

Glen Neilson
Durham

Conquering Mountains

Well where do I start?

In 1998, whilst serving as an intelligence operator onboard UK Nuclear Hunter Killer Submarines, I was diagnosed with cancer in three places in and around my neck. I was swiftly discharged in a very Military and timely fashion back home to the North East of England, and to my girlfriend Lyn and son MCauley, aged 3. I was to finish my treatment and receive two more operations, one of which was the total removal of my thyroid. To this day, the hormone replacement can still cause a little havoc in my life. It's amazing to actually think that I had never even heard of the word 'thyroid' before, to suddenly realising just how important this small gland in your neck is.

This obviously came as a massive shock - not just the cancer, which can, at merely just hearing the very word, send a shiver down anyone's spine - but for a 26-year-old fit-as-a-fiddle young man, ten years into a career that I absolutely loved to the core, it was unbelievable. I was travelling the world, doing things I had only seen in spy movies and witnessing things that still to this day leave me speechless - to the point that if they said "we cannot afford to pay you", I would have happily worked for free. I didn't ever admit this at the time as, knowing the



Glen on Mount Kilimanjaro.

Armed Forces, anything is possible. Losing my career was, for me at the time, more painful than the pain of going through the cancer treatment. We were all unsure as to what the future might hold for our family, especially if the worst was to happen.

What followed was a vast array of treatments and radiation therapy. At Newcastle RVI Hospital I was passed radioactive tablets, which were slid down a massive tube out of a lead box that the nurse was holding, and into my room, which was behind more lead shielding, with all the windows taped up!

Don't get me wrong; the staff never hung around for long idle chats for obvious

reasons, and I actually quite enjoyed the solitude, peace, and quiet.

One bit that I really enjoyed were the visits from my then-girlfriend Lyn, who I'm proud to say is now my wife, as she was allowed 20 minutes maximum stood behind the lead shielding outside my room. She would always bring me treats like pizza, wrapped in loads of foil so it was lovely and warm, as well as other sweet gifts. It was like having Santa visit you every night for a catch-up of how the day had gone, and how our little 3-year-old son was doing.

At the end of the year 2000, I started to become quite ill with toilet issues, and it's not really a subject that comes up often.

"Hi, how was your day?"

"Well, I've been to the toilet forty-odd times!"

It just doesn't cut the conversation does it? It's more of a conversation-killer, though to be fair it's more of a killer in general, because it's something that should be discussed as soon as anyone sees any change, blood, or anything that they aren't sure about.

Swiftly moving into the year 2001, when my older brother Wayne sadly passed away on January 19. This absolutely broke my heart as it would anyone, and at the same time I had just been diagnosed with IBD, which is Inflammatory Bowel Disease, in the form of ulcerative colitis. UC is a terrible, horrendous disease; when it flared up, I was completely disabled from performing and living a normal daily life. For the next 8 months, I think I had around 4 weeks of so-called 'normality' where excruciating

pain and going to the toilet - sometimes 48 times in one day - were not happening.

Not long after Wayne's funeral, we had the amazing news that my girlfriend Lyn was pregnant with our second child, so I had a brief reprieve and some good news.

However, the battle with ulcerative colitis soon commenced. I tried to ignore it and enjoy a cottage holiday to the Lake District, but sadly Lyn had to sit outside every toilet in the Lakes, waiting for me. By the end of the week, I was just about done-in totally and ready to collapse, but we were trying our best to let our son have a nice holiday at the same time.

As soon as we returned, I was rushed into hospital and was admitted for 3 months.

I cannot remember much regarding my stay, apart from certain snippets that stick out in my memory. I do remember being so weak I actually thought, 'This is it: I'm going to die tonight', and lying on the bed going through my life, trying my hardest to think of what I had done that was so bad to deserve this pain that I was in. I hallucinated terribly, with some of the most bizarre thoughts imaginable.

One night I was visited by some old school mates, had full conversations about school, and we had a great laugh, mostly of all the cheeky mischievous things we used to get up to. Sadly, it turned out no-one had visited me at all and I had been hallucinating the whole time. Oh well - it was good company while it lasted!

As it happens the staff had practically over-dosed me on morphine to the point

that I should have died, and there was an internal investigation at the time. I wasn't that bothered as the steroids, prednisone, were not working and I didn't feel much pain, let alone anything else, as I was away on a different planet.

A few things do stick in my mind: one being that the Sister was like something off the TV and ran the ward with an iron fist, and the other a heart-breaking thing. Lyn had to tell me there were complications with our little baby, and that she was going to have a still birth.

Broken? Yes, completely, but also worse for the fact that I couldn't be there for Lyn in her absolute time of need, when she had stood beside me through everything that we had already been through.

Believe it or not, Lyn was admitted onto the next ward and I was actually allowed with a nurse to visit Lyn while she gave birth to our little baby. I don't remember too much which, selfishly, is probably a good thing, and I was even too ill to make our little one's service at the crematorium. I actually shut this part out of my life for a few years as a way of self-preservation, which I have used in the past while in the Military. I'm not sure if that's a good or bad thing, but it worked for me.

Lo and behold, I awoke in intensive care with a stoma a few weeks later, after having an emergency ileostomy and total pan proctocolectomy. This basically meant that not only was my colon removed, but my rectum was removed also, as it was so badly diseased. I was so ill that I was even told I may not be strong enough to recover from it all.



Glen on the summit of Mount Skiddaw, Lake District.

Obviously, I didn't take one bit of notice and decided to just get better instead.

There I was, 29 years of age and now looking down at what I believed to be my insides hanging out of my stomach, ejecting poo into a massive see-through plastic bag. To say I was shocked would be an understatement, but one good thing which was pretty immediate was I didn't feel the pain from ulcerative colitis. Yippee! It was gone and I could shout from the rooftops.

But I thought: A stoma? What on earth is a stoma?

I remember looking at a massive open wound which seemed to be eating into my skin, in my stomach where I could even see the stomach wall. It was being packed and treated by a nurse daily. It turned out to be a wound caused by MRSA, which I contracted during the operation.

When the terrible 9/11 twin towers attack came on the TV, I remember feeling so hurt for the families of those involved. I looked at my predicament and thought I am so, so, lucky to be here in whatever pain I was in. It was nothing compared to what some people were going through. Once again, my rock and soulmate, Lyn, came forward and helped me through the toughest of times.

A few months later, we jetted to Las Vegas and got married in “The Famous Little White Chapel” on the Vegas strip - and nope, before you ask, I wasn’t allowed to ask Elvis to sing us a song! So, I suppose we know who wore the trousers from the day dot. We then took a trip to the Grand Canyon for our honeymoon, where our little 6-seater plane managed to get into trouble with a large tornado while we were returning to Vegas, and ended with us being very lucky to be able to get back in one piece. Obviously, I loved every minute, and filmed it on my massive (it was 2002) hand-held camcorder - not to my wife’s amusement.

And so, we became Mr and Mrs (slightly shaken) Neilson.

A couple of years later, I was diagnosed with chronic osteoarthritis in my upper spine, knees, hip and hands, and apparently this was caused from the steroids (prednisone) that I had taken to fight IBD.

Fast-forward through a crazy but exciting life of living with a stoma and building and selling small businesses from scratch. Something still wasn’t right and it was mentally affecting me. Whenever my life



Glen with wife Lyn in the Maldives.

seemed perfect, when I was working hard, making a few shillings, getting by, no dramas - all of a sudden, I would literally feel this dark cloud creeping up over me. It was such a strange sensation. I could feel it enveloping me and the only way to break it was to go to the extreme. Sometimes I was even going as far as suddenly deciding to sell our business and start again from scratch on another crazy idea, ranging from an events company, confectionery company, catering business, to even luxury mobile toilet hire (very apt I suppose). I would even pick up and go off testing myself in extreme weather up a mountain for days on end.

Keeping my mind occupied seemed to keep the dark cloud at bay so long as I threw myself into a new idea to make it work for a few years. Then I would seem happy and content, and it was only when it all seemed to be flowing nicely that it returned to haunt me.

I sometimes felt I practically had a death-wish, doing anything that made me feel totally alive, albeit in a dangerous situation.

Oddly, I felt less alone on a snowy mountain-top than at a party in a room full of people. Looking back, every time this happened, I kept having recurring nightmares from when I was in the Submarine Service, and it was not something I had ever spoken about. I had filed it away, just like before, with other things that bothered me.

Eventually I sought help after speaking to my wife for the first time and explaining, in detail, what happened during and after the incident from years before. My doctor and a team of specialists confirmed I had been suffering from PTSD, and I was sent on an intensive course and many counselling and therapy sessions. I also undertook EMDR (*Ed: Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing*) treatment. At first, I was the world's biggest sceptic as to how this would work, but it completely changed my thinking and my nightmares decreased to the point of almost disappearing completely.

Although I still like to climb mountains, I tend to see the danger a little differently and don't want to put myself at risk to the point of no-return, as I have a massive amount to live for with my beautiful family by my side.

Mental toughness is a strange thing, as sometimes when you wish for it, it never happens and we appear and feel broken. But at the times you least expect it, we feel the positivity drawn from within, deep down, and we know we are capable of anything. Just because I have a bag for life on my side, my bag will always be half-full



Glen with his family.

rather than half-empty. Not literally; it's just a figure of speech!

Today, I feel completely limitless in my abilities and only by trying and not succeeding will I even slightly listen to the notion that maybe I cannot do it. Yes, I may hike mountains, travel the world, take morphine, painkillers, and enjoy a few whiskies on the weekend, but hey-ho. Judge no-one, be kind and, most of all, keep bloody smiling!

I will always believe we should live everyday like it's our last, because it just might be.

In December 2019, Glen successfully climbed Mount Kilimanjaro. He reported that at 5895m high and -25 degrees, both he and his stoma bag performed very well indeed!