

OPERATION CIVVI STREET

By Sally Churchward

When Darren Binns heard the distant wailing sound his body jolted into readiness. Was it a siren warning of another missile bombardment on the military base in Iraq? No, he let himself relax - it was just a car alarm.

The former RAF movements controller was no longer in danger - he was back home in the UK. Adjusting to the fact that his life is not under threat on a daily basis is one of the many changes Darren, of Southampton, has had to make over recent months. After more than five years active service he decided military life was no longer for him. It was a tough decision and although he is sure that it was the right one, that hasn't made adapting to a very different lifestyle any easier.

Darren, now 34, went into the RAF in his late 20s. With two older brothers in the military he had always been interested in joining up himself. But it wasn't until his relationship broke down that he decided to make the leap and join the RAF. As a movements controller Darren was part of a team who transported everything from troops to supplies to and from such countries as Iraq, Afghanistan, Cyprus, Lebanon and the USA, spending up to ten months a year overseas. He often found himself in extremely dangerous situations. A friend who was doing the same job as him was almost killed in a mortar attack which ripped his side open.

"The most frightening thing was when we were in Iraq getting mortared," he says. "We had something like 400 rocket attacks on the base in the space of three weeks. It was that intense, you thought 'I'm going to die here'. They'd get louder and louder and closer and closer." The planes Darren was flying in were frequently shot at when they were coming into land and taking off.

"On one occasion we were taking off and we came under mortar attack. The pilot had to keep going round and round the runway. You'd think 'Oh my God, we're a big sitting target here.'" Darren decided he wanted to leave the RAF after he met Lucy, now his fiancée, and realised that he wanted more stability than his RAF life offered. "I thought 'I want a relationship over the job now,'" Darren says.

"Going away all the time, it's hard to keep a relationship going and I'd seen so many of my colleagues split up from their partners. I didn't want to get to the stage where I was married with children and was missing my child's first birthday or Christmas." Because of the nature of his job, Darren's leave was frequently cancelled and he and Lucy couldn't plan when they were going to spend time together.

Darren had begun thinking about handing in his notice when two of his friends did the same thing in November 2007 and after he met Lucy he decided to do it.

"It was a very difficult decision, giving up a secure job, travel, things like that. When I joined, it was what I wanted, but having done them and meeting someone, my priorities changed."

Darren has been on termination leave since March and is now adjusting to a very different pace of life. "We've bought a house here in Southampton because it's close to Lucy's work but moving here, I've separated myself from all my colleagues. You're used to working with people 24 hours a day, seven days a week, with all your mates looking out for you - all that



camaraderie. You go from that to having nothing so it's a massive culture shock and I feel I've lost a lot of confidence. I've been surprised by the loneliness.

"It's also hard to adjust to not having all the rules and structure. Your life's not mapped out for you anymore." Darren also misses the excitement that military life gave him. "When you're in RAF situations, you're hyped up. You don't get that in 'Civilian Street'. I can't get a rush like I got when I was there. It sounds strange but I miss that. I wouldn't want to go back and experience it again, but I do miss it."

That said, there are plenty of positives to Darren's change of lifestyle. "The best thing is not having to fear anymore - wondering if I get on a plane and go somewhere I might never come back. And I can plan my life now. Lucy has noticed I'm a lot calmer now. I could never relax before - I was always waiting for the phone to ring to say I had to go off somewhere."

Darren has started to make friends in the area and is also working towards a trade - he is training to be a plumber on a New Career Skills course.

He hopes that as well as providing an income this will offer some of the structured variety that he is missing since leaving the RAF. "I've always liked doing DIY. Plumbing is something that interests me and at the time that I decided to do the course there was a demand for plumbers. I like the idea of going into people's homes and meeting different people rather than going to the same place and seeing the same faces every day."

He has also used his new-found free time to get into a new hobby - cycling, spend more time on his motorbike and is enjoying the freedom to eat healthily rather than having three meals a day set in front of him.

Darren is looking forward to settling into civilian life - getting married, finishing his training and making more plans with Lucy. "I got fed up of the heat, the sand and the danger," he says. "I just didn't want that anymore."

Words and pictures reproduced by kind permission of
The Southern Daily Echo.