

Wags' army leads charge for wounded heroes

■ Jessica Jonzen

IT is a regular Ministry of Defence building, but it houses an unexpected army. Since September, when the Help for Heroes campaign was launched, an office block in Tidworth, Hampshire, has been home to a battalion of women every bit as dedicated as their husbands and boyfriends on the front line in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The office has become the operational hub for Help for Heroes, one of two charities being supported by our Christmas appeal. Sunday Times readers have been hugely generous, giving more than £250,000 of the £1.5m the charity has raised so far.

Since the Christmas appeal started two weeks ago, mail has been pouring in faster than it can be opened. "The response has been amazing," says Bryn Parry, the charity's founder. "The money really will change lives."

Help for Heroes aims to raise £5m to build a swimming pool and gym complex at Headley Court in Surrey, a military rehabilitation centre.

Headley Court specialises in treating "complex trauma", usually

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www.timesonline.co.uk/sundaytimes appeal

involving head and spinal injuries, and in helping those who have lost limbs to walk again. One soldier, who was treated there after losing a leg in Iraq, said the day you were pushed through the doors at Headley Court was "the day hope begins".

The charity began life in June when Parry, a cartoonist and former member of the Royal Green Jackets, and his wife Emma decided they wanted to help the war wounded coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan.

They began by visiting Selly Oak hospital in Birmingham, where acute cases are brought after being airlifted

out. "I was horrified by what I saw," says Parry. "There were young blokes the same age as my children lying on their beds with no arms and legs. One guy I met was covered in holes. A rocket had hit the wall above him while he slept and shredded his body. I thought, I've got to do something."

General Sir Richard Dannatt, the head of the army, suggested Headley Court as a focus for any money Parry might raise. The centre is in urgent need of a pool. Swimming helps to build body strength without putting strain on injured limbs, but the soldiers at Headley Court have to be bused to a public pool in nearby Leatherhead, causing distress and embarrassment both to them and the members of the public using the pool.

Parry's wife came up with the plan of a sponsored bike ride to the south of France to raise money. "The idea just snowballed from there," she says.

Jeremy Clarkson and his wife Francie became founding patrons and soon the Parrys had their own army behind them — the wives and girlfriends of soldiers, eager to volunteer.

"There is usually between one and 12 of us in the office and we'll usually have a few children in tow," says

Rosie Cullinan who, with Amanda Davies, helps run the charity.

Cullinan's husband James returned from Iraq on October 1, the day she began working for the charity. Davies's husband returned from Iraq last Monday but she's been in the office every day since.

Roger Morgan-Grenville, the principal fundraiser, served with Parry in the Royal Green Jackets. "In Northern Ireland in 1981, one of my soldiers was shot and paralysed," he says. "I saw his life just disintegrate. It was him I was thinking of when I agreed to get on board with the charity."

HELP FOR HEROES

How You Can Give

Online. Go to: timesonline.co.uk/sundaytimesappeal

By cheque. please fill in the details on this coupon, make your cheque payable to Help for Heroes and send them together to:

Help for Heroes, Unit 6, Aspire Business Centre, Ordnance Road, Tidworth, Hants SP9 7QD

Full name:

Home address:

Post code:

Daytime phone number:

Gift Aid.

I want the charity to treat all donations I make from the date of this declaration until I notify you otherwise as Gift Aid donations

☐ Please tick the box and note that you must pay an amount of income tax and/or capital gains tax at least equal to the tax that Help for Heroes reclaims on your donations in the appropriate tax year (currently 28p for each £1 you give)

Signature:

Date:

Thank you

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"The day you were pushed through the doors of Headley Court was the day hope begins" – soldier who lost a leg in Iraq