

Oliver gets his marching orders

Jules Ritter's son has dual nationality but still wants to do his Swiss national service

My Swiss-born son received his marching orders last week. Just turned 18, in his last year of school, he has been summoned by the Swiss Army to a compulsory recruitment day.

"You won't have to go: you have a British passport," I reassured him as I passed him the envelope.

"You'll go to university in the UK, maybe do an MBA there or the States, work a bit, come back after you are 26. By then you will have exceeded recruitment age, and will just have to pay exemption tax on your annual income."

Switzerland has no professional paid army but has developed a unique system best described as a cross between a militia and a regular army. All able-bodied adult males must attend a military training camp of 18 to 21 weeks, depending on the unit selected, or, since 1996, can opt for the far longer civilian service. Conscripts are then free to return to normal life but return for repeat courses of three weeks a year ending when they are aged somewhere between 31 and 36.

Oliver read the information booklet before filing it carefully in the kitchen drawer then he cleared his throat – always a cue that he is about to form a sentence. But nothing prepared us for this one.

"The thing is," he told his father and me. "I want to go. And I want to be a grenadier."

He said grenadier with a French accent not knowing how to say the English word. The Swiss Grenadiers are an elite infantry unit requiring additional weeks of training.

While my Swiss husband choked on his coffee, I, the British one,

without the neutrality gene, found myself yelling: "Cannon fodder!" I gave my husband a look that said: "This is all your fault."

My husband tried to persuade him at least to reconsider his choice of army unit, waxing lyrical about his time in the traffic police where, among other things, he was taught to ride a motorbike.

"No way!" Oliver snorted. "I want to do the hardest physical discipline there is. I'm thinking of taking a gap year."

We tried to argue him out of it; the problems with gap years, the question of what he would do for the remaining eight months or if accepted into the Grenadiers, six months. But he stuck to his guns.

"This is my home," he said. "I do want to go to university in England but maybe I won't come back to Switzerland right away and then I will be too old."

As a final push he added: "All my mates, Yann, Gillian, Frank, they're all doing it now."

The military is very much rooted in the Swiss culture. It is part of its folklore. Every serving Swiss male has his uniform and rifle at home. Fathers go off each year for their three weeks of service. In-between they practise their shooting on designated days at the shooting range. Sunday night trains are packed with soldiers in uniform returning to barracks after a weekend home. Now it looks like my son, who grew up in a house where toy guns were banned, will be joining them on the front line.

The role of the Swiss army is a defensive one: to protect its country and citizens. There is little chance of Oliver being deployed outside the country or



telegraph.co.uk/happyfamilies

Read Stephanie Calman online



Generation gap: Jules Ritter with her 18-year-old son, Oliver, (above) have opposing views on joining the Swiss army

seeing any serious action but still I lie awake at night trying not to visualise him in army uniform firing a gun and trying to make sense of his and his friends' surprisingly fervent desire to fulfil their military obligations.

I wonder if somewhere between the computer games and the hours of social networking my son's generation has lost itself in this complex world of ours and his peers simply yearn for a challenge, for more discipline, a clear purpose

and a set of skills that involves neither screen nor keyboard.

By making this choice Oliver pledges allegiance to his country of birth (Switzerland), to his friends, to the voice of his burgeoning politics and takes a solid step forward on his adult life path. In spite of my personal politics, for Oliver and his generation a little army training may be exactly what is required.

♣ Jules Ritter writes a blog on life as a writer in Switzerland at www.julesritter.com.