



Vice Admiral Nick Hine said that his condition meant he was suited to the loneliness of commanding a nuclear sub  
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## Vice Admiral Nick Hine: 'To be blunt, autism made me a better naval officer'

Second Sea Lord speaks of his condition for the first time, telling Larisa Brown the forces need more 'neurodiversity'

Larisa Brown, Defence Editor

Friday March 12 2021, 12.01am, The Times

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For years colleagues teased Vice Admiral Nick Hine for being blunt, challenging and difficult.

Now Hine, one of the Royal Navy's most senior officers, has revealed that he was diagnosed with [autism](#) a decade ago and is urging others like him to join the military.

The Second Sea Lord, 55, revealed his condition as he warned that Britain would not be able to win future wars unless it was

able to “think differently”.

In an interview with *The Times*, the former commander of a nuclear submarine said he was speaking out about his autism for the first time because he wanted to leave the navy in a better place.

Hine, a father of one, said: “I have a brain that is wired differently. It doesn’t mean that I am disabled, it doesn’t mean that I am odd, it doesn’t mean that I am in any way shape or form less capable. It means that I am different.”

Until 2018, Asperger’s and other forms of autism were generally a bar to service, but that year the military updated its “medical employment standards” to allow greater discretion on a case-by-case basis for a range of conditions.

There are 177 servicemen and women across the army, navy and RAF who have been diagnosed with autism.

Hine said the only way the UK could compete with other nations that had larger defence budgets would be by drawing recruits from a much wider pool, including those on the autism spectrum disorder and with other neurological conditions such as dyspraxia and dyslexia.

Speaking from Portsmouth via video link, he said: “As a military, we are not able to compete with adversaries in terms of mass. We do not have enough stuff. We are unlikely to be able to compete with adversaries in terms of technology, because they spend significantly larger sums of money.

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“So the only way we are going to win and compete is by thinking differently, and therefore having people who think differently has got to be part of the solution.”

Hine, who expects to retire in April next year, was born in Carlisle and joined the navy straight from school in 1984. He said his comrades used to comment on how he was “obsessive, challenging and difficult” and so, ten years ago, he went for a professional diagnosis, where he was told that he was on the spectrum.



Hine is starting a “neurodiversity network” for servicemen and women  
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As he rose through the ranks, Hine kept the diagnosis to himself, sharing it only with close family, including his wife and daughter. He was promoted to rear admiral in 2015 and to vice admiral in 2019.

In recent weeks he has disclosed to close colleagues that he has autism and next week he will launch a “neurodiversity network” where servicemen and women who have conditions such as autism can discuss their concerns and experiences.

He said that the skills which came with autism, such as precision, order, clarity and desire for structure, had meant that he thrived in the navy, but he admitted to struggling with noise and larger group conversations.

Hine spent most of his operational career in the submarine service, commanding the nuclear-powered Trafalgar-class HMS Talent at the turn of the century.

He said being in command was a “lonely activity”, which suited him because “not needing social acceptance is something that sits easily with that sort of level of responsibility”.

“When you’re underwater and you are responsible for 100 people, and a nuclear reactor, and you’re operating in an environment, that is fundamentally hard. If you make a mistake, you will sink and you will die, and everybody else will.

“It is a level of responsibility that sits well [with me] and the focus and the ability to deliver on the complexity of that operation is something that I was naturally comfortable and reasonably good at.”

Hine said that in previous years he would have described his condition as Asperger’s but that now comes under one umbrella diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

ASD is a developmental brain disorder that can cause a range of symptoms, such as problems communicating with others.

“The world is made for neuro-typical people by neuro-typical people, and therefore it’s not surprising that people who are not neuro-typical have a series of challenges or a series of difficulties both in interacting with that world, but also in the world interacting with them”, Hine said. Speaking about the difficulties he had faced over the years, he said that he struggled to pick up on non-verbal communication and that his colleagues had criticised his body language.

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**I was diagnosed privately at 40 with autism and it freed me from decades of feeling that I didn’t have a place in society. I served in the military and others noticed that I was not the average Joe but I put on a fake outer persona and managed to get by. I later joined the police service and again, using every tool in my toolbox to appear as normal, I got through although I made a**

**lot of enemies due to my straight-speaking and hyper-efficient way of working. There are many many people who know me and loathe me because of my free speaking and candour and I wonder whether the world has come far enough for me to out myself as autistic. Will any of those individuals understand better that I mean no harm and I live by a stringent regime in order to allow me to function with less stress? Probably not.**

Smiles

He said noise had meant that following conversations was particularly challenging, adding: "You have to really deal with people on one on one, it's much more straightforward."

He said that he was not blunt, as some colleagues had described, but clear, unambiguous and honest. "I would say that clarity is a gift, frankly", he added.

As the Ministry of Defence spends more money on technology, cyberwarfare and artificial intelligence, it is hoping to attract a wider range of candidates with diverse abilities..

Hine said the navy did not want everybody to think the same, adding: "If you want to transform, if you want a different way of doing business, you can't keep asking the same question of the same people and expect a different answer."

Asked why he was speaking out, he said: "This is the first time, and I'm talking about it now because as I've reached the end of my career, there is a sort of saying in the service that you should try and leave the service in a better place than you found it. And therefore, if I can do that by having some added value in the neurodiversity space, then I'll be OK with that."

### **Breaking the silence**

Autism spectrum disorder is a neurological condition that

affects social interaction. It can be diagnosed at any age and there are a range of symptoms, such as problems communicating with others and struggling with emotions.

Asperger's is the term used by some people to describe autistic people with average or above average intelligence.

Autistic people often have other conditions too, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or dyslexia. They can become anxious or upset about unfamiliar situations and can find things like bright lights or loud noises overwhelming.



Greta Thunberg  
AARON CHOWN/PA

The actor Sir Anthony Hopkins revealed in 2017 that he had been diagnosed with high-end Asperger's syndrome a decade earlier. He said he believed it had helped him as an actor because he "looked at people differently".

The environmental activist [Greta Thunberg](#) spoke about her Asperger's diagnosis in a social media post in September 2019. She said: "Given the right circumstances, being different is a superpower."

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