

Blesma

The magazine for
limbless veterans

**12-PAGE
BLACKPOOL
SPECIAL**

JOHN GREEN
Age: 95



*Meet the
residents of*
**BLESMA'S
BLACKPOOL
HOME**

Inspirational people • Incredible stories • Unbelievable lives

Channelling their emotions

How four Blesma Members became the first all-amputee team to swim the Channel **p40**



Gold medal Members

Get track, court and poolside with Blesma's stars of the Invictus Games **p04**



Giant strides in technology

Meet Michael Swain, the only soldier to have had Osseointegration surgery **p44**

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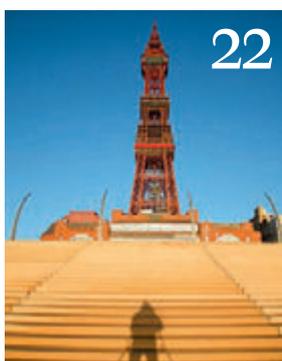


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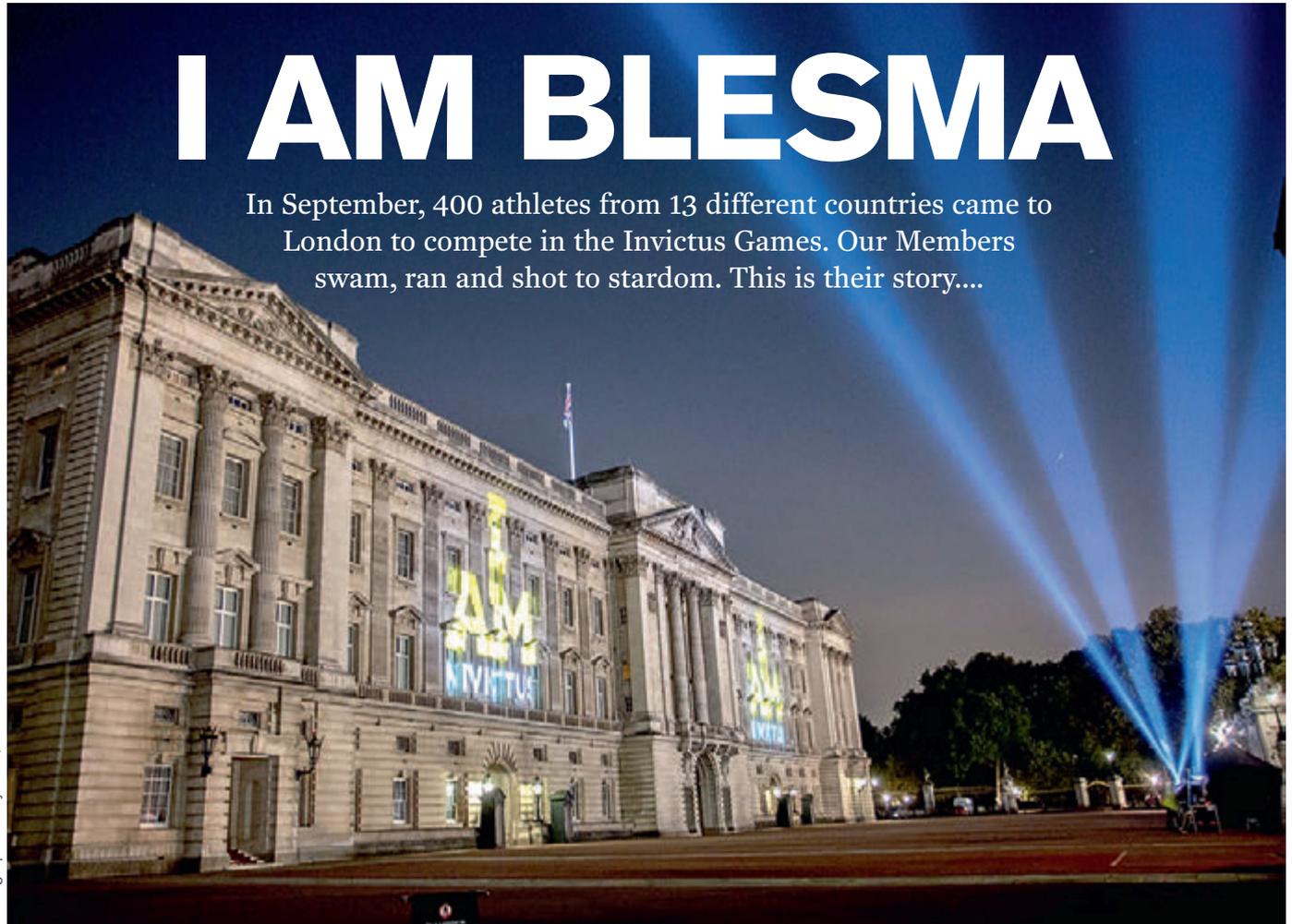
A copy of the latest **Directory** can be found in this issue. If you didn't get one email Elaine Hems on memberadmin@blesma.org

NEWS

News, views and opinion
from the world of BLESMA

I AM BLESMA

In September, 400 athletes from 13 different countries came to London to compete in the Invictus Games. Our Members swam, ran and shot to stardom. This is their story...



Photographs: Andy Bate, The Invictus Games

It was just an amazing, incredible, phenomenal week,” says runner Andy Grant. “Something crazy and once-in-a-lifetime seemed to happen every day!” Talk to anyone who competed in the first Invictus Games in September, and you’ll hear something similar. The Paralympic-style multi-sport event, featuring some 400 competitors from 13 nations, was a roaring success. Set up by Prince Harry, supported by the Royal Foundation of The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge and the Ministry of Defence, and sponsored by Jaguar Land Rover, both the quality of the sportsmen and women, and the enthusiasm of the crowds seemed to surpass all expectations.

Great Britain even managed to beat wheelchair basketball powerhouse USA at their own game. “Getting the gold was quite something, it all came together in the end,” says Adam Nixon, 31, a below-knee amputee and former soldier in the Royal Artillery who was part of the team. “The final started in the tunnel for us, getting all psyched up and trying to intimidate the Americans!



The Red Arrows
roar over the
Olympic Park



They were up for it too, and were giving us lots of attitude back. It was incredibly intense – but there was a friendly spirit.

“I think the match was one of the noisiest they’ve ever had at The Copper Box Arena. The Americans are basketball-obsessed and, from what I’ve read, they were odds-on favourites before the tournament. They’d cruised to the final and we’d had a bit of a struggle with Denmark in the semis. But the crowd spurred us on and we played the way we knew we could. To be cheered on to such an incredible level is something special. We pushed harder and faster. It was bonkers.”

PINCH YOURSELF, YOU’VE WON!

“To play at such a high level in front of so many people was almost unimaginable,” adds Gareth Golightly, 32, formerly of the Royal Logistic Corps, who had a double above-knee amputation in 2002 after a car accident. “We got an email five months ago asking if we wanted to be involved, but the side was only picked one month before the Games. Out of our lads, only three or four

Focus on the positives

The Photography Course doesn't just teach photography (p22)



Prince Harry and GB team captain Dave Henson

had played wheelchair basketball before. So to beat the USA, whose players grew up with the sport, was a real achievement. I'd love to push on to Paralympic standard now."

Below-knee amputee runner Andy Grant, 26, a former Royal Marine, picked up two individual gold medals and a bronze in the relay. "Competing in front of 5,000 people, getting so much support, having Prince Harry giving you a wink and saying; 'Well done, mate', the whole thing was surreal," he says. "I got gold in the 400m and 1500m, and I managed a personal best in the 400m. I got carried away and slowed down to celebrate – I could have gone faster!"

But while everyone was out to win, the true triumph of The Invictus Games was when the competitors reflected on how far they'd come. "The crowds were staggering and the team spirit was incredible," says Tony Harris, 33, a former Fusilier and current Blesma Trustee who won gold as part of the sitting volleyball team. "But what was really special was looking around and seeing how well you and all your mates had »



Dave Henson, GB team captain, won 200m athletics gold

welcome

This edition reflects upon events of the Summer and late Spring, and I would like to highlight some of the articles. Jim Keating, who is the subject of the Spotlight page, has been, and still, is a tremendous supporter of Blesma in many roles, and we cannot do without his like. Thank you so much Jim.

Photography goes from strength to strength in the Activities Programme and I hope the exploits in Scotland encourage more Members to participate. The Blackpool Home feature dwells upon the lively residents and their amazing, captivating stories. I am so glad Gwen and others were able to represent Blesma at the Westminster Abbey World War One Vigil on 04 August.

Michael Swain tells us of his pioneering down under, while Beeline Britain set records and Nick Beighton's achievement is inspiring. There was a wave of regional news coverage on route with locals filling the buckets that were being rattled. Sam Gallop is a long-standing Member who has done, and is still doing, so much for amputees and the disabled, both military and civilian. He certainly keeps Westminster alert to the cause as he drives the All Party Parliamentary Limb Loss Group. Blesma is immensely thankful to Sam.

The successful Channel Swim attempt by Craig, Jamie, Stephen and Conrad is another record-setting venture and we offer them our congratulations. We also had Members participating in the international Invictus Games and have helped some in their selection process.

We are immensely pleased the LIBOR funding application in partnership with Blind Veterans UK was successful for bespoke accommodation in North Wales and tailor made training and rehabilitation for Members. We look forward to working with Blind Veterans UK on this project. The collaboration is highly constructive and we are most grateful to Blind Veterans UK; we look forward to further such opportunities.

We met with the Under Secretary of State for Health, and the Department of Health confirmed that veterans' prosthetics services will continue to be part of NHS England core funding on a recurring basis. Good news, but we know that the NHS England Armed Forces Health Strategy has to lead to effective delivery across the country, and there still needs to be a scheme of equivalence between the NHS and MoD on medical devices including wheelchairs, so we won't be complacent.

I last wrote before the Members' Weekend. The feedback we received has been positive and helpful, and we hope that next year's event, on 16 and 17 May, will see even more Members, so please book it in your diary. We would like Members to do the talking instead of the Executive, as the Association really is made by you, the Members, and your fellowship and dialogue.

I ran in the Cheltenham Half Marathon for Blesma at the start of September, alongside volunteers from GE Aviation, who have chosen Blesma as their military charity. I am glad I survived to write the introduction to this magazine!

Barry Le Gry
Chief Executive



GB clinched archery gold with the very last arrow



Adam Nixon has his sights firmly set on basketball gold



The Foo Fighters at the closing ceremony

done in terms of recovery. I'm a below-knee amputee and got involved in volleyball just for Invictus – now I'm part of the Great Britain Development Squad. I'd love to play at a higher level now – that's my goal."

WHO'S UP FOR RIO DE JANEIRO?

Many other competitors are also seeing the event as a springboard to possible Paralympic involvement. "I wouldn't have said I was even a 'proper' archer before this," said Andy Phillips, 48, who has a spinal injury from the first Gulf War, and ended up winning gold in the team archery event. "I'd done a few veterans competitions and had really enjoyed them, but this was phenomenal and now my motivation is to try to get to the 2016 Paralympic Games.

"It came down to the last arrow for us, and I needed to shoot better than a six for gold. There was no silver medal on offer, so it was all or nothing. No pressure, then! I told myself that I needed a bull and I got a nine, so that was enough.

"It was the very last shot of the entire tournament, so I couldn't believe it when we won. I went through every emotion possible. I've never seen so many tears. I've made friends from all over the world and the spirit was perfect; everyone wanted

to win, but everyone wanted to make sure that everyone else had a good time, too."

GB team captain, Dave Henson led by example, picking up athletics gold in the 200m. "Captaining the team was a huge honour," said Dave, who gave a speech to the 26,000-strong crowd at the closing ceremony. "I think the Games marked a major milestone in how recovery is viewed



ARE YOU HOPING TO COMPETE IN THE 2016 PARALYMPICS IN RIO?

If you are then please get in touch with us at commslead@blesma.org

in this country – to see us injured blokes competing at such a high level in such an incredible arena with such incredible support was an important moment."

Blesma's role in helping the athletes get to the start line was crucial. "They've helped me so much," said Adam Nixon. "They sent me to Colorado skiing when I was in a dark place emotionally, and it was one of the best experiences of my life. Basketball is mentally and physically demanding, and now I'm as fit as anyone on the court. I'd love to train up to Paralympic level. I'm also training a kids' basketball team, which is fantastic."

THIS IS JUST THE BEGINNING

And the Invictus idea should be continued and built upon, think the competitors. "When the Games were first announced, I think people thought the standard would be quite low," reflects Andy Grant. "I think people assumed it'd be a load of guys without arms or legs trying to do sport – not doing it to such a high level. But it has definitely changed people's attitudes. The competitors weren't trying to do it, they were smashing it! I got texts off people saying they were embarrassed about their perceptions beforehand, and that they had been inspired. That's a great result."

Gareth Golightly before GB's historic basketball win over the USA

CONGRATULATIONS TO ALL BLESMA PARTICIPANTS

Steven Arnold Road Cycling
Jordan Beecher Indoor Rowing
Nick Beighton Indoor Rowing
Leigh Bland Archery
Josh Boggi Road Cycling and Cycling
Dean Bousfield Athletics
Alexander Brewer Athletics and Swimming
Vinod Budhathoki Volleyball and Road Cycling
Terry Byrne Road Cycling
Nathan Cumberland Athletics and Powerlifting
James Cumming Road Cycling
Derek Derenalagi Athletics
Annie Devine Powerlifting
Ricky Fergusson Athletics
Craig Gadd Road Cycling and Cycling
Steven Gill Archery
Gareth Golightly Basketball
Michael Goody Swimming
Andrew Grant Athletics
Anil Gurung Sitting Volleyball
Simon Harmer Swimming
Anthony Harris Sitting Volleyball
Grant Harvey Wheelchair Rugby
David Henson Athletics
Jonathan Le Galloudec Swimming
Kushal Limbu Athletics
Ray Lowrie Indoor Rowing
Corrie Mapp Sitting Volleyball
Scott Meenagh Indoor Rowing
Adam Nixon Basketball
Andy Phillips Archery
Craig Preece Road Cycling and Cycling
Netra Rana Sitting Volleyball
Stuart Robinson Wheelchair Rugby
David Scott Basketball
Clive Smith Road Cycling
Ben Steele Wheelchair Rugby
Joseph Townsend Athletics, Powerlifting, Road Cycling
Jaco Van Gass Road Cycling
Spencer Vaughan Wheelchair Rugby
Charles Walker Wheelchair Rugby and Sitting Volleyball
Matthew Webb Swimming
Daniel Whittingham Wheelchair Rugby and Road Cycling
James Wilson Powerlifting
Micky Yule Powerlifting
Ben Zissman Cycling

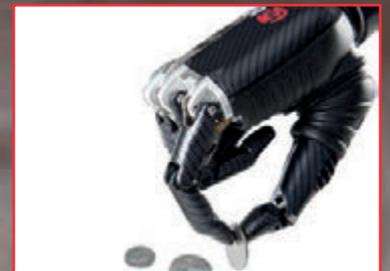
Apologies if your name isn't on the list. If we've missed you off drop us a line at commslead@blesma.org and let us know.



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Bee happy:
Nick and the team complete their 680-mile challenge in style

Photograph by Pete Firth

kayaking to Scotland. The four adventurers then cycled across Scotland, and mountain biked and hiked across the Cairngorm Mountains. Nick used specially-designed mountain hand-bikes to tackle the rugged Scottish terrain before the four ditched their wheels to hike to the top of Ben MacDui, the UK's second highest peak. The team then cycled to the edge of the Moray Firth before a final 10-hour kayak across the Scottish waters and a last cycle into John O'Groats.

The Beeline Britain team proudly carried the 'Bastion Baton', the handle of a combat stretcher used in Afghanistan to evacuate wounded soldiers, for the entire length of the expedition. The baton is a symbol of the nation's gratitude and respect for the



An epic adventure by bike...



...hike...

sacrifices made by members of the Armed Forces. "The support for Blesma from Nick and the team is appreciated no end by all Blesma Members," said Blesma's Chief Executive Barry Le

Grys as the team completed their challenge. "It helps in so many ways, not least in inspiring others to be positive. Blesma is about the realisation and celebration of potential, and the Beeline Britain team have made a unique contribution to this."

After they'd completed their expedition in John O'Groats, the team were rewarded for their ingenuity, determination and physical endurance with a phone call from His Royal Highness Prince Harry.

"You've done a sterling job. I am so glad you've enjoyed it and I am really sad I didn't get to join you," Prince Harry told them. "This was a seriously arduous journey in such a short space of time. It's a huge feat, I am really proud of you all."

You can still support Beeline Britain's fundraising efforts. To donate, simply text "Line 59" to 70070 or go to www.justgiving.com/beelinebritain. All proceeds will go to Blesma



...and kayak

Land's End to John O'Groats – as the Bee flies

A four-person team which included Paralympian, double amputee Army veteran and Blesma Member Nick Beighton have successfully completed the first ever straight-line journey from Land's End to John O'Groats.

The Beeline Britain team also included RAF helicopter crewman and founder of the Beeline Britain concept, Ian O'Grady, Tori James, the first Welsh woman to climb Mount Everest, and outdoor instructor and lecturer at Liverpool John Moores University, Adam Harmer.

They left Land's End on 17 May to kayak, cycle, mountain bike and hike their way across the UK, arriving in John O'Groats, the UK mainland's most northerly point, on 13 June. The epic voyage covered more than 680 miles and saw them break two record sea crossings, including the longest open sea kayak crossing in the UK – 34 hours of non-stop paddling.

"It a tough challenge. My body has been blown up and bolted back together again, and I knew Beeline Britain would test me to my limits," said Nick, who lost both his legs in an IED explosion in Afghanistan before recovering to compete in the London 2012 Paralympics. "I wanted

to show how life-changing injuries don't limit your ability to tackle epic challenges and I wanted to

raise funds for Blesma, who make a hugely positive impact on injured veterans. I feel we've achieved both those aims."

The team, supported by Prince Harry's Endeavour Fund, started their ambitious challenge with a gruelling first leg, setting a new UK sea kayaking record by paddling for more than 34 hours and 125 miles from Land's End to Pembrokeshire. They then completed a 93-mile kayak to Anglesey and cycled across the Isle of Man before

↘ BLESMA BRIEFING

Government commits to the future of VPP funding

Brian Chenier, BSO (Prosthetics) gives us the lowdown on the latest from the world of prosthetics as well as updates on the Murrison Report and the Veterans Prosthetic Panel



In the last issue I wrote about Prosthetic Centre User Groups and encouraged our Members to take a proactive approach and get involved. I hope that some of you have followed this up and made contact in your local areas. I also mentioned that NHS Centres in England that had not been identified as one of the Enhanced Veterans Centres were to receive a cash injection from the Murrison funding that has been made available to NHS England.

I am pleased to say that the process for identifying capital projects in these centres has been completed and the funding has been allocated accordingly, each of those centres receiving an equal share amounting to somewhere in the region of £38,000.

I was able to help some of the centres to submit their bids by ensuring they knew what was available to them, how to submit the bid and, in one case, I identified an administration error which meant the bid hadn't been received by the decision panel. Knowing the centre had worked hard to formulate a bid, I was able to draw attention to the error and the bid was given a fair hearing and was, in turn, agreed.

WELSH PROSTHETICS

Blesma has been invited to participate in the working group that has been established to look into the Service Specification for Prosthetics Provision in the three Welsh NHS Centres.

The working group will consider the cost and implications of providing prosthetic limbs to eligible veterans, and will look to provide an equal service for both civilians and veterans. I will be taking part in this work and will feedback as soon as I can. The service in Wales is currently provided 'in house' and prosthetics centres are working off a commitment to offer this service via Individual Patient Funding Request (IPFR) and without extra funding.

VETERANS PROSTHETIC PANEL AND ENHANCED PROSTHETICS

Dr Andrew Murrison's review *A Better Deal for Military Amputees* looked into the equitable prosthetic provision for eligible veterans. As a result, NHS England established the Veterans Prosthetic Panel (VPP) to decide on applications from NHS Limb Centres for enhanced prosthetic provision for eligible veterans.

Blesma has expressed concern over the current VPP funding and the ongoing commitment to maintain state-of-the-art prosthetics for those eligible. Blesma put the question of specific funding and contingency post 31 March 2015 to the Health Minister, Dr Dan Poulter MP and we are delighted that he has written to us to confirm funding will be maintained to the tune of £6 million annually. It will be up to NHS England to decide how to spend this money, but it is understood that it will be at the disposal of the VPP/Veterans Lead.

This is excellent news and should give all those Members affected confidence for their future care and provision of prosthetics. It should also instil confidence within the industry and among providers to be able to recruit appropriately and continue their infrastructure developments as planned. The excellent work of the VPP can, and will, continue, and Blesma looks forward to continuing to support this work well into the future.

IN OTHER NEWS

I continue to visit Limb Centres and attend meetings, seminars and conferences on a regular basis. I am also getting to meet, and know, more and more of you, the Members, by attending limb fitting appointments or taking part in Blesma-organised activities. It is incredibly helpful to be able to take away your stories and use your experiences to influence where I can, challenge when I need to and, above all, represent you as your Blesma Support Officer (Prosthetics).



I USE YOUR STORIES TO INFLUENCE WHEREVER I CAN, TO CHALLENGE WHENEVER I NEED TO AND, ABOVE ALL ELSE, TO REPRESENT YOU, THE MEMBERS



A Gazelle helicopter like the one Members are helping to restore



Turning a military chopper into a real show stopper

Eight Blesma Members are helping to restore a helicopter that was flown on operations in Iraq.

They are working with the Gazelle Military Helicopter Trust which teaches veterans how to restore and fly Gazelles that have been retired from service. The project is the brainchild of Marc Le Gresley, the civilian Chief Flying Instructor of The Army Flying Association (AFA). Marc previously served in the Army Air Corps, and is now Gazelle Squadron Display Team leader.

The Blesma Members have been volunteering with Falcon Aviation, the company that maintains the AFA's training aircraft. Falcon Aviation have sponsored the rebuild and have given the Blesma team the chance to gain an Aeronautical Engineering NVQ Level 2 accreditation.



“Helping to train veterans in aircraft restoration and giving them experience in flying has been very rewarding,” said Marc. “Two of the Blesma guys on the project have been helped back into civilian employment as a result of this work.”

The Display Team have also been taking several Gazelle helicopters to air shows this year as part of a static display where team members and Blesma Members have been collecting donations for Blesma.

“This project is about Members working together to rebuild an iconic helicopter,” said Blesma’s Chief Executive Barry Le Grys. “It promotes team work, confidence building and skills development.”

To find out where you can see the Gazelle Squadron Display Team perform, visit www.thegazellesquadron.com/events

RESIDENTS' WWII MEMORIES ON RECORD

At this year's Blackpool Home Garden Party, Ross Morgan presented the Home's Manager, Jacqui Longden, with a CD of interviews he conducted with three of the Home's residents.

Earlier this year, 19-year-old Ross, who volunteers with Talking Newspapers for the Blind and Radio Victoria, interviewed John Booth, Harry Foster and Eric Harrison about their memories of WWII. As a result, he was inspired to write an account of what life might have been like for a teenager growing up in the UK if the war had been lost. “It was an honour to speak to these very special gentlemen and I was greatly moved by their unbelievable acts of bravery,” said Ross. Since the recording, Eric Harrison has sadly died and Ross has ensured that his daughters have been provided with a recording of their father's recollections.

Bikers cruise into the record books

Two bikers have completed an epic trek for Blesma that saw them ride more than 15,000 miles across Europe on motorbikes.

Harry Glover and Peter Bray travelled through 28 countries, setting a new world record for visiting 25 European capital cities in one ride, as they raised money for Blesma, Soldiers off the Street and the Alder Hey Children's Charity.

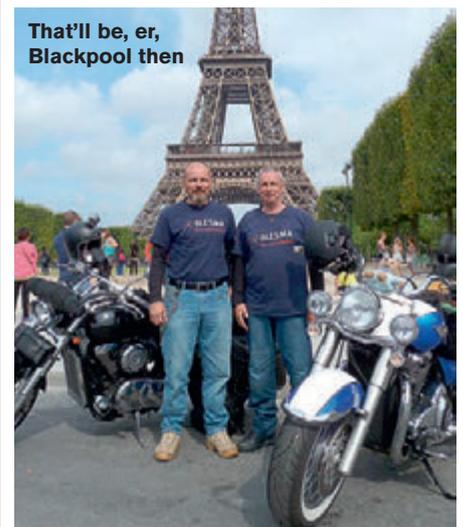
The pair set off from Buckingham Palace on Friday 1 August and, over the following 21 days, rode as far north as Helsinki, as far south as Athens, to Bucharest in the East and to Lisbon in the west. They visited capital cities including Paris, Amsterdam, Berlin, Copenhagen, Stockholm, Helsinki, Tallinn, Riga, Vilnius, Warsaw, Prague, Vienna, Bratislava, Budapest, Bucharest, Athens, Ljubljana, Rome, Madrid, Lisbon and Dublin.



“It was an incredible three weeks on the road,” said 49-year-old Harry, “but we as good as slept rough for all but one night as the entire trek was self-funded and we had to keep an eye on our bikes.”

Pete, 58, is already a world record holder as he is the only person to kayak across the Atlantic Ocean unsupported. But even he was out of his comfort zone on this expedition as the pair battled all kinds of terrain, storms and heatwaves – and Pete only passed his motorcycle test last year!

For more on the pair's expedition, and to sponsor Harry and Pete, visit www.triumphovertragedy.co.uk/sponsors



That'll be, er, Blackpool then

Photographs: The Gazelle Trust, Triumph Over Tragedy

In the spotlight

JIM KEATING OBE



“

WE HAD A FEW WWI RESIDENTS WHO WERE GREAT. ONE OF THEM HAD BEEN IN THE FIELD ARTILLERY, ANOTHER IN THE ROYAL FLYING CORPS!

”

Jim Keating OBE, 75, is a retired Lieutenant Colonel who has been a Blesma stalwart since 1991 following a long military career. He has held many roles in the organisation including National Welfare Officer and Chairman of the Midlands Area, and has run the Blackpool Home.

“I joined the Army in 1955. I was in the Infantry Boys’ Battalion, then I went into the Black Watch in Perth as a Lance Corporal. I travelled all over the world, and trained recruits for the Highland Brigade and the RAOC. I also spent a lot of time in Germany fighting the Cold War – or not fighting it, to be precise!

“After 13 years in the Black Watch, I went to Mons Officer Cadet School and was commissioned into the Royal Army Ordnance Corps. I served for 23 years in the RAOC – the highlight a two-year tour in Hong Kong – and retired as a Lieutenant Colonel in 1991.

“My first involvement with Blesma was when I was still in the Army. One of my tasks was to organise the COD Donnington charity raft race, and a number of Blesma Members got involved. Later on I was tasked with visiting the Leeds Wounded Warriors, many of whom were Blesma Members.

“When I left the Army there was a job going as Manager of the Blackpool Home – I think my Army experience helped me get the role. I managed the Home for two-and-a-half very enjoyable years. During that time it underwent much modernisation. We put in new carpets, updated all the rooms and put in new toilets. I drew up a five-year plan which, due to the generosity of the General Secretary and Trustees, was completed well ahead of schedule. It was a great place to work, with excellent staff and Members. We had several WWI residents, who were great characters – one of them had even been in the Field Artillery and another in the Royal Flying Corps!

“I then applied for the role of National Welfare Officer at HQ. I started the job on 1 April, which some said was fitting! I did it for nine years, until 2003, and I enjoyed it tremendously. Again, modernisation was

high on the agenda. When I took the job we didn’t know enough about our Members, so we carried out a large fact finding task. We learned a huge amount about the Members and widows, and what they needed.

“Off the back of that we had a great deal of success in getting the right allowances for our Members, who often weren’t getting their full entitlements. I also started employing and training Area Welfare Officers, which was a big step forward. By the time I left, we had five Area Welfare Officers.

“I retired in 2003, but got involved with Blesma in Essex, first as the Welfare Rep for the county, then as the Welfare Officer and subsequently as the Chairman of the Chelmsford Branch. When I relocated to the West Midlands I became Welfare Rep for Worcestershire, Herefordshire and Shropshire, and for the Walsall Branch, and finally became Chairman of the Midlands Area, which I recently handed over. I’m still Vice President of the Walsall Branch and a Blesma Trustee.

“I was incredibly proud to be awarded the OBE for my services to Blesma. My wife and daughters had a great day out at Buckingham Palace. I was on the Board of Trustees for a while [*Jim stepped down at the end of June*] and there have been a huge number of challenges for our organisation: the sad closure of the Crieff Home; making better use of the Blackpool Home; understanding the different types of amputees coming in; the advances in prosthetics – Blesma has steered that effectively. The introduction of the Armed Forces Compensation Scheme has been a big task, too.

“What has kept me coming back to Blesma time and time again, and has kept me working for them and volunteering for them for so many years, is the quality of the Members and the staff. You meet some very inspiring people through the charity. I get a huge amount of satisfaction from helping out and I’ve made a great number of friends during my years here.

“I’m slowing down now, but I still like to keep busy, even at 75. I like being involved and I will do so for as long as I can. It’s a wonderful organisation.”



Your technician will see you now



A new university degree for Clinical Support Technicians is giving those whose focus was on working behind the scenes to repair and maintain prosthetics new career opportunities.

“The foundation degree in Clinical Technology at London South Bank University is the first of its kind,” explains Gary Lee, 41, from Essex, who has just completed the two-year part-time course.

“I work at the Harold Wood Long Term Conditions Centre for RSLSteeper, and the course has given me a much better understanding of human anatomy and biomechanics, as well as the factors that impact on rehabilitation,” he said. Gary is already seeing the benefits of having been on the course. “I now run a full-time repair clinic, meeting patients

face-to-face to discuss repairs and replacements. I have more technical experience than ever before, so it means patients can talk to the person actually doing the work. This, in turn, frees up the prosthetists’ time to do other things.”

Gary’s job satisfaction has also improved massively as a result of completing the course. “I enjoy seeing the end result,” he says. “When you’re behind the scenes you don’t get to see your work in action. But now I can see people walk out more comfortably than when they walked in.

I’m improving lives and it feels great.

“There has never been a formal qualification for Clinical Support Technicians before, so it’s great to help spearhead that. I’ve learned more about modes of failure for materials and prosthetics, and I have a much better understanding of why they might break. I’ve also learned clinical skills like how to deal with patients and the long-term conditions of rehabilitation.”

Which all adds up to a better deal for Blesma Members, says Gary. “Blesma’s a great charity that really makes things happen for its Members. Hopefully, more and more limbless veterans can benefit as technicians continue to do this course.”



CASE STUDY

THE RIPPLE POND

“In 2009, my son was injured in an IED blast. A year later, as I started to absorb the shock of what had happened, I wanted to talk to others in a similar situation,” says Julia Molony.

“I couldn’t find any support online for the families of those who had been injured in conflict so, in 2012, I set about creating self-help support groups for all adult family members of serving Armed Forces personnel, veterans and Reservists who had been impacted by their time in the Forces, however, whenever and wherever that impact had occurred.

“The Ripple Pond now has members who are struggling with the fact their loved ones are suffering from PTSD,” says Julia, “we also have members whose sons, husbands, wives and daughters have been physically impacted by their time in the Services – all of us are coming to terms with a new ‘normality’.

“It’s not easy, but providing somewhere for people to be heard offers family members a space to draw breath, to refuel their capacity to support and care, and helps them adjust at

the same pace as their loved one so families can continue to walk the same path as each other. Being part of The Ripple Pond means that there is no need for family members to be isolated and alone with their fears and anger. They become part of a new, larger family that offers support and advice, the sharing of coping strategies and a space to be seen and heard.”

Each group has guidelines to ensure confidentiality and respect for one another, as well as to help provide a safe environment to talk about how they are feeling. They decide how frequently they want to meet and arrange their own venue and time. They support each other between meetings by phone or by getting together informally for a coffee, or by Facebook and email.

“We’re not a charity, but are a group that is self-supporting, self-funding and self-motivating. Through our groups we hope that other family members will experience a sense of belonging, acceptance, support

and understanding which will enable them to defrost from their trauma and move on,” says Julia.



You can contact Julia or fellow organiser Sue Hawkins on 07968 310329, 07748 364675 or 01273 499836, by email at theripplepond@gmail.com or by visiting www.theripplepond.co.uk



It's a tough job: Roger Fullbrook wants more Members to take up fishing

Photographs by John Francis

Gone fishing? If not, you should!

Give it a chance and you're sure to get hooked, says Roger Fullbrook

Used to fish a lot when I was younger but when I left the Navy I got into shooting," says Roger Fullbrook. "Both can be pricey so I gave up fishing – maybe I should have stayed with it because I lost my foot after an altercation with a shotgun!"

Roger's injury resulted in his left lower leg being amputated five years ago, and he joined Blesma soon after. He took part in Blesma's annual angling competition in 2011 and 2012, organised this year's event, and is now on a mission to cast the Blesma fishing net as wide as possible.

"At this year's competition we had three people who had never fished before in their lives. We set them up with some gear and I arranged for some guys from my angling club to go along and show them how to catch a fish. One Blesma Member came all the way from Cornwall, and it was the first-ever Blesma event he had attended!"

Roger is keen to make sure this is not a one-off and wants next year's event to be even more of a success. "I have been a keen fisherman before and after my injury, and I can say that fishing has been a big help



to me mentally. You can go for a day's fishing, sit on the bank and totally unwind. The wildlife you see is phenomenal; birds, dragonflies, grass snakes, voles, all sorts. And if the fish aren't biting it gives you the chance to think about things you probably haven't thought of for a while. The therapeutic value is huge."

According to Roger, many fisheries now offer disabled and wheelchair access and,

he says, the sport is very sociable. "Every fisherman will talk to another fisherman, no matter how long they've been involved in the sport," he says. "They'll chat about what you've caught and what bait you're using... and if you go fishing with Blesma Members you can talk to people who understand your problems."

WHERE'S THE CATCH?

Fishing's not just for lower limb amputees either, says Roger. "There are a couple of Blesma guys I know who fish who have lost arms – they tend to use poles rather than a rod and reel. And visually impaired Members can enjoy the sport, too – they can easily sit with the end of the rod on a rest, their finger on the line and when the line tightens up they know to strike. Then someone can help them guide the fish in. Fishing offers something for everyone."

"Anyone wants to have a go should get in touch with me. I'll help them get set up with some kit and put them in touch with a Blesma fishermen nearby who'll be happy to take them out and show them the ropes."

"Fishing gave me a point to aim at. As soon as I got my prosthetic leg I went down to my shed and found all my fishing gear. Mice had eaten my nets, my rods were old, but I remembered what I had been missing."

For anything fishing related, get in touch on 020 8590 1124 or at activities@blesma.org





Warren Wolstencroft pictured with his wife

Bolton Wanderers host Warren Wolstencroft Cup

In May, a charity football match was held at the home of Bolton Wanderers FC in memory of Warren Wolstencroft. Warren passed away in July 2013 after a long battle with a rare form of bone cancer that led to his discharge from the Army and the amputation of his right arm.

Warren spent a lot of time fundraising and, in 2013, he came up with the idea of a charity football match – The Blesma Cup. This year saw the second such match, now renamed the Warren Wolstencroft Cup, which was arranged by Warren’s best friend Ben Wiseman and contested by teams made

up of Warren’s family and friends. A one-minute silence was held before kick-off in memory of Warren, and donations will be shared between Blesma and the East Lancashire Hospice.

To make a donation please visit thewooleyfoundation.org.uk



A PERFECT MATCH

Bolton Wanderers FC have also chosen Blesma to be their national charity for this season. “We’re looking forward to engaging with Bolton Wanderers’ community in what is set to be a key year of remembrance,” said Annette Hall, Head of Fundraising at Blesma.



Surgeon Sir Archibald McIndoe, a leader in the rehabilitation of burned veterans who worked in East Grinstead during and after WWII, has been commemorated in the town with this statue. Sir Archibald’s patients realised they were medical ‘guinea pigs’ and formed The Guinea Pig Club charity which Sam Gallop (pictured far right) now chairs. Eight of the Club’s surviving 54 members were present at the unveiling.

NEWS BRIEFS

TEAM BLESMA TAKES ON THE CHELTENHAM HALF MARATHON

On Sunday 7 September, hundreds of runners took part in the Cheltenham Half Marathon on behalf of Blesma. The event was kindly supported by the GE Veterans Network, who encouraged staff from GE to take part and fundraise for Blesma, as well as providing a tent and lunch for Team Blesma supporters and volunteers.

“GE certainly made their presence felt, with hundreds of us running, organising, manning the marquee or lining the streets to shout encouragement,” said Wayne Keble, GE Operations Leader Avionics. “Each of us found it a personal challenge, but inspirational runners and our team raising lots of money for the charity made it all worthwhile. Hopefully, we’ve increased the awareness of Blesma in both the company and Cheltenham, and helped this wonderful charity continue its vital work.”

Blesma’s Chief Executive, Barry Le Grys, ran in the event. “GE and the Veterans Network have generously supported us



and I was delighted to show my support for the partnership and for our volunteers,” he said. Team Blesma expect to raise more than £20,000 from the event, and would like to thank all runners, volunteers and the GE Veterans Network for helping to make the event such a success.

To take part in next year’s event, either as a volunteer or a participant, contact the Blesma Fundraising Team on commevents@blesma.org

JOIN TEAM BLESMA!

Want to take part in one of our exciting events in 2015? For a full list of next year’s events visit the website (www.blesma.org), or call the dedicated Fundraising Team on 020 8548 7089. Here are just a few of the events we’ll be involved in next year...

- 26 April 2015** London Marathon, London
- 16 May 2015** Nuclear Rush Extreme Mud Run, Essex
- 25 May 2015** BUPA 10K, London

CHANNEL SWIM RECORD BREAKERS

Four Blesma Members (front) crawled into the record books in September when they became the first all-amputee team to successfully swim the English Channel.

Craig Howorth, Stephen White, Jamie Gillespie and Conrad Thorpe had to stick to the official Channel Swimming Association rules, which don't make any special dispensations for amputees, as they completed the relay swim in an impressive 12 hours and 14 minutes.

Blesma Magazine climbed aboard the support boat, braving seasickness, shipping lanes and seriously salty water to bring you all the action. Turn to page 40.



BLESMA NEEDS YOU!

Would you like to feature in Blesma's new series of adverts? The Association is looking for Members to volunteer to be part of a photo shoot. It doesn't matter how old you are, where in the country you live or how your injury occurred – if you have an interesting story to tell we want to hear from you.

The focus of the adverts will be to show Members with their families or as a group.

If you are interested in helping please contact Bryony Stevens on 020 8548 7092 or at mediasupport@blesma.org



Heather Stanning (right) with rowing partner Helen Glover

Intersport Images

Golden girl Heather is now a Blesma supporter

Heather Stanning is an Olympic gold medalist, a rowing world champion and the latest hero to be unveiled as a Blesma Celebrity Supporter.

"I have seen first-hand what Blesma has done for guys who have been injured, how it supports them and helps them get on with their lives in all sorts of ways," said Heather on why she has given her support.

"Nick Beighton, who has just completed Beeline Britain, was on the London 2012 Paralympic rowing team, and he told me all about the great work Blesma does. There's great camaraderie among the Members, what they do is fantastic and what they want to achieve in the future is inspiring. I can't wait to get involved."

Heather hopes her first engagement will be to cheer the SR UK team on in October.

"I would love to do more than just support from the sidelines, but that will have to wait until after the 2016 Olympics," she said.

Heather is still at the top of her game. She smashed the competition at the World Rowing Championships in Amsterdam this summer where she knocked a whopping three seconds off the Coxless Pairs world best time with partner Helen Glover.

"The World Championships is the pinnacle of the rowing year and I had never won a world title before, so it was a big deal. The final was nerve-racking but I managed to enjoy the race," she said. "When I returned to rowing I had three goals; to be world champion, to set a world best time and to defend my Olympic title in Rio."

Blesma's latest well-known supporter is already two-thirds of the way there!

BRANCH NEWS GREAT YARMOUTH AND LOWESTOFT

So what have we been up to over the last few months? The chairman (Ron), welfare officer (Tom) and myself (Bob) have been out and about visiting Members who have asked one of us to pop in. We are always happy to do that, and remember, if you don't ask, you won't get!

We have also given a couple of speeches to local groups kind enough to donate money to the Branch funds. The first was the ladies' section of Beccles Bowls Club, and a big thank you must go to Christine and the ladies for giving us £1,500.

The Waveney Social Club invited me to their fantastic Charity Night. Professional bingo dabbers were out in force, there was a fantastic raffle with lots of prizes, and even a bit of dancing (which I didn't take part in – I never danced when I had two legs, so I'm not going to start now that I have one!) At the end of the evening I was presented with a cheque for £500, so thank you to the Waveney Social Club.

We had a stall on Lowestoft sea front for Armed Forces Day in late June and our chairman, Ron Gill, was awarded

the Lord and Lady Shuttleworth award at the Members' Weekend. Congratulations to him from everyone in the Branch.

If you want to get involved in any of our activities just get in touch with me on 01502 565149 or email me at pdmonkhouse@supanet.com. Tom (who can be contacted on 01480 469216) and I are always on the end of a telephone if you need any help. We will do our utmost to help you, and if we can't someone in HQ will know someone who can.

Phil Monkhouse (aka Bob)



350 miles in 30 days - by homemade canoe!

Roger Fullbrook paddled for a whole month to raise funds for Blesma



Roger Fullbrook (above centre) is a modest chap, so he didn't shout about his expedition last year to raise money for two worthy causes. Roger spent a whole month canoeing from Kendal in the Lake District to Godalming in Surrey – in a canoe he'd built just days before he set off!

"It was an incredible adventure," says Roger when we eventually quizzed him about his exploits. "Seeing the countryside from the canal is truly fantastic. The wildlife you see is incredible because you move so quietly."

Roger, who hadn't been in a canoe for 35 years, found a paddle in his garage and hatched a plan. Starting from Kendal, he paddled down the Lancaster Canal to Preston, then he made his way down the Rufford Branch into the Leeds and Liverpool Canal, around Manchester on the Bridgewater Canal and into the Shropshire Union Canal – the prettiest of all, according to Roger. Then it was on through the Birmingham Navigation down into the Grand Union Canal to Brentford, before heading up the River Thames to Weybridge, into the River Wey and finally on to Godalming.



"I'd start early in the morning, usually just after 6am, and would travel a set distance every day – normally about 12 miles, which I would complete in about six hours. It was hard going at times but I've always been fairly fit and you don't really use your legs when you're canoeing. The biggest discomfort I suffered from was aching hips," Roger recalls.

Roger spent six months planning the route, and managed to stay in pub car parks overnight where he would meet his support crew – a trusty friend in a camper van – for a hearty meal and some well-earned rest.

He eventually reached his destination, Godalming in Surrey, after 30 days and 350 miles of paddling, having raised more than £5,000 in donations, which he kindly shared between Blesma and the Dorset and Somerset Air Ambulance.

NEWS BRIEFS

WEAR IT WITH PRIDE!

Inserted into this issue of the magazine you should find a Blesma lapel badge. The badge sports the new-look Blesma logo – please wear it with pride.



FANCY BEING A PARALYMPIAN?

Ticket 2 Tokyo is looking for potential tennis stars with the desire and dedication to train to become elite athletes and possibly compete at the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games. You don't need any previous tennis experience and you don't have to be a full-time wheelchair user to take part. **For more information visit www.ticket2tokyo.com**

A GREAT WEEKEND FOR £100

The Bendrigg Trust is offering newcomers a Multi-Activity Weekend Course for £100. Activities during the weekend, which will take place from 14-17 November, include canoeing, climbing, abseiling, caving, archery and zip wire. **For more info and to book visit www.bendrigg.org.uk**

ONLINE OPPORTUNITIES

For the most up-to date information, check the Opportunities for Our Members page on the Blesma website (www.blesma.org) or keep an eye on the Blesma Facebook Page (www.facebook.com/blesma). **If you have any questions about any of the activities on offer, or would like to know more about how you can get involved, please speak to either Dave Coulton or Emily Mizon at HQ on 020 8590 1124 or email them at mea@blesma.org**



INBOX

Word from our inbox. Get in touch at editor@blesma.org

That's job done:
Pete and Jon reach the summit of Snowdon



Andy delivered us safely to the start point at 0345 and we set off less than 10 minutes later. The steep climb was almost immediate and my energy levels felt low. I wondered whether I could keep the pace up – it began to hurt and I began to worry. ‘People have been so generous with their sponsorship, what if I let them down?’ I thought, and then it hit me; this was supposed to be hard, it is a challenge! That’s why people are sponsoring us, to take on this challenge and complete it, raising money for this worthy cause.

I ploughed on, we sweated as the sun started to rise in a gorgeous blue sky, and we reached the summit at 0536. Again, the journey down seemed harder than going up, and we reached the car at 0700 – with Andy fast asleep inside.

TWO DOWN, ONE TO GO

The temperature had soared by the time we pulled into the car park at Pen-y-Pass. At 1220 we set out across the Pyg Track. Snowdon is a much more forgiving climb as the track meanders its way through the mountain base. Knowing we had five hours and 40 minutes to complete the climb meant we could ease up on the pace and enjoy the scenery. We reached the summit at 1405 with the challenge in the bag.

The walk back down seemed painless in comparison to the falls of Ben Nevis and the shock of Scafell Pike. We strolled over the line at 1625, having completed the National Three Peaks challenge in 22 hours

and 25 minutes. We had driven 744km, walked 33km, climbed 3.2km and raised £1,400 for Blesma.

Sgt Pete Guard
33 Sqn, Puma
Force, RAF Benson

Team peaks at the right time

IN 2011, I COMPLETED A SERIES OF 10K runs to raise money for Blesma, a charity that’s close to my heart for so many reasons. Last November, I received a letter from Marine Andy Grant through Blesma that moved me so much it motivated me to launch another challenge (and rope my mates Pete Guard, Robbie Taylor, Jon Harcourt and Andy Gow in too!) I hope Andy Grant is well and I want him to know that he is truly inspirational.

The challenge this time would be to take on the National Three Peaks, which involves scaling the highest mountains in Scotland (Ben Nevis at 1,344m), England (Scafell Pike at 978m) and Wales (Snowdon at 1,085m) in 24 hours. Some solid training included a trip to the Brecon Beacons to climb Pen-y-Fan twice in one day and, at 1800 on 21 June, we stood at the bottom

of the highest mountain in the UK. We set off at a blistering pace but soon settled into a rhythm, continuing to trudge, one foot in front of the other, until we hit snow! In the middle of the summer! Through the snow we went, until we eventually reached the summit of Ben Nevis.

Picking your way back down really brings home how steep Ben Nevis is. Jon fell, I fell and Rob slipped, but we made it down – Jon with ripped trousers, me with a broken walking pole and a very hungry stomach. As we neared the bottom at 2200, we phoned Andy, our driver, who had not managed a wink of sleep... it was going to be a very long drive to Scafell Pike for him!



Sunrise over Scafell:
Well worth the climb



Blesma, my dad and Mrs Heggie

My name is Sophie, I look after my Dad who works for Blesma every day. Sometimes I see him sad, sometimes happy, but mostly I see him dashing around, looking after lots of nice people – he loves his work!

I like Blesma and go out with Dad on his visits. I cried so much last year when Dad told me Paul [Burns] had died – he was a cool person. Dad had to organise his funeral and it was a tough time for him. I met Paul many times – he was so brave and kind, I miss him so much.

I go to lots of lunches with Dad and meet all sorts of different people. I went to a Christmas lunch at a hotel with lots of people from Portsmouth. I met Dad's boss – he was tall – and I saw Mrs Yacomen at her home. A man called Charlie visited Dad at home – he was hot. Mrs Mills comes for Christmas lunch, and me and Dad go and collect her as she is all alone at Christmas.

I like meeting older people because they have lots of lovely stories to tell. Last year, I met Josh and Steve when my class went to H4H and they were on very cool bikes – the kind you sit in like a chair. My friends really enjoyed the day out.

This year I visited a lady who was my age when she lost her leg in an air raid in London. I listened to Mrs Heggie's very sad story and I couldn't help thinking how brave and noble she was. I asked her if it was OK to tell her story because this year at school we're doing a project on WWII. I wrote about her and all my friends wanted to meet her.

When I leave school I want to help lots of people like Dad. I understand that things are not easy for Blesma's men and women who have been hurt and lost legs, but they can do things I know I could not – jumping from jets and stuff. We are thinking about Grandad today, he landed on D-Day and I wrote a story about him. Tomorrow, I am going to the Salisbury Carnival with the Guides and will be dressed up as a soldier. I am going to wear Grandad's medals and will be very careful with them – they are very important to Dad.

Sophie Gillett

HELP US TO IMPROVE YOUR MAGAZINE

What do you think of this issue of Blesma Magazine? What subjects would you like to see covered in the next issue? Write to us at editor@blesma.org and let us know so that we can constantly improve your mag.



Getting a 'leg up' thanks to Blesma

I AM A 56-YEAR-OLD PARAPLEGIC, paralysed from the chest down and confined to a wheelchair as a result of an abseiling accident some 30 years ago whilst serving in the Royal Marines.

Since leaving the Service in 1982 I have tried to stay positive through the difficult times. I completed a BA (Hons) degree at Staffordshire University, and worked for my local Citizens Advice Bureau for 20 years until recent ill health forced me to give this up. I found myself depressed and wondering where my life was going.

I soon decided I had to do something positive to help me regain my confidence, self-esteem and general well being. I started doing some voluntary work and was introduced to Blesma by friends. I very quickly learned of the tremendous and wide-ranging work carried out by Blesma and, with the help of our local BSO, Charley Streather, I was able to loan (and later buy) an old Varna handcycle.

I booked onto the "Introduction to Handcycling" course at the Blackpool Home earlier this year and, although the course was new, I found it extremely helpful and informative. It helped to rebuild my self-confidence and self-esteem, and has ultimately provided the motivation to set myself new challenges.

The first of these was the Coast 2 Coast Handcycle Challenge (140 miles from Whitehaven to Sunderland), which I completed after three gruelling days

in July, raising money for the Royal Marines Association along the way.

This gave me the confidence to register for the Belgium War Graves Ride at the end of August, and the SR UK in October. Blesma gave me a leg up (pardon the pun!) when I needed it. I owe them so much for giving me the opportunity to rebuild my life and set myself new challenges. I am extremely grateful and feel privileged to be a Member of such a fantastic organisation – one that provides so many positive and empowering activities for veterans and their families. I thank you all.

Martin Kettrick



OBITUARIES

Those we have lost

Captain Tommy Catlow

4 December 1914 - 23 August 2014

CAPTAIN TOMMY CATLOW, WHO HAS died aged 99, was one of the last British survivors of wartime imprisonment in the notorious Colditz Castle.

At dawn on 16 February 1942 Tommy was dozing in the hold of a Wellington bomber taking him from Gibraltar to Malta, where he was due to take command of a submarine. He was woken up as flak burst around the bomber and two German fighter aircraft moved in before the Wellington crashed to earth on Sicily.

Tommy was captured and was well-treated initially, travelling first-class by rail to Rome with a four-man armed escort.

Once in Germany, however, he spent 10 weeks in solitary confinement, undergoing repeated interrogation before being sent to a prison camp at Sandbostel. He resolved to escape, and when he was moved to a camp for naval PoWs at Westertimke, he formed a six-man team which began digging a tunnel with plans to escape to Denmark.

With his limited knowledge of German, forged papers and some German currency that had been smuggled into the camp, he travelled by train and on foot, successfully crossing the border into Denmark. Several days later, weakened by hunger and thirst, he sought help at a farm — only to find that it was being worked by a German family who turned him over to the police.

Tommy's punishment was six weeks in solitary before he was sent to Colditz in Saxony, the high-security prison for incorrigible escapers. It was, he later observed, a mistake to assemble "an international array of talent which boasted an expert in almost every field from mechanical engineering to lock-picking, while the sheer vastness of the place, with sprawling attics, disused cellars and empty rooms, provided the facility to work on an astonishing number of escape plans".

He arrived there in November 1942, and for the next two-and-half years was never without an escape project, spending many months "grovelling in tunnels". He tried slithering along a sewer, and hiding beneath the coat of an exceptionally tall prisoner to fool the thrice-daily headcount. Meanwhile, as "parcel officer" he was able



Tommy (far right) with Kenneth Lee (left) and Peter Parker (centre) at Colditz Castle

to communicate by coded letter with MI9 in London, which sent cash, maps, blank German passes and other escape aids through the post, skilfully concealing them in items such as record sleeves and tins of food. In his "leisure" hours, he learnt Russian from a Polish general who had been captured in Warsaw.

In early April 1945 the British prisoners were told by their captors to be ready to leave Colditz within the hour. They mutinied, and for three days controlled the camp while, in the streets of the town below the castle, American troops fought an SS battalion.

On 16 April an American Jeep with a lieutenant and three GIs of the 69th Division drove into the castle forecourt: "We British kept our upper lips appropriately stiff," wrote Tommy, who was the only WWII submariner to be shot down in the air and captured. During his captivity his weight had dropped from 14½ to 9½ stone.

On the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Colditz, he revisited the prison with Major Peter Parker and Lieutenant Kenneth Lee, telling the press: "I suffered because of the terrible cold in winter and the bad food. We were always trying to escape, but I spent most of my time helping the others to get out. I never made it myself."

Thomas Noel Catlow was born at Simonstone, Lancashire, on 04 December

1914, and educated at the Royal Naval College, Dartmouth. Having qualified as a submariner before the outbreak of war, he joined the 4th Submarine Flotilla based in Hong Kong, serving as the junior officer in Rover. He started the war in the submarine Trident; but because it was still building at Birkenhead, he was told that he would be going to sea in Thetis to gain experience.

On the morning of its trials he was told that there were too many passengers, and that he should "go and play golf". The next morning he learned that Thetis had sunk, with only a handful of survivors.

He undertook two patrols in Trident before becoming first-lieutenant in Salmon, Sterlet and Sealion successively. On his last patrol during the invasion of Norway, Sealion sank a German troopship. He passed his submarine commanding officers' course in 1941 and took command of the training submarine L23. He had travelled to Gibraltar by submarine when the urgent call came for him to complete the journey to Malta by air.

Following his release from Colditz, Tommy remained in the Navy. In 1949 he was first-lieutenant in the heavy cruiser London during the Yangtze Incident, when the frigate Amethyst was trapped upriver by communist forces. On 21 April, London attempted to force a passage and was heavily shelled by shore batteries, causing floods and

fires throughout the ship. Several of the crew had been killed and wounded, and Tommy counted 48 shellholes.

In 1952/53, during the Korean War, he was second-in-command of the carrier Ocean when she launched a record 5,601 aircraft sorties. While refuelling in Japan, a fire broke out in Ocean, but Tommy's action saved the ship without affecting her patrol programme. Other appointments included commanding officer of the Royal Navy's leadership school; captain of the frigate Loch Insh in the Persian Gulf; and naval attaché in Rome.

Tommy retired to Lancashire to enjoy a life of sheep farming (he was president of the Rough Fell Sheep Breeders' Association), shooting, fishing, and golf. His father had been a founder of Royal Lytham St Anne's Golf Club, and Tommy was captain in 1979 when Seve Ballesteros won the Open there. His autobiography, *A Sailor's Survival*, was first published in 1997, and has since been reprinted three times.

Tommy Catlow married Jean Nuttall, a childhood friend who had a successful wartime career in the WRNS, in 1947. ("I'm glad we weren't married then," Tommy remarked, "because she was senior to me.") She died in 2010, and he is survived by their three daughters.



Frank O'Connell

19 April 1919 - 19 May 2014

THE OUTBREAK OF WWII FOUND FRANK O'Connell already registered for military training. He joined the King's Regiment in October 1939 and, having been made Corporal, looked after the training of new recruits and carried out various garrison duties. His battalion was disbanded in February 1942 and Frank was transferred to the Royal Artillery. August saw him posted to North Africa in 1st Field Regiment, where he formed part of the Desert Rats.

Frank's war ended in March 1943 at Wadi Akarit, when a German shell exploded in his gun pit, costing him his left leg above the

knee – he remembered seeing his limb flying through the air. Luckily a comrade used his own belt to apply a tourniquet and slow the bleeding. Frank kept that belt as a souvenir.

Discharged from the Army, Frank worked for the Co-op, where he became grocery buyer. After working there for 16 years, his career changed direction. He took a clerkship in the Supreme Court, serving with the Clerk of Assize Northern Circuit, based in his home city of Liverpool, where he married fellow clerk Gladys. He retired in 1984.

Frank was active in Blesma, having joined the Liverpool Branch in 1944. Over the years he was a committee member, the Minute Secretary, carried out welfare work and was ultimately Chairman of the Merseyside Branch. Frank was also Chairman of the Merseyside Branch of the Royal Artillery Association and a member of the British Legion and the Eighth Army Veterans' Association. His hard work resulted in him being awarded the Blesma Gold Badge and the prestigious Ernie Law award.

In more recent times, Frank moved into the Blesma Home in Blackpool, where, on 19 May 2014, aged 95, he passed away. A true Blesma man, he contributed his experience and wisdom to the Association right up to the very end of his life.

Others who have passed away

May 2014 – July 2014. May they rest in peace

Arter R	RN	HQ (SW Essex)	20/06/2014
Biscoe D	RA	HQ	17/07/2014
Bridges R	KOYLI	Southampton	18/07/2014
Collins D	Coldstream Guards	HQ	19/05/2014
Cooper P	RAOC	HQ	04/07/2014
Dwyer J	RN	HQ	02/07/2014
Evans J	Queens Royal	HQ (Torbay, SW Wales)	16/07/2014
Foley I	RAF	HQ	09/05/2014
Friend L	Welsh Guards	Cardiff	12/07/2014
Fullwood J	DLI	HQ (Bridlington)	20/07/2014
Hemenway A	Intelligence Corps	HQ (York)	09/05/2014
Henley R	RN	HQ (Wiltshire)	27/05/2014
Houghton P	RAF	Leeds	02/05/2014
Ingram D	RM	HQ	17/06/2014
Jones K	Kings Own/Royal Lancaster	HQ	July 2014
Lea J	RAC	HQ	13/07/2014
O'Connell F	RA	Blackpool Home (Merseyside)	19/05/2014
Pyatt J	RA	HQ (Birmingham)	16/05/2014
Roddis G	RAF	HQ (Birmingham)	23/06/2014
Sherratt H	The Borders	HQ	13/05/2014
Short F	RAF	HQ	09/05/2014
Slaughter P	Gloucesters/Buffs/RASC	HQ	29/07/2014
Smith Mrs M	Civilian Casualty	HQ (Birmingham)	April/May 2014
Sutton D	RN	HQ (Oxford)	19/07/2014
Taylor D	Merchant Navy	HQ	09/05/2014
Taylor J	W.Yorks/Yorks & Lancs/ N.Fusiliers	HQ	July 2014
Woodhouse R	RAF	Nottingham	25/07/2014

Giving Members a focus

Whether you're a complete beginner or a budding amateur, Blesma's photography course will give you the skills you need to take great pictures. But more importantly, it might just give you a whole new perspective on life...

“I was injured back in 1979, and one of the things that really helped me to cope with the situation was my love of photography,” says Blesma Support Officer Charley Streater, a below-knee amputee who was injured whilst serving in the Army. “For me, photography was a strategy. It was something I could do on days when I couldn’t get my leg on. It was something that would distract me when my leg was bleeding. It helped me look at the world with interest on days when otherwise, I would have been feeling sorry for myself. I found that when I got my camera out, I enjoyed the world and stopped feeling negative.”

Charley’s photography-as-rehab has transformed and evolved to become a key part of Blesma’s strategy, too. It’s both a great activity for those who perhaps don’t fancy some of the more adrenaline-fuelled expeditions like the charity runs and skydives, and it’s a way of enhancing and capturing those experiences for the Members who do want to try abseiling or rock climbing. A Support Officer for six years, Charley has been instrumental in Blesma’s Photography Week since its launch in 2012 – and it has proved to be a huge hit.

SETTING THE SCENE

“I decided to roll my sleeves up and get involved, because I knew how much it could help people,” says Charley. “The course is all-inclusive and caters for everyone, whether you’ve got a photography degree or have never picked up a camera before in your life. We have taught everyone, from those who are young and recently injured to our elderly widows. We start with the basics and everyone helps each other out. Even those who have a lot of experience with a camera say they learn from the course.”







Shooting stars: all the photographs in this feature were taken by Blesma Members on a photography course either in Blackpool or on the Isle of Mull

Beginners are soon brought up to speed with how to handle a modern digital camera, understanding what parts of the machine do what jobs before learning how to edit and manipulate the images they have taken on a computer. “We loan our own cameras to people who don’t have one and there is no jargon, so by the end of the week everyone is taking great shots and understanding things like apertures, shutter speed, depth of field, rule of thirds, golden ratios and colour awareness,” says Charley. “It sounds complicated but we explain it very clearly and nobody gets left behind.”

Two Basic Courses, catering for 15-or-so complete novices, have already been run out of the Blackpool Home, with more to follow. “Blackpool is perfect because of the facilities of the Home and the access to some glorious parts of the world,” says Charley. “We set up a studio in the Home and learn about portraiture, flash photography and macro photography (extremely close-up photography, usually of very small objects). We also run trips out to local beauty spots to photograph landscapes and seascapes. We even have competitions to make it fun, and I am always amazed at the standard of images our Members take after just one week. They are miles better than normal snaps!”

As a result of the success of the Basic Course, Charley is expanding the horizons of his Blesma photographers with more ambitious schemes. A party of 12 embarked on an expedition to Mull in May, to photograph sea eagles, otters and puffin colonies – developing their skills and enjoying each other’s company.

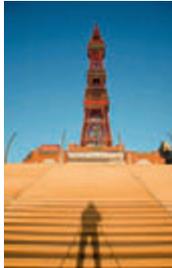
“I commandeered the disabled minibus and we overcame logistical problems, like getting people up a mountain, because that’s what Blesma does best – our Members help each other out!” laughs Charley. “There was a worry about getting some of our wheelchair users onto a small boat which would take them to a spot where they could photograph sea eagles, but they just said they’d shuffle onto it on their bottoms! I recce’d the trip carefully to make sure it was perfect for the Members and it turned out to be a huge success.”

An architectural photography course took place in August and, while there are no more courses on offer this year, there are plenty more ideas in development. Wherever you live, whatever your ability and whatever subject matter excites you, there’s likely to be something of interest on one of the photography courses.

A CHANGE OF PERSPECTIVE

Charley is heartened by the personal transformations he regularly sees on the courses. “People leave with a new enthusiasm for photography and the world in general,” he says. “In the past I’ve taken some Members aside who have been struggling with certain elements of photography and worked one-on-one with them. There was one lady who I remember going out with one morning at 5am to photograph the sunrise, and for the rest of the day all she seemed to say was; ‘Wow!’

“She’s gone on to buy her own camera now and has had her pictures published in the local paper – and she only went on the photography course in March!”



Wildlife & Landscape
Photography Course
The Isle Of Mull
7th - 14th May 2024

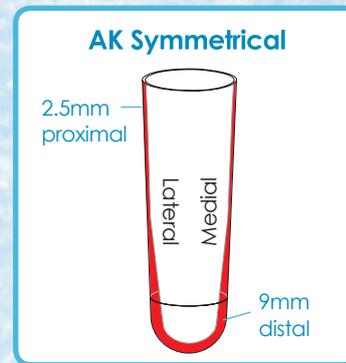
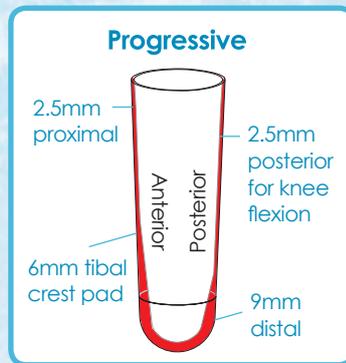
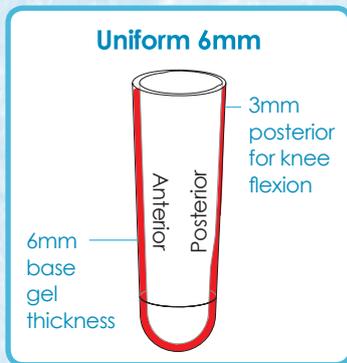


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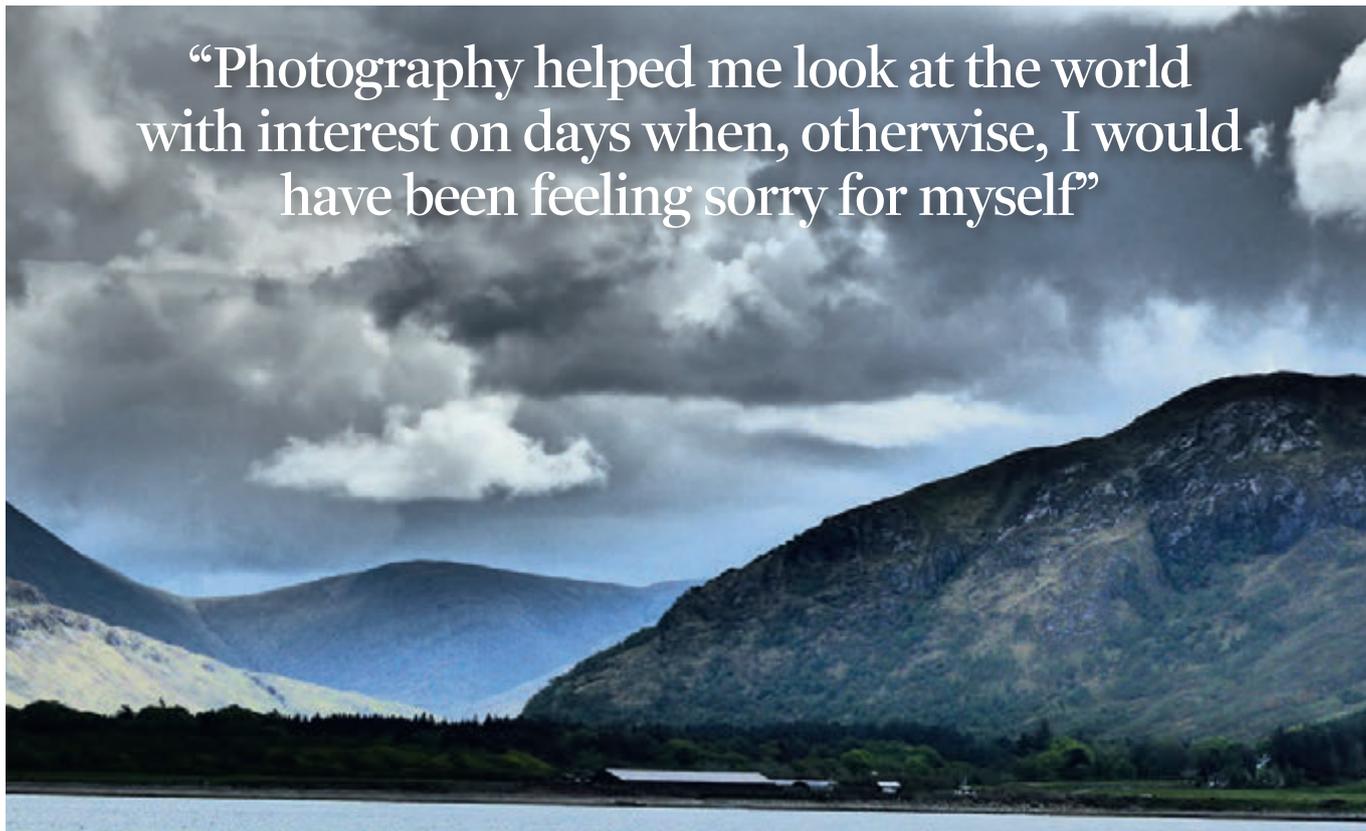
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“Photography helped me look at the world with interest on days when, otherwise, I would have been feeling sorry for myself”



Many thanks go to Terri Hunt, John Francis and Jeff Winder who have helped make Blesma Photography a success

Jeff Winder, 50, from Preston, a below-the-knee amputee who was injured in Iraq in 2004, is another great example of the powers of the camera. “I found the course absolutely fantastic,” he says. “It has given me an ongoing interest in photography, and has really helped with my charity work with Horseback UK in Scotland. I’m not the best in the world but I have found it gives me a real sense of satisfaction. More importantly, the course helped me hugely with concentration and gave me confidence when it came to socialising.

“At the start of the week I had my head down and was shy, but I soon found myself really enjoying it. I struggled for many years with confidence after my injury and was paranoid about my disabilities, but the photography course really helped me get over that. It has done me so much good. I’ve done all kinds of adrenaline events with Blesma over the years and they’re great but photography is something you can do any time, and it always cheers me up.”

According to Charley, that’s because photography also teaches you to look at the world in a different way. “It can change how you view things. We bring out an artistic side in people that they sometimes didn’t know was there. The life experiences of our Members also make them interesting photographers. They see things in a unique way so their choice of subject matter and how they frame a photograph is interesting. On one of our courses a military photographer came to talk to the group. He pointed out that the most common height for a photo is five foot eight inches. A wheelchair user, for example, has a different perspective.”

Blesma widow Jan McLelland, from Warwickshire, certainly found her knowledge increased when she went on the course. “It was really interesting and we all gelled together and helped one another,” she says.

“I was a complete novice, but I got so much out of it, and I’ve since bought two cameras. The trips out were fantastic, and now I feel I am getting so much more out of my photography than just taking a few snaps.”

For Charley, the photography course brings together all the best elements of Blesma. “It ties into our ethos of ‘inclusivity’ for a start – it’s a truly holistic activity,” he says. “We overcome logistical challenges together, and it ties in fantastically with the ethos and values that are important to Blesma. Some of the people who attended the photography course took the official photographs at this year’s Members’ Weekend in May, for example. There are all sorts of opportunities.

“But the best thing about the course is that it gives people a tool to change their lives. Some love the artistic side, some get into the technical aspect of it, but they all share the camaraderie. We all share disability, and now we’re sharing a different view of the world.”

Interested in attending a photography course? Contact Charley Streater on bsomidlands@blesma.org



The Home is where the heartbeat is

12-PAGE
BLACKPOOL
SPECIAL

Packed full of life, love, and barely-believable stories, nothing embodies Blesma's spirit more than the Blackpool Home. We pop in for a cuppa...

Pictures: Andy Bate Words: Nick Moore



The Elizabeth Frankland Moore Home (to give it its full title) is Blesma's heartbeat. Situated on Lytham Road, in a pleasant suburb of South Blackpool just a stone's throw from the sea air of the Promenade and the Pleasure Beach, it has been a home-from-home for Members since it opened its doors in 1949. It's comfortable and spacious, with famously good food and its very own bar (called The Legless Arms) where the locals have the most astonishing stories you've ever heard.

With expert care for its 20 residents, and space for another 20 visitors on themed weeks, few people understand Members better than the staff here. No wonder Jacqui Longden, the manager for the last 14 years, describes the place as "the Hilton, with care."

Back in 1949, Blesma bought the large house with the help of a big donation from the Not Forgotten Association. It was opened by the then-patron, HRH Princess Alice, the Duchess of Gloucester, and ever since it has provided exciting adventure breaks, quiet holidays, or first-class residential care, depending on what is required by the individual. "This place belongs to our Members," says Jacqui. "They helped to clean it up, to build it, to fund extensions and refurbishments. It is still here because of them."

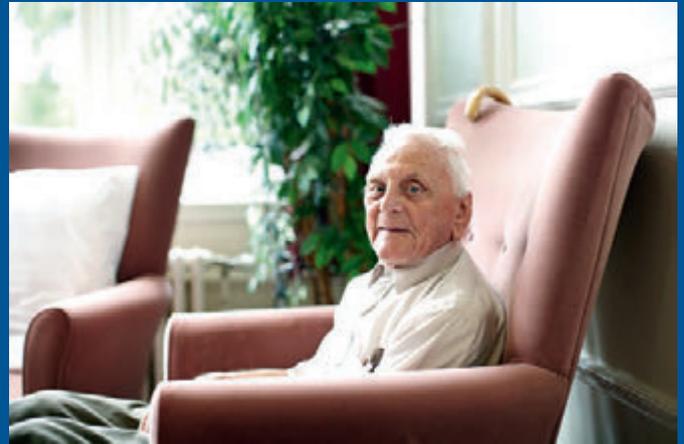
With two Activities Weeks, four Widows' Weeks, photography courses and all manner of other things

taking place here throughout the year, no two days are quite the same at the Blackpool Home. "That's why I love it, and why I've stayed for so long," says Jacqui. "Our staff tend not to leave, and that's a tribute to the place and to the Members. You become family. We have a chef and a nurse who have both been here 25 years. We have 40 staff and they all play a part in making this place special. We aren't just looking after people – we are looking after people we care for deeply."

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A RESIDENT

The day for residents begins with a cooked English breakfast around 9am – which can be taken in the restaurant or in bed ("Who am I to tell a 97 year old they have to get up?" laughs Jacqui). Treatments and clinical procedures take place in the morning. There are regular coffee breaks and chair-based exercises, plus trips to the local Limb Fitting Centre in Preston. The bar opens for an hour before lunch, there are films in the afternoon, cinema trips, days out, and a game called bocchia is played in the yard and at a local sports hall. The Home also has a number of season tickets for Blackpool FC and residents attend matches at home and even occasionally head to some away games.

The Home offers residents a fantastic service with professional, caring staff, but it has been a challenge to make it perfect, says Jacqui. "I came here as a nurse



manager – nursing is my background – but within six weeks the manager had left and I was holding the fort. I've been doing that ever since! I knew how to run a care home because I'd done that in my previous job, but my challenge was to learn about the specific needs of these people and the Association. I had never worked with amputees but as everyone who comes here quickly realises, you soon look past the disability and focus on the person. I've made great friends here, and you don't look on anyone as 'disabled'."

The Home is held in very high esteem within the ex-Service community. "I had to build relationships with a lot of new contacts at first, and that was hard work," says Jacqui, "but people know who we are now, and understand our vision and ethos when it comes to our residents. I get the most satisfaction from knowing that residents' relatives trust us to look after their loved ones, who may be moving to us from the other side of the country. It is absolutely vital that we deliver."

And deliver they do. The Home has received glowing reports from the Care Quality Commission, Blackpool Council, Environmental Health for Food Hygiene, and has twice been awarded Gold Investors in People and Beacon Status from the Gold Standards Framework. All rooms are en-suite, with Wi-Fi; while transport and powered vehicles are provided to give independence. "I encourage people to stay here first and try it out

before they think about moving in permanently," says Jacqui. "People come here to live life to the fullest, but we're committed to providing excellent end-of-life care when necessary. We treat everyone with dignity. People come here because they want to. When couples stay for convalescence and respite I always let them know that, when the time comes, they will be welcome."

BLACKPOOL BELONGS TO ITS MEMBERS

Blesma's Activities Weeks are run several times a year and use the Home as a base to explore the area. "The Weeks inject new life into the Home as the younger Members love to sit with our residents and hear their stories," says Jacqui. "They get good tips and exchange information. The old boys didn't have the support systems that the younger ones have now – they came home from Service with a wooden leg and had to get on with it, but I remind them if it wasn't for them the Home wouldn't exist. It is for their golden years."



If you would like more information about any aspect of the Blackpool Home, including how you can visit or stay, contact Jacqui Longden on jacqui.longden@blesma.org or call her on 01253 343313

BOB TOON
Age: 89 From: Leicester



DAVID (AND CATHERINE) GRAY
Age: 75 From: Blackpool



The Incredibles

Each of Blackpool Home's residents has led a life filled with courage, suffering and sacrifice. These are their stories in their own words...

Pictures: Andy Bate Words: Nick Moore

Many of the residents of the Blackpool Home have been Blesma Members for more than 70 years. "Blesma is their life which is why the Home has such a family feel," says Home Manager, Jacqui Longden. "The Members were injured together, they struggled together and here they can grow old together. Most of our residents have lived without limbs longer than they have with all their limbs. Blackpool belongs to them."

Each of the Home's 20 residents has the most mind-blowing stories to tell. The sacrifices they have made for their country and the things they have had to endure since are incredibly humbling, while the full lives they have gone on to lead make every single one of them an inspiration. Time to be amazed...

WALTER TAYLOR
Age: 98 From: Blackpool



JOHN GREEN
Age: 95 From: West Bromwich



ERNIE BEALE
Age: 88 From: Surrey



FRED TATTERSALL
Age: 94 From: North Wales



KEN HORNER
Age: 92 From: Blackpool



JOHN BOOTH

Age: 96 **From:** Lancashire

Served: in the Royal Artillery in WWII and lost both his legs while working on the Japanese railroads

How did you end up working on the Japanese railways as a Prisoner of War?

I worked as a driver as a young man. I joined the Royal Artillery when I was 21 and trained in North Wales and Woolwich. A few days after I got married, I was sent off to Singapore. After 10 months, many of us were taken as Prisoners of War by the Japanese, and initially we worked on the docks in Saigon, which wasn't so bad.

Then 700 of us were sent to work on the railways in Thailand and Burma. We went up the Mekong River on boats for two days and nights. We were packed in like cattle. We didn't sleep. I had toothache and a doctor removed some teeth. Then we were put on trailers along with the steel rails for the railways and transported for several more days.

We went through some beautifully colourful valleys, and I remember saying; "That's some sight!" Someone else said; "Have another look at that sight!" That's when the trouble started. I don't know what Hell looks like, but I wouldn't be surprised if it looked like that! Twelve thousand Allied PoWs died building that railway.

How did you get injured?

We all became ill because we were denied shelter and food, and we worked long hours. We were made to carry stuff we couldn't carry. One step out of line and we were thumped and beaten. We were all skeletons, but we had to work. The worst thing was that the tiniest bite or scratch would get infected. I had a job transporting water up a rock face from the river and I was bitten on my leg. The bite wouldn't stop bleeding. At some point I grazed my other leg on some bamboo. Both went septic – like every scratch did in the jungle – and that turned into something called 'tropical ulcers'. It's the most painful thing you can possibly imagine. Lads would be howling with pain like wolves. It eats your leg away. When it gets down to the bone, you haven't much chance.

So they had to amputate your legs?

One of doctors was taking legs away like ninepins. There was no anaesthetic, no medical stuff at all. Four people held me down and they chopped them off. Both legs went. But to be honest, I felt relieved. The ulcers were that bad. I was in so much pain I was nearly going mad. I fell asleep for a long time, and after that, I started to feel better.

Most lads died after the amputations, but I survived along with an Australian, Billy Hargreaves. We stayed in the camp under a mosquito net for 12 months. When lads died, someone would play the Last Post, and you'd hear it 20 times a day some days. I was lucky to survive.

How did you cope when you got home?

My wife hadn't seen me for years – and when I came back home I obviously had no legs. But I was in an OK condition considering. I got false legs and wore them for 70 years. I worked, I drove. I never had any trouble with the legs. I worked for the CWS (the Co-op) for 30 years doing maintenance, and I had a good boss. I had children. And I joined Blesma.

How helpful have Blesma been?

They've been great to me. I joined the Association in 1946, so they've been a part of my life most of my life. Over the years it has been fantastic to meet up with like-minded souls and share information, help each other and go on trips. And now I live in the Home.

I always wanted to stay independent, and I did well on my walking stick until recently, but then I had three falls in a week and couldn't get back up by myself. You get used to falls if you have a false leg – you just get up again – but when I couldn't get up, it shook me. So I came here, and the staff have been fantastic. It doesn't get me down at all. I go out around Blackpool every day on my buggy – I'm trying to find the best footpaths around the town but they're not great!

“Four people held me down and they chopped them off. Both legs went. But to be honest, I felt relieved. The ulcers were that bad. I was in so much pain I was nearly going mad”



THE BLACKPOOL HOME

PETER MAJOR

Age: 80 From: St Annes



MICK PENNEY

Age: 67 From: Milton Keynes



STEPHEN BODHAM >

Age: 60 From: Hull

Served: *injured in a motorcycle accident while serving in 50 Missile Regiment, Royal Artillery*

How did you get injured?

I joined the Royal Artillery when I was 17 and had a motorbike accident in July 1984, which is how I lost my leg. The ambulance that picked me up to take me to the hospital then crashed, and I got a serious head injury, too. I was in a coma, and then in hospital for a long time in Woolwich after that. I went through rehab and then went to live with my dad.

You ended up living in the Blackpool Home...

Yes. I used to come here for a few weeks twice a year to give my dad some respite. When he died in 1999

I moved in. It's excellent here, I haven't got a bad word to say about it or about Blesma. The Association has been everything to me – it is a family and I have been looked after 100 per cent. There is a great bar, there are great people... and I've met the Queen twice!





< MARGARET CARMICHAEL

Age: 93 **From:** Blackburn

Served: injured in a car accident while serving with the Wrens in WWII

Tell us about how you got involved with the military?

I was born in Blackburn in 1921 and left school just as WWII was starting. I wanted to contribute, so I joined the Wrens. I was asked if I had a mechanical aptitude, and I said I didn't, but they put me in anyway, and in 1940 I went to London for training. We were taught all about radar, and I got through because I was very keen. Nine of us were posted to Donibristle on the Firth of Forth, which was lovely. We put aerials on Walrus aircraft, worked with air-to-surface missiles, we would fit huge bits of equipment on planes. I spent a lot of time hanging upside down from planes and getting very strong – it was great!

How did you get injured?

In a car crash. A stupid man was showing off, driving us too fast, and crashed. My hand and arm were injured. I was in hospital for a year and when I recovered I was sent to Greenwich and ended up working as a secretary for Admiral Robinson. Later on, after the war, I worked at a hotel in the Hebrides which I loved, and then I ran a hotel in Glencoe. I married, had a daughter, and became part of Blesma.

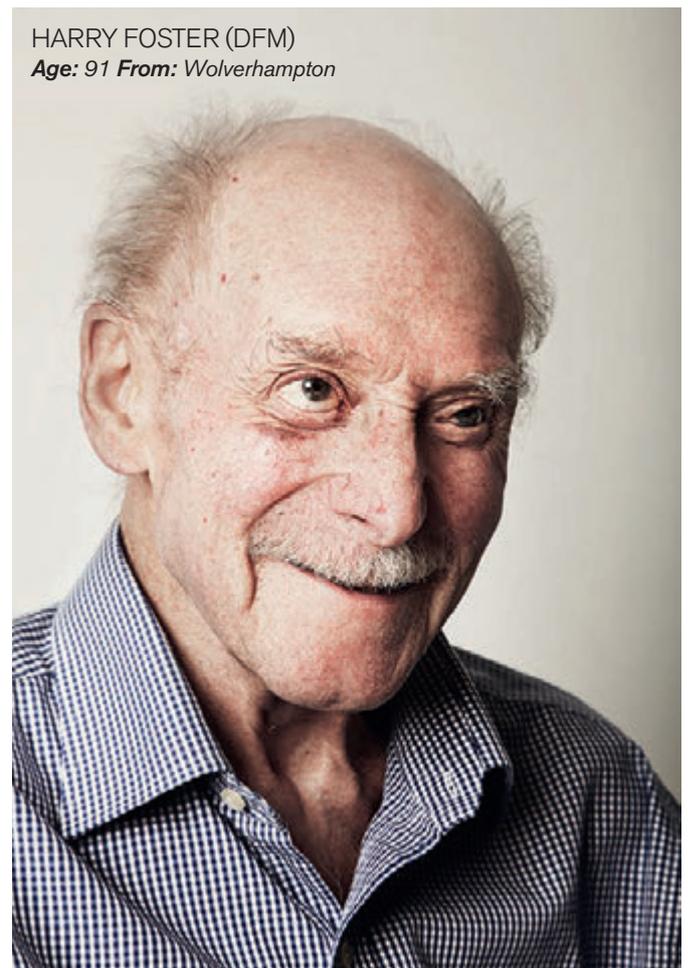
How did Blesma help you?

They have always done a great deal for me. Eventually, I came to live in the Blackpool Home and all the staff here have been very kind to me. I've been here for a year and it is like a family. I have a lovely room and I can see Blackpool Tower from my window! I apologise for giving them so much work to do, and they just tell me not to be so silly. They really make me laugh!



RON PHILLIPS

Age: 91 **From:** Birmingham



HARRY FOSTER (DFM)

Age: 91 **From:** Wolverhampton

GWEN MARSDEN MBE

Age: 90 **From:** Blackpool

Served: with the Auxiliary Territorial Service during WWII and lost her leg when she was just 22

How did you end up involved in WWII as a young woman?

I was born in Kingston-Upon-Thames, but was adopted at the age of four and moved up north, and eventually grew up here in Blackpool. I had a good job in the Civil Service but, in 1943, I decided I wanted to join the Auxiliary Territorial Service. I wanted to be a driver but I ended up working as a radar operator, although I don't know how – they wanted mechanically-minded people with good eyesight, and I had neither – but they put me in anyway, and I learned.

I could soon take a diesel engine apart, and I became Number One in the radar team. It was exciting, a new innovation, and very important. I worked in Liverpool, in Yorkshire, and eventually on the big guns on the East Coast, in 1944, in the radar section.

Radar unfortunately contributed to your injury though, didn't it?

It did. We only wore cotton garments, we didn't have protective clothing, and the radiation from the equipment caused a cancerous growth. I'd had a fall on some Tarmac, which hadn't seemed terribly serious, but the injury to my thigh bone became cancerous. A junior commander noticed I was dragging my leg and having problems getting in and out of the vehicles, so they did an X-ray.

The bone had splintered and there was a huge growth like a cauliflower. My parents were told that, unless they amputated, I had six weeks to live. My father said; "She's not having her leg amputated, she'd be better off dead." But I was 22 and made my own decision! People didn't talk about cancer then, it was taboo.

What happened after the amputation?

The operation was delayed by a fortnight and when it eventually did go ahead the surgeons had to take my leg off higher than they had initially hoped.

It was touch and go for a while. Before the operation I was told I'd be looked after and get a prosthesis from Roehampton, but it took two years to get one. I ended up being very good on crutches – I could go along a cinema aisle without hitting anyone's toes!

The delay was because the NHS had just been established and everyone who'd had to buy artificial limbs in the past suddenly got them for free. I was pushed to the back of the queue, the soldiers got the legs. I wrote to my MP, but Blesma came to the rescue.

How did Blesma help?

Someone from the charity heard about my situation and I had a leg within weeks. They were brilliant. I used my leg for many years and lived a normal life. I ran a hotel in Malvern, then moved near Ludlow, where I was a parish clerk, was in the Women's Institute and chaired a committee at the Housing Association. I stayed busy and raised money for Blesma. In 2000 I received an MBE. I was very proud, and meeting the Queen was lovely.

And how did you come to move into the Home?

My husband died some years ago, and although I had wonderful friends I didn't have family nearby, so it got more and more difficult for me. I've been here two years and the staff have been great with me. Blesma have always helped me – with a new bed, with my leg, and I'm proud that I've been a Member since 1948. I'm determined and I keep going through it all.

“My father said; ‘She’s not going to have her leg amputated, she’d be better off dead.’
But I was 22 and so made my own decision!
People didn’t talk about cancer then, it was taboo”



THE BLACKPOOL HOME



GEORGE SPENCER

Age: 93 From: Surrey



FRANK JOHNSON

Age: 92 From: Stourbridge

ERNIE MORRIS >

Age: 92 From: Warrington

Served: in the Royal Warwickshire Regiment and was injured by a mortar in WWII

What was your wartime experience?

I was a bricklayer by trade but I joined up to fight. I joined the Royal Warwickshire Regiment when I was 22. I landed in Normandy and at first it wasn't too bad because we went through Belgium – but it got rough in Holland. I was injured by a mortar that took my leg off and damaged my arm and hand. I came back home and had to retrain, so I went into book-keeping and worked in an accounts office for four years. I was taken ill, but later worked in the Army Pay Office for 21 years.

How did you find out about Blesma and what did they do for you?

After my injury I was told about them and I joined up the next year – that was in Liverpool in 1945. They helped me a lot. Members would meet up once a month and I did a lot of fundraising for them. I also did a lot of campaigning for the rights of war pensioners and people with disabilities, and I often wrote to my MP. Eventually, after my wife died, I came to Blackpool to live in the Home. Since I came here I've been to concerts, parades, the theatre, the Garden Party at Buckingham Palace – it's been a good 10 years of my life here. We are very well looked after. My son visits every week and phones me a lot more regularly, and my grandchildren come. It's not quite home but it's the next best thing.



BILL SHARPLES

Age: 90 **From:** Preston

Served: with the Royal Artillery and was injured in Normandy by shell fire shortly after the D-Day landings

How did you come to join the military?

I did quite well at school, so I went to Liverpool to become a vet. But shortly after that, war broke out and I thought I should sign up. My father and brothers had served in WWI – one of my brothers was killed and one lost an arm – so I felt that I should do my bit.

I joined the Royal Artillery, got a commission and was made 2nd Lieutenant. We did stringent exercises preparing for D-Day – wading through water and so on. And off we went, with the 20th Anti-Tank Regiment. We arrived after D-Day, but there was still lots of action. It was hectic and my experience of war was fairly short.

How were you injured?

As a Troop Commander I was leading my men on patrol at 5.30am. A sniper was giving us trouble, and I got hit by heavy shelling. The next thing I knew, I was down. I tried to get up, but I couldn't. I looked down and my right leg was sticking out at a right angle. I thought; "Bloody hell!" My leg had actually been blown off and was hanging on by my trousers! My Corporal came over and I said; "I can't get up". I was put on a stretcher, into a jeep, and taken to a medical tent near Bayeaux, where I stayed for a week.

What happened next?

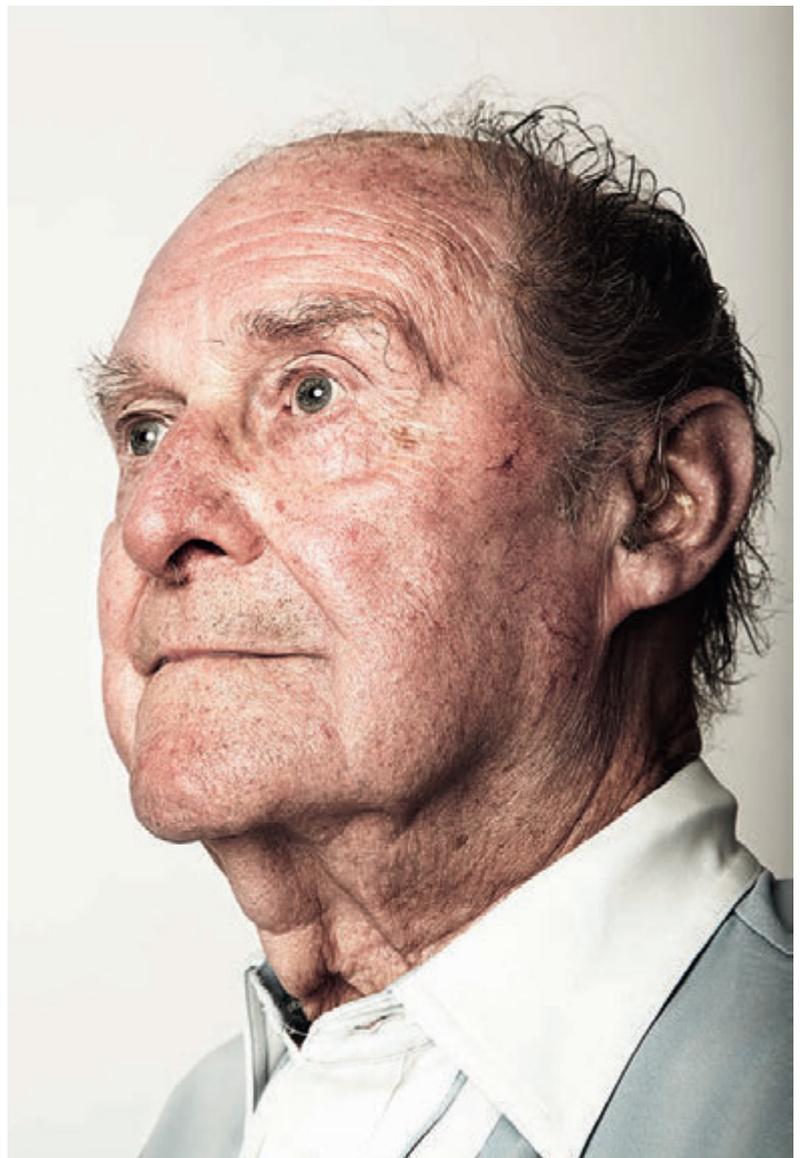
I went home in a landing craft used for D-Day, and was taken to a hospital in Leeds. I spent a month there. The doctors discovered that my left leg, which had also been shot, was giving me as much trouble as my right one. I'd lost a lot of muscle. And my shoulder and hand were also injured. They gave me a tin leg and I began to heal up, which took five months or so.

After that, I joined a barracks in Preston to help Prisoners of War who were returning from Germany and Japan. They were suffering from weight loss, diseases... all sorts. I helped them find jobs – they'd been through some harrowing stuff. I was discharged in May 1946 and bought an old mill with my father.

So into civilian life, then?

Yes. I never took handouts or drew the dole. We produced corn and oatmeal. I'd drive up to Scotland to pick up huge, heavy bags of oats – it was very physical work, but I could do it all despite the injuries, and I was keen to stay active. I ran the business and had seven children. Later I ran a Post Office, and then worked for a brewery as a travelling sales rep. I like ale, talking to people and travelling, so it was a fun job.

One of my daughters is autistic, so I read up on her condition and become very interested in it. That led



me, at 50, to retrain as a teacher in a special needs school, so I spent three years at university again. I really enjoyed that work, and did it until I retired.

You also drove rally cars with one leg...

Yes, I've always loved cars and motorbikes. I'd buy one for £30, do it up and sell it for £40. I must have had 120 cars in my time. When I rallied I'd just switch between the pedals using my good foot. At various points in my life things were hard and my leg got sore, but I've always got on with it. I've enjoyed my life immensely. I'm always positive. I'm grateful that I can still see and hear and move about and think. I'm not bothered about the things I can't do any more.

How have Blesma helped out?

They have been fantastic to me all my life. They helped so much with my leg, and as I got older I always thought that if I got to the point where I couldn't be independent, I would come to Blackpool. I moved into the Home four months ago, because I have cancer in my hips and the doctor has told me to walk less and use the wheelchair to take the pressure off them. It's frustrating but I have to do it, and the Home is just fantastic. It is a wonderful place – I cannot speak too highly of it: the food is superb, the people are so friendly, caring and helpful – and the bar is brilliant!





HOW TO...

Swim the English Channel

Seasickness, shipping lanes, severe cold and stroke after stroke after stroke after stroke after stroke after stroke after stroke... Jump aboard as four Blesma Members attempt to become the first all-amputee team to swim the English Channel





For the entire 12 hours I either had my head in a bucket, I was being sick over the side of the boat, or I was swimming,” says Steve White. “It wasn’t much fun at all, but letting the rest of the team down wasn’t an option, so I just had to get in the zone and get on with it.”

Blesma Members are renowned for their can-do attitude and ability to persevere under adverse conditions, but Steve and his three teammates went through the mill in September when they front crawled their way to becoming the first all-amputee team in history to swim the English Channel.

They left Dover at 6am on a crisp Autumn morning and reached French soil at Cap Gris Nez 12 hours and 14 minutes later. “It must have been an amusing sight for the locals,” laughs Steve when recalling the moment the team, which also included Jamie Gillespie, Conrad Thorpe and Craig Howorth, reached dry land. “Four middle-aged, one-legged blokes hopping up and down on a boat in Speedos. Crazy!”

As well as horrendous seasickness the team battled intense fatigue, treacherous waves, the odd colossal tanker and extreme cold on their way to a place in the record books. “When you first swim in those sort of temperatures, it’s incredibly hard to cope,” says Jamie. “You’re gasping for air almost straight away and your technique goes out the window immediately. It takes a lot of getting used to!” So how did they overcome all the odds to complete their mission and raise over £3,500 for Blesma to boot? Take a deep breath as two of the record-busting fab four talk us through what it takes to swim the English Channel.

1 DON'T THINK, JUST DO

“I’m an above-knee amputee,” says Steve, “and one thing I can’t do easily is jog.” Steve injured his leg 25 years ago while running at Pirbright Barracks as a Rifleman, and finally had it amputated six years ago. “I wanted to keep my beer belly down, so I started to swim and soon began to really enjoy it. That led to me taking on challenges, like swimming from Alcatraz to the San Francisco mainland. I also did a marathon swim up the west coast of Manhattan. I found out that no amputees have ever swam the English Channel as a team, so I thought; ‘Why not?’”

2 GATHER THE RIGHT TEAM

“I’m Steve’s prosthetist, and we often talked about open water swimming and triathlons,” says Jamie Gillespie, who was injured in a motorcycle accident when he was 19 years old while serving in the Royal Engineers. He had a below-the-knee amputation and, after becoming interested in rehabilitation while at Headley Court, eventually entered the profession.

“A few years ago I bought a wetsuit and got into swimming in lakes – it’s more fun than dodging people in a pool. I ended up doing some more serious events with Steve, and our families got to know each other.

“He suggested giving the English Channel a go and I jumped at the chance. Relay teams are normally made up of six swimmers, but we decided to do it with just four guys. We found the other two guys through Blesma. Craig is a strong swimmer and Conrad has competed in the Commonwealth Games. Doing it with just four of us added to the challenge.”

3 FACE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE STRAIGHT AWAY

“We took the idea to Blesma, they approved it, and we started training,” says Jamie. “I knew the cold would be the big challenge for me. The other guys just swam in trunks but I’d been used to wearing a wetsuit. The rules state that you can’t wear a wetsuit to swim the Channel, so I decided to ditch the suit in training. Getting into a lake in my Speedos in March was horrendous but after a while you acclimatise. You have to persevere – I swam in open water three times a week, so by summer, it was bliss!”

According to Steve water temperature is a huge challenge to amputees. “The Channel rarely gets above 17°C, while most swimming pools are 10°C warmer. Cold water causes our stumps blood supply issues, phantom pains, all sorts of things.”

4 GET TRAINING

“We did a five-mile swim in Coniston Lake together a few months before the Channel attempt,” says Jamie, “and we all did very well. It was our first endurance event together, so the team bonded then. I’m not the best swimmer in the world, but I’ll keep going and get the job done. It was tough for Conrad to find cold water to train in, because he lives in Kenya.”

“If I was advising anyone about doing this, I’d say to train in the sea as much as you can,” adds Steve. “The conditions are so challenging. We can all do 10 miles in a pool or a lake at the drop of a hat, but the sea is totally different. We prepared for 18 months, and entered as many cold water competitions as we could. We were swimming outside from April onwards.”



5 KNOW THE RULES

The rules of the Channel Swimming Association state that anyone attempting the daring crossing must first qualify by swimming in open sea water for two hours. The team chose Dover Harbour for this, and passed with flying colours. No dispensations are made for amputees, wetsuits aren't allowed and prosthetics may not be worn. An official "order" for the swim must be nominated, too, with each member swimming for one hour then getting back onto the boat. Swimming out of order, or touching the boat during the hour swim, means disqualification.

6 PREPARE FOR HELL...

"I took seasickness medication, ginger – which is meant to be good for seasickness – and wore acupressure armbands," says Steve, "but none of them worked. It wasn't fun for the guys either – I threw up in front of Jamie in the water – and because I couldn't keep any food or liquid down, I started to get dehydrated.

"The guys were great, and told me not to worry about it if I needed to chuck it in, but that was never going to happen. Being sick in the water is hard, because you're trying to breathe. Working out how to keep going forwards was a bit of a giggle. But once I'd worked that out, it was fine."

7 ...BUT TRY TO HAVE FUN!

"We started our first few rotations very seriously," says Jamie, "but after a few hours, we became more light-hearted. Having a laugh helped us get through the difficult challenges. By my third swim, the team were throwing ginger biscuits and

bananas at me. I was trying not to laugh otherwise I'd get a mouthful of water. All you can do is keep your head down and go as fast as you can – in the right direction! But in an odd sort of way it was more fun being in the water than on the boat, where you're bobbing all over the place at 2mph."

8 KEEP YOUR EYES, AND YOUR MIND, ON THE PRIZE

"All you do when you're in the water is concentrate on your stroke and on your breathing," says Steve. "It would probably get a bit much to be in the water for more than an hour, but because you're just doing a shift then getting out, you deal with it."

"The swell got very choppy, worse than I'd ever experienced," says Jamie. "That took me by surprise. You have to focus on staying on track, otherwise you are adding distance to your swim. On my first swim I was really inefficient. It was tough going against the waves and the current, and I was getting a mouth full of water all the time, but it got easier each time I swam.

"You don't notice amputation so much as a swimmer. In the water, your legs are just

a rudder, and all the power comes from your upper body.

"Reaching France brought an amazing feeling. It was a misty day, but our coach kept telling us; 'It's just there'. When we saw France it was heartening, but it still took a while to finish. Getting to the end, seeing Conrad touch the rock, was great."

9 NEVER SAY NEVER

"It must be like childbirth," laughs Steve. "I've heard ladies say; 'Never again', but soon after that, they're having another baby. It was the same with us. We had a tough time, but as soon as we were back on dry land we were talking about what we could do next. We're thinking about maybe swimming from Northern Ireland to Scotland. It would be great to spend more time with this team."

10 ALWAYS REMEMBER WHY YOU'RE DOING IT

"Blesma played a huge part in my rehab," says Jamie. "There are more questions than answers when you lose a leg as a young lad, but Blesma visited me, and offered me a ski-biking trip to Austria. I was very keen and that kept me going through my rehab. Ten months later I was on the slopes, having a great time.

"But, more importantly, I met guys in a similar situation. I realised that I was not the only one, that life can be fine. Blesma gave me the confidence to get back into normal life. I'm really grateful to them for that, and doing this is a way to say thanks."



SPEEDOS, CAMERA, ACTION!

Blesma Magazine boarded the support boat for a swimmer's-eye view of the record attempt.

Watch the exclusive access-all-areas film of the swim at www.blesma.org

You can still make a donation to the team. Visit www.justgiving.com/stephen-white12

STEPPING INTO THE UNKNOWN

Michael Swain is the only British Service man to have undergone a cutting-edge surgical procedure known as osseointegration. He explains how it feels to be walking after years of wanting...

Pictures: Andy Bate Words: Nick Moore

I'd like to run one day, but it won't be the end of the world if I can't," says Michael Swain. "After all, this time last year I couldn't walk and now I can."

Michael is strolling through the grounds of Headley Court where he is about to finish his last ever week of rehabilitation. Blown up by an IED in Afghanistan in 2009, he had pretty much given up ever being able to walk again after numerous operations had left him unable to wear a conventional socket. Then he learned about a cutting-edge procedure called osseointegration.

The surgery isn't available in the UK yet but, after almost 12 months of research and numerous requests for funding, Michael was given the go-ahead to travel to Australia at the end of 2013 for the operation. He is currently the only British Service man to undergo the procedure, which he describes as "life changing".

According to Dr Munjed Al Muderis, the pioneering surgeon who carries out all osseointegration operations in Australia, the procedure "provides a direct skeletal attachment to an external component through a transcutaneous bone anchoring device." In simple terms, that means a titanium rod is inserted into the middle of the bone – in Michael's case both his femurs. The rod protrudes through the skin for several inches at the base of the stump and an attachment at the end

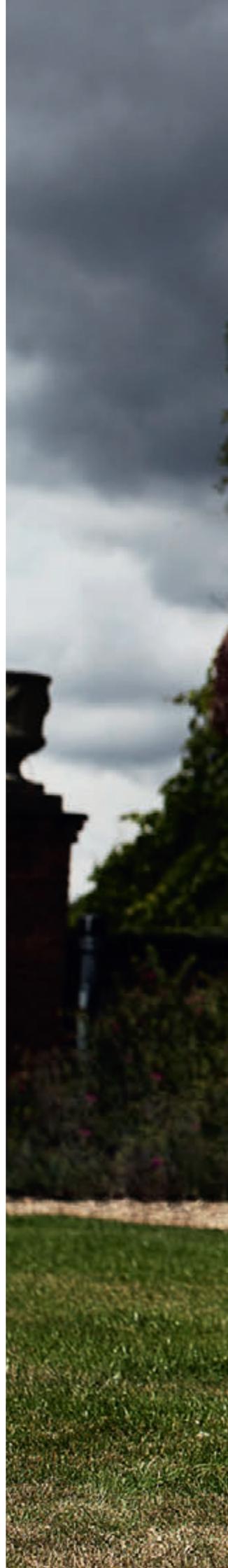
of the implant allows an off-the-shelf prosthesis to be clipped on and off in a matter of seconds.

"Osseointegration allows the forces exerted on the body to be transmitted naturally from the prosthesis through the bone when walking," says Dr Al Muderis, who has carried out 75 such procedures in five years. "That means osseointegration brings an amputee's movement closer than ever before to an able-bodied person's. Above-knee amputees can also find it difficult to feel the ground when they wear a socket, but with osseointegration they regain this sensation and can tell if they're walking on tiles, or carpet, or grass. That gives them the confidence to walk in dark rooms, for example, or without looking at the ground."

Dr Al Muderis is keen to stress that this is not a simple operation and that there are risks, but that this is a well-proven procedure and that risks are minimal.

"There is an increased risk of fracture as people who were wheelchair-bound are now more mobile," he says, "but bone density dramatically increases over the first few years in patients who have had osseointegration. Several patients have also had infections as a result of the procedure but those numbers are very low."

Michael takes some time to tell us about operations, osseointegration and his positive outlook on life...





NEW TECHNOLOGIES



“BEFORE THE OPERATION I WASN’T HAPPY USING A WHEELCHAIR OR BEING ON SOCKETS. I WANTED TO BE WALKING AGAIN, SO I DIDN’T FEEL COMFORTABLE IN MYSELF. SINCE I’VE HAD THE OPERATION I’LL TRY ANYTHING”

You are the first British soldier to have osseointegration. How does that feel?

Great now, but I have to admit that I was worried before I went into surgery. I’ve had loads of operations on my legs over the last five years, and most of them haven’t bothered me, but this one did. I mean, I was getting titanium implants inserted into both of my femurs – it was a big operation!

Tell us a bit more about what you had done?

I lost both my legs above the knee in 2009 when I was blown up by an IED in Afghanistan. I have about eight inches of bone left on my right leg, and I lost my left leg a couple of inches above the knee. The procedure was done in two stages and basically involved drilling holes in my thigh bones – the femur – and inserting a titanium rod up them. The rods stick out from the ends of my stumps and I can click prosthetics on and off them in seconds. I had to wait eight weeks after the first operation for my legs to heal enough before I had the second operation to fit the connectors to the ends of the titanium rods for the prosthetics to click on to.

Can you tell us about your time in the Army?

I joined 3 Rifles in November 2007, when I was 17, and deployed to Afghanistan in September 2009. I was blown up by IED in Helmand Province less than two months later, on 8 November. I was 19 years old.

What was Afghanistan like?

There was always something going on; IEDs going off and small arms contact. When I first got out there I was nervous; you can never know what will happen from one minute to the next. We patrolled every day, sometimes long hours, but our drills were good, we were well organised and worked well as a team. But by the end of our tour there had been two deaths and seven casualties, just in my section of 28 men.

Can you tell us about the day you got injured?

We left the base early. Our objective was to cut through the Green Zone, make sure a derelict compound was clear, and then give overwatch for a US bomb disposal team that was going to clear the area of IEDs. I was second in the patrol as we crossed through open fields.

We got to a little ditch that ran the whole way along the field. It wasn’t deep, so the first guy jumped over it and I did the same. As I landed the blast threw me into the air. I felt excruciating pain, but I was covered in smoke so couldn’t see anything. After a few seconds the dust started to clear. I looked down and saw that both my legs had gone, and that my arms were losing a lot of blood, too. The guys bandaged me up, gave me morphine and made a stretcher from a poncho. The Section Commander called in the helicopter and all I remember was him saying; ‘16 minutes’.

Did you know what had happened straight away?

Yeah, there was this deafening bang and instant pain. The worst thing of all was the smell of burning meat and the realisation that it was my flesh. That was probably worse than the pain! I nearly lost my left arm because the blast tore off so much muscle and skin that it was almost down to the bone. I’ve got some nerve damage to my right hand but my left hand has regained about 90 per cent of its strength.

The IED was on the side of a ditch so the blast came out at an angle. If it had come straight up I think it would have killed me instantly, so I’m quite lucky.

You have a very clear memory of what happened...

I’m glad because a lot of guys don’t remember what happened to them. I’m lucky I felt everything and that I remember it because it means I’m able to talk about it.

By the time the helicopter landed, I had lost so much blood that I was saying goodbye to everyone; there was no more pain, just this warm feeling. I thought I was going to die. A medic gave me an injection through my sternum and I passed out. I was flown to Camp Bastion and underwent surgery for 13 hours. When I came to I called the guys in the FOB – I couldn’t imagine what they were thinking having to go back out on patrol the next day knowing what had just happened! Then I spoke to my family and was flown back to Birmingham.

So how did you come to have osseointegration?

After years of trying to walk on a socket I got to the point where I’d had enough. The injuries to my right leg in particular meant it was short to begin with, but in the last five and a half years both have been made shorter and shorter as a result of all sorts of revisions and operations. I lost my right hamstring too, so my leg is quite pointed, which means sockets kept falling off. After a few years I went to a private clinic but I had the same problem; the socket they made me was really high and felt uncomfortable – it wasn’t practical, I couldn’t move, I couldn’t bend, and it wouldn’t stay on. I came to the conclusion that if I was ever going to walk again, it wouldn’t be through sockets.

Then I met a guy who’d had osseointegration in Australia and he told me all about it. I spoke with the team at Headley Court and together we found out all about the procedure, about the surgeon and why I’d have to go to Australia to get it done. All that research took 11 months and after all that the NHS wouldn’t fund it because it would cost about £100,000 – the rods in my legs are £18,000 each – so I had to wait to see if the MoD would fund it. Thankfully, they did.

What difference has it made?

It’s changed my life. I don’t worry about my legs, or prosthetics, or walking, or not being able to do things any more – I just click my legs on and get on with it.



A PHYSIO’S PERSPECTIVE

Kate Sherman is the clinical lead physiotherapist for amputee rehab at Headley Court

“Michael came back to us after the initial rehab in Australia to relearn muscle movement patterns – some of his muscles are stronger than others so he doesn’t move symmetrically.

“All sockets move a bit but you don’t necessarily get that force transmitting up into your body. The feedback Michael gets is now straight into the bone rather than through a socket and liner, so he feels what’s going on a lot more and is more sensitive to when it doesn’t feel just right.

“In the short term, more information through his residual limb is causing him problems, but over time he’ll learn that more feedback is a good thing – he will be aware if he stands on an uneven surface more quickly, for example, so he will be less likely to fall.”

The change was instant, and the control and movement I have now are amazing – it really made an impact straight away. Before I knew it I was trying new stuff; going to the park with my son, walking the dog for a few miles. Before the operation, whenever we'd go somewhere, I'd want to know what the ground was going to be like, or how far we were going to walk but now I just don't question it. Going to different places doesn't phase me now. I just crack on with it.

What was rehab like?

The first few days after the operation I couldn't do anything but then I started stump loading – putting more and more weight on my stumps every day. For the first three months you're supposed to use two crutches, and then for another three months you're supposed to use one crutch and after that you can walk unaided. The staff in Australia had to keep telling me to slow down because I was too eager to walk on my own. The first year is a healing process and the first few months your legs are very delicate so you have to make sure there is very little impact.

It was uncomfortable at first because I could feel the impact on my bones and the pressure up and down my stumps – it felt almost like the bones could snap, but that was just because it was a new sensation to me. Now I might get an ache in the end of my stumps every now and then, but only if I do too much – like if non-amputees go for a long walk and their feet ache.

You must have had to learn to walk all over again...

When you walk with a socket you have to tense your bum and your abs, but the staff in Australia told me that the procedure meant I could walk with my natural alignment and posture again, and that I didn't need to tense up any more. Once I learned to relax and let it flow, I progressed quickly. It was natural. Easy. Before that I had back problems but this procedure gives you your natural alignment back. It is more natural, easier, comfortable almost immediately and less effort to walk.

How do you feel now?

Before the operation I wasn't happy using a wheelchair or being on sockets – I wanted to be walking again, so I didn't feel comfortable in myself. Since I've had this operation I'll try anything. Right now my focus is on charity work, spending time with my family and doing as much motivational speaking as I can.

For more on Michael visit michaelswainmbe.co.uk



THE INSPIRATIONAL STORY OF A TRULY INCREDIBLE MEDIC

Pioneering surgeon Munjed Al Muderis is one of only a few medics in the world who can perform osseointegration surgery. Not content with that, he also devised and developed the attachment that secures any off-the-shelf prosthesis to the titanium implants he inserts into the bones of his patients. And if that were the extent of his story it would be impressive enough. But it's not even close.

"I studied medicine at Baghdad University and was living a very happy life, or at least as happy as you could be in a war-torn country run by a dictator," says Iraqi-born Munjed. "Then, one day, Saddam's soldiers came to the hospital where I worked and told me I had to cut off the ears of army deserters. I refused but immediately thought of my next door neighbour who had been dragged from his house in front of his family and killed because he was an army deserter.

"I knew I would be treated as a traitor for refusing to commit atrocities, and I knew the punishment would be execution, so I decided to flee.

"When I was on the run I faced death with every single step. I had no other choice but to put my life in the hands of thieves, smugglers and criminals. I had to pay them and trust they would smuggle me from one country to another until I reached somewhere that had signed the Geneva Convention and so would take refugees."

Crossing the Iraqi border was the most terrifying moment of Munjed's ordeal, he says,

because he had to go through various checkpoints trusting that the smugglers had wiped his name off the prohibited list and that the false passport he had paid a lot of money for would pass strict scrutiny. It



Rex

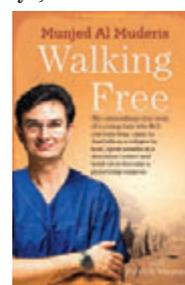
did, and he ended up in Australia.

"When I left Iraq I had no idea where I was going, my life was a dark tunnel without a light at the end. A sequence of events occurred that took me from Jordan to Malaysia to Jakarta, and then by boat to Australia. Until I reached the shores of Sumatra I didn't know where I would end up."

But Munjed's horror didn't end when he reached Australia as he was held in a detention centre for the next 10 months. "That was hell, the worst place on Earth," he recalls. "For 10 months I wasn't called by my name. I was simply '982'. It was a horrifying experience."

Munjed was finally freed and given refugee status. Within two weeks he had managed to get a job. Eight years later he became an orthopaedic surgeon and two years after that became a professor of orthopaedics.

He is an Australian citizen now and even serves the Queen as a Reservist Squadron Leader in the Australian Air Force.



You can read Munjed's full story in his autobiography, *Walking Free*, which is available to buy now on Amazon

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO OSSEOINTEGRATION

Osseointegration has been a common practice in dentistry since the 1960s, but has only been used in amputations since 1995. A highly-advanced external component (a prosthesis) is attached directly to the human skeleton through a “trans-cutaneous bone anchoring device” – or, simply, a metal rod. The procedure is currently not available in the UK.

1

1

1) A titanium rod is inserted into the middle of the bone using a technique similar to that in a hip replacement operation. Small fins stick out from the rod to keep it in place in the first few weeks. The rod's surface is also sprayed with a highly porous plasma that allows the bone to grow into it, producing an incredibly strong bond.

2

3

2) At the base of the stump the skin heals to the bone to form a seal around the implant. The base of the rod, which protrudes through the skin for several inches, is coated with a bacterial repellent called Niobium Titanium Oxide to combat the risk of infection.

3) An attachment at the end of the implant allows an off-the-shelf prosthesis to be clipped on and off in a matter of seconds. The entire procedure is usually carried out with two operations, eight weeks apart.





SHEILA BROWN

Sheila Brown is a Blesma widow and Secretary to the Portsmouth Branch. She got involved with Blesma in 2010 when her husband, John, lost his legs and sight

John had diabetes. His vision deteriorated in 2010, which was terrible. He walked into hospital in the August with black toenails and came out two months later after having his second leg amputated. It was a huge shock!

Blesma were incredible. An ex-Army colleague of John's suggested we contact them and I must admit, we'd never heard of them, even though John had been in the Army for 22 years. For me, the best things were the immediate moral support and being able to talk to people who'd been through similar things. That was hugely helpful.

The speed at which Blesma got things done was amazing. They sorted us out with a stair lift in two weeks, which was great because I was really struggling to get the occupational therapy people to listen to our needs. Blesma listened from Day One!

Blesma fought our corner when nobody else would. Various government departments were adamant that John could go back to work, right up to six weeks before he died. Blesma wrote letters to them and did everything they could to help. It made me feel I wasn't on my own.

I've made so many friends, not just at my local Branch in Portsmouth, but all over the country. A couple from Bournemouth really took John and me under their wing when we attended the AGM a few years ago, for example, and I've remained great friends with them.

Blesma's trips and social functions are very good. I've been to Blackpool for the Widows' Week, which was emotional as I'd only been up to the Blackpool Home once before, and that was with John. To go again was difficult, and I wasn't sure if I'd enjoy it – but I did. I've also run stalls at food festivals, been to Area Summer Lunches, and I'm currently helping to arrange a Red, White and Blue day in Bedhampton to raise money.

The Portsmouth Branch is excellent. We have got 73 Members on our list, and about 20 people regularly come to meetings. As Branch Secretary I do all sorts; I attend the meetings, which are a great way to share help and advice with other Members. I also collate the Members' list and help one particular Member by taking him to all our meetings – I just try to do as much as I can to help out.

**“THE ASSOCIATION
DOESN'T JUST
SET YOU UP AND
THEN WALK AWAY.
THE SUPPORT
IS FOR LIFE”**

The Members inspire me. They have been through all kinds of things. My husband suffered a heart attack and a real deterioration to his health, which was terrible. To meet some of the other Service men who have been through awful things – you really do admire them.

The best thing about Blesma is their life-long support. The Association doesn't just set you up then walk away. Even though my husband is gone Blesma are there for me and, if necessary, for my children. The support they offer is for life and I'm very grateful for that.

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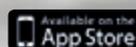
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