Blesma

Winter 2019

The
magazine
for limbless
veterans

GET CONNECTED
WITH BLESMA
NEWS, ACTIVITIES,
SUPPORT AND CHAT

BLESMA CONNECTS

TAP INTO THE WORLD OF BLESMA WITH THE ASSOCIATION'S BESPOKE NEW APP

Taking time to remember

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Phantom Limb Pain: the facts

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News

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A Day in the Life

Special thanks to: All our Members, Heather Betts, Brian Chenier, Lorna Dorrell, Elaine Hems, Jess Mackinnon, Jess March, Emily Mizon, Izzy Perks, Nick Tuck, Ian Waller **Blesma Magazine** is published on behalf of the **British Limbless Ex-Service Men's Association** (Blesma) by **ScratchCreate**. British Limbless Ex-Service Men's Association Charity Numbers: England and Wales 1084189, Scotland SC010315; Company Limited Guarantee No. 4102768. Contact ScratchCreate at david@scratchcreate.co.uk or paul@scratchcreate.co.uk This publication may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form, in whole or in part, without the prior permission of the publishers. All prices and addresses are correct at the time of going to press. Every care has been taken in the preparation of this magazine to ensure the contents are fully accurate, but neither ScratchCreate nor Blesma can be held responsible for the accuracy of the information herein, any omissions or errors, or any consequence arising from it. The views expressed by contributors, customers and Members might not reflect the views of ScratchCreate or Blesma. Publication date: Winter 2019. © Blesma 2019.

Words: Jessica Mackinnon Photographs: Brian Chenier

It's official: Blesma makes Chelmsford its new home

Blesma staff welcomed guests from the local community in Chelmsford to celebrate the official opening of the new Blesma head office in October. The Mayor of Chelmsford, Bob Massey, cut a ribbon to formally open the building on New London Road. Alongside him was Member Ashley Hall, who later shared his story of life-changing injury, overcoming adversity, and the support he has received from Blesma.

"I remember the Chadwell Heath offices very well. I used to cycle past them on a regular basis as I had friends who lived in the area," the Mayor told Blesma staff and invited guests. "I also have a son who served in the Royal Air Force for 22 years, and thankfully got away unscathed. I am really proud to do this on behalf of Blesma. Welcome to Chelmsford!"

Whilst spending some time with their new neighbours, guests were given an insight into the charity through Ash's story, which he presents to young people as part of Blesma's Making Generation R initiative.

The office move was the result of a thorough review by the Association's Board of Trustees. It concluded that Blesma's office in Chadwell Heath was no longer fit for purpose and that it would be more cost-effective in the long term, as well as being in the best interests of the Association, to purchase the more suitable – and accessible – building in Chelmsford.

It is expected that the new office, now home to 30 employees, will bring about more Member and staff interaction, as well as providing Members, staff and Trustees with a more practical working environment.

"Blesma thanks the City of Chelmsford for making us so welcome, and we are delighted to move into our new office in New London Road," said Ian Waller, Interim Chief Executive. "Our staff are really happy to be in the city, and we hope that the modern premises will allow us to be more efficient and deliver more for Blesma Members, wherever they live across the UK and Ireland."

Blesma is already forming strong bonds with the local community in the city; a poster featuring Member Craig Wood can be seen on the platform at the railway station, the Association has held its first Christmas Carol Service at Chelmsford Cathedral (see p06), and it has forged links with local businesses and charities. BBC Essex even broadcast news of Blesma's relocation to its listeners.

Blesma's best-kept secret
Find out why Seniors Week is so popular (p42)

From top: the Mayor of Chelmsford formally opens the building; guests and staff get to know each other; Ash Hall addresses the audience

BLESMA'S NEW ADDRESS AND CONTACT DETAILS

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Email: info@blesma.org
Stay in touch in January by downloading the Blesma Connects app for free from the App Store or Google Play

welcome

The last 12 months have seen the usual mix of Members doing extraordinary things and getting on with their lives. We have our inspirational world record breakers in rowing, cycling, and running. Then, of course, Martin Hewitt held a Blesma flag atop the world's highest mountain in May! For many, however, the daily challenge of living with limb loss or the loss of use of limb predominates. The decision by your Board of Trustees to reinforce our BSO coverage with 10 Outreach Officers will enable Blesma to support the membership in a more comprehensive way for years to come.

With connectivity between Members and with the Association at the heart of what we do, the launch of the Blesma Connects app in early 2020 will further energise how we support and communicate. I am sure you will find the article interesting before getting to grips with the app in due course.

Elsewhere in the magazine, we take a look at Seniors Week and hear from the Governor of the Royal Hospital Chelsea, our own Chairman General Sir Adrian Bradshaw, on how it is modernising its offer. Member Cornelia Oosthuizen shares her story and Lionel O'Connor tells us about helping others. I'd like to thank Lionel for featuring in our Autumn fundraising campaign to more than 200,000 homes, the early results of which are promising.

Throughout 2019, our donors have been ever more creative in raising the necessary funds to carry on our work, whilst staff and volunteers, both in Chelmsford and across the country, have regularly gone the extra mile to meet the needs of the membership as and when it has been required. Thank you one and all, and season's greetings!

Ian Waller
Interim Chief Executive

Photography: © Crown copyright 2019

Member chosen as first female Invictus captain

Thirteen Blesma Members have been selected to compete for the UK team at the 2020 Invictus Games, which will be held in The Hague, The Netherlands from 09-16 May.

More than 470 wounded, injured, and sick veterans took part in this year's first-ever Invictus Games UK trials, which were held in Sheffield, with just 65 people being selected to compete in the 2020 team.

In another first, the team will be led by a female captain – Blesma Member and Royal Air Force veteran Rachel Williamson.

"Being selected as part of the 2018 team to compete in Sydney was life-changing and, along with the rest of the team, I am looking forward to being able to represent my country once again," said Rachel, who will compete in field athletics, rowing, and swimming at next year's Games.

"To be selected as the UK team's first female captain is truly an honour and I feel immensely proud to have been given this opportunity. I am looking forward to the journey ahead and can't wait for Team UK to show the world what we are capable of at the Invictus Games 2020."

The 2020 UK team was unveiled by HRH Prince Harry in October. The athletes will go up against 500 competitors from 19 nations across nine sports including athletics, archery, wheelchair basketball, wheelchair rugby and sitting volleyball.

"The Invictus Games offers an amazing opportunity for Service men and women to regain a sense of pride, which can be lost following the onset of mental or physical difficulties," said Rachel. "Sport empowers us to refocus our attention on what we can do, rather than what we can't."

ASSOCIATION'S CHRISTMAS CAROL SERVICE KICKS OFF FESTIVE SEASON

BLESMA WAS THRILLED TO KICK off the festive season with a Christmas carol service on 05 December.

The celebration was held at Chelmsford Cathedral, with Reverend Canon Ivor Moody and Reverend Martyn Gough, Chaplain of the Fleet and Archdeacon for the Royal Navy, presiding over the service.

Guests were treated to music from soprano Alicia Lowes, the Felsted School Senior Chapel Choir, and The St Alban Singing Duo before enjoying a glass of mulled wine and a mince pie.

"Blesma's first Christmas carol service in our new home of Chelmsford was a wonderful success," said Tony Bloomfield, Blesma's Associate Director of Fundraising. "We were delighted to have Alicia Lowes and our very own Head of Finance, Boston Mwense, perform. Thanks to everyone who attended, and a big thank you to AQ Branding for sponsoring the event."

LEE WINS 'AGAINST ALL ODDS'

Blesma Member Lee Spencer has been crowned the 'Against All Odds' champion in the Amplifon Awards for Brave Britons 2019. Lee lost his right leg in a road traffic accident five years ago. Following the accident, he became part of the first British all-amputee (and all-Blesma) crew to row across the Atlantic Ocean and, earlier this year, he was back on the water to complete the fastest unsupported solo row across the Atlantic.

"I was surprised to find out that I had even been nominated," said the former Royal Marine. "It was in the local paper and people were messaging me to say congratulations. I had no idea! When I was rowing, I was in a world of my own, in a bubble, with no idea of the level of support there was for me. I was humbled to find out that I had won."

Rose rises to the top on Mount Kilimanjaro

Member James Rose has become the first double above-knee amputee to summit Mount Kilimanjaro, Africa's highest mountain. The British Army veteran, who lost both his legs 10 years ago to an IED blast in Afghanistan, reached the 5,895m summit in September after a five-day climb.

"Kilimanjaro ruined me, but I made it to the top without any help," said the 32 year old from Middlesbrough. "There were good times but there were some horrific times when I just wanted to give up. Somehow, though, I kept moving and was eventually able to conquer the highest free-standing mountain in the world!"

Exercise has played a vital role in James' physical rehab, but he also credits it with helping him with his mental health.

"I wanted this challenge to show people who are struggling with their mental health that they can do anything they put their mind to. People sent me messages telling me to keep going because what I was doing was helping them. I've learned that you need a focus in your life, otherwise you can go into a downward spiral."

Conquering Kilimanjaro was just the beginning for James. Since then, he has climbed Mount Snowdon and Scafell Pike, and now plans to summit Mount Kenya and Ben Nevis in 2020.

THE TEN-PERSON TEAM TRAINING TO TACKLE TUGELA

MEMBER IVOR GARDINER HAS recruited a team of wounded, injured and sick serving personnel and veterans to take on an ambitious expedition. They will climb, trek, canoe and cycle along the largest river in KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa.

The 10-person team – which includes Blesma Members Carl Anstey, Louis Farrell, Craig Howorth, Ray Priest, Dominic Hagans, Martin Hailstone and Oscar Churton – are set to travel the 504km length of the Tugela River before attending battlefield tours of Majuba, Rourke's Drift, Spioenkop and Colenso, where they will lay wreaths on behalf of Blesma and other military charities.

"In the two years that I spent at Headley Court, it struck me how many people would sign up to rehabilitation events but never turn up to take part," said Ivor, who is a former Lieutenant Colonel in the Royal Irish Regiment. "One way to get people to fully commit to a challenge is by building a team that also contributes towards the planning of the expedition. Our team members have been given roles and responsibilities, so as well as being involved in the physical activity, they can see the challenge come together in concept and execution."

Training is now well underway for the team, and the expedition is planned for April 2020.

Making Generation R Talks for adult first responders and frontline service workers

BLESMA HAS ANNOUNCED ITS LATEST Making Generation R brand extension: Making Generation R *Talks*.

The Talks will be tailored to adults in workplaces and educational centres across the UK who wish to learn how to improve personal resilience and overcome adversity.

As with the Making Generation R visits to schools, which have seen veterans tell their stories of life-changing injuries and personal struggles of overcoming adversity to more than 60,000 young people, the Talks will aim to inspire and motivate first responders and frontline service workers.

Members will share their life experiences and their individual journeys of overcoming physical and mental difficulties. These talks will be followed by short Q&As chaired by a professional workshop facilitator.

"We have seen the power of Making Generation R, both for Members delivering the resilience workshops and for their audiences in schools," said Ian Waller, Blesma's Interim Chief Executive.

"Widening the programme to adults with the Making Generation R Talks comes in response to requests from frontline service providers. We are sure the Talks will provide tangible benefits for all concerned."

The free Talks will be made available to all first responders and frontline service workers including those in the NHS, Police and Fire Services, social work, and other service occupations.

Words: Jessica Mackinnon   Photography: Anthony Upton

BLESMA BRIEFING

Phantom Limb Pain: the facts

What causes Phantom Limb Pain (PLP) and what can alleviate it? The experiences of those suffering from the condition is helping to increase our understanding

The definition of Phantom Limb Pain: a pain sensation which is felt by the limbless person to be somewhere within the amputated limb (the limb which no longer exists, hence the term 'Phantom')

It is important to distinguish between Stump Pain and Phantom Limb Pain (PLP), especially as the 'treatments' differ greatly. Unlike Phantom Limb Pain, Stump Pain originates in the residual limb (stump). It is often described as a sharp, burning pain that can easily be confused with Phantom Limb Pain, which is usually described as a crushing, burning or shooting pain, itching or contractions (Phantom Contracture).

One of the causes of Stump Pain is nerve damage in the residual limb. After surgery, the nerves try to heal themselves, which can result in abnormal sensations caused by neuromas (nodules at the end of the nerves located in the residual limb). These neuromas may continue to generate impulses, which travel up the spinal cord to the brain. According to research by Nikolajsen and Jensen (01 April 2000), between 60 and 80 per cent of amputees experience PLP, but only five to 10 per cent experience truly agonising pain.

Other researchers' varying claims are that as little as two per cent to as many as 95 per cent of amputees experience phantom sensations. Individuals born with limb absence can also experience phantom sensations. The sensations have a sense of presence, size and shape. Some feel that the missing limb moves on its own, whilst others experience it as a rigid, fixed state.

> “SOME FEEL THAT THE MISSING LIMB MOVES ON ITS OWN, WHILST OTHERS EXPERIENCE IT AS BEING IN A RIGID, FIXED STATE”

PLP and sensations can occur at any time following an amputation, immediately or several years later. At one time, it was thought that the neuromas were responsible for Phantom Limb Pain as well as Stump Pain. Surgeons cut the nerves and allowed the nerve ends to retreat higher up, so that they were not irritated by weight transmission in the residual limb. However, many patients still experienced PLP after surgery.

It became apparent that Phantom Limb Pain was, and is, more complicated. In the USA, Sherman and Jones received 7,000 responses to a questionnaire sent out to amputees regarding PLP. More than 80 per cent of respondents said that they had enough PLP to cause real problems for at least one week of the year. Most had episodes of pain lasting from a few seconds to several weeks. Approximately half the reported PLP was associated with avoidable effects, such as wearing an artificial limb, exhaustion, back pain and stress, or environmental changes such as cold and humidity. Almost no respondents reported that their PLP went away completely in the years after the amputation.

LIMBLESS ASSOCIATION APRIL 2011 CAUSES AND THEORY

The exact cause of Phantom Limb Pain is still unknown. One school of thought is that it is generated from the spinal cord and the brain. It is believed that the region of the brain responsible for sensation begins to function differently post-amputation, leading to the perception that the amputated body part still exists.

Psychologist Melzack talks about the neuro-matrix; the brain's map of the body. This is the 'matrix of wholeness' established in the brain, which will continue to operate even in the absence of sensory inputs, and therefore creates an impression of having a whole body, even when a limb has been removed. Nana Dawson Addoh refers to this as the brain's sense of self. Although the limb no longer exists, the amputee perceives the limb as still being an essential part of their body image.

Melzack maintained that the neuro-matrix is pre-wired by genetics, indicating that the brain is predisposed to believing all of its limbs exist and therefore it sends signals to this effect. Because there is no signal or sensory feedback from the amputated limb, the brain increases the intensity of the signal, thereby inducing Phantom Limb Pain. The phantom limb is perceived to be over-flexed and this causes cramping (Phantom Contracture). The brain's idea of self therefore becomes distorted by the amputation of the limb.

Another theory is that Phantom Limb Pain may result from a miscommunication between motor commands sent from the brain to the absent limb, as there is no sensory feedback from the limb to confirm that the motor command has been carried out. V S Ramachandran questioned whether amputees suffering from Phantom Limb Pain were suffering from rearranged body maps (neuro-matrix). From this, he formulated his cortical re-mapping theory.

Words: Kiera Roche

He examined the reorganised Sensory Homunculus (the blueprint representation of the body's surface) of amputees. The Sensory Homunculus, which acts as a switchboard, is strangely human in shape and is often referred to as the 'little person'.

If you wiggle your toes, a signal is sent from the skin receptors through the nerve pathways (central nervous system) to the corresponding part of the homunculus. Ramachandran noticed that, in upper limb amputees, touching the face brought on phantom sensations because the signals had been rewired to the next-door part of the brain, which happens to be the part that listens to signals from the face.

Ramachandran found that signals from the amputated limb are transferred to a neighbouring part of the homunculus. These are known as 'referred feelings'. When a nerve is cut during surgery, the raw end of the nerve is very sensitive to stimuli. Chemicals from cut or bruised skin can cause these nerve endings to fire off signals, so even minor pressure can be enough to send powerful signals to the homunculus. The homunculus doesn't know the nerve has been cut, so it reports the feeling as coming from the amputated limb and not the severed nerve ending.

Ramachandran created a method of using mirrors to provide the brain with the missing visual stimulation. The reflection of the intact limb is superimposed on the location of the amputated (phantom) limb, tricking the brain into thinking that the phantom limb is real. Using this technique, Ramachandran's patients have been able to shift their phantom limbs out of painful or awkward positions.

This so-called Mirror Box technique is one of the many treatments for Phantom Limb Pain. Through research, we now know the causes of several types of PLP. Burning and tingling phantom pain is caused by decreased blood flow to the end of the stump, while cramping phantom pain is caused by spasms in the stump.

For any prosthetics issues, contact BSO (Prosthetics) Brian Chenier on 020 8548 7080 or at bsoprosthetics@blesma.org

CARING FOR YOUR STUMP: THE ESSENTIALS

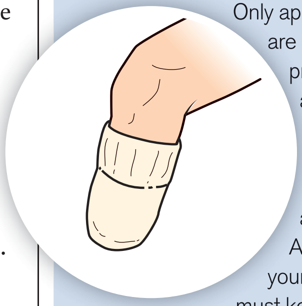
Maintaining a healthy stump is very important when it comes to making sure you stay mobile. Here's how to take good care of yours

Wearing a prosthesis can have a profound effect on the health of a stump, its muscles, and its skin. It goes without saying that a comfortable and well-fitting socket is a preliminary requirement. In some cases, an interface is used between the stump and the lining of the socket to reduce friction.

Keeping the skin clean and dry is the first rule of stump care. Wash your stump regularly with warm water using ordinary (non-perfumed) soap. Hibiscrub Liquid (an antiseptic cleaning liquid) is useful as a soap once a week, or daily if the skin is damaged.

Skin should be dried carefully with a clean towel. Do not use talcum powder or spirit. A moisturising cream like E45 or Aqueous Cream can be used if your skin is dry, but only at night or when you are not going to wear your prosthesis.

Some skin types are more prone to perspiration. Washing more than once a day would then be advisable. A suitable antiperspirant, such as Driclor, may help. Only apply it when you are not wearing your prosthesis. It is also best to avoid chemicals on your stump when you are wearing a prosthesis.



As well as keeping your skin clean, you must keep the interface (socket, socks etc) clean by washing them regularly. The manufacturer's washing instructions should be followed. The socket must also be cleaned regularly, preferably on a daily basis. Periodic use of antiseptics like Hibiscrub is good practice for both the interface and the socket. It is important to remove any residual cleaning/antiseptic material before using the prosthesis again.

Words: This is an edited version of a piece that was first produced by The Limbless Association in April 2011

Force of nature set to meet Forces of Nature

Members Cayle Royce, Lee Spencer, and Neil Heritage will join five fellow wounded veterans and four civilians next August in an attempt to kayak 3,500km down the Amazon River to celebrate the centenary of The Not Forgotten Association.

Team Forces of Nature will paddle for 60 days in the hope of raising £250,000 for the charity, which helps injured Service personnel and veterans. The expedition is the brainchild of Theo Jones, who raced against Cayle and Lee's all-Blesma Race2Recovery boat in the 2016 Talisker Whisky Atlantic Challenge.

"In 2018, Theo called me with an idea to paddle along the Amazon from Peru to its mouth in Brazil," said Cayle, who lost both his legs while serving in Afghanistan. "It sounded like a terrible idea, so I was happy to be included!"

An eight-man team will paddle for up to 10 hours a day to complete a daily target of between 50 and 60km. They will be followed by a four-man support team consisting of a medic, a videographer and two resting kayakers who will help with tasks like supply runs and setting up camp.

"I have been nominated to skipper this expedition and I hope that by taking part we can encourage others to push themselves out of their comfort zones and start challenging themselves in new and rewarding ways," said Cayle.

ASH IS "NOT GOING TO HOLD BACK" IN MMA DEBUT

A FORMER SOLDIER WHO LOST BOTH his legs whilst serving in Afghanistan was set to make his Mixed Martial Arts debut as this issue of the magazine went to press.

Ashley Hall, who suffered severe injuries when he stepped on an IED in 2010, was set to take part in a charity bout in aid of Cancer Research UK in December.

"My grandad was diagnosed with throat cancer earlier this year. He was looked after really well by the Cancer Research team, so I thought it was a charity worth fighting for," said Ash, who underwent eight weeks of intensive training to take part.

"When I was going through a dark period in my recovery I needed something to focus on, so I joined a Jiu Jitsu club. It helped with my mental health and, as I got better, I entered a couple of competitions.

"I am often underestimated because of my injuries but as soon as I start throwing leather, my opponents wise up and realise I am the real deal. I'm not going to hold back, so I don't want them to hold back either!"

JODY SHOWS RESILIENCE IN EPIC SWIM

A woman who was diagnosed with stage four bowel cancer has swum the English Channel in aid of Blesma. Jody Jones was set to swim the Channel last year but the shock diagnosis brought her training to a halt. Surgery to remove half her colon was followed by chemotherapy and then further surgery, but Jody remained determined to complete the challenge.

"When I was diagnosed, I was eight months away from the swim and it was the fittest I'd ever been," said Jody. "I delayed the swim for a year, but it never crossed my mind not to do it."

Jody began the epic challenge on 27 August, and completed the 21-mile swim 18 hours, 14 minutes and 30 seconds later. "It was incredibly hard. The boat ride out to the starting point was especially emotional. I didn't speak to anyone and just focused on getting my head in the right place. In theory, I shouldn't have made it across the Channel but, like Blesma's Members I'm quite resilient," said Jody, who has so far raised more than £11,250 for the Association.

PA Photos Ltd

Bill Gillett is recognised for services to veterans

Former Blesma Support Officer Major (Retd) Bill Gillett has been awarded an MBE for services to veterans. Having served in 3 Commando Brigade, 5 Airborne Brigade, and 16 Air Assault Brigade, Bill then worked as a BSO for 16 years, helping to provide vital support and advice to limbless and injured veterans, as well as their families.

During his time with Blesma, Bill built close relationships with many hundreds of Members, and would often handle up to 40 individual 'assists' at any one time. Bill said it was "absolutely incredible" to receive the honour, adding: "I'm very proud. I still feel a bit overwhelmed!"

The MBE, awarded for an outstanding achievement or service to the community, was announced in the Queen's Birthday Honours List, and was presented by Prince William. Bill now works at the War Injuries Clinic at Salisbury District Hospital.

FIRST ALL-BLESMA TEAM PREPARES FOR THE RACE ACROSS AMERICA

AFTER A LONG AND COMPREHENSIVE selection process, 18 Members have been chosen from more than 60 applicants to represent Blesma in Race Across America.

"Having an all-Blesma team in the race has been something we've always wanted to achieve," said Jess March, Blesma's Activities Manager. "Individuals were chosen who haven't had an opportunity to take part in something like this before, and who we felt could give the necessary time and passion to the event. Those selected were prepared to be either cyclists or support crew, so their team spirit was an important factor in their selection."

The team will attempt to ride 3,000 miles between the USA's Pacific and Atlantic coasts. Along the way, they will cross 12 states, climb the Rockies and Appalachians, and take on scorching deserts where temperatures can reach 45°C. The race will get underway on Saturday 20 June 2020.

NEWS BRIEFS

97-YEAR-OLD VETERAN GIVEN TOP FRENCH MILITARY MEDAL

A WWII veteran who was unable to leave his home for five years until Blesma came to his rescue has received France's highest order of merit; the Legion d'Honneur.

Reginald Webb joined the King's Royal Rifle Corps in 1942 after his family home was bombed in the war. He saw action two years later, landing on the beaches of Normandy in the days after D-Day. His first task was to help protect Arromanches, where troops and supplies would off-load.

"The Germans were trying to take the harbour away from us. By the time heavy Infantry arrived we had lost most of the company. We only had 34 men left!" recalled Reg. "We'd trained together for more than two years and knew everybody by their Christian names. We were all mates. They are the true heroes to me. I still remember them and think of them every day."

Reg later travelled with his regiment into France, through Belgium, and into Holland, where he fought in the Battle of Arnhem, helping paratroopers cross the River Rhine.

"I went to Arnhem with my section of just two Bren gunners, one rifleman, and I had a Sten gun. We were guarding a village and it was up to me and my section to hold the road in this village. Three hundred German troops walked down the road as if they owned the place. They were 60 yards away before I gave the order to open fire. We got 1,036 paratroopers across the river. We were quite happy about that."

It was after this that Reg was hit six times by machine-gun fire. The wounds resulted in him losing his right leg below the knee.

"This medal is not for me, but for the boys that I lost and left behind," said Reg during the presentation at King's Lynn Town Hall.

Reg sadly passed away this Armistice Day. Turn to p18 to read his obituary

Words: Jessica Mackinnon Photographs: Andy Bate, Brian Chenier

Jamie Weller has been named on The Shaw Trust Disability Power List 100

Jamie named on most influential power list

Jamie Weller has been named one of Britain's most influential disabled people by The Shaw Trust Disability Power List 100. "It is an honour to be on the list. I don't feel that anything I do is inspirational – I don't even particularly like that word!" said Jamie. "The key thing for me is to change perceptions and educate people about the challenges I face."

Jamie joined the Royal Navy at the age of 17, following a childhood dream to work with naval jets. However, he began to lose the sight in both eyes just two years later.

With his naval career over, he went on to became the first registered blind member of the Chartered Institute of Taxation, worked for Deloitte, represented Team GB as an alpine and Nordic ski racer, and won four bronze medals in cycling and track running at the Invictus Games. In 2017, he even trekked to Everest Base Camp.

Jamie considers his biggest achievement to be retraining to become a tax consultant after losing his sight. Now he fundraises for Blind Veterans UK, is a speaker and ambassador for Guide Dogs UK, and inspires young people to become more resilient as part of Blesma's Making Generation R programme. This year, he even took to the stage to appear in a theatre production by Bravo 22 Company.

"Being blind is a daily challenge. Simple things like recognising people, making a cup of tea, or cooking food is sometimes an adventure, but I keep trying to push the boundaries of what blind people can achieve," said Jamie. "Life in the sighted world is tough – I have always had to overcome the perception that being visually impaired prevents you from achieving. I try to manage my blindness rather than let it manage me."

GET ACTIVE NEXT YEAR

FANCY TRYING SOMETHING NEW OR getting better at something you've already had a go at? Blesma is offering its Members the chance to try more activities than ever before in 2020 – all for free!

There are lots of events in the Blesma activities calendar for every taste, level and ability – from beginner to serious adventurer. There's something on offer for every age group and interest, too.

There are lots of easily accessible events very close to home, but if you fancy seeing foreign shores in 2020 Blesma will be jetting off across the globe – from Belgium to Borneo, and from Slovenia to South Africa. But the most important part of any activity is still the social aspect – Members help each other, work together, and share experiences – you don't have to be an expert to have fun!

All the activities are free, you'll just need to get to and from the meeting point. Blesma will also normally pay for your stay the night before to allow you to travel at your own pace.

Read about the diverse range of free activities that are on offer next year, and find out how to apply for them, by going online at www.blesma.org/activities or reading the brochure that has been inserted into this issue of the magazine

Lorraine (and her dogs) love her new garden

RAF veteran Lorraine Tilston-Brookes has received a garden revamp by green-fingered guru Alan Titchmarsh. Lorraine became the star of ITV's *Love Your Garden* in October, when Alan and the team visited the Wiltshire home she shares with her assistance dog, Doris and retired therapy dog, Poppy.

Lorraine had previously described her garden as a "huge bed of shingle and concrete, with a muddy area I call 'the grave.'" Uneven levels caused flooding and little plant life meant it was far from ideal.

Thanks to a successful application for the show from Blesma, Lorraine's garden has been transformed into a pleasant, accessible space that is low maintenance enough for her to look after and enjoy all year round.

The finished garden has been given a new lease of life with an abundance of plants and flowers, as well as a seating area, water features, and even a paddling pool for the dogs. In recognition of her time in the Forces, the *Love Your Garden* team also planted poppies in a corner of the garden with a Lest We Forget sign.

"When I opened my eyes, my reaction was: 'Wow, my garden wasn't this big!' It really is perfect," said Lorraine, whose fall from a truck during Basic Training in 1983 was the initial cause of a life-changing spinal injury. "The garden is so tranquil and has given me a place to sit when everything gets on top of me.

"It means a lot that the team took on board what I'd said about it being a garden for the dogs as much as for me. There's a small herb garden where Doris can enjoy some rosemary with her bone and it's great to see them having so much fun in the paddling pool. My only problem now is getting them out of it!"

Read about Lorraine's experience as part of the Blesma contingent at the Armistice Day Parade at the Cenotaph on p26

NEWS BRIEFS

PAWSEIDON ADVENTURE FOR DOG-LOVING DUO

Blesma Members James Hill (pictured) and Scott Candlish were both wounded in incidents that killed their military dogs in the line of duty. In July, the former Royal Marine dog handlers opened Pawseidon Hydro Hub in Poole to help rehabilitate injured dogs.

"We've only been open four months but the response has been really positive," said James. "People put a lot of belief in us to try and fix their beloved pets, and we have already had some terrific success stories."

One of those is a Labrador called Jacob who came to the centre with a cruciate ligament rupture. Twelve sessions on the underwater treadmill increased his strength and muscle bulk to give him more balance and stability.

James and Scott are now planning to install a lift that will allow them to invite injured ex-Service personnel and their therapy dogs to the centre.

ANOTHER QUALIFICATION AFTER ALMOST DITCHING DIVING

Member Jamie Hull has fought back from serious injury, having almost lost his life in an aeroplane fire, to become a Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) Course Director.

Medics gave Jamie a five per cent chance of survival after the plane he was using to learn to fly caught fire, resulting in 60 per cent of his body being covered in third-degree burns.

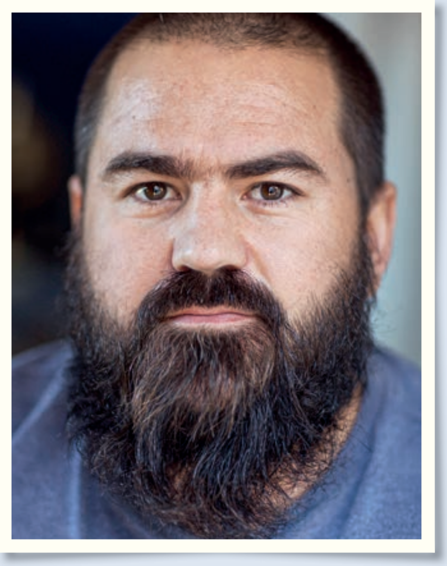
He lost his passion for diving for five years before eventually building up the courage to try the pastime again in 2012. The qualification, which was supported by Blesma, enables Jamie to teach at a high level and supervise new divers.

"Gaining the qualification was a personal ambition and shows how far I've come," said 44-year-old Jamie. "I've taught more than 300 people to dive now. It's really rewarding because I get to see the transition in those who have never dived and guide them through their fears."

Words: Jessica Mackinnon

In the spotlight

Lionel O'Connor



Lionel O'Connor served with the Royal Anglian Regiment. He lost his left leg above the knee in an attack on his vehicle in Iraq in 2006, in which two of his comrades were killed.

"My father was ex-Services and I felt like I needed to do something to earn my place in society, so I joined the Army. I wanted to be in the Infantry, and my local unit was the Royal Anglian Regiment. I fitted in quickly and I had my 21st birthday during training, but I was injured three months after being deployed to Basra soon after, in 2006.

"We were driving in a routine Land Rover patrol and I just remember seeing a big cloud of dust and sparks. I fell backwards, like I was in a tumble dryer, and everything went silent. Then I heard shouting but didn't know who it was. It took a me a few seconds to realise that it was me! I could move three limbs, but my left leg wouldn't move at all.

"One of the guys I was travelling with – a Fijian called Lewi – had taken me under his wing. We were good friends and he had looked after me, he'd taught me how to be a soldier. After the explosion, his face was right by mine. I tried to get him off me but he was unresponsive, and when I opened his eye with my thumb I knew he was dead.

"Another soldier, Adam, was lying on top of both of us. He had died too. I was stuck. There was nothing I could do. When the door was finally opened, blood poured out of the back of the vehicle like a river. I felt for my knee, and touched the bone that was sticking out.

PUTTING FAMILY FIRST

"My left leg had been blown off and I had shrapnel in my right, but my injuries were nothing next to what had happened to the others. I remember being asked if I wanted morphine and I passed out in the helicopter.

"I came round in hospital in Iraq. While I was there the hospital was mortared, but my leg was sorted out to stop any infection. I was evacuated to the UK and taken straight to Selly Oak, where I spent six weeks. It didn't take me long to get up and walking – I was using a prosthetic within three months. Rehab was ok because I was fit, but it got tougher over the years; partly because I was drinking a lot and partly because I lost my fitness. I've had dark times, but have always known that if I did anything silly to myself, it would be my family that would suffer. My eldest son saw me at my worst, when I was very angry, but my children have helped. I have four kids who were there for me when I needed them, so I need to be here for them now. And I've thought a lot about the guys who were killed – they didn't have the choice to waste their lives!

A GOOD FEELING FROM HELPING OTHERS

"Blesma was there for me right from the start. I didn't know about the charity, but a Member called Steve Gill came to see me in hospital. He walked in and asked: 'Why the long face?' I didn't know him, but he said: 'Don't worry – I'm one of you' and lifted his trousers to show he had two legs missing. The great thing with Blesma is they know exactly what to do. They don't ask anything of you, they just say: 'How can we help?'

"I was discharged from the Army in 2014 and for a long time I felt like I didn't need help, but my drinking got worse. I still have ups and downs, but I'm ok at the moment. I've struggled to get my weight down, but I do a lot of swimming now and I've realised that helping other people makes me feel good about myself.

"I've taken part in Making Generation R. Being able to share my story has helped me massively. I'm not the best public speaker, but helping the students and getting them thinking gives me a good feeling. I had some troubles as a kid, so I can relate to many of them. I'd like to do more talks and see where they take me. I also do some work with Mission Motorsport [a charity that uses motorsport as a recovery tool and helps injured Service leavers to find jobs in the auto industry], and I love it when you see people go home chatting and happy after not talking much at first.

"On Remembrance Day I think about a lot of things: the sacrifices made by soldiers, and the families of the blokes we lost. If you've ever lost somebody who has looked after you, someone close, that's the feeling that comes back to me on Remembrance Day. I try to be grateful for what I have and I think Remembrance is a good time to do that."

> **THE GREAT THING WITH BLESMA IS THEY DON'T ASK ANYTHING OF YOU, THEY JUST SAY: 'HOW CAN WE HELP?'**

Advantage Oosthuizen
How tennis has changed one Member's life (p34)

Words: Nick Moore Photographs: Andy Bate, Getty Images

INBOX

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

'GOT A STORY TO SHARE?' WAS THE QUESTION. I KNOW I HAVE…

Got a story to share? caught my eye in the Autumn issue of *Blesma Magazine*. I've got a story that I'm sure will resonate with many ex-Service personnel who have endured life post-injury feeling like they have slipped through the cracks before waking up, decades later, into a world aplenty and wondering: 'If only!'

I joined the Royal Artillery in 1977 and, having passed out as Best Recruit, joined 18 Battery 5 Heavy Regiment in Germany. I got my first stripe in four months, became a member of the Regimental sports teams, and spent every spare minute in the gym for almost a year until I finally got the call I had been waiting for and started life in the Army Physical Training Corps.

I began the '100 Junior Probationers Course' in April 1981. It was tough and I had to represent the Corps in the gymnastic display team. On 11 July 1981, at a display in Fleet, I over-rotated and crashed head-first onto the mat. I broke my neck and was instantly paralysed from the shoulders down.

The 18 months of hospitalisation that followed were tough, the letter from the Army Medical Board telling me that I was 'unfit for Service' was tough, and being told that my options for the future were either an institution, a nursing home, or moving back in with my parents was tough.

I was left on my own to navigate those dreadful first few years of depression with no offer of psychological care. I finally became strong enough emotionally to break away from my parents and buy my own home, which I did without help or support. I battled for three years with social services and the council to get my home converted to suit my wheelchair needs.

In the early eighties I found solace in sharing by giving talks in schools about coping and surviving through difficult times. I continue to do that at universities, medical schools, and businesses today.

Blesma

Autumn 2019

The magazine for limbless veterans

MAN'S (VERY) BEST FRIEND

ALLEN PARTON COULDN'T WALK, TALK, OR REMEMBER MUCH OF HIS LIFE. THEN HE MET A DOG CALLED ENDAL

So much more than smashes
Wheelchair rugby is so rough its nickname is 'murderball'. So why would you play it? *p24*

More connected than ever before
The bespoke new app that will keep Members in touch with each other and the Association *p04*

What can scuba do for you?
Members with loss of use of limb get that floating feeling off the coast of Florida *p42*

"I read these great stories and make comparisons with my own life"

I forced myself to keep busy, got a vehicle, and grew in independence. At one stage, I managed to spend two weeks in the Bahamas with an old Army friend, but not even writing *Tears In The Sand*, a book about those two weeks, made much of a dent in the pain of lost years I still feel.

I have tried reunions with 18 Battery and the PT Corps, but have never felt included. Then things changed, I moved area and Blesma Outreach Officer Vanessa Lucas got in touch. She enthused about what was happening with Blesma and I signed up to all that was going on. What a difference! Now comes a growing feeling that, at last, I'm not on my own.

Then, the other day, the Autumn issue of *Blesma Magazine* arrived and I decided to read it from cover to cover for the first time. What did I learn? That Members give inspirational talks to school kids, win sporting medals and write books, do a variety of exciting outdoor activities and achieve new heights of self-discovery. I've been doing all these things since the 1980s! This isn't a gripe, but more of an observation that individuals from the Armed Forces have been picking up the shattered pieces of their lives and doing remarkable things for decades.

There must be many people who, like me, have felt abandoned, unwelcome, no longer included and have been left to do their best, on their own. I read these great stories and can't help but make comparisons with my own life. I feel a greater sense of pride now than I did when I found out I had made it into the PT Corps because getting into one of the toughest units in the Army was much easier than living this predominantly lonely life with paralysis.

I also wonder how many others left in those cracks read, hear, or see lives being changed for the good after trauma and wonder, as I do: 'What if?'

What if the system had been better organised? What if the opportunities for employment, housing, counselling, and adventure for disabled people had been available in 1981? Would our lives be better, happier, more rounded?

Steve Rigby

SUPPORT FOR REG IS “TRULY BLESMA AT ITS BRIGHTEST AND BEST”

As a fellow 97 year old, I was delighted to read about the superb support given to Reginald Webb [*pictured below*] in the Autumn issue of *Blesma Magazine* that enabled him to regain his independence. This is truly Blesma at its brightest and best.

At the same time, seeing Reginald’s old-style artificial limb reminded me of my first visit to Roehampton in 1944 as a double below-knee amputee. After 10 minutes with my head in the clouds (that was how it felt after months in a wheelchair) Vic Palmer took off the left limb to discover a blister the size of a golf ball on the burns scar tissue.

The skilled technicians went to work to provide me with a non-weight-bearing left limb with a floating socket. The standard war-time elastic straps were no good, and we purloined straps from gas masks! It is great to know that the necessary leather and metal skills are still available.

Incidentally, I was pleased to see the focus on socket comfort at a recent ISPO conference. I was involved in research into weight-bearing socket fit and the good work is still going on.

Sam Gallop CBE

Reg sadly passed away this Armistice Day. Turn to p18 to read his obituary

Photography: Brian Chenier, Warrior Games/ Mark Reis

Words: Jessica Mackinnon Photograph: Andy Bate

Blesma Brunches given National Lottery boost

The Midland Area’s Blesma Brunch project has received a financial boost from the National Lottery. The grant, which is worth almost £10,000, will enable Midlands’ BSO Sam Wileman and Outreach Officer Vanessa Lucas to bring even more Members together in the local community.

The brunches allow Members to meet each other over a cuppa and a snack. As well as spending time socialising, the Members gain confidence and conquer isolation by making new friends and finding support from like-minded people.

“The brunches have proven to be really popular,” said Vanessa. “For those of our Members who don’t get out of their house on a regular basis, the brunches are the highlight of their month. These Members are extremely appreciative of the chance to meet other people who are in similar situations. If these brunches make a small difference, then Blesma is doing its job.”

The funding will enable the Midlands team to organise more brunches in 2020, including a new supper club for Members who aren’t able to attend during the day.

“We can’t thank the players of the National Lottery enough,” said Vanessa. “This grant will make such a difference to the lives of Blesma Members in our area. Everyone associated with the Midlands Area is overwhelmed!”

PARALYMPIC DREAM UP AND RUNNING

A former soldier who was told he would never run again is aiming to compete at the 2020 Paralympic Games.

Michael Bates’ right leg was amputated three years ago after he was involved in a motorbike accident. Having been a keen runner, he was eager to race back to fitness.

“Once I could walk again, I slowly started rowing and using the treadmill. I would push myself a little bit further each time, and within a couple of months I had built up to completing a mini-triathlon every Friday in the gym,” said 43-year-old Mick.

Mick competed in last year’s Warrior Games and is now crowdfunding to raise enough money for a bespoke leg to help him achieve his Paralympic dream.

“Blesma part-funded my first running blade but I’ve improved so much that I need a better one. I’m currently the fastest in the country for 200m and second in 100m but new prosthetics are crucial; at the moment it’s like I’m running with a stiff leg!”

To help, visit www.crowdfunder.co.uk/new-running-blades-for-paralympics

OBITUARIES

Those we have lost

Reginald Webb

25 July 1922 - 11 November 2019

REGINALD WEBB PASSED AWAY on Armistice Day, aged 97. Reg, as he preferred to be known, was born in London on 25 July 1922, the second eldest of 16 children. During WWII, his family home was bombed, igniting his sense of duty to protect his country.

Reg joined the Middlesex Regiment as a Home Guard at the age of 17. In 1942, he was called up to join the King's Royal Rifle Corps, a regiment that specialised in infiltration. He completed two years of training before his regiment was tasked with taking part in Operation Overlord.

Reg landed on the Normandy beaches 10 days after the initial D-Day Landings with the order to protect Arromanches, before his regiment travelled further into France, through Belgium, and into Holland, where it fought in the Battle of Arnhem.

Reg was en route to speak with his Platoon Commander when he was hit six times by machine-gun fire, lying alone for two-and-a-half hours before finally being found.

Reg was flown back to England, but after five operations to try to repair the damage to his right leg, it was amputated below the knee. He was 22 years old.

Reg spent 10 months in hospital before being sent for rehabilitation. Within a year of receiving his prosthetic leg, he was back playing his much-loved pastime, cricket, which he continued to play until he was in his late 40s.

He found work at the Ministry of Defence as a clerical officer before transferring to the Royal Armoured Corps Record Office, then the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, before finally working in the Army Recruitment Office in Finchley until his retirement.

Despite being injured in 1944 and having always been aware of Blesma, often donating to the Association, Reg only joined Blesma in recent years as he felt he didn't need the support before then. However, having struggled to leave his home for five years due to problems with his prosthetic, Reg reached out to Blesma.

Following the Association's intervention, Reg was fitted with a prosthetic that allowed him to walk around his bungalow safely and in comfort. With the assistance of BSO Kevin Long and BSO (Prosthetics) Brian Chenier, Reg recently enjoyed afternoon tea at Sandringham House, where the pair eased his worries about leaving his house with his new prosthetic leg.

In the following weeks, he grew confident enough for a family meal in a restaurant to celebrate his birthday. He had regained his belief that he would be safe outside his home after years of being housebound.

"They've done a wonderful job. I wouldn't have got out the house without them," Reg recently said of the charity. Meanwhile, in October, Reg received the Legion d'Honneur, France's highest order of merit, at a special ceremony arranged by Blesma.

Reg is survived by daughter Gwyneth, two grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren.

Those who have passed away

September - October 2019. May they rest in peace.

Chaplow W	RAF	HQ	17/09/2019
Foxwood P	Coldstream Guards	HQ (Oxford)	11/10/2019
Lakie D	Grenadier Guards	HQ	18/09/2019
Lewan D	Grenadier Guards	HQ	18/09/2019
Myles J	Special Air Service	HQ	09/10/2019
Taylor D	RN	HQ	03/09/2019
Weaver J	RN	HQ	October 2019
Zieba R	RA	HQ	September 2019

Simon Cuerden

24 November 1962 - 24 June 2019

IN JUNE 2019, BLESMA FUNDRAISER Simon Cuerden tragically passed away after suffering a stroke at the age of 56.

Being a soldier was part of Simon's DNA, having served in the British Army for more than two decades. He felt lucky to have left the Forces with little visible scarring and so felt an enormous sense of duty to support those who had not been so fortunate.

Throughout his life, Simon raised countless funds for Blesma – his charity of choice – partly thanks to the strong links he had forged with the Armed Forces Scooter Club, which has pledged to continue to support Blesma.

"I don't think it would be possible to truly articulate to those who did not know my father what a great man he was," said Simon's son, Zak. "Those who did know him carry him with them, and that is a great comfort. I love you Dad. I think of you every day and I hope I always will."

Dave Lewan

21 October 1967 - 18 September 2019

FOR HIS 50TH BIRTHDAY, DAVE LEWAN had the Blesma logo tattooed on his arm as a show of thanks and support for everything the charity had done for him. "I had it done because Blesma saved my life. I wanted to show how much they meant to me," the former Grenadier Guard said in an interview with *Blesma Magazine* in 2018.

Dave, who died in a collision with a lorry on 18 September, aged 51, had previously served with the Grenadier Guards for a decade. Having left the Army, Dave lost his right leg in an accident in Gran Canaria in 2003 before developing a highly painful neurological condition. After five operations to try to save his leg, he was told it would have to be amputated. A couple of years later, he was diagnosed with a neurological condition, Dystonia Torticollis, that causes the neck muscles to contract involuntarily.

"The pain was incredible. My head was tilted over at 90° and I had to move my whole body to turn around," Dave said in the interview. "I tried about 30 different kinds of medication but there was no relief."

It was at this point that then-BSO Keith Meakin got involved and began to guide Dave away from the brink. "The Association has been so special – nothing has ever been too much bother. They have been supportive throughout my darkest days and have never given up on me, even after I had given up on myself," said Dave. "My BSO was like a father figure. He came to the doctor with me, he really cared. When others stigmatised me, he saw something in me."

On Dave's behalf, the Association pushed for a new form of treatment, Deep Brain Stimulation, that helped with his pain almost immediately. This, in turn, led to him running his own courier business.

"Dave was a proud ex-Grenadier Guardsman who became a very popular, well-liked and respected Blesma Member," said Keith Meakin. "He attended many outdoor activities, raised thousands of pounds for the Association and, in 2010, became a Blesma Welfare Assistant because he loved helping other veterans.

"Dave will be sadly missed by everyone who knew him. He touched so many hearts with his caring nature, kindness, and willingness to help others."

Dave leaves a daughter, mum, sister, two half-sisters, and two half- brothers.

Words: Jessica Mackinnon Photographs: Andy Bate, Brian Chenier

NEWS ANALYSIS

New strategy for Chelsea Hospital

Some three-and-a-half centuries after it was first established, the world-famous Royal Hospital is looking to undergo a far-reaching modernisation programme

An ambitious strategy to modernise the Royal Hospital Chelsea has been devised to boost its ability to care for survivors of modern warfare. The Hospital, which was established in 1681 and is now home to 300 Chelsea Pensioners, is expecting an increase in applications from veterans who are coping with limb loss and mental health conditions. The Hospital's far-reaching proposals include a wellbeing clinic that could be shared by Army veterans and local NHS patients, re-designing the accommodation so that it is suitable for limbless veterans, the provision of more psychological support, and even regional centres of the fabled institution.

Its Grade I and II listed buildings are currently home to retired veterans who have en-suite rooms arranged in Long Wards alongside an infirmary, dementia wards and hospice care, but it is felt that they need revising for the advancing cohort of veterans.

"The defining injuries and illnesses that came out of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan were limb loss and mental health issues, and I feel the way the Hospital responds to those should change because, in several decades' time, those folks will be coming here as pensioners," said the Governor, General Sir Adrian Bradshaw (above left), whose distinguished military career includes operational service in Northern Ireland, the Balkans, Iraq and Afghanistan. "We want this place to be much better able to accommodate limbless veterans, so we intend to convert ward accommodation to their individual specification."

Gen Sir Adrian, who is also Chairman of Blesma's Board of Trustees, took up his post at the Hospital a year ago with a mission to reach more veterans without compromising the Hospital's unique heritage.

"My experience with Blesma, having talked at length to its staff and Members, is an important element in what we are doing here," said Gen Sir Adrian. "As Chairman of Blesma, I was determined the Hospital would become better placed to help limbless veterans, and we are moving in that direction. We have to get the message out that people with severe injuries can live lives as normal as possible and enjoy a full life as a Chelsea Pensioner on the Long Wards. They would not be sequestered away from the swim of activities in any way."

More than 1,550 soldiers lost limbs serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, whilst almost 120,000 Service personnel have been diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, according to Government figures.

Gen Sir Adrian added that the current rooms at the Hospital could be adapted to each applicant's needs and that a warm welcome awaits, with several Blesma Members among the current Chelsea Pensioner cohort.

> “OUR AIM IS TO BE HERE IN 300 YEARS. WE HAVE MODERNISED IN RECENT YEARS BUT WE NEED TO KEEP PACE WITH THE TIMES”

A SIX-YEAR STRATEGY

The Hospital's six-year strategy includes converting the Grade I listed Soane Stable Block into a visitor centre – with a direct link into the neighbouring National Army Museum – to support visiting veterans with a range of health and wellbeing needs, including mental health issues. It has also commissioned research to determine how best to collaborate with existing mental health services and charities going forward.

"Our focus for veterans with mental health conditions will be through outreach, as well as running wellbeing activities and classes. We are also in discussion with the Royal Horticultural Society about potential therapeutic gardening programmes," added Gen Sir Adrian. "We believe the shared experiences of soldiering can assist veterans. If you are struggling with a problem that has been caused by spending tough times in somewhere such as Helmand, it can be difficult to explain and get people to understand. But if you talk to someone here who was on the beaches at Normandy or who fought in Korea, they know something of what others have been through, and can offer support.

"In this old soldiers' environment, just like in Blesma, there is no gratuitous sympathy. If you get injured, your mates are concerned for you but you might get

Left: Chelsea Pensioners, including Blesma Member Lawrence Jablonski (near left), chat in the Royal Hospital's chapel

Words: Danny Buckland Photography: Andy Bate

a certain amount of ribbing. It is the normal soldier's self-defence mechanism." The Hospital has recently commissioned needs analysis research, as it would need to fundraise to create the new visitor centre and develop its outreach work.

"We are not setting ourselves up in competition with other charities or established services, but are keen to know where we can make a difference," said Gen Sir Adrian. "We do know that we can provide a unique environment with an outstanding track record of caring for veterans.

"This is a modern, forward-looking organisation but it is rooted in the ethos of the Army and it is important we keep that link. The deal is that pensioners get board and lodging, as well as excellent care facilities, for life and in return they represent the Army in their Scarlets, which they do in a charming and engaging manner with the public. It is a positive contract with the Army."

Future plans could involve a unit for veterans to attend day sessions, or stay for periods of post-operative care, along with the potential to provide benefit to others with activities such as the creation of a walled garden, perhaps in collaboration with the Royal Horticultural Society, that could be managed and staffed by veterans and be open to the public.

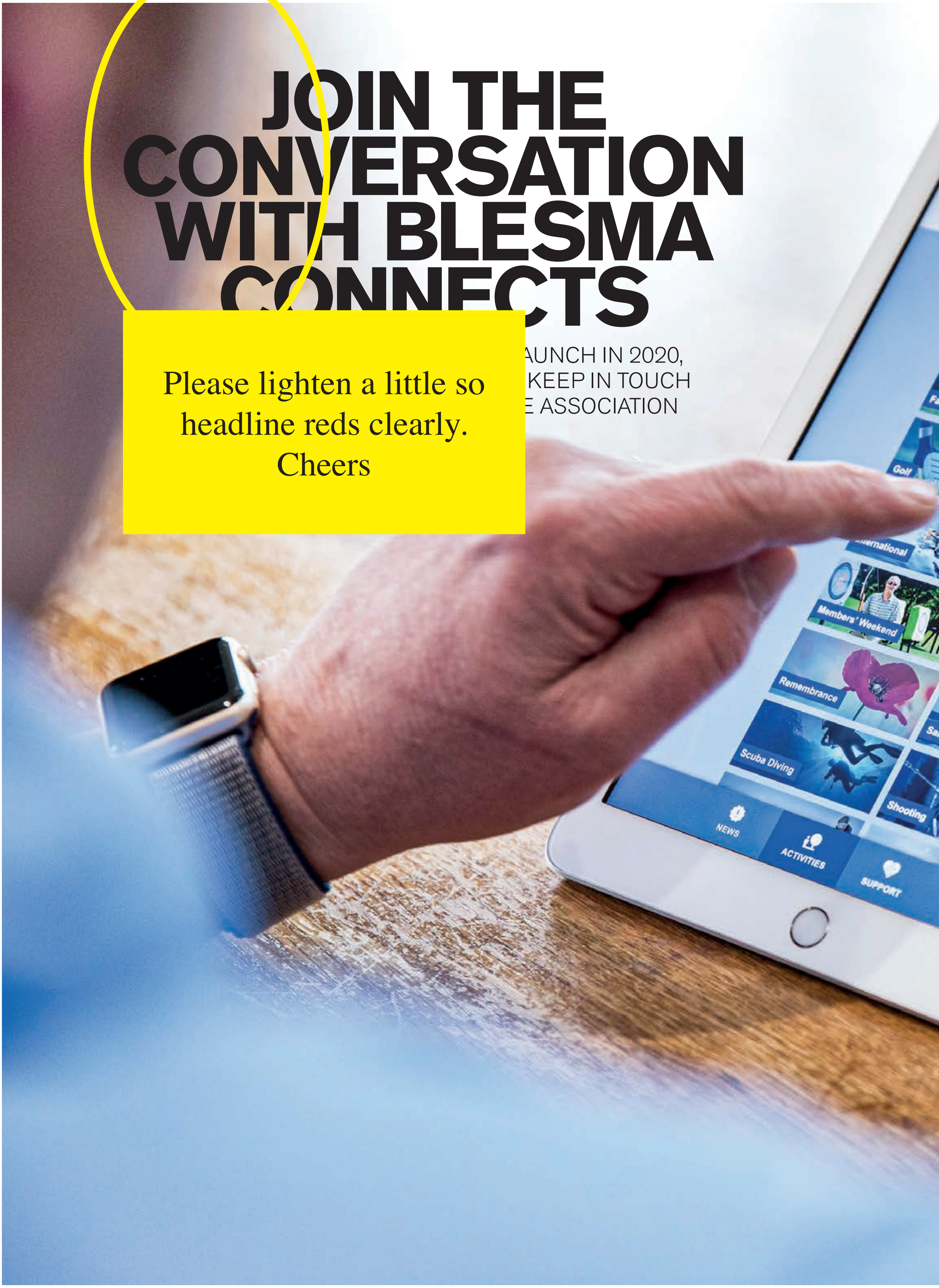
"Our aim is to be here in 300 years' time, continuing to deliver on King Charles II's intent, enshrined in his Royal Warrant of 1681," Gen Sir Adrian added. "We have modernised significantly in recent years but we need to keep pace with the times. We have outstanding facilities for the 300 Chelsea Pensioners who live here but there is more we can do in terms of outreach work and reaching a wider group of veterans."

For more on the Royal Hospital Chelsea visit www.chelsea-pensioners.co.uk

JOIN THE CONVERSATION WITH BLESMA CONNECTS

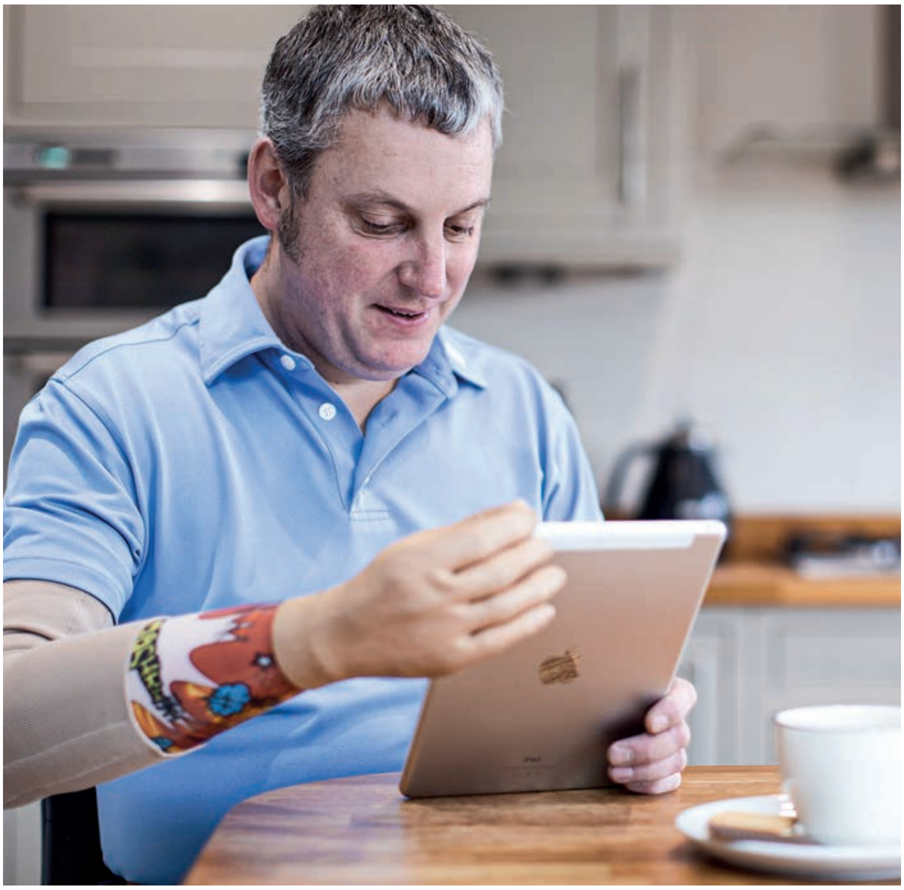
AUNCH IN 2020,
KEEP IN TOUCH
E ASSOCIATION

Please lighten a little so headline reds clearly. Cheers

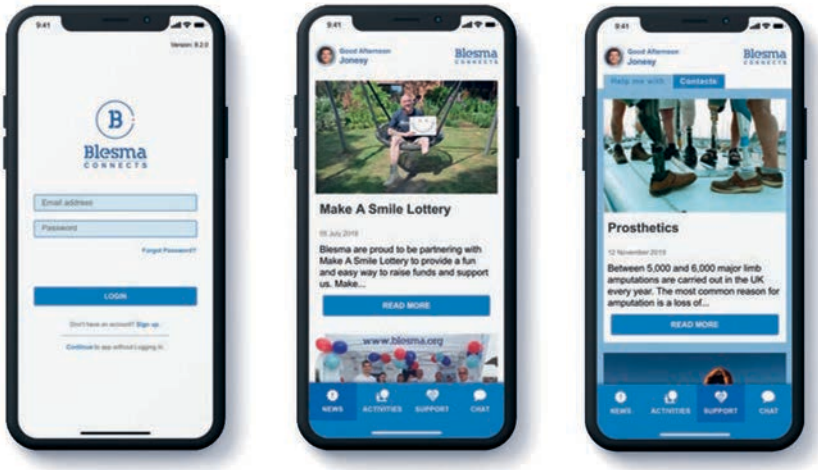


Words: Danny Buckland Photography: Andy Bate


Good Morning
Daz Fuller
All
My activities
Blesma
CONNECTS
Arts & Photography
Cycling
Fishing
Horse Riding
Lifestyle
Motorsports
CHAT



“WE CARRIED OUT RESEARCH AMONG MEMBERS AND USED THEIR FEEDBACK TO DESIGN A SECURE SERVICE THAT WILL MAKE THE MOST OF WHAT BLESMA OFFERS”



Make A Smile Lottery

Blesma are proud to be partnering with Make A Smile Lottery to provide a fun and easy way to raise funds and support us. Make...

Prosthetics

Between 5,000 and 6,000 major limb amputations are carried out in the UK every year. The most common reason for amputation is a loss of...

The all-new Blesma Connects app will bring the Association to your smartphone or tablet

Blesma has been at the forefront of connecting limbless and wounded veterans with one another for the best part of a century. In the early days, it was a network of local Branches that united the membership and, despite not being as prevalent as they once were, their ethos has been central to Blesma's thinking as it looks ahead to the next 100 years.

That's because the Association is about to launch Blesma Connects, a dynamic digital hub that will bring Members closer together by fostering independence, mutual support, and a camaraderie from shared experiences – key aspects of Blesma's values.

Blesma Connects is due to go live at the start of 2020 and is the result of 18 months of research, planning and development. The free app, which will be available to download and use on smartphones and tablets, will open up new channels of communication for Members, making it easier for them to organise local activities and keep up to date with information.

“We are always looking for ways to improve Members' lives and checking that we are doing all we can to support them,” says Ian Waller, Operations Director and Interim Chief Executive. “This project is about using the latest technology to stay true to Blesma's heritage of being in close contact with its Members and encouraging them to connect with each other.

“We carried out extensive research among the membership and used their feedback to design and construct a secure service that will help Members make the most of what Blesma has to offer. The app will give Members access to the latest news and information about the Association, which they will be able to tailor to suit their interests and needs.”

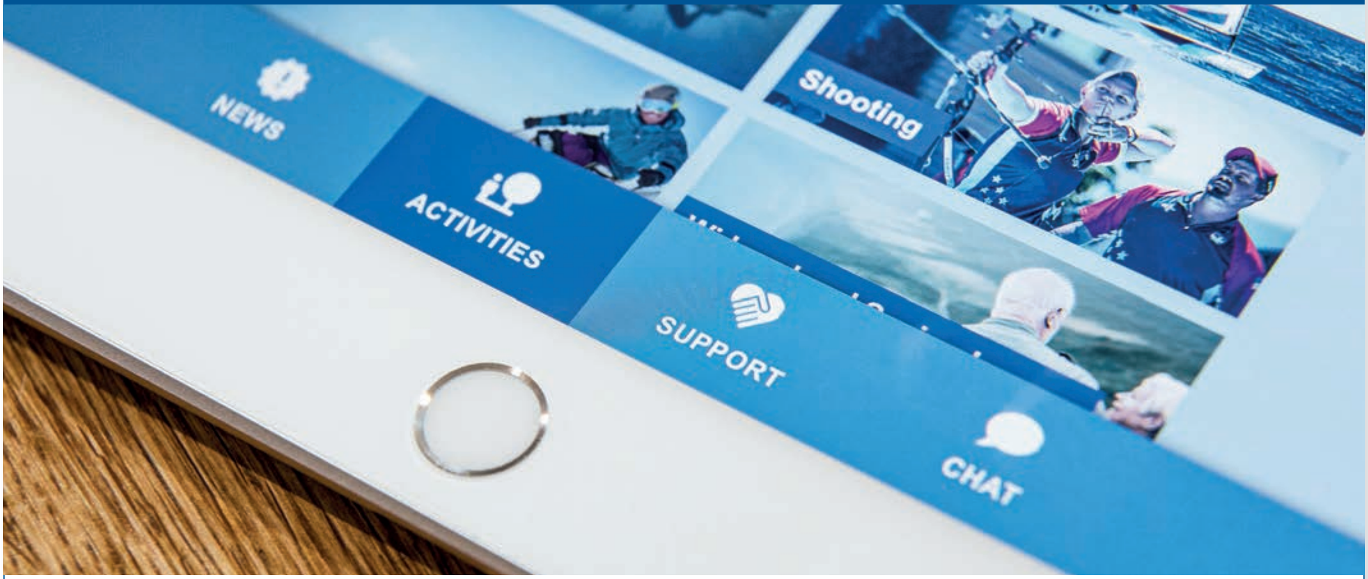
IT'S EASY TO CONNECT

The Blesma Connects app will be available to download from the App Store or Google Play early in the new year, and Members will quickly be able to reap the benefits of its easy-to-use system. Registering is done by following simple on-screen prompts to input your name, date of birth and address, which will then be checked against the Association's main, secure database.

Setting up a username and password will allow quick access to the app whenever it is needed. Users will then be able to move between the four main sections, or tabs; Activities, News, Chat and Support. “Over the last 18 months we have carried out extensive surveys with Members, which were then followed up with interviews with 20-or-so Members across the country to gauge exactly what was needed and how it would best serve the Blesma community,” says Ian. “The membership is very broad – we represent everyone from 19-year-old veterans to 95-year-old Widows – and their technical ability is incredibly varied. We have looked at the whole spectrum of needs, and the thing that tied them together was their desire to build communities. Blesma has a close connection with its Members and this app is set to take that further than ever before.”

The functionality and customer journey have been designed so that Members can access as much or as little of the service as they require. The app will energise the activities experience, for example, as Members will be able to apply for an activity directly through the service,

Blesma Connects: the functions explained



NEWS

- **Blesma news that is delivered via the magazine, Bulletin, and website will be available on the app**
- The news and information will be delivered as a 'news feed', with the most recent stories appearing at the top of the screen
- **Blesma will still operate on a policy of delivering only relevant information. No data will be shared with a third party and Members will not be subjected to external advertising**

ACTIVITIES

- Members will be able to apply to take part in activities via the app and have information and reminders sent directly to their smartphones or tablets
- **You will be able to set up a group and make contact with others going on the same activity to share information and advice**
- The group will be able to keep in contact after the activity to share memories and photographs of the event
- **The Activities tab will show the calendar of events and offer to send notifications when events are organised. The application process will become swifter and easier**
- Activities will still be publicised in the magazine and Bulletin, on the website, and via BSOs and Outreach Officers

SUPPORT

- **The app will offer a route to connect with your relevant Blesma Support Officer and Outreach Officer**
- Members will be able to access and read about Blesma's full range of support, and find contact details for relevant individuals and teams
- **The Association values any feedback you might have, so if you do have suggestions on how to improve the app, please get in touch with the team at the Chelmsford office**

CHAT

- Members will be able to chat to each other or form groups across a secure network, similar to WhatsApp
- **All communications will be contained within that Member-to-Member or group connection, and will not be able to be seen or accessed by anyone else**
- A Member can easily set their own level of engagement, limiting their chats to just a few close friends or opening their profile up to wider groups
- **The 'visibility' function will ensure that no-one will be able to 'see' your profile without your permission**

and then meet others who will be going on the trip, discuss any plans with them or the Activities Team, and share experiences of previous events. It will also make it easier for the Activities Team and BSOs to coordinate events and collate feedback, which will, in turn, influence future activities.

Members will be able to set up groups, similar to WhatsApp, so they can swap stories, memories and information. The app will even allow people to set up their own local activity (meeting up for a coffee, for example, or organising a pursuit) and invite others to come along.

"At its heart, the app will make it easier for Members to stay in touch with each other and have a regular dialogue with the office staff in Chelmsford," says Ian. "The system is safe to use and Members can be assured their data is secure. They can tailor information and news to suit their interests and needs, and can be as 'visible' as they want.

"Blesma's strong premise of Member helping Member is something we all treasure. The app is a natural extension of that Blesma ethos."

Blesma Connects will be available to download from the App Store or Google Play early in the new year. If you feel you need help with your digital knowledge, please contact your BSO to discuss access to training and equipment

MARKING A CENTURY OF MEMORIES

THE FIRST ARMISTICE DAY TOOK PLACE ONE CENTURY AGO, IN 1919, MAKING THIS YEAR'S PARADE AT THE CENOTAPH PERHAPS MORE POIGNANT THAN EVER

The Association's involvement in the Remembrance Day Parade is a hugely important tradition. For every Member it means something different, and over the course of the weekend a variety of emotions are experienced: from the fun, laughter, and companionship of the Saturday evening buffet, to the serious, sombre, and poignant business of the parade and two minutes of silent remembrance on the Sunday.

Fifty three people attended the weekend as guests of Blesma this year, including 27 Members, some of whom were accompanied by carers or family members. All looked respectful in blazers, berets and medals as they formed up in rows, many using mobility scooters.

After socialising with friends both old and new at a hotel on the Saturday evening, the contingent was led past the Cenotaph by Gambahadur Gurung, Cyril Crampin, and WWII veteran Roy Hayward, giving the Royal Salute and laying wreaths at the Cenotaph. Afterwards, several Members spoke about those they remember on this most moving of days, and what they thought of London's remarkably respectful and patriotic crowds...


Blesma
THE LIMBLESS VETERA

Words: Nick Moore Photography: Andy Bate

Gareth Thomas

Gareth (right) served with the Royal Hussars and the Light Dragoons. He was involved in a car accident in 1994 that caused a spinal injury

What did you make of the weekend?
It's something you've got to do at least once! Meeting other Blesma Members on the weekend was really interesting. I chatted to [former Blesma Chief Executive] Barry Le Grys and a number of REME bomb disposal guys. It was great to chat to Roy Hayward, who is a 94-year-old D-Day veteran. He would have been serving around the same time as my grandfathers, one of whom was killed in the war while the other died of his war wounds.

Who do you think about when it's time for the two minutes of silence?
I lost some friends in Bosnia in the early 1990s, and I lost a friend in the regiment due to an accident on exercise. He is on my mind a lot because he was taken at such a young age. I think about them all, as well as troops from previous generations. Observing the silence whilst being part of the parade was surreal – it gave me goosebumps!

You're about to qualify as a doctor of psychology. How has that come about?
I was injured in 1994, a couple of days after I got back from Bosnia, in a car accident. I died five times and they gave me eight pints of blood – it was a mess! But I was lucky, it could have been much worse. Over the last 12 years I've completed four psychology degrees. I specialise in PTSD and disability, and I'm hoping to work with some military charities to give something back. Blesma has been unbelievable for me, and I really like the fact that the Association never makes you feel embarrassed to ask for help.

Lorraine Tilston-Brookes

Lorraine served with the Women's RAF. An injury on Basic Training led to a degenerative spinal condition

For Lorraine, who has attended two previous Remembrance Sundays as part of the WRAF, marching with Blesma was a revelation. "On those past Sundays, because I was the only person using a wheelchair, they stuck me at the front," she says. "I wasn't with the other girls, so I didn't really feel part of it. Doing the parade with Blesma made so much difference. There was a real sense of belonging and comradeship. The day was super. Blesma has been so good to me – I've never known a charity that does so much for its Members!"

Lorraine recently discovered a previously unknown grandfather with a war story, who she reflected on during the two minutes' silence. "My mother didn't know her birth father but I did some ancestry research and identified him. He served in World War I, and I wore replicas of his medals on the day," she says.

"It was nice to think about him on the day, and I will go and pay my respects at his grave soon. He was a boy soldier who was either 14 or 16 at the outbreak of WWI. Records say he served from 1914 to 1920 with the Middlesex Regiment. I wish I'd been able to get to know him, but it was poignant thinking about him, and lovely to wear replicas of his medals."

> **"THERE WAS A REAL SENSE OF BELONGING AND COMRADESHIP. I'VE NEVER KNOWN A CHARITY THAT DOES SO MUCH FOR ITS MEMBERS"**

Phil and Kay Coombes

Phil was a submariner in the Polaris fleet. A fall from a ladder in 1996 eventually led to him losing a leg

Like many people who knew him, Phil Coombes was shocked and saddened by the recent death of fellow Blesma Member Dave Lewan (see p19). It added to the solemnity of Remembrance Sunday for the former submariner, who was attending his first ever march past the Cenotaph.

"Dave was very much in our thoughts," he says. "We'd been to his funeral the week before, and that made the day all the more special. I lost a few mates on HMS Sheffield during the Falklands Conflict, and my son did a tour of Afghanistan, working in bomb disposal. There are so many people to think about during the silence. It is a very special thing."

Phil got a lot out of the weekend, which follows a tried and trusted routine for Members: an early rise to get their uniform correct, followed by breakfast, the 7.30am bus to Central London, and a nervy wait on Horse Guards Parade before the big moment.

"I've been a Blesma Member for 11 years but this was all new, and fantastic to be a part of," Phil says. "I should have gone last year – which would have been great because my son was standing guard right opposite the Queen – but I had to have a brain operation. I was very pleased to go this time – I served 20-odd years in the Forces, but I've never done anything like this.

"I enjoyed the comradeship at Horse Guards, and how much the general public think of veterans. The standout moment was doing eyes right to take the Royal Salute. That's when you know you are really a part of it.

"Blesma was there for me when I had my brain surgery, which made representing the Association on the day very special to me. I think us Brits really do this sort of thing better than anyone!"

Matt Southwold

Matt served with the Devonshire and Dorset Regiment. He lost his right leg after numerous injuries took their toll

What did you appreciate most about the weekend?
Blesma organises it all so well, the charity does a fantastic job! We were very well looked after, with the more mobile Members on hand to look after those who weren't. The parade itself was a lump-in-the-throat moment. It's such a sensation when you come past the Cenotaph, and we were lucky because we had a huge screen near where we were, so we could watch everything as it happened.

And the Members found time to enjoy themselves, too?
Absolutely! It's always nice to meet up with fellow Members. On the Saturday evening everyone stayed in a hotel, so dining together was as entertaining as always. It doesn't matter if you served in the Army, Navy, or Royal Air Force, everyone is together, with a lot in common – and lots of banter! It's such a great feeling. And then, the next day, you're all taking part in the Armistice Day Parade together. The whole event is extremely humbling, and when it comes to the two minutes' silence you could hear a pin drop!

Have you benefited a lot from being part of Blesma?
I went on a sailing trip with the Association that literally saved my life! I think I've done more things through the charity than I probably would have done if I had not had an amputation. I sustained several injures – a ski injury, a fractured neck, I got malaria – that added up and resulted in me getting my amputation. I had nine major operations before losing my leg quite high up, then I was in hospital for months with septicaemia. The Association was great, I've had nothing but support from Blesma from the start.

Cyril Crampin

Cyril served with the Royal Army Service Corps and lost a leg below the knee in a car accident in the 1950s

Cyril was one of three Members who led Blesma's contingent on Remembrance Sunday. The 84 year old was naturally proud to spearhead Blesma's formation, but he kept a healthy perspective on the day and what it means.

"I was pleased to be leading the contingent, although to me it's all about being part of a group. Most of all, I was pleased just to be there," he says. "It's not what I'd call an enjoyable day; I think it is far too important for that. But we did get enjoyment out of being there, all together."

Cyril served with the Royal Army Service Corps, joined Blesma in the 1990s, and has been going to Remembrance parades for 15 years. His favourite part of the day? "Passing the Cenotaph and then getting applause from the crowd is a lovely moment. I know it's not for me personally, but it is for what I am, and for what we all are, as members of the military.

"I'm fortunate that I've not lost anyone personally in conflict – my grandfather was in WWI, but he came home. But through Blesma, I've met people who have been very seriously injured in war, so I think of them, as well as those people who aren't here. I'm just grateful to still be around to take part."

> "I KNOW THE APPLAUSE IS NOT FOR ME PERSONALLY, BUT IT IS FOR WHAT I AM, AND FOR WHAT WE ALL ARE, AS MEMBERS OF THE MILITARY"

Sally Cranmer

Sally served with the Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps. An injury on exercise resulted in her losing a leg, and she has since developed a rare neurological condition

You were a wreath-bearer for Blesma at this year's parade. How did you find that?

Well, this was my first Remembrance Day Parade in London – I usually go to local ones – so that was awe-inspiring in itself. Being a wreath-bearer made it even more interesting and a bit nerve-racking, but it was fine, and went quite smoothly. Overall, it was a very humbling experience, and I felt very privileged just to be taking part. I've been wanting to do this for a long time, and now that it is over it is difficult to put into words.

What was your favourite moment from the day?

It was lovely that there were a few other QAs [members of Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps) around who all said hello – and then the fact that everyone was cheering you on. It brought tears to my eyes – it was surreal! I loved going past the Cenotaph. That's when all the people in the crowd were just shouting: 'Thank You'. I found that really touching.

How was the social side of the weekend?

It was all very well organised by Blesma, and I loved the socialising. It was like going back in time and being back in the Forces – we all gelled very quickly, and I miss that so much. I've made quite a few new friends with Blesma, and it does feel like another family.

How else has Blesma helped you?

The Association has supported me enormously. Recently, Blesma helped me take part in a big swimming competition – I'd like to try out for the Invictus Games in the future. I'd be stuck without Blesma.

Chris Brown

Chris served as a submariner in the Royal Navy. He lost his legs 10 years ago due to arthritis

For Chris Brown, there's a huge amount to think about on Remembrance Sunday: not least his father. "I always think of my dad, who was a Japanese prisoner of war in WWII," he says. "He was in the Cambridgeshire Regiment, and he was lucky to come home because he'd worked on the Burma-Siam Railway. He was found four months after the war ended. He had lost his sight by then, so he never actually saw me, his son, his whole life."

Chris took his dad to several Remembrance Day parades over the years. "I used to go along with the group from St Dunstan's, which is now the Blind Veterans. After I came out of the Navy I joined the Prison Service, but I always liked going down there to help the parade – I'd have one veteran on each arm.

"A lot of my family were in the military – my uncle served with the Royal Lancers – so I think about all of them. It's a very moving moment, and a time to contemplate what's going on, as well as how lucky you are."

Chris thoroughly approves of the way Blesma handles the commemoration, too. "It was very good, really nice," he says. "There's a long wait on Horse Guards Parade, and we'd have been in trouble if it had rained, but luckily the sun shone and we had a good time. I went last year with Blesma, for the centennial commemorations of the end of WWI, when there were 10,000 people marching with us. That was very special."

Despite Chris being one of Blesma's more senior Members on parade, he's always fascinated by those who served in the same conflict as his father. "It's always nice to talk to the older chaps because they have remarkable stories," he says. "They never brag, they're always very humble. That always gets to me."

Penny Gore (and son Chris)

Penny served in the Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps, and lost her leg in 2015 after getting an infection. She was joined by her son Chris

Penny Gore was attending her second Remembrance Sunday with Blesma this year, but the fact that she was accompanied by her son, Chris, also a former soldier, increased the emotion this time around.

"I couldn't help feeling that I shouldn't be there with Blesma the first time I attended, because I hadn't lost my leg in service," she says. "But everyone told me; 'You served your country, why shouldn't you be here?' so this year I came with a different attitude. And I got so much more out of it because Chris was with me. He served his country as well, and that was so special for me."

Penny, who served from 1979 until 1985, had to make a major effort to make it to London. She is currently struggling with her remaining leg, which is at risk of amputation, and she was left partially sighted by a stroke seven years ago. It turned her journey from Hereford to London into a major undertaking, with Penny having to make an overnight stop on the way back.

"It was a long weekend, and a tiring one – with lots of trains and buses – but it was definitely all worth it," she says. "It meant so much to me that I'd do it every weekend!"

Unsurprisingly, as both a veteran and a mother of a veteran, Penny was emotional on the day. "As we were taking part in the parade one lady stood out from the crowd, she was just shouting: 'Thank you lads, thank you ladies,' at the top of her voice as we went past," Penny says.

"Giving the Royal Salute was remarkable, and my goodness, tears came to my eyes when that first cannon went off – they always do! I read the poem in the Order of Service during the silence, and it really made me focus on why I was there. I was so proud to be there with Chris."

Words: Natalie Morris / Metro   Photography: Getty Images

ADVANTAGE OOSTHUIZEN

CORNELIA OOSTHUIZEN WAS LEFT IN SEVERE PAIN AFTER AN INJURY AND WAS LATER DISCHARGED FROM THE ARMY, BUT DISCOVERING A TALENT FOR WHEELCHAIR TENNIS HAS TURNED HER LIFE AROUND

Tell us a bit about your background...
I served in the British Army for a little more than 10 years. I was captain of the Army ladies' tennis team for some time. I was injured whilst serving and, in the summer of 2014, developed a neurological chronic pain condition called Complex Regional Pain Syndrome, or CRPS. Essentially, the condition is a malfunction of the body's nervous system. It communicates to the brain that the effected limb is in pain, whether it actually is or not. I was suffering from such a severe level of pain that I had to go onto very strong medication, including opioids and morphine-related tablets.

How did the condition affect your life?
CRPS manifests itself differently for different people, which is partly why it is so difficult to treat – there is currently no known cure. There are two types of CRPS: one is brought on from trauma – an operation for something entirely different, for example – whilst with the other there is no obvious injury or trauma at all. I had that type. It began with a pain on the inside of my right foot, which soon moved up my lower leg, and finally to my knee. It led to me being discharged from the military in the spring of 2016.

What happened next?
The pain was all consuming, so it affected my life in every respect. People often develop body dysmorphia which results in them just wanting to cut the affected limb off. I ticked those boxes relatively early on, but that was before the medical professionals had exhausted all the rehabilitation options, so I was advised not to think about amputation as a solution at that stage. Four-and-a-half years later, I had tried all the rehabilitation options and interventions, and nothing had worked. By then, I was seriously exploring the viability of amputation because of the levels of chronic pain I was in and the ridiculous amounts of neuropathic pain killers and opioids I was taking just to deal with my day-to-day existence.

When did you finally decide to have the amputation?
In March 2018. I had spoken to people who'd had elective amputations related to CRPS and otherwise,

and had received a number of medical opinions. The broad recommendation is not to amputate because it is not a guarantee that it will take the pain away. In some cases it might work for a time and in some cases it can even make the pain worse! I was referred by my GP to a panel that included a Blesma case worker, surgeons, the Portsmouth Enablement Centre – which would look after my rehabilitation – and the medical board at Salisbury District Hospital. They made sure I had scoped out all the pros and cons, options and risks and, last October, confirmed they were content to carry out the operation. The amputation was done in two parts on 28 and 29 November 2018.

How have the last 12 months been?
Positive! I don't suffer from the chronic pain any more. I do suffer from acute pain and Phantom Limb Pain – which is still pretty fruity when it comes on – but it comes and goes, so is infinitely better than the chronic pain, which never dissipates. The CRPS could return at any minute, so I take one day at a time, but it has already made a massive difference to my quality of life. I took a calculated but informed risk, and I am lucky that it has worked so far.

Have you rediscovered your love of tennis since?
A friend from my Army tennis days actually coaxed me into going for trials for the Invictus Games back in 2017. I loved wheelchair tennis straight away; footwork had never been one of my game's strengths, so it was handy to be on wheels!

I made the team for the Invictus Games in Toronto. We did very well – my partner and I took bronze. I was talent spotted by the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) and invited onto the Adult Development Programme. Then, last year, I self-funded my place on the Wheelchair Tennis Tour, sort of in a semi-professional capacity, and managed to get into the top 50 by the end of last year.

I turned professional in January 2019. Now, I get out of bed every day and think: 'This is the best job I have had in my life!' So in a weird way, life has come full circle. My immediate target is to qualify for next year's Tokyo Paralympics, and then to develop my game so I can win a medal in Paris in 2024. I also want to get my ranking up so I can compete in – and hopefully win – a grand slam, Wimbledon being the top one!

What have been the biggest obstacles you have found to your development as a tennis player?
Wheelchair tennis is fundamentally very similar to non-disabled tennis, apart from the fact that the ball can bounce twice. At first, I found the movement very different and counter-intuitive. I wanted to be able to move sideways and towards the ball as opposed to diagonally and away from it. I struggled with coming to terms with the chair as an extension of my body. Getting the chair to help me maintain momentum – working with it – is something I am developing, and I have some way to go to change my mind-set.

And what about mentally?
I think it's about getting used to developing my abilities to a much higher level than as a recreational player. It is a very different mentality to be a tennis 'pro', and again, it's a wonderful challenge to develop my game and my mentality. Before the amputation, dealing with the chronic pain, the medication, and their side effects were arguably the trickiest aspects of trying to make the most of the opportunity I had been given. It was difficult to have enough energy to do a proper job on the tennis court. Since the amputation, things seem to be going really well. I'm trying to wean myself off medication completely, which is making a big difference physically, mentally, and emotionally.

> "BEING ABLE TO ENGAGE WITH LIFE THROUGH SPORT ONCE AGAIN HAS BROUGHT ME TO A PLACE WHERE I'M SO MUCH MORE POSITIVE THAN I WAS A YEAR AGO"

Previous page and right: Cornelia on her way to Invictus Games doubles bronze in 2017, before her elective amputation in 2018

What do you love about tennis and how has it helped you come to terms with your disability?
I was always a very active person and my life turned pretty much on its head when I was diagnosed with CRPS. Initially, I wasn't able to do much of anything, and my ability to walk was increasingly affected. The extent of the pain I was in, and the side effects of the medication, just cocooned my life and became all-consuming. I was initially loathe to try wheelchair tennis – it was probably a reluctance to come to terms with my 'disability' – but in the end I decided I had to see what I could do now that I was differently abled. I had been competitive and had loved sport – especially tennis – and after that first session I just thought: 'What took you so long?' I was hooked. It was a constructive outlet to re-balance my life and get back to engaging with the world around me – which I had avoided with the CRPS. I've been very, very fortunate with the trajectory that I've had as a result.

The Invictus Games result meant that I was selected for the Paralympic Inspiration Programme, and being able to engage with life through sport once again has brought me to a place where I'm so much more positive than I was a year ago. It's not just down to the tennis and the sport, but that is a massive part of it.

What advice would you give to other people with Complex Regional Pain Syndrome?
It's different for each individual and I think a lot of it depends on the support network that you may or may not have access to. But beyond that, it ultimately comes down to you making a choice. Initially, you do feel sorry for yourself. It is a loss and you do mourn; both for the person you used to be physically and what you were able to do. It's right and proper to have that time, but there comes a time when you choose to put that behind you and move on. I think we're lucky in this country and at this time, that the level of technology is unprecedented – it's almost criminal not to give something a shot because you might actually find that you are pleasantly surprised at what you can still do, or what you can do differently.

I know it's sometimes easier said than done, but fundamentally you have a choice about whether to go for something – to choose to see the positives – or not. I think there is a strength in choosing to get up again when you fail, whatever that 'failure' may look like in broader life.

My advice would be to just go for it. You have nothing to lose and there are just two outcomes: you're either going to realise that this is not for you or you're going to go about it in a different way and discover something new. Whether recreational or elite, sport changes people's lives – people re-engage, you see the sparkle reappear in their eyes, and it takes away some of the more difficult aspects that a disability or illness may have on your life.

2019 END OF YEAR REVIEW

2019 WAS ONE OF THE BUSIEST FOR THE ASSOCIATION SINCE RECORDS BEGAN. HERE'S A TASTE OF WHAT BLESMA AND SOME MEMBERS HAVE ACHIEVED IN THE LAST 12 MONTHS

Left: The Blesma Brunches proved to be a big success, while MGR (above) has reached 60,000 people since its launch in 2016

Spring

BRUNCH IS THE BEST MEAL FOR MEMBERS

Blesma staff all over the UK have gone the extra mile in 2019 to organise activities on a local level that make a huge difference to Members' lives. They reach out to Members who might feel isolated and help them to connect with the Blesma family. A perfect example of this is the Blesma Brunch.

"We get Members together for a cuppa and a chat in the local community, and the response has been excellent," says Vanessa Lucas, Outreach Officer for the Midlands. "Some of our Members can feel isolated and vulnerable, and don't get to go out that often. Sometimes, they may not have even left the house for a week or two, so coming to brunch is massive for them.

"Reducing isolation is a big aim for Blesma. Members say the brunch is a part of their social calendar that they didn't have before, others have said it is the only thing in their social calendar! Seeing relationships form, and seeing vulnerable Members who now have someone checking in on them, is brilliant."

Spring

MAKING GENERATION R REACHES 60,000 YOUNG PEOPLE

An insightful series of Making Generation R podcasts paired six Members with public figures for frank, funny, and often moving conversations earlier in the year. Some of the celebrities, including Ray Winstone, Carol Vorderman, and Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson were familiar with Blesma, while others like amputee chef Michael Caines were more than happy to take part once the concept was explained to them.

Meanwhile, in the 2018/19 school year, Blesma Members visited 182 schools, as well as educational, youth and first responder facilities, to hold 490 Making Generation R workshops and assemblies. These workshops reached 30,481 young people in that period – breaking the target of 30,000 set at the start of the year.

The Making Generation R initiative has now reached more than 60,000 young people since it launched in 2016. This year, it has also been piloted in the NHS, the Fire Service, and even with prisoners in HMP Swansea. See p07 for more on the plans for the programme in 2020.

All Year

GETTING MEMBERS MOVING

Blesma prides itself on encouraging its Members to stay active and pursue a range of interests and hobbies after injury. In the last year, the Association has organised 75 different 'official' events, expeditions, and activities that were attended by 493 participants.

That list of hosted events continues to grow every year, but the Association also provides support grants for external

"IT'S EXCELLENT TO HEAR HOW MANY PEOPLE DONATED TO BLESMA AFTER I SHARED MY STORY. I CAN'T THANK THEM ENOUGH!"

activities and events. Anything from art classes to canoe slalom challenges, whether it might be for fundraising or personal enrichment, is considered.

Blesma offers its Members support grants for kit and equipment, training or logistics subject to the event meeting certain criteria – namely that it will enhance a Member's health or wellbeing, or improve their independence.

"We are always keen to hear from Members who may need a bit of help to get going with an event or from those who want to pick a hobby or interest back up after recovering from injury," says Heather Betts, Blesma's Director Independence and Wellbeing. "The Association is not able to fund absolutely everything, but if a Member's application demonstrates how it will benefit either themselves, the Association, or the wider community then we are happy to support wherever we possibly can."

ROY HAYWARD

Sharing his memories of the D-Day Landings

Roy lost both his legs during the D-Day Landings when he was just 19 years old. Seventy-five years later, at the age of 94, he still sees it as 'a bit of bad luck'.

"I attended a very special D-Day 75 Voyage of Remembrance in June when I accompanied 300 D-Day veterans as we visited ports on both sides of the English Channel for a series of commemorations. It was a very emotional experience for me, particularly sailing out of Portsmouth as thousands of people, including a flotilla of Royal Navy vessels and their sailors, lined up to salute us.

"With a bit of trepidation, I put my name forward to be part of the Blesma contingent at this year's national Armistice Day Parade at the Cenotaph. Last year was the first time that Blesma didn't have a WWII veteran there and it made me think that we are all fading away, so while I'm still here I thought I'd do something about it! I was proud to be one of three Blesma Members leading fellow veterans as we remembered fallen comrades.

"I live on the Isle of Wight and our Blesma Outreach Officer Andy Barlow organises very good brunches (see story far left). There aren't a lot of us left on the Isle of Wight so it's nice to bring us all together once in a while.

"It's excellent to hear how many people donated to Blesma after I shared my story and explained how Blesma has supported me throughout my life. I can't thank those people enough! At the moment, the only thing I really need from Blesma is the Gardening Grant, but I always know that if I need something else, all I have to do is get in touch."

Photography: Andy Bate, Anthony Upton

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MEET BLESMA'S 2019 RECORD BREAKERS

1 Martin Hewitt
Martin lost the use of his right arm after being shot. He summited Mount Everest on 23 May as he aims to scale the highest peak on each continent, and walk unsupported to the North and South Poles, in the Adapted Grand Slam.

2 Michael Swain
Double amputee Michael Swain has become the fastest person to handcycle from John O'Groats to Land's End. He completed the epic challenge in an incredible three days, 17 hours, 55 minutes, and 40 seconds.

3 Stu Robinson
Stuart was an integral part of the GB team that won gold in the wheelchair rugby European Championships this summer. The impressive win gives the team automatic qualification to next year's Paralympics.

4 Lee Spencer
Single-leg amputee Lee rowed solo across the Atlantic Ocean in the first few months of the year. He completed the 3,000-mile row in 60 days, 16 hours and 6 minutes – beating the existing record by a huge 36 days!

Top: The all-new Blesma Connects app will go live early in the new year, and (above) Armistice Day was a touching event once again

Autumn

RELOCATION, RELOCATION, RELOCATION FOR HEAD OFFICE

In September, the Blesma office relocated to Chelmsford in Essex, just 30 miles from London. Following advice from surveyors and agents last year, the Board of Trustees concluded that Frankland Moore House was no longer fit for purpose and it would be more cost-effective in the long term, as well as being in the best interests of the Association, to purchase the more suitable and accessible building in Chelmsford.

Unlike Chadwell Heath, the new building offers access to each of its three floors via a lift and staircase. Each floor consists of a combination of open desks, meeting rooms, and facilities. For the first time, Blesma is now able to invite all Trustees into a boardroom at head office. It is hoped the new office will lead to more Member and staff interaction as well as a more efficient and sleeker working environment for staff, Members and Trustees (see p04 for more).

> **"WE'RE KEEN TO HEAR FROM MEMBERS WHO NEED A BIT OF HELP TO GET GOING WITH AN EVENT OR WHO WANT TO PICK A HOBBY BACK UP"**

Autumn

REMEMBERING THOSE WHO ARE NO LONGER WITH US

Armistice Day is always special but this year was perhaps more special than most as it marked 100 years since Remembrance Day began. 2018 was the first year that Blesma wasn't represented by a Member who had served in WWII, but this year Roy Hayward was one of three Members leading the Blesma contingent (see p39).

As Members remembered their fallen comrades this year, the day they were injured was never far from their thoughts. Remembrance is an incredibly important part of Blesma: many Members have had friends killed in combat, friends injured in combat, and friends who have taken their own life because of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Remembrance Day was their time to think of them, and to pay their respects to anyone who has ever served in the Armed Forces. Read more about this year's Remembrance Parade on p26.

NEW FOR 2020

AN APP FOR MEMBERS TO KEEP IN TOUCH

Blesma Connects is an app that will energise communication and engagement between the Association and its Members. It will go live at the start of 2020 and will open up new routes for Members to access everything from grants and medical information, to national Blesma events and local meetings.

It will also make it easier for Members to connect with each other to take part in local activities and access support, and sign up for information and news based on their own specific areas of interest. The secure, Member-only service will even allow Members to message each other and create groups based on shared interests.

"Blesma is built on a strong premise of Member helping Member, as well as the charity's central support, and we are always looking at ways to make that a better experience," says Ian Waller, Blesma's Interim Chief Executive. "The app is set to be a natural extension of that Blesma ethos and an extra benefit for Members. It will make it easier for them to get together and support each other."

Find out more about the app, what it can do, and how it can benefit you on p22.

For more on the range of free activities on offer in 2020, see the brochure that has been inserted into this issue

This year in numbers

2,387 BSO visits/contacts/communications

11,912 contacts with Members (incl home visits and other visits)

1,363 grants paid to **853** recipients

30,481 students reached by Making Generation R, meaning Blesma has reached more then **60,000** people since 2016. **100%** of Members who took part in the programme reported that it was 'Very Effective' or 'Effective' in improving their sense of wellbeing. **95%** of students said they felt inspired as a result of the workshop and **96%** of participants stated they had a better understanding of what resilience was as a result of the workshop

2,686 Member activity days provided **75** total activities across **31** categories to **493** participants. **49** of these activities were led by Members. **91%** of participants reported that the activities improved their wellbeing and confidence

25% of attendees to Blesma activities were new to the programme

19 Members were supported at Paralympic and elite level

163 New Members

519 successful prosthetic panel applications, **182** Members advised

398 counselling provisions provided

Words: Danny Buckland Photography: Andy Bate

THE SECRET OF SENIORS WEEK

EVERY SINGLE SENIORS WEEK IS SPECIFICALLY TAILORED TO THE INDIVIDUALS TAKING PART. LITTLE WONDER THEN, THAT PREVIOUS PARTICIPANTS CALL IT BLESMA'S 'BEST-KEPT SECRET'

From archery lessons to steam train rides, and from the cacophony of cabaret shows to quiet reflection at military memorials, Seniors Week packs a lot into seven days. The weeks are full of activity, but are carefully constructed so that those who take part – most recently a party of 10 Members and two wives – have plenty of time to build friendships and share their own personal stories of the ups and downs of military life.

Seniors Week has been a regular, not to mention a hugely popular, part of the Activities Programme for some years now. Open to both Members and Widow(er)s over the age of 60, there are two a year – one in Spring, and the other in Autumn – with a focus on relaxing and socialising, as well as taking part in a number of gentle activities and sightseeing.

The most recent Week took place in October and was based at Alvaston Hall Hotel, near Nantwich in Cheshire. Set in award-winning gardens and featuring a spa, several restaurants and evening entertainment, it provided the Blesma party with the perfect base for a week that took in, amongst other things, visits to the Imperial War Museum North, the National Memorial Arboretum, a canal trip, and a steam train journey. Spa visits were arranged for the ladies one day, while the men were taken to a barbers for a hair cut and beard trim. There was even the opportunity to try archery and crossbow shooting. The result didn't matter, claimed the men's team – mainly because they lost to the sharp-eyed ladies!

The events and logistics, which included meticulous attention to both dietary and accessibility needs, had been taken care of months in advance by BSOs Kevin Long and Paul Findlay. It was the second time they had been responsible for Seniors Week and were determined that everything would go according to schedule so all the group had to do was enjoy each other's company.

"Seniors Week was the first activity I took part in after I joined Blesma, and it has really evolved over the last four-and-a-half years," says Paul, BSO for London and the South East. "It was held at the Blackpool Home back then, which was great, but of its time. It could be difficult for Members in the South to get to, so many simply didn't apply. Now, we move the venue around the country each time which has allowed us to think outside the box in terms of the activities we provide. The different facilities of each venue give us the opportunity to try different activities and get more people involved."

> **"IT IS GOOD TO GET TOGETHER WITH OTHER MEMBERS TO HAVE A NATTER, LISTEN TO THEIR IDEAS, AND SHARE EXPERIENCES"**

Recent Seniors Weeks have been held in Scotland, Brighton and Cheshire, while the next one will be in Berkshire in May 2020 (see p47 for more).

"The activities are great but the most valuable times during the week are often the downtimes when the Members are just spending time together. That is so important! Some of the best comments I've heard this week have been whilst the Members have been sitting together at dinner," adds Paul. "They have so much in common that there's not the slightest hint of awkwardness. Some have been Members for years and some are new to Blesma, but before long they were swapping information and making friends with each other – soon it was like they'd known each other forever. We know from previous events that the Members stay in touch and continue to support each other long after they've gone their separate ways at the end of the week."

Below and right: For many Members, visiting the National Memorial Arboretum was one of the highlights of the week

A WEEK THAT'S TAILORED TO YOU

The events put on during the week are carefully spaced to give Members the time to relax and recover. As well as mixing as a group there is plenty of time to enjoy the hotel and spend time on their own.

"We tailor each week to the people on it and plan the activities so that everyone can enjoy them, making sure everything is accessible for everyone – even if they use a wheelchair or can't walk too far," says Paul. "I tell everyone at the start of the week that I guarantee they'll leave with new friends having tried something they've never done before. This week, we've had people in their 90s trying archery and crossbow shooting for the first time. There are always a few who think: 'I'm not sure I can do that' or 'That's not for me', but they surprise themselves when they give it a go."

A visit to the poignant National Memorial Arboretum, near Lichfield in Staffordshire,


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In memory of
Dorothy(Betty) METCALFE
BLESMA Fundraiser
1920 - 2004

PETER HELLIWELL

Peter, 86, from Rotherham, served with the REME, attached to the 4th Royal Tank Regiment with Middle East Land Forces from 1951 to 1953. After serving, he joined the National Coal Board, where he lost part of his left arm in an accident

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How did you first find out about Blesma?
A prosthetist at Sheffield Limb Centre put me onto the Association and showed me some of the magazines. I decided I had to join! I wish I had found out about Blesma a lot sooner than I did – it is an amazing organisation.

What did you know about Seniors Week beforehand?
I'd heard there would be a trip to the National Arboretum and that was a highlight for me – I was really looking forward to visiting the REME memorial. All the trips and entertainment have been incredible. We even had a go at bow and arrow shooting. The ladies beat us!

Did you know anyone else at the start of the week?
I didn't, but it has been very satisfying to meet new people and listen to their life stories – and to tell them mine! There are some real characters, everyone has been great, and the BSOs Kevin [Long] and Paul [Findlay] have been brilliant, nothing has been too much trouble for them. If you've not been on it yet, you should apply! I contacted Emily at the Chelmsford office and she was really helpful and sorted everything out for me. It was very easy!

“I TELL EVERYONE AT THE START THEY’LL LEAVE WITH NEW FRIENDS, HAVING TRIED SOMETHING THEY’VE NEVER DONE BEFORE”

was the highlight of the week for many. It offered Members a chance to pay tribute to fallen friends and relatives, and show their respect for the wider military community. Motorised buggies, complete with guides, were provided so Members could navigate around the 150-acre site and stop off at the relevant memorials, which includes the Blesma Garden and Armed Forces Memorial.

SHARING EXPERIENCES AT ANY AGE

“Everyone we met during the week was in the same boat, and it was great that couples could take part because they could share advice and experiences too,” said 69-year-old former Grenadier Guardsman Eric Edwards, who took part with his wife Jennifer. He was full of praise for his first Seniors Week: “It was great to visit the Imperial War Museum, where I got chatting with a guy who had been a Tail-end Charlie in a Lancaster Bomber. He enthused about how the camaraderie in the RAF at the time was similar to that of Blesma now.

“It is also good to get together with other Members to have a natter about things, listen to different ideas, and share experiences. People would say: ‘Have you ever thought about this or that?’ and it is often a completely different way to approach a problem. It is like an information super-highway for Blesma Members!”

Kevin Long, BSO for the East, says that organising Seniors Week is an exercise in learning and refinement. “You’ve got to think about couples, amputees, people who can’t transfer easily... and we have to recce everywhere fully to make sure it is appropriate and accessible for everyone.

“We’ve had two arm amputees with us during the week and they’ve been able to share tips and tricks on how they cope with the challenges of life. Even at 90 years of age they are sharing, and that is the great thing about Blesma – you can share experiences whatever your age.

“We got great feedback from last year’s events, with a number of Members saying that Seniors Week is one of Blesma’s best-kept secrets. It gets people out of their home for a week – away from the same four walls in some cases – whilst others have not been on holiday for ages. Seniors Week is especially important for those who aren’t often able to get out and about.

“How the Members bond is fantastic to watch – you can see the camaraderie develop. The socialising is empowering; they talk to each other and help each other. They are able to try things with confidence as they know Paul and I have checked the activities are all suitable, and having people around them is reassuring. We are opening a door for them to try new activities and the reward is seeing people really enjoying themselves, getting on, and experiencing something they may not have done on their own. That is fantastic!”

To find out more about the diverse range of free activities on offer next year, see the brochure that has been inserted into this issue of the magazine or go online at www.blesma.org/activities

APPLY NOW FOR SENIORS WEEK

The next Seniors Week will be held in Berkshire in May 2020, and the one after that will take place in Hampshire in the Autumn. There is also a Couples’ Seniors Week planned for next year for the first time. Applications can be made via the form inserted into this magazine, at www.blesma.org, or by contacting Emily Mizon at the Chelmsford office at meo@blesma.org or on 020 8548 7094. More details can be found below.

SENIORS WEEK (Spring 2020)

Location: Littlecote House, Berkshire
Date: 18-22 May
Application deadline: 01 February

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

Who can take part?

Seniors Weeks are open to both Members and Widow(er)s over the age of 60.

NEW FOR 2020 COUPLES’ SENIORS WEEK

Location: Alvaston Hall, Nantwich, Cheshire
Date: 03-07 August
Application deadline: 01 April

New to 2020, the week will be set out the same as Seniors Week but is intended solely for couples over the age of 60. Members and their spouses will enjoy a week of relaxation and gentle activities around Nantwich, as well as some great evening entertainment at the Warner hotel.

MAUREEN HEGGIE AND MARGARET CHENIER

Maureen Heggie (above left) and Margaret Chenier formed a dynamic duo throughout the week and were able to support each other at an important time. They first met at a Seniors Week in 2016, shortly after Margaret's husband, David, had died. This year's event came shortly after Maureen's husband, Jim, had passed away

Maureen

"Jim died at the end of August but when I knew Margaret was going to be here, I had to come," says 65-year-old Maureen from Bolton. "This is the first time I've been to Seniors Week on my own, and it has been lovely in spite of the circumstances. It's good to meet different people and hear their stories, and I like to get out and about, see different places, and do things I wouldn't do on my own.

"I knew Margaret from an earlier trip – she had just lost her husband back then. We made friends and I was able to help her. She has been returning the favour this time around. The week has been just what I needed, particularly with the chance to be around Margaret, with all her stories. Everyone has got their own story about what happened to them and how they got here. You respect everyone's abilities and disabilities, and you learn what they can and can't do. Everyone helps each other."

Margaret

"I'd just lost my husband on the 2016 trip and it was the first time I'd been away on my own," recalls Margaret, 71, from Colchester. "This week has been great fun. It's a lovely week, and it's nice to go somewhere under your own steam. The week allows you to be independent and meet new people with whom you have things in common. You gel straight away with everyone else, and the BSOs work so hard to make the whole experience fantastic – they do everything for us!

"Seniors Week is a way of getting away from everything on your own terms and not being cosseted by friends or family. You can relax and be friendly with people who you've probably never met but who you're sure to have lots in common with. Blesma is a great organisation, the help they gave me when my husband was ill was incredible."

MIKE AND ROSEMARY TIPPEN

Mike (77) from Dunfermline, served in the RAF for 15 years as a technician and electrical fitter working on Javelin fighters. He took part in Seniors Week with his wife Rosemary (71)

When did you learn about Seniors Week?
I saw a leaflet at hospital and decided to find out a bit more. I contacted my BSO, Steve Burton, who was very helpful. I did have some concerns about meeting new people, as well as how I would get on with the activities and whether I would slow people down, but I was soon put at ease – everyone made us feel very welcome.

Did you find the activities and accommodation suitable for wheelchair users?
The organisers had worked very hard, and a lot of thought had gone into everything so that, no matter what our condition, we could all take part. I have only been a Member for a year but everyone associated with Blesma is incredibly caring and thoughtful.

What was the highlight of the week for you?
It was great to have a break, try something different and have new experiences. It is difficult to pick one activity or trip over another, but we found the best thing was the camaraderie. Being ex-Service brings us all together – lots of joking with each other. Pleasant people, pleasant times. It was really refreshing!

LUKE SINNOTT

Almost a decade after losing his legs to an IED blast in Afghanistan, Luke Sinnott has one thing on his mind – next year's Paralympic Games

I was working as a skipper for a sailing company when I decided I wanted to join the Army. My family has a military background and I'd met a couple of people who had been in the Forces. It made me think: 'You know what, I can do it.'

I commissioned into 22 Engineer Regiment before moving to 23 Engineer Regiment (Air Assault). My squadron was re-rolled into an EOD squadron and I deployed on Herrick 13.

Given our counter-IED role, I remember telling my troops before we deployed: 'If anyone loses their legs you have to promise to try to compete at the Paralympics. You've got to make the best of your life!' Little did I know that it would be me who would be injured!

Halfway through the tour, in November 2010, we were tasked with clearing a steep slope just 60 metres from camp. I had made the trip four times when I triggered an IED. There was a big explosion, dust and dirt everywhere.... I stayed conscious throughout the whole thing.

The guys were straight on me and I was on a medical table in Bastion 23 minutes later. My left leg had been obliterated, all the skin and tissue had been removed from my right leg, my left hand was hanging by a thread, and I'd broken three bones in my right hand when the rifle was blown out of my grip. My lungs were damaged and I was bleeding out of three major arteries; I came very close to losing three limbs.

My recovery process was long – I was in and out of surgery for many years – but the Paralympics stuck with me. Shortly after leaving hospital, British Sailing was on the hunt for sailors. I joined two other Blesma Members – Craig Wood and Steve Palmer – on a three-man boat, but I needed a sport that didn't take me away from my young family so much. I loved running, so decided to join a local athletics club.

In 2014, I contacted British Athletics and told them I thought I could be a decent long jumper. I focused on training for Rio for the next two years. My coach, Roger Keller, had worked with Blesma Member Dave Henson, so had already experienced every prosthetic issue I might face. My journey began and, in 2015, I took part in my first international competition.

"I'M RUNNING FASTER AND FEELING FITTER THAN EVER. ALL MY TIMES ARE LOOKING GOOD. NOW I'VE JUST GOT TO WAIT..."

Unfortunately, I didn't make the squad for Rio, but I told myself that I wasn't going to miss that plane again. I'm feeling pretty good now. I'm running faster and feeling stronger and fitter than ever. All my times are looking good. Now, I've just got to wait until June to see if I'll be on that plane to the 2020 Paralympics!

Away from athletics, I'm a Veterans Rep for Veterans Gateway, and I'm a Trustee for Flying for Freedom. I'm a qualified flex-wing and hot air balloon pilot. Flying has been beneficial for my rehabilitation. Every January, we recruit a new group of wounded, injured and sick serving personnel and veterans, and teach them how to fly.

Words: Jessica Mackinnon

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If you are interested in the day, please discuss with your Prosthetist/Physiotherapist in order for them to register you for the day.

Date : Sunday 29th March 2020

Time : 10am - 4pm

Venue : University of Birmingham Sport & Fitness,
Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TT

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