

MEAN ON MONDAY

with Citizen Editor Ian Mean

GLOUCESTER has a long history of support for the military, and I hope we can throw our support around a really innovative project to help our Armed Forces' veterans.

Those veterans could have been out of service for ten or 15 years but they might only have been on active service for a relatively short time.

But a growing number of these men – fresh from fighting in Iraq or Afghanistan – often find life back in civvy street just too much to handle.

There are heart-breaking stories of soldiers who end up sleeping in cars with all their possessions.

Lesley Bradshaw, at The Rifles office at The Soldiers of Gloucester Museum, at Gloucester Docks, deals with these sad cases and writes poignantly on this page about the stresses they often experience when they leave the Forces.

I found her words particularly moving. They illustrate why we need to do more for those veterans who find it difficult to cope once out of uniform.

Many are damaged but not actually physically wounded. Some, as Lesley writes, are suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Some have alcohol and drug-related problems which have led to them leaving their families. Some of these veterans find themselves having to go to Gloucester's excellent Night Shelter for a bed on a regular basis.

Alabare is the Christian Care and Support charity behind the project to develop a home for these unfortunate ex-servicemen in Gloucester. It will cost around £60 000 a year to run but they are looking for an initial commitment of around £180 000.

The man leading the drive to give the charity a first home for the veterans in Gloucester is a distinguished soldier himself who served with great distinction in the Gloucestershire Regiment.

Brigadier Simon Firth CBE is a charismatic character who gets things done.

I met him last week at The Soldiers of Gloucester Museum where he was collecting support for the idea – he hopes to formally launch the fund-raising in the autumn.

"Some of these veterans might have left the Services ten or 15 years ago or just a few years ago," he tells me. "Some have found it quite difficult to fit back into society.

"Perhaps they became alienated from the family and would often spiral down into a chaotic lifestyle – often sofa surfing or living in a car.

"The very nature of regimental life is exactly that. They are fed, accommodated and the bills are paid – it is a very structured, organised and disciplined life. That is why

■ **INNOVATIVE PROJECT:** The Citizen's Editor Ian Mean at The Soldiers of Gloucestershire Museum, Gloucester Docks, with Brigadier Simon Firth CBE.



Let's give hope and honour to veterans

Ian talks to Brigadier Simon Firth CBE

our Armed Forces are so completely outstanding because they operate within this disciplined regimental environment.

"I am particularly interested in Gloucester because I was in the Gloucestershire Regiment. Here there are a number of veterans who are living rough – that is why we want to open up an Alabare Gloucester Home for Veterans to give those in need a safe and secure place."

The plan in Gloucester is to eventually have one intensive home and one move-on home. Most of the veterans, with the

help of Alabare, are able to get back on their feet within six months and move back to a normal life.

And that is why I think that companies wishing to put something back into the community could well support this project.

To see one of these veterans go back to a normal life, fit and well to cope, possibly with a job also being arranged through Alabare, would seem exceptional value for a donation of around £6,000.

Quite obviously, to raise

something like £180,000 will not be easy in this climate and Simon Firth and his team of influential helpers will be going to various trusts with their proposition.

But it does seem to me that this is an ongoing cause which may well appeal to companies in the county wishing to make a real difference to veterans' lives.

As has been said recently by several leading military men, the whole issue of Services veterans fitting back into normal life is very much a ticking time-bomb.

It will not be defused either when we finally withdraw from Afghanistan, for instance.

Homes like that proposed in Gloucester will provide hope, honour and respect for these veterans.

When men cry out in the night suffering from the effects of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, we must listen.

After all, they risked the ultimate sacrifice. And while not wounded, many of these men are damaged in their minds. The least we can do is to help them back to lead a normal life.

If you can help Simon Firth in his battle, you can contact Alabare through their chief executive, Andrew Lord by contacting him at a.lord@alabare.co.uk or telephone him on 01722-333946.

Facts at a glance



Alabare Christian Care and Support was born out of Alabare Christian Community.

Its work began in 1985 when the community was first asked to provide accommodation for a homeless man.

Now Alabare has more than 40 projects working with the homeless, or those at risk of being on the streets. It also helps ex-offenders, former servicemen and women, people with drug and alcohol issues, vulnerable women, people with learning disabilities and mental health problems.

■ Support: Alabare Homes for Veterans

They need our support

A VETERAN of HM Forces can feel total abandonment once they have been discharged into civilian life. RHQs and County Offices help where they can but many veterans chose to try and cope on their own as they are too proud to admit they are having problems. Having led a regimented life for many years, soldiers miss the structure and the deep regimental family ethos that unless you have served you would never truly understand.

Many men and women cannot cope with civilian life for a variety of reasons and hence a number of issues become apparent once they leave the 'care' of the forces, particularly now with the operational tours that many men and women have undergone since the first troubles in Northern Ireland to the present day in Afghanistan.

There is a high percentage of marriage and relationship breakdowns either just prior or just after a man is discharged from the Forces. Single men are often the lowest priority on the council list and many are not eligible to be housed for a number of years so are offered temporary hostel type accommodation which many,

as you will understand, will turn down. Sofa surfing is a term that many ex-Forces use when they move about from friend to friend as they look for work to raise the deposit to rent a home. Some are not so lucky, even sleeping in tents, sleeping rough and in their cars. One former Corporal in the Forest of Dean, having been made homeless, lived in his car, with all his possessions.

He could not recline on the front seat because all his possessions were kept in the car so slept in a football pitch dug out and used a local stream to wash in. After several months of this, and suffering with severe depression, he decided to take his own life, thankfully, though, he was found in time and pulled through. He just could not cope with life in general and now sees a woman from the Mental Health Team.

Several months after this, his car was towed away together with all his possessions and it was crushed. He lost everything. But, with the support of a good family and friends, he is now in a job and has a roof over his head with his parents. This former veteran is typical of many but some are not so fortunate and do end up taking their own lives. Several veterans are known to live in tents in various woods dotted about this county and beyond. Many are living in squalid conditions in houses that should be condemned. They have no alternative being single men on low incomes and many, as already mentioned, are sofa surfing. A high proportion of veterans end up serving a prison sentence and have a range of issues. These are the people we need to help in order that they may not re-offend. Many soldiers are suffering with Post Traumatic Stress disorder which often does not manifest itself until years later and many are scared to admit they even suffer with PTSD. Some I know, who have served out in Afghanistan, cannot bear bonfire night as they suffer from nightmares and have to deal with anxiety problems constantly. Even the backfiring of a car can set a guy back. Some turn to drugs or drink and even become violent which, prior to them seeing active service, would have been unheard of.

These guys need support and structure in their lives which the Forces gives them. Sadly, this is not followed through into civilian life. Many hide issues that need to be ironed out and hopefully irradiated to a degree. Alabare Homes have the trained staff and resources to help these veterans out and hopefully with the support of the public these resources can be met.

Lesley Bradshaw
Chief Clerk,
Rifles Office



Have your say. Write to The Editor, The Citizen, 6-8 The Oxeboe, Gloucester GL1 1RZ e-mail: citizen.letters@glosmedia.co.uk or log on