

SOLDIER

MAGAZINE OF THE BRITISH ARMY

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“

It was certainly a shock to the system at first

”

Royal Engineers take on royal guard duties – p18





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Invisible acts



THIS month's cover feature about the development of man-made, one-size-fits-all blood has to be read to be believed (page

28). Thank you to the brainy bods at the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory for taking the time to share this discovery with the very people whose lives it may one day save.

If you want to be amazed by military medicine, though, there is no need for a crystal ball.

The actions of Army medics today in UK hospitals shows how a single person's grit, courage and compassion has a far greater capacity for change than anything in a petri dish (page 34).

Thanks to your collective efforts on Op Rescript, the country is slowly starting to find its feet.

It may not involve an advance to contact, but when my dad took his turn to be vaccinated at Askham Bar in York last month it struck me how this work is every bit as heroic.

I will never get to know the Serviceman who may have saved his life. There will be no homecoming parade to convey society's thanks.

So instead, *Soldier* continues cataloguing your experiences in the hope we can help you to feel proud of the part you play.

Sarah Goldthorpe • Editor

Where to find *Soldier*

> Printed copies

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> Facebook, Twitter and Instagram

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

> Online

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

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Pictures: Graeme Main



Splashing out on soldiers

Naafi 'excited' to be dishing out £7.5m in welfare grants over the next ten years

SERVICE personnel are to receive millions in new grants in a bid to boost their quality of life.

The Naafi Welfare Fund will allocate £750,000 a year for the next decade.

Any Armed Forces individual or unit can apply, and payouts range from £5,000 to £20,000.

Since the scheme was launched at the end of 2020 it has been inundated with applications – more than 400 in the first round when only around 50 were expected.

"We are delighted to offer this money," said Naafi Managing Director Steve Marshall.

"We exist to enhance the welfare of Forces communities and we are excited to fund projects that will bring people together, help reduce isolation and enhance lives."

Applications for the second round of grants will open next month, and successful bidders should be notified in September.

Mary Pittuck, the Naafi manager responsible for the initiative, said proposals had so far included communal gardens, block games rooms and outdoor sports equipment.

She added that, although the project had been planned for a while, its timing during the pandemic would bring an extra boost to troops.

"It feels like this will raise morale even more now, given the context of

what's happening in the world," she told *Soldier*.

"Applications have covered a real cross-section of things, and that's been really interesting to see."

Naafi is the MoD's in-house service provider, which means that all surplus profit from its catering and retail outlets goes back into military coffers.

In 2020/21 that amount will total around £1 million.

The welfare grants are being funded by the organisation's cash reserve, and applications are sifted by Naafi before being administered by the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust. ■

ON A CASH RECCE

For more details of how to get your hands on a Naafi grant – including eligibility details, timelines and some project inspiration – log on to

covenantfund.org.uk



“It feels like this will raise morale”

SOLDIER

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GLOBAL SITREP



Picture: British Forces South Atlantic Islands

1. FALKLAND ISLANDS RIC RELIEF

TROOPS from 1st Battalion, Irish Guards are settling into South Atlantic life after taking the helm of the Roulement Infantry Company (RIC) from Grenadier colleagues.

The Micks assumed their new role for the territory's security in February and are now operating alongside tri-Service colleagues and the Falkland Islands' Defence Force.

Working across tough terrain, the new arrivals will fill their time with training serials and other activities in Antarctic conditions.

Maj Hugo Collis (IG) of Number 2 Company formally assumed RIC command from outgoing boss and Grenadier Guards officer Maj James Taylor at a handover ceremony.

'All eyes are on Cabrit'

Battlegroups gear up for handover – page 42

2. LEBANON WILD ROVERS

AROUND 100 versatile vehicles that once tangled with the Taliban have been given a new lease of life on a Middle East counter-terrorism mission.

The overhauled Land Rover Weapons Mounted Installation Kit – WMIKs – have been delivered to Lebanese troops for border patrols with neighbouring Syria.

It is hoped the agile platforms, which have now been replaced by the more modern Jackal in the UK, will stop extremists and arms smugglers in their tracks.

A small team of personnel from 16 Air Assault Brigade are on the ground to help familiarise their new owners with the equipment. Some £300,000 will also fund spare parts.

Middle East and North Africa Minister James Cleverly told reporters that keeping Lebanon's land border secure was "part of our shared fight against Daesh".

The UK has already provided nearly 80 other vehicles and trained thousands of military personnel as part of a package to support the state.



Picture: Graeme Main

3. UK WORDS OF WARNING

INTERNATIONAL treaties protecting the world against chemical and biological weapons should be strengthened after Covid-19, experts have cautioned.

A report by six UK-based academics emphasised the wide spectrum of threats faced and urged Britain and its partners to address the "weaponisation" of toxic chemicals and diseases.

The paper highlights repeated instances of chemical attacks by Syria upon its own people, assassination using toxins in Malaysia, Russia and the UK, as well as the widespread use of tear gas by police

forces around the world, including against Black Lives Matter protestors.

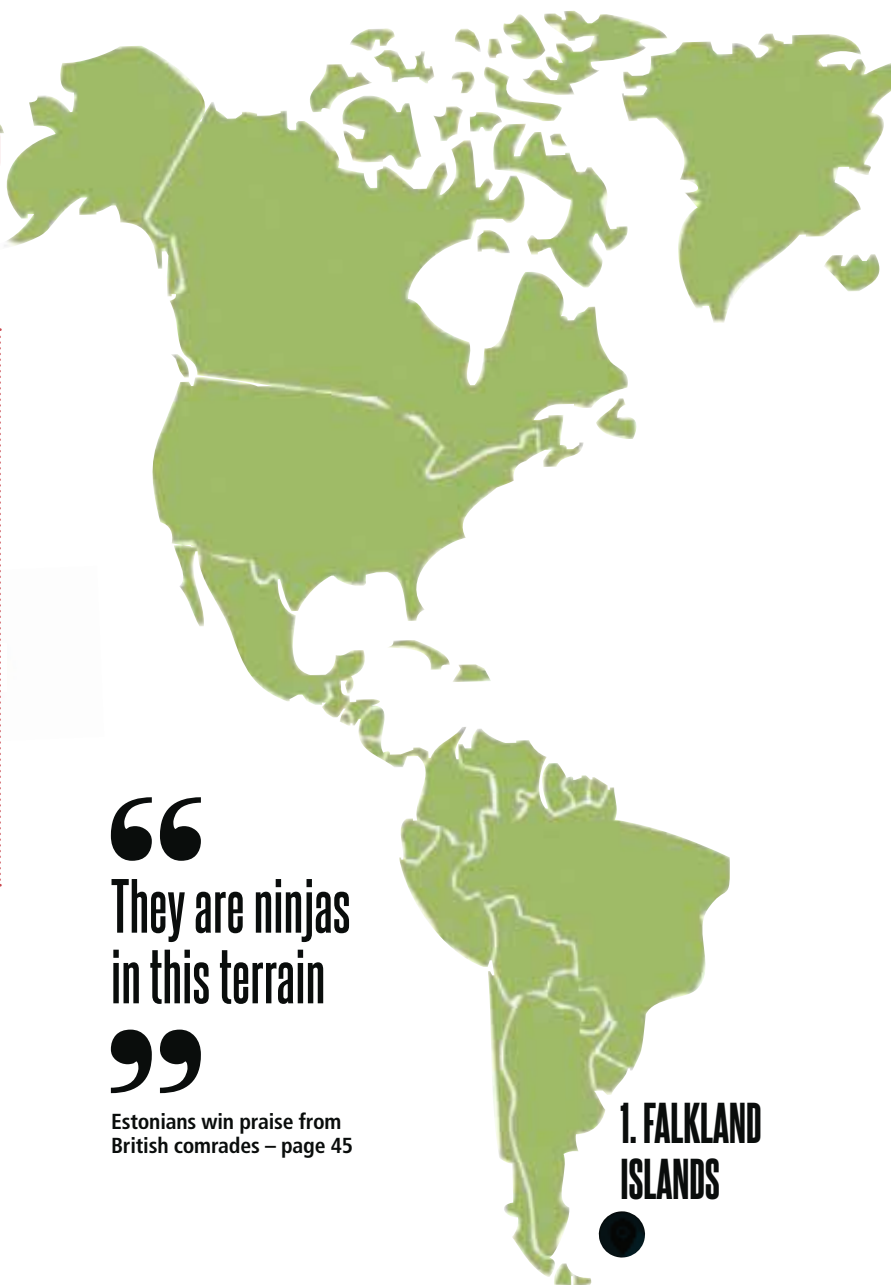
Project head Prof Lijun Shang, from London Metropolitan University,

said such examples along with the pandemic should remind leaders of the importance of chemical and biological security.

"It is crucial for good governance that the public and parliamentarians are well informed and aware of the potential ways forward to prevent benignly-intended science and technology being used for nefarious purposes," he added.



Picture: BG



“
They are ninjas
in this terrain
”

Estonians win praise from British comrades – page 45

1. FALKLAND
ISLANDS

INTELLIGENCE FOR THE ATLAS?

Brief the team now:



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6. AFGHANISTAN CHANGE AT THE TOP

BRIG Olly Brown has taken over from Brig Chris Ordway as head of the Kabul Security Force, which contains troops from Denmark, Mongolia and the US, as well as the UK.

The commander of 4th Infantry Brigade and HQ North East, Brig Brown brings a raft of international experience to the role, including a stint with Nato at HQ Allied Rapid Reaction Corps.

5. NEPAL COVID CAUSES SELECTION HEADACHES

THE latest intake of Gurkha recruits have completed the selection process despite coronavirus restrictions.

A total of 340 aspiring soldiers were due to arrive in Catterick as this issue went to press, having been whittled down from 1,600 hopefuls in their native Nepal.

With social distancing and regular hand washing becoming the norm, applicants quickly had to adapt to a new way of operating.

Interviews were conducted outside and through Perspex screens, while speaking and listening exams were

performed via video link with the English Language Wing at Catterick.

In addition, the infamous Doko stamina race was called off.

The travel ban prevented personnel travelling from the UK to help in the recruiting process, but 40 troops arrived from Brunei in time to ensure selection could continue.

With the course complete, those fortunate enough to progress had to isolate ahead of their kit issue and travel to the UK.



Pictures: HQ British Gurkhas Nepal



Picture: WO2 Rupert Frere, RLC



4. KENYA HEALTH CONCERNS ALLAYED

THE welfare of UK soldiers is being taken very seriously, the Service has reassured the public after an outbreak of Covid-19 among troops at the Batuk camp.

Personnel from 2nd Battalion, The Mercian Regiment had been working through their final preparations for Exercise Askari Storm last month when the base was put in enhanced isolation.

A Service statement at the time said: "All soldiers deploying on exercise had to conduct a period of isolation and test negative prior to travelling to Kenya.

"The British Army takes the health and wellbeing of personnel and the local community very seriously.

"The Ministry of Defence's Force Health Protection measures are being applied to prevent further infections."

Starting out with low-level drills, Askari Storm is set to ramp up over several weeks with a live-firing package before full-on battalion-level serials. Troops from 1st Battalion, The Duke of Lancaster's Regiment are poised to play the enemy force.

3. UK

2. LEBANON

6. AFGHANISTAN

5. NEPAL

4. KENYA

ONE-STOP CAREER SHOP

■ A PORTAL has been launched on Defence Connect to bring together information on careers policy, specialist courses and other Service opportunities.

It offers personnel greater access to both Army-wide and cap badge-specific information, whether for themselves or to help them advise subordinates.

The one-stop-shop was developed after research found that access to career information was not well signposted and spread across too many platforms.

BETTER CONNECTED APP

■ AN IMPROVED mobile phone app for Defence Connect has been launched.

It allows personnel to view their pay, check and submit leave applications and expenses, see what benefits they are eligible for and tap into what's happening in regiments and sub-units.

Individuals can also advertise their knowledge, skills and experience in their personal profile.

Search for *Jive Responsive* on your app store.



POWERING ON



■ COVID restrictions mean scenes such as these are not currently possible in sporting circles. In the meantime, the Army's cyclists are testing themselves in a new e-series. See page 71.

SENIOR SOLDIERS' BOOST

■ A COHORT of the Army's most senior soldiers gathered online to take part in an overhauled incarnation of the regimental sergeant majors' course.

The five-day package – which prepares the warrant officers for life and responsibilities at the top of their leadership chain – was delivered digitally for the first time.

While there had been plans to extend the training as well as beef up the syllabus this year, they were put on hold as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

Army Sergeant Major Gav Paton, who addressed delegates during one of the online sessions, said: "My future main goal is to see the length of the course doubled.

"There were changes to content this year, but I hope to see the training evolve."



Picture: Peter Davies

High honour for Peake

“I hope I can inspire young pilots”

BRITAIN'S first astronaut with the European Space Agency (ESA) has said he is "delighted and honoured" to become the new honorary colonel of Shropshire-based 9 Regiment, Army Air Corps.

Tim Peake added that he was looking forward to helping troops from the training outfit at RAF Shawbury embark on their careers.

"My passion has always been for aviation and I hope I can help inspire young pilots of the future to achieve their full potential," he continued.

Peake, who served for 15 years as an AAC pilot after originally joining The

Royal Green Jackets, joins a line-up of ex-soldiers recently returning as honorary colonels.

They include Olympian and former PTI Dame Kelly Holmes at the Royal Armoured Corps Training Regiment and Second World War veteran Sir Tom Moore at the Army Foundation College Harrogate, until his death (page 13).

Peake was selected as an astronaut by the ESA in 2009, launching to the International Space Station six years later and spending some six months in orbit.

During his long Army aviation career, he helped conduct trials on the Apache and deployed operationally to both Afghanistan and the Balkans.

He graduated as a qualified helicopter instructor from the Central Flying School, which is also based at RAF Shawbury.

Lt Col Stewart Pearce, 9 Regiment's commanding officer, said the new honorary colonel's appointment had been warmly welcomed by both staff and students.

"We are looking forward to officially welcoming him to the unit – when restrictions allow – to demonstrate the world-leading training being provided by personnel," he said.

Colonel Army Air Corps, Col Julian Facer, shared the CO's sentiment. "With his background and experience, Tim Peake will be a superb ambassador and role model for pilots embarking on their flying careers," he added.

TIM'S TIMELINE...

- **Current role:** Astronaut, European Space Agency
- **Time in space:** 185days 22hr 11min
- **Operational experience:** Includes Balkans, Afghanistan
- **Years of Army service:** 1992-2009
- **Cap Badge:** Army Air Corps
- **Rank at retirement:** Major





Drone swarms create a buzz

SQUADRONS of UAVs working together to support ground and air forces could be nearer to reality after a trial organised by the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (DSTL).

Up to 20 assets of five different types were flown simultaneously by three operators with the help of pre-programmed GPS routes.

The idea was to demonstrate that drones could work collaboratively as a team and fly beyond-visual-line-of-sight operations on typical military tasks such as reconnaissance.

Six different payload types were carried by the platforms, including optical sensors, as they carried out a wide range of simulated missions.

It was the largest experiment of its type ever to take place in the UK.

Throughout two weeks of flying tests out of RAF Spadeadam in Cumbria, more than 220 separate sorties were completed.

A DSTL statement said the trials produced "a significant step forward in the understanding of the capabilities of swarming drones".

They were the culmination of an 18-month collaboration with private industry. The commercial group was led by Blue Bear Systems Research, one of the first companies to operate a group of ten UAVs as a system at Exercise Unmanned Warrior in 2016.

Other parties include Plextek DTS, IQHQ, Airbus and Durham University.

“
It’s a
significant
step forward
”

HELPING WORKING MUMS TO WORK OUT

PREGNANT Servicewomen and new mums are to be given more guidance on taking part in physical training safely.

The policy, which is also aimed at commanders and PTIs, gives advice on moderate exercise, as well as suitable reconditioning plans.

High-risk activities such as scuba diving or high-altitude training must not be done. But women who feel capable and are medically cleared to do so can continue with adventurous training and attend fitness sessions alongside their peers.

Being active during and after pregnancy is known to benefit female health but also puts them at greater risk of musculoskeletal injury, according to studies from the women in ground close combat review.

Army chiefs hope the policy will have a positive effect on retention. According to Service stats, 29 per cent of female troops who returned to work after maternity leave between 2006 and 2016 left within the following two years.

FAMILY MATTERS

■ **THERE** is still time to have your say in the 2021 families' continuous attitudes survey and tell the Army what matters to personnel and their loved ones. Feedback drives policy change. To check whether you are invited to participate search for "MoD survey checker" online. The closing date is April 26.



Pictures: Jack Eckerley

BOXER EDGES NEARER

■ **DELIVERY** of the first Boxer armoured vehicles to units in 2023 has moved a step closer after the contract to supply its remote weapons station (pictured below) was confirmed.

Under a deal worth £180 million, Thales UK's Glasgow factory will supply the kit to the Army over the next decade.

The system includes a high definition long-range camera to scan for enemy threats, even at speed. And it alerts the soldiers inside through a digital display.

The equipment also comes with key defensive capabilities, including a multi-barrel smoke grenade launcher, a cooled, high-definition thermal imaging camera, visible and infrared pointers and integrated mounts for the general purpose or heavy machine gun.

The latest announcement follows the news that Cardiff-based manufacturer MilDef will supply the platform's suite of electronic equipment in a £20 million deal.

Director Land Equipment, Defence Equipment and Support, Maj Gen Darren Crook, said: "This is another significant step forward for Boxer and I'm delighted to see the different threads coming together."





Women wanted

■ **SERVICEWOMEN** are being canvassed for their opinions on body armour and other equipment.

The ten-minute survey will gather views on effectiveness and suitability – as well as on items such as sports bras and urination devices.

Findings will be used to inform future kit updates and the deadline is March 8.

Scan the QR code to take part.



POSTAL DELAYS CONTINUE

■ **MILITARY** personnel and families based in the European Union are continuing to experience lengthy delays to postal services in the wake of Brexit.

Letters and parcels being sent to and from

locations such as Sennelager via the British Forces Post Office (BFPO) were still taking up to five weeks to arrive as this issue went to press. Among the missing mail are goods ordered from retailers, as well as packages from relatives and official HMRC correspondence about tax returns.

Meanwhile, all parcel services for those based in Naples and Milan have been suspended, with troops told not to buy items online and to ask friends and family to delay sending items larger than letters.

According to the BFPO's Twitter account, part of the disruption relates to new import and export regulations introduced on January 1.

"Efforts to unlock the current local customs issues are ongoing at the highest level," stated the social media post, which also warned military customers that a "return to normal service frequencies is not yet possible".

A spokesperson for BFPO was unable to offer *Soldier* any further comment.

“It's great to use that skill set”

Dental problems bite

But RADC mission to reverse them is paying off

ROYAL Army Dental Corps personnel have deployed in mobile teams to combat falling levels of oral health among troops during the Covid-19 pandemic.

With access to routine dentistry reduced by the coronavirus, the Army's dental fitness dropped by around a quarter to just over 50 per cent, leaving personnel at risk of developing problems on operations.

As a result, dental readiness preparation teams were set up in conjunction with Defence Primary Health Care to provide additional support to high-priority units.

The most recent mobilisation saw two dentists and four dental nurses deploy to Kinloss and Fort George (pictured) – home of 3rd Battalion, The Royal Regiment of Scotland – where they treated 267 soldiers over the course of five weeks.

Dental officer Maj Christoph Harper said this increased the formation's oral health score by nearly a third, with 91 per cent of personnel dentally fit.

"This leaves the unit with a very low dental need in the immediate future and reduces their vulnerability to dental problems whilst deployed," he explained.

"The quality of care is exactly the same as in a normal surgery – we are able to provide the full range of treatments including inspections, fillings, extractions and root canals.

"We haven't done tented dentistry since Iraq and early Herricks, so it is also a great opportunity for us to use that kit and skill set."

Similar clinics were previously set up for Chester-based 1st Battalion, The Duke of Lancaster's Regiment and 1st Battalion, The Royal Irish Regiment in Tern Hill, Shropshire.



Picture: Maj Christoph Harper, RADC



SHINING A LIGHT ON THE COVID EFFORT

■ **THE** National Army Museum is continuing to appeal for memorabilia and personal accounts from soldiers deployed on the front lines of Op Rescript.

It wants artefacts and testimonies as part of efforts to reflect the Service's fight against Covid-19.

Head of Collections Development Emma Mawdsley said some items had been donated following an appeal during the first national lockdown last year.

But she added: "We are still looking for even very basic things – leaflets or notes – which will help to tell the story." Email info@nam.ac.uk to outline your offering.

Picture: Graeme Main



Pictures: Cpl Danielle Dawson, RLC



Socially distanced and sub-zero

■ **HARDENED** Reservists braved icy temperatures while maintaining strict Covid-19 protocols as they showed their core soldiering skills were in good order.

The troops from 4th Battalion, The Yorkshire Regiment battled the elements in a shakedown of disciplines including shooting and tactical patrolling. But they proved themselves capable in the training across the north of England.

Exercise Yorkshire Strike continued a busy schedule for the infantrymen, who have been supporting NHS colleagues on Op Rescript.

A number of personnel are also preparing to head out to Kenya later this year.



Tributes flood in to 'absolute gent'

Burma vet Sir Tom became source of inspiration to young soldiers

READERS of *Soldier* have paid tribute to Capt Sir Tom Moore, after the 100-year-old Second World War veteran died with Covid-19 last month.

Raising almost £33 million for NHS charities by walking laps of his garden, the lockdown hero became a popular household name after lifting the nation's spirits. He was knighted by the Queen and appointed honorary colonel of the Army Foundation College Harrogate as well as scoring a number-one single and book deal (*Tomorrow Will Be a Good Day*).

Soldier reviewer Mike Peters (ex-AAC), who gave the title a five-star rating last year, said the veteran would be remembered as "a great example of the best of his generation".

He added: "Sir Tom's humility and optimism is what stood out.

"So many of us were down in the dumps with the

pandemic and he got up and did something, carrying people along with him and leading by example.

"Even at 100 he was demonstrating all the qualities of a good soldier."

Last summer Moore fronted our coverage of the 75th anniversary of VJ Day.

Recalling the fierce fighting he experienced in Burma with The Duke of Wellington's Regiment, he said: "You could never look back and think we were badly done to because we weren't. Our morale was always high because we were the British Army and we were doing a very good job."

Lt Col Simon Farebrother (QDG), CO of AFC Harrogate, said: "We were really lucky that Sir Tom visited us a couple of times.

"He was an absolute gentleman and a real source of inspiration to the junior soldiers."

To learn more about the veteran's battlefield experiences read our August 2020 issue.



“He carried people with him”

SPINE LINE COMPETITION



LAST month's clues were inspired by the issue's photographic theme.

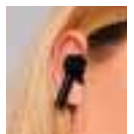
(Sergey) Gorshkov, (Tim) Laman, (Brent) Stirton and (Bao) Yongqing have all been winners of the UK's Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition.

This month we have teamed up with audio tech firm Ausounds (iamaudio.co.uk), whose next-generation products are specially tailored for musicians and music lovers alike.

We are giving away a pair of their Au-Stream wireless headphones – waterproof and designed with comfort in mind.

To have a chance of winning, tell us what links the clues on the spine of this month's magazine.

Answers, including daytime phone number, to comps@soldiermagazine.co.uk by March 31.



Picture: Cpl Becky Brown, RLC

A SECOND STAB AT SERVICE

■ **VETERANS** at a north-west care home had a throwback to their military past when serving personnel turned up to deliver their Covid-19 inoculations.

Ex-troops at Broughton House in Salford were given jabs by a six-strong team from the MoD's vaccine quick reaction force.

Col Russ Miller, Commander Army Headquarters North West and a trustee at the charity-run home, said there had been a healthy level of banter between the Army medics and residents.

"It's been a dose of familiarity for people who have been suffering and unable to socialise," he added.



Ground view

Army Sergeant Major, WO1 Gav Paton, offers his take on Service life...

IF YOU read this column last month you will probably recall that I had been in self-isolation after being exposed to someone with Covid.

Thankfully, after suffering no ill effects, I emerged from confinement in my spare room back to a more normal routine. But it dawned on me that it had been almost exactly a year since the pandemic began.

Life before this crisis seems an age ago. In the new reality of the last 12 months, soldiers have had the challenge of assisting the NHS as part of Op Rescript in the UK while maintaining operational commitments overseas. Troops, as well as their loved ones, have made significant sacrifices.

As I pick up my pen, personnel are playing their part in the huge vaccination effort. They continue to assist with a range of other tasks – from crewing ambulances to working at hospitals – as they support the extraordinary efforts of our health service colleagues.

The Army should be proud of all it has done. But as well as looking back on achievements of the past year, we should take this as an opportunity to consider all we have learnt and how it could apply in future.

During the crisis we have managed to adapt and to refocus our efforts to work remotely. Everywhere, soldiers have been cracking on at home, even while isolating. I've been busier than at any time I can remember, even though travel has been less frequent.

All this has challenged a problem culture in the Army head-on – that of so-called presenteeism.

Traditionally, troops have needed to turn up to a physical workplace and be seen doing their jobs.

In my view, this notion now needs to change for good.

Yes, nothing can replace face-to-face contact and there are times when people need to be together. But we should also trust soldiers to carry out their role.

In addition, we must make sure we empower our junior commanders to lead when their troops are working remotely. They must also take responsibility for keeping a check on the welfare of soldiers and their families.

In short, we must be able to rely on each other – our troops have done this in difficult times throughout history and will continue to do so beyond Covid-19.

Trust builds mission command.



Should scenes like this become a rarer sight? WO1 Paton thinks so...

“
We should trust soldiers
”

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL



Q What was the first thing you did after your self-isolation?

A I had breakfast with my wife and son – something so simple never felt so good!

Slaying the stigma

STAYING on the coronavirus crisis, there is a concern that has now been raised with me by soldiers a fair few times – I've been calling it “Covid shame”.

This phrase sums up their feelings after becoming ill or having to self-isolate. They've been worrying about whether they could have done more, and how colleagues will view them.

The fact is anyone can be infected by or exposed

to this virus – I was forced into quarantine by simply being in the same place as somebody who had tested positive.

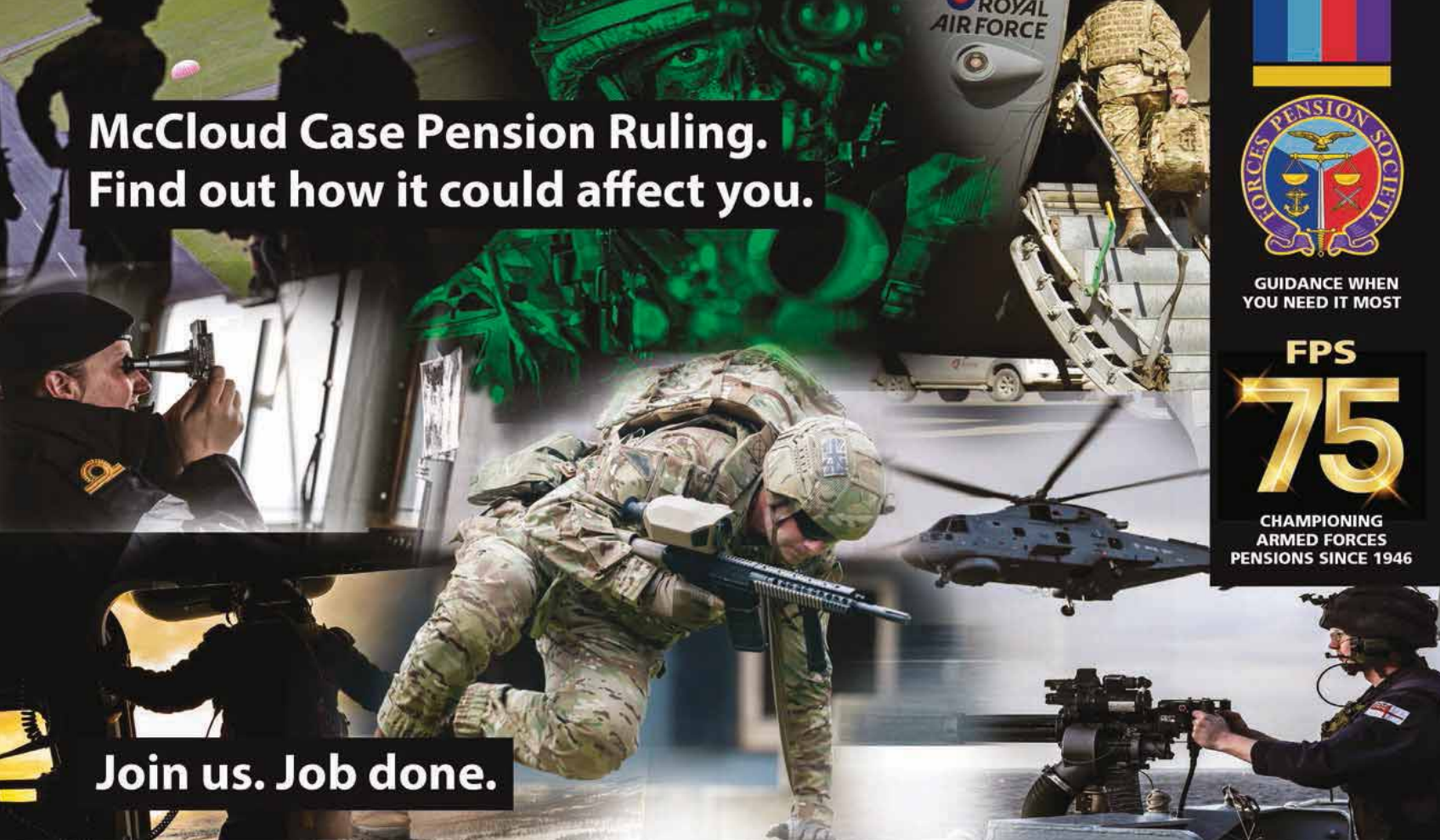
Let me be clear: nobody should feel shame.

What is important is that we follow the guidance as best we can and take action if we are exposed. This includes updating the Covid reporting tool on the Defence Connect portal.

No stigma, and no shame.

Matters of the mind

■ AS THIS issue of *Soldier* hits the press, I'll be hosting a second workshop on mental resilience – the feedback from which will be put before our most senior officers. Command and corps sergeant majors from across the Army will be joining me for the day-long online session, which will focus on suicide and self-harm prevention. In addition we'll be hearing from troops who have been directly affected. An earlier session looked at the wider issue of mental resilience, and info from both will help to inform future policy. Watch this space. Let's make sure we look after each other.



McCloud Case Pension Ruling. Find out how it could affect you.

Join us. Job done.

The McCloud case relates to an age discrimination ruling in 2019 against the Public Sector Pension Schemes introduced in 2015. Since then, the Government has been looking at two options for how to remedy the problem. That decision has now been made and it affects all personnel in service before 31st March 2012 and on or after 1st April 2015 (including service leavers). So there's a good chance it will affect your and your family's future income.

The decision has been taken in favour of "Deferred Choice Underpin". This was the option we at the Forces Pension Society supported and for which we lobbied hard. It means you will be able to make an informed decision based on the actual pension benefits earned, calculated toward the end of your service. And your right to do this will be underpinned by legislation. You need not take any immediate action, though as always, the Society will be on hand to advise and support our Members.

Independent, not-for-profit

Independence is vital to our work, calling Governments to account whenever we spot injustice or unfairness in the system. This year we celebrate our 75th Anniversary of supporting the Armed Forces Community, championing their pensions.

We are funded entirely by subscriptions from our membership, now over 60,000 strong and growing. Any surplus helps fund our outreach programme of free-to-attend Roadshows and Webinars at bases throughout the country and overseas – and our attendance at CTP Employment Fairs.

Visit: forcespensionsociety.org/join-now/

Annual membership for you and your spouse/partner is just £41. As a Member, you will have exclusive access to our Pension Advisory Team who can advise on the implications for you of the McCloud ruling. You'll also have exclusive access to Members' Webinars and our bi-annual e-newsletters and magazine, Pennant.

And you'll have access to our wide range of membership benefits from discounts on new cars and white goods to insurances, low-cost money transfers and a good deal more.

IT PAYS TO UNDERSTAND YOUR PENSION

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Tel: 020 7820 9988 - email: memsec@forpen.co.uk - www.forcespensionsociety.org



GUIDANCE WHEN
YOU NEED IT MOST

FPS
75

CHAMPIONING
ARMED FORCES
PENSIONS SINCE 1946



FEARLESS FUNDRAISING



Fight for funding

A DETERMINED Army Air Corps veteran has refused to let the pandemic put a stop to his £20,000 fundraising drive. Ian Haberfield, a former lance corporal, had to ditch his plan to run the London Marathon last year. But the ex-soldier, who served as a helicopter comms specialist, instead climbed seven of the UK's highest peaks to raise cash for Forces charity SSAFA. And having already hit more than half his target, he has further activities planned for later in the year. "The organisation has been massively hit by the pandemic and they need support now more than ever," the veteran said. Sponsor him by searching for his name at justgiving.com

Target:
£20,000
For: SSAFA



Sleep rough at home

TROOPS are being asked to give up their creature comforts and enlist for an uncomfortable night as part of a campaign to raise cash for homeless ex-personnel. Veterans' charity Alabare is urging soldiers to quit their bed and sleep in a less enticing place in their house or garden during the Big Sleep at Home on March 5. To sign up to the sponsored event visit alabare.co.uk

“I knew I wanted to do more”



Pte Ryan Shippey (Yorks) hopes to deploy this year

Pictures: Shutterstock, RFCA and Freepik

From Maccy D to Infantry

Fast food worker whizzes through Reserve training

A MCDONALDS employee has passed phase one and two Reserve training in record time.

Pte Ryan Shippey, 31, took just four months to complete the modules required by 4th Battalion, The Yorkshire Regiment – despite working full time at the fast food restaurant.

The speed has impressed his senior colleagues within Burma Company. "I can honestly say it is unprecedented," commented Capt Mally Birkett.

"Usually it takes our Reservists around 18 months to get through all the training courses.

"And it's even more incredible because it's happened against the backdrop of a pandemic."

The Barnsley-based infanteer

used his holiday and unpaid leave to complete the courses.

He paid tribute to the Army's support and encouragement.

"I couldn't be happier with how it's all gone," he added.

"Once I got halfway through phase one I knew that I wanted to do a lot more and take it further.

"Getting the training done quickly means that all the opportunities open up to me quicker, too.

"I hope to deploy this year."

Can you beat Ryan?

Contact our team with your unit's training success stories
news@soldiermagazine.co.uk



● A PARATROOPER from the Air Manoeuvre Battlegroup conducts a simulated helicopter raid on Fingringhoe Ranges in Colchester. Currently filled by 3 Para, the role has required soldiers to continue their training during Covid restrictions.

Picture: Cpl Danny Houghton, RLC

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PUMA ECOBOOST MILD HYBRID

PROUD TO OFFER CURRENT AND FORMER MILITARY
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**BRING ON
TOMORROW**

Model shown is a New Puma ST-Line X 1.0 155PS Mild Hybrid Electric Vehicle (MHEV) Petrol 6 speed manual with optional LED Headlights and Driver Assistance Pack. Fuel economy mpg (l/100km) (Combined): 47.9 (5.9). CO₂ emissions 135g/km.

Vehicle shown may not reflect latest UK specifications.

Figures shown are for comparability purposes only; they only compare fuel consumption and CO₂ figures with other cars tested to the same technical procedures. These figures may not reflect real life driving results, which will depend upon a number of factors including the accessories fitted (post-registration), variations in weather, driving styles and vehicle load.

Search: Ford Military Sales

ford.co.uk

About TURN!

Royal Engineers swap the day job for public duties

► THERE can't be many people who've been up to their elbows in engine oil one week and black boot polish the next, but Spr Thorpe Smith is one of them.

The heavy plant fitter is one of 80 personnel from 29 Field Squadron, 21 Engineer Regiment who have been supporting the Guards Division's public duties at Buckingham Palace, St James's Palace, the Tower of London and Windsor Castle.

"I normally have my hands covered in grease so to suddenly be spending my days in crisp white gloves and a pristine uniform couldn't be more different," the Serviceman (top right) told *Soldier*.

The squadron's six-week outing in this role, which ends this month, is only the second for the sappers during the past decade – the last being undertaken by 36 Engineer Regiment in February 2019.

Between 11 and 15 soldiers are required to be at each location at any one time, with two lance corporals, a staff sergeant and one officer in a typical contingent.

The troops started rehearsing

for the task in October and since then have been consumed with honing their skills and prepping kit, explained Capt Oscar Maynard.

"The engineers don't do advanced drill so it has meant some challenging extra training for us," he added.

"We've been using instructors from across the regiment and benefited from a Coldstream Guards short-term training team, who brought us up to speed, especially around the more intricate parts of the ceremonial stuff."

So just how out of their comfort zone were the Ripon-based troops?

"It wasn't what I was expecting as we had to tweak the drill we had been taught in basic training," explained Spr Smith.

Spr Mitchell Daly, a draughtsman by trade, added: "It was certainly a shock to the system at first as the only tasks of this type we have are during remembrance, but they're hardly similar."

Despite being relative novices, in a matter of three months the personnel had moved seamlessly into their ceremonial role.

Here, they reveal how they managed it...



THE DRILL

THE KIT

I was surprised by the speed of the marching pace – it is very fast compared to what we are used to and doing it in the heavy great coat takes some practice.



Spr Thorpe Smith

It's very high maintenance; if you do two shifts in a day you will spend nearly all your time between duties cleaning it. It's mostly about polishing the boots, but if it rains the creases can fall out of your great coat and trousers so then you have to iron them back in again.

You have to be aware of the small but vital differences in technique. During about turns, for example, we would normally bring the left foot in next to the right foot immediately before the turn itself. But the Guards swing the left foot forward – as if to take another step – and only then bring it in really sharply next to the right foot. It's a very small difference but ingraining it is challenging.



Spr Mitchell Daly

I learnt that before going out to the sentry post I should double-check I was good to go because once you're out there, if you've put your hat on slightly out of position and it's uncomfortable, you can't adjust it. You are expected to be absolutely still at all times unless carrying out drill movements or saluting officers and royals passing through the gate.

We put in lots of hours to get the Tower of London's famous Ceremony of the Keys just right. It's the most complex duty the personnel face on the rota and has been done every single day for about 700 years. Even the Blitz didn't stop it.

SSgt Martin Beech



Capt Oscar Maynard

We had some extensive tailoring requirements. We were given surplus great coats for the duties but engineers are all shapes and sizes and most of the garments had to be tailored. The bottom of the coat must hang 12 to 14 inches off the ground, regardless of physique.

The biggest hurdle was making sure all the guys understood the drill regimes at each location. The Ceremony of the Keys at the Tower, the changing of guard posts, the speed at which they march, how many steps they take on patrol and when is the best time to change the guard; all of these factors have to be ingrained before you are fit for role inspection.



WO2 Spencer Eardley

We had to get the boots worn in quickly. We were given brand new ones, so I put the guys on the parade square in them a few times to break them in and wear the studs down to make them less slippery. Only after that did we start the long process of burning down with beeswax and bulling the leather to get the required mirror finish.

THE PRIDE

“

During our time at the Tower of London, where we were doing the Ceremony of the Keys, the chief warder stressed to us its importance, its place in history, and that we were also providing real security at the home of the crown jewels. That really underlined to the guys what a big deal this was.

SSgt Martin Beech

”

“

It means a lot to us all to be doing this. The Queen was at Windsor Castle when we were on duty and we saw her looking out of the windows at us – I did feel proud to be there, guarding her. It brought home to us that we weren't just looking the part but actually doing an important job in protecting the royal family.

”

“

It was definitely an honour to be given the role and responsibility. My family have all been in touch with me to tell me how proud they were that I was guarding Buckingham Palace, so that felt really good. With everything that's going on it's been great to do something of real purpose.

”



Spr Thorpe Smith



Spr Mitchell Daly

Get a GRIP

Strongman shares some simple tips that could make a difference as fitness standards change

► WITH new physical employment standards on the way, personnel will soon be expected to carry out a range of tasks to gauge their fitness for the specific demands of their cap badge roles.

A casualty drag, stretcher carry, vertical lift and incremental lift are among the tasks included – meaning grip strength could prove a useful ally.

Here, World's Strongest Man contender and ex-Welsh Guardsman Gavin Bilton lists a few exercises that will boost what could be a key component in your fitness repertoire.

Reverse barbell bicep curls

Grip the barbell, palms facing down, while keeping your body straight and chest lifted. Holding the upper arms stationary, exhale and lift the bar toward your shoulders bending at the elbows. Continue to curl the bar toward your shoulders until you feel complete bicep contractions

Holding 20kg plates in each hand

This exercise trains the ability to hold onto something for an extended period of time. Grab the plate with your thumb on one side and your four fingers on the other. Stand up straight with the plates at your side

Each of these should be **timed** and **aim to beat your previous score** in each session

Heavy dumbbell hammer curls

Different to bicep curls, this movement sees the dumbbell rotated 90 degrees. Sit on a bench with the back upright and a dumbbell each side. Keep your elbows close to your body, pull your shoulders back and pick up the dumbbells – gripping them at the top, rather than middle. With your arms fully extended and hands facing each other, curl the dumbbells until your thumbs are near your shoulders. Pause at the top, before lowering under control

Hang grip from a pull-up bar

As simple as it sounds, hang from the bar using a parallel (front) or wide (sides) grip



To follow Bilton on Facebook and Instagram search **Gavin "The Bull" Bilton**

● Bilton breaks new ground – p68

In with the new

A peek inside the healthier lunch bags now being dished out to travelling troops



► **GREENER.** Tastier. More nutritious. Soldiers on exercise in 2021 are enjoying a far better class of packed lunch than they did last year. But it's bad news for pastry fans. Here is the sort of high-carb, slow-release grub you can expect to drop into your lap from now on...



Cereal bar

Replaces faster-release energy snack options

Juice or water
Replaces carbonated drinks or squashes



Fruit

Biscuits

Replaces chocolate bars and high sugar varieties



30g sugar or less for both snack items

Pasta salad, wrap or wholemeal baguette

(with a variety of fresh filling choices, including meat-free)

Replaces pies, pasties and processed sandwich fillings in thinly sliced bread



Popcorn

Replaces fried crisps and other fatty or high-sugar snacks



IN NUMBERS

Transit packed meals

£2.26

the price increase, per meal, which has allowed the improvements to be made

Health anxiety

What is it, and do you have it?

► A RAGING pandemic – it's pretty much the nightmare scenario for anyone suffering with health anxiety.

And if you didn't obsess about your physical wellbeing before, the last 12 months may mean that you now find yourself getting regularly stressed.

Here are some ways to spot health anxiety, and some simple steps to start tackling it...

Common thoughts

"Doctors often miss illnesses"

"Surely a headache like this can't be just stress"

"This must be cancer"

"If I don't do something I am going to die"

● You worry that your doctor or medical tests may have missed something

● You're always checking your body for signs of illness, lumps or pain – sometimes called "scanning"

● You are always asking others for reassurance that you're not ill

● You constantly worry about your health

Signs you may be suffering with health anxiety

● Anxiety can cause symptoms like headaches or a racing heartbeat, and you may in turn mistake these for signs of illness

● You obsessively look at health information on the internet

Ways to help yourself

Relaxation Try some breathing exercises or a sprint around the park

Keep busy When you have an urge to check your body, do something else to distract you

Challenge your thoughts Write your worries down and then try to counter them by writing more balanced responses next to them

Avoid Doctor Google

If your anxiety is still interfering with your life, contact your GP They may refer you for cognitive behavioural therapy or prescribe medication for your anxiety

Coronanxiety?

If you are struggling with worries visit anxietyuk.org.uk and search "coronanxiety" for a wealth of expert videos and support

Code red

How the Army
is busting myths
about periods

► **WOMEN** now hold their own alongside men in front-line roles, yet their periods – and the impact of this on soldiering – remain poorly understood.

But that is set to change thanks to a new campaign aimed at sparking honest conversations around reproductive health and, ultimately, improving life for female personnel.

MoD principal physiologist and lead for the Menstrual Health Action project, Prof Julie Greeves (pictured), tells *Soldier* more...



Combat roles were opened up to women in 2016, so why now?

There had to be a cultural shift – that takes education, buy-in and time. No one talks about periods in the military at all, so we need to do more to break the taboos.

Why is this needed?

Research has shown that demanding training and deployments impact menstrual health, which in turn can adversely affect physical performance and injury risk. Women are an important part of the workforce and we have to protect them.

How is female health affected?

Stress and poor nutrition can stop some women's periods completely. The body is clever – it realises it hasn't got the energy

to sustain the menstrual cycle and diverts resources to survival; to feeding the brain and the muscles. It's not a new phenomenon but it's never been looked at in the military.

So what if women miss a period?

Many may be pleased, but other than during pregnancy, if you're not menstruating your body is telling you something is wrong. It means your hormone levels, which are vital to protecting musculoskeletal health, are low. The same is true if you take contraceptives to control your cycle. It stops the production of your natural hormones. It's important that women know this.

Are you gathering data?

Yes. We sent out a survey via the Servicewomen's network and a desire for more knowledge on menstrual health was a common theme among the 500 responses we received. We've also held a series of focus groups with male and female personnel. Men need to know about these issues because they are in the majority. Leaders especially must be aware of the difficulties that women face in order to manage their soldiers properly.

What challenges did Servicewomen tell you about?

Some described carrying used sanitary products with them on exercise as there was nowhere to dispose of them, having to use tissues because they ran out of tampons and were too embarrassed to ask the chain

of command for help, or having to wear two pairs of underwear and extra pads for fear of leaking while on parade. Others questioned why some men feel it's okay to make comments like 'oh, she must be on the blob'. It was eye-opening and it's clear we have to debunk some myths and normalise periods.

What else is your research looking at?

The campaign is part of our optimising physical performance programme, which is also examining reproductive health and the use of hormonal contraceptives to control periods, as well as how sleep, nutrition, PT and equipment design affects female personnel. In society generally there is a data gap when it comes to women, and defence is no different. Our role is to gather evidence to support interventions that could improve the working environment for everyone.

What changes would you like to see?

Certainly awareness, so that men can empathise with women in the field by understanding the physical symptoms they may be suffering from and the need for disposal of sanitary products. We also want to educate women on what's normal when it comes to periods, when to seek help and how to make evidence-based choices – and to know they shouldn't feel shame, but be instrumental in bringing about change.





Menstruation myth-busters...

● **Periods are not shameful,** they

are a natural, healthy and important biological event that millions of women are experiencing every day. Not talking about the issue causes anxiety, spreads misinformation and stops women getting the support and facilities that they need.

● **Pre-menstrual syndrome (PMS) is not all in the mind.**

The majority of women experience some symptoms, including bloating, tummy cramps, anxiety, mood swings, breast tenderness and tiredness. For some this can prove debilitating. Lifestyle factors such as regular exercise, good diet and plenty of sleep can help, as can painkillers.

● **Women can be active during their period.**

In fact, exercise can help ease symptoms, and the release of endorphins – natural painkillers – can help. Swimming is perfectly safe and hygienic as well.

Speak up

Abnormal periods, including heavy, painful and infrequent bleeding, **are very common. But don't suffer in silence.** If something is affecting your day-to-day function, **speak to your MO**

In numbers:

228m

estimated number of women experiencing their periods every day around the world



Join the conversation

Use **#periodproud**, **#realtalk** and **#menstrualhealthaction** to share your thoughts



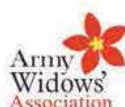
The Army's National Charity

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In a typical year, we help 70,000 people by awarding grants to individuals and 89 other charities and organisations that support the Army family. Our support is here at the start of your career and continues for life - long after service has ended.

These are just some of the 89 charities and organisations we supported in the 2019-20 financial year:





SUPPORTING
70,000
INDIVIDUALS &
89
ORGANISATIONS

SEARCH **ABF THE**
SOLDIERS' CHARITY
TO FIND OUT MORE

SUPPORT US
AND YOU SUPPORT
THE WHOLE ARMY FAMILY



THE
NOT FORGOTTEN
ASSOCIATION
From Comradeship To Challenge™



THE
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FACTORY
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EMPLOYMENT
CHARITY



Royal Star
& Garter
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the
Armed Forces
charity



housing and
helping Veterans





FIRST BLOOD

Defence scientists are helping to create a man-made, universal blood that could remove the need for human donation altogether. Could this amazing breakthrough be saving lives on ops one day soon?



Soldiers from The Royal Anglian Regiment practise medical emergency skills at Camp Bastion during Op Herrick, 2009

STU PEARSON'S memories of the day when his leg was blown off in an Afghan minefield are sketchy – the product of a haze induced by blood loss and morphine.

Seriously wounded and miles from expert medical care, he recalls seeing his left limb shattered and his boot at a bizarre angle with the laces attached to the stump. He fumbled for a tourniquet before injecting the opiate to stave off the inevitable onset of serious pain.

"I knew it was bad and reached for my medical pouch," the 46-year-old recalls of the now infamous minefield incident in Kajaki while serving with 3rd Battalion, The Parachute Regiment. "Although the wound did not hurt immediately, I knew it wouldn't be long.

"Even now there are gaps and I can't remember everything that happened on that day – September 6, 2006."

Severe bleeding from battlefield blasts affected hundreds of troops like Pearson in southern Afghanistan. Around 15,500 litres of blood were transfused to 2,600 patients during seven years of British ops in the region. It was, by all accounts, a conflict that placed huge demands on medical teams.

But lessons were constantly learnt, along with regular medical kit upgrades, and when the UK presence in Helmand province finally drew down, casualties were surviving injuries that would once have proved fatal. »

» Now, armed with the knowledge of that era, defence scientists have been looking at ways to further improve soldier survivability. And bleeding is a key concern – a medical study of Op Herrick from 2008-10 showed that nearly 30 per cent of casualties needed a transfusion.

But with life-giving fluid a bulky and difficult asset to deliver to the front line – and medics likely to be operating in far more austere conditions in future – genetic engineering appears to hold the answer.

Enter the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (DSTL), which is funding a project at the University of Bristol where boffins have worked out how to remove the part of blood that dictates which body can accept what type.

The researchers have then used this knowledge to grow red blood cells in laboratory flasks that are on their way to being “universal” – that is, able to be donated to anyone.

This was originally done using stem cells from donated blood. But thanks to DSTL cash, the experts have gone a step further and started growing this amazing super-blood independent of any donations at all.

Abi Spear, a scientist from DSTL's Trauma, Toxicology and Medicine Group, is fiercely enthusiastic about the potential.

“There is a real buzz to all of this and at times I have to make sure I keep my sense of perspective,” she tells *Soldier*. “There are many stages to go through – and it could take a decade or so before we see it on the front line – but it is all undeniably exciting.”

Britain's future operations are likely to involve fighting a campaign against a well-matched enemy – the scenario for which senior commanders are currently planning. This would mean clinicians operating closer to the front, and remote field hospitals being the first port of call for the wounded.

With this backdrop in mind, the lab-grown blood on the drawing board must be robust enough to withstand the rigours of sustained deployment.

So more genetic changes are being made to help it store on the shelf for longer and be easier to use in the field.

Dr Spear points out that cells could even be freeze-dried. This process would enable them to be stored without the need for a fridge, and “reawakened” at the point of use. »



Universal, man-made blood

How it works

HUMANS can have one of eight major blood groups running through their veins.

If someone is given the wrong type via transfusion the consequences can be life-threatening.

When you deploy on ops you are asked for your group so medical teams know which stock to give you if you are unfortunate enough to be injured.

If life is desperate, O negative donations will normally do the job. But there is always a risk that the body will reject it – and the risks are higher for people with a rarer

type of blood.

The components that decide your blood type are known as antibodies and antigens. Successfully removing these theoretically makes the blood suitable for anyone, or “universal”.

Using genetic engineering to grow this blood synthetically could then have far-reaching consequences – it could cut the need for donations and bolster stocks, as well as making life safer for casualties by allowing it to be more freely transported without refrigeration.

Pictures: Cpl Dan Bartsley, RLC

“

Blood is
vital on
operations
– you don't
want to be
running
out of it

”

Welsh Guards attend to an injured
soldier while under fire during
Operation Panther's Claw in
Afghanistan, 2009



IN NUMBERS:

5

Blood types, out of 8, which have so far been made universal by the university boffins



A wounded soldier is carried into a Blackhawk medivac helicopter in Helmand province, 2009

» “Manufacturing volume will be a challenge,” she admits. “Making large amounts of the blood is currently very expensive and would require a huge number of machines called bioreactors, but advances will come in this area with time.

“Technology gets smaller, faster, cheaper – you only have to look at mobile phones to see how they have evolved from their original brick-like design.

“At the moment we must concentrate on the biology.”

It is clear, however, that the positives of this project could reach well beyond the military world.

“Blood supply in the NHS is reliant on donation, and the blood type that is most universal, O negative, is always in demand,” Dr Spear continues.

“There could also be benefits on humanitarian ops.”

Consultant anaesthetist Lt Col Oli Bartels (RAMC, pictured right) – a veteran of casevac flights in Afghanistan – thinks the research could deliver a significant boost for troops.

With limited reserves of O negative blood,

he believes it could help keep lifesaving supplies topped up.

“In effect, you are increasing volume – currently the problem is that certain people can only have a specific type,” he explains. “If you can remove that issue and make the blood universal then you can make better use of stock.”

Stu Pearson certainly appreciates the concept of growing blood for a new generation of soldiers. His encounter in the Kajaki minefield left seven colleagues wounded while fellow junior commander and George Cross recipient Cpl Mark Wright died from his injuries.

The veteran says personnel will take heart in knowing scientists are looking at ways to keep them alive and comfortable if they are unfortunate enough to be injured.

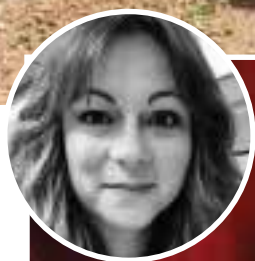
“Blood in particular is vital on operations – you don’t want to be running out of it,” Pearson – who now acts as a casualty actor on medical exercises – concludes.

“It’s good for soldiers to know that they are being backed up by expert thinking.” ■





Picture: Cpl Dan Bardsley, RLC



Abi Spear

Current role: Principal scientist, DSTL

Specialist areas: Regenerative medicine

Education: Biochemistry degree; PhD

Stu Pearson

Cap badge: Para

Years of service: 1993-2012

Rank on retirement: Sergeant

Operational experience: Includes Afghanistan, Iraq, Northern Ireland, Kosovo



Picture: Graeme Main

Regeneration game

Not content with blood, scientists are also trying to fast-track the healing of wounds...

DEFENCE scientists have their sights set on regenerating tissues torn apart by battlefield blast trauma.

In a concept familiar to fans of Harry Potter's wand-wielding escapades they have been looking at how healing processes of injured arms and legs might be accelerated.

While not yet matching the sickbay standards of Hogwarts's school – where JK Rowling's teenage wizard occasionally has his bones regrown after Quidditch pitch mishaps – work in this area holds real promise.

Army plastic surgeon Lt Col Graham Lawton (RAMC, pictured right), part of the team leading the regenerative medicine project, points out that stopping the deterioration of wounds and leaving them in the best possible position for future recovery is the priority. This has been the focus of initiatives at both Lancaster and Nottingham Universities,

whose experts have been stimulating cells in petri dishes under lab conditions.

The 'regen' project has also been trying to establish why the healing of combat wounds tends to be more of a problem than injuries sustained in civvy life.

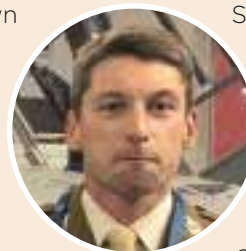
"There is something about the high energy of a blast that causes tissue problems – we are trying to work out what is impeding recovery," Lt Col Lawton says.

DSTL scientist Abi

Spear adds: "In collaboration with Oxford University, we have been growing muscle tissue in our labs

and subjecting it to the high energy shockwave from a real explosive event, something our labs at Porton Down are uniquely placed to do.

"The end goal is to develop a drug or a device – or a combination of these – that can be easily delivered to the complex wounds seen on the battlefield."



CALL to CARE

The military personnel treating patients on Covid's front line

JUST over a year ago, *Soldier* was invited to Frimley Park Hospital to shine a light on the military medical personnel who boost front-line NHS services at the Surrey facility.

It was a relatively relaxed visit in which we discovered Servicemen and women offer a welcome presence in a variety of settings – from wards, laboratories and theatres to radiography, critical care and accident and emergency departments – as they build the clinical experience that could be the difference between life and death on operations.

The Covid-19 outbreak was dominating the news agenda, but few could predict the dramatic impact it would eventually have on home shores.

Fast forward 12 months and the tri-Service unit – which is predominantly comprised of Army personnel – is at the heart of the battle in a hospital that has seen more than 500 patients die, with wards dramatically exceeding their capacities.

“Our people have been fantastic,” Lt Col Tessa Grieves (QARANC, pictured right), commanding officer of Joint Hospital Group (South East), said.

“Some, with previous operational experience in Sierra Leone in response to the Ebola crisis, were able to assist in the training and wearing of personal protective equipment, and their inspiring ‘get on with it’ attitude has instilled confidence in the civilian staff.

“This is the largest pandemic the NHS has ever faced and I’m incredibly proud of the professionalism and collaborative approach they have shown.”

The military’s presence at Frimley Park stretches back to 1995 and just under 200 Service personnel form the unit.

The majority are based at the hospital, with a small cohort of consultants working in other busy NHS trusts, and around 85 per cent have been directly involved in Covid-related clinical care since the early months of 2020.

Here, we get the inside story on a year like no other from those who have been fighting on the coronavirus front line...



Senior NCO charts the challenges faced in critical care

Name: SSgt Julie-Anne Fulford

Cap badge: QARANC

Age: 32

Length of service: 15 years

Previous experience:

Includes two Op Herrick tours at the role three hospital at Camp Bastion, Op Gritrock in Sierra Leone in response to the Ebola crisis

Joined Frimley Park: March 2018

to-two or one-to-three. It has even been up to one-to-four on occasions.

“There are just not enough of us to go around, so we are stretched thinly.

“There have been shifts where I’ve started at 0700 and finished at 2300 because I’m handing over more than 30 patients.

“It is long and taxing.

“We’ve had staff redeployed to critical care to help, but I’d say nine out of ten of those are not specialists and do not have the experience of working here.”

After seeing the first patients admitted in February last year, SSgt Fulford said the numbers plateaued over the summer before the arrival of what proved to be a traumatic second spike.

She added: “They now seem to be a lot sicker. Maybe that’s because people have stayed at home for longer before coming to hospital, I’m not

● AS THE military head of the department for critical care, SSgt Julie-Anne Fulford has seen patient numbers rocket during the Covid-19 crisis.

In normal circumstances, the intensive care unit (ICU) is a 12-bed facility, but its capacity has been stretched to three times that – with a surge to 40 beds at some of the worst points in the pandemic.

“The ICU is usually about one-to-one nursing,” she explained. “However, it is now one-



Healthcare assistant reflects on her role during the first wave

Name: Pte Holly Thompson
Cap badge: QARANC
Age: 22
Length of service: Three years
Previous experience: Healthcare assistant before joining the Army, Frimley Park is her first posting

sure, but it definitely feels worse this time round.

"It was bad enough last year, but now we've had to psyche ourselves up and go again.

"I've done two tours of Afghanistan and this has been more difficult. That is due to the staffing situation and the sheer relentlessness of it all – it is day in, day out and there is no let up.

"I have a one-hour commute which I use as my thinking time and there have been occasions where I have cried all the way home."

With a long-standing relationship with civilian counterparts in place, JHG SE saw its military commitments reduced by the chain of command so it could fully focus on supporting the NHS.

And in these challenging circumstances, their Forces mindset came to the fore.

"We are used to doing long hours at work, as well as being away from our families and loved ones," SSgt Fulford explained.

"Personally, my husband understands the situation and that I may be on a 16-hour shift.

"I have two young children who need my attention, and I am worrying whether I'm bringing coronavirus home to them.

"But I'm immensely proud of what we have done. When you are away on ops all you have to think about is work.

"Now we are fighting on home soil. You can have an awful day, but you also have the normal lifetime pressures to deal with.

"You see different things on social media with people asking what the military is doing. But we have been here since the beginning and are continuing to support the NHS."

● "ORIGINALLY, I was working on a surgical ward but due to the high number of Covid patients I was moved to the hospital's high dependency unit.

"I was doing whatever I could do to help out.

"Because family members were not allowed in, I was comforting patients who were dying. There would be three or four deaths a day and I would be sat holding their hands as their loved ones could not be there.

"In terms of coping, if I could talk to someone about it by the end of the day, I was generally okay. If not, it is something you can dwell on.

"The hardest part was not being able to go home and see

my family. We were living on the block but could not socialise – it was pretty tough going.

"I helped start a mental wellbeing group. It was about giving people some downtime, where they could rant and rave about what they've had to do.

"In some cases, it was as simple as working on a colouring book for half an hour, just so you are thinking about something else other than work.

"I pretty much worked 12-and-a-half-hour night shifts – I'd go home and then head straight back in again.

"My motivation is knowing I have provided comfort

for another family – I would want someone there if it was my mum or dad in the same situation.

"On joining the Army, I never imagined I'd be facing a global pandemic. I thought there would be a deployment here or there, but it is even harder knowing this is on your own doorstep.

"My long-term plan is to become a nurse. I've developed a lot of extra skills during this period and that will help when I move towards my degree." »

"I never imagined I'd be facing a global pandemic"





‘I knew I would come in and work hard’

From Sandhurst to Covid fight in first Army posting

Name: Capt William Preece
Cap badge: QARANC
Age: 25
Years of service: One – started at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst in January 2020, commissioning in March. Accelerated assessment saw him go straight to Frimley Park Hospital
Role: Military head of department for orthopaedics ward

How did you find the reality of starting your first posting in such circumstances?

“When I arrived, there was no orthopaedics – it was all hands on deck looking after Covid patients.

“I have worked in the NHS before in high dependency medicine so that training and experience was exactly what was required for these patients.

“I found coming to Frimley Park and seeing

the reality of Covid-19 quite overwhelming.

“You assume it is not happening but when you see it for yourself it almost becomes the day-to-day norm – it affects people, it puts staff at risk, and everyone is working incredibly hard.”

What is daily life like on the ward?

“When you go there you are in a bubble. You work hard and look after patients to the best of your ability, but it is the factors around that which make it challenging.

“The biggest one of those is when staff start to feel unwell. In normal times it is a manageable level of busy but when you have colleagues who call in sick with Covid, or have been contact traced and are off work, you are doubling your load.

“It means we are doing the bare minimum to keep patients safe – it becomes truly unimaginable.”

How have you and your Forces colleagues coped in such trying times?

“Prior to the most recent lockdown we tried to return to some kind of normality with military training on a Friday.

“Seeing that come back was a huge boost for morale and allowed us to switch our mindset from what was happening in the hospital.

“We have also done clinical supervisions that allow personnel to have a debrief and talk about the things they have done right or could do better.

“Some were saying they’d like more time with their patients as they are so unwell, but we are in a position where that’s not really an option. That is something which is hard to get your head round.”

What motivates you to keep coming back for more?

“I truly believe it is an honour to be in a position where I can look after the Service personnel I work with. They are getting up in the morning and are doing an amazing job, so being able to support them in any shape or form I can is my motivation.”

Can you describe the patients you deal with and the care they require?

“If they are on a certain level of oxygen, we can keep them on the ward and care for them.

“But if full

ventilation is required, they have to move to a high dependency unit.

“It is about the fundamentals of nursing, such as personal care, washing patients and getting them up in the morning and dressed.

“Some are acutely unwell with Covid but they may have other conditions like diabetes or Parkinson’s disease, which we cannot afford to neglect.

“It’s about personal



care, managing chronic conditions and emotional needs as well, while making sure our people are safe as they deliver that care."

How have you dealt with the possibility of catching Covid yourself?

"You have to trust the PPE and the evidence out there shows it works.

"When we sign up for this profession, we know there can be an element of risk. It is the same when joining the Armed Forces.

"You have to get on with your job. As healthcare professionals we have a sense of duty to look after our patients."

What have you done in your downtime to escape the many pressures of the day job?

"Maintaining my fitness has been massively important to me; it gives me time to get my head in the right place.

"Also, I'm fortunate that my girlfriend is so chilled out which means I can go home and talk about something completely different; I've found that to be so relieving."

Finally, how do you reflect on your first year in the Army?

"I knew I would come in and work hard as that is the kind of person I am.

"Dealing with Covid in a clinical environment has been challenging and I've been learning my officer skills on top of that. It's things like reporting systems, JSPs and the various acronyms - I've had to be really active in terms of my education."



Liaison officer's guiding role

Name: Maj Robin Dews

Cap badge: QARANC

Age: 45

Length of service: 22 years

Previous experience:

Joined the Army as a soldier in 1999, serving as a combat medical technician in the Royal Army Medical Corps and deploying to Iraq and Bosnia. Transferred to current cap badge in 2004 and completed two Op Herrick tours as a nurse in the accident and emergency department at the role three facility in Camp Bastion

Role at Frimley Park: Covid liaison officer for JHG SE

● "I'M THE single point of contact for all personnel for anything to do with Covid. If they develop symptoms, they should call me.

"Looking back, March, April and May were particularly difficult as the guidance was changing on a daily basis.

"As soon as Boris Johnson or the health secretary come on television, I'm all over it - you really have to be on the spot with everything that is changing.

"You get direction from the UK government, as well as the Army and the trust itself, and you have to take it all in.

"We'd have people going off sick and when the schools closed we had guys off for childcare reasons. During the second wave we've had a number of positive tests with the new variants.

"We are a unit of around 195 personnel and at any one time the most we have had off is 20.

"It is a relatively small number, but it can have a massive impact in terms of delivery. If an ITU nurse catches Covid they have to be off work for two weeks - they cannot come back early.

"I contracted the virus early on and, in a way, I was happy to get it. My thinking was it was going to happen at some point, so it was good to get it out of the way.

"It helped me reassure my colleagues. I could relate to those who had symptoms and tell them

that, while they will feel rubbish, they should not worry too much.

"We were seeing a lot of deaths last year, and it is the same again now, so we've really had to focus on the mental health side.

"We have a drop-in centre where personnel can go for a quiet debrief and there are wellbeing rooms across the hospital where they can sit, have a coffee and get in a better head space.

"We've got quite a lot of junior personnel and we were worried about them as they were straight out of training and into a pandemic.

"However, they have really stepped up - that's the military in us. It was a new and rapidly changing situation, but

Armed Forces personnel adapt to that.

"We reset over the summer and then went again in the second wave. It was almost an operational mentality, as if it was another tour.

"In a way, this is the best pre-deployment training they will do - if they can work in this, nothing will phase them." »



In numbers

198

Service personnel are based at Frimley Park Hospital with JHG SE

85%

are directly involved in caring for Covid patients

EIGHTEEN

of the unit's 29 consultants have been deployed to hospitals across London, including King's College, The Royal Free and Chelsea and Westminster

2,200

Covid patients have been treated at the hospital

500

deaths have been recorded at the site so far

800

Service personnel are working at four JHG facilities across the UK



Force multiplier

A view from the Royal Air Force

Name: Sgt Victoria Van Der Wel

Cap badge: RAF

Age: 39

Length of service: 18 years

Previous experience:

One Op Herrick tour, worked on the receiving ward at Selly Oak Hospital 2008-10, rehabilitation role at Headley Court

● **WORKING** as the military lead in the medical acute dependency unit (MADU), RAF nurse Sgt Victoria Van Der Wel has formed close bonds with her Army equivalents during the pandemic.

When patient numbers spiralled, the department was forced to expand into one of the hospital's private facilities – the

Parkside Suite – so they could increase the number of beds available.

Pre-Covid there were eight patients on the ward. Now, there are up to 39.

"The people we treat are the ones you see on television wearing the big ventilation masks," Sgt Van Der Wel explained.

"You are assigned three patients to care for, but due to the staffing situation it could be up to five. It is really difficult as the patients are so sick, and you are there to care for whatever needs they have.

"Because they are using machines

to help them breathe, they cannot eat or drink without assistance."

Sgt Van Der Wel said one of the biggest challenges her team has faced is the fact relatives have not been allowed to come into the hospital, although those at the end of their life have been granted visits.

"When relatives come in, they can usually make their own assessments," she added.

"But we've had people phoning up asking if their loved one is going to pass away – they are not normally that frank.

"Sometimes, when patients were going to die, their relatives could not come in as they had Covid themselves. That was particularly tough.

"In circumstances like these it is important to chat to your colleagues about what has happened. I've been a nurse for a long time, but death still bothers me."

When the MADU moved to Parkside its staff found a suite not tailored to their needs, but with military personnel used to setting things up from scratch it was quickly brought up to speed.

And it was an environment in which the team's cohesion quickly grew stronger.

"As nurses we are all in this together – you want to be there to support each other," Sgt Van Der Wel added. "It has been extremely tough, but we always face tough days – this has just been a lot of tough days.

"Everyone wants to achieve the same thing. The teamwork has really improved, and we are all





working towards the same end goal.

"Personnel have been brought in from different clinical areas and it was tough for those coming in, but they have shown a really good attitude throughout.

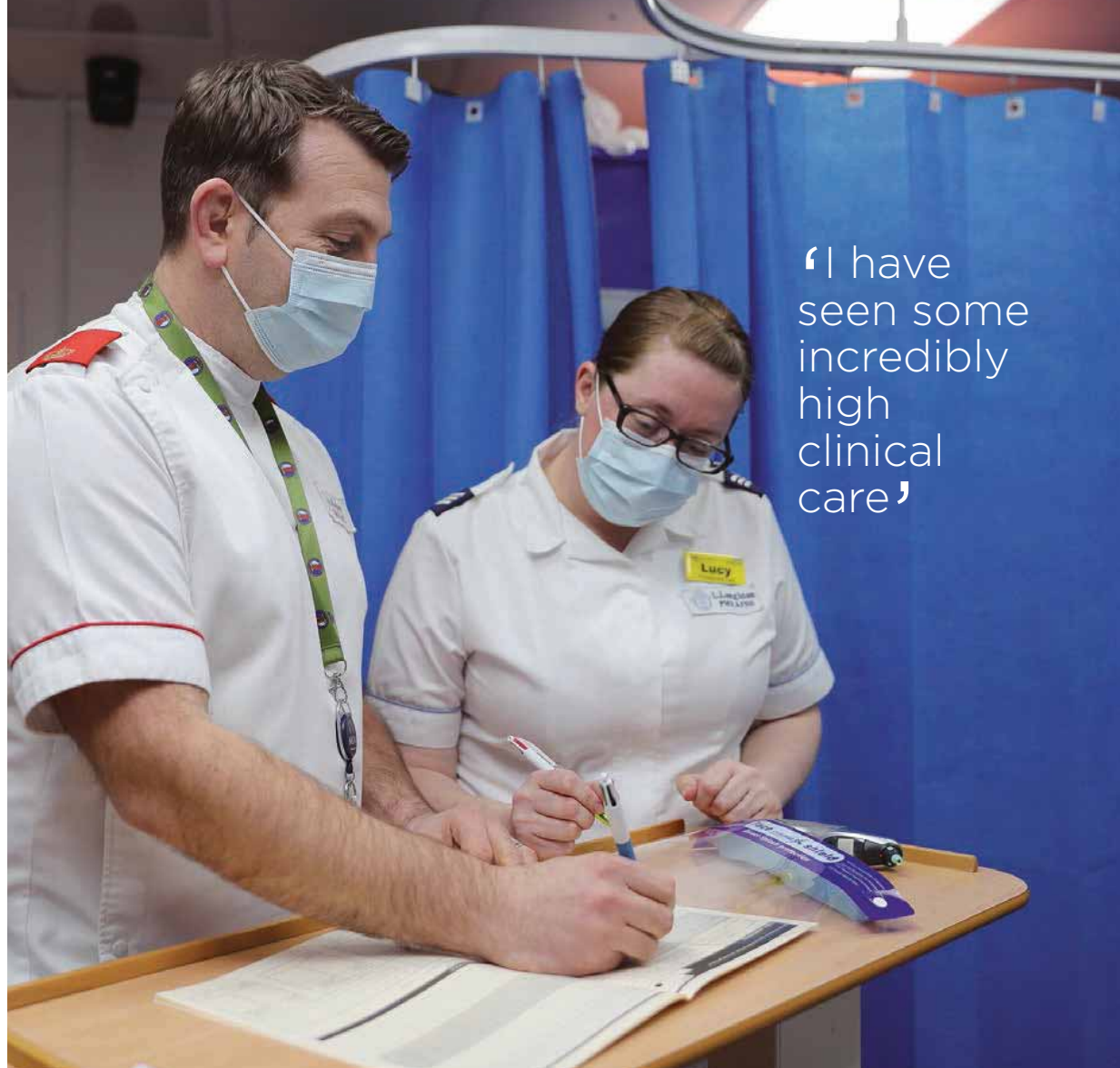
"I have to make sure I'm in a position to support them as it can be a daunting prospect - it is important they don't feel as if they've been dropped in at the deep end."

And while the national picture is now showing a drop in infection rates, Sgt Van Der Wel is not anticipating a reduction in workload or a reunion with her family just yet.

She said: "I live with my daughter in married quarters and Christmas 2019 was the last time I was home.

"Patient numbers have begun to decrease but because it takes them so long to recover from this virus, we have not seen things starting to ease - we still have 39 full beds every day.

"However, it is not all doom and gloom and we can take positives from the way the team has worked."



'I have seen some incredibly high clinical care'

Officer's thoughts on nursing responses

Name: Maj Adam Hughes
Cap badge: QARANC
Age: 43
Length of service: 12 years
Previous experience: Specialist nurse in the role three facility at Camp Bastion on Op Herrick 13, deployed on Op Gritrock in Sierra Leone, defence engagement tasks in Pakistan and Washington
Role at Frimley Park: Deputy OC Nursing

● "FUNDAMENTALLY, my job is about looking after

the guys on the clinical shop floor.

"I have been nursing for more than 20 years - I did ten years in the NHS before joining the Army - and I have never seen anything like this.

"I'd say the past two or three months have been more challenging than the first wave. It is the sheer volume of patients and how sick they are that makes it so demanding.

"A lot of our surgical caseload has reduced. We are still doing emergency surgery, but the more routine operations have gone down in number.

"As a result, a lot of nurses from those settings have been moved to support medical departments, or the areas they normally work in have been converted.

"That has had a really big impact.

"Covid presents in a slightly different way and patients can look well but, in reality, they're quite ill and the deterioration is very fast.

"In the South East we have been hammered in terms of numbers and having to deal with the high turnover across the wards has been demanding for all nurses.

"But I'm so proud of everyone I look after, and I have seen some >>

» incredibly high clinical care from them.

"One of the low points is just how big this second spike has been.

"We were ticking along before Christmas but then we saw the numbers start to go up.

"I could see it on the horizon, and it has been a real challenge.

"With any respiratory illness there is always a lull in the summer, so it was a case of waiting to see what the winter brings.

"We've been able to draw on all sorts of experiences. For Sierra Leone we did a lot of training with PPE, what to expect medically and how to manage patients. We drew on that here.

"My family lives 120 miles away in Birmingham, so when I get home that is when I attempt to switch off from the hospital.

"At the very beginning we made the decision that I would not come back, and I initially spent eight weeks away.

"I've deployed before and they went into operations mode, meaning we'd deal with things as we went along.

"While I was caring for sick patients, I was not under enemy fire or in a far-away land and I think that really helped.

"My wife has had to work, while also home schooling our children. It has been challenging, and she has been doing all that while I've not been there to help out.

"But we have found a way to make it work and that is the way life is now – everyone is stretched, and these really are unprecedented times.

"I contracted Covid last March. The biggest thing was the fatigue – I felt absolutely shattered.

"Doing the simplest things was tiring and I was eating without tasting anything. I didn't get my sense of smell back for around nine months.

"Anyone who goes down with this gets a bit of a shoeing, but by and large you will recover – it is only a small percentage who end up in hospital.

"My advice is that if you start feeling bad get a swab as soon as possible. If it's positive, isolate – the last thing you want to do is infect the people around you."



Senior sister's management role in the NHS

Name: Maj Ami Newburn-Johnson
Cap badge: QARANC
Age: 34

Length of service: 15 years

Previous experience: Joined the Intelligence Corps as a soldier before transferring and undertaking nurse training. Commissioned and served as a deputy team leader at the role three facility at Camp Bastion on Op Herrick 18. Posted to Frimley Park in 2018

Current role: Band seven senior sister at Parkside Suite, a full secondment with the NHS. Awarded an Associate Royal Red Cross Medal for her role in the Covid response

Tell us about your experience of facing Covid?

"It has been awful at times. Even the strongest people have broken down and there have been days where we just couldn't cope.

"It has required careful management and I've almost become an advocate for some colleagues in terms of deciding whether they should come to work or not.

"It has been incredibly challenging, but they have absolutely nailed it. They have stretched their nursing capabilities, and themselves, in order to give the patients what they need."



What makes caring for these patients so taxing?

"The issue with Covid is that it does not allow the body to maintain oxygen levels, so that is our number one concern.

"We have to look after their breathing, ensure the levels are right and work closely with the doctors.

"On top of that, we have to help them conduct daily activities, such as going to the toilet and eating meals.

"However, they do not have the energy or capacity to move.

"Getting people to eat their meals while still needing oxygen is a challenge in itself.

"We are the last line of support before they are ventilated and taken off to the ITU."

How have you stayed motivated in such trying circumstances?

"It is that initial call to care. I would say 99 per cent of people who do this job know they will become nurses – you want to care for people.

"The staff are like a family – they support and care for each other.

"You do not want to miss a shift as it means somebody, who is almost like a sister to you, will then struggle."

What coping strategies have you deployed?

"I have taken up mindfulness activities, such as colouring in. I've also trawled through old box sets, it's good to have something familiar that you can lose yourself in.

"I'm very lucky to be living with family members, so I can offload to them. Sometimes I want

to go home and tell them all about it, but at other times I want to talk about something else.

"I'll go outside for a walk, enjoy some quiet time and just generally get a break from a reality that can be too hard to bear."

You managed military personnel in the first wave before your secondment to the NHS, how do the two compare?

"In the NHS, the staff are bonded by their commitment to each other and their patients. They are choosing to come to work in extreme circumstances.

"Military personnel join up knowing they may not see their families that much or could get sent somewhere they have no choice over. It teaches you

it's okay to be out of your comfort zone.

"NHS staff sign up for busy days, but they do not sign up for things like this. We have junior personnel who have not been on tour, but they've completed basic training and cadres and have been able to tell their civilian counterparts 'it's okay, you've got this'.

"Bringing that in has definitely helped and I think that's why the trust is so grateful we are here."

What has the impact been on staff?

"Everyone is looking out for each other and it's important they know it's okay if they cannot cope.

"Some have struggled with the fact they have to go home and be mum or dad, whereas others live

alone and go home to an empty house.

"There are those who have lost relatives to Covid. They've had to deal with the disconnect from their families and there are grandparents here who have not seen their grandchildren for more than eight months."

How bad has it been during the second wave?

"There are days when you think 'will this ever end?' and it has definitely shocked a lot of people.

"I caught Covid myself and so many staff went off sick just before the vaccines were rolled out. A lot of those were not well enough to come back after two weeks.

"I'd say it has been the biggest nursing challenge of our lifetime and hopefully we never see anything like this again."

How did Covid affect you and your loved ones?

"It ripped through my family. My mum is asthmatic and has breathing issues, which is not great when you are fighting Covid. We had to give her some intensive nursing at home.

"When you are in hospital you are so alone, and I did not want her being acutely unwell and on her own.

"My sister and her baby live with me and they both caught it as well. Thankfully, they're all over the worst of it now but I had to deal with the guilt of thinking was it me that gave it to them, or was it something they got from the supermarket? We'll never know the answer to that question." ■





Report: Becky Clark Pictures: Cpl Jules Packer, RLC

THE LONG ROAD TO TALLINN

A late change in mission. Covid. Blizzards. Training for Op Cabrit has tested the 1 Mercian Battlegroup to the limit...

ANY British soldier bound for an operational deployment overseas expects tough times ahead – both professionally and personally.

But troops from 1st Battalion, The Mercian Regiment Battlegroup, who begin their shift in Estonia this month, have faced an arduous slog even to reach the starting gate.

Originally destined for Op Toral, they were busy prepping for the Afghan mission last July when news came through that they would be assuming command of Nato's enhanced forward presence instead.

A new training programme was swiftly devised, culminating in a combined arms live-firing exercise on Sennelager ranges in February. However, the surge in Covid-19 infections across Europe and the emergence of new strains threatened to derail the schedule at every turn.

"The timeline has been tough," admitted Sgt James Clayton (Mercian), during a brief lull in the Germany-based package.

"It's literally been go-go-go, with no days off since January, to

get ready in time, but people understand that we have to be at our best on tour for six months.

"That's the thing with the Army – you take every fast ball as it comes and you deal with it.

"All eyes are on Cabrit now and getting everything right."

The battlegroup put in place a rigorous programme of Covid screening to enable the training to go ahead, conducting around 3,000 tests during the six weeks of Exercise Tallinn Dawn, as well as observing strict social distancing and sticking within household groups throughout.

Inevitably, though, a small number of positive and suspected cases meant locking down sections of the formation's sub-units, which also included parts of 26 Engineer Regiment, 3rd Regiment, Royal Horse Artillery and the Royal Tank Regiment.

"Our B Company had a couple of positive tests, so have all been in isolation, not out on the ground," said Sgt Clayton, explaining the knock-on effect of the strict protocols.

"So Dragon Company, the support company, re-roled to become a fighting company as well.





“All eyes are on Cabrit now and getting everything right”

“It’s hard for everyone, including for B Company, I’m sure, not to be out here getting their training in.”

As the exercise drew to a close, Mother Nature threw one more curve ball at the troops.

Plunging temperatures and heavy snow forced a retreat into the simulated environment of the combined arms tactical trainer.

But despite the coronavirus and weather-related challenges, the nature of the task in Estonia and the UK’s determination to meet its commitment to Nato left the battlegroup no choice but to adapt and overcome.

Brig Paddy Ginn, commander of parent formation 20 Armoured Infantry Brigade (pictured right), said personnel were keenly aware of the importance of the Baltic operation.

“The Cabrit mission is absolutely vital because we hold very dearly that sobering task of working with our Estonian brothers to deter and defeat any potential threats,” the senior officer explained.

“Covid has been really difficult and has absolutely affected our ability to train. But we take

our responsibility to ensure we are abiding by the regulations of both our German hosts and the British government very seriously, while taking our responsibility to provide the best capability to Nato very seriously as well.”

The journey to Estonia may have been fraught with struggle, but with typical grit and determination, these British soldiers are ready for the challenge. »»



Soldiering on

The impact of Covid-19 on Exercise Tallinn Dawn



**Sgt Josh Maybanks,
RHA**

“I’ve been on Cabrit before and it used to be a smooth, slick process. You’d get on your pre-deployment training and your mission-specific training and then it would be ‘one place change’. Covid has made everything ramshackle and plans that were put in place have had to be constantly readjusted. But we’re getting there. We just have to mentor the guys to keep them on task. Morale is high, they have everything they need and we’re good to fight.”

**Sgt Tupou Veigo,
REME**

“For us it’s a day-to-day battle with the pandemic. If someone has symptoms they have to get tested and have the all-clear before they can be redeployed. It’s very limiting – even within the squadron to visit or pass a message to another crew you have to make sure you remain at the correct social distance and wear your face protection. We can only hope that the vaccine will reduce restrictions, but for us in the military we know we have to keep going and just apply ourselves.”



“ We know we have to keep going and apply ourselves ”

'ONE IN, ALL IN'

Rifles' Estonian stint ends on a high amid sub-zero training camp



Report: Becky Clark Pictures: Mark-Erik Tolpt, Estonian Defence Force

AS THE 1 Mercian Battlegroup made their final preparations for Op Cabrit in Germany, the outgoing formation was making the most of its final weeks in Tapa.

The command of Nato's enhanced forward presence in the region may have become a familiar tasking since the first deployment in 2017, but training in the punishing Baltic conditions remains anything but routine for the troops on the ground.

In preparation for an intense winter camp, the battlegroup led by 5th Battalion, The Rifles underwent a cold weather operators course to learn to survive in sub-zero temperatures.

Building shelters, making fire and finding food were among the challenges they faced, as well as a bracing plunge into frigid water as they simulated a fall through ice.

According to Commanding Officer Lt Col Jim Hadfield (Rifles), mastering such skills – unlikely as they are to be called on for real – was an important step towards being able to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with counterparts from the Estonian Defence Force (EDF).

"As part of our training here, one of the things that we absolutely have to be is combat credible," he said.

"And for me, a function of that is our ability to work in this environment alongside our Estonian colleagues.

"You know, as British troops we don't often soldier in -20 degrees Celsius or this kind of depth of snow.

"It presents equipment and clothing challenges, as well as different tactics, and the cold weather operators' course provides that foundational training to make sure we can build upon that and be as good a team as we can be."

Having become accustomed to the harsh conditions, the infantrymen »»»



embarked on the two-week winter camp, which covered live firing up to platoon level and dry drills to company level.

Meanwhile, their colleagues from D Squadron, The Queen's Royal Hussars deployed alongside the EDF's Scouts Battalion for joint armoured manoeuvres.

Cpl Jack Hellier, a section commander in 5 Rifles' A Company, explained how both the snow and the Estonian forest posed an extra test of skill for the dismounted troops.

"It's a lot different to the usual conditions we fight in," he said.

"With snow this deep it's like doing squat jumps the whole way through – there's a lot of burning on the quads.

"Also, it's about 70 per cent woodland here, so there are lots of fighting in woods and forest drills we have to do.

"There's a lot we can learn from the Estonians – it's their country, their environment. They are absolute ninjas in this terrain.

"But we can actually use the drills that we would use in the jungle – it's obviously not hot and humid but it's just as dense."

LCpl Joe Steel (Rifles) had found the going equally as tough, with hidden rivers and streams adding unwelcome "excitement" to the already draining business of conducting live attacks in the thick snow.

Describing the unrelenting cold, he continued: "When you go to sleep your tent is already frozen.

"You get in your gonk bag and the

outside is frozen as well – you're just hoping the inside isn't too, and you whack on as much warm kit as you can."

But while most people would baulk at the deprivations of a midwinter training package, according to Capt Will Moon, the company's second-in-command, this is exactly what the riflemen had signed up for.

"Every infanteer wants that sense of adventure and camaraderie," the officer said.

"You end an exercise on Salisbury Plain cold and wet, but usually with bags of morale, having accomplished something that is pretty substantial.

"In these extreme conditions, when you're with your mates and have survived a week of cold weather training, you are left with a great sense of achievement."

As the gruelling fortnight drew to a close and his comrades looked forward to returning to camp, LCpl Steel was inclined to agree.

While fully aware of the mission's higher purpose – protecting Nato's Eastern flank from Russian aggression – in his opinion it was as much about "mucking in with the lads".

"We're all here together," the junior NCO continued.

"The take-away from that for me is 'one in, all in' and I'm just happy to be out here with the boys." ■



“They are absolute ninjas in this terrain”



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NEW MODEL

ARMY

Miniature warriors
deployed on the
mental front line »

WHEN young soldier Neil Powell discovered war gaming after joining the Army, he could never have predicted its influence at the other end of his career.

The hobby seemed a perfect fit. Offering an opportunity to research battles and recreate the encounters of different adversaries in miniature, he soon found himself absorbed in its many facets.

But having left the military, and with a stressful civvy career leaving his mental health hammered, he discovered it also offered therapeutic benefits. And he is now looking to use the pastime to help veterans with similar issues.

"I discovered war gaming in a book written by a Royal Military Academy Sandhurst lecturer, who had simplified the rules for Napoleonic battles," Powell recalled.

"There were a few pages on modelling terrain; as I had always loved military history, I decided to make a start.

"I bought a load of 25mm metal soldier figures – and they came with me wherever I went in the world."

Gaming, by all accounts, has remained a constant with Powell throughout an unusual Army tenure spanning more than two decades. Having initially joined 1st Battalion, The Light Infantry, he left after three years for the civilian law enforcement sector. But he soon rejoined the Service, this time in the Royal Military Police.

Life took another twist when he commissioned into the Educational and Training Services branch of the Adjutant General's Corps, realising a long-held teaching ambition.

Having finally hung up his boots as a major in 2009, Powell went on to hold several senior positions in civvy schools – where he ultimately noticed his wellbeing was taking a hit.

"I'd been out of the Army for almost a decade in some pretty demanding roles before realising how poorly I'd become," the veteran admitted. "Stress and anxiety were causing problems and my mental health was suffering."

But returning to his old hobby – and a new game in the futuristic Warhammer 40,000 series – provided a therapy as effective as it was enjoyable.

"In modelling the troops, I found I was able to sit and concentrate for long periods," Powell recalled. "You have to be fully focused to paint a pupil in the eye of a 28mm soldier – to the extent that other things are unimportant."

"The hobby provided a sense of purpose away from all that had given me grief."

Now fighting fit again, he is on the cusp of launching his own outfit – Redoubt Gaming – which he

“
The hobby
provided a sense
of purpose away
from all that had
given me grief
”



hopes will benefit others including fellow veterans.

"You really don't know how much you will miss the military until you have left," Powell continued. "I'd like to bring together ex-soldiers who perhaps struggle with loneliness, isolation or their own mental health issues."

"There is an instant connection among former personnel that you don't have anywhere else in life – wargaming is an opportunity for us to meet, have a bit of banter and a brew while learning how to paint models and play games."

"It doesn't matter what type of genre you are interested in – from historic Napoleonic campaigns, to fantasy,





science fiction or even the zombie apocalypse.

"Everything with Redoubt had been primed to go but, like everyone else, we were then affected by Covid-19 and the lockdown – so we are on hold for the time being."

Powell – who is taking on the war gaming venture on a voluntary basis – also plans to introduce the hobby to students with special educational needs.

Lessons including English and art could be based around the pastime, he said, adding: "Getting people with conditions such as autism interacting would be a huge step in itself.

"With a pension income, I am now in a fortunate position in which I don't need to work – this is really my opportunity to give something back."

Despite the often grim subject matter, Powell was also keen to stress that war gaming did not promote violence – and offered positive experiences to those involved.

As well as researching the history behind the encounters, modelling landscapes and painting troops provides a different proposition while fighting battles stretches many skills.

"Tactics are key, but you must also consider the chance element," he explained.

"Rolling dice to determine unexpected events – such as where a rogue shell lands – makes you appreciate that no plan is immune to external influences.

"You have the opportunity to learn and put many diverse attributes to use."

War gaming has certainly stood the test of time. Having been around for generations, it continues to offer broad appeal and attract new converts to the fold.

As well as being a useful military tool, the positives extend far beyond the tabletop – the comradeship from a shared endeavour can have many life benefits. ■

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Half-service medal regs 'unfair'

DESPITE serving for 31 years as a Reservist without a blemish, my application for a fourth clasp to my Volunteer Reserve Service Medal (VRSM) has been rejected.

This award and its clasps are given to recognise long and efficient service.

According to regulations, any time spent mobilised or on full-time Reserve service (FTRS) after five years only counts as "half service" for medal qualification purposes.

Since receiving my third VRSM clasp in 2015, I have undertaken FTRS duties in the Cabinet Office supporting a crisis, been mobilised on Operation Shader and worked for the MoD as a designated key worker during the Covid-19 outbreak.

I question whether it is appropriate, or even in the spirit of the VRSM, to count operational tours and critical support to defence at a time of crisis as half service.

– Name and address supplied

Col Jim Taylor, Assistant Head, Personal Services, Army Headquarters, replies: Full-time and part-time personnel have different medals for acknowledging their long and exemplary service, each with their own qualifying criteria.

Regular soldiers are recognised through the Long Service and Good Conduct Medal, which requires efficient and good conduct over a period of 15 years. Clasps are awarded to reflect periods of a further ten years.

Reservists receive the VRSM for demonstrating these qualities and

commitment over a ten-year period – and they must have qualified for their annual bounty in nine of those years. Clasps recognise service periods of a further five years.

Then there are those in the full-time cohort serving on FTRS terms. To recognise these individuals, defence utilises the VRSM with modified criteria which acknowledges a period of five years at full rate with any further years at half rate.

The result is that these individuals – if they have not brought any other service over into the period – will qualify for the VRSM after 15 years and then every ten years after that for a clasp.

This makes the criteria equitable to those for full-time Regular personnel to receive the Long Service and Good Conduct Medal.

Also, Reservists are additionally recognised for giving ten years' service while maintaining a civilian career through the award of the Volunteer Reserve post nominals.

GOT A GRIPE?

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“It's not in the spirit of the VRSM”

Talkback

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.

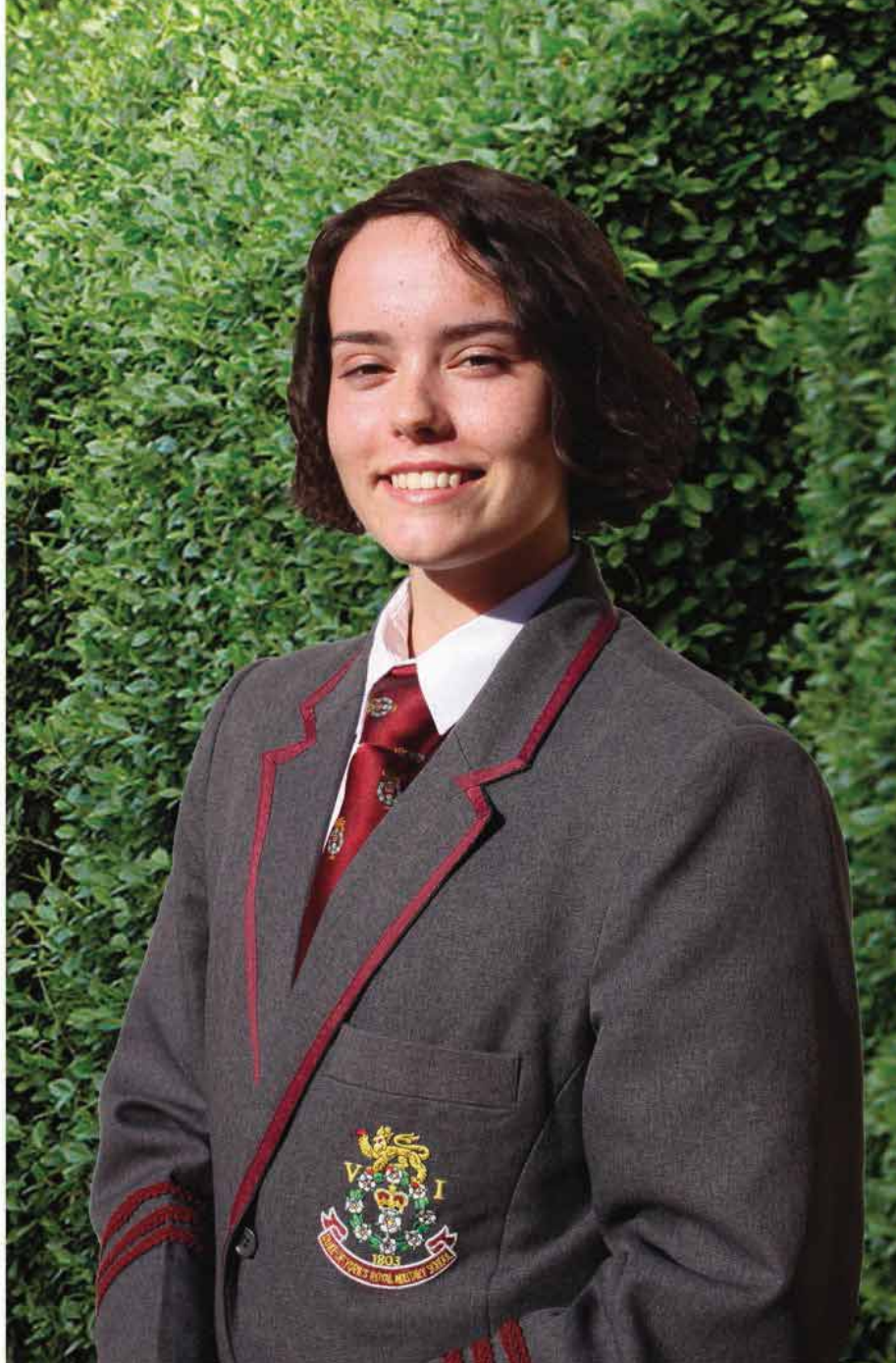
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Baseline UK is an innovative resettlement service tailored for the needs of Service personnel and veterans. The company offers free membership to those with a military background. Benefit from a professional network, hints, tips and training. For more details visit baselineuk.org

Veterans into Logistics CIC is a not-for-profit organisation based in Greater Manchester dedicated to training and supporting ex-military personnel for new careers within the transport and logistics industry. It recently received a £10,000 grant from the National Lottery Community Fund to continue its work. Visit veteransintologistics.org.uk

Linx Security Training is offering a 20 per cent reduction on 28 courses for serving and former personnel through the MoD-approved Defence Discount Service. The courses on offer range from technical skills to management with industry-approved qualifications. For more details visit linxtraining.co.uk

The Recruit for Spouses coaching programme, which helps Army partners get back into employment, has received a funding boost to reach more husbands and wives. To apply for a six-week course of one-hour sessions email coaching@recruitforspouses.co.uk

Forces Families Jobs is a new platform designed to help partners into meaningful employment. Visit forcesfamiliesjobs.co.uk to see the site, which is free to advertise on for employers who have signed the Armed Forces Covenant.



SEARCHLINE

Hollie Badrock is looking for partners of personnel who served between 1990 and 2011 to take part in a research programme for her masters degree. The interviews will take approximately one hour and will cover life in the military community, the impact of frequent relocations and experiences during times of conflict. To participate in the project email hlbadrock1@sheffield.ac.uk

Retired Royal Air Force

Serviceman Andrew Clark is a collector of British military tokens used in Iraq and Afghanistan and is seeking examples of pre-2007 issues to boost his collection. If you have any items of interest email amcpapermoneyman@aol.com

The Air Training Corps, now part of the Royal Air Force Air Cadets,

is celebrating its 80th anniversary this year. To help mark the occasion, they would like to identify those who were cadets when the formation launched in 1941 and interview them to capture early memories. Email al.munns@btinternet.com

The Royal Signals Amateur

Radio Society is looking for newcomers to join the fold. Open to all cap badges of the British Army, it currently has 500 members but is looking to boost numbers. In addition to serving and former soldiers, the society also welcomes cadet force and Nato personnel, as well as MoD civilians. Email p25@sky.com for details or visit rsars.org.uk

Anita Louise Watson is trying to trace her father, James Watson, who served as a lance corporal in the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers during the 1970s. Anyone with information should email anitawatson164@gmail.com

Hugh Corby is trying to trace the military medals and citations of his late father, Capt Eric Corby (RA), who served as a forward observation officer during the Second World War. Anyone with details should contact 07961 606766.



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ROADSHOWS

These events may be subject to delay or cancellation due to the coronavirus pandemic – check relevant websites

The Forces Pension Society is staging a number of roadshows as well as FAR (financial aspects of resettlement) briefings. See forcespensionsociety.org/news-events/events for the latest dates.

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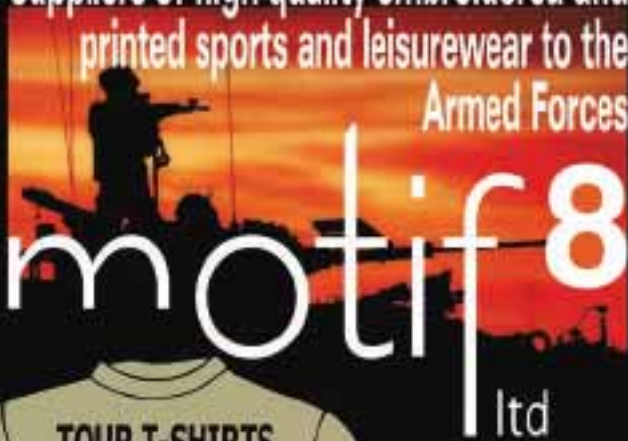
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The winner's name will appear in the May issue. All the usual rules apply.



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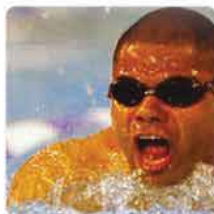
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REVIEWS

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YOU ARE NOT THE MAN YOU ARE SUPPOSED TO BE

Modern masculinity and mental health unpicked

➤ ALL is not well in the world of men. They are more likely than women to abuse alcohol and drugs, go to prison, fall victim to a violent crime or become homeless. Three quarters of suicides are male.

And while progress has been made in destigmatising mental health, men still commonly hesitate to speak out and access the help they need.

Journalist and author Martin Robinson was one of them. Despite starting an online magazine dedicated to men's issues and encouraging others to open up, he steadfastly avoided



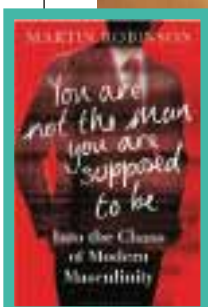
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MOVIES

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BOOKS



● *You Are Not the Man You Are Supposed to Be* by Martin Robinson is published by Bloomsbury, priced £20



Martin Robinson is the founder and editor of online magazine *The Book of Man*

addressing his own troubles. Until he decided it was time to “walk the walk”, as he put it while explaining his new book to *Soldier*.

You Are Not the Man You Are Supposed to Be charts his own battle against feelings of inadequacy, but also asks what it means to be a bloke in the era of “toxic masculinity” – the fallout that can come from teaching men that they must act a certain way and never express their emotions.

“The idea of men reading about masculinity is a bit of an alien concept,” he admitted.

“So I was conscious of making it as approachable as possible – making it funny, and also filling it full of people who men find quite appealing.”

Along the way he talks to rapper Professor Green, goes to the gym with Jason Fox, gets a makeover from a drag queen and generally leans into the discomfort of being emotionally vulnerable, often with hilarious results.

During a cringe-inducing intimacy workshop, he grits his teeth while two strangers caress him in a non-sexual way – an experience he described as “the most awkward few hours of my entire life”.

Robinson spent around 20 years as part of what he calls the “get drunk, get some girls, buy stuff” culture while working on men’s titles such as *Maxim*.

His website *The Book of Man*, however, marked a shift in focus onto what goes on inside men’s heads and that eventually turned

into the book.

As well as asking men to look inward and tackle long-ignored problems, he urges them to consider their role in making society a fairer place for women and other minority groups. The mere suggestion of inequality, though, is likely to get certain people hot under the collar – and Robinson is expecting some pushback.

“The most alpha of blokes might take great umbrage at even broaching this kind of subject,” he said.

“If you say anything about mental health or masculinity there’s a whole group on the internet who are going to be inflamed and want to destroy you – that’s just the way it is.

“But men do need to have some kind of active role in changing the culture and I think it’s important for the voices of men who see that as positive to be quite loud – because the guys who are against it are very loud.

“But those in the middle who might not speak out usually, for them to openly say ‘I support women’s rights and equality’ seems like a reasonable thing to believe in.

“It’s about realising things aren’t as fair for some communities. The very fact you’re defensive shows there’s a bit of a sore point and you know there is something amiss.”

Among the other themes Robinson explores is how strongly male identity is bound up in work, and the connection between social isolation and suicide – both of which are relevant to Service-leavers facing up to life

outside the military.

On a lighter note, anyone following the beards-in-the-Army debate may be amused by artist Grayson Perry’s historical take on facial hair as a reaction to perceived crises in masculinity – when the Industrial Revolution drove men into factories away from “manly” jobs on the land, a fashion for hairy, traditional versions of maleness swiftly emerged. Food for thought.

Of course, not everyone will agree with everything Robinson has to say, and that’s fine by him.

“I’m just as big an idiot as anyone else,” he mused. “I’ve got no answers, I’m just trying to make sense of stuff and I want men to not fear going into these areas.”

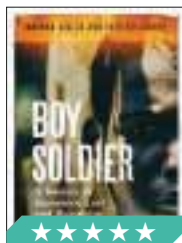
Most readers with an ounce of introspection should find something in this entertaining and honest book that chimes with them.

Unfortunately, it is possibly those who would benefit from it most who are least likely to pick it up. ■

INTERVIEW: BECKY CLARK, *SOLDIER*

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BOOK RELEASES



Boy Soldier

by Norman Okello and Theo Hollander

PROBABLY the most harrowing book I have read, this is the story of a 12-year-old Ugandan boy, abducted from his village and forced to serve in the Lord's Resistance

Army. The "recruitment" process consists of being beaten by sticks, machete blades and anything else to hand. Weeks later he has killed his first person and within months is fully brainwashed, capable of murdering anyone he is told to, even his own family. Okello eventually escaped and was rehabilitated but this offering provides an understanding of the horrific plight of child soldiers and the brutality of the civil war in Uganda.

Andy Kay, ex-RS



Winston Churchill – Greatest War Speeches 1939-1945

THIS is a new compilation of Winston Churchill war speeches that has been out of print since 1946. His most famous addresses –

"Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat" and "We Shall Fight Them on the Beaches" – are included, along with some of his lesser-known ones such as the 1943 address to the Eighth Army at Tripoli. The book opens with a foreword by his grandson, Sir Nicholas Soames, and is a truly inspirational title that now has pride of place on my bedside cabinet. You can hear Churchill's voice as you read his speeches, but be warned, this may lead to spontaneous impersonations.

Sgt Adam Jackson, Para



A Lancashire Fusilier's First World War

by Norman Hall

I HAVE read many First World War diaries and have to say this is one of the best I have come across. It tells the story of a Territorial battalion forming up, moving to France and

going into the trenches. The 2/5th Lancashire Fusiliers had a relatively quiet time until autumn 1916 when they were fed into the Battle of the Somme, during which they suffered nearly 100 per cent casualties. The author writes in great detail and talks about his men a lot. Fellow officers are his friends, but his respect for the soldiers shines through. It is a very informative and well researched book and one that everyone with an interest in the conflict should read.

Andy Kay, ex-RS

MOVIES



● *Last Moment of Clarity* is released on digital on March 8

PICK OF THE MONTH:

LAST MOMENT OF CLARITY

Tedious thriller baffles from start to finish

➤ A MAN skulks around in Paris, plagued by flashbacks of his murdered girlfriend, only to go to the cinema and see her appear on the screen in front of him.

Convinced the actress is the same person, he jets off to Los Angeles to track her down.

There, he bumps into the sister of an old school friend, who for some reason is happy to help him creepily stalk another woman.

Fortunately, she is also armed with a taser and a gun, which comes in handy for fending off the Eastern European mobsters following them around wherever they go.

That's the basic story behind *Last Moment*

of *Clarity*, starring **Brian Cox** (*Succession*, *Troy*), **Zach Avery** (*Fury*, *Farming*) and **Samara Weaving** (*Hollywood*, *Bill and Ted Face the Music*).

Billed as a Hitchcockian adventure, it borrows from the doppelganger plotline of 1958's *Vertigo*, but that is where any comparisons with the "master of suspense" end.

The premise of a man unhinged by tragedy and forming an obsession on a lookalike has potential. Is she his lost love, or is he perhaps a deranged ex?

But sadly, the film veers off in an all too predictable and disappointing direction, choosing the obvious path over any real sense of intrigue.

An air of randomness lingers – and not the intentional, mysterious kind, rather the accidental, A-level film project variety.

The amateurish vibe is reinforced by uneven pacing, with all the action squeezed into the last 15 minutes, as if the looming coursework deadline forced the post-production team into a





caffeine-fuelled all-nighter.

And the background to most of the scenes is strangely empty of extras, which would have made sense if this was a lockdown effort, but as filming was completed prior to the pandemic, is just another odd choice on the part of writer-director debutantes James and Colin Krisel.

A respectable cast don't get the chance to rescue the film as there is little in the way of character development.

Avery and Weaving lack chemistry as the star-crossed lovers and it's not actually clear why Cox is in the film, so irrelevant is his part to the overall plot.

If it wasn't already apparent, this illogical, dreary offering is best avoided.

Time may long have lost any meaning at this stage of lockdown 3.0, but life is just too short to waste on bad cinema. ■

VERDICT:

A cliché-filled, anti-climactic slog. steer clear

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

REVIEW: BECKY CLARK, *SOLDIER*



PICK OF THE MONTH:

DISJUNCTION

Infiltration is the order of the day in indie covert actioner

▶ THEY were once a mainstay of the gaming arena – but stealth titles have seen something of a decline since the days of *Splinter Cell* and *Metal Gear Solid*.

In a world where online play dominates the mainstream agenda, the first-person shooter reigns supreme. Sneaking around installations armed with nothing but wits and high-tech kit is not a scenario that fits in the new global order.

With more indie developers entering the fold, however, there are some encouraging signs of much-needed innovation returning to gaming. And *Disjunction*, a top-down outing from Ape Tribe,

marks a stylish return to this lesser-seen genre.

Set in a dystopian near-future New York, where an authoritarian regime prevails and cybernetic experimentation is common, players see this world through the eyes of three characters – each with different backgrounds and abilities.

They initially step into the shoes of private investigator Frank Monroe – who is probing the arrest of a friend accused of shooting a cop and possessing a dodgy drug called Shard. A disturbing conspiracy of some depth then begins to unravel.

With more than a passing nod to Hideo Kojima's original *Metal Gear Solid* games, play revolves around infiltrating hostile complexes and recovering intel.

Always outnumbered, both cunning and outright aggression are required to survive. Success is rewarded with character upgrades, which are invaluable to future outings.



An interactive storyline means player decisions influence how the plot progresses. A trigger-happy approach that racks up large enemy body counts is, for example, likely to attract unwelcome attention from the authorities as events unfold.

While it might have graphics resembling the 16-bit era of the 1990s, do not be fooled – *Disjunction* is atmospheric, addictive and compelling from the outset. *Soldier* sampled the Switch version of the game and was impressed on every front.

The action moves at a generous pace while the control interface is easy to master. Swapping weapons is mercifully simple and each assignment can be played in a variety of ways.

Disjunction also lends itself well to a handheld console – it is easy to play in short bursts, making it a good candidate for downtime on either ops or exercise.

The title's repetitive nature is the only downside

– missions can tend to involve similar objectives and more variety would have improved the overall experience.

Nonetheless, this is a small criticism of an otherwise solid offering. A salient lesson that first appearances are not always accurate, *Disjunction* marks the welcome return of a rare style. ■

VERDICT:

Console sneaky beakies will be in their element

★★★★★

REVIEW: CLIFF CASWELL, *SOLDIER*

GAMES RELEASES



Double Dragon Neon For Switch

PENT-UP frustration of endless coronavirus lockdowns may have spawned the current crop of retro-inspired side-scrolling beat 'em ups.

We've recently seen a *Cobra*

KaiTV tie-in plus a new *Streets of Rage* outing.

Now there is *Double Dragon Neon* – a salute to this vintage fight game's heyday four decades ago.

Players can team up with a buddy for this cartoonish brawl to rescue a girlfriend who – just as in the 1980s original – has been seized by thugs. Despite the ageing concept, the ensuing scrap is slick, mercilessly addictive and highly playable. Strongly recommended.

Cliff Caswell, *Soldier*



Assassin's Creed: Valhalla

For all formats, except Switch

SET in ninth century Norway, this latest instalment in Ubisoft's long-running series

tasks players with avenging their father's murder. Fans will not be disappointed – it's the usual open-world epic with plenty of quests to master. Though not quite as smooth as the earlier *Black Flag* title, *Valhalla* comes a close second in terms of quality. While there are a few control issues, this is nonetheless a solid offering and great fun.

David McDougall, *civvy*

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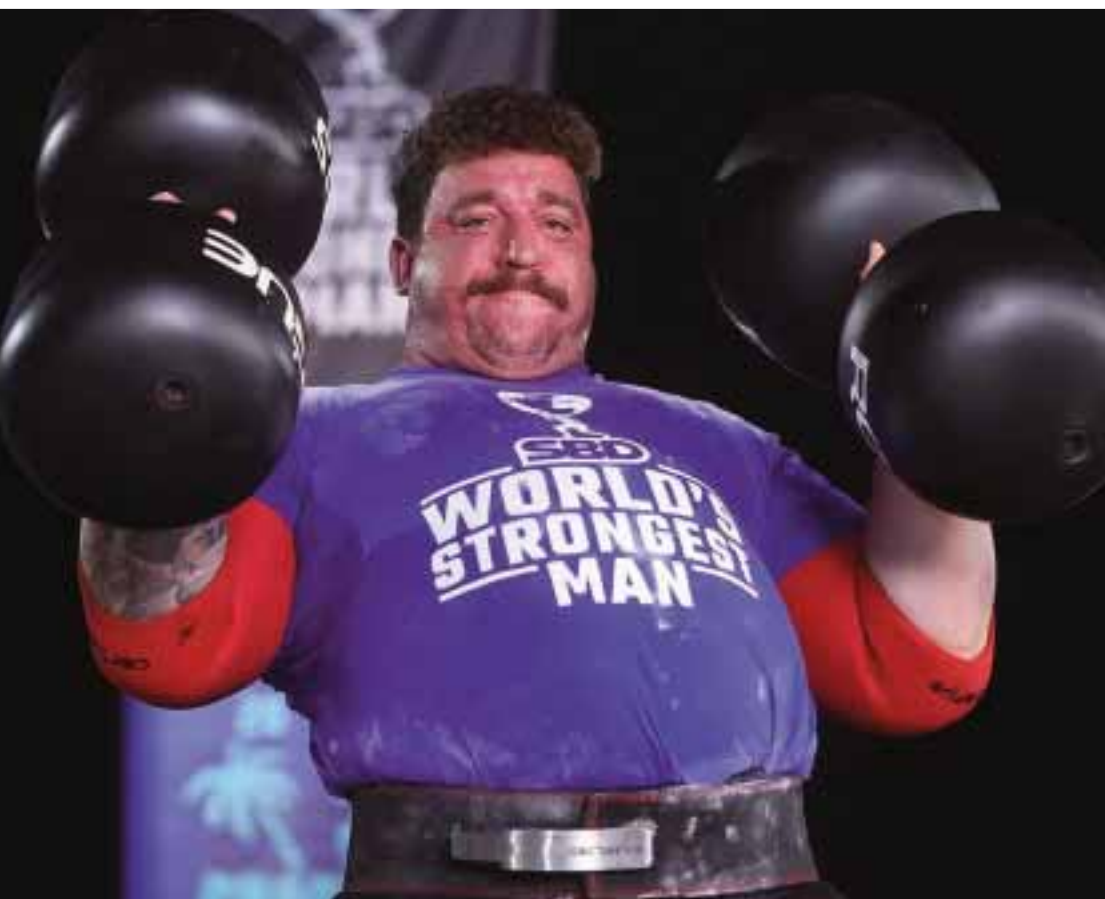
SOLDIER SPORT



HUNGERFORD GAMES >>

ARMY players WO2 Keith Emmerson (RAPTC, pictured) and LCpl Luke Cairney (RE) were performing starring roles for Hungerford Town in the National League South before the competition was declared null and void last month. Read their thoughts on the season on page 72...

Pictures: World's Strongest Man/IMG



BREAKING NEW GROUND

EX-SOLDIER SWAPS THE RUGBY PITCH FOR STRONGMAN ARENA IN QUEST FOR SPORTING GLORY

HAVING seen his career on the rugby pitch cut short by injury, ex-soldier Gavin Bilton set about bulking up and starting out on a new sporting path.

The 32-year-old, who served in the Welsh Guards for 14 years before leaving the Army in 2020, has since made rapid strides as a strongman – winning the UK's Strongest Man competition and later qualifying for the prestigious World's Strongest Man.

"It is always something I wanted to do – we all grew up watching it on television," the former guardsman, who completed two Op Herrick tours in Afghanistan during his time in uniform, told *SoldierSport*.

"In rugby I had an injury to my hand, and then my jaw and nose, and as I was recovering I started to put on size in the gym as I wasn't playing.

"In truth, I probably thought I was better at rugby than I actually was. At one point I had dreams of playing for Wales, but it wasn't to be.

"So, I thought 'why not give this a go?'. I was quite strong and could deadlift 300kg, and a friend of mine brought all the equipment I needed to the gym.

"I did a shoulder session and it felt amazing – six weeks later I entered my first competition and won."

As a rugby player, Bilton was on the books of Ebbw Vale, Newport and London Irish, among others, and also represented the Army and Welsh Guards (pictured right).

The change in direction initially proved a challenge as strongman competitions feature such diverse events, but the building blocks were in place.

"I had a good deadlift, squat and bench press and I was eating a lot of food, but it was the right food – things like fish and pasta," Bilton explained.

"I was the first Welsh athlete to win the UK's Strongest Man in 40 years and that was a really big deal.

"I got to the final and smashed it – I'd won it by the third event.

"I then got invited to the European Strongman with a week's notice and finished seventh, before I got the call for the World's Strongest Man.

"I was originally there as a tester, but two days before the competition started one of the guys withdrew and I was in."

Unfortunately, injury struck once again as Bilton tore the calluses in his hand during his first event, before he broke a rib while squatting in the second.

However, the athlete – who consumes six meals and 10,000 calories a day to fuel his imposing frame – was philosophical about the experience and believes his best is yet to come.

"You've got to be some kind of freak mutant to win the World's Strongest Man at your first attempt," he explained.

"It is almost impossible as the other guys are so experienced. Nobody has any real weaknesses, which means you doubt your own ability – I think it's important to get your backside kicked if you are to move forward.

"I could see how the other guys handle themselves and I learnt a lot. It was a great experience and has made me even hungrier for success."

Bilton's size – 6ft 6in in height and more than 30 stone in



**"MY MAIN
GOAL IS
TO BRING
THAT
TITLE
BACK TO
WALES"**

weight – makes him a natural at strongman's pulling and pressing events but he admitted that improvements are needed if he is to progress further.

"My conditioning is not the worst, and I can still shift over 100 metres, but I have lost some speed as I'm now ten stone heavier compared to when I was playing rugby," he explained.

"So that is something I'm working hard at, with things like tyre flipping. I'm doing two conditioning sessions a week and they are tough going."

The former Serviceman has a busy schedule planned for 2021 – including competitions in Britain and Europe – and is hoping to qualify for a second appearance in the sport's flagship contest.

And if he is to be successful, he believes his Army background will be a vital weapon in his arsenal.

"That has helped massively," he said. "I've done two operational tours and when you're on stag you have to switch on at a moment's notice.

"The way I prepare for an event or massive lift is exactly the same.

"The Army has given me grit, determination and a willingness not to give in – and that is my mentality in competition mode.

"My main goal is to win the World's Strongest Man, bring that title back to Wales and become only the second Welsh athlete to do it.

"You have to be confident in your ability, or there's no point turning up." ■

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SPORT SHORTS

Picture: Sgt Paul Day



Membership milestone

IN THE latest indication of the sport's popularity in Service circles, the Army Cycling Union has welcomed its 1,000th member to the fold.

Cpl Joshua Short (R Signals), of Colchester-based 251 Signal Squadron, had the honour of bringing up the landmark and he is looking to build on his experience of mountain biking and road cycling.

"There are fitness and adrenalin highs with both disciplines," he said.

"Moving forward, I'd like to cycle from John O'Groats to Land's End and also complete a training week in a different overseas location, such as Peru."



Series schedule in place

PLANs for the 2021 Army Cross Country Mountain Bike Series have been announced – with seven rounds scheduled, Covid permitting.

The first race is set for Bulford on March 21, with Exeter, Wimbish, Edinburgh, Folkestone and Aldershot staging legs in the following months.

The competition is open to riders of all experience levels and events will be held on terrain that will be manageable for all.

Personnel are advised to keep monitoring Defence Connect for updates on any cancellations. For more details visit armycycling.org or email james.cooper431@mod.gov.uk



ROAD REPLACEMENT POWERS AHEAD



**"IT'S
EVEN
MORE
POPULAR
THIS
TIME
ROUND"**

DESPITE not staging an actual race in more than a year, the Army Cycling Union (ACU) is still proving an attractive proposition for those in need of a sporting fix.

With Covid-19 restrictions making mass events an impossibility in 2020 the organisation moved online, where hundreds of cyclists took to the saddle in events organised by the virtual training app, Zwift.

Given such success, the initiative was rolled into a new eight-stage season that reaches its climax this month, when prizes will be awarded to the best performers in a host of individual and team categories.

"It is even more popular this time round and we had more than 320 Army riders in our last race," the ACU's e-cycling secretary, Sgt Will Nicols (Int Corps), told *SoldierSport*.

"We've alternated start times between 1500 and 1830, which has proven to be a good idea as it allows Regulars and Reserves to get involved.

"Zwift is quite different to real-life racing, but they've tried to make it as authentic as possible with things like gradients and drafting, and the fitness benefits will carry over.

"There have been some absolutely phenomenal performances so far."

While the series has already passed its midway point there are still opportunities for soldiers to get involved in the remaining races – with the high-speed action also being live streamed via the Army Cycling Facebook page.

Once complete, the ACU is hoping plans for a regular season can start to take shape.

"We are just waiting on the Army Sport Control Board to release dates for when things can resume," Nicols added.

"But we have got a few things lined up just in case that doesn't happen – including an Inter-Services competition.

"That's the great thing about Zwift, races can be switched on and off at short notice." ■



VOTE OUTCOME SHATTERS DUO'S PLAY-OFF HOPES

WITH Army football currently on hold, playing time for the Service's leading lights has been in short supply.

But two stalwarts of the Reds' success in recent years were bucking the trend at Hungerford Town, where they were helping the Berkshire-based outfit mount an unlikely play-off charge before the National League South campaign was declared null and void as this issue went to press.

Defender WO2 Keith Emmerson (RAPTC) and goalkeeper LCpl Luke Cairney (RE) joined the ranks last summer and were regular performers as the team defied their status as relegation favourites to surge to seventh place in the table.

But when National Lottery funding designed to cover the financial shortfall of playing in empty stadiums expired in December, all clubs in the National League North and South faced the prospect of having to vote on how to proceed for the remainder of the season.

It proved to be a close call, but the ultimate decision saw the competitions scrapped with immediate effect.

"Hungerford had measures in place to carry on, but it was a different situation for many others," Emmerson (pictured above) told *SoldierSport*.

"The appetite was not there; they have to look at their financial situations and nobody wants to see clubs going out of business.

"We were favourites to go down so to get in the position we were in was a real positive. We were happy to put the hours in and keep that play-off push going.

"As players we can be angry about the decision, but there are worse things going on in the world at the minute.

"The chairman and manager are aiming to keep the squad together and I want to continue playing at this level. Hopefully, that can be with Hungerford."

Cairney signed with the club after two seasons with Poole Town. The move saw him step up from the Southern Football League and he adapted well to



**"WE
WERE
ON A
REALLY
GOOD
RUN"**

the challenge of playing at a higher level.

"It gave me the chance to test myself against professional footballers and I've really enjoyed it," he said.

"I've felt comfortable in the games I've played; the standard of goalkeeping is very high and it has been a privilege to play in this league.

"We were on a really good run and as a squad we were fired up to prove people wrong."

Despite the outcome, the duo feel fortunate to have been able to play in a season when so many of their Service teammates have not had the opportunity.

"It is a privilege to have been involved," Cairney said. "There are so many talented players in the Army who have not had that, so we are really lucky.

"The lads I've spoken to in the Royal Engineers are keeping fit and they are optimistic about playing again soon.

"They miss the camaraderie and going into battle with other teams, but they are managing to stay positive." ■

WAITING GAME

IN NORMAL times, the Army's footballers would be preparing for the pinnacle of their season with the Inter-Services showdown looming on the horizon this month.

But thoughts of challenging for silverware will have to be put on hold as the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, and subsequent restrictions, has resulted in the cancellation of the 2021 tournament.

It means the competition will be unable to crown champions for a second successive season after last year's contest failed to reach a conclusion.

The latest decision was unanimously agreed by the football associations of all three Services following considerable discussion and deliberation.

"The primary concern is the health and wellbeing of players, coaches and officials, as well as the recognition that many of our personnel play a vital role supporting defence in the national effort against the virus," the organisations said in a joint statement.

"While we recognise the disappointment this will cause, we thank everyone for their understanding and patience through these difficult and uncertain times."

A decision has yet to be made on how to proceed with Army-level competitions, but a variety of proposals and options are in place.

These will be dependent on future guidance from the national governing body and Army Sport Control Board. However, the Army FA has said it is keen to avoid any 2020/21 competitions stretching into next season. ■



SPORT SHORTS



Soper stands down

RUGBY union stalwart SSgt Lee Soper (RA) will call time on his 24-year Service career this month.

In a distinguished playing spell, he won 11 Army caps and lined up for Harlequins, Worcester, Cornish Pirates and London Scottish in the civvy game before turning his hand to coaching.

Soper was part of the Reds' backroom team between 2016 and 2020 and later became head coach of the UK Armed Forces.

"I've been very privileged to achieve what I've achieved," the soldier, who also deployed on operations to Iraq and Afghanistan, said.



Picture: LPhoto Louise George, RN

Invictus postponed

THIS year's Invictus Games – due to take place in The Hague from May 29 to June 5 – have been postponed.

The competition was set to bring more than 500 athletes from 20 countries together in a series of adaptive sports, but social distancing measures and other restrictions mean it is not viable in the current climate.

"The competitor recovery journey and the wish to provide them with as much certainty as possible lay at the heart of the decision making," the organising committee said.

It is hoped the showcase can go ahead in spring 2022.



● ARMY rugby union forward Cpl Lewis Bean (Rifles) will leave Premiership outfit Northampton Saints at the end of the current season and join Glasgow Warriors.

The 28-year-old signed for the Franklin's Gardens outfit in 2019 and went on to make 15 appearances for the club.

He enjoyed a loan spell with the Scottish side late last year and is currently plying his trade with Bedford Blues in the Championship.

"Northampton is a wonderful place to play rugby, in front of incredibly passionate supporters alongside a great group of lads, but the opportunity for more game time in Glasgow was one I could not turn down," the second-row explained.



Everyone in 21 Engineer Regiment is looking forward to developing as a strike unit. We'll be working with Mastiffs before moving on to the Boxer vehicle. It feels like a complete flip, going from ceremonial duties at the royal palaces to then training with the cutting edge of the Army's fighting capability.

SSgt Martin Beech, RE



I was due to do adventurous training in Cyprus last year, but ended up on guard duty at my barracks in Ripon. I'm still hoping to do that mountain biking package, and a well driller's course to increase my chances of deploying to places like Kenya or Somalia.

Spr Thorpe Smith, RE



I'm looking forward to deploying to Estonia. Since March last year we've had to work from home because of Covid. Now we're getting some training in and people have a chance to do their jobs.

Sgt James Clayton, Mercian



I'm in the middle of driver training for 21 Engineer Regiment's new strike role. I was gutted to miss out on going to Canada in 2020 for Exercise Warpaint, so hopefully this year won't see a repeat of anything like that.

Spr Luke Bingham, RE



I just want to go on exercise as a unit. I joined two years ago and have only been out once, building ranges for the Infantry in Deptford, which was great. I would love to do more stuff in the field.

Spr Riece Nixon-Anderton, RE

It's the easing of restrictions I'm looking forward to most. The last few months have been up in the air with everything very reactive and difficult to plan. We want to end the frustration of cancelling exercises and courses.

WO2 Steve Walker, Coldm Gds



High hopes

We asked troops if 2021 is shaping up to be a better year than last...

I am fortunate enough to have been selected for promotion so I'll be off on a training cadre later this year before moving to another regiment within the Royal Engineers. I'm really looking forward to taking on more responsibility.

Spr Mitchell Daly, RE





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