formations.

They advance at a steady pace, pushing through the protestors' barricade of car tyres and rubble. A dozen baton-wielding personnel then break out and force the angry mob back down the road into a contained area, while colleagues form up to support them and secure the ground behind.

Many of these tactics were developed by Roman legions more than 2,000 years ago. And soldiers could soon be employing them to quash hostilities with similar age-old roots.

A mixture of Reservists and Regulars carrying out public order drills at the Mission Ready Training Centre (MRTC) in Bassingbourn are preparing for deployment on Operation Tosca, the UK's contribution to the United Nations peacekeeping effort in Cyprus.

It is a country that has been torn apart by the ancient and deep-seated rivalry between the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities for control of the island.

Tensions escalated into full-blown conflict in 1974, when the Turkish Army invaded and the island was partitioned into two areas, North and South.

Violent outbreaks

A buffer zone controlled by the UN runs roughly across the island's centre, but the situation is complex as there are crossing points for work and trade, a few small villages and farms and illegal encroachments into this neutral area by developers from both sides.

All of this can, and does, lead to regular outbreaks of violence.

Approximately 1,000 incidents occur in and around this area each year, according to the UN, ranging from gang brawls and demonstrations of various sizes to the unauthorised use of firearms.

British troops are required to patrol the central segment known as Sector Two, covering the large city of Nicosia.

Top-notch public order skills are required, so at Bassingbourn a rough approximation of a narrow city street has been created from Iso containers placed across a Second World War runway and painted to look like buildings.

Superficially, it looks crude. But it does what it needs to do by producing the constricted spaces, points of congestion and eery echoes that magnify the sense of threat stemming from even relatively small demonstrations.

“The pressure on personnel is huge in riot situations so what we're putting them through is vital,” explains WO2 Cas Castell (Para), one of the instructors on the two-week package.

“In a heated confrontation, where there is a lot going on, you need to meet force with force, but it has to be in a controlled manner.

“We often refer to this as bringing order to public disorder.

“That's what we are really focusing on here; the fundamentals of using controlled aggression to reinstall discipline in the crowd.

“You're always going to be outnumbered in a riot and the atmosphere is highly volatile – the platoon commander has a massive responsibility as one wrong word or action can result in the situation escalating.

“Discipline is essential across the teams too, because even if one of them doesn't react correctly it can be the difference between successfully dispersing the crowd or having petrol bombs thrown at you.”

Learning curve

With real riots and skirmishes potentially lying in wait for these soldiers, the need to get everyone up to speed on some well-established tactics is paramount.

However, the learning curve is steeper for some than others.

Of the 220 troops about to deploy, around two thirds will come from 16 Air Assault Brigade Combat Team – the majority with the Reserve's 4th Battalion, The Parachute Regiment – and many conduct public order training as part of their high-readiness duties.

“Unlike some here we've done these types of physical drills before,” says Reservist LCpl Mike Kennedy (Para). “But we still have a lot to learn, specifically about how the UN operates and what it expects of us, plus specific training for the Tosca environment.

“The classroom sessions have been intense.”

Other Reservists on the deployment come mainly from the Royal Army Medical Corps and Honourable Artillery Company – while they will be joined by Regulars from the likes of The Queen's Gurkha Engineers, Royal Artillery, and 23 Parachute Engineer Regiment, some of whom have never trained in this discipline.

“This is actually my first op and I'm completely new to public order training,” says Spr Ujjwal Karki (QGE).

“We know we must be prepared for handling demonstrations as they might happen out there at any time, and you have to react properly.

“I've found the physical side of this fine – we are part of 16 Air Assault Brigade so we”





“
We have to remember
We are ambassadors
for the UN
”

» do a lot of combat training – but the mental challenges stemming from working in heavy suits and big masks while having to adapt to an unpredictable threat has been a big hurdle to overcome.”

Taking the kicks

Gnr Maisie Stack (RA), a drone specialist with 32 Regiment deploying in a female searcher role, also found the drills daunting initially.

“It’s the first time I’ve done this and, overall, it’s been tough but very satisfying to get through,” she explains.

“We’ve been taught procedures to deal with different scenarios and to know what our role within the squad is.

“Physically, I’ve found it exhausting as the kit is heavy and you are getting battered constantly. As the smallest person here, taking the kicks has been tough.

“Mentally, it was challenging at first as well. You can’t get too wrapped up in the emotion of the situation, you have to be stand-offish and focus on the job.

“The drills we’ve been going through are designed to desensitise us to the intimidation of having people charge and attack you and I really think they’ve achieved that.”

Anyone doubting the need for such intense preparations need only recall events from 1996 when a Greek Cypriot was beaten to death by Turkish nationalists during a large demonstration march.

Days later his cousin was shot dead by a Northern Cyprus government minister after entering the buffer zone to lay a wreath.

That murder sparked more demonstrations and two British soldiers from 39 Regiment, Royal Artillery were shot and wounded by Turkish forces.

And only last August two Household Cavalry personnel and one Slovak soldier serving as peacekeepers were taken to hospital after being attacked by Turkish Cypriots.

Their injuries included head wounds and a broken ankle after they tried to prevent the construction of an unauthorised road from the Turkish side of the island to the mixed community village of Pyla, which lies inside the buffer zone.

Spark points

The UN’s efforts to block that construction project continues and is one of the potential spark points for more trouble during the next Tosca tour, says WO2 Matt Cooper (Para), an instructor overseeing the training package, who will be deploying next month, too.

“People have been land grabbing in the demilitarised zone for a while so there will probably be work to do there,” he adds.

“This two-week exercise will give these boys and girls the skills to deal with anything that kicks off. At the end of this there is an assessment, after which they’ll be signed off by MRTC as competent to deploy and conduct public order duties.”

He continues: “We cover the basics up to advanced techniques.

“Commanders receive lots of education about crowd psychology and how to negotiate with warring factions.

“And all the troops have to learn about the legalities involved, what they can and can’t do.

“For instance, when using your baton you can hit a protester’s arm between the shoulder and elbow but you can’t hit the head – unless the situation is life-threatening.

“We have to remember we are ambassadors for the UN, we’re flying a second flag so to speak, so we have to get everything right.

“The press are likely to arrive quickly if there is a skirmish, and everyone has a smartphone nowadays and can record what your actions are and that could be used to turn public opinion against you.”

WO2 Chris Matthews (Para), a permanent staff instructor attached to 4 Para who is also deploying to Cyprus next month, echoed his colleague’s views.

“These personnel are receiving some vital sessions from the military police here and they’ll also get more legal briefings once they get out to theatre.

“We’ve heard that the antagonists in both the Greek and Turkish communities know when the handovers occur and often test the water, so we need to be aware of that and be on our game from the off.

“I was on Op Pitting so I’ve found out how valuable this training is when it’s called upon.

“We had to hold back crowds of desperate people – we were probably outnumbered by thousands to one.

“They wanted their papers processed to get out of Kabul, people were panicking but we had to calm them down and inspect their paperwork at the same time – there were lots of forgeries being presented – before letting them through, or not.

“Public order duties like that test everything – communications, command and control, awareness and teamwork – in the most stressful of circumstances, which is why successfully passing this test is essential before these personnel deploy.” ■

Letters

YOUR letters provide an insight into the issues at the top of soldiers' agendas... but please be brief. Emails must include your name and location (although we won't publish them if you ask us not to). We reserve the right to accept or reject letters, and to edit for length, clarity or style.

Before you write to us with a problem, you should first have tried to get an answer via your own chain of command.

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Older generation 'willing to get hands dirty'

AM writing in because of the recent comments made by Chief of the General Staff, Gen Sir Patrick Sanders, regarding potential ideas on conscription in the future.

I'd like to respond by saying that there are plenty of people aged around 50 who, although maybe not as physically fit as the Army standard, are robust enough to be able to learn some of the static support skills that would be useful.

I think the Service should assess the possibility of launching special volunteer units in different areas across the UK.

These personnel would be trained up to learn capabilities where running two miles in nine minutes isn't necessary, such as manning certain artillery, which requires strength and stamina.

Vehicle driving is another area where we could offer support. There may even be more complex disciplines like training drone pilots where qualified civilian volunteers could use the skills they have from their day jobs or hobbies.

I have no background in the military but I believe there is plenty of energy out there for helping to defend this country. Maybe we should initially limit duties to a small number of designated roles at first so as not to alarm the population.

This would allow these volunteers to provide some valuable cover when Regular and Reserve troops are deployed on operations.

Maybe I'm over-thinking things but I was annoyed to read the hordes of negative attitudes on social media about conscription. Imagine if we had 100 of these support units spread across every strategic area of the UK, ready to step in if our Armed Forces become embroiled in a major conflict.

It could certainly help with what looks to be an enduring recruitment crisis.

Don't be frightened to ask the not-so-older generation because many of us are more than willing to get our hands dirty. I'm up for it. — **David Keen (yes, that really is my name), Bournemouth**

“We could learn some of the static support skills”

Gleneagles prize hits the mark

MANY thanks for a fantastic weekend at Gleneagles – and what a brilliant prize for winning your Christmas 2022 competition it turned out to be.

It took some time for my wife and I to find a suitable slot in our diaries to travel to this legendary Scottish venue, but it was worth the wait.

It started memorably in the first-class lounge at King's Cross with some superb

tea and biscuits, and got better from there.

The train journey flew by with a hot lunch and a gin and tonic to wash it down. The hotel was spectacular with beautiful wood-panelled hallways and some stunning grounds to walk around.

The whole set-up was exceptional and we even had time for a dip in the pool and a session in the opulent steam room.

We'd love to go back – any more similar comps? — **Jim Kilbride, ex-Para**



More letters please

● I WOULD like to suggest a reinvigoration of the *Talkback* section.

Over the past 20 years it's been the first part of the magazine I looked for.

Once upon a time it was page after page of humorous observations, gripes and concerns not all of us were alive too. At a time when morale is generally pretty low, a few more pages of *Talkback* this year would help us smile a little more.

More opinions on beards (or no beards) and the long-term plans for flip flops Friday please!

Keep up the good work. — **WO2 Wes Meredith, RE**

The managing editor replies:

Thanks for your note Wes, and let's hope it serves as a clarion call for more people to write in.

Unfortunately, the number of letters we receive has dipped in recent years, which we believe is down to a combination of soldiers using social media forums that can provide almost immediate (but mostly unofficial) feedback; the poor distribution of hard copies in barracks; lack of awareness of our online edition (it's on the Army website, in the news and events section, and also on Defence Connect); and — so we've heard — pressure on some personnel from superiors not to whinge or ask for advice from Army Headquarters through these pages.

All I can ask is that you spread the word and remind everyone that *Talkback* is a resource troops can use to contact the Army's top subject matter experts.

If you want to message us please use the channels below — and letters remain anonymous to the chain of command if the authors request it.

GOT A GRIPE?

THEN WHY NOT GET IT OFF YOUR CHEST?

✉ mail@soldiermagazine.co.uk

WHATSSAPP 07973 614782

'Equality of opportunity is missing'

● THE Army's diversity and inclusion web page says it embraces equality of opportunity but in the Reserve officers can serve until they are 60 while other ranks can only serve until 55, with a maximum three-year extension as an option.

Also, a pension is offered in the Reserve and you can receive it immediately if you serve until 60 — but if you don't you have to wait until state pension age.

Is this equality of opportunity?

In your reply I would appreciate it if you do not state "it says so in policy" because as we all know policy once said gay people could not serve in the Armed Forces and if women got pregnant they had to leave. — **Sgt Mick Healy, RLC**

Brig Adam Fraser-Hitchen, Head Personnel Reserves, replies: Your questions are particularly topical given the Army's increasing focus on the Reserve and its role reinforcing the Service at home and abroad.

While we have obligations as a public authority to eliminate discrimination under the Equality Act 2010, the schedule nine exemption for age takes precedence.

This is justified and necessary for the Army as soldiers need to be combat effective to deploy. Additionally, age is a factor in overall workforce planning and related policies that require personnel to leave after a certain number of years ensure constant movement through the "promotion pyramid". Without this, career progression would slow and our effectiveness would be undermined.

While there are fit and capable troops who could serve beyond 55, many would not continue to meet either the medical retention or deployability requirements.

These are the same standards that apply to Regulars who will normally be discharged on completion of a VEng(short) (12 years) or VEng(long) (24 years); this is nearly always well before they reach 55 years of age.

A small minority are offered a VEng(full) which is for 30 years and could take them to the normal retirement age of 60. When a Service need exists, an extension of usually three years may be offered which is akin to a Reserve over age extension (OAE).

For both officers and soldiers there is no right or guarantee to serve to retirement age, just the

potential opportunity to do so and there is, similarly, no right to serve beyond this point.

The current mechanism that enables service beyond 55 or 60, via OAE application, is a balance of risk between operational effectiveness and retaining skills and experience.

On the issue of Reserve pensions, all serving members of the Regular and Reserve who have not opted out are now members of the Armed Forces pension scheme 2015 where those who leave the Service at age 60 or over will be entitled to an immediate pension.

If they leave before 60 they are entitled to a deferred pension paid at state pension age — which is currently 67 or 68 depending on when they were born.

You can ask for your deferred pension to be paid from 55, but the amount will be reduced as it will be paid over a longer period.

Also, under the Reserve pension scheme (RFPS) 05, pensions will be paid at 60 for those who serve until this age. If you leave beforehand, the funds are preserved and paid at age 65 — the state pension age when RFPS 05 was initially set up.

You have to wait until state pension age

Talkback in time

LETTERS

What about ration packs for 'veggies'!

Some time back I became a vegetarian, both for ethical and health reasons, and after having asked my husband if he would decline, declaring that in his personal opinion vegetarianism is a "lost cause", a question was put to me as to how vegetarians in the Army (both male and female) manage to stick to a wholesome, well-balanced diet.

Contrary to popular belief, vegetarianism is most definitely not all lettuce and lentils, and I have been most impressed to actually cater for when it comes to things like ration packs.

I am sure that there must be at least a few "veggies" in the Army, and I am also sure that they would find their meals most palatable if they could do so to eat the basic meals served to others, but decline the meat/fish/poultry.

At the moment, I have only met one other vegetarian Army wife, and that is Mrs Stone from West Germany, which is not the best of combinations as meat would be the staple diet here and as yet there is a vegetarian Service woman — are there any out there, and if so, how do you get by? — **Mrs E. M. Stone, 1988, REMLM att 1 KOSB, Brook Bks, BPPD 45.**

• Mrs Stone wins our star letter prize book

REUNIONS

• 656 Air Cpl Sign RFA AAC and 886022 Flight Reunion, July 2018, Templemeads Hotel, Torquay, on March 26. Details from the

ANY VEGGIES OUT THERE? A reader laments the lack of meat-free options in *Soldier*'s letters section 36 years ago this month

COMPETITIONS

JANUARY 2023

HOAY winner (Majority party speaker): Luke Boer, Gateshead.

RULES: Winners chosen at random from valid entries. Unless stated otherwise, competitions are open to readers aged 16 or over only. We have no responsibility for incorrect, incomplete, lost or delayed entries. Any winner will be bound by our terms and conditions. Where we are unable to contact a winner within one month, or any prize cannot be taken up or is declined or returned undelivered, a substitute winner may be drawn. At that point, the original winner shall cease to be eligible. The judges' decision is final and no correspondence will be entered into. *Soldier* is compliant with the Data Protection Act. We will not pass your details to a third party without your prior consent. Automated entries, bulk entries or third-party entries will be disqualified. Competitions are not open to *Soldier* employees, competition sponsors or anyone else connected with the competition, or the immediate families or agents of the foregoing. We have the right to verify the eligibility and identity of any entrant. Prize winners acknowledge and agree that neither *Soldier* or any competition sponsor(s) or any of their employees, agents or subcontractors shall have any liability whatsoever in connection with the winner's use and/or possession of the prize.

SEARCHLINE

Applications are open for the SSAFA short break scheme.

The free trips are available to serving (including Reservist) families with a child who has an additional need or disability, be it developmental, emotional, behavioural or physical. The outings in the Lake District and Exmoor allow Forces families to undertake activities including kayaking, rock climbing, horse riding and archery together. For more details visit ssafa.org.uk and click on "get help" and "military families".

WELFARE

If you have a problem, your **chain of command** and **unit welfare teams** are a good starting point. They may also be able to help you find local support groups not listed below. **Padres** can provide individuals with pastoral care and moral guidance, whatever their faith. Here are some other national organisations that can offer help:

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advertising@soldiermagazine.co.uk



Army HIVE

These centres provide information for the whole military community on a wide variety of topics affecting their everyday life, including relocation, accommodation, health and well-being, finance, non-UK nationals, education, employment, deployment, resettlement, military discounts and local area information.

army.mod.uk/hives

Forcesline

A free and confidential telephone helpline and email service for Regulars, Reserves, ex-Forces and their families.

0800 731 4880

ssafa.org.uk/get-help/forcesline

Army Welfare Service

Contact directly via rc-aws-iat-0@mailbox@mod.gov.uk or 01904 882051/2053

ALCOHOL AND SMOKING

If you are concerned about someone else's health or your own you can get confidential, free advice from your medical officer during routine hours, or your unit duty officer.

Drinkline

A free, confidential helpline 0300 123 1110

NHS support

nhs.uk/livewell

BULLYING/HARASSMENT/ DISCRIMINATION

Army Mediation Service

0306 770 7691 or mil 96770 7691 army-mediation-0@mailbox@mod.gov.uk

Army Speak Out Helpline

0306 770 4656 or mil 96770 4656 army-speakout@mod.gov.uk

Defence BHD Helpline

Confidential, freephone and outside the chain of command 0800 014 2381

CHILDCARE/CARING/FAMILIES

Army Families Federation

The independent voice of Army families, offering confidential advice and support 01264 554004 aff.org.uk

Flexible working has been introduced by the Army to help personnel tailor their work-life balance. This includes arrangements such as remote working, variable

finish times and restricted separation. Read more in the *Flexible Working and You* guide on Modnet. Regulars can find out how this impacts pay and benefits at discovermybenefits.mod.gov.uk

DEBT AND MONEY PROBLEMS

These can be a considerable burden, made worse by dealing with them alone. The following organisations can provide support.

Forces Pension Society

A not-for-profit, independent military pension watchdog and enquiry service 020 7820 9988 forcespensionsociety.org

Joining Forces Credit Union

Saving and affordable loans for the Armed Forces community from not-for-profit financial cooperatives joiningforcescu.co.uk

Money Helper

Government-backed money and pensions guidance with a wealth of in-depth guides, tools and calculators moneyhelper.org.uk

National Debtline

A charity that can talk through your options and help you take back control 0808 808 4000 nationaldebtline.org

StepChange Debt Charity

The UK's leading debt charity offering free, confidential advice 0800 138 1111 stepchange.org.uk

GAMBLING

National Gambling Helpline

Free information, support and counselling for problem gamblers in the UK 0808 8020 133

GRIEF

Cruse Bereavement Support

0808 808 1677

SSAFA support groups

People who have been through a similar tragedy, giving you the opportunity to talk through your emotions with an understanding group supportgroups@ssafa.org.uk

HOUSING

Joint Service Housing Advice Office

The MoD's tri-Service focal point to provide Armed Forces personnel and their dependants with civilian housing information

07814 612120
rc-pers-jshao-0mailbox@mod.gov.uk

Single Persons Accommodation Centre for the Ex-Services
01748 833797
spaces.org.uk
Veterans Gateway
A first point of contact for veterans seeking support
veteransgateway.org.uk

INJURY/SICKNESS
Personnel Recovery Centres
These centres can be found across the United Kingdom. To find out more

about your local service, speak to your unit welfare team, search for Army Recovery Capability on Defence Connect or send an email to rc-pers-arc-0mailbox@mod.gov.uk

LONELINESS

Armed Forces and Veterans Breakfast Clubs

A network of clubs to enjoy breakfast and banter, while combating social isolation afvbc.net

Samaritans

Someone to talk to, night or day, for free and without judgement

116 123 samaritans.org

The Royal British Legion

Contact the friendly team for information about local groups and support services
0808 802 8080
britishlegion.org.uk

MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

There's always someone you can talk to. Speak to your friends or family, boss or padre, unit welfare staff (details above), medical officer or GP. There are a number of charities and other organisations that can also provide support and they include:

Combat Stress 24/7 Helpline

0800 138 1619

Headspace

All British Army personnel and civil servants can access this mindfulness app for free with an @armymail.mod.uk email address work.headspace.com/britisharmy/member-enroll

Mind – The Mental Health Charity

0300 123 3393
mind.org

> **continued overleaf**

HOW OBSERVANT ARE YOU?

No. 982



...an internet radio music system



TEN details have been changed in this picture of The King's Troop, Royal Horse Artillery during their annual inspection by Maj Gen James Bowder, General Officer Commanding The Household Division.

Circle all the differences on the left image and send the panel to HOAY 982, *Soldier*, Ordnance Barracks, Government Road, Aldershot, Hampshire GU11 2DU along with your contact details – including email address – by March 29.

A photocopy is also acceptable but only one entry per person may be submitted.

Alternatively, email a photograph of the image highlighting the differences to comps@soldiermagazine.co.uk

The first correct entry drawn after the closing date will win

a Bard 2.1 Bluetooth internet radio music system, courtesy of Majority (majority.co.uk).

This slick piece of kit, worth more than £150, allows its users to explore thousands of different stations across the globe plus the very best of DAB+ and FM radio.

After a daily station fix, music fans can access their own listings via Spotify Connect or the built-in podcast player.

The Bard also boasts an internal subwoofer, helping to deliver a beautifully clear and crisp bass – whether at the start of the day via dual alarm, or late into the evening for night owls.

The winner's name will appear in the May 2024 issue and all the usual competition rules apply (see details on the opposite page).



> continued from page 53

NHS

General mental health support
nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters

Op Courage

A specialist NHS service for Armed Forces leavers, Reservists, veterans and their families. Search for "Op Courage" on nhs.uk to find your local team.

Samaritans

116 123 samaritans.org

The Ripple Pond

A self-help support network for relatives of physically or psychologically injured troops and veterans
0333 900 1028 theripplepond.org

Togetherall

A safe, online community where people support each other anonymously
togetherall.com

RELATIONSHIP BREAKDOWN/ABUSE

Aurora New Dawn

Safety for survivors of domestic abuse, sexual violence, stalking
02394 216 816 aurorand.org.uk

ManKind

Support for male domestic abuse victims
01823 334244 mankind.org.uk

Relate

Relationship support relate.org.uk

WHAT'S ON AT MILITARY MUSEUMS

Imperial War Museum London

The atrocities of the Holocaust are the focus of an IWM Institute masterclass on March 17, hosted by leading academics. The event costs £78 with a discount for museum members. iwm.org.uk

Imperial War Museum North

Northern Ireland: Living with The Troubles runs from March 22 until the end of September. The exhibition shines a light on the 38-year Op Banner deployment, while looking to the future. iwm.org.uk

Army Flying Museum

The Army Air Corps' role during the Bosnian civil war three decades ago will be the focus of a talk by former Gazelle pilot John Greenacre on the evening of March 18. An online pass is available for those unable to attend in person. armyflying.com

National Army Museum

A veteran quartet from the Women's Royal Army Corps will be talking about their lives in uniform on the evening of March 15 – held to mark the 75th anniversary of the WRAC's formation. nam.ac.uk

Norfolk Tank Museum

Fans of military vehicles are gearing up for Armourfest, a two-day festival on August 17-18. Find out more at norfolktankmuseum.co.uk



RESETTLEMENT

Last year the **Career Transition Partnership (CTP)** supported more than 310,000 Service leavers in its 25 years as the official provider of Armed Forces resettlement. Regardless of service, time served or reason for leaving, all members of the Armed Forces can benefit from CTP support. Here are **six top tips** to ensure you make a smooth transition to civvy street:

1. Prepare yourself and get engaged early. Too often the CTP hears from workshop attendees who wished they'd started sooner. Remember, regardless of your reason for leaving, you're entitled to CTP support – embrace it.

2. Make a plan. Confirm your timelines, set yourself "smart" goals (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-based), and identify what path you want to pursue. CTP career consultants can help you on a one-to-one basis to ensure you find the right option.

3. Avoid making snap decisions. Instead, research the sector you want to work in and people to talk to. The CTP team can support you by introducing you to a wide range of employers and providing detailed guides on various sectors as well as an ongoing supply of vacancies.

4. Identify what skills gaps you

might have and give yourself time to mitigate against these through some vocational training or a civilian work attachment. The CTP can advise and offer a wide range of qualifications and experience for you to add to your already considerable bank of transferable skills.

5. Explore and promote your brand. Who are you beyond the uniform? How are you going to let the world know you exist? The CTP will work with you to develop and hone your CV and LinkedIn profile to ensure you make a good first impression.

6. Perform well in interviews by practising with friends, family, your network and online digital tools. Let the CTP support you so you land the right outcome at the right time.

Where to start with resettlement

- Speak with your local unit resettlement information staff, who can offer advice on your entitlement.
- Contact your Service resettlement adviser (SRA) to discuss your resettlement package and available funding. You can find their details on ctp.org.uk/contact-us/sra-contact
- Register with the CTP via JPA and one of the team will contact you to book your first appointment.

CTP TRAINING COURSES 2023/24

- LCL L3 Certificate in Refrigeration, Air Conditioning & Heat Pump Systems
- Domestic Electrical Installation Full Scope
- 18th Edition Wiring Regulations
- C&G 2391-52 Level 3 Award in Inspection and Testing
- C&G 2391-52 Inspection & Testing Resit
- EAL L3 Certificate in Traction and Rolling Stock Systems
- EAL L3 Award in Programmable Logic Controllers
- IMI L3 Certificate in Cycle Maintenance
- Hard Landscaping and Bricklaying
- Plastering
- Plumbing
- Property Maintenance
- Cisco Certified Network Associate

- CompTIA A+
- CompTIA Network+ and Security+
- CompTIA Cyber Security Analyst
- Strategic Finance for Non-Financial Managers
- Executive Mini MBA
- Director Development Programme
- QMS ISO 9001:2015 Lead Auditor Level 3
- Level 5 Certificate in Service Improvement (Lean Six Sigma – Green Belt)
- APMG Change Management
- Management of Risk
- IWFM L4 Certificate in Facilities Management
- CIPD Level 5 Associate Diploma in People Management
- First Aid at Work Level 3 Award
- Managing Safely (IOSH)
- NEBOSH National General Certificate (SQA Level 6)
- NEBOSH Certificate in Fire Safety
- NEBOSH Health & Safety Management for Construction

Information about all training courses can be found on ctp.org.uk and troops can attend any of the below employment fairs in 2024 across the UK. Book via ctpevents@ctp.org.uk



CTP provides support for up to two years post-discharge, during which time troops can access its full suite of support. After two years, you have life-long employment support through the Forces Employment Charity (forcesemployment.org.uk).

FORCESLINE

REACH OUT FOR TRUSTED SUPPORT IN YOUR TIME OF NEED

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Free and confidential. Open weekdays, 09:00 to 17:30



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ssafa.org.uk/forcesline

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REVIEWS

PICK OF THE MONTH

Masters of the Air

Exclusive: *Soldier* speaks to the author – and consultant – behind a new drama on the European air war

IT WAS one of the most brutal and bloody campaigns of the Second World War – and fought in broad daylight across the skies over Western Europe.

The titanic clash involved two superpowers – the United States Eighth Air Force, which was aiming a daytime blow on the Nazis by using UK-based bombers, and the defending, battle-hardened pilots of the German Luftwaffe.

American military planners were testing a theory that strategic attacks – using the likes of the B-17 Flying Fortress mated to precision sighting systems – could hit the enemy's ability to wage war by destroying targets such as factories and railyards. But it ultimately resulted in a battle of attrition that left thousands dead while laying waste to vast European cityscapes.

Now the human story behind the battle is the focus of the new Apple TV+ miniseries *Masters of the Air*, from the same **Tom Hanks** and **Steven Spielberg**-led stable behind *Band of Brothers* and *The Pacific*. Charting the fate of US crews on the aerial front line, it pulls no punches in showing the conditions they endured as they tangled with wave-upon-wave of determined German attackers as well as accurate and murderous fire from the ground.

"This was not a remote form of combat by any means," said Donald Miller – professor of history at Lafayette College in Pennsylvania who wrote the book of the same name on which the series is based and was closely involved with the show.

"Several witnesses on the bombers told me that the Luftwaffe fighters would come in so

close that they could actually see the eyes of the enemy pilots.

"Unlike fighting with the infantry – for example – this was also a form of warfare in which there was no cover," he continued. "Men were effectively trapped in vulnerable aluminium cylinders of altitudes up to four miles high and they had to remain on their course without taking evasive manoeuvres."

Maintaining a decent defence required bomber pilots to fly in close formation, relying on the cover of one another's machine guns. Stragglers were easy prey and long-range escort fighters were ultimately needed as losses mounted.

Crews also had to deal with an unforgiving battlespace. Operating in the rarefied stratosphere at 30,000ft, oxygen was a basic requirement for survival. And with temperatures plunging to minus 40 Centigrade in unpressurised aircraft, frostbite and other cold weather injuries were common. Giving first aid to anyone who was wounded presented its own challenges.

The prognosis was grim. During the early stages of the campaign in 1943, American losses were so great that just a quarter of crews could expect to finish a 25-mission tour. Huge attrition rates were also being suffered by Royal Air Force Bomber Command colleagues, attacking cities at night.

Miller admitted to being astonished that Allied personnel continued to fly despite the near certainty of death, serious injury or capture by the enemy. "I always wondered how anyone can hold up under that type of extreme stress," he added. "But, ultimately, guys prevail for all the other guys around them – so they continued to get on the planes and fly the missions."

"As we focused on real people in the series, it was important for us as a team to make sure that all the facts were correct and the story was complete to the best of our ability – that we did not 'Hollywoodise' it, so to speak."

With accuracy crucial, Miller also pointed out that movie prop specialists had built replica B-17 aircraft to use in the filming on the ground. Air combat scenes were shot using CGI tech – with actors playing crew members seeing real-time,

virtual action on special screens to immerse them in the battle.

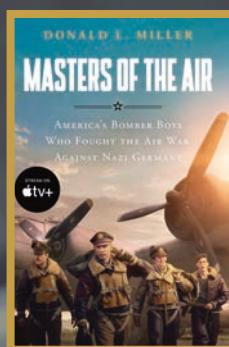
The first few episodes of *Masters of the Air* had already been broadcast as this issue went to press. And *Soldier* can testify that the series maintains the integrity of Miller's excellent work – refusing to shy away from the brutality of the era, nor its impact on the military personnel or civilians involved.

Production values are sound, with solid acting throughout and action sequences that provide an insight into the pace of the fighting. The book charts several facets of the battle, including the experiences of crews taken prisoner, so it will be interesting to see how they translate to the screen.

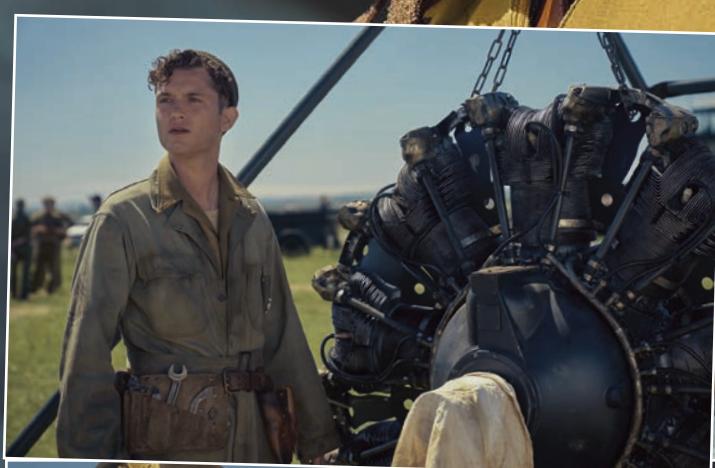
In the end, the US crews prevailed in a campaign that helped destroy the Nazi war machine while having a pivotal role in smashing the relentless Luftwaffe defenders.

"German industry was destroyed over time – it was like a death by a thousand cuts," Miller concluded. "But a lot of lives were lost, and others changed forever. I hope that we can tell the story behind the people of this era" ■

● *Masters of the Air* is available for streaming on Apple TV+



INTERVIEW: CLIFF CASWELL, SOLDIER



MORE TOP PICKS

GAMES



Hitman: Blood Money - Reprisal

Out now for Switch

STEALTH games once again seem to be proving all the rage with a new generation of players thanks to a string of releases on Nintendo's hybrid console.

Last year brought remixed and remastered versions of the 1990s *Metal Gear Solid* classics. And now the ever-popular anti-hero Agent 47 reprises his role in *Hitman* with another chapter of assassination and retribution.

Blood Money - Reprisal is an overhauled version of a 2006 title in which players assume the role of the iconic suited-and-booted, shaven-headed killer responsible for carrying out operations against bad guys around the world.

The hitman is a nasty piece of work, but his foes are worse and players are responsible for manipulating the environment, assuming disguises and acquiring weaponry to carry out contracts against murderous criminal kingpins.

This Switch version, while showing the age of the underpinning game, is still a decent third-person romp and worth a look for those who missed out some two decades ago. The level and type of violence involved, however, makes this one a definite adults-only outing.



Review: Cliff Caswell, *Soldier*

MOVIES



Fortunes of War

Out now on digital format

IT HAS been 25 years since *Saving Private Ryan* reignited cinema interest in the Second World War – and the conflict has continued to rage in celluloid form ever since.

But these outings can be decidedly hit-and-miss affairs, as testified by *Fortunes of War*. The latest in the seemingly endless parade of 1939-45 themed movies takes a cue or two from the **George Clooney** military heist movie *Three Kings* and sees a group of British commandos stumbling on a gold cache during a failed mission. The reason behind the stash of booty unfolds as the Germans mysteriously hold off mounting an easy killer blow.

The characters are two-dimensional, the acting unconvincing in places and the plot could have been better developed. Yet there is pace and action aplenty, and a draw that is strong enough to engage viewers until the conclusion. If you're short of a flick for a spot of exercise downtime, this might be an option.



Review: Cliff Caswell, *Soldier*

GAMES



Ultrawings 2

Out now on VR for PS5 and PC

FLIGHT sims would seem an obvious candidate for conversion to the virtual reality experience – but there don't seem to be as many around as might be expected.

This is certainly the case with the PlayStation 5 VR2 system, where *Soldier* has thus far been confined to piloting fast jets on the vertigo-inducing *Wingman* – until *Ultrawings 2* landed.

And the newcomer is a gem of an offering – making full use of the dual-handed controllers to simulate cockpit levels and switches. And there are a host of taskings ranging from free-flight to dizzying Second World War-style air combat.

With a £16 price tag on the PlayStation store, there is a fantastic bang-to-buck ratio too. But play in short bursts to avoid the onset of airsickness.



Review: Cliff Caswell, *Soldier*

Passage

Ex-soldier offers fictional take on notorious Naval calamity

AS far as tales of disaster at sea are concerned, few are more morbidly fascinating than that of Sir John Franklin's doomed 1845 expedition to discover the Northwest Passage.

All 129 souls aboard HMS Erebus and Terror vanished into the Canadian Arctic, with human remains discovered years later indicating at least some had turned to cannibalism before succumbing to starvation.

The latest retelling of the grisly saga comes courtesy of one its key protagonist's descendants.

Infanteer-turned-author Angus Wardlaw (ex-WG, pictured below) is the distant nephew of Francis Crozier, captain of Terror, and in his debut novel – *Passage* – he fills in the blanks between historical fact and archaeological evidence to reconstruct what could have happened to the ships' companies.

The result is a compelling yarn that has the reader rooting for the ill-fated sailors despite knowing the hopelessness of their situation. *Soldier* wanted to know more...



Describe the book in three words

It's a tragic Victorian rollercoaster.

What's your connection to Crozier?

His brother was my four-times great grandfather. Most of my family from Crozier down to my grandfather and father went into the Navy but I ended up in the Welsh Guards. I loved it and don't regret a second, but I think I should have joined the Navy – that's where my heart was.



How long did the book take to write?

About ten years in total – originally I wanted to write a film script but during lockdown I had time on my hands and decided I'd turn it into a novel. After that it took me two or three years to finish.

How did you span the gap between fact and fiction?

A bit of soldierly intuition – a lot depends on camaraderie and what you would do in

that situation. If you look at the map of where bones were found and the cartography you can make a trail based on what men in an extreme environment would logically have done.

How did you bring the characters to life?

For Crozier there are quite a few letters that he wrote. He was a bit maudlin, but also a very stern leader. He'd been in the Navy since he was 14, had quite a hard life and he gave the men no latitude at all. And the blokes on the ships are modelled on a few guys I've known in the Army – there's a certain type, with a gallows sense of humour.

What's your take on what went wrong?

I've used the idea that they probably couldn't rely on their tinned rations. The contractor supplying them had undercut the big companies and filled the tins with all sorts of hideous stuff, which was borne out by an official report at the time. But the real point is the mini-ice age they encountered, which lasted for five or six years. They got trapped and you can't hunt in those situations, so it's like a famine. It was the perfect storm.

What was your reaction when Erebus and Terror were discovered in 2014 and 2016 respectively?

It was amazing – you assumed they'd be crushed by the ice and would never be seen again, so the fact they turned up intact was ridiculous. Terror, in particular, is in superb condition. They found Crozier's cabin neatly stowed with the door shut as if to keep out the cold. The only reason they haven't got into his desk is because of a build-up of silt. When leaving those ships, he'd have taken the log with him but he'd likely have left a replica or other notes behind – that could answer so many questions. ■

Passage by Angus Wardlaw is out now in paperback, published by Daredevil Books and priced £9.95



INTERVIEW: BECKY CLARK, SOLDIER

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SOLDIER SPORT

HIGH ACHIEVERS >>

SHEFFIELD'S The Climbing Works hosted the inaugural Inter-Services Bouldering Championships, with Army athletes facing a stern test against their Royal Air Force rivals. The event showcased the growing popularity of the sport in military circles. Read more on pages 66 to 67...





MERIBEL'S MIXED BAG

TITLES COME AND GO AS BATTLE RESUMES AT FORCES SNOWSPORTS CLASH

THE women's Alpine team proved to be the Army's standout success as action resumed on the slopes of Meribel at the Inter-Services Snowsports Championships.

Maj Tess Pirie (RAMC) was at the forefront of the charge with victories in the super giant slalom, giant slalom and individual combined competition – an effort that helped the soldiers to a clean sweep of the team titles.

She was ably supported by LCpl May Percival (RLC), who finished third in the individual combined, Lt Imogen Bird (RE) and LCpl Jess Corbel (Int Corps). The team's fifth member, Pte Isla Jackson (PWRR), was named the contest's best newcomer.

Their results saw the Army women crowned overall combined team champions having trailed the Royal Air Force in 2023.

"I'm delighted," Pirie told *SoldierSport*. "Winning individual titles is great, but this is definitely a team event.

"At the start of the week we decided we would go out and ski as a team, and we did that on every single run.

"We were able to clock where we were and then radio the person at the top to give them our position and tell them how much they needed to push."

Injuries to Spr Lizzie Knox (RE) and Cpl Maddie Critchley (AGC (SPS)) in the build-up reduced the squad strength from seven to five, and with competition rules stating teams must get four skiers to the bottom to score points in each discipline the pressure was on.

Pirie continued: "That made everything more difficult, and

they all did really well.

"The downhill was the hardest it has ever been. It was fast and icy, there were four or five big injuries and Lizzie and Maddie were both hurt during practice. The Inter-Services is a real step up in terms of danger."

The week-long contest also saw the Reservist renewing her battle with the RAF number one Fg Off Kirsty Guest, who reigned supreme last season and was victorious in the downhill, slalom and individual super combination.

"She beat me by four hundredths of a second in the super G last year, but I got her this time round," Pirie said. "I also managed to pip her in the giant slalom when she missed the second to last gate.

"Kirsty is a brilliant skier and was part of the GB team before she joined the RAF – it is great to compete against her."

Having lost out in the women's field, the RAF proved an unstoppable force in the men's Alpine competition as they claimed all five team titles as well as a host of individual accolades courtesy of newcomer Fg Off Ollie Weeks.

Capt Josh Serdet (Rifles) proved to be the Army's top performer, finishing second to Weeks in the individual combined competition.

The snowboarders won a host of collective prizes in 2023 but there were fewer trophies to celebrate in the latest showdown, with their sole success coming in the men's team slopestyle.

SSgt Dave Grant (REME) topped the podium in the individual parallel slalom, while Capt Lisa Gibson (RAMC) finished second in the women's



**"THE
RAF
HAD AN
INFLUX
OF
TALENT"**

individual combined standings. There were also silver medals for WO2 Dale Gallagher (REME) and Maj Kelly Richards (RA) in the men's and women's boardercross, and Cpl Dan Robinson (REME) took bronze in the parallel slalom.

"We narrowly missed out in a number of events," team manager Gallagher said.

"There was just one point separating us and the RAF in the boardercross and the parallel slalom was very tight.

"On another day it could have been a different story. The level of competition was ramped up this year; the RAF have had a long losing streak, but they've had an influx of talented people who put us on the back foot. We also picked up a few injuries at the Army Championships, which didn't help.

"There is a big difference between that competition and Meribel in terms of the grade of slopes and type of gates. The other teams had an extra week to practice beforehand whereas we came straight from the Army Championships in Austria – we will perhaps have a change of plan for next season."

And in Telemark, Capt Stefan Hurst (RLC) won the individual parallel slalom on his way to being crowned men's combined champion, while there were victories for OCdt Georgia Binnington in the women's giant slalom, sprint and individual classic.

Maj Lori Seed (RA) was second in the women's combined standings, while the Army men were joint winners in the team parallel sprint. However, the remaining honours were shared between the RAF and Royal Navy. ■



CLIMBERS FIND THRILLS IN FRESH FORCES FORMAT

ARMY climbers embraced a new challenge on the indoor walls of Sheffield as they competed in the inaugural Inter-Services Bouldering Championships.

While the event proved to be a happy hunting ground for the Royal Air Force, it served to underline the rapid growth of the sport – which is performed close to the ground without the use of ropes and harnesses – in military circles. Much of this has been fuelled by climbing's inclusion at the 2020 Olympics.

The soldiers saw four athletes qualify for the women's final, with another one in the men's, and their participation came on the back of a strong showing in the Armed Forces Bouldering League where Maj Amy Johnstone (RAMC) was crowned female champion. Cpl Matt Price (REME) was second in the male ranks and Cpl Dan Seeley (REME) finished third.

Given the popularity of that competition – each of the six rounds regularly attracts in excess of 100 entrants – the introduction of an Inter-Services event was a natural progression as those in charge seek to maintain the momentum.

"This is a trial," Maj Paddy Snow (RE), chair of the UK Armed Forces Sport Climbing Association, told *SoldierSport* as he discussed the move.

"I think it will become a permanent fixture, but that is obviously dependant on funding."

"Bouldering was combined with ropes at the 2022 Inter-Services and the league has been running for 15 years."

"In 2019 we started getting unworkable numbers, with more than 160 people coming. We've now had to limit entries to a first come, first served basis."

"Climbing has been a massive growth sport outside the military and a lot of those people are now



**"SOME
TOUGH
CALLS
HAD
TO BE
MADE"**

joining up.

"Bouldering is the discipline that is practised most at grass roots level. It is more sociable and you can have total novices training alongside the best climbers in the military, while getting tips from them. It has developed into a nice scene."

Price (pictured left), who is also Army climbing team manager, missed out on a place in the Inter-Services final but was pleased with the turnout in what was the concluding event of the bouldering season. Attention now turns to lead climbing and the bid to retain the Forces titles won in 2023.

"There have been more than 100 personnel in each round of the league, and the Army have brought a lot of those," he said.

"We have given people ranking points throughout the season and could only select ten men and ten women for this, so some tough calls had to be made."



GET INVOLVED: EMAIL THOMAS.
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» CRESTA

“Some prefer bouldering to lead climbing so events like this give them an opportunity to take part; having an extra competition is always welcome.

“It is a great way to end the season and see if the hard work and training has paid off. The strength needed for this discipline carries over into lead climbing, but you need to have endurance as well. We won all three categories at the last Inter-Services and are looking to do the same again this year.”

Work commitments mean women's league champion Johnstone (pictured below) is unsure about whether she will compete on the ropes this year, but was delighted with her victory having only competed in three of the six rounds.

“It was a really tough field, and it was difficult to get the time off to compete,” she explained.

“The standard has really picked up over the last few years and it is so tight in the men's and women's events.

“This style of competition is very challenging – it is more modern climbing, and a lot of people are not used to this. It is alien, and quite difficult to adapt to, which adds to the challenge. And as I get older, it is hard to keep up with the youngsters.

“It is hard work, particularly on the forearms, and I do not always have the time to climb for two days in a row, like we are here.

“But I love moving on the wall, and figuring out the movements you need is really cool.” ■



CRESTA IN NUMBERS

THE CONTEST'S TOP SPEED, IN MPH, CLOCKED BY SURG CDR DAVE POTTER

75

TOP-TEN PLACES CLAIMED BY ARMY ATHLETES AS THEY SECURED THE TEAM TITLE

5

UNITS WITH PERSONNEL INVOLVED IN THE BEGINNERS' WEEK AND ARMY CHAMPS IN THE BUILD-UP TO THE INTER-SERVICES

13

SOLDIERS TAKING TO THE ICE AT THIS SEASON'S CAMP – AN INCREASE ON LAST YEAR

45



Picture: Will Webb

RIDERS TOAST FIVE IN A ROW

A FIFTH successive title at Inter-Services level proved to be the crowning glory in the Army Cresta team's 2024 season.

As was the case 12 months earlier, the Royal Navy's Surg Cdr Dave Potter led the charge in the individual ranks, clocking 53.88 seconds in his opening race on his way to sealing the gold medal.

However, it was the soldiers' strength in depth that proved decisive as they dominated the top ten to secure the collective honours. Capt Alex Villiers-Smith (Gren Gds) was third – improving on the fifth-place finish in his 2023 debut season – and Maj Paul Chishick (LG, pictured) fourth, with newcomer Lt Charlie Wallace (RHG/D) eighth.

“Dave Potter produced some storming rides – he has been on fire this season,” Army Cresta captain Maj Tom Wythe (RL), who was seventh on the leaderboard, told *SoldierSport*.

“But the focus for us is the Inter-Services title.

“The Army is in the privileged position of having

such depth – we have been able to identify talent, and then nurture and develop it, for this competition. It is a real team effort, and we are not relying on a single trail blazer to lead the way, it is about everyone pulling together.

“The other Services had fallers but all six of our riders made it down.”

Lt Carina Evans (R Signals) finished second in the women's competition, while 24 personnel sampled the sport for the first time as the set-up staged its annual beginners' week in the build-up.

“We had 45 people riding in total, which was up on last year,” Wythe continued. “When I started out, we were lucky to get 20.

“This sport pushes people outside of their comfort zones and embodies everything the Army wants from us as soldiers. Lying on the toboggan in the start box, knowing what is coming, takes no small amount of courage.

“I would encourage anyone who is interested to come and have a go.” ■

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QUALITY FROM QDG

SKIERS from 1st The Queen's Dragoon Guards enjoyed a successful season that saw them battling for honours on two fronts.

In the Alpine disciplines, a team combining novices and seasoned campaigners enjoyed a close-fought battle with the Royal Tank Regiment at the Royal Armoured Corps Championships in Verbier, where they clinched victory on a challenging slalom course.

From there, they faced longer races, icy conditions and steeper slopes at the divisional showdown in Les Contamines and finished second in all four events to be crowned overall runners up.

Unfortunately, injury hampered the QDG's assault on the Army Championships but despite being a man down, they went on to finish second. Another highlight saw Lt Toby Clark selected for the Army squad at the Inter-Services.

The Nordic team travelled to Norway for the annual RAC training camp before skiing at the corps and divisional contests in France, where the highlight was a fifth-place finish for the men's team in the military patrol race.

Tpr Dylan Lewis and Lt Freya Logan went on to compete at the Army Championships, while the latter co-led the first RAC women's team at the divisional championships, finishing fourth.



JAMES' LATE SHOW RESCUES REDS



An injury-time header from Pte Owen James (RLC, pictured) salvaged a deserved draw for the Army under-23s in the concluding match of their Inter-Services campaign.

The striker's effort saw the Reds tie 1-1 with defending champions the Royal Navy in Aldershot and avoid the prospect of back-to-back defeats following a 2-0 loss to the Royal Air Force on the opening day.

The result was a fair reflection of an even game in which passion and endeavour were at the fore, with moments of quality sprinkled in between.

Senior Service forward PLAET Matt Iceton was the first to threaten as he lashed a shot into the side netting during the early exchanges. He spurned a better opportunity in the 22nd minute as he burst into the area only to dwell on the ball too long, allowing Cfn Danny Constable (REME) to deflect his shot wide.

Pte Lewis Simmons (Para) saw a free kick tipped over from the Army's first opportunity of note, before home keeper Pte Harry

Birchnall (RLC) scrambled across goal to thwart a chested effort from striker AB Jensen Bryan.

With half-time looming James drew a smart save from Navy stopper AET Matt Tomlinson and then crashed a close-range effort off the near post as the soldiers headed into the break on the front foot.

The pressure continued in the second period as James saw a shot blocked at the near post, with Cfn Alfie Watts (REME) denied by Tomlinson from the resulting cross.

However, it was the visitors who opened the scoring in fortuitous circumstances in the 58th minute as a deep free kick from Iceton on the right evaded both attackers and defenders and skidded into the net.

Substitute LCpl Matthew Gray (AAC) fired wide in the 69th minute and with the clock ticking down the Army looked destined for defeat. But James had other ideas as he glanced home at the near post in the seventh minute of injury time to rescue a point for his side. ■



TALENT BLOSSOMS AT ANNUAL CAMPS

SKILL progression and nurturing grass-roots talent was the primary focus for the Army's kendo and WT taekwondo set-ups as they hosted their latest training camps and championships.

Novice kendo athletes benefitted from expert coaching before making their competitive bows, with the Service then hosting one of the biggest tournaments on the civilian circuit at the Army invitational.

"We are taking individuals from zero right through to being able to compete," explained Army Kendo OiC Maj Mat Frost (AGC (SPS)). "And for the first time in recent years we are following the grading syllabus, grading people up to second and third kyu. We have also been running a concurrent coaching course.

"This year is more about reinforcing the foundations of the sport and in 2025 we will look to push the performance side. We are already planning a tour of central Europe, so we need to feed people through and get them to the appropriate standard."

In the meantime, the squad will

look to secure a tenth successive Inter-Services title when they face their Forces rivals in July.

"We tend to dominate, but the other teams have some superb individuals," Frost added.

Coaching qualifications and gradings were also key components of the WT taekwondo programme, which welcomed more than 25 personnel to Aldershot.

"It is a good turnout for us," said OiC Maj Stephen Gibbons (R Signals). "We've had guys come over from Brunei and I have travelled from Belgium.

"We are a fully formed club and people love getting on the mat. We run this twice a year and enter lots of competitions, so there are great opportunities."

The squad returned from last year's European Masters Games with 12 medals – including five golds – and were victorious at Inter-Services level. They will look to defend that title at the next event in June, while 2024 also sees them competing at the British University Taekwondo League World Championships for the first time. ■



**"PEOPLE
LOVE
GETTING
ON THE
MAT"**



HEAD OF THE TABLE

THE Army Table Tennis Championships proved to be a happy hunting ground for LCpl Dom Weston (RE, pictured above) as he claimed both the men's singles and doubles titles.

His success formed the culmination to a positive week of action for the sport, with more than 100 players taking part in training sessions and various competitions.

Elsewhere, Sgt Hilary Greig (AMS) claimed the women's singles crown and teamed up with Rev Nicola Frail (RAChD) to win the doubles. Frail and Capt Matt Hutson (REME) triumphed in the mixed doubles, with the latter helping Weston to glory in the men's equivalent. 11 Signal Regiment lifted the unit trophy.

"It has gone really well," Hutson, who is chair of the Army Table Tennis Association, told *SoldierSport* as he reflected on the success of the event.

"In the past we would have elite players and novices, with not a huge amount in between. But we have seen people start clubs at corps level which means we are now getting that middle ground where individuals are pushing for a place on the Army team – it is great to see."



SPORT SHORTS

Picture: Cat Gony/Allign Photography



Reds find form

THE Army men's rugby union team enjoyed back-to-back wins on the road as preparations for this season's Inter-Services campaign continued.

A 31-17 triumph over Cambridge University was followed by a resounding success against Cambridge 1923, when they ran in 11 tries on their way to a 71-14 victory.

The results followed on from defeats to the British Police and Nottingham. Their next test comes against the French Army, in France, on March 15.



Guba's home honour

ARMY taekwondo ace Sgt Yamikani Guba (RA) has been crowned Malawi's sportsman of the year.

The award comes on the back of a successful 2023 that included silver medals at the European Masters Games, Dutch Open and UK National Championships.

"I am humbled and privileged to be recognised for my achievements, especially as I'm based abroad," he said.

"It means a huge amount and hopefully it inspires other individual athletes in my country."



MAT APPEAL REMAINS AS HIGH AS EVER



**"WE
WANT
TO
RETAIN
THAT
TITLE"**

ANOTHER high turnout was celebrated at the Army Brazilian Jiu-jitsu Championships as more than 120 athletes battled for honours at Aldershot's Combat Sports Centre.

The contest welcomed competitors ranging from white to black belts in a host of weight divisions in both gi and non-gi contests, with the top performers earning selection for this summer's Inter-Services clash.

Among those to catch the eye were Cpl Kyle Wilson and Cpl Dave Agar (both Para), who won blue belt titles in the lightweight and middleweight divisions respectively.

"The standard here has been very high," Lt Col Shamus Kelly (RRF), former chair of and now adviser to the Army Brazilian Jiu-jitsu Association, told *SoldierSport*.

"The sport has matured; it has been part of the Army for more than ten years now and we are getting a lot of guys and girls joining up as they

know there is an opportunity to compete.

"These are high level athletes who are joining us as private soldiers."

The set-up secured a bronze medal at January's European Championships courtesy of Cpl Laurie McCutcheon (R Signals) and will see Bdr Josh Gibbs (RA) compete at the World Championships in California later in the year.

While such athletes fly the flag at the elite level, Kelly stressed it was equally important to concentrate on the next generation of talent and the Forces clash to come.

"We use the Army Championships as a way of growing the sport by focusing on the lower belts, while also selecting our squad for the Inter-Services," he added.

"We won that event last summer and we want to retain the title."

"The soldiers who win gold here will be selected for the competition – it is a totally transparent process." ■

SPORT SHORTS



Sprules' nations call

ARMY ice hockey star Sig Jess Sprules (R Signals) was part of the Great Britain squad that competed in the Four Nations tournament in Denmark last month.

The team started the campaign with a 2-0 loss to Italy that was followed by a 5-1 reverse against Poland. They completed the competition with a battling performance against the hosts before succumbing to a 3-2 defeat.

Sprules has since been named as a reserve for the British squad that will compete at the World Championships in Riga next month.



Starting in style

PENTATHLON ace 2Lt Kerenza Bryson (RLC) started the Olympic year in style by claiming a bronze medal at the Hungarian Indoor Championships.

The Reservist, who was crowned sportswoman of the year at the 2023 Army Sports Awards, crossed the line two seconds behind British teammate Emma Whitaker. Home favourite Michelle Gulyas took the gold.

Bryson had further cause to celebrate as she and Whitaker, along with Charlie Follett, captured the team gold.

She booked her place at the Paris Games with a bronze at last summer's World Championships (pictured).

MEDAL JOY AT 24-HOUR TEST

ENDURANCE runner Pte Damian Carr (R Anglian) is planning a relatively low-key year after ending 2023 on a high with a bronze medal at the IAU 24-hour World Championships in Chinese Taipei.

The Reservist was part of the six-man Team GB squad that finished behind champions Lithuania and Poland in the gruelling event, which saw athletes running loops of a two-kilometre circuit and posting the greatest distance possible in the allotted timeframe.

Carr clocked a personal haul of 239.384km, finishing 31st in the individual standings.

"The pressure was on us going in as we knew we had to medal to secure funding down the line," the 40-year-old told *SoldierSport*.

"It was a bit of a relief really. There are so many variables in a 24-hour race, which meant it was a great result – we put a lot of effort in."

Carr and his teammates arrived in country ten days before the event in a bid to acclimatise and this, along with other preparations in the build-up, paid dividends on the day.

"We were wearing ice packs beforehand to keep our core temperatures down and were checking the carbs and protein we were taking on board," the soldier explained. "We also looked at sweat ratios to work out how much sodium we were losing."

"I personally covered 150 miles and the conditions out there were quite tough due to the heat and humidity, so I was pleased."

Success in Asia made up for the disappointment of missing out on a medal at the European Championships in Verona, Italy, a year earlier and attention has already turned to the next world test in 2025.

"There are no major championships this season so I'm focusing on improving my speed over shorter distances," Carr, who has been competing for The Royal Anglian Regiment in this season's Army Midlands cross-country competition, added.

"I will try and qualify for the World Championships, while we will also look to improve as a team." ■



Picture: UIPM World Pentathlon/Nuno Goncalves

MONTH IN SPORT

March's key dates...



WHAT: Inter-Services Netball
WHEN: March 6 to 8
WHERE: Aldershot
NEED TO KNOW: The Army recorded

a fourth successive clean sweep of the titles in 2023, with the senior, development and masters squads all on top. Can they make it five in a row?



WHAT: Inter-Services Football Championships – Army v RAF
WHEN: March 5 and 6
WHERE: Aldershot Town FC
NEED TO KNOW: The soldiers start their quest for honours on home turf, with the women's game up first. The men commence battle 24 hours later – both matches kick off at 1900

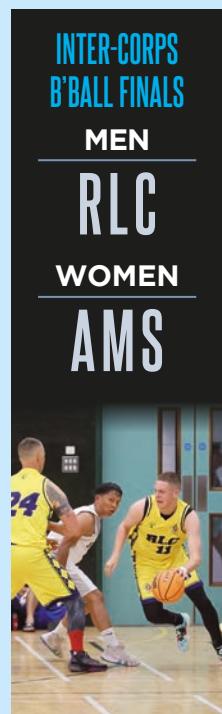


WHAT: Inter-Services Hockey
WHEN: March 19 to 21
WHERE: Aldershot
NEED TO KNOW: Goal difference proved decisive last

season as the Army women surrendered their crown to the RAF. They'll be going all out to regain the title, with the men and under-25s also hoping to improve



NEW COURT CAMPAIGN ENDS ON A HIGH



ORGANISERS of the new-look Inter-Corps Basketball Championships have celebrated a successful finish to the event's debut outing, with the Royal Logistic Corps and Army Medical Services sealing the top honours.

A 72-56 victory over the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers saw the Loggies reign supreme in the men's final. However, they suffered a comprehensive defeat in the women's showpiece, where the AMS recorded a 57-45 win.

The games marked the end of a tournament which started last summer and featured monthly pool fixtures ahead of semi-finals and finals, as opposed to the old system which saw the event crammed into a one-week window.

"It has been a huge success" Capt Craig Douglass (AAC), the Army Basketball Association's competition secretary, told *SoldierSport*. "It has given us the opportunity to see more basketball played and there has been a massive

reduction in injuries, as well as an overall improvement in the standard on court.

"We've seen different people at different games and there have been no limits on squad sizes – teams can use 12 players for one match and another 12 in the next. It has given the corps more flexibility.

"The finals were good games, but they were not as close as everyone expected. The AMS pulled away quite early in the women's match and it was the same for the RLC in the men's. Both teams then managed those gaps."

Attention now turns to this month's Inter-Unit finals ahead of the Inter-Services in May, which also marks the start of the next corps campaign.

Douglass said tweaks will be made to the admin of the tournament and there will be a trial of an expanded format.

"We are looking at corps entering two teams in the men's competition," he explained. "Some have lots of players but they are not always getting the opportunity to play. This will help that." ■

Final Word



Legal protection for our personnel to take extra leave from their civilian employers. I believe that in America and Australia Reservists train on a set number of weekends and their employers are legally bound to give them the time off. We benefit from this for deployments but not for normal jogging, yet the Army is asking more from us than at any time since the Gulf War.

Lt Luke Tarry, Yorks



As a Reservist of 19 years, I think the policy for employing us is due a change. What we have now is a zero-hours arrangement with the bounty being the main incentive, and people pick and choose when they come in. But we need long-term contracts stipulating certain training objectives be met each year. We should have a responsibility to turn up when we're supposed to – that would attract the right individuals and more of them.

CSgt David Treslove, Para



We are away for many months on this deployment and by law when I go back everything in my civilian career should be exactly the same, but will that be the case? Maybe the government should get involved and press home the message that if Reservists have been away serving their country they can't be treated any differently when they return.

Pte Fergus Baird, Para

Interviews: Steve Muncey Pictures: Sgt Murray Kerr, RA



RESERVE -ATIONS

We asked part-time soldiers training for Op Tosca about the biggest issues facing the Army Reserve right now

I think in the run-up to major deployments like Tosca there should be a concerted effort by the Army to engage with our employers and educate them.

LCpl Mike Kennedy, Para



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