

Mike Harries 1958 -. British Army Loughor & France

West Wales Veterans' Archive

Dates of Interview: November 2020

Description:

Mike Harries was born in Loughor in the front room of a farm. His parents were Calvin, an Electrical Fitter with SWEB, and Alice, a tailoress/catering manager (she learned her trade making uniforms during WW2, aged 15 years old). They lived at Bryn Farm. Mike went to school in Penyrhoel and turned down a place in the Swansea College of Art to join the Army as a Junior Leader in the Royal Regiment of Wales at the age of 16yrs. As a young theatre medic in the RAMC he served a tour in Northern Ireland.

Mike and his young family spent many years living in West Germany and his description of travelling with them through checkpoints into East Germany provides a vivid illustration from this extraordinary period in recent history. Mike was later promoted to Warrant Officer and became a Document Inspector in the RAMC, a role he thoroughly enjoyed, enabling him to travel to Brunei, Cyprus and Nepal. He served 21yrs and just over two months in the Army followed by a further 13 years as a locally employed civilian working as a Crown Servant for the British Sovereign Bases in Cyprus before retiring to France. At the time of writing his account, Mike was preparing to move from France to live in one of the Greek islands.

Mike's Story

It is a privilege writing this piece for the West Wales Veterans' Archive. Whilst, putting this together it has meant different things to me as I recall my days in the military and later, once more working alongside Service personnel as a civilian. It has most certainly been one of the most challenging pieces of writing, memory wise, that's for sure. I know how many times I've sat at my laptop scratching my head whilst thinking back over the years. That said, I found this experience also thought provoking – seeing how things have moved on in my life and in our world in general. Compiling this has also been meaningful, helping me to reflect and to know how grateful I am for being part of the lifestyle as it was back in the 1970s through to late 1990s. (*It wasn't all bad - at least in my experience and from my point of view.*) And, as I travelled back in my mind over the past forty-six years, I realise how much British culture changed, and so has the military.

I hope that my contribution to this collection will bring a few smiles to the faces of its readers, but above all, a chance to take a glimpse at the past as you travel with me on my particular journey. Thank you. Mike Harries.

Ich Dien - Royal Regiment of Wales

Gwell angau na Chywilydd; *Death rather than Dishonour*

I was aged 15 when I left school, and not long after my 16th birthday I began my military career in August 1974; although I had been awarded a scholarship to Swansea College of Art. I remember my careers advisor at school, who told me that there was no future or money in art. He said, '*you could go into advertising, but it does not pay well either*'. In 2010, I held a solo exhibition of my paintings and sold 14/21. My education had two setbacks: late one Sunday evening I had been playing outdoors with a few friends in our neighbourhood – I had been called indoors by one of my parents. Not long afterwards I ended up having a bad accident and was rushed by ambulance to Morriston Hospital. I lost over a whole term of school as a result. I don't feel you really ever catch up. At the time, I had not long started my secondary education and even though I was doing fairly well, I still never made it into the higher stream. The second set-back was from the introduction of the Comprehensive schooling system - which occurred during my final year - *33 pupils turning up for class, on occasions no teacher would appear, disillusioned, not enough books to go around in English Literature, loss of subjects during transition included: History, General Science, Music, topped by a mathematics' teacher who'd say, 'I'll show you once again. If you don't understand, you might as well forget it!*' All of which did little to steer me in any other direction. I wanted to leave school and ended up spending most of my time in the art room.

My memories jump around as I write, so please bear with me. I think I was around 11 years old, when I first met someone serving in the Army. My sister met and married a soldier, well, he was much more than just a soldier, Ray was an Avionics Technician and multi-lingual [apart from his native tongue, Welsh, he achieved the equivalent of a degree in Mandarin (in the 70s long before it became fashionable), spoke colloquial German, as well as speaking French, Spanish, and a sound knowledge of Arabic]. He'd suggested I join the Army, so one Saturday morning, I jumped on a red double-decker bus (*they all seemed to be red back then*) and found my way to the Army Careers Office, High Street, Swansea. Just round the corner from Castle Gardens (sadly no longer even though it was created, I believe, as a memorial). My parents didn't know about my little adventure until a recruiting Sergeant arrived at the farm where I lived with an older brother. Steve also ended up joining the Royal Army Pay Corps and later the RAMC. In his hand, the Sergeant held the paperwork for my parents to sign. (I seem to recall pleading with my mam to agree to me leaving home). It is hard to believe that all these years later, I still have my New Testament from my Attestation. I had enlisted as a Junior Leader in the Royal Regiment of Wales. It was the very first time, and definitely not the last, I'd be called 'Taff', by another recruit who'd enlisted in the Devon and Dorset Regiment. It was also the first time I'd come across lads whose parents were divorced. Our platoon was made up a group of young adults from all walks of life; some had had little alternative reaching a fork in the road and were forced along a narrow street with a steep incline – making it difficult to climb up in civvy street. They had also been given a choice – the military or Borstal.

I count myself fortunate; we did not have much money as a family, that said, I remember my grandfather, a very tall, slim and dignified man. He used to stand on his head when it came to his birthday - we believe he was either 97 or 99 when he passed away. He used to ask me, 'can you touch your toes?' Then would show me as he touched his. I can on good days! I remember him wearing a 'stud collar' tie, a waistcoat with his pocket-watch tucked away and dressed smartly whenever he left the farm to go to the village and to chapel on

Sundays. A working man of the outdoors, which probably gave him the strength he had. I digress.

Cwrt-Y-Gollen Camp, Crickhowell, also trained young soldiers from the Gloucestershire Regiment. Funny what memories stay with you or resurface, 'swing your arms lad,' said our drill Sergeant. He was a short chap, but boy could he shout. *'Or I'll rip 'em off and beat you with the soggy end, you 'orrible little'*. (True, no wonder it's been used in scripts.) I babysat for him and his wife twice, he seemed human out of uniform. It was a real treat for me being away from the barrack block: TV, a warm home, hot drinks and biscuits.

On the parade square, if you were caught watching another lad doubling around it with his rifle raised above his head, you'd soon be joining him. I only ran around it once! Looking after our kit included: blanched garters, rolling puttees ready to wear, polishing brass, hot spooning best boots, waiting your turn for the iron and pay parades ... (I still have my savings book, alas empty). I remember the tributary running to the river Usk, whereby we'd cross over it on a monkey bridge at speed and on the odd morning when our platoon would, at the double, run to the river and use a mess-tin as a mirror to shave. It was before 06:00hrs. Other images surface of firing all sorts of different weapons on the ranges, running up and around the foot of the Beacons, and rugby, *(I played on the wing)*. We also went to the education centre and had help with mathematics, and English. I have some fond memories and some not so fond of being 16 years old.

Jumping back a little to the first few days in the Army, I remember our platoon all lined up outside the barber's shop and the QM's. I got kitted out and measured up for my uniform, a man told me, 'don't worry lad, you'll grow into it'. I did. I must have done alright at drill, as I was chosen for the Guard of Honour for the Colonel in Chief, HRH Prince Charles, who visited the training establishment. Either that, or the eight of us chosen were all of similar height and build. I trained with the RRW as a Junior, until March 1975 then signed back on the dotted line, only this time it was to be discharged at my own request.

Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC)

In arduis fidelis; Faithful in Adversity

Fast-forward to January 1977 and with the military still running through my veins, I re-enlisted to train as a Medical Assistant in the Royal Army Medical Corps. I had decided that factory life (INA Bearings, Bynea) wasn't for me, nor working as an invoice clerk for Bailey's Carpets, Cwmbwra, Swansea *(I remember the days when Swansea was known as a town.)* I'd exchanged mid-Wales for the county of Hampshire, Keogh Barracks. Ashvale, not far from Aldershot. It was so different from my short stint with the RRW, although the former training had put me in good stead. I had swapped running with rifles above our heads for stretcher races in teams of four, as well as going over the assault course with a telegraph pole in teams of six, running in DMS boots, webbing, mud, sun and rain. I wasn't the only Welshman I recall, there was Taff Roberts-Morgan from Tylorstown. One thing I do remember whilst during my time away from Wales is having to slow my speech down for others to understand me but then getting flak from friends and family upon my return as I sounded 'posh'. There are many times still, when I happily slip back to my roots, particularly

when I have been on the phone to South Wales. My training included suturing an orange peel, learning how to make weapons safe (*I knew quite a bit from earlier days*). Nuclear Chemical Warfare, how to treat those exposed, recognising the agents used and of course more drill on the parade square. Not to mention making a bed-block. I was getting good at both. In our final week we sat in the cinema and watched the film, 'Medicine in Vietnam' - if you can sit through this film then you stand a good chance of making it. I did. I passed, as an (A-grade,) Class 3 Army Medic, aged 18 years old.

After our passing off parade in the April, we were given some leave before commencing further training - a six-week attachment to a hospital. I was with a group of other medics training at the Royal Herbert Hospital, Woolwich. It was an eerie place, Nightingale wards, the smell of disinfectant, and in the forecourt once you entered from under an arch was an old octagonal shaped wooden gazebo. (It felt military, but also different – there were women here, military nurses and WRAC attached). No military hospital was without its rugby pitch, the Ole Herberts', I seem to recall being particularly grand.

A few of the lads I had trained with from Jee Squad, Keogh Barracks were with attached with me to Woolwich (although, later they would be posted to different units, mainly in BAOR, West Germany.) Whilst at Woolwich, four of us provided Medical Cover at the Queen's Silver Jubilee in Wembley Stadium. We had to wear Number 1 dress (Blues). Our training of running with a telegraph pole came in handy, when the Drum Sergeant Major (Tiger skin and all) collapsed on the field in front of a crowded arena. Once we had recovered him the Doctor suspected he'd had a heart-attack. It was a very warm day that I do remember well, and later seeing the imprint from the brass plates and pins (collar dogs) holding the two RAMC badges in the collar of my uniform that had been pressing into my neck. Whilst there, we also helped to close down the Royal Herbert (or Ole Herbert as we'd fondly call her) and assisted with the move (lumping boxes) to the newly built Queen Elizabeth's Military Hospital, Woolwich which opened officially in 1978. At the time it was state of the art, a complete change to the old place. And in its hey-day as a Military Hospital, provided healthcare for the local community as well as Service personnel and their dependents.

After completing my stint in Woolwich, I joined my unit, 11 Field Ambulance, Bielefeld, British Army on the Rhine (BAOR). I hadn't gone straight there like some of the other lads from Jee Squad; I had been granted special leave to be best man at my brother's wedding in the August. I remember my first night when I did eventually join them in West Germany (as it was back then) – two of the lads I had trained took me to a Schnellli Imbiss just along the strasse from Mossbank Barracks. We ordered 'ein halbus hunchen, mit pommes frites. (half-chicken and chips) - I don't think I'd ever seen a plate so full in my life. My mam was a fantastic cook, and Sunday lunches were always special at home - always sitting at the table she had set. Still, half a chicken was an awful lot for just one 9.5 stone guy. Not long after arriving at 11 Field Ambulance, (four months, seems to spring to mind – February 1978.) I boarded a Hercules aircraft at RAF Gutersloh, hours later it landed at RAF Aldergrove. Northern Ireland. I had been attached to 56 Field Surgical Team, Musgrave Park Hospital, Belfast. It's a picture still very clear in my mind – stepping down from the rear of the aircraft, welcomed by bright lights, high wire fencing with three, perhaps four rows of

barbed-wire running along the top and armed soldiers lying flat on their stomachs, flak jackets with weapons to the ready.

At my unit, I worked with another medic, he was much older and had served a lot longer than I. We worked a week in and a week out of the Operating Theatre. "In" meant we helped the anaesthetist, theatre techs and sister. "Out", meant we would collect/return the patients from the wards, and assist in recovery. It was all hands-on deck, in an emergency. Just 24 hours after my arrival, it was certainly a wake-up call for a 19-year-old, my emergency pager beeped, and our team were called back to work. I remember that it was late in the evening, could even have been early the next morning and as we were working inside the operating theatre. I could hear sirens and see the reflections from flashing blue-lights through the frosted windowpanes in the recovery room. I asked the Staff Sergeant (Jake – I can't recall his surname) in charge *'are there more casualties arriving'*. He replied, *'no, congratulations, you've just worked through your first bomb scare'*. The IRA had said they'd planted an explosive device on the railway lines near to where we were working. Thankfully, it was a hoax, but it didn't stop them whilst I was there from firing bullets over our barrack accommodation in the echelon, targeting it with a missile into the camp without a detonator, nor did it stop a number of the nurses and especially the porters on the civilian side of the hospital, keeping an eye on us as we walked the road between the echelon and the military wing of Musgrave Park Hospital.

The echelon was guarded by a platoon from either 1st or 2nd Battalion, the Parachute Regiment. (I don't remember which as during my second tour, the Paras also provided cover for the hospital, as did the Black Watch). I do remember though that the echelon had a shop in one of the huts and the guy who ran it made the best burgers, particularly if you'd missed out on your evening meal.

56 FST also responded and treated civilians in cases of an emergency and I recall one incident at night when we were dealing with a young man who'd been shot in the neck - I didn't know the circumstances and, in a life, and death situation, just got on with the job I was trained for - working as a member of a team. Once the casualty had been stabilized, we transferred him to the Royal Victoria. Belfast. Going down the Falls Road in an Ambulance didn't mean you were safe. When I think back, I can still see the images - only every other fourth/fifth streetlamp was lit. Figures lurked in darkened doorways. You'd just see the glow from a burning cigarette. We found out upon our return to Musgrave Park that the young man we'd transferred had actually been involved in an attack against an RUC patrol. Still, we were medics, doctors, nurses and civilian support staff. (Over the years, I've always found it to be a sad state of affairs seeing in the news - hospitals and medical facilities directly targeted, be it riots, conflicts or just mankind behaving without any thought towards people who dedicate their lives to helping others).

My three-month tour ended up being just short of five months - I stayed longer due to a problem with sending our replacements. In my final few weeks, we dealt with three military casualties injured from a helicopter that had been shot down, one of whom had 80% burns. We cared for the injured for over 5 hours, before we could have them medevacked to the UK mainland. It was this event that made me decide that I wanted to train to become a nurse, but I did not have 5 O levels (just 4 CSEs equivalent).

When I returned to my unit, it was preparing to amalgamate and to form: 4 Armoured Field Ambulance, which entailed a move to Kingsley Barracks, Minden. On this occasion I didn't go to Minden nor did I stay with 11 Field Ambulance. I passed my Class 2 exams, got promoted to acting Lance Corporal. and was posted to MRS Bovington, Dorset. Such a contrast from my time spent in Belfast, and West Germany. It was the first time I'd seen a woman smoking a cigar and drinking a pint in the NAAFI bar on camp. She was one of our ambulance drivers. A great girl and we had many a laugh in and outside of work. I think my tour at the MRS was when my addiction for coffee began - there always seemed to be one on the go or placed in front of you. It was an interesting place to work, on night duty you'd be alone (although the ambulance driver and on-call doctor were at hand when needed as well as the Matron who lived in an upstairs flat), caring for whoever had been admitted onto its wards (22 beds in total - I hope I recall correctly, divided into bays of 4 and some side rooms). It was an on-call sleeping duty, (providing care and first-aid) you'd often double back from a morning shift and get some kip once the ward was settled. The lads who were able to, would help with the last run of the tea-trolley, usually hot chocolate and biscuits before lights out at 22:00 hundred hours. It was easy to get volunteers, especially if they were on IM penicillin injections. It was also my first experience of meeting someone with PTSD. Although back then it wasn't as recognised as it is these days. He was a night owl, usually rang the bell around 02:00hrs. I'd sit up and chat with him over a cuppa (damn another coffee), until he was ready to leave. Oddly enough he seemed to know when I was duty and turned up at least once a week. Guess that's how people may often relate when the chips are down or whatever it is going on in their/our minds at the time.

Around eighteen months later, I returned to Germany, BAOR, only this time as a married man. Posted to 4 Armoured Field Ambulance, Minden. Crazy, it was as if I was meant to be there one way or another. (We were stationed for a total of eight and a half years in West Germany, which entailed three postings and four changes of married quarters as our family grew and promotion allowed us to move into a house for our final tour). I avoided taking my Class 1 training and returned though not as a Medical Assistant, but as a Clerk RAMC. I had changed trades, was demoted back to the rank of Private and began training as a Special to Arms Medical Clerk, Class 3. (I still think I would be able to erect a 9 x 9 (tent) in the dark).

West Germany (as it was known back then) was an interesting place to live. Clean, impressive infrastructure, modern, and overall friendly if you made the effort to speak some basic German. The favourite for most squaddies at the time was '*ein bier bitte*' and '*noch ein mal*'. You learned to wait as the beer was poured slowly and until the schaum had been scrapped from the overflowing glass with something that looked like a wooden spatula. Not that many squaddies ventured off camps into the small local bars, they weren't all welcoming. On camp there was the NAAFI, as well as the different messes, if you were of the rank to use the latter. I never seemed to leave North Rhein Westphalia, being posted from Minden to BMH Rinteln, and then returning a few years later to Minden. They were great times in many ways, (West Germany was where I developed my taste for strong filter coffee) the shops had extended shopping on the first Saturday of each month until 5pm or a bit later for the larger stores (usually they closed around 2pm). It was known as Familientag (family day). You soon got used to it and weekends were just that, time for the family and friends. No washing your car, pegging out clothes on the line or cutting the lawns on Sundays. You did though have to keep the pavement clear in front of your home if it had

snowed (which it did every winter) and the autumn leaves. (A bit of my upbringing springs to mind of how Wales used to be and how Sundays were revered. As a boy, I only ever knew our neighbours as Mr this or Mrs that. If I ever heard a forename mentioned, it was by my parents.) Opposite our apartment lived an old lady on her own. My wife and I sort of adopted Frau Meyer. We helped her from time to time and also invited her to spend Christmas Day with us, along with about three other single lads from the barracks. I digress once more.

I guess being a young man away from home and family helps you to stand on your own two feet. At the time you are so busy concentrating on work, providing a home, learning to live in a country that is not the one you had known for so much a part of your life and then ... in the January of 1981 my first child was born; life had taken on a completely different meaning. Our finances changed too, and I was learning not only to be a clerk, but also to be a dad. I look back and wonder which of the two were harder at the time. We relied on our neighbours and friends a lot throughout our eight and half years in Western Germany. Friendships formed that are still there as I write this piece.

Friends, like Bill Williams, Ian Graham, Alun Fitzsimmons, who would join us for walks in the parks of Bad Oyenhausen where kásekuchen mit kaffee on a Sunday afternoons were part and parcel of life, just like autumn and winter hikes up to the Klipitrum, (Wesergebirge) on the hills above British Military Hospital (BMH) Rinteln, two children in tow, sledges and all. A stark contrast to when we drove through the corridor to Berlin in 1985. It was a controlled zone and as such we had to apply three months earlier for a Berlin Travel Order. I still have my stamped official document. You were not able to see very much once we were inside the restricted zone and as you travelled, you were also being timed between checkpoints. (I think there were a total of 5, as the travel order has 5 stamps on it in Russian). If you were too early, you were kept waiting double the time from when you should have arrived at the next point before being allowed to continue. At each of the checkpoints along the route, I was the only person permitted to step out of our vehicle and to present our paperwork in a small office. Inside, I had to slide our paperwork, including my MOD Form 90 (military ID Card) and my wife's passport through a small gap in a screen between myself and whoever they were on the other side. (A bit like being at a post office, but there was no glass partition). I remember hearing the sound of a photocopier behind the screen. Then a voice telling me I could proceed.

My wife and two children had to remain in the vehicle. I followed the brief I had been given, keeping a mental note of anything seen. I spotted a foot patrol at one stage on our journey. The soldiers on guard by our car at each of the stops, looked like they should have still been in school. Their uniforms hung on them as if they were two sizes too big.

We entered Berlin and stayed at Edinburgh House. Not before a bit of a panic as I drove into the centre where we were faced with five lanes of busy traffic and a roundabout. I had learned to drive in long-wheel base Army land rovers in Minden town and surrounding villages. There were no roundabouts (like most of Western Germany back then), and even the autobahn nearby where we lived only had two lanes, so it was a novelty. The Berlin wall was two things, overwhelming in size and scale and also sad. It truly was a divide. East and West, a blockade that kept a country apart in more ways than one. (My father-in-law at the

time had mentioned that he had been involved with the Berlin Airlift, during his National Service.)

“Checkpoint Charlie” could be viewed from a distance. The Reichstag was impressive, as was the Brandenburg Gate and the Olympic arena. When I returned to Berlin in 2012, I didn’t recognize it at all and when I left the city the second time, the memorial to the Holocaust victims was very much in my thoughts.

Moving on. To qualify at Class 1 level as an All Arms Clerk, we needed to be able to touch-type (80 wpm was considered to be fast). I remember the teacher gently wrapping you on the knuckles with a ruler if you looked down at the keys – only two keys were visible in any case – the letters G and H – she made us laugh, it was all good fun and we just got on it. We also studied Military Law (I passed with a 100%). Our special-to-arms side was in F-Meds (Forms Medical) and training was held back at Keogh Barracks, which is where I learned about the complex world of Medical Records. Both in peacetime and also when deployed in the Field. I still wanted to train as a Nurse and went to evening classes at the school in Rinteln.

I took a Basic Computer Programming course – it was fun using a BBC square piece of technology for a keyboard and a clumpy looking monitor that looked more like an oversized heart monitor. I never did make it to be a nurse. Promotion and family commitments had changed my mind and before my thirty-second birthday, I was promoted to Warrant Officer Class 1. At the time, I was one of the youngest in the RAMC and the British Army. Even so, I kept my feet firmly on the ground and would carry out on-the-job training when I spotted a common error, perhaps due to a misunderstanding of the regulations or a process. One of my favourite expressions being, 'Don't worry too much about it, if I try to walk on water, my feet get soaked.' It usually helped to relax the situation.

Throughout my career as a Senior Non-Commissioned Officer, I tried to implement the skills I had learned from the ‘pilot’ (first time) course I had been a part of, once more held at Keogh Barracks. The training concentrated on man-management skills. You could get an awful lot done and bring out the best in people if you tried. I did.

Some of the highlights of my military career included working in the role of Military Administrative Office (Civil Hospitals). MAO(CH) for short based in HQ North West District. It was a new experience and one that changed my outlook on life. We hadn’t long moved into the house we had purchased in Ingol, Preston. I recall standing in our kitchen washing up when the telephone rang. An eighteen-year-old serviceman on our books had passed away from Leukaemia, (sadly his twin brother followed some time afterwards). I felt privileged to share and to be a part of this side of the military, a side that is often unknown outside of the main gate. Where both civilian and military work hand-in-hand. One day completely unaware I opened a letter marked ‘Personal For’. I had been awarded a Civil Honour - Serving Brother in The Order of St John.

After thirty months in post, I was promoted and posted to the Medical & Women’s Services Manning & Records Office, Queens Park, Chester in the role of Documentation Inspector. (*I went out and bought a double-breasted blazer, a Harris Tweed jacket and some ties as most*

of the time for this role, I would not be in uniform.) It was a role which I very much enjoyed, and not just for the vast amount of travel around the UK it provided, as well as short spells in Brunei, Cyprus and Nepal. Seeing Mount Everest is something else! The first time I saw it I was spell bound, after about the fifth it still fascinated me. I'll never forget the hospitality of the Nepalese people – Gurkha soldiers and their families. *(I had some money stolen from my suitcase in the hotel we stayed at in Kathmandu – about 80 Hong Kong dollars, it was apparently at the time more than six months wages to many in that region. I let it go. It taught me a lesson in being careless.)* Nor will I forget seeing young women carrying baskets upon their heads, collecting stones and taking them up a hill. Children playing outdoors, scantily clothed and no shoes on their feet, but they wore some of the biggest smiles I have seen as they ran towards us.

The Adjutant's General Corps

Animo et fide; With resolution and fidelity

On yet another of the British Armed Forces restructuring points, I left Queens Park, Chester and joined a larger team based at HQ Wales and Western District, Shrewsbury. I also had had to rebadge along with the remainder of the Army's clerical cadre to the Adjutant's General Corps. (AGC). It was either that or I could be made redundant. The AGC when first formed consisted of the Royal Army Pay Corps, Staff Clerks of the Royal Army Ordnance Corps and the Women's Royal Army Corps. The remainder of the all-arms clerks, myself included, were absorbed at a later stage. By then though, the Commissioning Cadre for Late Entry applicants, already had its top tier in place should one aspire to the dizzy heights of wanting to apply to become a Commissioned Officer. I applied but did not even get through the paper filter board, even though I had been highly recommended whilst serving in the RAMC over consecutive years. On my second attempt I succeeded and went to a three-day selection event. I never did workout how one applicant left on day two, and another did not attend, but both were successful and would be commissioned. I chose not to apply again.

I mention civilians and the military. I should say that my first unit upon my return to the UK from BAOR was to serve as the Chief Clerk (Permanent Staff) at 250(V) Field Ambulance, Wenlock Barracks, Hull. To have a burly, over 6 feet tall, coal miner crying on your shoulder one evening was not part of the terms and conditions I'd remembered being part of my remit. Still, once more it was a new part of my world in the military, one with very fond memories. Civilians who work during the day then commit to serving, donning a uniform and switching between their two worlds.

I left Shrewsbury whilst going through a divorce and returned full-circle as the Staff Assistant and Personnel Support Manager, Hospital Warrant Officer and Deputy MAO(CH) NI, based at the Military Wing Musgrave Park Hospital, Belfast. Part of my role whilst there was to oversee the move back into the Military Wing after an IRA bomb killed RAMC Warrant Officer Phillip Cross (I had served with him in BAOR) and Driver Craig Pantry. Those injured included a baby of four months and a five-year-old girl. The bomb was planted in a tunnel linking the children's and orthopaedic wards to the military wing. We achieved the move over a weekend and did not lose one clinical day. Appalled by seeing medals just handed over a desk, I introduced a medal award ceremony (No2 Dress) during my two-year

tour of Musgrave Park, ensuring that the spouses also received a bouquet of flowers from our Commanding Officer (Commander Medical Northern Ireland), when a Long Service & Good Conduct Medal was being presented.

In 1996, at Theipval Barrack two car bombs exploded, the second was timed and planted close to where the Medical Centre was situated – it was reduced to rubble, catching those injured in the first blast as well as the medical staff. As the Deputy MAO(CH) I worked alongside the Chaplains, SSAFA and the St John's Red Cross Defence Medical Welfare Services helping to support the family of an injured Warrant Officer.

He died a few days later from his injuries at the Royal Victoria Hospital. At his widow's request, I took her children to see their father at the hospital. I remember a middle-aged female nurse stood there; I think she managed to tell us which room we could go in. Even when I think back, there's only one word to describe her and that is 'cold.'

It is hard to cram twenty plus years into a few pages. There's lots of bits and pieces spring to mind even when I'm not sat at my laptop. Things like:

Duty Clerk – HQ 11 Armoured Brigade, Kingsley Barracks Minden. It was an interesting place to be and offered an insight into another side of the military. The Warrant Officer in charge wanted me to transfer to the Royal Army Ordnance Corps as a Staff Clerk.

1982 – Falkland Islands – I had received a deployment order and was to be detached in support of the Field Hospital. My wife was expecting our second child, and so it was deferred. My son was born two days before the end of the conflict.

1984 – G1 No Duff – HQ Exercise Lionheart – we dealt with the administrative side of real 'non-exercise' type casualties. I do not remember how many in total, however, there were at least two deaths and several service personnel injured. Part of our role involved NOTICAS (Notifiable Casualties) ensuring the right formation had been sent by signal, which included details of the next of kin.

Duty Clerk – BMH Rinteln – it was a pain producing a tickertape, showing all of the admissions and discharges over the last 24 hours. As well as showing patients listed: VSIL and SIL (Very Seriously Ill and Seriously Ill), we had to feed the start of tape through a teleprinter to the COMMCEN. Quite often it would jam or break during transmission and you would have to patch it or start all over.

1991 – Gulf War – I, along with others in the Headquarters received some training in Bereavement Counselling for notifying next of kin in our area. I also did some training in PTSD. My role as the MAO(CH) included looking after (administrative wise) Service personnel evacuated back to an NHS hospital in the North West of the UK. I also recall chatting online with lads out in Iraq, long before the software/hardware reached the public domain.

1997 – Royal Army Medical College – Millbank

This was to be my last unit before coming to the end of my military career. I was meant to assume the role of Staff Assistant at the college. However, it was not to be. I had an RTA in my last few months in Belfast. (My pager sounded, and I was called back into work – on route a car pulled out in front of me.) It brought my career in the Army to an early end.

I was sad, but also proud when I handed back my No2 Dress Uniform, apart from having the tunic tailored, the only other changes made was having the trouser length shortened some twenty years earlier.

In all, I served 21 years and 66 days in the Military, with a further 13 years as a locally employed civilian working as a Crown Servant for the British Sovereign Bases in Cyprus. Then employed as the Librarian and Clinical Coder for the Princess Mary's Hospital, (TPMH) RAF Akrotiri. Later I was promoted to the grade of Locally Employed Officer (LEO) and moved to work as a member of the Continuous Improvement Team (LEAN Techniques) based at HQ Episkopi Garrison. Following a restructuring, our team became a part of J6 Branch. I took over as the project manager for the introduction of a pan-island administrative data system, linked to what was already being rolled out in the UK military bases. I worked alongside a great team of RAF personnel and UK based, Cypriot nationals and UK dependent civilians.

After I left on voluntary redundancy from my job in Cyprus, I thought that was it, no more jobs for me with Defence, and then one day I received a telephone call saying I had been successful at interview and starting working as a contractor for a further two and half years with the Defence Science and Technology, Fort Halstead, in support of Biometrics. Whilst there we were awarded the Team Award two years in a row, by the Chief Scientific Advisor. It remains one of the highlights of my time working in Defence.

My training as a medic stays with me and on more than one occasion, I have put the skills I learned to use over the years as I stumbled upon an accident or an injury.

I would like to finish on a different note. I counted eleven members of our family (whom I am aware of) having served in Her Majesty's Armed Forces. My father, his sister, an uncle and two cousins in WW2. On the 50th anniversary of the Malta Convoys, my late father told our family a little bit about his time in the Royal Navy. With glassy eyes he told us about the men he saw in the water, their ships had been hit and that the ship he was on was not allowed to stop to help for fear of also being hit.

Lest we forget