

# Blesma

The magazine for limbless veterans

## SO MUCH MORE THAN A NEW HOME

*Blesma has teamed up with the RBLI to offer Alex Stringer a new home and a fresh start*



**Plus!**  
Blesma Week  
**How your BSO helps**  
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**Blesma's new Chairman**  
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What the Members think of Members' Weekend **p32**



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Photography: Andy Bate, Cimbaly | ©AlexisBerg



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**Special thanks to:** All our Members, Brian Chenier, Frank Garside, Barry Le Grys, Jess Mackinnon, Jess March, Emily Mizon, Heather Nicholson, Bryony Stevens, Ian Waller **Blesma Magazine** is published on behalf of the **British Limbless Ex-Service Men's Association (Blesma)** by **ScratchCreate**. British Limbless Ex-Service Men's Association Charity Numbers: England, Wales & N Ireland 1084189, Scotland SC010315; Company Limited Guarantee No. 4102768. Contact ScratchCreate at david@scratchcreate.co.uk or paul@scratchcreate.co.uk Printed by Wyndeham Grange. This publication may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form, in whole or in part, without the prior permission of the publishers. All prices and addresses are correct at the time of going to press. Every care has been taken in the preparation of this magazine to ensure the contents is fully accurate, but neither ScratchCreate nor Blesma can be held responsible for the accuracy of the information herein, any omissions or errors, or any consequence arising from it. The views expressed by contributors, customers and Members might not reflect the views of ScratchCreate or Blesma. Publication date: Summer 2017. © ScratchCreate 2017.

# NEWS

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

## Sir Cedric retires as Chairman and leaves Blesma in ‘very good shape’

After seven years at the helm, Chairman Sir Cedric Delves steps down at this year’s AGM “very proud of what we continue to achieve at Blesma”



**T**he Blesma Annual General Meeting (AGM) took place at the Members’ Weekend for the first time this year to encourage Members to get more involved with, and better understand, the running of the Association.

The membership said a fond farewell to Chairman Sir Cedric Delves (above right) at the AGM as he retired after nearly seven years as Chairman of the Board of Trustees. Votes were taken on his successor, and Sir Adrian Bradshaw (above left), who retires from a distinguished Army career in August, was nominated to fill the post.

“Sir Cedric has had to preside over some difficult decisions, but his attentive and inclusive leadership on a highly passionate Board has been highly instrumental. Blesma

is in a good position as a result,” said Chief Executive Barry Le Grys, who paid tribute to the guiding role Sir Cedric has played and welcomed Sir Adrian to the pivotal role. “Sir Adrian is a soldier with a wealth of combat experience and he is keen to exploit the best opportunities and safeguard the solid position of Blesma.”

Blesma Magazine caught up with both former SAS commanders at the AGM...

### **SIR CEDRIC DELVES**

“I have thoroughly enjoyed my time as Chairman and being with people I have much in common with,” said Sir Cedric after the AGM. “Blesma is a charity and an association, something of a club, and it is great to be with people who have shared

experiences. I don’t think the charity has changed in any fundamental way over the last seven years, it remains faithful to its values of helping one another. But there have been significant changes around us, not least greater public awareness and scrutiny, and the emergence of other powerful charities. This encouraged us to examine ourselves and how we sat in the charity landscape – it was a healthy exercise. We move on but essentially unchanged, suggesting we had things about right.

“Recent operations have changed the context, as did other societal developments, high among which would be providing for an older population. We acknowledged that people want to age in their own homes and, if necessary, find residential care in their



## Up the Hammers!

Blesma joins forces with West Ham (p52)



own areas. This eventually required us to close the Blackpool Home. Now we are putting the resources into home care and working with the Service charities specialising in residential care to ensure our Members can remain in their own homes and areas.

“But closing the Blackpool Home was very difficult for everyone. It had a totemic position within Blesma, it was more than the home, and it had wonderful people working there. They created a benchmark for residential home care across the country.

“It was painful, but in true Blesma style everyone saw what had to be done and got on with it, including the staff. I would take this opportunity again to draw attention to their contribution and to thank them for their truly magnificent service. In life,

**Sir Adrian Bradshaw (left) took over from Sir Cedric Delves as Blesma's Chairman at the AGM in June**

# welcome

The content in this issue is varied and demonstrates just how much happens across the Association.

West Ham United FC hosted Blesma towards the end of last season at their training ground and at their new home at the London Olympic Stadium.

Members' Weekend was very well attended and lively, and the AGM was held there, too. Sir Cedric Delves retired as Chairman of the Board of Trustees after nearly seven years and Sir Adrian Bradshaw was elected to the Board and then elected by Trustees to be their new Chairman. He was joined as a new Trustee by Member Alison Grant. Vice Chairman Will Dixon presided over the AGM and told the membership that the Association is in good shape and that the Board is looking to invest more. This will start by increasing the number of BSOs before the end of the year. The article on Bill Gillett shows how important their relationships with the membership are.

Blesma Week has gained momentum over the past four years. The fundraising makes a big difference, of course, but the engagement and profile is equally significant. Meanwhile, being the partner charity at the Inter Services T20 cricket tournament, held at Lord's Cricket Ground, was a recent highlight.

Thank you to Duncan Slater for sharing his desert adventure with us. It was a tremendous achievement and we look forward to working with him on the prosthetic techniques he discovered from Italy. We are always looking for ways to collaborate with other charities, using respective expertise to bring greater benefit to those in need. We are indebted to Alex Stringer for telling us how collaboration between the RBLI and Blesma has been a success.

Tragic events in Manchester and London have been disturbing. As the Reverend Phillip McCormack advocated at Members' Weekend, we should take the time to reflect upon our goals and achievements as citizens in society. The Blesma Board of Trustees did just this in April and have given clear direction to the Executive. Blesma has a strong sense of purpose; assisting independence and fulfilment for the membership, in the longer term, not to be deflected by difficult times.

**Barry Le Gry**  
Chief Executive



I think one should strive to leave things better than one found them – everyone involved at Blackpool most certainly lived by that philosophy.

“I am very proud of what we continue to achieve at Blesma, and that will continue with Sir Adrian. We recently asked if we should be doing things differently, such as merging with another charity or opening membership up to the emergency services. We concluded that we are doing the right thing and the challenge is to improve on that.

“One example is activities. They are excellent but in the main are very physical, such as skiing and diving – typical Blesma, pushing at the so-called limits. There are serious artists in the membership and we need to give the arts a fair crack.

“I will miss the Trustee meetings, which could be quite demanding. But I am still a Member, so I won't be a stranger, and the chairmanship passes to Sir Adrian who I have known for a long time. He is Blesma at heart – he is not one for complacency – I am sure he will help harness our natural energy and enthusiasms, and take things on in new and exciting ways.”

## SIR ADRIAN BRADSHAW

“I have known Cedric for some time and I didn't have to think twice when he asked if I would be interested in replacing him as Chairman. Blesma is a fine association that has done excellent work over generations, so I am delighted to be involved.

**“IN LIFE, I THINK ONE SHOULD STRIVE TO LEAVE THINGS BETTER THAN ONE FOUND THEM”**

## SIR CEDRIC DELVES

“My intention is not to come in and affect change, but to learn and understand the organisation, what it does best and how it might do it better. Then I can start having an input. But my impression is that it does what it does very well indeed.

“I see my role as one of guardianship and my primary responsibility is to ensure that nothing stops Blesma fulfilling its role.

“It was good to attend the Members' Weekend, meet Members and get a feel for the Blesma way, and it is clear that it is about comradeship and practical help. Blesma brings people together with shared experiences and understanding. There



Vice Chairman Will Dixon

## Notes from the AGM 2017

**T**here was some robust debate during the AGM, but everyone left reassured that Blesma is in a healthy place. Chief Executive Barry Le Grys opened proceedings with a moment of silence for the fallen, before outgoing Chairman Sir Cedric Delves delivered a touching and amusing speech.

Vice Chairman Will Dixon then ran through the books, proclaiming the charity in “very good shape.” He outlined a number of achievements from the past year, including opening up membership to those who have suffered loss of use of limb outside of Service, Headley Court re-admitting some Blesma Members who were no longer serving, the

progress of the Veterans Trauma Network, and the availability of microprocessor assisted knees for associate Members. He urged Members to continue to participate in the Activities Programme. “Please encourage others who may be sitting at home,” he said. “The isolated need help the most.”

Next came the numbers. Accommodation and activity spending were boosted, while the decision to close the Blackpool Home, and move towards supporting Members in their own communities, was outlined.

Will concluded by outlining the debate on Blesma's future. The Trustees had debated a number of alternatives, including merging with another charity, he said, but had concluded that the best way forward was to “do what we do now but better, with more investment.”

The annual accounts and auditors were then approved by vote, before Philip Monkhouse, Will Dixon and Colin Rouse were reappointed as Trustees. Incoming Chairman, Sir Adrian Bradshaw – who is to retire as Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe in August – and Alison Grant, were appointed as new Trustees.



is a community with shared background. You don't have to explain some things when you are in that company.

“I have been intimately involved in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Northern Ireland before that, and the loss of limbs almost defined the injuries from those campaigns. We started to see triple amputees surviving with serious life-changing injuries, and aside from the trauma of the aftermath, they have the rest of their lives to live. The obligations of the state only reach so far and Blesma is the charity that really understands the issues and the problems that come with these injuries.

“It is the charity of all charities that have expertise in this area. It plays a vital role and I will carry on Cedric's great work in ensuring that continues.

“I joined the Army for what I thought would be three years before I went into farming but I found it was a job I loved doing, and there was always a challenge. I have to retire in August after 36 years and will be an Honorary Colonel in a couple of regiments and will join the RAF Reservists so I can continue to fly, but I am really looking forward to meeting more of the Members and doing what I can to enhance the charity's work.”



Words: Jessica Mackinnon

Rob and Becky – on their wedding day!



## NEIGH TIME LIKE THE PRESENT FOR RIDING NOVICE

JAMIE HULL HAS LEARNED TO HORSE ride with the help of fellow Blesma Member Mick Foulds. Jamie, who suffers from bilateral foot drop and nerve damage in his lower legs, visited Mick's ranch in March, and within hours was "riding around like John Wayne."

"Mick was a very calm tutor," said 41-year-old Jamie. "I met him on a trip last year and was inspired when I heard he rides despite being a double amputee. I instantly took up his offer of the riding experience."

Double amputee Mick, a keen rider for almost 30 years, owns his own ranch in Suffolk. Getting back in the saddle was his motivation to recover from his injuries, and just nine days after he received his prosthetic legs, he was back doing what he loved once more.

Mick started Jamie off by teaching him some basic controls as he walked on horseback. But the gentle pace didn't last for long though.

"By that afternoon I was riding through the local village like John Wayne. I had to pinch myself!" said Jamie.

The following day, Jamie learned to canter, give clear instructions to his steed and even make his horse walk backwards! Later that afternoon, Jamie accompanied Mick and his wife Sue as they went for a ride around the local countryside.

Jamie is hoping to return to Mick's stables for more lessons in the Summer.



# Pair are muddily in love

AMPUTEE GROOM ROB COPSEY AND his bride Becky were joined by nine Blesma Members, including paraplegic Andy Bracey in his wheelchair, to complete the 7km Blesma Wave at the Nuclear Races in May.

The mud-mad couple, who had tied the knot earlier in the day, led 186 competitors through the sludgy obstacle race to raise more than £11,000 for the Association.

"We got a varied response from the wedding party before the event," said Rob, 46, who married Becky in Brentwood earlier in the day before making his way across town to race with 40 guests from their wedding party. "It was actually Becky's idea.

We love to get muddy and take part in fun runs. We've been to many weddings and thought this would be something different."

Speaking about her special day, Becky said: "The wedding went really well. Though we got mixed responses before the mud run, afterwards loads of people said how much they enjoyed it and what a great idea it was. And lots of those who watched said they wished they had done it!"

Rob and Becky were joined on the run by a number of Blesma Members as well as staff and supporters of the Association, and soldiers from 151 Regiment, Royal Logistic Corps.



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Chris rides without a prosthetic arm

## Chris gets podium in first race

Chris Ganley turned heads as he blasted around the Snetterton Circuit in his first motorbike race at the start of May, and not just because he managed to finish in third place.

Chris lost his left arm above the elbow in a road traffic accident in April 2014 and raced at the Norfolk circuit without the use of a prosthetic arm. The 28 year old has moved the clutch to the right hand side of the handlebars of his Yamaha R1, which enables him to ride with just one arm.

While he was serving in the Rifle Brigade Chris was asked by his Company Sergeant Major to join the pit crew of the British Army racing team. He agreed, and soon asked if he could have a go at racing. His goal was to compete for the British Army racing team but his plans were cut short by his accident.

Despite his injuries, Chris got back on his motorbike six months later. His goal for his first race in May was to just finish.

"I was totally surprised to come third," said Chris. "I thought they were calling me

over to say well done for riding with one arm, then they put me on the podium!"

His team, G-Rex Racing, is made up of Toby French and Anthony Stephens, who are both double amputees from birth.

"My real aim is to teach people with disabilities how to ride a motorbike and get them involved with the team," said Chris, whose ultimate racing goal is to compete at the Isle of Man TT. "I don't care how many people I have in the pits as long as I'm helping them in some way."

## MARK SET TO TAKE ON THE WORLD

AMPUTEE VETERAN MARK SMITH has successfully defended his title as Britain's Strongest Disabled Man.

Mark fought off competition from all over the UK in May, blitzing the five tough events; the Seated Deadlift, Viking Press, Sled Pull, Dumbbell Medley and the Atlas Stones. Mark strained his way to top spot in three events and finished second in the other two rounds.

"This year's competition was my most consistent performance so far," said Mark after the event. "I felt great going into it,



but knew that the level of competition would be much higher than last year. To win brought relief more than anything

else. I was pushed really hard by another veteran, Martin Tye, who was taking part in his first ever competition. We bounced off each other all day but I was determined not to give up my title without a fight!"

There's no time to rest though, as Mark is now busy training for the World's Strongest Disabled Man competition, which will be held in September at the Olympic Park in London.

## CHARLES' BIRD BOXES FEATHER BLESMA'S NEST

AN ARMY VETERAN HAS RAISED MORE than £20,000 for Blesma, partly through the sale of his homemade bird boxes. Charles Chapman has been making and selling his own bird boxes and tables at car boot sales and outside supermarkets for 10 years.

The 79 year old served in the Royal Army Service Corps for 22 years before leaving in 1981 as a Sergeant Major.

"I used to attend Royal Corps of Transport reunions in Liverpool and we used to fundraise for a charity. I found out the money was going to Blesma and decided to carry on fundraising myself," said Charles. "One of the first things I sold was a painting of Afghanistan that a young girl in Yorkshire painted.

"It keeps me busy and keeps my wife, Pauline, from moaning at me!" said Charles. "She does help from time to time though."



Words: Jessica Mackinnon Photographs: Brian Chenier

## Photographers explore Isle of Mull

**M**EMBERS HAD THE CHANCE TO practise their wildlife and landscape photography at the end of May on an expedition to the stunning Isle of Mull.

In a week-long activity, Members were set tasks including finding their own shoot locations amongst rocky terrain, and learned about image selection and composition amongst the beautiful scenery.

“The best thing about the trip was that the more experienced Members taught those with less experience – they exchanged tips and knowledge amongst themselves – and that is the ethos of Blesma,” said BSO Prosthetics Brian Chenier, who led the event. “And the entire trip was Member directed, so if the group decided they

wanted to stop on the way to a location because they had seen something they wanted to photograph, that’s what we did.

“We also took one Member on the trip who uses a wheelchair and he wasn’t able

to get to some of the more rocky locations,” said Brian, “but Blesma gave him a grant to buy a telephoto lens before the trip, so he could use it from a safe spot and still get a great shot. That was fantastic to see!”



### PHOTOGRAPHY WINNERS REVEALED

Members were encouraged to enter a photography competition recently for the chance to have their images displayed to the public. The entries were judged by Chief Executive Barry Le Grys and head photographer at Verdi Studios, Kirsty Verdi.

The six winning images were taken by Charlie Armstrong, Brendan West, Mick Williams, Keith Harness, Steve Barnes and Charley Streather (pictured above). The photographs were professionally enlarged, mounted and framed, and put on display at Verdi Studios in Chadwell Heath earlier in the year.



Row2Recovery's skipper Cayle Royce



## BLESMA RACER OFFERS SUPPORT TO INJURED TEEN

WHEN BLESMA RACING SENSATION David Birrell heard about the horrific accident sustained by teenage Formula 4 driver Billy Monger at Donington Park back in April, he immediately knew that he could help.

Eighteen-year-old Billy had both legs amputated after a crash that saw him trapped inside his vehicle for more than an hour.

"I got in touch with his family via Facebook, and his mum reached out. I was invited to Nottingham Hospital, and spoke to him. He's a great lad," said David. "I talked him through some issues, but most importantly, I told him how I threw my crutches away and got back on my feet. Hopefully, he can do the same."

And David, who hopes to become the first amputee to compete in the Le Mans 24 Hour race in an unadapted car, can also see Billy continuing with his racing dreams. "What has happened to him is incredibly tough, but he's already getting on a simulator and trying out hand controls, so hopefully he can race again one day soon. And I'm always available if he needs help or moral support."



## MAGNIFICENT SEVEN HONOURED AT 2017 SOLDIERING ON AWARDS

Seven Blesma Members received Soldiering On Awards in recognition of their outstanding achievements at a glittering event in March.

Snowboarder Owen Pick (above left) took the award for Sporting Excellence, Blesma's record-breaking four-man Row2Recovery crew won the Team Sporting Excellence award, double amputee Adam Francis took home the Inspiration award, whilst Simon Brown (above right) took the People's Choice award.

In all, 11 Blesma Members were nominated for an award. Congratulations to everyone who made the shortlist!

## Cyclists pay their respects on Belgium's WWI battlefields

BLESMA'S ANNUAL BATTLEFIELD RIDE ACROSS BELGIUM took place in May, with nine Members attending the week-long cycle ride. The ride saw injured veterans visit WWI sites such as the Battle of the Somme and Passchendaele, as well as Tyne Cot Memorial.

"The trip was superb," said 78-year-old Tom Gowar. "It was a great way to pay our respects to those who gave so much. It's an amazing activity that Blesma puts on for its Members."

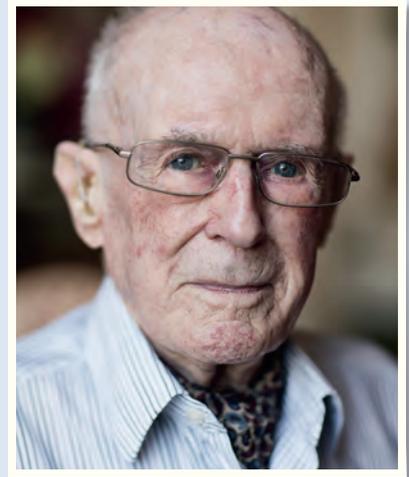
The week-long cycling trip proved to be emotional for many Members, and this year it was made even more personal as a Member laid a wreath in memory of his great-great-grandfather.

"It was a very special moment for us all," said Tom. "The trip really taught me to step back and look rather than just act all the time. It's not something I thought I'd ever experience in my life."



In the spotlight

# Peter Van Zeller



**P**eter Van Zeller, 95, served in both the RAF and the Army during World War II. Shortly after the D-Day Landings, he was shot in the arm and had to undergo amputation. In the years following the war, he reinvented himself as a globe-trotting agricultural expert. Peter is now retired and living in Sussex.

“I had always wanted to go to university, but the war started before I left school so I joined the RAF instead. I got my pilot’s badge after just 136 hours of flying – that was one of the proudest moments of my life.

“One night, while I was a duty pilot seeing aircraft in and out, one guy went into an uncontrollable loop in his Spitfire. He crashed and we had to watch the poor guy die. It was very, very upsetting. Shortly afterwards, I was sent for by my Commanding Officer, who was niggling me over some minor matter. I lost my temper and told him what he could do with his aeroplanes. I was thrown out of the RAF within 24 hours, and that was the end of that career!

“My nerves were shattered, so I decided to work on a farm but after six months, in Spring 1942, I decided to join the Army. I was identified as a possible officer, but before I could go off for training, we were sent to France. Next stop, the beach!

## WOUNDED IN WORLD WAR II-

“It was a week or so after D-Day – we were the first reinforcements to arrive. Our boys must have been 10 miles into France, and I was drafted into the Somerset Light Infantry. We were at Hill 112, where there had been one hell of a battle. The guys were at the end of their tether and they were so glad to see us.

“One very foggy night we took over a trench on a downward slope. I was on watch, and suddenly I saw hundreds of German helmets in the field below. ‘I don’t think we’re going to get through this lot,’ my mate Charlie White said. But we knew we had to try. We woke everyone up, but just as it got lighter, I heard a Cockney voice: “Peter, you silly bugger, they ain’t Germans, that’s a field of cabbages!” Ha!

“Soon afterwards, we were walking through open fields when I was shot in the upper arm by a sniper. My arm went numb and I was pumped full of

morphine, put on a stretcher and sent to the field hospital in Bayeux. That was the end of my second period of service! I was flown to a hospital in Wales, where I was seen by a magnificent young surgeon. My elbow had been shattered but he managed to save it. My hand died, but to keep the elbow was a tremendous bonus.

“It was a great shock, though. I was right handed and it took four years for me to instinctively use my left hand. I was in hospital for a few months and then given a prosthetic. It wasn’t much different from what I have now, and I’ve had this one for more than 20 years. I can open the hook by stretching my shoulder – this has been my arm for 70 years. I wouldn’t want anyone to waste £30,000 on a robotic hand for me!

## I’VE NEVER GIVEN UP

“I was determined to remain independent. I moved in with my sister, and she treated me the same as always – if I’d asked her to tie my laces, she’d have told me to get on with it. So I learned to do everything again. It still takes me an hour to shave, shower, dress and make my bed each day, but I do it.

“I didn’t receive any compensation, so I needed to find a job. I worked in agriculture in Rhodesia and Essex, then went to Oxford University and got a degree in agriculture. I learned to ride a horse to a high standard, and later, when I worked for the Milk Marketing Board, I drove 40,000 miles a year. I’ve also worked in New Zealand and Portugal.

“There was no on-going rehabilitation back then. I saw a prosthetist from time to time, but no-one ever talked about mental health issues, you just had to have a stiff upper lip. It’s very different now in that regard. I became an assistant secretary in Blesma’s Norfolk Branch, and I enjoyed the company of other Members, and the satisfaction of helping other people out.

“I believe that recovering from amputation is up to yourself. I was always determined and stayed positive. I’ve seen people give up, and you can even wish yourself to death. I’ve been through despondency, but I don’t let it last. I may have destroyed a lot of neckties while learning to do one up properly, but I found a way to tie them. I’ve never given up – and Blesma helps people not to give up, too.”

“

**JUST AS IT GOT LIGHT I HEARD A VOICE SAY: ‘PETER, YOU SILLY BUGGER, THEY AIN’T GERMANS, THAT’S A FIELD OF CABBAGES!’**

”

## Feel the burn

Duncan Slater takes on the world's toughest race (p24)



Words: Nick Moore Photography: Andy Eate

L to r: Robert Osborn and Bill Belcher are joined by Lt Cmdr Mark Trasler



## Emotional reunion for Falklands veterans

**A** NUMBER OF VETERANS WHO were injured in the Falklands have been reunited with the nurses who treated them. To mark the 35th anniversary of the Falklands War, more than 60 nurses and former soldiers who served or were treated on board Her Majesty's hospital ship *Uganda* during the conflict boarded the ship once again for an emotional reunion at sea.

The Falklands War, which began on 02 April 1982 and lasted 10 weeks before the Argentines surrendered on 14 June, saw 255 British military personnel lose their lives, with a further 777 suffering non-fatal injuries. Thirty two Blesma Members were injured in the conflict.

During the war, the *Uganda* treated some 730 casualties, including a number of Argentinian troops. Three Blesma Members Bill Belcher MBE, Robert 'Ossie' Osborn and Terry Bullingham (two of whom are pictured above), were among them and attended the four-day reunion.

"I took part in the landings on 21 May," recalled Bill Belcher, a Royal Marine who was injured when his helicopter was shot down. "We were tasked with supporting 2 Para on the raid of Darwin and Goose Green. The aircraft I was travelling in was shot down. I took a cannon shell through my right ankle and a machine gun round

through the other. There was so much damage to my right ankle that it had to come off."

Bill's foot was amputated that day, and the following evening he was flown to *SS Uganda* where he spent three weeks and underwent five further operations.

"I am eternally grateful to the medics who were on board," said Bill. "This reunion is a chance to say thank you to them for all their work and to renew friendships."

Former Scots Guard Robert Osborn also had his leg amputated on the *SS Uganda* after he was severely injured at the battle for Mount Tumbledown, just days before the war ended. For Ossie, the reunion served as recognition of the nurses' vital work during the conflict.

"None of the nurses ever got the recognition they deserved. If they hadn't been there, then I wouldn't be here right now," he said.

**"THE NURSES NEVER GOT THE RECOGNITION THEY DESERVED. IF THEY HADN'T BEEN THERE, THEN I WOULDN'T BE HERE RIGHT NOW"**

### NEWS BRIEFS



#### TEAM PREPARES FOR AMBITIOUS JET-SKI ATTEMPT

An Iraq War veteran is preparing to attempt to circumnavigate Ireland and Northern Ireland by jet-ski in the Ireland 360.

Rory Mackenzie served as a Combat Medical Technician and will be joined by Royal Marine Commando turned Special Forces officer Neil Laughton and two other team members in August as they try to zip around Ireland on jet-skis

"Neil and Tim became the first pair to jet-ski around the British mainland," said Rory, who lost his right leg whilst serving in Iraq. "The Ireland 360 is the completion of the project." The four-man team will start their 1,500km expedition at RMS Titanic in Belfast and head off in a clockwise direction, aiming to complete the challenge in two weeks.



#### TRIATHLON SUCCESS FOR TRIPLE AMPUTEE MATT

Matt Webb, who lost both his legs and his left arm to an IED blast in Afghanistan six years ago, has swam 250 metres, cycled 10km on a hand bike and walked 2.5km to complete the Burnham-on-Sea triathlon.

Matt decided to take on the challenge for fun. "It was really enjoyable and all the locals were egging each other on. Professional triathletes do take part, but I just did it for fun," said the 31 year old, who was cheered on from the sidelines by avid supporters that included BSO South West Steve Fraser.

Matt completed the triathlon in a very respectable 1 hour and 20 minutes. Watch this space to see what's next for him!

Team GB, including 34 Blesma Members, is unveiled to the world's media



# Invictus team for 2017 revealed

**A** STAGGERING THIRTY FOUR Blesma Members have been selected to compete for Great Britain at this year's Invictus Games, which will be held in Toronto in September.

The prestigious Games will bring together wounded, injured and sick Armed Service personnel and veterans from 17 nations for the third time when competitors meet in Canada later this year. Previous events have been held in London (2014) and Orlando (2016). Double amputee, Blesma Member and this year's team captain, Bernard Broad (pictured right) will be making his debut at the Games, where he will lead the 90-strong Great Britain team.

"Being named captain was incredible," said Bernie, 50, from Derbyshire. "It's been the one thing that has put everything back to normal since I left Service. I feel back to my old self again."

Bernie has been chosen to compete in golf, swimming and sitting volleyball, and has been placed on the travelling reserve

**"THERE ARE SICK BUCKETS PLACED NEXT TO THE ROWING MACHINES BECAUSE ALL THE ATHLETES PUSH THEMSELVES SO HARD WHEN THEY'RE TRAINING"**

list for wheelchair rugby and basketball. As captain, Bernie has vowed to give the team whatever they need from him.

"Anything they want, I'll be there. The effort, the team work, the encouragement. They come first, then I come second," he said. Joining Bernie in Toronto will be triple amputee Mark Ormrod, who had chosen not to take part in previous Games due to the disadvantages he would have faced with the category classifications.

"It's an honour for me to be selected for the team," said Mark. "I don't come from an adaptive sport background so I never

expected to be chosen. It means a lot to me to be able to represent my country, wear a uniform and fly the British flag again."

Mark will be competing in cycling, rowing and swimming, and has already started training hard, with regular 5:30am starts, to keep up with fellow competitors.

"I massively underestimated how hard you have to work and how competitive everyone gets. There are even sick buckets placed next to the rowing machines because athletes push themselves so hard!" he said.

Congratulations to everyone who has made the team and good luck in Toronto!



GB captain and Blesma Member Bernie Broad addresses the team at a recent event

Words: Jessica Mackinnon Photographs: UK MOD Crown Copyright 2017

# Blesma buckets brimming after a wonderful week

Thanks to Blesma Week's main sponsor



**T**hey climbed, they cycled, they baked... no event was too big or too small as Members, fundraisers and volunteers across the country supported our wounded veterans during Blesma Week.

The fourth annual week of fundraising and awareness raising, which this year ran from 05 to 11 June, saw Members climb a whopping 4,531 feet and supporters cycle an impressive 150 miles while others launched an 8,000-mile rowing challenge to help raise £60,000 for the Association.

Elsewhere, schools held collections, cake sales and summer parties for the Association's special week, which this year was sponsored by iSPARR.

"Blesma Week is a great opportunity to bring Members, volunteers and supporters together to raise funds and catch up with one another," said Chief Executive Barry Le Grys. "The momentum helps spread the word about Blesma. In particular, the Inter Services T20 event communicated to those serving in the Armed Forces that we are there to support them if they ever suffer a traumatic injury; they will not be left to fend for themselves. Blesma is tremendously grateful for all those who have contributed to the week and I hope they will stay in touch and follow Blesma regularly."

Here are just a few of the activities that took place during this year's Blesma Week...



Andy Mudd at the T20 at Lord's



**Above: getting ready for rush hour on the Tube**  
**Right: some of the team take a break from the Yorkshire Three Peaks**

## YORKSHIRE THREE PEAKS

Blesma Week was kick-started by Members Kirk Bowett, Stu Pearson and Craig Howorth, who were joined by Blesma's Chief Executive, Barry Le Grys, as they climbed the peaks of Pen-y-ghent, Whernside and Ingleborough to complete the Yorkshire Three Peaks challenge.

During the one-day, 23-mile climbing challenge, Stu completed two of the peaks in 10 hours, whilst Kirk, Craig and Barry finished all three in 11 hours, before the team celebrated with a well-earned pint.

"Craig and Stu, who are both leg amputees, drew a massive amount of support from other walkers along the route," said Kirk, who lost his left arm in Iraq. "We tackled the challenging Pen-y-ghent first and the route took us over



## Sofa, so good

What happens when charities work together? (p46)



Whernside and finally over the extremely steep Ingleborough.”

For leg amputees the challenge can prove a dangerous one.

“It was a lot harder than I thought it was going to be,” said Stu, who lost his left leg in Afghanistan. “As an above-knee amputee, I found the terrain very difficult, and picking a way uphill and downhill through the rocks was exhausting. At times, it was very dangerous so I made the decision not to attempt to peak Ingleborough.”

Craig, who is also a leg amputee, added: “I struggled for the last three miles coming off Ingleborough. These are three tough climbs with a lot of walking in between. All the lads were great though, and we cracked on over tough ground and were glad to finish with a pint in the pub!”

### INTER SERVICES T20

Marylebone Cricket Club welcomed Blesma as their chosen charity for the Inter Services T20 at Lord's Cricket Ground, where the Armed Forces' best batsmen and bowlers showed off their skills. The Army team maintained its recent stranglehold on the competition by defeating the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force to win their fifth straight T20 title – this time with the penultimate ball. Meanwhile, Blesma's 'bucketeers' were joined by members of

### Support by the bucketload at the Inter Services T20 cricket (above) and on a London to Birmingham bike ride

the Coldstream Guards who helped out with the fundraising and managed to collect a large amount for the Association.

“The T20 was a great event for Blesma to be involved in. Thank you to the MCC for hosting us on the day and to all at the UK Armed Forces Cricket Association for choosing Blesma as their charity for 2017 and 2018,” said Community and Events Manager Zanika Fearon.

Trustee and Blesma Member Andy Mudd was one of many who flocked to the ground with a collection bucket at the ready. “I enjoyed the day very much and I like the idea that we have a collection week as it's my way of giving. It was a great day for meeting fellow Blesma Members and staff and, of course, it was great to be able to watch the cricket,” said Andy. “It was a good location too, as I could see the players, the crowd and what was going on from wheelchair level.”



### LONDON TO BIRMINGHAM BIKE RIDE

On Friday 09 June, employees from prosthetics company Opcare were joined by Blesma Member Jez Scarratt on a gruelling 150-mile cycle ride from London to Birmingham.

The intrepid team met at 6:30am and set off for three laps of Richmond Park before heading off for the West Midlands Rehabilitation Centre in Birmingham.

“A massive thank you to Dom, Ben and Jez for taking on the epic 150-mile ride, and to all the employees for completing the London loop and the Oxford staff who completed a static bike challenge on the same day,” said Barbara Warner, Associate Director Fundraising. “Last but not least, thanks to Nicola and Andy who manned the support vehicle.”

So far, the bike ride has raised more than £1,300 for Blesma Week!

### INDOOR ROWING

On Thursday 08 June, Blesma Member Nigel 'Woody' Woodward launched an indoor rowing challenge at Abbey Wood. Over the next few months, Bristol Poppy



## Proud to be **Gold Sponsors** of **Blesma Week 2017**



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Appeal will aim to row 8,000 miles in support of Blesma and the 2017 Row2Recovery team, with donations also being split with the Royal British Legion.

“I started the challenge by rowing the first 400 metres,” said leg amputee Nigel. “There was a great amount of support from those who work at Abbey Wood, and four veterans also came down from Gloucester.”

Supporters rowed more than 100 miles on the first day, and the team will continue to chase their target

until 02 November, the Bristol Poppy Day, when the remaining miles will be rowed.

**If you would like to make a donation, visit: <http://uk.virginmoneygiving.com/team/TRBL>**

## UNDERGROUND COLLECTIONS

For the second year running, Blesma took over three of London’s busiest Underground stations during Blesma Week. Volunteers and their collection buckets were out in force at the

entrances to London Bridge, King’s Cross and Canary Wharf stations. This year ‘Sorry, no change’ was no excuse as fundraisers came with a card machine! Thanks must go to the kind support of TFL, and in particular Rob Varney, TFL Charities Scheme Manager. Watch out – Blesma fundraisers will be taking to the Tube stations once again in July.

## AFTERNOON TEA

Silver Sponsors of Blesma Week, Bolt Burdon Kemp, held an afternoon tea on Friday 09 June. Employees sold homemade sandwiches and cakes, raising £112.50 during the event. The team are still selling Grand Prize Draw tickets and are aiming to break the £250 mark soon!

“We had a fantastic day of tea, cake and fizz in aid of Blesma Week,” said Ahmed



**Supporters across the UK got stuck in to help raise more than £60,000 for the Association during the week**

Al-Nahhas, Partner and Solicitor Advocate. “We act for injured Service personnel and are aware of the great work that Blesma does. It’s all for a very good cause and everyone enjoyed it – so much so, that we are planning to do it all over again!”

## CURRY LUNCH

The Landmarc HQ team enjoyed a curry lunch on Friday 09 June and raised £330 for Blesma in the process. Employees each donated a minimum of £5 for their meal. The team includes a significant number of

ex-military staff, including a colleague who has been supported by Blesma following life-changing injuries sustained in Iraq.

“What better way to raise money during Blesma Week than to cook up a delicious curry lunch for the team?” said Fiona McKnight-Burton, Communications Coordinator. “Our catering partner, ESS, provided a wonderful spread of chicken and beef dishes, as well as samosas, onion bhajis and poppadoms. Everyone enjoyed the opportunity to take a break from work and get together for a curry and a chat!”



## Thank you to our Silver and Grand Prize Draw sponsors

*The fantastic efforts of Members, supporters and volunteers were backed by the generous support from a loyal group of sponsors; Bolt Burdon Kemp, Centro, Marbank Construction, Military Mutual and Ottobock*



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## Wheelchair rugby league team ready for World Cup

DOUBLE AMPUTEE JAMES SIMPSON has been chosen to represent the England wheelchair rugby league team that will compete in the World Cup in France in July. James, who lost both his legs and suffered damage to his arms whilst serving in Afghanistan, first got involved in the sport after being inspired watching the London 2012 Paralympics.

“This will be my first World Cup and I’m excited to play teams that I’ve never played before, particularly Australia who are regarded as the best,” said the Leeds Rhinos player. France are the current holders of the World Cup but England took home the most recent European Champions trophy. As the team heads out to the World Cup, James would like more veterans to get involved in the sport.

“The Paralympics inspired me to take up a team sport and so I found myself looking into wheelchair rugby league. The sport is fantastic – it is open to anyone of any disability or either gender, which is why it’s so great. Leeds Rhinos, for example, currently have the only female England international,” said James.

*The Wheelchair Rugby League World Cup will take place from 18 to 29 July*



## SILVER MEDAL FOR STEVE IN HIS FIRST EVER TRIATHLON

AFTER STEVE CROWLEY WAS INJURED in Iraq seven years ago, running became a major part of his rehabilitation. The single leg amputee would constantly set himself bigger goals to help with his recovery, and soon 10km runs were turning into half-marathons and then marathons.

After completing Ironman 70.3 UK in Exmoor, Steve decided to contact the Great Britain talent squad and joined the triathlon team. In his first race of the season, at the Besancon ITU Paratriathlon World Cup in France in June, Steve finished an impressive second.

“It went pretty well,” said the 40 year old from Exeter. “I had a crash with another runner the week before, so had a few dents in my leg and a bruise on my hip. I felt as though there was a lot of pressure on me to put in a good performance. I’m ranked 16th in the world, so I had to prove that I was up to it.”

Now, three years on since he joined the Great Britain squad, Steve’s goal is to compete at the Paralympics.



## BLESMA GOLFERS TRAVEL FAIR WAY

The first Blesma golf trip for experienced golfers was held in May when 12 Members, with ages ranging from 26 to 69, headed to Spain for a weekend on the fairway.

“Most previous golf trips have catered for those wanting tuition, but I’ve had a lot of comments that there haven’t been enough opportunities for those with more experience,” said Paul Findlay, BSO London and Kent, who hosted the activity.

“This trip gave everyone the platform to participate even more once they got back home. Members were arranging to meet up for a round of golf before they even got off the plane!”

# OBITUARIES

## *Those we have lost*

Former Chairman  
Henry Hugh-Smith  
with Pam Rogers



### Henry Hugh-Smith

19 June 1937 – 01 December 2016

FORMER NATIONAL CHAIRMAN HENRY Hugh-Smith has died at the age of 79. He was a Colonel in the Blues and Royals, having joined the regiment aged 19.

In 1972, Henry was sent to Northern Ireland for the second time. He had served a tour of duty there the previous year, but this time he went as a member of the Widgery Tribunal, which was sent to investigate the Bloody Sunday deaths in Londonderry. Henry was the secretary to the Army's legal team.

By the night of 13 March, the tribunal had sat in 16 sessions and listened to 114 witnesses, but were yet to visit the scene of the shootings. The atmosphere in Northern Ireland made it very difficult for the inquiry to visit the scene, but Henry saw it as their last opportunity before its members went back to London.

So they went, but the tribunal, along with members of The Green Jackets, came under fire as they walked along the streets

of Londonderry. Henry was shot by an M1 carbine bullet in his right arm. He lost consciousness at the scene and came very close to bleeding to death.

Henry was flown back to London that night for further treatment and, later in the year, his right arm was amputated. Despite this, Henry went on to serve in other posts, even becoming the Duke of Edinburgh's equerry, before retiring as a Colonel.

In 2001, Henry was appointed Chairman of Blesma and for the next nine years he took a very keen interest in all the Association's activities. Henry was an accomplished sailor and introduced many Blesma Members to the ocean. One such event was in 2010, when at the age of 72, he joined 13 other ex-Service men to make history as the first all-amputee sailing crew to take on the RORC Caribbean 600, a four-day yacht race around the Caribbean.

Henry Hugh-Smith died peacefully at home on 01 December 2016.

### Vincent Kemel Horton

27 March 1921 – 09 March 2017

VINCE HORTON WAS BORN IN ESSEX, the second of five children. The family moved to Bradford in the 1920s but when Vince's father, out of work in the Great Depression, heard there was work back in Essex, the family walked all the way to Southend over the Summer of 1930 with one child still in a pram. They slept in barns and hedgerows along the way, using water from cattle troughs and relying on food from friendly farmers.

Vince joined the Royal Marines in August 1940, completing basic training at Lympstone. He was then posted to the 11th Battalion Searchlight Unit, Royal Marines in Southend and, after less than a month, was sent to Crete via South Africa, the Red Sea and Alexandria. Crete was captured by the Germans and Vince became a Prisoner of War on 01 June 1941. He and others escaped and, after six months, were evacuated to Egypt by submarine.

In September 1942, Vince was part of a Commando raid on Tobruk, Libya when he was captured again. He was exchanged after seven months, this time after being in a Prisoner of War camp in Italy.

He returned to the UK in August 1943 and trained for D-Day. His landing craft left Warsash for Juno Beach on 05 June 1944 with 48 Commando RM. Vince's war ended



Vince and Olive on their wedding day, 1946

on 15 June at Sallenelles when he stepped on an anti-personnel mine. He was evacuated and had his legs amputated.

He met his future wife, Olive (who sadly passed away in September 1993) and they married in 1946, he walking up the aisle in uniform and with two new prosthetic limbs. He was discharged from the Royal Marines in September 1948, trained as a cobbler and later got a job with the GPO, which lasted until he retired in March 1981 at the age of 60.

He enjoyed angling and crabbing with his grandchildren, and was a member of the Caravan and Camping Club. Vince joined the Southampton, Winchester & District Branch, was a Committee Member for some years, and was Chairman from 2011 to 2013. He came to meetings until he died in March. Vince was awarded the Legion d'Honneur by the French Government in 2016. Blesma would like to extend its condolences to his family, especially his children; Paul and June.



Vince, photographed recently for an issue of Blesma Magazine

## Those who have passed away

*March 2017 – May 2017. May they rest in peace.*

<b>Child J</b>	Royal Signals	HQ	21/05/2017
<b>Coe E</b>	RN	Portsmouth	April 2017
<b>Davies D</b>	RAF	HQ	27/04/2017
<b>Gilbert R</b>	Royal Hussars	HQ	30/04/2017
<b>Glenton F</b>	RN	HQ (Teesside)	01/03/2017
<b>Hiscott J</b>	Blues & Royals	HQ	26/05/2017
<b>Hodson Mrs J</b>	ATS/WRAC	HQ	27/04/2017
<b>Holmes K</b>	RN	HQ	April 2017
<b>Hood F</b>	REME	Portsmouth	21/04/2017
<b>Horton V</b>	RM	Southampton	09/03/2017
<b>Houghton K</b>	RAF	Gt Yarmouth	28/04/2017
<b>Marshall M</b>	Army Catering Corps	HQ	30/05/2017
<b>McCready J</b>	UDR	HQ	19/04/2017
<b>Metcalf E</b>	Seaforth Highlanders	HQ (Bridlington)	27/05/2017
<b>Milne A</b>	RA	HQ	May 2017
<b>Moore J</b>	RAF/UDR	HQ	05/03/2017
<b>Moore W</b>	Royal Sussex	HQ (Brighton)	23/03/2017
<b>Mundy M</b>	RAF	Nottingham	03/03/2017
<b>Nesbitt T</b>	RUR	Isle of Wight	20/03/2017
<b>Palmer N</b>	RE	HQ (Tyneside)	16/05/2017
<b>Paton M</b>	RN	HQ (Aberdeen)	02/03/2017
<b>Pedrick P</b>	RN	Southampton	28/03/2017
<b>Rodgers L</b>	Sherwood Foresters	HQ (Derby)	23/05/2017
<b>Rye B</b>	RAF	HQ	May 2017
<b>Selwood A</b>	Army Catering Corps	Sutton/Merton	08/04/2017
<b>Spencer G</b>	RAC	Sutton/Merton	15/05/2017
<b>Waterworth R</b>	RAF	HQ	18/03/2017



**Blesma Member Duncan Slater,  
somewhere in the Sahara Desert**



# HAS ANYONE SEEN DUNCAN?

IN 2013, DUNCAN SLATER  
BECAME THE FIRST DOUBLE  
AMPUTEE TO WALK TO THE SOUTH  
POLE. THIS YEAR, HE DECIDED TO  
TURN THE HEAT UP A BIT

## EXTREME CHALLENGES



Words: Nick Moore Photographs: Cimbaly | ©AlexisBerg

**Anyone fancy following in Duncan's footsteps and running 156 miles in six days, in temperatures reaching 50°C?**

Imagine the most horrendous hangover you've ever had, but you've not had anything to drink," laughs Duncan Slater. "You're in the middle of the Sahara Desert, you've got heatstroke, you're rigged up to a drip to rehydrate. You've just run a marathon, and you've got to get up shortly and run another one. It was the hardest thing I've ever done, but I just had to crack on!"

Duncan has survived many difficult situations during his eventful life. He's recovered from an IED blast that shattered his legs and broke his back, ribs and shoulders. He's taken the decision to have double below-knee amputations. He's cycled from Land's End to John o' Groats since that decision, and he became the first double amputee to walk to the South Pole in 2013. So when he says the Marathon des Sables is the toughest experience he's ever faced, you pay attention.

### THE WORLD'S TOUGHEST FOOTRACE

The Saharan slog has been called the 'world's toughest footrace' for good reason. With temperatures regularly soaring above 50°C, competitors complete six arduous days running across the scorching desert. They start with three marathons in three days, before they have to endure the 'Long Day' (a double marathon). There's another marathon on day five, and a 15km 'charity run' on day six. The event has defeated the fittest people on Earth, so to even attempt it is ambitious. Considering that Duncan was told he was unlikely to ever walk

again in 2009, the fact that he even decided to take on the challenge is impressive enough. And his journey to the start line reads like something from a movie...

"I grew up near Inverness and joined the RAF in 1998. I was in for 14 years and left as a Sergeant," says Duncan. "I loved the camaraderie and travel. After 2003, I bounced between Iraq and Afghanistan."

Duncan suffered his injuries during a clearance patrol in July 2009 in Afghanistan. "I was travelling in a Jackal when we hit a roadside bomb. I flew through the air and landed in a compound. I was struggling to breathe but luckily a helicopter got to me quickly and I was back at Camp Bastion within 20 minutes."

Five months in intensive care – four of which were spent lying on his back – followed. "My body just withered away," says Duncan. "I was in a state. I went to Headley and threw myself into rehab, but after a year, my legs were still a mess. My pain was worsening, and so when the option came to amputate, I went for it. It made sense. I got rid of the parts that didn't work, and once they'd gone, so did a lot of the pain."

Within six weeks of his amputations, Duncan was walking again. "It was the best feeling in the world. I always stayed optimistic and decided to set myself some challenges. A mate of mine suggested we should do a cycle ride, so I agreed. Then he told me it was Land's End to John o' Groats! I couldn't back out, and eventually rode 1,000 miles in 10 days. It was a buzz, and it got me wondering what else I could try."

Duncan Slater is the first double amputee to complete the tough Marathon des Sables



**“Everyone was complaining about their feet. At least I didn’t have to worry about that! I told everyone it pays to be an amputee sometimes”**



# The world's toughest marathon in numbers

Six stages over six days

**156 miles**

the total distance of the race

**52+ miles**

the longest single stage of the race

**50**

top temperature on most days (°C)

**10**

the record-breaking number of times  
Lahcen Ahansal has won the race

**81**

the age of French finisher  
Claude Leonardi in 2017

**52**

nationalities represented this year

**120,000**

bottles of water consumed

**300**

Berber and Saharan tents  
for the competitors

**Four**

camels used to carry supplies

**72**

medical staff on hand

**6,000**

painkillers used

**2.3km**

of plasters applied

**20,000**

competitors since 1986

**14,000**

calories (minimum) per competitor

**19**

hours and 15 minutes – time of  
2017 winner Rachid El Rachid

**1,094**

finishers in 2017



Prosthetics from Italian company Sigil-in made all the difference

In 2013, Duncan took part in the Walking With The Wounded expedition to the South Pole. “That was very hard, but it gave me so much confidence,” he says. “I used it as a massive positive and started looking for something to top it. The Marathon des Sables looked like an option, but I knew they wouldn’t let just anyone turn up.”

After completing the London Marathon to prove that, fitness-wise, he was the real deal, a place in the Marathon des Sables was arranged for 2016. Drastically, just 35 miles from the finish line, Duncan was forced to abandon his attempt. “My legs just couldn’t take it any more. I was as well prepared as I could have been, and was doing OK. But then I began to suffer from serious swelling that started to really damage my shin bones. They were getting rubbed raw, it was awful. I had no option other than to stop.”

Duncan was gutted, and even though he was told he’d be welcome back the following year, he couldn’t work out how his prosthetics could be improved. But then he got an unexpected email from Italy.

## THE PERFECT PROSTHETICS

“A prosthetics company called Sigil-in got in touch to say they thought they could solve my prosthetics problem. I was intrigued, so I flew out to meet them. They were revolutionary: they cast my legs in a totally different way – using a method of pressure casting that they’ve invented – and it made a world of difference.

“The new legs were fantastic. I could run a half marathon in the morning, then still walk around all day with them – which I could never do on my old legs. I’m so impressed that I’m trying to get the company in front of the NHS. I’m convinced their process would help a lot of people and would reduce the number of amputees returning to the NHS with problems.”

So Duncan was able to ramp up his training in earnest. “I ran three half marathons a week and also



**Duncan took part with his best friend, Chris, who was with him the day he was injured in Afghanistan**

did some sessions in the heat,” he says. It was at this point that his old South Pole pal, Prince Harry, dropped in to say hello (“I had to come and see you sweating your balls off on a treadmill in a sauna,” exclaimed the man fifth in line to the throne).

Then it was off to Morocco for another crack at the challenge. “The training helped, but absolutely nothing can prepare you for 156 miles in that heat,” says Duncan. “The first few days were OK. We’d start and finish at a big camp – essentially huge sheets held up on sticks. You carry everything you need with you for the race – all your food and bedding. So you have to be as light as possible. It’s a balancing act, because you go through calories like nothing on Earth. You’re on dried rations – it’s like being back in the military.”

### **HUMOUR, HARDSHIP AND HEATSTROKE**

The good humour in the camp almost made up for the torment of the actual race. “It was a great crack. There are some brilliant athletes knocking out three-hour marathons, but you’re all in it together. Everyone was complaining about their feet, so at least I didn’t have to worry about that! I told everyone that it sometimes pays to be an amputee!”

But the hardships were severe and numerous. “The surfaces were so tough to run on. There were dunes, dry beds, wadis... all sorts. I just had to grit my teeth and get through it. It was monotonous, which was psychologically hard. Luckily, I was running with

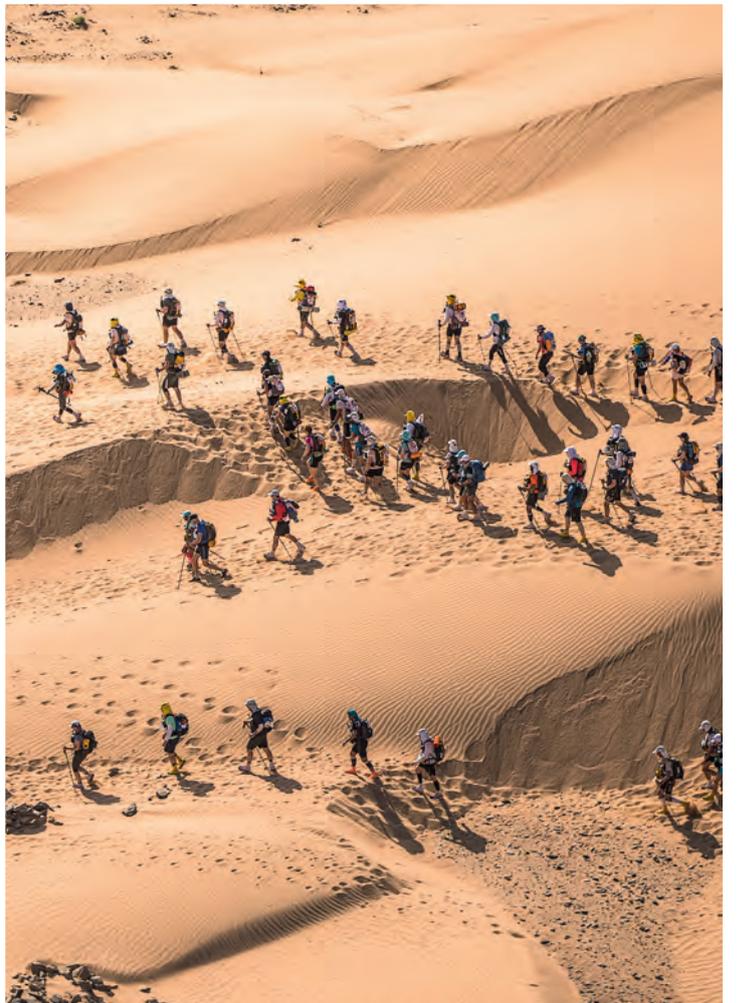
my best mate, Chris, who was with me the day I was injured. We’d always wanted to do a challenge together. We chatted and laughed, but also knew when to be quiet, and when to help each other along.”

The ‘Long Day’ – a double-marathon 52-mile stretch on day four – almost broke them. “You have a 35-hour window to complete the day and we did it in 31. That’s two marathons, each taking around 10 hours, with a break in between. Being in the sun for that long left me massively dehydrated. You only get a certain amount of water at checkpoints, and it can run out. That’s when I got heatstroke. But luckily, after some fluid and a rest at the camp, I managed to get going again.”

The final finish line brought “an overwhelming feeling of relief,” Duncan admits. “It was much harder than the Pole expedition.” Having become the first double amputee to reach the South Pole, he’d now become the first to complete this notorious race, too.

Understandably, Duncan’s now having a break from extreme physical exertion, and is concentrating on the day job – running fundraisers in schools for Walking With The Wounded. But if anyone else fancies following in his sandy footsteps, his door is open. “It was a superb experience, so I’d be happy to advise any Blesma Members who’d like to do the Marathon des Sables. I can give them some tips, and get them in front of Sigil-in. They should feel free to get in touch.”

Glory may well await. Just be ready for that really strange hangover!





# MEMBERS' WEEKEND





# 2017

Members' Weekend was back in June, bigger and better than ever before! This year attracted many first-timers, who all soon felt like they'd been coming for years. If you've not been yet, this is what you're missing





## Blesma Community Programme

The weekend's attendees heard a series of uplifting life stories on the opening day. Former bomb disposal operator Ken Bellringer (above right) and ex-Paratrooper Jordan Beecher (above) gave electrifying accounts of their injuries and recovery as part of the Blesma Community Programme. The pair, both injured by IEDs in Afghanistan, are part of a team of 27 Members who have received coaching on how to deliver their life stories and have used these techniques to inspire more than 5,000 youngsters across the UK.



## Inspiration from our Members

Presentations were given by (amongst others) former Parachute Regiment Captain Martin Hewitt, who revealed the latest triumph in his quest to complete the Adaptive Grand Slam. This involves summiting the tallest mountain on each of the seven continents, as well as walking to the North and South Poles. His team is set to tackle Mount Everest next March. Double amputee David Birrell, who was injured when he was a 24-year-old Black Watch corporal on patrol in Afghanistan in 2010, spoke about his rise as a racing driver, with help from Blesma sponsorship.



**“It’s wonderful. If you want to have a quiet time you can, or you can get stuck in!”**

## A weekend to remember

**L**ike much of what Blesma does, Members’ Weekend sees all kinds of positive transformations. Sure, for first-time visitors, it can be a little nerve-racking – spending a couple of days with people you’ve never met before, not quite sure how it all works, can feel difficult. But if there are any anxious thoughts on Saturday morning, they’re banished by... Saturday afternoon! And by Monday everyone leaves with great memories and new friends, well aware of how Blesma can enhance their life.

“I’m apprehensive about meeting new people, so I was unsure about coming”

reveals Hilary Pearson, who attended her debut Members’ Weekend with husband Graham. “But it’s been wonderful. There’s no pressure to do anything you don’t want to do. If you want to stand back and have a quiet time, you can – or you can get stuck in.”

As Hilary chats, it should be noted, she is busy firing arrows into an archery target in the Chesford Grange Hotel garden. She’s got thoroughly into the swing of things this weekend. “It’s been ever so welcoming. We will definitely come again!” she says.

And that’s the beauty of Members’ Weekend. First-timers regularly become,

well, regulars. “We were nervous at our first one last year, but this time it was like getting together with old friends,” says Karie Branch, who attended with husband Colin. “The Blesma spirit is unique. We’ve loved the hotel, the facilities, the food – and it’s great being among like-minded people.”

Held from Saturday 10 to Monday 12 June at the Chesford Grange Hotel in Warwickshire, this year’s event was billed as being ‘the same as last year – but better’. Several elements of the weekend stuck to a winning formula: there was a fantastic function and awards presentation on the Saturday evening, with a delicious meal and drinks enjoyed by all – the storytelling, bonhomie and camaraderie were in full flow.

David Birrell



Martin Hewitt



## Blesma Awards 2017

The Blesma Awards were presented at the dinner on the Saturday evening. This year, the Hambro Award was picked up by Alex Krol (top) on behalf of the Blesma Community Programme. The Frankland Moore Trophy was won by Gloucestershire's Welfare Rep Chris Jones (middle) for his dedication to Blesma since 2005. Brian and Sheila Woodhouse (bottom) were awarded the Cyril Stephens Award for their fundraising efforts. The other award winners this year were Andy Grant who won the Jack Trigg Memorial Award, and Sue Wright who won the Earl of Ancaster Memorial Award. Congratulations to all the winners!



A series of insightful talks (above) were held on Sunday morning, showcasing just a few of the astonishing array of activities that Blesma Members have been up to over the last year: scuba, parachuting, motor racing, family glamping and mountaineering were all on the agenda. Then, in the afternoon, there was time to try much-loved activities such as scuba diving, archery, clay shooting and photography. There was a coach trip for those who fancied something a bit more sedate, followed by the traditional barbecue.

But there was also plenty new. One of the success stories of the last couple of years has been the Blesma Community Programme. This is a course that teaches Members to tell their stories with all the verve of a West End

actor. The Members then go out into the community to give talks at schools, prisons and pupil referral units, with the aim of inspiring young people. Having reached 3,000 teens in 2016, the Programme is set to inspire 5,000 this year, and 9,000 in 2018. Anyone who heard the stirring monologues delivered by Ken Bellingier and Jordan Beecher on Saturday afternoon will be in no doubt that it will succeed.

There were new activities, too. "We tried to be more inclusive in 2017, with extra activities for those who didn't want to do sports," says Blesma's Activities Manager, Jess March. "So we had a tray painting session, which was a great success. There was also a session for those new to cycling,

giving Members the opportunity to try adaptive bikes, hand cycles and recumbents, with a view to getting involved on trips."

The participants approved. "This is an excellent addition," says Chris Jones. "I've struggled with other bikes, but I've found one here that I can use well without my prosthetic. I'll try more cycling as a result."

Chief Executive Barry Le Gry's concluded that the weekend had been "full and fun. It's always great to see people of all generations, newcomers and old friends all blending in. For me, the highlight was hearing about all the wonderful things Members have done in the last 12 months. Hopefully, others will have been motivated to do something similar."

As ever, positive transformations abound.

# VOX POPS

## How was your Members' Weekend?

Views, thoughts and opinion from across Blesma. Come along next year and have your say



### MARTIN HEWITT

"At most of the other charity events I go to, I mostly only meet people from my own age group. What's brilliant about Blesma's Members' Weekend is the sheer range and variety of people who you get to talk to. There must be an age range of more than 50 years! We're all so different but we've got a shared background and common experience, which for me makes it unique and really quite cool. It's a great gathering and I would recommend it."



### SHEILA WOODHOUSE

"I've enjoyed every second of my time here. This is my first Blesma Weekend and it's just so nice for me as a partner of a Member to be able to meet people who are in the same boat as us. Being given the award for our fundraising efforts was very special and so we had to bring along our accordion and have a sing-song with people, too. There's a great, fun spirit at Members' Weekend among all the age groups!"



### BOB DAWSON

"This weekend is one of the highlights of my year. I really enjoy the evening gatherings – getting together to have a drink, a great meal and to swap some stories. My table was a lot of fun this year and I will treasure the memories. You meet some fascinating folk. I love the activities too – I won the shooting last year, so I need to defend my title!"



### DONNA MOLLOY

"I am a Blesma newbie, but I was put at ease straight away by everyone, you really do get looked after! The food is nice, the hotel is lovely, and the best thing is the variety of people you meet. I'm the partner of a Member, so I'm in a slightly different position, but I've met so many ladies this weekend who, like me, take each day as it comes and deal with everything. It's inspiring and very helpful to spend time with them."



### MARK SIDWELLS

"This is the first time I've been to a Members' Weekend and it has surpassed all my expectations. What's been particularly surprising is how informative it has been. The talks from the Members who have been doing all sorts of things, and then having the chance to try some activities really shows you how much this charity does for people. I've met some great people and I have had a really wonderful time."



### STEVE COKAYNE

"The good thing about this weekend is that you can make what you like of it. You can go to the talks or do the activities, or you can enjoy the hotel facilities. I'm in training for the Invictus Games this year, so I had to take advantage of the gym and the pool, which were great. I also tried diving as part of the Activities Programme, and like most people, the highlight for me was the chance to do some socialising."



## Adaptive Cycling

**B**lesma's cycling expeditions are growing ever more popular, but many Members still haven't had the chance to try some of the bikes that are available for those with disabilities. That changed in the hotel car park on Members' Weekend as adapted bikes, recumbents, hand cycles and tandems were available to take for a spin around a short course.

They were met with great approval. "This is an excellent addition to the weekend," says Chris Jones after doing

a few laps. "I've been involved with Blesma for 51 years and done a lot of activities, but I've always struggled a bit with the bikes. The friction often created a lot of sores for me, but I've found one here that I can use well without my prosthetic. I'll try more cycling as a result."

*For more information, help or advice on this, or any other activity, get in touch with Jess March on [activities@blesma.org](mailto:activities@blesma.org) or on 020 8548 3519*



## Craft Workshop

**A**ctivities aren't all about ambitious physical tasks. The photography courses, for example, allow Members to express their artistic side, and during Members' Weekend, BSO Pete Shields led a craft workshop with the same goals. The group learned polishing, waxing, varnishing and painting techniques to transform some old trays, customising their woodwork with impressive results. "It's been really relaxing and good fun," said Sheila Ward after the class. "My daughter did the workshop with me, and she is going to apply some of these techniques to painting her cottage, so it's been useful, too!"

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## Adaptive Laser Shooting

These guns wouldn't be much good out in Afghanistan," laughs David Birrell, a double leg amputee, as he gets to grips with an adaptive shotgun on Blesma's shooting range. "You need more than a laser to battle the Taliban – I think you'd have to say that these are combat ineffective."

He might have a point, but that doesn't stop the range being a big hit amongst the membership. A clever system makes the guns as accurate as the real thing, with digitised clays arcing high in the air outside the Chesford Grange Hotel. Members try to outgun each other across a variety of categories – including sharp-shooting: it's enjoyable to watch fiercely competitive ex-Service men and women all going for one target, with only the first person to score a hit gaining points.

"It's brilliant fun," adds David. "Being in the Infantry sharpens your eye, so there are a lot of Members here who are pretty good.

And it gets you all interacting with each other. For me, the activities are a key part of the weekend. I'd do it every month if I could."

It's not just for ex-Infantry, mind: one of the myriad delights of Members' Weekend is its inclusivity and soon, older Members are battling young upstarts, single amputees are pitting their wits against double amputees, husbands are taking on their wives – all on a level playing field.

With no recoil, the guns are suitable for older Members too, and the instructors are impressed. "You can tell this lot are military," says one. "They've got a good eye, and they're competitive! They're getting great scores, especially considering a lot of them haven't picked up a gun in years."

*For more information, help or advice on this, or any other Blesma activity, get in touch with Jess March on activities@blesma.org or call her on 020 8548 3519*



**BILL ARSCOTT**

"I really enjoyed the clay shooting, it was a lot of fun. I served as a submariner so I didn't use a gun too much! The best thing was that I couldn't accidentally kill anybody! I've had a very good afternoon at the activities, and it's an excellent angle to the weekend. It's my first time here and I've been very impressed with everything."



### MARTIN KETTRICK

"It's great competition and a lot of fun. I'm not quite as good at handling a gun as I used to be, and I've just had an operation on my shoulder, so I had to take it easy. But even with me struggling physically a little bit, I can take part in the activities, and that's one of the great things about Members' Weekend – everyone can get completely involved."



## Scuba Diving

**B**lesma's scuba diving expeditions remain a favourite among Members, and with good reason: the pastime offers trips to exotic locations, and the therapeutic, calming effects of drifting in clear seas have been well documented. As Andy Jepson says; "everyone feels the same underwater" – and a dozen new recruits got to experience what he means in the hotel pool.

There was some hesitancy as Members got to grips with all the gear, but in the capable hands of one of the charity's experienced instructors, Matt Goodwin, they were soon excitedly talking about that fantastic floating feeling – and pondering potential trips away.

"Diving will always be a key Blesma activity, because it ticks so many boxes," says Activities Manager Jess March. "Lots of people get the bug and go on to become instructors, and it's an activity that generates a really close social circle."

Whether you fancy doing it for fun, or getting serious and earning qualifications, Blesma can help. And the annual trip to Egypt – held in October – is a great experience for every level of diver.



### MARION MEECHAN

"I've never, ever picked up a gun before in my life, so I couldn't believe it when I beat my partner David [Lewan]. I'll make sure he never hears the end of it! I loved it, and I'm hoping nobody beats my score all afternoon. I think maybe I've got a good eye – perhaps I should have joined the Army. I've definitely found my sport!"



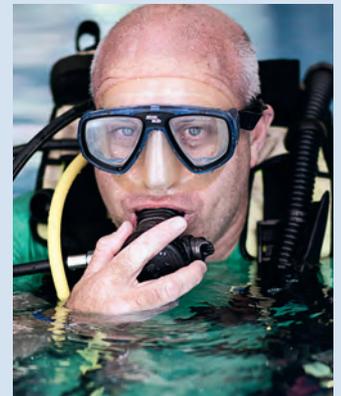
### LINDEN ALLEN

"I've not shot at a clay pigeon since I was about 15, so it was nice to get back in the groove. This is a very clever system – it's moved on a bit since I was shooting a white blob on a screen down at the arcade! Everyone has had a blast at it and it's just part of the entertainment and camaraderie. I really enjoyed it."



### ANDY JEPSON

"I'm a good example of how people progress – I tried it out, then got really into it, joined a club and am now training up to be an instructor. I've done multiple trips to Mexico and Thailand with my club, but the Blesma trips are really special. For an amputee, it's great to get in the water and not be judged."



### MATT GOODWIN

"We had a good turnout this year. There were plenty of nerves, but they soon all turned to smiles from the first timers. That's what you want to see – a transformation. I always try to get people relaxed – you can learn at your own rate. The idea is to give people confidence here, and then they can move forward if they fancy it."



**GRAHAM PEARSON (LEFT)**

"I'm a first timer at Members' Weekend and it's been brilliant. With things like archery, you're kept busy all weekend, and there has been much more going on than I'd expected. It really is very well planned! This is also the first time I've done archery. I'm happy that a few of my arrows have hit the board – I can only get better. And it's lovely that my wife can give it a go, too."



**HILARY PEARSON**

"I'm not a sporty sort of person – I never have been and I don't think I've done any since I was forced to at school! So this was way beyond the kind of thing I thought I'd ever do, but I gave archery a go and I really enjoyed it. It has been a great part of a wonderful weekend, and I like the fact there's such a variety of activities, so you can get as involved as you like."



**CONRAD MOLLOY**

"I used to do quite a bit of archery when I left the Army, but I've not done it for 15 years, and never since I've been in a wheelchair. It's great to get back into it. It took a bit of getting used to, but the instructor helped me with leaning forward a little bit more, and then I got the hang of it. This is my first Members' Weekend and it's been fantastic. I've had so much fun."

## Archery

The sun shone again on the large field around the back of the Chesford Grange Hotel, but slightly blustery conditions gave the already tricky sport of archery an added challenge this year. "That was a light arrow," contends Graham Pearson as his effort misses the board completely. As is usual when military folk get together, getting to grips with a new skill is accompanied by lots of laughs and smart comments – needless to say, there are plenty of threats of balancing apples on each other's head!

Thankfully, there's a professional instructor on hand, both to prevent any dares from coming to fruition, and to advise Members on the finer points of one of the world's oldest sports. With Members learning to stand or sit correctly, get their weight right and release the arrow at the correct time, improvements are soon being made, and bullseyes nailed. "Archery has remained really popular," says Activities Manager Jess March. "Anyone can give it a go, but to get good you have to really concentrate. It gets you outside and is a lot of fun."

*For more information, help or advice on this, or any other Blesma activity, get in touch with Jess March on [activities@blesma.org](mailto:activities@blesma.org) or call her on 020 8548 3519*



## Photo Booth

*We grabbed you for a picture – now it's your turn to grab one back off us!*

As always, there were many, many great photographs taken over the course of Members' Weekend – way too many to show off here, unfortunately. So, if you had your picture taken in the studio with friends or family over the weekend and would like a digital copy to share with your loved ones, please send an email to [editor@blesma.org](mailto:editor@blesma.org) and we'll be happy to send them over to you!

*If we didn't get around to speaking to you at the Members' Weekend you can still have your say. Let us know what you thought of the event by dropping us a line at [editor@blesma.org](mailto:editor@blesma.org)*



## HOW TO...

# Make the most of your BSO

*A network of committed Blesma Support Officers are positioned throughout the UK to offer you help, support and guidance. Have you been in touch with your dedicated BSO recently?*

BILL GILLETT HAS BEEN ON THE ROAD since 5am this morning. “It’s often a very early start, and a very late finish in this job, but I’m always on time for everyone!” he says. This is typical of the dedication shown by the eight men who are employed as Blesma Support Officers (BSOs), spread out across the UK to perform wide ranging but vital functions in support of the Association’s 3,093 Members.

They constantly assess the membership’s needs and are an invaluable source of advice when it comes to claims, benefits, stump care, wellbeing... the list goes on and on. BSOs accompany Members to medical appointments when they’re asked, and can offer pointers on matters relating to everything from pensions to prosthetics to health. And if it’s not something they can deal with directly, a BSO will always be able to signpost a Member towards somebody who can.

Bill has been the BSO for the South East area since 2005. He served in 3 Commando Brigade, 5 Airborne Brigade and 16 Air Assault Brigade, leaving as a Major – and began work for Blesma the very next day.

“With help from Branch Welfare Officers and Welfare Reps I see every Member in my area at least once a year,” he says. “I started as a Private, and worked my

way through the ranks, so I have the ability to talk to anyone. That’s important – I need to relate to brigadiers and riflemen.”

No two days are ever the same for the BSOs, but Bill talks through some of the issues he faces, and explains why Members should be in touch with their BSO...



## 1 HOME VISITS

“They are vitally important. When military people get together, bravado and macho nonsense often kicks in. But when I go to somebody’s home, he or she will talk about real issues. If they don’t, their spouse or partner often will.

“On home visits, I can see a Member’s domestic environment and assess their real needs – could they benefit from a stair lift, ramp, or new wheelchair, for example? It’s an intelligence gathering operation. Sometimes, we’ll just have a conversation. I never just ‘pop in’ – it’s always a proper visit. Sometimes, it takes an hour or so and a couple of brews to get people telling you what they really need. The longer I’ve done this job, the more trust I’ve built up, and the more Members tell me. That helps me to address their problems better.”

## 2 LIMB CENTRE VISITS

“There are five Limb Centres in my area, and I get a lot of requests from Members to go along with them, especially when they feel like they’re



not getting the proper support. They might be struggling with the Veterans Prosthetic Panel, getting Murrison money, maybe there's a certain prosthetic they can't get. We can fight their corner. If I can't sort it out, I'll consult with Blesma's prosthetics expert at Chadwell Heath, Brian Chenier, or with the chaps at Headley Court."

### 3 FORM FILLING

"I hate to think how many forms I've had to fill in since 2006 – probably about 2,500! There



are all sorts: Personal Independence Payment, Attendance Allowance, War Pensions, Armed Forces Compensation Scheme claims... The important thing is that BSOs know the paperwork inside out, and we're aware that if you miss out a particular phrase, it's likely that the civil servants are going to say 'No'.

"I was recently helping a Member with his application for a Haig Home because he's blind and wants to live independently. Filling out an application form can be very stressful and difficult for Members, so our help in that regard is appreciated. We can also inform people who don't realise what they qualify for, and help to convince Members – especially the over-65s, who often don't want to accept grants and funding – of the benefits."



### 4 BEING ON CALL

"It seems like you're never off duty when you're a BSO. I'll be there if there's an emergency but we're not the fourth emergency service.

I had to take five calls this weekend, for example.

Sadly, on Sunday, I had to deal with two deaths. I was talking to one widow for an hour. Her husband had just died and she wasn't sure if it was too soon to reach out for help. I told her; 'No, do it as soon as you can.'

"If someone calls me at home, I know it is important. I often take calls in the night, especially from older Members who find themselves awake at 3am. My little Jack Russell was trained as a listening dog, so he howls like a wolf at the phone!

"Sometimes, it can be an issue that can wait until the Monday – but often it isn't.



## Bill's a BSO with a difference

Bill is a BSO with a difference: because his patch covers Headley Court, he visits the rehab HQ twice a month. "I come here every other Tuesday," he says. The recent decision to allow him to be present while Members meet their medical consultants has been hugely beneficial.

"It's a good thing in lots of ways," says Bill. "I see some horrendous injuries, and chaps with real trauma. It's very personal, and you need to build up trust to be part of that. But it means I can fight for their medical needs much more effectively. I can also report back to Chadwell Heath, so when it's time for the other BSOs to pay them a visit, they know what their guys are experiencing."

"I've seen seven chaps this morning, and I'll write up reports for all of them. For many, this is their first encounter with Blesma, so making the right first impression is vital."



There are mobility issues, or someone is worried about their mental state. Sometimes people aren't well supported, so we do the best we can. I've lost one Member to suicide. It's tough to deal with these sorts of issues, so you need to be mentally strong. I don't allow it to get to me."

### 5 SIGNPOSTING

"There are some things we simply aren't trained to do, like mental health issues, where our role is not to fix the issue but to provide the best signposting possible."

"When people need clinical support for the hidden wounds that are brought about by mental health issues, we look to refer them to Combat Stress. Members may be eligible for the War Pension and we also point them towards the Armed Forces Compensation Scheme. Others may need housing advice or help from the Veterans Agency, and we can make the necessary introductions there. Headley Court is part of my patch. I've got the authority to refer Members who were injured in Afghanistan, say, to the War Injuries Clinic. It's about matching Members to the right service."

### 6 ON THE ROAD

"There are more than 400 Members in my area, and I also attend clinics at Headley Court, Tedworth House and Salisbury Hospital. I drive more than 35,000 miles a year, but I make sure I'm at my appointments on time because people wait in for me. If a meeting is going to go on longer than I had expected, I'll make sure I'm not late for the next one – I'll return to the first meeting again at a later time. BSOs plan their own work, so we have to be very organised."

### 7 SIGNING UP NEW MEMBERS

"Because I'm at Headley Court a lot, I'm often the person who signs up new Members. That first encounter is vitally important. Our protocol is to simply listen to someone's story, and take our time. We're not pushy!"

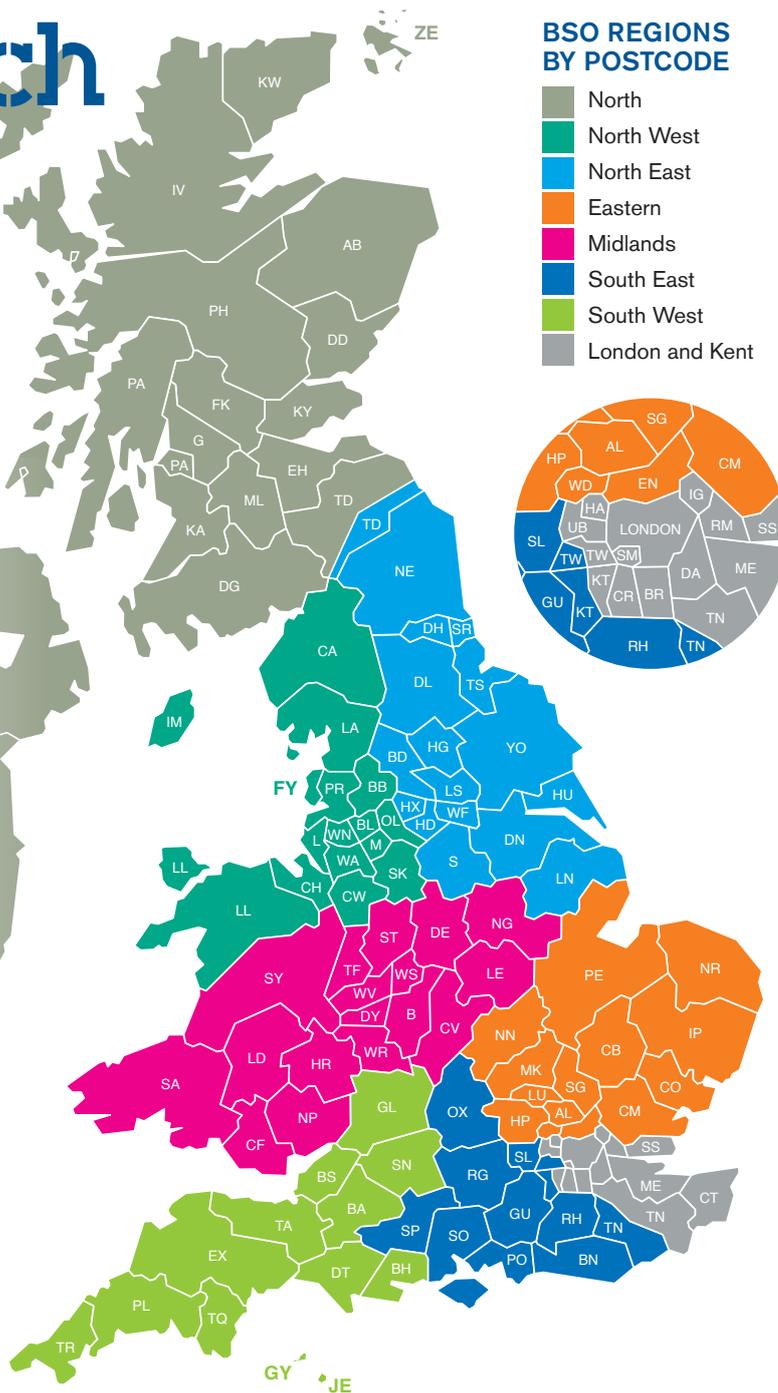
"We dedicate ourselves to the individual and make sure they have a very smooth transition from the military. I have good relationships with all the staff, officers and medical consultants at Headley Court, and we are constantly building relationships to make sure new Members get the best critical support they possibly can."

# Get in touch with your Blesma Support Officer

Following the Board of Trustees' decision in 2016 to invest in the Blesma Support Officer team, the BSO areas were reviewed, and a number of boundary and area changes were made to reduce the size of the individual geographical areas each BSO covered.

A new area, 'North', was created, which encompasses Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. There are now eight Blesma Support Officers who are spread across the entire UK. Every single Blesma Member is assigned to a BSO, who is on call to help you with any questions, concerns or needs you might have.

Please make sure you are in touch with your Support Officer. After your family and friends, they should be your first line of support. All the contact details are listed below. Please feel free to get in touch on any issue, no matter how insignificant you think it may be.



## CONTACT YOUR BSO

*Have you got a question or need advice? Don't hesitate to get in touch with the Blesma Support Officer in your area*

**BSO (North)**  
**STEVE BURTON**  
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 Email: bsonorth@blesma.org

**BSO (North West)**  
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 Email: bsolk@blesma.org



From left: RBLI's Emma Cottee, Blesma Member Alex Stringer and BSO Paul Findlay outside Alex's new apartment

# “You have to roll with the punches”

*Despite having been through way, way more than most people, Alex Stringer has managed to stay incredibly positive. Finally, something has gone his way*

**N**estled in the heart of Kent is a village with a difference. At first glance, the RBLI village in Aylesford might not look particularly out of the ordinary. The village café, a great place for residents to meet up, is at the heart of the community. There are shops and apartments, and a factory that gives the local community a place to work. There's a nursing home for elderly residents and a Garden of Honour, built to commemorate the centenary of WWI, which is a place to remember those who served, and still serve, in the Armed Forces.

So far, so normal. But look more closely and you'll see that the village is different. Very different. That's because it is purpose-built to provide housing, welfare support and care to more than 300 members of the Armed Forces community. It is run and maintained

by Royal British Legion Industries (RBLI), a charity dedicated to looking after the housing, healthcare, welfare and employment issues of veterans. The aim is to offer a range of accommodation, welfare support and convalescent care to those with a connection to the Armed Forces, or with a disability or health condition.

“The RBLI village was set up in 1919 as a hospital for those suffering from tuberculosis,” explains Emma Cottee, a senior administrator at the village. “The guys who recovered from the illness needed employment, so a training project was established. Later, a factory was built, and the residents were given jobs making ammunition boxes and soap. That's where the social enterprise side of what RBLI now does started. Today, we look after ex-Forces people, including spouses, widows and dependants. We've got people who have lived here for 70 years!”





## “I DON’T WANT LOTS OF ADAPTATIONS. I’VE NEVER SEEN MYSELF AS HAVING A DISABLED LIFESTYLE”

It’s no secret that Blesma helps its Members in any way it possibly can, and if that means partnering up with another charity that specialises in a different field, the Association is happy to help make the necessary connections. One of these vital partners is Royal British Legion Industries, and when BSO Paul Findlay got wind that the RBLI was constructing 24 new apartments at its Centenary Village development, he knew just the person who would benefit.

Alex Stringer, a triple amputee and Blesma Member who served with 23 Pioneer Regiment, very recently became the first person to move into this superb new accommodation – and it has already transformed his life. Having previously struggled in a small, expensive flat in Basildon following the break up of his marriage, the light, airy environment in Aylesford has quickly become a family home for his three daughters to visit.

“These 24 apartments were built because we knew there was a growing need for accommodation among veterans. They are very high quality and there is big demand to fill them, but we have a criteria based on need,” explains Emma. “Alex fits that need. He’s unique to us, our first triple amputee, and we’re all inspired

by his attitude to life. He’s an amazing guy. Our remit is to improve lives, and people who come here benefit from the whole package, it’s a real community. It’s been lovely working with Blesma, too, because we’ve got the same aim – to help those in need.”

Alex took us on a tour of his box-fresh pad, and talked us through his injury and rehab. Alex’s BSO, Paul Findlay, meanwhile, explained how proper ‘joined up thinking’ between Blesma and the RBLI has produced a working relationship that is set to benefit many more Members in the future...

### **You’ve been in your new home for just one week. How’s it going so far?**

Just great! It’s a lovely place. The flat has everything I need. There’s a wet room, it’s got good floors for getting around in a wheelchair, there are decent entrances... It has been thought through properly. I’m not someone who wants lots of adaptations, to be honest. I’ve never seen myself as having a disabled lifestyle. I could have had a kitchen with adaptive appliances, but they feel weird to me, so I didn’t want them. But it’s so much better than where I was living.

### **Were you really struggling in your old place?**

The main problem was paying for it. Previously, I’d been living with my family – my wife and our three daughters, who are nine, six and four. Then, out of nowhere, she told me she didn’t want to be with me any more. I ended up moving out, and that put quite a strain on me financially. That’s when I reached out to Blesma, and my BSO Paul has been so helpful.

**Above: Alex was the first resident to move into the RBLI’s brand new Centenary Village development. Right: wide doors, smooth floors and an accessible wet room help Alex with daily living**



## Paul Findlay, BSO

*Paul Findlay is the Blesma Support Officer for London and Kent, and the man instrumental in ensuring Alex moved to Aylesford*

### How have you helped Alex, and what made you think of him when this opportunity first arose?

I know Alex from way back, and where he was living was not suitable for him. The rent was extortionate and he was getting further and further into debt. We first helped by getting him on a debt management plan, but there was still a shortfall. We needed to get his finances under control, and when I saw the architect's plans for this place, it just seemed to be the perfect fit for him. He was eligible for housing benefit if he lived in Kent, too, which he wasn't entitled to where he was living in Essex, so we knew it could mean big savings if he moved.

### How does Blesma help people like Alex connect up with charities like the Royal British Legion Industries?

I've managed to build a good relationship with the guys at the RBLI, as the village in Aylesford is within my area. The people at the charity are what I would call 'straight shooters'; there are no difficult roadblocks or levels of bureaucracy between our two charities. It's great working with another charity that has a passion for helping people. Some people think charities are in conflict. This is a perfect example of what they can do when they're not. The RBLI assesses people according to their requirements and needs, and I helped by writing referral letters, which made it easier for them. When it came to needs, both financially and physically, Alex ticked every box for this project.



### How satisfying is it for you, seeing something so transformative?

It's absolutely brilliant. We actually toured the site while the flats were still being built, and one of the builders working on the project said that just meeting Alex was all the motivation the team needed to do a great job. The day he moved in, Alex sent me a message that I'll keep forever. He's not an emotional guy – but he definitely was that day! It's very pleasing: this can be a tough job, but a day like that can keep me going for six months.



## “THE DAY HE MOVED IN, ALEX SENT ME A MESSAGE THAT I WILL KEEP FOREVER”

He got me straightened out, and he pointed me in the direction of this opportunity. It's just been fantastic.

**It seems like a really pleasant place for the kids...**  
I've had them down for two weekends already, and they didn't want to leave! They're little angels and they help me out with everything, but they love to play – and this is spot on, because it has nice big windows so I can keep an eye on them. I can open the patio doors and they can chase each other around. It's nice and secluded, so I don't have to worry about traffic. They're not stuck indoors all day, like at the old place.

### Can you tell us a little bit about how you received your injuries?

I joined the Pioneers in 2008. After I finished my training, I completed a tour of Cyprus and then deployed to Afghanistan. I was part of a search team tasked with looking for bombs, so to be honest I never really expected to come back in one piece! My job was to scan the road for anomalies, and then bomb disposal would come in and blow the devices up.

We were called out on a job in January 2011: a device had been found in the road, and we needed to find out if there were any more in the area. A couple of guys ahead of me had stepped on an IED but didn't trigger it. I had that extra bit of kit in my bag, and so was that little bit heavier. It went off. The explosion blew me high into the air but it also initiated a fire. During that, a can of spray paint in my pocket was hit, exploded, and set me on fire. My mates had to put me out before getting a tourniquet on me. A helicopter came in and I was in Birmingham within 24 hours.



**How did you initially manage to cope with the immediate aftermath of your injuries?**

Straight after the incident, I was in a coma for six weeks. When I woke up, I knew my legs were gone, but losing my arm was news to me. I guess it was just one of those things. Life is life, and you have to roll with the punches – you can't sit there and wallow, thinking; 'What if?' That will get you absolutely nowhere, and people will eventually stop wanting to help you if you're not helping yourself. So I've never really taken it to heart.

**How was rehab?**

I went to Headley Court, but I was only there for a few months. My left leg was amputated so high up that there wasn't much point trying to use prosthetics. The rehab I could do was pretty limited, and a wheelchair was the more viable option, so I didn't spend too much time there. It was nice being back among the other lads though, and getting in the military mindset again.

**And the fact that the RBLI village is a military community must help with that, too?**

Yes. I was the first to move into this building, so the community is really only just starting, but I've got neighbours now and they seem really nice, and we already have three Blesma Members here. The main village has barbecues, curry nights, that sort of thing. I like that. And the RBLI has been great with me, so I'm going to do some volunteering for them.

**And you wouldn't be here without a good working relationship between Blesma and the RBLI?**

No, they've worked together perfectly. My BSO Paul has got me out of a real drama. I'm not really one for activities, but Blesma supports its Members in lots of other ways. For me, it was financial. Blesma and the RBLI took all the strain of the admin away from me, and helped me through the application process. I'm not wised up on all that. I'm used to being told what to do in the military, so it was very helpful!

**Sofa, so good:  
BSO Paul Findlay  
and Alex relax in  
Alex's new home**



Words: Jess MacKinnon and Danny Buckland Photographs: Andy Bate

# HELP FROM THE HAMMERS

BLESMA WAS WEST HAM'S CHOSEN CHARITY FOR THE 2016/17 PREMIER LEAGUE SEASON. THANKS FOR THE SUPPORT LADS!



## PARTNERSHIPS



**B**lesma Members were guests of honour for a unique experience with Premier League football club West Ham United at the start of April. The Hammers rolled out the claret and blue carpet for the Association's memorable behind-the-scenes visit to the club's training ground, which is located just three miles from Blesma's head office in Essex.

The four-man Blesma team got to meet many of the club's stars including Andy Carroll, José Fonte, Mark Noble, James Collins, Michail Antonio and goalkeeper Darren Randolph in a special event laid on for the charity, which was the club's partner for the 2016/17 season.

The players posed for photos and chatted to Blesma's Matty Woollard, Stuart Pearson, Gambahadur Gurung and Nigel Smith. West Ham's club captain, Mark Noble, even donated a signed pair of football boots to Matty, who is a lifelong West Ham fan.

The day was organised by the West Ham Foundation to celebrate the club's partnership with Blesma throughout the Premier League season and highlight the

club's participation in the local community.

"Meeting the players and getting a few selfies was like a dream come true," said Nigel Smith, a former Royal Navy Marine Engineering Mechanic from Kent, who lost his right leg in a motorcycle accident in 1977. "It was a privilege to meet them, they were all really down to Earth and extremely supportive of Blesma. I think the Association struck a chord with the players and it's great that West Ham chose us as their charity partner. I'll make my friends jealous with these photos!"

The club, which prides itself on its local connections, extended its hospitality to the home game against Swansea a week later, when Blesma Members were ushered onto the pitch and introduced to the crowd. In return, fans generously donated more than £3,000 to Blesma's bucket collection.

### ACCESS ALL AREAS WITH THE IRONS

The 'Blesma Day' began when the four Members were welcomed at the Rush Green training complex as the team were put through their paces on the practice pitches. West Ham's players wore Blesma t-shirts for the training session under the watchful eye of manager Slaven Bilic and

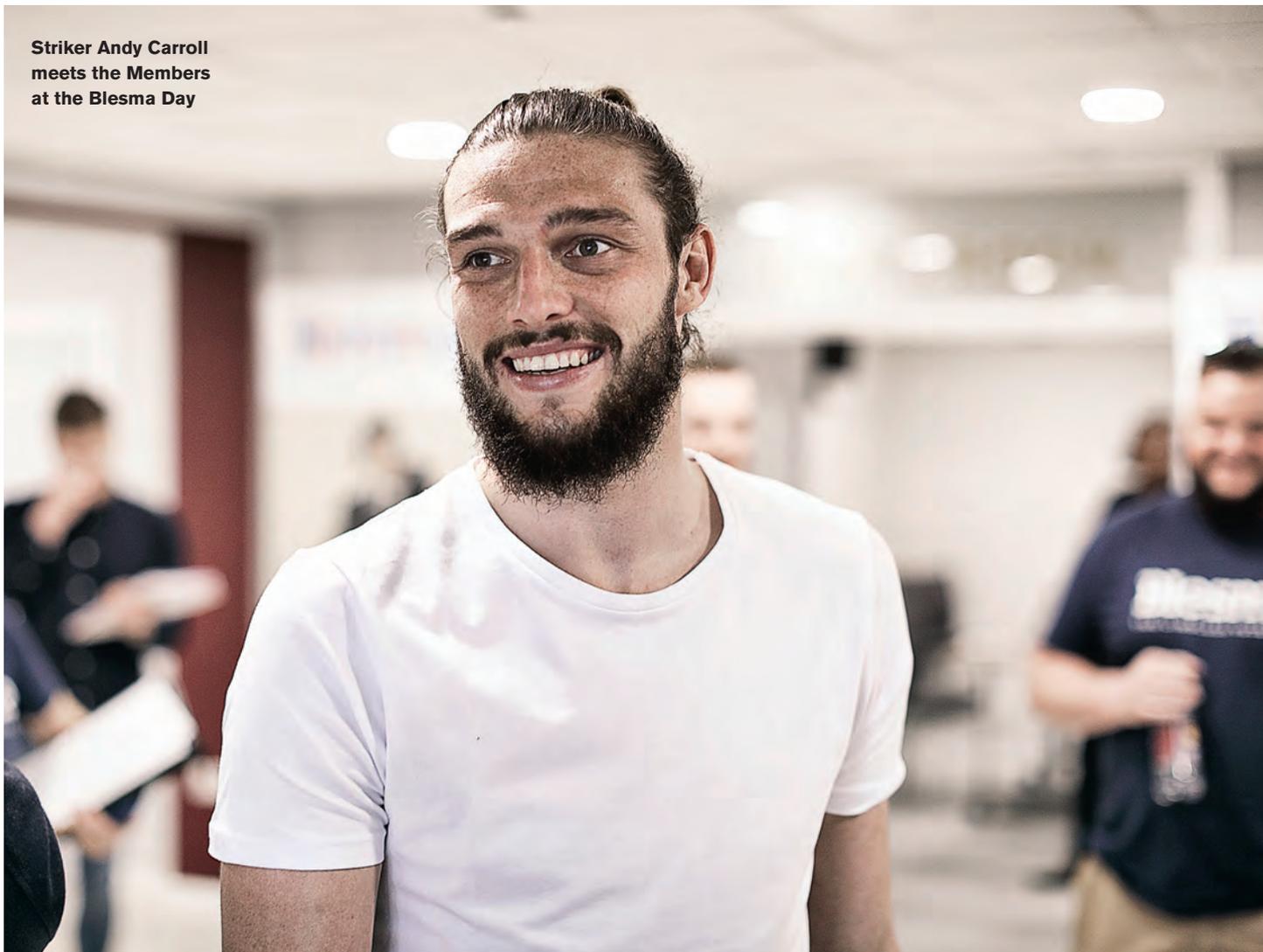
the rest of West Ham's coaching staff. Afterwards, the club laid on a special lunch for the Blesma team who also got a chance to meet their heroes, pose for photographs, and chat to them about football as well as Blesma's role in helping limbleless veterans.

Armed with a selfie stick, Member Gam Gurung made sure he got a snap with every player! "I was so excited to be at West Ham and meet the famous players," said Gam, from Surrey, who served in the 6th Queen Elizabeth's Own Gurkha Rifles for 16 years. He was injured in an explosion during a battlefield training exercise in 1987, losing his left arm and suffering damage to his face, right hand, stomach and legs.

"I am proud to be a Blesma Member – the Association has changed my life! I've been to South Africa with Blesma, I've been on fishing trips and safari trips, and to France to ski for the first time! Blesma Members are like my family and make me smile every time I see them!"

As the players cooled down from their training session, West Ham defender José Fonte took the opportunity to find out more about the charity and sat down with former Parachute Regiment Sergeant Stuart Pearson for a one-on-one chat.

**Striker Andy Carroll  
meets the Members  
at the Blesma Day**



**Stuart Pearson (left)  
chats to West Ham  
defender José Fonte**



“WEST HAM IS A  
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**Blesma**  
THE LIMBLESS VETERANS

Lifelong Hammer  
Matty Woollard  
bagged a pair of  
Mark Noble's boots



## MATTY WOOLLARD

### Lifelong Hammer Matty on his dream day with his idols

#### What was the day like?

I'm a massive West Ham fan, so it was a dream come true. I've been supporting them all my life, so it was great to meet the players.

#### Did West Ham look after you?

They were brilliant. They let us watch their training, they put on a fantastic lunch, and then we got to chat to the team. The players, manager and staff gave us a lot of their time. I even got a pair of Mark Noble's boots – what a gent!

#### You spent some time with defender James Collins.

##### What did you talk about?

He was really interested in what happened to me and how I coped and adapted after my incident. We chatted about Blesma's history and he mentioned that he had family who'd been in the Army, so we chatted about the military, too.

#### How important is it for a club to have connections with its local community?

The community is a vital part of West Ham's identity, and you could tell by the players' interest and the time they spent with us that they care deeply about the local community and the Armed Forces.

#### You made it out onto the pitch at the Swansea home game. What was that like?

It was a surreal and overwhelming experience for me. I could imagine how good it must be on the pitch during a match. West Ham is a community club and has the same family feel as Blesma – that really shone through on both days.



Gam Gurung grabs a selfie with West Ham's Mark Noble



"I was pleased to meet Stuart and hear his story. It is great to be able to support the brave people who go into the military and put their lives at risk for the rest of us," José said. "We can only say thank you, and welcome Blesma any time. We are keen to help in any way we can because that is part of being a footballer and of being a club. Being a footballer is about much more than a game. We have a responsibility to help our communities."

José was particularly interested in Stuart's rehabilitation, finding out what Blesma has done to help him and how the Association continues to support him.

"It was a great day all round, everyone was so friendly and accommodating. The club is behind Blesma," said 42-year-old Stuart, from Colchester, who was injured by an anti-personnel mine in Afghanistan in 2006. "It's great to have such a big club on side. It means so much to all of us to have their support."

During a chat with Matty Woollard, West Ham defender and Wales international James Collins (left) revealed the military was close to his heart and opened up about his brother's discharge from the Army.

"My brother was discharged on medical grounds. He was devastated, but it was nothing compared to what you boys have been through – and will continue to go through for the rest of your lives," said James. "You are an inspirational group of lads to everyone."

Matty explained how he was on his first tour of Afghanistan in 2007 when he stepped on three anti-personnel mines. As well as losing his right leg, the 28 year old suffered burns to his hands and arms, and sustained a severe injury that runs from his

left knee to his stomach. "To hear a story like that is gut wrenching but it is great to see that Matty is in a good place with a positive frame of mind," said James.

#### WEST HAM AND WORLD WAR I

West Ham United have always had a strong connection to the military, and a group of Hammers fans even signed up together to fight in WWI. The 13th (Service) Battalion The Essex Regiment, better known as the West Ham Pals battalion, fought across the Western Front during the Great War, and made headlines with their 'Last Stand' at the Battle of Cambrai in 1917.

The Pals, who lost almost 25 per cent of their original 1,000 recruits, had a cap badge featuring two crossed hammers. Their battle cry 'Up the Hammers' was used throughout the war.

West Ham played in the Southern League First Division at the outbreak of WWI but were in the Football League, playing at the Boleyn Ground, when a German V-1 flying bomb landed on the pitch in WWII, causing severe damage to two stands and the offices.

The club now plays at the former London 2012 Olympic stadium and Stuart Pearson was invited to the home match against Swansea to tell the crowd how Blesma has changed his life through support and rehabilitation programmes. His story was published in the match day programme.

"It was fantastic to have the Members at the training ground to meet the players and at our home game against Swansea," said Joe Lyons, Chief Executive of the West Ham United Foundation. "The work that Blesma does is essential, and we are delighted to be supporting them."



## WILL DIXON

*Blesma Trustee Will Dixon served as a Platoon Commander with 3 Rifles. He needed a below-knee amputation after his armoured vehicle was hit by an IED in Afghanistan*

**I loved my time in 3 Rifles. I'm from a military family,** my old man served for 20 years, and I always wanted to join. I went to Sandhurst in 2007, and deployed to Afghanistan in 2009. I was part of a Quick Reaction Force when the Mastiff I was in was hit by an IED.

**We were lucky that everyone survived. My guys filled** me with morphine, and I was in a Black Hawk and back at Bastion in an hour. My leg was amputated straight away.

**Rehab was excellent – I've been very lucky. I've got** a good family, good friends, and I've never had a down day since my injury. This is a scratch in Blesma circles, and I quickly appreciated there are those in far worse condition.

**I launched the AFTER Programme** at Barclays in 2010, which helps place injured veterans into jobs. I felt out of my depth, but the programme was a success, and Barclays offered me a job.

**Becoming a Blesma Trustee was a** huge honour. A few years after I joined, Sir Cedric Delves approached me as he wanted new faces on the board, as well as someone to represent those injured in the Afghan campaign.

**I think of the Trustees as the Association's stewards.** We represent the Members and help form a strategic direction for the Association. Of the 11 Trustees, six are Members, and that's important because it means we can ensure Blesma continues to be fit for purpose.

**The Trustees meet quarterly, and it's both a big** responsibility and a privilege. Each meeting is different: sometimes it's about budgeting, other times we scrutinise the Executive's performance to make sure we are learning lessons. Because our youngest Member is only in his early twenties, we need to be here for decades to come.

**Blesma is unique and very special – I learn that the** more I am around Members! The Association has adapted and moved with the times, helping a vast range of people. Yes, I'm from the Afghan generation, but I'm absolutely aware of the breadth of the membership.

**I hope, as a Trustee, I ask the odd difficult question.**

I have a passion for the membership and faith in the power of activities. Our challenge is to stay relevant. The Association is doing well, funding wise, but the big challenge is just around the corner now wars are out of the news.

**If the Trustees all agree with each** other, we're not doing a good job. Disagreement and debate are good.

It's important to have a balance on the board, with everyone bringing a different view. The Members have one perspective, while the non-Member Trustees, who are all experts in their field, bring another. That's healthy.

**I'm very busy with my job and Blesma, and I'm getting** married next year, so a paddle on the Thames in my kayak on the weekend is a very nice way to relax.

**“IF THE TRUSTEES  
ALL AGREE WITH  
EACH OTHER THEN  
WE'RE NOT DOING  
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IS GOOD”**

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