

Blesma

The magazine for
limbless veterans



THE INVICTUS LEGACY

Blesma Member Dave Henson captained Team GB at the Invictus Games. He looks back at the competition and looks forward to its legacy

2014: a year to remember

The last 12 months have been packed with change, challenge and Channel swimming **p38**



The end for prosthetics?

Will we really be able to grow our own limbs in 25 years' time? **p14**



No ordinary work of art

Meet the artist who will paint 100 soldiers to mark the centenary of World War I **p40**

ORION 2

WHERE PERFORMANCE MEETS LIFESTYLE

Orion 2 combines hybrid control and new software to give users flawless performance

The new look Orion 2 is packed with features to expand your choice of activity. Cycling Mode and Fixed Angle Lock open up possibilities for additional leisure and relaxation options. Enhanced progressive stability means that new users can have targeted high level security, which may be toned down as rehabilitation progresses. The new look knee has clean lines and a sleek finish.

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Photographs: Louis James-Parker, Ian Burton/Image Impossible, Simon Hildrew

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A copy of the 2015 Activities Brochure can be found inside this issue.
If you didn't receive one email Emily Mizon on me@blesma.org

Special thanks to: Brian Chenier, Dave Coulton, Frank Garside, Barry Le Grys, Emily Mizon, Nick Moore, Heather Nicholson, Bryony Stevens, Ian Waller **Blesma Magazine** is published on behalf of the **British Limbless Ex-Service Men's Association (Blesma)** by **ScratchCreate**. British Limbless Ex-Service Men's Association Charity Numbers: England, Wales & N Ireland 1084189, Scotland SC010315; Company Limited Guarantee No. 4102768. Contact ScratchCreate at david@scratchcreate.com or paul@scratchcreate.com. Printed by Wyndeham Grange. This publication may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form, in whole or in part, without the prior permission of the publishers. All prices and addresses are correct at the time of going to press. Every care has been taken in the preparation of this magazine to ensure the contents is fully accurate, but neither ScratchCreate nor Blesma can be held responsible for the accuracy of the information herein, any omissions or errors, or any consequence arising from it. The views expressed by contributors, customers and Members might not reflect the views of ScratchCreate or Blesma. Publication date: Winter 2014. © ScratchCreate 2014.



REMEMBRANCE 2014

The Tower of London, November 2014

This breathtaking sight greeted visitors to the Tower of London in November. The art installation, called *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red*, was commissioned to mark 100 years since the first full day of Britain's involvement in the First World War.

It was created by ceramic artist Paul Cummins and consisted of 888,246 ceramic poppies – one for each British fatality in WWI according to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission audit of 2010. Every single poppy has since been sold, with proceeds going to six military charities.





Photographs: Simon Hildrew

Blesma pays its respects

Blesma played its part in this year's Remembrance Day Parade as 29 military veterans from the Association marched past the Cenotaph to pay their respects. The day was a great success, and was particularly poignant as this year marks the 100th anniversary of the start of World War I.

"We changed our parade this year," explained Frank Garside, Office and Facilities Manager at Blesma. "Our previous General Secretary, Jerome Church, used to lead the march, but this year we decided to have younger Members in the role of Parade Commanders, with two veterans from Afghanistan flanking an older Member in a wheelchair. Behind them we had 19 Members on mobility scooters and seven walking wounded, followed by the Members' wives and carers."



Ted Johnson

Tony Harris (pictured above right) who served with the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers, was selected as a Commander. "It was a great honour to march with all the lads and to lead the scooters," he said. "I was barking out the orders and hopefully everyone could hear me over their revving engines!"

A NATION REMEMBERS

"The crowds on the day were truly amazing – and the weather was stunning as we came down Whitehall," said Tony. "It was a very poignant, emotional event. Seeing such a level of support for the Armed Forces, and people remembering the sacrifices of others, was astonishing and very humbling."

The widely differing ages of the Members – always a highlight of any Blesma gathering – was certainly a talking point. "This was my first time at the Cenotaph

An award winning documentary

Cover every mile of Beeline Britain for yourself (p34)

welcome

You will all know that the Association was formally registered as a charity in 1932 with a membership of some 40,000; a direct legacy of the First World War. We have continued ever since, through the Second World War and many other wars and conflicts, there for the injured, standing firm to the goals and objectives laid down by our predecessors.

For me, our most distinguishing characteristic, there from our earliest, formative days, is the drive to get on, Member helping Member, as far as that is possible. Of course, we need, and certainly appreciate, the help so selflessly given by others, but underpinning all is self-determination, both individual and collective.

This drive was clear to see throughout the year, in our communities, the various social events, fundraising initiatives, our work with government. It was a notably full year. Pushing hard on physical 'limits' continued to feature, often in that faintly wacky Blesma way. There was Nick Beighton's epic journey from Land's End to John O'Groats (kayaking, cycling, hiking), a 'first'. If that wasn't zany enough there was the first all-amputee swim across the Channel by Jamie Gillespie, Craig Howorth, Conrad Thorpe and Steve White. A Member made the first UK triple amputee solo freefall, Dave Henson and some 50 Members participated in the Invictus Games.

There was much more, too much to mention here. I would, though, stress the importance of our activities. I hope we can add to them, branch out, move things into the arts, for example. We have already made a good start with our photography and perhaps we can promote all this at our annual Members' Weekend next year. I like to think this will become the occasion every year where we go over our activities and the achievements of the previous period, and get together to develop ideas for what's next. So, I strongly encourage you to make sure you put the Members' Weekend into your diaries, making it part of the annual rhythm.

In closing, I would just like to mention Jerome Church's retirement and register again our deep appreciation for all that he did for the Association, as General Secretary in particular, over many years. And I take this opportunity of extending a warm Blesma welcome to his successor, Barry Le Gry. A Merry Christmas to you all, Members and supporters alike – and a Happy New Year, when whatever else we may do or confront, we continue to do and take on together.

Lt Gen Sir Cedric Delves KBE DSO
Chairman



Blesma Members were out in force to pay their respects



Jim Chittenden (above left) and Tony Harris (above right) at the Parade

for Remembrance Day as I usually go to a local service," said Tony. "It was brilliant because I met up with a lot of old friends from my Regiment. It was also great speaking to the older guys and hearing their stories. Everyone has had such varied careers and the sheer number of different medals on display was staggering."

Jim Chittenden, 90, (pictured above) who served with the Pathfinders in WWII, agreed. "It was a really good day and went extremely well," he said. "I lay my own Pathfinder wreath every year, I never miss it, and I look forward to it all year. I'll be 91 years of age soon but some of the others consider me the 'young one'!

"It was particularly emotional with it being the 100th anniversary of World War I and I think it was the biggest turn out I've ever seen. The Blesma parade was very well organised and I love talking to the younger Members. One of them had a mate who was also a Pathfinder and he came down to have a photo taken with me. That was a great moment."



Members of the Rolls Royce team with Walsall Branch Members in the Garden



Photographs by Stephen Parslow, Walsall Branch, Photographer

Rolls Royce steer Garden's refresh

Blesma's Garden has been tended all year by a team of volunteers

The Memorial Garden at the National Memorial Arboretum was chosen by Rolls Royce at the start of the year as one of their volunteer projects for 2014. A team of 20 volunteers have given their time over six months as and when their work commitments have allowed.

They created four new paths leading to the four circular benches in each quadrant of the Garden, with the digging alone taking a team of 15 three days to complete. They then created flowerbeds along both sides of each path, and these have now been planted with perennial flowers in red, white and blue. Two pergolas have been erected at the main entrances to the Garden, and these now have roses and clematis growing up the supports. Finally, two additional entrances to the garden have been opened up leading from the adjoining gardens.

Many thanks must go to the Rolls Royce team, and to Emily Cook in particular, for all their hard and exacting work on Blesma's behalf. Thanks must also go to James Shallcross, Assistant Curator at the National Memorial Arboretum, for choosing our Garden for this project and for his time and energy in overseeing the work.

On 24 July a number of the Rolls Royce team, together with Gill Fennell, the Rolls Royce Community Investment Manager,



Mike Gallagher presents Rolls Royce team leader Emily Cook with a Blesma plaque

paid their final visit to the Garden and were thanked on behalf of Blesma by a number of Walsall Branch Members. A message of thanks from the Chief Executive was read by Mike Gallagher and a Blesma plaque was presented to Emily to mark the occasion.

NEWS BRIEFS

PLAYING A PART IN RESEARCH INTO SOCKET DESIGN

Last year Blesma was invited to initial meetings about a potential research project to rework a 1970s device that measured pressure distribution inside a socket under load bearing conditions.

The 'Isherwood rig' was developed by PhD student Peter Austin Isherwood who, in 1979, whilst studying at London South Bank University (LSBU) designed, built and tested "The Controlled Pressure Distribution System for Prosthetic Casting".

A redesign was proposed that would use the latest technology. The early stages were funded by LSBU before it was established that the project was viable and that the device, although crude, had potential to work.

Blesma has contributed a modest grant to support the next stage of development; to convert the output into digitised format. This work is underway and the team at LSBU will report back in due course.

MUD, SWEAT AND CHEERS!

Blesma Member and keen mountain biker Jude Paton (right) learned about the Bartlett Tendon Knee while he was looking for a prosthesis he could use to hurtle down muddy mountain trails.



After consulting Pace prosthetist and fellow Blesma Member, Jamie Gillespie, it was agreed that Blesma and H4H would help Jude to buy one. "The knee has made a huge difference in allowing me to ride more like I would have before my accident," says Jude, who made a significant contribution to the purchase. "Being able to stand up and put my weight through the pedals rather than the saddle whilst jumping and riding rough trails makes it much easier and loads more fun.

"I can't thank Blesma enough for helping me with the cost of the leg. Without their help, and the help from H4H, I wouldn't have been able to afford the leg."

JOIN TEAM BLESMA FOR FUN AND FUNDRAISING!

Want to take part in one of our exciting events in 2015? For a full list of next year's events visit the website (www.blesma.org), or call the dedicated Fundraising Team on 020 8548 7089.



Photograph: The Duchess

Fancy being on the TV rather than watching it?

Blesma has teamed up with one of Britain's top casting agencies to offer Members the opportunity to get a taste of life on a film set. Mad Dog Casting has provided extras for blockbuster movies including *Skyfall*, *Philomena*, *Sweeney Todd* and *The Duchess* as well as celebrated television series such as *Broadchurch* and even adverts.

The casting agency, which is based in London, has been running for 15 years. It is well established, with more than 10,000 people on its books, but only a handful of

those are amputees. "We are delighted to team up with the military in this way," said Mad Dog Managing Director, Vikki Scott. "We are often asked to provide people with very specific skills, so ex-Service men and women who know their way around a rifle, for example, could be very useful."

If you're interested, and have a flair for theatre and the performing arts, you should register your interest on their website at www.maddogcasting.com. You'll get paid anywhere from £100 to £160 a day – more

if you're lucky enough to get a speaking part or something specific to do on camera, and Mad Dog have agreed to charge a special discounted commission and registration fee for Blesma Members.

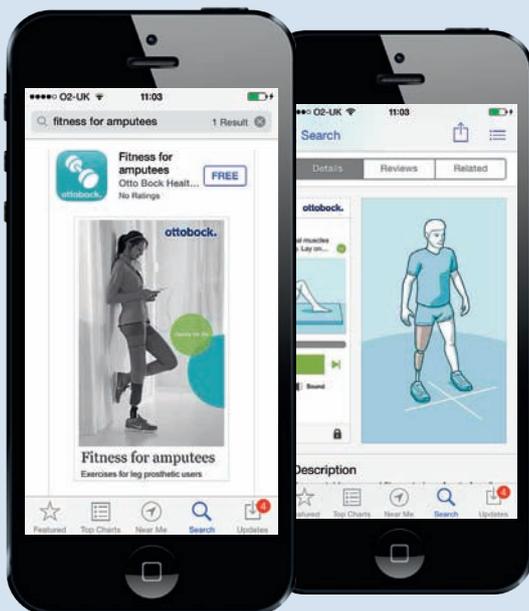
"Being on set is exciting, there are often lots of famous people walking around, you'll get a taste of life as an actor and you never know, you might end up in the next big blockbuster!" said Vikki.

Research has shown that taking part in public performances such as acting or singing can significantly impact on recovery and the levels of self-confidence and self-esteem of those leaving the military.

"It is important to recognise that just because someone is injured it doesn't inhibit their ambitions or aspirations," said Blesma Operations Director, Ian Waller. "The feedback we have received from those who have worked in the arts or the theatre is massively positive and this partnership represents a really exciting opportunity for our Members."



To apply, visit www.maddogcasting.com and make sure you also email them at blesma@maddogcasting.com to let them know you have registered



USE YOUR PHONE TO GET FIT

Prosthetics manufacturer Ottobock has launched a free fitness and rehabilitation app for lower-limb amputees. The app, called *Fitness For Amputees*, includes 16 exercises, designed by Ottobock's leading physiotherapist with a specific focus on improving strength, endurance, coordination and balance.

"Remaining active with an amputation is extremely important for rehabilitation and this app is ideal for existing and new amputees who want to improve their independence and mobility," said Ken Hurst, Ottobock UK Academy Manager. "You don't need any workout equipment beyond a cushion or a football and the instructions are simple to follow. Best of all, amputees can integrate the exercises into their everyday fitness or therapeutic routines."

Fitness For Amputees is currently only available for iOS (Apple) devices and can be downloaded for free from the App Store.

In the spotlight

FRANK GARSIDE BLESMA OFFICE AND FACILITIES MANAGER



“
I WORK FOR THE MEMBERS, SERVING THEM IS MY KEY AIM. IT MAKES LIFE MUCH MORE INTERESTING TO WORK DIRECTLY WITH THE PEOPLE YOU HELP

”

Frank Garside (above left) is Office and Facilities Manager at Blesma Headquarters. After 26 years in the RAF he joined the Association in 1997.

“I joined the RAF straight from school and reached the rank of Sergeant. I played football for the Air Force and travelled to all kinds of places with my job – it was a very interesting way of life. I loved the camaraderie of the Service life, but eventually I decided to make a change and I saw the Blesma role advertised.

“Administration work seems different in Blesma, somehow. I think that’s because it’s not just a charity, but a Membership association. I am working for, and with, the Members, and serving them is my key aim. It makes life interesting to work directly with the people you’re helping.

“I was certainly thrown in at the deep end! When I joined I went straight to my first AGM in Blackpool, and in those days there were 67 Branches and 430 delegates. We realised the constitution needed to change when the Branches started closing. At the time it was one vote per Branch, and those who were HQ Members – nearly 50% – felt disenfranchised. It changed to one Member, one vote in January 2001.

“Other changes brought in that year meant we could help Associate Members financially. Prior to that, the constitution wouldn’t allow us to. Associate Members, those who have lost limbs after service rather than during it, are very important to the Association – they have served their country, too.

“Blesma has changed so much over the years. When I joined we had 12 staff and four computers at HQ. Now there are 27 staff, and they all have a computer! There was no fundraising department, so I helped establish that. I did media and advertising, we also set up a network of people in the Service community.

“I don’t just have busy days, I have busy decades! Recently, I’ve been working on the infrastructure within HQ. We’ve had to create two new departments and expand our Membership Services team. I was responsible for changing an entire floor within HQ’s

building, as well as sorting out the car parking and drains, a new foyer, new kitchens, new toilets. It was a big project. On top of that it’s my job to arrange the AGM, the Remembrance Parade, a Members’ seminar. There’s no such thing as a typical day at Blesma!

“Whatever I’m working on, though, I love the variety my job brings. It’s why I’ve stayed for 17 years. I support officials and Members, organise events, look after insurances, oversee building work, get involved in health and safety and human resources. It’s wide and varied. Officials and clerical staff at Blesma tend to remain with the charity for a long time. We’re loyal to the Association because it does such fantastic work.

“A lot of my time is still spent talking to Members because I’ve been part of their lives for a long time. I might not necessarily be the person to deal with their specific issues, but they often come through me for advice because they know who I am. I’ll have a chat with them and guide them in the right direction; I find that very rewarding, and I find that the Members constantly inspire me. How can they not, when you see a 90 year old doing his first ever parachute jump, or an 82 year old taking gliding lessons? Members want to challenge themselves – and they never give up!

“I also love the fact that Members open up when they get together, especially the older generation. They can often be reserved, not wanting to talk about their experiences – until they are in the company of like-minded people, that is! It’s satisfying to see the older Members bouncing off the younger ones, too. They can unburden themselves, they become family.

“As for the future, Blesma has huge potential to pick up Members who don’t yet know about the Association. We’re determined to keep on finding ex-Service personnel who we can help. We exist for them. A guy in Tunbridge Wells recruited 30 new Members over two years. There could be many people eligible for our assistance out there. Blesma does such good work because it’s specialist, and we need to keep finding people who can benefit from that expertise.”



Pensions for life for surviving spouses and civil partners

Widows, widowers and civil partners of all members of the Armed Forces Pension Scheme will now retain their pensions for life. From 1 April 2015, all survivors' pensions awarded to Armed Forces spouses and civil partners will also be for life.

Those who already receive a survivor's pension will be entitled to keep it for life, even if they decide to remarry, cohabit or form a civil partnership in the future. Previously, some may have had to give up their pension if their circumstances changed.

The decision highlights the commitment by the Government to the Armed Forces Covenant by recognising the difficulties many partners of Armed Forces personnel face in earning their own occupational pensions, often due to having to relocate their homes within the UK or overseas.

"We welcome these changes, and it is absolutely correct that the Government

has put right something which has, in the past, caused so much upset and distress," said Heather Nicholson, Blesma's Director of Membership Services.

Blesma recognises that the nature of Service life has left widows, widowers and surviving civil partners of members of the Armed Forces at a disadvantage. The changes, which apply to members of the Armed Forces Pension Scheme 75 (AFPS 75) and the War Pensions Scheme, will allow those who qualify after 1 April 2015 to retain their Armed Forces pension for life. That is regardless of whether the AFPS 75 member's death was caused by service or whether the surviving partner remarries or cohabits at any point in the future.

This change will come into force in conjunction with the launch of the new Armed Forces Pension Scheme.



BLESMA BATTLE BUS HITS THE STREETS

According to government statistics, the average driver spends one month in every year behind the wheel. Perhaps even more amazing is that as many as 3,000 people will see your vehicle every day.

Vehicle advertising, particularly on Britain's busy roads, is therefore probably one of the most cost effective ways of reaching your target audience, so Blesma has decided it is time to take its message to the streets.

The Chadwell Heath pool car has been branded with the Association's new-look logo to coincide with the launch of the new corporate identity. Thanks must go to Totally Dynamic in Enfield who made an offer we couldn't refuse – designing and fitting the logo for free!



FUNDRAISER IS MUSIC TO ASSOCIATION'S EARS

A charity concert has raised £2,500 for Blesma's Blackpool Home. The concert, featuring the Blackburn Salvation Army Band and Westholme School Chamber Choir, took place on Saturday 18 October at the Blackburn Salvation Army. It was organised by Richard Walsh, a Blesma supporter and member of the local British Legion.

During the event there was a time for remembrance following *The British Legion* march that included the *Last Post* and a choric presentation of the poem *Who are these men?* by the choir.

Congregational singing of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* was followed by the band's presentation of Aaron Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man*, a tribute to all who have risked life and limb for country and freedom.

The choir also entertained the audience with songs including *Let the Trumpet Sound*, *All you need is Love* and *Signed, Sealed, Delivered*. The band was not to be outdone, and belted out renditions of music from *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*.





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Bolton shirt raises £10,000 for Blesma



Bolton Wanderers' limited edition 'Blesma' shirt



Bolton Wanderers FC have raised £10,000 for Blesma through the sale of their limited edition military green football shirt. One thousand shirts were produced, each with the words 'Lest We Forget' on the reverse and words from Laurence Binyon's poem *For the Fallen* inside the label.

The cheque was presented to Blesma Member Lance Corporal Stuart Robinson and BSO Charley Streater by staff from the football club.

"We'd like to say a huge thank you to all the staff, players and fans at Bolton Wanderers for all their efforts supporting Blesma," said LCpl Robinson, who is an avid Bolton fan. "Their support means that Blesma can continue to support guys like me for life."



Richard Gough, Head of Commercial at Bolton Wanderers, said: "Everyone at Bolton Wanderers is proud to do what we can to support Blesma.

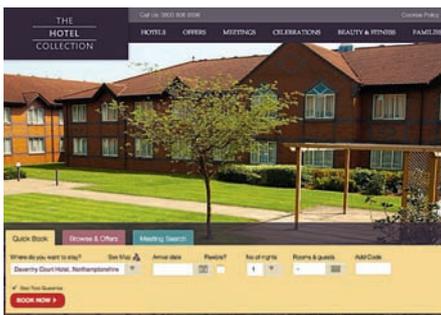
Our thanks must go to our supporters who have bought the limited edition Macron shirts." Blesma are Bolton Wanderers' national charity partner for the 2014/15 season.



BOLTON WANDERERS COME TO BLACKPOOL

The relationship between Bolton Wanderers and Blesma was further cemented in November when representatives from the football club visited the Blackpool Home and met a number of the residents. The Association is Bolton Wanderers' chosen charity for this season, and to date the club has raised more than £12,000 for Blesma.

"It was a real pleasure to meet the veterans and our club is delighted to support such a worthwhile charity," said Club Chaplain and Head of Community Trust, Phil Mason. Meanwhile, Blackpool Home Manager, Jacqui Longden said: "Our residents really enjoyed the visit and we are grateful to the club for supporting Blesma and to the fans for their generosity."



MEMBERS' WEEKEND VENUE CONFIRMED

The Members' Weekend 2015 should already be pencilled into your diary but you can now ink it in as the venue has been confirmed. The Members' Weekend 2015, which is free to all qualifying Members, will be held from Saturday 16 May to Monday 18 May at the Daventry Court Hotel situated near Daventry Water in Northamptonshire.

Places are limited so to avoid disappointment book your place by calling 020 8590 1124 or emailing chadwellheath@blesma.org

NEWS ANALYSIS

WILL WE REALLY BE ABLE TO GROW NEW LIMBS BY 2039?

AND WILL THAT MAKE PROSTHETICS A THING OF THE PAST?

Scientists have launched an ambitious project to enable amputees to 'grow' missing limbs within 25 years.

The £60 million campaign will harness the latest cutting-edge technology, drawing on major advances in stem cell and growth factor research along with progressive techniques in biomechanical engineering and orthopaedics. The ultimate goal is to be able to regrow limbs but there will also be major benefits for Blesma Members along the way as the project advances over the next two-and-a-half decades.

"This is a long term project and these are very early days but it represents a major commitment for amputees and is a very exciting project," said Professor Anthony Bull, lead at the Centre for Blast Injury Studies at Imperial College, London which is the centre for the project.

"The science involved is incredibly complex and will take years to come to fruition, but Blesma Members can look forward to a trickle of advances over the coming years.

"Ultimately, the goal is to be able to grow a limb, and I believe we will eventually get there, but the first major step is to grow a joint that functions – a knee or an ankle, for example. That would make a huge difference and is currently our main focus.

"The research we have from double amputee veterans of the Vietnam War is that they end up in wheelchairs for reasons to do with prosthetics and the socket, mobility and simply getting tired. I find that soul-destroying. At the moment we have fantastically fit young people doing brilliantly with wonderfully advanced prosthetics, but research tells us that they will most likely end up in a wheelchair."

The project is being funded by the charity Find A Better Way, which was founded by England and Manchester United soccer legend Sir Bobby Charlton in 2011. Imperial College, the centre for the research, will work in partnership with Georgia Tech in the United States.

"The world has moved on and there is now so much expertise in stem cell, growth factors, and biomaterials," added Professor Bull. "It is now a case of combining the science of orthopaedics and the science of regenerative medicine."

THE SCIENCE BIT...

The project will build on existing work at Imperial College in which scientists have constructed biomaterial meshes that act like scaffolding in gaps between bones and encouraged the body's cells to regrow bone and tissue to bridge the gap. The regrowth process will involve the construction of this biomaterial mesh that will promote bone and tissue formation without being rejected by the body. It will be loaded with growth factor and a package of cells that will kick-start the body's regenerative biology.

But the biggest challenges will be to scientifically convince the body's tissue

to bond to the mesh and to manage that interaction between muscle, tendon and bone. The work will range across technical disciplines as the team attempts to fuse all the elements into one cohesive process.

Cells and tissues will be cultured in complex biological incubators while detailed mechanical testing will focus on the dynamics and performance of a range of materials.

The first major focus will be to design elements of an artificial knee joint and to combine that with the mesh so that bone, tissue and muscle can grow through and around it to create a new limb.

"We hope to be able to see above-the-knee amputations converted to through the knee and that would be better for load transfer, and would create less bone calcification in the stump so amputees will get less pain and better mobility. But the real scientific developments will start next year so don't expect developments overnight."

Rob White, a trustee from Find A Better Way, added: "We don't want to give the impression that there will be a major development tomorrow, or in the very near future, as it will take a long time for the science and research to be tested and made viable.

"But we are extremely excited by the potential and believe that we will be able to help people in an incremental way. So some injuries which result in amputation now may, in five or 10 years' time, be managed with regenerative medicine to retain the foot, ankle or lower leg, for example.

"That is much better than having to rely on a prosthetic – however good they are. It will be your own limb."



WHAT DO BLESMA MEMBERS THINK?

CHARLEY STREATHER

Charley was injured in 1976 while serving in the Army and has been a Blesma Member since 1983

"The implications are super and it would be good if we saw some interim results every few years. People whose stumps are too short to accept a prosthetic, as well as those who cannot wear prostheses because their legs have been amputated too close to a joint, could really benefit.

"The possibility of muscle regrowth for those who have massive scarring would produce a cleaner stump which would benefit their socket fitting."

COLIN HAMILTON

A former Royal Highland Fusilier and member of the Black Watch, Colin lost his right leg above the knee while attempting to rescue a comrade in Kosovo

"I think it's a really good idea but are you going to be able to wear a prosthesis while the limb is growing more bone or tissue? And if so, will you have to keep changing the prosthesis? If the amputee has lost a leg rather than an arm will he or she have to use a wheelchair during that time? There are definitely practical issues that need to be addressed along the way."

JAMIE GILLESPIE

Jamie lost his left leg below the knee while serving as a Sapper with the Royal Engineers in 1994. He is now a prosthetist.

"This has been portrayed as growing a leg when it is really about lengthening someone's amputation stump. If someone were to have an amputation through or above the knee, they may try to salvage the knee. If they succeed in that there is hope for growing a leg back in the future.

"There has been progress on the regrowth of bone and tissue, so the science is already heading in that direction."

ALASDAIR CARNEGIE

Alasdair lost his left leg in a military training exercise in 1963. He is 79 years old

"It is a fabulous proposal, I only wish I was younger! I think this will be tremendous but it will be long and difficult. They will need people to test it and that is where the challenges may lie.

"People jokingly say to amputees; 'Will your leg grow back again?' They've been saying that to me for years, but that is now a possibility. It is a superb development and there is a lot to be learned throughout the project."

Sun, sea and... sharks

IN EARLY NOVEMBER SIX BLESMA Members ventured to Cape Town for a once-in-a-lifetime trip courtesy of Blesma. Stewart Harris, Stuart Robinson, Neil Heritage, Gary Meekins, and Alan Carson were led on the expedition by John Francis and were hosted by fellow Blesma Member and South Africa resident Neil Palmer.

“The whole trip, from start to finish, was absolutely fantastic,” said Stewart Harris. “We were in South Africa for 10 days and in that time we did a crazy number of things. We went on safari, flew in a private plane, shot AK47s, 12 gauge shotguns and pistols on a shooting range, went to the top of Table Mountain, and even had time to chill out on the beach and wander around Cape Town. Going up Table Mountain was a great experience – you could look down on the clouds which formed a perfect sheet over

the whole city. But the chance to go shark diving was definitely everyone’s highlight.”

Stewart only joined Blesma in 2013 and this was the first activity he has taken part in with the Association, but he soon got to grips with the Blesma banter.



“I am blind in one eye and partially sighted in the other as well as having lost most of the hearing in my left ear after being caught in an IED blast in Afghanistan in 2012,” said Stewart. “I have all my limbs but as we were getting into the cage to dive with the Great Whites all the other guys were making jokes, telling me I was about to become a proper Blesma Member!”

And the Blesma Members didn’t just get on well with each other. “Everywhere we went people asked us where we were from,” said Stewart. “Complete strangers would pay for our meals and we were invited to all sorts of places. The whole experience was nothing short of awesome.”

AND A BIG THANKS TO BA

The hospitality extended to the guys wasn’t restricted to South Africa though. “When we arrived at Heathrow we got chatting to someone from British Airways,” said Stewart. “When Reg Harper (below right with Stewart and another BA member of staff) learned we were injured soldiers, he put us in the first class lounge and arranged for our seats to be upgraded to business class on the return journey. He certainly didn’t have to do that, so it was very kind of him and that really set the tone for the entire trip.”



Fishing, Blesma style: shark diving proved to be the biggest catch



Blesma THE LIMELIGHT VETERAN Activities 2015



NEW YEAR, NEW EXPERIENCES. COME AND GET STUCK IN!

Inserted into this issue is a brochure of activities that are on offer to Blesma Members in 2015. “All the activities that we provide are completely free, Members only pay for their transport to and from the meeting point,” says Activities Manager Dave Coulton, “and we will normally pay for accommodation the night before so you can travel at your own pace.”

Blesma’s activities cater for every level and ability, from beginner to serious adventurer, throughout the duration of the year. There’s something on offer for every age group and all interests too, so if you think Blesma’s activities are just for adrenaline junkies think again.

Take a look at the events on offer and reserve your place as soon as you can by emailing Emily Mizon on mea@blesma.org, by calling her on 020 8548 7094, or by using the Application Form that is inserted into this issue of the magazine.



The team conquer their most recent challenge; Mount Kilimanjaro

Photographs: www.adaptivegrandslam.com

7 summits, 2 poles, 1 serious challenge

A Blesma Member is the driving force behind a team of four veterans who are attempting to become the first disabled team in history to complete the notorious Explorers Grand Slam. This treacherous challenge entails summiting the highest peak on each of the seven continents, as well as walking unsupported to the geographic North and South Poles.

Only 41 people have ever completed the Grand Slam, partly because of the extreme cold, which can drop as low as -68°C, the wind speeds that can be in excess of 200kph, the altitude sickness, lethal ice crevices, polar bears and avalanches. Trying to complete it without the use of all limbs has been described



by some mountaineers as impossible. "We are setting out to do two things," said Martin Hewitt, the team leader and former Parachute Regiment officer who became a Blesma Member several years ago when a gunshot wound to the chest in Afghanistan left him partially paralysed. "We want to change attitudes towards disabled people whilst inspiring those who have similar injuries to make the most of what they've got. Secondly, we want to give the opportunity to other disabled people to join us on their own road to recovery."



The team have already conquered Europe (Mount Elbrus in Russia at 5,642m), North America (Mount McKinley in Alaska at 6,194m), Africa

(Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania at 5,896m) and the North Pole (where they were joined by HRH Prince Harry). Now, their sights are firmly set on their second attempt to climb Mount Everest after horrendous weather conditions forced them to abandon their first attempt. They also aim to scale Mount Aconcagua (Argentina, 6,962m), Mount Vinson (Antarctica, 4,892m) and Carstensz Pyramid (Indonesia, 4,884m), and reach the South Pole by 2016.

For more information on the attempt visit www.adaptivegrandslam.com

NEWS BRIEFS

YOUR ASSOCIATION NEEDS YOU!



Will you join Team Blesma next year in aid of our limbless veterans? In 2015, Members, supporters and volunteers will run marathons, scale mountains, cycle across continents and push their minds and bodies to the absolute limit in extreme sporting challenges, all in the name of raising money for the Association.

Whichever event you choose, as a Blesma fundraiser you will receive a fundraising pack and Blesma branded training gear, while Blesma's dedicated fundraising team will be there to support you every step of the way.

For more information on how to get involved take a look at the Events Calendar that is inserted into this issue of the magazine or visit www.blesma.org

MEMBER'S HISTORY FOUND

Blesma Member James Kinchin-White has discovered some details about the service of one of the first Blesma Members to have been buried at the Blesma Plot in Crieff Cemetery.

"I discovered the details of Private Alexander Kerr Wilkie in an out of print history of the 17th Battalion the Highland Light Infantry," said James. "Private Wilkie enlisted in November 1914 and survived the fields of France. In his later years he was cared for at the Blesma Home Crieff where he died on 08 February 1972 at the age of 80. He is interred at Crieff Cemetery in the Blesma Plot. It is perhaps fitting that one of the earliest Blesma Members buried at Crieff was also one of those who enlisted in November 1914 and who was remembered exactly 100 years later."



↘ BLESMA BRIEFING

Giving advice, advocacy and our full support

Brian Chenier, BSO (Prosthetics) gives us the lowdown on the latest in prosthetics as well as updates on Government funding and advice on how to get what you need



PROSTHETIC SUPPORT

Part of my job is to provide Members with advice, advocacy and individual support in their dealings with the NHS Limb Service. At a national level, I have been able to develop close working relationships with the NHS Limb Fitting community, from commissioners to managers and clinicians. Such relationships have many advantages; the ability to telephone or email a Limb Centre Manager to discuss issues that may have arisen, or to prompt the clinicians to look at alternative prescriptions is often helpful to a patient.

Historically, this work was done on a regional basis by Blesma Area Support Officers, and the relationships and support they provide locally remains vital. One of the significant advantages of having national oversight is that I am able to seek a broader opinion or have access to a greater depth of knowledge that I can utilise when supporting individual Members.

ARE YOU ELIGIBLE FOR BLESMA MEMBERSHIP?

If you're reading this and for some reason you're not already a Member of the Association, then please read on because you might just be eligible to join.

If you do join you will be visited by your local Blesma Support Officer who can advise you on your dealings with the Limb Service and on the benefits and allowances that you are entitled to receive. You can also participate in our programme of sporting, social and cerebral activities, you can receive financial support in the form of grants to assist with the purchase of disability and mobility aids and, perhaps most importantly, you can meet other people who have experienced the life-changing impact of amputation.

So, if you have served in any part of Her Majesty's Armed Forces and have lost a limb or the use of a limb, or your sight, either in service or afterwards, please contact our Membership Services team at Blesma Chadwell Heath by calling 020 8548 7093 or emailing memberadmin@blesma.org.

For full details of Membership categories and more general information about Blesma, visit the website at www.blesma.org

HONOURING THE COVENANT TO VETERANS AND ARMED FORCES PERSONNEL

I represent Blesma at the All Party Limb Loss Group (APLLG) and in October I presented a paper outlining the work that has been done in the past 18 months in regard to Prosthetic Services. One of the key points from the paper (which can be found in its entirety at www.apllg.eu) is the financial aspect of development.

By the end of 2015, £6.7m in grant aid will have been given to the nine Enhanced Veterans Limb Centres in England to support them in providing services to veterans with attributable amputations. The focus of spending has been on staffing, workshop and therapy equipment, accommodation changes and training. The paper also highlights that, as at August 2014, 311 applications had been supported by the Veterans Prosthetic Panel at a cost of £2.9m. A further £1m has been made available to the other 24 NHS Limb Centres to be allocated equitably to enable them to upgrade their equipment or infrastructure.

The paper also remarks on the work which still needs to be done; in particular, seeking parity in provision of wheelchairs to meet the needs of our Members. We also await the result of the NHS prioritisation process so that we can confirm that baseline funding will continue for supporting veterans with attributable amputations.

ON THE SPOT ADVICE

Do you feel as if you need an upgrade to one or more of your prosthetics? Has your activity level changed or have you taken up a new sport or hobby, for example? There is no guarantee that a request will be successful, but if your needs have changed you should make a point of discussing them with your prosthetist or fitter.

It might be useful to ask for a joint appointment with the doctor and other members of the clinical team – this is often called a Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT) review (and will normally take longer to arrange). This might not be necessary as your prosthetist may take up your case at regular team meetings. For more advice, get in touch with me on bsoprosthetics@blesma.org or on 020 8548 7080 and I'll do all I can to help.



IF YOUR NEEDS HAVE CHANGED RECENTLY YOU SHOULD MAKE A POINT OF DISCUSSING THEM WITH YOUR DOCTOR OR FITTER



“Diving as an amputee has opened a new world up to many. The sense of freedom and movement you get underwater is incredible”



A magical week in an underwater world

IN LATE SEPTEMBER A GROUP OF Blesma adventurers travelled to Egypt for a week of open water diving in the Red Sea. The group – a mix of old hats and scuba virgins – spent an action-packed week exploring a deep and endless new world full of wrecks, reefs and watery wonders.

“The reefs were masses of colour and life, from the smallest Clownfish to beautiful but deadly Lionfish,” said experienced diver Bob Monkhouse who helped out on the trip. “During the week we were lucky enough to see Bottlenose dolphins, large and graceful Eagle rays, Moray eels – some with heads as large as my own – and even a predatory Barracuda. It was like being in the world’s biggest and most impressive aquarium!”



But two dives from the end of their trip, Blesma’s intrepid explorers made their most impressive find. “A big, Whitetip Reef shark came cruising right by us,” said Bob. “It was an awesome sight and, in true squaddie style, several of our guys went after it!”

During the week the divers gained all manner of qualifications including open water, advanced open water, deep diving, boat diving, enriched air, night diver and search and recovery diver qualifications.

“Diving as an amputee has opened a new world up to many of us. The sense of freedom and movement you get when you’re underwater compared to being on land is incredible,” said Bob. “The trip was a terrific experience in so many ways. The guys learned new skills and pushed their own boundaries, and they made some great new friends (or buddies as we divers say!), and for that I’d like to say a huge thank you to Blesma and our instructors John, Stuart and Sarah for giving us the tools and confidence to go and explore.”



Blesma and Wounded Warrior Project Members at this year's SRUK

Get on your bike and see the world

IT'S OFFICIAL: BLESMA MEMBERS love lycra! Over the last few years the UK has gone crazy for cycling – and the Association is no exception.

It's little wonder when you consider the benefits. Cycling is low impact, so is better than running for joints and stumps, it is sociable, and it allows you to cover large distances and so see more, while a range of adaptive kit makes the sport easily accessible to many people.

Two key events in the Blesma cycling calendar took place recently. The fourth annual SRUK (formerly Soldier Ride UK) was held in October. Starting at Woburn Abbey, a team of 13 Blesma cyclists were joined by 14 American veterans from the Wounded Warrior Project as they rode 150 miles in five days across the South East of England. The ride finished at the Tower of London where the cyclists were greeted by Blesma's Patron The Duke of Gloucester.

"This year's event was a huge success," said Blesma Activities Manager Dave Coulton. "The participants got a lot out of it no matter what their experience or fitness. Cycling in a group encourages the military mindset of looking after each other. We had five cyclists on hand bikes and those guys work so hard hand-cranking their bikes so everyone had to look out for each other.

"SRUK offers something worthwhile to the Members who take part; they have a

good time, bond with other Members, enjoy a bike ride, and get to work as a team."

BATTLEFIELD RIDE

One month before SRUK, seven Blesma Members travelled to Belgium to take part in a very fitting cycle ride.

"The group traced the WWI advance by Germany into Belgium, taking in a number of places of real significance along the way," said Brian Chenier, BSO (Prosthetics) who accompanied the group. "The guys stopped in Ypres and at the Menin Gate, as well as at the St. Symphorien cemetery and the Tyne Cot cemetery, where there is a memorial to almost 50,000 soldiers."

The tour consisted of five days of riding, completing between 18 and 25 miles a day. It was taken at a steady pace but, in true Blesma style, the group pulled together to make sure it was enjoyable for everyone.



"One guy in particular started the week lacking confidence in his ability to complete the ride, but the other cyclists rallied around and supported him, and by the end of the week he had signed up for SRUK," said Brian. "The group have even decided to organise their own, more challenging, coast to coast trip in 2015."

If you would like to get involved with cycling, whether you are a complete novice or you have a decent amount of experience on two wheels, you should get in touch with the Activities Team at Chadwell Heath.

"If you've never cycled before as an amputee we want to help you, and if you cycle occasionally but haven't experienced a group ride then you should think about coming along," said Dave. "We had one guy who did the Intro to Cycling course this year on a hand bike and he was in his 60s. We make sure we pitch the events at the level of the people taking part."

The full cycling itinerary for 2015 can be found in the Activities Brochure that is inserted into this issue of the magazine. If you are interested in taking part but have some concerns or would like more information contact the Activities Team on mea@blesma.org or 020 8548 7094



Mark's got flex appeal

Blesma Member Mark Smith has won one of the UK's first ambulant disabled bodybuilding competitions, held in Margate in November.

Mark, who lost his right leg above the knee following a live firing incident on Pre-Deployment Training in 2011, scooped top prize in the competition despite having only trained for the event since May 2014.

"I've always enjoyed going to the gym and decided immediately after my accident that I wanted to stay active," said Mark, who spent nearly 10 years in the First Battalion, the Grenadier Guards. "Since I came back from Afghanistan a few years ago I've craved adrenaline rushes and after my injury I tried all sorts of amputee sports but nothing excited me. Then I found bodybuilding and immediately knew it was something I wanted to stick at.

"My regiment has a family day every summer and each year people ask me how my leg's doing, or tell me how well I'm walking. This year was the first time no-one asked about my leg. I felt 10 feet tall that day and that spurred me on to win.

"I've spent the last three years craving a serious adrenaline rush and the moment I stepped on stage in front of 800 people and struck my first pose I knew I could

finally move on from the Army. The reception I got gave me closure. That was the first time since leaving the Army I realised I wasn't going to miss it any more."

Mark can't celebrate with a tray of mince

pies over Christmas though as he's been invited to compete in Texas in March. Watch this space for more on Mark's muscles!



NEWS BRIEFS



COMMUNITY SAYS A BIG THANK YOU TO DOREEN

Eighty-six-year-old Blesma Widow Doreen Johnson has been awarded two lifetime achievement awards in the last few months.

Age Concern and Beach Radio, her local radio station in Cobham, Surrey have both recognised Doreen for her impressive fundraising exploits over the years.

"I got the first one from Age Concern in October for raising money and helping out at the Cobham Community Centre. I moved to Cobham in 1981 and have helped out and raised funds for the centre for more than 40 years," said Doreen. "A few weeks later I got a call from Beach Radio to say that I had won their lifetime achievement award. I was very, very proud to go to the awards. I got such an ovation I thought the roof was going to come off. I felt like a film star that night!"

Doreen's late husband, Don was a Blesma Member and over the years Doreen has raised money for all sorts of charities including Blesma, East Coast Truckers which was set up by her son, and Age Concern.

GET ONLINE AND GET IN THE KNOW

For the most up-to-date information on everything Blesma related, check out the Opportunities For Our Members page on the Blesma website (www.blesma.org) or keep an eye on the Blesma Facebook page (www.facebook.com/blesma). If you have any questions about any of the activities on offer, or would like to know more about how you can get involved, please speak to Emily Mizon or Dave Coulton on 020 8548 7094 or email them at mea@blesma.org

HELP US TO IMPROVE YOUR MAGAZINE

What do you think of this issue of Blesma Magazine? What subjects would you like to see covered in the next issue? Write to us at editor@blesma.org and let us know so that we can constantly improve your mag.

RALLY PAIR DRIVE HEADLONG INTO THE RECORD BOOKS

Race2Recovery team members Grant White and Yanto Evans have become the first amputee crew to finish a British Motorsport Rally. The pair, both below-the-knee amputees, took part in Round 5 of the British Cross Country Championship.

"We were more than four minutes in front at one point but had gearbox issues which was massively frustrating," said navigator Yanto. "But we did complete the rally to become the first disabled crew to finish a British Motorsport event. That's what Race2Recovery is about; proving to ourselves we can achieve what people say can't be done."



(From l) Grant, Yanto and team manager Ben Gott

This was the first time Yanto had paired up with driver Grant and they seemed to click straight away – odd considering Grant is an ex-Royal Marine and Yanto an ex-Para!

The pair will drive together next season with the aim of competing in the Dakar Rally in 2016.

"Our achievement shows that serious injuries can, and do, happen but that shouldn't stop you doing anything you want," said Yanto.

Support the family says new report

The family plays a vital role in rehabilitation and should be given more help says study

A report that was commissioned by Blesma has called for a policy shift towards family-centred care for injured veterans. The report, *Traumatic Limb Loss and the Needs of the Family*, was carried out by Anglia Ruskin University's Veterans and Families Institute (VFI). Its findings recommend more quality research to "inform the debate and raise the profile of family needs as we strive to provide the best possible care for our injured Service personnel".

The report calls on policy makers to consider the importance of family support on rehabilitation and recovery for those injured in conflict, suggesting the needs of those family members providing care also need to be taken into account.



Photographs: Andy Bate

The lack of existing research into the effects of limb loss on the families of Service personnel has been highlighted in the report, which made sure it reviewed all material published since Blesma became a charity in 1932. No articles were found that directly focused on the needs of the families or their coping strategies.

"The VFI at Anglia Ruskin University is working collaboratively with Service charities to help them provide the most up-to-date and well-evidenced interventions

possible," said the report's lead author Matt Fossey, who is a director of the VFI. "As this important piece of research shows, after 100 years of devastating conflicts, we still have a long way to go to understand the needs of the families of our injured personnel.

"More needs to be done to ensure that interventions are provided to those families and that they have a robust evidence base."

Barry Le Grys, Blesma's Chief Executive, said: "Blesma aims for this valuable piece of work to be a catalyst for the Government and Service charities to collaboratively improve understanding of the family needs surrounding those severely injured in the service of their country."

The full report can be found and downloaded at www.blesma.org



Anglia Ruskin University

TAKE PART IN THE MILITARY PILGRIMAGE 2015

IN 1958, 13 YEARS AFTER THE END OF WWII, the French military invited their German counterparts to join them in a Pilgrimage of Peace at Lourdes in France.

The pilgrimage, now the International Military Pilgrimage, involves more than 30 countries and 20,000 personnel. Every year, the British contingent is joined by a group of ex-Service personnel with disabilities who are part of Group 507 (Joint Services) attending through The Pilgrimage Trust.

The Group travels to Lourdes for a week, visiting places of spiritual and historical interest nearby after the pilgrimage. The trip includes a full day's excursion taking in a visit to a Crusader Church, and the chance to join in a candle-lit procession, after which members place a candle bearing the names of those they specifically wish to remember in one of the stands close to the shrine at the heart of Lourdes.

Accommodation is provided at Hosanna House just outside Lourdes, which belongs

to The Pilgrimage Trust, and caters for a variety of needs. In 2015, the pilgrimage will take place from 14 to 22 May. You don't need to be Roman Catholic to take part, but many find the spiritual aspects enriching.

If you are interested in going on the 2015 pilgrimage and would like some more information, please contact David Loftus on david.e.loftus@blueyonder.co.uk or visit the Group's website at www.jshhg507.com



INBOX

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

A BIG THANK YOU FROM ONE OF OUR WIDOWS

In the last issue of the magazine I saw a picture of Jim Keating (below). My late husband, Stefan Majek, was a veteran and Blesma Member who lived in Canada, and Mr Keating did so much for him. When my husband passed away in 2011 I had problems with government departments regarding my widow's pension. I needed help and Heather Nicholson at Chadwell Heath continued to look after me and gave me the required advice and assistance.

I must say that being a veteran's wife and corresponding with Blesma was a very pleasant experience for me. I can't say enough about the efforts of Blesma for veterans whether they live in England or, as in our case, in Canada. Everyone at the Association did their utmost to see that all my late husband's needs were met.

I was sorry to hear of Mr Keating's retirement but it is well deserved; he not only served his country but also took on the work of looking after the needs of disabled veterans at home and abroad. I cannot thank him enough.



Jim Keating

I could write a book about all the good you have done for me but I just wanted you to know that it is almost four years since my husband passed away but I still think of Blesma as my English friends to call on if I need advice or just to say hello.

Thank you so much for all the emotional and unlimited support shown to us.

Christina Majek

Bolton Wanderers sport their limited edition 'Blesma' strip



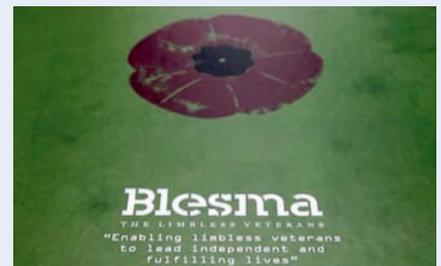
Bolton FC supports Blesma

What a pleasant surprise it was to find out that the football team I support, Bolton Wanderers, have chosen Blesma to be their chosen charity for the 2014/2015 season. The club has brought out a limited edition shirt in support of Blesma which they will wear in some games during the season.

The action of the club would have been very much welcomed by my late father George Tomlinson who, for many years, was the Blesma Assistant General Secretary working alongside Charles Dunham, Fred Tattersall and Ray Holland. Thank you for the continued supply of Blesma Magazine, the article on the Blackpool Home was excellent. The Home was something close to my father's heart along with the Widows' Weeks, which he helped to start.

Austin Tomlinson

The War Pensions Agency offices in Blackpool were named "Tomlinson House" in honour of the work George Tomlinson did on behalf of all ex-Service amputees. [Editor]



COME AND JOIN US ON THE RHINE

Following on from four previous successful trips organised by the North West and North East Areas, a trip along The Rhine is planned for 28 May to 01 June 2015. Numbers are strictly restricted to 30 places and will be allocated on a first-come, first-served basis.

Following an overnight ferry crossing from Hull to Rotterdam on 28 May, we will travel to Koblenz, Lahnstein and stay for two nights on half-board basis. We will take part in tours throughout the Rhine area on

both days and will manage to squeeze in a short Rhine Cruise before returning to Hull on Monday 01 June.

Headquarters have kindly agreed to subsidise the trip, reducing the cost from £340 to £174 per person. Applications are very welcome from Ordinary and Associate Members, as well as their wives, widows, partners or carers.

For more information, or to book your place, please contact me on either 01407 761597 or at neilrowbottom@hotmail.co.uk

Neil Rowbottom

OBITUARIES

Those we have lost

William Robert Dunn MBE JP

09 June 1923 - 09 October 2014

BILL DUNN LOST HIS LEFT ARM ABOVE the elbow and received gunshot wounds to both legs and his spine whilst engaged in the Normandy Landings on Juno Beach during World War II.

Bill was born in 1923 at Ryhope, Tyne & Wear. In 1936, after the death of Bill's father the previous year, Bill's mother and her four children moved to Silksworth. On leaving school, aged 14, Bill started work as a miner and remained in the job until the pit closed in 1939.

When war broke out Bill was working in Chester but was soon called up to serve and was sent to Strensall for training. He served with the Kings Own Yorkshire Light Infantry (KOYLI) the Essex Regiment and then the Royal Armoured Corps with 26 Assault Squadron RE.

He was seriously wounded by machine gun fire on D-Day, 06 June 1944, in Graye-sur-Mer, and in addition to losing his left arm he suffered gunshot wounds to both legs. His Churchill tank was one of the first vehicles across the beach at Graye-sur-Mer before it got stuck in a large crater and sank into the mud. As the crewmen got out, four of the men were killed by mortar fire, and only Bill and fellow Blesma Member Bill Hawkins survived.

On Thursday 25 November 1976, the tank was exhumed in the presence of the two Bills and their wives. For many years after they were invited by the Mayor of Graye-sur-Mer to visit the town, and when they did they were treated "like Royalty". The tank now stands on a beach near Graye-sur-Mer as a memorial to all those killed on D-Day.

Following discharge from HM Forces, Bill went back to work in the Silksworth Colliery but soon had to give up the underground work due to his war injuries. Instead, he found work as a cost clerk with the National Coal Board in his home town of Sunderland, and joined Blesma in December 1944.

He married Marion, the love of his life, in December 1947, was elected to the committee of the Colliery Welfare Football Club in 1950 and was elected Secretary



shortly after. Due to ongoing problems as a result of his war injuries he retired in 1974.

In 1953, he joined the Sunderland Branch of Blesma. Not long after joining he took on the duties of Branch Welfare Officer

and was elected Honorary Secretary of the Branch in 1958 before becoming Chairman of the North East Area, a position he held for 30 years.

Not content with his already heavy workload, he joined the Northumbria War Pensions Committee in 1954 and, six years later, he became the committee's Chairman. After amalgamation, he served as Chairman of the new Newcastle and District War Pension Committee, was a member of the Advisory Committee on War Pensions in London for 12 years and even found time to serve as a magistrate on the Sunderland bench for 17 years.

Bill, who was awarded an MBE in 1973, sadly lost his beloved wife, Marion, in June 1995. He is survived by his only daughter, Jean. Bill died peacefully after a short illness on 09 October 2014. He was a great stalwart of the Association and he will be sadly missed by all who knew him.

Philomena Agnes Magdalene Tibbenham

11 November 1923 – 16 October 2014

PHIL TIBBENHAM LOST HER LEFT EYE as a result of enemy action whilst serving on an anti-aircraft gun site near Hastings in 1944. She served as a member of the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) from 1941 until 1946 and, following discharge from HM Forces, took up employment as a Civil Servant until she retired in 1980.

She joined Blesma and Blind Veterans UK (formerly St Dunstons) and was very active in support of both charities alongside her husband Richard, and son and daughter. Originally a member of the Buckinghamshire Branch, Phil and her family moved to Crieff, Perthshire and transferred to the Fife Branch for a short period of time before returning to the South of England when they joined the East Berkshire Branch. It was here where Phil volunteered to take on the duties of Branch Secretary before the family were on the move once more, this time to the South



West of England. Again, she applied to transfer, firstly to the Southampton Branch and subsequently to Headquarters Branch.

Phil had a passion for sailing and was often found sailing the English Channel with fellow Members. On more than one occasion during the 1980s, the Association entered a float in the Lord Mayor of London's Procession, and each year Phil was part of the crew.

The family were also keen attendees of the AGM, where they made friends across the Association as well as with delegates from our French "sister" charities. The Ancaster Blesma Home in Crieff was a favourite holiday destination where each year Phil and Dick would catch up with many life-long friends. Another event that they would not dream of missing was the

Annual Remembrance Parade Weekend at the Cenotaph in London where Phil would act as the Wreath Bearer.

Sadly, Dick predeceased Phil in early 2013. A well respected and much loved Member, Phil is very much missed by all who knew her.



Those who have passed away

August 2014 - October 2014. May they rest in peace.

Cameron R	Catering Corps	HQ	Aug 2014
Cawdron E	RAF	HQ	01/08/2014
Coulson A	Fife & Forfar Yeomanry	Blackpool Home (SW Essex)	19/10/2014
Cruickshank R	RN	HQ	18/08/2014
Dallow K	Royal Welch Fusiliers	HQ (Walsall)	23/08/2014
Draper S Mrs	Women's Land Army	HQ (E.Berks)	16/09/2014
Dunn W	RE	HQ (Sunderland)	09/10/2014
Elliott C	Royal Horse Guards	HQ (Bristol)	29/08/2014
Gray D	RN	Blackpool Home	11/09/2014
Howard P	RAF	HQ (Oxford)	04/08/2014
Howarth A	RN	HQ	03/09/2014
Johnson F	Black Watch	Blackpool Home	13/10/2014
Jones B	RASC	HQ	Sept 2014
Lawrie R	Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders	HQ (Aldershot)	12/08/2014
McCauley W	RN	HQ	07/09/2014
Murdock G	RN	HQ	01/08/2014
Nightingale W	RASC	HQ	Sep 2014
Oldfield B	RN	HQ	04/09/2014
Phillips R	RASC	Blackpool Home (Birm)	09/10/2014
Pull F	Royal Dragoon Guards	Bournemouth	07/10/2014
Smith C	Royal Signals	HQ	27/08/2014
Smith R	RASC	HQ	Oct 2014
Stanley E	RASC	HQ	10/10/2014
Stevenson E	KRRC	HQ (Bradford)	Aug 2014
Stott E	Hampshire	HQ (Bristol)	11/09/2014
Sutcliffe N	RA	HQ (Bradford)	07/10/2014
Tibbenham P Mrs	RA	HQ (Southampton/E.Berks)	16/10/2014
Tollington B	Coldstream Guards	HQ	Aug 2014
Woodcock M	RA	HQ	23/09/2014

I AM DAVE HENSON

The Invictus Games captured the nation's imagination and catapulted recovery and rehabilitation into the country's consciousness. GB Team Captain and Blesma Member Dave Henson looks back at the Games and looks forward to the Games' legacy

Pictures: Andy Bate

SOLDIER, OFFICER,
CAPTAIN, ROYAL ENGINEER,
AMPUTEE, BLESMA MEMBER,
ATHLETE, GOLD MEDALLIST,
HUSBAND, DAD-TO-BE



ARMY



BRITISH
ARMED FORCES



THE INVICTUS GAMES





Dave Henson is a very busy man. “I’m training seven days a week right now in the hope of making the GB Paralympic athletics team for Rio 2016,” he says. “I’m also about to start a PhD and I’ve got my first baby on the way. I guess I’m not going to be sleeping much over the next few years!” This sort of triple-pronged challenge is typical of Dave. A former officer in the Royal Engineers who lost both his legs in 2011 after treading on an IED (“Not the best day in the office,” is how he remembers it), he doesn’t let much – correction, he doesn’t let anything – hold him back.

He sped through rehab and was out on the running track after just 10 months despite having one above-the-knee and one through-the-knee amputation. As if that wasn’t enough of a challenge he has, over the last year, been heavily involved in the Invictus Games. Not only was he instrumental in helping to plan the event, he also captained the Great Britain team, and still had time to scoop two gold medals as a competitor.

He also made an inspirational impromptu speech at the closing ceremony. “The whole thing was Prince Harry’s project and to have him in your corner is not bad, is it?” Dave, 30, says of the heady events of September. “He was the overall manager of the event and a genuinely nice bloke. He’s a public figure but is also an Army Captain so he knows how to talk to military guys and girls. Invictus has become incredibly close to his heart, so captaining the GB team was a huge honour.”

Dave saw the Invictus Games as “a milestone in how recovery is viewed. Seeing injured blokes competing at such a high level in such an incredible arena was important,” he says. He also thought of the event as a tribute to organisations like Blesma. “The support I get from the likes of Blesma is fantastic and the Games were a celebration of that,” he says. He admits though, that his life continues to be so hectic that he hasn’t had much chance to take part in many Blesma activities yet. “I am hoping to go on a skiing trip when my missus gives me a leave pass though!” he says, but with their first baby on the way in early 2015, that doesn’t look like being any time soon!

Dave took a break from training to tell us about his Invictus journey and what he’s planning next...

DAVE ON... HOW THE INVICTUS GAMES CAME TO BE

“I was lucky enough to take part in the Warrior Games in Colorado in 2012 and 2013. It was there that I met Prince Harry. He’d had the idea for Invictus and really drove it along. Last September, he called me and some other guys who had competed in the Warrior Games to talk through his plans. We didn’t have specific job titles, but we gave our opinions on how the event might take shape. The management team did an awesome job, but we were a sounding board for the organisers from an injured Service man’s point of view.

“I was also involved in pitching the Games to corporate sponsors. We had to capture their imagination, so my role was to explain how sport had benefited me during my recovery. I didn’t do a sales pitch as such, I just told my story. I was back in the swimming pool two months after my injury, I was running after 10 months, I joined

THE INVICTUS GAMES



Blesma Member and GB Team Captain Dave Henson with Prince Harry (above) and with the GB athletics team (top)

the sitting volleyball team, went skiing and tried hand cycling. Sport definitely gives you something to think about other than recovery. I gave a speech at the official launch of the Games to sponsors at the Royal Hospital, Chelsea. It was nerve-racking because I knew what was at stake. I'm used to public speaking from my time in the Army, but this was a whole different thing. You don't get direct feedback, but the sponsors piled in, so it must have been alright!"

DAVE ON... BEING TEAM CAPTAIN

"It was a great honour to be asked by the organising committee to be Great Britain team captain. I guess I was chosen because I'd been to the Warrior Games, knew a lot of the soldiers involved, had been involved in the organisation of the tournament itself, and was competing in the 200m and sitting volleyball.

"My role was to represent the needs of the Service men and women who were competing and make sure they were looked after. It was hard work – we had a big team with lots of issues to deal with, and I tried to do my best for everyone and make sure any concerns were aired. I was exhausted by the end of the Games



– I got about three hours sleep a night for months because I was always at an appointment or interview, and had to fit in the training sessions for my events in between. I crashed afterwards, but it was well worth it."

DAVE ON... WINNING TWO GOLD MEDALS

"In sitting volleyball I was definitely the bench warmer! It was great to be in the team, but there were much better players than me. I performed my role as best as I could – that bench wasn't going to warm itself! Seeing the guys go on and smash it, winning gold, was amazing. The front row view was incredible but I didn't feel like I deserved my gold medal.

"My main event was the 200m. I really upped my training after the Games were announced in March, but I had some bumps along the way. There were issues with my prosthetics: one of them snapped and resulted in me dislocating my shoulder. A certain part wasn't up to scratch and I'm either too fat or too strong, because it broke. I had to get treatment first and then redesign the brackets on my blades. If it hadn't been for Blesma talking to the manufacturer and getting some new blades sorted in record time there's no way I would have been able to compete!

"The build up to the race in the above-knee class was intense. There were 5,000 people at the Lea Valley Stadium and I felt under a lot of pressure to perform, especially with my family and friends watching. But I did well and ran it in 28 seconds – close to my PB time. The field was less experienced than me and I won by a decent margin; I'm looking forward to the next Games, and the Paralympics, where there will be a much higher standard. Being on the podium was fantastic, a real release. I'd achieved my personal goal and I could concentrate on the team again."

DAVE ON... HIS BEST INVICTUS MOMENT

"It's difficult to put one single moment ahead of any other, but I did enjoy the three recumbent cyclists storming away, dominating their races and crossing the line together in the Men's event. I loved the archery – the concentration of the competitors

TRAINERS ARE FOR WIMPS

These are the state-of-the-art running blades that powered Dave to victory at the Invictus Games. He talks us through his "Gucci legs"

"These are the Cheetah Xtend blades made by Ossur and are the ones I ran with when I won 200m Gold at the Invictus Games," says Dave. "They're made from one piece of carbon fibre and are standard apart from the bracket at the top of the blades which I designed myself. I guess I'm either too fat or too powerful because the standard brackets kept snapping, so these are bespoke and are made from aircraft-grade aluminium."

"The soles are made by Nike and are purpose-built for blades, while the individual spikes that attach to the soles are off-the-shelf and fit trainers as well as blades."

"I've been running on blades for three years now and, to be honest, I'm still getting used to them. They're really springy and are optimised to drive you forwards with every step, so standing still on them is almost impossible."



THE INVICTUS GAMES



Dave representing the Invictus Games in the build-up to the event

was great – and the wheelchair rugby on the Friday night was very impressive. The guys showed such fantastic teamwork, and seeing some of the girls scoring against the bigger guys was unbelievable.

“But the opening ceremony summed it all up for me. Seeing all the competitors get emotional with their families and friends was humbling. Many family members were overcome by the strength their loved ones showed just to get to the start line, and it just meant so much to everyone. Gold medals come way down the list when you see what recovery means to a soldier and his or her family. I knew many of the guys from being in rehab at the same time as them, so seeing their journeys has been very poignant.”

DAVE ON... THAT SPEECH

“THAT was an emotional moment! I was asked to say a few words at the Closing Ceremony and I had about three minutes to prepare! That was as nervous as I’ve ever been but it seemed to go down well, even though 25,000 people were waiting for the Foo Fighters to play!

“I wanted to mention the way the public had reacted and the subtle change in how injured soldiers are seen. People came to the Games to watch a sports event and that’s exactly what they got. All the men and women competing had been through trauma but they put on this great sporting experience. That’s testament to those who serve in the Armed Forces, and that’s what was on display. The public took away that this

is what you can achieve with a proper recovery system. We get an awful lot of help and support along the way, but I wanted to get across that these guys are so strong-minded that they can achieve an awful lot.”

DAVE ON... WHAT’S NEXT

“Raising awareness of the issues of injured Service personnel has to be the legacy of the Games. The event was a much bigger success than anyone had predicted – bigger than we could ever have hoped for! People still talk about it and what it meant to them.

“As for the future, in terms of solid action, I think there will be some announcements soon. Personally, I’m hoping to make the GB Paralympic team for Rio. My training schedule is very intense, I’m taking it very seriously. I was on the track last night, I’m going into the gym shortly, I’m training seven days a week and it’ll be 12 sessions a week after Christmas. I’m always getting my prosthetics altered to suit my running style too – I’m fine-tuning the sockets with my prosthetist. My run in the 200m at Invictus put me eighth in the world last season. I’m aiming for first in Rio!”

DAVE ON... JOINT REGENERATION RESEARCH

“Away from running I’ve just finished a Masters degree in Biomedical Engineering and am about to start a PhD in Regenerative Medicine at the Centre for Blast Injury Studies at Imperial College in London. I’m looking at regenerative medicine and orthopaedic implants for amputees. I became interested in the field after my injury: I hope I can benefit from it personally, but I hope my research will help many other people too.

“My research will look at joint recreation and regeneration within the body, rather than having to rely on external prosthetics. The prosthetic limbs we have now are superb but they’re nothing compared to biological limbs. It’s an exciting long-term project and we’re partnered with Georgia Tech in the USA, which is a world leader. We are looking to improve the ends of amputees’ bones and recreate joints with artificial materials, then we plan to work out how to integrate biological tissue and move into the stem cell side of things. I want to apply my engineering knowledge to the research, working holistically with biologists.

“On a personal level, a major breakthrough would be to recreate a complete knee joint – that would allow me to do all sorts of activities that I can’t do right now!”



THE BLESMA MEMBER WHO STRUCK GOLD

The medals for the Invictus Games are based on a concept by Blesma Member Harry Parker, who lost both his legs when he stepped on an IED in Afghanistan. They were then designed and made by world-renowned jewellers, Garrard.

The design is intended to represent the philosophy and vision behind the Invictus Games. An embossed pattern, reminiscent of stitching, represents each competitor’s journey of recovery and rehabilitation, while a quote from William Ernest Henley’s poem *Invictus*, which states; “I am the master of my fate” is engraved on each medal.



“MANY FAMILY MEMBERS WERE OVERCOME BY THE STRENGTH THEIR LOVED ONES SHOWED JUST TO GET TO THE START LINE. GOLD MEDALS ARE WAY DOWN THE LIST WHEN YOU SEE WHAT RECOVERY MEANS TO A SOLDIER AND THEIR FAMILY”

As the Crow Flies



Pictures: Michael Kelly, Ian Burton Words: Sam Webster

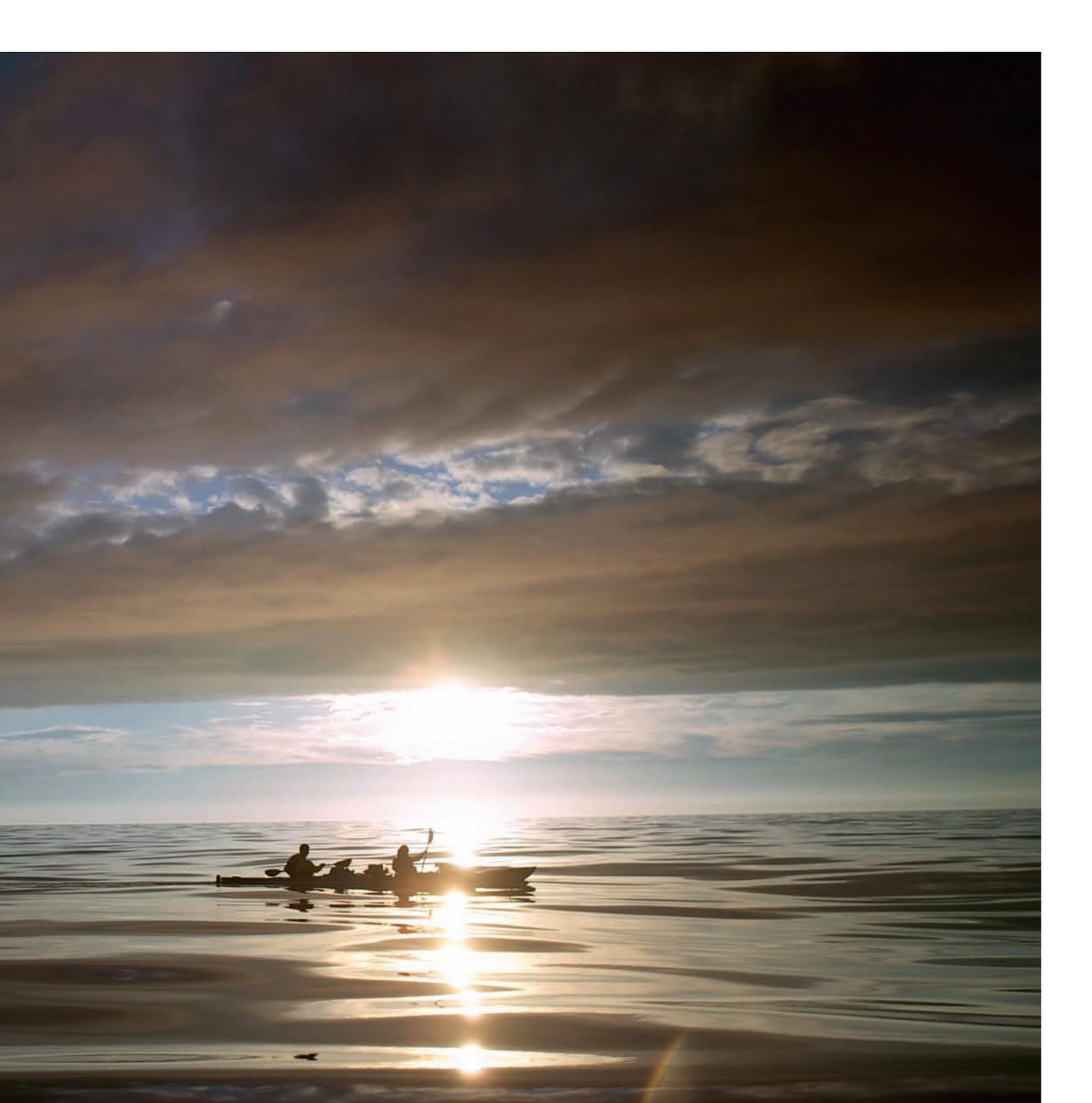
No-one has ever made the journey from Land's End to John O'Groats in a straight line. Until now! Meet the extraordinary team who refused to let anything stand in their way

“It started life as one of those quirky ideas you have in the pub,” says Nick Beighton about the birth of Beeline Britain. “Ian O’Grady came up with it. He drew a line from Land’s End to John O’Groats on a road atlas and was captivated: he thought it was a beautiful line that was just crying out to be travelled. He wanted to get a wounded service person involved, and a mutual friend told him I was the sort of bloke who enjoys a mission and might be up for doing something a bit crazy.”

Ian’s moment of inspiration over a pint has had staggering repercussions. After devising the concept – to kayak, cycle and hike directly between Great Britain’s most distant points – he put together a quite remarkable team. Ian, an RAF helicopter crewman

by day, recruited outdoor instructor Adam Harmer; Tori James, the first Welsh woman to climb Everest; and Nick, a Blesma Member and Paralympian who lost both legs to an IED blast in Afghanistan. Helped by a £10,000 grant from Blesma, the foursome completed their mission on Friday 13 June, having overcome numerous obstacles including Ben MacDui (the UK’s second highest peak), and some truly terrible weather.

The result, as well as raising thousands of pounds for Blesma, included a unique documentary: *As The Crow Flies*, directed by Ian Burton, who accompanied the team on their trip. The film has since won the People’s Choice Award at the Kendal Film Festival. We spoke to team member Nick and filmmaker Ian to capture two sides of an amazing story...



NICK BEIGHTON

Nick, 33, was a Captain in the Royal Engineers. He lost both his legs to an IED blast in 2009 and competed at the London 2012 Paralympics. He is currently training with the GB sprint canoeing squad with an eye on competing at Rio 2016

Having rowed for Great Britain at the London 2012 Paralympics, the timing of Beeline Britain couldn't have been much better for Nick. "I was looking around for something to do, and when Ian got in touch it just fitted the bill perfectly," he says. "I'm not sure we knew what a huge task it was going to be, though. We thought it'd be a simple journey, with four people just jumping in a boat, but it turned out to be a lot more

complicated than that. We needed a big team to help us with kit, logistics, physio. We also had journalism students, a filmmaker, family members, and a guy managing a student development project along with us. It turned into a bandwagon, but it was great. It added to the camaraderie of the mission. That's what these trips are about – a shared sense of adventure."

Physically, it was the sheer length of the journey that proved to be more arduous than any single element. "It was all about cumulative tiredness," says Nick. "It was a slow burner, especially for me because I was using my arms and shoulders for the entire trip. The others at least got to use their legs on the bike. The mountains were hard! I really felt it getting over the Cairngorms, and by the end I had a lot of aches."

“He initially told me it was a Land’s End to John O’Groats journey and I couldn’t have been less interested. But then he explained the route and I loved the idea. I like esoteric adventures”

IAN BURTON

is a filmmaker based in West Yorkshire. He has estimated that he spent 2,500 hours editing the footage into an award-winning, and truly inspirational, documentary

NICK BEIGHTON

A former Captain in the Royal Engineers and a member of the four-person team who became the first to travel from Land’s End to John O’Groats in a straight line



Richard Strudwick/Image Impossible, Ian Burton, Michael Kelly

There was simply no entertaining the idea of giving up, however. “I’m not the kind to do that – I’d break myself first,” says Nick. “And I had specially converted stubbies for the mountains, so there were no real technical issues.” There was a lot of laughter along the way, too. “The whole thing was so much fun. When you’re that tired, you get delirious.

I remember paddling for 25 hours at one point and then laughing hysterically for 20 minutes about absolutely nothing. When we reached John O’Groats, Prince Harry called to congratulate us. We had a great chat and it gave the trip a real stamp of credibility.”

And Nick thinks the film has already proved to be a powerful way to document the experience. “There was a bit of conflict with the camera crew early on, until we got comfy with each other. The style of film Ian made is very raw and experiential. None of it was scripted or planned. It is genuine, honest, all filmed in the moment, and that makes it powerful. There is a lot of very personal stuff in there, which can be awkward to watch. It’s unsettling when you expose your feelings, but I understand why it’s in there, and it’s interesting to see yourself through other people’s eyes.”

IAN BURTON

Ian, 36, is a filmmaker based in West Yorkshire. His documentary As The Crow Flies won an award at the Kendal Film Festival

Ian Burton knows all about being patient. “My background is in wildlife filming. Six months or so waiting in one location is an endurance sport!” he laughs, “but it’s given me an appetite for epic trips – and that’s what appealed to me about Beeline Britain.”

Having put out a plea on Facebook for interesting projects to get involved with, Ian was contacted by Adam Harmer. “He initially told me it was a Land’s End to John O’Groats journey and I couldn’t have been less interested,” says Ian. “But then he explained the route and I loved the idea. I like esoteric adventures and this seemed perfect.”

Bored of the traditional manner of telling stories of people overcoming adversity, Ian was determined to work differently with Nick and the team. “I didn’t want the narrative to be formulaic. I’m not sentimental and neither is Nick. The way the Paralympics were covered turned me off. Nick’s injuries are part of the film, but they’re also unimportant. I don’t want to give away too much because it’s the crux of how the documentary succeeds, and I’d like people to see that for themselves. But I think we’ve covered his story in a different way.”

Music is key to the atmospheric nature of *As The Crow Flies*. “I wanted to turn the manic character of an expedition like this into poetry,” says Ian. “I didn’t want to spoon feed the audience. There’s a lot of metaphor, the journey had the right feel to it and



Nick Beighton



(Front row, l to r) Ian O’Grady, Adam Harmer, Nick and Tori James

I changed my main piece of music while looking at the footage afterwards. We ended up using a piece based on the theme Time from the film *Inception*. It worked.”

It goes without saying that the characters involved were key to the quality of the film. “Right from the first day, I thought: ‘This is going to work’. The whole team were great, but Nick and Ian O’Grady stood out. Ian is one of those magical people who you can put in front of a camera and who will say clever, inspiring, funny lines. And Nick is a natural narrator.”

The occasional tension between filmmaker and subjects also worked to his advantage, says Ian. “I’m not sure whether the team thought I was a clown or a genius when I first met them. But we became a real team during the expedition, and we even got a bit competitive – they’d try to ride past me before I’d set up my camera. It worked very well in the end, and to win The People’s Award at the Kendal Film Festival was the icing on the cake.”



Donate at beelinebritain.com or facebook.com/beelinebritain

Download or stream the film at vimeo.com/ondemand/25658
You can also buy the DVD, download it or stream it at reelhouse.org/imageimpossible/as-the-crow-flies



BEELINE BRITAIN IN NUMBERS

From the south of England to the north of Scotland – just because!

1,400km
the total distance covered during the expedition

800km
the distance covered by sea kayak

600km
the distance covered by bike and mountain walking

221km
the longest single stretch of kayaking.

It took the team 34 hours to complete

22,000
the calories each person burned on this kayak stretch

28
the number of days it took to complete the entire journey

18
the number of days the team were on the move. The other 10 were either rest or planning days

1,309m
the highest point of the expedition (at the summit of Ben MacDui)

1,000,000
the (estimated) number of arm repetitions that Nick completed by kayak and hand bike during the journey

£20,000
raised so far

£20
the cost of a copy of *As The Crow Flies* (well worth it!)

HOW TO...

Have a very, very busy year

From gold medals to a new logo, and from world firsts to a new Chief Exec, 2014 has been a year to remember. Here are just a few of the highlights

JANUARY AN INSPIRATIONAL START

The Race2Recovery team of injured soldiers and civilians, featuring three Blesma Members, finished the Dakar Rally for the second year running in January. Tony Harris, Baz Whittingham and Philip Gillespie became the first amputee team to enter and finish the Dakar Rally twice.

Billed as the world's toughest land race, the 9,100km course sees competitors driving across the Atacama Desert and Andes Mountains over two weeks, with an average drop out rate of 50 per cent.

A NEW WAY OF WALKING

Blesma Member Gregg Stevenson (below) broke new ground when an NHS Limb Centre fitted him with the world's most advanced bionic knee. Gregg became the first wounded Service man to wear a



prosthetic limb that is fitted with a Bluetooth remote control that can switch between walking, jogging and cycling modes. The £70,000 Genium X prosthesis can be programmed from a laptop, but what makes it particularly ground-breaking is the fact that it uses computer console-style sensors to anticipate when the wearer is breaking into a run and adapts accordingly, similar to a human leg.

AN ATLANTIC ADVENTURE

If rowing non-stop across the Atlantic Ocean sounds like an awesomely difficult task, then doing it in some of the most rotten conditions imaginable makes it twice as hard. But not only did the four members of the Row2Recovery boat (which included Blesma Members Scott Blaney and Cayle Royce alongside two able-bodied team mates) successfully reach Antigua in January 2014 after 48 days of furious paddling, they also finished an impressive third out of 16 vessels taking part in the prestigious Talisker Whisky Atlantic Challenge.

The team, who capsized during the race, rowed in two-hour shifts and survived on freeze dried food and ration packs.



MARCH A NEW CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Barry Le Grys became Blesma's new Chief Executive in March. He joined the Association following a distinguished career in the Armed

Forces, where he saw active service in Northern Ireland, the

Falklands, Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Iraq and Afghanistan. Whilst in the Army, Barry commanded national and international forces up to Brigade level, and joined Blesma from a final posting to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in Canada.

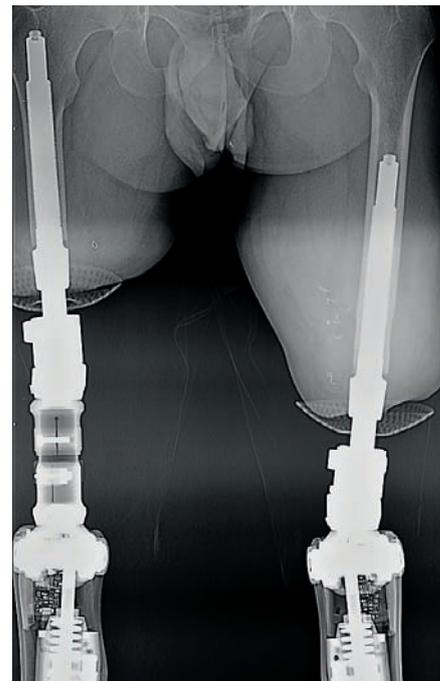
MAY A TRULY INSPIRING EXPEDITION

Numerous people have made the journey from Land's End to John O'Groats for charity, but no-one has ever tried to do it as the crow flies. Beeline Britain saw a team of four, including Blesma Member Nick Beighton, attempt to travel in a straight line between the UK's most distant points in May, by kayak and bike as well as having



**SEPTEMBER
AN INCREDIBLE CELEBRATION**

In September, 400 athletes from 13 countries came to London to compete in the Invictus Games. The Paralympic-style multi-sport event was a huge success, with some 50 Blesma Members taking part in at least one event, and many winning medals. Set up by Prince Harry, supported by the Royal Foundation of The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge and the MoD, and sponsored by Jaguar Land Rover, both the quality of the sportsmen and women, and the enthusiasm of the crowds surpassed all expectations.



**ALL YEAR
A WORLD FIRST**

Blesma Member Michael Swain (above) is the only British Service man to have undergone a cutting-edge surgical procedure called osseointegration. The surgery, which isn't available in the UK, involves inserting a titanium rod into the middle of the bone. The base of the rod protrudes through the skin and an attachment at the end allows an off-the-shelf prosthesis to be clipped on and off in seconds. Michael travelled to Australia at the end of 2013 for the operation and has spent much of this year in rehabilitation.

**SEPTEMBER
A RECORD-BREAKING CHANNEL SWIM**

In September, four Blesma Members front crawled into the record books when they became the first all-amputee team to successfully swim the English Channel. Craig Howorth, Stephen White, Jamie Gillespie and Conrad Thorpe all swam without wearing their prosthetics as they had to abide by official Channel Swimming Association rules which don't make any special dispensations for amputees. The inspirational team completed the relay swim in a very impressive 12 hours and 14 minutes.

**NOVEMBER
A DAY TO REMEMBER**

Blesma played its part in this year's Remembrance Day Parade as 29 veterans from the Association joined the service at the Cenotaph to pay their respects. The day was particularly poignant as this year marks the centenary of the start of WWI.

Blesma
THE LIMBLESS VETERANS

to hike over several mountainous regions. The team achieved their goal, earned a place in the record books, and even received a congratulatory call from Prince Harry.

**JUNE
A NEW LOOK**

A group consisting of Blesma Trustees, staff and Members worked closely with an external creative agency this year on a project to rebrand the Association.

The brief was to refresh the Blesma brand, ensuring the Association continues to be seen as dynamic, forward-thinking and purposeful in the coming years, as well as appealing to an increasingly younger membership demographic. The working group was given strict parameters to adhere to. The Association's name and strapline could not change, while the Tri-Service colours needed to be incorporated into the new logo.

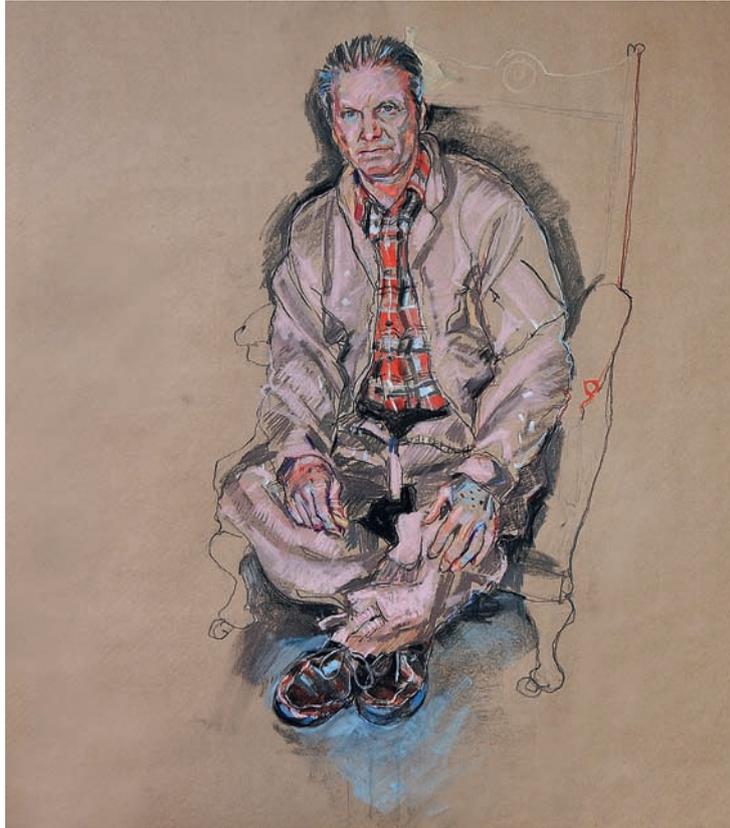
A NEW NAME (WELL, SORT OF)

With the new branding came a change of name... of sorts! The previous way of writing BLESMA, in upper case letters, changed and it was decided that 'Blesma' would now always be written in lower case (with a capital B).

There was logical thinking behind this. In essence, it would stop the need to have to 'unpack' and explain the acronym to people outside the Association who were unfamiliar with Blesma and what it stood for. In effect, Blesma has now become the name of the Association as much as standing for the name of the Association.



Pictures: Cascade News, Andy Bate



Tom McKendrick
(self portrait)

Soldiers

Celebrated artist Tom McKendrick (self portrait, above) is painting 100 soldiers to commemorate the centenary of WWI. We meet him and some of his Blesma subjects

Words: Nick Moore Paintings: Tom McKendrick

“I’ve always wanted to be an artist since I was a wee boy, and oddly enough it was because of soldiers,” says Tom McKendrick. “The first artists I ever saw were war veterans and amputees. Growing up in Clydebank in the 1950s, I’d go out with my mum on a Saturday for a lollipop, and under every bridge there was some poor soul sitting with no legs. These were guys who had been wounded in war, and they would always be drawing pictures on the street. People would cross the road to give them money, and my mum would often give me money to give to them as we walked past. Everyone knew what they’d sacrificed. I was fascinated all those years ago, and this project came out of that.”

Today, Tom McKendrick is an award-winning Scottish painter. He is also a man on a mission. To commemorate the centenary of WWI, he has set himself the challenge of producing portraits of 100 war veterans, ranging from century-old pensioners to young men injured in recent conflicts. Some of his subjects are Blesma Members.

Over the past 100 years Britain has been involved in two world wars, large-scale conflicts in Korea, Iraq, and Afghanistan, and small-scale actions in Africa, the Middle East and Asia. There have been operations in defence of the empire, Cold War operations, support for friends and allies, and, closer to home, the ‘Troubles’ in Northern Ireland. In the last century there has only been one year in which the British Army has not lost a serving soldier in action. So far, Tom has painted personnel who have fought at Monte Cassino, Dunkirk, Normandy, Greece, North Africa, Germany, Northern Ireland, the Falklands, Iraq and Afghanistan.

“I’ve always wanted to paint soldiers and ex-Service men because although the technology of war changes, the scars don’t,” says Tom. “At first, I give them a call to have a chat. I let them tell me their story. Sometimes, at first, they don’t understand my motivation but I tell them that often people need someone else to tell their story effectively. I don’t have a vested interest, I’m not »



JAMES SMITH

33, from Erskine in Scotland, was injured while serving on operations in Afghanistan

Tell us a bit about your military background...

I went into the TA straight from school in 1998, deployed to both Iraq and Afghanistan with the Regular soldiers in 4 Scots, and made the rank of Corporal. When I got my injury we were returning from a fire fight and my vehicle drove over a huge IED. It shattered the bones in my legs, which were eventually both amputated below the knee, and I had other injuries too. I went to Headley Court for rehab and was soon active again. I've got into mountain biking and have set up a bike repair business.

What was it like sitting for Tom?

It was great. He is such a nice guy and he really put me at ease. He worked around my needs and was very

considerate. I was really blown away when I saw the end result, he really is an incredible painter.

What do you think about the exhibition?

It's been very humbling to have been a part of it. I've met so many older soldiers as a result of being involved in the project, and I have so much respect for all of them, they are an awesome bunch. I am not a massive art fan, and I don't really know that much about it, but Tom's pictures have really got something special. This exhibition is immortalising these soldiers. Hopefully, a lot of kids will see the paintings on school trips, and they'll feel a sense of respect towards the Army and what the guys in these paintings have sacrificed.

“I’ve always wanted to paint soldiers and ex-Service men because although the technology of war changes, the scars don’t”

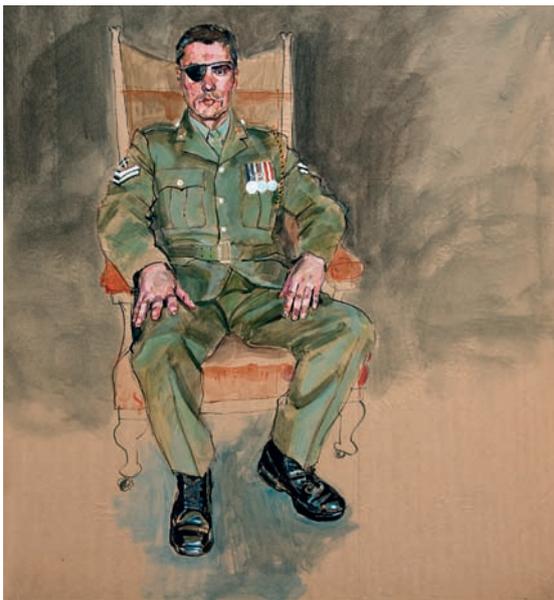
» doing it for money and I won’t take payment or sell the pictures. I just want to tell a positive story and produce an honest snapshot of these guys. I’m acknowledging what they’ve done, and I think it can often be a good form of therapy for them as well.”

A VERY EXCLUSIVE BAND

Tom’s background as a shipbuilder has, he thinks, helped him connect with his subjects. He left school at 15 and worked as a shipwright and loftsman – both jobs require an ability to sketch very clear and specific reproductions of a draughtsman’s ship designs. As well as helping his drawing skills, that time helped him connect with war veterans and understand their attitudes.

“I would often work with a group of guys who had been on Normandy’s beaches, for example, or in camps in Burma, and they never moaned about anything,” recalls Tom. “There was this one particular guy who I remember very clearly. He had been a Japanese POW, and when he got home he was horrified to hear his mum moaning about egg rations. He’d say to me; ‘I was sitting in the jungle eating grasshoppers a year ago. Two eggs would have been like finding treasure!’ The guys I have painted for this exhibition have the same attitude, they’re part of a very exclusive band!

“They are all so proud to have served. I don’t think anyone I have painted has said anything even remotely negative about having served in the British Army. They all have such pride in their uniform, in their medals, in their regiment and their history. They have seen appalling and horrific things, but it has given them a wonderful and realistic appraisal of life. They have a great sense of purpose.”



Some of the soldiers Tom has painted have, at first, been surprised by his vision. “When I met James Smith, for example, he said to me; ‘I guess you want to paint my stumps?’ But I told him no, I wanted to paint him how he wanted to be seen. He said he’d like to put his uniform on for the painting because he hadn’t worn it since he sustained his injuries.

“It was a very special moment. There was something breathtakingly honest about it. I could have painted him in his kilt without his legs, but we did something more subtle and true. You don’t always immediately realise these guys have limbs missing when you meet them.”

AN INDIVIDUAL APPROACH

This individual approach to everyone who has sat for him has given Tom’s collection real variety: some of his subjects wear their uniforms and medals, others don’t. Each person has taken ownership of how they are depicted in the paintings. “I’m just here to record their image, I don’t get involved in how they want to be seen,” says Tom. “And the variety has been amazing. I’ve painted two guys who lived in the same town, who were both on the beach in Dunkirk on the same day, and their stories couldn’t have been more different.

“The process, and the entire project, has also been very rewarding. The guys have a great sense of humour, and the older guys in particular are full of stories. They like a whisky, they might even sing as I paint, and because I’m not a family member I’m not involved in their lives, so they’ve told me things they wouldn’t have told anyone else. I did get a complaint from the Paras, though. They wrote me a stropmy email saying that they’d had to call an emergency meeting because I’d painted their colleague, Bert, wearing a pair of glasses!”

Tom feels that the importance of the collection will increase over time. “These 100 pictures will never be broken up and I think their value comes in the fact that they are a snapshot of an era, the people in the paintings are witnesses to very important events. The way I see it, I’d love to walk into a similar exhibition of 100 Civil War veterans in America. You’d get a wonderful insight, better than a history book, because they’ve been at the source, telling a teeny bit of a big story.”

Tom is aiming to complete 20 paintings a year, concentrating on the older veterans first “before we lose them.” He has learned a lot from the experience. “I didn’t know what I’d turn up when I first embarked on the project,” he says. “There was some trepidation initially, when speaking to guys who have severe facial injuries, or who have lost limbs, but every single one of them has been, and is, truly remarkable.”

Any veteran who might be interested in being part of Tom’s project should get in touch with him at tom.mckendrick@btinternet.com



DAVID TIMMINS OGM

33, from Glasgow, won the Queen's Gallantry Medal for his bravery on operations in Afghanistan

You won the Queen's Gallantry Medal after serving in Afghanistan. What happened?

I was on operations with the 11 Explosive Ordnance Disposal Regiment. A colleague stepped on an IED and was very badly injured – they didn't think he'd make it. I was one of the guys who patched him up and helped stabilise him. Ten days later I got blown up!

How did it feel to become a model for a painting so soon after your injuries?

Very interesting. Amazing, actually, because a lot of people have commented that they can tell how I was feeling at the time. I was still a serving soldier when Tom painted me, and what had happened was very fresh at that point, very raw. Tom captured how I was thinking as I talked through my experiences with him.

And you've become firm friends since then...

Yes, he's a great bloke. My involvement in the painting didn't take too long at all – just a day of him sketching me and taking some photos to work off, but we got on really well. He wouldn't let me go home without cooking me dinner. He's a typical old-school Glaswegian! It means a huge amount to me to be a part of this. I love the fact that a painting captures you for eternity.

How much have Blesma helped you out?

They've been fantastic. After an injury, there are so many things to think about straight away; a medical pension, adaptations, long-term support. But all you are trying to do is just deal with recovering. Blesma came in and took all the pressure off by dealing with everything for me. I'll always be grateful to them for that.

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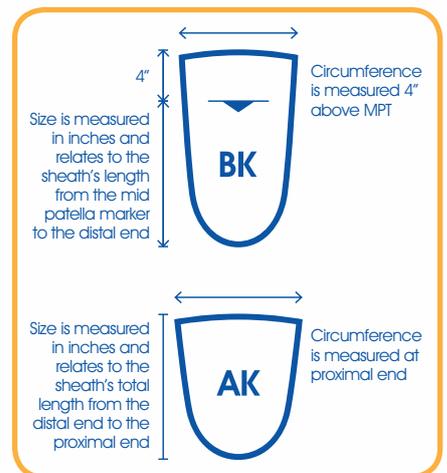
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PETE SHIELDS MBE QGM

63, from Lincolnshire, was awarded the Queen's Gallantry Medal for his actions while serving in Kuwait

You ended up sitting for Tom thanks to our other two interviewees, didn't you?

Yes, I'm the Blesma Support Officer for both Davie and James as I cover all of Scotland. I actually met Tom, the artist, at Davie's wedding in Glasgow. He explained that he was painting former soldiers who had interesting stories to tell. Davie had told him that I had been awarded the Gallantry Medal and my involvement in this project went from there. I sat for Tom, he took loads of photos and it was very relaxed.

What do you think of the end result?

I am more than pleased! Everyone who has had their portrait painted by Tom seems happy, I think partly because he consults you through the whole process.

I've got a feeling the exhibition will be a tremendous collection when it's finished. I think Tom is being very ambitious with his plans to paint 100 pictures. It'll be a struggle, but knowing Tom, he'll achieve it.

Tell us about how you won the QGM...

I joined the TA in 1968, and then 7 Tank Transporter Regiment, two years later. I went out to Kuwait in 1991 as Camp Commandant. Oddly enough, that fateful day started when I was supposed to be picking up Bobby Davro from the airport! He was coming to do a show for the troops, but then an American vehicle that was loaded with explosives caught fire. Eventually, the whole compound was ablaze. I filmed it, helped to evacuate the camp, and went back in to check everyone was out.

Owen Pick:
amputee, Blesma
Member... and
future Paralympian?





“Do I feel more protective of my body after losing my leg? If anything, I’m less protective”

Blesma introduced Owen Pick to wakeboarding and gave him the chance to try snowboarding. Now, the 23 year old competes against able-bodied boarders and has his sights set on the Winter Paralympics

Pictures: Louis James-Parker Words: Nick Moore

Thundering down black ski slopes at ridiculous speeds, chucking yourself over gigantic jumps and, most importantly, making sure you pull off landings smooth enough to defy the laws of physics automatically comes with a major health warning. So attempting all that as an amputee might be seen (by some) as deeply unwise. But Owen Pick, a 23-year-old Blesma Member from Cambridgeshire who has one leg, chuckles in the face of such dangers. “Do I feel more protective of my body after losing my right leg?” he ponders. “Not at all. If anything, I feel less protective! The way I see it, I have one less ankle to break! You need to have a bit of a screw loose to do this kind of sport anyway – the jumps and the speed. You have to be a bit batty.”

Owen, who lost a limb to an IED in Afghanistan in 2010, has never let his injury get in the way of his exhilaration. He used wakeboarding as part of his rehab, becoming one of the best exponents of the sport in the UK along the way, before turning his attentions to the slopes. He has

since qualified as a snowboard instructor and now he’s got his sights firmly set on two things: the 2018 Pyeongchang Paralympic Winter Games, and inspiring more amputees to strap on their bindings and make their mark on a mountain or two.

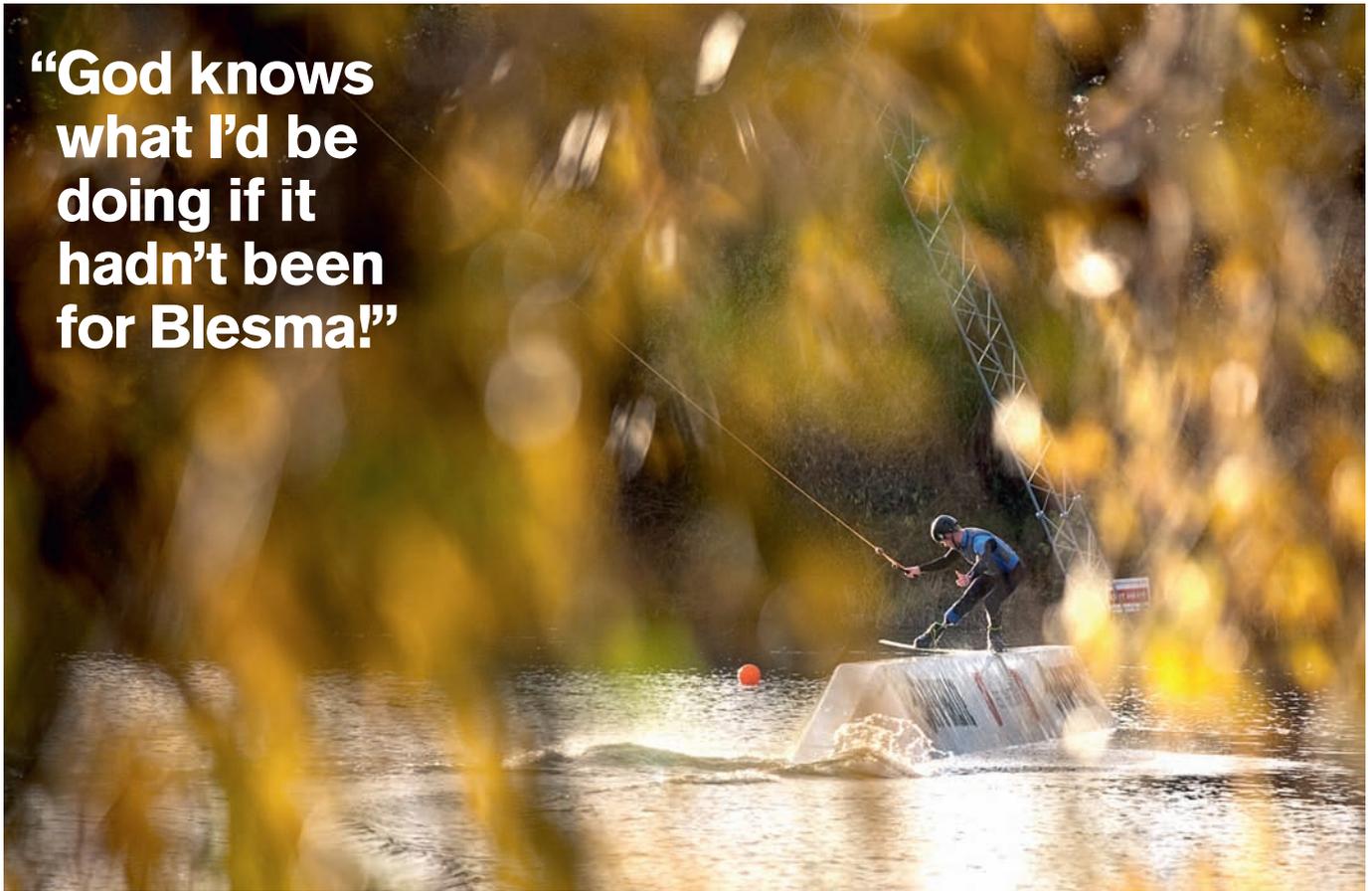
“No matter where in the world I go, people are shocked that I’m an amputee,” Owen says. “It happened again today. My mate was asking me how my leg was getting on, and a girl in the queue for the ski lift turned to me and couldn’t believe I had one leg. But I snowboard just the same way as anyone else does.”

We sit down with Owen to discuss his amazing journey and how he plans to win Paralympic gold in four years’ time...

Tell us a bit about your time in the Army and how you got injured...

I joined 1st Battalion The Royal Anglians straight from school. I was three months into my first tour of Afghanistan when I got blown up. That was in January 2010. We’d been under fire all day and got the order to assault a compound. I stood

“God knows what I’d be doing if it hadn’t been for Blesma!”



on an IED. I didn’t know anything about it, all I remember is a white flash, but I was apparently blown about 10 feet in the air. I woke up back in Selly Oak with my parents by my bedside.

The operations and rehab couldn’t quite save your leg though...

That’s right. I battled for 18 months to keep my leg, but in the end nothing was working. The surgeons gave me the choice: take it off or keep having numerous operations in the hope that it might get better. In August 2011 I eventually decided to amputate my leg below the knee. I felt relieved once I’d made the decision, and since then I’ve not looked back.

How much has it affected you mentally?

I have the odd bad day, where I think; ‘For God’s sake, I wish I had my leg back!’, but I generally just think there is nothing I can do about it, so I get on with things. I look at what I’ve managed to do since my leg came off, and think; ‘I’m doing alright’.

Which brings us to your wakeboarding and snowboarding achievements. How did you get started?

I enjoyed sports at school, but it was always just Army, Army, Army for me, so I didn’t really participate at a serious level. After the injury I got the chance to try all sorts of crazy adventure and extreme sports through the likes of Blesma and Battle

Back. On one trip in 2012 we went to a lake to try sit-down waterskiing and while I was there I saw a guy wakeboarding. I didn’t even know what it was. I asked him if he thought I could do it, and he said he had no idea because he’d never seen an amputee try it! So I did a little research and found one other amputee who’d done it. I realised it could be done and that’s when the learning process really began.

And you’ve not looked back...

I was hooked! I was enrolled on a course in Southampton at the time but I ended up driving back to the lake every night to wakeboard. I asked the guy who was running the wakeboarding if he needed any help and I moved to the lake for the summer, worked there, and really got to grips with it. Then, the next season, I was at my local wakeboarding park every day and they offered me a job as an instructor. I’ve also competed widely and made the podium at competitions in the UK and overseas. I’m the only guy in Europe with an amputation competing against able-bodied wakeboarders.

What were the main physical challenges you had to overcome?

The biggest challenge is waterproofing. I tape up the valve well and make sure I have a good seal on the leg. I use my normal prosthetic and I learned like a regular wakeboarder.

And from there you got involved in snowboarding...

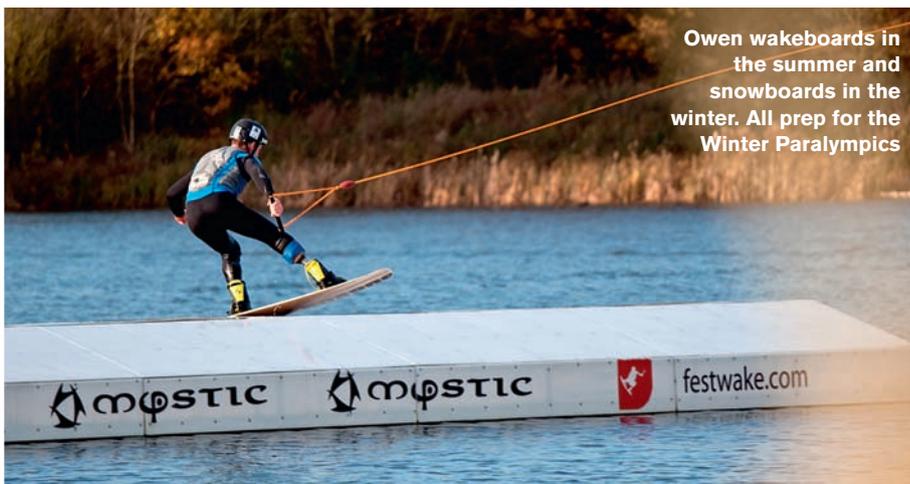
I’d been wakeboarding all summer and it was getting to the point where I was about to be discharged from the Army. I was asked what I wanted to do for my resettlement and I said I’d like to go on a snowboarding instructor course. I’d never snowboarded before but I had it in my head that I wanted to become a snowboarding instructor, and I did.

Which is where Blesma came in to help you once again...

Yes, I went to Colorado on a Blesma skiing trip, which was great. They were happy for me to snowboard instead of ski and I loved it. I went to Canada after that for three months to complete my instructor’s course. The following winter I was all over the place snowboarding, and at the end of March 2014 I entered the French National Adaptive Snowboardercross Championships, which also doubled up as my trials for the Great Britain Paralympic team. My coach just wanted me to get down the course without falling and clock a better time on each consecutive run. I outdid that by a mile – I got the silver medal with only four days’ training, against guys who had been competing for two years or more.

So you realised you had a talent?

That was my first competition, so it might have been Beginners’ Luck! I need to enter



Owen wakeboards in the summer and snowboards in the winter. All prep for the Winter Paralympics



more competitions to work out what level I'm able to compete at. With wakeboarding, it feels great when I win competitions against able-bodied guys. I'm not beating the pros yet, but I'm doing OK. Realising I could enter competitions has made both sports more enjoyable and I now really want to go to the Paralympics, but that was never really the driving force in the beginning – it was about having fun!

Can you explain a bit about how Adaptive Snowboardercross works?

I describe it as being like a motocross track on snow. It's a downhill race against the clock – and I absolutely love the adrenaline of racing. The track is made up of banked turns, jumps, whoops, spines and other obstacles. The aim is to keep the board on the ground as much as possible so that you can go as fast as possible. It's about absorbing all the bumps, so you need to have power in your legs and get your balance and edges just right.

Have you had to adapt your snowboard?

I put a hard plastic tube under my heel in the snowboard binding to lean my knee forward slightly and give me the correct position. Apart from that there's nothing different, it's all regular gear and technique.

Do you do any tricks?

I do – it kind of comes naturally from the wakeboarding. The Army's freestyle

“Bad stuff has happened, but that doesn't mean that you can't still enjoy yourself”

snowboarding team are here [*in Austria where Owen is training*] at the moment, and I'm going to enter a freestyle competition with them. To be honest, I enjoy that side of the sport as much as the racing.

What does your journey to the Paralympics look like?

My teammate, Ben Moore, and I are the only two British Adaptive Snowboardercross competitors, so we're working to improve all the time. We also need lots of people to donate money to help us get where we want to be. I'm doing as much social media awareness as possible to raise money. It's tricky because we are pioneering this – nobody has done it before, so we haven't got anyone who can tell us what to do. It's difficult, but one way or another we'll get to the 2018 Paralympics, I'm sure of that.

How and where are you training?

I'm in Austria until December and then I'll head over to Utah for the winter. At the moment I'm concentrating on getting the strength in my legs. The hard training will really start when we get to Utah, where we'll have professional coaches and physios. That's when the competitions start too, so we'll be entering a lot of tournaments. We'll do that for the next few seasons, then it's the Paralympics.

How much have Blesma helped?

I'd never heard of them before my injury, and like many people I thought they were a charity for old people at first. But then they sent me to Colorado where I first tried snowboarding – and that's the reason I'm doing what I'm doing. God knows what I'd be doing if it hadn't been for Blesma!

What would you say to any young amputees keen on getting involved in this, or other, extreme sports?

I'd be happy to help them however I can. One of my biggest aims is to get other guys out on the mountain. I'd love to coach more and my message would be: some bad stuff has happened to you, but that doesn't mean you can't still enjoy yourself.

Follow Owen's progress or donate at:

Facebook: Owen Pick GB Adaptive Snowboardercross Team

Instagram: owenpick



BEATRICE LAW MBE

Beatrice, 87, is President and Vice Chairperson of the Blackpool Branch. She has been involved with Blesma since WWII and still visits the Home for lunch every day

I found out about Blesma after a plane ran over my first husband, Leonard's, big toe during WWII. We laughed it off really, but the injury meant he got involved in Blesma, and we both loved the people. He was invited onto the board. Ever since, Blesma has been a huge part of my life.

Leonard died in 1985 of cancer of the oesophagus. I eventually met my second husband, Ernie, through Blesma. His wife, Rose, died of the same cancer. That's how we got talking – we'd been through the same thing. We helped each other, and eventually got married. It was a big Blesma wedding, all the staff came, and we had the reception at [Blackpool Home's] The Legless Arms.

Ernie was a below-knee amputee, but I never really knew what happened to him. He didn't talk about it and never made a fuss. At one point he had a stroke and Blesma sent him £5, which was a lot of money back then, but he sent it back. He said others needed it more than him. He became Blesma National Chairman in the late 1970s.

Being part of Blesma is huge fun. When I first visited the Blackpool Home on holiday I helped run the bar. Later, they bought me a whistle to keep the Members in order!

Blesma is my family. Wherever there is a branch, you can go and be with family. When both Leonard and Ernie died, Blesma were there for me and my children. I'd have

been lost without them. Both my boys spent time helping Members, and they grew up to be great boys as a result.

I still have lunch at the Blackpool Home every day. I get there on my mobility scooter and I really enjoy it. The lunch is great – they've always had good chefs – and the staff and the manager, Jacqui, are wonderful.

I love the widows' days out. We've had good times over the years. I'm attending less these days as I'm having a few health problems, but as Blesma Members know, there's always someone worse off. How can you grumble when you see some of our men?

“AT THE HOME I HELPED RUN THE BAR. THEY BOUGHT ME A WHISTLE TO KEEP MEMBERS IN ORDER!”

I still run the Home Support Group with a lady called Wendy to raise funds for Blesma. Last year, we put £8,000 back into the Home. I can't do as much as I used to – it used to be a big affair with great garden parties – but we still do raffles and coffee mornings. The raffle raises at least £100 a week.

I got an MBE 13 years ago, but I was too embarrassed to tell anyone. It was such a surprise. When I got a letter from Downing Street, I remember saying; “If Tony Blair wants some money from me, he's got another thing coming!” I couldn't tell anyone – I couldn't imagine what they'd say – but they eventually found out through the local papers. Going to the Palace was great, my daughter and grandson went with me, it was fantastic.

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