



LIFE BEYOND THE MILITARY –
OUTDOORS



Jon Perkins

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Friends of HighGround: PROFILE

Jon is a retired Royal Navy officer who has been involved with HighGround for over a year and recently joined the Board of Trustees. Nicole went to meet him to find out more...

Tell us a bit about yourself.

I was a Royal Naval officer for 33 years. Having joined [the Service] from university I followed a traditional career for the first 16 or 17 years, largely at sea in a range of appointments. I then embarked on a much more office-based set of jobs. I'm very lucky; I did all sorts of different things including a 3 year spell working between London and Paris on a Joint Anglo /French programme; a full-time sponsored MBA; a secondment to KPMG as an MoD consultant and a period leading tri-service technology training at the Defence Academy. Latterly, and more by accident than judgement, I specialized in Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) filling both single Service and Joint leadership roles. Overall, I was hugely lucky to enjoy a varied Service career which, although in part office-based, never really kept me in an office but rather saw me travelling, talking and meeting people, being accountable for my actions and trusted to deliver what needed doing. I left the RN just before I reached compulsory retirement age, largely because then I felt a compulsion to build another career and an established Defence company offered me a reasonably well-paid job which looked interesting.

What was your experience of life outside the military?

Although I left to work for a very good company, snatching at the first role I was offered was probably the worst thing I could have done. I did not like the role and specifically was not suited to the typical ex-military officer type job, employed for previous knowledge and not future potential. The company was great, but it just wasn't the job for me. After about five years I decided that the time had come to stop and do something with my life that I actually wanted to do. So, I retired from full-time work and concentrated on training my gundogs and working around my smallholding. For many years I've been involved in shooting – game shooting, clay shooting, but specifically working with dogs. I can honestly say that whilst I don't have particularly gainful employment it is massively satisfying. As well as supporting HighGround I also volunteer for the Dogs Trust and in both these charities I have found something worthwhile to do with my time.

How did you come to be involved with HighGround and what is your role?

I read an article about the charity and then looked it up online. I found a couple of Anna's pieces and in one she said HighGround was always looking people to help. So, I dropped her line saying, "I'm an old sailor and really like the sound of what you're doing; I love being outdoors and hate being trapped in an office – What can I do to help?" Until recently I've not had a formal role but did pretty much anything Anna asked me to. That included raising awareness at agricultural shows, helping on Rural Weeks and giving Anna a bit of administrative support. I'm now a member of HighGround's Development Board (DB) looking after both the Smallholding and Country Sports portfolios, and have very recently been appointed as a Trustee where I have been asked to link the direction set by the Board to the practical delivery undertaken by the DB and others at the coal face.

What was it specifically about HighGround that resonated with you?

It was the connection between the military and outdoor space. Until Anna started knocking on doors, there was no representation from the land-based sector within the Career Transition Partnership (CTP). The CTP doesn't have the bandwidth to explore where, for example, a former Royal Marine who has spent all his life outdoors might fit best. The system tries hard to place people in a job when they first leave the Armed Forces but there is a limited appetite to explore anything out of the ordinary. There are targets for finding jobs and assisting with initial transition but there is not enough thought about where people might be in two, three or five years' time. Also, I think the whole business of leaving the military and living at home for an extended period is hard and affects people in very different ways. I found it complicated, and I know a lot of other people have the same issues.

What would your advice be to someone leaving service?

Stop and think, understand what you want and work to get it.

Do you just want a good salary – which is a perfectly valid choice – or do you need a role that satisfies more?

What makes service personnel so perfectly suited to work in the rural sector?

I think the biggest benefit is their ability to get on and do something without constant referral back. It's their ability to work independently and take responsibility perhaps beyond the task that they've been asked to do.

What are your hopes for HighGround's future?

HighGround is at the cusp of moving from a niche charity to a nationally recognised institution. I would love to see it reach the level of charities like Combat Stress and BLESMA. There is of course a huge funding chasm to bridge in order to run the volume of courses and other interventions that could make a massive difference. Anna's endeavour to reach out to absolutely everybody is great but also challenging, however, where there's a will there's a way and I am confident that HighGround has the people and the drive to get there.

How do you relax?

I am rubbish at relaxing. I love being out with the dogs and I like to read but I'm usually doing something that I'm interested in. I'm the kind of person who, if not awake and doing, is usually asleep.

Is there anything about the military you miss?

I look on the past with great affection, but it is the past.

I've always tended to look forward – to think what I'm going to do next. I do miss the friendship and having total trust in my colleagues but don't feel any regret about leaving.

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