



## *An interview: David Estyn-Jones - Interim Manager*

### **From the Barracks to Civvy Street**

**Mike Faull, Director working in the Defence sector in our Interim practice, speaks to David Estyn-Jones about his experience of transitioning out of a successful military career and into the world of interim management. David has words of advice both for those seeking a career outside of the armed forces as well as for those looking to hire, and why ex-military personnel can prove to be invaluable to any organisation.**

#### **Could you start by telling us a little bit about your background?**

I often say I've got a career of four chapters.

Chapter one is ten years in the military, army officer, through to a junior major by the time I left, and a variety of operational and training roles between.

The next chapter was in retail. I left the army, went into retail, initially in operations, but then in projects and program management. That's really where a switch flicked. I found what I enjoyed and what I was good at, which was projects and program management.

I spent four years in the Middle East running a small business out there, which was interesting - a bit of a departure. And when that ended, I came back to the UK and set myself up as an interim.

#### **Can you describe what you did in the military?**

I was an infantry officer with the Royal Gurkha Rifles for about ten years, I progressed upwards along a fairly well-defined plan from platoon commander to specialist platoon commander, then a couple of operational tours in Bosnia.

#### **What was it that made you look outside and into the commercial world?**

Somewhere around my early thirties was when I started asking myself the question. I'd really enjoyed my time in the military, but you really don't have much control on where you go and what you do. I had a couple of great years as a company commander out in the Far East, and I knew, after that, I was going to sit behind a desk somewhere, essentially. I didn't really want to do that, or at least not in uniform. I wasn't seeing enough of my young family, and I wanted to know what life was like on the outside. That's really what prompted me to start thinking about leaving.

#### **What was your first role out of the military?**

I left and joined Aldi, the German supermarket. At the time, back in the early 2000s, Aldi was not the hugely successful business in the UK that it is now. It was still struggling to gain a foothold and had a certain reputation - that wasn't really fair or accurate, but we were working hard to improve on it, so it was tough.

The whole experience was a bit like going back to Sandhurst, but less camaraderie and fewer good times. It was a rude awakening.

#### **How did the opportunity arise?**

I found them. I didn't handle my transition well at all. I didn't really know what civilians did, which sounds like a stupid thing to say. I didn't really understand the world of work outside the military. I didn't understand nor have any interest in networking - the thought of it terrified me. I looked for jobs that: Number one: I could do. Number two: might want me. And number three: would earn me enough to pay the mortgage and bills. I found an advert at the back of the newspaper, applied and got in. But that was really my only plan at the time - find jobs and apply for them. And it's certainly not what I'd be doing these days.

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## **What did you feel is the biggest adjustment you had to make?**

The personal side was tough. I was away a lot. For several years, I left before my kids got up, got home after they'd gone to bed and had very little time at weekends because I was in retail. In the military you have tough times away and then some time back at home - these were relentless hours without that welcome change of pattern. That was one of the big adjustments.

Another is that you're suddenly in charge. You don't have an adjutant or a careers branch to tell you where your next posting will be and sort out all the paperwork. No one's going to manage your career for you. You need to be proactive - far more so than in the military. You've got to go out and make it happen. I came in with a positive work ethic and I worked hard, but in those early days, I didn't manage my own career at all really, to my detriment. It's a very different environment and that's something that takes time to adjust to.

## **Other than the work ethic it clearly gave you, what positive aspects of your military experience have you brought to bear?**

I've always felt that military people are very good at changing roles. You've got to become an expert pretty quickly. I enjoyed the challenge of getting my head around something new.

There is an element of military leadership which I think translates very well too. Lead from the front, lead by example, don't expect people to do things that you're not going to. I think that always translates well.

Also, that ability to quickly understand a complex situation and form a plan - or at least separate the wheat from the chaff - and then communicate that. Whether it's in training, on operations or just in normal, day-to-day administration, military life is all about making plans, making things happen and communicating. If I look back at my ten years, at how much was invested to train me into the person I became as an officer, it's incredible, and the same is true for pretty much everyone in the military, whether that's basic training or continuation.

## **What led you to where you are now – working as an interim manager?**

I worked out what I enjoyed doing - to go into a difficult situation, understand it, get people on your side, put a plan together, get buy-in, deliver it, hand everything over and step away. That's essentially, in very brief terms, what I've done for the last nine years as an interim. It's a progression of eleven or twelve contracts, each anywhere from six to sixteen months. It's project management and program leadership typically, with quite a hands-on flavour as well. It's been very interesting, challenging and rewarding.

## **What is it you enjoy the most about being an interim?**

I'm an adventurer at heart. I like to go to new places, whether that's geographically or professionally. I enjoy new experiences. The variety of challenge and of environments in the interim world is fascinating. During my first role, I was running car washes in Belgium and Luxembourg. My latest role was as a project director in Central Government. In between, I've worked in some FTSE 100 businesses, in start-ups, scale-ups, private equity-backed businesses, all sorts of different projects.

It's been a very varied journey. Some people hate that. I really enjoy it, as well as the challenge of finding new work and selling myself, which I think any successful interim has to do. It's great to be good at the job and have a solid reputation, but you've still got to go out there and find business, in most cases.

## **Has your approach to leadership changed since your exit from the military?**

It's one thing to lead a company of soldiers who will follow your instruction, but that doesn't translate into the outside world. That style needs to change. Many of the same things apply, but an entirely different approach is appropriate.

## **What challenges have you had around people's perception of you and your military career within Civvy Street?**

There are stereotypes. On the whole, people have a very positive view of ex-military folk, but some will be scared witless by the thought of being managed by, or working for or alongside, an ex-military person. That perception works both ways, though. It comes back to this point about understanding the environment. I think it probably took me six or seven years to loosen up a bit after leaving the military. I remember the first day I wore jeans into work was about six years after I had left. Everyone wore jeans, that was the norm, but it felt too casual to me at the time.

I never used to shout in the in the army. Most people aren't shouty, aggressive types, but that's what some expect of ex-military people. It's important to anticipate that. I attended an interview about fifteen years ago and halfway through the interviewer said 'You're ex-army. Aren't you just good at following orders?'. Everyone can follow orders, but if you want a bunch of people who are able to think on their feet and question and work collaboratively, then look to the army. Some people's perceptions will take a bit of work to sway, so just be aware of it.

## **What was the biggest challenge to transitioning out of the military for you?**

There are people who left the forces before you who will tell you how wonderful life is, how brilliantly they're doing and how it was all really easy. Don't believe just one person. The adjustment can be tough. My first two and a half years were tough. Money was tight. I had a young family. I really wasn't enjoying the job, and there was a bit of a hit to the ego as well. This maybe sounds silly but whatever rank you are in the army, you have a certain status. You leave that behind and I think some people find that harder than others. You have to re-establish your identity. Much like sports men and women find, when that career ends, they look in the mirror and say 'who am I'? And 'what am I'? My advice would be to talk to people about it. Keep close to that ex-military family because you'd be surprised by how many people go through that.

## **What advice would you give the old you before you left the army?**

How long have you got?

**Number one:** when you leave the forces, you've typically been institutionalised. You've likely gone from school or university straight into the army. You've probably never really experienced the real world for any significant period of time as an adult. You need to treat this almost like an operation into enemy territory, and you've got to do your intelligence work. Start early. Speak to everyone. You've got the advantage of a fantastic network of people who will, for the most-part, help you. I've always been surprised by how generous people are with their time. I certainly try and repay that as much as I can. People will help. Get familiar with what is out there.

**Number two:** work out what you enjoy. There's loads of stuff you can do, but what do you actually like doing? No amount of money really makes up for doing something you dislike. Life is so much better when work puts a smile on your face.

**Number three:** consider career development. You're on your own, which is a wonderful thing in many ways, but no one is going to manage your career now for you. You need to. Once you get a job, that's great, but don't stop networking, don't stop thinking about what's next. It doesn't mean you need to be moving on every six months, but equally you really need to take responsibility for managing your own career.

**Number four:** In the military you can look at a person and tell immediately who they are from their uniform. It's more difficult to navigate in the outside world because there are no indicators like that. You have to learn how to read people.



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