



Equipped for life
...a shared responsibility

Equipped for life... a shared responsibility

The idea of making a report on a two-year research study, funded by FiMT, 'come to life' emerged from a conversation between Dr Nikki Lloyd-Jones of Wrexham Glyndŵr University and photographer Ceridwen Hughes, who is also a Director of Same but Different, an organisation that uses the arts to raise awareness.

This partnership has resulted in a photographic project, which will allow you to take a visual journey into the world of those who have left the Armed Forces, and how they experienced transition as a civilian. Through imagery and creativity, the narratives provided by the veterans portray five common phrases used to explain transition "Moving forward", "Putting down roots", "Changing pace", "Living the moment" and "Being a veteran".

Our interpretation of these as a process of transition has been through conversation with each of the participants involved about significant aspects of both their military and civilian identity.

This project supports the commitment made through the Armed Forces Covenant, to see transition as a shared responsibility with the communities in which veterans live. Dialogue is often around injured and damaged service people, but challenges experienced on transition can be felt by all, often exacerbated by a lack of awareness and understanding by the very communities they move into.

The aim of this project is to highlight transition experiences as open to dialogue allowing greater awareness about what can be done to make life easier for those in transition.

Committed to trying to bridge communications between those who have a military background and those who do not have such an insight, it is hoped that this project contributes to the conversation about transition to becoming a civilian.



Vic - putting down roots

"I joined the navy with a few GCSE's to do my student nurse training and all the rest of my education, right up to Masters level, has been funded or partially funded by the military. I spent 23 years 'in', it somehow captivates you and keeps a hold on you.

I left the military just over two years ago, it was quite a change for me to be honest. Elements of my personal life have been really pivotal to helping me settle. The animals are a really important part of my life, they help me relax, they give unconditional love and the dogs are my connection with home.

When we go out and walk the dogs, people know who we are and the whole village know Magnus, our dog, and that's lovely because that means that people know who we are and know when things change, and that's part of being in a community.

For the first time in my entire life I don't need to be packing my desk up and relocating. All the things that we take for granted as part of being in the military, but actually they are very disruptive to life in general. It's something for me to get my head around that actually we're staying where we are, and having the choice to move rather than being told to move is very different."





Matthew - putting down roots

"I originally joined the Household Cavalry and then re-allocated to the RAVC through my training. I have always loved dogs and it was something I was keen to pursue. I always knew I would leave after 6 years and initially it seemed really easy. I left and went to university and enjoyed the social life. At first it was happy days, socialising, drinking and meeting people but then it started getting harder. It took me over a year to get a job. No-one would hire me, even McDonald's turned me down!

I really enjoyed my armed forces days and I have nothing to complain about regarding my experience but it was a complete shock to suddenly struggle to get a job and have no money after being in a career for 6 years.

It is no coincidence that I was in the military, where there is so much structure, and then when I left I went straight to university where everything is still very much protected from real life, but then 'boom' you are in the real world. That is the hardest bit. A slow transition definitely helped but looking back I should have tried to ensure I had a job to go to straight away.

Military people crave brotherhood and I now get that from my music. That is my release. The camaraderie and brotherhood that comes with that because it is the same people, the same circle that I crave. It just took a while to find it."





Steve - living the moment

"I joined straight from school and was in the Royal Marines just short of 16 years; I specialised in mortars. When I left full time service, I joined the reserves which subsidised me going through university. Being in the reserves made it easier going from military life to a civilian life because it was like coming out of the sea slowly instead of jumping straight out.

I suppose in the first year and a half, I didn't control my emotions very well, I think if I'm being brutally honest. I still lived that culture of the military, so drinking a lot, going out every weekend. I didn't have any children at the time either so it was quite easy for me to be irresponsible.

I suppose I was a 32 year old person behaving as an 18 year old. It became apparent pretty quick when you behave like that at that age, you look a bit stupid really.

The martial arts is something that I've done for a long time. Most people who join the military probably enjoy an element of risk taking, that buzz, the adrenalin. I think, now, I get that camaraderie from martial arts, it's a group of people who have a similar goal, which always helps. We train hard and we do enjoy the social side of things, so it's almost a military type environment without completely being engulfed in that life. I think the humour's very, probably not dark, but it's certainly darker than what you'd get away with in an office."





Andy - moving forward

“I decided to join the RAF in 1999 as an assistant air traffic controller. I served 14 years before leaving. My decision to leave was nothing to do with not liking my job but after taking up the role of instructor and I was spending increasing amounts of time responding to the welfare needs of the younger students, I realised, after looking out for one of these students who was sent to me for guidance, that I could see myself doing more in an advocating role.

The Care Council in Wales were really supportive and valued the skills I could bring to social work as an ex-military person. Being a student was a really positive time and I went from having 2 GCSEs to achieving a first class honours degree and an award for the most achieving student.

Since leaving the University, I started working for a third sector charity which needed some organisation and although they only took me on for one day a week initially, I have been promoted twice and I am now their director of operations. I am able to transfer the skills I gained in the military to my current job which is to make a difference for the people that the charity support.

So having taken a risk 5 years ago when leaving the military, everything I have learnt has paid off beautifully. I think my transition from one role to another has been seamless because I took control of what I wanted to do and did not rely on the military to do it for me.”



Stack of books on the desk, including titles like "Social Work" and "The Art of War".



AJ - changing pace

“I am from a Naval family and so I was really pleased to join the Royal Navy to become a Nuclear Propulsion Engineer. After a year, I was picked to represent the Navy in hockey and then I became the team captain which was a dream come true and meant life was wonderful. Then one day during a match I was playing, my ankles disintegrated and I was rushed into hospital for surgery. After coming round I found out there was nothing they could do and I was going to be discharged from the military, so I lost my job and my hobby all in one go. I went from feeling the luckiest person to being utterly devastated.

I used to be super fit with a 28” waist and a six pack, I was at the peak of fitness and then it stopped all at once.

After I was medically discharged, it wasn’t great. It was difficult and I did what most sailors would do, I went to the pub and that became my new normal. Then when depression and anxiety took hold, I stayed at home and got fatter and fatter. Things changed radically by accident. I met someone from Help for Heroes who invited me to go for wheelchair basketball trials. I was able to move fast for the first time in ages. I was surrounded by people with various body parts missing, we were having a laugh and everyone was sweating, but it was good to be alive, to feel that adrenaline again.

Since the Invictus Games, I give motivational speeches about mental health and I have starting a care farm business. I feel a pride again and I’ve got a purpose to help others on their journeys.“





Dougie - changing pace

"My name is Dougie, I joined the Military in January 1978 at the Royal Marines School of Music in Kent. You know when you join that you are going to have to do other things than just play music; we learnt how to clean and fire weapons, drive trucks, do live fire and range test every year. Obviously not to the standard of the marines but we can still behave in a military way. We have a dual role, military and music. The band players are very versatile and can turn their hands to most when you need to, they're very good in a crisis but if you want us on the front line, you've lost the war!

When in the combat situation, it depends which band you're in so when I was in the Falklands, I was a stretcher bearer.

It was a bit like MASH, the helicopters would bring casualties on to the ship and we would take them to the various treatment areas. When they closed down the flight deck at the end of a day, potentially we could be playing that evening, so you had to go and wash your hands, get a clean uniform and forget about what you had seen, you close your mind and get on with what you are doing.

I think I have transposed the camaraderie I experienced when in the military to what I'm doing now. Music has played an enormous part in my transition. The band I conduct now has a strong family connection of almost a hundred years and while my wife was in Afghanistan, I was playing every night either conducting or playing, neighbours used to come around bringing food."





Jon - living the moment

"I joined the Royal Air Force back in 2000 as a mechanical transport technician, did my basic training and took an apprenticeship to achieve a really good qualification. I was 22 when I joined up which was relatively late but my father was a Warrant Officer of 22 years service and I was at a military boarding school from the age of 11 until 18.

When I left I used to just put my head down and get on with it, go for it, keep running around, you get anxious when you stand still. Although when you come to leave, you can have money to use for training, I was of the view that I just wanted to get out and I relied on my confidence to help me get sorted. It was in this transitional period that I met some interesting people who gave good advice.

I was told it is not what your skills are, it is how you adapt them to what you want to do. It was this mind set that gave me the confidence to realise I could make my own way in the world. I am not just a mechanic, I have knowledge of mechanical training. I could go back on the spanners but I could be a teacher or an assessor and that's what happened. It was the meeting people and networking that was the most influential impact on my success for moving forward.

I've started to slow down, get better jobs, better house and I feel happier about my life so I don't need to run around on my bikes, spend a load of money on things. I am at an age now where I am okay with looking like an idiot riding around on an old lawn mower!"





Carol - being a veteran

“I was nursing for the NHS and I joined the reserves in November 1987, I have always been an outdoor person and not interested in the night-club scene so joining the army didn’t need much thinking about. When the opportunity arose, I joined the medical corps and went to Bosnia. My first posting was in Denmark and I drove the truck all the way through Europe for a 2 week camp. It was a mix of reserves and regular army, a real eye opener, there was no easing into the reserves.

One of the biggest highlights of my career was our work at an orphanage on the border of Croatia and Bosnia. We had a team of us that went to this place, as part of a goodwill project, to see how we could help towards improving the environment for these children.

We did a lot of work with the staff developing a sensory room and encouraging them to spend time with the kids in a positive way.

The biggest problem for me whilst in the Balkans was that we were told not to walk on the grass because of the risk of landmines. It was interesting when we first arrived, as there was snow on the ground, so you couldn’t see where the grass started and finished. For me it is such a normal thing to do, in everyday life I would take my dog out in the fields or just go for a walk, so to be unable to go on the grass was hard.

I know if someone asked me if I needed help I’d say “no thanks” but I reckon if you asked any veteran if they would help others, they would go out of their way to lend a hand.”





Andy D - moving forward

"I joined the Air force as a sixteen year old, I was little boy, I didn't shave, didn't smoke or drink, I hadn't even kissed a girl properly but by the time I was eighteen I was drink dependent. It was part of the culture to go out for a few pints after work although my drinking was controlled because you still had to turn up for duty. I had a responsible job and there were times when you couldn't drink and I accepted that.

When I left I continued to work for the air force as a civilian, working away all week, and that was when drinking became a problem. I don't live in the past but my drinking is part of my journey. At my lowest point I was street homeless and living a tramp's existence with a craving for alcohol.

When I was in the gutter I met a man who was from the church, he didn't force religion down my throat but he said to me you can be the master of your own ship. I had what some people describe as an epiphany, I was able to reflect on what had become of my life and how my behaviour had impacted on others.

I had this tattoo done on my arm and it says 'sail on with dignity' because I believe I live a dignified life now. I can honestly say once I stopped I never wanted another drink and I have an unbelievable relationship with my family. I've got to keep moving forward, keep clean, keep sober and just try to be the person I was born to be. I feel I am really the master of my own ship now."





Shaun - being a veteran

“I joined the Royal Welsh Regiment at 16. Just 6 days before my tour of Afghanistan was due to end, and when I was just 19, I stepped on an improvised explosive device (IED). I lost both my legs, injured my hand and initially lost all my sight, although I have now about 30% vision in one eye.

I was in a coma for eight weeks and had a huge number of operations. It has been particularly difficult for my family and friends but the support I received from everyone has been amazing. Early in my recovery I was transferred to Headley Court (Defence Medical Rehabilitation Centre) and the team there were absolutely brilliant.

Not having legs has become so normal for me. I have loads of alan keys scattered around my house. Putting my legs on now is just like someone slipping into their shoes. I have things in place to help me, like using a magnifying glass to read things and technology helps.

When people offer sympathy I explain that, even though it sounds strange, I don't regret it. It has made me the person I am today. I was so young when I joined the army but these experiences have given me so much. I travel lots and now use my story to inspire others.”



With kind thanks

We are grateful for the generous grant awarded from the Forces in Mind Trust and made possible by a substantial endowment provided by the Big Lottery fund. Thanks also go to the ex Armed Forces service people for their generosity in sharing their time and thoughts with us.

This exhibition brochure is a snapshot of the project and you can learn more about the individuals and the detailed research that this project is based on by visiting the website www.equippedforlife.org.uk



