

Soldiers on a special mission: to help kids with special-needs

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They ride their motorcycles through roaring flames and once had a record-breaking 56 people perched on eight motorcycles.

Now they're tasked with sanding floors, knocking holes in walls for doors and fixing drainage.

Members of the British Army's Royal Signals White Helmets Motorbike Display team may have expected better weather in Johannesburg. Instead, they were welcomed by the dripping summer rains. However, it's still warmer than their weather back home, and the team walks through the Forest Town School for children with special needs, sans their white bike helmets, in shorts and t-shirts. Their mission is simple and determined.

A serious hailstorm in November last year left the Forest Town School with damage to the ceilings, floors, walls and electrical system. "Offices and classrooms are in a bad state. The school has been evacuated because of the damage and learners can only return when the school has been declared safe enough," says Marion Leatherbarrow, Programme Manager at the school. The damp paper notices dated January 9, 2008 plastered outside the building attest to the school's plight, "School closed until further notice due to rain damage."

Subsequent rain after the hail last year means leaking roofs are the reason why wet carpets are hung over the sides of stairs to dry and the school corridors are slick and hazardous.

The school is South Africa's oldest for children with disabilities. Established in 1948, the school consists largely of prefabricated buildings which are always in need of replacement and refurbishment.

But the soldiers are here and they'll do whatever they can to help.

They've been coming to the school for the last eight years in a unique initiative that sees ten soldiers from the White Helmets Motorbike Display team come to the school during their annual leave to help with renovations and repairs.

"It started in 2001 during a fund-raising trip to the UK. I was accompanied by a student, Charl du Plessis, and we were taken on a visit to army barracks in Sussex. That's when we met the White Helmets. Charl was quite eloquent and completely won them over. They have been trained as artisans and promised to help where they could and they've been coming through to the school ever since," Leatherbarrow says. "We are lucky to have Virgin Atlantic Air sponsor their flights, as without that, this would've been impossible," she added.

The voluntary mission is completely reliant on donor partners. "The soldiers had to camp out on the floor of the school's coffee-shop for one of the previous two-week missions. We were unable to secure sponsorship for their accommodation that year. Depending on what's been made available, the soldiers have stayed in Centurion and Muldersdrift. This year we were lucky to have them stay at the Gardencourt in Milpark," Leatherbarrow says.

The mission is completely unique to the school and the British Army as no other

unit in the army has this type of relationship with any school. And the soldiers are protective of this affiliation.

"There was talk of some other units also sending people over here. This would mean we'd be able to bring fewer people from our unit. We'd lose ownership of what we're doing here and we don't want that to happen," says Captain Ted Tedby of the White Helmets.

The unit aims to send different people every year, however a few of the soldiers return to the school for multiple missions. The staff at Forest Town School greet them with handshakes and big hugs. These are old friends.

They sport nicknames like Gypo, Fozzie, Bazz, Chalky and Gezza. The only thing true to the biker cliché is that the soldiers are tattooed and walk around shirtless while they work in pursuit of an elusive tan.

It's Barry 'Bazz' Fullerton's fourth mission to the school. He hails from Scotland and has been with the White Helmets for almost 15 years. "I love the work we do here. We've also developed good friendships with the children," he says.

The absence of the children at the school is tangible and the soldiers are disappointed they're not there.

"It's also a highlight for the children. They've been asking throughout the year about when the soldiers would be coming," says Leatherbarrow.

The soldiers are taken on an inspection tour through the school.

"It's always nice to go around the school and see the work we've done before," says Gypo Hooper.

The soldiers are chirpy and eager to work. One of them sings the Bob the Builder theme song as they walk from classroom to playground inspecting the damage.

They need to level a path near the greenhouse to aid drainage, and are shown the rondavels that need painting. "Rondavels," they try to pronounce after the caretaker who's taking them around. "We just call them roundhouses," says Andrew Butterfield from the group.

Butterfield notices the stairs he painted near the pool two years ago are now flaking green from hail damage. No doubt, that'll be added on the to-do list the group has been given to complete.

Walking through the school's corridors, the group stops at a wall of photographs of previous missions that have been to the school.

One impressive photograph shows the White Helmets in full regalia forming a pyramid on motorcycles. "We broke the world record by having 56 people on eight motorbikes," says Hooper.

The Royal Signals White Helmets are made up of 30 volunteer soldiers from the Royal Corps of Signals. They tour Britain from April to September each year demonstrating all the personal qualities demanded of the modern Royal Signals soldier. They're responsible daredevils. And perhaps it's this spirited streak that endears them to the children.

The school enrolls around 300 to 370 children ranging from ages three to 18 years of age. There is no specific intake period as children are referred to the school all the time. Their disabilities range from cerebral palsy and epilepsy to attention deficit disorders.

"Hardened and battle scarred soldiers are often reduced to tears seeing how

courageous children are in facing their own difficulties. Often, children faced with abuse will find the courage to let a soldier know of their ordeals, because they feel they can trust them with this knowledge," Leatherbarrow says.

After the inspection tour, the group gathers in the school staffroom.

"The damage is bad ma'am," says Gypo. They sit down and methodically outline their plan of action. Organised and pragmatic, the soldiers are dispatched to their duties. There is work to be done, before the children can come.