

# Blesma

The magazine for limbless veterans

## CHILLED THRILLS & SPILLS

PARA ICE HOCKEY IS FAST PACED, FULL CONTACT AND FANTASTIC FUN. SO WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?



### Ready to race across America

An all-Blesma team is preparing to ride 3,000 miles across the USA – without stopping! **p42**



### How the Veterans' Pain Clinics work

Meet the specialist who is helping veterans with a holistic approach to dealing with pain **p34**

### “I’m enjoying the gift that is life”

Jack Cummings talks about injury, regaining independence, and why he feels lucky to be alive **p14**





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Words: Jessica Mackimmon Photography: Invictus Games Foundation

## Andy rocks out for charity with Prince and Bon Jovi

**B**lesma Member and Trustee Andy Mudd (pictured above, far right) has recorded a charity single with Jon Bon Jovi and Prince Harry.

Andy, along with 11 other members of the Invictus Games Choir, was invited to the world-famous Abbey Road Studios in London at the end of February to record a cover of Bon Jovi's track *Unbroken* for the Invictus Games Foundation. Afterwards, Andy was then asked to recreate The Beatles' iconic zebra crossing photo outside the studio.

"It was great fun! I couldn't believe I was singing in the iconic Abbey Road Studios, which was very meaningful because The Beatles recorded their *White Album* there," said former Royal Military Policeman Andy, who lost both legs when he was blown up

by an IRA car bomb in Colchester in 1989. "Jon Bon Jovi seemed like a really nice chap. He is a huge rock star, but so humble and appreciates what the military does. He stayed until the track was perfect. I had to pinch myself to make sure I was singing with Bon Jovi while Prince Harry watched!"

*Unbroken* was written by Bon Jovi to honour those military veterans who live

**"THE SONG IS A SOLDIER'S SONG. IT HAS VERY DEEP AND MEANINGFUL LYRICS THAT I CAN RELATE TO"**

with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The proceeds from the single, which was due to be released towards the end of March, will go to Prince Harry's Invictus Games Foundation.

"The song is a soldier's song. It has very deep and meaningful lyrics that I can relate to as an injured ex-Serviceman. I think it's going to knock people for six when they hear it," said Andy.

"I have friends who live in New Zealand, Australia and America, and they were calling me to say that they had seen the photo of us on the zebra crossing outside the studio. *Hello!* magazine even ran a double-page spread of the picture – it was unbelievable! It made me so proud to be a Blesma Member on that crossing."





## Having an ice time

Thrills and spills at 30mph (p26)



**From far left: Prince Harry, Invictus Games participant Susan Warner, Jon Bon Jovi, and Andy Mudd recreate an iconic Beatles photograph**



# welcome



Welcome to the first issue of 2020 and the start of a new decade in which the pace of change is already electric. Life at Blesma is proving no exception; as always, the Association and our Members, staff and supporters are fully engaged in a plethora of activities and work to ensure Blesma Members lead interesting and fulfilling lives, with no-one left behind.

This year, Making Generation R has already reached 10,700 individuals, with Members delivering some 90 sessions in more than 70 schools. Early in the year our Blesma Connects app was launched to help improve connectivity amongst our people and already an incredible 700 have signed up. If you wish to be part of this digital community please download the app from the Apple/iTunes store or from Google Play. Those Members not currently online shouldn't worry because Blesma can help. Please speak to your Outreach or Support Officer, or the team at Chelmsford on 020 8548 3511 or by email at [app@blesma.org](mailto:app@blesma.org).

In this edition of the magazine we are once again able to show the eclectic nature of what Blesma and its people are up to. We look at a devolved administration, initially Wales, and the unique opportunities it poses for Blesma, whilst Dale Leach tells us about his journey from injury to employment as an HGV driver. There are awards, achievements and world records aplenty, and we have features on para ice hockey and how the cycling training is going for the all-Blesma team that is set to Race Across America in June.

Finally, pain is a complex condition that affects all too many Members. With this in mind, we interview pain specialist Dr Dominic Aldington and find out the latest on the Veterans' Pain Clinics.

**Ian Waller**  
Interim Chief Executive







## Rita regains confidence thanks to Blesma family

**W**ith the help of the Association a Blesma Widow is beginning to regain her confidence following the passing of her husband. Rita Taylor was devastated by the loss of husband David in September last year, but thanks to the support of her Outreach Officer Jas Suller and Welfare Rep Chris Jones, she is finding a new support network in Blesma.

In January, Rita attended the Gloucester Christmas Lunch – the first Blesma activity she has taken part in on her own.

“If it hadn’t been for Jas, I might not have got dressed that morning. I might have just sat at home knitting and listening to the radio. At first, you can’t go out alone after losing a loved one. You lose all your confidence. You need someone to prop you up and Blesma has been that prop to take me out into the world,” said Rita who was married to David for 57 years.

David served in the Royal Navy for 11 years before becoming a Blesma Member in 2012. Rita recalls Members Chris Jones and Harry Johnson visiting him after his left leg was amputated, which gave them both hope of life after limb loss. Following David’s passing, Blesma has continued to provide Rita with emotional and welfare support.

“Chris contacted me to see if I needed anything. Now I feel included and part of something special,” said Rita. “Being the wife of a Blesma Member, I have attended a number of lunches and events before, so I knew I wasn’t walking into a room full of strangers at the Christmas lunch. We are all in a similar situation. There is a bond. It’s reassuring.” Rita has now applied for Widows Week. “If I go away with people who have experienced what I have we’ll have things in common. Blesma is giving me a community again,” said Rita.

## TONY AIMS FOR 20 MILLION STEPS TO HELP BLESMA

INTELLIGENCE CORPS SOLDIER TONY Pitt is aiming to walk 20 million steps in 2020 to raise money for Blesma. The 39 year old from Deptford will have to clock up a whopping 55,000 steps every day for the whole year to complete the challenge.

“Walking is something that I used to take for granted,” said Tony. “I wanted to do something step related for Blesma and the recommendation is that we take 10,000 steps a day. The challenge escalated from there. Twenty in 2020 rolls off the tongue!”

To make his daily step count Tony has to walk 26 miles a day. “I don’t think in distances anymore, I think in steps. It’s a 15km walk to and from work, so that’s 18,000 steps each way. I’m managing one million steps every four weeks. I’ve got sore feet, a neglected partner, and each day I have to figure out how I can get my steps in, but it’s worth it to raise money for Blesma.”

*Tony is already halfway to reaching his £2020 fundraising target. If you would like to donate, please visit <https://uk.virginmoneygiving.com/Twentyin2020>*



## CORIE PUTS HIMSELF ON THE MAP

Corie Mapp has become the first Briton to win a European Para-bobsleigh event when the former soldier finished first in back-to-back races at the World Cup series in Oberhof, Germany last December. The 41 year old has now secured three wins and a second place in the opening four races of the 2019/2020 season. Corie is currently top of the World Cup Para-bobsleigh table with an 82 point lead over current champ Lonnie Bissonette.



Words: Jessica Mackinnon





## Cometh the hour cometh Wayne Harrod on a bike

**P**ara cyclist Wayne Harrod, whose left leg was crushed by a tank during a training exercise, has set a new cycling world record. After discovering a passion for cycling on a Blesma activity, Wayne rode from London to Paris before being selected for the Invictus Games.

With that complete he set his sights on a self-funded bid to beat the Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) hour world record, which involves riding as many miles around a velodrome track as possible in one hour.

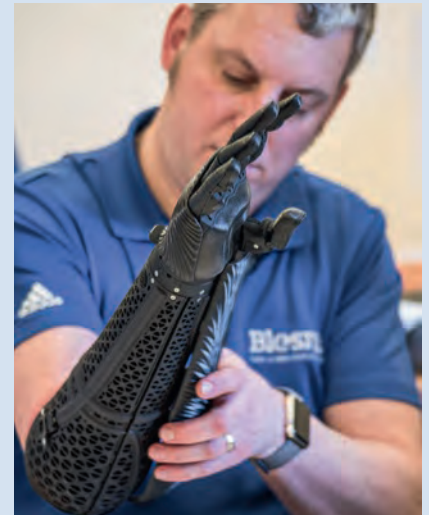
“My partner Jayne bought me the book *My Hour* by Bradley Wiggins, which is all about the history and science behind the challenge. I found out that no-one with my classification of injury had completed the challenge, so I started to ride in the velodrome to get fitter and stronger.”

Wayne took on the challenge on 11 January, completing 171 laps of the Derby Velodrome – a total distance of 42.46km.

“The existing para-cycling record was 42km, which is equal to 168 laps of the velodrome,” said Wayne. “It was just me and the bike for one hour. Any adjustments to my position impacted my speed. After 15 minutes, I had to dig deep as my entire body ached. I just zoned out – the feeling when I finished was epic! Cycling gives me freedom to escape my demons. I got rid of all my rage in that hour!”

With a world record under his belt, Wayne is busy planning his next world first. “I want to push the boundaries of para-cycling in the non-disabled world. When it comes to how I’m going to do that, watch this space. I want it to be global!”

## DARREN IS FIRST VETERAN TO GET 3D-PRINTED ARM



BLESMA MEMBER AND OUTREACH Officer for the Eastern Area Darren Fuller has become the first military veteran to be fitted with the world’s first clinically approved 3D-printed bionic arm.

Designed by Open Bionics, the Hero Arm is a lightweight prosthesis that is controlled by the wearer’s muscles. Darren, a below-elbow amputee, had previously tried a number of myoelectric hands but found them heavy, unwieldy and expensive.

After reading about the Hero Arm in *Blesma Magazine*, Darren approached BSO (Prosthetics) Brian Chenier, who helped him with an application for the arm through the Veterans’ Prosthetics Panel (VPP). It marks the first time that the bionic arm has been funded by the VPP.

“It is a more sensitive device than those I have tried before, and it allows me to move the thumb to a wide range of angles. I can’t wait to get home and try loads of everyday stuff, but I’m saving my first handshake for my little girl!” said Darren.

Photograph: Brian Chenier

## Blesma trio recognised in New Year Honours list

ANDY REID, GUY DISNEY AND Netra Rana are now Members of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (MBE).

Amateur jockey Guy received his MBE for services to horse racing, veterans’ charities and polar expeditions. Meanwhile, GB Paralympian Netra has been recognised for his contribution to sports, and triple amputee

Andy (pictured right) has been acknowledged for his voluntary service to veterans and those with disabilities.

“I didn’t set out to help or work for veterans’ services; it just happened through networking and going to different events,” said Andy, who is an ambassador for the Morson Group recruitment



firm, works for Step Forward Homes, and jointly set up AIM: Amputation, Inspiration, Motivation. “I had to transition myself into civilian life and employment after leaving the Forces due to injury. Having lost three limbs, I’m in a pretty good position to give advice. It was a role that I fell into but am extremely passionate about.”



## ↘ BLESMA BRIEFING

# Living through a time of change

Prosthetics technology and provision have come a long way in recent years, but while the pace of change is increasing we can't just sit and wait for the future says Brian Chenier



**T**he future for prosthetics promises a world where capabilities will be driven by bionics and human-robotic interfaces – today's science fiction is set to become tomorrow's reality. But until that *Star Trek* generation of technology lands, there is the daily task of ensuring that service delivery meets the needs of Blesma Members and enables them both to rehabilitate and regain their independence.

Seven years in post seems like a good time for Blesma Support Officer (Prosthetics) Brian Chenier to reflect on some of the challenges, successes and potential in the sector. It is a period book-ended by the fight for basic prosthetic provision some seven years ago to the provision of the first 3-D printed Hero Arm to a veteran earlier this year.

"There has been an amazing amount of progress in the sector during the seven years I have worked at Blesma," says Brian, a former Royal Military Policeman with 24 years' service. "New technology obviously makes for good headlines, but it is often the smaller things that make a difference to people's lives, which is why everyone at the Association works hard to understand each Member's individual needs and get them the right help."

Blesma created the post of Support Officer (Prosthetics) in response to Dr Andrew Murrison's report *A Better Deal for Military Amputees* in 2012.

"Blesma's Chief Executive and Board of Trustees recognised that the prosthetic landscape was about to change as a large number of younger men and women were being discharged with complex medical needs," says Brian, who had project managed a veterans' mental health charity before joining Blesma. His immediate task was to assimilate a mountain of information and ensure that Blesma Members' voices were being heard loud and clear through the corridors of power and provision.

"It was a steep climb because there were so many different rules and procedures – such as the fact that England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all operate differently. Most people also think of the NHS as a single entity when in fact it is made up of lots of organisations under the NHS badge that don't always communicate perfectly with each other.

"At Blesma, there is something new to focus on every day; challenges big and small that we need to address. The job is a perfect fit as I like working with people and it mirrors the demands of my previous career as a military policeman, and later a military custodian, with its emphasis on investigating, getting to the facts, dealing with problems and managing expectations."

Establishing the Veterans' Prosthetics Panel in England has improved access to kit and technical support, but the Support Officer role is vital in ironing out kinks in service provision that run across the nation's Limb Centres and funding approval processes. Understanding and utilising the different funding routes across Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are key.

### REPRESENTING THE WIDER POPULATION

A prime example was an NHS England policy change that made it difficult for anyone other than service-injured amputees to access microprocessor knees. The prosthetics have been transformative for many Members, so Blesma was part of a lobby group that built the evidence-based case that opened up access for non-Service attributable veterans and civilians.

"Murrison had said that benefits for military veterans should also have a beneficial impact on the general public somewhere further down the line, so we took

“**ONE OF THE THINGS BLESMA DOES WELL IS BRING THE HUMAN STORY TO ANY ISSUE, PROVING WHAT IMPACT A DECISION CAN HAVE ON PEOPLE**”







Words: Danny Buckland Photography: Open Bionics, Andy Bate



that to the commissioners with questions from real-life patients and pressed the case for wider provision,” says Brian.

“My role in that was to represent our non-Service-injured amputees who might have had traffic accidents or illnesses, for example – people who we knew would benefit from microprocessor controlled knees but who couldn’t access them – on a number of panels and boards. I made it clear that we were representing those people and the wider civilian population.”

The next seven years are likely to be peppered with a whole host of exciting developments but the pragmatic approach is to remain focused on current, individual cases. “I keep a watching brief on future developments and, working with the NHS, one of the most important things I’ve realised is that decision makers – NHS commissioners or the NHS England board – are people with families and lives. They are not faceless bureaucrats and one of the things that Blesma does very well is to bring the human story to any issue, proving what impact their decisions can have on people and their families.

“I see a great deal of innovation on the horizon, particularly in the way prosthetic devices are connected to the body. Over the next 25 years we will see advances such as genetically programmed field dressings that will repair wounds immediately to save lives and reduce scarring – we really are looking at *Star Trek* stuff. But the important job is to get things right

here and now. We need a more equitable service around the UK so that everyone has access to every piece of equipment that can allow them to live a fulfilling and independent life.

“Every day I see people with limb loss who are highly functioning and highly valuable to society but who are being held back by the function of their prosthetic limb. We want that to change.

“If I had a magic wand, I would like there to be an independent, fully-funded innovation team working to research the best technology and apply it to Blesma Members and the wider public. But we cannot just sit around and wait for the future, we have to make sure people get the help they need now.

“I give a lot of talks on behalf of Blesma and I always say that the Association doesn’t look after heroes, it looks after people who do heroic things every day. And that is what I enjoy most about this job; seeing how people pick themselves up every morning and, if they are struggling to keep themselves up, Blesma is there to help them. Seeing people on some of their most difficult days and being able to help them have their best day is a privilege.”

**If you have a question or would like advice on any prosthetics issues, please contact BSO (Prosthetics) Brian Chenier at Blesma Chelmsford on 020 8548 7080 or at [bsoprosthetics@blesma.org](mailto:bsoprosthetics@blesma.org), or visit [www.blesma.org](http://www.blesma.org)**



**Top: Darren Fuller has become the first veteran to receive a 3D-printed Hero Arm**



Chris hopes to be the first one-armed racer at the Isle of Man TT



## Chris has an ambition to help amputees ride

**O**ne-armed motorcyclist Chris Ganley is training to become a motorcycle instructor. Chris, who lost his left arm above the elbow in a motorcycle accident in 2014, plans to help people with injuries get on a bike for the first time.

“It’s always been a plan of mine to help people who have a disability and don’t think it’s possible to ride a motorbike,” said Chris. “I already have one bike that has been adapted to allow someone with an arm injury to ride it, but the plan is to have more bikes in the future to cover a range of injuries. I’ll soon be ready to start taking people out on the road – I can’t wait.”

After a successful year competing in the Thundersport GB championship last year,

in which he finished seventh out of 30 riders, Chris is edging closer to his other dream of becoming the first one-armed rider to compete at the Isle of Man TT.

“Last year was a good one with a few podium finishes. As the season went on, I got a lot faster and felt a lot more planted on the bike. I’ve started to get lap times that many other riders can’t match, which has shown me that I need to start focusing on my qualifying more to put me in a better position at the start of a race.

“My aim for 2020 is to complete the last part of my National Race Licence, which will allow me to compete in road racing and get one step closer to my goal of racing at the Isle of Man TT.”



## FULL STEAM AHEAD FOR MARK'S MODEL RAILWAY MAN CAVE

MODEL RAILWAY ENTHUSIAST MARK Bascombe thought his life-long hobby was over when he lost all his fingers, but thanks to Blesma’s support his collection is looking more impressive than ever before.

In 2016, former Fusilier Mark was busy constructing a purpose-built room to house his hobby when he dropped a brick on his hand, losing his three remaining fingers.

“I was gutted! I’d been into model railways since I was three years old but didn’t think I’d be able to continue with the hobby,” said Mark, who initially lost both his legs and a number of fingers as a result of frostbite and Buerger’s disease. Mark gave up on his beloved hobby until a routine visit from his Support Officer Steve Fraser in May 2018.

“Steve is my hero. Once he saw the building, he spearheaded a project to get funding that would allow me to finish the job. He also put me in touch with the Bentley Model Railway Group in Calne, who showed me different ways that I could operate the layout without fingers.

“I have to use some unorthodox methods, like using my chin, belly and the palms of my hands to cut parts and build the kit, but I’m adapting!”



Words: Jessica Mackinnon





But Sally's life took an even more devastating turn when she lost both her parents, following which she developed anorexia.

"The more weight I lost the better I felt," she said, "but it eventually led to a spell in a coma, three years in an eating disorder unit, and almost cost me my life. I survived on nutrition drinks for more than 10 years."

But in November 2017, Sally met Hazel, a Care Support Enabler, who has helped her turn her life around, partly by introducing her to swimming. Sally went swimming last May for the first time since her initial injury 30 years ago, and the impact of the sport on her physical and mental wellbeing since has been nothing short of colossal.

"I was terrified to get into the water at first," said Sally. "I couldn't even float because the missing limb affected my buoyancy; I was like a ball rolling over! But the feel of the water helped with my joints and I quickly began to realise that swimming might be an activity that I could enjoy without being in pain. Now, I can do more in the water than I can out of it!"

After that first day, Sally went home to watch YouTube videos to learn how to swim as an amputee, before her Support Officer Steve Fraser introduced her to Paralympic swimmer David Hill.

"My swimming was improving but I was still struggling to swim in a straight line, which is where David was able to help," said Sally. "I'm better at backstroke and freestyle than breaststroke, but I'll get there eventually." Last September, Sally entered her first competition, and returned home a champion with four medals and a trophy. "I quite like how winning feels," she said afterwards. "Bring it on!"

Eager to become a better athlete, Sally has now joined a gym and is beginning to fuel her body with the nutrition she needs to become a stronger and faster swimmer.

## A stroke of good fortune has changed Sally's life

Swimming is helping to transform the life of one injured veteran. In 1989, Sally Cranmer was serving with the Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps, and was firmly on course to become a military surgeon, when her ambition was brought to an abrupt end.

Sally tore ligaments in her foot during a training exercise and although she fought

for four years to save her leg, she eventually made the very difficult decision to amputate it below the knee.

"The injury put paid to my career. My leg was dying right in front of me. I developed severe depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, as well as Complex Regional Pain Syndrome and Neutropenia. My parents became my carers," said 54-year-old Sally.

## THEY'RE A FOUR TO BE RECKONED WITH

Three Members and one Blesma fundraiser have been nominated in the Soldiering On Awards in recognition of their achievements.

Lee Spencer (right) who rowed solo across the Atlantic Ocean, has been nominated for the Inspiration Award, Michael Lewis has been put forward for stepping into the ring to compete in white collar

boxing events, and James Rose has been nominated after becoming the first double amputee to summit Mount Kilimanjaro unaided.

Meanwhile, Blesma fundraiser Jody Jones will battle it out for the Sporting Excellence Award. Jody, who swam the English Channel in aid of Blesma last year while having treatment for Stage 4

cancer, received the news of her nomination whilst having a blood transfusion.

"I am humbled to be a 2020 Soldiering On Awards finalist for my Channel swim," she said. "Thanks to those who nominated me and who gave blood so I can be well!"

The award winners will be announced at a gala dinner and awards ceremony which will be held on 24 April.





Graeme 'Billy' Billington is the star of a new BBC2 TV show



Words: Jessica Mackinnon Photography: GW Productions Ltd / BBC



## OWEN PICKS UP SNOWBOARD GOLD IN COPPER MOUNTAIN

BLESMA-SPONSORED SNOWBOARDER Owen Pick (above right) is the Dew Tour Adaptive Banked Slalom Champion. The win at the event in Colorado in February marked Owen's first gold medal in a major contest.

"Winning gold was pretty rad, especially at Dew Tour because it is an invite-only competition that features some of the top adaptive snowboarders in the world," said 28-year-old Owen.

Despite heavy snowfall the night before the competition, Owen finished 1.56 seconds ahead of second place Matti Suur-Hamari from Finland in the men's class.

"The weather conditions were terrible; a metre of snow fell overnight and buried the course. Officials had to rebuild much of it in just a few hours, but the fresh snow made the run mega-soft, so it became a super-technical race," said Owen. "I tried to take the course as gently as possible; loads of pressure would have meant sinking and coming to a complete stop!"

Owen was just 18 years old when he was injured serving in Afghanistan with the Royal Anglian Regiment. He battled for 18 months to keep his leg before undergoing amputation in August 2011, after which he took part in a Blesma activity and tried snowboarding for the first time.



## Mechanic turns into TV star in *The Speedshop*

Blesma's Graeme 'Billy' Billington has put his skills as a mechanic to the test on a new prime-time TV programme. BBC2's *The Speedshop* follows custom motorbike and car builder Titch Cormack and his team (including mechanic and ex-Tank Regiment commander Billy) as they take on a range of challenges to convert broken and battered vehicles into beautiful, bespoke machines.

Billy (pictured above) began working at the real-life bike workshop in Poole, Dorset three years ago, shortly after ex-military man Titch opened the garage for business.

"A producer visited the garage one day because he'd heard about the work we were doing," said Billy, who also races in enduro motorcycle events. "When they started filming they just told us to do what we normally did at work, but said they'd be pointing a camera at us! Lots of people have got in touch to say how much they love the show, so hopefully more will come from it."

Billy, whose right arm was paralysed after he was blown up whilst on operations in Afghanistan, decided to retrain as a mechanic following his medical discharge from service.

"I've always been passionate about motorbikes and when I was discharged I knew I wanted to work with them in some way. I went to college for a couple of years to gain a qualification because I was worried that I wouldn't get a job in the industry without something that proved I was able to be a mechanic regardless of my disability."

The pilot episode, which aired in January, followed the team as they built an adapted motorcycle for amputee paratrooper and Blesma Member Chris Duggan. The team modified a Honda FX650 Vigor to help Chris ride across the Alps.

"The bike is awesome as it's a one-off build," said Chris. "It looks iconic and it's a beautiful bike to ride, too. I was actually surprised by how good it turned out!"





## Africa's highest summit no match for Blesma duo

**E**arlier this year, double amputees Justin Davis and Hari Budha-Magar (above left and right respectively) successfully scaled to the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro. The pair joined forces to climb the world's highest free-standing mountain in aid of Make-A-Wish Foundation UK. It took them six days to scale the 5,895-metre peak.

Hari and Justin both served in Afghanistan; Hari with the Royal Gurkha Rifles and Justin with the Rifles, and both lost their legs above the knee in IED strikes.

"Reaching the highest point in Africa was a truly humbling experience," said Justin. "The first four days were easy compared to the 12-hour overnight summit attempt.

For that final part of the climb we set off at 10pm and reached the summit at 10am the following morning. It took unrelenting effort, physical endurance and extreme mental resilience!"

Kilimanjaro is not the only mountain the pair plan to summit. Justin is getting ready to climb Mount Elbrus in Russia in July while Hari is working towards scaling Mount Everest in 2021.

"We took on Kilimanjaro to test our mind, body, emotions, kit, equipment, technology, team and limit," said Hari. "Being double above-knee amputees, Justin and I had to focus on every single step. Afterwards, every part of our body was painful."

## 60,000 FOOTBALL FANS CHEER ON THE ASSOCIATION

Blesma's strong partnership with the West Ham United Foundation entered its fourth year with a show of support at West Ham's match against Liverpool in January.

The latest collaboration saw Member Ashley Hall stand pitchside before kick-off to tell 60,000 West Ham and Liverpool fans about the work of Blesma and how the Association supported him during his time of need. For the first time, younger Blesma supporters also took part during the match as West Ham mascots.

While the tie ended in defeat for the Hammers, the collection was a success as generous fans donated almost £300.

"At Blesma, we are extremely proud of our partnership with West Ham United," said Mike Allen, Corporate Partnerships Manager at Blesma. "We have received support in many areas over the years which has proved invaluable to our Members whilst also raising much needed awareness of our cause. We are looking forward to working more closely with the West Ham Foundation in the future."

The match was the club's latest show of support for the Association, with past events including a Members' visit to the team's training ground, a Remembrance Day ceremony, and awareness raising at a number of previous matches.



## HOT-SHOT LESLEY TARGETS 2020 PARALYMPIC SELECTION

A FORMER ROYAL MILITARY Policewoman who missed out on selection for the Paralympics in 2016 because of injury is hoping to make a comeback at this year's Games in Tokyo.

Lesley Stewart from Perthshire, Scotland sustained a back injury 16 years ago during a combat fitness test. The incident resulted in a brain injury and ultimately led to the amputation of her left

leg in 2007. Shortly after that, Lesley was diagnosed with an intensely painful condition known as dystonia.

After two agonising years having to live with immense pain, Lesley underwent Deep Brain Stimulation; an operation to implant a neurostimulator and electrodes which then send electrical impulses to specific areas of the brain.

During her rehabilitation at Headley Court in 2010, Lesley discovered a talent and passion for target shooting. Now, a decade later, she is hoping to battle it out for a qualifying place for the Tokyo Games.

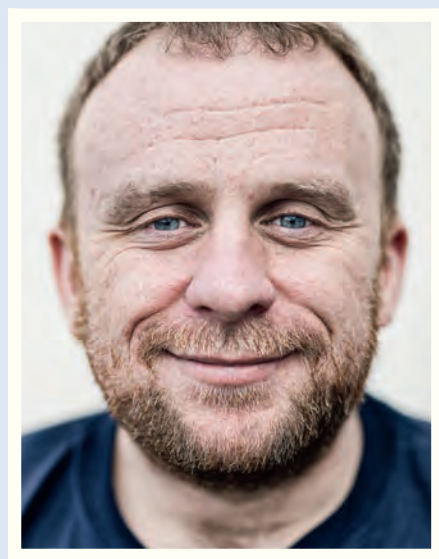
"In early 2016, I got an infection in my stump which eventually led to my leg having to be amputated higher up. That meant I missed out on selection

for Rio and I was gutted," said Lesley. "After taking three years away from the sport, I returned to it last February. Since then I've worked my way back up to the National Academy, which is one level below the World Class programme. My scores have been good, so although the long-term goal is the Paris Games in 2024, Tokyo may be possible."



In the spotlight

# Jack Cummings



**J**ack Cummings was part of a Royal Engineers bomb disposal team when he was injured by an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) in 2010, losing both his legs above the knee. “A week after getting my GCSEs, I began my career as a soldier at the Junior College in Harrogate. My dad had been in the Royal Signals, but he advised me to join the Royal Engineers. I liked the fact that you could get civilian qualifications in the Engineers, and so I trained as an electrician. But after training, we were told that if we weren’t going the Para or Commando route, we would be going into bomb disposal because the role was undermanned and Afghanistan was kicking off.

“I suppose the job chose me, but I really enjoyed it. It was packed with adrenaline and I deployed on my first tour of Afghanistan when I was just 19. The IEDs were all made of metal back then so were quite easy to find with our metal detectors. Looking back I was naive, but I was doing proper soldiering; we were on the ground so much that our beards grew out.

## A WHOLLY DIFFERENT EXPERIENCE

“When I went back to Afghanistan in the summer of 2010 the threat had totally changed. The Taliban had realised that it had been too easy for us to detect the IEDs so they were now much smaller, with less metal in them. Service personnel were getting killed every day.

“I was injured on 14 August 2010. I was 22 years old. I can’t remember anything about what happened but have been told that I’d been searching an area when an IED went off. I landed face down. My team commander thought I was dead. The guys on the ground applied tourniquets and kept me conscious until the emergency response team got there.

“I came very close to dying. The doctors didn’t think I’d make it, and when my mum and dad got the dreaded knock on the door they were told to just pack a weekend bag because they would be coming to say goodbye. It must have been devastating for them.

“I was in a coma for 30 days, then in intensive care for six months. When I woke up, what had happened didn’t kick in because I was groggy from medication. It wasn’t until a week or so later, when I was able to

talk to my dad, that I realised the extent of my injuries. He’s ex-Army, a man’s man, but when I asked him if I’d lost my legs he started to cry. I’d never seen him in tears before. That’s when I realised I wasn’t dreaming.

“I’ve had loads of operations since – too many to count. At the start, I was in and out of theatre a lot. I went to Headley Court in February 2011 and was there for three-and-a-half years. My rehab was slow; at first I used an electric wheelchair, then a manual one. I was given prosthetics, but because my injury is through the pelvis on one side that didn’t work. I had to relearn everything – how to shower, drive a car with adaptations, use the toilet...

## FEELING LUCKY TO BE ALIVE

“I’d left home at 16, so I wanted my independence back. I didn’t want my mum and dad around 24/7. Headley Court was a long slog, but by May 2014 I was ready to move on. I was medically discharged from the Army and left Headley. Mentally, I just got on with things. More than anything, I felt lucky to be alive. Talking through stuff keeps you positive. I met a Special Forces guy who’d been paralysed when he was shot through the neck. He was getting on with his life so I thought I should, too. I’m independent, I got married in 2017, I have so much to live for.

“Blesma was there for me right from the start and has been really helpful ever since. After I was discharged I went on a Blesma skiing trip, which was fantastic, and the Association got me a really good wheelchair. I took part in last year’s London Marathon to raise a few quid for the charity and I really enjoyed it, although the training was hard! I finished in just over four hours and raised more than £3,000.

“I’ve recently taken part in Making Generation R. I’d done a few talks before using PowerPoint and photos, but the programme really taught me how to keep people’s attention. The training was very intense – listening to fellow Members’ stories was an emotional experience, but so inspiring. Now, I’m enjoying the gift that is life, and sharing that with my wife, Sarah. We’ve been through hell, so now we want to enjoy life together.”

“  
**MY DAD’S  
EX-ARMY,  
A MAN’S  
MAN, BUT  
WHEN I  
ASKED HIM  
IF I’D LOST  
MY LEGS  
HE BEGAN  
TO CRY.  
I’D NEVER  
SEEN HIM  
IN TEARS  
BEFORE**

”



## Driving ambition

How one Member keeps on trucking (p36)



Words: Nick Moore Photography: Andy Bate



## Activities 2020

# Get out and active in 2020

Blesma is offering its Members the chance to try more activities than ever – all for free! Here's what's coming up in the next few months. Apply now by downloading the Blesma Connects app, by emailing Emily on [meo@blesma.org](mailto:meo@blesma.org), or by calling her on 020 8548 7094.



### Turn to Starboard Sailing

**Location:** Falmouth

**Date:** 26-31 July

**Application deadline:** 15 April

A chance to sail the Cornish coast. You will get an introduction to sailing, learn to work as a team, be taught important skills such as navigation, and experience life on the seas.

**Who can take part?**

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

### Open Water Lake Swimming

**Location:** Slovenia

**Date:** 08-14 August

**Application deadline:** 01 May

Located at the junction of the Alps, the Mediterranean and the Pannonian Plain, Slovenia will surprise you with its diversity

and lush natural beauty. It has an idyllic landscape and is known as 'the land of pure water', making it perfect for this four-day open water swimming trip. This holiday adventure will take Members to Lake Bled, Lake Bohinj, the Soca River and the Triglav National Park. This is a coached event sure to improve Members' stroke, fitness and wellbeing in the pristine waters of the Slovenian Lakes.

**Who can take part?**

There will be two swims totalling between 4km and 5km each day. It is not compulsory to finish the swims on each occasion, but you are advised to work towards this to improve your swimming strength. Wheelchairs will be accommodated to the lakes, although be aware it may be difficult. We will work to ensure everyone enters the water together.

**Requirements:**

You will need to attend at least one training session to prove you can swim approximately one mile. You will need a triathlon wetsuit, which will help with buoyancy and warmth, to complete the training phase. However, the water should be warm in Slovenia.

### Family Glamping Weekend

**Location:** Brampton, Cumbria

**Date:** 15-19 August

**Application deadline:** 15 May

Engage with other Members and their families, and share in the friendships our Members enjoy whilst being in the great outdoors. Spouses, partners, carers, children and grandchildren are all welcome.

**Who can take part?**

Any Member with a family of between two



To apply for a place email [meo@blesma.org](mailto:meo@blesma.org) call 020 8548 7094 or use the **Blesma Connects** app



and five members (eg. Member + up to four others). Please note: the pods and surrounding areas are not entirely wheelchair accessible.

## SR Handcycle

**Location:** Vienna to Budapest

**Date:** 27 August - 06 September

**Application deadline:** 01 June

This is one of the most popular family cycle routes in Europe, so is mostly flat and traffic-free. The six-day ride will take in more than 200 miles and three capital cities; Vienna, Bratislava and Budapest. The route will take in lowland forests, traditional villages, castles, Roman ruins, and very diverse flora and fauna. The route lends itself to a challenge ride specifically for hand bikes and recumbents.

**Who can take part?**

Any Member who owns a recumbent or a handcycle.

**Requirements:**

You must be able to cycle at least 20km a day.

## Couples' Weekend

**Location:** London

**Date:** 28-31 August

**Application deadline:** 15 May

A weekend break for Members and their spouse/partner to explore the city, enjoy a show, and socialise with other Members and their spouses.

**Who can take part?**

Any Member and their spouse/partner.

## Challenge Aspen Military Opportunities (CAMO)

**Location:** Colorado, USA

**Date:** 30 August - 08 September

**Application deadline:** 15 May

This multi-activity expedition is hosted by Challenge Aspen Military Opportunities in Colorado. It includes six days of activities in the famous Rocky Mountains. Past events have included white water rafting on the Colorado River as well as archery, horse riding, climbing, hillwalking, fishing, exploring old silver mines, downhill biking and much more. There will also be plenty of time to enjoy the great outdoors, socialise, and understand just how much you are capable of doing.

**Who can take part?**

Open to most Members. The team in America do their best to get every Member active and involved in all the activities. Please contact the Activities Team if you would like more details.

**Requirements:**

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

*To apply for a place call Emily on 020 8548 7094, email [meo@blesma.org](mailto:meo@blesma.org), or use the Blesma Connects app*



## Remembrance Weekend

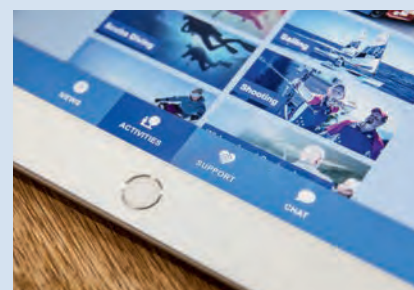
**Location:** The Cenotaph, London

**Date:** 07-08 November **Application deadline:** 01 July

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

**Who can take part?** Any Member.

## NEWS BRIEFS



## BOOK YOUR ACTIVITIES ON THE BLESMA CONNECTS APP

Signing up to Blesma Activities has never been easier because you can now book your place on the Blesma Connects app.

The Activities tab at the bottom of the screen (see picture above) lets you view the entire Activities Calendar, filter out options that aren't of interest to you, and apply for those that are. You can even choose to have information and reminders sent directly to your smartphone or tablet.

Rather than having to fill out forms for each event, the app saves your details and sends them straight to the Activities Team. You can then track the progress of your applications and as soon as the participants have been selected, they will be added to a group.

This gives everyone the chance to get to know each other, receive updates, and share information such as accessibility, timings and planning before the event. And the chat threads continue after the trip so you can share photos and memories, and keep in touch.

Activities will still be publicised in the magazine and Bulletin, on the website, and via BSOs and Outreach Officers as well as on the new app. And don't worry, you can always still apply for an activity by calling the Activities Team on 020 8548 7094 or by emailing them on [meo@blesma.org](mailto:meo@blesma.org).

*Get connected! Download the brand-new Blesma Connects app today from the App Store or Google Play*

## 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](mailto:editor@blesma.org)





Jonny with his wife Lauren and daughter Amalie

the Association spearheaded a project to revamp the Holloways' house and garden.

The stairs and hallways have now been widened for wheelchair accessibility, while a wet room and drop curb have been added for Jonny's needs and have improved access to the garden. After 24 months of renovation work, the house was finished in December in time for the arrival of Maverick.

"The adaptations have been discreetly but effectively done, which is great for me being in my late twenties," said Jonny. "You don't walk into the house and think 'disability'. It was incredibly reassuring to know the work would be done in time for the arrival of baby number two. It means I can get around the house with ease which has made all our lives easier!"

"Without Kev Long, my Support Officer, the adaptations would have taken much longer. Kev played a vital part throughout the process, helping with all sorts of building and funding issues. Whenever we had an issue, Blesma was there to step in and rectify the problem. The Association's help made it easier to sort out the contracts to get the accessibility I needed within the house and garden."



## Help with home means Jonny can help at home

**H**ousing adaptations funded by several charities are enabling injured veteran Jonny Holloway to fulfil his role as a young dad. When Jonny's left leg was amputated below the knee in 2016 his home, where he lives with wife Lauren, three-year-old daughter Amalie and four-month-old son Maverick, was unfit for a wheelchair.

"I work full time and am standing up all day. When I get home, I want to take my prosthetic off and rest my leg for the next day," said Jonny. "But I couldn't use my wheelchair around the house, and I wasn't much help using crutches. It was difficult."

Eager to help Lauren look after their daughter, Jonny turned to Blesma and

## "IT'S ONLY A GLIMPSE OF WHAT'S NEXT" SAYS BRUCE

DOUBLE AMPUTEE BRUCE Falkenberg has found a new lease of life thanks to wheelchair rugby. Bruce served with the Royal Regiment of Wales for 16 years, during which time he was deployed to Kosovo and Iraq. Nerve damage and a series of injuries to his feet led to complications which resulted in the below-knee amputation of his legs in 2013 and 2015.

Bruce discovered his passion for wheelchair rugby after visiting his local team, the Ospreys.

"I visited a team training session and watched them play before chatting to the coach," said Bruce. "I had a whizz around on one of the chairs and I was hooked! It's a complex game

with lots of tactics, but I've got to grips with it. I play on Tuesdays for four hours and lose myself. It's fantastic – almost like therapy."

Keen to improve his skills and ability, Bruce wanted to get his

own equipment, which is where Blesma comes in. "Every rugby wheelchair is individually designed, so I was having to wedge myself into a small spare chair the team had," said Bruce.

"Getting access to my own bespoke, made-to-measure chair with the help of Blesma has been instrumental in changing my game."

The Ospreys are coached by Paul Jenkins, who also coaches Team UK's Invictus Games squad. He encouraged Bruce to take part in the Invictus trials, which led to him being selected for this year's Games in The Hague.

"Unfortunately, I picked up a shoulder injury during the trials and decided to pull out of the squad," said Bruce, "but being part of a team once again gives me the sense of family that I had when I served. I took up wheelchair rugby to pass the time and it led to Invictus – it's only a glimpse of what's next."



Bruce on a recent Blesma cycling event





## Stuart aiming for a first in British Touring Cars

**A**mputee veteran Stuart Gibbs has plans to become the first amputee to race in the British Touring Car Championship. Stuart began a two-year programme in the JCW Mini Challenge in 2017 that saw him learn race craft and get used to the car in the first year before he started racing in year two.

Stuart completed the two years of training and one-to-one mentoring, and signed with JamSport Racing for the 2019 season.

"I have always loved motorsport and competed in rally cross when I was based in Germany in the Forces," said Stuart, who served in the Light Infantry for nine years. "When I became an amputee, I thought I'd see how far I could take it.

"Last year, my confidence increased and I got a lot quicker. I'm in my fourth season

now, I've learned a lot, and that shows in my lap times."

Stuart, who lost his right leg below the knee in a road traffic accident in 2012, is currently the only driver racing in the JCW Mini Challenge who uses a prosthetic leg without any modifications to the car.

Next year, the championship will act as a support race to the British Touring Car Championship, taking Stuart closer to his ultimate goal.

"This season is massive for me. Every race will be in front of 30,000 fans, and two races will be shown live on ITV4. The team and I think this is our year for podiums!"

**Stuart is looking for sponsors for this season. For more, contact him on 07972 262757 or visit [www.sgibbsracing.com](http://www.sgibbsracing.com)**

## WWII VETERAN MARRIED FOR 75 YEARS

In January, Blesma helped Member Ken Foster (97) and his wife Vera (92) celebrate their 75th wedding anniversary by organising a reception, hosted by Sheffield's Lord Mayor in the city's Town Hall. The couple feared they would never see each other again when Ken deployed for the D-Day invasion. He was shot on Sword Beach during Operation Overlord.

"I was unlucky," recalls Ken, who only had thoughts for Vera while he was recovering from amputation; "I didn't mind losing my leg, but I couldn't cope with the thought of losing Vera."

Three quarters of a century later, the couple celebrated their 75th wedding anniversary with guests that included Blesma Members and staff, as well as serving personnel from 4th Battalion The Yorkshire Regiment. To mark the occasion, Blesma presented the couple with an engraved bowl and Captain Malcolm Birkett MBE of Burma Coy presented Ken with a Regimental cap badge plaque to acknowledge his service in WWII.



## NEWS BRIEFS

### SHONA SHINES IN HER FIRST SEASON AS AN ALPINE SKIER

Shona Brownlee has bagged a haul of medals in her first international season as an Alpine ski racer. Shona, who serves with the Central Band of the Royal Air Force, won gold for the first time at the Swiss National Championships in January. A second gold quickly followed at the same meet before Shona collected two golds and a silver at the Europa Cup finals in Zagreb, and another silver at the Croatian National Championships.

"It's a great feeling to know that I have improved since the start of the season. I had no expectations, so winning medals was an unexpected bonus," said Shona, whose right leg was amputated in 2012 following an injury sustained in 2018.

Shona will now continue to train with the Armed Forces Para-Snowsport team in Switzerland before competing at the British Championships and the World Para-Alpine Skiing races in Liechtenstein.



### TUGELA TEN ARE READY FOR AN EPIC ADVENTURE

A team of wounded, injured, and sick serving personnel and veterans will set off on an epic voyage along South Africa's Tugela River in April.

The 'Tugela Ten' are set to climb, trek, canoe and cycle along the largest river in KwaZulu-Natal Province before attending battlefield tours of Majuba, Rourke's Drift, Spionkop and Colenso, where they will lay wreaths on behalf of Blesma and a number of other military charities.

The team includes Blesma Members Carl Anstey, Louis Farrell, Craig Howorth, Ray Priest, Dominic Hagans, Martin Hailstone and Oscar Churton. They plan to raise funds for an HIV and Aids hospital at Tugela Ferry as well as for the Defence Medical Rehabilitation Centre Benevolent Fund and UK charity Heads Together.



# OBITUARIES

## *Those we have lost*

### Arthur Dennis Bomber

08 July 1919 - 25 December 2019

WORLD WAR II VETERAN ARTHUR Dennis Bomber has passed away at the age of 100. Arthur was born on 08 July 1919. His parents separated when he was three years old, and both he and his brother Jim spent a period of time in a children's home before being raised by their maternal grandmother.

On 15 January 1942, 22-year-old Arthur was called up for service and joined the Royal Berkshire Regiment. He was given a 48-hour pass later in the year to marry his sweetheart, Floss. After training, he was sent to India and saw action on The Arakan Front before his regiment was sent to Kohima to relieve the Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment, who had managed to halt the Japanese advance.

On 23 April 1944, Arthur was badly wounded in battle, suffering a gunshot wound to his left leg. He was given the last rites by a chaplain, but survived and left India in July 1944. Due to his injury, Arthur was discharged from service in September 1944 in the rank of Corporal.



His health suffered as a direct result of his injuries and, two years later, he made the decision to amputate his leg below the knee. Arthur became a Blesma Member in 1946.

Before the war, Arthur had trained as a plumber, but when he returned the only job he was offered was as a lavatory attendant. He eventually got a job with a building firm and was able to work as a plumber. He never learned to drive, so would ride to work on his bike until he retired at the age of 62.

Arthur and Floss had one son, Keith, who was born in 1945 and who followed his dad's example and served his country. Arthur and Floss spent 70 years happily

married before Floss sadly died in 2012. Arthur, a native of Kent, moved to Northern Ireland in 2015 to live with his son.

In November 2018, Arthur gave a helping hand to Blesma Member Bryan Phillips's fundraising campaign to mark the centenary of the end of WWI by laying a wreath at Greyabbey Church War Memorial (pictured above, Arthur centre).

On 08 July 2019, Arthur celebrated his 100th birthday surrounded by friends and family as well as Outreach Officer Fiona Morrison. Arthur is survived by his son Keith, grandchildren James and Jessica, and great-grandchildren, Jake and Jethro.

### Those who have passed away

November 2019 - February 2020. May they rest in peace.

Anderson G	RAF	HQ	17/12/2019
Bomber A	Royal Berkshire	HQ	25/12/2019
Bright R	RAOC	HQ	03/11/2019
Burgoyne E	Royal Irish Rangers	HQ	08/12/2019
Cannon D	RAF	HQ	31/12/2019
Chang R	RADC	HQ	12/02/2020
Clarke B	RAMC	HQ	10/01/2020
Dyche D	Royal Signals	HQ	February 2020
Horwood D	Royal Berkshire	HQ (E Berks)	28/11/2019
Jeffery S	Royal Marines	Portsmouth	12/12/2019
Lackie A	REME	HQ	04/11/2019
McMeechan C	Parachute Regiment	HQ	February 2020
Mulhern J	Royal Signals	HQ	05/02/2020
Norman S	RAOC	HQ	February 2020
Osborne C	REME	Southampton	08/01/2020
Pratt S	Royal Signals	HQ (Portsmouth)	25/12/2019
Prince D	RAF	HQ	16/12/2019
Squires P	Mercian Regiment	HQ	January 2020
Streeter J	RAF	HQ	24/02/2020
Tubb D	RAF	HQ	23/12/2019
Webb R	King's Royal Rifle Corps	HQ	11/11/2019
Wood T	RASC	HQ	02/02/2020





 **YOUR QUESTIONS**

# Your Questions Answered

The Association receives a wide variety of questions and queries from the membership. Several of the most common will be answered in the magazine on a regular basis

**A**s a Member's Association and charity, Blesma is always delighted to hear from all its stakeholders, particularly from the membership. Blesma exists to support its Members, who are the focus of all that the Association does. The fact that 87 pence of every pound spent by Blesma goes to directly supporting its beneficiaries underlines this approach.

Since the last issue of the magazine Blesma has received a number of questions and queries from individuals. Some of these questions may also be on the minds of other Members, so here are the answers to a couple...

**Q** What are the rules regarding membership of Blesma for those who have lost the use of limbs?

**A** Blesma has supported non-amputees for many years. The rules of the Association allow membership to all those who, whilst serving or as a result of Service in any branch of HM Forces or Auxiliary Forces:

- *Have lost a limb or an eye*
- *Have permanent loss of speech, hearing or sight of an eye, or use of a limb*

Up until June 2016 Blesma did not support those with loss of use of limb who had served but were injured after Service. Due to the anomaly that a veteran can lose a limb outside Service for non-attributable reasons and join Blesma, but a veteran who loses the use of a limb outside Service for non-attributable reasons could not, the rules of the Association were changed.

The changes were discussed by the Board of Trustees in December 2015 and voted on at the AGM in June 2016, where there were only two votes against from the membership. The Articles of Association and Rules were adjusted and adopted in 2016 to cover injury suffered post-Service:



**Rule 2.2 (b).** All ex-Service men and women, who served in any Branch of HM Forces or Auxiliary Forces, who have lost a limb or an eye, or the use of a limb through traumatic incident, other than through Service-related causes.

**(c).** All men and women of civilian status and all ex-Service men and women, who lose a limb or suffer loss of use of limb, in exceptional circumstances, subject to approval of the Trustees.

All applications for membership of the Association are checked for proof of service and eligibility.

**Q** What is the role of the Board of Trustees and how do they work with the staff that Blesma employs?

**A** Blesma is both a charity and an Association, and as such is responsible to its Members as well as to charity law and regulation. The Board of Trustees has the overall responsibility for governing the organisation, as well as overseeing and controlling its management. The

membership of Blesma acts to appoint Trustees who demonstrate values such as honesty and integrity, and who are committed to the charity's aims and values.

Blesma's Board of Trustees comprises of not less than nine and not more than 11 elected competent persons. Typically, the Trustees will bring skills, experiences, attributes and areas of knowledge in 'hard' skills – legal, financial, communications, management and so on, together with 'soft' skills – such as, encourage team working, problem solving and decision making.

Blesma's Trustees work collectively as a board and take decisions at four formal board meetings each year. Once a decision has been made, all Trustees are bound to support that decision. Blesma aims to have at least 50 per cent of its Board taken from within the membership, although this is not stipulated in the rules. Currently, 60 per cent of Trustees are Members. At present all Blesma's Trustees are unpaid volunteers.

Blesma's Trustee board delegates the day-to-day running of the organisation, along with some decision-making powers, to the staff team via the Chief Executive. Where technical knowledge or professional expertise is not present within the staff, Blesma will utilise other professionals, such as lawyers. Through a range of measures including regular reporting, policies, procedures and meetings, the Board is able to scrutinise the work of the Executive to ensure the strategic aims, values and ethos of Blesma are delivered.

## DO YOU HAVE A QUESTION?

Have you got a question you would like answering? You can write to the Association at 115 New London Road, Chelmsford, Essex CM2 0QT or send an email to [info@blesma.org](mailto:info@blesma.org)



## NEWS ANALYSIS

# What works well in Wales?

A new series of features examines the unique opportunities posed to Blesma by the devolved administrations. First up, we shine the spotlight on Wales



Tom Hall, BSO  
Wales and West

With almost 200 Members scattered across 8,000 square miles, it is little wonder that Blesma Support Officer Tom Hall and Outreach Officer Jason Suller are getting to know the delights and frustrations of the Welsh road networks. Tom has clocked up more than 43,000 miles in just two years looking after the vast Wales and West of England patch, with five-hour car journeys a regular feature of his role supporting Members and advocating for improved services.

Tom, who served a 29-year military career before he took up the role of a BSO, is also on a mission to explain Blesma's purpose to as wide an audience as possible and to petition for greater support across a complex sweep of local authorities, NHS departments, welfare organisations, and the Welsh Government.

"The Government works differently from the set-up in England, so we have to navigate a separate set of regulations and processes," Tom explains. "But Blesma's aim here is the same as everywhere; to get the best for its Members and to help them get the best from life. I support veterans, Widows, widowers and family members. Their ages span from 23 to 98 years old so, just like all BSOs, I have a range of issues to deal with.

"Blesma wanted to focus more on the regions, which was a good call, but when I arrived Blesma wasn't that well-known in Wales. I've worked hard with Jason, my Outreach Officer, to spread the Blesma message to the Welsh Government and the Armed Forces networks, and explain the great work we do for Members."

### MAKING THEMSELVES HEARD

This approach is starting to pay huge dividends, with Blesma's voice now being heard increasingly through the corridors of power and the committee rooms where key decisions are made. Tom served across the world as an officer in the Coldstream Guards and the REME, including a tour of Afghanistan as the Bastion Joint Operating Base Garrison Sergeant Major in 2009.

Working closely with Jason and BSO (Prosthetics) Brian Chenier, he has been wearing out his shoe leather and his voice attending meetings across the country to ensure limbless veterans are heard.

"The healthcare system in Wales has its challenges. The Welsh Health Specialist Services Committee (WHSSC) allocates the funding for prosthetic provision and additional monies for those veterans with Service-attributable amputations. Extra funding requests can take time but the provision process is smoother for established war pensioners and veteran patients.

"Members living with limb loss that is not Service attributable have the same access to prosthetic support and quality of care as any other citizen. An advantage of living in Wales, though, is that the possibility of an enhanced prosthesis is still possible through the Individual Patient Funding Request (IPFR) process, although this must be justified on clinical grounds and the needs of the individual. In most cases, the standard provision is suitable.

"It can be a tricky process in Wales if you have, for example, a non-attributable injury from a road traffic accident or industrial injury after leaving the Services," says Tom. "We're working hard to establish consistency in provision for items such as waterproof limbs for showering, for example, or recreation limbs that can be used for fitness and which can enhance independence and wellbeing. We are also working with WHSSC to develop a funding policy for prescribing microprocessor controlled knees to non-Service attributable amputees, which are currently funded in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, but not in Wales."

Collaborating with the Welsh Government Armed Forces Team, Tom has secured quarterly meetings with WHSSC, Cardiff Artificial Limb and Appliance Centres (ALAC), Blesma and the Welsh Government to discuss issues affecting amputees as well as improvements in policy and funding. Brian Chenier also attends these to add his wealth of experience.

“**BLESMA'S AIM HERE IS THE SAME AS ELSEWHERE IN THE UK; TO GET THE BEST FOR MEMBERS AND HELP THEM GET THE BEST FROM LIFE**”





Words: Danny Buckland Photography: Shutterstock





**Jason Suller**  
Outreach Officer  
Wales and West

Tom has developed excellent working relationships with the three NHS Limb Centres in Wales and can help Members get what they need. Where necessary, he will involve BSO (Prosthetics), particularly where there is an opportunity to influence policy changes.

The call for enhanced services as well as access to improved support is being echoed across the Welsh healthcare spectrum and Hannah Blythyn, Deputy Housing and Local Government Minister, recently attended an event at the Wrexham Artificial Limb and Appliance Centre organised by Blesma, where she met Tom and Jason as well as a number of Blesma Members, carers and ALAC staff.

“It gave us a chance to brief Hannah about the specific issues in Wales and she was very responsive, picking up on the issue of microprocessor knees and the reductions in ALAC staff as well as a number of other issues,” says Tom. “She has been in touch since and wants to attend one of our popular Blesma social lunches to follow up on the discussions.”

Tom has made sure that Blesma is involved in, or is represented on, various committees and boards; from the Armed Forces Expert Group of the Welsh Government, which feeds policy back to the UK Government, to cross party groups, local authorities, Armed Forces forums, and the All-Wales Service Charity Group.

## GETTING GROUPS TOGETHER

A crucial part of the mission is the work being done by Outreach Officer Jason who was in the Royal Welsh Regiment for 27 years before working as a Regimental Welfare Officer for a Reserve Unit.

The Welsh Government’s Armed Forces Team has awarded Blesma a grant of £3,000 to deliver social groups throughout the region which help to tackle loneliness and isolation among Members. Jason has developed the growing network of Blesma Social Groups, forming nine which meet regularly.

“My main task is to set up events and activities that bring Members together in a social environment,”

## KEEPING THE COUNTRY CONNECTED

*A team of Blesma Digital Volunteers are helping Members stay in touch with family and friends*

Jason Gill, who served in the RAF and in the Territorial Army with the Royal Engineers, has been putting his skills to work as a Digital Volunteer, helping Members in Wales connect with friends, family and support.

The 49-year-old Blesma Member from Chester, who was paralysed from the waist down in a climbing accident in 1997, is playing a vital role by passing on computer skills and internet advice.

“Helping people learn these skills is rewarding as it can open up a whole new world for them. They can keep in contact with fellow Members and family,” says Jason. “Many older people don’t have much experience with smartphones and the internet, and are amazed when I show them what is possible. They’re not aware they can have information such as travel and the weather at their fingertips, or get in contact with friends or their Support Officer.

“A lot of Blesma Members are grandparents, so being able to FaceTime their family rather than wait for a visit is huge. Their



grandchildren can share photos and videos to show what they are doing at school – it is beneficial for the kids as well as the Members?”

As one of several volunteers his work with Digital Communities Wales complements the launch of the Blesma Connects app and Blesma’s Digital Inclusion Programme by showing Members how digital media and better communication can reduce isolation and loneliness.

“It is fantastic to see Members responding so positively,” says

Jason, who is a wheelchair athlete and keen rally driver. “The sheer volume of information available can often seem daunting to start with, which is why it is important to have help and take it slowly. But with support and guidance from the Association, Members are able to do so much digitally which, in turn, can make such a difference to their lives.”

*Information about getting online with the Blesma Connects app can be found at [www.blesma.org](http://www.blesma.org)*

“  
**WE ARE BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER AS WELL AS FIGHTING FOR THEIR RIGHTS AND PROVISIONS**  
”





says Jason, who lives in Newport with his wife Debbie. “We’ve organised all sorts of events, from pottery and zoo visits to sailing and cycling days, and the feedback has been very positive.

“Wales is a vast area and Members have a range of ages and interests. A lot of the younger ones are cracking on with life, but know we are here if they need us. The best part of the job is bringing people together; particularly those who feel isolated or struggle to get out.”

Tom, who lives near Swansea with his wife Lisa, agrees: “The Blesma Social Groups have allowed many isolated Members to reconnect with each other and with the Association. It’s important to spread the word so we can grow groups and networks. Sometimes, just meeting up for a cup of tea and a chat can give someone a sense of purpose. The social aspect of Blesma’s help and support is important because spending days or weeks at home alone can have an extremely negative impact on someone’s mental and physical health, and that’s when people can start to go downhill.

“We have a number of volunteers in the area who do great work for the Association. We wouldn’t be able to do our jobs effectively without our Welfare Volunteers who touch base with Members and feed back issues. The same goes for the growing number of Digital Volunteers (an initiative started in Wales) who show Members and Widows how to get online, use email, and engage with the Blesma Connects app (see panel, left).

“It’s great to know that we are making progress in Wales when it comes to bringing people together in fellowship as well as fighting for their rights and provisions. These things form the basis of what Blesma is all about, no matter where you happen to live.”

*You can find the contact details for your Blesma Support Officer at [www.blesma.org/blesma-bsos](http://www.blesma.org/blesma-bsos)*

“  
**THE BEST PART OF THE JOB IS BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER; ESPECIALLY THOSE WHO FEEL ISOLATED OR WHO STRUGGLE TO GET OUT**  
 ”

## CASE STUDY STODDARD NICHOLSON



**Former Welsh Guardsman Stoddard Nicholson joined Blesma after a difficult time during which his physical and mental health were affected.**

The 64 year old suffered post traumatic stress after being blown up in the 1974 Guildford pub bombings. Back then, he was

a 19-year-old new recruit looking forward to a military life, but he was discharged less than a month later and was left struggling for work and identity.

BSO Tom Hall picked his case up two years ago. Tom joined forces with SSAFA to help Stoddard with his rent arrears, and referred him to the Bulldogs Development Centre – a veterans’ hub in Port Talbot – where he met other veterans. Since then, Blesma has supplied Stoddard with a power-assisted wheelchair and put him in touch with Veterans UK to secure a war pension.


“Stoddard had no on-going support after discharge and had been on a slow slide into poor mental health and an unhealthy lifestyle, which led to a double amputation,” said Tom. “He suffered little physical injury in the bombing but it was the traumatic mental exposure that damaged him. We’ve got him better housing support and he now enjoys lunches with the Swansea Social Group.

“He is happier, more independent, and taking more responsibility now. He’s even asked if he can be helped to walk again using prosthetic legs; something he had given up on a long time ago.”









“  
**WHEN PLAYERS  
GO AT EACH  
OTHER IT CAN  
BE LIKE A SMALL  
CAR CRASH!**  
”

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PARA ICE HOCKEY IS A FAST-PACED, FULL-CONTACT, NO-NONSENSE SPORT PLAYED BY SOME OF THE NICEST PEOPLE YOU'RE EVER LIKELY TO MEET. DON'T BELIEVE US? WHY NOT GIVE IT A GO FOR YOURSELF?

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**T**he rink at iceSheffield is alive with noise, adrenaline and action as the Sheffield Steelkings para ice hockey squad thunders across the ice on double-bladed sleds. The players propel themselves with a pair of sticks; one end spiked for gripping the ice while the other has a blade for hitting the puck. It's quickly apparent that, much like wheelchair rugby, this is a full-contact, no-holds-barred sport that is definitely not for the faint-hearted. It's basically murderball (as wheelchair rugby is affectionately named) but on ice.

And Andrew Mead (left) absolutely loves it! “The top players can reach speeds of up to 30mph, and when you've got two players going at each other it can be like a small car crash!” he says with relish. “It's full on, which is why you need protective gear. It's not too ferocious at club level, but at the national level it can be a bit daunting. I'm much faster on my sled than on my prosthetics, which is partly why it feels so fulfilling after a match. I'm dead on my non-existent feet, but it feels so good!”

Andrew, 55, is a relatively recent convert to para ice hockey, but has improved so



## PARA ICE HOCKEY

rapidly that he is already being considered for Team GB, with an eye on the Winter Paralympics in Beijing in 2022. If he does make the grade, it will be the latest chapter in something of a remarkable life.

Born in Canada, he moved to Newcastle when he was nine years old (“I got beaten up a lot because of my accent”), before joining the Royal Navy when he was 16. He served as a Radio Operator (Submarines) for seven years and “travelled the world, but didn’t see that much of it because I was underwater.” Leaving the Navy at 23, he went backpacking in Australia and ended up staying for 27 years. During that time he joined an improvisational comedy group, trained as an actor, and ended up performing in more than 250 theatre shows, as well as doing lots of TV and film work. “And before you ask, yes, I have been in *Home and Away!*” he laughs.

In 2016, Andrew came back to the UK, but upon his return his life was almost immediately turned upside down by injury. “I was playing football, we were just silly old guys and the older we got, the lower down the league we went – but we loved playing,” he says. “One day, I was involved in a bad tackle. I broke three toes, but the skin split and I contracted septicaemia.



In the hospital, I was told: ‘You’re going to lose some toes’. Then it became: ‘We’re going to take your feet’. I asked if I could think about it and they replied that if I left it past lunch, they’d have to take my knees as well, so I said go for it! I also lost my little finger on my right hand and the tips of three other fingers. It was horrendous – although the good news is that we won

**Top right: Blesma Member Andrew Mead has only been playing para ice hockey for a year but is already training with Team GB**

the match 3-2, and I scored the winner!” Andrew’s legs were eventually amputated below the knees, but he coped extremely well thanks to being fit, having a number of unique physical skills, and a positive mental attitude. “I’m a fairly easy-going guy so I got my head around it quickly,” he says. “I’d learned circus skills at theatre school, so I could juggle, fire-breathe and stilt-walk. I told the hospital staff that I’d take to my prosthetics pretty quickly because I didn’t think it would be much different from walking on stilts. They thought I was joking, but I was right. As soon as I got my prosthetics, I was up on them, walking around.”

### A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

Andrew recuperated at his sister’s house before getting his own home in Derbyshire, where he met his fiancée, Merle; “a beautiful German woman who works as a BMW mechanic and is a semi-pro footballer.”

It was this sporty union that would eventually guide him towards ice hockey. “Merle wasn’t happy with me just sitting around, so she took me to try some sports,” Andrew recalls. “I tried wheelchair tennis, but I almost fell asleep. I hate wheelchair basketball, and I tried sitting volleyball,













## MEET THE BOSS JAKE OAKLEY

*Jake, 33, is chairman of Sheffield Steelkings – as well as a coach and player for the current national champs*

### How did you get involved with the team?

I had a motorcycle accident in 2005. Thankfully, it wasn't too serious but it meant I couldn't really run anymore. I've always been an ice hockey fan and as soon as I found out para ice hockey was coming to Sheffield, I wanted to get involved. It was a great way to stay fit and give back to the sport I love.

### Is it a tricky sport to learn?

It's difficult to master but it's a sport that you can enjoy straight away. I've not met many people who have come off the ice after a taster session and not loved it. But it takes a few years to get really good. You have to play games, learn to launch a puck and how to push yourself, learn the rules and intricacies of the game. It's a fast-paced contact sport, and very competitive – but in a friendly way.

### How has Andrew settled into the team?

He has only been with us for a year since he came to a 'learn to sledge' session. It's an ideal sport for him – physical but skilful. You have to do a lot with your upper body. He's come on because he likes to be pushed and works hard.

### Have you seen the sport help people?

Mental health is a big thing with this sport. Being on the ice offers you freedom; you can train hard, work up a sweat, everything else is forgotten for a while. The sport gives us a level playing field, and what counts is how hard you work. We have a triple amputee playing, who is doing great.

### And there's also the opportunity to progress to Team GB level...

Exactly. We want to help develop the next generation of GB players. For Service men and women, that's huge. They get to serve their country again, to wear their colours with pride. They've got that grit and determination. We are particularly looking for women players because the International Paralympic Committee wants to add the women's sport to the Paralympics in 2026. If we can get a team together, GB can be there.

### How can Blesma Members get involved?

We're trying to arrange a try-out session soon for Blesma Members. In the meantime, if anyone wants to come to training, they are more than welcome. The first two sessions are free, and we have all the equipment you'll need.



**“WE’VE GOT ABLE-BODIED PLAYERS NEXT TO OTHERS TAKING LIMBS OFF AFTER TRAINING – THAT’S GREAT FOR DISABILITY AWARENESS”**

which I admit was kind of fun. I remember Merle coming home one day and saying: ‘We’re going somewhere tomorrow’. That was when we travelled to Sheffield and met up with Jake Oakley [pictured left] from the Sheffield Steelkings ice hockey team. The rest is history. What really impressed us was that when Merle dropped me at the rink, they said: ‘Hey, don’t you want to stay and play, too?’ So she did.

“You don’t have to have a disability to play at club level, and it’s the most inclusive sport I’ve ever come across – young and older, men and women can all play on the same team. Once you strap yourself into the sled, you’re on a level playing field. And the sport appeals to ex-Service personnel like myself because it’s full contact. The missus and I never argue because if we have a problem at home she can take it out on me on the rink. Her gloves come off!”

Andrew and Merle now play regularly for the Sheffield Steelkings, one of four

UK sides that make up the national league – the others are the Peterborough Phantoms, Manchester Mayhem and Cardiff Huskies. Sheffield have the bragging rights as the current reigning champions, and Andrew is turning into one of their rising stars.

“Being Canadian, I was able to skate before I could walk, so I’ve always loved ice hockey, but anyone can give it a go. You need good hand-eye coordination, but I’ve seen people who have never been on the ice before take to it quickly. The thing I love most is the team spirit, and I’ve never met a nicer bunch of people, especially the volunteers who help to run the team.”

### THE MOST INCLUSIVE SPORT

Andrew has seen up close how the sport can change the lives of those who play it. “I got to grips with having an amputation pretty well,” he says. “I didn’t really grieve about it, I guess I’m just a very pragmatic person. In the hospital I was given a



**“BEING ON THE ICE GIVES YOU FREEDOM. YOU WORK HARD, SWEAT... EVERYTHING ELSE IS FORGOTTEN FOR A WHILE”**

wheelchair and would take myself around the wards talking to people who'd just been injured and trying to cheer them up. But there are definitely other guys on the team who have had their lives turned around for the better by playing hockey.”

Andrew stresses that for those who don't quite fancy the rough and tumble of this sport, just getting involved in a team, or an activity, is the most important thing.

“It can be life changing and can get you away from sitting at home watching TV,” he says. “And I love the fact that the sport is inclusive. In the changing rooms, we've got able-bodied people as well as players who are taking their arms and legs off after the training session – that's great for disability awareness.”

Blesma has played a key part in Andrew's fledgling hockey career. “The Association funded my purpose-built sled, so I can't speak highly enough of Blesma,” he says. “My BSO Sam Wileman came to visit and asked if I needed anything. When I told her that the hockey equipment was kind of expensive, she said: ‘Let's get you sorted.’”

Andrew was so grateful that he named his sled Sam in her honour, and has covered it in Blesma stickers. “She is so proud,” he laughs. “She's never had anything named after her before. She's always asking how Sam is doing. I tell her: ‘Fine!’”

Earlier this year, Andrew was invited to train with Team GB, and is now being touted as a future national player. “I never dreamed that I could be representing my country again,” he says. “It's kind of freaky. People in my village are beside themselves about it, but it hasn't hit me yet.”

It's been a good start to the new decade so far, in fact; Andrew has also just got a new job, and is getting married in July. “I'm as happy as Larry,” he says. But never happier than when he's crashing his sled into someone at 30mph!

**Anyone interested in a taster session with the Sheffield Steelkings can contact Jake on [sheffieldsteelkings@gmail.com](mailto:sheffieldsteelkings@gmail.com)**



## THE FIRST RULE OF ICE CLUB...

### IT'S A GAME OF THREE HALVES

The game comprises three periods, each 15 minutes long. Six players are allowed on the ice at any one time, and a total of 15 players make up a team.

### NEXT GOAL'S THE WINNER

The side with the most goals wins. If there is a tie at full time, the match goes into overtime. If it's still a draw after that, teams face the drama of a penalty shoot-out.

### SPECIALLY DESIGNED SLEDS

Athletes use specially-designed sleds fitted with two blades to move around the ice. They each have two playing sticks, which are used for

pushing – a bit like the ski poles in cross-country skiing – as well as to control and shoot the puck.

### FROM STOCKHOLM WITH LOVE

The sport was invented at a rehab centre in Stockholm, Sweden, in the early 1960s. Originally known as sledge hockey, it was renamed para ice hockey in 2016.

### A PARALYMPIC SPORT

The men's sport made its debut at the 1994 Winter Paralympic Games in Lillehammer, Norway. The International Paralympic Committee is hoping there will be enough women's teams for the 2026 Games in Italy.









# PAIN

*n* – *noun* –

unpleasant feeling caused by injury or trauma

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THE VETERANS' PAIN CLINICS ARE PIONEERING A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO DEALING WITH PAIN RATHER THAN VIEWING IT AS SIMPLY PHYSICAL. COULD THEY HELP YOU?

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**Dominic Aldington is chair of the Medical Advisory Committee for COBSEO and the Surgeon General's Advisor of Veterans' Health**

DICTIONARY DEFINITIONS DON'T DO IT JUSTICE. Pain is a complex condition that is rarely solved simply by an operation or a course of pills. It often confounds conventional medical approaches and requires emotional as well as physical solutions.

Amputees can experience a range of pain symptoms; from Phantom Limb Pain (PLP) and associated pain in the back, neck and shoulders, to pain from their stumps and wounds. The feeling is rarely capped at the dictionary's definition of 'unpleasant' and is more often enduring and corrosive.

Two clinics are pioneering a more holistic approach to dealing with pain; examining both the physical and psychological impacts, and devising tailored strategies to mute or dampen the jagged edges that can destabilise a patient no matter how successful their surgery and wound care might have been.

"Our role is to help people cope with intractable pain, which can be a problem for amputees. Broadly speaking, we look at the physical and emotional components of pain, discuss them and devise techniques to manage them," says clinic boss Dominic Aldington, a pain specialist and consultant anaesthetist who served in the Royal Army Medical Corps for 24 years.

"It is very important that our help is holistic because pain is a holistic problem. It doesn't just 'hurt'; it can ruin a patient's life and the lives of everyone around them," Dominic adds. "We listen and work out what

the problems are, as well as how big they are. It is a case of teasing out the emotional components; the anxiety and the worry. It is incredibly important to understand what pain does to us; how it makes us miserable, isolates us socially, stops us sleeping, and generally frustrates us. Those elements are not usually accounted for because when you see a doctor, they tend to go straight for the drug cabinet. But no drugs are going to address these issues completely and many veterans find it comforting that I have served and so have an understanding of what went before."

## TWENTY YEARS OF EXPERIENCE

Dr Aldington established the pain clinic at Headley Court and now runs pain clinics for veterans at the Chelsea & Westminster Hospital and the King Edward VII Hospital in London. Both are free for veterans.

With more than 20 years of military experience, including postings to Northern Ireland, Kosovo and Iraq, he has a wealth of knowledge from having treated Service personnel across the full spectrum of pain.

"Pain is defined as an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience that bothers us. It limits us and that is crushing. But, really, we don't have enough words for pain," Dominic says. "One of the problems for amputees is that everyone assumes there are attributable issues. Someone might be missing a leg but they could well get back and neck pain simply



## CASE STUDY

### CHARMAINE HEALY

*Having lived with pain for more than a decade, Charmaine has recently been to see Dr Aldington*

Charmaine Healy, who served with the Royal Signals, suffered a life-changing injury that led to an amputation in 2010. She has won silver and bronze medals at the Invictus Games but struggles with pain from eight corrective operations. She has used a TENS machine to deal with Phantom Limb Pain in the past and has recently had a consultation with Dr Aldington.

"I was referred to the Pain Clinic by the surgeon who is going to be doing the next surgery on my leg," says Charmaine. "When I met Dr Aldington he asked me all about my medication and came up with some tweaks that I'm just starting to try. I've had to deal with a lot of Phantom Limb Pain and have other issues with my stump which have been caused by nerve damage and a wound that hasn't healed. Dr Aldington went through my medication and asked me how they were working for me. With one painkiller in particular I told him I didn't know because I'd been on it for so long.

"He's brought the dose of that down and has upped some medication to help me sleep, which is good. He has also put me forward for the Pain Management Course because of the levels of pain I will always have.

"He explained about the emotional side of pain – not the actual pain itself, but how it affects my life. I'm going to deal with the surgeries first and then go on the course, but I felt that it was a positive consultation and he certainly knows his stuff. I feel that I can go and see him again if I need to, which is good to know."



Words: Denny Buckland Photography: Andy Bate

because of the changes to the way they walk or sit. We need a paradigm shift in how we think of pain. We have been taught to believe our drugs work, and if a patient leaves with a prescription for a painkiller they are initially happy. But remember the 'Mars Bar Approach'; if the tablets don't help you work, rest and play you probably shouldn't be taking them."

#### IT IS NEVER JUST AS SIMPLE AS TAKING A PILL

Dr Aldington, who is chairman of the Medical Advisory Committee for COBSEO and the Surgeon General's Advisor of Veterans' Health, believes a fundamental change in how we view pain is needed to promote better coping mechanisms.

"It is never just as simple as taking a pill," he says. "Pain is a problem because the person in pain lets it become one, but that is a tough concept to embrace, particularly when the route we have always taken is that if there is pain, there must be a pill for it.

"Pain is very complex but there is usually something we can do at the clinic to help; it is the helping 'you' that is important. We are not going to be able to get rid of someone's pain but we can help people be people. I think we're bad at recognising the spiritual element – we should not be looking at pain as just physical."

The Veterans' Pain Clinics, which operate on a referral basis from a GP, consultant, charity, Regimental Association, or self-referral use a 'pain inventory'

**"WE NEED A PARADIGM SHIFT IN HOW WE THINK OF PAIN. WE ARE NOT GOING TO BE ABLE TO COMPLETELY GET RID OF SOMEONE'S PAIN, BUT WE CAN HELP PEOPLE BE PEOPLE"**

to assess the all-round impact of the pain, as well as a medication review and guidance to new pathways that can involve talking therapies, online courses and intensive five-day programmes on management techniques.

"The feedback from veterans has been good and if they are prepared to travel to London, it is clear their medication isn't working and a fresh approach is needed," says Dominic. "Outcomes are difficult to assess as I'm not there to reduce pain. I'm there to help people cope with pain better so that it becomes less of a problem.

"I warn my patients that I don't have the authority to tell them what to do. I tell them what the issues are and what solutions might work to allow them to deal with the pain better. We look at the impact someone's pain has on the wider aspects of their life and then we form a plan. People with pain experience misery and frustration from not doing the things they want to – it is not necessarily the amount of 'ouch'. If you could do twice as much with the same amount of 'ouch' then your life would be significantly improved. That is the change of thinking we need to work towards."

**To find out more about the Veterans' Pain Clinics visit [www.kingedwardvii.co.uk/the-charity/veterans-pain-clinic](http://www.kingedwardvii.co.uk/the-charity/veterans-pain-clinic). You can contact the The King Edward VII Hospital clinic on 020 7467 4370 and The Chelsea & Westminster Hospital clinic on 07595 532042 or at [martin@supportingwoundedveterans.com](mailto:martin@supportingwoundedveterans.com)**



# “THERE’S SO MUCH MORE TO LIFE THAN SITTING AROUND THE HOUSE!”

DESPITE THE INTENSE HARDSHIPS OF INJURY AND REHAB, THE HARDEST THING FOR MEMBERS CAN OFTEN BE DECIDING WHAT’S NEXT. DALE LEACH SPOKE TO HIS BLESMA SUPPORT OFFICER AND SET THE WHEELS IN MOTION

**A**fter Dale Leach was injured on operations in Afghanistan, he faced a quandary that will be familiar to many Blesma Members. With his military career cruelly cut short, and dealing with the physical and mental difficulties of amputation, what was he going to do next? “I was discharged from the Army at the end of 2013, and for a while I would just sit around the house, not knowing what to do with myself,” remembers Dale. “I was a mess; some days I wouldn’t even leave my room. My mum was in my ear telling me to look for a job, but I didn’t know where to go. I just stayed inside.”

Blesma’s mission statement is to help veterans live independent and fulfilling lives, often by providing them with challenges and adventure. In Dale’s case, something more straightforward was required to get him feeling positive again: employment. “My mum was getting really worried about me, and I realised that I needed to pull myself together,” Dale admits. “It was

around this time that I spoke with my Support Officer Tom Hall, who offered to help and put me in touch with The Poppy Factory; a charity that helps veterans back into work. Together, they helped me to get my Class 1 driving licence, and now I’m an HGV driver.”

Dale, from Barry Island in Wales, has come a long way since his injury, which saw him on the brink of death in Afghanistan in 2009. “I joined the Welsh Guards in 2003 at the age of 16, and deployed to Iraq, Belize and Bosnia,” he says. “But I was injured soon after going to Afghanistan. We’d carried out a foot patrol to take over a compound one night, and the next day we went out to give fire support in the Jackals. That was when we drove over an Improvised Explosive Device (IED).

“I was up top as a Gunner and was blown out of the vehicle. My only memory is from the day before, playing volleyball in the base, but one of the boys captured the whole thing on a camera mounted to his helmet. It’s strange to watch the video because the first five minutes of footage is just the dust clearing.

“We were parked on the IED for a few seconds and when we moved, it went off. I was blown upwards and my leg was caught between the gun mount and the gun. It was taken straight off, pretty high up. On the film, the boys are trying to get to me, but they’re still getting shot at. You can hear them talking about going to get my leg. I was conscious and apparently said that I didn’t want morphine, and to give it to the lad who was next to me. But once I had that, I was out of it.”

Dale’s cousin, also a soldier, was flown in to see him because the medics weren’t sure if he would make it back from Camp Bastion to the UK alive. “They were actually brushing my teeth so that I didn’t look so bad when my parents saw me!” remembers Dale. After six weeks in a coma in Queen Elizabeth Hospital in



Dedicated dad and driver Dale Leach





Words: Nick Moore Photography: The Poppy Factory





**"I DID FOUR DAYS  
OF DRIVING, AND ON  
THE FIFTH I TOOK  
MY TEST. I PASSED IT  
WITH FLYING COLOURS  
– IT WAS A REALLY  
GOOD FEELING!"**



## “CHAT TO YOUR SUPPORT OFFICER. I ALWAYS USED TO BOTTLE THINGS UP, BUT TALKING ABOUT MY PROBLEMS WITH MY BSO SORTED ME OUT”

Birmingham, Dale regained consciousness in the ambulance on the way to Selly Oak. “The guys in the back wouldn’t tell me what had happened – they said they’d let my parents tell me,” says Dale. “I had about four inches of my left leg remaining, my right heel had been shattered and had needed to be pinned, I’d broken my back in three places, both of my lungs had collapsed, and I’d fractured my skull.”

### MAKING THE DECISION TO GET ON WITH THINGS

Dale spent much of his rehab bouncing between trying to stay positive and feeling utterly bewildered. “When I woke up from the coma, it didn’t really hit me what had happened, and with all the medication I was on, I was all over the place,” he says. “But I have a strong mind and eventually decided that I had to get on with things. I came to realise that I was lucky to be alive. Headley Court was amazing – and I met some of my best friends there – but I had absolutely no idea what to do with my life after I had been discharged.”

Discussions with his Support Officer changed all that – especially when Blesma offered to pay for Dale to get some new qualifications – and he was referred to an employability consultant to discuss his best options.

“I had been a mechanic before joining the Army and had thought about doing that again, but being under a vehicle all day wouldn’t have been good for my back,” he says. “So I thought about driving. I’m obsessed with cars anyway, so getting a job driving an HGV seemed to make sense. They’re all automatic these days, so my injury wouldn’t affect being able to drive.”

“I got my Category C licence through the Army, but lost it after sustaining my head injury so I had to pass that again. Blesma and The Poppy Factory got me through it all. The training was great; I did four days of driving, and on the fifth day I took my test. I passed with flying colours – it was a really good feeling!”

Dale has been on the road for a year-and-a-half now, mainly transporting goods across the Midlands for supermarkets. “It’s been good for me mentally; it’s given me something to do and got me out of the house,” he says. “It has also cleared my head and meant that I’ve not been worrying about silly things.”

Dale is now happy and settled: a dad of three young boys, he does school runs and cooks their meals in between work. He’s also a keen kart racer and is hoping to get involved in motor racing through Blesma soon. He’s been on a Blesma canoe trip to France and the Association has helped with modifications to his house, so he understands the benefits Blesma can bring and stresses that, for any other Member finding themselves in his position, the key is to talk.

“Chat to Blesma and chat to your Support Officer,” he says. “I used to bottle things up, but talking about my problems and worries with my BSO sorted me out. They understand and can help. There’s so much more to life than sitting around the house!”



Blesma helped fund Dale’s driving qualifications, which led to him finding employment as an HGV driver



Words: Danny Buckland. Photography: Shutterstock



# Medicine and Innovation in Conflict

A FASCINATING EXHIBITION AT THE MUSEUM OF MILITARY MEDICINE CHARTS THE ADVANCES IN BATTLEFIELD TREATMENT AND TECHNIQUES

**T**he blunt saw on display at the Museum of Military Medicine may look like it's come straight from a garden shed but it was state-of-the-art battlefield kit in World War I, when military medicine was tested like never before. The atrocities of The Great War still resonate more than a century later, but the horrific events also brought about some of the biggest advances in treating the wounded, with techniques and protocols that endured for decades afterwards.

World War I's conveyor belt of casualties challenged the collective ingenuity of the Royal Army Medical Corps, which had only been formed 16 years earlier, and the Army medical services' response is highlighted in a fascinating exhibition currently running at the Museum of Military Medicine.

*Medicine and Innovation in Conflict* charts the improvements in triage, treatment and battlefield systems that saved record numbers of lives and gave hope to thousands of soldiers who would have certainly perished in earlier conflicts.

"WWI was a key period, a turning point in medical capabilities," says David Wiggins, assistant curator at the museum, which covers military medicine from the English Civil War to current practice. "One of the key aspects was the casualty evacuation chain. It had its origins in the Napoleonic Wars but in WWI they really got it working well – evacuating the wounded through field hospitals and casualty clearing stations with the use of dedicated transport from horses and wagons to hospital barges and trains. This meant that more soldiers



**“THE EXHIBITION SHOWS HOW THE INNOVATIONS DEVELOPED DURING WWI WENT ON TO SERVE THE ARMY SO WELL”**



– particularly amputees, who would have died of their wounds in previous conflicts – survived and were able to return to civilian life after the war.

“This was important not only for survival and recovery, but also as a morale booster as it showed serving soldiers that they would be cared for and that every effort would be made to save them if they were injured.”

### **SAWS, SPLINTS AND SAVING LIVES**

The serrated hacksaw was part of a field kit which included a range of blades and bullet extractors, and is displayed along with wood and corrugated metal mock-ups of field dressing stations. The challenges of evacuating casualties are highlighted by an exhibit of a hospital wagon that would have been pulled through the mud of the Western Front by pairs of straining horses.

“The significant improvements in both the techniques and survival rates seen in World War II were built on the innovations of WWI,” David adds. “We saw the use of mobile X-ray units for the first time, while the Thomas Splint was introduced for leg fractures and reduced mortality rates from 80 to 20 per cent. Versions of it were still being used up until the 1980s.



**Above: a WWI hack-saw that was part of a medic’s field kit and a hospital wagon that would have been pulled by a pair of horses**

“Field surgeons also had chiropody kits, which were kept in hessian wallets and were vital for keeping soldiers on their feet, and they were even equipped with basic dentistry tools because the Dental Corps wasn’t formed until 1921.”

WWI’s demands on improved healthcare are further illustrated by the rise of nurses; from just 300 serving with the British Expeditionary Force in 1914 to 10,000 by 1918. The array of exhibits also includes uniforms, informative displays, and medals which underscore the bravery of the medical teams on the front line: the Royal Army Medical Corps’ 29 Victoria Crosses are only eclipsed by the Royal Engineers (with 41) and the Royal Artillery (with 51). The museum owns 17 of the VCs and its collection also features one of the first WWI prosthetic legs, fashioned in 1917.

“It is essentially tin, wood and leather straps but you can see that it is well crafted,” says David. “The exhibition has been designed to show how military medicine rose to the challenges posed by WWI and how the innovations developed during this period went on to serve the Army so well.”

*Medicine and Innovation in Conflict: The Army Medical Services During WWI is on at the Museum of Military Medicine, Keogh Barracks, Aldershot, GU12 5RQ. The museum is open Monday to Friday and on the first Saturday of the month*







# THIS IS A RACE LIKE NO OTHER

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A TEAM OF BLESMA MEMBERS ARE PREPARING TO PUSH THEIR MINDS AND BODIES TO THE ABSOLUTE LIMIT IN A NON-STOP 3,000-MILE RACE FROM ONE SIDE OF THE USA TO THE OTHER

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## RACE ACROSS AMERICA

**T**he Race Across America, aka RAAM, is billed as ‘The World’s Toughest Bicycle Race’. Covering 3,000 miles, from Oceanside in California on the West coast to Annapolis in Maryland on the East coast, it is a third longer than the Tour de France. It battles up (and races down) 175,000 feet in elevation, and crosses 12 states. It weaves between three mountain ranges – the Sierra Nevada, Rocky and Appalachian – and blisters through the Mojave and Sonoran Deserts, where temperatures can soar above 40°C. And unlike the Tour de France, it’s not a stage race: once the starting pistol fires and the adventure begins, the clock doesn’t stop until the finish line.

All of this, of course, attracts Blesma Members like moths to a flame. “Our membership are always trying to challenge themselves, so when they found out it’s the toughest race around, they were all over it,” says Blesma’s Activities Manager Jess March. “We’ve had Members take part individually, but have never entered a team, so this year we decided to put one together.”

Blesma has put together a team of 18 Members (made up of eight riders and 10 support crew) for RAAM 2020, which starts on 16 June. While some riders take RAAM on solo or as a pair, Blesma has chosen an eight cyclist set-up which adds an extra layer of difficulty. Whilst solo riders inevitably have to stop and sleep in a race that takes a maximum of 12 days, all relay units must have one member in action at all time – day and night.



**Blesma’s RAAM riders are following a comprehensive training programme to get them ready for the event in June**

“This means we’ll always have one person riding and one person getting ready to ride while the other six are resting,” says Jess. “It also means you’re constantly driving, and the support team is always in action.”

### CONSTANTLY ON THE MOVE

Blesma has employed the expertise and guidance of Mike Griffiths as Team Director. Meanwhile, the team captain is Stuart Croxford, a former Captain in the Duke of Lancaster’s Regiment whose injury in Afghanistan in 2012 led to the amputation of his right leg. Stuart was part of the Help For Heroes support unit for the race in 2016, and learned some valuable lessons from the experience.

“I found it difficult being part of that race because I started out trying to get in as a rider but didn’t make the cut,” he says. “They were looking to get the fastest team possible together to try and break the record, and I found it really tough. The competitive nature also meant there were some disagreements within the team.”

“But I got to grips with the event, and I don’t know if riding it or driving the bus for 12 hours straight is harder. When you get into day six, it starts to get pretty tough going. This definitely isn’t a cruise across America. I learned how much of a challenge it is and, for a rider, the efforts you have to put in are enormous.”

“When you’re pedalling, you go through physical pain. Your body seems to be permanently stiff and sore, but what makes the RAAM so hard is the endurance aspect of it. You might put a half-hour shift in on the







**Clockwise from top left:** Will Browning, Stuart Croxford (team captain), Colin Davies (reserve rider/support crew), and Grant Jenkins (reserve rider/support crew) on a training ride in the New Forest National Park, February 2020







bike, but then you'll only get a short rest, and that's in a vehicle that is constantly on the move. You only get short bouts of sleep so fatigue kicks in. It's a challenge just to try and eat fresh food and stay healthy.

"As the days go on, both your physical and mental resilience degrade. That's where the team members have to understand each other and accept that people are going to get frustrated and angry. Everyone has to be able to manage those situations, it's about avoiding those fractious environments. When you add injuries and disabilities into the mix, it makes it all a hell of a lot harder – for both the riders and the support crew."

#### AN OPPORTUNITY FOR PEOPLE TO GROW

Partly due to Stuart's learnings back in 2016, Blesma decided to clearly define everyone's role in RAAM 2020 right from the start. "I run training camps for Blesma cycling, so when I was asked if I'd like to take part in this, I said I'd love the chance. It was a great opportunity to put a team together," says Stuart.

"We agreed that we weren't going to try to assemble the quickest team or just pick the most experienced cyclists. We wanted it to be an opportunity for people to grow. We aren't going there to break records. We're going there to prove what people can do, so we had to get the team dynamic right. For Blesma, RAAM is about showing that guys with one leg or one arm, or paraplegic cyclists, can do this. Everyone has been supporting each other during the training rather than competing for places. The journey is about recovery. It's about adapting to injuries and situations."

**Blesma will enter a team of eight riders who will take it in turns to pedal non-stop across America**

Jess March is delighted with how the group has come together. "We ran the selection for this event very differently from other activities," she says. "I asked for personal statements from applicants, and I wasn't just looking for a passion for cycling, it was also about a passion for Blesma, and a passion for being in a team.

"We chose people who wouldn't mind what part they played in the group – whether that was on the cycling or supporting team – and who would go on to have a lifetime inside Blesma, giving back to Members. And we're very happy with who we've chosen.

"Everyone is getting stronger, both physically and mentally, at each training session, and there are great dynamics across the board. Everyone is helping each other out, which is exactly what we were aiming for. We have set up a WhatsApp group so everyone can share training programmes and offer encouragement, and we have a training programme on the Strava app which has been specifically designed for each rider so we can monitor the team's training and progress.

"This is such a tough event, so the support team is massively important – you simply wouldn't be able to race without it. The Members who have been chosen for that will be driving, navigating, getting people on and off the road, and communicating with the riders to work out how far they can ride, and when to swap over. They'll be working just as hard as the riders!

"Everyone will suffer from a lack of sleep, so we needed people resilient enough to be able to deal with that and still be great team members. It's one thing to be a fit cyclist, it's another to keep going day after day."



## DAN RICHARDS

*Dan, 34, from London, lost his arm in a motorcycle accident in 2009. The former King's Troop Royal Horse Artillery soldier has worked as a chauffeur, TV presenter and model*

**Cycling has changed your life...**

Yes. I got into it in 2016. I'd been training to row the Atlantic but didn't get to go. I looked at new challenges and threw myself into cycling. I couldn't afford a coach, so I used YouTube.

In 2018, I was picked for the Invictus Games. I was tracking my performances on Instagram, and that led to a lady getting in touch wanting to be my agent. I'm now a model, and I worked as a host on a TV series called *Naked Beach*. And it's all thanks to cycling! The RAAM has been on my bucket list for a while.

**How difficult will the RAAM be?**

I'm looking forward to the adventure and the challenge. We've all got our own reasons for doing it, but it will be such a great team exercise. My arm shouldn't be a problem because my balance is good and I have a good core. That's what I like about cycling – I'm equal to anyone when I'm on the road. It'll show people that, regardless of circumstance, if they can put their mind to something, they can achieve their goals.

**Do you like inspiring people?**

Yes. I remember riding past a little lad on a balance bike in Richmond Park once, and months later his mum came up to me and said that her son wanted to become a cyclist because of me! That was lovely. I love riding – it's just you and the road. I love where it takes you.







## JOHN WILLIAMS

*John Williams, 60, is originally from Liverpool. He was electrocuted in 1987 while serving with the Royal Signals, which led to an above-knee amputation. He now lives in Germany and took up cycling four years ago.*

### **What got you into cycling?**

It was Blesma! I'd never even been on a bike before 2016, but I decided I needed a challenge. I went on the Belgium cycle ride with the Association, and that's where I learned to ride. I really enjoyed it, so after that I decided to take part in the German Para Triathlon Championships to raise money for the Association.

### **You're an experienced wheelchair racer...**

Yes. After my accident, I got involved in the wheelchair marathon scene. But in 1993 I was diagnosed with epilepsy, and for five years I couldn't do much – training, driving, swimming... I hit the bottle, but eventually got therapy, and I've been sober for nine years now. In 2016, I decided I needed to get back into sport and chose the triathlon. I took to the swimming like a duck to water, then I got a bike and the rest is history!

### **What do you love about riding, and how hard are you expecting RAAM to be?**

I love the fresh air on my face, but most of all I like the chance to switch off from any problems I've got. I like riding along and talking to someone, too. I think RAAM will be mega tough, but more on the psychological side rather than physically. They've told us that our patience will be tested, but I feel ready. I'm really looking forward to it.





The 18 Blesma Members (including several reserve riders) will fly to America on 13 June. They will stay near the race start in California to get used to the hot weather and the roads, as well as overcome jet lag. The riders will then be put through a number of steep training climbs, and then it's off to the start line.

All the support members are amputees, and the group is well balanced when it comes to injury. "We've got two below-knee amputees, two above-knee amputees, two paraplegic riders and two arm amputees," says Stuart. "During the training, everyone has been sharing knowledge and being really supportive of one another. There is a great atmosphere in the team and that is making it enjoyable. We have gelled well on training rides in places like the New Forest and Mallorca, and have been getting used to riding for whole days."

For both Stuart and Jess, this is the perfect Blesma event – and cycling is the perfect Blesma pastime. "Cycling keeps me fit, active and sane, and different bikes make the sport open to almost anyone," says Stuart. "In my opinion, it's the sport we should be focusing on getting Members into."

And when it comes to RAAM, Jess has a clear idea of what she will consider a success. "We want people to gain a huge sense of achievement from this because it's genuinely about pushing boundaries. And we want the riders to keep the team spirit going after the event and have friends they know they will be able to lean on for the rest of their lives.

"The team members will also receive some mentoring on leadership skills and working within a big group. After this, we want them to feel that they can achieve anything, and we want them to pass that feeling on to others. It's about Members supporting Members, because that's what Blesma does."

*Blesma hosts a range of cycling events throughout the year for all abilities. Find out more on the Blesma Connects app or at [www.blesma.org/activities](http://www.blesma.org/activities)*

## THE RAAM IN NUMBERS



### PIER PRESSURE

In 1982, four people raced from the Santa Monica Pier in Los Angeles to the Empire State Building in New York, and the RAAM was born.

### TIME FOR TEAMS TO TRY IT

In 1992, a decade after that first race, teams were allowed to enter. Teams of two, four, or eight people can compete. While riders who race as individuals are (obviously!) allowed to stop and sleep, teams must always have someone cycling – day and night.

### STATS ACROSS THE STATES

Racers must cycle 3,000 miles across 12 states, and climb more than 175,000 vertical feet. Teams must finish in nine

days but most finish in about seven, with the fastest in just over five. Solo racers have 12 days to complete the race, most finishing in 11 days with the fastest finishing in about eight.

### DON'T STOP MOVING

The RAAM is basically the world's longest time trial. Unlike the big three European races (Tour de France, Vuelta a Espana and Giro d'Italia) it is not a stage race with a start and finish to each day.

### THE TOUR DE WHAT?

The RAAM is about 30 per cent longer than the Tour de France. Riders must complete it in roughly half the time, with no rest days.







**In January, just weeks before she sadly passed away, one of Blesma's longest-serving Members reflected on her life**

## STELLA CLARKE

When Stella was interviewed for this piece she was 94 years old and was one of Blesma's longest-serving Members, having being injured 76 years ago as a civilian

**I was 13 years old when WWII broke out. My father was a Regimental Sergeant Major, so my five siblings and I knew a lot about Army life. We weren't children – we were his troops! We'd come home from school, polish our shoes and line them up ready for his inspection. We learned all sorts of things; my father even taught me how to read a blueprint!**

**During the war, I worked at a pen factory. One day, my boss asked if any of us could read a blueprint. I was the only one. I had no idea what we were making but I made good money doing it and got my own work station. I later found out I was making radar parts.**

**Three days before my 18th birthday, I took my friend Jeanie to the cinema. We had hardly sat down when we heard a WHOOSH. Down came a bomb. There was no air raid warning. I was knocked unconscious. The cinema had collapsed and we were buried by the rubble. When I woke up I looked to my feet. There was the bomb – it hadn't exploded! Jeanie was beside me, shouting out. I told her everything was alright but she died while I held her hand. She'd been married 11 days.**

**I was taken to hospital where my leg was amputated above the knee. I never felt any pain. My right leg was broken in several places and was bruised all over. I was told I had been lucky as a surgeon who had been knighted for his work had carried out my amputation. To this day I still get told how neat my stump is!**

**Shortly afterwards, I was told I was being sent to a military hospital because I had been part of the war effort. At the hospital there was me and one other lady – who had been in the Auxiliary Territorial Service – with 2,000 blokes. The more injured men I met, the more I thought my injuries were nothing compared to some of those chaps.**

**I was there nearly five months, then they wanted my bed because they knew D-Day was coming. I was sent home where I was kept busy with chores around the house. It**

**wasn't long before I got a prosthetic leg. After a fortnight, I was walking and soon I was back to work at the pen factory. That didn't last long as once they found out I was getting a war pension, they wanted to cut my wages and hours.**

**In 1946, I met my future husband, Roy. My family were furious because they wanted me to stay at home and look after our parents. We were married for 64 years and had two boys; Peter and John.**

**“I WAS TAKEN TO HOSPITAL AND MY LEG AMPUTATED ABOVE THE KNEE. TO THIS DAY I STILL GET TOLD HOW NEAT MY STUMP IS”**

**I always just accepted the fact that my leg was gone. I got on with it. It was only when people were unkind or spiteful that it bothered me. I think I'm one of the longest-serving Blesma Members. I joined in 1944 and it cost me half a crown – I've still got my card. I remember seeing the first Paralympic Games with Blesma. They weren't a huge success; there were only two people in the swimming event, but it was good to see that someone was making the effort!**



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