



We salute the true heroines

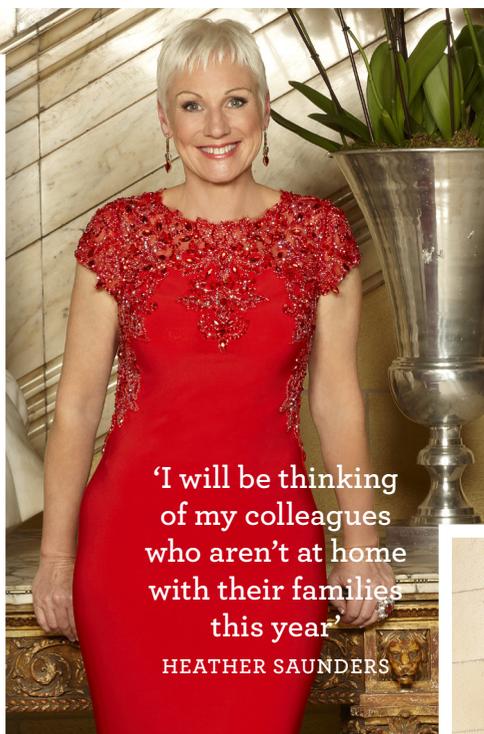
As we celebrate and enjoy our family, friends and food this Christmas, our thoughts and hearts will go out to the brave women and men serving their country who can't be with their loved ones. Because we know a home can never be complete when someone is missing, and while many troops have left Afghanistan this year, others will remain - and many more will be working all over the world, in situations that

seem ever more dangerous. So, to the children who miss their parents and the partners left to cope alone, to the Forces mothers who can't sleep for worry as well as to those putting their lives on the line for the rest of us, we say thank you. And to show our gratitude, Good Housekeeping brought five women from the Forces family to London for a luxury break and makeover. As you will see, they are true heroines, and we wish them, and all of you, a very merry Christmas...

PHOTOGRAPHY JOHN SWANNELL FEATURE MOYA SARNER



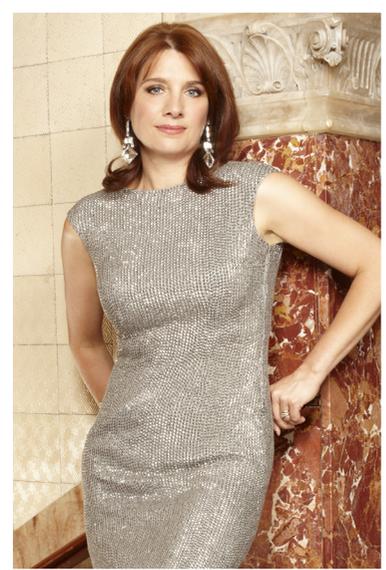
'My grandson knows all about his uncle, the soldier in the sky'
SARAH ADAMS



'I will be thinking of my colleagues who aren't at home with their families this year'
HEATHER SAUNDERS



'This year is about celebrating life'
JANETTE COOPER



'I'm still waiting for the forever home I dreamed of as a little girl'
HELEN BRETTCELL



'It took me a moment to realise that we were under fire'
HARMONY SLADE

'Whenever I feel overwhelmed, I think of my son, his brightness and his love'

There'll always be someone missing at Christmas for SARAH ADAMS, but she takes courage from the memory of her son James, who was 21 when he was killed in Afghanistan

As a little boy, James was always happy and laughing, dressing up as superheroes and messing about with his older sister Emma and younger brother Josh. I'll never forget the emergency trip to hospital after he was given a Batman cape – he thought it meant he really could fly! He grew up into a very happy and honourable young man, and he liked the thought of doing something positive for his country. But I could not have been more shocked when he told me he wanted to join the Forces. It was my worst nightmare. I'd been on my own since my divorce, my children and I were really close; I couldn't bear the thought of not being there for him and the huge things he'd be going through. I was traumatised, but I had to hide it from him because I wanted him to follow his dreams. So I tried to be brave and supportive, even though I knew it wouldn't be long before he was sent to Afghanistan.

And I was right. He was posted five months after he joined up. The day I drove him to the base was one of the worst of my life. He was really quiet, and I had a very heavy heart. As he walked away from me, he didn't look back. I don't know how I managed the drive home, because I cried the whole way. It was the last time I would ever see him.

I wrote to him every other day and he was able to phone us four times while he was there, serving with 2nd Battalion, The Royal Welsh. The last time we spoke he was upbeat and seemed really happy. He was due home for R&R in under a fortnight.

Two days later, on 27 September 2009, Josh and I were having breakfast when there was a knock at the door. We looked at each other, horrified, and we knew. I walked towards the door, but instead of answering it, I went into the living room and looked through the window. I could see a man in a suit and a soldier. I answered the door and the man in a suit asked me my name, and if I was James's mum. I just kept saying,

no, he's coming home in 10 days, and I wouldn't listen when they told me he'd been killed. I remember hearing Josh crying in the kitchen. It felt like everything was going on around me, and I was listening in. I would later learn that James and



Sarah: 'I'm campaigning for better treatment for soldiers and their loved ones'

other soldiers had been told the Taliban was storing weapons in a compound, and were tasked to go and clear it. He was driving a tank when it went over an improvised explosive device, and was directly above it when it exploded.

My brother came over, and he called my daughter Emma, who lives in Nottingham. The door was constantly being knocked on by James's friends as they found out what had happened, and very quickly the house was full of the people who loved him. I looked out of the window and saw eight 21-year-old girls and boys sitting on the wall outside my house – the lovely, tight-knit group of James's best friends whom I'd known most of their lives – and thought what am I going to do with all of you? How am I going to get us all through this?

I didn't sleep for days, and I remember lying in bed, thinking: what would James do? How would he deal with this? He was such a positive young man, and he just got on with things in his own happy way. From that point, I knew that was what I needed to do, too. So we have all stuck together, and when times are hard and we feel overwhelmed, we think of James, and his brightness and his love.

It wasn't long after James's death that Josh, Emma, his friends and I started fundraising for ABF The Soldiers' Charity, from packing bags in supermarkets to running half-marathons. We've raised over £35,000 so far. I'm also campaigning for better treatment of soldiers and their loved ones, and even visited Afghanistan and wrote a report for the Ministry of Defence about how it can deal more sensitively with bereaved families.

My first grandchild, Riley, is two years old and has been a huge lift to us all. He never met James, but has his massive blue eyes, and he knows all about his uncle, whom he calls the soldier in the sky. Having little kids around has breathed new life into our family, and brought the magic of Christmas back. Now it's all about Santa Claus and stockings, and laying food out for the reindeer. This year, as I celebrate with my beautiful children and grandchildren around me, I know James will be in our thoughts, because he never leaves them – I still talk to him.

He left his mark on the world in the 21 years we had him and is still a huge part of our family. As it says on his headstone, he is, and always will be, my "Beloved son and hero".



'I volunteered to serve last Christmas because I don't have children, so others could be with theirs'

After spending last Christmas saving lives in Afghanistan with the RAF, Flight Lieutenant HARMONY SLADE is putting her feet up this year – and she deserves it!

When I woke up on Christmas Day last year, it was in the dusty heat of Afghanistan. I'm a part of the RAF's Medical Emergency Response Team (MERT), and we fly by helicopter to pick up the most seriously injured casualties, whether they're Afghan civilians, children or UK and other NATO troops. They might have lost limbs in explosions or been shot, but if we can get there in time, and we get them to the field hospital alive, there is a 98% chance they will survive.

Whenever a call comes in, a horn goes off and we immediately run to the helicopter and put our protective equipment on. I can hear the medical team in one ear and the aircrew in the other – I'm the only one who communicates with both – so it can be tricky when they're talking at the same time! In under 10 minutes, we'll be in the air, on our way to help whoever is in need. We might land in an operating base or in the middle of nowhere – but you can guarantee one thing: there will be a lot of dust.

When the paramedic leaves the aircraft to help get the patient on board, the rest of us maintain silence in case they need to tell us something, while preparing our equipment. As soon as I have the injured person in front of me, my clinical blinkers come on, checking for blood loss, airways, breathing and circulation. In under 90 seconds, we will be back in the air with the paramedic and patient, on our way to the hospital at Camp Bastion.

That will be the last I see of them, but I always try to fill in the patient diary, so when they wake up they can find out what happened to them while they were unconscious. Sometimes, we get letters a few weeks later, thanking us for what we've done. That can be very humbling, and it's wonderful to hear how well some people are doing, particularly when you get a letter saying "I've just had my first child, and I wanted to say thank you".

It is a risky job, because we are a target for the Taliban. While I was in Afghanistan over Christmas last year, I remember hearing a distinctive, buzzing sound as I was treating a patient. It took me a moment to realise that it was us returning fire – we were under attack. I was too focused to feel afraid. There were holes in the helicopter by the time we got back, but all six casualties, including an Afghan woman who'd been shot, survived.

The thing I find hardest to deal with, though, is picking up our own. Of course we treat everyone in exactly the same way, but it's much more personal when you're on your way to a British soldier. It changes the ball game completely.

I volunteered to serve at Christmas last year because I don't have children, so it meant someone else could be at home with theirs. And even though I had to work back-to-back shifts on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, it was fun – we all wore silly jumpers and hats. The people you serve with are like a family you live with 24/7. But I did miss my relations; I'm looking forward to seeing them this year and putting my feet up in front of the tree.'



Harmony in action: 'It's a risky job'



James in Afghanistan

SARAH WEARS: DRESS, ADRIANNA PAPPELL EARRINGS; DAISY & EVE AT EVANS; CUFF, WALLIS; HARMONY WEARS: DRESS, GINA BACCONI; EARRINGS AND RING, BUTLER & WILSON; CLUTCH, RUSSELL & BROMLEY



'Choosing whether or not to leave my son was the hardest decision I've ever had to make'

Juggling work and home life is tricky for any single mother, but combine it with a career in the Army Reserve, and it's particularly tough. For Lieutenant Colonel HEATHER SAUNDERS, that just makes Christmas even more special...



Heather:
'I didn't
have much
time to
reflect
on home'

When I left school with very few qualifications, I was terribly shy, and had no confidence. If someone had told me back then that I would one day be second in command of an entire hospital in Afghanistan, I would have laughed. But the Army Reserve has helped me to build confidence and as that has grown, I've grown with it. Now I can help others to overcome hurdles, too.

Of course, it hasn't always been easy. By the time I was called up for my first tour, to Iraq in 2003, my husband and I had separated, and my younger son James was 14 and suffering from Crohn's disease, causing him terrible pain. We couldn't predict if he would need urgent surgery while I was away, and choosing whether or not to go was the toughest decision I've ever had to make. But, my ex-husband said he would move back into our home to look after James, and my unit explained that if his condition started to deteriorate, they would get me back. I was very worried about him when I left, but within three days of our arrival war had broken out and we were so busy looking after the troops, I didn't have much time to reflect on home. As a nurse, I've had to learn to park things. And when I did get the call that James needed an operation, I was flown back and was there for my son when he needed me. Thankfully, he has since made a full recovery.

And tough as it is being away from my family, coming back can be just as hard. During my tour in Afghanistan in 2009, we had so many casualties and deaths that I found it very difficult to adjust when I came home. But there are moments that make it all worthwhile. I will never forget watching my team pull together time after time, knowing how exhausted they were. And I have wonderful memories of spending Christmas 2012 in Afghanistan – from one of my superiors playing bagpipes in the hospital corridor, to handing out Christmas stockings and hearing the staff choir singing carols.

At times like that you do miss home, and I was sad not to see my grandchildren open their presents. So this year I will really make the most of it, as I host our family get-together. I can't wait to put a carrot and a glass of sherry out for Santa Claus on Christmas Eve, and I still put a pillowcase filled with presents at the end of James's bed – even though he's now 26 years old and a qualified paediatric nurse!

I'll also be thinking of my colleagues who aren't with their families; it's not just about Iraq and Afghanistan – we have service personnel posted all over the world.

So I'll relish spending time with my family, but I'll be remembering the men and women who are giving up their Christmas for everyone else.'



Celebrating Christmas
2012 in Afghanistan

'I know many families will have an empty chair around the Christmas table, and I feel their pain'

The sacrifices that HELEN BRETTELL has made, first as the daughter of a soldier, and now as an RAF wife, have not been in vain. She is supporting Forces children, helping them to feel safe and understood

‘Whenever my dad was away with the Army, I would just put my head down and get on with things. But when he walked back up the drive, I would burst into tears with relief at having him home and safe. It was as though I'd taken a deep breath and held it until I saw him again.

We moved around a lot, following him from post to post, and I always hated walking into class on my first day at a new school, seeing all the heads turn to look at me as I took the lone, empty seat at the back of the room. But now I know experiences like that gave me the qualities that make me who I am. My dad made me attempt things I never thought I would be able to cope with, and gave me the confidence to deal with life outside my comfort zone and make new friends wherever we were.

I had no idea at the time just how well those skills would serve me as an adult. Because my husband, Len, is in the RAF, we've moved eight times in the 13 years we've been married, so I'm still waiting for the forever home I dreamed about as a little girl. But, you love who you love, and I couldn't imagine a life without my husband. If this is the price I have to pay for us to be together when we can, then so be it.

Spending Christmas apart was the toughest time of all. When Len went to serve in Iraq, I was left at home with two small children of two and four. It seemed as though every night the news was showing the face of another serviceman killed in action, and I had to stop watching. I tried to focus on our short phone call each week, but it lasted just a few minutes, and the kids found that so tough. I kept smiling for the sake of the children, and I remember fighting back the tears when my daughter Libby was crying, saying she could see Daddy's face in her head, and she was worried it was going to disappear. But we got through it, thanks to our wonderful family and friends, who would turn up at my house bringing wine, food and love.

And now I'm using all those experiences to support children who, like mine, are growing up with a parent in the Forces. I work in local schools, as part of an organisation called the Service Children Support Network, to help pupils to cope while a parent is away, or if they are moving to a new area. When one little boy asked me if my daddy had ever been away



Helen: 'Spending Christmas apart was the toughest time of all'



Helen can empathise with the children she helps

from home, I was able to explain that yes, he was away an awful lot when I was growing up. He looked so relieved to have found someone who knew how he felt, and he drew a picture of himself with me standing beside him, holding his hand.

This year we will be lucky enough to have Len with us as we decorate our tree and sit down to Christmas dinner. But I know many families will have an empty chair around the table, and I feel their pain. So I will be thinking of all the children who will be missing a mummy or a daddy, and sending them the courage and love to make it through.'



'I was too busy looking after everyone else to look after myself'

While serving as a nurse with the Royal Navy in Afghanistan, Lieutenant Commander JANETTE COOPER realised something was wrong. She won't take Christmas for granted again...

Growing up, I always wanted to join the police force like my dad – but he told me: no, it's too dangerous for a woman. He had tears in his eyes as he hugged me before the first time I left for Afghanistan. He said he wished he'd let me join the police!

When I first wanted to sign up to the Royal Navy, women weren't allowed to join or to stay in the Armed Forces if they had children, so I had to wait, as I'd already had my elder son, Jack. But things have come a very long way since then. When, after joining up, I was offered a promotion that meant moving to Lisbon, my husband Howard was also in the Navy, and they offered him a three-year career break so that he could come with me and look after our two boys. Years later, when I was deployed to Afghanistan, Howard made the decision to leave the Navy after 27 years to be with the boys, so that I could continue in my career. I would never have got this far without him.

My first tour in Afghanistan in 2009 was very tough. I was working in a front-line clinic treating men, women and children, with a very small team and with very few resources. Seeing a child in pain is heart-wrenching, and people broke down, destroyed by seeing children in agony. Although I stayed focused and calm, I still reflect on those experiences. But there were high points, too – saving children who'd been scooped up off the ground after being shot and reuniting them with their parents was wonderful. We had a child who lost an eye, but survived, and the parents brought the child back to visit us and brought gifts for the team. These people had nothing, but they brought us a bag of pistachio nuts because they were so grateful.

But sometimes you're too busy looking after everyone else to look after yourself. When I started having pelvic pain, I didn't want to accept the fact that there was something wrong – I knew it deep down, but I didn't want it to affect my job. It was in May 2013, a year and a half later, that I finally had the surgery that revealed my diagnosis. When I saw the Macmillan nurse walking towards me the next day, I knew I had ovarian cancer. I felt my world collapsing, and I thought I was going to die.

But after surgery and chemotherapy, I've had no more signs of the disease, and I'm taking every day as it comes. The best Christmas present is just to be here, celebrating with my husband and our boys.

I'll send comfort boxes to all my colleagues who won't be home, to brighten up their days, and, as every year, we'll watch the BBC on Christmas morning when they broadcast the messages from all the deployed servicemen and women from around the world.

This year is about celebrating life. Our son Jack joined the Navy, and his brother Lewis joined the Royal Marines. Howard and I are incredibly proud of them both.'



Janette: 'The best Christmas present is just to be here'



Poppy Collection medium brooch, Royal British Legion (poppyshop.org.uk)



After a glamorous shoot at the Royal Horseguards Hotel, our heroines dined at the National Portrait Gallery and, next day, met the Jersey Boys backstage!



Watching the friendships form...

GH's MOYA SARNER takes you behind the scenes, as our heroines enjoyed a luxury break in London thanks to these generous organisations...

As our heroines walked through the doors of the Royal Horseguards Hotel, they were rendered speechless by the lavish marble and elegant chandeliers. But that's when the silence ended, because from that point, bonds of friendship started to form and the laughter and chatter didn't stop.

They swapped their uniforms and everyday clothes for glamorous gowns, and instead of caring for everyone else, for once these women became the centre of attention, posing for John Swannell, the acclaimed photographer who took the Queen's official portrait for the Diamond Jubilee.

The heroines were rewarded for all their hard work with a Champagne dinner at the National Portrait Gallery's Rooftop Restaurant. The generosity shown by the staff was very moving.

After the five new friends had explored London, we were chauffeured by WestOne Cars – who did all our driving – to the West End's Piccadilly Theatre, to see the multi-award winning musical Jersey Boys. I will never forget the moment the heroines and I got to our feet and danced through the final number. They thought it was all over when the curtain came

down – and could not have been more surprised to be taken backstage to meet the stars. Hearing their shrieks of delight, I knew they would never forget this incredible weekend, made even more special by all those who donated their services to honour our heroines. □



✳ Learn more about our amazing weekend at goodhousekeeping.co.uk/gh-heroines-2014

JANETTE WEARS: DRESS: ADRIANNA PELLATI; JOHN LEWIS; EARRINGS: BUTLER & WILSON; BAG: UK BENNETT. HAIR: PETROS MAIROUDHOU; TREVOR SORRIBÉ ASSISTED BY LOUISE QUÉREÉ; AT TREVOR SORRIBÉ. MAKE-UP: LINDSEY POOLE; STYLING: JILLIE MURPHY