

BRIGADIER'S DAUGHTER HELPS WAR HEROES ON ROAD TO RECOVERY

Two really wonderful things happen to them... they sleep and laugh again



RELAXED: The Royal Marines and Jennifer are all smiles after day of activities such as golfing and clay-pigeon shooting, below. Bottom, it's dinner time



EASING THE PAIN: Jennifer opens her home to wounded soldiers

A REMOTE Scottish village on the Solway Firth has become a haven for injured British servicemen.

The handful of houses that make up the tiny village of Carsethorn offer solace, peace and relaxation to those dealing with injuries ranging from lost limbs and sniper bullet wounds to broken bones and post-traumatic stress.

And it is all thanks to Brigadier's daughter Jennifer Tobin. She was so moved by the plight of brave servicemen and women left injured by war that she decided to open her home to them.

Jennifer provides a warm, welcoming homely environment, lays on plenty of food and sets up a range of activities that help the soldiers rediscover a trust in their bodies and renewed self-confidence.

It is two-and-a-half years since Southwest Scotland R'n'R opened its doors, and so far it has helped 180 servicemen recover.

Jennifer, who is in her sixties, said: "I have been told by officers there

Injured

By Samantha Booth
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are two really wonderful things that happen when the lads come here - they sleep and they laugh again.

"The whole point is to create a place where they can chill out, while also being pressed into learning to trust their bodies again.

"All our activities are essentially fun, but they push boundaries and gently encourage them to do things they weren't doing before.

"They seem completely amazed by the idea that they are in my own home, that I am a stranger who thinks they are good enough to be invited into my private quarters.

"It is like I am telling them they are worthwhile, especially as many of them don't come from supportive backgrounds.

"It helps them because they don't know how valued they are. We take them to the pub and people come up to give us £20 'for the soldiers'.

"Our local church make endless trays of home baking, the school-children paint pictures for them and a 93-year-old former Wren who lives in a big house lays on picnics.

"I just love to see them go away at the end of the week and have that

soldiers find solace at Scots refuge

lovely, soft, anxiety-free look on their faces. One chap even picked me up once and hugged me and told me it was just wonderful to know we exist.

"But it is not about us, it is about these very brave people who put themselves in harm's way yet have very little to fall back on when they need help.

"That's why there are so many terrible statistics about the numbers of ex-servicemen who are in jail or on the streets."

Visiting Jennifer's home for a day, I joined a group of 10 Royal Marines all fighting their way back to fitness.

Boisterous and full of fun, these guys were quite at ease. And despite having only known each other vaguely before arriving on the Solway Firth, they developed an easy camaraderie.

But where there is war, there is pain. And the sadness lurks just behind the bravado.

Jennifer told me how one of the lads has a tattoo on his shoulder dedicated to a close friend he lost in combat. As she shows me the extra beds she has had made up for the lads, she is reminded of one who stayed last year.

At almost seven foot tall, he was

there to recover from being shot. A few weeks ago, Jennifer heard the terrible news that the soldier has now also lost both his legs.

With tears in her eyes, she said: "It was the most devastating news and we are all heartbroken."

One soldier staying, Marine Tom Gardner, 24, had his tour of duty in Afghanistan cut short when debris from a crashing helicopter gave him serious eye problems.

He is hoping he will soon be given a clean bill of health in order to try for selection for the Special Forces, and believes being at Jennifer's has helped him no end.

He said: "I have loved everything about being in Carsethorn. It's such a change to everyday life when you are in remedial, which can become repetitive and boring. I feel fit and ready to go again."

After an afternoon spent clay pigeon shooting and playing golf cross - golf with a ball shaped like a rugby ball - the lads meet back at Jennifer's for dinner.

There are 14 gathered elbow to elbow around the dining room table and the plates of food are stacked high. The lads also help themselves to beer as they rib each other about the afternoon's activities. Among

them is Royal Marine Sergeant Martin Ash - a veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan who has brought three groups of injured Royal Marines to Carsethorn.

Talking about the importance of Jennifer's non-profit venture, the only one like it in Scotland, he said: "For one thing, coming here is a break for the guys as rehab becomes incredibly repetitive. For the more injured guys, it also gives them a really good opportunity to mingle with the more able-bodied.

"They gain so much from that as they start to see what they can achieve. Quite often, the more badly injured will hold back and be more reserved. But being here brings them out of themselves and they gain huge confidence.

"It is a unique and fantastic combination of outdoor activities and a home environment. Moments after arriving here, the lads relax."

Jennifer is now hoping to be able to do more for the soldiers, such as helping care for the more seriously injured for longer periods.

She recently heard from a young man who lost three of his limbs in combat and he asked if he could come and stay.

Jennifer said: "I haven't answered him yet because what would I say? We just don't have the money at the moment.

"I want to do more and in particular I want to be able to offer long-term support to amputees.

"There is a terrible spell for them between finishing their medical care and having prosthetics fitted where many of them get sent home to mum - if they are lucky enough to have one.

"You can imagine how demoralising that must be. So I hope to be able to start taking them here for that period. I just need more money. Plus I want to do more for the units who can't afford to pay the costs.

"There are hundreds of soldiers around now who are grievously wounded and their lives are going to be blighted no matter which way you look at it.

"And as these people get older, they are going to suffer more pain from their injuries and I believe we should be offering them natural pain relief and moral support for the rest of their lives."

● To find out more, go to www.southwestscotlandnrn.org.uk or to make a donation or help email info@southwestscotlandnrn.org.uk or call 01387 880647.



TOM NICHOLLS