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| Logo | ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUSARMED SERVICES LIAISON **STORIES BY AA MEMBERS WITH ARMED SERVICES EXPERIENCE** |

# A journey through service

As I lay in the hospital bed drowning in shame, guilt, and remorse, recovering from my last alcoholic bender, a huge dark shadow appeared across the bed. Ex-RSM ‘Big Bob’ as he was known, gently for a big man said, ‘I did that, tried to sleep my problems away. I’m Bob and I’m an alcoholic. I understand you have a problem with drink. There’s a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous down the town in half an hour. I’ve checked with the nurse and it’s OK for you to go.’

We chatted for half an hour, and I disclosed I’d come out of the services the previous year and wasn’t making it. He shared with me some of his drinking experiences in the forces and his subsequent fall from grace to a life on the streets in Bristol, loss of jobs, home, marriage, and family. I identified. He then told me about his recovery through AA. This was an old-fashioned ‘twelfth-step call’. [Editor: a visit by an experience AA member to a potential newcomer; the ‘twelfth step’ includes work to carry AA’s message to others.] I went to the meeting, and the first share I heard was an ex-serviceman from the Royal Navy—my story! This was powerful, the identification was incredible, and I’ve not drunk alcohol since that day, 25 January 1986, exactly 26 years ago today. It’s still one day at a time, not picking up that first drink, and using the twelve-step programme of recovery as it’s beautifully laid out in the *Big Book* [Editor: AA members’ fond term for AA’s basic text, *Alcoholics Anonymous*].

I did my first twelfth-step call with Big Bob in the local infirmary on a guy on a drip. He remained unconscious the whole time, but we went home sober. I stuck like glue to Bob and the meetings during those early months. My first service began at the hospital where I was twelfth-stepped. There was a meeting on a Monday night, and I was given permission by the staff to be tea boy. Although still a patient because of other issues, I started to feel useful once more. Some months later I actually held down a real job and became secretary at the local meeting. Then I was in and out of hospital and became a gypsy in meetings. No home group, no sponsor and the occasional meeting, but praying every day to do battle with my mental health issues. A couple of years later and still not drinking, I pitched up at the Winton Sunday night meeting of AA. Here I was really ready to accept everything about me, alcoholism, mental health and all.

I got involved in service again but was really battered and lacking confidence. I now had a sponsor (AA’s term for a mentor), and we’ve grown into service together. He’s never told me what to do, but I like his way of living and try and emulate his life of service to AA, which in turn spreads into our private lives. I’ve had the privilege of doing most service positions at group level and this has taught me to let go of ‘me’ and try to carry this message to other alcoholics. Service throughout the structure of AA has taught me to let go of the fear and present my views soberly yet go with the group consensus, although at times it’s not what I would like to happen.

I’ve just returned from the national AA service office in York, where I had the privilege and honour of representing the South-West Region at the Regional Armed Service Liaison Officers meeting, where I met many sober and experienced AAs. I was able to put faces to the emails received over the year, the talk and discussion was sober, and I found it inspirational. One thing discussed was the fact that our work to carry the message to current and former serving persons is essentially the same as carrying the message to other alcoholics, but because of the sometimes ‘closed shop’ nature of the armed services and their particular way of doing things, ex-serving persons who are members of AA can sometimes grab and hold the attention of alcoholics from the services more easily.

I feel that it is ‘horses for courses’, my Higher Power put two ex-servicemen my way, and I am now able to repay that unconditional love shown those two men by carrying out this service to the best of my ability. I thank all those who have been involved in my recovery and allowing me to serve AA in this way.

Mike S