



CARL'S STORY

A VETERAN'S EXPERIENCE OF THE BENEFITS SYSTEM

A GRAPHIC NOVEL FROM THE SANCTIONS, SUPPORT AND SERVICE LEAVERS PROJECT
PHIL MARTIN, ANDREA MOTTA, LISA SCULLION, CELIA HYNES, JOE PARDOE, DAVID YOUNG
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ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

SINCE 2017, THE UNIVERSITY OF SALFORD HAS BEEN LEADING A PROJECT FUNDED BY THE FORCES IN MIND TRUST (FIMT) CALLED SANCTIONS, SUPPORT & SERVICE LEAVERS. THE PROJECT REPRESENTS THE FIRST, AND ONLY, SUBSTANTIVE RESEARCH TO PROVIDE AN UNDERSTANDING OF VETERANS' EXPERIENCES OF NAVIGATING THE UK SOCIAL SECURITY BENEFITS SYSTEM. PRIOR TO OUR STUDY, VERY LITTLE WAS KNOWN, BEYOND ANECDOTAL EVIDENCE SUGGESTING THAT VETERANS WERE NOT ALWAYS AWARE OF, OR ABLE TO ACCESS THEIR ENTITLEMENTS TO WELFARE SUPPORT.

OUR RESEARCH EXAMINED VETERANS' EXPERIENCES ACROSS A SPECTRUM OF BENEFITS PROCESSES AND INTERACTIONS, INCLUDING UNDERSTANDING ELIGIBILITY, APPLICATION PROCESSES, BENEFITS ASSESSMENTS, CONDITIONALITY, INTERACTIONS WITH THE DWP, AND INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN BENEFITS AND ARMED FORCES COMPENSATION PAYMENTS AND PENSIONS.

OUR STUDY CONCLUDED IN THE SUMMER OF 2024. OVER THE LIFETIME OF THE PROJECT, WE HAVE GIVEN VOICE TO 108 VETERANS, AND CARRIED OUT 298 INTERVIEWS.

AS PART OF OUR PROJECT, WE COMMISSIONED PROFESSIONAL DIGITAL ILLUSTRATOR, ANDREA MOTTA, (A UNIVERSITY OF SALFORD GRADUATE), TO PRODUCE A GRAPHIC NOVEL. USING A COMPOSITE OF SOME OF THE EXPERIENCES OF VETERANS, A STORYBOARD AND SCRIPT WERE PREPARED BY THE RESEARCH TEAM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SALFORD. THE IMAGES WERE THEN PRODUCED BY ANDREA. IN ITS FINISHED FORM, THE GRAPHIC NOVEL IS THE RESULT OF A DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE RESEARCH TEAM AND ANDREA, WHO GUIDED US ON HOW THE STORY MIGHT WORK EFFECTIVELY AS A VISUAL NARRATIVE.

THIS GRAPHIC NOVEL TELLS THE STORY OF A VETERAN OF THE BRITISH ARMED FORCES CALLED CARL AFTER HE LEAVES SERVICE AND NAVIGATES HIS WAY THROUGH CIVILIAN LIFE. IT EXPLORES HIS EXPERIENCES OF TRANSITION AND EMPLOYMENT, BUT THE MAIN FOCUS IS HIS CONTACT WITH DIFFERENT PARTS OF THE UK BENEFITS SYSTEM.

ALTHOUGH 'CARL' IS NOT A REAL PERSON, THE ISSUES RAISED IN THIS GRAPHIC NOVEL ARE ROOTED IN THE REAL LIFE EXPERIENCES OF VETERANS ACROSS OUR RESEARCH.

THE AIM OF CARL'S STORY IS NOT TO RE-INFORCE NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES ABOUT ISSUES LIKE PTSD, SUBSTANCE ABUSE OR HOMELESSNESS, THAT ARE SOMETIMES ASSOCIATED WITH PAST MILITARY EXPERIENCE. BUT NEITHER SHOULD WE SHY AWAY FROM THE CHALLENGES THAT SOME SERVICE LEAVERS CAN EXPERIENCE, AND HOW THIS CAN BRING THEM INTO CONTACT WITH THE BENEFITS SYSTEM.

OUR SAMPLE, THEREFORE, REFLECTED THOSE WHO HAD FACED (OFTEN MULTIPLE) CHALLENGES IN CIVILIAN LIFE, BEFORE AND AFTER SERVICE. IN THIS GRAPHIC NOVEL, WE POSITION CARL AS SOMEONE WHO LEFT SERVICE SOMEWHERE IN THE PERIOD 2000-10, SO HIS EXPERIENCES OF TRANSITION SUPPORT ARE VERY DIFFERENT FROM THOSE WHO LEFT IN THE 1980S - OR, INDEED, SOMEONE WHO LEFT IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS. HIS STORY IS NOT, THEREFORE, MEANT TO BE A PICTURE OF THE CONTEMPORARY RESETTLEMENT AND TRANSITION SUPPORT NOW, ALTHOUGH SOME OF THE SAME CHALLENGES MAY STILL OCCUR.

MOST OF THE VETERANS WE SPOKE TO FOUND EMPLOYMENT QUITE QUICKLY AFTER LEAVING THE ARMED FORCES AND DID NOT COME INTO CONTACT WITH THE BENEFITS SYSTEM UNTIL MANY YEARS LATER, OFTEN AT TIMES OF CRISIS IN THEIR LIFE. CARL'S STORY REFLECTS THIS. AS MOST OF OUR INTERVIEWEES WERE MALE, WE CHOSE TO MAKE THE CENTRAL CHARACTER A MAN, BUT WE ARE AWARE THE EXPERIENCES OF FEMALE VETERANS ARE ESSENTIAL AND STILL NOT WIDELY UNDERSTOOD.

AUTHORS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

LISA SCULLION IS PROFESSOR OF SOCIAL POLICY AND LEAD PROFESSOR FOR THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SALFORD, UK. PHILIP MARTIN, DAVID YOUNG, CELIA HYNES AND JOE PARDOE ARE RESEARCHERS AT THE SUSTAINABLE HOUSING AND URBAN STUDIES UNIT (SHUSU) AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SALFORD. ANDREA MOTTA IS AN INDEPENDENT DIGITAL ILLUSTRATOR AND ARTIST BASED IN NORTH WEST ENGLAND.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE SANCTIONS, SUPPORT AND SERVICE LEAVERS PROJECT, PLEASE CONTACT PROFESSOR LISA SCULLION: L.SCULLION@SALFORD.AC.UK. WE ARE GRATEFUL TO THE FORCES IN MIND TRUST WHO FUNDED OUR RESEARCH PROJECT AND TO THE UNIVERSITY OF SALFORD FOR PROVIDING THE FUNDING TO PRODUCE THIS GRAPHIC NOVEL.

WE DEDICATE THIS PUBLICATION TO ALL THOSE VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES WHO CONTRIBUTED THEIR TIME AND TRUST TO OUR RESEARCH. IN PARTICULAR, WE REMEMBER THOSE PARTICIPANTS WHO ARE NO LONGER WITH US. WE RECOGNISE THESE WERE NOT ALWAYS EASY THINGS TO TALK ABOUT AND REMAIN HUMBLLED THAT SO MANY WERE WILLING TO TELL US THEIR STORY.

THE CONTENTS OF THIS PUBLICATION DO NOT NECESSARILY REFLECT THE VIEWS AND OPINIONS OF THE FORCES IN MIND TRUST OR ANY AGENCY MENTIONED THEREIN. THE AUTHORS TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR ANY INACCURACIES OR OMISSIONS.



CARL'S STORY

I WAS BORN IN A NORTHERN TOWN IN THE 1970S. I'D ALWAYS WANTED TO JOIN THE ARMY, BECAUSE IT SEEMED LIKE A CAREER, YOU KNOW, YOU GET TO GO ALL THESE EXOTIC PLACES, LEARN A TRADE, THAT KIND OF THING.

IT WAS QUITE A TOUGH CHILDHOOD, BUT I'M NOT GOING TO GO INTO THAT. I STRUGGLED TO PAY ATTENTION AT SCHOOL, AND I WAS OFTEN BORED, ALTHOUGH I MANAGED TO GET A COUPLE OF GCSES -- ERM, A 'D' IN ART & DESIGN AND AN 'E' IN GEOGRAPHY. I STILL STRUGGLE TO READ OFFICIAL FORMS AND THAT KIND OF STUFF.

WHEN I LEFT, I DID A BIT OF WAREHOUSE WORK AND I ENROLLED IN COLLEGE, BUT I ONLY STAYED SIX MONTHS BEFORE DROPPING OUT. I GOT IN A BIT OF TROUBLE HERE AND THERE. A MATE OF MINE HAD AN OLDER BROTHER WHO WAS IN THE ARMY. I SAW HIM SOMETIMES WHEN HE WAS ON LEAVE. ONE DAY, I WAS ROUND THEIRS, AND WHEN HE HEARD I WAS DOING NAUGHTY STUFF, HE SAID 'YOU NEED TO SORT YOUR HEAD OUT - WHY DON'T YOU JOIN THE FORCES?' SO I THOUGHT WHY NOT? I JOINED THE INFANTRY - LOCAL REGIMENT - WHEN I WAS 19. I GOT TO LANCE CORPORAL, ALTHOUGH WHEN I WAS LEAVING, THEY TOOK THAT OFF ME.

I SERVED 8 YEARS. I GOT MY GCSE ENGLISH AND MATHS AND A FEW OTHER QUALIFICATIONS WHILE I WAS IN, BUT MAINLY IT WAS BASIC SOLDIERING; HOW TO MARCH, HOW TO FIRE A GUN AND LOOK AFTER IT.

WHILE I WAS IN, WE DID TWO TOURS OF AFGHAN. I ENDED UP IN A MORTAR PLATOON. I SAW A FEW ROUGH THINGS. AFTER THE SECOND TOUR, I DECIDED TO LEAVE. A BIG PART OF ME DIDN'T WANT TO, BUT THERE WAS A NUMBER OF THINGS GOING ON, AND I KIND OF THOUGHT 'THAT'S ENOUGH FOR ME.' I DIDN'T THINK ABOUT IT AT THE TIME, BUT PERHAPS DEEP DOWN SOMETHING WAS SAYING THIS IS TAKING A TOLL, YOU NEED TO LOOK AFTER YOURSELF. WHEN I CAME OUT, I RETURNED TO WHERE I'M FROM AND THOUGHT 'RIGHT, I'M ONLY 28 - NOW WHAT?'

IT REALLY MADE ME THINK - WHY DID I LEAVE THE ARMY? I HAD EVERYTHING SET UP THERE, I COULD HAVE DONE 20, AND THEN COME OUT AT 40 WITH A GREAT PENSION AND WHO KNOWS WHAT QUALIFICATIONS? I EVEN THOUGHT OF RE-JOINING. BUT BY THEN, I'D STARTED TO GO OFF THE RAILS A BIT. LITTLE THINGS AT FIRST; LIKE, IF SOMEONE CUT IN FRONT OF YOU IN TRAFFIC, OR WAS TAKING TOO LONG AT THE POST OFFICE, I COULD FEEL MYSELF GETTING READY TO FLY OFF THE HANDLE.

THAT WAS A FEW YEARS AGO. RECENTLY MY HEALTH HASN'T BEEN GREAT. I'D LIKE TO FIND SOMETHING REWARDING, BUT RIGHT NOW, WHAT I NEED TO DO IS GET MY HEAD STRAIGHT. THAT'S WHY I'M ON BENEFITS AT THE MOMENT. I NEED TO FIND A JOB THAT SUITS ME BUT LIKE EVERY VETERAN, PART OF ME FEELS I HAD THE BEST JOB AND I LEFT IT. BUT I WAS TRAINED TO BATTLE ON, SO I DO.



CHAPTER 1 TRANSITION

I NEVER WANTED TO LEAVE THE ARMY - IT WAS MY LIFE, THAT'S ALL I HAD EVER DONE - THE ONLY PROPER JOB I HAD.

VARIOUS THINGS CAME TO A HEAD. TWO FRONTLINE TOURS, THE GIRL I WAS SEEING WAS PUTTING PRESSURE ON ME, AND I HAD A FALLING OUT WITH MY SERGEANT. I WANTED TO DO SOME COURSES, I THOUGHT "I'VE DONE EIGHT YEARS, I SHOULD BE MOVING UP", BUT HE WAS HAVING NONE OF IT. I THOUGHT "SOD IT, I'M NOT WAITING AROUND."

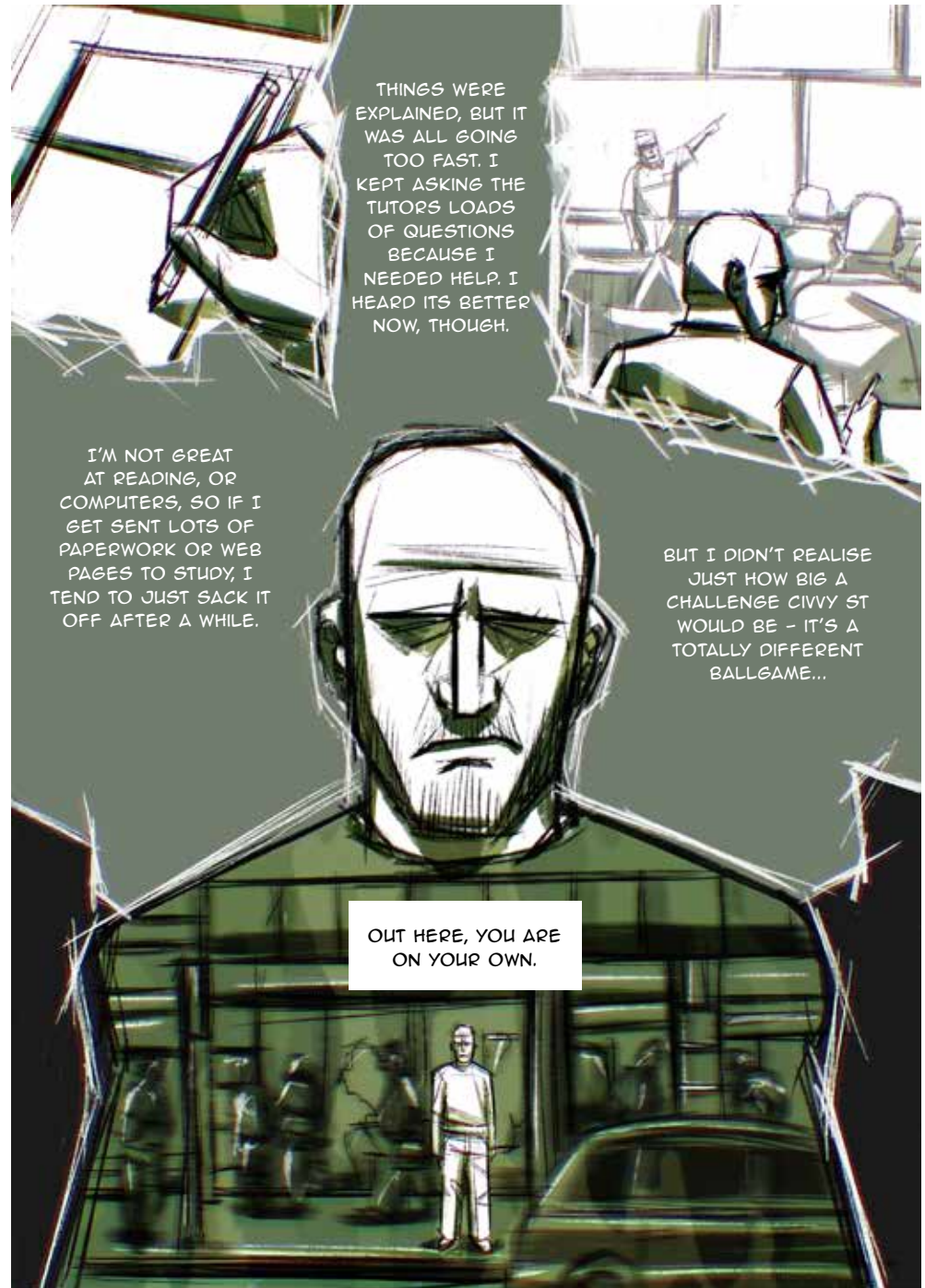
SO I PUT MY PAPERS IN. I MADE IT IN HASTE, AND REGRETTED IT ALMOST IMMEDIATELY, BUT IT WAS TOO LATE.

I PROBABLY WASN'T THE EASIEST PERSON TO DEAL WITH ON RESETTLEMENT, BECAUSE I DIDN'T HAVE A CLUE WHAT I WANTED TO DO.

I WAS ENTITLED TO SO MANY COURSES, AND TO BE HONEST THEY GAVE ME LOADS OF OPTIONS. "WHAT DO YOU WANT TO DO?" AND I WAS LIKE "ER, I DON'T KNOW!"

THEY OFFERED ME A COURSE SOMEWHERE, BUT I COULDN'T DO IT... I WAS BACK FROM AFGHAN, AND I HAD ALL THAT GOING ON IN THE BACKGROUND, AND TRYING TO GO THROUGH TRANSITION WAS A BIT TOO MUCH.

MY CONCENTRATION WAS GOING TO PIECES, SO I GOT FRUSTRATED. THERE WERE A FEW GENERIC CLASSES... YOU KNOW, WRITING A CV AND ALL THAT KIND OF STUFF.



I HAVE A SON, BUT HE LIVES WITH HIS MUM IN A DIFFERENT PART OF TOWN.

IT WAS JUST ONE OF THOSE THINGS, YOU KNOW, ALWAYS ARGUING ABOUT MONEY AND STUFF. IN FACT, THAT WAS ONE OF THE REASONS I ENDED UP LEAVING THE ARMY, BECAUSE SHE WAS ALWAYS ON AT ME - "YOUR SON NEEDS HIS DAD", THAT SORT OF THING.

THAT DIDN'T WORK OUT. BUT I SEE HIM EVERY COUPLE OF WEEKENDS NOW.

I WAS COMPLETELY NAIVE ABOUT MONEY. STILL AM.

IN THE ARMY, EVERYTHING IS DONE FOR YOU. IT'S SUCH A COMFORT BLANKET, YOU DON'T HAVE TO THINK ABOUT BILLS OR ANYTHING.

I'VE DONE SOME CRAZY THINGS ON PAYDAY, LIKE BUYING THREE PAIRS OF THE SAME TRAINERS.

WHEN I LEFT, I FELT REALLY LOST. I DIDN'T KNOW WHERE I BELONGED OR WHERE I FITTED IN.

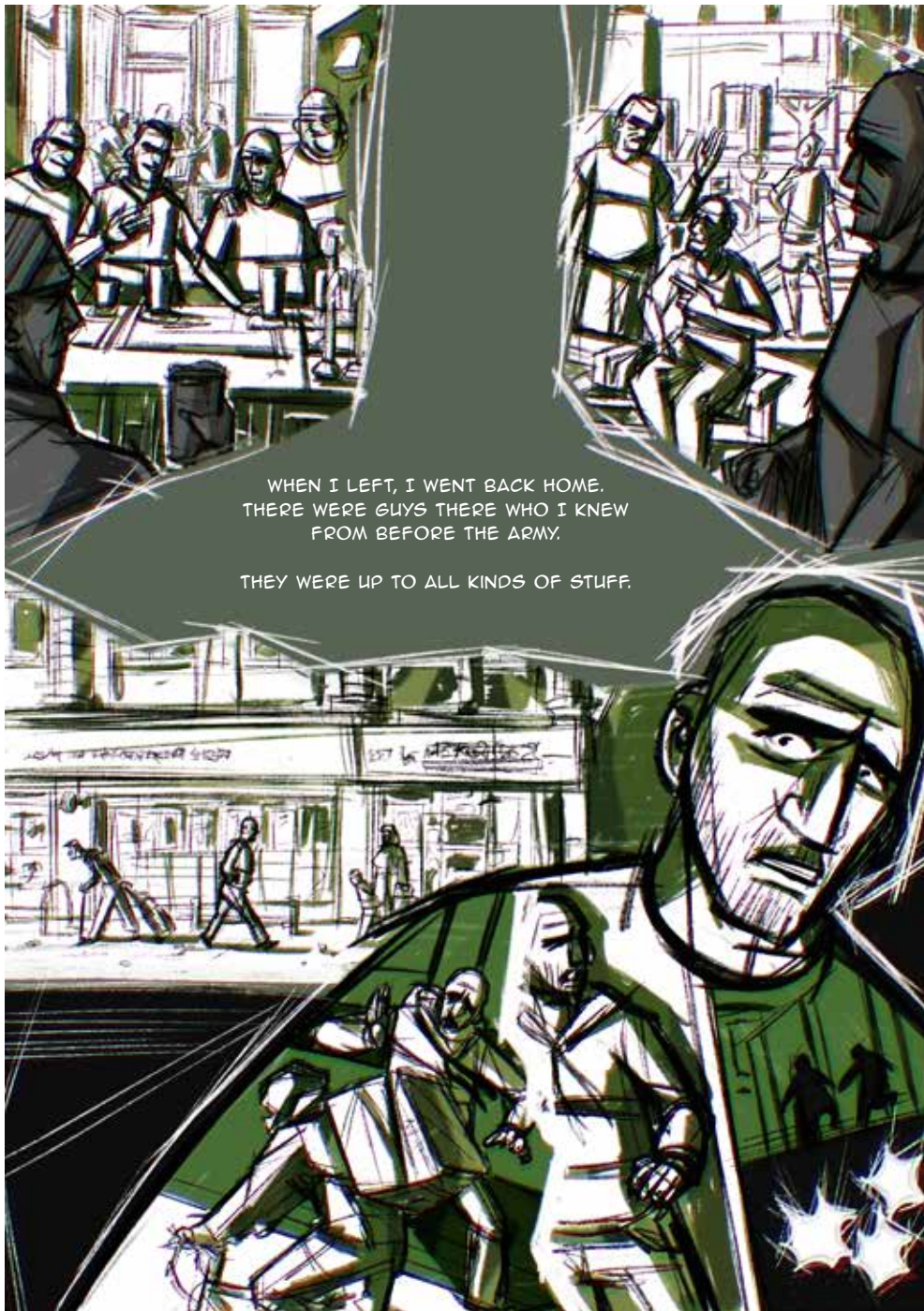


IN THE ARMY YOU HAVE TO BE INDEPENDENT FROM THE AGE OF 16, 17 WHATEVER.

BUT WHAT THEY DON'T TELL YOU IS HOW TO LIVE ON CIVVY STREET - NOT HOW TO BE A HUMAN, BUT HOW TO BE A CIVILIAN.

I DON'T GET ON WITH MY MUM AND DAD - THEY WERE ONLY EVER PROUD OF ME WHEN I JOINED UP.

I DON'T HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH THEM IF I CAN HELP IT, EVEN THOUGH THEY AREN'T FAR AWAY. SOMETIMES I'VE HAD TO BORROW MONEY FROM MY AUNTIE, THOUGH.



WHEN I LEFT, I WENT BACK HOME.
THERE WERE GUYS THERE WHO I KNEW
FROM BEFORE THE ARMY.

THEY WERE UP TO ALL KINDS OF STUFF.

THE FIRST COUPLE OF MONTHS
WAS ALL FUN AND GAMES AND
I COULD SEE MYSELF SLIPPING
BACK INTO BAD WAYS... DRINKING,
TAKING DRUGS, PARTYING, YOU
KNOW.

BUT I WAS LIKE "THIS ISN'T ME,
WHO AM I?" I WAS PART OF
SOMETHING BIG, WHERE YOUR
COLLEAGUES ARE LIKE BROTHERS
AND THEN TO COME OUT
AND BE NOTHING.

THEN I REALISED THAT YOU DON'T
COME BACK THE SAME AS YOU
GO.

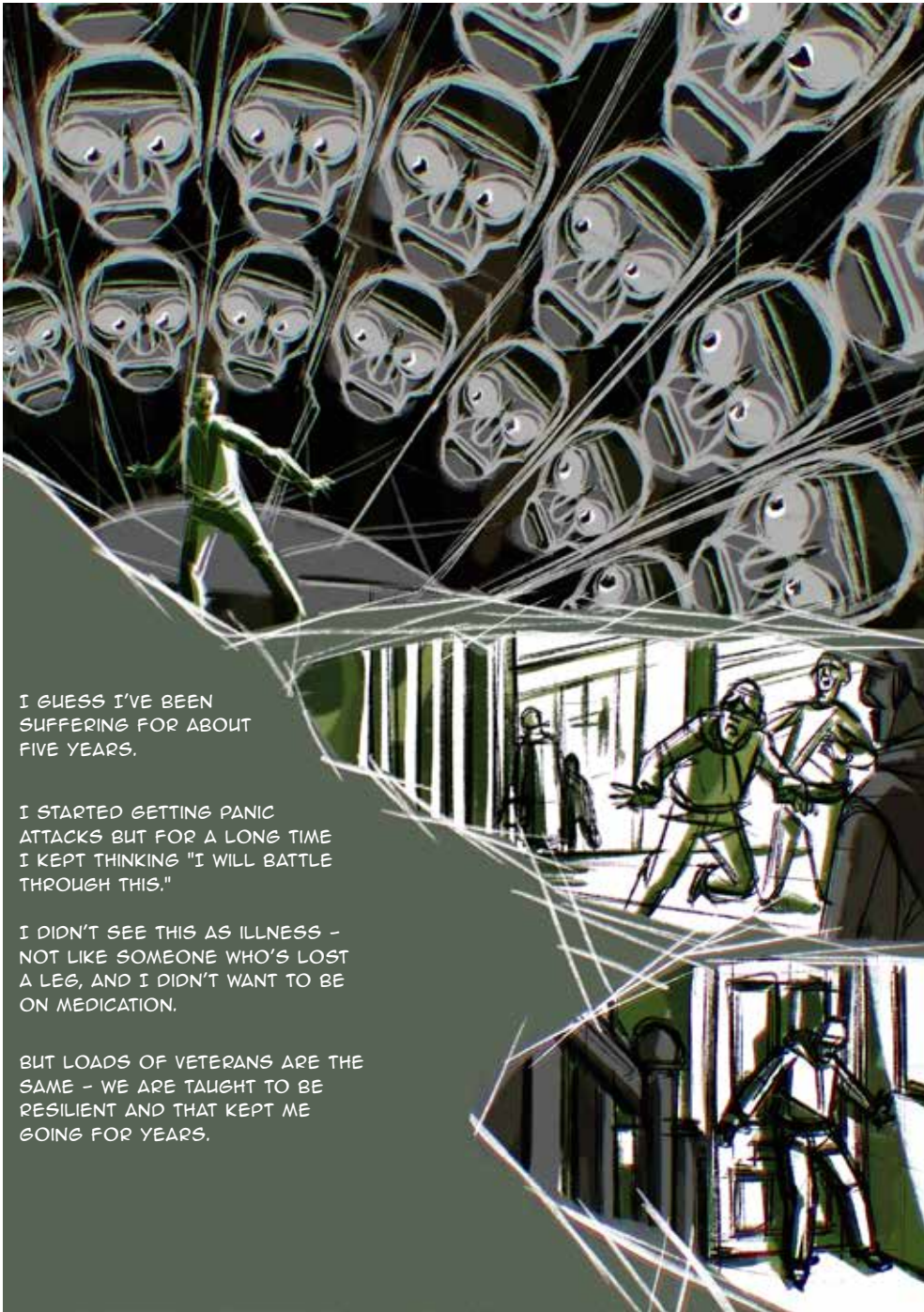
YOU ARE WORN DOWN IN TRAINING,
REBUILT AS A SOLDIER, BUT THEY
DON'T UNTRAIN YOU WHEN ITS TIME
TO LEAVE.

I'M NOT GOOD WITH CROWDED
SPACES ANYMORE. JUST AFTER
I LEFT, I WENT INTO TOWN
AND SOME KIDS LET OFF
FIRECRACKERS.

I HAD A BIT OF A MELTDOWN.
EVERYTHING FELT LIKE A THREAT
THERE - LIKE, ZERO TO A MILLION
SORT OF THING.

I WENT HOME.

LIKE OTHER GUYS I KNOW,
BONFIRE NIGHT ISN'T A GREAT
TIME OF YEAR, PUT IT THAT WAY!



I GUESS I'VE BEEN SUFFERING FOR ABOUT FIVE YEARS.

I STARTED GETTING PANIC ATTACKS BUT FOR A LONG TIME I KEPT THINKING "I WILL BATTLE THROUGH THIS."

I DIDN'T SEE THIS AS ILLNESS - NOT LIKE SOMEONE WHO'S LOST A LEG, AND I DIDN'T WANT TO BE ON MEDICATION.

BUT LOADS OF VETERANS ARE THE SAME - WE ARE TAUGHT TO BE RESILIENT AND THAT KEPT ME GOING FOR YEARS.

I ALWAYS TOLD MYSELF THAT I'M FINE AND I NEED TO GET A GRIP OF MYSELF, AND GO BACK TO WORK FOR MY FAMILY.

BUT YOU CAN ONLY DO THAT FOR SO LONG UNTIL YOU NEED TO PUT YOUR HAND UP.

I WAS IN A NEW RELATIONSHIP BY THEN, BUT IT STARTED TO FAIL EARLY DOORS. I WAS TURNING ON AND OFF.

I HAVE GOOD DAYS AND BAD DAYS.

I DON'T LIKE CONFRONTATION, HAVING TO DEAL WITH PEOPLE FACE TO FACE, ESPECIALLY WHEN THEY ARE PLACING ALL KINDS OF STRESS ON YOU TO DO THINGS.

I ACTUALLY LIKE SECLUSION AND ISOLATION, BEING ABLE TO GET AWAY FROM IT ALL IN THE COUNTRYSIDE AND STUFF.



CHAPTER 2 EMPLOYMENT

I'VE REALLY STRUGGLED IN ALL THE WORK SETTINGS I'VE BEEN IN.

BY THE TIME I LEFT THE FORCES, I'D ALREADY GOT SOMETHING LINED UP, VIA A MATE. HE SAID HIS DAD HAD A ROOFING JOB READY AND WAITING FOR ME.

ANYWAY, IT TURNED OUT NOT TO BE WHAT I THOUGHT, SO I DECIDED TO GO INTO PAINTING AND DECORATING.

IT WAS ALRIGHT FOR A WHILE, BUT I GOT BORED AFTER ABOUT A YEAR...

...THEN I BECAME A PET GROOMER! SOMETIMES I DO IMPETUOUS THINGS, AND THIS WAS ONE OF THEM.

I'VE DONE ALL SORT OF JOBS - DRIVER'S MATE, WAREHOUSING, PARCEL DELIVERY... LOADS OF RANDOM THINGS, BUT I NEVER SEEM TO LAST LONG.

NOTHING EVER SEEMED TO EXCITE ME AS WHAT THE ARMY DID.

IT'S ONE OF THOSE THINGS WHERE AFTER TWO OR THREE YEARS, I GET BORED AND WISH I WAS BACK IN THE ARMY.



IT'S JUST COMMON KNOWLEDGE THAT YOU'RE NOT GOING TO SETTLE UNLESS IT'S THE RIGHT JOB FOR YOU..

BUT PART OF YOU THINKS YOU'VE LEFT THE RIGHT JOB.

IN THE ARMY, EVERYTHING IS STRUCTURED BUT IN CIVVY STREET NOTHING'S STRUCTURED. YOU'RE ACTUALLY TAUGHT TO WORK IN ONE WAY, YOU'RE TRAINED IN THAT WAY, YOU GET AN ORDER, YOU DO IT WELL, YOU GET REWARDED, GET ANOTHER ORDER.

THEN ALL OF A SUDDEN, YOU'RE LET OUT INTO THE BIG WIDE WORLD, BASICALLY, AND NOW YOU CAN THINK FOR YOURSELF. IT MAKES IT VERY, VERY HARD.

ONE OF THE LAST JOBS WAS SECURITY.

I COMPLETED AN SIA COURSE, FIRST AID, AND SO ON.

I GOT OFFERED A JOB BY A GUY WHO RAN SECURITY AT EVENT - TURNED OUT HE WAS A VETERAN TOO AND BECAUSE I WAS ONE, HE SNATCHED ME UP.

PROBLEM WAS I DIDN'T GET ON WITH THE OTHER GUYS ON THE JOB. WE WERE AT LOGGERHEADS AT LOT OF THE TIME, BECAUSE THEY WERE JUST TAKING THE PISS, LAUGHING AND JOKING.

ONE DAY, I SAW THEY'D POSTED SOMETHING ABOUT ME ON FACEBOOK. I THOUGHT I DON'T GET PAID ENOUGH FOR THIS, SO I EMAILED THE BOSS AND I SAID HERE'S MY NOTICE, I'M OFF.

I LEFT, AND I LEFT WITH STRESS, BECAUSE I WAS TWO MINUTES AWAY FROM PUTTING SOMEBODY THROUGH A WINDOW.



I'M A GRATER, AND I WANT TO EARN AND HAVE NICE THINGS, BUT THERE ARE TOO MANY IDIOTS OUT THERE....

YOU HAVE PEOPLE WHO COAST ALONG... YOU KNOW, TURN UP, DO MY WORK AND GO HOME...

I'M NOT LIKE THAT. I END UP GETTING TOO STRESSED.



THE LAST JOB I WAS ON, THEY KEPT ON PROMOTING THESE KIDS OVER ME, AND I SAID "HANG ON, WHAT'S THE DEAL HERE?"

I WAS LEADING A MORTAR PLATOON WHEN THEY WERE IN NAPPIES!

SO THEY MADE ME A SHIFT SUPERVISOR.

IN ONE JOB, I WENT TO MY BOSS AND SAID "THIS IS WHERE YOU CAN IMPROVE THE PROCESS", AND HE ENDED UP GETTING REALLY UPSET WITH ME. I THINK HE SAW IT AS A THREAT, LIKE I WAS TRYING TO TAKE OVER.

LATER, A MANAGER CAME OVER AND SAID "YOU NEED TO STOP TAKING OVER."

I REALLY LOST MY RAG AND SAID "I'M NOT TRYING TO TAKE OVER, I'M TRYING TO MAKE THINGS MORE EFFICIENT." I SAID "DO YOU KNOW WHAT? I'M APPALLED AT THE WAY YOU JUST TALKED TO ME - COMPLETE LACK OF RESPECT. YOU'VE NO RESPECT FOR ME AND I'VE NO RESPECT FOR YOU." THAT HAPPENED A COUPLE OF TIMES.

I KEPT GETTING PEOPLE RINGING ME UP FIVE MINUTES BEFORE, SAYING "SOMETHING'S COME UP I CAN'T MAKE IT IN."

I THOUGHT I CAN'T DO THIS ANYMORE, SO I SENT THEM AN EMAIL SAYING "JUST TERMINATE MY CONTRACT", AND I WAS GONE.

I SEEM TO UPSET PEOPLE A LOT.

THE MAIN PROBLEM IS ADJUSTING TO THE ATTITUDES OF CIVILIANS. TRYING TO GET USED TO THE WAY THEY OPERATE IS A HUGE CHALLENGE.

IT'S THE BACKSTABBING THAT DOES YOUR HEAD IN...

IN THE ARMY, IF SOMEONE DOESN'T LIKE YOU, THEY WILL TELL YOU TO YOUR FACE. NOT ON THE SAME WAVELENGTH AT ALL.

I HAD ALL THESE BILLS
COMING IN.

THERE HAVE BEEN TIMES WHEN I
PHONED UP THE WATER OR GAS,
AND SAID TO THEM, "LOOK, I
KNOW THIS SOUNDS STRANGE, BUT
I WAS IN THE ARMY, SO WHEN IT
COMES TO THIS, I HAVEN'T GOT A
CLUE."

WHEN I WAS WORKING, I GOT INTO
THIS TRAP WHERE I WOULD GET
PAID AND THEN BUY STUFF, AND
BY THE MONTH END I WOULD HAVE
VERY LITTLE.

SO I TOOK OUT A CREDIT CARD
TO PAY SOME OF THAT, BUT
I DIDN'T REALLY CHECK THE
INTEREST RATES, SO IT STARTED
TO BUILD UP.

I WAS STRUGGLING TO KNOW
WHERE TO LOOK. I CALLED A
VETERAN'S CHARITY AND THEY
WENT THROUGH A CHECKLIST AND
ASKED IF I WAS GETTING ANY
BENEFITS. I REALLY DIDN'T WANT
TO, BECAUSE I THOUGHT OF ALL
THESE SCALLIES AT THE JOB
CENTRE, WHO'VE NEVER DONE A
DAY'S WORK IN THEIR LIVES.

WHY SHOULD I BE FORCED TO
BEG FOR HELP ALONGSIDE THESE,
WHEN I'VE SERVED MY COUNTRY?

SO I DID WHAT A SQUADDIE
NORMALLY DOES, HUNKER DOWN
AND SURVIVE, I DON'T GIVE A SHIT.

BUT AFTER A WHILE, I THOUGHT
NO ONE'S GOING TO GIVE ME
A MEDAL FOR STARVING, SO I
ASKED IF THEY COULD HELP ME
APPLY FOR UNIVERSAL CREDIT.



THE THING IS, WHEN YOU
LEAVE, THERE'S PLENTY
PREPARING YOU FOR
YOUR NEXT CAREER,
AND TONS OF AGENCIES
FINDING VETERANS WORK.

BUT THE ONE THING
THEY DON'T TELL
YOU IS WHAT TO DO
IF SOMETHING GOES
WRONG - YOU KNOW,
ACTUALLY IF THAT JOB
DOESN'T WORK OUT,
OR IF YOU'RE IN A
TIGHT SPOT,
THIS IS WHAT TO DO -
HERE'S THE SUPPORT
YOU MIGHT BE ABLE
TO GET.



CHAPTER 3 HEALTH

THERE WAS A FEW MONTHS
WHERE I DIDN'T GO OUT OF
THE HOUSE ONCE.

MY GIRLFRIEND AND
MY FAMILY MEMBERS SAID
"YOU'VE CHANGED, YOU'RE NOT
YOURSELF ANYMORE," STUFF
LIKE THAT.

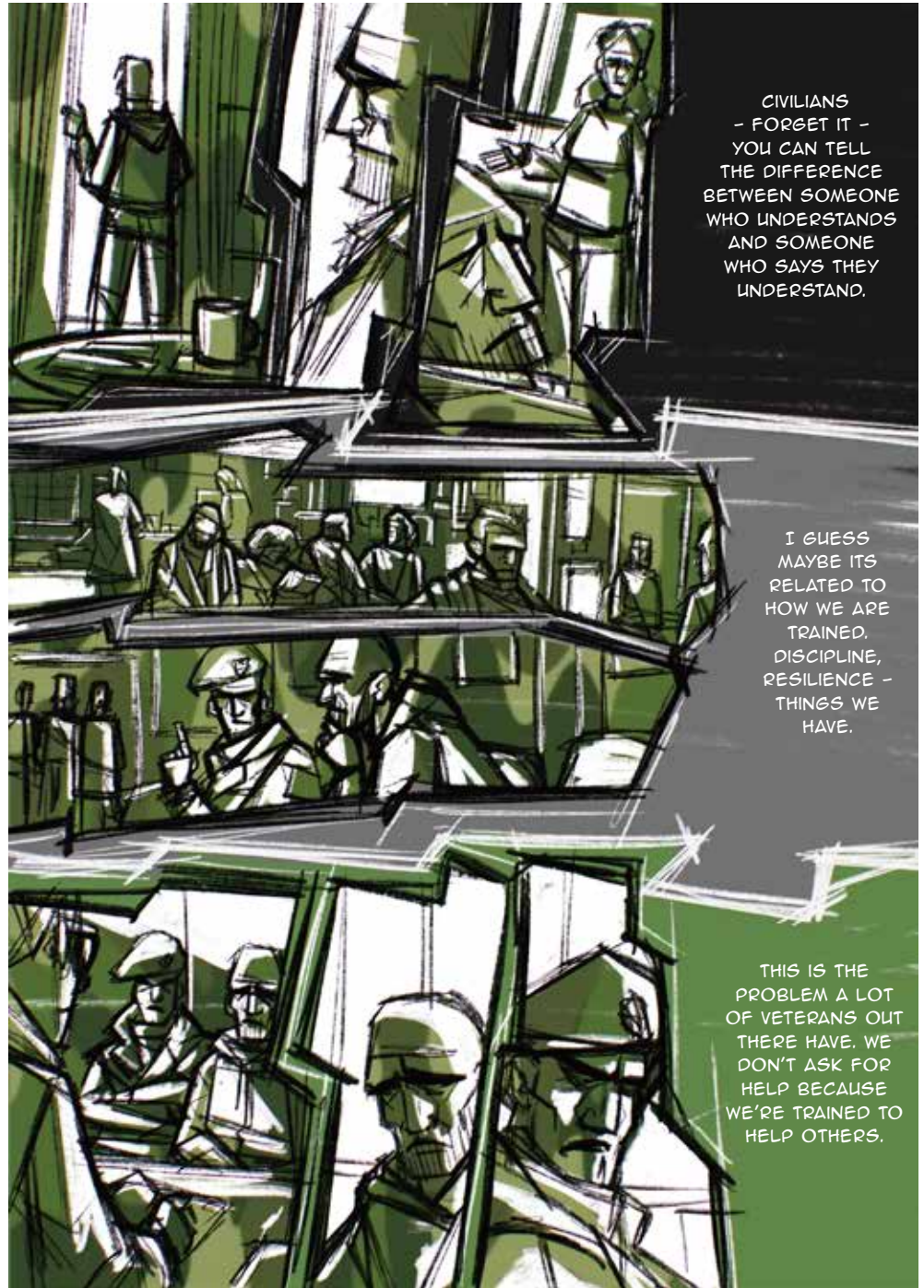
TO BE HONEST, I WAS BEGINNING
TO FEEL THE SAME WAY I
DID WHEN I WENT THROUGH
RESETTLEMENT.

I STARTED TO FEEL LIKE
I WAS FALLING INTO A HOLE,
BUT I WAS TRYING TO HIDE IT
THE BEST I COULD.

IT'S HARD BECAUSE WHEN YOU
ARE ON A BAD DAY, YOU DON'T
WANT TO GET UP IN THE MORNING,
BUT YOU DO.

I'VE GOT SO MUCH TO DO,
BUT NO MOTIVATION. I MEAN,
YES THERE IS SUPPORT, BUT YOU
NEED THE RIGHT PERSON.

THE PROBLEM IS UNLESS I'M
TALKING TO SOMEONE WHO
UNDERSTANDS OUR LANGUAGE,
WHAT'S THE POINT? HOW THE HELL
CAN I TELL SOME 20 YEAR OLD
LASS WHAT I'VE BEEN THROUGH?



CIVILIANS
- FORGET IT -
YOU CAN TELL
THE DIFFERENCE
BETWEEN SOMEONE
WHO UNDERSTANDS
AND SOMEONE
WHO SAYS THEY
UNDERSTAND.

I GUESS
MAYBE ITS
RELATED TO
HOW WE ARE
TRAINED.
DISCIPLINE,
RESILIENCE -
THINGS WE
HAVE.

THIS IS THE
PROBLEM A LOT
OF VETERANS OUT
THERE HAVE. WE
DON'T ASK FOR
HELP BECAUSE
WE'RE TRAINED TO
HELP OTHERS.

I CAN MANAGE MY DAILY LIFE WHEN I'M IN THE HOUSE, BUT IF I HAVE TO GO OUT FOR ANY LENGTH OF TIME, I WILL FIND THE QUICKEST WAY TO GET THERE, DO WHAT I NEED TO GET DONE AND GET HOME.

REALLY THOUGH, I TRY TO AVOID IT, BECAUSE OF THE ANXIETY.

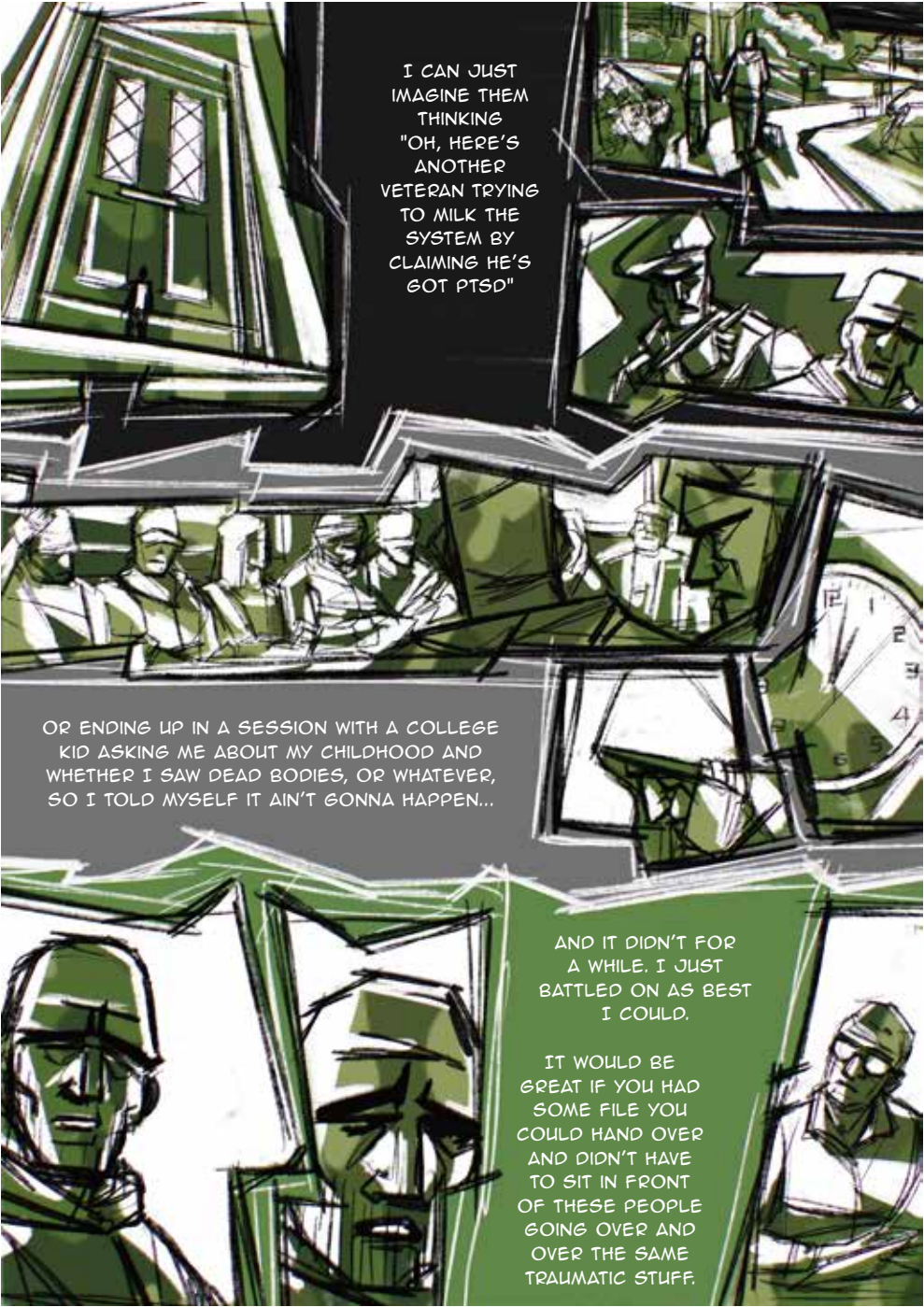
IT'S BECOME TEN TIMES WORSE SINCE COVID.

EVEN BEFORE THAT, MY ANGER WAS CAUSING PROBLEMS IF I WENT OUT. BUT MY ARMY SELF KEPT ON SAYING "YOU WILL MANAGE, YOU HAVE BEEN TRAINED TO COPE, TO BATTLE ON...THIS IS WHAT YOU DO."

IF YOU PUT ME IN A DOCTOR'S WAITING ROOM AND EXPECT ME TO BE SITTING AROUND FOR HOURS WITH MY ANXIETY GOING THROUGH THE ROOF, JUST TO BE TOLD I'M DEPRESSED - I'M GOING TO WALK OUT.

I DIDN'T KNOW BACK THEN I HAD PTSD, BUT EVEN IF I HAD, I DON'T KNOW IF I WOULD HAVE GONE AND SEEN ANYONE ABOUT IT.

I'M NOT SOME SNOWFLAKE WHO CRUMBLES BECAUSE HIS DOG DIED OR SOMETHING.



I CAN JUST IMAGINE THEM THINKING "OH, HERE'S ANOTHER VETERAN TRYING TO MILK THE SYSTEM BY CLAIMING HE'S GOT PTSD"

OR ENDING UP IN A SESSION WITH A COLLEGE KID ASKING ME ABOUT MY CHILDHOOD AND WHETHER I SAW DEAD BODIES, OR WHATEVER, SO I TOLD MYSELF IT AIN'T GONNA HAPPEN...

AND IT DIDN'T FOR A WHILE. I JUST BATTLED ON AS BEST I COULD.

IT WOULD BE GREAT IF YOU HAD SOME FILE YOU COULD HAND OVER AND DIDN'T HAVE TO SIT IN FRONT OF THESE PEOPLE GOING OVER AND OVER THE SAME TRAUMATIC STUFF.



MY GIRLFRIEND AT THE TIME GAVE ME A FLYER FOR A VETERANS SUPPORT CHARITY. I DID SPEAK TO THEM AND THEY SAID "WE CAN GET YOU ON A PROGRAMME."

BUT WHEN THEY'D FINISHED TALKING, I SAID "I'M DOING ALRIGHT AT THE MOMENT, THANKS, I'M SURE THERE ARE PEOPLE MUCH WORSE THAN ME WHO NEED IT MORE, SO I WILL LEAVE IT FOR THE MOMENT."

THE THING IS, IT'S EASIER TO WATCH A FILM, PLAY A VIDEO GAME, THAN IT IS TO GO AND SAY "I NEED HELP... MY HEAD IS MASHED."

THAT WAS ONE GOOD THING ABOUT COVID... NO ONE BOTHERED YOU, OR EXPECTED YOU TO GO PLACES.



IN THE END I DID GO TO THE DOCTOR, BECAUSE I THOUGHT IF I DIDN'T, THEN MY RELATIONSHIP MIGHT GO SOUTH, AND I COULD LOSE ACCESS TO MY CHILD.

THE DOCTOR ASKED ME ABOUT MY SYMPTOMS AND I TOLD HIM I WAS STRUGGLING TO SLEEP.

I DIDN'T TELL HIM EVERYTHING, BECAUSE I DIDN'T WANT TO SEEM LIKE I WAS MOANING. I DEFINITELY MADE THINGS OUT TO BE BETTER THAN THEY WERE.

I DOWNPLAYED IT.


.. I'M NOT FAULTING HIM AS A DOCTOR, BUT I DON'T THINK HE GETS THE MILITARY SIDE OF IT.

SO I WAS OFFICIALLY CLASSED AS BEING DEPRESSED. BUT I DON'T WANT TO BE CATEGORISED LIKE THAT.

PART OF ME - THE PROUD PART - SAYS YOU DON'T NEED A DOCTOR OR A COUNSELLOR, YOU ARE NOT LIKE THAT. WE LOOK AFTER OTHERS. THAT'S HOW WE LIVE OUR LIVES... ASK ANY VETERAN AND THEY'LL TELL YOU, WE DON'T WANT TO MITHER ANYONE.

I'M NOT WASTING ANYONE'S TIME. I'M A PROUD PERSON. I'LL MANAGE, AND THAT'S HOW I LIVE MY LIFE.

IF YOU ASK OTHERS TO BE BRUTALLY HONEST WITH YOU, THEY'LL TELL YOU THE SAME.



THINGS WERE
GETTING A BIT
OUT OF CONTROL.
MY ARMY SELF WAS
SAYING I NEEDED TO
CRACK ON.

BUT I COULDN'T
CONCENTRATE ON
ANYTHING.

I WENT BACK
TO THE GP
AND I SAID
THINGS WERE
REALLY BAD.

HE REFERRED
ME TO AN
EMERGENCY
COUNSELLING
THING AND IT
TURNED OUT
THE GUY WAS
EX-FORCES.

HE WAS GOOD AND HE LINKED ME
INTO A LOCAL VETERAN'S GROUP,
WHICH I STILL GO TO NOW.

THE GP ALSO GAVE ME A
PRESCRIPTION FOR SOME
ANTI-ANXIETY TABLETS.

IN GENERAL, I DON'T LIKE
TAKING MEDS, BECAUSE PART OF
ME BELIEVES YOUR BODY HEALS
ITSELF NATURALLY GIVEN TIME,
AND YOUR MIND IS PART OF THAT.
I REALLY HOPED THEY WOULD
MAKE A DIFFERENCE.

AND THEY DID FOR A WHILE.

THEN I HEARD ABOUT THE SIDE
EFFECTS, AND ALL THAT KIND OF
THING, SO I THOUGHT THIS IS
PROBABLY DOING ME MORE
HARM THAN GOOD AND I THREW
THEM AWAY.

I DO WANT TO GET BETTER....
I DON'T WANT TO BE STUCK
LIKE THIS.

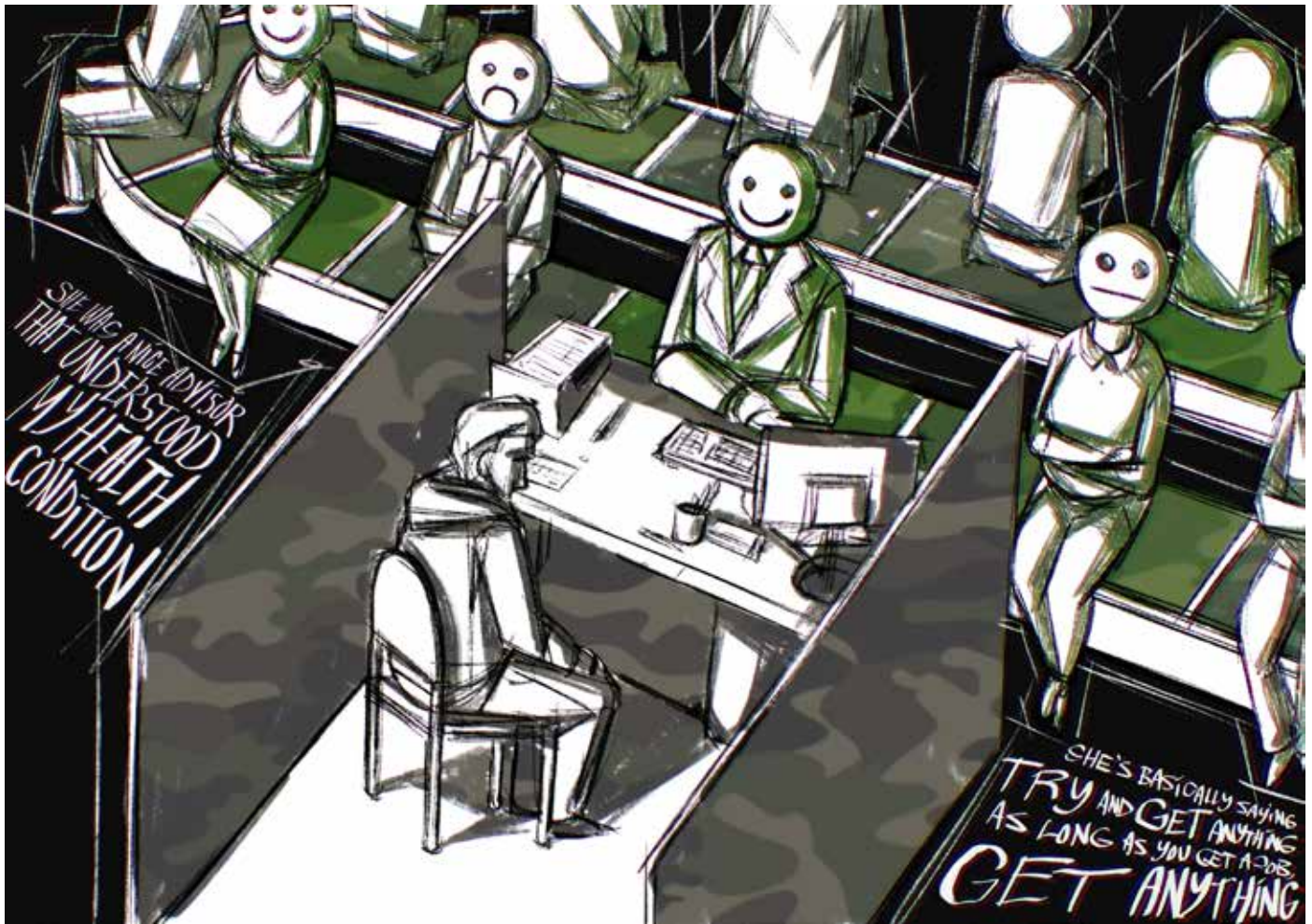
I'M NOT SAYING I WON'T FALL
OFF THE CLIFF SOMETIME IN THE
FUTURE, BUT AT LEAST I HAVE A
BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF IT.

IN THE MEANTIME, I NEEDED
SOME MONEY.

I DECIDED TO APPLY FOR UC,
SO I RANG THE MAIN DWP
HELPLINE TO ASK FOR ADVICE.
I WAS ON HOLD FOR EVER.

I GOT UPSET AND SAID TO
MYSELF, I'LL DO IT ON MY OWN.
BUT I DIDN'T REALLY KNOW WHERE
TO START.

ON VETERANS FORUMS ONLINE,
IT'S LIKE ANOTHER LANGUAGE
ALL THAT BENEFITS STUFF. I
DIDN'T KNOW WHAT THEY WERE
ON ABOUT: ADVANCE PAYMENTS,
LIMITED CAPABILITY, PIP - WHAT'S
ALL THAT?



CHAPTER 4
CLAIMING BENEFITS

WITH UC EVERYTHING IS ONLINE.

IT SEEMED LIKE THERE'S LOADS OF PITFALLS. THERE'S A LOT OF INFO THEY WANT, AND I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT THEY WERE LOOKING FOR, OR WHAT THE CONSEQUENCES WOULD BE OF GETTING IT WRONG.

I READ LOADS OF HORROR STORIES ON VETERANS FORUMS ABOUT PEOPLE BEING SANCTIONED FOR NOT REPLYING TO A MESSAGE AND BEING LEFT WITHOUT MONEY FOR WEEKS.

IN ANY CASE, LIKE I SAID, MY READING ISN'T GREAT AND MY MEMORY IS HAZY AT BEST. SO I RANG UP THE HELPLINE AND SAID "I CAN'T FILL THIS IN, NOTHING MAKES SENSE. I'VE NEVER HAD TO DO ANYTHING LIKE THIS, IT'S ALL NEW AND I DON'T LIKE IT."

TO BE FAIR, THE GUY WAS ACTUALLY QUITE SUPPORTIVE AND UNDERSTANDING. I CAN'T FAULT THAT, BUT LATER ON, I REALISED THAT IT ALL DEPENDS ON WHO YOU GET ON A PARTICULAR DAY.

THERE WAS A QUESTION "HAVE YOU EVER SERVED IN THE ARMED FORCES?" I DID TICK IT, BUT IT DIDN'T TELL ME WHY IT WAS ASKING. THEY SAID THERE WAS AN ARMED FORCES ADVOCATE, WHO I MIGHT GET TO SEE.

ANYWAY I DID A BIT OF HUNTING ON THE INTERNET AND IT CAME UP WITH DWP ARMED FORCES CHAMPION FOR THE LOCAL AREA.

I CALLED THE NUMBER BUT THEY SAID "WE DON'T KNOW WHO THAT IS" - I SAID, "BUT IT'S ON THE WEBSITE." THEY SAID 'WE DON'T KNOW ABOUT THAT."



I DON'T KNOW WHAT THEY DO WITH THAT INFO ABOUT SERVING.

SO FAR IT HASN'T LED TO ANYTHING - YOU KNOW, JOBS THAT MIGHT BE RELEVANT FOR MY SKILLS, THAT KIND OF THING.

I RECEIVED A TEXT FROM THE BENEFITS PEOPLE SAYING THEY'D RECEIVED MY APPLICATION FOR UNIVERSAL CREDIT.

IN THE MEANTIME, DID I WANT A ADVANCE LOAN OR SOMETHING?

I HAD BILLS, SO I TOOK IT.

AFTER A WHILE, I HADN'T HEARD ANYTHING, SO I CALLED THE HELPLINE AGAIN. BUT OFTEN IT'S REALLY HARD TO SPEAK TO ANYONE. THIS IS THE THING, I CAN'T SPEND FORTY MINUTES HANGING ON BECAUSE I'M GOING TO BE A NERVOUS WRECK BY THE END OF IT. IT WAS EVEN WORSE IN COVID TIMES WITH ALL THE CLAIMS.

THAT KIND OF THING FRUSTRATES VETERANS TO THE POINT THEY WANT TO THROW THE PHONE AT THE WALL. THAT, AND WAITING FOREVER FOR AN ANSWER. TIME IS REALLY IMPORTANT. THEY EXPECT YOU TO ANSWER AN EMAIL WITHIN SO MANY DAYS, OR ATTEND THIS MEETING, SO YOU'VE GOT TO BE AVAILABLE AT THIS TIME AND THEN, TEN MINUTES BEFORE THE WINDOW CLOSES, THEY EMAIL TO SAY "WE CAN'T MAKE IT." BUT OFTEN YOU DON'T GET AN ACKNOWLEDGEMENT A MESSAGE HAS BEEN RECEIVED, SO THAT CREATES EVEN MORE STRESS.

I RECEIVED A MESSAGE SAYING THEY WANTED ME TO COME IN FOR A MEETING - TO DISCUSS A COMMITMENT OR SOMETHING. I WROTE IT ON THE CALENDAR, SO I WOULDN'T FORGET - THAT WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN A GREAT START.

ALL THESE FEELING STARTED TO RUSH AROUND. HOW AM I GOING TO COPE WITH ALL THOSE QUESTIONS IN A ROOM FULL OF PEOPLE? IS IT GOING TO TRIGGER THINGS OFF?

SO WITH THIS MEETING, I NEEDED TO GET ALL MY PAPERS IN ORDER, CV, DISCHARGE, WHATEVER.

I WENT TO THE JOB CENTRE IN TOWN. IT'S NOT A NICE PLACE. AFTER A WHILE THEY CALLED ME OVER.

THE GUY BROUGHT UP MY APPLICATION AND THEN ASKED ME TO AGREE TO THIS CLAIMANT COMMITMENT.

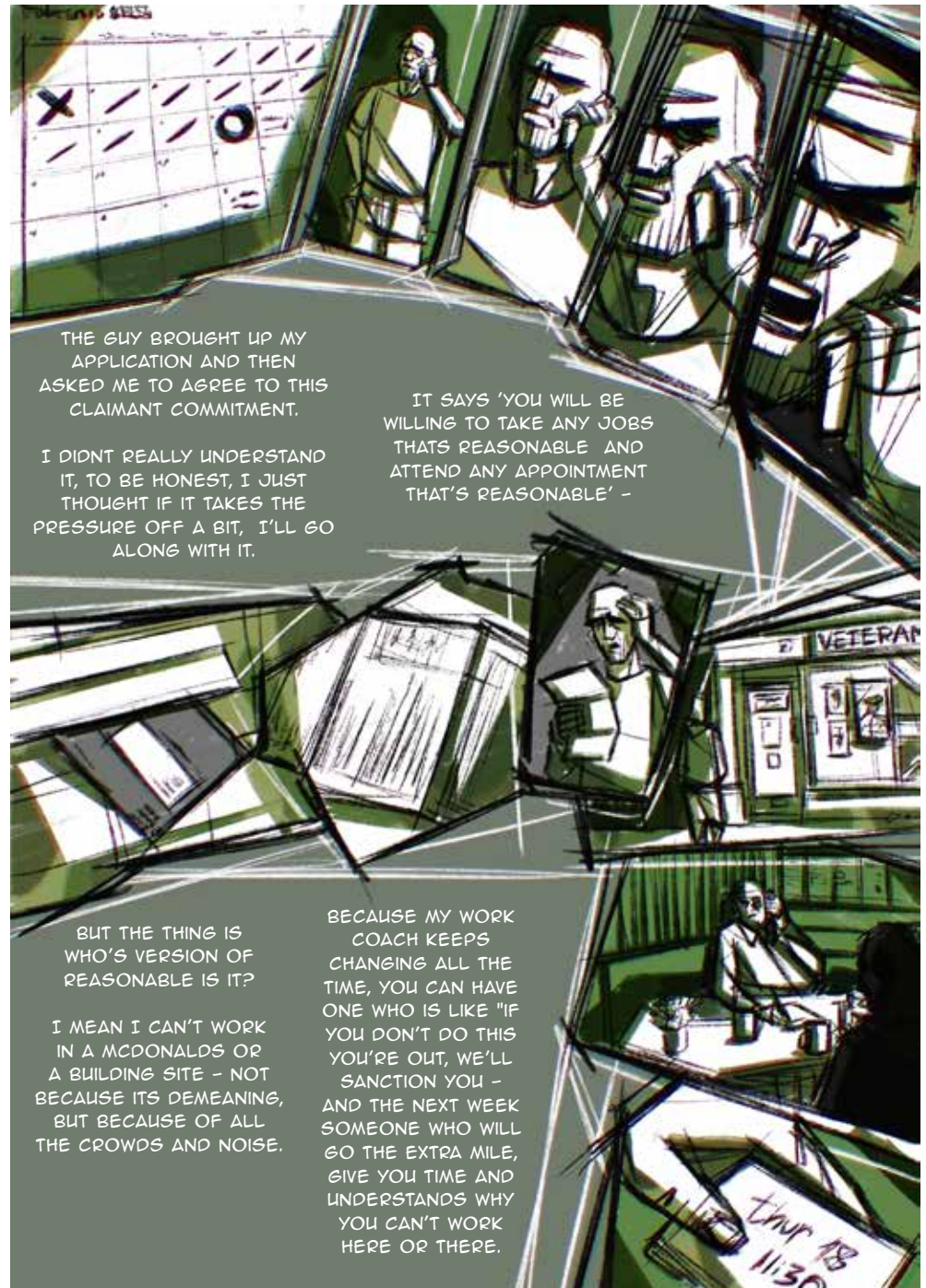
I DIDN'T REALLY UNDERSTAND IT, TO BE HONEST, I JUST THOUGHT IF IT TAKES THE PRESSURE OFF A BIT, I'LL GO ALONG WITH IT.

IT SAYS 'YOU WILL BE WILLING TO TAKE ANY JOBS THATS REASONABLE AND ATTEND ANY APPOINTMENT THAT'S REASONABLE' -

BUT THE THING IS WHO'S VERSION OF REASONABLE IS IT?

I MEAN I CAN'T WORK IN A MCDONALDS OR A BUILDING SITE - NOT BECAUSE ITS DEMEANING, BUT BECAUSE OF ALL THE CROWDS AND NOISE.

BECAUSE MY WORK COACH KEEPS CHANGING ALL THE TIME, YOU CAN HAVE ONE WHO IS LIKE "IF YOU DON'T DO THIS YOU'RE OUT, WE'LL SANCTION YOU - AND THE NEXT WEEK SOMEONE WHO WILL GO THE EXTRA MILE, GIVE YOU TIME AND UNDERSTANDS WHY YOU CAN'T WORK HERE OR THERE.



THERE HAVE BEEN TIMES WHEN I WENT THERE AND TURNED AROUND BECAUSE I JUST COULDN'T FACE IT.

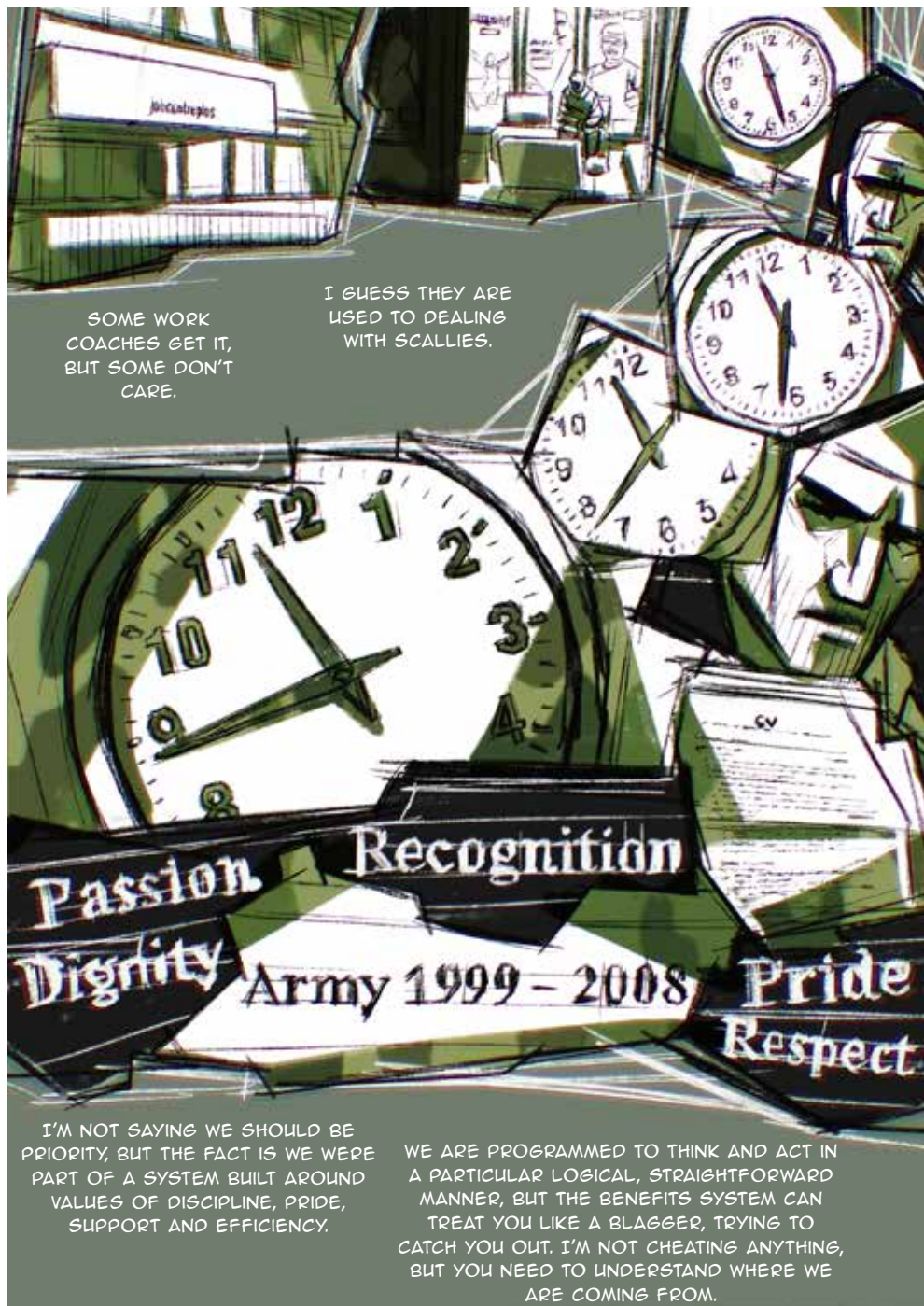
ONCE, I WENT INTO THE JOB CENTRE AND THEY GIVE YOU A TEN MINUTE SLOT, BUT AN HOUR LATER, I STILL HADN'T BEEN SEEN.

I WAS ON THE BRINK OF LOSING IT. SO I WALKED OUT, BUT THEN I GOT A TEXT SAYING I DIDN'T ATTEND AND I WAS AT RISK OF SANCTION.

IN THE FORCES EVERYTHING IS ORGANISED AND EFFICIENT. THIS IS WHY SOME OF US LOSE OUR TEMPER, OR GIVE UP. YOU CAN'T EXPECT SOMEONE WHO'S BEEN IN THE ARMY FOR YEARS TO TAKE ANY JOB OR GET NO BENEFIT BECAUSE THEY WON'T BE ABLE TO COPE.

SOMETIMES THE EXPECTATIONS ARE HORRENDOUS.

WHAT I WOULD APPRECIATE IS SOME RECOGNITION - FIRSTLY, THAT IF SOMEONE HAS SERVED, THAT TELLS YOU THEY ARE WILLING TO WORK. SECONDLY, RECOGNITION THAT FOR SOME OF US, WE DID THIS JOB, AND IT'S AFFECTED OUR ABILITY TO LOOK FOR WORK - BUT WE DO WANT TO WORK.



SOME WORK COACHES GET IT, BUT SOME DON'T CARE.

I GUESS THEY ARE USED TO DEALING WITH SCALLIES.

I'M NOT SAYING WE SHOULD BE PRIORITY, BUT THE FACT IS WE WERE PART OF A SYSTEM BUILT AROUND VALUES OF DISCIPLINE, PRIDE, SUPPORT AND EFFICIENCY.

WE ARE PROGRAMMED TO THINK AND ACT IN A PARTICULAR LOGICAL, STRAIGHTFORWARD MANNER, BUT THE BENEFITS SYSTEM CAN TREAT YOU LIKE A BLAGGER, TRYING TO CATCH YOU OUT. I'M NOT CHEATING ANYTHING, BUT YOU NEED TO UNDERSTAND WHERE WE ARE COMING FROM.



MY CURRENT WORK COACH IS SOUND... HE KNOWS MY BACKGROUND.

HE SAID TO ME "YOUR AREA OF WORK IS SPECIALIST, I'LL LEAVE IT TO YOU..."

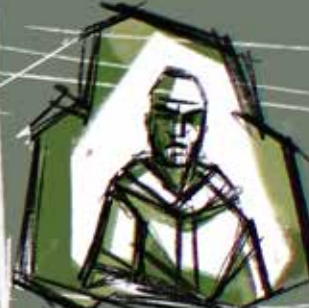
IN THE END, HE SUGGESTED I MIGHT BENEFIT FROM AN EXTERNAL EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT SERVICE,



HE EVEN REFERRED ME TO SOME LOCAL VETERANS'S SERVICES.



I'M NOT GOING TO PUSH ME TO TAKE SOMETHING IF YOU'RE NOT READY."



BUT HE SAID "IF YOU DON'T FEEL HAPPY WITH IT JUST LET ME KNOW AND WE'LL STOP IT."



HE REALLY UNDERSTOOD MY HEALTH CONDITIONS AND WHAT I CAN AND CAN'T DO.



HE'D TELL ME WHEN COURSES WERE ON AND IF I ATTENDED, HE WOULD COVER MY COSTS.



HE WENT ABOVE AND BEYOND. BUT ITS NOT ALWAYS LIKE THAT...

OFTEN, IT'S NOT A TWO WAY CONVERSATION. I SAID "THESE ARE THE SKILLS I HAVE, AND THIS IS THE AREAS OF WORK I'M LOOKING AT." ITS LIKE "IF YOU DON'T FIND ANYTHING, THESE ARE THE JOBS WE WILL BE PUSHING YOUR WAY." I THOUGHT "IF YOU'RE GOING TO FORCE PEOPLE INTO WORK, AT LEAST FOCUS ON WHAT THEY ARE TRAINED TO DO." BUT NO.

I'M STILL TERRIFIED OF GETTING A SANCTION.

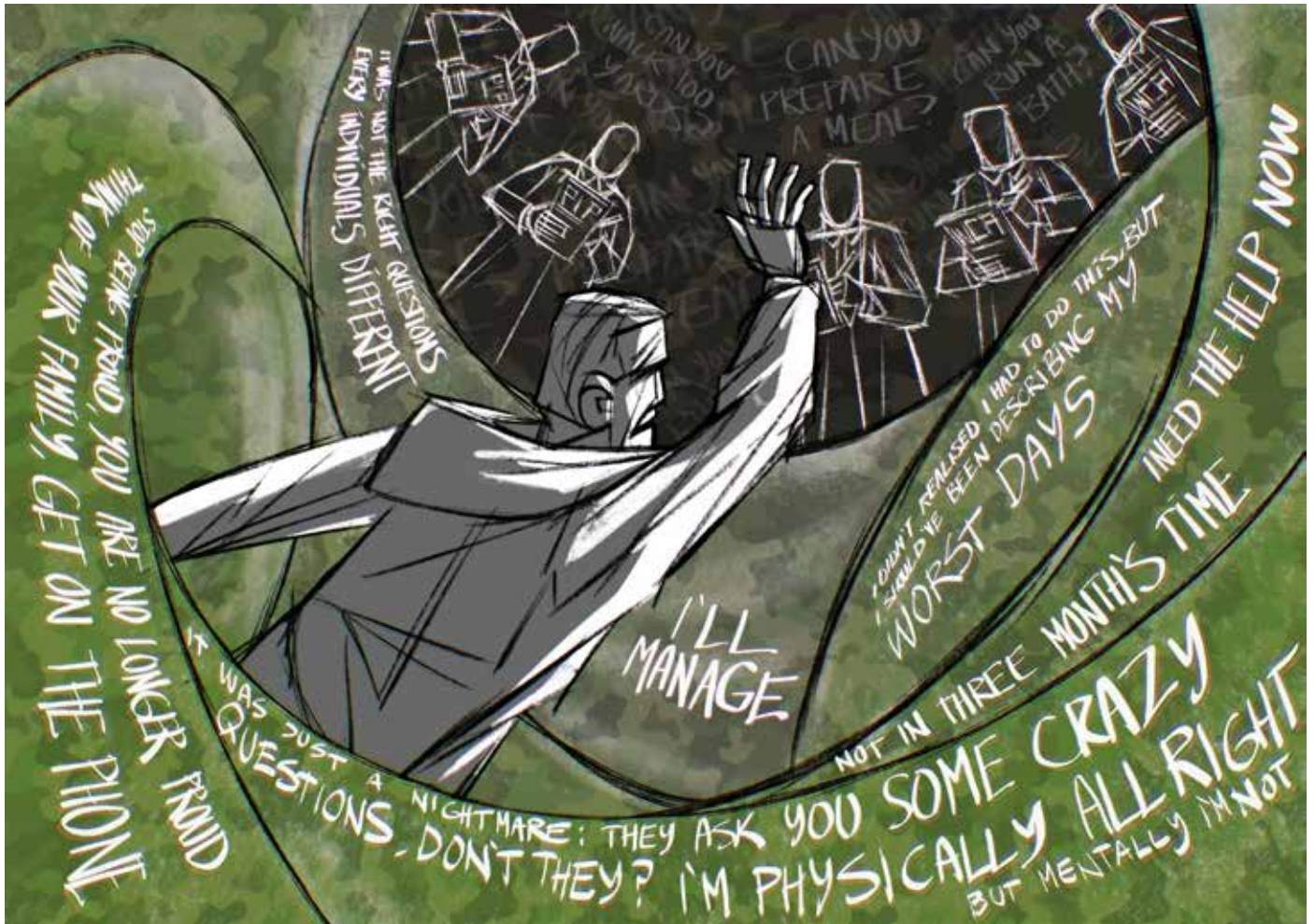
WHAT THEY ARE ASKING YOU TO DO IS KIND OF STRAIGHTFORWARD, BUT THE THING IS THERE OFTEN ISN'T FLEXIBILITY. YOU ARE ALWAYS GETTING MESSAGES: REPLY TO THIS, COMPLETE THIS OR YOU MIGHT LOSE YOUR BENEFITS.

SOMETIMES IT FEELS LIKE THEY OWN YOU. THEY CAN REALLY TALK DOWN TO YOU.

ONE TIME, I SAID "LOOK I CAN'T DO THAT JOB BECAUSE OF MY PERSONAL SITUATION." BUT SHE SAID "PLENTY OF OTHER PEOPLE DO IT." I SAID, "THOSE PEOPLE HAVEN'T BEEN BLOWN UP IN AFGHANISTAN." SHE TOLD ME IF IT WAS UP TO HER, I'D BE IN THERE EVERY DAY. NO COMPASSION AT ALL.

IT'S NOT LIKE I HAVE FOUGHT IN TWO WARS FOR SOME GIRL TO TELL ME I CAN'T GET ANYTHING BECAUSE I HAVEN'T RESPONDED TO AN EMAIL OR SOMETHING.

BUT I'M NOT GOING TO PULL THE VETERANS CARD OUT - PARTLY BECAUSE I'M PROUD BUT ALSO BECAUSE OF THE REPERCUSSIONS. IF I WAS CONFIDENT, I COULD CHALLENGE HER, BUT THERE'D ONLY BE ONE WINNER IN THAT SITUATION, AND SHE'S SAT BEHIND A DESK.



CHAPTER 5 BENEFITS ASSESSMENTS

AFTER A FEW MONTHS, THE JOB CENTRE CALLED ME BACK IN AND SAID I HAD TO START LOOKING FOR ANY JOB. THEY WERE GOING TO GO THROUGH MY WORK SEARCH LINE BY LINE. MY MOOD WAS UP AND DOWN, SO I THOUGHT I CAN'T DEAL WITH THIS.

SO I WENT TO THE GP AND GOT A 3 MONTH FIT NOTE. I UPLOADED IT TO MY JOURNAL AND THEY SEEMED OK WITH IT. BUT I KEPT THINKING WHAT IF THEY CUT OFF MY PAYMENTS?

THE WORK COACH EMAILED ME BACK AND SAID "IF YOU AREN'T FIT FOR WORK, HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT APPLYING FOR LIMITED CAPABILITY FOR WORK?" I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT THEY WERE ON ABOUT.

I GOT A QUESTIONNAIRE AND IT SAID IT WAS CHECKING HOW YOUR HEALTH AND DISABILITY AFFECTS YOUR ABILITY TO WORK.

I'M NOT DISABLED, I JUST CAN'T COPE SOMETIMES. I'M NOT GOING TO BE DISHONEST TO FIT THEIR CRITERIA. ON THE VETERANS FORUMS ONLINE, THEY SAID YOU HAVE TO WAIT ABOUT THREE MONTHS, BUT I NEEDED THE HELP STRAIGHTAWAY, SO I IGNORED IT.

THE GUY PHONED ME UP AND SAID "WHY HAVEN'T YOU RETURNED YOUR WCA FORMS?" I SAID "BUT I'M SICK, YOU GOT MY DOCTOR'S NOTES, WHY DO YOU NEED ANOTHER FORM FILLED IN?" HE SAID "WELL, THIS IS A DIFFERENT PROCESS, TO ASSESS IF YOU HAVE LIMITED CAPACITY" OR SOMETHING.

THAT PHRASE REALLY NEEDLES ME BECAUSE I WAS A SOLDIER - WELL, I AM A SOLDIER. I'M NOT LIMITED ANYTHING.



I GUESS THEY START BY SUSPECTING EVERYONE, BUT THAT'S NOT GOING TO WORK WITH US BECAUSE WE HAVE A THEM AND US MENTALITY.

I WAS BEGINNING TO FEEL WOUND UP, AND SAID "LISTEN, I'M NOT SOME TOERAG WHO SELLS DRUGS OR SITS ON THEIR ARSE PLAYING VIDEO GAMES ALL DAY



- I WAS SERVING AT 18 -
IS THIS HOW THIS COUNTRY
TREATS ITS VETERANS?"

SOMEBODY AT THE VETERANS CLUB MENTIONED PIP BUT ALL THE GUYS I KNOW WHO HAVE GONE THROUGH PIP ASSESSMENTS SAY YOU GET KNOCKED BACK FIRST TIME.

SO WHY SHOULD I GO THROUGH THE HASSLE?

IF THEY CAN'T BELIEVE THE EVIDENCE AND THEY WON'T BELIEVE MY WORD, WHAT'S THE POINT?

I SPOKE TO MY COUNSELLOR ABOUT IT. HE SAID "LOOK, ITS NOT ABOUT LABELLING YOU AS DISABLED, ITS ABOUT YOU NEEDING A BREATHING SPACE TO GET BETTER."

IN THE END, I ASKED MY NEIGHBOUR. HE'S DONE A FEW FOR OTHER PEOPLE AND WAS PRETTY CONFIDENT I WAS GOING TO GET IT. I THOUGHT WELL HE MUST KNOW.

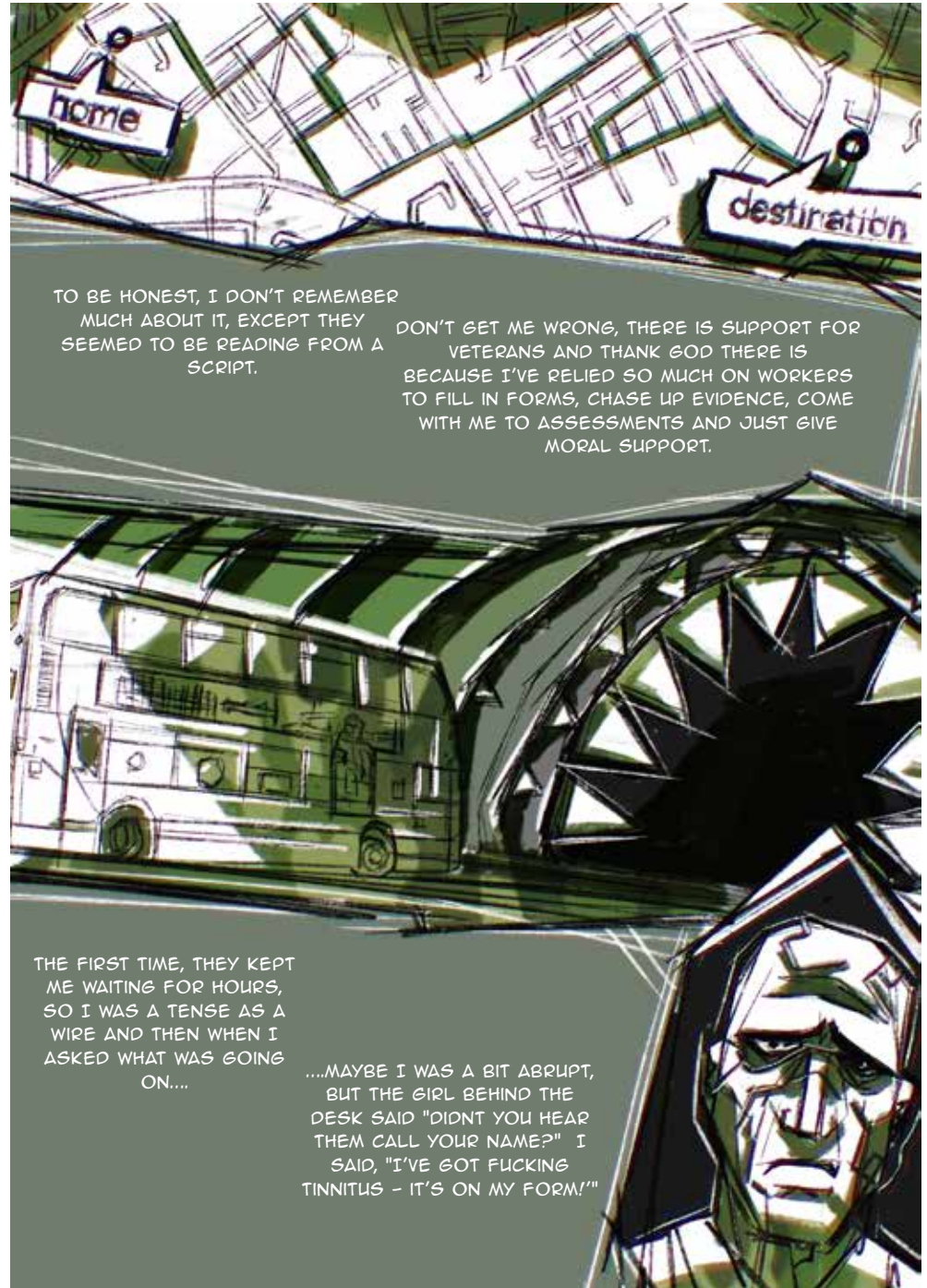
FILLING IN THE FORMS IS TOUGH THOUGH - IT SEEMS LIKE ABOUT 140 PAGES. BUT IN THE END WE DID IT.

I GOT A LETTER TELLING ME TO COME TO A WORK CAPABILITY MEDICAL ASSESSMENT IN TOWN. I DRESSED UP SMART, YOU KNOW, LIKE FOR REMEMBRANCE DAY. BUT AS THE DAY APPROACHED, I STARTED TO GET MORE AND MORE ANXIOUS. I DON'T LIKE NEW ENVIRONMENTS.

THE THING IS YOU HAVE TO GO OR YOU WON'T GET IT, BUT WHEN YOU DO, THEY ASK YOU "HOW DID YOU GET HERE? DID YOU COME ON YOUR OWN?"

AND IF YOU FAIL, YOU WILL LOSE PAYMENTS THAT YOU'VE COME TO RELY ON, AND BEFORE YOU KNOW IT, THEY ARE ASKING YOU TO LOOK FOR WORK. AND THEN YOU HAVE TO DO IT ALL AGAIN IN A COUPLE OF YEARS.

THE WHOLE PROCESS ALMOST SEEMS DESIGNED TO SET YOU ON EDGE. AS I WAS ON THE BUS, I WAS READING THROUGH WHAT I'D WRITTEN. I DID SEVERAL VERSIONS OF THE FORM - THE FINAL ONE I ADDED MORE INFO ABOUT FLASHBACKS AND INSOMNIA - REALLY PERSONAL STUFF. BY THE TIME I GOT THERE MY HEAD WAS FEELING A BIT BLOWN.



TO BE HONEST, I DON'T REMEMBER MUCH ABOUT IT, EXCEPT THEY SEEMED TO BE READING FROM A SCRIPT.

DON'T GET ME WRONG, THERE IS SUPPORT FOR VETERANS AND THANK GOD THERE IS BECAUSE I'VE RELIED SO MUCH ON WORKERS TO FILL IN FORMS, CHASE UP EVIDENCE, COME WITH ME TO ASSESSMENTS AND JUST GIVE MORAL SUPPORT.

THE FIRST TIME, THEY KEPT ME WAITING FOR HOURS, SO I WAS A TENSE AS A WIRE AND THEN WHEN I ASKED WHAT WAS GOING ON....

....MAYBE I WAS A BIT ABRUPT, BUT THE GIRL BEHIND THE DESK SAID "DIDNT YOU HEAR THEM CALL YOUR NAME?" I SAID, "I'VE GOT FUCKING TINNITUS - IT'S ON MY FORM!"

THE WHOLE SET UP IS WRONG. AS SOON AS YOU GO IN, THERE'S A SECURITY GUARD, THEN ALL THESE CLOSED DOORS.

THEY ASKED ME A WHOLE SERIES OF QUESTIONS, LIKE 'CAN YOU RAISE YOUR ARMS ABOVE YOUR HEAD?' 'CAN YOU RUN A BATH?' I SAID "OF COURSE I CAN RUN A BATH, I JUST CAN'T GET OUT OF BED FOR THREE DAYS AT A STRETCH!" NONE OF IT WAS GEARED TO MENTAL HEALTH. I REALLY LOST MY TEMPER AND SAID "ARE YOU TRYING TO PROVOKE ME?" AT THAT POINT, I JUST CLAMMED UP AND LOOKED AT THE FLOOR.

WHY SHOULD I HAVE TO FIGHT TOOTH AND NAIL FOR THIS? I KNOW THE ASSESSOR WASN'T A MEDICAL PROFESSIONAL.

WE GO INTO THESE THINGS OPEN AND HONEST BUT IF YOU ARE LIKE THAT YOU ARE LIABLE TO COME A CROPPER. ONE TIME THEY ASKED ME "DO YOU THINK YOU ARE CAPABLE OF WORK?" AND I SAID, "YES, OF COURSE, IF THE RIGHT JOB COMES ALONG." BIG MISTAKE!

THEY TRY AND MAKE YOU GO TO PLACES YOU DON'T WANT TO - PART OF ME IS THINKING WHY SHOULD I TELL YOU, ITS NOT LIKE YOU COULD POSSIBLY UNDERSTAND.

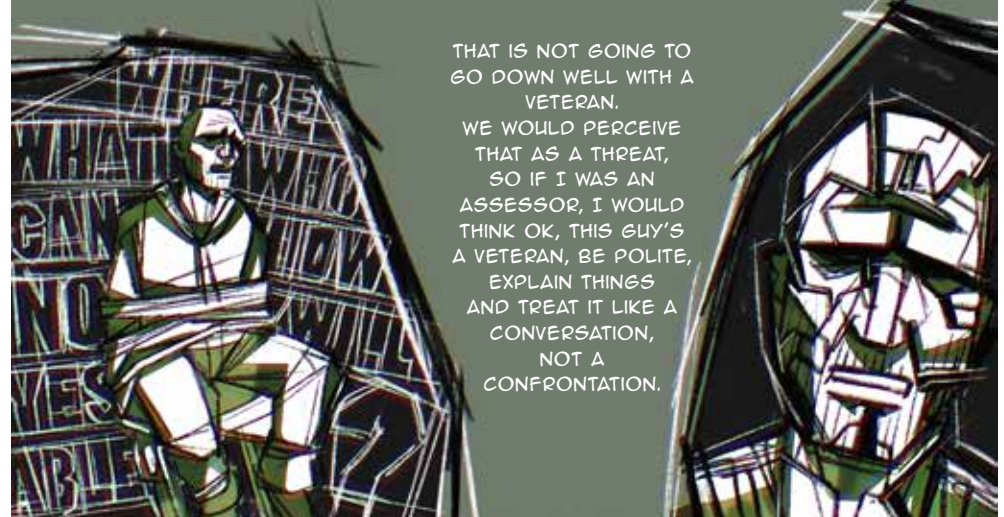
THEN THERE ARE PIP ASSESSMENTS - THEY ARE DIFFERENT TO WCA, BUT THEY ASK YOU SIMILAR QUESTIONS. I SAID TO ONE ASSESSOR "HOW MANY OF THESE DO YOU HAVE TO HAVE? SURELY YOU HAVE ALL THIS INFO FROM THE LAST TIME?" BUT HE SAID "NO, THIS IS DIFFERENT, PLUS YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES MIGHT HAVE CHANGED."

WHEN THEY SUSPENDED THEM DURING COVID, IT WAS A HUGE RELIEF.



SO, I HAVE GOT PTSD THROUGH NO FAULT OF MY OWN, BECAUSE OF WHERE ONE PART OF THE GOVERNMENT WANTED ME TO GO. BUT NOW, ANOTHER PART OF THE GOVERNMENT WANTS ME TO TALK ALL ABOUT IT. IT'S LIKE A VICTIM BEING PUT IN A ROOM WITH THEIR ASSAILANT.

NO WONDER SO MANY VETERANS SAY 'FUCK THIS, I'M OFF' - OR DON'T EVEN DO IT IN THE FIRST PLACE. PTSD IS DIFFICULT TO EXPLAIN EVEN ON A GOOD DAY. IF THE ASSESSOR ISN'T TRAINED, THEY MIGHT THINK YOU ARE MAKING IT UP. THEN IF THE QUESTIONS COME ACROSS AS AGGRESSIVE OR ACCUSATORY, WELL FORGET IT.



THAT IS NOT GOING TO GO DOWN WELL WITH A VETERAN.

WE WOULD PERCEIVE THAT AS A THREAT, SO IF I WAS AN ASSESSOR, I WOULD THINK OK, THIS GUY'S A VETERAN, BE POLITE, EXPLAIN THINGS AND TREAT IT LIKE A CONVERSATION, NOT A CONFRONTATION.

I HAD TO WAIT A FEW MONTHS TO HEAR. THEN I GOT A LETTER - 'YOUR SCORE IS ZERO.'

IT WAS LIKE A KNIFE IN THE HEART. THAT REALLY DESTROYED ME.

I JUST TORE THE LETTER UP AND THREW IT IN THE BIN. I THOUGHT ALL THIS STUFF I TOLD YOU AND YOU DIDNT EVEN TAKE IT INTO CONSIDERATION. EVEN MY GP WAS LIKE "HOW THE HELL HAVE YOU GOT ZERO?"

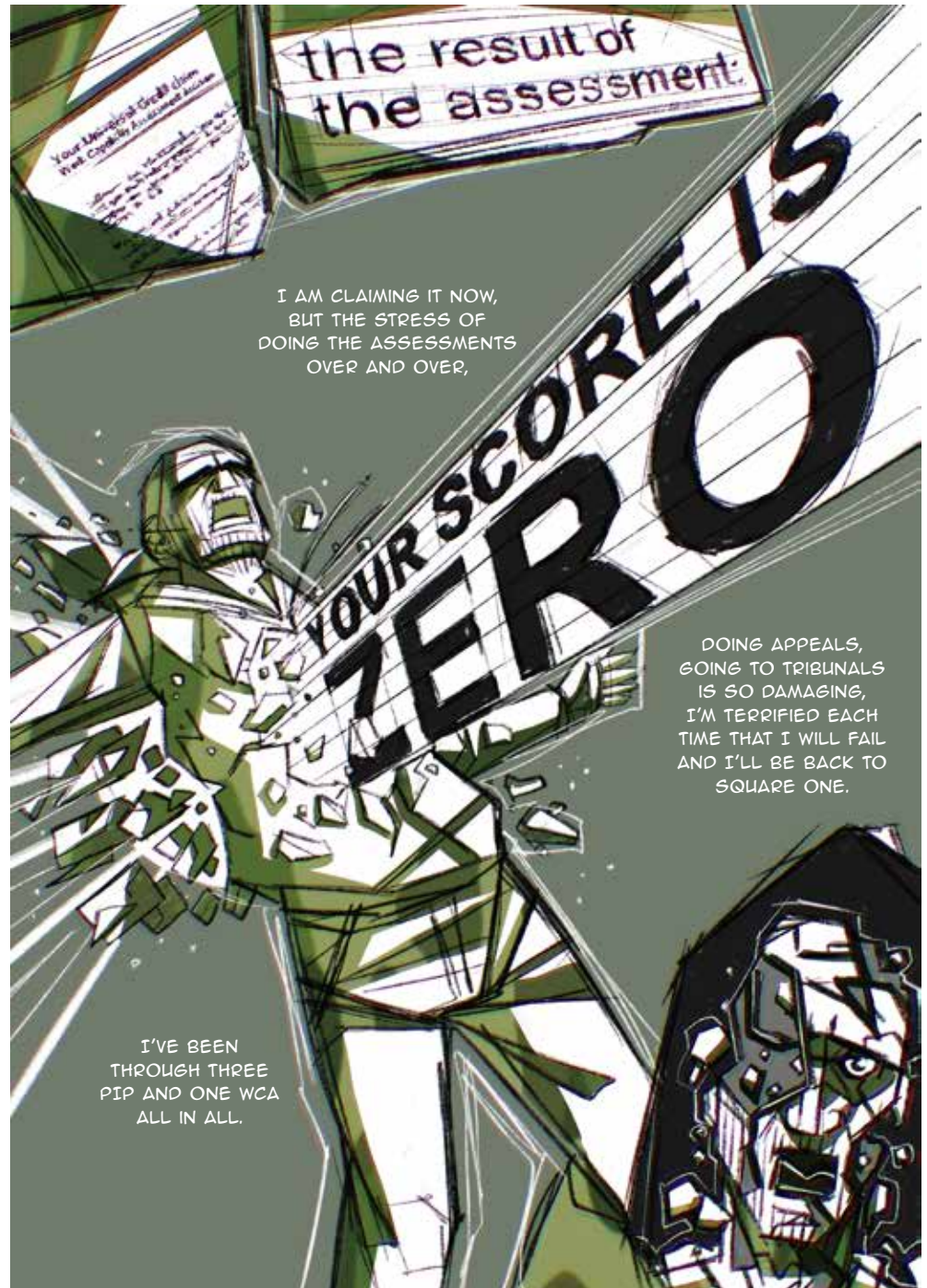
THERE IS A SECTION WHICH SAYS YOU CAN APPEAL. YES, YOU CAN, BUT THAT JUST PILES ON EVEN MORE PRESSURE.

YOU KNOW THE FIRST LINE OF THE LETTER IS GOING TO DESTROY YOU IF IT'S BAD NEWS. GOING THROUGH THE PROCESS ITSELF MADE MY MENTAL HEALTH A LOT WORSE.

THAT WAS THE START OF A LONG DOWNFALL.

I BECAME A BIT OF A RECLUSE. I CAN UNDERSTAND WHY LOADS OF GUYS WON'T EVEN CLAIM, EVEN WHEN THEY'RE ENTITLED, BECAUSE YOU'RE ASKING SOMEONE TO WRITE DOWN, AND THEN TALK TO STRANGERS ABOUT YOUR MOST TRAUMATIC EVENTS - WHICH THEY WILL NEVER UNDERSTAND - AND AT THE END OF THAT, THEY MAY SAY THEY DON'T BELIEVE YOU.

I THOUGHT IF I EVER APPLY AGAIN IT WON'T BE FOR A LONG TIME AND I WILL GET EVERY BIT OF SUPPORT I CAN. YES, IN THE END I DID, BUT THE EXPERIENCE REALLY SCARRED ME.



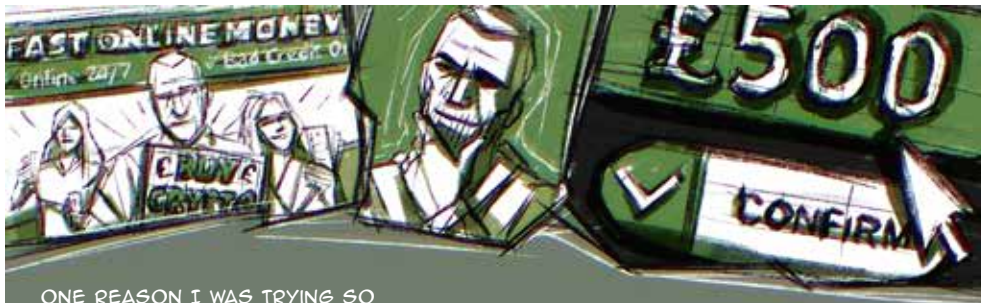
I AM CLAIMING IT NOW,
BUT THE STRESS OF
DOING THE ASSESSMENTS
OVER AND OVER,

DOING APPEALS,
GOING TO TRIBUNALS
IS SO DAMAGING,
I'M TERRIFIED EACH
TIME THAT I WILL FAIL
AND I'LL BE BACK TO
SQUARE ONE.

I'VE BEEN
THROUGH THREE
PIP AND ONE WCA
ALL IN ALL.



CHAPTER 6 FINANCES



ONE REASON I WAS TRYING SO HARD TO GET PIP WAS BECAUSE OF ALL THE DEBTS.

I WASN'T VERY SAVVY WITH MONEY - THE HEIGHT OF KNOWING ABOUT IT IN THE FORCES WAS GETTING A PAY SLIP EACH MONTH, AND THEN I NEVER OPENED IT. ONCE YOU GOT PAID, YOU SPENT IT IN A FEW DAYS ANYWAY.

MY BUDGETING SKILLS WERE NOT GOOD. EVERY MONTH, NEW PAYMENTS WERE GOING OUT THE DOOR AND I WAS TICKING OFF THE DAYS TO THE NEXT UC PAYMENT.



WHEN I LEFT THE ARMY, I GOT SOME COMPENSATION. THEY SAY NEVER ACCEPT THE FIRST OFFER BECAUSE THEY'RE JUST TRYING TO GET ONE OVER ON YOU, BUT BECAUSE OF MY FINANCES - AND THE FACT THAT I HAD A KID ON THE WAY - I FELT I HAD TO.

I NEEDED ADVICE, BUT THEY JUST SAID SIGN HERE, SIGN THERE, AND THAT WAS THAT. I THINK I'VE LOST ALL THE PAPERWORK ANYWAY WHEN I MOVED.

ACTUALLY SOME OF THE COMPENSATION WENT ON SOMETHING ELSE. I SAW THIS OFFER FOR GOLD SOVEREIGNS, AND I BOUGHT ABOUT 50 AND STUCK THEM IN A SAFE. THEY ARE AN INVESTMENT.

SO IN THE END, I GOT A CREDIT CARD. ACTUALLY I GOT THREE, BUT I MAXED OUT TWO. I DIDN'T REALLY GET THE TERMS - IN FACT, SOMEONE ELSE FILLED IT OUT FOR ME. AFTER A CERTAIN PERIOD THE INTEREST RATE SOARS. I USE IT TO TOP UP THINGS FOOD WISE AND THE ELECTRIC METER, WHICH IS NOT GREAT.

THERE'S A TEN POUND NOTE WHICH IS FLOATING AROUND ME AND A FEW OTHER GUYS WHEN THINGS GET TIGHT.

"HAVE YOU GOT £10 YOU CAN LEND ME?" SO I GIVE IT THEM. A COUPLE OF DAYS LATER, I'M LIKE "CAN I BORROW A TENNER?"

THAT WAS ALSO ONE OF THE REASONS I APPLIED FOR UC IN THE FIRST PLACE. I HAD HELD OUT AS LONG AS I COULD. I REALLY DIDN'T WANT TO, BECAUSE TO GO FROM THE ARMY TO SIGNING ON FELT BELITTLING, BUT WITHOUT IT I WOULDN'T SURVIVE.

WHILE I WAS WAITING FOR THE FIRST PAYMENT TO COME THROUGH, I TOOK OUT AN ADVANCE LOAN, BECAUSE YOU CAN'T REALLY LAST WITHOUT IT FOR 5 WEEKS, WHILE YOU HAVE ALL THE USUAL BILLS. LATER ON, I ASKED FOR A BUDGETING LOAN, SO I HAVE TO PAY INSTALMENTS ON THAT AS WELL. YOU CAN ONLY HAVE ONE A YEAR, OR SOMETHING.

WORST OF ALL, I GOT SANCTIONED BECAUSE I MISSED AN APPOINTMENT. I LOST MY PHONE, THEN I GOT A NEW ONE, BUT WITH A DIFFERENT NUMBER. TO GET INTO THE JOURNAL, YOU GET A CODE SENT TO YOUR PHONE - OBVIOUSLY WITHOUT A PHONE I MISSED IT. SO THEY TOOK A COUPLE OF HUNDRED OFF UC. I ASKED IF THERE WAS ANY HARDSHIP PAYMENTS AND THEY RANG UP, ASKING HOW MUCH TOOTHPASTE DO I USE OR WHATEVER. I GOT IT, BUT IT WAS LESS THAN THEY TOOK OFF ME. THAT RUBBED SALT IN THE WOUND.

THEY TOLD ME I SHOULD HAVE GONE TO THE JOB CENTRE AND SPOKEN TO SOMEONE ABOUT THE PHONE. THEY STILL EXPECT ME TO RESPOND TO MESSAGES AND CALLS AND SEARCH FOR SO MANY JOBS, OTHERWISE I WON'T GET ANYTHING.

THAT WAS BEFORE I GOT 'LIMITED CAPACITY', OR WHATEVER THEY CALL IT AND PIP - WITHOUT THEM I'D BE STUFFED AND THAT MAKES ME NERVOUS.

I THINK ITS ABOUT £7000 IN ALL THAT I OWE. AFTER A WHILE I JUST THOUGHT IT IS WHAT IT IS - I CAN'T PAY IT; IT'S NOT GOING ANYWHERE, SO LET IT BE.

BY THE TIME ALL THAT GOES OUT, I'M LEFT WITH ABOUT £55.

NOT SUPRISINGLY, I'M STRUGELING A LOT. MY FINANCES ARE RUBBISH.



I GOT INTO ARREARS WITH COUNCIL TAX, AND THE WATER, SO THAT COMES OUT AS WELL. I ALSO HAD COURT FEES. THE THING WAS, I WAS SUPPOSED TO ATTEND A COURT DATE, BUT BECAUSE I WAS HAVING A BAD DAY, I DIDN'T GO. THAT SOUNDS LIKE ANOTHER EXCUSE, BUT THE FACT IS ONE THING IMPACTS ON THE NEXT AND THEN IT ALL GETS TOO MUCH.

THE VETERANS GROUP PUT ME IN TOUCH WITH MILITARY CHARITIES AND THEY ALSO SUGGESTED I SPEAK TO THE COUNCIL WELFARE RIGHTS TEAM.

I GOT AN APPOINTMENT WITH A WORKER THERE TO GO THROUGH ALL MY FINANCES. I HAD TO BRING ALL MY BILLS. IT WAS HIM WHO MENTIONED RE-APPLYING FOR THE LIMITED CAPACITY THING. I SAID NO WAY, BUT HE SAID "DON'T WORRY, I WILL HELP YOU." SO WE FILLED THE FORMS OUT TOGETHER.

HE SAID THE BEST THING WOULD BE TO GO TO MY MENTAL HEALTH TEAM AND ASK THEIR ADVICE ABOUT WHAT EVIDENCE TO PROVIDE, BECAUSE THEY KNOW HOW TO DESCRIBE MY CONDITIONS IN THE RIGHT WAY, FOR THE FORMS, THAT IS. MAYBE I COULD EVEN GET SOMEONE TO ACCOMPANY ME, SO I WOULDN'T FEEL SO STRESSED.

THE OTHER THING I HAVE TO DEAL WITH IS ALL THE FORCES PENSION AND ARMED FORCES COMPENSATION STUFF. THERE IS SO MUCH PAPERWORK. WITH NOT READING WELL AND STRUGGLING TO CONCENTRATE I NEED PEOPLE TO EXPLAIN IT. THERE ARE MEDICAL DOCUMENTS, LETTERS FROM VETERANS UK, ARMY COMPENSATION BOARD AND ALL THAT.



I GOT AN INCREASE TO MY FORCES PENSION AND I APPEALED FOR A HIGHER COMPENSATION PAYMENT. WHEN THEY PAID IT OUT, IT WIPED £300 FROM MY UC PAYMENT.

I RANG THE DWP CALL CENTRE. I SAID 'PLEASE TAKE YOUR TIME', BUT SHE DIDN'T ACKNOWLEDGE THAT AND RUSHED THROUGH THE INFORMATION.



SHE SAID "YOU SHOULDN'T BE CLAIMING BENEFITS, BECAUSE YOU HAD A PAYOUT - YOU'RE NOT RELIANT ON THE STATE." I SAID "I DEFENDED THE STATE - AM I NOT DUE SOME SLACK? I NEED THAT MONEY FOR TREATMENT AND HIGHER COSTS. WHERE'S YOUR DUTY OF CARE?"

IN THE END THEY SAID I NEED TO SEND PROOF OF WHAT I SPEND EACH MONTH, RECEIPTS AND SO ON, THEN THEY MIGHT RECONSIDER. MORE ADMIN!



BEING ON YOUR OWN MAKES YOU DEPRESSED, WHICH THEN MAKES YOU EAT LESS.

I DON'T EAT FOR DAYS AT A TIME...THAT'S WHAT A SQUADDIE CAN DO. OR I WILL EAT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE DAY AND I'M UP FOR 20 HOURS STRAIGHT OR SOMETHING.

IF I'M REALLY STRUGGLING FOR FOOD, I WILL ASK FRIENDS OR MAYBE A FORCES CHARITY. I DIDN'T NEED TO DO THAT WHEN I HAD THE COVID TOP UP.

I HATE ASKING, BUT THE WOMAN AT THE LOCAL ONE SAID "DON'T BE DAFT, JUST ASK." EVERY COUPLE OF MONTHS, SHE COMES ROUND WITH A VOUCHER FOR FOOD OR A BAG OF SHOPPING.



THEY ALSO PROVIDED ME WITH SOME WHITE GOODS, AND A MOBILE PHONE. THE PHONE IS ACTUALLY A KEY THING BECAUSE I'VE LOST SO MANY - WITH MY MEMORY BEING SO BAD.

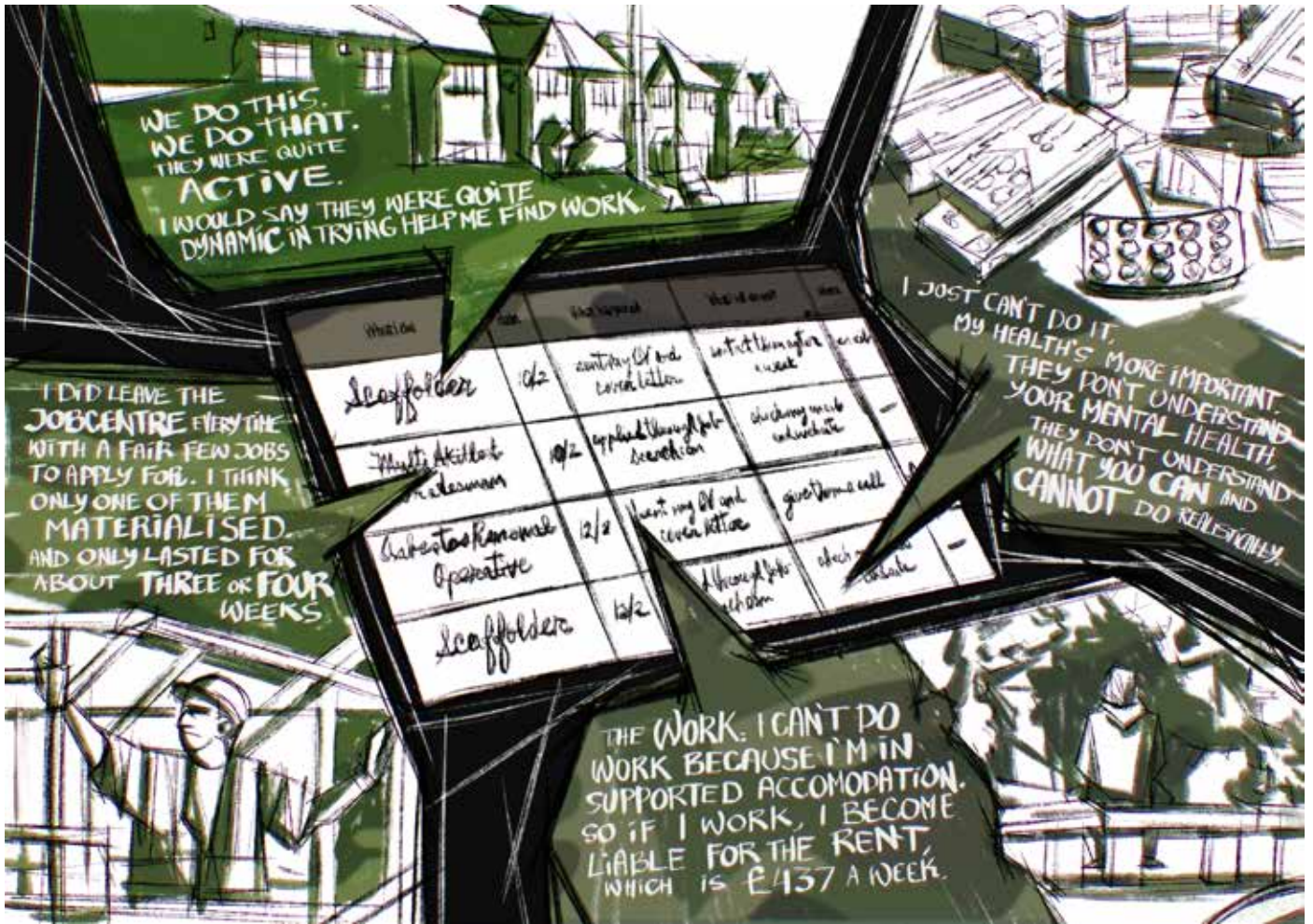
BUT YOU CAN'T JUST AFFORD A NEW HANDSET THERE AND THEN, BUT THEN YOU CAN'T GET MESSAGES, FROM DWP, GP OR WHOEVER. ITS LIKE LOSING A LIMB.

LATER ON, BECAUSE I HADN'T HAD MUCH MONEY AND BECAUSE I WAS FEELING DOWN, I WASN'T EATING, SO I DROPPED A COUPLE OF CLOTHES SIZES. I NEEDED A NEW SUIT FOR JOB INTERVIEWS, SO I ASKED THE JOB CENTRE FOR AN EMERGENCY PAYMENT. UNFORTUNATELY, MY WORK COACH BACK THEN WAS NOT VERY SYMPATHETIC, AND THEY SAID THERE'S NO WAY, SORRY.

THAT MEANT I DIDN'T HAVE THE HEATING ON FOR A WHILE. BUT YOU KNOW, ONCE A SOLDIER... YOU LEARN TO SURVIVE HARDSHIPS LIKE THAT - IT'S JUST A BIT OF COLD AFTER ALL.

THERE'S NOT MUCH I CAN DO ABOUT IT AT THE MOMENT. I MEAN, IF I WANT TO GO OUT AND HAVE A PINT WITH THE LADS, IT'S LIKE 'HANG ON, I CAN'T RIGHT NOW.' I MEAN I'M SURE THEY WOULD STAND ME A COUPLE, BUT I WOULD HATE FEELING LIKE I COULDN'T PAY MY OWN WAY.

YOU END UP NEEDING AN ACCOUNTANCY DEGREE TO KEEP ON TOP OF ALL THIS. NO WONDER LOTS OF VETERANS CAN'T COPE, BECAUSE THEY ARE TRYING TO JUGGLE BENEFITS PAYMENTS, FORCES PAYMENTS, DEBTS, AND ALL THE WHILE PTSD, OR WHATEVER, MEANS YOU ARE FINDING IT HARD TO CONCENTRATE OR REMEMBER WHAT IS DUE, WHAT NEEDS CHECKING AND WHO NEEDS PAYING. ON TOP OF ALL THAT, YOU DIDN'T HAVE THE EXPERIENCE THAT CIVILIANS HAVE OF MANAGING MONEY.



CHAPTER 7 RECOVERY

AS OF NOW, THINGS ARE MORE ON AN EVEN KEEL THAN THEY HAVE BEEN FOR A WHILE. WE'VE FORMED A MEN'S GROUP, WHICH IS BASICALLY AIMED AT GUYS LIKE ME. IT STARTED IN COVID TIME ONLINE, BECAUSE PEOPLE WERE REALLY ISOLATED. I GOT IN EARLY.

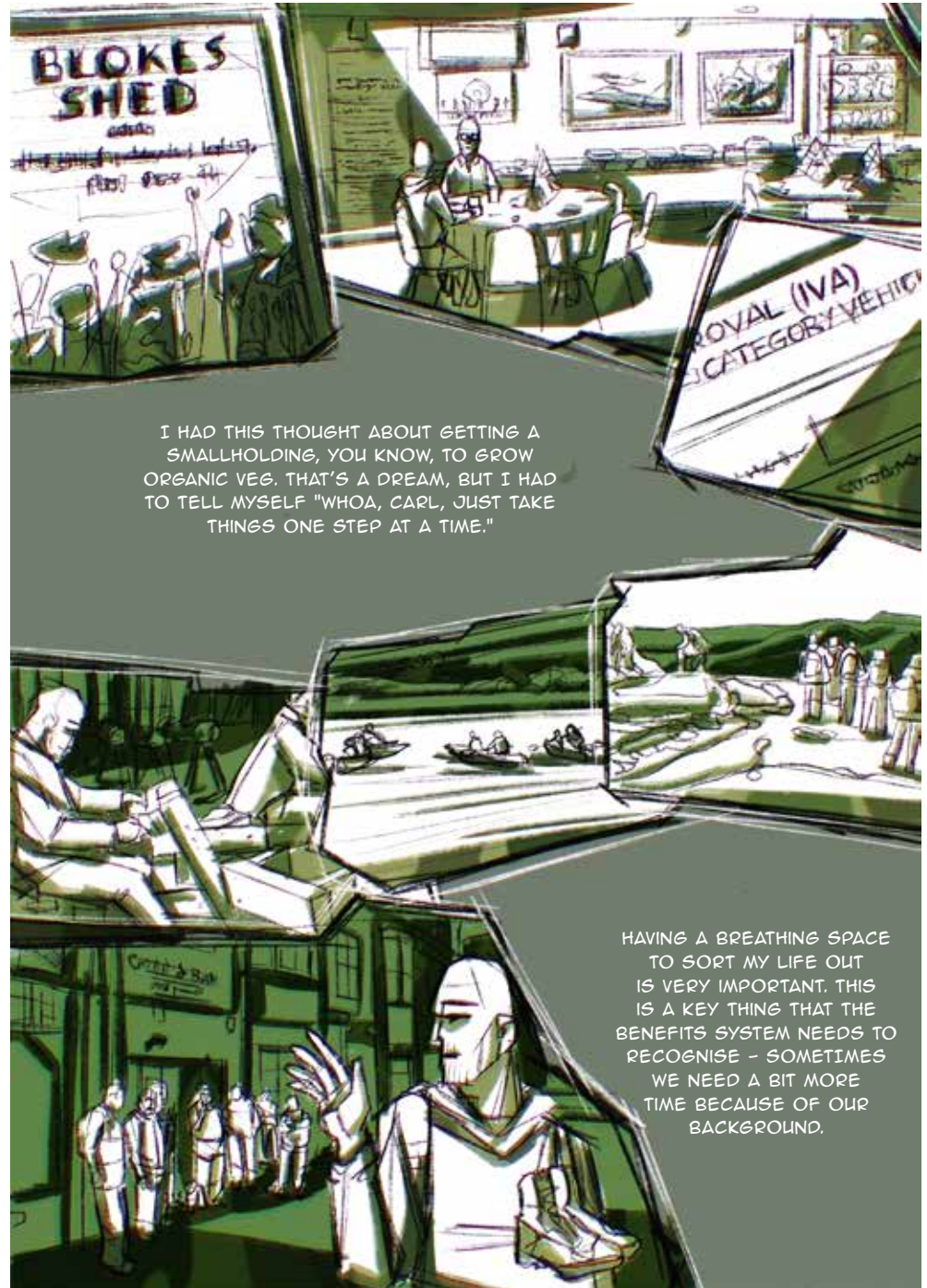
WHAT WE DO IS, WE GET ANY BLOKE THAT'S FEELING DOWN, AND WE GO FOR HIKES AND GENERALLY JUST HAVE A CHAT. WE MIGHT GO TO THE PUB AS WELL, BUT SOMETIMES THE NOISE CAN GET A BIT MUCH, YOU KNOW IF FOOTBALL MATCHES ARE ON.

THE GOOD THING IS, IF I'M STRUGGLING A BIT MYSELF, I CAN MEET SOMEONE OUTSIDE AND THEY CAN COME OUT AND HAVE A CHAT UNTIL I FEEL READY TO GO IN. TALKING TO OTHERS IN THAT SITUATION IS VERY CLEANSING FOR THE SOUL. BUT GENERALLY I PREFER LISTENING TO SOMEONE ELSE TALK ABOUT THEIR ISSUES THAN TALKING ABOUT MINE. I GUESS OLD HABITS DIE HARD - TOO STOIC FOR MY OWN GOOD SOMETIMES.

I'VE JUST COME BACK FROM A WEEK LONG COURSE AWAY IN THE LAKE DISTRICT. YOU GET TAUGHT CLIMBING, TEAM LEADING SKILLS, FIRST AID, ALL THAT.

ON THE LAST DAY, WE HAD AN INFORMATION SESSION RUN BY A GUY FROM A FORCES HUB SOMEWHERE IN THE NORTH EAST. HE SAID IF I WANTED TO I COULD JOIN IN THEIR FUNDRAISING WALKS. I THINK I MIGHT.

I NEED TO BE DOING SOMETHING, PREFERABLY OUTSIDE IN THE FRESH AIR.



I HAD THIS THOUGHT ABOUT GETTING A SMALLHOLDING, YOU KNOW, TO GROW ORGANIC VEG. THAT'S A DREAM, BUT I HAD TO TELL MYSELF "WHOA, CARL, JUST TAKE THINGS ONE STEP AT A TIME."

HAVING A BREATHING SPACE TO SORT MY LIFE OUT IS VERY IMPORTANT. THIS IS A KEY THING THAT THE BENEFITS SYSTEM NEEDS TO RECOGNISE - SOMETIMES WE NEED A BIT MORE TIME BECAUSE OF OUR BACKGROUND.

I SAW THIS TEXT ON MY PHONE. IT SAID 'WE WILL BE HOLDING YOUR PIP REVIEW ON THE PHONE A MONTH FROM NOW.' I COULD FEEL MY PULSE INCREASING.

THIS LADY RANG UP. SHE WAS A COUNSELLOR WORKING ON BEHALF OF THE BENEFITS PEOPLE. REALLY NICE, EMPATHETIC. SHE ACTUALLY LISTENED TO ME. SHE WAS THOROUGH, BUT SHE DIDN'T QUITE GET IT ABOUT VETERANS. I SAID TO HER "HAVE YOU EVER HAD TRAINING ABOUT THE KIND OF THINGS EX-FORCES FACE?" SHE SAID SHE HADN'T, BUT SHE DID SOUND GENUINELY INTERESTED.

IN THE END, I DID LOSE A FEW POUNDS OFF MY AWARD, BUT I WAS JUST GLAD TO KEEP IT. DON'T GET ME WRONG - YOU STILL HAVE TO GO TO PLACES YOU DON'T WANT TO, BUT IT WAS FAIR AND HONEST - THAT'S ALL I EXPECT.

I HAD SENT IN THE EVIDENCE THE MENTAL HEALTH TEAM SORTED FOR ME. I DON'T KNOW IF THAT MADE A DIFFERENCE, BUT THEY DIDN'T ASK FOR MORE INFORMATION. THERE WILL BE ANOTHER IN TWO OR THREE YEARS BUT EVERYTHING REMAINED THE SAME.

I RE-ENGAGED WITH THERAPY. IT'S BEEN REALLY GOOD. BEST OF ALL, I GOT A PROPER DIAGNOSIS OF COMPLEX PTSD. ONCE I'VE FINISHED, I WILL BE REFERRED BACK TO A LOCAL NHS TEAM. THEY ARE HELPING ME WITH A WHOLE LOAD OF ISSUES FROM MY PAST. IT'S HELPED ME UNDERSTAND MYSELF A LOT. I'M NOT SAYING I WON'T HAVE A CRISIS IN THE FUTURE - I PROBABLY WILL AT SOME TIME, BUT I'LL BE BETTER PREPARED.

THEY ALSO PROVIDED A STATEMENT FOR PIP AND ARMED FORCES COMPENSATION CLAIM WHICH I THINK HELPED. IT DID MAKE ME THINK 'I MIGHT LIKE TO DO THIS FOR A JOB.'

ANYWAY, ONE DAY WHEN I WAS WALKING HOME, I SAW A JOB ADVERT ON A BUS STOP. IT WAS FOR A PART TIME GROUND MANAGER AT THE LOCAL FOOTBALL TEAM.

IN THE CORNER, IT SAID THE COMPANY HAD BEEN AWARDED EMPLOYER RECOGNITION SCHEME 'GOLD' FOR THEIR VETERAN FRIENDLY POLICIES. THE ONLY ISSUE WAS IT SAID YOU NEEDED CERTIFICATES IN SAFEGUARDING AND HEALTH AND SAFETY AND WHATNOT.



THEN I THOUGHT WHAT ABOUT MY BENEFITS - THIS COULD MUCK IT ALL UP? BUT IT TURNED OUT HELP WAS JUST AROUND THE CORNER.

THE VETERAN'S CLUB HAVE THIS CHAMPION WHO ALSO HAPPENS TO WORK AT THE DWP. HE RUNS A DROP IN THERE, SO YOU CAN GO AND ASK ABOUT ISSUES. I SAID TO THE GUY - MARK, HIS NAME IS - "I'M THINKING OF APPLYING FOR A JOB. I'M GOING TO NEED SOME ADVICE AND ASSISTANCE WITH GRANTS. I NEED A BATTLEPLAN!" HE SAID HE WOULD RING MY WORK COACH AND THE ARMED FORCES CHAMPION FOR THE AREA AT THE SAME TIME.

I GOT A CALL BACK FROM A REALLY HELPFUL FELLA, WHO SAID "PUT A MESSAGE ON YOUR JOURNAL AND SEND IT TO YOUR WORK COACH, EXPLAINING YOU WANT TO APPLY FOR THIS JOB."

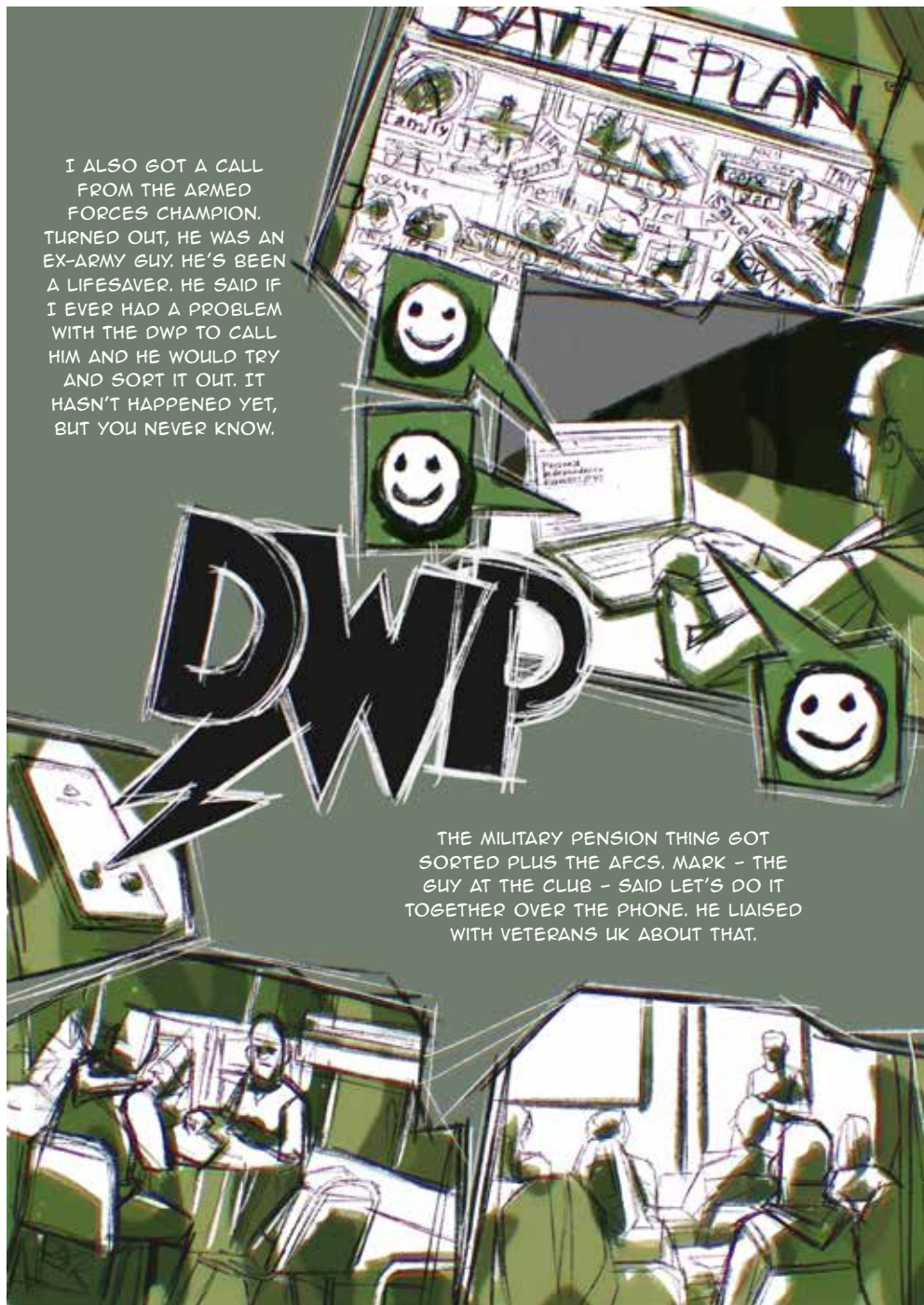
I PUT A MESSAGE ON AND SAID "LISTEN THIS COURSE IS £400, CAN YOU HELP ME OUT?"

STRAIGHTAWAY, I GOT A REPLY SAYING "SEND PROOF AND WE WILL SEE WHAT WE CAN DO." A COUPLE OF DAYS LATER, I GOT THE MONEY. COULDN'T FAULT THAT. MY LATEST WORK COACH IS ONE OF THE BEST I'VE HAD. SHE SPEAKS TO YOU LIKE A HUMAN BEING. SHE SAID IF I WAS EVER NOT IN A STATE TO COME IN TO LET HER KNOW AND SHE WOULD MAKE SURE I WASN'T PENALISED.

SHE EVEN SAID SHE THOUGHT VETERANS SHOULD GET MORE SUPPORT. SHE'S ON THE BALL, SENDING ME JOBS, BUT SHE KNOWS I'M ON THE COURSE AND SAID SHE WASN'T GOING TO PRESSURE ME.

I ALSO GOT A CALL FROM THE ARMED FORCES CHAMPION. TURNED OUT, HE WAS AN EX-ARMY GUY. HE'S BEEN A LIFESAVER. HE SAID IF I EVER HAD A PROBLEM WITH THE DWP TO CALL HIM AND HE WOULD TRY AND SORT IT OUT. IT HASN'T HAPPENED YET, BUT YOU NEVER KNOW.

THE MILITARY PENSION THING GOT SORTED PLUS THE AFCS. MARK - THE GUY AT THE CLUB - SAID LET'S DO IT TOGETHER OVER THE PHONE. HE LIAISED WITH VETERANS UK ABOUT THAT.



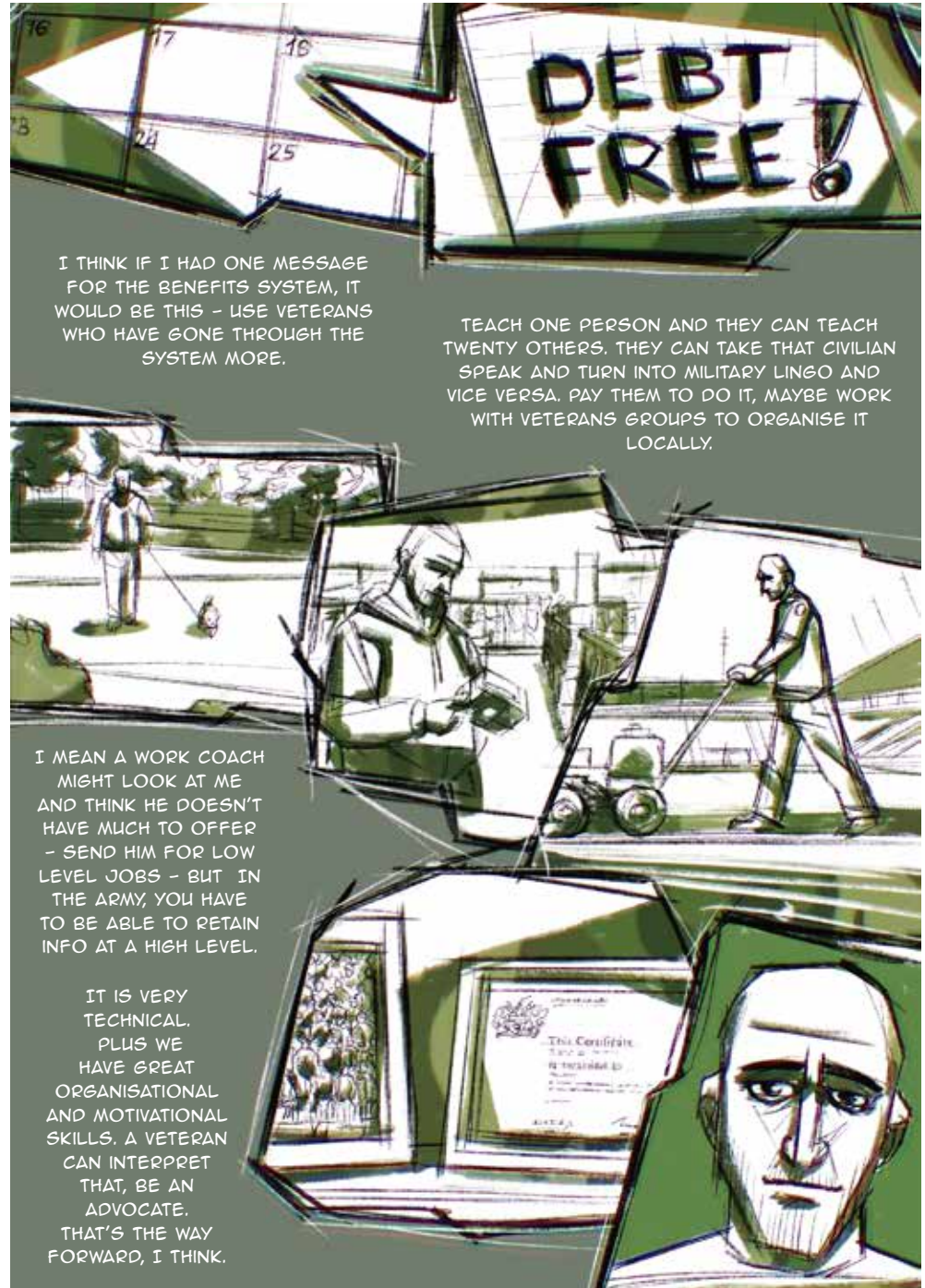
I HAVE A DOG NOW, AS WELL. TALK TO ANY VETERAN AND THEY'LL TELL YOU A DOG IS A GOOD THING. NO JUDGEMENT, YOU SEE, LOYALTY, EVERYTHING. AND OF COURSE, IT FORCES YOU TO GET OUT OF BED. YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR SOMEONE ELSE. I TAKE MINE FOR A WALK FOUR TIMES A DAY, SO THAT GIVES ME STRUCTURE, EXERCISE, AND FRESH AIR.

MY FINANCES ARE MORE STABLE NOW AS WELL. THE GUY AT THE LOCAL HUB RECOMMENDED I GO FOR AN IVA - AN INDIVIDUAL VOLUNTARY ARRANGEMENT. HE SPOKE TO MY CREDITORS AND SAID "THIS IS WHAT HE CAN AFFORD EACH MONTH." SO NOW I PAY £100 PER MONTH IN TOTAL. BEFORE, I WAS GETTING LETTERS, PHONE CALLS ALL THE TIME, BUT NOW THEY'VE ACCEPTED THE DEAL, IT'S QUIETENED DOWN. IN SIX MONTHS, IT SHOULD BE CLEARED, HOPEFULLY.

IN THE END I GOT THE JOB! IT'S VERY DIFFERENT TO THE FORCES, BUT THEY REALLY WANTED SOMEONE WITH ALL THAT UNDERSTANDING OF WORKING AS A TEAM AND DISCIPLINE.

IT'S A SOLID ROLE AND IT WILL GIVE ME A FOUNDATION WHILE I EXPLORE THE COUNSELLING THING.

ALL IN ALL, I'M IN A BETTER PLACE NOW. MY NEIGHBOURS ARE NICE. I'M NOT LOOKING FOR A RELATIONSHIP, BUT IF IT HAPPENS, IT HAPPENS. THE MAIN THING IS I CAN HAVE MY SON OVER MORE REGULARLY NOW. YES, MY TIME IN THE ARMY WILL ALWAYS BE SPECIAL, BUT I RECOGNISE I CAN'T LIVE IN THE PAST TOO MUCH - ITS NOT HEALTHY.



I THINK IF I HAD ONE MESSAGE FOR THE BENEFITS SYSTEM, IT WOULD BE THIS - USE VETERANS WHO HAVE GONE THROUGH THE SYSTEM MORE.

TEACH ONE PERSON AND THEY CAN TEACH TWENTY OTHERS. THEY CAN TAKE THAT CIVILIAN SPEAK AND TURN INTO MILITARY LINGO AND VICE VERSA. PAY THEM TO DO IT, MAYBE WORK WITH VETERANS GROUPS TO ORGANISE IT LOCALLY.

I MEAN A WORK COACH MIGHT LOOK AT ME AND THINK HE DOESN'T HAVE MUCH TO OFFER - SEND HIM FOR LOW LEVEL JOBS - BUT IN THE ARMY, YOU HAVE TO BE ABLE TO RETAIN INFO AT A HIGH LEVEL.

IT IS VERY TECHNICAL. PLUS WE HAVE GREAT ORGANISATIONAL AND MOTIVATIONAL SKILLS. A VETERAN CAN INTERPRET THAT, BE AN ADVOCATE. THAT'S THE WAY FORWARD, I THINK.



University of
Salford
MANCHESTER

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SUSTAINABLE HOUSING
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