

## WELFARE ISSUES

# Coping on Civvy Street

Homelessness amongst ex-servicemen has hit the headlines in recent years, but a Legion project is providing hope for veterans on the streets. **Peter Benson** reports

Recent statistics have painted a shocking picture. One in four men sleeping rough on the streets are ex-servicemen, some 13 per cent of *Big Issue* sellers have served in the forces, and, at any one time, 500 ex-servicemen are sleeping in London hostels. The South Atlantic Medal Association believes that at least 200 Falklands' veterans have committed suicide since the conflict because they were unable to cope with their experiences. And the recent closure of military hospitals, alongside a 50 per cent shortage of doctors in the defence medical service, means the NHS and over-stretched social services are having to take more responsibility for ex-service personnel.

The reasons behind these disturbing statistics are complex. An inability to cope with civilian life combined with financial and emotional difficulties are often blamed for the large homeless figures within the ex-service community. New MoD measures are easing the departure of service personnel from today's forces but it is practical help that is making a real difference to the lives of ex-servicemen and women currently struggling on the UK's streets. And this is precisely where a Legion funded project has stepped in – in the form of Julie Rogers and the Alcohol Recovery Project (ARP).

At the ARP, Julie and her colleague, whose post is funded by the Legion, help in the resettlement of homeless ex-service people. Over the past two years she has worked tirelessly to resettle about 200 ex-service personnel. Her relationship with the Legion is strong – she works closely with Trevor Dale, Legion County Field Officer for the London area, whilst also working for the ARP based in Pentonville Road, London.

## One in four men sleeping rough on the streets are ex-servicemen

When Julie started working with homeless and traumatised ex-servicemen, there were few facilities or opportunities available. She helped set up day centres, lunch clubs, soup kitchens, and other projects in an attempt to find out what was needed.

As Julie explains: "It's not just about finding a home for someone – sometimes this can be the start of a whole new range of problems. It's also about helping them to cope with loneliness, new-found independence, and rebuilding their confidence enough so they can go out and find work – and a new life – for themselves.

"If a homeless ex-serviceman needs help, it is out there. Many problems stem from the fact that people simply don't know where to look."

### Horrors of war

John Butt was one such case. Softly spoken with a friendly, easy-going manner, he sits in his sunlit flat in West London looking for all the world as though nothing could – or has – ever troubled him. Only the medals on the shelf – a South Atlantic Medal, a NATO Medal for Service in the Former Yugoslavia, and a Royal Navy Long Service Good Conduct Medal provide a clue to what sort of life he's had.

**"Each time you opened a cargo door you prayed you wouldn't see something worse than what you'd seen before. But of course you did."**

Both his mother and father were sergeants in the RAF, and he spent his childhood following his parents between postings. So when, in 1977, he joined the Navy at the age of 16, it seemed like the most natural thing in the world to him. He trained as a junior naval aircraft mechanic, and within three years was working with the submarine-seeking 820 Squadron on HMS *Hermes* and HMS *Invincible*.

He was with the re-fuelling squadron at RAF Culdrose when the Falklands conflict broke out, and in May 1982 found himself heading to the South Atlantic on the MV Baltic Ferry, with half of the stores, fuel and ammunition for 5 Brigade, with flight decks and fuel tanks welded to the original decks.

"We sailed into San Carlos Water early one morning. HMS *Sheffield* and HMS *Antelope* had already been lost, and we'd been offloading stores for about an hour when the sirens started, and an Argentinean air attack began," John remembers. "It all happened so quickly, we didn't have a clue what was going on – the day before we'd been happily sailing through the South Atlantic, and now the enemy was trying to kill us.

"When the attack was over we continued with our work until late, but that was the night when *Galahad* was hit. And this is when the horror really began. The dining room on our ship had been converted into a hospital, and our decks were being used to refuel the helicopters that were being used to ferry the wounded. To refuel a Sea King or Wessex 5, you have to open the cargo door to communicate with the aircrew, and when I opened that first door I was confronted with a group of lads from the Welsh Guards, flesh hanging off their faces, suffering from the most appalling wounds you could imagine. And so it went on – we refuelled around eight

aircraft during that period, and each time you opened a cargo door you prayed you wouldn't see something worse than what you'd seen before. But of course you did."

When the war was over, John remained on the islands for three weeks until he was flown back to the UK and his former post at Culdrose. His first appearance in his local pub caused something of a stir – his friends thought he'd drowned in the sinking of the Atlantic Conveyor, so they'd already held a wake for him.

But his first morning back in the UK gave him pause – his alarm clock sounded exactly like the air-raid siren on the Baltic Ferry, and he woke in panic and confusion, shouting for his anti-flash gear. Nightmares followed, and horrific flashbacks to the war disturbed his days – life back in the UK was not the peace and quiet he'd imagined or hoped for.

The last ten years of his service were spent in a number of different postings, but in 1995 he was diagnosed with diabetes, and in the following year he received a medical discharge. He was 35 years old. John moved to London to work in a pub, but this was where his problems really started.

John explains: "I couldn't keep up the payments on my house so it was repossessed, and when I moved to the pub my drinking increased to the point where it started to get out of hand."

### Desperate measures

It was at this time that John looked for help, and got in touch with Combat Stress. This is the only charity in the UK dedicated to giving care, comfort and reassurance, backed by skilled clinical support, to ex-service personnel who are suffering from mental illness as a result of traumatic battle experiences.

Combat Stress arranged for John to meet Surgeon Captain Morgan O'Connell who diagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). "It was so much easier to talk to another ex-serviceman about these things than it was to talk to other people – simply because they've been through the same things," John recalls.

After a number of in-depth consultations, Captain O'Connell advised him to give up his job, explaining that putting a man with a drink problem in charge of a bar was simply asking for trouble. But this presented problems of its own – John was living over the pub, so would now be homeless. Put in touch with the Ex-Services Fellowship Society, he found a place at Belvedere House, a hostel for ex-service men.

"I found myself living in a tiny hostel room, my life reduced to a single bed and the clothes I stood up in, and I thought 'After all I've been through, after the service I've given to my country, is this what my life has come to?'"

Physically and mentally run-down, and in a state of utter despair,

The Royal British Legion provides support for homeless ex-service people whatever their problems are – from those with alcohol, drug or mental health problems to people who are less vulnerable, but still in need of help to find housing – by providing financial support to projects targeting specific groups. These include:

- **Homebase project** aimed at younger ex-service people arriving in London
- **Sir Oswald Stoll Foundation** supported housing schemes for people with alcohol, drug and mental health problems
- **Ex-Service Resettlement partnership project** with the Alcohol Recovery Project and Sir Oswald Stoll Foundation
- **Ex-Service Fellowship Centres**, providing the only hostels specifically for ex-service personnel in London

The Legion also provides on-going assistance to individuals through County Field Officers and Regional Branches, including one-off grants for rent deposits, setting up home costs etc, and wide-ranging advice and help to access information, such as job seeking and rehabilitation.

John stayed in the hostel for eight months, and his health deteriorated even more. It was during this time that he met Julie Rogers. Shocked by his appearance, she recognised his needs immediately, and helped to set him on the road to recovery.

### New beginnings

With Julie's support and encouragement, John applied to the Sir Oswald Stoll Foundation, who work with homeless and disabled people – predominately ex-service men and women. They work to provide homes and support, counselling, rehabilitation, education and training, and in 2001 they offered John one of the 137 flats they own on the Fulham Road in London.



**"I have no idea where I'd be without the Legion. Probably dead."**

John Butt, Falklands veteran with Julie Rogers, case worker

He explains the difference this move made to his life. "I'd been drinking heavily when I was in the hostel – sitting in the pub all day – but as soon as I moved into the flat I started cutting down and taking more care of myself. With Julie's support and that of the doctors and nurses at the round-the-clock Oswald Stoll medical centre, I have begun to sort myself out. And of course the Legion has been wonderful. They helped me with my moving costs, and provided the cash to buy much of my furniture. I still have the flashbacks and crises, the nightmares never go away, but since I've been here I've been easing myself back into the world of work."

John's long-term ambition is to help people who are suffering from similar problems to the ones he suffered. And with this in mind, he has approached Training for Life, an organisation that helps ex-service and homeless people to get back on their feet through a wide range of work-related courses. He says: "I want to help people in the same way that I've been helped. I want people to know that however bad things seem, there is always hope."

The statistics are shocking and John Butt's story graphically illustrates the difficulties some ex-service personnel experience on the hard road back to civvy street. However, the future is looking brighter. The MoD is working to improve the way service personnel are prepared for post-military life. For example, resettlement advice now begins two years before anyone leaves the forces, and continues for two years after. They have also launched a confidential housing hotline, and are offering grants totalling £200,000, which will fund housing placement and support schemes for single ex-service staff.

But for John Butt and other ex-service personnel sleeping rough on our streets, the Legion's welfare work has never been more relevant. "Julie has been amazing. She and the Legion have provided me with total support," says John. "I have no idea where I'd be without them. Probably dead."

It is to the Legion's credit that John is still with us, thriving and ready to help people in the way that he's been helped.