

By (Gunner) Jack Lopresti MP
I had always regretted not serving my country by doing military service. On my 16th birthday I went down to the forces' recruiting office in Bristol to sign up for the Royal Marines; unfortunately as I was under 18, I needed my parents' permission, which was not forthcoming. Time moved on, I got heavily involved in my family's small business; I got married, had children and thought I'd missed my chance to serve. The events of September 11, 2001 changed all that...
In early in 2002, with the war in Afghanistan still going on and unfinished business looming in the Persian Gulf, I tried again to enlist. I had a romantic vision of myself storming across the desert like my great hero Gen George Patton in a tank, so I applied to the Royal Wessex Yeomanry, a cavalry regiment. I had a very nice letter back thanking me for my interest but telling me that alas, I was too old. So that was that I thought, once again.
Then in January 2006 I was reading an article in The Daily Telegraph which stated that the Territorial Army had a recruitment crisis due to the fact that so many soldier had been compulsorily mobilised for the 2003 liberation of Iraq, and that the pressure of current operations on reservists was increasing and people were leaving in droves. I found my nearest TA centre on the internet, 266 (Gloucestershire Volunteer Artillery) Bty RA (V), and phoned them. I spoke to the battery clerk and she suggested I come in for a chat. So I did.
The BK was very helpful and explained that, though I was four years over the normal joining age, at 36, I had nothing to lose by completing the application process. He couldn't make any promises but he said he'd see what could be done. A couple of tense months went by, before I got the call ♦ I'd been accepted, subject to passing a medical. I was over the moon!
Once I'd passed basic training and had a couple of years under my belt, I felt pretty certain that I would end up doing an operational tour at some stage. When an opportunity came up to deploy on Op Herrick 9 with 29 Cdo Regt RA, as part of 3 Cdo Bde RM, I jumped at the chance! 266 Bty's emerging role is to support 29 Cdo on operations and exercises. Both units are closely linked; 266 Bty has full-time members of staff who are regular soldiers from 29 Cdo. I, along with a few others, volunteered for the tour.
We had to wait for a few months to see if we had been accepted which I found a bit nerve-racking. The feedback from friends and family was mainly positive; a few thought I was mad, most brave and some were worried that I would have a tough time. We didn't have to wait too long before confirmation came that our services would be welcomed.
So on 6 April, we were on our way up to RTMC Chilwell, the UK's reserve forces mobilisation centre in Nottingham. We were a merry band in high spirits; the six of us were Dominic Davidson, Dave Mordecai, Dave West, James Brown, Steve McNally and myself. All of us from different walks of life and backgrounds, but with a shared belief we were on a grand adventure.
The two-week course at Chilwell is quite intense. It takes you back to basics; you go over all your basic military training and redo all your annual training tests. The first couple of days were spent undergoing strict medicals, getting inoculations and basic administration covering pay, wills, insurance and so forth.
The final day includes the combat fitness test, an eight-mile march with additional weight, (most of us carried around 20kg) to be completed in just under two hours. We were told by 29 Cdo Regt RA in a pre-mobilisation briefing that if we couldn't pass this test we would not to be mobilised to serve with them. We were all quite nervous as we didn't want to fail at this stage, but in the event we all passed. A final weekend at home with our families, and then we were on the bus and heading for Plymouth and the Royal Citadel.
The chance of serving in a commando unit was something we were all looking forward to as well as the prospect of being based in what is probably the best military camp anywhere in the country. But we were all very nervous, not knowing quite what to expect, what the regime would be like,

how, as TA soldiers, we would be treated or how we would be rated by our fellow soldiers.

We needn't have worried. We were treated very well indeed, and made to feel welcome and part of the regiment. I was in 79 (Kirkee) Cdo Bty RA, the others were in 8 (Alma) Cdo Bty RA. On my first day at the Citadel I met my BSM, WO2 Bocek, who is a legend in 29 Cdo. It was obvious that he cared about his men hugely and they would follow him anywhere, myself included. I quickly made friends in 79 Cdo Bty and settled in fine.

Life at the Citadel was good and I loved my time there. We had OPTAG training at the Lydd ranges (in Kent), which was a very enjoyable few days followed by a three-week exercise; two weeks in Otterburn and a week in Thetford. I enjoyed the Thetford stage more than Otterburn which focused less on gunnery and more on Afghan scenarios; we practised convoys, movement of guns, and life in a forward operating base. This training was invaluable in familiarising us with likely scenarios in theatre and making us proficient with the weapons we would use.

By the time summer leave came we all just wanted to go out to theatre and get on with it. Finally, after five months of training and a long flight, we landed in Afghanistan. When you first arrive in Camp Bastion you are accommodated in the Reception Staging and Onward Integration (RSOI) 'hangar'. While here, you receive a day of briefings on Camp Bastion and Afghanistan in general followed by a session on the ranges zeroing your personal weapon. I then had a very disconcerting couple of days when the others who had travelled with me got picked up and went off to their jobs and units; nobody came and claimed me! So I spent the time seizing the opportunity to have a look around and explore Camp Bastion.

Camp Bastion is the biggest overseas British base built since the Second World War and it's growing. If anyone should doubt ISAF or Nato's resolve in seeing the job through out here, they should come to Camp Bastion; they would leave under no illusions as to our (the UK's) resolve. Life is generally comfortable here. There is even a Pizza Hut (a shipping container painted in Pizza Hut colours) as well as a couple of gyms and a state-of-the-art hospital!

Well, I needn't have worried as I was eventually claimed; I was to be a duty driver working for the Bastion Support Unit MT department. We were a new team who hadn't worked together before. Mainly Royal Marines and Gurkhas, but also a commando engineer, an engineer and me the only Gunner! We were to be commanded by a great guy, a Royal Marine, WO2 Hutchins, also known as Rhino or Sir. He ran a very effective team. I was particularly fortunate to work for him as he sorted me out some of the best accommodation in Bastion and briefed me that I would get the opportunity to get out on the ground, do some soldiering and see some of the country. Most importantly, Rhino didn't treat me any differently to any other member of the team.

I didn't have to wait too long for an opportunity to get out on the ground. The Rifles are responsible for force protection duties and needed help. I soon found myself working with them for the best part of two months. I started working on the main entry point into Camp Bastion, searching vehicles and people as they came in and out of camp. I saw the amazing search dog teams in action, got to know a few of the interpreters and, along the way, learned a few basic words of Pashto.

I also picked up other force protection duties and was able to get trained on a WMIK Land Rover so I was able to get out on patrol with them. It was fantastic driving across the desert; I felt I was really living the dream. It was amazing to see camels and Bedouin camps; a beautiful but barren, rocky and dry landscape. We had a very good reception from the locals we met on our patrols. It never ceased to amaze me how they managed to survive, grow crops and live in such a hot, dry country. The stars looked spectacular on a clear night, and you could see for miles.

I also did a spell on QRF (Quick Reaction Force) before my next duty was providing force protection on the medical emergency response team

Chinook helicopter. This involved being on call, in a tent where we slept, watching DVDs, reading and relaxing, sometimes for hours on end until the radio crackled into life with a 'shout' and we had to grab our weapons, helmets and body armour and get to the flight-line to get on the helicopter ASAP.

I'd only arrived on duty a few minutes prior to my first shout and found myself being driven at speed to the flight-line. It was all very exciting and the adrenalin was beginning to pump as we took off and towards our first job. It was a routine pickup in a forward operating base less than an hour from Camp Bastion. It was a beautiful, clear and hot sunny morning. I began to enjoy myself. I thought this was a great way to see some of Helmand Province. A jolly adventure.

We landed at the FOB, the injured chap walked on and off we went. Before we'd arrived back at Bastion we heard we had another job to do straight away, so we dropped off our patient and immediately took off again. We had to land somewhere in the middle of the desert and, with an Apache helicopter as escort, I thought things might get a bit hairy. As we got nearer we found out more details, it was a mine strike; three Americans, one dead, two injured.

We landed and I and the other troops got out of the Chinook and fanned out to give protection as the injured were loaded onto the helicopter. Once back on the Chinook, it was a hive of activity with the doctors and nurses frantically working on the two casualties. I helped by passing the medical team things and holding up the drip and lightly squeezing the bag as instructed. When we got back to Bastion I helped carry the stretcher to one of the waiting ambulances. As I got back on the Chinook they were cleaning out the helicopter - it was a brutal demonstration of the grim reality of the conflict out here and the daily sacrifices being made. I thought of the families of those boys, the heartache and the calls they were going to get in the next few hours. And still we weren't finished! Another call had come in, out to another FOB; a poor lad had been injured by mortar fragments.

There was a lighter moment on the way back though. He was stable, conscious and laid out on a stretcher. I don't know whether it was the shock, the morphine or what, but he started to hug and cuddle one of the nurses. I must say we didn't blame him as she was actually very pretty! She was very nice to him and chatted all the way back to the hospital; no mean feat in a noisy helicopter. All this happened in a single morning. It was a hell of an introduction to the heroic work of the aircrew and medical teams who do these duties 24/7.

When I look back over what was nearly a year, I can honestly say that I had a fantastic time. It was an awesome experience, but humbling at times. I had the great privilege of working with some fantastic people; I include some of the locals in that, especially the interpreters who risked their lives just by working in Afghanistan for the allied forces. I also made some great friends. I have enjoyed serving with 29 Cdo Regt RA and 3 Cdo Bde RM hugely and would say to any of my fellow TA Gunners, if you get a chance to do an operational tour with 29, then jump at it.

This article first appeared in The Gunner magazine. 3 Commando Brigade is currently serving once more in Afghanistan and is expected to return to the UK towards the end of this year.