

Serving in the Combined Cadet Force as an Adult

Volunteer

Captain Graham Naismith

Eight years ago, I was an active member of the school's PTA when a request came in from then Captain Aimee Reynolds to support a CCF activity at the school. A stand selling tea, drinks, crisps stand – that sort of thing.

We met at St Johns Yard for an initial chat together with then Lieutenant Ian Patterson. I woke up the following day with a headache and a King's shilling in my pocket. What happened in between is very vague.

When your kids are at primary school, you are intrinsically involved in almost all their life. What happens in the evenings and weekends is dictated by you and your partner and they follow along. Within a few years of being in double figures, things change and a gap can develop, one that is healthy and helps promote independence. But it's quite rapid and you can very quickly lose commonality with your kids. As a father of three, at this time my eldest was in Year 8 and would, like many others, be signing up to CCF in the following fall.

So I saw cadets as being something of a bridge so that when she returned from these weekend camps and my wife was given a grunt and a load of dirty washing, I'd have a clearer idea of what they'd done and common ground to discuss. Naturally, I didn't want to intrude but my Hannah was fine with it so I signed up. But it became a bit more than that.

Fast forward a year and I'm lying in a ditch with Hannah's French teacher, rapidly firing a weapon as troops are advancing. Fast forward two years and I'm with my wife at a Buckingham Palace Garden Party for cadet staff with the Queen in attendance. And there's lots more. But these personal experiences are bonuses. As cliched as it sounds, it's about seeing bright, caring and sometimes scared kids grow. We teach them to lead and lead they do.

CCF made me fall in love with teaching and I seriously considered a career change. I put time into my lessons and got out what I put in. I developed a structured syllabus for First Aid and Navigation that senior cadets can pick up and deliver better than me.

And my fellow staff were great and really supportive. Teaching the same lesson 5 times in a row can suck the life out of you but we were all in the same boat as we sat down together at the end of day's camp and shared a beer together.

But overall I found a place that had the same values that I'd always aspired to but didn't realise. Courage, Discipline, Respect for Others, Integrity, Loyalty and Selfless Commitment are the 6 core values of the army and not just something we pay lip service to in CCF. Yes, they learn great skills – how to save a life, strip and fire a real gun, learn to navigate with a compass, survival skills, eating and sleeping outside becomes 2nd nature and heaps more. They push themselves beyond what they

thought they were capable of and come out their shell. The current conventional education system recognises certain individuals and arguably makes others feel insignificant. Seeing some of those otherwise barely noticeable individuals excel and climb to the very top in CCF is so rewarding.

But it is those values that are ultimately what they learn and leave with. And as a dad it's a really good pillar of support so it's not just me preaching about these things – others support them as well. I would encourage any parent to give it a try. Whilst we'd be delighted to have someone with 20+ years military experience we'll look at anyone and what they need to do. Helping every Monday although really useful, isn't a prerequisite nor is knowledge of the areas that you might want to teach in. We have courses for that. Our cadet unit is entirely voluntary and that's key – you're helping people that want to be there.

Time wise, the commitment can vary tremendously so it's difficult to put a figure on it. If you want to

be commissioned (become an officer), you need to do a week's initial basic training at Frimley which, for me, was one of the best weeks I've had. It wasn't an "up at 6am for inspection type course" but it gave me the cadet experience – all the things the cadet knows, we were taught and I'm still in touch with many who were on that.

All three of my kids went through cadets and I'm now moving on after a calling from a higher deity (my wife). So it's with a heavy heart that I say goodbye to some amazing experiences and friends for life but with the rallying call of "give it a shot – you might be surprised".