

# When recce commander Nathan Cumberland lost both legs to an IED blast his future seemed bleak. But in just a handful of years the determined Grenadier Guardsman has gone from wounded warrior to dedicated welfare worker. He tells *Soldier* his story...

**"I**T turned out to be third time lucky for me," Nathan Cumberland says grimly of his Herrick tour in 2009. The Serviceman was on patrol when he stepped on an IED, leaving him with catastrophic injuries that would see him become a double amputee.

"I sensed something wasn't right that day," he recalls of his final military mission.

"It had been quiet, like something was being planned. We'd all joke about whether it would be our turn next, and how we should have picked our wheelchairs out."

The dark humour turned out to be a terrible prophecy. Cumberland lost one leg in the blast, and in the chaos of the aftermath he had to apply tourniquets to himself while awaiting the Mert helicopter.

Thirteen pints of blood, 27 operations, two years of rehab and several bouts of MRSA later, something of a normal existence was starting to come into view for the Serviceman.

"My regiment was amazing," he recalls "People visited daily and I had no issues with the support.

"I was more worried about my family and fiancée."

Following stints at both Headley Court and Tedworth House, Cumberland was eventually ready to enter civvy street.

He took up a job with Help for Heroes, coordinating the charity's ambassadors, and even went on to compete at the Invictus Games in shot put (pictured) and powerlifting.

"Your head is going at 1,000mph, trying to accept that things have changed," Cumberland explains.

"I was meeting all these charity people and the world of welfare just grabbed me.

"When you're serving you don't really think about that

side of things because you seem invincible."

But when a position was advertised at the Defence Medical Welfare Service last year, the ex-Serviceman made the move.

And – as is often the case with those leaving the military – his experiences at the sharp end would prove to be a vital asset to his new employer, which supports Armed Forces personnel and veterans undergoing medical treatment.

The 33-year-old is based in Nottinghamshire, where he spends a lot of time assisting the elderly.

"It appealed to me to work with guys over 65," he explains. "The sorts of stories you hear are fantastic.

"Often people just need our reassurance.

"It might be little things like telling them what's what, or how long they will be in hospital for.

"Sometimes the doctors are busy and welfare officers can act like go-betweens."

It doesn't sound like the easiest of full-time jobs for someone who has seen more than his fair share of medical procedures.

"I found the first few months a struggle," Cumberland concedes. "But I just got on with it.

"I think if you ask anyone you don't do this job for the money; it's a cliché but you just want to help."

He continues: "It can be hard to see people with fewer injuries than you not coping – at one point I did wonder if I was cut out for the welfare thing.

"But there's a lot of factors involved and over time I've learnt to see these.

"Someone may have lesser injuries, but their road to recovery could have been more difficult than mine.

"Perhaps they were on their own, maybe they don't have a big family like I do, or a fiancée whooping their arse.

"Until you're in someone else's shoes you never know."

The veteran's sympathetic yet no-nonsense approach is clearly one that many of his military patients appreciate."

He tells me: "Sometimes I do have to be quite blunt with people, but as they are ex-Forces they usually want that.

"I explain that no one likes asking for help but that amputees like me will have to do that for the rest of our lives.

"It goes from there, really."

It might not be the patrol-base banter he was wrenched away from, but Cumberland's





career has been a boost to him as well as his service users.

"You usually find that sense of humour is there," he says.

"An elderly veteran might not recognise their wife any more but I guarantee they will know their service number and be up for a laugh."

Having the strength of character to take on other people's problems is an admirable trait in anyone.

But to do so after sacrificing nearly a decade of your own life to the recovery and rehabilitation process is nothing short of remarkable.

He may be out of uniform, but Nathan Cumberland is just about the most positive embodiment of grit, determination and courage it's possible to imagine – and yet another example of how the Army's values and standards can make a positive impact long after discharge.

"I will be part of the welfare bubble for the rest of my life," says the veteran matter-of-factly. "That's just the way it goes."

"No one can know what's coming if they get injured, and it comes down to how you want to deal with it."

"When I was in Selly Oak I decided I had two choices – blame everyone or accept that I am never going to be in the Army again and focus on the future."

If that sort of outlook doesn't inspire those he works with, nothing will. ■

# The FLIP SIDE

