

**Good Careers Guide Reviews
of
Apprenticeships
at
The Ministry of Defence
April 2016**

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The British Army

Snapshot

Regular soldiers provide the main body of personnel for one of the world's elite fighting forces and serve a variety of important functions. They could be fighting in combat zones or providing peacekeeping and humanitarian services around the world. You name it, the Army does it.

'One minute I was in Afghanistan, the next I was doing flood defence work at Chickerell Beach in Dorset.'

Fit for a future king and his brother: both HRH Prince William and HRH Prince Harry trained and served with the British Army.

'It's a point of honour being in the Army – I feel proud' a Lance Corporal told us.

Of course the Army doesn't just rest on the laurels of its illustrious past; it looks to the future by providing excellent training, apprenticeships and qualifications in more than 200 roles.

Roles that are essential to the Army and qualifications that are highly transferrable to the civilian workplace.

'You can shape your career yourself, you can decide where you want to go – the possibilities are endless', one young soldier told us.

'I'm a very outdoors person, so that appealed, as well as the travel.'

A lot of people from my hometown are stuck in a rut and I always wanted to break away, so this was an ideal opportunity.'

They may wear the same uniform, but there isn't a singular 'Army-type'. You certainly don't have to be ultra-driven or an adrenaline junkie. All sorts of skills, talents and personalities serve the regiments and corps, although most share crucial characteristics – adaptability and initiative, consideration and compassion, loyalty and commitment.

The rewards are good, the 'family' lifestyle a reality, but equally it's a serious commitment and the risks, responsibilities and disruption to home life should not be underestimated. However, if you strive to be the best you can, seek to work in a professional environment, and want to serve Queen and Country, a career in the Army is well worth investigating.

What the Army does

The British Army is actively engaged in operational duties at home and around the world. The work it does is incredibly diverse – from peacekeeping to providing humanitarian aid as part of the United Nations; from enforcing anti-terrorism measures to helping to combat the international drugs trade.

As the Army says, its mission is 'Securing Britain in an uncertain world'.

The Army prides itself on the quality of its soldiers. There are currently over 80,000 soldiers and officers serving in the British Army and they have a worldwide presence.

Of course the soldiers on the frontline rightly grab the headlines, but they could not operate without all the other units working like clockwork, be they logistics experts, engineers, chefs, medics or drivers.

‘Humanitarian relief is a big part of what we do. There is no other job in the world where you help people to the degree that we do.’

Roles, and what’s on offer

There are over 200 roles within the Army so its recruits can specialise in anything from combat infantry to engineering, logistics to nursing, IT to mechanics – in other words, there’s something for everyone.

‘Once I told my dad about the trades and apprenticeships he was a bit more on board with me joining the Army.’

Most youngsters who sign up are attracted by the diverse career opportunities and by a desire for adventure. Every day is different – a point made by all the soldiers we met:

‘If you get bored easily, it’s the ideal job because there’s a lot of variation in what you do’ said one.

Careers advisers and assessment tests help to match recruits with jobs that suit their abilities. Once they join up they undergo training and gain qualifications that are recognised both inside and outside the Army.

‘The certificates accumulate to tick off the criteria that count towards your apprenticeship - I didn’t even realise it was happening because it ties in so well with your job.’

One young Signaller on deployment in Sierra Leone during the Ebola crisis recognised that doctors urgently needed to consult their specialist colleagues at home but had no phone or 3G signal to do so. He rapidly designed and built a microwave and internet solution and in doing so saved countless lives.

An officer said that his career highlights were almost too numerous to mention. He’d been to Afghanistan three times (one operation involved training and mentoring 160 Afghan officer cadets in Kabul), built wells and delivered aid in Kenya and even created a full-sized cricket pitch for a tribe of Masai Mara warriors.

‘We played three games of cricket, with them in full Masai Mara gear. We won two and lost one.’

Will the Army suit me?

‘It’s your career and you need to take it seriously. You need to know whether it’s the right thing for you.

It’s fantastic, but it’s a big responsibility as well.’

‘Sometimes you think “Why on earth have I got to do that at this time in the morning?” but you’ve just got to get on with it.’

'Be the Best' says the Army, but being the best takes hard work and dedication to duty. The conditions can be challenging, sometimes dangerous, and the work unpredictable - forget nine-to-five working with weekends off. You have to be able to cope with the unexpected, with taking orders and with moving every few years.

'If you don't like travelling, don't bother. If you want a boring, regular job where it's the same every single day, don't bother.'

You need determination - there's no time for an "I can't do it" attitude here' one young soldier told us.

'You've got to be committed to your job and balancing it with your relationship is quite difficult sometimes. Your family life does take a hit.'

The Army prides itself on being, as an officer put it 'a shining example of diversity.'

Gender, race, ethnic origin or religious belief may not be important in the Army, but you do need to be disciplined and for many trades, practical. Ability to work as part of a team and think on your feet in challenging situations is important too. We were told about one recruit who was sent home shortly before finishing Specialist Training because on a tough training exercise he hadn't shown cool judgement when tired - and that could have jeopardised the whole unit.

Not everyone is confident about their skills when they join. If you really want to be the best, you'll be supported all the way.

And the camaraderie and trust formed by working so closely together – after all, your life may depend on it - leads to life-long friendships. One parent told us:

'Our daughter is quite reserved and joining the Army has brought her out of herself.'

'She's made loads of friends.'

'You have to have a bit of grit about you - be robust.'

'Not be afraid to get dirty and wet. And you need to like working in teams.'

Recruits are welcomed from 16, but it usually pays off to have a bit of life experience first.

One young soldier, whose younger brother was desperate to join the Army straight from school advised:

'Take a year after school; work, see what civilian life is like. It gives you a bit of work ethic as well. That's what I told my brother too and he did but he was just counting down the year til he could join the Army.'

Women in the Army

Currently, 8% of recruits are women.

They are represented in most of the 200 roles in the Army, although there are a few front line and combat roles that women cannot currently take on.

Some units have higher percentages of women; the intake to the Royal Army Veterinary Corps, for example, which works with dogs for protection and search all over the world, is around 33% female and their Lieutenant Colonel said:

'That diversity makes us stronger.'

One young female Engineer told us:

'I thought it would be quite macho and you'd get shouted at a lot, which was true for Phase 1 and Phase 2 training, but when you get to your unit you're looked after a lot more and I'm surprised by how concerned they are about your welfare and what sort of infrastructure is in place to support you and your family.'

She went on to say:

'Some girls struggle with the phys – but we're not always expected to be at the same standard as the men. It's realistic and it's doable – you don't have to be superhuman.'

Being fit and being up for a challenge applies to anyone in the Army – it's certainly not gender-specific.

One mother told us:

'Basic Training is hard – learning the Army way.

The days were long and tough, but our daughter loved it and was Top Recruit on her course.'

Training and Support

'I expected Basic Training to be mad and it was about as mad as I expected it to be.'

Basic Training

New recruits aged 17½ and over take part in a 14-week Phase One training programme, often called Basic Training. This takes place at centres around the country and includes drill skills, map reading, first aid, weapons handling, field craft and night training, target practice and live training, fitness tests and adventure training. Recruits under 17½ complete a 6 or 9-month course.

'A lot of the things I do now I wouldn't have had the confidence to do before.'

Specialist Training

Once Phase One training is complete, recruits move to their chosen regiment or corps to start specialist Phase Two training where they also work towards relevant qualifications in their particular trade.

The Army provides all the training that recruits need to do their job well, whether they're building bridges, repairing tanks or driving vehicles. They also learn key soldiering skills, enabling them to operate safely in hostile environments.

Further Training

After completing Specialist Training, apprentices join their new unit and are deemed ready for their first operational deployment.

'On my first deployment, I proved to myself I really can do my job.'

Most recruits complete their intermediate apprenticeships within 12 months, while advanced apprenticeships usually take 36 to 42 months. Some go on to take foundation degrees or other degrees – funded by the Army.

One Lance Corporal reflected on the various stages of training :

'Basic Training was a shock to the system at first - being told what to do all the time, given five minutes to do it, treated like children. Then you realise you've got to change with it - and I very much enjoyed it.'

He went on to say that by the time you start Specialist Training:

'You're just a bit more mature, you are given more freedom but you're still treated like a teenager'.

And he concluded that Further Training is :

'Massively different – you're treated like adults.'

Training is highly valued and expertly and continually delivered. Whatever the rank, however long you have served, expect to continue to train and to learn new skills. Recruits, soldiers and officers study for civilian qualifications as well as military ones - NVQs, BTECs, apprenticeships, Bachelors and Masters degrees. It's also possible to gain professional qualifications that lead to Institute or Chartered status.

Don't worry if you're not an academic high-flyer; support is available, too, for those requiring help with reading, writing, maths and computer skills.

Many of the most valued skills are hands-on and practical; as one Sergeant told us :

'These soldiers didn't join the Army to stay in the classroom.'

'I succeeded in getting a construction qualification called the Construction Plant Competence Scheme.'

Great emphasis is placed on pastoral support as well. A soldier explained that if anyone was upset or depressed, friends and colleagues try to help them, while their captain had an open door policy for anyone who wanted to talk. There are also dedicated welfare officers and padres in camp.

'In a sense you are family and you look after each other' he said.

Pay, Perks and Play

'I spend a little on food and accommodation and the rest is disposable income.'

Typical starting salaries for soldiers are £14,492, but as recruits progress through the ranks they could earn up to £50,000.

Some specialist roles pay more and salaries rise every year, with additional pay for promotion and extra responsibilities. Soldiers can reach the rank of corporal within five years, earning a salary of £27,053 or more.

'I have a friend who was an apprentice car mechanic; to start with he barely earned the minimum wage so he was envious of me.'

There are plenty of perks, including subsidised meals and accommodation, free medical and dental care, forces' discounts in many stores, six weeks' paid holiday a year, a pension, help with housing, travel and education and the opportunity to study for a degree or a range of other valued qualifications.

'Free medical, free dental, pension, paying a lot less for married quarters than a civilian – pretty damn good.'

A career in the Army offers opportunities for travel, adventure and teamwork – and much, much more. The Army encourages soldiers and officers to play sport, reckoning that it enhances teamwork, leadership, initiative and fitness.

'I don't think there's a sport the Army doesn't do' we were told and during our visits we met people who'd learned to fly, ski, dive, sail and ride.

One soldier said:

'We have to be fit, it's an essential part of the job. There are regular fitness tests to pass - continued failure can end your career.'

The social side is a real perk for many. One young soldier, just back from her first deployment, said

'It's great waking up and being on a corridor with all your best mates. There's always somebody about, always something to do, everyone's doors are always open to you.'

Prospects – Life beyond the Apprenticeship

Promotion in the Army

The Army is keen on progression and fast movers are promoted. A 30-year-old Captain who had been in the Army for seven years said:

'My first job was commanding 40 people. Now I lead a squadron of 226 people. They will fast track you as long as you have the aptitude for it.'

A young soldier in the Royal Signals, yet to go on his first tour of duty, told us he has options : if he stays in the Army, he would be interested in joining the Special Forces in a few years. But on top of his experience in computer networking and telecoms, he has qualified as a PT instructor and has a Hazardous Materials qualification – so he knows that he already has a number of extremely useful and transferrable skills and qualifications tucked in his back pocket, whether he progresses in the Army or works for a civilian company.

'I'm learning a broad range of skills. Just because I'm in the Signals doesn't mean that's all I can do.'

Life after the Army

'There is a recognition that people who've been in the Army turn up on time, look smart, are reliable, confident about what they do and are good at working as part of a team. We are a really good bet for employers.'

Every year nearly 8,000 people ‘transition’ out of the Army. They have skills that are directly transferable in Civvy Street and most find work quickly.

‘I haven’t seen anyone leave and not be employed within six months,’ said a Lance Corporal.

‘A driver who left the Army was applying for HGV drivers’ jobs but an employer recognised the skills he had and took him on as a fleet manager.’

And a young Private told us that her Dog Handling qualification could be used in the security industry and that she also wanted to qualify as a PT Instructor.

The Application Process

You can talk to Armed Forces Careers Advisers first, or just apply via the Army website. After applying online, applicants are invited to their local Armed Forces Careers Office to have a chat about life in the Army and to do a British Army Recruit Battery (BARB) test, which tests applicants on basic English, Maths and problem solving and matches them with trades that suit their abilities.

Once passed, you’d then be invited to an Assessment Centre for two days, where you’d do a range of medical, fitness and mental aptitude tests and get to grips with what life is really like in the Army.

Applicants must be aged between 16 and 33 (parental consent is needed for under-18s). There are no minimum qualifications required (except for certain technical jobs) but your GP would need to fill in a medical questionnaire and a security and reference check would be run before you’re offered a place in the Army.

It’s a good idea to do your own research before applying; go on careers forums, get fit and start thinking about which trade you might want to join.

How do I find out more?

Have a chat with an advisor at your local Armed Forces Careers Office, or visit the Army website – www.army.mod.uk – which gives details of everything you need to know about the roles available, training and education, operations and deployments and how to apply.

Don’t worry if you’re not quite sure what role might suit you or what you’d be good at. Once you’ve applied you’ll be helped to find what’s right for you. Not all trades have vacancies all the time, so you might have to wait for the right thing.

The Army holds careers events at schools all over the country and also takes part in Education Business Partnership events, giving young people a better understanding of what Army life is like.

‘It doesn’t matter if you are a technical wizard, a gym nut who wants to be a fitness instructor or someone who drives tanks and engages with the enemy. Everyone finds something they are good at.’

The Royal Airforce

Snapshot

Interested in maths and science? Enjoy problem solving? For those for whom adventure and living away from home are more attractive options than staying on at school after GCSEs, RAF engineering apprenticeships offer outstanding training in an exceptionally supportive environment.

'I couldn't wait to get away from home and do something exciting'

The RAF is not so much a career as a way of life. Discipline and teamwork are key: 'Fighters first, engineers second,' is how the RAF sees its apprentices.

What is asked of RAF technicians is a questioning (but always respectful) obedience. Apprentices are expected to 'speak up' and are told 'you have a right to respond.' On the front line they must have the confidence to flag up problems. Lives could depend on it.

'Lots of my friends have got degrees but are not doing the jobs they hoped for' - Apprentice

The RAF offers around 1500 apprenticeships each year in most trades; 600 of these are engineering apprenticeships, with a new intake starting every seven to ten days. You can specialise in avionics, mechanical, weapons, ICT tech and survival equipment.

At the RAF's radio school, you can become a Communications Infrastructure Technician or an ICT Technician. You can join at 16 but most recruits are slightly older; many have taken AS Levels or have worked since leaving school.

'He has landed in a good place doing exactly what he wants. He is moving forward and has qualifications' - Parent

What the RAF does

'Our people lie at the heart of our capability. We rely upon their professionalism, dedication and courage'

It's certainly not all about 'bandits at 2 o'clock'.

As the UK's aerial, peacekeeping and fighting force, the RAF's role is to defend UK airspace as well as work in trouble spots around the globe, including supporting peacekeeping and reconstruction initiatives and flying in humanitarian aid to victims of war and natural disaster.

In the aftermath of the devastating earthquake in Nepal in 2015, an RAF Hercules flew a successful aid mission to the area.

During the busiest period of the deployment, crew flew missions of up to 16 hours, delivering World Food Program high energy rations, 10 tonnes of shelters and tents

as well as essential water purification equipment for use by the British Gurkha Engineers in Nepal. As the Detachment Commander said:

'It has been a real privilege to command this detachment; challenging at times, but also incredibly rewarding.'

Together, every member of the team has contributed 100 per cent to deliver much needed aid to the people of Nepal safely, and they all go home in the knowledge that they have made a difference.'

Roles and what's on offer

'After five years, apprentices have hands-on practical experience, they're motivated, have been trained to a high standard and have seen a bit of the world – it is the whole package and a lot more than simply getting an engineering qualification' - Station Commander

The fact is, the RAF couldn't function without its engineers. Several million pounds'-worth of fighter plane isn't going anywhere, unless the Mechanical Technicians have repaired and maintained the aircraft; the Avionics Technicians have checked the complex electrical, electronic and sensory systems that are its brains; the Weapons Technicians have armed it and the aerial, radar and communications systems are all in perfect working order, courtesy of the Communications Infrastructure Technicians. It's the ultimate in teamwork.

Quick-thinking but thorough and prepared to get their hands dirty, apprentices are motivated by wanting to get the job done properly first time round. You need to be methodical and determined – the type of person who enjoys the challenge of solving a problem, sometimes quickly and under pressure. If you are the first to figure out how to work the complex new TV remote control at Christmas, then one of these apprenticeships might suit you.

Aircraft Avionics Technician

If you are hungry for power, becoming an Avionics Technician could be for you. Apprentices in this role service the power and electrical systems on aircraft. So if a technical fault means an aircraft needs its complex electronic and electrical equipment checked out, or an aircraft can't fly because its reconnaissance equipment has a fault, you are in the front line for getting it sorted.

It is important that you are comfortable working in confined spaces as this comes with the job when conducting fault diagnosis and replacing components. And in a combat situation, pressure really mounts to find a quick solution. Not only is the aircraft out of action but other technicians can't complete their jobs until you finish.

'Though he's bright, my son lost interest in his A Levels after the AS year. He could have got avionics experience locally but it would have meant him staying at home and he wanted to travel and do something exciting' - Parent

Aircraft Mechanical Technician

If getting your hands dirty and messing around with machinery is your idea of heaven, the RAF has lots of high-tech equipment to keep you busy.

Mechanical Technicians are responsible for keeping the aircraft structure and propulsion equipment in tip-top condition. It helps to be agile and resilient as you could be working on any part of the aircraft and the work is often difficult, fiddly and dirty. But cracking a difficult mechanical problem and getting a jet, helicopter or transport aircraft back in operation requires teamwork and dedication and is a lot more rewarding than trying to get your dad's old banger back on the road.

Weapons Technician

This job is not for the faint-hearted but that is part of its appeal. Forget a gung-ho attitude to explosives, this job requires care, precision and accuracy. Whether you are arming aircraft with bombs, smart weapons and missiles, loading aircraft guns or servicing high performance weapons like machine guns and mortars, there is no room for error.

Later in your career, if you have steady nerves and hands, you can volunteer to do bomb disposal.

'Going to uni and getting a good degree is no guarantee of a job. In the RAF he has prospects, a pension and a future' - Parent

Survival Equipment Specialists

Want to save lives? So does the RAF.

At the title suggests, this role is at the heart of the RAF. When it comes to anything about survival equipment – either on a person or an aircraft – these specialists know it all.

From testing night vision devices to repairing emergency parachutes and life rafts, a Survival Equipment Specialist's workload is huge and extremely varied. It's a bit like being Q in James Bond – but as with so many jobs in the RAF, there is no room for error.

Communications Infrastructure Technician

Does the idea of developing, repairing and maintaining the most up-to-date and complex battlefield communications in the world appeal?

If so, this job could be ideal for you.

The importance of maintaining reliable communications, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, cannot be overstated. The success of the most advanced fast jet is reliant on excellent battlefield communications. It also means that whether you're working on cyber security, long-range surveillance radar or satellite and data communications, you will never be idle.

The RAF wants self-starters who can both understand the needs of the aircrew and come up with innovative solutions.

But be warned, the ability to work at heights is vital.

You will also need to be able to work outdoors, exposed to the elements, while maintaining mission-critical communications, possibly in a war zone.

You will be expected to work with other nations, setting standards and working with authority and responsibility.

Short trips abroad are par for the course, as is the excitement of never knowing exactly what the next day will hold.

‘Our son has a degree and though he considered joining the police, he always came back to the RAF. He was 24-years-old when he joined and we were thrilled to bits’ – Parent

ICT Technician

Tactical satellite systems and airfield radars don’t work without your expertise.

Working on communication, radar and information systems means you could be deployed anywhere around the world to ensure that these systems are maintained and repaired.

Working as part of a tight-knit team, this role requires a logical and precise mind but one that can handle the dynamic and demanding environments of RAF life.

Of all the trades, that of ICT Technician is one of the most diverse, with nine different employment fields, ranging from deploying mission-critical communications and information, to providing operational support to an operational commander, whether in the UK or abroad.

ICT Technicians are an essential part of the RAF, using their skills to design, build, sustain, protect and recover communications and information systems.

‘I liked the idea of getting paid to get qualified rather than racking up student debt’ - Apprentice

Will the RAF suit me?

‘Motivation is the most important quality; we can train technical skills’ -

Station Commander

The RAF is different in many ways from civilian life – but that is what makes a career in it interesting. It has its tensions though; homesickness, regular relocation and unsocial hours can be stressful for you and your family.

Service life offers history, comradeship and belonging. It can be a shock to begin with, but most adapt to it – those who cannot, usually realise that they have made the wrong choice after a few weeks of basic training.

You learn that communal living can lead to lifelong friendships - but may also require you step away from confrontation.

As one Station Commander put it: *‘It helps to be a ‘stable extrovert’* - the sort of person who can engage with those around them but maintain good sense and judgement under pressure.

And if saluting someone younger than you is an issue, think again about joining the RAF. Rank is important in the RAF but it does come with respect. We found that approachability and mutual respect amongst staff, across all ranks, was something that stood out.

With entry requirements of GCSEs (or equivalent) in Maths, English and an approved science/technology-based subject, joining the RAF may look easy. Don't be misled. Courses are no walkover; hard work, commitment, problem solving skills and a lot of thinking are required.

If you've got these attributes, it really does not matter what twists and turns your life has taken so far. If the RAF thinks you have what it takes, they will take you on.

'We don't have any background in the Forces and he didn't go to the ATC but once he'd found out about the RAF, he really wanted to join. He didn't get through basic training until his third attempt. He loves the RAF and hasn't looked back' - Parent

Women in the RAF

The RAF is keen to welcome and encourage women to join up. The message seems to be getting across as women currently make up 13 per cent of its apprentices. We found that while on some courses there were only one or two women attending, on others women made up a quarter of the class.

Although it is traditionally a male-orientated environment, the ethos of respect in the RAF means that being a female apprentice is now much more accepted and indeed unremarkable. Participation in the Women in Science and Engineering Scheme (WISE - www.wisecampaign.org.uk) is one way the RAF encourages women to take up engineering. In the meantime, it is putting time and effort into welfare initiatives for women that are supported by senior female welfare officers.

Training and Support

The RAF were awarded 'Outstanding Training Provider' grading by Ofsted following an inspection in December 2014.

Good support is essential at the start of any career. Is it available at the RAF?

Perhaps surprisingly (it being a military organisation), the answer is a resounding 'yes'. It was clear from our interviews with apprentices and RAF staff that welfare within the RAF is exceptional, with a great emphasis on pastoral attention. This is a point reinforced by parents. Clearly the RAF lives up to its mantra of 'select well and nurture through'.

'I feel like he has got two families' - Parent

Basic Training :

Recruits spend 9 action-packed weeks at RAF Halton near Aylesbury, learning about RAF life, including fire fighting, first aid, using and maintaining a weapon, looking after your kit, teamwork and discipline.

This can be a shock – even for the hardest. Days are long, physical and testing. 5.30am starts and 10pm finishes are typical. There's a tough adventure training weekend too.

But the RAF sees it as a necessary introduction to the discipline and rigour expected in RAF life.

It aims to test candidates mentally and physically and leaves them in no doubt that RAF life is different to Civvy Street.

'Having to run one and a half miles on a treadmill for basic training was brutal'
- Apprentice

The RAF has produced a series of YouTube videos filmed by recruits showing a 'warts and all' view of the basic recruit training course. The Good Careers Guide particularly enjoyed watching the fly-on-the-wall diaries of AC Laura Skinner and AC Chris Marchant. A 'must' watch for potential recruits, these videos don't pull any punches. Amateur videos also appear on YouTube and offer interesting insights.

'His passing-out parade was amazing and we were so proud. We think he has found his vocation' - Parent

Specialist Training :

Once they've completed their basic training, recruits transfer to dedicated RAF training centres to learn their specialist skills. Recruits are screened for learning difficulties (such as dyslexia) when they arrive. All study and must pass level 2 functional skills in English and Maths (GCSE or equivalent), even if they have A Levels or a degree.

Specialist training is not school; apprentices are expected to treat their training as a job. Classes are small – up to 16 people in total – so there is no hiding at the back of the classroom. Experienced instructors (mostly former technicians) work in computer-filled, state-of-the art classrooms. Later on, working in groups of four, apprentices learn hands-on engineering on former combat jets.

Instructors get to know apprentices well; most apprentices need support at some point so there's no stigma about getting a bit of one-to-one tuition. The ethos reiterated by all the instructors we spoke to was 'we're on your side.'

Following Basic Training and Specialist Training, technicians undertake several years in the workplace and further specialist Technician Training, before qualifying as Advanced Apprentices. It is worth noting that RAF apprenticeships vary in length; Avionics Technicians and Mechanical Technicians take approximately five years, while Weapons Technicians, Survival Equipment Specialists, Communications Infrastructure Technicians and ICT Technicians take around three years.

Pay, Perks and Play

Starting salaries for apprentices are pretty competitive. Basic recruit training salaries are more than £14,400 pa, but rise on passing the course to £17,845. Add to this an overseas allowance when serving abroad, benefits from subsidised housing and food, an attractive RAF housing package, a pension, as well as entitlement to a further education allowance designed to encourage apprentices to extend their qualifications privately.

Five years on and qualified, the salary for Aircraft Avionics Apprentices, for example, rises to £29,000 plus allowances, and there are good promotion prospects.

For those taking a three-year apprenticeship, salaries rise to approximately £24,600 after qualification.

As airmen progress through the ranks they could earn up to £50,000.

Being fit and keeping fit go with the job. Having said that, you don't need to be an Olympian to join the RAF; there is a multitude of sports on offer to all, from football and volleyball to badminton; ice hockey to paragliding; sailing to judo.

Prospects – Life beyond the Apprenticeship

'After five years apprentices have hands-on practical experience, they're motivated, have been trained to a high standard and have seen a bit of the world – it is the whole package and a lot more than simply getting an engineering qualification' - RAF Station Commander

Promotion within the RAF

The RAF is good at keeping its people. Part of the reason is that two or three markedly different careers can be had within the RAF without leaving the service.

Joining as an apprentice might appeal in your 20s, but the idea of being an instructor or working for welfare or management might be attractive in your 30s and 40s. Alternatively, you might consider training to become an officer.

'He intends to stay in the RAF but it is good to know that he could do jobs outside the service if that changes' - Parent

Life after the RAF

'We know we can find work in engineering companies, on rigs and at companies like BAE' - Apprentice

Apprentices we spoke to were confident about their ability to find a job outside the RAF, not least because the apprenticeships and other qualifications they gain in the RAF are so sought after in the civilian world. It is clear that employers value the RAF's rigorous training and discipline.

All RAF technical courses include a strong thread of leadership and management, which is essential for work on operations but also a great advantage in civilian life.

The Application Process

You can apply via the RAF website. Applicants must sit the Airmen Selection Test (AST) in basic English, Maths, problem solving and mechanics. Successful applicants are invited to an interview with a careers adviser to discuss which RAF trade they'd like to join and would best suit. They must also pass medical, eye and fitness tests and a security and reference check.

Once through that hoop, recruits attend a free, three-day pre-joining course to get a feel for RAF life. They do fitness tests (including completing a 2.4km run in a specific time) and get their heads round RAF-style discipline.

Advice for would-be applicants included: do your research; go on careers forums; get fit and figure out which trade you want to join.

How do I find out more?

Your local Armed Forces Careers Office will be happy to tell you more, or you can look at the RAF website – <http://www.raf.mod.uk> – which has a wealth of information, including details of what the RAF does, the trades you can join and how to apply.

If a career in the RAF appeals there's probably a job or role to suit you. Don't worry if you're not quite sure what that is or what you would be good at. Once you've applied you'll be helped and guided to find what's right for you. Not all trades have vacancies all the time, so you might have to wait for the right thing.

The RAF holds a range of careers events at schools and also takes part in Education Business Partnership events, giving young people a better understanding of what life in the RAF is like.

The Royal Navy

Snapshot

The Royal Navy offers opportunities that you simply can't get elsewhere – from policing the world's oceans and preventing conflict to delivering humanitarian aid and safeguarding trade routes, no two days are the same.

'Joining the Navy means that I'm not just an engineer, I'm in the Navy too.'

The Navy - which includes the Royal Marines - prides itself on the first-class training it offers. Progression is excellent - good sailors can achieve several promotions within five years. They gain valuable qualifications that are recognized in the civilian workplace and, providing they have the appropriate academic qualifications, they can do a university degree – at no cost to themselves.

'I joined as a weapons engineering technician, worked in HMS Illustrious and HMS Albion and got paid to do a university degree.'

A Leading Hand told us that going home and seeing friends stuck in boring dead-end jobs made him realise that he'd done the right thing. He told us:

'I have a future, I can make progress, get promoted, go places, do things.'

Everyone we spoke to at one of the training bases, HMS Collingwood, emphasised that a Navy career is *'a lifestyle, not a job,'* while a sub-lieutenant (Commissioned Officer) who had worked his way up the ranks (or rates, as the Navy calls them) said:

'If you have got an inquiring mind, a spirit of adventure and the capability to work hard, then the Navy is definitely for you.'

If that sounds like you, then the Navy's apprenticeship programme could be the springboard to an exciting and unique career, bringing adventure and rewards.

What the Navy does

That probably seems blindingly obvious, but not so fast. To quote the Navy:

'We are first and foremost a fighting force, serving alongside our allies in conflicts around the world. We also protect Britain's ports, fishing grounds and merchant ships and help tackle international smuggling, terrorism and piracy. Increasingly, we're involved in humanitarian and relief missions, where our skills, discipline and resourcefulness make a real difference to people's lives.'

Such a varied and important role requires a multitude of talents. Engineers, communicators and aircrew help keep the Navy afloat, while chaplains, chefs and medics are amongst those attending to mind, body and soul.

In total there are 38,000 ratings and officers in the Royal Navy, including the Royal Marines. Ships operate out of three main naval bases – Portsmouth, Devonport and Faslane (Scotland) – and are deployed across the world, from UK waters to the Southern Ocean.

Roles and what's on offer

'The saddest thing is unfulfilled potential – discover your talents, make the most of the opportunities' - Rear Admiral

There's something for virtually everyone, at every level, working above or below water, on land or in the air.

Recruits sign up as engineers, IT technicians, nurses, chefs, logistics experts and more. New recruits join the Royal Navy as ratings or officers, specialising in fields such as warfare, engineering, logistics and aviation.

The Royal Navy's apprenticeship programme started in 1998, trains 2,500 apprentices across a vast range of trades (or 'branches' as the Navy calls them) every year and has featured several times in the top 100 apprenticeship employers. The manager of the Royal Navy's apprenticeship programme at HMS Collingwood told us:

'It's a very good career because the progression is built in. If you've got drive and ambition, you can be earning a lot of money in a short time.'

Applicants can join most Royal Navy branches between the ages of 16-37. A few join after GCSEs (one boy we met left school on the Friday and started at HMS Raleigh on the Monday) but the majority are over 18. Some have A Levels and/or degrees while others seek a career change. A group of engineering technicians we spoke to included an ex-baker and a former estate agent in his 30s who'd always dreamed of being a submariner.

It's awesome,' he told us, 'although it's a bit humbling when you first go onboard'.

Will the Navy suit me?

'Be open-minded and be prepared to have some difficult days – but remember that you get to do things that you would pay a fortune to do' - Rating.

A career in the Royal Navy isn't something to be undertaken lightly. The Navy has exacting standards and requires grit, hard work and dedication.

You train, live and work with others and this fosters a camaraderie that is second to none. After all, your lives may depend on each other.

'When you start on a new ship, it's only hours before you're taking the mick out of each other' – Leading Hand

There isn't a 'Navy type'– you will meet people of every personality, background, race and creed.

So if you have a sense of adventure, get on well with others, are open-minded, fit, hardworking and willing to learn, the Navy could be perfect for you. You'll be supported, but will have to think for yourself too.

'It's great for anybody who wants structure in their lives. My daughter has good leadership skills but also has no problem obeying orders' - Parent of rating

Initiative is vital, but so is being able to follow orders. And it's not the life for home birds, loners who like their own space or couch potatoes. Ratings can be away for up to six months at a time, sometimes at short notice and even when you're in port, you won't be able to pop home every weekend.

Family and friends can visit when you're in port but it'll be at their own expense.

'It can be frustrating for families not knowing whether you're going to be at home for Christmas. We try to communicate as much as we can but it's not always possible' – Rear Admiral

That said, the days of being out of contact for months on end are long gone. Everyone is encouraged to connect with their families and ships do have broadband, although being miles out to sea means the connection is unreliable at best. And messes are comfortable nowadays, with four-man bunks, iPod connections and Xboxes.

In true Navy-banter style, one new recruit said anyone joining up should *'have a love of potatoes'* while a trainer dispelled the myth that you need good sea legs to join the Navy. *'You'd be surprised how many get sea-sick, but it stops eventually,'* he said cheerily.

Everyone we met at HMS Collingwood and HMS Sultan – able seamen, petty officers and sub-lieutenants alike – stressed that a career in the Navy may be hugely rewarding but only if you really want it.

'Only do it for yourself, not to please others.'

If you're a tough Bear Grylls type, the Marine Commandos or Special Boat Service might be for you. Exceptionally sporty? The Navy offers elite training (a Royal Marine won a judo gold medal at the 2014 Commonwealth Games) and if you're something of a musical maestro you can combine performing with frontline service.

Women in the Navy

'No-one in our family is in the Services. Initially our daughter was interested in the Police but joining the Navy has been the best decision she's made in her life. I'm very proud' – Parent of rating

Currently, over 10% of recruits are women and they are expected to do exactly the same as males. *'In terms of diversity and inclusion there are no barriers'* we were told.

However, there are more women in some branches than others. We spotted four females in a 15-strong class of communications and information systems technicians but none at all in a class of weapons engineers. Recruiters are keen to redress the balance.

'Finishing her Specialist Training has given my daughter more confidence' - Parent of rating

A female officer we met joined the Navy as a rating eight years ago. With A Levels in maths, psychology and sociology, she liked the fact that she could apply her mathematical ability in 'the real world.' She worked in HMS Illustrious and HMS

Albion, was recommended for officer training and was paid to do an electronic engineering degree at Portsmouth University.

'I wanted to work my way up,' she said. 'If you put in the hard work you get the rewards at the end.'

Training and Support

'When I went home my mum said that I do things totally differently now; I used to leave my bedroom in a shocking state. Now I can't go out without ironing everything' - Rating

Basic Training :

Royal Navy recruits join as ratings or as officers, specialising in fields such as warfare, engineering, logistics and aviation. Ratings spend 10 action-packed weeks at HMS Raleigh in Torpoint, Devon, learning about naval life, including fire fighting, first aid, using and maintaining a weapon, looking after your kit, teamwork and discipline.

Days are long, physical and testing. 5.30am starts and 10pm finishes are typical. There's a tough adventure training weekend too.

'Trekking across Dartmoor with a 30kg backpack and taking part in a flood simulation exercise was quite a shock to the system,' female communications and information systems rating .

The passing out parade at the end of the 10 weeks of is a proud day for ratings and their families alike.

Specialist Training :

After completing basic training, ratings transfer to centres such as HMS Collingwood in Fareham or HMS Sultan in Gosport to learn their specialist skills over 16 weeks. Recruits are screened for learning difficulties (such as dyslexia) when they arrive. All study and must pass level 2 functional skills in English and Maths (GCSE equivalent), even if they have A Levels or a degree.

Training is delivered in modern classrooms and vast workshops filled with bits of ships, helicopters and planes - very *Boys' Own* we thought. But this isn't a male-only domain; women more than hold their own.

Highly-trained teachers also act as coaches and mentors, dealing with welfare, pastoral and career issues. *'We are the eyes and ears for any concerns'* an experienced trainer told us.

Many of those nearing the end of their 16-week training reckoned that life at HMS Collingwood was like being at college or university – but with a peppering of military skills (including a fair amount of marching) and a salary. A young weapons engineer said he'd grown up and become independent at HMS Collingwood.

At her son's passing-out ceremony, one parent told us *'I'm very impressed by the training - it teaches them so much and the camaraderie is fantastic.'*

After completing Specialist Training, apprentices are deemed ready for their first operational deployment, which involves two years at sea, although there's often a wait to be allocated a ship.

Most recruits complete their intermediate apprenticeships within 12 months, while advanced apprenticeships (completed out at sea) usually take 36 to 42 months. Some go on to take foundation degrees or other degrees – paid for by the Navy.

Pay, Perks and Play

'You get paid well, but you have to earn it'.

Typical starting salaries for ratings are £14,492, but as recruits progress through the rates they could earn up to £50,000.

Extra 'trade-pay' is offered to submariners, pilots and aircrew, mine clearance divers and nurses.

There are plenty of perks, including subsidised meals and accommodation, free medical and dental care, forces' discounts in many stores, six weeks' paid holiday a year, pay for being at sea, help with housing, travel and education, the opportunity to study for a degree or a range of other valued qualifications and a pension.

Navy personnel are expected to look immaculate at all times and uniforms are provided.

Being fit and keeping fit are essential job requirements.

But it's not just about gym work and gruelling runs. An air engineering technician we spoke to represented the combined forces at cricket and football while a sub-lieutenant played rugby at Twickenham and gained qualifications in power-boating and sailing.

'The Navy is very pro-sport and there are so many opportunities,' he said. 'I've done everything from gliding to riding – and you are still safeguarding the country.'

Prospects – life beyond the Apprenticeship

Promotion in the Navy

The Navy is a firm believer in merited progression and good people move up the rates very speedily. Those who join as ratings and do well can be selected for officer training and fast tracked - a third of all officers start this way; the other two-thirds train as officers from the start.

Promotion doesn't just mean becoming a Commissioned Officer, though; some prefer to progress into senior Non-Commissioned Officer roles. As one NCO said, it's quite simple:

'If you work hard and show aptitude you go up'.

Life after the Navy

Unlike most jobs, having some thoughts about what you might do when you leave is actively encouraged.

Most stay the course but ‘resettlement’, help and support is given to all who leave, regardless of how long they’ve been in the Navy. Lots of courses offered by the Navy lead to widely recognised qualifications – so recruits can easily transfer their skills when they move into the civilian job market.

The Application Process

You can apply via the Royal Navy website. Applicants must sit the recruit test (RT) in basic English, Maths, problem solving and mechanics. Successful applicants are invited to an interview with a careers adviser to discuss which Navy branch they’d like to join and would best suit.

They must also pass medical, eye and fitness tests and a security and reference check.

Once through that hoop, recruits attend a free, four-day pre-joining course to get a feel for Navy life. They visit a ship, do some fitness tests (like complete a 2.4km run in a specific time and swim 50 metres in under four minutes) and get their heads round Navy-style discipline. *‘It shows what’s expected of you,’* said one fresh-faced recruit. Another said that the four-day induction course was tougher than Basic Training.

The process is different for the Royal Marines : because of the especially demanding nature of their role, aspiring Royal Marines have to attend and pass a 2 ½ day assessment – the Potential Royal Marines Course (PRMC) - to gauge their physical and mental strength, before they can start their training.

Advice for would-be applicants included: do your research; go on careers forums; get fit and work out which branch you want to join.

‘Listen to advice about what trade to learn but don’t be swayed if you know what you want to do.’

How do I find out more?

Your local Armed Forces Careers Office will be happy to tell you more, or visit the Royal Navy website – <http://www.royalnavy.mod.uk> – which has a wealth of information, including details of what the Navy - including the Royal Marines - does, the branches you can join and how to apply.

If a Navy career appeals, there’s probably a role to suit you. Don’t worry if you’re not quite sure what that is or what you’d be good at. Once you’ve applied you’ll be helped to find what’s right for you. Not all trades have vacancies all the time, so you might have to wait for the right thing.

The Navy holds a range of careers events at schools and also takes part in Education Business Partnership events, giving young people a better understanding of what Navy life is like.

‘Everyone thinks that if you join the Navy all you do is sail a bit but there are so many other things going on underneath,’ we were told.