

Blesma

The magazine for limbless veterans

PLUS:
THE SOMME'S LEGACY
OUR PARALYMPIANS
MASTER INSTAGRAM
TMR SURGERY



I CALL IT MY 'FREEDOM DAY'

FOR 20 YEARS, NOTHING HAPPENED IN JON NOBLE'S LIFE WITHOUT SOMEONE DOING IT FOR HIM. THEN HE TRIALLED THE JACO ARM

It's Members' Weekend 2021

It's back: the much-missed mix of fun, formality and friendly faces
20-page supplement inside



Murray's in a proper hurry

The Blesma biker who's fully focused on getting his life back on track *p54*



Invictus veteran Dave Henson MBE continues to enjoy his family life and sport thanks to having his knee joints upgraded through the VPP

Former veteran and Paralympic athlete Dave Henson found sport and competition as a way to focus his rehabilitation and achieve success in life.

Dave, 36 from Southampton became an amputee during his service with the British military, which resulted in the loss of both his legs; one through the knee and the other above the knee. Dave spent a lot of time following his injury in rehabilitation under the care of the Defence Medical Rehabilitation Centre (DMRC), Headley Court where he learned to walk again. The rehabilitation protocol at the DMRC places a high focus on physical rehabilitation.

This is often emphasised through sport and Dave found his passion and focus learning to run again, using running blades. "I maintained a focus during my rehabilitation that I would try and get to the highest fitness standards I could – comparable to before I lost my legs", says Dave. After re-learning to walk and achieving his desired fitness levels, Dave was fitted with Ottobock Genium microprocessor knees via the Veterans Prosthetic Panel (VPP) policy and he chose these particular knees as they suited his high activity levels and allowed him to live his life without restrictions to his mobility. In the years that followed, he progressed to a level of fitness that met the standards for the Army's fitness test, which he says, "Was a huge psychological achievement given my new physical condition."

Shortly after, Dave led Team GB at the inaugural Invictus Games in London during 2014.

Invictus Games is a sports competition for wounded, injured or sick veterans and service personnel from many countries around the world, and the games took place at the Olympic Park in London in 2014. 'It was a huge honour to be made the UK team captain', says Dave. He went on to win a gold medal in the 200m sprint during the games and truly led by example. Following the Invictus Games, Dave moved into para-athletics and competed at the World Championships in Doha, the 2016 European Championships and the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games.

After his Paralympic success, Dave retired from competing and focused his time on his family and his career. Over six years on from his original Genium fitting, Dave, now a father of two and enjoying a successful career, had reached the point where his warranty on his legs has expired. Having been notified by his limb centre, Dave entered into the refitting process and opted to upgrade his legs to Ottobock Genium X3 knee joints. The Genium X3 provides the same features as the Genium and offers the additional benefit of being fully water and corrosion proof. With Dave's job taking him into situation where his legs would be in water, this proved to be invaluable. "Having young kids, and being in and around the water for work, having a waterproof leg is essential to get me where I need to be without worrying about the prosthetic", said Dave.

If you have had your prostheses for 6 years or more, you could be due for a refitting. Contact your limb centre to discuss your own personal requirements and start the process to renewed prostheses.

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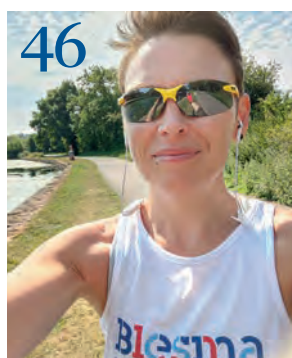
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"I am knitting scarves and hats for homeless people, and hats for premature babies"



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Photography: Andy Bate

Back and better than ever: Members' Weekend 2021

LAST YEAR'S EVENT WAS CANCELLED BECAUSE OF COVID, BUT MEMBERS' WEEKEND MADE A WELCOME RETURN IN OCTOBER PACKED WITH FUN, FORMALITY AND FRIENDLY FACES

After a year-and-a-half of isolation, during which Members' Weekend 2020 was cancelled because of Covid, the Association was finally able to gather Members together again in October for two days of hugging old friends, meeting new ones, sharing stories and trying out new activities. Members' Weekend 2021 was nothing short of a triumph.

More than 180 Members gathered at the Chesford Grange Hotel near Coventry on 02-03 October. Safety was paramount, with all attendees having to present a negative Covid test before they were able to enjoy the mix of fun and formality that has become synonymous with Members' Weekend.

A Service of Dedication and Remembrance opened proceedings on the Saturday and included an emotional rendition of The Last Post. Later, there was time to catch up for drinks in the bar before a gala dinner. The conversation flowed as Members and staff came face-to-face once more, in most cases for the first time since the pandemic.

A WEALTH OF ACTIVITIES

The following day showcased the scope of activities Members can get involved in (see the supplement in the middle of this issue). Members gave presentations on everything from adrenaline-fuelled activities to Outreach work. Andrew Mead, for example, gave a

passionate talk on the joy of para ice hockey and appealed for more players, while Alex Krol gave a brilliant presentation on the Race Across America, which is billed as the world's toughest cycling road race. A Blesma team plans to become the first all-disabled crew to complete it in 2022.

Jonny Holloway gave a great overview of the Fitness and Lifestyle Course, which can help Members get fitter and lead healthier lifestyles, while Outreach Officer South Andy Barlow showcased the online Outreach work that has taken place over the last 18 months. Jack Cummings spoke of the rise in popularity of video gaming as part of a Blesma team, and Martin Ketrick told

Jon and the JACO arm

Jon Noble's life has been transformed (p32)



Above: Peter Sherston-Baker won the Frankland Moore Trophy. The citations for this year's Blesma Awards winners will be published in the Winter issue of the Bulletin

his life story as part of Blesma's renowned Making Generation R programme.

A buffet lunch followed, after which Members embarked on an afternoon of activities. There was much fun outside where archery, axe throwing and shooting took place, while others enjoyed chats on nutrition, or learned more about Making Generation R. Some decided to have a cream tea while being serenaded by live music, while those with an artistic flair brushed up on their watercolour skills or learned how to gift wrap like a professional.

Yoga and Tai Chi classes were also held, helping numerous Members unwind and acquire new skills, before an Italian buffet was served on the Sunday evening.

Chief Executive Jon Bryant, enjoying his debut Members' Weekend despite being in post for 19 months, perhaps summed it up best and most succinctly: "It's been an absolute pleasure from start to finish," he said. He wasn't wrong!

See the supplement in the centre of this issue for much more on Members' Weekend. A number of awards were presented to Members and supporters during the gala dinner. A full report of award winners and their citations will feature in the Winter Bulletin, out in December

"BLESMA GATHERED TOGETHER FOR TWO DAYS OF SHARING STORIES AND TRYING NEW ACTIVITIES. IT WAS NOTHING SHORT OF A TRIUMPH"

welcome



Welcome to the Autumn/Winter issue of the magazine. It is a real pleasure to include a supplement in this issue of some of the highlights of our Members' Weekend. Despite the twin challenges of Covid and fuel shortages, more than 200 Members of the Blesma family

gathered in Kenilworth to catch up after 18 months of enforced separation. If you weren't able to join us in person the supplement has a full report.

In the main issue we have news of a number of the activities that have taken place since Covid precautions were relaxed. Stu and Lizzie Croxford tell us about the benefits of combining surfing and yoga in Cornwall, while Murray Hambro describes how his love for motorcycling and intense exercise has helped him stay focused after injury.

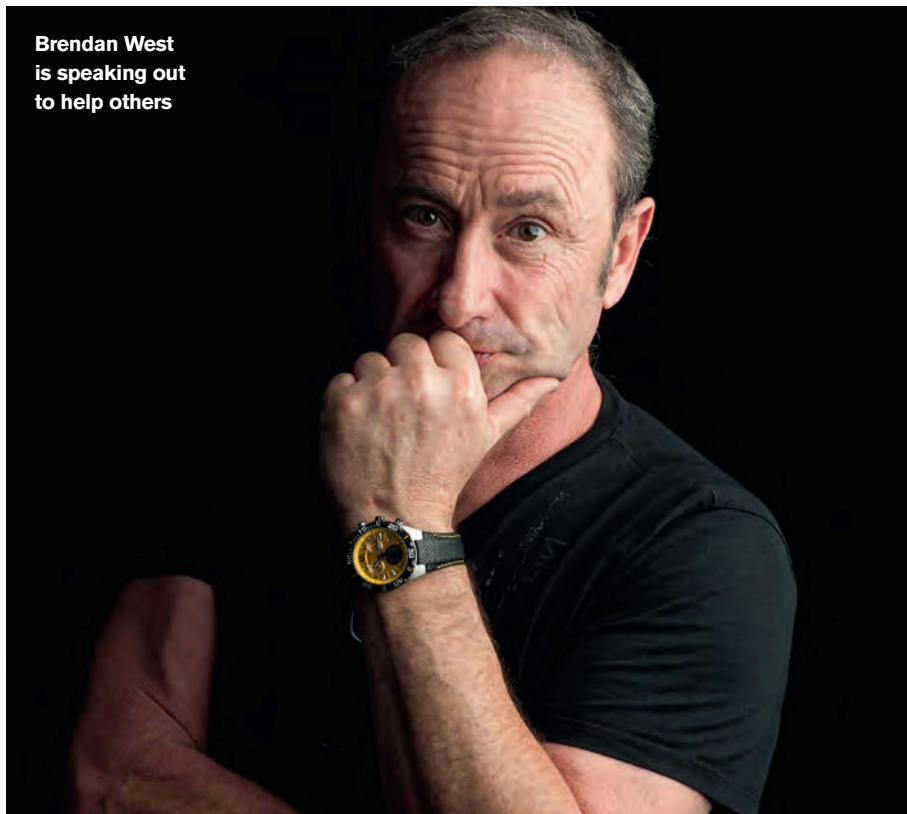
We also have several exciting developments in treatment to report. Jon Noble tells us the story of how his wife, Glynnis, discovered the JACO robotic arm on an internet video, how a number of charities worked with us to quickly source one, and the incredible difference it has made to his life since. Lexi Chambers explains how her surgeon, Tania Cubison, was able to ease her constant pain through innovative nerve surgery, while Tania herself outlines some of the potential benefits of this procedure for those suffering Phantom Limb Pain.

As we approach our 90th anniversary it is heartening to hear how attitudes to disability have changed since the dark days following World War I. Emily Mayhew gives us a timely reminder of how the wounded were once screened off from the general population in this country and how associations like Blesma fought to gain proper recognition. What a contrast to the news that the UK came second in the world medals table at the 2020 Paralympics. Enjoy the issue.

Jon Bryant
Chief Executive



**Brendan West
is speaking out
to help others**



Member speaks about Infected Blood Inquiry

A Blesma Member who contracted Hepatitis C from contaminated blood has given evidence to the Infected Blood Inquiry in the hope of helping others. Brendan West lost his leg in 1979 and was given a blood transfusion while at a British Military Hospital in Germany. After trying to give blood earlier

this year, the 61 year old learned he has been infected with Hepatitis C for decades.

“It was a surprise. Tests show it has caused significant damage to my liver. I am on medication for 12 weeks in the hope of removing the virus, but I must be monitored for the rest of my life. I am uncertain about my future health,” said Brendan.

The Infected Blood Inquiry – a public inquiry into thousands of people who were given blood infected with HIV and hepatitis in the 1970s and 1980s has, for the last two years, been taking evidence from people who have been affected. Brendan spent two days with an investigator in May to provide his story.

“Over the last 42 years, I’ve had bouts of unexplained ill health and have suffered exhaustion on and off even though I played sports and lived a healthy lifestyle. During that time, I have had medical appointments concerning unusual blood readings relating to my liver, but I have never been tested for Hepatitis C,” he said.

“I’ve been a little angry at times, but in a way I’m relieved now because it is easy to blame yourself, thinking the minds of medical science haven’t discovered anything and therefore it must be my fault. To find out something isn’t necessarily my fault is a bit of a relief. It’s down to the inquiry to hold people accountable.”

Brendan is using his experience and speaking out to raise awareness of the issue.

“If people have similar symptoms to those I have, such as unexplained tiredness and exhaustion, and they lost a limb in the 1970s or 1980s and know they received blood products, I would advise them to consider getting a test.

“I’m not doing this lightly – I don’t particularly want the world to know I have Hepatitis C – but I want to make sure that Blesma doesn’t have Members who are unaware like I was. I’m lucky to be alive.”

GPs, sexual health clinics, genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinics and drug treatment services all offer testing for Hepatitis C.

For more information please visit www.nhs.uk/conditions/hepatitis-c/diagnosis

HAND CYCLES ONLY FOR THIS YEAR'S SOLDIER RIDE UK

FIVE BLESMA CYCLISTS HIT THE ROADS of South Wales for three days in September as Soldier Ride UK returned to Blesma’s activities calendar. This year, the 100km ride was reserved for those who use hand bikes and recumbents.

“On previous events, those riding hand cycles have felt they were holding back those who were using upright bikes, as the bikes tend to be hard work,” said event lead Alistair Cope, “so it was great to design a route tailored to them. On the first day, one of the guys commented how good it felt to be able to look across to someone at eye level to chat.”

John Ray, who served in the Grenadier Guards, echoed Alistair’s comments: “Over the last 18 months, I’ve had my hand bike set up indoors and have pounded away for 12,500 miles in the front room. I was excited to get back out in the fresh air once again and cycle with some familiar faces. We worked well together as a team, and being at eye level meant we could chat, pass on our skills, and motivate each other as we rode. We definitely appreciated the experience we were all sharing.”





Wounded Highlanders team member David Dent

Wounded Highlanders pushing for inclusivity

A team of injured veterans are campaigning to make the Highland Games more inclusive for competitors with disabilities. Originally held to allow clan chiefs to select their strongest warriors and swiftest messengers, the tournaments now attract athletes and spectators from around the world. However, competitors with disabilities only competed for the first time in 2018.

Injured veterans have now formed the Wounded Highlanders, a team that became associated members of the Royal Scottish Highland Games Association (RSHGA) in 2020. The team currently has 30 athletes and adaptive and sport specific coaches, and aims to grow to encourage more athletes with disabilities to take part.

“A couple of years ago, a group of injured veterans and service personnel went to the Mey Highland Games at the invitation of the Royal Scottish Highland Games Association,” said David Dent (above). “Other wheelchair users admitted that they didn’t think they could compete at this level

until they saw us participating. Since then, veteran Jim Holborn has worked hard to set the team up and has been in regular contact with the RSHGA to push for more inclusivity for disabled competitors.”

Having started with no funds or support except from friends and family, the team were invited to the Stirling Highland Games this year.



Blesma Member David Dent, who suffered two injuries while serving as a frontline trauma specialist and now uses a wheelchair, competed in 2019 as well as in this year’s Games.

“Some of the team members set world records and, as a seated athlete, I am one of the few people who has tossed a caber from a wheelchair. Sometimes people equate disability with weakness but it’s about adapting. We are in the very early stages, but we are hoping to encourage other teams around the world to take part.”

For more on the Wounded Highlanders visit www.woundedhighlanders.co.uk or find them on Facebook and Instagram

NEWS BRIEFS

660 SIGNAL TROOP TACKLE BRITAIN ON BIKES FOR BLESMA

Soldiers from 660 Signal Troop, which is part of 29 Explosive Ordnance Disposal and Search Group Support Unit, have cycled 1,160 miles around Britain in 11 days to raise funds for Blesma and the Royal Signals Charity.

Staff Sergeant Jon Wilkinson, Sergeant Steve Okey, Lance Corporal Tom O’Regan, Sergeant Gary Friend and Corporal Max McEwen traced the unit’s roots on the ride, reaching Edinburgh on their round trip from their base in Essex.

“It was fun but challenging at times,” said event organiser Jon Wilkinson, who has served with the Royal Signals for 19 years. “The event really came to life when we were joined for part of the ride by Blesma Members Grant Jenkins and Paul Cockram – they really spurred us on.”

Altogether, the 660 Tour of Britain raised more than £4,400, which will be split between the two charities.



JOIN THE ASSOCIATION FOR THE REMEMBRANCE 11K

The Blesma Remembrance 11K is set to make a welcome return on Sunday 14 November. The event, which commemorates the significant day of Remembrance while raising vital funds for Members, will bring together the Blesma community by creating an interconnected group of participants to take part in an 11K in their local parks and neighbourhoods.

From 08.30 on Sunday 14 November, you will be able to join the Blesma team virtually, wherever you are, as the Association comes together to complete 11K in remembrance of the fallen and those who returned from conflict injured.

For more information, or to sign up, visit <https://blesma.enthuse.com/cf/remembrance-11k-2021>



Flying leaves Albert on cloud nine

A former Royal Highland Fusilier who lost his left leg above the knee has won a scholarship to learn to fly. Albert Thomson, 53, from Lincolnshire, has been working towards his Private Pilot Licence with Flying Scholarships for Disabled People (FSDP), which was established in memory of Sir Douglas Bader.

FSDP aims to give people with disabilities the chance to realise their full potential through the challenge of learning to fly. The charity has trained more than 400 people since it was set up in 1983.

After completing an application and interview process, Albert was awarded the scholarship in June and began his flying training at the Bristol Aero Club at Gloucestershire Airport on 15 August.

"I've always been interested in flying and came across the charity 10 years ago, but back then I didn't have the time," said Albert. "I get 16 hours of flying as part of the three-week course and need a minimum of 45 hours to obtain my Private Pilot Licence. My goal is to be able to fly independently anywhere in the world."

Albert is one of 13 people to be awarded the scholarship this year, which covers the cost of flying training, ground school,

accommodation and meals. Each student learns to fly in either a PA-28 or a Microlight aircraft, and each tutored flight lasts roughly one hour. "It was quite frightening at first, but it quickly became exciting when I was able to see above the cloud base," said Albert. "I'm at the stage where I can get into the plane, do all the

checks, and take off. I can fly in a circuit, but my landing isn't quite there yet – that's what I need to concentrate on next. There's a lot of brain work involved. It's exhausting but it's a good feeling and very worthwhile."

Anyone interested in applying for the course should visit www.fsdp.co.uk



Albert is working towards getting his Private Pilot Licence so he can fly on his own

Mike Browne is the UK's first pro amputee golfer



UK's first pro amputee golfer on top of his game

Mike Browne, the UK's first pro amputee golfer, is feeling on top of his game after hiring a mindset coach and qualifying for the Race To Dubai.

So far this season, Blesma Member Mike has played on the UK circuit and has had success in the Welsh and Irish Opens of the European Tour, finishing third in both. His results mean he has qualified for the Race To Dubai in November, which will crown the European Tour's top player.

"I was struggling with my game after lockdown. I was alone throughout the pandemic, so I was trying to stay sane by training in the garden," said the 43 year

old from Somerset. "Golf is a mental game, and if your head isn't in the right place, your golf isn't very good. Fear can destroy it! I hired a new mindset coach and we've worked on positive thinking and being in the moment. I'm feeling really confident."

Mike has also recently enrolled on a three-year PGA university course.

"It's a qualification that will allow me to earn from teaching as it will qualify me to teach any player in the world. I would love to set up an academy in the future. Being a disabled golfer, I know how important golf can be in recovery and I also know the process and limitations."

CHARITY FOOTBALL MATCH RAISES FUNDS FOR BLESMA

A CHARITY FOOTBALL MATCH IN AID OF BLESMA has raised £6,300. The Combined Veterans Football Club, which was set up earlier this year to raise funds for military charities, took on Weston All Stars at Riverside, Branwell on 27 June. The event, which attracted 250 spectators from all over the UK, was organised by British Army veteran Jonathan Farrelly (pictured right).

"It was a great success," said the 32 year old from Weston-super-Mare. "Awful weather meant we didn't get as many spectators as we had hoped for, but people did come from all over the country. We lost 4-3 against a really good team, but everyone had a great time."

Jonathan has now evolved the club into a non-profit organisation and has set up The League of Heroes so veteran football teams can play each other across the world.



SHORTLIST FOR SOLDIERING ON AWARDS 2021

BLESMA MEMBERS NEIL HERITAGE, Josh Boggi, Martin Hewitt and Mark Ormrod, as well as the Making Generation R programme, have been recognised as finalists at this year's Soldiering On Awards for their outstanding achievements.

Martin Hewitt and Mark Ormrod have been shortlisted for the Inspiration Award while Neil Heritage (pictured below) and Josh Boggi are finalists in the Sporting Excellence category. Making Generation R, meanwhile, has been nominated for the Education, Training and Development Award.

Neil was nominated after he became the first double above-knee amputee to summit The Matterhorn last year.

"I really appreciate being nominated; I'm in a great category with some great nominees," said the former Corporal, who lost both his legs to a suicide bomb



in Iraq in 2004. "It's cool to be a Soldiering On finalist, although I don't normally like to be in the limelight"

Since his record-breaking climb, he has continued to use sport as a form of recovery for fellow veterans. His work with Climb2Recovery, the charity he established in 2016, has been non-stop since April. "The money raised from The Matterhorn climb has funded 20 courses in our 2021 programme, and we were recently able to take 25 veterans to the Peak District," said Neil.

The winners of each category were about to be announced online as this issue was going to press. A full report will appear in the Winter Bulletin

In the spotlight

Janet Riddell



Janet Riddell joined the Royal Navy in 1990 as a naval clerk. She was involved in a helicopter crash during a posting to Baghdad, sustaining injuries that led to her becoming a through-knee amputee. She now spends her time supporting other amputees, Service personnel and civilians.

“I initially joined up as a Radar Operator in March 1983. I was only 16 years old and when I arrived for training, I felt totally overwhelmed. I just wasn’t ready to join up and had to go home the next day.

“I started work as an account clerk and later applied to join the Greater Manchester Police, but I loved the sea and had a burning desire to travel, so I applied for the Royal Navy again. I joined in January 1990. Heather Betts, Blesma’s former Director Independence and Wellbeing, was my Divisional Officer and was fantastic.

“I completed my training at the Old Royal Naval Academy and began my career with postings on HMS Centurion and HMS Sultan. In 1994, I was posted to HMS Tamar in Hong Kong.

“On my return, I played for the Royal Navy football team and, in 1998, I volunteered for sea. My first ship was HMS Westminster. We went to Sierra Leone and I remember it being horrendous. A lot of the ship’s company struggled with mental health problems because of what we saw. It was hard to deal with, and I see a psychologist now because I have a lot of nightmares.”

HURT IN A HELICOPTER CRASH

“After HMS Westminster, I was posted to the Second Sea Lord’s Office and, in 2002, I went on my next sea draft on HMS Endurance. I went to Antarctica, all around South America, the Caribbean, the Bahamas, the United States, and The Falklands.

“In 2005, I was told I was going to Baghdad. Two months in, I was travelling in a Black Hawk when we were shot down by small arms fire. I really damaged my knees, which were already hurt from a cruciate ligament injury I’d picked up playing football for

the Navy years before. I stayed in Iraq for a couple of months, but my right knee would click in and out. I went straight to Selly Oak when I got back and was told the only treatment was a knee replacement.

“I was eventually called in front of the Medical Board of Survey and was medically discharged on 21 May 2008. After several corrective and reconstruction operations, and years of pain, my right leg was amputated through the knee in December 2017.”

HELPING OTHERS HELPS ME

“I wanted something positive to come from my amputation, so I held a ‘guess the weight of my leg’ fundraiser for Blesma, the Royal Navy Benevolent Fund and SSAFA – The Armed Forces Charity. I raised £1,700 and have fundraised for the Association ever since. Blesma has been brilliant to me. Without the Association, I don’t think I’d be in the positive frame of mind that I am in now. I have survivor’s guilt from Sierra Leone, so helping other people helps me mentally – I get a sense of fulfilment from it.

“When I joined Blesma in 2016, I became a member of the Portsmouth Branch straight away and recently helped out as the Secretary. I also took up a post as a Welfare Representative. Throughout Covid, I rang Members and delivered DVDs and food. I also sat with one Member who was dying from cancer. I helped his wife at the time and still check in with her now.

“I’m also the patient representative at Portsmouth’s Enablement Centre. When a new amputee patient joins, they are given my number in case they want someone to talk to. We all meet up about once a month. I take them swimming, and I also teach Blesma and civilian amputees how to swim.

“The welfare work takes up a lot of my time, but it makes me happy seeing a smile on someone’s face.”

To find out how you can volunteer for Blesma visit www.blesma.org/support-us/volunteer-your-time or call Blesma Chelmsford on 020 8590 1124

“

I HAVE SURVIVOR’S GUILT FROM SIERRA LEONE, SO HELPING OTHER PEOPLE HELPS ME MENTALLY; I GET A SENSE OF FULFILMENT FROM IT

”



murder mystery events, book clubs, monthly quizzes and presentations, yoga and Tai Chi.

Not only did Roy benefit from the online activities, so did his wife Diane, who is also Roy's full-time carer. "I felt under a lot of strain during lockdown as I was responsible for Roy, my 93-year-old mother and work," said Diane. "Blesma's online activities were a godsend. They kept Roy physical and using his social skills, and took the pressure off me when I had other things to do."

"I've spent years trying to teach him basic computer skills but the last 18 months, with everything that Blesma has put on, have given him an incentive. Plus, he has started sleeping better; and the more relaxed he is, the more relaxed I am!"

Roy added: "I've met Members across the UK who are now close friends, and I was able to meet some of them in person at Members' Weekend. I'm hoping Blesma will keep going with the online activities as the world opens back up. The pandemic may be over for some, but I still have to be careful because of my health problems."

To find out more about Blesma's online outreach activities visit www.blesma.org

Online community is a 'godsend' in lockdown

Blesma's online lockdown activities have proved life changing for former Grenadier Guardsman Roy Townsend and his wife, Diane. "We had to shield back in February 2020 and felt very isolated at the time," said the 85 year old, who is from Aberdare in Wales. "I got very down, and

when I started seeing people talk about mental health issues on the news I thought: 'That's me!' I would just watch TV all day, but then Blesma came along with wonderful things for us to do and everything changed."

Roy took up every opportunity available; meeting and making new friends through



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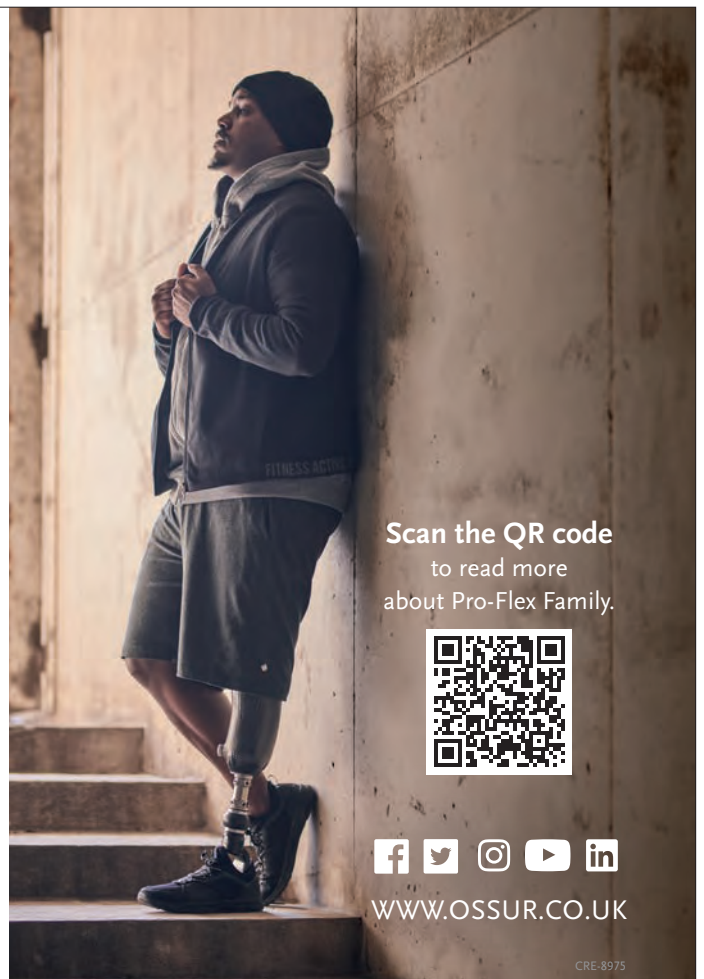
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↘ BLESMA BRIEFING

The lowdown on the Freemasons

BSO (Prosthetics) Brian Chenier is a passionate member of the Freemasons. Here, he dispels a few myths about who the Masons are and what they do...



Blesma receives donations from many different sources; from large organisations to individuals raising money through events and sponsorship. Lesser known is the fact that regular donations come from the Freemasons. In the last four years, Blesma has received £35,000 from 64 individual Masonic Lodges in the UK and overseas. The Freemasons have supported Blesma for decades, with several Lodges having a direct connection to the Armed Forces or specific regiments or corps.

Who are the Freemasons and what do they do?

Freemasons are normal people from almost every walk of life, and a number of Blesma Members and staff are Masons. There are approximately six million Freemasons around the world, with about 200,000 in England and Wales, and 30,000 in Scotland. Some 5,000 female Masons in England are involved under two Female Grand Lodges.

Organised Freemasonry is more than 300 years old, but it can trace its traditions and meetings back much further. Freemasonry is not a secret society, despite what the popular press and rumour would have one believe. It is right, though, that within a Masonic meeting certain elements of the proceedings are kept secret as this forms part of the ceremonial process of becoming a Freemason.

Freemasonry uses a series of ceremonies designed to educate and build a person's character as a good citizen and person. These ceremonies use the ancient artisan craft of stone masonry, and the tools of that trade, to illustrate the moral lessons that are taught within the Lodge. Freemasonry is not a religion, nor is it a political group – such topics are actually not permitted to be discussed when Masons meet to ensure harmony within the Lodge.

Freemasonry is also one of the largest charitable givers in the country, and charity is a cornerstone of the fraternity. Masonic charitable giving comes from the Brethren themselves and is distributed to Masonic and non-Masonic causes through individual Lodges or the Masonic Charitable Foundation. Many air ambulances, for example, carry the square and compass badge as a sign of recognition of the support provided by Masons.



How did I become a Freemason?

My dad was a Freemason for many years, so I was aware they existed. To be honest, I thought the whole thing was a bit weird, so I never really asked him what he did when he left the house with his briefcase. He had invited me to join on many occasions but I'd declined, partly because I didn't know what it was all about and also because I was not ready to commit to joining what I thought was a club for old men.

As I approached the end of my Army career he invited my wife and I to a gala dinner held by his Lodge. I was

“
IN THE LAST FOUR YEARS BLESMA HAS RECEIVED £35,000 FROM 64 INDIVIDUAL MASONIC LODGES IN THE UK AND OVERSEAS
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I AM PRIVILEGED TO BE ABLE TO VISIT OTHER LODGES AND GIVE TALKS ON BLESMA, WHICH ALWAYS LEADS TO A DONATION

surprised to find the people there weren't all old men, and that they were actually quite normal. So, thinking it would be a good way to meet people after I'd left the Army, I joined my dad's Lodge in Colchester. That was 11 years ago.

I wish I had joined earlier. I progressed quickly to become the Worshipful Master of my Lodge in 2017, but my dad never got to see that as he sadly passed away the year before. I know how proud he would have been. Since then, I have been promoted with my Masonic Province of Essex and now hold Provincial Grand Rank (which isn't as 'grand' as it sounds, but is still a great personal honour).

I am also the Mentor and Membership Officer for my Lodge. I am privileged to be able to visit other Masonic Lodges and give talks on Blesma, which always leads to a donation. I enjoy the camaraderie of being with like-minded people, and I meet a lot of Masons who have served or who are still serving.

My Lodge is due to welcome a Blesma Member as a new Brother in November, for example, which will carry on the legacy of past Blesma Members who have belonged to my Lodge, including my dad.

How to find out more?

A common misconception is that you have to be approached by a Mason to become one, or that you have to find one and then ask. The reality is that you can search how to become a Freemason on the internet. This will take you to either the Grand Lodge for your country or Provincial Grand Lodge for your area. You can also find a lot of useful information on Freemasonry and how to join at the United Grand Lodge of England website at www.ugle.org.uk.

You can make an approach through the website or by email and a membership officer will contact you. You can also email me at bsoprosthetics@blesma.org for more information.

If you are a Blesma Member and already a Freemason, I would be delighted to hear from you. It might be possible in the future to hold an informal meeting of Blesma Freemasons, so watch this space.

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



Steven runs marathon to honour good friend

Steven Waterson, who is blind in his left visual field and partially sighted in his right, ran the London Marathon at the start of October in memory of his friend, fellow veteran David Timmins QGM, who died suddenly earlier this year.

Steven (above) took on the 26.2-mile challenge for the seventh time, this time in aid of Blesma. The charity was close to David's heart after he suffered serious blast injuries in 2009.

The pair met while they were both recovering from injury at Headley Court in 2010. "David was one of the nicest guys I've ever met. I was looking up to the sky, asking him for some help along the route when it got

tough," said 49-year-old Steven, who served in the Army Catering Corps.

Steven was diagnosed with a brain condition in 2003 after suffering a subarachnoid haemorrhage. Since then he has had to deal with three ankle ligament reconstructions, deep vein thrombosis, meningitis and a second haemorrhage that left him paralysed down his left side. He still has a significant left-sided deficit.

"In 2011, I joined an athletics club. As a disabled person, running is the only thing I can do that gives me solace and allows me to feel like a regular person," said Steven.

"Running is what I turn to when I find things difficult or distressing."

SNOWDON SUMMIT AFTER SIX YEARS

DOUBLE AMPUTEE TIM TOMKINSON has fulfilled his six-year goal of climbing Mount Snowdon. Tim set his sights on scaling the highest mountain in Wales to honour his cousin who passed away, and was even more determined when his left leg was amputated in 2015.

He finally achieved his goal on 25 June after 36 operations, and raised more than £2,700 for Blesma along the way.

"It was extremely difficult and there were times when I wanted to give up, but everyone we saw cheered us on," said Tim. "The release pin on my left prosthetic broke, so taking it off to dry my liners was difficult. Reaching the summit was emotional – I was elated!"



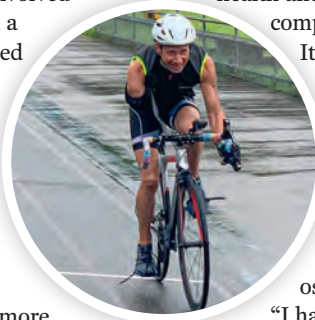


Veteran wins bronze a year after amputation

A military veteran has won bronze at the British Para Triathlon Championships just one year after losing an arm in a cycling accident. Royal Marine veteran Jim Ashworth-Beaumont was training for a triathlon when he was involved in a road traffic accident with a lorry in July 2020. He sustained a number of critical injuries, and his right arm was severed above the elbow.

“I spent five weeks in a coma and was in critical care for four-and-a-half months,” said Jim, 55, who works at the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital in Stanmore.

“I went into hospital as a national level triathlete and lost more than a third of my body weight and couldn’t walk. Blesma, alongside my colleagues at the hospital, funded my physiotherapy to improve my balance and strength. When it came time for me to go home, I needed some changes to my accommodation, and Blesma stepped in again to help.”



Jim had to learn to stand, walk and run again. He then tried open water swimming and cycling, and it wasn’t long before he applied to enter the British Para Triathlon.

“Physical movement is psychological health and in triathlons you are competing to do the best you can.

It was amazing to be back, and it was pretty wild to finish third!” said Jim. “Blesma’s help really accelerated my rehab. I would not be at the level I am now without the Association.”

Jim is now fundraising for osseointegration surgery.

“I have raised £155,000 and the surgery is booked for December,” he said. “Osseointegration involves putting an implant into my arm to which I can attach an artificial limb. I’ve only got six centimetres of arm left, so it would be difficult to wear an artificial limb and grasp anything. Osseointegration will improve the function of the limb without needing a socket.”

JON INSPIRES OTHERS WITH BEN NEVIS SUMMIT

AMPUTEE JON HILTON BROKE DOWN in tears after reaching the peak of Ben Nevis nine months after having his left leg amputated. Jon reached the UK’s highest peak as part of the Three Peaks Challenge, which he undertook in aid of Blesma and three other military charities.

“It’s one of the hardest things I’ve ever done,” said the 42 year old from Hull, who set out to complete the challenge before his one year ‘amp-iversary’ on 13 November.

“After losing my leg I had a massive fear that I would never walk again, so the challenge was to prove to myself that I can do anything and to not let being an amputee take over my life.

“I had the whole team cheering me on as I hit the trig point. It was like a wave of energy hit me – but it also felt like I had nothing left! The pain from my leg suddenly hit me too, so I was riding a wave of emotions.”

On his descent, Jon lost his footing and injured his stump so was unable to join the team as they summited Scafell Pike the next day. However, he conquered Mount Snowdon two days later, on 18 August, and returned to summit Scafell Pike on 09 October, raising his £13,000 target.

“So many people have told me that I’ve inspired them from doing this challenge,” said Jon. “Three people have reached out to me after having been told they needed an amputation, and I was in tears when a young lady on Ben Nevis said to me: ‘Thank you so much, you’ve inspired me!’”



MGR-trained Jon Hilton is new to Blesma



Latest prosthetic gives Ben new lease of life

A former Regimental Sergeant Major has told how a trial for an advanced microprocessor knee gave him the confidence to improve his fitness and lifestyle. Ben Elton, who is an above-knee amputee, tested the Ottobock Genium for three weeks before being fitted with the prosthetic in 2016. He now enjoys regular fell walks and other challenging activities.

“I got a phone call out of the blue from Blesma to see if I wanted to take part in a trial for the Genium. It is one of the best things I’ve ever done,” said Ben, who served for 25 years in the Royal Logistic Corps.

“I was a bit surprised by its weight to start with but the capabilities it provides are incredible. I was using a standard-issue NHS prosthetic and, to be honest, had put on a bit of weight from being less active.

“The Genium has enabled me to do more. My wife and I started with small challenges

around our local area during lockdown but have since been walking in the Peak District: our last adventure was the eight-mile Derwent Edge Circular. The plan is to try Cumbria next and then maybe the Scottish Highlands.

“The prosthetic’s anti-stumble function gives you a huge confidence boost when you’re scrambling over rocks, and it allows you to do things you wouldn’t normally have the confidence to even attempt. I’m very grateful to Blesma for getting in touch and offering me the trial.”

Ben, 56, from Hull, suffered a wakeboarding injury while serving in Cyprus a number of years ago and had his left leg amputated in 2004 before being medically discharged. He rehabilitated at Headley Court and the Genium was fitted at Hull University Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust’s Artificial Limb Unit in 2016.

TAIL END CHARLIE IS HELPING VETS

ROYAL ARTILLERY VETERAN David Gardner (right) used his extensive military connections in lockdown to create Tail End Charlie – a group of volunteers across the country who have come together to support vulnerable veterans.

“It started by helping people out with food parcels. We put people in touch with each other through regional Facebook groups and now have thousands of people involved,” said David, 56, who lost both his legs after a scorpion sting caused blood clots and nerve damage. “If we can’t help someone directly, we put them in contact with organisations we trust.”

Tail End Charlie has supported veterans with accommodation, welfare support, and signposting to mental health charities.



For more, contact digger@tailendcharlie.uk



Words: Jessica Mackinnon

CORIE'S STORY: FROM BARBADOS TO BOBSLEDDING

SINCE LOSING BOTH LEGS SERVING IN Afghanistan, Corie Mapp has become a champion bobsledder. He is now sharing his story to help those from disadvantaged backgrounds realise their dreams.

Corie was born in Barbados in 1978 and served with the Barbados Defence Force Reserves and the Royal Barbados Police Force before moving to the UK in 2005 to join The Household Cavalry.

“I had a conversation with an ex-officer from my regiment about how we could make an impact on people who come from disadvantaged backgrounds,” said Corie, 42. “He suggested writing a book. At first, I didn’t think I had enough of a story, but we realised there isn’t much out there from Commonwealth soldiers about how they got on after joining up.”

Written during lockdown, *Black Ice* tells Corie’s story in conversation with former Life Guard, author and military historian, Christopher Joll. “A significant chunk of my memory was lost along with my legs during the incident. Writing the book forced me to readdress everything that I went through. It helped me regain a lot of great memories,” said Corie.

“For me, the book is a story of triumph over adversity. If it convinces just one Barbadian kid with no qualifications to follow their dream, no matter the obstacles, then I will have succeeded. It is also a thank you to the public and charities like Blesma that have supported me.”

NEWS ANALYSIS

The aftermath of the Somme

This year marks the 105th anniversary of the Somme Offensive. Those injured in the battle would go on to leave a legacy that is still felt more than a century later

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THERE WAS A LOT OF STIGMA ABOUT BEING A WWI AMPUTEE. A LOT OF INJURED VETERANS COULDN'T GO BACK TO THEIR OLD JOBS

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The soldiers who came home injured from WWI were not allowed to return as heroes. Train station platforms from ports on the south coast all the way into London were boarded up to hide the returning soldiers from public view. Those in power felt that the public should not see the bloodied bandages, amputees and dispirited stares of those who survived the horrors of The Great War.

Hospital trains trundled through empty, barricaded stations at night as if the gloom would hide the human cost of battles such as the failed Somme Offensive. The British suffered 57,470 casualties on the first day of the Battle of the Somme, which began on 01 July 1916 and lasted until 18 November. Soldiers returned to receptions of shame and pity, and were given paltry assistance from a government that had neither anticipated the level of injuries that might be sustained nor had the capability to provide adequate long-term help. Now, new research is unpicking the dreadful aftermath for those 41,000 soldiers who lost limbs in World War I and came home to a lack of support that was the catalyst for the founding of Blesma.

THE EVENTS THAT GAVE RISE TO BLESMA

The Association was created as a response to the pain and social hardships that stalked amputees long after the spotlight of victory at the end of WWI had dimmed.

“The public thought the Battle of the Somme was going to be the big push that ended the war. It wasn't, but the remarkable fact was that more than 30,000 casualties from the battle survived because of advances in battlefield medicine,” says Dr Emily Mayhew (left), military medical historian at Imperial College London.

“The largest cohort of survivors were those who lost limbs, but authorities were worried about the impact on public morale. Scaffolding and boards were put up so people near the train stations couldn't see the volume of people coming home with missing limbs.”

Saving the wounded at point of injury and at casualty

clearing stations was a triumph, but the Government and public struggled to welcome home the wounded.

“The underlying social attitude at the time was that if you were wounded you were irreparable,” says Emily, the author of *Wounded*, which charts the experiences of battlefield stretcher bearers, medics and surgeons. “They received The King's Medal, which indicated they could not serve any more so rather than being an honour, the medal became a badge of pity. There were unprecedented levels of amputee survivors and society was simply not set up to care for them.”

The welfare vacuum meant that veterans could not return to their jobs while war pensions were crudely graded on the extent of an amputation – the more limb lost, the more the pension. There was little thought for, or understanding of, how limb loss might impact a veteran over the rest of their lives.

Thousands of veterans endured financial, physical and psychological hardships as the cascade of loss of independence and dignity, combined with chronic pain and discomfort, washed away their lives. The maximum pension rate in 1920 was 40 shillings a week at a time when unskilled labourers were earning twice that amount. Amputees had to petition local medical boards to prove their impairment and many complained that the process was demeaning and, invariably, that their cases were not believed.

Veterans banded together to form associations that became the forerunners of Blesma, which was officially founded in 1932.

“The big question was: what would happen to veterans 10 years down the line when there was compassion fatigue and people wanted to move on? The veterans still had their injuries but they were unheard. There was no poetry about the WWI limbless. Instead, they were kept in the shadows,” adds Emily.

“If you go through the Ministry of Pensions files you find records of people who wanted to work and support their families but were living lives of pain; they suffered



EMILY MAYHEW
Emily is Historian in Residence at the Centre for Blast Injury Studies



Words: Danny Buckland Photography: Shutterstock, Andy Bate



Phantom Limb Pain and problems with their stumps and shoulders from using crutches, but there was little sympathy for them. In many respects, this was sadly repeated with veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts as there was only a three per cent increase in pain outcomes from WWI. That learning was locked away in files and wasn't acted upon."

SOCIAL STIGMA AND A LACK OF SUPPORT

Sarah Dixon Smith, who works at Imperial College's Centre for Blast Injury Studies and has been researching the Ministry of Pensions archives for her PhD, has unearthed scores of case studies of veterans whose wounds corroded the rest of their lives.

"There was a lot of stigma about being a WWI amputee," she says. "On big victory parades, many amputees were given a train ticket they could use to go away for the day – anywhere the public couldn't see them. A lot of injured veterans couldn't go back to their jobs and government support schemes were limited."

The National Archives at Kew catalogue some of the correspondence, medical and pension records of 22,829 soldiers from 1914 to 1985. They clearly show lives dominated by chronic pain, further disabilities caused by their amputations, and an uphill battle to access support and financial aid.

Rifleman Ernest Silverman, of the King's Royal Rifles, reported: "I have pain in the stump of my leg all the time," in 1933, 17 years after his left leg was amputated because of a gunshot wound he sustained at the Battle of the Somme.

RAF Lieutenant James Atkinson, who was shot down over Ypres and had his left leg amputated, had his war benefits reduced. "Ever since the amputation, I have done my best to overcome my disability and work as well as I could," he wrote in 1926. "I consider it very hard that I should have my pension reduced so much when, for the last nine years since my wound, I have been in and out of hospital undergoing operations (three) and treatment, and have never had a chance to settle down without interruption to make a living."

In 1959, he was still suffering from a sensation of "hot needles" in his residual limb. Blesma eventually managed to get his pension increased in 1970 and also assisted his widow when he passed away.

"The files regularly record Blesma stepping in to help these veterans, who had to prove that their health and work opportunities had deteriorated as a result of their amputations, and Blesma often advocated for them," says Sarah. "Lots of cases also have notes from civil servants recommending help because Blesma had become involved or the case had become public."

Above: injured British soldiers in WWI's trenches
Left: prosthetics manufacturers in the 1920s
Below: a prosthetic leg for a below-knee WWI amputee



OBITUARIES

Those we have lost

Rosemarie Heggie

06 November 1926 - 28 May 2021

WHEN ROSEMARIE HEGGIE WAS 14 years old her family home was destroyed in The Blitz. "The whole street was taken out. My mum and dad were killed. I was very badly burned by the fire, but incredibly lucky to be alive because I was buried under rubble," she told *Blesma Magazine* several years ago.

Rosemarie had to go through a major ordeal afterwards, too. "I was pulled out of the debris but I was in a lot of pain and my right leg had to be amputated below the knee. It was a real shock."

After she recovered Rosemarie was first sent to Brighton to live with her uncle, before moving to Northern Ireland to live with her grandmother.



"I grew up on their farm. It wasn't easy being on crutches all the time, but I got used to using my prosthetic leg, and I learned to ride a bike and drive a car," she said.

Disability didn't stop Rosemarie. She found work in Belfast at the War Pensions Welfare Service before eventually returning to England when her life-long best friend Alice got married there in 1962.

It was in England that she would meet and marry her much-loved Jim. One other constant throughout her life was Blesma.

"They sorted me out with my first prosthetic leg, so they've helped right from the start," Rosemarie said. "They also sorted me out with a stairlift and a wheelchair.

"The best thing about Blesma is the care they take of you. I don't have to ask for anything. My Support Officer is lovely and is always making sure that I'm doing OK. It's a wonderful charity."

Those who have passed away

May they rest in peace

BARTLETT D J	RAF	HQ	24/05/2021
BOOTH P C	ARMY	HQ	11/05/2021
BOSTON B V	RM	HQ	06/06/2021
COLLINS S J	ARMY (SCOTS GUARDS)	HQ	03/09/2021
CORBETT J W	RN/RAF	HQ (MERSEYSIDE)	22/09/2021
DONNACHIE P B	ARMY (ROYAL SIGNALS)	HQ	26/09/2021
EVANS R I	ARMY (REME)	HQ	10/06/2021
GURNEY D M	CIVILIAN CASUALTY	HQ (HASTINGS)	12/08/2021
HIBBERT G A	ARMY (RA)	HQ (DERBY)	NOT KNOWN
JOHNSON C	ARMY (RA)	HQ	15/07/2021
JONES K	ARMY (ACC)	HQ	NOT KNOWN
LEE R	ARMY (RLC)	HQ (PORTSMOUTH)	22/06/2021
LONGMUIR C	RAF	HQ	27/07/2021
MACPHERSON L	RN	HQ	07/09/2021
MCQUISTON W A	ARMY (REME)	HQ	15/07/2021
MORRIS T E	ARMY (RA)	HQ	SEP 2021
PAYNE L J	RN	HQ	20/05/2021
PECHKAYTIS C A	RM	HQ	SEPTEMBER 2021
PHILLIPS E F	ARMY (ATS & WRAC)	HQ (PETERBOROUGH)	NOT KNOWN
POTTER P N	ARMY (ROYAL WELCH FUSILIERS)	HQ	06/08/2021
REDDING L T	ARMY (ROYAL ENGINEERS)	HQ	14/08/2021
RICHARDS H	ARMY (ROYAL PIONEER CORPS)	HQ	NOT KNOWN
ROBERTS N D	ARMY (ROYAL ENGINEERS)	HQ	SEPTEMBER 2021
SEXTON J J	RAF	HQ	26/07/2021
SMITH I	ARMY (ACC)	HQ	13/06/2021
SMITH R	ARMY (ROYAL SIGNALS)	HQ	25/07/2021
SWAN K P	ARMY (ROYAL SCOTS)	HQ (HASTINGS)	09/03/2021
TURNOUGH J G	RN	HQ	12/05/2021
UPPARD C	ARMY (ROYAL NORTHUMBERLAND FUSILIERS)	HQ (BLACKPOOL)	NOT KNOWN
YOUNG J C	ARMY (RAMC)	HQ	09/03/2021

NEWS BRIEFS

LLOYD'S OF LONDON AND BLESMA TEAM UP IN CHATHAM

Blesma Members met up with supporters working at Lloyd's of London to visit the Historic Dockyard in Chatham in July. As part of the corporate day, the group enjoyed lunch and a guided tour of the ropery with the aim of reducing the social isolation that has been exacerbated by Covid.

"As a veteran working at the Lloyd's of London site, I joined Lloyd's Military Network and had the opportunity to volunteer to attend the Blesma event," said Carl Honeysett, UK Security Operations Manager at Lloyd's of London. "It was great to chat with Blesma Members and other volunteers. The tour was great – a real mix of the visual and the sensory."



JANET PLEDGES PROCEEDS OF HER MEMOIR TO BLESMA

Blesma Widow Janet Wilkes is donating all the proceeds of her memoir *After The Blossom* to Blesma to thank the Association for all the support it gave her when she lost her husband, Keith.

Janet's autobiography covers such things as the events of her post-war childhood, her working life in London, how she met Keith and the life they spent together.

"When I became a widow, Blesma really helped me. I went on my first Widows Week in 2008, and that allowed me to make a new circle of friends. People tell me they can relate to things I write about in my book and have enjoyed reading it," she said. "I think everyone should have the chance to tell their story."

To order your copy of *After The Blossom* please contact Janet directly by email at janetwilkes1947@gmail.com



From South Africa to Chelmsford in seconds

An isolated veteran living in South Africa is connecting with his friends online for the first time with the help of Blesma's Digital Inclusion Programme.

Leo Kirk, 87, contacted Blesma last June after he felt disconnected from those around him during the height of the pandemic.

"I saw lots of wonderful online activities in *Blesma Magazine*, and I wanted to get involved," said the REME veteran who lost his right leg below the knee in a road traffic accident. "I contacted Blesma and explained that my phone was too small to use. When the Association realised I couldn't afford a tablet, I was kindly given a grant."

The Digital Inclusion Programme, which coincided with the launch of Blesma Connects, provides tablets to those who are digitally isolated to help them access



the online world, and offers help and advice to those who don't have the confidence to make the most of their device.

"I had never used a tablet before but Blesma taught me a lot via Zoom," said Leo. "It's been a battle from time to time as I'm a slow learner, but I'm getting there and Blesma staff are always on hand for any questions I do have."

Thanks to Blesma's intervention, Leo has now participated in a range of online activities, including the Association's online quizzes and the Royal Hospital Chelsea's Breakfast Club, not to mention becoming adept at video calling friends across the globe.

"The tablet has added another interest to my life," said Leo. "I'm very much on my own these days so it's great to have the tablet and join in with the activities."

SENIORS COUPLES WEEK IS A SUCCESS

THE FIRST SENIORS COUPLES WEEK took place in Nantwich in August. New to 2021, the event is similar to Blesma's Widows and Seniors Weeks but is intended for couples over the age of 60. Five couples enjoyed five days of relaxation and activities in and around Nantwich, as well as great evening entertainment at the Warner Hotel.

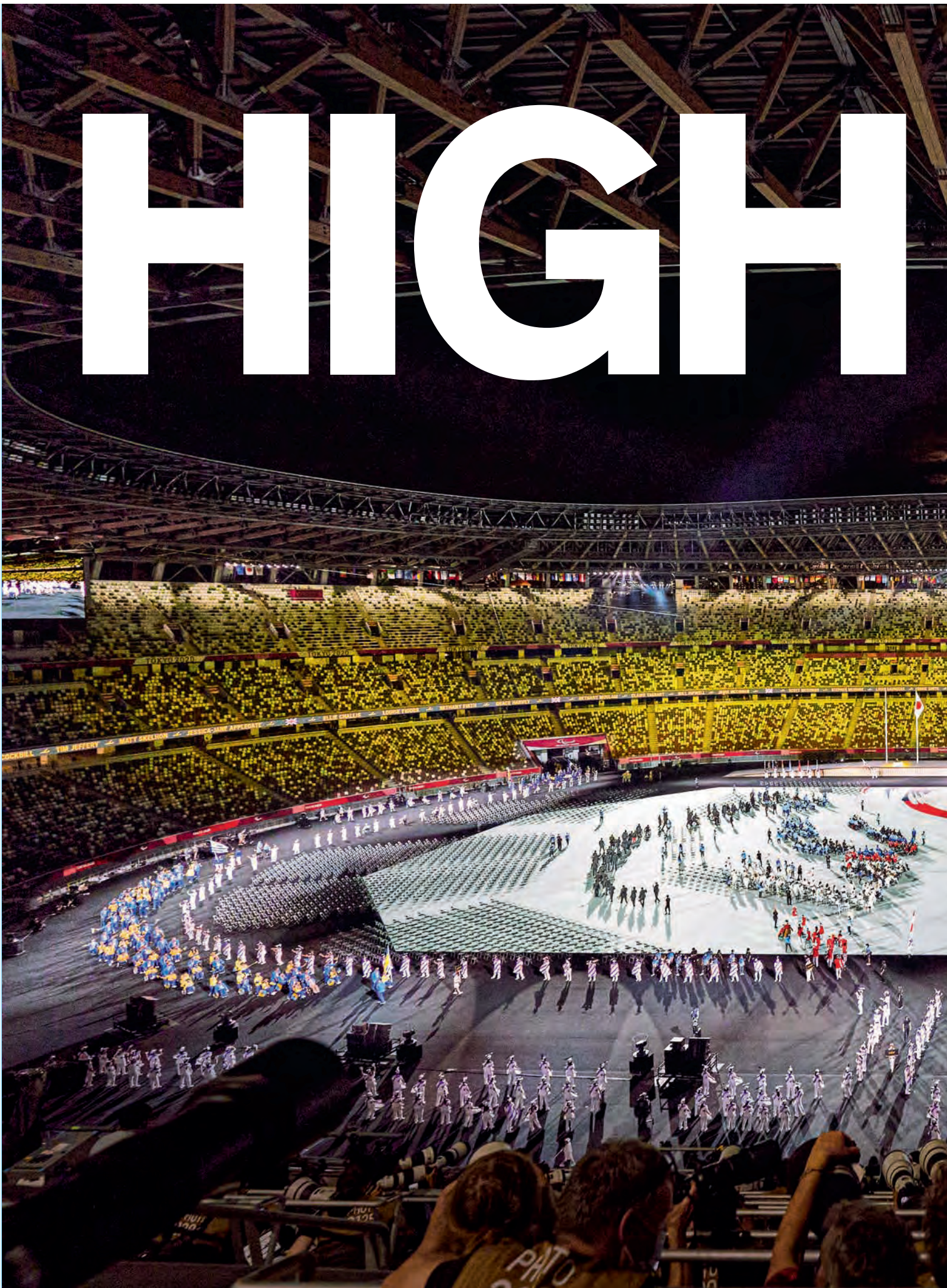
"It was a good week with lovely accommodation, and we really enjoyed the entertainment," said Alison Evans, who was on her first event since becoming a triple amputee. "I was anxious before coming as I haven't ventured out much recently. My partner, Emyr, came along, which eased my worries. The week gave me a boost."

During the trip, the couples got to enjoy the hotel's spa and sporting facilities, but one of the highlights for Alison and Emyr was a crossbow shooting activity.

"The trip was a massive step forward for us. Two years ago, I had to see Alison very poorly with sepsis shock and was told the following 24 hours would be critical. Now we are enjoying a trip with people who are in a similar situation to us," said Emyr who, like Alison, served in the Royal Air Force.

"We've never met anybody in our situation before, so it was beneficial to meet people who are. We are in denial that we are in our 60s, but it was an excellent week that we can't believe Blesma paid for."

HIGH



FIVE

A HANDFUL OF BLESMA MEMBERS TRAVELLED TO TOKYO IN AUGUST TO COMPETE IN ONE OF THE GREATEST SPORTING SPECTACLES ON EARTH. THEY CAME BACK WITH MEDALS, MEMORIES, AND MUCH, MUCH MORE...



The Tokyo 2020 Paralympics Opening Ceremony took place at the Olympic Stadium on 24 August 2021

Words: Nick Moore Photography: imagecomms



Stuart Robinson

Wheelchair rugby

Stuart Robinson completed four tours of Iraq and four of Afghanistan as an RAF Gunner before being injured by an IED in 2013, losing both his legs. A keen sportsman, he got involved with wheelchair rugby almost immediately after injury and was rapidly promoted through the ranks at ParalympicsGB. This summer, 39-year-old Stuart was a key member of the side that won Britain's first ever Paralympic medal in the sport, defeating the USA in a dramatic final to win gold.

How were your preparations over the last couple of years, and how did you feel about the delay to the Games last summer?

As a group, we tried to use the postponement as an opportunity. We got fitter, stronger and faster. We had a lot of Zoom meetings and looked at ways to train at home. It was tough at times, but it obviously paid off for us in the end.

What was it like out in Tokyo?

I was very focused on just going out there and playing well, so a lot of the other stuff was in the background. We were in our bubble and we prepared very well, which helped us to bond even more as a team. The organisation in Tokyo was very good – overall it was a great experience.

Did you get to meet many athletes from other countries and enjoy the Paralympic spirit?

There was a bit of that in the dining area. We also got to meet a lot of other ParalympicsGB athletes. Chatting to them about their backgrounds, sports and training was very interesting.

You lost an early group game to the USA. Did that affect the side's confidence?

Not at all. Our first match against Canada was the most important one to win. They'd beaten us in the Rio Paralympics, knocking us out of medal contention.

“I GOT A CALL FROM MY SON, AND EVEN THOUGH I'D WON GOLD HE POINTED OUT WHERE I COULD HAVE IMPROVED. I LOVED THAT!”

We knew that if we'd lost that, we'd have been in trouble when it came to getting out of the group, but we performed well and our confidence grew. The USA were tough opponents and we made a few errors, but we used the defeat as a springboard. Everything we'd been working on in training came to fruition.

And you got past the hosts Japan before beating USA in the final...

Yes, Japan were strong but we did the job, and then to come up against the USA again, we knew we needed to be strong all round. We made sure that anything that had let us down in the pool game was put right.

How much can you enjoy matches or is it just full-on concentration?

A lot of people watching on TV said that I looked very serious! There was a lot of pressure because our team had never won a Para medal, so I wanted to carry out the game plan. We got to enjoy it all afterwards!

How happy were you with your individual performance?

Very pleased. I've only been playing at Para level for four years, and there is a lot to learn. I just wanted to perform well, and I feel like all that work I was doing at home in the garage was worth it.

As an ex-serviceman, how does it feel to represent ParalympicsGB?

It's like putting your military uniform on again – I've always felt great pride in that. I like to look smart, and you've got to value the ParalympicsGB uniform because someone is always coming for your place.

What kind of messages were you getting from home?

People were gutted that they couldn't come out and watch, but Channel 4 put on some unbelievable coverage. I got lots of messages afterwards, but the thing that meant the most to me was a call from my son. Even though I'd won gold, he pointed out areas where I could have improved. I loved that!

Did you realise how much it meant to everyone back home?

Not at the time because we were in our bubble, but I definitely realised when we went to the official homecoming celebrations for ParalympicsGB in London. Lots of members of the public were showing their support. That was special.

What's next?

I'm not sure, but I'd like to show that this wasn't just a lucky victory for GB. With Paris 2024 only being three years away, and the hope of some crowds, the idea of trying to win another one is very tempting.

Phil Eaglesham

Target shooting

By his own admission, Phil Eaglesham didn't compete as well as he would have liked in the target shooting at Tokyo 2020, but the trip was a huge success for another reason. After spending five years working incredibly hard on his company, Conquering Horizons, Phil managed to take a pre-production prototype of his innovative wheelchair, the Victor, to Japan.

The chair has the capability to smoothly elevate the user to 'eye level' or drop down to fit underneath a standard desk, and boasts a small turning circle and four-wheel drive wheelbase. It provides independence, flexibility and sociability for the user, and is seen as one of the biggest breakthroughs in disability mobility for years. Not surprisingly, when suddenly surrounded by hundreds of other wheelchair users, everybody at the Games wanted to know about it.

"It was just great," says Phil, 40. "I was able to drive around everywhere at a social height and keep up with people, and it gave me so much independence. We saw what a great product it was.

"I couldn't get very far without people from all over the world wanting to take a picture, or saying it looked awesome. They could see that it is the sort of thing that will change people's lives and challenge stigmas. It reaffirmed that the chair will achieve everything I wanted it to. That was one of the best things about being out there."

The shooting itself was less satisfying for Phil, a former 40 Commando Royal Marine corporal who became seriously ill with the incurable disease Q Fever while serving in Afghanistan in 2010.

"A LOT OF THE TEAM ARE MILITARY, SO IT'S LIKE A FAMILY. IT'S LIKE BEING BACK IN THE CORPS AGAIN, AND I SEE IT AS A FORM OF REHAB"



"I probably didn't get the best preparation because the shooting ranges were shut a lot during the pandemic so I wasn't able to get on the 50m range," Phil says. "I had about four weeks training in Gibraltar and felt great, but then I lost confidence as I wasn't able to shoot again after that.

"Overall, it was a really different experience. I went to Rio in 2016, and people were saying Rio wasn't as good as London 2012 but that Tokyo would be because of the crowds and atmosphere. Of course, in the end there were no crowds and that was very strange, especially at the opening ceremony. But I'm glad

I went, it is something I will be able to look back on even though I didn't shoot quite as well as I would have liked."

THE BEST SORT OF REHAB

Phil finished 14th, 15th and 21st in his three events. "Anyone in the top 20 can win on the day so I could have done better, but my shooting wasn't quite where I wanted it to be and the guys who won were worthy winners," he says. He was also proud to prove to himself that he could compete at the top level. "Sport means a great deal to me," he says, "and a lot of the team are military, so it's like a family. It's like being back in the corps again, and I see it as a form of rehab."

Since returning from Japan to his home in Taunton, it has been full steam ahead for Phil with Conquering Horizons. "We're finishing up our verification and validation phase, and looking for investment to put it into production," he says. "We hope to be selling it in 2022. The time I spent in Tokyo means I have lost all my worries about it being a success."

Phil has also got an eye on the next Paralympics. "It's just under three years until Paris 2024, and if I can get some support, I will have another go," he says. Phil knows that if he does, he can count on Blesma. "The Association has been great during the pandemic, one of the things the staff there did was call up every week or so to check up on me. I didn't always need help, but the fact that I knew someone was there was a help in itself. It's a simple thing but it makes such a difference."

Find out more about Phil's groundbreaking Victor wheelchair at www.conqueringhorizons.com





Photography: imagecomms, Andy Bate



Jaco van Gass

Track cycling



Jaco van Gass was one of ParalympicsGB's standout athletes at the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games, but the cycling star had to improvise and overcome a number of challenges to secure his impressive medal tally of two golds and one bronze. His first mission – like everyone else – was to make it through the pandemic. “I was in great form when the Games were postponed, so I was disappointed,” he says. “It didn’t sink in right away and I carried on training really hard but eventually, after lots of Zoom calls with my coach, we got a plan together. We decided to use the extra time to find some marginal gains where I could improve, such as my position on the bike during the pursuit, and my prosthetics, which had become a bit outdated. In the end, it all helped.”

The second challenge was adapting to the conditions in Japan. Jaco, 35, is used to training in cold, rainy Manchester but baking hot Izu and Fuji, where the cycling events were held, required something different.

“The velodrome was amazing but extremely fast because of the air conditions,” he says. “To suddenly produce ridiculous speeds took adjustment. Without getting too technical, you need to figure out gearing systems and lap splits. I only realised on the day of the pursuit event that I needed to revise my times down.”

“I STILL HAVE TO PINCH MYSELF. I’VE BEEN FASCINATED BY THE DREAM OF BEING A PARALYMPIAN FOR A LONG TIME”

It worked a treat. Jaco came away with a gold medal and world record in the individual pursuit.

“I’m still not sure I’ve put it in perspective,” he admits. “I still pinch myself. I’ve been fascinated by the dream of being a Paralympian for a long time. When I look at the pictures of myself there now I think: ‘That’s actually me doing that, using that incredible equipment, I was actually there!’ I’ll be forever grateful for the experience.”

THE ONE TIME THAT REALLY MATTERED

Another problem loomed in the mixed team event, however. Despite being a formidable group of athletes, the three riders (Jaco was joined by Kadeena Cox and Jody Cundy) had been struggling to dovetail effectively.

“We were a fantastic team but we had our struggles going into the event,” Jaco says. “We knew if it came right we would be unstoppable, but it hadn’t come right in training and it didn’t in the build-up or the qualifying rounds. But in the final, after a lot of analysis, we somehow rectified everything, and it all worked perfectly. The one time that it really mattered, we produced the best ride we’d ever done.”

Jaco puts some of this success down to his military background. “My experiences have helped me massively because they have taught me to deal with circumstances that aren’t going smoothly. At one point I was told that one of my new prosthetics had been disallowed. That could have thrown a lot of people off, but I just went back to an old one and made some adjustments. It’s like being on a military operation – things don’t always go to plan, but you crack on.”

Jaco served with the Parachute Regiment and sustained major injuries in Afghanistan when he was hit by a rocket propelled grenade, losing his left arm above the elbow. But getting involved in some major expeditions, such as a trek to the North Pole with Prince Harry, biking down Route 66, and an attempt on Everest – some of them supported by Blesma – restored his confidence.

“The North Pole expedition was such a great life experience and set me on my path,” he says. “I realised that if I could do that, I could do a great deal more. Achieving something spectacular gave me confidence, and that’s kept me going in my sporting career.”

Jaco is hopeful of rolling that over into the next Paralympics. “I will carry on to Paris 2024 as long as I enjoy the process,” he says. “It’s a big challenge to defend your titles and I’d love to see if I can do that – and maybe even improve on my times!”

Leslie Stewart

Target shooting

Leslie Stewart, 43, from Blairgowrie, competed at Tokyo 2020 in target shooting, finishing 13th in the 50m rifle and 18th in the 10m. It represented a great achievement for the former Royal Military Police Officer, who was initially injured on a combat fitness test and had a below-knee amputation in 2007. She endured years of pain and was eventually diagnosed with a condition called dystonia. Deep brain stimulation, and another amputation, eventually helped her recover but she missed the chance to shoot at Rio 2016. Now she's targeting Paris 2024 for another go.



too, which was an amazing set up. It was probably the safest place on the planet at the time!

What was it like to be on the shooting range at the Paralympics?

It was obviously an unusual feeling because of the lack of spectators. But these were my first Games, and it was still busy on the range. I tried to flip the lack of crowds around in my head, and say to myself: 'This means there is less pressure on you.' So I didn't mind it too much. It was also unreal seeing all the Tokyo 2020 signs and banners everywhere. I couldn't help but think: 'I can't believe I'm actually shooting on this amazing range.'

And how pleased were you with both your performance and your results?

I was very happy with how everything went. The event was great – I loved every minute of it. I wasn't sure how I'd react, whether I'd like it or not, and I'd worked so hard to get there. But I settled right into it. I permanently had a smile on my face on the range, despite being on the world stage and competing against the very best. I knew that I deserved to be there. I was nervous, of course, but I ended up being happy with how I did.

As a former servicewoman, is there an extra pride in representing your country?

I think so. When you put the ParalympicsGB kit on it's like putting the military uniform on again: you feel a real sense of honour and pride. Having the Union Jack on my arm once again was a very powerful feeling because I felt like I'd earned it.

And how was the reaction back home?

On the day I was flying out my wife drove me from Scotland to Heathrow, but as we set off the town had put on a surprise send-off party! It had been arranged quietly by my sister, and it was absolutely mobbed, with a pipe band and all sorts. That was lovely. And during the Games, everyone was staying up until 2am to watch me – even my dogs were dressed up in Union Jack flags to watch! My friends and family were more nervous than I was, but they gave me such great support.

So have you got a taste for more, and do you hope to get to the next Paralympic Games in Paris?

Yes absolutely. I've had a nice warm-up in Tokyo, so Paris is the next goal for me.

How did you manage to make it to Tokyo after three-and-a-half years out of the sport?

The fact that the Paralympic Games were delayed last year actually helped me – I don't think I would have made it to Tokyo if there hadn't been that extra year. The lockdown gave me more time to train. We got the whiteboard out and went back to basics. I trained at home, I improvised and adapted until the shooting ranges opened again. I also really improved my fitness and had a nutritionist on hand. Once I got back to the range, my scores took a major jump, which was great.

How was going out to Japan?

It was an amazing journey and experience. Going there felt a bit unreal: you don't believe it is really happening until you're sitting in that seat on the plane. Being out there was so interesting, too. The athletes' village was absolutely huge, with massive blocks for each country, and flags on all the balconies – it was great. Every person in the village got tested for Covid every day,

“WHEN YOU PUT THE GREAT BRITAIN KIT ON IT'S LIKE PUTTING THE MILITARY UNIFORM ON AGAIN: YOU FEEL A REAL SENSE OF HONOUR AND PRIDE”





Photography: imagecomms, Craig Stephen



Photography: imagecomms

Micky Yule

Powerlifting

Last year was a difficult one for a lot of people, and Micky Yule certainly had his fair share of bad luck. The former Royal Engineers Staff Sergeant has already achieved a huge amount in the powerlifting world, winning national and European titles, but as he eyed up his first Paralympic medal at Tokyo 2020, fate seemed against him.

“After the Rio Games, I had osseointegration surgery [which involves a titanium rod being permanently implanted into the bone], which stopped me training for a year or so,” says Micky, 42, who lost both legs to an IED in Afghanistan in 2010. “Then I got an infection, which also set me back. In all, that took 18 months out of my training. I struggled to catch up with what I was lifting pre-Rio and when I got back into a routine we had lockdown, and I was training in my garage.

“After that, last November, I got Covid. That messed me up again because I missed four weeks of training – all during the build-up to qualifying. I went out to Dubai and somehow qualified under massive pressure, but afterwards I had to self-isolate in a hotel for 11 days, just eight weeks prior to Tokyo. It wasn’t ideal – I was losing momentum all over the place.”

Despite all these setbacks, Micky went on to achieve his greatest ever sporting moment. Competing in the men’s 72kg event, he won a bronze medal. He puts his success down to adapting quickly to the unusual conditions. “I went there ranked sixth in the world, but I managed to train well in Tokyo, and I got on top of the jetlag quickly,” he says. “During the competition, it was strange: the anticipation of competing was different. We were in a hall for 4,000 people, but there were only 50 people in there, and you could hear a pin drop.

“I noticed early on that the judges were being very strict on the lifts. So I got tactical and decided to start off with a lighter weight than I’d normally go for. I thought a lot of guys would go heavy and get fouls, and that proved to be the case. A few of the guys ahead of me were messing up, which put more pressure on them.”

“MY CAREER WAS ON THE LINE. I KNEW IF I GOT IT, I WAS PROBABLY GOING TO MEDAL, SO I HAD TO DO THAT FINAL LIFT CLEANLY”



It all came down to one moment of truth: Micky’s third lift of 182kg. “I haven’t committed to trying to go to the next Paralympics in Paris in 2024, so I knew this could be my final ever lift on the biggest stage,” says Micky. “That put me under a huge amount of pressure, as well as knowing the judges were being so strict. My whole career was on the line. I knew if I got it, I was probably going to medal, so I had to do that final lift as cleanly and as technically as I could. I managed to do it, and afterwards there was just a rush of emotion. It was a crazy moment, just fantastic.”

POWERLIFTER TURNED SUPPORTER

These weren’t the only nerves Micky experienced at the Games, however. He also had to watch his good friends and fellow Blesma Members Jaco van Gass (cycling) and Stuart Robinson (wheelchair rugby) in action. “Me, Jaco and Robbo were all keeping an eye on each other, and I was more nervous watching the men’s wheelchair rugby than I was competing,” he says. “But watching them smash it gave me momentum to do it myself.”

The reaction from Britain, meanwhile, made all these travails worthwhile. “It’s touching how many people were paying attention back home,” says Micky. “I was lifting at 3am, but when I put my phone back on and checked my messages and social media, I realised how many people were invested in me.”

And while Micky hasn’t committed to Paris, he’s certainly not finished yet. “My concentration is on the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham next year,” he says. “I’ve come fourth at the last two Commonwealths and I’d really like to medal. Then I can say I’ve got a medal from the Europeans, Paralympics, British and Commonwealth Games. Hopefully, the support should be massive.”

“I FELT LIKE A FLY ON THE WALL IN MY OWN LIFE”

EARLIER THIS YEAR JON NOBLE BECAME ONLY THE SECOND PERSON IN THE UK TO BE FITTED FOR A JACO ASSISTIVE ROBOTIC ARM. WHAT HAPPENED NEXT WAS NOTHING SHORT OF LIFE CHANGING...

Since former Paratrooper Jon Noble was paralysed in a road traffic accident in 2003 the sole control he has had over his daily life has been through a chin-operated joystick on his electric wheelchair. For the last 17 years, he has been unable to complete many tasks that most people take for granted; relying on others to help him eat or even scratch an itch on his head.

Jon was left feeling like a “talking mouth with no purpose”, before he became only the second person in the UK to own a JACO assistive robotic arm. The state-of-the-art arm – part-funded by Blesma – is mounted on Jon’s motorised wheelchair and has already given him a new-found independence and lease of life...

Tell us about your military service...

I joined the Parachute Regiment in 2000 and served in 3 Para. I was Champion Recruit in training and wanted to stay in for the full 22 years. I had dreams of being the Regimental Sergeant Major like my dad, uncle, and grandfather were before me – I told the recruiters that

in my first interview. I served almost five years, having completed two tours of Northern Ireland and one in Iraq in 2003 as part of the invasion force. That was a powerful experience and, looking back, I feel as if I needed to go on operations to qualify everything that I had been training for.

How were you injured?

The accident happened on 07 September 2003. I was only 20 years old and had just come back from Iraq. I was based in Pirbright, where I was training to become a sniper, and was the front seat passenger in a road traffic collision. When the vehicle I was travelling in rolled over, the roof crumpled in and broke my neck near the top of my spinal column. I was paralysed from the neck down. Immediately after the accident, I was taken to Frimley Park Hospital while I waited for a bed space to become available at Stoke Mandeville, the national spinal injury centre, in Aylesbury. I was in hospital for the next 18 months and was discharged in April 2005.



Jon with wife Glynnis.
The JACO robotic arm
is attached to the left
side of Jon's wheelchair



“For the best part of two decades, nothing happened in my life without someone else doing it for me,” says Jon

What rehab did you receive?

Initially, my rehab was excellent and very involved, but I felt it started to slow down after about six months. The severity of my paralysis meant that I was unable to carry out most of the activities the physiotherapists were offering. It seemed to me that they concentrated on patients with less extensive injuries – those who had the use of their arms, for example – who could do more physio. I felt that there were more activities for them to get involved in. That was really hard for me to get to grips with – I had been such an active person and very fitness orientated, so to watch other people becoming able to do more was discouraging.

Did that have an impact on your mental health?

There were some dark times in the early days with some really dark thoughts. My dream career was ripped away from me without any warning and I was expected to just turn my entire life around. I was lost up until four years ago. I had no direction. I kept asking myself what purpose I had and what was the point because I felt that I wasn’t contributing anything. I still have to deal with a lot on a daily basis; I worry about pressure sores and have constant catheter issues. I am in pain permanently and have to keep busy because of the fear of mental health issues. Finding new interests is very difficult when all I wanted to be was a soldier.

What has life been like for the past 17 years?

For the best part of two decades, nothing has happened in my life without someone else doing it for me. I had

zero autonomy over my own life; simple things like scratching an itch on my head or choosing when to open and close the blinds were impossible. I’d stare at things hoping I could move them telepathically, and due to the way I felt about myself, I’ve shied away from socialising with friends; what was I going to do when we went to the pub when I couldn’t even hold my own drink or order a round? I felt like a fly on the wall in my own life. When I was first injured, all I would think to myself at night was: ‘Can I just have one arm, just one arm back, please?’ I even tweeted Elon Musk [*the founder of aerospace manufacturer SpaceX*] to ask him to develop something. Now, some 17 years later, the JACO assistive robotic arm has answered my prayers.

When did you first hear about the JACO assistive robotic arm?

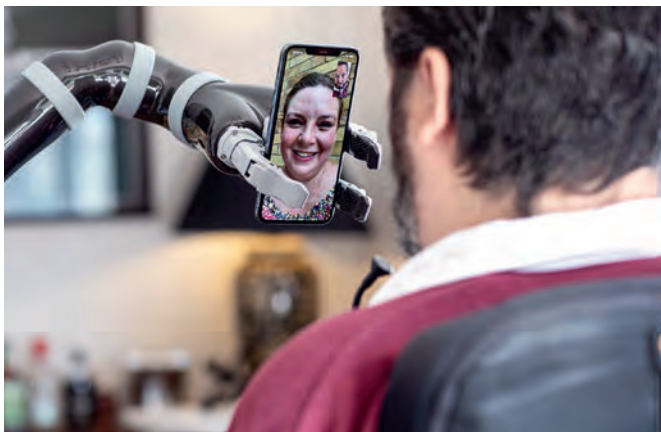
It was actually my wife, Glynnis, who discovered it on Christmas day in 2020. A random video came onto her YouTube feed, and she watched a young American woman cook for herself and get letters out of her mailbox using the arm. It was incredible! Glynnis’ mind was blown, so she quickly searched for more videos – and then showed me.

What did you do next?

We had to wait until after the Christmas period to contact somebody about the possibility of having a trial, and we made contact with Rahana Life, who are the distributors in the UK, at the first opportunity.



The JACO arm can perform 16 smooth movements by mimicking the shoulder, elbow, wrist and hand



HOW DOES THE JACO ARM WORK?

The JACO assistive robotic arm functions much as a human arm does and is entirely controlled by the user.

The arm is easily fitted to the side of an electric wheelchair, and the six inter-linked segments of the arm are controlled using the existing wheelchair control, which is either a joystick, head control, head array or 'sip and puff' system.

The arm can extend to 90cm, giving the user a similar reach to that of an able-bodied person, while its carbon fibre construction means it is light (5kg), durable and weather resistant.

The arm can perform 16 movements which are achieved by the six-axis feature that mimics the shoulder, elbow, wrist and hand. It allows the user to carry out daily tasks such as eating, drinking, holding objects, opening doors and writing. The hand can grasp or release objects using two or three fingers and is powered by the electric wheelchair, with power typically lasting all day.

For more on the JACO arm visit www.rahamanlife.co.uk/jaco-robotic-arm

“I had an attitude change towards my life – I could see opportunities opening up for me,” says Jon about the JACO arm





They were swift and keen to let me trial the arm, which we organised for 11 January 2021. At the same time, we got in touch with Support Our Paras to ask for help with funding. The charity assigned me to a case officer, and he very quickly coordinated a Trustees' meeting to discuss a plan, which again was given the green light very quickly. Contacting Blesma was the next port of call and, through Blesma, other military charities were brought in to assist.

How was your experience when you trialled the JACO arm?

When I was able to control it for the first time I didn't want to take it off! I was fascinated with it; the way it moves is just so intuitive – it's like it was always supposed to be there. I was blown away when I used it – just speechless. Straight away I was opening doors, picking up my phone (and dropping it a few times, of course). I quickly got better with practice. It's a fantastic piece of equipment that's been around for a while, so more people need to know about it. I had a massive attitude change towards my life – I could start to see opportunities opening up for me.

What sort of things were you able to do when you trialled the arm?

I experimented with using it to eat, and I was able to feed myself a piece of apple. That was the first time in 17 years – more than 6,000 days – that I was able to eat something by myself. The next thing I did was pick up the TV remote. I was also able to open doors, which

is huge for me for safety reasons. Glynnis sometimes has to leave me at home and worries in case of things like a fire. Our neighbours would come running, but it still plays on her mind...

How is the JACO arm improving your quality of life and independence now?

I received my arm on 17 June 2021 – I like to call it my Freedom Day. I absolutely love my arm. It has already enabled me to be independent when it comes to eating and drinking, and I am able to do things like go into the garden whenever I want without having to wait for someone to be available. And it's going to give me back interaction with my friends. It's all about control: I have control of my own life again after I lost all that 17 years ago.

What have you achieved with the arm so far and what are you hoping to achieve?

It sounds like a small thing but being able to pass my dad a beer was a huge thing for me. The first time I did that was pretty emotional. I'm currently doing a module at the Open University on STEM subjects, so it will enable me to do the practical experiments I'll be expected to do to pass the course. I can also potter around the kitchen now – Glynnis can put a spoon in my hand and I can finally help out. I can get a bottle of wine out for dinner instead of just staring at it, hoping it will move by itself. I can reengage in life again. I'm quite inventive, so my only limitation now is my imagination!



WORKING HARD BEHIND THE SCENES

BSO Pat Donnachie played a key role in making sure Jon got the JACO arm...

When did Blesma get involved with Jon about the arm?

We were contacted by SSAFA and Support Our Paras in January to see if we could offer any specialist guidance to help move the casework forward.

How was Blesma able to help?

First, we contacted the NHS and local authority but neither would fund the arm as they classed it as a social rather than a medical issue. We engaged with other charities to show them the benefits of the arm, but we had to manage that process as we didn't want lots of people going to assess Jon.

How long was the process?

The first contact was made in January, and all the grants were submitted by April. Collaboration was key. We raised more than £40,000 in two months, but that was only achievable because all the charities worked together for Jon.

SURF



'SUP!

FANCY GOING FROM NOVICE TO GNARLY WITH A WEEK OF SURFING AND YOGA IN CORNWALL? IT'S TIME TO ZIP UP YOUR WETSUIT, GRAB A BOARD AND PADDLE OUT INTO THE WAVES



Sun, sea, sand and surfing in Cornwall. What more could you possibly want?





Husband and wife team Stu and Lizzie Croxford complement each other perfectly in their working relationship. “A lot of what Stuart does is adrenaline-driven,” says Lizzie, “and I offer the other side – calming people down afterwards!”

The pair (right), who run the Blesma Surf and Wellbeing course close to their home in Bude, Cornwall, seem to have found a winning formula. Their day-to-day business, ThreeZero12, offers a number of different activities: Blesma Member and single-leg amputee Stu coaches stand-up paddleboarding, cycling, surfing and physical conditioning, while Lizzie has qualifications in yoga, pilates, sports massage and physiotherapy.

For the Blesma course, they’ve combined two of their favourite activities. Stu loves to catch a wave on the stunning Cornish coast and wants to share his passion with other amputees. Lizzie, meanwhile, has discovered that yoga can make a massive difference to the lives of Blesma Members, for whom mobility, flexibility and balance can all be challenging.



Stu and Lizzie Croxford ran the recent Surf and Wellbeing course in Bude, Cornwall

The week-long course eases Members into both, and you don’t need previous experience (although you do need to be able to swim). It follows a simple formula: each morning Members have a yoga class with Lizzie, easing some of the aches and pains, before taking part in two surf sessions with dedicated instructors. This is all broken up by great spreads of food in a beach hut and endless cups of tea and coffee. In the evening, there’s a group meal – then it’s off to bed, exhausted and exhilarated, before it’s time to get up and do it all over again.

Stu used surfing as part of his rehab. He joined the Army in 2007 and was a Captain in the Duke of Lancaster’s Regiment when he was injured in Afghanistan in 2012: an IED blew up his Jackal vehicle, shattering his heels. He had reconstruction, but developed Compartment Syndrome after a sailing accident. Numerous operations followed to try to save his right leg, but it was amputated below the knee in 2014.

Stu later got involved in Thundercat powerboat racing, and it was while working at the Endeavour Fund that he decided to give surfing a go. The fact that this coincided with a family move to Cornwall, the focus of the UK surf scene, also helped move things along.

FORGET THE CRAZY STUFF

“I was already paddleboarding, and so understood how to balance. Then I met a bunch of veterans surfing in Bude and started to go more regularly,” Stu explains. “I just love being on the water. You don’t have to think about whatever crazy stuff is going on in your life – when you get on the water, it’s all gone. It’s real therapy.



GRANT JENKINS

Grant, 53, from Cardiff, served with the Royal Artillery. His right leg was amputated below the knee after a road traffic accident

What were your thoughts about surfing before this course?

I must admit, I was sceptical – I’m a one-legged 53 year old – but I absolutely loved it! The instructors were so supportive, such nice people. It took me a few days, but I managed to stand on the board on the last day. That was a fantastic moment.

So a convert to the sport?

Absolutely! I’m actually driving from Cardiff to Bude this weekend just to have another go, because I want to keep it up. I called up my tutor, Paddy, and he can’t do enough for me. He just loves helping people surf. It’s the whole ‘surf dude’ mentality, which I’ve not experienced before, but it’s really nice!

You were even getting some cheers from spectators on the beach...

Yes, a lot of civilians were giving us a lot of appreciation when we caught the waves. At one point, a group of local surfers even came over to surf with us because they were loving the atmosphere. That made it really special, too.

SURF AND WELLBEING

“I can catch a few waves, but I’m definitely not a good surfer,” Stu says. “But I like the fact that I still have so much to learn with surfing. There is no particular standard required; anyone can have a go at any level. It’s not an elitist sport, and half of the fun is just paddling out, floating around and having a chat with the guys. So we knew it would be good as a course for Members. I’ve seen weeks like this being run out in the US, and when Lizzie and I moved to Cornwall we realised that there would be potential for something here, too.”

For those not in the know, it’s surprising how good the quality of the waves can be in Cornwall. “With the pandemic, people haven’t been travelling abroad much,” says Stu, “so everyone has started to discover what Britain has to offer, including surfing.



“I managed to stand on the board – that was a fantastic moment,” says Grant Jenkins

We’ve got some really amazing waves in places like Cornwall and Wales, and people don’t often realise it’s on their doorstep.”

The six Members on the course arrive with a variety of injuries, fitness levels and expectations, but Stu has the same plan

for all of them. “I think a lot of people look at surfing and think they’ll never be able to do it, or our amputees think they won’t be able to stand up on the board,” he says. “But we don’t worry about any of that, and set out to take people to whatever level they can reach. It may be standing up and catching a wave or it may be bodyboarding – there are lots of ways around it.”

LEARNING AT YOUR OWN SPEED

“We make sure that everyone on the course has their own instructor, who is in the water with them at all times. It helps with safety, and means the Members can learn at their own speed,” Stu continues. “And focusing on a small group of six Members allows everyone to bond together more quickly. We get to know each other well in no time, so the social side of the course is really nice. I think with that in place, everyone realises that there is a group of people behind them, supporting them to achieve their goals. That makes what we are asking people to do more achievable, and it also helps us to push everyone along a little bit!”

“EVERYONE REALISES THAT THERE IS A GROUP OF PEOPLE BEHIND THEM, SUPPORTING THEM TO ACHIEVE THEIR GOALS”



CAROLE KING

Carole, 57, from Exmouth, served in the Women's Royal Army Corps. She was injured in a trampolining accident and eventually had her left leg amputated

How did you find the course?

Just unbelievable. I've been lucky enough to do a lot of things with Blesma over the years, and this one might top the lot. I've been boring my friends silly and posting non-stop on Facebook about it. It was lovely to be out of the house again after Covid and to see other people.

What impressed you the most?

It was just the whole experience. We did yoga in the morning and would then get on the boards, and we were looked after so well. The instructors were excellent and we all felt very safe. It was so much fun all the way through, and because the instructors were all veterans, there was some great military humour, too.

So will you return to the waves?

Definitely! I needed a rest after the course – I slept from 10pm until 5pm the next day when I got back. But I've already arranged to go surfing again in a couple of weeks. My daughter paddleboards, so we will go down together soon. It is addictive.



“Some people do things very quickly and others take more time. That doesn’t matter as long as everyone is enjoying themselves. And everybody here has had a big, beaming smile on their face all week.”

YOU CAN’T PUT A PRICE ON IT

There’s something all-consuming about the enjoyment of catching the surf and being propelled along at speed, and the Cornish air is full of laughter throughout the sessions. The instructors soon have several Members up and away, with Stu keeping a keen eye on everyone involved. Even the locals seem impressed, with cheers coming from the beach whenever a Member catches a good wave.

The group are also inspired by Martin Pollock, a former soldier who lost three



Personal instructors allow everyone on the course to go at their own pace

limbs to an IED in Afghanistan and has since become a gifted surfer. “He’s a real mentor – for me and for the others here this week,” says Stu. “Having him here, and seeing him surfing some big waves, is so motivating. He’s an incredible person.”

Member Grant Jenkins agrees: “Martin is so impressive, from the way he gets into his buggy and then out onto the waves, and then the way he surfs... he is mesmerising. He shows that anyone can do it, and we have all followed his lead.”

Stu takes GoPro footage of the Members as they cut through the swells, and once everyone is weary and the day is done, it’s time to relax for the evening. As the sun sets slowly over the beach, things couldn’t be much better. In the morning, they’ll be up again, enjoying some relaxing yoga with Lizzie [read more on that, right], before heading back to the ocean. It’s supremely balanced yin and yang.

Member Mitchell Singleton perhaps sums it up best: “Everything about the course has been fabulous, from the way they have looked after us at the club to the lady making the cakes and sandwiches,” he says. “To be honest, the entire week was perfect. I couldn’t put a price on it.”

“SOME PEOPLE DO THINGS QUICKLY AND OTHERS TAKE MORE TIME. THAT DOESN’T MATTER AS LONG AS EVERYONE ENJOYS THEMSELVES”

Find out more about the activities on offer in 2022 on the Blesma Connects app and at www.blesma.org

MITCHELL SINGLETON

Mitchell, 57, from North Wales, served in the Royal Marines. He sustained an injury as a police officer that was made worse by surgeries and a cycling injury, resulting in amputation

How did you find the surfing?

I loved it! I’m a real Sport Billy and always have been – what I take up, I can usually do quite well. I told myself not to have any expectations going into this, and my instructor worked out a plan for me. He said: ‘If we achieve this by the end of the week, I’ll be happy.’ Three hours into the first day, he said: ‘I’m going to have to draw up a new plan tonight, because you’ve done it all already!’

So you’re going to keep going with it, then?

For sure. I’d go back on this course like a shot! I’ve already joined the local club in Bude as well as the North Wales Veterans Surfing Club, which I knew nothing about before this course. My instructor, Johnny, also wants me to come down regularly because they want to put me forward for the disabled championships next year. That’s how well it went!



A CHANCE TO RESET BOTH THE BODY AND THE MIND



LIZZIE CROXFORD has been helping Blesma Members during lockdown, delivering yoga and pilates courses via Zoom. Now she's got the ideal set-up to deliver flow exercises, breath

work and meditation sessions in her own backyard. Members joined Lizzie for a yoga session every morning before heading to the beach – and all agreed it set them up for the day, assisting their aching muscles and resetting them mentally for the efforts ahead.

“One of the guys said that without the yoga sessions, he wouldn't have got through the week, and that's lovely to hear,” says Lizzie. She initially trained as a physio, but learned a huge amount from watching Stu rehabilitate, eventually qualifying in yoga and pilates.

“I originally worked for a big corporate medical firm, but after what Stu – and I – went through, both physically and mentally, with Stu's injury, I knew I wanted to work in this field. During Stu's rehab we learned better ways to look after our body and mind, so it is great to be able to pass that on.

“Yoga and pilates helped me so much, so we knew Members could benefit from them. This is a very gentle introduction to yoga for a group of people who have never done it before.”

As with the surfing, Lizzie tailored her exercises to the Members' individual needs. “I look at the bigger picture and try to see what people are getting out of the sessions. Hopefully, by personalising things, it can be more rewarding,” she says. “We keep it quite simple by identifying some basic breath work and movements, plus some strength work and balance. That can be powerful, and we think it worked well.”

Tellingly, the Members vow that they're going to keep up the exercises – as well as the surfing. “It's that first step, letting people tap into something, and we've had some excellent feedback,” says Lizzie. “Hopefully, we have helped to demystify what yoga is all about. We are very excited with the results, and we hope we can run a lot more courses in the future.”



“This is a gentle introduction to yoga for people who haven't done it before,” says Lizzie



THE PATIENT'S STORY

When Lexi met Tania

LEXI CHAMBERS HAD EIGHT UNSUCCESSFUL OPERATIONS IN EIGHT YEARS TO TRY TO CALM THE CHAOS OF COMPLEX REGIONAL PAIN SYNDROME. THEN SHE MET LIEUTENANT COLONEL TANIA CUBISON...

Pain has been a gnawing, debilitating and constant companion for Lexi Chambers for the best part of 20 years. The former Royal Signals soldier, marathon runner and award-winning fitness instructor, has endured eight surgical operations over eight years, starting with the removal of a toe and culminating several years ago with the elective amputation of her left leg.

Along the way, her diary has been crammed with medical appointments, procedures, reviews and an

ever-increasing cocktail of painkillers, antibiotics and opiates to quell the excruciating pain that was initially caused by hammer toes and which eventually led to Complex Regional Pain Syndrome (CRPS).

But now, thanks to the pioneering surgery of Lieutenant Colonel Tania Cubison of the Royal Army Medical Corps, the pain is in retreat.

"Tania has literally changed my life," says 42-year-old Lexi. "I now have hope and can start planning things again. I've already signed up to do a triathlon and a half marathon using a wheelchair. Before the

Lexi in surgery in June to undergo TMR surgery performed by Tania (third from right)





operation, I could only focus on the daily battle with the pain – my horizons were incredibly narrow. The pain in my stump had been so bad that I needed heat packs on it 24/7, but the pain is subsiding and today I only need them now and again. I have my life back thanks to Tania and Blesma.”

GROUNDBREAKING SURGERY

Lexi, from Exeter, is one of around 60 people in the UK who have had Targeted Muscle Reinnervation (TMR) surgery, a procedure that attaches nerve

endings, known as neuromas, to other nerves to minimise the pain they cause in amputated limbs.

“I’d had so many consultations and no-one could really get to the bottom of the CRPS. You start to doubt yourself and wonder if it is actually all in your head. To have someone say: ‘I believe you’ and that they could do something about it was incredible,” says Lexi. “When it was at its worst, I was in constant pain and wouldn’t go out for months at a time. I would get depressed, which is completely unlike me, but the surgery has reduced the pain and given my life more

THE PATIENT'S STORY

meaning. I now have the chance to wear a prosthesis, even if it is just for an hour a day.”

CRPS, by its nature, is difficult to define. Medical science is still studying what factors are at play in the body and brain that trigger the high levels of pain that can be a feature of amputation. Lexi was born with hammer toes; a muscle and ligament deformity that causes the toes to contract, but they initially had little impact on her life. She forged a career in fitness; becoming a UK Fitness Instructor of the Year runner-up, entering natural body building competitions, and joining the Royal Signals at the age of 22. She left the Army as the pain started to impact her life and retrained as a nurse but had to reduce her hours as CRPS took hold.

“I loved being in the Army, but I was noticing the first signs of pain whenever I ran or after playing football,” says Lexi. “I had orthotics put into my shoes and got permission to wear my own trainers, but it was the start of a nightmare for me.

“When I became an orthopaedic nurse and saw patients with hammer toes I had the surgeon look at mine and he agreed they needed to be operated on.”

That was the first of eight surgeries that graduated from tendon release to toe and joint removal. But any relief proved to be merely temporary.

“They broke bones then reset them, cut and lengthened tendons, and performed joint release surgery to get more movement in them,” Lexi adds. “My surgeon predicted that I would be able to run after six to 12 weeks but at the end of that time I was still on crutches, and after six months I was still off work and couldn’t walk.

“I slowly went back to work but had to reduce my hours and couldn’t do anything physical, so it was a miserable time. And it affected my relationship; my wife, Shannon, and I would always cycle and run together but now we couldn’t do that, and she had to see me in constant pain but was unable to help.”

PLANNING WHAT HAD BEEN IMPOSSIBLE

CRPS, which causes severe, debilitating pain ranging from burning to stabbing sensations, is poorly understood but is thought to be the result of the body reacting abnormally to an injury and disrupting its pain pathways. A study suggests one in 3,800 people develop the condition every year. The main treatments are self-management, pain relief, psychological support and physical rehabilitation.

“I HAD THE FEELING THAT MY LIFE HAD ALMOST GONE, BUT SUDDENLY HAVING THE POSSIBILITY OF DOING THE THINGS I LOVE AGAIN IS AMAZING”

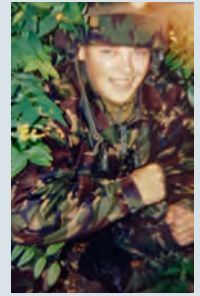


“It has given me a huge psychological lift and I’m planning things I didn’t think would be possible,” says Lexi of her TMR surgery

“I’d pray that I would wake up the next day and that things would be okay, but the pain was unbearable,” adds Lexi. “I never give up easily on anything so it was very frustrating. The pain continued so I had an elective amputation two years ago but then had to cope with Phantom Limb Pain as well as CRPS. I wrote a blog – www.wheelybigchallenge.com – and a reader suggested getting in touch with Tania. When I did, Tania explained that the nerves in my leg were causing mischief because they had nothing to do. The operation attaches them to a muscle to stop them misfiring and causing problems. She was very realistic about the outcome and explained I might only get a 20 per cent improvement, but that was massive to me.”

Tania performed the four-hour operation at the Queen Victoria Hospital in East Grinstead in June, and Lexi’s condition has been steadily improving since.

“I spent a month in hospital gradually getting the pain under control and being able to reduce my levels of pain relief. I still have CRPS but the pain caused by the neuromas and subsequent nerve pain is reducing,



Lexi during her time in the Army (above) and training to take on challenges for the Association (left)



which lessens the frequency of CRPS pain flare-ups when my pain sporadically escalates to 10 out of 10.

“Before the operation, I thought I would never be able to walk again, but now I’m thinking I could be cast for a new prosthetic. It has given me a huge psychological lift and I’m planning things that I never thought would be possible, such as doing a wheelchair marathon to raise funds for Blesma and travelling to Everest Base Camp.

“Shannon has seen an improvement already. I used to be moody but now I’m cheery again. Blesma and Steve Fraser [*Blesma’s Support Officer in the South West*] have been fantastic throughout. Steve’s been with me for every appointment; guiding and advising me, and helping me with my mobility issues. I had the feeling that my life had almost gone but suddenly having the possibility of doing the things I love again is amazing. I can’t thank Tania or Blesma enough.”

Lexi has written a blog that charts her journey with CRPS. Read it at www.wheelybigchallenge.com

THE SURGEON'S STORY

Tania, the RAMC and TMR

The three letters TMR could spell a world of difference for amputees enduring the corrosive force of Phantom Limb Pain. The acronym stands for Targeted Muscle Reinnervation, an innovative surgery that is being pioneered in the UK by Lieutenant Colonel Tania Cubison of the Royal Army Medical Corps who combines her operational role, which has included three tours in Afghanistan, with her position as deputy medical director at a busy NHS Hospital Trust.

TMR was devised by an Austrian physician and involves complex microsurgery performed under general anaesthetic. Tania, who has served with the Welsh Guards, the Royal Regiment of Wales and the Black Watch during a 35-year military career, is one of the first surgeons to perfect the technique, performing the operation on both military and non-military patients in the UK.

“The results have been encouraging, and although it is not perfect, TMR has the ability to change people’s lives for the better,” says Tania, who is a burns specialist as well as a leading expert in stump revision and reconstruction.

Tania’s career spans from a military-sponsored medical degree and RAMC service at the Cambridge Military Hospital, Aldershot, through postings to Catterick, Germany and Afghanistan. She then began work with NHS services and is now part of the leadership executive at the Queen Victoria Royal Hospital in East Grinstead, Sussex.

Focusing on trauma injuries, Tania trained in plastic surgery and burns, and became part of key teams treating military personnel at Selly Oak and Headley Court, as well as in Camp Bastion.

“By the time I got to the hospital at Camp Bastion in 2010, it was very well equipped and full of experienced and skilled professional teams which enabled us to manage the most difficult injuries,” says Tania. “Everyone knew what they were doing. The teamwork was first rate and often there would be a general, plastic and orthopaedic surgeon working together on one patient, which allowed us to save the lives of very severely injured soldiers. The complexities of injuries continued to rise from



Above: Tania on operations in Camp Bastion
Right: preparing to perform surgery in East Grinstead

huge energy transfer damage from bigger IEDs and the fact that soldiers carried so much kit. The average soldier weighed in at 162kg – that weight detonated IEDs that might not have been intended for Infantry.

“But the transfer of knowledge and professionalism at Bastion was so good that our automatic thought process came to be: ‘Let’s go in there, do our job and get this soldier back to Headley Court. He’ll be alright.’”

GIVING NEUROMAS SOMETHING TO DO

Phantom Limb Pain (PLP) has been a huge concern for countless amputees since WWI and while its causes are still being researched, the root of the pain is believed to come from the nerves that are cut during an amputation trying to reconnect with their lost ends. As they misfire they send conflicting signals to the brain which can be interpreted as a range of pain symptoms.

TMR takes those nerve endings, known as neuromas, and splices them into other nerves to give them something to do, thereby reducing the range of pain sensations that afflict amputees. Some 60 people, including Lexi and a number of other Blesma Members, have had TMR surgery and their outcomes are being monitored as medics build a bank of research to inform future treatments.

“We have to be cautious and we are aware that it is not a quick fix. The nerve gets better straight away when you cut it but then it has to regrow and join into the new muscle, which can give patients a pretty miserable time,” says Tania. “It can take a long time but we have found that it is effective for most people, although for a few it doesn’t work at all. Up until now, there hasn’t been a treatment for PLP so to have a treatment that actually helps is definitely progress.

“Most patients have a significant reduction on their global pain score. Some patients report feeling 75 per cent better all the time, with huge reductions in their PLP, whilst others have two or three great days followed by a rubbish one, and we don’t yet know why that is. One patient is off pain meds and back at work because of the TMR surgery but gets awful pain three times a day for five minutes that she can almost set the clock to.

“We still need to research and understand more but, generally, we are increasingly able to take patients from levels of unmanageable pain and an unworkable quality of life to manageable pain and a place where they can get on with life even though they may still have bad days.”

“THE RESULTS HAVE BEEN ENCOURAGING, AND ALTHOUGH IT IS NOT PERFECT, TMR HAS THE ABILITY TO CHANGE PEOPLE’S LIVES FOR THE BETTER”



How to... Improve your Instagram feed

WORRIED THAT YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA IS ONLY SOCIAL MEDIOCRE? FOLLOW THESE SIMPLE STEPS AND WATCH YOUR INSTAGRAM ENGAGEMENT TAKE OFF

Launched in 2010 as a simple photo and video sharing service, the growth of Instagram has been little short of staggering. It was bought by Facebook for \$1bn in 2012, and had clocked up an incredible one billion users by 2021. Today, a third of all internet users are believed to have an account. Plenty of Blesma Members are active on Instagram promoting their endeavours and fundraising exploits (as well as showing off what they had for dinner on Friday night!) but what can you do to make your pictures jump out amongst all that content? Whether you're using Instagram for fun or something serious – or even if you have been thinking about posting pictures but are unsure where to start – there are some simple tips, tricks and techniques you can use to improve your feed and grow your audience.

1 WHY BE ON INSTAGRAM AND HOW MANY ACCOUNTS DO YOU NEED?

There are no right or wrong reasons to be on Instagram. It can be used as a simple form of record: a chronicle of what you've been up to for your own personal enjoyment, much in the same way as an old photo album. At the other end of the scale, Instagram can be a career in itself and a vital selling tool for people and businesses. The key thing is to know where you are on this scale – and not to mix the two up.

SORT YOUR HASHTAGS OUT!

#blesma #sport #2020
#TokyoParalympics
#Tokyo2020 #military
#veterans #cycling
#injured #amputee

If you're pushing fundraising or selling something hard, it might make sense to keep personal shots to another account.

2 CHOOSE A STYLE

Curate your grid. If you want to establish an aesthetically pleasing feed that creates a certain 'vibe' among your followers, it's worth considering an overall style before you start. To do this, visualise a bigger picture (your full grid on page) rather than just putting up any random image you like the look of. If you want yourself, your business or your fundraising activities to truly resemble

a brand, think about the values you want that brand to project – and choose shots accordingly. Whether it's wild activity photos or product placement, staying consistent will help your audience understand what you're all about.

3 TAKE LOTS, BUT USE LITTLE

Today's smartphones have extremely impressive cameras with remarkable capacities and capabilities. Photographers of previous eras didn't have this luxury, so take advantage: there's no harm in taking too many photos from numerous different angles if you like the look of something,



Choose your pictures carefully – great images make a big difference



Instagram is a great way to promote yourself, your passion or your fundraising exploits – especially as the Association has a ready-made audience to tap into

because you never know which one might turn out best. But once you've done that, make sure you edit ruthlessly. Your followers don't want their feeds flooded with lots of photos of the same kind of thing – so pick the best shot or two and delete the rest afterwards.

4 LEARN TO EDIT

If you want your feed to look professional, editing pictures is essential. Luckily, the process is now almost as simple as actually taking the photographs: smartphone cameras will allow you to crop pictures easily to remove unwanted backgrounds and focus more on the subject. After that, try playing around with things like light and colour settings, and using the wide variety of different filters that smartphone cameras and Instagram itself offer. If you really start to get into it, there are numerous more sophisticated editing apps, such as Hipstamatic, which can turn your shots into something really arty.

5 AFTER POSTING... ENGAGE

If you are really keen to grow a following, engagement is key. That means replying to people's comments on your pictures, and posting comments on other people's, too. Due to Instagram's algorithm, increased engagement means your photos will get seen more often, and if you do it consistently, other users will start to feel like a part of your online community. If you want to dig deeper into hitting big numbers, it's also worth researching the timing of your posts – some days and hours reap more hits than others.

6 USE #HASHTAGS

The correct use of hashtags can supercharge your feed. Hashtags are used as a search term by people who are interested in seeing content about a specific topic – so try to cover off as many different angles as possible. For example, a @blesma photo of a member who is a Paralympic cyclist might have included hashtags like #sport #Tokyo2020 #TokyoParalympics

#military #veterans and #cycling. Suddenly, you're opening up a huge potential audience. Discover which hashtags produce the best results by searching through them yourself, and whether it's #baking, #sailing or any other subject, don't forget to tag it!

7 BE YOURSELF

As much as there are general rules that produce results, remember the most interesting about you is... you. Every Blesma Member has a story to tell, and Instagram can be an extremely powerful medium through which to tell it. Most of all, Instagram should enhance and improve your experience of being online. Try to only follow other feeds that either inform you of something or bring you joy, and approach your own feed in the same way. Genuine enthusiasm can shine through above technical photographic brilliance.

Follow @Blesma on Instagram where you can also find other Members' feeds





GETTING HIS LIFE BACK ON TRACK

MURRAY HAMBRO HAS BEEN THROUGH A HUGE AMOUNT; FROM SERIOUS INJURY TO SEVERE ANXIETY TO TRAGIC BEREAVEMENT. HE'S COME THROUGH IT THANKS, IN PART, TO BLESMA AND HIS LOVE OF MOTORBIKES

Murray photographed at his home with the Ducati Panigale 959 he races in the Ducati Performance TriOptions Cup



The Royal Tank Regiment, and the wider British Army, was Murray Hambro's passion for the 12 years he served in it, but his military life – and much else beyond – was shattered in Afghanistan in 2010 when the Warthog armoured vehicle he was travelling in drove over an IED. As a result of the injuries he sustained in the blast, Murray ended up having both his legs amputated below the knee.

In the years that followed worse was to come as he struggled mentally with the aftermath of injury and his discharge from the military, and then lost his young son to a sudden illness. These tragedies would be enough to break most people, but through a combination of hard work, smart decisions, counselling, and some help from Blesma, Murray is now leading a fulfilling and active life once again. He races motorbikes, runs his own gym, and

competes successfully in international Crossfit competitions. "I've realised that I have to keep busy," he says. "If I sit and think, I can focus on the negative side of life too much, and could get into a mindset I wouldn't be able to break free from. I find my Crossfit gym such a brilliant coping mechanism for everything. For an hour or two, I can't think about what's going on in the outside world. I always say to my gym members: 'Whatever you've got going on stays outside.' I live by that."

For several hours, Murray let us inside to talk about getting blown up, getting back on a bike and getting involved with Blesma...

What got you into the military?

I grew up on a council estate in East Sussex. I was a bit of a toe-rag and got tangled up with the wrong people. I had a life-changing moment when a gun was put to my head – that's when I knew

I needed to get away. I joined the Royal Tank Regiment in 2002 and loved it immediately. I'd only been out of the country once before I joined the Army so the travel was great. I was posted to Germany and Cyprus, where the camaraderie was brilliant, and in 2007 I did my first tour of Afghanistan. I was in Sangin, engaging with the Taliban – it felt exactly like what the Army was all about.

How did you get injured?

It was in 2010, on my second tour of Afghanistan. We were using Warthog armoured vehicles to support 2 Para in Helmand. I was the commander of my vehicle, sitting in the turret at the top as we were transporting stores along the Helmand River. One day, we were heading back from our last run, sticking to track discipline. We'd been over this particular field before because I had seen a farmer ploughing it and I remember thinking: 'If he's happy enough to plough the field, I'm happy enough to drive across it.'

But it contained an IED...

Yes. To be honest, we must have already driven over it several times – it could have been there for weeks or years – but at some

“MY SURGEON SAID I SHOULD FIND A DIFFERENT HOBBY. I IGNORED THAT ADVICE BUT I DID HAVE TO WORK OUT HOW TO RIDE WITHOUT FEET!”



point the Taliban had pulled alongside it and connected it to a battery pack. We were heading back to base when there was a big boom. The vehicle was thrown 10 feet in the air. I went on going another 40 feet, then fell back down to Earth.

Do you remember the aftermath?

The other two guys in the vehicle weren't hurt too badly. I remember being on the ground and my friend approaching with a metal detector and telling me: 'You've been blown up mate, it was a bloody big one.' It was very surreal. The medic gave me morphine, after which my memory gets blurry. I was under a blanket at one point, looking for a cigarette in my pocket, not knowing I didn't have clothes on any more.

But your injuries were very serious...

My shins had been shattered, so when they lifted me onto the stretcher my feet flopped down. That was the wake-up call that brought the pain. I'd fractured my back in six places, broken my pelvis, ripped my liver and spleen... I was flown to the UK, and the doctors told me I had severe fractures in both feet. When I heard that, I thought: 'OK, six weeks on crutches, then I'll be fine.' But the language they use is misleading. My feet had disintegrated.

What happened next?

The surgeons told me that my right foot had to be amputated but that they could try to repair and rebuild my left one. They also said it might take years, I might be in a lot of pain, and even then it might need amputating. The surgeon said I'd recover faster, and life would be better, if both feet came off.

How did you feel about that?

Initially, I didn't give myself a chance to think about things. I was bedbound and had to wear a massive chest and neck

“40MPH ON THE ROAD OR 200MPH ON THE TRACK? IT WAS A NO-BRAINER AND, WITH HELP FROM BLESMA, I'VE BEEN RACING EVER SINCE”

“THERE'S ONLY TIME FOR RACE CRAFT AND ADRENALINE”

Soon after his injury Murray decided to buy a motorbike, and soon after that he decided to take it racing. But racing motorbikes as an amputee brings a whole host of challenges – not least how to control one at 200mph without feet...

How did you get into biking?

I've always loved two wheels; I was riding a motorbike around fields at the age of eight and got my bike licence before my car licence. I eventually bought a Ducati, which I loved riding on the autobahns when I was stationed in Germany.

Post accident, did you think you'd ever ride again?

No – my surgeon told me to get a new hobby, but I didn't fancy that so I bought a Triumph Daytona 675R and found a button shifter called a Kliktronic that other disabled riders use. It's a push and pull system that you mount on the handlebars to change gear. Normally, you change gear with your left foot and use the back brake with your right. Now I just shift gears with the Kliktronic, and I only use the front brake.

How did you get into racing?

In 2012, a Navy guy approached me at a hospitality day at a British Superbike race. Now, I race in the Ducati TriOptions Cup, which is a support class for British Superbikes. Sometimes 120,000 people come to watch the racing over the course of a weekend. In my series, everyone's on the same bike so it's all about rider skill. We usually have eight race weekends a year, running from Easter to October.

What is the racing scene like?

Great. Everyone is friendly and happy to help each other out – there aren't any big egos. Everyone has been very positive towards me, from the riders to the race directors who have allowed me to race as a disabled person. My results haven't been too bad considering most of these guys have been racing all their lives and I don't get much track time. I'm doing it on a shoestring, but I have the mentality to never give up. Because of my injuries I do have to muscle the bike around a little bit more. Most riders push their weight down through the footpegs to help them to steer, but I have to use my arms more.



What do you enjoy about being in a race?

The fact that you're totally in the moment. You forget about all the other stuff that is going on around you. When you're riding all you're thinking is: 'Third gear, fourth gear, fifth gear, pull over, ride the line, braking marker, brake, turn, apex, stand the bike up, get on the gas...' There's only time for race craft and adrenaline!

Does the danger worry you?

I've had a few crashes, including one into a tyre wall at 80mph, but you just shake it off.

What are your ambitions in the sport?

Racing is a very expensive pastime, so right now I'm just focused on being able to race again next year. I'd like to have more of a support crew trackside and to get some Blesma Members involved. Oh, and I'd like to get faster, too!

What has been your best biking moment?

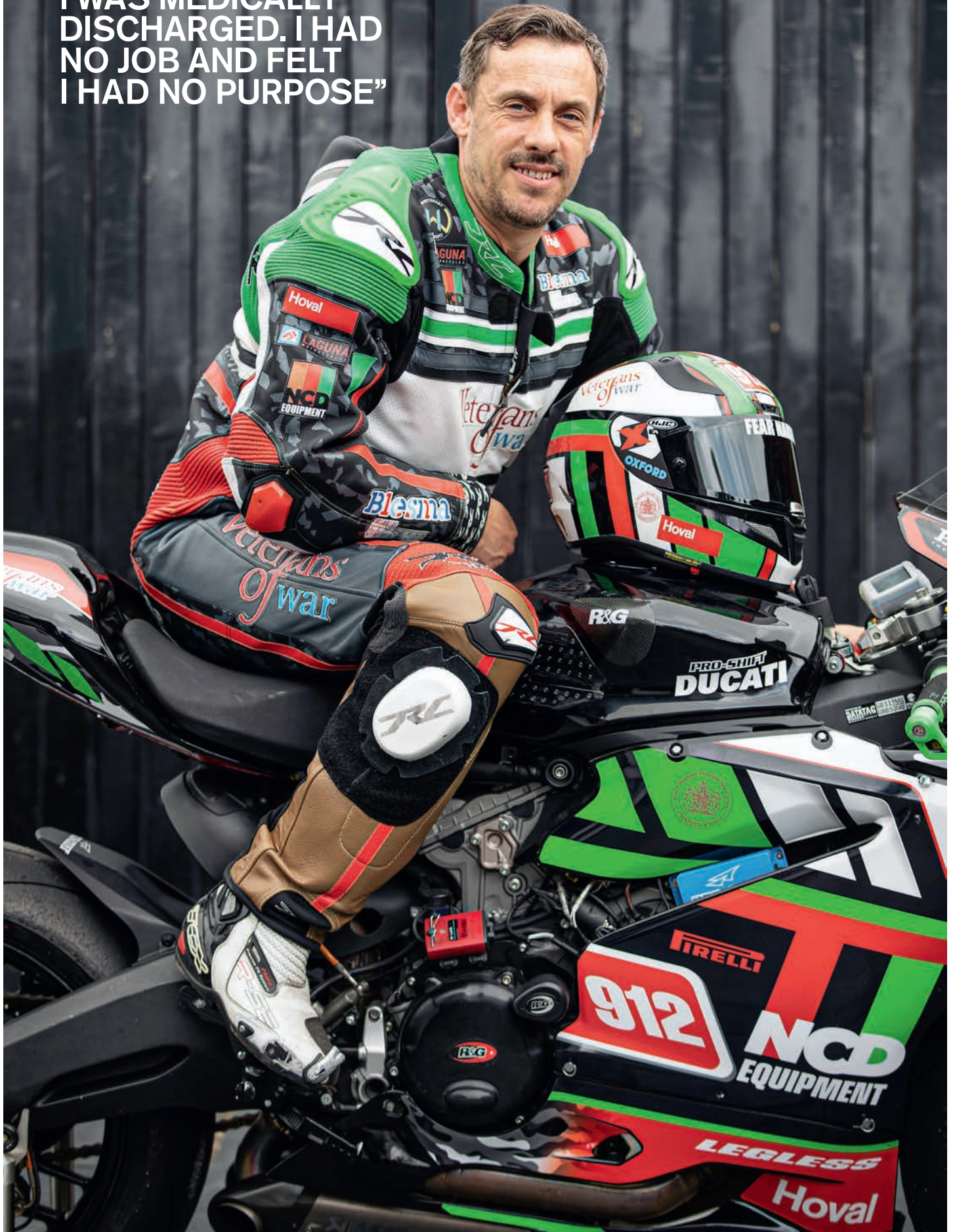
I won a Soldiering On award, and four-time World Superbike champion Carl Fogarty delivered a video message. And now I'm racing at the same race weekends as TT legend John McGuinness – little things like that are amazing.



“Most riders push their weight down through the footpegs to help them steer. I have to use my arms more,” says Murray



“I'D WANTED TO STAY
IN THE ARMY, BUT
I WAS MEDICALLY
DISCHARGED. I HAD
NO JOB AND FELT
I HAD NO PURPOSE”



brace. I remember being taken out for a Christmas meal by the hospital staff, and never having felt so many eyes on me – I was sitting in this huge wheelchair with braces and leg boards. I didn't like it much, but knew I'd have to get used to people seeing me as a double amputee.

How was Headley Court?

I went in 2011 and it was an eye-opener. I thought I was going to be the most injured person there, but then I met triple amputees and guys who had lost both their legs above the knee. I also met double below-knee amputees who were very mobile, so they became my glimmer of hope. I was engaged to my fiancée and wanted to be able to walk down the aisle, so I was determined to walk again as quickly as I could, and was able to do that within three months of the injury.

But you were deteriorating mentally...

At home I was struggling. I'd wanted to stay in the Army, but I was being medically discharged. I had no job and felt I had no purpose – I didn't know what to do. I also started suffering from anxiety and was waking in the night with cold sweats and heart palpitations. I'd be sitting around

over-thinking and over-analysing things while my fiancée was out at work. It was a difficult time with some very low moments.

And then your son became ill...

We had two sons, and our youngest got Leigh's Disease, a condition with no cure. From the age of 18 months he went from being a happy, healthy boy to needing to be fed through a tube. His health deteriorated and he eventually passed away.

Was it during this terrible period that Blesma started to help you?

Yes. I needed to focus on my son but we had other problems, too. Our house had been renovated very badly, so I reached out to Blesma to see if they could help sort that out so I could focus on my son. Later on, my marriage came under pressure – my wife felt that I hadn't mourned our son properly – and Blesma helped me with some counselling sessions, so I've got nothing but love for the charity.

And Blesma has supported you in your new endeavours?

Yes. After the anxiety, I realised I needed to stay occupied, so I bought a motorbike. My surgeon told me I should probably find

a different hobby, but I ignored that advice! I've always loved bikes but I had to work out how to ride without my feet! I was invited to a British Superbikes event where I met a Navy guy who asked me if I wanted to start racing. Would I rather do 40mph on the road or 200mph on the track? It was a no-brainer and, with help from Blesma, I've been racing ever since. [See the panel on p58.]

You also set up your own racing team?

When my insurance policies paid out I had enough money to start an injured servicemen's race team, which I called True Heroes Racing. So when I wasn't at Headley, I was learning how to race and fix motorbikes. It's been great.

And you opened a Crossfit gym just before lockdown, too...

In 2017, I qualified as a personal trainer, and I really started to get into Crossfit. I didn't like working for the big gyms so I became self-employed, and Blesma helped me buy enough equipment to start my own business. I've since got into competing, and Blesma helped me with flights to compete in America. Last year, I managed to win a competition in Miami, which was brilliant.





Chairman General Sir
Adrian Bradshaw presents
Jean with her award at
Members' Weekend

JEAN McCREADY

Jean began fundraising for Blesma with her late husband, Jack. She has been awarded the Cyril Stephens Award, which recognises the work of Blesma supporters

I have lived in Portadown, Northern Ireland for more than 50 years. I finished technical college before working for a local estate agent. In 1985, my 27-year-old sister was serving in what was then the Royal Ulster Constabulary when the police station she was posted to was bombed. She was killed along with eight of her colleagues.

I met my husband, Jack, at a Royal British Legion dance. His friend asked if I would dance with Jack, but the whole time the band sang, Jack would sing along. I was so embarrassed! At work on the Monday, I got a call from Jack – that was in June 1977. We were together for two years before we married in December 1979.

Jack served in the Ulster Defence Regiment for 14 years before he was discharged in September 1984 because he had diabetes. He was very disappointed. In 2004, he got an ulcer on a toe and gangrene set in. His right leg had to be amputated below the knee and two years later, the same thing happened to his left foot.

We started organising collections in aid of Blesma in January 2013. I'd get in touch with the local newspaper to let them know what we were doing. We held collections in supermarkets, Jack gave talks about the Association, and we even held coffee mornings which the Lord Lieutenant turned up to!

We kept fundraising through to early 2016, when Jack's kidneys started to fail. After refusing to continue with dialysis any longer, Jack passed away at home in April 2017.

In 2018, I received some Blesma Grand Prize Draw tickets and I decided to sell a few. That inspired me to continue what I had done with Jack. I get a bit emotional when I'm fundraising now as it's for him, too. You must keep occupied when you are on your own. I operate by helping others.

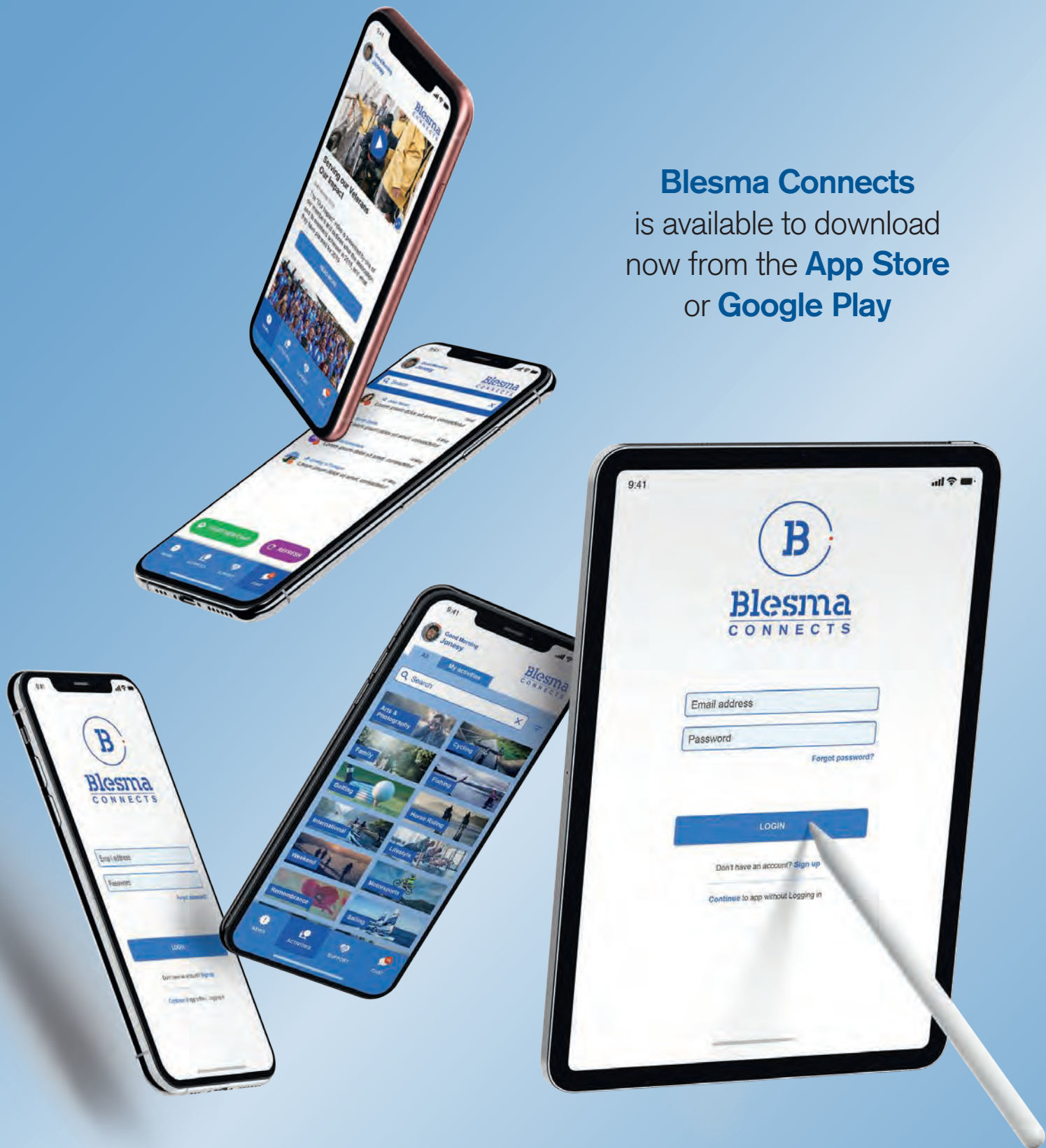
I contacted all the managers of the local stores, and soon enough I was collecting donations again. I've also held a couple of car boot sales at my church, so everyone has got to know me.

I also knit teddies, which a couple of the local ladies loved. They wanted them for their grandchildren, so I told them: 'Make a donation and I'll do it.' I also made crochet poppies and everyone wanted one. It raised £180. Together with other

Blesma ladies and Widows, I have been knitting scarves and hats for homeless people, and hats for premature babies.

Receiving the Cyril Stephens Award and being recognised by Blesma was lovely. I accepted the award at Blesma's recent Members' Weekend, and a couple of the chaps from Northern Ireland were banging the tables when my name was called out. I was so embarrassed!

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OCCUPIED WHEN
YOU ARE ON
YOUR OWN.
I OPERATE
BY HELPING
OTHERS”**



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