

Written evidence submitted by Justine Montgomery¹

Women in the Armed Forces: From Recruitment to Civilian Life:

I joined the Royal Air Force in Oct16 as a Dental-Nurse with no pre-existing medical conditions and an exemplary fitness level. I was at the start of what I thought was going to be a lifelong career, develop both personally and professionally, travel the world with a reputable employer that cared about me. I started the initial stage of my career at RAF Halton-Recruitment training squadron and this was when the wool was pulled over my eyes. Not only did I see it frequently occur, but I experienced first-hand the Military's lack of duty of care towards its employees. January17 I was unfortunate enough to sustain an injury to my right knee whilst I was on duty, during basic training, under the care and provision of the military. From this point onwards my experience with the MOD has been beyond traumatic, reckless, unsafe, neglectful and will ultimately not only go on to affect me for the rest of my life but my family also. From the point of sustaining the knee injury the medical treatment in response was beyond delayed, haphazard and neglectful. During this time I was put on a holding flt 'McTeague' at RAF Halton. I was in crippling pain, on crutches as I was unable to walk, given an amalgamation of medication (from opioids, sedatives etc.) and was expected to follow the daily routine of military basic training. I became increasingly unwell, my health deteriorated to the point my life was threatened. September18 I was medically discharged; with no acknowledgement, support and left in a complete opposite condition in which I joined. I was unable to walk, unable to function without strong pain and nerve medications, unable to perform basic tasks without being in pain. To this day the military has taken no responsibility or showed any duty of care. Their response is to try and make it as impossible that it can possibly be to make any progress. I am not the person who I was when I first joined. I cannot get into the shower without aid nor do most of the activities I used to. But the sad thing is; I'm not the first this has happened to and I'm not the last. But there needs to be a last, this needs to change and stop. The military needs to IMPLEMENT and STRICTLY follow a policy where people in these situations get the care and support that they need. This doesn't have anything to do with rank or gender- lives are put at risk due to the attitude the MOD are treating people with. An acknowledgement needs to be made for anyone that has been in this situation, they need to bring it out into the open, analyse what went wrong and put preventive measures in place. Those who have been medically discharged need to be treated with the duty of care that they deserve as ultimately they signed their LIFE to queen and country but all they get in return is to be treated like they don't exist, muted and every measure is then put in place to shut them out when they want answers.

Do female service personnel face unique and/or additional challenges in the armed forces?

Recruitment:

Female personnel are often faced with the challenge that they aren't as strong, tough and durable as the opposite sex. You get faced with this prejudice attitude from the point of walking into the careers office- once you've completed your aptitude tests and you're posed with either choosing from I quote the more "girly" trades as opposed to the "more manly" ones. The mere scent of sexism starts from the second you walk into the careers office and it doesn't pass- it lingers from there on. So there you are first step into your career and you're faced with that you have to live up to the 'male standards' and have this challenge that you have to seem just as tough as the guys. Not a good recruiting strategy I must say. This sets the tone of and plants the seed of the attitude many females and males will be met with and drilled into. This opens up the floodgates to the abuse that

¹ Minor redactions made to protect others' identities

women and men both have to endure. Therefore making women less likely to raise complaints and grievances as they don't want to be seen as "weaker" than the opposite sex.

We progressed onto my selection interview at [...] Barracks. I was assured I could "put my career on hold" to have children. Automatically assuming because I am a female I desire to have children? Firstly highlighting the fact that if females have to accept the fact they are less likely to be up the career ladder as they have to put their career "on hold" because they want to have a child? Just because a female wants to have a family does not make her less eligible for a promotion than her male counterparts.

Raising medical concerns:

I repeatedly attended the medical-centre and informed the medical/rehab staff to raise my concern that my health was deteriorating but nothing was ever actioned. I was prescribed opioid drugs, gabapentin and amitriptyline all which cause extreme sedative effects, extreme drowsiness, confusion to hallucination. It states on the drug packet not to operate machinery or heavy equipment. I was expected to attend rehab in a gym full of this type of equipment and machinery- which could cause extreme harm not only to the safety of myself but others. As a result of their delay in actioning anything, it got to a point where I had to receive critical care and rushed to A&E. The attitude of the individual of duty when I started to get a nose-bleed, woke up covered in bruises, my body was in layman terms bleeding internally. I wasn't taken seriously and he didn't act upon my concern. "That is the typical female instinct to overreact" I can assure you in the moment of quite literally 'life or death' the last thing you are remotely considering is your gender. Gender stereotypes need to be banished. Let alone that just the consideration of my gender put my life in danger. To even consider that the reaction of someone is determined by the gender is completely false. Despite it being communicated by the Haematologist [...] if I was to have any further bleeding or bruising I had to go to A&E immediately. To the point my Mother had to phone the camp and raise a complaint. I was very weak and barely able to speak on the phone. My colleague had to speak to her as I was extremely upset by this point, they were now concerned for my life and said she would phone 999 to get an ambulance onto the camp if they didn't do something immediately. There was no duty of care instilled at any point when my life was at risk. The individual on duty that evening was dismissive and condescending down to the fact that I was a trainee and he 'outranked' me; he insisted he had the control on the outcome and deemed 'just a nosebleed' as not a concern. Despite there being strict and frequent communications given by the consultant to the medical staff at RAF Halton that any instance of further bleeding I had to admit myself to A&E immediately. There is no procedure in place- that I am aware- when this sort of situation, when a recruit is in imminent danger and requires emergency medical care. (And if there is it's not being implemented).

Due to ongoing complications from my injury as a result of the delay in medical care this came to a very critical point. I was then referred to see a Group Captain Rheumatologist, when the appointment came, he had various other ranking male officers in the room with him- their purpose in the room was unbeknown to me. After the negative experience I had experienced with my health, I attended this appointment hoping for a light at the end of the tunnel. Instead I was informed that some blood results came back indicating I could have 'AntiPhospholipid syndrome'. I was then asked gruelling questions at the age of 18/19, in front of these men; if I had experienced miscarriages, was I planning on having children and if I was planning children this could pose complications and cause excessive bleeding, handed a leaflet and sent on my way. This was an extremely upsetting appointment, to say I felt I had been ambushed in this room; then just brushed off, no support offered with just a leaflet that didn't offer any comfort whatsoever was heartbreaking.

How easy is it in practice for female service personnel to complain? What are the issues encouraging or hindering female personnel from complaining?

When concerns are raised or the point of injury occurs they are not recorded so anything can be acted upon. E.G the obstacle course at Halton camp. There was an instance that whilst completing the course that one of my colleagues was on the top of the metal railings and at this point of the course the objective is to cross to the other side over some rope which is attached to the metal railing. She noticed that it did not seem stable (whilst about 16ft in the air). Apprehensive to cross at this point the PTI staff became aggravated and she was told to 'man up' 'get on with it'. Being met with this aggression she tried to cross the rope to which at this point the rope began to detach from the metal railings completely. She had to hold her body weight grasping onto the rope so she didn't fall 16ft to the solid rock ground which could easily break your neck, potentially paralyse yourself or kill you. What was the result that came from this? Nothing. No risk assessment, she wasn't met with are you okay? Let's ensure this doesn't happen again. She was given the label of the 'winger' 'girly', a sexist and dismissive attitude. It wasn't noted that clearly the course should after every use have a safety check from qualified engineers to ensure the safety and duty of care of trainees when completing the course. On the occasion where I required emergency medical care in a life-threatening situation the MOD's response was completely delayed, dismissive and unorganised. There was poor (almost non-existent) communication and unaware on how to deal when this sort of situation arises. They didn't report on the occurrence, no risk assessment, no was there any after care provided. You would like to think that they could reflect on this in a positive critical manner in that they could put something in place to put the duty of care of recruits first. But no, yet again it is treated with the mute button.

Therefore the points above shine a light on the prejudice attitude women are faced with when raising complaints. The system is so uncomfortable, unappealing and drawn out that the complaint itself never sees the light of day but loiters under the surface causing detrimental effects to mental, emotional and physical wellbeing. All this does is prolong pain to the "Plaintiff" resulting in a range of disorders from anxiety, PTSD, depression the list goes on.

Since things are not reported on in the first place they cannot learn from their mistakes. There is so much of a blame culture. Mistakes cannot be learned from if they're not made known in the first place. Influence and authority of this shouldn't be down to rank or gender. Adversity and whistleblowing should not be shunned but appreciated- because the only outcome is beneficial. Preventative measures can then be put in place to stop it from recurring. Those in lower ranks are made to feel powerless and purposeless and this isn't right.

Do female service personnel face unique and/or additional challenges during transition to civilian life?

I was medically discharged in Sep2018 on crutches, the opposite condition to which I joined, my medical care was disjointed and up in the air. This made the transition back into civilian life even more daunting. I wasn't signposted to support networks nor made aware of entitlements. I wasn't aware of agencies that could support me transitioning not only from military to civilian but from fit and able to disabled and unwell. I was very much backed into the room, the lights were then switched off and the door was locked.

What are the issues faced by women veterans once they have left the services? & Are the needs of female veterans currently met by the available veteran services?

No

Armed Forces Compensation Scheme(AFCS):

Considering I was injured in service on duty and experienced delayed care I wasn't given any guidance on how to process an AFCS claim. I had then had to prove to the military what happened to me (even though they put through the sheer and utter hell of the whole situation and medically discharged me as a result). They make the compensation process so tedious, draining and near enough impossible to complete let alone progress with. That people who are already in a vulnerable and traumatising position are made to do the leg work and have to prove themselves. They offer no guidance/support in the process and expect you to face it on your own.

I have been set up to fail by the MOD when I finally had the courage to get support. I found every person I have spoken to within these agencies and charities lack one crucial element- empathy. When you are physically impaired, receiving hospital treatment, on a cocktail of medications and therapies, also considering the mental impact this has. It can be a struggle to get out of bed in the morning let alone to try and get help. After plucking up every bit of courage to ask for this help you're then kicked back further into the gutter.

Not only have these services not actually made me aware of the help I am **entitled** to but when I have gone, *at great length may I note*, to try and get help it has been made blatantly clear to me the MOD is systemically setting you up to fail when trying to get the help you deserve. Because of medical neglect my life was put at risk and I now require a knee reconstruction. My nerves have become so damaged by the injury sustained, which has only deteriorated by the MOD inability to act- I will suffer from chronic pain for the rest of my life. This isn't exactly what I envisioned when joining the RAF as an extremely athletic and motivated female with the world at my feet ready to travel the world (now I can barely manage the local food shop). Yet the AFCS has rejected my application on numerous occasions. This is how the AFCS meet their objective: they force the appellant to drain their energy because the burden of proof is on them, even though they are the broken party. Resulting in, leaving them with a mental injury with having to fight this for years, the goal; the MOD trying to exhaust them in the hopes they give up.

The reality is anyone that needs to apply for the AFCS needs it upon discharge, not after discharge, let alone leaving them to fight the exhaustive process for years after. The cut off system they pose on dates; that they won't take into consideration a further diagnosis or if your condition is now progressively worse from when you first applied (which is bound to happen). This would require a further additional application- they want to drag you straight back through the dirt and relive the traumatic process all over again when they know you are at the point of complete exhaustion.

They strategically limit the terms of reference for the appellant as they have the respondent write it. Instead they allow the respondent to airbrush and photoshop it to the point it doesn't even look like the true picture so an unfair outcome is inevitable. Therefore there is always going to be an unconscious bias from their side as they have a premeditated outcome. The MOD makes the process of getting justice difficult and quite frankly a maze to get your head around. They chip away until every bit until it is all gone. Justice is never able to swim, it just drowns.

Benevolent Fund(BF) :

[...] This is the face of the "RAF Family" and the attitude of those discharging vulnerable people without a care in the world then to make matters worse doesn't even follow up for aftercare. [...] Sinister as it is, the reality being that no-one came to support me for 3-4 years and even when reaching out to the BF they ignored my request for 9 months. Essentially the RAF pushed me into the river, watched me drown, struggle and cry for help then at the very last second wanted to be seen as

pulling me back out; to seem sanctimonious. Shedding a light on the hypocritical and contradictory nature of this whole set up.

As stated on their website: The leading welfare charity, providing financial, practical and emotional support to serving and former members of the RAF – regardless of rank – as well as their partners and dependent. "SUPPORTING THE RAF FAMILY WHENEVER THEY NEED US". I am yet to see any of these phrases and slogans be put into action. And sadly, I know of **many** others going through a similar struggle, alone. I haven't been in receipt of any this support since being left disabled from my injury in service. Never did I think when joining the RAF at 18 years of age I would be then be leaving a few years later in the opposite state I joined. Worse yet every agency, charity and organisation that I was told that would be there to support me in the event of this happening, have completely abandoned me.

Those who are supposed to be there to support you and have your back quite evidently stab you in the back. I feel as though since leaving service not only have the MOD just brushed me under the rug but kicked me when down.

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