



Former soldier Sean O’Keeffe admits that launching his own business was a huge step into the unknown – but no more challenging than getting any other job in Civvy Street.

“These days, there’s no more security in working for someone else than in giving your own enterprising skills free reign,” he says. “I’d urge anyone leaving the forces who is keen to be their own boss to give it a go – what have they got to lose?”

A surveillance and reconnaissance specialist, Sean, aged 31, left the Army in 2006 and spent five years as head of IT and Communications with Aegis Defence Services in Iraq.

But during that time, he and fellow former soldier Jordan Wylie launched an informal, free, online forum for old Army friends and contacts to pass on tips and advice about quality training to help their friends find jobs and earn good money after leaving the forces.

“We soon realised we could actually do the training ourselves instead of signposting our friends and colleagues to other businesses, and the idea for The Training Wing was born!” says Sean.

He initially set up the business from home in Tidworth, but soon realised he needed a more professional environment and moved into offices at the Castledown Business Park, Ludgershall just a few miles from Tidworth garrison.

The Business Park is owned and run by Wiltshire Council, offering offices, hot desks, meeting rooms and networking opportunities to all sizes of business including start-ups.

Through an initiative called The Enterprise Network, led by the Council using EU and Government funding, business tenants can also access free, impartial expert advice and support from the Wiltshire Business Support Service, which Sean describes as ‘invaluable’.

Now, just two years on, The Training Wing has eight full-time staff and up to 10 expert training consultants working around the world at any one time. Everyone who works for the company is ex-military, or a military spouse, and the flexibility of office space at Castledown means the business has been able to expand to meet demand.

The Training Wing specialises in maritime security, close protection and medical training as well as a wide range of other personal development programmes and courses linked to those sectors. Students and clients include military service leavers, former police officers, medical professionals and security and risk management personnel.

But setting up the business wasn’t plain sailing. “It took over my life for a while, working 18-hour days, sitting in a tiny room with a laptop. But now we’re turning over £500,000 in only our second year,” says Sean.

“It helped finding the right offices, and the free business support we get at the Castledown Business Park. We’re very lucky in Wiltshire - there is a lot of support for new and growing small businesses from The Enterprise Network, so there’s no excuse for not becoming your own boss!”

At first, Sean thought he knew everything he needed to about business – but he soon learned to look for help: “There are some fantastic books and websites out there to help you along the way; some amazingly successful people are happy to share their knowledge and expertise. Read and learn is a good tip! Everyday really is a school day in business.”

Recalling the challenge of leaving the relative security of Army life, Sean understands how most soldiers would find the idea of being their own boss daunting, but he’s sure most would relish the exciting challenges that it brings.

“I think many are put off simply by the words associated with business – even the basics like profit and loss, marketing strategy, business plan, VAT and tax payments sounds too complicated and too much hassle.

“But if you have a strong desire to be your own boss, and the determination to succeed, it’s not that great a risk. It doesn’t take much money, just a great idea - and a huge commitment of time. But there’s nothing like it. Give it a go!”

Sean has also just launched a blog <http://sean-okeeffe.com> which he hopes will encourage people to start a business.

Sean’s top tips for anyone thinking of becoming their own boss:

- Take the first step – only then will you know how fun and challenging being your own boss is
- Network, network and network... you never know when one of those contacts will turn into a lead

Sean’s top reading for budding entrepreneurs:

- *43 Mistakes Businesses Make...and How to Avoid Them* by Duncan Bannatyne
- *The 30 Day MBA: Learn the Essential Top Business School Concepts, Skills and Language Whilst Keeping Your Job and Your Cash* by Colin Barrow