

With arboriculture struggling to attract enough people into the profession could military veterans fill the skills gap the industry currently has?

Anna Baker-Cresswell, the founder and Executive Director of HighGround, a charity that helps service leavers and veterans explore opportunities in the land-based sector, believes they could definitely play their part.

Anna explained, "I started the Charity because there was a gap in the provision of advice and support for people with military experience who didn't want to work in an office and over the years have met many, many people who have said that they would like to employ ex-military personnel but simply didn't know how to find them."



*Anna Baker-Cresswell with a HighGround Rural Week Group*

Recognising that each person who comes to them is an individual HighGround work with all ranks and ages, including those who are in the process of leaving the military and those who have already made that move. Anna explains, "HighGround recognises that some people who come to us for help might know what they want to do and once we have made a couple of introductions for them they are sorted, whilst others can be less sure, and will need more ongoing support as we help them to make choices and navigate their way towards employment or self-employment they like and enjoy. Not as easy as it sounds..!"

Six years into their Rural Weeks programme, which gives service leavers and veterans a week of learning about the opportunities available in the land-based sector, HighGround have linked many HighGrounders (the term used for those who have attended the Rural Weeks programme) with the arboriculture and forestry industry, with both employment and self-employment in the sector being a popular choice.

During the residential Rural Week the group attend sessions with people within the land-based sector such as arboriculture, forestry, landscaping and forest school.

Working with HighGround for the last three years Hi-Line Training have been involved in giving presentations and demonstrations on arboriculture as well as offering work experience days to those considering a career in tree work. Having served in the Royal Marines for 10 years, their lead instructor, Matt Evans, who delivers the presentations with his colleague, has first-hand experience of moving into tree work following leaving the forces.

Matt explains, "I knew I wanted to go into tree work on leaving the Marines, working outdoors, at height with chainsaws, with the risks that go with this type of work, what is not to like? Many people are unaware of the many outdoor based jobs available though. When I was in the resettlement process most of the careers literature available was for office based or finance jobs, there was virtually no information on outdoor based work. Lots of military leavers want to continue working outdoors in a physical, practical job and arboriculture offers this as a career."

Having gained 6 years' experience in utility and domestic tree work, Matt joined Hi-Line in 2012 as a utility arborist, he ran a team for 5 years and then moved to the companies training department in 2017. "Being involved in the training over the past 3 years has highlighted the strengths that military personnel bring to this industry and has led me to become involved in promoting the industry to military leavers. The work with HighGround gave us the idea to run work experience days for those considering a career in arb. Transitioning into life outside of the military can be hard for some people, I hope that, having gone through this process myself, our work experience days can offer a chance to try out arb work before committing to it".



*Matt Evans with a HighGround Rural Week group*



*Matt Evans – utility site dismantle job*



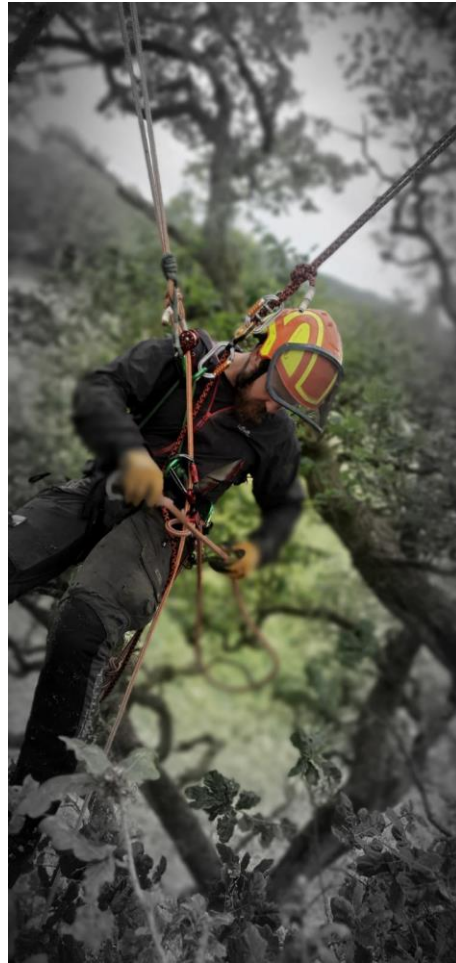
Whilst keen for everyone to experience tree climbing, Matt understands that this route may not be for everyone, “although I was initially just really interested in the climbing side, and this is still a passion of mine, the more time I spent in tree work the more I realised how varied the industry is. Although I still love the practical side of the job, I have become more and more involved in the academic side - the tree management, physiology and ecology aspects, which culminated in me completing my Level 4 Arb in 2018. Arb and forestry careers don’t have to just be about using chainsaws or climbing trees, there are lots of other options available for people and lots of possible training routes”.



*Matt Evans mentoring on a large rigging job in Exeter*

The promoting of careers in arboriculture seems to be working for the Hi-Line Training team as currently approximately 15% of Hi-Line’s workforce are military veterans. Mike Lowry, who served with the Royal Marines for 10 years and James Harris, who served in the Army for 16 years, work as utility arborists for the large arboricultural company. They gave an insight into their experience of transitioning into their new careers.

Mike explains how he moved into the industry, “Through a friend I had had experience of the arb industry and when it came to leaving I was able to plan a clear path I wanted to take. My biggest priority was to carry on working outside. In terms of advice I had already done quite a lot of research into my new career path, so I didn’t need help there. If people need advice though, there are many charities willing to help including Royal Marines Charity, SSAFA and HighGround. Working outside appealed to me the most but climbing trees and playing with interesting tools is a pretty cool way to spend your day. No two days seem to be the same and there are always challenges which I enjoy.”



Mike Lowry carrying out aerial rescue practice    Mike Lowry – utility arb site

Like many ex-forces personnel, Mike was eligible for the military ELCAS scheme which enabled him to use learning credits to fund chainsaw qualifications prior to joining Hi-Line. He remembers, “My first month went extremely well and I transitioned across better than I thought. Having already had most my arb qualifications it was a pretty quick time frame to me joining and then gaining my utility tickets with the Hi-Line training team and out on the job. It was good to move about teams and meet new people, learning different skills and how they do things.”

Chatting about those currently in the process of leaving the military Mike gives the following advice, “The biggest bit of advice I would give is plan in advance the steps that you want to take leaving and book all the courses possible to help your transition from the military to your chosen career path.

It's a well-known fact that you're told there are no jobs out there and a bit of the fear factor is put into you, but if you're proactive and hardworking then the world's your oyster.”

James also knew he wanted an outdoor based career when he left the army, “I was given the basic help every soldier receives when going through resettlement, but this was mainly aimed at driving jobs and such. I knew I wouldn't be suited to an office job or being stuck behind the wheel of a vehicle, so the outdoor aspect of the arb industry was a key factor. I found out about the qualifications needed from google searches and other service leavers wanting to go into the same industry. Being able to climb, use a saw in a tree and the physical aspects of the job was a massive draw”.





James Harris on a site in Devon

James attended one of the HighGround Rural Weeks and from this took part in a work experience day with Matt at Hi-Line. On completing his chainsaw qualifications, he then joined Hi-Line. “My first month was exciting, new and daunting all at the same time. I completed my UA1, UA2 and first aid+f with Hi-Line and once authorised I was soon out with a team, learning new techniques and different ways of doing things. No two days are the same, no site is the same and no tree is the same, because of this it really keep you on your toes and gets you thinking about the different solutions and techniques to use to complete the job. I feel challenged mentally and physically every day”.

As with Mike and Matt, James’ advice to those in the process of leaving the military is to plan ahead and research, “I had decided pretty early on that I wanted to be a tree surgeon once I was out but I made sure I researched the job role. I talked to people already in the industry to get advice but also had backups as well – just in case my first choice didn’t work out. Start early and don’t rush the process, leave yourself plenty of time because before you know it your end date will be fast approaching. Visit job fairs, talk to people, look on Facebook for groups in your chosen industry and make new contacts. Be proactive, work for what you’ve set your sights on but don’t be under the illusion that things will be handed to you or fall into your lap”.

As well as fitting in well in larger arboricultural companies, military veterans can also be a great addition to smaller arb firms.

Byron Brain works for Chapel Tree Services in Ross on Wye. On leaving the Royal Air Force after 12 years’ service he knew that a career in trees was something that he wanted to pursue, “When deciding to leave the military I knew what I wanted to do, I had a plan and I stuck with it. I absolutely love working for Chapel Trees and the team around me are fantastic. The main things that appealed to me about tree work and the arb industry were working outside and the mental and physical demands. Every job is different, working in a small team with loads of experience and knowledge of the job really helps bring newbies on, every day is a school day for me and I really enjoy learning new skills and putting them into practice”.



Byron Brain working on site

With many forces' personnel serving in the military for in excess of 10 years the prospect of changing career can be daunting but researching and planning for future work can obviously ease this. Byron explains, "When leaving the military I didn't really come across any challenges when transitioning into civilian life. I knew what I wanted to do and I was financially sorted before I left the military. Of course, I miss the boys and the banter and my role within the military, but I left for the right reasons. I wanted more stability within my home family life, and I wanted to start a new career in something new and exciting before I became a little old for the new job. And for those currently leaving the armed forces he offers sound advice "I'd say make sure you find something that you really want to do and that you are passionate about. Leaving the forces is a big step and it isn't easy, make sure you are financially stable and you have a home to come back to".

With both recruitment and retention of staff an ongoing challenge for arboricultural companies large and small, Anna sums up why she thinks military veterans are so suited to work in arboriculture and forestry and the benefits they may bring to the organisations they join, "Military training involves teamwork, motivation, problem-solving and resilience in all weathers and environments, some more hostile than others. Arboriculture and forestry both involve an element of risk and ex-military people bring the most wonderful loyalty to any employer – priceless."

*Feature written by Kirsty McNicol*

*Photo credits – K McNicol, M Evans, A Minns, M Lowry, B Brain, HighGround*