

Blesma

The magazine for limbless and injured veterans | Summer 2022

PLUS:
REMEMBERING
THE FALKLANDS
TEAM PHOENIX
GET INTO GAMING
EDUCATING THE
LIMB CENTRES

**NEW-LOOK
BULLETIN INSIDE**



Plus: How Lisa impressed her kids at Invictus 2022

THE STAGE IS SET

THIS YEAR'S MAKING GENERATION R GRADUATES ARE
READY TO TELL THE WORLD ABOUT THEIR INCREDIBLE LIVES

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“We’ve not
been found
wanting
on any
expedition”



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Words: Jessica Mackinnon Photography: ParalympicsGB/L_Percival, G_Picout, SA-IMAGES

Paralympians do themselves proud in Beijing Winter Games

SIX BLESMA MEMBERS REPRESENTED GREAT BRITAIN AT THIS YEAR'S SPORTING SPECTACLE, AND ALL OF THEM CAME AWAY HAVING PUT IN PERFORMANCES THEY COULD BE PROUD OF

Blesma's Members competing at the 2022 Winter Paralympic Games earlier this year all made a shared vow; to go out there and enjoy themselves. Travelling to Beijing in March were Owen Pick who represented GB Para snowboarding, Shona Brownlee, Alex Slegg and Dan Sheen who were part of the GB Para alpine skiing team, and Scott Meenagh and Steve Arnold who made up the GB Para nordic ski team.

For Alex, Dan and Shona, it was

their Paralympic debut, although Shona had already made a name for herself as the fastest female mono-skier in Great Britain. The Royal Air Force corporal finished the Paralympics in the top 10 in Giant Slalom, Slalom and Super-G.

"The opening ceremony was an amazing experience. You can't describe the feeling when you are walking out behind the national flag," said Shona. "It was a privilege to represent the RAF and my country

Above: Scott Meenagh's top six finish in the nordic skiing biathlon individual event was better than he had expected

at the Games. I only started racing in 2019, and then Covid disrupted everything. Under the circumstances I was working to a tight time frame and my goal was really just to reach the Paralympics, finish the races, and get a benchmark for the next Games. With hindsight, my performances were beyond my expectations."

Heading into his second Games, snowboarder Owen Pick aimed to put his disappointing performance at the 2018 Games behind him. For

Welcome



Above: the closing ceremony at this year's Winter Paralympic Games



Owen Pick vowed to enjoy the experience at this year's Games



Scott Meenagh now has his sights set on the 2026 Paralympics in Milan



It feels as though the Association is returning to pre-Covid levels of activity. Les Binns has recently climbed Mount Everest, Fran Townsend has been competing in the World Polo Championships, five

Members are sailing in the Caribbean and two more are diving in the Bahamas. Closer to home we've held successful Widows and Seniors Weeks as well as a family glamping event.

In this issue we hear about Members' successes at the Winter Paralympics and Invictus Games. Martin Hewitt reports on his epic journey in the Antarctic, and Team Phoenix update us on their aerobatic training. We talk to Leslie Harris, who shares his 90th birth year with Blesma, and as we approach the commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the Falklands War we hear very personal recollections from our former chairman Sir Cedric Delves.

Elsewhere, Brian Chenier talks to Alan Meyer from the Billericay Limb Centre about the vital relationship between veteran patients and the staff who support them.

It would be inappropriate for me not to mention the financial challenges some are facing due to increases in the cost of living. We have systems in place to support those who experience difficulty, and we will continue to deliver support to our Members through the welfare network.

Our 90th anniversary Members' Weekend takes place in mid-June. As well as hosting a range of activities, we will be conducting our first 'in-person' AGM since 2019. There will be an option to join the meeting online for those who wish to do so.

Jon Bryant
Chief Executive



Shona Brownlee is Great Britain's top female mono-skier



the last four years, he has worked hard on his mental strength to become a more confident racer.

“Everything from the venue to the slopes to the courses was better than four years ago in my opinion, so it was easier for me to enjoy the experience,” said Owen. “I finished ninth in boardercross, which was frustrating because I got stuck behind another competitor. Banked slalom went much better for me, but finishing fourth was difficult to take as that put me just outside the medals. I put everything on the line, but a tiny wobble was the difference between me and the other competitors. I was 0.8 seconds from first place and just 0.1 seconds from third.

“I’m undecided what the future holds when it comes to competing in the next Games. I’ve been involved in Paralympic snowboarding for 10 years now, so I’m going to take a year out and do something different – perhaps coaching. I’m deciding if I want to keep pushing myself through it.”



Despite Steve Arnold’s Paralympics debut hanging in the balance in the run-up to the Games after testing positive for Covid, he was able to take part. He competed in two nordic skiing events, finishing 29th in the cross-country middle distance race and 12th in the open relay team alongside Scott Meenagh (above) who, in his second Games, had the team’s best finish in Beijing with sixth in the biathlon individual event.

“Four years ago in Pyeongchang, the team

only had me and one coach to represent the sport. Back then, we were there to make a statement and lay the foundations. I had more clarity and was less overwhelmed in Beijing. My priority was my performance – to show we can compete with the best. My goal was to be a top-10 athlete, and if I could achieve a diploma [*a handwritten scroll you receive if you place in the top six*] that would have been as good as a medal for me. I definitely have my sights set on Milan 2026 now!”

Alex Slegg, meanwhile, placed 26th in the giant slalom while Dan Sheen was unfortunately unable to finish his races. “Just getting to the start line was my main goal,” said Alex. “I got a personal best in my race so am happy with my performance, coming 26th out of a field of 40. I’m pleased with where my head was at and I’m excited to see what I can do in the next four years, especially now that I have secured funding from Blesma’s Venture Fund.”

Stuart had to cycle through 21 counties on his challenge



Stuart “rides into unknown” on epic 2,000km UK cycle

Stuart Croxford has taken part in a 2,000km endurance cycle covering the length of the UK to raise funds for Blesma. Starting on 09 May, Stuart rode for up to 20 hours a day through 21 counties of England, Wales and Scotland from Land’s End to John o’Groats. He reached his destination just 10 days later.

A former Captain in the Duke of Lancaster’s Regiment, Stuart is no stranger to using his resilience to push his limits, having previously competed in a full Ironman, the London Marathon and numerous 100-mile cycling challenges since losing his right leg in 2014.

“Riding this distance and duration with little rest would push an able-bodied rider to their extreme, both physically and mentally,” said Stuart. “All the things I needed to think about and overcome as an amputee added extra stress. I had never put that amount of pressure through my residual limb and prosthetic before so I was riding into the unknown.”

“To complete this challenge, I had to rely hugely on my own resilience to pull myself through some very difficult times.

My motivation in those difficult times came from knowing that I was raising funds for a fantastic charity.

“Since losing my leg in 2014, I have just wanted to get on and live an independent and fulfilling life, even with the struggles of life as an amputee. That reflects very well with what Blesma’s ethos is and how it supports its Members.”



Inspired by Stuart’s story, electric vehicle company AVA has developed an electric Land Rover Defender – which they have named the AVA Croxford Defender – in collaboration with Stuart. The vehicle has even been fitted with bespoke interiors that reflect Stuart’s life.

“The AVA Croxford Defender celebrates Stuart’s remarkable story of resilience and positivity. The vehicle is AVA’s tribute to Stuart’s incredible courage and determination in the face of adversity,” said AVA founder Norman Crowley.

Stuart hopes the challenge will raise £50,000 for Blesma. You can support him and the charity by donating at <https://www.justgiving.com/fundraising/stuartcroxford>

GAMER RUNS AND GUNS TO RAISE FUNDS

CHARLEY HALFORD QUIT HIS FULL-time job to become a professional video gamer and has since raised more than £12,000 for Blesma and Combat Stress through a unique marathon challenge.

The 21 year old from Kent ran 26.2 miles on a treadmill while playing *Call of Duty: Warzone*. He started training for the challenge in January, running every day as well as going to the gym, and used his online following of 125,000 Facebook subscribers to raise momentum for the event.

“It was part of a series of challenges which involved playing games in weird locations. I completed one on a treadmill and then wondered if I could run a marathon while playing,” said Charley, who got into gaming in 2019 after breaking his leg. “At the time I weighed 18 stone and was very unfit, but as soon as my friend said I wouldn’t be able to do it, I knew I was going to prove him wrong!

“It took me five hours, 11 minutes and 59 seconds – which was two hours faster than I’d predicted. The support I’ve had from Blesma along the way has been great. It’s been a pleasure to raise money for the two fantastic charities and meet all the wonderful people at Blesma.”





Words: Jessica Mackinnon

‘Sheila the Agila’ set for 27,000-mile roadtrip

A prosthetist and an occupational therapist are gearing up for the adventure of a lifetime in which they will drive a 27,000-mile ‘rally’ in a 19-year-old Vauxhall Agila in aid of Blesma.

Doug Oldrey and Alex Hunter were set to take on the Mongol Rally in 2020, but after the event was recently cancelled for the third year in a row, the couple from Oxford



Is the 21-year-old Agila up to the task?

decided to plan their own route. To complete the rally, they have converted ‘Sheila the Agila’ into a camper and fitted it out with a bed, kitchen and lighting.

“Alex and I spoke about the Mongol Rally on our first date; we loved the idea of a ridiculous adventure in rubbish cars,” said Doug. “Knowing the event was likely to be cancelled again this year, we organised our own equally challenging and ridiculous event – the Long Loop Rally – with two other teams.”

The pair plan to drive their way around Europe, Africa and Asia, taking in a total 29 countries.

“We will attempt to reach the most westerly, southerly and northerly points of mainland Europe as well as going as far east in Asia as we can,” said Alex. “We are planning a total of 507 hours of driving and can’t wait to get going. We’re setting off on 11 July.”

WORLD CUP HOPEFUL READY TO FIGHT FOR HIS PLACE (LITERALLY!)

FORMER GRENADIER GUARD Mark Smith is entering the boxing ring for the first time since he lost his leg. As this issue was going to press Mark, who boxed for his regiment, was set to fight fellow amputee Brad North in May in the hope of raising £750 to play for England in the Amputee Football World Cup in October.

“Having the opportunity to be involved with England is a dream for me,” said Mark, who made his England debut in May and who will move from Peterborough Utd to Chelsea next season. “The England Amputee Football Association is a registered charity and so is reliant on people’s support. I wanted to raise money to play my part, and I feel I need to justify asking people to donate.”

To prepare himself for the fight, Mark has enlisted the support of fellow Blesma Member and former Paratrooper Mike Lewis, who competes in white collar boxing.

“I’ve been training with Mike since January, working on my sparring and learning how to change my stance from right leg to left leg to allow for my prosthesis. Having been shot in my right shoulder and having to box with that hand also comes with its challenges!”

To support Mark, visit <https://donate.giveasyoulive.com/fundraising/supporting-the-england-amputee-football-national-team>



Mark made his England debut in May



Mark recognised with mural

A 40ft mural of triple amputee Mark Ormrod has been erected in his hometown of Plymouth. Artist and former Coldstream Guardsman Kevin Preston unveiled the artwork, which is displayed on the side of a house in Pounds Park Road, in early March.

“I wasn’t really keen on the idea in the beginning as I thought it would be weird having a giant picture of myself,” said the

former Royal Marine. “But after speaking with Kevin and the Plymouth artists, and hearing their idea to include quotes and prosthetics, it became more about the prosthetics and the inspirational message they portray for me.”

Money was raised for the artwork but Kevin, together with the paint suppliers and scaffolders, have donated the money to Mark’s charity REORG.

12 YEAR OLD TAKES TO THE SKIES FOR BLESMA

MACEY HAND HAS RAISED ALMOST £1,000 for Blesma by completing a tandem paraglide. She was born with fibular hemimelia and underwent a Syme amputation (an amputation at the level of the ankle joint during which the heel pad is preserved) when she was just 10 months old. Now 12 years old, Macey walks and runs confidently on a prosthesis.

Having completed the tandem paraglide, Macey is planning to run 5K for Blesma in May, using her prosthetic running blade.



Photograph: Haganova Photo

VENTURE FUND SETS PAIR UP FOR ICE HOCKEY SUCCESS

BLESMA MEMBERS SUSI ROGERS-Hartley and Stacey Quirk (pictured) are representing their country once again; this time in women’s Para ice hockey.

They both made the GB team last October and have already represented their country at an International Paralympic Committee (IPC) development camp in the Czech Republic. Both have hopes for selection to the IPC Women’s World Challenge event this summer in America.

“I had a terrible year in 2021, so between [Blesma Member] Andy Mead and my Support Officer, I was persuaded to try ice hockey,” said Royal Navy veteran and ice hockey goaltender Susi. “From the first session on the ice I loved the team spirit. I came away feeling euphoric, so it was incredible to join the team officially.”

Both athletes have now been supported by Blesma’s Venture Fund.

“Blesma – and my BSO Kevin Long in particular – have been very supportive of my Para ice hockey journey. I am truly humbled and grateful to have been awarded a substantial grant from The Venture Fund,” said Stacey. “Not only has this enabled me to purchase my kit, it has also taken away a lot of pressure with regards to training and competition costs.

“Putting on the kit for the first time was comical, and on the ice I struggled to stay upright and skate, let alone attempt to handle a puck, but it didn’t matter. Usually, I’m a bit of a perfectionist when it comes to sport, but I was too busy laughing and enjoying the moment to care. I was hooked from the first session.”

↳ BLESMA BRIEFING

Limb Centres, Blesma and you

THE ASSOCIATION IS ON A MISSION TO HELP THE NATION'S LIMB CENTRES UNDERSTAND THE UNIQUE CHALLENGES FACED BY MILITARY AMPUTEES



Limb Centres are crucial to the wellbeing of every amputee. They are run both by the NHS directly and by third party service providers who offer care on behalf of the NHS. The partnership between these organisations, the NHS and Blesma is vital in ensuring veterans receive the care they need.

Brian Chenier, Blesma's Support Officer (Prosthetics), is the main link between the Limb Centres and the Association. He is undertaking a series of visits to facilities across the UK (there are 35 in England, five in Scotland, four in Wales and one in Northern Ireland) over the next 12 months to hold continuous professional development (CPD) sessions with key staff.

The aim is to increase awareness among Limb Centre staff about what the Association does and what its Members need. Brian (above left) recently visited Billericay Limb Centre, where he spoke with the centre's Service Manager Alan Meyer (right) and his multi-disciplinary team. Billericay has 26 staff, including 10 prosthetists, and sees some 30 patients a day. It provides more than prosthetic care however, with veterans and civilian patients able to access a range of professional services from occupational therapy and mental health services, to physiotherapy and prosthetic care.

What's the idea behind getting out to visit Limb Centres on behalf of Blesma?

Brian: Towards the end of lockdown, I was having more and more conversations with prosthetists who didn't know who I was or what Blesma did. I knew I had to get out there, to physically see people, because there had been a significant churn of staff at some centres, and also because people simply forget. We know that almost every problem our Members have with their prosthetics can be dealt with through communication,

and the best form of communication is face to face.

Alan: It's very useful and incredibly important for our team to get a visit from Brian. His knowledge and information keep us up to speed with – and help us understand – the needs of the military community. But having a close working relationship with Brian is incredibly useful for our dealings with individual patients throughout the year, too. Brian can let us know about a Member's requirements before he or she arrives, so we are prepared. That helps give the veterans confidence that we can help them.

Brian: I've set a goal of visiting as many centres as I can this year, either with individual Members or to carry out the continuous professional development sessions. The idea is to reacquaint whole teams – the prosthetists, nurses, physios, doctors – with who Blesma are, what we do, who we support, how we support them, and what part they can play in that.

What are some of the more common misconceptions that Limb Centre staff sometimes have about veterans?

Brian: That all veterans have seen combat service, that all veterans are super fit and want to climb mountains, that all veterans have benefitted from defence rehabilitation... This can lead to a breakdown in communication, and the wider perception of a modern veteran can make Members feel as though they need to live up to something. I say in my talks that 'veteran' just gives you a clue as to someone's job – not their mentality or physicality.

But veterans often have a different attitude towards getting things done...

Brian: They do. In the military, when someone is told to do something, the expectation is that it gets done. Veterans tend to be on time, and if they are kept waiting

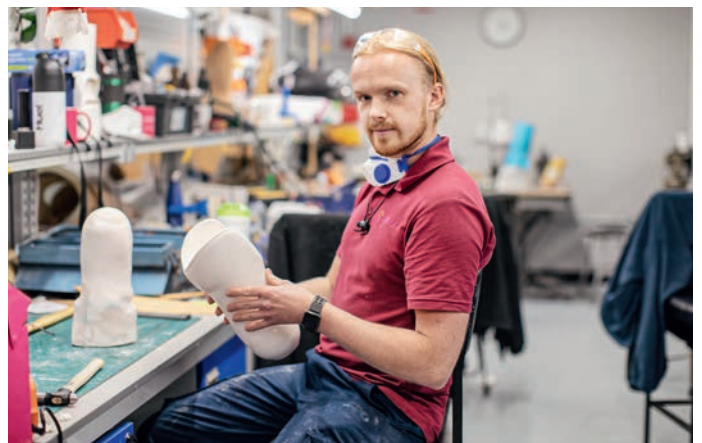
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I SAY IN MY TALKS THAT 'VETERAN' JUST GIVES YOU A CLUE AS TO SOMEONE'S JOB, BUT NOT ABOUT THEIR MENTALITY OR THEIR PHYSICALITY



Alan Meyer is
the Billericay
Limb Centre's
Service Manager



Words: Nick Moore Photography: Andy Bate



by someone else turning up late, it's good to explain why that has happened. That can be done through good communication in a waiting room, for example.

Alan: In general, military amputees are very motivated; they want to make progress and be the best that they can be. Veterans who have come through Headley Court or Queen Elizabeth Hospital have had intensive rehabilitation and have often been fitted with high-end prosthetic limbs. NHS Centres can lack the capacity to deliver intensive rehabilitation in the same way, so turnaround of new sockets or components may not be in line with what veterans have been used to.

Members can also make assumptions...

Brian: It works both ways. Our Members can sometimes think that the NHS is just trying to save money, but patient safety is the NHS priority. Some Members go into Limb Centres expecting a poor experience. They can sometimes attend appointments feeling confrontational or submissive because of previous experiences.

Alan: I agree. From our point of view here at the Limb Centre, the key challenge is always managing expectations. Communication is vital to that. We have to be careful to work as a team because patients come in with complex problems; it's rarely simply a case of fitting a prosthesis. The patient might need psychological support, or fitness training, or wound dressing. They might have a specific muscle weakness, for example. It's about understanding what is holding them back, their limitations, and what we can do to benefit them. It's not just about giving them a prosthetic arm or leg.

How can the most common issues be avoided?

Alan: The best way to build a relationship that works is through familiarity and communication. A big part of that is to help the veteran get to know their clinician so that the professional is able to earn the patient's trust. That has to happen over a period of time. For us, it's all about getting to know the veterans as individuals.

Brian: Again, it's about communication. I always try to explain to Members the value of being clear and assertive, to get across what they need, and to make sure the right conversation is had. The best way to do that is to go into an appointment with a script. Write down what's wrong and what's going right, so when there is limited time they can get all their points across.

Alan: It is very important that a patient comes in with a clear idea of what they want, but they must also be realistic. That said, we will try to move any mountain that needs to be moved.

So being proactive is key?

Alan: It's all about collaboration, about understanding needs and expectations. Together, we can put plans in



Brian Chenier plans to visit every Limb Centre in the next 12 months to educate staff about Blesma and veterans' needs

place to meet goals and make sure nothing is left to chance. And it's important for us to be able to spread the word about all our services; such as our clinical support technician service, for example. That's for people who have suffered breaks to their prostheses. A patient can come in and have things fixed or be seen on the day. What we can fix we will fix, otherwise we can order parts and fit them as quickly as possible.

Brian: For our Members, getting into the mindset of taking ownership of their own prosthetic provision so that they can get the best results is important. Rather than waiting for something to break, it is much better to be fully engaged in self-care. Contact your Limb Centre when you first notice a problem rather than three weeks later when it becomes urgent, for example, because they might not be able to fit you in quickly.

In general, is the relationship working well between Blesma and the Limb Centres?

Brian: Absolutely. On behalf of the Association and our Members I'd like to say thank you for everything the staff at all the Limb Centres do – particularly for what they did during Covid. They were brilliant.

Alan: From our point of view, we certainly appreciate what Blesma does. Having organisations like Blesma being part of national commissioning on prosthetics is important. They definitely help shape our service, and it's vital that they are listened to.

If you are experiencing problems with your prosthesis or provision of prosthetics, please get in touch with Brian, BSO (Prosthetics), at Blesma Chelmsford on 07796 715908 or at bsoprosthetics@blesma.org, or you can visit www.blesma.org

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TOGETHER WE CAN PUT PLANS IN PLACE TO MEET GOALS AND TO MAKE SURE NOTHING IS LEFT TO CHANCE



Words: Jessica Mackinnon

L to R: John Nelson, Billy Billington and Titch Cormack

I feel the need, the need for speed!

Following a successful pilot episode, *The Speedshop* returned to our TV screens in March co-hosted by Blesma Member Graeme ‘Billy’ Billington (below left). In the six-part series the former Royal Tank Regiment commander designs and builds bespoke motorbikes and cars from a “souped-up man cave” on Poole’s picturesque waterfront.

Billy and his team of military fixers – former Royal Marine Titch Cormack and engineering expert and REME veteran John Nelson – face a range of challenges as they bring broken and battered machines back to life.

The gang open the series by creating an adapted motorcycle sidecar for ex-Special Forces soldier and Blesma Member Tobias Gutteridge, who is paralysed from the neck down after being shot in Afghanistan. Toby needs a mechanical ventilator to breathe, but was determined to be back on a bike.

“Building the sidecar for Toby was the most rewarding part of the series, but it was also the hardest build we did,” said Billy. “He has been through so much and it was nice to give him back something that he used to enjoy doing.”

“It was a lot of hard work making the series despite it looking like three mates

having a laugh. We are doing what we enjoy – adventure and engineering – but someone is pointing a camera at us.”

Later episodes see the crew explore further afield as they take on a Moroccan desert expedition with veterans’ charity Future Terrain (see the Spring 2022 issue of *Blesma Magazine*) and devise an inventive solution that enables them to trek hundreds of miles across the stunning snowscapes of Iceland on motorbikes. Blesma proudly funded the injured veterans on the Moroccan trip.

“I’ve been a Blesma Member for 11 years now and, thanks to the Association helping me along the way and giving me opportunities, I’m in a position where I can now help others and give back to veterans. We have had some great feedback and the more people who watch the programme on iPlayer the more people we can help through the Speedshop in the future,” said Billy.



Billy (left) riding in the Moroccan desert



RAAM team make final preparations for epic ride

Thirteen veterans will compete in one of the world's toughest endurance cycling race, Race Across America, in mid-June. After a two-year postponement due to Covid, the Blesma team will set off on 14 June, and will collectively cycle 3,000 miles from the Pacific Coast in the west to the Atlantic Coast in the east. The race will cross 12 states, climbing more than 190,000 feet across the Rockies and Appalachians. The team will even have to cross deserts where temperatures can reach 45°C.

Wil Browning, Dan Richards, Alex Krol, Luke Delahunty, John Williams, Grant Jenkins, Simon Khan and Matt Edwards will make up the team's cyclists, while Ken De Soya, Steven Williams, and Terry

Morgan will act as the support crew. Outreach Officer Jas Suller and volunteers Mark Roffey and Liana Finlayson will also be assisting the team.

"Blesma is all about overcoming adversity, and the team was set up to push many boundaries," said Activities Manager Jess March. Event captain Wil Browning said the team have been working hard and sticking to their training. "We have had to adapt and learn to live with so much uncertainty, but we always had the belief that one day RAAM would happen," he said. "Everyone has worked hard. It's a massive challenge. We will visit some emotionally dark places and will have to dig deep to pull through. We all share a nervous excitement!"

MT TOUBKAL NEXT ON JAMES' HIT LIST

Double amputee James Rose is set to climb North Africa's highest mountain, Mount Toubkal, in June in aid of Blesma. James' passion for mountaineering has already seen him become the first double above-knee amputee to climb Kilimanjaro, which he summited in 2019.

"Getting to the top of any mountain is quite an accomplishment, but just getting outside does wonders for your mental health. That's the message we want to raise," said James.



PAIR TAKE ON A GRUELLING RACE WITH NO SET ROUTE

TWO WOUNDED WAR VETERANS HAVE run themselves to exhaustion in their bid to complete a 340-mile race from Los Angeles to Las Vegas. In March, Ibrar Ali, a former Captain in the Army who lost his right arm below the elbow in Iraq in 2007, and ex-RAF Paratrooper Luke Wigman teamed up once again to tackle America's ultra-relay race The Speed Project.

Since 2013, runners from around the world have been assembling teams to tackle the 340 miles from the Santa Monica Pier in Los Angeles to the Las Vegas sign with no set route, no specific rules, and only one goal: to get there first.

The pair, who have previously run seven marathons on seven continents in seven days, completed the challenge in 4 days, 11 hours and 16 minutes.

Ibi (below left), who had support from Blesma to be able to take part in the challenge, said: "The heat made it really tough, especially in the last 24 hours as



we pushed to get as close to 100 hours as possible. It took us a total of 107 hours.

"There was a period on the final day when we would have normally rested because of the heat, but we had to continue. It reached at least 40°C in parts of Death Valley as we ran along the long road toward Vegas. At one point we could see the city in the distance, but it was still 40 miles away!"

"It was a lot tougher than other events I've taken part in, such as the Marathon Des Sables, because there was no option to rest without it eating into our time. Other events have a rest time but here the clock kept ticking!"

Les Binns



For the last six years, keen mountaineer Les Binns has had unfinished business on Mount Everest. Reaching the summit has been his goal since 2016, when he was just 500m from the peak before stopping to save a fellow climber. The following year, he had the same fate. This May, he returned to the mountain thanks to funding from Blesma, determined to accomplish his goal.

“Back in 2016, I decided I wanted to summit the world’s highest mountain. It was probably one of the craziest things I’d ever thought up. On my summit push, at around 8,400 metres, I stopped to rescue a fellow climber, Sunita Hazra. She was in a really bad way, suffering from cerebral and pulmonary oedema and frostbite,” says Les. “On the way back down we came across her climbing partner, Subash Paul. I thought I could try and rescue them both, but things started to deteriorate as I began to slip off the side of the mountain a couple of times. I realised I could only save one of them. Sunita seemed to be the strongest, so I managed to get her motivated and back down to Camp Four.”

DEVASTATING NEWS

“I had every intention of going back to get Subash, and could still hear him screaming, but I ended up passing out from exhaustion. When I woke, I tried to warm myself up but another team in a fitter state had gone to rescue him,” recalls Les. “Sadly, the next day, as I was descending the mountain, I found his body. It knocked me for six. I’ve been through all the emotions of what happened that night, but what really made me break down in tears was the Indian Mountaineering Foundation wanting me to present an award to his daughter. She is the same age as my daughter, Emma. I didn’t have the moral courage to be able to go over there and keep it together.

“A year later, I had to abandon my attempt once again to rescue another climber in bad weather. We experienced 80mph winds at an altitude below

8,000m. As my climbing partner and I were fighting to keep our tent up, we heard another climber shouting. His tent had collapsed, and he was holding on for dear life. I got some rope, threw it out to him and we pulled him into our tent. We rode the storm out for more than 20 hours before we could head back down. I thought it would be suicide to try the summit after that.

“When you get so close to the summit of a mountain sometimes things happen that are simply outside of your control. You always think of the ‘what ifs’: ‘What if that never happened, I could have stood on the summit.’ That’s the thing that was spurring me on for my third attempt.

“This has been my aspiration since I watched a documentary about Everest in 2015 while working in Iraq as a security guard. It started out as a personal quest, but now I want to inspire my daughter.”

LIFE AFTER THE ARMY

“I fell in love with climbing thanks to the charity Climb2Recovery, and I found that climbing replaced something I had lost when I left the Army,” says Les. “As I suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), climbing is an escape for me. Over the years I’ve become a rock climbing instructor and a winter mountain leader, and I’ve reached the summits of Mount Blanc (2018), Gran Paradiso (2019), the Matterhorn (2020) and Dent du Géant (2021).

“As well as having PTSD, I lost the sight in my left eye after an improvised explosive device detonated while I was serving with the Light Dragoons in Afghanistan. My loss of sight sometimes affects my depth perception – when I’m reaching for ropes when I’m rock climbing, for example. But climbing has taught me that there’s something else to achieve after leaving the Army, and I think reaching the summit of Everest has been the pinnacle of that.”

Les spent a month acclimatising on Mount Everest before he made his successful summit attempt on Friday 13 May. Congratulations from all at Blesma!

“

I THOUGHT I COULD TRY AND RESCUE THEM BOTH, BUT WHEN I BEGAN TO SLIP OFF THE SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN I REALISED I COULD ONLY SAVE ONE OF THEM



Barefoot feat of endurance for Craig on 96-mile walk

Former Sapper Craig Curtis is walking 96 miles barefoot across the West Highland Way, from Milngavie near Glasgow to Fort William in the Highlands, to raise money for Blesma. The ex-Royal Engineer from Lanarks, who is now a personal trainer, is in the process of preparing his feet for the tough terrain.

“I’m currently getting my feet prepared by wearing shoes adapted to help feet feel

everything on the ground,” said Craig. “I have also completed a 5K run on a treadmill, which I did with the intention of making my feet badly blistered. It’s a long process to get my feet prepared, but it will definitely be worth it!”

To donate to Craig’s cause, visit <https://www.justgiving.com/fundraising/craig-curtisbarefoot>

MEMBERS HAVE LEARNED TO SIGN ONLINE

INJURED VETERANS HAVE been getting to grips with British sign language (BSL) to broaden their communication skills with the deaf community.

Members recently joined Teach Me Sign online for an 11-week course that taught them basic BSL. During the course, they learned to introduce themselves, finger spell places, names and objects, and discuss a number of everyday topics.

“Ahmed, our teacher, was a delight. He was very clear with his signing and he made it fun,” said Member Maggie Hall who initially suggested the activity. “Running was a big part of my life before I was injured [*Maggie was hit by a drunk driver in 2016 and had an elective below-knee amputation in 2019*]. Even though I’m not able to run yet, I volunteer at my local park run. My aim is to be able to sign

the introduction and health and safety information. I would also love to volunteer at the local Deaf Community Centre.”

Stephen Salmon also took part in the course. “I volunteer at the charity Whizz-Kidz, and two of the young people there sign,” said Stephen. “I noticed the difference a greeting made to them, so a few years ago I started learning BSL online. Blesma offering the chance to learn more has been great.”



LEXI IS LOOKING AT SEVEN RACES IN SIX MONTHS

LEXI CHAMBERS IS PREPARING to mark Blesma’s 90th anniversary by taking part in seven challenges over the coming months.

The former Royal Signals soldier began by taking on the Exmouth triathlon in May and the Great West Run half marathon just a week later. The Rehab triathlon in Plymouth is set for 23 June, then it’s the Cardiff summer half marathon in July, the Bridgewater half marathon in September, the Goodwood Motor Circuit marathon later that month and the London Marathon just one week after that on 02 October.

The 44 year old, who elected to have her left leg amputated below the knee after suffering from excruciating pain caused by hammer toes which led to Complex Regional Pain Syndrome, said: “When I first lost my leg, I was pretty much house bound in a first-floor apartment. It was difficult to do anything, but then Blesma helped me regain my independence by giving me a lightweight wheelchair.

“I had dreams of doing a marathon and triathlon before my amputation, and I was determined those dreams would not be gone forever.”

To support Lexi, please visit <https://blesma.enthuse.com/pf/lexi-chambers-799fb>

Activities

THE ASSOCIATION IS OFFERING THE CHANCE TO TRY ALL SORTS OF ACTIVITIES THIS YEAR AFTER COVID RAVAGED THE CALENDAR FOR THE LAST TWO YEARS. WHAT DO YOU FANCY?

From fishing to fitness, from gaming to golf, from Colorado to Cologne to the Canary Islands, Blesma is giving Members the chance to try lots of activities this year – all for free! **Apply now on the Blesma website at www.blesma.org/activities or by emailing eventscal@blesma.org**

AUTUMN WIDOWS AND SENIORS WEEKS

Location: Cricket St. Thomas, Somerset

Date: Widows Week: 19-23 September

Seniors Week: 26-30 September

Application deadline: 15 June

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

Who can apply?

Seniors Week is open to Members and

their spouses, and Widow(er)s over the age of 60. Widows Week is for Widows only.

EGX LONDON

Location: Excel Centre, London

Date: September (TBC)

Application deadline: 15 June

Blesma is offering Members the opportunity to attend the EGX video game convention at the Excel Centre in London. EGX is the UK's premier video game show and is a celebration of all things gaming. This will be a one-day event and may include gaming on the day.

Who can apply?

Any Member.

RIDE TO THE WALL

Location: Burton-on-Trent

Date: 30 September-01 October

Application deadline: 01 July



Join the Blesma crew on this poignant annual ride in memory of the fallen which finishes at the National Memorial Arboretum.

Who can apply?

Any Member who owns a motorcycle.

COUPLES SENIORS WEEK

Date: October (TBC)

Application deadline: 15 July

This week is set out the same as the Seniors Week but is intended solely for couples over the age of 60. Based at one of the prestigious Warner hotels, Members and their spouses will enjoy a week of relaxation and gentle activities, as well as some great evening entertainment at the hotel.

Who can apply?

Any couple over the age of 60.

Fitness and Lifestyle course

Location: Fuerteventura, Canary Islands

Date: 18-26 November

Application deadline: 01 August

Reset your diet and learn tips on how to balance your lifestyle. Experience the beauty Fuerteventura has to offer whilst being active. This week will have a variety of activities from yoga, pilates and cycling to paddleboarding and golf.

Who can apply?

Suitable for any Member.

Requirements:

Members must be triple vaccinated and must have a passport with six months' validity during the time of travel.





Blesma Golf UK

Location: Shropshire **Date:** 12-16 September **Application deadline:** 15 June
Members will enjoy three rounds of golf spread across three days at Macdonald Hill Valley Hotel in Shropshire. The hotel boasts 18-hole emerald and sapphire golf courses, making it one of the top 10 golf venues in the UK. Accommodation will be provided at the hotel. These will be friendly matches, making them open to all.

Who can apply?

Any Member with a set of golf clubs. Please state your golf handicap when you apply (if you have one).

You can apply online at www.blesma.org or by email at events@blesma.org



DORSET FISHING COMPETITION

Location: Dorset
Date: 09-11 September
Application deadline: 15 June

Beginners and seasoned anglers alike are welcome to take part in the Dorset Fishing Competition. The focus will be on relaxing, socialising and taking part in a bit of friendly competition at Revels Fishery, which is a still water fishery located in Dorset. Most noted for carp/specimen, coarse and fly/game fishing, carp, roach and perch are among the key species on offer at the venue.

Who can apply?

Any Member is welcome to take part.

Requirements: Members will need to have their own fishing license as well as access to their own fishing equipment.

Activities

TURN TO STARBOARD

Location: Falmouth

Date: 03-07 October

Application deadline: 01 July

A chance to sail on the Cornish coast. You will get an introduction to sailing, learn to work in a team, be taught important skills such as navigation, and experience life on the seas.

Who can apply?

Any Member. Please be aware that there are steps and ladders on board the boat.

ACCESSIBLE GLAMPING WEEKEND

Location: Somerset

Date: 21-24 October

Application deadline: 01 July

A new addition to the Activities Calendar. Based at Wall Eden Farm in Somerset, this accessible glamping site can be enjoyed by the whole family. Members will stay in accessible lodges that can sleep up to six, from where they will be able to enjoy the beautiful surroundings as well as take part in a range of on-site activities from axe throwing to canoeing.

Who can apply?

Any Member with a family of between two and six people (i.e. Member and up to five others). Please note that whilst there is no minimum age to attend, some activities will be restricted to an age limit.



CHRISTMAS MARKETS COUPLES WEEKEND

Location: Cologne, Germany

Date: 01-05 December

Application deadline: 01 September

A weekend break to get you well and truly into the Christmas spirit. This will be the perfect opportunity to enjoy the historic city of Cologne and its world-famous Christmas Markets. You will be

able to explore Angel Market, the oldest Christmas Market in Cologne, whilst soaking up all the festivities, relaxing with your partner and enjoying the company of other Blesma couples.

Who can apply? Any Member.

Requirements: Members must be triple vaccinated and must have a passport with six months' validity during the time of travel.

Remembrance Weekend

Location: London

Date: 12-13 November

Application deadline: 01 August

The annual Blesma Remembrance Parade at The Cenotaph over Remembrance Weekend. One of the most poignant events in the Blesma Calendar.

Who can apply?

Any Member.



Colorado Ski Spectacular

Location: Breckenridge

Date: December (TBC)

Application deadline: 01 August

This annual event run by Disabled Sports USA, is one of the world's biggest and best ski spectaculars for all adaptive Winter sports. The perfect week to have fun on the slopes and enjoy all that the ski spectacular has to offer. Mono ski, snow-boarding, stand-up skiing and three-track will all be available.

Who can apply?

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

Requirements:

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



Sign up for the activities digital newsletter by email at aelocal@blesma.org



Rachel Williamson
(second from left)
with her family

Invictus “about more than medals”

Postponed in both 2020 and 2021 due to the Covid pandemic, the fifth Invictus Games eventually took place in The Hague, The Netherlands in April. Sixty one wounded, injured and sick military personnel and veterans represented the UK, 12 of whom are Blesma Members (see table right for the full list of Blesma representatives).

After the competition had finished, the UK’s first female Invictus Games team captain, Captain Rachel Williamson, recalled how proud she felt after watching the British team find their inner strength as they represented their country.

“It was an amazing experience; one that we have been waiting – and training – so long for. I absolutely loved it,” said the former RAF medic who was medically discharged after a rugby injury left her with no function in her right arm. “I couldn’t be more proud of how every single team

member performed. We all competed as best we could and had fun doing it.”

Rachel won three gold medals and one silver medal in swimming, and another gold in rowing, but she was quick to point out that the UK squad used the Games as an

opportunity to aid their recovery, with participation being about more than just winning medals.

“As a team, we put in 95 personal best performances. The whole experience was about having a positive mindset again,

CONGRATULATIONS TO THE 12 BLESMA MEMBERS WHO TOOK PART

| MEMBER | EVENT |
|--------------------------|---|
| Spencer Bull | Archery |
| David Dewar | Wheelchair rugby |
| Tom Folwell | Sitting volleyball, wheelchair basketball, wheelchair rugby |
| Vikrant Gurung | Powerlifting, sitting volleyball |
| Lisa Johnston | Athletics (running, shot put, discus), rowing, swimming, wheelchair rugby |
| Jack Otter | Athletics (shot put and discus), rowing |
| Stuart Padley | Archery, rowing |
| Daniel Phillips | Archery, athletics (running), rowing, wheelchair basketball, wheelchair rugby |
| Craig Styles | Wheelchair basketball, wheelchair rugby |
| David Wilkinson | Sitting volleyball, wheelchair rugby |
| Rachel Williamson | Athletics (shot put and discus), rowing, swimming, wheelchair rugby |
| Sean Wiseman | Rowing |



having fun and being able to socialise and get out of the house. We were able to use sport as a recovery tool, and everyone is one step ahead of their goals now. They are much stronger mentally and physically. I know I've got more confidence now."

Echoing Rachel's message was Lisa Johnston (middle image above), whose goal was to show her young sons that she was able to run again.

"I took part in athletics, rowing and swimming, and I was chuffed to come away with five medals," said the mother of three. "For me, it was all about my kids seeing me run for the first time in a long time. I was coming last so my fellow competitors came back and ran with me over the finish line, which is exactly what the Invictus Games is about. It's about cheering for others. My boys were at the finish line and gave me a massive hug and said they were proud of their mum. That was the moment for me!"



Quality time for all at the Blesma Glamping Weekend

One experience many able-bodied families take for granted – the classic UK staycation – can prove to be something of a challenge for an amputee and their family. That's why Blesma made its Families Glamping Weekend accessible for everyone.

Based at Wall Eden Farm in Somerset from 15-18 April, three Blesma Members and their families stayed in accessible lodges, enjoyed the beautiful surroundings, and took part in onsite activities that ranged from axe throwing to canoeing.

Shane Henry (pictured below) attended with his partner Emma, and two children; 13-year-old Callum and 7-year-old Abbie.

"As a family, we have had a rubbish few years. Just as Emma finished her nursing

degree, I was diagnosed with cancer which led to my leg being amputated," said Shane. "It hit the kids hard. We wanted to press the reset button and get away, so we applied. It was amazing to attend the activity. It's been a dream of mine to stay in a cabin, so it was very emotional when we arrived. It was breathtaking to be there."

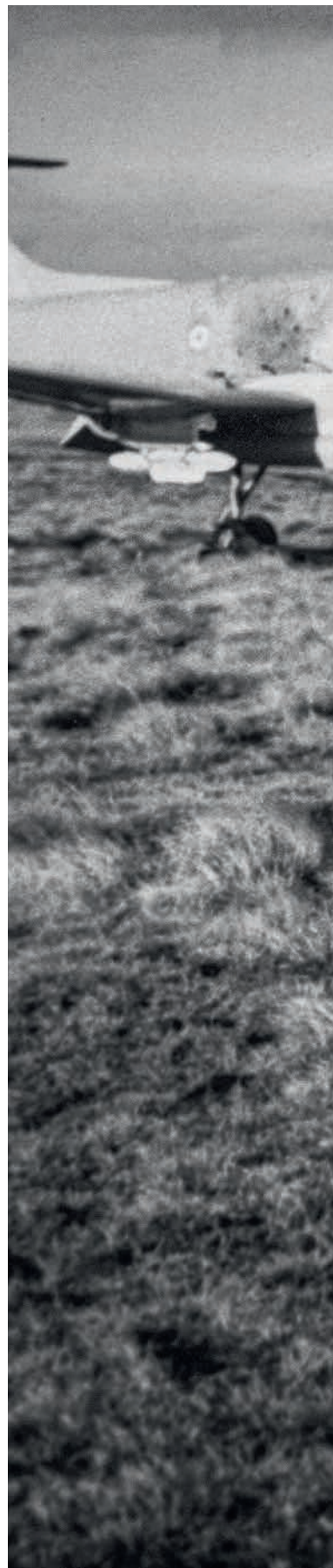
During the trip, the families enjoyed canoeing, axe throwing, archery and shooting, and visited the local pier.

"It was great to be outside and to get the kids away from computer games. We get so wrapped up in work and housework that we forget to have quality time together. It was great to give the kids a trip that we wouldn't have been able to afford otherwise. We are eternally grateful to Blesma."

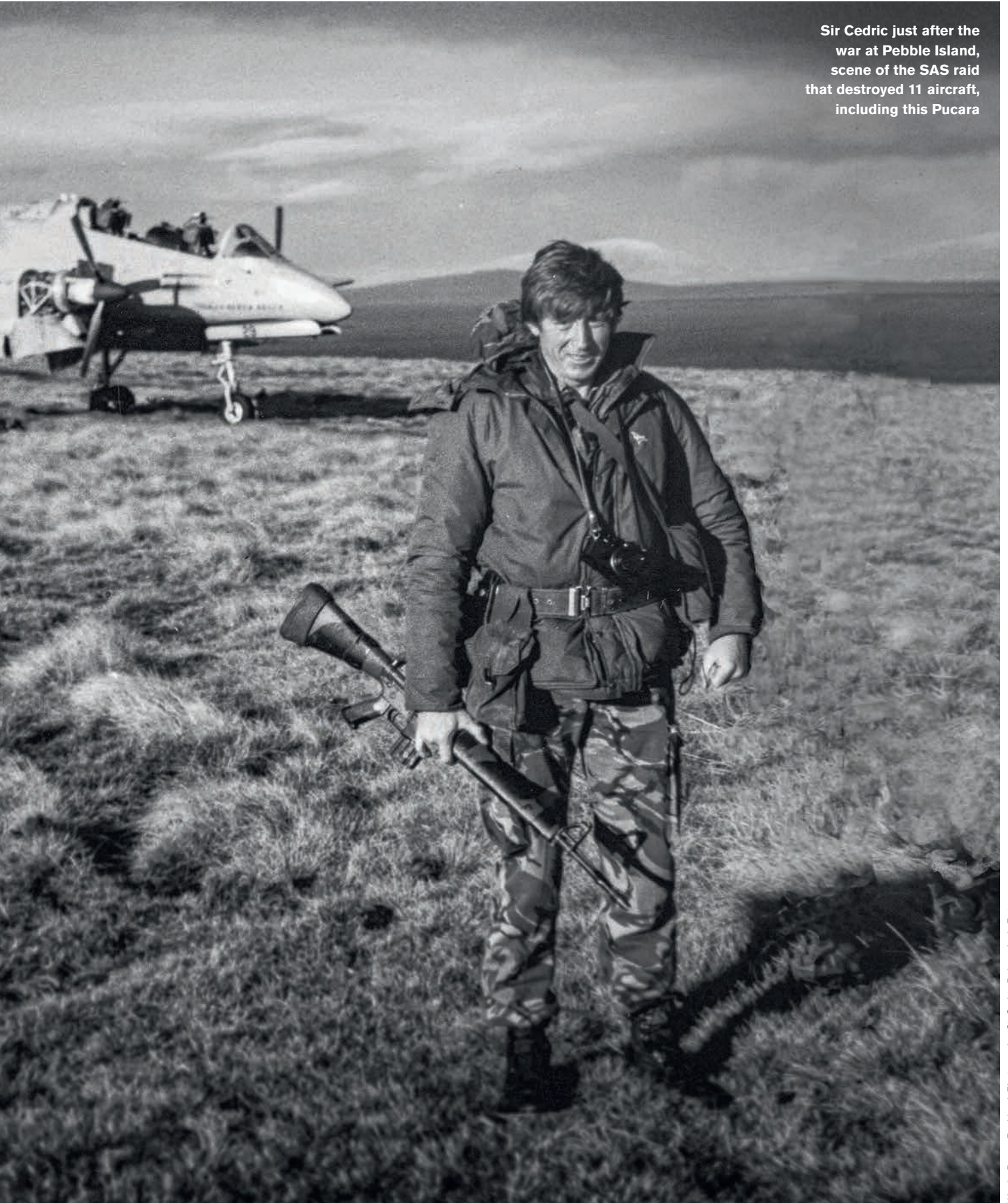


**“THIS WAS
A SHORT,
SHARP WAR
WITH HEAVY
LOSSES AND
MUCH HURT.
WE SHOULD
NOT FORGET
THAT – NOR
THOSE WE
LOST”**

VERY FEW PEOPLE KNOW MORE ABOUT THE FALKLANDS WAR THAN BLESMA'S FORMER CHAIRMAN LIEUTENANT GENERAL SIR CEDRIC DELVES. HE SHARES HIS THOUGHTS AND MEMORIES 40 YEARS ON



Sir Cedric just after the war at Pebble Island, scene of the SAS raid that destroyed 11 aircraft, including this Pucara



Words: Danny Buckland Photography: Sir Cedric Delves, Andy Bate

**Below right:
Sir Cedric Delves
photographed at
Blesma Members'
Weekend in 2017**

Former Blesma Chairman Sir Cedric Delves was a 35-year-old Major leading D Squadron 22 SAS when the Falklands War began 40 years ago. Gathering his kit and unit together, he embarked with the Task Force heading 7,864 miles south for the 74-day conflict that resulted in the Islands being liberated on 14 June 1982. His unit was involved in critical

early strikes on South Georgia and operated throughout the campaign. It also had to contend with the Regiment's heaviest loss of life when 20 members were killed as a Sea King helicopter plunged into the freezing seas on 19 May. The war saw the loss of 225 British Service personnel and 649 Argentinians. Forty years on, Sir Cedric reflects on the conflict, how it shaped a prosperous future for the Falklands, and how it allowed Argentina to break free from its ruinous military dictatorship...

The early 1980s were a difficult time for Britain with unemployment and unrest. Was the nation ready for Argentinian invasion?

It was quite unexpected and came at a time when the country seemed to be somewhat on its uppers. As it turned out, we were certainly not ready to be pushed around by Argentina – or anyone else, come to that. Indeed, I recall feeling really angry; a people's right to self determination had been disregarded shamelessly, our people simply trampled on. It was too bad and had to be put right. Just about the whole country saw it the same way. I think there are parallels to what we are seeing today in Eastern Europe, a similarly shared sense of disbelief and anger.

How did you and your unit react to being deployed?

Along with the strong sense of national purpose there was excitement. We were all much younger then. With age and experience you gain in wisdom, and you realise

these things cost dearly; we went on to lose many friends and close colleagues. It turned out to be a short, sharp war with heavy losses and much hurt on both sides. We should never forget that, nor those we lost. But at the outset we, along with most others, were swept up in the excitement and transitioned to war pretty effortlessly.

Did that confidence endure?

I remember clearly a distinct mood change in the Royal Navy after HMS Sheffield got hit (20 crew members died and another 26 were injured when it was hit by an Exocet missile on 04 May). We'd not worked with the Navy before. They were very, very impressive and confident. If anything, after Sheffield that high confidence moved on, became more firmly grounded in a steely, quieter determination. I believe we all realised at that moment that there was going to be a lot of pain. At the same time, we all got better at calculating the risks of our particular war, upping our skills. Of course, one's enemy also gets better, but we kept our edge and few of us, if any, doubted the eventual outcome. After it was all over, it came as a surprise to learn that it had been close run.



You suffered setbacks and tragedies during the campaign. How did you deal with them?

The simple answer is by getting on, activity being a form of therapy in itself. We stayed in the fight as best we could, still at it on the very last night, in fact. When my friend Colonel H Jones was killed commanding 2 PARA at Darwin I got really angry; not with the Argentinians, not with the conduct of the war, but with the war itself. We'd just lost 20 people ourselves, in a helicopter lost at sea. So I felt rage. We had to put a stop to the bloody thing, get on and win, and quickly, before more people got hurt. Ironically, it wasn't until the morning after that last night, standing on Murrell Heights looking down into Stanley, having a quiet smoke, that the full cost of our war hit home. I had unconsciously looked

“WE WERE ALL MUCH YOUNGER THEN. WITH AGE AND EXPERIENCE YOU GAIN IN WISDOM, AND YOU REALISE THESE THINGS COST DEARLY”

**Wessex helicopter
Humphrey lifting from
HMS Antrim. He rescued
troops from the Fortuna
Glacier, found an SAS
patrol that had been swept
40 miles out to sea, then
did for an enemy submarine**



**The 2 PARA memorial
at Darwin/Goose Green**





Sea Harriers on
HMS Hermes

**“NEW ISLAND MUST BE ONE
OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL
PLACES; FULL OF WILDLIFE,
INCLUDING THAT MOST
ENDEARING PENGUIN;
THE ROCK HOPPER”**



around for Lawrence, my Squadron Sergeant Major, before realising that he wouldn't ever be there again. He had been lost in the helicopter.

How did British Forces perform in the Falklands?

Some time in the late 80s a piece of Army doctrine was produced that defined military power as comprising three parts: 'physical' stuff, the hardware; 'conceptual', the business of how that stuff gets used; and 'moral', what used to be called the 'fighting spirit' of the people involved. In the Falklands, the Argentinians had more of most things, and they were closer to home, better able to sustain their things and people. But I believe it was one of those rare instances when stronger spirit and better know-how were able to trump an opponent's more considerable quantities of 'stuff'. On this occasion that could only be achieved by the whole Task Force pulling together and giving of their very best.

What were the decisive elements of the campaign?

As said, it was a whole team effort. We made the best use of the available hardware, and I wouldn't wish to be misunderstood; we had some first-rate equipment, albeit not always in the quantities we would have liked. And we had self-belief; I would underscore that by citing 2 PARA. I don't think we ever doubted ourselves, but after 2 PARA took Darwin and Goose Green that confidence translated into near certainty; there would be more battles to fight, more hurt to endure, but it felt as though we had just won. And again, on land, I would single out 3 Commando Brigade, everything a Brigade should be: skilled, knowledgeable, cohesive and yet readily able to absorb other combat and combat support elements. They underpinned our success on land and provided superb leadership.

What are your reflections on the war, 40 years on?

It was a historic event, a short war fought without hatred and, by us, in a just cause. The UK achieved what it set out to do: liberate its own and uphold the right of people to self-determination. And, ironically, it brought Argentina back to a better place, helping to re-establish democracy. I feel privileged to have been part of all that, a member of the Task Force. I am also deeply conscious of the cost. We lost many people, many friends. I miss them. We were close.

Did your experiences affect you?

I'm not quite sure. There must have been some impact; the addition of more experience that adds to that already accumulated, that informs one's approach to things. We were back on operations almost as soon as we got back home, so there was not a lot of time for reflection. And as far as I'm aware, we suffered very little or no severe traumatic stress disorder, at least not until years later.

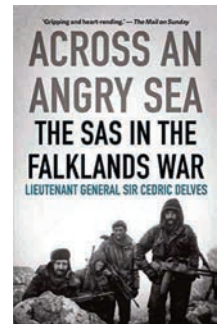
Have you returned to the Falklands?

Yes, many times; to see friends and as part of my previous duties as a trustee of the New Island Conservation Trust. New Island must be one of the most beautiful places; full of wildlife, including that most endearing penguin; the Rock Hopper. And on every visit to the Islands I am struck by what the islanders have achieved over the years with their freedom. The Falklands is a most successful country in its own right, thriving. The islanders are ever mindful of what it took to secure their freedom, and what it takes to hold it safe. I believe it informs their approach to life, and they are the stronger for it. This is the legacy of those days.

How did you enjoy your time at Blesma, and did it play a role helping those injured in the Falklands War?

I really enjoyed my time as Chairman. It's invigorating being with Blesma Members, and I think that is the point: our Members know the costs of war, the acute and long-lasting consequences that have to be endured and managed. Blesma helps with that, and it is good at it: reliably there, skilled, knowledgeable. I was always struck by our Members' enthusiasm, their optimism, their humour and positive approach to life. Perhaps that is part of the natural make-up of people from the Armed Services; the genius of Blesma is that it knows how to nurture the positives, knows how to help people. To be honest, I was not all that aware of Blesma until I became membership 'compliant' myself one day. And then there it was – big time – with just what was needed. As we all know, it's more a club than a charity, although not one you might go out of your way to join, with membership requirements being what they are. Even so...

*Sir Cedric's book **Across An Angry Sea: The SAS In The Falklands War** is published by Hurst Publishers. The paperback edition costs £12.99 and can be ordered online from www.hurstpublishers.com*



*Sir Cedric's book **Across An Angry Sea: The SAS In The Falklands War***

“I WAS NOT ALL THAT AWARE OF BLESMA UNTIL I BECAME MEMBERSHIP ‘COMPLIANT’ MYSELF ONE DAY. AND THEN THERE IT WAS – BIG TIME”





UP, UP AND NO WAY!

THERE ARE MANY THINGS YOU MUST POSSESS TO BE ABLE TO EXECUTE DEATH-DEFYING MANOEUVRES AS PART OF AN AEROBATICS TEAM. FOUR LIMBS, HOWEVER, ARE NOT ESSENTIAL

Words: Nick Moore

f aeroplane acrobatics – aerobatics for short – looks pretty risky, that’s because it is! “Flying a small plane as low as 300ft is inherently dangerous,” explains Mike Wildeman, co-founder and leader of Team Phoenix, who will be wowing crowds at air shows all summer. “Doing it six feet away from another plane makes it even less straightforward, but we want to show that disability doesn’t stop you doing something like this.”

As the world’s only amputee formation aerobatics display outfit, Team Phoenix is unique. Mike, 60, and his colleague Alan Robinson, 42, are amputees and Blesma Members, and are ably demonstrating that limb loss is no barrier to being counted among the best pilots in the country.

For both of them, flying is a passion. “My enjoyment comes from the pure professionalism of the flying,” says Mike. “When you are booked by an air show, they want to know you can put on an attractive display – they don’t care how many legs you’ve got. They want the same level as the Red Arrows. So that is rewarding, and the fact we have been able to do that, and be accepted, is great.”

“AN AIR SHOW WANTS TO KNOW THAT YOU CAN PUT ON AN ATTRACTIVE DISPLAY – THEY DON’T CARE HOW MANY LEGS YOU’VE GOT!”

The two men had curiously similar lives before coming together as a team: they both grew up dreaming of flying, both achieved their ambitions as part of the RAF (Alan is still serving) and both suffered motorcycle accidents that led to amputation. They also got into aerobatics later in their careers as a way of dealing with their injuries.

“I joined Bournemouth Flying Club when I was just 17 years old and won a scholarship that paid for my flying,” says Mike. “After that, I went to university before joining the RAF in 1984, aged 22. I was lucky enough to achieve my childhood dream of flying. I originally wanted to be a fighter pilot

but it didn’t work out. I still managed to fly with the RAF all over the world, including flying tactical C130s with UK Special Forces, and even worked with the Belgian Air Force. I was in Bosnia, Somalia and Burundi. We had some tough moments in Rwanda, pulling people out on the last sortie as guys with machetes came over the airport fence!”

Life changed for Mike in 2000 when he rode his motorbike into a ravine in France. “I was on holiday with my Belgian Air Force mates and I misjudged a corner,” he says. “I shattered my leg to pieces, but luckily I was with the right people to get me out. The boys made a stretcher, and even though my leg was facing the wrong way, I was oblivious to it all because the adrenaline had kicked in.”

Years of problems ensued as Mike left the Forces and tried to carry on his career as a commercial airline captain. “I was OK for a while, but after four failed leg fusions my leg was disintegrating and eventually, with the pain medication I was on, I couldn’t fly, work or walk. Six years ago, I opted to have an amputation.”

Mike has thrived ever since, returning to work and feeling full of life again. “It was restorative, and released me from pain,



Team Phoenix pilots Alan Robinson (far left) and Mike Wildeman

Performing the caterpillar loop. Mike is the lead out at the bottom



IS IT A BIRD? IS IT A PLANE? YES, IT'S A PLANE...

How do they do that? A brief guide to some smooth aeroplane acrobatics moves...

"I can't feel my left leg and Alan can't feel his right, so it can be tricky to get the correct input," says Mike. "You're using muscle memory and hoping you get it right!" There's slightly more to it than that of course, and the pair have mastered several classic display moves. Here are a few...

BREAKING MOVE

A real thriller, as it passes directly over the heads of the crowd at a display, creating a noisy, breathtaking illusion that the planes are close to colliding. "We head towards the crowd, brake, and then reverse to create a Red Arrows style cross," says Mike.



"Alan aims to be slightly above me, so it looks like we've crossed perfectly."

HEART IN THE SKY

A great way to end a display, the planes leave the crowd happy with a heart shape in the sky before buzzing back off to base. "We pull up then go into a roll," explains Mike, "then we turn on the smoke, roll away from each other, and fly down in a crossing dive to about 300ft."

QUARTER CLOVER

A loop with a quarter turn at the top. "It's demanding because as we change speed, we need a fair amount of rudder input to keep the craft straight, so it doesn't corkscrew," says Mike. "We're pulling up to five Gs, and Alan is doing everything to keep us in formation."



“I’d not done aerobatics since I was 28 and I’m 60 now,” says Mike

as well as giving me an avenue back to flying,” he says of the amputation. He became involved with the charity Aerobility as well as the Douglas Bader Foundation, who worked together to establish the UK’s first display team using pilots with disability.

“They had the money in place but didn’t have the expertise. Aerobility provided the adaptive planes but they needed someone to run the project,” says Mike. This is where Mike joined forces with Alan.

ALAN’S LIFELONG LOVE OF AVIATION

“I grew up in Lincolnshire and used to fly model planes with my dad, I loved aviation,” says Alan. “I joined the RAF as an aircraft engineer in 1998, when I was 19. The job has taken me all over the world; from Alaska to Afghanistan. I’ve served for 24 years.”

Alan was injured in 2011 when he was knocked off his bike – he had his leg amputated above the knee that same day. “I went through Headley Court – rehab was straightforward for me – and after a bit of a fight, I was allowed to stay in work,” he says. “I work with my hands, so why not? I have

“THIS WAS A REAL LEAP IN TERMS OF DIFFICULTY. IT ISN’T JUST A CASE OF CHUCKING IN A COUPLE OF MOVES”

carried on fixing jets, and H Squadron were phenomenal in keeping my post open.”

Learning to fly was a different matter. “I’d always wanted to do it, but I didn’t have the A Levels to join up as a pilot,” says Alan. “I raced motorbikes instead, but after my amputation I started flying microlites, which was great, and then I saw an advert for the Spitfire Scholarship and applied.

“I was lucky enough to get on that, and became the first amputee since Douglas Bader himself to fly a Spitfire solo. Flying a Spitfire is incredible; it is just how you

would dream it would be. It can be a handful on takeoff and landing, but there is real emotion when you’re flying an iconic fighter.”

This led Alan to Bader’s Bus Company where he met Mike. The pair did months of training in P828 planes, which have good adaptive flying controls but lack real power.

“We did a season of displays in 2019 and were neat and tidy, but it’s difficult to do anything spectacular in those planes,” says Alan. After that, money for the project ran out, and Covid hit. The project wound down, but the pair founded Team Phoenix to build on the work they had already put in, getting training funds from the Douglas Bader Foundation and some local sponsorship from Marshalls of Cambridge – and then Blesma.

“We were able to use two Yak 52s, which are military planes,” says Mike. “They have more power, smoke, and brakes on the control column, so they’re perfect. They are Russian though, so we have wrapped them in Ukraine colours.”

Alan proved to be a natural despite the steep learning curve. “Mike really wanted

Mike and Alan fly their planes in line astern as they complete a loop



to step it up and do something dynamic to show what disabled people are capable of,” he says. “This was a real leap in terms of difficulty. It isn’t just chucking in a couple of moves. Formation aerobatics is more difficult than either of us had expected.”

Mike concurs. “It’s a totally different skill set to flying an Airbus,” he says. “I’d not done aerobatics since I was 28 and I’m 60 now. And Alan had never done it. Learning to fly a new plane, then learning

to do aerobatics, then learning to fly in close formation is incredibly challenging. It’s tough when you have two arms and legs. My left leg is thin around the knee, and Alan’s prosthetic fell off last year while he was flying after he got too sweaty. It can be tricky.”

The (literal) highs make it all worthwhile, though. “Being there with my mate, seeing him a few metres away, you think: ‘This is epic!’” says Alan. “But there isn’t too much

time to enjoy it, because you have to stay focused and in the zone. It’s intense, and with all the adrenaline and concentration it’s really tiring.”

Every time they fly, they prove a point, however. Mike has taken part in Making Generation R, which allows him to talk about how Team Phoenix has helped him overcome adversity. “It’s a great way to get the message across,” he says.

And Alan perhaps sums it up perfectly: “My amputation doesn’t interfere with flying,” he says. “We use hand brakes not toe brakes, and even though I have less strength and get less feedback from the plane on the side that I have my amputation, I can work around it. We are able to show what is possible.

“We are really looking forward to doing the events this summer. It’s been a long process to get here, and it will hopefully put us on the map. Blesma’s sponsorship has been great and has really helped us along the way.”

Mike (far right) and Alan talk through their routine one more time before they head out to their aircraft



Find out more about the team and this year’s events at www.teamphoenixair.com



LOOKING BACK AT THE LAST NINE DECADES

BLESMA BECAME A REGISTERED CHARITY IN 1932. IN THE 90 YEARS SINCE, THE ASSOCIATION – AND THE 62,000 IT HAS HELPED – HAVE ACHIEVED MUCH

Blesma Member Leslie Harris shares his birth year with the Association. He was a young child living in Exeter when World War II broke out and remembers German raids on the city from 1940 through to 1942. Leslie went on to serve as a Wing Commander in the RAF, losing a limb following a flying accident. He took time to tell us about his life...

What are your memories of WWII?

I remember there were quite a few attacks on Exeter. My father was a baker working night shifts and he came out of the bakery one morning to find the row of houses across the road had taken a direct hit and had been demolished.

What inspired you to join the RAF?

A former pupil came back to school in his RAF uniform so, in 1948, a couple of us decided to sign up. I was initially trained as a radio fitter. I enjoyed it and signed up for 18 years. I then trained to be a pilot at RAF Thornhill, getting my wings in 1953.

What assignments did you get?

I was posted to Singapore where I flew Meteors – it was a great life. Sadly, on one flight, I undershot the runway, crashed into the sea wall and came to rest just on the airfield. I was taken to RAF Changi Hospital with multiple injuries and was flown home after a month. I was taken to RAF Halton, and then to Headley Court for a year where I had



a number of skin and bone grafts as well as various other procedures.

Did that end your RAF career?

No, I got back to flying Canberra PR7s and, although I had a restricted category due to my injury, I was still flying operations. But I was walking with great pain and I was grounded for review. The medical team said I had arthritis in my ankle because it had got smashed up in the crash; they had done the best for me but it had been put back together badly.

They decided to try an operation to fuse the bones together but, unfortunately, that went wrong – I got an infection and was

rushed back into hospital. The surgeon couldn't guarantee surgery would make it any better, so I decided to have the leg amputated below the knee. It seemed the better of two evils at the time. I was 23 years old.

Were you able to fly again?

Sadly not. It took me a long time to recover, but I had a full Service career, joining the Air Traffic Control Branch and ending up as a Wing Commander on the ATC Examining Board. I was in charge of a five-strong team that travelled the world. I retired on my 55th birthday and then got a job as an RAF civil servant, finishing off at RAF High Wycombe. The Air Force was like a big family, and I was fortunate to enjoy great times.

Did you join Blesma after your accident?

I didn't think I was eligible because I was still serving. One day, I was manning a stall next to Blesma's at the RAF Museum Hendon and got talking to them. They said I could join, so I did! The Association has adapted to the changing times and, although things have got better in many areas for injured Service personnel, the Association is still needed.

How have you benefitted from Blesma?

Knowing it is there should I need it is a great comfort. It has put me in touch with other Members, and I got to meet lots of others through Branch meetings. Even after 90 years, it is still bringing Members together.



Leslie Harris turns 90 this year, as does the Association



Words: Danny Buckland Photography: Andy Bate

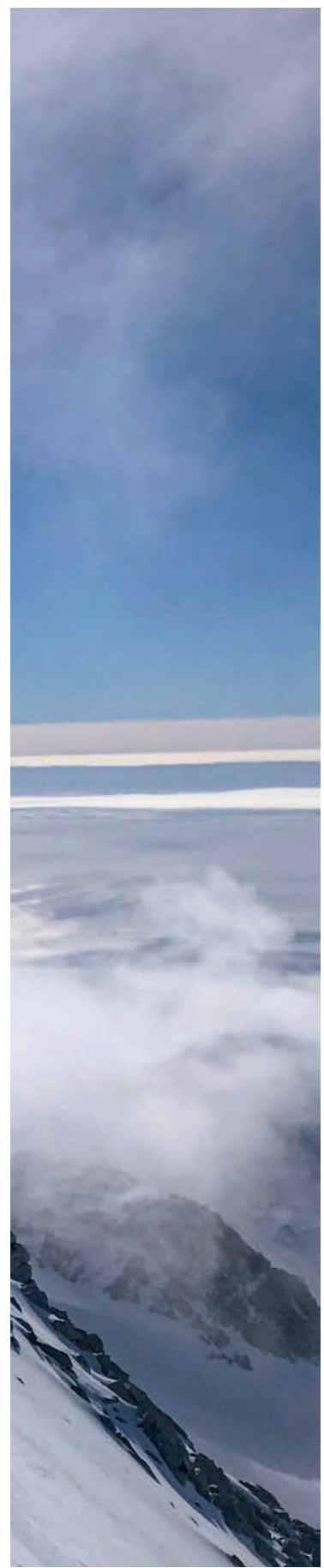




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**The
nearest
human
beings to us
were on the
International
Space
Station**
”

HOW DID YOUR YEAR START? MARTIN HEWITT HAD TREKKED TO THE SOUTH POLE AND CLIMBED ANTARCTICA'S HIGHEST MOUNTAIN BY FEBRUARY. BUT THAT'S NOT EVEN THE HALF OF IT...

Martin Hewitt knew that trying to complete the Adaptive Grand Slam was going to be hard – but he didn't know it was going to be quite this hard. The former Captain in the Parachute Regiment went into the ludicrously difficult challenge – to summit the highest peak on each of the seven continents and walk unsupported to the North and South Poles – being told by experts that his paralysed right arm would make the task almost impossible. But in the end, it hasn't been physical shortcomings that have threatened to derail Martin's mission. Nor has it been altitude sickness, frostbite, storms or giant crevasses. By far the biggest risk of failure has come from much more mundane quarters: funding, paperwork and COVID-19 lockdowns.



Words: Nick Moore Photography: Martin Hewitt



After 50 days of trekking in temperatures as low as -35°C Martin (right) and Louis reach the Pole

“It was touch and go whether we’d be able to keep going with the project for quite a while,” says Blesma Member Martin, 41, who had already summited five peaks (including Everest) and reached the North Pole before the pandemic hit. “Covid had a huge impact from an organisational and financial point of view. We were trying to generate sponsorship deals, but weren’t sure we would be able to honour them by getting to do the expedition and generating the publicity. I also couldn’t do speaking engagements to help get deals done.”

After numerous setbacks, however, Martin eventually got funding in place for his South Pole expedition. Due to Covid, “the paperwork was astronomical, and the process was so inefficient. We just didn’t know if we could even get to Chile.”

Last winter, however, Martin made it to Latin America’s continental edge and finally began his bid to walk unsupported to the South Pole before attempting to reach summit number six of seven; Mount Vinson in Antarctica. Once there, he and his logistics team were tested daily for the virus, but once he got going there was at least the silver lining of no more coronavirus

“FOR THE FIRST 10 DAYS, THE HEADWIND WAS RAGING UP TO 45 KNOTS AND, AT -35°C , THE RISK OF FROSTBITE WAS EXTREMELY HIGH”

worries. “We didn’t have to talk about it for two-and-a-half months,” he says, “and there was even less risk. At one point, the nearest human beings to us were on the International Space Station!”

Martin had a new team in place for the mission – his former teammates were reminders of the dangers at hand. American Matt Nyman, who had joined Martin on several previous climbs, lost his life in an avalanche in early 2021. Ex-Paratrooper Terry Byrne, meanwhile, had dropped out due to injury. Prior to Martin’s successful Everest attempt, meanwhile, 11 people had

perished in the previous nine days. Wanting to minimise risk, Martin teamed up with legendary explorer and former British Army officer Louis Rudd for the 750km trek.

“Lou is a Polar guide who spent 30 years in the SAS and is one of just two people to cross the continent solo and unsupported,” says Martin. “He was perfect for the job.”

Their main foe would be – fairly obviously – the weather. “In the South Pole there is a permanent katabatic wind [*pushing high density air down from an elevation*], and it’s in your face the whole time as you start on the ice shelf and move onto land, up a gradual incline heading to 3,000m,” says Martin. “For the first 10 days, the headwind was raging up to 45 knots, day and night. With the temperature dropping to -35°C , the risk of frostbite was extremely high. That all made it very difficult to do things like get a tent up and make it windproof with one arm. So Lou and I relied on teamwork a lot – using my bodyweight to get pegs in, finding efficiencies.”

The other key difficulty was that the route to the Pole is not flat. “There are sastrugi – bumpy mounds of snow that build up – that can go on for kilometres,” says



Martin, “and they’re hard to negotiate with one arm. Being unassisted, we had no resupplies, and we were not using kites. The sled weighed 108kg at the start of the expedition, and pulling it over sastrugi was tricky because I had to put all the weight on my left leg, and then generate force to pull the sled up and over. Eventually, 250 miles into the expedition, this caused my left leg significant problems. I developed achilles peritendinitis, and eventually we had to go back to the logistics base for medical attention and to rest for a couple of weeks.”

GETTING BACK TO POLE POSITION

Once sufficiently rested, the duo began again, conscious that they had to complete the expedition by 11 January 2022 in order to get a flight to Mount Vinson to attempt to summit Antarctica’s highest peak.

“We managed to crack on, and thankfully my Achilles held up,” says Martin. “But I’d rank it right up there with the hardest expeditions I’ve done. It’s not as dangerous as some of the mountains, but it’s relentless. There are no rest days and you’re pulling 10 to 12 hours a day in a harsh environment. You take the lead and navigate for 90 minutes, then follow the other person.

“I wasn’t able to complete any environment training beforehand, so I hadn’t acclimatised to the cold since I was on Everest back in 2019. Physically, we were strong, but for the first two weeks I struggled psychologically with the brutality of the expedition.”

There was also the lack of stimulation to deal with. “After the first 60 miles of



2. DENALI, NORTH AMERICA (5,895M)

The highest mountain in North America was conquered by Martin as part of a six-man team in May 2013. Each team member had to lug a 30lb rucksack and 200lb sled, battling wind speeds of up to 60mph.

GRANDEST OF GRAND SLAMS

Seven continents, seven summits, two Poles, one place in the record books. A step-by-step (by step!) guide to the planet’s biggest challenge

5. MOUNT ACONCAGUA, SOUTH AMERICA (6,961M)

The team scaled the Argentine peak in January 2017. With an atmosphere of only 40 per cent that at sea level, altitude sickness is always a real risk.



8. MOUNT VINSON, ANTARCTICA (4,892M)

After trekking to the South Pole, Martin tackled Antarctica’s highest peak, situated one kilometre north of the Pole. He made it to the top on 14 January 2022.





1. GEOGRAPHIC NORTH POLE

Martin's first completed mission in April 2011. A 190-mile, 13-day slog in aid of Walking With The Wounded.

4. MOUNT ELBRUS, EUROPE (5,462M)

Located in Russia and summited by the team in April 2014. Some argue that Elbrus is actually in Asia, making Mont Blanc Europe's highest mountain – so the team climbed that, too!



6. MOUNT EVEREST, ASIA (8,848M)

The big one. The team's first attempt was abandoned in 2012 due to serious threats from avalanches. Martin was successful on his second attempt, reaching the highest point on the entire planet early in the morning on Thursday 23 May 2019.



3. MOUNT KILIMANJARO, AFRICA (5,895M)

The top of Africa. Located in Tanzania, Kili's 5,895m peak was reached after nine days of climbing in November 2014.



9. CARSTENZ PYRAMID, AUSTRALASIA (4,884M)

Also known as Puncak Jaya. It's a five-day hike through the jungle just to reach base camp. The team plan to attempt this final challenge in October 2023.

7. GEOGRAPHIC SOUTH POLE

From March to September, the South Pole gets no sunlight. Martin and Louis reached the Pole on 05 January 2022, in the summer, when the sun is continuously (but only just) above the horizon. The South Pole's climate is one of the coldest on Earth. The team faced a true test of endurance across the barren, icy plateau during the 750km trek.



SOUTHERN OCEAN



Martin picks up the pace to push on to the summit of Mount Vinson

High winds and low temperatures made basics such as putting a tent up incredibly difficult



the expedition, the views of mountain ridges disappeared, and there was nothing but snow and ice as far as the eye could see,” says Martin. “It didn’t help that both my pairs of headphones failed, so I had no music or audiobooks. I was in my own head for all that time. But after a few weeks, I readjusted and accepted that this was my new environment. My job was to walk. It became easier and we started to excel.”

After 50 days of slogging, they reached the South Pole on 05 January 2022. “It was amazing, that place is unbelievable!” says Martin. “After the lack of stimulation, being in a kitchen and smelling proper food was very surreal, and a glorious feeling.”

There wasn’t much time to celebrate, however: Martin still had Mount Vinson, Antarctica’s 4,892m peak, to stand on. “Vinson was amazing, and it’s not too hard a mountain,” he says. “It’s very cold, and it’s obviously not small, but it isn’t overly technical, so we enjoyed it. We were able to take in the view. Sometimes, you’d see a rocky outcrop and realise that it was a 3,000m mountain, but there was so much snow on it that you could only see the top.

It was nuts. We had a good weather window, so we pushed the pace and got to the top in three days. It felt great.”

With peak number six in the bag, Martin headed home in January – just in time to get Covid – and is now planning the last stage of his epic Grand Slam. So have the naysayers who doubted that it could be done finally been silenced?

“I’m pretty satisfied,” says Martin. “People maybe don’t know you, your background or what you’ve done when you’re trying to do something like this. We had the right background, the right preparation, the right level of responsibility. We’ve not been found wanting on any expedition.

“I didn’t know if we’d do it at the start – there were so many moving parts to it – and if I was a billionaire it would have been a hell of a lot easier! The organisational and time pressures have been significant, and getting to the start line has always been just as hard as doing the physical training or the actual climbs.”

But whether it’s form-filling or dealing with death zones, Martin has proved equal to the challenges. Again and again.

WHAT’S NEXT FOR MR MOUNTAIN?

One Tyrolean traverse, one Herculean effort, and then it’s home to Cheshire

HAVING TICKED OFF DENALI (North America), Elbrus (Europe), Kilimanjaro (Africa), Everest (Asia), Aconcagua (South America), Vinson (Antarctica) and both Poles, only the Carstensz Pyramid in Indonesia lies between Martin and completing the Adaptive Grand Slam. The ninth highest mountain on earth, on an island in New Guinea, is no pushover, however.

“It will be tricky for me as there is a lot of rock climbing, which is hard with one arm,” says Martin. “It’s over 4,000m, and when you get to the summit there’s a Tyrolean traverse; an eight-metre gap between two areas of rock. You have to lean on a thin wire and tightrope across with two other wires as support. Try doing that with one arm and full kit after several thousand metres of climbing and with a massive drop beneath you!”

Luckily, Martin has found a place in Wales to train for the traverse, and he feels ready. “We are looking to do it in October 2023, and will try to get as many of the guys as we can along who have been on our previous expeditions. We will have a selection process and hopefully get some Blesma Members on the trip.”

Once done, Martin will stay involved with the Adaptive Grand Slam charity, which supports members of the disabled community by funding their participation in expeditions and physical challenges.

If you want to apply for a place on the Carstensz Pyramid expedition email martin@adaptivegrandslam.com





NO MORE WAITING IN THE WINGS

AFTER SEVERAL YEARS OF MGR TRAINING BEING ONLINE, THE GRADUATES OF 2022 GOT USED TO LIFE IN THE SPOTLIGHT AS THEY PREPARED TO TELL THE WORLD ABOUT THEIR INCREDIBLE LIVES

The latest Making Generation R (MGR) graduates are taking their inspirational stories around the country as Blesma's unique project continues to boost the nation's resilience. The programme, which develops Members' storytelling and enhances their communication skills, is now reaching further than ever before, with workshops being delivered to NHS staff and first responders as well as in schools and colleges, and to military audiences.

The 16-strong group, who have a range of ages and backgrounds, hail from all branches of the military. They are now using their life stories to inspire others while gaining huge personal satisfaction and reward from giving back to society.

"MGR continues to be an amazing programme with incredibly positive results," says Jess March, Blesma's Activities Manager. "That's not just because of what Members learn in order to speak in front of an audience, it's also because of those life skills they pick up during the actual training. One of our new graduates recently told me that just being able to talk through the incident that led to his amputation has made a huge difference to who he is as a person and how he communicates on a daily basis.

"One of the great by-products of the project is the confidence it gives people when they recognise that they are interesting regardless of what has happened to them. Being able to open up and talk about what has happened is very powerful for the Members and their families."

Since 2016, MGR has trained up 110 Members whose workshops have reached more than 125,000 people.

"We have great feedback from Members about the

satisfaction they get from delivering the workshops and making a difference to people's lives," says Jess, "but we also see them gaining the confidence to take part in other activities after they have completed MGR.

"Once they realise they can stand up in front of a room full of people and talk, they know they can push their boundaries in other ways and do other things they have never tried before. It all fits in with the Blesma ethos of helping Members to become more confident so they go on to lead independent and fulfilling lives."

ADDRESSING ISSUES AND IDEAS

The training, which this year culminated in a showcase performance on stage at Sadler's Wells Theatre in London, is perhaps more transformative for those with no experience of public speaking than it is for those who are more comfortable in front of an audience.

"Theatre is a love of mine and I thought this would be a walk in the park, but MGR made me challenge myself," says former Royal Navy submariner Andrew Mead, who spent 27 years as an actor in Australia. "When you hold a mirror up to yourself, it makes you think more deeply and address issues and ideas.

"My life story, which I'd been telling for years, became different. I'd always focused on the negative stuff – having my legs amputated and my previous life being cut short – and I wasn't looking at the bigger picture or how far I'd come. MGR helped bring all that out and I was able to change my story for the better.

"The overall experience was incredible. All the acting coaches and facilitators were fantastic, and as a group we trusted each other and that allowed everybody to feel safe. Some in the group have been through very dark times, but everyone was so honest

Below: Andrew Brown in full flow during the course finale in front of an audience at Sadler's Wells Theatre in London





“It’s given me a purpose because I’m giving back, and I’m more confident to get back out into the world”

training before, so it was all a bit daunting to start with. I wanted to get out of my comfort zone but it was strange doing all the voice and acting warm-up exercises. But everyone was so supportive and encouraging. We were all in it together and when you see others getting involved, you don’t want to let the side down.

How did taking part in the course affect you?

As a family, we’d been through an awful lot – finishing chemotherapy, moving house, my wife qualifying as a nurse, and then Covid – so had been trying to piece our lives back together and a lot of feelings had been suppressed. MGR opened a lot of doors back up and there were tears. But it forced us to talk about what had happened and that really helped.

How was your first workshop?

The headmaster, teachers and all the school made us feel very welcome. I was paired up with Dan Richards, who’d also done the course, which made me feel more comfortable, and the facilitator we had was outstanding. It went well because I could tell my story was having an impact on the audience.

Has the experience changed you?

I had always been a very confident, outgoing person but it went the other way after the cancer and I became quieter and more reserved. This made me realise I am still the same, but I just have a fancier leg than most people. It’s given me a purpose because I’m giving back, and I’m more confident to get back out into the world.

SHANE HENRY

Shane was diagnosed with cancer after developing a lump in his right leg. The sarcoma was so advanced that surgeons had to amputate his leg. He then developed sepsis and was critically ill in intensive care before his condition stabilised. Shane served for five years in the Royal Navy, and lives with his partner and two children

How did the cancer get noticed?

I was focused on training for a number of strongman competitions and was in the gym when I felt a strange sensation in my leg. It didn’t feel muscular so I just shrugged it off, but my wife is a nurse and she was having none of it. I went to have it checked out and was quickly transferred to hospital to have a range of blood tests and MRIs. I was told I needed the amputation or I would die. It all happened very quickly.

When did you learn about MGR?

I’d read about it in *Blesma Magazine* but didn’t give it much thought. The doctors told me I was a success story because not many people survive that type of cancer and said it would be good to talk about it. My wife said why not give MGR a go because not many people talk openly about going through cancer and what it does to your life.

How did you settle into the training?

I’d never done public speaking or virtual

and giving, and we all got on with it together, as a team.” Andrew, who was injured playing football, was struck with septicaemia that, in turn, led to a double below-knee amputation. He delivered his first workshop at a school in Nottinghamshire alongside Member Steven Sampher.

“It went well. We have very different stories and the youngsters were really engaged,” he says. “Steven and I went for a coffee afterwards and a group of the students came past and started asking us more questions, which was a really great and rewarding end to the day.”

BREAKING OUT OF THE CLASSROOM

Making Generation R is increasing its reach by staging more sessions for adult military audiences and frontline workers including fire crews, NHS and military medical staff over the coming months. A session at HMS Excellent, the Defence Medical Services Centre at Portsmouth, was well received, with praise coming for Blesma Members Rob Bugden and Luke Delahunty who led the talk.

“Rob and Luke absolutely inspired everyone. They were amusing, honest and came across as incredibly genuine, kind men who have absolutely made the best of a challenging situation that no-one can truly prepare for,” came anonymous feedback from HMS Excellent. “Everyone came out of the talk with better perspective and with more focus on their goals. The last two years have been difficult for everyone for many reasons but meeting these two men, who have faced arguably the most difficult of challenges with confidence and grace, was awe inspiring.”

The 16-strong group bonded well during the online and face-to-face elements of this year’s training



COLIN BRANCH

Colin served in the Royal Anglian Regiment for 14 years. For eight of those he coped with a knee injury that led to his right leg being amputated. He was medically discharged from the Infantry in 2007 and worked as a welfare officer and foster carer. He is married with three children

What made you sign up for MGR?

I’d heard about it but didn’t think it was my type of thing until another Member said I should give it a go. I watched him tell his story at last year’s Members’ Weekend and I was blown away by the power of his talk. I’m fairly confident talking in front of groups, but I wanted to learn how to be more effective in getting things across with a more personal touch.

What was training like?

It was two days online and two days in person. It was a healing process for us. I’m still getting over my injury and it was good to hear other people sharing their stories. There was such a range of backgrounds – from military injuries to traffic collisions – but they have all had a massive impact on our lives.

How did your injury affect your life?

I was six years into my career and got injured when another guy fell on my leg during a patrol. I hid the severity of the injury at first, but it got worse and I started to self-medicate before the full extent of the problem became clear and I had the amputation.

What did you learn from taking part in MGR?

We have resilience in the Army but this allowed us to see it through a different lens and accept that you don’t have to portray yourself as unbreakable. It’s ok to hold your hands up and say you are vulnerable.

How was your first session?

It was at a college where my daughter is a lecturer. It was an eye-opener for her because I talked about stuff she wasn’t aware of, and also because my wife, Karie – who is my guiding light – features heavily.

What do you hope to achieve through MGR?

The main aim is to inspire kids and help them build resilience. We all have to be resilient from time to time, and it’s important to know that everybody’s different. If people get a better understanding of themselves and others from the workshops that will be rewarding. I’m also hoping to take it forward and do some public speaking or presenting.

Trustees' Annual and Strategic Report 2021

Every year, the Association must publish an annual report alongside a set of financial statements. Below is an abridged version of the most recent report

The COVID-19 crisis continued to affect the ways in which Blesma supported its Members in 2021. As the country went through varying degrees of lockdown our ability to conduct activities and meet face to face changed. The pandemic also continued to have a significant impact on the delivery of statutory services and our ability to raise funds in traditional ways.

Our Blesma Support Officers, Outreach Officers and volunteers worked very hard to maintain contact with Members, visiting in person whenever possible and keeping up a steady flow of emails and telephone calls when lockdown restrictions prevented this. Learning the lessons from 2020, our online activities programme was expanded, with a number of Members being provided with IT and advice to enable them to keep in contact with friends, family and other Members.

We were forced to call off our planned Members' Weekend and AGM in June, but were able to take advantage of a gap between lockdowns to deliver a successful event in October. This was the first chance for Members to gather together in more than two years, and it acted as a reminder that Blesma is an Association of friends who share ideas and support each other.

Although there were no major combat operations in 2021, UK personnel were deployed across the world in peacekeeping,

deterrence and advisory roles. They also played a key part in the Government's response to Covid at home. The unexpected events in Afghanistan in August reminded us that our military personnel can quickly find themselves in harm's way, and that the after-effects of conflict can last a lifetime.

During 2021, the Association welcomed 118 new Members. We continue to maintain very close links with the Defence Medical Rehabilitation Centre at Stanford Hall and NHS Limb Centres across the country. This enables us to provide immediate specialist advice and assistance as patients come to terms with limb loss, as well as the ongoing support they need. Sadly, we lost 193 Members, Widows and Widowers over the year. Our sympathies go out to their families and friends. The Association remains steadfast in its determination to be there for its Members through life.

Security

Blesma continues to provide professional welfare and outreach services, supported by our nine dedicated Support and 10 Outreach Officers, augmented by our 287 volunteers who continue to provide vital advice and support to Members across the UK. Our support has also included professional counselling for 39 Members spread over 328 counselling sessions, and assistance with

financial planning and debt management, along with work to secure the correct provision of Veterans UK and DWP pensions and allowances.

We have been very effective at mitigating the impact of the pandemic on prosthetic services through collaborative engagement with the NHS and Limb Centres. Blesma has built on the previous three years' success in delivering a wide range of online and outdoor activities to improve health and wellbeing by reducing social isolation and promoting digital inclusion. This has been especially relevant during the various periods of Covid lockdown.

2021 followed a similar theme to 2020, with the Independence and Wellbeing department facing significant Covid-related challenges. During this period of significant social dislocation and anxiety, the team remained the principal channel for information gathering on how our Members had fared during the year. In a similar vein, Blesma contributed to regional GP training programmes to help educate 150 young GPs, nurses and occupational therapists on the nuances of providing community-focused primary care for disabled veterans. Over the last three years this amounts to around 3,500 GPs having been formally inducted to veteran healthcare issues by Blesma.

Due to Covid restrictions, the traditional Blesma model of face-to-face welfare delivery



Something's brewing

Blesma's wide-ranging activities programme is a key element of its offer to Members and plays a vital part in supporting rehabilitation, restoring self-confidence and pushing boundaries. Despite the restrictions imposed by Covid for parts of 2021, the Association was still able to put on 136 face-to-face activities when restrictions allowed. Almost 5,000 Members, family members and carers took part in activities during the year – either in person or online – ranging from breath workshops to brewing a Blesma beer.



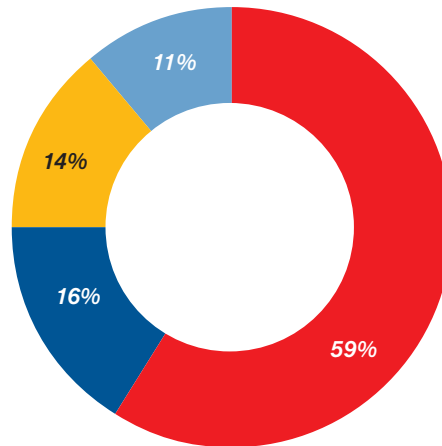
to Members quickly migrated to online and telephone delivery by Support Officers. Whilst this presented challenges, the success and lessons learned from 2020 enabled our Support and Outreach Officers to collectively deliver a 39 per cent increase in contact levels with our Members when compared to 2020.

The turn of the year saw the continuance of lockdown from late 2020 through to May 2021. During this challenging period Blesma Support Officers, supported by Outreach Officers, once again carried out 100 per cent checks of Members to establish a baseline of need and identify those at risk requiring closer and more regular support. Where 'in extremis' cases were identified, Support Officers conducted tightly risk-managed personal visits to Members. Although the majority of Members did not require immediate assistance, feedback suggested Members were deeply grateful for the continuing contact.

Our work to counter digital isolation has seen Members expanding their social networks by engaging online with families, friends and other Members across the country and overseas to an extent not seen before. A significant number of Members came to the Members' Weekend in order to meet up with friends they had made online during the pandemic.

In total, Blesma awarded 1,325 grants to 754 Members in 2021 to assist in the purchasing of specialist prosthetics, wheelchairs, mobility scooters, stairlifts, disabled bicycles and electrical goods. We also assisted with adaptations to bathrooms, kitchens, non-slip flooring, access ramps, disabled access to car ports and gardens, as well as helping with equipment and training for employment, physiotherapy, hobbies and counselling services.

INCOME



| | |
|----------------------|-----|
| ■ Donations & Grants | 59% |
| ■ Legacy | 16% |
| ■ Investment | 14% |
| ■ Other | 11% |

“Many grants have provided life-changing interventions for Members, improving their mobility, dignity, and physical and mental health”

This represents an increase of 18 per cent more grants awarded to 6 per cent more Members when compared to 2020. Many of the grants awarded this year have provided life-changing interventions for our Members, directly improving their mobility, personal dignity, and physical and mental health.

Feedback from Blesma's Support Officers indicates that casework has become significantly more complex and time intensive. This has largely been a result of the impact of Covid on service delivery, particularly where Members have required a multi-agency approach. Where this has been evident, Support Officers have been highly proactive and sensitive in taking a coordinating role to ensure that all key service and care providers honour their statutory obligations. Several interventions have been life changing for our Members.

However, not all grants were solely awarded by Blesma as we proactively sought to collaborate with other partner military charities to help fund 62 high value grants during the year, a 55 per cent increase in this sort of almonisation work compared to 2020. One such collaboration enabled a Blesma Member to undertake a complete home adaptation following a catastrophic life-changing injury.

Blesma continues to engage with the DWP and delivery partners, highlighting issues affecting veterans. This includes monitoring and publishing changes to existing policy which may affect our Members.

During the year, the Association has provided detailed feedback and advice on several government consultation papers on health, disability, and the provision of care services. The long-term pressure on health and social care budgets has been exacerbated by the pandemic. We closely monitor where



gaps in support leave our Members vulnerable, and we will continue to step in to meet their needs whilst always holding the State to account where appropriate.

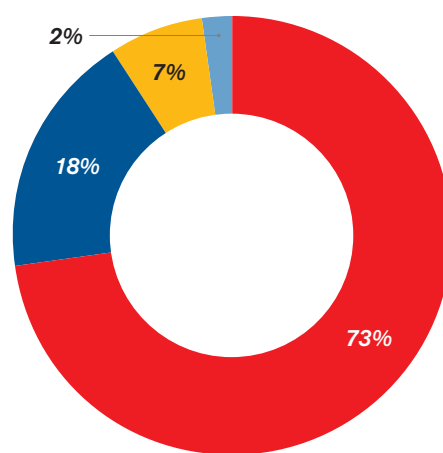
Identity

Blesma's wide-ranging activities programme is a key element of its offer to Members and plays a vital part in supporting rehabilitation, restoring self-confidence and pushing boundaries. As well as physically challenging adventure pursuits, Members are able to take part in a wide range of social activities and events, both in person and online.

Linking Members and their families together in comradeship was particularly important in 2021. Although Covid restrictions significantly affected our ability to arrange face-to-face activities throughout the year, the Association fought hard to deliver if at all possible within the rules in force at the time.

The year began under lockdown conditions with the focus on virtual events, including a full year's course of Tai Chi, breath workshops, photography and video editing, baking and painting. As Covid measures eased, some face-to-face activities were able to restart in the summer. All our activities were over-subscribed as Members made the most of the opportunity and took part in cycling trips, a surf training week, fishing, and Widows and Seniors Weeks, as well as families and couples breaks in London, Edinburgh, and Alveston Hall in Cheshire.

Although the planned Members' Weekend and Annual General Meeting in June were unable to take place due to lockdown, the Association was able to conduct the AGM online and delay the Members' Weekend until Covid restrictions were eased. The event took place at Chesford Grange, Warwickshire

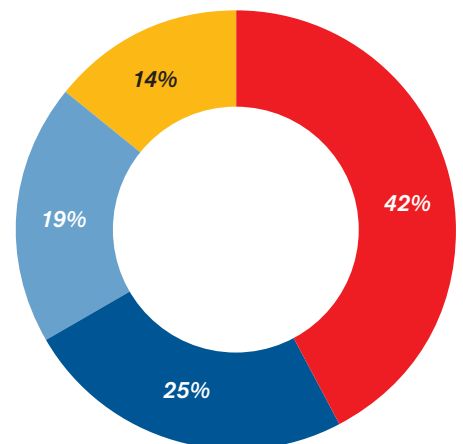


EXPENDITURE

| | |
|----------------------------|-----|
| Membership Services | 73% |
| Fundraising | 18% |
| Awareness & Representation | 7% |
| Investment fees | 2% |

MEMBERSHIP SERVICES EXPENDITURE

| | |
|-------------------------|-----|
| Advice, Support, Visits | 42% |
| Engagement, Other | 25% |
| Grants & Assistance | 19% |
| Activities | 14% |
| Overheads | 14% |



with 227 Members, family members and carers attending, despite a last-minute fuel crisis. The event began with a moving memorial service and included a gala dinner as well as a range of activities including a hugely popular cream tea as well as axe throwing and virtual gaming.

Blesma Members also gave a series of presentations focusing on the activities they were personally involved in. This was the first time that Members from across the country had been able to meet up, compare their experiences and enjoy each other's company in more than two years.



Chairman General Sir Adrian Bradshaw presents Jean McCready with the Cyril Stephens Award at Members' Weekend



Fortunately, the Remembrance Parade at The Cenotaph did take place in 2021. Blesma was represented by 22 Members (38 participants) and the Chief Executive. The Remembrance 11K challenge event was run for the second year, with 104 Members, staff and supporters raising £14,000. Blesma's Venture Fund continues to provide funding to enable Members to take part in a broad range of activities, including individual and team sports, expeditions, personal development and individual challenges. Following a review by the Board, funding was significantly increased in 2021.

Activities supported in the year included competitive motorsports (powerboat, car and motorcycle), Summer and Winter Paralympic training and flying training.

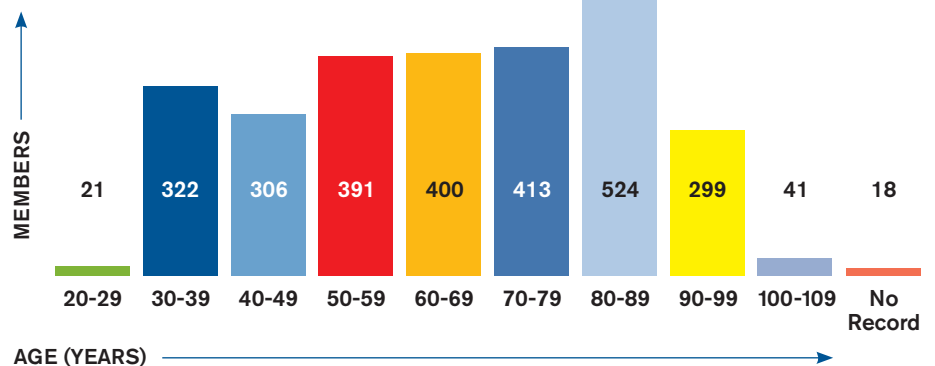
International activities were unable to take place in 2021 due to Covid travel restrictions. Although plans were made for a skiing activity in France in January 2022, these had to be cancelled due to the Omicron variant. Nevertheless, Blesma continues to develop plans for a range of overseas activities as soon as conditions will allow.

Making Generation R continues to enable Blesma Members to 'give back' by describing to youth audiences how they have learned to develop resilience after injury. During the five years of the programme more than 120,000 participants have experienced a Member's story. The majority of presentations in 2021 were online, reaching an audience of more than 30,000 people.

In 2021, 98 per cent of Blesma Members taking part stated that the project effectively improved their confidence and self-esteem. Meanwhile, 100 per cent of BSOs stated that MGR was 'very effective' at improving Member wellbeing, while 89 per cent of students and 98 per cent of teachers rated their experience of the workshop as either 'excellent' or 'good'.

THE AGE OF BLESMA'S MEMBERS

Blesma has a total membership of 2,725





Making Generation R also won the Training and Development Award at the 2021 Soldiering On Awards. An external evaluation of the programme will be conducted in 2022.

Connectivity

Maintaining connectivity across the Association is fundamental to Blesma as a key part of what the Association was formed to do. We seek to represent our Members' interests, gain support to enable our work, and promote wider understanding of the impact of disability on Members and families. Within the Association, strong connections between Members were kept up through a steady flow of publications, social media output, and bringing Members together in person or online.

More widely, our advocacy on behalf of Members has continued, with direct input to policymakers and statutory authorities. We work to reinforce our connections with agencies such as the NHS, Veterans UK, and the Department for Work and Pensions. Blesma also maintains close links with other military charities, either directly or through

membership of the executive committee of the Confederation of Service Organisations (Cobseo). The Association continues to be respected as a specialist and honest broker on behalf of its Members.

In 2021, the Communications Department continued to focus on its priority of ensuring timely communication with Members, supporters and the public via our printed publications, online, and through coverage in national and local media outlets. During the year, the department continued to produce the *Blesma Magazine* and *Blesma Bulletin*, totalling seven publications. A review of print resulted in the decision to reduce the frequency of this output to a quarterly publication from 2022 onwards. This new 'merged' publication will be more Member focused and ensure that those Members who are not digitally active continue to be informed and supported.

The use of video has been a particular success story in the latter half of the year, covering Remembrance commemorations, Member activities and Blesma's annual Big Give campaign.

Audience figures across the range of social

“We will continue to step in to meet Members' needs whilst holding the State to account where appropriate”

media channels almost doubled in 2021, with performance varying between platforms as audience preferences changed. Blesma's videos on YouTube and coverage on the LinkedIn professional networking site performed particularly well.

The Blesma Connects app continues to be used and regularly updated, with 19,000 views during 2021. Following feedback from a Member survey in 2020, a review took place which will help determine how the app can most effectively be used by Members.

Notable press stories throughout the year included coverage of the Making Generation R programme in the *Daily Mirror*, widespread reporting of Member Jon Noble receiving a JACO robotic arm, supporter James Kirby's 48-hour fundraising march, Member Tim Tomkinson summiting Mount Snowdon in aid of Blesma, and Member Chris Ganley's battle to get back to motorcycle racing after his bikes and equipment were lost in a fire.

Blesma's Digital Inclusion Programme continued to provide iPads and 'user friendly' training and information for Members who needed to connect digitally as the pandemic wore on. This year, some 20 new iPads were provided, including one to a Member in South Africa.

The Fundraising and Activities Departments kept up a steady flow of communications due to the threat posed to revenue and the requirement to adjust our support to Members as circumstances changed throughout the year. Activities and fundraising events that were able to take place were widely publicised and promoted to Members and supporters, with the result that the significant majority were oversubscribed.

The above is a synopsis taken from the Trustees' Annual and Strategic Report 2021. You can read the full report online at www.blesma.org/news-media/annual-report

GAME ON!

IN RECENT YEARS COMPUTER GAMES HAVE BECOME BIG BUSINESS, WITH TOURNAMENTS PLAYED BY PROS AS PART OF COMPETITIVE TEAMS. MAKE WAY FOR THE BLESMA LEGENDS

It's April and Blesma's newly launched esports team, the Blesma Legends, have the chance to meet up in person and compete in their debut outing at Birmingham's legendary gaming festival; Insomnia. Many gamers at Insomnia Festival's 'Bring Your Own Computer' LAN party have brought with them their own computers and consoles, from the latest PlayStations to personalised gaming PCs. While connected to the Local Area Network (LAN), the gamers are part of one vast network and can play matches against anyone in the room.

Within the Bring Your Own Computer space there are tournaments, rematches and new personal bests happening in their hundreds. The Members representing the Blesma Legends esports team are Lionel O'Connor, Jack Cummings, Daniel Bingley and Alex Harrison, and they form a team in *Call of Duty* within moments of arriving. Tournaments and matches are organised on the event's Discord channel; an online message board app that is popular with gamers looking to find opponents.

"The Bring Your Own Computer element of Insomnia is great because it offers a chance to relax, play games and chill with people. There's competition as well – it was great when me, Jack, a Member of the RBL, and our



Alex Harrison takes part in a Royal Navy *Halo* tournament



Words and photography: Izzy Perks

supporter Halford came second overall in a *Call of Duty Warzone* tournament on the second day,” says event lead and organiser, Daniel. Blesma was far from the only military charity in attendance. Sharing a row of desks with Members were gamers who play competitively representing the Royal British Legion and Help for Heroes. There were also huge numbers of serving personnel taking part, with teams from the REME and the RAF situated just across the desk.

ANYONE FOR A QUICK GAME OF HADO?

There is more to Insomnia Festival than the Bring Your Own Computer section, however. The main gaming expo hall itself boasts a range of arenas, with retro games arcades, stalls selling exclusive merchandise and more.

Perhaps the most eye-catching stall is that of the British Army. The Army esports team have brought along a Challenger 2 main battle tank to invite the public into conversation. With the link to popular war games such as *Call of Duty* unavoidable, it may seem surprising that this game was not all the Army stand had on offer. The stall had computers set up for what proved to be an exceptionally popular *Halo* tournament, proving that the military interest in gaming is more than just one note.

With so many Service personnel and veterans together in one place it was only a matter of time before the competitive military nature bubbled to the surface, and a veterans’ charity versus serving personnel tournament was quickly organised.

The game was *HADO*; the only official sport to use augmented reality. Unlike most video games, this esports is played on a real court, with players moving around the court and using their bodies to play. The game sees three players on either side firing virtual balls at one another, and raising shields to protect themselves and their team. Players can still see the real world around them, but with specialised visors adding the elements of the game as an overlay to reality.

“It was a great experience and good to get the military organisations together on the court. It would be great to stay in touch with the *HADO* guys and perhaps extend the opportunity to other Blesma Members and families in the future,” said Daniel after the tournament.

Blesma faced off against the Royal British Legion first, but with a few seasoned *HADO* players amongst the ranks of the British Legion the result was a close defeat for the Blesma Legends. You can watch the match, including the virtual elements seen by the players, on Blesma’s YouTube channel.

“A gaming festival like this is perfect for bringing the team together. When we do well, we can look at our neighbours and give each other high fives,” says Blesma Legends team member Alex. “When you’re online, you can talk to each other, but it’s not quite the same.”

If you would like to find out more about joining the Blesma Legends contact the Activities Team



Serving soldiers compete in the *League of Legends*



Above: the Blesma Legends have a screen break to talk gaming tactics. Jack Cummings (right) is focused on his online battle





THE BRITISH ARMY AND ESPORTS

The newly appointed SO2 Army esports Major Tim Harcourt (above) and the British Army's Call of Duty manager Lance Corporal Kieran Girdler explain what gaming means to the Army

How did you guys come to be here today?

Major Harcourt: It's part of the Army's engagement programme. We come to big events like this to show the public that we're normal people, and we like to have fun as well. The fact that I'm employed as the officer in charge of esports engagement shows that the British Army is taking this seriously. Some might see us as recruiting, but we don't want it to be seen like that. It's about showing the human side of the Army.

What does esports mean to you?

Lance Corporal Girdler: For me, esports is about getting people involved. Everyone plays and it doesn't matter if you're big, small, weak or strong, there's a game for everyone. It means competition as well. We have corps tournaments where we all play each other, we get veterans involved, civilian organisations as well.

Esports has a bit of a bad rap within the military because it's not a physical sport.

But if you look at the nature of competitive games, we work on tactics, we work on communications, hand-eye coordination skills, reaction times... They're all things that we can take into our day job.

Major Harcourt: A huge advantage of esports is its massive community. The British Army's Discord has thousands of people, veterans, members of different corps, Service families and civilians who want to connect. You just can't do that with other sports.

Where do you see gaming in the Army going in the future?

Major Harcourt: It's only going to get bigger. We will be doing other events around the country and around the world, continuing to be ambassadors for the British Army, for the military, and using esports as a vehicle to connect with other parts of society. The British Army is evolving and becoming more intelligent. If you've been following The Future Soldier programmes, you'll know that the military

and the Army are developing massively in terms of technological capabilities and understanding of cyber – everything within esports is relevant to that. We need to connect with technologically minded people, with the future generation of the military. If we can't relate to those people and we can't learn from them, we will be left behind.

Lance Corporal Girdler: I would like to see us attending more tournaments; they are massive opportunities for soldiers to represent the Army at something different. If you're not a physical sports player, it gives you an opportunity to represent your organisation doing something you love.

Major Harcourt: I think a lot of people have been very impressed and surprised, some of these guys are incredible. We've got some Army gamers in the top 100 rankings for *Call of Duty* and the Army team reached the semi-finals of the *League of Legends* tournament, beating several pro teams and really turning heads.



Join Blesma this Remembrance Day

Take part in the march to The Cenotaph for one of the most poignant events in the Activities Calendar

Contact the Activities Team: eventsca@blesma.org

Applications close 01 August

Bulletin

Ladies with Limb Loss event is success

Blesma was delighted to hold its first Ladies with Limb Loss event, timed to coincide with International Women's Day on 17/18 March. The event, held at the Doubletree Hotel in Sheffield and supported by NHS Limb Centre Sheffield and The Limbless Association, was a huge success with nine female amputee Members attending.

Following a number of requests from Members, Adele Miller, Outreach Officer NE, and Kirsten Morrissey, Outreach Officer NW, devised the unique event focusing on the specific issues women amputees face. It was a great opportunity for the women to meet other female Members, enjoy some time away from their busy lives, and to share, support and learn from each other.

After some much needed R&R in the hotel spa, Members enjoyed an evening meal with a presentation from Lisa Johnston, one of Blesma's recent MGR graduates. Lisa described how she felt it was important for the unique issues female amputees face to be more widely recognised and supported.

One subject raised was that of body image. Amongst fellow female amputees, the Members found it easier to share their feelings about their bodies, and found confidence to jump in a jacuzzi together. One Member even swam in a pool for the



first time since her injury. The highlight of the event was a seminar provided by the NHS Limb Centre in Sheffield. Centre manager Alison Stenson, clinical lead Jane McLean, and prosthetist Zoe Savage all spoke to the group. Alison said how delighted the team were to be invited to what was the first female-focused amputee event they were aware of. During the seminar, the Members were able share their experiences and seek support and

guidance not only from the clinical staff but also from one another.

As a direct result of feedback from Members, Alison is now working with her Limb Centre colleagues and patients to produce specific guidance for pregnant amputees that can be shared more widely across Limb Centre services nationally.

"The event was an absolute godsend for me," said Michelle Murphy. "I've spent time with limbless men – and that was

"The event was an absolute godsend for me. I've spent time with limbless men – and that was great – but meeting with other women living with limb loss is so different"

Michelle Murphy

Continued from over

great – but meeting with other women living with limb loss is so different. Just talking to the other ladies and knowing they're feeling the same as me was like a breath of fresh air.

“It felt great not being the odd one out and nobody was staring as we were all the same. I learned quite a bit as I'm sure the other ladies did, and the Outreach Officers were amazing as usual. Blesma has been so much help and support to me when I've been at my absolute lowest. Even the massage we got was just heaven as I suffer with my back a lot. It was nice to be around military women again and chatting about our experiences.”

Lisa Johnston, whose Invictus victory is covered on p22, agreed: “Some female amputees have issues with body image, so some of us have never been in a swimming pool as an amputee, for example, because we don't want to be stared at. But as a group we are able to bounce off each other and give each other confidence. Going swimming again is momentous for some people because they've not been since their limb loss.

“This activity was really beneficial as it allowed everyone to be around like-minded people. As females, we were able to talk about things like being a mother in terms of ‘how do you do this when you're having a bad leg day’ and we gave each other tips.”



Happy faces at the make a smile lottery

On 28 April Member Nik Eley joined Blesma staff on an outing to the make a smile lottery gardens in Colchester. The trip was organised to take some new images to help promote the lottery, which has so far raised more than £237,000 for Blesma.

As well as being a photoshoot, the trip was an opportunity for the make a smile lottery staff to hear directly from a Blesma Member about how the funds they raise help to make a difference.

“I did rather well in the Army. I had a successful career and, until 2018, felt that I had come out relatively unscathed,” Nik told the group. “Then I found that a training accident that I had thought was simply a badly twisted ankle while in the Forces had developed into ankylosing spondylosis. It left my leg useless. I was referred to several doctors, and eventually took the decision to amputate because it was causing me a lot of pain.”

Nik then explained how Blesma has helped him. “Since then, Blesma has been absolutely fantastic. The Association has helped me with my mental health by giving me the chance to meet other veteran amputees so we have a shared experience and camaraderie. The Association has also paid for me to do a cybersecurity course,



and helped me to move from a place that wasn't suitable for a wheelchair user to a ground floor flat. Blesma has furnished it and put carpets in. The charity has helped and supported me throughout the entire pandemic, and any time that I do need help, it is there.”

Marketing manager for make a smile lottery, Shelley Loder, said; “The make a smile lottery team had a great day with Blesma. Hearing from Nik about his story and the support he receives was absolutely incredible. It really made everyone realise what a fabulous charity this is. The make a smile lottery team are proud to be partnered with Blesma, helping to raise vital funds to help those just like Nik and their families.”

Calling all Members: there's a chance to have your say

At this year's AGM, Members will be able to take part in a survey which will have a direct impact on the Association's future.

This survey will form the first part of a wider research piece, conducted by the independent organisation Nfp Research, a leading market research agency that has worked with charity and not-for-profit organisations for more than two decades.

“This survey will be an important

opportunity for every Member to have their say on the services and support Blesma provides. The research will help our Board of Trustees shape the strategy of our Association for the next five years,” said Jon Bryant, Blesma's Chief Executive.

The survey will be distributed following Members' Weekend, after which the team plans to conduct interviews and focus groups later in the year.

Forces Carp Classic makes a big splash

The team behind the Forces Carp Classic fishing competition have raised £28,000 for Blesma since 2015. Following the presentation of their latest cheque to Chris Knight, Blesma's Regional and Corporate Fundraising Manager, Tim Gray writes of the history of the competition...

The event has been running since 2009, with the first competition run at Abbey Lakes France, on Heron Lake, with 17 pairs. Each year, more and more anglers wanted to fish the event and every year another lake was added from the Abbey Lakes complex. By 2014 we were fishing all five lakes.

We went to Abbey in 2009 as it suited the event, initially signing up for a three-year deal. We are still there some 13 years later. The venue ticks so many boxes for both the competition and the anglers, with some incredible fish. The event has caught the largest resident, a fish called Shoulders, three times – at 79.08lb, 80lb, and again at 93.14lb before the fish sadly lost its life.

In 2018, it was decided to hold a UK version of the competition, and after a few meetings with different lake owners we

managed to secure the famous Carp Society Horseshoe Lake in Lechlade. We spent two years here, allowing a maximum of 27 pairs. In 2020, due to Covid, we had to relocate to Walthamstow Reservoir for 27 pairs. In 2021, and again this year, we relocated again and now hold the UK competition at RK Leisure, Wraysbury 1, North and South. This venue is stunning and has also given us space for 43 pairs.

The event now caters for all serving and ex-serving personnel and all Emergency Services, giving us a great pool of anglers to draw from. If anyone is interested in attending the event, they should contact Russ at forcescarpclassic@hotmail.co.uk

The event has two primary aims; one is to bring together anglers in a competitive but social environment from all services, and the second is to raise money for charity. Our two charities are Blesma and GOSH (Great Ormond Street Hospital for Sick Children).

The event is run by two ex-members of the Royal Artillery; Russ Marsh and Tim Gray. It is as serious as the anglers wish to make it and it caters for all standards. So, if you're keen and fancy joining the competition, then get in touch.



Ness moves from Outreach Officer to BSO



Midlands Outreach Officer Vanessa Lucas has been appointed the area's Support Officer following the departure of previous BSO Sam Wileman.

"I'm really excited about the challenges that the new role brings and to be able to build on the fantastic work that has already been delivered to the membership," said Ness. "We have established relationships across the region which I hope will provide a smooth transition for the Members, and I hope they know that I will work closely with them to continue to deliver a high level of support."

As former Outreach Officer for the Midlands area, Ness is ready to step into the role and is already well versed in Blesma's work, and familiar with many of the Members she will be supporting. With a background in HR, Ness brings a wealth of experience to the role and thrives on being able to deliver support to the membership within the region. Knowing that she can continue to support the membership in such a unique way, and that she can play a part in the fantastic work that Blesma does, means everything to her.

We're sure you will join us in wishing her congratulations!

Albert Thomson: the story of a one-legged pilot

Thanks to funding from Blesma, Albert Thomson is fulfilling his lifelong dream of learning to fly. He writes about his experiences so far...

Update as of 22 April 2022

In the summer of 2021, I was successful in gaining a scholarship with Flying Scholarships for Disabled People (FSDP). I completed 16 hours flying, which only began to cover the basics of learning to fly – even the most capable of people would require a minimum of 45 hours to master the basic skills of flying.

Following an appeal to Blesma, I was granted funds to help me on my mission to become a one-legged pilot, achieving more specifically my Private Pilot's Licence (PPL).

The funding, given to me by Blesma in December 2021, was immediately paid to the Peterborough Flying School at Sibson Airfield and my first lessons were booked.

Before applying to Blesma to support me in my quest, I had looked into various flying schools around the southern half of England and decided that, although I had a local airport only 10 minutes drive from me, the personalities and availability of lessons and suitable aircraft for my disability were better at Sibson Airfield, Peterborough.

Having already spent just under £2,000 from my rainy-day fund for headset equipment, I began trialling lessons at various airfields. Armed with a holdall full of literature provided to me by FSDP, I was a bit like the chap who buys his bicycle clips and helmet before he buys his bicycle!

On a beautiful, breezy December morning, I headed off in the Cessna 172 from Sibson Airfield. My instructor, Fletch, was a serving member of the RAF. Despite the usual Army/RAF banter he has been easy to get on with, and I really do feel that he has made a huge difference to how well I am able to perform in the lessons.

Lessons were mostly confined to weekends, and my progress was somewhat slowed down by the festive holiday period and awful weather. It is useful to learn in 'imperfect' weather as it makes it easier



“Lessons two and three, and I was there. I got it! A few more lessons in the days that followed, and I headed back to the UK full of hope and renewed vigour”

in the future when you are faced with such changeable conditions once you are qualified. It helps to better understand the reactions of the aircraft and how to handle different situations.

As I continued with the flying lessons, in the background I have been studying



a library (I kid you not!) of literature for exams that need to be passed, all within an 18-month period, or you must start all over again. Air law is very in-depth and intense!

As we moved towards the end of February, I was becoming frustrated that I was not quite able to perfect the art of landing. The instructor and others told me not to worry, it was something that one day would just fall into place, but that's not me. I needed to get this under my wing, so to speak. So I looked into some intensive lessons in Europe, where the weather was better and would allow me to master this skill, and then I'd tackle it in the blustery UK conditions of our winter and spring.

Meet the staff

I booked several lessons over a few days with a flying school in Prague, after checking out the weather for the week ahead and organising some cheap flights and accommodation.

This was an opportunity to cover another necessary part of learning to fly; adapting to different airfields. One lesson in, and I thought I already had it nailed. Lessons two and three, and I was there. I got it! A few more lessons in the days that followed, and I headed back to the UK full of hope and renewed vigour. Once back at Sibson Airfield I realised that it was the tree line as I headed into the approach that was causing me to try to do everything at the last minute. I had it cracked! Now I just needed to work on perfecting my landing.

Now into April, I have studied and passed air law and aircraft general exams, and am currently working through the navigation section – triangle of velocities. There are a total of nine subjects to study and exams to pass followed by the skills test, which qualifies you for your PPL.

I was never very studious, so I have again decided that I want to focus on the lessons and exams and get them all completed. I have just enrolled with a ground school that works intensively with you to get through the literature and lessons, and you sit your exams through them. Although I will continue to study, I am looking forward to joining them in June with exams to follow. Fingers crossed!

So far, I have completed 26 hours of airtime at Sibson Airfield (with the grant provided to me by Blesma, and have a further 19 hours of that remaining).

Once again, I am so grateful to have been given this opportunity to fulfil a lifelong ambition that I never ever thought I could even attempt. I cannot thank those involved in supporting me enough.

Albert Thomson

AMANDA BROWNLIE

Amanda has recently taken over as the new Blesma Support Officer for the North West. Welcome Amanda!

Tell us about your role...

As a Support Officer I am responsible for supporting North West Members with advice, support, advocacy and helping to provide grants where required within Blesma's criteria and processes. I will be visiting Members in their own homes as well as at activities across the North West as much as I can, which I really enjoy. I will also be working closely with the Outreach Officer for the area who will be arranging local activities for Members, so it is quite a varied role.

How have you settled in?

Everyone has been so welcoming and friendly, which has been lovely. It's a large area to cover and the previous BSO was in post for a long time, so I feel I have a lot to learn; but the Members I have met already have been fantastic and understanding. Starting a new job is always daunting but I love working in the charity sector, having done so for the last seven years, and I'm enjoying getting out and about in the region.

Tell us something about yourself...

I was born and raised in Bristol and the accent tends to confuse people as I don't sound like I am from the North West! I have lived on Merseyside for 13 years now. I love the area and have raised my family here. I have previously worked for the Royal British Legion and, before that, the Citizens Advice Bureau, so my



employment background is in veterans' welfare as well as welfare in general. I enjoy reading and travel, and can be a bit of a history geek.

What are you looking forward to over the next 12 months?

I am most looking forward to getting out and visiting or meeting as many Members as possible. I have already been out to visit some Members and have also been introduced to others at various events, which has been lovely. I am hoping that the next 12 months brings many opportunities to meet Members in the North West.

“It’s a large area to cover and the previous BSO was in post for a long time, so I’ve a lot to learn; but the Members I have met have been fantastic and understanding”

Photographer Andrew Haugen discusses life behind the lens

Andrew Haugen (right) has been a keen photographer since 2013 and has attended many Blesma photography trips to help him hone his skills. Now, he is collecting some of his favourite images into a book. He wrote of how he discovered the art form, and the meaning behind some of his favourite photographs...

I joined the Royal Navy in 1980 with the idea of serving for a long time. Seven years later, I was medically discharged with multiple sclerosis. I had to fill my time, so I started airbrushing. I was quite good at it, but my illness was making it harder and harder. That's when I changed one medium for another and took up photography. I had always had a camera of one sort or another – even if it was just a small instamatic for family snaps – but I got my first real camera in 2013, joined a local camera club, learned a lot and was successful in competitions.

I believe photography is very much an art and the photographer the artist. Getting someone to see your intention, and seeing the story that you set out to achieve, is the most thrilling part for me.

SEEING THE WORLD DIFFERENTLY

Being a photographer makes you see the world very differently; you don't realise what is around you until you look, and as a photographer you look more closely. My partner didn't understand this until she started her own photography journey, and now she sees the beauty the world has to offer. People might look at a cloud and see a cloud; a photographer will look at a cloud and see the shapes, how the light bounces off its surface, see the tones of colour, and then decide if it will make a good photo.

I used to be an artist, so I incorporate my artistic mind into my photos. I like using colours and sometimes exaggerate them to show the colours the eye cannot see, or should I say, does not notice. For me, photography is very therapeutic; if I have a bad day, I know I can pick up a camera and go into 'photographic mode' as my partner says.



My main interest is black and white portraiture; I like to delve into the emotional aspect and a face can tell a story within itself. My other passion is motorbikes. I can't ride them so I do the next best thing; I photograph them. I like to bring them to life, to fill the screen with all the paintwork and chrome.

IMAGES WITH MEANING

My daughter had just finished her chemotherapy, so I wanted to take a photo of her – I wanted to show her resolve. We took all the camera equipment into the bathroom and a photo was born. I called it *Washing Away My Troubles*. I wanted also to show her struggles, so with the



aid of face paint and a slow shutter speed I created a photo called *Internal Struggle*. Another photo I took was of my neighbour Mark, who is a Blesma Member. I wanted him to have an arrogant look that said: 'you are not going to beat me.' That's the message behind *I'm Still Standing*.

Blesma has made it possible for me to broaden my photographic skills and opportunities. I have been to Iceland and on various photographic trips around the UK with Blesma. There are a lot of good photographers in the Association who are all willing to share their knowledge to anyone who would be interested in picking up a camera. Come and join us.
Andrew Haugen



Scotland update: From north of the border

ONLINE DRAMA PROJECT

Scotland's successful drama project will continue with a second project that is more performance focused. Supported once again by Stand Easy Productions, this time there will be eight weeks of performance-based work followed by a recording. Stand Easy Productions will then edit together what we hope will be a more polished performance which we can look to get played on radio stations or, if our aspirations are met, performed at a venue, with the real dream being the Edinburgh Fringe.

PIZZA MAKING

Online and at home pizza making for National Pizza Day on 09 February was popular, with Members making pizza at home in their own time and also on Zoom.

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF FLIGHT

Members received a guided tour of The National Museum of Flight, which is situated at East Fortune Airfield and was first designated as a fighter and airship airfield in 1915. It then became a Royal Naval Air Service station in August 1916 and now houses many aircraft, including Concorde.

PROSTHETIC AND PAIN MANAGEMENT FORUM

The forum continues to be held every six-to-eight weeks with our BSO and Members sharing tips and stories to help each other as well as getting updates from their local Limb Centres. As a result, Members have been referred to courses with Pain Association Scotland and Thistle Foundation to help manage their pain and improve their mental health. Initial reports are that the courses have been really helpful, and Members are set to join future forums to share their experiences with others who could benefit from them.

BOOK GROUP

The book group has been running almost since the start of lockdown, and we were given the opportunity to get books free



Members took part in online pizza making for National Pizza Day in February



Below: The National Museum of Flight

of charge via the Reading Force charity. It's great to see the different views of Members about the same book, with some loving the selection and some not enjoying them so much. That is the fun of the group, and we make sure that there are a wide range of genres and authors so that everyone can be catered for.

MEMBER-LED ACTIVITIES

MEMBER-LED FLIGHT SIMULATION

Member John Bacon is once again taking up the simulation controls of the Blesma plane and taking Members on a variety of virtual trips. The first of the year will be to the Panama Canal.

WHEELCHAIR SPORTS TALK

Member Michael Mellon joined Gemma Lumsdaine from Dundee Dragons Wheelchair Sports Club to talk to Members about his journey to become the captain of the Scotland wheelchair rugby league team. This led to us booking a taster session with the club at the end of April.

GOOD CRAIC QUIZ

Member Lorraine Anderson continues to host a wonderfully entertaining quiz each month which sees Members from all over the UK and overseas joining in to see who can get the top score and win a prize. Some Members who have won already will donate their prizes to other participants!

COMING UP

Other recent events have included carriage driving, a golf day, an online Blesma 90th anniversary-inspired mosaic workshop, a wheelchair sports taster, a racket sports taster session, clay pigeon shooting and archery, a Burrell Collection visit, and whale and dolphin watching. I am also working on plans for quad biking, paddleboarding, and a summer BBQ.
Emma Gratton, Outreach Officer



The lowdown on Northern Ireland

OUTREACH NORTHERN IRELAND

We have enjoyed a variety of activities across Northern Ireland over the last few months, and it has been great to see Members and their families reconnecting, along with some new faces joining in. Activities have ranged from the educational tour of the historic Enniskillen Museum and Brownlow House, where we were invited to take afternoon tea in the drawing room, to the competitiveness and teamwork of an escape room in which two Blesma teams took part in the same mission, attempting to be the first to 'save the city'.

Alongside this, we enjoyed a number of online interactive workshops: create your own pizza, pancake flipping, spring wreath making and resin dipping daffodils. We have also been collaborating with Reading Force to coordinate our book club.

Blesma has also been represented at a number of veteran information roadshows across Northern Ireland, sponsored by the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner's Office, and has presented to other veterans' charities.

Myself and two of our Blesma wives – Cathy Kelly and Vivienne Adamson – embraced the Blesma Step into Spring Challenge from 01-30 April. There's was a fantastic achievement to not only exceed the 10,000 steps each day, but also to raise funds along the way. Mabel Logan, one of our 'Crafty Widows', handcrafted 155 woollen hats to support our fundraising efforts. Meanwhile Iain McAfee, who fundraised last year to mark his 50th birthday, is setting himself another challenge to mark Blesma's 90th birthday, only this time he will have the company of his son, Cameron.

Global Intergenerational Week ran from 25 April to 01 May. The week looked to inspire intergenerational practice, connecting people of all ages, especially the younger and older generations. I was inspired by a lady who started a Kindness Postbox project in Enniskillen; bringing 'little bursts of happiness' through the post. I adopted this idea for Blesma Members in



Fiona Morrison (left) with Members, volunteers and some of the area's 'Crafty Widows'



Aliyah, great granddaughter of Jim Adamson

Northern Ireland. William Curran, one of our Members, happily volunteered to make a Kindness Postbox, which really brought the project to life. Children and grandchildren of Members thoroughly enjoyed designing their own cards and making them 'one of a kind'. They then added messages to simply brighten



Fiona, Cathy Kelly and Vivienne Adamson

someone's day. Posting in the postbox simply added to the experience of what they were doing. Cards are now ready to be posted out with the aim of spreading happiness, sharing a kind gesture and connecting the generations.

Fiona Morrison, Outreach Officer

Branch news from around the network

GREAT YARMOUTH & LOWESTOFT BRANCH

Chairman: Philip (Bob) Monkhouse
Honorary Secretary: Helen Cullen
Honorary Treasurer: Simon Cavie
Welfare Officer: Philip (Bob) Monkhouse

The Great Yarmouth & Lowestoft Branch held its AGM and Lunch on 22 February. We are delighted that Branch members are keen to keep the Branch active. With that in mind, we are arranging an afternoon tea in Norwich over a weekend in July (date to be confirmed) and would like to extend the invitation to other Blesma Members in the Norfolk and Suffolk area.

The Branch will also be hosting a Blesma stand at this year's Armed Forces Day in Lowestoft on Saturday 25 June. Come along and see marching bands, military vehicles, displays, stalls, food and live music. For more information, visit www.armedforcesday.org.uk/event/lowestoft-armed-forces-day-8

If anyone is interested in attending any Branch events, please contact the Chairman, Philip Monkhouse, on 07951 292681.

SUTTON, MERTON AND DISTRICT BRANCH

On Wednesday 20 April, Sutton, Merton and District Branch met for its AGM. Branch Treasurer David Hobson had the pleasure of surprising Blesma's Director Independence and Wellbeing Ian Harper with a cheque for £1,000. These funds were raised by the Branch from various events and activities, and it was decided by the committee members that these funds should be allocated for use in supporting Blesma's popular Widows Week activity.

The Morden Brook Greene King was the venue chosen; a regular favourite for Branch meetings. As well as the affairs of the AGM, there was a well-attended lunch at which the Branch was joined by a host of Blesma staff. Debbie Mayne, Blesma's new Membership, Branch and Volunteers Executive, visited for the first time. Local BSO Steve Burrell and Outreach Officer



Sutton, Merton and District's David Hobson (left) hands a cheque to Ian Harper

Jess Linge were also in attendance. A great many thanks to all at Sutton, Merton and District Branch for their kind contribution to Widows Week.

BOURNEMOUTH & DISTRICT BRANCH

Bournemouth & District Branch held its AGM on 04 April at The War Memorial Homes in Bournemouth. It was well attended and all were invited.

As per the constitution, the election of officers was held, and a new position of Vice Chairman was also created. As you are well aware, 'Team Snoddy' have had to retire, and the Branch wishes them all the best for the future. Mary-Jane Sweetzer has been accepted as an Honorary Member and proposed and seconded as Honorary Secretary. Mark MacDonald has accepted the position of Vice Chairman in order to future proof the Branch. Mark is a former Sergeant in the REME and has served all over the globe. He is a resident at the War Memorial Homes and has been a Branch member for many years.

The Branch Officers 2022

Chairman and Welfare Officer: Peter Sherston-Baker

Vice Chairman: Mark MacDonald

Hon Secretary: Mary-Jane Sweetzer

Hon Treasurer: Hazel Crofts

It has been in our mind for some time that the distance travelled to meetings has been considerable for some of our Members;

Ann and Brendan journeying from Portland for many years is a fine example. Therefore, we decided to move the meeting for one occasion only and combine that with a lunch to celebrate our 75th year.

We booked The Quiet Place, a meeting room in Poundbury, Dorchester for our next meeting, which took place on Monday 06 June. The purpose was to include all those who live out on 'The Rock' and all others in the Western Approaches. This was followed by lunch at the Duchess of Cornwall, just a stone's throw away. We booked a private room on the first floor with access to a lift. There we could celebrate our 75th anniversary in style!

Peter Sherston-Baker, Chairman

INTERESTED IN JOINING YOUR LOCAL BRANCH?

Blesma Branches are steeped in history reaching back all of Blesma's 90 years, when the first groups of limbless servicemen banded together following World War I.

Some are still active today, and you can get involved! If you are interested in getting in touch with a Branch near you, please contact Debbie Mayne in the first instance at: mbvexec@blesma.org

Current Branches:

Nottingham

Great Yarmouth & Lowestoft

Sutton, Merton & District

Bournemouth & District

Portsmouth

Southampton, Winchester & District

Spotlight on Benefits and Social Care

Welcome to the Bulletin's regular section on the benefits system. As well as highlighting some useful information regarding the benefits system, on occasions we will be raising awareness of some health and social care matters or other available support. *Blesma Members can either contact their Support Officer for further information about their benefit entitlement or contact Blesma's Benefits and Social Care Adviser Liz Watling on 020 8548 7080 or email iwabenefits@blesma.org Please note: these contact details are for Blesma Members only.*

DISABILITY BENEFITS

In this issue, we are raising awareness of disability benefits, which are for people who have difficulty with their personal care or, in some cases, their mobility. The difficulties can be due to a physical or mental health condition.

Disability benefits are:

- Not means tested (it does not matter how much income or capital you have)
- Tax free
- Paid whether you are in or out of work

You will need to have lived in the UK for two out of the last three years. Which benefit to claim will depend on whether you are of state pension age or below. This article provides a summary of the benefits. For more information on the criteria and whether the benefit could be for you, please contact your Blesma Support Officer or see the Blesma website for a factsheet at www.blesma.org/understanding-benefits

Above state pension age

Attendance Allowance is for people over state pension age who require assistance with their personal care or help to make sure they are safe. This can include difficulties such as getting washed and dressed, or difficulties they have overnight.

Attendance Allowance is based on the effect your long-term health condition or disability has on your daily life, not the

condition or disability itself. You can get Attendance Allowance even if you live alone and you do not need to have a carer. It is paid to recognise the increased costs an individual may face due to an illness or disability.

You will need to satisfy a disability test showing how your care needs affect you throughout the day or at night. Most claims are decided by the information you write on the form and from supporting evidence from someone who knows you well, such as a medical practitioner.

Attendance Allowance can be paid at one of two rates depending on the level of care required:

Lower rate: £61.85 per week day or night-time care needs

Higher rate: £92.40 per week day or night-time care needs

If you already receive Personal Independence Payment or Adult Disability Payment you will not be able to receive Attendance Allowance. Payment of Attendance Allowance may be affected if you receive Constant Attendance Allowance with a War Pension or Armed Forces Independence Payment with an Armed Forces Compensation Scheme.

Below state pension age

Personal Independence Payment is for people who have difficulty with their daily living activities such as washing and bathing (the daily living component), or difficulty getting around (the mobility component).

Personal Independence Payment is based on the effect your long-term health condition or disability has on your daily life, not the condition or disability itself. You can get Personal Independence Payment even if you live alone. You do not need to have a carer. It is paid to recognise the increased costs an individual may face due to an illness or disability.

You will need to meet the disability conditions, which means satisfying a points-

based test which assesses your ability to undertake specific activities. Decisions can be made based on the information you write on your form and from supporting evidence from someone who knows you well, such as a medical practitioner. However, most claims will require you to take part in a telephone, video or face-to-face assessment.

Personal Independence Payment can be paid at one of two rates for each component, dependent on the number of points scored in the assessment:

DAILY LIVING COMPONENT

Standard rate: £61.85 per week

Score 8-11 points

Enhanced rate: £92.40 per week

Score 12 or more points

MOBILITY COMPONENT

Standard rate: £24.45

Score 8-11 points

Enhanced rate: £64.50

Score 12 or more points

Payment of Personal Independence Payment may be affected if you receive Constant Attendance Allowance with a War Pension or Armed Forces Independence Payment with an Armed Forces Compensation Scheme. You can continue to receive Personal Independence Payment after state pension age as long as you continue to meet the criteria.

If you live in Scotland, Personal Independence Payment is being replaced by Adult Disability Payment. The rules for the benefit are predominantly the same and include the same points-based assessment and rates of payment. Adult Disability Payment is being phased in across Scotland.

You can claim from the following dates:

- 21 March if you live in Dundee City, Perth and Kinross or the Western Isles
- 20 June if you live in Angus, North Lanarkshire or South Lanarkshire
- 25 July if you live in Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire, East Ayrshire, Fife, Moray, North Ayrshire or South Ayrshire



- 29 August if you live anywhere else in Scotland

If you live in Scotland and already receive Personal Independence Payment you will be transferred over to Adult Disability Payment at some stage over the next few years. You do not need to do anything at this stage; Social Security Scotland will contact you at the time of your transfer.

THE MOTABILITY SCHEME

If you receive a benefit because you have a disability or illness that makes it hard for you to get around, you can use the payment to pay for a vehicle from a charity called Motability. You can choose from lots of different vehicles, for example; cars, mobility scooters or powered wheelchairs.

You can access the Motability Scheme if you have been awarded:

- Personal Independence Payment

- enhanced mobility component
- Adult Disability Payment enhanced mobility component
- Disability Living Allowance higher rate mobility component (the precursor to Personal Independence Payment)
- Armed Forces Independence Payment
- War Pensioners' Mobility Supplement

You must have at least 12 months left before your benefit ends. Your benefit will go directly to the Motability Scheme every four weeks to pay for your lease. Some lease vehicles cost less than your weekly benefit, and you will be able to keep the difference if you lease a lower cost option.

You will probably need to make a payment upfront if you choose a more expensive vehicle. You may be able to receive a grant from Motability to support with the extra costs.

The lease also covers:

- Insurance
- Breakdown cover
- Vehicle tax
- Servicing and maintenance
- Some adaptations

How to find a Motability vehicle

You will need to show evidence that you are eligible for the Scheme. You will need:

- ID such as a driving licence or passport
- Your certificate of entitlement from the Department for Work and Pensions or Social Security Scotland

You will then need to visit the dealer of your choice. If you are unsure what is available where you live, you can find a dealer on the Motability website at www.motability.co.uk or call the Motability helpline on 0300 456 4566. Ask the dealer for an appointment with their Motability specialist. If you use a wheelchair or mobility aid, take it with

Continued from over

you to make sure it fits in the vehicle. You can visit several different dealers if you wish.

INCREASES IN WAR PENSIONS AND ALLOWANCES 2022

The new rates of War Pensions and Allowances proposed from April 2022 are set out in the tables below. The annual uprating took effect from the week beginning 11 April. Rates for 2022 are increasing by 3.1% in line with the September 2021 Consumer Prices Index. *(Weekly rates unless otherwise shown)*

WAR PENSION

| | |
|------|---------|
| 100% | £200.00 |
| 90% | £180.00 |
| 80% | £160.00 |
| 70% | £140.00 |
| 60% | £120.00 |
| 50% | £100.00 |
| 40% | £80.00 |
| 30% | £60.00 |
| 20% | £40.00 |

The actual amounts paid may vary slightly from this due to the impact of the various component level rounding rules.

AGE ALLOWANCES

PAYABLE FROM AGE 65

| | |
|------------|--------|
| 40% or 50% | £13.35 |
| 60% or 70% | £20.60 |
| 80% or 90% | £29.30 |
| 100% | £41.20 |

CONSTANT ATTENDANCE ALLOWANCE

| | |
|-------------------|---------|
| Part Day Rate | £37.75 |
| Full Day Rate | £75.50 |
| Intermediate Rate | £113.25 |
| Exceptional Rate | £151.00 |

INVALIDITY ALLOWANCE

Lower Rate £8.00

(Retired between 50 and 54 (women) and 50 and 59 (men) years of age inclusive)

Middle Rate £16.00

(Retired between 40 and 49 years of age inclusive)



Higher Rate £24.45

(Retired under 40 years of age)

CLOTHING ALLOWANCE

£ per annum £258.00

EDUCATION ALLOWANCE

Maximum £ per annum £120.00

MOBILITY SUPPLEMENT

One Rate £72.00

ALLOWANCE FOR LOWERED STANDARD OF OCCUPATION

Maximum £75.44

UNEMPLOYABILITY ALLOWANCE

| | |
|----------------------------------|---------|
| Personal | £123.60 |
| Adult Dependency Increase | £68.70 |
| Increase for First Child | £16.00 |
| Increase for Subsequent Children | £18.75 |

COMFORTS ALLOWANCE

(PAID WITH CAA AND UNSUPP)

| | |
|-------------|--------|
| Lower Rate | £16.25 |
| Higher Rate | £32.50 |

EXCEPTIONALLY SEVERE DISABLEMENT ALLOWANCE

One Rate £75.50

SEVERE DISABLEMENT OCCUPATIONAL ALLOWANCE

One Rate £37.75

WAR WIDOW(ER)'S PENSION

| | |
|--|---------|
| Widow(er) (Other Ranks) | £151.70 |
| Childless Widow(er) Under 40 (Other Ranks) | £36.34 |
| Supplementary Pension (Pre-1973 Widows) | £101.49 |

WAR WIDOW(ER)'S AGE ALLOWANCE

| | |
|-----------------|--------|
| Aged 65-69 | £17.30 |
| Aged 70-79 | £33.25 |
| Aged 80 or over | £49.35 |

CHILDREN'S ALLOWANCE

| | |
|----------------------------------|--------|
| Increase for First Child | £23.80 |
| Increase for Subsequent Children | £26.50 |

RENT ALLOWANCE

Maximum £57.10

THERAPEUTIC EARNINGS LIMIT

Annual Rate £7,904.00

Those who have passed away

May they rest in peace

| | | |
|-------------|---------------------|---------------|
| ALMOND L | | 27/03/2022 |
| BARBER M | Army (REME) | 25/01/2022 |
| BOULD E | | Not Known |
| BRIDSON P | Army | Not Known |
| BROWN A | Army (RE) | 23/01/2022 |
| BROWN M | | Not Known |
| BURBRIDGE P | | 01/01/2022 |
| BURDETT H | | 15/01/2022 |
| CHAMPKEN G | Army (Gren Guards) | 14/01/2022 |
| COOK J | | December 2021 |
| COLLINS B | Army | 09/12/2021 |
| COTTLE D | RAF | 01/12/2021 |
| DINHAM R | Army (RA) | Not Known |
| DUFFNER K | | 03/03/2022 |
| DUGDALE M | Army | Not Known |
| DYER J | Army | 05/03/2022 |
| EASTER S | Army (RM) | 02/06/2021 |
| EVANS E | Royal Navy | 08/01/2022 |
| FOX F | Army | Not Known |
| FROST B | Army | 01/12/2021 |
| GASTON I | | 02/01/2022 |
| GIBBS F | Army | Not Known |
| GREEN T | | 12/09/2021 |
| JAMES P | | Not Known |
| LAWRIE M | | 27/02/2022 |
| LEE M | | 09/01/2022 |
| LENG O | | 14/03/2022 |
| LEWINGDON S | | Not Known |
| LINCOLN J | Army (REME) | 16/02/2022 |
| LIPSHAM I | | Not Known |
| MARLOW D | | Not Known |
| MILLAN M | | 19/03/2022 |
| MORE E | | 14/01/2022 |
| PENFOLD R | Army (Roya Hussars) | Not Known |
| POTTER E | | Not Known |
| RAWLINS L | | 17/01/2021 |
| RIACH M | | 22/04/2022 |
| RONDEAU T | Royal Navy | 09/04/2022 |
| ROSE M | | Not Known |
| SLAUGHTER M | | 13/04/2022 |
| SMITH R | Army | Not Known |
| STONES D | Army | 03/11/2020 |
| STONES R | Army (Scots Guards) | 11/01/2022 |
| SWALLOW M | Army | 25/02/2022 |
| THOMAS G | Royal Navy | 28/09/2021 |
| VICKER B | Army | 01/12/2021 |
| WATSON G | Army | 01/04/2022 |
| WILLS P | | 23/03/2022 |
| WOOD A | | 17/01/2022 |

George takes on Beeline Challenge

George Bromley has taken on the Beeline Challenge; a record-breaking straight-line journey of some 745 miles. George, a former British Army Captain, broke his neck following a military rugby accident in 2019. The incident fractured his cervical vertebrae and damaged his discs, which led to temporary loss of the use of his left arm and could have left him permanently paralysed.

He has become the first person to complete a solo beeline route from Land's End to John o'Groats, which he attempted in aid of several military charities including Blesma.

Using a kayak, he followed the Cornish coast from Land's End to Lundy. Crossing the Bristol Channel, he worked his way up the Welsh coastline before undertaking an epic 75km paddle to the Isle of Man. From there, George paddled to Galloway where he ditched the kayak and set off across Scotland on foot, crossing the country's second-largest peak, Ben Macdui, along the way. Finally, he swam the Moray Firth

and then walked the final 100km to the finish.

"After suffering a serious neck injury playing rugby, I found myself unsure of my career and my future, and I realised just how much I took for granted," said George. "The biggest challenge I faced was the mental battle. With an injury like that you think you're not going to be employed any more, that you could lose this or that; your home or your living. That is something I really wanted to fight against. This challenge was something to reach for, something to look forward to, something to keep me going."

Chris Knight, Blesma's Corporate and Regional Fundraising Manager said: "Had George been paralysed from his rugby injury, Blesma would have been there to support him for the rest of his life. He is now fundraising for military charities to acknowledge the help they give to veterans who are in the position he faced. George's challenge was incredible, and we are so proud of his success."



Useful contact numbers across the Association

| TITLE | NAME | TELEPHONE | EMAIL |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------|--|-----------------------------|
| BLESMA SUPPORT OFFICERS | | | |
| BSO (Prosthetics) | Brian Chenier | M 07796 715908 | bsoprosthetics@blesma.org |
| BSO Eastern | Kevin Long | T 020 3954 3020 M 07825 536364 | bsoeastern@blesma.org |
| BSO London & South East | Steven Burrell | T 020 7501 3030 M 07469 242277 | bsolse@blesma.org |
| BSO Midlands | Vanessa Lucas | T 020 8548 7095 M 07825 536363 | bsomid@blesma.org |
| BSO North East | Christine Landess | T 020 3954 3027 M 07917 972825 | bsone@blesma.org |
| BSO North West | Amanda Brownlie | T 01257 795144 M 07825 536362 | bsonw@blesma.org |
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The aids that can help you fill up

If you are an unaccompanied disabled driver, filling up with fuel can be one of your biggest challenges. Getting help at a petrol station can also be a challenge, especially at those that are operated by one person, or where no-one can help for security reasons, or with the introduction of chip and pin.

Disabled Motoring UK has been working with a number of different companies to try to find an alternative to disabled drivers having to drive from

station to station to find help. Disabled Motoring UK has suggested the following:

FUELSERVICE APP

provides disabled drivers with all they need to refuel their cars. The app will tell you which nearby stations have assistants available who will refuel your car, and will let you know which petrol station can help before you go there. It will allow you to call them and ask if they can help in the next 30 minutes

and also let staff know you have arrived or let you know how long they will be.

CONTACTA

devised a handy alternative system called MyHailo. Drivers carry a small key fob in their vehicle which they can use to summon help. The petrol station has a receiver, and once the system is activated by the customer the attendant will press a button so the customer knows help is on the way.

You can find out more information about MyHailo and purchase a MyHailo key fob at www.disabledmotoring.org/shop/motoring/product/myhailo



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Sarin gas to blame for Gulf War Syndrome

A study funded by the US Government believes the lethal nerve agent Sarin, which accidentally pervaded the atmosphere after Iraqi bomb stores were destroyed during the bombing of Saddam Hussein's chemical weapons stockpiles, affected thousands of troops after they breathed it in.

More than 53,000 British troops served during the war, with 33,000 thought to still be

struggling from Gulf War Syndrome, according to the Royal British Legion.

On their return home, many otherwise-healthy soldiers developed illnesses that puzzled medical teams, but researchers now think they were caused by diluted doses of the nerve gas.

American scientists hope the breakthrough will help to deliver a treatment for those who have been affected.

A (two) grand gesture from Brighton golf club

Members in Eastbourne recently gathered for a cheque presentation in commemoration of Blesma's 90th anniversary. The event was held on Thursday 31 March. The cheque for £2,000 was presented by Member Alan Moulpied, who raised the funds during his two-year tenure as club captain of the Brighton and Hove Golf Club. The cheque was accepted on behalf

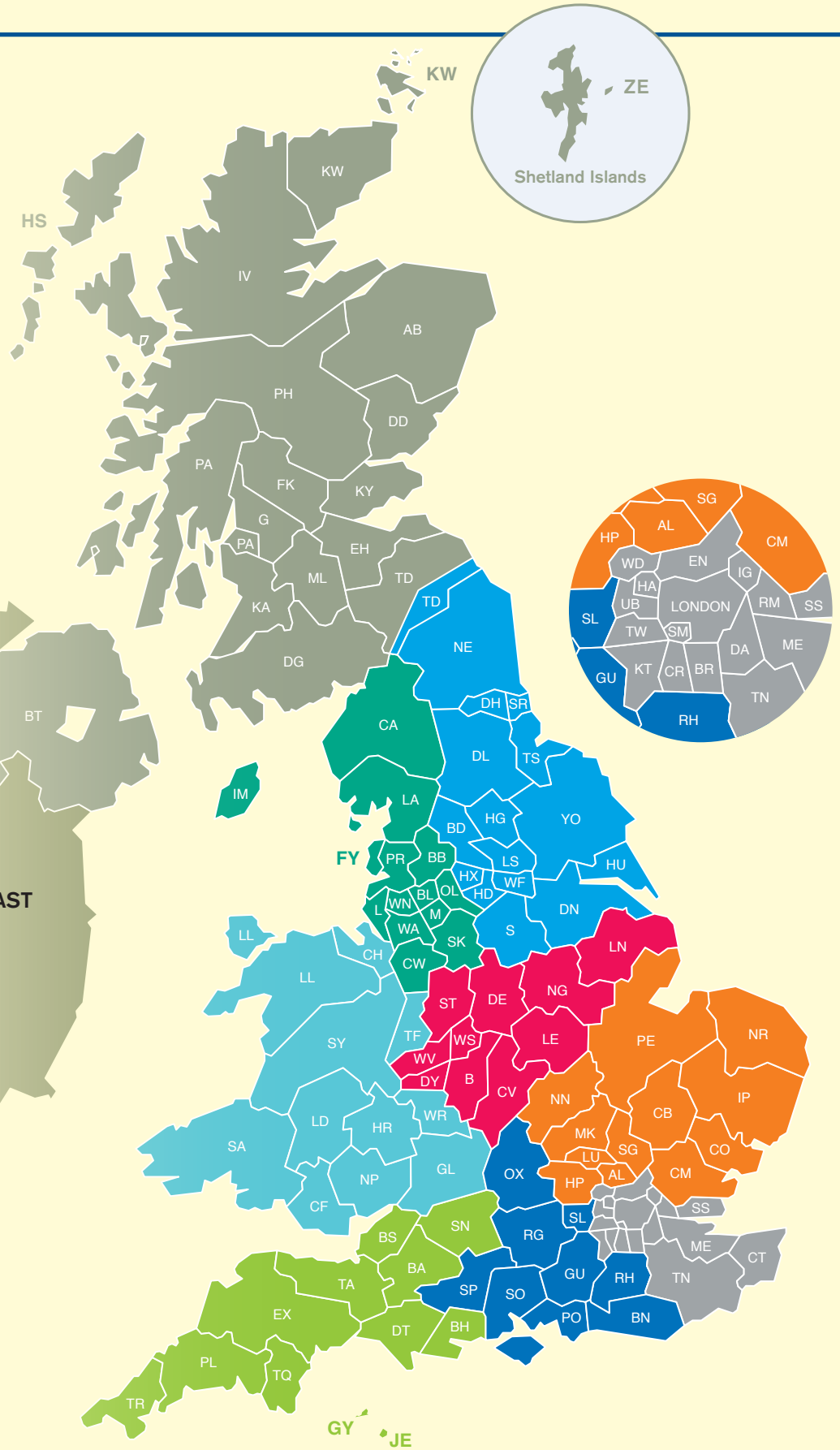


of Blesma by Terry Bullingham, who is a loss of sight Member and who was injured during the Falklands War 40 years ago.

Blesma by area

Have you got a question or need advice? Don't hesitate to get in touch with the Blesma Support Officer in your area. The contact numbers for all BSOs, Outreach Officers, and relevant members of staff can be found on p76.

- SCOTLAND, NI AND ROI
- NORTH WEST
- NORTH EAST
- EASTERN
- MIDLANDS
- WEST
- SOUTH
- SOUTH WEST
- LONDON AND SOUTH EAST



In the Autumn issue

Warning: this is not for the faint-hearted



Michael Mellon will captain Scotland in this year's Wheelchair Rugby League World Cup. We go pitchside for a crash course

Love gaming?

Join the Blesma Legends

Blesma



If you love gaming as much as we do then
become part of Blesma's esports team

Contact the Activities Team: meo@blesma.org