

Fiona Galbraith knows ex-armed forces staff have plenty to offer UK farms, which is why she is helping them take up a second career in the land-based sector. **Clemmie Gleeson** reports.

After 23 years in the army and near constant relocation, Fiona Galbraith decided she wanted some stability to establish a second career in the land-based sector.

She joined the army's Intelligence Corps at the age of 21, after graduating in Eastern European politics at the University of London.

Over the next 23 years her career took her to Bosnia, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Afghanistan and, at her peak, she was commanding officer of a military intelligence battalion.

"It was a really challenging and fulfilling time. It was demanding and interesting," says Fiona.

After that role came to an end, she spent another two years in the army before deciding it was time to develop other interests.

In particular, she was keen to pursue a career in the countryside having spent her childhood from the age of 10 on her family's vineyard in east Kent.

"I really enjoyed my time in command and could not see myself getting as rich a challenge again, so that was the push factor," Fiona says.

"The pull factor was there were other things I wanted to do. Because you are always physically relocating in the army, it is difficult to get involved in any community, voluntary or sport activities outside of the military system. To do that I needed to be more stable."

The first eight weeks of lockdown in the UK was the longest time Fiona has ever stayed in one place in her adult life.

Now based in Cirencester, she says: "I have grown vegetables for the first time since childhood. On balance, I don't miss the army, but I do miss the exceptional people."

"The armed forces attract some really good quality people and they train people extremely well."

After leaving the army, Fiona spent a few months working out what she wanted to do next.

"I was interested in education and working on the land. I worked out that I could do both."

Fiona went to the Royal Agricultural University (RAU), Cirencester,

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FIONA GALBRAITH

to study for a masters degree in rural estate management.

"I was the grandma of the course at 45," she says. "Most students were in their 20s and a few in their 30s."

"But in terms of me changing from the military way of life to finding the new me, it helped me achieve that."

"During that year I grew a new network and, towards the end, I successfully interviewed for a new job."

The job was chief operating officer for a national agricultural company.

"It was great in terms of learning and reassurance for me that I could apply nearly 25 years of experience in the army to a completely different sector quite successfully," Fiona says.

However, after nearly a year in role she decided to move on again and start Ruralink.

The idea had come from discussions with other ex-military personnel studying at RAU.

Fiona says: "I became aware it was very difficult for armed forces leavers to find what the opportunities were in the land-based sector."

Opportunities

Ruralink's aim is to inform and inspire those planning to leave the forces about the opportunities in the land-based sector through workshops, networking events and individual advice and coaching too.

Fiona believes that ex-military men and women have a lot to offer agriculture and its allied industries.

"There are many transferable skills from military life to agriculture.



Helping armed forces staff return to the home front

"The task-orientated, pragmatic, problem-solving approach really shines through," she says.

"The way people live on the land is similar to how people live on operations. They consider the problem and risks and find a way to solve it."

And military life, she says, develops great leaders and those who are great at grasping new skills and taking on new roles.

"Pretty much from day one people are expected to lead," Fiona says.

"Not necessarily big teams of people, but some form of leadership, whatever their trade."

"Being a good leader also includes being a good follower. That makes them exceptional team players. They know what they have to deliver, expect good leadership and ask good questions."

"People in the armed forces change jobs frequently and are

expected to deliver within a few weeks of their new job.

"This is a really significant facet for those who go to work on-farm with very little farming experience. They will have done their homework before they get there, will ask lots of good questions and they will deliver pretty quickly."

And there is a growing network of forces veterans in land-based industries, Fiona says.

Supported

"I'm just providing an enabling function to that network so it can grow stronger and more visible to those interested in land-based careers – when a person leaves the armed forces, assuming they have served the minimum period, they are supported to move on to their next career."

"This includes coaching and a well-resourced jobs board.

"But there is a blind spot around the land-based sector. All the narrative around farms is around basic entry-level roles which, for people with families and who are used to earning a reasonable salary, is not going to be enough."

While a leaver is working out their 12 months' notice with the forces, they are allowed to spend time away on work experience.

"As advocates for ex-military personnel, we want them to get on farms and be inspired by the lifestyle and work and discover they are very well-suited to it," says Fiona.

"This can help boost their CV too, which can be a problem for those who have spent all their working life in the military."

"It is difficult to relate military service to something that makes sense to others."

The process of hosting someone

for work experience does not require arduous form-filling.

Fiona says: "The farmer just has to sign one form to confirm they have insurance and confirm the person's attendance."

Mixed farms are particularly in demand, but any type of farm offering work experience would be appreciated. Similarly, there is demand for placements nationwide.

Experience

"We are very keen to encourage farmers to host military people in work experience which can be unpaid," she says.

"Plus points for the farm business are you get someone who is health and safety aware, mature and has all the other military attributes. They are actively looking to change career and so are very motivated. They are reliable and robust."

Fiona is also keen to identify what she describes as 'gateway roles', jobs which require leadership and management skills but don't necessarily need in-depth farming experience from the off. These may include middle management jobs.

She says: "There is often a real difficulty recruiting to these roles and employers and recruitment companies are beginning to look outside the box. Here is a really great talent pool who can lead and manage well but who may take a year or two to get really confident in the specifics of the farm."

Ruralink holds insight days every quarter, which include guest speakers from industry who give career information and advice.

These have been face-to-face events but the most recent one was held online due to coronavirus restrictions in May. It was recorded

and is now available via Ruralink's YouTube channel.

Meanwhile, its Rural List events are primarily for networking and again the most recent was held online with 80 people attending virtually.

"We have significant numbers coming forward now," says Fiona.

"Some are already working in the land-based sector but most are people within two years of leaving the forces and considering what to do next."

"Some are also people who have left the forces who are dissatisfied with their choice of second career and want to find something more purposeful and better suited to them."

"It is amazing what we have achieved through Ruralink so far, which proves what demand there is."

MORE INFORMATION

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