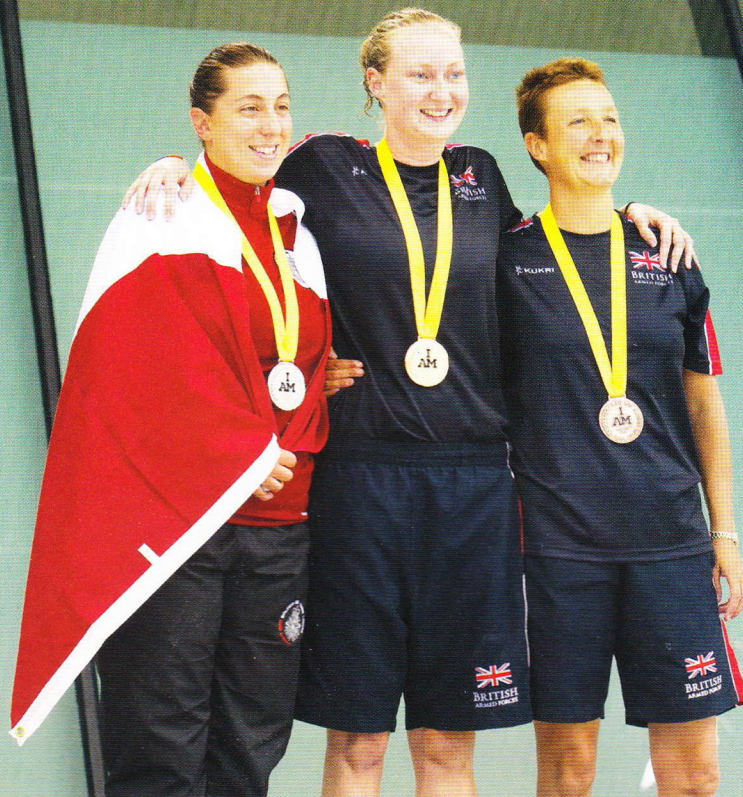


Hythe's Golden Girl

The injured servicewoman
from Hythe who lit up
the Invictus Games



Usain Bolt and the late George Best share more than just legendary status in their respective sports: they are prime examples of what the Romans described as 'nomen est omen' or 'name is destiny'. If further proof is needed that one's name can be a very good measure of its possessor, look no further than Lance Corporal Kimberley Sterling, a serving Army combat medic and Invictus Games four-time gold medallist in 2014.

Kimberley, 26, was born and brought up in Hythe and has recently returned to take up a posting with the Second Battalion, the Gurkha Rifles, who are based in Shorncliffe. She suffered a life-changing foot injury whilst on Army exercises in spring 2013, exacerbated by later surgical complications. "Unfortunately, I woke up from surgery not being able to walk. They diagnosed me with Complex Regional Pain Syndrome, or CRPS for short. There's no cure, so I'm never going to be free of it." For a serving soldier with a career dependent upon maintaining peak physical fitness, it was potentially devastating news.

However, the opportunity to attend a rehabilitation course at Headley Court, the world-class centre for injured service personnel, proved to be Kimberley's salvation. It was at Headley Court that Kimberley met the physiotherapist to whom she says she 'owes everything' and who made her realise that, despite her injury, she remained a talented athlete. "I have always loved swimming; in fact, my mother was in the Hythe Imperial pool the day before I was born so I am a real water baby. It was a running joke with my physio and the rehabilitation instructors that I couldn't necessarily walk at the time, but I could beat everyone – men included – in the pool. I was extremely limited in gym rehabilitation classes

but in the pool I felt normal again, not like that person who couldn't do anything. It was then it was suggested to me that I should try for the Invictus Games."

The Invictus Games was the brainchild of Prince Harry, himself a serving Army officer, and who Kimberley describes as "just one of the guys". He set about creating an international, Paralympic-style event for wounded, sick and injured service personnel. The Games took their inspiration from a line from the haunting poem, *Invictus*, by William Ernest Henley, "I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul."

TOP SPOT ON THE PODIUM

Invictus itself means 'unconquered', and that sums up Kimberley's experience at the inaugural Games in 2014, where she left the pool with four Team GB gold medals hanging around her neck. Kimberley had to see off stiff competition from her American and Australian rivals, both of whom had faster times than hers, in order to claim the top spot on the podium. "It was one of those moments when you think, 'I'm in the (London) Olympic pool, this is actually happening.... It was so surreal. My amazing coach had faith in me though; he told me not to let them psyche me out and then I won all my heats in the morning. I'd never swum that fast, but then I was worried I had done too much

and worn myself out for the afternoon finals. But when I went into the water everything went calm. My final race was the 100m, there were banners up with my name, and I could hear people shouting for me. It was packed: the pool events had sold out months in advance. It was then that I realised what I had done. I don't think I ever swam this fast when I was fully fit!"

Kimberley's experience underlined to her that a life-changing injury does not have to be life-limiting. "Invictus showed that you can be injured but anything is possible. It opened a lot of doors for a lot of people who thought their lives were over, and some are going for the Rio Paralympics now. A lot of us had been at Headley Court at the same time, and it was like being with your extended family at the end of the day; we had been through so much and had a lot of emotional strength in our team because of that. At Headley Court, they enable you to believe that you can do anything if you want to do it. People get branded disabled, but they show you that you can have any injury and you don't have to be stuck in that one lifestyle of being limited."

Inspired by her own Invictus success, and keen to find new challenges, Kimberley is already planning new adventures. "I still swim every evening, and I would love to get into the GB Masters' Swimming team, so I have joined Hythe Swimming Club. I love doing fitness events, just to prove that I can do normal things again. I'd also absolutely love to swim the Channel: I just need to find someone to do it with!"

From wondering whether her foot would be amputated to winning gold medals for her country within the space of a year, Kimberley embodies the spirit of *Invictus* so hauntingly captured in William Ernest Henley's verse. A sterling effort indeed.