

# **COMBAT STRESS 100**

## **LEARNING RESOURCE 6b PTSD & ENLISTING & BASIC TRAINING**

**Veterans describe their experiences of enlisting and basic training**

**DEAN**

My uncle was in the Army and my first holiday was in Germany into an army barracks. I've been to Germany six times to visit my uncle and his family. When I was 16, I went to get my GCSE results. They weren't what I expected and I didn't like them so I just went straight to the careers office and signed up. I went to get my GCSE results, went home and I'd signed up to the army. My mum and dad fell off basically.

**PETE W**

I think I was about 15, 16 when I started looking at joining up because I come from a big military family anyway so I've always wanted to join the forces. I always wanted to join the army. And then I went down to my local army careers office which they told me, "Nah, our kid, you're a little bit too young, come back when you're old enough to sign on." And I went to the Leeds branch, signed on there and I was yes, 16 so I were a kid when I joined up.

**DAVE T**

I signed up because I was looking for a little bit of adventure, for a better life. All the pits were closing in the South Wales Valleys and unemployment was quite high. It was 1983 so I joined up in December '83 at HMS Raleigh and that's where I signed and had my first night in the Royal Navy and a new life.

**GED**

I thought well, for people like me who were told you've got no education and you'll never have anything and you'll never be anywhere, I might get some sort of career out of this. With that in mind, I... well, I was homeless actually. At 15, I'd run away from home and I slept in Salford by the arches in Salford. And across the arches was the navy recruiting office so it just seemed to.. one day I just got up and walked across the road and started the process and that was it.

## **DAVINA**

Well, I started off...I was born in Plymouth and then we temporarily lived in South Africa and then that didn't work out so we moved to Belfast because that's the only place that my family had relatives because my mum's from Northern Ireland. My dad's from London and they met, ironically, in London. We just ended up there because we didn't really have a choice. It was a money issue that they had, but my dad couldn't live with us because he'd served in Belfast so there was a lot of risk of him being recognised, but he was going for a job in the prison service. He was staying there in this particular place and eventually when we had our own place then my dad could move in with us. It was weird. Although my dad had left the Navy, he still wasn't living with us so it was a bit strange.

**Interviewer:** You're a military family through and through.

**Davina:** Yes, pad brat, they're known as.

**Interviewer:** Pardon?

**Davina:** A pad brat *[laughs]*. We'd come to the end of school, the army turned up and they had this big display, talked of all of these things. I'd spent my whole life listening to my dad's stories and thought, "Yes, that's great. Adventure, that's what I'd like. That's great." The army came and I thought, "That's what I want to do. Absolutely." I don't need to think about anything else, that's what I'm going to do. I was all excited, got home, couldn't wait to get home to see my folks and my mum was the first one, she was at home at the time. I went, "mum, guess what I'm going to do?"

I relayed this whole life plan that I had and she went, "Okay." I said, "Well, you need to sign the form." She went, "I think you'd better speak to father about that first." It was just really weird because my mum would normally just... she wouldn't be the person that would pass on responsibility. She would say yes or no herself but she felt that was my dad's area. My dad came home from work and I thought, "Dad, guess what? I'm going to join the army. Yay!" I was giving him all this stuff and my dad just sat there and went, "Oh, right."

He said, "I didn't know you wanted to get your hair cut." I went, "What you mean?" "You have beautiful hair, why would you want to get it cut.?" I went, "I don't!" "Well, if you join the army you'll get your hair cut." "Would I?" He went, "Yes." I went, "Maybe it might be worth the sacrifice? I don't know. Maybe it'll look nice?" He went, "I'll tell you what, when you're 18 you can sign your own death warrant but I'm not going to sign my child's death warrant."

## **BRIAN**

I first had contact with the military when I was 15. I joined the army youth team in the west coast of Scotland area because I was getting in a little bit of bother with those people in blue uniforms and I decided that at the tender age of 16.1 to join the army. Prior to that, I did come and have three days with the Royal Navy but I thought it was a little bit too girly so I went with the army and I was an apprentice based at the Army Apprentice College in Chepstow and I joined as a marine engineer and we had two years basic training there and I flourished as a young apprentice. I suddenly had goals and objectives and I really enjoyed the way of life. I then left there and done another 40 years service regular and reserve.

## **PAUL**

I joined the Royal Navy when I was 16. I had problems during my childhood so I wanted to get away from home as quickly as possible and I joined the Royal Navy. I was categorised after doing the entrance exam to be an air engineer so I became an aircraft engineer. I was brought up in Ipswich in Suffolk, which was a fairly rural area and a very small place. I went to Raleigh initially to do my six weeks of basic training, which was a bit of a shock to the system, having to do what you were told and be nice and neat and tidy after your mother's done it all, but I fitted in. I felt I fitted in really well within the forces environment. There was no greys in that environment. You did as you're told and got on with the task that was there.

## **JAMES**

I left school at the age of 15 and a half, a little earlier than normal. I had a couple of jobs in the local community. I worked as a trainee gents outfitters as a tailor and then I went to Tesco's and to me, they were mediocre jobs. I was thinking that there has to be something more, this can't be it? And I'd already been an Army Cadet in Sea Scouts. I had that sort of background and I decided to join. I went to join when I was 16. I enquired about it and then I pulled out because of nerves, scared, I wasn't quite sure if it was right. Carried on with the job and then became more and more sure that okay that's the right cause of action. I reapplied and I joined the army just as I turned 17 in 1987.

**Interviewer:** Where was this?

**James:** This was in Chelmsford. These were the days when you had recruiting offices. I walked into the recruiting office, there was a sergeant there and I sat and I did my exams. He gave me a long list of regiments that I could join and I chose the Royal Artillery and then I went to a place called Sutton Coldfield for an overnight stay. I did my fitness test, my medicals, and everything and then went home and then sat there twiddling my thumbs. Then I got a letter saying that I'd been accepted and in April 1987 I went to Woolwich, which was the Royal Artillery Training Depot at the time and I started basic training.

## **DAVE S**

I was 18 when I enlisted. I actually wanted to go in as a boy soldier but my mum wouldn't sign the form to let me go so I served an apprenticeship as a toolmaker and then as soon as I was 18, I joined the army and away I went. The reason I joined was at that time, all the industry where I lived was shutting down, it was all... and the only thing really, the choice was the army or the pit and I couldn't go down the coal mine. It just wasn't in my nature to do that so I joined the army.

**Interviewer:** So which service then...you joined the army? Which regiment?

**Dave S:** When I first joined the army, I joined the cavalry, the 13/18th Royal Hussars but I only stayed with them for five years and then I was transferred, but my basic training and everything was as a tankee.

**Interviewer:** And where did you enlist? Was that your local town?

**Dave S:** Yes. I enlisted in Doncaster Town Centre and joined the local regiment. The 13/18th Royal Hussars was a Yorkshire regiment.

**Interviewer:** Now, everybody says basic training was either great or horrible. Can you just give us an idea of what your basic training was like?

**Dave S:** Actually, I quite enjoyed it. I knew I was going in the army so I got myself quite fit; really fit, to be fair and I actually enjoyed the basic training. I enjoyed being with the guys. To be fair, when I joined the regiment, I realised that basic training was nothing like the real army, but still I enjoyed the camaraderie, the things you learned and the things you did.

**Interviewer:** Were there any particular characters that you can remember that stand out, like jokers or idiots or whatever?

**Dave S:** Yeah, yeah. We had a lad, in our troop, I suppose, as they called it back then. He was always singing songs and carrying on and he tried to make a living as a musician, failed. He joined the army and completed his basic training. He actually finished it to prove to himself that he could and then he got out. He went away and became quite a successful musician. His name was Billy Bragg. You've got to be of a certain age to understand that, but Billy Bragg was actually in my intake when we joined up.

## **ERIC**

I was enlisted into the Royal Navy when I was 18. Actually, the interview for that was probably a couple of years before that because I went to Dartmouth, to the Britannia Royal Naval College at Dartmouth, to join as an officer. I managed to pass the interview. On the 12th of September 1973, I joined a rather extraordinary place with quite a terrifying looking college up on the hill, overlooking the River Dart.

**Interviewer:** Great. Can you tell us a little bit about your basic training?

**Eric:** The basic training, as I think with most people, it started quite early in the morning, with a lot of early morning activities. Then you end up with breakfast, then you end up with after-breakfast activities, then you ended up actually doing a lot of training. There was a huge amount of physical activity, a lot of sport, but actual physical activity. There was a little bit of academic training, some maths and languages and that sort of thing. A lot of boat handling on the Dart and a lot of learning about seamanship, learning about what this strange word leadership is meant to mean, but the biggest thing I think was actually joining in with... I think there were just over 100 hundred of us who joined that day. We all arrived on the playground, terrified but looking forward to what on earth was coming up for us all.

## DAVINA

Basic training. The funny story was, when I had this massive bag with all the gear that I had, the only thing I didn't carry was an ironing-board because I thought, "You know what? I just can't put it in my bag." I had an iron. Everything I had it. Because you get a list, a kit list of everything you've got to bring. I could hardly even lift this bag, it was heavier than me.

I'm walking through Belfast airport and this man, the customs guy was obviously thinking, "What the hell is this girl doing?" I put the bag on the thing that goes to check it and he pulled it aside and he went, "I need to ask you a few questions about this." My mum just looked at me and she went, "Go on, you'll be all right." Because I was still kind of like, wouldn't do anything until my mum said it was okay. She goes, "It's okay. Talk to the man. Tell him the truth."

The guy must have sensed something different here so he brought me into a room and he opened my bag, got all the stuff out and he was like, "What are you doing?" and I went, "[murmurs]" He goes, "It's okay, you can tell me." and I went, "I'm going to basic training in Winchester to join the army and it's my first day and I've got to get to Winchester." He went, "All right, okay that explains everything." He just put everything... zipped it all up and he went, "I was Royal Irish so don't worry, I know what you're going through. That's good." He gave me a lovely nice chat and he sent me on my way. Shook my hand and went, "All the best, I wish you all the best." Then off I went. That was really strange because Belfast airport then was just like an empty room with some, what do you call them? Fake walls. I had this big, massive goodbye from mum and dad, "We love you. Bye." Then my mum, it was just the first time I'd ever seen her looking like a little girl almost and it was heartbreaking.

Then I walked off, going "bye" and then sat in this chair, which was just opposite them. I thought, "Well, that was a bit profound." and then I went, "I'll just sit here then." I thought, "I can't look behind me. I don't want to see her crying or getting upset." Anyway, that was that. Then I turned up, I flew over there. Got the train to Winchester. There was loads of people in the carriage and all that and of course, when we rocked up at Winchester, everyone that we were sitting in the carriage was all going to Winchester and none of us actually know that we were all going to the same camp.

Because we were all sitting there nervous, just minding our own business kind of thing. We get out and there's a bloke standing there, a blue cap and a long khaki, I go, "He must be for us." We stood there and he obviously waited 'till... he knew who the sprogs, we were called sprogs, he knew who the sprogs were going to be, waited for the civvies to go and he went, "Right, the bus is there. Get on it you're going to Winchester. Welcome to the army."

## **TOBY**

That was an entertaining time, for want of a better term. The first day was the standard, off the bus, on the bus, off the bus, on the bus. We all got told, "You meet here at a certain time, you're picked up," and the first thing you get corporals shouting at you, "Get get down here, sit down there, whatever. Then we were taken away to the units' barbers for the inaugural haircut, which every serviceman has to go through, which I think it was the princely price of £1.90 to have your head shaved. Even if you'd already had your head shaved before coming in, you still had to have your head shaved again. That was that.

The basic training itself lasted eight weeks, which in certain circumstances wasn't too bad. There was some really funny times there. We had one guy, Rushy was his nickname and I always remember he was a steward. Where my bed was positioned, I could see all the other beds in the 18-man room. We all had to make bed packs, which is making a brick-like version of your entire bedding using your counterpane, blankets, sheets, etc., into the most solid stable structure you can imagine. But Rushy couldn't manage to do this.

The corporal goes up to him and says, "Rushy, what do you think this looks like?" He goes, "I don't know corporal." The corporal says to him, "It looks like a hat. What do we do with hats, Rushy?" "We put them on our head, corporal." "Off you go," and sure enough, Rushy had to put this on his head. That was the fun times in basic training. There were some tough times as well, but there was some of the most entertaining times of my service career.

## **JULIAN**

Yes, lots. Lots and lots really. Very rich memories. Joining the Junior Parachute Company in Aldershot at Browning Barracks, which was the depot of the Parachute Regiment. Isolated, unlike things like the Junior Leaders Battalion, which was an amalgamation of regiments, this was purely Parachute Regiment Depot with a junior company and a recruit company, with the training staff.

We were all 16 year olds, we were the youngest platoon in the juniors because we'd literally only just turned 16. So I joined two weeks after my 16th birthday. I had a year there, where I formed the longest standing relationships and friendships that I've had throughout the course of my life. We had a whittling down process which quite would appear, for want of a better word...brutal... in terms of, it was not just the physicality of it, it was the mentality of it.

What the staff tended to do was make you challenge every day whether you really, really wanted to be there. By the time they'd finished the process, they had people that were 100% committed to being in the regiment, passing all of the tests, mentally ready for what was about to come. Because as hard as training is in all regiments, and it's known as boot camp, the bottom line is that when you actually get to a battalion, and you get called on to serve, the real hard work starts. So they were very, very thorough in their training process. We started off in junior parachute company with 270 people on the 9th of September and one year later, there were 42 of us left.