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Playing war, killing time and eating army biscuits

300 days of national service with the Swiss army.

Memories of Patrick Heck, a young Swiss living in England.

It's 3am on a February morning in the Leventina valley. It's minus 15 outside the tent, as we peel ourselves out of our sleeping bags and tie our frozen boots, to begin guarding the camp. Two miserable hours spent complaining, up to our necks in snow. We've been doing this for days, and we'll be here for many more. My buddy didn't choose to be here, but as a Swiss person from abroad I have but myself to blame...

Somehow, I always knew I would be a soldier. Growing up in rural Fribourg, the army is a fact of life. Tank convoys regularly rattled through our village, as we watched in awe from the classroom window. Jets screamed by in the summer sky. We played war around the gym hall. But things changed: my family moved abroad, playing war was for kids, and my marching orders never came. The thought of signing up would come occasionally, and go just as quickly.

In 2009, however, the credit crunch hit the UK, and my firm began laying off staff. As I was turning 25, I realised that the opportunity to enlist wouldn't present itself again. Within weeks, I'd attended recruitment in Lausanne, taken leave from work and vacated my flat in London. At the end of June, I made my way up the mountains to Airolo in the Gotthard Pass, the heart of Switzerland. I was to be an army medic, and Bedrina military base was to be my home for the next 10 months.

The army has a lot of stereotypes, and it didn't disappoint. Recruit school was a combination of standing to attention and learning to soldier, while being barked at all day long by some angry Swiss German. Living conditions were basic, personal space minimal. As a recruit, you wait to run and run to wait. The one exception was food: apart from the infamous "army tea" (which I hope never to taste again), subsistence was plentiful and generally good.

Between being stacked in trucks and doing push-ups in our nuclear suits, genuine camaraderie emerged within our platoon. German, French and Italian speakers became a team, carrying out duties quickly and efficiently. The prospect of a night on the town

or an early train home was always strong motivation!

Most of our time was spent practising paramedical skills. As well as putting IV drips on each other and learning to set up field hospitals, we learned to manage "everyday" situations such as car crashes, etc. We once worked with the fire brigade, responding to a simulated earthquake. We were dispatched across the country to complete work experience in civilian hospitals, and mobilised to vaccinate the population during the H1N1 pandemic.

After 10 months of endless training and complaining, our time was up, and I found myself once again behind my desk in the UK. Memories of Bedrina fading fast, the time has come to take stock of my year in the army, and draw several conclusions:

■ I see the purpose of having an army. It is a valuable resource to be called upon should the nation be in need. However, the govern-

ment is reluctant to actually use it. I believe the Swiss army could be deployed internationally for disaster relief to great effect.

■ The army is a vector of national unity. Recruits get to know people from the four corners of the land and converse in another national language. To me, this is a fantastic achievement.

■ National service suffers from a terrible image in Switzerland. Recruits drop out at a phenomenal rate, army bashing is a daily topic in the media, and yet the army is doing nothing about it. The day may soon come where the Swiss vote to disband a great national tradition.

Personally, I now know what a beautiful and diverse nation Switzerland is. It is a place to be proud of, a place worth defending, and it was a privilege to be able to complete my national service there.

And sometimes, I find myself staring out the office window wishing I was outside with my platoon, surrounded by the snow-capped mountains of the Leventina...



Daily life in the army