

DERAILED TRAIN, SIGNAL FAILURE AND A13 CRASH CAUSE RUSH HOUR TRAVEL MISERY

Book club that keeps soldiers and families at home on the same page



Army wife: Alison Baverstock with one of Reading Force's scrapbooks (Picture: Glenn Copus)

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A ground-breaking "book club" for soldiers is helping to prevent service families from becoming estranged when a parent is deployed abroad.

The Reading Force project aims to support families through awkward phone calls from combat zones as well as the transition back into civilian life. Dr Alison Baverstock, a publisher, set the scheme up after spending 30 years dealing with her husband leaving and returning from operations.

"When my husband was away in Northern Ireland, Afghanistan and Iraq it was often difficult to find neutral ground to talk about," she says. "You can't talk about what they are doing and you don't want to talk about your life at home when you are just keeping things going. You have nothing in the middle. So we always used books." Families who take part choose and read the same book, talk about it and fill in a scrapbook with their thoughts on it. Reading Force sends each family a certificate for every scrapbook filled in.

This month the project gained charitable status, four years after Dr Baverstock set it up in Aldershot. It is funded by ABF The Soldiers' Charity — one of the charities at the heart of the Standard's Homeless Veterans campaign.

Dr Baverstock says many believe they will enjoy a "second honeymoon" when one partner returns home. In reality it can be a difficult time.

Family breakdown is a contributing cause of homelessness but the "sheer ordinariness" of having something in common to talk about can help.

The mother of four says the first book her family chose was *To Kill A Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. Other popular books are *Horrid Henry* by Francesca Simon and *Diary Of A Wimpy Kid* by Jeff Kinney. Wendy Searle, head of communications at ABF The Soldiers' Charity, says her family also used the scheme: "Sitting around the kitchen table doing an ordinary thing like reading really helped us settle back into normal routines.

"I can think of so many ways this scheme could help — from speaking to grandparents who aren't nearby, to encouraging younger children to find words to talk about how they feel about a parent's deployment."

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