

Blesma

The magazine for limbless veterans

PLUS!
142 MEMBERS JOINED DURING COVID. WHAT DOES LOCKDOWN LOOK LIKE FOR A NEW AMPUTEE?



REHAB, RIFLES AND RESILIENCE

LESLEY STEWART HAS HAD TO ENDURE SO MUCH IN THE LAST 20 YEARS. HOW DOES SHE STAY SO FOCUSED?

Behind the scenes of *A Call To Spy*

The must-watch film that tells the true story of WWII amputee spy Virginia Hall **p32**



The Resilience Sessions podcast

The popular podcast makes a welcome return with more candid and moving conversations **p44**

Blesma's unique support model

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Celebrate with Blesma this VE Day!

**BLESMA MEMBER AND WWII
VETERAN ROY HAYWARD LANDED ON
THE NORMANDY BEACHES IN JUNE 1944**



Get involved and help veterans like Roy at www.blesma.org

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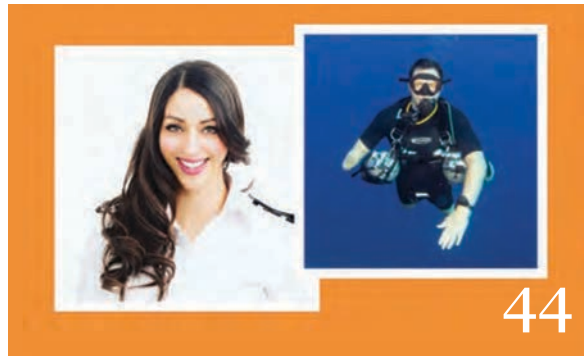
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£700,000 fund will expand provision of MPKs in Wales

ADVANCED MICROPROCESSOR-CONTROLLED KNEES ARE NOW AVAILABLE TO WALES RESIDENTS WHOSE AMPUTATIONS WERE NOT ATTRIBUTABLE TO MILITARY SERVICE

Vaughan Gething, Welsh Minister for Health and Social Services, has announced a £700,000 fund to provide microprocessor-controlled prosthetic knees (MPK) to a wider group of people living in Wales. The announcement brings Wales into line with the rest of the UK and will benefit a number of Members who have had above-knee amputations that were not attributable to military service.

“This announcement is wonderful news for our Members in Wales,” said Tom Hall, BSO Wales & West. “The funding will help a number of our non-Service attributable above-knee amputee Members, enabling some to lead more independent lives. This outcome shows what close and strong collaboration with the Welsh government and the NHS – including the Welsh Artificial Limb and Appliance Centres – can achieve.”

Microprocessor-controlled knees use computer technology to provide enhanced stability and safer walking. The technology makes it easier for the user to navigate slopes, stairs and uneven terrain with greater stability, therefore improving people’s long-term health, independent living and quality of life.



Joining during a pandemic

What was it like to become a Member in 2020? (p20)



The fund was made available from 01 April to those eligible via the NHS Prosthetic and Amputee Rehabilitation Services, which are delivered in-house by three specialist Artificial Limb and Appliance Centres in Cardiff, Swansea and Wrexham. Those eligible can discuss this with their prosthetists at their next assessment.

“The fine detail now needs to be worked out and Blesma has a role to play here,” said BSO (Prosthetics) Brian Chenier. “We will work closely with the necessary parties to establish a fair and workable prescribing policy. This is very welcome news.”

Throughout the process Blesma – through Tom Hall, BSO Wales & West and Brian Chenier BSO (Prosthetics) – has campaigned for this uplift in funding and has provided case studies and important data that have helped inform this decision.

“Blesma is very grateful to everyone who has worked to get this funding approved,” said Blesma’s Chief Executive, Jon Bryant. “As a national charity that supports veterans living with limb loss across the UK, we know just how life changing an MPK can be. For some time, our Members with Service-attributable above-knee amputations have been able to benefit from such technology. The decision to extend this to civilian amputees and our non-attributable amputee Members is great news.”

For more information please contact Tom Hall on bsowest@blesma.org or 020 8548 7098, or Brian Chenier on 020 8548 7080 or bsoprosthetics@blesma.org



“BLESMA IS VERY GRATEFUL TO EVERYONE WHO HAS WORKED TO GET THIS FUNDING APPROVED”

welcome



Welcome to the Spring issue of the magazine. I am writing as the news on vaccinations allows us to start planning a number of ‘live’ activities in addition to virtual events over the Summer. As well as cycling, glamping and fishing, the Activities Team are organising two Couples’ Weekends. Readers will be aware that the Members’ Weekend planned for

June has had to be postponed, although a virtual AGM will take place on Sunday 13 June. The good news is that we have secured a booking for the Chesford Grange Hotel in Warwick for a Members’ Weekend on 02-03 October – please save the date and details will follow.

You will see from this issue that there is lots going on in Blesma despite the pandemic. The agreement from the Welsh government to broaden eligibility for microprocessor-controlled prosthetic knees is great news and a tribute to the hard work of Tom Hall and Brian Chenier. Elsewhere, our fundraisers are still hard at it with football matches, rowing marathons, endurance events and more.

In Chelmsford, we have welcomed Ian Harper as our new Director Independence and Wellbeing, the Finance Team have successfully completed Blesma’s first virtual audit, and the membership application process has been taken online and simplified.

In this issue, Members Charlie Holford and Jon Hilton describe the experiences that led up to them joining the Association in 2020, we hear from Conrad Molloy about the difference a model making workshop has made to his life, and Lesley Stewart explains how she has come to be competing for selection for the Tokyo Paralympics.

Readers will be familiar with *Caring and Coping – the Family Perspective on Living with Limb Loss*. Dr Hilary Engward explains how Blesma, Anglia Ruskin University and the Forces in Mind Trust are about to repeat the study, this time examining the experiences of Members who have loss of use of limb. In another area, the Making Generation R team have switched to online presentations, 19 new recruits have trained to take part this year, and the Resilience Sessions podcasts have teamed Members with public figures once more. Enjoy the issue.

Jon Bryant
Chief Executive





The 101-year-old war memorial in Over Wallop has been restored to its former glory



from the original memorial. Last October, the renovated war memorial was rededicated in time for Remembrance Sunday, 101 years after it was first erected. “The main memorial, which contains the names of those who died, has been refurbished and a new pavement has been laid,” said Ben.

“The stone came from the same quarry as the original memorial, with the work eventually costing almost £100,000.

“I feel very happy that we achieved what we set out to do. It took a long time – I had my leg amputated during the project – but the main thing is the memorial records a major part of the village’s history. I feel a lot of people who come back from conflict wounded or with limbs missing don’t get the recognition they deserve. Getting recognition for those whose names had disappeared was the driving force for me.”

Member helps restore century-old memorial

For the last six years, injured veteran Ben Cartwright was been on a mission to restore a 101-year-old war memorial in his Hampshire village. The memorial in Over Wallop honours those from the village who served in the World Wars and the conflict in Afghanistan. Among the names are those of 95 men who fought in WWI, 18 of whom were killed in action.

“The memorial was erected in 1919, and though it had been cleaned over the years it was suffering from wear and damage,” said Ben, 75, who served in the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers.

“Over Wallop is a small village so the names of all those who served were able

to be recorded but most had weathered away. The memorial is in the middle of a junction so vehicles would occasionally damage the base, too. I wanted to reinstate the names so they were recognisable.”

After reading an article about The War Memorial Trust, which offers funds to refurbish war memorials, Ben formed the ‘They Also Served’ committee with two fellow ex-servicemen in 2014.

The trio raised almost £10,000 through fundraising events and received donations from The War Memorial Trust and the local Borough and Parish Councils. They also spent a great deal of time researching the veterans whose names had slowly eroded



TRIBUNAL RULES IN FAVOUR OF BLESMA MEMBER

MEMBER CHARLIE RADCLYFFE HAS won a significant tribunal hearing in which he argued that disability benefits for double lower leg paralysis should be treated similarly to double lower leg amputation.

Charlie was paralysed from the waist down after jumping off a bridge during adventurous training in 2003. By the time he was medically discharged in 2006 he was able to walk with crutches, using a wheelchair when necessary. However, he was left paralysed below the knees and his disablement was classified as 80%.

Between 2006 and 2020, Charlie had three medical assessments, and on four occasions Veterans UK reconfirmed his 80% disablement.

In 2017, Charlie challenged this figure on two grounds. Firstly, he claimed his disablement was worse than his medical reports suggested, and secondly he claimed that paralysis injuries should be treated similarly to amputations of a similar level.

Following Charlie’s hearing in Autumn 2020, the tribunal agreed with his claim, stating: “In light of all that we have heard and read... we are in no doubt that we should allow this appeal. We agreed with the appellant that he should be equated with a double below-the-knees amputee and that accordingly 100% was the correct award.”

This result could have implications for

Blesma Members with loss of use of limb who have a wide range of disabilities, most of which fall outside the defined disablement figures under the War Pension Scheme.

“Charlie made it his personal goal to seek a change to the original decision, which not only benefitted him personally but could have wide-ranging impact for other Members and veterans,” said BSO (Prosthetics) Brian Chenier. “His tireless dedication to research and presenting his case is to be applauded.”

If you would like to discuss your situation in light of Charlie’s tribunal decision, please contact your Support Officer



Chris raises £10K to get his season back on track

Generous supporters have raised thousands of pounds for one-armed motorcycle racer Chris Ganley after his bikes and kit were destroyed in a fire.

Blesma Member Chris, from Clevedon, incurred £25,000 worth of damages when he lost three motorbikes, including his race bike, in a suspected arson attack at Bridgwater and Taunton College that caused extensive damage to the campus.

Chris had been storing the bikes along with some of his kit and tools in the college's motorsport workshop for the last three years so students could help maintain them and gain experience in adapting bikes for amputee riders.

"I was devastated when I heard the news," said the 31 year old, who was back on his bike six months after losing his left arm in a motorcycle accident in 2014.

"It's not just about the money – it's also the memories that go with the bikes – I competed for the first time on one of them," said Chris. "A lot of hard work and care had gone into fitting them with a lot of bespoke modifications – one was all set up and ready for triple amputees to learn to ride. It's definitely chucked a curve ball into the year and the racing season ahead."

After encouragement from friends, Chris

set up a GoFundMe page in an attempt to raise £10,000 to prepare an old bike for racing on 01 May. The generosity of the biker community, Blesma and other donors saw him quickly thump his target.

"I can't believe the support I've had – especially in such hard times. I reached the £10,000 target within a week. It would have been selfish to take more, so I shut the page down once it met its target. I didn't want to take more than I needed."

Chris now plans to compete in the first race of the ThunderSport GB season from 01-03 May at Snetterton.



FOOTBALL TEAM ESTABLISHED TO SUPPORT BLESMA

BRITISH ARMY VETERAN JONATHAN Farrelly hopes to raise £50,000 for Blesma by putting on a veterans vs civilians football match on 27 June.

Jonathan established the Combined Veterans Football Club (CVFC) in December with the aim of raising funds for Blesma and other military charities after seeing smaller veterans' charities struggle during COVID-19.

"I've set up a Facebook page and the response has been overwhelming," said the 32 year old from Weston-super-Mare. "People I didn't know began offering to help – a few celebrities have even offered their support."

The CVFC's match against Weston All Stars is set to take place at Riverside, Branwell, with live entertainment and food and drink also on offer.

"The health and safety procedures are complete, we've had kits made for both



teams, and we've already sold 100 tickets," said Jonathan. "We've achieved a lot so far so hopefully we can raise a good amount for Blesma. I've seen the fantastic work the charity does as it has supported my friend Scott Yarrington, who lost both his legs in Afghanistan, so it will be good to give back."

Jonathan has big ideas for the team's future including an attempt to break the world record for the longest football match, and fixtures against a German or American veterans' team.

For tickets: <https://www.fresha.com/a/combined-veterans-football-club-banwell-riverside-5g116rll/vouchers>



Lifelong West Ham fan Matt Woollard received a call from reserve team keeper Darren Randolph

“HE TAUGHT ME THAT ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE”

A TEENAGER IS FUNDRAISING IN memory of former Lance Corporal David Timmins, who inspired her to follow her dream when the pair met during a Camps International project in 2019.

Amy Dunton, 17, from Middlesbrough, met David in Borneo when they were both volunteering with Camps International. David, along with fellow Blesma Member Ben Ayres, was mentoring teenagers during the month-long expedition.

“David and Ben spoke to many students about their lives, careers in the Forces, Blesma and lots more, and were a true inspiration to me,” said Amy, who is joining the Royal Air Force in July. “I had always wanted to join the military but had never had that much confidence in myself. Hearing and witnessing how David just carried on with life even though he had sustained serious injuries really inspired me to pursue my dream. He taught me anything is possible if you put your mind to it.”

When Amy heard of David’s passing in January, she decided to raise funds for a memorial plaque to be put in Camp Bongkud where the project was based.

“During the Borneo trip, David set himself the challenge of climbing Bongkud Hill eight times. That was the equivalent of 4,216 metres, so one of my plans is to climb a local hill where I live 13 times to match that,” said Amy. “Another idea I’ve had is to run the distance of a half marathon. I’m hoping to raise £2,000 to pay for the plaque.”

Turn to p18 to read more about David, who sadly passed away in January



Hammers heroes spend time online with Members

West Ham United football players have been surprising Blesma Members with video calls. Lifelong Hammers fan Matt Woollard (above) and season ticket holder Matt Weston have both received calls from players in recent weeks as part of the club’s continuing support of the Association.

Reserve goalkeeper Darren Randolph surprised Matt Woollard with a call and took the time to thank him for his work during lockdown – Matt works at a primary school in Chelmsford.

“The call was a big surprise. It was good to chat to Darren, and it was interesting to find out how West Ham have been affected by coronavirus,” said Matt. “Darren was grateful for the efforts of all key workers.

My workload has increased to keep the school clean and the children and staff safe, so it is really uplifting to have that support.”

Matt Weston received a call from players Ryan Fredericks and Pablo Fornals after his boss tricked him into thinking he was helping with a technology problem for a charity event. “I thought I was about to join a planning meeting between Blesma and West Ham,” said Matt. “We had a really good chat, and the guys were genuinely interested in what I had to say, especially about the work I do at Barclays.”

West Ham has fostered a very strong partnership with Blesma since 2016, and held an awareness match in support of the Association in January when they played in the Premier League against Liverpool.





Paralympic gold medallist retires after 11-year career

Jon-Allan Butterworth MBE, who became the first British veteran injured in Iraq or Afghanistan to win a Paralympic gold, retired from professional cycling in December after an 11-year career.

“I wanted Tokyo to be my last Paralympic Games, but when they were postponed I knew I would have to spend another 18 months sacrificing a lot of things and training in lockdown,” said the 35-year-old former RAF Weapons Technician. “It’s hard to live the Paralympic cycle life, and I realised I’d be more gutted if I committed to training and the Games didn’t happen than missing them if they did take place.”

Jon-Allan began his cycling career just 10 weeks after his arm was amputated due to injuries suffered in an attack at the Basra Air Station in August 2007. He set a world record in the C5 Kilo time trial at the 2011 World Championships before competing at London 2012, where he won silver medals in the C4-5 1km, C5 individual pursuit and C1-5 mixed team sprint.

He went on to become part of GB’s mixed team sprint squad at the Rio Paralympics in 2016, where he topped the podium to become the first British veteran to win a Paralympic gold. In his 11-year career, Jon-Allan won 10 World Championship medals, including four golds.

“My proudest moment was winning gold in Rio, but getting to represent GB again was incredible,” said Jon-Allan, who is currently working for a cycling company.



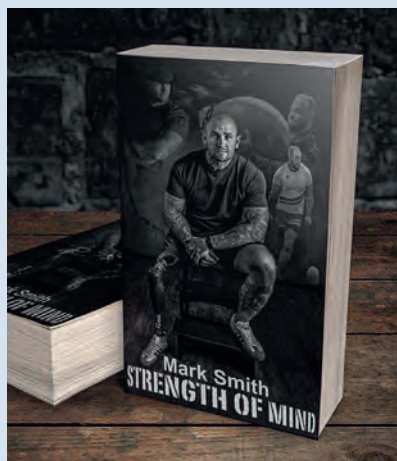
Photography: onEdition

MARK’S JOURNEY FROM STRONGMAN TO WRITING BOOK *STRENGTH OF MIND*

MARK SMITH, WHO WAS INJURED ON a live firing exercise in Canada before going on to become Britain’s strongest disabled man, has written his autobiography.

“Writing the book felt like therapy – the one thing I wanted was to be honest,” said Mark, who is now an amputee footballer for West Brom after retiring from strongman competitions three years ago. “The book talks about how I contemplated suicide, how I came out the other side, and the things that helped me through that. I’ve already had friends open up about their own struggles.”

Mark’s experiences from school, his military career, and his sporting endeavours are all covered in the book. “Throughout



2017 and 2018 I was getting heavier, which is an asset in the sport, but it was hindering me using a prosthetic,” said the 36-year-old former Grenadier Guard. “I was due to compete at the World’s Strongest Disabled Man in 2018, but during a family holiday I could barely walk a metre. I’d had a failed operation in 2017 to help with the pain, and in that time a comrade who had kept me alive when I was injured took his own life.”

Following discussions with his wife, Mark decided to go to counselling and ultimately felt that the time was right to stop competing.

“After losing some of the strongman weight, I started playing amputee football. I enjoy being part of a team – football has a togetherness that I’ve missed,” said Mark.

Strength of Mind is available on Amazon. All profits are being donated to Aidan’s Funds For Fun, a charity that supports children and their families who are going through cancer

In the spotlight

Ian Harper



Ian Harper is Blesma's new Director Independence and Wellbeing. He joined the Army in 1977 and began a 30-year career, initially serving in the Royal Regiment of Wales and then the Royal Army Medical Corps. Between serving in each regiment, Ian spent nine years in the commercial world, during which he completed an MBA and an MA in marketing. Ian started his new role with Blesma in January.

"I had wanted to join the Army for as long as I could remember. My father and brothers all served, as did my grandad, who had fought in World War I and was wounded at the Somme, losing his left leg. Being in the Army was part of my family's DNA," says Ian.

Ian became a soldier before he received his A-Level results, starting his military career at the training depot at Lichfield. He went to Beaconsfield for leadership training, completed a selection course at Westbury, then joined RMA Sandhurst in 1978 to train as an officer.

"Afterwards, I joined my regiment in Aldershot as part of 5 Airborne Brigade as a Second Lieutenant and had a platoon of 32 soldiers. We were very rapidly deployed to Ireland as a spearhead battalion during the riots following the death of Bobby Sands. It was a very intense and difficult time."

Following that deployment, Ian spent two years as a Boot Camp Instructor at Crickhowell in Wales before taking up the role of Regimental Training Officer, and subsequently the Mortar Officer, in Germany. He was then assigned to the Royal Signals after which he joined the Gurkhas in Hong Kong in 1998.

"Next, I was posted to HQ 1st British Corps. It was an intense and professionally challenging time because the whole of the British Army was gearing up for the first Gulf War. The headquarters was responsible for mounting the 1st (UK) Armoured Division from Germany and I was responsible for battle casualty replacements," says Ian.

However, in 1992, soon after rejoining the Royal Regiment of Wales, Ian was made redundant as part of Defence cuts under Options for Change, a response

to the changing face of world politics following the fall of the Berlin Wall.

"It was a shock, but the reality is that when most soldiers are presented with something life-changing, they get over it. You dust yourself off and say: 'What are my options?' I realised that, at the age of 33, I didn't have much in the way of academic or management qualifications, so I applied to go to university to study for an MBA. The programme was thorough but the long hours were worthwhile."

FROM MARKETING TO THE MOD

After graduation, Ian gained significant experience in several marketing, business development and recruitment jobs. Notably, he spent 18 months in Germany working for the British Forces Germany Health Commission to maximise the £54m budget for healthcare services across Western Europe.

"In 1996, I married the doctor of my old regiment, who a number of Blesma Members may know as Tania Cubison. She is a Lieutenant Colonel in the Royal Army Medical Corps and is a burns and reconstruction specialist as well as one of the leading experts on stump revision and amputations in Europe," says Ian.

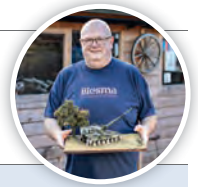
"Around 2002, Tania was appointed a consultant surgeon and I soon found out there were vacancies in the RAMC – a result of the heavy commitments and poor recruiting inflow. I rejoined the Army as a Medical Planning Officer and was assigned to the MoD in Whitehall. Being back felt like I'd just put on my long-lost slippers. For four years, I was one of six involved in the transformation of Defence Medical Services and how it was delivered to the wider Armed Forces, covering 250,000 people spread across the globe. It was a really exhilarating time for me."

Ian deployed to Afghanistan twice. The first time as the Deputy Medical Director in Helmand Province, responsible for managing five hospitals and more than 20 medical trauma units supporting 48,000 combat troops. The second time, he ran the media and communications campaign of the UK Forces during the last critical six months of operations in Afghanistan.

“

BEING A VETERAN, I FEEL IT IS MY DUTY TO SERVE THOSE WHO HAVE GIVEN SO MUCH – OFTEN NEARLY EVERYTHING – FOR OUR COUNTRY

”



“During this time, I helped to bring a 20-bed health centre online in Lashkar Gah as well as negotiating the release of critical radio equipment with a senior Afghan commander for us to use at the Command Centre. That meant the whole of the Helmand River Valley had communications, enabling emergency services to be coordinated for the very first time. On leaving, I felt a great sense of achievement knowing the small changes I had made would improve the health and survival rates of the Afghan people in the wider area around Lashkar Gah,” says Ian.

“I have been blessed in my career to have had the opportunity to do so many different and rewarding things. Now, in Blesma, I hope my experiences and knowledge can be used to help Members, especially those in need and distress. Being a veteran, I feel it is my duty to serve those who have given so much – often nearly everything – for our country.

“I hope I can achieve this through being part of what is an outstanding team. I feel my role is very much about listening and trying to anticipate what people need, ensuring they are supported as quickly as possible through the amazing work of the Support and Outreach Officers. I don’t want our Members to be left waiting for help. I want them to have decisions – and ideally the decisions they are hoping for. It is deeply rewarding knowing that, at a time of need, what we as a team do will make a big difference.”



Above: Ian with his dad on Remembrance Day 2011 and (left) in Kabul in 2012

BLE SMA BRIEFING

Diabetes: what to be aware of

Diabetes diagnoses have more than doubled in the UK in 20 years. BSO (Prosthetics) Brian Chenier looks at what can be done to minimise the impact of the disease



AMPUTATIONS ARE ON THE INCREASE DUE TO DIABETES

A significant number of Blesma Members living with limb loss have diabetes, and this was either the primary cause or a major factor in them having amputation surgery. A recent study highlighted that the large numbers of military personnel becoming amputees through conflict or other military activity is massively outweighed by the number of veterans who have amputations due to conditions such as diabetes. Statistically however, veterans were at no more risk than the rest of the population matched for age, gender and geographic area.

So what can Members do to help reduce the impact of the disease and assist with self-management and care? Firstly, it is important to discuss any concerns you might have with your GP and other healthcare providers. The following information is generic and does not replace professional medical advice and support.

ABOUT DIABETES

Diabetes is the result of too much glucose in the blood, either because the body cannot produce the insulin needed to regulate blood sugar (Type 1), or because the body becomes resistant to insulin (Type 2). It is estimated that more than 4.7 million people in the UK now have diabetes, and the number of diagnoses has doubled over the last 20 years.

If not managed well, diabetes can lead to complications including amputation, sight loss, kidney failure, stroke, heart disease and death. Every week there are 140-170 amputations, 680 strokes and 530 heart attacks as a result of diabetes in the UK. Many of these are avoidable.

(GIRFT; Getting It Right First Time Programme National Speciality Report – Diabetes, Rayman Karr Nov 2020)

TOP TIPS

IF YOU SMOKE, STOP

Of course, this isn't as simple as it sounds, but there is a lot of support out there to help you quit. Your GP or local pharmacy can help.

KEEP ACTIVE AND EAT A HEALTHY DIET

Get support from a dietician so you know what to eat and how food affects you. Always get advice from a healthcare professional before starting anything new.

MONITOR YOUR HEALTH

Keep an eye on your blood sugars, cholesterol and blood pressure – regular checks and monitoring to keep within safe limits can help prevent further damage. Getting the correct medical and nutritional advice is important. Accessing support groups and helplines can be useful to help you manage your diabetes.

CHECK YOUR FEET EVERY DAY

Get into the habit of checking your feet, or get someone else to check them for you. Spotting problems early is vital, and seek medical help as soon as you notice a problem.

TAKE CARE WHEN CUTTING TOE NAILS

This simple activity may seem harmless enough, but if you have diabetes, piercing the skin can be dangerous and can lead to other injuries; and you might not even know you have done it.

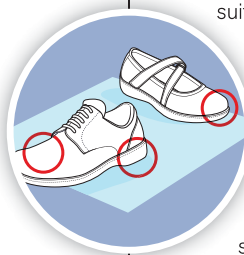
WEAR FOOTWEAR THAT FITS WELL

Wearing footwear that rubs, is too tight or too loose can lead to problems. You may not realise that damage to the skin is being done and this can be dangerous. Seek advice on suitable footwear if necessary. Buy shoes that:

- are broad fitting
- have a deep and rounded toe area
- are flat or low heeled
- are fastened by a lace or buckle to stop your feet sliding

WHEN YOU CUT YOUR TOENAILS...

Cut them often but not too short or down the side. Trim them with nail clippers and then use an emery board to file any corners. Clean them gently with a nail brush – don't use the sharp points of scissors to clean as this isn't safe. Washing daily is also a simple way



“ IT IS ESTIMATED THAT MORE THAN 4.7 MILLION PEOPLE IN THE UK HAVE DIABETES ”



to keep your feet and toenails clean and safe from infection. A simple mix of soap and warm water will do, but always check the temperature before you put your feet in. Be careful not to soak your feet as this just makes the skin soggy and more likely to get damaged. If you've lost some sensation in your feet, or if you're worried about things like ingrown toenails, see a foot specialist – they're used to helping with these things.

USE MOISTURISING CREAM EVERY DAY

Using emollient cream will keep your skin healthy – combine this with checking your feet daily. It's best to talk to your healthcare team about which emollient cream is right for you. Don't put cream between your toes as this can cause problems. The same goes for talcum powder which can cause excessive dryness between the toes.

AVOID BLADES AND CORN PLASTERS

Trying to deal with corns or other foot issues on your own can put you at risk. Always seek the advice and support of a specialist. It is a good idea to speak to a podiatrist.

A TRAINED PROFESSIONAL SHOULD CHECK YOUR BARE FEET ONCE A YEAR

But don't wait a whole year if you notice a problem – seek medical advice as soon as you can.

KEEP A LIST OF USEFUL NUMBERS HANDY

Make a note of contact numbers for your GP surgery, podiatrist or healthcare providers, as well as your BSO and the Diabetes UK helpline (0345 123 2399). Diabetes UK has a range of advice and information on its website (www.diabetes.org.uk). If you don't have access to the internet contact your BSO who will be able to talk you through what options are available.

For more on managing diabetes call Diabetes UK or visit its website. If you have any concerns about your health then speak to your GP as soon as you can

Every week in the UK there are 140-170 amputations, 680 strokes and 530 heart attacks as a result of diabetes

Adapted from various internet sources, including Diabetes UK

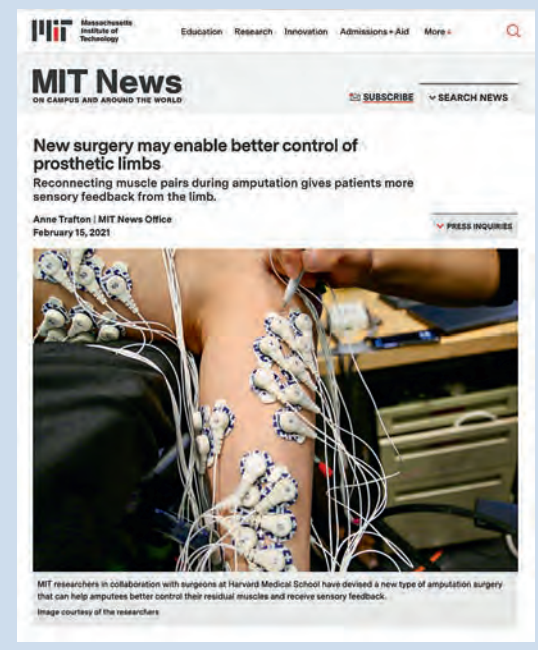
NEW AMPUTATION SURGERY GIVES BETTER CONTROL OF RESIDUAL MUSCLES

Researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) have discovered a new type of amputation surgery that allows amputees to have improved control of their residual muscles and a better sense of where their 'phantom limb' is. Researchers believe this could translate to better control of prosthetic limbs and a reduction in limb pain.

In most amputations, the muscles that control joints such as elbows and ankles are severed. The MIT team has found that reconnecting these muscle pairs, allowing them to retain their normal push-pull relationship, offers amputees much better sensory feedback.

"Both our study and previous studies show that the better patients can dynamically move their muscles, the more control they're going to have," said Shriya Srinivasan, lead author of the study. "The better a person can actuate muscles that move their phantom ankle, for example, the better they're actually able to use their prostheses."

Read the full news article at <https://news.mit.edu/2021/surgery-control-prosthetic-limbs-0215>



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



Blesma paves the way for drive renovation

After moving house two years ago, Jack Otter was saving to renovate his “depressing” driveway, but when the quotes he received were all more than £23,000, he approached Blesma for support.

“The driveway had been a mess for a while,” said Jack, who lost both his legs and his left arm above the elbow in an IED attack in 2009. “It was uneven, which caused me to trip on several occasions. It depressed me, but to redo it was proving to be expensive. By the time I approached Blesma, my BSO had met Jason Owen of EJM Paving, who offered his services.”

Jason offered his time and skills for free and even persuaded fellow tradesman and contacts to provide materials at cost.

“My wife and I like to help charities,” said Jason. “I’m sure Jack has helped many people before, and as we were in a position to help this time, we wanted to give Jack the driveway he deserved. Once others heard his story, they wanted to help, too.”

Jacks’s driveway was finished in January, with the final costs – less than half the original quotes – being split between Jack and the Association.

“Blesma has helped me out massively as I wouldn’t have got the driveway done without the Association’s involvement,” said Jack. “I’m really happy with the job and grateful to Blesma as well as to Jason and the team who completed it. It’s smart and flat, and I haven’t tripped yet!”

SIX SERVICEMEN GET SET TO CYCLE

A GROUP OF SIX SERVING personnel from 660 Signal Troop have set themselves a target of cycling 1,236 miles around Britain to raise funds for Blesma and the Royal Signals charity. The team plan to hit the road on 28 June and are aiming to complete their mission in just 11 days.

“I took up cycling last year as an escape during the first lockdown, and I got the bug,” said Staff Sergeant Jon Wilkinson, who has served with the regiment for 18 years. “I came up with the idea of visiting



each of the 11 regiment headquarters, as previously 660 Signal Troop was part of 11 EOD Search Regiment.” Starting at Carver Barracks in Essex, the team will travel anticlockwise around Britain before finally returning to the barracks 11 days later. The legs of the trip will vary from 57 to 142 miles.

The team is hoping to raise £6,000 for the two charities. To sponsor the ride, visit <https://uk.virginmoneygiving.com/Team/660TourofBritain>

MGR CLOSE TO HAVING TRAINED 100 MEMBERS

MAKING GENERATION R (MGR) HAS now taught more than 90 Members how to deliver their stories of overcoming adversity in a way that can help and inspire young people.

Earlier this year, the groundbreaking storytelling training programme was delivered to 19 new Members, who all took part in online training because of restrictions caused by the Covid pandemic. MGR was launched in 2016 and its talks have already reached more than 100,000 students and front-line workers.

“The training was flawless. I’ve shared my story for several years at business networking events, but I learned so much,” said Jon Hilton (below), who only joined Blesma in November. “As a recent amputee, sharing my story and hearing the stories of others has really helped me cope.”

Newly trained speaker Charmaine Healy has already given her first talk, speaking to students from The Prince’s Trust in March.

“The talk went really well. I really enjoyed it and the students asked lots of good questions. One student was about to join the Army, so had lots of questions about Basic Training, while another said the talk was one of the best things about The Prince’s Trust,” said Charmaine.

Read about Jon’s journey and how it feels to become a Blesma Member during lockdown on p20



MGR-trained Jon Hilton is new to Blesma

NEWS BRIEFS

LEARNING NEW SKILLS RESTORES SENSE OF SELF

Gavin Brechany has launched a YouTube channel to teach and inspire others how to restore a range of items.

"I served in the Royal Navy for 12 years before joining Hampshire Constabulary in 2005, but I sustained an injury on duty in 2016 that led to the amputation of my left leg," said Gavin. "I decided to use the skills I'd gained in the Navy to do some restoration jobs. You can have an identity crisis when you lose a career, so it was a chance to reinvent myself."

Gavin has already restored a number of bicycles and developed new skills, and his goal is to evolve his venture – Survivor Engineering – into a skill sharing platform.

"There's a real cathartic process to taking something that's old and making it shiny and relevant again. The YouTube channel was done for therapeutic and educational purposes, but friends who have seen the videos have asked me for advice on starting their own projects."



VETERAN 'SO MUCH HAPPIER' NOW SHE IS WALKING AGAIN

Royal Signals veteran Charmaine Healy is walking again, more than three years ago since she was last able to use her prosthetic. Charmaine's left leg was amputated below the knee following a bomb blast in Afghanistan in 2010, and she has struggled with pain ever since. She has had eight operations in the last decade, and her most recent one – last July – has allowed her to use her prosthetic leg again.

"My skin started to break down in 2017 which caused an infection. It was really painful, and I eventually found out the infections had led to a sinus tract," said Charmaine. Following recovery, Charmaine was fitted with a socket in mid-December.

"Within two weeks, I was able to walk on it almost every day. I'm so much happier since the operation – I was signed off from the mental health team before Christmas, and I had been seeing them since 2015."

Words: Jessica Mackinnon



Celebrate VE Day 76 with the Association this May

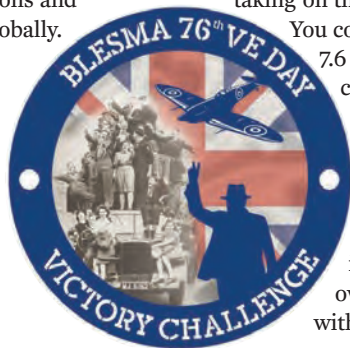
VE (Victory in Europe) Day in May 1945 signified an end to six long years of devastating warfare which took the lives of millions and injured 75 million people globally.

In towns and cities right across the UK, the relief of victory was celebrated with street parties, dancing and singing. Blesma is delighted to once again unite its Members, supporters, friends and families in commemoration of that special historic day 76 years ago.

An online event will be held from 2-3pm on 08 May showcasing nostalgic war-time music from a live band. Why not gather the whole family around the 'wireless' and take in the spirit of the day? Also, keep an eye out for Blesma's VE Day-themed Member

activities, which will include bunting making and crafts.

Why not support the Association by taking on the VE Day 76 Challenge?



You could run 7.6km, walk 7.6 miles, bake 76 cupcakes, climb the stairs 76 times, or do 76 star jumps. Your victory effort is entirely up to you! And once you have completed your challenge you can celebrate VE Day in style by holding your own VE Day celebration with your victory pack.

To take part in the VE Day 76 Victory challenge please visit Blesma's website or email fundraising@blesma.org. For Member Activities, please get in touch with the Activities Team on 020 8548 7094 or by emailing meo@blesma.org

KELLY IS BACK ON TWO WHEELS

At the age of 23, Kelly Ganfield developed a rare autoimmune disorder that led to her losing her sight. Seventeen years later, a tandem bike joint funded by Blesma and Blind Veterans UK is helping her regain her passion for cycling.

"I loved riding before I lost my sight," said Kelly, who received the bike in January. "Now I can be on the back while my wife, Sarah, steers. It has given me back some of my independence – it's wonderful."

Kelly has already set herself a challenge: to ride the equivalent of Land's End to John O'Groats in 69 days with her wife, Sarah, her five-year-old daughter, Bethany, who has cerebral palsy, and her brother-in-law, Steve.





Table tennis proves to be a smash hit for Ian

In 2015, former Royal Engineer Ian Murphy was doing his 75th skydive when he was involved in an accident that led to the amputation of his right leg below the knee. In the months that followed, angry at himself and with his confidence stripped away, Ian isolated himself from everyone.

“I didn’t adjust well,” said the 55 year old from Nottingham. “I shut down and refused any help. It took me 18 months after I was discharged from hospital to stop crying! I was on a very steep downward spiral and, by 2018, I’d ballooned in weight. I was very immobile through my hips and had ill-fitting prosthetics.”

Everything changed during a visit from a close friend when Ian asked for help and his friend suggested a game of table tennis.

“I was horrendous at it! I had no lateral movement at all and I got thrashed, but something just clicked. As well as being good exercise, I loved the competitive spirit and the social aspect of it,” said Ian. “It wasn’t just hitting a white plastic ball over a net, there were tactics involved; you have to concentrate on your opponent’s position and how they serve. I’m in the moment when I play.”

Over the last two years, Ian has been improving his game, has lost weight, and has even hired a coach. He joined a veterans’ table tennis group in 2019

and was on the cusp of competing in a tournament when COVID-19 struck.

“Initially, I just wanted to beat my friend, but the more table time I got, the more passionate I became. If the game could help me so much, physically and psychologically, I wondered how it could help other veterans. Currently, there isn’t an adaptive league, but I’m trying to spread the word and would love to see it included in the Invictus Games. I’ve shared my vision with able-bodied and adaptive players, and they are really supportive of my mission. I want to take this as far as I can.”



GARY IS ONE IN A MILLION AFTER EPIC CHALLENGE

FORMER SOLDIER GARY HUNTLEY has completed a one million metre rowing challenge, raising more than £6,000 for Blesma in the process. Gary began the rowing machine challenge on 01 January, giving himself just 66 days to hit his target in between busy days as a fitness coach.

“I feel ecstatic to have finished the challenge. I was rowing 15,000 metres a day, which took me about an hour. It doesn’t sound like much, but the average person takes between six months and a year to complete it,” said Gary, who has had a double knee replacement following 22 years of service – 12 in The Parachute Regiment.

“I was burning 1,000 calories a day, every single day, and didn’t have a single rest day. I lost six kilos in weight during the challenge and for the last 100,000 metres my body had had enough,” said Gary. “I had tendonitis in my left elbow, I was starting to get a bit of a niggle with tendonitis in my left Achilles, and my artificial knees didn’t want to know anymore. It was definitely a massive relief to finish the challenge!”



Gary celebrated reaching the million metre mark by popping a bottle of champagne as his next-door neighbours cheered from over their garden fence.

“I have a few old comrades who have been injured during operations and lost limbs, and they have been helped out tremendously by Blesma. I’ve always admired the work that the Association does. A massive thank you to everyone who has supported me, whether that’s financially or through words of support,” said Gary.



following an IED blast while serving with the Royal Logistic Corps in Iraq.

“In 2019, Blesma facilitated a grant to enable my wife, Kate, and I to fly out to Australia for MoD-funded life-changing osseointegration surgery,” said Pete. “In one operation I had my non-functional right leg amputated and bilateral transfemoral osseointegration carried out, with the eventual aim to get back up walking.

“Blesma has supported me and my family throughout this journey, helping me get to and from the DMRC rehabilitation unit, as well as with numerous other things over the years. It is truly a great charity that has its Members’ needs at heart.”

Pete, along with his wife Kate who completed a virtual half marathon in Shrivenham last November, raised more than £11,000 for Blesma from the two events. Pete is currently benefitting from an intense MoD-sponsored physical rehabilitation programme, making the transition from ‘stubbies’ to above-knee microprocessor-controlled prosthetics.

Pete completes milestone after osseointegration

Triple amputee Pete Norton GC has completed a milestone 5km walk – the furthest he has walked since he was injured in 2005. Pete, who has used a wheelchair for much of the last 15 years, took on the Dorney Lake 5km in Windsor in December on his new ‘stubby’ prosthetics.

“It all went really well. The course was on a footpath, which was relatively flat with

only a few minor long slopes to navigate,” said Pete. “I had my walking sticks to keep me steady, a woolly hat because it was windy, and my wife came to support me.”

Pete completed the course in two hours 55 minutes, notching up 25,000 steps as he smashed his five-hour target. Pete lost his left leg above the knee and left arm below the elbow, as well as suffering back injuries

SENIORS AND WIDOWS WEEKS POSTPONED

IT IS WITH A HEAVY HEART THAT the Association has made the decision to cancel the upcoming Widows and Seniors Weeks that were due to take place at Littlecote House in May. The weeks are designed to be sociable and engaging experiences, but due to the ongoing effects of COVID-19, delivering the events to their fullest would not have been possible.

“We understand this will come as a real disappointment to some of our Members. However, we will be hosting a virtual Widows/Seniors Week afternoon in May that will be a celebration of the greatest show tunes from stage and screen,” said Activities Manager Jess March. “Called *Curtain Up*, the event will be hosted by



mezzo soprano singer Chess Taylor, who has performed across the UK for the last seven years. Participants will also have the choice of receiving an afternoon tea or graze box to enjoy whilst watching the show.”

The event will take place on Wednesday 19 May at 2pm via Zoom video conferencing.

If you would like to join the event, please contact Emily Mizon at meo@blesma.org or by calling her on 020 8548 7094. Places are limited and you will need access to the internet to watch the performance. If you need help with getting connected just make Emily aware

OBITUARIES

Those we have lost

David Timmins QGM

19 January 1981 - 06 January 2021

DAVID TIMMINS, WHO HAS DIED AT the age of 39, saved the lives of countless service personnel including one Blesma Member during his military career.

After working as a civilian HGV mechanic, David joined the Royal Logistic Corps as a driver at the age of 22. On his last tour of Afghanistan, he became a Driver Explosive Ordnance Disposal Number 2 and an Infantry Escort. He was a member of Explosive Device Disposal Team 5, the Royal Logistic Corps, who were celebrated as 'The Famous Five' for their incredible record at dismantling deadly devices planted by the Taliban.

Just 10 days after saving one of his comrades in action, David took the full force of a roadside bomb as he and his team tried to defuse it. In a coma, bandaged from head to toe, David suffered 22 injuries, lost his right eye and the hearing in his right ear during Operation Panther's Claw in July 2009.

At the age of 32, David received the Queen's Gallantry Medal from Her Majesty



The Queen at the Palace of Holyroodhouse, in Edinburgh, for saving badly wounded Matt Weston (now a Blesma Member) as well as for his work defusing a total of 93 explosive devices and Taliban mines which undoubtedly saved scores of other lives. He described receiving the QGM as one of the best days of his life.

Feeling lucky to be alive, David spent his time working with The Prince's Trust to help underprivileged children and young offenders, with Glasgow's Helping Heroes as a peer support worker aiding service personnel and veteran soldiers needing care, and as a Regional Mentoring Coordinator on SSAFA's mentoring programmes for wounded, injured and sick soldiers.

In 2010, David joined Blesma. He enjoyed trips to the Greek Regatta and Borneo, and fundraised for the charity. Notably, a year after he was injured, David and former comrades from his bomb disposal unit cycled 1,000 miles from Land's End to John O'Groats, raising £30,000 in aid of Blesma. Meanwhile, in 2015, he was part of the eight-man team that took on the gruelling Race Across America, raising a further £38,000 for the Association.

Before his passing, David had plans to be part of the Blesma team taking on the Mount Toubkal Challenge in 2021.

Sadly, the former Lance Corporal died at his parents' home in Neilston, East Renfrewshire, on 06 January. David's funeral took place in Neilston on Saturday 30 January.

Those who have passed away

May they rest in peace.

ARCHER L J	RN	SOUTHAMPTON	08/01/2021
BROWN C H	RAF	HQ	02/10/2020
CHALK S P	ARMY (RLC)	HQ	November 2020
CLARK I	ARMY (RE)	HQ	16/02/2021
COWIE T C	ARMY (LOVAT SCOUTS)	HQ (WILTSHIRE)	20/03/2020
DOBBS K C	RAF	HQ	27/11/2020
GILL B J	ARMY (RTR)	HQ	14/01/2021
HANCOCK G C R	RAF	HQ	25/12/2020
LAMBETH G	ARMY (REME)	PORTSMOUTH	06/02/2021
LEWIS F G	RN	HQ	02/01/2021
MADDOCKS D	ARMY (KSLI)	HQ	07/08/2020
MCCAMLEY J	ARMY (ROYAL SCOTS)	HQ	22/11/2020
MCKEOWN J	RM	HQ	06/12/2020
MOORE P P	ARMY (RIR)	HQ	27/09/2020
MOORE R R	ARMY (RA/CHESHIRE/1ST RIFLE BN/MONS)	HQ (BIRMINGHAM)	14/02/2021
NASH W W	ARMY (KING'S ROYAL HUSSARS)	NOTTINGHAM	25/02/2021
PETERS I M	ARMY (RTR)	HQ	22/11/2020
SALISBURY D E	ARMY (WRAC)	HQ	06/12/2020
SARGENT A G	ARMY (ROYAL SIGNALS)	HQ (BIRMINGHAM)	30/12/2020
SAUNDERS B	ARMY (RASC)	HQ	February 2021
SHAW G	ARMY (REME)	HQ	25/12/2020
TIMMINS D J QGM	ARMY (RLC)	HQ	06/01/2021

Peter Van Zeller

13 August 1921 - February 2021

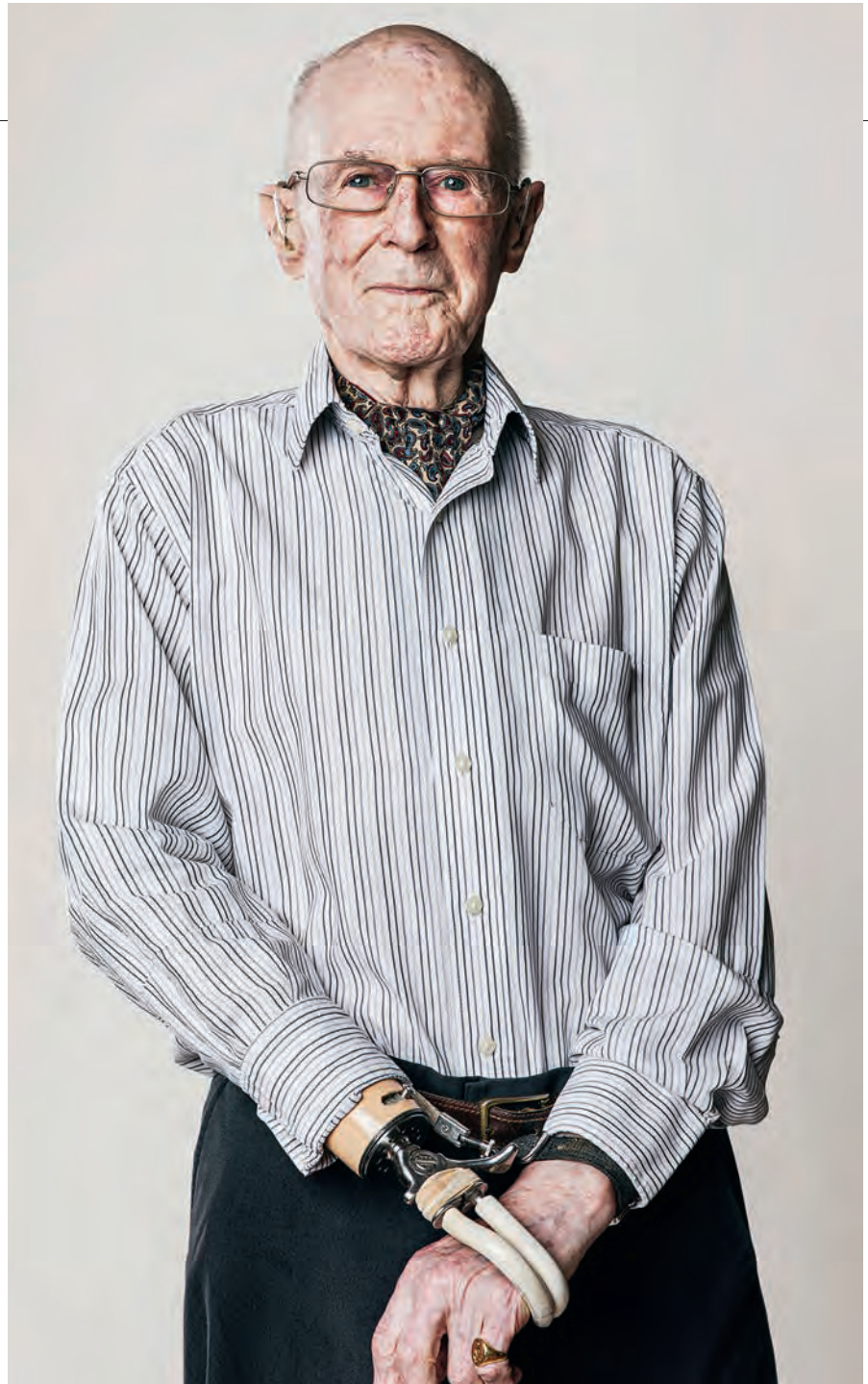
Peter Van Zeller has sadly passed away, aged 99. Peter was born in London and grew up in Inverness. He served in both the Royal Air Force and the British Army during World War II.

Peter always wanted to go to university, but the war started before he left school so, at the age of 18, he joined the RAF instead, receiving his pilot's badge after just 136 hours of flying. It was one of the proudest moments of his life. However, after witnessing a friend and fellow pilot die after being involved in a plane crash, Peter left the RAF after just two years.

Peter joined the Army in December 1943 and served in the Somerset Light Infantry. He was sent to France a week after the D-Day Landings in one of the first reinforcements to arrive, landing at Sword Beach, Normandy in June 1944. A couple of weeks later, at the age of 23, he was shot in the arm by a sniper in the town of Villers-Bocage.

He was flown back to a hospital in Wales, where a surgeon saved his elbow but had to amputate his arm below the joint, ending his war. He received no compensation and no rehabilitation, but was determined to live a full and independent life. "I learned to do everything again," he told *Blesma Magazine* in an interview several years ago. "It still takes me an hour to shave, shower, dress and make my bed each day, but I do it."

In the years following the war, Peter reinvented himself as an agricultural expert. He worked in Rhodesia as well as Essex, before studying agriculture at Oxford University. He would go on to work for the Milk Marketing Board in a job that involved driving 40,000 miles a year, and



became assistant secretary of Blesma's Norfolk Branch for several years.

Peter lost his sight later in life as a result of glaucoma and macular degeneration, and became a resident of Blind Veterans UK's Brighton Centre after receiving the charity's support in 2016.

In May 2018, at the age of 96, Peter found love again when he met Nancy Bowstead at Blind Veterans UK's training and rehabilitation centre. Peter proposed to Nancy a little more than six months

later, in November 2018, and the pair made a formal commitment to each other surrounded by family and friends in 2019 at the charity's chapel in Ovingdean. Peter and Nancy vowed to live out the rest of their lives together.

"I was always determined and stayed positive. I've seen people give up, and you can even wish yourself to death," Peter said of his life. "I've been through despondency, but I don't let it last. I've never given up – and Blesma helps people not to give up, too."

Charlie Holford became
a Member in November
2020 after his left
leg was amputated
below the knee



Words: Nick Moore Photography: Andy Bate, Rob Whitrow

ONE HUNDRED AND FORTY TWO

BLESMA HAS WELCOMED MORE THAN 140 NEW MEMBERS DURING THE GLOBAL CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC. TWO RECENT AMPUTEES TALK ABOUT WHAT IT IS LIKE TO LIVE THROUGH A MAJOR PERSONAL CHALLENGE DURING A GLOBAL CRISIS

Blesma is a charity that thrives on face-to-face contact. When a new Member joins, a meeting with their Support Officer is a priority, and taking part in something sociable to meet fellow Members and like-minded individuals is always an early suggestion. So what happens when a global pandemic strikes and everyone is forced to stay at home? Like other areas of the Association, there has had to be a degree of adapting and overcoming. It's impressive, therefore, that since the COVID-19 outbreak took hold just over a year ago, more than 140 new

Members have joined Blesma – and are reporting back hugely positive experiences.

Charlie Holford from Dorset (left) and Jon Hilton from Hull have both joined very recently. While their stories are, in many ways, extremely similar – they are both former soldiers who sustained injuries during training, both have had to endure years of pain before opting for amputation (both, as it happens, last November) – their stories clearly illustrate the widely differing needs of all Blesma Members.

Charlie, 30, received a series of incorrect diagnoses following a routine injury in 2012, and joined the Association after his left leg was amputated below the knee in November.

“I joined the REME as an armourer when I was 20, and I loved it,” he says. “I breezed through Basic Training, won best recruit, and wanted to go into the Commandos or Paras. But after I’d been in a year, I hurt my ankle on a run. The PTI told me to get up and carry on, and I did. I was diagnosed with shin splints so did 13 sessions a week for months to try to address them. Eventually, it turned out that I’d broken the ankle, so I had been doing the worst thing possible.”

The problem went on for years as Charlie battled to get fit. He underwent private surgery and, from 2015, “beasted himself” in an attempt to join the Marines, but still found himself in huge amounts of pain.

CHARLIE HOLFORD

Charlie is one of 142 new Members to join the Association since Covid. His Support Officer is BSO (South West) Steve Fraser

STEVE FRASER

“Charlie came on our radar last year because he was awaiting an amputation. I was able to talk him through the process and what would happen, and provide links to other Members if he needed extra support. I was also able to look at all the things he would need, and I liaised with the local authority to make sure Charlie was going to get all the help and home adaptations it had agreed to,” says Steve.

Covid has posed numerous challenges but it has allowed Steve to refine his working practices with Outreach Officer Sarah Payne.

“At the start of the pandemic we made an initial round of calls to every Member in the South West to make sure they were ok. Sarah has maintained that cycle of calls every three months since. That has meant I have been able to continue with my planned contacts and deal with emergencies. It has worked well; Sarah maintains that drum beat of contact, and if she needs to escalate anything, we talk.”



“I COULDN’T HAVE THE VOLUME IN THE CAR TOO HIGH BECAUSE THE VIBRATIONS WOULD HURT MY LEG”

“The sensation ranged from feeling as if barbed wire had been wrapped around my leg and it being on fire, to it freezing and being smashed with a hammer. The pain was a nine out of 10 every single day.”

It wasn’t until 2018, when he visited a new GP after moving house, that Charlie was diagnosed with Complex Regional Pain Syndrome. Amputation eventually became his best option, and it was here that Blesma stepped in to help.

“I already knew a few Members, and they gave me great advice before my amputation about getting my glutes and core strong so I would be able to manage better,” he says. “Covid delayed my operation, which was meant to take place last March, so I had eight months to get fit before amputation.”

During that time Steve Fraser, BSO South West, visited Charlie to give him advice. “We spoke about the recovery process and all the benefits of joining. Steve was really helpful,” said Charlie, “so I was ready to join the day I had my operation.”

Charlie’s prep paid off; he was walking on his new prosthetic without the need for a stick after a little more than five weeks of rehab, and is now eyeing an active future. “I feel there’s nothing I can’t do,” he says. “I’ve been doing a virtual peak-to-peak challenge, and I feel so much better. I’m in no pain, so the operation has been

life changing. Previously, I couldn’t have the volume in the car too high because the vibrations would hurt my leg, and going to the shops would put me in clip for hours.”

And Charlie is grateful that Blesma is there for him if and when he needs help or advice. “The charity has already been amazing, the staff have been so proactive despite lockdown,” he says. “Thankfully, I’ve not needed much so far, but the odd time I have, the help has been immediate. Steve told me to ask if there was anything I felt I needed, and when I got home from hospital, despite my house being adapted, I realised one of the ramps wasn’t right because I couldn’t quite get out of my back door. I spoke to Steve, and a couple of days later, a new ramp turned up!”

JON’S JOURNEY TO BLESMA

Jon Hilton’s story starts much like Charlie’s. He joined the Royal Engineers from school in 1995 and served all over the world, only to be slowed down by a leg injury. “I wanted to be a rugby league player growing up but I didn’t make it, so I joined the Army,” he says. “I played rugby at a high level for the Army and Combined Services, but I broke my knee in 1998 and subsequently had lots of injuries. I suffered continuous leg problems – years of carrying heavy rucksacks didn’t help –



NEW MEMBERS

and I was medically discharged in 2009. It was a tough period because around that time my wife was diagnosed with cancer and my brother was murdered outside a pub. Physically, I suffered 11 years of agony. I had blood clots, necrosis, tissue damage, vasculitis, ulcers... it was incredibly painful," says Jon.

"My ankle would swell up as big as my thigh, and I ended up taking so many different drugs, including morphine and tramadol." Eventually, a consultant brought up the subject of amputation. "I have plenty of friends from the military who are amputees," he says. "Some of them are now gold medallists, so I went for it."

Results were initially encouraging. "The amputation was amazing," says Jon. "I had an epidural and sat up to watch most of it – I'm a qualified medic, so I was interested – they only put me to sleep when they started sawing it off! Rehab went well, my stump healed and I was free from pain. All I take now is blood-thinning medication and occasionally medication for phantom pain."

But a number of setbacks in the run-up to Christmas saw Jon face some dark times. "On 12 December, I fell in my bathroom onto the stump. I broke the leg and damaged my artery, blood vessels and calf muscle. I dragged myself out of the bathroom – I had to bite down on my wheelchair to get through it – I put on some trauma dressing and just cried to my wife thinking I'd need an above-knee amputation."

Jon was operated on once again, with an inch being taken off his stump below the knee. Then he got Covid. "I got my result on Christmas morning. I'd been due to

JON HILTON

Jon joined the Association last November. His Support Officer is BSO (North East) Christine Landess

CHRISTINE LANDESS

"Jon is one of the first Members I ever spoke to; he joined the Association about the same time I started in my role as Support Officer. When I listened to his Making Generation R talk I felt as if I was watching a professional – his delivery was amazing and he was able to make his story incredibly visual. I was astonished by his ability.

"I think we have all been on a learning curve over the last 12 months not having been able to do things face to face. I want to be out there making connections, listening and helping people. If someone is struggling, I hope there is something I can do to help – even if that is in just a small way. My motivation is to be part of their journey."

get my new prosthetic in January, but I had to shelter because of the virus. I became really depressed. I'd wanted to walk at New Year – out of the front door, around the house and in the back, out with the old and in with the new. The fall set me back. I started doubting and it got very difficult. I was wondering if I'd ever walk again.

"It was tough because before I decided to have the amputation, I'd put my business hat on and done a SWAT analysis. What





Jon Hilton fell a month after his left leg was amputated, breaking his residual limb which left him needing further surgery

The Association in Numbers

COVID-19 changed almost every aspect of Blesma's plans in 2020, but the Association made sure it helped its Members in any way it could

● 142 New Members

1,669

Members took part in 174 virtual activities during the COVID-19 pandemic

92%

of participants reported that the activity had improved wellbeing and confidence

13,617

visits, contacts or communications by Support and Outreach Officers

1,083

Grants paid to 711 recipients

14,105

Members of the public took part in face-to-face Making Generation R (MGR) sessions prior to lockdown

41,000 people were sent the MGR Digital Resilience pack

389

successful Veterans' Prosthetics Panel applications

54

individual counselling provisions (442 sessions)

163

referrals to other charities



“I BELIEVED IT WAS THE RIGHT DECISION, BUT I STARTED TO FEEL LIKE A BURDEN ON MY FAMILY”

would be the impact, what were the pros and cons? I believed that it was the right decision, and still think it was – I’m not in as much pain now – but I wasn’t mobile and I started to feel like a burden on my family. I was getting suicidal.”

Once again, Blesma was able to help. Jon took part in the Making Generation R programme in which Members are trained by actors and directors to tell their story in a concise and dramatic way, and then deliver their resilience-building talks to teens and front-line workers

“Lots of people told me about Blesma when I was preparing for my amputation, and I’d read all the magazines in the Limb Centre, so I knew what the charity did,” he says. “So when I joined, I decided to take part in MGR. It is a phenomenal programme. I have shared my story at business networking events for years, and each time I add another chapter. Now there is a new chapter because of amputation.

“The way the online MGR training is done is perfect, and I found it great to meet other amputees. They weren’t old friends, so weren’t telling me just what they thought I might want to hear. They gave me a new perspective on amputation, and they are so inspiring – I was honoured to be on the programme with a guy who

has rowed solo across the Atlantic! The whole thing gave me something to focus on when I was feeling depressed, and when it came to do my talk for real I realised that if I could inspire just one person and help them make a change then I would have achieved something. It has allowed me to look at my situation in a different way, which has been such a positive because I was so down.”

Brian Chenier, Blesma’s Support Officer (Prosthetics) has been heavily involved in the process of getting new Members on board during the pandemic and is extremely pleased by the reactions.



“The pandemic has forced us to change how the Association does its business. There have been opportunities to do things in a new way and sometimes in a better way,” says Brian. “We have simplified the joining process, for example. We still need evidence of injury and service, but instead of people having to send in paper forms we have taken the whole process online.

“We have also made the form much simpler. We needed to make sure the first contact people had with the charity was a positive one, and we help people who might feel excluded from the process because of difficulty accessing technology by phoning them up to go through the form with them. A process that used to take six weeks can now be done in a day.”

DELIVERING THE SAME SERVICE

The joining process is just one part of Blesma’s broader adaptation to the new circumstances we find ourselves living in.

“Obviously, we can’t wait to get back to meeting Members face to face,” says Brian. “I miss sitting down with Members and really getting to the root of their issues, but a lot of the work we do has transitioned smoothly online. In the last few months, for example, I have found myself on a call with a Member who was in the car park of a Limb Centre, talking to a prosthetist wearing full PPE. Blesma has found different ways to deliver the same service.”

It all points to a positive future for Jon, Charlie, and the rest of the Association’s membership. “Things are heading in the right direction now,” says Jon. “I feel Blesma pushes the Armed Forces forward, and I’d like to get involved in some of the activities as soon as I can. I’m also Director of Safety and Medical for Great Britain Disability Boxing, which promotes inclusivity in boxing for any disability. Currently, we’re focusing on wheelchair boxing and would love to see boxing at the Paralympics.”

Charlie has also got his eye on sports. “I play wheelchair rugby, and there are some Blesma Members in my local club who have been very helpful,” he says. “I’d love to go on a Blesma ski trip, and I’ve been approached by the Armed Forces Para Snowsport Team. I’d like to try stand-up snowboarding, and I’m already thinking about the Winter Paralympics in 2026.”

Whatever they choose, pandemic or not, Blesma will be doing all it can to help them every step of the way.

If you know someone who could possibly benefit from becoming a Blesma Member visit www.blesma.org/join

SHAPING THE FUTURE

A NEW RESEARCH STUDY, SPEARHEADED BY BLESMA, WILL AIM TO UNDERSTAND THE EXPERIENCES OF FAMILIES LIVING WITH LOSS OF USE OF LIMB. THE FINDINGS WILL INFLUENCE HOW THE ASSOCIATION SUPPORTS MEMBERS GOING FORWARD

In the summer of 2018 Blesma published pioneering research that revealed the necessity for a radical new approach to supporting veterans and their families who were trying to cope with the wide-ranging impacts of limb loss. The 18-month study, which interviewed more than 70 Blesma Members and their immediate families, identified the need for significant changes in the way support was given to both Members and their family carers.

The report – *Caring and Coping: The Family Perspective on Living with Limb Loss* – came to be known as the Blesma Families Project and immediately fed into the Association’s working practices. Vitally, it also allowed the development of the Living With Limb Loss Support Model, which enabled both civilian and military services to provide better support to families dealing with limb loss.

Now, Blesma hopes to revolutionise charity and statutory body service delivery once again – this time for those living with the loss of use of limb/s.

“Currently, there is no UK research into the impact on the families of veterans living with muscle function loss or paralysis,” says



Hilary Engward, project leader and senior research fellow at Anglia Ruskin University

Blesma’s BSO (Prosthetics) Brian Chenier. “This pioneering study will once again be led by Blesma and conducted by the Veterans & Families Institute at Anglia Ruskin University, with funding from the Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT).

“It will seek to understand the primary issues and needs not just of the Blesma

Member living with the loss of use of limb/s, but of their family members, too.

“Blesma has existed for close to 100 years. In that time it has helped change policy and has influenced major milestones such as War Pensions and the Motability Scheme. Our Members expect Blesma to be at the forefront of these kinds of research projects. The Association’s core business is to support its Members with everything from practical support and advice to fellowship and fulfilment through activities and events. That’s why the Association will be heavily involved in this research from the very start.

“We’ll help shape the questions, we’ll play an intrinsic role in identifying the Members the research initially wants to target, we’ll promote the opportunity to get involved, and we’ll act as a guiding hand for the research team,” says Brian.

“Blesma and its Members will ultimately be the ‘end users’ of the research, so it’s vital we are involved at every stage.”

ANOTHER PIONEERING STUDY

The new project is currently looking to recruit 15 families to participate in the first stage of the research – hour-long interviews

The study will seek to understand the needs not just of Members, but of their family members, too



HOW TO TAKE PART IN THE RESEARCH

The research team is looking for 15 families to participate in the first stage of the study. They would particularly like to hear from the following:

- Veterans whose loss of use of limb is attributable to military service but NOT Operations Telic or Herrick
- Veterans whose loss of use of limb occurred during service but NOT as a result of combat injury
- Veterans whose loss of use of limb occurred after transitioning out of the military

Participants will be required to invite up to four members of their family network (aged 18 or over) to participate. By 'family', Blesma means those who are active in supporting Members' overall health and wellbeing. This could include biological relations (parents and siblings, for example), those related through partnership or marriage, or friends.

Participants must be willing to be interviewed individually by the research team for approximately 60 minutes by either telephone or conference call. The session will enable them to talk about their experiences and problems, as well as how they may have overcome them.

All interviews will be recorded (for audio only) but Members' identities will not be referred to in the reporting of the study. All information provided will be anonymised and kept confidential. Personally identifiable information (such as names and places) will be removed from the data.

If you are interested in being part of this project, please contact Dr Maria Iancu on maria.iancu@aru.ac.uk to discuss the study in more detail. You can read the full findings of the original Blesma Families Project at www.blesma.org/familiesproject

that will be carried out by phone or video conferencing. Much as with the original study, it is hoped that by Members sharing honest accounts of the challenges they and their close network experience in their daily lives, Blesma will be able to better support its membership in the future, as well as influence other charities and statutory bodies that provide health and social care.

"Blesma was the first organisation to look at the family in relation to limb loss on an international, let alone national, scale," says Hilary Engward, project leader and senior research fellow at Anglia Ruskin University's Veterans and Families Institute, who will be working alongside research fellow Maria Iancu on the new study.

"Past research focused on veterans, with little recognition of the role of their families. To a large extent, the family has been neglected. For that reason, the focus of the first Blesma Families Project was very much on the everyday family experience of living with loss of limb. By listening to how people had coped or managed in society, we were able to provide targeted support. Now we want to listen to people living with loss of use

Members will be able to talk honestly and openly about what life is really like for them and their family



“IF A MEMBER HAS THE SLIGHTEST INCLINATION THAT THEY MIGHT BE USEFUL FOR THIS STUDY, I WOULD URGE THEM TO GET IN TOUCH”

Project and the development of its Living With Limb Loss Support Model are really good examples of how research has had a positive impact – not only on the beneficiaries of one charity but in being able to enhance national understanding. This new project is equally as ambitious, and we hope it will create similar results.”

THREE STAGES OF RESEARCH

The research will be split into three phases. Initial 60-minute interviews (by telephone or Zoom/FaceTime) will run until June. A more detailed questionnaire will follow from June to October, before a final round of focused interviews will take place from September through to February 2022. The final report will be published in July 2022.

“Members will be able to talk honestly and openly to a dedicated and experienced researcher who wants to listen to what life is really like and learn what really matters to them,” says Brian. “Ultimately, Blesma will get an intimate yet anonymous view of Members’ lives, and will then be able to assess the support it provides. If a Member has the slightest inclination that they and their family might be useful for this study, I would urge them to get in touch with Maria at Anglia Ruskin University.”

If you are interested in being part of this project, please contact Dr Maria Iancu on maria.iancu@aru.ac.uk to discuss the study in further detail

of limb to understand their everyday family experiences. We want to find out what has worked for them and what hasn’t, what has been difficult and, importantly, why something did or didn’t work. The more they are able to tell us, the better.

“Nobody is asking the family of the individual living with loss of use of limb how they are coping, not just in the veteran community but anywhere. The family – who are often the unpaid carers – play a big role in the recovery process, but it is assumed that if the veteran is coping then so is the family. We previously found that was simply not the case,” says Hilary.

A STRONG PARTNERSHIP

The success of the first study, which has been incorporated not only into Blesma’s working practices, but is also part of the GP curriculum training model and civilian care systems, has led to the Forces in Mind Trust funding the second study. This will allow Blesma and Anglia Ruskin University to continue their strong partnership, with

hopes of a similarly comprehensive understanding and end results.

“FiMT’s mission is to enable ex-Service personnel and their families to make a successful and sustainable transition when they re-join civilian life,” says Clare Crookenden, Grants Manager at FiMT. “We do this by generating an evidence base which we hope will then create policy change, whether that’s within Armed Forces charities like Blesma, government departments like the NHS, or more local health trusts. We don’t want research to just sit on the shelf, so the Blesma Families



PETER SIDDONS

Peter had both his legs amputated following a roofing accident in 2010. He took part in the first study, the Blesma Families Project, waving his anonymity to encourage fellow Blesma Members to get involved with the new study



Why did you choose to get involved with the original Blesma Families Project?

When I was first injured, I didn’t realise how big an impact my injuries would have on my wife,

Ann, and everyone in my family. I could remember lots of stories, anecdotes, facts and details from my experience that I knew would be useful to the study, so I thought I’d make my family’s side of my story heard.

Can you share some of the information you told the researchers?

Everyone saw me, the double amputee, but nobody saw how Ann was trying to do everything at home. Before the injury,

we did whatever we wanted because our daughters had left home. Then, suddenly, my path dramatically changed. I had to give up work, so Ann was trying to hold the fort, go to work, look after me... We had two wonderful dogs that, sadly, had to be re-homed when I had my right leg amputated. My granddaughter broke down and cried the first time she saw me without my legs... It affected Ann and the family as much as me, and it was time their story was heard.

How did you find taking part in the study?

Everything was quite straightforward. Hilary visited twice to speak with us, and we had a couple of very nice chats. She was really friendly, she made it very easy for me to talk, and I really felt as though I was being heard.

What did you and your family get out of taking part?

It allowed us to talk about the problems we’d experienced. Ann helps me so much and played a huge role in my recovery. On her days off from work she would be with me at hospital visits and prosthetics appointments. She needed support too, and I wanted to talk to Hilary about that.

Why should your fellow Members get involved?

Blesma is there to help us, but if it doesn’t know the problems we are having how is it going to give us the support we really need? The Association is striving to make things better for its Members. Taking part in the survey will allow you to highlight the challenges and barriers you and your family face, and perhaps Blesma can help with that in the future.

“IF CUTHBERT SLOWS YOU DOWN, ELIMINATE HIM”

A NEW FILM TELLS THE REMARKABLE STORY OF VIRGINIA HALL, A WORLD WAR II SPY WHO TOPPED THE NAZIS' MOST-WANTED LIST

Virginia Hall established one of the most successful espionage rings in France during World War II armed with cunning, resilience, courage... and a wooden leg. The Limping Lady, as she would come to be called by the Germans, managed to evade capture despite a huge manhunt, and even survived a two-day hike over the snowy Pyrenees mountain range in the depths of winter to reach safety.

The astonishing story of how a 34-year-old woman with a below-knee amputation battled discrimination in the War Office and then built up a potent resistance network has now been made into a film, *A Call to Spy*, which brings to light the bravery of female agents who were sent on missions that often had less than a 50 per cent chance of survival.

Virginia Hall walked with a clunky wooden leg that she christened Cuthbert. It was attached to her body with leather straps and was supported by metal struts. She was repeatedly turned down for diplomatic roles but eventually gained the confidence of Vera Atkins, the ‘spymistress’ of the Special Operations Executive (SOE) which was dubbed Churchill’s Secret Army.

“These women put their lives on the line at what was the start of the spy network when there was a 50-50 chance of survival – their bravery to take that on was



Sarah Megan Thomas wrote the screenplay for *A Call to Spy* and plays the role of amputee Virginia Hall

just incredible,” says Sarah Megan Thomas, an award-winning producer, writer and actress, who wrote the film’s screenplay and plays the role of Virginia Hall.

Sarah spent four years researching the background of Hall and her fellow agent Noor Inayat Khan, combing through SOE files and interviewing living relatives to create the stylish and nerve-jangling





“THESE WOMEN PUT THEIR LIVES ON THE LINE WHEN THERE WAS A 50-50 CHANCE OF SURVIVAL – THEIR BRAVERY WAS INCREDIBLE”

dramatisation of their efforts to undermine the Nazi war machine. She discovered that Hall had needed surgery after tripping and shooting herself in the leg while out hunting. Sarah also consulted with experts as to the standard of prosthetics in the 1940s and how using one might have impacted on Hall’s ability to blend into French life without raising suspicion.

When it came to filming, technicians created a replica of a 1940s prosthetic that was used for close-ups (see image below) and made a number of other lightweight models for when the prosthetic needed to be visible in action scenes.

“Most prosthetics at that time were made for men,” says Sarah. “They were heavy items so, added to the fact that it didn’t even fit her, Virginia had to contend with the increased pressure on her back and hips.

“She got blisters all the time and I spoke to her family who confirmed that she was in pain every day. But she actively tried to hide it as she didn’t want to be looked at in a different way.”

Virginia Hall was an unlikely recruit to the British cause. She was an American (the US wouldn’t enter the war until a year after she was deployed to France) but to the Nazis she became ‘the most dangerous of Allied spies’ and was more regularly referred to as, ‘The Limping Lady’.

The pacey film picks up Hall, who was born to a wealthy family in Baltimore, Maryland, as she struggles to channel her adventurous spirit into the war effort. She had taken lowly clerical jobs in US embassies in Europe before the outbreak of war, but was repeatedly turned down by the US Foreign Service for more senior roles. When hostilities broke out, she drove ambulances for the French Army until the country’s surrender in June 1940.

She moved to London and, through a friend, was introduced to Vera Atkins and recruited to the service, where she trained in wireless transmission, codes, dead letter drops and guerrilla warfare. She was dispatched to France six months later as the first female SOE

Opposite page: Sarah Megan Thomas and a replica of ‘Cuthbert’ on the set of *A Call to Spy*

“IT MUST HAVE BEEN A GRUPELLING CHALLENGE”

Blesma’s BSO (Prosthetics) considers the advances in prosthetics technology over the last 80 years



At the time of WWII, prosthetics were still based on designs first introduced in the late 17th century and were made from wood, metal callipers and leather harness fastenings, says BSO (Prosthetics) Brian Chenier.

“Comparing the prosthetics of the 1940s to those of today can be likened to comparing a horse and carriage to a family car,” says Brian. “Virginia Hall’s prosthetic leg would have weighed in the region of 8lbs – that’s almost twice as heavy as a modern version.

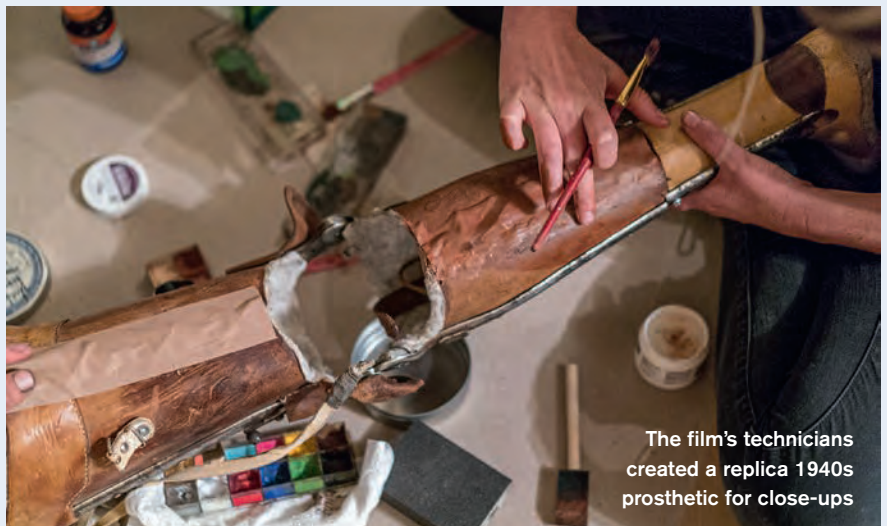
“It would have been very difficult to walk on and is likely to have been painful. The foot would have been made of wood; solid and with no suspension.

“It is remarkable that she climbed up and down mountain paths with it. There are lots of modern examples of amputee veterans climbing Snowdon, Ben Nevis or even Kilimanjaro, but they have used lighter prosthetics made from modern materials equipped with suspension systems, and ankle and foot components

that move to provide extra stability and function. Virginia Hall had nothing at all as she made her escape. It must have been a gruelling challenge.”

Technological advances following WWII saw the introduction of plastic, aluminium and composite materials, along with some major improvements in socket comfort. Today, innovations continue to make prosthetics lighter and more responsive.

“Virginia had none of these advantages,” adds Brian. “It would have been virtually impossible for her to disguise the limp because her ankle and foot would have been set rigid. She would have had to land her foot flat on the floor and then step over that foot. She would only have felt the ground when the pressure rose through her stump. She was obviously brave and exceptionally resilient.”



The film’s technicians created a replica 1940s prosthetic for close-ups

“IT IS A FILM ABOUT HOPE, THE POWER OF THE INDIVIDUAL, AND HOW WE ARE ABLE TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE WITH OUR CHOICES”



A *Call to Spy* is available to watch on Amazon Prime

operative, where she was able to operate under the cover of being a war correspondent for the *New York Post*. She established the HECKLER network around Toulouse, which gathered information, sabotaged German Army supply lines, and helped downed British pilots escape to safety.

“Virginia was a woman who wouldn’t let any obstacle get in the way of how people perceived her,” says Sarah. “She was a leader, and the reason she was so dangerous to the Nazis was because she organised the entire resistance in Lyon.

“The astonishing element is that Hall, Khan and the other women – there were 39 in total – were essentially amateurs. They weren’t professional spies but they came together for a common cause.”

Despite a lack of experience, these women formed a vital part of the 470 Britons who were dispatched on missions armed with little more than suicide pills and weapons hidden in pens and umbrellas. These spies faced constant danger from Nazi troops, double agents, and collaborators who knew they could earn a huge bounty for turning in a British agent.

Noor Inayat Khan’s network was betrayed and she was captured, interrogated and tortured before being shot at Dachau concentration camp. Hall was also compromised by a Nazi agent posing as a Catholic priest but she managed to flee to the Spanish border and then trek over the Pyrenees in the depths of winter.

“I can’t imagine climbing over the Pyrenees in the middle of winter with both legs let alone having to use a 1940s prosthesis, but she did it,” adds Sarah. “I researched what it would be like to carry that weight over that terrain for some 50 miles, and she would have struggled with her balance and the snow.”

Hall radioed a message to SOE headquarters in Baker Street, London, saying she was worried that Cuthbert might slow her down over the mountain range and her bosses, unaware it was her nickname for the prosthesis, advised: “If Cuthbert slows you down, eliminate him.”

After she reached safety, the SOE refused to send Hall back to France because she was such a prize target for the Germans but, with the US now in the war, she managed to return as an American agent disguised as an old lady to continue relaying vital information to the Allies and coordinating resistance.

THE POWER OF THE INDIVIDUAL

After WWII, in 1947, Virginia Hall joined the CIA and worked as an intelligence analyst specialising in Soviet activities in Europe before retiring in 1966 and living with family on a farm in Maryland until her death, at the age of 76, in 1982. She rarely spoke about her time serving in France and, despite being awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, the second highest American military decoration for valour, Hall’s role in World War II has largely remained in the shadows.

“It was fascinating to research Virginia Hall’s life and make it a central part of a film because the story of the bravery of these women should be told,” says Sarah, who studied at Drama Studio London and the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA). “The fact that she achieved what she did with a prosthetic leg is amazing and demonstrates how you can overcome setbacks.

“I hope everyone is engaged by this new story of heroism. It is a film about World War II, but it is also a film about hope, the power of the individual, and how we are able to make a difference with our choices.”

Opposite page (bottom): Noor Inayat Khan, played by Radhika Apte, was captured and shot during WWII





BLESMA'S SUPPORT MODEL

FOR CONRAD MOLLOY, MODEL MAKING IS MUCH MORE THAN A MERE HOBBY. THAT'S WHY HIS BLESMA-FUNDED WORKSHOP IS HELPING HIM TO LEAD AN INDEPENDENT AND FULFILLING LIFE...



**“BECAUSE OF PTSD
MY HANDS SHAKE
WHEN I’M NERVOUS.
MODEL MAKING CALMS
ME DOWN WHEN
I’M STRESSED”**



Conrad Molloy (he prefers to be called Molly) served with the Royal Anglian Regiment and was injured following an IRA bomb attack in 2000. He struggles with post-traumatic stress disorder and lived with severe pain in his left leg for many years before it was amputated in 2017. Being a keen model maker, a Blesma-funded craft shed has been hugely beneficial to his mental health...

Why did you join the military, and how was your early career?

I grew up in Peterborough and joined the Army straight from school in 1991, at the age of 16. My grandad had fought in World War II and was always talking about it, so I was very interested in serving. I joined the Royal Anglians and spent quite a bit of time on tour. I deployed to Northern Ireland three times and to Bosnia once. I enjoyed military life – doing something different every day rather than putting up with the same old nine-to-five job – and I was jumping in and out of helicopters all the time, which was fun!

Can you tell us a bit about your injury?

It happened in April 2000. I was based at Ebrington Barracks in Londonderry. The peace talks were going on, so we weren't allowed out, apart from to protect the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) during riots. The IRA would attack us at the barracks by throwing bombs over the wall. One morning, someone threw a device into the guard room. My bed was 30 metres away. You're taught to get under your bed in a situation like that, and as I did that



Molly has made more than 40 models since he got his Blesma-funded craft shed

I smashed my knee on my bed box – a big wooden box with metal corners. It hurt but we were cleared to a safe area, and then went out to try and find who had done it, so I didn't get immediate treatment.

And things got worse...

Because we were confined to barracks, I didn't get to hospital – I was just given some ibuprofen. Unknown to me, my knee had twisted very badly. It swelled up, but I just cracked on. After I left the Army I got a job driving trucks. The pain wasn't so bad when I was driving, but it hurt a lot when I walked and it just got worse. The doctors



“IT HAS BEEN AN ABSOLUTE GODSEND”

Molly wasn't the only person delighted with his model making shed. His wife, Donna, has been able to reclaim their house...

What has life been like as a partner of someone who has experienced multiple operations and PTSD?

It has been hard, to say the very least! Of everything Conrad has been through, the PTSD has been the toughest. The amputation certainly wasn't a breeze, but it was perhaps easier than I thought it might have been. As a partner, there are practical things you can do to make life easier for someone who has physical difficulties. But with PTSD, there's just nothing you can do. You can't begin to understand – you can only be there to support them, rather than pushing them in a certain direction. It's very difficult.

How much of a difference has the shed made?

It has been an absolute godsend. We have a three-bedroomed house and Conrad's stuff used to be in the spare bedroom. But because he didn't want to keep going upstairs, it ended up spreading all over the dining room table, too! So we lost the spare bedroom – which had been useful if one of us was having a bad night – and the dining room. Now we have them back.

And it gives you more free time, too?

Yes. In summer, he can be out in the shed until 10.30pm. I take him the odd cup of tea and that's it for the day – he's as happy as can be. It has made a huge difference to my quality of life as well as his. I like to cook and make cakes, and I can blare out music knowing he's fine and safe: he's got his models and is happy – while he's doing that, his mind is not elsewhere. Then we can sit and eat dinner at the table as a family. It's been great for all of us, and hopefully he will be able to teach other veterans about model making in the shed soon, too.





“BLESMA IS ONE OF THE ONLY CHARITIES THAT STAYS IN TOUCH TO CHECK HOW I AM. THE STAFF ALWAYS ASK HOW THEY CAN HELP”



tried a number of different operations on my leg – they tried to clean inside the knee and I even had a knee replacement – but nothing worked.

How did this affect your mental health?

Mentally, it was a very difficult period. I was on morphine all the time, and I didn't know where I was. I felt like there was no use in living – I was like a zombie.

My wife and son tried to help me out as best they could, but the pain got too much.

And you were struggling with PTSD, too...

During an earlier riot in Northern Ireland I had been set on fire. A petrol bomb landed on my head, and it had taken a long time to put the fire out. I had also seen some awful things in Bosnia during the genocide. Those experiences gave me nightmares when I slept, but I would also spend a lot of time ruminating about things during the day. I had nothing to do and was on a downward spiral.

What helped you get back on track?

Initially, the amputation really helped. In October 2017, my left leg was amputated above the knee. I felt much better almost straight away. It only took me six weeks to get off painkillers, and I've not taken anything since. My life has completely changed. The PTSD has also been much

more manageable since the amputation – I think the painkillers I was taking made that worse, and I got brilliant rehab at Bury St Edmunds hospital. I was up and about quickly, and for the last eight months I've been walking without a stick.

And you rediscovered model making...

Yes. I was really into it as a kid and have taken it back up. I became part of a charity called Models for Heroes, which I've still been able to do online during the pandemic. I like making models of World War II guns and vehicles, but I've also made a Challenger II tank that won first prize in an online competition. I find it very relaxing; it helps me forget about my own problems.

Blesma funded your modelling shed.

How helpful has that been?

It's been incredible. It's insulated and heated, and has electricity so I am able to use my tools. I can be in there most of the day – I put the radio on in the background and the hours just fly by! Concentrating on something is very good for me. Because

of PTSD, my hands shake when I'm nervous. It gets better when I concentrate, and model making gives me a focus – it calms me down when I'm stressed. Since I've had the workshop, I've made more than 40 models; from battlefield dioramas to WWII tanks. My wife, Donna, is very happy that I've moved all my stuff out of the house – it used to be all over the place! Blesma has been great for me. I've taken part in one of its family glamping activities, I've been on a skiing trip, and have been to Members' Weekend. It is one of the only charities that stays in touch with me to check how I'm doing. The staff always ask how they can help, and they've helped me a lot already!

So life is much better now?

It's a 100% improvement from life before the amputation. I have even been ok during lockdown because I've been quite happy shielding in my shed. I have a lot of ex-military friends who I used to meet with regularly before Covid, so hopefully we can get back to that soon, and I can show other people how to get involved in model making.

Rediscovering model making has helped Molly manage his PTSD by giving him a focus. He can often spend all day in his shed

To find out more about a Blesma Grant download the Blesma Connects app then visit the Support tab



The Resilience Sessions Series 2

THE SUCCESSFUL MAKING GENERATION R PODCAST IS BACK FOR A SECOND SERIES, WITH MORE FRANK AND MOVING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RESILIENCE

Back in 2019 a number of Blesma Members involved in Making Generation R took their life stories of overcoming adversity out of the classroom and into the sound booth for a series of podcasts. *The Resilience Sessions* paired injured veterans with well-known public figures to share their stories of facing challenges. Unsurprisingly, the podcast was a success.

A lot has happened in the last two years. Making Generation R has reached more than 100,000 people and, partly because of the impact of coronavirus, the programme is being delivered to more front-line workers and first responders as well as young people in schools.

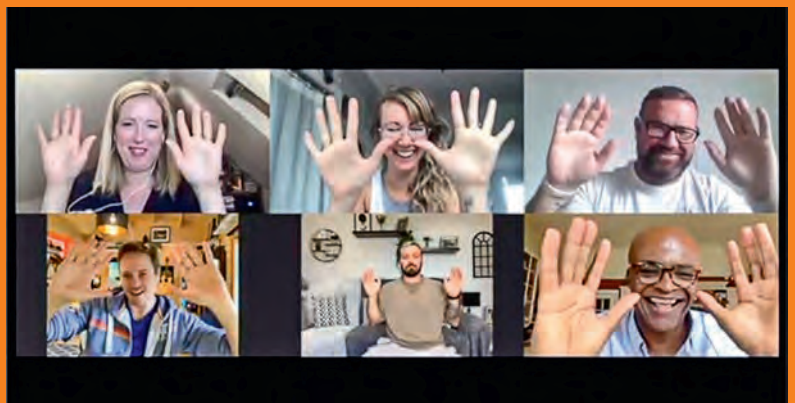
Now, *The Resilience Sessions* is back for a second series, the conversations having been recorded remotely because of Covid guidelines and restrictions.

“We had some amazing feedback from the first series, particularly from school teachers who said it was really positive for their pupils,” says Jon Bryant, Blesma’s Chief Executive. “The podcasts are inspirational conversations between individuals who have been through challenges but have come out the other side. Our Members have been through hugely traumatic experiences and have

had to deal with life-changing injuries and all their effects. These well-known personalities have stories of their own, and the benefits of sharing these are huge. The podcasts show that we all share so much common ground and that, no matter what challenges are in front of us, we can come through them and be ok.”

We spent time with a number of those who took part to find out what they got from the experience...

The second series of *The Resilience Sessions* was recorded remotely



The complete playlist

From magical thinking to the importance of failure and 'striving for mediocrity', the conversations in the new series of *The Resilience Sessions* cover a lot more than resilience

#01 Emily Dean talks to Darren Swift

Broadcaster and author Emily Dean talks to Blesma veteran Darren Swift, who lost both his legs after a coffee jar bomb exploded while he was serving in Northern Ireland. They discuss unconventional childhoods, forming a sense of self, dealing with grief, making people laugh, and the clarity of life that can be found around death.



#02 Kriss Akabusi talks to Mat Armitage

Olympian and TV personality Kriss Akabusi, who has one of the best laughs in show biz, talks to Blesma Member and free-runner Mat Armitage, who lost his right leg in a motorbike accident. They chat about childhood experiences, stealing dinghies, magical thinking, squaddie humour, and the ability to emotionally disconnect.



#03 Steve Swanson talks to Jack Cummings

Former NASA astronaut and Commander of the ISS Steve Swanson pairs up with veteran Jack Cummings, who lost his legs after an IED explosion in Afghanistan. They chat about hard work, the importance of failure, fitness for mental health, 'striving for mediocrity', and the shifts in perspective that enormous life events can bring.



#04 Judith Owen talks to Stephan Van Niekerk

Comedienne Judith Owen chats with veteran Stephan Van Niekerk, who lost his legs in an IED explosion in Afghanistan. Together, they cover topics ranging from childhood instability to the power of music, laughing, mental health, and the importance of asking for help.



#05 Billy Billingham talks to Alex Krol

Former SAS soldier and star of TV show *SAS: Who Dares Wins*, Billy Billingham talks to veteran and pilot Alex Krol, who was left paralysed from the waist down following a motorbike accident. The pair talk about endurance, self-belief, determination, family, and the importance of always going 'a little bit further'.



#06 Sabrina Cohen-Hatton talks to Josh Boggi

Chief fire officer and psychologist Dr Sabrina Cohen-Hatton is in conversation with veteran Josh Boggi, who lost both his legs and an arm in an IED explosion serving in Afghanistan. They talk about identity, refusing to be pigeon-holed, experiencing homelessness, human error, dark humour, and Invictus Games medals.



#07 Alice Driver talks to Stewart Harris

Alice Driver, founder of the Making Generation R programme, and Stewart Harris, veteran and Making Generation R speaker pick out their most memorable moments from the series. They also chat about the Making Generation R programme, the impact telling his story has had on Stewart, and the work of Blesma.



Listen to the entire second series of *The Resilience Sessions* and catch up with the first series at smarturl.it/resiliencesessions

Sabrina Cohen-Hatton talks to Josh Boggi

Sabrina Cohen-Hatton is one of the UK's most senior firefighters, having risen to be West Sussex Fire Brigade's chief officer in 2019. Troubled teenage years following the death of her father from a brain tumour when she was just nine years old left her homeless and destitute before she managed to turn her life around to become a firefighter.

Sabrina, who is the architect of decision-making guidance for fire crews across the UK, features in the second series of *The Resilience Sessions* podcast with Blesma Member and former Royal Engineer Josh Boggi, who lost both his legs and his right arm in an IED explosion in Afghanistan in 2011 when he was just 23 years old.

You were living on the streets in Wales as a teenager before joining your local fire brigade. How did you overcome such a tough start?

I think everyone is more capable of being resilient than they give themselves credit for. I don't think it's until you are tested that you appreciate quite how resilient you can be. When something does happen, many people surprise themselves. A huge part of it is perspective. My grandmother was a refugee who fled the pogroms in Morocco. She was attacked and left for dead just because she was Jewish, but she survived and fled the country at the age of 20 with just a small suitcase full of belongings. Despite that, I've never seen her show hate or resentment but only speak with a huge amount of forgiveness. When I'm having a bad day, I think back to when I was 16 and had literally nothing and nowhere to go. Back then, I would have given anything for that 'bad day'. No matter how bad things seem, the world will still turn, and the sun will still rise tomorrow.

Do you think resilience can be built?

You can't choose what happens to you – you can't even choose how you feel about it – but you can choose what you do next. I think you can build your resilience to help you function better under pressure and stress. I think the more that you practise cognitive skills such as decision making, situational awareness and communication



Sabrina is a firefighter, psychologist and author

when you are under pressure, the more effective – and therefore the more resilient – you will become.

Your resilience must have been tested when you joined the fire service at a time when women firefighters were rare?

It wasn't always easy, particularly in the early days because women firefighters were still incredibly rare – only 1% of operational firefighters were women when I joined, and I wasn't made to feel welcome by everyone. Equally, there were people around me who were like big brothers to me, and who still are. They believed in me so much, and that pushed me to do things I never thought I was capable of.

Presumably a high level of camaraderie is important in the fire service...

It's very important because the ability to gel together is vital to our success and safety. We are called to extreme events and have to think quickly and solve problems with what's available to us. For me, that's when teamwork really comes into its own; you

need to be able to trust each other, sometimes with your life.

You were once called to a fire where an officer had been severely injured. At first, it was thought to be your husband Mike – how did you deal with that?

It was awful. It turned out to be a friend of ours, and I still get that sticky feeling in the pit of my stomach. After the shock, it made me look at why we have injuries – not just in the fire service – and I wanted to do something about it. I had left home at 15, and school at 16, so had nothing to fall back on. I started a psychology degree at the Open University and then did a PhD at Cardiff University. I was a mum by this time, so I was in the lab doing research at 5am, pulling a shift with the fire service, and then going back home to put my daughter to bed. My research helped to completely revise the Incident Command Manual to create a decision framework that allows firefighters to use their instincts and experience when they get to an incident. I'm really proud that something good has come from that horrible experience.

What did you get from speaking with Josh for *The Resilience Sessions*?

Josh's story is really inspiring because of the resilience that he has displayed time and time again. It goes back to the idea that you can't choose what happens to you but you can choose what you do next, even if that choice is a really difficult one. Josh made the choice to push forward. He is an amazing guy, and it was great to spend time talking to him. The fact that his story makes a positive difference to people who hear it is really important. It is inspiring. That's why I was delighted to be involved with the podcast.

“When I'm having a bad day now, I think back to when I was 16 years old at a time when I had literally nothing and nowhere to go”



Josh on meeting Sabrina

“I’d read up on Sabrina before we spoke for the podcast so I knew a bit about her story, but it was inspiring to hear her talk about what she’s been through and how she has overcome challenges to be the person she is today,” says Josh.

“I’ve spent a lot of time with guys at Headley Court – and we’ve all been through a lot – but we had the opportunity to feed off each other to overcome adversity. It was still a lot to deal with, but we went through things together; Sabrina was on her own. She had nothing and no help,

and I am genuinely awestruck by what she has been able to achieve.

“Sabrina knew she was in a bad situation when she was a teenager, but she didn’t sit there and feel sorry for herself. She went out and did something and slowly started improving her life.

“I think her example shows that you don’t have to be macho to tackle adversity as resilience comes in all forms. So many people are facing challenges at the moment because of the current situation – we all have to deal with what life throws at us.

“A lot of us who went through Headley Court had to find an inner resilience to get on with life. I didn’t want to feel like a burden on society, so I made the choice to learn how to become mobile again and fit back into society.

“Sabrina says in the podcast that it’s what you choose to do when you hit setbacks that matters most. That is a great message for people to pick up on, and I hope the podcast encourages people to work through their challenges and build better lives for themselves.”



Mat on meeting Kriss

“Kriss is an incredibly inspiring guy, and it was great to chat to him on the podcast. He had a tough start in a children’s home and was in danger of falling into a life of crime – to become a world-class athlete from that shows incredible strength of character,” says Mat.

“What comes across so strongly in his story is his belief that there’s no point worrying about something unless there

is actually something to worry about. He lets stress wash over him, which is the same for me. It was interesting to hear his approach to that as well as his dedication to being an athlete.

“The one thing I took away from our podcast over everything else is the belief Kriss has that you don’t have to be stuck in your situation. Life may appear tough but things change, life goes on, and you

always have choices. You need to be able to muster the courage to get out of various situations, but you can change.

“When I lost my leg, I didn’t want to be a victim and say: ‘Why me?’ OK, I found a lot of things were harder to do, but I also found that new opportunities opened up for me. You should never think you are stuck in one place, and working on resilience helps you get on with life.”

Kriss Akabusi talks to Mat Armitage

Kriss Akabusi MBE is an Olympian, TV presenter and motivational speaker, but his formative years were spent in a children's home in North London in an environment stalked by the lure of crime. Kriss joined the Army in 1975 and served in the Royal Corps of Signals and the Physical Training Corps, developing an athletic ability that led to him becoming an international sprinter.

He was part of the team that won gold in the 4x400m World Championships in 1991, and has a haul of other medals that includes four golds, two silvers and three bronze medals from the Olympic Games, and World and European Championships.

Kriss shared his story with Mat Armitage, a 29-year-old ex-REME armourer, who lost his right leg after a motorbike accident.

You were brought up in foster care, did the Army give you a sense of family?

It did. I had some stark choices to make when I left care at the age of 16. A friend's family had offered to take me in, which was great, but their house was too small. It was difficult to see how I was going to look after myself after leaving the children's home, so I joined up.

Was it a tough transition?

I came from an institutional background, knew how to make a bed with hospital corners, and was used to sharing a room with other people. I was familiar with a regimented life so felt I was qualified to join up. What the Army gave me that the children's home couldn't was a sense of family, belonging and significance. I had a role and responsibility.

What would have happened if you hadn't joined the Army?

I would have been in trouble! I wasn't a bad lad, but I was easily led. I was happy-go-lucky and could have slipped into crime, doing stuff without really understanding where it was taking me. The Army definitely saved me from that.

Your athletic talent was noticed while you were serving, and Sergeant Ian Mackenzie became your trainer...

That was massive for me – it transformed my life. Sergeant Mackenzie saw something



Kriss is an ex-soldier and Olympic medallist

in me and said: 'I believe in you'. That was incredibly empowering and liberating. He took me under his wing and opened up all the power I had inside me. At the time I was based in Lippstadt, Germany and would train with an athletic club in Gütersloh three or four times a week. I became a bit obsessive – I think you have to be to succeed at the highest level in sport – and what some people might have seen as sacrifice I saw as commitment and dedication.

One of your greatest moments was running the anchor leg in the 1991

World Championships 4x400m to defeat the USA and win gold...

The Americans had not been beaten for 15 years. Every team would put their best man on the final leg, but the Americans were always 20 metres clear by then so no-one stood a chance. We decided to reverse our order so we could be in contention on the final leg and have a chance of capitalising on any mistakes. It was a bold move but we had to dare to be different. We had to be prepared to accept responsibility for failure but also knew we could trust each other to do everything possible to succeed. No-one believed it was possible except for us, and we were able to pull it off!

You are now a motivational speaker, what is the essence of your message?

I speak at a lot of business conferences, and I'm trying to get people to engage with their story. Life is not really about what happens to you. Life is about what you make of what happens to you. I want people to look at the story they are telling themselves and live their best life. I want to release the power in people to do that.

Did sharing your story with Mat take you back to your Army days?

It did and it was great to talk to Mat. He was just a kid when he joined, just like me, and it made me think of all the soldiers I served with and how any one of us could have been blown up in an area of conflict. Losing your leg is irreversible, but what you make of that and the possibilities in front of you is where your vitality comes from. The important thing is that Mat is not a victim, and he is showing incredible resilience to get back to his sport and life. I enjoyed the experience and hope our conversation resonates with people.

“Life is not really about what happens to you. Life is about what you make of what happens to you. I want people to be able to live their best life”



FEW ARE AS FOCUSED

LESLEY STEWART HAS LIVED MUCH OF THE LAST 20 YEARS IN EXTREME PAIN. HOW ON EARTH THEN, HAS SHE FOUND THE ABILITY TO STAND ON THE EDGE OF PARALYMPIC SELECTION?

Most people who have served in the military would rate themselves as an above-average shot – you only have to witness the banter when the air rifles make an appearance at Members' Weekend to know that – but top-level marksmanship requires something different from being on the ranges, says Lesley Stewart.

Lesley, a former Royal Military Police officer, is a Paralympic prospect in a number of shooting disciplines. She's hopeful of selection for Tokyo 2020 – now scheduled to be held later this year – with success at the Paris Paralympics in 2024 being her long-term target. "I had to retrain my brain to learn how to shoot competitively," she

explains. "There's an aggression to military shooting, but it's the opposite in a competition. To succeed, it's all about staying calm. You've got to relax, lower your heartbeat, keep your movements to a minimum, be smooth on the trigger, never snatch, adjust your sights..."

"I love the challenge. It's technical, and there's a lot to take in. When you're shooting outdoors you need to consider the weather, too. People look at shooters and think they're just standing still, but there's so much more to it than that. It's physically demanding; you've got to be fit and strong because you have to hold a position and support a rifle, without moving, for an hour and 15 minutes."





“No matter what I do in the future, to get to this point is a massive achievement,” says Lesley

Lesley, from Blairgowrie in Perthshire, Scotland puts her excellence in the event down to her determination. “I take pride in improving,” she says. “I was full of pride at serving in the Army, and putting on a GB kit makes me feel the same.” Hearing Lesley’s full story, it’s clear she’s extremely driven. After joining the Army in 2000, and whilst enjoying her time in the RMP, her life changed forever on an annual combat fitness test.

“I pulled a muscle in my back during the eight-mile run. It ached straight away, but within a week I was getting severe pain in my left ankle. My foot began twisting and pointing to the right. None of the medics could understand it because I hadn’t hurt my leg at all.”

DIAGNOSED WITH DYSTONIA

Years of mystery would follow as Lesley underwent numerous scans and several operations in an attempt to straighten her foot, but not a single medical expert could explain why her ankle kept twisting sideways and upwards. “I got moved to Headley Court and had further operations, but everything failed. I was in a huge amount of pain and was heavily medicated – so much so that I didn’t know where I was,” says Lesley. “I’d phone my dad up to ask him to visit even though he’d just left me! Eventually, in 2007, I had a below-knee amputation because the leg was starting to die.”

But even this didn’t put an end to Lesley’s ordeal. “After a couple of months of rehab, I started getting horrendous pain behind my knee. It was buckling backwards. I had more operations, but the doctors realised that they had to explore further. I was eventually diagnosed with something called dystonia.

“Basically, when I pulled that muscle in my back, my brain malfunctioned and started sending signals to my ankle instead of my back, telling it to go into spasm. After the amputation, the signal just moved to my next joint, which was my knee.

“My life was horrendous. I was screaming in pain constantly – you couldn’t have given me enough drugs! Eventually, I had to make a decision. I was told about a process called deep brain stimulation during which a box is implanted into your chest and wires are fused into your brain. The box would emit electric currents with the aim of blocking the pain signals to my knee.

“The operation is dangerous – I was told I might not wake up and that there was a high possibility that if the signal went to my spine or neck they could snap – but I was in so much pain that I decided to go for it.”

REHABILITATION AND RIFLES

Lesley underwent the procedure in September 2009. The operation meant she had to relearn how to speak and move around. “Thankfully, the operation was a success because after a couple of weeks, the knee released itself,” says Lesley. “I’d been in bed for years, so I had to retrain my whole body to walk. There was a lot of crying, but eventually the hard work paid off.”

During her rehab, meanwhile, Lesley was introduced to shooting. “The Shooting Association visited Headley to host a ‘have a go’ day. I did well and was invited to another weekend at Stoke Mandeville. While I was there, I was spotted by the performance director of

the GB Paralympic team and soon after that I was training with them.” Lesley was a natural. She won a silver medal at the 2013 European Championships in the 3P Para shooting category (competitors shoot in three positions – standing, kneeling and prone – over 50 metres). She also quickly excelled in the 50m prone shooting and 10m air rifle disciplines, both of which are Paralympic events, and a Team GB berth for Rio 2016 looked likely.

“Soon after that I was competing in Germany to try to get a qualifying score for Rio, when I got an infection in my stump,” she says. “I had an operation to clean it up, but over the next 14 months it kept reappearing. Eventually, the infection chewed through my stump. I had to have a conversation with my wife, Kirsty, about what to do next. Eventually, I made the decision to have an amputation above the knee.”

This ended Lesley’s Rio Paralympic dream; she had the amputation in 2017 and her hiatus from the sport lasted three years. But she has returned to shooting and – more determined than ever – has worked her way back into Paralympic contention.

“I’m now walking well on an above-knee prosthetic, and I’m shooting better than I ever have,” she says. “I’m back up to National Academy level, just one rung below the World Class programme. Lockdown has slowed my progress, but if a couple of competitions go ahead and I shoot well, I can still get the right results to get into Team GB and go to Tokyo. My ultimate goal is Paris 2024, but in my mind, I’m planning for Japan.”

SUPPORT THROUGH SHOOTING

Every month, Lesley attends two shooting camps, each lasting five days, and she trains locally, too. She is full of praise for two communities that, she says, have supported her over the years; athletes and Blesma.

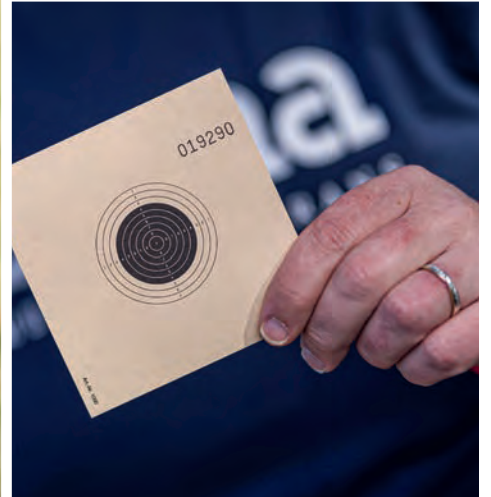
“Shooting is a small world and the athletes have been like another family to me,” she says. “Many people stayed in touch and supported me during my time out of the sport, for example, while my physio and conditioning coaches have really helped with my rehab from amputation.

“Blesma has also been great. My Support Officer, Steve Burton, is often in touch, and the Association assists me with funding. The charity has also been great during lockdown; I’ve enjoyed all the Zoom conversations, activities and presentations.”

Lesley remains keenly focused on the bullseye of Paralympic qualification. Yet however things turn out, she’s keeping her perspective, and is full of gratitude for her current happy state.

“If I got to Tokyo or Paris I would be so emotional,” she admits. “I’d be lost for words to put on that GB uniform again. After everything I’ve been through it would be such an achievement because I’ve busted my gut. I’d also feel pride for my family who have helped me so much but, at times, didn’t think I’d pull through.

“Life for me is really good now. I’m in great health and have a supportive family. Whenever I have a competition now I always look back on how I was doing a few years ago. No matter what I do in the future, to get to this point is a massive achievement.”





ANDY ALLEN

Andy Allen lost both his legs and his sight when he was just 19 years old. He now runs a charity and is a member of the Legislative Assembly for Northern Ireland

I was 17 years old when I joined the Royal Irish Regiment. Serving gave me a sense of purpose and achievement. I travelled to Kenya, Iraq in 2007, and Afghanistan in 2008, where I was subsequently injured in the July.

We were on a foot patrol and had stopped for a short break. As I got ready to set off, the Taliban detonated a device. It took my right leg and badly damaged my left one. Ten days after getting back to the UK, my left leg was amputated.

When I woke up in Selly Oak Hospital a lot of emotions were going through my head. I think the main one was fear because I couldn't see anything. The blast had burned my face and eyes, which resulted in me losing my sight. I knew I had lost my legs immediately. I couldn't see they had gone, but I could feel it.

I've had several operations on my eyes since. My cataracts were removed in 2008 – the day after my wife, Natalie, gave birth to the first of our three children. It gave me back very blurred vision, but another operation two years later gave me more sight. I have a blurred, underwater view of the world, with about 30-40% vision in my right eye.

As I spoke to former soldiers, it became apparent that there was a gap in service delivery for veterans living in Northern Ireland. We would have to travel to England or across the province to receive respite, treatment or training.

A BBC documentary, *Wounded*, had followed my rehab, and I wanted to do something with that profile. Starting a charity was the only way to achieve the outcomes that I felt were necessary. In 2011, AA Veterans Support was established. We've supported thousands of veterans since and now have a drop-in and training centre in Belfast.

The charity work led me to politics. More and more people were asking me for advice and guidance. At the time, the Military Covenant was being brought forward by the UK government, and I wanted to understand it better; what it meant, what it hoped to achieve, and what elements of it existed in Northern Ireland. It gave me the bug for the legislative side of politics.

I got involved officially with party politics in late 2014, co-opted into the Northern Ireland Assembly in September 2015, and stood for election in May 2016. I stood for election again in March 2017, and I'm still a Member of the Assembly today.

I am the Ulster Unionist Party spokesperson for communities. I am passionate about equality, making sure people with disabilities have the opportunity to fully participate in society, addressing Northern Ireland's lack of social housing, and obviously all aspects of veterans' lives.

I was proud and humbled to be awarded an MBE in 2019 for services to veterans and families in Northern Ireland.

“IT BECAME APPARENT THAT THERE WAS A GAP IN SERVICE DELIVERY FOR VETERANS LIVING IN NORTHERN IRELAND”



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