

My Life as an Army Cadet

Good evening! My name is Natalie Laird, and I am a 2-star Corporal in the Army Cadet Force. I joined the Army Cadets in summer of 2019, when I was 12, after attending the Achiever camp run by the cadets. The Achiever camp is a transition camp for Broxburn Academy, and it gives primary 7s going into s1 a chance to meet each other and make friends, but also gives them a taster of Army cadets. This is where I was first introduced to my now best friend, and also where I was introduced to the cadet force.

I didn't have the easiest childhood. When I was very young, I was extremely confident, chatty and bubbly, but at the age of just 7 years old, I was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. I fell really ill with it, and when I was well enough to go back to school, all my friends didn't want to speak to me, and I went from being a super chatty, confident, and quite popular little girl to the girl with diabetes and no friends. This shattered my confidence, and I struggled to make friends and talk to people as a result. I always felt like there was something wrong with me, and that was why no one wanted to talk to me. Joining the cadets completely reversed this. When I put on my uniform, I felt part of something, and I, literally, was camouflaged with everyone. I finally felt part of something, and felt people saw me for me, and not as my medical condition. I realised diabetes does not define me. Because of this new-found confidence, I was able to gain my Lance Corporal, the first rank of the cadet rank structure. My confidence soared and I recently earned my Corporal, the second rank. My cadet career has not always been easy, though. Although diabetes doesn't define me, unfortunately it doesn't go away. I've had some real health worries whilst at camps or just in detachment, the most recent resulting in a hospital visit, and these health problems can hinder me from being able to train with everyone else. However, the adults in my company always make sure I am given the same opportunities even if it comes in a different form to someone else. I honestly don't think I would be where I am in the cadets without my adults constantly going above and beyond in my care.

Just as I started to really enjoy cadets, the lockdown happened, and the cadet building was shut in late March 2020. The adults worked really hard to provide online training, where I was able to do some of the signal's course, which allows cadets to operate radios, alongside other star-badge training. I also took part in several competitions, like walking 5k every day for 25 days, and earned a medal for a 1-mile virtual run. I also took part in step change, creating a poster for anti-bullying that is now in detachments across the UK. But being unable to train face-to-face was really hard, so when I was offered the chance to choose cadets as a subject in school for when we eventually went back, I immediately said yes. 28 platoon linked detachment, otherwise known as Uniformed services, was the first detachment in our battalion (?) to go back to face-to-face training. Lockdown was really hard on everyone, especially those, like me, who were shielding due to their medical condition. Being isolated once again was really tough on my mental health but going back to cadets really helped. In September 2020, the main unit went back to extremely restricted face-to-face training. We then shut again due to another 2 lockdowns but started fully back with little to no restrictions in the summer of 2021.

I've been part of the school detachment for 2 years now, and in that time, I have achieved a national 4 Uniformed service, a Bronze Duke of Edinburgh and both my 1 and 2 star. I am currently working towards my silver Duke of Edinburgh, as well as a national 5 leadership qualification and my 3 star. These opportunities were accessible to me much earlier than to non-cadets. For example, in my school (Broxburn Academy,) you must be a senior phase pupil, which is S4 onward, to complete Bronze Duke of Edinburgh. I, as well as the rest of uniformed services, completed it before finishing S3. Being part of two detachments means double training and double opportunities and being part of school cadets had really boosted my confidence to be able to mentor the younger cadets. It also means I get more specific training for my star badges, for example with Uniformed Services we are able to use the facilities at our local cadet camp, Drumshoreland, to complete weapons training that otherwise would have to be done at weekend camps.

The qualifications I have gained and continue to earn not only provide a sense of personal achievement, but also will help me in my future. The leadership qualifications I have earned, alongside the Duke of Edinburgh awards and other qualifications are what set me apart from my peers, and this will help my acceptance chance when going into higher education or future employment. I don't know what I want to do for a career yet, but I am determined to give myself the best chance and keep as many doors open as possible, and the opportunities and qualifications I am offered by the cadets ensures this.

I think the best thing about Cadets is not only the qualifications that it can get you, but for me the restored confidence has genuinely completely changed my life. The ability to talk to people again, and not only that but to teach a lesson, or be in command of a room, or even just be able to take control in a situation.

I am constantly told by adults that they see the kids wanting to listen to me, or coming to me with their issues, and the feeling of knowing that I am inspiring even one person, that is what cadets is about for me. If there is one thing I could say to everyone, it is that your circumstances do not define you. What others think you are capable of or not doesn't matter, and other people's words are not your truth, because our happiness is not in other people's heads. Not only would Natalie 3 years ago be unable to stand here and talk in front of all these people, but she just wouldn't believe she is special or good enough to be chosen to give this speech. Natalie *now* knows that she *can*, and she *will*, because being different doesn't mean you are worth any less. Diabetes is no longer who I am, it is merely a small part of me.

The biggest lesson cadets have taught me is to take every opportunity, and to face your fears afraid. I have 3 years left of cadets, and I aim to continue to improve myself, and in that inspire others to do the same.

Thank you.