

'I wanted to be a chemistry teacher but found my true calling as a QA nurse!'

Karen Irvine, who chairs the Scottish Branch of the QA Association, speaks to The Gazette about her life and career, and successfully rebuilding her branch...

"Having a morning at home is a novelty," admits Karen, when we meet up on Zoom. She has been caring for her mum, with many trips to the hospital of late. The pair are very close and once went on an extended European road-trip to celebrate the conclusion of Karen's two year posting in Cyprus, but more on that later.

Karen was born in Glasgow in 1961, and did her student nurse training from 1979 at the North Eastern College of Nursing and Midwifery, at Stobhill Hospital in Glasgow. Karen's mum, Irene, had been a secretary and her dad, George, was a buyer for a big grocery company. "There was absolutely no Army connection in my family at all, apart from my paternal grandfather who did national service," Karen says.

Growing up she had wanted to be a chemistry teacher, finding the subject "fascinating" and benefitting from a good teacher who made the subject interesting. However, Karen reveals, "my downfall was maths, I was never very good at maths and to get into university to do chemistry, you needed to get a good maths pass."

A rethink was needed and nursing started to suggest itself as a job that would be interesting, involve working with people and provide some structure. After training, she worked as a staff nurse at Stobhill for 18 months in a surgical and vascular unit. "Having vowed I would never darken the doors of a maternity unit again, I found myself applying to do midwifery training," she laughs, explaining that at that time a second qualification was required to climb the career ladder.

On completion of that course, Karen returned to Stobhill Hospital and worked in the recovery area. She recalls it was a busy department serving eight operating theatres. There was not much opportunity for speaking to the patients though. "You brought them in, they came out of theatre, they recovered, and you would take them back to the ward. It was just a snapshot of the patient experience," says Karen.

When they advertised for a Ward Sister, Karen decided to apply and see what happens. To her surprise she got the job, and in late 1985, she became the Ward Sister for a 56-bed general surgical & vascular unit, aged just 24.

Karen had a great role model in Annie Woods, the Senior Sister. From Southern Ireland, she had a reputation for being hard task master and a good teacher – as well as being popular with the patients. "Nurses were a bit in awe of Annie," recalls Karen. "She knew absolutely everything that was going on in that ward,

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and I decided to try to follow her lead. I would make sure I knew the details of everything on my watch to do with the patients, so that if anybody spoke to me, I could respond with knowledge."

Karen held the role for four years but as the 1980s drew to a close, she started getting itchy feet and looking for another challenge. One of the girls who Karen had met during midwifery training had joined the Army as a midwife. Karen visited her and started thinking about the Army as an interesting possibility.

She stopped by the Army careers office in Glasgow's Queen Street and registered her interest. Then went on holiday for a fortnight and thought little more about it. She came home to a letter inviting her to present for an interview with what was back then called the Women's Service Liaison Officer,

Karen passed the interview and was sent to Aldershot for three days to undertake a pre-selection course and attend a second interview at Empress State Building in London. Despite feeling like a "fish out of water" in a new environment



and far from Glasgow, she made some new friends and was reassured by them.

Shortly after new year, in 1990, Karen received a letter to say she had been successful and was to report to the QARANC Training Centre in Aldershot for the student officer course. She turned 29 on the course, had no ties and was looking forward to seeing the world. Karen intended to join for three years, little realising she would stay in the Army for close to three decades. However, something about it had "ticked the boxes" for Karen.

She also made lifelong friends on the course who she would bump into in the following years, and despite the passage of time, they would pick up where they left off. Karen recalls: "I remember at the Royal Pavilion when the postings were being handed out, I said to Ross McCullough on my course, 'I'll be fine, as long as they don't send me to orthopaedics,' and of course my first posting was to the Queen Elizabeth Military Hospital in Woolwich on the orthopaedic wards! On the first day, I remember standing in the Ward Manager's office thinking they were all talking a foreign language with different terminology and weird Army ranks, like Lance Corporal of the Horse!"

Looking back, Karen thinks the Army had been keen to fill a gap in her CV and take her out of her comfort zone. It turned out to be a great experience, despite Karen "almost hyperventilating" when trying to navigate her way around the M25 and London traffic with just a map in the days before Satnav.

Another new experience was the "split shift or 2-5", which started at 07.30 until 13.00, returning to finish the shift at 16.45 until 20.00. Those extended lunch breaks proved quite useful for running errands and catching up on personal admin, no online banking in those days! She started at QEMH in June 1990 and by September she learned she would be deployed to the first Gulf War – a big surprise.

"I never thought for a moment I would be deployed – we had not seen any active operations, outside of Northern Ireland, since the Second World War. My mum was distraught because she'd encouraged me to join the Army and now her only child was due to deploy to a war zone," says Karen.

Her pre-deployment training didn't get off to the best start. While on the bus to Saighton Camp, Karen realised to her horror, not to mention embarrassment, that she couldn't find her ID card. She cursed her stupidity, but she managed to sort it out on arrival. Later, back at Woolwich and packing up her room, she found the ID card in the pocket of the jacket she had worn the day before leaving for pre-deployment training. Suffice to say, Karen has been careful never make that mistake again.

Karen was stationed at 33 Field Hospital in Al Jubail, Saudi Arabia, in a tented hospital which she remembers was "very dusty, lots of sand everywhere, and keeping the place clean was a constant challenge". It was all-hands-on-deck, putting up tents, building the beds, stocking the hospital and filling sandbags (the latter being a regular chore). The waiting game started, where Karen and others wondered whether peace talks might prevail, and in the meantime, they saw patients with regular complaints like appendicitis and sports injuries.



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She recalls: "The engineers were brilliant and could build all sorts of things for us, but still we had to learn to make-do and adapt. How do you put a double tubigrip on somebody with an injured ankle or knee when you've got nothing to widen it up to get it over very painful joints? We found big canisters of popcorn in the American NAAFI equivalent and used those as a wide applicator for legs. For finger injuries we used Smartie tubes. There was no integrated bed rest, so we fashioned sturdy cardboard boxes into a triangle shape. Before we threw anything out, we had to think whether we could use it for something."

Then the war started. There were lots of SCUD missile attacks. The American Patriot missile defence system could shoot these down but when the alarms sounded at night, everyone had to get into their IPE and get under their beds or if they were on the ward, get 'kitted up' and then make sure the patients were protected.

Karen gave her best, and at the conclusion of the war, she was returned to Woolwich and subsequently posted to BMH Iserlohn in Germany, for 18 months. On returning home, she did a refresher course in midwifery at Frimley Park Hospital and then started working at Louise Margaret Maternity Wing at Cambridge Military Hospital in Aldershot.

While there, Karen deployed to Bosnia on Op Grapple, in 1994. She joined a medical support team in a small single-ward hospital, which despite its size was well equipped with a lab, X rays and blood transfusion, so emergencies could be dealt with. "For anything we couldn't deal with, we would stabilise and then evacuate the patient," Karen explained.

She was grateful to be deployed with Irene Penney, a theatre sister and fellow Scot, and they were a great support to one another. One Sunday afternoon, they returned from the unit and were enjoying a cup of tea on the balcony when gunfire started. It initially appeared their lodgings might be under attack, but thankfully it turned out to be local people celebrating Easter Sunday by firing weapons in the air!





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Later, Karen's team relocated further north and rebuilt the medical facilities within a large warehouse. She reflects on the experience saying: "You never think you're going to cope with stuff like that, but you get through by pulling together, and it just all works."

A posting BMH Rinteln followed and then to Hong Kong in 1996-97, the final year of British control before handing back to China. Karen left Heathrow in a blizzard and flew into Hong Kong for the Chinese New Year celebrations, experiencing the hair-raising approach to Kai Tak Airport through high rise buildings. Her new colleagues were waiting and whisked her off to the mess to get changed and join the celebrations – a "good way to get over jetlag" she was assured. "I remember getting to my bed at something like two or three in the morning and thinking, this is just crazy," said Karen.

While there she undertook combined midwifery and practice nurse role, and worked with RAF practice nurse Jacquie Merritt, who she is still friends with today and is godmother to one of Jacquie's children. Karen remembers Hong Kong as one of her "standout postings" because it was so different culturally to everything previous, although she admits, "If I thought driving in London was scary, driving in Hong Kong was definitely not for the faint hearted."

After Hong Kong, Karen returned to Catterick in the UK for a year before being posted to Cyprus in 1998, to run the maternity unit at the Princess Mary's Hospital at RAF Akrotiri. During that two-year posting she was promoted to the rank of Major. At the end of the posting instead of flying home via RAF Brize Norton, "a pretty dull way of ending two years in Cyprus" she thought, Karen embarked on a road trip

across Europe with her mum. They caught a ferry from Cyprus to Greece and drove across the country to catch another ferry into Italy, then up through Austria and Germany, and finally home.

She recalls, "Mum wasn't very good as a navigator. Every night, the Atlas would be out and we would be plotting our route, but it was an amazing experience for both of us."

Not long after Karen found herself back in the UK, first at Frimley Park Hospital, followed by Edinburgh as Matron at the Medical Reception Station in Redford Barracks. "It was an amazing experience being back in Scotland and close to friends and family. I had lots of visitors, and my weekends were very busy with people wanting to stay in Edinburgh," she recalls.

During her earlier time in Catterick Karen had attempted to put down roots, buying a house in Northallerton. She had about 10 months use of the house before she was posted to Cyprus and despite best intentions, never went back to live there. Instead, she was posted to Birmingham and then London, where she eventually decided to put the house on the market. During this time Karen continued to learn and gain qualifications, completing a BSc in Clinical Governance via distance learning with the University of Glamorgan.

After serving as SO2 Clinical Policy in the Defence Medical Services Department in Main Building in London, which was a "real eye opener being involved in tri-Service policy making," she was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and appointed as SO1 Clinical policy at HQ Army Primary Health Care Service at what was then Former Army Staff College in Camberley. Having bought a house in Marlborough as a second attempt to put down some roots, she was deployed to Afghanistan to HQ Joint Force Support in Camp Bastion, with responsibility to set up the assurance system with the Field Hospital. She remembers Afghanistan as a "kinetic environment with lots happening and people working at the top of their game all the time" which was inspiring. On return she moved to a Healthcare Assurance role



within Army HQ in Andover. At last, she had the opportunity to live in her own house.

Karen had not expected further promotion, but to her surprise she was made a full Colonel and dispatched to Rheindahlen as the Clinical Director for British Forces Germany Health Service. That posting was a "real eye opener" as it was a quasi-commercial environment and something new for Karen. Her focus was on how the Army could ensure that its people were in receipt of the right care at the right time and the contractor was meeting their targets and milestones.

Karen left Germany in December 2014 at the end of her three years and to her great joy and surprise learned she had been awarded the RRC in the Queen's Birthday Honours List of 2015. She recalls a telephone call, "The DG wants to speak to you. I got that sinking feeling when somebody really senior wants to speak to you on the phone. The General came on to say I had to keep it quiet until midnight, but I had been awarded the RRC first class. I was struck dumb, probably for about the first time ever!"

The investiture was at Windsor Castle with HRH The Princess Royal and Karen's mum attended with her. They reflected on Karen's journey, from being waved off from Central Station in Glasgow as she set off for Gulf War, her mum in tears, the investiture at Windsor Castle. "I think it's been a bit of a journey for mum as well," Karen says. Sadly, her father had died a few years earlier while Karen was in Cyprus.

Karen had continued studying for her Master of Laws in Legal Aspects of Medical Practice while in the Germany, finishing her dissertation there. Looking back, she has no idea how she fitted in studying around a very demanding job, and there were a couple of times she was on the phone to her mum exhausted and sobbing. Karen found the resolve to overcome the difficulties and achieve her goals. "I had to prove to myself that I could hold down the job and do the course, but honestly, it nearly broke me," she confesses.

In early 2016, Karen was selected to become Chief Nursing Officer (Army). "It was an absolute privilege to serve in that role and I felt a genuine sense of responsibility to make the right decisions, because those decisions would ultimately have an impact on patients and our personnel. The best part of the role for Karen, was meeting personnel out in the various Units.

However, she recalls: "If you're out at units, meeting people, attending a graduation parade or promotion boards, when you come back you've got to catch up on the work you missed for that day. I was based in Andover but would frequently be up and down to Lichfield, to DMS Whittington, or to sit on Boards at the Army Personnel Centre in Glasgow so there was a lot of travel involved too." Karen was especially grateful to have Lt Col Lynn Adam as SO1 Nursing, who she had first met and worked with in the Gulf.

After two years as CNO(A) Karen retired in May 2018. It felt like the right time. "If I'd retired two years earlier, I would have felt I still had something to accomplish, whereas I felt when I left in 2018, I had done as much as I could have done," she says. Most people thought Karen would settle into a good NHS



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job, but she decided instead to "have a gap year" and enjoy herself.

While in Spain, at a house she owned with her mum, Karen made the decision she was not going to apply for NHS jobs and would instead enjoy being retired. However, the QAs were not done with her, and Karen was encouraged by Laura Murray, the outgoing Chair of the Scottish Branch of the QA Association to stand for election as Chair in September 2018. She formed a small committee with Sheila Jones as Secretary and Ron Buist as Treasurer.

The early months were a challenge, it felt as if we were constantly on the phone to Laura asking a multitude of questions, she must have been fed up with us! The membership is based across Scotland with the biggest proportion in the central belt. However, these days the Branch is getting more members in the Highlands and Borders. Under the trio's stewardship the Branch has grown from 70 members to the current 130.

Karen explains, "We have a summer event and a festive lunch and every month a coffee catch-up somewhere in Scotland. That has worked well and we had thought it would be members local to the specific area who would attend but instead we've found that a number of our members will travel to virtually everyone, no matter the distance involved. As we say in the Branch, "what's not to like about a coffee with a tasty scone and some good chat".

Scottish Branch was the first Branch to be formed in 1950. Karen and her committee have served seven years and are keen to hand over to a new committee once successors can be found. "We need to hand over before we get too stale! Hopefully over this year we will have more people coming forward with a view to them taking over, one day!" she says.

Karen keeps herself busy, living in Newton Mearns on the outskirts of Glasgow. She remains forever grateful for the varied career and opportunities to experience the world that the Army and nursing has provided her, and above all proud to be a QA.

Interview by Steve Bax