

NHS clinician by day Army Reservist by special leave

Simon's story...

I always had an interest in joining the armed forces, as far back as I can remember. Right up until I finally decided to do my nurse training in 1999 I was still toying with the idea. Life moved on, as it does, but there was still a part of me that wanted to at least give it ago, to see if I could do it.

In 2004 I took the plunge and joined 243 (Wessex) Field Hospital. I had been qualified as an adult nurse for two years at that point, working mainly in coronary care. I joined the Army Reserve Medical Services to develop my existing skills and learn new ones in an environment that was completely different to the NHS.

I was encouraged to go down the officer route when I joined because of my existing professional experience at the time. This meant taking the Queen's commission. I was happy to follow this route in order to develop and push myself further. You don't have to follow this path; other options are available.

My training consisted of two, separate, two-week courses. The first was basic training at Strensall Barracks in York, where I learnt the basics of how to become a soldier including how to wear uniform, weapons handling, looking after oneself, one's kit and team mates in the field, and how to react in different situations. These skills are the basics of how to become a soldier. The second course was officer training at Sandhurst which consolidates the basic training with a strong leadership focus, aiming to provide the skills needed to command others.

I had great training experiences which gave me a better understanding of the Army and my role in it. The courses were quite mentally and physically demanding. Having a good level of fitness really helped as it allowed me to focus more on the mental tasks and not how tired I was feeling.



Managing family life, work life and Army life can be tricky. You do need the support and understanding from your husband/wife/partner and family. Although most reservist roles are part time, everyone could potentially be deployed for up to six months with very little notice. My advice is be open with those close to you, have the discussion and go from there. The upside is **you get to have a second career that you get paid for and this includes all training you take part in**. You also get a yearly tax free bounty which goes up over five years, providing you do all your days and mandatory training – both of which are easily achieved.

I've found Somerset NHS Foundation Trust a great supporter of reservist careers. We are given two weeks' extra leave to use for our military activities. My managers have always been supportive of my Army career and taking time away from my NHS work has not been an issue for me. This is helped by my NHS role being mainly Monday to Fridays. Shift work is a bit trickier but

generally there is a 'forecast of events' from the military so we can start to book leave or weekends off in advance.

Working in the NHS and working in the Army are clearly two very different environments for a clinician. Apart from the different logistics of an NHS hospital and a military field hospital, there are some unique mental, physical and emotional demands of each working environment. Of course, the medical and nursing scenarios are considerably different as well. This generates **greater professional and personal growth** for individuals which results in a **whole host of transferable skills that benefit both the Army and the NHS.**

I've had a fantastic time in the reserves. Although I've not had the opportunity to deploy in my time so far, the training to prepare for this is exceptional and I would feel comfortable and prepared to be deployed. You get to meet a great set of likeminded people, and you will make new friends. **The experiences you have can't be gained anywhere else.** I have been on annual camp to San Diego and Gibraltar. My trip to a rather rainy north Wales camp was just as brilliant. You learn to make the most of every situation and it's about the people that you are with.

If the thought is in your head, or you have the itch, just go for it, you have nothing to lose and everything to gain. I can only speak for 243 (Wessex) Field Hospital but we are friendly unit and always welcome new interest.

Simon

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