

Blesma

The magazine for limbless veterans

Commemorative Issue



Born out of WWI and brought to life by every Member since, this is Blesma one century on



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WWI Commemorative Issue | Autumn 2018



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World War I
Commemorative Issue
Autumn 2018

**“This special edition of
Blesma Magazine is a
snapshot of the Association
today, displaying what
defines the Members as
they live beyond injury”**

HRH The Duke of Gloucester KG GCVO



KENSINGTON PALACE
LONDON W8 4PU

The limbless amongst the War Pensioners of the First World War banded together to fight each other's corner when no one else would. The homecoming was not as promised; they could not live off the meagre pension and they were denied employment to earn a decent wage. They formed 'Limbless Ex-Service Men's Associations' and the network spread across the UK, becoming a country-wide registered charity in 1932. Campaigning for disabled veterans' rights was taken to the national stage, and Blesma (having become the British Limbless Ex-Service Men's Association) was in the vanguard.

In 1948, after there had been many new additions to the list of injured, my mother, Princess Alice Duchess of Gloucester, became Blesma's Patron, having been introduced to the Association the previous year. Her patronage spanned decades, and she frequently attended events and gatherings until the later years of her life. I was pleased to succeed as Patron in 2006.

Through the years, Blesma has continued to support those Service personnel who have suffered life-changing injuries. The Association has adapted to the times, including looking out for a new generation of injured who have lost limbs, or the use of limbs, from the most recent conflicts.

Blesma has changed its form as an organisation since the immediate aftermath of the First World War, but its objectives and ethos remain the same. Blesma still exists to assist those living with limb loss to lead independent and fulfilling lives. The fellowship of shared experience continues to succeed. This special edition of *Blesma Magazine* is a snapshot of the Association today, displaying what defines the Members as they live beyond injury. I am proud to support their triumph over adversity.

HRH The Duke of Gloucester KG GCVO
Patron
Blesma, The Limbless Veterans

“This special edition notes the journey Blesma has taken as an Association in assisting more than 62,000 injured veterans since WWI and, most importantly, it highlights the service and fortitude of the current membership”

General Sir Adrian Bradshaw KCB OBE

Blesma has been around for almost 100 years and is still the Association acknowledged as expert in the field for the ex-Service disabled of limb. At its heart is the ethos identified by those who founded Blesma in the shadows of WWI; that Member shall support Member. The rich background we have in supporting each other comes from the knowledge and experiences of our many Members over decades. In this respect, our perspective is unique.

While the Association shall never deflect from its determination to be there for its Members, throughout their lives, the method has changed over time in order to stay relevant to the membership. For example, the extensive Branch structure of earlier years has reduced, and we rely more upon a much enhanced Activities Programme to bring people together. In 2017, there were more than 50 events covering 23 different activities, many led by Members themselves, ranging from adapted snow sports to a respite week for Widows. To meet the breadth of membership and the complexity of need for the most injured and infirm, we have also invested in the Support Officer network. Striving to understand the needs of the individual is key, and we continue to work hard to gain a proper understanding of our Members' individual, as well as collective, needs.

Blesma Members have pushed the bounds of rehabilitation and mobility for veterans with resultant benefits for the wider public, and encouraging deeper expertise and provision in National Health services. For example, we supported the call to provide microprocessor controlled prosthetic knees to the general public, including veterans with non-attributable-to-Service injury. Thanks to pioneering veterans proving the worth of this technology, the nation as a whole has benefitted. It is most reassuring to know that our expertise is valued and sought after.

We measure our success as an Association by the contribution we can make in the improvement in quality of life and achievement of our Members, whether by helping them to use a prosthetic limb for the first time or achieving an improvement in mental health and wellbeing, getting a Member back into regular employment or starting a family, reaching the elite level of a sport or teaching resilience to school children.

Having taken over as Chairman of the Board of Trustees at the charity's AGM in Summer 2017, I wish to thank all our supporters for all that you do for our cause. Without your help, the Association could not do the much needed work that it does. This special edition notes the journey Blesma has taken as an Association in assisting more than 62,000 injured veterans since WWI and, most importantly, it highlights the service and fortitude of the current membership. I am very privileged to be the Chairman of such a highly respected organisation of veterans and I commend to all readers the endeavour of all of our Members, staff and supporters.



National Chairman
General Sir Adrian Bradshaw KCB OBE

BLESMA: 100 YEARS IN THE MAKING

BLESMA WAS FOUNDED IN THE AFTERMATH OF WWI. IN THE CENTURY SINCE, THE ASSOCIATION – AND THE 62,000 IT HAS HELPED – HAVE ACHIEVED MUCH

The guns had just fallen silent at the end of World War I when a brand new movement emerged that would help the veterans who had fought for freedom across Europe. Comradeship forged in the darkest hours, as well as a desire for justice for the 40,000 men who lost limbs in the conflict, laid the foundations of an organisation that, 100 years on, is still hard at work for veterans.

Blesma, The Limbless Veterans, was born out of a need to establish basic rights and

welfare for the men who returned from war to a society that was unable and unwilling to cope with their broken bodies. The public struggled to accept soldiers returning with missing limbs or disfigured features, while government support was thin and patchy.

Medical technology was in its infancy in 1918, with the manufacture of prosthetic limbs merely a cottage industry producing rudimentary models carved from wood and fixed with cumbersome leather strapping. Injustices and despair raged across the

veterans community as they found themselves without jobs, homes or prospects. Only one in 10 could return to work, and many faced discrimination as they struggled to take up the lives they had so selflessly put on hold to fight for their country.

But energised by the spirit that allowed them to hold their nerve under enemy fire, veterans mobilised to help each other and, in 1921, the first Limbless Ex-Service Men's Association was formed in Glasgow. Dozens more Branches followed across the country

Blesma: the first 100 years

1914-1918

WORLD WAR I

40,000 British men lose limbs in The Great War's four years of trench warfare



1914-1919

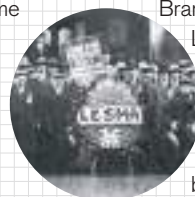
COMING HOME

Specialist hospitals for the war limbless are set up at Roehampton near London, and Erskine in Scotland. The prosthetics of the day are heavy and cumbersome; mostly wooden items with leather strapping (see p132)

1920s

LESMA IS FORMED

Amputees come together to discuss their problems and improve their conditions. A group in Glasgow form the first Branch of the Limbless Ex-Service Men's Association



1932

NATIONAL STATUS

Branches of the Limbless Ex-Service Men's Association come together to gain national charitable status, becoming the British Limbless Ex-Service Men's Association, or BLESMA for short

1939-1945

WORLD WAR II

475,000 British Service men are injured, 12,000 of whom lose limbs. Blesma is determined that this new generation of war limbless will not suffer neglect as their predecessors did



as the movement gathered pace and power. These people – Blesma’s ancestors – raised funds, negotiated rights and, crucially, supported each other with camaraderie.

In the years after WWI, the government mechanics of providing aid for veterans were laboured and lengthy, so the Branches joined together for extra muscle, and Blesma was formed as a national charity in 1932. This was a watershed in military welfare. The Association’s original central aims and values of helping Forces personnel regain

their independence with practical support, while campaigning for better conditions and rights, still burn in all Blesma does.

MORE CONFLICT, MORE MEMBERS

Peace in Europe was brief, and World War II brought a fresh wave of casualties and new challenges. Blesma’s work continued over the six years of conflict as 12,000 Service personnel lost limbs – it even launched its first morale-boosting magazine in 1944! Its role in society became more established

as it promoted research and harnessed the opportunities presented by the formation of the National Health Service in 1948; the same year that HRH Princess Alice The Duchess of Gloucester agreed to become Blesma’s first Royal Patron.

As the years ticked on, access to a wider range of medical treatments improved prospects for veterans while advances, in prosthetics and wound management, as well as more considered social care, brightened the post-conflict lives of many.

Continued overleaf

**1944
BLESMA'S
MAGAZINE**

BLESMAG, edited and published by the General Secretary, is welcomed for its useful information. It also attracts new Members and supporters



**1948
ROYAL PATRONAGE**

HRH Princess Alice The Duchess of Gloucester becomes Blesma’s Royal Patron in the same year that the National Health Service is launched

**1949
CARE HOMES FOR
THE WOUNDED**

Blackpool Home is opened. Over the years, it cares for many veterans and Widows, providing them with accommodation and support

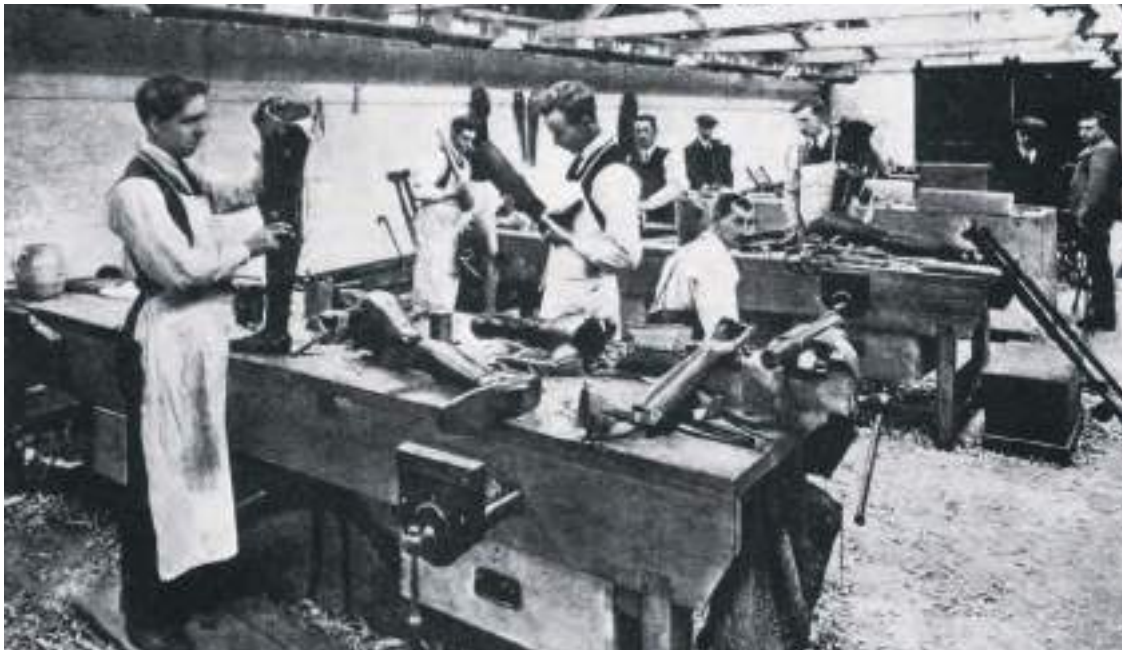


**1951
REPRESENTATION**

Blesma has always campaigned on behalf of its Members. The early 1950s see Blesma oppose the government’s refusal to increase disability pensions for limb loss

**1954
PORTSMOUTH
HOME OPENS**

Catering for Members in the South, the first resident moves in on 16 September. The Home is officially opened by Blesma’s Patron, HRH The Duchess of Gloucester, on 30 October 1954



Left: manufacturing prosthetics by hand

Clockwise from right: Jon White, Race2Recovery, Team BRIT on track, success at Invictus, Remembrance Day, backstage at the Blesma Community Programme

But there were still many gaps in service provision, as well as practical and financial support, with a pressing need to provide facilities to augment the NHS.

In 1949, Blesma opened its first home, in Blackpool, and followed that with further sites in Portsmouth and Crieff, in Scotland. Each proudly cared for hundreds of veterans who were ill-served by existing services. The Elizabeth Frankland Moore Home in Blackpool was the last of the three to close, in 2016, as new models of care in the community created improved options for the Association's older Members.

Blesma took up the campaign for better disability pensions for World War II limb loss veterans, and has continued to win significant victories for the injured since.

The Blesma All-Party Committee of MPs pressed for increases and, in 1955, a Blesma delegation presented a proposal to the Prime Minister calling for an immediate rise in the rates for all disabled pensioners.

The Association became the established voice for limbless veterans. Over the years, Blesma has faced numerous tough battles

but has never shied away from asking difficult questions of governments and administrators. The Association has pushed the boundaries on all fronts, and its first National Sports Day in 1961, held at the National Spinal Injuries Centre in Stoke Mandeville, was a forerunner of today's Paralympic Games. This revolutionary approach to rehabilitation has gone on to redefine the perception of disability.

CHALLENGING PERCEPTIONS

Blesma's ethos of promoting independence among veterans has helped many challenge their physical limitations and demonstrate capabilities previously thought impossible. Limbless teams first took part in a cross-Channel yacht race before others went on to row across the Atlantic Ocean, as Members inspired other Members.

All the while, fighting and conflict have continued to challenge the Association; Northern Ireland, the Falklands War, Iraq and Afghanistan all raised complex health and care issues. The response from Blesma has always been positive and progressive,

with Blesma-sponsored research helping to advance medical capabilities as well as understand the needs of modern veterans. Meanwhile, a national roster of dedicated Blesma Support Officers has been on hand for some years, providing advice and guidance across a range of issues.

Blesma Members are now a regular feature in the Great Britain Paralympic and Invictus Games squads, and test themselves on skiing, skydiving and scuba expeditions, by rowing the Atlantic, tackling Mount Everest, or taking part in any number of other, less adrenaline-fuelled pastimes.

Research into the provision of prosthetic limbs, government support packages, and the welfare of veterans and their families are integral parts of Blesma's modern quest to help its Members.

The demands of life as a limbless veteran change with the conflict and the times but, as we pay our respects at the centenary of the end of WWI, Blesma continues to stand shoulder to shoulder with Service men and women, and remains committed to their health, welfare, and independence.

Blesma: the first 100 years

1955

MAKING A STAND

Members march on Downing Street with a proposition for steps to increase the rates of pensions for all disabled pensioners



1960

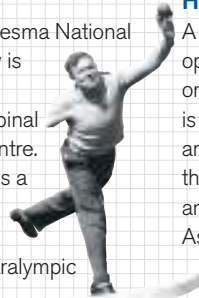
STAYING MOBILE

Member HF Ball, who was injured on the first day of the Battle of the Somme, is given the first Mini Minor to come off the production line. This is the precursor of the modern day Motability scheme which helps disabled people remain mobile

1961

A SPORTING CHANCE

The first Blesma National Sports Day is held at the National Spinal Injuries Centre. The event is a forerunner of the modern Paralympic Games



1963

THIRD BLESMA HOME OPENS

A third Blesma Home opens in Crieff, Scotland, on 24 August. The land is donated by Earl and Lady Ancaster; the Earl is a Member and becomes the Association's National President

1964

DRAMATIC GROWTH

The Association has grown dramatically over the last 20 years, from 24 to 120 Branches





Continued overleaf

**1968-1998
NORTHERN
IRELAND**

British troops like Darren Swift (right) deploy to Northern Ireland in response to The Troubles



**1969
PETER SPENCER**

Member Peter Nelson Spencer, an ex-RAF pilot who, after a crash, had one arm amputated and lost the use of the other through paralysis, paints Blesma's armorial bearings (right) by holding the brush in his teeth



**1973
IMPROVEMENTS
TO PENSIONS**

Blesma helps to bring change to the War Widows' Pensions. The bar is removed for Widows whose marriage took place after their husbands left the Services following WWI and died before 03 Sept 1939

**1975
NORA PEACOCK**

Nora Peacock is the first limbless ex-Service woman to be elected onto the Executive Council. She served as a WREN in Egypt in WWII, losing her right leg above the knee



**1982
MARKING BLESMA'S
GOLDEN JUBILEE**

500 limbless Members and partners parade down Whitehall to the Cenotaph following a service in Westminster Abbey. It is during the ceremony that Margaret Thatcher declares the country is at war with Argentina



Blesma: the first 100 years

1982

FALKLANDS WAR

Britain loses 255 personnel, six ships and 34 aircraft during the conflict to take back the British territory that had been invaded by the Argentine military under the Junta Generals. As a result of the conflict, Blesma gets 32 new Members

1989

FIGHTING FOR WIDOWS

Following campaigning from Blesma, the government introduces a weekly payment for pre-1973 War Widows



1992

NEW NATIONAL PRESIDENT

The Duke of Westminster becomes Blesma's National President in the charity's Diamond Jubilee Year. Rosemary Cornwall becomes the first Area Welfare Officer; her job is to ensure veterans receive their correct entitlements

1996

PARALYMPIC GAMES, ATLANTA, USA

Three Blesma Members are part of Team GB. Tony Downs becomes the first Blesma Member to win a gold medal – for sailing

1998

WINTER OLYMPIC GAMES, NAGANO, JAPAN

Blesma Member Chris Moon (left) completes the final part of the Olympic Torch Journey and lights the Olympic Flame





Clockwise from far left: the JST voyage, the Channel swim, support from West Ham FC, Mark Ormrod, Gregg Stevenson and his family, Lamin Manneh and his family, Luke Sinnott training with Graeae

2001-2014
AFGHANISTAN AND IRAQ WARS

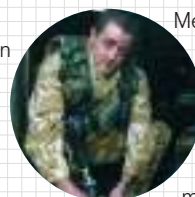
Operations HERRICK (Afghanistan) and TELIC (Iraq) mark the beginning of a new generation of military amputees. Blesma receives 339 new Members, including 97 double and 19 triple amputees, from both conflicts

2001
CONSTITUTION AMENDED

The Blesma Constitution is rewritten to include membership for those who lost the use of limbs whilst in service or as a result of service. Meanwhile, the National Memorial Arboretum opens in Staffordshire on 10 June

2005
CORPORAL COLIN HAMILTON

Member Cpl Colin Hamilton (right) is the first British above-knee amputee to go back on operations as he deploys to Iraq with The Black Watch



2011
FASTNET RACE

A crew of 19 Blesma Members, aged from 22 to 68, successfully takes part in the Rolex Fastnet Race – a 605-nautical-mile yacht race, which starts and ends in Antigua

2011
THE MURRISON REPORT

Blesma contributes to Dr Andrew Murrison's report *A Better Deal For Military Amputees*. Sparked by personnel returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, he outlines 12 recommendations to improve the care of military amputees

CAPTAIN MARVEL

Stu was Team GB's wheelchair rugby captain at the second and third Invictus Games



STUART ROBINSON

MEMBER SINCE: 2013 **AGE:** 36

MILITARY SERVICE: Royal Air Force, RAF Regiment

Stuart was injured by an IED in Afghanistan in 2013. He has since become a key member of the Team GB wheelchair rugby squad.

How come you joined the military?

I wasn't interested in college so I ended up joining the RAF Regiment – a Force Protection-type role within the Air Force. I was a Gunner and enjoyed my service. I was away constantly – on four tours of Iraq and four in Afghanistan.

Talk us through your injury...

I was in a three-vehicle patrol outside Bastion. The front and rear vehicles were armoured, but I was in the central command vehicle, which wasn't. The first vehicle drove over the IED, crushing the sand and priming it for us. The wheel underneath my seat at the front drove over it. I was thrown out of the vehicle, but my next recollection was waking up from a coma in hospital two months later. It was surreal.

How was the aftermath?

My left leg had gone and my right leg eventually had to be amputated, too. I'd fractured my upper scapulas and shoulder. My teeth were knocked out and my jaw fractured, so I couldn't even speak to my wife. And my brain had taken a shake from the injury. I was in a bad way, but I still felt lucky.

How did your rehab lead you to rugby?

I tried to walk as soon as possible at Headley Court. Being there helped a lot – I saw people worse off than myself, and being in that military environment made the transition easier. I was still walking with sticks when I left, so I thought I'd try wheelchair rugby to have a bit of fun.

You were picked for London's Invictus Games...

That was 18 months after my injury and I was still coming to terms with things. My first training camp was the final selection camp! I didn't have a clue; I thought you played with a rugby ball and had to pass backwards, but I got stuck in and somehow made the squad. I wasn't expecting anything from Invictus. I just wanted to show my kids that I was still their dad, and could get on with life.

But then you won gold!

It was amazing! The more the competition went on, the better we did. The final against the USA at the Copper Box Arena was incredible. I decided that if we won, I'd go absolutely mental, but I was so tired I could barely lift my arms up! Since then, though, it has snowballed. I was captain for the



second and third Invictus Games, and then I got on the Paralympic elite squad last year. We're looking towards Tokyo 2020.

So what's it like playing 'murderball'?

Lots of people see it as just smashing into each other, but it's very technical. You're making mental calculations, because you're time limited in certain parts of the court. It's knackered, too, because you're up and down the court. I love it. It's done a lot for the image of wheelchair users. It's satisfying being in a contact sport. I played rugby before I was injured, so I like the collisions!

Tell us about your chair...

It's an offensive player's chair, rounded and full of armour. It's my job to get away from the defensive chairs that have an extra bumper, engineer plays, and score. I take a lot of hits so it's beaten and Gaffer-taped up, but these chairs cost £4,000!

How has Blesma helped you?

Someone from Blesma came to see me in hospital and helped me get my first hand bike, which was great for my fitness. I did the South Africa trip just after my injury, and that got me using my legs. It was a big part of my rehab and getting me straight. Meeting Members who are in the same boat makes the transition much easier.

BLESMA FACT: Out of the 50 activities on offer last year, 22 were run by Members. Thankfully, 'murderball' wasn't one of them!



MADE TO BE ABUSED

It may be bashed, beaten, and Gaffer-taped to hell, but Stu's chair still cost £4,000!



STU'S INJURIES

Stu lost his left leg in an IED blast, while his right leg was amputated afterwards as a result of the injuries he sustained



“When my wife told me I’d lost my legs I was very upset, but I’m a positive person and realised I had to get on with things. If I sit here moaning, what example am I being to my kids?”

LAMIN MANNEH

MEMBER SINCE: 2011 **AGE:** 41

MILITARY SERVICE: British Army, Irish Guards

Lamin Manneh was blown up by an IED in Afghanistan in 2010 while serving with the Irish Guards. He lost both his legs above the knee and his left arm above the elbow. As part of a project involving Walking With The Wounded and Haig Housing, he moved into a home on Canada Street in Manchester that was custom-built for his injuries. The build, and Lamin's move, were featured on the prime-time TV programme *DIY SOS*.

How is the house working out for you a few years on?

Really well – life is good! The house was fitted with a lift, which is great because it means I can get upstairs more easily to read my kids a bedtime story. The kitchen is great with its adjustable appliances and work surfaces, the corridors and doors are wide, and the bath, which has a lift into it, is fantastic. There is so much accessibility, and it's perfect for the kids. We have five and I would like more, but I'm not sure my wife wants to. Never say never though!

How is life on the street generally?

It's great. We have a couple of great neighbours, and because the street has been transformed especially for veteran Service personnel, the houses have helped all of us. It's that camaraderie you get from being in the military – just like you get in Blesma. We look out for each other, we have a support network. It's perfect, really.

You've become heavily involved in para-sport over the last few years...

I was at the London 2014 Invictus Games, then went to the Orlando 2016 and Toronto 2017 Games (see p56). They were great experiences, both for myself and my family. We travelled a lot, took part in all sorts of activities away from the competitions, and met a mixture of people from lots of countries. Being part of such a noble event brought some joyful moments, and I was given a great reception wherever I went. I didn't think anything could top London, but Orlando beat it and Toronto was better still! In Canada, we were given police escorts – it was like a dream! I think Invictus will get bigger and bigger, and will be here for a long time. It was very fulfilling.

You did pretty well, too...

In Toronto, I won a gold medal in the shot put, a silver in discus and sitting volleyball, and a bronze in the rowing. Sitting volleyball is a great team sport, but rowing was my favourite thing to participate in. It's so hard – you have to really show your inner determination.

You're also looking at getting involved with Team BRIT, the motor racing outfit that is made up of all-disabled drivers and crew...

Yes. They're trying to put together a simulator for me to train in. I drive a regular car all the time, but for racing, my driving needs are different. I'm really excited, I can't wait, because I love to drive and I've done a bit of karting with Mission Motorsport. I'm improving all the time, and am getting my lap times down and getting used to the single-hand controller.

How do you reflect on your service, injuries and rehabilitation, now?

I grew up in Africa wanting to be a soldier, and I admired the British Army. I liked the discipline. I joined in my early 20s, and I loved the sport and fitness. Getting injured was a shock! All I remember about being blown up is someone saying; *'You're going to be alright'*, then I woke up in Birmingham. I'd been in a coma for seven days. When my wife, Binta, told me I'd lost my legs, I said; *'That's a lie, I can feel them!'* At first I was very upset, but I'm a positive person and realised I had to get on with things. If I sit there moaning, what example am I being to my kids? I quickly got back to being determined. It got me through.

How has Blesma helped you most?

Well, the house came about partly thanks to Blesma because my Blesma Support Officer was the person who told me about the opportunity. In general, anything I find difficult, Blesma makes easier. They open doors for you and give you possibilities. I'm going to look into doing the Blesma Community Programme. I'd love to tell my story to kids and help people. Even if you impact just one person and get them thinking about life, let them cherish life, that is important. You never know when you might lose something important to you. Helping each other through adversity is a key part of what Blesma does.

BLESMA FACT: Blesma has 19 triple amputee Members. The oldest is 63 and the youngest is 27





SKIING IS BELIEVING

The footplate of Shona Brownlee's fibreglass chair clips onto a ski. She holds two poles with small skis at the bottom to help her steer

BRING 'EM ON

Shona had never skied before her injury, but now she competes at RAF and inter-Service level



SHONA BROWNLEE

MEMBER SINCE: 2018 **AGE:** 39

MILITARY SERVICE: Royal Air Force, RAF Music Services

Shona could well be Blesma's newest Member; it has only been a matter of weeks since she had her right leg amputated below the knee. For Members meeting her, many of whom were injured years ago, she is a stark reminder of what they went through in those surreal days immediately after limb loss.

For Shona, who is still serving in the RAF Music Services, the experience is still pretty strange – but like many who have undergone amputation to end medical complications, her overwhelming feeling is one of relief.

“I looked down after my operation, and I didn't have toes any more, which was odd,” she says. “I woke up and things were different. I was worried about having a stump – I just couldn't imagine it – but it's actually fine. The situation I am in now is much preferable to what I was going through before.”

Shona was injured during the final exercise of her Basic Training in 2012. “It sounds stupid because it was such a minor thing,” she says. “I slid off a ledge into a loading bay and didn't realise it was bad – I thought I'd just twisted my ankle and would be able to walk it off.

“But when I got back to base and took my boot off, my leg was black and blue, it was bruised up to my knee and very swollen. I had suffered severe ligament damage but thought I was lucky. In actual fact, a break would have been much better. The injury developed complex regional pain syndrome – which is basically when your nerves don't fire correctly. My foot was useless for six years. It swelled up, and I couldn't walk on it.

“Eventually, after all the medical options were exhausted, I decided on amputation,” says Shona. “I didn't want to be on crutches or have to deal with that level of pain for the rest of my life, so off it came. Straight after surgery, I felt much better. I was happy, and now I realise how much it had been affecting me. It was definitely the right decision.”

The 39 year old from Livingston in Scotland, who is stationed at RAF Northolt, can now concentrate on what drew her to the military in the first place; playing the French horn and piano. “I've got a degree and a master's in music, and before joining up I worked as a session musician, taught, and performed –

anything that paid the bills! But I wanted some stability, so I joined the Royal Air Force. I'd expected training to be horrendous, but I enjoyed it before my accident. Even though I was injured, I've stayed in and now play in the bands, take part in concerts and recording sessions, and play in the Officers' Mess.

“Apart from being in uniform, the job isn't that different from being a civilian musician. Marching is obviously a big part of being a military musician, though, so I need to get back to that. I'm learning to use a prosthetic now, and we have trousers on when we parade, so nobody will ever know!”

Shona's rehabilitation is progressing well. “I have just started attending Headley Court and am only on my fifth day with the new leg, so I just pop it on for a while each day. Headley is great; the staff there have dealt with injuries a million times worse than mine, and because there was no blast trauma, I shouldn't have any healing problems.”

Shona hasn't taken part in any Blesma activities yet, but her other favourite pastime – skiing – means she will probably be joining fellow Members on the slopes soon. She's got an adapted fibreglass mono ski which she uses to compete at RAF and inter-Service level.

“You sit in it and the footplate clips onto a ski, then you hold two poles with small skis at the bottom to steer,” she explains. “I'd never skied before my injury, but I've got reasonably good since – I won a prize at the RAF championships! It's a cliché, but it's true that skiing gives you freedom. Everyone is on the same mountain, regardless of whether or not they have been injured! The gondolas can be tricky, but I'm learning quickly.”

And meeting other amputees – which she is increasingly doing since she started visiting Headley Court and joining Blesma – is having the kind of benefits that all Members recognise.

“I meet other Members and straight away they tell me to try this or that,” she says. “It gives me a network and, of course, they laugh at my paper-cut injury. That's good, because it normalises things. Blesma is great for that, and the Association was invaluable when it came to helping me with advice about my prosthetics. I'm really glad I got involved!”

BLESMA FACT: *The Association is dealing with more than 400 issues for Members at any one time*

PHILIP BAILEY

MEMBER SINCE: 2013 AGE: 73

MILITARY SERVICE: British Army, Worcestershire and Sherwood Foresters Regiment

Philip Bailey admits that when Blesma first turned up to see him in hospital, he didn't want to know. "Someone rocked up out of the blue, and I was feeling sorry for myself," he says. "I had spent an awful period in pain, veering between raging anger and tears of frustration, and didn't want to see anyone."

That was in 2012, when the former Infantry Major, who'd always been very fit, contracted Necrotising Fasciitis. Philip probably picked up the flesh-eating bug when he scraped his shin in the garden. He almost died as a result, and when he regained consciousness weeks later, he was told he'd only survived because his legs had been amputated above the knee.

Most people nearing their 70th birthday would have resigned themselves to life in a wheelchair. But Philip, who is now 73, defied medical expectation and made it his mission to walk again. Now, he admits to being grateful to the matron who nagged him to meet his Blesma Support Officer.

"The Association has given me very good support from the beginning," he says. "I've been using my prosthetic legs since 2015, but I wouldn't have got them in the first place without Blesma's hard work and help," he says. "I hit a wall with the NHS when it came to getting the right prosthetics, but the Association knew where to go. When I lost my legs, Blesma's help and advice filled a void. The Association gave me the ability to try things I wouldn't have done otherwise. Blesma got me back to living life."

Philip has rediscovered a life-long passion for sailing, in particular. "I used to sail, and three years ago I bumped into old friends, who invited me onto their yacht on the Suffolk coast. I thought that, as long as they realised I was a rusty, legless sailor, I'd give it a go!

I was back in my element. The microprocessor knees weren't suited to being on board, so I just slid around on my Mark 1 backside!"

A trip along the French coast followed, and last year Philip joined Blesma's Greek sailing trip. "A dozen of us sailed on three yachts – we had three legs between us on ours!" he laughs. "But we could make it shift, so we weren't bothered. It's such a beautiful area – we went as a flotilla and would meet at a taverna in the evening. It was wonderful."

With the bit between his teeth, Philip was inspired, and earlier this year he qualified as a skipper. "I've said to Blesma that I'm happy to work as a skipper and help get other people sailing. I think that would be fantastic."

The social side of the charity has been very important to Philip, too. "I went on this year's Members' Weekend and met lots of people, including two chaps who'd been in my Rifle Company!" he says. "I've also been shooting at Bisley, which was an awful lot of fun. I was shooting semi-automatic rifles, competing against 50 people – many of whom were still serving. I haven't shot a rifle for decades, but I had a really good time."

And Philip has begun to head off-road on his state-of-the-art mountain trike. "I used my NHS wheelchair as an exercise machine because I became massively unfit after my amputations, and I got to the point where I could complete a marathon," he explains. "But the small wheels are limiting, especially in winter, so I got this cross country thing. It's made using proper mountain bike technology, and was designed for injured mountain bikers."

With bespoke wheels, disc brakes and shock absorbers, Philip is able to rove along muddy paths without issue. "I capsize it sometimes, but that's all part of the fun of getting about."

**"When I lost my legs,
Blesma's help and advice
filled a void. Blesma got
me back to living life"**



BAND OF BROTHERS (AND SISTERS)

Shona was injured during Basic Training in 2012 but has only recently had her leg amputated. She still serves in the RAF Music Services



“Other Members tell me to try this or that. It gives me a network and, of course, they laugh at my paper-cut injury!”





LIFE-SAVING SURGERY

Philip had both legs amputated above the knee when he contracted a flesh-eating bug in his late sixties



DEFYING THE DOCTORS

Philip was told he would probably never walk again, but he made it his mission to prove the medics wrong

CHRIS GANLEY

MEMBER SINCE: 2014 **AGE:** 29

MILITARY SERVICE: British Army, 1 Rifles

Chris Ganley lost his left arm above the elbow in a motorcycle crash in 2014. He quickly got back on his bike though, and has his sights set on racing in the infamous Isle of Man TT.

What drew you to the military?

I always wanted to be a soldier. I joined the Cadets when I was a kid and served in Afghanistan with the Territorials while working in Public Services. My grandad was a Sergeant, and I decided to join the Regulars after that tour. I went out to Afghan again in 2011 with 1 Rifles, which was full on.

You were injured on your bike in 2014...

I had a crash at 30mph. I hit a lamppost, which took my left arm straight off. My right arm was close to being amputated, too. I also broke some of my ribs and my back in three places. I damaged a lung and had a severe brain bleed, which means I am classed as having brain damage.

Many people would have been afraid to get back on a bike after that...

In hospital, it was knowing that I wouldn't serve in the Army any more that upset me the most. That had been taken away from me and I didn't want my other love – motorbikes – being taken, too.

How did you manage to get back on a bike from a practical point of view?

Losing my arm was a shock, but I had to get on with life, so I sat and worked out ways to do it. I was discharged after a few weeks and I started making adaptations straight away. Headley Court had been fantastic, but I had to learn how to do everything again. I had to relearn how to walk because my balance was off, but I also had to relearn how to do everything from tie laces to peel potatoes. As part of that, I managed to strip my bike and put it back together in a way I could use. My local garage then made some improvements. Six months after my injury, I rode again.

What adaptations did you make?

The main one was moving the clutch from the left handlebar to the right, behind the front brake lever. I did try and reach for the controls with my missing arm once and burst into tears, but I put in lots of practice until I could ride again. Then, the next step was to try a track day.

How do you balance?

It's strange, but I've just somehow managed to adapt. I get my bike lower than a lot of racers through the corners, so my elbow touches the floor now! I do struggle with heavy braking and hard acceleration though, because I don't have the second arm for balance.

And now you're racing at a good level...

Yes, in Thundersport GB. It's tough, because the majority of the racers are trying to move up to British Superbikes. I've never been so scared than the first time on that grid! Now, I'm just about holding my own at the back of the pack. I could have raced at a lower standard and finished nearer the front, but I'm not going to improve that way.

What is your ultimate biking ambition?

I would love to become the first arm amputee to race at the Isle of Man TT. It was always my dream to compete in the Manx GP and then the TT before I was injured.

And Blesma is helping you with your quest?

A hell of a lot! Without the Association, I'd only have had enough money to take part in a couple of races this season. After I did well in my first few, Blesma got behind me, and paid for all of last season as well as this season. If I keep achieving, I hope they'll back me all the way to the TT! I owe Blesma a lot. The biking community has been very supportive and impressed with my times. I'm much more confident this year, but know that there's still plenty of room for improvement, so I'm really excited about the future.

“Knowing I wouldn't serve any more upset me the most. I didn't want my other love - motorbikes - being taken, too”

BLESMA FACT: The Association made 1,194 grants to 771 recipients in 2017, helping with everything from pulling out weeds to pulling wheelies

MIND OVER MATTER

Six months after losing his arm in a motorcycle crash, Chris was riding again





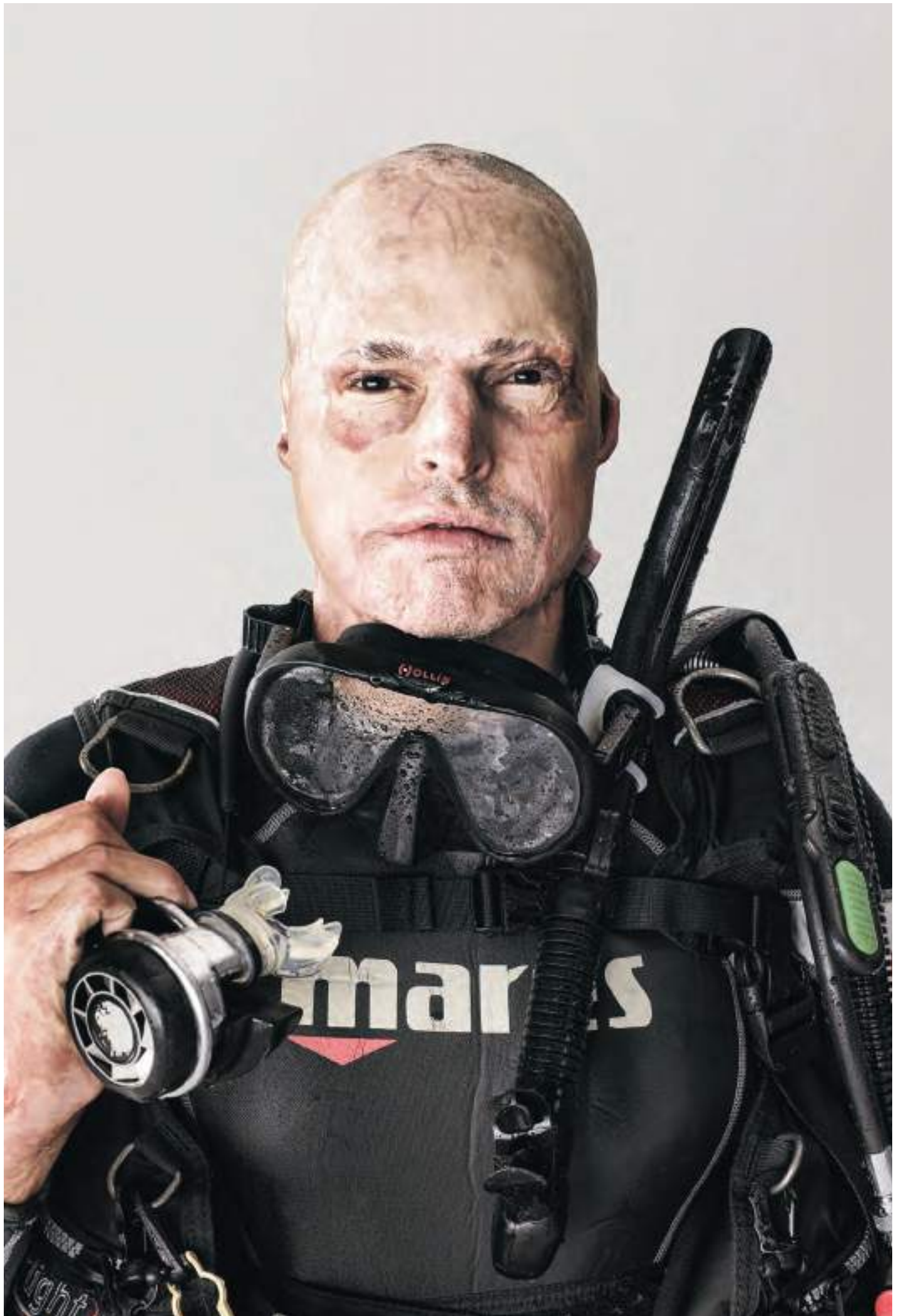
THE RACE IS ON

*Chris is aiming to become
the first arm amputee to race at
the infamous Isle of Man TT*



RIGHT IDEA

Chris moved the clutch from the left side of the handlebars to the right, behind the front brake lever





JAMIE HULL

MEMBER SINCE: 2016 **AGE:** 43

MILITARY SERVICE: British Army, 21 SAS (R)

The horrific third-degree burns that Jamie Hull suffered over 60 per cent of his body in an aircraft fire almost cost him his life. The doctors gave him a five per cent chance of survival and, as he admits, it took an “epic journey and an inordinate amount of grit, determination, and willpower” to pull through.

After his recovery he almost lost his passion for diving, too. “I first tried it as a backpacker in my early twenties, and I got bitten badly by the bug!” says Jamie, who ended up making a living from the sport in some of the most beautiful reefs and oceans across the world.

“I started with the PADI (Professional Association of Diving Instructors) open water course, then did more and more. I travelled around Australia, worked for a couple of dive companies in Cairns and became a dive master, guiding and supervising students. I was super-hooked and travelled all over to dive; New Zealand, Fiji, Hawaii, America...

“Later, when I joined the Thames Valley Police and had a more conventional career, I often thought about diving and dreamed of getting back into the industry. I eventually took a sabbatical, qualified as a PADI instructor, and worked in Egypt and the Philippines.”

But after his injury, Jamie “completely lost the confidence to get into the water. My mojo was gone, but I knew why. It takes a huge amount for fragile skin to recover from third-degree burns like mine. I can’t emphasise enough how debilitating it is. And I was so, so worried what the corrosive salt water might do to me. So I just decided not to risk it.”

But five years on from the 2007 incident, after being invited along on a dive by some old scuba buddies, Jamie decided to give it a go. “I was so worried,” he says. “I thought my skin might come off with the wetsuit! Waiting to jump into the water was incredibly nerve-racking. It took all my courage just to get the suit on and take that giant stride into the ocean. But I did it.”

Despite being highly experienced and well qualified, Jamie felt like a novice again. But to his delight, the skills soon came flooding back – and he realised the sea water was actually beneficial to his delicate skin. “I found

that out to my joy and astonishment!” he says. “It was a therapy in itself! The water was my friend again, and it helped my skin redevelop.” He’s now fully immersed – quite literally – back into that watery world and is aiming to qualify in 2019 as a PADI course director.

“I am currently training with a leading PADI dive centre, Crystal Dive in Koh Tao, Thailand. It’ll be a big ask to qualify, but I’m ambitious and determined to do it.”

Jamie is aware of the huge distance he has come since that fateful day back in the plane. “Back then, I was part of 21 SAS, and an active young officer in the Thames Valley Police,” he says. “I had an ambition to learn to fly, so I went out to Florida to complete a course. I was eventually allowed to fly solo, but one day an engine fire breached the cockpit at an altitude of 1,000ft. As I made a concerted effort to bring the plane down, I sustained the burns. I had two or three dark years after that and underwent 61 surgeries.”

Blesma played a big part in Jamie’s journey back into the water: a trip to the Red Sea with the Association helped reaffirm his love of diving, and he has since helped out on some of the Association’s diving trips. “It’s nice to give something back,” he says, “and Blesma’s scuba diving programme really does have great scope because it’s an activity that is accessible to people with almost any form of disability. Once you’re underwater, you’re completely weightless, so it doesn’t matter if you’ve got limb loss because you can use the rest of your body to compensate.”

Jamie qualifies as an Associate Member of Blesma not because of his burns but because of the nerve damage he has suffered in the lower portion of both legs. Since joining, he’s been skydiving and horse riding in Arizona, but the water remains his focus.

“Both physically and mentally, I get so much out of diving. There’s also a strong environmental aspect to scuba. The sport and PADI are addressing environmental issues such as plastic in the oceans, which we should all be mindful of. A small impact makes a real difference, and that can hopefully be brought into some of our future Blesma dives.”

BLESMA FACT: In 2017, Members were able to take part in 23 different activities, from photography to parachuting and, of course, scuba diving





WILL AND MIA DIXON

MEMBER SINCE: 2009 **AGE:** 34

MILITARY SERVICE: British Army, 3 Rifles

Will Dixon joined the Army in 2007, following in the footsteps of his father. After passing out from Sandhurst when he was 24 years old, Will joined 3 Rifles as a platoon commander.

“I remember those early days as being everything I wanted them to be,” says Will. “I’m from a military family, my old man served for 20 years, so I always wanted to join. The Army gave me discipline, direction, and the privilege of joining a great regiment with great soldiers. I loved my time in 3 Rifles.”

Barely two years later, in September 2009, Will deployed to Afghanistan as part of 3 Rifles Battlegroup. “Three months into the tour, I was travelling in a Mastiff when it was hit by an IED. The first thing I knew about it was the blast. I was a bit shaken, but at first glance the vehicle appeared to have done its job. I checked that everyone was okay, and it was only then that I realised I wasn’t. There was a searing pain in my left foot that seemed to be getting worse and worse.”

Will’s soldiers filled him with morphine, and he was in a Black Hawk helicopter and back at Bastion within an hour, where his left leg was amputated below the knee.

Three months after the blast, Will began his journey to recovery at Headley Court. “Rehab was excellent – I’ve been very lucky,” he says. “I’ve got a good family, good friends, and I’ve never had a down day. Mine is a scratch in Blesma circles, and I very quickly appreciated there were those in far worse condition.”

Will learned to walk again at Headley Court, and shortly afterwards he heard about an opportunity to work at Barclays. He applied for the role and has worked at Barclays ever since. “The job was to launch the Armed Forces Transition Employment Resettlement (AFTER) Programme, which helped to place injured (and now non-injured) veterans into jobs. Initially, I felt completely out of my depth – this was in 2010 – but the programme has gone on to be a big success.”

Not content with pushing himself out of his comfort zone at work, Will was also part of the first Row2Recovery crew to race in the Talisker Whisky Atlantic Challenge, rowing non-stop across the Atlantic Ocean in 2011/12. The epic voyage raised significant funds for charity and sent a positive message about what can be achieved post-injury.





AN OAR-SOME EFFORT!

Will was part of the first Row2Recovery crew that rowed non-stop across the Atlantic Ocean in 2011/12

“We joked that you couldn’t find an unluckier crew, bearing in mind four out of the six of us had been blown up in one way or another!” The crew’s luck continued to be somewhat lacking. There are two things that can end an Atlantic row and the guys managed both! “Firstly, we broke the water pump and had to rely on our reserve water, which got very low so we became very dehydrated,” says Will. “Then our rudder broke, and it took 10 days for a support boat to reach us and fix it.”

Despite these setbacks, the crew completed the row in a little under 51 days, finishing in a respectable seventh place out of 17 crews and raising more than £1 million for charity.

The following year, Will was approached by Blesma’s then chairman, Sir Cedric Delves, about becoming a Trustee. Sir Cedric was conscious that younger veterans from recent campaigns weren’t represented on the board, and he wanted to make their views heard.

“It was an incredible honour,” says Will. “I think of the Trustees as the Association’s stewards. We represent the Members and help form a strategic direction for the Association. Of the 11 Trustees, six are Members, and that’s important because it means we can ensure Blesma continues to be fit for purpose.

“Each meeting is different; sometimes it’s about budgeting, other times we scrutinise the Executive’s performance to make sure we are learning lessons. I hope, as a Trustee, I ask the odd difficult question. If the Trustees all agree, we’re not doing a good job. It’s important to have a balance on the board, with everyone bringing a different view.

“I have a passion for the membership and faith in the power of activities. Blesma is unique – I learn that the more I see Members. The Association has adapted and moved with the times; our youngest Member is in his early 20s, so we need to be here for decades to come. Our biggest challenge is to stay relevant.”

MIA DIXON

Mia met Will just before his fateful tour of Afghanistan. They were recently married

How did you and Will meet?

We met on a night out in Oxford about nine years ago. I was walking down the road with a friend, when she recognised Will from school. We went on a couple of dates over the Summer, just before he went to Afghanistan, but I didn’t think it was going to be anything serious.

Did you think of Will while he was on tour?

It was a horrible time because things were just heating up in Afghanistan. News of Service men and women being killed was always on the radio and TV. It was odd because I would think about Will a lot even though I didn’t really know him. We emailed each other while he was out there, and then I didn’t hear anything from him for a while. We had planned to meet up when he came back for his R&R, but then I got a phone call from him and he said; ‘*So, I’ve lost my left foot.*’

Do you remember your initial thoughts?

I was really quite shell-shocked because he was so blasé about it. I just didn’t know what to say, but he was so high on painkillers that he doesn’t remember the conversation! It was a weird one; I was relieved that he wasn’t actually killed out there, but I didn’t know where his injury left us. Neither of us was looking for something serious, but we were spending hours on the phone while he was in hospital.

What were your thoughts about his injury?

Will has always been really positive about it, even from the very beginning, and I had studied occupational therapy, so I knew the outcome could have been a lot worse.

And you ended up getting married...

Yes, in April 2018. We were engaged for about 18 months and were married in South Africa, where I was born, so my grandparents and all the family could come. It was amazing – an incredible and very special day.

“Mine is a scratch in Blesma circles, and I very quickly appreciated there were those in far worse condition”

ROSEMARIE HEGGIE

BLESMA MEMBER SINCE: 1985 **AGE:** 91

MEMBERSHIP: Civilian casualty in The Blitz (Injured 1940)

Rosemarie Heggie's life was probably saved when, as a 14-year-old schoolgirl during The Blitz, she decided to manicure her nails.

"On the night that the bomb dropped – 11 December 1940 – I said goodnight to my mum and dad, and they told me to go to bed," she recalls. "I said; *'Goodnight, God bless you and keep us safe.'* But instead of going to sleep I sat in front of the fire and did my nails. That's when it dropped. The whole street was taken out. My mum and dad were killed. I was very badly burned by the fire, but incredibly lucky to be alive because I was buried under rubble."

The family had been struggling to stay safe from the German attacks. "In December 1940, we lived in Acton, which was being bombed quite a lot. But it was really difficult to get into the air raid shelters because they were just so crowded. My dad was also a very big man so sometimes, when the bombs came, we just had to stay at home."

Rosemarie, now 91, had to go through a major ordeal afterwards, too. "I was pulled out of the debris but there was rubble everywhere on the street, so I was taken through the neighbours' gardens and off to hospital. I was in a lot of pain and my right leg had to be amputated below the knee. It was a real shock. After I had recovered enough to leave hospital, I was sent all over the place. I was sent to Brighton first to live with my uncle, but he had young children and didn't want me around, so I was sent to live with my grandmother in Northern Ireland.

"It was a long journey – a train to Stranraer, and then I was carried onto a boat by sailors! I ended up getting lost in Northern Ireland, too – I took the bus to the wrong place. But I got to my grandmother's eventually and grew up on her farm. It wasn't easy being on crutches all the time, but eventually I got used to using my prosthetic leg, and I learned to ride a bike, drive a car, and even dance!"

Disability didn't stop Rosemarie. She found work in Belfast, partly thanks to her regular visits to the Limb Centre and to see Blesma.

"They'd always make such a big fuss of me at the limb fitting centre, and I was very



pleased with my prosthetic leg. One day, they told me the manager downstairs at the War Pensioners' Welfare Service wanted to speak to me. They'd seen me filling in my own forms and thought I'd be good at administration. I thought that was wonderful. I passed the examinations and worked there for years, helping to look after war pensioners."

Eventually, Rosemarie returned to England when her life-long best friend, Alice, got married there in 1962, and it was in England that she met and married her own much-loved Jim. One other constant throughout her life has been Blesma. "They sorted me out with my first prosthetic leg, so they've helped right from the start," Rosemarie says. "They've also sorted me out with a stairlift and just today, five minutes ago, they gave me a wheelchair!"

"I think the best thing about Blesma is the care they take of you. I don't have to ask for anything – they ask if I need anything. My Support Officer is lovely and is always checking up with me, making sure that I'm doing OK. It's a wonderful charity!"

BLESMA FACT: Men and women aged 90 years old or over make up 6.5 per cent of Blesma's membership

THE BLITZ AND BLESMA

Rosemarie qualifies as a Member because she was injured by enemy action as a civilian. She lost her leg in The Blitz when she was 14 years old



AIMING FOR A MEDAL

Steve missed out on selection for the Rio Paralympics by just a few points, but he already has his sights trained on Tokyo in 2020

STEVE GILL

MEMBER SINCE: 1992 **AGE:** 49

MILITARY SERVICE: British Army, 2nd Battalion the Royal Anglian Regiment

Steve Gill, from Leicestershire, served in the Royal Anglian Regiment. He was injured on his first tour of Northern Ireland in 1989. After trying a number of sports as part of his rehabilitation, he discovered a talent for archery and is now part of Team GB.

Did you always want to serve in the military?

I grew up in Leicestershire as part of a farming family and always wanted to be a farmer. I went to agricultural college and studied farm management, but I felt that the government ruined everything for farming. The only other thing I fancied was being a soldier, so I joined the Royal Anglian Regiment. I loved it! It was right up my street. I was posted all over the world – Germany, Canada, Norway. Then I served in Belfast, which resulted in me being sat in this wheelchair.

How were you injured?

It was May 1989. We were on the notorious Falls Road in West Belfast. I'd been serving there for four months and was due to return home just a few weeks later. Unfortunately, I was hit by

an IED that had been hidden in a beer barrel and placed behind a corrugated iron fence. We walked by and someone in a pub pressed a button. I was normally on point when we were patrolling but for some reason I'd switched and was the last man that day. The force from the blast picked me up and threw me against a wall. I remember lying there thinking; *'My little finger really hurts!'* Can you believe it? That's all I could feel, even though everything was hanging off!

Do you remember much?

I remember my mates telling me; *'Sit still Fish, we don't know what's going to fall off you.'* The steel valve on the top of the barrel had taken my right leg off above the knee and a brick had wedged itself in my face, which resulted in me losing my right eye. As if that wasn't enough, someone then set a dog on us and it attacked me! I was unconscious for five days and had eight blood transfusions – it was touch and go for a while. My left leg was removed below the knee two weeks later because it had gone gangrenous. I'm lucky to be alive!





BLESMA FACT: *The Blesma Mission is to assist limbless veterans to lead independent and fulfilling lives*





What was life like after injury?

The aftermath was very difficult. It wasn't just the fact that I'd lost my legs, I'd also lost my career. I was only 19 and had wanted to see my years out in the Army, but I was medically discharged in 1991. There was less help for us back then. It was a year before I could get up on prosthetic legs, and 18 months before I could look in the mirror because of my face. But I moved to the Queen Elizabeth Military Hospital and slowly built myself back up. I knew I wanted to get married and have kids. I got divorced, remarried, and divorced again, and have now got nine kids.

How did you get involved with sports?

For a while I had a smallholding – pigs, donkeys, chickens, and ducks. That kept me busy, but my mother met a Paralympian who played wheelchair basketball, and he suggested I gave it a go. I went on to play and coach in Leicester for 15 years. I also got involved with Blesma. I did lots of sailing with the Association – even though I'm scared of the water! I pushed myself and it did me good.

And how did all this lead you to archery?

That was another chance meeting. I was coaching basketball in a school hall, and across the way somebody was teaching archery. We tried each other's sports and I loved it. Archery is a sport that requires you to use your brain – it's a great mental challenge. I'm an outdoors person, and the sport gets you out in the fresh air. Since I've started competing, it has taken me around the world, too.

How soon did you realise you were good?

I started as a recurve archer, which is the more traditional style of the sport. I learned all about it, got myself to a reasonable standard, went to the first Invictus Games and won bronze. After that, I was picked up by Archery GB's development squad. Being paid to practice a sport you love is awesome! I missed out on qualification for the Rio Paralympics by just a few points, which was really disappointing, but I'd gone from nothing to being in the top few in the UK. I was taken out to experience the Games in Rio as part of the Paralympic Inspiration Programme. Then Archery GB decided to change me to the other style of bow – compound. I've been competing in that discipline for two years now.

Are you hoping to go to the Paralympics in Tokyo in 2020?

I'm on the Tokyo pathway, so it's definitely a possibility. I need to meet GB's high standards, and so far I've been hitting them. To be selected, you need to hit 680 points or more out of a possible 720. That's basically hitting all 10s, with the odd nine, from 50 metres out.

Talk us through your gear...

My bow is worth around £3,000. It's expensive but getting it has helped me to improve my scores, so I'm feeling quite confident. A compound bow has 'limbs and cams', which make the arrows travel faster – they go at 330ft a second, so it's more like shooting a rifle than a bow! As soon as I let go, the arrow is basically in the target. I've got sighting scopes, which you use to check your shots. I've also got an archery wheelchair with a higher back, which is better for shooting. It has arrow tubes welded to it and there's a bow rest.

What makes a good archer?

Your mindset. I used to think all that mental stuff was a load of rubbish, but now I know it's vital. You have to build the right team around you. If you build a professional mindset, you can get great outcomes. It's changed me completely – I'm much more professional now, and have the attitude of a top sportsperson. Shooting a bow requires a set process and great concentration. You'll make a mistake if you let yourself get distracted by anything – a thought, a noise, a sight out of the corner of your eye...

Blesma has helped you with your equipment, but what does the Association mean to you?

I've been massively involved for a long time now. Thanks to Blesma, I've done things that I never would have thought possible; climbing rock faces, abseiling, sailing the Atlantic Ocean in a world record time... Blesma has done so much for me, and now it is supporting my archery. It costs me a lot to take part in the sport – accommodation, travel, food, fuel, massages, gym and coaching sessions – and Blesma has helped so much with that. But most of all, it's really about the people you meet along the way. Blesma is full of great talent – from runners to bobsledders. We push each other on.

AND FIRE!

The arrows that Steve fires out of his compound bow travel at speeds of about 225mph





PAUL FINDLAY

MEMBER SINCE: 2010 **AGE:** 33

MILITARY SERVICE: British Army, Royal Signals

“Most of my family were military, but I had no interest in it growing up,” says Blesma Support Officer Paul Findlay. “Then 9/11 happened and I changed. I felt a sense of duty, that there was more to life than being selfish.”

Paul joined the Royal Signals as a Radio Operator the following year, when he was just 17 years old. He completed three tours of Iraq before being caught in an IED blast in Afghanistan in 2009, which resulted in the amputation of his right leg 10 months later.

“Just 19 days after the operation I was walking with the help of bars, and within six months I was living a normal life. It’s a decision I have never regretted,” says Paul.

A work placement with Barclays helping veterans find employment led to a permanent job offer, which he did for almost five years. “I eventually realised that my passion was helping people, so when a role as a Blesma Support Officer became available in 2015, I jumped at it. The job has its challenges, but unlike a lot of jobs there is a strong emotional attachment. The difference I can make can genuinely change people’s lives, which gives me more job satisfaction than I’ve ever had.

“The support Blesma offers is so varied – from employment and hardship grants to medical support, advice, and advocacy. The ways in which Blesma can help, I feel, are almost limitless and that’s an amazing thing.

“Independence means different things to different people. For some, it’s getting back into employment, for others it’s being able to get up and down their stairs, or trying a new activity. As long as I can demonstrate how a particular opportunity will increase a Member’s independence, chances are it will get the green light.”

Take Paul’s passion for golf, for example, which he is now spreading to Members.

“To be able to play a sport that I’m passionate about without feeling my disability is holding me back has been a game changer for me,” he says. “That is something other Members have found too, so we decided to create a Blesma golf society. So far, we’ve got 70 Members, and are expecting to hit 100 by the end of the year. Some of our one-armed golfers, in particular, are phenomenal. To see them play a sport you’d think you’d need two hands for proves that anything is possible!”

HERE TO HELP Paul has been the BSO for London and Kent since 2015







MOVING MOUNTAINS

Hari Budha-Magar was set to climb Everest in March 2018, but the Nepalese government banned double amputees from the mountain. Hari has since successfully fought the ruling

HARI BUDHA-MAGAR

MEMBER SINCE: 2010 **AGE:** 39

MILITARY SERVICE: British Army, 1st Battalion The Royal Gurkha Rifles

Why did you decide to join the British Army?

It was my father's dream for one of his three sons to join. In life, you need something to aspire to, and joining the British Army in Nepal is very difficult; more than 10,000 people compete for a place every year, but only about 150 people are selected. I didn't really expect to be successful, as lots of people in Nepal try many times and fail, but I passed first time. I joined 1st Battalion The Royal Gurkha Rifles in 1999.

Did you travel to many countries?

I've been to quite a few countries on exercise, and I have served on operational tours in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan. I was blown up on my first tour in Helmand Province.

Can you tell us a bit about what happened that day?

It was in 2010, some time in the afternoon. We had been given a mission and had just left the base to go out on patrol. I was walking through the fields when I stepped on an IED and lost both my legs. I looked down at my legs and my right one wasn't there at all. I still had my left leg but it was really badly injured – the bones were completely shattered – and it was amputated as soon as I was brought back to Camp Bastion.

How did you react to losing your legs?

When I woke up in Camp Bastion, I didn't have the courage to lift the blanket and look at my injuries. I had often thought that I might die while I was serving, but I never thought that I was going to lose both my legs. Yes, I might get shot, lose one of my limbs, but never both of my legs. I was 32 years old, and suddenly completely lost.

How did you overcome that feeling?

I spent three-and-a-half years at Headley Court. Initially, I found it quite exciting. I think it's best

to go out and challenge yourself. So as well as learning to walk again, I tried lots of sports like skydiving, which I had never done during my service. My logic was that half my body was now gone, so I didn't need to worry where the other half went! I still had two limbs. I'd lost two but I had other things I could use.

So you stayed strong by pushing yourself?

Yes. Once I landed on the ground safely from that skydive, I thought; *'Actually, I can do things even though I have no legs. Anything is still possible!'* It gave me back my confidence. After that, my aim was to find out what I could do physically. I thought; *'I'm a Gurkha, I'm going to fight until my last breath. That's how I work.'*

You were aiming to climb Mount Everest in Spring 2018. Where are you with that?

I worked so hard last year to get ready for the climb, and I was actually training on a mountain when I found out that the Nepalese government had banned double amputees and blind people from climbing Mount Everest. You can't tell someone they can't do something just because they don't have legs. It's about someone's rights! For about three months I didn't sleep much. I was fighting not just for my rights, but for the rights of all people with disabilities. I decided this was a bureaucratic mountain that I would have to climb before I could climb Mount Everest! We eventually overturned the rules in March.

So when do you plan to attempt to climb Mount Everest?

All the planning and logistics have been done, so that side of things is ready now. I am doing lots of training already and will begin the altitude training either at the end of this year or the start of next, before attempting the climb in Spring 2019.

“You can't tell someone they can't do something just because they don't have legs. It's about someone's rights”

BLESMA FACT: Blesma currently supports 1,796 Members and 1,064 Widows



THE INVICTUS GAMES

It captured the nation's imagination and catapulted rehabilitation into the country's consciousness

The Invictus Games, a Paralympic-style multi-sport event, was first held in London in September 2014 and featured some 400 competitors from 13 countries. The brainchild of HRH Prince Harry, supported by the Royal Foundation of The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge and the Ministry of Defence, the quality of the athletes, and the enthusiasm of the crowds surpassed all expectations.

But while everyone had their sights set on winning (Team GB even managed to beat wheelchair basketball powerhouse USA at their own game) the true triumph of the Games came to light when the competitors were able to reflect on how far they'd come.

GB's 2014 team captain, Blesma Member Dave Henson, led by example, picking up athletics gold in the 200m. "Captaining the team was a huge honour," said Dave, who gave a speech to the 26,000-strong crowd at the closing ceremony. "I think the Games marked a major milestone in how recovery is viewed in this country – to see injured veterans

competing at such a high level in such an incredible arena with such incredible support was an important moment."

Team GB followed London 2014 with 49 gold, 46 silver and 36 bronze medals at the 2016 Games in Orlando, which welcomed more than 500 competitors from 14 countries. Invictus Games founder Prince Harry attended, and a number of world-famous faces dropped by, including former First Lady Michelle Obama, former US President George W Bush, and Hollywood A-lister Morgan Freeman.

"Competing in Invictus was the perfect way for me to show people how far you can come after injury," said Luke Delahunty at the time. "If you'd told me in the early days after my injury that one day I'd be competing in this huge event, I'd never have believed you. You can't help but be inspired in the most direct way by the other competitors."

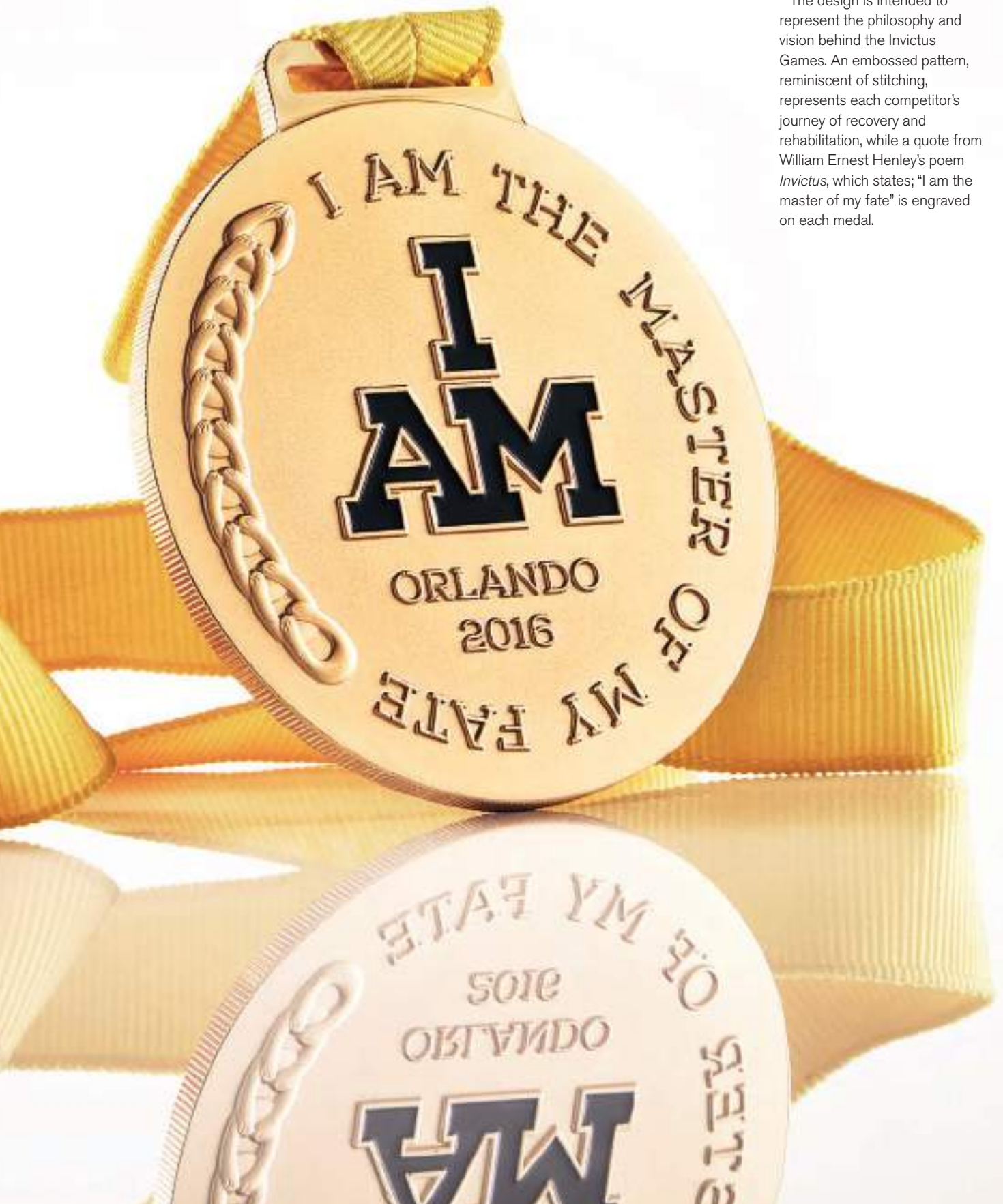
The third Invictus Games was held in Toronto, Canada, in September 2017. The event was bigger than ever, with 550



THE BLESMA MEMBER WHO STRUCK GOLD

The medals for the Invictus Games are based on a concept by Blesma Member Harry Parker, who lost both his legs when he stepped on an IED in Afghanistan. They were then designed by world-renowned jewellers, Garrard.

The design is intended to represent the philosophy and vision behind the Invictus Games. An embossed pattern, reminiscent of stitching, represents each competitor's journey of recovery and rehabilitation, while a quote from William Ernest Henley's poem *Invictus*, which states; "I am the master of my fate" is engraved on each medal.



competitors from 17 nations competing in an expanded programme of 12 sports. Team UK, as it was now called, was captained by Blesma Member Bernie Broad and scooped 87 medals.

“Being captain was a tremendous honour, and I proved to myself that I could lead,” said Bernie, a former Major with the Grenadier Guards who lost both his legs below the knee in 2009. “The atmosphere among the team was excellent – I absorbed all the energy from our athletes and it’s really given me confidence,” he said after the event.

With the fourth Games approaching (they take place in Sydney, Australia in late October) the Invictus legacy was perhaps best summed up by David Scott, a former Major in the Army Physical Training Corps, after the 2017 event.

“Invictus has brought back the camaraderie and the competitive edge, a military mindset,” he said. “Playing sport has given me a focus and that’s important psychologically. Sport can develop people so much, especially those with mental injuries as well as physical ones. There is nothing else like Invictus!”

INVICTUS GAMES ROLL OF HONOUR

One hundred Blesma Members have competed at the Games over the years

Ibrar Ali 2016	Anil Gurung 2014, 2016	Daniel Phillips 2017
Steven Arnold 2014, 2017	Ashley Hall 2017	Craig Preece 2014, 2016
Ross Austen 2016, 2017	Murray Hambro 2018	Richard Pullen 2018
Jordan Beecher 2014, 2016	Simon Harmer 2014	Netra Rana
Nick Beighton 2014	Anthony Harris 2014	2014, 2016, 2017, 2018
Leigh Bland 2014	Wayne Harrod 2017, 2018	Daniel Richards 2018
Josh Boggi 2014, 2016	Grant Harvey 2014, 2016	Stuart Robinson
Steven Boulton 2016, 2017	Charmaine Healy 2017	2014, 2016, 2017
Andrew Bracey 2016, 2017	David Henson 2014, 2016	James Rose 2018
Alexander Brewer 2014	Ryan Hewitt 2018	David Sandles 2016, 2017
Bernard Broad 2017	David Hubber 2014	David Scott 2014, 2017
Vinod Budhathoki 2014	Kirk Hughes 2017	Ryan Seary 2016
Spencer Bull 2018	Olaf Jones 2017	Luke Sinnott 2016, 2017
Terry Byrne 2014	Alex Krol 2016, 2017	Clive Smith 2014, 2017, 2018
Andy Carlton 2018	Jonathan Le Galloudec 2014	Daniel Spender 2017
Steve Cokayne 2017	Alan Le Sueur 2016	Ben Steele 2014, 2016
Nathan Cumberland	Kushal Limbu 2014, 2018	Mark Stonelake 2016
2014, 2016	Ray Lowrie 2014	Michael Swain 2018
Jack Cummings 2017	Rory Mackenzie 2017	Joseph Townsend 2014
James Cumming 2014	Lamin Manneh 2016, 2017	Aveuta Tuila 2018
Luke Delahunty 2016, 2017	Corrie Mapp	Jaco Van Gass 2014, 2016
Derek Derenalagi 2014	2014, 2016, 2017	Spencer Vaughan 2014
Annie Devine 2014	Michael Mathews 2016	Paul Vice 2016
Dean Dousfield 2014	Scott Mcneice 2018	Charles Walker
Kevin Drake 2017	Scott Meenagh	2014, 2016, 2017
Peter Dunning 2018	2014, 2016, 2017	David Watson 2017, 2018
Ricky Ferguson 2014	Michael Mellon 2017, 2018	Matthew Webb 2014
Craig Gadd 2014	Chris Middleton 2016	Jamie Weller 2017
Sean Gaffney 2016	Adam Nixon 2014, 2016	Daniel Whittingham 2014
Daniel Gill 2017	Pa Modou Njie 2017, 2018	James Wilson 2014
Steven Gill 2014	Mark Ormrod 2017, 2018	Craig Winspear 2016, 2017
Phillip Gillespie 2018	Steven Palmer 2017	David Wiseman 2014
Gareth Golightly 2014, 2016	Chris Parkes 2016	Scott Yarrington 2017
Michael Goody	Vicky Parrett 2016	Micky Yule 2014, 2016
2014, 2016, 2018	Nerys Pearce 2016	Ben Zissman 2014
Andrew Grant 2014	Andy Phillips 2014, 2016	

COMMONWEALTH GAMES GOLD COAST 2018

Last year, Blesma supported six Members at the elite sporting level, including those who were preparing for the Commonwealth and Winter Paralympic Games.

This Commonwealth Games commemorative medal belongs to Nerys Pearce, who came fourth in the Women's Para-Powerlifting





PETER CROTTY

MEMBER SINCE: 1947 **AGE:** 93

MILITARY SERVICE: British Army, Royal Artillery

Peter Crotty lost his right arm below the elbow after being hit by a shell during the Normandy Landings in World War II. He has been a Blesma Member ever since.

Why did you decide to join the Army?

I grew up in London before my family moved to Gloucestershire. I volunteered to join the Army in 1942, when I was 18 years old. I joined the Royal Artillery as a Gunner and worked a lot with the radios. After I joined up, it wasn't long before I was sent to France to fight in World War II.

And you walked straight into a battle?

Yes, I had been serving less than two years when I was injured during the D-Day Landings. I didn't get very far! As soon as we landed in Normandy, the Germans were shooting at us. We ran up the beach, but they were waiting for us and were hammering away at us. We were under very heavy fire when, all of a sudden, a shell hit. It was a 25-pounder I think, a big one, and there was a big explosion. It damaged my arm below the elbow and I was hit in the stomach, too. I remember holding my arm to try to stop the bleeding. I was evacuated to England immediately and my arm was amputated soon after.

What was your recovery process like?

I was in a military hospital for about a year, having treatment on my stump and other wounds. I was medically discharged in early 1945 and was sent to Roehampton to learn how to use the artificial limb I was given, along with all the attachments that came with it. I was fitted with a number of prostheses that could do different things – I had one for holding my camera, and a hook for lifting... It felt good to be with other amputees.

And you managed to get back into work?

Yes. I got a degree and then worked for the Civil Aviation Authority as a radio engineer. I worked on the technical side of the radios and I enjoyed using the equipment. I did that for 30 years – my injury didn't hold me back. I got married and we had two sons. I've just lived a normal life.

And what do you do for fun?

I had a yacht for a number of years and used to take limbless ex-Service men sailing – either over to France or around the coast of England. Lots of Blesma Members have been sailing with



me over the years, it was good fun! I was in my eighties when I gave it up. Now, I like to play crown green bowls. It keeps me occupied mentally and physically, and it's the perfect one-handed sport!

How has Blesma helped you along the way?

As soon as I was in an English hospital someone from Blesma visited me, so I've been a Member for a very long time. They provided me with the prosthetics I was fitted with over at Roehampton, and have always been very helpful. I've been on some nice Blesma trips over the years too, staying at the Blesma Homes in Blackpool and Crieff. Anything you want, Blesma can arrange it. As a charity, it's second to none!

And you found love through Blesma?

That's right. I took part in a Seniors' Week at Crieff Home about 20 years ago and met Betty, who was attending a Widows' Week there. We started chatting and got on famously straight away. We started courting and, a year later, we were married. I moved from Cornwall to live with her in Ramsgate, and we had 20 wonderful years together. Devastatingly, she passed away just three months ago. She was the love of my life.

BLESMA FACT: 12,000 British Service personnel lost limbs during World War II

SUSI ROGERS-HARTLEY

MEMBER SINCE: 1999 **AGE:** 52

MILITARY SERVICE: Royal Navy

Susi Rogers-Hartley is a very experienced horsewoman who was injured in 1998 while serving in the Royal Navy. She has adapted to her severe injuries and has gone on to become one of the UK's top disabled riders.

You've got something of an interesting equestrian background...

I'm from Norfolk and have always ridden horses. When I was 13 years old, I worked for the trainer Ginger McCain, who became famous for training Red Rum, and I was lucky enough to ride the Grand National winner just after he retired. When I grew older, I became a professional rider and competed in eventing and racing, polo matches and show jumping. I took over the management of a yard and worked for a family looking after their horses. They were the best years of my life, but the work didn't pay so well!

So you joined up?

Yes. I needed a change of scenery. I thought I'd take advantage of being fit (and getting paid to stay fit!) so I joined the Navy when I was 30. I really enjoyed it until I got broken, two years in. I don't like talking about my injury, it's enough to say I was crushed and then didn't get the right spinal treatment. I carried on with shoreside duties in a wheelchair, but I was eventually discharged.

And things then got very bad for you?

I went from being a very outgoing person to being incredibly introverted. I didn't think I was going to live. I was housebound, immobile, living in pain and with my internal organs not working properly. I tried to end my life because I couldn't cope. I'm not sure what happened after that, but I realised that I could either stay at home and eat biscuits for the rest of my life, or I could try and do some of the things that used to make me smile.

Which led you back to riding?

I didn't think I'd ever ride again after my injury, but I decided to give it a try. Logistically, it was difficult – I had to teach myself from scratch. My brain still knew what to do, but my body couldn't do it, so I had a constant internal monologue, a fight with myself. But I ended up becoming a coach for the Special Olympics and in return I was given riding



time. It involved a 200-mile round trip for me, but having half an hour on a horse again was brilliant.

And you eventually got your own horse?

I got my first horse, William, in 2006. He was an ex-racehorse and had also done eventing and dressage. I bought him after he was retired. It was a baptism of fire! I had to work out how to get on him because I was 3ft high in a chair, rather than 5ft 8in. It was trial and error. I got a wheelchair that raised up, then I'd try and jump! Sometimes I'd fly over the other side, with William staring at me. I figured it out eventually. I also learned to clean up after him – I couldn't push a barrow, so it was a shovel and bucket. I adapted!

What have you done since?

All sorts. William was an amazing horse – he never threw me off, but unfortunately he had to be put to sleep. Then I got Seamus [pictured]. He's quirky and a bit of a diva. He didn't like the wheelchair at first, so for a while I had to be carried to him, but we got used to each other. Since then, we've been all over Europe competing.

BLESMA FACT: Earlier this year, 24 Members took part in the Graeae Theatre Company production 'This is Not for You'

RED LETTER DAZE

When she was a teenager working for top trainer Ginger McCain, Susi got the chance to ride Red Rum





DRESSED FOR SUCCESS

Susi was hoping to compete in dressage at the 2016 Paralympics before Seamus (pictured) got injured

Blesma



How tough is it to ride with your injuries?

I've certainly had some spills! The bones in my ankles aren't particularly dense or strong, and at one event, I came over a double jump and both my ankles snapped. The sound was like shotguns going off! My feet were literally flopping about. That meant I was no longer able to compete in show jumping, so I got into dressage instead. I was hoping to compete in the Rio 2016 Paralympics, but Seamus got injured during selection so we couldn't take part, which was frustrating.

What do you love most about horses?

Everything. I even love the smell of them! I feel freedom when I'm riding because I'm away from

the wheelchair. I can cover terrain, I can go at speed, I can jump fences. Nobody knows I'm disabled either, so it's a level playing field. I've been in *Horse and Hound* magazine as 'one to watch', and I was in the Lloyds advert riding the black horse. Horse riding is my passion, and it has opened up all sorts of opportunities for me.

How has Blesma helped you?

This has been the best year I've had with Blesma. I got involved in the Graeae theatre production, which was absolutely wonderful, I just loved it. I've learned to act and sing – a month ago I didn't know I could sing, now I'm a soprano! If Blesma does more of this kind of thing, I'm in!

“I feel freedom when I’m riding. I’m away from the chair, I can go at speed, I can jump fences... Nobody knows I’m disabled, so it’s a level playing field”





BARRY LE GRYS

ROLE: Chief Executive **JOINED BLESMA:** 2014

MILITARY SERVICE: British Army, Royal Engineers

During such a significant year, how do you reflect on Blesma's formation after WWI?

When the injured returned from WWI, they were convalesced but were expected to rejoin society within a few months. That transition wasn't as welcoming as it should have been; there was a stigma to being disabled. The injured needed employment and to provide for their families, but they met considerable resistance. The need for Blesma was born out of those circumstances.

How did Blesma come together?

From the grass roots. Those returning from WWI struggled to find proper work. They received a small war pension; not enough to live on, but it was seen as an advantage so they went to the back of the job queue. They weren't listened to, so combined forces and, working together, gathered momentum. Branches formed and eventually combined to form the Association. They began to lobby on a national basis and formed a real identity. By 1932, Blesma was a recognised charity. Its voice was heard.

How much has changed for Blesma since?

Reading through Branch minutes from the early 1920s, the issues back then were very similar to the ones our Members have now. Those principle needs haven't changed, and the motivations for the Association's being haven't changed. What has changed is the way those needs are catered for.

What have been Blesma's biggest challenges?

Adapting to WWII, which greatly added to the ranks, and then to Iraq and Afghanistan, which did the same. Those from WWII faced similar injustice to those coming home from WWI. Again, Blesma

was a considerable force. Its lobbying after WWII was largely responsible for the compensation schemes that we have for injury today. And we've taken the lead on policy post-Iraq and Afghanistan.

What shape is the Association in?

One of our roles is to make sure casualties are safeguarded and not lost to public memory. Remembrance tends to focus on the fallen, but it's also about those who go on with injury. They're here, and will be for a considerable time to come. Blesma is in good shape due to good governance by the Trustees, supported by the membership. Sensible decisions have been made on difficult issues. And Blesma gets tremendous support from the public, who understand the message.

What are the key challenges for the future?

Staying relevant to the membership's needs; from those in later life to those beginning to settle down with a new family or employment.

What was it about Blesma that made you want to become its Chief Executive?

I was Engineer in Chief in the Corps of Royal Engineers. One of our roles was mine clearance, so we had a lot of Blesma Members. I knew about Blesma, and often found myself alongside them in Birmingham Hospital or Headley Court. When the role came up, I thought; *'These are people I have first-hand experience with and respect highly. Maybe this is a chance to do something for them.'*

What do you enjoy about the job?

I'm trusted by the Trustees to keep the wheels turning. I enjoy that no two days are the same. You never know what's around tomorrow's corner.



IAN WALLER

ROLE: Operations Director **JOINED BLESMA:** 2012

MILITARY SERVICE: British Army, Adjutant General's Corps

What attracted you to working for Blesma?

During my military service I'd met a number of Blesma Members and respected their positive attitudes and phenomenal dignity. Most of them had been at the sharp end in conflicts and deserved our support. I retired from the Army in 2012, and when the opportunity to join Blesma arose later that year, I jumped at it.

How did you find working at Blesma, and what was your initial role?

Blesma's work is often understated, but it is also fantastically valuable. I was initially the Director of Support and Communications. We realised that if we were going to tell the Blesma story in a proper way, we needed to develop things further. I eventually became Operations Director.

Activities are now a big part of your role...

The Activities Programme serves several functions within the rehabilitation process and in promoting independence and wellbeing. Providing fellowship within the Association is important, too. The range offered by Blesma is special; skiing, skydiving, swimming, art, photography, fishing, golf... And not just in the UK, we've run trips to the Bahamas, South Africa, Iceland, the USA... It is phenomenal.

But it's not all about activities, is it?

Blesma is not all about extreme pursuits. Where the Association's rubber really hits the road is with the Blesma Support Officers who help Members on a local level. Blesma is a national charity with a regional footprint, but it is essential that we deliver on a local level, and bringing care and comfort to many is just as important as our high-end activities.

And the plan is that the nine new Outreach Officers will help with that?

A funding opportunity arose to get extra people on the ground. The Outreach Officers will do more things locally – visits for a cup of tea, for example, or showing a Member how to use the internet. And we have a network of people who want to volunteer. We can now do more with them, too.

That will deliver the Blesma message wider...

Yes. We are all currently very busy with that. We want to dig out people who don't know about Blesma yet. Some Members might not want to engage because they are self-sufficient, which is great, but we want to reach those who might not realise what Blesma's proposition to them is.

How do you see the Association changing over the next few years?

We are quite quickly moving towards offering a more bespoke service. With Blesma's relatively small membership (which is below 3,000), we can certainly aspire to deliver an individualised service that addresses Members' issues as specifically as we can.

What do you love about the job?

Every day is different, and it's great to engage directly with the people you are working for. I love that the Members are the ones who drive the Association forward. Blesma is agile, too. If you have an idea that people agree with, you can put it into action pretty quickly. Blesma looks to make things happen. My job as Operations Director is to make sure things can, and do, happen to improve the lot of our Members.



HEATHER BETTS

ROLE: Director Independence and Wellbeing **JOINED BLESMA:** 2008

MILITARY SERVICE: WRNS / Royal Navy

You started your career in the Royal Navy?

The WRNS sponsored me through my degree, and I joined them as an officer after I graduated in 1986. I trained as a Logistics Officer, and after the regulations changed in 1990 allowing women to serve at sea, I served in HMS INVINCIBLE and HMS SUTHERLAND. I left the Royal Navy in 2004 and worked for a medical charity, then the Royal British Legion Scotland.

What brought you to Blesma?

The role of National Welfare Officer appealed to me, and although I didn't know a lot about the challenges that amputees faced, I was determined to do what I could to make a difference. Some 10 years later, that determination is even stronger.

Have things changed over the decade?

Blesma's ethos hasn't changed, and our Support Officers are still at the front line of what is developing into a bespoke service. However, our ability to support individual Members and Widows according to their specific needs has improved, and we're now focusing on supporting families, too. We get to know our Members and have a life-long relationship with them.

It's moving towards a more flexible service?

Yes. Our ability to support Members according to individual needs is possible because we're better informed and resourced. It's definitely not a case of 'one size fits all', and we're constantly looking at ways in which we can improve the services that we offer. For example, in the last couple of years we have introduced counselling and financial guidance services for Members,

Widows, and their Carers. The Outreach pilot, meanwhile, is enabling us to give our Members and Widows more opportunities to get together locally, which is really important as we are aware that some of our Members and Widows feel increasingly isolated.

And Blesma still helps with things like advice on Benefits and access to prosthetics?

Absolutely; these are fundamental parts of our work and are areas where we have always made a difference. Blesma has a long and proud history of campaigning, and we will continue to campaign so Members get the support they need.

How has your job evolved?

The change to my role has been driven by a determination to be relevant to all Members and Widows. Physical and mental wellbeing is key, and I focus on issues that are becoming increasingly important, such as enabling Members and Widows to remain independent in their own homes for as long as they are able and helping them access additional care if they need it.

How will the new Outreach Programme help?

The Outreach Programme has the potential to have a real impact in reducing isolation by giving Members and Widows more opportunities to meet and socialise locally – something that the Branches have been providing for years.

What do you enjoy most about the job?

Blesma's people; the Members and my colleagues. I love that the Association is unafraid to evolve in order to stay relevant, and that no two days are ever the same!

OWEN PICK

MEMBER SINCE: 2011 **AGE:** 26

MILITARY SERVICE: British Army, Royal Anglian Regiment

Owen Pick had his right leg amputated below the knee 18 months after standing on an IED in Afghanistan in 2010. He's since become perhaps one of Blesma's best-known Members after competing in snowboarding for Great Britain at the 2018 Winter Paralympics

Tell us about your time in the Army and the events surrounding your injury...

I joined 1st Battalion Royal Anglians straight from school. I was three months into my first tour of Afghanistan when I got blown up. We'd been under fire all day and got the order to assault a compound. I was out on patrol when I stood on an IED. I didn't know anything about it, all I remember is a white flash. I was apparently blown about 10 feet up in the air – so I'm lucky, really. I woke up in Selly Oak with my parents by my bedside.

They tried to save your leg, but it eventually had to be amputated?

I battled for 18 months to try and keep it but nothing was working. They eventually gave me the choice of either taking it off or carrying on with numerous operations in the hope that one might work. My leg was amputated in August 2011 and I immediately felt relieved. Since then, I've not looked back. After my injury, it took me six months to start walking. After my operation, with the prosthetic, it took maybe two months.

You're well known as a snowboarder having competed for Team GB in PyeongChang. But you started out as a Blesma novice?

Yes, I did! Blesma got me into snowboarding in the first place. I'd never done skiing or anything like that before but it looked cool. Blesma sent me on a trip, and I certainly didn't pick it up straight away. When I went for the first time, I spent the initial three days on my face!

So how did your love of the sport develop into something serious?

I went on a snowboarding course in Canada for three months. After a while I started doing some competitions and eventually made the World Cup circuit, but I still wouldn't say it was serious. I found it so much fun. I just loved the challenge, the adrenaline, the lifestyle, being in the mountains with mates, laughing about falling over... A year-and-a-half out from the Paralympics, it got serious.



How did your training change?

I started getting more support staff and help from specialists. I was doing more gym and physio work too, which made a big difference. I completed a couple of seasons of hard training and travelled all over Europe to compete. The intention was to make all my mistakes (and learn how to fix them!) leading up to the Winter Games

What's the key to getting fast as an amputee snowboarder?

Having strength in your legs definitely helps and you need to really build up your mobility. You have to learn not to be scared, too. If you can go down a slope without fear, you will become fast! If you're timid or lack confidence, your times will be slower.

Does having a military background and attitude help with the fearlessness?

I don't think it's that, but I think military people can sometimes be more confident in the skills they learn. I'll always put my hands up on the slopes and say; *'I'm pretty scared of this, how do we fix it?'* Because then we can work to eliminate the fear. The better I've got, and the more I know how to avoid injury, the less nervous I am.

BLESMA FACT: In 2017, Blesma supported six Members at the elite sporting level – including a number of Paralympians

FLYING THE FLAG

*Owen was given the honour of
being Team GB's flag bearer at the
2018 Winter Paralympics*





PICK 'N' TRICKS

Owen works at a paintballing company, teaching basic military skills and drills

How were the Paralympic Games?

PyeongChang was absolutely crazy. It was full-on before I even got on the plane. I'd done well that season, so my expectations for a medal were high. I was chosen as the flag bearer for the Opening Ceremony, too – which was the best bit! In one interview, I'd mentioned that I'd fought for this flag and now I was going to get to carry it. That went viral! It was nuts, but it meant a lot to me.

You didn't get the results you were hoping for. How do you reflect on that?

I think all the pressure added up. When I had the 'Whatever' attitude I was getting medals, but when it got more focused I didn't do as well. What happened, happened. I was low. It was horrible.

Can you take away any positives?

I'll always have the fact that I competed on the

world stage in the Paralympic Games. There wasn't a British Snowboard Paralympic Team four years ago, so being one of the first athletes to go, being a member of that team and seeing how it evolved – I'm proud of that. The next Paralympics, in Beijing in 2022, are already in my mind. I'm only 26 now, so I'll be a better boarder by then.

How has Blesma helped you along the way?

The Association has helped me so much. Blesma has been with me from the start; for all my major competitions, helping with flights and equipment. It's been a great relationship. I'd like to pay Blesma back by doing some training. The least I can do is take some Blesma guys away, teach them how to snowboard, and have some fun. I'd like to get some more guys into the snowboarding lifestyle!

“When I went snowboarding for the first time, I never thought it'd come to anything. I spent the first three days on my face!”



THE RIGHT DECISION

Doctors tried to save Owen's right leg for 18 months before he decided to have a below-knee amputation

BLESMA FACT: 339 new Members joined Blesma following the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan

“I’m not sure I believe in fate, but I had a profound premonition that something bad was going to happen. I remember the noise, landing, screaming, and being blown away by the elemental ferocity. I knew my life would never be the same again.

“My left leg was blown off, and my right leg was badly damaged. I’d broken my pelvis, had collapsed lungs, and perforated eardrums. I lost a finger, damaged my forearm, had nerve damage, tissue loss, internal injuries. I’d had a pulmonary embolism and was given 36 units of blood - there are only eight in your body!”



DOING THE DOUBLE

Two-time Paralympian Nick represented Great Britain at London and Rio – in different disciplines!



NICK BEIGHTON

MEMBER SINCE: 2009 **AGE:** 36

MILITARY SERVICE: British Army, Royal Engineers

Nick was injured in 2009 whilst serving as a troop commander in the Royal Engineers. He got involved in sport as part of his rehab and competed at the London 2012 and Rio 2016 Paralympic Games. He now has his eye on a Paralympic hat-trick in Tokyo in 2020.

Why did you decide to join the military?

As a kid I loved climbing, camping, sport, and adventures. I was in the Army Cadet Force and got up to Master Cadet, so I fancied the military. I took a gap year commission, went to Sheffield University, then Sandhurst. My first unit as a troop commander was in the Royal Engineers. I enjoyed it a lot and travelled to Germany, Canada, Kenya, and then Afghanistan.

You were injured on your first tour...

I was supposed to have been posted to a new job, but I stayed on and deployed to Afghanistan to help out the guy who was coming in. It was October 2009. I was with the Light Dragoons at first and then the Coldstream Guards. It was intense; we were doing big clearances, building checkpoints, all with significant enemy activity around us. I was injured doing a route recce. It was a kilometre away, which felt as far as the moon!

What do you remember?

I'm not sure I believe in fate, but I'd had a profound premonition that something bad was going to happen that day. It was during a night patrol, we were about 40 metres away from base, on a narrow path, and I stood on a pressure plate. A couple of guys ahead of me hadn't initiated it – maybe they were lighter than me. I remember the noise, landing, screaming, and being blown away by the elemental ferocity. It's startling what clarity you have. I knew my life would never be the same again, but I was remarkably calm really, looking at my little finger dangling off.

What were the extent of your injuries?

My left leg was blown off, and my right leg was badly damaged. I'd broken my pelvis, had internal injuries, perforated eardrums, collapsed lungs, and a pulmonary embolism. I lost a finger, had damaged my forearm, had nerve damage, tissue loss... Luckily, the medics were there in minutes. I don't know how I survived, I was bleeding from so many different parts. I was put in a coma when I got back to Camp Bastion and was given 36 units of blood – and there are only eight in your body! It was touch and go for a long while.

How was rehab?

It was extremely tough. My body was absolutely wrecked. I was losing weight and suffering from hallucinations, paranoia, and stress. I had about 35 operations, including removing my right leg. It took me years to get straight, and it's still very much an ongoing project. But Headley Court was great. There was so much love and attention, and there was a great group of us working together. I realised the value of staying focused. I decided to smash it!

Blesma helped to lead you towards sport...

Yes. Only six months after injury I was rafting in Colorado. It gave me an idea of what might be possible if I didn't dwell on the dark side of things. It opened my mind. I went sailing and learned to mono-ski. The Blesma attitude really helped me, and I realised that sport could give me a goal. I did a talent ID day for Team GB in 2010. I wasn't in great shape, but my attributes fitted rowing so I started to learn. By 2011, I was rowing six days a week, training for London 2012.

How were those first Paralympics?

Incredible! I'd gone from injury to rehab, to trying rowing, to London 2012 so quickly. In the end, we came fourth, 0.21 seconds off a medal. At the time it was frustrating, but in hindsight I think losing was a good thing because I learned from it. And I was burned out! I loved the structure of training. My focus might have been unhealthy, but it was probably the only way I could deal with what had happened to me.

So you changed things up?

Yes, I did Beeline Britain, travelling from Land's End to John O'Groats in a straight line, and raised £35,000 for Blesma. I also switched to canoeing; it's a solo sport, so I'm totally responsible for all my successes and failures. And I've had kids. My partner has been brilliant and has stood by me whenever I've been grumpy. Having a family has given me a new perspective and priority.

And you also trained for Rio 2016...

It was intense. I didn't have much time – just 18 months to prepare to race in a new discipline. But I approached training in a different way and tried to enjoy everything. Rio was great – I got a bronze medal, which was such a buzz, and I've got my mojo for Tokyo 2020. To compete in a third Paralympics would be amazing, I'll be a better athlete by then, and after that I know I will be happy to walk away and try something else.

JOB DONE!

Nick's bronze medal from the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games





THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

"I knew my life would never be the same again, but I was remarkably calm really, looking at my little finger dangling off"

100 MILES IN A DAY
Jonathan is instrumental in organising the annual Blesma 100 cycle ride which raises funds for the Association



JONATHAN BELL

MEMBER SINCE: 2006 AGE: 53

MILITARY SERVICE: British Army, 1st Battalion The Green Howards

Some people won't enjoy jumping out of a plane, others don't fancy scuba diving, but the key to getting the most out of Blesma's Activities Programme is to find the pastime that will give you life-long pleasure. When Blesma ambassador Jonathan Bell tried cycling with the charity, for example, he immediately knew he'd found his future passion.

"I hadn't done much riding before I gave it a go with Blesma, but I quickly picked up a lot of tips from the guys around me on those first few rides," he says. "I gradually increased my mileage – the encouraging environment made a crucial difference – and my enthusiasm for the sport grew and grew."

Jonathan joined The Green Howards when he was 19 and was injured in the 1990s when a car drove into his platoon during a night exercise. "The vehicle ploughed through my foot patrol, and 16 of us were injured," he says. "The one guy left standing gave first aid to everyone – he saved my life! I was paralysed, but my rifle sling was strangling me. He cut me free. The group is still in touch and, oddly enough, cycling has brought us back together. We now ride the Blesma 100 every year."

Jonathan says he struggled to make sense of what happened and found it hard to adjust to his disability. "I was no longer a fit young

soldier, I was paralysed and in a wheelchair. But I had fantastic family support, and my regiment was incredible."

Having completed a degree and taken a job as a BBC producer and documentary maker, Jonathan was busy and successful. Work distracted him, he says, but Blesma eventually helped him get back to being the active person he was pre-injury.

"I was ill for a long time and had terrible leg injuries. It was a while before I could think about getting active, but with Blesma's help I have become enthusiastic about sport and fitness again. I'm never going to break any records, but I do all sorts of things that I never thought I'd be able to do. Three years ago, for example, I couldn't have imagined riding 100 miles in a single day.

"Keeping fit is important to my health now. I've had a foot amputated and have to be careful with my legs, but I've treated myself to a top-of-the-range hand cycle. It's my sport, and I get a lot out of it. Best of all, The Green Howards have a huge turnout for the Blesma 100, which we organise and, with volunteers from across the regimental family, raise money for the charity. You'd be hard pushed to find a better bunch of people! It's a day we all really enjoy – great camaraderie!"



BLESMA FACT: The Association offers a range of cycling activities, from beginners' days to mountain bike expeditions to Morocco





MORE THAN A MEMBER

As well as being a Member, Jonathan is also one of the Association's official Blesma Ambassadors

LISA JOHNSTON

MEMBER SINCE: 2016 **AGE:** 36

MILITARY SERVICE: British Army, Royal Army Medical Corps

Lisa Johnston served in the Army as a Combat Medical Technician. A training injury led to her losing her left leg above the knee in June 2016. She has since gone on to compete – and set records – in the Warrior Games.

How come you decided to pursue a career in the military?

I grew up in Hertfordshire, and when I was a teenager I really enjoyed being in the Army Cadet Force. My mum was a nurse, so I wanted to do something medical but thought nursing was a bit boring, so I became a paramedic in the Army. I joined the Royal Army Medical Corps in 2001, when I was 19. I served for 17 years and loved every minute of it. I went all over; Germany, the Falklands, Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait. I was attached to 5 Rifles. It was great. I also had three kids during my time in the Army – they're five, six and 12 now.

How were you injured?

It was during a routine PT lesson on an assault course in 2014. I sustained an injury and it just got worse and worse. It developed Complex Regional Pain Syndrome and by the time I was diagnosed with it, my leg was in a really bad way.

Can you describe how it felt?

The pain was indescribable. Your body basically overreacts to an injury. My foot would swell up and go different colours. If I had a shower, the water would feel like burning fat. There was no comfy position, so I quickly became sleep deprived. I was irritable and got no respite. Sometimes, it felt like my whole leg was on fire, or being sandpapered. My kids really suffered because I couldn't hug them or walk them to school. I felt as though I had become a burden rather than a parent.

So you decided to have an amputation?

Yes, in June 2016. Nothing could be done for the leg so the next pragmatic step was to take it off. Unfortunately, the syndrome had crept up my leg and gone higher than the knee, so my only regret is that I didn't make the decision to amputate earlier. But the relief was incredible. The day I came back from hospital was amazing, the kids hugged me and it was the best feeling! I'm almost back to normal now, but I've swapped one set of hassles for another.



You've been very active since, too...

Since I was discharged, I've tried a bit of everything. I've done three-track skiing, which was very cool but hard work. I'm also learning to fly a plane, and I'm just back from America, where I competed in the Warrior Games.

How was that?

Just incredible. They're so patriotic over there. People hug you, shake your hand, and thank you for your service. I met some inspirational people. I don't think I've ever cried so much! The cheering was deafening. I competed in shot put, discus, swimming, volleyball and basketball. I got three golds in the pool and broke the Warrior Games record in backstroke. I'd like to keep the sport going and train for Invictus.

And now you're involved with Blesma?

I've only just joined, but I think it looks great. I've already put my name down for scuba diving and the CAMO trip in Aspen. The Blesma family trips look great, too. I never thought I'd be doing anything like this – when I was in so much pain, I didn't think there was a future for me.

BLESMA FACT: The Association received 107 new Members in 2017, including 21 who are suffering loss of use of limb

RECORD BREAKER

In her first Warrior Games, Lisa won three swimming gold medals and broke a Games record in backstroke





2020 VISION

The Team BRIT crew is planning to make history at the Le Mans 24 Hour Race in two years' time

TEAM BRIT

This is endurance racing – tailored for those who have had to endure more than most

When Blesma Member Dave Player founded KartForce in 2010, his goal was to get injured veterans into karting so they could discover their potential post-injury. When KartForce proved to be such a success Dave, who was paralysed in an accident in 1991, decided to take motorsport to the next level.

That next level is Team BRIT, a motorsport team that operates as a professional racing outfit rather than as a charity. It is made up entirely of disabled drivers and crew, including a number of Blesma Members, and is partly funded by the Association (which also provides funding to cover Members' costs and race kit).

“Lads with physical injuries feel normal behind the wheel. On the track, everyone is exactly the same, and for guys with mental issues who struggle on a daily basis, it’s even better,” says Dave. “Once they start driving, the effects can be amazing. It gives people confidence, and it often gives them the strength to change other parts of their lives.”

Team BRIT now competes in the Fun Cup as well as the GT4 series in this Aston Martin (pictured). However, the goal is to then step up to GT3 level before racing at the world-famous Le Mans 24 Hour Race in 2020. Time to meet some of the team...



LEADING FROM THE FRONT

"When I started in karting the hand controls were rubbish," says team boss Dave Player, "so I've been working at it. A lower limb amputee race car driver needs to do everything with their hands that an able-bodied driver does with their feet, so we've designed the world's most advanced hand controls." Team BRIT's steering wheels have a right hand paddle for the throttle and a left hand paddle for the brake, while you gear up and down with your thumb. "The concept is simple, but the tech is incredibly complex," says Dave. "It means we can open up the driving seat to triple, and potentially even quadruple, amputees."



A PARALYMPIAN'S DRIVE

Jon-Allan Butterworth is the most successful military Paralympian, having won three silver medals and one gold



JON-ALLAN BUTTERWORTH MBE

MEMBER SINCE: 2007 **AGE:** 32

MILITARY SERVICE: Royal Air Force

In 2007, Jon-Allan Butterworth was serving in Iraq as an RAF Weapons Technician, when he was injured in a rocket attack and lost his left arm above the elbow. During rehab, he took part in a Paralympic trial day, discovered cycling and went on to win three Paralympic silver medals (in London) and one gold (in Rio). Jon-Allan is already the most decorated military paralympian, but he's still hungry...

What happened at the Paralympics trial day?

I thought I was going to collect some leaflets and be shown what Paralympic sports entailed, but it was a try-out day! I did the cycling trial and my times were good, but Beijing was just around the corner so I didn't have time to make the team.

What did you do next?

About 18 months later, in January 2009, I had a retest and made the team. It came at just the right time, as my military career was ending and this gave me the opportunity to put all my energy into something else. It meant everything to me. In the early days, cycling gave me the focus and fitness that I needed to get me through my recovery.

What was it like to compete for Team GB at London 2012 and Rio 2016?

Intense! I pretty much just ate, slept, and trained. I never expected to be on the starting line at a Paralympic Games, but to win three silver medals was crazy. Ultimately though, I wanted to be a winner, so I really enjoyed getting the gold in Rio.

And then came the MBE...

It felt like an appreciation and acknowledgment for what I'd done for the sport. It was a nice way to cap off my career because at this point I don't know if I'm going to the Tokyo Games in 2020.

What support have you had from Blesma?

They bought the shoes I wore when I won gold in Rio! The Association also gave me a grant for training equipment in the run-up to the Games, and before that I went on the Colorado Ski Spectacular which definitely stopped me from becoming depressed. More recently, Blesma has contributed to help me race with Team BRIT.

So you're currently training for Tokyo 2020 AND racing with Team BRIT?

I'm extremely busy! Even when I'm racing for Team BRIT I have to train for cycling, too. I really love testing and racing in the car, but if the hotel has a gym I head straight there after getting out from behind the wheel!



How did you get involved with the team?

I've been interested in cars for quite a while now, and straight after Rio I got my racing licence. I already had a track car and had done some races for Mission Motorsport, but waiting a long time between races was frustrating. I wanted to do more so was looking for a team when Dave Player invited me to a test in December 2017.

The team's ambition really appealed to me; taking part in a journey like the Paralympics but this time to Le Mans. And I enjoy racing – I like the adrenaline, the pre-race nerves, and the buzz.

Is that different from competitive cycling?

When you're competing in the Paralympics, you're at the peak of what you can achieve in your sport, and that's fantastic, but your injury is totally visible. To anyone watching endurance motorsport, I'm just one car racing another. And when it comes to the other drivers, nobody knows – or cares – that I've got a disability. They're just trying to overtake me. I'm competing on a totally level playing field.

What are your goals now?

For cycling, it's to carry on winning at the top level. For Team BRIT, it's to get into the GT4 car next year, and then make it to Le Mans. So, Le Mans in June 2020 and Tokyo for the Paralympics in the September. That is going to be quite tricky!

IT'S SHOE TIME!

Blesma supported Jon-Allan with funding for his Paralympic dream and even bought the shoes he wore for his gold medal ride in Rio



CUTTING-EDGE PROSTHETICS

Ash's life changed dramatically after he had state-of-the-art osseointegration surgery

ASH HALL

MEMBER SINCE: 2010 **AGE:** 28

MILITARY SERVICE: British Army, Royal Engineers

In 2010, Ash deployed to Afghanistan as part of an Improvised Explosive Device search team. During his tour he stepped on an IED, losing his legs above the knee and sustaining severe injuries to his hands and arms. For years, he grappled with the overwhelming difficulties that came with his new life.

“I struggled with sockets because of the shape and length of my stumps. They were so short and round that it was a real pain every morning to line my legs up properly,” he says. “I didn’t deal with things as well as I could have. I was angry for a long time and drank quite a bit. It’s taken me seven years, but I’m in a much better place now.”

Ash has found that better place thanks, in no small part, to a revolutionary form of surgery. “I was frustrated and unmotivated at Headley Court, but that all changed when I found out about osseointegration. Suddenly, there was a light at the end of the tunnel. I had a goal that seemed achievable.”

Osseointegration, or direct skeletal fixation, is a cutting-edge surgical procedure that involves inserting a titanium rod into the middle of the thigh bone. The base of the rod protrudes through the skin, and an attachment at the end allows an off-the-shelf prosthesis to be clipped on and off in seconds.

“So I put my head down, stopped drinking, started going to the gym, and started putting the effort in at Headley Court. I had the operation two years ago, and it has changed my world dramatically,” says Ash, who has catapulted himself into life ever since.

“I went on my first Blesma trip – horse riding in Arizona – the year after my operation. Now, every January, I take a look at Blesma’s activities calendar to see what I could benefit from or if there’s something new to try.”



In the same year, Ash headed to Canada with the UK Invictus Games squad and won silver with the wheelchair rugby team. His attitude and performance caught the eye of Dave Player, who invited Ash down for a Team BRIT recce day at Brands Hatch last year.

“I get a buzz out of racing – it does get the adrenaline going, but it’s also great being with the team. There’s a feeling of being part of something – that military sense of humour. And you have to be professional, too,” says Ash. “I’d love to improve and get in the GT4 car, but I’d also love to open the door so more disabled people can get into the sport, maybe train them up. I love the ambition the team has – and the ambition it has given me!”

“I get a buzz racing, it gets the adrenaline going! I love the ambition the team has, and the ambition it has given me!”



ASH'S INJURIES

Ash lost his legs and sustained severe injuries to his hands and arms in an IED blast in Afghanistan in 2010



TONY WILLIAMS

MEMBER SINCE: 2017 **AGE:** 34

MILITARY SERVICE: British Army, Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps

"I joined the Army in 2003 and deployed to Afghanistan in 2010," says Tony Williams. "I was shot six times; once through the shoulder by a sniper and twice in my helmet as I began to direct care for others who had been hit. I scrambled to a casualty and was shot twice in the body armour. A final round went through my left hip, tearing through my abdomen, bowel, and spine."

Tony was evacuated to Camp Bastion and, a week later, woke up in hospital in Birmingham. "I was told I might never walk again, that I wouldn't have control over my bladder or bowels, and that I had less than a five per cent chance of having kids." By his own reckoning, Tony became "a nurse's worst nightmare. I wouldn't sit in a wheelchair because I just wanted to use a Zimmer frame. Four months later, my right leg began to show signs that it was getting some function back, but doctors wanted me to slow down, so I knew then that I needed to get to Headley Court. That's when Blesma first came on the scene. I had spent three months staring at a ceiling because my back had been broken during the incident, so the Association arranged for a specialist ambulance to get me to Headley Court sooner."

Following years of rehab, Tony built enough strength in his legs to walk again with the use of braces. Then, incredibly, his first daughter, Holly, was born on Valentine's Day 2014. A year later, his second daughter, Ellena, was born. "When I think about being a dad, all the hairs on my body stand up! It means everything to me. It is like I reached a sense of fulfilment," says Tony.

Eager to make his daughters proud, Tony joined KartForce in 2015 and, in 2017, progressed to Team BRIT. "KartForce had such a positive effect on me. I was setting goals, losing weight, and my mental health was improving. I got my self-esteem back. Team BRIT is way beyond what anybody had expected of me, but without Blesma's help I wouldn't be able to drive. I'm very grateful!"

JAMES 'JIMMY' HILL

MEMBER SINCE: 2016 **AGE:** 36

MILITARY SERVICE: Royal Marines

You joined the Royal Marines when you were 23, what did you do before that?

I was a footballer and a carpenter. I joined the Royal Marines in 2006 because I just needed a change. I was injured in Afghanistan in December 2013, but I wouldn't change any of it for the world. It's been an amazing journey!

How were you injured?

We were training Afghan forces when we got into a fire fight. I was shot six times; once in my helmet and five times in my legs. The incident left me with drop foot and no feeling or movement from the knee down in my left leg. One of the rounds went through my right hip and broke my femur, so I have lost some function in that leg, too

How did your injuries affect you?

I've always been really active, even before I joined the military, so I found that hard – playing football had been my release. Mentally, I feel as though I've been alright, but I think charities have perhaps done more for me than I realise. Playing golf and racing for Team BRIT both help me a lot. They replace certain elements that I miss from the military, like being with a team and competing. I'm just doing those things in a different way now.

When did you find out about Team BRIT?

I saw a poster for KartForce in Headley Court and thought I'd try go-karting to pass the time. I was competitive but had never tried racing. Surprisingly, I won a few races and was asked if I fancied attending a Team BRIT rookie day. I joined the team in 2015, when they were just getting started with their first season.

What has your journey been like so far?

Initially, I joined Team BRIT to fill some time, but I'm getting more and more involved and am doing lots in the background. It's no longer about me; it's about Team BRIT. I like the message the team delivers; encouraging those with disability to find a place within motorsport and trying to normalise it. It's really about encouraging people to get out and try things, not only in motorsport but anything. Just get out there and do it, regardless of disability!

HIT FOR SIX
Jimmy was shot half a dozen times in Afghanistan. His helmet stopped one of the bullets!





LIFE CHANGING

Alex has no movement or sensation below his chest following a motorbike accident when he was just 22 years old



ALEX KROL

MEMBER SINCE: 2011 **AGE:** 36

MILITARY SERVICE: Royal Marines

Ask anyone with an energetic toddler and they'll tell you the hard work never stops. Factor in the difficulties of dealing with major injury and it becomes tougher still.

"Our son Xander loves to climb," says Alex Krol, a former Royal Marine who was paralysed when a car pulled out in front of his motorbike in 2005. "And I can't get up to get him down. If my wife Jayne goes out, it can be tricky. She'll sometimes come back and Xander will have no clothes on and will be eating a packet of chocolate buttons that I've had to bribe him down with!"

Alex was injured when he was just 22 years old, but that hasn't stopped him packing his life with activity and adventure ever since – not least the myriad challenges of fatherhood.

"After my injury, I was very focused on myself and my development, trying to sort myself out, carve a way," he says. "I was lost for a little while after injury, but then I applied for a flying scholarship for disabled people and I was sent to South Africa to learn how to fly. It was fantastic. Now I'm a qualified pilot, and I do it as much as I can in my spare time. I've also got five wheelchair bungee jumps to my name, and I got involved with Blesma and started cycling a while ago.

"While I was concentrating on getting better, Jayne was always in the background, and I knew I had feelings for her. We were friends at first, but eventually we got closer and closer, married, and had Xander."

Being a dad means having to put a limit on the amount of adrenaline-fuelled activities Alex gets involved in these days. "We were ready for kids, but it's always a bit of a shock, and takes a while to adjust," he admits. "In the veteran community there are always so many different opportunities and activities to get involved in. My expectations of reining it in had to be reined in! But now we sit down with a calendar and work out what I can do."

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Alex is one of 40 Members who have taken part in the groundbreaking Blesma Community Programme



JAYNE KROL (AND XANDER)

Jayne married Blesma Member Alex in 2011. They have a two-year-old son called Xander

How did you and Alex meet?

We were in the Air Cadets together, so we go way back. We lost touch for a while and met up again when I was 18. Then I went off to university, but we stayed friends. When Alex was injured – for something like that to happen to someone so young – it was a massive shock.

How quickly did Alex come to terms with his injury?

He was amazing. I spent quite a bit of time with him around that stage. I was off university for the Summer and visited him in hospital in Sheffield. Alex accepted his injuries and decided to bounce back as quickly as he could, so everyone around him followed his lead. He was raring to go, to get through rehabilitation and get on with life. We thought; 'OK, if you're getting on with it, we'll help you!'

And eventually you got engaged?

He was always progressing – he'd find some crazy sport to play or holiday to go on. His focus was on finding a purpose for his life. His job and social life had been torn apart, but I watched him get back to living life to the full. By the time I came home from uni, he was a different person, much for the better. I worked for the civil service, and we got married in 2011, on the same day as William and Kate. It was the alternative Royal wedding!

But you've had some challenges?

Alex got septicaemia and had a hard time for a year. He'd cut himself while swimming but couldn't feel it, so it healed with the infection inside. We missed my 30th birthday and our anniversary, which was tough. But we've had great times together – travelling and lots of holidays. We designed and built our house and then, after five years together, we started a new chapter when we had Xander.

How has Blesma helped your family?

If Alex has support, opportunities and purpose, and can work through what's happened to him, that benefits the family. He's always alright as long as he's got something to do – he doesn't do bored or sitting still. Ever! Blesma has helped keep him on the right path.

Alex has recently done his bit to spread his passion for flying to others by organising a Blesma beginners' aviation day – an idea that was eagerly adopted by the Association. Eight Members took the controls of a small plane as they learned to fly over Liverpool. "I saw that Blesma was running a scheme in which Members could pitch an activity, so I went for it," he says. "They were keen, and I was happy about that. Blesma invested time, support, and money into it, and that's fantastic."

And when he's not in the air, Alex is usually around town on his freewheel bike [pictured]. "It really helps me when I'm out and about," he says. "It's better for kerbs, and people tend to move out of my way when I'm on

it! Xander likes to hop on too, and that stops me falling off. It's by far the best bit of kit I've got."

Taking part in the popular Blesma Community Programme, meanwhile, is helping Alex process his injury.

"The speaking balances my mental health," he says. "I've never been too depressed, and Blesma continues to help me with that by giving me all sorts of opportunities. I didn't go to Headley Court because I had a spinal injury, so it took me a while to discover the charity, but I'm so happy I did. I love the fact that Blesma does all kinds of stuff"

Armed with his bike – and with enough chocolate buttons to keep Xander in check – Alex won't be slowing down any time soon.



LOVE IS IN THE AIR
*Jayne and Alex first met
in the Air Cadets. They
were married in 2011*



NEW TO BLESMA

Albert was injured in The Korean War but only became a Blesma Member a few years ago

ALBERT HAZELTINE

MEMBER SINCE: 2015 **AGE:** 88

MILITARY SERVICE: British Army, Royal Artillery

Albert Hazeltine lost a leg in the Korean War, and recently had to have his below-knee amputation taken above the knee. He's a latecomer to Blesma but is already a huge fan.

How did you get involved with the military?

I'm from London, but I eventually moved away and began working on farms on the Isle of Wight. When it was time to do my two years of military service, I thought I might as well join up properly and get paid for it. I joined the Royal Artillery and was attached to the Maintenance Corps. I learned how to drive tanks, and later I taught tank driving to younger soldiers.

You served in Korea, didn't you?

I did. I must admit my memory of it is hazy, but I don't remember it being a particularly good time! I hadn't been there very long when I was injured in an explosion and lost my right leg below the knee. Two of my fellow soldiers were killed in the same blast, so I've always considered myself lucky to escape with just an injury. I don't remember the incident at all, I just recall being on a plane home, then in a hospital in England.

What happened next?

I was disabled out of the Service. Being injured, I just had to accept it and get on with the rest of my life. I did my rehabilitation at Roehampton, which I remember as being good. I managed to find it relatively easy to get walking again and I got to grips with the artificial leg I was given very well. Once I'd recovered enough, I went back to farming, and after a while I got into engineering and fixing cars – the Army experience working on the tanks helped with that! I moved to Chigwell in Essex, got married and had a couple of kids.

How has Blesma helped you out?

I didn't actually know about the charity until recently because I didn't use Blesma after



my first amputation. But a couple of years ago I fell down some steps and broke the femur in my right leg. Due to complications after the fall I had to have my leg amputated above the knee, and the nurse told me about the Association then. Since then, Blesma has put a stairlift and a wet room in my house. It's a great charity.

And you're still up and about on an above-knee prosthetic?

Yes, although I only wear it off and on because it can sometimes give me some trouble. But with the prosthetic leg and my walking sticks, I can still get around well enough. If I was a bit younger, I'd be whizzing about like some of these young Blesma Members!

“Two of my fellow soldiers were killed in the same blast, so I've always considered myself lucky to escape with just an injury”

A CAREER CUT SHORT

Jamie joined the Royal Navy at 18, but his career was cut short when his sight began to deteriorate at the age of just 20



THE PAW-FECT PAIR

Guide dogs are matched to their owners, so Freddie was always going to be the perfect fit for Jamie





BLESMA FACT: *The Association supports 118 Members who have lost either some or all of their sight in one or both eyes*

JAMIE WELLER (AND FREDDIE)

MEMBER SINCE: 2006 AGE: 48

MILITARY SERVICE: Royal Navy

Jamie Weller realised that he was going blind in the most inconvenient of places. “There I was, driving along a dual carriageway, when I suddenly saw a car coming right at me,” he says. “I thought; *‘That’s strange!’*, but then realised I wasn’t on a dual carriageway, I was on the wrong side of the road! My retina nerves had started to deteriorate. It was a shock!”

Londoner Jamie, who was training to be a Sea Harrier Aircraft Engineer, managed to get off the road safely. But, at the age of 20, he realised his dream job was about to disappear. “I’d joined the Royal Navy at 18, and was top of my class in aviation engineering,” he says. “After noticing problems with my eyesight I went to the medical officer and he told me my central visual fields were being lost. I went to a consultant at Moorfields and was told the life-changing news that the damage was permanent and irreversible. If you are sitting across a table from me, I can’t see you. I’ve only got peripheral vision, but I regretted losing my naval career more than my sight.”

Jamie found that attitudes to blindness were less than progressive. “People told me I wouldn’t be able to do anything,” he recalls. “Even my gran said that! But I didn’t listen. I went to Warwick University and got a maths degree. That was tough as a visually impaired person, but I had a good brain and a good memory. Graduating was a big achievement.”

Jamie became a tax accountant for Deloitte. “I used specialist scanners and reading devices,” he says. “It was less exciting than being an Aircraft Engineer, but I was so proud when I qualified as no other blind person had done this, so I felt I was changing perceptions of blind people. I was even put forward by Deloitte to carry the London 2012 Olympic torch.”

Meanwhile, Jamie had to relearn basic life skills. “As a kid, you learn to read and write, get around, cook, communicate using sight. When that is taken away, it’s like being a child again. It’s easier these days because of smartphones; I have an audio keyboard and I can get around using online maps.”

But now, Jamie has got an altogether cuter navigation aid by the name of Freddie. “Guide Dogs get matched to their user; their lifestyle and walking speed, for example, or if you have a family. I’ve got two daughters, aged 12 and nine, and Freddie is just right. He’s very useful at night, when my vision drops off – he won’t cross the road unless it’s safe for me!”

Jamie has dedicated himself to numerous projects and charities. He has joined the Armed Forces Para Snow Sport Team and competes in Para Alpine and Nordic skiing for Great Britain. He competed in cycling and athletics at the 2017 Invictus Games, and he climbed to Everest Base Camp last November.

“My life now is about using my experience to help others who face similar challenges, as well as being a fundraiser, and a good father. I never say I’m a disabled person, I am a person who can’t see well, and I ‘can do’ but need to think outside the box to do it without sight. I manage my blindness, I don’t let it manage me!”

Blesma has helped Jamie along almost as much as Freddie. “The Association has helped with some financial things, it’s a great charity. I want to do the Community Programme soon. I’d like to become a motivational speaker and share the story of my resilience. I think talking to school kids would be good for me, and would hopefully be beneficial for them too.

“Blesma is great at setting up things like that – win-wins for everyone involved!”

“I was on a dual carriageway when I saw a car coming right at me. Then I realised it was me on the wrong side of the road!”



DAVE LEWAN

MEMBER SINCE: 2003 AGE: 50

MILITARY SERVICE: British Army, 2nd Battalion Grenadier Guards

Dave Lewan is a walking advert for Blesma. Quite literally! On his 50th birthday, he got the Association's logo tattooed on his arm as a show of thanks and support for everything the charity has done for him.

"I had it done because Blesma saved my life," says the former Grenadier Guard from Nottingham. "If it wasn't for the people at Blesma, I wouldn't be here today, it's just as simple as that. I wanted to show how much they mean to me. As far as I am concerned, Blesma is for life. And the other Members seem to quite like the ink, too!"

Dave lost his right leg in an accident in 2003, before developing a highly painful neurological condition. "I was on holiday in Gran Canaria when I fell off a balcony. The bone shot right out of my leg. It was bad, but what happened next made it so much worse. The hospital botched the operation. I was kept in for 35 days before being repatriated, but they didn't get the infection out. After five operations back in England to try to save my leg, I was told it would have to be amputated."

Things would get much worse still for Dave. A couple of years after the amputation, he was diagnosed with the rare neurological condition Dystonia Torticollis that causes the neck muscles to contract involuntarily. "The trauma of losing my leg had brought it on," he says. "The pain was incredible. Losing my leg was bad, the Phantom Limb Pain was bad, but this was on another level. My head was tilted over at 90° and I had to move my whole body to turn around. I tried about 30 different kinds of medication; acupuncture, botox, nerve block... but there was no relief. I was drinking heavily, getting more depressed, and eventually I couldn't take any more."

Dave made numerous attempts on his life. "I tried to gas myself," he says, "I jumped in the local canal and was pulled out, I took overdoses, I was sectioned under the Mental Health Act... I think the early attempts were a cry for help, but in 2009 I plunged a six-inch knife into my heart. I really wanted to die."

It was at this point that a Blesma Support Officer got involved and began to guide Dave

away from the brink. "I met my BSO at the Limb Centre and since then, the Association has been so special – nothing has ever been too much bother. They have been supportive throughout my darkest days and have never given up on me, even after I had given up on myself. My BSO was like a father figure. He came to the doctor with me, he really cared. When others stigmatised me as an alcoholic ex-squaddie, he saw something in me and was at the hospital so quickly after my final suicide attempt."

With Blesma's help, Dave turned a corner. The Association pushed for a new form of treatment, Deep Brain Stimulation, and that helped with Dave's pain almost immediately. He stopped drinking, lost weight, and started work, running his own courier business.

"I also met my partner, Marion, at a Blesma fishing match in Lincolnshire," he laughs. "She was working in the hotel we were staying in. Life has got better and better, and Blesma has helped with that in so many ways. The charity is a vital support mechanism for so many people. There is always someone you can talk to, and if they can't help directly, they'll find someone who can."

"Blesma assists with practical things like prosthetics and benefits, but it also helps with your self-esteem. I've taken part in loads of the Association's activities, for example. I've been skiing in Colorado, taken part in Activities Weeks at Blackpool, I always attend the AGM, I take part in as much as I can because I want to help other Members now that I'm able to – it's my turn to give back after Blesma has done so much for me."

Dave's favourite Blesma event, however, is joining Members for the Remembrance Parade at the Cenotaph. "When Big Ben chimes at 11am, you can hear a pin drop – then everyone claps and cheers you," he says. "The remembrance element of the charity is important. We remember those who have fallen, and we remember those who are injured. It brings back that *Band of Brothers* element of the military. I love that, and it's so important. I can't thank Blesma enough!"



BLESMA FACT: 93p of every pound of income generated in 2017 will be directly spent on helping Members in 2018



NERYS PEARCE

MEMBER SINCE: 2012 **AGE:** 36

MILITARY SERVICE: British Army, Royal Army Medical Corps

Nerys Pearce has to be one of Blesma's most active Members but that certainly wasn't always the case. After being paralysed when a car reversed in front of her motorbike in October 2008, the former Combat Paramedic initially found her disability extremely tough to deal with. But after realising that she "could stay like that for 50 years and do absolutely nothing, or I could look at my old life, which I loved, and get it back", she threw herself back into sport and began by taking part in Blesma's Soldier Ride.

Since then, she's clocked up a list of athletic achievements to rival anyone: medals in track and field, handcycling, swimming, basketball and weightlifting at the Warrior and Invictus Games; she has represented Wales in Para-Powerlifting at the 2018 Commonwealth Games; joined the Armed Forces Para Snowsports Team; and set both British and World records in indoor rowing.

But Nerys isn't just satisfied with competing in disability sport. She's also making a huge impression in events that are open to anyone. "Last year, I won a couple of open water races

against able-bodied swimmers," she says. "People would actually ask me why I was entering!" She answered them by winning. "It's the love of sport, training hard, and always pushing to be a better version of myself. That's what's important, not disability.

"I'm still surprised by my results. I won the River Adur 5km open water swim, for example. Competing has been great for me mentally. It has cancelled out lots of the negative mental health issues I had towards my injury and feeling that I was less than my former self. Hopefully, I've also countered the labels people put on those with disabilities.

"I have the power to show people that the seemingly impossible is possible, and that you can make a difference in your own life."

Such successes have also boosted Nerys' confidence to arrange events and activities for herself rather than just attending pre-organised races. She has swum the lakes in the Lake District and attended swim races in Finland and Sweden, and is off to Croatia soon. A Channel swim is on the cards, but next Summer will see her attempt what will



ON YOUR MARKS...

From Soldier Ride to the Commonwealth Games, sport has played a huge part in Nerys' life post-injury





IT'S NOT ALL SPORT *Nerys has pushed herself by taking part in the Blesma Community Programme and this year's collaboration with the Graeae Theatre Company*

perhaps be her most ambitious project to date; a 3,000-mile ride across America with seven other sick, wounded or injured women. This is a challenge they have planned from scratch.

"Blesma is a sponsor and has been vital in giving me more confidence," she says. "As a team, we have sorted out all our own logistics for the trip, and that's something Blesma has helped empower me to do. I used to rely on organisations to run things, now I'm making them happen."

But as well as her major missions, she's keeping her hand in with disability sport. "I've just bought this new race chair from another athlete," she says. "Before I was injured, I was a triathlete and the more sport I've done, the more I have realised that endurance sports are my real love. The longer the race, the better I get!"

"I recently competed in my first race in this chair and was in the lead until I crashed into a dog that was loose on the course! It was hugely disappointing, but I will race again soon."

"I want to be pushed to use my intellect as well as my power, stamina, and endurance. That's where sport makes me feel fulfilled, like I'm pushing all of myself. So I'm training in the chair and looking to take part in more triathlons."

Meanwhile, Nerys has also stretched herself mentally through her involvement in the Blesma Community Programme and the Graeae Theatre Company's production of *This Is Not For You*.

"That was a phenomenal and genuinely life-changing experience," she says, "and off the back of it, I have even been offered a job with Graeae as a co-lead creative facilitator in schools. That's just an amazing feeling."

"Along with the Community Programme, it has given me a great boost. I've never been the most confident in a big group of people, or been the arty, theatrical person who stands out and is good with words. I have always been nervous so taking part in that was a crazy journey. I've discovered I can interact with people and change the way they think. The Community Programme showed me that everyone else was just as nervous! I can let people in a bit more, and the confidence has even translated over to my sporting performances."

"Before, I used to think; *'The worst that can happen is that I come last'*. Now, I think; *'I want to win this!'*" Opponents beware!

IT'S ALL IN THE MIND

"Before, I used to think; 'The worst that can happen is that I come last.' Now, I think; 'I want to win this!'"





MATT'S BEST FRIEND

Dozer has been by Matt's side, helping him through his difficult days, for the last nine years



MATTY WOOLLARD

MEMBER SINCE: 2007 **AGE:** 29

MILITARY SERVICE: British Army, 1st Battalion Royal Anglian Regiment

Matty Woollard's brush with death has not taken away his zest for life, as you can tell by the fact that the 29 year old is well on his way to qualifying as a ski instructor thanks to a Blesma Winter Sports programme. And on the icy slopes is probably the only place Dozer – a constant companion through some very tough times – can't be by his master's side.

"He has been through everything with me," says Matt. "I got him in 2009 and in the space of four years I'd lost my career, my leg, and my mother, I'd had my first child and then I'd lost my marriage. Dozer gives me the incentive to get up in the morning. Whenever I'm having a hard time, I just take him out and clear my head. He has always been there."

Two years previously, in 2007, Matt was following his boyhood dream having joined the Army, and was serving in Afghanistan with 1st Battalion Royal Anglian Regiment.

"I had been in the Army Cadets, and knew right from the start that I liked the discipline, the family, the routine... it offered something I wasn't getting in school. So I signed up when I was just 16 years and nine months old – the youngest you could be. I never had a Plan B!

"I deployed to Afghanistan in 2007. Training was tough but I felt confident and ready to go, even though I had only just turned 18."

Matt had only been in theatre for six weeks when, on 03 May 2007, he was blown up after stepping on three anti-personnel mines that had been stacked on top of each other.

"I could see immediately that my right leg had gone below the knee, but at the same time I had to hold my left leg up because it was split open and the muscle was hanging out. My arms and hands were badly damaged too, and I've had to have several skin grafts since."

As horrific as that day was for Matt, he says the worst moment of his Army career was being told he couldn't redeploy to Afghanistan.

"I'd done the training, I was back to being fit again and, if anything, I was a better soldier the second time around. I had a doctor's appointment three weeks before deployment and he asked all these questions about my prosthetic leg, then gave me a hearing test.

"I failed it! I found out I had tinnitus in both ears and some loss of hearing in my left ear. It was enough to stop me deploying."



In 2013, Matt was medically discharged, and for the last five years he has been on a path to discover a new passion – which is exactly where Blesma has helped out.

"Blesma came into my life right from the start, when I was in hospital. My BSO introduced himself and another Member, Steve Gill [see p44]. That was as terrifying as it was rewarding because this guy – a real big character, covered head to toe in tattoos – was cutting around on two prosthetic legs. That day changed the rest of my time in hospital because I was inspired. I decided that if Steve could walk that well on two prosthetic legs, I'd put in the effort to walk just as well."

Matt discovered a new family amongst the membership, found a passion for cycling and, in January 2017, took part in Blesma's Winter Sports activity in France. He is now halfway to becoming a qualified ski instructor.

"I took a group of novice skiers out for the day, and I realised how lucky I was and how rewarding my life had become. Understanding what a difference that day on the slopes made to other people's lives really took me back. I loved it and wanted to do more of it. That feeling is something I want to chase!"

BLESMA FACT: The Association was the chosen charity of Matt's beloved West Ham United for the 2016/17 and 2017/18 seasons

“Blesma has made a huge difference to my world. It has made my world colourful! If I feel lonely, I think of Blesma, and I forget that I am lonely. Blesma has brought back my smile”

GAM GURUNG

MEMBER SINCE: 1994 **AGE:** 56

MILITARY SERVICE: British Army, Gurkha Rifles

When did you join the military?

It was in 1980. I was young and handsome – just 19 years old! I served for 16 years in the 6th Queen Elizabeth's Own Gurkha Rifles. I was champion recruit of my regiment and overall champion recruit of my intake of 80.

How were you injured?

In 1987, I was selected from my company to go on a Section Commander's Battle Course in Wales. Part of the training involved being on exercise in Brecon, learning about ammunition and weapons. It was during that time that I was blown up by some plastic explosive. I lost my arm, some of my hearing and sight, my right hand was damaged, and so was my stomach and my face.

What happened immediately after you were injured?

I was taken to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham and then onto Headley Court. I was in and out of hospital for 18 months; every day I needed to do exercises and physiotherapy, as well as normal, simple duties. Even after I was blown up, I continued to help with my regiment and worked at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst as admin corporal.

How has Blesma helped with your recovery?

I discovered Blesma in 1994 and being a Member has made a huge difference to my world ever since. It has made my world colourful! If I feel lonely, I think of Blesma – which I think of as my family – and I forget that I am lonely. Blesma brought back my smile and happiness, so I want to share that happiness with other Members.

You must have taken part in a few activities?

I have done a lot! My first was back in 2016 – I travelled to South Africa with eight other Blesma Members, my brothers. I really enjoyed it, the only thing I can say about that is 'Wow!' I went skiing in France the following year. I had seen the sport on TV, in films, and in *Blesma Magazine* but didn't think I could do it myself. I gave it my full effort for



10 days, and by the end of the trip I was awarded the skibob most improved newcomer 2017!

What do you do now?

Now, I'm happy. I work three days a week as a tax revenue officer and every Thursday, for an hour in the evenings, I am a DJ! I only play Nepalese songs on my show, which is called *The Everest Show with Gam* and is on Kingston Green Radio. "Good evening to all my listeners. This is the Everest Show with Gam. Welcome to my show. Thank you for listening. Here's a beautiful song for all my listeners." I'm also a volunteer at the Poppy Factory, an assistant tour guide, and a Suited and Booted model. Suited and Booted is a charity that helps vulnerable, unemployed and low-income men find employment by providing clothes and advice for job interviews.

BLESMA FACT: Last year, Blesma made 337 successful Veterans' Prosthetic Panel applications. The eldest beneficiary was 89 years old

GAM'S INJURIES

Gam lost his arm when he was blown up by some plastic explosive on exercise in Brecon in 1987





JAN MCLELLAND

WIDOW MEMBER SINCE: 2010 AGE: 59

Jan McLelland became a Blesma Widow in 2010 and since getting involved with the Association has discovered a passion for photography. She is now a key member of the Association's popular photography group.

Tell us about your husband's service...

Robert started out in the Royal Army Ordnance Corps, which later became the Royal Logistic Corps. He joined as an Ammunition Technician straight from school. We got married in 1981, and he eventually commissioned as an officer in 1996.

And he was injured in Northern Ireland?

Yes, he was injured there in 1994. He had cleared a vehicle and had taken it back to Crossmaglen for forensics. But the dashboard had been booby trapped, so when Robert parked it up and turned the ignition off an explosion detonated from underneath his legs. He was quite badly injured and subsequently lost an eye from the blast.

And so Robert became a Blesma Member?

Yes, he took part in some social activities with the Association, including going on a skiing trip, which he enjoyed very much. It did him good. But I never really met any Blesma people back then – I was always too busy with the family.

But after he died in 2010, you got involved...

When he passed away his Blesma Support Officer asked if he could come and visit me. We had a nice chat and he told me about the benefits of being a Blesma Widow. When he started talking about the new photography programme that was being set up, I took an interest. I've always liked taking photos, and I wanted to learn more about it. When the project got off the ground, I got involved.

How did you start off?

I took part in the first course, which was held at the Blackpool Home. We went to Windermere in the Lake District to photograph the scenery, and we learned about editing and printing. While we were there we would make up these fun

competitions and I won a little trophy for the best image of the week, which was nice. I found that the photography group also had a great social side to it. It had a decent mix of Members, and it was good to meet other people and hear their stories.

What have you done since then?

I've been on the photography trip to Mull a couple of times. They were beautiful, relaxing trips. Mull is so scenic, and when you go out on the water you can even get pictures of eagles. Since then, I've helped out on the Basic Photography Course, and I went on the Iceland trip in September. That was amazing – we got to take pictures of waterfalls, hot springs, and even the Northern Lights! I've seen them before in Canada and they were just amazing.

How much have you progressed since doing that first course?

I've advanced pretty well, I think. I've spent a lot of money on cameras and lenses, though! I take photos all the time. I've got three grandchildren, so I inevitably take a lot of pictures of them. And I take my camera along almost everywhere I go. I think it's because I enjoy the challenge. I like trying to get the images just right; getting the lighting correct at the time and then fiddling with the pictures afterwards.

How different is Blesma to most charities, the way it involves family, as well as the injured?

Blesma treats Widows well; it takes the time to involve us in its activities and it looks out for our welfare. I think that adds to the charity's family focus, and we feel involved rather than forgotten. I'm one of the younger Widows but it's a nice group, and we have a good time on trips. I also like the artistic side to Blesma's activities – it's a bit different. Photography is great because anyone can have a go at it, you can get all kinds of adaptations, so anyone can take a photograph no matter what injuries they have.

“Blesma takes time to involve Widows and looks out for our welfare; we feel involved rather than forgotten”

DARREN SWIFT

MEMBER SINCE: 1991 **AGE:** 52

MILITARY SERVICE: British Army, Royal Green Jackets

“Having Blesma in my life is like having another parent,” says Darren ‘Swift’ Swift. “Blesma has been there for me, supporting me in everything I have done. The Association has my back and, in return, I have other Members’ backs. Blesma is all about being a team, a family, a like-minded bunch.”

Few Blesma Members are as well-known throughout the Association as Swift, who is now one of the charity’s official ambassadors. He’s been a Member since 1991, when he lost both legs above the knee after being injured by a Mk15 coffee jar bomb whilst serving in the Army’s Dog Unit in Northern Ireland

“The first visit I had in hospital was from a Blesma Member,” he laughs. “I was at Queen Elizabeth’s in Woolwich and an old boy told me I was now a Member. I had no choice! Within a year, I was on a Blesma skiing trip in Austria, and attending all the functions and activities. It has been an important part of my recovery from day one.”

He remembers a decision that he took while in a “dark place” mentally, soon after his injury. “I realised I had a choice; keep my chin up and get on with the rest of my life, or put my chin on my chest. I went for chin up,” says Swift who has since worked as an actor and become a canoeist, snowboarder and skydiver.

He has taken part in a number of expeditions, including solo canoe trips in the Arctic and a hand cycling expedition across Iceland. He also became the second double-leg amputee skydiver after Alistair Hodgson in 2000 (“they said we couldn’t skydive because we didn’t have any legs”) and won gold at the 2003 British Skydiving Championships.

“Then I got into sit-skiing and have since taken part in lots of ski and snowboard trips, including the annual Blesma trip to Colorado.”

Swift became so proficient on a snowboard that Paralympic qualification for PyeongChang 2018 became a very real possibility. “It totally consumed my life for two-and-a-half years. I gave up everything – and it was great – but I didn’t quite make it. I got through to the last

qualifiers, but I wasn’t fast enough and missed out by seconds. I didn’t pass the criteria for the British team, who set the bar higher than any other country, but I really enjoyed it and couldn’t have done it without Blesma’s support.”

Ever the pioneer, Swift is now developing snowboard bindings with suspension to help above-knee amputees get back some of the shock-absorbing benefits of having knees.

“I’ve been working on the bindings for 14 years and am now experimenting with mountain bike shocks. It won’t be long before I’ll be trialling them. It’s been years of angst to get here, but hopefully the next generation of double above-knee snowboarders will benefit.”

Having become an actor, Swift has been a trailblazer for the Blesma Community Programme. “I’ve been astounded by the take-up of the project and how it’s evolving,” he says. “It is fantastic for the Members, the facilitators, the schools and pupils. The feedback is so positive, and I’ve watched Members go from newbies to great public speakers. Schools are booking us time and again, and it’s hard to see where it’ll end.

“Young people’s lives are being changed because they are being given the chance to listen to us talk about adversity and resilience.

“Being taught to speak publicly and to tell your personal story, are great skills for our Members, too. It was a leap for me, despite already acting. And as one of the older bunch, it’s great to see the younger guys and girls come through and evolve into people they wouldn’t have dreamed possible, telling their life stories with confidence to 400 kids.”

But even as he develops revolutionary snowboard equipment and helps others find their inner orator, Swift knows that some simple truths lie at the very heart of Blesma.

“Members love meeting up and putting the world to rights. That, together with the charity’s rehab and welfare work, has seen Blesma go from being just another charity to being *THE* charity for limbless veterans. I don’t know where I’d be without it.”

BLESMA FACT: In 2017, 359 Members took part in a Blesma activity, meaning the Association put on 1843 activity days in total



SWIFT ON SNOW

Swift narrowly missed out on representing Great Britain in snowboarding at the Paralympic Games in South Korea

“Having Blesma in my life is like having another parent, supporting me in everything I have done. Blesma has my back!”



WICKED AIR Before he discovered snowboarding, Swifty won gold at the 2003 British Skydiving Championships





TEEN ROYAL MARINE

*Bill signed up to join the Royal
Marines when he was 16 years old*





BILL BELCHER MBE

MEMBER SINCE: 1982 **AGE:** 63

MILITARY SERVICE: The Royal Marines

Why did you decide to join the military?

I became interested in joining the Royal Marines and seeing the world during my last two years at school. I signed up in 1971, when I was 16.

Where did your service take you?

All around the Mediterranean; Malta, Cyprus, Turkey, Gibraltar, as well as the USA and the South Atlantic. I spent some time on NATO exercises and in Kansas as a young lad. I also did two tours of Northern Ireland, and later passed aircrew selection and became an air gunner.

How were you injured?

It was during the Falklands War. I was flying to a Regimental Aid Post when two Argentinian aircraft attacked from out of the clouds. I was hit in my right leg by a cannon shell, and through my left ankle by a 7.62 round. Richard Nunn, who I was flying with, got a 7.62 round through his right cheek and died immediately. We crashed, bounced, burned, and I was thrown out.

What were the extent of your injuries?

My right foot was hanging off at the ankle. I was initially given a below-knee amputation but was later amputated above the knee on HMS Uganda after I caught gangrene. My left leg was badly broken, so I had numerous operations on that. Most of my recovery focused on rebuilding my left leg; I had a vein graft, bone graft, external fixation, and even a bone marrow transplant.

What did you do after you recovered?

I saw an advert for a post as a civil servant with the MoD. I took the interview, was successful, and started work a fortnight later. I only retired from that job 18 months ago.

What do you enjoy doing now you're retired?

I've become interested in photographic drones. I used to fly helicopters, and the principles of flight are similar. I'm a keen photographer, too. I went on a photography course prior to a tour of Northern Ireland to become the company's photographer.

LUKE DELAHUNTY

MEMBER SINCE: 1997 **AGE:** 46

MILITARY SERVICE: Royal Air Force

What did serving in the RAF mean to you?

I was in the Air Cadets as a teenager and liked everything I learned about the RAF, so I decided that was the career for me. I joined in 1990, when I was 17 years old. It wasn't just a job, it was a way of life. The people you worked with were the people you socialised with, so everything about the job was a lifestyle. I just loved everything about it.

Talk us through the day you were injured...

It was in October 1996. I can't actually remember the accident, although I have been told about it since. I was in Norwich at the time, 30 miles away from RAF Honington, and had woken up late that morning. I got out of bed, got dressed, and jumped on my motorbike. I was about a mile away from the base when I started to overtake a line of traffic that was stuck behind a tractor. The tractor turned right in front of me, and I went underneath the 18-tonne trailer. It broke my spine.

What were the extent of your injuries?

I was paralysed from the chest down. I spent two months in intensive care and in my more lucid moments – through all the morphine and drugs – I realised something pretty serious had happened to me. I never felt angry about my injuries, but I did feel angry about how I was told. The doctor who told me was so blunt about it. He stood at the end of the bed, didn't introduce himself and just said; *'You are never going to walk again.'*

What have you achieved post-injury?

I was discharged in 1998. After rehab, and when I had found suitable accommodation, my next step was to get a job. I didn't have many transferable skills, so I did some training in IT and computer maintenance, as well as graphic and web design. My first job was in 2000, designing pages for local newspapers.

Do you still work in newspapers?

No. I worked for Stoke Mandeville Hospital for a while, educating patients and their families as part of their rehab. I was proud to work at the hospital where I had my rehab. Now, I work for the charity Sports for Schools which came about from having competed in the Invictus Games. The charity uses sportsmen and women to go into schools to promote exercise and a healthy lifestyle.

And you've become a keen Blesma Member?

My first activity was Soldier Ride New York in 2014. That was a mind-blowing experience; I've been injured for 22 years now and that's still one of the best things I've ever done. The only thing that perhaps surpasses it is the Blesma Community Programme. That is all about helping others, even though I still benefit. I get to teach really important life lessons about resilience and overcoming adversity to young people. To be able to help someone to become more resilient before they need it, to give them the tools they might need, is a fantastic opportunity.

And do you still love cycling?

Totally! I first tried cycling thanks to a charity that helps people with spinal cord injuries. I bought my own hand bike in 2011 and started riding close to home, trying to go a bit further and a bit faster each time. In 2012, a friend asked if I wanted to cycle from London to Paris. He has since passed away, so I did the ride again in July to raise money for the same charity and to remember him.

What is it about cycling that you love?

It gets me out in the fresh air! I love cycling long distances, and have made lots of friends and had some great opportunities through the sport. I've ridden all over Europe and have even taken part in the Invictus Games!

“To be able to help someone to be more resilient before they need it, to give them the tools they might need, is fantastic”

BLESMA FACT: Since the Blesma Community Programme began in 2016, 40 Members have helped 20,000 youths become more resilient



A BIG APPLE A DAY...

Soldier Ride New York is Luke's second favourite activity, after the Blesma Community Programme





YOU'VE GOTTA HAND IT TO HIM

Luke's love of cycling has seen him hand bike all over Europe and even compete in the Invictus Games

PROSTHETICS OF THE PAST

Today's advanced rehab techniques and state-of-the-art prostheses are a far cry from those used by Blesma's earliest Members

PROSTHETIC HAND (CIRCA 1920 -1940)

This prosthetic from the interwar years was built with cosmetics in mind; at the time it was more important for prosthetics to resemble human limbs than function like them.

The rudimentary thumb worked on a spring that essentially offered a human-like version of a split hook. The residual limb would sit in the hollow forearm, held in place by a strap above or below the elbow.

A second strap would protrude from the hole in the palm and attach to a shoulder harness on the user's uninjured side. By tensing and relaxing that shoulder, the user could open and close the thumb.

The thumb on this model could only move up and down (it couldn't pinch, for example) and so was most likely made for someone with an office job who spent a lot of time holding a pen.



PROSTHETIC LEG (CIRCA 1900)

This prosthesis from the early 1900s had changed very little from Pieter Verduyn's version from the 1690s.

This example is for a below-knee amputee. The stump would sit in the tin section at the bottom of the image, with the leather strap above it protecting the knee.

When the user stood up, the callipers on either side would lock the hinge above the tin section. This meant the leg was unable to bend, so the user would have to swing the prosthetic to walk.

To unlock the hinge, the wearer would pull the leather strap hanging from the leather corset socket, allowing the knee to bend and the user to sit down.

Despite looking fairly rudimentary, a number of Blesma Members still use this sort of prosthesis.





EARLY WALKING AID (CIRCA 1900)

This is an early walking aid rather than a full prosthetic, and would have been used in the days and weeks after amputation to start learning to walk again.

The leg, with its wooden rocker foot, would have been used without a shoe during rehab or in hospital under supervision. This below-knee example comes from the turn of the 20th century. The wearer's stump would sit in the felt socket, with the mechanical hinge joint locking the knee so the leg remained straight in the same way as the prosthetic on the previous page.

Even though it came into use a decade before WWI, this sort of walking aid could have still been used as recently as the 1980s.



PROSTHETIC ARM AND COSMETIC HAND (CIRCA 1945)

The hand on this prosthetic is purely cosmetic, with the silicone 'skin' designed to look like a human hand.

Each finger is made from a heavy-duty spring coated in dense rubber, which could be bent and shaped by the other hand.

This particular hand has no practical purpose but it could be removed by unlocking the lever on the wrist and replaced with another, more functional, device such as a split hook.

The L-shaped lever on the inside of the forearm allows the prosthetic to bend and rotate at the elbow, before being locked into the required position.

As with the prosthetic on p132, the cord at the elbow would be attached to a shoulder harness to make the more functional attachments open and close.

Even though using this prosthetic would prove to be extremely labour intensive, something very similar could well be given to new amputees today.



GWEN WATTS

WIDOW MEMBER SINCE: 2016 **AGE:** 92

Ninety-two-year-old Gwen Watts has enjoyed years of Blesma meet-ups since marrying her husband Ron, who was injured during WWII.

How did you become aware of Blesma?

I lived in Wimbledon during World War II. It was a difficult time; I remember seeing German planes coming down and attacking us, leaving bodies lying in the streets. After the war, in the early 1950s, I lived in a flat. I had a friend a couple of doors down, and I would go over to her house to watch television because it had just become available. That's where I met her brother, Ron.

Ron was a wartime amputee?

Yes. He had stood on a mine and lost a leg in the war. The fella next to him had taken the full brunt

of the explosion and didn't survive because the blast went the other way, so Ron always felt lucky to be alive. Anyway, after I'd gone over to watch their television one evening, Ron walked me home even though it was only two doors down! He asked me if I'd like to go out with him on a date and asked if I minded that he'd lost his leg. I told him of course I didn't mind.

So you got involved with Blesma?

Yes. Ron was an active Member and went to a lot of Branch meetings. We enjoyed the social side and loved meeting other people. I've stayed involved since becoming a Widow. Blesma has supported me very well since Ron passed away. They've been wonderful, and I still like going to meetings and having a chat.

BLESMA FACT: In the last 12 months, Blesma has helped elderly Members stay independent by providing stairlifts, bathroom adaptations, life-lines, wheelchairs, electrically powered vehicles and ramps



NO PLACE LIKE HOME

*Gwen remembers what life was like
in Wimbledon at the time of The Blitz.
She still lives there today*



A SOLDIER AT 16

Jessie joined the Army at 16 after an unhappy childhood. He knew he belonged in the military immediately



JESSIE JAMES

MEMBER SINCE: 2014 **AGE:** 57

MILITARY SERVICE: British Army, Worcestershire and Sherwood Foresters Regiment

When Angus 'Jessie' James recounts the story of his life to amazed groups of students on the Blesma Community Programme, he often opens his speech with a loud scream. He's trying to get across the shock of the moment that changed his life; being run over by a Land Rover in Canada while serving in the nineties.

"I often just shout; 'AAAARGHHH!'" laughs Jessie. "I remember the air being forced out of my body. I only knew I was going to survive because my sense of humour came back quickly. When a doctor asked for four soldiers to carry a stretcher, I told her; 'You're going to need 10!'"

Jessie knew straight away that his Army career was over, and being medically discharged hurt almost as much as the accident. "I'd had a crap home and school life growing up, and was bullied in both places. But after I joined the Army at 16, I knew I was in the right environment. I loved it. I was a good runner and boxer. I went to Belize, then began to work my way up the promotion ladder.

"I was eventually doing logistics for a whole company; 110 fighting men. That's when I got run over. I had damage to my back and neck, my eye was hanging out, and the incident gave

me PTSD. Mentally, I started questioning lots of things. In the Army, you're normally unquestioning, but I suppose my mind started going in the wrong direction."

Jessie admits to being a "lost soul" after he was discharged. "I bounced from job to job, but eventually the pull of a military-style life took me to Iraq as a civilian risk consultant. I did that for seven years, but my PTSD came back in a major way," he says.

During his stressful work in the Middle East, Jessie contracted gangrene in his foot but didn't notice. "I started to feel really bad, but by the time I got it checked, the gangrene was in my bones. I was told in 2014 that they'd have to remove my leg above the knee. Since then, I've gone from being an athletic bloke to catching every cold that's going. My kidneys only operate at 30 per cent, I've had heart failure, and have lost the sight in my right eye. That's a lot of ailments to cope with, and I get very depressed. I'm a sod to live with and sometimes get lower than a snake's belly!"

Thankfully, however, Jessie has found some good coping strategies and a great support network in Blesma. "After the amputation I was completely lost," he says, "but a former military colleague pointed me in the direction of Blesma. I love the Association's structure, with the Support Officers always looking out for me and making sure I'm OK.

"I've made a lot of use of Blesma because I feel like I've really needed the support. The activities, in particular, are fantastic. You go along to an event, meet people for the first time, and soon after that you're best friends. You have a bond! The Blesma Weekend is amazing, and I've done all sorts of things that have put a smile back on my face. Fishing, quad biking, and especially photography – I've joined the photography group, bought a camera, and become particularly enthusiastic. I see the world in a different light since Blesma opened up my artistic side!"

Jessie is also looking forward to paying his respects at this year's Remembrance Day, having recently discovered a family military link. "I found out that my grandfather, Westmore James, won medals while serving in the British West Indian Regiment. I'm hoping to wear them at the Cenotaph as part of the Blesma group. That will make me really proud!"



MAL JAMES

Mal is married to Jessie and is the Walsall and District Branch Secretary

How did you and Jessie meet?

We met 15 years ago and got married very soon after. Jessie was in Devon, looking after young people with difficulties on a residential camp. A counsellor there was a friend of mine and set us up on a blind date. Four days later, Jessie said; *'Let's go to the Caribbean and get married!'*

How difficult is living with someone who has suffered serious injury?

It is a challenge. We have both been in the Army – I served in the Adjutant General's Corps for 12 years – and we were both very independent when we met. But I understood the military side of Jessie, and that level of understanding makes a big difference in a relationship. When Jessie started working as a consultant in Iraq he'd go there for 12 weeks, I'd miss him, then we'd have a great holiday, then he'd go away again. But when he lost his leg, both of our lives completely changed.

He suddenly started depending on you much more?

Yes. I think a lot of Blesma partners will have found that their other half suddenly needs them more than ever after injury. I had my own work as an extra on films and TV shows, but I had to stop that for a couple of years. Everybody in a relationship or family has to adjust to injury and disability, and we quickly found out that our house wasn't right, either.

Did Blesma help with that?

Yes, the charity has been absolutely great. Blesma helped with all kinds of adaptations; from doors to wet rooms to ramps. Most of all, the social side of Blesma has been very good for Jessie. We're looking to do some Blesma events together soon, too – it's great the way that partners are included.

MAY THE FOUR BE WITH YOU!

*Jessie proposed to Mal four days
after their first date. They have been
happily married for 15 years since*



STEVE FISHER

MEMBER SINCE: 1996 AGE: 62

MILITARY SERVICE: British Army, Welsh Guards

Like many Blesma Members, Steve Fisher has had to endure more than his fair share of pain. The Swansea man joined the Welsh Guards as a Junior Leader in 1971, when he was just 15 years old. He served two tours of Northern Ireland before he was severely injured in the Falkland Islands in 1982.

“My injury occurred just after the Argentinians had surrendered, while I was standing on Port Stanley runway,” he says. “An RAF Harrier Jump Jet accidentally discharged both its Sidewinder missiles. Thankfully, they weren’t armed, but they broke into pieces and hit 11 of us below the waist. My right leg was hanging off below the knee, my left femur was broken in two, and the side of my left foot, including a toe, was blown away. I joined the Army with 10 toes and left with four!”

As horrific as the incident was, this was only the start of Steve’s woes. “I was medically downgraded, and so I took a job as an Army Recruiting Sergeant in Swansea,” he says. “But my right leg got worse and worse. I still had both legs but couldn’t get around without horrendous pain, so I decided to have my right leg amputated below the knee 11 years after the initial injury.”

Steve was discharged from the Army and went ahead with the amputation, but due to nerve complications, it made matters worse.

“For the next 16 years, I lived in pure pain hell,” says Steve. “I was in a wheelchair, on huge amounts of painkillers and medication – including morphine – but nothing helped with the pain. I was severely depressed and became suicidal.

“When I put my prosthetic on the pain was unbelievable, but the specialists wouldn’t listen to me when I told them it felt like a raw nerve pain. In the end, I turned to alcohol to kill the pain. I used to drive past cemeteries, jealous of the bodies in the graves. I would think; *‘I can’t wait to get there, so I’m not in any more pain!’*”

Eventually, a pain specialist diagnosed a neuroma. “The raw nerves in my stump had grown and fragmented, and had attached to scar tissue,” he says. “I had basically been suffering from raw nerves for 16 years!”

The answer, said doctors, was to push a long needle into Steve’s stump to inject the nerves and kill them. This, however, meant yet more pain. “They did this twice, and although I did get some pain relief each time, it came back,” says Steve. “The needle going in and out was pure torture, and I said I’d rather kill myself than go through it again.”

Five years ago, Steve’s stump was cut open and the offending nerve buried in the bone to stop any regrowth. This, finally, was a success.

“Until recently, I hardly ever slept due to severe Phantom Limb Pain. It felt like severe shots of electricity or as if somebody was stabbing me in my stump with an ice pick! There was no controlling it. I have suffered with pain since the age of 26, and I’m 62 now. And due to the huge loss of blood and oxygen when I was hit, I can’t even remember getting married, my kids growing up, or most of my life before the injury. That makes me very sad!”

Steve has, thankfully, managed to curb the cocktail of drugs he was taking in his quest to control the pain, and only takes Co-codamol now to dampen his stump pain so he can sleep.

After enduring so much, Steve feels that Blesma is the one place where he can find people to whom he can relate. He plays an active role in the Association, and was the Honorary Secretary and Welfare Officer for the Swansea Branch before it closed.

“Blesma has been a big part of my life since 1996, it is like a family for me,” he says. “It’s the one group of people who can understand something of what I’ve been through – and what I’m still going through! That means a lot. I still organise two lunches a year, and I have three rescue horses, so I’m hoping to go to Arizona next year on the ranch trip.”

BLESMA FACT: The Association received 32 new Members because of The Falklands Conflict



36 YEARS OF PAIN Steve was injured in 1982 when a Harrier Jump Jet accidentally discharged both its Sidewinder missiles

“For 16 years, I was in pure pain hell. I was severely depressed and finally became suicidal. I would often drive past the cemetery, jealous of the bodies that were in the graves”



STEVE'S SERVICE

Steve completed two tours of Northern Ireland with the Welsh Guards before he was injured in the Falklands

PETE'S INJURIES

Pete Norton lost his left arm below the elbow, his left leg above the knee, and suffered serious back injuries when he was blown up in Iraq in 2005



A CHANCE TO FOCUS

*Thanks to Blesma, Pete has rekindled
his passion for photography*



PETE NORTON

MEMBER SINCE: 2005 **AGE:** 55

MILITARY SERVICE: British Army, Royal Logistic Corps

Some say Pete Norton is the bravest man in the Association. It's not a title the modest, softly-spoken man from Shrivenham accepts, but his story is a remarkable one. Not only was he awarded the George Cross for bravery on operations but because he saved American as well as British lives, he was awarded the FBI Star, the Bureau's equivalent of the Purple Heart.

"I was an Ammunition Technical Officer in the Royal Logistic Corps," he explains. "My job involved anything that went whoosh or bang. I completed seven tours of Northern Ireland and worked my way up to WO1 Conductor RLC before I commissioned in 2001."

Pete was injured in Iraq in 2005. "I was second in command of a Coalition unit that was basically weapons intelligence; we would investigate explosions, finds of bomb making equipment, shoot downs of helicopters – it all fed into the intelligence cycle.

"It was like *CSI Miami* but on steroids, and real! We were investigating prints, finding out how electronics worked, how the enemy operated... It was the best job in the world – technical, exciting, operational, with loads of adrenaline and a great bunch of people."

There was also great danger. "While I was out there I trod on a pressure pad. Underneath it were two 122mm artillery shells. Thankfully, although they exploded, they didn't quite detonate as designed. But I lost my left leg above the knee, my left arm below the elbow, and suffered quite a lot of back injuries."

Pete's quick thinking immediately after the attack, however, was life-saving. "I remember everything – I was conscious throughout. We were funded by the US Navy, and there were Brits and Australians on my team, as well as American guys from the FBI.

"The worst thing after the explosion for me was the fact that my own team was in danger. I didn't want them to get injured. It was a high threat area, so I was doing a one-man check around. I could see my guys coming forward, but I told them to stop and briefed them about what I'd done.

"I strongly suspected there were more IEDs – which turned out to be true – so before

they came in to give me first aid I wanted to make sure they knew what was around, where I'd been, and where was safe to tread."

It was this refusal to be treated for his imminently life-threatening injuries until everyone else on his team was safe that would eventually see Pete decorated in both the UK and USA. After guiding them in, Pete was given life-saving treatment and put on a Black Hawk helicopter. "That's when the medics started pumping the drugs in. I eventually woke up with a nurse telling me; *'You're alright, mate, you're in Selly Oak!'* as if I knew where that was."

Pete's rehab was tough. He spent "surreal" weeks drifting in and out of a coma, and his first marriage suffered due to the stress. But after a year in hospital and another at Headley Court, he returned to work in 2007, still in the field of defence intelligence and analysis. "I did a master's degree and then worked as a member of the directing staff, lecturing in counter-IED work."

All the while, the honours kept coming. "Getting the George Cross was a shock but a great honour," he says. "Then, one day, I got a phone call from Washington. They wanted to give me the FBI Star. I was incredibly grateful but told them I'd have to check with my chain of command. The MoD said no!

"Eventually, I called the honours secretary and said; *'If you think I'm saying no to the FBI, you can think again.'*"

Pete has kept busy with his work in the military intelligence field ever since, and has rekindled a passion thanks to Blesma. "I've rediscovered a love of photography," he says. "I've been to Mull, Anglesey, and Iceland with Blesma's photography group, and the trips are just fantastic.

"And Blesma has helped me in other ways; I was one of the first claimants of the Armed Forces Compensation Scheme, and Blesma guided me through that. But just as important is the work the Association does when it comes to the welfare and integration of its Members, and making sure they keep active. Blesma is always there if I need support."

BLESMA FACT: Pete survived seven tours of Northern Ireland, but *The Troubles* increased Blesma's membership by almost 100

AMERICAN APPRECIATION

Pete was awarded the FBI Star, the Bureau's equivalent of the Purple Heart, for his actions in 2005



“It was like CSI Miami but on steroids, and real! It was the best job in the world; technical and exciting, with loads of adrenaline and great people”

THE GEORGE CROSS

The UK's joint highest award is given "for acts of the greatest heroism or for most conspicuous courage in circumstances of extreme danger", not in the presence of the enemy, to members of the British Armed Forces and to British civilians

GENERAL SERVICE MEDAL 1962 (NI CLASP)

A campaign medal introduced in 1962 to combine the GSM (1918), as awarded to the Army and RAF, and the Naval GSM (1915). It was replaced by the Operational Service Medal in 2007

IRAQ MEDAL

A campaign medal issued to members of the Armed Forces, and certain attached personnel, who served between 20 January 2003 and 22 May 2011 on, or in support of, Operation TELIC – the 2003 invasion of Iraq

QUEEN'S GOLDEN JUBILEE MEDAL

The medal marked the 50th anniversary of Queen Elizabeth II's accession. It was awarded to active personnel in the British Armed Forces and Emergency Personnel who had completed five years of qualifying service



QUEEN'S DIAMOND JUBILEE MEDAL

This marked the 60th anniversary of Queen Elizabeth II's accession in 2012. It was awarded for honourable service in the military, emergency or prison services, or for outstanding achievement or public service

ACCUMULATED CAMPAIGN SERVICE MEDAL 2011

This medal was awarded by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II to members of her Armed Forces to recognise long campaign service

MEDAL FOR LONG SERVICE AND GOOD CONDUCT (MILITARY)

Instituted by King George V in 1930, the medal could be awarded to Regular Army Warrant Officers, Non-Commissioned Officers and men of the British Army

OMAN GLORIOUS 25TH NATIONAL DAY MEDAL

The Glorious 25th National Day Medal is the Sultan of Oman's silver jubilee medal, and was awarded to those UK Armed Forces personnel who were on Loan Service with the Omani Forces on 18 November 1995



MARTIN HEWITT

MEMBER SINCE: 2008 **AGE:** 37

MILITARY SERVICE: British Army, Parachute Regiment

Martin joined 3 Para as an officer in 2004. His right arm was paralysed when he was shot in Afghanistan in 2007. He's aiming to complete the Explorers' Grand Slam, a challenge that involves summiting the highest peak on each continent, as well as walking unsupported to the North and South Poles.

Tell us about your injury...

I was on my third tour of Afghanistan and we were looking to take out some Taliban commanders in a heavily fortified position. I was hit by machine-gun fire and the bullet severed my brachial artery. My right arm was paralysed instantly. I actually thought I'd lost it before I saw it was still there. I couldn't move it and the wound was gushing blood. I knew I'd bleed out quickly – I must have had about 90 seconds to live.

How did you survive?

To this day, I don't know! I must have got a hand into the wound to stop the flow. We managed to fight our way to safety, and then a medic sorted me out. I had two life-saving operations in Camp Bastion. I was in a pretty bad place for a while before getting involved in the adventurous stuff, which really helped my rehabilitation.

And since then you've set up your own charity, the AGS Foundation...

Yes, we help people with disabilities take part in challenges, with the aim of getting them out of the mentality of feeling down. We're running two weekends a year to try and get people involved.

And it's all grown out of you taking part in the Explorers' Grand Slam?

The Grand Slam was the hardest thing I could think to do. It involves summiting the highest peak on each continent, as well as walking unsupported to the North and South Poles. We've still got to reach the South Pole and summit Mount Vinson in Antarctica, Carstensz Pyramid in Indonesia, and Everest! We're going to try to tackle Everest next Spring. The toughest part for me is that I suffer at altitude. I can't eat above 7,000m, and altitude causes nerve pain, too. Doing the Grand Slam has led to other things – we've sent a group rafting in Sierra Leone, for example.

You've also built your own company, in which military figures help train businesses...

Yes. When I started talking to business people about our expeditions, I would hear about the challenges they faced when developing leaders.



That led me to create Fieri, which helps to mould better individuals and teams. Our seven full-time staff and 90 associates run workshops and talks, and design leadership programmes. We help businesses change their culture. People in the military have strong character and occupational behaviour traits – skills that translate readily into the corporate world.

As an employment expert, what would you advise Blesma Members to do when it comes to finding a career after leaving the military?

It's important not to rush, and make sure you do your research. Lots of people jump into the first thing they're offered because they can be under financial pressure, or need a sense of purpose like they had in the military. But it will help in the long run to think very carefully about the culture and environment you want to work in.

Is developing a network also key?

Yes, and military people are blessed with support. There are great organisations and charities out there to help, so knock on a few doors. The military network in the corporate world spans far and wide, so tap into it. Think about regimental or officers' associations. It's like joining up; you don't join the first unit you see. Life in those units varies enormously and the job market is just the same.



ANDREW HAUGEN

MEMBER SINCE: 2017 AGE: 54

MILITARY SERVICE: Royal Navy

Andrew Haugen, from Barnsley, served in the Royal Navy but eventually had to leave the service after developing multiple sclerosis.

You're from a Navy family, so did you always want to go to sea?

I did! I grew up in Scarborough, and my dad was a Norwegian Merchant Navy officer. We lived in Norway when I was very young and then moved back to the UK. But I still remember summer holidays on my dad's ships, we would go all over the world. It developed my love for the sea. At school, I was told that I'd have to wait a while to join the Merchant Navy, but I didn't want to wait. I had also fancied joining the Royal Navy, so I did

that instead. I joined up in 1980, when I was just 16 years old.

What do you remember from your Navy days?

I just remember loving every single minute of it – particularly being at sea. I was in for seven years, and I was gutted when I had to leave.

I travelled all over the world – the Falkland Islands, South Georgia, the Caribbean, the USA, South America, Norway, Gibraltar, around Africa... You really do get paid to see the world in the Navy!

When did you get the first inkling that your health was deteriorating?

I suddenly went blind in one eye – that was while I was still serving. At the time, the medics didn't tell me what it was connected to, that it was a sign of





“Sometimes even now, I don’t accept my MS, even though I know deep down that I have to. But I’m not one to do nothing or wallow in self pity”

MS. I was allowed back to sea even though the military knew I wasn’t right. They didn’t want to tell me after that first episode, but in 1985 I had another flare up, and that time they told me.

How was it all handled?

The Navy were good with me. They let me work in the Careers Office, so I had two years there. But coming to terms with the illness was very difficult. At first, I didn’t want to know and tried to ignore it. It took a long time, and it affected my relationship with my family. I was so angry. Eventually, once I’d accepted what had happened, things got better.

How was your health when you left the Navy, and what did you end up doing?

I’d pretty much lost my mobility, and was in and out of a wheelchair. I’d relapse, then get better, then it’d happen again. I was in bed for 15 months at first. I had trouble accepting having to use crutches, and the progress was slow. There were a lot of hospital appointments and rehab sessions. Sometimes even now, I don’t accept my MS, even though I know deep down that I have to. But I’m not one to do nothing or wallow in self pity. I had some talent for art, so that kept me sane.

And you found work in graphic design...

I worked for the Amiga computer group, designing demos for software packages. At one time I did a lot of airbrushing, but computers moved on and I stopped doing that sort of work. And I couldn’t

always commit to long-term projects because I didn’t know if I’d be well enough to finish them.

It took you a while to get involved with Blesma, didn’t it?

Yes. My next door neighbour is a Blesma Member, as it happens, and he hounded me into joining. My BSO eventually came around to have a chat, and now I think joining up was the best thing I could have done. I’ve always had a camera and been interested in taking photos, so the photography group really appealed to me.

What do you enjoy most about the activity?

I get out, I meet people, I see new things. Blesma bought me a camera, which is just fantastic. Since then, I’ve been on City Photo courses in York, Edinburgh and Liverpool, and to the Lake District and Cumbria. I love the company, and I love the way we all ‘insult’ each other. The humour makes me feel as though I’m right back in the Navy!

And how has family life been?

I’ve been married to my wife, Marie, for 33 years. We’ve got two kids and four grandkids. It’s been difficult for her, especially when I was first diagnosed with MS, but we had counselling and things just clicked after a while. She loves photography, too, and is always nicking my lenses! It would be great if she could come on some Blesma trips. It’s something we do together outside of the Association, and that’s really nice.

BLESMA FACT: Every year, Blesma helps every one of its Members in one way or another



BOB MONKHOUSE

MEMBER SINCE: 1996 **AGE:** 49

MILITARY SERVICE: British Army, Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Tell us about your early military career...

I joined the Army in December 1985, when I was 17-and-a-half years old. I went to Arborfield to complete Basic Training, and then I joined the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers as a Recovery Mechanic. After trade training at Bordon I was posted to Germany with The Royal Hussars.

Did you spend a lot of time abroad?

I was posted to Canada a couple of times on exercise and to the Falklands for four months in 1989. From there, I was posted on operations to the first Gulf War. Two years later, I did my first tour of Bosnia attached to the Norwegian Engineer Platoon. Next, it was Kenya for seven months and back to Bosnia again in June 1995. Then, on 22 November 1995, I was injured and ended up losing my left leg above the knee.

What happened?

There had been a big accident; tanks had fallen off the back of a tank transporter and blocked Route Gold, one of our main supply routes. I was called to clean up, and while I was there I went between several vehicles. At that moment, another wagon came down the road and crashed right into the front of my recovery vehicle. It crushed my leg. I was medically discharged in 1997, just three months short of having served 12 years.

What was your rehabilitation like?

I didn't have a rehab process. I was sent to John Radcliffe Hospital, transferred to the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital and became an outpatient at Norwich Limb Centre. I did one physio session, and they told me what I couldn't do. That was it.

How did you deal with that?

I got very grumpy! Then an older guy, John Green, turned up at my door and lifted his trouser leg up. I invited him in for a cup of tea! He was part of the Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft Branch and knew about me from an article in the local newspaper. That's how I found out about Blesma.

Did you get heavily involved with the Association from then?

Pretty much. I was invited to an event and met Blesma's former General Secretary, Ray Holland. He asked if I wanted to go skiing, so that's how I got involved in the ski bike activity. I had such a good time that I wondered how I could make sure I could keep coming back. So, in February



1998, I paid my own way to France to become a ski instructor, and now I help instruct on the trip every year.

What does skiing mean to you?

Ski biking is something that has grown to be quite close to my heart. I built my own ski bike – I think the sport is a fantastic tool to help injured veterans get out on the slopes. I can help most people get skiing in half an hour.

How did you design your ski bike?

There used to be more ski bikes around but they don't seem to sell as many now. It was really just a case of seeing what bits worked off one bike and what worked from another, then putting them all together in one package. My brother has his own engineering company, so it wasn't a problem.

How much does yours cost?

In all, this one perhaps costs about £1,000, but you can spend more; it just depends how fancy you want it! Once I have the frame it is quite easy to build, and I know a couple of mountain bike shops that I use for the suspension and handle bars. If you were buying a new bike off the shelf, it would probably cost about £3,000.

BLESMA FACT: 96 per cent of Members say that activities improve their confidence and wellbeing

TRUSTY TRUSTEE

As well as being a Member, Bob is also one of Blesma's 11 Trustees, a position he has held since 2008



BRIAN HOGG

BLESMA VOLUNTEER SINCE: 2005

Thundercat racing is one of the most popular sports in the powerboating world. Thanks to a £15,000 grant from Blesma and further support from several other military charities, Team Endeavour Racing gives injured Service men and women the opportunity to take part in this high-octane sport as pilots, co-pilots, and support crew. With a higher power-to-weight ratio than F1 cars and spills aplenty, it's one of the most challenging – and exhilarating – racing disciplines on water or land! Blesma volunteer and Team Endeavour Racing's Operations Manager Brian Hogg explains...

Tell us more about Thundercat racing...

The catamarans weigh about 80kg and, with a 750cc engine, travel at about 60mph. They can pull 3G into a corner, so are challenging to operate. Each boat has a pilot and a co-pilot; the driver is at the back and controls the speed and direction, the co-pilot is at the front to help the boat turn sharply and act as ballast, a bit like sidecar racing. You can only go forwards and backwards, you don't change gear.

It sounds tough but very exciting...

You race through choppy, changeable surf near the shore or on the open sea, so you get a lot of spills and thrills. Added to that, our racers are going up against able-bodied people, including former national and international champions.

But we are giving the whole field a real run for their money, which is something to be proud of.

How expensive is it, and does taking part have to be a big commitment for Members?

It doesn't cost Blesma Members anything to take part because we are supported by the Royal Foundation (Endeavour Fund) as well as grants from military charities like Blesma. The only demand we ask of anyone is to commit their time. It's quite hard work fettling the boats, attending the training weekends, and taking part in the racing weekends, so we look for committed people. We do offer the chance to just come along and have a go, to see if powerboating might be for them. Our team members are all serving or medically discharged UK Armed Forces personnel who use the racing as part of their sports recovery and transition.





NEIL HERITAGE

MEMBER SINCE: 2004 AGE: 37

MILITARY SERVICE: British Army, Royal Signals

Neil Heritage is a patient man. His quest to become the first double above-knee amputee to make it to the top of the Matterhorn has been several years – and attempts – in the making. He started training for the ascent of the notorious 4,478m peak (it is the sixth highest in the Alps and has claimed the lives of more than 500 climbers) back in 2015. A year later, he made his first attempt.

“We got quite a few things wrong on that first climb,” he says. “Nobody had tried this before, so mistakes were inevitable. The prosthetics we designed didn’t last long enough, and we were too slow climbing, so I had to turn back halfway up. We learned a lot though, and made a plan for 2017.”

Neil, from Poole in Dorset, who was hit by a suicide bomber while serving in Iraq, was to be frustrated then, too. “We had a different strategy and a bigger team in 2017,” he says. “We had more equipment and had redesigned the prosthetics to counter the problems I’d had. But it snowed so much that we couldn’t even start. I came back very disappointed!”

Frustratingly, Neil’s third attempt, in July 2018, was also thwarted by the weather. He got to a height of 3,825m – just 600 short of the summit – before he had to turn back because of bad weather. His persistence with the mission shows his fighting spirit, and Blesma has helped with every tough step.

“It took me five years from being injured in 2004 to walking without sticks. During that time I went on a Blesma introduction to watersports trip in New York,” he says. “We tried waterskiing, scuba, sailing, fishing... I got thinking about being more independent and doing more of those kinds of things.

“Meeting Members with similar injuries was very helpful right away for me, so I’ve been involved with the Association ever since. Rehab was long and arduous, so chatting to people in a similar situation and seeing them

achieve was important and gave me ideas.”

Neil is now thriving; he’s a fitness instructor and an active dad of two kids. “I’m very mobile now – I’ve had a very good spell – and doing the climbing has also got me innovating with prosthetics. What I use when I climb doesn’t come off the shelf. I’ve involved my prosthetist and a company that makes climbing shoes to create prosthetics with sharp edges and robust rubber. It’s exciting to be a pioneer of this climbing gear, developing the kit.”

The physical demands of climbing without legs are, it goes without saying, extraordinary.

“When I took part in the Row2Recovery race across the Atlantic, we knew that about 65 per cent of a rower’s power comes from the legs,” Neil says. “I have no idea what the percentage is when it comes to climbing. Because there are so few amputee climbers, it has never been measured!

“The main thing for me is to try and use my upper legs as much as I possibly can on the mountain – more than it feels natural to! Although I rely on my arms massively – for obvious reasons – I can use my legs too, and it is impossible to just pull myself up all day.”

Blesma has supported Neil’s climbing with funding – for professional guides who help pick the best routes up a mountain, and for some of his camping kit and equipment. But the assistance goes beyond money, says Neil.

“To me, there are important emotional and financial sides to the help that Blesma offers. What’s really useful is staying in touch and hearing what all the other Members are planning and doing. It’s interesting to get other people’s ideas on prosthetics, too. We’ve got quite a few inventors in the charity who are making things work for themselves!

“I have to experiment with heavy-duty tape and crampons to get over the snow and ice on the mountains. It’s a lot to think about, so it’s great to have Blesma in my corner.”

BLESMA FACT: Blesma’s Facebook reaches more than nine million people, with more than one million logging on every month



YEARS IN THE MAKING

Neil's mission to climb his way into the record books on the Matterhorn has been all-consuming since 2015

MIND OVER MATTER

The Matterhorn, which Neil has attempted to climb three times, has claimed the lives of more than 500 mountaineers



(MOSTLY) CUTTING EDGE

Neil has had to design his own prosthetics with sharp edges, robust rubber, and just a bit of trusty tape



MIA HERITAGE, 13

Neil's daughter (and biggest fan!) talks photo shoots, tackling tough peaks, and being positive

Your dad is trying to climb one of Europe's toughest peaks despite being a double amputee. What do you think about that?

It's amazing! He's been climbing for years now and he's got really good. He works very hard to make sure he's strong so that he gives himself the best chance. I hope he gets up that mountain! I think he will do it. I hope it helps that my brother and I support him.

How do you support him when he is away on a tough expedition?

I phone him up when he's away and try to let him know how much we are behind him. Last year, we went out to see him when he was making an attempt on the Matterhorn, but it didn't work

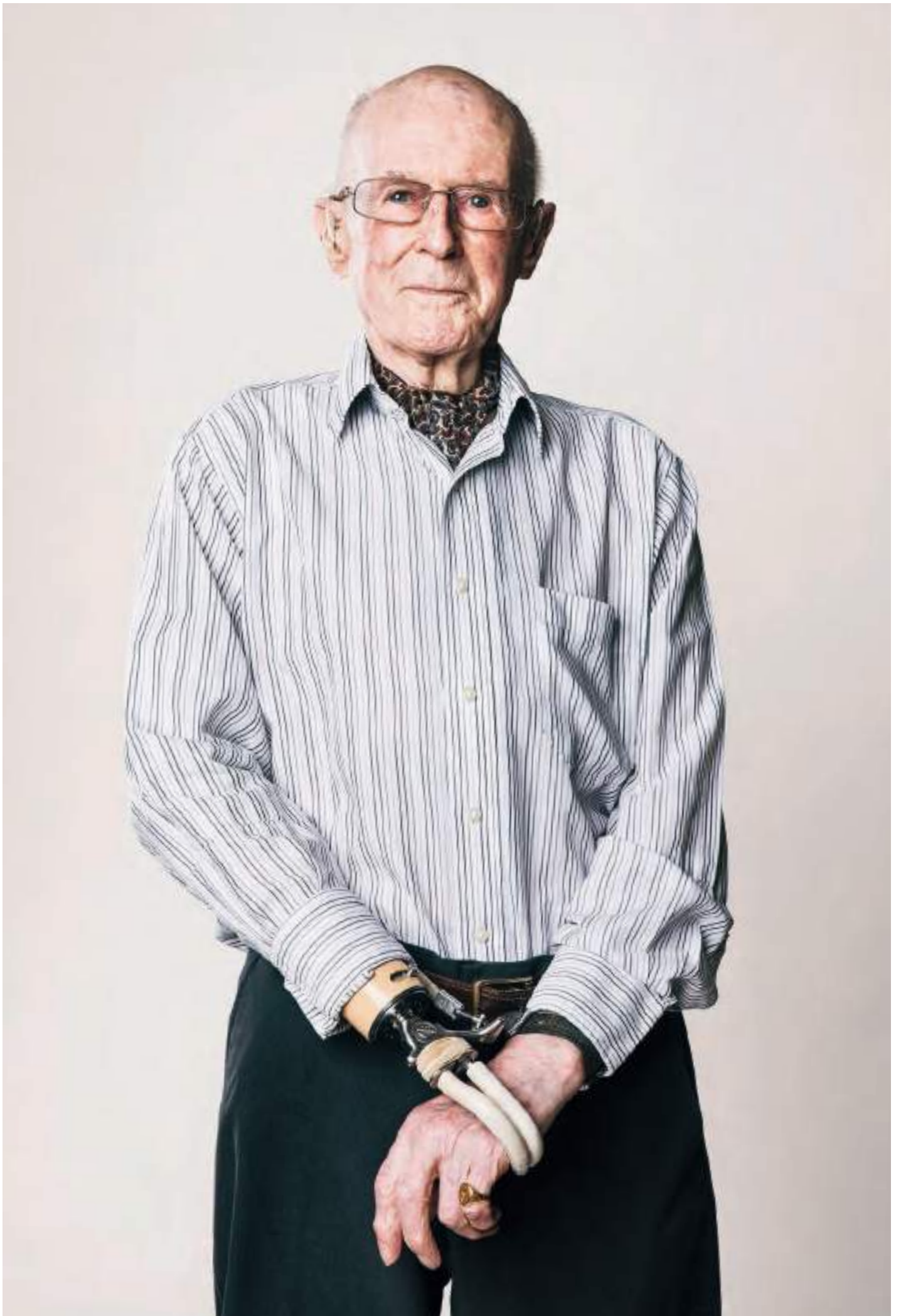
out because of the weather, which was a shame. It's an amazing place out there! It was really cool, seeing the mountain in the distance and knowing your dad is trying to climb it. Then we drove back through loads of different countries for a couple of weeks, and that was great.

What's it like seeing your dad having his photo taken and being interviewed all the time?

My dad gets his photo taken quite a lot so I am used to it now, but I don't get my photo taken all that often. It's fun. I'd quite like to be a journalist.

Would you like to climb a mountain one day?

I don't know about that. I just like trampolining at the moment!



PETER VAN ZELLER

MEMBER SINCE: 1988 AGE: 97

MILITARY SERVICE: British Army, Somerset and Cornwall Light Infantry

Peter Van Zeller served in both the RAF and the Army during World War II. Shortly after the D-Day Landings, he was shot in the arm and had to undergo amputation. In the years following the war, Peter, who is now retired and living in Sussex, reinvented himself as a globe-trotting agricultural expert.

“I had always wanted to go to university, but the war started before I left school so I joined the RAF instead,” he recalls. “I got my pilot’s badge after just 136 hours of flying – that was one of the proudest moments of my life.

“One night, while I was a duty pilot seeing aircraft in and out, one guy went into an uncontrollable loop in his Spitfire. He crashed, and we had to watch the poor guy die. It was very, very upsetting. Shortly afterwards, I was sent for by my Commanding Officer, who was niggling me over some minor matter. I lost my temper and told him what he could do with his aeroplanes. I was thrown out of the RAF within 24 hours, and that was the end of that!

Peter’s nerves were, by his own admission, “shattered” so he went to work on a farm but after six months, in the Spring of 1942 and with the country at war, he joined the Army.

“I was identified as a possible officer, but before I could go off for training, we were sent to France. Next stop, the beach!” he says. “It was a week or so after D-Day – we were the first reinforcements to arrive. Our boys must have been 10 miles into France, and I was drafted into the Somerset Light Infantry. We were at Hill 112, where there had been one hell of a battle. The guys were at the end of their tether, and they were so glad to see us.

“One very foggy night, we took over a trench on a downward slope. I was on watch and suddenly saw hundreds of German helmets in the field below. *‘I don’t think we’re going to get through this lot,’* my mate Charlie White said. But we knew we had to try. We woke everyone up, but just as it got lighter I heard a Cockney voice; *‘Peter, you silly bugger, they ain’t Germans, that’s a field of cabbages!’* Ha!”

Soon afterwards, Peter was patrolling across open fields when he was shot in the upper arm by a German sniper.

“My arm went numb, and I was pumped full of morphine, put on a stretcher, and sent to the

field hospital in Bayeux. That was the end of my second period of service!” From there, he was flown to a hospital in Wales. “My elbow had been shattered, but a young surgeon managed to save it. My hand died, but to keep the elbow was a tremendous bonus.

“It was a great shock, though. I was right-handed, and it took four years for me to instinctively use my left. I was in hospital for a few months and then given a prosthetic. It wasn’t much different from what I have now, and I’ve had this one for more than 20 years. I can open the hook by stretching my shoulder – it has been my arm for 70 years. I wouldn’t want anyone to waste £30,000 on a robotic hand for me!”

Peter was determined to stay independent. He moved in with his sister, and she treated him the same as she always had. “If I’d have asked her to tie my laces, she’d have told me to get on with it, so I learned to do everything again,” he says. “It still takes me an hour to shave, shower, dress, and make my bed each day, but I do it.”

Peter didn’t receive any compensation for his injury, so once he had recovered from surgery he needed to find a job.

“I worked in agriculture in Rhodesia and Essex, then went to Oxford University and got a degree in agriculture. I learned to ride a horse to a high standard, I’ve worked in New Zealand and Portugal, and later, when I worked for the Milk Marketing Board, I was driving 40,000 miles a year.

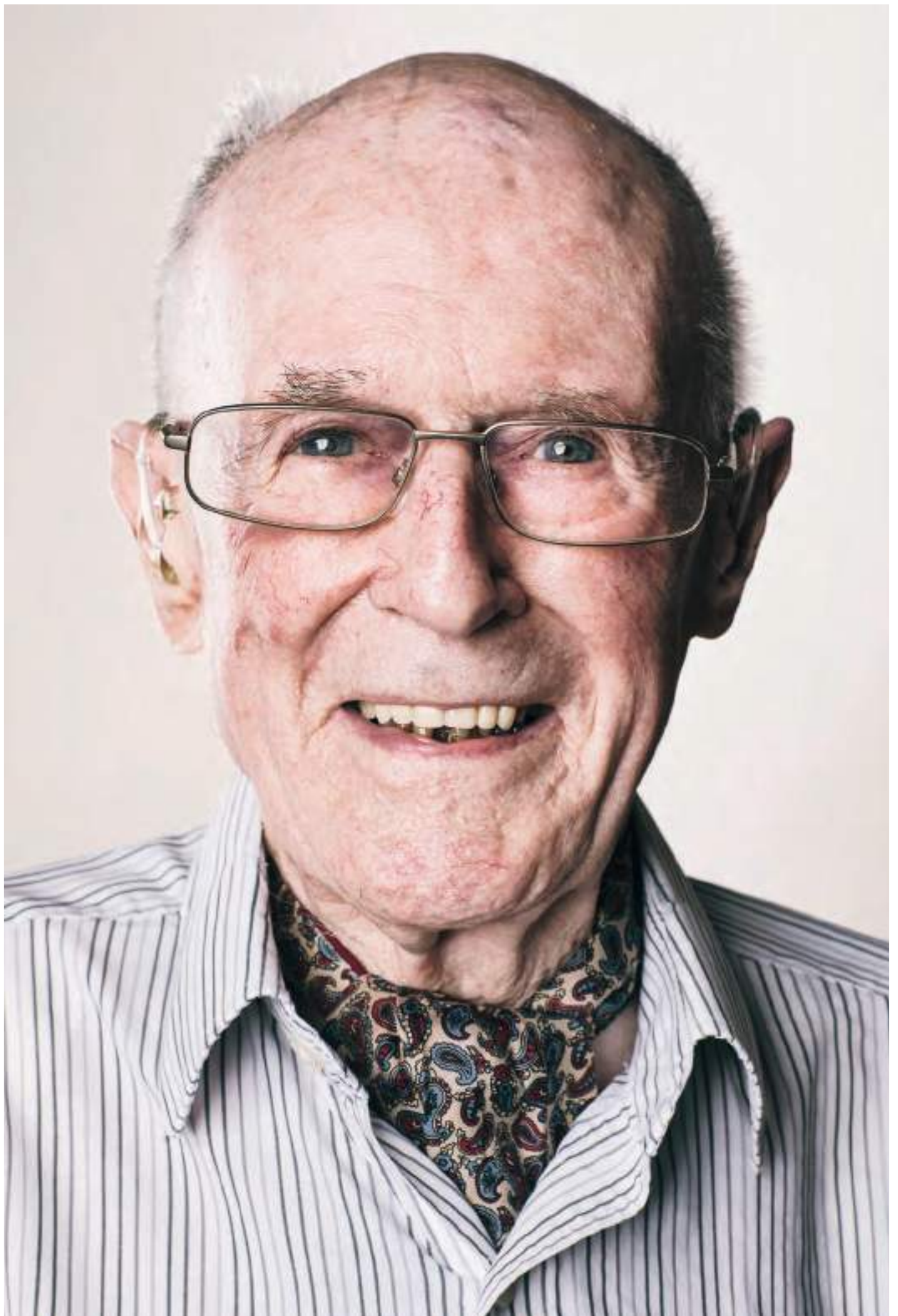
“There was no on-going rehabilitation back then. I saw a prosthetist from time to time, but no-one ever talked about mental health issues, you just had to have a stiff upper lip. It’s very different now in that regard.”

In time, Peter became an assistant secretary in Blesma’s Norfolk Branch, and enjoyed the satisfaction of helping other people out.

“I believe that recovering from amputation is down to you. I was always determined and stayed positive. I’ve seen people give up, and you can even wish yourself to death. I’ve been through despondency, but I don’t let it last. I may have destroyed a lot of neckties while learning to do one up properly, but I found a way to tie them. I’ve never given up!”

BLESMA FACT: 475,000 British men and women were injured during the Second World War

“I saw hundreds of German helmets in the field below. We woke everyone up, but just as it got light I heard a voice saying; *‘Peter, you silly bugger, they ain’t Germans, that’s a field of cabbages!’*”



ALISON GRANT

MEMBER SINCE: 2004 **AGE:** 50

MILITARY SERVICE: British Army, Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps

Tell us a little bit about your military career...

I joined the Territorial Army while I was doing my nursing training in 1988. The school of nursing wasn't keen on me being in the TA because it meant I took more time off than I was allowed, so they made me stop. As soon as I'd qualified, I went straight back though, and joined the Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps in 1991.

It sounds like serving in the Forces was something you always wanted to do...

I suppose in some ways it was. When I was 12 years old, I told my mum I wanted to join the Army and be a helicopter pilot. After school, I went to university to read Business Studies and French. While I was there, I decided I wanted to do something that paid while I learned, so I sort of fell into nursing and discovered that I loved it.

What happened the day you were injured?

I was driving to Geneva with my gran when I was involved in an accident. A drunk driver coming the other way at 100mph hit a rock on the opposite side of the road and flipped his car. It landed on

top of mine! I clearly remember the sound of the airbags going off and then the fire brigade cutting me out. I broke my neck in the crash.

What happened afterwards?

I spent the next eight-and-a-half months in Stoke Mandeville Hospital, followed by a further four-and-a-half months at Headley Court. Then I had another seven months of intensive physiotherapy at the rehabilitation centre in Aldershot. It was during this time that I went back to university to study law and started skiing again. When I finally graduated, I just wanted to get out there and do the things I used to enjoy. I started travelling and sailing again, I did some voluntary work and learned to fly. Different sailing competitions run across the country between April and October, and I've also taken part in the European Championships three times and the World Championships twice.

When did you first get involved with Blesma?

I joined the Association in 2004 but didn't get involved until 2008, because I was too busy at university and was learning how to live in a wheelchair. Since 2008 I've been skiing, I've taken part in activity weeks and photography trips, and have just been on the tall ships voyage to Jersey with Blesma and the Jubilee Sailing Trust. I'm also part of the Blesma Community Programme and was part of the Blesma cast in the Graeae Theatre Company's production *This is Not for You*. Blesma has become a big part of my life; I've made some good friends through it and have experienced a great camaraderie over the years. Plus, I recently became one of the charity's Trustees.

What made you decide to become a Blesma Trustee?

I was asked by a couple of Members if it might be something I'd consider back in January 2017. I thought it would be an honour to represent the Association and its membership, and I became a Trustee at the Annual General Meeting in June 2017. I try to represent the membership as best I can, and raise any valid and relevant questions, comments or queries from Members. I'm very much the new kid on the block at the moment as I'm the newest Trustee, but I'll hopefully bring a different voice and viewpoint.



BLESMA FACT: The Association has 258 Members who have lost the use of a limb or limbs





YEE-HAW!

For the last three years, Mick has led the Blesma trip to 'cowboy school' in Arizona

MICK FOULDS

MEMBER SINCE: 2007 AGE: 66

MILITARY SERVICE: British Army, Royal Engineers

It's a little more than a decade since Mick Foulds was run over by a train. "As it hit me, I went under it and screamed," he recalls. "The driver slammed the brakes on and managed to stop the thing, but it was 2,000 tonnes pulling 16 wagons, and two of them had already rolled right over my legs!"

By the time the train had stopped, Mick – who was 55 years old at the time and working as a shunter on a stone yard having served nine years in the Royal Corps of Transport and the Royal Engineers – had lost both his legs below the knee.

"I had just started my early morning shift when a train arrived and I was tasked with uncoupling the engine from one end and attaching it to the other. I was unaware that the points were in the wrong direction, so I thought I was safe on the track. In fact, the train was coming up right behind me."

After a phone call to his wife, Sue, to whom Mick believed he was saying goodbye for good, he was taken to hospital in an ambulance, along with his legs that had been recovered by firemen "in case the doctors were able to put them back on."

They weren't, but he got by in hospital with the support of his friends and family, and with the motivation to get back on his horse, Kaz.

Mick's love for horses began as a child, but his passion for riding took hold in his 30s when his daughter wanted to learn to ride. As Mick lay in his hospital bed the doctors were unsure if he would ride again, but a visit from a double amputee gave Mick hope.

"A friend of mine asked a lady called Alison to visit me. She was wearing trousers and walked in as anybody would. I couldn't stop looking at the way she walked around," says Mick. "She was a show jumper and she told me she was able to get back on a horse two weeks after she got her prosthetic legs. As soon as she told me that, I was determined to beat her time! She was such an inspiration to me – she changed everything."

And so, nine days after Mick received his prosthetic legs, he was on horseback and cantering on his beloved horse Kaz. But while his riding went from strength to strength, Mick struggled through many dark moments when he was alone with time to think.



"Sue is my rock, she was very supportive, and I had very supportive friends, but I did go to a dark place for a long time," he says. "You tend to take these sorts of things out on the people you are nearest to. Then Blesma came along and changed everything."

In 2008, Mick attended an activity week in Crieff followed by a Winter Sports activity.

"Blesma has been a life saver, for myself and Sue. I really don't know where I'd be without the Association; it has changed everything for me. It's the comradeship, being with people in the same situation as yourself, and the military sense of humour – that's what got me when I first went away with Blesma. Nothing had changed, everything was exactly the same. I'd fall off my skibob and everybody would just laugh, and that was exactly what I needed."

Now, Mick loves to share his passion for horses with his fellow Members. They will often visit his home, where he has his own stables, to experience horse riding for the first time. And for the last three years, Mick has led a Blesma trip to Arizona, where Members learn cowboy skills. It's fair to say that Mick's love of horses has brought him one heck of a long way!

BLESMA FACT In 2018 Blesma published 'Caring and Coping: The Family Perspective on Living with Limb Loss', a research paper on how families live with limb loss. The findings will feed into working practices for BSOs



SUE FOULDS

Mick calls Sue his 'rock' but it took her a while to realise she wasn't going to crack

You must remember that call from Mick?

It was a surreal moment. I didn't take it in to start with. Mick said; *'I've really messed your life up this time! I've lost my legs, they've gone. I'm under a train and I want to say goodbye before I die.'*

How did you react?

It was extremely emotional, an awful situation to be in! I was trying to take it in and stay calm, ask if the ambulance had been called. I certainly wasn't going to say goodbye!

What were your immediate thoughts when you learned about Mick's injuries?

Was he going to survive? And if so, how would we move forward? Mick's fear was that he would be in bed all the time but Alison, a double amputee

we met, gave us hope. The one thing that really helped was finding Blesma. Mick's first Blesma activity changed him because he was pushed. He had to climb this big hill on his prosthetic legs! Then he started talking to other Members who had different injuries and he realised they were experiencing their own mental health issues. So by talking to them, and sharing their experiences, it was a form of mutual self-help.

What does Blesma mean to Mick?

Blesma has been a rock to Mick. He says I'm his rock, but Blesma has always been there for him. It's something that's dependable, it's always there in the background. Blesma is very important to Mick, but it's important to me, too.

MICK'S INJURIES Mick lost both his legs in 2007, when he was run over by a train



KEVIN LONG

BLESMA SUPPORT OFFICER (BSO) SINCE: 2017 **AGE:** 46

MILITARY SERVICE: British Army, Royal Artillery

Kevin Long was well aware of Blesma before he applied to become one of its newest BSOs just over a year ago. But even though he knew a great deal about the Association before his successful application, he has been surprised by the scope and reach of the charity's work.

"I spent 29 years in the military, reaching the rank of Warrant Officer," says Kevin, who joined the Royal Artillery in 1988. "From 2012, I worked with the Army Recovery Capability in Colchester looking after wounded soldiers. A lot of them were Blesma Members, and I also knew some of the BSOs because I had referred some of my guys to the Association.

"I had a good idea of what Blesma did, but fast forward 12 months and it's clear I didn't realise just how big the Association's impact can be. What you think Blesma does and what it actually does are very different things."

From his experience working in Army welfare, Kevin had seen first-hand how the transitional nature of military support could sometimes frustrate injured troops.

"There was often a gap in the support we could offer in the Army Recovery Capability as personnel transitioned out, and that could be difficult to be part of," he says. "You'd be there to help for three months after discharge, but sometimes people would call me up a couple of years after they'd left, asking for help, and there was nothing I could do.

"That's why I think it's great that Blesma offers through-life support. Members aren't suddenly going to be told that we can't deal

with them any more. And it's great that I can see the impact of the work we've done, too. I'll deliver a wheelchair to someone, for example, and see them down the line using it. I know I've had an immediate impact and solved the problem. That's really satisfying!"

Blesma's BSO Eastern says the sheer variety of his work is his favourite thing, though.

"I love that no two days are ever the same. One day I'm with a World War II veteran, the next day a Widow, the next day someone who served in Iraq or Afghanistan. I meet someone different every day, and that's fantastic."

Kevin also believes his work puts any gripes he may have into perspective. "You can't wake up and tell yourself; *'I'm having a bad day'* when you're spending that day helping someone who has lost limbs or who uses a wheelchair. They're cracking on with life, and supporting them is hugely rewarding.

"I really enjoy getting on with things and delivering results, and Blesma allows me to do both those things. Every day I'll be visiting, supporting, dropping off kit, and that can make a big impact on people's lives – giving them more mobility, freedom and accessibility.

"I feel as though I am paying things forward and helping people keep their independence. I'm a cog in that wheel, and it's fantastic fun. I love meeting Members and learning all about them. My job is different from a typical nine-to-five because it's never just nine to five – it's everything else around that, and that suits me down to the ground."

"It's great that I can see the impact of the work I've done. I've solved the problem and that's really satisfying!"

BLESMA FACT: Blesma Support Officers completed 1,481 home visits and 310 other visits to Members in 2017



Assisting limbless veterans to lead independent and fulfilling lives





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