

‘Just because they wear a uniform and are prepared to go to war doesn’t mean to say they can face everyday actions’

David Fitzgerald

Meets Falklands veteran Simon Weston on a visit to Devon



SIMON Weston CBE, Falklands veteran, who has been in Devon to see plans for a new veterans’ facility, took the time to talk to me about his own background and the very different approach to care for the services back in the 1980s.

I had to ask him, what was on offer back in 1982 after he was injured?

“There was very little available to us after the conflict,” he said, reflecting on the situation. “These ‘hubs’ are a modern idea and are very important especially to veterans who feel isolated. It gives them the chance to communicate with people of their own ilk.

“They are also vital to pass on information and assistance to a very large part of the community... ex-services. They can give the right advice, tell people what they are entitled to, advise on financial and health matters and are there to ‘just’ to talk.

“Sitting down and sharing a cuppa and experiences, talking about those life changing moments from similar situations is a great way to unburden. Look, just because they wear a uniform and are prepared to go to war doesn’t mean to say that they can face everyday actions. That is not the case, they need help and guidance like everyone else and I am delighted to see places being set aside for the services.”

On June 8, 1982, Simon was on the RFA Sir Galahad in Port Pleasant near Fitzroy, just off the Falkland Islands. It came under fire from Argentine Skyhawks during the Bluff Cove air attacks and was hit by a 500lb bomb. The ship was carrying ammunition as well as phosphorus bombs and thousands of gallons of fuel. Out of his platoon of 30 men, 22 were killed. Simon survived with 46 per cent burns.

He is impressed by the new hubs. “These military hubs are very new. The breakfast clubs, the meeting rooms and the veteran networks in general have only started to appear recently. Nobody seemed to care back in my day, especially if you were returning from the Falklands or Northern Ireland, there was no structure in place to deal with a very different life on civvy street. The military pension people visited you but there was little communication, no compensation and we couldn’t claim for anything like hearing loss from that period.”

I am surprised and double check, there was no payout for what happened to him?

“No! I had my army pension, which they tried to advise me not to take



Falklands veteran Simon Weston has spoken to broadcaster, writer and podcaster David Fitzgerald © Matt Austin

and to accept a £30,000 lump sum instead. I did not accept that, and I will admit that I have now had more than the offered ‘lump figure’.

“I am not sure why they tried to get me to take the ‘payoff’, maybe they

thought I wasn’t going to survive. I would have been in real trouble if I had not got that pension in place because let’s face it, when I left the army, I was not fit to be employed by anyone. But I have made a lot of op-

portunities and have been very lucky along the way, but for a lot of guys it has not been the case which is why these hubs are vital to help people along the way. There is a real need. It should have governmental

and/or MOD support, highly unlikely, but there are so many issues that can be tackled by this sort of organisation.”

One of the most poignant moments of his arrival back in the UK from the Falklands in 1982 was his entry into the transit hospital at RAF Lyneham. Simon was wheeled past his mother and grandmother. His mother, Pauline, exclaimed: “Oh mam, look at that poor boy.” When Simon answered: “Mam, it’s me!” her face turned to stone and she later recalled that her legs went from underneath her.

“That was an horrendous moment. Because of the trauma I had gone from 16 stone to just eight! I was blind for a while, my heart stopped, the dressings had fused to my body and to cap it all, the aircraft which was taking me home... the engine fell off as we screamed down the runway! Just call me lucky. To date I have had 97 operations, the most recent was on my eyes, last year. The scarring hardens and I have difficulty closing my eyes.”

Simon admits that he loves to visit Devon and thinks of it as a second home.

“Glamorgan is my favourite county, that’s where I was born and I have just been made a deputy lieutenant of Gwent which has been a great honour but to get away and enjoy natural beauty and a lovely welcome, Devon is the place to come.

“The last time I was down here I ran into the stretcher bearer who carried me into the field hospital on that day. We were at Newton Abbot racecourse and the Band of The Rifles were playing and a very familiar face was grinning at me.

“Gary Halsey, who lives locally and had been a Royal Marine, picked me up after I got off the Galahad. He tried to get me through the door of the hospital, but it was too narrow, so he tipped the stretcher... I fell off. Like an idiot I got on again and he did it again!”

He laughs at the ridiculous situation.

“I walked in after that. It was great to see him, but I did remind him that he dropped me twice.”

I ask Simon what he is doing now. “Lots of things in business and the media. I am just finishing a celebrity Antiques Roadshow programme.

“I can’t tell you anymore about it as I don’t know when it is going out or when we are filming the auction... or where...”

“I am not teasing you; I just haven’t been told. Life is interesting at the moment; one chapter is coming to an end, and another is about to start.”

Simon will be back in Devon in September to support fundraising for PL1 Civvy Street, the new military centre in Plymouth which will serve the armed forces family of Devon and provide the sort of support that Simon rates so highly.



Simon Weston is never too far away from the armed forces family he treasures