

Real Stories 2024

Through their lens: our Armed Forces community

Front cover

HUMANITY & DISABILITY

Keith Harness

Features in the landscape become metaphors of my physical condition.

Real Stories 2024

Building on the success of Real Stories 2021, the Real Stories team invited members of the UK Armed Forces community to submit any number of images that held significance for them and accompanying text to bring the images to life. A meaningful moment looked different to everyone. For some, it was a major milestone like rowing the Atlantic, graduating from University, or finding purpose in life again. For others, meaning was found in quieter moments like a meadow at dawn, a son's uniform flapping on the washing line and walking in the wilderness with family.

Welcome to Real Stories 2024! We hope this array of images will move you, the reader, and provide a window into what life is like for those connected to the UK Armed Forces today.

Thank you to all our contributors and supporters. We are delighted to share the following images.



HOME: *A SPICE JAR OF SOIL*

Lucy Robinson

This jar is filled with soil taken by my father from his mother's garden, when he joined the Army. It was then taken with my father on Operations throughout his military career. To me, it serves as a reminder of the importance of home.



PROMOTION

Sarah Dodd

Our son, around ten years ago. My husband had just got a promotion from Corporal to Sergeant and this photo encapsulates how his promotions have shaped the course of all of our lives, from moving house, jobs and schools many times for myself and our two children.



SEPARATION

Sarah Dodd

This photo of our daughter, aged one, represents change and separation. My husband was preparing to go to Iraq and sorting out his kit. This photo is sweet but also reminds me of the long periods without their dad, which so many military children experience as normal life.



PROUD DAUGHTER

Perdita

Military families can face a lot of distinct challenges but we try and embrace the positives. Our daughter is so proud of her Daddy and loves nothing more than a trip to his work to spot a military vehicle or watch the marching bands practicing!



ON THE MOVE

Sarah Dodd

This photo represents opportunities that being a military family brings. We are taking a walk around Fort George in Inverness where we had just moved to. Being a military family has seen us move seven times in the last ten years, to three different countries.



NEW SCHOOL, NEW COUNTRY

Kirsty Davies

This was taken on the children's first day of school in September 2023 after moving to Germany a few weeks before. This is our eldest's third school, second for our middle, and the very first day of school for our youngest.



MIXED EMOTIONS

Sarah Dodd

This photo is of our 'chuff chart' from the last tour my husband went on. The chart had mixed emotions to me and at the midway point I took a photo of it and wrote a poem which summed up how it felt to have had nearly four months apart:

Continues overleaf..

Three months through the Iraq Tour Marathon,
Sometimes the days have dragged on and on.
Tears hidden in cupboards, behind closed door,
Away from the wee ones and others, not wanting to be a bore.

Video calls watching the kids go wild,
The excitement of them seeing him makes me feel like a child.
Time delayed conversations and dodgy internet,
Writing a letter to get the message through is sometimes a safer bet.

When communication stops and I know someone had died,
The fear of a knock at the door I fight to hide.
The jealousy at families on a weekend day out,
When they look grumpy and stressed I want to give them a clout!

Solo dinners sat in front of the TV,
No one to have a laugh with, or take the mickey out of me.
Makes me appreciate how lucky we are,
But god it feels so lonely when you are so far.

The disasters at home that I've dealt with on my tod,
Microwave on fire, hoover blowing out ash, water leaking out of the back
of the bog!
Concussion and car flat battery, Jessie puking at a wake,
The many times I've just wanted to take break!!!

As R&R dawns and you'll be home for 2 weeks the sun seems to shine,
I know when you're home we'll have an amazing time.
And when you go back we'll be on the home straight,
We'll cope & we'll get through it, the summer will be great.

We'll look back on this time and think, god that was tough,
But love & laughter will make it not so rough.

Sarah Dodd



A SON RETURNS, AND A MUM'S HAPPY

Sarah

This first image is from when my Army son comes home and he gets his washing on the line before heading off to see friends. He's a whirlwind of activity, buzzing about what he's been doing and quite often sharing funny stories. The camaraderie of his life shines through.



DUTY, FAMILY AND LOYALTY

Sarah

This second image is from when my Submariner son and his partner were home and about to head off for the Submariner Remembrance Sunday service, caps on the work surface, shoes polished, looking so smart and proud to be part of something special. It's a very different life for them, the lack of comms and the uncertainty if and when they'll be about for family events. I couldn't be prouder of my boys and the life they've chosen.



GRADUATION DAY

Helen

This is a photo that means a lot to me. It was a very proud day when my daughter graduated from the RAF in June 2019 with her brother by her side who graduated in the April. It also shows that things don't always go to plan as three years later she was medically discharged but is now a serving Police Constable with the civilian police. My son is still serving.



REMEMBERANCE SUNDAY

Patrick Ofori Mensah

The Remembrance Service was a very poignant and solemn moment for me as I was calling to memory all of our fallen comrades who made the ultimate sacrifice particularly during the WW1 and WW2. With specific emphasis on the contributions of the over four million non-white soldiers from the Commonwealth, who are often overlooked or forgotten, as emphasised by a recent article by King's College and other resources. It was a moment of deep respect and homage for me.



MASTERS DEGREE

Patrick Ofori Mensah

The Master's degree in Child and Adolescent Mental Health graduation encapsulates the quest to better understand how my Service-sustained injuries (PTSD and non-freezing cold injury to both hands and feet) impact my health, family and society in general. The picture also subtly celebrates in appreciation, the incredible support I received from my family and my supervisors during this incredibly difficult process and I am forever grateful.



ALLIED FORCES PARADE BERLIN 1983

Derek Johnson 2RRF

My first year in my Battalion, so my first truly international parade.



PROUD GRANDDAD

For me this picture depicts one of the greatest days of my life: in the midst of the pandemic when we were married in our local church in front of a few family members. What made it even more special is that my granddad could be there to walk me down the aisle. My husband now serves in the REME, as my granddad did several years ago.



OUR FIRST ANNIVERSARY

Victoria Kinkaid

My husband and I are a dual-serving couple, most of our early years of marriage were spent catching each other for brief intervals. In this photograph, it was our first wedding anniversary, he had been in the jungle in Brunei and was about to fly home, and I was arriving for a three-month exercise. The joys of being a dual-serving couple!



MYSELF IN IRAQ

Chris Nowell Photography

This photo was taken in 2005 during my six-month tour of Iraq with The King's Royal Hussars.



MYSELF STANDING ON A HILLSIDE DURING A TEMPERATURE INVERSION AT DAWN

Chris Nowell Photography

This photo was taken in the area of Hope Valley in the Peak District National Park during a cool September morning.



DEFYING THE ODDS

Keith Harness

Despite visual weakness, remaining strong.



DRAWN IN

Keith Harness

Not always taking the expected path.



QUIET CONTEMPLATION

Keith Harness

Sat in thought, the sounds of nature fill the air as I connect to my surroundings.



WHEN THINGS ARE BAD, PLEASE DON'T JUST TALK

Dougie Durrant

Photography was a way for me to deal with the traumas of the past, having spent 23 years in the military, I've seen my fair share of death in conflicts all around the world and also almost losing my life to two 800lb car bombs in 1996. I joined AAVSNI Photography Group a few years ago as I was in a very dark place, and I needed a way to occupy my mind as all I was thinking about was ending my life. Now I don't carry a rifle, I carry a camera.



**“MY DEAR WATSON
DRINK YOUR PORT”**

Dougie Durrant



TULLYMORE FOREST STEPPING STONES

Dougie Durrant



STREET ART - TRYING TO PUT FOOD ON THE TABLE EVEN IF YOU CAN'T PLAY

Dougie Durrant



IN DOGS WE TRUST

Dougie Durrant

Emotional support dogs don't judge you, they just listen and give.



MAN OF TWO HEADS

Steve

These are two self-portraits that were painted with an approximate six-month gap between them. One was painted during therapy and one was painted after therapy. On one I was suicidal and on the other I am looking forward to living my best life.



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SETTING GOALS

Geoff Day

Former Fusilier and after being diagnosed with complex PTSD, alcohol dependency, a barrage of mental health challenges, including suicide tendencies, I sought counselling, rehab and a whole lot of support from loving partner and family. I then set myself a challenge to lose weight and complete a half marathon. After a year I lost five stone and ran the Plymouth Half Marathon in 2hr 05min. Still training now and learning to cope daily with my P.T.S.D., setting more goals for the future.



ON THE STREETS OF LONDON WITH PILGRIM BANDITS, AROUND CHRISTMAS TIME

Stuart Griffiths (ex-Parachute Regiment, 1988-1993)

On Tuesday 12th December 2023, I was invited by my old friend to photograph his charity 'Pilgrim Bandits' as they went and delivered food parcels to the homeless in central London. I have not seen my old friend since before lockdown, so for me it was a cathartic experience. It was important for me to be in contact again and share stories with our special Paratrooper humour, but what was most important, I realised just how much I had really missed my old buddies and that we were doing a just cause in helping the vulnerable. This is a photograph of the driver Adam, an ex-Paratrooper, and for me captures that special stoic 'Airborne Spirit' as we drove in his 1973 British Army Land Rover across central London giving out food parcels to the homeless.



ANTIGUA ARRIVAL

World's Toughest Row

Team Emotive crossing the finishing line in Antigua after rowing continuously for 3271 miles in a crossing time of 45 days, one hour and 54 minutes (the time is a palindrome and so far is the only boat ever to have such a crossing time).



CROSSING THE LINE

World's Toughest Row

Team Emotive crossing the finishing line in Antigua after rowing continuously for 3271 miles in a crossing time of 45 days, one hour and 54 minutes (the time is a palindrome and so far is the only boat ever to have such a crossing time). From left to right: Phil Kite (his second crossing of the Atlantic) - ex-Managing Director of Reece Group in Newcastle who makes all the chassis and tracks for British military vehicles and mine clearers; Chris Harvey - ex-Royal Artillery; Garreth Murrell - ex-Cheshire Regiment; and Jason Watkin - ex-Royal Navy.



LIFE-AFFIRMING

World's Toughest Row

It has truly been a life-affirming voyage and confirms that the work the charity Veterans at Ease does, really works. Prior to 12th December 2022 we spent the previous three years planning, organising and fundraising every single penny needed. In the end, as well as the money for the event, we raised an extra £54,000 for the charity, so it can continue to carry out its work.



PURPOSE

Christian Mitsiaras

I struggled with who I was and finding my purpose in life when I left the military. I had no reason 'why' for anything. What was the point? When I became a dad that changed everything for me. A reason to get up in the mornings, someone who needed me to teach them, protect them and more importantly to show them how to thrive in this world under our own steam.

Thank you!

Thank you so much Real Stories 2024 contributors, for taking the time to be part of this project and for opening a window for us into your experiences, achievements and memories as members of the UK Armed Forces community.

There are several organisations who were instrumental in the promotion of Real Stories 2024 and without whom we would not have been able to reach such a diverse audience.

In particular, we would like to give thanks to the Army Families Federation; British Forces Broadcasting Services; Confederation of Service Charities; King's Centre for Military Health Research's Patient and Participant Involvement and Engagement Groups; Naval Families Federation; Royal Air Force Families Federation; and everybody else who helped share our call for images.

With many thanks from the Real Stories team:

Grace Williamson, Anna Verey, Dan Leightley and Nicola Fear

Back cover

POPPY

Chris Nowell

Every year between June and July, I try and look for local fields of wheat or corn, which hopefully will hold within a section of poppies or a complete red field of flowers. This one in particular is quite old now in the area of Dronfield, Derbyshire when I visited the field the night before during some location scouting. The field was full of red poppies, and as the sun was setting it looked stunning. Returning the next day, I was initially saddened to see that most of the flowers had been blown off. However, after closer inspection and picking out a few individual flowers I came across this one and, in my opinion, although this wasn't the initial thought it had a lot more power in the image having one individual flower During the Downing of the Sun..



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