



FLIPPING AMAZING!

WHEN MAT ARMITAGE LOST HIS LEG HE VOWED TO BE ABLE TO DO BACKFLIPS AGAIN. THAT WAS JUST FOR STARTERS

What's so special about this photo?

A huge coincidence opens a floodgate of memories for Larry and Jean Morgan **p34**



Time to discover the value of verse

Could your wellbeing benefit from a poetry workshop? Find out how it helps Members **p40**

'Putting' the focus back on activities

Pro footballers, sports promoters, supporters and Members make golf day a huge success **p16**



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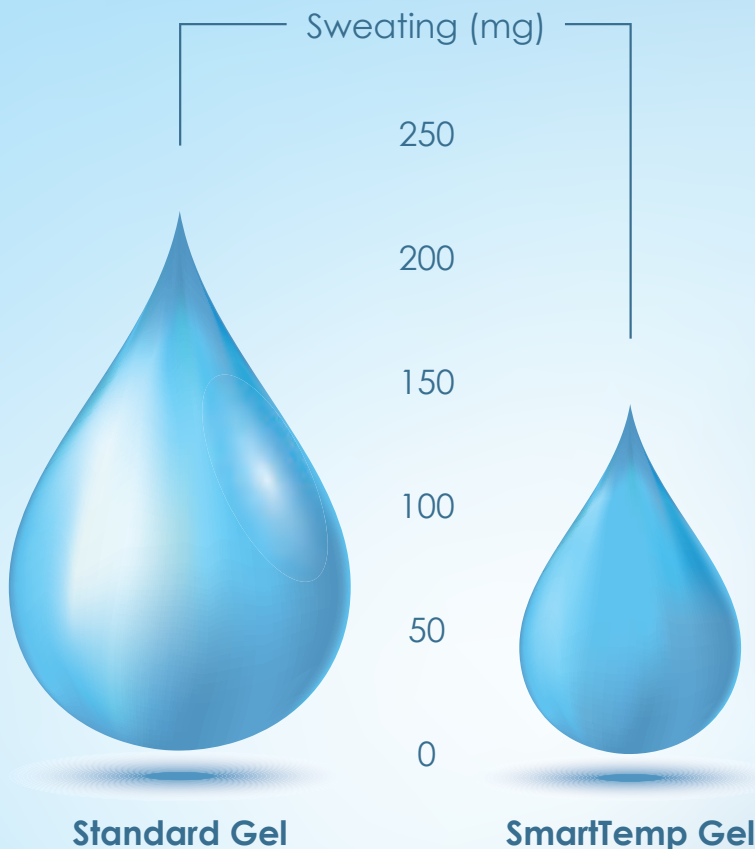
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Special thanks to: All our Members, Heather Betts, Jon Bryant, Brian Chenier, Lorna Dorrell, Elaine Hems, Jess Mackinnon, Jess March, Emily Mizon, Izzy Perks, Nick Tuck **Blesma Magazine** is published on behalf of the **British Limbless Ex-Service 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: Autumn 2020. © Blesma 2020.

Blesma Member makes history on Matterhorn

MIND OVER MATTER
The Matterhorn, which Neil
summitted at the fourth attempt,
has claimed the lives of more
than 500 mountaineers



Words: Jessica Mackinnon

NEIL HERITAGE'S MISSION TO CLIMB HIS WAY INTO THE RECORD BOOKS IN THE ALPS HAS BEEN ALL-CONSUMING SINCE 2015. NOW HE'LL NEED TO FIND ANOTHER CHALLENGE!

Neil Heritage has become the first double above-knee amputee to summit the Matterhorn in an attempt that was part-funded by Blesma.

Army veteran Neil, who lost both his legs in Iraq, reached the 4,478m peak on Friday 07 August on what was his fourth attempt to conquer one of the deadliest mountains in the world.

"The whole expedition went really well, and it was amazing to reach the summit," said the former corporal, who was injured by a suicide bomber in Iraq in 2004. "I have had a couple of goes at this now, so to finally get up there was an incredible experience!

"Our aim for the first day on the main mountain was to climb up to a camp and rest overnight before carrying on to a

mountain hut called Solvay Hut, which sits at about 4,000m, the next day. But after a 10-hour climb we made it to Solvay Hut on day one!

"I was too slow to make the summit on the next day though, so instead we rested before setting off on the Friday at 5:30am. I made the summit at midday."

FIVE YEARS OF FOCUS

Neil's quest to climb his way into the record books on the Matterhorn has been several years – and attempts – in the making. He began training for the ascent of the notorious peak (it is the sixth highest in the Alps and has claimed the lives of more than 500 climbers) back in 2015 before making his first attempt the following year.

"We got quite a few things wrong on that first climb," he said. "Nobody had tried this before, so mistakes were inevitable. The prosthetics we designed didn't last long enough, and we were too slow climbing, so I had to turn back halfway up the mountain. We learned a lot though!"

Neil had to abandon an expedition in 2017 as the weather thwarted any possibility of a safe climb even starting. Then, on his third attempt, in July 2018, he was just 600m short of the summit when he had to turn back due to bad weather.

Neil's persistence shows his fighting spirit as the physical demands of climbing without legs are huge; it is estimated that he uses seven times more energy on a mountain than a non-disabled climber.

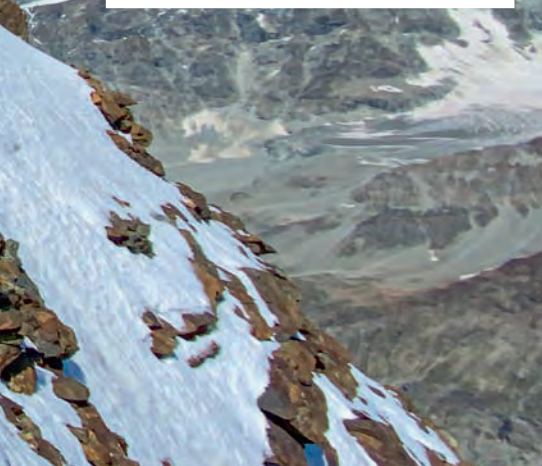


Veterans' verses

Wellbeing through poetry (p40)



"I HAVE HAD A COUPLE OF GOES AT THIS NOW, SO TO FINALLY GET UP THERE WAS AN INCREDIBLE EXPERIENCE!"



Below left: Neil Heritage makes history on his fourth attempt to summit the Matterhorn



welcome



Welcome to the Autumn edition of the magazine. I hope you will agree that it shows that Members and staff are looking to make the most of every opportunity whether individual, virtual, or in a socially-distanced group. Our priority throughout COVID-19 will, of course, be everyone's

safety, and we will continue to comply with the relevant rules across the different parts of the UK. But where we can find a way to do something safely within the rules, we will look to do so.

As usual, there are some significant achievements in these pages. Neil Heritage tells the story behind his triumph on the Matterhorn, Nerys Pearce has an update on her three-phase endurance challenge, and Mat Armitage recounts his journey from soldier to amputee freerunner (via TV show *Ninja Warrior*).

There is also good news in motor racing, cycle training, job hunting, an upcoming movie, and some extraordinary fundraising efforts. It is also a real privilege to tell Jean and Larry Morgan's story after an extraordinary coincidence occurred when we published a photo in the Summer issue of Jean and her sister at a VE Day celebration 75 years ago.

Readers will be saddened to hear that Ian Waller has decided to leave Blesma after eight years of service as Director Support and Communications, and then Operations Director. We are hugely grateful for his contribution to the success of the Association during this period and wish Ian the best of luck for the future.

I would like to thank all the staff, volunteers and Members who are helping to mitigate the effects of the current pandemic. In this issue, Steve Burton and Emma Gration update us on some of the great work they are doing in Scotland, while Chris Jones reviews 15 years spent delivering voluntary welfare support and reminds us that Member supporting Member never stops. Enjoy the issue.

Jon Bryant
Chief Executive





Thanks to Neil's charity Climb2Recovery several other climbers, including Blesma Member Les Binns, also reached the summit

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

Neil's successful 15-strong climbing team included six wounded, injured or sick veterans who were supported on the climb by Climb2Recovery, a charity Neil founded in 2016. Blesma Member Les Binns was one of the six. He joined five experienced mountain guides and four sponsors, and was successful in reaching the summit.

“The main effort of the charity is running courses and helping people get qualifications back in the UK, so this expedition was a bit unusual,” said Neil. “Les and several other members of Climb2Recovery made the summit, which is pretty cool and a massive achievement for any climber.”

The 2020 Matterhorn expedition has already raised more than £9,000 for Climb2Recovery. “The money raised is amazing for the charity. We only have a small budget so the funds will go a long way and will pay for a big chunk of what we are going to try to achieve in 2021.”

As well as running a charity, being a pioneer of climbing equipment, and breaking world records, Neil is a fitness instructor and an active dad of two kids.

“IT TOOK ME FIVE YEARS FROM BEING INJURED TO WALKING WITHOUT STICKS. MEETING OTHER MEMBERS WITH SIMILAR INJURIES WAS VERY HELPFUL FOR ME”

Blesma has supported Neil's climbing with funding for professional guides as well as camping kit and equipment. But the assistance goes beyond money, says Neil.

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

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

“To me, there are vital emotional and financial sides to the help that Blesma offers. What's really useful is staying in touch and hearing what all the other Members are planning and doing.”



Murray Hambro has made a return to racing after two years out

NEWS BRIEFS

IT'S GAME ON (AND ON, AND ON!) FOR BLESMA

The first Game On For Blesma event has taken place, with Callum Walker spending 24 hours on live video gaming website Twitch, raising more than £1,000 for the Association in the process.

Starting at 5pm on Saturday 27 June and playing right through until 5pm the next day, Callum is the first gamer to live stream his gaming to support the Association.

"The fundraiser went really well. I mixed it up a bit by playing multi-player games so I had people to talk to online," said Callum, whose right leg was paralysed below the knee after a freak running accident two years ago.

"I have always had close relationships with our veteran community, and had members of the Intelligence Corps, Army Air Corps, Royal Artillery and Royal Signals in my live chat throughout the challenge."

Callum pulled in donations from Poland, Russia, Italy, Sweden, and Denmark to more than double his target of £500.

Look out for Blesma's Game On Week which starts on 24 October with a 24-hour Gameathon. If you would like to get involved, please contact regfundmgr@blesma.org or look out for news on the Blesma Connects app



100 MILES IN LESS THAN FIVE HOURS FOR BLESMA'S LEIGH

Royal Air Force veteran and amputee Leigh Bland has completed a 100-mile non-stop static bike ride in aid of Blesma and the American military charity the Wounded Warrior Project.

Leigh, 40, from Leicestershire, had planned to take part in the 2020 Prudential RideLondon event before it was cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic. Still wanting to raise funds for the two charities, Leigh came up with his own challenge and completed it in four hours and 54 minutes – a full two hours less than he expected.

Murray has rediscovered his love for bike racing

An Army veteran who became the first double leg amputee to race in a support class of the British Superbike Championships before hanging up his leathers has made a return to racing.

Murray Hambro stepped away from racing two years ago but made a comeback at Donington Park earlier this year in the Ducati Performance TriOptions Cup.

"Having raced for a team in the past, I decided to make a solo return in 2020," said the 40 year old, who has been racing in various classes since 2012. "Now that I'm riding for myself, there's no pressure and I've found my love for racing again."

This year, the TriOptions Cup series will consist of five rounds and, unlike previous seasons, which have pulled in crowds of more than 130,000 over a race weekend, the circuits will be closed to fans due to social distancing guidelines.

"Racing without the crowds was a bit surreal because the circuit was really quiet, but it did mean I could fully focus on the racing," said Murray. "I'm always making adaptations to my bike and, as I get faster, I'm learning things such as my corner entry line and speed so I don't rub my prosthetics against the Tarmac, but my first race didn't go too badly."

48 HOURS IN THE SADDLE FOR BSO PAUL

BSO Paul Findlay completed a 48-hour cycle challenge in August, raising £4,500 for Blesma and NHS Charities Together. Cycling in two-hour shifts followed by two hours' rest, Paul battled through extreme tiredness and painful stump sores.

"The challenge was the toughest thing I've done both physically and emotionally," said the 35 year old, who lost his right leg after an injury sustained in Afghanistan.

"I wanted to highlight the conditions that those in the NHS and the Armed Forces often experience when they have to work having had little or no sleep. I had difficult times throughout the challenge, but the last three sessions were excruciating. On more than one occasion I didn't think I was going to be able to complete the ride!"

Messages from friends, donors, and the cycling community – with support coming



from as far away as America – helped Paul through his 372-mile ordeal.

"I burned 23,500 calories and consumed only 6,000, and I got a total of three hours and four minutes sleep in the 48 hours, but I kept going by reading messages of encouragement and looking at the amount of money that people were kindly donating"



Member walks again for the first time in six years

Former Gurkha Pradip Rai, who is paralysed from the chest down, has walked again thanks to robotic exoskeleton technology.

Prad, 48, has used a wheelchair for the last six years, but over summer he was able to trial four different suits at The Royal Buckinghamshire Hospital. Taking his first steps was an “emotional and happy moment for everyone involved,” he said.

“After paralysis, any form of walking is very good because you get to talk to people at eye level,” said Prad. “It feels good; you can be helpful at home and walking improves your circulation and heart rate, as well as your bowel and bladder function.”

Before the trials began, Prad underwent

a number of physical checks, such as having his bone density and upper body strength measured, to make sure he met the necessary criteria.



“It’s like learning to drive a car; you just need to build up your skills with a trainer. For me, it’s hard to stay upright because I have no core function, but that’s the kind of thing you learn.

“Initially, I trialled the Ekso suit for a week with a walking frame before moving onto an Indego suit, then ReWalk, which has hip and knee sensors, and finally Free Walk. Indego was my preferred device as I found it flexible, practical, smooth, and lightweight. I could use it sitting in a wheelchair or walking on a variety of surfaces,” said Prad.

BLESMA CONNECTS RECOGNISED IN CHARITY AWARDS

THE BLESMA CONNECTS APP WAS shortlisted in ‘The Best Use of Technology’ category at this year’s Charity Times Awards.

Now in their 21st year, the awards aim to celebrate best practice in the UK charity and not-for-profit sectors, and continue to honour the outstanding professionals who work in the many and varied fields of charity management.

“It is fantastic that Blesma Connects was a finalist in the 2020 Charity Times Awards,” said Nick Tuck, Blesma’s Digital Media Manager. “The app has been designed to connect the membership and, only nine months after its launch, we are already hearing some amazing success stories about how new friendships have been formed through the app during self-isolation.”

The app allows Members to read all the latest news from the Association, access tailored welfare and support information, view and apply for activities, and message each other. Since it launched earlier this year, it has been downloaded by more than 1,000 users.

You can download the app for free from the App Store or Google Play



CHRIS GETS SEASON ON TRACK

ONE-ARMED MOTORBIKE RACER Chris Ganley is feeling “pretty proud” after finishing 15th in the first round of the ThunderSport GB 2020 racing season. The former Lance Corporal was finally able to start the racing season at Donington Park at the end of July after lockdown guidelines eased.

“I’m feeling pretty proud after round one of the season. We raced in the rain, and the track was slippery, but I started from 31st on the grid and finished 15th,” said the 31 year old from Clevedon, who has his sights set on becoming the first one-armed racer at the Isle of Man TT.



Rob Copsey completes another stint during his Channel swim



Rob channels his energy into swimming to France

Having watched the first all-amputee Blesma team swim the English Channel six years ago, Rob Copsey has finally taken the plunge. He was part of a six-person relay team who successfully swam 21 miles from Dover to France in one-hour intervals on 11 August, completing the epic swim in 16 hours and five minutes.

“I had originally planned to run the London Marathon in aid of Blesma, but after deferring it until October 2021 because of coronavirus, I thought I’d make up for

it – and thank those who sponsored me – by doing the swim,” said the 49 year old from Kent, who lost a leg when he stepped on a landmine whilst serving in Rwanda.

“It was a great experience. It wasn’t the fastest swim, as the tides and currents gave us problems and we ended up swimming two hours longer than expected, but I loved it. It was great fun!”

Rob has so far raised £1,700 for the Association and hopes to take on the Channel again with an all-Blesma team.

“IT GIVES MY MIND A FOCUS AND GIVES ME PEACE”

A Blesma-funded course has given one Member the confidence and skills to start his own motorbike spray painting business.

Roger Mason attended a Paint My Ride course last December, having always dreamed of working in the paint spraying industry. For the last eight years, he has been spray painting for his wife’s business and teaching himself along the way, but he decided to take his passion further after finding it helped with his PTSD.

Thanks to funding from Blesma, Roger attended an intensive 11-day course which taught him how to repair metal, plastic and fiberglass, as well as to master a number of air brushing and polishing techniques.

“Spray painting gives my mind a focus and gives me peace,” said the 56 year old from Lancashire, who currently works in a police control room. “The course was absolutely fantastic and has greatly improved my skills and confidence!”

Roger is already taking commissions and is in the process of building his website.



Having fun and raising funds on the inaugural Bowra 1000



Words: Jessica Mackinnon

Foundation does John O’Groats to Land’s End with a difference

VETERAN MARK BOWRA, who suffered a stroke in 2014, has completed a 1,000-mile challenge to raise money for stroke survivors.

Mark established the Bowra Foundation in 2019 and had planned to fundraise by cycling, swimming, paddling and walking from John O’Groats to Land’s End but, due to COVID-19, he adapted the challenge to use some static equipment and set off virtually on 03 June.

“The inaugural Bowra 1000 was superb. We had to complete most of the 1,000 miles locally due to COVID-19, but as restrictions eased it was great to get out on the road from Dartmoor through parts of Devon and Cornwall,” said the 46-year-old former

Special Forces soldier. “Crossing the finish line with fellow veterans, people with brain injuries, and the Commandant General of the Royal Marines was epic. It shows what people can do if they put their minds to it.”



In the spotlight

Chris Jones



Chris has been a Blesma Welfare Volunteer, a position historically known as Welfare Rep, for 15 years and a Member for 54. He steps down from his role in September and has received another Blesma award for his hard work.

“I became a Welfare Rep for Gloucestershire in 2005. I had just been medically retired from the Civil Service, and after travelling around America and Australia for several weeks, retirement hit me like a brick. The phone never rang, I missed the social aspect of work, and I struggled with having so much free time. I began to look for a volunteer role and was on a Blesma activity when I learned that John Francis, the Support Officer for the South West at the time, was looking for a volunteer Member to cover the area. I used to be the honorary secretary for the Gloucester and Cheltenham Branch, so I phoned John. He gave me an interview over the phone and the rest is history!

A CONSTANT FOR A DECADE AND A HALF

“In my time, I’ve worked under four BSOs. They’ve all had their own ways of working, but the way I’ve worked as a Welfare Rep has never changed. The role mainly involves looking out for Members. I keep in touch with them, make a visit every now and again, and report back to the BSO. I like to call it ‘being on patrol’. Often, it’s just about having a chat with people, but I will sometimes come across a Member who is struggling; perhaps with a prosthetic issue, disability or mobility problem, or perhaps they might be in need of a grant. I’ll offer a suggestion or, if it’s something simple like repairing a flat tyre on a scooter, I’ll do it.

“The role has given me a lot of pleasure over the years – I’ve enjoyed travelling around the county and seeing different people. I’m the type of person who likes to help others. Members could call me any time – I’ve even worked on Boxing Day when a Member who was desperate for a scooter had a brand new one delivered in kit form and needed it assembling.

“Knowing that Blesma is there for them makes Members feel happier. Being a Member myself, having lost my right leg while serving in the Army in 1966 before having two re-amputations on the same leg,

I do like to give people the benefit of my experience. Recently, I’ve been helping a new Member who is 82 years old. It’s a shock to lose a limb at any age, so whilst the remit of a Welfare Rep is to try and see every Member in your area at least once a year, and follow those up with phone calls every so often, I’ve seen this particular gentleman about a dozen times now. I’ve tried to help him come to terms with losing a limb. The old saying; ‘Don’t try to run before you can walk’ rings true – that’s what I tell people.”

THE EYES AND EARS OF THE BSO

“On 31 August, I stepped down from being so readily available. I’m not finishing completely, and will still help out on the odd occasion, but I need to slow down a little as I have some health problems. It’s nothing too serious, but I have an optical problem and shouldn’t be doing any lifting. I don’t want to let anybody down, but some days I haven’t got the energy that’s needed.

“I recently received the Frankland Moore Trophy for the third time. The first nomination was in 2009 by John Francis, the second by Steve Fraser in 2017, and this time by Tom Hall. I found it rather embarrassing really, but it means a lot to be recognised and it is proof that I must be doing something right! The framed citations are proudly displayed at home.

“I have really enjoyed my time as the Welfare Rep for Gloucestershire, and I would appeal to all our Members who can afford to spare a few hours to consider taking up the role. This is your Association, it was formed by wounded ex-servicemen getting together, so we mustn’t lose it. Everyone needs to work to keep it going. The BSOs and Outreach Officers do a great job, but the volunteer Welfare Reps offer that bit of extra support – I like to think we are the eyes and ears of the BSOs – it’s like a little bit of intelligence gathering. We have a unique Association; our ethos is Member helping Member. That’s the way it has always been and that’s the way it needs to continue.”

If you would like to find out more about becoming a Blesma Welfare Volunteer, contact your Blesma Support Officer or Outreach Officer

“
THE ROLE MAINLY INVOLVES LOOKING OUT FOR MEMBERS. I KEEP IN TOUCH AND REPORT BACK TO THE BSO. I LIKE TO CALL IT ‘BEING ON PATROL’
”

'I'm finding out what I can do'
Mat Armitage rediscovers freerunning (p26)



Chris hard at work in his role as Welfare Rep, recovering a Member's broken-down scooter

Words: Jessica Mackinnon

↘ BLESMA BRIEFING

Your country (still) needs you

Ever thought about taking part in a research project? BSO (Prosthetics) Brian Chenier explains how you can support fellow ex-Service personnel after you leave the Forces



Everyone who has served in the military has had their own reasons for joining up. I suspect that somewhere in our thought process was the desire to do something useful, to support our country, and to stand side-by-side with our brothers and sisters in arms. There might have been the lure of adventure, foreign travel, and earning a living, but whatever the reason, choosing to serve one's country by engaging in military service should be a source of pride.

Opportunities to continue to help after service are varied, but one way is to engage in research projects. The Blesma website has a page dedicated to ongoing research and, from time to time, the Association will publicise a project via social media or in the magazine or Bulletin. A current project that Blesma is involved in is to do with how veterans feel about their bodies or appearance after injury. Studies like this offer a valuable insight and can often lead to real changes in the way care and support are provided. Here are details of the study and how you are able to get involved:

The Centre for Appearance Research wants to know how physically injured veterans who have scars and/or limb loss feel about their bodies, the way they look, and how this affects their everyday lives. It is doing this research as part of the Scar Free Foundation Centre for Conflict Wound Research, from the Centre for Appearance Research, at the University of the West of England. The Centre will use what it learns to see if physically injured veterans would like any support for how they feel about their bodies. It will then design

“
STUDIES LIKE THIS OFFER A VALUABLE INSIGHT AND CAN OFTEN LEAD TO REAL CHANGES IN THE WAY CARE AND SUPPORT ARE PROVIDED
”

RESEARCH NEEDS YOU!

How veterans feel about their bodies after injury is rarely talked about. For many, the way they look might not be important to them or they might feel great about their body and the way they look after injury. However, having physical scars and/or losing limbs might affect how some veterans feel about their bodies, themselves, and their relationships with others.

Research with civilians has shown that while many people manage well, some with scars and/or limb loss experience social and psychological difficulties. This might be because other people stare at them, make inappropriate comments, ask unwanted questions, or avoid them. This might lead to low self-esteem, worries about the way they look, low confidence or mood, and feelings of anger and hostility.

You are invited

by researchers at the University of the West of England

to complete a **confidential** survey about your injuries that have caused scars and/or limb loss

- are you a UK military veteran?
- injured during deployments or deployment training since 1969?



* Win up to £100 in Amazon vouchers *

To take part: go.uwe.ac.uk/unitsveteran

For more information or a paper version

Tel: 0790 224 6225 or

Email: unitsstudy@uwe.ac.uk

@unitsstudy



Centre for Appearance Research



UWE Bristol University of the West of England

THE SCAR FREE FOUNDATION CENTRE FOR CONFLICT WOUND RESEARCH

Funded by the Chancellor using LIBOR funds



tailored support if it learns that injured veterans want or need it.

It doesn't matter if appearance is important to you or not, whether you feel good or you have some concerns, the Centre wants to hear about all experiences.

Veterans with scars on their body or face, and/or limb loss, who were injured during a deployment or training for a deployment can participate. Taking part will help the development of new support. For more, or to take part in the research, please email unitsstudy@uwe.ac.uk, call 07902 246225, or visit <https://go.uwe.ac.uk/unitsveteran>

RETURNING TO A NEW NORMAL

As restrictions due to COVID-19 slowly start to ease, the limb services across the country are beginning to address the inevitable backlog. Each Limb Centre will have its own challenges to overcome to support as many patients as possible in a timely manner.

There is no getting away from the fact that, despite an easing of restrictions, many services are still operating at limited capacity as safety measures are still in place. These measures are designed to keep everyone as safe as possible and will continue for the foreseeable future. Measures such as the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) for staff, as well as face coverings for patients, are likely to last for some time.

A major area of restriction is on physical space. Maintaining social distancing has reduced the available space within Limb Centres and some facilities have had to share space with other services. This means that while the clinicians work through the backlog they will need to prioritise on a case-by-case basis. This will inevitably lead to longer waiting times for routine appointments for repairs or changes in components due to prescription changes. Trials of new limbs will not be a priority unless there is a pressing medical need.

Patients are being asked to only contact their Limb Centre where there is an urgent need. Nobody knows how long it will take to recover services following COVID-19, so continued resilience is key. Blesma is here to help mitigate any of the effects that this may cause Members. Your BSO or BSO (Prosthetics) can discuss your specific circumstances with you and, where necessary, can assist you in contacting your Limb Centre.

If you have a question or would like advice on any prosthetics issues, please contact BSO (Prosthetics) Brian Chenier at bsoprosthetics@blesma.org or on 020 8548 7080, or visit www.blesma.org



Fred gets carried away with a unique challenge

After being inspired by fellow Blesma Member Neil Heritage and his efforts conquering the Matterhorn (see the separate story on p04) former Royal Engineer Fred Pavey came up with his own unique challenge to support the Association.

In June, 64-year-old Fred decided to get fit by walking around his garden 30 times a day carrying a backpack weighing 30lbs.

After a while, determined to increase his fitness and inspired by the exploits of double amputee Neil, Fred came up with a 10-day challenge. He increased the weight of his backpack to 50lbs, and each day carried different household objects and appliances ranging from a jet washer and a pair of garden step ladders to children's buckets and spades.

"With the Blesma bucket collections cancelled I decided to complete my own fundraising event in aid of the Association," said Fred, who lost his right hand while attempting to neutralise a mine in Libya in 2011.

"As an upper limb amputee, carrying 50lbs wasn't much of a problem, but carrying something awkward like a vacuum cleaner or an ironing board made it a little more difficult. It was a bit of a slog because as I started the challenge a heatwave began. The paintwork in my garden certainly suffered because I kept banging into things as I tried to get around the corners!"

Fred began his challenge on 05 August and has so far raised more than £1,400 for the Association.

Cycling novice Jonny is already riding high

Jonny Holloway only took up cycling during lockdown but has already completed his first two-wheeled challenge, raising almost £2,000 for the Association. After several falls during training that resulted in broken pedals, a hospital trip and eight stitches, Blesma stepped in to provide Jonny with some new pedals and a pair of cycling shoes.

"I have completed an 80km ride, which was definitely a challenge!" said Jonny, who lost his left leg below the knee and the sight in his right eye in an IED blast in Afghanistan in 2014. "Without Blesma, I wouldn't be where I am today. They have helped with every issue or interest I have had."



Words: Jessica Mackinnon



Nerys says the support Blesma has given her has “saved her life”



“The last 20km were agony; my wrists felt like they were going to explode, but I got the 90s songs out and started singing. It took my mind off the horrific pain!”

On 22 August, Nerys completed her second event, a 100-mile cycle around London’s Royal Parks, which leaves the simple task of swimming the Channel.

“The English Channel is a scary beast. I’ve never swum that distance before and there’s a lot that you can’t control, so that always makes it more difficult.”

Through the challenges, Nerys hopes to encourage others to complete their own goals, however big or small, all while she’s raising funds for Blesma. So far, she has raised £2,400.

Nerys sets herself push, cycle and swim challenge

Former Army Combat Medic Nerys Pearce is in the middle of a mammoth triple endurance challenge in support of Blesma who, she says, “saved her life.”

Five years ago, Nerys was bed bound and “wanting to end it” after she was paralysed when a car reversed over her motorbike in October 2008. But thanks to Blesma’s support, she is now taking on a number of extreme endurance challenges.

“I wouldn’t be able to attempt them if it hadn’t been for Blesma getting me on the

right path and being so supportive,” said the 38 year old from Ascot. “Blesma saved my life so I wanted to give back to the charity that’s given me phenomenal support.”

Nerys kickstarted her triple challenge on 25 July by completing a 105-mile push in her wheelchair. “The Lakeland 100 is a 105-mile run or walk around the Lake District. This year, because of COVID-19, it was a virtual event. I was nervous because I’ve never pushed that far before. I’d planned for it to take 35 hours but I finished it in 22!

SHE CAN DO ENDURANCE, NOW IT’S TIME FOR SPEED

Nerys has recently become Team BRIT’s first female driver. She was invited to the team’s base in Dunsfold, Surrey for an assessment and a coaching session on the track. She loved the experience and has started training as a rookie, with plans to take the Association of Racing Drivers Schools test and race in the Trophy Category of the Britcar Championship later this year.

“I’ve never really considered race car driving before, but I was looking to get involved in something that involved speed. I’m hoping that I can be competitive and do the team proud,” she said.



MARK ORMROD: THE MOVIE

THE LIFE OF FORMER ROYAL MARINE MARK Ormrod is being made into a movie. Mark lost his right arm and both legs above the knee when he stepped on an IED on Christmas Eve 2007.

He has gone on to own several businesses, become a motivational speaker, and win several medals at the Invictus Games. His autobiography, *Man Down*, is now about to be made into a film.

“I’m excited about it; this is a good opportunity to do something positive. Though I’m the face of the movie, the story represents a lot more. It’s for Blesma Members, people who live with limb loss or disability, and all those who served in the

Afghanistan conflict,” said Mark, who is set to be a co-producer on the movie.

“Service personnel pick military films to pieces if the wrong weapon or uniform is used, or if something isn’t performed correctly, so I want to make sure all those details are perfect. I want the military audience to go away saying we nailed it, which is why I would like Blesma Members and people I went through rehab with to be in the rehabilitation and hospital scenes.”

The script for the movie is currently being written and production is expected to begin next year, with a release slated for 2022.



Dominic's experience finding work will help him in his new job

It's a different life after lockdown for Dominic

A Blesma Member who lost his job due to the coronavirus pandemic has found new employment thanks to the support of a number of charities.

In March, Dominic Howells was a self-employed first aid trainer, but when the UK went into lockdown and businesses began to close temporarily, Dominic quickly found himself out of work.

"A few weeks before lockdown began all the work dried up," said Dominic, who served in the Royal Engineers for six years and lost the sight in his left eye after a road traffic accident in 1992.

"I soon found myself in a position where I didn't know when the next money was coming in. I didn't know how I was going to pay for food, bills or rent, and I had a lot of

debt pressures. I had to make a decision; was I going to wait around for work, or do something about it? That's when I plucked up the courage to phone my BSO."

Support Officer Tom Hall was able to support Dominic with a grant to cover bills before referring him to The British Training Board (TBTB) and The Poppy Factory, who helped him identify his key skills. Thanks to Blesma funding, the TBTB then fast-tracked Dominic through qualifications in Level 3 Safe Guarding, Mental Health First Aid, and Paediatric First Aid with their Career Development Programme, and helped him with his job searching and interview prep. Blesma even provided Dominic with a laptop so he could update his CV and complete his TBTB training.

On 01 June, Dominic started his new job as a project coordinator with The Family Foundation in Llanelli, where he will be working to provide employment support to veterans and their families.

"The journey has been huge. In just one month, I've completed four qualifications and have found a new job, which is awesome. All the experience I have been through to gain employment will now help me in my new role. I can empathise with my clients because of that. I can't express how much the support of these charities has helped my family."

Blesma, Careers Wales and TBTB are also supporting Dominic with funding to further enhance his education. He is now studying towards L4 Education & Training, L4 Project Management, and L3 Facilities Management qualifications, all of which are relevant to his career development plan and beneficial in his new role.

ALEX GETS RID OF 'DONKEY' AS HE TRAINS FOR RAAM

A BLESMA-FUNDED BIKE HAS BEEN a "godsend" for Alex Krol during lockdown. Alex was selected for Blesma's 2020 Race Across America team, but after turning up to a training day in January with what his teammates called a 'donkey of a handbike', Blesma stepped in to get the former Royal Marine a more suitable set of wheels.

"The new bike is phenomenal and it has given me something to focus on," said the 38 year old from Merseyside. "I rocked up to the first training camp and Mike Griffith, the Team Director, told me I was sitting too high in my bike and that I looked uncomfortable. It was suggested that if I was going to do RAAM properly, I needed the right gear."

Alex has now upgraded to a Force NRG



handcycle from manufacturer Top End, and has spent the summer training along the coast where he lives in the north west.

"The bike is a real head-turner. People stop me to tell me how amazing it is. It has electric

gears, low profile carbon wheels, and it's lightweight so it's much easier to get into and out of the car. And RAAM being postponed has given me an extra year to get the training right and get up to speed."



The West Ham Utd Foundation team with Glen Johnson (right) and Blesma's Matt Woollard next to him

Charity Golf Day puts focus back on activities

The annual Blesma Golf Day marked the Association's first foray into the 'new normal'. Following months of cancelled events, the Charity Golf Day at the prestigious Thorndon Park Golf Club in Brentwood, Essex marked the first outdoor activity for the Association since the start of the COVID-19 lockdown. Unlike any previous Blesma event, staff donned face masks and gloves, while anti-bacterial gel was available across the course.

To keep to safe separation guidelines and to adhere to government advice, only 10 teams of four players were in attendance on 24 July, and each team was given a staggered start time.

Each participating team was joined by a Blesma Member and, to the delight of life-long West Ham United football fan Matt Woollard, former England and West Ham star Glen Johnson played for a team from the West Ham United Foundation.

"We loved the event. Matt's a great lad with a touching story, but he's just one of the boys at the end of the day," Glen said afterwards. "We had a great day out and the course was good. We played alright – a bit hot and cold – but we made some friends, so it was happy days!"

Also in attendance at the event were Barry Hearn, chairman of the Professional Darts Corporation, and Blesma Member and professional golfer Mike Browne.

"It was my first time at the event and what a lovely day, with fantastic company," said Barry. "The pandemic is a disaster unlike any we've ever known; but at least we still have Thorndon Park and can enjoy a round of golf!"

The winners on the day were Team Hill Partnerships; Richard, Henry and Pascal, who played with Blesma Member Rob Linge. Thanks to everyone who took part in the event, which raised £5,870.



Stu Ellis



A decade of dedication

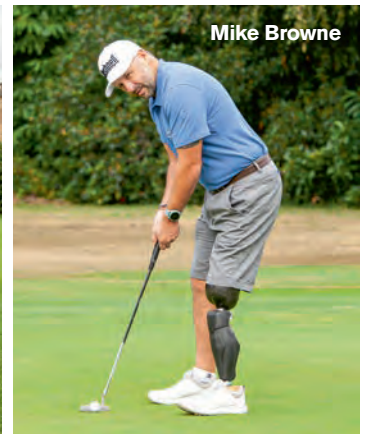
Inside the Centre for Blast Injury Studies (p48)



Gaz Meekins



Michael Swain



Mike Browne



**Ex-footballer
Glen Johnson**



Daz Fuller

Words: Jessica Mackinnon Photographer: David Tombs

INBOX

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

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

I read in a recent copy of Blesma magazine that about 4% of Blesma Members are over the age of 90. As I am 97 years old, it prompted me to share my story.

During the early part of WWII (between 1939 and 1941) I worked in John Brown's Shipyard in Clydebank, near Glasgow. In wartime, the job was classed as a reserved occupation which meant you could not be called up for the Armed Forces.

Most young men were anxious to join the Forces and I was no different. In 1941, I left the shipyards and started work as a locomotive engineer in the local gas works knowing full well that I would be called up.

In the summer of 1942 I was called up for service, and reported to the Bridge of Don barracks in Aberdeen for Infantry training. Arriving at the barrack gates for the first time was quite an experience for a young man. Everything was strange and new; for most of these young men it was their first experience of being away from home.

After training, I was transferred to the Seaforth Highlanders and went to Dalton-in-Furness to complete a specialist course combining the Bren Gun Carrier and the mortar. I can still recall one occasion whilst training when I loaded the three-inch mortar shell and the sheer force blew my helmet off!

ACTION AND INJURY

In September 1943, I was posted to Italy via Algiers, arriving in the Port of Taranto. We were transported to Foggia to join the 6th Battalion of the Seaforth Highlanders, who were waiting for reinforcements prior to going into battle against the German Army. In December, we were transported to the west coast of Italy to get ready for the push towards Cassino.

The first part of the offensive was to cross the Garigliano River, which was heavily defended. On 17 January 1944, we headed in darkness towards the river, but about 400 yards away, the leading troops walked into an area that had been mined by the Germans. The explosion alerted them and soon, the whole area was being raked by machine gun fire. Mortar shells were landing with deadly accuracy. Many were killed and wounded.



Top: George (far right) in uniform circa 1944 **Above:** Blesma annual conference mid-60s

As we waited for troops from another battalion to take us across the river I was hit in the left arm by shrapnel from a mortar. I was taken by truck to a casualty clearing station where I received some attention and, a few hours later, I was transferred to a field hospital where my left arm was amputated.

A week later, I was taken by hospital ship to Algiers then to an Army hospital on the outskirts of the city where I convalesced for a couple of weeks before being brought

back to the UK in another hospital ship. I spent three days in a hospital in Leeds before being sent back home to Glasgow in February 1944. A few weeks later, I was fitted with an artificial limb and, for two weeks, I attended an Artificial Limb Centre where I received instructions in the use of the limb and its various attachments. I was discharged from the Forces in March 1944.

At this time, educational and technical courses were available for ex-Service



and amendments. I was Branch Treasurer for almost 60 years and, as membership declined, held the dual positions of Branch Secretary and Treasurer from 1981. As Treasurer, one of my jobs was to organise an annual appeal each November, sending out more than 1,000 letters to businesses and individuals. The returns allowed us to set up an appeals list of subscribers which enabled the Glasgow Branch to present healthy cheques over the years for the homes in Crieff and Blackpool.

For more than 50 years I was a regular delegate at the annual conference and Area meetings, where I enjoyed meeting with other Members.

RECOGNITION OF A LIFETIME'S WORK

In May 1994, I attended the 50th anniversary pilgrimage to Cassino and Anzio organised by the Royal British Legion with my late wife Isa. It was a very moving experience for us both. Ten years later, in February 2004, members of the Glasgow Branch took the decision to close it. It was a sad day, as Glasgow had been one of the founder member Branches of Blesma.

In 1987, in recognition of a lifetime's work for Blesma, I was awarded the Certificate for Long and Meritorious Service (Gold) and, in 2000, was presented with the Ernie Law Memorial Award Citation. I was very honoured to receive both of these awards.

Over the years I have seen a lot of changes to the work the Association does and also in the advancement of modern prosthetics and the difference it has made to so many limbless people. Blesma does such good work, and I always look forward to reading the magazine and keeping up to date with all that is going on.

I still like to keep busy. I have been a long-time member of the local bowling club, and I enrolled on a computer course a few years ago. I have an iPad now, and during lockdown I was introduced to FaceTime to help keep in touch with my family. I have enjoyed it so much that I now prefer this method of communication rather than phone calls!

I send my best wishes to all at Blesma.

George Watson

Age: 97

Member since: 1946

Military Service: Seaforth Highlanders



Top: George today **Above left:** George is presented with the Blesma Certificate for Long and Meritorious Service (Gold) by Lord Provost Susan Baird (Glasgow City Chambers, 1987)

Above right: George is presented with the Ernie Law Memorial Award by Blesma's National President, the late Duke of Westminster (July 2000)

personnel who were unable to continue their normal employment due to their disablement. I chose a course in book-keeping and accountancy at Stow College in Glasgow, and on completion was offered a position with the then-Glasgow Corporation.

I joined Blesma in 1946 and began a long and active association with the charity. In 1948, I was appointed to the Committee of Management, Glasgow Branch. At this time we had more than 100 members meeting

twice a month to discuss topics such as better War Pensions, transport issues and prosthetics. Prior to the advent of Social Work and DSS, the Welfare Committee was heavily involved in home visits.

During the next 40 years, Blesma was run exclusively by war limbless members and a Head Office staff of about five. Area meetings were held twice a year and there was an annual conference, where delegates went armed with resolutions, motions

GOT A STORY? GET IN TOUCH!

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

OUR MEMORIES OF SPENDING TIME WITH ENGLAND'S WORLD CUP WINNER JACK CHARLTON

The death of Jack Charlton on 10 July 2020 prompted a flurry of emails between some former staff members and a Blesma Trustee who had spent several hours in the company of Jack and his wife, Pat, whilst completing a fundraising walk for Blesma in September 2004.

At the time, I had recently retired as the National Welfare Officer and had become a Welfare Representative (WR) for Essex. Along with Mike Gallagher, previously the Area Welfare Officer (AWO) South West and subsequently WR Wilts and Hants, Phil Britton AWO (SE), Keith Meakin AWO (Midlands), Ian Ritchie WR Swindon and Vice Chairman of Trustees, John Francis AWO (SW), and Eric Pitchforth AWO (N), I walked the 86 miles of Hadrian's Wall from west to east between Monday 27 September and Friday 01 October 2004. We raised in excess of £16,000 in the process.

Along the way, we were joined by various Blesma Members and Widows, the Widows having travelled all the way from the Crieff Home by minibus with John Francis. The Members were long-serving Blesma Trustee Andy Mudd, Paul Waldon and Chris Thompson; a young Iraq veteran and recent amputee. At Wallsend, the end of our journey, we were welcomed by several members of the old Tyneside Branch.

Highlights along the way included bumping into the former Foreign Secretary Lord Douglas Hurd, who was walking east to west with Lady Hurd. We very much



Leeds Utd footballer Jack Charlton (sixth from left) with Blesma Members and staff

enjoyed their company for two nights at our Saughy Rigg Farmhouse accommodation.

On our fourth day of walking the great Leeds United and England soccer star, Jack Charlton, and his wife, Pat, joined us. Jack and Chris Thompson walked with us for some two miles before we all retired for a convivial pub lunch, where we were joined by Pat.

Jack made 773 appearances for Leeds United during his 23 years with the club, and won 35 caps for England, including one as a World Cup winner in 1966, of course. He was a great raconteur, with a store of anecdotes from his time as a player, a successful football manager, and

as a football pundit. He was particularly proud of the time he spent as manager of the Republic of Ireland team that he took to the quarter finals of the Italia 90 World Cup, for which he was awarded the Freedom of Dublin and made an honorary Irish citizen.

We are proud that he took the time to join us to support Blesma and feel sure that he would have been delighted to see what the Association continues to achieve and to know that, after several years away, his beloved Leeds United have, this year, secured promotion from the Championship and are heading into the Premier League.

Jim Keating

Those who have passed away

May they rest in peace.

Burrows E G	Coldstream Guards	Sutton & Merton	31 May 2020
Goldsworthy B M	RASC	HQ	25 August 2020
Grigg R	RAF	Bournemouth	06 June 2020
Meads H	RE	HQ	April 2020
Payton A R	RAF	HQ	04 June 2020
Pendry D	Queen's Regt	Gt Yarmouth	03 June 2020
Reaney R J	RE	Walsall	30 June 2020
Shaw A	Royal Lancers	HQ	06 August 2020
Stewart J	RN	HQ	28 April 2020
Sutton T J	King's Regt	HQ	04 June 2020
Terry M	Staffs	HQ	08 June 2020
Warren R H	Black Watch	HQ	Not Known
Weston J C	RM	HQ	27 March 2020
Whittaker W	REME	HQ	May 2020
Williams-Moore H I	RAF	HQ	21 July 2020

MEMBER RUNS 48 MILES IN MEMORY OF GOOD FRIEND

British Army veteran Philip Parker has recently completed a 48-mile run to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the death of a much-loved friend and fellow soldier.

Twenty five years ago Philip and WO2 Phil Pert were part of a team from the 8th Infantry Brigade (pictured) that set out to run from John O'Groats to Land's End to raise money for Blesma and the Altnegelvin ICU in Northern Ireland. On the penultimate day of the challenge Phil Pert, the organiser and inspiration behind the event, was struck and killed by a passing vehicle.

"Phil is always on my mind when I run," said Philip, who served for 20 years and now works as an MOD civil servant at RAF Wyton. "I've been organising a lot of events this year which have taken me back, so I decided to dedicate my run to Phil."

Philip had originally planned to participate in the RAF Wyton Pathfinder March – a 46-mile course around the original Pathfinder airfields in Cambridgeshire – but the event was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Not wishing to see six months of training go to waste – and as he was turning 48 on 25 June – Philip decided to run 48 miles to pay tribute to his friend, whilst also raising £1,500 for Blesma and the NHS.



him with third degree burns to 75% of his body, a gunshot wound to his right leg, and loss of function in his left arm and hand. "We always found it more beneficial to our recovery to stick with people who had been through similar experiences. We set up Stand2 Motorsport in January for that reason.

"Our race at Brands coincided with the 14th anniversary of me being injured, so the team surprised me by wrapping the car in camouflage and giving it a Union Jack roof. It was quite a head turner and a surreal moment!" said Martyn.

Stand2 Motorsport is looking for sponsors, while packages are also available for track days. For more information, get in touch via email at info@stand2motorsport.co.uk



Penlan Farm will be a place for veterans to talk, chill out, or just visit for a cuppa

Ex-Forces drop-in centre opens in West Wales

Blesma has collaborated with charity Woody's Lodge to transform Penlan Farm in Ceredigion, Wales into a sanctuary for veterans and emergency service personnel. Last year, the 11-acre farm was donated to Woody's Lodge so it could be transformed into a drop-in centre for West Wales. The plan is to offer respite, camping holiday facilities, and a focused residential training centre for charities and individuals working within the Armed Forces and emergency service communities.

Blesma was invited to take part in the project earlier this year. "I live five minutes from the site and grew up in the area, so BSO Tom Hall invited me along for a visit

in March to see how I might be able to help," said Blesma Member Steve Owen, who helped get the site ready and is now employed as Woody's caretaker manager. "The site was completely overgrown, but over lockdown we got the place ready."

An event was held on 03 September to open the farm's temporary veterans' drop-in centre, which will be open from 10am to 2pm, Monday to Friday.

"It's been fantastic to watch this veteran-led project come together. The centre is a place for veterans and emergency service personnel to chill out. It offers somewhere to talk, but if they just want to visit for a brew that's fine, too," said Steve.

NEW MOTORSPORT TEAM TO SUPPORT INJURED VETERANS

MEMBER MARTYN COMPTON AND Warren McKinlay, who met while racing for Kart Force during their rehabilitation, have founded Stand2 Motorsport.

Racing in a Praga R1S in the Britcar Dunlop Endurance Championship, the team's first competition was at Croft Circuit, Darlington in July. Their second race was at Brands Hatch in August.

"We wanted to create a racing team that supported injured veterans and focused on great driving," said Martyn, who was seriously injured in Afghanistan, leaving



Stand2 Motorsport's Martyn Compton

NEWS ANALYSIS

What works well in Scotland?

A series of features examines the unique opportunities posed to Blesma by the devolved administrations. This issue, we shine the spotlight on Scotland



Steve Burton,
BSO Scotland,
NI and ROI

With 31,000 square miles of terrain, 900 offshore islands, and the journey from the English border to the northernmost settlement taking 18 hours, supporting Members in Scotland could seem like a daunting task. As the BSO for Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, Steve Burton is responsible for 198 Members, ranging in age from 22 to 99, who are spread across the Scottish mainland and isles. Home visits to Members, not to mention liaising on health, welfare and care matters with a devolved government and 32 local authorities, present all sorts of challenges.

But, says Steve, Blesma’s mission to empower independence and provide critical support to its Members north of the border is helped by Scotland’s extremely positive view of veterans and their families.

“The Scottish government is engaged and alert to veterans’ needs,” says Steve. “Scotland believes that veterans are an integral part of the community, and having a Veterans’ Commissioner within the government structure is a great example of that commitment.”

The fact that senior government welcomes a dynamic relationship with the Association allows Blesma to engage directly with the relevant departments, making strong, evidence-based submissions to support Members and bring about genuine and lasting change.

“We worked very closely with the previous Veterans’ Commissioner on research that identified veterans’ issues – particularly around health and wellbeing – and the experiences of Blesma Members have been used to highlight issues around physical health, access to wheelchair services, and the provision of support within Limb Centres,” says Steve. “I also attend a cross-party group with ministers and other charities to raise and discuss issues, and we have, where appropriate, the capability to influence discussions and decision making. Unlike with other devolved governments, we also have the opportunity to engage directly with the Veteran’s Minister and the Defence Policy Unit.”

With Liz Watling, who works in Blesma’s Independence and Wellbeing team, Steve has been involved in the development of the new Social Security Scotland Agency that will replace the Department for Work and Pensions to deliver benefits and allowances in Scotland.

“Blesma is very much involved with this new agency and how it operates as it will deal with many benefits – such as disability benefits – that will impact Members,” says Steve. “We have been involved from the outset, discussing with various panels the challenges, both physical and psychological, of being an amputee. We wanted them to fully understand the impact on Members when they are called to an assessment; what it is like getting to and from the assessment centre and into the buildings, and what effect sitting in the waiting room has on them. We have been involved in a lot of background work that will help shape and influence how the service runs from next year, and we continue to engage in stakeholder meetings and experience panels. We have made sure the agency has a 360° view and is aware of the potential issues and challenges.”

REMAINING AGILE AND RESPONSIVE

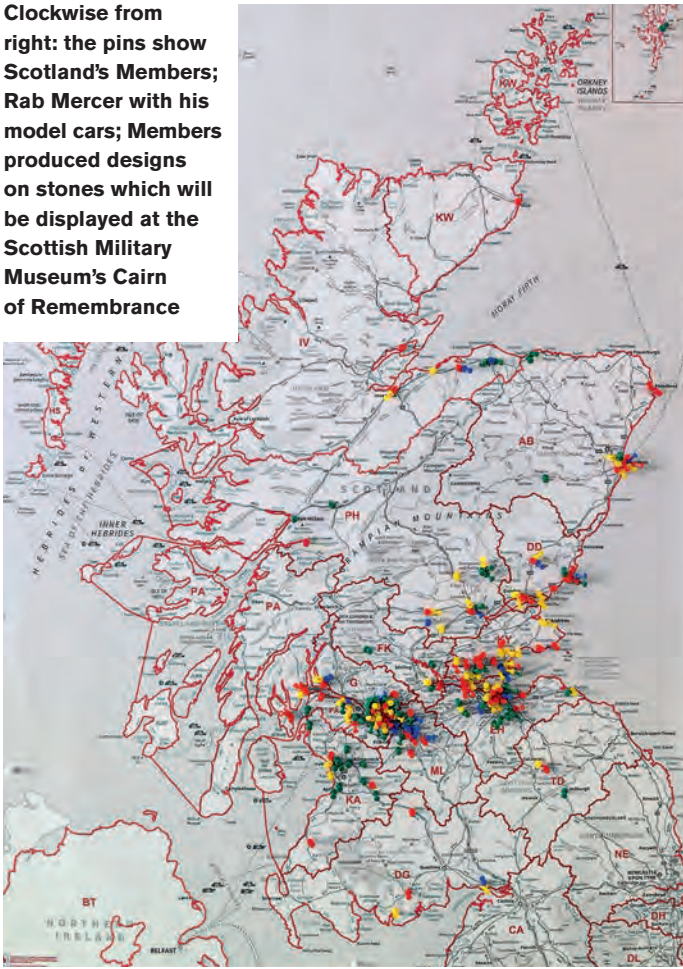
Scotland has four main Limb Centres – in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee and Aberdeen – with a satellite facility in Inverness. When appropriate, Blesma attends visits with Members or acts as an advocate.

Funding for prosthetics and orthotics comes directly from the Scottish government and, says Steve, the level of support is no different from the rest of the UK. He is quick to point out that the service has been very good, although he is keen to further explore the potential opportunities at Raigmore Hospital in Inverness as that is the closest centre for Members in the Highlands and Islands.

“Our core business – individual support to our Members – continues in the face of COVID-19, and although how we operate has changed as a result of the pandemic, we have maintained regular contact

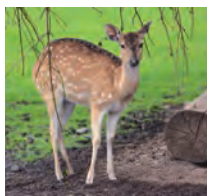
“
OUR CORE BUSINESS OF SUPPORT TO OUR MEMBERS CONTINUES IN THE FACE OF COVID-19
”

Clockwise from right: the pins show Scotland's Members; Rab Mercer with his model cars; Members produced designs on stones which will be displayed at the Scottish Military Museum's Cairn of Remembrance



NEWS

Clockwise from far right: Member Ken De Soyza with his chocolates; an otter photographed by Kev Bryant who leads the photography group; Member Margaret Riach with a blanket made and donated by Member John Bacon; Diane Reid (wife of Member Ian) who won the baking competition; a flower photographed by Lorraine Anderson and a deer taken by Ken De Soyza



“**THERE IS MORE TO DO BUT THE FULFILLING ASPECT FOR ME IS THE PLEASURE OF SEEING MEMBERS HAPPY**”

either through phone calls, WhatsApp, Zoom or Facebook,” says Steve. “Emma Gration, the Outreach Officer for Scotland, has been totally immersed in delivery of outreach to our Members since her arrival in January, and has been personally responsible for delivering our Contact Programme alongside four outreach activities each week [see panel, right, for more].”

Through close contact with Members, Steve and Emma have remained agile and responsive throughout the pandemic. When a Member recently received news that his brother was seriously ill in Germany, for example, they were quickly able to help out.

“It was very upsetting for the Member and he needed to go to Germany to visit,” says Steve. “We got the call at 9am, and by 4pm we had booked his tickets and made financial arrangements so the Member could

get to Germany in time. The teamwork and commitment were classic aspects of what Blesma does very well.”

This is just one example of the significant progress that has been made in Scotland since 2016 and, says Steve, Blesma is now firmly on the map with the government, relevant agencies, and other charities.

“They are alive to what we do and that helps us in terms of referrals and collaboration,” says Steve. “Witnessing Blesma’s development is incredibly rewarding. The Association is helping people every day, and while there is still more to be done, the fulfilling aspect for me is the pleasure of seeing our Members happy.”

You can find the contact details for your Blesma Support Officer at www.blesma.org/blesma-bsos



“WITH EACH MEMBER I MEET, I MAKE A NEW FRIEND AND CAN THRIVE OFF THEIR IDEAS AND LEARN HOW TO DO THINGS BETTER. FOR ME, THIS IS MORE THAN A JOB!”



TAKING TIME TO LEARN WHAT TRULY MATTERS TO MEMBERS

Scotland's Outreach Officer joined just weeks before lockdown, but that hasn't necessarily been a bad thing

Outreach Officer Emma Gratton had a whole calendar of potential events in mind for her first year with Blesma but most had to be put on hold because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The former Intelligence Corps soldier joined Blesma in January and had to swiftly adopt a new strategy to reach Members and provide a range of activities through the long months of lockdown.

“I'd only just joined and was looking forward to getting out to meet Members at events, but lockdown changed all that and we had to quickly refocus,” says Emma. “It was important that we were able to still be there for Members even if we couldn't physically go into their homes or put on face-to-face activities.”

Emma embraced the BSO Contact Programme, calling all Members to assess their immediate needs during lockdown. She then turned her attention to activities, organising online events such as cooking demonstrations and workshops, book groups, knitting classes, seated yoga sessions, quizzes and online chats.

Twice weekly drop-in Zoom forums, such as when Member Lesley Stewart

talked about her journey to become a GB Target Shooting Paralympian, connected Members and enabled group discussions.

“Many Members had reduced contact with friends and family during lockdown, so the online calls really cheered them up, introduced them to Members they might never have met, and provided a real sense of community,” says Emma. “As a result, we've seen friendships develop and people have become interested and engaged in activities suggested by other Members.”

“They have enjoyed the banter and it was great to be able to help and make a difference – that gave me a warm, fuzzy feeling. For me, this is more than a job!”

A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

One of the most popular events Emma organised was a stone painting project in which Members produced designs on stones they had collected. These will be displayed at the Scottish Military Museum Cairn of Remembrance alongside stones that Emma painted for all the Blesma Members lost during lockdown.

As outdoor activities begin to open up once more, Emma hopes Members and

their families will be able to deliver the stones to the Scottish Military Museum on the outskirts of Edinburgh. Meanwhile, golf, sailing and fishing events are all on the cards in the near future.

“We will make sure we are doing things that Members are comfortable with and that can work with the social distancing measures and government guidelines that are in place,” she says. “With each Member I meet, I make a new friend and can thrive off their ideas and learn how to do things better. Although it has been challenging at times, I feel that lockdown has been a huge bonus for me as I have been able to chat to more Members than I perhaps would have, and it has highlighted just how important a simple call or visit can be to Members who may not be in a position to attend an event.”

“I'm keen to see the sense of community developing further so that Members connect with us about things they want to do. It is not just about us putting things on for them, it is about finding out what they like doing. Members are engaging with us and are volunteering to plan activities for others, which is great.”



THE FREEDOM OF FREERUNNING

MAT ARMITAGE WAS AT THE VERY TOP OF HIS GAME, PERFORMING GRAVITY-DEFYING TRICKS FOR HOLLYWOOD BLOCKBUSTERS, WHEN A MOTORBIKE CRASH LEFT HIM WITH A NEW OBSTACLE TO GET OVER

An anyone who believes that amputation automatically equals limitation should spend 10 minutes in the company of Mat Armitage. The charismatic 29 year old from the Wirral is a ball of energy, and must be one of the few men on the planet who can do a backflip wearing a prosthetic leg. A former professional freerunner (a discipline similar to parkour that involves flipping and spinning off obstacles and buildings) Mat was never going to let a horror motorcycle accident in 2018 change his outlook on life.

“When I was lying in the hospital bed after my leg had been amputated, I set myself the goal of being able to do a backflip again within 18 months,” says Mat. “I was determined – even if it meant I’d have

to do it on one leg, I was going to do it again! In late November 2018 I got my first prosthetic and, almost exactly a year after my crash, in July 2019, I landed my first ever backflip as an amputee. I was made up. I thought; ‘Other things are back on the table now!’”

Mat has been freerunning since he was a teenager. “I started learning how to do it when I was at school, aged 15, and had been doing it for a few years by the time I started Basic Training,” he says. “My friend was doing freerunning on the school field, and I asked him if he could teach me how to backflip. I learned it in a lunch break. He then introduced me to a guy who lived locally, who was one of the best freerunners in the world. That was when we all started training and practising together.”



FREERUNNING

Having always been keen to join the Army, Mat's experience of service turned out to be somewhat unfortunate. "My sister, auntie, and uncle had all served in the Royal Logistic Corps, but my mind is more suited to engineering, so I decided to become an armourer in the REME," he says. "I thought taking all those weapons apart would be an interesting job.

"I started Phase 1 training in 2008, aged 17. I really enjoyed my time in the Forces, but I only served a couple of years. All my freerunning, combined with the tabs in the Army, had led to my quads and calves becoming overdeveloped, but the ligaments and tendons in my knees were tearing as they were struggling to keep up. I should have rested for six weeks, but instead I was given strength exercises, which was the worst thing possible. It eventually led to me being medically discharged.

"I'd wanted to do my full 22 years, but instead I was out after just a few. I'm not bitter, because it led me down a completely different route. When I was training with the REME near Basingstoke, I'd met a group of freerunners called 3run. I'd train with them every weekend and we got very close. They were a commercially successful parkour and freerunning team, and when

"I HAD MY STUMP IN THE AIR AND A SMILE ON MY FACE. I KNEW THAT I HAD DONE THE RIGHT THING"

they asked me if I wanted to join them, I literally jumped at the chance!"

Mat was soon travelling across the globe, running workshops and appearing in films and commercials. "I'd teach freerunning in schools and universities and then, once I'd proved myself, I started working on bigger jobs with them. We'd travel to China, India, and the Caribbean, stay in five-star hotels, and work on shows for Hennessy Cognac and adverts for Thomson Cruises.

Below: Mat trains in a gym in Liverpool that has been specially designed and built for perfecting freerunning moves

"Because we produced our own videos to show to clients, we became good at doing our own editing and filming. We knew the best angles to shoot the moves from and how to make the jumps look the most impressive, so we began pitching to the companies that were hiring us to also do their media as an entire package.

"That led to us working on Hollywood blockbusters like *Captain America*. We'd carry out concept work on the way the characters would move and were creative enough to come up with sequences and add in specific moves."

THE DAY EVERYTHING CHANGED

As well as this, 3run also held numerous world records – things like the furthest flip off a wall – so it made sense for Mat to compete on the TV show *Ninja Warrior*.

"That period was one of the best times of my life," he says. "I didn't even train specifically for the show because I just wanted to find out how far I could go on my ability. I ended up getting to the final."

But then, just as life was cruising along sweetly, disaster struck. Having always been an adrenaline junkie, Mat got into riding motorbikes, and suffered a serious crash in North Wales.







"A lot of the impact goes into my knee, so I have to be careful, but I'm enjoying finding out what I can do," says Mat



“I remember it was a beautiful sunny Sunday, and I was up bright and early because I’d take any opportunity to go out on the bike,” he says. “I usually rode alone, but that day I did my usual route to Caernarfon and then I met a mate at a biker café in Llangollen.

“There, I met some lads from Manchester who all had amazing, brand-new bikes. One of them had a more powerful version of my bike, the one I really wanted, and after chatting to them I found out they were going to Porthmadog. They were following a sat-nav but I knew a better route, so I suggested that they followed me.

“Half an hour later we were flying along one of the best roads in the area. I was conscious of where the other guys were so I was looking in my mirrors a lot, and I ended up misjudging a corner. Immediately, I knew I’d broken both my legs. My shoulder was dislocated, and I had pain all around my arms and elbows.”

It was 90 minutes before an ambulance arrived, and another hour before an air ambulance made it to the scene. “They gave me morphine, which went straight through me – I discovered I have a high threshold for painkillers!” says Mat. “My boots were cut off and my legs were put

in splints. I don’t remember much after that, but I was told that it took five-and-a-half hours from the time of the crash to me arriving at A&E in Stoke.”

Mat had shattered his right ankle, and 80 per cent of the bone was dead. “I put



Mat: “I didn’t want to resent the foot or for it to stop me doing so many things”

that down to the time it took to get to A&E, but it was so broken that they probably wouldn’t have been able to do anything anyway,” says Mat, who now had the dilemma faced by many Members: whether to endure a lengthy and painful spell trying to rescue the leg, or opt for amputation.

“The doctors said they could grow and fuse bones, but the process would take two years,” says Mat. “I thought: ‘Why spend so much time, effort, agony and money on something that’s not even going to end up working at 50 per cent? Why don’t we cut it off?’ I didn’t want to resent the foot or for it to stop me doing so many things.

“So I had an initial operation and then did some research. I tried to get as much information as possible from doctors and other amputees. I spoke to the Paralympian Richard Whitehead, a double above-knee amputee who is a friend of my brother-in-law. Everything spurred me on to have the amputation – it was a decision made without emotion. When I told my surgeon, he said: ‘We’ve got a spot this afternoon if you want it’, so I booked myself in.

“I went into theatre at 1pm, and by 5pm I was met by my mum and dad. I had my stump in the air and a smile on my face. I knew I’d done the right thing.”

“IT HAS BEEN NICE TO LEARN THE BASICS AGAIN. IT’S A VERY DIFFERENT CHALLENGE, BUT I FEEL REBORN”

Mat’s triumphant backflip a year later was further proof, if he needed any, that he’d made the right decision, and he is now busy turning every potential negative into a positive. “If I’m honest, I had reached the point with freerunning where I wasn’t pushing myself any more,” says Mat, “so it has been nice to go back to the start and learn the basics again. It’s a very different challenge, but I feel as if I am reborn.

“I know there are going to be some limitations to what I can do. A lot of them will be to do with impact; I can’t jump from the heights I used to, or land on certain surfaces, and there are also issues with the rigid ankle of a prosthetic. It means a lot of the impact goes into my knee, which I have to be careful of, but I’m enjoying finding out what I can do.”

BACKFLIPS WITH BLESMA?

Away from freerunning, Mat’s about to become a dad for the first time, and has very much embraced Blesma. “I’ve done some great stuff with the Association, including parachute jumps in Virginia Beach, ZipWorld in Snowdonia, and the Couples Retreat in Mallorca,” he says.

“I’m also part of Making Generation R, the Blesma storytelling project that teaches resilience in schools, which is something I love. It’s another craft to learn, with lots of different techniques.”

So will he be running parkour workshops for Members any time soon, or is the thought of amputees jumping around on the asphalt a bridge too far? “I guess freerunning is the extreme end of the movement spectrum,” he says, “but amputees can benefit from thinking about all kinds of movement. You can start off with something gentle, like yoga, then explore the limitations of your prosthetic and learn what it is capable of. After that, maybe you might decide you would like to push yourself a bit more.”

He may not be guaranteeing backflips for all, but Mat’s mindset, and demonstration of what the body can achieve post-trauma, can certainly be an inspiration.



FREERUNNING EXPLAINED

WHAT IS IT?

Freerunning is leaping, flipping and spinning over obstacles and through the built environment – typically with audacious style and always at the risk of taking a hazardous tumble.

HOW DID IT START?

French soldier Georges Hébert invented *parcours du combattant*, aka the obstacle course, in the early 20th century, while modern freerunning was adapted from parkour around 20 years ago by Frenchman Sebastián Foucan.

HOW IS IT DIFFERENT FROM PARKOUR?

Most freerunners do parkour, and vice versa, but parkour is a more formalised system, developed from moves on military assault courses. Freerunning is less prescribed – generally focusing on artistry and what looks impressive.

WHO ARE ITS STARS?

Foucan was a trailblazer, starring in freerunning documentaries like *Jump London*. He went on to perform in James Bond’s *Casino Royale*, and toured

with Madonna. Since then, the likes of Daniel Ilabaca, from Merseyside, have taken things to another level, appearing in music videos, adverts and TV shows.

IS IT IN THE OLYMPICS?

The International Gymnastics Federation added parkour to its list of sports in 2017. While it hasn’t been put on the Olympic programme yet, some believe (and hope!) it might join new disciplines like skateboarding and breakdancing on the roster at some point this decade.

Freerunning involves leaping, flipping and spinning over obstacles with style (and the risk of a hazardous tumble!)





Summer 2020

VE DAY '45



...were a little mad. Schools were closed for the day. It was a day of celebration! He added: 'I didn't see too many drinks, now that I think on it. There was no need. The spirit was lifted high enough as it was in children begging kissing and generally flirting with the civilian population.' However, Dr Jeffrey's research mentions a restrained observation to the celebrations: 'Victory was well forecast as there were not the same levels of drunkenness as in 1945. Also, troops were still fighting in South East Asia so there were in POW camps, so a lot of people didn't celebrating with the tension of war took a while to warmer pieces of jewellery and they day after the war. German homes got by...

“ There were VE Day broadcasts singing fireworks and...



A photograph in our Summer issue showed a joyous moment on VE Day 1945 when WWII was declared over in Europe and the nation could try to begin to smile once again.

But a huge coincidence also opened a floodgate of memories for Larry and Jean Morgan. This is the astounding story of their life together...

Jean Morgan was halfway through the Summer 2020 issue of Blesma magazine when she spotted a photograph of herself and her twin sister, Joy. It had been taken on VE Day when they were surrounded by crowds as British and US troops danced with civilians on the streets of London. “I was reading the magazine and saw the photograph of the people jitterbugging in the streets, and recognised myself and Joy at once,” says 90-year-old Jean, who has been married to Blesma Member Larry, a Burma campaign veteran, for some 66 years.

“It was incredible to see us both standing there in the picture and all these memories came flooding back because I can still picture that day so clearly. The atmosphere was fantastic, as you can imagine. Everyone was really happy because the war was over in Europe. There was worse to come, of course, as the war wasn’t over for everyone, but that was a day to celebrate and cherish. It was a surprise to see myself in the magazine, but I can remember VE Day and that scene so vividly.”

The identical twins were 15 years old in May 1945 when their boss, Garth Hudson, gave them the day off and escorted them from Essex into London to savour the Nazi surrender on 08 May 1945. Two months later, an amputee veteran looking for a job would enter the photographic shop in Brentwood, Essex, where Jean (whose maiden name was Stapler) worked. That moment of fate led to an enduring relationship that is still going strong some 75 years later.

The couple, who now have three children, eight grandchildren, and four great grandchildren, would go on to run the shop and photographic business for the next 40 years.

“We have had a wonderful life together, but it might not have ever happened as I am so lucky to be alive,” says Larry, who is now 98 years old. “I lost a lot of mates in Burma and was very fortunate to survive. It was pure luck!”

FROM LINCOLNSHIRE TO JUNGLE WARFARE

Larry, whose family was bombed out of their home in London’s East End during The Blitz in 1941, was re-homed and worked as a builder. He was soon called up and trained as a signaller attached to the 8th Battalion Suffolk Regiment – a second line battalion supplying drafts to other, depleted regiments.

He was initially posted to Lincolnshire, where he served on coastal defences before being selected to be part of a 20-man section that was kitted out in tropical uniform and sent on a 12-week voyage to India. There, they joined up with the 1st Battalion Wiltshire Regiment, which had been in country since 1936. Within weeks, Larry was involved in a jungle warfare offensive against Japanese forces that had conquered Burma. The fighting was relentless across treacherous terrain as British and Indian forces tried to dislodge the invaders from heavily fortified positions

Burma veteran and Blesma Member Larry Morgan met his wife Jean shortly after VE Day in 1945

“We have had a wonderful life together, but it might not have ever happened as I am so lucky to be alive. I lost a lot of mates in Burma and was very fortunate to survive”





Twin sisters Jean (left) and Joy Stapler
celebrate VE Day on 08 May 1945



across the Arakan region. Larry was seconded to a unit that was trying to relieve and supply soldiers who had been surrounded by Japanese forces.

“We were ordered to climb over a mountain range via a pass and fight our way down the other side, pushing mules and carrying gear as the Japanese shot at us,” said Larry. “They sent troops out to harass us as well. Nonetheless, we eventually relieved those men – it was the first victory we’d had over the Japanese.”

Larry and his close friend, Arthur Harford, were among a group of men chosen to meet the British commanders Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten and General William Slim to celebrate the triumph and raise morale for the rest of the campaign.

“It was a great honour but we had to go straight back and join the advance which was trying to push 10,000 Japanese troops back,” says Larry. “They were well dug in and tended to attack us at dusk or dawn, so we were ‘stood to’ a lot of time.

“We fought across the hill tops and captured a Japanese position but we knew they would be back.

Jean recognised herself and her twin sister, Joy, in this picture from VE Day that was printed in the Summer issue of Blesma magazine

They launched a bayonet attack up the side of the hill and we threw grenades at each other like cricket balls! There were only five of us but we just had to keep going to stop them over-running the position. At one point they were very close and one grenade fell between Arthur and I. It exploded and down we went; Arthur’s leg was hanging loose below the knee and I copped a load of shrapnel in my left knee and thigh.

“I managed to get the three lads with us to keep firing and we did what we could until the Japanese soldiers eventually pulled back. A medic arrived and gave us rum and injections. Then, at daybreak, we were stretchered down to a rough road, and from there a jeep took us back to a military post.”

Larry was plastered to the hip and flown to a bamboo hospital in Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh. While he was there, Vera Lynn passed by the end of his bed after giving a concert for the wounded. He was then airlifted to a hospital in Calcutta, where he caught malaria, and then onto Hyderabad, where his leg developed gangrene.

“They gave me a choice; take a chance that it would clear up or have it amputated, so I decided to go for that and it was cut off mid-thigh,” says Larry. “It was a very basic job and there is a terrific scar to this day, but I count myself lucky. Fewer than half of the 20 I sailed with made it through and, in hospital, the two chaps either side of me died in the night.

“I’d also had to bury several of my mates where they’d fallen. We had to shovel the ground out and go down deep enough so the jackals wouldn’t dig them up. It was very distressing!”

‘THE BEST DECISION OF MY LIFE’

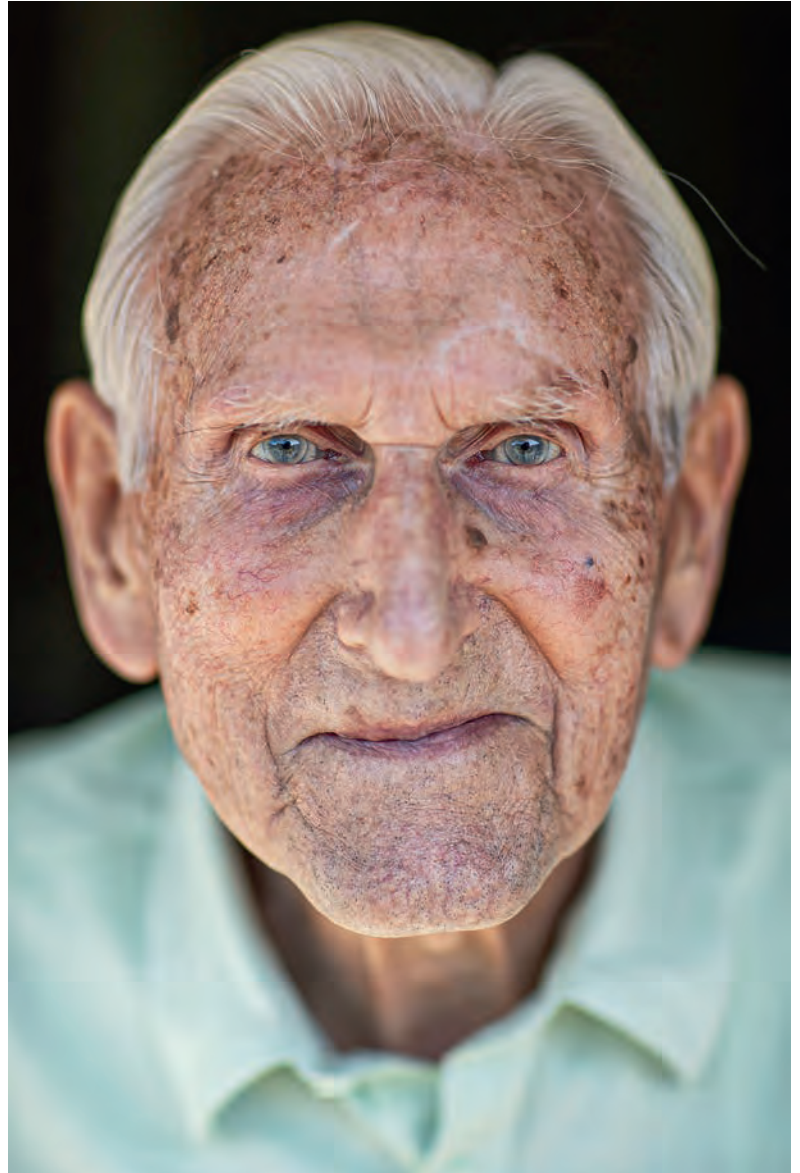
Larry was transported back to the UK by a hospital ship that docked at Avonmouth, where locals greeted the wounded with fish and chips and cups of tea. His rehabilitation continued at a hospital in Bradford before he travelled home on crutches to start the rest of his life.

“It took several visits to Roehampton Hospital and seven months before they had a prosthetic leg for me,” says Larry. “The passing out test was to get on a bus, go upstairs, come back down and get off. If you could do that, you were signed off.

“I couldn’t go back to the building trade, so the Labour Exchange sent me along to this photographic shop for an interview. When I arrived, Jean said the boss wasn’t in and I was to come back the next day. It had been an effort to get there on my new leg in the first place, so I wondered if I should go back at all. I did – and it was the best decision of my life!”

Larry was given the job and, in 1946, Mr Hudson asked him to take over the shop before proceeding to match-make Larry and Jean as a couple.

“Larry was quite shy, so Mr Hudson often invited us both over for dinner and visits,” recalls Jean. “On one occasion, he sent us out of the room as part of



Larry chose to have his leg amputated after he was hit by shrapnel fighting in Burma in WWII

a game and we found ourselves in the hall where he had hung some mistletoe. There was a kiss and our relationship developed from there.”

Larry joined Blesma after the war and the couple, who married in 1954, became active in fundraising for the Association and supporting their local Branch.

“We’ve had a wonderful life and worked in the photography business until 1986,” adds Larry. “I still think of the lads from Burma and kept in touch with Arthur until he passed away three years ago. I’m the only one left and always remember them on VJ Day.”

Jean, whose twin sister, Joy, became a nurse and settled in Australia after marrying a naval officer, adds: “It was great to come across the photograph in the magazine and see me and Joy there at that moment. There were some dark days, but we have also had such happiness and have a wonderful family, so we really are lucky.

“The article in Blesma magazine brought it all back. It reminded us of the sacrifices made by so many, but also of the good that comes in life.”





“POETRY CAN HELP TO CRAFT A NEW SENSE OF YOURSELF”

AT THE OXFORD BROOKES POETRY CENTRE A WEEKEND-LONG COURSE SPECIFICALLY FOR MILITARY VETERANS IS CHALLENGING PERCEPTIONS, DISPELLING MYTHS AND HARNESSING CREATIVITY...

Britain has a rich tradition of military poetry, but most of it stems from the two World Wars – recent military verse hasn’t achieved quite the same impact.

“It’s interesting; we have a great deal of substantial writing from those conflicts, but unlike in America, where the Vietnam War produced a large number of veterans who went on to become writers, poets and artists, we haven’t had very much poetry from members of the UK Armed Forces since WWII,” says Niall Munro (pictured) director of the Oxford Brookes Poetry Centre.

Last year, Niall and the Centre set out to change that by running poetry workshops for British and American veterans. The Poetry Centre, which is a home for research into poetry and advocacy of its value in society, has since run three weekend-long courses. Led by poets, veterans and academics, the course explores the ways in which writing can enable military personnel to think about their experiences, with an anthology of the best writing compiled at the end. Two Members have participated, and it’s hoped more will in the future.

“At the Centre, we were recently involved in a project about war commemoration that involved academics, architects, musicians,



Niall Munro is the director of the forward-thinking Oxford Brookes Poetry Centre

novelists, poets, writers and veterans,” says Niall. “From those, I became interested in how veterans were (or often were not!) included in planning commemorations. Often, they’re not consulted. Veterans we spoke to felt the planning of such things

can be very ‘top-down’; that they’re told by the government what’s going to happen without necessarily feeling as though their voices are being heard.

“Younger veterans aren’t always included in commemorations of past conflicts either. So we thought it would be good to involve those who had taken part in recent conflicts and give them a voice. One of the ways we could do that was through poetry.”

PUSHING THE ENVELOPE

Three courses, each involving 10 veterans, have been run in Oxford. Some participants have travelled from the New York Veterans Workshop and the Joiner Institute in Boston, which researches war as well as its social consequences, while the third course was specifically aimed at women.

“We thought it would be interesting to gain a different perspective on military poetry by hosting a group that was made up entirely of women,” says Niall. “The participants got to discover a tradition that they could fit themselves into, that they’d never heard about before.

“One of the people involved in planning the workshops was Alex Donnelly, a Blesma Member who had served in the Navy and who had been injured in an IED explosion.

“IT SHOWED US THAT VETERANS AREN’T ROBOTS SENT INTO BATTLE TO DO AS THEY’RE TOLD. THEY HAVE AN INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM”

Through him we met Blesma staff, and from there Janet Wilkes, a Blesma Widow, came on the course, while Member Noel Harrower contributed to our anthology.”

The first day-and-a-half of each course was spent reading and listening to poetry about conflict – from the World Wars to the American Civil War. The remainder of the workshop was led by poet Susie Campbell, who worked with the group on different exercises to stimulate their writing.

“We tried to get people thinking about language – things like military jargon,” says Niall. “We also looked at visual stimuli like mark-making – expressing yourself on the page without words – which can then inform how you set out a poem. We used materials like paint, charcoal and collage...”

“The group completed exercises to do with commemoration, and explored how you can create your own journey through writing. We wrote haiku – Japanese short form poetry – and they are often linked with bits of prose to create a narrative called haibun, so we tried that, too.”

Niall believes that veterans, each with a unique and often extreme set of life experiences, are able to produce poetry from a fresh angle. “What came home to us is that these are largely ordinary people doing extraordinary work,” he says. “A lot of perceptions were challenged, including the idea that all veterans have fought, which isn’t true. A lot have very different memories of being in the Forces.”

“Drawing on psychology research into public perceptions of ex-Service personnel,

we also challenged the idea of military veterans being put on a pedestal and thought of as heroic figures. That’s not necessarily how they see themselves at all. They often view themselves as people who just did a job. And we challenged the idea that civilians might not be able to access their poetry, or what they might have to say, because of the language they use or because their experiences might seem radically different. It is remarkable how viscerally connected readers can feel to military experiences, even if they have never had those experiences themselves.”

SHARING EXPERIENCES

Tales from Iraq and Afghanistan weren’t always negative, either. “Hearing the veterans talk about that was fascinating,” says Niall. “They shared experiences of Afghan culture, which many of them embraced. They realised a lot of civilians don’t understand those cultures, or who they were fighting. Thinking about those relationships, and how people in conflict aren’t necessarily enemies, was revelatory.”

“Some of the poems the group produced explored trauma, while others showed scepticism about whether Afghanistan or Iraq should have been invaded in the first place. Overall, the courses have showed us that veterans aren’t robots simply sent into battle to do as they’re told. They have an intellectual freedom.”

Potential course-goers might be wary of the idea of poetry. Isn’t it too difficult to understand? Too intellectual or complex?

JANET WILKES



Janet Wilkes, from Ealing, is a Blesma Widow. Her husband Keith, who died in 2007, served in the Intelligence Corps during WWII. He lost his legs in 2003 after a hospital

infection, and subsequently became a keen Blesma Member. Janet is a big poetry fan and is writing her first book

What attracted you to the course?

I saw it advertised in Blesma’s activities list and thought it was a wonderful idea. I like reading poetry, and this seemed like a very interesting weekend. It was a wonderful group. The standard of poetry was fantastic – much better than I imagined it would be. There were four American servicemen on the course, and it was all very stimulating. Niall and Susie brought in different people, which kept it fresh and meant there was different input constantly. It was one of the best courses I’ve been on.

Talk us through what happened...

We had poetry readings, and then we did exercises and wrote some poetry ourselves. Niall was a master craftsman; he’d work in short, sharp 15-minute slots, because you can’t keep your concentration much longer than that.

What did you get out of the course?

It stretched me, and gave me a lot of encouragement and inspiration. I went home with lots of paperwork and then had time to look at it properly, so I’ve been able to learn more. I will definitely keep writing poetry. I got involved in a Zoom poetry group with Age UK during the lockdown. Someone suggested looking at poems, so every week we choose a theme and read about it.

What have you been focusing on?

Last week, the theme was flowers, so we had to start off with ‘In Flanders fields’, and then Wordsworth’s *Daffodils*. It’s really fun, and it’s not a stuffy group. You have to watch the war poetry, though! It can be quite depressing. It’s very good but it’s not ‘entertaining’.

And you’ve got a budding career as a writer going, too...

I’m currently finalising the manuscript of my memoirs. It’s about my life in London over 46 years and has been accepted by a publisher. I worked a number of different jobs, from the typing pool to the laundry, and in each one I learned something about myself.



Janet (centre) and fellow poets-in-the-making

Tom

“It’s just a scratch,” said Tom, yet I’m still here,
still able to wheel myself around and
see others that I’m told are worse than me
and remember, with crystal clarity,
rorking carrions above the clearing
smoke and feel their wings flap-splattng in the
blood. “Get off!” I yelled. “I’m still here. I’m not
done yet. I have a home, wife and children,
and when I get back I have things to do.”
But this vulture fixed me with his evil
eye daring me to call another shot.
I wanted to swipe him but my arm had
gone, to kick him but I had no legs, to
tell him war should never be his banquet,
but I was overcome with tiredness...
Then smoke swirled round as incense and I saw
in this wilderness a serpent lifted
high like a talisman round a pole and
I saw angels, hundreds of them, thousands
and I called out “God, I’m not ready yet!”
Then they lifted me from the bed to a
wheelchair. “It’s just a scratch, Tom,” the Sergeant
said. “Don’t worry. It’s Church Parade now. You
relax. Let US get on and sort this out!”

Janet Wilkes

OWED TO J

How to capture that first enrapture when I fell in
love with J,
The world lit up: colours brightening and minds
enlightening,
New paths appeared at every turning on my way.

I went prancing down the street, pondering the
years ahead.

How could one girl have done all this, with a
touch of lip and tongue?
Tingling, mingling, with our kisses, memories
streaming, kindling feelings
If we marry, will it always be like this - living in
our vale of bliss?

Thirty years have passed since then
and we have calmed our ways.

We had to, when I lost a leg.
And J gets tired these days.
We lead a simpler type of life,
based on a health food diet
and avoiding stress and strife,
But when the lockdown's ended,
If Exmouth takes your fancy,
ring us on 01 **5 2**7* 1
and we will let you know
if it's convenient to call.
We hope it won't be 'No'.

Noel Harrower

NOEL HARROWER



Noel Harrower served in the Royal Army Service Corps before studying for an English degree and working in the Careers Advisory Service. He has written numerous

plays, books and poems, and was due to take part in the poetry course but had to withdraw through ill health

You missed out on the course...

It's always good fun to meet people and share new things, but I wasn't in great health so I couldn't go along. But I like writing poetry so I thought I would try and contribute a poem. I was pleased when Niall said he liked it. I've taken part in a few poetry courses – it's good to express ourselves in different ways.

You're an experienced writer already...

Yes. I've written several books; one about the English Civil War in Nottinghamshire, called *Uncivil War*, which took a lot of research. I've also written a book set towards the end of this century, called *Yestermorrow*, and one called *The Night Traders* about smuggling in Devon.

You wrote a poem for the anthology...

It was about being a child during The Blitz. My father converted an old coal shed into a bedroom for me and my brother to sleep in when the bombs were falling. It was a really exciting adventure for us – or so we thought – I can still remember it vividly.

That must have taken you right back...

Writing the poem made me remember it all again. It was frightening when the bombs were falling, but you don't really think you are in danger when you're a child. I remember seeing a house down the road that had the front blown off and a bed hanging out of the wall. And there was a hole in the roof at school, which all the boys wanted to sit underneath so that they could look up at the sky. But I never thought our house would be hit, because we were good boys and said our prayers. I suppose we got used to the bombs.

Do you think poetry can be a good outlet for veterans?

Yes. I enjoy all kinds of poetry – about the neighbourhood, birds, the weather. Poetry is for everyone, whether you're a soldier or not. We are all human beings with feelings, with loved ones... Poetry and the arts should be encouraged – it's great that Blesma is helping to do that.

Members are learning to write poetry in the city of dreaming spires



"The Poetry Centre's mission is to break this down, and it often means just not being afraid of poetry," says Niall. "Maybe you studied a bit of WWI poetry at school. It's well-crafted, using words you might not know, imagery you might not understand. But poetry is about picking up material around you and putting it on the page.

"It doesn't have to be wonderfully crafted; nobody writes a poem that is fully-formed as soon as it goes on to the page. You can put down what you like to start with and shape it over time. You enter into a relationship, and that is something that you might feel does something for you. For a lot of veteran writers, it's about wellbeing. Poetry can be therapeutic. It can give you a different kind of status. You might come out of the military and feel you need to re-identify with yourself. Poetry can help with that, help to craft a new sense of yourself."

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS

With Blesma increasingly embracing the arts – witness the success of photography, storytelling and painting courses – this is an obvious next step, and a good option for those who might not be attracted to the more physical pursuits on Blesma's calendar. These creative dimensions can help change the perceptions of soldiers, too.

"People might not associate soldiers with the arts, so this can help to address that," says Niall. "Everyone has a creative side, but they don't always tap into it. Something like poetry can push people into thinking differently about experiences they've had.

"We don't want to re-traumatise people, so we are careful about how we address things like conflict. But the military is a rich subject, and if there were more art and poetry out there by veterans, it would change the way they are viewed.

"An American on the course pointed out that people always thank him for his service, but he wondered if they know what service actually means? Most people don't. In the UK, we often focus on commemoration, and for the rest of the year veterans are in the background. A better understanding of their lives and their situations might help dispel some of the macho stuff, and allow for the fact that veterans can have difficult times."

The three courses so far have been deemed a major success. Niall says that the participants performed brilliantly and were thrilled to see their work and thoughts treated seriously. Nerves were overcome, and many will continue to write.

In these strange times of coronavirus, it's uncertain when the next course will run, but Niall is optimistic. "It's all a bit up in the air at the moment," he says, "but I'm always happy to hear from veterans who are interested in writing. Hopefully, we can secure funding to run another course soon, and more Blesma Members will come along when we do. I think it can really help them."

You can read the anthology at www.brookes.ac.uk/poetry-centre/veterans--poetry-workshops



AN INITIATIVE TO BRING BLESMA MEMBERS AND CHELSEA PENSIONERS TOGETHER ONLINE HAS ALREADY BEEN CALLED "THE MOST MEMORABLE AND ENJOYABLE HOUR SPENT DURING LOCKDOWN". FANCY JOINING THE BREAKFAST CLUB?

The year 2020 will go down as the one in which the world truly went online. Stuck at home in lockdown, everyone has had to improvise, adapt and overcome when it's come to staying connected. Blesma has been no exception, shifting a huge number of its activities into the virtual realm. One of the most successful has been a link up between Members and residents of the Royal Hospital Chelsea; the world-famous Chelsea Pensioners.

A Blesma/Royal Hospital connection existed before lockdown, with a number of meetings at the wonderful building in London having already been arranged. But after COVID-19 struck, the initiative went online. "We had been hosting a Breakfast Club a year before coronavirus, inviting other veterans for breakfast in our Great Hall as part of a national scheme to get veterans to meet up around the UK," explains Frankie Howell, a Captain at the Royal Hospital. "But when lockdown began, we needed to reach out to people



Blesma Chairman and Governor of the Royal Hospital Chelsea, General Sir Adrian Bradshaw

and our Governor, General Sir Adrian Bradshaw, who is also Blesma's Chairman, suggested linking up with the Association."

Since then, several group video calls have taken place, with Members and Pensioners being matched by their regiment and, where possible, dates of service. They may be strangers at the start of the call, but it doesn't take long for the military banter to start flowing and, by the end of the hour, firm friendships have been established.

"It was the most memorable and enjoyable hour I spent during lockdown!"

says Blesma Member Robin Smithers, 65, from Chelmsford, a former Grenadier Guard who lost his legs recently due to a vascular condition. "I really enjoyed the call. There were four of us and we got on brilliantly and had such a good laugh. It was refreshing to go back into that old military mentality, all telling funny stories about our past Sergeant Majors!

"We all fitted in so well that we could have been in a Staff Mess anywhere. The Guardsman mentality is unique – if it stands still we'll polish it, if it runs we'll shoot it! I'd love to do another session."

THEN THE BANTER BEGAN BOUNCING

The Royal Hospital residents are relishing the experience, too. Dave Cootes, 75, was one of the Chelsea Pensioners who spoke to Robin. "We had a really good chat, and at the end we were all saying we'd love to do it again," says Dave. "We talked about where we'd been and what we'd done with our regiments. It started off gently, but then the banter began bouncing. It took



Before lockdown the Breakfast Club used to take place in the Great Hall

Words: Nick Moore Photography: Andy Bate

us right back – to all the things that went wrong and all the mates who caused chaos!

“The call gave me something similar to being a Chelsea Pensioner; comradeship. One of the reasons I’m here is to try and put something back into the community of veterans. We all sometimes feel a bit isolated, so connecting via a call is a great idea. It was nice sharing what it’s like being at the Royal Hospital, too. It’s a brilliant place for an ex-serviceman when he’s left on his own. It’s the best thing I ever did!”

To become a Chelsea Pensioner, you need to be over 65 years of age, have served in the British Army as a Regular soldier for at least 12 years (even if you later took a commission), and not have a spouse (both men and women are eligible).

Captain Frankie Howell says that the calls have also been a good way of pointing out the potential suitability of the Royal Hospital to Blesma Members. “If you’re a veteran with limb loss, this place is set up for you,” he says, “but a lot of people don’t know the rules about getting in.”

Martin Gwillim, the National Outreach Coordinator at Blesma, has overseen the initiative for the Association. He says it has been such a success during lockdown that it is set to be extended.

“Frankie gives me a list of names and potted histories of the Chelsea Pensioners involved, and I try to match them up with our Members,” he says. “Finding ideal matches can take a little bit of time, but 20 Members have taken part so far and they’ve all had great chats. Numbers and details have been swapped, we’ve had two Padres chatting, and an ex-Dragoon Guard has even had a personalised mug made for someone he met on a call.”

NO NEED TO BE TECH SAVVY

Martin stresses that you don’t need to know about computers to get involved. “That’s where our Outreach Officers have helped,” he says. “If you’ve not used video calls before, we can get you set up. This is all part of a wider trend that can do your mental health a tremendous amount of

good, especially if you are isolated. Blesma is already bringing Members together on calls and holding virtual coffee mornings. Members are chewing the fat on Zoom, sharing lockdown stories, seeing buddies and meeting others they don’t know. The plan is to continue with schemes like this.”

Robin Smithers certainly intends to carry on. “I’m doing loads online now,” he says. “I use Blesma Connects – my wife can’t believe it because it is so out of character for me. I’m quite private normally, but I really enjoy it! I’ve also done a breathwork course with an American teacher, which was brilliant, and now I’m doing yoga courses online. I’ve never done anything like this but because I’m high risk I’ve not been out at all since lockdown. If it wasn’t for Blesma, I don’t know what I’d be doing. It has been a massive benefit!”

If you are interested in taking part in the Royal Hospital Breakfast Club, get in touch with Martin on 07741 891632 or by email at outreachcoord@blesma.org

A BEACON OF HOPE FOR AMPUTEES EVERYWHERE

THE CENTRE FOR BLAST INJURY STUDIES HAS BEEN CONDUCTING GROUNDBREAKING RESEARCH FOR 10 YEARS WITH THE SOLE AIM OF IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR SERVICE PERSONNEL AND VETERANS

A decade ago, a PhD student from Imperial College London, who was also in the Army, noticed the types of injuries that troops were sustaining from landmines detonated under vehicles in Afghanistan. He believed some of these injuries could be prevented, or the outcomes improved, and studies got underway. The project was initially called Imperial Blast and was a collaboration between the Ministry of Defence and Imperial College London. In 2011, it morphed into the Centre for Blast Injury Studies (CBIS).

Since then, the Centre has become a bustling hub of research into numerous topics by staff with backgrounds as diverse as engineering, physics, life sciences, medicine and computing. Today, research is being carried out on the medical conditions most associated with injuries caused by IEDs; investigations are on-going into protective clothing, socket improvement and Direct Skeletal Fixation; and there are collaborations between military medical officers, civilian engineers and scientists. This mix ensures the research is solely focused on improving outcomes for Service personnel and veterans.

The Centre's research projects, led by staff at the top of their fields, are often directly relevant to the future wellbeing of Blesma Members and, as the problems

faced by injured veterans have changed over the years, so too has the focus of the Centre. "The Royal British Legion initially put £5 million into the CBIS and, a few years ago, added another £5 million to take our work through to 2021," explains Alison McGregor, Associate Director of the Centre. "Imperial College has also contributed £3 million in-kind in terms of staff and facilities, and we have been especially fortunate to have had a number of military medical staff, who have been funded by the Ministry of Defence, embedded within the Centre over the years."

A FOCUS ON WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

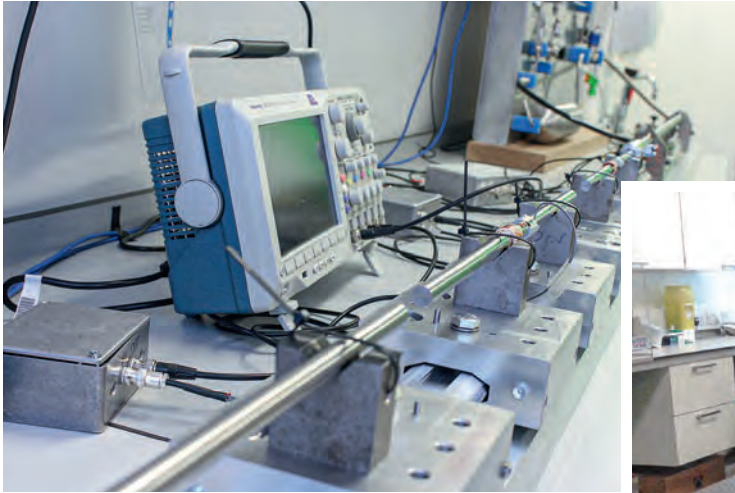
As active conflict has wound down, CBIS has conducted more research into what happens next: how to mitigate for future injuries, for example; design better protection for soldiers; or look after a young generation of injured veterans and keep them healthy as they age. Alison was brought in to look at this last area, and takes the lead on all things related to rehabilitation and long-term health.

"We studied Headley Court (the Defence Military Rehabilitation Centre has since moved to Stanford Hall in Leicestershire) to see how it was thriving and how we might be able to maintain what it had achieved," says Alison. "Our team at CBIS is multi-disciplinary,



*Alison McGregor,
Associate Director
of the Centre for
Blast Injury Studies*

RESEARCH



The CBIS team is multi-disciplinary; with engineering, computing and natural sciences all involved



Alison McGregor is responsible for all studies related to rehab and long-term health

with faculties such as engineering, computing and natural sciences all involved. We are gathering lots of different expertise under one umbrella, and we collaborate closely with colleagues in America, with surgeons in Beirut... with people all over the world.”

CBIS is based in London, but as its research requires a great deal of crossover – imagine a medic advising an engineer on stump problems as they try to design a better socket – people with diverse disciplines are pulling together to find unique solutions. It also means close connections with associations like Blesma.

“I find working with veterans – looking at how they have faced injury and gone on to live their lives and achieve so much – to be hugely inspiring,” says Alison. “I also feel protective towards them. I can see their potential future health issues, and I feel society hasn’t been proactive enough about the issues they may face. Ours has become a partnership, and we are hoping to address some of the questions they have started to ask.

“We’ve got some work coming out soon about bone changes, for example, that will be important for many Blesma Members. We’ve been looking at conditions such as arthritis – how we manage, understand, and prevent it. We’ve found that amputees often experience changes in bone quality in their thirties, and start to suffer from issues like osteopenia and osteoporosis.

“We’ve discovered that bone changes in amputees are often the result of a loading phenomenon because bones aren’t loading in a normal way. That means that it’s not a systemic or hormonal issue, so we can work on the design of sockets to help alleviate the problem. It also means that this condition needs to be treated mechanically and not with drugs, as they wouldn’t help.

“If we redesign sockets, we can maybe simulate some of the loading and muscle pull that are needed to avoid osteoporosis. We’ve done it theoretically, but further research will corroborate that. Hopefully, the end result can be smarter sockets that don’t rub or hurt as much, and which look after bone health as well.”

Blesma has been consulting directly with the CBIS to help identify the most pressing problems faced by

those who have undergone amputation. “One of the reasons we set up the Military Amputee Research Advisory Group was because we wanted amputees to bring us their problems rather than us to try and decide what their issues might be,” says Alison. “Blesma has been brilliant for that. For Members to come in and be subjects for our studies, we needed the buy-in of Blesma, Headley Court/Stanford Hall, and military representatives. They have all helped so much.

“The Association has participated in surveys and studies, and shared with us the issues its Members are experiencing. Blesma has encouraged us to address long-term rehabilitation needs by putting us in touch with amputees who aren’t doing so well or who don’t feel as though they are able to make the best of things.

“The Association has pointed out that its Members aren’t just those injured on operations, they are also people with diabetes or other issues. That ensures we see the broader picture, and translate to the broader population of amputees and NHS patients.”

STILL LEARNING EVERY DAY

You wouldn’t think there is much Alison could still learn in this area: she is a former physiotherapist who studied a bioengineering masters and doctorate, and is now a Professor of Musculoskeletal Biodynamics. But, she says, she is still learning every day – and Blesma plays a big part in that.

“I used to work in elite sports medicine, and military veterans have a similar mindset to athletes,” she says. “They’re an easy group to work with because they contribute, they’re motivated, they see the bigger picture, and are always prepared to give back. They’ll think about things from their recovery that will help others. These are all very impressive traits.”

With such exciting collaborations in place, whether to understand back pain, arthritis, biomechanics or any number of other topics, the CBIS is a beacon of hope for amputees everywhere. We spoke to some of their researchers to discover just a few of the recent areas of study...



LOUISE MCMENEMY

Louise serves with the Royal Navy and is a PhD student at CBIS (funded by the military). Her study, co-authored with military clinicians and rehab specialists, tracks the progress of bilateral above-knee amputees who have had Direct Skeletal Fixation



Give us some background to this procedure...

Seven or eight years ago it was noted that some amputees had used their war pensions or payouts to travel abroad – mainly to Germany or Australia – to

undergo Direct Skeletal Fixation [*also known as osseointegration*]. Titanium rods are permanently inserted into the thigh bone, with an abutment sticking through the skin so a prosthetic limb can be attached directly to an external fitting. **Is the hope that this will be an available treatment option in the UK in the future?** A UK team was sent to work with surgeons pioneering the procedure in Australia. The UK team learned how to perform the operation, looked at costings, worked out what rehab looked like... The UK's first patients are approaching their five-year follow-up. The study we published was in response to their two-year follow-up.

What did you want to see from the study?

Firstly, we hoped to demonstrate that the operation is safe, and secondly that it improves outcomes for the amputee. It's important to point out that this operation is not for everyone. If you can use traditional prosthetics, you should continue to do so. But if you use a wheelchair for more than 50% of the day, it might be a solution for you. We have been cautious in our approach because this is not an experiment.

But, generally, patients are doing well?

Yes. This operation does get people back towards full fitness in an incredible way. Attached to the abutment, for example, is something called the 'failsafe', which will give way before the bone breaks if it is twisted. The weight limit is 110kg, and the only problem we've found is people trying to lift more than that in the gym! It shows how well they're doing – living life to the full, running around the garden with their kids, all those kinds of things...

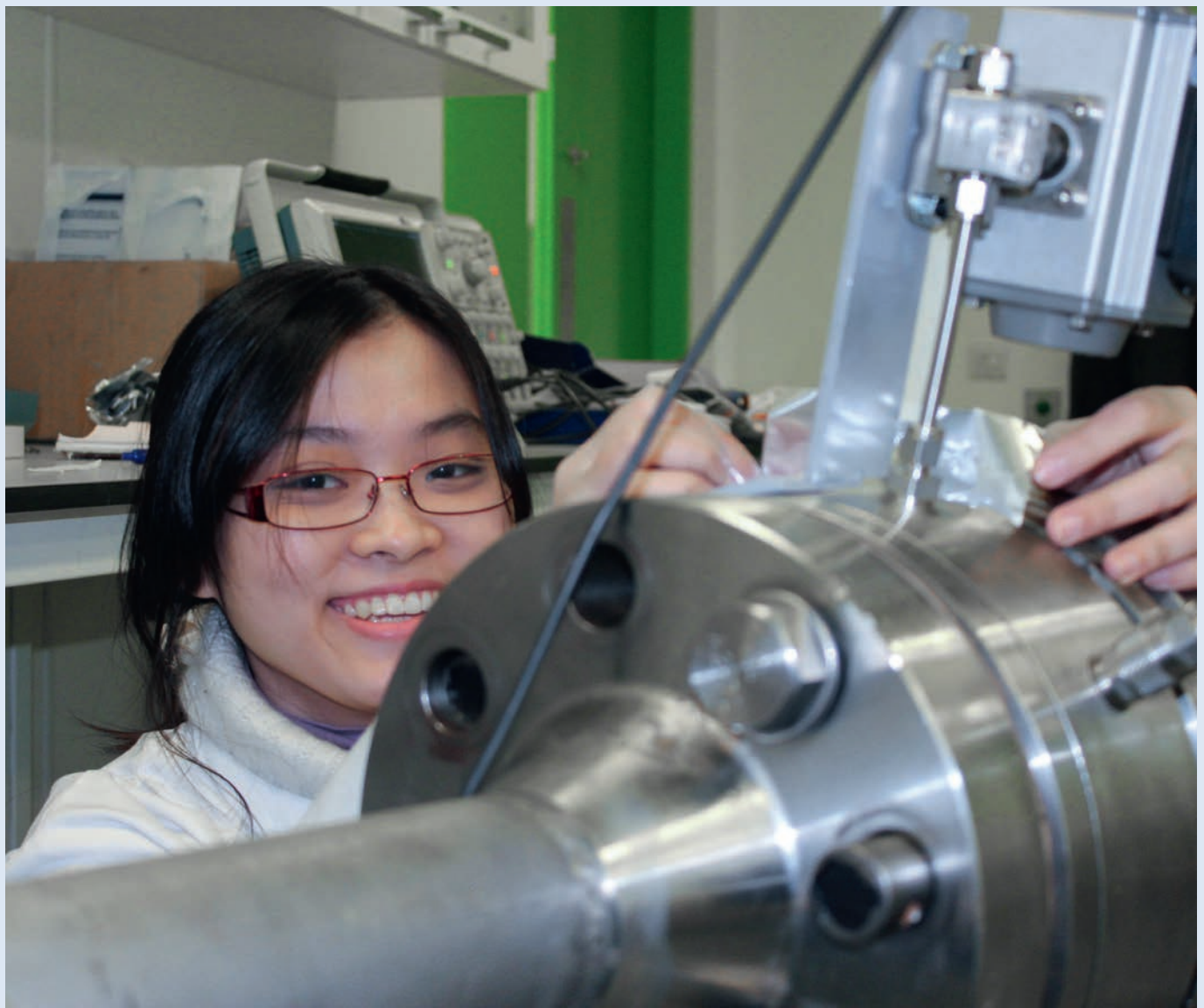
What sort of negative issues are these amputees facing?

There are on-going things to look at. The skin can get infected where the abutment

comes through, for example, so sometimes there is a need for antibiotics or further operations. Our main worry is infection travelling into the bone, which would result in having to take the stem out and which, in turn, would mean not being able to go back to using regular prosthetics. It's not a miracle cure, but the study shows that people are doing well, and hopefully it will encourage more amputees who could benefit to consider Direct Skeletal Fixation.

You're also carrying out research into momentum offloading braces to help those with foot and ankle injuries...

Yes. We [*the CBIS and military colleagues*] are studying how people are getting on with what we call the Bob Brace. It works for a lot of patients with lower leg nerve injuries, but it's not for everyone so we've been looking into different injury patterns and what makes the difference for some. We are now fairly confident that we can predict who the brace will work for in the long term. Rehabilitation can take up to 18 months, so hopefully this research will be helpful for people considering the brace.



THUY-TIEN NGUYEN

Thuy-Tien Nguyen, from London, became interested in traumatic injury while studying at Imperial's Institute of Shock Physics. She recently produced a study about blast fragments, the risk of bone fracture, and the potential of lightweight protection to aid the military – eventually aiming to minimise the kind of injuries commonly suffered by many Blesma Members



What motivated you to research battlefield blast injuries?

I'm interested in shock scenarios – extreme pressure, temperature, and velocity. It's not something you see in everyday life,

so it is interesting to learn about. I did my BSc and MSc in physics, but I was interested in the Centre for Blast Injury Studies because it is multi-disciplinary; you have to learn about biology, medicine, engineering... it's a good challenge.

You've been examining how explosions affect the tibia...

Yes. When you're looking to protect the tibia from explosions, you need to look

at the structure of the bone – the biology, physics and mechanics – then you have to examine different protective fabrics, textiles and weaves, and how things knit together.

How do you hope your study might eventually assist military personnel?

At the moment, the people who are working on this kind of protective equipment don't necessarily know a lot about the injury mechanism and criteria – there isn't much information out there for them to reference. This study should help inform them.

How might it do that?

We are trying to understand the threshold for different kinds of bone fractures so that we know what to look for in protection. In the long term, we want to be able to advise the Ministry of Defence how to improve military trousers. I think the solution will be thin liners that are attached to specific areas so they aren't too uncomfortable or add too

much weight. Maybe we can look to keep fragments or sand out of injuries, too.

You've been given some insight into this world by a Blesma Member...

Dave Henson was a PhD student here and is now a member of staff. He's talked about his everyday requirements and challenges, and that has given us an understanding of how it is for people who have been injured. We also have open days, when people come in to talk about their experiences. It is great to have this information and hear what is important for both rehab and injury. We need to have genuine insight rather than just information on a piece of paper.

What are you working on next?

I'm researching how blast fragments penetrate the skin. Skin is a very complex structure and many injury models have to neglect its effects or assume it is the same as muscle tissue.

SHRUTI TURNER

Shruti was heading for a career in the RAF when injury halted her progress. Having studied aerospace and biomedical engineering, she decided to help others whose plans have been altered by circumstance. She has studied socket fit, and aims to improve the process using technology



You were set to join the RAF...

Yes, I went to Welbeck Defence Sixth Form College but I ended up being medically discharged; I had knee problems and couldn't run or play sport. Suddenly, at 18, my career and hobbies were taken away from me. I'm still fortunate compared to many, and it motivated me to do something that could improve

people's quality of life. A lot of biomedical engineering is about extending life, but I also think what's the point of living longer if we're not going to have quality of life?

You've completed a research project on socket fit...

When people talk about prosthetics, they don't always discuss socket fit. There are many exciting technological advances such as brain-controlled prostheses, but the part that is really important for many amputees is the socket. It doesn't matter how advanced a prosthesis might be, it is of no use if the socket isn't right. It might not be quite as cutting edge, but I feel that improving this area can have so many benefits to amputees.

What did you discover?

I carried out surveys and interviews with amputees and rehabilitation clinicians, and found that many of the issues they face are related to socket fit. Many will perhaps look at the research and say: 'Yeah, I already knew that', but it's important to document it because in academia, if something isn't documented, it's like it's not there. We needed to share this information so researchers, engineers and clinicians could see it and realise it is a priority. There isn't much on record about what frustrates those going through rehabilitation.

How can these discoveries improve amputees' lives?

It's important to point out that prosthetists do an incredible job. Our bodies are ever-changing, and things can fluctuate, causing discomfort and pain. In this research, amputees share how their life has been impacted. Not everyone wants a robotic limb or to become a Paralympian, but they do want to go to the pub or have a day out with their children. If we can make strides to improve the socket, making them more adjustable or adaptable to change in volume, more breathable or more lightweight, that can help.

You're working on an app to address these issues...

Yes. A sensor network inside a socket communicates with an app via Bluetooth to create a 3D pressure map which allows you to 'see' what's going on in the socket. It means clinicians can track how things change. Someone may be walking in a way that puts pressure on a certain part of the residual limb, for example, and this information can help prosthetists adapt the socket. Or someone lacking sensation in a particular area might not be able to sense a problem until a sore develops – so we could prevent that, too. Hopefully, it will help in lots of ways, although I think we will always need a human to complement the tech!





JAMES O'CONNELL

James O'Connell, 60, lost his right eye during the Falklands War. He has now turned his story, and his fellow soldiers' memories of the conflict, into a book

I served in 3rd Battalion, The Parachute Regiment in the Falklands Conflict. During the Battle of Mount Longdon, the main attack came from the west, but my company was located to the north in the direct line of Argentine fire. All their guns were facing our location so our area was swept with machine gun fire and pounded with artillery. The battalion took many casualties: 23 dead and 48 wounded.

I was clipped in the face by a bullet. I lost my right eye and cheekbone, the centre of my nose and my front teeth. Thanks to the expertise of surgeons over a five-year period, my cheekbone was replaced with bone from my hip, and I received a plastic centre to my nose, an artificial eye, and new front teeth.

I left the Army in 1984, got married, had two sons, and created a new life as a taxi driver before going on to own a small taxi business. In 2010, I decided to write an account of the battle which I called *Three Days In June*. I travelled around the country interviewing 50-or-so of my old colleagues, several of whom were, by then, Major Generals.

I signed with a publisher and all was looking good, but in 2012, as I neared the end of my book, I was diagnosed with kidney cancer. I was diagnosed on the Monday and had a kidney removed on the Wednesday. Fortunately, the cancer hadn't spread, but as soon as my left kidney was removed my right kidney began to fail.

The publisher refused the book as I'd missed my deadline, and for the next four years I was on dialysis for six hours every other day. Publishing my book was no longer my focus as I just wanted to be alive for my wife and two sons.

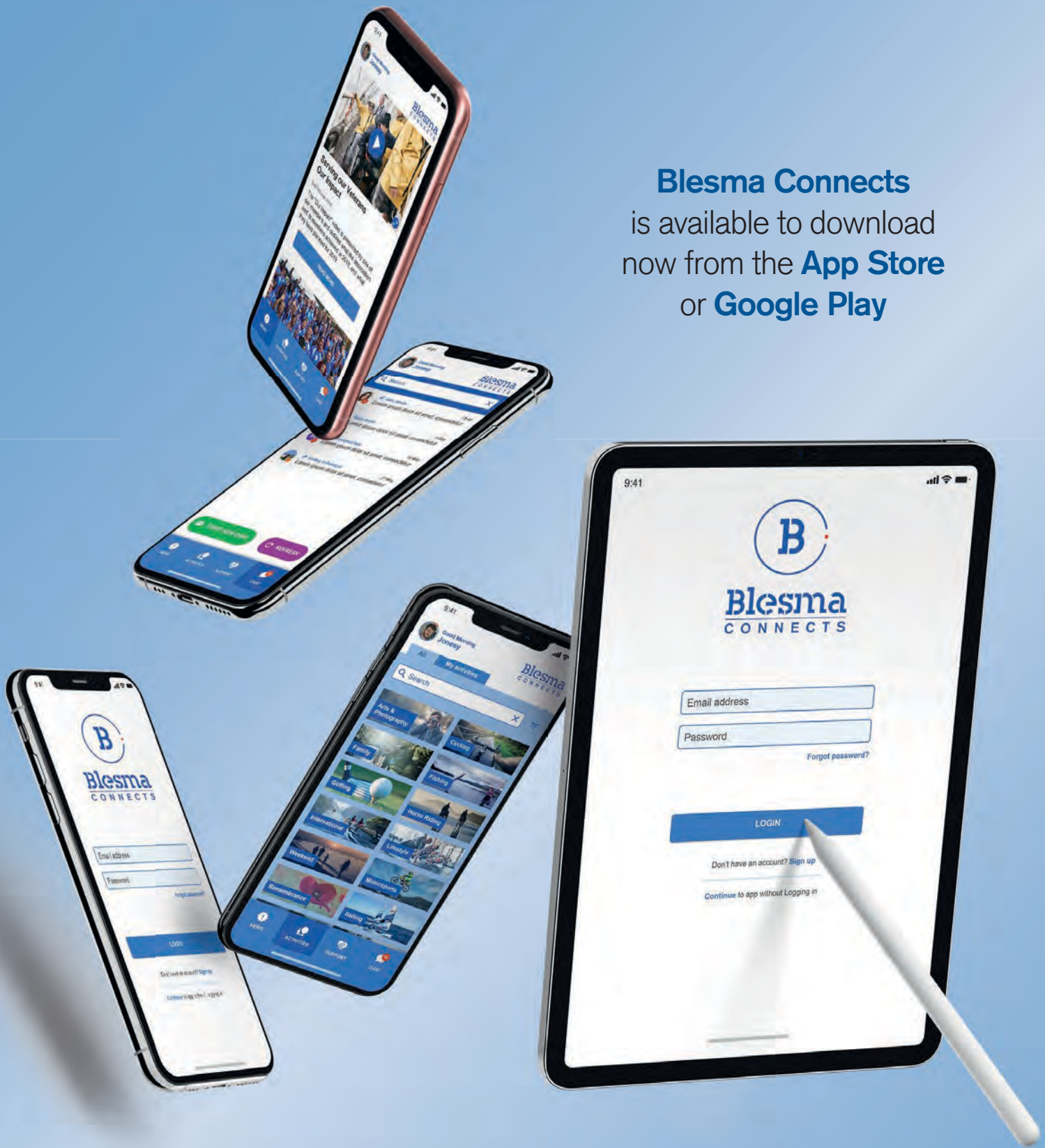
In 2017, I was fortunate to receive a donor kidney from a young man who'd died in a motorcycle accident. I will never be able to fully express my gratitude to this young man or his family, but it has given me a new life.

“I WAS CLIPPED IN THE FACE BY A BULLET. I LOST MY RIGHT EYE AND CHEEKBONE, THE CENTRE OF MY NOSE, AND MY FRONT TEETH”

During lockdown, I was contacted out of the blue by a publisher who wanted to publish my book. I'm delighted. It finally gives recognition to all the unsung heroes who were there, and to the many acts of bravery that went unseen and unrewarded, such as my colleagues who carried me through a minefield whilst under fire, and Corporal Stewart McLaughlin who was outstanding on the night but was killed near the end of the battle.

We also mustn't forget the ten 17-year-old soldiers and 42 18-year-old soldiers who took part in the battle. Three of the 17 year olds were killed, and another soldier died on his 18th birthday. It's quite chilling when you look back on it, which is why I hope my book will give a better understanding of the battle.

***Three Days In June* is due to be published in hardback in June 2021 and in paperback the following year**



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