

Blesma

The magazine for limbless and injured veterans | Winter 2023

PLUS:

MEET BLESMA'S
CHIEF EXECUTIVE

BENEFITS ADVICE

TAKING CENTRE
STAGE IN BELFAST

REMEMBRANCE

BULLETIN INSIDE

“I CAN ACHIEVE A LOT WITH BLESMA'S SUPPORT”

WALI NOORI LOST HIS
SIGHT IN AN IED BLAST
WHILST WORKING AS
AN INTERPRETER IN
AFGHANISTAN. THEN
HE DISCOVERED BLESMA



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the famous Belfast
International Tattoo

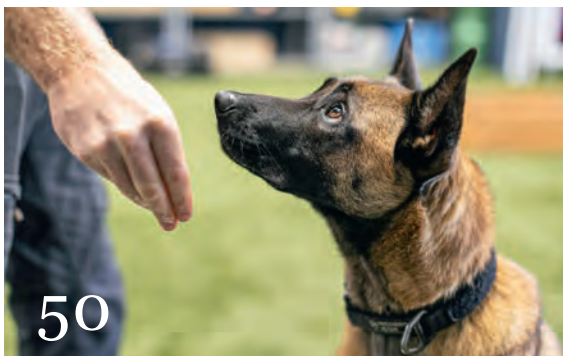


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Association plays huge role in £2.52m Mobility Fund success

HAVING CAMPAIGNED FOR THE REINSTATEMENT OF THE VETERANS MOBILITY FUND, BLESMA AND HELP FOR HEROES ARE SET TO ADMINISTER THE NEW £2.5M GRANT BY MARCH 2024

Campaigning work by Blesma has helped to create a new £2.52m mobility fund that will provide specialist equipment to improve the lives of injured veterans.

The Veterans Mobility Fund closed in 2021 but will restart by March 2024 administered by Help for Heroes in partnership with Blesma.

The two charities collaborated in a lobbying campaign; firstly to win approval for the fund and then to be its administrators.

“This is a fantastic boost for the injured veteran community who have made huge sacrifices for their country,” said Jon Bryant, Blesma’s then-Chief Executive who stood down from the position in October. “We know what a difference it will make to veterans who have been injured in the service of their country. Blesma is delighted to have been part of this campaign and looks forward to delivering this much-needed support.”

Above: former Royal Marine and Special Forces soldier Toby Gutteridge with Veterans’ Affairs Minister Johnny Mercer

The new fund was announced by Veterans’ Affairs Minister Johnny Mercer MP, a former Royal Artillery captain who served three tours of duty in Afghanistan. He praised the work of Blesma and Help for Heroes at the official launch at the Union Jack Club in London in October.

“It was absolutely vital,” he said. “This is a very important issue for the veterans community that I care deeply about. We now have this money and we’re going to set it

Welcome



Former Chief Executive Jon Bryant called the Fund a “fantastic boost”

on an enduring basis, because the Prime Minister is crystal clear that nobody who’s had an injury should be paying for their mobility needs, and we’re going to achieve that through this pathway.

“Working in this job and representing veterans is a privilege. I think the country should be giving them world-class care, and it does, and I’m determined to keep it at that level because I think they deserve the very best for the sacrifices that they’ve made.”

FILLING THE FUNDING GAP

The Veterans Mobility Fund was launched in 2015 with £3 million from LIBOR banking fines to be used over five years to help veterans

with service-attributable injuries to lead fulfilling lives. But a funding gap appeared when it closed in early 2021, leaving charities such as Blesma and Help for Heroes needing to step in.

The joint campaign for its reinstatement involved making a solid business case on how funds would be administered, as well as their positive impact on both injured veterans and their families, and the health service. A 30,000-strong petition, and letters to the Chancellor and relevant Secretaries of State, underscored the need.

“There was a lot of work involved and these things are never easy,” added Jon Bryant. “But there was an unassailable logic about this which helped carry the day; the fund had worked, there was a need and these are lifetime injuries.

“We have the understanding and expertise and, with Help for Heroes, we have the relevant capability to deliver this on behalf of the Government. Between us, we know the majority of people who both qualify for this sort of support and thoroughly deserve it.”

The fund will provide mobility aids that are not usually available

“BLESMA IS DELIGHTED TO BE PART OF THIS CAMPAIGN AND LOOKS FORWARD TO DELIVERING MUCH-NEEDED SUPPORT”



Welcome to the Winter edition of the magazine and my first as Chief Executive. We say a fond farewell to my predecessor, Jon Bryant, and wish him and his family well in their future endeavours.

I come from a 31-year military career which culminated in my final appointment as Chief of the Royal Military Police.

Switching from policing to a Service charity may not seem like a natural fit but, as with any organisation, it is all about the people. Whether that is victims, suspects or injured personnel, people skills transcend across all cultures and demographics.

I have been President of two military associations that support veterans and the Chair of Trustees of three Service charities supporting veterans, serving personnel, their families and heritage. My experience enables me to understand you, as veterans, the military context you served in and the Service charity environment.

I spent my first few weeks meeting staff and Members, and getting a detailed understanding of the organisation. A huge thank you to everyone for giving me such a warm welcome and being extremely friendly, open and engaging. Blesma is a first-class charity with an amazing reputation. I will do everything I can to continue to build on that excellent foundation, consistently deliver support to Members and help Blesma thrive.

Over the coming months I look forward to meeting many more of you and hearing your views. As a Members’ organisation it is vital that we take Blesma forward together.

I wish you all a very happy Christmas and a healthy and happy New Year.

Vivienne Buck
Chief Executive



Newsfeed

on the NHS, such as specialist wheelchairs and mobility scooters, and different orthotics such as splints and braces.

The new fund will run for five years but Mr Mercer would like it to be enshrined as part of a long-term provision alongside initiatives such as Op COURAGE and Op RESTORE. He is also pushing for improved recognition of veterans' needs at GP surgery level.

"I would like to see every GP surgery and NHS Trust veteran-accredited by the next election," he said. "If an individual presents as a veteran, they should be made aware of all the schemes available to them. We are building a world-class provision for veterans' care... and GPs are an important part of that."

HATS OFF TO BLESMA AND H4H

Injured veterans were among the first to hear news that the fund had been reinstated and would be administered by Blesma and Help for Heroes.

"It is a great move because the funding was there to support me with a wheelchair that has enabled me to live a fulfilled life," said former Royal Marine and Special Forces soldier Toby Gutteridge, who was seriously injured when he was shot through the neck during a night raid on a compound in Afghanistan in 2009.

"I still want to live a really active life and I probably wouldn't be able to do that without the correct mobility funding in place. I don't know what would have happened to the funding had it not been for Blesma and Help for Heroes. I take my hat off to organisations like these because they do so much for veterans.

"It was good to chat to Johnny Mercer as you can tell he genuinely cares for injured veterans and the very seriously ill veterans' programme, which I fall into. He wanted to know how I was getting on and is focused on seeing how he can develop better support for veterans."

Blesma Member Mark Bowra MBE, a decorated Special Forces officer who suffered a stroke in 2014 said orthotics from the original fund had been crucial to his recovery.

His friend Stuart Hitchman said: "The key is that veterans now understand they can be a beneficiary from this fund. The work of Blesma and Help for Heroes has been vital and it is two-fold because they



From L: Hugh Player, Union Jack Club Chief Executive, Jon Bryant, and Help for Heroes Chief Executive James Needham

Words: Danny Buckland Photography: Stan Papior



"WE KNOW WHAT A DIFFERENCE IT WILL MAKE TO VETERANS INJURED IN THE SERVICE OF THEIR COUNTRY"

have secured the public money and can deliver it to the people who need it. We say thank you to both of them."

James Needham, Chief Executive of Help for Heroes, said: "The collaboration with Blesma was so important because we're all trying to deliver interventions and effects to a group of people with complex needs, and to do that you need good thinking, different perspectives, you need to challenge each other and to come together and stand up for what's important.

"Between us, we know a significant proportion of the cohort this fund was set up to serve, and we are now working quickly and carefully to establish a robust programme so we can open the fund to eligible veterans by March 2024."

Jon Bryant added: "This fund has been justified twice and approved by the Government twice, so although we have not got an enduring commitment, we are heading in the right direction. This is for injuries attributed to military service when military veterans were serving the Government; their injuries last a lifetime and we firmly believe that support should last a lifetime."



Lexi after her world record at the London Marathon in 2022

Lexi writes her name into record books for third time

Lexi Chambers has claimed another world record as she continues to push the boundaries of sport, endurance and inspiration. In August the former Royal Signals soldier wheeled her non-sport wheelchair around an athletics track for 12 hours. In that time Lexi completed 193 laps of the track, covering a distance of 77km and taking her third world record.

Lexi, who elected to have her left leg amputated below the knee after suffering from long-term excruciating Complex Regional Pain Syndrome (CRPS), holds the world record for completing the marathon and half-marathon in a non-sporting wheelchair.

“It was the greatest distance travelled by a female in 12 hours using a manual wheelchair and I went past the existing 60km record at 8.5 hours,” said Lexi. “It was a tough day because I had a fibro flare in the morning and then struggled with heat stroke for about 90 minutes when it got really sunny in the afternoon. I had to

go at a snail’s pace, but I managed to get through it and was bombing around the track at the end.”

The rubber composition of the Exeter Arena track combined with the grip of the everyday wheels on her chair made for arduous wheeling, but Lexi kept her spirits up with a playlist of her favourite songs and a supply of food and drink from her support team.



“It is great to have achieved the record,” she added. “It’s a personal achievement but the main motivation is to show people that you can play sport and achieve anything with what you have. I use an everyday wheelchair to reinforce the point that no

matter who you are, you can engage in sport in some way. I’ve had lots of great feedback from people who have told me they have achieved something they previously thought wasn’t possible.”

Lexi is planning another world record – this time wheeling from John O’Groats to Land’s End in a non-sporting wheelchair – for some time in 2024.

COULD YOU BE BLESMA'S NEW WIDOWS ADVISER?

The Association’s Trustees are looking for a volunteer to advise the Board on issues that particularly affect its 700 Widows. The Widows Adviser will be responsible for representing the interests and views of Blesma Widows (and Widowers), and will work closely with the Board of Trustees to ensure that Widow beneficiaries are able to access support and events that are planned and delivered with their specific needs in mind.

The Blesma Widows Adviser will work with a lead Trustee (currently Richard Gilbert) to seek the views of Blesma Widows, attend events and brief the Board in person at least once a year. Attendance may be in person or online (as decided by the Adviser) with expenses paid by the Association. The Widows Adviser will be asked to serve for a period of three years, with an option to extend in post by agreement.

If you are actively involved in the Association and would like to represent the interests of the Association’s Widows at the Blesma Board, please write to the Chief Executive detailing your experience as a Blesma Widow, how you would wish to represent the interests of Blesma’s Widows and Widowers, and why you would wish to take on this important role.

Letters should be addressed to Vivienne Buck, Blesma Chief Executive, at the address on page 03.



NEWS ANALYSIS

Welcoming Blesma's new Chief Executive

BRIGADIER VIVIENNE BUCK JOINS THE ASSOCIATION AFTER A 31-YEAR CAREER IN THE BRITISH ARMY AND IS ALREADY ENJOYING GETTING TO KNOW ITS MEMBERS

Brigadier Vivienne Buck recently started her role as the Association's new Chief Executive after a highly distinguished military career that culminated in a term as the first female head of the Royal Military Police. Vivienne held the critical role of Provost Marshal (Army) for four years and was responsible for delivering a policing, investigation and detention service to Defence, as well as ensuring the safety and security of serving personnel across the world.

During her 31-year service Vivienne gained a wealth of experience dealing with complex investigations, often working in operational environments, and she has worked across all aspects of the RMP; from the Special Investigation Branch to welfare and human resources at the Army Personnel Centre. She has studied at the NATO Defence College in Rome, has spent time as an instructor on the Officer Training Course at Sandhurst, and has served on the boards of military associations that have delivered welfare support to veterans and their families.

Are you from a military family and was an Army career pre-destined?

I had a relative who served in World War I but no-one in my family has served since. Before I sat my A-Levels, I was drawn to both the Police Force and the Army but couldn't decide which I preferred. After leaving school I worked for a year at the



Bank of England, which I learned very quickly was not going to be the career for me. I picked up sport and activity qualifications and went to the Middle East as a recreations manager for a big hotel before working for American Express. It felt like something of a five-star lifestyle but I decided to come back for the Regular Commissions Board to go to RMA Sandhurst because I wanted to say that I had at least tried. With every interview and test I took, I kept getting told 'Yes', so I started officer training in 1992. I was commissioned directly into the Royal Military Police and I have never looked back.

How were your early years in the RMP?

It was definitely the right choice for me. I joined the Army as an officer because of the leadership opportunities, and straight away I was a platoon commander of 30 soldiers so immediately had responsibility for their welfare and professional support. I sometimes had to make tough decisions and was learning the technical elements of policing and investigations at the same time.

What appealed to you most about the job?

I like solving problems, and as I moved through the ranks I experienced command and leadership at different levels across overseas postings and operational tours. I worked with different cultures and different people, which was absolutely fascinating. It is also highly demanding and complex to operate across international boundaries and jurisdictions, but I relish the challenge of piecing things together. I have also had varied experience in the Special Investigation Branch and Close Protection, instructing at Sandhurst and being involved in welfare which gave a more rounded understanding of all aspects of service life.

What have been some career highlights?

There have been many, particularly serving overseas, as well as many challenges. I enjoyed the operational tours even though they came with the physical and emotional challenge of difficult times, but it is what you train for. To feel you have been



“I want to meet the people who make Blesma what it is,” says Chief Executive Vivienne Buck

Words: Danny Buckland Photography: Andy Bate



challenged professionally whilst serving your country brings an element of patriotism and pride. That is rewarding.

Were you aware of Blesma during your military career?

I've always known about the Association because my very first tour in the Army was in Northern Ireland and one of our RMP soldiers, who is a Blesma Member, was injured. I also have a couple of close friends who have lost the use of a limb – one operationally, one non-operationally – so I know what a fantastic organisation it is and how it supports its Members. In my last role, I was chair of Trustees of two boards which delivered support to our members, veterans and their families, plus two charitable associations that also supported veterans. I was also on the board of the Royal Military Police Museum, which looked after the RMP's heritage.

What drew you to this role?

My varied experience focusing on the welfare of Service personnel and victims of crime, as well as working with veterans through the various associations, put me in the sphere that Blesma operates in. I'd also previously visited the Royal Hospital

Chelsea and was impressed by its work, which helped sharpen my focus towards Service charities as I started to transition from military to civilian life. I believe my background gives me the experience to help and support others. I feel as though I was fortunate to have a career that I enjoyed every minute of. There were ups and downs, of course, but I feel the Forces invested in me and supported me to enable me to have that successful career, so this is my opportunity to give back to a similar environment where I understand the Members. It gives me a chance to help make a difference to people's lives.

What do you hope to implement for the Association now you are in the role?

I had a fantastic handover from my predecessor, Jon Bryant, and it is clear that we are now due a new five-year strategy, which I will deliver to the Board of Trustees. Blesma is undoubtedly a high-performing charity that will continue to consistently deliver on its vision and intent. So my role clearly is going to be to continue to deliver and also develop, build and grow, in order to consistently deliver the same – if not better – levels of support for the Members.



What challenges lie ahead?

Clearly, the challenge is how do you deliver the same, or better, level of support at a time of economic downturn when people are less able to donate and investments do not perform as well as they have previously. But we have to maintain that high level of operational support and protect the reputation. It's a Members' charity, with Member presence on the Board, and I need their consent. So it is my job to keep them, the staff and the Board, fully informed and bring them along in how we develop the Association together.

Do you have a busy run-up to Christmas?

In my last job, it felt like I was away a lot of the time and I think that is a glimpse of what is coming because I want to meet the people who make Blesma what it is, and I'm not going to learn the best and the most by sitting in an office reading papers. I'm visiting Support Officers, Outreach Officers, Branches and volunteers, and I've said yes to a lot of Christmas lunches so I'll probably be turkeyed-out by Christmas! But I'm really looking forward to meeting everyone and continuing Blesma's great work supporting its Members. It is a privilege to have this role.



Blesma pair putt on a show for Simpson Cup

Members Mike Browne and Ian Bishop have helped Great Britain defend the Simpson Cup in what was a nerve-jangling final day of the prestigious golf tournament.

The annual Ryder Cup-style competition is hotly contested between injured Service personnel and veterans from Great Britain and the USA. Former Gunner Mike sank the crucial putt on the 18th green to seal the trophy for Team GB in September.

He and Ian, who served with 45 Commando Royal Marines, brought home the vital points at Royal Lytham & St Annes,

Lancashire, for a 9.5-9.5 scoreline to retain the trophy the team won at Baltusrol Golf Club, New Jersey, USA, last year.

“It was very close and very tense but it was a superb victory for the entire team,” said Dave Ward, GB’s captain. “We decided to send Ian and Mike out late as a bit of insurance, and the Blesma guys were great.”

The tournament is organised by the On Course Foundation, a golf-specific military charity that uses the game as a vehicle for recovery. It offers ex-Service personnel a sporting challenge and route to career opportunities in golf.

RAF COMMUNITY PULLS TOGETHER FOR BLESMA

A SEVEN-DAY, 7KM CHALLENGE has raised almost £2,000 for Blesma thanks to AS1 Jenny Lovejoy and the RAF community.

A team of 65 participants walked, jogged or ran the distance at various RAF bases around the country each day for the fundraising event.

“We had a great response and everyone is really pleased with the amount we raised,” said Jenny, who serves as a simulator pilot with 54 Squadron based at RAF Waddington. “It is the event’s second year and this year we tripled the numbers.”

The challenge attracted personnel from RAF stations Brize Norton, Boulmer, Coningsby, Leeming, Lossiemouth, Marham, Odiham and Waddington, and from the Imjin Army Barracks in Gloucestershire.

“I’ve always done things for charity, and when I heard about Blesma and read into the great work it does, I couldn’t imagine what it would be like to have devastating injuries,” said Jenny, 23. “I wanted to do what I could to help, and the response from the RAF community has been great.

“We are definitely going to do the event again next year, and we hope to have even more people taking part.”

TWO STEVES SET SIT-SKI RECORD

Members Steve Whitehead and Steve Shaw have set an endurance world record with a team of sit-skiers. The group of eight smashed the target of completing 44km in eight hours by reaching 60.25km in just six hours.

The team carved down the 180m indoor slope at the Chill Factore in Manchester 399 times in a continuous relay. “We had skiers with a range of disabilities and experience,” said former Royal Marines Reservist Steve Whitehead. “I got into skiing after a spinal cord injury and am grateful to have been on some fantastic Blesma trips.”

Steve Shaw, also a former Royal Marine who has competed in the Paralympics, added: “It was a great challenge, a lot of fun, and shows what you can achieve!”



FIND YOUR NEW PASTIME IN 2024

Whether it’s glamping in Somerset, skiing in Colorado, cycling in New York or keeping fit in Spain, Blesma can help you find your new favourite thing in 2024. And what’s even better, it is all free! Turn to p22 to take a look at the Activities Calendar 2024 and get in touch with the Activities Team to book your place.



From close protection to protecting what's close

Former Infantryman Steve Owen has opened the doors to a new career with the launch of a farm shop selling quality local produce.

The 33 year old and his wife, Kirsty, are building a strong reputation at the Cherrypicked Farm Shop in West Wales for their array of cheese, cured meat, seafood, fresh bread, local cakes, locally roasted coffee and customised hampers.

"We are loving running the business and giving it our own personality," said Steve, who served with the Royal Welch Fusiliers and suffered injuries in an IED blast which eventually led to an elective amputation in 2016.

"Kirsty was running a mobile catering business and I was an operations manager for a charity, and we thought it was time for a new challenge. At least 60% of our stock is sourced from within a 50-mile radius and some of the cheese we sell starts off from cows four fields away!" said Steve.

"I worked for the British Embassy in

Iraq in close protection after leaving the military, but after 25 surgeries on my leg I opted for an amputation and haven't looked back. Blesma has been a game-changer for me. It has been there all the way through and has supported me with a rugby wheelchair and a mountain bike so I can cycle with my sons.

"But the emotional support is massive, too. I had surgery last December, which was quite daunting because it was the first operation I'd had in six years. Blesma said they'd support me no matter what happened, which was

really reassuring. It's a unique charity!"

Steve has also put in the hard yards to raise funds for military charities including setting a record for the furthest distance walked by an above-knee amputee, at 113 miles in 52 hours, and rowing 130 miles in 23 hours as part of a disabled veterans team.

Visit Steve and Kirsty's business at www.cherrypickedfarmshop.co.uk



MIKE 'DELIGHTED' TO RAISE FUNDS ON WALK

MIKE ARMSTRONG HAS RAISED £1,000 from a strenuous walk across the distance of Hadrian's Wall. The 62-year-old Associate Member is an above-knee amputee. He covered the 90 miles in 10 stages, with his partner Sandra giving him support each day before returning to Wigton, near Carlisle, for rest and recuperation to prepare for the next effort.

"The going was tough in places and I needed the rest to recover from the rubs, strains, blisters, sores and fatigue," said Mike, who served with the King's Own Royal Border Regiment TA before a life-changing accident in 2022.

"I took a month to do it. It was a fantastic experience to be out there and we're delighted with what we've raised."



Mike walked 90 miles in 10 stages

WET ROOM BRINGS PEACE OF MIND

BLESMA HAS PROVIDED THE FUNDS for former 3 Rifles soldier Alex Swinhoe to install a wet room at his Sunderland home.

"I had to hop over a raised bit to get into the old shower and there was always a risk of slipping and injuring myself," said 32-year-old Alex, who lost a leg in conflict in Afghanistan in 2009. "I've been a Blesma Member since I got the injury, and my support officer Christine was really helpful and handled the grant application. The new wet room is wonderful, and I can now have a shower without worrying about injuring myself.

"I'm really grateful for Blesma being there when I needed them!"



Fancy doing this in 2024? It's easy to get involved

Team Endeavour Racing is getting ready for a new season with a move to a new base in Portsmouth. The charity, which uses powerboating to create transformative team environments for veterans, aims to provide challenges and opportunities for Forces personnel transitioning from military life.

"It is a great group to be involved with," said Brian McGuffie who, along with Mark Sidwells and David Gardiner, makes up a three-man Blesma contingent in the team.

"There will be plenty of opportunities for Blesma Members during 2024. You start

off doing tasters but will soon build your confidence, and being part of a team really helps. I would recommend it to Members."

Brian is working towards obtaining his Powerboat Level 2 certificate next year.

"It will allow me to do further training and to race in the UK and abroad, and I hope it will inspire others," he said.

Team Endeavour Racing is recruiting new team members and would welcome all Blesma Members. For more information on the team, the boats and the racing visit www.teamendeavourracing.co.uk

News in brief



RESIN COURSES AND RIVER TABLES FOR ROB

Member Rob Linge has honed his creative skills by learning to make stunning resin 'river tables'. The intricate designs are achieved by adding epoxy resins to upcycle and refurbish sculpted wood, and result in striking tables and worktops.

Rob completed an initial tutorial then delved deeper with a six-day course to learn and practice new techniques.

"The course was very good and I've just sold my first table!" said Rob, 59. "It's worth doing the basic course first as the table course is quite in-depth."

Resin art expert Norman Reay, who founded Reson-8 and runs beginner and advanced courses, added: "Rob learned plenty during the course and is now very capable to continue with projects of his own. A very big shout out to Blesma for supporting Rob during this course and allowing him to find a greater sense of independence."

LEARN TO STAND EASY ON STAGE

Blesma Member Nigel 'Woody' Woodward is helping veterans cope with post-Service life and improving mental health provision. The former 3 Royal Tank Regiment trooper is performing with Stand Easy Productions which runs workshops and productions with veterans to increase their resilience and confidence.

Woody was part of a performance to the Scottish Parliament that highlighted the mental health issues faced by veterans.

"You get so much from taking part," said Woody, who has also taken part in Making Generation R. "The productions aren't scripted but we are helped with their structure to give them impact. There are weekly group sessions for military veterans and those who have worked in the emergency services. Everyone gets a lot from the sessions – they're great social events as well as being something worthwhile."



Words: Danny Buckland

Widows Week is “like being wrapped in a warm embrace of friendship”

Widows Week was held at Alveston Hall in Nantwich, Cheshire, in September and focused on sightseeing, guided tours and socialising, with the added opportunity to sit back and enjoy a little pampering. For some, this was their first Widows Week and so arrived with a little trepidation. However, nerves were soon diminished with a warm welcome from BSO Scotland and Northern Ireland Steve Burton and Outreach Officer Northern Ireland Fiona Morrison. The ladies have lived through similar experiences, and showed each other mutual respect, support and warmth throughout the week – sprinkled with a lot of fun and laughter!

The first outing took them to the National Memorial Arboretum. The rain didn't dampen the spirits; rainproof ponchos were donned and they boarded the train to take a tour around the gardens and listen to the

“THANKS TO THESE NEW FRIENDS, MY PRAYERS HAVE BEEN ANSWERED”

stories behind the various memorials. A visit to the Blesma Memorial Garden was a must, and time was given to reflect and remember.

The next day it was off to the World of Wedgwood for a behind-the-scenes guided tour followed by a fabulous afternoon tea. Next stop was a visit to Trentham Gardens to explore the enchanting fairy sculptures and take in the beautiful surroundings. The week was finished off with the ladies enjoying a manicure or pedicure and relaxing in Alveston Hall's gardens.

During the week the group discovered that two of the ladies are extremely talented; Shirley writes poetry, and the garden was the perfect place for her to recite some of her work. Bidy, meanwhile, creates her own copper wire jewellery and very kindly made everyone a bespoke handcrafted piece.

“Widows Week was like being wrapped in a warm embrace of friendship! I thoroughly



From left: Bidy, Ruth, Jackie, Shirley, Fiona Morrison (Outreach Officer), Yvonne and Lynne



At the NMA's Blesma Memorial Garden

enjoyed my time away with some remarkable ladies and felt spoilt by Fiona and Steve who could not do enough for us. Thank you Blesma,” said Yvonne Streeter.

Each evening was spent chatting over dinner and enjoying the entertainment, and it wasn't long before some of the ladies were up on the dance floor!



Bidy at the stunning World of Wedgwood

“This was my first Widows Week. I was widowed earlier this year and didn't think I could go on holiday on my own,” said Jackie Eaton after the event. “But thanks to these new friends, all my prayers have been answered. I have enjoyed every moment, and Steve and Fiona instilled so much confidence in me.”

Words: Fiona Morrison



This year's Fastnet Race not for the faint-hearted

The Rolex Fastnet Race lived up to its fearsome reputation this year with gusting winds and raging seas buffeting the 400-strong fleet, but former Royal Signals Captain Kevin Fitzpatrick braved the elements to raise funds for Blesma.

Four yachts were de-masted, one sank and 90 were forced to pull out of the gruelling 695-mile race which ran from the Solent around the Fastnet Rock off the southern tip of Ireland, and onto the finish line in Cherbourg, France, in July.

"It is the second time I've raced the Fastnet; it was brutal the first time and even harder this year," said Kevin, 64, from Penistone in South Yorkshire. "We raced in a 72-foot yacht but there were times when I wondered if we would make it! It was tough but exhilarating, and our crew was made up of 16 determined people, so we gained confidence from that."

Kevin, who served in various countries around the world including in Northern Ireland and Bosnia during his 26-year military career, was part of the crew of the yacht CatZero, which was named after a charity in Hull that provides opportunities for disadvantaged children and their families.

"It was a great experience but to do it for Blesma was personally rewarding," Kevin added. "I came through 26 years' service relatively unscathed, so to be able to give something back was great. All the fantastic work that the Association does really struck a chord with me, and I was delighted to be able to fundraise for it through both my Fastnet experiences."

Kevin, who worked in outdoor education and healthcare estates management after leaving the Royal Signals, raised around £2,200 from the race, boosted by his local pub The Huntsman in Thurlstone.

News in brief

MAYHEM HITS THE MARK FOR HOCKEY-LOVING LEE

A Blesma grant has helped Lee Warburton get back into the thick of the action with the Manchester Mayhem para ice hockey team.

The Association funded specialist equipment for the 27-year-old former Royal Artillery gunner to take up the fast-paced sport.

"I'd played hockey before I suffered a spinal injury in pre-deployment training so was able to pick this up quite quickly and I'm really enjoying being part of the team," said Lee, from Blackpool. "The sport is inclusive of all levels of disability, and it is great fun with lots of camaraderie. I'm very grateful to Blesma for helping me with the equipment. It is great for your mental health, and I would recommend anyone give it a try."

For more information, contact info@manchestermayhem.co.uk

BSO Praised for Help with Housing

Former Queen's Gurkha Signals soldier Ajit Tamang has praised London and South East Support Officer Steve Burrell who raced to the rescue when Ajit struggled to find accommodation after the owner of his rented property sold the house in Hayes, Middlesex.

"We had to move out but it was very difficult to find anywhere because of the high rental costs. It was very stressful," said Ajit, 62, who lives with his wife Sudha. "Steve was incredible: he found us a disabled-friendly Haig Housing flat and also organised for me to get a mobility scooter."

Ajit, who worked in security following a 15-year career in the Army and has been a Blesma Member since 2016, needed an above-knee amputation after developing a cyst in 2007.

"All credit to Blesma and Steve for their help. I don't know what we would have done without them," added Ajit, who is now enjoying life in his new home in south London.



Words: Danny Buckland Photography: Garth Banks

No terrain too tough for intrepid team

A number of Blesma Members were put through their paces in the Pyrenees in September as they tackled a challenging expedition route driving 4x4 trucks and riding motorbikes. To complete the epic 1,000-kilometre adventure the team had to navigate their way through steep passes, boulder-strewn tracks and corkscrew twisting routes that weaved through the mountains.

The Ibx Endeavour trip, which was organised by military rehabilitation charity Future Terrain, was a demanding, rewarding and inspiring week for the veterans. It even culminated in a tour of D-Day sites on the return journey.

“About 60 per cent of the driving was off-road and most of the time we were about 30km from the nearest road,” said Grant White, a Blesma Member

and former Royal Marine who co-founded Future Terrain in 2016. “We could often go all day without seeing another person! The team were tested by all sorts of obstacles and hazards along the way



and had to use a great deal of skill and determination to get up some of the tracks.

“It was certainly not a question of just going slowly, but the rewards were immense. At one point, we stopped and there were 20 vultures circling above our heads. Seeing that sort of wildlife in its element can’t help but make you feel good. Being immersed in nature and having those views was incredible for everyone’s wellbeing, and it is great that we received support from Blesma through their Venture Fund to make it happen.”

Blesma Members Jason Gill, Garth Banks, Clive Smith and Graeme Billington were given extensive skills and safety training before the 12-strong team caught the overnight ferry from Portsmouth to Caen and then motored the 800km through France to the Pyrenees.



You don't want to meet someone coming the other way on this road!



The 1,000km expedition route took the convoy of two Toyota Hilux pick-ups, a Land Rover Discovery, six motorbikes and a back-up truck across a huge range of terrain from both muddy and desert-like areas through to winding single-track gravel paths across mountainous ground.

“Each of the three vehicles was piloted by two people who took turns driving and navigating, while another six guys were on their own motorbikes. They generally went ahead to prove the routes and radio back about any sections that weren't navigable,” added Grant, who served 23 years in the Royal Marines.

“The trip focused on developing each individual's ability to explore the limits of their disability within a risk-managed environment. Everyone had to really use the skills they had learned and there was

a great sense of achievement as well as brilliant camaraderie each evening.

“Everyone had to be fully trained before the expedition and certified to drive the all-terrain vehicles. But those certificates can be used to enhance CVs to get people back into work and, for some, it was the first time since leaving the military that they have had to complete a course, so that sense of fulfilment was empowering.”

The team headed for home before first light on the final day to take in the D-Day sites around Caen, including Pegasus Bridge and the Pegasus Café, before taking the night ferry back to Portsmouth after an action-packed trip.

If you would like to learn more about Future Terrain's annual expeditions visit www.futureterrain.co.uk

OUTREACH ROLE HITS THE RIGHT NOTE FOR AMY

A NEW ROLE AS BLESMA OUTREACH Officer for the South is hitting all the right notes for Amy Barnes who is tuning up for her first festive season with the Association. The former professional singer, who joined the Association in August, is busy putting the final touches to almost a dozen in-person and virtual events that will run throughout December.

“It's been a bit of a whirlwind but I'm loving every minute of it,” said Amy, who set up and ran a community arts and wellbeing centre putting on 40 activities a week for 10 years after her singing career.

“I have strong military connections, with both my grandfathers fighting in WWII and a cousin retiring from the Army a few years ago. It's something I've always been proud of, so having the opportunity to work with Blesma Members is a privilege.”

Amy, who lives on the Isle of Wight and is a qualified Singing for Lung Health practitioner, has wasted no time setting up an online singing group that meets every Monday. “I'm enjoying meeting Members, hearing their stories and being able to help them,” said Amy. “I've been speaking to a 100-year-old Widow who's joined our book club and a Member who is training for the Disabled Strongman competition. That just shows the breadth of the membership.”



BLESMA BRIEFING

Always putting Members first

THROUGHOUT 2023, BLESMA HAS LED RESEARCH PROJECTS, CAMPAIGNED FOR GOVERNMENT FUNDING AND BEEN CONSULTED ON AN NHS REVIEW



HEALTH INNOVATION FUND – ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY FOR MOBILITY DEVICES

You will have seen that throughout most of this year, Blesma has been working with Anglia Ruskin University to deliver a year-long research project looking at the use of assistive technology for mobility devices. Specifically, we have been assessing what barriers there might be to accessing activities or locations using self-propelled manual wheelchairs. The project, using a grant of £200,000 from the Office for Veterans Affairs through their Health Innovation Funding, has benefitted from the lived experience of some 40 Blesma Members.

We are now in the latter stages of the research and will soon be testing certain types of assistive technology in the form of power add-ons for the front or rear of manual chairs. We will be trying to establish if such devices work as advertised and the impact or benefit that using such devices can have. The full report will be published in the spring of 2024.

There is still time to get involved by contacting Tom Kersey at Anglia Ruskin University by email at thomas.kersey@aru.ac.uk. Tom would be very pleased to hear from you if you are already using a power add-on to your manual chair.

VETERANS MOBILITY FUND UPDATE

In March, as part of the Government's Spring Budget, the Chancellor announced the reinstatement of the Veterans Mobility Fund. The original fund was financed through LIBOR fines and was administered by The Royal British Legion. The funding stopped in early 2021 and since then Blesma, in collaboration with Help for Heroes, has been campaigning for the fund to be restarted.



Help for Heroes will be the lead charity and will provide the necessary infrastructure and lead the administration. Blesma will have a place on the grant committee and actively be engaged in governance of the fund. Recruiting is in progress and the detail of how to apply to the fund and the internal processes are now being finalised.

In the meantime, we will continue to consider grant requests from Members for items that may come under the Mobility Fund in the future. To be eligible for the Veterans Mobility Fund, an applicant must have been injured as a result of their military service and have service attributable injury or illness. This is normally evidenced by an appropriate War Pension or Armed Forces Compensation Scheme award.

You can register for updates via the Help for Heroes website. Simply search 'veterans mobility fund' at www.helpforheroes.org.uk or ask your BSO for more details. For the full story on the reinstatement of the Veterans Mobility Fund, please turn to page 04.



WE WILL CONTINUE TO CONSIDER REQUESTS FOR ITEMS THAT MAY COME UNDER THE MOBILITY FUND IN THE FUTURE



“Blesma has been able to represent the wider patient view,” says Brian Chenier of the NHS England Prosthetic Service Review

NHS ENGLAND PROSTHETIC SERVICE REVIEW

The review into prosthetic service delivery in England is nearing its final stages. Work to draft a new service specification is almost complete and it is hoped that it will be shared via a public consultation soon. Blesma is directly involved in the process and has been since the start. This has enabled the Association to feed in its experience on your behalf and, along with the Limbless Association and LimbPower, Blesma has been able to represent the wider patient view.

The Association will make Members aware when the public consultation is open and we will do what we can to make sure you are able to contribute by responding with your personal experiences and views.

For advice and information on prosthetics, please get in touch with Brian, BSO Prosthetics and Acting Director Independence and Wellbeing on 07796 715908 or by email at bsoprosthetics@blesma.org

“**BLESMA IS DIRECTLY INVOLVED IN THE PROCESS AND HAS BEEN SINCE THE START**”

Alan proves to be master class

Former Royal Marine Alan Le Sueur has celebrated another ‘passing out’ ceremony having graduated with a First Class Masters degree in Advanced Clinical Practice. The 40 year old, who served for 11 years before a training accident resulted in him needing his right leg to be amputated below the knee four years later, has become an Advanced Paramedic Practitioner.

“It was three years of hard study, but I’m very grateful to Blesma for providing an education grant so I could pursue the course,” said Alan, after his graduation ceremony at Bournemouth University. Alan, from Wareham, Dorset, took a medical course before leaving the Royal Marines in 2016 and then continued his studies while working in NHS hospitals.

“I was accepted onto the Masters degree course which involved lots of modules covering advanced examination, decision-making skills and prescribing as well as a large-scale project of my own choice aimed at improving an element of the NHS,” he added. “But it was only when former BSO Steve Fraser visited me that I learned I could get an education grant. It really helped because I was working and bringing up a family, so it was all a bit of a juggling act.

“The degree resulted in a promotion and taking on more responsibility for my own patients which includes interpreting x-rays and writing prescriptions.”

Alan, who is married with two children, is now working as the senior clinician at a minor injuries hospital in Wimborne.





IRONMAN SETS HIS SIGHTS ON 2028 PARALYMPICS

A GRUELLING TRAINING REGIME HAS helped Michael Fox go from having a tough personal time to being in contention for a spot on the GB Paralympics team.

The 33 year old took up serious training with a friend, and a Blesma grant helped with equipment so he could enter the Marbella Ironman contest earlier this year. His performance caught the eye of coaches, and Michael is now on the GB pathway with a view to competing in the triathlon at the 2028 Paralympics in Los Angeles.

"I was feeling very down, but my friend Alberto encouraged me to train with him and it changed my life. He spurred me on and has made such a difference to me," said Michael, who developed a tumour that cut short his military career and led to a below-knee amputation of his left leg whilst in training to be a Guardsman.

Dragon boat racer turns up the heat at Awards

Glyn Barrell has won the prestigious Sporting Excellence accolade at the 2023 Soldiering On Awards. The 55 year old, a former member of the 40th Regiment Royal Artillery, is a leading force in dragon boat racing and was the only disabled person in Team GB at the 2019 World Championships as well as becoming a world champion in outriggering.

Glyn, a through-knee amputee who has crushed vertebrae and lung damage from

a serious accident in Germany in 1993, picked up the Sporting Excellence Award at a ceremony in London in September.

"I was speechless when my name was announced. I couldn't believe I'd won as there were so many other deserving people in the line-up, but it is a great honour," he said. "I'm so grateful for the support I've received. Blesma has been really helpful and its support through the Venture Fund helps me train and compete."

ARTWORK "OCCUPIES MY MIND"

Veteran Victor Boumonte is making a bold splash with his collection of abstract artwork. The 61 year old, who served with the 1st Devonshire and Dorset Regiment for six years, uses painting as a release from PTSD and fibromyalgia.

"I'm up at night and early in the mornings, so it is good to have something to occupy my mind," said Victor. "I get a lot of satisfaction from both the painting and people enjoying my artwork. I've been in temporary accommodation for a while but have recently moved into a bungalow, which has been great. Blesma has been hugely helpful and Support Officer Sarah Payne has been a rock."



"Blesma has been very important in the transformation by funding my bike box so I can go to events and compete. I'm really enjoying training and life now."

Michael, from Wakefield, has reduced his work hours with Puma to devote even more time to training as he will be putting in more than 20 hours a week next year as he progresses with the GB sprint triathlon squad.



Blesma pays respects on Remembrance Day

Members paid their respects at Remembrance services up and down the UK and across the world in tribute to the fallen in November.

A group of 51 Members, led by Chief Executive Vivienne Buck, attended The Cenotaph in central London to be part of the wreath-laying and march past of 10,000 veterans.

King Charles led the nation in Remembrance as the two-minute silence was observed with dignity.

“It was very poignant and moving, and a privilege to be part of,” said Lexi Chambers, who was attending her first ceremony at The Cenotaph. “It was almost overwhelming in many respects because of what it signifies. There were so many regiments represented, and it was great to be able to chat to so many different people. The march past was incredible and Blesma got a great welcome from the crowds –



people were saying lovely things. It was fantastic to be with other Members and represent the charity in the parade.”

Former Royal Signaller Lexi along with Mick Foulds, ex-Royal Engineers, were interviewed on Sky TV as part of its coverage.

“The event went like clockwork as it always does,” said Mick. “I was very proud to lay a wreath on behalf of Blesma. I’ve attended a few times now and it is always a great tribute.”

Graham Kelly laid a wreath on behalf of Blesma in Northern Ireland. “Dervock is a village just outside

Ballymoney and has a popular service with a piper and bugler,” said Graham, a former Lance Corporal in the North Irish Horse Regiment. “We are always welcomed, and it is an opportunity to pay my respects and spread the word about Blesma and all the good work it does for veterans.”

News in brief

BLESMA MEMBER TRUSTEE VACANCY

Blesma is currently looking for a committed, energetic and innovative Member to join the Board of Trustees in 2024 and help set the strategic direction for our Association. Trustees have independent control over, and legal responsibility for, a charity’s management and administration. They are required to:

- Ensure the charity is carrying out its purposes for the public benefit
- Comply with the charity’s governing document and the law
- Act in the charity’s best interests
- Manage the charity’s resources responsibly
- Act with reasonable care and skill
- Ensure the charity is accountable

Blesma’s rules state that the Board should consist of at least 50% Member Trustees to ensure that Members’ experiences and views inform their vital work.

Trustees are expected to attend four Boards, a Board awayday and the Association’s Annual General Meeting each year. The position is voluntary, although expenses are paid.

If you have a passion for the Association and wish to help our Members overcome injury to lead independent and fulfilling lives, please consider the role. More information about the role, including the job description, person specification and details of how to apply will be communicated soon.

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 with us at editor@blesma.org

Activities

WHETHER IT'S GLAMPING, GOLF OR GOING ON A CULINARY RETREAT, BLESMA CAN HELP YOU FIND YOUR NEW FAVOURITE THING IN 2024. AND EVEN BETTER, IT IS ABSOLUTELY FREE!

From glamping in Somerset to skiing in Colorado, cycling in New York to fitness in Spain, with lots of other amazing activities in between, Blesma is giving Members the chance to experience all kinds of activities next year – and they're all free! Take a look at the choices below and apply online at www.blesma.org or by emailing the Activities Team on eventsca@blesma.org

Please be aware that dates are subject to change and that Members are expected to share a room on each event unless otherwise specified or the Activities Team have been contacted beforehand with viable reasons.

Why not sign up to Blesma's Activities email newsletter to stay up to date with all the upcoming events and date changes. Please email eventsca@blesma.org and asked to be added to the subscription list.

NRA ADAPTIVE SHOOTING

Location: Bisley, Surrey

Date: 19-20 June

Application deadline: 15 February

This great competition is open to all disabled ex-Service personnel. A fantastic chance to re-live and redefine the skills learned on those fun days on the ranges.

Who can apply?

Any Member.

EASTER ACCESSIBLE GLAMPING WEEKEND

Location: Somerset

Date: 29 March - 01 April

Application deadline: 15 January

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 will be able to enjoy the beautiful surroundings

as well as on-site activities ranging from axe throwing to canoeing.

Who can apply?

Any Member with a family of between two and six people (i.e. the Blesma Member and up to five others). Whilst there is no minimum age to apply, some activities are restricted to an age limit. Members are not expected to share rooms with other Members.

WIDOWS AND SENIORS WEEKS

Location: Studley Castle, Warwickshire

Date: Widows Week 29 April - 03 May

Seniors Week 13-17 May

Application deadline: 15 January

Based at one of the prestigious Warner hotels, the week focuses on relaxing and socialising, with the added bonus of gentle activities and sightseeing in and around Warwickshire.

Who can apply?

Seniors Weeks are open to Members and Widow(er)s over the age of 60. Widows Weeks are for Widows only. Members are not expected to share rooms with other Members.

DAVE LEWAN MEMORIAL MATCH

Location: Newcastle-under-Lyme

Date: June/July

Application deadline: 01 March

The focus will be on relaxing, socialising and taking part in a bit of friendly competition. The fisheries are set in the beautiful surroundings of the Whitmore Estate in the heart of Staffordshire.

Who can apply?

Both beginners and seasoned anglers alike are welcome.





Apply online now at blesma.org or by emailing eventsca@blesma.org

Get your fix of winter sports adventures

WINTERSPORTS LA PLAGNE

Location: La Plagne, France

Date: January 2025

Application deadline: 15 August

Our fully adaptive ski week returns.

Working with adaptive ski instructors, the event will include sit-ski, stand-up, snowboard and ski biking.



Who can apply?

Everyone, but Members new to skiing or who haven't skied in the past five years must complete our try-out day prior to selection. Carers are not able to ski.

Requirements: You must have at least three months' validity on your passport at the time of travel.



COLORADO SKI SPECTACULAR

Location: Breckenridge, USA

Date: December

Application deadline: 01 August

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

Who can apply?

Most injury types can be catered for on the slopes. However, hotel rooms are not adapted and you must be able to use a bath.

Requirements:

You must be able to enter the USA. Your passport must be valid for the proposed duration of your stay in the USA.

Activities



Apply online now at blesma.org or by emailing eventsca@blesma.org

Photography Course

Location: East Anglia

Date: July

Application deadline: 01 March

Throughout the photography course, Members will get the opportunity to put their photography skills to the test. They will visit a number of locations and capture a variety of different subjects; from wildlife and architecture to landscapes and more. This course is open to all abilities.

Who can apply?

Any Member who owns their own photography equipment.



COUPLES WEEKEND LIVERPOOL

Location: Liverpool

Date: 19-22 July

Application deadline: 15 March

Enjoy a new location for this year's Couples Weekend. Over the course of the weekend Members will get plenty of time to experience the rich cultural heritage that Liverpool has to offer. Liverpool has been voted the second friendliest city in the UK, which makes it the perfect location for Members to have fun socialising with one another and taking part in a range of activities around the city.

Who can apply?

Any Member along with their spouse/partner. Please note that Members are not expected to share rooms with other Members.



The Members' Weekend and AGM

Location: Forest Pines Hotel, Lincolnshire

Date: 29 June - 01 July

Application deadline: 01 March

Meet up with 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 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?

Open to all Members and partners or carers. Members are not expected to share rooms with other Members.



SRNYC

Location: New York, USA

Date: 15-21 July

Application deadline: 15 March

A prestigious event in the cycling calendar and a privilege to be invited back year after year. Cycle with the Wounded Warrior Project (WWP) around New York for three days, 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 WWP). Please be aware that 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 be valid for the proposed duration of your stay in the USA.

TURN TO STARBOARD

Location: Falmouth

Date: 31 July - 04 August

Application deadline: 15 March

A chance to sail the Cornish coast. As a valued crew member, you will get an introduction to sailing, learn important skills and experience life on the seas.

Who can apply?

Any Member. Please be aware that there are steps and ladders on board the boat.

COLIN WILSON MEMORIAL GOLF DAY

Location: Forest Pines Hotel, Lincolnshire

Date: 29 June - 01 July

Application deadline: 01 February

In memory of the late Colin Wilson, join us for the first-ever commemorative golf day in his name. Colin was known and loved by many, and the former Royal Green Jacket could often be found on the golf course, with many Members having had the privilege of playing alongside him. Please note, this event will be taking place during Members' Weekend.

Who can apply?

Any Member with a set of golf clubs.

COUPLES WEEKEND LONDON

Location: London

Date: August

Application deadline: 15 April

A fabulous weekend break for Members and their spouse or partner to explore the capital. Members will have the chance to meet other couples within the Association and experience some of London's finest attractions, whilst enjoying some precious time spent together as a couple.

Who can apply?

Any Member and their spouse/partner. Members are not expected to share rooms with other Members.

GLAMPING NORTH WEEKEND

Location: TBC

Date: August

Application deadline: 15 April

The aim of the event is to engage with other Members and their families and allow you to share in some of the friendships our Members enjoy whilst being in the great outdoors. Spouses, partners, carers, children and grandchildren are all welcome.

Activities

Who can apply?

Any Member with a family of between two and six people (i.e. Member and up to five others). Please note that whilst there is no minimum age to apply, some activities are restricted to an age limit. Members are not expected to share rooms with other Members.

COUPLES GLAMPING

Location: Somerset

Date: September

Application deadline: 01 May

A weekend break for Members and their spouse/partner to spend some quality time together as a couple.

Who can apply?

Any Member and their spouse/partner. Members are not expected to share rooms with other Members.

COOKERY RETREAT

Location: Oxfordshire

Date: October

Application deadline: 01 June

This is a new addition to the Blesma calendar, and one which will give Members (along with their partners) the chance to try something different. During the retreat you will have the opportunity to take part in a number of cookery classes that will help you become more creative in the kitchen. Members will learn how to prepare meals that are healthy, satisfying and fun to make whilst spending some quality time with their partner.

Who can apply?

Any Member and their spouse/partner.

RIDE TO THE WALL

Location: Burton upon Trent

Date: 04-05 October

Application deadline: 01 July

Join the Blesma crew on this poignant and meaningful motorcycle ride in memory of the fallen. Fittingly, the ride will finish at the National Memorial Arboretum.

Who can apply?

Any Member with their own motorcycle.

FAMILIES CHRISTMAS EXTRAVAGANZA

Date: December

Location: Secret Location

Application deadline: 01 August

Join us for a mesmerising top-secret



Greek Regatta

Location: Greece

Date: 14-22 September

Application deadline: 15 May

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?

Anyone can apply but you must be physically fit and a confident swimmer in open water. 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 are unable to swim in their application.



Fitness and Lifestyle Course

Date: 15-23 November

Location: Fuerteventura, Spain

Application deadline: 15 July

A chance for a reset and a health change. Get moving together and experience the beauty that Spain has to offer whilst trying out new activities. Improve your diet and learn tips on how to balance your lifestyle. This week will have a variety of activities including yoga, pilates, cycling, coasteering, paddleboarding and golf.

Who can apply?

Suitable for any Member.

Requirements:

Your passport must have at least six months' validity during the time of travel.



Apply online now at blesma.org or by emailing eventsca@blesma.org



Remembrance Weekend

Location: London

Date: 09-10 November

Application deadline: 15 June

Join the annual Remembrance Parade in London. The weekend always marks one of the most poignant events in the calendar. Blesma makes a weekend of the occasion, with a social gathering on the previous evening and a hearty lunch before departure.

Who can apply?

Any Member and their spouse/partner/carer. Members are not expected to share rooms with other Members.

Discover the thrill of scuba diving

TRY DIVES

Location: Lord Wandsworth College, Hampshire

Date: 17 February

Application deadline: 01 January

Date: 20 April

Application deadline: 01 February

Date: 21 September

Application deadline: 01 June

Learn to dive with experienced dive instructors in the safety of dive pools whilst working towards your PADI qualifications.

Who can apply?

Any Member, but this will be subject to medical clearance.

SCUBA DIVING

Location: 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. If you've never dived before or need some refresher training, then a team of highly qualified 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 beforehand.

Who can apply?

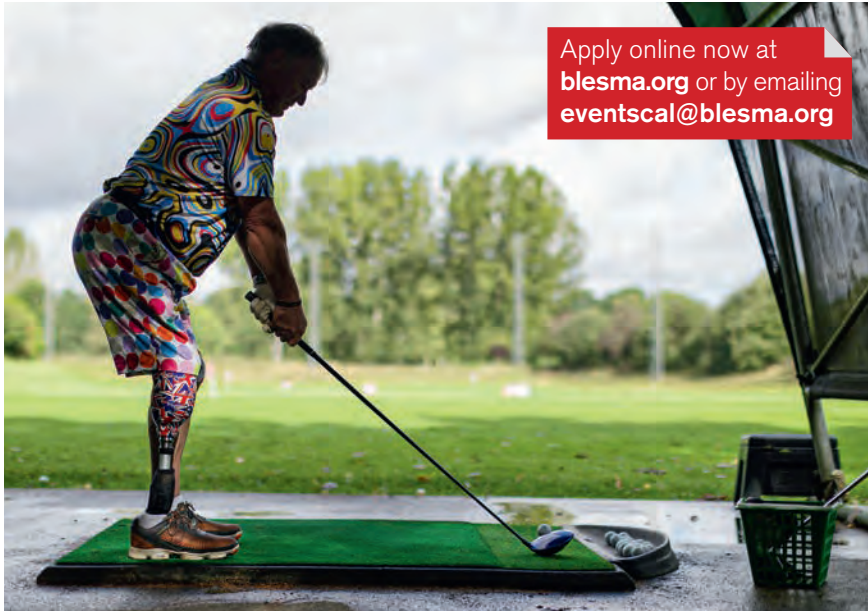
Anyone who can move up and down stairs on a 60ft dive boat with minimal assistance.

Requirements:

You must be able to enter Egypt and your passport must have at least six months' validity from the date of travel.

GIVE IT A TRY!

Blesma will be running a series of 'Intro to' activities throughout the year to allow Members to try some of our main calendar events. The dates of these will be published on our mailing lists and in the magazine. Events include, but are not limited to, skiing, horse riding, sailing, golf, diving and cycling. Stay in the loop and register your interest at eventsca@blesma.org



Golf UK

Location: Carden Park **Date:** 27-29 September **Application deadline:** 15 May
Members will be able to enjoy three rounds of golf that will be spread across three days at Carden Park Golf Resort in Cheshire. The resort boasts two championship courses. Accommodation will be provided at the hotel and there will also be a friendly match, making it open to all.

Who can apply?

Any Member with a set of golf clubs. Please state your golf handicap when you apply if you have one.

Families Christmas Extravaganza where you will have the opportunity to experience the magic of Christmas with your loved ones like never before.

Who can apply?

Any Member with a family of between two and six people (i.e. Member and up to five others).

HORSE RIDING

Location: TBC

Date: September/October TBC

Application deadline: 01 June

A week-long event that will allow you to experience riding in amazing countryside. This is an opportunity to get back to basics and enjoy being out in nature on horseback.

Who can apply?

Anyone. Members will be expected to have riding experience or to have completed one of our try-out days.

ARE YOU INTERESTED IN FITNESS AND NUTRITION?

We are looking at designing a series of fitness and lifestyle courses based around cooking and nutrition, meditation, yoga and flexibility, and bespoke training. These will run throughout the year.

If you would like to register your interest and stay up to date with future plans please email eventscal@blesma.org

WOULD YOU LIKE TO PUT ON AN ACTIVITY?

The Activities Team is available to support you in organising an activity and can explain 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

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.







Learn to really tell your story

A BRAND NEW COURSE IS TEACHING MEMBERS HOW TO TELL A STORY TO A WIDE RANGE OF AUDIENCES. BUT THE BENEFITS ARE SO MUCH GREATER THAN SIMPLY BEING ABLE TO TALK IN PUBLIC

The new Blesma Storytelling and Wellbeing programme is boosting Members' confidence by helping them to hone their communication skills. The project is providing a unique opportunity for Members to learn how to structure and pace how they communicate, and the first few sessions are already paying dividends, with Members enthusing about their impact. The first sessions, which have been run both in-person and online – have taken small groups of Members through a series of exercises that have been designed to equip them with the skills, techniques and confidence to tell stories, hold conversations and connect with other people in all sorts of situations.

The power of storytelling for improved wellbeing is gathering increased scientific recognition, with research highlighting it as a trigger for the brain to release feel-good hormones such as oxytocin and suppress cortisol which influences negative moods.



Feedback from the storytelling pilot has been very positive

Being able to tell stories in an engaging way – from everyday chats to more set-piece talks – also helps people to create connections and strengthen bonds.

“It has really helped me,” says Colin Adamson, a former Royal Navy chef who lost his sight after an accident at work. “I often do talks to raise money for guide dogs and, after the storytelling course, I was able to alter my talk to make it more compelling. I was able to make it more personal and more human, and people really engaged with it which was very rewarding. I’m chuffed with the results.”

Colin, 49, from Horwich in Lancashire, is one of 24 Members who have attended the two pilot courses and initial six sessions in the South West and West. More courses are being arranged around the country for 2024 (see the initial list on page 35).

The initiative, which replaces the acclaimed Making Generation R (MGR) programme, involves online and in-person workshops that guide Members in how to use language, their voice and energy to express themselves. The workshops range from three hours online to a full-day in person with no long-term commitment required and, unlike MGR, there is no public presentation element.

It is being run by The Drive Project, the team behind the award-winning MGR that enabled 110 Members to tell their stories of resilience to youth audiences.

WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM IT?

“The programme aims to improve people’s confidence, wellbeing and self-esteem, but we also want to allow people to be creative and share their stories,” says Tuesday Critchfield, Project Manager for The Drive Project. “Through stories, we find out so much about people, and that helps build really strong connections. We found in the pilot that, within a very short time,



we knew so much about individuals just by the stories that they were sharing.

“The sessions offer an introduction to storytelling – what makes a good story, tips and tricks to become more engaging – and the Members meet two professional storytellers, who are very different in their style and delivery, to pick up more skills.

“The end result will be different for everybody as some want to write their life story, others want to support their public speaking, and others just want to be creative and learn skills that will give them confidence and be better able to communicate with others.

“Everyone will come to this wanting to get something different out of it but they may come out with unexpected benefits as well. The main thing we want to achieve is to build confidence and wellbeing, and improve social inclusion.”

Storytelling experts and Drive Project staff run the workshops, with the venues chosen for their creative appeal. The team has used the Norwegian Church in Cardiff, where Roald Dahl worshipped, as well as the Paintworks in Bristol’s creative quarter, and the Theatre Royal, Plymouth.

“Members get to experience different styles and techniques, with opportunities

DANNY HOLMES

Danny served for 12 years in the Household Cavalry. He was badly injured in a traffic accident and spent a year in hospital before having his right leg amputated above the knee

Why did you do the course?

I originally took part in MGR but couldn't do the final theatre performance because I got Covid. I enjoyed it though, so when I was offered a place on the Storytelling sessions I decided to give it a go.

Has it helped you?

It definitely helps you tell stories and express yourself. The instructors broke down our stories and showed how they could be told positively or negatively. We then went backwards and forwards with another person, not knowing where the story might go. That was really interesting.

What techniques did you learn?

The instructors helped us understand that senses like touch and smell can be included in the stories along with your feelings to give them an added layer and depth.

Where might you use the skills?

I recently went to a school for disabled children with four other veterans to talk about Remembrance, and I was able to put some of the techniques I learned on the course into practice. I'm also an instructor in the Sea Cadets and I can see it helping me get points across to the youngsters and helping them relate to me.



Words: Danny Buckland Photography: Andy Bate



COLIN ADAMSON

Colin served in the Royal Navy for 11 years. He retrained as an HGV driver but an accident in 2016 left him registered blind. He lives in Lancashire with his son, Michael and his guide dog, Diamond

What attracted you to the course?

I give talks for The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association and wanted to improve my talks so they have more impact and to give me extra confidence.

What skills did you pick up?

I learned various ways of creating stories and using imagination to bring my experiences to life. It was good to understand the different ways of putting your words across.

Have you put the learning into practice?

My story was about how I lost my sight and how I thought my life had ended. Now, instead of starting with that I start on a positive note with how Diamond was trained by the time I was ready for a dog so we were destined to be together.

What was the audience reaction?

One of the organisers said you could have heard a pin drop and that everyone was leaning forward on their seats, leaning into the story. To know people are really listening is the best feeling.

Has it helped your wellbeing as well?

My mental health took a dip in lockdown, but talking about my experiences benefits my mental health. Before, I wasn't able to get across what I wanted to. I would thoroughly recommend the course to other Members.



“SOME PEOPLE DON'T THINK THEY HAVE A BIG ENOUGH STORY, BUT IT'S NOT ABOUT THAT. THE SESSIONS OFFER A SAFE SPACE”

to play around with stories and share them if they feel comfortable,” adds Tuesday. “It is not the same as MGR and there is no requirement for public speaking. We want to take people out of their comfort zones a bit so they can get new experiences, but Members will not have to do anything they are not comfortable with.

“Some people don't think they have a 'big enough' story but it's not about that. The sessions offer a safe space to share whatever story they feel comfortable with.

“We have had a huge range: one Member shared a hilarious story about his grandmother which told us so much about him and his family life, another talked about their experience of injury, while another just spoke about their journey to the workshop that day.

“This is a new programme that is open to all Members. There's something for everyone, whether you are new to storytelling or have previous experience, and Members who have taken part in MGR are also very welcome to sign up.

“It is so varied and everyone learns from each other. The feedback has been great and we are looking forward to extending this with more sessions that will be open to the entire Blesma membership.”



WORKSHOPS WILL BE TAKING PLACE ACROSS THE MIDLANDS ON THE FOLLOWING DATES

WORKSHOP 1 INTRODUCTION TO STORYTELLING

An introduction to storytelling and all that is involved, with the aim of finding out what makes a good story.

In person: Wednesday 21 February

Online: Friday 23 February

WORKSHOP 2 MEET THE STORYTELLERS

Your chance to meet and learn from professional storytellers and experience a wonderful storytelling performance.

In person: Friday 01 March

Online: Saturday 09 March

WORKSHOP 3 EXPLORE YOUR SENSES

How can your senses lead to stories? In the third and final workshop in this season, tap into memories to prompt and reveal the stories held within. We understand that not everyone has access to all their senses, and the exercises will reflect individuals' accessibility.

In person: Wednesday 20 March

Online: Wednesday 13 March

If you would like to attend any of these classes, either in person or online, please register your interest by emailing activities@blesma.org





STARS OF THE SHOW

THE BELFAST INTERNATIONAL TATTOO HAS BEEN RUNNING FOR A DECADE AND HAS BECOME A SIGNIFICANT EVENT IN NORTHERN IRELAND'S MILITARY CALENDAR. FOR THE SECOND YEAR IN SUCCESSION, BLESMA TOOK CENTRE STAGE TO RAPTUROUS APPLAUSE

BELFAST INTERNATIONAL TATTOO



Front Row: Graham Kelly, Colin Shields and Mark Rogerson
Back Row: Fiona Morrison, Brian Chenier, Graeme Tomlinson, Jean McCready, Anna Shields, Steve Burton and Cathy Kelly

The audience for the Belfast International Tattoo knew roughly what to expect when they took their seats at the SSE Arena in September; they were going to be treated to first-class pipe bands and musical

entertainment from around the world. Something they perhaps hadn't been anticipating was a 70-year-old amputee roaring into the arena on a 1100cc motorbike. But then, they probably hadn't considered the 'Blesma factor'.

"It was a brilliant moment," recalls Graeme Tomlinson (opposite page), who was the pensioner in question. By the end of the show – which involved Graeme and several of his fellow Blesma Members – it was little wonder that the audience were donating to the Association in their droves.

Blesma and the Belfast International Tattoo are the perfect fit. The Tattoo is the biggest military event in Northern Ireland. Taking place since 2013, it has its roots based in the history, music and dance traditions of the Ulster Scots community. Held at the rink that is home to the famous Belfast Giants ice hockey team, it aims to

give local and international talent, mainly from the pipe band tradition, a platform to showcase their abilities.

These include Northern Irish favourites such as the Ballygowan Pipe Band as well as Highland dance teams and acts from Canada, New Zealand and Scotland (as well as a troupe of trampolining German policemen known as the Flying Grandpas!)

The Tattoo has also become Blesma's biggest fundraiser in Northern Ireland.



Fiona Morrison, Outreach Officer for the area since 2018, was at the heart of the link up. "When I started the job, I got in touch with Colin Wasson, the director of the Tattoo," she says. "He kindly gave us tickets to take our Members along. Then Covid happened, but in 2022 Colin said he would like Blesma to be the Tattoo's charity partner and for Members to feature in the performance. That was amazing and, of course, we wholeheartedly embraced it. When it was confirmed that Blesma would be the charity of choice for the second year we decided to take the opportunity to showcase some of the things our Members get up to.

"Four Members and one Widow volunteered to take part, and during the performances – there was one on the Friday night and two shows on Saturday – they delivered a message about Blesma's ethos and how it helps our Members lead independent and fulfilling lives," says Fiona.

"Mark Rogerson narrated the Blesma 'performance'. He has been involved in Making Generation R, so he was good at projecting his voice. He was great, especially as it was his first time doing something like that.

"We spoke about Blesma Widow Jean McCready and how she was able to move

GRAEME TOMLINSON, ROYAL AIR FORCE

Graeme Tomlinson, 70, joined the RAF in 1969. He was involved in a motorcycle accident in 1974 and was medically discharged three years later. He is now president of the Northern Ireland Royal British Legion Motorcycle Branch

Tell us about your injury...

It was a motorbike accident. I was getting ready to leave the military and join the Metropolitan Police. I was riding home from the police college one day when someone pulled out in front of me. Nothing could be done really. I had several operations – bone grafts and titanium plates – to see if I'd be able to stay in the Forces. It was always a struggle, but I didn't have the amputation below the knee until 2004. I had been suffering with pain and osteoarthritis, the leg kept breaking

down with the wound, and after one particular infection it was amputated.

How did you get involved in representing Blesma at the Tattoo?

Fiona got me into Blesma about three years ago – I already knew about the charity but hadn't done anything about joining. I've enjoyed being part of the Association ever since; we've had fun days out and Zoom calls, but the Tattoo has been the best bit so far. It is very special, so going on stage was thoroughly enjoyable.

What did you think about the idea of riding into the arena on your bike?

It was a bit of a crazy idea, but it worked really well. The theme was to show how Blesma's Members are getting on with their everyday lives despite injury and amputation, and motorbikes are my thing. I was chuffed to go in on the bike. The arena is normally an ice rink but thankfully I didn't have to ride out onto that! I think I got one of the biggest cheers of the performance, there were a lot of 'yahoos' for me and the bike!







MARK ROGERSON, REME

Mark, 60, joined the REME from school in 1979 and worked for the Territorial Army after completing 22 years' service. He was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 2010. Mark was the narrator for the Blesma section of the Tattoo

How did you get involved with Blesma?

I served all over the place in the REME and enjoyed military life. When I was diagnosed with MS, I knew it was progressive. I can't move my legs much and need a wheelchair. But I go to the gym most days with my son, which helps my mental health. I became aware of Blesma after discharge and applied to join after speaking to other Members at different events.

How did you feel about getting on the mic in front of such a big crowd?

One of my problems is my memory, so I used a teleprompter. I worked with Helen, the compare for the event, and she helped me with the script. I practised and practised,

and it worked. The dress rehearsal was a bit daunting, but it went well and after that it was great.

What were the actual shows like?

The reaction from the public was fantastic. I was proud of the other Members telling their stories. You're in the middle of an arena with thousands of people watching; it was amazing! It's very prestigious in military circles, too. The Ulster Defence Regiment is there as are the Royal Irish, so it is very well supported. When people were leaving, it brought the importance of it to the fore. People were saying: 'Thank you for your service'. It was a very positive experience, and it gives you confidence in yourself.

"IT IS CLEAR THERE ARE POSITIVE AND UPLIFTING STORIES AFFECTING BLESMA'S MEMBERS, AND WE WERE KEEN THE PUBLIC HEARD THEM"

forward with Blesma's support after she lost her husband. Jean is now one of our 'crafty widows', taking part in lots of arts and crafts with other Members.

"We then had Graham Kelly, who entered the arena on his hand trike. Blesma has supported him for 30 years, and he recently completed a Blesma activity travelling 80 miles across Wales on his hand cycle. Colin Shields and his daughter Anna then took to the arena. It was moving to hear how Colin felt he lost his identity as a husband, father and grandfather after his amputation, and how Blesma got involved to give him the support he needed. He's now playing wheelchair basketball, and his daughter plays competitively alongside him."

Finally, in thundered Graeme on his motorbike. "We spoke about the sights, sounds and smells of motorbikes, which are very prevalent in Northern Ireland as we have lots of road races here," says

Fiona. "The narration explained to the audience how, after his accident, Graeme wasn't just left to polish the chrome on his bike. Blesma helped him get back on two wheels, as did the Royal British Legion, where Graeme is now the Motorcycle Branch President."

Tattoo founder and director Colin Wasson was impressed and felt justified in his decision to hook up with Blesma. "When we initially spoke to Fiona a few



years ago, we were so impressed by her and her passion for the people she deals with at Blesma on a daily basis. We'd been looking for a partner, and Blesma seemed perfect," he says. "We felt Blesma fitted where we were. They weren't a well-known charity here. We wanted to give Fiona the space to come forward and show us what it was all about. When you talk to Fiona, it becomes clear that there are many positive and uplifting stories affecting Blesma's Members, and we were keen to ensure the public heard them."

BLESMA IS THE PERFECT FIT

A few Members got involved in last year's Tattoo, coming into the arena as a script about Blesma was read out. "There wasn't a dry eye in the house last year, so we wanted to do something similar this year, but to show what happens on the other side of the fence, when people are coming out of their difficult situations and how they move forward with life," says Colin. "So over seven minutes, we had these storytelling vignettes, and it worked really well."

Colin has a personal affiliation for the charity, too. "My son has been a below-knee amputee since he was 13 years old, and I've always wanted to highlight



“I WAS PROUD OF EACH AND EVERY ONE OF THEM. IT SHOWS HOW THEY FEEL PART OF THE BLESMA FAMILY. IT WAS EMOTIONAL!”

possibilities for amputees. He trains guide dogs these days and so, working with Fiona, we wanted to show the positive side of Blesma Members’ stories.

“Having them riding bikes and playing basketball shows what Blesma is about, what these people are about. It was brave of them to come into the arena, but they don’t want to hide their disabilities.”

For all the participants, appearing in front of a huge audience was a challenge. “It was daunting, but the Tattoo directors were really encouraging and supportive, and made them believe they could do it – and, of course, they could!” says Fiona. “I know the courage it took, physically and mentally, for those guys to go across that arena floor, but they put 100% effort into it, and had great fun along the way. In the dressing room there was a great atmosphere. It also made them feel honoured and privileged to be part of the Tattoo.

“The Members took part in all three performances and were exhausted afterwards, but they were superb. They came on for the finale, too, and were right at the front. It was complete involvement, and it delivered a very positive message. The feedback from the public was fantastic. I think the amount of money we raised spoke volumes.”

A TRUE TEAM EFFORT

It did indeed. As well as appearing in the arena, a squadron of Blesma Members and their families helped with bucket collections. “We raised £6,269 across the three performances, and there were plenty of Members’ children and grandchildren getting involved, so it was very much a team effort,” says Fiona.

“I was so proud of each and every one of them. It shows how they want to support Blesma and how they feel part of the Blesma family. It was emotional! On the way out, it was amazing how much money was donated, people were so generous. It definitely showed the impact our Members had.”

The relationship is set to continue with Colin Wasson who has plans to support Blesma in the future. “The money is essential, but it’s also looking at the profile in which Blesma is held within Northern Ireland – that’s important,” says Colin.

And long may it continue!



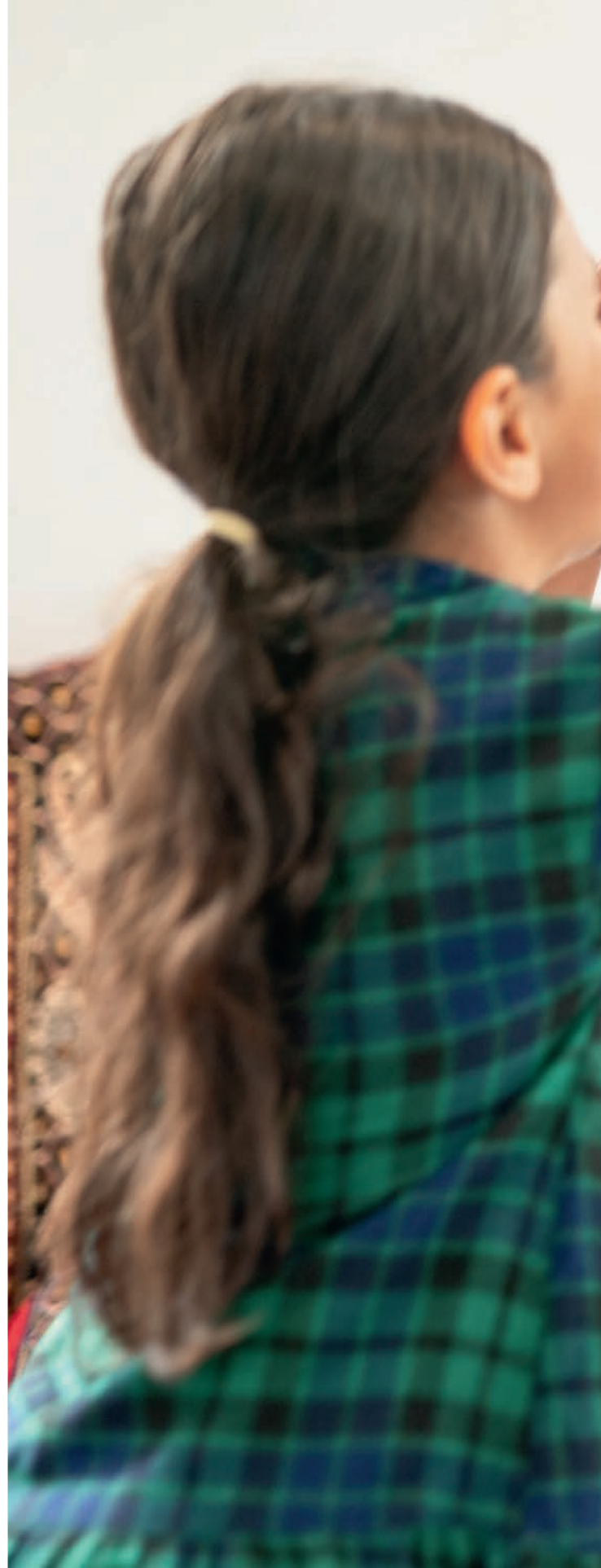


**“I HAVE NEVER
SEEN THE
FACES OF MY
CHILDREN
OR MY WIFE.**

**THAT WOULD
BE MY GREAT
WISH IN LIFE”**

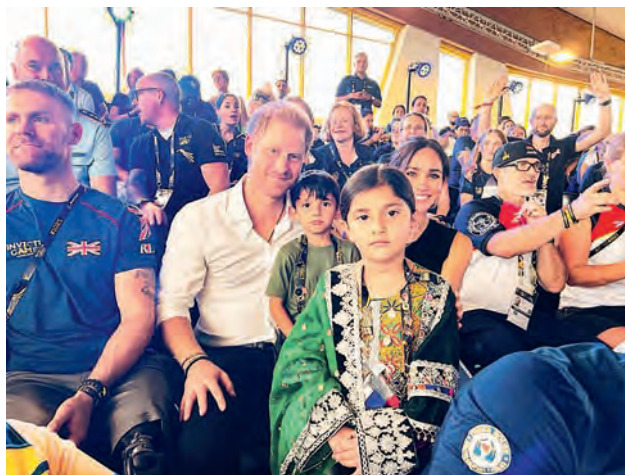
WALI NOORI FEARED WHAT LIFE HELD IN STORE FOR HIM WHEN HE LOST HIS SIGHT WORKING AS AN INTERPRETER IN HELMAND. THEN HE MET HIS WIFE, MOVED TO THE UK AND BECAME A BLESMA MEMBER

Words: Nick Moore Photography: Stan Papior



Wali at home with two of his children (and just a few of his running medals!)





Competing at the Invictus Games cheered on by Harry, Megan and his children, and working for the British Army in 2009

Wali Noori is an Afghan national who worked as an interpreter and cultural adviser for the British Army during the war in Afghanistan. He was blinded by an IED blast in 2009 and was relocated to the UK in 2016. He became a Blesma Member in 2022 and, earlier this year, represented the UK at the Invictus Games, where he won four gold medals.

Can you tell us a bit about your life before you worked with the British Army?

I was born, and grew up, in Kabul. I was born into war because the Russians had invaded Afghanistan back then. I finished my studies and wanted to go to university, but I needed to help feed my family so I joined the British Army as a translator and cultural adviser. I had studied English a lot, I loved the language and was good at it.

What was it like being part of the conflict in your homeland?

I wanted to support my family, help my people and help the British. My job was

to act as a vital bridge between the British Army, the Afghan forces and the local civilians. There would have been so many more problems without the translators, it was a very important job. We did whatever was needed. I was asked if I would go to Helmand Province, and I said yes. I knew that if I agreed to go there, I had to accept that I might be injured or die. It was like hell: a lot of ambushes and a lot of killing, fighting every day with the Taliban.

How were you injured?

We were on patrol in Helmand when I stood on an IED. I remember most of it. I was thrown up into the air and then came crashing back down to the ground. I thought it was my last day of life, my doomsday. I was ready to die, but it felt like a dream, like it wasn't real. I had blood all over my face and lots of injuries

from all the shrapnel. I lost 28 teeth. The fighting was still going on, but the world had gone black because I had been blinded. My breathing stopped. I put my hand down my throat, pulled a piece of shrapnel out and started to breathe again. I was helicoptered out, and I fell into a coma. When I woke up again I was very worried.

What happened next?

Initially, I went to Kabul, then to Bagram Hospital and airbase, where the Americans did some good treatment for me on my facial wounds and fractures. I couldn't talk and was breathing through a tube from my neck. I was there for a month. After that, I was discharged. I was able to be fitted with artificial teeth and I spent a lot of time in hospitals in both India and Pakistan to see if they could save my sight, but it didn't work.

“I THOUGHT IT WAS MY LAST DAY OF LIFE, MY DOOMSDAY. I WAS READY TO DIE, BUT IT FELT LIKE A DREAM”

Wali won four golds for Team GB at the Invictus Games earlier this year





"I INVEST EVERY SECOND IN TRYING TO IMPROVE. I HAVE NEVER ONCE SURRENDERED TO MY DIFFICULTIES"

How did you adapt to your new life?

It was not easy. I was facing a lot of difficulty. I used to love running, but I thought my running days were over. I was a single man. I ended up living back with my family in Afghanistan. It is not a suitable country to live in if you are disabled or blind. You are not set up to cross the road or anything like that. So it was a difficult time, trying to work out how to come to terms with my injuries and how I was going to get through life. Then, in 2012, I met my wife-to-be at a friend's wedding, and we now have three kids; two girls and a boy. I've never seen my children or my wife's lovely faces. That would be my one great wish in life.

How did you come to be living with your family in the UK?

In 2014, I was informed by the British Government that I was eligible to come to the UK with my family. It was great news, I wanted to come and try to achieve something here. It took two long years to sort out all the necessary paperwork, and I arrived in 2016. I came to Colchester and I really like it here. It is a nice place and I have made friends. It's a military town and I have found lots of people who can help me. I do my running training at the Army track here. It took a while for my family to settle, but now they are very happy. My life had been war, war, war since birth until I came to the UK.



You competed in the Invictus Games...

I always want to move forwards, I never look back in life. I like going to the gym, swimming, doing lots of hill running and track training. I waited for five years to get selected for the Invictus Games. I was so proud to get there, and when I did, I knew I had to do everything to win. I got four gold medals – in the 100m, 200m, 400m and 1500m. I wanted to show I could do something for the UK in sport just as I did in the military, but it was not easy.

You've become a motivational speaker, talking in schools about your injuries and recovery. You have a positive attitude...

I just make sure I never give up. Some people give up when they don't achieve what they want, but success is not a sprint, it is a marathon. It takes time and dedication to achieve. Your journey

is unique and important. It is about consistent effort and hard work. Rome wasn't built in a day, and dreams need planning and patience. I invest every second of my life in trying to improve. I've never surrendered to my difficulties. Living without sight, I find it easy. I knew the risks of joining the Army. People told me: 'Wali, you will die'. So I accepted anything bad that could happen. That's why I could adjust to a life with problems.

How does running make you feel?

I love running, it makes me feel very happy. When I am out running, all my problems go away. If I have a headache, I go running and the headache goes. If I am stressed, a run makes the stress and pain go. I love every type of running. I am fast but I'm an all-rounder, I did the London Marathon in 2019, and I also like half marathons and 10ks. Including Invictus, I have won 19 medals for running and three for swimming.

How did you get involved with Blesma?

I was accepted as a Member last year after Blesma changed its admissions policy. The Association does amazing work and supports lots of people. It has even funded a treadmill for me.

What are your hopes for the future?

I would love to get to compete in the Paralympic Games in Paris next year. We are looking into whether that might be possible. I am discussing it with my coaches and management at the moment, so I hope I am able to make it. This is only the start of my journey. I want to keep inspiring others and show people that disability doesn't stop you from achieving great things.



A man with a beard, wearing a black wetsuit, is smiling and looking towards the right. He is in a swimming pool. On the right side of the frame, the nose and pink tongue of a dark-colored dog are visible, looking towards the man. The background is a blurred outdoor pool setting.

REFUSING TO PRESS PAUSE

(UNLESS IT'S FOR REHAB!)

It was a hydrotherapy session at Headley Court that gave Jimmy the idea for his new career



Words: Nick Moore Photography: Andy Bate



WHEN JAMES HILL WAS TOLD HIS MILITARY CAREER WAS OVER HE ACCEPTED IT STRAIGHT AWAY. THE QUESTION WAS: WHAT WOULD HE DO NEXT? IT WAS DURING REHABILITATION AT HEADLEY COURT THAT HE HAD AN IDEA AND DECIDED TO JUMP IN AT THE DEEP END

For most injured veterans, Headley Court was a place where they began their long, and often difficult, rehab journeys. For James ‘Jimmy’ Hill, it was certainly that – but it was also the place that inspired a brilliant business idea.

“I remember getting into the hydrotherapy pool for the first time at Headley, putting a float band on and being told to run. It felt fantastic!” says Jimmy, now 41.

“I was sprinting. I could actually feel my muscles engaging again. You could just feel how much good it was doing.

“I’ve always loved dogs – I grew up with them. I didn’t know what I was going to do after the military, and the hydrotherapy got me thinking that it could work really well for them, too. Dogs that have had surgery and are stiff and sore, or older

dogs – I knew they would benefit both mentally and physically from swimming.”

The pun-tastically monikered Pawseidon Canine Rehabilitation Centre in Poole was the end result. This bespoke suite offers space and comfort for dogs to relax whilst being coached in remedial and specialised exercises. It has become a thriving business, providing for canines what health and wellness coaches do for humans – as well as having its own puppy training unit for those just starting out.

The name is a reference to Jimmy’s background as a Royal Marine and member of the Special Boat Service (SBS). Birmingham born-and-raised, he has had a long journey to get to this point.

“I was a fit, young lad, played football to a high standard and, at the age of 23, I joined the Royal Marines Commandos,” says Jimmy. “I didn’t look back. I served at Fleet Protection Group (FPG) Scotland, then I joined the maritime security team

operating in the Gulf chasing down pirates, terrorists, and traffickers. Following that, in 2010, we went out to Afghanistan. We lost a lot of guys out there, and I wanted a more direct and purposeful role. I felt that if there was going to be sacrifice, it needed to be for a good reason. So I applied for the Special Forces and got through selection.

“In 2011, during my time in the SBS, we engaged in targeted operations aimed at addressing global issues. Being part of an organisation capable of influencing positive outcomes gave a deeper sense of purpose to those operations. I witnessed the significant impact those efforts had in ensuring the safety of the UK.”

THE QUIETNESS OF HOSPITAL

It was while on operations in Afghanistan that Jimmy was injured. “That December, we were in a gunfight with a target,” he says. “It was like a stand-off which ended in a cave complex. My Military Working Dog was killed and I sustained multiple gunshot wounds. One hit my helmet, and I took five more to my legs.

“I crawled to safety, falling off a mountain top on the way! The rest of the guys fought their way out, got me onto a stretcher and we waited for the helicopters while under fire. Within 24 hours I was in

“I WANTED A MORE DIRECT AND PURPOSEFUL ROLE. I FELT IF THERE WAS GOING TO BE SACRIFICE, IT NEEDED TO BE FOR A GOOD REASON”

From dog handler to dog healer: Jimmy has left the military but taken his love of dogs with him



**“HEADLEY WAS AN
AMAZING PLACE, AND
THE STAFF WERE
UNBELIEVABLE. IT GOT
ME BACK ON MY FEET”**





“You go from a very fast pace of life to nothing,” says Jimmy of life after injury

hospital in Bastion. I got back to the UK on Christmas Eve and had my first operation on Christmas Day. I just remember the quietness of hospital. You go from a very fast pace of life – months of just eating, sleeping and fighting – to nothing. It was a very strange feeling.

“Someone told me my career was over. One bullet had shattered my hip, but the one that caused the most damage went through the sciatic nerve in my left leg giving me drop foot, with no function or feeling from the knee down.

“I accepted it straight away. I knew it was time to move on to the next chapter, but my rehab took so long. I waited two years to see the extent of the nerve damage because the nerve only grows a millimetre a day. The hip also wasn’t uniting because my body was fighting the medical swab that had been left in it. I had 16 operations. But Headley was an amazing place and the staff and set-up were unbelievable. It got me back on my feet.”

Jimmy initially thought he might follow one post-military career that is typical of former Special Forces soldiers; working security and risk contracts. “But I have a family – a wife and kids – and I decided I’d rather stay at home,” he says. “So we put pen to paper on Pawseidon in 2018.



Jimmy was shot in the head in Afghanistan in 2011. This is the helmet that saved his life



“WE GIVE THE OWNERS A PHYSIO PLAN, HOMEWORK AND EXERCISES TO DO, AND IT’S GREAT WHEN YOU SEE AN IMPROVEMENT”

“The business is going well. We do all kinds of things – puppies learning to swim, dogs that have had knee surgery, hip injuries or arthritis, old dogs that need exercise, high-level dog training...

“We work with the local vets who send dogs our way if they initially don’t want to go down the surgical route. We see what we can do. We give the owners a physio plan, homework and exercise plans to do, and it’s great when you see an improvement.”

It’s a hugely fulfilling career, adds Jimmy. “Even now I’m learning so much every single day and have just completed my degree in dog behaviour,” he says. “The things that dogs can do are unbelievable. We’ve got a K9 training centre for all different stages of a dog’s life including puppy fundamentals now, too.

“How people treat their dogs these days is very different from when I was growing up. They’re less backyard animals and

more part of the family now, so we take the work we do extremely seriously. Owners put their trust in us. They don’t know if we will be able to make a difference, but after eight or 10 sessions, when they come away and they see a real change in their pet, they’re so happy.

“They tell us their dog can jump up on the bed again, or that they wish they’d found us sooner. It’s always the results that win them over rather than anything we can say.”



Jimmy is still in the water regularly, too, and not just to help his hounds. “I do open water swimming now, and I took part in my first triathlon recently with the help of Blesma, who funded my leg brace,” he says.

That recognition and assistance works both ways. “We’ve done a fundraiser for Blesma this year to raise some money, and I’ve also taken part in a Blesma golf week in Portugal, which was great. It came at the right time. I needed a break and a refocus, and it was nice to meet guys I’ve not met before and see what they’re going through. Talking to other Members, trying to help people who might be really struggling, giving your insight on how you got through things, that’s all really helpful.”

Jimmy and his team are also planning to organise a triathlon in the Dorset area for Blesma Members. “It would be brilliant to do something down here,” he says. “You don’t realise how easy running is until you are injured, and then you have to work out things like braces or prosthetics. I know it is difficult but it can be done, so anything we can get going will be great.”

Knowing Jimmy, it will be a success. If there’s one man who knows exercise, and the water, it’s him – and whether you’re human or canine, chances are he can get you moving!



James 'Jimmy' Hill puts a dog through its paces at the Pawseidon Canine Rehabilitation Centre

Book your place now

For Members' Weekend
and AGM 2024

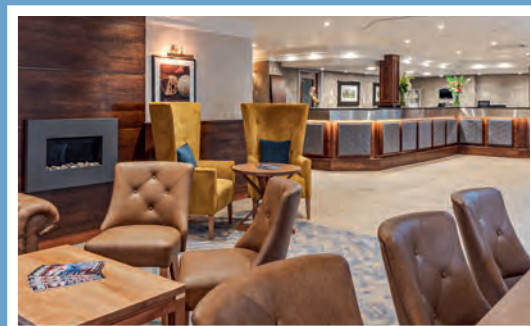
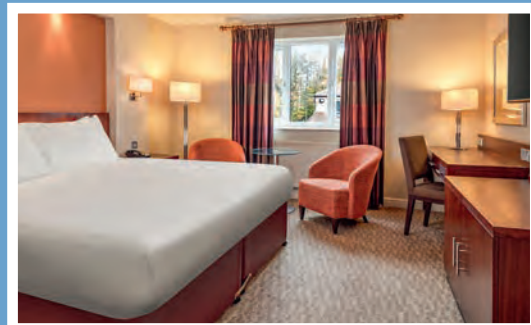
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Blesma
THE LIMBLESS VETERANS



Bulletin

Fore-tune favours the brave at golf day

Members and corporate supporters got into the swing of things recently at a Blesma corporate golf day

Golf has always been a key sport for Blesma, with its sociable nature fitting naturally with the Association's 'Member helping Member' ethos. A recent corporate golf day at the renowned Sand Martins Golf Club in Berkshire allowed corporate supporters to play alongside Members and gain a unique insight into what the charity they support does. Alana Warwick, Senior Corporate Fundraising Officer, who organised the day, talks us through it...

Tell us about the aim of the day...

The Association has put on golf days for Members over recent years, but our last corporate golf day was in 2020. We feel it's very important to create opportunities to engage our corporate supporters by hosting events like this as it gives them an opportunity to engage directly with our Association. The day was not only about fundraising. We wanted our supporters to spend time with Members, that way they get to know so much more about who we are and what we do – hearing the stories directly from Members is so much more powerful and engaging. On the day, each



Stuart Ellis dazzled on the day – mostly because of his driving (honest!)

Words: Danny Buckland Photography: Andy Bate

team included a Blesma Member, which we know works well.

What kind of companies got involved?

We have a wide variety of businesses that support Blesma, from design agencies to businesses in the financial sector. The winners were a company called Brace Creative Agency. In second place we had a combined team from Eurogroup and

Agility, who are long-time supporters, and in third place was a company called Marsh Commercial Ltd.

How many Members got involved?

Eleven signed up, and they really enjoyed the day. We also had two guides with us as several Members who took part are visually impaired. As well as having experienced golfers, we also had Members

“There’s a really strong group of golfers in the Association; lots of Members love the sport and it suits the Blesma ethos of having fun and helping each other”

who had only recently taken up the sport. It's great to be able to include our Members at events like this.

Was it pretty competitive?

There's a really strong group of golfers in the Association; lots of Members love the sport and it suits the Blesma ethos of having fun and helping each other. The day had a real feeling of camaraderie, and everyone seemed to get along very well. There was a friendly competitiveness, and there's always a really strong team spirit. We have some outstanding golfers in the Association who always catch the attention of the corporate team they are playing with. Many of our supporters are in awe of our Members.

Although the weather got a bit feisty...

Yes. There was a lightning strike towards the end of the day, and everyone had to return to the clubhouse for safety reasons. We also got suitably drenched, but once the storm passed pretty much everyone went back out again. The weather didn't dampen any spirits!

How was the feedback from the participants?

We received lots of really positive feedback. All the participants told us they had a brilliant day, and that it was great to meet and play with the Members as well as to understand where their donated or raised funds for Blesma go and how they are used. It was great to achieve what we set out to do in that regard. We had compliments about the course too, and a lot of people said they couldn't wait for next year's event. We have already booked next year's golf day – 20 June 2024 – so if anyone is interested in playing, or would like to receive more information, please do get in touch.

It seems like it was a real team effort?

It really was. The local Support Officers and one Outreach Officer came along to support the event. That meant we could make sure everyone who was involved on the day felt suitably looked after and thanked. It's important to make sure everyone enjoys themselves.



L to R: Stephen Pumfrett, Anna Maxwell, David Chandler, Stuart Ellis and Mick Foulds



David Chandler prepares to tee off



Stuart Ellis and Andy Jones in action

And how did you find the day?

I loved it – even if I nearly got taken out by a golf ball at one point while I was just standing by a tree! Most importantly, we raised more than £6,000 for the Association, which was brilliant. So it was a successful day all round.

How is the job going generally?

I'm really loving it. To be able to get out and about, meeting our Members and supporters and to see everyone in one place, that's what I really love about the role. It is incredibly rewarding. I'd like to say a huge thank you to everyone who supported us.



Mick Foulds pauses playing for a pose



From left: Blesma's Alana Warwick, three Members of Team Brace, Member Gary Meekins and Chris Knight from Blesma



Drive time: Mick again, this time aiming for the rainbow after torrential rain briefly stopped play

Wales and West: storytelling, support and sprucing up a home

An increase in the need for household heating has led to support for Members in accessing grants for fuel, installation of new fires and re-lining of chimneys. One Member, for example, who is a double-leg amputee and wheelchair user, has been unable to top up his gas pre-payment meter and was without heating for almost five days. After many hours attempting to resolve the issue the Member finally got his heating back on.

There has also been an uptick in the need for white and brown goods after Members have relocated to reduce their daily living costs and improve their overall situation. Housing authorities can help in some areas but are expecting their clients (our Members) to fill gaps in essentials such as ovens, hobs, carpets and basic furniture. Housing is becoming a hot topic in the veterans arena, especially in Wales. I have been spending a protracted amount of time dealing with Armed Forces Liaison Officers and local authority veterans champions to try to find smooth ways into appropriate housing for Members in need.

Wellbeing support is in increased demand, with many Members still feeling isolated and vulnerable post-Covid. I carried out more than 50 visits to Members between mid-August and late October. I have also accompanied a number of Members to Limb Centres, helping them access the correct prosthetics provision. We are stepping up our visits to Members in advance of the Christmas period and are hoping that many will attend the social and Christmas lunches that have been organised across the region.

If you are in need of support, contact Tom on 07780 165085 or bsowest@blesma.org

DECORATING TO SUPPORT HEALTH AND REDUCE ISOLATION

Nigel Rogoff, a Welfare Volunteer living in Hereford, has assisted me by visiting a new Member in need of close support and mentorship. This has not only helped the vulnerable Member to boost his self-esteem but has also led to the cleaning and



Welfare Volunteer Nigel Rogoff called in family support to help decorate a Member's home



BSO Tom (middle right) checks in with Members at a social lunch in Cardiff

decorating of his home after many years of difficult living and the demands on the Member's mental and physical health.

Nigel's son, Harry, stepped into the breach after it was almost impossible to find a business willing to quote for the much-needed work at the vulnerable Member's home. This formed the catalyst of a new idea to help veterans in need in the Herefordshire area, and the formation of a new veteran-friendly cleaning business. Harry organised for family and friends to visit the Member's home to bring it up to

the standard expected of someone living in such difficulty. The result was a sparkling new kitchen and living area, and a very grateful amputee Member.

STORYTELLING IN CARDIFF

The first Blesma Storytelling session took place at the Norwegian Church Arts Centre in Cardiff Bay on Friday 27 October. Six Members took part in the session which has been designed to instil confidence and allow an appropriate output for feelings and stories that might ordinarily not have a release. It also gave Members the chance to connect, have fun in a safe space, and find out more about the resilience of others. Turn to page 30 for more on the Storytelling Programme and how you can get involved.

OUTREACH WORK

Outreach Officer Jason Suller has continued to organise activities and social lunches for Members and their families. Numerous lunches across the area were enjoyed between August and November as well as a visit to Chester Zoo, a golf day



Above: Six Members took part in the new Storytelling and Wellbeing programme



Outreach Officer Jason Suller accepts a cheque from Jo Gowar, daughter of Blesma Member Thomas who passed away recently

experience, a trip to the white water rafting centre in Cardiff and a family picnic at St Fagan's Museum and Gardens. Jason has also been visiting Members to reduce isolation and loneliness. The need for social groups is obvious in the post-Covid landscape. People have taken a step back from their previously busy social lives and withdrawn more into the home. It is becoming increasingly difficult to

coax Members out of their houses, so it is essential to develop a model of informal social groups to allow Members to connect, build trust and enjoy the company of others going through similar adversities.

This is proving increasingly successful throughout Wales and West, with the exception of certain parts of North Wales. This area will be an obvious priority for the coming months.

OPEN HOUSE RAISES FUNDS

Blesma Wales & West were asked to help out at an Open House being organised at 'Chingola' in Gloucestershire in memory of late Blesma Member Thomas Gowar.

Thomas's daughter Jo, and her family, decided that all proceeds would go to Blesma for all the help and support given to Thomas (ex-Royal Sussex Regiment) since his right leg was amputated below the knee in 2009. Various items, including some of Thomas's paintings, were sold and raised almost £2,000 for the Association.

SUMMARY

The last few months have proved to be another very demanding yet rewarding period for the Wales & West staff and volunteers. In each area, Blesma is able to achieve great output, making speedy and life-changing decisions with positive results with only a BSO, an Outreach Officer and a small number of dedicated volunteers.

We currently have 303 Members in the Wales & West area spread from Pembrokeshire to Newport, Gloucester to the Wirral, and Deeside to Anglesey. The spread of Members is vast, with difficult geography in between and varying degrees of need. However, the Blesma model seems to work.

Simplicity, speed and priority support (when it's needed) are clearly working and paying dividends across a wide and complex membership. The Blesma Wales & West field staff are on hand when Members need them and have the authority to deal with issues quickly and confidently, using the fantastic support and partnership of those working diligently and tirelessly from the head office in Chelmsford. It is a team effort, and across all regions of Blesma this partnership is producing results and endearing the Blesma model not only to the Members, but also to the partners working closely with our Association.

Thank you to all those who give their time and donations to Blesma. It is greatly appreciated!

Tom Hall and Jason Suller

Sam Gallop

11 August 1922 - 17 October 2023

Sam was an extraordinary man who led an extraordinary life. He was also extraordinarily modest. He was born in Croydon on 11 August 1922. He went to school in South London and joined the RAF shortly after the war started. In 1943, Flight Sergeant Gallop was ordered to go on a training flight. Minutes later he was involved in a mid-air collision that ripped a wing off his Spitfire.

The plane caught fire when it crashed: his lower legs were badly burnt, both arms broken, one wrist burnt, one finger lost, his jaw smashed and his lower spine had crush injuries. He was admitted to RAF Cosford Hospital and was later transferred to Queen Victoria Hospital in East Grinstead where he was treated by Sir Archibald McIndoe and so became a member of the Guinea Pig Club. Both legs were amputated below the knee, and his treatment took 18 months.

After the war, a brief spell of clerical work was followed by studies at Brasenose College, Oxford where he read PPE. He joined the British Electricity Authority in 1949 and continued working in the industry, eventually running IT services for the Central Electricity Generating Board. He retired in 1977 and then began his main life's work.

He set up Employment Opportunities; a charity recruitment agency to get disabled people into work. It grew from two small rooms in the Bank of England into a UK-wide service. He created Aim Hi; a charity for hearing impaired students linked to Oak Lodge School. He established the All Party Parliamentary Limb Loss Group to influence emerging disability legislation; he was also the first chair of the Limbless Association, the chair of Opportunities, and was involved with numerous charity boards.

His work was recognised first with an OBE in 1993 and later a CBE in 2002. Amongst many lifetime achievement awards, this citation gives a concise summary:

“Throughout his life, Sam has worked tirelessly for the rights of disabled people. He successfully campaigned for improved access to employment and has enhanced the lives of innumerable disabled people



Sam Gallop (left) receiving the Hambro Award from the late Duke of Westminster

through his charitable work. Even in his tenth decade he remains a passionate advocate who is greatly respected for his wisdom, energy and pragmatism. When you consider the life-changing injuries that Sam

suffered more than 70 years ago and the challenges that he faced, his achievements are even more incredible. His enduring commitment and determination to ensure that disabled people have equal opportunities to lead independent and fulfilling lives is humbling, and Blesma recognises his life-long work by the presentation of the Hambro Award.”

Dad loved Renée throughout a 71-year marriage. He was a father of three, grandfather of six and great grandfather of eight children. He loved his family, was proud of them and got great joy from them.

While he became physically frail, his lively intellect remained to the end. He mastered new technologies, drove cars, flew the occasional jet, read *The Times* and *The Spectator* on their apps. He was interacting on email and by phone to a grandchild on the morning before he died in the afternoon.

His was an astonishing life, always lived to the fullest possible extent.

Nick Gallop

Denzil Connick

23 December 1956 - 05 September 2023

Falklands War veteran Denzil Connick has passed away after a battle with cancer at the age of 66. Denzil grew up in Chepstow and joined the Army as a Junior Leader at the age of 15. He served for 12 years with 3 PARA and, at the age of 25, lost his left leg at the hip during the Falklands War after being struck by a mortar round on 13 June 1982.

Denzil co-founded the South Atlantic Medal Association, a charity that campaigns for Falklands veterans and helps them and their families return to the islands on a pilgrimage. He was awarded the British Empire Medal for voluntary service to military veterans and their families.

We offer our deepest condolences to Denzil's family and friends.



Those who have passed away

May they rest in peace

BAILEY SE	Royal Anglian Regiment	08/11/23
BARKER J	Widow	13/11/23
BISHOPP LM	Widow	03/11/23
BOLSTRIDGE S	Royal Tank Regiment	31/08/23
BOWEN SM	Widow	16/10/23
BOYCE AM	Royal Artillery	02/11/23
BULLIVANT EM	Widow	07/11/23
COLLINGWOOD J	King's Shropshire Light Infantry	20/10/23
CONNICK D	Parachute Regiment	05/09/23
COOPER SP	Army Air Corps	08/11/23
DAVIS NJ	REME	01/09/23
DUNNE PA	Royal Air Force	19/09/23
FENTON F	Grenadier Guards	26/10/23
FISHER B	Widow	23/10/23
FREW A	Women's Royal Army Corps	13/11/23
GALLOP SR	Royal Air Force	17/10/23
GLAISTER MA	Widow	02/11/23
GODWIN J	Widow	17/08/23
GONDEK Z	Polish 2nd Corps, British 8th	27/10/23
HAMER JS	Royal Navy	07/11/23
HAZELTINE A	Royal Artillery	21/09/23
HIATT E	Widow	07/09/23
HOWARD RG	Royal Signals	28/09/23
KNOWLES IM	Widow	07/09/23
KRASNOWSKI G	Royal Artillery	01/08/23
MILLER J	Staffordshire Regiment	18/09/23
MINARDS IB	Widow	16/10/23
NEIL JH	Royal Navy	02/10/23
PATRICK BD	Intelligence Corps	07/11/23
PEARSON RM	Widow	21/09/23
RILEY A	Widow	07/11/23
SAMPSON VSJ	Royal Army Service Corps	18/09/23
SHERRATT MJ	UDR and Parachute Regiment	02/11/23
SINGLETON M	Widow	21/09/23
SMITH JW	Royal Artillery	20/10/23
SOLLIS GE	Royal Navy	19/09/23
SOPER T	Widow	27/08/23
STACEY CB	Royal Signals	25/10/23
TAPP PW	Royal Navy	19/09/23
THOMAS G	Royal Regiment Of Wales	01/09/23
THORNLEY J	Light Infantry	03/11/23
THORNTHWAITE RT	Parachute Regiment	19/09/23
TURNER B	Army Air Corps	23/10/23
WALL ET	Middlesex Regiment	20/10/23
WATTS J	Widow	21/08/23
WHITE LC	Widow	11/08/23

News from around the Branches

NOTTINGHAM BRANCH

The Nottingham Branch continues to flourish, regularly welcoming new members and meeting throughout the year. We will be holding our 2024 meetings/lunches at The Vale Hotel, Daybrook, Nottingham on the following dates:

13 February (11.30)

12 March (11.30 AGM)

14 May (12.30)

09 July (11.30)

10 September (12.30)

12 November (11.30)

If you would like to join us at any of the above events, it would be great to see new faces and you would be made very welcome.

After an absence of three years we held this year's Branch Summer Evening Meal at Colwick Hall on 24 August. More than 20 members gathered in the ancestral home of the famous poet Lord Byron, where we were treated to some amazing food.

This year's Branch Christmas Lunch was held on 05 December at The Orchard Hotel and Restaurant, a new venue that we tried in the beautiful grounds of Nottingham University and Lakeside Park.

If you are interested in joining the Branch, or would like to know more about our activities, please contact me, the Branch Honorary Secretary David Ledger, on 07794 309927.

David Ledger

Honorary Secretary

BOURNEMOUTH BRANCH

Bournemouth headed west in June following our policy of moving the meetings. We had a meeting in Poundbury on the outskirts of Dorchester. It was not designed as a meeting, but more of a coffee morning with some discussion. All seemed to enjoy it. We then strolled up to the Duchess of Cornwall and had a very pleasant lunch.

Later on in the month, we joined Outreach Officer Gordon Clark on Weymouth Esplanade for Veterans Weekend. The parade of Standards was followed by the three Service veterans and a number of WWII vehicles including a Sherman tank.

In August, we celebrated the 75th anniversary of The Bournemouth War Memorial Homes (BWMH) where we hold our meetings. Blesma has a long connection with BWMH, as it is now called – there were many members living there when I started. The longest resident (64 years) is our own Pat S, who was invited to cut the celebration cake with the Deputy Mayor. The Lord Lieutenant planted a tree right next to our Blesma tree, which unfortunately is a little unwell, some bug or other has got into it and eaten most of it. We have been reassured of a replacement should it not recover. Then we drank wine, ate cake and listened to the music.

Finally, a warm welcome to our new Chief Executive Vivienne Buck.

Yours Aye

Peter Sherston-Baker

Spotlight on Benefits and Social Care

Welcome 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 (see p68 for contact details) or they can get in touch with Blesma's Benefits and Social Care Adviser Liz Watling on 020 8548 7080.

COST OF LIVING PAYMENTS

The Government has announced the payment date for the second Cost of Living payment for those on a low income benefit. The payment of £300 should have been made between 31 October and 19 November. If you were eligible you will have been paid in the same way you usually receive your benefit or tax credits. This includes if you are found to be eligible for the payment at a later date and your benefit is backdated to cover the Cost of Living payment date. The payment is tax free and will not affect any benefits you receive.

The Government will not contact you to ask for your bank details, so if you receive any correspondence asking for these details it is likely to be a scam.

You may be entitled if you get any of the following benefits on a certain date: **Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, Income-related Employment and Support Allowance, Income Support, Pension Credit**

– You may be eligible if you were entitled to a payment of benefit for any day during the period 18 August 2023 to 17 September 2023

Universal Credit

– You may be eligible if you were entitled to a payment of Universal Credit for an assessment period that ended in the period 18 August 2023 to 17 September 2023

Tax Credits

– You may be eligible if you received a payment of tax credits for any day in the period 18 August to 17 September 2023

In some cases your benefit entitlement is reduced to £0; for example, if your earnings went up or your benefit was sanctioned for not complying with a condition. You would not be entitled to a Cost of Living payment in this situation.

If you did not receive a payment and think you are entitled, you can report this online at www.gov.uk/guidance/cost-of-living-payment. If you do not have online access, please contact the Department for Work and Pensions on the telephone number at the top of your award letter.

The qualifying date for the third and final payment of £299, which is due in Spring 2024, is yet to be announced.

PERSONAL INDEPENDENCE PAYMENT UPDATE

PIP TELEPHONE DELAYS

The Department for Work and Pensions has taken steps to improve problems with the Personal Independence Payment Helpline. Issues have included prolonged wait times before calls are answered and thousands of disconnections. The DWP has recruited more than 600 staff to increase the number of calls answered and reduce waiting times.

PIP REVIEWS

From August 2023 a new light-touch review form was introduced. This is being issued to claimants who have reached state pension age or have stable or high-level needs which are unlikely to change. A health assessment will not be needed in most cases. The shorter AR2 form is, at just six pages long, a much shorter version of the AR1 review form which most other claimants receive.

Regardless of which review form you are sent, it is important to complete it within the timescales given or your benefit may stop. You can request an extension if you need more time. Contact your Support Officer if you need help completing the form.

LATEST TRIBUNAL STATISTICS

If you feel your award decision is incorrect, you are able to challenge it. In the first instance, this should be through a request to the Department for Work and Pensions which will review its decision. If you are still unhappy with the decision, you can go to an independent appeal tribunal. Personal Independence Payment appeals currently make up 62% of all benefit appeals lodged. At present, the appeal overturn rate (in favour of the claimant) is 68%.

It would be prudent to get advice before challenging a decision as your award may decrease, stay the same, or increase. There are timescales to register your challenge. This usually needs to be requested within one month of the decision, but may be extended by up to a year depending on the reason for the delay. Please speak to your Blesma Support Officer if you feel unhappy with your award.

DISABILITY BENEFITS IN SCOTLAND

ADULT DISABILITY PAYMENT

Adult Disability Payment is a disability payment for those aged from 16 up to state pension age who have difficulty with their daily living activities – such as washing and bathing, preparing food and making budgeting decisions – or have difficulty with their mobility. Those who receive the benefit before they have reached state pension age can continue to receive the benefit past their state pension age.

Adult Disability Payment replaced Personal Independence Payment and Disability Living Allowance for those living in Scotland only. The eligibility for the benefit broadly aligns with Personal Independence Payment.

Since August 2022, claimants of Personal Independence Payment and Disability Living Allowance have started to transfer to Adult Disability Payment. This process is expected to be completed by summer 2025. Claimants will receive a letter from Social Security Scotland advising them it



is time for them to transfer. There will be no change to the amount of benefit received.

Personal Independence Payment

If you are receiving Personal Independence Payment, the date of transfer will usually depend on your review date. You will be fast tracked if 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 is about to end

Disability Living Allowance

If you are receiving Disability Living Allowance, the date of transfer is linked to your date of birth and review date. If you were born on or after 08 April 1948 you will transfer to Adult Disability Payment if:

- You report a change in your disability or health condition
- You ask to move to Adult Disability Payment
- Your Disability Living Allowance is ending or renewing from Summer 2022

After Social Security Scotland moves your benefit, it will pay you an interim Adult Disability Payment award. This will be the same amount as your Disability Living Allowance. Following this, Social Security Scotland will then begin to review your award. This may affect your payment.

If you are thinking about asking for your Disability Living Allowance to move to Adult Disability Payment, it is important to seek independent advice due to a possible affect to your payment. Please speak to your Blesma Support Officer.

If the circumstances above do not apply to you, or you were born before 08 April 1948, the Department for Work and Pensions will continue to administer your Disability Living Allowance. Your benefit will move at a later date.

Attendance Allowance in Scotland

Attendance Allowance is a disability benefit for those over state pension age who have difficulty with their daily living activities such as washing and bathing, preparing food, and staying safe in the home.

Attendance Allowance is being replaced by Pension Age Disability Payment in Scotland only and there are no plans for

a replacement to Attendance Allowance in other parts of the UK.

Pension Age Disability Payment will be administered by Social Security Scotland and the eligibility for the benefit broadly aligns with Attendance Allowance.

From Autumn 2024, there will be a phased introduction for new claimants of Pension Age Disability Payment. It is expected that claimants of Attendance Allowance living in Scotland will be transferred at some stage starting in early 2025. They will receive the equivalent amount of benefit to their Attendance Allowance. Claimants will not need to make a claim and will transfer automatically. Social Security Scotland will write to a claimant when it is their turn to transfer. A more detailed timescale for the roll-out and transfer will be announced at a later stage.

Current claimants of Attendance Allowance in Scotland do not need to do anything at present. Until the introduction of Pension Age Disability Payment, the Attendance Allowance claim will be managed by the Department for Work and Pensions. We will give updates in future Bulletins as we hear more.

Useful contact numbers across the Association

TITLE	NAME	TELEPHONE	EMAIL
BLESMA SUPPORT OFFICERS			
BSO (Prosthetics)	Brian Chenier	M 07796 715908	bsoprosthetics@blesma.org
BSO Eastern	Kevin Long	T 020 3954 3020 M 07825 536364	bsoeastern@blesma.org
BSO London & South East	Steven Burrell	T 020 7501 3030 M 07469 242277	bsolse@blesma.org
BSO Midlands	Vanessa Lucas	M 07825 536363	bsomid@blesma.org
BSO North East	Christine Landess	T 020 3954 3027 M 07917 972825	bsone@blesma.org
BSO North West	Amanda Brownlie	M 07825 536362	bsonw@blesma.org
BSO Scotland & Northern Ireland	Steve Burton	M 07766 258461	bsosniroi@blesma.org
BSO South	Pat Donnachie	T 020 3954 3026 M 07741 846106	bsosouth@blesma.org
BSO South West	Sarah Payne	M 07741 737563	bsosw@blesma.org
BSO Wales and West	Tom Hall	T 020 8548 7098 M 07780 165085	bsowest@blesma.org
Members Living Overseas	Liz Watling	T 020 8548 7080	iwabenefits@blesma.org
BLESMA OUTREACH OFFICERS			
Outreach Officer Eastern	Francesca Anastasio	M 07741 661159	outreacheastern@blesma.org
Outreach Officer London & South East	Jess Linge	M 07741 845793	outreachlse@blesma.org
Outreach Officer Midlands	Sarah Cruddle	M 07741845429	outreachmid@blesma.org
Outreach Officer Northern Ireland	Fiona Morrison	M 07741 744617	outreachni@blesma.org
Outreach Officer North East	Adele Miller	M 07741 847211	outreachne@blesma.org
Outreach Officer North West	Catherine Green	M 07741 846674	outreachnw@blesma.org
Outreach Officer Scotland	Rachel Kennedy	M 07884 695703	outreachscotland@blesma.org
Outreach Officer South	Amy Barnes	M 07435 283102	outreachofficersouth@blesma.org
Outreach Officer South West	Gordon Clark	M 07788 312747	outreachsw@blesma.org
Outreach Officer Wales and West	Jason Suller	M 07741 744141	outreachwest@blesma.org
INDEPENDENCE AND WELLBEING			
Head of Welfare Support	Colin Branch	T 020 8548 7090	hws@blesma.org
Benefits and Social Care Adviser	Liz Watling	T 020 8548 7080	iwabenefits@blesma.org
Grants and Outreach Activities Executive		T 020 8548 3516	goaexec@blesma.org
Membership, Branch and Volunteer Network Executive	Debbie Mayne	T 020 8548 7093	mbvexec@blesma.org
Welfare – Direct Line		T 020 8598 9459	
ACTIVITIES			
Activities Manager	Jess March	T 020 8548 3519	activities@blesma.org
Events Coordinator	Clare Wellings	T 020 3954 3021	ae@blesma.org
Events Coordinator	Nicole Findlay	T 020 8548 7097	aelocal@blesma.org
FUNDRAISING			
Head of Fundraising	Anna Scalera	T 020 8548 3517	hf@blesma.org
Community and Events Manager	Abbie-Louise Mills	T 020 8548 7089	communityeventsofficersnr@blesma.org
Corporate & Regional Fundraising Mgr	Chris Knight	M 07774 797318	crfm@blesma.org

TITLE	NAME	TELEPHONE	EMAIL
COMMUNICATIONS			
Digital Media Manager	Nick Tuck	T 01299 896282	digitalmedia@blesma.org
Blesma Magazine			editor@blesma.org
DIRECTORS			
Chief Executive	Vivienne Buck	T 020 8548 3512	ce@blesma.org
Operations Director	Tony Bloomfield	T 020 8548 3513	od@blesma.org
Interim Director Independence and Wellbeing	Brian Chenier	T 07796 715908	bsoprosthetics@blesma.org
Finance and Support Director	Boston Mwense	T 020 8548 3518	fsd@blesma.org
USEFUL CONTACTS			
Main Office		T 020 8590 1124	info@blesma.org
BLESMA BRANCH OFFICIALS			
BOURNEMOUTH BRANCH			
Chair	Peter Sherston-Baker		chair.bournemouth@blesma.org
Secretary	Mary-Jane Sweetzer		Please use Chair's email
Treasurer	Hazel Crofts		treasurer.bournemouth@blesma.org
Welfare Officer	Peter Sherston-Baker		Please use Chair's email
GREAT YARMOUTH AND LOWESTOFT BRANCH			
Chair	Bob Monkhouse		chair.yarmouth@blesma.org
Secretary	Helen Cullen		secretary.yarmouth@blesma.org
Treasurer	Simon Cavie		treasurer.yarmouth@blesma.org
NOTTINGHAM BRANCH			
Chair	Andy Fitzgerald		chair.nottingham@blesma.org
Secretary	Dave Ledger		secretary.nottingham@blesma.org
Treasurer	Keith Meakin		treasurer.nottingham@blesma.org
SUTTON, MERTON & DISTRICT BRANCH			
Chair	Annie MacMillan		chair.sutton@blesma.org
Secretary	Karen Mason		secretary.sutton@blesma.org
Treasurer	Dave Hobson		Use Chair or Secretary at present
SOUTHAMPTON BRANCH			
Chair	David Rowe		chair.southampton@blesma.org
Treasurer and Secretary	Stephen Coltman		secretary.southampton@blesma.org
Welfare Officer	Jacqueline Brodrick		welfare.southampton@blesma.org

Important information for emailing Blesma Branch officials

Anyone wishing to email a Branch official must use a specific Blesma email address rather than a personal account with immediate effect.

Previously, Members have been sending and receiving personal data in potentially unsecured emails, which has been placing the Association at risk of large penalties. Official Blesma Branch email addresses

have now been established (please see the table above) which ensure the Association is working within the legal framework and is compliant with General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).

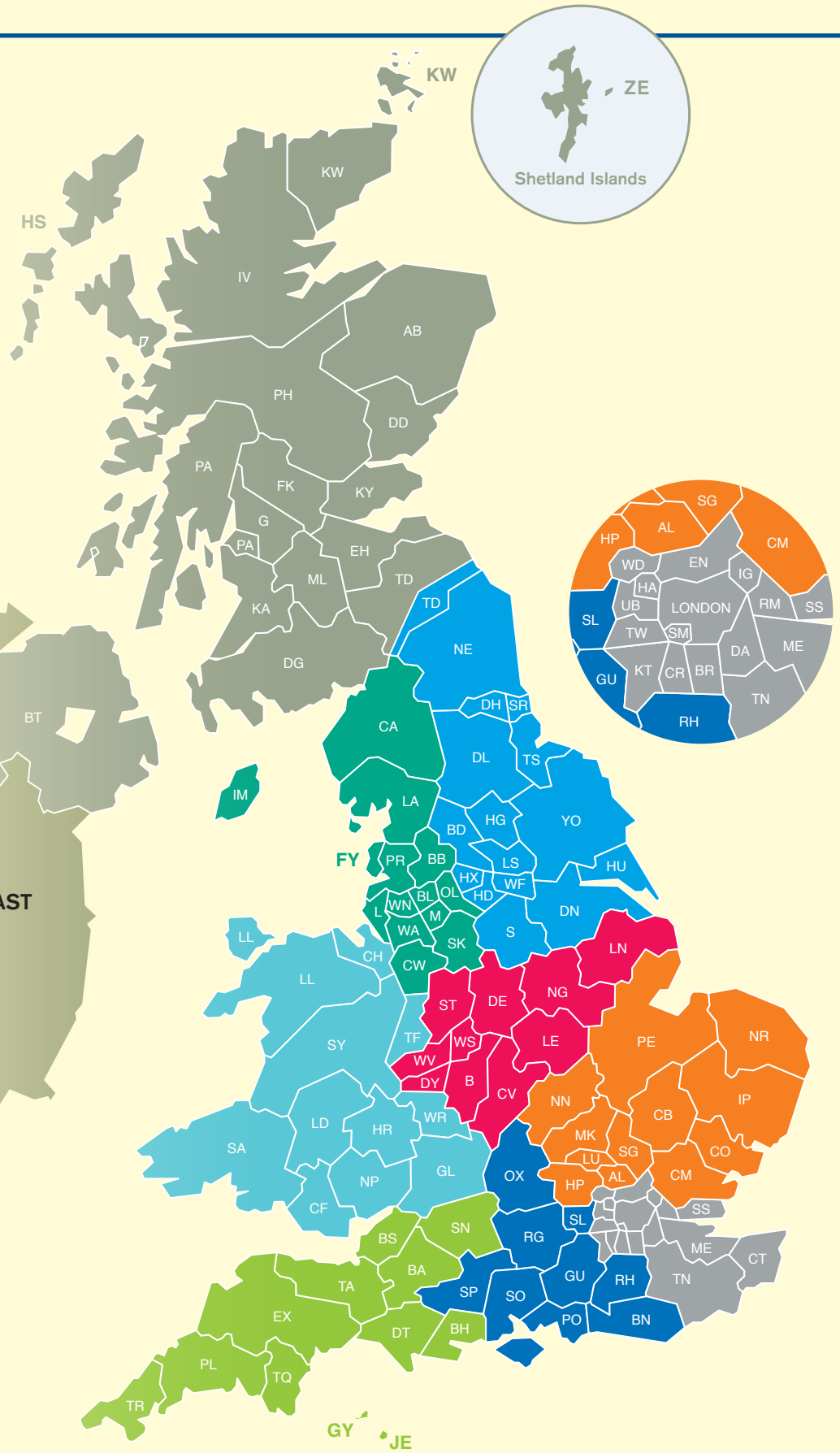
If you want to send an email to a Branch official that is not related to Blesma activity, then personal contact information can still be used.



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 p68.

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



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Lionel O'Connor

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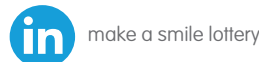
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Free Will Writing Service

Blesma is partnered with the National Free Wills Network, a free Will writing service for anyone wishing to leave a gift in their Will.

The National Free Wills Network will connect you to a local solicitor to guide you through the process of writing or amending your Will.

If you prefer, you can write your Will online. The process is quick and easy, and every Will is checked by a team of qualified solicitors.

A gift in your Will helps us be there for limbless and injured veterans. Always.



Blesma, The Limbless Veterans, 115 New London Road, Chelmsford, CM2 0QT
Registered Charity Numbers 1084189 SC010315



1 in 5 Blesma Members is helped through gifts in Wills

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

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No obligation to leave a gift

Learn more

Contact
legacies@blesma.org
020 8548 7085

Visit
blesma.org/legacy