**Neil Davis, (64), a client from HeadwayB&S and from Birmingham**

Neil Davis, a client at Headway is an active member of the group, always smiling, always rising to whatever new challenge the groups bring. But Neil has been hiding his light under a bushel and none of us knew what an amazing life he’d led until one of our volunteers found out!

Not only is Neil a dad of two, a granddad of six, he’s travelled the world, he’s worked a as a fireman, a bus driver, a long-distance lorry driver, a driving instructor, and an air Marshall.

Neil has also served seven-years as a Naval Officer on his beloved Ark Royal, a former flagship of the Royal Navy and a vessel that will always be a very special part of Neil’s life.

Neil, like all great seaman has many a colourful story to tell and every one told with a wide smile and a glint in his eye.

But four years ago, Neil’s life was dramatically changed when he suffered a stroke.

It was only the quick thinking of his devoted partner, Mel, (60) that saw Neil rushed to hospital, treated for a stroke, then undertaking months of intensive physiotherapy to re-adjust to the disability caused by the stroke.

Neil’s life will never be the same, but what has never changed is Neil’ amazing zest for life!

Neil says: “I’ve always seen a new opportunity as a new adventure and loved the variety life brings.

As a teenager, I knew my future was in the services – it was in my blood.

‘My mum, Helen was a Wren and worked as a nurse in Malta where I was born and my dad was in the Army Catering Core.

‘Sadly, my mum and dad, Reg separated when I was very young. I lived with my mum in a beautiful Scottish village called Moniaive until I was 12, then we moved to Birmingham, while my dad had moved to Canada.

‘I’ didn’t settle well in Birmingham, a big bustling city, compared to the calm and quiet village life I had been used to in Moniaive. So, aged 15, I was itching to see the world and do my duty saw me join the Royal Navy – a dream I was determined to fulfil.

‘I began my naval training on HMS Raleigh, then one year on HMS Seahawk before becoming a naval airman on HMS Ark Royal.

‘I spent eight years in the navy and it’s one the proudest achievements of my life.

‘The navy took me all over the world, to Oslo, Gibraltar, the Virgin Islands, Iceland, Malta, Puerto Rico, St Thomas, New York and Fault Lauderdale.

‘It was an exciting life, full of adventure, seeing parts of the world you could never dream of. But it was the camaraderie that I loved the most.

‘Any service person will tell you, that you find a family like no other in your fellow servicemen and women.

‘I felt like I was at home!’

On the Ark Royal Neil worked as a lift operator and flight logger.

But aged 23 Neil left the navy because he felt he might build a career outside of the services on civvy street and found adjusting to normal life again his toughest challenge yet.

It was my whole life as I knew it - gone.

Routine, home, friends, family, social life – it was all aboard that ship and then, I was without it and felt quite lost.

Despite leaving the service, travelling was still in my blood,’ remembers Neil. ‘So I went to Canada to see my dad.

‘We both had the best intentions, but 21-years apart was too bigger a gap to repair. And we never bonded.’

Bu never one to miss a life-times opportunity Neil trained with the Canadian National Railway for a month before returning home to Birmingham

Back in Birmingham Neil married and had two children. But his marriage broke down and Neil was single and missing a sense of family he had loved so much in the Air Force.

Neil says: ‘I knew I wanted to work in an exciting, fast paced environment so Birmingham Airport seemed the next best thing to the forces. I worked as an air marshal, my skills on the flight deck of the Ark Royal served me well.

‘My job was to direct flights in and out of the airport and directing them to parking bays. It gave me a real thrill every time I directed those huge planes!

‘I didn’t think I could enjoy a job more until an opportunity arose to become part of Birmingham Airports Fire Brigade Crew.’

Neil remembers the fire brigade with joy and pride.

‘It was just like the forces. The crew were a family, we would spend 12-hour shifts together, undertaking dangerous work and always looking out for each other.

I spent sixteen glorious years in the fire brigade at Birmingham Airport and it was a job that demanded peak physical fitness. I kept fit by going to the gym, playing volley ball and being very active.’

But unfortunately, a ligament problem in Neil’s knee saw him forced to retire from the fire service early.

Neil was desperately disappointed, but refused to let his knee stop him working and he became a bus driver.

‘I worked the night service bus route on the number 61, 62, and 63 in the South of Birmingham. It was a challenge make no mistake! Says Neil.

‘There was many a funny, dodgy, undesirable or unconventional characters on that night service bus route!

‘And a lot of the time the police would be waiting at the bus terminus after I’d called for help for reinforcements!

‘I also worked as a driving instructor and a long-distance lorry driver.

‘Being on the road for long periods gave me a real sense of freedom!

‘It was also my last job before I suffered a stroke.

Neil remembers another normal day, finishing a shift on the lorries, returning home and hearing the phone ring, knowing it would be his partner, Mel, calling to ensure he was home safe.

Neil will never forget that day!

‘I walked into the hall to answer the phone ringing as I always did, then I collapsed without any warning.

‘I could still hear the phone, but I was on the floor and couldn’t move and I remember thinking Mel will be ringing to see if I’m ok – and I’m not ok!

‘After that I remember nothing until I woke up in Birmingham Queen Elizabeth Hospital four years ago.

‘A few days after my stroke I was moved to Moseley Hall Hospital in Birmingham to start rehabilitation.

I couldn’t use my left side. I had to learn to walk all over again.

It was devastating and frustrating. I had been a fiercely independent man. Now I had to ask for help with everything.

‘Mel, my beautiful partner of 21 years was now my carer too. I hated that I had to rely on Mel for everything.

‘But Mel was my angel, so devoted and so caring – I’m a very lucky man to have her in my life!

With Mel’s emotional and physical support and Neil’s fierce determination he was soon walking with a stick. Only for his recovery to be scuppered by that persistent knee problem, which saw him back in a wheelchair, downbeat for a while, but not defeated.

Neil says: ‘This wheelchair is the one thing in my life I want to get rid of. Hopefully after a knee operation and a steady recovery I can get back to walking again.

‘Coming to HeadwayB&S three times a week has really aided my recovery. Before coming to Headway, I was depressed and felt life was over.

Headway got me out of the house, meeting people, engaging and laughing again.

‘I have made great friends and enjoy all the activities and camaraderie of the group. I understand talking to other people who have been through similar things to me helps a great deal.’

But after a casual chat with one of Headway’s volunteers, Jenny Robertson, they discovered they had a lot in common. Being in the WRAC, (Women’s Royal Army Corps) from 1980 to 1984 Jenny could relate to Neil as they shared a common history. Not only that, they both shared Scottish heritage.

Jenny says: ‘We got chatting along with other clients about our history during one group session at Headway. When Neil mentioned he was a veteran it sparked a long and lovely conversation between us. I asked him if he had been presented with his Veteran’s Pin.

‘But Neil had no idea he could even get one!’

The Armed Forces Veterans’ Lapel Badge was launched in May 2004 by the Minister for Veterans. Its purpose is to raise the profile of veterans by helping the public recognise veterans and their amazing work.

‘I asked Neil if he wanted me to apply for his pin on his behalf,’ Jenny explains.

 Neil said, ‘yes please.’

‘I took all his details and contacted the Lord Mayor who put me in touch with the Ministry of Defence. I waited tentatively for a response and two weeks later Neil’s pin arrived.

Neil was so happy and so appreciative, but it is rightfully his, he earned it.

It is a representation of the loyal service Neil gave to this country and now he cherishes it with pride.

I’m just glad I could help Neil as it’s made my day too. We have become great friends and we often reminisce about our time in service.’

While Neil is so grateful to Jenny and says: “Jenny went above and beyond for me and I’m so grateful to her. To have this pin on my lapel is recognition of my time in the services and it represents a wonderful time in my life.

‘It makes me very proud!

‘I have to say thank you to Jenny and to Pam and Ian, the staff at Headway who have helped and supported me, along with all the other staff here.

‘I never imagined this could happen to me, the stroke has changed my life, I won’t ever be the fiercely independent man I was.

‘But I am learning to accept these changes.

‘My Veteran’s pin is a constant reminder of a steely determination I was taught in the navy – and I’ve carried that through since my stroke.

‘Never giving into it, never letting it beat you is the key to coping and getting through it.

And if you can smile and laugh along the way – that’s a big help too!”

ENDS.

**HMS *Ark Royal*** was a [light aircraft carrier](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Light_aircraft_carrier) and former [flagship](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flagship) of the [Royal Navy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Royal_Navy).[[7]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Ark_Royal_%28R07%29#cite_note-7) She was the third and final vessel of [*Invincible* class](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Invincible-class_aircraft_carrier). She was built by [Swan Hunter](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swan_Hunter) on the [River Tyne](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/River_Tyne) and [launched](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ceremonial_ship_launching) by them in 1981. *Ark Royal* was christened by [Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queen_Elizabeth_The_Queen_Mother). She followed [sister ships](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sister_ship) [HMS *Invincible*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Invincible_%28R05%29) and [HMS *Illustrious*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Illustrious_%28R06%29) into service in 1985.

Affectionately known as *The Mighty Ark*, she is the fifth Royal Navy ship to have borne the name of the [1587 flagship](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Ark_Royal_%281587%29) that defeated the [Spanish Armada](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_Armada) in 1588.[[8]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Ark_Royal_%28R07%29#cite_note-8) Originally intended to be named [*Indomitable*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Indomitable)[[9]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Ark_Royal_%28R07%29#cite_note-Times60310-9) to match the rest of the class, this was changed due to the public reaction to the loss of the *Ark Royal* name after the scrapping of the [previous *Ark Royal*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Ark_Royal_%28R09%29) in 1980, after 30 years' service.[[*citation needed*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia%3ACitation_needed)]

Slightly larger than her sister ships, and with a steeper [ski-jump ramp](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aircraft_ski-jump), *Ark Royal* carried the [STOVL](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/STOVL) (Short Take Off and Vertical Landing) [Harrier Jump Jet](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harrier_Jump_Jet) aircraft, as well as various helicopters. With a crew complement of over 1,000 sailors and aviators, she saw active service in the 1990s [Bosnian War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bosnian_War) and the [2003 Invasion of Iraq](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2003_Invasion_of_Iraq).

Originally due to be retired in 2016, *Ark Royal* was instead [decommissioned](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ship_commissioning#Ship_decommissioning) on 11 March 2011, as part of the [Navy restructuring](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strategic_Defence_and_Security_Review_2010#Royal_Navy) portion of the [2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strategic_Defence_and_Security_Review_2010).[[10]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Ark_Royal_%28R07%29#cite_note-10) After *Ark Royal*'s decommissioning [HMS *Albion*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Albion_%28L14%29) replaced her as the Royal Navy flagship.[[11]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Ark_Royal_%28R07%29#cite_note-11) *Ark Royal* was sold for [scrap](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ship_breaking) to the Turkish company Leyal Ship Recycling and left [Portsmouth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portsmouth) in May 2013