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'Defence cuts may boost business but will cost lives'

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Hugh Andrée, founder of ForceSelect, looks at the effects of recent armed forces redundancies



Having been an army officer for a decade myself, and finding I had little support when I finished my commission, I knew that there was an opportunity to help the men and women who have served their country. Little did I know when I set up ForceSelect in 2009 quite how dramatic the cuts to the armed forces would be, and I have to say the scale of the cutbacks has left me shocked.

Command, control and leadership will be undermined due to the loss of so many officers, while the vital support given to our forces by the RAF will also be compromised.

In general terms these cuts will reduce operational effectiveness which, at worst, could cost lives. The rebalancing of strength, to be achieved by 2015, could result in our armed forces becoming nothing more than a part-time fighting force as more flexible terms of engagement are introduced.

I know of one senior army officer who is choosing to leave a career he loves due to the pressure of working consistent seven-day weeks in an over-committed, under-resourced army - it is having a very negative effect on morale. The government has to realise that laptop surveys will ultimately cost lives.

In essence, we are becoming a territorial-style army, not only betraying the great traditions on which this country was built, but also leaving ourselves exposed at a time when we are involved in two major conflicts and overshadowed by the constant threat of terrorism.

As the founder of a service-leavers' recruitment consultancy, I should of course be delighted by this news, but I am concerned that we will simply be unable to meet our commitments effectively or act as global custodians when the need arises.

If there is a positive in this sad news, it is that British businesses will benefit from the wealth of talent that will become available from the armed forces.

Service leavers offer a raft of transferable skills. They are efficient, reliable, disciplined and enthusiastic, working well both in teams and as individuals.

Of course their skills and experience vary according to regiment, squadron or unit but that is in their favour: the next wave of service leavers will be able to fill positions as engineers, maritime specialists, aviation specialists, logisticians, project managers, operational and business managers.

Service leavers must appreciate the adjustments they may have to make when transitioning into civilian life. It is important that they have realistic expectations with regard to salary levels because earnings and other benefits may not be what they have been led to believe.

Likewise, sometimes in order to secure the job that they want, particularly in this economic downturn, they need to realise that they may have to travel or even relocate. For the majority, who have led a more transient lifestyle than most, this should not present too much of a challenge.

Service leavers also need to ensure that they self-promote and don't undersell the skills they have – they have to translate their military experience into civilian-speak.

The use of Enhanced Learning Credits (ELCs) is all the more important because they enable service leavers to gain qualifications recognised in the civilian world prior to leaving.

I am meeting with a senior RAF figure next week to discuss employment opportunities for 200 RAF trainee pilots. UK companies should see this as an opportunity to recruit some of the best young talent this country has to offer in engineering, aeronautics and suchlike.

We have already seen a significant increase in candidates at all levels – from privates to three star Generals - and the Ministry of Defence's loss is the private and third sector's gain.

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