



► Tony Wright heads a North East based charity which helps forces Veterans come to terms with life back in civvie street

Why Tony Wright says it shouldn't happen to a Vet

IF anybody was born to do the job they do it is Tony Wright.

He heads Forward Assist, a North East based charity which helps forces Veterans who have fallen through the cracks, having struggled unsuccessfully to come to terms with life back in civilian society.

The issue is, at last, becoming a political one because of concerns expressed about the affect of reduction in the Armed Forces which will see thousands of personnel will be leaving the armed services prematurely over the next year.

Fears of what they might do and how they will cope are not new. It's just now these fears are being expressed more in public.

"We have men in Forward Assist who go back to the Aden Emergen-

Tony Wright turned his painful army experiences into a force for good for other veterans. He spoke to MIKE KELLY

cy," said Tony. For those without a history book to hand, the Aden Emergency was the revolt against forces in the British controlled territories of South Arabia, now part of Yemen. It began in December 1963 with a grenade attack on British officials at Aden Airport. A state of emergency was then declared in Aden, then a British colony and the surrounding area. It lasted for four years and led to the end of British rule in November 1967.

A further trawl through the history books from Aden would see British forces taking part in active service in

the Northern Ireland troubles, the Falklands, the first Gulf War as well as Bosnia and Kosovo before Gulf War II and Afghanistan.

The image of the tough as teak soldier - "Macho nonsense", as Tony calls it - has helped successive Governments to draw a veil over this suffering. For a long time they were left to fend for themselves and while conditions like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder are now discussed, the authorities are hugely reluctant to accept a causal link between it and the combat experiences of services personnel. To accept the responsi-

bility would cost money, lots of money in health and compensation claims.

"There are a lot of people out there still suffering, that's the key thing," said Tony.

A contributing factor is that sometimes the service personnel can be their own worst enemy either not actively seeking help or unable to open up to those back on Civvy Street who could help them, sometimes with catastrophic results both for them and society. To cope, many turn to alcohol and drugs and with this comes a descent into crime.

Tony said: "An American guy I spoke to summed it up like this. If you look on society as sheep we take these people into the military and turn them into a wolf - they have to learn to kill as that is the role of the military - and when they return to society they are a wolf among sheep."

Forward Assist hosts "peer led" support groups and comes up with "structured diversionary activities" to reduce the social isolation of veterans and promote community engagement with other veterans on a daily or weekly basis. Its qualified staff assist those who come to them to navigate and access the multitude of organisations and services availa-

OPINION

No silver bullet for solving housing crisis .. but it can be done

PAUL TANNEY, chief executive at North East-based social housing provider Four Housing, on what needs to be done to tackle the region's housing crisis

THERE are currently about 1.8m people on the "waiting list" for affordable housing, as well as people looking to buy new homes.

At the end of 2012, this figure was 86,919 households in the North East alone. Almost half of these are in Tyne and Wear, with the figure standing at 42,965.

It is generally accepted that to meet future need for new homes, we should be building between 220,000 and 245,000 homes per year across the UK.

As well as fulfilling a housing need across the region, new homes create jobs, and not just in construction. The building of new properties creates demand throughout the supply chain for materials such as bricks, wood, plaster, carpets, furniture and white goods.

There needs to be a change in policy if the housing shortage is to be met. There is no silver bullet to achieving this, but rather a whole series of actions.

Firstly, the Government needs to work with local councils and convince communities to free up sufficient land to build new houses. The current Government is implementing a number of planning changes in the hope that more land will be released, more quickly. However, unless local politicians can look beyond their short-term need to get re-elected and the communities can be convinced of the benefits of new housing, local objections to new-build developments will still exist.

Secondly, the right lending mechanisms need to be in place. For those wishing to buy a property, that means access to mortgages and secure, well-paid jobs to fund them. Homes need to be affordable to the average working family.

The current financing model needs to change to support the development of so-called affordable housing.

Currently, most housing that is made available for rent is funded through a combination of Government grant and private borrowing.

Under the current Affordable Housing Programme, the aver-

age grant is around £21,000 per home. This is approximately half of what it was prior to the last election and, from 2015-18, the grant is likely to be even less.

This means that housing associations have to borrow more to fund the remainder of the building cost. This is then reflected in higher rents for social housing residents. Housing associations are able to charge what is known as "affordable rent", which can be up to 80% of the full market rent.

In the North East, this has two different effects. Firstly, where the market rent is significantly higher than the social rent guidelines, new tenants' rent is increased to the "affordable rent" level.

In other parts of the North East there is not a significant difference between market rent and social rent levels due to the depressed housing market. This means there is very little increase in rent for the new tenant, which is great for the individual and the housing benefit bill. However, there is little extra income for the housing association to pay for the extra borrowing and therefore less funding to build new homes.

In London and the South East the picture is very different. There are significant rental differences between affordable and social rents, meaning housing providers can increase their rents significantly and therefore access funding to build more new "affordable homes", although this is in part counterbalanced by higher land costs.

Consequently, there are now at least two entirely separate housing markets: London and the South East, and the rest of the country.

There is a need for separate housing policies that reflect those circumstances.

If we are to tackle the UK's housing crisis, there is a need to look at increased grants and a return to social housing rents. This would enable social housing providers to build the right size homes in the right location, with rents that are truly affordable.

> About Turn CIC angling course for war veterans with the help of the Angling Development Board. John 'Lofty' Rames, ex forces, left casts at Higham Lakes Trout Fishery, with angling coach Nick Wood



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ble to them in the civilian community whilst using activities and vocational skills based projects that enable veterans to gain nationally accredited qualifications as a matter of course.

The activities and support groups offer a safe environment and a chance to meet and be with others who understand the multiple and complex issues facing individuals that have served in today's Modern day armed forces. The aim of the group is to empower and give group members the skills, experience and opportunity to run and facilitate groups, provide mutual support and mentoring to those less well settled Veterans who have not yet reached a level of stability.

Its major asset is that veterans are being dealt with by veterans who understand what they have gone through.

Tony said: "One of the first things many say to me is 'I think I'm mad'. I say 'you're not mad, your reaction to the extraordinary circumstances you have operated in is completely understandable'."

He added: "We don't do counselling. What we do is activities and people talk about their experiences when they are ready and they know the people they are talking to have gone through it

themselves. The older veterans we have are absolutely brilliant. It's easier to speak to them than a 20-odd-year-old blonde, beautiful psychotherapist who will not have the same experience."

In a way, Tony has been working towards this from the time he left the army on a medical discharge just before the Falklands war.

Originally from Teesside, he joined the Marines as he didn't have the qualifications for any other form of occupation.

"I was in the army for three years and injured my shoulder. They operated on it three times but..." his voice trails away, before he adds

enigmatically: "...maybe things have got more hygienic these days."

The upshot was he had to leave. "The really interesting thing is I remember the Falklands and everybody going there, spotting my mates on the telly.

"At the time I really felt I should have

been there but now, having done this work for five years and talked to people who went there, I'm actually glad I didn't go. I would have come back equally as messed up as some of them.

"One guy I spoke to said, even today, the experience is like carrying three bags of wet sand about constantly on your back - you just can't shake it off."

After getting a discharge grant he headed for Newcastle by train. On arrival he discovered all he needed on the doorstep of Newcastle Central Station - a Yates' Wine Lodge and a bookies.

"I found myself sitting next to an ex-army guy and probably drank with him for about five hours. We were both miserable and asking 'what are we going to do?'"

By chance, again in the pub, he got talking to a regular, asking him what he did for a living.

"He told me he was a support worker with 16 to 18-year-olds whose time in care had ended. His job was to help them re-engage with society through various activities."

Inspired that he could do something similar, he became a trained social worker and in 2000 moved to the probation service, eventually ending up as a Government drug advisor.

"All through that process I dealt with people with mental health issues,

Paul Tanney



► Tony Wright on fact finding trip to US

► Tony on a trip to the US department that deals with Vets

Paul Norris

drugs, alcohol, the homeless, I just kept coming across more and more ex forces people who were really messed up.

"The more I worked with them, the more I saw they had slipped through the cracks."

It affected him so deeply that in 2008 he decided to do something about it and packed in his well paid job to do just that.

"I gave myself a year to set it up. At that time I didn't even have an office. I worked out of my car. I had a laptop and an idea, that was it."

It actually took a bit longer than a year before in 2009 'About Turn CIC' came into being.

"It was a huge risk. My wife was really supportive. I think all my family was. I always wanted to do something around ex forces."

It has been hard work - "18 hours a day, six sometimes seven days a week," said Tony, but with the results and the evident goodwill out there, it's been rewarding.

"The best thing I have ever done," he said.

Exchange trips with veterans in the US have borne particular fruit. From just sharing experiences and the camaraderie between those with a Forces background to ideas in the US - which Tony says is way ahead of the

UK in its treatment of vets - being hopefully introduced here. This includes Veterans Courts - something Tony is leading the way in trying to have introduced in the UK - to mentoring programmes.

Only this month, Blaydon MP Dave Anderson who is patron of Forward Assist, presented Mentoring Certificates to ex-forces personnel in HMP Northumberland who had taken part in a mentoring course to enable them to help fellow veterans who find themselves in jail.

"We're not out for the sympathy vote," Tony visibly bristles at the suggestion.

What he is looking for is a different approach to an issue that not only won't go away but is likely to increase over the next few years with the results of the defence spending review.

About Turn - now the trading arm of Forward Assist - has seen veterans taking part in varied activities like fishing expeditions, cookery programmes and sports competitions. "It's not just about a big jolly. They have to contribute back to society."

One example is taking kids with learning difficulties and their carers out on their fishing expedition. "That was fantastic, a really rewarding experience for all involved."

Next year sees their US counterparts coming to the UK as part of the exchange hook-up.

"We're really looking forward to returning the fantastic hospitality they showed us."

But as Tony said, it's not just a jolly, with plans for a presentation at the House of Lords, amongst other things.

However the hard work does have some fringe benefits. "I got a call from a guy who said he'd been really impressed with the fishing expedition with the kids. He said he had a friend who was a millionaire who had some land in France next to a carp lake. Would we like to go?"

"We had a great time. There's something about a long day when you go to bed exhausted just through exertion, not drink or anything like that, but you know you're going to get a good night's sleep because you've got your mates around you."

It's a simple thing, basically about peace of mind. That in essence is what Forward Assist is offering and the chance to start again, no matter what age.

And for the future. "I'd love to go on a boat and sail to Greenland and climb the glaciers there with the vets," said Tony. "Why not?" he laughs.

Why not indeed.



PAUL LINFORD COLUMNIST

WHILE there are undoubtedly some politicians who struggle to become household names in their own households, there are a few who, by sheer force of personality, have the ability to shape or shift the political agenda.

Margaret Thatcher was of course one such individual and so, in a very different sense, is the Scottish Nationalist leader and current First Minister Alex Salmond.

Over the course of a long career which began before the Iron Lady even came to power, he has wheeled away in the cause of Scottish independence, taking what was once a marginal issue to the very centre of political debate.

Next year, on 18 September to be precise, Mr Salmond will finally have his date with destiny, as the Scots are given the chance to decide in a referendum whether they wish to become an independent country.

Until this week, little attention had been paid at a national level to the impact which Scottish independence may have on the rest of the UK - or the 'rump UK' as one suggested it might hence be called.

I suspect this is probably a somewhat more pressing issue in the North-East than in many other parts of England. The region is, after all, one of the biggest markets for Scottish goods, and vice-versa.

Furthermore, a large number of people who would call themselves Scots also live in the region, although of course they will not have any say in whether their mother country becomes an independent state next year.

By contrast, a similar number of native North-Easterners who now live north of the border will have a vote, the logic of this presumably being that these two anomalies will cancel each other out when the votes are counted.

Joking aside, though, what this demonstrates is the degree of interdependence between Scotland and England that cannot easily be disentangled.

Partly this is social and cultural, but mainly it is economic, as illustrated by the argument between the Yes and No camps this week over whether an independent Scotland would be allowed to keep the pound.

Mr Salmond's insistence that it will be has been portrayed by his opponents as evidence that his plans for independence, as set out in this week's 640-page White Paper, contain more than an ele-

ment of fantasy. As a statement issued by the Scottish Office warned: "Joining a currency union with another state would involve the UK giving up some of its sovereignty in monetary and fiscal policy. Why would it agree to this?"

The truth is, of course, that Mr Salmond is seeking to have his cake and eat it - on this as well as on a number of other issues.

He is probably safe to assume that the Scots can ditch the UK and still keep the Queen - Her Majesty is, after all, half-Scottish by descent and spends most of her spare time there.

Thanks to the march of technology he is also probably safe to assume the Scots can ditch the BBC yet still tune in to Doctor Who, EastEnders and Strictly, although the inclusion of this in the actual White Paper led to predictable guffaws.

But he is on much more slippery ground with the pound and EU membership. Actually what is much more likely to happen here is that an independent Scotland would, firstly, have to reapply to join the EU, and secondly, be forced to join the euro as a pre-condition of entry. Current opinion polls showing the Yes camp around 9-10 points behind suggest all this talk will ultimately be academic, and that the Scots will vote decisively to remain part of the UK after all.

Ten months out from the actual vote, however, I think it's probably a bit too early to draw that conclusion.

While the discussion around this week's White Paper has demonstrated fairly conclusively that the No campaign, ably led by former Chancellor Alistair Darling, has both reason and logic on its side, politics is sometimes as much about emotion as reason and logic.

And given Mr Salmond's past history of bouncing back from political adversity, I wouldn't write his chances off just yet.