

## MIND OVER MATTER

NEIL HERITAGE IS READY TO SCALE A MOUNTAIN THAT HAS KILLED MORE THAN 500 PEOPLE



### Members ready for the spotlight

Blesma teams up with a top theatre company to put Members through their paces **p32**



### Blesma is helping GPs to help you

From amputation to PTSD to deafness; GPs are being taught how to support veterans **p38**

### What should we tell the kids?

Why Michael Mellon kept his young family in the picture about his amputation **p26**



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## A day to remember

**R**emembrance Day 2017 was a great success, with 54 Members taking part in the parade. Many travelled to the Cenotaph for the first time, some from as far away as Germany. Blesma was proudly led by Gam Gurung, Member and Trustee Alison Grant, and WO1 John Mason MBE, who is still serving in the Royal Engineers despite being the first IED amputee from Afghanistan in 2001.

“This is a very important event in the Blesma calendar because the Members have such a great connection,” said Frank Garside, National Volunteer Officer, who organised Blesma’s participation for

the Association. “Apart from Members’ Weekend, this is the largest gathering of Members at a single event.”

Despite Blesma having some 120 living Members who served in WWII, this was sadly the first time in the Association’s history, that it didn’t have any WWII veterans on parade. For those who were able to attend, though, the day proved to be as poignant as ever.

John Lloyd laid the Blesma wreath and Andy Jones laid one on behalf of the Royal Navy. Elsewhere in the country, Clive Smith laid a wreath at Wolverhampton Wanderers football ground, Arnold Pickup

laid one in Huddersfield, and Peter Sherston-Baker did likewise in Bournemouth.

“Members don’t find the day difficult so much as sombre,” said Frank. “It gives them the opportunity to remember friends, especially those who died in conflict. All the Members who took part said they would apply to come next year, which will be particularly poignant as it will mark the centenary of the end of WWI. We’re hoping to be allocated more tickets in 2018 so we can have a larger contingent.”

*To apply to take part in 2018, contact Frank on [nvo@blesma.org](mailto:nvo@blesma.org) or on 020 8548 3510*



## Generally speaking

Helping GPs to help veterans (p38)



Blesma remembers.  
Members on parade  
at the Cenotaph on  
12 November 2017

# welcome



Since WWI, Blesma has been working to improve the quality of life of Members who have to live with disability, and to bring our people together to share their experiences and help each other. Your Board consists mostly of Members, and together we seek to ensure the State meets its obligations in our areas of interest, and that Blesma provides such additional help as appropriate. In addition, a large part of our work is to organise opportunities for Members to meet each other and take part in activities together.

Activities, close to half of which are led by Members, provide entertainment, challenge and opportunity, and bring us together in a mutually supportive community.

Our approach is to build upon the strengths of our well-established Association, adapting as appropriate to meet the new demands and opportunities of changing times and circumstances, but in an evolutionary and careful manner that avoids imprudent or unnecessary risk. Careful management in the past, combined with the continuing generosity of our donors, has ensured that our financial situation is healthy. We have thus been able to increase annual spending whilst taking care to retain sufficient reserves to cater for the unpredictable potential shocks of the future. Our approach has been to put extra resources into those things that are known to deliver benefit and which are most appreciated by our Members. In particular, we have been able to increase spending on activities again this year. In 2018, besides the continuing Activities Programme as seen in this issue, we will have two events to commemorate the founding of Blesma. One will be a collaboration with Graeae, a theatre production company, and will include Blesma Members in a number of key roles. This will be followed later in the year by the Blesma-sponsored tall ship sail on a voyage to the Channel Islands from Southampton with Members and families crewing.

We continue to explore opportunities to assist our more elderly Members to continue to live comfortably at home, and for those who are no longer able to do so, be provided for in good quality accommodation. Accordingly, we have increased the number of grants to individuals and increased the total spend to promote independence. The majority of grants are given to Members and Widows aged over 70. Grants include payments for respite stays and accommodation fees.

It is appreciated that Members show a close interest in the continued good governance, reputation and influence of our Association, as well as in our ability to remain well informed of developments in related fields of activity. In support of those priorities, we sit on the NHS England Veterans Prosthetics Panel, the Clinical Reference Group for Complex Disability Equipment, the MoD Central Advisory Committee for Compensation, and we are part of the NHS England review of prosthetics services.

Whilst we remain confident we are collectively using our resources wisely, and to best effect, we know that we can never afford to become complacent, and together we look forward to our Board, our Executive and our Membership working together to ensure that Blesma continues to deliver the best achievable benefit for our Members.

On behalf of the Board, I wish all staff and Members a very Happy Christmas and a fruitful New Year.

**General Sir Adrian Bradshaw KCB OBE**  
Chairman



# NEWS



Photography: Simon Hildrew



“THIS IS AN IMPORTANT  
EVENT IN THE BLESMA  
CALENDAR BECAUSE THE  
MEMBERS HAVE SUCH  
A GREAT CONNECTION”



## Remembrance Day in Pictures



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 NEWS ANALYSIS

# Blesma's boost to those behind bars

Shaun Stocker is putting the skills and techniques he learned on the Blesma Community Programme to great effect to help people in prison

**B**lesma Member Shaun Stocker has become an integral part of a project to help rehabilitate jailed ex-Service personnel. The 27 year old, who suffered devastating injuries from an IED blast in Afghanistan, now counsels former Forces' members who are serving time at HMP Berwyn, the UK's newest and largest prison.

The Category C jail in Wrexham has a progressive approach to rehabilitation and has replaced terminology such as *wing*, *cell* and *inmates* with *community*, *room* and *men*. The area dedicated to the ex-Servicemen has been christened the 'Shaun Stocker Community'.

"HMP Berwyn has an opportunity to make a real difference," says Shaun, a motivational speaker and Welsh national Paralympic powerlifter, who runs a property development business in his home town of Wrexham. "It is a bit controversial, with some people questioning if the regime is too soft, but my view is that people being rehabilitated to rejoin society need to be treated with respect. If they're not, it is going to be very difficult for them to change, and so the time they have been inside will have been wasted. I feel privileged to be able to help veterans and other members of society."

HMP Berwyn opened earlier this year and has the capacity to hold 2,106 men in three main blocks. Shaun, who was blinded, lost both legs and was told he could not have children naturally after the blast in Helmand Province, was asked to share his inspirational story of how he rebuilt his life, regained 30 per cent sight in his right eye, and became a father.

He was a 19-year-old Fusilier on the last week of his first tour of Afghanistan with Bravo Company of the 1st Battalion the Royal Welsh Regiment when disaster struck in April 2010. Doctors put him into an induced coma and performed a pioneering sperm salvage operation to give him the chance of becoming a dad. He has had more than 50 operations since, including groundbreaking osseointegration surgery.

"I speak a lot about how my rehabilitation took a long time and how I had a lot of help, including from Blesma who were always there for me," he says. "But I had to do a lot of hard work myself. I didn't know what reception I would get at the jail but everyone seems to enjoy it and I get a lot of respect because I've served



Words: Danny Buckland

“**I LOVE TO BE INVOLVED IN POSITIVE PROJECTS. THIS CAN CHANGE LIVES; FROM THE KIDS IN SCHOOL TO THE MEN AT BERWYN**”

just like they have. I tell them to take every opportunity the prison has to offer; enrol on courses, spend time in the library... I say that if they can turn their darkest day into one that changes their life, which I did, then they can build a better future.

"I was helped along the way and the Army gave me everything it could, but it would have meant little if I hadn't put the hard work in. You can look back at what happened as the start of a new life rather than something to be ashamed of for the rest of your days."

Shaun's role at HMP Berwyn came after a chance meeting with a senior prison officer while he was travelling to London to take part in the Blesma Community Programme (BCP). "It was pure chance that we sat next to each other and got talking," says Shaun. "She had two sons in the Army and I offered to come into speak at the prison. It is great to be part of something that helps people get their life back on track, and I'm using skills I picked up on the BCP. I tell them the truth and speak from the heart.

"I love getting involved with positive projects like the BCP – this can change lives; from kids in school to the men at HMP Berwyn."

## ↘ BLESMA BRIEFING

# Have your say on latest NHS review

Brian Chenier, BSO (Prosthetics), offers the latest on prosthetics. This issue; making sure Members' needs are addressed in the on-going NHS review of specialised services



**T**he NHS is currently reviewing a range of specialised services, and of particular interest to Blesma Members, this includes prosthetics.

It is part of a continuing drive to maximise the return on every pound spent by the Department of Health and applies to all major upper and lower limb amputees, as well as people with congenital limb deficiencies who have the potential to use prostheses to help them mobilise or improve upper limb function.

The NHS spends around £60 million a year on these services, which are delivered at specialist rehabilitation centres in the UK to around 60,000 patients. Blesma continues to advance the case for Members and has been instrumental in establishing access to microprocessor controlled knees and other initiatives in recent years.

Innovations in prosthetics are fast moving and the NHS wants to commission services that are fit for the future as well as provide equitable access to high quality care across the country. The review is in its early stages and the government has promised to take into account patient experience and the distinct factors that impact Service veterans as it does its sums.

Treatment for Blesma Members often involves a degree of complexity, in both equipment and support services, so it is vitally important that we represent the collective interests of the Members through the review process. But we also encourage you to register as a stakeholder so you can provide personal feedback and receive direct information (please use the link at the end of this article).

There are 35 centres in England providing specialised prosthetic services, including nine Murrison Veteran Centres, and the drive is to make them as efficient as possible without compromising on delivery. Providing prosthetic services for Members is an evolving discipline and it is important that we do not lose the big advances we have secured recently, which makes the Blesma voice a powerful element of the NHS review.

The NHS's Clinical Reference Group (CRG), which covers complex rehabilitation and disability services, has outlined the funding challenges in the face of tightened budgets, and the British Healthcare Trades Association has called for greater protection for patients whose quality of life depends on access to good prostheses and new technologies, such as microprocessor knees and limb components. It believes



**Member Philip Bailey receives specialist treatment at an NHS limb centre in Nottingham**

£11 million needs to be made available for staffing and training as well as funding the latest equipment.

As this review gathers speed, our main aims are to ensure that Blesma Members and other patients can live independently – thus reducing social care costs – return to work to contribute to the economy, and reintegrate into society with increased responsibility for their health to reduce further illness.

Advances in technology are giving greater scope for independence and to fulfil those aims, but they must be properly funded so we can get the maximum benefit and value for money. The voice of Blesma and its Members is crucial to illuminate the personal impact of both good and substandard services, to ensure that the next set of regulations and funding are fit for purpose.

*To receive regular updates about the prosthetics review, you will need to sign up as a registered stakeholder for the Rehabilitation & Disability Clinical Reference Group at [www.engage.england.nhs.uk/application/crg-stakeholder-reg](http://www.engage.england.nhs.uk/application/crg-stakeholder-reg)*

“  
**THE VOICE OF BLESMA AND ITS MEMBERS IS CRUCIAL TO ILLUMINATE IMPACT OF BOTH GOOD AND SUB-STANDARD SERVICES**  
 ”



Chris on his modified R1. Next year, he's aiming for the top step of the podium

## Chris blasts to fourth in his first season racing

ARM AMPUTEE CHRIS GANLEY HAS finished fourth in the Thundersport GB Championship in his debut season in motorcycle racing.

Despite starting the season late (Chris only competed in seven of the nine scheduled races) he worked his way up the series leader board to beat able-bodied racers to fourth position. Chris achieved his best finish of the year in his very first race back in May, when he grabbed the third step on the podium.

Chris, 28, from Clevedon, lost his arm in a motorcycle accident in 2014 but always remained determined to pursue his dream of motorcycle racing. Six months after his accident, he was back on a motorbike.

He now competes on a Yamaha R1 which has been adapted so that the clutch, brake and gear lever are on the right handlebar.

"I've slowly improved throughout the year, so much so that other riders have said they've been able to see the change in my confidence. At the start of the year I was running at the back of the races but towards the end of the season, I was racing in the middle of the field," Chris said. "Having Blesma's support again in 2018 will be incredible. It's allowed me to live my dream."

*Chris's 2018 season will start at Donington Park in late March and end at Snetterton in October. Follow his progress on his Facebook page; Chris Ganley Racing*

## SUN, STARS AND CITY FOR SNAPPERS

IN OCTOBER, BLESMA'S photographers put their skills to the test in the busy streets of York on the City Photography course.

The event, which took place between 13 and 16 October, was aimed at experienced photographers and gave them the chance to enhance their skills in a busy city environment.

Professional photographers Parm and Kirsty Verdi volunteered their time and knowledge to give Members one-to-one tuition. The group took advantage of the



weather to head onto the North York Moors to photograph the sunrise and the night sky.

"The trip included every Blesma demographic; amputees, loss of use of limb and Widows," said Brian Chenier, BSO (Prosthetics) and lead for the activity. "Despite everyone preferring to take different types of photography at the start of the course, they all planned to take more sunrise and night photographs by the end – something they wouldn't have been able to do without having been on the course."

## NEWS BRIEFS

### TRY SOMETHING NEW IN 2018

Fancy trying something new or getting better at something you've already had a go at? Blesma is offering its Members the chance to try more activities than ever before in 2018 – all for free!

There are lots of events in our new Activities Calendar for every taste, level and ability – from beginner to serious adventurer. There's something on offer for every age group and all interests too, so if you think activities are just for adrenaline junkies, it's time to think again.

There are lots of easily accessible events close to home, but if you fancy seeing foreign shores next year, Blesma will be jetting off across the globe – from the Bahamas and Borneo, to Egypt, Europe and the USA. But the most important part of any activity is still the social aspect – Members help each other, work together and share experiences – you don't have to be an expert to have fun!



And all the activities are free, you'll just need to get to and from the meeting point. Blesma will also normally pay for accommodation the night before to allow you to travel at your own pace.

*The 2018 Activities Brochure is inserted into this issue. Apply now by using the enclosed application form, by emailing Emily Mizon on meo@blesma.org or by calling her on 020 8548 7094*

## TELL US WHAT YOU WANT FROM YOUR MAGAZINE

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

In the spotlight

# Gregg Stevenson



**A**sk Gregg Stevenson about the circumstances surrounding his injuries and he brushes it off as “the same old story”. But while there are aspects of his story that will be all too familiar for many Blesma Members, the personal events of being blown up can never lose their rawness.

“I was serving in Afghanistan on Herrick Nine in 2009, and was on a routine foot patrol when I stood on an IED,” says the former Commando-trained Royal Engineer. “I’d joined three years earlier, when I was 20, and this was my first tour. I’d pushed into a compound and was looking to get onto a roof to supervise cover, when I experienced an almost fairground-like sensation of being thrown upwards.

“That was quickly followed by the feeling of being punched very hard! I was thrown against a wall, my ears were ringing, the heat was incredible! It all happened so quickly that it took me a while to work out what was going on. Then I remember the lads shouting as they looked for a route to extract me.”

## PROFESSIONALISM AND POSITIVITY

Gregg had lost his right leg below the knee and his left leg above the knee. “It was odd being the one getting extracted. The lads carried me over all kinds of terrain to the chopper, which was testament to their fitness. I remember thinking everyone was being bloody professional as American accents told me I’d be OK. I had surgery at Camp Bastion before I was flown back to Selly Oak.”

It took a while for Gregg to fully comprehend how tough life would be. “Mentally, I was fine at first – I was super positive and just grateful to be alive. People would visit me in the hospital and tell me that they’d been through the same thing, and I was looking on the internet at amputees who’d run marathons or completed Iron Man challenges.

“It wasn’t until I got to Headley Court that the reality set in. I realised that there was a bloody long road ahead of me – there was so much to be done. I’d lost my strength, my back hurt constantly, I’d put on weight...”

Like many Members, it was whilst at Headley Court that Gregg discovered Blesma. “I was 24

and didn’t have a clue about benefits or finance, if I was going to get discharged, or even where I was going to live! There was compensation stuff going on, and it was a scary time, but Blesma was there for me with so much good advice.”

The benefits that Blesma offered were mental, as well as practical, says Gregg. “I’d gained weight and wasn’t feeling good about myself, but Blesma kept my head straight. They helped me set small goals, just doing something positive once a day, like going to the gym. They smoothed the whole process for me.

“Then Blesma took me to Colorado to go skiing and I had the time of my life. It raised my aspirations and showed me what could be done with a disability. It took a couple of years but once I was up on my prosthetics, I became more independent. Things started to change and I began to look at my diet and fitness. Now, I’m as fit as I’ve ever been.”

## A LIVING EXAMPLE OF WHAT CAN BE DONE

After completing a year’s work experience at a gym during which time he also earned some qualifications, Gregg found employment as a personal trainer. In October, however, he found his perfect role – as the lead Physical Training Instructor at the Specialist Mobility Rehabilitation Centre in Preston.

“It’s an amazing place and I’m very excited to be part of it,” he says. “The team there are really driving things forward, and I want to link as much as I can back to Blesma. I’d like to encourage those people who might not be getting involved in activities with Blesma, or elsewhere, to get in shape to do just that.

“Rather than people going on skiing trips and finding out they’re physically limited when they get there, I’d like to train them up to make sure they have the right sort of strength and fitness before they go.”

Gregg is a busy dad of two young boys, and eager to put himself forward as an example to others who may be struggling. “I’m living proof that you can get better and now I want to help others do the same,” he says. “It sounds a bit cheesy, but Blesma helped me wake up to the fact that, ok, what happened to me happened – but that I could still get on with my life and have some real fun.”

“  
**BLESMA HELPED ME WAKE UP TO THE FACT THAT I COULD STILL GET ON WITH MY LIFE AND HAVE SOME REAL FUN**  
”

## Mind over matter

Neil Heritage is ready to take on the Matterhorn (p44)



Gregg at home with wife, Melanie, and their kids



Words: Nick Moore Photography: Andy Bate



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## HARI PREPARES TO TAKE ON THE WORLD'S BIGGEST CHALLENGE



DOUBLE AMPUTEE HARI BUDHA-MAGAR is to realise his childhood dream of climbing Mount Everest in Spring 2018. Hari, who is already the first double above-knee amputee to summit a peak over 6,000 metres, lost both legs in an IED blast serving with the Royal Gurkha Rifles in Afghanistan in 2010.

Since his injuries, he has taken up sports such as skydiving, skiing and rock climbing.

“As a child, I could see mountains from my village in Nepal and always knew one day I would climb Everest,” he said. “After I was injured I wondered how I could climb a mountain without legs, but having tried lots of sports I know anything is possible.”

Hari took up climbing five years ago, and as well as preparing physically, he is waiting for a pair of newly designed prosthetics legs that will have crampons fitted and warm sockets that will stay secure as he climbs.

*For more info on Hari's record-breaking attempt go to [www.conqueringdreams.org](http://www.conqueringdreams.org)*

## FELLOWSHIP FOR BLESMA MEMBER DAVE HENSON

PARALYMPIAN DAVE HENSON HAS BEEN awarded a fellowship by the University of Hertfordshire for his contributions to sport and the local community. He graduated from the university in 2007 before joining the Royal Engineers. Three years later, he deployed to Afghanistan but in 2011 he stood on an IED and lost both his legs.

It was during his rehab that he found a passion for sport, which led to fundraisers, Invictus Games medals and Paralympic success. Dave is currently working towards a PhD in Amputee Biomechanics.



Mark in training for the Invictus Games earlier this year

# Coming soon: the story of Mark's life

**T**riple amputee Mark Ormrod is in the process of making a documentary about his life. The production, which has so far taken almost a year to film, will follow a typical day in Mark's life and focus on a number of areas including Mark's family and business, his time in the Royal Marines, his life as a veteran, his training for the Invictus Games, and much more.

“For many years, I didn't think anyone would care about my life, but I've realised it's about how my life and experiences can help other people,” said Mark, who receives thousands of messages every day from people telling him how his social media posts have motivated or helped them.

Mark says the documentary, which he is making with former Royal Marine Matt Elliot, will be “warts and all” in which he will talk about the ups and downs of his life.

“If I'd seen something similar when I first became a triple amputee, it would have made things a lot easier for me,” said Mark, who is hoping the documentary will be finished by December 2018. In order to complete it, Mark needs £20,000 and he will soon be launching a crowdfunding page to help him raise the money.

*For more information or to keep up to date with the documentary, sign up to Mark's newsletter at [www.markormrod.com](http://www.markormrod.com)*

## Ride your bike



## Do your own thing



# Team Blesma puts the 'fun' into fundraising

Do something incredible next year and raise money for the Association at the same time – there really is something for everyone. Take a look...

**T**eam Blesma will be taking on some awesome fundraising events in 2018 – we will be running, jumping, cycling, walking, baking and much more to raise money for the Association. All our fundraisers will receive a Team Blesma top and fundraising pack. Our Fundraising Team is always here to help with advice,

inspiration and those all-important fundraising materials.

Here are some of the highlights that we have planned for 2018 – you can find the full details of all the events for 2018 in the Fundraising Events calendar which has been included with this issue, or you can visit [www.blesma.org](http://www.blesma.org) for more information.

### NEW FOR 2018

**25 MARCH**

**London Landmarks Half Marathon**  
London

2018 sees the first London Landmarks Half Marathon – this will not be your average city run! From cultural landmarks and heritage to the city's quirky and hidden secrets, our runners will get to explore the capital on a route like no other!

**Fundraising target: £350**

### 22 APRIL

**Virgin Money Giving**  
**London Marathon**  
London

Our team of runners will be joining the 40,000-strong field for what is quite probably the world's most famous marathon. If you would like to soak up the atmosphere without taking on the 26.2-mile run, then why not come and join us at the Blesma cheer point? Your support would give our runners a massive boost!



Words: Jessica Mackinnon

**19 MAY**

**Nuclear Rush, Essex**

Team Blesma will be getting muddy again! This has become a firm favourite on the Fundraising Events calendar, and 2018 looks as though it will be just as fun. With new obstacles and a special Team Blesma start, we will be taking on 7km and 12km challenges.  
**Fundraising target: £100**

**28 MAY - 03 JUNE**

**Blesma Week**

Blesma Week is back! Our annual week of fundraising and awareness raising will be full of chances to get involved.

**05-07 JUNE**

**D-Day 44 Challenge**

**France**

The D-Day 44 Challenge commemorates the 1944 Allied invasion of occupied France. This unique challenge takes place on 06 June – D-Day – and will be the first time that

Blesma has teamed up with Blind Veterans UK and Combat Stress for a fundraising event. This event will be held in memory of Lieutenant Colonel Mike McErlain who established the challenge back in 2009. Team Blesma runners will take on an epic 44-mile run while our walkers will conquer a 22-mile walk – all in just one day.

**Fundraising target: £1,000**

**NEW FOR 2018**

**08-10 JUNE**

**Great North Swim**

**Lake District**

The Great North Swim is Europe's biggest open water swimming event, attracting almost 10,000 swimmers each year. The one-mile swim will take place at Brockhole on Windermere from Friday 08 to Sunday 10 June.

**Fundraising target: £150**

**Take the plunge**



**08 JULY**

**Velocity Zip Line**

**North Wales**

After the success of the 2017 event we are heading back to North Wales in 2018. Our intrepid team of adrenaline seekers will once again fly headfirst down Europe's longest – and the world's fastest – zip line. Hopefully, they'll keep their eyes open on the way down to see the stunning views!

**Fundraising target: £150**

## Do the Dalai Lama trek



## Ride a zip line



## Skydive

## Bake a cake



## Do your own thing



### NEW FOR 2018 29 JULY

#### Prudential RideLondon-Surrey 100 London – Surrey

We are delighted to have guaranteed places in this ride for 2018. Starting in Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, following a 100-mile route on closed roads through the capital and into Surrey's stunning countryside, finishing on The Mall, it's a truly spectacular event for all involved.

**Fundraising target: £500**

### 25-26 AUGUST South Coast Challenge Eastbourne – Arundel

Team Blesma will be taking in some of England's finest scenery; climbing up Beachy Head, over the magnificent Seven Sisters, and along the South Downs Way to a Brighton mid-point. Devil's Dyke, breathtaking views, and ups and downs all lie ahead before historic Arundel comes into

view after an amazing journey never to be forgotten. Our runners, joggers and walkers will take on either 25km, 50km or 100km routes.

**Fundraising target: £175-£425**

### 08 SEPTEMBER Fall For The Fallen

#### Devon and across the UK

Our annual charity tandem skydiving event to honour our fallen heroes, with each jump representing a life lost in conflict. In 2018, brave Team Blesma members will take to

the skies 15,000ft above Dunkeswell in Devon for the highest jump in the UK! Those who can't make it to our main event can jump from 20 other sites in the UK.

**Fundraising target: £500**

### NEW FOR 2018 16 SEPTEMBER

#### London to Brighton Cycle London – Brighton

Team Blesma cyclists will be taking on this iconic 54-mile

route along with 4,000 other cyclists. The day will be one big rolling carnival from London into the Sussex countryside. Riders will be greeted with the sight of the Brighton beaches and the chance for a refreshing dip in the sea.

**Fundraising target: £150**

### NEW FOR 2018 25 OCTOBER - 04 NOVEMBER Dalai Lama Trek

#### The Himalayas

Intrepid Team Blesma trekkers will be taking on this multi-day challenge exploring the foothills of the Himalayas. Starting in the heart of the Dalai Lama's Tibetan community, this challenging trek will take Team Blesma 67km through this fascinating region of North India. Ending this awesome experience with time to explore the Taj Mahal will make memories that will last a lifetime.

**Fundraising target: £2,740**

### DO YOUR OWN THING!

Not everyone who is part of Team Blesma takes part in one of our events. Whether you want to run, walk, cycle, or organise your own fundraising event or collection, we would love to welcome you to Team Blesma! Simply let us know what you want to do and we will be able to provide the fundraising support and materials to help.

*You can find full details of all the events for 2018 in the Fundraising Events calendar that has been included with this issue, or visit [www.blesma.org](http://www.blesma.org) for more information*



**To join Team Blesma at any of the 2018 events, contact the Fundraising Team at [fundraising@blesma.org](mailto:fundraising@blesma.org) or call 020 8548 7089**



↘ BLESMA BRIEFING

# From Salisbury Plain to the Atlantic Ocean

When you're tucking into your Christmas dinner, spare a thought for Jordan Beecher and Jon Armstrong. They'll be in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, rowing non-stop

A friendship that was forged years ago during a freezing military exercise on Salisbury Plain has led to two former Paratroopers taking on a daunting 3,000-mile row across the Atlantic Ocean. A decade after that meeting, Jordan Beecher and Jon Armstrong are about to plunge their oars into an epic challenge that will see them brave fearsome seas for more than 40 days.

Jon (right) now a Captain in the Royal Gurkha Rifles, and Jordan (far right) a former Lance Corporal in the Parachute Regiment who lost his left leg below the knee to an IED in Afghanistan, were given a rousing send-off at a fundraising evening held at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst in late November.

The duo, who are part of a 28-boat field that set off from the Canary Islands on 12 December bound for Antigua, hope to raise £100,000 for Blesma, the Royal Gurkha Rifles Trust and Dreamflight charities as a result of their epic expedition.

Racing as Team Trident under the Row2Recovery banner, they will face mountainous waves, winds of up to 50 knots, 40°C temperatures, and gruelling physical and mental shifts to power their seven-metre-long boat across the Atlantic for more than a month.

"It is not going to be an easy task. There will be days when one of us won't want to play the game, and will want to get out of the boat and walk home!" said Blesma Member Jordan, from St. Albans. "But obviously we know that is not an option and we'll definitely have each other's backs when we each need help."

Jordan, who was on his third tour of Afghanistan when he was injured in October 2012, has already won four Gold medals at the Invictus Games and become a British Indoor Rowing champion since his injury.

Blesma Chief Executive Barry Le Grys told the audience at the fundraising event at Sandhurst's Indian Army Memorial Room at Old College that the Association has been supporting war veterans for almost a century. "I dare say that in the 1920s it was dominoes, but now it is adventurers trying to row the Atlantic," said Barry. "But whatever it is, the principle of the Association remains the same and that is of trying to help one another. We are pleased to launch Jon and Jordan on their endeavour. We will always support our Members, whether it is rowing the Atlantic or regaining the mobility to play with their children."



From left: Jon and Jordan have been friends since they were teenagers. Now they are about to row the Atlantic

**"IT IS NOT GOING TO BE EASY. THERE WILL BE DAYS WHEN ONE OF US WON'T WANT TO PLAY THE GAME, BUT GET OUT OF THE BOAT AND WALK HOME!"**

At the fundraising event Jon, 30, said: "The charities that are supporting us share the same values – mostly that through friendship we can overcome the challenges life puts in our way. We'd like to thank Blesma, who have been so supportive over the last 18 months, and it is due to them that we are in the position to launch this endeavour."



Words: Danny Buckland

# INBOX

Word from our inbox. Get in touch at [editor@blesma.org](mailto:editor@blesma.org)

## Ten-and-a-half years as a BSO

*The Association has welcomed three new BSOs this year but, sadly, it is also saying goodbye to one. BSO Eastern Tom Ormiston is retiring from his position after 10-and-a-half years with Blesma.*

I WASN'T LOOKING TO WORK HARD after I retired from the Army in 2007. Then a call came that was to extend my working life by 10 years, and my feet haven't touched the ground until now! Unbeknownst to me at the time, three Blesma Area Welfare Officers – Keith Meakin, Pete Shields and Eric Pitchforth – all belonged to my Corps. I started working for Blesma before leaving the Army, and my first contact with Members was the 75th anniversary celebrations at the National Arboretum. My wife, Jill, was with me.

The Area Welfare Officers, as we were called then, looked after 700-plus Members and Widows each. Back then, there were large numbers of WWII Members and Widows in the Association, and I loved to hear their stories when I attended Branch lunches and other functions. I used to cajole the brave men and women of that era to write their stories down, and some of them did.

Amongst the Members were a few who had not served but had been injured by enemy bombs, mainly in the Blitz. Their stories were just as harrowing as those who had been to war but, to a man and woman, they wore their injuries lightly and never grumbled. As I hear often when I visit Members of that generation they “just got on with it”.

Along the way, we have inevitably lost many of our older generation. Tony Chapman, for example, who lost his leg when he was run over by a tank on an exercise on Salisbury Plain during the war. The tank sat on top of him for five hours! Reg Gutteridge lost his leg on D-Day and then went on to become a famous boxing commentator on TV. His lovely wife Connie is still with Blesma. Peggy Simmons lost her

leg to German bombers in London, then went on to have a very successful career overseas. I remember we had to ban John Green from going up and down the promenade in Great Yarmouth collecting for Blesma because he was in danger of being mugged!

The focus of Blesma increasingly encompasses all Members, and activities have moved on from simply the annual Widows' and Activity Weeks with a bit of skiing, scuba and sailing thrown in. Now, the Association sends Members to far-flung places such as South Africa, the Greek Islands, the Bahamas and the Maldives.



Tom has been a BSO for more than a decade

Speaking of Widows' Weeks, if I never see a bingo card again it will be too soon!

Many of our younger Members don't need Blesma day to day and are happy to get on with their lives knowing that the charity is there when they need it. Some have volunteered their services to help other Members. Prosthetics are far superior to the ones issued in the 1940s, '50s and '60s. Computerised legs were the stuff of science fiction but are common place today and, thankfully, the NHS has come on board to start issuing them to non-war pensioners and AFCS recipients.

Now that my time has finally come to leave Blesma, I can be satisfied that I did my best for my flock. I have tried to be available to whoever needed me in my Area. I hope I have made life easier for some and, if I didn't get around to seeing you as often as you would have liked, I can only apologise.

I would like to thank my Welfare Representatives and the Branch Secretaries for all their hard work over the years. Without you, life would have been difficult and I would have seen fewer Members.

I must also thank the other BSOs for their friendship and advice over the years. We always said we were a team who did

the same job very differently! In particular, I will miss my Friday conversations with Pete Shields, putting the world to rights and bouncing ideas off each other. Bill Gillett and Mike Downes have also been alongside me for my entire time with Blesma. I wish them all well for their remaining time with the Association.

However, the one person who has made it all so much easier is my wife Jill, who has run my office, kept my diary, typed, shredded, posted and filed my paperwork, and generally kept me on the straight and narrow. She loved coming to lunches, dinners and most other functions with me, but her greatest enjoyment was talking to the older Members and listening to their stories. Without her, I probably wouldn't have lasted as long as I have with the charity.

We first met when we were in our teens in Edinburgh and now we are off to start the next phase

of our life together. We have our grandson Sam (who loves to be involved with Blesma when he can) and another on the way in January. Then we have our indoor bowls and we may buy a motorhome to travel around the country.

Finally, thanks must go to my Members who have put up with me for 10-and-a-half years. I have enjoyed your company, your friendship and your cups of tea! Perhaps we will meet again at a lunch but, if not, take care and remember, your BSO is just on the other end of a phone if you need anything.

**Tom Ormiston**

## NEWS BRIEFS

### THE GREAT SOUTH RUN. DONE!

The grown-up children of Member Dave Clackett beat heavy winds and rain in October to conquer the Great South Run, and raised £730 for Blesma in the process.

Sixty-one-year-old dad, Dave, lost his leg while serving as a Royal Marine. His kids, Lee and Marc Clackett, and Kirsty Cobb (below) from Waterlooville decided to take on the half marathon in Portsmouth as a 'thank you' for the continuous emotional and physical support they say Blesma provides their family. "We had noticed an improvement in dad mentally and physically



after Blesma's support, so we decided to team up and give the charity something back as a thank you," Kirsty said.

Kirsty's son, Ashton, was all set to take part in the Great South Junior Run but the event was cancelled due to the heavy storm. Instead, he ran the Santa Mile Fun Run in Portsmouth in December, with his cousin Amy, both dressed as Santa.

### CHIEF EXECUTIVE LOOKS BACK ON A GREAT YEAR

Blesma's Chief Executive Barry Le Grys recorded his annual video message at Horse Guards in London after the Remembrance Service at the Cenotaph.

"There have been quite a few changes in Blesma in 2017," he said. "We have taken on a new Support Officer to look after Wales. Heather Nicholson, with the assistance of the nine Support Officers, will focus specifically, at the wish of Trustees, on independence and wellbeing. And Ian Waller will take on the Activities Programme."

Barry singled out the Arrow 100 Cycle, the Blesma Community Programme and the Borneo Expedition for particular praise.

"The standout message is to stay engaged with the Association and keep in touch."

**Watch the full video at [www.blesma.org](http://www.blesma.org)**

Words: Jessica Mackinnon

Pictures: Kingsize Photography



## Association to back Team BRIT for fifth year

**B**lesma has confirmed that it is set to support Team BRIT in 2018, marking the fifth consecutive year the charity has supported the motor racing outfit.

Team BRIT is made up of disabled drivers, a number of whom are military veterans, and they have the ambitious goal of becoming the first-ever all-disabled team to race in the 24 Hours of Le Mans.

Drivers and Blesma Members Anthony Williams, Jimmy Hill and Andy Searle have all competed in a number of races this year, with Blesma Member Ashley Hall (right) joining the team in early October.

"We are extremely grateful for the continued support we have received from Blesma over the years," said Blesma Member and founder of the racing team, Dave Player. "The Association's backing has been extremely influential in creating the

technology that we initially needed for KartForce, which has now been further developed for Team BRIT"



## BLESMA TO BENEFIT FROM LIBOR FUND

IN HIS AUTUMN 2017 BUDGET, THE Chancellor Philip Hammond announced that Blesma will receive nearly £900,000 from the LIBOR banking fine fund.

The money has been awarded for several specific projects: the Association is set to receive funds to support limbless veterans across Wales and the Border counties by employing a new BSO specifically for that Area. The grant money will support the permanent post – including all associated running costs – for three years.

Blesma will also receive £694,000 to create and run a new National Outreach Team. The Outreach programme will have

funding for two years and will provide extra support and services to Members in each of the Areas over and above that currently delivered by the BSOs.

"We are delighted that the Chancellor has recognised the continued work of the Association with this grant," said Ian Waller, Operations Director. "The funds, which will be available from May 2018, will allow us to provide a number of fantastic opportunities and services to Members across the UK over the next couple of years."

More detailed information on exactly how the grants will be spent will be revealed in the Spring 2018 issue.

# Set sail for a unique adventure next year

## Landlubbers wanted for trip of a lifetime

Fancy being part of a Blesma crew for a week's sailing next August? The Association has chartered a tall ship from the Jubilee Sailing Trust to sail from Southampton to the Channel Islands on 18 August 2018.

*Tenacious* has 36 berths and caters for all disabilities. Members will get stuck in, take part in watches and contribute to work on board, although no previous sailing experience will be required. Carers, spouses and families are welcome, however children must be at least 12 years old.

For more info and to apply, email  
[meo@blesma.org](mailto:meo@blesma.org)

Or call

**020 8548 7094**

**Apply  
Now!**





Martin Berry captures 'speed and power' at Sandown Park



## It's a photo finish for Blesma's snappers

**B**lesma photographers were given the chance to broaden their skills in September when they were invited to the races at Sandown Park. Horse racing is notoriously difficult to photograph, but with access to the parade ring and winners enclosure as well as being able to shoot the races themselves, Blesma's photographers were spoilt for choice on the day.

"It was a great day out, and as I have never tried to capture this style of photography before, it was quite a challenge," said Martin Berry, one of the 11 Members who attended the event. "I enjoyed trying to capture the horses racing at speed, and it was fantastic to be able to spend the day with other Members sharing advice about angles and camera settings."

The Jockey Club's racing photographer, Dan Abraham, kindly gave Members tips on what he looks for when taking photos at racing events, and then the Members were given the chance to put his advice to the test with a photography competition.

Members were tasked with submitting three photographs on the themes of Power and Speed, Elegance and Beauty, Atmosphere and Relationships, and Spontaneous Moments. The photographs will be judged by Blesma Ambassador and celebrated photographer Marcus Lyon, with the shortlisted photographs to be shown in an exhibition on Grand Military Day at Sandown Race Course in March 2018.

## BIKERS RIDE IN REMEMBRANCE



BLESMA'S BIKERS JOINED THOUSANDS of other motorcyclists in October to honour those who could no longer ride beside them. More than 7,000 petrolheads made their way to the National Memorial Arboretum from all across the country at the start of Autumn for the tenth annual Ride To The Wall event.

Riders set off from 11 official starting points around the UK to join together for a special service at the Armed Forces Memorial in Staffordshire. Over the decade that the event has been running, the ride has raised more than £600,000 for the National Memorial Arboretum.

This year, nine Blesma Members and their partners attended the event. "Ride To The Wall has become very special to a lot of people," said Linden Allen, who first joined the ride in 2010. "It means a great deal to me, especially after I finished my service. It is something I can dedicate to the friends I have lost and so it means a lot to me. It's important not to forget."



## HIT FOR SIX BY OUR CHARITY GOLF DAY

Denham golf club hosted a charity golf day in aid of Blesma in September, with TV's *Bargain Hunt* auctioneer Charles Hanson hosting the charity raffle and auction.

Sixty golfers, including 15 Members, headed to Buckinghamshire to raise money for the Association, hoping to hit a hole-in-one and drive away with a £20,000 Mini.

"The superb day brought Members and supporters together, and raised £6,000 for the Association," said Operations Director, Ian Waller. "Congratulations to the winning team, Hampden Agencies Ltd, Howard Lambert who won 'Nearest the Pin' and Matt Goodwin who won 'Longest Drive.'"

# OBITUARIES

## Those we have lost



### Mary Drake

16 October 1925 - 07 September 2017

MARY DRAKE, a veteran fundraiser, has died at the age of 92. Mary, who lived in Chelmsford, Essex, was involved in establishing the Friends of Blesma more than 47 years ago, and raised more than £100,000 for the Association throughout her lifetime.

Mary's connection to the Armed Forces began just before the outbreak of WWII, when she joined the Women's Air Training Corps. Mary met Lancaster Bomber Rear Gunner Albert Drake at a dance, and was married to him for 65 years before he passed away in 2012.

The couple spent 50 years raising money for Blesma at events across the country. In 2016, Mary was recognised by the Association for her selfless work by being given the Cyril Stephens Award (above).

Mary was well known in her local community for her kindness and faith. Her devotion to a cause was evident, even on the day she was admitted to hospital, when she worried that being there meant she wouldn't attend a fundraising event.

Mary leaves behind a son, Kelvin, three grandchildren, three great-grandchildren and her sister, Alice.

### Lawrence Holt

01 December 1935 - 13 June 2017

LAWRENCE HOLT served in the Royal Navy as a Mechanical Engineer between 1952 and 1963. After initial training at Torpoint in Cornwall, Lawrence joined HMS Glory in 1953 for active service in the Far East and Korea. Lawrence was awarded the Korean Campaign Medal, the United Nations Korean War Medal and the Queen's Coronation Medal.

During the next 14 months, Lawrence also served on board HMS Birmingham on peacekeeping duties in the Far East. He later served on HMS Bramble and HMS Victorious until he was medically discharged for a severe intestinal illness that led to a long period of treatment.

In 2005, as part of the fiftieth anniversary commemorations of the Korean War, Lawrence was awarded the Ambassador for Peace Medal by the South Korean government. In 2012, he received the Lord and Lady Shuttleworth Award which is presented to a Blesma Member who is very active in Blesma affairs.

Lawrence leaves two children, Michael and Susan, four grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren.

### Mark Fincham

09 July 1980 - 06 August 2017

MARK FINCHAM, from King's Lynn, served in the Royal Marines from 2003 to 2011, before leaving as a Lance Corporal. After a career in the Marines, Mark – who

## Those who have passed away

September 2017 - October 2017. May they rest in peace.

Ashmore T	RMP	HQ	25/09/2017
Astell C	RA	HQ (Richmond)	30/09/2017
Breese B	RM	HQ	19/10/2017
Crilly J	Irish Guards	HQ	22/09/2017
Devonport G	Royal Signals	HQ	01/09/2017
Garbett J	RAF	HQ	13/09/2017
Hedgecock R	Wiltshire	Southampton	31/10/2017
Hughes J	RM	HQ (Newham)	31/10/2017
Nobbs T	RMP	HQ	29/10/2017
Potts R	York & Lancs	HQ	19/10/2017



had his leg amputated following a traffic accident in 2007 – turned to motorbike racing. He competed for True Heroes Racing, a team made up of injured UK service personnel and veterans.

Sadly, Mark lost his life when he was involved in a crash whilst competing in a Pirelli National Superstock 1000 Championship race at Thruxton in Hampshire on Sunday 06 August.

Hundreds of motorcyclists travelled from across the country to join Mark's funeral procession following an appeal from Mark's family for riders to accompany him on his final journey.

## Stuart Holt

**14 November 1934 - 23 August 2017**

STUART WILLIAM JOHN HOLT sadly passed away peacefully on 23 August after a short illness.

Stuart, from East Sussex, was born on 14 November 1934 and joined the Royal Engineers at the age of 18. In 1997, at the age of 62, Stuart lost both his legs below the knee after contracting meningitis and septicaemia. Shortly afterwards, he began fundraising and volunteering for a number of charities, which led to his involvement in Coasting Together, a user group for amputees and wheelchair users at the Sussex Rehabilitation Centre.

In 2014, Stuart became the Chairman of the Limbless Association and was invited to join the Westminster Cross Party Limb Loss Group.

Owen has his sights on Paralympic glory in South Korea



Words: Jessica Mackinnon, Danny Buckland Photograph: Frazer Waller

# Owen picks up pace for Paralympic place

Owen Pick's Paralympic dream is carving ever closer into view as the former Royal Anglian closes in on a coveted slot in the GB team. The 25 year old, who only took up snowboarding five years ago, hopes to lead the British charge for glory in the boardercross and banked slalom disciplines at the 2018 Winter Paralympics.

Blesma-sponsored Owen, who had a below-knee amputation of his right leg after stepping on an IED in Afghanistan as a 19 year old, has risen up the rankings after securing a silver medal in a World Championship event earlier this year and attaining the squad qualification times.

"I've done all I can now. It is ridiculously tight at the top with a second separating the first five riders," said Owen. "It'll be anyone's on the day, but that means if you

mess up in the tiniest way you'll miss out on a medal!" Owen's busy schedule includes training trips to Canada, Finland and France in the coming weeks, before the GB squad is announced in January. If successful, he will compete in the 2018 Paralympic Winter Games in South Korea on 12 and 16 March.

"To go to the Paralympics having jumped on a board for the first time five years ago in a country where there's no snow would be just *wow!*" Owen added. "I hope it boosts the adaptive snowboard scene in the UK. It would be cool to inspire anybody, not just people with disability, to realise that there's nothing to stop you unless you let it. I'm working hard and know this is an amazing opportunity for me. I can't thank Blesma enough for taking me on that first ski trip and for supporting me along the way."

## £8K NOT SOMETHING TO CARP ABOUT

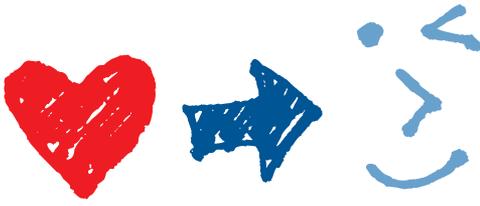
THE NINTH ANNUAL FORCES CARP Classic has raised more than £8,000 for Blesma and Great Ormond Street Hospital.

The competition, which took place over a week in October at Abbey Lakes in France, was the best attended to date, with some 100 anglers from the military and emergency services taking part. Veterans, including Blesma Members Kelvin Daniels and Roger Fullbrook (far right), got in on the act too.

Organised by veterans Russ Marsh and Tim Gray, there were plenty of prizes up for grabs including Lake Champion (the competition took place over five lakes) and Overall Pair, which was awarded to the pair of anglers who caught the heaviest amount of fish over the five lakes.



Russ and Tim, who between them have served in the Royal Artillery for more than 50 years, saved the original Army Carp Classic from demise. Next year will be the event's tenth anniversary and the team are already planning to make it extra special.



“I was quite excited and a wee bit scared”



WHEN MICHAEL MELLON DECIDED TO HAVE AN AMPUTATION, HIS THREE YOUNG KIDS KNEW EXACTLY WHAT WAS GOING TO HAPPEN. BUT THEY COULDN'T HAVE DREAMED HOW POSITIVE THE OUTCOME WOULD BE

Support is a huge part of life for the Mellon family. Rugby, basketball, swimming – you name it, Blesma Member Michael and his wife Deborah, or one of their three children Ryan (11), Eve (10) or Sarah (six) is probably doing it. Yet a little less than four years ago, Michael could barely walk, was in constant pain and had to spend much of his time using a wheelchair.

Michael, now 37 years old, joined the RAF in 1997 when he was just 17. Four years later, he was playing his beloved rugby for his RAF station when he was badly injured in a tackle that fractured the fibula and tibia in his left leg. The injury developed into Compartment Syndrome, where “the blood would flow into the different compartments of my leg, but wouldn’t flow out, so my leg would swell up, damaging nerves and killing

off muscle.” The pain, Michael recalls, was severe and persistent.

By 2005, Michael’s leg wasn’t getting any better and he was still in huge amounts of pain. He was medically discharged and decided to relocate to Fife, where Deborah had grown up. Further operations made no difference and in 2011 a surgeon suggested amputation. It was, Michael says, “a bit of a shock.” But in late 2013, after weighing up all his options, with expert support from a team of NHS consultants, psychiatrists and physiotherapists, Michael made the difficult decision to have his leg amputated.



#### MAKING THE RIGHT DECISION

Meeting the family at their home in Cardenden, Fife, they admit there have been some challenging times over the last few years, but Michael’s amputation is clearly a decision that none of them

would reverse. Before his amputation, Michael could only walk using a stick, if at all. His weight ballooned from 14 to 20 stone and his lack of mobility caused him huge psychological issues and put real pressure on his marriage. “I couldn’t do much with the kids,” he says. “I would walk a short distance and be in pain, so we never went out, not even to the park.”

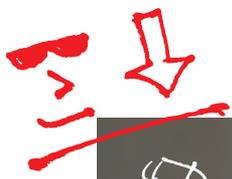
“It was terrible,” recalls Deborah, of the impact on their relationship. “I wanted to go out and do things with the kids, but I didn’t want to do it on my own, so we would be in the house pretty much all the time. We would go out for maybe 15 minutes before Michael would want to go home. We lost contact with our friends. It was so isolating.”

Things were made more challenging by the fact that Michael was the primary carer for Ryan and Eve while Deborah worked

*"My daddy hurt  
his leg and needed  
to get it chopped  
off, and the doctors  
made a new leg  
for him"*

*Sarah Mellon*





*“Dad was always in pain. We’d ask him to play, but he couldn’t walk. He’d just sit there”*

*Ive Mellon*





full-time as a nursery manager. “Initially, when the kids were little and I was just changing nappies it was fine,” says Michael, “but when they started to get more active, I struggled.” Eve remembers the height of her dad’s injury as a “worrying” time because “he was always in pain. He would always be shouting out ‘Ow,’” she says. “He would be sitting on the couch watching TV and we’d ask him to come out and play, and he wouldn’t be able to walk or anything. He would just sit there.”

But even though life was anything but easy before Michael’s amputation, Ryan and Eve admit they had mixed feelings about their dad having his leg removed. Ryan, who was just seven at the time, recalls that he “didn’t really want him to get it off” at first and worried that his dad might end up in more pain than he already was. “But then dad spoke to us and said it would be better because we’d be able to go out and play, and do stuff together as a family.”

Eve was “quite excited and a wee bit scared” and, with ambitions as a six year old to be a doctor (she now wants to be a scientist), was fascinated by the amputation process. “One of her questions was: ‘what are they going to do with your leg?’” says Michael. To answer her questions, Michael and Deborah found an animation of a leg amputation on YouTube. Deborah advises

**Four years after his elective amputation, Michael feels as though he has been given ‘a fresh start’**



others going through a similar experience to “be honest” with their children. “Let them understand what’s happening and talk them through it step by step,” she says. So Deborah and the children visited Michael in the hospital every day, and the children were always full of questions.

“They would constantly ask: ‘What’s this for, dad? What’s that?’” says Michael. It helped that he shared a ward with five other amputees. “They were telling us how they had lost their legs, and how everything was going to be fine,” remembers Eve.

Immediately after the operation, Ryan’s fears seemed to be coming true as Michael struggled with phantom pain and his leg swelled up “like an elephant’s foot”. He was in such agony that at first he regretted his decision, but within four days of receiving his prosthetic leg Michael was walking normally. His progress and commitment to physiotherapy “amazed” his doctors.

“His mindset was completely different almost straight away,” recalls Deborah. “Once he made the decision to lose the leg, he just got on with it.” She and Michael both acknowledge that the element of choice, something many Blesma Members won’t have had, made his recovery easier.

Six weeks after the operation, Michael was back home. The phantom pains have been eased by the drug Memantine, and although post-amputation sores mean he can’t wear his prosthesis every day, he is far more mobile than before the operation.

### LOOKING AFTER EACH OTHER

Since Michael’s amputation, daily life has changed for the family. Deborah works part-time in the mornings at a local shop, so it’s up to Michael and the children to get themselves ready for school. It takes Michael longer to get ready now – “I can’t just jump in the shower” – so the children all play a part. Eve gets Sarah dressed for school while Ryan sorts out the washing machine and dishwasher. Has it made them grow up quicker? “Yes, when we’re older it will be easier for us,” says Ryan.

As Michael tends to wear shorts, it’s no secret to the children’s friends that their dad has a prosthetic leg. Sarah, who thinks her dad’s leg is “cool” and has never known anything else, tells her friends “he hurt his



leg and needed to get it chopped off, and the doctors made that new leg for him.”

Ryan and Eve are now in the Cubs and Beavers, and Michael has been invited to chat to both groups about his amputation. “I went along, took my leg off, and they all wanted to hold it and have their picture taken with it,” he laughs.

The new lease of life that’s come with having the amputation means Michael has also been able to get back into sports, which has played a huge role in bringing the family closer together. The NHS gave him a blade to help him walk and run, and Deborah says she’ll never forget the first time Michael was able to play with Ryan in the garden, only a few months after his amputation. “That had never happened before,” she says. Now on Saturdays, Ryan plays wheelchair rugby and basketball with his dad, and Sunday mornings are spent at Kirkcaldy rugby club, where Ryan and Eve play, and Michael coaches.

Going to the disability sports club has been particularly useful, says Deborah, because it has opened the children’s eyes to a range of disabilities. “Disabled people are just a part of life for them now,” says Michael.

“[People at the sports club] are just like me, only a little bit different,” says Eve. “When my dad came in to talk to

**Food for thought: family time is more fun for the Mellons since Michael made the decision to amputate his leg**



the school, everyone got used to him.” For the youngest, Sarah, who doesn’t remember her dad with both legs, disabilities are something she doesn’t even notice. “We were watching CBBC and there was a girl with one arm,” says Ryan. “We asked Sarah: ‘What’s different about that lady?’ And she said: ‘She’s got blue eyes.’”

There is a sense that the Mellon family is making up for lost time, embracing a range of activities and opportunities that would have been unthinkable before Michael’s amputation. He has represented Scotland in the Wheelchair Rugby League World Cup and was part of Team UK at the recent Invictus Games in Toronto, which the whole family was able to attend. “My most favourite thing to do is watch my dad play wheelchair basketball,” says Sarah. “He’s really good at it, and throws the ball a lot. Sometimes he wins medals – that makes me really proud of him.”

Michael certainly has no regrets now about his decision to remove his leg. “I wish I’d had the amputation years before,” he says. “We’ve missed out on lots of things, like holidays and doing stuff with the kids.”

For other children whose parents may be considering, or have been forced to have, an amputation Ryan has the following advice: “It will be alright and you don’t have to worry about things. It will be better for you when the limb does come off as you will be able to do more stuff together.”

“I really thought I had lost everything,” Michael reflects of the years after his injury. “I lost my job, I lost my friends, I felt so sorry for myself. But what I can do now is great. I can’t wear the leg every day, but that’s outweighed by the advantages of getting to run around the park and the rugby pitch with my kids. It’s like I’ve been given a fresh start!”

*For more information on any issues relating to prosthetics, contact Brian at Chadwell Heath on 020 8548 7080 or at [bsoprosthetics@blesma.org](mailto:bsoprosthetics@blesma.org), or visit the Blesma website at [www.blesma.org](http://www.blesma.org)*



## FAMILIES PROJECT TO HELP FUTURE GENERATIONS

The findings of Blesma's Families Project are set to be published in 2018. The work, which explores the everyday experiences of limb loss, and the needs of veterans and their families, has been conducted with the Veterans and Families Institute at Anglia Ruskin University.

Members, their partners, and wider family members have spoken about the realities of living with limb loss, including what it is like to transition back into their family home after amputation, the challenges of living with an amputation, how families cope with caring responsibilities, and views on prosthetics care and NHS health and social care.

The findings, which will be published in the Summer 2018 issue of Blesma magazine, will inform how Blesma can enhance support now and in the future. It is also hoped the project will influence services such as charities and health and social care services specific to veterans.



*"Dad said it would be better because we'd play and do stuff as a family"*  
Ryan Mellon

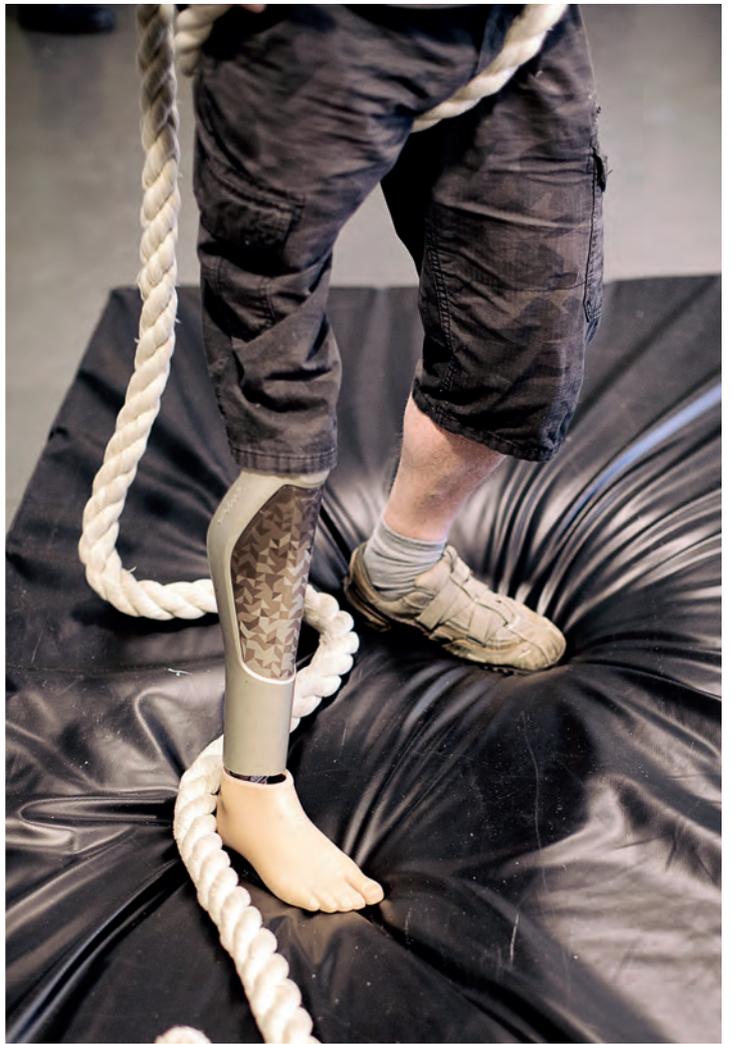


Photography: Andy Bate Words: Nick Moore

A person with prosthetic arms is shown from the back, wearing a dark t-shirt. They are in a workshop or studio environment with various tools and equipment visible in the background. A bright light fixture is visible above them. The person's prosthetic arms are metallic and have a textured surface. One arm is extended towards the left side of the frame.

**“I WANT  
PERFORMERS  
WHO HAVE A  
STRENGTH,  
A MAVERICK  
SENSE, AND A  
WILLINGNESS  
TO TAKE  
A RISK”**

BLESMA MEMBERS HAVE BEEN  
INVITED TO A WORKING SESSION  
WITH GRAEAE THEATRE COMPANY.  
TIME TO GET AIRBORNE...



**A** quite extraordinary scene is unfolding in a rehearsal studio in a theatre in fashionable East London. Hanging from three pieces of circus equipment – a rope, a hoop and a hammock – are three Blesma Members. Seventy-one-year-old Tony Lloyd is out of his wheelchair and in fits of laughter, swinging back and forth with great gusto. Nerys Pearce, who also uses a wheelchair, is hoisting herself up a rope with the kind of power that’s won her multiple medals at the Warrior Games – all the while joking about ‘face-plants’.

Meanwhile, Kirk Bowett, who lost part of his left arm in a vehicle blast in Iraq, has managed to get into a hoop and is dangling upside down. “You need upper body and core strength for this – it’s not easy with one arm,” he grins. But everywhere you look, people are overcoming difficulties to get things done. That’s the Blesma spirit!

These exercises have a wider purpose beyond having fun and learning new skills, however. The Members are at the rehearsal studio a theatre called Graeae (pronounced

## “THE ARTISTIC SIDE OF BLESMA IS SUCCESSFUL NOW, AND THAT’S BECAUSE ANYONE CAN HAVE A GO”

grey eye), which is the UK’s flagship dramatic company for D/deaf and disabled artists, and this is actually part of an audition process for a large-scale show.

Aerial performances are a key element of the audition. “There’s something about the discipline of circus skills that is similar to how things work in the Armed Forces,” says Jenny Sealey, the theatre company’s Artistic Director who, having co-directed the London 2012 Paralympic Games opening ceremony, certainly knows how to stage a spectacle.

“Those injured people who were involved in the 2012 ceremony found aerial work allowed them to readdress their physicality. They felt liberation, empowerment and renewal. I’m looking for performers who have a strength, a maverick sense, and the willingness to take a risk. These skills can help in a very interesting way in terms of their long-term rehabilitation.” The audition day is split into two parts.



### JENNY SEALEY

*Jenny, a former actress, has been the Artistic Director and Chief Executive of Graeae for 20 years. She co-directed the 2012 London Paralympic Games opening ceremony*

#### Tell us about Graeae’s aims

Our vision is to fight the inequality and the lack of visibility of deaf and disabled people in theatre. We want to push the boundaries into the arts in general. It’s about putting deaf and disabled people centre stage. After injury, there are many barriers to break through to feel like a person again, and that’s why organisations like Blesma are so important.

#### You co-directed the London 2012 Paralympic Games opening ceremony.

##### How amazing was it to be involved in something like that?

It was an extraordinary time in my life. I worked alongside Bradley Hemmings, and we were the first disabled duo to ever run an opening ceremony. I learned so much and it was so hard, but I loved every single minute of it.

##### How impressed are you by Blesma’s performers?

They have a drive, resilience, and a beautiful vulnerability. The guys I’ve talked to wear their hearts on their sleeves and are very emotionally literate. They fit well with Graeae. We’re not a company that sits still. We do a lot with very little money.

After the acrobatics, the second segment involves storytelling. Through voice work, song, and script read-throughs, Members share their life stories and get an idea of what the final performance might feel like. As for the show, Jenny hopes that audiences will come away with a new perspective on what it means to be a soldier.

“Because the show is planned for the outdoors, the soundscape and physicality will be very important. Words can get lost

very easily. This is all about developing a powerful visual picture,” says Jenny.

“I’d like people to remember what wounded veterans have been through a little more. Often, society likes to forget those soldiers, because they are physical reminders of the atrocities of war. But when we remember the dead, we also have to remember the living. The show will demonstrate the extraordinariness of the human spirit, and it ends with quite a

## Blesma Members take centre stage



### 1. TERRY BROOKS

"I did the Blesma Community Programme last year despite being sceptical of storytelling. I quickly realised how fantastic it was, and now I tell everyone how beneficial storytelling can be. I think I did OK on the aerials for 71! It gave me a real sense of freedom."



### 2. NERYS PEARCE

"I was impressed with the aerial set-up. The fact that I could use the equipment as someone who is paralysed was great – and I didn't mind splatting on the mat! I'd love to get involved with the performance because I have an arty side that I don't often use."



### 3. TONY LLOYD

"It was a brilliant day. The aerials took me back to gymnastics in my youth. With more practice, and after losing a few pounds, it'll get easier! The storytelling is also something I'm really up for. I've done a few drama things with Blesma and it's great to mix in with all the other Members."



### 4. JOHN REEVES

"I work in a gym, but this was very different. I used muscles I didn't know I had, and it showed me that I'm not as flexible as I thought! I'd really like to be involved with the play. It's very important to tell our stories – the focus of today's world has moved on from injured veterans."



### 5. KIRK BOWETT

"It was great doing the audition – we were all trying to show what we could bring to the table. I think the confidence-building aspect of both aerials and storytelling is important. The more artistic side of Blesma is very successful now, and that's because anyone can have a go."



### 6. ALAN LONG

"I'm the sort of person who will try anything and I'm so glad I gave this a go. I've never done storytelling before, but I can talk for England, so I don't think it will be a problem! I love to tell tales, and educating people about amputation is interesting."



**Out of their comfort zone: Jenny and her team at Graeae are looking for Members who are enthusiastic and willing to take a risk**

euphoric moment, with our actors saying; ‘Look at us’.

It’s something that resonates with the Members who are dangling upside down from the array of apparatus. “I’ve been in situations where people didn’t know how to deal with my injuries,” says Alan Long, who lost a hand in a forklift truck accident – it was later sown back on – and a leg in a vehicle incident.

“My son married a woman who had two children, and they used to be very unsure about my leg. But once they got to know me, they realised it wasn’t an important thing – and now they even play with it!

“An old friend used to cross the street to avoid me, too. I eventually knocked on his door and spoke to his wife. She told me that he didn’t know what to say to me. But it didn’t matter what he said. We’re great pals again now, and it’s important to keep the message out there. Hopefully, a show that involves injured veterans will do that.”

Kirk agrees. “One hugely positive effect of the Blesma Community Programme, in which veterans tell their life stories to groups of teenagers before they then run workshops on the theme of overcoming adversity, is that it has given Members confidence. Today is very much an extension of that, building on what the brilliant Community Programme has done.

“Some of us who would never have dreamed of doing this kind of thing when we were in the military have now got the confidence to perform and act. We might have been shy before, but now we’re stepping up to the plate to audition for a big show. Blesma’s physical challenges build confidence in one way, while this does it in another. It’s all good!”

Not that there aren’t some sore muscles today, too. “It was certainly a struggle getting upside down, but the instructors were absolutely brilliant and helped me with all the equipment,” says John Reeves

after the session. “It’s something very different, so I’m keen to get involved in the show, given the chance.”

It’s also a clear sign that Blesma is now truly expanding its creative horizons. Artistic projects such as the photography group and the Community Programme are becoming more and more popular within the Association, and cater for many Members who perhaps don’t fancy the idea of a tough physical challenge.

Today’s workshop feels like it fits perfectly with that ethos. As Jenny says: “There are many artists and poets in the Armed Forces. Some just don’t quite know it yet!”

*More details will be available on Blesma’s website at [www.blesma.org](http://www.blesma.org) early in 2018. To get involved in all sorts of Blesma activities, take a look at the Activities Brochure that is included in this issue of the magazine*

# Changing the way military veterans are treated

THERE ARE AS MANY MILITARY VETERANS IN THE UK AS THERE ARE DIABETICS. SO WHY ARE THE MAJORITY OF GPs SO ILL-INFORMED?

**S**imon Brown has got the audience at the Salisbury Arts Centre Theatre in the palm of his hand. “On a mission to rescue six people in Iraq in 2006, I was shot in the face by a sniper,” says the former REME man. “The bullet went into my left cheek and came out of the right one. As you can imagine, it ruined my day! But a mate owed me a fiver, and being a Yorkshireman, I wanted to make sure I got off the battlefield alive!”

There’s a ripple of laughter from the crowd as Simon, who is sporting a striking Union Jack false eye, diffuses the tension of his dramatic story. His one-man show is working very well on stage but this is, in fact, an educational experience. The audience is made up of

GPs and Registrars (GPs in training), and the evening, organised by the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP), is aimed at giving the nation’s doctors a better understanding of veterans’ healthcare.

The idea for the series of seminars came about after the RCGP was persuaded that, with 2.8 million veterans in the UK (almost the same number as there are diabetics), GPs should learn more about their unique medical needs. An e-learning package was written by Dr Jonathan Leach and soon afterwards, Lieutenant Colonel Julian Woodhouse, a GP in the Royal Army Medical Corps, began to deliver some direct teaching. So far, he’s hosted 33 events like this one, with more than 2,000 GPs having taken part.



## **SIMON BROWN**

*Simon served for 13 years in the REME before he was injured in 2006*

"During these talks, I try to get across what the medical issues are for veterans, what the most common pitfalls are, and what resources GPs can pull in to help us. A lot of GPs don't realise there is a plethora of well-resourced organisations they can refer us to.

"I want GPs to leave these seminars with more confidence to ask their patients if they are veterans, and to contact the appropriate support agencies. They'll find that, all of a sudden, there are lots of resources they can tap into. I represent Blind Veterans UK and Blesma during the speed dating, so I tell the GPs what the charities offer. It's great that there is practical, financial and emotional peer support for veterans – and GPs can find this very powerful if used in the right way."



**“I’VE BEEN STABBED, SHOT, BLOWN UP, SET ON FIRE, AND RUN OVER TWICE. YOU’VE PUT ME BACK TOGETHER”**

**ABOVE**  
**Simon explains to GPs and Registrars how they can be of more help to military veterans**  
**OPPOSITE**  
**(Clockwise from top left) Lt Col Julian Woodhouse, Simon Brown, Brian Chenier, Col Chris Woodhouse**

“I joined up in 1988 and have served on operations on every continent, including the Antarctic!” says Julian. “My father was an Infantry officer, and my father-in-law was in the Engineers. I am wholly invested in veterans’ healthcare – it’s a subject very close to home.

“My sister is a GP, and she initially asked me to run a few lectures. The first one, in 2015, was very successful, attracting more than 100 GPs, so we’ve continued to expand. Brigadier Robin Simpson then made sure veterans’ healthcare was put on the curriculum for Registrars, so everyone learning to become a GP now HAS to be interested!”

**Nuts, bolts and speed dating**

The sessions follow a similar pattern. Julian gives a talk in which he explains the “nuts and bolts” of veterans’ healthcare, covering issues from amputation to PTSD to deafness. Then, a veteran tells their personal story.

“After that, we have what I call ‘speed dating,’” says Julian. “We split the GPs into groups and they rotate through a number of support agencies; Blesma, Help for Heroes, Combat Stress, Blind Veterans UK, The Ripple Pond...

“GPs learn by identifying problems and finding solutions – they don’t like the *fact, fact, fact* approach. They love to associate a solution with a real patient, so meeting veterans works very well. They learn about specifics and find out what organisations like Blesma can offer. We hope they all leave with an increased understanding of the veteran community and an awareness of the need to identify and refer them.”

Tonight’s talk comes from Simon, who outlines the issues he faced during, and after, his 13 years of service. “I’ve had mental health issues as a result of seeing horrific things in Iraq and Kosovo and not talking about them,” he tells the audience. “My mental health also dipped when I woke up from an induced coma on Christmas Eve to discover I’d lost my left eye!

“But I do consider myself fortunate. Military people try to look on the bright side. At the same time, I found out that two of my mates had been killed. Suddenly, being shot in the head didn’t seem so bad!

“Over the last 11 years, I’ve had 25 operations, and most of my medical care has been very good. For me, it’s about communication – I’ve only had one poor experience with a surgeon – so my message to you as health professionals when you’re working with veterans is *talk to us*. I was a mechanic. If you bring your car to me, I know how it works, but you know what’s wrong with it. A body is the same. You as GPs know how the body works, but I know what’s wrong. Unless we talk, we’re going nowhere.

“You don’t need to prove you’re cleverer than me by using massive words – and remember that military people don’t like fluffy talk! We get told what to do in life, so tell us straight what our problems are, and what we need to do to sort them out. We’ll listen.

“I’ve been stabbed, shot, blown up, set on fire, and run over twice – I’ve cashed in on my National Insurance! You have put me back together. But people like me want to help you deliver a better service, so ask as many questions as you can. We’re very open.”





**NOMSA MAPHANGO**  
GP REGISTRAR

“War can sometimes seem distant and unreal when you’re watching it on TV. This event brought home the fact that there are still lots of people suffering from the aftermath of conflict.”

## THE DOCTOR WILL SEE YOU (DIFFERENTLY!) NOW



**LAURA EDWARDS, GP**

“This is a very new perspective. I hadn’t considered identifying veterans before this, or thought about how they tick. I found it interesting that Simon said veterans like to be told things straight – and are used to getting services quickly.”



**RUPESH SETH, GP**

“I found the seminar very enlightening. All the organisations like Blesma have real specialisms that can help my patients. The charities are practical, and very good to know about. I will definitely use this knowledge positively with my patients.”



**JULY HUNT  
GP REGISTRAR**

“Learning that there are the same number of veterans as their are diabetics in the UK is an amazing statistic. There are lots of GPs who specialise in diabetes – perhaps I should specialise in veterans!”



**BEN KAY, GP**

“I gained lots of insight into what veterans go through and where I can signpost them to. There were gaps in my knowledge about this. Being able to recognise a veteran is very important for GPs as it can influence our treatment.”

After the talk, it’s speed dating time, and BSO Bill Gillett and BSO (Prosthetics) Brian Chenier host several tables of curious doctors over coffee.

“We need to raise awareness of all the daily issues our Members face,” Brian tells the smaller groups as they rotate through Blesma’s table. “Sometimes, a GP will know all about prosthetics but will know nothing about sores. The NHS can be disjointed. You might have a nurse treating your stump and also be seeing a pain specialist, but the two don’t always talk. We need to show GPs that a holistic approach is needed. Don’t just see the amputee, see the person.

“I’ve had issues with GPs: one told me I should be paying for painkillers. Some GPs don’t understand the military covenant or realise we get free prescriptions.

“Our Members also sometimes find that GPs don’t realise we can choose our Limb Centre if we’re not happy with our current one. It’s about education. The good news is that charities like us are here to help, and GPs can work with us to get the best results. This training is great, because it helps both sides.”

Julian, meanwhile, is very much a Blesma fan. “The Association brings a lot to these seminars,” he says. “I always like to have someone from Blesma here because their veterans have first-hand experience of recovery – both physical and psychological.”

What would Julian say to a Blesma Member struggling with their GP? “Tell them you’re a veteran, and make sure they’re aware of the access available to different types of care. If you’re at all unsure, there’s a lot of good information on the RCGP’s veteran training web page. Talk to Blesma, and get your GP to talk to Blesma, too.”

Brian Chenier agrees. “Members need to know what treatment they want and what they are entitled to, and must be confident to say all that to their GP.”

Members should also ask that any referral letter from their GP to a Limb Centre or hospital flags up that they are: *‘a military veteran and that their current condition may be related to military service so the referral should be considered for priority treatment under the rules set out in the Commissioning Board mandate and Armed Forces Covenant.’*

It’s Simon who sums it up best, though. “Sometimes, GPs ask me; ‘How do I ask if someone is a veteran?’” he says. “The answer is easy. Just ask them straight! If everyone can communicate that little bit better in both directions, everyone will benefit.”

**For more information on any issues relating to prosthetics, contact Brian at Chadwell Heath on 020 8548 7080 or at [bsoprosthetics@blesma.org](mailto:bsoprosthetics@blesma.org), or visit the Blesma website at [www.blesma.org](http://www.blesma.org)**



# MIND OVER MATTERHORN

MORE THAN 500 PEOPLE HAVE DIED TRYING TO SUMMIT THE ALPS' NOTORIOUS PEAK. BUT NEIL HERITAGE WON'T LET THAT STOP HIM





Neil has had two failed attempts to become the first double amputee to reach the Matterhorn's peak. Will this be third time lucky?

**W**hen it comes to doing something that sounds nigh-on impossible – like climbing one of the world's deadliest mountains as a double above-knee amputee, for example – it helps to have already done something that sounds just as impossible.

Neil Heritage was part of the first Row2Recovery crew – a team of six men, four of whom were Blesma Members, who rowed across the Atlantic in less than 51 days in 2012. On paper, this was an expedition unlikely to succeed before the crew, well, succeeded.

“That was so hard,” winces the former Royal Signals man at the memory. “I can't say that it was a couple of months that I particularly enjoyed, but it was a huge part of my mental rehabilitation. Ever since then I've been able to think: if I can do that, I can do anything!”

Cut to the Matterhorn. An infamous, near-pyramid of a peak that juts 4,478 metres into the sky, it is the sixth highest mountain in the Alps and is arguably its most recognisable. And it is a summit that more than 500 climbers have died trying to reach. Fitness instructor Neil is attempting to become the first double above-knee amputee to make it to the top, and it's a quest that has already been years in the planning.

“Exercise has always been a big part of my recovery, and I prefer to have a goal to work towards rather than going to the gym without an aim,” he says. “It took me five years to go from being injured in 2004 to walking without sticks. During that time I went to New York

with Blesma on an Introduction to Watersports trip. I had a go at waterskiing, scuba diving, sailing and fishing, and it really got me thinking about being more independent and doing more activities.”

Row2Recovery followed and after the epic row, which consisted of an estimated 1.4 million pulls of an oar, Neil's gaze turned to the heavens. “I got into climbing because it seemed like something I could get better at and it would allow me to build up to a big challenge,” he says. “I started off on an indoor wall and really enjoyed it. The Matterhorn came into my thoughts because it's a mountain that you have to climb up – it's not something you can walk up. A lot of mountaineering can be ‘one foot in front of the other’ stuff, but this is pure climbing. That's why it's iconic.”

### A (VERY!) STEEP LEARNING CURVE

The difficulties facing Neil were immediately obvious, but no less perilous because of that. Having been hit by a suicide bomber outside Fallujah while on a tour of Iraq, Neil doesn't have the lower limbs that the vast majority of climbers rely on to push them up rock faces.

“Before we rowed the Atlantic, we knew that about 65 per cent of a rower's power comes from the legs,” says Neil. “I don't know what the equivalent is for climbing – because there are so few amputee climbers, I don't think it has ever been measured!”

“The main thing is to try and use my upper legs as much as I can. Although I rely on my arms massively,

A man with a prosthetic left leg is climbing a steep, textured rock face. He is wearing a black long-sleeved shirt with white stripes on the sleeves, black shorts, white gloves, and sunglasses. He has a blue rope attached to his harness. His prosthetic leg is blue and has a silver foot with a crampon. The background shows a clear blue sky and a mountain range with snow patches.

**“DOING THE  
ROW GAVE ME  
MY CONFIDENCE  
BACK, AND I MADE  
A LOT OF FRIENDS.  
IT GOT ME OUT OF  
THE MINDSET OF  
NEEDING TO  
BE HELPED”**



**A lot of trial, error and technology have gone into the world record attempt. Not to mention plenty of climbing!**

## “WHAT MOTIVATES ME THE MOST IS WHEN PEOPLE TELL ME THAT I WON’T BE ABLE TO MAKE IT UP THERE!”

I can use my legs too, and it is physically impossible to just pull yourself up all day. I needed to get those big muscles into play somehow.”

A lot of trial, error and technology have gone into finding the solution. “I climb using adapted stubbies, because I wouldn’t be able to use something with a knee, and I’ve developed my own technique,” Neil says. “I’ve had a lot of help from Ian Jones, who makes my prosthetics, and from a company that re-soles climbing shoes. They understand what the surfaces are like, and we’ve developed a selection of prosthetic feet with rubber soles and different edges. I even have some with crampons fitted for higher up the mountain.”

Neil has already had to endure one failed attempt, and had another scuppered before it could even begin. “I went out to the Alps to train in 2015, and made my first attempt the following year. I pretty much got things wrong in every area! I wore through the rubber on my prosthetic feet very early on, which slowed me down. I tried to match the pace of the able-bodied

mountaineers I was with because we realised that if we went too slowly we wouldn’t reach places where we could stop for the night. It was either turn around there and then, or keep going and risk needing to be rescued – which was obviously a no-no. It was a very steep learning curve!”

Neil’s next attempt, set for summer 2018, can only benefit from these harsh lessons. “I’ve changed almost everything in my preparation,” he says. “On the first try we went up the Swiss side of the mountain, because it is considered easier. But there aren’t enough places to stop for the night, so this time we will go up the Italian side, which is harder but has more rest points.”

The team of seven will aim to make the ascent in four days (it’s usually a two-day climb for experienced mountaineers), and descend in two – but with a buffer that could increase the overall climb to 10 days. “The idea is that I will always be with two professional mountaineers who will move at my pace,” says Neil. “They’ll help me with my equipment and will set up camp to take some of the strain off me. All I’ll need to think about will be climbing.”

Neil was all set to attempt the climb this summer, only to be plagued by bad weather. “Two metres of snow fell in three days, just as we were about to go,” he says. “It was deeply frustrating. Safety is obviously the main concern, and too much snow and ice makes it too dangerous when you’re all tied together. We’d already been out for a week’s acclimatisation, so we were ready



## Don't fancy climbing? Hit the slopes instead

The Winter Sports programme is designed to let you experience the thrill of taking to the slopes. These activities will take you out of your comfort zone, increase your confidence, and give you the chance to meet other Members



To apply for a place  
email [meo@blesma.org](mailto:meo@blesma.org)  
or call 020 8548 7094

### Neil will take a selection of prosthetic limbs with him

to go, but unfortunately the attempt had to be postponed until July 2018.” The wait should be worth it, though. “I’m very happy with the kit and the plan now. I train pretty much every day and I spend as much time climbing as possible. I try to focus on endurance. For climbing, the lighter you are, the better, but if I lose too much weight my prosthetics won’t fit, so I have to keep a very delicate balance!”

However long it takes, you sense that the 37 year old will eventually make it to his mountain top. With Blesma’s backing, he’s been proving people wrong since being injured: completing triathlons and learning to ski, among many other achievements.

“That Blesma trip to the US was my first sports-style activity outside of my rehabilitation, so it really started things for me,” says Neil. “Going on to do the row gave me my confidence back, and I made a lot of friends. It got me out of the mindset of needing to be helped all the time. Other amputees might be able to benefit from what I’ve developed, although the prosthetics are tailored to my injuries. But I’m enjoying the challenge of making the kit work, as well as the physical side of it. What motivates me most is when people tell me that I won’t be able to make it up there!”

Many people said that about the Atlantic Ocean. And look where that got them.

*Details on how to sponsor Neil's world record attempt will be published in the next issue of Blesma magazine*

### CAMO WILDERNESS EXPEDITION

**Location:** Colorado, USA

**Next event:** 03-11 September 2018

The Wilderness Hut Expedition is hosted by Challenge Aspen Opportunities in Colorado. It includes six days of activities on the mountainside – plenty of time to socialise and enjoy the great outdoors.

**Who can take part?**

You must be reasonably fit and able to hike a few miles at altitude. You must be able to enter the USA.

### COLORADO SKI SPECTACULAR

**Location:** Colorado, USA

**Next event:** Late November / early December 2018

This annual event, which is run by Disabled Sports USA, is one of the world’s biggest and best ski spectacles for adaptive Winter Sports. The perfect week to have fun on the slopes by day and spend time getting to know like-minded people in the evenings.

**Who can take part?**

Most injury types can be catered for. Members must be able to enter the USA.

### WINTER SPORTS EUROPE

**Location:** France

**Next event:** 20-27 January 2019 (TBC)

A week-long trip of snow sports to suit everyone. Mono skiing, snowboarding, stand-up skiing, three-track, and ski bike are all available.

**Who can take part?**

This activity is open to everyone.



## HEATHER NICHOLSON

*Heather joined Blesma almost a decade ago to oversee the welfare of its Members. As a result of changes to her role, she is doing that now more than ever before*

**During my degree I was sponsored by the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS),** so when I graduated in 1986 I was given the chance to train as a WRNS Officer.

**Women were allowed to serve at sea from 1990.**

I wanted to know what it was like and if I could cope. My first ship was the aircraft carrier HMS INVINCIBLE. I was the Captain's Secretary and during my two years on board spent two six-month deployments in the Adriatic Sea.

**I took early retirement in 2004, leaving the Navy as a Lieutenant Commander.** I wanted to work in the charity sector as I was fortunate to come through my military career unscathed and wanted to give something back.

**I was living in Scotland when I left the Navy.** After eight months with the Tourette Syndrome (UK) Association I successfully applied for the role of General Secretary at the Royal British Legion Scotland. I thoroughly enjoyed my time there, but after two and a half years, I wanted new challenges. I met Jerome Church through Veterans Scotland and he told me Blesma was looking for a new National Welfare Officer.

**I joined Blesma on 01 April 2008 and as the charity has evolved, so has my role.** The change has been driven by a determination to be relevant to all Members and help them achieve independence and fulfilment.

**We meet the needs of individual Members, whether that's benefits advice, additional home support so a Member can retain their independence for as long as possible, or financial assistance to buy sports equipment to maintain physical and mental wellbeing.**

**Blesma is about assisting Members to lead independent and fulfilling lives.** Physical and mental wellbeing is key to that, and my new title 'Director of Independence and Wellbeing' more accurately reflects my refocused role.

**My new role will allow me to ensure we are working with the right partners, whether it's to provide specialist support around mental health or employment, or to seek**

out new partnerships with charities that provide opportunities for veterans and their families to get together in their local communities. It's about providing solutions to meet the needs of individual Members rather than thinking that one size fits all.

**It's vital that the BSOs and the team in Chadwell Heath have the resources and training to deliver the right**

support at the right time. I feel privileged to work with dedicated colleagues; we all care passionately about doing all we can to support Members. My responsibility is to Members who've endured so much as the result of life-changing injuries or illnesses, and ensuring BSOs have the tools to do their jobs helps me fulfil this responsibility.

**"IT'S ABOUT PROVIDING SOLUTIONS TO MEET THE NEEDS OF INDIVIDUALS RATHER THAN ONE SIZE FITS ALL"**

# Members' Weekend 2018

## 09-11 June

Chesford Grange Hotel,  
Kenilworth, Warwickshire

- Try new activities
- Share your stories and learn about others'
- Socialise with old and new friends
- Find out what's been happening in Blesma
- Enjoy the Blesma Awards and Gala Dinner
- Attend the AGM 2018



**Free!**

The Weekend is free for Ordinary and Associate Members, spouses and carers, Welfare Reps, and Honorary Members who hold Branch office. Spaces are limited and will be allocated on a first-come, first-served basis.

Make sure you don't miss out!

Book your place now by contacting Sue Stokes on [officeexec@blesma.org](mailto:officeexec@blesma.org) or 020 8548 7091



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