



Personal Profile: Danny Nelson — Support Services Manager — RNZRSA

This article was originally published as a segment in VA News.

 Read the full edition of VA News Summer 2021 (<https://www.veteransaffairs.mil.nz/assets/VA-News/VA-News-2021-Edition-4-Summer.pdf>) 

It wasn't an auspicious start to my military career. It began when I went truant with some mates from high school to sign up for the Army in 1991 as Regular Force cadets.

Then I found out that I was the only one accepted for it. The idea of a career in the NZDF didn't take hold immediately and it took a while before I felt an actual passion for it.

This may have been because of my naivety in selecting the infantry as my corps of choice, especially during basic when realising I actually had to dig holes in the ground to live in. However, I persevered becoming an adequate infantryman and after five years, I had my first deployment overseas to Bosnia, a country where I learned at the tender age of 22 how people can be so different from what I grew up with in New Zealand.

Bosnia opened my eyes up to ethnic conflicts and also to the strain of peacekeeping operations, where you've got certain rules to follow in how you try to keep two sides apart to establish peace and reconciliation, and there was no guarantee of success. Coming back from Bosnia it hit me that despite all the difficulties and tragedy that I'd seen and all that I had done over there, for my fellow New Zealanders their life went on as normal with barely a blip. For me it took me a while to adjust back to the routine of mundane life, despite being in anything but a mundane job.

Having lived the dream of an infantry deployment overseas I decided to have a crack at a role within Intelligence, where 2/1 battalion had just established company level Intelligence operators. This was my dream job with a mix of infantry field dynamics and cerebral intelligence work. I enjoyed knowing what was going on at every level, retaining the camaraderie I found in the infantry with the variety of intelligence work. In short, I had found my niche. Not soon after I changed corps to intelligence and over the next seven years got posted to different units and deployed to East Timor and Afghanistan in intelligence roles.

After 12 years in the NZDF, I felt that it was time to leave. So in 2003 I bid farewell and transitioned out of the military.

This transition was fairly smooth because of two things. Firstly, I had started my mental journey to transition out of the military back in 2001 (after my deployment to East Timor). This allowed me to get used to the idea and to make sure that this was indeed the right thing to do.

Secondly, I had a plan. Even though I liked my intelligence work, I had out-grown the NZDF organisation and wanted new challenges, so I thought, “How do I do intelligence work as a civilian employee in a government strategic role?” Answer: get an academic qualification. So off to university I went with my superannuation payment in hand. As with all things in life the easy ride of transition hit a few speed bumps. I found the university life a challenge to my sense of order and professionalism. I found numerous examples of students and staff who were not exactly dedicated to giving their best performance in the academic arena, and this irked me. I also missed the regular income and benefits of military life both tangible and intangible. Luckily for me I soon had another job, this time with the Police.

The quasi paramilitary culture of the Police was a comfortable fit for me. Here, despite being a non-sworn member or in modern parlance a Police employee, I enjoyed the camaraderie of the uniform police staff where my military background was an asset.

I was part of the Organised Crime Group (OCU) and enjoyed the pace and work, where the purpose and goal of the unit was very clear. It was there I realised just how much being in the NZDF had given me in terms of hard and soft skills. I could brief and ‘deploy’ with the unit to a drugs warrant, comfortably make safe firearms found, and find things of court and intelligence value. But my soft skills of leadership, initiative and work ethic were also valued and used as well. Though my roles changed as time went on in the Police, from analyst to supervisor and manager, I found that my military background stood me in good stead wherever and whatever I needed it.

Why the long-winded speech about my military service and the time after it? As overseas research has shown, good transition from the military leads to better all-round health and wellbeing for our ex-service people, and that is at the core of what I want for all our veterans. As part of my current role as the Support Service Manager for the RNZRSA I attend transition courses for NZDF personnel to let them know we are there to help, but more importantly I try to pass on nuggets of information to avoid poor transition from the military service.

While RSA Support Services focuses on the needs of the service person, I would sooner have ex-service people and their family healthy and well on their own terms without the need for our help and good transition is fundamental to this.

Date

26 January 2022

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Last Modified: 26 January 2022