



LIFE BEYOND THE MILITARY –
OUTDOORS



Chris Shepherd

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Friends of HighGround: PROFILE

We couldn't deliver Rural Weeks at Bicton College without Chris who runs the Timetable and organises all the wonderful visits to farms, golf clubs, nature reserves and so much more...

Tell us a bit about yourself.

I come from a farming family. My father was a veterinary surgeon and there was nothing I loved more than going with him on his rounds – being lifted up and sat down on a hay rack to watch a calving. My mother's family had a farm in East Cornwall so all my summer holidays and Easters were spent there. It was a tenanted farm and sadly the tenancy went out of the family through the death of an uncle. I was about 17 so I was never in a position to take that forward, but I was in a position to go to agricultural college at Seale Hayne in Newton Abbott in Devon. I literally went straight from there into land-based education at the Cornwall College group of which Bicton is a part. Being involved in the land and looking after it was instilled in me at a very early age.

What do you do for HighGround?

I put the Rural Week programme of activities together. I guess my unique selling point for HighGround is my experience in land-based education and apprenticeship management which brought me into contact not only with the rural community but with lots of employers and individuals involved in the land-based sector. It means I have a great network of friends contacts who can and do contribute to the Rural Week programme either by coming to share their experiences at the vocational sessions or inviting us to visit them and see what they are doing. It's a constantly evolving process and I am always on the look-out for different experiences to bring to the delegates. I always take their feedback into account too so each Rural Week reflects the experiences of the ones that took place before it. This (December 2018) is our 24th one which is a fantastic achievement.

Can you give us some idea of what happens on a Rural Week?

Anna (Baker Cresswell) developed the structure of the course which takes place over five days with delegates – we call them HighGrounders – arriving on a Sunday afternoon and leaving on the following Friday. It's a residential course with the HighGrounders all staying on campus. Typically the week runs along the lines of vocational sessions during the day and then in the evenings we have guest speakers who are generally individuals who have previously served in the armed services, left and transitioned into civilian life. Essentially they share their experiences with the HighGrounders and give them an insight into what they can expect when they leave and how to approach their second careers. It's so much more impactful when someone is allowed to see, smell and hear the subject rather than just having someone come in and give a powerpoint presentation. We cover about 15 different vocational areas in a week which is a lot and most of that is outside the classroom looking at the various careers most suited to the unique skills of service personnel.

What do the delegates expect from the courses?

The common themes, the areas people express an interest in before they come, tend to be a mixture of arboriculture, countryside management, horticulture, and environmental work. But then during the week they start to see the wider areas of say, green-keeping, pig farming, butchery, cider making, animal care and what they start to see is the inter-relationships and cross-cutting themes across the rural sector and how the skills, the maturity they bring to the table are very, very relevant to all of those sectors. It helps them appreciate that actually they would be very capable of learning relatively quickly the skills needed for the jobs that they're looking at, because they've got the right attitude, the right transferable skills and the right drive.

Who is the typical HighGrounder?

The lovely thing about HighGrounders is they're incredibly diverse in terms of their starting point. A HighGrounder could be somebody who's been a veteran of 30 years or someone two or three years from leaving the armed services. There's a huge diversity in the ranks and positions and then also in terms of physical or mental health. No one group is the same but irrespective of their starting point, when they leave they have all seen that they're far better skilled, or matched to land-based than they maybe previously thought. I think there's a strong match between the personalities of those in the armed services and the communities involved in land-based work. The camaraderie, the fellowship, the loyalty; it's a good match.

What have your successes been?

Clearly there are some people who have had hugely transformational experiences in terms of their emotional wellbeing and confidence building. I think one of the most lovely things is when an alumni of previous Rural Weeks comes back to share his or her experience and is able to say to the group "I was, were you were, two and a half years ago and now I'm doing this". That's an incredibly powerful thing for the group to hear. We have someone who has established his own forest school and chainsaw instructor business and a one of our HighGrounders now runs security business based on his experience with service dogs – he's a really good example of someone whose confidence was boosted and he really got his mojo back.

What have you found most surprising?

I've been really surprised at how open-minded the delegates are and how hungry they are for information and content. Even though they might not have expressed an interest in a particular area or session, they are very respectful and engage with all the speakers. The great thing about the residential nature of the course is that at the end of the day we retire to the bar and have a few drinks with the group and the conversations are all about the day they've had and a lot of analysing and reflection on the core themes goes on. As an educationalist there is nothing more rewarding than playing a part in putting together a programme that then stimulates all of that thought and discussion. That is the holy grail of education, isn't it?

Have you found it challenging working with people who have experienced trauma?

I had no understanding of what combat stress was – just no idea so it has been interesting to see how different the reality is from the perception. Of course we need to be aware of what might cause someone to feel unsafe – say for example if someone is uncomfortable with being in a minibus – but on the whole the people we have had here are very much in tune with how they feel and what they need. After the first Rural Week two lads took me aside and said they could tell I'd been worrying on their behalf all week and it really wasn't necessary. I learned a lot from that. The delegates know that they are free to come and go and they have developed their own coping mechanisms.

Favourite moments?

On every course there is something – often something quite small – which happens and which becomes a really big moment. For example I remember being in the Forest School session with a lad who was in a tank regiment. We were doing one of the exercises we get young kids to do which is just positioning a mirror in front of their field of vision so that the tree canopy is reflected back into their eyes. He just transfixed by how beautiful it was because he'd never taken time to look up into the trees. His job was to focus on looking for landmines on the ground. In that moment of realisation he started feeling safe in that outdoor environment. It blew me away.

For more information about HighGround's services please contact Anna Baker Cresswell
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