

The sky's the limit: How Linbrooke's new Project Manager began a new career in rail after 25 years' RAF service

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Speaking onsite from [Linbrooke's](#) Eastfield REB project, Project Interface Manager Kevin Smith discusses how he has transitioned from a 25-year career with the Royal Air Force to overseeing complex rail infrastructure projects for the signalling, power and communications specialist.

Before joining the rail industry, I began my career in the Royal Air Forces (RAF), joining in 1997 at age 18, which feels like a very long time ago now.

I started as a Communications Infrastructure Technician, specialising in providing ground-to-air communications and Data Infrastructure for the Royal Air Force. I began life as a tradesman, eventually working my way through to Sergeant over a 25-year career.

In my early years, I was part of a response team providing Ground to Air Communications maintenance at RAF Sealand, supporting wherever British Forces were stationed. The main attribute of our team was specialist working-at-height engineers for the RAF but we also assisted the Army and the Navy. In that role, I worked all over the world and you could expect it to be away in the region of 230 days every year, so it was a big commitment.

After five years in the role, I was promoted to Corporal and was assigned to 90 Signals Unit at RAF Leeming, which are an Expeditionary & Readiness Force. This position saw me serve in hostile environments in Iraq and Afghanistan, leading small teams working on ground-to-air communications and providing data infrastructure networks for British Ground Forces and allied partners.



Kevin pictured in Iraq during his RAF service days

Supporting NATO's global communications

During that time, I was posted to Supreme Allied Headquarters (SHAPE), which was in Belgium, so I worked for NATO for three years again providing communications for up to 26 different nations. This was a very important role and it was a 24/7 on-call service we provided.

During my time in NATO, I was promoted to sergeant and assigned Communications Infrastructure Trade Manager. In this role, I was responsible for the development and implementation of new trade initiatives and strategies designed to enhance the development of CYBER Space and Comms Infra Managers/Technicians for 2400 members.

I'd advise on new training and development, implementing new qualifications, changing accreditation bodies, and liaising with funding organisations. This ensured all personnel received correct competencies and industry standard qualifications whilst in RAF and could be used for future employment if transitioning across to civilian work.

In 2021 I received commendation in the Queens Birthday Honours List 2021 for exceptional efforts in the development of communications infrastructure at RAF Coningsby supporting QRA and Typhoon Operations.

From sky to track: transitioning to civilian life

Leaving the forces after serving for 25 years was a huge step for me. I'd had the job security and a good package there, without any risk of being made redundant, however, I realised it was time for a change and I was ready to take on a new challenge.

I joined Linbrooke as a Project Interface Manager in 2022. My role is focused on liaising with the different disciplines involved across project delivery. I act as the go-between for the site teams, the discipline heads and the project managers. Essentially like the glue that sticks everything together.

There are a lot of different aspects to the role- from looking at the scope and allocating the right disciplines, liaising with the engineering teams and capturing any issues that can arise. Then there's also the commercial side of the project that needs consideration.

Then there is the client interface, which is key to our project success. I ensure we have a consistent dialogue with the client, keeping them up to date, getting the relevant information we need from them to then put our program into fruition but also to ensure that what we're doing can be handed over to them in the best possible manner.

Coming from a telecoms engineering background in the forces, I had a lot of knowledge gaps to fill when joining the rail industry. I had no idea about signalling, or E&P, for example.

One big gap for me was the commercial side of projects. Maintaining the budget, planning for it and pricing and tendering for work. I've had to learn about these commercial aspects by working closely with the senior project managers to understand their role within the business.

Working at Linbrooke, the company has helped me to find a role that fits my skills and experience. They've given me a lot of freedom to learn because it's a brand-new role, which I'm grateful for.



Kevin working onsite for Linbrooke

Supporting Network Rail's Eastfield Life Extension Works

I'm currently working on Linbrooke's Eastfield Signalling Life Extension Project. The scope of work includes replacing two semaphore signals with colour light signals, converting nine mechanical GPLs with LED type with associated route indicators, fitout and installation of a new Relocatable Equipment Building (REB), renewal of signalling wiring within the Signalbox, alterations to the Signalling Panel in the Signalbox, renewal of the 16 point detectors and removal of redundant cabling. My role included being the site manager and reporting officer during the staged commissionings

A key stage of the works involved sliding the REB into possession under the overhead line wires during a Saturday night possession and isolation of the railway. My role included developing the traffic management plan, developing the hour by hour plan with Linbrooke's construction team and subcontractor, monitoring and reporting progress during the works. I played a fundamental role in ensuring the works were completed on time without delaying the handback of the isolation /possession

On 12th November, Linbrooke successfully commissioned and entered into service the new and modernised assets in and around Eastfield Signal Box, a significant achievement for the team both due to the volume of work delivered and alongside being completed in a particularly challenging environment due to the age of the interfacing assets. The project objectives have been met to increase reliability of the infrastructure, improve the service of the operational railway and reduce future maintenance costs.

Following completion of this project, I'll be moving into a new project management role, which I'm very excited about and will be another opportunity to further develop my industry experience.



Kevin onsite during Linbrooke's Eastfield Commissioning on Remembrance Day

Getting on track with a career in rail

There are some cultural differences moving into the rail industry from the forces but the two sectors are reasonably similar. The cohesion you have and the camaraderie made it very comfortable for me to transfer across from the Royal Air Force to the rail. There's a similar sense of work ethic and a desire to get the job done with a 'can-do attitude'.

Linbrooke is very proactive with its approach to armed forces veterans' recruitment. Our current head of recruitment and training is an ex-marine and with the transferable skills and the mindset, coming from a military background is very much catered to the way organisations working in the rail industry operate.

As Linbrooke's Director of Rail, Ben Lynch, explained: "The power of camaraderie at Linbrooke rubs off across the board with a real sense of loyalty to the business, as proven by the successful and on-time Eastfield commissioning during the Remembrance weekend. I want to applaud all our personnel for delivering work with military precision.

We, as a business, are committed to helping ex-force personnel retrain in the sectors we operate in to gain a profession and transition smoothly back into civilian life. Kevin is one of the cases within the business where we have successfully applied his vast array of skills to a relatively similar discipline."

Discussing Kevin's appointment, Nikki Grice-Sims, Project Director- Rail at Linbrooke said:

"It's been an absolute pleasure witnessing Kevin's progress over the last 18 months, and I couldn't be prouder of his achievements. Not only has he excelled in our industry, but he's also made a successful transition from a different one. Kevin has showcased the power of adaptability, a thirst for learning, and an unwavering pursuit of success—traits he honed during his time in the RAF, and truly emphasises the value of recruiting ex-forces individuals into our business."

For people considering a role in the rail industry, I do believe the career options are endless. There are so many different areas you can work in, from project management to telecoms, and E&P to signalling. It's an industry where you can be part of delivering top-quality projects that provide an essential service for the public. From extension of life works to building bridges, office and site-based roles, there is a huge variety of work out there and something for everyone.

For more information on Linbrooke visit: <https://linbrooke.co.uk/>