

Blesma

The magazine for limless veterans

4 MEN 3 LEGS 1 GOAL

The all-amputee crew set to row the Atlantic Ocean



Feeling tense? Go glamping

Barbecues, bike rides and family bonding; the Association's guide to wellbeing **p34**



1,000, 2,000, 3,000, Pull!

Would you jump out of a perfectly good plane to raise money for Blesma? **p44**



American honour for British soldier

Ken Gash was awarded the Silver Star for his bravery during WWII. This is his story **p30**



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CONTENTS

Inside the Autumn 2015 issue



News

THE WHITE REPORT 04

Member Jon White authors a hard-hitting report into the care of amputee war veterans

SPOTLIGHT ON... 10

Martin Pollock, who says surfing has helped him understand his body and get his life back



PROSTHETICS NEWS 15

BSO (Prosthetics) Brian Chenier gives us the latest from the world of prosthetics

Features

WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE... 22

Four Members are set to row into the record books as they take on the vast Atlantic Ocean

AMERICA SALUTES YOU 30

Discover why British soldier Ken Gash won the Silver Star for his actions during WWII

LIKE CAMPING BUT COOLER 34

Family time is more fun when Facebook's not involved. Time to hit the great outdoors

HOW TO... USE YOUR BSO 38

Blesma's dedicated Support Officers are here to help you with whatever issues you face

BLESMA'S WOMEN (PART II) 40

Member Nerys Pearce has turned her life around in the last 18 months. Discover how...

A Day in the Life

ALASDAIR CARNEGIE 50

On starting businesses, campaigning for amputees' rights, and writing his first book



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Have you got a great story you'd like to tell? Do you want help publicising an event or expedition that you're planning? Then get in touch with us at editor@blesma.org

Special thanks to: Lisa Aston, Brian Chenier, Frank Garside, Barry Le Grys, Emily Mizon, Heather Nicholson, Bryony Stevens, Sue Stokes, Ian Waller **Blesma Magazine** is published on behalf of the **British Limbless Ex-Service Men's Association (Blesma)** by **ScratchCreate**. British Limbless Ex-Service Men's Association Charity Numbers: England, Wales & N Ireland 1084189, Scotland SC010315; Company Limited Guarantee No. 4102768. Contact ScratchCreate at david@scratchcreate.co.uk or paul@scratchcreate.co.uk Printed by Wyndeham Grange. This publication may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form, in whole or in part, without the prior permission of the publishers. All prices and addresses are correct at the time of going to press. Every care has been taken in the preparation of this magazine to ensure the contents is fully accurate, but neither ScratchCreate nor Blesma can be held responsible for the accuracy of the information herein, any omissions or errors, or any consequence arising from it. The views expressed by contributors, customers and Members might not reflect the views of ScratchCreate or Blesma. Publication date: Autumn 2015. © ScratchCreate 2015.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Hard-hitting report reveals care failings

An investigation has been commissioned by Blesma and the Royal Marines Charitable Trust Fund into the care of Britain's amputee war veterans. It has found failings across the NHS and calls for a restructuring of health services to support those seriously injured

Blesma Member and former Royal Marines Captain Jon White is pursuing a crucial mission; to improve the care that is currently available to amputee veterans with what he hopes will be a radical shake-up of services.

The 32-year-old triple amputee has researched and delivered a hard-hitting investigation that challenges how care is being provided to above-knee amputee Service veterans injured since 2003.

The White Report, a detailed analysis of current provision combined with far-reaching recommendations to improve services was seized upon by the national media when it was published in August.

The report suggests that Service veterans who have suffered terrible injuries while on duty experience variable standards of care which are hampering recovery and adding a needless burden to the NHS.

Jon lost both legs above the knee, and his right arm at the elbow, after triggering an IED while serving in Afghanistan in 2010. Since then, he has witnessed the impact of the best and worst of care.

"In my opinion, care can be fragmented and slow, which can lead to sub-optimal results," said Jon, who appeared on TV, radio and in print to talk about the report.

"I have a great deal of experience of healthcare and have spoken to many fellow Service veterans who have been through the system. The major findings are issues with funding and bureaucracy combined

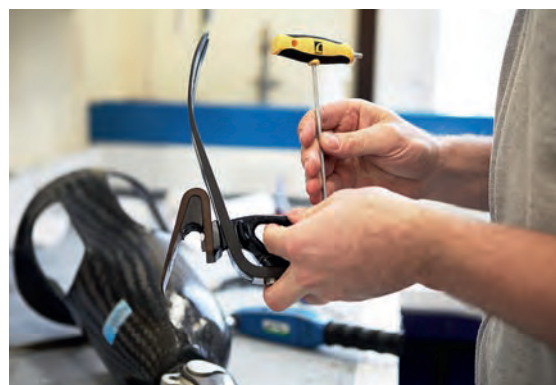
with the fact that current services have a lack of relevant experience. The patients are young, fit, determined former Forces personnel with huge potential for society yet they can experience daily frustration, delay and complications on a needlessly lengthy medical journey.

"The aim of the report is to help the Government create the conditions to allow our injured Service personnel to shine."

A QUEST FOR INDEPENDENCE

Jon, a second generation Marine, has said that his motivation comes from a desire to help the 160 above-knee amputees who have been injured since 2003 reclaim their independence and enjoy productive lives.

The report, which was commissioned by Blesma and supported by the Royal Marines Charitable Trust, aims to enhance healthcare for amputee veterans.





Fall For The Fallen

Blesma puts the fun into fundraising (p44)



The report draws on Jon's experiences and interviews with veterans, clinicians and health service administrators

welcome

Summer is past and the record rainfall left behind. Blesma Week was full and much fun. Involvement is growing and planning for next year is already underway at Chadwell Heath, and with you as well we hope.

On planning, we have now fixed the time and place for the 2016 Members' Weekend; 04-06 June 2016 at the Chesford Grange Hotel, Kenilworth, Warwickshire. We were 'sold out' this year so we have increased capacity and need you to fill it! There is the option to stay for one or two nights.

The AGM this year was equally lively as you can read on p07, and we are grateful to Members Alex Stringer, Dave Henson, and Owen Pick, as well as sculptress Frances Segelman, for making it so. We were pleased our National President, His Grace The Duke of Westminster, was there to make an impassioned speech and several presentations.

Member Jon White was asked by Blesma and the Royal Marines Charitable Trust to write a report on NHS Limb Service provision. It focuses upon a small cohort of the most severely injured. Deliberately, we did not revise Jon's words. *The White Report* made national headlines, and we believe it merits serious consideration and debate. Public response from the Ministry of Defence and NHS England has been muted but we have had follow-up discussions with both and they have been encouraging.

However, there is much to do if the nation is to be better equipped to provide optimum prosthetics support in highly complex cases. In balance, we have also done some more survey work across Members to confirm that the majority are satisfied, or better, with the NHS Limb Service. Where Members are not satisfied, there is often something we can do to improve matters and the starting point is your Blesma Support Officer. I commend the article on p38, therefore, and take this opportunity to reveal that we have recruited an additional support officer to cover the North.

Another theme that Members have brought to the fore is the value of family support and involvement. The article on glamping on p34 reinforces the worth. We aim to have more opportunities in the Activities Programme next year.

I would particularly like to thank Nerys Pearce, Ken Gash and Alasdair Carnegie for telling us their stories, taken together there is an enormous span of experiences, interests and aspirations. Jack Booth remembered VJ Day from the Blesma Home and his striking story featured as an exclusive in the *Daily Mirror*; we are so pleased Jack was able to share his thoughts with us all. I never cease to be amazed by the rich tapestry that is Blesma.

Barry Le Gry
Chief Executive





Jon's proposals aim to give veterans the choice of care they want and need



“THE MOD AND NHS NEED TO WORK TOGETHER. ONLY WHEN THAT HAPPENS WILL WE GET THE STANDARD OF CARE WE NEED”

“The report looks to improve provision across the board, optimise Government spending on service provision, and give Service veterans the choice of the level of care they want and need,” added Jon.

Variable and disjointed care is causing anxiety and stress despite progress with the introduction of nine regional Murrison Centres. The recovery pathway that is shared by the MoD and the NHS – with provision varying between individual trusts – has been criticised for leading to clinical and administrative problems.

“The MoD and NHS need to start to work together, and only when that happens will we get the optimum standard of care we so desperately need,” said Jon.

THE SOLUTION

The *White Report* draws on Jon's personal experiences and carries interviews with other veterans, clinicians and health service administrators to interrogate the fault lines of the current system and make positive recommendations. It proposes a new, four-tier system using the NHS, Defence National Rehabilitation Centre (DNRC) and the private Hanger Clinic

in Oklahoma, USA as a progressive alternative that would save NHS funds.

Service veterans could then choose between a local Limb Fitting Centre, the nearest Murrison Centre, the DNRC or Hanger, with those returning from Oklahoma having to collaborate with a UK research and development programme to promote advanced techniques and increase home grown expertise.

Adopting the recommendations would improve UK capabilities, give a smoother and faster treatment pathway, lead to NHS savings and give a huge psychological boost to veterans, says Jon. In time, the report could also improve provision for non-Service amputees as expertise filters through the NHS.

“We work with the NHS at an individual level to resolve difficulties and we will continue to do so,” said Blesma's Chief Executive, Barry Le Gry. “We are grateful to the NHS for a constructive relationship.”

In response, an MoD spokesperson said; “Our Armed Forces make a tremendous contribution and sacrifice, and deserve the very best support. The MoD has an on-going successful relationship with Blesma, which is valued by the Surgeon General and Blesma's Chief Executive. Along with the NHS, the MoD is looking into how we can further support veterans and civilians with more complex prosthetic needs.”

Although the report has been welcomed by veterans, Jon believes the response from officials has been disappointing.

“The MoD's words sound insincere to me as I don't believe they have been supported by action. The NHS has shown a good level of engagement and will, but it cannot make the improvements without the active support of the MoD,” he said.

“The MoD has a definite responsibility to veterans, and it risks losing the current expertise it has gained in prosthetic care over the last 10 years due to a lack of new injuries. The recommendations in this paper will help prevent that, and will allow the MoD to fulfil its responsibilities to veteran amputees, as well as improving care for veterans, Service members, and the wider UK amputee community.

“These recommendations require no extra funding. So my question to the MoD is; *Why not engage with us and take action to improve?*”

Read the full report at www.blesma.org/media/360057/The-White-Report.pdf



Sam Gallop (centre) received the Hambro Award for his work for Blesma and other charities

 BLESMA AGM

A fantastic year but challenges remain

Last year saw some significant triumphs and milestones for the Association but, at this year's Annual General Meeting, Members and distinguished guests were told that challenges still remain if Blesma is to maintain progress and keep public support.

The focus of the AGM, which was held at the Institution of Civil Engineers in Westminster, London, was the inspiring efforts of the Members, volunteers and staff who are core to the Association.

Guests learned of the achievements of Dave Henson and Owen Pick, and witnessed an impassioned speech from the Duke of Westminster in which he outlined his vision for the Defence Medical Rehabilitation Centre.

Lieutenant General Sir Cedric Delves, Chairman of the Board of Trustees, told the audience that the end of combat operations in Afghanistan in 2014 had encouraged a feeling of 'job done' among certain sections of the public. But, he stressed, it was vital

for Blesma to maintain public engagement and goodwill. He added that Blesma would always be characterised by the comradeship of shared experiences, and a drive towards maximum self-sufficiency by Members helping one another.

During the AGM, the Trustees' Annual and Strategic Report 2014 was accepted unanimously as the Board reiterated its commitment to work for Members for life.

An example of what Members can go on to achieve was then highlighted by former Royal Engineer Dave Henson, who lost both his legs in an IED blast in Afghanistan in 2011. The 30 year old explained how he had managed to rebuild his life, captaining Team GB at last year's Invictus Games.

He then went on to explain how he is currently studying for a PhD in bio-medical engineering at Imperial College, London, where he is focusing on advanced developments in prosthetic limbs.

Former Royal Anglian Owen Pick then spoke of his increasingly impressive snowboarding career. With Blesma's help, Owen has risen up the rankings just two years after taking up the sport, and is already on target for the 2018 Winter Olympics in South Korea. "If I'm going, I'm coming back with a gold medal," he pledged.



Owen Pick entertains a packed room

WORDS AND AWARDS FROM THE PRESIDENT

Blesma's National President, the Duke of Westminster, spoke at the AGM to outline the plans for the building at Stanford Hall, near Loughborough, which will replace Headley Court in 2018. His commitment to creating a legacy shone through in his address.

The Duke then made two presentations. The first was to former RAF pilot Sam Gallop (above), who was given the Hambro Award for his tireless efforts for Blesma and other charities. Sam, 92, was seriously injured during WWII but, despite losing both legs, graduated from Brasenose College, Oxford after the war and dedicated his life to improving rights and conditions for the disabled.

The Duke also presented 24-year-old former Royal Logistic Corps Private Alex Stringer (near right) with a sculpture created by Frances Segelman. Alex lost three limbs in an IED explosion when he was just 20 years old.



The Duke of Westminster (far right) with Frances Segelman and Private Alex Stringer (left)

Darren Carew on his way to silver in the discus



Photographs: Darren Carew, Todd Weiler Words: Danny Buckland



Team GB triumphant at the Warrior Games

Team GB have returned triumphant from the Warrior Games in the USA with a haul of 62 medals, including an impressive stash of 42 golds. The 40-strong team, including a number of Blesma Members, enjoyed 10 days of competition and camaraderie with US Service teams in a range of adaptive sports at the US Marine Corps Base, at Quantico, Virginia.

The Warrior Games inspired Prince Harry to establish the Invictus Games after seeing them a few years ago. The action on the track and field was no less intense this time around, but there was also plenty of time for fun, and the British team had the crowds laughing at the Closing Ceremony when they serenaded a Navy

contingent in their dress whites with the *Top Gun* movie classic; *You've Lost That Loving Feeling*.

"It was great to be part of the British team, which was a mix of people who had competed before and those trying it out



for the first time," said Darren Carew, a 35-year-old former Sergeant with the 1st The Queen's Dragoon Guards, who was injured in 2008 when his vehicle hit an IED in Afghanistan, resulting in a below-the-knee amputation of his left leg.

"There were definitely nerves but also a lot of excitement, and we were all buoyed by the experience. It was inspirational to see people just smashing it out of the park on events they had never competed in before. It has encouraged many of them to keep going with their new sports.

"When you first get injured there is a lot of 'you can't do this' or 'you can't do that', and you are always looking for things you can try and get involved with. There was a lot of 'I can' at the Warrior Games!"

Darren, from Cardiff, who served for more than 17 years, won silver at the discus and shot put, and also helped to train other members of the British squad.

Paul Vice, a 32-year-old former Royal Marines Corporal injured in Afghanistan in 2011, had competed in last year's Invictus Games and a previous Warrior Games. He won seven medals here, including three golds.

"It is a brilliant competition and I only knew four of the team members before we came out here, so it was great to meet new faces, too," he said. "The team had people at different stages of their recovery and it was very inspiring to see everyone progress."

BRANCH NEWS

"DEAR SOUTH WEST AREA MEMBERS..."

"Firstly, may I apologise for the lateness of this thank you note. I missed the last issue because I thought that, now I have retired, time was on my side.

"Sadly, that is not the case. Anne's list of essential household jobs would fill a tome and it continues to grow daily. I get little notes at breakfast giving me my daily timetable; it would have been easier to remain at work – at least I got time off for good behaviour!

"Since retiring in April I have achieved some of my goals. My garden is taking shape and the allotment (jungle!) has been de-weeded and half dug ready for next year's growing season. My art course starts in September and my photography course begins in January.

"I have helped out on a few Blesma activities and am looking forward to the annual Ride to the Wall motorbike event which is held at the National Arboretum

in honour of our fallen and which will raise much-needed funds for Alrewas.

"I would like to thank everyone who donated towards my leaving gift; it was a wonderful surprise and much appreciated. I have yet to buy a top-end camera, but when I do it will be the right one.

"I wish all Members everything they could possibly wish themselves, and I hope to see you all again at some stage."

John Francis MBE (retired)



Snappers' skills get slicker on City course

Blesma's urban photography course improves Members' picture taking



Photographs: Brendan West

Blesma's digital photography courses have proved to be a huge success over the last few years. And with Members' skills improving all the time, the tutoring that the Association offers is becoming ever more advanced.

In August, Blesma's resident expert photographer Brendan West, along with BSO Charley Streather and Brian Chenier BSO (Prosthetics), led a City Photography course over several days in London, with eight members learning the secrets of architectural and urban picture taking.

"This training follows on from our Basic Photography course and aims to advance Members' techniques," explained Charley. "We had a good wander around the South Bank and Camden Market. We took lots of pictures of people and graffiti, but mainly focused on the capital's superb buildings, learning about angles, lines, lighting and focal distances."

The following day, the group shot in a studio, where they experimented with using different equipment and lights.

"The Members are getting very good indeed, they're really taking things to the next level," said Charley. "We've run a trip to Anglesey, and this one to London will deepen their knowledge even further."

Blesma photographers have already exhibited their work on The Mall, and with world-famous photographer Marcus Lyon on board as an ambassador, they are sure to go from strength to strength.

"Our Members are producing magazine-quality work," said Charley, "and we're hoping that with Marcus's involvement, we can continue to improve and get more people involved."

Interested in taking part in a photography course? Get in touch with Emily Mizon at mea@blesma.org or on 020 8548 7094

NEWS BRIEFS

FREE FIRST AID TRAINING

Want to gain a recognised First Aid at Work Qualification? Centric UK, which is run by a Blesma Member, is offering free courses to Members in South Wales. The courses on offer include a three-day first aid at work course, two-day refresher training, defibrillator training and even paediatric first aid. To book a course, or to find out more, visit www.centricuk.com

DIY STORE FOOTS THE BILL

An amputee faced with the choice of a £7,000 bill or a three month wait on the NHS to replace his broken prosthetic limb got it fixed for free at his local DIY shop – in just 20 minutes.

Dave Parr was on holiday in the UK when his prosthetic foot broke. The NHS refused to repair it as it had been bought privately and there was a lengthy waiting list for a new one.

Unable to afford a new prosthetic, Dave went to his local DIY store to buy the tools to try to fix it himself. To his amazement, Gary Wight, the owner of Exmouth Power Tools, offered to repair it there and then, which he did for free in the back of the shop.

Dave had only planned to visit his local DIY store to buy an Allen key to tighten the bolts on the bottom of the foot. But when he explained his situation to the shop's owner, he was stunned to be told he would have it fixed for free.

"When I explained what I wanted the tool for Gary asked me to show him the foot. He took it into the back room, redrilled it, and now it's as good as new. He didn't even charge me!" said Dave.

HELP OTHERS TO GET FIT



InstructAbility are looking for people who can use their experiences of overcoming barriers to exercise to support other disabled people to participate in fitness. They are currently offering a free gym instructor course in Romford. If you are interested, visit www.instructability.org.uk to find your nearest venue.

In the spotlight

MARTIN POLLOCK



“
I HATE THE WORD ‘DISABLED’. THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS DISABILITY. I FEEL VERY STRONGLY THAT I AM STILL ABLE, BUT THAT I JUST DO THINGS IN A DIFFERENT WAY

”

Martin Pollock is no ordinary surfer. The Blesma Member, who lost both his legs above the knee as well as part of his left arm in an IED blast in Afghanistan, took part in two Blesma skiing trips, and tried kayaking and waterskiing before discovering the joy of surfing when he spent 10 days in California with the US charity Operation Surf.

“Surfing is pure joy, I really don’t know how else to describe it,” says the 31-year-old former Infantryman who served with 4 Rifles. “There is a definite rush when you ride a wave – it’s an incredible feeling.

“When I’m on land, I don’t feel as if I’m limited by my physical restrictions but I’m always reminded of them. On water I feel free. Apart from the fact that I am sitting down on the board, everything else is the same as other surfers. It’s a great equaliser.

“I hate the word ‘disabled’. There is no such thing as disability. I feel very strongly that I am not disabled but that I am differently able. I am still able but I just do things in a different way.”

Martin deployed to Afghanistan in October 2009, six months after completing his training. He was the only member of his platoon to achieve marksman status for his shooting ability. His unit patrolled the 611 Highway near Sangin, in Helmand Province, where they were ordered to clear out a Taliban compound that had firing lines on British positions. Martin had only been back with his unit for 10 weeks after being shot in the leg when disaster struck.

“The Taliban had two ‘murder holes’, which looked down on our sangar and a culvert section of the road where we could be fired on,” Martin remembers. “One of the positions was in a toilet block in the corner of the compound and I went to check it with another soldier. I remember putting my rifle down and 30 seconds later I was digging dirt out of my mouth and feeling as though I couldn’t breathe. I must have been knocked out. The guys told me one of the walls had come down on my chest. My eyes were clogged with dirt so I couldn’t see what happened next.”

Martin remembers being carried back to the patrol base on a stretcher and airlifted out. He recalls talking to a couple of the Section Commanders but feeling like he was drifting away. He thought he was dying.

“I didn’t ever feel angry or depressed about losing my limbs, I just got on with it,” Martin says. “But I was really frustrated with my legs. The shapes were awkward, I needed skin grafts and fitting the sockets was difficult, so it was hard to get going.

“For two-and-a-half-years, I was numb emotionally and had no direction or passion. Then I found surfing and it just felt right. It was an amazing experience to start with but I didn’t twig how important it would be. Surfing has given me my life back. It has helped me understand my body and even adjust my prosthetics so I can walk full time. I need to be able to walk to get down to the beach so the motivation is strong.”

Martin started surfing on larger boards that were fitted with handles but he soon graduated to the sleeker, performance models and the only aid he has now is a prosthetic to help him paddle out to sea.

Recently, Martin has been surfing with former UK pro Dan Joel, who runs a surf school in Cornwall. “I was amazed by his natural talent and his go-for-it attitude,” says Dan. “I think many of us would really struggle to cope with his injuries, but Martin takes life by the horns. He is a real inspiration and an amazing guy, and he also has natural talent. He can read the waves and cut across them brilliantly.”

Martin is now a regular on the adaptive surfing circuit in the US and has even surfed in Hawaii with surf legend Laird Hamilton.

“It is funny that despite growing up in Cornwall I never surfed before my injury,” says Martin. “Part of me wonders why, but if I had I may not have taken the path I did and be where I am now – and I like where I’m at and wouldn’t want to change it.”

For more on the activities Blesma offers, as well as how you can get involved, contact Emily Mizon on 020 8548 7094 or email her at mea@blesma.org

British soldier, American honour

Why Ken Gash was awarded the Silver Star (p30)



Words: Danny Buckland

Blesma pair have sights set on Paralympic glory

Blesma Members Nick Beighton and Nikki Paterson are subjecting themselves to gruelling sessions on the water and in the gym in the hope of paddling to Paralympic glory.

The pair were selected to be part of the Great Britain squad that competed at the recent Paracanoe World Championships in Italy, which was also a qualifying event for the 2016 Paralympic Games.

Nick, perhaps best known to Members for his role in Beeline Britain, and 26-year-old Nikki, an ex-REME mechanic, competed in sprint events at the championships held over three days in Milan.

Nick narrowly missed out on an adaptive rowing medal at London 2012. He switched to canoeing 18 months ago, and then to kayaking nine months later, finishing in the top six in his first competitive race at the European Championships this year.

“The canoe is not an eligible sport for the Paralympics so I decided to change

to the kayak which was effectively like starting again,” said Nick. “I increased my training because I had a lot to learn technically, so I’ve been doing three days a week through the Summer and ramped it up even more for the World Champs.”

Nikki, from Manchester, has made remarkable progress after attending a Paralympics talent day. She finished second in the event in Milan and is training six days a week for the Paralympics next year. “I started in the sprint boat at the end of 2014 and since then I’ve had two major surgeries,” said Nikki, who had a through-knee amputation of her right leg after a motorbike accident while on leave in 2010.

“It was brilliant to get selected for the Great Britain squad, and to follow that up with a silver at these World Championships makes all the hard work worthwhile. We have a great squad and we really push each other, so it is unreal to be part of such a fantastic set-up.”



NEWS BRIEFS

MEMBERS PULL TOGETHER

A Blesma team has taken part in an annual clay pigeon shoot in aid of Walking With The Wounded.

The team, who are working with the Gazelle Military Helicopter Trust to restore a helicopter that saw service in Iraq, joined more than 120 other competitors to take part in this year’s shoot at the Sandringham Estate.

Determination and resilience were in abundance as Ron Bright, Mike Fowler, Andy Phillips and Tom Stimpson worked their way around the stands.

Itinerary of the Day	
8.30	Coffee and Registration
9.00	Welcome and Briefing
9.30	Shooting Competition
10.30	Lunch including speeches on auction and prizes.
11.00	Depart

The event will be based upon a minimum of 25 teams of 4 shooting 5 drives providing a variety of "game birds" all arranged through the use of clay pigeons.
Cost: £850 per team of 4 guns or £175 per gun for individual bookings

Raising Funds to Support Our Wounded into Work

For more information please contact Andrew Cook on 01283 863900 or via Andrew@www.org.uk

The team enjoyed the day and would like to thank both Alfie Southwell, one of the helicopter’s trustees who arranged for the team to take part, and Bergen Capital for generously covering the team’s expenses and entrance fees.

A TRULY GREAT SWIM

Blesma Member Rick Clement, who lost his legs from an IED blast on patrol in Afghanistan in 2010, has completed a one-mile swim using just his arms. Rick took two hours to complete the Great Manchester Swim to raise money for his charity, A Soldier’s Journey.

HELP US TO IMPROVE YOUR MAGAZINE

What do you think of this issue of the magazine? What subjects would you like to see covered in future? Let us know at editor@blesma.org so we can constantly improve your magazine.

Almost 100 years ago,

Steeper was founded to treat veterans of the Great War.

Today, we continue to bring together innovative products and clinical services to create positive turning points. With Formula 1 and military precision, our flagship bebionic range pushes the boundaries of multi-articulating myoelectric hands, transforming the lives of amputees; allowing them to take back control of their world.



Steeper is a global company dedicated to creating turning points that enhance lives, through world-leading innovations and supportive services. For details on Veteran's Prosthetic Panel funding, visit www.bebionic.com/veterans or contact us to find out how we can empower you to experience your own turning point.

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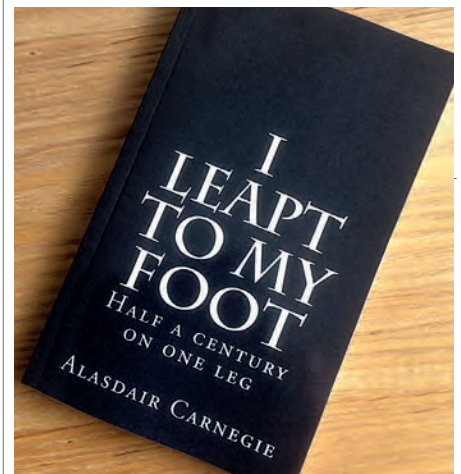
Eight Blesma Members took part in this year's US Soldier Ride

MEMORIES OF HALF A CENTURY OF LIFE ON ONE LEG

“Writing keeps me off the street corners,” laughed Alasdair Carnegie. In reality, at 80 years of age and after a lifetime of helping others and campaigning for amputees’ rights, Alasdair isn’t a menace to society.

His first book, *I Leapt To My Foot*, celebrates “half a century on one leg”, and he hopes it will help Blesma Members and other amputees who may be struggling to come to terms with their injuries.

“So much has happened to me during my lifetime, and people who have just lost a leg might well be interested,” said Alasdair. “When I lost my leg, I was given a copy of Douglas Bader’s book and it was very helpful – it gave me tremendous hope. I thought; ‘If he can do it, then so can I.’”



Alasdair lost his left leg above the knee when he was just 28 years old. He went on to start several companies, sat on a number of committees that fought for better disability access, and became chair of the Disabled Drivers’ Motor Club.

In the book, Alasdair looks back on the last 50 years, reflecting on his personal progress as well as changes in society and prosthetic technology. It is the story of a full life filled with positivity and energy.

“The book starts when I lost my leg,” he said. “It charts the various types of limbs I’ve used, my struggle to get mobile, and the various ups and downs I’ve had in my life. Falling flat on my face and coming back for more has been a big part of my life, and so it is a big part of the book. It’s fun and it will hopefully make people laugh as well as inspire them.”

I Leapt To My Foot by Alasdair Carnegie is available on Amazon in paperback (£5.99) and on Kindle (£2.99)

Blesma bikes across NY’s Brooklyn Bridge

The world-famous Brooklyn Bridge in New York bustles with 120,000 vehicles and 2,500 bike journeys every day. But all the traffic heading in and out of Manhattan was halted at the end of July as the 11th Soldier Ride New York streamed out of the city on closed roads to the sound of bagpipes and cheering from crowds lining the streets.

“It was an incredible experience – it’s not every day that you get the Brooklyn Bridge closed so you can ride over it,” said Blesma Member Captain Stuart Croxford of the Duke of Lancaster’s Regiment. “We had a police escort and 2,000 riders paid for the privilege to ride behind us!”

The three-day event, which covered more than 60 miles and involved injured US forces personnel, eight Blesma Members, and five members of the Israeli Defence Forces, was organised by the Wounded Warrior Project which runs a range of recovery programmes and events across the United States.

“It was overwhelming at times,” said 29-year-old Stuart, who was injured in Afghanistan in 2012 and later had his

right leg amputated. “On day two, we let the community riders go ahead and they welcomed us into the finish area with an amazing reception.

“The event helped me get back into cycling following the amputation of my right leg last October. It was great to be supported by Blesma and complete the ride with other guys at various stages on their path to recovery.”

For Dan Phillips, the ride was a psychological and physical battle as his injuries were sustained when he was

hit by a lorry while he was out cycling.

“It was the first time I’d been on a bike since that day, so to take part in something like this was a real milestone,” said Dan, a REME soldier with 22

Signal Regiment based in Stafford, who had an above-the-knee amputation to his right leg in February.

“I was on a handbike and the thought of doing more than 60 miles in three days was quite a challenge. But it has shown me that, despite everything that has happened, I am still capable of doing so much. It has been a huge psychological help.”



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 BLESMA BRIEFING

Travel costs and overseas claims

Brian Chenier, BSO (Prosthetics), offers the latest on prosthetics. This issue: working with Veterans UK, Members living overseas and who should pay your travel costs?

HELP WITH TRAVEL COSTS FOR NHS CARE

We are aware of a number of cases in which individuals in receipt of a War Disablement Pension (WDP) have encountered difficulty in claiming travel costs to an NHS Limb Centre. We have looked at the process and it seems that not all Limb Centres are fully conversant with the system. The claim form provided gives the impression that claims are submitted to Veterans UK for payment, and the form, HC5(T), still has the address for Veterans UK as SPVA.

Veterans UK does not pay travel and subsistence costs for attending a Limb Centre as the Health Travel Cost Scheme (HTCS) caters for this. We are working with the Department of Health to clarify this and ensure all Limb Centres in England are aware that payment is an NHS liability. The HC5(T) form should only be sent to Veterans UK to confirm a claimant is a War Pensioner and that amputation (the reason they attend the Limb Centre) is an accepted disability. This, once confirmed, is returned to the NHS for payment.

Currently, some centres know the War Pension status of the patient and simply pay the claim while others do not. This is unsatisfactory and we will continue to work to rectify this across the board. Further complications arise in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland where slightly different systems are the norm. We are working to establish the facts and will report our findings.

WHAT ABOUT THOSE WITH AFCS AWARDS?

An added complication to the system of claiming travel costs is that, while in certain circumstances AFCS awardees receive the same benefits as War Pensioners (such as free prescriptions applicable to the accepted disability), this does not apply to travel and subsistence costs when attending a Limb Centre. This is an issue of equity that we are trying to address with the MoD and the Department of Health.

BLESMA MEETS VETERANS UK

In July, we visited Veterans UK (formerly the Service Personnel and Veterans Agency or SPVA) at Norcross. We discussed issues relating to our overseas Members as well as partnership working so that we can both best support our Members. As part of that partnership, a prosthetics familiarisation event will be arranged for

the team from Norcross who deal with overseas claims for treatment costs. This will help them understand the needs of amputee veterans and give an insight into the various (and many) prosthetic prescription options.

The team will seek advice from NHS England's Armed Forces lead, the Veterans Prosthetic Panel, and Blesma on what is available in the UK to make decisions on overseas claims. It is worth noting that the payment of treatment costs is available to War Pensioners living overseas in respect of their accepted disability only, and that this is at the discretion of the Secretary of State. Those in receipt of AFCS who live overseas must have moved from the UK within 12 months of discharge to be eligible to apply for treatment costs. This is to support those who wish to return to their home country having served in the British Military, but does not exclude UK citizens who choose to move abroad post discharge.

For more information, contact Veterans UK by email at veterans-uk@mod.uk, by UK freephone on 0808 1914 218 or from overseas on +44 1253 866 043. You can also write to Veterans UK at Ministry of Defence, Norcross, Thornton Cleveleys, FY5 3WP.

BLESMA NHS LIMB CENTRE SURVEY

An electronic survey to assess Members' general views on the NHS Limb Service has been circulated and 290 people have responded. The key initial analysis is:

- About two thirds of respondents had a Service attributable amputation(s)
- 73% had a single lower limb amputation while 3% had multiple limb loss
- 87% rated the NHS Limb Service as Adequate or above (including Good (30%) and Very Good (31%))
- 18% told us that the general provision of prosthetic limbs was Poor to Very Poor

The NHS provides a suitable service for most Members, but some still face significant difficulties. We'll continue to resolve individual issues while keeping an eye on trends and working with key departments to aim for a sustainable service which benefits all amputees.

For advice and support on any prosthetic matter please contact BSO Prosthetics on 020 8548 7080 or email BSOprosthetics@blesma.org

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”



Member draws on raw talent to 'forget' pain

A Royal Marine who had never shown any interest in art before being injured is drawing on an incredible talent to move on with his life.

Alan Le Sueur produces these stunning drawings despite having picked up a pencil less than 18 months ago and, remarkably, having never had any formal training.

"When I was in rehab I went along to an art group because they were giving away free paper and pencils. That's when I first gave it a go," said Alan about his initiation into illustration in May 2014.

"Drawing definitely helps me mentally – that's what got me

hooked in the first place. It immediately helped to take my mind off my injury. I would get so absorbed that the hours would fly by, I would miss appointments and I would even forget about the pain. It was that much of a distraction!"

Alan was injured in 2010 whilst on Pre-Deployment Training as a Combat Medic in the Royal Marines. He fell down a deep hole while carrying a fellow soldier and sustained a horrific break and soft tissue damage to his leg. Four years and six

operations later, Alan finally took the decision to have his right leg amputated below the knee in August 2014.

"I was taking 20 painkillers a day for years to stop the nerve pain, but since the amputation all the pain has gone. It was not the perfect solution but it was definitely the best decision," said Alan, who now plans to make drawing a full-time career.



"I have already been commissioned to do lots of pieces and can't take any more orders before Christmas. I work from seven or eight different pictures for reference – different angles, colours and shading for certain areas. It takes me a few

hours to finish a rough outline and then I start adding the shading and the detail. On average, it takes between 10 days and two weeks to complete each drawing.

"I've set up a studio at home now where I can lock myself away. I've got into a good routine; I see the kids off to school and then I spend all day drawing. It's mentally draining but in a good way!"

To see more of Alan's work follow him on Facebook at SketchyAI

NEWS BRIEFS

SEND A CHRISTMAS CARD AND RAISE MONEY FOR BLESMA

Following on from the success of last year's Blesma Christmas cards, the Association is once again offering Members and supporters the chance to send friends and family Christmas wishes AND support Blesma.

There are six designs to choose from, with packs of 10 cards costing just £2.75. An order form has been inserted into this issue of the magazine but if yours is missing please get in touch with Sue Stokes at Chadwell Heath on 020 8548 7091 or email her at officeexec@blesma.org

Blesma
THE LIMBLESS VETERANS

Have a very merry Blesma Christmas



DONATE THROUGH DONUTS

A whopping total of 600 Krispy Kreme doughnuts were sold in just 10 minutes (that's one every second!) at Queens' School in Hertfordshire earlier this year, with all proceeds going to Blesma. Cadets and sixth-formers from the school helped to raise more than £400 for the Association through this and various other fundraising activities.

GOT A STORY? GET IN TOUCH!

Have you got a great story you'd like to tell? Want some help publicising an event or expedition you're planning? It's easy to put your story in the magazine – just get in touch at editor@blesma.org

NEWS BRIEFS

'PUTTING' INJURED SERVICE MEN AND WOMEN FIRST

The On Course Foundation, which supports the recovery of injured Service personnel and veterans through golf, celebrated its fifth anniversary recently. To mark the occasion, the charity held a competition at Royal Wimbledon Golf Club in mid-September. More than 20 wounded Service personnel, including 11 Blesma Members who have all been helped by the charity, took part in the competition which saw teams of four (including a Blesma team) battle it out for top honours.

DUCKS DASH FOR DOSH

On Monday 31 August more than 1,000 plastic ducks took part in the Great Amesbury Duck Race on the River Avon in support of Blesma. Some 200 people watched the race, after which a cheque for £1,500 was presented to Blesma BSO Bill Gillett (below right) by race organiser Andy Derry (below left). The winner of the Blesma race was Tim Regan, from Bolton, who won £150.



100 miles in the saddle for Blesma

Blesma's Operations Director Ian Waller completed a tough 100-mile cycle route in August to raise money for the Association. The RideLondon-Surrey 100 started in the Olympic Park and wound its way through the capital before heading over Box Hill and into Surrey's countryside.

"It was great to ride the route that Bradley Wiggins and the world's top cyclists competed on at the London 2012 Olympics," said Ian. "It was a tough ride, but raising more than £1,500 for the Association made it all worthwhile."

VETERAN BECOMES FIRST AMPUTEE TO CROSS ICE CAP

BRITISH VETERAN PETER BOWKER HAS become the world's first amputee to complete an unsupported crossing of the Greenland ice cap. He led a team of five intrepid adventurers almost 600km across the ice cap in June.

The team used skis to pull the 300lb sleds that carried everything they needed; their food, clothing and survival equipment. As well as the sheer distance and fatigue involved, they battled against temperatures that dropped as low as -37°C and had to be aware of the constant threat of polar bears during the 27-day world record attempt.

The record-breaking expedition, 65 Degrees North, was supported by the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge as well as Prince Harry's Endeavour Fund.



"The team spent two years preparing for the expedition and we spent 27 days on the ice in permanently arduous conditions. The trek broke new boundaries of daring and determination for war-wounded amputees," said Peter, who is a Blesma Member. "We are all determined to continue enabling the war wounded to address significant physical challenges, all of which bring with them equally tough psychological challenges. The team also takes great pride

in helping disabled people by demonstrating what is achievable despite injury, and to show once again why Britain is great."

Plans are already underway for further expeditions in 2016 and 2017. For more information on this and future expeditions, go to www.65degreesnorth.co.uk

INBOX

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

Sailing, soaring and shooting on Activities Week

Day 1 Meet and greet

IN THE BEGINNING THERE WAS LIGHT or, in our case, it was meet and greet. Steve Fraser and Dave Coulton gave an outline of the week ahead and everyone seemed happy, so we introduced ourselves and got to know the people we were about to spend the next eight days with. Very quickly, it seemed like I'd known them for years!

No matter what disability you have, you always find a hidden strength on Activities Week and you find that anything is possible if you're in the right frame of mind.

Day 2 Partridge Lake Fisheries

We went fishing and I was surprised how enjoyable and relaxing it was. The heavens opened a couple of times but even that didn't put a damper on things. Afterwards, we went into Blackpool to see a show, which was a great ending to a perfect day.

Day 3 Wheeton Barracks Motor Sports

When we arrived at Wheeton Barracks and saw what we were going to drive I knew it was going to be a buzz. For one of the group it was something even more special because he hadn't been behind the wheel of a car for 17 years. I cannot imagine how he felt when he set off around the track in a rally car!

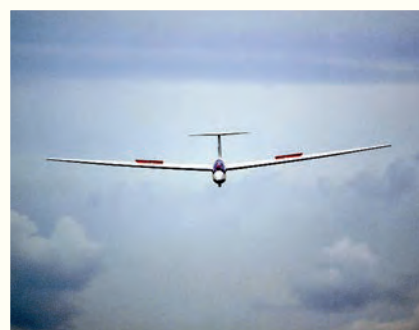
We all achieved something that day and it reinforced the knowledge that, no matter what disability you might have, if you put your mind to it nothing is impossible.

Day 4 The Imperial War Museum

It is always a pleasure to visit a war museum. The evening was spent at the Comedy Station in Blackpool. The comedians were good and a great night was had by all.

Day 5 Homescales for Outdoor Pursuits

We didn't realise how much of a battle of nerves it was going to be! We started by driving an armoured vehicle through an assault course. From there it was on to quad bikes – what a white-knuckle experience that was! The clay pigeon shoot and archery were equally as competitive. In the evening we had a movie night with popcorn.



Day 6 Gliding in Selby

The highlight of the week and well worth the two-hour journey. It was a total rush of excitement, with a few scary moments thrown in for good measure, but everything changed once I was floating on air! Taking the controls for a few moments was an unbelievable feeling and coming in to land, watching the ground get closer, made me just want to get back up there again.

Day 7 Helly Hansen Watersports Centre

Several of the group went out in canoes while others, including myself, went out in sailboats. I was just getting the hang of it when the safety boat made waves and over I went – soaked from head to knee (I didn't say toe as I don't have any!)

On our last evening together we all went out for an Italian meal and then it was back to the Home to chill out and reflect on the week and take in everything that we had achieved.

On a personal note, I would like to comment on the service and help we received from the Blesma Home staff. This was my first time at the Home and I found the staff to be very friendly and cheerful.

I would also like to thank Steve Fraser, Dave Coulton and Paul Findlay. To organise a week like this must take a lot of hard work and I'm sure that I'm writing on behalf of everyone who attended the trip when I say a very big thank you to them, and to everyone else involved.

Bob McCartney



Miles and smiles for Blesma

AFTER TAKING MY SEVEN-YEAR-OLD daughter, Chloe, to the London Marathon earlier this year to cheer for Blesma's runners, she decided that she wanted to do something herself for our Members.

She saw an advert in the Marathon's official programme for the BUPA Westminster Mile and decided that was what she wanted to do.

Unfortunately, she was too young to enter alone so I had to run it with her,

much to her amusement! We managed to run it in 11 minutes and 27 seconds. The support we got from friends and family was fantastic, and Chloe was delighted that she raised £274 and got a medal to show her friends at school.

She has now decided that her next challenge will be to do a Mud Race – I've already told her that her Auntie can do that one with her!

Lisa Aston

More than a quarter of a century as a Blesma supporter

BY OCTOBER THIS YEAR, I SHALL HAVE been involved with Blesma for 26 years – a good length of time by any standards. It all began in Autumn 1989, when a few Members, including a boyhood friend who had lost his leg in the Korean War, came into a club I used. They were there with a raffle to raise funds for Blesma. I had been running marathons for charity for five years, so I agreed to run one for Blesma in December that year in Barbados, and raised about £700.

I was invited to the next monthly meeting of the Huddersfield Branch, and from then I ran at least once every year for Blesma.

In February 1996, I was presented with a framed 'Friends of Blesma' certificate at a Huddersfield Branch meeting. That year, my son finished his Army career and took on the manager position at our local golf club, which became the Blesma base for the next 17 years.

I had been given the position of looking after the social side of the Branch up to 2000, when I was asked to take on the Welfare Officer's position. I accepted, and within a couple of months the Halifax area was added. This carried on until October 2006 when, sadly, the Huddersfield Branch closed. At this point I changed from Welfare

Officer to HQ Welfare Rep. I didn't mind – I was enjoying and getting satisfaction from the work. Then came the closure of the Bradford Branch and I agreed to take it on, which doubled my 'flock' and gave me a greater distance to cover.

I had a nice boost at the AGM in 2008 when I was presented with the Ernie Law Memorial Award. And the following year, at the Blackpool Home Garden Party, Jerome Church introduced me to the Duke of Gloucester – great memories!

In June 2010, I was one of three people nominated for "The Service to Charity" award at the Huddersfield sports stadium. An ITV newsreader was there to present the award and I was chosen. GREAT! I even got a good write-up in the Blesmag!

On my 80th birthday, in July 2011, Ernie Stables and his wife came as special guests and presented me with a Blesma glass tankard. My next special occasion was 03 November 2011 when, along with my wife Gill, I was invited to a special Blesma reception at the Terrace Pavilion at the House of Commons.

In December 2012, I gave up my Welfare Rep position, but we had been having monthly get togethers and everybody agreed we should keep them going until a new rep came to the area. After two-and-a-half years we still have our monthly meetings. I notify HQ about Members who pass away or who have queries over garden grants or attending funerals. I shall ask those at the Town Hall if they require a wreath from Blesma again on 11 November. I have taken care of this for the last 11 years, either placing the wreath myself or accompanying a Member to lay the wreath.

I think that about covers, in short, highlights of my 26 years with Blesma. I have to say that I'm glad it happened!

Arnold Pickup





Words: Danny Buckland

The FelixRAAM team, which featured former members of the Royal Logistic Corps Bomb Disposal Squad, was led by Major Peter Graham.

“It was fantastic to be part of a team with a military mind-set once again, supporting each other with that ‘can-do’ attitude,” said Davie, from Glasgow, who lost his right eye and suffered 22 other injuries in an IED blast in Helmand in 2009. “The biggest challenge was living in the support vehicles. It was so cramped that the cycling was a cinch compared to that! I am sporting a big bruise where I came off the bike at 25mph, but my pride was hurt more than my body. It was a great team effort.”

The FelixRAAM team finished the course in seven days, 20 hours and 51 minutes, well inside the nine-day target time, and have raised more than £20,000 for Blesma and the Wounded Warrior Project.

Across the USA on a bike – in one week!

A BLESMA MEMBER HAS BRAVED scorching heat and freezing snowstorms – sometimes in the same day – to complete a 3,000-mile cycle expedition across the USA.

The west to east coast adventure took the eight-man team from California, across the entire United States, through the Rocky Mountains to the finish line at Annapolis, Maryland, in just under eight days.

“It was an absolutely amazing experience. We got sunburn in the morning and within 12 hours we were riding through falling snow in the Rockies,” said Davie Timmins (right). “The welcome we got from the public was incredible, they couldn’t have been kinder. Members of the LAPD bomb disposal squad even turned out to see us one evening and brought along souvenirs.”



WALK OF BRITAIN STROLLS INTO BLACKPOOL HOME

L-R Stewart Hill, Matt Fisher, Scott Ransley, Kirstie Ennis, Andrew Bement and Alec Robotham



A team of injured veterans from the UK and the USA visited the Blackpool Home in September on their Walk of Britain.

Four British and two US wounded veterans are walking 1,000 miles around Britain to raise money for Walking With The Wounded. They started in Scotland on 22 August and plan to finish at Buckingham Palace on 01 November.

The team is made up of Alec Robotham, Matt Fisher, Scott Ransley and Stewart Hill as well as Americans Kirstie Ennis and Andrew Bement, all of whom have suffered life-changing injuries while serving with the military. When they reached Blackpool, the team had completed the 27th day of the 72-day challenge, which has already raised more than £11,500.

“It is marvellous to host the Walk of Britain at the Blesma Home,” said the Association’s Chief Executive Barry Le Gry. “We recognise the needs of Members, so we turn to the likes of Walking With The Wounded when our Members would benefit. This visit demonstrates how like-minded Service charities work together to meet the needs of beneficiaries.”

For more about the walk and how you can donate, go to www.walkingwiththewounded.org.uk/walkofbritain2015

Blue Badge thefts soared by a massive 167% over last year

Thefts of Blue Badges in England have risen a staggering 167 per cent in 12 months – soaring from 656 in 2013 to 1,756 in 2014 – the Local Government Association has revealed.

More than two million Blue Badges are in use, offering holders free parking and exemption from London's Congestion Charge. But over the past 12 months, thieves have smashed their way into cars and broken into retirement homes to steal the badges, which they then either sell for thousands on the black market or keep to use for free parking.

One man even used his grandmother's Blue Badge to park for four months after her death. He was prosecuted during Operation Clamp – a joint initiative by Watford Borough Council and Hertfordshire Police.

Councils are targeting Blue Badge fraud, and prosecuted 565 offenders in 2014 and

seized badges they suspected of being used illegally. Some local authorities have set up specific enforcement teams to tackle what is becoming an increasingly common crime.

“Illegally using a Blue Badge is not a victimless crime. For disabled people, these

Blue Badges are absolutely essential in order to get out and about to visit shops or family and friends,” said Local Government Association Transport Spokesman Cllr Peter Box.

“The callous thieves

and unscrupulous fraudsters who are using them illegally are robbing disabled people of this independence. It is staggering how low some people are stooping simply to con a few hours of free parking.

“Despite limited resources, councils will continue trying to crack down on this crime and will not hesitate to prosecute drivers who try to abuse the system.”



NEWS BRIEFS



Tom Ormiston (right) collects a cheque from Sqn Ldr Martin Larwood-Hughes, OC RAF Wyton Area Voluntary Band

BANDS JOIN FORCES TO BRING IN BIG BUCKS FOR BLESMA

The RAF Wyton Area Voluntary Band and the RAF Central Band held a concert in Peterborough Cathedral to raise money for three charities, including Blesma.

More than 800 people, including Blesma's Operations Director Ian Waller and Tom Ormiston, BSO Eastern Area, attended.

Thanks go to Wing Commander Fashade, Commanding Officer RAF Wyton, for giving his permission to hold the concert and to Graham Sheldon, the Bandmaster, whose organisation and 'enthusiastic' conducting made the event possible.

FOLLOW BLESMA ON TWITTER

For all the latest news, views and activities taking place across the Association, follow Blesma on Twitter. Search @Blesma

Those we have lost

Those who have passed away between June and July 2015. May they rest in peace.

Balmer R	RA	HQ (Durham)	07/06/2015
Bass G	Sherwood Foresters	HQ	11/06/2015
Burgess I	KOSB	HQ	08/07/2015
Cope R	RAF	Isle of Wight	June/July 2015
Davies O	Herefordshire	Walsall	June 2015
Dyke V	Black Watch	HQ (Wiltshire)	01/07/2015
Fairbairn F	Ayrshire Yeomanry/REME	HQ	04/07/2015
Freeman C	RN	HQ	July 2015
Green J	Oxford & Bucks LI	Blackpool Home (Birm)	24/07/2015
Harrison J	Green Howards/Duke of Wellington	HQ	25/06/2015
Locke B	RAF	Gt Yarmouth	June 2015
Mackenzie F	Parachute Regt	HQ	July 2015
Maher P	Lancashire Fusiliers	HQ	04/07/2015
Mills K	Royal Signals	HQ	June 2015
More A J	RA	HQ (Bolton)	22/06/2015
Robinson J	RAF	HQ (Eastbourne)	June 2015
Tibb M	RTR	HQ	03/07/2015
Whatrup J	RASC	HQ	06/06/2015



**48 DAYS
3000 MILES
1,400,000
OAR PULLS
FOUR BLESMA MEMBERS
AND ONE
WORLD RECORD ATTEMPT**

IN DECEMBER, FOUR BRAVE BLESMA MEMBERS WILL ATTEMPT TO BECOME THE FIRST ALL-AMPUTEE CREW TO ROW ACROSS THE ATLANTIC OCEAN. THIS IS THE INCREDIBLE STORY OF HOW THEY PLAN TO ROW2RECOVERY

Pictures: Andy Bate

From left: Paddy Gallagher,
Nigel Rogoff, skipper Cayle
Royce and Lee Spencer



got a call saying; ‘We’re putting together an all-amputee crew to row the Atlantic. Are you interested?’” says Cayle Royce. “I said; ‘That sounds like an absolutely terrible idea. How do I get involved?’” Cayle laughs as he recalls signing up for another Row2Recovery, the third ocean crossing of its kind that will involve Blesma Members when it sets off across the Atlantic on 14 December.

Cayle knows better than most about the risks and challenges involved. He was part of the second such adventure, in December 2013/January 2014, and the memories of 60ft waves (“like being trapped in a washing machine”), endless monotony (“you’re constantly wet”) and physical agony (“sores all over your body”) are only just wearing off. “It’s funny,” he says, “when I agreed to take part again, I just remembered the good bits. Now we’re getting closer, the difficult parts are resurfacing in my memory!”

So what did motivate him? Simple: the chance to make history. While the other two missions involved rowers who had all their limbs, this is the first time a crew made up entirely of amputees will have attempted the crossing. “It sounded like something I couldn’t miss,” says Cayle. “The fact that it has never been done before is a motivating factor, and it will be great to show people that we can compete on the same level.”

The last Talisker Atlantic Challenge has already gone a long way to proving this. After 48 days, nine hours and 13 minutes at sea, during which the crew covered 3,000 miles, made up of an estimated 1,400,000 oar pulls that burned 8,000 calories per-man-per-day, the Row2Recovery boat finished third out of 17, completing the event in second place in the fours classification.

The crew that departs this Winter will be aiming for a similar triumph, and will contribute to a cause that has already raised more than £1,000,000 for a host of Service charities, including Blesma.

OARSOME FOURSOME

Getting the right team in place has been paramount, says organiser Paddy Nicoll.

“We wanted Cayle to be our skipper to benefit from his experience,” explains Paddy, who served in the Black Watch before starting Rowing For Our Wounded, a charity that supplies adaptive equipment to military personnel, which he later merged into the existing Row2Recovery.

“We put the word out for the rest of the places and, early on, we met with Blesma’s Barry Le Grys and Ian Waller. They were extremely helpful. All the military charities have coordinated very effectively, but we knew that, in all probability, the crew would all be Blesma Members.”

Inspired by recent high-profile events like the Invictus Games, there was a lot of initial



Cayle last time around; and (below) training for this time around

IT CAN SEEM LIKE THE SEA WANTS TO KILL YOU. THERE WILL BE DAYS THE GUYS QUESTION IF THEY HAVE MADE THE RIGHT DECISION



interest, which resulted in 21 very serious applicants. “Trying to whittle them down was incredibly difficult,” says Paddy, “but it boiled down to finding those who were most keen and most able to do it. Could they still pay the mortgage with the commitments that the expedition would demand? Could they communicate well with us, and make all our meetings and gatherings? Eventually, we ended up with 11 people doing the trials.”

The final four were selected through a gruelling ‘test by rowing’ process. In the plush surroundings of the River and Rowing Museum in Henley, 24-hour shifts – two hours on, two hours off, to replicate the race – revealed those with the right stuff.

“The trials are horrible,” says Paddy. “They can be more difficult than the actual expedition, because at least you’ve got something to concentrate on at sea. This was hard, but the four we have chosen are very impressive. They are a cross-section of war wounded and those who have been injured in accidents. They are great lads and there is real cohesion in the team.”

Skipper Cayle Royce agrees. He’s a pretty tough judge: originally from South Africa,

he was hit by an IED in 2012 while serving with the Brigade Reconnaissance Force in Afghanistan. He lost both legs, a hand’s worth of fingers and part of his face, and spent 48 days in a coma.

“Our team are good soldiers who are well suited to hostile environments,” he says. “They are very keen, too. Two of them don’t have a great deal of boating experience, so it will be an eye opener, but they have the mentality to succeed. This is a hard thing physically but, most of all, it is a mental battle. Between shifts you don’t just rest; you need to clean, cook, repair things that have broken on the boat, check in with base, study weather forecasts, and even update Facebook so our families know we’re OK. There is a lot to think about and do, even during the hours when you’re not rowing.”

A POTENTIAL DEATH SENTENCE

How will the sheer number of missing limbs change things from the last boat, in which two rowers had all their limbs? “I think one key difference is that two of the guys are taking their prosthetics this time,” says Cayle, “so their admin will need to be very



slick. We will have to control sores because we don't want them getting out of hand. We may have some issues moving around the boat too – we're not so steady on our feet, so safety is really important.

"We must be clipped onto the boat at all times, so there's no chance of going over. That's a death sentence in the Atlantic, even for guys with all their limbs. We'd have no chance. On top of that, we need to stay in a good routine; stay fed, clean and watered, because if we start to deteriorate physically, we'll have serious issues."

The other big challenge is mind over monotony. "You can't really train for the sense of isolation – losing sight of shore over the horizon, being on your own," says Cayle. "It's a mental game that you must get your head around quickly! It can seem like the sea wants to kill you. There will be more than a few days when the guys question if they've made the right decision. But I can help them through that. I've been there, so I can tell them how bad it really is – or if it is going to get worse!"

Training over Summer has mainly been in the gym. This Autumn, the crew will

concentrate on water work, including overnight rows. Yachtmaster ocean theory courses have been completed where necessary, equipping the team with vital navigation, survival and communication skills. And there have been meetings with other crews who are doing the row, which leaves from La Gomera in the Canary Islands. "We've had a shindig with them too, because supporting each other during those weeks, and taking the p*ss out of each other during the race, is a big part of surviving. You need that mentally."

RAISING FUNDS AND AWARENESS

As the crew members sharpen their biceps, organiser Paddy Nicoll has been sharpening his sales patter. "The key challenge to setting this up has been money," he says. "There has been a decline in corporate contributions to expeditions like this one over the last year or so. Companies often initially see it as a charitable donation, but they realise afterwards that it is money incredibly well spent when it comes to brand awareness.

"But it is going well, and we've secured some great support from Opus Energy,

Inmarsat and Raymarine. We've also had wonderful support from Blesma, as well as the Endeavour Fund and Help for Heroes. The crew are determined to raise as much as possible for their four military charities."

Raising awareness remains as important as raising cash, though, says Paddy. "It is all about showcasing that British military spirit. We are proud of these guys, who have sustained life-changing injuries in our name, and they do inspire the disabled community. Sometimes, it takes a nutter military guy doing a thing like this to make someone think, 'I might do something myself'. It can help get people out of bed."

In the meantime, there is another positive that can be taken from preparing for an Atlantic row: you can eat as much as you like in a bid to add vital body fat that will be lost during those weeks at sea.

"I'm doubling down on the bacon at the moment," says Cayle. "I'm going to be eating dehydrated goo bags for weeks on end, so I might as well enjoy myself for now!"

For more on the challenge, and to make a donation, visit www.Row2Recovery.com



MEET THE MEN WHO WILL ROW THE ATLANTIC

CAYLE ROYCE (LEFT)

Age: 29

Cayle is the skipper of the R2R mission, having taken part in the last row in 2013

How mad do your family think you are, rowing across the Atlantic Ocean again?

I've had some funny looks, and they question my sanity all the time. But really, they're glad I've got another project on the go. The more money we can raise the better, and this sort of thing keeps me out of trouble.

The last mission was plagued by huge waves and unusually bad weather. Would you like the ocean to be as still as a millpond this time?

No, because you do actually need some waves to propel you along, or you'd be in for a very long row. But I do hope it's not as rough as last time. We want a happy compromise – waves big enough to keep us moving, but not so big that we're clinging on for dear life.

You generate a huge amount of power when you row despite not having legs, which usually account for 85% of a rower's strength. How do you do that?

I have to lean all the way forward and use my back and arms to generate the power. The key is to never stop pulling. I'm too dumb to stop! We want to compete with all the other crews, so we just row as hard as we possibly can.



LEE SPENCER

Age: 46

Lee is serving in the Royal Marines. He lost his leg in 2014

Your accident happened quite recently, how are you doing?

I'm doing well. I stopped to help at a road traffic accident about 18 months ago. I had finished helping people in the crash and was about to walk along the hard shoulder to warn oncoming traffic when another car hit the initial crash and the gearbox took my leg off. I knew from my time in Afghanistan that I needed a tourniquet on there quickly, and luckily we got someone to stand on my artery so I didn't bleed out. But I've been fine since – I've stayed in the Marines and my injury hasn't got me down. I've been very lucky.

How did you get involved in R2R?

I met Roycey at Headley Court when he had just come back from doing his first crossing. The expedition really captured my imagination – he had some mesmerising stories. I'm an old romantic fool who loves those tales, so when the chance came to get involved with this, I jumped at it.

What are your hopes and fears for the row?

My hope is to make it across! I have no rowing experience at all, so I want to do my very best. My biggest fear is letting the crew down. That, and sinking!



PADDY GALLAGHER

Age: 30

Paddy served with the 1st Battalion Irish Guards. He lost his right leg below the knee in Afghanistan in 2009

You're a keen sailor. How will that help you in a rowing boat?

I've got a lot of sailing experience – more than 12,000 miles of offshore sailing. The skills cross over quite well – all the navigation and dealing with the weather are exactly the same – so I'm well aware of the way the Atlantic works. Having grown up on an island off the west coast of Ireland, where I spent most of my youth oyster and lobster fishing in the Atlantic, will probably help.

No fears, then?

No, none. I actually feel better on water than when I'm on dry land! I just want to complete the journey, like all the others. I'm getting a new socket to help bend my leg more, so I'm really hoping that works well.

How is the training going?

It is tedious but necessary. Sitting on a rowing machine for a couple of hours at a time is not that much fun. My fitness is going OK, but dealing with the monotony is part of the mental challenges we will face. It's a necessary evil. At least I get to eat the occasional extra kebab to help build up a fat reserve!

NIGEL ROGOFF

Age: 56

Nigel served as a parachute instructor and PTI in the RAF. He lost his leg after a parachuting accident in 1998

Tell us about your injuries...

It was a bad day at the office. I was dressed as Santa doing a skydiving demonstration for kids. Some demo – I redesigned the roof of a building! But Blesma have been there all the way for me with great rehab, skiing and scuba diving expeditions, and the chance to make some good friends.

Have you got any rowing experience?

Only on the Serpentine! But this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. To be able to share our experiences with a wide audience and show there is life after trauma is a wonderful responsibility. The other boys inspire me, I'm loving the training, and I'm really excited. You get out of life what you put into it!

What are you eating to get that extra body fat on?

Everything! I'm eating for Great Britain. And I'm looking forward to a big rum and coke on the other side!



MODESTY, MORTARS' & AMERICAN MEDALS

Ken Gash was a trainee watchmaker before joining the Army at 19 when “that bloody fool Hitler started a rumpus.” His actions during WWII led to him becoming one of only a few Brits to win the American Silver Star...

Pictures: Andy Bate Words: Nick Moore

Not many American soldiers are ever awarded the Silver Star, one of the USA's highest military decorations for bravery. So to win one as a British soldier is something quite remarkable. But then, there is something extremely special about Kenneth Gash, whose heroics on Anzio Beachhead as a 21-year-old gunner in the Royal Tank Regiment led to him being decorated by a high-ranking US General in 1945.

Now 92, and living in Gretna with his wife Win, it's still possible to picture the tall, strong soldier who heroically took a machine gun from his broken-down tank while under heavy German fire. Ken then spent a day fighting alongside an American unit and shuttling between a nearby ditch and the armoured vehicle to get more ammunition, before finally being hit by a mortar.

Just as impressively, Ken has lived with multiple wounds for seven decades, all the while working hard, raising a family, and becoming an active Member of Blesma. Like many WWII soldiers, he is also extremely modest. His wife has to coax many of his stories out of him – “he doesn't talk about it much, and doesn't like to be seen as anything special,” says Win – but eventually, a fine picture of a true British action hero emerges.

“His courageous and aggressive action was an important factor in repelling the German counterattack, and reflects the finest traditions of military service,” runs the text on the commendation certificate awarded to Ken by the American government, and issued directly from the President. And that's only half the story. We sat down with Ken to find out more...

Tell us about your early life...

I was born in Carlisle in 1922. I wasn't very keen on school and I wanted to work. I started training as a watchmaker as soon as I could, but that bloody fool Hitler had other ideas, and started a rumpus! I joined the Royal Armoured Corps in February 1942. I was just 19 and driving all sorts of vehicles – motorcycles, fourteen-tonners, tanks... One day, on Salisbury Plain, I remember driving over a hill in a 30-tonne tank and it started slipping towards traffic on a nearby road. The people got out of the way soon enough, though!

When were you deployed to a conflict zone?

In August 1942. Our boat called in West Africa, then Durban. At first, it didn't feel like we were at war. We were having a nice time. But then we went up to Port





Ken (right with his wife, Win) was injured fighting in Italy in 1944 and was just four minutes from death as a result of being caught in a mortar blast



Suez, which was horrible. We stayed in billets full of bugs. Hitler thought that if he could get Egypt, he'd have control of North Africa – and then the Mediterranean. The Americans arrived in West Africa but they were learners and took big losses at El Alamein. We went to join them but we missed the fighting at Alamein, which was lucky because that was a hell of a do!

You started to edge towards Italy...

The 14 Battalion Royal Tank Regiment had been in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia up until May 1943. I came down with impetigo and had to go to hospital, but rejoined the guys in Tunisia. The Nazis came at us but we hammered them. Conditions were hot and tough – we rarely got a bath, for example – but we survived. In the Autumn, our tanks were waterproofed for landing in Italy, and we went to Anzio in January 1944. I remember my CO saying: “If any of you report sick with diarrhoea tomorrow, you’re on a charge!” But we were ready.

And one month later, you were injured...

Yes. So much of what happened in Italy was senseless. The Germans retreated to Normandy soon after, so many people died for nothing. They even killed the livestock as they withdrew. I remember we once came across a cow that they'd missed and a farmer in our battalion milked it, which was great! I was co-driving my tank when we became immobilised in full view of the enemy. We were taking heavy fire. My Commanding Officer ordered me to get out and join a friendly Infantry unit in a nearby ditch. I took a machine gun from the

tank and manned it through the day, making some runs back to the tank to secure more ammunition and carry vital messages.

Tell us about when you were hit...

People never believe me but I was making tea! We had an urn that we heated up using diesel. I was making a cuppa when the mortar fire came in. I forgot to duck and was thrown up in the air. I got multiple injuries; I lost a finger, three toes and had numerous pieces of shrapnel embedded in me. I suffered from blast deafness and tinnitus, and ended up with thrombophlebitis [*a circulatory problem*] of my lower right leg.

How close to death were you?

Four minutes. Luckily, I'd been in the Scouts, and I knew to ask the Staff Sergeant to get a tourniquet on me; a major artery had been severed and I'd have bled out quickly otherwise. The next thing I knew, I was at a hospital near Mount Vesuvius. My mother got a couple of telegrams saying I was seriously ill and unlikely to make it. But I did. The hospital was interesting – children would bring us cigarettes and sing opera in the mornings, and in the next bed was a wonderful Sikh soldier who made chapatis.

What was your rehabilitation like?

After 10 days I was evacuated to the Atlantis, a beautiful, brilliant-white hospital ship, and then on to hospital in Southport, Lancashire. My recovery was a slow process. Over the years, I've had lots of hospital visits to have shrapnel removed from my wrist, ankle, arms and chest. I'd lost a finger, so I couldn't become a watchmaker. Instead, I went to work in a Maintenance Office, where I met my wife, Win. Then, for 20 years, I worked in the records department at the hospital in Carlisle. I played darts and bowls, we had three sons, and I joined Blesma.

What was Blesma like back then?

I really enjoyed it. I used to be a welfare officer and would travel around checking that Members were OK. I met some great people. There was an 88 year old who used to take both legs off to do his gardening, and another chap, John Nixon, who went around on a moped with one leg – often carrying a leg of pork! My Blesma friends were real champs. They support me to this day. My BSO, Pete, is a marvellous man, and he's just helped to get me a mobility scooter.

Finally – how did that Silver Star come about?

The Americans found out about my actions and a Colonel came over to award me with the medal. That was in 1945. There was a ceremony at Carlisle Castle, and the mayor came, it was all really nice.





DOMINIC HOWELLS

Dominic was blinded in his left eye following a car accident while serving in 39 Engineer Regiment

What was the best part of the trip?

It was great for us as a family because we wouldn't have been able to afford a break otherwise. I'm just starting my business as a self-employed first aid trainer, so there's been a lot of focus on that and not enough family time. This gave us the only quality time we've had together all Summer.

What were the highlights?

The setting was outstanding, the accommodation was to the highest standard, and the support from Blesma was perfect. We chopped wood and cooked together, and the children loved it. We'll never forget it.

How have Blesma helped you over the years?

They've always been absolutely superb. They've even provided me with help when I've been in financial difficulty and not known where to turn. I'll always appreciate that. I'm hoping to give something back to Blesma at some point – perhaps by giving Members first aid training.

SO MUCH MORE THAN A HOLIDAY

Spending time as a family – making memories and strengthening bonds – can play a huge part in helping Members rebuild their lives. And here, there's not a mobile phone in sight!

Anyone who has experienced one of Blesma's activities can testify to the power of good they can do for Members: bonding with new friends, overcoming challenges, trying different experiences and enjoying that old military camaraderie can give a real boost.

But limb loss never just affects one person and, for Members with spouses and children, regaining a fulfilling life is often strongly tied to a happy domestic environment. With this in mind, Blesma's latest activity – glamping at the lovely Dome Garden site in Gloucestershire – focused on family bonding.

“Last year, Blesma started working with Anglia Ruskin University to study the effects of limb loss on families, and the results were very interesting,” says Brian Chenier, Blesma's BSO (Prosthetics) and

the organiser of this event. “Academics found that those recovering from trauma just can't do it in isolation. What's more, children can often take on the problem of the parents, with the risk of growing up too quickly. Kids need to be kids, after all.

“Added to that, we talk to partners and often tell them; ‘What a wonderful trip your husband had’ – which can sometimes be awkward. We felt like Blesma needed to do more for those who support Members.”

A WEEKEND OF WELLBEING

Activities Manager Dave Coulton came up with the glamping idea after carrying out some fact finding, but insisted the weekend should have certain key aims.

“Dave wanted the activity to promote wellbeing rather than just being a free holiday,” says Brian. “He wanted lasting

outcomes, as we do from all our activities. The families wanted to be able to spend time together, and camping is ideal for that, but glamping is not as hardcore.”

Three families signed up: the Smiths, Howells and Hillards, and the Dome Gardens were chosen for a number of reasons. There is no Wi-Fi, for starters, and there's only a poor phone signal, so the temptation to check Facebook was removed for the teenagers (and adults!).

“It was about getting the kids off their phones and letting their parents spend quality time with them,” says Brian. “The children from all the families had a lot in common, too – most notably a parent with an injury – and they may not want to talk to mum, dad or a teacher about that.”

As well as spending time outdoors and having to chop wood for their fires, an



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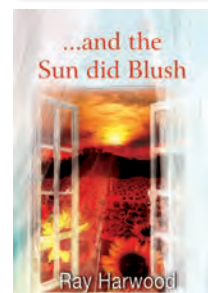
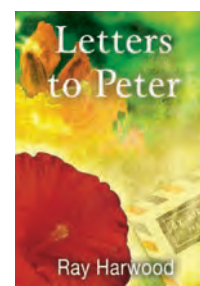
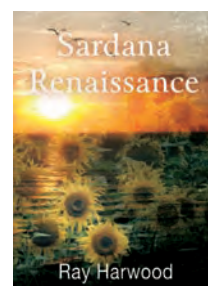
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KEVIN SMITH

Kevin, from Watford, lost his left arm while serving on HMS Glamorgan in the Falkland Islands in 1982

How was the glamping for you?

It was a huge success. We had an amazing time as a family. I was worried about it before the trip, because we were going to go on a bike ride and I hadn't been on a bike for 35 years. I didn't know if I'd be able to keep myself stable but, with a few adjustments to the seat, I was fine. I even managed to complete the entire 10-mile trip, despite falling off twice!

And the kids enjoyed it, too?

They had a superb time. Calum was a wood-chopper extraordinaire by the end. It did him the power of good – he now realises there is a world beyond a computer screen. We got on brilliantly as a family, and we got out and did things we'd never have done stuck at home.

How has Blesma helped you out?

My BSO, Tom, is amazing. At one point a while ago I was struggling mentally, but speaking to Tom and getting therapy helped me to turn myself around. The glamping was my first Blesma trip, and my first time out with other limbless guys. It did me a lot of good. You think you're on your own, but you're not.



activity day of cycling was arranged, with superb results. “Everyone loved it,” says Brian, “seeing Geraint on a bike towing his little girl behind him who was shouting; ‘Faster, Daddy!’ was amazing to see.

“And interesting things came out of the activity that we could never have known beforehand. It turned out Geraint doesn't have a bike at home, so Blesma are going to get him one. He'd never have rung us up and asked for one, but because we've seen the benefits, we can offer that.”

Kevin Smith, who lost an arm in 1982, took to the saddle for the first time in 35 years. “He overcame real fear to get on a bike again,” says Brian, “and at the end there was a lump-in-the-throat moment. Kevin was happy to complete the 10-mile ride, and that's what these trips are all about – proving there is normal life after limb loss. The moment was made even better because Kevin's family was there to see him conquer something.”

The Howell family, meanwhile, decided to give the cycling a miss because mum, Christine, is seven months pregnant. “The nice thing about that was that the other children could have joined in on the ride, but they chose to spend the day

together as a family instead,” says Brian. “They had a fantastic time as a group and, at the end, said how nice it was to have fun as a family. That's a great result.”

Meanwhile, the trip gave Blesma's two representatives, Brian and Director of Membership Services, Heather Nicholson,



the chance to get to know the families – especially during a pizza evening – and discuss any issues they were having.

“One wife wanted to speak to me about her husband's prosthetic issue, which we are able to help deal with, but she also told us that Blesma activities give her husband the headspace to go and do something great,” continues Brian. “She told us that gives him six to eight months of battery power to be a ‘normal’ husband and dad. But, she said, this trip had been even better because they had been able to come away as a family. That's exactly what we had wanted to achieve at the very beginning.”

Having seen all the children become friends on wood-gathering missions, and the families plan a bowling trip together away from Blesma, Brian believes that this trial event can be a springboard for similar activities. “We're going to run the glamping again next year with five more families,” he says. “Hopefully, we can connect even more people and give more families the chance to spend more time together.”

If you are interested in taking part in next year's event contact Emily Mizon at mea@blesma.org or on 020 8548 7094

HOW TO...

Get the most from your BSO

Whatever the question, issue, worry or problem, Blesma Support Officers should be the first port of call for any Member. Here's how they can help...

When it comes to Blesma's seven national Support Officers, the operative word is in the job title: *support*. Your BSO is a roving representative of the Association's staff, who exists to lend a hand with whatever you might need – with the overall aim of helping Blesma realise its mission to enable limbless veterans to live independent, fulfilling lives.

Pete Shields, BSO for the North East of England and Scotland (pictured right) is a typical example. A former Royal Corps of Transport Lieutenant Colonel from Glasgow, he now clocks up about 40,000 miles a year travelling to advise Members on everything from funding to fun days. He's typically on the road making visits for three days every week, with the other two days spent in his office following up on Members' issues, updating their records, and organising trips, events and appointments.

"I absolutely love the job," says Pete. "I was in the Army for 37 years and was fortunate not to get injured, so it is great to be able to assist those who did."

Here are Pete's top tips on what you can call on your Blesma Support Officer for...

1 A FRIENDLY CHAT

Every Blesma Member should get at least one visit and one phone call from their BSO every year – even if the conclusion is that you're doing absolutely perfectly and don't need any further help



or assistance. The help on offer for those Members who do need it, though, varies wildly. "We have every kind of issue, from a 20-year-old lad who is trying to come to terms with a recent amputation, to a 90-something veteran who may need a gardener," says Pete. "Our key skill is listening. A lot of Members just need to offload, and that's fine. All our BSOs are ex-military, so we talk their language."

2 HELP WITH GRANTS

Making sure you get all the financial and practical assistance you're entitled to, from Government benefits, Veterans UK, and NHS services, is another central part of a BSO's role. Talk to yours if you think you're missing out and he will be able to advise you, or even make appeals if you've had claims rejected. "We top up our knowledge and training when new benefits come into action," says Pete. "We know certain traps – an extra £20 here might lose you £40 elsewhere, for example, because it might move you into a different category." BSOs are experts at finding the right paths to take – so let them lead you.

3 PROSTHETIC PROBLEMS

BSOs are directly involved in supporting Members at NHS Limb Centres to ensure that they get the correct treatment. "We help articulate problems to doctors because the Member can often be very emotional," says Pete. "We can take that anguish away and get your message across." Increasingly, however, prosthetic issues are being passed on to Brian Chenier, the specialist BSO (Prosthetics),





CONTACT YOUR DEDICATED BSO

*Got a question or need advice?
Get in touch with the Blesma
Support Officer in your area*

BSO (Eastern)

TOM ORMISTON

Tel: 01480 469216

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Email: bsoeastern@blesma.org

BSO (London and Kent)

PAUL FINDLAY

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Email: bsolk@blesma.org

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BSO (South West)

STEVE FRASER MBE

Tel: 01278 789393

Mob: 07788 312747

Email: bsosw@blesma.org

who works out of Chadwell Heath. “Brian now covers much of this work beyond first meetings,” says Pete. Talk to your BSO about how this can work best for you. You can also read Brian’s regular update, and find his contact details, on p15.

4 MAXIMISING MOBILITY

Part of your BSO’s brief is to keep you as mobile as possible, and to solve those tricky little problems you might be having around the house. This can be through sourcing mobility aids, often from within the Blesma network. “There’s a lot of communication among the BSOs – we’ll often send out an ‘all points bulletin’ looking for a particular thing,” says Pete. “It may be for a scooter or some raises for an armchair – we’re always couriering useful items to Members. These things can improve lives and stop Members from feeling like a prisoner in their own home.”

5 ACTIVITIES AND EVENTS

BSOs can let you know exactly what is going on in the Association – both in your local area and on a national scale – and can advise on how to participate in



all the exciting things the Association gets involved in; from skydiving to photography. And you’ll always find a friendly BSO or two helping out on any Blesma trip.

“From chaperoning a group of widows during a day out in Blackpool to giving someone a pep talk before a fundraising skydive, we’ll be there supporting our local Members,” says Pete. “This also helps us to tap into the wider network and find out how people who we may not have had the chance to see recently are doing. A close-knit network of other Members makes sure nobody slips through the net.”

6 THE FIRST PORT OF CALL

A BSO will always do their best to assist you with anything. If they can’t help, they’ll point you towards somebody who can. But it is worth remembering that they aren’t qualified psychologists, financial advisors, or members of the emergency services. “We don’t step into areas we’re not experienced enough to give an opinion on, but we will make every effort to seek a resolution from those who are,” says Pete. “We’re not a rapid response unit, but we do work long and hard to ensure we ‘meet the need with speed’”

“I used to feel that I wasn’t good enough to do anything, but now I feel like myself again. I guess you could say I’ve found peace”



Nerys Pearce (left)
lost the use of her
legs in a motorbike
accident in 2008

Nerys Pearce

In the second in a series of features about women in Blesma, Nerys Pearce talks about how she came to terms with her injury

I used to feel as though I wasn't good enough to do anything. I literally just sat indoors and did nothing." Nerys Pearce (far left) gives an extremely honest account of how she felt after losing the use of her legs in a motorbike accident in 2008. Hers are feelings that numerous Members will be able to relate to: post-injury, many people struggle to see a way back into 'normal' life. A Combat Paramedic who lived for sport, Nerys was suddenly forced to use a wheelchair, and immediately felt "muted and stalled." Even Blesma events didn't appeal to her; "I thought I wasn't worth spending money on," she says.

But after reaching a nadir, Nerys decided that there were two distinct paths in front of her; continued inaction or a commitment to turn her life around. By initially venturing out on Blesma's Soldier Ride last year, and shortly afterwards becoming reinvigorated by a Blesma skiing trip to Colorado, she suddenly "accepted that people like me, for being me, again."

That burst of activity triggered an avalanche of action: this Summer, she has scooped up gold medals at the Warrior Games, blasted through triathlons, and spent time working with disadvantaged kids. She brought the house down with a heartfelt speech at the recent Members' Weekend, and is now planning more events than most people can cram into a calendar.

Her message is simple yet powerful and inspirational; "The only way you'll know whether you can improve your life is by trying – so make the effort." Nerys took time out from her busy schedule to talk about winning a fist full of medals at the recent Warrior Games and what it's like to be a female Blesma Member...

Tell us about your life before your accident...

I always wanted to be in the military, and I joined the Army as a Combat Paramedic in 2004. It was amazing. I had some great experiences, such as kayaking in Bavaria and skiing in Austria. I took part in lots of sports, but particularly loved skiing and competing in triathlons. But in 2008, back in the UK, I was on a motorbike when a car reversed off a kerb and went right over me. I was paralysed from the chest down.

It took you a long time to recover, mentally...

I was all over the place for years. I stayed on in the military for four years, but I spent so long in and out of hospital, and I was on eight different drugs. I went from weighing nine stone to somewhere near 15 stone. Everything changed, even my social groups. Before the injury I was always the first one to suggest doing things, and that just stopped overnight. I gave myself a really hard time and felt like I was a burden on everyone. I was staring at the walls. My parents and sister were amazingly supportive, but I was dragging my family and friends down. I eventually realised I had to change my way of thinking.

What prompted you to become active again?

Last Autumn, I realised I was making myself ill by just sitting there and doing nothing. I wasn't even dwelling on things, it was just pure emptiness. That was partly down to the nerve drugs I was taking; they were doing me more harm than good. I'd lost my character. I used to be so active – out from 5am until 10pm every day. I realised the way I was living was ridiculous. I could



Amongst other things, Nerys teaches at a craft club

stay like that for the next 50 years and do absolutely nothing – or I could look at my old life, which I had loved, and get it back. I made a decision to come off all the drugs and get myself out of the house.

What did you do first?

The Blesma Soldier Ride last October. I had a hand bike that I'd never really ridden. I thought; 'I can make another excuse or I can go along, be the slowest, and get there in the end.' And the whole ride was awesome! Some of the guys helped me – literally, with a push at times – and I helped some of them with the mental side of things. I immediately felt useful again. Then, last December, I went to Sportsable, an activities club in Maidenhead for people with disabilities, to give wheelchair basketball a go. Then I went skiing with Blesma to Colorado this January. It was then, when I was coming down a mountain on a mono ski, that I realised I could be good at something again. Coming off the drugs was like a fog lifting. I realised that the person who had sat around doing nothing wasn't me.

And you've really been making up for lost time...

The aim was to get out the house for four hours every day, even if it was just to read a book on the lawn. I decided that I'd sign up to anything that Blesma, Band of Brothers or Help For Heroes offered me if it was interesting. I took part in a swimming weekend, and a GB Paralympic coach told me I should look at taking it seriously. Then, at the European Sports Games, I won eight swimming golds. I'm also about to do a 300-mile London to Paris triathlon.

How were the Warrior Games in June?

They were amazing! I won gold in the 50m freestyle, 50m breaststroke and 50m backstroke, and the 100m, 200m, 400m, 800m and 1500m on the track – as well as in the hand-cycling, shot put and discus. I was also in the wheelchair basketball team and trained with the volleyball team, although I was face-planting all over the place! I was so busy; up at 4am and back at 10pm. It was like my old life! I got that camaraderie back. I'm hoping to get selected for the Paralympics next year, and am part of Target Tokyo for 2020 as an archer. My main sport is swimming, but I don't know if I've done enough classification events to qualify for Rio. I hope so, because I'm only three seconds off the world record!

You gave a speech at the recent Members' Weekend. How did you find that?

Nervy! I was petrified of speaking in front of so many people. The point I tried to get across was that I'd gone to the Members' Weekend the previous year having just found out about Blesma. I'd sat there not wanting to put my name forward for anything. I want people to know that it's OK to feel like that, because everybody gets down at some point in their lives. But I tried to offer some encouragement to anyone who was in that position to give something a go. You have no idea what it might kick-start. Regaining that attitude has helped me so much, and Blesma have been a massive part of that. I have rediscovered how to push my limits and boundaries, and I've even realised that I can be among the best in the world at something.

What is it like to be a woman and a Blesma Member?

When I was in the Army I was in an all-male unit, so I'm used to being around blokes. Obviously, there are fewer female Members but we pretty much all know each other. We can give a female perspective on things, and often chat and support each other with issues we might not discuss with the guys. But having said that, everyone in Blesma has been through similar situations, and the laughs I have with all the Members are great. The Association has a nice, relaxed atmosphere and the range of activities Blesma offers is fantastic. I recently did a tandem parachute jump, and now I want an even bigger adrenaline rush! I've seen some guys base jumping using wheelchairs, so I might give that a go!

You're doing all sorts of activities outside of Blesma, aren't you? Tell us about some of them...

I coach wheelchair basketball at Sportsable now. I have a trained cat and dog, which I use for Pets As Therapy. I help children and adults who have communication, behavioural and emotional difficulties, both in schools and at Broadmoor Hospital. It's a big buzz helping them, and it's very satisfying – I've seen a child with selective mutism read a book to my dog! I also run a craft club at Sportsable, which has brought out a different side of me. I've done kayak surfing and waterskiing, and I'm planning a swim around Jersey. I'm training for about 40 hours a week, and I feel like myself again. I guess you could say I've found peace.

What advice would you give to Members who might be struggling to come to terms with their injuries, as you did not so long ago?

As soon as you feel like pushing yourself forward, you really should just go for it. The longer you spiral down, the harder it can be to get back up. If you think you might be interested in trying something, do it. Remember, how you feel inside doesn't reflect who you are. If you don't like an activity, you haven't lost anything. I'd also say to start off realistically. I decided to try to get myself out the house for just a few hours every day. If I'd tried to get out for 18 hours, I'd have set myself up for a fall. The first month is the hardest, so push on. You'll soon find that you, your family, your friends and the local community can all benefit.

“As soon as you feel like pushing yourself forward, you should go for it,” says Nerys







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*Up in the sky... It's a bird... It's a plane...
Forget Superman, these are superfans;
a bunch of fearless fundraisers hurtling
towards Earth to raise money for Blesma*

Pictures: Andy Bate



“I WANTED TO DO THIS FOR MY OWN PEACE OF MIND”

Fifty-seven-year-old Wayne Rostron (right) was serving in the 9 Independent Parachute Squadron in 1979 when a jump went wrong and he was left with partial damage of his spinal cord. His enthusiasm for life, however, has never dimmed.

“The day it went wrong was just one of those things,” he reflects. “There’s no point going on about it. Life’s too short – this is not a dress rehearsal, you know!”

A relentless fundraiser, Wayne only recently started raising money for Blesma after finding out about the Association later in life. “It’s daft, but I didn’t realise that I actually qualified as a Member for years,” he says. “I thought you had to have limbs missing, and I’ve still got both of my legs, even though one doesn’t work. The only reason I haven’t had it off is to save the NHS some money. Then I met a Royal Marine who told me about Blesma, and I joined up.”

Inevitably, for an all-action bloke who has worked all over the world and who performed numerous parachute jumps while serving, it was the activity side of Blesma that appealed most. “The Association has made me realise that there’s more to fundraising than shaking a tin – I can actually go out and do stuff,” says Wayne. “I wanted to do this for my own peace of mind,” he says afterwards. “And I wanted to let other people know that you don’t have to just sit there in a wheelchair doing nothing. If I can do it, anyone can do it. I absolutely loved it. The camaraderie and barrack humour are still there, too. Some of the guys have had a dig at me for being a Para, but it doesn’t matter what cap badge you are – we all served.”

“Events like this are so important to Blesma because they capture people’s imagination and they also show where the money is going. I can’t afford to parachute on a war pension, and today made a big difference to me.”



Before and after: an instructor explains what’s about to happen (top). He was right about the elation! (above)

It’s a brisk August Bank Holiday Sunday in Netheravon, Wiltshire. Wayne Rostron, a former Paratrooper from Manchester who was seriously injured the last time he jumped out of a plane, is grinning from ear to ear after successfully completing a tandem skydive. “That was just fantastic,” he says. “I was like a little kid at Christmas. I’m still buzzing. Let’s do it again!”

The event, Fall For The Fallen, is Blesma’s annual charity skydiving event. Each jump that takes place this weekend represents a life lost in conflict, and each skydiver is raising funds to support the Association’s limbless veterans. With the participants leaping from 13,500ft – in the safe hands of the Army Parachute Association – it’s no wonder that smiles like Wayne’s are plastered across everyone’s face. But amid the fun, there’s something very significant taking place. The enthusiasm on display is rocket fuel when it comes to fundraising for Blesma.


“These events are hugely important to us,” explains Laura Hyde, Blesma’s Community Events Manager. “We don’t receive government funding, so we rely heavily on the support and hard work of our community – the people who go that extra mile for us and do crazy events like this. We only have a small fundraising team, and Blesma wouldn’t exist without these people.”

FIND YOUR FUNDRAISING NICHE

From running the London marathon or cycling to Paris to rowing across the Atlantic Ocean, there’s a fundraising event to suit the most ambitious participants – but it’s not all about extreme sports and adrenaline rushes.

“That’s the hard-core stuff, which appeals to many of our Members, supporters and volunteers,” says Laura. “But alongside that we have all manner of activities that anyone can do to raise money. People can organise a quiz night, a coffee morning, or a cake sale. Even if someone raises just a few pounds, all funds are equally appreciated, and we will support them in their fundraising exploits. Blesma Week is a big part of that, and is the one week every year when many people put on or take part in events for us. But we operate all year round, and we’re getting to the point where the crazy things people do for Blesma just can’t surprise us!”

And while there are plenty of Members taking part this weekend, including Blesma’s all-amputee skydiving

A man with a mustache, wearing a black leather helmet and a red and blue jacket, is shown in a close-up, looking upwards and to the right. His hands are clasped near his chin, suggesting a state of deep thought or reflection. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be an indoor setting with lights.

“The day it went wrong
was just one of those
things. There’s no point
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short – this is not a dress
rehearsal, you know!”



outfit, the Trans4mers, what is striking is the number of people from outside the Association who are huge supporters of the charity.

“I have no direct links to Blesma, but I just think it’s the most wonderful organisation,” says Veronica Hawthorne, 67, a funeral director, who has completed her tenth tandem skydive this morning (she agreed to do her first after having had “too much wine”).

“I like the charity because it’s so down to earth. It’s humbling to be around Members who fought for us and who now get on with their lives without complaining. It makes me very emotional. I often think about Blesma Members if I find myself complaining about a headache or something trivial. I’ve raised about £1,500 for them this time. I can’t run a marathon at my age – I’ve got my bus pass – so I act my shoe size instead and do things like this. It’s all about giving something back, and I know Blesma relies on fundraisers.”

Michael Bracken agrees. Having served in the RAF for 30 years, leaving as a Wing Commander, he now works for TfL, and has brought a group of 15 fellow employees and family members along to jump today.

“It’s a really important charity,” he says. “During my time in the military I was involved in bringing injured Service men and women back from battle. And my daughter, who is training to be a doctor, has done work experience at Headley Court. Seeing people go through rehab, you realise that the mental side of things is so important – and that’s what Blesma gets right.

“We’re hoping to raise about £8,000 this year and, without government support, it’s vital that Blesma has lively fundraisers. There is a misconception that the Association gets handouts, which is why the hard work of the employees and volunteers is important. This year, we’ve taken part in the Nuclear Races and attended a black tie dinner. When I get time, I’d like to do more.”

IT’S ABOUT GIVING SOMETHING BACK

Family ties often play a key role when it comes to fundraising. There are a number of relatives of Members jumping today, and the event – initially set up to remember those who lost their lives in Afghanistan – now encompasses all conflicts.

Susan Tyrrell, is the wife of Mark, a Blesma Member who has Multiple Sclerosis. She and her daughter, Elizabeth Ogden, decided to raise money to thank Blesma for the support they’ve received – despite it all being a bit out of their comfort zone.

“I’ve done a tandem jump before and it made me feel really sick,” says Susan, who met Mark when they were serving in the Queen Alexandra’s Royal Army Nursing Corps. “I’m shaky, but I’m proud of myself. I saw this event in Blesma Magazine and we had to do it. Mark and I did a tandem jump, and he wanted to do another, but unfortunately his condition is now quite advanced. My daughter has stepped in, and we’ve raised £400 each.

“I’m very grateful to Blesma, who have helped me out with money for petrol to visit Mark in the nursing home. I wanted to do something in return. But next time I raise money for them I might walk the Pennine Way instead.”

Elizabeth enjoyed herself a little more than her mum. “I was quite chilled out, which surprised me,” she says. “Free-falling was amazing, then the view was just wonderful. What Blesma has done for my mum is great, and these events are very important. As well as raising money, I’ve seen first-hand how they raise the charity’s profile. A lot of people in Bolton, where I live, hadn’t



heard of Blesma, but now they’ve sponsored me, they know all about it! The different ways you can raise money are great, too: I had a look on the website and the Great Wall of China hike caught my eye.”

Ray Harwood, from property company Centro, was one of the event’s main sponsors. “Blesma’s a great charity and events like this really allow Members and supporters to boost their confidence and self-belief,” he says. And just as Blesma leads the way in proving that limb loss is no barrier to action, Blesma’s fundraisers show that age doesn’t get in the way.

Charlie Neal, for example, is an 80-year-old former member of the Airborne Forces and a driver in the Royal Army Service Corps. “This was my first drop since 1959 and it was lovely,” he says. “When the instructors talked through the process, it all came back to me. And in the plane, the guy I was jumping with said; ‘I think you’ve done this before.’ When I landed he told my grandsons that they should be very proud of me. I’m a big fan of Blesma and they will be getting a small amount out of my pension every month. It all helps.”

As the last of the 55 jumpers descends safely, the fundraisers can reflect on a very successful day. “It’s been great,” says Laura, “and it just shows how fantastic our fundraisers are. We couldn’t manage without them, they are our lifeblood. But they love how effectively Blesma money is used. It makes a real, direct difference to people’s lives, and that is very much appreciated.”

Members of the Army Parachute Association gave instruction on the ground and a little nudge on the plane

To take part in next year’s Fall For The Fallen contact the Fundraising Team on 020 8548 3517



ALASDAIR CARNEGIE

At 28, Alasdair lost his left leg above the knee. Now 80, he has spent the last half century starting up businesses and campaigning for amputees' rights

I left school in 1952 and was called for National Service.

I joined the Devonshire Regiment, commissioned into the Royal Engineers, and was posted to Egypt. I loved the structure and teamwork of military life, it suited me. I was initially injured at 20 after my vehicle was pushed off the road in Egypt and I broke my fibula.

The leg troubled me for years; I struggled with running, it was painful, but life was good. I joined the TA and, at annual camp in Ashdown Forest, I struck the same leg on some equipment. It emerged that a tumour had been growing for eight years. I was in and out of hospital. They removed the tumour, but another grew.

Eventually the leg came off in 1963.

I was 28. It was a shock. I went to see the consultant on the Friday, he took some X-rays and said; "Let's amputate on Monday." It wasn't what I'd planned for the weekend! But I didn't let it depress me. I got my head around it, which was the only thing I could do.

Rehab was basic in those days. I was taught how to use crutches. My physio got me metal ones rather than the traditional 'Long John Silver' style. They were very new, but getting up and down stairs was terrifying.

I worked for Esso at the time of my injury, and they were terrifically supportive. In those days, if you lost your leg, there was a fair chance you'd lose your job, too. There was a totally different attitude towards disability. Things are

much better now. If I'd been injured a few years ago, I'd have been doing my best at the Invictus Games, but back then, just walking around was punishing.

Amputation was a great character builder. As I was a typically arrogant young man, it matured me and balanced my character. You can do one of two things when you lose a leg: resent and fight it, or put up with it and look for the profit. At first I was embarrassed – especially when there was a good-looking girl around – but eventually I realised that my leg made me unique.

“YOU CAN DO ONE OF TWO THINGS WHEN YOU LOSE A LEG; RESENT IT OR LOOK FOR THE PROFIT”

Blesma were terrific. I was having difficulty getting my disability pension and they sorted it in no time. I also got involved in the Disabled Drivers' Motor Club, and was involved with various committees on rehab and amputation. We helped get black cabs in London to cater for wheelchairs.

In 1972, I started a company that made slide rules.

We produced well over 10 million. And I have a company called Carnegie Comfort that makes socket liners. That company is still going and is hopefully helping people.

I've just written a book called *I Leapt To My Foot*.

It celebrates half a century on one leg and aims to help others who might be coming to terms with their injuries.

For more information on Alasdair's book, including details on how to buy a copy, read the story on p13



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