

The Resilience Sessions



CAROL VORDERMAN | TANNI GREY-THOMPSON | MICHAEL CAINES | VICK HOPE | JONNY BENJAMIN

WHEN KEN BELLRINGER MET RAY WINSTONE

BEHIND THE SCENES AT THE MAKING GENERATION R PODCAST SESSIONS

Coffee, cake and companionship

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How going digital will help veterans

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Are you getting the right care?

The Bristol Centre for Enablement and its progressive attitude to care and support **p30**



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is Blesma's Benefits and Social Care Adviser. Discover how she might be able to help you



USEFUL CONTACTS

Editorial

020 8548 3513
od@blesma.org

Membership Services

020 8548 3515
diw@blesma.org

Activities

020 8548 7094
activities@blesma.org

Fundraising

020 8548 3517
fundraising@blesma.org

PR and Media

020 3954 3023
commsmgr@blesma.org

General Enquiries

020 8590 1124
chadwellhealth@blesma.org



Please send any written correspondence to the Blesma office at: Frankland Moore House, 185-187 High Road, Chadwell Heath, Romford, Essex RM6 6NA

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Andy Reid (near right)
with fellow Afghanistan
veteran Alex Kemp



Blesma man helps Army friend get back on track

A Blesma Member whose life was saved by a teenage comrade when he was a soldier has helped the younger man after finding him homeless almost a decade later.

Andy Reid, 42, from St Helens, was an Army corporal when he lost an arm and both legs after stepping on a Taliban bomb in Afghanistan, in October 2009. Alex Kemp, then an 18-year-old member of Andy's section in the Yorkshire Regiment's Third Battalion, rushed to his aid to stem catastrophic bleeding.

The blast happened as the men were on patrol in Sangin, a dangerous district of Helmand Province. The eight-man section had forged close friendships with each other after a number of previous

bombs had claimed the lives of colleagues. Andy was airlifted to hospital at the military base at Camp Bastion in Helmand, before being flown back to the Queen Elizabeth II Hospital in Birmingham. The pair only met again briefly a few months later, but last year, Andy became concerned after spotting a Facebook post from Alex and got back in touch with him.

He found out that Alex was homeless as a result of crippling post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and had even attempted to take his own life. He has since helped Alex battle his mental health issues.

"The hard work has come from Alex and, with the help of others, we have just put things in place for him," said Andy. "I saw that Alex had put a post on Facebook and

that it didn't sound right, that he might be struggling, so I got in touch. He told me he wasn't in a good place, his relationship had broken down and he was homeless.

"I felt guilty because I thought I should have checked in on the guys from our section a long time ago, that I should have been able to help him before that."

Andy paid for Alex, who was now a young father, to catch a train to Manchester to see him, and collected him from the station.

"He arrived with two carrier bags of belongings," said Andy. "From there, we got a plan in place to help him get back on track and become self-sufficient."

Alex, now 28, said: "I came out of the Army in late 2010 after being admitted to the Army hospital due to my mental

Something's brewing And it's not just a lovely cup of tea (p42)



health. I chose to come out so I could be with my child.” But Alex said his mental state left him “dripping with sweat” whenever he went out and he “didn’t want to speak to people or work”.

He recalled: “We lost a few men in our section and it was hard to cope with the things I’d seen. I lost my grandmother and lost my home, I had no job and was struggling to see my daughter. I would get a job and get back on track for it to fall apart again. I even made an attempt to take my own life and was admitted to hospital.

“So many people have helped me since: I was able to get a job and I now have a place to stay so I can have my daughter to visit. I can’t thank everyone enough.”

I KNEW I WAS A SURVIVOR

“I remember the dust around me and that I couldn’t see my legs, but it never occurred to me how bad the injuries were. I never even felt any pain,” said Andy, who has a six-year-old son with his wife Claire, of the incident that took three of his limbs.

“When I was brought out of the coma in hospital I knew straight away that I was a survivor and not a victim, that this would not stop me from living.”

Andy became an ambassador for Step Forward Homes three years ago. It helps find homes for veterans, and through the organisation Andy was able to find Alex a home, which he moved into last August.

Since then, Alex has passed his driving test, bought a car and started a job in railway maintenance. He is able to see his 10-year-old daughter, and makes weekly visits to a counsellor to help him cope with his post-traumatic stress disorder.

For more on Step Forward Homes visit www.stepforwardhomes.co.uk



“THE HARD WORK HAS COME FROM ALEX AND, WITH THE HELP OF OTHERS, WE HAVE JUST PUT THINGS IN PLACE FOR HIM”

welcome

Last year saw Blesma Members make a special mark on the commemoration of the end of WWI through various events, notably the performances of *This Is Not For You* and the tall ship voyage to Jersey, both of which featured in the last issue of the magazine. This year is looking equally as lively but with the focus trained in different directions.



The Blesma Community Programme initiative, whereby Members are trained to use their stories to inspire resilience in young people at schools and colleges, has grown into Making Generation R. Participating Members aim to reach 30,000 young people this year and the feedback on the benefits for both Members and their audiences is very positive, building upon the Community Programme. A further addition to Making Generation R is the making of podcasts with some well-known supporters, and partnering with Openreach and The Drive Project.

We are continuing to promote engagement at the local community level and Vanessa, the Blesma Outreach Officer in the Midlands, shares a good example with us. Collaboration is a key feature of the Association's work, especially with the National Health Service England; we have worked closely with Bristol Centre for Enablement and I would like to thank them greatly for their support and for featuring in this edition.

Veterans UK is another body that supports the membership and my thanks also go to Andy Dowds for a most constructive relationship and for giving up his time to appear in the magazine. As always, this issue features the core of Blesma; the Members. We are grateful to Andy Reid, Justin Davis and Ben-Jack Shaw for sharing their stories and letting us know how they are forging ahead. In particular, Andy sends an invaluable message on the importance of fellowship, both across the Association and, in this case, beyond. Andy's promotion is an exemplar.

Finally, the future of our office in Chadwell Heath was raised at the Annual General Meeting last year. Matters have moved on and the office will be moving to Chelmsford later in the year. Planning is in hand to make sure there is no impact upon the business of the office.

Barry Le Gry
Chief Executive



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Alex Krol has his hot air balloon pilot's licence

TEAM BRIT ON POLE AS IT LAUNCHES RACING ACADEMY

TEAM BRIT HAS LAUNCHED ITS OWN racing academy with the aim of creating new opportunities for disabled drivers.

The new academy will offer expert tuition as well as the chance to take an Association of Racing Driver Schools test. Those who pass the test will be able to race at UK circuits and may even get the chance to try out for Team BRIT.

“We’ve worked closely with Blesma for some time,” said Team BRIT founder and CEO, Dave Player. “Many of Team BRIT’s drivers are Blesma Members and I hope that, through the academy, we can offer other Members an entry level route into motor racing so that they can find out if it’s something they’d like to pursue. For the first time, disabled drivers will have access to top-of-the-range technology and coaching, enabling them to get out on track in the same way as anyone else.”

To register your interest with Team BRIT, visit www.teambrit.co.uk/racing-academy



Photograph: Alessio Corneglio Photography

Up, up and away for Alex

Not content with having organised an activity that introduced Blesma Members to flying a plane, Alex Krol has taken to the skies once again, but this time in an altogether more serene craft.

Last October, the former Royal Marine from Liverpool spent two weeks in Italy where he undertook 16 hours of training, sat five written exams, took a flight test and successfully completed a 30-minute solo flight to obtain his Balloon Private Pilot Licence.

“I saw Blesma Member Luke Sinnott gain his licence last year and thought it looked awesome,” said Alex, who is also part of the British disabled air display team Bader’s

Bus Company. “He put my name forward for a Boeing Ballooning Scholarship and I was lucky enough to be selected.

“It’s bonkers flying a hot air balloon. Everything is very slow and you sit on a seat that looks like a couch. Surprisingly, you have to keep the balloon at quite a low level in the sky, but you’ve constantly got to be thinking 10 steps ahead!”

Whilst Alex was deciding what to do next with his ballooning licence, he already had plans for his next flying challenge. On 09 March, he travelled to New Zealand to join up with Handiflight and take part in the not-for-profit organisation’s attempt to fly around the world in adapted planes.

IMAGINATION IS THE KEY TO PAINTING THE PERFECT PORTRAIT

A GROUP OF NINE MEMBERS AND WIDOWS were encouraged to ‘let go and allow their imagination to take over’ on a beginners’ acrylics portrait painting course. The aim of the local activity, held in Reading over three days in February, was to bring out the artist in the participating Members whilst helping to improve their general mindfulness and wellbeing.

“On the first day we learned to sketch and paint from photographs before we progressed to larger canvases and more challenging photographs on day two,” said Steve McNeice. Each Member was encouraged to bring along their own photographs on the final day so that they could paint a more personal portrait.

“Everyone on the course had a fantastic time; we laughed and enjoyed a lot of banter. What a fabulous activity!” said Steve.



Words: Jessica Mackinnon



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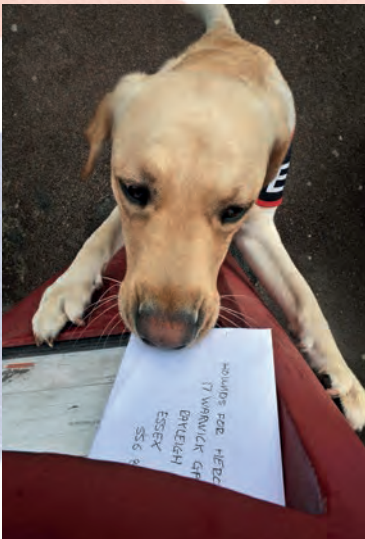


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BLESMA WELL REPRESENTED ON SOLDIERING ON AWARDS SHORTLIST

TWENTY SEVEN MEMBERS WERE shortlisted for this year's Soldiering On Awards, held on 05 April as this issue was going to press. The 2018 Invictus Games team, which included 21 Blesma Members, was shortlisted for the Sporting Excellence award, as was Michael Mellon.

David Birrell, Nathan Cumberland, Dan Richards and Luke Sinnott have all been nominated for the Inspiration award while James Simpson has been shortlisted for the People's Choice award.

"I had no idea that I had been nominated until I received an email," said Scottish veteran David Birrell, who was nominated by his fiancée, Mary.



The UK's 2018 Invictus Games squad

"I'd be humbled and overwhelmed to win the award, but I think the deserving winner is Anna Kelton, an inspiring woman who sadly passed away last year."

Former-soldier-turned-model Dan Richards has been nominated for being a role model for body positivity. "It was a massive surprise to be shortlisted as I never set out to get any gratification from modelling or trying to spread body confidence," he said. "It is really just something that I've done for myself." The awards are dedicated to celebrating the achievements of the Armed Forces community, with nominees being put forward by local businesses, sponsors, and a host of charities.

Visit www.blesma.org for news of the winners, who were announced at a ceremony on 05 April



Be part of Tim's around-the-world boat adventure

A former soldier who lost both his legs in a car accident whilst serving is preparing to sail around the world. Tim Griffith, 62, from Nottinghamshire has spent more than three years planning his around-the-world adventure, which he estimates will take him 10 years to complete. He aims to set sail in August and has opened the experience up to any Blesma Members who might like to join him for parts of it.

He has bought, and is currently refitting and adapting, a Jeanneau Sun Odyssey 43 DS (above), which he has named Tigger after the nickname he gave his daughter.

"Sailing is my passion. It makes me feel human again," said Tim. "Following my

accident, I rediscovered sailing with Blesma and found that I could compete on almost equal terms with able-bodied people. So I took the RYA Yachtmaster course and bought my own boat."

Tim plans to stop and explore the many different countries he's sure to visit on his decade-long adventure. "I am making the yacht available to all UK, USA, Australian, Canadian and New Zealand veterans and their families," he said. "All I ask is that they pay for their own food and drink, and contribute to the fuel and marina fees."

To contact Tim about taking part, visit www.sailblogs.com/member/tiggersworld

MIKE DOESN'T DO THINGS BY HALVES

MIKE MULVEY IS HOPING TO BECOME the fastest person with one leg to complete a half marathon using crutches. Mike, 58, from Cheshire, will need to finish the London Landmarks Half Marathon in less than two hours and 31 minutes to break the current record, held since 2014 by American Larry Chloupek.

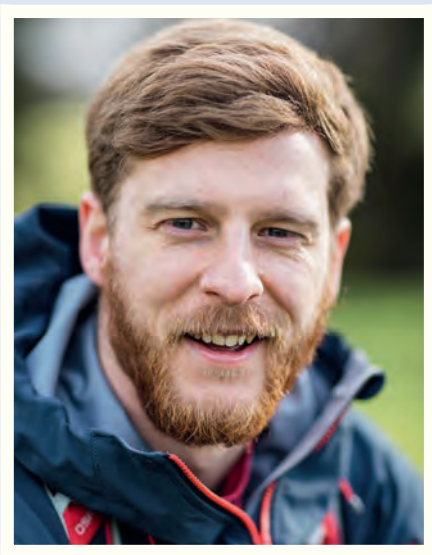
"I'm experiencing a lot of pain in my hands as the crutches hit the concrete," said Mike, who lost his leg whilst serving with the Royal Pioneer Corps. "If I can solve that, I'll fly around the route!" In 2017, Mike broke the 10km record by 69 seconds. "The guy who holds the half marathon record then beat my time, so it would be nice to take one off him!"

Mike's record attempt took place as the magazine went to press. Find out how he got on at www.blesma.org



In the spotlight

Justin Davis



Justin Davis, 30, from Gloucestershire, joined The Rifles in 2009. He stepped on an IED on his first tour of Afghanistan and lost both his legs in the blast. He has since had to endure eight years of operations but has remained largely positive and ambitious, and is now ready to inspire others through the Making Generation R programme.

“I grew up in The Cotswolds and worked as a joiner, but I felt that there was more out there for me, so I joined the Army when I was 21. I loved the physical side of it, pushing myself to the limit, learning skills and procedures, training in places like Kenya... I felt as though I’d found my calling.

“I was injured on 15 December 2011, two years or so after joining up. I was part of a Quick Reaction Force patrol that day, dashing around assisting a lot of different call signs. We’d already provided support for another casualty extraction, then we went to intercept a Taliban ambush call sign. I was Point Man, and I detonated a well-hidden IED.”

OPERATIONS, SETBACKS AND FAILURES

“I was conscious throughout the incident, and remember the sights, sounds and smells. There was a lot of swearing! The guys on the ground did a fantastic job, and I wouldn’t be here now if it hadn’t been for them. My right leg had been blown off and my left leg was hanging by a tendon. My forearm was damaged and I’d lost a couple of fingers. I was evacuated to Bastion, where I had emergency surgery to amputate both my legs through the knee.

“I felt a range of emotions afterwards; I felt lucky to be alive, but I was also very frustrated. I was so annoyed that I’d been caught out. I’d worked hard since joining the Army to get all these new skills, so to be doing the job for real and then getting the rug pulled was bad. I was really enjoying my work and then, suddenly, it was all taken away.

“I’ve had a lot of ups and downs, stresses and strains since. I’ve undergone lots of operations, had constant setbacks and many failures. At the start of 2018 I had my most recent surgery, taking my legs off above the knee because I couldn’t get sockets to

fit. That was holding me back from being active. It’s been a fight since then; a year and a half of hard work, but I should be back up walking with the right sockets soon. I’ll always have the will to keep on battling, but the frustration of having to deal with things that are out of my control has been the most difficult.”

TURNING A NEGATIVE INTO A POSITIVE

“Being involved with Making Generation R has really helped. I’ve loved taking part – it’s the best programme I’ve ever been on. I was so impressed with the other Members, too; they’re all incredible and have really compelling stories.

“I wasn’t confident in my ability to convey my story before the training, especially if I was standing in front of people I didn’t know. I was anxious at the start of the programme, but I knew positive growth was going to come from it, so I got stuck in and it turned out to be an exhilarating experience.

“The programme teaches you practical speaking skills and how to tell a story, which is a real art. I learned a lot about myself, too. I found out that if you push hard, into areas that you think you are going to find difficult, you get rewarded.

“It was interesting to work with professional storytellers. I turned up with no idea how to tell a story and they told me I’d soon have 20 minutes of good material. I thought: *‘No way!’* but by the end they’d really brought the emotion out. I talk in depth about the incident, and the instructors took me back to moments I thought I’d forgotten about.

“I’ve not been into the schools to tell my story yet, but I’ve got a few lined up and I’m really looking forward to seeing how they go. I’m excited because the power of storytelling is incredible; if someone can find help or solace in my story, that’s great. If I can inspire just one kid, that will be an achievement.

“My recovery has been hard; because of the surgeries it has been so stop-start. I want to do so much, I’ve got so much drive and ambition, but I’ve been held back by circumstances. Now, I feel ready to turn a negative into a positive!”

“

MY RIGHT LEG HAD BEEN BLOWN OFF AND MY LEFT LEG WAS HANGING BY A TENDON. MY ARM WAS ALSO DAMAGED AND I’D LOST A COUPLE OF FINGERS

”

When Ken met Ray

The Making Generation R podcasts (p20)



Words: Nick Moore Photographs: Andy Bate

Boots on for Blesma



Join our Blesma Members and challenge yourself to one of their personalised military circuits and raise money to support all of our injured veterans this Blesma Week.

To find out more visit www.blesma.org/blesmaweek or call our Fundraising Team on 020 8548 7084

Rob Linge (near right) on the first Caddie School for Soldiers



Photograph: Peter Marley

NEWS BRIEFS

NOW YOU CAN QUICKLY PROVE YOU ARE A VETERAN

The Ministry of Defence has launched a new Veterans ID card. The card, which came into existence on 18 February, gives proof that a veteran has served in HM Armed Forces. Previously, there was no way for veterans to easily prove they had served. **For more about the ID card, contact Veterans UK on 0808 1914 218 or visit www.veterans-uk.info**

BLESMA DOUBLE NOMINATION

Darren 'Swifty' Swift and Josh Boggi were among the final nine nominees shortlisted for an Endeavour Fund award in February. Swifty was nominated for the Henry Worsley award, which recognises an individual's courage in overcoming adversity. Josh was recognised in the Celebrating Excellence category. Whilst neither quite managed to win, both made it through to the final three in their category.

EVEREST ATTEMPT UNDERWAY

Blesma Members Martin Hewitt and Terry Byrne left the UK for the Himalayas on 24 March to attempt to summit Mount Everest. They will make two attempts on the 7,161m Pumori to acclimatise before turning their attention to the world's highest mountain in May. Martin heads up the Adaptive Grand Slam; a team of disabled adventurers who are attempting to summit the highest peak on each of the seven continents, as well as walk unsupported to the geographic North and South Poles.

Words: Jessica Mackinnon

Driving ambition to be a caddie? This is for you!

A Member has taken part in the first Caddie School for Soldiers. Launched in February at St Andrews, the home of golf, the course trains former soldiers to become professional caddies, with the aim that they go on to find a career in the sport.

Six veterans from the UK, the USA and Canada were the first to take part in the month-long course, where they received classroom and field lessons from Davy Gilchrist, a former top caddie, and David Scott, a PGA Master Professional.

"The course was harder than I thought it was going to be. There's more to being a caddie than just carrying a golfer's bag!" said former national one-armed golf

champion and Blesma Member Rob Linge (above left), who lost his right arm above the elbow in The Gulf War in 1991. "I'm not playing competitively any more, and while caddying is something I haven't done before, I like to challenge myself."

During the course, the students were able to practise their new skills by caddying for different groups of golfers, including a team of Blesma Members. In the final week, the group faced the ultimate test; caddying for golfers of the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St Andrews on the Duke's Course.

"We had to make sure we did everything right on the day, but we all passed with flying colours!" said Rob.

MARK GIVES FAMILY BEST CHRISTMAS GIFT

Former submariner Mark Hancock brought his family to tears last Christmas Day when he walked for the first time since his legs were amputated more than 10 years ago.

"I had secretly been learning to walk for a couple of months leading up to the holidays, and I wanted to surprise my family on Christmas Day," said Mark. "When the big day came, it was very emotional! I asked my family to close their eyes, and I walked into the room with the help of a frame. When I asked them to finally look at me, there were lots of tears. Even my boys excused themselves to shed a tear in private."



Mark suffered from Complex Regional Pain Syndrome for years. The pain became so unbearable that one leg was amputated in 2006, followed by his second leg a year later.

"I had been spending some time with veterans who had lost limbs and had seen them on their good but also on their bad days, when their stumps would be red raw," said Mark, who is now walking with the help of a stick. "It made me wonder

if I would be able to wear prosthetics, but I decided to get in touch with my Blesma Support Officer, who helped me make an appointment with a local Limb Centre and, soon enough, I had my prosthetic legs!"

CALLING ALL THOSE INVOLVED IN THE D-DAY LANDINGS

Were you involved in the D-Day Landings, preparations or subsequent actions? If so, we would like to invite you to tell your story in *Blesma Magazine*. Your unique memories will ensure that your efforts and sacrifices will be recorded for future generations. Contact editor@blesma.org or call **020 8548 3514**

“Veterans UK is a hidden gem within the MoD”

Andy Dowds has been in post as Head of Veterans UK for eight months. He sits down with *Blesma Magazine* to set out his future vision for the organisation



ANDY DOWDS
Andy is eight months into his role as Head of Veterans UK

Veterans UK is the government organisation that administers some £7 billion of Armed Forces pensions and compensation payments. At its helm is Andy Dowds, who has been charged with taking the Ministry of Defence organisation into new territory with an ambitious programme to digitise forests of paper records that track more than 1.2 million beneficiaries.

The organisation employs 450 staff who deal with the complexities of 30,000 new claims a year as well as those 1.2 million existing clients. Veterans UK also runs the Veterans Welfare Service, which provides one-to-one support for veterans, including recently bereaved Forces’ families, and the Ilford Park Polish Home.

Andy, a 59-year-old father of four, who was a professional footballer before becoming a chartered accountant, has worked with a range of public and private companies, including advising golf and tennis stars, as well as troubleshooting for a government utility.

Eight months into the job, he took time out of his busy schedule to speak to *Blesma Magazine* about the future of the organisation, and pledges to improve a service that can cause frustration for some Members...

You have had eight months in the post as Head of Veterans UK. What are your early impressions?

It is a big job. I am still relatively new in the role, but I recognise that we have a very dedicated workforce and they are really keen to make sure we deliver an excellent service. We are hampered somewhat by the fact that a lot of what we do is predominantly paper based. Despite that, I believe we do a very good job and that Veterans UK is a hidden gem in the MoD. A lot of our cases have complex medical components and people are living longer, so there are huge volumes of information coming in, but my staff deal with it all very well. Like any large organisation, we do have things that sometimes go wrong and they attract a lot of public and political attention.

How do you think Veterans UK is performing?

We’re doing a lot to improve clearance times on our pensions and compensation scheme claims. Meanwhile, the time people wait for a decision has come down over the last few years. Given the weight of the paper systems, I’d currently rate us at about eight out of 10. Taking the service digital will give us an opportunity to do even better.

There has been frustration over delays to processing claims. Can you improve on the service delivery?

Digitisation will have a really big impact on the time it takes us to process claims. Most of the time is taken up with gathering information and with files going between the relevant people dealing with the claim and, for instance, a medical representative. There are frequent delays as we wait for extra data from outside Veterans UK. One of the biggest frustrations for people is not knowing where their claim or pension is in the system. When we have an online service, that is linked with medical records in the NHS and other schemes that will interface with our services, we will really be able to speed things up and make them more accurate. I want our clients to be able to see exactly where their claim is and make changes to details such as their address and bank accounts which can, at the moment, cause delays.

What is the timetable for the digitisation?

We have started a feasibility study to track what the user’s journey and ease of access would be like electronically. We are also currently organising a new contract with the private sector that will help us to make the digital improvements we want. With both the internal work we are doing combined with the ask on the private side, we are looking at a three-to-five-year journey. That said, I know that our Minister shares our desire for things to be done as quickly as possible.



Words: Danny Buckland Photography: Crown Copyright/Andy Eden

What will digitisation mean for both veterans with an award and those making new claims?

It will be a better service. Clearly, there will be different challenges in different areas, but digitisation will enable us to provide coherence in what is a very fragmented space. One of the opportunities is to link through the Veterans Gateway to the government's online gateway. That is the same route to getting a passport or driving license, or completing a tax return. It would create a protected area for our customers where their details would be protected but they could easily get to them and self-serve their claim. It will make a big difference.

My aspiration is that we should be able to resolve most cases here in Veterans UK with the right level of support, help and financial compensation quickly in the future. Some people are dissatisfied with their award decision. I can't do anything about that because they are individually assessed medically to established guidelines. But I can certainly do quite a bit about the administration and the time it takes to resolve a claim.

What are your priorities as the service develops?

There are three main priorities. I want us to continue to hit our operational targets of 90 days to process a compensation scheme claim and 127 days for a war pension. I then want to have a radical approach to reducing those targets; not by a handful of days but by a substantial amount, creating a fundamental shift in how the system works. And, importantly, I want Veterans UK to be a great place for people to work. There is a lot of change and I recognise this can cause

“
NO MATTER HOW GOOD YOUR PROCESS IS, YOU NEED A GOOD WORKFORCE THAT CARES. WE HAVE CARING IN ABUNDANCE HERE
”

some anxiety. No matter how good your process is, you need a good workforce that cares, and I know that we have caring in abundance here.

How does Blesma fit in to the work of Veterans UK?

Blesma is one of the better models in terms of veterans' support. It is clear where it steps in and has a defined direction, which helps in the support it gives its Members. It picks things up after an award is made, provides additional services, and is there to help people find the right level of service.

Are you looking to develop closer links with Blesma and its Members in the future?

We absolutely appreciate the very specialist and dedicated care and support that Blesma offers. As an organisation, we firmly believe that supporting veterans is very much a team game, and that in order to achieve the best we can for veterans, we need to work hand in glove with our partners in the charitable sector. I am always pleased to see Blesma represented at my regular Veterans Customer Advisory Group meetings, and in the coming year we will be working closer than ever with the charities as we look to roll out a number of collaborative work streams alongside the digitisation programme. Blesma is certainly a trusted partner of Veterans UK and I look forward to developing my own knowledge of what Blesma does in the coming months.

To get in touch with Veterans UK, visit the website at www.gov.uk/government/organisations/veterans-uk

Activities 2019

Get out and active in 2019

Blesma is offering Members the chance to try more activities than ever before in 2019 – all for free! Here's what's coming up in the next few months. Don't miss out! Apply now by emailing Emily on meo@blesma.org or by calling her on 020 8548 7094



Couples' Weekend

Location: London

Date: 09-12 August

Application deadline: 01 May

A weekend break designed for Members and their spouse or partner. You will both be able to explore the major sights of our capital city, as well as enjoy a show and socialise with other Members and their spouse or partner.

Who can take part?

Any Member.

Battlefield Tour

Location: Ypres, Belgium

Date: 16-20 August

Application deadline: 01 May

For the four long years of The Great War, the Flanders Fields around the old town of Ypres witnessed the loss of a generation. In defending Ypres from the attacking German war machine, 250,000 men of

the British Empire made the ultimate sacrifice and today lie in one of the 160 battlefield cemeteries surrounding Ypres. This is an opportunity for Members and their partners to embark on a guided trip.

Who can take part?

All Members and their partners.

Requirements:

Travellers must have a valid passport.

Family Activities Week

Location: Bendrigg Trust, Lake District

Date: 19-23 August

Application deadline: 15 May

The Family Activities Week will be held at the Bendrigg Trust. Members and their families will be staying in the fully adapted Acorn House. The week has been designed for families to enjoy activities such as archery, climbing and canoeing together.

Who can take part?

Any Member with a family of between

two and six members. (Eg. a Member and up to five others). If you have a larger family, please contact a member of the Activities Team directly.

Requirements:

Children must be at least five years old.

Greek Regatta

Location: Greece

Date: 14-22 September

Application deadline: 15 June

This is a chance to learn to sail in the Mediterranean. Beginners can gain the first level of a yachting qualification, while those with more experience can simply enjoy lots of great sailing.

Who can take part?

The boat is not wheelchair accessible and Members must be able to move around, with minimal assistance, on a 40ft non-adapted boat. Members must state if they cannot swim in their application.



To apply for a place email meo@blesma.org or call 020 8548 7094

Widows' and Seniors' Week

Location: Alvaston Hall, Cheshire

Date: Widows' Week 30 Sept - 07 Oct

Seniors' Week 07-14 October

Application deadline: 01 July

Based at one of the prestigious Warner hotels, each week will focus on relaxing and socialising, with gentle activities and sightseeing taking place in and around Cheshire.

Who can take part?

Seniors' Weeks are open to Members, spouses and Widow(er)s who are over the age of 60. Widows' Weeks are for Widows only.

Bahamas Expedition

Location: Bahamas

Date: 27 October - 05 November

Application deadline: 15 July

An opportunity to spend a week doing some amazing water sports and activities, as well as exploring the island of Nassau.

Who can take part?

Any Member.

Requirements:

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

Horseback in America

Location: Arizona, USA

Date: 26 October - 03 November

Application deadline: 15 July

An action-packed week of horsemanship

and general 'cowboy-ing it up'. Spend seven days in the Arizona Desert on a course designed to teach you all about life on a ranch and riding on the trails.

Who can take part?

This activity is not suitable for the majority of wheelchair users due to poor wheelchair access, deep sand and no wheelchair-accessible facilities. However, exceptions to this rule have been made in the past, so if you feel like you can cope in these circumstances, please apply and inform the Activities Team.

Requirements:

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

To apply for a place call Emily on 020 8548 7094 or email meo@blesma.org



Remembrance Weekend

Location: The Cenotaph, London

Date: 09-10 November **Application deadline:** 15 July

The annual Blesma Remembrance Parade is commemorated at the Cenotaph in London over Remembrance Weekend.

Who can take part? Accommodation for the Remembrance Weekend will change this year to allow better hotel accessibility to all those who wish to attend. The new hotel, in Hayes, offers 43 wheelchair-accessible rooms combined with ADA wet rooms, as well as providing full accessibility throughout the hotel to cater for all Members.

NEWS BRIEFS



BREAKFAST CLUB PROVES TO BE A SERIAL SUPPORTER

Shrewsbury Armed Forces and Veterans Breakfast Club has raised £10,958 for Blesma after 12 months fundraising for the Association. Members of the club held numerous raffles throughout the year and even scaled the O2 to support Blesma.

"Each year, our members vote for a military charity to support throughout the year and when one of our members, Clive Smith, took part in the Invictus Games, we were inspired to raise money for Blesma," said Amanda Cundall, founder of Shrewsbury Armed Forces and Veterans Breakfast Club.



RACE2RECOVERY CHANGE LOOKS TO THE FUTURE

Race2Recovery has changed its name to Future Terrain. The charity, which aimed to inspire others by taking part in the Dakar Rally every year, will expand its role to help veterans with career needs and focus on more inclusive, long-term and incremental rehabilitation, but still with a competitive motorsport flavour.

GOT A STORY? GET IN TOUCH!

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

OBITUARIES

Those we have lost

Beatrice Law MBE

16 Oct 1927 - 25 Dec 2018

BLESMA VOLUNTEER BEATRICE LAW has died at the age of 91. Blesma was a huge part of Beatrice's life, as she was involved with the Association since World War II when an aeroplane ran over her first husband, Leonard's, foot.

In 1985, Leonard died of cancer of the oesophagus. Through Blesma, Beatrice struck up a companionship with Member Ernie whose wife had also sadly died from the same illness. Their friendship led to a Blesma wedding and their reception was even held at the Blesma Blackpool Home's bar, The Legless Arms. Ernie would go on to become Blesma's National Chairman in the late 1970s.

Beatrice was born in Blackpool and lived there all her life. She was no stranger to the Blesma Blackpool Home and spent more than 30 years volunteering there.

"Being part of Blesma is huge fun," she said in an interview with *Blesma Magazine* in 2014. "When I first visited the Blackpool Home on holiday, I helped run the bar. Later, they bought me a whistle to keep the Members in order!"

Beatrice went on to become President and Vice Chairperson of the Blesma Blackpool Branch and, in the 2002 New Year Honours list, she was awarded an MBE for her services to the Association.



"BLESMA IS MY FAMILY. WHEREVER THERE IS A BRANCH, YOU CAN GO AND BE WITH FAMILY. BLESMA WAS THERE FOR ME AND MY CHILDREN. I'D HAVE BEEN LOST WITHOUT IT"

Beatrice also ran the Home Support Group for many years which raised funds for Blesma by holding garden parties, raffles and coffee mornings. "Blesma is my family. Wherever there is a Branch, you can go and be with family," she said in the interview with *Blesma Magazine*. "When Leonard and Ernie died, Blesma was there for me and my

children. I'd have been lost without it. My boys spent time helping Members, and they grew up to be great boys as a result."

Beatrice died in hospital on Christmas Day 2018. She leaves a sister Ellen, sons Gerard and Simon, daughter Bernadette, grandchildren Charlotte, Victoria and Dominic, and great-granddaughter Mia.

Those who have passed away

November 2018 - January 2019. May they rest in peace.

Evans K	Royal Signals	Southampton	05/11/2018
Fray K	Merchant Navy	Southampton	Nov 2018
Gray J	Royal Signals	HQ	11/11/2018
Hesketh J	RN	HQ	20/11/2018
Prescott G	Royal Signals	HQ	Nov 2018
Rayner C	RA	HQ	23/01/2019
Sharp D	RN	HQ	08/12/2018
Sheldrake G	RN	Gt Yarmouth	07/01/2019
Styles G	Royal Scots	HQ	18/01/2019
Sutherland N	RN	HQ	Nov 2018
Thomas K	RAF	HQ (Walsall, Wolverhampton, Birmingham)	04/01/2019
Vallance E	RE	HQ	06/01/2019
White R	Royal Welch Fusiliers	HQ (Cardiff)	24/01/2019
Wills E	RN	HQ	26/12/2018
Wren M	RE	HQ	25/12/2018

NHS ENGLAND 'WILL KEEP STAKEHOLDERS INFORMED'

NHS ENGLAND (NHSE) IS RESPONSIBLE for planning and buying specialised services for people who need complex disability equipment. This includes all major upper and lower limb amputees, as well as people with congenital limb deficiencies who have a potential to use prostheses.

As part of the review into specialised prosthetics services, the NHS England team met with staff in prosthetics centres across the country in January to discuss potential changes that could be made to the existing service specification and clinical model to address some of the issues that have been raised by patients, carers and professionals.

There were constructive conversations about how services might work differently in the future, but these discussions have been effectively paused while the priority from April 2019 is collecting robust and



comparable data from all centres to give a clear picture of current services.

Any proposed changes need to be based on accurate information, and so far this has been difficult to collect. Discussions about how things could be done differently to improve services will pick up when the first stages of this data collection are complete, and any suggested changes will be fully engaged and consulted on.

There are concerns that decisions to make changes have already been made – but NHS England has reassured that this is not the case, and will continue to keep all stakeholders informed. You can register as a stakeholder to receive updates directly.

In its last update, NHS England shared survey feedback from patients and carers, and outlined the key issues that it intended to address through the review. Some of the comments were concerned with how services are delivered within individual centres and NHS England suggests that issues such as appointment systems and patient transport are picked up with your centre.

Michael (in blue) steps into the ring for Blesma



Photography: Contender White Collar Boxing

Fundraising gets serious

Michael Lewis has taken part in a white-collar boxing match to raise money for Blesma. "I gave as good as I got in the first round, but it started to go wrong in round two," said Michael, who suffered blast wounds in Afghanistan in 2008 that nearly severed his left arm and led to his right leg being amputated.

"I was boxing a heavier fighter with more experience. A big right hook knocked me down and I had to go into survival mode, but I went the full distance. I was gutted! Lots of people came to support me so I felt I'd let them down. I was annoyed with myself, but looking back now I loved it; I've taken to the fitness side of it and I don't even mind being hit in the head!"

Michael says the training has benefited him in all sorts of ways. "I've done lots of mud runs and have just completed a half marathon, but I was throwing up after the first few training sessions! Now, I'm in the best shape I've ever been in. I worked on my footwork a lot, with my trainers trying to knock me off balance to see how I would react if I took a big hit during the fight. That's helped with my day-to-day mobility."

Despite the loss, Michael has taken many positives from the experience. "I fought an able-bodied guy, and that was important to me to prove I could still compete, I raised more than £2,640 for Blesma, and I've found something I love doing. I've signed up to fight again in July – I can't wait!"

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“YOU THINK: ‘HANG ON, THIS IS RAY WINSTONE POURING HIS HEART OUT HERE’”

A SERIES OF MAKING GENERATION R PODCASTS PAIRS SIX MEMBERS WITH CELEBRITIES FOR FRANK, FUNNY AND OFTEN VERY MOVING CONVERSATIONS

The Blesma Members involved in the Making Generation R programme have, for the last few years, been taking their life stories of overcoming adversity into schools. Now, their inspiring tales are being shared with an even wider audience through a series of podcasts.

The Resilience Sessions podcasts pair a Member with a well-known public figure, and the results have been a moving and thought-provoking series of talks.

Some of the celebrities, including Ray Winstone, Carol Vorderman and Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson, were already familiar with Blesma, while others like amputee chef Michael Caines were more than happy to take part once the concept was explained to them.

“I think the Members have got a lot out of the talks,” says Operations Director Ian Waller. “Self-worth and usefulness are powerful feelings, and these stories can inspire anyone. The workshops have been working so well in schools that we wanted to spread the message even further. Hopefully, the talks will encourage more people to develop their personal resilience.”

We spent time with the six Members who took part to find out what they got from the experience..



Words: Nick Moore Photography: Manon Oujimet



Member Ken Bellringer (left) and acting legend Ray Winstone record one of the Making Generation R podcasts



Left: Si Harmer chatted with Carol Vorderman, while Ken Bellringer spent time with Ray Winstone (right)



When Ken met Ray

Ken Bellringer was injured by an IED blast in Afghanistan in 2009. He spoke to British acting legend Ray Winstone

What did you think of The Resilience Sessions podcast concept?

The idea is brilliant. I believe it came from something Si Harmer had said when thinking about his time in hospital. He said the demons would come out at night, and you could end up thinking about your injuries, your life and your future. That struck a chord with me. Si said he needed something to listen to at that time, and this project came about to address that.

What was it like speaking to such a huge box office star as Ray?

Fantastic! I've met Ray before – he came to Selly Oak when I was injured, so it was quite relaxed. We chatted about all sorts. It was set up a bit like a TV show, with Ray and I as the guests. We got on so well that we were interviewing each other – we behaved like naughty boys!

But things got quite serious, too...

Ray has this hardman persona, and he was a very successful amateur boxer. He told me that sometimes people avoid him on a film set because they think he's grumpy! But he isn't. He's a nice, down-to-earth man. The hard outer shell is how he made his career, but I got Ray talking about when his mum died, and how it affected him.

Opening up about things is the central message to the podcasts, then?

Yes. You think; *'Hang on, this is Ray Winstone pouring his heart out here.'* Hopefully, it will get people to realise that if Ray can do it, so can they. It's all about getting people to talk. Hopefully, that will help them through life, and in some cases it might actually save their life.

When Si met Carol

Si Harmer lost both his legs to an IED in Afghanistan in 2009 while attached to the Coldstream Guards. His podcast saw him chatting to TV presenter Carol Vorderman

What was it like to be part of a podcast?

It was really good fun. I've been on a few before to tell my story, both in the UK and the USA, so I was familiar with how they work – but this was a little different because it involved a celebrity. I like podcasts, they're a great format because they're really accessible; you can listen to them anywhere – on your commute to work or at the gym – and I find that you can often listen to them a number of times. You can go back again and again, and take different things out of a conversation.

Did Carol surprise you with what she spoke about?

She did. I learned loads I didn't know about her. Her dad was in the Dutch resistance during WWII, and she had wanted to serve in the RAF after graduating from

Cambridge, but she got knocked back because they didn't allow female fast jet pilots at the time. It was interesting that she didn't feel bitter about that, and still has a deep affection for the RAF. She was affable, great to chat to, and very interested in what I had to say. She really listened, and it was a lot of fun.

You were already an experienced public speaker before doing this project, but did it help you polish your story?

I followed much of the same narrative I use for my Making Generation R talks in schools, although I mixed it up a bit for the podcast. We went into what I did before my injuries, my experiences leading up to the incident, and what happened on the day. I then assessed what took place afterwards, and how I got through the whole thing with the help of others.

Making Generation R definitely helped me refine my story, though. It's great when you strike a chord with someone during the talks and workshop – there is usually one student who stands out. And if the podcast can help a wider group of people in a similar way, that's great. That's what we want it to achieve. It's all about making connections, and hopefully people can pick up a few tools to apply to their lives.

“THE PODCASTS ARE ALL ABOUT MAKING CONNECTIONS. HOPEFULLY, PEOPLE CAN PICK UP A FEW TOOLS TO APPLY TO THEIR LIVES”

HOW TO LISTEN TO THE PODCASTS

Podcasts are like radio shows that you can download onto your smartphone or tablet. Here's how to listen to The Resilience Sessions...

- If your phone doesn't have a podcast app installed, download one for free from the app store
- In the podcast app, search **Blesma**, next to the magnifying glass icon
- Choose **The Resilience Sessions** from the search results. On the homepage you will see a list of recent episodes. Tap on the download symbol next to the episode to play
- Tap the subscribe button at the top of the page to be notified when a new episode is available. And don't forget to share the podcasts with your friends!
- Follow The Resilience Sessions across all the usual social platforms [@theresilienceessions](https://www.instagram.com/theresilienceessions)

"WE GOT ON SO WELL THAT WE WERE INTERVIEWING EACH OTHER – WE BEHAVED LIKE NAUGHTY BOYS!"



When Shaun met Vick

Shaun Stocker was injured by an IED in 2010, losing his legs and much of his sight. He spoke to presenter Vick Hope

You've lost much of your sight since your injury. Have you found podcasts useful?

My eyesight is not good enough to read books, so along with audio books, podcasts are my main source of learning and have improved my life massively. I listen to a lot of self-development podcasts, so when I was asked to be on one, I saw the value right away. This puts part of the Making Generation R talks we give in schools permanently on record, so people everywhere can access them.

How was the day for you?

Meeting Vick was great. She was lovely, very intelligent, and it was interesting to hear her backstory. She's not been in the military or suffered injury, but she went into some of the things she faced and had to come to terms with growing up, like dealing with grief at university and challenging sexism throughout her career.

Your rehabilitation has been particularly tough. That must have been a major part of the conversation...

Yes. I stood on an IED in Afghanistan while I was looking at the floor, so the blast hit me in the face. I was blinded instantly, so I couldn't see what was going on. I was conscious but didn't know I'd lost my legs – the body shuts the pain down! I thought that once they taken the dirt out of my eyes, everything would be clearer, but I had surgery and one eye was removed, while the other recovered just 30 per cent sight. Losing your legs is tough, but trying to regain your independence and learning



to walk on prosthetics when you've also lost your vision is even harder.

How helpful has the Making Generation R programme been for you?

It's been brilliant. I'd already been giving talks about what I've been through, but Making Generation R has given more schools the opportunity to get me in to talk. Blesma gets to make a difference in the community. It is a brilliant way for Members to both give something back and build their independence. It's one of the best projects I've ever been involved in!

What do you hope listeners will get out of your podcast episode?

It's an opportunity for people to hear what I speak about in my talks. They can go back to the podcast episode and get different things out of it. I really hope it can help and inspire lots of different people.

This page: Nerys Pearce (left) meets Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson, while Shaun Stocker spent some time with Vick Hope (opposite page)



When Nerys met Tanni

Nerys Pearce was paralysed in 2008 in a road traffic incident. She met Paralympic legend, Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson, who is now a politician and TV presenter

What do you think of the concept behind The Resilience Sessions podcasts?

I love the idea that when people are feeling low, often at night when they're alone, they can turn to podcasts to help them through. It's something uplifting to listen to during dark moments, lying awake in pain. That's a really hard time to find resilience. This is an amazing way to put something positive out there. I've always put a film on when I've been having a bad night, but this has introduced me to podcasts, and I'm looking forward to listening to the other ones.

How was Tanni?

She's funny, down to earth, and she has faced all kinds of struggles. She knows all about sports and disability, of course. She's had the same struggles as I've had – but maybe even more so because she's never

had the opportunity to run up mountains. There's a side of life she's not been able to experience. But she's so inspiring. At one point she held 30 world records at the same time! Winning 16 Paralympic medals while dealing with disability and everything life throws at you is pretty impressive.

What did you chat about?

All sorts. She had actually commentated on my 2016 Invictus Games race, so that was funny. I grew up with my mum facing disability, and Tanni's daughter is in the same situation, so we spoke about disabled parents, transport problems, using sports to push yourself forward. We have similar opinions, although I could never get involved in politics! Tanni is trying to make changes. She's doing things that are perhaps outside the realms of what some people might think a disabled person can do.

How do you hope people will react to your conversation?

I'd like it to show that no matter how down you might be, if you can just take a minute to accept help, you can find a way forward. I hope it encourages people to say yes to every opportunity they get. Whether you think you like art, sport, drama or politics, give everything a go. You may discover a new side of yourself.



“WHETHER YOU THINK YOU LIKE ART, SPORT, DRAMA OR POLITICS, GIVE EVERYTHING A GO. YOU MAY DISCOVER A NEW SIDE OF YOURSELF”



Mark Ormrod (centre) spent time with Michelin-starred chef Michael Caines

When Mark met Michael

Mark Ormrod lost three limbs to an IED attack in 2007. He spoke with Michael Caines, the Michelin-star-winning chef, who lost his right arm in a car accident in 1994

You've got your own podcast as well as going on this one. What do you like about the format?

I'm a massive fan. I've been on quite a few, and I set up my own, the *No Limits Podcast*. The idea of mine came from doing a lot of personal development activities. I got into journaling – writing down your thoughts, feelings and what you want to achieve – but it's a pain for me because I have to use my left hand. So I began talking into my phone, and that turned into a podcast.

How was this experience?

It was a great idea. Michael is a very cool guy and he's done a lot of cool stuff in his life. From a listener's point of view, I think introducing regular people to celebrities is very interesting. It's people from two different worlds coming together.

“I THINK INTRODUCING REGULAR PEOPLE TO CELEBRITIES IS VERY INTERESTING. IT'S PEOPLE FROM TWO DIFFERENT WORLDS COMING TOGETHER”

We both did a bit of an overview of our stories, and then the conversation started to flow in all directions.

You've both been through limb loss.

What was Michael's perspective on it?

He has a very good attitude about it, and he was very positive about getting the story out there and using it to inspire people; not just people who are going through the same situation, but anyone. It's about motivating and inspiring others. I think Michael probably told me some things that he might not have said to an able-bodied person. We had a commonality through limb loss, and could relate to each other.

Did the experience give you any ideas for your own podcast?

The reaction has been pretty good so far, but it's really just been something I've done for myself. I think I'm now going to get more guests on, and talk about mental health, motivation... all that kind of stuff. The idea is always to get people talking – Making Generation R does that, and hopefully I can reach more people through the podcast, too.

The No Limits Podcast with Mark Ormrod can be found on iTunes, Stitcher, Podbean, YouTube and at MarkOrmrod.com



When Stewart met Jonny

Stewart Harris suffered multiple injuries, including the loss of his right eye, after an IED blast in 2012. He spoke with mental health campaigner Jonny Benjamin

Jonny's message is about how more people need to discuss mental health. That must have been fascinating...

It was. I'm glad to have met Jonny because he's done some amazing campaigning in the area of mental health [Jonny has schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, and wrote the book *The Stranger On The Bridge* about his suicide attempt]. It's something I always try to educate people about whenever I get the chance. It's all about being a bit kinder to yourself in certain situations. These issues affect everyone, and you can't have a good day unless you've experienced a bad day.

You've shared some similar experiences. Did you discuss them when you met?

Jonny ended up putting himself in a mental health unit, and I've been there too. I was choking up a bit at his story. It educated me, because my mental health issues were related to combat, while his were very different but just as serious – if not more so.

Jonny had schizophrenic episodes from a young age...

He'd hear voices. His parents would tell him not to be silly, and I think I would probably have been like that in the same situation with my kids: 'Don't be daft'. But then he started to see people, and made the decision that he was going to kill himself. For me, I felt like I was holding everyone back. I thought taking myself out of the picture was the answer.



Stewart Harris (left) with mental health campaigner and author Jonny Benjamin

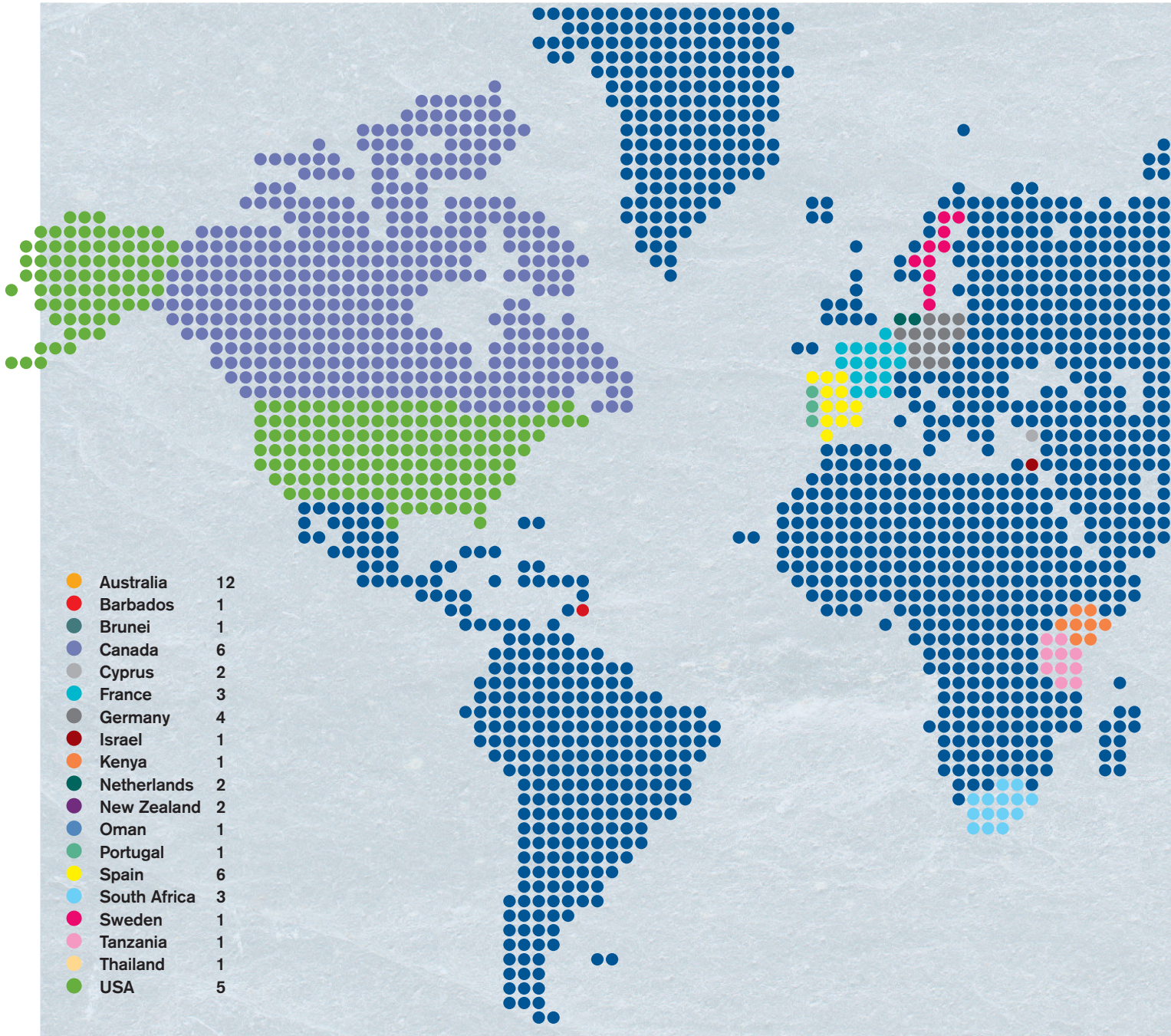


You both had revelations at the point of attempting to commit suicide?

He was about to jump off a bridge when a man appeared and talked him out of it. I was also about to do it, and boom, I had a vision; I saw my daughters being bullied at school. I don't know why it happened, but I'm so glad it did. We told each other how wrong we were to feel worthless, and discussed the things we've achieved since. I can honestly say that the earth is a better place with you on it – we can all change, and there is always room for forgiveness.

A podcast is a great place to advertise the power of talking to each other...

Yes. And it was a great experience; very professional and well organised. We talked about all sorts, from social media to how anyone can be affected by these issues. I hope the chat can help a few people.



The Association across the world

The vast majority of Blesma Members live in the UK, but the Association is also there for our limbless veterans who have decided to live overseas

JOHNNY BISSELL

JOHNNY HAD HIS LEFT LEG AMPUTATED IN 2013



Johnny Bissell and his wife, Mary, emigrated to Canada in 2005. Eight years later, Johnny's left leg had to be amputated below the knee.

"I had to have a bilateral femoral artery bypass in both legs in 2001 when we were still living in England. Everything was great afterwards and we moved to Canada in 2005,"

says Johnny, whose full service began in 1964 when he joined the Royal Artillery band as a 16 year old.

"Everything was fine until May 2013, when I began getting pains in my left leg. I had stents put in to increase the blood flow because the arteries had collapsed.

"But I was on a lot of painkillers and the decision to operate was made a month later. I had the amputation in August 2013 and a second surgery took a bit more of my left leg in November 2013. Now, my amputation is just below the knee, and although there are plenty of people worse off than me, it was completely life changing.

"Mary and I felt alone. If we had been in the UK we would have known where to get help. We tried various charities, but got no help at all. We phoned every organisation we could think of in Canada and the UK, and we filled out so many forms, but because the amputation wasn't due to time served and because we weren't living in the UK there was nothing anyone would do," says Johnny.

"We found Blesma completely by chance and their reaction was immediate, they were absolutely brilliant. It was like seeing the light at the end of the tunnel!

"At first, Blesma said they would reimburse us for various small things. A couple of years later I had difficulty walking and Blesma gave us the funds to buy a mobility scooter, then I started to get lots of pain in my hips because I was using a basic prosthetic. In Canada, the surgery is free but you have to pay for your own equipment, such as prosthetics and wheelchairs.

"My prosthetist suggested I needed a more advanced prosthetic foot and because there is no NHS equivalent in Canada, Blesma covered the entire cost. They look at each case on an individual basis and although I felt embarrassed to ask for help, I did in the end and Blesma were fantastic. Now I feel absolutely fine. The foot has been marvellous – I can walk on slopes and rough ground again, which I couldn't do before. Everything about it has been terrific."

So does Johnny feel like a Blesma Member despite living thousands of miles from Chadwell Heath?

"I do. I get the magazine and the newsletter, and it's nice to see what other Blesma people are doing – it makes me feel part of something despite being all the way over here. I had never heard of the Association while I was in the Army or living in the UK, but now we tell everybody we talk to about Blesma – we have even shown the magazine to our prosthetist here in Canada.

"The last few years have been difficult and have made me think about those who have multiple limbs missing. I have only lost half a leg so there are a lot of people a lot worse off than me. I can't thank Blesma enough!"



The Association currently supports 54 Members and Widows who live overseas, as well as nine who live in the Republic of Ireland and come under the care of BSO Steve Burton.

"Our support to overseas Members is focused on financial assistance for mobility and disability aids, and advice about prosthetics. There is no NHS or VPP equivalent overseas so Members face different challenges in accessing prosthetics," says Liz Watling, Blesma's Benefits and Social Care Adviser who is the point of contact for Members living overseas. "Where appropriate, Blesma will contact charities local to the overseas Members, such as The War Amps in Canada, so someone can pay them a visit and help."

Please get in touch with Liz if you would like to update your contact information. Her details are on p50

“
IT'S NICE TO SEE WHAT OTHERS ARE DOING. IT MAKES ME FEEL PART OF BLESMA DESPITE BEING ALL THE WAY OVER HERE
”



DETERMINED TO MEET YOUR NEEDS

THE BRISTOL CENTRE FOR ENABLEMENT IS A STATE-OF-THE-ART FACILITY BUILT ON AGE-OLD VALUES; KINDNESS, COMPASSION AND A DESIRE TO HELP

Highwood Pavilions, a two-storey building next to a shopping mall on the northern edge of Bristol, is home to the Bristol Centre for Enablement. As one of the nine Murrison Centres, it serves a 500,000-strong population across four counties, and provides prosthetics for anyone who has undergone amputation, including trauma victims and patients with congenital deformity.

Among its clients are 80-or-so attributable and non-attributable ex-Forces personnel who rely on the Centre's dedicated staff for prosthetics, as well as a broad service of care and advice.

"Anyone with any form of limb loss can come to us to be assessed for an artificial limb; either

primary patients using us as a first port of call or the Armed Forces veterans community who have been rehabilitated at Headley Court or who are transferring to us from another area," says Helen Harvey, Clinical Manager Prosthetics and Orthotics at the Centre.

"Whilst we provide an excellent service for all our patients, we really enjoy working with veterans. We recognise the sacrifices that Armed Forces personnel have made on our behalf, and we are determined to do our best to provide a service that meets their needs."

The Prosthetics Team has 29 staff, comprising Consultant in Rehabilitation, Nurse Specialist, specialist therapists in occupational therapy, physiotherapy, podiatry and counselling,





Helen Harvey (left) is Clinical Manager Prosthetics and Orthotics at the Centre in Bristol

“You hear horror stories about what life will be like when you leave the military, but my transition was seamless,” says Blesma Member Matt (below)



assistant practitioners, and 14 prosthetists and technicians (seven of each) all backed up by administration staff.

The Centre manufactures prosthetic limbs on site, with skilled technicians using both old and new techniques; a computer-guided Omega Carver machine can fashion prosthetic moulds from high density foam blocks in 20 minutes, whilst a heritage Singer sewing machine is used for intricate stitching on leather and fabric support straps. This balance highlights the fact that, as with all Murrison Centres, the Bristol team has had to adapt from purely civilian provision to treat ex-military patients, too.

“Initially, there was some concern from war veterans as to whether the Murrison Centres had the time and the specific skills to help,” admits Helen, who is also the clinical lead for prosthetics at the Bristol Centre. “They were valid concerns; we had the foundation skills but didn’t necessarily have the experience. We have certainly built up our knowledge and expertise since then.

“Forces personnel usually go through Headley Court, where they are able to access treatment quickly, so they had legitimate concerns about us being able to match that

level of care. We had to be honest to begin with and admit we couldn’t, but I hope we have proven ourselves. I think we have built up a good relationship with the veteran community and are responsive to their needs.”

The veterans who use the service at Bristol have been robust in their feedback, whilst their expert knowledge of living with advanced prosthetics has been a vital tool for the Centre to create an effective service.

“A lot of the veterans we help came for a visit before arranging an appointment. Coming here is a shift from Headley Court and they want to be sure we have the time, skills and energy to care for them,” says Helen. “It is sensible to ask questions when there is going to be a change in your care, and we are keen to establish a good working relationship with our patients.”

Matt is a Blesma Member and former Royal Marine who lost both legs through the knee and his left arm above the elbow when he stepped on an IED in Afghanistan in 2011. He was on his fourth operational tour of duty, his second in Afghanistan, when he was injured and is now a double through-knee amputee who uses the Centre.

“I had a bit of trepidation about coming here as I’d previously had all my prosthetics and sockets done by Headley Court,” says the 42 year old. “You hear horror stories about what life will be like when you leave the military, but my transition was seamless.

“I came to have a look around first and saw it was a new building with state-of-the-art facilities. They had all my notes when I started, so I was impressed!” Meanwhile, treating military veterans

“COMING HERE IS A SHIFT FROM HEADLEY COURT AND VETERANS WANT TO BE SURE WE HAVE THE TIME, SKILLS AND ENERGY TO CARE FOR THEM”







The Centre at Bristol has 29 staff, including seven prosthetists and seven technicians. The Centre is able to manufacture a range of prosthetics and attachments on site, with skilled technicians using a range of techniques



Prosthetist Hannah Pentin (right) and in consultation with Matt (below)



with attributable injuries who have access to enhanced funding and first generation devices has provided vital clinical and patient experience that benefits the rest of the amputee population.

“A great example of this has been the microprocessor knees that war veterans have been using for some years now,” says Helen. “The NHS was not in a position to offer them to the rest of the prosthetic community, but the war veterans have provided an evidence base for studies that have resulted in other amputees having access to this hardware.

“Veterans have also been amongst the first to try direct skeletal fixation, and in all these cases the veterans’ experience has a large impact on the non-military community.”

IMPROVING SERVICE FOR ALL

As prosthetics innovation races along so does cost. The NHS is conducting a service review of the £60 million budget that is used to provide specialist services to some 60,000 patients across its 35 multi-disciplinary centres. It will look at the demographics of the patients, and outcome measures including quality and overall service performance.

The extensive review is due to report within 12 months and Helen, who is a member of the NHSE Clinical Reference Group and the review’s steering committee, is quick to stress that provision will not be compromised.

“We want to look at good practice and gather robust data so that we can ensure all Centres provide the same level of service and can access the hardware they need,” she says. “It’s important that we provide an equitable service across NHSE, and the review will give us an opportunity to identify areas for development.”

Matt has been impressed with the level of service he has received since moving from Headley Court. “I mainly use the Centre to look after my prosthetics and service the microprocessor knees, but they have made new sockets for me which work really well,” he says. “And when



“I’D ENCOURAGE ALL AMPUTEES TO TALK TO A CENTRE AND FIND OUT ABOUT THE GREAT THINGS IT CAN PROVIDE THAT WILL MAKE A DIFFERENCE TO THEIR LIVES”

I had a problem with my prosthetic legs, my prosthetist said to come in the next day and he’d have replacements for me. They were ready when I got here so we were able to just swap them over and the broken ones were sent off for repair.

“When you get injured you can’t do the things you loved doing, and that is very difficult. I loved being in the Royal Marines, and there are things like running and cycling that obviously have to change. But you can do things with the right help and equipment, which is why it is so important to have good prosthetics and people you trust looking after them.”

Helen, who has worked for the North Bristol NHS Trust for 21 years, believes the service will continue to improve. “We welcome Forces veterans and are keen to

support them and to learn from their experiences,” she says. “We want them to find out what we can offer and help us to develop further skills and flexibility in our service that will benefit all our patients.

“I am passionate about the work we do and am excited to see how our services develop over the next few years. All our staff are committed to providing a quality service so I would encourage amputees to talk to a Centre near them and find out about the great things it can provide that will make a difference to their lives.”

For more on any prosthetics issues, please contact BSO (Prosthetics) Brian Chenier at Chadwell Heath on 020 8548 7080 or at bsoprosthetics@blesma.org, or visit www.blesma.org



HANNAH PENTIN

Prosthetist

OPEN ANY CUPBOARD AT THE BRISTOL Centre for Enablement and a treasure trove of gadgets is revealed. The shelves are stacked with a myriad of appliances designed to make the seemingly impossible almost routine. From archery and kayaking to peeling a potato, there is little that can't be tackled thanks to attachments designed and manufactured here.

"You name it, we'll have something for it," says prosthetist Hannah Pentin. "We can either order something in or make



Prosthetist Hannah Pentin loves to think outside the box: "You challenge us and we will do our very best to make it work!" she says

it ourselves. Equipment goes from standard split hooks, which are very functional, to a device that helps one-armed patients perform handstands. You challenge us and we will do our very best to make it work!"

Hannah, who has worked at the Centre in Bristol for four years, started her career as a prosthetist at the Murrison Centre in Portsmouth. "Mine is a very fulfilling job because I see patients who want to take part in a certain activity and I can help them achieve their goals," she says.

"Military veterans are an exceptional group of patients who tend to enjoy more challenging activities. It is our role to help support their high activity level. At times that can be challenging and requires extra thought, which is always great for our team.

"Some have multiple amputations and have different prosthetics for climbing, cycling, swimming and everyday use, so we need to be responsive to any changes. For

example, if the socket fit changes, then all limbs will potentially require a new socket to enable the patient to continue to engage in all their activities with the least possible disruption to their lives."

Hannah thinks people may be surprised by what attachments are available. "There are so many that you can just clip onto a rotary wrist; a hammer, pliers, a fishing rod, a kayak paddle... We are also good at adapting attachments to make them work well for other disciplines. The kayak attachment can be used for weight lifting, too, for instance.

"I love the fact that we can improve people's capabilities and, because of that, enhance their lives. It is lovely when patients come back with videos of what they've been up to. It's a great feeling to know that you have helped them crack something and can see what a difference it has made to their lives."



Ben-Jack Shaw has
relearned to snowboard
after losing his sight



“

You lose your whole life when you become blind

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WHEN BEN-JACK SHAW LOST HIS SIGHT TO AN IED BLAST IN AFGHANISTAN HE HAD TO RELEARN EVERYTHING HE KNEW. AND THEN HE GOT BACK ON A SNOWBOARD

Ben-Jack Shaw lost both his eyes to an IED blast in Afghanistan in 2007. Having loved winter sports since he was a young child, he's recently started to blaze a trail as the world's first completely blind competitive snowboarder. Here, he talks about his incredible journey – one that he hopes will lead him to compete in the Beijing 2022 Winter Paralympic Games – and explains how he's come to feel very welcome within the Blesma fold.

You've been a keen snowboarder for a long time. How did you get into it?

I'm from a military family and my dad was based in Garmisch, Germany for a while, so I started skiing there when I was three. When I was 10, I discovered snowboarding and wanted to do that because I thought it looked cooler! We ended up living back in Hereford, and I joined the Army when I was 18. A friend encouraged me to sign up. I was in 2nd Battalion, the Light Infantry, which became 3rd Battalion, The Rifles. I served in Cyprus and Northern Ireland, and when Iraq kicked off I was deployed pretty much non-stop.

Tell us about your injuries...

The incident happened near Basra in 2007. We were five days away from coming back

to the UK. I was driving a vehicle on a routine patrol when we hit an IED. I was conscious throughout the entire event. The blast took my right eye immediately, and my left eye was cut by shrapnel. The fluid leaked out. The American soldiers who picked me up and carried out most of my primary care decided to remove it. My arm was also badly injured, but luckily they managed to save that.



How was the immediate aftermath, both mentally and physically?

I was looked after by the Americans, first in Iraq, then in Germany. When I got back to the UK I had one major operation, and after that, I signed myself out of hospital. I'd been in for a year by then, and there was no real surgical reason for me to stay. Mentally, coping with blindness wasn't a big issue for me – it's not like I had a steady office job or was a flower arranger. Death and injury are very serious, but very real, parts of our job in the military. When I joined up, the war in Afghanistan was already on and I knew the risks. But sight loss does have a huge impact on your life. You literally have to relearn everything.

That must have been incredibly difficult to say the very least...

There's obviously the physical rehabilitation after an injury; getting your strength up to do things like snowboarding again. But in a way, you lose your whole life when you become blind. The entire world, in terms of how you interacted with it, is gone. You have to rebuild. I wouldn't say there's one particular thing that's most difficult, it's more annoying than anything. Relearning to do everything is just a pain, and there are a lot of things to relearn. The added frustration is that it doesn't come quickly.

Has technology helped?

Tech can be useful; you don't have to learn Braille now, for example, because smartphones have found a way around reading. And GPS is great, but you can't rely on technology. It breaks. So in rehab, the staff will say: "No, you're not using that." You need to learn the basics like long cane training, or learning to cook, because then you're not relying on battery life or internet signals. It's like learning to walk again – you don't forget how to do it, you just have to adapt.

How did you end up back on a snowboard?

Post-injury, in 2008, I visited my mum and dad who have a chalet out in The Alps, with my fiancée, who is now my wife. I thought snowboarding again would be doable, but the problem is that when you're newly blinded, your brain goes into chaos. It has never lacked that visual point of orientation, spatial awareness and balance before. All those sorts of things just aren't there now. So when I tried snowboarding back then, it didn't work out. I thought: "Oh well, this isn't for me." There wasn't anybody doing blind snowboarding back then, so there was no guidance, either. I became resigned to never doing it.

But you obviously came back to it...

Yes. Over the years I got settled, my brain got used to lacking sight and developed some key skills. I could process things better so I thought I'd give it another try. Then, last year, I got the Blesma Activities

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The entire world,
in terms of how
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newsletter, and it mentioned the Armed Forces Para-Snowsport Team (AFPST). I ended up getting in touch with them and they sent me to Castleford, where there's an indoor snow dome. I tried it out again, and this time I really liked it. Then, last October, the AFPST took me to Austria.

How does blind snowboarding work for you, logistically?

I get paired with a guide. I've got a coach called Jim, and since we started working together we've gone from strength to strength. There's a big difference between losing your sight and being visually impaired. As far as I can tell, there is nobody else in the world who is totally blind snowboarding. Jim and I are evolving. We started out with Jim snowboarding in front of me with a cowbell. He'd ring it, and I'd just follow the bell. Now, we're using military radios and he's guiding me while I'm in front. The radios work better than Bluetooth speakers because you've still got the peripheral sound. So now we are working on my technique and it's coming along well.

You're part of the GB Para-Snowsport Team. What's your ultimate goal?

I'd like to get more people involved in blind snowboarding, and hopefully take it to the Beijing 2022 Winter Paralympics. I want to show people that it's doable. I've competed at the Royal Navy Championships and at the Inter Service Championships, but at the moment I'm competing against myself. Skiing tends to be the go-to sport for people with visual impairment. People think it's easier because you're facing forward, but I've found that it's just a case of getting used to snowboarding, like anything else with blindness.

And how has Blesma helped you?

I was slow to get involved with Blesma because I thought it was a limbless charity. But on learning more and talking to other Members, I realised it is more than that. I've been welcomed, and my BSO explained that Blesma also supports blind people. They're helping with some snowboarding funding, and I've put my name down for the ski trip in December. It's a great charity, and seems like it could be a lot of fun!



Now it's time for you to get a piste of the action

The Blesma winter sports programme has been designed to give Members the chance to experience the thrill and adventure of taking to the slopes. These activities are hugely popular amongst the membership and will take you out of your comfort zone, increase your confidence, and give you the chance to meet other Members. Fancy it?

COLORADO SKI SPECTACULAR

Location: Colorado, USA

Date: 30 November - 10 December TBC

Application deadline: 01 August

This annual event, which is run by Disabled Sports USA, is one of the world's biggest and best ski spectaculars for all manner of adaptive winter sports. It offers the perfect opportunity to have fun on the slopes and enjoy all that the Ski Spectacular has to offer. Mono-ski, snowboarding, stand-up skiing, and three-track disciplines will all be available.

Who can take part?

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

Requirements

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

WINTER SPORTS EUROPE 2020

Location: La Plagne, France

Date: 18-26 January 2020 (TBC)

Application deadline: 01 October

A week-long trip of snow sports to suit everyone. Mono-ski, snowboarding, stand-up skiing, three-track, taxi ski, and ski bike are all available. This will be the fourth year of combining Blesma's ski bike event with its adapted winter sports programme.

Who can take part?

Any Member. Please state which winter sport you are most interested in taking part in when completing the application form.

Requirements

Members must have a valid passport.

WINTER SPORTS FAMILIES

Location: La Plagne, France

Date: 15-23 February 2020

Application deadline: 15 October

The perfect chance to explore adaptive winter sports with your family. This will be the first time Blesma has run a family activity of this kind. Children can have first-class instruction while you explore the slopes with skilled instructors and guides.

Who can take part?

This event is suitable for everyone, but be aware that there are no babysitting facilities so your children must be of an age to ski.

Requirements

All participants must have a valid passport.

GET YOUR APPLICATION IN TODAY!

To apply for your place on any of these activities email meo@blesma.org, call 020 8548 7094 or apply online at www.blesma.org/activities

THE MOST IMPORTANT MEAL OF THE DAY IS... BRUNCH

A CUPPA, A NATTER, AND A SLICE OF CAKE ARE WHAT MAKE BRITAIN GREAT, AND NOW THEY'RE ON THE MENU FOR MEMBERS. BEHOLD THE BLESMA BRUNCH

The idea behind Blesma appointing nine Outreach Officers last year on a LIBOR grant-funded pilot scheme was to get extra staff on the ground in each Area to concentrate on running activities on a local level that would make a big difference to Members' lives. Whether it was organising a coffee morning, carrying out more home visits, or just getting someone onto the internet, the rationale was to reach out to Members who might feel isolated and help them to connect with Blesma.

A prime example of this new way of thinking is gathered around a table at Swarkestone Garden Centre in Derby one morning. The group of Blesma Members – some of whom have brought along their partners – are tucking into a delicious brunch. The laughter and anecdotes are flowing as freely as the cups of tea and coffee, but beneath the low-key surface, something very significant is happening.

“I came up with the idea of holding a Blesma Brunch because, for a lot of Members who maybe don't get out much, or don't want to go to the bigger national events,

it ticks a lot of boxes,” explains Vanessa Lucas, who became the Outreach Officer for the Midlands Area when the post was created nine months ago. Now, she runs brunches for Members in seven different parts of the Midlands Area, four times a year.

“It is all about having a cuppa and a chat in the local community, and the response has been excellent. The links Members have forged have been amazing. We've got Widows going for a cup of tea with other Widows, we've got Members with health issues discovering other Members who've been through the same thing, and so are helping each other, we've met some phenomenal people, and this peer-to-peer support is exactly what we aimed for. The brunches have been embraced – they're simple events with no airs or graces.”

In organising these events, Vanessa has focused on one of Blesma's core philosophies; that of Members helping other Members. Today's gathering includes eight Members (two have come with their wives), and Vanessa has made sure the group car-shares, which has the added outcome of deepening friendships.





Outreach Officer Vanessa (standing, left) and BSO Sam enjoy nothing more than meeting Members

“SOME MEMBERS CAN FEEL VERY ISOLATED AND VULNERABLE, AND DON’T GET TO GO OUT THAT OFTEN, SO COMING TO BRUNCH IS A MASSIVE THING FOR THEM”

“Some of our Members can feel isolated and vulnerable, and don’t get to go out that often. They may not have left the house for a week or two, so coming to brunch is a massive thing for them. But some wouldn’t be able to come along at all without help, so I coordinate lifts. It means some Members feel they are being useful by helping out, while other Members get the assistance they need. It’s a brilliant outcome.

“We’ve got a great cross-generational mix, too. At our Birmingham Brunch, a double amputee in his late twenties who was injured in Afghanistan has formed a friendship with an 89-year-old Widow. They get on so well and catch up all the time, and they’d never have met otherwise!”

That sort of camaraderie is clear for all to see in Derby, too. “We’ve been blessed by the amount of lovely people we have met through Blesma,” says Len Shorthouse, 82, who is attending his second Blesma Brunch with his wife, Muriel. “Through these events we’ve made friends with people who live just around the corner from us, who we didn’t even know were there! The charity can’t do enough for us. There are so many Members in our area – 300 or so – but we haven’t met very many, so this helps.

“Vanessa and Sam [Wileman, BSO for the Midlands Area] are great, we’ve got a great deal of admiration for them. I love seeing people doing all the Blesma activities, but it’s nice to just sit down and have breakfast as well. We speak on the phone with people we’ve met at the Blesma Brunch – I’ll ring up to see how they’re doing. It’s positive that we’re taking an interest in each other and checking in.”

REACHING OUT TO MEMBERS

This morning is just a small part of Vanessa’s new role, which is being reflected across the country by eight other committed Outreach Officers. A military wife with experience working in a military school (“I understand the humour and the lingo,”) she reports directly to the Midlands Area’s BSO, Samantha Wileman.

“Sam and I hit it off straight away and we work well together,” Vanessa says. “Our approach is similar. The main aim of my role is to reach out to Members on a local level, so my vision was to make getting involved with Blesma accessible by organising events that anyone could come to.

“We’ve got such a broad demographic in our Area. Our youngest Member is 20 and our oldest is 104, so there is a massive range of people to please. We have a large geographical area, too, so I try to break events down into each quarter, and make sure there is something for everyone.”

Activities are only a part of Vanessa’s role as an Outreach Officer. She must also coordinate her Area’s volunteers and showcase the charity to the wider community. “I’m always meeting with other charities, local authorities and councils, promoting Blesma wherever I can,” she says. “I also touch on the fundraising side of things, I try to take some admin tasks off Sam’s plate where I can, and I try to do as many tasks as I can for Members.”

According to Sam, the biggest impact Vanessa has made is in what she calls ‘the drumbeat of contact’. “I can only see so many people in one day, and it has taken me a year and a half to get to the point where I have seen almost every

VANESSA'S CHECKLIST FOR BEING AN EFFECTIVE OUTREACH OFFICER...

BE ORGANISED

"My workload involves constantly juggling a number of things at once, so I need to be organised and know how to jump between priorities. One minute, I'll be spending time with a Member and the next I'll be in a meeting with the local authority, so I have to be able to adapt my approach."

WORK WELL WITH THE BSO – AND MEMBERS!

"We all need to pull in the same direction, so communication is key. And I need to listen to the Members, and be led by them when it comes to what they need and what they'd like to see me doing. Being friendly and patient are big parts of it, too."

THINK QUICKLY

"Versatility is key because no two days are ever the same. Unexpected challenges come up, and we have to find the right solution. Doing the best we can for Members doesn't mean firefighting with short-term solutions – we try to solve a problem properly, otherwise we'd be throwing money away. Blesma is about long-term support."

KEEP IT SIMPLE

"Events don't have to have lots of different things going on – something simple like a brunch has got clear aims and delivers obvious results. It gets people together and gets them talking, and that can solve a lot of different problems."

ENJOY IT!

"I absolutely love my job as an Outreach Officer, it's fantastic, such a great role! I think you need to have that enthusiasm to succeed, because you will come across lots of different things that need sorting out. I love the fact that the role is brand new; it's really good to get your teeth into something and make it your own."

Member in the Midlands Area on a one-to-one basis," says Sam. "Not only is Ness getting out and meeting Members, but the Members in the Midlands Area are now making contact with, and supporting, each other. Ness is also able to disseminate a lot of information because she operates our social media."

THE DRUMBEAT OF CONTACT

"I think the Outreach Officers have already been a real success, specifically when it comes to helping Members engage with the Association. For me, Blesma has always been about that human connection. Members might not see each other for a long time, but there's a common bond when they do come together. Whether it's a Widow or one of our younger Members, regardless of their background or how they were injured, that bond is instant."

The brunch at the garden centre has certainly worked like that. Paul Woolley has given a lift to two Widows today. "They were on my route, and it's important for older Members to have social contact, so I was happy to help," he says.

Sam is very impressed with Vanessa's new event. "It's quick, easy and cost-effective. It just works," she says. "A lot of our Members struggle to take part in an activity for a whole day, let

alone go away for an entire week – but they can manage a couple of hours out, and it's so good for the mental health of Members who might otherwise feel isolated.

"Reducing isolation is a big aim for us because much of the Midlands Area is rural. Even if someone is reticent about coming along I suggest they try it for 10 minutes and, if they don't like it, there's no pressure, they can leave. Invariably they end up enjoying themselves.

"I've heard Members say that the brunch is something that is now a part of their social calendar that they didn't have before, others have said it's the only thing in their social calendar. In a way, it harks back to the days when the Branches were vital, and we are so grateful for the response we've had from everyone."

And things are only going to improve, thinks Vanessa. "I've only been in the role for nine months, so we are really just starting on the road to what we can achieve," she says. "The main aim now is to make as many people as possible aware of what Blesma can do for them.

"A real highlight for me has been things like this – seeing new relationships form and seeing vulnerable Members who now have someone checking in on them. That's brilliant."

We'll drink (a cuppa) to that!



LOCAL ACTIVITIES



LEN SHORTHOUSE

Len, 82, who served in the Royal Army Ordnance Corps, attended the event with his wife, Muriel. An unsuccessful operation three years ago led to an above-right-knee amputation

You've been making friends thanks to the Blesma Brunch...

We have, and it's just wonderful. We've been to two so far, and Sam and Vanessa have done us proud. It was so interesting because we found out that the people at the end of the table only live a couple of miles away from us, and we are now friends, which is the point of things like this. We're going to pick them up and have a cup of tea soon.

And there's a constant supply of new Members coming through...

Yes. There were two ladies we met at the first brunch, and it was as if we'd been friends all our lives, it was amazing! And we all chat

about our amputations – I've even made some progress on the leg situation thanks to chatting to other Members, which is a tremendous benefit of going to an event like this.

You're getting involved in some pretty wild Blesma activities too, right?

Ha, yes! Last year I took part in the zip wire event in Wales, and I was going to try the skydive this year, but unfortunately it didn't go ahead. I might try to get a place on the Arizona Cowboy College activity because I love country music. I would try to get sponsorship for it, but I don't think you can sponsor someone for having fun, can you?

ERIC EDWARDS

Eric, 68, from Derby, was injured as a teenager shortly after joining the Grenadier Guards. He came to the brunch with his wife, Jennifer

You were heavily involved in your region's Branch, weren't you?

I was the Branch Secretary, and would often drive around the county to see people. I enjoyed it, but unfortunately I was the one who had to recommend the closure of the Branch. I was the youngest Member at the time – at 48!

Does this feel a bit like a return to those days?

Yes. I really enjoyed the brunch because I got to see other people from around the same area with the same problems, and I could sit and chat about them. It was brilliant. Jennifer and I have been to two now and they've both been really enjoyable. In the past, Branches were a central point of contact for Members to meet up within the county. Now we've got Ness, it feels like there's a central point again.

What did you enjoy most about today's brunch?

Meetings like this are a bit like the Members' Weekend; you chat to people you've never met before, and they can be very inspirational. They make you realise you need to just get on with life, and that's always been my attitude. I joined up just after my 17th birthday and was injured on an assault course that had been neglected 18 months later. I've had a number of operations throughout my life, but you carry on because there's no point moaning!



A close-up portrait of a man with short, dark hair and a beard, smiling warmly. He is wearing a maroon polo shirt. The background is a soft, out-of-focus outdoor setting.

ANDREW CARLTON

Andrew, 41, from Swadlincote, served with the Queen's Royal Lancers and was injured in Afghanistan in 2010

You're a busy man, was it nice to be able to squeeze a Blesma event into your week?

I work as an enforcement agent, and I have a wife and stepdaughter. My wife is studying at university so I'm working extra hours to keep the pennies coming in. As much as I'd like to be heading off with Blesma for a week, it's not easy for me to get to day-long events. This was a perfect compromise, I could go for a few hours, and because it was local, it was easy to get to.

Did you enjoy it?

It was my first one and it was good to meet other Members. It's a bit different, informal, and a nice break for a couple of hours. It's great to talk to people, find out what other activities are happening and chat to people who have done them. I like meeting the older Members, too.

And you got involved directly because of Vanessa, right?

Yes. Ness and Sam are brilliant, they're doing such a good job. Ness is always in touch, she's been very proactive. The Outreach Pilot seems to be getting more people involved. It definitely connects people.

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MARGARET LESTER

Margaret, 86, from Mickleover, is a Blesma Widow. She was married to Bill, who served with the Royal Corps of Signals

What do the Blesma Brunches mean to you?

I've enjoyed every one I've been to. I don't like to be greedy and ask to come to too many, but they've told me I'm welcome to come along to them all! That's lovely, and they're such nice, helpful people. I enjoy the chat, and the food is great, too – today I had bacon, egg, mushrooms, beans and toast, it was delicious. I love meeting everybody because when you live on your own, you do miss company and having a chat.

How much did Blesma help you and Bill over the years?

They've been brilliant for us and have done all sorts. They provided Bill with a wheelchair and always looked out for him. It's a marvellous charity and I can't thank them enough. When Bill passed away three years ago, we had a collection at the funeral for Blesma because I wanted to repay them for all they had done for him. I always tell everybody I meet about Blesma.

And now you're getting more involved yourself...

Yes. I didn't hear from them for a while, then all of a sudden I heard from Samantha, and now they always invite me to things. I'd like to take part in more Blesma activities. I've put my name down to go to Alvaston Hall on the Widow's Week – hopefully I'll get to go. The company and change of environment are great, and it's so nice to speak to people who have been through similar things to you.



PAUL WOOLLEY

Paul, 61, from Kings Bromley, sustained a spinal injury in a car accident in 2003

You didn't know about Blesma for 15 years, despite being eligible to join...

That's right. I met somebody on a cruise who had a spinal injury and was a Member of Blesma. By chance, I'd mentioned my military background – I had been in the RAF – and he told me about the charity. I didn't realise I was eligible because I wasn't limbless, but he explained and I joined last year. Events like this one mean I can make connections with people in the area. It has been a very nice and very sociable event.

Getting people together locally is a real focus for the Outreach Officers...

It's important that people get to know that Blesma is a charity that works on a local level, rather than an Association that just

organises big trips. And it's not a club solely for young people or Widows either – it makes links through the generations. Sam and Ness have worked hard on this, and are very good at staying in touch. When I joined, Sam came over and we had a good, long chat. She helped me to understand more about what Blesma could do for me.

Who have you linked up with recently?

Ness put me in touch with two Blesma Widows who I drove to the event. That's part of it; Members helping each other. They might not have been able to make it to the brunch otherwise. And there's talk of me being able to help another Member who is a tree surgeon.



LIZ WATLING

Blesma's Benefits and Social Care Adviser explains why she loves working for the Association, and why it pays to be pernickety!

I started working at Blesma in 2016. Originally, my role was to process grants, but I was soon using my previous experience as a benefits adviser to advise individual Members and assist the Support Officers in dealing with the more complex cases Members had. As the benefits system became even more difficult to decipher, and it became apparent that Blesma Members needed more support, I was asked if I would be prepared to take on the new role of Blesma's Benefits and Social Care Adviser.

I have been working in the benefits system for 17 years now. I suppose I'm rather pernickety – and in this line of work you have to be! It's very structured, there is a lot of detail, and it can be a challenge to keep up with the changes in legislation. Of course, I get to work very closely with colleagues and Members, which is great – I really enjoy the different elements of the job.

Being the Benefits and Social Care Adviser involves being the lead on welfare, tax credit, benefits and social care. I make sure that Blesma is kept up to date with policies, and I liaise with the government departments and their delivery partners. I need to check that they are all aware of the Armed Forces Covenant to make sure no veteran will be disadvantaged as a result of claiming benefits.

One of the things I've been keen to do is to enable Members to navigate their way through the benefits

system if they feel confident enough to do so. I've written some fact sheets for the Blesma website and I review them periodically to ensure they remain up to date. Although I do get involved in advising individual Members, the BSOs are still the first point of contact for Members when it comes to support with claiming benefits.

If a Member makes a benefits application which is turned down or awarded at a lower rate than they were expecting, then it's important that they let their Support Officer know straight away. Challenging a decision must be done within a certain time limit – usually one month – so the quicker the BSO gets involved the better.

“I AM THE LEAD ON WELFARE, TAX CREDIT, BENEFITS AND SOCIAL CARE. I MAKE SURE THAT BLESMA IS KEPT UP TO DATE ON POLICIES”

I've recently become the point of contact for our Members who live overseas [see p28]. I've contacted them all, which wasn't easy because of the different time zones, but everyone got a phone call, an email or a letter. It's really important that they keep us informed of their up-to-date contact details so we can offer them support.

Working at Blesma is amazing! This is the only place I've been where everyone works so well together across all departments. I love the team spirit and I like the fact that everyone has an important part to play.

Contact Liz in the Independence and Wellbeing Team at iwabenefits@blesma.org or on 020 8548 3516

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