

**Written evidence submitted by Claire Booker**

Women in the Military. Call for Evidence Submission.

My Name is Claire Booker I am 45. Last year, on 27 May 2020, I retired from the RAF after 20 years of Service. I retired, not because I came to the end of my service as I had a full career ahead of me with a guaranteed stability until state retirement age. Nor did I retire because I did not like the job, I loved the job. I loved deploying on Operations and Exercises even though it took me away from my family. I walked away from a £65k salary that was only ever going to increase. I was on the verge of promotion to Wing Commander; I received free healthcare and dental care. I had access to continuity of education allowance (private education boarding school for my children), and one of the best company pensions available. I had worked in some of the most rewarding roles including for the UN HQ in New York. Why would I leave? I left because I was becoming ill with stress, depression and anxiety. I was medicated and downgraded. I left because I was being made ill by poor leadership and management. The climax of me having to leave was nothing dramatic; it was a culmination of years of attritional behaviour by many line managers and career managers. I was left feeling like a commodity; disposable, replaceable, expendable, insignificant. After 20 years of service, I did not receive any formal thank you or goodbye. I have a plethora of evidence of each of the events that resulted in me finally leaving. I felt I had no choice but to leave, I was angry and even sought legal advice to investigate constructive dismissal. However, I knew it was the only option to make sure I did not deteriorate to a point that there would be no return.

My lowest point came in January 2020. Because of my managerial training, I knew my behaviour had become serious. I had cut all of my hair short; I regularly would go a whole day not eating as this made me feel in control. I had made plans to walk out on my Husband, 2 children and work. I had planned to take as much money as I could without leaving my husband and children with nothing, out of my account and our joint account (c. £20k) and leave the country. I planned to do this on 16 Jan 2020 when I was due to be on a Public Health Training day. Unfortunately, (or fortunately), I did not have the phone number of the colleague who I was to go to the training with, we were due to meet at Birmingham New Street Station. So I met him, with the intention of crying off from the training day and using the day instead to withdraw the money and make the plans to leave. Circumstances meant this didn't happen. The following week I told a work colleague of the plans I had made and I knew they were right when they told me to go back to the doctors.

I knew my option retirement date was 27 May 2020 and I was entitled to a period of terminal leave, resettlement leave and annual leave so I only needed to push on until 13 March. My line management were fully aware of how much I was struggling. I worked as the Military Assistant to a 2\* and I had had a very frank conversation with the Director General (Civilian of 3\* equivalence). They listened but did nothing. At one doctor's appointment the doctor wrote to the Chief of Staff and said (Sic) "there is nothing wrong with this officer that good line management cannot fix".

I think the reason women leave the military is that they are strong and they have the moral courage to walk away. I do not know the statistics but I am sure that although more women, as a percentage, suffer mental health issues while in Service, more men, as a percentage suffer as a veteran. I feel this is because we walk away when we do instead of keeping slogging away hoping things will change. I knew when to get out and in effect save myself and my family. The money and benefits of remaining in simply were not worth my health and wellbeing. I really do miss the RAF and would gladly join up again tomorrow if I thought things had changed. However, I don't think they have or that they will, if anything I think it will get worse. I am very conscious that I am writing and submitting this on the final day of the call for evidence. I would love to show you the detail but I know you will be inundated with material to read. I would be more than happy to discuss in greater detail if you would like me to.

*2 February 2021*