

SoS speech to Combined Cadet Force headteachers' conference 27 February, 2020

Thank you Commodore Fry. I am delighted to join you today.

I'd like to start by asking you all a question. When was the last time you turned up for work and ended up doing something that scared the living daylights out of you? Sweating palms, heart racing, feeling slightly sick ...??

I'm very much hoping that this is not an everyday occurrence in any of your classrooms...

I found myself in that position when I was at the Ministry of Defence and I joined the Royal Marines on exercise in Norway. There was a hole in the ice and I was instructed to jump in. Now I knew full well that no one was going to let me sink like a stone or freeze to death... but even knowing that it was still going to be colder than I had probably ever been in my life and it wasn't going to be pleasant.

It took an enormous amount of grit and faith to jump. But I have never regretted doing it. Nor have I forgotten the pride I felt afterwards and the increased respect it gave me for our Armed Forces - for whom being brave is all in a day's work.

And this, ladies and gentlemen, is why I mention it. Our Armed Forces are among the best in the world, and through the Combined Cadet Force their values and ethos are being shared with more and more young people, who are benefitting in so many ways - many of them probably not even aware just how much.

Only recently I met a number of young cadets who were on duty at the Education World Forum. They were not just representing the Armed Forces, they were representing the whole country... and doing it brilliantly. That's no mean achievement when you are barely in your teens.

In 2015 the Government set a target of getting 500 cadet units into schools by this April and I'm delighted to say that we reached this number last October, thanks to the efforts and commitment of people like you.

We also said we wanted to see the number of cadets in schools increase to 60,000 by 2024 and my department is working closely with the Ministry of Defence to make sure we are able to tick that box too.

So what is it about this experience with the Armed Forces that is proving so popular? What are young people getting out of it?

Rather like my experience in the ice hole, young people who join cadet forces get the chance to do activities that are way beyond their normal experiences. Activities that will stretch them, like using a map to find their way through a forest, lighting a fire in the pouring rain or sleeping under canvas.

Many of the activities require problem solving, perseverance and self belief, the kind of skills that we all need to cope with the setbacks life throws at us from time to time.

Employers tell us over and over again that the kind of things they're looking for in job applicants are skills that cadets develop and have in abundance: skills like leadership... team spirit... loyalty.

Being a cadet can also broaden a young person's horizons and open their eyes to all kinds of brilliant careers... and not just those in the Armed Forces. One of the main ways is through the marvellous STEM camps which are run by the single Services. These action-packed events focus on the kind of tasks and activities that are part of the day job for our servicemen and women but which are just as relevant in any work setting.

For instance the STEM Logistics Camp at RAF Wittering saw cadets working with RAF personnel to calculate what you'd need to support a humanitarian mission, using the right equipment and skills, as well as planning budgets, and assessing risks... These are the kind of things that any project manager in any industry needs to have a grip on.

In another camp, some lucky cadets were able to get close to the incredible Bloodhound supersonic car, which is designed to reach speeds of more than one thousand miles an hour. They were then tasked with designing, building and testing

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one of their own, using as a guide some of the Army's high-tech equipment such as aerial surveillance systems, thermal imaging, radars and precision rockets.

I would have loved to have been on that camp!

The STEM camps enable youngsters to see why exams - and all the work they do in school - matter. They show a direct link between the classroom and future jobs, which can help pupils make more informed decisions about what they want to do in the next stage of their lives.

But joining the cadets has many other beneficial effects that to my mind makes them an even more valuable force for good.

For young people who have had a tough start in life, a military ethos can give them stability and a sense of belonging, possibly for the first time in their lives.

For a young person who might be in danger of drifting or disengaging from school, finding a new sense of self belief, and a moral code to go with it, could literally be a life-changer. You can't really put a price on that kind of transformation.

I care passionately that every child in this country has a chance to make the most of their potential and go on to lead a happy and fulfilling life. But there are children for whom this will be a challenge, for whom opportunity doesn't come knocking, and I am 100% behind anything we can do to help reduce some of the disadvantages they face.

One thing I am especially grateful for is the help of the Combined Cadet Forces Association through the grants schemes it offers to cadet units. This has enabled more units to support those young people whose families would otherwise struggle to provide extra-curricular activities for their children.

At Albion Academy for instance, 75% of their pupils receive free school meals and the fund has enabled them to invest in uniforms for a number of cadets from low-income families.

I would also like to congratulate University of Northampton, who I know you'll be hearing from later, for their ground-breaking study on the social impact of being in the cadets. This is vital work and I am looking forward to seeing their conclusions.

I would at this point like to thank those who do so much to make the cadet experience what it is, and that's the instructors. The School Staff Instructor is one of those multi-tasking heroes who are responsible for making every cadet unit tick and ensuring that everyone who is part of it is motivated, happy and safe - that goes for adult volunteers as much as the young recruits. A good SSI, like any good teacher, is key to the success of a unit and I am currently looking at ways I can support them more in the future.

Up to now I've concentrated on how cadet membership can help future job prospects, but there is a far wider range of experiences that will add to a young person's confidence... The units teach life-saving skills, they encourage members to volunteer in their local communities; many even offer the chance to join a marching band or musical ensemble... All of these activities are enriching and all of them help to develop character and resilience.

The benefits are immense not only for the individual and their wider communities but also for schools too. I'm sure there are many of you in the audience who have seen how a cadet unit can have indirect benefits on the rest of a school... Headteachers speak of improved behaviour and attendance. Those two things on their own are likely to have a significant impact on how well pupils do at school.

A cadet unit can help a school show that it is meeting statutory requirements to deliver a broad and balanced curriculum and promoting British values, at the same time as helping it to support the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of its pupils.

The new Ofsted Inspection Framework looks at how a school fulfils the personal development of pupils, how it builds character and resilience. What better way to show this than to highlight a flourishing cadet unit? I know you will be hearing more about how Ofsted sees this working in practice later from David Storrie.

The Cadet Expansion Programme has been a tremendous success however you look at it, but the challenge now is for those schools that already have cadet units, to increase the number of recruits and to encourage even more children to undertake this life-changing experience.

I know there are many helpful materials on the Combined Cadet Force website, which can be used to spread the word, through resources like posters to publicise cadet units, as well as great videos and lesson plans ... I can personally recommend the one on knots for example.

We all know that school is about far more than sitting exams. It's about learning who you are and how to make the best of yourself. It's about having the confidence to give something a go, even if sometimes you'd rather not. These are the qualities that Britain is going to need more than ever as we take our new place in the world. Our cadet forces are helping to forge a nation of can-doers. All of you are making this happen and I want you to know I am enormously grateful to you for it.

Thank you.