

AA

and the

Armed Services

Helpline: 0845 769 7555



Alcoholics Anonymous® is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism.

The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. There are no dues or fees for AA membership; we are self-supporting through our own contributions.

AA is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy; neither endorses nor opposes any causes.

Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety.

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AA and the Armed Services

“When World War II broke out, this spiritual principle had its first major test. AA’s entered the services and were scattered all over the world. Would they be able to take discipline, stand up under fire, and endure the monotony and misery of war? Would the kind of dependence they had learned in AA carry them through? Well, it did. They had even fewer alcoholic lapses or emotional binges than AA’s safe at home did. They were just as capable of endurance and valor as any other soldiers. Whether in Alaska or on the Salerno beachhead, their dependence upon a Higher Power worked, and far from being a weakness, this dependence was their chief source of strength.”

Reprinted from Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions

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Who has a drinking problem?

Few individuals in the Armed Forces, or any other walk of life for that matter, like to admit they have a problem with alcohol. "Not me," they say. Whether they are Army, Navy or Air Force personnel or their dependants, they say, "That's not what's the matter with me." It is their job that has gone wrong, or their health, or

For most people the word "alcoholic" is a distressing term, conjuring up images of park bench drinkers, tramps or any of a variety of people they are proud not to be. Their image of the alcoholic is so different from the way they see themselves it provides an excuse to go on drinking.

Every member of Alcoholics Anonymous understands this kind of thinking. Why? Because almost every member had the same thoughts. They have learned that denying there is a problem is part of the disease of alcoholism. It is a disease and described as such by both the British Medical Association and American Medical Association. Few individuals with a drinking problem, however, care if they have a disease or not: they just do not see how they can give up alcohol which, they feel has sustained them for so long. Giving up alcohol, they are convinced, is like giving up a best friend. This, too, is part of the problem.

This pamphlet will acquaint you with some of the men and women in the Armed Forces, from a wide variety of backgrounds, who want you to know how they came to grips with their common problem, alcoholism, and how fruitful their lives have become

since they became sober members of Alcoholics Anonymous. These stories, indeed all AA stories, illustrate that alcoholism comes in many disguises. There is no such thing as being too young, too old, too different or too special to be an alcoholic.

It is important to bear in mind that alcoholism is not determined by where you drink, how long, how much or even what you drink. The true test is in the answer to this question: What has alcohol done to you? If it has affected your relationship with your family, friends, former or present employer; if it has affected your health; if it determines or affects your non-drinking moods or your state of mind; if you have become preoccupied with alcohol, then it is likely you have a problem.

In the stories that follow, you will learn how a variety of men and women came to Alcoholics Anonymous and found it worked as well for them as it has for many thousands of others who suffered from the same drinking problems. They learned to change their lives, not by 'white-knuckling it', but through shared experiences with other members of AA.

They learned they were no longer alone.

Who is an AA member?

Any kind of man or woman, as the typical stories in this pamphlet will show, can be a member of AA. The illness of alcoholism can strike a person of any rank, any age, any race, any social, religious or educational background and any field of skill. The blackouts and the shakes, the loneliness and the fears are the same for a Private or a Chief

Petty Officer, a nurse or an Officer. To begin with, these shared experiences of active alcoholism make up a bond among all members of Alcoholics Anonymous. "I know what you're going through" every one of them can say to a newcomer, "because I've been there and I remember what it felt like."

But AA members have something much more important in common. They are not just staying dry together. Through the AA programme, summed up in the Twelve Steps (page 58), they are learning a new way to live. The men and women telling their stories on the following pages want to share with you how they came to join AA, and how its programme is helping them to grow as human beings.

In most cases they give details about their present lives but if, after reading their stories, you have additional and specific questions, other members of AA answer these in the final section of pamphlet called, "What it's like to be in the Armed Forces - and in AA."

Alcoholics Anonymous in Great Britain and Continental European Region has over three thousand five hundred meetings a week. There will be meetings close to almost every Naval, Army and Air force base together with other meetings, worldwide, in most cities where UK Servicemen and women and their dependants may find themselves.

All meetings are completely confidential and personal anonymity is assured.

Personal Stories

A Soldier's Tale

In 1967 at the age of 17 I joined the army. As both my parents were dead the army became my "surrogate family". After basic training I was sent abroad to Germany. It was there that I came to realise that drinking in the army was a way of life. You are fed, clothed, given accommodation and money to spend, and most of my money was spent on drink. I was drinking almost every night, but weekends were the real drinking times. Being drunk for much of the time was just a laugh (or so I thought). At this time I was starting to get into trouble through drink. I would end up in the middle of a field, or occasionally be locked up for the night in the guardhouse for some drunken escapade. As time passed by drinking started to even out and I managed for the most part to stay out of trouble, but only for a while.

I was eventually promoted and given stripes, although never a week went by when I was not drunk. As my alcoholism progressed I started to get into more serious trouble. I was arrested by the German Police for drunk driving and this culminated in my entry into a detox unit. After treatment I went through a "dry" period and the army shipped me back to England for two years. During this time I decided to start a fitness regime and somehow managed some "controlled drinking".

I arrived back in Germany and for a few years I continued to manage "controlled drinking". I saved up all my "sweeties" for

the weekend. I was then promoted and given a normal posting back to England. At this time the progression of my alcoholism was affecting me more and more. After a drunken argument I clocked an officer and was in trouble again. It was 1986, I knew I had a serious drink problem and it was then that I first made contact with Alcoholics Anonymous.

I went to a few AA meetings and managed to stay "dry" for six weeks. "Fear" was what stopped me from drinking. I was still blaming people, places and things however, and inevitably lifted the "first drink". Providence again seemed to be on my side and I was given a posting back home to Scotland before retiring from the army. I finished my last three years without any more serious trouble.

When I left the army it was with a great sense of relief. It was 1991 and my alcoholism began to accelerate. For the next three years I went through a cycle of "binge drinking" emerging from each bout demoralised and full of fear. During this time I tried to get back to AA and managed some "dry periods", but all I was doing was "getting fit to drink again". On 11th November 1994 I asked for help and finally took the First Step.

I knew I had to build up a "mental defence against the first drink" by using the 12 Step recovery programme. Being "atheist" at this time, the mention of God always put me off. The Third Step in particular seemed to be a major hurdle. It was explained to me however that I was only being asked to

"make a decision" to turn my will and my life over to the care of God as I understood him. The actual turning over would take place as I "worked the next eight Steps".

I began to understand that the alcohol was only a "symptom" of deeper emotional problems. I then sat down and took a moral inventory of myself, writing down all my fears and resentments. After some serious thinking, I took my inventory to a priest in the Fellowship and unloaded all the "emotional garbage" I had been carrying around all my adult life. I told him things I thought I would take to my grave. What I had done was build myself a "platform" which would then allow me to move on to a new and sober life.

I continued on the recovery programme and made a list of all the people I had harmed. I made amends as best I could and put myself on the top of the list. By this time I was starting to become "God conscious" and I was also reading a lot of AA books. It was after I read Chapter 16 of "Pass it on" that I was guided to a church in Glasgow where I went through a "Spiritual Experience". After that night the whole 12 Step recovery programme fell into place.

At the beginning this "atheist" was told that if I thoroughly applied myself to the 12 Steps as they are laid down, it would be "impossible" not to come to believe in a God of my own understanding. Today the first 9 Steps have been put into the dustbin of the past (I would only have to go back to them if I got drunk) and I use the last 3 Steps as my daily maintenance Steps.

I met my wife Mary in AA and we have both settled down to a happy and sober life. All thanks to AA and the grace of God as I understand him.

Brian

Angels on my shoulders

My name is Barry and I am an alcoholic. Having recently left the armed forces to embark on a new life in civilian street, it has been suggested that I put pen to paper and share my experience, strength and hope as someone who got sober while serving in the Royal Navy and came through the somewhat difficult transition into civilian life.

My drinking career started at the age of fourteen and lasted some twenty-six years, most of it taking place during my time serving in the navy. I joined at the age of sixteen to escape, what seemed to me, a life of quiet desperation. Anything but live a normal life. I wanted adventure, travel and excitement. A shy and unconfident teenager I believed I could never find these things using my own resources, so I set off one morning from Chatham train station for this new life that I had dreamed of since I was a small child.

Initial training soon got rid of my shyness but never took away the feeling I owned all my life, a feeling that I was somehow less than others. So, I started to feel at home in a culture of structure and discipline, where other people would arrange my life for me.

I was paid, fed, clothed and told where to be and what to do at all times of the day, while they turned me into a sailor in readiness for a life at sea. Most importantly of all I found other people who drank like me; I had found heaven or so I thought. I remember clearly the first time I was allowed out of the base and let loose with my first weeks pay, a princely sum of thirty pounds.

Once I had that first drink I felt on top of the world: my shyness left me, a false sense of confidence returned and I turned into jack the lad, eager to please, fit in and be as popular as I could possibly manage. I told the funniest stories and became a great actor who was always ready to get up to any number of pranks in order to impress my new friends and fit in.

The next nine years became a succession of working hard and partying even harder. If ever I had to miss a social event I always felt left out and was bitter and angry. There also followed a string of failed relationships including a marriage, within which my son died in childbirth, the guilt of which I carried for twenty years. In 1989 I left the navy to live in Denmark with yet another woman I had fallen in love with. I took the navy with me out into civilian life and arrived in Denmark drunk with the expectation that my girlfriend would lead the way in finding me a job and make my life happy and successful. The relationship failed for the same reason all the others did: she had loved the man she met but hated the drunk she got to know.

I once again ran quickly back to the people

who would look after me and pay for my lifestyle of drinking. On returning back into the services I felt a failure and began a long and painful journey of lonely and isolated drinking trying to fit in, but never succeeding. I managed to promote myself to middle management and used the excuse of stresses that come with the job to justify my drinking and so I progressed into the world of active alcoholism, where I learned the many survival skills needed to carry on drinking, but none of the living ones.

The years went by and I watched other people build their lives while mine got progressively worse as my loneliness, despair, and frustration grew ever more powerful within. I survived by the skin of my teeth and evaded court marshal for a drinking offence, which I can only put down to a Higher Power looking after me.

In 2003 I was to meet a woman just outside where I was based, who was to change my life and lead me into the rooms. We had a brief fling together and parted company due once again to my drinking. Some time later we became friends and met up again for a drink. I arrived drunk and my behaviour caused her to reject me almost immediately. She pushed me away and told me to get out of her life and stay out. I realised that night that I had become everything I hated in a person. I was drunk, rude, obnoxious, and very sick. I saw fear in her eyes when she looked at me and I felt sick to my stomach. She and everybody else in my life had deserted me because I was impossible to love.

I called the AA helpline the next morning and began the most incredible journey of my life. I finally put the drink down in April 2004 after many vain attempts and many meetings. I had surrendered. The last two and a half years have been a rollercoaster of emotions from real joy, to pain and confusion, but I have not picked up that first drink. I have been given support, love and genuine friendship from the moment I arrived. Today I am standing on my own two feet in civilian life and I have a home I can call my own. I am sober, in service for others and myself while feeling needed, wanted and loved. Life has some meaning at last.

My AA friends have been there for me through every step of my journey and so they have become much more than a family. They have been in the past, and are today without any doubt, angels on my shoulders.

It could happen to you, or your children

I am an alcoholic; that in itself is not as unusual as you may think as 3% to 4% of the world's population are like me. What is unusual is that I am alive to tell you my tale because most people who have the condition, illness, call it what you will, die as a result of it.

I started drinking at about sixteen or seventeen years old and at that stage there appeared to be nothing wrong. Things started to go wrong at university but neither I nor anyone else realised that my drinking was abnormal. With hindsight I can see now that every activity I got involved in

was accompanied by drink and if anyone was going to get drunk it was I.

I left university prematurely (having got married and failed my exams) and to my surprise was accepted by the RN to train as a pilot, so it was back to boarding school (Dartmouth) for me. It is significant that having arrived on the evening of the first day I managed to find time to locate the NAAFI by the evening of the second day and made time to imbibe a few beers while others were dealing with the mountain of kit with which we were issued!

At this stage of my life I don't think my drinking was that obvious; we all worked hard, played hard and drank hard. I failed flying which surprised the NAB because I had passed all their aptitude tests with flying colours; what I now realise is that the one thing I lacked in a major way was self confidence but that doesn't show up in their tests. Anyway I went off to become an ATCO. I got through that alright but was in the bar every night without fail which got me into a couple of scrapes but nothing serious - unless of course you count as serious having a drinking party in the Blue Room on a Saturday night, just after it had been re-carpeted and decorated to entertain a member of the Royal Family if the weather came in on their visit to Aberporth that Sunday. Luckily they didn't have to make use of it but when the cleaners saw it on Monday morning, well, you can imagine.

My first serious clash with authority was when I lost my driving licence returning

from a Saturday night party; nothing to do with drinking too much, you realise - just bad luck, wasn't it! ! I didn't advise Their Lordships about this which would have been okay but a few months later I got into trouble again with the Law and this time Their Lordships did get to hear about it and, of course, the drink driving offence as well. They expressed their "Severest Displeasure" (I have learnt that the Senior Officer who accompanied me to the Captain to hear the reading of that "Displeasure" has since died of alcoholism, though neither of us was aware of our predicament at the time.) What amazes me now is that, at that stage, I actually realised that alcohol and me did not mix without subsequent trouble so I decided to stop drinking. We were actually short of money due to high mess bills and paying off fines and we didn't have a car - well, we did actually have a car but my wife hadn't a driving licence and I was banned, so the result was the same. I drew a Pusser's Red and took a job on a farm in my off watch time and things improved for a while. I even avoided mess dinners and other mess functions until the fateful night I decided to attend the Tarranto Night Dinner. I didn't have a pre-dinner drink; I even avoided the wine but, at the end, allowed myself a glass of port. I was among the last to leave the mess that night, was back there the following lunchtime and didn't stop drinking for twenty years.

Things just went from bad to worse after that, to the extent that one of my SATCOs cautioned me about my drinking in my annual 206, but that had no effect. It should be noted that throughout this my

professional performance was never criticised - I was a "functioning" alcoholic and although I think many people recognised that I might have a problem, no one seemed to think it necessary to pull me up about it. But it was all in someone's little black book because, when I applied for a PC, I was turned down and I have absolutely no doubt that it was my drinking that led to that.

So I left the Navy. The family set up shop in a city where my wife started a polytechnic course, my children went to one of the top fee paying schools and I went abroad to earn enough money to pay for it all. Out there the drink flowed freely and I was always in the middle of the drinking activities. The duties were not onerous as the ATCOs worked a three watch system with no night flying and one transit flight every other afternoon, ie open the airfield at about seven, two or three waves then everyone back to the bar to debrief at lunchtime. I stayed for five years, during which my wife divorced me and I started to take a couple of cans with me for the afternoon watch (don't know which came first - probably the booze). After five years when I asked for another contract they said "on yer bike" - they'd had enough of my drunken performances in the mess and elsewhere. There are numerous hilarious takes from that time - suffice it to say that every morning when I regained consciousness I'd get up, throw a towel round my waist and go outside to see whether my car was there. If it was, I then had to check to see if the keys were there and give it a "walk round" to see if there were any more dents in it - and there often

were. I then had to try and remember what day it was, and whether I had to turn up for duty, sometimes only to realise that the sun was going down, not coming up, and I could go back to bed - well, have a beer and go back to bed. And of course there were many days when the car wasn't anywhere to be seen and I had no idea where it was or how I'd got home; they could be troublesome.

So I came "home" to Blighty. The next ten years are a bit of a blur. I couldn't get a job in middle management; I couldn't even get a job managing a pub but at the time I put that down to the fact that I hadn't got a wife (ignoring the fact that I had arrived in London at 1130 for a 1400 interview and spent the intervening time in a pub). I took up lorry driving but lost my licence again through drink so went warehousing. I lost my licence again (while banned) and ended up in prison. I came back out to warehousing, became a fruit market porter ('Enry 'Iggins style) and eventually ended up as a milkman. I lost that job through drink and a bad back.

I had become "unemployable"; I started to drink my way through an inheritance and ended up going to a doctor. I told him I was drinking a bottle of whisky a day (a conservative estimate) and I thought that might be abnormal!! He agreed with me whole-heartedly but told me nothing could be done unless I gave it up. He estimated that at my present rate I would last about eighteen more months and my inner reaction to that was dismay - not because I was dying, but because it would take so long to do it. So I settled down for the long

haul, estimating that I had enough money left to spend another summer sailing, a winter wintering and then sail the following summer until I died. It didn't work out like that; at the beginning of the first summer I had an oesophageal haemorrhage and nearly died (blood all over the issue). Then, one afternoon, a week after I'd been discharged, I found myself back on a bottle a day. I was very ill: the daily fifty yard walk to the off licence and subsequent return to my first floor flat would raise my heart beat to 140/150 and it would stay there trying to bang its way out of my chest for as long as two hours. It was that afternoon that I decided to "do something" about my drinking and I ended up signing myself into a treatment centre and using what remained of my inheritance to pay for it.

I will never know why I had that change of heart.

And that was where I came into contact with Alcoholics Anonymous. I had many preconceptions about what to expect but none matched up to what actually occurred. At first I merely "visited" AA with the rest of the inmates of the treatment centre; my concentration was on getting well through "treatment" thinking it more "professional". My feelings about the whole thing were mixed; I had fallen on very hard times but it was, I believed, through my own lack of moral fibre. I didn't want to return to the life I had, but there was no way I was going to drop my firm disbelief in any such thing as God (with or without a capital "G"). On top of that, on walking through the doors of

the treatment centre, my arrogance took over and I immediately felt "above" the rest of them. The truth be told I didn't know whether I was coming or going.

I slowly accepted that I would probably never be able to drink safely again, though I now know that it's not "probably" and that I must never, ever forget that glass of port on Tarranto night thirty years ago. I left that treatment centre after five months and rejoined "life". I knew that I, more than anyone else, would never be strong enough to stay off the booze; I had mentally gone through all the other inmates of the treatment centre and had worked out who would make it and who wouldn't, and I was top of the wouldn'ts. In fact, out of about eight who left around the same time, I'm the only one left alive.

I threw myself into AA, worked hard at the twelve-step programme and now, thirteen years later, help others with it and help with the administration of the "nuts and bolts" of AA. The wife who divorced me, and remarried, is in friendly communication with me and my children have allowed me back into their lives. It has taken a long time, but for today I am safely aware of my condition and unlikely to take a drink.

I owe my life to a couple of Americans who, in 1935, found that together they could keep each other sober when every other effort by them and their relatives had failed. They then went out and found another drunk and got him sober, so then there were three. After about three years they had expanded exponentially to nearly a hundred and knew

that they had found something special. Until then there were only two possibilities for the alcoholic - they could die or go insane; nobody in the history of mankind had come up with a "cure" and still hasn't. They put down what they had found in writing. That text is still the one that AA adheres to; we haven't changed a word of it. We realised that we were not bad human beings, just human beings on whom drink has an awful, addictive effect that it does not on normal humans. Not only that, drink had brought us so low that we had lost all spirit for life and that we must somehow find a "spiritual" solution, a complete change in the way we viewed life and dealt with it.

That is what the "twelve steps" of the programme are about. Quite simply, one admits that one cannot drink and that drink has ruined one's life, and then the rest of the programme is one of intense self-appraisal and going about life as selflessly as possible, in the knowledge that as long as you do the best you can to be as selfless as possible in everything (including motives) then things will be "alright" because something outside yourself will look after you. It can be a tall order, never thinking "what's in it for me" or "it's not my turn" and never ever blaming someone else - but it grows on you.

Is there a moral to this tale? Not really. I am not against drinking alcohol, just aware that alcohol and alcoholics don't mix in the same way that sugar and diabetics don't mix. The main problem with alcoholism is the lack of understanding of it; it's just a bad

balance of neural messaging and metabolism but reveals itself to the onlooker in the form of the "Skid Row" drunk - and who would want to admit that they are the same as him? Or that their Dad or Mum is? Attitudes are changing but as more and more alcoholics achieve some form of sobriety we are now getting the pointed finger: "he managed it, why can't you?" I don't know the answer to why AA works for some and not for others - it's probably akin to the feeling that makes one person turn away from the edge of the pool when everyone in it says "Come on in, the water's fine". Having taken that plunge myself I now have a peace of mind that I didn't even know existed until I found it, and I wouldn't want to lose that to a glass of whisky.

I have tried to make this as "non attributable" as possible by naming no names or places or years; some of you may guess who I am but I ask that you keep that to yourselves. I haven't written it for you to say "well done him" because it isn't well done me - there have been lucky coincidences in my life which have lead me to where I am now. I'd pretty much given up on life when something took me by the hand and said "There is another way", and I was willing to give it my best. Any alcoholic can start this journey, no matter how early in their drinking career; you don't have to take it to the extremes some of us did. If drink is costing you more than money (eg relationships, work) or if you're in the habit of not remembering how you got home (or whether you did a strip at the stag party again!), give Alcoholics

Anonymous a ring (0845 769 7555) or look us up on Google and email us - our ranks are full of ex-service men and even some still in the services. We remain totally anonymous and your "dreadful" secret is safe with us; most of us wouldn't have come in the first place if we had thought otherwise.

The above text expresses the writer's own feelings and is not necessarily the opinion of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Paul's Story

As a young lad I always felt a little awkward around people, especially in family situations. People would say I was just shy which frustrated me because in my mind I always had something to say, just never the confidence to say it. I then always ended up feeling a little stupid and I knew I wasn't. I'd show them one day.

At an all boys catholic school near Liverpool discipline was strict. There were always fights going on, bullying was commonplace and though I was involved in none of this there was always the fear. I kept my head down and did well in class. During my teens I discovered that booze really boosted my confidence and I was soon getting involved with girls. All along though there was still the awkwardness, the sense that everything wasn't quite right, until, that is, I got some alcohol.

At 17 I joined the Royal Navy as an apprentice. Basic training was fun. I got fit, always being a bit lardy before; it really

boosted my esteem. I was getting paid, albeit not a great amount, more than I'd ever had before. And just couldn't wait for the first "run ashore".

Out that day for the first time the majority of my division headed straight for the bright lights of Plymouth. I, however, with some older boys never made it past the first pub in town a dingy "old man's" pub. There I won a bottle of sherry in a raffle. My recollection of the rest of that day is almost non-existent. What I do remember is being shook awake on a sofa in a strange house I'd wandered into, its inhabitant being somewhat annoyed returning to his home to find a skinny matelot, uniform covered in vomit, asleep in his lounge. Later, at one of the many alcohol lectures we get in the forces, I identified that I'd experienced a blackout here, but at 17 there was no way I could have a drink problem. I pushed that notion deep down inside.

The next part of my training was supposed to be three years studying and training to be a marine engineer. I had no gratitude whatsoever of the benefits afforded by being on this course. I never studied as I was always out on the town and in the workshops I was always too hung-over to produce any great results. A lot of my time was spent at the discipline office and I was always skint! Eventually, having been placed on every warning right up to the Commodore, I was removed from the course pending discharge from the service. I always managed to know how far to push things though and by the skin of my teeth managed to convince my Divisional Officer

that I loved the Navy and was just in the wrong branch. If only I was to be an aircraft engineer then surely my attitude to the studies would alter. It didn't, but I did get through the training.

I still always had a feeling that something was missing, so I got married. That never fixed it either; what it did do was bring along another host of excuses for me to drink. The marriage was mayhem to say the least. Both of us serving and on different ships, it caused all sorts of emotional instability and my drinking went nuts. The next few years was a fog. I was at sea for a couple of years but in-between I managed a nasty motorcycle accident, a divorce, an AWOL charge and a drink-driving charge.

In 2005 I found myself back on a training course. I've a new wife, house, car, motorcycle, holidays, promotion, all good stuff - on the outside, that is. Inside, I'm hollow. I feel life is a constant struggle; I'm drinking daily and feeling so low, stretched out inside. I've accrued debt, unbeknown to my wife who'd only months earlier helped bail me out. I'm spending time with other women while my wife works away. I'm racked with feelings of guilt, shame and remorse that only worsen each time I awake. I can't take any more. The drink wasn't helping any more, if it ever did.

I walked into my Divisional Office and broke down, explaining to my boss how it was but not putting too much emphasis on the drinking, you understand! He got me a five day alcohol awareness course down in Plymouth of all places.

The day before that course started I was out drinking with a Royal Marine friend. We stopped to ask a biker for directions. He didn't know the pub we sought. He didn't drink. He told me he used to drink but how it had become a real problem in his life. He shared some of his experiences with me; I totally related to his behaviour and feelings. Before we parted my Marine friend joked as he pointed out the sign above the door to the building we stood outside. It was Alcoholics Anonymous.

Until that point Alcoholics Anonymous was in my mind something to do with abolition in America and an alcoholic was a park bench tramp. I attended my first meeting in Plymouth and was overwhelmed by the experience. It felt like what I had been missing all the time was here in this room. I couldn't believe how genuine and friendly everybody was. They shared their experiences and told me about my problem and also about the solution, how they'd recovered from this seemingly hopeless state of mind and body. I left there excited and full of hope and was told to "Keep coming back!"

I went to a few more meetings then at the weekend there was a party and I got drunk. Very soon I was back in a right mess, I drank for weeks but something was different. A seed had been planted. After what was to be my final bender I was driving in Wales and lost control of my van. The wheel was wrenched from my hands and I ended up on an embankment. Something snapped inside me: I'd really had enough now. I knew what to do. I just

finally let go and got back to Alcoholics Anonymous. I have since become actively involved in this unique and wonderful and powerful fellowship.

Since coming to Alcoholics Anonymous my life has transformed. By working the 12 step programme of recovery, being guided by a sponsor and attending AA meetings I have learned how to live a rich, meaningful and fun life. I have many real friends and have already experienced many great things. I have energy I never knew existed and happiness so profound I can sometimes cry! I look forward to my day when I awake and feel safe in the knowledge that I need never drink again. I know how to react normally to situations that would normally get me down and like to think that some of it rubs off on the people in my life. I couldn't imagine life, never mind Navy life, without drinking but I'm discovering there's so much more to experience and learn. Life is really exciting!

I have recently met other servicemen of all ranks in Alcoholics Anonymous, both in the rooms and in service, and this itself is extremely encouraging to know that the message is being carried within the Armed Forces.

Mick's Story

At the age of nearly 18 I joined the RAF Police in 1968; however, prior to this I'd already had several brushes with alcohol which resulted in various scrapes, functioning blackouts and remonstrations from my mother. I never realised the full

impact of the blackouts until I joined AA many years later. Even at this early stage in my drinking career I was never satisfied with just a couple of drinks but always wanted to drink as much as I possibly could, which invariably led me to getting so bad that I could not remember what I had done. My progress in the RAF was average and whenever social situations arose I always seemed to get blind drunk. There were some wonderful, hilarious, tragic, funny, pathetic incidents but I always seemed to get away with it. I remember once when I was not trusted to be issued with ammunition and another time when I left my patrol area to get a drink. There were other times too numerous to mention but as I was good at my job I survived. Specialist courses followed and at one stage I worked all over Scotland and northern England dealing directly with very senior officers. It was only years later that I realised that my arrival interview's emphasis on the perils of alcohol was due to my reputation which preceded me. Still I climbed the promotion ladder and by this time had been married twice with 3 young children. I prided myself on the fact that I didn't drink in the morning, when driving, before important meetings or duties etc., unless I wanted or had to. Once I got very drunk before seeing off a royal flight and managed to escape the fall out by promises, pleas and tears. At this time my second marriage failed and for 10 days I reached for a bottle of whisky before I got out of bed despite being in sole charge of my 3 young children. Still promotion came and I drank. In 1993 I was lucky to escape arrest at an international event when at the debriefing it was emphasised that I

was not wanted back in the future. Luckily I managed to stay in the RAF by the skin of my teeth. I continued to drink as I thought I would sort it out when it became too much of a problem. I did go to the Medical Officer but when he asked me how much I drank I lied to him and as a result he said he didn't think I had a drinking problem. As I later found out this was a case of total denial.

Eventually in March 1995 I called AA to prove to my wife that I wanted to change and got to my first meeting in Buckinghamshire thanks to a member of AA picking me up and taking me there. I drank again in early May but since then until today I have not taken a drink one day at a time. I would like to say I got the message at once but I would be lying as I thought I was different and that what was suggested did not apply to me but I did not drink. Initially I came to meetings to please my wife but eventually realised that I could only stop for me. (Incidentally we are no longer married but are very good friends). I took various jobs in original meeting but only because I wanted to impress people and not because it would help my recovery. I went to Belgium and stayed away from AA for 6 months because it would be full of Americans who would not be my type of alcoholic even though the AA books I had been reading were written by Americans who had started AA. Despite this I stayed sober and when I eventually swallowed my pride, went to meetings where the people helped me so much I will never be able to thank them enough. What they did was get in my face and tell me some home truths which resulted in me doing the AA

programme to the best of my ability on a daily basis. I got involved in helping because I wanted to, enjoyed it and realised it helped me.

There have been some wonderful and some horrific times in the last 13 years but as yet I have not found a reason, including the death of my daughter, to pick up that first drink. I continue to do service because if someone had not answered the phone and taken me to my first AA meeting it is possible I would not be alive today. So if you think that drink is costing you more than money and you would like to change things give AA a call. It could well be one of the most important things you do in your life. It was a special day when I called and now my life is absolutely wonderful most of the time.

Susanna's Story

I have always felt uneasy with myself and with life in general. My parents divorced when I was very young and I was sent away to school. I thought that these things gave me insecurities and made me emotionally vulnerable. I discovered alcohol when I was about fifteen. Alcohol made me feel like "one of the crowd" and my insecurities and social fears would leave me when I drank. For the first few years I felt great - able to chat away to friends and colleagues and behave in a more outgoing way - but I could never control my drinking. Once I started I just wanted more and more until I couldn't even raise the glass to my mouth anymore. The odd occasion when I could only have two or three drinks were very

uncomfortable. By the time I joined the Army as a cadet, I would say I was drinking alcoholically, but at University there seemed to be plenty of other people around who were spending just as much time in the student bar as me. Once I gave up for three months just to prove that I could do it. At the time I thought this was proof that I didn't have a problem, but looking back now I realise that I had concerns about my drinking even then.

Once I had left Sandhurst I was posted to Germany. I remember arriving at my new post determined to turn over a new leaf and keep my drinking under control, but the first unit dinner soon put paid to that. I was back to square one. It was around this time that I became very unhappy with my drinking. Although I was still turning up to work every day and living a relatively normal life on the outside, I was churning with fear on the inside and felt very ashamed of my drunken behaviour in the Mess.

Finally, after an operational tour with the UN, my CO interviewed me and suggested that I had a drink problem. I was strangely relieved that I could confide in somebody about my fears and agreed to see a military psychiatrist on my return to the UK. For a while life seemed to improve and I was drinking much less but my old habits soon returned. I remember asking the military psychiatrist if there was a chance that I could be an alcoholic. He didn't think that I "was as bad as that". Despite this, I eventually phoned AA and started going to meetings. I stopped drinking and enjoyed

attending meetings but was unable to really accept that I was an alcoholic and once I got posted away from the area, the old drinking habit of loss of control, blackouts, fear, humiliation and depression soon returned. Although I wasn't drinking daily, I was getting absolutely hammered two or three times a week and occasionally turning up to work still in blackout. I tried going to meetings in Northern Ireland but was worried about the security issues. Eventually on return to the UK after yet another drunken mess night I realised that if I didn't do something about my drinking I was going to die young. I had sort of accepted this as my fate up until then, but realised that this was not how I wanted my life to be. Having been so fearful about asking for help in the past I was suddenly filled with a mysterious courage to face the problem head on and do whatever it took to get sober. After a few phone calls I managed to get a place in a treatment centre in Berkshire. I was fortunate enough to be able to fund it privately, but inpatient treatment for alcohol problems is now available through the services. I needed time away from my normal environment to really focus on myself and my recovery. I went to see the Medical Officer and got a sick chit for five weeks whilst I was in treatment. He was so supportive and congratulated me on having the courage to take matters into my own hands. I realise now that my "courage" was part of my spiritual healing which is such an important part of AA sobriety. The treatment centre was hard work emotionally. I realised that I had been using my chaotic childhood and busy Army job as a reason to drink ("wouldn't you drink if

you had the childhood/job that I had?") and that my drinking was a way of avoiding uncomfortable feelings which I didn't have the emotional maturity to deal with. We were bussed to AA meetings every evening and I could see the joy and serenity of other recovering alcoholics. I really wanted what they had and was advised to go to meetings regularly, get a sponsor, do the 12 Steps and be honest with myself and others.

Seven weeks after leaving the treatment centre I was posted to Northern Ireland. My sponsor was very keen that I should work as hard as possible on the steps before I went and I managed to complete Step 7 before my posting. On arrival in Northern Ireland I started going to a meeting at a Training Centre. This was a great start and shortly afterwards I managed to get clearance to attend AA meetings in other parts of the area. I attended meetings four times a week and soon built up a group of firm AA friends. They were my lifeline. I made good progress at work and also managed to give up smoking and improve my fitness. Since then I have completed tours in different parts of Europe, as well as operational tours, including one in the Middle East. I have always managed to find English speaking AA meetings wherever I have been posted. My sobriety is my priority now and I know if that is threatened then my life and sanity is threatened. I have had nothing but support from my line managers who applaud my efforts to keep myself fit and capable for work. After all - I am more useful to them sober than I am drunk and they understand that. Now based back in the UK I continue to attend meetings and do

service. Day-to-day sobriety does require some effort on my part - effort I am very willing to make. Helping others who are trying to get sober is a valuable reminder of what life was like for me at the end of my drinking. I really don't want to go back there again. I am still a serving officer and it is my great ambition to carry the message to the still suffering alcoholic who is still serving.

What's it like to be in the Forces - and in AA?

How is promotion affected?

“I have reached the top of the non-commissioned ladder, which is a great deal better than being on a slippery slope ready to go to the bottom.”

“Since joining AA, I've been commissioned and have gone in five years from second lieutenant to captain to selection for major. I've had the usual succession of overseas and home duty tours, each one a little better than the last. I've had no adverse annual reports since joining. I had many in the seven preceding years as a practising military drunk”.

How do we cope with the social aspects of Service life?

“When we're drinking heavily, we tend to think that everyone else must be doing the same. But we're not in AA long before we find out that this just isn't so. At first, I

avoided social events where there would be heavy drinking, but this didn't last long. Today, now that the physical craving for booze is gone and my self-confidence is up, I can go to a party and have one hell of a time - entirely sober. In my seven years as an officer and an AA member, I've never had a low mark for 'sociability' on an annual report."

"I'm a sailor - a chief petty officer - who doesn't drink. Preposterous! Yet true. Just what is there for a serviceman who doesn't partake now and then? Plenty. No matter where I go, I have a lot of friends I haven't met yet - AA friends. From Portsmouth around the world in both directions, I have met men and women just like me - people who understand and who are always willing to help. These are friends - not the kind you'll find in dockside pubs and not the kind after a sailor's money. They are friends who open their homes and hearts to welcome the travelling man and perhaps continue the sharing of experience, strength, and hope."

Is difference in rank a problem?

"When we go to AA meetings, we leave our rank outside. Each member is addressed by his first name, and just as much respect is shown an other rank member as is shown the higher ranking officers."

"Over the entrance to our meeting place is a sign: 'Abandon rank, all ye who enter here'."

"One of my closest AA friends," says an

Aircraftsman, “was a Royal Marine major. We spent much of our off-duty time together at AA meetings and on Twelfth Step calls - to help alcoholics who wanted to stop drinking. On these occasions, we called each other by our first names, of course, and we were in civilian clothes at the meetings. But when we met in uniform, neither of us had any difficulty showing the proper respect to the other’s rank. We felt that, because of our fellowship in AA, we respected each other more as individuals in our profession.”

“Because I’m an officer, AA newcomers who are other ranks are always hesitant about our relationship. I make a point of discussing this problem and reiterating that my rank remains outside the meeting, even when we are forced by circumstances to wear uniforms there. And I find that the problem rapidly dissolves and is soon forgotten.”

What kind of AA meetings do we attend?

“I joined in East Anglia, where there were civilian AA groups,” says an Air Force man. “I’d been sober for a year when I was sent to Cyprus. I thought I could stay away from drink on my own there, but after a month I got drunk. The next day, I headed for the nearest AA group. I stayed sober the rest of my 18 months in Cyprus, thanks to that group. It was composed of service members, dependants, and civilians connected with the Forces. Two of the civilians had been in AA for many years, and had worked with military leaders, hospitals,

or chaplains to establish new AA groups in different places.”

Overseas, AA groups often include other civilians (in addition to the types just mentioned), such as Diplomatic personnel and employees of large business organisations.

“The Adjutant explained a little bit about AA to me and then said, ‘You are going to call them and you are going to a meeting if there is one in this area tonight’. I called the AA office at York, and was told that an AA man would meet me and see that I got to a meeting that night. He was right on time, and we had a good talk over coffee, and then went to the meeting. I was uneasy, of course, but I did accept everything that was said there. Above all, I was happy to hear that AA was not controlled by some religion or other. That night, I met many people I could put my trust in, and it was unusual for me, as it is for every alcoholic, to put any faith in anyone or anything. That was ten years ago, and I haven’t had a drink of alcohol since”.

“In Europe and throughout the world I have been able to maintain continuous contact with AA. For two years at one location, AA meetings were held in our home. For my first six months in Germany, I was able to attend AA meetings twice weekly.”

How do we stay in touch with AA when there are no meetings nearby?

“For us Servicemen, AA has some very special projects to participate in. There are

the seagoing AA Internationalists, travellers to meet, share, and correspond with. There is the AA newsletter “*Loners-Internationalists Meeting*” to write to and receive letters from. What sailor or soldier doesn’t get a little extra respect from the post clerk who notices letters from all over the world arriving with each mail?”

“I have to go it alone occasionally because of my life as a career soldier,” an officer writes in an article in the *SHARE*, AA’s monthly magazine. “On both my tours in Malaysia, I was an AA Loner (listed with the AA General Service Office). Each one of all the letters I received seemed to be a meeting in itself. I think of all the encouragement given me by others who were alone like me, and I find I am looking forward to the next year of AA experience.”

“At a remote country location in the desert, the chaplain was in tape-recorder contact with an AA group in Saudi Arabia, and through him I could stay close to the programme. Also, there were the welcome Loners letters from the AA General Service Office. When I’ve needed it, when I’ve wanted it, in one form or another the AA Fellowship has always been there.”

How can you reach AA?

Almost anywhere in Great Britain you will find a listing for Alcoholics Anonymous in the local phone book. In Europe, there are many English-speaking groups in the Continental European Region (information available from the General Service Office, York).

Your chaplain or your medical officer may be able to tell you whether there are civilian AA groups nearby - and will certainly be familiar with any armed forces group at or near your base.

If you cannot get information in any of the above ways, write to the AA General Service Office, at:

P.O. Box 1
10 Toft Green
York
YO1 7NJ
England

THE TWELVE STEPS OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol - that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, *as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

AA Publications.

Complete order forms available from:

AA General Service Office at P.O. Box 1,
10 Toft Green
York, YO1 7NJ

Pamphlets

44 Questions
Is AA For You?
Who Me?
This Is AA

Periodicals

SHARE (in England & Wales)
ROUNDAABOUT (in Scotland)

DVDs

Who Me?
The Road to Sobriety

**I am responsible...
When anyone, anywhere,
reaches out for help, I want
the hand of AA always to be there.
And for that: I am responsible.**



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Website address

www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk

National Helpline Number

0845 769 7555

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