

Claire Hughes (CH) talks to Niall Munro (NM)

Niall Munro Well thank you very much Claire for speaking to me about some of your experiences. Could you possibly start by just saying a little bit about your military background and experience.

Claire Hughes Yeah so I joined the British Army when I was eighteen, just a week after I turned eighteen. And I joined the Royal Army Medical Corps as an ODP, which is an Operating Department Practitioner, so working to assistance to the surgeons and anaesthetists. I went through basic training for fourteen weeks and then my phase two training, so to train to be an ODP, was two years at university. So I went to Birmingham City University. It's quite an odd environment because you're training with civilians as well but you still have to... you're still military, which is quite difficult because you're doing a lot of your training. So you're doing all the civilian work, your studies, placements in hospitals. But on top of all that you've then got to do all your military things, keep on top of your fitness, and all kinds of things like that. My placements were all in military areas so I went to Frimley Park, Cyprus, I went down to Portsmouth, and kind of all over. And then after I'd qualified as an ODP, my first posting was Portsmouth. And I was down there. You have to be supervised when you just qualify. And again, you're in a civilian hospital so it's again that mixture of military and civilian. And then, I had some problems personally, some mental health problems which meant I wasn't allowed to stay in the hospital so I went to a local field unit in Gosport and worked with the field hospital. We did a lot of exercises, putting the field hospital up, and basically your role is to maintain the kit that you would need if you get deployed. So I served for five years in total. I was put on standby for deployment which it's quite common with the medical staff that because you're not a unit as such, you're not a regiment, you would basically be an individual that would go out with different companies and stuff. So you get put on standbys, that you might go for three months, you might not. You'll be on standby for a period of six months and then you'll come off. And unfortunately because of my mental health, I was taken off that standby. And that's ultimately why I was discharged. I was medically discharged on the basis of mental health. So after five years, that's when I left.

NM Why did you decide to join up in the first place?

CH A mixture of reasons. My grandpa was an artificial limb fitter and he worked a lot with veterans. I grew up listening to those sorts of stories, and very much listening to how important veterans were and listening to stories of the war and things like that. And it was always something to be quite patriotic about, quite proud about. And then I was going to join the RAF and I remember going into the recruitment office and at the time I had quite a strong Brummie accent. I'm originally from Birmingham. And the RAF said well if you want to join us you need to change that accent.

NM Wow. So when was that? Which year was that?

CH That would have been in 2007.

NM That's incredible. So what was the justification for that?

CH They were just like you can't talk like that. Because I'd been interested in being an officer and they were like "No, our officers don't speak like you. You need to change your accent". And at the time, the army blokes were opposite and they were like "Come and talk to us. We don't mind. We don't mind accents. You come and talk to us, love". So I went to the army desk and that's how I ended up with the army. I'd originally gone in to be an RAF officer and I ended up as a private in the army.

NM All on the basis of your accent.

CH Yeah on the basis of my accent. But it had been a bit of escape as well, things weren't great at home and the army was a way to escape into an entirely different world and things. But yeah I ended up in the army because I've got a brummie accent.

NM So thinking about that experience in the army, what was it like to be a woman?

CH Initially because my basic training--when I went through basic training, they had already separated so you only went in with women. My squadron was women and the boys trained by themselves and you would maybe come together on certain things but on the whole you were with other women. My section corporal was a man and a couple of them were, but that was all, you were all with women really. So that was fine. And then I didn't struggle with the whole being a woman in the army until I started doing my training. I came across my sergeant and my warrant officer who very much didn't like women being in the army. They were very much "It's a man's world and men should be doing it". There were comments like "You run like a girl. You do this like a girl". And wanting you to be more masculine. If you showed any sort of femininity it was a weakness. And they very much bullied the girls actually. There were me and two other girls who they seemed to just take a dislike to and they would give us a hard time just over silly things. We would get a much harder time than the boys.

NM So how did that manifest itself?

CH One of the things which comes to mind is we were doing a fitness test while we were at university. I passed mine. It was only by ten seconds but I passed. And one of the lads failed. He didn't finish. We were both taken into the office. And I was given a big dressing down: "This isn't good enough. 10 seconds to pass isn't good enough. You need to improve". And the lad's was all "Oh well, never mind. It's fine. You know, you'll get better."

NM You could see then, right there in the room.

CH Yeah actually in the room, because it was the army guys who were saying this. The medical service is very tri-service so there were a couple of RAF guys in the room and they were just gobsmacked--"What was going on?". And it happened a few times. I would do well on assignments. If I didn't achieve my usual standard I was told off whereas the boys probably wouldn't have had the same treatment.

NM So how did that make you feel?

CH It's quite frustrating because you just... I cannot be a man. I can't be that. And you know they would say things like and I remember them saying to my friend once "You know your face is too girly" and she was like "I cannot do anything about my face". Yeah so it's quite frustrating that there's still... And it was quite bizarre at the time that there was such a resistance to women being in that environment, particularly a medical environment, where a lot of my friends were nurses, so you think you're in a very female environment but then the men were like well you still don't belong here. I joined up in 2008 and you would think those attitudes would have changed by then but they totally hadn't where I was. But with some people it had. The RAF guys were like "This is silly". But yeah, the people in charge of me...

NM But they had a problem with your accent, initially.

CH Yeah, it was very strange but yeah the accent thing came up again. We were training in Birmingham so I was like everyone had an accent around here. But they would laugh at it and make fun of it. That's part of the reason I don't have it anymore because people higher up would always be like "Why are you talking like that? We can't understand you". It was always an issue. Even when I joined the army it became an issue with people higher up.

NM Was some of that prejudice -- was that older men?

CH Yes.

NM OK.

CH Yeah. I had particular problems... there were like three of them: a sergeant, a staff sergeant, and a staff officer. All of them older and two of them particularly were older men. They did a lot of crazy things. My mum actually worked at the university in a totally different department, nothing to do with what I was doing. But they knew where she worked and they knew of her. And they would go and talk to her and they would tell her I've been out drinking, I've been doing this. My mum was very cool about it, she was like "Well I don't care. She's eighteen, nineteen, and she's doing what she's doing". And they told her where I was being posted before I knew so she phoned me and she said "You're going to Cyprus. Why didn't you tell me?" And I was like "I'm not going to Cyprus. What are you talking about?" So they would go round and tell her things and...

NM What was the point of that? They were just trying to intimidate you in some way?

CH Yeah I think so. They did it a lot. There was actually a guy who was a bit higher up and I went and told him and I was like "They're going to talk to my mum. They're not phoning anyone else's parents. Just because she's here they shouldn't go and talk to her". And he spoke to them about it and said "You can't be doing this". But then the guy who had been doing it brought in our entire cohort, of course, sat down, and addressed it in front of everybody. And he said "Private...". I was Walker at the time. That was my maiden name. And he said "Private Walker has brought this up about us talking to her mum" just in front of everybody. And sort of humiliated me in front of everyone. And it was always little things like that and it was constant things. And because the ODP card was very small, there's about ninety in the entire British army, so everyone knows everyone. And I got there and they said

“Oh we’ve heard about you”. My name had sort of got there already and “We’ve heard all these stories about you”--a lot of which were untrue. It just kind of followed me everywhere. It was quite difficult.

NM So does this eventually end up with you leaving. So this was partly why you left? And also health issues?

CH Yeah, partly, yeah. I started to have mental health problems because of the job that I was doing. My father was very ill when I was younger and they thought that it had triggered a PTSD response to when my dad was ill which spiralled into a lot of other things. And I remember the psychiatrists saying to me “We can deal with this and you can be well but unless they can move you away from these people then we don’t think you will be able to sustain this”. Because... I mean they would do things like, the guy who was in Portsmouth, he would phone and email the mental health nurses and badger them to tell them what’s wrong with me because I wouldn’t disclose it. I wouldn’t tell them what’s going on. And they were civilians, the mental health nurses, and they got phone calls every day, like “We need to know what’s happening. Why’s she there? What’s going on?” And they were great--they refused to tell them. And there was no way for me to get away from those people.

NM So they were never disciplined?

CH No. No when I went to the field hospital, there was a really great sergeant there who I was good friends with and he tried. Because you get reports every year and they’d written me a really bad report that would mean I basically wouldn’t get promoted for years. So he tried to help me lodge a complaint but everything had been done so sneakily. It had been done verbally or telephone calls that there was no way to prove it. They tried really hard but there was no way to prove it. There were a couple of other girls that had the same thing but we could just never prove what was happening so yeah they kind of got away with it. In fact, I think two of the guys were made officers a few years later.

NM Right.

CH Yeah. I think they have only just left the forces so yeah it all carried on as normal. But it wasn’t an unusual story. They’d done it to two other girls in that unit and those two girls think that it had happened to a few other women as well. I don’t think it had happened to any of the boys, so... yeah. But it was just this cluster of men doing it. It was very very strange. But yeah, no way to discipline them about it.

NM So what was it like to leave?

CH It was weird. In the end, it was a relief. I was quite glad to get away from it but I was almost abandoned with it as well. So I left and then you go through... when you get medically discharged, it’s a very long process. You have to wait to go to a medical board for it all to be made official. That took about five months. And then to actually leave is like another six months and you can’t work in that time. So I just went home and didn’t have any contact with anybody. They were supposed to help me with resettlement and stuff but I didn’t get anything. They just sort of left me at home. So it was kind of a relief to get away from it but also I had wanted to join the military from about thirteen, fourteen--so for it to be over

was quite a shock, and I was like well what do I do now? That was my only career plan and I now have nothing else. What do I do now? I struggled for that whole year when I left. Well I don't know what to do now. This is what I wanted to be from a teenager. And it's all gone. And my husband--well he was my boyfriend at the time--was still in. He was still in that world, so he was in Colchester so if I visited him I was still back in that environment and stuff. So yeah, a lot of mixed emotions when I left really.

NM When did you start writing?

CH When I was going through with the mental health team.

NM Oh so they encouraged you to write?

CH Yeah they did. It was one particular nurse actually. I kept saying "I was fine. I'm fine. There's nothing wrong. It's fine". Because I had a hard time even admitting something was wrong. The doctors weren't very supportive of it. I finally got to the mental health team and I kept going "I'm fine, there's nothing wrong. Just send me back to work. It's fine." And they were like "Well you need to write about it. If you're not going to talk to us will you write it down?" So I did. I thought I'm going to write poetically then you won't understand what I'm saying.

NM So it was a deliberate choice?

CH Yeah it was. I'm going to hide everything and if I write it in this poetic way you can interpret what you want from that. And she said to me "You write quite well". And I said I've never thought of that before. She said "Well look, you might be looking at having to find a new career so literature could be a way to go". And so I just kind of ran with it. I was like right, go and do my English Literature degree and stuff. So yeah, it started there and it started as a way to kind of talk about what was happening but also hiding as well, very much hiding from it.

NM And then you did a masters?

CH I did. So when I left when I was twenty-two, I went and did my BA in English Language and Literature with the Open University. And then I think it must have been like two or three years and then I started to find the MA and decided that I really did want to write but I didn't really know what I was doing.

NM So you didn't write about military experience in the MA?

CH No. No, not at all. I kind of... like I was saying the other day after I left, I didn't really want to talk about it. In fact, I didn't want to write about it even personally, not even in journals or anything. I threw out all my things, all my military things. I actually only stayed friends with two other people from the military. I kind of cut myself off from it entirely.

NM And you say you also lost friends when you would come back periodically when you were still in...

CH Yeah, yeah I lost a lot of civilian friends from that. I think actually when I joined up, I was with someone. I'd got a boyfriend at the time. And sort of after a year after I'd joined up it ended because he was like "You've changed too much. I don't know who you are". I remember my mum and dad saying "You're changing and we don't know if it's a good thing or a bad thing but this doesn't seem to be who you are". And a lot of my friends at the time said that. We just sort of... not so much they went off and ignored me but we distanced ourselves. And I did lose a lot of people because people were like "You're not who we knew before". But since my mum and dad have said "Oh you seem to be coming back round to who you were before you went in", which is quite interesting. They were like "You seem to have gone full circle and back to who you were before you left".

NM So is that something you would like to write about or would you still prefer not to write about?

CH I think it would probably be good to write about. I think it's quite hard to think about those things. Leading up to coming on the workshop, I was speaking to my husband, and I was like "Oh I'm a bit nervous. I've not talked about this for a long time and you know how am I going to write about it and stuff." I think there are things that I could explore with the writing and unpack those sort of things. There's a lot there that would I think produce quite good writing so maybe it is time to look back and look at these things.

NM Do you think poetry is a particularly good way of doing that?

CH Yeah.

NM You've already had experience of using poetry in kind of oblique ways to...

CH Yeah, well I think that's what I've found with poetry. You can hide behind it. I think in prose you're a bit more open and you have to have a bit more clarity whereas poetry you can write what you want to say but people will interpret it different ways and people will look at it and relate it to their own experience or something else. So you can stand back and have a bit of a guard with poetry I think, in a way that you don't get with prose. Like if you were writing a memoir, you have to be very honest and very straightforward. With poetry, you can be oblique and vague but still explore that emotion enough for yourself.

NM So would that be good for both people who know the subject we're talking about but also I guess the general public who would be able to access that but interpret it differently?

CH Yeah, I think it can be quite a good bridge because then if you can manage to write about something and they can look at it and go "Well you know what, I haven't been there and done that, but I know what this feeling is and I felt that way". And I think that can be the connection. It's the feeling rather than where you felt it and how you felt it. Because I think people face bullying in workplaces and not just in the military and there is sexism and everything else in all sorts of jobs. And I think if you look at that in poetry, a lot of people will look at it and say "OK I get that".

NM What do you think is the place of the female veteran in British society?

CH I think people still.. from my experience people still see it as men. I think it's changed. I think it is changing and I think, with the fact that they're letting women... women are going into infantry roles now. A woman has just passed out of P company. It is changing and their views are changing. I think if you asked people what an image of a veteran is they'd probably still see a man rather than a woman. I think it will take a long time for that to change really.

NM Do you think there'll be something particular that might change it?

CH I think it's just time. I think. And it's you know like my son's generation will grow up knowing that women did it. I grew up with my grandfather's story and it was men whereas my son will grow up and listen to women being in the military. So I think as long as you talk to people about the fact that you know our women are going out and doing these jobs as well then it will stick. You do still find... one of my cousins who is a lot younger than me--he's about fifteen years younger--I remember him first finding out that I had been in the army and he was like you know "Girl's don't do that. Girls aren't soldiers. What are you talking about?" which is quite interesting because he was only about eight at the time. This wasn't long ago. Yeah so you'd hope people will talk about it and I think that's the only way it will change. But it's whether people do talk about it. You are seeing more women in the media so hopefully that will change it as well.

NM Well, I'm really grateful to you for speaking about it, particularly the more difficult stuff as well, so thank you, Claire, very much.

CH Yeah, cool.