



Jennefer Tobin, who runs St Mary's RnR, comes from a military family. Her father – whose regimental badge she wears – served with the 2nd Punjab Regiment



Soldiers from 3 Para, such as Jon Buckley (far left) and Charl Pienaar (far right), try out carriage driving and horse grooming at Chariots of Fire at Boreland



# SPECIAL THANKS

Jennefer Tobin wanted to do something for troops returning from active service, so she's created a holiday centre where soldiers can enjoy rest, fun and a host of activities, helped along by local residents, she tells **Mary Smith**

**Photography by Charlie Hedley and Angus McDougal**

Almost every week there are media reports of yet another British soldier killed in Iraq or Afghanistan. Death or injury can come through engagement with the enemy, sniper fire, ambush or landmines. Young – often very young – men witness dreadful sights and those who do come home are greeted by press coverage often hostile to the conflict and a seemingly indifferent population.

One woman who feels the troops deserve better is Jennefer Tobin, who has set up a local non-profit organisation to provide support for British service personnel returning from active duty.

Based in the New Abbey area, St Mary's RnR – named after the church its founders attend – provides residential holidays which include a wide range of outdoor activities

arranged and supported by the local community.

It welcomed its first group – 11 medically downgraded Royal Marines – in January. Since then groups from 3 and 2 Paras have been to the area and more soldiers are expected.

Jennefer, who is director of Datatrac Limited, an award-winning systems integration company, comes from a military background: "I was born in India where my father served with the 2nd Punjab Regiment. He was in the habit of entertaining soldiers during my childhood so it's something I've been accustomed to.

"I wanted to do something for the troops returning from active service. They go off to do this seriously nasty fighting in conditions that contrast starkly with the population's

normal life."

The civilian population's lack of understanding of the horrors that the troops face is, Jennefer believes, partly because few people actually know soldiers today. "The army today is only 85,000-strong. That's very small. The Bank of Scotland is twice that," she says. "It used to be that everyone knew someone in the army, but nowadays hardly anyone knows a soldier."

RnR provides accommodation on the Solway coast and recreational activities include fishing, clay pigeon shooting, hill walking, horse riding, carriage driving, sailing, golf, massage and aromatherapy and picnics and barbecues.

"Our aim is to provide the boys with a jolly good holiday. We also act as a conduit for local people to give some time and energy

towards helping the troops. In contrast to media messages, people do want to support our troops and we've had a tremendous response. Lots of folk have been more than happy to share their skills and offer tuition in various sports."

The soldiers from 3 Para who visited the area in May have had two tours in Afghanistan where they served with Corporal Mark Wright, who was killed when he entered a minefield to try to save the life of another injured soldier. A Chinook helicopter attempting a rescue detonated more mines and Mark was hit by shrapnel, dying of his wounds before he reached hospital. The man whose life he tried to save lost a leg.

It's not the sort of thing soldiers can talk about to civilians. George McGinney, from 3 Para, says: "You form a bond with your mates out there and that carries on when you are back here. You can talk about stuff with them because they've been in it with you."

Alison Chandler from Rockcliffe is an ex-Wren who opens her home for the boys, helped by her friend, 90-year old Sue Fortune, who served with Alison in the Wrens. In May, Alison provided a picnic lunch for a group of very appreciative lads spending the day clay pigeon shooting and golfing.

"Jennefer asked me to, so I did and I'm delighted to be able to do so," Alison says.

It's not only people with a connection to the armed forces who want to help. Lynn Otty of Dumfries provided a meal in her home for the lads of 3 Para after they had spent a day trying out carriage driving at the Chariots of Fire centre at Boreland near

Lockerbie. "When I heard that something was being done in our locality for young men who had seen active service in places like Afghanistan and Iraq, I wanted to be a part of it," says Lynn who attends St Mary's.

"Not having anything to offer in the way of distractions and fun activities, I decided something I can do is cook and so I invited them over for dinner. They'd been outdoors most of the day and were amazingly hungry. I thought I had provided enough food to feed a whole platoon but I had forgotten just how hungry active, fit young guys can be.

"During the meal, which was full of silliness and laughter, I looked round the table and found it disturbing that every one of the young men was someone's son. When they left the house, relaxed and tired after a full day of just having fun, I was glad to have demonstrated, in a very minor way, that we appreciate what they are doing for their country."

Sergeant Andy Dollan of 3 Para was genuinely taken aback by the welcome the lads received in Dumfries & Galloway.

"It's been just amazing," he says. "The hospitality has been overwhelming and we'll never forget it."

■ *St Mary's RnR receives some funding from Help for Heroes which was launched in October 2007 to do something to help the wounded coming back from Afghanistan and Iraq.*

*If you would like to do something to help or want to give a donation, contact Jennefer Tobin at [jennefer.tobin@btinternet.com](mailto:jennefer.tobin@btinternet.com)*

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Lee Howard is shown how to drive a carriage