

From combat to college

by Graham Grant

AS an SAS soldier, Colin MacLachlan lived in a world of constant danger where his life was at risk every second of the day. But after he was captured by opposition forces in Iraq, he decided a change of pace was needed and returned to Scotland to study creative writing at college.

The two career paths could hardly be further apart but at least his war-time experiences gave the 35-year-old a fund of valuable material.

He recently completed a full-time, one-year Arts and Humanities Award at Newbattle Abbey College in Dalkeith, Midlothian, Scotland's only adult education residential college.

As well as creative writing, the course covers history, ecology, psychology, politics, sociology, English literature, communications, computing and maths. Mr MacLachlan is now preparing to start a history course at Edinburgh University.

The former soldier, who lives in Edinburgh, signed up for the Army after leaving school at the age of 15 with no qualifications. He had always planned to stay in the Army and 17 years ago he moved into the 22 SAS Regiment.

But two years ago his plans changed dramatically. He explains: 'I was on duty with the SAS in Basra when we came under attack and I was captured by opposition forces.'

'I was lucky enough to escape unharmed but this experience really made me re-evaluate my life. I began to see things from a differ-

ent perspective and decided to leave the SAS.'

'I didn't really have an education at school, so I made the decision that I was going to pursue this.'

Around the same time as Mr MacLachlan decided to leave the SAS, Stewart Cavanagh, 23, was also contemplating his future in the Army.

Both men, whose paths had previously crossed on duty in Baghdad, had no idea they were both starting the same course at the same college - until they came face-to-face in class.

Mr Cavanagh, who has lived in Earlston, Berwickshire, for most of his life, also left school as a young man and had signed up for the Army by the time he was 16. He

says: 'I had been in the Army for six years before deciding to leave and return to education. My brother was at university and I guess that inspired me.'

'I tried to get straight into university but was told I needed some kind of access course. I looked at various courses available before deciding on Newbattle.'

'Living and working in the same place really appeals to me - I suppose it reminds me a bit of Army barracks.'

Students can study Newbattle Abbey College's Arts and Humanities Award on a full-time or part-time basis. The SQA-validated course is specially tailored to grant access to a wide range of university programmes. The former soldiers'

stories illustrate the important role colleges play in helping people change the direction of their lives - particularly in a recession, when many are forced to switch careers.

Universities are recording an upsurge in the numbers of former bankers looking to join postgraduate courses so they can re-train in more secure industries.

Edinburgh, Glasgow, St Andrews and Aberdeen universities have all reported significant increases in postgraduates, with popular courses including medicine, law and teaching. But others decide to change direction simply because they are fed up with their current jobs.

After working for several years in the film and theatre industries, 29-year-old Mark Shackleton

decided to leave it all behind and return to education to pursue his passion for writing.

Mr Shackleton signed up for the same course as Mr MacLachlan and Mr Cavanagh at Newbattle. He has now been accepted on to the BA (Hons) English with History course offered by Strathclyde University and Glasgow University.

BORN in Hertfordshire, Mr Shackleton spent most of his life in Australia after his family emigrated to Sydney when he was ten. On leaving secondary school, he decided to enrol at his local college and three years later achieved an acting diploma.

His acting led him back to the UK, where he eventually decided to follow his true calling in life and returned to education to develop his writing skills.

He said: 'I had become disillusioned with my life and what I was doing. I was becoming an avid reader and writer, so I decided to bite the bullet and apply to Newbattle to develop these skills further.'

'It was like giving into something that I've secretly known of for a while but hadn't done anything about.'

• For more information on Newbattle Abbey College courses, call 0131 663 1921 or email office@newbattleabbeycollege.ac.uk



SAS: Colin MacLachlan fought in Iraq, left

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NEWBATTLE ABBEY COLLEGE

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