

# Blesma

The magazine for limbless and injured veterans | Spring 2023

**PLUS:**

LIVING WITH LOSS OF  
USE OF LIMB STUDY

ACTIVITIES IN 2023

THE ARMY MUSEUM'S  
ROAD TO RECOVERY

BENEFITS UPDATE

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**“My mum had been told I was going to die. I had lost pints and pints of blood”**



## IRAQ: TWO DECADES ON

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Words: Danny Buckland

## Blesma trio an integral part of undefeated ice hockey team

TEAM GB CAME AWAY FROM THE RECENT WORLD PARA ICE HOCKEY CHAMPIONSHIPS IN THAILAND WITH A GOLD MEDAL. BLESMA MEMBER ANDREW MEAD TAKES UP THE STORY...

**A**ndrew Mead, Susi Rogers Hartley and Stacey Quirk have brought home gold after Great Britain made a clean sweep at the world para ice hockey championships C-pool. The trio were part of a victorious squad that won all their matches without conceding a single goal in the tournament held in Bangkok, Thailand, last December.

“It was a great tournament and it was fantastic to win. We thought we had a chance of doing reasonably

well but never thought of ourselves as gold medallists,” said Andrew. “It was a great squad performance.”

Great Britain beat hosts Thailand, France and Austria before facing Kazakhstan in the last game of the round-robin group event.

In para ice hockey teams made up of men and women use bladed sleds to hurtle across the ice. They propel themselves with two sticks that are also used to control and shoot the puck.

**Above: Andrew in action during a training match for his club side; the Sheffield Steelers**

“One thing we are all proud of is that four of our 14 players are women – one became the first woman to score a goal at a world championships!” said Andrew, 57, who had a double below-knee amputation after an infection led to septicaemia following a sporting injury.

“The matches were great but it got a bit tense towards the end of the final game as we were desperate to keep a clean sheet throughout. It was a wonderful time and I felt extremely

# Welcome



“Much of my success in the sport is down to Blesma,” said Andrew



privileged to be there. It would not have happened without Blesma though; the Association paid for my equipment when I was getting started in the sport and then provided venture funding for this tournament. I feel that much of

my success in the sport is down to Blesma.”

The tournament win puts Great Britain in the B Division of the sport and automatically into the qualifying competition for the 2026 Winter Paralympics in Italy.

**“WE THOUGHT WE HAD A CHANCE OF DOING REASONABLY WELL BUT NEVER REALLY THOUGHT OF OURSELVES AS GOLD MEDALLISTS”**



Welcome to the Spring issue. Inside, we reflect on the 20th anniversary of the start of the second Gulf War, with Stephen Shine and Lionel O'Connor telling us of their experiences.

We have a report on the *Road to Recovery* exhibition at the National Army Museum, we hear from Michelle Murphy about overcoming some quite unusual but very significant challenges, and Alison Evans describes how a life-threatening illness resulted in multiple amputations just a few years ago.

The Association has worked with the Forces in Mind Trust and Anglia Ruskin University to study the experiences of families living with the loss of use of limb. Our next piece of research will be a study sponsored by the Office of Veterans' Affairs into different mobility devices.

2022 was a challenging year. We began the year under Covid lockdown, and the war in Ukraine and its economic impact resulted in a cost-of-living crisis that impacted on fundraising and saw the highest rate of UK inflation in 40 years. While the Association made use of its reserves to continue (and in many cases increase) its support for Members, the impact of the crises has driven the value of those reserves down. Whilst we are able to withstand these shocks and can see some signs of recovery, we must continue to scrutinise our spending and ensure that we make the most of every pound raised.

Finally, please take a look at the article on activities planned for this year. Demand is high after a tough period so please get those applications in. Enjoy the issue.

Jon Bryant  
Chief Executive





Widow Pauline Cunliffe with her Christmas hamper

## Corporate supporters kindly donate Christmas hampers

**E**lderly veterans and Widows received a surprise Christmas gift in December thanks to Blesma's Operation Christmas Cheer. Members received Christmas hampers filled with treats and household essentials from corporate supporters BAE Systems and Safeguard Engineering, who relished the opportunity to step into Santa's boots.

The project aimed to let older Members know Blesma was thinking of them whilst also expanding how the Association works with companies.

"We are lucky that we have so many people who are passionate about supporting good causes and were the driving force in what we achieved," said John Grealis, Head of Programme Management and Site General Manager at BAE System Air. "We had teams baking and organising cake sales to generate money as well as simply

collecting donations from employees to buy items. Teams worked together and picked items from the hamper list which they would then supply to a local team coordinator on site."



In total, more than 100 hampers were made. Widow Vera Levett was grateful for hers. "I was so surprised and thrilled with all that was in my hamper. It was so wonderfully thoughtful, I don't know what to say other than thank you all so very much," she said.

"The card thanked my late husband for his service and me for looking after him for all those years. It warmed my heart!"

Fellow Widow Pauline Cunliffe added: "I don't know what I have done in my life to deserve such a wonderful gift. All just so thoughtful. I will feel special when I eat and drink all the lovely gifts inside."

## JAMES PREPARES FOR HIS SECOND WALK IN MEMORY OF HIS MUM

SERVING SOLDIER JAMES KIRBY IS SET to walk 154 miles in 48 hours in memory of his late mum to raise funds for Blesma. This will be the second time James has taken on such a challenge; in 2021 he marched from Preston to ITC Catterick and back.

James' mum, Denise, was a double amputee who passed away in March 2021 after being diagnosed with Covid. James plans to set off on his two-day tab around Cyprus on Friday 10 March carrying 59 pounds – one for each year of Denise's life.

"The first challenge raised £8,000 for Blesma. I wanted to do it again as I'm still a little bit depressed over my mum and I want something positive to come out of a negative," said the 36 year old, who has served with 1st Battalion The Duke of Lancaster's Regiment for 10 years and is currently based in Episkopi, Cyprus.

"It's going to be a lot tougher this year. The weather is going to play a massive part, and half the route is uphill so that is going to take some mental strength. The resilience my mum showed throughout her life will be my motivator though."

James will be joined by members of his Battalion and other serving personnel.

To support James on his epic walk, visit <https://gofund.me/6535152b>



James on his first walk in 2021



## Who fancies taking part in a sailing challenge in 2024?

**S**peedster Talan Skeels-Piggins, who is a double motorcycle world champion, is planning to slow down the pace next year for a unique sailing challenge.

The 52 year old, a Winter Paralympian and motorbike racing pioneer, has his sights set on a round-Britain journey but he is dialling down the adrenaline rush by attempting it in a series of one and two-day cruises. And he'd like Blesma Members to join him.

Talan is busy planning the logistics and finer details of the trip, which he plans to complete in his 27ft sail boat over the course of 50 days next summer.

"The idea is to complete the challenge in a series of one-day sails, and I'd like to invite Blesma Members to join me on the journey," said Talan, a former Royal Navy Reserves Lieutenant, who has previously enjoyed success powering a 600cc motorbike around the race track as well as winning medals at downhill, slalom and Super-G ski events.

"I get a great sense of calmness when I'm out sailing; the movement of the boat, the

noise of the water, the sense of freedom... It's a truly magical place to be and is something that benefits my mental health. Hopefully, it can help other people," said Talan. "I've taken people sailing who have never been before and they got a feeling of self-belief and self-confidence. Suddenly, they are steering the yacht and no-one has given them that sort of responsibility before."

Talan, an experienced sailing and windsurfing instructor who has taken part in tough ocean races, will start the round-Britain trip from Portsmouth and cover in the region of 2,000 miles depending on weather and sea conditions. His plan is to put into harbour every 24 or 48 hours.

Talan was paralysed from the chest down in 2003 and became the world's first paraplegic to hold both motorcycle and car race licences.

"When I was first injured, my life effectively had no meaning until I found skiing and that gave me a new direction," he said. "There may be people who are struggling with change in their lives and maybe joining me for a day or two could help them progress."

## MILITARY CHARITY DONATES TO OUR MILITARY CHARITY

THE QUEEN'S LANCASHIRE Regiment Veterans Charity has donated £7,000 to Blesma. The charity was founded in 2016 to raise funds for two memorials. When it was successful, the charity decided to donate the rest of the funds to other organisations.

Joe Horvath, chairman of the charity and a former Warrant Officer with 23 years' service in the regiment, said: "We had people doing all sorts of things to raise the £200,000. People threw themselves out of aeroplanes, some carried a large ammo box for 130 miles, and others completed all sorts of charity walks across the country. Some even jumped off a 75ft tower!



"Blesma is a fantastic organisation and was really well spoken about amongst the community here, so we wanted to donate to the cause. It was great to meet the Members and have Member Mark Brown hand over the cheque to Blesma's Fundraising Team."

## GOT A STORY? GET IN TOUCH!

Have you got a story you'd like to tell? Want some help publicising an event or expedition you're planning? To put your story in the magazine just get in touch at [storiesandpress@blesma.org](mailto:storiesandpress@blesma.org)

## ▶ BLESMA BRIEFING

# New courses to help old issues

PROSTHETICS SERVICES ARE SEEING A REDUCTION IN STAFF NUMBERS BUT COURSES AND APPRENTICESHIPS AIM TO BRING PEOPLE INTO THE SECTOR



**I**n my last article I mentioned that I have been on the road visiting Limb Centres to provide training on veterans' health, and this has continued. Working closely with our Support Officers around the country I have also been engaging with Limb Centres to assist individual Members and have accompanied some to their appointments. In the last few months I have visited the Limb Centre in Wrexham and Scottish Government health officials in Edinburgh, and have also held talks with Northern Ireland health colleagues. This engagement gives me an oversight of emerging issues and allows me to relay those issues to interested parties, especially individual Members or the Blesma membership as a whole when appropriate or as required.

A major issue impacting prosthetic services across the UK at the moment is a reduction in the workforce. This has been happening for some time and in recent years it has seemed to increase. A reduced workforce leads to increased times between appointments. If this directly affects you, I will do what I can to get you seen in good time. However, this has to be measured against a number of factors, including the clinical needs of other patients; for example, new amputees. Some Limb Centres have also reported delays in obtaining supplies from mainland Europe, and this is out of their control.

Key to reducing appointments is ensuring new sockets are made well first time around, which can be a challenge for a number of reasons. If you need a new socket I will assist where I can to try and ensure the process is as good as it can be and that you are kept fully informed.

It is important to communicate effectively with your prosthetic provider and that can be a challenge sometimes, especially if you are feeling rushed or not listened to. I strongly advise taking notes and a list of

questions with you to your appointments. That way, you can be sure to get your point across and you can leave a copy of those notes or comments with your prosthetist. It is also helpful, if you can, to make notes of what you have been told so that you are able to remember what has been discussed or agreed.

### PROSTHETIC APPRENTICESHIPS

To help address some of the long-standing workforce issues new Prosthetics and Orthotics Apprenticeship Schemes and Courses have been established through the University of Derby. The university offers two courses: Level 3 Prosthetic & Orthotic Technician Apprenticeship and Level 6 BSc (Hons) Prosthetic & Orthotic Degree Apprenticeship. The Level 3 course is run over a 12-18 month period and the Level 6 course is run over three years. Both follow a programme of work-based learning (80%) with on-site tutors/mentors as well as online and in-person modules (20%). The courses allow candidates to earn as they learn and develop skills in a work setting.



“  
**ONE MAJOR ISSUE THAT'S IMPACTING PROSTHETIC SERVICES AT THE MOMENT IS A REDUCTION IN THE WORKFORCE**





## Big Give gives big for Blesma

**B**lesma's 2022 Big Give Christmas Challenge has raised more than £26,000 for the Association. As the cost of living increased at the end of 2022, Blesma campaigned to help veterans combat hardship and isolation. The Big Give Christmas Challenge offered supporters of participating charities the opportunity to see their donations doubled, meaning their support had twice the impact.

In the lead-up to 'Giving Week', which ran from 29 November to 06 December, charities secured pledgers for their campaign. These pledgers made up half of the match funding pot, with the other half secured through a champion funder. Last year, Blesma's champion funder was The Bernard Sunley Foundation. During the week, all donations made through Big Give were doubled.

"Our Big Give campaigns have grown each year," said Chris Knight, Blesma's Corporate and Regional Fundraising Manager. "Match giving inspires our supporters to donate because they know their donations will have twice the impact."

"Taking part in the Big Give has been a great way for Blesma to engage with its existing supporters as well as promoting the campaign through Giving Week to new supporters. Our annual Big Give campaign is an important fundraising and awareness campaign for the Association."

Funds raised from this year's campaign have enabled Blesma to support Members with benefits, fund essential home or garden maintenance projects, and access health treatments and mobility aids.



These courses offer another route into the profession alongside the established degree courses at Salford and Strathclyde. You may start to see students on these courses working alongside your prosthetists, orthotists or technicians in the near future. The Level 6 degree apprenticeship will have a module on veterans, and Blesma will provide input and delivery on that.

### AMPUTEE CHARITIES INFORMAL GROUP

I have maintained links with a number of civilian charities that support the limb loss community through an informal 'Amputee Charities' network set up by Steel Bones. Throughout Covid we met regularly over Zoom and we will soon hold our first face-to-face meeting.

Blesma is hosting this one-day workshop at its office in Chelmsford. We will be looking at commonalities, shared visions and hope, along with developing a succinct agenda for raising common issues to the relevant commissioners of health and prosthetic provision across the UK. An example of working closely with this group is the promotion of key events or raising awareness such as Living with Limb Difference Awareness Month. As an established charity we can offer advice or a sense check to newer friends in this sector.

*If you are experiencing problems with your prosthesis, please get in touch with Brian, BSO (Prosthetics) on 07796 715908 or at [bsoprosthetics@blesma.org](mailto:bsoprosthetics@blesma.org)*

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**I HAVE MAINTAINED LINKS WITH A NUMBER OF CIVILIAN CHARITIES SUPPORTING THE LIMB LOSS COMMUNITY**



Words: Jessica Mackinnon

## BLESMA PAIR ARE ALL SMILES AFTER THEIR JIU-JITSU BOUT

MEMBERS PAUL SKIVINGTON AND Scott Blaney went head to head at the inaugural REORG open jiu-jitsu tournament in Wolverhampton last August.

With both having single leg amputations, the pair often cancelled out each other's grappling moves, but Paul (pictured below right) eventually got the better of Scott to



Scott Blaney (left) and Paul Skivington

win. Paul served in 9 Parachute Squadron, Royal Engineers and lost his left leg in a motorbike accident whilst serving in 2001. Sport has gone on to play a massive part in his recovery; he has competed in golf in the Simpson Cup and has enjoyed boxing before getting into jiu-jitsu.

"It was a really good fight," said Paul, who has been training for four years. "I usually fight non-disabled competitors, which comes with its disadvantages only having one leg. Sports jiu-jitsu is about scoring points, so someone just has to move past my stump in a lock to score a point. Scott and I are both above-knee amputees, so it evened out and we had a good scrap."

Former Grenadier Guardsman Scott also competed in the able-bodied class, taking bronze in his category, but when he came up against Paul, it was his first time competing against another amputee.

Member Mark Ormrod also took part in the tournament. Paul, Scott and Mark are all hoping to compete in Abu Dhabi as part of a team of para jiu-jitsu athletes in the World Para Jiu-Jitsu Championships in November.

## Helping after garden blaze destroys Mark's entire crop

**M**ark Strachan was devastated when he woke up last November to find the two polytunnels in his garden on fire. After he put out the flames, he realised that the majority of his 5,500 plants and bulbs had been destroyed.

"We think it was probably caused by a stray firework," said the former RLC corporal. "I was gutted. I lost 5,500 bulbs that I had collected over the last two-and-a-half years – some were really quite rare."

Gardening has become a lifeline for Mark. He was diagnosed with PTSD following an incident in Iraq in 2003 in which he lost the sight in his right eye after an explosion.

"Gardening got me doing something. I didn't want to socialise because of my PTSD, but I was able to potter in the garden. It's been great for my mental health," said Mark.

News of the fire soon reached the Facebook group Mark set up during lockdown. The group raised £550, but it wasn't enough for new polytunnels. That's where Blesma came in. "My Outreach Officer arranged for two

new polytunnels to be delivered the moment she heard. Blesma has been so supportive and has helped me go from being a recluse to meeting other veterans," said Mark.

"Now, I've started a community charity – people nominate someone who they think will be cheered up with a plant. I love growing plants and giving them away. I look after the gardens of care homes too, and if anybody struggles with their garden, I'll help them for free. It makes my life a bit better."



Mark's new Blesma-donated polytunnels



## Injured interpreter on path to realising Paralympic goal

**A**n Afghan interpreter who lost his sight whilst working for the British Army in Afghanistan is getting ever closer to his Invictus and Paralympic dreams thanks to Blesma. Wali Noori, 35, was working as a translator and cultural advisor on the front line for the British Armed Forces when he was caught in an IED blast in September 2009.

“My family were starving and needed food. I had to have a job, so I went to one of the British Forces’ offices in Kabul to get a job as an interpreter,” said Wali. “When the Taliban detonated that IED, I was thrown up into the sky. I landed

on my back and couldn’t see anything. I could hear bullets being fired around me, and once I was helped onto the helicopter, the world went black.”



Wali during his time as a translator...

In 2016, Wali was granted asylum through an MoD scheme and relocated to the UK. He immersed himself in his new local community in Essex and took up running.

“Before I lost my sight, I was a good runner. When I relocated to the UK, I had the chance to get back into running – the blast has taken my two eyes but has given me 100 hearts! I have to inspire people and show people I still have energy and spirit. I haven’t surrendered to my blindness.”

First up was the London Marathon in 2019. Since then, Wali has taken part in 13 running competitions, winning gold and silver medals along the way. Swimming followed, and Wali is now winning medals in swimming galas, too.

In 2022, he joined Blesma, and shortly afterwards was granted British citizenship. This year, Wali has become one step closer to his Invictus and Paralympic dreams as his training will now be supported through Blesma’s Venture Fund.

“Nothing is impossible, but you need to fight for your goals; it takes willpower,” said Wali. “People see my disabilities, but I only see my ability. With Blesma’s support I can achieve a lot.”



...and more recently on the running track

## SKIING ‘SO BENEFICIAL’ FOR FORMER INFANTRYMAN INJURED IN IRAQ

MEMBER MARTIN ‘ED’ EDWARDS, A former 5 Rifles Infantryman, took to the ski slopes for a series of exhilarating runs on a week-long adventure in Austria recently.

The 40 year old, who suffered a severe brain injury in 2006 after his vehicle was hit by an IED in Iraq, requires 24/7 support but relishes the thrill of sit skiing.

“Ed had an amazing time and it was so good for him,” said his former key worker Sally Mendonca, who organised the trip thanks to a Blesma grant. “He was doing red runs with his guide by the end of the week! The trips are so beneficial for Ed.

He likes getting his kit ready leading up to the trip, and after every run he just says: ‘Amazing, amazing!’ It is fantastic to see.”



Sally, who served 23 years in the Adjutant General’s Corps and worked with Ed at the Phoenix House Recovery Centre at Catterick Garrison before it closed, added: “We started off at an indoor ski slope and Ed just took to it. Blesma funded a trip for him in 2019 but we couldn’t go because of the pandemic, so it was great that Blesma stepped in again to support him and get him back out on the snow in January. We are all so thankful because it means so much to Ed. It is really good for him physically as well as for his morale. Ed says a big ‘thank you’ to Blesma.”



Gregg is training four days a week in preparation for this year's racing season

Words: Jessica Mackinnon Photography: Bertiehoods

## Rowing success not plain sailing

**F**ormer Royal Engineer Gregg Stevenson has set his sights on competing as a rower at the Paris 2024 Paralympics after his 2020 Tokyo bid was cut short due to surgery.

“My competitive rowing journey started at the Invictus Games trials back in 2012. I was taking part in a 2,000m test when a Team GB rowing coach told me my time was good enough to qualify for the Great Britain squad,” said Gregg, 38, from Lancashire. “I remember that’s when I left my Invictus journey and started my Paralympic dream.”

With this year’s racing season beginning in the summer Gregg, who lost both his legs after being caught in an IED blast in Afghanistan in 2009, is currently training intensely four days a week. The first race of the season will see him compete at the European Championships with rowing partner Lauren Rowles (above).



Gregg aims to be at the 2024 Paralympics

“For me, rowing is one of those spiritual things in life,” said Gregg. “Sport doesn’t care who you are, it doesn’t discriminate based on your looks or where you are from. You get out of it what you put in; the harder you work, the better your results. All the signs are good for us to secure a top five position once the season is finished. If we can do that then we are guaranteed a place at the Paralympics next year.”

Gregg is grateful to Blesma for offering him vital help and support that is allowing him to pursue his sporting dreams.

“None of what I am doing now in rowing would be possible without Blesma’s support. The Association has paid for my travel and accommodation which has allowed me to attend training. Blesma chose to support me before I’d even taken part in a single race. It’s incredible to know that Blesma supports and believes in me, just like they have always done since I was injured.”



## Groom planning on making a big entrance on wedding day

**C**hris Parkes is planning to skydive into his own wedding this summer alongside his nine groomsmen. Fortunately, his bride-to-be Pippa knows all about his plans. “I’ve always wanted to do things a little differently so why not?” said Chris, a former Rifleman who lost his left leg below the knee in an IED blast in Afghanistan. “A friend got in touch with the Guinness World Records and found out that it’s never been done by an amputee and his groomsmen before, so we definitely want to be the first!”

Chris met Pippa at the 2019 Invictus Games and their romance soon blossomed. Skydiving became a part of Chris’ life in the wake of the injuries he sustained in 2009.

“I was injured on 18 December,” said Chris. “The device took my left leg below the knee and my left arm at the elbow, but my arm was fortunately recovered and saved. I lost two fingers on my left hand and my entire left-hand side took fragmentation injuries.

“Immediately after the explosion I was also hit by small arms fire. I took a gun shot to the right lower leg, losing my hamstring. A lot happened in that 10-minute period!”

Chris has been a qualified skydiver for five years. “When I’m in the air, descending at speeds of up to 120mph, I don’t feel disabled. There are no barriers to my capability whilst I’m in the sky, I’m just present with my friends. All of the traumas and obstacles just evaporate. I feel free!”

## THE SUMMIT OF SNOWDON IS JUST THE BEGINNING

MEMBER MARK KELLY SUMMITED Mount Snowdon just three months after having one of his legs amputated.

“I wanted to set myself a challenge and prove to myself and other amputees what can be done if you have the right mindset,” said the former Royal Tank Regiment corporal. “I put myself through hell that day, but I was well supported by NHS staff. I had a physio and prosthetist with me, and they made changes to my prosthetic as we went to allow it to load in different ways.”

It took Mark just under three hours to make it to the summit, raising more than £10,000 along the way. “Blesma has given me great support before and after my amputation. They regularly check in on me and gave me funding to make my house more suitable for my needs. This sort of challenge is a part of my rehab and really helps with my mental health, too,” said Mark, who now has his sights set on Kilimanjaro and the Three Peaks Challenge.



Mark on his way to the summit of Snowdon

## “IT’S GOOD TO KNOW BLESMA HAS MY BACK”

A ROYAL NAVY FLEET AIR ARM VETERAN has credited Blesma for its life-long welfare support. “I want to thank Blesma, especially their local welfare volunteers, for keeping an eye on me and checking in. It’s good to know that Blesma has my back,” said Bob Freestone, 74, from Norfolk.

More than a decade ago, Bob suffered a sequestrum [*when a piece of dead bone comes away from the live tissue*]. It led to chronic pain and septicæmia.



“I didn’t realise how close I came to dying. I was diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder at that point, too. But I was contacted by the Association just when I needed someone to speak to.”

Bob joined the Royal Navy Fleet Air Arm in 1964 and served in countries including Aden, Singapore and Hong Kong. He spent six months in hospital after being seriously injured in a road traffic accident and as a result had his leg amputated below the knee in March 1977. At the time he was a TA sergeant and went on to complete more than 20 years service with the Territorials.

# Activities

FANCY FETTLING YOUR FITNESS IN FUERTEVENTURA, GOING GLAMPING WITH THE GRANDKIDS OR SAILING OFF THE CORNISH COAST? BLESMA'S GOT 2023 SORTED WITH ACTIVITIES FOR ALL

**F**rom fishing to photography, from cycling to watercolour painting, from York to New York, Blesma is giving Members the chance to try all sorts of activities this year. **Apply now by emailing [eventsca@blesma.org](mailto:eventsca@blesma.org), or calling 020 8548 7097. Please note: entry requirements may be subject to change.**

## FITNESS AND LIFESTYLE COURSE

**Location:** Fuerteventura, Spain

**Date:** 18-25 November

**Application deadline:** 01 August

A chance for a reset and a health change. Get moving together and experience all the magnificent beauty that Spain has to offer whilst trying out a host of new activities. Improve your diet and learn tips on how to balance your lifestyle. The week will have a possible variety of

activities ranging from yoga, pilates and cycling, to paddleboarding, coasteering and golf.

**Who can apply?**

Any Member

**Requirements:**

You must have six months' validity on your passport at the time of travel and you must be triple vaccinated.



## BRAMPTON FAMILY GLAMPING

**Location:** Brampton, Cumbria

**Date:** 12-16 August

**Application deadline:** 01 May

The aim of the event is to engage with other Members and their families, making new friends and sharing existing friendships whilst being in the great outdoors. Spouses, partners, carers, children and grandchildren are all welcome.

**Who can apply?**

Any Member with a family of between two and five people (i.e. the Member and up to four others). Please note: the pods and surrounding areas are not wheelchair accessible. For wheelchair accessible glamping, please refer to the Accessible Glamping Weekend in Somerset (p17).

## DAVE LEWAN MEMORIAL FISHING MATCH

**Location:** Newcastle-under-Lyme

**Date:** 30 June – 03 July

**Application deadline:** 01 May

Set in the beautiful Whitmore Estate in the heart of Staffordshire, the focus will be on relaxing, socialising, and taking part in a bit of friendly competition.

**Who can apply?** Both beginners and seasoned anglers alike are welcome.

## COUPLES WEEKEND NORTH

**Location:** Manchester

**Date:** 22-25 September

**Application deadline:** 15 July

A new location for the Couples Weekend and a first in the Blesma calendar. Members will be able to enjoy the rich industrial heritage that Manchester has to offer. Manchester has been voted one of the 10 friendliest cities in the world, making it the perfect location for Members to

## Watercolour Painting Course

**Location:** Somerset

**Date:** 04-08 September

**Application deadline:** 01 May

A five-day course for beginners and improvers. Members will have the chance to take part in studio-based painting as well as some fieldwork compositions. This is a great course for Members looking to take up a new hobby or improve their artistic skills in a relaxed and sociable environment.

**Who can apply?**

Any Member. Equipment is supplied or you can bring your own. Experienced artists are welcome to hone their skills.





Apply now by emailing  
[eventscal@blesma.org](mailto:eventscal@blesma.org)  
or calling 020 8548 7097

## Colorado Ski Spectacular

**Location:** Breckenridge, Colorado

**Date:** December (TBC)

**Application deadline:** 01 August

This annual event, organised by Disabled Sports USA, is one of the world's biggest and best ski spectaculars for all adaptive winter sports. The perfect week to have fun on the slopes. Mono ski, snowboarding, stand-up ski and 3 track are all available.

**Who can apply?** Most injury types can be catered for. However, hotel rooms are not adapted and you must be able to use a bath.

**Requirements:** You must be able to enter the USA (ESTA), your passport must have at least six months' validity during the time of travel, and you must be triple vaccinated.

# Activities

If you've not yet been to a Members' Weekend, make 2023 your year



Apply now by emailing [eventsca1@blesma.org](mailto:eventsca1@blesma.org) or calling 020 8548 7097



socialise with one another and take part in activities around the city.

#### **Who can apply?**

Any Member

### **GREEK REGATTA**

**Location:** Greece

**Date:** 16-23 September

**Application deadline:** 01 June

This is a chance to learn to sail in the Mediterranean. Beginners will be able to gain the first level of a yachting qualification, while those with more experience can simply enjoy lots of great sailing.

#### **Who can apply?**

The boat is not wheelchair accessible, and Members must be able to move around, with minimal assistance, on a 40ft non-adapted boat. Members must state if they cannot swim in their application.





## The Members' Weekend and AGM

**Location:** Chesford Grange

**Date:** 24-26 June

**Application deadline:** 25 March

Meet up with old friends and make lots of new ones, find out what Blesma Members are up to, and have your say on what Blesma should be focusing on to support its Members. Save the date in your diary now! Blesma covers the cost of Ordinary and Associate Members, as well as their partners or carers.

**Who can apply?**

Members' Weekend is open to all Members and their partners or carers.



**Requirements:**

You must have six months' validity on your passport at the time of travel, and you must be triple vaccinated.

### DORSET FISHING COMPETITION

**Location:** Dorset

**Date:** 08-10 September

**Application deadline:** 01 June

Beginners and seasoned anglers alike are welcome to take part. The focus is on relaxing, socialising and taking part in a bit of friendly competition at Revels Fishery, which is a stillwater fishery located in Dorset. Most noted for carp/specimen, coarse and fly/game fishing, carp, roach and perch are amongst the key species on offer at the venue.

**Who can apply?**

Any Member, regardless of experience.

### RIDE TO THE WALL

**Location:** Burton upon Trent

**Date:** 07 October

**Application deadline:** 01 July

Join the Blesma crew on the annual poignant and meaningful ride in memory of the fallen. The ride finishes at the National Memorial Arboretum.

**Who can apply?**

Any Member with their own motorcycle.

### AUTUMN ACCESSIBLE GLAMPING WEEKEND

**Location:** Somerset

**Date:** 20-23 October

**Application deadline:** 01 July

Based at Wall Eden Farm, this accessible glamping site can be enjoyed by the whole family. Members will stay in accessible lodges that can sleep up to six and enjoy the beautiful surroundings as well as on-site activities from axe throwing to canoeing.

**Who can apply?**

Any Member with a family of between two and six people (i.e. the Member and up to five others). Please note: whilst there is no minimum age to apply some activities are restricted to an age limit.

### SOLDIER RIDE UK

**Location:** TBC

**Date:** 15-22 July

**Application deadline:** 15 April

A chance for Members to enjoy a week's cycling through beautiful English

# Activities

countryside with hand-picked routes, enjoying the company and camaraderie of other Members.

## Who can apply?

Anyone with a bike.

## GOLF PORTUGAL

**Location:** Portugal

**Date:** 02-07 October

**Application deadline:** 01 July

Enjoy three rounds of golf in a stunning location in the Algarve. Golfers of all abilities are welcome, but you must have a handicap.

## Who can apply?

This is not suitable for wheelchair users.

## Requirements:

Members must have EHIC or GHIC health insurance cards and they must also be triple vaccinated.

## SOLDIER RIDE NYC

**Location:** New York

**Date:** 10-17 July

**Application deadline:** 01 April

A prestigious event in the cycling calendar and a privilege to be invited back year after year. Cycle around New York for three days with the Wounded Warrior Project finishing with a huge celebration. An absolute must for any keen cyclist.

## Who can apply?

Anyone who can use some form of adaptive bike. These will be supplied by the Wounded Warrior Project. Please note: temperatures will be hot and you will be expected to cycle more than 70 miles in three days.

## Requirements:

You must be able to enter the USA (ESTA), your passport must have at least six months' validity during the time of travel, and you must be triple vaccinated.

## TURN TO STARBOARD SAILING

**Location:** Cornwall

**Date:** 31 July – 04 August

**Application deadline:** 15 April

A chance to sail the Cornish Coast. You will get an introduction to sailing, learn to work as a team, be taught important skills such as navigation, and experience life on the seas. This activity is suitable for beginners and those with more experience who are looking to hone their skills. There are opportunities to develop teamwork and navigation skills.

## Who can apply?

Any Member, but please be aware that there will be steps and ladders on board the boat.



## EGX London

**Location:** Excel Centre, London

**Date:** 12 October

**Application deadline:** 01 July

Blesma is offering Members the opportunity to attend the EGX video game convention at the Excel Centre in London. EGX is the UK's premier video games show and is a celebration of all things gaming. This will be a day event and may also include gaming on the day.

**Who can apply?** Any Member



An underwater photograph showing two divers in a clear blue environment. One diver is positioned higher in the water, while the other is lower, both appearing to be on a vertical rope that extends from the surface down towards the seabed. The seabed is rocky and covered with some marine life. The lighting is bright, suggesting a shallow depth.

## Discover the thrill of scuba diving

### DIVING LONG WEEKEND

**Location:** UK (TBC)

**Date:** July (TBC)

**Application deadline:** 01 April

Brush up on your diving skills with some of the UK's best diving. With tuition from experienced divers, the event will give Members an opportunity to get back in the water post-Covid and return to the social aspects of diving.

**Who can apply?**

Divers must hold relevant qualifications.

### SCUBA DIVING EXPEDITION

**Location:** Egypt (TBC)

**Date:** October

**Application deadline:** 01 July

A great chance to enjoy some of the world's best scuba diving in warm water. You can dive for fun or work to pick up a number of diving qualifications. Instructors will take you through everything you need to know at a weekend training session in the UK prior to the trip. Complete novices are welcome, however, please note that you will have to attend and undertake the mandatory training.

**Who can apply?**

Anyone who can move up and down stairs on a 60ft dive boat with minimal assistance.

**Requirements:**

You must be able to enter Egypt, you must have six months' validity on your passport at the time of travel, and you must be triple vaccinated.

# Activities

## CHRISTMAS MARKETS COUPLES WEEKEND

**Location:** Cologne, Germany

**Date:** 01-04 December

**Application deadline:** 15 August

A weekend break to get into the Christmas spirit. A chance to enjoy the historic city of Cologne and its world-famous Christmas markets. Explore Angel Market, the oldest Christmas market in Cologne. Soak up the festivities, relax with your partner and enjoy the company of other Blesma couples.

**Who can apply?**

Any Member

**Requirements:**

You must have six months' validity on your passport at the time of travel, and you must be triple vaccinated.

## NRA ADAPTIVE SHOOTING

**Location:** Bisley, Surrey

**Date:** 21-22 June

**Application deadline:** 01 April

This competition is open to any disabled ex-Service personnel. A fantastic chance



to re-live and redefine the skills learned during those fun days on the ranges!

**Who can apply?**

Any Member

## AUTUMN WIDOWS AND SENIORS WEEKS

**Location:** Alvaston Hall, Cheshire

**Date:** Widows Week September (TBC)

Seniors Week September (TBC)

**Application deadline:** 01 June

Based at one of the prestigious Warner hotels, the focus of the week will be on relaxing and socialising with gentle activities and sightseeing opportunities in and around Cheshire.

**Who can apply?**

Seniors Weeks are open to Members, spouses, and Widow(er)s over the age of 60. Widows Weeks are for Widows only.

## SENIORS COUPLES CHRISTMAS

**Location:** Warners hotel (TBC)

**Date:** November/December (TBC)

**Application deadline:** 15 August

This will be the first event of its kind for the Association. Members over the age of 60 and their partners can enjoy a festive break at a Warner hotel, complete with carol singing, themed quizzes, cabaret, movies and panto.

**Who can apply?**

Any Member who is over the age of 60 with their spouse or partner.



Apply now by emailing  
[eventscal@blesma.org](mailto:eventscal@blesma.org)  
or calling 020 8548 7097

## Remembrance Weekend

**Location:** London

**Date:** 11-12 November

**Application deadline:** 15 July

The annual Blesma Remembrance Parade at the Cenotaph over Remembrance Weekend. One of the most poignant events in the Blesma calendar.

**Who can apply?**

Any Member.

Apply now by emailing  
[eventscal@blesma.org](mailto:eventscal@blesma.org)  
or calling 020 8548 7097



## WOULD YOU LIKE TO PUT ON AN ACTIVITY?

If so, we'd love to hear from you! The Activities Team is available to give you as much support as you need in organising an activity and can explain exactly what you'll need to do. First, you will need to complete the Activities Proposal Application Form which is on the website, or you can contact [aelocal@blesma.org](mailto:aelocal@blesma.org)

You will be able to discuss the things you'll need to consider about the activity and venue to ensure everything runs smoothly and that Members/Widows are able to enjoy themselves in a safe environment. Is the activity suitable for those with limited mobility? Is the venue accessible and wheelchair friendly? Are there accessible toilets?

Blesma will pay for the cost of hiring the venue, the activity itself, refreshments and, where appropriate, accommodation. Please get in touch with the Activities Team if you would like to learn more.





# IRAQ 20 YEARS ON

TWO DECADES AFTER THE BEGINNING OF THE SECOND IRAQ WAR, TWO BLESMA MEMBERS RECALL THE EVENTS LEADING UP TO THEIR INJURIES IN A CONFLICT THAT CHANGED THE LANDSCAPE OF BATTLEFIELD TRAUMA FOREVER

**T**his March sees the twentieth anniversary of the start of the Second Iraq War, which required the biggest deployment of British Armed Forces since WWII. It was a politically complex conflict, initially targeting dictator Saddam Hussein and his brutal Ba'athist regime. The conditions for the war had been set two years earlier; following the Al Qaeda attacks on the United States on 11 September, 2001 Prime Minister Tony Blair made a vow to stand with his American allies. Citing the NATO tenet that an attack on one member was an attack on them all, the UK took part in the operation to oust Al Qaeda in Afghanistan

But US President George W. Bush also had his eye on Saddam. His father, George Bush Senior, had led the coalition that had pushed back Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1991 – but it had never toppled the regime. The new Bush administration claimed Saddam was breaking international law by developing weapons of mass destruction, and was refusing to allow UN weapons inspectors into the country.

Despite anti-war protests at home, Tony Blair gained the backing of the House of

Commons to commit the UK to joining the US in military action. On 20 March, an ultimatum for Saddam to vacate Iraq ran out and invasion began led by American and British troops. Some 130,000 troops were from America, with 45,000 more coming from the British Army – roughly a quarter of the overall fighting force.

The initial tactic was known as 'shock and awe': the use of tremendous force, from several directions, to overwhelm the enemy. The British deployment was known as Operation Telic (a Greek word for decisive action), with the 1st Armoured Division, under Major General Robert Brims, at its core. It included 16 Air Assault Brigade, 102 Logistics Brigade, and 7th Armoured Brigade, which were equipped with Challenger 2 tanks and Warrior armoured vehicles. 3 Commando Brigade Royal Marines were also under Brims' command.

While many troops had previously served in peacekeeping operations in places like Bosnia and Kosovo, this type of military offensive, and particularly desert warfare, would have been unlike anything much of their generation would have seen before.

The initial phase of the conflict, tasked with 'regime change' – the vanquishing of

the Ba'athist regime – lasted just a month. Iraq's poorly equipped Infantry troops folded rapidly under pressure from a combined might of armoured vehicles, artillery, helicopters and air strikes. Vital ports and oilfields soon fell under coalition control, and British troops captured the tactically crucial city of Basra.

While regular Iraqi soldiers abandoned their bases, Saddam's loyal Fedayeen fighters did mount a resistance, with snipers and ambushes their main methods of offence. British casualties began to rack up.

### CHANGING FACE OF WARFARE

The capital city was captured on 09 April, after the six-day 'Battle of Baghdad'. Kirkuk and Tikrit quickly fell. 172 coalition troops were killed in this initial phase of the war, including 33 from the UK.

President Bush soon gave his 'Mission Accomplished' speech on board the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln. But his speech hinted that this was really just the beginning of the struggle. "Our mission continues," he said. "We have difficult work to do in Iraq. We are bringing order to parts of the country that remain dangerous."

Saddam and his allies had gone into hiding – but political stability was a long way away. The void in Iraq's leadership was filled by sectarian violence, insurgency and chaos. The war would last until 2011, with British Service personnel remaining in the country until 2009.

It was during this insurgency that the vast majority of British fatalities, and life-changing injuries, would be sustained: from bomb attacks, sniper fire, firefights and improvised explosive devices.

Overall, 179 British Service personnel died serving in the war, 136 of them as a direct result of hostile action. Around 3,500 servicemen and women were injured, with an estimated 2,000 requiring some form of medical evacuation. The Army's Infantry units were particularly heavily hit.

It was amid this conflict that Blesma Members such as Stephen Shine and Lionel O'Connor were seriously injured. The use of IEDs, in particular, would lead to a generation of Service personnel sustaining battlefield injuries the likes of which had never been seen before. In turn, this would require Blesma to address a complex new set of requirements that would need to be put in place in aid of its Members over the coming years.



## Stephen Shine

**STEPHEN, FROM LONDON, LOST HIS LEFT LEG ABOVE THE KNEE WHEN HIS CHALLENGER 2 TANK WAS CAUGHT IN AN IED BLAST IN BASRA IN 2007**

**W**hen a roadside bomb hidden in a barrel exploded underneath the driving seat of Stephen's Challenger 2 tank he bore the brunt of the blast. Twenty years after the war began, Stephen takes us back to the events surrounding his injury...

### **When did you decide you wanted to join the Army?**

I grew up in Paddington, London and left school when I was 16. I went to work with

**"My mum had been told I was going to die. I'd lost pints of blood. When I woke up, my leg was gone"**

my dad as a builder and was starting to make good money, but I was hanging out with bad people and my life was heading in the wrong direction. The Second Iraq War was being fought; I wanted to see what was going on and there was only one way to do that. I literally walked off the building site one Friday afternoon and headed straight to the Careers Office. That weekend, I was ready to go to Pirbright for training.

### **Did you enjoy military life?**

I flew through training and ended up joining the 2nd Royal Tank Regiment. I'd seen the Challenger 2 tank and I liked the idea of driving one. I went out to Iraq in October 2006, I couldn't wait and had to change squadrons to get out there as quickly as possible. I was with my mates, and initially I enjoyed it. I didn't have long before I was due to go home when the incident happened.

### **Talk us through the incident...**

We were in Basra, and I was the lead call sign in a convoy trying to find a bomb maker. We were diverted down a path and I immediately knew something was off; I'd been there for five-and-a-half months, so I knew the area like the back of my hand. I said to my commander: 'I'm not happy





**Stephen quit his job as a builder to join the Royal Tank Regiment and deployed to Basra in 2006**

“I didn’t want to check my legs because I knew I was in trouble. I was too scared to look”



When Stephen's Challenger 2 tank was hit, his driver's seat took the full force of the blast



with this, I don't want to keep going? That's what they told us to say if we felt as though something was wrong. But because I was the first vehicle, it made things awkward. Nobody behind me could move.

**So you had to keep going?**

Yes. We were funnelled by bollards through to a rubbish tip. I thought that the Iraqis might have built it so they could block out our night sights by starting a fire, or could try to launch an ambush, but I was in a 65-ton tank, so I didn't feel too unsafe. We reached a barrel in the road and had to stop. I told my commander we couldn't move until we'd blown it to bits. We put loads of rounds into it and nothing happened. There was pressure from HQ to continue, so I drove around it, and BOOM! that was it.

**It was an IED?**

Yes. The road had been dug up so the device could be buried. Our guys who looked at it later said it was the biggest one of its kind they'd ever seen. The bomb had been buried and the road completely re-laid. Tyres had even been burned over it to disguise the work. Under my driver's seat, there was a drain plug and it took a direct hit. I thought: 'I'm dead, I'm done'. The blast blew my headset off, the noise was deafening.

**Did you realise the extent of your injuries?**

I didn't want to check my legs because I knew I was in trouble. I went to open



Stephen's service medal from Iraq (far left) has great sentimental value



Stephen's dogs have played a huge part in his physical and mental rehabilitation



Right: money in Stephen's pocket was lacerated by shrapnel in the blast

the hatch and my fingers were hanging off. I was too scared to check anything else after that. I just waited. The operator in the tank put a tourniquet on me. It felt like I was sitting there forever but he saved my life!

#### What happened next?

My legs were mincemeat, I was a real mess. One of the guys who got me out of the tank later told me that when he pulled me out my leg just separated. He said the smell had made him want to throw up. I remember being put onto a stretcher and being able to see silhouettes of soldiers in firing positions, putting in a ring of support to get me out. I was put into a Warrior, then a helicopter, and that was the last thing I remember.

I've been told it took just 45 minutes to get me from the blast back to Camp Bastion.

#### You fell into a coma?

Yes. I woke up a week later in Birmingham and couldn't grasp what was going on at all. I thought I was still in my tank on operations. One minute I was fighting on the front line, the next minute I was lying in a hospital bed with my mate and my mum there. Coming out the coma was the worst. My right hand had been shattered, so I could only use my left arm – my mum had to feed me ice cream. I'd lost so much weight; I was down to about six-and-a-half stone. My hearing was messed up, I couldn't speak...

#### It must have been awful for your family...

My mum had been told I was going to die. I'd lost pints and pints of blood. They put an injection into my heart to slow it down to its lowest possible rate. They weren't sure if it would kill me or help me, but I would definitely have bled out without it. When I woke up, my left leg was gone.

#### How was rehab?

Initially, I was in the hospital for three months, which was horrible, and then I went to Headley Court, which was a struggle, too. I was on so much medication, I couldn't do anything. My attitude was that the staff there couldn't do anything for me. But a guy called Mick took me under his wing and was a massive help. Once I came off the medication, I got into a routine and started to recover. I met blokes there who

**"My legs were mincemeat and when I went to open the hatch my fingers were hanging off!"**

have become friends forever. Eventually, I got really fit, and am now avidly into Crossfit.

#### You've overcome challenges since...

I deployed to Afghanistan on another operational tour in 2009. I wanted to be back out there with my mates again, but I hated it because I was stuck in camp.

I left the Army for good in 2015. I still get horrendous Phantom Limb Pain, which really affects my sleep, but I was doing OK for a few years. Covid really messed up a lot of things for me though, including my fitness.

#### When did you first encounter Blesma?

It has been there for me pretty much from day one; the Association was by my bedside in the hospital in Birmingham. Two Members came to visit me, and I was amazed because one of the guys had two prosthetic legs but he'd turned up on a motorbike! I didn't realise that was possible. I knew nothing about life as an amputee, but from the get-go Blesma has been there to help.

#### How has Blesma helped specifically?

It has helped me get grants for my new flat, which has got me settled. And I've been on some great trips; to Colorado, the Bahamas, Austria and France. They are beautiful places to go and have been so good for my mental health. But the best benefit of Blesma is in meeting a mix of other people. That sense of camaraderie is so helpful; it helps me feel much better.



## Lionel O'Connor

**THE TRAUMATIC EVENTS SURROUNDING LIONEL'S INJURIES HAVE BEEN HARD FOR HIM TO DEAL WITH, BUT HIS FAMILY HAS GIVEN HIM STRENGTH**

**L**ionel served in Iraq with the Royal Anglian Regiment. He lost his left leg above the knee in an attack on his vehicle in 2006, in which two of his comrades were killed.

“My father was ex-Services and I felt like I needed to do something to earn my place in society, so I joined the Army,” says Lionel. “I wanted to be in the Infantry, and my local unit was the Royal Anglian Regiment. I fitted in quickly, but I was injured three months after being deployed to Basra in 2006.

“We were driving in a routine Land Rover patrol and I just remember seeing a big cloud of dust and sparks. I fell backwards and everything went silent. I heard shouting but didn’t know who it was at first. It took a few seconds to realise it was me! I could move three limbs but not my left leg.

“One of the guys I was travelling with had taken me under his wing. We were good friends and he’d taught me how to be a soldier. After the explosion, his face was right by mine. I tried to get him off me but he was unresponsive, and when I opened his eye with my thumb I knew he was dead. Another soldier, Adam, was lying on top

of both of us. He had died too. I was stuck. When the door was finally opened, blood poured out of the back of the vehicle like a river. I felt for my knee, and touched the bone that was sticking out. My left leg had been blown off and I had shrapnel in my right leg. I passed out in the helicopter.”

Lionel was evacuated to the UK and was taken straight to Selly Oak. “It didn’t take me long to get up and walking – I was using a prosthetic within three months. Rehab



**Lionel joined the Royal Anglian Regiment in 2006 and deployed to Iraq soon after he passed out of training**

was ok because I was fit, but it got tougher over the years. I’ve had dark times, but always knew that if I did anything silly to myself, my family would suffer. My eldest son saw me at my worst – when I was very angry – but my children have helped. I have four kids and a partner, who were there for me when I needed them, so I need to be here for them now. And I’ve thought a lot about the guys who were killed – they didn’t have the choice to waste their lives!”


### FEELING GOOD HELPING OTHERS

According to Lionel, Blesma was there for him right from the start. “I didn’t know about the charity before I was injured, but the great thing with Blesma is it knows exactly what to do. They don’t ask anything of you, they just say: ‘How can we help?’

“I was discharged from the Army in 2014 and for a long time I felt like I didn’t need help, but my drinking got worse. I still have ups and downs. I’ve struggled to get my weight down, but I do a lot of swimming now and I’ve realised that helping other people makes me feel good about myself.

“I’ve taken part in Making Generation R. Being able to share my story has helped me massively. I’m not the best public speaker in the world, but helping the students and getting them thinking has given me a good feeling; I had some troubles as a kid, so I know how to relate to many of them.

“I have been on three trips with Blesma and that opened my eyes to a new world, and I also do some work with Mission Motorsport [*a charity that uses motorsport as a recovery tool and helps injured Service leavers to find jobs in the auto industry*]. I love it when you see people chatting after not talking much at first.”

A close-up photograph of a man with a full, dark beard and mustache. He is wearing a grey military uniform jacket over a red shirt. He is adjusting a green beret with a red and white insignia on his head with both hands. The background is a blurred indoor setting with blue walls and some framed pictures.

Lionel lost his left leg  
above the knee when  
the Land Rover he  
was travelling in was  
struck by an IED

**“I’ve had dark times,  
but always knew that if  
I did anything silly, it  
would be my family  
that would suffer”**

# “I AM IN AWE OF HOW ALISON HAS BOUNCED BACK FROM THIS”

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ALMOST THREE DECADES AFTER SERVING IN THE ROYAL AIR FORCE, ALISON EVANS ONCE AGAIN FOUND STRENGTH AND CAMARADERIE IN THE MILITARY COMMUNITY. THIS TIME AS A BLESMA MEMBER AND TRIPLE AMPUTEE

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**A**lison Evans, 63, served with the Royal Air Force for 14 years, leaving as a sergeant in 1992. In 2019, she was admitted to A&E with excruciating stomach pains but was misdiagnosed with food poisoning and sent home. Alison was soon blue-lighted back to hospital where she underwent emergency surgery before falling into a coma. She was actually suffering from a potentially deadly kidney blockage which led to her developing sepsis. When she woke from her coma, she was faced with the devastating realisation

that she would have to undergo a triple amputation, losing both legs below the knee and her left hand, as well as the tips of the fingers on her right hand. This is her story...

**Can you tell us a bit about your career?**

I joined the Women's Royal Air Force (WRAF) in 1978. At the time, due to family circumstances, I wanted to leave home and become independent. I couldn't have chosen a better career, and my family were proud. I worked with Phantoms at RAF Coningsby, Vulcans at RAF Waddington, and Harriers at RAF Cottesmore. I can still name the different aircraft, but the Vulcans are my favourite.







Words: Nick Moore Photography: Andy Bate

Alison (middle) was told she had to have a triple amputation in 2019





## “WITH THE BENEFIT OF HINDSIGHT, I WISH THEY’D AMPUTATED RIGHT AWAY. FROM GETTING SEPSIS IN JUNE 2019 I HAD MY FIRST OPERATION SIX MONTHS LATER”

### **Your future husband also served...**

Yes, he was in the RAF too and we lived all over the UK and in Cyprus. I left the Forces when we had our daughters; I brought up the kids and did lots of jobs wherever my husband, Emyr, was based.

### **But you became unwell out of the blue?**

Back in 2019 I began to feel very tired and lacking in energy. I was sent for a scan but was told I was healthy. I was losing weight and wasn't feeling like myself. I came home from a dog walk one day with a pain in my abdomen. It became very painful so I called 999. I was rushed to A&E but unfortunately I was misdiagnosed. The doctors didn't give me a scan, and I swiftly developed sepsis.

### **And your condition soon became critical?**

I was rushed back to hospital but I can't remember a thing after getting into the ambulance. I was in a coma for three weeks. Doctors called my family to my bedside at one point because the prognosis was so bad.

### **What do you remember from the early days after you came around?**

It was awful. I couldn't speak because I'd had a tracheotomy. I tried to communicate with my family through sign language, but that was frustrating. I was dazed and could see that there was obvious damage to my arms and legs; that was my biggest concern.

### **When did you realise that the amputations were necessary?**

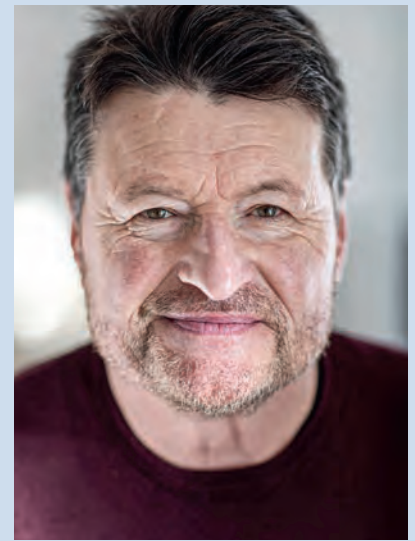
The surgeon, who happened to be a Royal Naval Officer, thought there might be some hope of recovery, but after six months of trying to save my limbs it became clear that amputation was the only route. With the benefit of hindsight, I wish they'd amputated right away rather than me having that fruitless hope. From getting sepsis in June 2019 I had my first operation six months later, in the December.

### **How was your rehab?**

The initial aftermath was horrendous. Emyr probably took the brunt of it because our daughters have grown up and moved away. But as soon as I was pointed in the direction of prosthetics I was fast tracked, so that helped a lot. By March 2020 I had prosthetic legs, and I taught myself to walk during lockdown. It's been a long process.

### **Everyone around you says how positive you have remained...**

This is not something I would want anyone to go through, and I obviously wish it hadn't happened, but as my eldest daughter keeps telling me; I'm still here. You have to look for the positives and get on with life. One of the consultants on the amputation ward told me that he'd never heard laughter on



## THE FEAR IS FELT BY THE WHOLE FAMILY

**A**mputation doesn't just affect the individual: it is distressing for family members too. Emyr Evans, who served in the RAF from 1983 to 2012, had it about as tough as any partner could.

“When Alison was taken to A&E, we trusted the doctors, but she was misdiagnosed. At her age, she should have had scans, but the doctor asked if we'd eaten out the night before and sent us home with paracetamol. The next morning, Alison felt much worse and she went back to A&E, but the signs of sepsis were already there.”

Emyr was told to contact his daughters in case the worst should happen.

“You end up numb, on autopilot. They did stabilise Alison and got the infection out, but we were told she could have brain damage. The medics had been protecting her vital organs, but her limbs were developing gangrene. The whole episode was as stressful as anything you can imagine!”

“But I am in awe of how she has bounced back,” he says. “Strangers tell her how inspiring she is, and our friends are so impressed. She must be as hard as nails to come back from this.”

Blesma has played a part in Alison's journey. “In the beginning, we were at a loss about who to contact, but from the moment we found the Association, they've been fantastic. Their prosthetics advice, their visits, the way they bring people together... Blesma knows what being an amputee means.”



**Alison (pictured in the photograph) served in the WRAF from 1978 until 1992**

## “THROUGH BLESMA YOU MEET PEOPLE WITH DIFFERENT DISABILITIES; YOU ALL TALK TO EACH OTHER AND SHARE THINGS. IT HAS BEEN INVALUABLE”

the ward until he heard me joking with some of the other ladies one day.

### **And you're still able to enjoy life?**

I'm getting on brilliantly with my prosthetic legs. I'm never going to be like the younger amputees – my fitness just isn't there – but I do well enough and I can get around. I went to see Robbie Williams in concert in Manchester towards the end of last year, and I've got lots planned for 2023. I'm walking better all the time, and my friends are impressed. I can't walk for miles, but I am able to get around short distances without needing to use a wheelchair.

### **How much has your family helped?**

I've had amazing support from my daughters and my husband. I need help with things like putting my prosthetics on and getting into the shower, so I couldn't live independently. I can't dry my hair like I used to, I can't do up buttons or get dressed like I used to. I need help, but my husband can still go out; he likes to keep fit, and I'm OK on my own in the house when he's out. My daughters have moved away from home, but they are a great support, too. My eldest is a doctor in the geology department at Oslo University, and my youngest is involved in marketing for River Island and lives in Brixton, so I'm a very proud mum.

### **How has Blesma helped?**

After my amputations, Emyr reached out to a few charities and Blesma was the only one that got back to us. We weren't looking for money, just to find some connections and advice. All I can say is thank goodness he found Blesma because the charity is fantastic. The best thing about it for me



is the way it connects you with other people. I wouldn't have known there are folk with similar issues living close by. It is so beneficial; it gives you a real sense of community.

### **It's that 'Member helping Member' philosophy, isn't it?**

Yes. We have had a little bit of financial help from Blesma, but that's not what it's about; it is all about making those vital social connections. I now know lots of Blesma Members and what they've been through. I've got their contact details in case I need to call them, and we have local meet-ups and brunches. We went for a Christmas lunch with them last year, which was brilliant. It was only 10 minutes away from where we live. No other charity has offered me that kind of social interaction.

### **And the Association has also helped you with a new mobility chair...**

Yes. I had mentioned to my Support Officer at one point that I was going to get a mobility chair that could fit into Em's car. I had absolutely no intention of asking for any money from Blesma but the Association wouldn't hear of it and made a contribution towards it. I just thought: what wonderful people. Without Blesma, I'd be lost.

### **Is there anything you would like to do with Blesma in the future?**

I've enjoyed the social side of things already. We've been to a seniors' residential event in Nantwich, and we made some good friends there. I also went to the women's only event in Sheffield last year. There were people there of all ages and they were all very nice. It's lovely to meet new Members and do different things.

### **There are lots of activities, too...**

I can't really see myself taking part in things like scuba diving, but I do plan to do more social things. At Blesma events people talk to you and give you advice and empathy. You meet people with all different disabilities; whether it's someone who has used a wheelchair for 40 years, someone who has had a double amputation, or someone who's missing an eye. Either way, you all talk to each other and share things. The Association has been invaluable.

“As my eldest daughter keeps telling me; I’m still here. You have to look for the positives and get on with life,” says Alison





Words: Danny Buckland Photography: Andy Bate

**CARING AND COPING:**

# LIVING WITH THE LOSS OF USE OF LIMB

AFTER TWO YEARS OF RESEARCH, THE FINDINGS OF AN IN-DEPTH STUDY INTO THE LIVES OF MEMBERS WITH LOSS OF USE OF LIMB ARE SOON TO BE PUBLISHED. SO WHAT CAN WE EXPECT TO LEARN?



**HILARY ENGWARD**  
Associate Professor at  
Anglia Ruskin University



**BRIAN CHENIER**  
Blesma Support Officer  
(Prosthetics)

**T**he knowledgeable voices that often go unheard when it comes to the challenges of living with the loss of use of a limb have been given sound and impact in a major new research study from Blesma. Members have revealed their private struggles as well as the pressures on their families and relationships, along with their hopes for greater understanding in the project. The findings will help shape support services and create a new dialogue about living with the many and varied types of loss of use of limb.

The study, which took detailed insights from 84 Members and their families, is a follow up to the *Caring and Coping: Living with Limb Loss* research that was published in 2018. That study was instrumental in establishing new guidelines and care provision across both the military and civilian sectors.

The latest report delves into the rhythm of daily lives and probes areas of often unspoken challenges where Members and families struggle to share and articulate their emotional feelings and physical needs. The aim? To understand and value differences across this population.

“There was a gap in understanding how living without the use of a limb, as opposed to living with limb loss, affects people so we wanted to learn more about the everyday experiences of the individual and their kinship

**“THERE WAS A GAP IN UNDERSTANDING HOW LIVING WITHOUT THE USE OF A LIMB, AS OPPOSED TO LIVING WITH LIMB LOSS, AFFECTS PEOPLE”**

carers,” says Dr Hilary Engward, Associate Professor at the Veterans & Families Institute for Military Social Research at Anglia Ruskin University, who led this and the previous research programme. “We wanted to identify the barriers they experience and, more importantly, how they overcome them. From this, we can inform policy and practice in military veterans as well as in civilian life. The experiences of living with the loss of use of a limb are varied and we need to raise the visibility of all these experiences.

“Whether loss of use occurs through trauma or because of a chronic condition, the future is thrown into uncertainty and it is very difficult to plan ahead. Alongside that, the immediate family is witnessing that person trying to deal with the loss – it can feel like a whirlwind with lots of changes taking place. Making sense of that, for everyone, is a challenge. The questions they experience are: ‘How do I make sense of what I’m feeling? How on earth do we talk about this?’ They don’t want to upset anyone, particularly the person dealing with the loss, but how do you express your emotions or say you’re scared?

“It is the silent aspect of living with the loss, or caring for someone and witnessing what they are going through, that hits us the most.”

### THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF PEOPLE

The research, carried out over two years, includes Members of all ages and backgrounds who share their hopes, fears and the lighter moments of fun and banter that characterise their daily lives. Their open testimonies provide valuable insights into the need to draw greater flexibility into support services.

“People don’t fit neatly into boxes,” adds Dr Engward. “But unless the individual has some kind of crisis that needs immediate help, that flex in the system is not there to support the family. We need to be able to focus on everything from practical pressure points, like paying the mortgage, through to managing emotions such as how to not be grumpy with each other.

“Our research is very much grounded in the lived experiences of people and the key finding was that lack of stability in their lives; there’s constant change. You can be fairly stable one day, but not the next and this can be for many reasons both emotional and physical. There is real uncertainty in the everyday experience so being able to recognise and understand these uncertainties, and to talk about them, is key to managing them. That is where we need change.”

*Caring and Coping: Living with the Loss of Use of Limb*, which will be published in the coming months, will contain a series of recommendations designed to guide families to view and discuss their challenges and uncertainties and to inform organisations, such as Blesma, on how they can better support Members. It was funded by the Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT), which also funded the first report.

“We have been working with Blesma since 2016 and the first report was a key work that revealed lots of previously unexplored detail,” says Rob Thorburn, senior



**“THERE’S CONSTANT CHANGE AND REAL UNCERTAINTY IN THE EVERYDAY EXPERIENCE. BEING ABLE TO RECOGNISE AND UNDERSTAND THE UNCERTAINTIES, AND TO THEN TALK ABOUT THEM, IS KEY TO MANAGING THEM. THAT IS WHERE WE NEED CHANGE!”**



**“There are two very different perspectives involved. We have had to change over the years; we’ve adapted together,” says Chris Kettrick**

share the roles in the household, that’s good. I did find that hard to talk about but I’m much better now. It is having the understanding to accept that and realise you are not losing your independence.”

The need for partnership came into sharp focus after Martin had a shoulder operation and had to spend a lot of time in bed after being discharged early from hospital. “We didn’t have the equipment we needed and Chris had to turn me over at night. That was terrible and I found that very difficult,” Martin says. “Chris coped with it and made sure I kept to the discipline of my exercises, and from that I got a better long-term outcome.”

Chris says: “Hilary spoke to Martin and then she spoke to me because there are two very different perspectives involved. Because Martin has been using his chair for almost 42 years now, we have a lot of experience. We have had to change over the years; we are into preserve and conserve now rather than being gung-ho and swinging in and out of the car. We’ve adapted together.

“The time after his shoulder operation was one of the worst we’ve had but if one of us gets down, the other one rises to take on the challenges. If one of us is struggling, the other takes over.”

Martin agrees: “We all want to be fiercely independent, and in the Service community we can be a bit too stubborn. It was great to be a part of the research, and we hope it will help others cope better and understand each other more.”

## MARTIN AND CHRIS KETTRICK

**MARTIN HAS BEEN USING A WHEELCHAIR FOR THE LAST 40 YEARS. HE AND HIS WIFE, CHRIS, SAW THE STUDY AS A CHANCE TO SHARE THEIR LEARNING**

**M**artin and Chris Kettrick, who have been living with the loss of use of limb for almost 42 years, were interviewed by the Anglia Ruskin team to understand how the couple adapted to life after Martin was badly injured in an abseiling accident whilst serving with the Royal Marines.

Martin, now 64, became a paraplegic after a training exercise went wrong and he left the Marines in 1982. The couple, from Cheadle, spoke with Dr Engward and her team over a series of interviews.

“It was an informal chat and it helped reveal a lot of the stuff that we take for granted that could actually be very useful for other people,” says Martin. “I don’t think we appreciated how much

integration we have as a couple and how much we work together.”

Chris and Martin shared how they have coped with different physical challenges over the years, how they communicate and work together, and how they have had to adapt through different phases of their lives.

“You learn new things about your body as you age and it is vital to be able to pass experiences on,” says Martin. “Communication can be a challenge and it is difficult because the relationship roles change, even if it is sometimes only slightly. I used to feel terrible when I saw Chris outside scraping the gutters or mowing the lawn. I felt a bit of shame that something had been taken away – that was really my role.

“It can be upsetting, but if you can start to understand that although you can’t do those jobs, there are others you can do to





grants and data officer at FiMT. “It led to a Living With Limb Loss Support Model which was adopted by the NHS and incorporated into The Royal College of General Practitioners’ training programmes.

“This report will be equally as important for our understanding and to make sure the right support is available. The negative impact of uncertainty comes across very strongly and the response may not necessarily be about increasing resources but about being more responsible and flexible with support.

“It was absolutely critical to place the veterans and their families at the heart of this research. Their input will shape future policy and practice, and we are very grateful for Blesma Members’ involvement. The value of working with Blesma and the Anglia Ruskin team is key to the high quality output of this report.”

### UNDERSTANDING MEMBERS’ LIVES

For Brian Chenier, Blesma Support Officer (Prosthetics), it was important for the Association to really understand the lives of its Members who are living with loss of use of limb. “We understood that there could be implications across the wider family for people living with the loss of use of a limb and because our main mission is to help our Members lead independent lives, we really need to understand their lives,” says Brian. “It isn’t about finding a gap in services and pressuring the Government to do something. It is about understanding our Members’ needs and meeting them by delving into their lives. This research will enable us to take stock and understand what is going on for Members and their families, and not assume anything.

“It’s about understanding and accepting that different things are happening at different times in different families. And actually, that sometimes, different things

are happening within the same family.” The report will be distributed across the healthcare sector and will also be used by Blesma Support Officers, Outreach Officers and other Member-facing staff.

“It will broaden their knowledge and help them avoid falling into the trap of making assumptions,” adds Brian. “It will also help our teams understand the conversations they need to have, when to have them and who to have them with. It won’t significantly change what we do because we deliver a welfare output based on individuals and their family situation at any given time. But it will give us a confidence and a guide to what conversations need to be had across a range of themes from emotional stress to practical issues, such as how to talk about managing chronic pain.”

### DEVELOPING A CONVERSATION PROTOCOL

Dr Engward and the Anglia Ruskin research team have developed a ‘conversation protocol’ from the findings which has a series of steps to open up safe conversations to help share burdens and work towards understanding.

“It’s about finding that right emotional space to have safe conversations. The research participants were really clear about that because they’d had many that they didn’t feel were safe,” says Dr Engward. “The protocol was developed directly from what they told us and this will be shared across the health and social care sector. We make sense of things through discussion and dialogue, but there needs to be an understanding that there are times when people are not ready to talk.

“This applies to the whole family. It may work for some families but other individuals might need to speak to people outside of the family unit, so it is important to have access to talking therapies. Children also need to have space for safe conversations and we need the education system to be aware of families with a kinship caring role and have adequate, flexible services that can respond to their experiences.

“It has been incredibly rewarding working on the report and the cooperation, good will and honesty of Blesma’s Members has been crucial to creating something that can make a difference. It will help Blesma in its work and we will share it with other organisations, as we did with the first report, so that it can inform discussions, policy and practice. It will be exciting to see where this can lead and the potential benefits it can bring.”

*The findings of the study, along with an idea of just how they will be used for the benefit of Members, will be published in the summer issue of the magazine*

**“THE COOPERATION, GOOD WILL AND HONESTY OF BLESMA MEMBERS HAS BEEN CRUCIAL TO CREATING SOMETHING THAT CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE”**

**“This research will enable us to take stock and understand what is going on for Members and their families, and not assume anything,” says Brian Chenier BSO (Prosthetics)**



SEVERAL BLESMA MEMBERS  
HAVE TAKEN PART IN A NATIONAL  
ARMY MUSEUM EXHIBITION AND  
PANEL DISCUSSION ABOUT THEIR  
UNIQUE EXPERIENCES ON THE

# ROAD TO RECOVERY





“I wanted this to be a hopeful exhibition; these people have suffered but have managed to build a new life,” says curator Sophie Stathi

**B**attlefield medicine has pushed the boundaries of capability in recent years and ‘unexpected survivors’ have been given hope and rehabilitation pathways that were unimaginable a generation ago. But the road to recovery from life-changing physical injury or mental trauma is fraught with new challenges for medical and support teams as well as those who are rebuilding their lives.

Their journeys are explored in *Road to Recovery*, an exhibition running at the National Army Museum (NAM) which features the testimonies of Blesma Members Simon Brown, Dave Henson and Harry Parker, as well as former Army officer Gemma Morgan and Victoria Cross recipient Johnson Beharry. It frames the challenges they faced after life-changing injury and how they, medics and support staff slowly constructed ways of coping with their revised physical and psychological futures.

The roles of medical and support staff feature large in the exhibition, with visitors greeted by a panel displaying a quote from Headley Court physiotherapist Major Peter Le Feuvre, stating: “Rehabilitation starts the moment a life is saved. From that moment, we start to consider life beyond survival.”

The free exhibition displays symbolic

items from each of the five contributors, ranging from prosthetics to medals, which accompany audio and video contributions on the uncertainties of recovery from both the veterans’ and the clinicians’ viewpoints.

“I wanted to produce an exhibition with a modern focus on Service personnel who had suffered life-changing injuries or severe PTSD,” says Sophie Stathi, NAM’s Senior Curator, Collections Development and Review. “The stories of these unexpected survivors, who might have died if they had been injured a few years earlier, cannot

always be explored in depth in the rest of the museum. I really wanted to follow their stories all the way to what happened later in life, once they had left the Forces.

“It is a critical area because, bearing in mind how young they were when they were injured, they have to live with their injuries for the rest of their lives, and they have to manage them somehow. I wanted this to be a hopeful exhibition; these people have suffered terribly but they have managed to build a completely new and, as they often say themselves, better life.”





Words: Danny Buckland Photography: Stan Papior

Sophie started researching and interviewing for the exhibition as Headley Court was closing and handing over its role as the Defence Medical Rehabilitation Centre to Stanford Hall in Nottinghamshire.

“We asked the five veterans to provide an object that relates to their service or recovery,” she adds, “and have displayed those alongside objects from Headley Court, but their voices are the main draw. Everyone’s journey is different. Some talk about post-traumatic growth, for example, while others talk about post-traumatic stress disorder. I tried to choose people who were different in terms of their injuries, their backgrounds and the lives they built after leaving the Army.

“The exhibition explores the challenges soldiers face, the help they receive, and the resilience they need to continue on their path.”

Simon Brown, Harry Parker and Gemma Morgan gave a compelling insight into their struggles and achievements at a recent Q&A session at the Museum with former soldier and *Declassified* podcast host Michael



**Declassified** podcast host Michael Coates

Coates (above). The trio detailed the moments their lives changed, the initial impact of their injuries and illnesses, and how they gained strength and purpose through their recoveries.

“One of the main elements of recovery is the importance of having people around, whether that is a medical or support team, or friends and family. The road to recovery is much bumpier if you don’t have that,” says Michael, whose award-winning podcast features a range of military figures and delves into post traumatic growth and human development.

“It was great to hear their testimonies. Everyone’s recovery is different and totally

## THE ROAD TO RECOVERY EXHIBITION

*Road to Recovery* is free to attend at the National Army Museum, Royal Hospital Road, London and runs until 28 August.

The first floor exhibition takes visitors through five veterans’ stories, with information panels and audio clips detailing their Service history, the incidents that changed their lives and their individual recovery journeys.

Audio tracks cover each aspect of their story and large-print booklets are available.

The exhibition’s curator Sophie Stathi (below) interviewed veterans who had been treated at Headley Court along with staff at

the facility to create a compelling insight into the collaborative nature of recovery and how it varies from person to person.

“For all who have suffered a life-changing physical or mental injury, the road to recovery is long, hard and often paved with setbacks,” the exhibition states. “This exhibition explores the challenges soldiers face, the help they receive, and the resilience they need to continue on their path.”

**More details about the exhibition can be found at: [www.nam.ac.uk/whats-on/road-recovery](http://www.nam.ac.uk/whats-on/road-recovery)**



The exhibition focuses on Service personnel who have suffered life-changing injuries



Details of Simon Brown’s facial injuries

individual to them. Some people don’t want to talk about it but we have learned so much from Service personnel who have gone through experiences like these. They have taken action and have impacted other people and society on how disability is now viewed, particularly amputation and PTSD. They are not a victim generation, they are a generation of growth and development, highlighting issues and also the positives that have resulted from that.

“They also engage with research at places like King’s College and Imperial College. They are selfless with their injuries and illnesses, and that helps change the future of medicine and other people’s recovery.”





## HARRY PARKER

*HARRY LOST HIS RIGHT LEG ABOVE THE KNEE AND HIS LEFT LEG BELOW THE KNEE IN AN IED BLAST IN AFGHANISTAN IN 2009*

**H**arry, from Wiltshire was a 23-year-old Captain in the 4th Battalion, The Rifles when he was injured. While leading a foot patrol in Afghanistan in 2009 he stepped on an IED and, as a result, had both legs amputated. He was resuscitated three times on the helicopter journey back to Camp Bastion and had 11 operations at Selly Oak Hospital in Birmingham. He is now an artist and the author of two books.

### ON THE INCIDENT

“We were based west of Lashkar Gah and I remember it being very challenging from a leadership, personal and operational point

of view. People were getting hurt. It was a very unpredictable patch. On the day I was injured we had been on an operation and were just withdrawing. I didn’t feel that the situation was lethal. The sun was coming up and it felt sort of relaxed in a way.

“We got to a position where I could see the camp and I thought it was time for breakfast. I walked across the field thinking it would be safe but there was an improvised explosive device dug into it. I just remember being flipped over by the violence of it. In some senses I was quite lucky. I had a traumatic amputation of my left leg and my right leg came off because of infection 10 to 15 days later.”

### ON RECOVERY

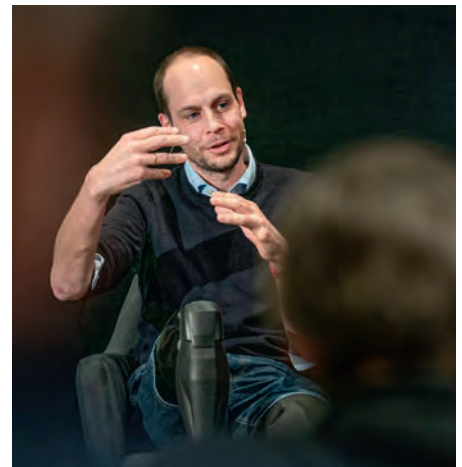
“I came round in intensive care and the doctors, my parents and friends gradually gave me the news. I was in hospital for a total of six weeks and have never been back. I was driven down to Headley Court and then it was the rehab phase; that was a combination of the physiotherapist, the prosthetist and myself – and we were going to learn to walk again together, as a team.

“I was an in-patient for about a year. The entire process of learning to walk all over again felt very positive; the chance to be active and overcome something gave me a sense of purpose.

“My injury, for the most part, is something I now feel quite positive about, but there was a moment when I thought: ‘This is it – I’m not going to get any better. You can throw every £80,000 prosthetic at me but at the end of the day I am disabled.’ I found that hard to swallow because when you are going through recovery, you think you are going to get better. For me, there was a sort of plateau and at that moment it became all about family, finding a new community and a new job, a new purpose – that’s what recovery is for me.

“I think the military has got better at allowing people to find new communities, and I was so lucky with my education and family that I had the opportunity to go back and practise art and write. But I know that lots of people in the military don’t have that.

“Managing the injury becomes a day-to-day thing, quite automatic, so it’s about finding new ways to be a part of a community, being an asset to this country and society as a whole. So many of the injured community are contributing and are an asset to society.”





## GEMMA MORGAN

**GEMMA SUFFERS FROM PTSD AS A RESULT OF WHAT SHE WITNESSED DURING HER TIME IN KOSOVO. SHE ISN'T A BLESMA MEMBER**

**G**emma, from Surrey, was a 24-year-old Captain in the Royal Logistic Corps when she was deployed to Kosovo in 1998 to observe and verify instances of ethnic cleansing. The horrors she witnessed contributed to her PTSD, which was only diagnosed three years after she left the Army, cutting short a career in which she was tipped to be a future Colonel.

### ON THE INCIDENTS

“My job was to verify atrocities taking place which meant building close relationships with the locals. We would pick up on the atrocities and start to film them; these

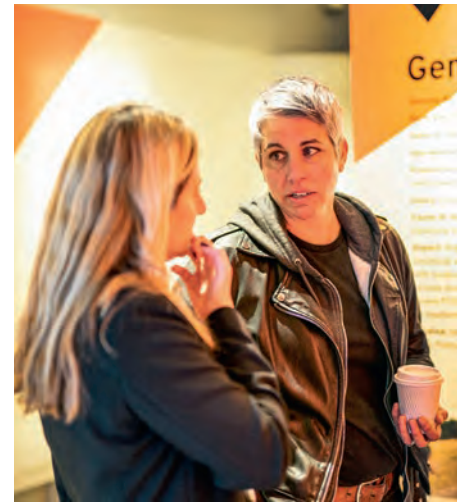
were people you had built relationships with. There were no normal military boundaries in place – we didn’t go back to the barracks at night and hand over to another patrol, we were staying in a house, in the community, being watched. There was a constant threat.

“Children would come and ask us where their dad or brothers had gone. I would keep getting flashbacks from one particular ambush. I’d seen dead bodies before but this was different, the car had been attacked and there were 60 bullets in the passenger’s side. The nightmares were of a woman who came to the front of the cordon and just fell where we were standing. Her boys were in the car. I still remember the noise, the grief, the howl!”

### ON RECOVERY

“I came back home and there was no decompression and no shared experience because I had been the only one from my regiment on that mission. There wasn’t a role for me, so I was given the job of itemising the silver in the Officers’ Mess! I tried to talk about what I had seen but people would stay away from me so I just withdrew. I started self-medicating because I couldn’t sleep – I would drink to be able to sleep and then I’d wake up two hours later. I’d be in the bar earlier and earlier, and there wasn’t anyone to talk to.

“I got some treatment but it was exposure therapy – looking at the photos I had taken in Kosovo. I was put on medication, then I was permanently downgraded because



I’d attempted suicide. I didn’t want to kill myself, I just wanted it to stop. I felt betrayed and angry, and that developed into a rage which set my recovery back and meant that it became far more complex, because there were all these layers over the top of what started out as PTSD.

“I left the Army of my own accord – sticking two fingers up – which I regret now. I struggled for years until I could no longer function. My husband sought private help and I tried all sorts of therapy. It wasn’t that the memories went away but I was able to remove some of the fear from them.

“Living with PTSD is exhausting. Everything is a threat you have to cover off. The biggest turning point has been to take a holistic approach – the breathing, the movement and the cognitive piece have been incredibly helpful; the therapy I’d had before missed the spiritual component.”



## SIMON BROWN

*SIMON LOST THE SIGHT IN BOTH EYES WHEN HE WAS SHOT IN THE FACE WHILST ON OPERATIONS IN IRAQ.*

**S**imon, from Leeds, was a Corporal in the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers. He completed one tour of duty in Kosovo and two in Iraq before he suffered a gunshot wound to the face as he was helping recover stranded comrades in a stricken vehicle on operations. The attack resulted in complete loss of sight in his left eye and 80 per cent loss in his right eye. Simon spent 17 days in an induced coma and has had 25 reconstruction and eye operations over the last decade.

Simon now works for Blind Veterans UK and is a coach for Leeds Rhinos physical disability rugby league team.



### ON THE INCIDENT

“I was in a patrol of five vehicles. We were getting absolutely peppered by the enemy and we wanted to subdue them and withdraw but the driver said he couldn’t see where he needed to go. The other vehicles pulling off had kicked up all this dust, so I put my head out of the turret and said: ‘Yeah, you’re clear, just go!’ and that’s when I felt the impact. The bullet went into my left cheek and out of my right. I put my thumb in my mouth to keep my palate up and we got out of the killing zone.”

### ON RECOVERY

“I woke up in the UK and could hear the doctors saying to my parents that I was blind. I only had light perception. They told me that my left eye had been destroyed and that they didn’t think I’d recover any more vision – that was the dip before my recovery started.

“Because my unit was still away on operations I had to find a new family. I needed to work out what I was going

**“WE LOOK AT WHAT WE DON’T HAVE WHEN WE SHOULD REMEMBER WHAT WE DO HAVE. I AM A SURVIVOR”**

to do next and my community, my family, and the rugby team that I used to play with all rallied around. The rugby guys used to take me out on a Saturday, get me drunk and leave me on my dad’s doorstep. It dawned on me that they didn’t see me as a different person and that awakened in me that I was the same person, I just had different challenges. I was lucky that I had a family and a community outside the military to rely on.

“That mindset started in hospital when I was feeling sorry for myself and found out that two of my mates had died in an IED blast. It got me thinking: ‘Why am I sulking? I’m still here.’ We look at what we don’t have when we should remember what we do have – I am a survivor not a victim. It dawned on me that I needed to refocus my life and my recovery around what I still had instead of what I had lost.”

# Listen Up!

ONE OF THE MOST CONTROVERSIAL NOVELS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY HAS BEEN REIMAGINED FOR BBC RADIO 4 LISTENERS, AND A NUMBER OF BLESMA MEMBERS WERE INVOLVED. ISN'T IT TIME YOU TUNED IN TO *THE CHATTERLEYS*?

**A** radical new version of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* has hit the airwaves with four Blesma Members taking key roles in the BBC Radio 4 adaptation. Steve Watson, Andy Mudd and Jason Burns became part of the cast, with Luke Delahunty joining as script consultant, for a bold version of the scandalous classic which moves the drama from a Nottinghamshire country estate to modern-day Redcar to explore the impact of disability on relationships and family life.

In D. H. Lawrence's original novel, which was written in 1928 but only published in 1960 after a landmark obscenity trial, Sir Clifford Chatterley comes back from WWI paralysed from the waist down and witnesses his wife's affair with their gamekeeper, Mellors.

For the two-part BBC Radio 4 adaptation, which aired in February, playwright Mike Kenny reinterpreted the story, with injured Cliff returning from Afghanistan as the story of love, sex and class is played out in the shadow of the Redcar steelworks. *The Chatterleys*, which was recorded at a farmhouse holiday home in

North Yorkshire rather than in a purpose-built recording studio, features Cliff attending a disabled veterans' support group as he tries to come to terms with his new life using a wheelchair.

"The team was staying in a barn and all the recording equipment was squeezed into a communal room, so it had a very real sense of authenticity about it rather than being in a studio," says Jason Burns, a former Royal Marines Commando, who suffered life-changing injuries in a mortar attack on his base at Lashkar Gah, Afghanistan, in 2011.

"The producers wanted Blesma Members to play the veterans and I really enjoyed the experience, particularly because the subject matter dealt with PTSD as well as physical injury. It was very well written, it dealt with emotions I've experienced, and the lines I had were words I've actually said myself, so it was not hard to put myself into the lines of the script."

Jason, 53, who served for 26 years and moved from Plymouth to South Shields after he was injured, added: "I've taken part in Making Generation R, which was great, and I'm keen to do more acting in the future."

**Below left: the cast and crew of *The Chatterleys*, and Redcar, where the play is set (right)**





*“The team was staying in a barn and all the recording equipment was squeezed into a communal room, so it had a real sense of authenticity about it rather than being in a studio”*

*Jason Burns, former Royal Marines Commando*

Steve Watson, a former Intelligence Corps soldier who became an amputee in 2019, said: “The cast and crew were welcoming, it was an inspiring experience.”

The drama was co-directed by Polly Thomas of Manchester-based Naked Productions, and Jenny Sealey, the founder of Graeae Theatre Group, which specialises in productions with disabled actors and crew. It was their idea to get in touch with Christine Landess, BSO North East for cast members.

#### **THE CHANCE TO TRY SOMETHING NEW**

“It was a great project to be involved in and we were made very welcome and included by the team,” says Christine. “Watching the production crew and actors was fascinating, and our Members blended perfectly into the team, they were so professional. This is a brilliant example of the many opportunities Blesma can offer its Members to try something new and raise awareness.”

The idea for the contemporary *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* was devised by award-winning playwright Mike Kenny, who also wrote *This Is Not For You*, the outdoor performance that paid tribute to those wounded in WWI.

“The idea for adapting *The Chatterleys* came from that production and working with disabled veterans,” says Mike. “The obsession in the original novel is that

your life is over if you are disabled; you cannot have an intimate relationship, you can’t have kids... we know that none of that is true. We were discussing the fact that if it was set now, the outcomes would be very different.

“I was interested in relationships in times of economic struggle and the pressures on disabled ex-Service personnel and their families, but there is a lot more hope in this work. There is a lot of struggle in it but things are made possible through organisations such as Blesma. Most of all, I hope *The Chatterleys* can be enjoyed on its merit as a good, human story.

“The Blesma Members who took part were fantastic in their honesty, and that found its way into the play. They took to it like pros and were very supportive of what we were trying to achieve,” adds Mike. “The veterans we spoke to have been through very different situations to everybody else on set but they are not different people. They speak from human experience and I hope it is possible to identify their feelings and empathise with them. None of them wanted sympathy but they do want people to take notice and that is important because many of their injuries were sustained in service, representing us.”

**“The Members were fantastic in their honesty, and that found its way into the play,” says playwright Mike Kenny**

*The Chatterleys is currently available on BBC iPlayer*

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# FROM TOP

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MICHELLE MURPHY IS AN AMPUTEE, BUT BLESMA HASN'T HELPED HER WITH A PROSTHETIC OR MOBILITY AID. INSTEAD, THE ASSOCIATION HAS SORTED OUT HER SHOES AND HER SMILE. NOW THAT IS TOP TO TOE TREATMENT!

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**H**aving served in the Royal Signals for 22 years, Michelle Murphy lost her right leg in 2018 after an innocuous cut on her foot led to the flesh-eating disease Necrotising Fasciitis. She would have been forgiven for taking her time to come to terms with this 'new normal' but for the last two years, she has barely left her house after a horrific fall resulted in her breaking or losing almost every single one of her teeth...

**Blesma normally supports its Members with prosthetics or mobility aids, but the charity has recently helped you with something else...**

Over the last 12 months the charity's support has been life changing for me. Thanks to Blesma, I have an amazing new set of teeth! I had such a bad fall one day right at the beginning of lockdown – I fell at home from the top of the stairs to the bottom without touching a single stair! I landed on my face and knocked out all my top teeth. I couldn't move for 20 minutes and then was only able to crawl into the living room and phone my son for help. It was at the beginning of Covid and although a dentist came out to see me, there wasn't a great deal he could do. I had black eyes and a bruised and bloodied face, and had chipped, broken, loosened or knocked out every single one of my teeth.

**That must have had a massive impact on your life...**

I certainly had a long list of things I wasn't able to eat! Everything had to be incredibly soft, even fruit. I tried wearing dentures, but they made me feel sick. At first, it wasn't too bad because I could wear a Covid mask when I went out. But then my self-confidence got very low – I couldn't even look at myself in the mirror – and it got so bad that I wouldn't even step out of the front door.

**How did Blesma help you?**

My Support Officer suggested implants, but I couldn't afford them. She told me to get several quotes and Blesma would help to cover the costs. It was around this time that one dentist discovered that I had damaged my jaw bone in the fall, which is where they would have put the implants. The only option was to go into my cheek bones, and that bumped the total price up to £22,000. Blesma reached out to five other military charities and together they funded my treatment.

**What did the dental work involve?**

I had to be in the chair for six-and-a-half hours. I was awake the whole time. The roof of my mouth was cut open and peeled back so they could see into my nasal passage to make sure they didn't damage any nerves in my face while they put the implants into my cheek bones. I had three weeks of horrendous pain afterwards; but in hindsight it was the best thing I could have done.

# TO TOE

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**“I LOST MY JOB, MY  
CAR, EVERYTHING. IT  
WAS HARD TO DEAL WITH  
BECAUSE I’VE ALWAYS  
WORKED HARD”**



**This isn't the only time Blesma has helped you, is it?**

I attended Blesma's Ladies with Limb Loss event last March. We were all comparing prosthetics, injuries and our difficulties. My Outreach Officer overheard me telling the group that I kept falling because my prosthetic leg was too long and she immediately put me in touch with Brian Chenier, Blesma's Support Officer (Prosthetics). At the time, the Worshipful Company of Pattenmakers had been in touch with Blesma to offer their support to the charity. They wanted to fund a pair of boots that would be made by Bill Bird Shoes, a bespoke orthopaedic shoemaker.

**What was the problem with your prosthetic?**

Being only four foot ten inches tall, my prosthetic is just that little bit too long, but it's the smallest size the NHS will fund. I didn't have the money to fund a custom-fitted prosthetic, so I've just always put up with it, but because it is longer than my remaining leg, it gives me terrible hip and back pain. When I take a step with my prosthetic it often just clips the floor, which is what caused the horrendous fall down the stairs.

**So how did Bill Bird Shoes help?**

Last year, I visited their workshop in the Cotswolds where they measured my feet and legs. The boot they made for my remaining leg has a heel inside to make it the same length as my prosthetic, but from the outside the shoes look exactly the same! The shoes have been life changing and have helped so much with my back pain. They feel great and look fantastic, too.

**What was it like to finally get that support?**

For three years I thought my problem was unsolvable. The hospital had told me there was nothing I could do unless I had £100,000 to buy my own prosthetic. When

Brian called, it seemed like such an obvious solution; make the shoe, rather than the leg, fit the person. I was blown away that the Worshipful Company of Pattenmakers and Bill Bird Shoes would do this for me.

**You became a Blesma Member in 2019, tell us about your military background...**

They were the best years of my life! I travelled all over Europe – mainly to Germany and Holland – as well as all around the UK. I worked in motor transports as a teleoperator. If I hadn't been paid, I still would have done it! I loved the comradeship and the fact that you were never alone.

**How were you injured?**

I left the Army in 2011, when I was 46 years old; I felt I was getting too old and I had achieved everything I'd wanted to. I hurt my leg just a few months later at my sister's wedding. I woke up the next morning



**“They were the best years of my life! If I hadn't been paid, I still would have done it!” says Michelle of her 22-year career in the Royal Signals**

in incredible pain. I went to A&E and they thought I'd torn a ligament. They put a strap on my leg and sent me home, but two days later I was screaming in agony. There was a horrible smell coming off my leg and the pain was unbearable. When I took off the strap, my leg was grey with dots of blood. It was like someone had been prodding me with a small pin. I was rushed back to hospital, but I don't remember anything from the moment I arrived until a few weeks later.

**Have you been told what happened?**

I was put on an antibiotic drip for a day while doctors tried to work out what was wrong. Within 48 hours, I was in theatre having my leg opened up so that they could see what was going on. The anaesthetist spotted that it was Necrotising Fasciitis, which is a flesh-eating bug. At the wedding, I'd cut my foot on some glass and walked across the grass. It wasn't a torn ligament at all! Necrotising Fasciitis doesn't respond to antibiotics, so the doctors had to cut it out – from my ankle to my knee, all the way down to the bone. They took away all the affected muscle tissue. The only bit I had left was my thigh. But the infection had also travelled up to my kidneys, so I was put in intensive care. Doctors told my husband and sons that it didn't look like I was going to make it and that they should say their goodbyes. They operated once again to take more of the infection out, and luckily this time, it worked.

**Did you manage to keep your leg?**

Initially, but I was in immense amounts of pain for several months and went back into theatre another six times. I had a skin graft onto my bone but it formed too tightly to my knee which meant I couldn't bend my leg. I walked with a limp, but it was a charity 26-mile tab in Army boots with an 86lb weight on my back that ended it all. A few weeks after that, there was a cut on my skin graft and, within weeks, my leg was pouring with blood. There was nothing the doctors could do but amputate.

**How did you cope?**

I lost my job, my car, everything. It was hard to deal with because I've always worked hard to be able to afford things. Then, suddenly, I couldn't even walk to the shops. But I've always been strong mentally. In the early days, before I got my prosthetic, I tied a little basket to my Zimmer frame, which I would put my cleaning stuff in, and that's how I cleaned the house!

**When did Blesma enter your life?**

An old Major of mine came to check in on me and he was the one who suggested that I should join Blesma. It wasn't long until I went on my first Blesma activity – that was in 2019 – which was horse riding in America. I learned so much from the group about prosthetics and being an amputee. I fell a lot on the trip, but a young veteran with the same injury told me about microprocessor knees. The rest is history!

**During the six-and-a-half hour dental operation, the roof of Michelle's mouth was cut and peeled back to make sure the nerves in her face weren't being damaged while the implants were put into her cheek bones**





## FOOTING THE BILL: HOW MICHELLE WAS GIFTED HER SHOES

Brian Chenier, Blesma's Support Officer (Prosthetics) was approached by the Worshipful Company of Pattenmakers last year with an offer to fund bespoke footwear made by Bill Bird Shoes.

"They wanted to help Members who needed specific footwear that would correct any issues that weren't currently being addressed through prosthetics or orthotics," says Brian. "It was purely a coincidence that Michelle needed this type of support as the offer came in."

When Brian spoke with Michelle he learned that she had a leg length difference that wasn't being corrected through standard orthotics. "I liaised with Bill Bird and his team, and Michelle was invited to an initial appointment," says Brian. "The Company made it clear they would fund the shoes, whatever the cost."

It took six months from Michelle's initial appointment to her getting the finished footwear. During that time she had several consultations to take measurements, design the shoes and

make sure they fitted her correctly, but the team also got to know Michelle and her wants and needs.

"The skill to make these shoes was fantastic to watch, but the most humbling aspect was that Bill Bird and his team cared about making the shoes as good as they could be for Michelle," says Brian.

*If you would benefit from a bespoke pair of shoes like Michelle's, contact your Support or Outreach Officer. Their details can be found on p76*



# Make sure you're part of Members' Weekend 2023

Chesford Grange, 24-26 June

Would you like to come along to meet old friends and make some new ones, find out what Blesma Members are up to and have your say on what Blesma should be focusing on to support its Members in the AGM on Sunday 25 June? Apply by 25 March by emailing [eventsca@blesma.org](mailto:eventsca@blesma.org) or by calling 020 8548 7097

**APPLY FOR YOUR PLACE NOW!**

# Bulletin

## Experience the beauty of sailing

**BLESMA SAILING ACTIVITIES 2022  
BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS AND  
TURN TO STARBOARD IN FALMOUTH**

**T**wo sailing activities took place last year, the first of which was in the British Virgin Islands in May. Five Blesma Members flew out on 10 May for a week-long sailing activity around the islands in the Caribbean. The activity was originally going to be led by Nigel Smith, but unfortunately Nigel succumbed to an injury prior to the activity so was unable to participate. Fortunately, the hosts for the trip were able to provide a stand-in skipper.

The trip started with a flight to Antigua, and after a short stopover we boarded a much smaller plane to Beef Island in the British Virgin Islands. Then it was on to the 42ft catamaran in Tortola Marina.

Simon, our skipper, greeted us at the marina and showed us around the boat which included four en-suite cabins and a large saloon with all the mod-cons you would expect at home.

The next morning, we set sail for Cooper Island which, like all the surrounding islands, had beautiful sandy beaches and clear blue waters. It was a good sail, with fair winds and clear blue skies.

Sailing in this part of the world does not offer many quays in which to berth, so going to a buoy became the norm. Dining was made simple, as most of the islands only had one restaurant, so all reservations



**Eight Members sailed the Cornish coast last October on the tall ship Spirit of Falmouth**

were made well in advance of us arriving. In total, we visited six islands, all of which were lovely, unspoilt locations. I think the one that was closest to *Death in Paradise* was Jost Van Dyke, which included a lively bar, sandy road, a church with a missing roof, and a police station.

Our last stop was Norman Island, which had a big bay where there was a variety of expensive vessels berthed. The island had

a beautiful restaurant which unfortunately could only be reached by a sandy beach – not great for an amputee – but as with most places we visited, assistance from a willing yachtsman was always to hand.

The week offered the chance to hone our sailing skills, and gave novice sailors the chance to learn new ones. There was also time to take part in ‘hands to bathe’ in the clear blue waters.

**“The week offered the chance to hone our skills, and gave novice sailors the chance to learn new ones. There was also time to take part in ‘hands to bathe’ in the blue waters”**

## Continued from over

### TURN TO STARBOARD

On 03 October, eight Members headed to Falmouth to take part in a four-day sailing adventure on the *Spirit of Falmouth*. The vessel is owned by the charity Turn To Starboard, who very kindly provided an experienced skipper (Paul), five experienced crew members, and the yacht at no cost to the Association. The only cost for the trip was for food and refreshments.

On arrival at the Turn To Starboard office, we were met by BSO Steve Fraser, who was the lead for the activity. Once everybody had been briefed, we were kitted out with our sailing kit and transported to the marina where the *Spirit of Falmouth* was berthed.

The boat is a traditional 91-foot wooden tall ship, which was gifted to Turn To Starboard in 2014 by The Prince's Trust. The Mersey Pilot Schooner was built using traditional methods in Liverpool in 1985 and requires a core crew of six with the capacity to carry 12 passage crew. The accommodation is very cosy to say the least, but being ex-Service personnel, we soon adapted to our surroundings.

Once unpacked, Paul gave an in-depth health and safety briefing and issued everyone with their own life jacket. The next morning, we set sail along the rugged Cornish coast where we were greeted by porpoises and blue fin tuna. Once we had left the harbour and had sailed out to sea, the crew invited those who wished to hoist the huge sails. This was a task undertaken by two Members either side and was certainly a good workout. The sails had to be hoisted up manually, with no winch to help with the heavy load.

Whilst at sea we were also given the opportunity to learn navigational skills and even take control at the helm. For those wanting to brush up on their knot tying skills the crew members, including Steve Fraser who is an experienced sailor, kindly taught us the ropes, so to speak!

As the day progressed the weather turned and the winds began to pick up, making it uncomfortable for a few of the Members, who succumbed to the bumpy seas. The



From left: Shane Henry, Janet Riddell and John Bonar



skipper received some disturbing weather warnings of an increase from a force 6 to a force 8 gale. At this point Paul made the sensible and safe decision to go alongside to enable the storm to blow through.

Unfortunately, Plymouth had closed the harbour so our only other safe option

was to sail into Fowey, where we would tie up at a buoy and wait for the storm to pass through. That first night at sea was a rough one and the movement of the waves could be felt by all. The weather was so bad that the rope which was tied to the buoy virtually sheered right the way through. Luckily, the experienced skipper and crew quickly rectified the problem.

I would also like to commend Jamie, one of the crew members, on his culinary skills. He very kindly made two huge cottage pies which were gratefully received by all on board – even those who were feeling under the weather! Each evening two Blesma Members would undertake washing up duties; it was the least we could do in return for the hospitality and culinary skills. We



From left:  
Bill Arscott and  
crew member Jamie



were tied up at the buoy from Tuesday night until Thursday morning. The skipper arranged for those who wished to go ashore in Fowey on board the tender to do so. Those who did kindly brought back pizzas for our dinner on the Wednesday evening.

The evening activities, organised by Steve Fraser, proved to be both popular and highly amusing. *Just a Minute* from

the Radio 4 show was the highlight of the evening. I am sure it will remain in the memories of all those who took part for a long time to come.

On the Thursday morning we sailed for Falmouth under engine as the weather was still a little temperamental. On our return to Falmouth, it was decided we would all go for lunch at one of the restaurants in

the marina. To say a huge thank you to the crew from Turn To Starboard, the Blesma Members put money into a kitty to ensure that they didn't have to pay for a single drink all evening. It was the very least we could do to say thank you for having had such an amazing week.

One of the most important things that came from both activities was the camaraderie between Members, which money can't buy but Blesma allows us to achieve. A huge thank you to the Activities Team for organising the events. A huge thank you also goes out to the skipper in the British Virgin Islands and to Turn To Starboard, who we hope to sail with again in the very near future.

*Bill Arscott and Janet Riddell*

**“One of the most important things that came from both activities was the camaraderie between Members, which money can't buy but Blesma allows us to achieve”**

# Resin Course inspires Members to develop their own creations

**T**he aim of this three-day Member-led Beginners Resin Course was to bring out Members' creativity and give the knowledge, skills and practice to allow participants to carry on after the course. It was about creating not just copying.

All Members participating appreciated the help, guidance and expertise of Norman, the resident professional resin expert, who allowed us to each create two kitchen worktop designs – which doubled up as individual pieces of art – and a wooden tray, which we finished in clear resin before setting with a choice of handles in resin. We also created resin bowls, which we created from a resin base set in cling film or plastic sheeting. We also created some individual design pieces; one Member sank coloured resin into a wooden Lake Windermere so it looked like water. Another set some of his daughter's wedding mementoes into clear resin with a coloured base as a lasting keepsake.

Any leftover resin didn't go to waste as we made multi-coloured skulls and coasters amongst other things. Norman gave each Member attention, guidance and help if, where and when needed in order to allow them to 'develop their own creations'.

Norman also gave us a brief overview of some more advanced techniques to make, repair/recycle and up-cycle resin furniture, as well as how to create wood and resin wall clocks and jewellery.

We all really enjoyed the course; the time just flew by and clearly we got lost in the process of making so many varied pieces. The beginners workshop clearly aided mindfulness and our individual wellbeing, whilst blowing our minds about what else we could be creating.

Renewed thanks to Norman for putting up with us, to Norman's wife who always made sure that we were well fed, and to Blesma for arranging this course.

**Stephen McNeice**



Members show off their resin artwork



Stephen's Falklands tribute resin piece

## FALKLANDS TRIBUTE

Someone asked me if I would produce a painting of a Royal Marine given that 2022 was the 40th anniversary of The Falklands War. I felt that such a piece needed to be something that someone would look at more than once. I took up the challenge and tried to create something unique.

I wanted to capture the tactical recognition flash badges, the motto of the Royal Marines and, somehow, Service humour. I wanted the Marine to come across as confident and in control, and I wanted the piece to have a 3D effect to allow for some viewer interaction. So I drew

and then painted this Marine on card before cutting him up into pieces. Then, using an art resin with various emulsion and acrylic paints and inks, I created a sea washing up on a beach with multiple layers for depth. After sinking the pictures and lettering into the sea and beach I finally positioned the Marine standing above the beach.

I decided to cut the Marine's legs off above the knee for two reasons; the first being that in war there can be a life-long price to pay for the survivors, whether mental or physical. I know a number of Marines who have lost limbs and would give anything to be back on a beach doing what Marines do. Secondly, as a double above-knee amputee I understand the many challenges of reinventing oneself after life-changing injury. I also wanted to capture the fact that many Service personnel can return from a tour of duty with other, often unseen, conditions. That is why I cut up the Marine and pieced him back together within the resin, as many Service personnel may return in hard-to-see broken pieces.

**Stephen McNeice**



# Two-day break allows Widows, spouses and partners to bond

**T**hanks to a generous donation from JWPM Ltd we were able to arrange a two-night spa break for our Widows and those who look after and support our Members last October. The ladies arrived at Airth Castle Hotel in Stirlingshire and had time to meet each other and use the spa before dinner.

At dinner, we were joined by Blesma Chief Executive Jon Bryant and Support Officer Steve Burton. It was interesting for them to chat with the ladies and gain an understanding of their perspective of Blesma and of life supporting Members.

Day two was spent relaxing and chatting, everyone had a spa treatment and met again for dinner. One of our ladies even plucked up the courage to play the piano in the bar, which was amazing.

The next morning there was a sombre air at breakfast as everyone realised they would soon be leaving each other. Phone numbers were swapped and a WhatsApp group was set up so everyone could keep in touch. I will look to arrange some more partner only events, but these are likely to be locally based and of shorter duration.

**EMMA GRATION**

## WHAT THEY HAD TO SAY

“I have struggled a lot mentally since Steve’s amputation with the responsibility. Coming together with this group of ladies made me realise I’m not alone and what I’m feeling is ok. This was my first chance to really relax and unwind. I laughed so much.”

*Member’s wife Jenna Becala*

“It was so nice to spend time with people who have similar home lives. We were all able to have so much fun and we all became friends. It was fab!”

*Member’s wife Corrinne Currie*

“I was astounded but not surprised to hear what some of these ladies and their families



The two-day spa break allowed everyone to relax and share similar life experiences

are faced with daily. These women work hard, and we all enjoyed taking full advantage of the lovely facilities. There was a good exchange of information because we all have had similar problems, so that was helpful. We felt special and it elevated the idea that some of the ladies had about their position in the Blesma family.

*Widow Member Lorraine Anderson*

“It was lovely to be away with a group of people who have different stories but an understanding of each other’s needs. I was a little nervous before arriving as I wasn’t sure what to expect, but all the nerves settled as soon as I met all the group. What a fantastic bunch and it was so good to have sore cheeks from all the laughing. It’s been too long since I laughed so much!”

*Member’s fiancée Jac Allan*

“What a great couple of days spent with old and new friends. A lovely group of ladies whose life experiences are so similar but also so different. We entered as individuals and left as a bonded group of friends. The whole experience was relaxing, fun, chilling, busy, hysterically funny at times and educational. Hopefully, this is the first of many of these breaks/meetings.

Thank you to Blesma for arranging this and encouraging us to be the women we are.”

*Member’s wife Pauline McQueen*

“The experience was relaxing, fun, busy, educational and hysterically funny at times. Hopefully, this will be the first of many of these breaks”

# Getting in the festive spirit on the Cologne Christmas Weekend

**L**eaving Lancashire on a Thursday morning at the start of December my wife, Janet, and I set off from our home near Preston for Heathrow. We met our lead, BSO Pat Donnachie, and a group of 10 who had come from across the UK to the Holiday Inn Heathrow for what was sure to be a spectacular long weekend at the stunning Cologne Christmas market.

## FRIDAY 02 DECEMBER

Arriving at Terminal 5 the British Airways assistance team made sure we were well taken care of. We arrived in Dusseldorf before midday and were driven to our hotel in Cologne. The Hyatt Regency hotel has stunning views overlooking the Rhine and the cathedral, and exceptional facilities.

Once checked in we were free to use the hotel's facilities or explore the surrounding riverside, shops, cafés and restaurants before everyone met for an evening in one of the hotel's restaurants. We were treated to authentic German cuisine, something that most of us had never tried.

## SATURDAY 03 DECEMBER

After a late breakfast, we made our way to the Cologne perfume factory, (House of Fragrances 4711) where we attended a seminar to learn about cologne and how it is made. We were then encouraged to make our own fragrances (and gave them some memorable names!) It was certainly a fun-packed morning with much laughter.

After a successful morning, we made our way to a lovely coffee shop with a plentiful display of cakes to choose from. The afternoon was spent with a mini winter cruise along the Rhine with music, mulled wine and refreshments. It was also a welcome break from the weather which had started to turn quite chilly.

After the cruise some Members decided to stay out and browse around the town whilst others made their way back to the warmth of the hotel. Those who had stayed in the city met us at the Belgischer Hof restaurant later that evening. Once again, everyone thoroughly enjoying the authentic



The group proudly show off their certificates from the fragrance making event



German cuisine. It's certainly true to say that it had been an eventful day with plenty to see and do.

## SUNDAY 04 DECEMBER

A free day during which Members could either enjoy the hotel's facilities or take in the sights of the city, walk around the many stunning markets, enjoy hot chocolate and mulled wine, and try the famous currywurst or bratwurst. Several Members arranged to meet up in a city centre bar in the early

evening to watch England take on Senegal in the World Cup. Once the game had ended, we made our way to the riverside for a meal and afterwards, it was a short walk over the footbridge to the hotel. An end to a perfect day and a truly memorable weekend!

## MONDAY 05 DECEMBER

Another early morning start for our journey home. Back at Dusseldorf airport the British Airways check-in staff assisted us without much disruption and once through passport control we enjoyed light refreshments before boarding our flight back to Heathrow.

Back in London, it was just a case of saying our farewells with new friendships having been made. It only leaves me to say a big, big thank you to Blesma and, of course, to our lead BSO South Pat Donnachie for a wonderful and well-organised trip.

*Mark and Janet Brown*

# Fairwell to BSO Steve from all at Bournemouth

**S**teve Fraser has retired from his position as BSO for the South West having joined Blesma eight years ago. It wasn't long before he established his presence on a line between Bournemouth and Bristol and all points west. As a gunner his motto means 'everywhere' – that's our Steve! It was his aim to befriend every Blesma Member in his patch, and this he accomplished in a very short space of time. Nothing was too much trouble; no problem too large, no question too small.

I have worked closely with Steve from him starting in the role; it is one of the joys of Branch membership. After many years, Members become more than acquaintances; they become friends, and this is a great help to the BSO as the welfare of our 'parishioners' is a shared knowledge. If I could not do it Steve sure could – and did. His support, not just to me, but to the whole of Blesma has been incalculable. We will surely miss him.

One then became two, as Sarah our fantastic Outreach Officer became part of the team. And what a team they were; so much so that we are happy to announce that Sarah has been promoted to BSO South West. I am sure that all of Blesma South West wishes her well in her new post.

Finally, I must thank everyone who made a donation to Steve's farewell fund. It raised a considerable sum, which I am reliably informed will go towards a new guitar. Steve has promised to not be a stranger; he will come to Weymouth for the Armed Forces Weekend in June, and our Branch doors are always open.

Steve, we all wish you well in your new career.

*Peter Sherston-Baker*

PS: Bournemouth Branch is still doing well, we are all looking forward to the Spring and some sunshine. Our next meeting will be our AGM on 03 April at 10.30 at Bournemouth War Memorial Homes. The following meeting will be held in The Quiet Space in Poundbury, Dorchester followed by lunch at The Duchess of Cornwall (unless it changes its name to The Queen Consort!)



# Those who have passed away

## May they rest in peace

<b>ANDERSON R</b>	Royal Marines	15/10/2022
<b>BLYTH PB</b>		28/01/2023
<b>CARLIN A</b>	Royal Engineers	08/12/2022
<b>CARRINGTON BA</b>	Royal Navy	04/11/2022
<b>CHANDLER RV</b>	Royal Army Service Corps	27/11/2022
<b>COLLINS E</b>	Royal Artillery	09/01/2023
<b>CRAWFORD RS</b>	Royal Artillery	01/02/2023
<b>DALTON CA</b>	Royal Air Force	26/12/2022
<b>DOEL BE</b>		21/10/2022
<b>DORNAN RG</b>	Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers	24/11/2022
<b>EATON W</b>	York and Lancaster Regiment	01/01/2023
<b>EMPSON JR</b>	Royal Air Force	20/11/2022
<b>EVANS R</b>	Royal Navy	07/12/2022
<b>FIDLER M H G</b>	Civilian	23/01/2023
<b>FLETCHER D</b>	Army Catering Corps	03/12/2022
<b>FORSYTHE S</b>	Royal Irish Fusiliers	13/12/2022
<b>FREEL J</b>	Royal Horse Artillery	03/02/2023
<b>HANRATTY D</b>	Royal Air Force	12/12/2022
<b>HEGGIE M</b>		25/01/2023
<b>HOBDAY B E</b>		20/10/2022
<b>HUDSON S</b>	Royal Air Force	12/12/2022
<b>JAY P M</b>		05/11/2022
<b>JEWKES P E</b>		25/01/2023
<b>KENDALL D E</b>		23/11/2022
<b>KITCHEN E N</b>		29/11/2020
<b>LAW I</b>		25/01/2023
<b>LEWINGTON J</b>		17/11/2022
<b>MIDDLEDITCH C J</b>		06/11/2022
<b>MILLER I B</b>	Scots Guards	31/01/2023
<b>MINSHULL P G</b>		02/01/2023
<b>MURRAY J D</b>	Royal Corps of Transport	02/12/2022
<b>OSER H L</b>		19/12/2022
<b>SMALE M R</b>	Royal Navy	26/01/2023
<b>SMITH M</b>		31/10/2022
<b>STEPHENSON C</b>	Royal Signals	09/12/2022
<b>WATSON G</b>	Royal Navy	27/12/2022
<b>WATSON J</b>		29/11/2022
<b>WYATT J</b>	King's Own Royal Regiment/ Army Catering Corps	20/11/2022

# Scotland update: From paper quilling to prosthetics forums

## PROSTHETIC AND PAIN MANAGEMENT FORUM

This is a popular forum that attracts a mix of Members; both amputees and those with loss of use of limb. The forum is held every six to eight weeks, with the Support and Outreach Officers fully engaged. The forum is a great opportunity for the BSO to provide an overview of the current situation in the five Limb Centres followed by an open forum for Members to provide updates and discuss and share various tips and stories. The events have consistently generated useful tips and good practice. Notably, one Member stated that every day is a school day, and he has been an amputee for more than 30 years! New Members have found it invaluable as well, and it is proving to be a successful event where Members can openly raise concerns in a safe environment, develop confidence and be part of the Blesma family.

## BOOK GROUP

A popular at-home activity in which Members enjoy reading books that they would often not normally select. Members then engage on a Zoom meeting to discuss the book. This has generated a closer bond between Members and has made them feel part of Blesma. More importantly, it has helped to reduce loneliness and also enables those less talkative to engage in a social environment.

## COLLABORATION

We are working with an increasing number of organisations to highlight their work and to give Members more options of things to do. With valuable transport support from Fares4Free we have had our first joint lunch with Help for Heroes in Aberdeen, have had visits to Erskine Reid Macewen Centre, the ACVC Hub in Glasgow, and the Veterans Community Hub in Wishaw.

## CHRISTMAS BAKING COMPETITION

Members and their families selected a baking kit and then expertly made their items at home before sending in their



The Christmas lunch in Lanarkshire is in full swing



Cheese tasting with Ken De Soyza



Susi Rogers Hartley's resin poppy



The Member-led paper quilling session



Christmas baking winners Carl and Zenna



Members and partners take time out from enjoying the Christmas lunch in Perth



Pottery at the ACVC Hub in Glasgow

photos. The competition was judged by Widow Eleanor McQuiston and her family who won the previous competition. The winners were Steve Becala's children Carl and Zenna. Well done to everyone who took part – it was difficult to pick the winners!

### RESIN POPPY WORKSHOP

Members were led by Abby from Inion Arts to make a gorgeous poppy out of wire and resin. Everyone produced a

gorgeous flower and had enough resin left over to make several more!

### ONLINE MURDER MYSTERY GAME

Popular with all our budding Miss Marples and Hercule Poirots, this activity saw us join an online play with the opportunity to interview the suspects between scenes. This was our second online game and was great fun. A few Members were even able to work out who the murderer was!

### DRAMA GROUP LIVE SCREENING

The culmination of months of hard work by a small group of Members resulted in a live screening of the play *Stand To (Not Bloody Likely!)* which was written and performed by Members and their families. The Zoom screening was watched by Blesma Members, their families and staff, as well as staff and beneficiaries from other organisations.

### CHRISTMAS LUNCHES

A number of Christmas lunches took place across Scotland, from Inverness (which went ahead despite the snowy weather) in

the north to Hamilton in the central belt and Perth and Edinburgh (courtesy of The Not Forgotten Association) in between. There was plenty of food and laughter, and it was great for Members to catch up with each other and to meet new friends.

### ONLINE CHEESE TASTING

Cheese tasting has perhaps been the most popular activity we've put over the past year and this session was equally as enjoyable for all present. The cheese was delicious and Svetlana, The Cheese Lady talked through each cheese in turn, discussing where it came from, how it was made and what to expect from the taste. The evening session meant that Members who are usually working also got the opportunity to join in.

### 2023 LUNCHES

We have started the year with a few lunches to make sure that Members get the chance to meet up whilst the weather isn't great. The lunch in Ayr was a first and it was good to meet some new Members and catch up with others who we haven't seen since before the pandemic.

### MEMBER-LED ACTIVITIES

#### GOOD CRAIC QUIZ

Member Lorraine Anderson was back throughout the period with entertaining and fun quizzes. The Christmas one was well attended and everyone who took part left with aching jaws from all the laughter.

#### PAPER QUILLING WORKSHOP

Lorraine also inspired and delivered this workshop which gave Members an introduction into the art of paper quilling. Paper quilling involves using strips of paper that are rolled, shaped, and glued together to create patterns and designs. Some Members found the techniques fiddly and frustrating at first but after a few attempts seemed to be hooked. The results were brilliant, with everyone putting a different spin on the crafting activity.

*Emma Gratton*

# Wales and West: from welfare work to clay pigeon shooting

**B**lesma Wales and West has had a very busy period, having held 16 Outreach events over the last quarter. These have been popular and varied, ranging from St David's Day lunches, social brunches, wreath making and a shotgun range day to online bug making and cheese tasting workshops.

It has been wonderful to see Members, their partners and their families come along and enjoy all the activities we have to offer. Wales and West took the initiative a couple of years ago to start a social network across its area and now has thriving Member Social Groups in Swansea, Cardiff, Hereford, Gloucestershire and Deeside. There are other groups developing in north and mid-Wales, and as the news spreads so will the turn-out.

Our Members love to connect with each other, and now that the Branches have disappeared from Wales and West the advent of informal social groups is definitely the way forward. Social lunches and activities are organised every three months by Outreach Officer Jason Suller, and a forecast of events is sent to each Member and Widow. The great thing about these Social Groups is that as well as the organisational skills of the Outreach Officer the Members can contact each other and organise their own events and lunches. This fosters friendships and builds a network over time. Some of the events enjoyed since Christmas have been the following:

## MEMBER SOCIAL LUNCHES

Several lunches have taken place across the regions, notably in Cheltenham, Chester, Newport, Shrewsbury, Swansea and Worcester. These events were thoroughly enjoyed by Members of all ages and their families, who got the chance to meet other Members and discuss past experiences.

## CLAY PIGEON SHOOTING

In February, five Members and two carers gathered in the Cotswolds to enjoy a great day of clay pigeon shooting. One Member even came all the way from Chester. Jason



**Philip Martin (pictured far right) notched up the highest score in the clay pigeon shooting**

ran a competition for the highest score, which was won by Philip Martin, 71, ex-Royal Green Jackets from Cheltenham.

## WALES AND WEST WELFARE WORK

BSO Wales and West, Tom Hall, had a busy start to the year, visiting 22 Members at home and three Limb Centres in January and early February. Tom has attended Armed Forces Covenant forums to promote Blesma, added value at MoD veteran sessions, and held meetings and discussions with the Welsh Government, the NHS, DWP and various local housing associations in advocacy of Blesma Members.

In particular, the issue of a lack of NHS appointments and delays in orthopaedic surgery have been huge areas of anxiety for Members, carers and their families. The reduction in access to GPs has forced the Blesma membership to seek the help of the BSO to push for information about medication, referrals and basic health checks.

## MOBILITY EQUIPMENT SUPPORT

Darren Lingard, a below-knee amputee and veteran of the Royal Regiment of Wales lives in Newport. He was visited at his home by BSO Wales and West Tom Hall, which resulted in Darren receiving a mobility scooter to give him much-needed independence and mobility outdoors.

Darren has recently undergone surgery for a medical condition and his mobility has been reduced as a result. The scooter will boost Darren's mental wellbeing as well as help him physically. Darren wrote to his BSO with the following thank you:

"Mr Hall, please let me say thank you for the help of yourself and your colleagues from Blesma. I have been trying so hard to find positive thoughts after my previous injuries and now going through major abdominal surgery to remove (I hope) a large cancer tumour. On top of everything I now have the challenges of having a permanent stoma and some weakening in my abdomen.

"I really needed to use my abdominal muscles to get anything done outside as



Jason Gill travelled all the way from Chester to attend the clay pigeon shooting event in the Cotswolds in February



Getting together in a relaxed social environment at the Worcester area lunch

my legs are so affected by bone and nerve damage. As well as the legs, I have to contend with spinal nerve damage that presents other challenges. I am so grateful for your support. I have been trying not to think about being stuck indoors even more than I already have been. The scooter I have been donated is a real boost to my morale. Thank you for your help and thanks to Blesma. They have given me a lifeline to

get outside when I am well enough, as I know I have something to look forward to.

#### **HAPPY 100TH BIRTHDAY**

Widow Barbara Allen was visited at her home in Abergavenny by BSO Tom Hall prior to her 100th birthday. Barbara was in great spirits and thoroughly enjoyed her big day surrounded by family and friends. Blesma sent her flowers to mark the

occasion. "What a wonderful surprise I had when I received the gorgeous flowers," Barbara wrote in response. "Thank you so much for thinking of me and helping to make my birthday such an amazing experience. My best wishes to you all."

#### **HAPPY BIRTHDAY**

Phyllis Lewis celebrated her 102nd birthday in February. BSO Tom and Outreach Officer Jason sent her flowers and a message on behalf of everyone at Blesma. Tom plans to visit in March to congratulate Phyllis in person and make her a cup of tea!

#### **SUMMARY**

The start to the year has been busy but rewarding and very positive. Members are being connected in many different ways, and the fantastic welfare work continues. Thanks also to our fabulous volunteers, who go out of their way to take Members to appointments, provide befriending services and specialist advice, and attend fundraising events to raise awareness for Blesma.

**TOM HALL AND JASON SULLER**

# Northern Ireland: Brunch and a blether

## BUILD YOUR OWN

With the sights and sounds of Spring starting to appear, especially the birds singing in the morning, this seemed like the perfect opportunity to encourage Members to take an interest in nature. The 'build your own' activity allowed Members to choose between a bird nest box, butterfly house, bat roosting box or squirrel feeder. The activity gave Members the satisfaction of building a unique piece whilst supporting the local wildlife around them.

## BRUNCH AND A BLETHER

We started the year with a number of brunch meet-ups across Northern Ireland. On the menu was the chance to get together, slow down and reconnect in a comfortable warm space. This was also an ideal way for some new Members to get to know other Members – enjoying lots of tea and, for some, the taste of 'a wee fry'!

Some Members joined online workshops from home, while others took part at home with step-by-step instructions, to learn the art of melt and pour soap making. With essential oils and dried fruit, and no harsh chemicals, beautiful soaps were made. The possibilities of what you can add to your soap base are endless – from oatmeal to honey to pressed flowers and your favourite coffee beans – making this a fun and creative hobby.

Members were asked to supply their own silicone moulds, making each soap unique and 'lather' lovely!



Ballymena Sea Cadets present a cheque to Members Bryan Phillips and Brian McKee

## CADETS SHOW THEIR METAL

Ballymena Sea Cadets have been working hard alongside cadets from detachments throughout Northern Ireland to collect aluminium ring pulls for their fundraising campaign, with Blesma being their benefitting charity.

These young people, their instructors and families collected so many ring pulls that they were able to cash the metal in for £400. Myself and two Members – Bryan Phillips and Brian McKee – were delighted to visit a training evening, accept the cheque on behalf of Blesma and say a big thank you and well done to the cadets.

## RECOGNITION WELL DESERVED

It was a privilege to witness Iain and Cameron McAfee being recognised and congratulated by the mayor, Causeway Coast and Glens Council for their fundraising efforts for Blesma. This father and son team supported one another throughout various challenges, raising £2,300 for the Association. They definitely went the extra mile for Blesma – fantastic work!

**FIONA MORRISON**



From left: New Member Robert Beattie gets crafty; Brian Lawrence and Jim Adamson; Mayor's Reception for Iain and Cameron McAfee



# London and the South East

**O**n 02 February, Member Tony Richards and I visited the Minster Ladies at the Minster & Monkton Royal British Legion Social Club in Ramsgate to collect their very kind donation of £1,000.

The Minster Ladies have been supporting Blesma since 2015 and have donated in the region of £4,500 to the Association over the years. The Minster Ladies were having their monthly meeting at the time, so it was great to sit in and be a part of it. Tony had already met the Minster Ladies in the past, so this was a great opportunity for them to catch up with one another.

During the meeting, we discussed some potential ideas on how to continue our relationship and I hope to organise some outreach activities with their involvement this year. The ladies have attended a number of local events in support of Blesma, one of which included a trip to the Spitfire and Hurricane Memorial Museum where they

were met by some of our wonderful Blesma Members. This was a very enjoyable trip, filled with history and very interesting exhibits, including the legendary Spitfire and Hurricane aircraft. To finish the day on a high the group got to experience flying a Spitfire on the simulator.

Also this year, we have held a Members' lunch at a local Harvester in Essex which was lovely and social. Myself and a few Members also attended the National Army Museum in London to listen to the powerful panel discussion 'Journeys of Recovery' which included two Blesma Members. The National Army Museum is currently hosting an exhibition called *Road to Recovery* that will run until August, and I would highly recommend visiting. [Turn to p44 to learn more about the exhibition and panel discussion.]

**JESS LINGE**

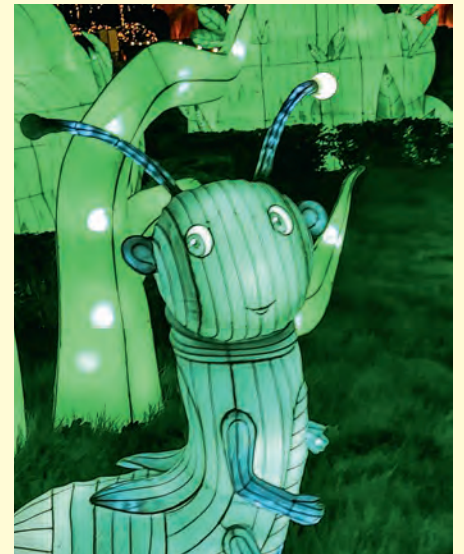
**“The Minster Ladies have been supporting Blesma since 2015 and have donated £4,500 to the Association over the years”**



# Blesma South safari was a roaring success

**O**n 20 November, Blesma South organised a family day out to Longleat Safari Park and the festival of lights. Despite the group experiencing miserable weather (the day started cold and sunny, then the heavens opened and the temperature dropped to 4°C), everyone had a wonderful day and evening.

The weather didn't dampen anyone's spirits, and we didn't even lose anyone to the lions or sea lions of Longleat. The day was much fun for all.



**Lights, camera, action at Longleat**

# Spotlight on Benefits and Social Care

**W**elcome to the Bulletin's regular section on the benefits system. As well as highlighting some useful information regarding the benefits system, on occasions we will be raising awareness of some health and social care matters or other available support. Blesma Members can either contact their Support Officer for further information about their benefit entitlement or contact Blesma's Benefits and Social Care Advisor Liz Watling on 020 8548 7080 or email [iwabenefits@blesma.org](mailto:iwabenefits@blesma.org). Please note these contact details are for Blesma Members only.

## COST OF LIVING PAYMENTS

As part of his 2022 Autumn Statement Chancellor Jeremy Hunt announced that, following last year's cost of living payments, further payments would be made across the UK in 2023/24.

The finer details, including exact payment windows, have yet to be announced. However, we do know that the payments will be spread across a longer period to offer support throughout the year. We will update Members in the next Bulletin with more details. Currently, we are aware of the following payments:

### Cost of Living Payment

This is expected to be made to those on some means tested benefits. There will be three payments:

Spring 2023 at £301  
Autumn 2023 at £300  
Spring 2024 at £299

### Pensioner Payment

This is expected to be paid for pensioner households. The payment is expected during:

Winter 2023/24 at £300

### Disability Payment

This is expected to be paid to those on Personal Independence Payment, Adult Disability Payment, Disability Living Allowance, Attendance Allowance, Constant Attendance Allowance and War Pensioners'

Mobility Supplement. Each person in the household entitled to a disability benefit is expected to receive a payment, which is expected during:  
Summer 2023 at £150

## BENEFIT AND WAR PENSION RATES FROM APRIL 2023

It was also announced in the Autumn Statement that benefits would rise in line with the Consumer Prices Index figure at the time of 10.1%. We have also heard that the War Pension will be increasing by the same percentage.

### Benefits

Benefit claimants will receive an award letter mid-March advising them of their entitlement.

### War Pension

The new rates of War Pensions and Allowances proposed from April 2023 are set out in the tables below (these are weekly rates unless otherwise shown):

#### WAR PENSION

100%	£220.20
90%	£198.18
80%	£176.16
70%	£154.14
60%	£132.12
50%	£110.10
40%	£88.08
30%	£66.06
20%	£44.04

The actual amounts paid may vary slightly from this due to the impact of the various component-level rounding rules.

#### AGE ALLOWANCES

##### PAYABLE FROM AGE 65

40% or 50%	£14.70
60% or 70%	£22.70
80% or 90%	£32.25
100%	£45.40

#### CONSTANT ATTENDANCE ALLOWANCE

Part Day Rate	£41.55
Basic Rate	£83.10
Intermediate Rate	£124.65
Exceptional Rate	£166.20

#### INVALIDITY ALLOWANCE

Lower Rate (initial claim aged 50 or over)	£8.80
Middle Rate (initial claim aged 40 to 49 incl)	£17.60
Higher Rate (initial claim aged under 40)	£26.90

#### CLOTHING ALLOWANCE

£ per annum	£284.00
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#### EDUCATION ALLOWANCE

Maximum £ per annum	£120.00
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#### MOBILITY SUPPLEMENT

One Rate	£79.25
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#### ALLOWANCE FOR LOWERED STANDARD OF OCCUPATION

Maximum	£83.04
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#### UNEMPLOYABILITY ALLOWANCE

Personal Allowance	£136.10
Adult Dependency Increase	£75.65
Increase for First Child	£17.60
Increase for Subsequent Children	£20.65

#### COMFORTS ALLOWANCE (PAID WITH CAA AND UNSUPP)

Lower Rate	£17.90
Higher Rate	£35.80

#### EXCEPTIONALLY SEVERE DISABLEMENT ALLOWANCE

One Rate	£83.10
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#### SEVERE DISABLEMENT OCCUPATIONAL ALLOWANCE

One Rate	£41.55
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#### WAR WIDOW(ER)S' PENSION

Widow(er) (Other Ranks) Supplementary Pension	£167.00
(Pre-1973 Widows)	£111.74
Other allowances within War Widow(er)s' Pension have also risen by 10.1%	

#### THERAPEUTIC EARNINGS LIMIT

Annual Rate	£8,684
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#### PERSONAL INDEPENDENCE PAYMENT FOR THOSE LIVING IN SCOTLAND

Many of our Scottish Members will be aware of changes to the benefits system within Scotland, notably the introduction of Adult Disability Payment which is replacing Personal Independence Payment in Scotland. We would like to remind Members of the process for moving to Adult Disability Payment, which will happen between Summer 2022 and Summer 2024.

You will not need to apply for Adult Disability Payment. The Department for Work and Pensions, which processes your Personal Independence Payment, will liaise with Social Security Scotland to manage the move of benefit. Social Security Scotland will not reassess or review your award during the move and you will be paid the same amount as your Personal Independence Payment. You will be paid on the same days and there will be no gap in your payments.

The Department for Work and Pensions will write to you to let you know that your benefit is moving to Social Security Scotland

and when your Personal Independence Payment award will end. Until your Personal Independence Payment has moved to Adult Disability Payment you will need to carry on answering any requests from the Department for Work and Pensions, such as filling in a Personal Independence Payment review form.

#### The date of your move

The date you are given for the transfer will usually depend on your review date for Personal Independence Payment. You will be fast tracked if any of the following apply:

- There has been a change in your condition since 29 August 2022
- You are due a Personal Independence Payment review
- Your Personal Independence Payment award is about to end

You will stay with the Department for Work and Pensions for now if any of the following apply:

- You returned the renewal form before 29 August 2022
- You reported a change of circumstances before 29 August 2022

#### During the move

The Department for Work and Pensions will send Social Security Scotland information about your Personal Independence Payment. This includes anything you have told them about your condition or disability. Social Security Scotland will use this information

to make sure your Adult Disability Payment is the same as your Personal Independence Payment. During the move, Social Security Scotland may need to write or call you to confirm some details, such as your address and bank details. If it does call you, it will be from this number: 0800 182 2222.

#### What happens after the move?

Social Security Scotland will send you a letter when the move is complete. This is to let you know:

- What rate of Adult Disability Payment you will get
- What date your Adult Disability Payment starts
- When Social Security Scotland will review your Adult Disability Payment (this is expected to be around the same time as your Personal Independence Payment would have been reviewed)

#### If you are acting on behalf of someone else

If the Department for Work and Pensions appointed you to act for someone who cannot manage their benefits, you can continue to act for them for their Adult Disability Payment. Social Security Scotland will contact you to review your appointment after the person's benefit has moved.

#### If you lease a car through the Motability Scheme

Moving from Personal Independence Payment to Adult Disability Payment will not affect your Motability Scheme lease. Social Security Scotland will:

- Tell the company you lease the vehicle from about the move
- Take over payments from the Department for Work and Pensions

If you have a vehicle, powered wheelchair or scooter through the Motability Scheme, you will be able to keep it until the end of your lease. If your lease ends during the move, you can renew your lease with Motability.

# Useful contact numbers across the Association

TITLE	NAME	TELEPHONE	EMAIL
<b>BLESMA SUPPORT OFFICERS</b>			
BSO (Prosthetics)	Brian Chenier	<b>M</b> 07796 715908	bsoprosthetics@blesma.org
BSO Eastern	Kevin Long	<b>T</b> 020 3954 3020 <b>M</b> 07825 536364	bsoeastern@blesma.org
BSO London & South East	Steven Burrell	<b>T</b> 020 7501 3030 <b>M</b> 07469 242277	bsolse@blesma.org
BSO Midlands	Vanessa Lucas	<b>T</b> 020 8548 7095 <b>M</b> 07825 536363	bsomid@blesma.org
BSO North East	Christine Landess	<b>T</b> 020 3954 3027 <b>M</b> 07917 972825	bsone@blesma.org
BSO North West	Amanda Brownlie	<b>M</b> 07825 536362	bsonw@blesma.org
BSO Scotland & Northern Ireland	Steve Burton	<b>M</b> 07766 258461	bsosniroi@blesma.org
BSO South	Pat Donnachie	<b>T</b> 020 3954 3026 <b>M</b> 07741 846106	bsosouth@blesma.org
BSO South West	Sarah Payne	<b>T</b> 01278 789393 <b>M</b> 07741 737563	bsosw@blesma.org
BSO Wales and West	Tom Hall	<b>T</b> 020 8548 7098 <b>M</b> 07780 165085	bsowest@blesma.org
Members Living Overseas	Liz Watling	<b>T</b> 020 8548 7080	iwabenefits@blesma.org
<b>BLESMA OUTREACH OFFICERS</b>			
Outreach Officer Eastern	Francesca Anastasio	<b>M</b> 07741 661159	outreacheastern@blesma.org
Outreach Officer London & South East	Jess Linge	<b>M</b> 07741 845793	outreachlse@blesma.org
Outreach Officer Midlands	Sian Richards	<b>M</b> 07741845429	outreachmid@blesma.org
Outreach Officer Northern Ireland	Fiona Morrison	<b>M</b> 07741 744617	outreachni@blesma.org
Outreach Officer North East	Adele Miller	<b>M</b> 07741 847211	outreachne@blesma.org
Outreach Officer North West	Catherine Green	<b>M</b> 07741 846674	outreachnw@blesma.org
Outreach Officer Scotland	Emma Gration	<b>M</b> 07884 695703	outreachscotland@blesma.org
Outreach Officer South	Elmo Moses	<b>M</b> 07435 283102	outreachofficersouth@blesma.org
Outreach Officer South West	TBC		
Outreach Officer Wales and West	Jason Suller	<b>M</b> 07741 744141	outreachwest@blesma.org

## Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth update

Since our last update the Branch met for its Christmas Lunch in December and was pleased to welcome 24 members and guests, including the Great Yarmouth Lions President Chris Speed and his wife Jaime.

We extend our thanks to them for their continued support and generous donation. We were also delighted to welcome Joyce, her son Michael, and her daughter Jane. Joyce has been an active Member of Blesma for 80 years, since

marrying her husband in 1943. He was a founding member of the Branch in 1946. Joyce isn't always able to attend our lunches, so it was good to see her again.

In January, the Branch was very sad to hear of the passing of long-standing member, Phyllis, who had reached her 104th birthday. Phyllis was very independent, still lived on her own and had a fantastic knowledge of Great Yarmouth. She was always happy to



**Blesma Widow Joyce with her family at the Christmas Lunch**

welcome visitors with a cup of tea and a chat, and she will be missed. The Branch extends its condolences to her family.

The Branch held its AGM on Saturday 04 March which was followed by lunch. Thanks to all Members, old and new, who attended. The Branch hopes to hold several events this year including an afternoon tea and a sailing day following the success of 2022's events.

If anyone in the Association would like to attend any of our events or become a Branch member, please contact the Chairman, Philip (Bob) Monkhouse, on 07951 292681.

TITLE	NAME	TELEPHONE	EMAIL
<b>INDEPENDENCE AND WELLBEING</b>			
Benefits and Social Care Advisor	Liz Watling	T 020 8548 7080	iwabenefits@blesma.org
Grants and Outreach Activities Executive	Jackie King	T 020 8548 3516	goaexec@blesma.org
Membership, Branch and Volunteer Network Executive	Debbie	T 020 8548 7093	mbvexec@blesma.org
Welfare – Direct Line		T 020 8598 9459	
<b>ACTIVITIES</b>			
Activities Manager	Jess March	T 020 8548 3519	activities@blesma.org
Activities Executive	Clare Wellings	T 020 3954 3021	ae@blesma.org
Activities Executive (Local)	Nicole Findlay	T 020 8548 7097	aelocal@blesma.org
<b>FUNDRAISING</b>			
Head of Fundraising	Anna Scalera	T 020 8548 3517	hf@blesma.org
Senior Community and Events Officer	Abbie-Louise Mills	T 020 8548 7089	communityeventsofficersnr@blesma.org
Corporate & Regional Fundraising Mgr	Chris Knight	M 07774 797318	crfm@blesma.org
Senior Corporate Fundraising Officer	Alana Warwick	T 020 8590 1124	scfo@blesma.org
<b>COMMUNICATIONS</b>			
Stories, Content and Press Officer	Jess Mackinnon	T 020 8548 3514	storiesandpress@blesma.org
<b>DIRECTORS</b>			
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Great Yarmouth Lions  
President Chris Speed  
presents Simon  
Cavie with a cheque

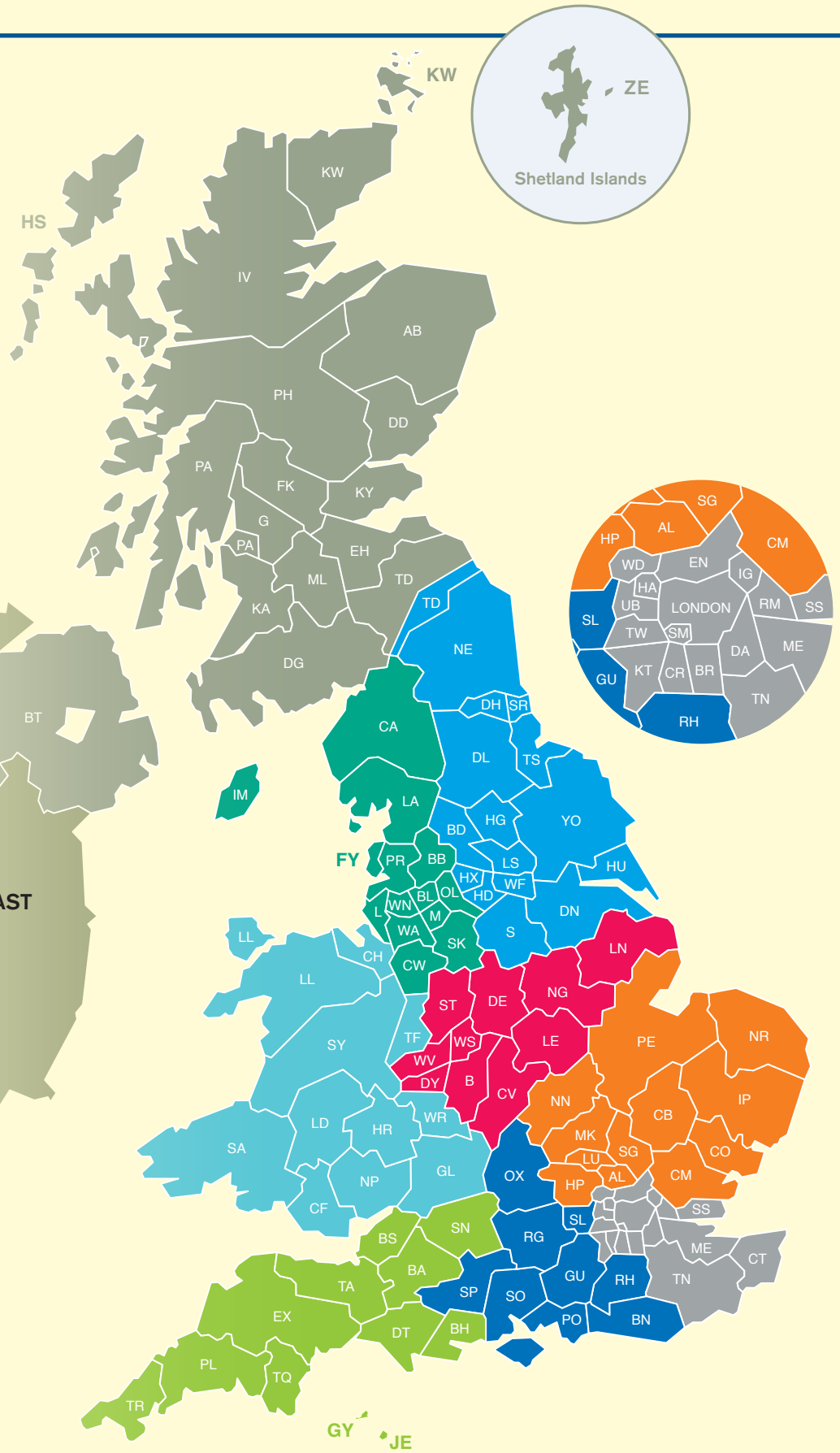
## How would you like to receive yours?

**B**lesma magazine is now available electronically. If you no longer wish to receive a copy of the printed magazine and would only like a digital version, please let our team know by emailing us at [storiesandpress@blesma.org](mailto:storiesandpress@blesma.org). You will be added to an email database and will be notified by email when a new issue of the magazine is available.

# Blesma by area

*Have you got a question or need advice? Don't hesitate to get in touch with the Blesma Support Officer in your area. The contact numbers for all BSOs, Outreach Officers, and relevant members of staff can be found on p76.*

- SCOTLAND & NI
- NORTH WEST
- NORTH EAST
- EASTERN
- MIDLANDS
- WALES AND WEST
- SOUTH
- SOUTH WEST
- LONDON AND SOUTH EAST



# Bake for Blesma



## Bake for Blesma 01-08 May

Whether you are celebrating the King's Coronation or VE Day, you can take part in Bake for Blesma by putting on a cake sale, afternoon tea or tea party.

Blesma can provide you with everything you need, including recipes, cake toppers, balloons and bunting.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**



To get involved,  
please contact your  
Outreach Officer

**Blesma**  
THE LIMBLESS VETERANS



## Free Will writing service

Blesma is partnered with Guardian Angel, an online Will writing service for anyone thinking of leaving a gift in their Will.

The online process is quick and easy, and every Will is fully checked by a qualified solicitor.

We remain part of the National Free Wills Network who will connect you to a local solicitor who can guide you through the process of either amending your Will or creating a new one.



1 in 5 Blesma Members is helped through gifts in Wills

Guardian Angel online process takes just 30 minutes

National Free Wills Network sends a Will writing pack by post or email

No obligation to leave a gift

Learn more

Contact  
[legacies@blesma.org](mailto:legacies@blesma.org)

020 8548 7085

Visit  
[blesma.org/legacy](http://blesma.org/legacy)