CAREERS

Role model: Ian Nesbitt

Anne Gulland

London

Anne Gulland speaks to Ian Nesbitt, a consultant in anaesthesia and critical care at Freeman Hospital, Newcastle Upon Tyne. When the World Trade Center was destroyed on 11 September 2001 Ian Nesbitt knew life was about to change. As an army reservist, Nesbitt was about to go on a military training exercise to Oman. When he arrived in the Gulf state, the Americans were using the British army camp as a base to bomb Afghanistan.

“There was a feeling that we could have got on a plane to go to Afghanistan at any time,” he says.

His next tour of duty was to Kosovo on what was essentially a peacekeeping mission. It brought with it, however, a new level of responsibility. “Someone got shot in the head in Pristina and we had quite a discussion about the flight and transfer. That wouldn’t have happened on an exercise,” he says.

In 2003 Nesbitt was deployed to the Middle East—starting in Kuwait and ending up in Basra, Iraq. He then did two tours of duty in Afghanistan in 2007 and 2010, stationed at Camp Bastion, the large allied base. In 2007 the camp was a collection of tents but by his second tour it was home to up to 10 000 British military personnel and its hospital was as well equipped as any in the UK. Nesbitt’s job was a mixture of anaesthetics, intensive care, and working as a member of the helicopter based medical emergency response team.

“You get in the helicopter and you don’t know who you’re picking up. It could be one patient, five patients—it could be civilians, it could be children. There would be extra bullet holes in the helicopter when you got back to camp. It was quite exciting,” he says.

Nesbitt’s wife, a GP, and three children were at home and he says that they probably had the toughest job. “One of the things that is not understood about the military is how hard it is for the people left behind. When I went to Kosovo we had just had our third baby who was only a few weeks old. My wife was at home on her own with three children under five,” he says.

Nesbitt was born in Northern Ireland to English parents, which meant he was slightly removed from some of the sectarian

politics. However, the Troubles were a constant presence—helicopters were often overhead and buildings were barricaded to prevent car bombs.

He studied at Newcastle University and was set on a career in ophthalmology until he did a rotation in anaesthetics. “Within three weeks I thought this was absolutely the right thing for me. I loved the immediacy of doing something and seeing a result straight away. You can save a life with a relatively straightforward intervention,” he says.

Apart from a stint in Australia and New Zealand, Nesbitt has spent most of his career in Newcastle. His employers have always been supportive of his military responsibilities and his current trust has benefited from his experience.

“I’m the lead for major incident planning, which I wouldn’t have been able to do without my military training,” he says.

The difference between civilian and battlefield medicine is stark, says Nesbitt, who found it hard to adjust to the slow pace of work back in the UK.

“I work with a very good team here in Newcastle but it’s not up to the tempo of Bastion. Things don’t happen instantly so it was clinically frustrating,” he says.

Nesbitt was medically retired from the army in 2013 and is mulling over his future. “Government policy means that for people like me our next move will probably be retirement. The NHS has changed a lot in recent years. In 2017 I went to Afghanistan with a charity so I may do something like that, or work with a group like Médecins Sans Frontières,” he says.

Nominated by Chris Yates

“Ian has balanced being both an army reservist and a medical consultant in a busy acute hospital, and has achieved a lot from the two.

“As a reservist, Ian has been deployed on operations to Kosovo, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Using the experiences gained from these conflicts he has helped to develop major incident planning within the Newcastle region and recently returned to Afghanistan in a civilian role to help improve and deliver anaesthetic services within the country.”

Chris Yates is a year two foundation trainee in emergency medicine at Northumbria Specialist Emergency Care Hospital

Figure

[Image: Ian Nesbitt. Credit: Lorne Campbell/Guzelian]