

From theatres of war such as Afghanistan, British servicemen come back



BATTLE STRESS: Many soldiers are in need of rehabilitation

SILVER-HAIRED Jennifer Tobin is in deep conversation with two young Royal Marines about to enter the fast-flowing waters of the River Nith.

Within minutes they will find themselves being tossed about in the rushing white water waiting for them below, in an adrenalin-fuelled 'river swimming' session.

Before that, brigadier's daughter Jennifer is grilling them intently – not about the activity that awaits them but about their favourite chat-up lines.

The ensuing laughter and inevitable cheesy jokes serve their purpose and the two grinning men, dressed in wet suits and buoyancy jackets, finally head off to join their fellow marines for two hours of action-packed fun. Miss Tobin raises her eyebrows and remarks: 'Well, that was very enlightening!'

But the humorous moment hides a more traumatic period in the lives of the pair from 42 Commando and their colleagues, who are among the latest batch of injured servicemen lucky enough to find themselves at Miss Tobin's door, near New Abbey, Dum-

by Patricia Kane

frieshire. She runs Southwest Scotland RnR, a charity set up more than two years ago to offer activity holidays to service personnel undergoing rehabilitation after being injured.

'I wanted to do something for the troops returning from active service,' she explains. 'Their life, their career is being a fighting soldier or marine. It's the ultimate heady game.'

'But it can come with a price and I wanted to create an environment where our troops could come and relax and have a break from rehab and get away from their normal surroundings to help in the healing process.'

'It gives us a chance to say to these truly brave young men and women, "Thank you – how come and have some fun."

Miss Tobin founded the charity in late 2008, following the death of her mother. The house on the Solway Firth had been a holiday home for the family as she was growing up and her parents decided to spend their retirement there.

Miss Tobin's father served with the 2nd Punjab Regiment – she was born in India – before the family returned to the UK after partition and he served with the British Army.

As an officer's daughter, she enjoyed a privileged lifestyle along with her brother and sister and, when she was 21, her father made her a member of The Army and Navy Club, better known as 'The Rag', in St James's, London.

She believes her first-hand experience of what it is to be part of the wider military family and its traditions has given her an empathy with the injured service personnel, which helps her bond with them in a way others might find difficult.

'The boys who come here show massive courage and strength and we do everything possible through a variety

'I abhor anyone who removes the dignity of any human being'

of activities to rebuild their confidence,' she says.

'I hate and abhor anyone who removes the dignity of any human being.'

Injured men come and go but several remain in Miss Tobin's thoughts, particularly the ones who are transformed for life by their stay at Southwest Scotland RnR.

Miss Tobin recalls: 'A bunch came down from 3 Scots, The Royal Regiment of Scotland. One guy had a paralysed arm and was very quiet when he arrived. The first event the following morning was mountain biking and he thought he wouldn't be able to take part.'

'But the brakes were changed around to compensate for his arm and off he went with the others. He had been alone for a year, unable to do anything much because of his arm. We were able to change that for him.'

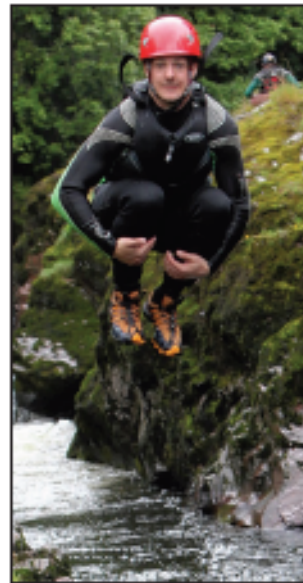
'The next day, it was a climbing activity and he took part in that, too. We simply had his bad arm tied to the hand of a strong boy and they climbed together, using three hands. It was fantastic to see his self-confidence come back.'

The charity currently needs £3,000 a week to give ten service people at a time a holiday at the unique facility, which Miss Tobin hopes to expand in the future to include a fully-equipped rehabilitation unit.

A crucial part of their RnR is that they mix with the community and hear how highly they are thought of by the public for the good work they are doing in Afghanistan.

Miss Tobin said: 'I don't think many of them realise how much support there is for them out there but the bottom line is they are doing a good thing and helping to protect their country and make things better for the people in Afghanistan.'

'I find it unacceptable when I hear people say they shouldn't be there.



HIGH POINT: A soldier lets off steam, taking a leap above the River Nith



UNDERSTANDING: Jennifer Tobin has a private chat with one of the Marines

Pottles has nothing to do with it. People have to realise they are just doing the job they are paid for and we have to show our appreciation for what they are doing.

'This project gives people a way to show their admiration and provide practical support and encouragement to those soldiers.'

The practical support ranges from shooting trips and dinner parties for the troops at country estates owned by Miss Tobin's numerous friends to batches of home-baking being delivered frequently by supporters, some in their 90s.

The dinners can be a culture shock for some but their elegant hosts make it as easy for them as possible.

Miss Tobin said: 'They are all incredibly generous and kind. I remember one dinner with Lady Landale and the soldier seated beside her was looking on in bewilderment at the large array of cutlery on the table in front of him.'

'She leaned over to him and said, "Just follow my lead and work your way from the outside in." He was fine after that.'

'The point to what we do is that it's a distraction from the mental trauma of seeing their comrades injured or killed and dealing with injury themselves. The clear message from all of us is, "We think you're great!"'

Following Miss Tobin's mother's death in March 2008, it seemed the obvious way forward to use the large empty house for a greater purpose.

She said: 'My father had an unbounding energy. He was always described as the fairest man everyone knew. My mother had an unceasing tenacity of purpose.'

'I like to think those are the qualities that I take forward from them and they would have been happy for their house

wounded and traumatised... and a dedicated Scot helps rebuild their lives



'These boys show massive courage and strength. This is a chance to say thank you'

to be used in this way.' Generous donations from officers who had served with her father gave her the opportunity to launch the charity seven months later. The first group of injured men arrived in January 2009.

But she admits it was a steep learning curve, adding: 'I thought, "How am I going to pull this all together?" But we've managed, with a few changes on the way.'

'One of the first things I had to do was get bigger beds and duvets specially made. Most of the men are well over six feet tall, some nearly seven feet. They were too big for my beds! I thought, "How awful!"'

'My mother taught me your guest bed should be better than your own bed, if someone has taken the trouble to come to stay.'

'With that in mind, beds were specially made for the five twin guest rooms. They are seven feet long, together with duvets that measure eight feet long.'

Now Miss Tobin wants to develop the house and garden further by creating an adjacent rehabilitation centre and hopes to raise £150,000 to



realise her dream. Her inspiration comes from a riding accident she sustained as a young woman, when she was thrown from her horse and broke her back. She was sent to Tyrtingham Naturopathic Clinic, in Newport Pagnell,

Buckinghamshire, for specialist hydrotherapy treatment and within two weeks was back 'hop, skipping and jumping'. She said: 'I had ten treatments a day, which were all about stimulating blood flow and circulation. Parts

of my body would be treated with cold water at the same time as other parts were treated with hot. This actually created the correct means for treating a body in trauma. This is the sort of treatment I want to see happening at Southwest Scot-

PROUD TO HELP: Jennifer Tobin believes her Service background enables her understand the needs of battle-weary troops in need of rest and relaxation, left

land RnR. In the future we are looking for as much support as possible to see that happen.'

As she finishes talking, the men from 42 Commando reappear from their river swimming, clearly energised by the activity.

Sergeant Karl Anderson, 29, from Liverpool, a rehab instructor, said: 'It's amazing what Jennifer has achieved. She has taken care of everything, even the little things that are important to those in the forces, like linings. Everything is done at a certain time in a regimented way, which is what we are all used to.'

'Morale can be very low during rehab and this is the perfect break from it. It's fantastic.'

Passing out filled rotis and drinks, Miss Tobin says: 'It's hard to let them go and say goodbye when the time comes. But it does help knowing that we have made a difference to the lives of these young people who are putting their lives on the line for their country.'

● To make a donation, send a cheque made out to Southwest Scotland RnR, at The End House, Carsetham DG2 8DS