



MAN'S (VERY) BEST FRIEND

ALLEN PARTON COULDN'T WALK, TALK, OR REMEMBER MUCH OF HIS LIFE. THEN HE MET A DOG CALLED ENDAL

So much more than smashes

Wheelchair rugby is so rough its nickname is 'murderball'. So why would you play it? **p24**



More connected than ever before

The bespoke new app that will keep Members in touch with each other and the Association **p04**

What can scuba do for you?

Members with loss of use of limb get that floating feeling off the coast of Florida **p42**



AllPro from *Fillauer*®

LIVE LIKE A PRO

This dynamic all-in-one foot allows users to switch between daily activities and high impact sports, without swapping their limb



Use the AllPro with an ultra-realistic micro-coated vinyl foot shell, with Kevlar® reinforcement for enhanced durability

Adapts to any terrain • Stable multiaxial function • High energy return

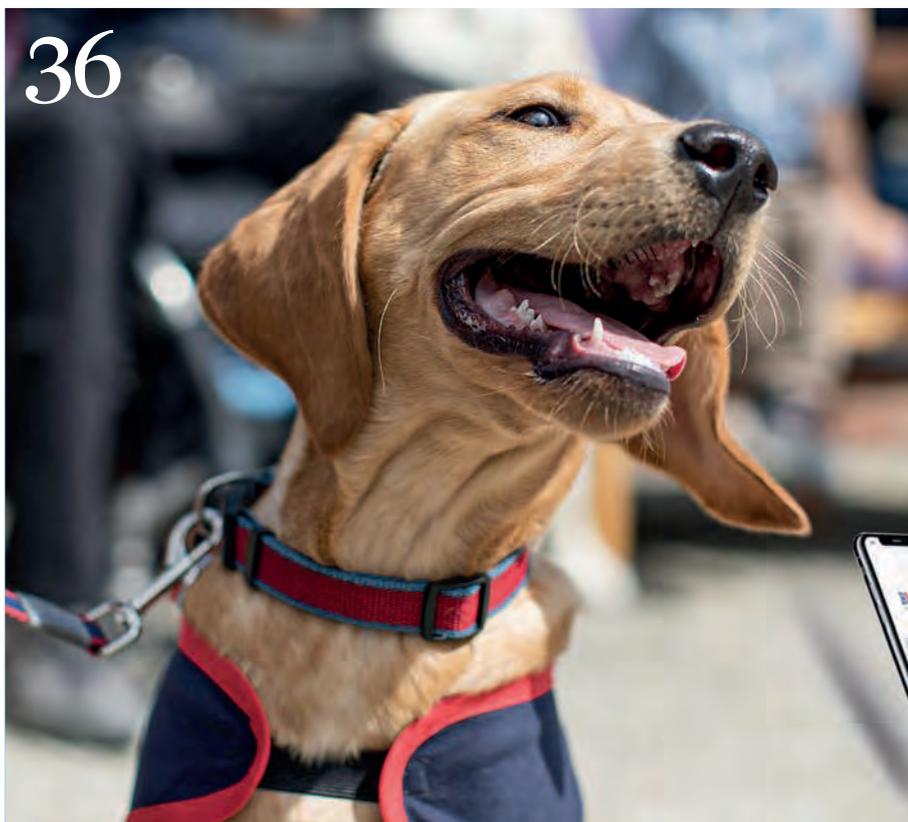
 **ortho**europe®

Ortho Europe
01235 552 895

Ability House, Nuffield Way, Abingdon, OX14 1RL
info@ortho-europe.com | www.ortho-europe.com

CONTENTS

Inside the Autumn 2019 issue



News

BLESMA CONNECTS 04
The Association is about to launch an app to keep its Members more connected than ever

IN THE SPOTLIGHT 16
Michael Swain handcycled from John O'Groats to Land's End, and on into the record books

NEWS ANALYSIS 22
What does the race towards a bionic future mean for prosthetics provision in the UK?

04



Features

MURDERBALL ANYONE? 24
Stuart Robinson has gone from beginner to winner in one of the toughest sports around

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER 30
A soldier and nurse are reunited decades after they last saw each other during WWII

ON YER MARKS, GET SET... 34
Want to take part in an event but don't quite know where to start? Blesma can help you

MAN'S (VERY) BEST FRIEND 36
A dog saved Allen Partron's life in a story so moving it is about to be turned into a film

THAT FLOATING FEELING 42
Blesma scuba diving expeditions can open up a whole new world, no matter what your injury

A Day in the Life

LORNA DORRELL 50
Blesma's Communications Manager

Useful Contacts

EDITORIAL

020 8548 3513
od@blesma.org

MEMBERSHIP SERVICES

020 8548 3515
diw@blesma.org

ACTIVITIES

020 8548 7094
activities@blesma.org

FUNDRAISING

020 8548 3517
fundraising@blesma.org

PR AND MEDIA

020 3954 3023
commmgr@blesma.org

GENERAL ENQUIRIES

020 8590 1124
info@blesma.org



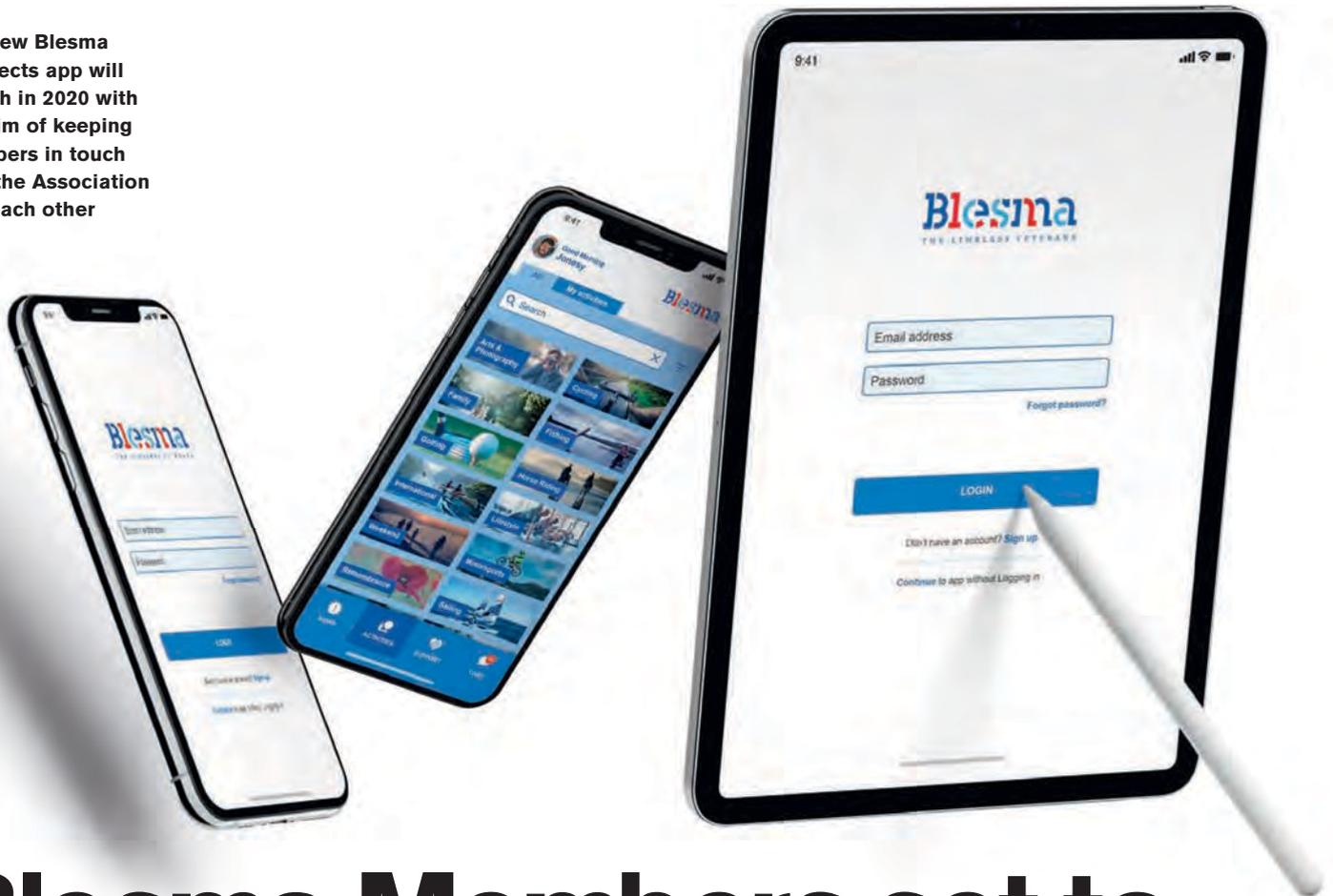
Please be aware that any written correspondence should be sent to the new Blesma office at: 115 New London Road, Chelmsford, Essex CM2 0QT

Special thanks to: All our Members, Heather Betts, Brian Chenier, Lorna Dorrell, Barry Le Grys, Jess Mackinnon, Jess March, Emily Mizon, Ian Waller **Blesma Magazine** is published on behalf of the **British Limbless Ex-Service Men's Association (Blesma)** by **ScratchCreate**. British Limbless Ex-Service Men's Association Charity Numbers: England and Wales 1084189, Scotland SC010315; Company Limited Guarantee No. 4102768. Contact ScratchCreate at david@scratchcreate.co.uk or paul@scratchcreate.co.uk This publication may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form, in whole or in part, without the prior permission of the publishers. All prices and addresses are correct at the time of going to press. Every care has been taken in the preparation of this magazine to ensure the contents are fully accurate, but neither ScratchCreate nor Blesma can be held responsible for the accuracy of the information herein, any omissions or errors, or any consequence arising from it. The views expressed by contributors, customers and Members might not reflect the views of ScratchCreate or Blesma. Publication date: Autumn 2019. © Blesma 2019.

NEWS

News, views and opinion
from the world of Blesma

The new Blesma Connects app will launch in 2020 with the aim of keeping Members in touch with the Association and each other



Blesma Members set to 'connect' with new app

Blesma is putting the finishing touches to a new system that will energise communication and engagement between the Association and its Members.

Blesma Connects is an app that can be tailored to each Member's interests and needs. It will go live at the start of 2020, and will open up new routes to everything from medical information and grants, to national Blesma events and local meetings.

The dynamic digital hub will also make it easier for Members to connect with other Members to take part in local activities and access support. Members will be able to search for, join or create local events, and sign up for news and information based on their personal interests.

"The idea behind the app was to respond to Members' strong interests in local events

and their desire to be connected to other Members and to Blesma," said Ian Waller, Blesma's Operations Director. "Blesma Connects will allow each Member to tailor the news and information they receive, and will provide a great way to connect with each other.

"Blesma is built on a strong fellowship of Member helping Member, as well as the charity's central support, and we are constantly looking at ways to make that a better experience. The app is set to be a natural extension of the Blesma ethos and an extra benefit for Members."

BUILDING A STRONG COMMUNITY

A six-month research and development programme canvassed the opinions of Members as well as Blesma's staff and Support Officers, and the clear message

was that Members valued more frequent updates and better connection with the Association and other Members.

Blesma Connects will be a secure, Member-only service that focuses on the key results from research such as community building through activities and events, relevant news and information, and greater Member-to-Member connectivity.

Members will be able to message each other through the app and create groups based on shared interests. They will also be able to set the app to give notifications of activities and Blesma news.

"The app is being designed to be a personal and flexible service that will exist in addition to our normal channels of communication and our strong work from Support Officers and Outreach staff," said Ian. "We listened to the feedback from the



Paws for thought

The incredible story of Allen and Endal (p36)



research surveys amongst our community and believe that Blesma Connects will serve everyone well, and build on our existing communications.

“Members will be able to use the app to create local groups, which will make event organisation much easier. It will also allow them to simply connect with each other to arrange to meet up and stay connected.

“Accessing support and keeping up to date with developments will become more personal. We also know that Members and their families value the strong bonds created by military service, and this will make it easier for them to get together and support each other.”

The app, which will be available to download to smartphones, is being developed with Blesma by award-winning agency Way to Blue, which has a wealth of technology experience across the health, wellbeing and lifestyle sectors.

Further details about Blesma Connects, as well as information on how to access the app, together with how the Association intends to ensure that all Members who wish to are digitally connected in 2020 will be provided in the next issue

“BLESMA CONNECTS WILL ALLOW MEMBERS TO TAILOR BOTH THE NEWS AND INFORMATION THAT THEY RECEIVE, AND WILL PROVIDE A GREAT WAY TO CONNECT WITH EACH OTHER”

welcome

By the time you read this we should have moved the Blesma office to Chelmsford. Hopefully, you will not have noticed any disruption in our services. The office team have been working extremely hard behind the scenes to make sure we can ‘plug straight in’.



I should very much like to thank the Members who have contributed to this issue. Michael Swain has taken to cycling with a vengeance and does so much to support his fellow Members. Stuart Robinson is established as an elite sportsman and is always encouraging others. I would also like to thank Allen Parton for telling us how dogs can help so much, while the story of Maria Kowalska and Waclaw Domagala is incredibly moving.

On the matter of communication, Blesma is introducing a new app, Blesma Connects; it means Blesma can be in a Member’s pocket and close at hand. We really want to exploit this tool for all generations, encouraging all to make best use of, and contribute to, the Blesma proposition. Meanwhile, there is a Trustee vacancy, as announced at the AGM in June, and I should remind the membership that the deadline for applications is 01 November.

I regret to say that I will be leaving Blesma at the end of September to tackle a new challenge. I will certainly miss the membership and I will always remain a strong supporter. The Trustees are working to a rigorous succession plan which has the best interests of the Association at its core. The search will be widespread, including the membership, and all the Trustees are involved. In the meantime, Ian Waller will lead the office and I am sure he will have your full support.

Very best wishes for the future.

Barry Le Gry
Chief Executive





Photograph: Shutterstock

NEWS ANALYSIS

Disabled bays regularly 'abused'

One in five disabled parking bays in supermarket car parks is being abused by somebody parking in it without displaying a Blue Badge, according to findings by Disabled Motoring UK.

In June, the charity asked members of the public to help with its Baywatch Campaign by surveying their local supermarket car park for disabled parking bay abuse. The average number of disabled bays provided across all of the supermarkets surveyed was 15, with three of them (20 per cent) being abused in each car park.

All of the supermarkets surveyed have been contacted by Disabled Motoring UK with the Baywatch Campaign results and have been encouraged to start a dialogue with the charity to help improve their parking facilities for disabled motorists.

"DMUK is ecstatic with the level of support it has received for this year's Baywatch Campaign," said Heidi Turner, Communications and Campaigns Director at DMUK. "Disabled parking is under immense pressure to meet demand and if supermarkets enforced their disabled bays properly they would increase the volume of available disabled parking by 20 per cent. It is time that the supermarkets take this issue seriously and support their disabled customers," she said.

The research also discovered that in the car parks where there was visible signage or other evidence that enforcement took place, the level of abuse dropped to 16 per cent, but increased to 36 per cent in those without visible signage or enforcement.

On 30 August, the eligibility criteria for the Blue Badge Scheme changed in England

and more people with 'hidden' disabilities are now eligible. DMUK predicts that this will see a dramatic increase in Blue Badge holders, meaning that disabled parking will become even more pressured.

For more on the changes to the Blue Badge criteria see the panel below

ARE YOU ELIGIBLE FOR A BLUE BADGE?

The Blue Badge Scheme allows people with severe mobility problems, registered blind people, and people with severe disabilities within both arms, to park close to places they wish to visit.

The scheme is available across the UK, but there are differences depending on which part of the UK you live in. In England, from 30 August, new regulations extended the eligibility to people whose mental health or 'disability' impacts on their ability to walk during the course of a journey.

The requirement that a disability was 'permanent and substantial' has also been changed to 'enduring and substantial'. This is deemed more appropriate to encompass non-physical conditions such as mental

and cognitive disabilities, or 'hidden' conditions such as irritable bowel conditions, which may be difficult to categorise as permanent since they may vary over a period of time, but endure nonetheless.

HOW TO APPLY FOR THE SCHEME

Those living in England, Scotland and Wales who would like to apply, or find out if they qualify, for a Blue Badge should contact their local authority or claim online by visiting www.gov.uk/apply-blue-badge

Those living in Northern Ireland should contact the Blue Badge processing unit on 0300 200 7818 or visit www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/apply-or-renew-blue-badge



Rose hopes to rise to the occasion on Kilimanjaro

Member James Rose attempted to become the first military double amputee to scale Kilimanjaro in September. After competing in last year's Invictus Games, James decided to take on another sporting challenge and asked his friends on Facebook for ideas. It was his former Invictus Games teammate, Darren Young, who suggested climbing Africa's highest mountain, and the pair enlisted Darren's wife Mel and friend Mark Burns to join them.

"I remember when I first got injured, I couldn't see life past the hospital bed," said James, who lost both his legs when he stepped on an IED whilst serving

in Afghanistan in 2009. "But as time goes on you start pushing your boundaries and that's when you start to become stronger. An annual challenge keeps me focussed and helps me with depression, which is something I share with Darren."

James and the team were aiming to climb 5,895 metres to the top of Kilimanjaro as this issue of the magazine was going to press in early September. "I'm raring to go now. Mentally I am there, but it's stuff like the altitude and sores from my stumps that may stop me," James said of the attempt.

You can donate to James' effort at www.justgiving.com/crowdfunding/road-to-kili

VETERAN "OVERWHELMED" BY SUPPORT

A Weston veteran has been left feeling "totally overwhelmed" after more than £2,000 was raised to replace a motorbike and tools stolen from his home.

The money will help double amputee Mark Hancock, who restores the vehicles for Blesma, continue his work in the community.

The former submariner had a Honda 500 Shadow and "all of his tools" stolen from his shed in July.

"On 10 July, I got up at around 6am and went to my shed. When I saw people had stolen every tool I owned, as well as the motorbike, I was horrified," said Mark, who made the decision to amputate one of his legs in



2006, followed by the other in 2007, due to agonising pain caused by Complex Regional Pain Syndrome.

The money that Mark makes through restoring motorbikes, which he does

to help "keep him away from the TV", goes to the Association. "A friend set up a JustGiving page to fund the replacement of my stolen tools, which raised £2,200," said Mark. "I'm totally overwhelmed by the response, and I want to say a big thank you to everyone for their donations."

Bikers from far afield heard of Mark's plight and donated. The money raised will go towards the cost of Mark's new bike project, replacing his tools, and improving his home security.

To donate, log on to www.justgiving.com/crowdfunding/tom-monaghan

NEWS BRIEFS

BEIGHTON DOWN BUT NOT OUT IN HIS TOKYO QUEST

Paralympic medallist Nick Beighton has narrowly missed out on securing his place at the 2020 Tokyo Paralympic Games at the first attempt. Nick travelled to Hungary in August to compete at the Paracanoe World Championships but finished half a second shy of booking his place in the KL2 event in next year's Games.

"I was disappointed in my performance, especially to miss out by half a second, but it doesn't always go to plan!" said Nick. "Now I'm just resetting to get my focus for next season and the next chance to qualify."

The next (and final) opportunity to qualify will be at the 2020 World Championships in Duisburg, Germany next May, where Nick will have to finish in the top 10 to secure a place for the Games.

LAW FIRM REFUSES TO CRACK DURING THE NUTS CHALLENGE



Law firm Irwin Mitchell has raised £1,200 for Blesma after taking part in an obstacle course challenge. On 31 August, a team of 14 employees from Irwin Mitchell's Southampton firm were joined by Outreach Officer South Andy Barlow as they took on The Nuts Challenge – a seven-kilometre assault course – in aid of the Association.

Every year, the Southampton office undertakes a challenge to raise money for an Armed Forces charity.

POST A STORY ON INSTAGRAM AND RAISE CASH FOR BLESMA

Instagram has launched a feature to help fundraisers raise money for non-profits and charities directly through Instagram Stories.

The 'donation sticker' allows users to create a 24-hour fundraiser on their stories. To add a Blesma donation sticker to your story, all you need to do is swipe to your camera on Instagram and take or select an image. Tap the smiley face sticker icon on the top right and choose the donation sticker. From there, you can search and select Blesma, before adding it to your story. Followers can then donate.



MEET BLESMA'S NEW REGIONAL FUNDRAISING MANAGER LUCY DALGROSS

LUCY DALGROSS IS SETTLING INTO her new role as Regional Fundraising Manager. Lucy, who has previously worked for When You Wish Upon A Star, The National Autistic Society, and Parkinson's UK, will focus on engaging with supporters and developing new networks and opportunities in the Midlands and the north of England.

"I started fundraising at university, and became a volunteer coordinator at the University of Nottingham when I returned to my home city," said Lucy, who now lives in Nottingham with her husband Josh. "I really wanted to find a role where I could make a difference. The fact that Blesma's Members are supported for life means that each penny I raise has a lasting legacy."

Lucy's role is specifically targeting the Midlands and the north of England because of their historic affinity with the military, in recognition of the level of support for Blesma, and the economic growth being seen there.

"Lucy brings lots of regional charity fundraising experience to the role and will provide the Fundraising Department with a regional focus so that we can better work with existing supporters as well as sourcing new supporters in the Midlands and the north of England," said Blesma's Associate Director of Fundraising, Tony Bloomfield.

If you're looking to fundraise in the Midlands, North East or North West you can get in touch with Lucy at regfundmgr@blesma.org or call her on 07774 797318

Making Generation R reaches 50,000 people

Making Generation R, an initiative by Blesma and social enterprise The Drive Project, has reached more than 50,000 young people since the birth of the programme in 2016.

Making Generation R trains Blesma Members to take their powerful and inspiring life stories about overcoming adversity into schools to help teach pupils about everyday resilience. This learning allows the students to better cope with the stresses of growing up.

In the 2018/19 school year, Blesma Members visited 182 schools, as well as educational, youth and first responder facilities across the country, facilitating a mammoth 490 workshops and assemblies. In that same period, the workshops reached 30,481 young people – breaking the target of 30,000 set at the start of the year.

"The programme has proved a huge success; the innovative workshop sessions have been praised by teachers, youth

leaders and young people alike," said Ian Waller, Blesma's Operations Director. "To hear how Blesma Members have dealt with adversity and rebuilt their lives gives young people an idea of the coping skills they need to face up to their own challenges."



In addition to running workshops in schools in 2018/19, MGR was piloted in the NHS – with four workshops being run to 119 nurses and 15 junior doctors – as well as one to 17 Fire Service personnel. This August, a team even delivered a workshop to prisoners in HMP Swansea.

"We were invited to adapt the sessions by staff at the prison and felt that our

Members' experiences could help people make the transition back into society," said Ian. "The veterans have been trained to deliver their experiences in an engaging way and the impact has been significant. To hear how they dealt with adversity and rebuilding their lives gives people the strength to face challenges that otherwise might derail them."

What are the odds?

Two people are reunited after 75 years (p30)



First-ever trials held for GB Invictus Games team

More than 470 wounded, injured, and sick veterans took their A-game to Sheffield in July as they competed for a chance to make the 2020 UK Invictus Games team. The first ever UK Invictus Games Trials, which took place from 22-26 July, saw athletes take part in nine adaptive sports: indoor rowing, athletics, swimming, cycling, archery, powerlifting, wheelchair rugby, wheelchair basketball, and sitting volleyball.

For double amputee Tom Folwell (below), the trials were his first taste of Invictus Games competition. "I decided to put my name forward last year as I wanted to see what it was all about," said Tom, who lost both his legs to an IED blast in Afghanistan. "Unfortunately, I didn't make the 2018

team, but I enjoyed the training weekends and being with people who are in the same situation as me, so I went for it again."

Tom, who is a keen archer, took the opportunity to explore sports he hadn't previously participated in such as wheelchair rugby, wheelchair basketball and sitting volleyball.

"The trials were a lot of fun and really well run," said Tom. "I'd still like to focus on archery, but now I've also joined a local rugby team, a local basketball team, and I'm looking to join a volleyball team, too."

Next year's Invictus Games will be held in The Hague, The Netherlands from 09-16 May 2020. For more on the Games, visit www.invictusgames2020.com



BLESMA CLIMBER HITS NEW HEIGHTS ON WORLD STAGE

STUART SNEDDON CLIMBED TO A personal sporting milestone in July when he competed in his first Paraclimbing World Championships. The former Airman was one of 20 British athletes competing at the World Championships in Briançon, France.

"I placed eleventh overall and I was happy with the result as it was my first World Championship competition," said Stuart, who became a right leg below-knee amputee in 2013. "The level of competition was high, so I need to train harder in order to be more competitive!"

The Climbing World Championships are held every other year, and have featured both climbing and paraclimbing athletes since 2011. After attending a Great Britain Paraclimbing selection event, Stuart joined the GB team's development squad in 2018.

"I have always climbed recreationally, and I got back into the sport at Headley Court after my amputation. By 2017, I was good enough to compete in my first national competition," said Stuart, who will compete in the Paraclimbing Championships in October followed by the Parabouldering Championships in November.



BLESMA AUTHOR GETS CRITICAL ACCLAIM FOR NEW NOVEL

MICHAEL MORPURGO, THE author of *War Horse*, has praised Blesma Member Noel Harrower's new novel *Yestermorrow*.

Noel, an 87-year-old former national service soldier, has written a saga about climate change. His novel caught the eye of fellow novelist Morpurgo, who remarked: "Huge theme wonderfully achieved. Bravo!"

Being passionate about climate change and sustainable living, Noel decided to write

a futuristic novel about human life on earth in the hope of encouraging others to preserve a decent quality of life for future generations.

Set in East Devon, the story focuses on a group of families who are battling with the rigours of climate change and survive by working together. A seaside town is swept away in a storm, and a new town is constructed in a series of clusters, where community eco-tasks are shared.



"*Yestermorrow* is a futuristic tale about climate change, sustainable living, and the dangers that face us. The story is about how people who are living sustainably are affected when storms and other things start to disturb the climate around them," said Noel, who has been campaigning for cleaner living since 1983.

Yestermorrow is available from Amazon in Kindle and print-on-demand formats

↘ BLESMA BRIEFING

Hi-tech doesn't suit everyone

Modern-day artificial limbs pack some serious technological punch, but prosthetics are hugely personal and, for some people, the latest does not necessarily mean the greatest



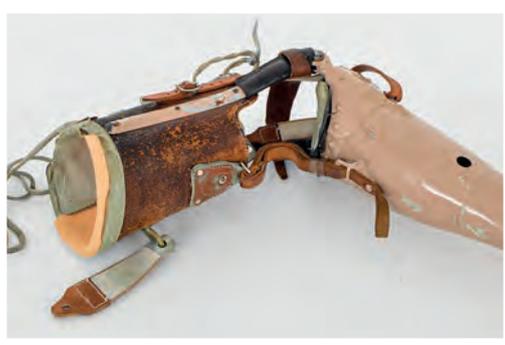
Blesma Member Reginald Webb (pictured right, sitting in the wheelchair) contacted his BSO, Kevin Long, for advice on prosthetics recently as he was experiencing some issues. His NHS Limb Centre in Norwich had provided him with a modern modular prosthesis with a knee strap support and he was having difficulty getting on with it.

Reg, as he prefers to be called, was originally injured in 1944, just after the D-Day Landings, and his right leg was amputated below the knee shortly afterwards. After his discharge from the Army, Reg attended Roehampton Hospital for his prosthetic provision. When he moved to Hunstanton some 35 years ago, his prosthetic care transferred to Norwich.

Since first being fitted for a prosthetic limb in the late 1940s, Reg has preferred a design which incorporates side steels and a leather adjustable corset over the thigh (pictured below). Reg had given the modern modular limb a chance, but it just wasn't working for him and after a while he decided he needed the old style artificial leg back. With steps to both the front and rear of his bungalow, Reg was finding it difficult to leave home, and the thought of a long journey to the Limb Centre, followed by hours of waiting were not in the slightest bit appealing.

A joint home visit was arranged with Reg's BSO Kevin and BSO (Prosthetics) Brian Chenier to assess Reg and come up with a plan. Following the visit, Brian contacted the Limb Centre at Norwich and the senior management of OpCare to arrange for a home appointment to clinically assess the new prosthesis Reg was using and to work out a plan of action.

During the subsequent visit, prosthetist Helet and technician Clive made Reg's current prosthesis safer by making minor adjustments. A cast was also taken and a plan made to get Reg to the Limb Centre to make him a new leg which would meet his needs. This next appointment was to be one week later.



On the day, Brian was on hand to ensure the journey to Norwich was as trouble-free as possible, and the hospital transport crew from ERS were superb, making Reg feel safe and secure when leaving his home for

the first time in a long while. At the Limb Centre, Reg was kept fully informed about what was happening and the team were very attentive. The first fitting of the new leg was done without the side steels and leather corset, and Reg was taken home to give the limb a proper test.

The following week, when the side steels and corset were added, Reg's sense of relief was clear for everyone to see. This is what he was used to and it made him feel safe. A further two visits were needed to deal with some

“
REG'S
SENSE OF
RELIEF WAS
CLEAR FOR
EVERYONE
TO SEE.
THIS IS
WHAT HE
WAS USED
TO AND IT
MADE HIM
FEEL SAFE
”

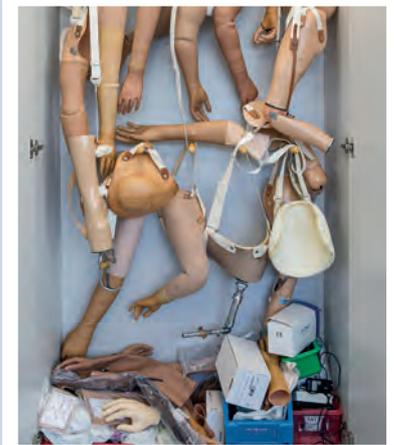


BRIAN'S FAQs

*Every issue, BSO (Prosthetics)
Brian Chenier answers a number of
your questions about prosthetics*

What should I do with my old or unused prosthetic limbs?

If the prosthesis was provided by the state health system in the UK (NHS or MoD) the ownership remains that of the issuing authority. For limbs issued by the MoD through the Defence Medical Rehabilitation Centre at Headley Court (now Stanford Hall) the NHS assumes on-going responsibility and ownership once a service person is discharged. Once a limb becomes obsolete for the user it should be returned to their NHS Limb Centre for disposal. The selling on of such items is illegal and in such cases the people involved may be subject to a criminal investigation.



Why is it not possible for me to pay for my own socket and get the NHS to provide the other components?

Mixing between NHS funded/provided prosthetic components and those purchased privately is not possible as the whole limb build is considered a complete prosthesis. The components used, including the socket, have been clinically decided as the optimum safe prescription for the individual. To remove or add other components would potentially compromise the integrity of the whole limb build and the NHS is not in a position to accept that liability. It is possible, however, to have separate limbs supplied by different providers; for example, an everyday limb from the NHS and a specific activity limb that has been funded privately.



Reg with his new 'old style' prosthetic limb



Words and photographs: Brian Chenier

minor fitting issues and now Reg is able to safely move about his home. He has also been able to get out of his bungalow with the assistance of Kevin and Brian, and enjoy afternoon tea at Sandringham House, with a detour to his favourite butchers, followed a few weeks later by a family meal to celebrate his 97th birthday.

Despite being injured in 1944, Reg only joined Blesma a couple of years ago as he felt he didn't need the support on offer before that. He has always been aware of Blesma and has supported the charity by making donations. "I joined Blesma because I knew I needed help, and they have been magnificent," he says.

For more on any prosthetics issues, please contact BSO (Prosthetics) Brian Chenier at Blesma's new Chelmsford office on 020 8548 7080 or at bsoprosthetics@blesma.org, or visit www.blesma.org



Mind Over Matter make history at Race Across America 2019

Mind Over Matter have become the first British all-female wounded, injured and sick team to complete the gruelling Race Across America bicycle race. Starting on 08 June the team, which included Blesma Members Tara Robertson and Nerys Pearce, rode 3,000 miles across the breadth of America, from Oceanside in California on the West coast to the City Dock in Annapolis, Maryland on the East coast. What's more, the team completed the challenge in a staggering eight days and 12 minutes.

"It's difficult to describe what an amazing experience Race Across America was and what a fantastic opportunity it was to take part in something like that," said former Army Private Tara Robertson, who was medically discharged after she was partially blinded by an IRA bomb in 1996. "We finished the event in a faster time than we had planned, so it was incredible to be nearing the finish line and realise we were going to do much better than we had expected. Crossing the finishing line was amazing. Riders who didn't manage to finish the challenge came to cheer us to the finish. It was very emotional."

Founded and led by Major Sally Orange, the team pushed both their physical and mental capabilities to the limit as they crossed 12 states and three major mountain ranges (Sierra, Rocky and Appalachian), climbing 190,000 feet in the process. The team also had to overcome temperatures of 45°C as they tackled the Mojave and Sonoran Deserts.

"We didn't really get to stop and appreciate the landscapes, but the weather was kind to us," said Tara. "I had never experienced that sort of altitude on a bike before and at 8,000ft I felt nauseous and a little dizzy. Thankfully, it didn't stop me cycling, and we had a fantastic support crew who gave me that much needed extra help at the end of my sessions!"





NEWS BRIEFS

DO YOU KNOW SOMEONE WHO IS WORTHY OF AN AWARD?

If you know someone who deserves to be recognised for their achievements or for their support for the Armed Forces community then Soldiering On is calling on you to nominate them for an award.

Next year will be the tenth anniversary of the awards, which were designed to highlight the inspirational achievements of current and former Service men and women and their families, as well as all those who have shown support to the Armed Forces community.

The Soldiering On Awards are seeking nominations across 12 diverse categories ranging from Sporting Excellence to Family Values, and from Business of the Year to those championing inclusivity within the Armed Forces.

The deadline for submitting your nominations is 30 September. For more information on the Awards, or for advice on how to make your nomination, visit www.soldieringon.org

Blesma's Arthur Bomber celebrates a special day

A World War II veteran, who was given the last rites whilst injured fighting the Japanese in Burma, has celebrated his 100th birthday. Arthur Bomber was joined by family, friends, and fellow Blesma Members at Mullaghboy Nursing Home in Donaghadee on 08 July to celebrate his special milestone.

"Everyone gathered at the nursing home and surprised him when a nurse helped him into the room," said Arthur's son, Keith, who organised the surprise. "He was speechless! Dad has had a hard life; from his childhood through to being injured

in WWII, and he never learned to drive so has had to cycle everywhere."

Blesma Outreach Officer for Northern Ireland Fiona Morrison (above) and Blesma Member Bryan Phillips, who has struck up a good relationship with 'Bomber' as he is affectionately known, also surprised him on the day with a Blesma birthday cake.

To add to Arthur's birthday celebrations his local council have invited him to be guest of honour at a Veterans Parade and Beating of the Retreat in September.

Happy birthday Arthur, from everyone at Blesma!

EMAIL BUDDIES

Still not receiving email updates from the Association? You're missing out! If you don't have an email address but have someone who could accept them on your behalf, please ask them to email memberadmin@blesma.org

BLESMA FAN TAKES ON PEN Y FAN

Veteran Brian Chapman, who had his right leg amputated in 2010 following a motorbike accident, has conquered South Wales' highest peak, Pen y Fan, in aid of Blesma.

After a slight delay due to bad weather, Brian and a team of 19 reached the Welsh peak after three hours of tough climbing on Sunday 11 August.

"Going up was hard but I could cope – it was going down when I needed some help," said Brian, from Nottingham. "There were loads of gullies with water running through, and wet stones and steps, so I needed to be careful not to bend my leg too far or it would have ended up collapsing or slipping.

"I started doing challenges for Blesma to inspire other Members to be independent and active, but they've become a yearly challenge for me. I'm always beat at the end, but I always enjoy them!"

Since joining the Association, Brian has become a fundraising stalwart for Blesma. So far, he has reached the summit of Mount Snowdon (in 2016), cycled the length of Hadrian's Wall (in 2017), and canoed from Nottingham to Newark in one day.

In total, Brian has raised more than £7,400 (and counting) for the Association through his activities and adventures.



Words: Jessica Mackinnon

Blesma photographers enjoyed the Shetland scenery this summer



Photographs: Kevin Bryant

During the week the group visited St Ninian's Isle, Sumburgh Head, and the Jarlshof prehistoric archeological site. They travelled to Lerwick, Burra, Scalloway and Tingwall – to name but a few more locations – and photographed puffins as well as the scenery at Meal and Minn beaches.

There was even the chance to sample Shetland food, listen to presentations from local photographers, and enjoy traditional Shetland music.

“Shetland is a beautiful, rugged, and dynamic place – a photographer’s dream with unique landscapes and wildlife,” said Jan McLelland after the trip. Member Charley Armstrong agreed: “A great place for novice and advanced photographers. Shetland has it all!” he said. Janet Riddell added: “A photographer’s paradise with wildlife in abundance, spectacular landscapes, and award-winning beaches.”



Seven snappers visit ‘spectacular’ Shetland

Seven Members headed to Shetland in June for a week-long photography expedition led by island residents Kevin Bryant and his wife, Cheryl. The hosts have both served in the Army; Kevin was in the Royal Engineers for 24 years whilst Cheryl was a radiographer with the Royal Army Medical Corps for 14 years.

“Blesma gives great support to its Members and I have enjoyed some terrific

experiences, including scuba diving in the Red Sea, white water rafting in Colorado, and photography in Iceland,” said Kevin, who lost his left leg below the knee in Lebanon in July 2002 before joining Blesma the following month. “Since moving to Shetland in 2010, I have become a keen photographer and felt it was time to give something back to the Association and its Members by organising this trip.”

BLESMA MOVES TO CHELMSFORD

Blesma is set to move offices on **20 September 2019**. The address of the new office is **115 New London Road, Chelmsford, CM2 0QT**. Any written correspondence should now be sent to this address. General email enquiries should be sent to info@blesma.org. All staff and BSO telephone numbers and email addresses remain the same.



Photograph: Brian Chenier

Nate Macabuag shows off Mitt Wearables' latest prosthetic sleeve



Start-up is fine-tuning its lightweight prosthetic

Two engineering graduates have designed a lightweight prosthetic that could solve “uncomfortable and frustrating” issues for below-elbow amputees. Entrepreneurs Ben Lakey and Nate Macabuag (pictured above) joined forces to launch Mitt Wearables in March 2018 with the aim of creating “simple, flexible and affordable” prosthetics that users could fit and adjust themselves.

Made from materials and processes used in the sportswear industry, the medically approved prosthetic will soon be available for less than £500. Last September, Mitt Wearables ran its first trial to test a number of interchangeable tools that attach to the

sleeve. Seven months later, they began testing how efficient it was for potential users to provide the dimensions of their residual limb online before receiving a prosthetic through the post.

This autumn, 100 amputees will receive a Mitt Wearables beta prosthetic arm. Their feedback will directly contribute to Mitt's next product version. “Our ambitions are global, and as limb loss rates are higher in low-to-middle-income countries, our aim is to assist people regardless of their financial status,” said Ben.

To register your interest in a Mitt Wearables prosthetic arm visit www.wearmitt.com

NEWS BRIEFS

VETERANS HELPED WITH THE GUARANTEE OF AN INTERVIEW

A Guaranteed Interview Scheme for Service leavers and veterans will soon be adopted by the Welsh Government.

Officials considered the HR and legal aspects and consulted with the Trade Union Council before agreeing to guarantee Service leavers and veterans an interview when applying for external vacancies within the Welsh Government.

The scheme is expected to be in place early in the new year.

For more on the Guaranteed Interview Scheme visit www.thebtb.co.uk/GIS



YOU WON'T GET STUCK IN YOUR LEATHERS EVER AGAIN!

An aerospace mechanical technician has invented a gadget that he hopes will help amputee bikers like Blesma Member Chris Ganley. After a day's riding Gary Muir, hot, sweaty and tired, struggled to get out of his leathers. That got him thinking of ways to help bikers get their arms out of their sleeves when no-one is around to help.

After a number of trials, Gary developed a prototype and began showing it to bikers, including one-armed racer Chris Ganley (pictured together above).

“Chris is an inspirational guy, a racer who is taking his disability and turning it into a plus,” said Gary. “I contacted him about my idea and he was keen to see it. I had to make some changes but came up with something that gives Chris complete independence when removing his leathers.”

The discreet contraption, called Grippa, fits to the cuff while the other end attaches to a point that can be pulled against.

“I'm still working on my idea and have applied for a patent. I would love to see if others could benefit from it!” says Gary.

If this could help you, get in touch with Gary at gary.muir@hotmail.co.uk

MGR PILOT SCHEME GOES TO PRISON

MAKING GENERATION R GRADUATES Si Harmer (right) and Stewart Harris have spent time with inmates at HMP Swansea in the hope of inspiring ex-Forces prisoners with the story of how they rebuilt their lives after injury.

This is the latest addition to the MGR programme which has reached more than 50,000 civilians since it was launched in 2016 (see separate story on p08).

It is estimated that some four per cent of the prison population are ex-Service personnel, and Blesma hopes the pilot scheme will improve their mental and physical health by making them feel part of the military family again.

“We didn't want to preach to them, so we talked about the things that helped us get



through the situations we've been in,” said Si, who lost both his legs in a bomb blast on operations in Afghanistan in 2009. “It's about finding positive people and a support network. The hope is that this project will start something in these men to make a different decision in life.”

In the spotlight

Michael Swain



When Michael Swain started handcycling two-and-a-half years ago, his sole aim was to make the 2017 team that was taking on the Race Across America.

With that box ticked Michael, a double amputee who had only learned to walk again three years previously, went from strength to strength, racing at Invictus and international level. Recently, he took on the challenge of becoming the fastest person to handcycle from John O’Groats to Land’s End.

“When I was training for Race Across America my fitness went through the roof,” says Michael. “I felt really good on the bike, so I thought I’d take it up as a hobby. I’ve always been into endurance sport and I love that a bike can take you anywhere.

“I went to the British Cycling Championships, where I won two silver medals, and I spent most of 2018 competing on the European and World circuits, topping off the year by winning two golds at the Invictus Games in Sydney, which was fantastic. Completing those challenges added fuel to the fire, and once the racing season had come to an end, I was keen for an even tougher challenge.”

A DESIRE TO LIVE LIFE TO THE FULL

When he was 17 years old Michael joined 3 Rifles to escape a 9-to-5 lifestyle, but just a few years later, in 2014, he became the first veteran to undergo the cutting-edge surgical procedure, osseointegration.

“I remember everything that happened on the day I was injured,” Michael recalls. “It was winter 2009 and I had deployed to Afghanistan on my first tour. We were heading into an area south of our patrol base to give overwatch for an American bomb disposal team that was clearing the area. On the way, I was hit by an IED. As soon as I landed on the ground I was in pain, and when the dust settled I could see that I had lost both my legs and that my right arm had been badly damaged.

“The guys on the ground were amazing though. They patched me up, stopped the bleeding and, 16 minutes later, I was casevaced back to Bastion. Once back in the UK, my two-year-old son was my focus

to get me through rehabilitation. Even though I was struggling to learn to walk on stubbies and to use sockets, my personal life was going well. I had accepted that I would need to use a wheelchair and was getting on with life, but then I had the chance to have osseointegration and felt I had nothing to lose.

“Thankfully, it was a huge help to my mobility. It allowed me to play with my kids more, take part in sports like golf, and go for walks with my dog. By the end of 2018 I was ready for a new challenge. I did my research on handcycling records and found one didn’t exist for John O’Groats to Land’s End. Guinness World Records told me they wanted it done in 10 days, so I said I’d do it in six, thinking I’d manage it in five.

“The training was full on. It was hard to juggle the hours on the bike, two kids, and the rest of my life, so I was relieved when it was time to start. I set off on 04 July, battling headwinds all day which slowed me down by three hours. By the end of the day I was exhausted but, surprisingly, had exceeded the day’s 215-mile target by about 20 miles.

“I knew this was going to be more of a mental challenge than a physical one, and I was tested twice. On day three, it hit me hard. I was falling asleep on the bike as I had been running on five hours’ sleep and my body was just giving up. There was also a moment on the A30, just coming out of Dartmoor, where the hills were extremely steep and for an hour I was questioning whether the challenge was even possible. When I got over the last hill, the feeling of achievement was amazing and I got a second wind that spurred me on for the next seven hours!

“The banter and morale with my support team kept me going. Every time we stopped we just had a laugh. I couldn’t have asked for a better team. Coming to the end of the challenge, it was all or nothing. There was a point where my body was hurting so much that it was easier to keep going than to stop because I wouldn’t have been able to get going again. And it was only in those last few hours that I realised I was going to complete the challenge. It took three days, 17 hours, 55 minutes, and 40 seconds to reach Land’s End. It was incredible!”

“

I WAS FALLING ASLEEP ON THE BIKE AS I HAD BEEN RUNNING ON FIVE HOURS’ SLEEP AND MY BODY WAS JUST GIVING UP

”

A feeling of floating

See what scuba can do for you (p42)



INBOX

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

A FOND FAREWELL TO KAZ (25 APRIL 1993 - 20 JULY 2019)

My wonderful horse Kaz was 26 years old when he was taken ill very suddenly with colic on the evening of Saturday 20 July. Kaz was a very special horse, and was instrumental in my recovery after losing my legs 12 years ago. Since then, he has touched the hearts of many Blesma Members who have met and ridden him.

Kaz was born in Cornwall in 1993 and was brought to Essex as a magnificent young stallion a couple of years later. When I first saw him I thought he was the horse of my dreams and never could have imagined that I would end up owning him. I bought him when he was nine, and he was a real handful at first. He was terrified of motorbikes and bicycles, and could reverse into ditches at speed, or bolt forwards into a gallop with no brakes! I was younger, tougher, and more foolhardy then. And I had legs!

Over time our partnership developed, and before long we were competing at rodeos.

We were successful at speed events such as barrel racing, as well as working with cattle, although our success there was limited as Kaz would often be disqualified for 'cow harassment'!

We also competed at polocrosse, an energetic team game played with a smaller version of a lacrosse stick and a soft, bouncing ball. My proudest moment was when Kaz achieved Best Horse at his grade in the 2006 UK Polocrosse Association Finals Tournament.

Little did I know that by the time the 2007 tournament came around I would be lying in hospital, just coming to terms with the fact that my legs were gone forever, and wondering whether I would ever be able to walk, let alone ride a horse again. Lying in that hospital bed, looking at a picture



**Mick Foulds
with his beloved
horse Kaz**

of Kaz on the wall, was one of the things that kept me going on my road to recovery. I was cantering around the arena just nine days after getting my first set of prosthetic legs. I couldn't walk, but being back on a horse felt normal again!

From the first day I got back on him with my prosthetic legs, Kaz's demeanour changed. He was much quieter, and he always waited for me to get on or off him, something he had never done before. He became a horse that anyone could ride.

We took part in many new adventures. In June 2011, for example, I was part of the Horses Help Heroes challenge, which involved taking a replica WWI horse-drawn ambulance non-stop from Land's End to John O'Groats to help raise money for Blesma and three other military charities.

In the run up to the challenge, Kaz and I were involved in a number of prestigious events including the British Military Tattoo at Earl's Court, and parading in front of the crowds with the ambulance at Olympia (international showjumping) and Badminton (cross country eventing). A couple of years ago we were even given the opportunity to ride in the New Year's Day Parade in London.

His last public appearance was at the photo shoot for Blesma's commemorative magazine in 2018 (pictured left), where his behaviour was exemplary!

So many people have enjoyed the experience of riding with Kaz, and some have even had their first experience of sitting on a horse with him. People who I recollect as having a connection with Kaz are the dearly missed Paul Burns, who participated in the Horses Help Heroes challenge along with Colin Hamilton and Matt Wilson.

There was also Matty Woollard, Terri Hunt, Jeff Winder, Alison Grant, John Francis, Dan Richardson, Susi Rogers-Hartley, Gam Gurung, Stephen White, Lee Menday, Stuart McLelland, Olivia Zambonini, John Phillips, Jamie Hull, Ian Lloyd, Allan Long, Alan Carson, Terry Brooks and Chris Livett.

Although he had a number of health issues in his latter years, I continued to ride Kaz until just two weeks before he died. I am so very sad to have lost him, but he had a good life and brought a lot of joy to a lot of people. I am lucky to have shared a partnership with him for 17 years.

Kaz is irreplaceable, but my wife, Sue, and I have three other horses, and I will continue to ride, and continue to encourage other Blesma Members to do so, too.

Mick Foulds



FROM PASSENGER TO PILOT IN JUST A FEW MONTHS

In January, after receiving an email from Blesma promoting an air experience day with the charity Flying For Freedom (FFF), I headed to Kemble Airfield in Gloucestershire to spend the day punching holes in the clouds as a passenger in a microlight.

Two months later, in March this year, I began my training to become a microlight pilot. After injuring my leg in 2013, my ability to play rugby, box, run and do most things in between evaporated. So did my desire to try new things simply because I didn't want the fuss of adapting things and slowing other people's activities down.

At the point of injury I had taken the first steps to becoming a military pilot, something that went on to become near impossible in my mind during my 12 surgeries, and which had completely slipped off the radar when I discovered

my injury was incompatible with military service. How wrong could I be? The requirements for a National Private Pilot's License for a microlight are 25 hours of flying, 10 of which must be solo, and five of those must include navigation. From my first week in control of the aircraft at JAMC South Cerney, through two expeditions to the south of France, and my qualifying general skills test, I have qualified as a pilot and learnt that the limitations I imposed on myself were non-existent.

My family has seen me regain my interest in an activity – something I haven't had since being part of a rugby or boxing team prior to injury. Now I am qualified, I have free access to the FFF aircraft whenever I want – all I need to do is add fuel. It is my goal to introduce as many injured Service personnel as I can to flying as it has genuinely changed my attitude, given me something to work on, and pulled my

life back on track. The three aircraft currently operated by FFF are adapted for a range of injuries – from spinal to amputation and different levels of paralysis, and are constantly being modified to allow military personnel and veterans to take to the skies.

Since beginning this journey I have realised that a career in aviation is still possible – a current injured veteran and member of the FFF team is a pilot with TUI. This has motivated me to pursue my prior ambitions, and I am now at the final selection stage of a cadetship programme with an airline, and have just one more interview to go.

I would like to say a huge thank you to Blesma and Flying For Freedom for enabling this whole adventure and for putting me back on a fulfilling career path as I was before the loss of my limb.

Louis Farrell

OBITUARIES

Those we have lost

Timothy Shea

01 Nov 1915 - 07 August 2019

Timothy, known as Ted, grew up on a small hill farm at Coomerkane on the Healy Pass Road outside Glengarriff, County Cork. Ted and his five siblings were orphaned when his parents, James and Bridget, died within eight years of each other.

Ted spent three years in the industrial school in Upton with his younger brother, Paddy, before he returned to Glengarriff. Then, in the early 1930s, they followed their older sister Molly to London. Ted began work laying electric cables for Prices before joining Nash Builders to build a new estate in Romford.

In 1939, he joined the Queen's Royal Regiment which was based in Surrey. Shortly afterwards, World War II broke out and he joined the newly formed Parachute Regiment, training all over England. To qualify as a paratrooper, Ted was required to complete seven jumps; five from a barrage balloon with a basket beneath, and two from an aeroplane.

In November 1942, Ted saw action in Tunisia when he parachuted into Souk-



el-Arba before being deployed to fight beside the French Foreign Legion at Djebel Mansour.

In February 1943, Ted was wounded in the leg at Djebel Mansour, but was soon able to rejoin his unit when they parachuted into Sicily in July 1943 to help secure the Catania Bridge. The unit was subsequently withdrawn to take part in the invasion of Italy, where Ted and his fellow Paras landed by sea at Taranto and fought their way up to Brindisi before they were withdrawn once again.

Back in Britain, Ted was held in reserve during the D-Day Landings but, three months later, the British 1st Airborne Division was ordered to capture the bridge over the Rhine at Arnhem in eastern Holland, playing a major role in Operation Market Garden.

On 17 September 1944, the Division took off from Beacon Hill in Lincolnshire at 11am with instruction to take the bridge within four days. During the battle, Ted was wounded when a burst of machine gun bullets ripped through his left arm. It led to his capture and his left arm needing to be amputated by a German doctor before he was transferred to Stalag VII, a prisoner of war camp at Moosburg near Munich.

Ted returned to England in January 1945 on a prisoner exchange. He spent two years at Roehampton Hospital where surgeons worked to correct the botched amputation before he was discharged from the Army. During this time, he met his future wife Sheila Hoare. The pair were married in Overton Road, Enfield and moved to Newcastle in 1947. Ted worked in security for Bainbridge and later John Lewis. Sheila died in 1993 and Ted missed her every day.

Ted died peacefully at home, aged 103. He is survived by his two daughters, Bridget and Susan, and his granddaughter Fiona.

Those who have passed away

June - August 2019. May they rest in peace.

Beach D	RN	HQ (Cardiff)	July 2019
Brown D	RAF	HQ	23/08/2019
Cowan D	Royal Pioneer Corps	HQ	02/06/2019
Crotty P	RA	HQ (East Berks)	02/06/2019
Davison P	Yorkshire Regt	HQ (Wolverhampton / Doncaster)	14/06/2019
Doolan M	RCT	HQ	29/07/2019
Flower L	West Yorkshire Regt	HQ	27/06/2019
Gallagher J	RAOC	HQ	19/08/2019
Guy B	RE	Bournemouth	29/07/2019
Heggie R	KORB	HQ (Bolton)	29/07/2019
Kennie C	The Royal Hussars	HQ	15/08/2019
Needle R	RAF	HQ	21/08/2019
Newman R	Lancashire Fusiliers	HQ	August 2019
Savage R	RN	HQ	19/08/2019
Shea T	Parachute Regt	HQ (Tyneside)	07/08/2019
Smith J	Parachute Regt	HQ	July 2019
Underwood T	RM	Portsmouth	05/07/2019
Walker R	RTR	HQ	23/08/2019
Wheeler N	RN	Southampton	11/08/2019



Warrior Games highlights sport's role in recovery

An injured veteran who lost his sight and both legs in an explosion in Afghanistan has scooped four silver medals at this year's Warrior Games.

Former soldier Andy Allen was just 19 years old when he was injured by an IED blast whilst serving with The Royal Irish Regiment. For some years after the incident, Andy shied away from sport, but he recently took the advice of fellow injured veterans and got involved in the Warrior Games.

Some serious training meant Andy was one of three Blesma Members (along with Gordon Clark and Simon Flores) selected to join the 20-strong UK team that flew out to Tampa Bay, Florida in June to compete.

"It was an immense experience. The atmosphere was electric, and it was so

humbling to be treated well by the American public," said Andy. "My goal wasn't to win medals but to enjoy the camaraderie and teamwork that comes with the Games, which have now given me the incentive to get back into sport."

Andy competed in four of the 12 adaptive sports on offer – indoor rowing, shotput, discus and powerlifting – winning two silver medals in rowing, one in discus, and another in shotput.

"I never appreciated the role of sport in recovery and rehabilitation until I started hearing the positive stories of others," said Andy. "Using my prosthetic limbs is one thing that has always defeated me, so right now I'm trying to use sport in my goal to accomplish that."

UNDERSTANDING THE ARMORIAL BEARINGS

Armorial bearings are a design or image depicted on a shield. Blesma was granted its armorial bearings in 1958 by the College of Arms. They consist of a shield with a blue background (that represents peace) on which is a sun for the 'place in the sun' that the Association seeks for its Members.

On the sun is a cross potent (potent is the old English word for a crutch or walking staff) – an ancient heraldic form associated with The Crusades. The four crutches are in the colours of the



Services – blue for the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force, and red for the Army and Royal Marines. These are joined together to represent limbless personnel from the four Services, united in the Association. The shield is surmounted by the emblems of the Services with swords sheathed for ex-Servicemen.

On the collar of the lion to the left are two roses and a daffodil, whilst on that to the right are two thistles and a shamrock to represent the four countries of the United Kingdom.

NEWS BRIEFS

MEMBERS: 'WE DECLARE THIS PRIMARY SCHOOL OPEN!'

A number of Blesma Members took part in the official opening of Kingfisher Primary School in Yeovil at the end of June.

Members Andy Barlow, Kirk Hughes, Andy Phillips, Adrian Thornton, and National Outreach Officer Martin Gwillim joined an afternoon assembly on Friday 28 June, during which the pupils spoke about their experience of helping to build the school, visiting the site during construction, and using its state-of-the-art facilities.

The Members, who had been invited because they had competed in the Invictus Games and reflected the school's motto of "Being The Best We Can Be", spoke of their stories of overcoming adversity before they joined the pupils to try a range of sporting activities.

Kirk Hughes, who competed for Team GB in wheelchair basketball, wheelchair tennis and handcycling at the 2017 Invictus Games, said: "It was a really nice day. The pupils had lots of questions about how we were injured, and it was nice to talk about our sporting endeavours as well as raise a younger generation's awareness of limb loss. They really took it on board."



FUNDRAISING DUO TAKE ON CYCLING CHALLENGE

Two members of Blesma's fundraising team took on the London to Brighton cycle challenge on Sunday 15 September.

Abbi Wilkins (above left) and Molly Watson (right) were joined by friends and family members to make a team of seven who cycled the 55-mile route for Blesma.

"Abbi and I took on the Velocity Zipwire last year and really enjoyed the challenge," said Molly, Blesma's Community Events Officer. "Over the past two years, we have met many inspirational Members who have overcome adversity, so this year we decided to set ourselves a harder physical challenge and raise even more money!"

NEWS ANALYSIS

The race towards a bionic future

A future when prosthetic limbs are wired to the body's nervous system is an exciting prospect that is moving from science fiction to reality

Prosthesis, once a healthcare outlier of wood, leather, tin and a clanking delivery, is in the spotlight as a supercharged sector crackling with hi-tech potential thanks to bionics and advanced technology. Shoulder harnesses and fixed-joint legs were still common until recent years, but now engineers and scientists are pushing towards the prospect of prosthetic limbs powered by thought.

The rudimentary artificial limbs of World War II heroes were often hidden away under baggy trousers and jackets, but advances are opening unheralded opportunities for amputees. Thanks to dedicated research programmes and the inspirational Paralympics and Invictus Games, prosthetics are now at the heart of a dynamic fusion of science, engineering and medicine.

"In the past, a hospital's prosthetics department was often shoved away, but through the Paralympics and Prince Harry's Invictus Games, it has become more mainstream," says Brian Chenier, Blesma's BSO (Prosthetics). "We have witnessed massive progress in recent years with technology and design innovation. The future is looking incredibly exciting!"

CREATING A SENSE OF TOUCH

NHS England spends approximately £60 million on prosthetic services that support some 60,000 people who have lost limbs through trauma or suffer congenital limb deficiency. The burden is growing as the number of amputations accelerates. Diabetes UK recorded 26,378 lower limb amputations related to diabetes in England from 2014 to 2017, an increase of 19.4 per cent over 2010 to 2013.

The personal misery is profound and the £44-million-a-year price tag for dealing with a rising cohort of limbless patients from circulatory issues is troubling. But the scientific and engineering communities are rising to the challenge. The leather and tin have been replaced by light, flexible materials, while artificial intelligence (AI), algorithms and implantable myoelectric sensors are driving a new generation of prosthetics that create a sense of touch for the wearer.

The big hope, however, is from the technology that allows prosthetics to be connected to the body's nervous system, responding to the electrical output from natural thought; the biological and robotic in harmony. And it is becoming a tantalisingly close prospect.

A project run by Icelandic firm Ossur has successfully implanted myoelectric sensors in the residual tissue of two Swedish leg amputees and both have been able to raise and lower their legs by thinking about specific movements.

"Mind-controlled bionic prosthetic legs are a remarkable clinical breakthrough in next-generation bionic technology," says Jon Sigurdsson, the company's president and chief executive. "By adapting not only to the individual's intentional movements, but to intuitive actions, we are closer than ever to creating prosthetics that are truly integrated with their user."

Such advanced prosthetics are currently out of the reach of most people and healthcare systems. The global challenge is to bring that price down and Bristol firm Open Bionics is leading the way with a range of responsive bionic hands and arms that could be prescribed via the NHS or bought privately. The success of its Hero Arm for younger users, which can be



“
WE HAVE
WITNESSED
MASSIVE
PROGRESS
IN RECENT
YEARS. THE
FUTURE IS
LOOKING
INCREDIBLY
EXCITING!
”



Left: In 2013, Andrew Garthwaite became the first person in the UK to be fitted with a prosthetic arm controlled by the wearer's mind. Below: Open Bionics' Hero Arm is a 3D-printed myoelectric prosthesis



customised with graphic designs, recently helped it raise £5 million from investors that included the Williams Formula 1 racing team.

But Professor Chris Nester, a foot and ankle specialist and academic director of Salford University's School of Health and Society, believes a radical rethink in business models, currently dominated by low-volume, high-profit devices, is needed to get better prosthetics across wider markets, particularly emerging nations.

Professor Nester sees huge value in using technology such as AI and 3D printing to democratise devices, as well as feeding back information about prosthetic limbs to clinicians and the NHS to create ever more efficient treatment pathways.

"We need cheaper prices. Many prostheses available in the UK are pretty expensive because there are not

that many of them and the development costs are high," he says. "Replacement parts are one of the most expensive elements, but with 3D printing you can just email a CAD [computer-aided design] file and it can be printed locally, which opens up potential for more people to benefit, no matter where they are."

The industry is fragmented, however, with research often confined to silos, so a number of projects are being run to standardise parameters around hardware design, prosthetic control, amputee biomechanics and the use of software.

"Good prostheses can give people back their independence and this is, for many, life changing. There are some clear systemic challenges in terms of getting the technology to the people who need it, but the research is travelling at pace," says Brian Chenier.

SERIAL THRILLER

STUART ROBINSON'S BEEN KILLING IT AT INVICTUS, CLUB AND TEAM GB LEVEL SINCE HE TRIED 'MURDERBALL' FIVE YEARS AGO. HIS NEXT TARGET? THE PARALYMPIC GAMES IN 2020...

Stuart Robinson's first experience of wheelchair rugby – a sport that has been nicknamed 'murderball' because of its intense collisions – was much more full-on than he was expecting. The former RAF Gunner, who completed four tours of both Iraq and Afghanistan, was looking for an activity to get involved in after being severely injured by an IED on operations in 2013. "I sent an email to the Invictus team to see if I could come to training and find out what wheelchair rugby was all about – I was looking for a bit of fun," he says. "They invited me to Leicester for a weekend, but what I didn't know was that training weekend was also the final selection camp for the London 2014 Invictus Games team!

"I was thrown in at the deep end, with just a weekend to pick up a new sport. I didn't have a clue at first – I thought you played with a rugby ball and had to pass it backwards, but wheelchair rugby is played with a round ball which you can bounce and pass in any direction. Luckily, I learned quickly!"

Stuart impressed enough over the weekend to become a key member of the Invictus side that won gold at the Olympic Park in 2014, defeating the Americans in front of a partisan crowd. It was quite clear that Stuart, who had been an excellent sportsman before his injury, had massive potential. He was invited onto the GB development squad, and attended the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games as part of the Paralympic Inspiration Programme. After







Words: Nick Moore Photography: Greigphoto, Andy Bate

that, he was promoted to the elite GB national squad and, as a professional sportsman, has dedicated every moment since to a career he hopes will culminate with an appearance at the Tokyo Paralympics in 2020.

“It’s been amazing. When I started playing the game, I just wanted to show my three kids that I was still their dad, that I could get on with life, and that they could look up to me,” says 37-year-old Stuart. “I saw leaflets at Headley Court advertising local clubs and thought I’d give it a go. I wasn’t expecting anything from Invictus, but I really picked up the sport. I was strong and fit, which helped. Now, having watched the Paralympic Games in Rio, I’m very excited to hopefully be selected to take part in Tokyo. The Games are such an amazing spectacle.”

Stuart is quick to dispel some of the myths about wheelchair rugby. “A lot of people think it is just about collisions. They do happen – you can hit chair-to-chair as hard as you like, regardless of whether you have the ball – but person-to-person contact is not allowed.

“There is much more to the sport than that though: it’s physically demanding, you need a high aerobic capacity, you’ve got to be strong and have good hand-eye coordination, and it’s very technical. As well as making passes and avoiding hits, you have to remember lots of timing issues, so you’ve got all these numbers going through your head, as well as trying to work out which pass to make.”

The game’s timing rules mean that the ball must be bounced or passed every 10 seconds. Players have 12

Invictus Games gold medallist and European champion Stuart Robinson has his hopes on making Team GB’s Paralympic squad

seconds to get out of their own half, and then another 28 seconds to score a point before the ball goes to the opposition. And they’re not allowed in the opposition’s ‘key area’ for more than 10 seconds.

“You’re constantly making calculations because you’re time limited, and it’s exhausting at the same time,” says Stuart. “You’re trying to control the chair, stop yourself from going out of bounds, you’re taking hits... and you’re up and down the court all game! I love it.”

TACTICS MAKE PERFECT

The Paralympic version of the sport is four-a-side, with one point scored when a player takes the ball over the opposition’s line with both hands. Each athlete is given a classification based on their functionality, ranging from 0.5 for those with the least functionality to 3.5 for those with the most. The four players on court cannot exceed a total of eight classification points.

As functionality is assessed in half-point graduations there are many combinations of players that a coach can use to try to gain a tactical advantage. “I’m classed as a 3.5,” says Stuart, “so I’m looked on to do most of the offensive work on the team. Different teams have different tactics. Australia are current Paralympic Champions, and Japan are World Champions, and they both play with two 3.5 players who are fast and agile, and two 0.5 players whose role is mostly defensive.”

The GB team is currently ranked fourth in the world. “Australia, Japan, and USA are the top three teams, and we recently overtook Canada to claim fourth place,”





says Stuart. “We meet once a month for a training camp in Lilleshall, and we worked hard this summer for the European Championships in Denmark. We won the competition for the third successive time, which was great because the top two teams automatically qualified for next year’s Paralympics in Tokyo!”

Stuart, from Morecambe, plays club rugby for West Coast Crash, a side based in Southport. They’re part of the top GB division – with three leagues overall containing 19 teams. “We don’t play every weekend,” says Stuart. “Instead, we meet every couple of months and play every team in the league over the course of a weekend – which is pretty tiring!”

“I also train twice a week; once in Southport and once in Sheffield. It’s a full-time job. I’m in the gym most days, aiming to get fitter, stronger and faster – anything that makes it easier once I’m in the chair.”

Playing elite wheelchair rugby isn’t open to everyone: upper body injuries are a pre-requisite, so many lower limb amputees don’t qualify (Stuart lost both legs in the IED blast, but also sustained shoulder injuries that allow him to compete). For those who do qualify, there is fierce competition to get into the GB squad. “It’s unbelievably tough, but I want to be the best,” says Stuart. “When I started I wanted to be as good as the best guy on the Invictus team, now I want to get as good as the best in the world. A couple of my fellow club players have been on the GB team longer than I have, so I’m always looking to learn from them.”

But away from the elite level, the sport is open to anyone. “There are various clubs and leagues that newcomers can play in and which accommodate all kinds of injuries,” says Stuart. “Anyone who wants



“We needed him to knock them out of their chairs. We needed him to become fearsome!” says Stuart’s coach



to take part should have a look on the Great Britain Wheelchair Rugby website for their nearest club.”

Stuart hopes the sport can change more lives in the way it has changed his. “The sport has given me so much. It’s kept me fit and healthy, and has got my life back on track. Mentally, it has helped me massively. When you leave the military, where you’re used to teamwork, banter and camaraderie, you fear you are never going to get that again. Lots of injured military people suffer because they miss it so much. Getting involved with a local team puts you back into that zone. Luckily for me, I fell right back into it with sport. The fun is there, and you are looking out for one another. I can’t recommend it enough.”

Find out more about wheelchair rugby, and learn where you can play, at www.gbwr.co.uk

ALAN ASH COACH OF WEST COAST CRASH

Alan Ash is the coach of Stuart’s team, West Coast Crash. A former Royal Marine, he played for Team GB at five Paralympic Games after taking up the sport in 1991

How much has the sport changed since you first got involved?

It has evolved massively. It wasn’t as professional, it was more of a bit of fun to get you fit. We played in a combination of day chairs and sports chairs. Now, the chairs cost about £8,000! The technology involved is phenomenal. Players are fitter, faster and stronger now.

What did you first think of Stuart as a player?

He was quiet, but I could see that he was very sharp. He read the ball well, and his hand-eye coordination was very good. He’s gone from strength to strength since he first started playing. He’s done a lot on his own physically to get himself to where he needs to be, alongside some tactical and technical guidance from us.

What did he need to learn to reach Paralympic standard?

At first, Stuart wasn’t as aggressive as he needed to be. We needed him to move people about, put them off balance, knock them out of their chairs. We needed him to become fearsome! We did a lot of drills with him and showed him videos of what other players could do. Now he is dominant on the court, which is just what we wanted him to be.

Would you encourage other Blesma Members to try out?

Of course! There are lots of clubs to choose from, so there ought to be one reasonably close to anyone who wants to play. You can find the nearest club by going to the GBWR website. It may be a bit daunting for newbies, with chairs crashing about, but you soon get used to it.



The last time
Maria Kowalska
and Wacław
Domagala met
she was a

21-year-old nurse
and he was a
teenage soldier
who had just had
a leg amputated.

SOME 75 YEARS AFTER THEY LAST SAW EACH OTHER DURING WWII, A BLESMA MEMBER AND POLISH NURSE MET AGAIN AFTER A CHANCE ENCOUNTER AT THE ILFORD PARK POLISH HOME

A cheery “Good Morning, Sister” evaporated 75 years of separation in a remarkable meeting in a Devon care home earlier this year. Maria Kowalska didn’t recognise the man in the wheelchair, but Polish war hero and Blesma Member Waclaw Domagala never forgot the “angel” who nursed him after he was wounded in the World War II Battle of Monte Cassino.

“I knew it was her the moment I saw her,” he says. “She was one of the nurses who helped me and I am so grateful to all of them. How could I forget her?”

Waclaw fought in the Italian campaign with the 2nd Polish Corps, which suffered 923 deaths, 2,931 injuries, and 94 troops missing in action as a result of the conflict. Maria was a ward sister at the No. 1 Polish Hospital, treating wounded troops throughout the 123 days of fighting until the German lines broke and the route to Rome was opened.

“No-one had called me ‘Sister’ for a long time, so I thought: ‘My goodness, who is that?’” says Maria, who, like Waclaw, settled in England after the war. “It was only my second day as a resident at the Ilford Park Polish Home and I never expected anything like that to happen. I didn’t recognise Waclaw at first, but

then he started talking about Monte Cassino. It was incredible to see him after all this time. I looked after the ward where the soldiers recovered, but would also help out in theatre. I remember Waclaw because it was so sad to see a young man lose a leg. He was only 19. I knew he had survived and had been sent to Scotland to recover, but that was all I knew. There were so many bad injuries to so many young men.”

A STRONG BOND AFTER 75 YEARS

Today, Maria needs the support of a walking frame, while Waclaw uses a wheelchair and his memory is clouding with dementia. But after a lifetime apart they still have a strong bond, and they now have rooms close to each other at the Ilford Park Polish Home, which was established after WWII by Prime Minister Winston Churchill as a symbol of the country’s debt to the Polish troops who fought and died for the Allied cause.

It is the only home still operated by the Ministry of Defence, through Veterans UK, and is an astonishing microcosm of the impact of Nazi and Russian control over Poland during WWII. Its 85 residents remember street executions, hangings, persecution in the ghettos,

Below: Maria still has her British Army and Polish Hospital identity cards in her maiden name of Staszczak



“I remember Waclaw because it was so sad to see a young man lose a leg. He was only 19. There were so many bad injuries to so many young men”

starvation, relatives lost to the concentration camps, and forced marches in the harsh winters without food. But above all, they remember the indomitable spirit of their fellow countrymen and women.

Maria’s memory is sharp and she keeps her British Army and Polish hospital identity cards, in her maiden name of Staszczak, among mementos in her room at the Home near Newton Abbot.

Like millions of people, her life changed forever as a result of the war. A boarding school girl raised in south-east Poland, she was destined for a professional career but was transported to a Russian work camp at the outbreak of the war. Tens of thousands of Poles were sent to harsh camps before getting the chance to enlist with the free Polish forces that were an integral part of Allied resistance.

Maria trained as a nurse and was posted to Palestine and Afghanistan, where she worked closely with top surgeons before transferring to southern Italy as the Allies pushed north from Sicily. The fight for the strategic Monte Cassino, about 80 miles south of Rome, resulted in more than 200,000 dead and wounded from both sides.

“We took over a school and soon became the biggest hospital in the area,” Maria remembers. “We had anti-aircraft guns on the roof as it was such an important building. I worked there until the hospital transferred to England after the war.”

Meanwhile Waclaw, who was born in Miechów, was deported to a Siberian labour camp with his family in 1940 before being liberated to join the 5th Kresowa Infantry Division, 2nd Polish Corps. He was awarded

Below: Maria was reunited with Waclaw on her second day as a resident at the Polish Home



a number of military medals and decorations by the British and Polish governments for his actions in WWII, including Poland's highest military decoration, the Virtuti Militari Class 5.

After he was injured, Waclaw was sent to the UK for rehabilitation, and settled in Bristol. Four years ago, after losing his wife and daughters to cancer, Blesma helped him and arranged for him to move to the Ilford Park Home. Amazingly, Maria married and settled down to raise a family in Wiltshire, less than 60 miles away from Waclaw, but their paths didn't cross again until both became residents at Ilford Park.

AN INCREDIBLE PLACE

Their reunion is not the first witnessed by staff at the Home. Ninety-two-year-old Tad Stopczynski still speaks about the moment Andrew Borowiec came to the Home and they met for the first time since they were teenage members of the Warsaw Uprising. They had fought alongside each other, harrying the Germans and getting supplies to starving families, but were separated after being caught and sent to Prisoner of War camps.

Veterans UK goes to great lengths to create a special atmosphere at the Home, which is known locally as Little Poland. It holds traditional Polish celebrations, has a resident Polish Catholic priest, and serves Polish food. The Home also has signs in Polish and English (its corridors are named Warsaw Street and Gdynia Street), and 40 of the 100 staff are Polish.

Clare Thomas, who is the manager of Ilford Park, says traditional touches such as these help the residents feel comfortable as well as helping with dementia – almost half have some form of the condition – by connecting them with reassuring images and memories.

“This is an incredible place, absolutely one of a kind, with amazing people and staff,” says Clare. “Winston Churchill told Parliament that the nation owed a debt to the Polish people for their actions during WWII and his pledge has never wavered. Many of our residents endured terrible times and it is right that we are here to care for them now. Our newest residents are in their late 70s and were only small children when their families were forced to flee, but Churchill's promise has been sustained to support them.

“Barely a day goes by at the Home when I don't hear something utterly remarkable about how the residents survived World War II, and their stories and dignity are humbling for all the staff.

“It was astonishing when Maria and Waclaw met again at the Home after all that time apart, but it shows how deep those memories and connections go, and their shared history is so important to their wellbeing now. All the residents here have lived full lives and now have children, grandchildren, and even great grandchildren who are the focus of their days, but every now and then you get a privileged glimpse of history and the strength of a very special generation.”

Below: “This is an incredible place, with amazing people and staff,” says Home manager Clare Thomas

ILFORD PARK STILL KEEPS THE 'WINSTON CHURCHILL PROMISE'

Ilford Park Polish Home, in Newton Abbot on the edge of Dartmoor National Park, first opened in 1948 as Stover Camp. Lines of huts were built for the American troops who had been stationed nearby and who were expected to be injured in the D-Day Landings.

It became one of 45 resettlement camps after the war when the Polish Resettlement Act 1947, affectionately known as the Winston Churchill promise, put the responsibility on government agencies to care for Poles who had fought under British command.

Over the years, it has evolved from a resettlement camp to a nursing home. The old huts were replaced with a purpose-built home covering nine acres in 1992. Today, it is overseen by Veterans UK, which is a part of the Ministry of Defence.



How to...

Apply for help with funding for an activity

THE ASSOCIATION HOSTS AN ARRAY OF ACTIVITIES, BUT IF THERE'S SOMETHING SPECIFIC YOU WANT TO HAVE A GO AT BLESMA MIGHT JUST BE ABLE TO HELP

Whether you'd like to scale a mountain or paint one, Blesma could help with the costs



Blesma prides itself on encouraging its Members to stay active and pursue a range of interests and hobbies after injury. Last year, the Association organised 65 different 'official' events, expeditions, and activities that were attended by 445 participants.

That list of hosted events continues to grow every year, but did you know that the Association also provides support grants for external activities and events? Anything from art classes to canoe slalom challenges, whether it might be for fundraising or personal enrichment.

Blesma can offer support grants for kit and equipment, training or logistics subject to the event meeting certain criteria – namely to enhance a Member's health or wellbeing, or improve their independence.

"We are keen to hear from Members who may need a bit of help to get going with an event or from those who want to pick a hobby or interest back up after recovering from injury," says Heather Betts, Blesma's Director Independence and Wellbeing. "The Association is not able to fund absolutely everything, but if a Member's application demonstrates how it will benefit either themselves, the Association, or the wider community then we are happy to support where possible."

So, whether it's an expedition organised by an external body or a solo challenge you would like to pursue, Blesma might just be



Words: Denny Buckland

able to help with some of the finances that could turn a far-fetched fantasy into an achievable adventure. Here are five top tips to give you the best chance of getting a discretionary grant...

1 RESEARCH IT THOROUGHLY
Research your proposal thoroughly so that you fully understand the logistics and requirements, and have a clear idea where and why you might need

support from Blesma. It is much easier for the Association to assess and process requests that are thoroughly costed and have clear aims, objectives, and outcomes.

2 CONSULT YOUR BSO
Your first port of call should be your Blesma Support Officer (BSO). Give him or her as much detail as possible about your event including the timescale, total costs, and



how much you might be able to contribute. They can help develop your idea and guide you through the application process. You can find your BSO's contact details at www.blesma.org/blesma-bsos

3 GOING IT ALONE

If you want to take part in a solo challenge rather than an event that is being organised by a third party, you will need to carry out a thorough risk assessment and consider any health and safety requirements so that your project does not get delayed or prevented because of a later technical issue. Start by asking yourself: "Is what I would like to do achievable?"

4 HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Assess how the event or activity will benefit your health and wellbeing. The Association is committed to supporting events that help Members enjoy a lasting improvement, such as returning to a hobby or sport that you have had to put on hold because of injury. But you don't have to limit yourself



to an activity you have done previously, it could be something new that you would like to try with the aim of making it a regular part of your life. Many Members are enthused about taking up a new pursuit after trying it out at Members' Weekend, for example.

5 INSPIRE OTHERS

If you are thinking about taking on a solo challenge, why not research how it might help and inspire other people, either locally or within the Association? Could a number of other Blesma Members take part with you, for example? A request for funding will carry more weight if you can prove that it would have a positive impact on others.

The Activities Calendar 2020, which carries all the necessary information about the events that Blesma will host next year, will be inserted into the Winter 2019 issue of the magazine. For more help and advice on applying for an activities grant, contact your BSO. Their details are at www.blesma.org/blesma-bsos





THE HEALING POWER OF A HOUND

BLESMA MEMBER ALLEN PARTON WAS LEFT UNABLE TO WALK, TALK, OR REMEMBER MUCH OF HIS LIFE WHEN HE WAS INJURED IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE GULF WAR. THEN HE MET ENDAL

A dog called Endal saved Allen Parton's life. This happened quite literally: as Allen was left unconscious in a car park after a hit-and-run incident. "Endal put me in the recovery position, got a blanket from my wheelchair and put it over me, and got my mobile phone from under a car and brought it to me," remembers Allen, 60, from Hampshire. "He put the phone to my face, couldn't get a reaction from me, and so left to get help. It was icy cold, so I'd have died out there without him. He was later given the canine equivalent of the Victoria Cross!"

This is impressive enough on its own, but Endal also saved Allen's life in another sense. As a Naval Artificer, Allen received a traumatic head injury in the aftermath of the Gulf War in 1991. "It left me in hospital for five years," he says. "I lost all memories of my wife and children. To this day, the memories haven't returned. I can't remember my wedding or my children's births. Fifty per cent of my life history has gone. I couldn't read, write, walk or talk, and I lost every human emotion – love, hate, happiness, and sadness. Without one, you can't be human. I lost all four in one whack!"

The situation left Allen severely depressed. He tried to take his own life on two separate occasions ("It was

whilst I was at Headley Court and they saved my life on both occasions!” he says). Left in “a bubble”, unable to communicate with his wife Sandra or his children Zoe and Liam, he was taken to a day centre, where he sat “in a vegetative state”.

It was a quirk of fate that led to Allen meeting Endal and which, in turn, would lead to his life changing forever. One day, the bus that took Allen to the day centre didn’t arrive, and so he ended up attending an assistance dog puppy training class that his wife had signed up for. “I was shown into this building in Hampshire and there were puppies everywhere,” Allen recalls. “I didn’t respond to any of them, so they weren’t interested in me – all apart from an 11-month-old Labrador called Endal.

“He saw something on the floor by my wheelchair, trotted over, picked it up, and put it in my lap. Even though he didn’t get a treat from me, he kept putting things in my lap until I felt as though I was disappearing under a mound of stuff. Towards the end of the day, he got a smile from me – and that day, he came home with us.”

The connection between the two awoke something in Allen. “I still wasn’t able to communicate with my family, and experts

“WHEN HE DIED, HE TAUGHT ME TO BE SAD AGAIN. I CRIED LIKE A BABY! I HADN’T BEEN EMPATHIC BEFORE THAT BUT I WAS HUMAN AGAIN!”

had said I’d never speak again, but that dog and I learned to communicate at a high level,” he remembers. “I wasn’t able to talk, but I learned sign language. If I touched my head, Endal brought me a hat. If I touched my face, he would bring me my razor. In the end, we learned something like 1,000 commands.

“If there’s one animal that can make you relearn lost emotions, it’s definitely a dog,” says Allen. “Endal taught me happiness, he taught me to hate people who are cruel to animals, and I learned to love again. After a while, I got permission to remarry my wife, with Endal as my best man!”

From left: one of Hounds for Heroes’ training dogs Rookie, Endal Junior, and Allen enjoy some downtime from training

THE LAST PIECE OF THE JIGSAW

Further miracles followed. “I then started grunting to Endal and those grunts became stuttered words, which became stuttered sentences,” says Allen. Even the eventual, devastating loss of Endal taught Allen something. “My life was like a jigsaw puzzle, torn asunder in 1991, and every day Endal found a piece of that jigsaw and put it back,” he says. “When he died, he put the last piece in place because he taught me how to be sad again. I cried like a baby! I hadn’t been able to be empathic before that, but I was human again!”

Another Labrador, Endal Junior – EJ for short – took over as Allen’s assistance dog, and learned the same range of astonishing skills as his predecessor. EJ knows to pull the plug out of the bath if Allen falls unconscious in it, and has an Oyster card to operate Tube station barriers.

The massive benefits that a dog brought Allen got him thinking. “I became vice chairman of Canine Partners, the charity where I’d met Endal,” he says. “I discovered that there were thousands of injured Service people in the UK, but only a few had assistance dogs. Endal had given me back my happiness and independence, and I wanted to do that for more people.



'Puppy parents' look after the dogs-in-training until they are given to their owners



ENDAL GOES TO HOLLYWOOD

Endal was Allen's loyal friend and trusted companion for 13-and-a-half years, but it was a chance moment at an ATM that made the pair nationally famous. "Endal learned to use a cashpoint; he could put the card in, then take the card, money and receipt out for me," recalls Allen. "One day, he did it in Portsmouth and it happened to be witnessed by a journalist.

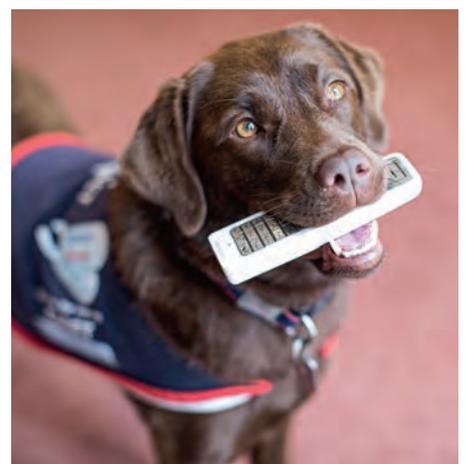
"Endal ended up in newspapers all over the world, and was given the 'Dog of the Millennium' award. Lots of things happened after that; he was the first dog in the cabin of an aircraft, the first on the London Eye, and we wrote a best-selling book, which we launched at Crufts. He was signing books there with his paw!"

The book *Endal: How One Extraordinary Dog Brought A Family Back From The Brink* got rave reviews. It was eventually picked up by Hollywood and is currently in development to be made into a major motion picture. "After the book, we were approached by a major



player wanting us to do the Endal movie," says Allen. "I was very touched by that. The producer of the film was involved in *Harry Potter* and *Star Wars*, and even though they won't tell me who is going to play me yet, I've got a feeling it will be Brad Pitt!" he jokes.

Allen hopes the film will help to spread his message of positivity. "Sandra and I wanted the film to show the aftermath of things going wrong, but then show there can be hope for people, too. We hope it will be life affirming. If you'd told me when I was in the Navy that a dog would save my life and marriage, I'd not have believed you. It's a great story!"



HOUNDS FOR HEROES





“I had the name ‘Hounds for Heroes’ in my head, and I shared the idea of ex-Service men setting up a charity to help our own at a tri-Service meeting. We decided to include the emergency services, and our selling point would be that we would fund the full cost of a dog – training, vet’s fees, insurance costs – for life.”

The idea was met with enthusiasm, and Hounds for Heroes is now a well-established charity that has placed 15 dogs, or ‘cadets’ as they are called, with suitable owners. Each dog has £20,000 spent on its training, with another £20,000 put in place to cover a lifetime of expenses. “No cadet comes on parade until all funding is in the bank,” says Allen.

HOW TO HAVE THE HELP OF A HOUND

Anyone with the right credentials is eligible for an assistance dog, whether they were a private, a constable, or a colonel.

“We have premises in Hampshire, and are helping everyone from a police officer with a back injury, to a bomb disposal officer, to a chap with Parkinson’s disease whose dog is taking up the workload as his condition deteriorates. We currently have 22 cadets in the pipeline, and are planning on training and placing roughly

Man’s best friend: Endal Junior, or EJ for short, is Allen’s assistance dog and can carry out a huge number of tasks

two squadrons of four cadets a year.” For any Blesma Member interested in a dog, the process is simple. “We invite people to visit us, and we look at their medical records to get an idea of their condition. They then come for two fully funded one-day visits at the centre. They work the dogs, and if we see a match, we note that; the dog chooses the handler, not the other way around. If we think it’s going to work, we will then invite them to a two-week fully funded residential course in Winchester. During that time, the applicant gets to understand the dog, and the dog learns the applicant’s disability.”

“WHEN THE GUNS GO QUIET ON THE BATTLEFIELD, THE BATTLES WITH TRAUMA AND BEREAVEMENT ARE JUST BEGINNING”

After a dog has been placed, it gets lifelong support and regular visits from trainers to maximise its ability. “There is no cost to the client at all, and our after care is second to none,” says Allen. “And we’re not just focused on the 18 year old coming off the battlefield today, we are just as interested in the 18 year old who served in Northern Ireland or The Falklands. Lots of people have struggled for a long time, and the benefit of a dog is massive.

“We want to enhance the lives of these brave men and women,” Allen says. “A dog provides a reason to smile again, because when the guns go quiet on the battlefield, the battles with trauma and bereavement are only just beginning.”

Visit www.houndsforheroes.com for more





IN AT THE DEEP END

FOR YEARS, SCUBA HAS BEEN A POPULAR PART OF THE ACTIVITIES CALENDAR. SO THIS YEAR, THE ASSOCIATION DECIDED TO ORGANISE A DEDICATED EXPEDITION FOR THOSE WITH LOSS OF USE OF LIMB



Corey Goodson is floating in a coral reef wonderland. It's just over a year since the 19 year old from Ipswich was left paraplegic after he was involved in a car accident during a week off from Phase Two training with the Royal Anglian Regiment. But that's not on his mind right now. Eighteen metres below the surface, floating through the crystal clear waters of the Florida Keys, he is marvelling at the rich marine life in front of his eyes. "It was so good, so beautiful down there that I find it hard to explain," says an exhilarated Corey afterwards. "I saw stingrays, barracudas, lobsters, and so many fish. And being weightless was amazing. It's fantastic moving around freely, and you don't get tired. I can't wait to go again."

What Corey is describing is what you'll hear from the vast majority of Members who participate in a Blesma

scuba diving expedition. Underwater, many constraints that are brought about by limb loss or the loss of use of limbs suddenly disappear. Scuba diving can be a great leveller, and something almost anybody can learn to do.

This particular scuba expedition, which saw Blesma take only wheelchair-using Members abroad for the very first time, was the perfect example. Working closely with an American not-for-profit group called Diveheart, the 10-day trip proved that scuba is truly inclusive, regardless of fitness or mobility issues.

"Diveheart is a great organisation because its ethos is that it can get anyone into the water, and give them as much support as they need, so there's no reason for anyone to say: 'I can't do this,'" explains Matt Goodwin, the Blesma Member and highly experienced dive leader who coordinated the trip.

NEW CHALLENGES



After compulsory classroom sessions it is off to the pool to learn the basics (above) before it's time to explore the open water

“They coped brilliantly with the fact that our guys use wheelchairs. We established what each person could and couldn't do, and what might have stopped them from qualifying as a conventional scuba diver. Maybe they'd need two buddies underwater rather than one, for example. We worked out the parameters and made sure everyone was going to be safe, and then we got them to progress towards getting PADI [Professional Association of Diving Instructors] qualified. Blesma is a big mix of different people, but to become a diver, you have to fulfil certain performance requirements. This was the perfect way of doing it.”

THE SAME AS ANYONE ELSE

Matt, who joined the Royal Marines in 1985 but left in 1991 after an ankle fracture eventually led to an amputation, credits scuba diving with playing a major part in his own recovery. “I got involved with both Blesma and diving almost straight away after my amputation. Blesma has given me a lot of support and a real sense of belonging,” he says. “I went on a Blesma sailing event first in Antigua, which was great, and I've since become very passionate about our Association.

“I started diving in 1992 and I loved it for the same reason that most amputees do – the weightlessness and freedom. Having an injury can be limiting, but you lose all of that underwater. You're the same as anyone else. I've since been diving all year round, all over the world. I've loved going to the Mediterranean, the Caribbean, the Maldives, Egypt, and places like

Scapa Flow in Scotland, where the German High Seas Fleet was scuttled after World War I. Diving those wrecks is absolutely fascinating, and you realise that not many people get to do this sort of stuff.”

Matt has since progressed through the instruction levels, becoming a British Sub Aqua Club dive leader in 1993, a PADI Dive Master in 1995, and is now a Master Scuba Diver Trainer. “I enjoy the instructing side of it because I want people to feel the way that I feel when they get into scuba,” he says. “I like giving that to them – it's all about taking off the shackles and increasing people's confidence. You're giving them the idea that they can progress if they work at something, that they should not be held back. You're removing the stigma of disability.”

Blesma's dive trips have become a firm favourite on the calendar, something that Matt credits Philip 'Bob' Monkhouse with driving forward over the years. But what was different about this recent expedition was that it focused on a specific section of Blesma Members – those who use a wheelchair.

“It was good getting a number of people together who are in the same boat, if you'll excuse the pun,” says Matt. “A trip like this is about diving, but even more than that it's about learning, being positive, and getting people talking. We brought Wayne Rostron along with us, a Member with a spinal injury who is a very experienced diver. He was valuable in the water, but he was just as valuable afterwards, chatting to the other guys over dinner and showing them what they





“IT INCREASES THEIR
CONFIDENCE AND
GIVES THEM THE IDEA
THAT THEY SHOULD
NOT BE HELD BACK.
YOU’RE REMOVING
THE STIGMA OF
DISABILITY”







“I could see our Association was doing something to put people on the road to recovery,” says Member and dive leader Matt Goodwin. “It’s really nice to be involved with that!”

can achieve. The idea is for them to have a great time, but also to use that experience to get healthy and move forward with their lives.”

This activity can also be seen as part of a growing trend within Blesma for Members to lead from within. While BSO Steve Fraser attended to help out with the admin, the diving side was led entirely by Matt.

“It’s great that our Members can get involved in organising trips,” says Steve. “Matt put this concept together and then delivered it. We couldn’t have asked for a better location or a better group of people to work with. It is all about that key aim of Members helping Members. When I joined Blesma five years ago, I used to run the sailing trip, but in time I managed to back off and let a Member take control. That, in turn, meant 12 Members could go on the trip rather than 11. The more we can do this sort of thing, the better.”

Matt agrees. “It’s great that Members can now help to organise and lead these trips. I see it as vitally

“IT WAS GOOD GETTING PEOPLE TOGETHER WHO ARE IN THE SAME BOAT. IT IS ABOUT DIVING, BUT EVEN MORE ABOUT LEARNING, BEING POSITIVE, AND GETTING PEOPLE TALKING”

important. It’s not about me, it’s about the Association giving a framework to other people. So, in the future, someone might start diving, progress through the qualifications, and take over this trip themselves. We’ve got a system in place to make that happen. Blesma’s aim is to enable the limbless and those with limb loss to live independent and fulfilling lives. This reflects that.”

ON THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

The expedition to Florida saw three rookies make that first move. After several hours of classroom work (for both the Diveheart and PADI programmes), the Members moved into ‘confined water’ (“a swimming pool,” laughs Matt, “so you can’t go drifting off into the distance, and things can’t swim up to you”).

Once they were confident and competent in that environment, the group moved off to the reefs of Key Largo. “Diveheart brilliantly overcame any logistical difficulties we had, and we had some great days out,” says Matt. “The thing that got me most was seeing a young lad like Corey, who is just 19, swim past me with his instructor. He was in a good position, really enjoying it. That’s what it’s all about – it was quite overwhelming. I could see that our Association was doing something to put people on the road to recovery. It’s really nice to be involved with that.”

The final couple of days of the trip were marred by poor weather, but the Members used their unexpected downtime productively, taking trips to Key West and Miami. Overall, everyone involved was happy with how



the expedition had gone. “The location was lovely, with lots of different places to eat, and the feedback about the diving was great – everyone thought that the pace was comfortable and the learning was graduated,” says Steve. “Being transferred by hand from a wheelchair on a quayside into a boat was a big experience, a huge trust exercise – it was the same with going in and out of the water – but to see people who had never dived before being underwater was amazing. And it gave the Members the motivation to think they can do more of this kind of thing. It was a life-changing experience.”

That’s certainly the case for Corey, who is looking to dive again. “I loved the diving and the fact that I could get about quite quickly using webbed gloves,” he says. “I ended the trip by getting my PADI open water ID card, and I’ve been recommending scuba to loads of people since I got back! The social side was great, too. It was very interesting talking to other people about their injuries and how they are coping.”

The trip has spurred Corey on and he is now looking towards another water-based activity as his long-term goal. “I’ve signed up for Team GB’s Talent Programme for paracanoe, so I’m hopeful I can get to Paralympic standard by 2024,” he says. “All of this has been really helpful with my rehab.”

Whatever your age or disability, Blesma’s activity trips can expand your horizons. Look out for next year’s activities calendar, which will feature scuba diving and many more activities, in the Winter issue

As with every other Blesma activity, the social aspect of the expedition allowed Members to bond and form a strong support network



LORNA DORRELL

Blesma's Communications Manager on keeping you in the know, and keeping the Association in the public consciousness

After graduating with a degree in Art History I became interested in Art Therapy – psychotherapy using art practise. I began working with mental health service users, which led me into the charity sector. I'd always had an aptitude for writing and a leaning towards charity and health, so third sector communications beckoned.

I worked for an East London disability charity for seven years, working across events, fundraising and marketing, and leading on public affairs campaigns. Then, in January 2018, a position became available for a Communications Manager at Blesma.

The Communications Team acts as the face of Blesma, keeping the Association in the media and developing resources and systems to spread the stories, good news, and values of the Association.

My role involves coordinating and overseeing the work of the Comms Team. We develop and implement Blesma's communications strategy – overall and for distinct campaigns – ensuring that we are consistently representing the Blesma offer, as well as the endeavours and accomplishments of our Members. As well as connecting the Association, it is our responsibility to keep Blesma in the public consciousness.

We ensure that Blesma's output remains relevant to Members, supporters and volunteers, and that it stands out from the competition and has a clear proposition.

We do all of this via press, leaflets and literature, adverts and broadcast coverage, social media, a digital presence, and our own publications; the *Bulletin* and *Blesma Magazine*, which keep the membership and our stakeholders in the know.

I get a lot of job satisfaction from my role. I enjoy seeing a project like the D-Day 75 campaign, the commemorative issue of the magazine, or The Resilience Sessions podcast series come together. And I love seeing the Association get the press coverage that it deserves!

**“IT IS ABOUT
KEEPING ALL OUR
GREAT WORK IN
THE PUBLIC ARENA
AND ENSURING WE
ARE EMBRACING
ALL WHO ARE
ELIGIBLE”**

But it's not just those highlights. This is a lovely organisation to work for – the family ethos extends well beyond the membership and is carried down throughout the staff. Ours is an extremely collaborative and hands-on working environment. We get the chance to attend very interesting and exciting events, and witness first-hand our Members' endeavours and breakthrough moments.

Communications doesn't exist purely to generate income; it is about keeping Blesma and all our great work in the public arena and ensuring that we are embracing all those who are eligible for Blesma membership.

Our Members have amazing stories to tell, even those who think they don't. When we are sharing Members' stories, we aim for the content to inspire and reassure that there is life after limb loss.



Walking Together #MadePossible

We combine clinical expertise and pioneering innovation to redefine mobility, helping people get more out of every day.

Blatchford
Mobility Made Possible

@blatchfordgrp | blatchford.co.uk

PROPRIO FOOT[®]

Because the world isn't flat

Proprio Foot is an adaptive microprocessor controlled ankle for amputees of low to moderate impact levels. Motor-powered ankle motion increases toe clearance in swing phase by raising the forefoot, reducing the risk of trips and falls. It also adjusts the ankle angle to changing terrain, providing stable foot placement on stairs and inclined surfaces.

For more information, please contact us at ukprosthetics@ossur.com



WWW.OSSUR.CO.UK

52 % of
amputees
have fallen in the last year¹

40 % of falls
result in injury
with half needing medical attention²

70 % reduction
in falls
while using Proprio Foot³

1. Miller, William C., Mark Speechley, and Barry Deathe. "The prevalence and risk factors of falling and fear of falling among lower extremity amputees." Archives of physical medicine and rehabilitation 82.8 (2001): 1031-1037. 2. Kaufman, K. Risk factors and costs associated with accidental falls among adults with above-knee amputations: a population-based study. American Orthotic and Prosthetic Association 2016. (Mayo Clinic). <http://www.aopanet.org/resources/research/> 3. Ludviksdottir A, Gruben K, Gunnsteinsson K, Ingvarsson Th, Nicholls M. Effects on user mobility and safety when changing from a carbon fiber prosthetic foot to a bionic prosthetic foot. Presented at Orthopadie&Reha-Technik Congress, Leipzig, May 2012.