

## **Storybook Soldiers – fighting overseas is not an obstacle to bedtime stories for the children of British soldiers**

We all know that, for a child, there is nothing more soothing or evocative than the voice of a parent reading a bedtime story, even more so if your parent happens to be in the Services and is deployed overseas. Thanks to Kirsty Alderson and Rosemary Meeke, a chance meeting led to the creation of Storybook Soldiers, a project enabling service personnel to record their own stories for the families. The chance meeting at an education awards ceremony brought Kirsty Alderson into contact with the founders of Storybook Dads, a scheme to help male prisoners keep in touch with their children by recording audio books. Kirsty explains, "I just thought the underlying principle was so blindingly obvious. Being parted from their children is part of the job that soldiers do, but they sign up quite young, when they don't have families of their own. It's the older ones, in their thirties, who are very aware of what they are leaving behind."

The scheme offers a link between parents deployed on military operations and their children. Soldiers are able to record a bedtime story that begins and ends with a personal message. Volunteer editors from Storybook Soldiers then use a specialised computer programme to remove background noises from the original recording (which is often made on the edge of a battle zone) before adding music and other sound effects that give the story a polished edge. The result is a professional production, but more importantly, the recording is an incredibly special and hugely personal link between parent and child that makes the distance that separates them seem a little less. And, whilst the story is recorded with children in mind, the CD often becomes a reassuring part of life for all the family.

Some of the soldiers are dyslexic and worry about making mistakes but the editors' work hard to piece together different takes to produce a wonderful piece of family history. Kirsty again, "The soldiers put so much care into it, because they know how much it matters". Since 2007 they have sent out more than 2,500 CDs, and the scheme now covers the whole Army, with 30 stories a week arriving home for their volunteers to start editing.

Annington has supported the initiative since November 2007 via both the Annington Trust (the charity formed by Annington in 1996 to support Service families) and the Company, with both financial and technical assistance. This included the donation of additional digital storage capacity and the provision of professional IT training for the administrative team. James Hopkins, Chief Executive of Annington said, "From the start, I have been hugely impressed with this project and the enthusiasm and dedication of those who run it. What they have achieved is remarkable, especially

considering it is not a charity and receives no formal funding – it's volunteers who do all the work. And the effect on morale is obvious."

Annington is looking forward to providing further support and help in 2010 and beyond, to a project that makes such a profound difference to Service personnel and their families.

Top 5 bedtime stories

1. The Gruffalo
2. The Snail and the Whale
3. Room on the Broom
4. The Tiger who Came to Tea
5. The Gigantic Turnip

Some of the messages left by Service personnel and their families on the Storybook Soldiers website ([www.storybooksoldiers.co.uk](http://www.storybooksoldiers.co.uk)) underline the difference the scheme has made to Service families:

"Many thanks for the excellent CD for my daughter. She says that she misses me lots but that it helps."

"My 6 year old son told his daddy who called from Afghanistan tonight that if he shuts his eyes while listening to the CD he thinks he is back in the room with him ..."

"Thank you very much for taking the time to make my children so happy."

"It's wonderful - a very professional production and something very special to keep. Please pass on my thanks to your wonderful editors for giving up their time and helping Service children make those miles not seem so very far. "

***Pictures show:***

***Soldiers after recording stories***

***An editor gets to work 'cleaning up' the voice track prior to adding music and sound effects.***