



# Olivia's Story

Member

**Olivia Zambonini**

Reason for joining C2R - Isolation / Camaraderie

**Medical Challenges - Multiple Sclerosis/Loss of sight**

Service Career

**Regular and Army Reserve service**



**O**livia joined the Army Reserves and then transferred to Regular Service where she thrived on the structure, discipline, and adventure. Olivia was full of life, extremely fit and flew through all the military fitness and aptitude tests, beating the majority of her peers and seeing her opportunities and career develop quickly. Olivia had everything she had ever wanted, her health, fitness and a wonderful military career and community.

Suddenly though Olivia was struck down by a series of serious health complications that eventually led to her being diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis.

***"I was gutted and felt like I had lost everything, I had already lost some of my memory shortly after diagnosis, and now to this day I have no long-term, and very limited short-term memory".***

**Living with Multiple Sclerosis** dramatically impacted Olivia's life, leading to her medical discharge from the military and the life, community, and adventure that she was so committed to.

***"I was gutted and felt like I had lost everything. Because of MS I am completely blind in my right eye and if I get stressed or upset my left eye can shut down, leaving me completely blind. It's scary when this happens because you just never know if my sight will return or not. My memory too has been impacted, I have lost much of my short-term memory and have no long-term memory whatsoever. I can't feel or fully control my limbs, I struggle to balance, walk, and climb stairs. Life is really difficult."***

**Despite her optimism and courage**, Olivia's mental health also deteriorated and she experienced loneliness and isolation, which further compounded her already very significant challenges. However, shortly after the pandemic Olivia was offered the chance to try indoor climbing in Edinburgh, close to her home. Olivia enjoyed this experience so much that she was determined to do more - this led her to Climb 2 Recovery.

**S**ince then, Olivia has become an incredibly valuable member - regularly attending courses all over the country, and in the Alps, learning to climb, lead climb and multi-pitch climb, helping introduce and mentor new members, supporting existing members towards their goals and qualifications, and becoming one of the most inspirational members of the C2R community.

C2R has given Olivia a new purpose, a regular programme of adventures to look forward to, a sense of belonging, a wonderful community of friends and support, a laugh and great fun. C2R has replaced all the best bits of military service for Olivia, and she attends and participates as much as she can.

***"The support I have received from C2R has been incredible, and very encouraging. My initial meeting with Neil Heritage and Chris Pretty was very supportive, and later I met and climbed with Joe Winch - they are all fantastic."***



Olivia with her team on a C2R Multi - Pitch Climbing Skills Course.



# My Situation now

Although still very unwell with MS Olivia is now in a far better place because of Climb 2 Recovery. Olivia climbs regularly and throughout the year and always really looks forward to catching up with friends, helping introduce new members, and having a good laugh at courses. Being more physically active, and particularly being active through climbing, Olivia has found her strength, fitness and independence returning, and her ability to cope with and manage her pain has also greatly improved. In turn, this has allowed Olivia to move about more safely at home and when out and about, and when using stairs, allowing her to do more and reducing her isolation and loneliness. Climbing with Climb 2 Recovery and the broader support, encouragement and friendship, alongside the physical exercise and resilience she has developed, have been so important to her physical and mental health.

*“Being medically discharged from the Army, and everything about it that I loved was very upsetting, and depression set in. I decided I needed something that cheered me up a bit. I had a think, all my clothes were dark, and it was quite boring, so I thought ... I'll start introducing some colours in my life!”*

## C2R’s training provider, Andy Charlton, said;

I had the privilege of guiding Olivia on a winter mountaineering route in the Cairngorms. She'd always seemed a phenomenal individual with an incredibly positive outlook on life, but what she achieved that day was one of the most humbling and impressive feats I've ever seen.

Given her limited sight and sensation in her legs she had to battle step-by-step for hours through strong winds, ice and snow to get to the base of the climb (and back again) but it wasn't her incredible physical effort that has stuck with me - it's the attitude she has, her determination to crack on and keep smiling and joking as she endures difficulties that would have made most people never consider trying something even half as challenging.

My lasting memory of that day will be Olivia laughing her way up the entire climb. Pitch after pitch, the only constant to accompany the battering wind was Olivia laughing and joking as she climbed.

Aside from her personal achievements in climbing, Olivia is an inspiration to everyone at C2R - having been one of the first female members, she appears to have led the way in encouraging a much greater female participation and she's the first to offer a friendly and encouraging arm around any new members.



**Pic. Olivia enjoying a moment on the C2R Winter Skills course in Scotland 2023. As always in bright pink!**



**Climb2Recovery**  
**Registered Charity Number 1186493**  
Supporting the recovery of veterans,  
through climbing and mountaineering

