

Blesma

The magazine for
limbless veterans

MAN vs EARTH

Martin Hewitt won't rest until he becomes the first disabled adventurer to conquer the notorious Explorers Grand Slam – the most extreme challenge on the planet



Taking Blesma to the community

The pilot project that aims to help everyone, from budding actors to homeless people **p22**



The buzz of Breckenridge

Hitting the slopes during the biggest disabled ski meet in the world **p04**



Stereos, snakes and cyborgs

Meet the woman who turns prosthetics into art pieces. What would yours look like? **p40**

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Have you got a great story you'd like to tell? Do you want help publicising an event or expedition that you're planning? Then get in touch with us at editor@blesma.org

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NEWS

*News, views and opinion
from the world of Blesma*

Blesma hits the slopes!



The Hartford Ski Spectacular, run by Disabled Sports USA, is one of the largest disabled skiing events in the world. Every December, some 800 people head to Breckenridge in Colorado, USA to learn how to ski, snowboard, and take part in many other winter sports.

Blesma has been sending a group of Members for the last 10 years, and the event is now one of the highlights in the Association's exciting activities calendar.

"The first time we went, in 2004, we took just six Members, but this year we took 20, our biggest group yet," said Major Colin Whitworth, a serving officer and Blesma Member who, along with Brendan West, has organised Blesma's involvement in the event for the last decade. "The beauty of the trip is that it is for people with disabilities, and it is accommodating for those with severe disabilities, so it's not off limits to any Member."

If participants have the use of both their legs they can take part in what is known as 'two track' skiing, while those with one leg

use poles with small skis on the end, and learn 'three track'. Meanwhile, 'four track' is similar but participants ski wearing a prosthesis. Members can snowboard, of course, while others choose to ski on their stumps. Those with severe disabilities can try sit-skiing, which is essentially an adapted seat on skis (see above right).

No matter which discipline participants opt for, they are given their own dedicated instructor as well as their own helper. Such is the event's popularity amongst Blesma Members ("the whole thing is funded by Blesma – our guys only pay for their beer!"

said Colin) that the numbers applying for a place on the trip far exceed the spaces available. "We give priority to Members who haven't been before, and we split the group into pairs, taking into account who will go well with whom and making sure amputee helps amputee," said Colin. He then decides which discipline suits each individual and registers them on a course.

MAKING THE MOST OF THE TRIP

Colin is confident that he can get anyone skiing, regardless of their disability. The only factor he can't control is a Member's fitness – the altitude in Breckenridge can leave people out of breath quickly. But he makes sure he speaks to all participants well before the trip so they can ask any questions and he can allay any fears.

"It really is an outstanding event and the spirit of the group is always great," he said. "Everyone leaves a better person for having taken part – everyone benefits from it. We have a 'work hard and play hard' mentality and we are always the first ones



Dealing with depression

Dave Lewan tells his extraordinary story (p46)



Breckenridge offers something for everyone

on the slopes in the morning!” The social aspect of the event, meanwhile, is almost as important as the skiing. Members spend time with American veterans from Warfighter Sports and Wounded Warriors, and attend various dinners and events.

“The ultimate aim is to get our Members interested in the sport so they can go skiing on their own or with their family,” said Colin. “Most are complete novices when they go to Breckenridge, although some of our guys have skied before their injuries, and we do take people back who show an interest or have a genuine ability.”

And the trip does occasionally throw up genuine talent. Mick Brennan has gone on to compete in the 2014 Paralympics, while Owen Pick tried snowboarding and skiing for the first time on a Blesma trip and is now aiming for Paralympic glory in 2018 (see separate story on p09).

Are you interested in taking part next year? Contact Emily Mizon on 020 8548 7094 or email her at mea@blesma.org

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN!

Blesma is offering its Members the chance to try lots of activities in 2015.

The activities cater for every level and ability, from novice to serious adventurer. There's something for every age group and all interests, too – from photography and painting to skiing and skydiving.

To find out more about the events on offer, and to reserve a place, call Emily Mizon on 020 8548 7094 or email her at mea@blesma.org

welcome

As I write, we close in on the Members' Weekend. The programme is full and the Executive is not doing too much of the talking – the plan is for the Members to – and there are some entertaining ideas and stories in store. We have plans too, for the AGM on Thursday 25 June, as advertised in the last Bulletin, which will be more informal than in the past. If you can, drop in, we would be pleased to see you.

The winter has seen some of our Members excel. We sent our largest-ever party, with the most complex injuries, to ski in Colorado and all report great quality of life benefits. Jon-Allan Butterworth shone in *The Jump* on Channel 4, and Owen Pick is really making his mark on the international snowboarding competition circuit. Meanwhile, the ski bikers, a more mature cohort, have been to Austria. Whatever your appetite, please study the Activities Programme (it is diverse, with arts growing), and express your interest.

In this edition, I would like to draw attention to Braham Myers, who has done so much for Blesma and fellow Members for so long. Thank you so much Braham. Also, John Francis, who retired in March, a key member of staff to whom we are grateful. Dave Lewan bares his soul with a passionate message for those who may struggle with depression. We respect Dave immensely for doing this.

The pilot Blesma Community Project, and I stress *pilot*, is hopefully the forerunner of a scheme in which Blesma Members will take their stories into schools and community groups. There are benefits, not only to Blesma Members and their audiences, but also in awareness raising for the Association and in connecting Blesma within communities.

Campaigning to remove anomalies in compensation for Service attributable injuries goes on. We have made headway on one in particular, and are in close dialogue with the Royal British Legion and other charities to amend the Care Act 2014 and to improve mobility aids provision. Dr Andrew Murrison's initiative 'A Better Deal for Military Amputees' still gathers momentum in delivery within NHS(E) and we are actively supporting. Of course, we now have unanswered questions on the intended devolution of health and care to Manchester.

Blesma Week gets under way in June and the Fundraising Team have some good tips. Details on Blesma Week are in the Bulletin, this magazine and on our digital media. So if you fancy a Big Blesma BBQ or a Blesma Bake Off please get in touch. The team's idea for me is to lead a run over the three highest peaks in the UK over a weekend; perhaps they would like to lose me!

Barry Le Gry
Chief Executive



Are you ready for Blesma Week?

Blesma Week is our annual week of fundraising and awareness raising activities to support injured veterans. This year, Blesma Week will take place from 01-07 June, and every penny raised from activities will benefit Blesma Members, young and old.

Everyone is invited to join us to make sure this year's Blesma Week is bigger and better than ever before! So if you're wondering how you can get involved, here are a few ideas:

THE BIG BLESMA BBQ

Are you a 'natural born griller'? Then why not host a Big Blesma BBQ during Blesma Week? We'll provide you with a BBQ pack to get you started and make sure you're a real BBQ hero!

GRAND PRIZE DRAW

Enter our Grand Prize Draw, or sell tickets for the chance to win some fantastic prizes, including a first prize of £1,000 kindly donated by Irwin Mitchell LLP. The tickets

are priced at just £1 each, and the draw closes on 17 June. Please find some tickets enclosed in this edition of the magazine. You can order more by calling the Fundraising Team on 020 8548 7089 or emailing them at fundraising@blesma.org.

BLESMA WEEK QUIZ

Think you might have the biggest Blesma brain? Find out by hosting your very own quiz night for friends or colleagues. We'll provide the questions and quiz sheets, you provide the collective knowledge.

THE BIG BLESMA BAKE OFF

Move over Mary Berry, The Big Blesma Bake Off is here! Fancy yourself as a master baker? Like to impress with your Eton Mess? Then head to the kitchen, cook up a storm during Blesma Week, and hold a cake sale #fourwounded

THREE PEAKS CHALLENGE

Got what it takes to conquer the three highest peaks in the UK in just 24 hours? Blesma Chief Executive Barry Le Gry (inset left) will be leading the Blesma team on this challenge and we want YOU to join us. If you'd rather cheer from the sidelines, you can sponsor Barry at www.justgiving.com/Barry-Le-Grys-Three-Peaks

TEXT TO DONATE

If you don't fancy organising an event you can still make a donation. Simply text **BLES15 £3 to 70070** to make a donation to support Blesma Week.

REQUEST YOUR BLESMA WEEK PACK

Our Blesma Week Pack is full of great ideas to help you organise your own Blesma Week activities, and also includes posters, balloons, banners, sponsorship forms and collection boxes. Plus, we'll send you a certificate of achievement that you can display on completion of your activity.

For more information on Blesma Week contact the Fundraising Team on 020 8548 7089 or email fundraising@blesma.org

Follow the conversation online by using the hashtag **#fourwounded**



Cook up a storm for Blesma Week – in the kitchen or on the barbecue



Steve has his sights firmly set on Paralympic glory

Steve Gill is not the sort of bloke who often gets in a quiver. The straight-talking Blesma Member is a down-to-earth kind of guy, but get him talking about his chances of archery Paralympic glory in Rio de Janeiro in 2016 and he allows himself to get a little excited.

That's because Steve, along with fellow Blesma Members Leigh Bland, Carl Harding and Mikey Hall, is being fast tracked to Paralympic standard by the GB team's

archery academy. "My first competition was the Invictus Games last year and I got a bronze medal, which was pretty cool," said Steve, who had only been shooting for a year before entering the Games.

"The experience was great. I've never done anything on that scale before. The whole thing was phenomenal, although I could have done better, to be honest – I think my nerves got to me a little bit."

Steve had played wheelchair basketball for 18 years before he gave archery a go. He showed "a bit of promise" so went on a beginners' course and was spotted by local county archer Nigel Gensmantel who offered to train with him three days a week. That led to the Invictus medal and an approach from the GB Paralympic set up.

"I'm training six days a week. I'm at my local range every day for five hours, I go to Lilleshall National Sports Centre one day a week, and once a month I'm there for three days straight. It's a big commitment – it's like having a full-time job without getting paid!" said Steve. "And if it hadn't been for Blesma, who support me with some of the funding, it would be impossible for me."

Training as an elite athlete has meant Steve has had to relearn many of his routines, processes and techniques to ensure he shoots the 'Great Britain' way.

"The coaches look at every aspect of your shooting. It's a very technical sport and so much of it is in your head – you have to be able to switch everything off and get in the zone. If you have the slightest thought in your head before a shot you'll never win.

"But I really enjoy it. It's like being in charge of a weapon again, and that's great for us military guys. It can be difficult to fit all the training in around my family but I want to represent my country at the top of my sport so I have to make sacrifices.

"My goal is to make the GB squad and, ultimately, represent my country as a professional athlete in the Paralympics. That would be pretty awesome."



FALL FOR THE FALLEN

Fall for the Fallen is Blesma's annual tandem skydiving event, where each jump symbolises a life lost in conflict, and where funds raised go towards supporting Blesma Members.

Fall for the Fallen takes place over the August Bank Holiday weekend (28-30 August) at Netheravon, Wiltshire. You will jump from a height of 13,500ft safe in the hands of the Army Parachute Association. Friends and family are invited to join you on the day. Secure your place today with a £50 deposit and pledge to raise an additional £350.

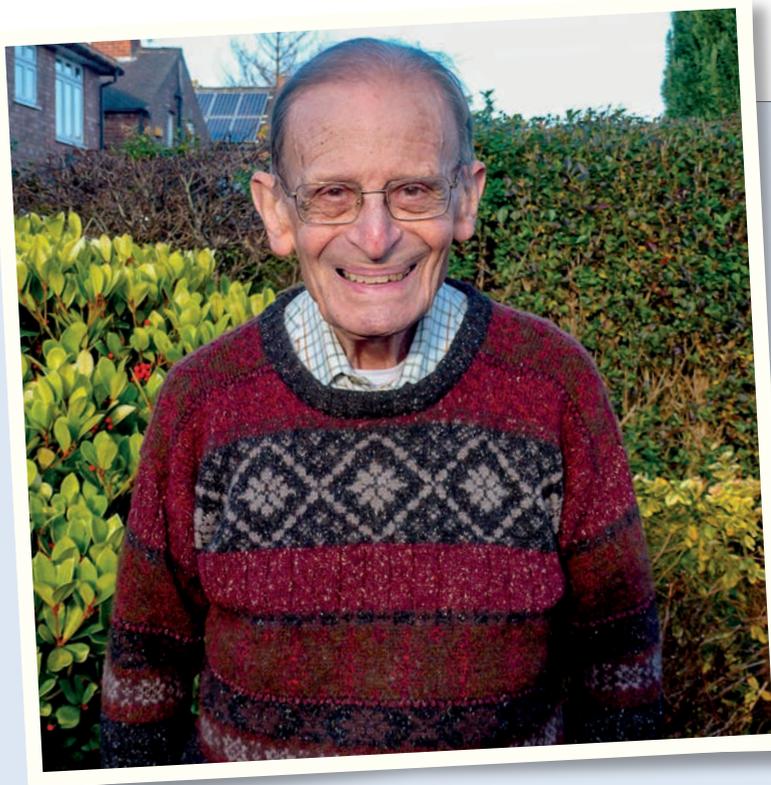
All Fall for the Fallen participants will receive:

- A fundraising pack and support from the Blesma team
- An exclusive Blesma T-shirt
- BBQ and entertainment on the day for all the family
- An option to have your jump photographed/filmed

For more information please contact the Fundraising Team on 020 8548 7089 or email fundraising@blesma.org

In the spotlight

BRAHAM MYERS



“

I WAS 24 WHEN I WAS INJURED. I STOOD ON AN ANTI-PERSONNEL MINE. I LOST THE LOWER PART OF MY RIGHT LEG AND WAS FLOWN BACK TO ENGLAND

”

Braham Myers, 94, was injured while serving as a gunner in WWII. Later, he became chairman of the Leeds Branch and played a key role on the Association's National Executive. He was awarded an MBE in 1985, mainly for his work for the Association.

“I served as a gunner between 1941 and 1945, and was 24 when I was injured,” he remembers. “I was serving in North West Europe, on the Dutch-German border. I was reconnoitring a gun position when, like many during the war, I stood on an anti-personnel mine. I lost the lower part of my right leg and was flown back to England. I spent a long time in hospital, eventually ending up in Chapel Allerton in Leeds, not too far from my parents' home in Harrogate.”

With so many war wounded, rehabilitation after WWII was a slow process and improvisation often became necessary. “Recovery was quite extraordinary in those days,” says Braham. “It took a long time to get a prosthesis. I was on crutches for a while and found that very frustrating. Eventually, I went to the Limb Centre and my surgeon, who was in fact an eye surgeon, made me a peg leg out of plaster and steel. It worked, but one day when I was in London it came to pieces at the top of some stairs. I hopped down the stairs and had it repaired at Roehampton, but on the way back to my digs it collapsed once again when I was changing buses.”

Braham was forced to return to Harrogate, where a letter awaited him telling him his prosthesis was finally ready. “Losing a leg never held me back,” he says. “I worked for the Ministry of Education, then completed a history degree on a Cambridge University scholarship. Eventually, I joined the family business, Headwear Manufacturers, where I spent the rest of my career. I retired fully in 1986.”

Braham discovered Blesma while rehabilitating on his hospital ward. “There was a WWI veteran called Wilf Wolfson who would come around the beds, give us sweets and cigarettes, and recruit amputees,” he remembers. “Apparently, he recruited nearly 1,000

men, and I was one of them. I didn't do much with Blesma at first, but in the 1950s I went to a Leeds Branch meeting thinking it was time I got involved.”

Merely turning up was enough to earn him a senior Branch role. “It was very funny,” says Braham, “I went to the AGM and didn't know a soul, so wandered in with another newcomer. The Branch was in trouble and there were two places up for grabs on the management committee. I'll never forget it, a man called Costello got up suddenly and said; ‘Shall we elect these two likely lads?’ And that was that. I've been involved ever since – and I'm still the chairman!”

“My first local role was as Employment Secretary, not the onerous role it was after WWI when Blesma played a huge part in getting amputees back into work. However, I did find some people jobs.

“After a few years I became involved on a national level and was sent to the AGM and conference as a delegate. Afterwards, Philip Dixon, who had chaired the event, came up to me and said; ‘Why didn't you open your bloody mouth?’ So at the next conference I did – and as a result ended up on the Executive, eventually becoming Honorary Treasurer.”

Braham is full of praise for the work Blesma does. His happiest memories are of the golden anniversary events that took place in 1982. “It began with a large conference with delegates from all over the British Isles and overseas. We had a parade along Whitehall and a service in Westminster Abbey, as well as many local events. Even Margaret Thatcher attended the function in the Guildhall in the City of London in spite of the beginning of the Falklands Conflict.”

And Braham sees the charity as being relevant despite the changing landscape. “The Association has changed both in terms of the way it is run and the make-up of the membership. Many Members have far more severe injuries than ever before – people just wouldn't have survived such incidents in earlier conflicts – and the charity plays a vital role for them. May it continue to thrive as long as the need remains.”



Snowboarding sensation and Blesma Member Owen Pick is hurtling his way towards the 2018 Winter Paralympics. The 23 year old, who tried snowboarding for the very first time on a Blesma trip two years ago, has made such an impression in the sport that he was invited to compete in the prestigious X Games in Aspen, Colorado in January.

The all-action X Games attracts the most exciting and extreme skiers and snowboarders from across the world, and Owen finished a creditable seventh

in his debut appearance in the Adaptive Snowboardercross competition.

Owen, a former Royal Anglian whose right leg was amputated below the knee after he stepped on an IED in Afghanistan in 2010, is being funded by Blesma as he hopes to build a future in the sport.

“I couldn’t believe it when I got invited to the X Games. It is such a big deal,” said Owen. “At first, my snowboarding was just about doing something cool. I’d never even skied before Blesma introduced me to it. At first, I had no thoughts about taking

it any further than enjoyment, but to get to the X Games so quickly is amazing. I was buzzing when I was racing against the best guys in the sport, and was pretty chuffed with seventh place.”

Owen is hoping to compete against able-bodied boarders at the Inter-Services Championships in March and has his sights firmly set on competing in the 2018 Winter Paralympics in South Korea.

“It is very exciting and I’ve got to thank Blesma as I wouldn’t be here without them,” added Owen.

OBE HONOUR FOR JEROME CHURCH

Former Blesma Chief Executive Jerome Church received an OBE in the New Year Honours List at the start of the year for services to veterans.

Following a long military career, during which he lost a leg while serving in Northern Ireland, Jerome became a Member of Blesma and was appointed the Association’s Chief Executive in 2000. He helped steer the organisation through a period of great and often unpredictable change before retiring in 2013.

“When I joined Blesma we were a Branch orientated organisation. We had thousands of WWII Members and their needs would increase with age, so growing the welfare service seemed sensible,” said Jerome of his time in charge.

“But the events that unfolded before our eyes as we were glued to the office TV on 11 September 2001 would change our work in the years ahead. The levels and



complexity of amputation wounds rose dramatically in Iraq and then Afghanistan.

“We took a long view – amputation is something young people live with for a long time – I know! Blesma are in it for the long haul and always have been.”

THE ROAD WIZARDS MOTORBIKE CLUB MAGICS UP £4,000

The Road Wizards motorcycle club, based near Oldham, adopted Blesma as its charity of choice several years ago after the Association helped to adapt a motorbike for one of its members.

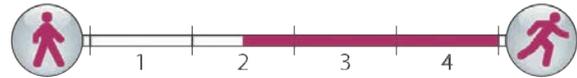
Led by husband and wife team, Ossie and Sharon McDaid, the Road Wizards hold events during the year, with all profits going to Blesma. In 2013, the group raised £2,100, but last year more than doubled that to £4,350.

A cheque was presented to Mike Downes, BSO for the North West, and Laura Hyde, Community and Events Fundraising Manager at the Road Wizards’ Christmas party last year. Joining Mike and Laura were several Blesma Members, their wives and partners. A big thank you must go to everyone at the Road Wizards who have confirmed that Blesma will be their charity of choice for 2015.

For more information on how to fundraise for Blesma contact the Fundraising Team on 020 8548 7089



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Steve Fraser joins Blesma after 25 years in the British Army



Steve Fraser takes over as new South West BSO

This is most certainly not a job, it's a vocation, and one that I am sure I will really enjoy. I have already met some fabulous people and am aware that I am in a very lucky position."

That's the view of the new BSO for the South West, Steve Fraser MBE. Steve served in the Army for 25 years, reaching the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, before leaving at Christmas to take up his new role with Blesma.

"When I heard about the position it appealed to me straight away," said Steve. "I was looking for a change and wanted something people focused. I was looking for a role that would allow me to give something back and make a difference, so when I heard about the job being vacant, I spent the weekend considering the impacts of leaving the Army before finally deciding this was the right move."

Steve, who took up his role as BSO in January, joins Blesma from the Royal Artillery, where he spent much of his career, including many operational tours,

serving within 3 Commando Brigade, Royal Marines. "I've been aware of Blesma and the Association's work for years through friendships with colleagues like John Francis and Bill Gillet," said Steve. "I am also very well aware of the work Blesma does because of operational casualties I have been involved with."

Steve has been spending the last few months finding his way and learning all about the Association, but he already has a clear idea of what he would like to achieve in his new role.

"I want to spend as much time as I can meeting Blesma Members face to face so that I can make sure they're ok. I think it is important for me to continue to ask questions and find out those little things that might make a big difference to someone's life.

"I also want to work closely with the welfare volunteers in the South West to ensure we maintain maximum physical contact with the large number of Members we are responsible for."

FOOTBALL TEAMS SUPPORT BLESMA

Players and fans of Nottingham Forest and Bolton Wanderers football clubs pulled out all the stops in support of Blesma when the two sides met in the Championship in February.

Both clubs warmed up in Blesma T-shirts, with generous fans donating £1,512 to a bucket collection held before the match.

The players emerged from the tunnel for kick-off to a Blesma Guard of Honour and the mascots for the day were the children of Blesma Members and supporters.

Chairman of the Midlands Area Keith Meakin MBE and local businessman Richard Waring, both lifelong Nottingham Forest fans, organised the day. Richard's company, Waring Engineering, provided the hospitality for the Blesma volunteers.

"It was fantastic to see more than 50 Blesma Members and volunteers having a great time at



the game," said Richard, who is an Honorary Member of Blesma. "We raised a brilliant amount for this

amazing charity that helps so many of our ex-Service men and women who have suffered life-changing injuries."

After the match Keith Meakin said: "We are grateful to the Nottingham Forest and Bolton fans for their generous support, to the clubs for their help, and to all the volunteers for a brilliant turn out."

TAKING ON THE COAST2COAST CYCLING CHALLENGE

At the start of April, five Blesma Members, along with a group of friends, will be taking on the Coast2Coast cycling challenge.

On Easter Monday, Jonathan Bell, Mark Brown, Martin Kettrick, Jez Scarratt and John Reeves will set off on their three-day expedition. They will cover a gruelling 140 miles, starting in Morecambe on the west coast and finishing in Filey on the east coast. On their journey they will pass through Ingleton, Hawes, Redmire, Leyburn, Thirsk and Malton, before finishing at Filey seafront. "This is about Blesma Members putting something back in – it's as simple as that," said

Jonathan Bell, who has been in charge of coordinating the ride. "We want to make sure more injured guys have the opportunities that we've had by raising as much money as possible for this fantastic charity that has helped us so much."

The team members have already collected £4,500 but are determined to raise as much as possible.

For more information on the five riders, and to find out how you can donate, visit www.blesma.org/what-we-do/members-challenges/coast2coast

➔ BLESMA BRIEFING

We'll support our wheelchair users

Brian Chenier, BSO (Prosthetics) gives us the lowdown on the latest in prosthetics as well as an update on Blesma's work with the Spinal Injuries Association



I am increasingly being asked questions relating to the upgrading of components rather than socket fit and comfort. I am able to provide individual support and advice and, if necessary, liaise with the Limb Centres on your behalf. I also accompany Members when they attend appointments if necessary, and help broker good communication between all concerned.

One of my many tasks this year is to produce a series of information leaflets for our Members covering both general and specific information relating to Blesma and living with limb loss. I have also been working with colleagues at the Spinal Injuries Association (sia) to develop a leaflet that is aimed at our veteran community. The hope is that this will become a joint project. The design work is now under way and the leaflets will be downloadable from the Blesma website, with hard copies distributed as required.

Blesma and the sia are working towards a greater level of understanding as we have similar aims. In the February 2015 issue of *Forward*, the sia's magazine, Mike Hutchins produced the following article which will be of interest to some of our Members...

RIGHT CHAIR, RIGHT TIME, RIGHT NOW

NHS England has set up a review of NHS Wheelchair Services in partnership with service users and their representative organisations, one of which is sia. [Blesma is also represented.]

In November 2014, NHS England held a wheelchair summit and has produced a report which outlines:

- Why we need to act to improve wheelchair services
- What happens when people are let down by a poor service
- What it looks like when we get a service right
- What needs doing
- What can be achieved

The report highlights some interesting facts and figures regarding wheelchair services. For instance:

- There are around 1.2 million wheelchair users in the UK – which is approximately the population of Leeds and Manchester put together
- Around two thirds of the 1.2 million are regular users
- More than half of all patients waiting to be assessed for a wheelchair wait more than two months, of which; 70% wait more than three months, 30% wait

- more than six months and 15% wait more than a year
- 50% of powered wheelchairs are privately purchased
- There are 151 NHS wheelchair services in the UK responding to approximately 185,000 referrals a year
- The NHS spends approx £182m a year on wheelchairs
- Up to 100,000 wheelchair users will develop a pressure ulcer from being given the wrong chair
- A full thickness sacral sore costs as much to treat as 16 hip replacements

The report concludes that if the Government can work positively together with all stakeholders, including disability organisations that are committed to improving wheelchair services, we can expect to:

- Provide a positive experience of wheelchair services for all wheelchair users, ensuring that there are no more reports of individuals coming to harm or even dying before their wheelchair is available
- Reduce the unacceptable delays that sometimes occur in respect of wheelchair provision
- Significantly reduce harm; the risk of secondary complications and all associated costs to the benefit of the individual, their family, carers and society
- Achieve the desire to support wheelchair users to lead as full and as active a life as they choose, creating equality with a freedom that non-wheelchair users take for granted
- Support staff with the right skills to co-produce solutions with people who are seen by them so that the above outcomes are met.

Visit www.nhsiq.nhs.uk to see the report in full

FINAL THOUGHTS

I continue to push the work of Limb Centre User Groups and I make no apologies for this. I have seen first-hand the excellent work that can be achieved by even just a few dedicated and knowledgeable people.

I therefore recommend that you at least get in touch with your User Group and see what they can do for you and, perhaps just as importantly, what you can do for them and others.

For support or advice on prosthetics, orthotics or wheelchairs please contact Brian on 020 8548 7080 or email him at BSOprosthetics@blesma.org

“

I HAVE SEEN FIRST-HAND THE WORK THAT CAN BE ACHIEVED BY EVEN JUST A FEW DEDICATED PEOPLE

”

Blesma in the community

The pilot project that will make a real difference (p22)



JOIN BLESMA FOR THE AGM

Blesma's President and Chairman extend an invitation for you to join them at Blesma's Annual General Meeting on Thursday 25 June.

The itinerary will begin at 14.00 with the brief constitutional element of the AGM. Delegates will then have the opportunity to find out what Members have achieved in the past year, and will be able to learn more about Blesma's plans for the future. Afternoon tea will follow at 15.15.

The AGM will take place at One Great George Street, Westminster, London, SW1P 3AA.

If you wish to attend, please email Lisa Aston on execasst@blesma.org, call her on 020 8548 3511 or write to her at Chadwell Heath



Photograph: John Francis

Great landscapes like this could soon be part of a Blesma photo exhibition

Ambassador brings focus to Blesma photography

Blesma photography has been given a massive boost with the appointment of prominent photographer Marcus Lyon as the Association's latest Ambassador. The announcement was made at Marcus' solo exhibition, *Timeout*, at Somerset House, London in January.

"Marcus will give Blesma photography a real sense of direction," said Charley Streather, who has been instrumental in establishing Blesma's popular photography courses. "He sees where we currently are and where we want to go, and will be able to help us reach our goals."

Marcus will offer Members his expertise by attending some of Blesma's photography courses. He will also head up the appraisal panel for submissions of work to Blesma's inaugural photography exhibition.

"We are working to introduce courses for Blesma photographers and, later in the year, hope to hold our first Blesma photography exhibition," said Charley. "In the coming months Members will be asked to submit their best photographs which will then be appraised by Marcus and a panel of photography experts. The top images will then be included in a Blesma exhibition."

HAVE YOU GOT WHAT IT TAKES?

Could you take on a punishing, gritty cross country race through muddy Essex farmland in aid of our veterans?

Blesma is partnering with Nuclear Races for this year's Nuclear Rush and we want YOU to join us on Saturday 16 May as we take on more than 50 man-made and natural obstacles in the battle for the finish.

More than 90 people have already signed up, and for every registration received into the Blesma wave at 12.30pm, the Nuclear Races team will donate £5 to Blesma. Plus, we'll send you a fundraising pack.

You can register as an individual or as a team and compete for 'top fundraising' and 'fastest individual/team' trophies. All registrations must be made online and in advance at www.bit.ly/NuclearBlesma

For more information contact Blesma's Fundraising Team on 020 8548 7089 or email fundraising@blesma.org



NEWS ANALYSIS

100 years of service to soldiers

From the peg legs and rudimentary designs of WWI to today's state-of-the-art limbs fitted with hi-tech microprocessors, the last 100 years has seen a revolution in prosthetics provision

It wasn't all over by Christmas. The daily casualty lists had yet to become part of Britain's mournful World War I life, but there was already no escaping the limbless survivors. Young men, with the excess khaki of their sleeves and trousers folded up, gave a graphic reminder of a conflict that would claim more than 800,000 British soldiers.

The nation was haunted by the sight of soldiers walking on rudimentary prosthetics, or with devastating facial disfigurements, as so few had survived such battlefield injuries in previous campaigns. They were a social and medical phenomenon, and their very presence energised a remarkable revolution in caring for the wounded that brought together the nation's greatest clinicians, technicians, sculptors and artists.

Those early WWI amputees had to make do with stumps fashioned from wood and held on with leather straps, but a constant demand for progress fuelled development that has brought about today's carbon fibre blades and hi-tech microprocessors.

Prospects for limbless survivors were bleak in 1915. There was no NHS, while medical knowledge of how to perform

amputations was very much in its infancy, and rehabilitation was a limited concept. More than 41,000 men lost at least one limb during World War I, while 60,500 returned with facial disfigurements from shrapnel bursts and burns.

The focal points of the rebuilding process were two former mansions, commandeered by the War Office, and a district hospital where maxillofacial and plastic surgery were developed. Roehampton House, in London, opened its doors to 25 patients in 1915 and unified the cottage industry of artificial limb makers. It was the first time surgeons and limb fitters worked together.

THE TIN NOSE SHOP

Plastic surgeon Sir Harold Gillies pioneered facial reconstruction at Queen's Hospital, in Sidcup, Kent, and worked with sculptor Francis Derwent Wood who used his artistic talents to create facial masks at what would become known as the Tin Nose Shop.

"This was a landmark time for medicine because the surgeon's job was simply to amputate. Artificial limbs were supplied separately and most people couldn't afford

them so had to make do with peg legs," says Dr Julie Anderson, a reader in medical history at the University of Kent.

The process could be gruesome for the veterans, with some enduring up to five re-amputations. The only cushioning provided between the inflamed stump and prosthetic was talcum powder and a sock. The psychological impact on the individual, and on society as a whole, was devastating.

"There are reports of women crying and fainting at the sight of limbless men in the street," says Dr Anderson. "No one had witnessed this before – these men were heroes yet they looked different. It was a highly censored war and it was not until wounded soldiers returned to their homes that people saw the extent of their injuries.

"Nowadays, you see guys displaying their prosthetics loud and proud, but back then most people tried to pass themselves off as able-bodied. Up until about 15 years ago, it was rare to see a prosthesis that was not masquerading as a proper-looking leg."

The public shock and the struggle to return to their jobs meant that thousands were tormented by their post-war profile.





“THE EMOTIONAL AND FINANCIAL COST OF YOUNG MEN RETURNING FROM WAR IS STILL WITH US, BUT MEDICAL AND PUBLIC SUPPORT REMAIN STRONG”

“The system was overwhelmed at the start of 1915, and there was a lot of crisis management as authorities tried to supply limbs of some quality to so many,” says Stewart Emmens, Curator of Community Health at the Science Museum. “In the 10 years before WWI, there were few patents around, but during and immediately after the war it became a fairly lucrative business.

“There were training courses to get ex-Service men back into work but once the war was over the veterans drifted back into the general population of the disabled, losing their status, so organisations such as Blesma were set up.”

The Ministry of Pensions was established in 1917 to provide welfare but the Kings Roll employment scheme, designed to fast track disabled veterans into jobs, largely failed. There were also accusations that help for ex-Service men was disproportionate and, at a 1920 conference, it was even claimed that the general disabled population endured ‘an appalling amount of suffering’ because funds had been diverted.

100 YEARS ON...

Today, they still make prosthetics at Queen Mary’s Roehampton, though staffing is down to 35 technicians from a peak of 1,200 in the 1960s when it was the national centre. “But we have seen some amazing developments over the last century and this is a unique part of British history, something we can be very proud of,” says Stan East, Director of Operations at Queen Mary’s. “The emotional and financial cost of dealing with young men returning damaged from war is still with us, but medical and public support remain strong.”

But the medical advances were huge and ingenious. Derwent Wood made plaster moulds and tin masks that he would then paint to match the wearer’s skin tone before adding a top coat of varnish. False eyes with eyebrows and eyelashes could be painted on in a process that took up to a month for each mask. His studio at the south London hospital employed three sculptors, a casting specialist and a plaster mould-maker.

“My work begins where the work of the surgeon is complete. The patient acquires his old self-respect, self-assurance, self-reliance and once more takes pride in his personal appearance. His presence is no longer a source of melancholy to himself nor the sadness of his relatives and friends,” Derwent Wood said in an interview in 1917.

Advances were rapid, with lighter, metal-based legs introduced from 1917. The fusing of medical talent, craftsmanship and public spirit was the catalyst for improvement and a more egalitarian approach to national health. The revolutionary artificial jointed Carne arm became known as the ‘Officer’s Arm’ because it was so expensive that few soldiers could afford it.



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light to high
activities



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- It has been shown to significantly increase comfort levels in the socket, as well as reducing skin irritation caused by sweating.
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Street named in honour of Blesma man

NOT MANY OF US CAN BOAST ABOUT having a street named in our honour, but that's exactly what happened to the late Peter Crawford. Peter was a Blesma Member and Tunbridge Wells councillor from 2000 until the time of his death in January 2012, aged 76.

"Peter did a lot for his constituents and a great deal for charity," said his wife Linda. "He was a quiet man, but he was forceful in a good way – he got things done."

Peter received a posthumous civic medallion from Tunbridge Wells Borough Council in 2012 and, last year, a road on a new estate in the area he represented was named Crawford Close after him.



"It was a lovely day and Peter's four-year-old great grandson helped the Mayor cut the ribbon to open the street. Afterwards, we had afternoon tea with the Mayor and other dignitaries," recalled Linda.

Fittingly, a shop and a post office that Peter was instrumental in preserving are located on Crawford Close, along with more than 60 homes. "As well as representing the people as a councillor, Peter did a lot of work for charity – notably for Blesma and the Royal British Legion," said Linda. "The family are all very proud of him."



Cassidy is the People's choice

Blesma Member and ex-Royal Marines medic Lance Corporal Cassidy Little has won Comic Relief's version of the hit TV show *Strictly Come Dancing*.

Cassidy partnered *Strictly* professional Natalie Lowe as they danced the Paso Doble and scooped the coveted glitter ball trophy in *The People's Strictly* in March.

"*Strictly Come Dancing* is a guilty pleasure, it's just beautiful to watch," Cassidy said before the competition began, "but I didn't anticipate that I would ever dance professionally again, even before my injury." Cassidy, who trained as a dancer before spending 10 years in the Royal Marines, lost his right leg below the knee in an IED blast in Afghanistan four years ago.

"I had a fabulous time," said Cassidy of his appearance on the show. "I danced in front of millions of people with one leg – and won!" Congratulations from everyone at Blesma!

ASSOCIATION'S AMBASSADOR SWAPS CYCLING FOR SKI JUMPING

Blesma Ambassador and Paralympic cycling silver medallist Jon-Allan Butterworth swapped his bike for a bobsleigh earlier this year to take part in Channel 4's hit show *The Jump*.

He had "a fantastic experience" on the show, which tests celebrities' mettle as they take on eight adrenaline-fuelled winter sports.

"We had seven weeks of training before the show was on TV and we got to try some amazing sports," said Jon-Allan. "I love adrenaline sports, and disciplines like the skeleton bobs, skiing, bobsleigh and snowboarding were definitely exciting." Jon-Allan wasn't even fazed by the toughest of all; the ski jump.



"It is so technical, and I had a bad crash three weeks into the training," he said. "The first few times you try something new are always a bit hairy, but as I got better I started to enjoy the adrenaline rush. I was competitive, but only ever against myself," he said of his time on the programme.

Jon-Allan plans to do more TV in the future, but for now he is totally committed to his cycling.

"I started serious training again two weeks ago and I've got my sights set on the national championships in September and then, hopefully, the Paralympics in 2016," said Jon-Allan. After that, who knows – maybe he really will swap his bike for a bobsleigh!



Blackpool's new bus

BLESMA HAS TAKEN DELIVERY OF the Association's new minibus, which will be based at the Blesma Blackpool Home. On 19 March, Dave Leo, the lead driver at the Home, received the keys from Chief Executive Barry Le Grys.

The Mercedes Sprinter has been adapted to very high specifications at Stanford Coachworks in Essex and has been paid for in full through kind donations from Queen Mary's Roehampton Trust, The Childwick Trust, the QBE Foundation and the Bernard Sunley Charitable Foundation.

The minibus is a welcome addition to the Home and will be used to give residents even greater mobility around the local area. Blesma Members taking part in activities at the Home, and in the region, will also have use of the new vehicle.



CHADWELL HEATH STAFF GET READY FOR BLESMA WEEK

BRIAN CHENIER, BLESMA SUPPORT Officer Prosthetics (right), is set to join Rob Chatfield, Managing Director of OpCare, on an epic one-day cycle ride. On 03 June the pair will cycle 100 miles from Exeter Mobility Centre to the Bristol Centre for Enablement via Cheddar Gorge to raise money for Blesma Week.

Meanwhile, Blesma Chief Executive Barry Le Grys is set to undertake a huge challenge in support of Blesma Week. The Three Peaks Challenge involves scaling the three highest peaks in the UK in just 24 hours. On 05 June, Barry will lead the Blesma team to the top of Ben Nevis (Scotland), Scafell Pike (England), and Snowdon (Wales), walking a distance of about 26 miles and climbing 3000m.



For more information on how to join Barry on the Challenge, or how to donate to Blesma Week, turn to page 06. You can sponsor Brian at www.justgiving.com/BriansCycleChallenge

NEWS BRIEFS

BOOK A HOLIDAY FOR JUST £50

The Calvert Trust runs outdoor activities for all ages and disabilities. Since last April, the Lake District Calvert Trust has welcomed more than 140 people as part of the Armed Forces Covenant (LIBOR) programme.

The programme gives Armed Forces families with at least one member with a disability the chance to go on subsidised outdoor adventure breaks for just £50 per person. This includes accommodation, food and a range of exciting activities from climbing to horse riding. All the activities are open to those with even the most complex disabilities.

The Lake District Calvert Trust has added extra dates for Summer (see below). To qualify for LIBOR funding at least one family member must have served, or be serving, in the UK Armed Forces, at least one family member must have a disability, and at least one member must be under 18.

ADDITIONAL DATES FOR SUMMER

Friday 01 - Monday 04 May
 Friday 19 - Monday 22 June
 Friday 21 - Monday 24 August
 Friday 28 - Monday 31 August

To find out more about the offer, or to book a holiday, call the Calvert Trust on 017687 72255 or send an email to enquiries@lakedistrict.calvert-trust.org.uk

GIVE YOUR NECK A TREAT

The new Blesma tie is available to order now from Chadwell Heath. The cost of the tie is just £10 and can be ordered by calling 020 8590 1124 or emailing chadwellheath@blesma.org



INBOX

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

NEW FRIENDSHIPS CAN BE FOUND ONLINE (BUT BE CAREFUL)

When a letter arrived for the attention of 'The Lovely Person at The Above Address', I opened it with curiosity.

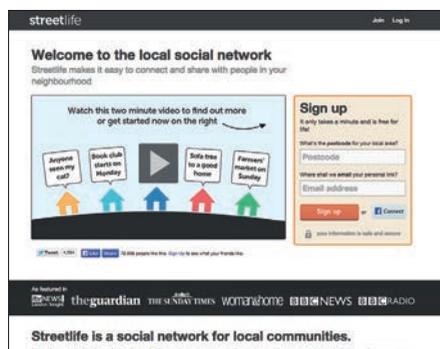
It turned out to be from an organisation called Streetlife.com offering services, friendships and clubs in my local area. So, with some trepidation, I logged on to the website where all I was asked for was my postcode and e-mail address. I put in my details and asked what a 'lovely' newcomer could do. In a few minutes I had replies with offers of games of bowls, a knitting circle at the local library and a coffee morning, all from people in a similar situation to me.

I wrote explaining that I suffer from agoraphobia and cannot always get out. Within minutes, I had four replies offering help from people locally who had overcome the same problem; it was lovely to suddenly know that I wasn't alone.

So far, my experience with this website and organisation has been positive. I have been contacted by some really nice people and have no negative comments but, as usual, I have been very careful where and when I meet people.

Roberta Kerslake

ED: *Streetlife.com is a nationwide scheme that is supported by the BBC, ITV and a number of national newspapers. Its aim is 'to help people make the most of where they live by connecting with their neighbours and sharing practical information, advice and resources'. As with any online forum, a cautious approach should be taken, especially if agreeing to meet people, and at no time should Members pass on personal or financial information to anyone they do not know.*



Blesma Members relax after some serious action on the slopes



Great times in Breckenridge

My name is David Sandles and I have just come back from the Hartford Ski Spectacular in Colorado to which Blesma took a group of 20 people. It was a fantastic experience, not just skiing for the first time as a paraplegic but also meeting, and sharing thoughts and experiences with like-minded people.

The staff from the charity – Colin, Brendan and Frank – worked tirelessly and with dedication on our behalf, which made the trip a complete success and I thank them for their hard work.

The skiing itself was second to none and, with the help of the American volunteer coaches, was both challenging and fun. It made me realise that, even after being injured for 20 years, there are still experiences that will make me both smile with joy and cry with frustration, and that the attitude of 'if you get knocked down, get back up and try again' is still very much a relevant phrase. (All too often in my case, I hasten to add!)

Without the help and assistance of Blesma I wouldn't have attempted to ski, and I would like to take the opportunity to thank the charity for the support and help it gave, not just me but all who have recently come back from Breckenridge with a refreshed outlook on life.



Please pass on my thanks to all at Chadwell Heath as well as the individuals who made it all possible.

Dave Sandles

A(NOTHER) BIG THANK YOU

I would like to pass on how much I have benefitted from the recent skiing trip to Colorado. It has given me confidence, and it has also made me feel 'normal' and 'human' again. The level of instruction was superb, although I unfortunately came away from the trip with three broken ribs due to a simple mistake on my part. However, I would not have missed the opportunity for anything. I hope the skiing trips to Colorado will continue in the future and hopefully my name will be pulled out of the hat to go again.

Andy Jones

OBITUARIES

Those we have lost

Peter Newlove

05 March 1926 - 03 December 2014

PETER NEWLOVE JOINED THE Northamptonshire Regiment in 1943 and later transferred to the Green Howards. He was discharged in 1944 after being wounded at the Battle of Anzio in Italy.

His injury led to the amputation of his right arm in 1949 in Scotland, where he met and married his wife, Rose. Peter and Rose had three sons and a daughter, and



Peter worked for many years for British Aluminium and, later, Tarmac.

Peter was an active Member of Blesma from 1968 in the Stirling and, later, Glasgow Branches. He was Minute Secretary from 1992 until 2010, all in longhand. He was Branch and Scottish Delegate, and was a long-serving member of the Scottish War Pensions Committee. He spent countless hours assisting Blesma Members and Widows, and, in 2004, he received the Ernie Law Memorial Award. After Rose died he began his world travels, firstly

Those who have passed away

November 2014 - February 2015. May they rest in peace.

Adams D	RAF	Gt Yarmouth	06/02/2015
Ambler B	REME	HQ	20/02/2015
Askin A	RA	Blackpool Home (Leeds)	20/02/2015
Beale E	HLI	Blackpool Home (Guildford)	21/12/2014
Bierton A	RAF	Portsmouth	09/01/2015
Bishop N	RAF	HQ	Jan 2015
Brookes F	Coldstream Guards	HQ	Nov 2014
Bullard W	Queens Own Hussars	Gt Yarmouth	30/12/2014
Clark K	RAC	HQ (Chelmsford)	05/11/2014
Clarke D	RAF	HQ	13/01/2015
Defriend S	Royal Scots Greys	HQ (SW Wales)	29/11/2014
Dowlman C	RAF	HQ	06/02/2015
Fearn B	RAF	HQ (Birmingham)	01/11/2014
Gaunt F	REME	HQ	27/12/2014
George D	RE	HQ	Nov 2014
Hambrook S	RE	HQ (Hastings)	07/02/2015
Harrison C	RE	HQ	17/02/2015
Hawksworth A	RAF	Nottingham	19/01/2015
Holden R	East Lancashire	Blackpool Home (Rochdale)	29/12/2014
Hulme H	South Lancashire	HQ (Bolton)	30/01/2015
Jones L	RN	Portsmouth	30/12/2014
King J K	RAF	HQ	16/01/2015
Kirkham R	RASC	Nottingham	24/01/2015
MacWilliams W	Kings	HQ (Mid-Wessex)	06/01/2015
Marriott R	REME	Walsall	16/11/2014
Moore K	RN	Blackpool Home	05/02/2015
Mould R	RAF	HQ	Oct/Nov 2014
Newlove P	Green Howards	HQ	03/12/2014
Poole J	RN & RE	HQ	31/12/2014
Ross Mrs C	WRAF	HQ	06/12/2014
Smith R	RAF	Cardiff	02/11/2014
Stuttard D	RE	HQ	21/12/2014
Thomas P	RAF	HQ (Wiltshire)	Feb 2015
Toon R	REME	Blackpool Home (Leics)	26/12/2014
Vaughan T	DLI	HQ	23/12/2014
Ward J	RRF	HQ	20/02/2015
Watts J	Royal Fusiliers	HQ (Bucks)	25/01/2015
Wilmot A	RA	HQ	16/12/2014

revisiting Anzio to honour his friends who had died there. He travelled to New Zealand frequently to visit one of his sons, and made many friends on his travels.

Peter always attended the Falkirk Remembrance events, and although he was too ill to attend last year, he watched the service at the Cenotaph on TV. It was the last programme he watched.

Brave to the end. He will be missed.

Catherine Violet Glynn 'Cath'

14 May 1926 - 15 January 2015

CATHERINE GLYNN WAS BORN IN Galleywood, Essex in 1926. She came from a military family, her father having served with the East Anglian Regiment, seeing active service in both World Wars. During the Second World War, Cath worked in Crompton's factory, which was frequently targeted by German bombers.

Cath married Harold in 1952 and they had two sons, Peter and Andrew. As well as being a devoted mother, Cath became involved with the Chelmsford & District Friends of Blesma from about 1970. She took part in many activities, including the annual knitting fundraiser, which became a popular and successful fixture in the group's calendar.

Cath passed away in hospital after a short illness on 15 January 2015, where she was surrounded by her family. Her funeral was held at Chelmsford Crematorium on 06 February where donations to Blesma were received.

She will be missed by all at the Chelmsford & District Friends of Blesma.



Photographs: The On Course Foundation

How playing golf can give you a new drive

The On Course Foundation supports the recovery of injured Service personnel and veterans through golf.

Now in its fifth year, the Foundation has launched an Ambassador Initiative to cater for a growing interest in the charity's work.

Several of those Ambassadors, including Garry McNulty, are Blesma Members.

"The On Course Foundation is a fantastic organisation that has already helped hundreds of wounded, sick and injured

Service personnel find a new direction," said Garry.

"Set up five years ago to introduce the game to injured ex-Service men, it now also helps people find work within the golf industry, in jobs ranging from greenkeeping to IT to facilities management."

Garry has been a Blesma Member since 1967, when he lost a foot after being blown up by an anti-personnel mine while serving in Yemen aged just 20.

"I played golf before my injury, but when I tried to get back into it I found it difficult," said Garry. "I actually gave up for a year but I'm glad I took it up again. I've adapted my game to suit my injury, and although it might look awkward it works."

A year after the On Course Foundation was established, in 2010, they contacted

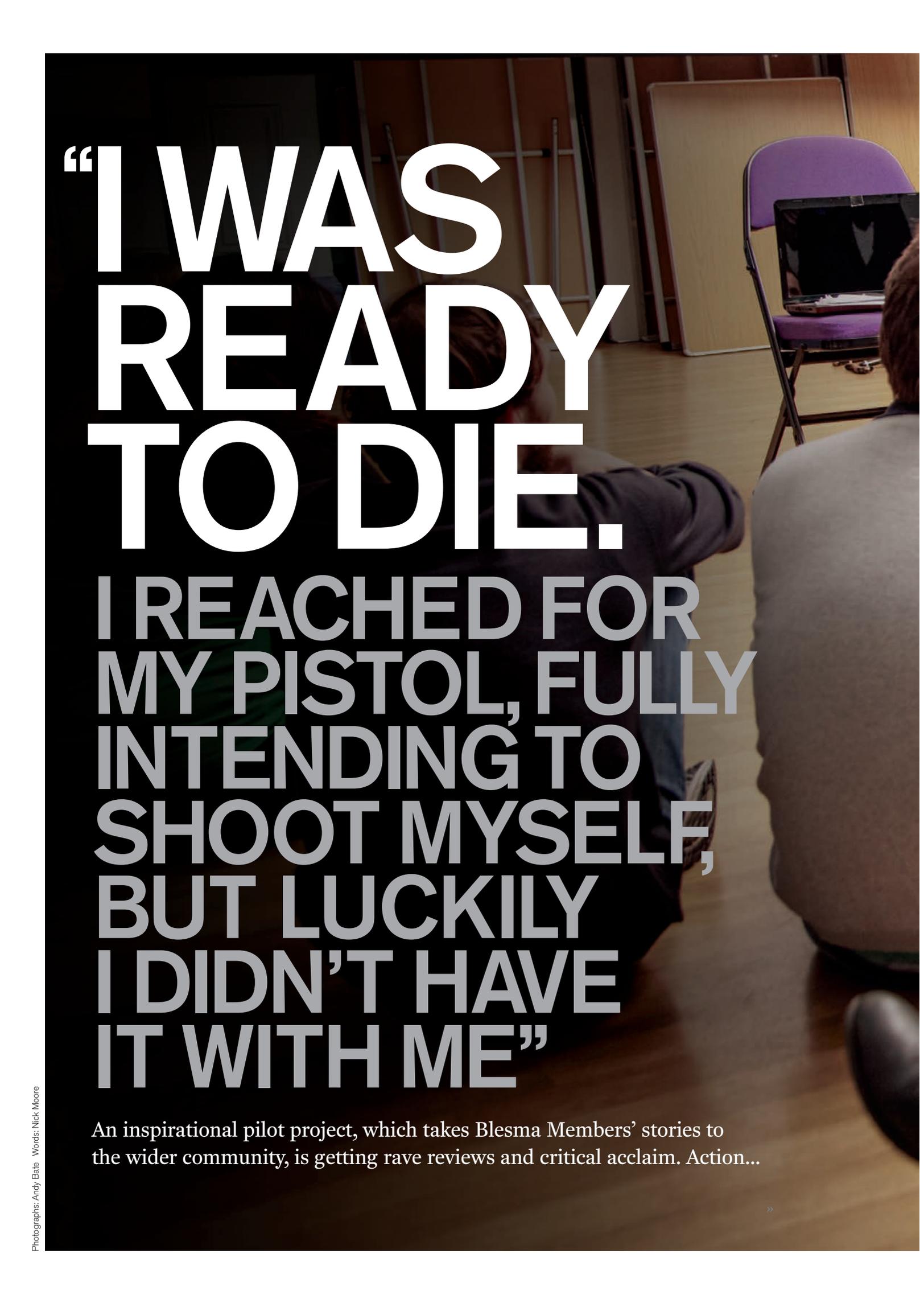


Blesma to see if any Members might be interested in joining. Now, the Foundation has almost 400 Members of its own.

"Anyone can play golf, and the

Foundation caters for both physical and mental disabilities, and all golf abilities," said Garry. "Eighty five per cent of our Members had never played golf before they joined us. They all benefit from the Foundation, which puts on one-day charity matches all over the country as well as golf skills and employment events where Members can get free coaching and advice."

For more about the On Course Foundation call Garry on 0141 959 1377, email him at garry.mcnulty1@btopenworld.com or visit www.oucoursefoundation.com



**“I WAS
READY
TO DIE.**

**I REACHED FOR
MY PISTOL, FULLY
INTENDING TO
SHOOT MYSELF,
BUT LUCKILY
I DIDN'T HAVE
IT WITH ME”**

An inspirational pilot project, which takes Blesma Members' stories to the wider community, is getting rave reviews and critical acclaim. Action...



Wednesday evening at the Brook Theatre, Chatham, and actors in a teenage drama group are sitting in silence, awe-struck, listening to a Blesma Member speak.

“It was a typically grey, overcast Belfast day,” explains Darren Swift (pictured right). “I was working with the Army Dog Unit and was feeding my dog when two members of the IRA threw a coffee jar bomb at me. It instantly killed my colleague and good mate, Geordie. I was blown to the floor. There was smoke and cordite, and I felt shocked – like I’d been cuffed around the head. But, weirdly, I wasn’t in any pain.

“I looked down at myself. My left leg had gone completely – it was found 20 metres away, over a wall, still smoking in my boot! My right leg was hanging off, as were several of my fingers. I remember being fascinated that they weren’t spouting blood. Then I decided that I was probably about to die, so I reached for my pistol, fully intending to shoot myself, but luckily, I didn’t have it with me.”

Swift’s story is the stuff of high drama. Indeed, his incredible monologue explaining how he became a double amputee on that fateful day, before gradually rebuilding his life, formed part of last year’s hit play, *The Two Worlds of Charlie F*, which has undertaken two tours of the UK and been seen by nearly 35,000 people. Swift is now using his incredible story to inspire and motivate others in a new drama-based project devised by Alice Driver, Blesma’s Community Programme Workshop Leader.

“I’ve always thought Blesma is fantastic, but the more Members’ stories I heard, the more I realised how inspirational they were,” says Alice. “So Swift and I have decided to put together a programme that takes these



stories out to a wider audience in the wider community, motivating and inspiring those who listen to them.”

The project has multiple aims, benefitting Blesma Members *and* their audiences. “We want to provide employment for Members who will become part of a workshop delivery team, telling their stories to different and diverse community groups. As part of the delivery team, Members will see that their experiences have real power. We want to develop the programme so that more and more Members can get involved, creating new relationships within their communities.

“The members of the public listening to the experiences of the Blesma Member, and taking part in the accompanying workshop, will be inspired and motivated. They might decide; ‘If this person has been able to adapt and overcome their circumstances, then so can I! We have undertaken a pilot project in which we’ve worked with a number of

different community groups and have had some fantastic feedback, particularly from young people. Stories like Swift’s can open eyes. As individuals, we can get closed off to the world around us. Hearing from someone who has lost limbs or who has suffered a traumatic injury suddenly makes you think about yourself and your own journey.

“You get an insight into true resilience and what it is like to overcome real adversity, and this workshop then helps each and every participant to set their own goals and focus.”

ENTER SWIFTY, STAGE LEFT...

The teenage drama students really throw themselves into the evening, initially participating in a number of warm-up exercises, including an entertaining role play version of TV’s *Would I Lie To You?* There’s an introduction to Blesma, what the Association does and for whom, before Swift takes centre stage. He starts by removing his prosthetic legs – immediately challenging the group to confront the rawness of his injuries. “How much do you think these prosthetics cost?” he asks. Guesses range from a few hundred pounds to a few thousand, before he reveals they are “£90,000 a pop”. Queue teenage disbelief.

He then tells his story over an emotional 40 minutes: it is simultaneously upsetting, hilarious and life-affirming. After Swift was blown up, his dog, Troy, ran for help. “He got a medal for canine bravery,” laughs Swift. “But even when people come to help they can’t walk straight into a bomb blast because there could be a secondary device waiting to go off. So I tried to crawl to those waiting to help me. I thought I was making good progress, but it turned out that I was going round and round in circles!

“Once I realised the medics didn’t have any morphine, that’s when the pain hit me. I was bundled into an ambulance – past







a guy in a dressing gown who, in my altered state, I genuinely thought was Batman – and we proceeded to drive to the hospital over every bump, with me holding my remaining leg in my hand. They gave me Entonox [better known as laughing gas] in the ambulance, so I was laughing hysterically one second before screaming in agony the next. Then I was bundled through the doors of a hospital. It was like a film.”

As is the case for many Members, it was on the long road to recovery that Swifty found himself feeling at his lowest. “I had a terrible feeling of being alone,” he says. “The Gulf War had already kicked off but there weren’t many amputees coming back from Iraq at that time. I didn’t have anyone to share my feelings with who understood. I was in a very dark place. One day, after a bath, I saw myself in a full-length mirror for the first time and it shocked me. I was horrified. I thought; ‘I’m a complete mess.’”

But this moment led to a breakthrough. “I realised I had a choice: I could keep my chin up and get on with the rest of my life, or I could put my chin on my chest. I went for Chin Up!”

And then some! As well as an acting career, Swifty has worked in numerous other fields, and has still found time to become an expert canoer, snowboarder and skydiver.

A STORY THAT GETS RAVE REVIEWS

After Swifty finishes his story and answers a number of questions, the workshop comes to an end, conclusions are discussed and the young people talk about what they have learned, and then set themselves goals.

The young people are lavish in their praise of the evening. “You don’t often hear tales like his,” says Jason Baker, 20. “Swifty has so much character. My mates are always moaning about petty things, but he has been through something truly horrific and still

makes the best of everything. Being part of this will make me more determined.”

Andrew Green, 18, added: “The workshop made me realise that I’ve not been putting enough effort in recently – hearing this story has reinvigorated me. Fate controlled what happened to Swifty, but he didn’t let it control him or how he thought.” And Charleen Meredith, 22, said: “You can’t let fear rule your life, and I’ve learned that from Swifty. I come from a military family and I’ve been to Headley Court. When I tell people how positive amputees often are, they don’t believe me, but Swifty has proved the point. I hope they run more sessions like this, because you can get so much out of it.”

Alice is delighted with the level of positive feedback. “Everyone who has taken part has found it very impactful and has come away feeling determined to find the positives, having set their own goals,” she says. “Our



aim is to grow this programme and then to take it to as many community groups as possible – firstly schools, and then youth groups, hostels, retirement homes...”

Blesma Members who think they might want to tell their story and improve their ability to speak in public should also get in touch, says Alice. “We want to give Members the chance to work with theatre professionals to train them to a point where they can do what Swifty does,” she says. “This is a great training opportunity for Members. Gaining these communication skills could open up a number of varied career opportunities as well as providing immediate employment through the programme.”

Swifty, equally, hopes that the project can be extended and rolled out to benefit both Blesma Members and the groups taking part. “Today was great, a real fact-finding mission for us. I think it helped give the youngsters an insight into another life and another perspective,” he says. “For Members who might be interested, I’d say to definitely get in touch and try it out.

“It’s a great opportunity for Blesma Members to reach into the civilian world and get into public speaking, or just have their confidence boosted. Talking to a group can help you find your voice again – it certainly did that for me. Being thrown in front of an audience can be nerve-wracking, but it helps with your confidence and self-awareness. This has provided a new career path for me that I would never have expected. You’re a band of brothers and sisters again – you train and rehearse together for a job, and then you go out and do it. There’s an adrenaline rush for sure, and it’s a lot of fun.”

For more information on the Blesma Community Programme, please send an email to community@blesma.org

SWIFTY IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Darren Swift was injured by an IRA bomb in May 1991 while serving with the Army's Dog Unit in Belfast. He went through 18 months of recovery at Woolwich Hospital and Headley Court before being offered the chance to stay in the Army. Not keen on "plinky plonky desk work" he opted to be discharged in 1992.

"It was the best decision I've ever made," he says. He went on a number of expeditions over the next few years, including canoe trips to the Arctic and a solo 'trike ride' around Iceland. After becoming one of the first ex-military amputee skydivers with Alistair Hodgson ("We were told; 'You can't skydive, you've got no legs,' but we did it anyway,") they won a gold medal at the 2003 British Championships.

Swiftly then became an amputee snowboarding pioneer. "Again, I got; 'You can't snowboard, you've got no legs,' but I drew a design for some bindings on a beer mat and eventually made it happen. Now I'm at my happiest screaming down a mountain, and have just come back from snowboarding in Colorado with Blesma," says Swiftly.

He has also had multiple successes as an actor, does TV and film extra work, and takes part in 'casualty simulations' in which he plays the role of an injured soldier to teach military and emergency service personnel how to respond in critical situations.



19 September 2014



Quick on the draw

With a sharp wit, and an equally sharp pencil, Captain Alex Biddulph passed the time during his two tours of Afghanistan by sketching life on operations



A TALENTED ARMY CAPTAIN has produced a unique set of frontline sketches in an echo of First World War battlefield art.

Artillery officer Alex Biddulph picked up a pencil to capture the tension and humour of life under fire in Afghanistan. The 32 year old found time between tense patrols to record everything from dark military humour to the nerve-jangling moments when a fellow soldier used his fingertips to carefully probe for an Improvised Explosive Device.

"I have always enjoyed art, and being on tour gave me the chance to take up sketching again and kill some time between patrols," said Captain Biddulph, of 26th Regt RA (The West Midland Gunners) who served two tours in Afghanistan. "I would draw when we were out on week-long patrols," he says. "It was a good way of passing the time while we were stuck in an old Afghan compound. But there were plenty of times when I would have to stop in the middle of a drawing because we were effectively on duty 24/7 for six months and you could never plan what was going to happen from one minute to the next," he says.

Captain Biddulph was part of the last group of British forces to leave Helmand Province in October 2014. "I took a lot of photographs on my first tour

in 2010, but I found sketching gave me a totally different perspective the second time around. I think everyone in the military has a fairly dark sense of humour, especially in Afghanistan – it helps us get by."

Capt Biddulph also liked to compare the humour in his work to pieces drawn by war artists in WWI. "I feel that drawing has become a bit of a lost art and I often found it easier to get my thoughts and feelings across in drawings rather than in any other medium," he says.

Capt Biddulph, from Uttoxeter, is currently based in Gütersloh, Germany. He worked with fine liners and biros in a sketchbook, and had to make sure there was no sensitive military information in his drawings. Other than that, he had a free hand to record events.

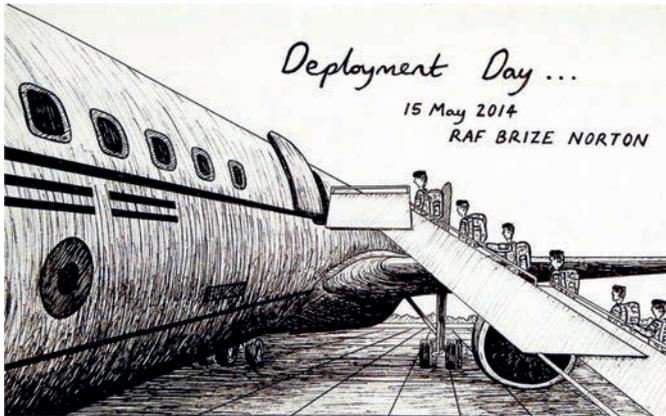
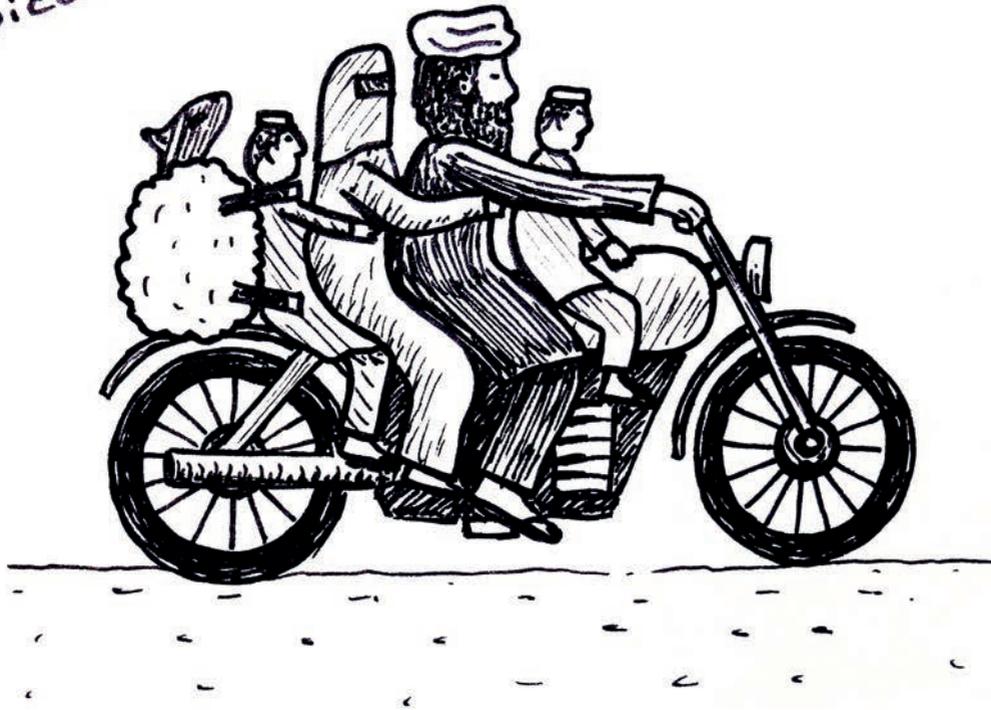
"I just wanted to do something a little different from taking photos, which everyone seems to do these days," he said. "I didn't intend to publish a book when I started sketching, but was encouraged to by my colleagues when they saw what I was producing.

"I hope that the book is enjoyed by both military personnel and civilians as it offers a totally different perspective of those final months in Helmand. And any money from sales is going to two great charities."

All proceeds from the book, *Drawing the Front Line*, will be split between Blesma and ABF The Soldiers' Charity. To buy your copy please go to www.blurb.co.uk/b/5828961-drawing-the-front-line



A typical Afghan sighting



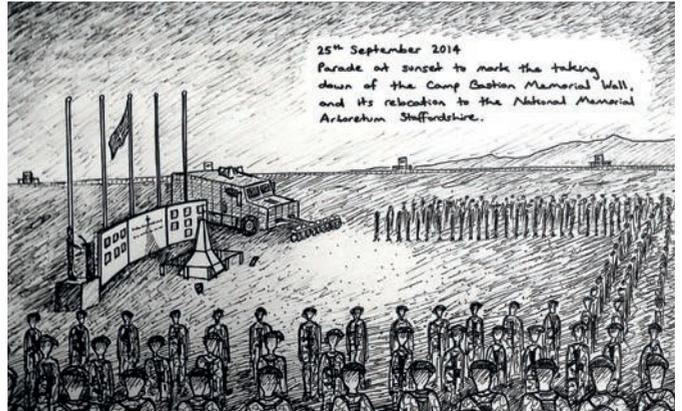
Deployment Day ...
15 May 2014
RAF BRIZE NORTON



A Lonely Place ...
confirmation drills on a possible IED.



WITCHCRAFT 23 HELI INFERTION VIA USMC CH52
OF LIONS FLIGHT - 13 AUGUST 2014



25th September 2014
Parade at sunset to mark the taking
down of the Camp Bastion Memorial Wall,
and its relocation to the National Memorial
Arlingham, Staffordshire.

Earth, meet Martin

After Martin Hewitt was left partially paralysed from a Taliban bullet to the chest he made the obvious decision: to attempt the most arduous and dangerous challenge on the face of the Earth...





There's no better motivation for a bunch of soldiers than to be told they won't be able to succeed at something," laughs Martin Hewitt. The former Parachute Regiment Captain, who lost the use of his right arm after being shot in Afghanistan, is talking from experience. Before his successful expedition to the North Pole with the Walking With The Wounded team in April 2011, he was told by a number of experts that what he was attempting was impossible.

"Well-known explorers said it was too dangerous and too difficult. One went on film saying we wouldn't make it and, after he saw footage of us training, said maybe we had a 50 per cent chance. Then, while we were training in Norway, climbers who saw that we had missing limbs said we had no chance. But that's just a negative trait of human beings. Yes, it was always going to be hard, but if you prepare correctly, have decent equipment and a bit of good fortune, these things are achievable. As soon as people said it couldn't be done, I thought; 'That's it, I'm doing it!'"

Accompanied by Prince Harry, and surrounded by a media fanfare, Martin and the team made it to the North Pole four years ago. That would have been impressive enough, but for this Blesma Member, sticking a flag into a remote bit of Planet Earth kick-started a much more ambitious goal – to stick more flags into even more remote places.

Inevitably, 'experts' have been crawling out of crevasses ever since to tell Martin his even grander plans will end in even bigger failure. And on the surface of it, you'd think they have a point because Martin and his colleagues, American Matt Nyman and ex-Para Terry Byrne, are attempting to become the first disabled team to complete the notorious Explorers Grand Slam; a treacherous challenge that involves summiting the highest peak on each of the seven continents, as well as walking unsupported to both the geographic North and South Poles.

Along the way they'll experience temperatures that drop as low as -68°C, wind speeds in excess of 125mph, altitude sickness, lethal ice crevasses, polar bears and avalanches. Only 41 people have ever completed the Grand Slam.

But having already ticked the USA's Mount McKinley off the list in 2013, and after scaling Mount Elbrus in Russia and Africa's Kilimanjaro last year, as well as that trek to the North Pole, Martin plans to scale Mount Aconcagua in Argentina later this year, and Everest and the Carstensz Pyramid on the Australian continent in 2016. After that he plans to trek to the South Pole before summiting Antarctica's Mount Vinson to complete the challenge in 2017.

THE MAKINGS OF A RECORD BREAKER

It's fair to say that it's been a long and arduous journey for Martin – quite literally – since his injury in 2007. Having commissioned into the Paras as an officer in 2004, his regiment, 3 Para, was the first to deploy to Helmand Province during the Afghan conflict. "As soon as I commissioned, we were on a war footing," says Martin. "I loved my first tour and redeployed twice.

It was on that third tour that I was shot. We were looking to take out some Taliban commanders and were in the process of attacking a heavily fortified position. I was hit by machine gun fire – the bullet caught me above my body armour and severed my brachial artery, instantly paralysing my right arm. I thought I'd lost it and remember looking around for it, then I saw it was still attached to my body, but I couldn't make it move.

"I knew I'd bleed out quickly if I didn't do something; I must have had about 90 seconds to live. I don't know what I did, but I must have got my other hand into the wound to stop the blood flow. We fought our way out of the contact and a medic was able to sort me out. Then I was in a Chinook on the way to Bastion where I had two life-saving operations over 10 hours. The next thing I knew, I woke up in Selly Oak Hospital in Birmingham."

More than a dozen operations later and Martin finally accepted that he would never regain much movement in his arm. "A nerve graft helped to get a bit back into my bicep, which made the arm worth keeping, otherwise I'd have lopped it off because it's heavy and painful," he says. "I was naïve at first. I thought that if I thrashed myself in the gym I'd be back out in Afghanistan in a few months. When I realised that wasn't going to be the case, I struggled mentally – I wasn't in a good place and could have easily gone down a path of decline."

Below: Martin and the team get closer to the North Pole – one step at a time



“I WANTED TO TAKE GUYS IN REHAB ON THE EXPED TO SHOW WHAT DISABLED SOLDIERS CAN ACHIEVE IF THEY’RE GIVEN TRAINING THAT FOCUSES ON A PARTICULAR CHALLENGE”

MARTIN HEWITT

Martin deployed to Afghanistan three times as a Captain with 3 Para. He was shot on his third tour – the bullet severing his brachial artery and paralysing his right arm. He aims to become the first disabled person to complete the Explorers Grand Slam.





“WE SPENT SEVEN WEEKS ON THE MOUNTAIN, BUT IT WAS EXTREMELY DANGEROUS AND THERE WERE HUGE ISSUES WITH AVALANCHES. IT WAS DEVASTATING, BUT WE ARE READY TO TRY AGAIN”



THE MOUNTAIN MEN

The Adaptive Grand Slam is no solo mission. Meet the team who trudge, scrabble, clamber and climb shoulder to shoulder with Martin

MATT NYMAN

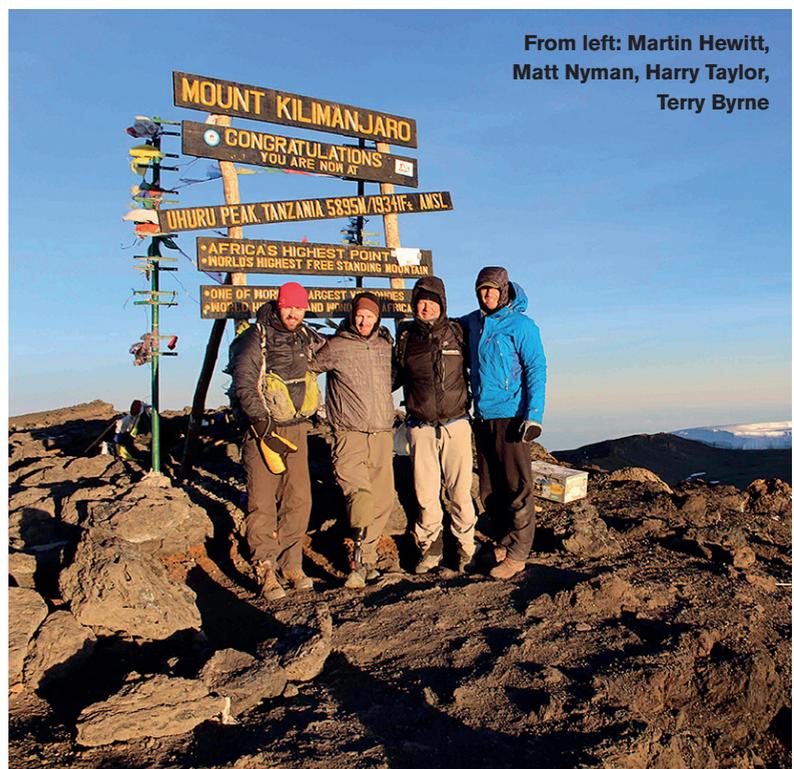
Born in Iowa and currently living in Colorado, Matt was in the 2/75th Ranger Battalion for eight years. He lost a leg while serving in Baghdad in 2005. The helicopter he was in was put into a spin after sucking in debris, he was thrown out, and a blade cut off his right leg below the knee.

TERRY BYRNE

A former member of 2 Para, Terry made an incredibly quick transition into Paralympic sport after an IED left him a below-knee amputee in 2008. He joined the GB Cycling Team and soon broke a track world record and won gold at the 2011 Para-Cycling Track World Championships.

HARRY TAYLOR

The team's guide is a mountaineering legend. A former Royal Marine, he became a mountain warfare specialist in the SAS and led the first Special Forces expedition up Mount Everest. He left the military to focus solely on mountaineering and holds a number of world records, including the fastest solo ascent of Everest without oxygen.



From left: Martin Hewitt, Matt Nyman, Harry Taylor, Terry Byrne



That was when, like many Blesma Members, Martin turned to sport. “I needed a focus and I was asked to get involved in a project for adaptive sport for injured Service men, which went on to become Battle Back,” he says. “I got invited on their first ski trip and I loved it.”

Martin soon became a member of the newly formed Combined Services Disabled Ski Team and went on to represent Great Britain from 2010 to 2012. “I got loads of satisfaction out of it and really enjoyed helping other injured lads learn to ski. Disabled guys were beating some able-bodied guys at the Army Winter Sports Championships and seeing their attitude had a massive impact on me. I did the Paralympic circuit and finished 15th at the World Championships, but I knew I’d never be able to beat the European guys and get on the podium, so I started looking for a new challenge. That’s when Walking With The Wounded came along.”

It was a tough sell to the MOD. “We had to convince the bosses that the expedition was feasible when many experts were saying it wasn’t. Luckily our training, and the fact that we had reputable Polar explorer Inge Solheim leading the group, swung it in our favour. Then Prince Harry decided he wanted to get involved and it all went ballistic!

“I wanted to take guys in rehab on the exped to show what disabled soldiers can achieve if they’re given the opportunity and are offered training that focuses on

a particular challenge,” says Martin. “We had great sponsors who funded seven trips to Norway so that we could prepare. That meant we could learn all about the environment and adapt our kit accordingly. It mitigated a lot of risk. In the end, we managed to reach the Pole in half our target time.”

Not that the guys found it easy going. The team had to dig deep to overcome extreme challenges such as ‘spindrift’, when severe blizzards whip up loose snow that sandblasts your body, and lethal splits and cracks in the ice known as ‘open water leads’. “We had to get across the leads either by swimming in our dry suits, using our sledges as rafts, or by jumping across them,” says Martin. “We started the expedition too slowly and at first we weren’t even completing 10 miles a day, but once our routine was established we worked as a real team. Erecting a tent with one arm at temperatures of -35°C was difficult, but we worked together to find solutions, and soon we were banging out between 16 and 18 miles a day. And Prince Harry was great, he was so down to earth. We missed him when he went.”

Suddenly, the Grand Slam seemed as if it could be a possibility. “I still wasn’t sure if it was feasible though,” says Martin. “I’d read all the books about the difficulties and dangers. But the Polar trip gave us belief. We had a team that was physically and mentally capable, we just had to balance it with family, and get enough funding.”

Martin pauses on a ridge during the ascent of Mount McKinley in the US

1. GEOGRAPHIC NORTH POLE

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



2. MOUNT MCKINLEY USA (6,194M)

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

ATLANTIC
OCEAN

MISSION POSSIBLE

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

PACIFIC
OCEAN

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

The team will attempt to scale the Argentine peak in November 2015. With an atmosphere of only 40 per cent that at sea level, altitude sickness is a real risk.



SOUTHERN
OCEAN

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

The final piece of the jigsaw. After walking to the South Pole, Martin and co will tackle Antarctica's highest peak, situated one kilometre north of the South Pole. With an attempt billed for February 2017, success would make Martin the first disabled man to complete the Explorers Grand Slam.



3. MOUNT ELBRUS EUROPE (5,642M)

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



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

The big one. The team's first attempt was abandoned in 2012 due to serious threats from avalanches. A second expedition is slated for 2016. The team have already summited nearby Mount Manaslu (8,156m) in preparation for the first attempt.



4. MOUNT KILIMANJARO AFRICA (5,895M)

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



7. CARSTENSZ PYRAMID, AUSTRALIA (4,884M)

Also known as Puncak Jaya. It's a five-day hike through the jungle just to reach base camp. Temperatures average 0.5°C, the peak is 4,884m high, and the climb is extremely technical. The team will attempt it in April 2016.

INDIAN
OCEAN

8. THE GEOGRAPHIC SOUTH POLE

From March to September, the South Pole gets no sunlight. The team will make their attempt in December 2016, in the summer, when the sun will be continuously (but only just) above the horizon. The South Pole's climate is one of the coldest on Earth. The team will face a true test of endurance, crossing long, monotonous paths across the barren, icy plateau during the 730-mile trek.



Everest was, and still is, the major challenge standing between Martin and a place in the record books. The team have already made one unsuccessful attempt, in 2012, when the climb was called off due to bad weather and extreme danger on the slopes higher up the mountain. Several sherpas had already been lost to the season and expedition guide, Harry Taylor, felt he had no choice but to send the team home.

“We spent seven weeks on the mountain, but it was very dangerous and there were huge issues with avalanches. We didn’t get our chance. It was devastating, but we are ready to try again,” says Martin. “We’ve trained hard to be ready to take on any challenge. The harshest thing I’ve ever done was the training on Manaslu, which is the eighth highest mountain in the world, while we were preparing for Everest. No matter how fit you are, some people just can’t tolerate the altitude in the 8,000m ‘Death Zone’.

“At one point I was crossing a 2,000ft crevasse, my arm was weighing me down, and I’m scared of heights! I was already bricking it, but then an earthquake measuring 6.2 on the Richter scale kicked off. We were the only people on the mountain and it triggered avalanches all around us. It was ridiculous. We had to get down on unstable surfaces by initiating avalanches all the way down. But it was great preparation for the crevasses on Everest!”

ANOTHER DAY, ANOTHER MOUNTAIN

Alaska also proved to be a huge challenge. “It was the longest winter since records began and the weather was absolutely hideous. Climbers were abandoning their attempts all over the mountain. McKinley is such a hard mountain to climb because you can easily get caught without enough kit. It’s a cross between Everest and the North Pole – you need to pull a sledge and carry a rucksack. We had to use a system called ‘forward and backward carries’ which involves taking some supplies

“AN EARTHQUAKE MEASURING 6.2 ON THE RICHTER SCALE KICKED OFF. WE WERE THE ONLY ONES ON THE MOUNTAIN AND IT SET OFF AVALANCHES ALL AROUND US”

part of the way up the mountain before digging a hole, marking it, then going back down for more. During the first 10 days we were aiming to climb 1,000m a day, but only managing 250m. You think; ‘Bloody hell, why am I here?’ But then I’d see guys with legs missing and think; ‘I can’t leave’. And the place is absolutely stunning – the last true wilderness.”

For the last few years, training has been constant and arduous – gym work, marathon running, endless fitness circuits and squash matches – but it does have some upsides. “You have to bulk up to take on the North and South Poles. You need to have 20 per cent body fat, so you can eat as much as you like. One night during the preparation for the North Pole expedition I had seven puddings! Chocolate fudge brownies are a favourite.

“And you develop such close bonds with the team. We know each other so well, and on missions you see people in a new light. It’s like being on ops again. And I find it humbling to see the leg amputees taking on these challenges. I can’t complain about anything.”

With Everest still to conquer, as well as a 730-mile South Pole expedition from Hercules Inlet (“the sheer distance will be a major endeavour,” says Martin), there is a long way to go yet. But even when the last step is taken, Martin’s mission still won’t be complete.

“Hopefully, I’ll become the first disabled person to complete the Grand Slam, but the aim is to then keep the project going as a charitable enterprise. We want lots of disabled people to get involved in similar missions and benefit in the same way I have from adaptive sport. We want to help make it part of people’s rehab.”

*Interested in taking part or finding out more?
Visit www.adaptivegrandslam.com*



Unfinished business: Martin takes in the view from Mount Everest in 2012. Next time it will be from the top!







Alternative Thinking

Sophie de Oliveira Barata has dedicated the last decade to personalising people's prosthetics and, in the process, has transformed amputees into walking works of art

At first glance, Sophie de Oliveira Barata's compact studio in Harlesden, North London, looks very much like the kind of place you're probably already all too familiar with. A wide range of moulds, casts and silicone parts reside on every available shelf and surface, all sorts of tools are on show, as are lots of different prosthetic arms and legs – all in various stages of repair or manufacture.

But look a bit closer and you'll soon realise that this place is a little bit different from what you're used to. Actually, it's very different indeed!

High up on a shelf there's a woman's thigh embedded with jewels and a pair of miniature stereo speakers. In a display cabinet rests a forearm that looks like it's come straight from a battle scene in *Game of Thrones* and, taking pride of place on a workbench, is a realistic looking arm with what appears to be a live snake coiling out of a substantial gash in the forearm.

Welcome to the inner workings of the Alternative Limb Project – a fantastically creative environment in which off-the-shelf prosthetics meet wild, wonderful artistic fantasies to create a world somewhere between art, science and technology. For the last four years Sophie's forward-thinking, cutting-edge business has been offering amputees hyper-realistic limbs as well as more offbeat, bespoke prosthetic designs that reflect the wearer's personality. She makes us a cup of chai, offers us a biscuit and explains all...

"After university I worked for RSL Steeper for eight years making realistic looking limbs," Sophie begins, by way of explanation. "It was great training and I learned a lot of vital skills, including how to use high definition silicone. I learned how to sculpt fingers, toes, feet and hands, bespoke liners, and leg and arm covers. I still do a lot of realistic work, which involves taking a cast of a patient's existing limb and using that to create a new one. The key is to match the skin tones using different layers of silicone, then adding in details such as nails, veins, freckles and fingerprints. It can be difficult because our skin is changing all the time.

"One day, a five-year-old girl called Pollyanna came to see me. She wanted her prosthetic leg to look totally different from every other one she had seen. She asked me if I could make this or do that and I went away to try and find an answer – it was incredibly exciting.

"She began to enjoy our appointments, and I decided there and then that there must be lots of other people who thought the same way about their prosthetics. All I could think of was that old cartoon, *Inspector Gadget*, and I realised I wanted to use my imagination much more in my job. So I decided to strike out on my own."

The Alternative Limb Project was born and, in 2011, Sophie moved into this studio, determined to either "sink or swim". Having trained in special effects at the University of the Arts, part of the London College of Fashion ("we were a scruffy but very creative bunch

"A FIVE-YEAR-OLD GIRL CAME TO SEE ME. SHE REALLY WANTED HER PROSTHETIC LEG TO LOOK TOTALLY DIFFERENT FROM ALL THE OTHERS SHE'D SEEN"



“I MADE A JEWELLED STEREO LEG FOR HER, AS WELL AS A CRYSTAL LIMB, WHICH SHE WORE TO DANCE TO COLDPLAY DURING THE PARALYMPICS CLOSING CEREMONY”

on the sixth floor;”) Sophie was already keen on “fooling the eye”. Realising she needed a glamorous model to showcase her creations, Sophie started looking online.

“I just googled *model* and *amputee*, and the search results brought up Viktoria Modesta.” A well-known fashion and catwalk model whose left leg is amputated below the knee, the pair were a match made in heaven. “Viktoria sees her prosthesis as an accessory. Richard Niveen at Proactive Prosthetics built us a limb structure and we started doing some unusual work together,” says Sophie. “I made a jewelled stereo leg for her, and later a crystal limb, which she wore while dancing to Coldplay during the London Paralympics closing ceremony.”

Requests for commissions soon began to trickle in from all over the world. “Now I’m at the stage where I can’t say yes to them all,” says Sophie, “I like to work directly with a patient and their prosthetist, but if they both live overseas I can’t always do that. I had to turn down a request from Papua New Guinea recently!”

THE MORE RANDOM THE BETTER

A completed limb can take up to six months to complete from the initial concepts and sketches. “A client’s input is vital,” says Sophie. “When they first come in we’ll have a long chat. I need to find out what is important for them in a limb when it comes to function and functionality; do they want something interchangeable, is it something they’ll wear every day or is it something

they want to wear only on special occasions? If they don’t have a clear idea for a design, I’ll ask them to bring in lots of images they like – the more random the better! I’ll use these pictures to make a mood board – I’ll get an idea about what makes a person tick visually, in terms of colour, composition and materials.

“That can inspire me, and we’ll develop concepts as a team – involving the client in the entire process is vital. It’s not a case of; ‘This is my idea, accept it’. Sometimes they might have to rein me in and stop me from getting too carried away. Other times these discussions will bring out imagination and creativity in my clients that they might not have realised they had!”

Sophie now employs a team of freelance experts with specific skills in hi-tech processes such as 3D modelling and laser cutting to help construct ever more intricate prosthetics. “We use silicone, wood, carbon, decorative metal, 3D printing, jewels, all sorts,” she says. “But we have to consider the resilience of the limb, and whether each piece is for the catwalk or the high street. I get a mix, which is great. Prosthetists refer their clients to me, and I still do lots of realistic limb work for the NHS and private companies like Blatchfords, but working with clients is the most rewarding part of my job.”

One of Sophie’s favourite pieces is a leg she made for Blesma Member Ryan Seary. The prosthesis has ‘detachable muscles’ that gives the impression you can see down to the bone (see p45). “I love the mixture



of realistic and alternative on his leg and it really tricks the eye. Technically, it perfectly demonstrates everything I can do. A lot of the military amputees I've met are happy to display their amputations – they're proud to have their prosthesis on show and wear it like a badge of honour. It shows that they fought for their country.

“Ryan has a really strong personality and is a very enthusiastic person, despite having been through a lot. That inspires me to do great work. Most of us customise the things we like, it makes sense – it's exactly the same idea as fashion and what makes us wear certain clothes – and with something challenging, like an amputation, personalisation can give you a better connection with it.”

Sophie's creations get great reactions from the public. “Sometimes people even say to my clients; ‘I'd love one of those!’ Obviously that's a bit inappropriate, but it does show how far society has come in recent years. People see disability in a very different way these days.”

PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES OF PROSTHETICS

Sophie is always looking out for her next idea, and finds inspiration in unexpected places. “Random things get me thinking about possibilities,” she admits. “I was in the airport looking at the abstract shapes in the ceiling, and that gave me ideas. I like the contrasts between city and countryside, nature and man-made things...”

Her bustling studio is the evidence of that inspiration: an assistant is currently laser cutting a design into a

realistic leg so that it looks like a tattoo, while another is shaping textured leather and dragon designs around the sides of a prosthetic leg. “We can reproduce old tattoos, or even old scars,” says Sophie, “and I'm starting to use neon and iridescent colours more often.”

And as films like *Kingsman: The Secret Service*, with its amputee character, put the issue of amputation increasingly in the public eye, Sophie is keen to push the boundaries of prosthetics even further. “I'd like to expand on multiple functions within limbs, teaming up with a range of specialists to create more technical and multifunctional elements such as interchangeable parts, or lights within an arm, for example,” she says.

“The little girl, Pollyanna, who helped give me the idea of doing all this in the first place, came back to me recently with a drawing for a new leg – it had secret compartments in it. Her prosthetist was worried she was getting carried away... but we'll see what we can do!”

With Viktoria Modesta's music video *Prototype* going viral – boasting 5.6 million hits, and featuring three legs constructed by Sophie (a spike, a neon light, and one encrusted with jewels) – Sophie looks as though she'll be busy for some time to come. “I like limbs that speak from people's souls,” she says – and there's no doubt that she's helping amputees express their individuality.

Find out more about Sophie, the Alternative Limb Project, and her creations at www.altlimbpro.com



STEREOS, SNAKES AND CYBORGS

Whether you're into robots, rubies or rattlesnakes, Sophie will personalise your prosthesis to match your passion



GADGET ARM

"This is a demonstration piece but I'm sure it will inspire future limbs. It is an arm in the same vein as a Swiss Army Knife, with all sorts of things going on; a secret compartment, whistle, compass, a couple of blades..."



JEWELLED LEG

"Viktoria Modesta wore this at the Paralympic Games closing ceremony in 2012. The leg must have been seen by millions of people on TV, because she was being twirled around to Coldplay wearing it."



SNAKE ARM

"This was made for the swimmer Jo-Jo Cranfield. Her brother is a taxidermist – I stayed at their house and it's crammed with animals! Jo-Jo likes snakes so we made this, which looks like one is slithering into her arm."



STEAMPUNK LEG

"This was made for the model and musician Viktoria Modesta. We wanted to trick the eye and blend flesh with machinery, so we made a realistic foot in a high-heeled shoe within a brass structure – almost like a birdcage."



TATTOO LEG

"This was done for a woman who wanted a tattoo of her grandparents, mixed in with jewels, on her leg. It also has a watch embedded in it, which we placed in upside down so she can tell the time by looking down onto it."

RYAN SEARY

Blesma Member Ryan Seary lost his left leg above the knee, and left arm above the elbow, after an IED blast in Afghanistan. Sophie made him a prosthesis with 'removable muscles'

How did you start working with Sophie?

I'd already had the idea that I'd like a prosthesis that was a bit different, because while I was at Headley Court, everyone was wandering around with the same legs. I was tinkering around with some designs myself, and then my prosthetist suggested that Sophie might be able to help me. The end product is the result of both our input, and I think it looks great.

What gave you the idea for the design?

I just wanted something different, and Sophie is an awesome artist, so we eventually came up with the removable muscles. The central pole has been designed to look like a tibia, and the toes and nails look like my real foot. It's all anatomically correct as well.

What kind of comments do you get?

The response has been fantastic. It messes with people's minds – they don't know what's going on! I get all sorts of funny comments, but I don't mind that.



FROM DESPAIR TO WHERE?

Dave Lewan knows what it's like to hit rock bottom. He also knows what it's like to emerge from the depths of depression. This is his story, in his own words

Pictures: Andy Bate

ANYONE WHO SUFFERS SUCH A MAJOR TRAUMA as losing a limb wouldn't be human if they didn't succumb to a certain amount of depression. Every Blesma Member will have experienced extremes of emotion and incredibly difficult days while dealing with the consequences of their disability – and for some, things can get very difficult, very quickly.

Dave Lewan, a former Grenadier Guard from Nottingham, lost his right leg in an accident in 2003 before developing an incredibly painful neurological condition. Turning to alcohol to deal with the pain, he became violent and suicidal. But after pioneering surgery, and thanks to some mighty willpower and the support of Blesma, his family and friends, Dave has rebuilt a happy and productive life.

In this raw and honest interview, he tells us how he turned his life around – and appeals to any Blesma Members currently struggling to never give up hope.

Let's start at the beginning. Life seemed to be going well when you achieved your dream of joining the Army
Yes. All I ever wanted was to be a soldier. I had two great years in the TA, then joined the Grenadier Guards. I served for 10 years and I loved it, the comradeship

was great. I served in Northern Ireland and travelled to Canada, Belize, America, Kenya and Botswana. I learned to drive, and when I came out, in 1994, I worked driving jobs as part of a two-man team. Life was good.

And then you had your accident...

Yes. I was on holiday in Gran Canaria in 2003 and I fell off a balcony. The bone shot out of my right leg. It was bad, but what happened next made it so much worse. The hospital botched the operation. I was kept in for 35 days before being repatriated, but they didn't get the infection out of my leg. When I returned to England, after five operations to try to save it, it had to be amputated. I was very bitter with the Spanish hospital.

But then you started to get your life back together...

I set myself small goals; to walk again, drive again, work again. I went to the Limb Centre and dealt with everything. But I couldn't drive a van with a manual gearbox, so I lost my job. I was a reasonably heavy drinker anyway, but after I lost my job my drinking got completely out of hand. I was getting into trouble and having fights. My assault offences got more and more severe and, eventually, led to time in prison.





Dave has been teetotal since his brain surgery five years ago

Was that as bad as it got?

Not even close. Eighteen months after losing my leg I was diagnosed with Dystonia Torticollis, a neurological condition that causes your neck muscles to contract involuntarily. It started with a pain in my hip and after lots of tests I was diagnosed. The trauma of losing my leg had brought it on. The pain was incredible. Losing my leg was bad, the phantom pain was bad, but this was on another level. My head was tilted over at 90° and I had to move my whole body to turn around.

How did the doctors treat your condition?

I tried everything you can imagine, I was a human guinea pig. I tried in the region of 30 different kinds of medication; acupuncture, botox, nerve block, but there was no relief. I had read that alcohol could sometimes suppress the pain, and that's when I really spiralled. I was drinking myself to death. At my peak, over a four-day bender, I drank 100 cans of lager and 17 bottles of vodka! I got more and more depressed, and eventually I decided that I simply couldn't take any more.

That's when you became suicidal?

Yes. I made numerous attempts to take my life. I tried to gas myself, I jumped in the canal and was pulled out, I took overdoses, I was sectioned under the Mental Health Act. I think the early attempts were a cry for help, but in 2009 I plunged a six-inch knife into my heart, and I really wanted to die. The pain from my dystonia was just too much.

What role did Blesma and Keith Meakin play in your recovery?

Without Keith, I wouldn't be here. He was my Welfare Officer at the time and nothing was ever too much bother for him. He's been supportive through the darkest days. He never gave up on me, even when I gave up on myself. He's been a father figure. When others stigmatised me as an alcoholic ex-squaddie, Keith saw something in me. He got to the hospital so quickly after my final suicide attempt. He is a fantastic man.

Was this the point when you turned a corner?

Yes. After that I never drank again. The dystonia reached a 'last resort' – surgery. The procedure is called Deep Brain Stimulation, or DBS. I desperately wanted the operation, but it was a question of whether the NHS would carry out an expensive procedure on me. Keith helped to convince the neurosurgeon. The operation is risky and complicated. There can be haemorrhaging, loss of sight, infection. You can even be paralysed or die from it. But the decision to have it was easy. I was in so much pain that I was willing to take the risk.

Tell us a bit about the operation...

DBS only helps certain types of dystonia but tests looked OK for me, so in May 2010 I had the 12-hour operation. They put a scaffold around my head and drilled into my skull. They put a cable through the holes and connected electrodes in my brain to a neurostimulator battery pack. Midway through the operation, the surgical staff woke me up to check I could still speak and think!



BLESMA ALWAYS HAS SOMEONE WHO CAN HELP

Keith Meakin MBE (far left) was a Blesma Welfare Officer for 16 years. Now retired, he still volunteers for the Nottingham Branch

How much relief did you feel afterwards?

I had the operation on a Tuesday and the surgeon told me when he turned on my neurostimulator battery my pain would disappear. On the Friday morning, he turned it on and the pain went immediately. It was incredible, such a relief after five years. I was a new person. I went from taking 27 pills a day to being medication free.

And you've radically rebuilt your life since then...

I've not had a drink for five years. I've lost a lot of weight – I'm down from 19 stone to 14. I feel good. I met my new partner, Marion, and we've been together for three years. We met at a Blesma fishing match in Lincolnshire when she was working in the hotel we stayed in. I've started a courier business and passed an advanced driving course.

How have Blesma helped you?

In so many ways – they're a vital support mechanism. There's always someone to talk to, and if Blesma can't help directly they'll find someone who can. They help with your self-esteem as well as prosthetics and benefits. I'm a Blesma Welfare Rep now. I want to help others and give something back after Keith and Blesma have supported me so much.



What would your message be to any Blesma Member who is going through a tough time?

Don't give up. I nearly did. If I can come through all that and have a great life, it's possible for anyone else to. A counsellor once told me; 'There's help out there, but you're on a see-saw and it's up to you whether you go up or down.' When you're down, always think; 'at the moment.' For the rest of my life I'll remember the neurosurgeon, Mr Basu, for giving me my life back, and Keith Meakin, without whom I wouldn't be alive.

If you're struggling to come to terms with limb loss there are people out there who can help. You can ask your GP to be referred to Mental Health Services or you can contact your local Increased Access to Psychological Therapies Services (IAPT) directly by searching IAPT online. Combat Stress can help, and can be contacted at www.combatstress.org.uk, on 0800 138 1619 or by emailing contactus@combatstress.org.uk. Alternatively, Big White Wall (www.bigwhitewall.com) is an anonymous, online service that offers help 24 hours a day.

"I met Dave just after he'd lost his leg. He was in shock, his world had collapsed around him. Dave needed emotional and practical support, so I gave him as much help as I could.

"I never gave up on him, even after the suicide attempts. My role was to be there in that hour of need. I would take calls at any time of day. I was very worried for Dave and can't tell you how many people I contacted to try to get him the right help.

"I'm over the moon with how well he has done over the last few years. He has taken the bull by the horns and rebuilt his life. He is a credit to himself, and has got through his problems superbly.

"If anyone is going through similar things I would strongly advise them to talk to their Welfare Officer. The help is out there, and if you're struggling it is really important to come forward and be honest about your feelings.

"Dave has shown what you can do from a very low ebb."



Photograph: Charley Streater

JOHN FRANCIS MBE

BSO Projects John Francis MBE retires from Blesma at the end of March. He looks back on his time as a Commando Gunner and on his work with Blesma

Concentrating at school was difficult for me. I was better on a pinball machine and in the wide, open spaces of rural Somerset! I joined the Army at 15 as a junior leader and was awarded my green beret in July 1965.

I was sent to Singapore as a bright-eyed 17 year old. I met, and later married, a Wren during my time there. Then I went to Borneo and my great military adventure was under way – 60 countries in 42 years.

I enjoyed every aspect of military life, even being on a war footing, and I've seen active service all over the world. I was the BSM during the Falklands Campaign and the troops under my command thankfully all came back home. The return of the Islands to its people was a great achievement. I was "Mentioned in Despatches" for that campaign.

I think I did well in the military because I'm a people person. I love being outside, I've always loved a cup of tea, and I loved to talk to all ranks. That said, I did give a talk to the WI in Weston recently and seven of the eight ladies on the front row fell asleep!

Working for Blesma was a very natural progression. In a way I feel like I've never left the Forces as so many Members have military links, that dark sense of humour and a must do, will do attitude. It made adapting to the job, when I joined in 2004, that much easier.

I've been the liaison with the Veterans Prosthetic Panel. My role was to make sure Members got the prosthetics they were entitled to as well as the right treatment. I think our Members have been largely well served by the panel.

Being the liaison with Veterans UK has been rewarding. I take pleasure in having fought people's cases and won. Much of my work has been to support Members with all sorts of problems; from incorrect payment for attributable injuries to entitlements at appeal tribunals.

**"ONE MEMBER
WAS SCARED
OF WATER. SIX
MONTHS LATER
HE SAILED THE
ATLANTIC!"**

I organised the first Activities Week. Chadwell Heath gave me free rein and it worked very well. I take a lot of satisfaction from seeing what Members can achieve and how they benefit. One Member was scared of water when he first tried rafting. Six months later he sailed the Atlantic!

I'll keep busy after retiring. I'm doing a photography course and will be returning to watercolour painting. My wife, Anne, and I are planning to travel, too – starting in China. But I'll stay involved with Blesma – I have taken so much pleasure, made many new friends and have been so humbled since being involved. I couldn't just walk away.

I hope people see me as honest, approachable and supportive. I've put in as much effort as I could and feel I've made life better for our Members in some small way as an Area Welfare Officer, BSO and Projects Officer.



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