

BLESMA IN LOCKDOWN

HOW THE ASSOCIATION HAS PULLED TOGETHER DURING ONE OF THE MOST UNIQUE PERIODS IN ITS 100-YEAR HISTORY

Self-care during self-isolation

Helping Members stay mobile, motivated and mentally healthy during the lockdown **p36**



MGR goes digital in a time of need

In a global pandemic, inspiring the nation's young people is more important than ever **p50**

Commemorating 75 years of VE Day

Some 12,000 British troops lost limbs in WWII. Henry Harley was just 18 when he became an amputee **p26**



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

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NEWS

News, views and opinion
from the world of Blesma



Photographs: Andy Bate

Here to support you in the midst of a global pandemic

In recent weeks, COVID-19 has impacted severely on all our lives, and Blesma and its Members are certainly no exception. The Association has faced many challenges in its 100-year history, but the coronavirus pandemic is unique. Blesma has continued to support Members and their families in this period, with an even greater emphasis on tackling loneliness and isolation.

As a matter of course, the team based in Chelmsford regularly updates a risk register for the Board of Trustees, which includes the Association's planned responses to all manner of significant events. Front and centre of the Association's thinking from the very beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, according to Blesma's Operations Director Ian Waller, were its Members.

"We knew it would be difficult to reach everybody but we wanted to try to contact the entire membership as soon as possible," said Ian. "We phoned and wrote to Members, prioritising those deemed vulnerable or who needed to be shielded. Most were ok, but some weren't, and the Support and Outreach Officers responded to a number of requests for assistance. We wanted to ensure that our Members felt reassured that the Association was there to support them during the crisis. In the first 10 weeks of lockdown, we had 5,703 'contacts' with Members, including 3,390 by phone."

Blesma began 2020 in a sound financial position, and strong reserves have allowed the Association to function despite the harsh economic affects of the pandemic.

"Straight away, through running various cash flow projection scenarios, we were confident we had enough funds to continue to operate," said Ian. The next step was to transition staff to working from home.

BUSINESS AS (NEW) NORMAL

"We were already in the process of an IT migration programme that would enable staff to work from anywhere," said Ian. "We quickly provided staff with what they needed, and those who couldn't work – our face-to-face activities had to stop in line with government guidelines, for example, while corporate and community fundraising came to a direct halt – were furloughed. However, we are bringing those members of staff back to work in the coming weeks."



Behind the scenes

On set with Member Simon Brown (p32)

The Association's financial assistance and grant giving continued to operate. For the two months from the end of March, Blesma awarded 219 grants to 189 Members for items ranging from mobility aids to living expenses. A number of Digital Inclusion grants provided Members with tablets and laptops to stay in touch with loved ones.

"Members have not been able to meet in person – which is one of the cornerstones of Blesma membership – but we quickly established a range of online activities, from fitness classes to book clubs, that brought people together," said Ian.

SET TO COME OUT STRONGER

"We have also been liaising with the NHS and other service providers to ensure our Members are supported with their health and prosthetic needs," said Ian. "Many NHS staff were redirected to support the COVID-19 response, so we are expecting something of a bow wave when it comes to prosthetics provision in the coming months, and we will continue to advise our Members accordingly.

"But Blesma is in good shape. We are in a robust financial position, we continue to foster links across the Association, and we aim to come out of the crisis with an offer that is even broader than was the case pre-lockdown," said Ian. "Our focus now is on preparing to start visiting Members, but this will be done very carefully and slowly as we follow government guidelines. We like to think we know our Members and that they know us, and through good and bad times we will continue to be there to help ensure they have independent and fulfilled lives well into the future."

If you have been affected by COVID-19 and would like to talk to someone, please call your BSO or email info@blesma.org

"BLESMA IS IN GOOD SHAPE, AND AIMS TO COME OUT OF THE CRISIS WITH AN OFFER THAT IS EVEN BROADER THAN WAS THE CASE BEFORE THE LOCKDOWN"

Left and below: BSO and Member Paul Findlay has been supporting Members from home. Read about his experiences of lockdown on p54



welcome



Welcome to the Summer issue. This is my first as Chief Executive, so it would be remiss of me not to say a huge thank you to the Members, Trustees and staff who have been so generous in welcoming me into the organisation. The comradeship of Blesma has shone through,

despite us all having to communicate electronically. The Association is in good shape thanks to a tremendous spirit, some sound planning, and a lot of hard work. We were, therefore, in a good position to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This issue is full of examples of how Members have reached out to each other. The article on self-care in self-isolation shows how some Members are keeping fit, while others are improving their health and wellbeing through online classes. I am very grateful for all the support, encouragement and advice that has passed across the organisation.

We also commemorate VE Day through the stories of some of the Blesma Members who were there. Amongst all the celebrations in 1945, there was a deep appreciation of the sacrifices that had been made, and an understanding of the challenges to come. The same was true at this year's anniversary.

It is heartening to hear how quickly the Making Generation R programme was able to adjust and then continue its work in the face of the lockdown. Members explain how they recorded their stories to give advice and techniques for staying resilient.

We also hear from veteran Simon Brown on how he participated in a film project looking at the psychological impact of scarring. Both these projects illustrate how relevant our veterans' experiences are, and how they may be used to 'give back' to others facing challenging circumstances. We will continue to support this important work.

Thank you to all those who have worked so hard to produce this lockdown issue of our magazine.

Jon Bryant
Chief Executive





Virtual cream tea is a real success for Neil

In March, the Association was forced to cancel its Blesma Connects and Cream Tea session because of restrictions around COVID-19, but that didn't stop one Member from having his cake and eating it!

Former Royal Air Force Reservist Neil Owen had planned to attend the session, which was aimed at connecting Members in their local area and helping them with their digital and online skills. When the event had to be cancelled he decided to host his own cream tea get together from the safety of his home and asked his Outreach Officer, Sarah Payne, to join him via Skype.

"It was lovely to talk to a real face on my screen," said the 74 year old, whose left leg was amputated above the knee in 2008 following an infection he picked up

whilst having knee replacement surgery. "You can speak on the phone and send text messages, but it's not the same as chatting to somebody you can actually see, especially as I am on my own right now. That was what my Skype video call with my Blesma Outreach Officer was all about."

During their catch-up, Sarah was also able to calm Neil's worries about getting food and medicine while he was self-isolating alone, ensuring him that Blesma had a team of volunteers who could make the deliveries if he was in need.

"We made our own cream teas and said cheers with our Blesma t-shirts on," said Neil. "It's great to know the Association is there and that I can ring them if I ever have a problem. It's a huge relief right now."

COMPETITION TIME: ON YOUR MARKS, GET SET, GROW!

JANET RIDDELL AND JACK BROUGHTON are keeping themselves entertained during the lockdown by having a vegetable and sunflower growing competition.

Former soldier Jack and Royal Navy veteran Janet became friends following a local activity arranged by Blesma Outreach Officer Andy Barlow last summer. Earlier this year, Jack was hospitalised with pneumonia and Janet visited him regularly. The competition is a way for the pair to support each other and keep their spirits high through the tough times.



"We were planning on joining the gym together. Unfortunately, we can't do that right now, but wanted to do something to keep us active," said Janet, who served in the

Royal Navy for more than 18 years. "We've agreed that the person who grows the most tomatoes and best sunflowers doesn't have to buy the coffees at our first gym session!"

Below-knee amputee Jack, who served in the Princess of Wales Royal Regiment, is classed as high-risk, having been diagnosed with immunosuppression and pneumonitis. Gardening helps with his rehabilitation, as does his Blesma-funded rowing machine.

"Gardening keeps us both busy and in the fresh air," he said. "My three-year-old daughter, Rebecca, is getting involved, too. During my stay in hospital, Jan would come and be that little boost of morale. She is always a golden ray of sunshine."





BODYBUILDING MEMBER AARON OVER THE MOON

BLESMA-FUNDED SPORTING GEAR is helping bodybuilding Member Aaron Moon stay in shape during lockdown – and will hopefully help him secure a new job.

The former Royal Marine turned to Blesma for help when demand for home gym equipment skyrocketed following the closure of gyms due to COVID-19.

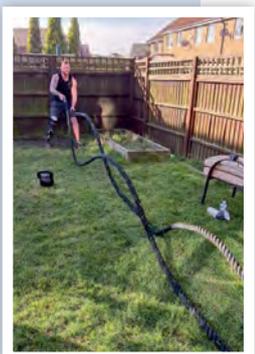
“I was six weeks out from a bodybuilding competition when everything kicked off. I didn’t want all the hard work I’d put in to be for nothing, but finding equipment was almost impossible,”

said Aaron, who lost his right leg and sustained other serious injuries whilst serving in Afghanistan.

“But as soon as I contacted my Support Officer Mike [Downes], the equipment was here within days.”

The Association was able to source Aaron a punchbag, boxing gloves and battle ropes – equipment that has proved vital to his home workouts, given him a focus, and is helping him get fit for his next career move.

“I want to switch up careers and with the job I have in mind, I need functional fitness rather than being lean and looking the part. The punchbag and battle ropes are keeping me fit and helping me with my future career move,” said Aaron.



On the front line in the fight against coronavirus

Former RAF Senior Aircraftman Dean Mills is serving on the coronavirus front line after being called up to help in a hospital’s Intensive Care Unit (ICU). The 49-year-old Member, who had to leave the Forces after a serious climbing accident, has been working 13-hour shifts, with up to 11 hours spent in full protective gear and face mask. Dean, who was in the RAF for 10 years, is now a key ICU team member at St. James’ Hospital in Leeds, a regional centre for treating COVID-19 patients.

“It has been very tough. We have lost people but, thankfully, seen lots go back to their families,” he said. “We do our best every shift and the professionalism here is outstanding. We work as a team so it is like being back in the Forces. We all have a huge sense of pride and help each other to make sure we all have the right Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).”

Dean was working in the hospital’s Theatres Department when he was called to the COVID-19 wards to join the effort to cope with a surge of seriously ill patients as the virus spread across the nation.

“There is an intensity to it which is draining, and being in the PPE is hot

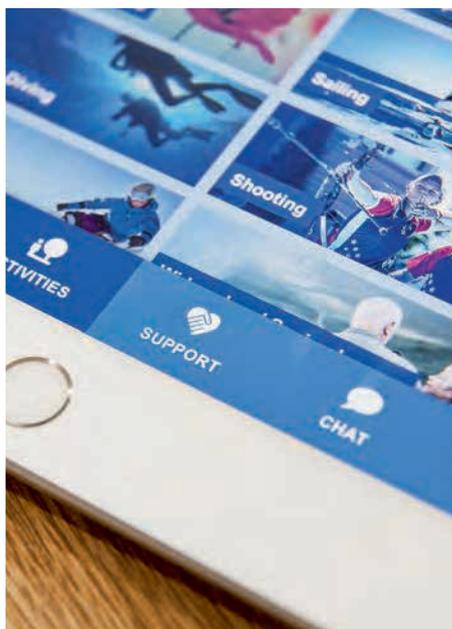
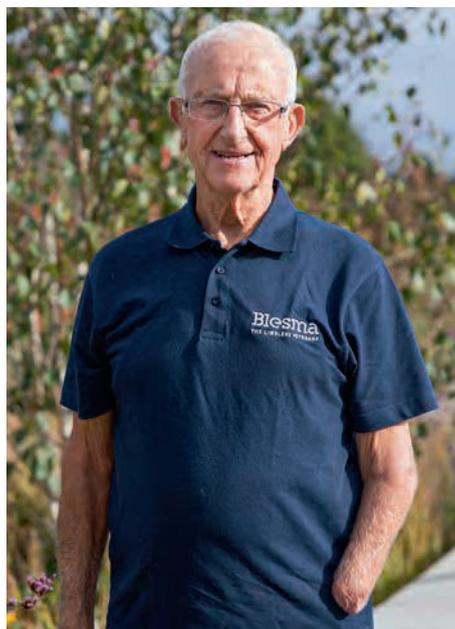
and exhausting,” said Dean, who works night shifts. “It is not nice and you feel claustrophobic, but help is there if we need it and we all keep each other’s spirits up.

“Again, it’s like being in the Forces in that you have good days and bad days. We have a laugh where possible, but we all know how serious this job is and how important it is for people to know that their loved ones are in safe hands.”



Dean was on a mountain rescue training mission when he fell down a crevasse in Wales in 1993, suffering severe injuries to his left leg and hands. He left the RAF and worked in the civil service as an IT specialist. It was after joining the International Rescue Corps, which runs missions to disaster zones around the world, that he developed an interest in medicine and joined the NHS.

“I decided to retrain to become a nurse, which is ongoing,” said Dean. “It took me 18 months to rehabilitate after the accident, and I had to leave the RAF, which I found very difficult because being in the Forces was my life. The leg is still a bit of an issue, and I’ve thought about amputation at times, but I also think I’m luckier than a lot in that I still have some use of it.”



“I DON'T KNOW WHAT I WOULD HAVE DONE WITHOUT BLESMA”

AN INJURED VETERAN WHO WAS MADE homeless earlier this year has one less thing to worry about during lockdown thanks to Blesma. Dave Moore moved to Scotland in 2018 but following the breakdown of his relationship this February, the former Royal Highland Fusilier found himself homeless.

Dave turned to the Association and Blesma was able to find him accommodation with the Homeless Veterans Project in Ayrshire before a longer-term move to the Scottish Veterans Residences in Glasgow.

“The new accommodation is cracking,” said the 49 year old, whose left leg was amputated below the knee following a roofing accident 10 years ago. “Everything is adapted to my needs – it is a downstairs flat and even has a wet room. I don’t know what I would have done without Blesma.

“My Outreach Officer Emma [Gratton] has seen me through thick and thin. Blesma also supplied me with some groceries and a grant to see me through this tough time. It means a lot to have that support and know Blesma is at the end of the phone.”

Dave is now enjoying the virtual events that Outreach Officer Emma is hosting for Scottish Members, and meeting fellow Members is keeping his spirits up.

“I couldn’t handle life before I joined Blesma,” said Dave. “The Association gives me something to look forward to. The way they treat Members is invaluable.”



Blesma connects friends during lockdown period

The Blesma Connects app is helping one isolated Member feel less alone during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Charles ‘Pete’ Helliwell, who only joined the Association two years ago, has spent the last few weeks connecting with the many Blesma friends he has already made through the app’s chat function.

“I have made quite a few friends on various Blesma events, and now I’m using the app to catch up with them,” said Pete, who served with the REME in the Middle East Land Forces in the Suez Canal Zone, and lost his left arm below the elbow in a mining machine accident in 1957.

“Television is too depressing right now so every morning, while I’m having my cornflakes, I check the app to see if there are any updates from Blesma or if I have received any new messages. I have even made new friends through the app! I’m

learning a lot about other Members’ lives and their disabilities, and they are finding out about mine.”

While the 86 year old was self-isolating alone in his home in South Yorkshire, Outreach Officer Adele Miller encouraged Pete to pick up an iPad for the first time. He agreed, and through Blesma’s Digital Inclusion Programme, he became the first Member to be given an iPad to allow him to connect with other Members, as well as with his friends and family. He has already learned how to send photographs through the app’s chat function, so he and fellow Member Martin Brummitt can share their gardening photographs.

“I am still in the learning stages and am teaching myself how to use the tablet, but I am confident that I’ll take to it,” Pete said. “My grandson Jamie – as well as Blesma – help me when I get stuck.”

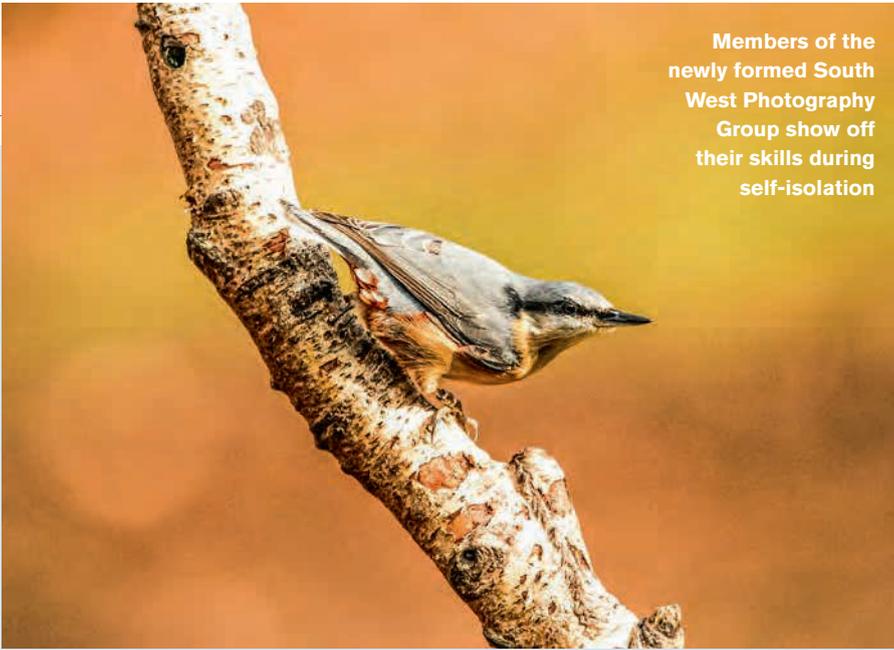


“AN EXTRA YEAR OF HARD WORK”

THE TOKYO PARALYMPIC GAMES, originally due to start on 24 August, have been put back a year because of the coronavirus pandemic. The International Olympic Committee’s executive board made the decision in March following concerns that athletes, coaches and spectators would contract and spread COVID-19. The Games will now run from 24 August to 05 September 2021.

Paralympic hopeful Luke Sinnott (left), who had set his sights on competing in the long jump and 400m competitions, welcomed the news. “Postponing the Paralympics was a good call and I see it as an opportunity to put in an extra year of hard work,” he said. “Now, more than ever, athletes will be tested to see if they have the motivation to adapt to the situation and train smart during the coronavirus pandemic. I was hoping to get to the Paralympics before I was 40, but competing in my first Paralympics at the age of 40 has a good ring to it”

Members of the newly formed South West Photography Group show off their skills during self-isolation



Life through a lens in a time of change

The newly formed South West Photography Group is showcasing and sharing beautiful moments during the coronavirus lockdown. The group of 16, which was formed by Members Neil Owen and Darran Thompson, only met for the first time in January. They were planning to get together and socialise once a month on photography day trips but have had to adapt, and instead are showcasing their photographic creativity under government lockdown rules.

“A lot of our Members live on their own and have nothing to do, so I thought a competition would cheer them up and give them a new focus each week,” said Royal Navy Veteran Darran, who recently

gained a photography diploma and hopes to qualify for the Royal Photographic Society.

“I get great enjoyment from collating all the photos and checking that everyone in the group is ok. I also hold a photography tutorial on Zoom every Thursday for anyone from the South West who wants to join.”

Giving a glimpse into the lives of the Members during lockdown, photographs have included wildlife, plants, countryside settings and deserted seaside towns. The competition winner is decided by South West Outreach Officer Sarah Payne, who receives the anonymous photographs from Darran. So far, Peter Siddons has been the hot-shot snapper, scooping first place in the competition every week since it began.



How coronavirus has changed fundraising

Fundraising efforts have been severely disrupted as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, with everything from small activities like bucket collections to major events such as the London Marathon having been cancelled or postponed over the last few months. Corporate supporters have also been affected as businesses have had to adjust rapidly during this period of uncertainty.

Nonetheless, donations remain vital for the Association, so the Fundraising Team has been busy working out new ways for Blesma's supporters to give, even during social isolation. Here is a snapshot of what the team has been doing...

VE Day Appeal

In late April, a mailing was sent to donors and supporters commemorating the 75th anniversary of VE Day. The appeal (below) told the story of World War II veteran Roy Hayward who lost both his legs fighting in France shortly after D-Day. Not only did the mailing attract new donors, it also resulted in many fascinating conversations with supporters; many of whom had their own childhood stories of World War II to share. One caller was born on the exact day that the war broke out, whilst others remembered being evacuated. Some callers even recounted their own harrowing experiences of witnessing warfare.

2.6 Challenge

With larger fundraising events such as the London Marathon being postponed

Right: Game On For Blesma invites people to raise funds by playing games with friends



or cancelled, virtual events were soon being organised across the country. The 2.6 Challenge was one of the largest, and was open to all ages, abilities and interests. Those taking part had to think of an activity based around the numbers 26 or 2.6, and complete it on or from 26 April (the date of the 2020 London Marathon). Several people took part in events on behalf of the Association, including one person who completed 26 laps of their garden.

Text giving

With 'normal' bucket collections in public places no longer possible during lockdown, the Fundraising Team created a Virtual Bucket Collection. The initiative used Text To Give to enable people to give modest, one-off donations, just as they might to a real bucket collector.

Quiz Night

Online quizzes have proved a popular way for charities to raise funds during social isolation, and are also a great way to bring family and friends together online. Blesma's weekly quiz cost just £3 to enter and took place at 8pm every Saturday during the lockdown. The virtual quiz is now here to stay, so why not play along once a month? The next quiz is on Saturday 25 July at 8pm.

Gaming

The Association's newest challenge, Game On For Blesma, encourages people who love gaming to challenge friends and family to play online, competing in tournaments or completing challenges to raise money.

To take part in any of the activities, please visit www.blesma.org/virtualfundraising

We're here for our Members. For Life.

Blesma has supported limbless and injured veterans to live independent and fulfilling lives since the end of WWI. Here's how...

Prosthetics
We work with the National Health Services to ensure our Members are aware of and have access to the latest prosthetics and mobility aids.

Grants
We help with the costs and hardships of disability, paying for wheelchairs, stair lifts, and home and garden adaptations so Members can stay independent in their own home.

Information and Advice
We are experts in the War Pension, the Armed Forces Compensation Scheme, and other allowances, so ensure

Activities
Keeping fit and engaged after injury is vital for health and wellbeing. Our activities and courses range from the relaxed to the action packed.

Older Veterans
We pay special attention to the care of our most infirm and elderly Members. We make sure they are well cared for and comfortable in a place they feel happy. We give older veterans the chance to meet each other.

Advocacy
We campaign and advocate where necessary so that disability and prosthetics provision meets the needs of every Member.

Social Inclusion
Our Outreach Programme makes sure that our Members have regular opportunities to get together with one another to share experiences and build a support network.

Personal Approach
Our Support Officers are in regular contact with Members. We place great emphasis on caring and listening to our Members, and responding to their needs.

VE Day puts end to years of fighting in Europe

World War II was the deadliest and most widespread war in modern history. During the six years of conflict across the world, some 380,000 British servicemen were killed. Similar numbers were injured, including 120,000 who lost limbs. Following Adolf Hitler's suicide on 30 April 1945, the surrender of the German armed forces was announced to the British people on the radio late on 07 May. The following day was declared a public holiday and became known immediately as VE (Victory in Europe) Day. After Prime Minister Winston Churchill's radio address to the nation at 8pm on 08 May 1945, bonfires and fireworks were lit across the country, and an estimated 50,000 people had crowded around Piccadilly Circus by midnight. But not everyone felt they could celebrate VE Day. Hugo numbers of families had lost loved ones, and the war in the Far East and Pacific would still rage until 14 August, when Japan finally surrendered.

Please remember those who gave up so much in WWII

On 06 June 1944 Roy Hayward landed on the beaches of Normandy. Days later, he had to have both his legs amputated...

Blesma
THE LIMBLESS VETERANS

VE DAY ANNIERSARY APPEAL

FR REGISTERED WITH THE CHARITY REGULATOR

NEWS BRIEFS

NO CHOICE BUT TO PUT CHALLENGE BACK TO 2021

Injured veterans who have been planning to climb, trek, canoe and cycle along the Tugela River in South Africa have been forced to postpone their expedition.

The challenge, which was the brainchild of Member Ivor Gardiner, aimed to raise money for several military charities as well as South African HIV and Aids hospitals. It has been rescheduled for March 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“A large part of the challenge in the first instance was about resilience and overcoming adversity, and who couldn’t be inspired by the actions of Captain Tom Moore?” said Ivor. “There was nothing we could do about the situation, so the overwhelming attitude of the group has been a pragmatic one of; ‘Let’s get on with it next year!’”

Thankfully, the support teams, sponsors and donors who had all pledged to support the challenge have unanimously agreed to continue their support in 2021.

HOW YOU CAN BENEFIT FROM A FREE WILL SERVICE

The strange and difficult situation people have found themselves in over the last few months has led to an increase in people reviewing their finances.

Lockdown provides a good opportunity to get your finances up to date. Blesma provides a free will writing service for simple single and mirror wills.

If you would like more information on updating your will for free, get in touch with the Association by calling the Fundraising Team on 020 8548 3517 or emailing them at legacies@blesma.org

GOT A STORY? GET IN TOUCH!

Have you got a great story you’d like to tell? Want some help publicising an event or expedition you’re planning? It’s easy to put your story in the magazine – just get in touch at editor@blesma.org

Words: Jessica Mackinnon



Conrad’s model behaviour is given new lease of life

Thanks to the Association, injured Army veteran Conrad Molloy now has a dedicated workspace in which he can pursue his model making hobby.

Conrad served with the Royal Anglian Regiment for nine years before his left leg was amputated below the knee after he was injured by a bomb blast in Londonderry, Northern Ireland, in 2000.

Eight years ago, he reconnected with a childhood hobby; model making. When his pastime began to take over the family living room, Blesma stepped in to fund a workshop in the Molloy’s garden that would allow Conrad a private space in which to focus his mind and pursue his passion.

“The shed has been brilliant – it is even kitted out with electricity for my tools!” said Conrad, who is now spending up to

six hours a day creating 1:35 scale military-themed models. “Because of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder my hands shake when I get nervous. When I am concentrating it gets a lot better, and model making gives me a focus – it calms me down when I’m stressed out. I’m so grateful for the shed.”

Since getting the workshop in December 2019, Conrad has made more than 40 models, including battlefield dioramas, WWII tanks and even a *Star Wars* X-Wing.

“The workshop has been a godsend,” said Conrad’s wife, Donna. “I’ve got my dining table and living room back. It’s perfect because when Conrad is out in his workshop, he’s happy. His mind is on model making and not on other things. It means he sleeps well at night and neither of us suffers for it.”



Conrad spends six hours a day making military models in his Blesma-funded workshop

↘ BLESMA BRIEFING

The pandemic and prosthetics

NHS limb services are facing unprecedented challenges. BSO (Prosthetics) Brian Chenier looks at what to expect from prosthetics services and Limb Centres in the coming months



This is a timely opportunity to reflect on how things have been since lockdown and look ahead to how things might work in the months to come in respect of prosthetic services.

It quickly became apparent that, because of the coronavirus pandemic, there would be a prolonged period of unprecedented change, whilst access to a lot of NHS services would be severely reduced and, in some cases, cease to operate at all. NHS limb services across the UK were told by health authorities to stop routine appointments, not see any new patients, and only see emergency or urgent cases if there was no alternative. This led to a large number of patients receiving advice from a prosthetist over the telephone, on a video call, or via email.

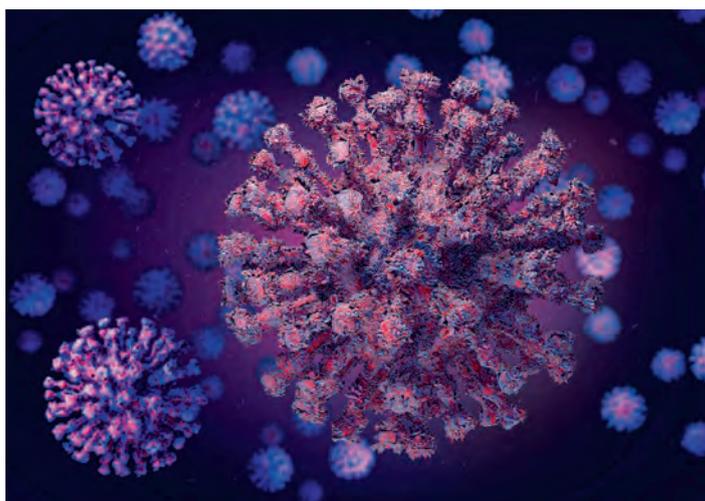
If this did not solve a particular issue, and the patient was either a key worker or failure to intervene could result in a hospital stay, then stringent safety procedures were adopted to meet that patient's need.

PRIORITISING THOSE MOST IN NEED

Patients who have needed to visit a Limb Centre for prosthetic issues will most likely have been asked to notify the Centre when they arrived, and remain in their vehicle. A member of the clinic will have discussed options with the patient and, if necessary and viable, the prosthetic would have been taken into the Centre for work to be carried out. This meant the patient would not enter the building – a necessary safety measure.

Prosthetics services require close contact, which is why only emergencies have been dealt with. If a patient did need to enter the Centre, then face masks, PPE and social distancing (where possible) were in force.

When restrictions are eased, all Limb Centres will have to carefully consider how they return to as normal a service as possible. They will need to prioritise those most in need clinically, and it may be some time before planned routine appointments are available. I remain in regular contact with the NHS Limb Service and, with fellow BSOs, will assist our Members as required.



Photograph: Shutterstock

So, what have we learned so far from this terrible and unique situation? The NHS has learned several lessons out of necessity, such as telephone triage to assess an amputee patient's needs. Where necessary and safe, advice has been given over the phone and items sent out directly to the patient to negate a visit to a Centre. This has worked for some, but not all.

I also believe that amputees have shown incredible patience and resilience, and have been overwhelmingly supportive of these temporary restrictions on services. In the coming months, the NHS limb services will begin the hard work of returning to a new normal. Continued patience and resilience will be needed. Blesma is here to assist as required, so do get in touch if you experience difficulties regarding prosthetics.

I would like to thank the NHS workers who have supported us all through this crisis. I would also like to thank all our Members who have taken this in their stride and shown the spirit of resolve that the military and veteran community is known for. Please stay well, stay safe, and stay in touch.

If you have a question or would like advice on any prosthetics issues, please contact BSO (Prosthetics) Brian Chenier at bsoprosthetics@blesma.org or on 020 8548 7080, or visit www.blesma.org

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David enjoyed golf before socket issues stopped him playing

Osseointegration proves the right choice for David

Former soldier David Sneddon has become the third single-leg amputee to undergo osseointegration surgery in Scotland through the NHS. David was seriously injured by a bullet from a Taliban sniper while on a routine patrol in Afghanistan in 2010. The decision was made to amputate his right leg above the knee two years later, while battling infection after two failed knee replacements.

Subsequently, David used a prosthetic leg for eight years before pains and sores led him to consider osseointegration. Also known as Direct Skeletal Fixation, the procedure involves inserting a permanent titanium rod into the bone so a prosthetic limb can be attached to an external fitting, doing away with the need for a socket.

"In early 2018 I began getting lots of socket problems: my socket kept dropping off, and would dig into my leg, causing pain.

I play a lot of golf and volunteer three days a week, so I'm quite active and the socket problems were holding me back," said the 42 year old from Bathgate.

Since undergoing osseointegration surgery last October, David has been exercising on a daily basis to rebuild his muscle strength, and has been attending hospital appointments three times a week. In March, he had already managed to build up enough strength to walk unaided.

"The first 12 weeks were quite intense. I was going to physio five days a week for four hours at a time to work on my glute and core muscles. It's still early days, so the bone is tender and I have some muscle pain, but the pros already outweigh the cons. I've already been able to walk three miles with the aid of just one crutch – which I couldn't do before the operation – and I've not got the discomfort I had with the socket."

MEMBER REGAINS HIS FREEDOM AND INDEPENDENCE

DOUBLE AMPUTEE TIM TOMKINSON has regained his independence and freedom after Blesma provided him with a lightweight wheelchair.

Tim, who joined the Royal Artillery at the age of 16, has been having difficulties with his prosthetic legs that have left him unable to complete essential food shops or walk his dog, Teddy. "My prosthetics are not fitting right and it hurts if I walk on them for too long," said the 48 year old. "Limb Centres can't help right now and the wheelchair I owned was too heavy; the operations I've had on my right wrist make it impossible to lift the chair into my car."

Tim has only recently become a double amputee; his left leg was amputated in 2015, followed by his right leg last year. He needs walking aids to use prosthetics, making food shopping a struggle.



"When I've tried to go shopping for food, I've had to ask people to help me with my wheelchair. I've had no independence. If I can't use my prosthetics, I'm stuck indoors all day. I haven't even been able to walk my dog. I struggle severely with depression, so being stuck inside was not helping," said Tim. "That's when I spoke to my BSO, who said the Association would be able to provide me with a lightweight wheelchair that was collapsible to put into the car for longer journeys. It has given me back my freedom and independence. Now, if I can't use my prosthetics because my stumps are swollen or sore, I can still go out without needing help."

Blesma is now helping Tim find an adaptive bike so he can exercise. "I am so grateful for everything Blesma has done for me – I can't thank them enough," said Tim.

World-record rower Lee wins award

LEE SPENCER WAS HONOURED WITH THE Endeavour Fund's Celebrating Excellence award at a ceremony attended by Prince Harry in March.

Lee was recognised for completing a solo row of the Atlantic Ocean in 2019, breaking three world records along the way. "The Endeavour Fund has played a large part in my rehab and recovery, so I was extremely humbled just to be nominated," said Lee, who served in the Royal Marines for 24 years. "To win the Celebrating Excellence award blew me away, especially as the competition was so inspiring."





The England Rugby Sevens squad were 'bowled over' by Jack

Making Generation R is proving its resilience

Making Generation R (MGR), which trains veterans to deliver their life stories to help build resilience in pupils and first responders, has been running a series of online initiatives to support skill levels and maintain connections in lockdown.

One of these offerings is live sessions via a Zoom link to groups and organisations. More than 40 players, coaches and staff from the England Rugby Sevens squad were 'bowled over' by former 101 Engineer Regiment's Jack Cummings, who gave a 20-minute talk about being wounded by an IED in Afghanistan and how he overcame the dark days that followed.

Meanwhile, MGR's Resilience Resource Packs are proving an effective support. Schools can access videos of Members telling their stories as well as online lesson plans and feedback forms. So far, this digital version of MGR has reached more than 28,000 pupils.

"We have been very busy with the Members, running virtual sessions that are still being delivered to schools online via digital packs," said Ian Waller, Blesma's Operations Director. "They have been well received and it is great

to see Members and their stories still having an impact even though they are not able to physically get into schools."

Along with the webinars and Resilience Resource Packs, the Making Connections workshops, delivered by Member Nerys Pearce and two MGR trainers, have brought together 23 Members, spouses and carers to talk, share stories, and develop connections across a regular Zoom call.

The sessions have created waves of connections as Members use the techniques they learn to stage separate group calls with friends and family.

"It's been brilliant," added Ian. "The sessions have focused on being comfortable with the technology and using it to make and keep connections.

"We have seen friendships blossom as people have set up their own Zoom sessions outside the group. There have been virtual yoga and gym sessions, with workshop members and others. It has been a very positive environment – completely free of talk about coronavirus – and Members have enjoyed that as well as being able to share stories and improve communication skills."

Elsewhere, the 75 Blesma Members who have been MGR trained have also benefited from a weekly MGR at Home session, which has allowed them to keep developing their storytelling skills and stay in touch with each other.

It is clear that, in these times of self-isolation and social distancing, the power of connecting with others is becoming more important to our mental health and wellbeing than ever.



To find out more about MGR's successful digital Resilience Resource Packs turn to p50



"HELPING PEOPLE IS A PRIVILEGE"

AN ARMY VETERAN HAS BEEN DELIVERING food parcels to the vulnerable during lockdown. Peter Deluce served with the Queen's Lancashire Regiment before suffering a serious fall in the Lake District in 2009, which resulted in his left leg being amputated above the knee four years later.

Peter, along with volunteers at Wigan Borough Armed Forces HQ, has been using his military skills to provide shielded and vulnerable people in Wigan with essential food supplies, and has even delivered vital PPE to hospitals.

"I wouldn't be able to look at myself in the mirror if I didn't do something to help," said Peter, who began volunteering in April. "I've met elderly people who are broken-hearted because they've been

indoors for such a long time. I've witnessed a great community spirit but also a lot of sad stories."

Wigan Borough Armed Forces HQ is regularly sent a list of addresses needing help by its local council. The team were delivering up to 20 parcels a day at the peak of the pandemic, and throughout it all Peter has been wearing his Blesma t-shirt to spread awareness of the Association.

"I wear it so people understand that there are charities out there to help them. We've helped a lot of veterans and they've all asked questions about the Association. The grin on the face of a 96-year-old Member when I helped him with a parcel was what this is all about. Helping people who have looked after us in the past has been a real privilege."



MEMBERSHIP MOVED TO SAY 'HAPPY BIRTHDAY'

BIRTHDAY CARDS AND GIFTS FROM Members have helped raise the spirits of a 99-year-old Blesma Widow.

Lilian Almond was discharged into a nursing home after spending some time in hospital after a fall at home in January. Even though her treatment wasn't COVID-19 related, she had to self-quarantine in her room in the nursing home without coming into contact with other residents.

In May, with her 99th birthday fast approaching, BSO Tom Hall and Outreach Officer Jas Suller called on Members in their area to send them cards for Lilian's birthday. But in true Blesma style, Members from all regions inundated the pair with cards, flowers and gifts.

"We received cards and gifts from all the regions across the UK. It made my day and reminded me how special the Association really is," said Jas.

Lilian's daughter, Patricia, said: "Mum had a happy 99th birthday and her spirits were lifted greatly. My brother visited and saw her through the window. She was so excited as she had not been able to see him for months. A big thank you to all who sent cards and gifts!"



A big Blesma happy birthday to Lilian!

Kirk quick to RE:ACT to help those on front line

Eager to use his military experience to help those on the coronavirus front line, Kirk Bowett began volunteering with disaster response charity Op RE:ACT (previously Team Rubicon UK) in April.

The former Infantryman was part of a group of 20 tasked with supporting NHS staff at Guy's and St Thomas' hospitals in London at the peak of the pandemic.

"Hospital staff were working 12-hour shifts and were then unable to find food as everyone was panic buying," said Kirk, who lost his left arm below the elbow in an IED attack in Iraq in 2013. "Initially, we set up a free marquee for staff at the hospitals offering basics like milk, bread and eggs."

Having collected food donations from supermarkets and restaurants unable to

sell their produce, the team then set up marquees for local community clinics and services. In three weeks, Kirk helped deliver and distribute PPE and helped the British Red Cross with community food banks.

"A lot of NHS staff who were treating patients were falling ill themselves. They were worn out. I've previously been on the front line, and this time I had a choice. NHS staff didn't have that choice. It was a calculated risk but I wanted to support them."

Op RE:ACT is a disaster response charity that deploys teams of highly skilled volunteers to provide essential aid to those who need it most. Staffed primarily by ex-military volunteers with experience in hostile environments, they are able to deliver life-saving aid at home or abroad.



BRIGHTENING UP SOMEONE'S DAY

A BLESMA MEMBER WHO WISHES TO REMAIN anonymous has gifted knitted creations to remind isolated Members that they are not alone during lockdown. The Member took part in an online rainbow crochet activity that had been organised by an Outreach Officer, but with wool to spare after making one rainbow, decided to pass the time by making more.

"I've been isolated during lockdown, so having an activity to focus on has really helped me get through the loneliness," said the Member, who learned how to crochet several years ago whilst recovering from surgery. "Seeing the finished products makes me feel I've achieved something. If they can cheer somebody else up, even just for a short time, that's a bonus.

"I hope that receiving a surprise rainbow might help brighten up the day for someone who is self-isolating. Even though it can be a difficult time with no visitors or social contact, it might be a way to let them know that they are still thought of and cared about."

In the spotlight

Blesma's new Chief Executive Jon Bryant



Jon Bryant OBE, 54, is Blesma's new Chief Executive. He joined the Royal Artillery after commissioning from RMA Sandhurst in 1985, and began a 36-year military career, serving in Air Defence Artillery and the Army Air Corps (AAC). He left the military in March 2020 at the rank of Colonel, and started his new role with the Association in the week the coronavirus lockdown began.

Welcome to Blesma! You've had an unorthodox start to your tenure, with coronavirus hitting...

It's been surreal. The positive thing, from a Blesma point of view, is that there was a tight, effective team in place. I've taken over from Ian Waller, who was the interim Chief Executive. He has run a tight ship, has been very helpful, and is still around as Operations Director. I've had good interaction with the Chairman and Trustees, who are clear about what they expect. The only downside is that I particularly wanted to meet the Members, travel around the organisation, see what's being delivered, and hear people's views. I haven't been able to do that yet. There has been a lot of video conferencing though, and the staff have been very patient with all my questions.

Could you tell us a little bit about your military background and career?

I grew up all over the world because my father was a civil engineer. I had always wanted to join the Forces and train as a pilot, but couldn't do that straight away because I'd had hayfever as a young child. So I went to the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst and commissioned into the Royal Artillery. I eventually persuaded the medics to let me attend selection for flying, got through that, and became an Army pilot. I piloted helicopters in the Army Air Corps, which was fantastic. I commanded a Lynx Helicopter Squadron, an Apache Helicopter Regiment, and eventually the Joint Helicopter Force in Afghanistan. Later on, I ran the Army Aviation Centre where all our aircrew and groundcrew are trained. My final job in the Army was as Corps Colonel of the AAC.

It sounds like a hugely varied role...

It was. I never really had a long-term career plan – I've always done what I thought would be most interesting next, and I enjoyed it all. All the leaving speeches you hear in the military are very similar because the best thing about being in the Forces is the people you meet.

What attracted you to the Blesma role?

I knew I wanted to do something that would be of benefit to others, and I'd had some experience of charitable work as a Chair and Trustee in the latter stages of my military career. Blesma involves working with, and for, the sort of people I have a huge amount of time and respect for. I wanted to do something charitable, but where I'd be operational every day. This gave me the chance to do both.

Did you know much about Blesma beforehand?

I knew what the charity did, and in Afghanistan half of my job involved coordinating the medical evacuation of our casualties. It was the start of a process that would lead many soldiers to Blesma. And there were soldiers under my command who were injured, so I was aware of the Association and of the kind of support that the charity gives to our injured personnel and veterans.

What do you feel is the most important part of the role of Chief Executive?

For me, the key element of the role is to act as a link between the Members and the Trustees. It's an unusual role because I work for both. I've got 3,200 employers, not just a Managing Director. I answer to the membership, as do the staff – it's a huge privilege to be in that role, and I'm very conscious of it.

What do you hope to bring to the role?

I've had some experience of taking over units and organisations that are already in good shape, and Blesma is, too. I haven't tried to find anyone with a bad word to say about Blesma, but literally everyone I've spoken to – whether they're within the charity world, the military world, or they're a Member – has said it's an excellent organisation. It has a very good reputation. I don't think there is a significant shortfall that needs an urgent change. I was asked at interview what I'd like to do in my first six months, and I said learn as much as I can about Blesma. I've been tasked with reviewing the organisation, as you might expect, but I've not come in with any preconceived ideas.

Although not an amputee, you have some personal experience as a carer...

I have a young son who has suffered with a kidney problem all his life. Of course, I don't have first-hand experience of limb loss but we've dealt with a serious condition and have had a lot of surgery. The situation has given me experience of being a patient, supporting

“
BLESMA INVOLVES WORKING WITH, AND FOR, THE SORT OF PEOPLE I HAVE A HUGE AMOUNT OF BOTH TIME AND RESPECT FOR

”



other people, and dealing with the NHS. I feel like I have some understanding and some empathy. One of the reasons I wanted to do something altruistic was because I've been very inspired by the people who help in circumstances like my son's.

COVID-19 has disrupted how Blesma usually works...

Yes. Most of my work has been on the response to COVID-19. The lockdown started on my first day. We immediately reached out to our Members, prioritising those who were particularly vulnerable. That included the elderly and shielded, of course, but some Members don't fall into the groups officially classed as vulnerable but still need extra care: permanent wheelchair users who don't drive and live alone without a support network, for example. We spoke to well over 90 per cent of Members in those categories to check people were safe and had adequate support in place. If they didn't, we provided help through BSOs and Outreach Officers. We've also been making connections so Members can support each other. Because activities have been cancelled, we have taken all sorts of activities online. We want to keep everyone linked up. We've also been explaining to our supporters that our Members' needs still exist. A lot of Blesma people are standing up in a crisis like this and helping others.





“It is just built in me to help others” says Victor

An injured veteran is helping Devon and Cornwall residents during COVID-19 lockdown by delivering emergency food supplies. Victor Boumont and his Frontline Veterans Support team are working alongside Devon and Cornwall

Food Action, a charity that supplies food in emergency situations, to deliver essential supplies to those in need.

“We’ve supported thousands of people so far,” said former soldier Victor, who served with the Devonshire and Dorset Regiment

for seven years. “People are often in tears when we turn up and are always so thankful for the help. We’ve had that kind of reaction throughout the community. People are just happy that someone is there.”

Frontline Veterans Support is a community group that was established by veterans to give ex-Servicemen and women, and their families, the tools to learn to live and cope with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and other mental or physical disabilities.

After just a few weeks, the team had delivered almost 500 tons of food, made up in delivery boxes containing fresh bread, fruit and vegetables as well as tins, porridge, pies, pasties and other fresh, frozen and non-perishable items.

Local schools and several members of the area’s police force have benefited from the service, and Victor has also reached out to Blesma to offer his support to fellow Members.

Blesma Member Malcolm Bright has received supplies from Victor. “I was so grateful that someone was thinking of me,” said the 71 year old. “I was overwhelmed when Victor arrived with the food box. I’m not classed as vulnerable, but things have been tough. I had an amputation last September, and currently only have a wheelchair despite having to look after my wife, who is also a full-time wheelchair user. It’s good to know someone is there.”

When asked why he wanted to help, Victor said: “It’s just built in me to help others.”

RICK INSPIRES RED DEVILS DESPITE ‘PRE-MATCH NERVES’

Former Duke of Lancaster’s Regiment soldier and life-long Manchester United fan Rick Clement has been inspiring his idols with his story of overcoming adversity.

In February Rick, who lost both his legs while serving in Afghanistan, was invited to the club’s training ground by manager Ole Gunnar Solskjær to talk to the club’s first team players and coaching staff.

“Every year, the Manchester United Disabled Supporters Association holds a black-tie dinner, and a guest speaker from the club attends. Last year, that was Ole,” said the 40-year-old from Lancashire. “During the Q&A, I took the opportunity to offer my services to speak to the team. I didn’t expect anything to come of it, but the club got in touch and invited me along.”

Rick was treated to a guided tour and was able to watch the first team train before talking to the players and coaching staff about his service, injury and life since.

“I joked with Ole beforehand that I had pre-match nerves! I spoke about the



Rick Clement spoke to Manchester United players and staff

similarities between soldiers and footballers – the discipline and time spent away from home. I’ve noticed more footballers are speaking out about mental health, especially when their careers come to an end. After my talk, every player shook my hand. It was

brilliant! I watched Ole play when I was growing up and I never imagined I’d be telling my story to him and my favourite football club. It was an amazing day.”

The club has since asked Rick to come back to speak with its youth teams.

Gold medal winner Ben-Jack (right) with coach Jim Hossell



Ben-Jack delighted with first snowboarding gold

Ben-Jack Shaw has made a huge leap in his career as a competitive snowboarder by winning his first gold medal. The 37 year old was one of 10 athletes representing GB Snowsport when he picked up his first-ever win at the European Winter Para Sports event ParaSki4Europe in Poland in February.

“It was great to win gold. My coach, Jim Hossell (pictured above) is a serving Royal Marine, and the time he puts into coaching, training, and guiding me is completely voluntary. It was fantastic to be able to get gold to say thank you to him for all his hard work as well,” said Ben-Jack who served in The Rifles.

Ben-Jack lost both his eyes to an IED blast in Iraq in 2007. Having loved winter sports since he was a young child, Ben-Jack

started to blaze a trail as the world’s first completely blind competitive snowboarder last year.

“I was the only person competing in the blind and visually impaired category, but it’s got to start somewhere. Getting to the point where I am able to compete highlights to other people that it can be done. Representatives from the national, European, and international Paralympic Committees witnessed me receiving my medal. Hopefully, they will pass the word on. Come and compete, and try to take this gold medal off me!”

During the 2019/20 season, which was the first competitive outing of Ben-Jack’s career, he also competed at the RAF championships where he pitted his skills against serving Armed Forces personnel.

TROOPS TACKLE TAB TO RAISE FUNDS

SERVING PERSONNEL OF 34 SQUADRON ROYAL Air Force Regiment have been running, tabbing, and even leopard crawling 7.5km to raise money for Blesma.

“I’ve been a supporter for a long time,” said Lance Corporal Callum Brown (pictured), whose idea it was to start the challenge. “The work the charity does is unbelievable – it is still providing vital support with everything that’s going on. The Members have given so much, the least we can do is support them.”

On 29 May, Callum and members of his squadron completed the 7.5km distance carrying 40kg.

Senior Aircraftman Alex Crossley from High Wycombe, who has been serving for 18 months, said: “I completed the tab as a challenge to myself, but also to go through a tiny amount of pain for such a worthy charity. The work they do for our limbless veterans is incredible.”



NEWS BRIEFS

DEAR BLESMA...

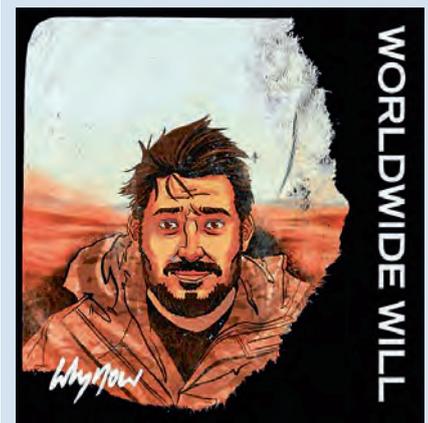
I just want to say thank you so much to Outreach Officer Jason Suller and BSO Tom Hall for getting me on the iPad, and putting me in touch with Jason Gill to learn by phone. He certainly helped a frustrated old lady when I lost all my contacts! I still have heaps to learn but I’m not so terrified of the thing now. At this time of lockdown, to speak with and write to family and friends, and to see them on FaceTime and send photos is great. Thank you.

A Rutherford

MEMBERS JOIN PODCAST TO SHARE THEIR LIFE STORIES

Members and ex-Service personnel have been sharing their unique stories as part of a podcast series in collaboration with Style for Soldiers.

Afghanistan veteran Will Watkins has been using his podcast *Worldwide Will*, which is now in its second season, to chat to fellow veterans about their lives and experiences, military careers, life-changing injuries, and daily challenges.



Season two, which has been produced in collaboration with the charity Style for Soldiers, features conversations with Blesma Members Andy Reid, Hari Budha Magar, Lisa Johnston, and Matt Weston.

The first episode was released on 29 May and is available now on iTunes.

100 NOT OUT FOR LEIGH

Member Leigh Bland has completed a 100-mile indoor static cycle ride to raise money for Blesma and American charity the Wounded Warrior Project. Leigh, a single leg amputee, was due to take part in the 2020 Prudential RideLondon event in June before it was cancelled due to COVID-19. Instead, the 40-year-old RAF veteran completed the distance on a static bike and hopes to raise £500 in sponsorship.

OBITUARIES

Those we have lost

William 'Rex' Blood

10 November 1924 - 27 March 2020

WWII VETERAN WILLIAM 'REX' BLOOD, who lost an arm serving his country in the D-Day Landings, passed away peacefully in his sleep at his home in Enderby, Leicestershire on Friday 27 March.

Rex was hit in the arm when his unit landed in Normandy in June 1944 as the Allies began their efforts to drive back the forces of Nazi Germany. His arm had to be amputated two weeks later.

Over the coming decades, Rex survived cancer and, in more recent times, had been suffering from heart problems. Rex has sadly passed away at the age of 95, leaving behind his wife, Ivy, and daughters Joy and Debra, as well as four grandchildren, six great-grandchildren, and four great-great-grandchildren.

Rex's funeral took place on 08 April at South Leicestershire Crematorium, but due to coronavirus restrictions only 10 family members were able to attend.

"We are saddened by our grandfather's passing and it is worsened by the current coronavirus crisis which is looking to rob him of the send-off he deserves," said his granddaughter Laura. "Only 10 people



will be permitted to attend his funeral despite his large family and the even larger network of lives he touched over the years. It's so sad we can't have everyone there."

Rex and his wife Ivy, who is 95 years old, have both been Blesma Welfare Officers, and many friends would have wanted to attend his funeral to pay their respects.

"HE WAS WONDERFUL AND ALWAYS FAMILY-ORIENTED. HE WAS THE HEAD OF THE FAMILY AND WHEN ANYTHING NEEDED DOING HE WAS THERE. HE OFTEN SPOKE ABOUT D-DAY AND WE NEVER TIRED OF HEARING HIS STORIES"

Rex met Ivy in a pub on her 21st birthday and sadly passed away two days before the couple's 73rd wedding anniversary.

"Rex was sent home after his arm was amputated and they found him a bed at a hostel in Leicestershire," said Laura. "He raced pigeons and, one night in the pub, my grandma's mother spotted his pigeon flyer's badge and they got talking."

Describing her grandfather, Laura said: "He was wonderful and always family-oriented. He was the head of the family and whenever anything needed doing he was there. He often spoke about D-Day and we never tired of hearing his stories."

Those who have passed away

May they rest in peace.

BIRD BW	D&D Regt	HQ	16 March 2020
BLACKBURN T	Royal Signals	HQ	19 May 2020
BLOOD WR	KOYLI	HQ	27 March 2020
BOARDMAN K	RRF	HQ	2019
BROOME G	RADC	HQ	April 2020
BROWNING RA	RAF	HQ	01 April 2020
COOTE JV	RGJ	HQ	01 September 2019
COSTELLO WA	RAF	HQ	November 2019
CROOK MA	RA	HQ	18 April 2020
DUNN DT	RA	HQ	October 2019
EMERY WLA	Army	Walsall	Late 2019
FLETCHER K	RAC	HQ	February 2020
GRIFFITHS WG	Nat Fire Service	HQ	October 2019
HARTLEY GW	STAFFS	HQ	30 April 2020
HAUGHIAN T	QOH	HQ	18 April 2020
HENDERSON JJ	RE	HQ	08 April 2020
HISLOP D	Black Watch	HQ	30 March 2020
HOLDERNESS CW	RN	HQ	Not known
JAMES PD	RAF	HQ	30 April 2020
JENNER WA	ARMY	HQ	December 2019

Elizabeth Bartlett

27 April 2020 - 15 April 2020

WWII WOMEN'S LAND ARMY VETERAN Elizabeth Bartlett passed away on 15 April due to coronavirus. She was 99 years old.

Elizabeth was just 21 years old when she gave up her job in a Sheffield steelworks in October 1941 to join the war effort. She was one of 80,000 women who signed up for the home-based force to take farming and industrial jobs to help the war effort, and was sent to work on a farm in Kent.

On her first day, she fell into a threshing machine and sustained a devastating injury that resulted in the loss of her right leg.

"I had worked on the machine in the morning but when I went to stand on it in the afternoon, someone had moved a board and I fell into it. My leg went into the machine," recalled Elizabeth in a previous issue of *Blesma Magazine*. "I didn't have too much pain then; that all came later on. I remember going to hospital in an open-backed farm van and being taken straight in for an operation. I also remember coming out of the anaesthetic and being told off by the matron for making too much noise. I shut up after that! From then on, no-one contacted me, there was no interest in me, but I just go on with life."

Elizabeth's boyfriend of the time visited her in hospital just as he was about to deploy to the front line with his regiment. He was killed in action a few weeks later,



Elizabeth with former Blesma Support Officer Bill Gillett

which left Elizabeth having to deal with heartbreak, come to terms with limb loss, and get to grips with using a rudimentary prosthetic leg – all at the same time.

In time, Elizabeth began to focus on her recovery, and once she learned how to walk again, she re-joined the Women's Land Army (WLA).

In more recent times Blesma petitioned to win Elizabeth a war pension and, after a 75-year wait, she was eventually granted compensation, although even then it was only backdated five years – to the time Blesma took up her case.

"Elizabeth was very stoic and got on with life without a shred of bitterness," said her

previous Support Officer, Bill Gillett (above). "She served her country in the Land Army and, although she never complained, she deserved compensation. Elizabeth didn't feel any hostility to the authorities, which was amazing considering how harshly she was treated. If she had been hit by a doodlebug, she would have received a full war pension. I don't see the difference as she was serving her country, and the WLA was recognised as a military organisation."

After the war, Elizabeth went on to marry Peter, a horticultural expert, and worked in gardens and orchards as she and her husband brought up their two children, Richard and Anne.

Those who have passed away (continued)

JOYCE MJ	ACC	HQ	14 April 2020
LANGLEY EP	Royal Signals	HQ	March 2019
MILLINGTON WH	RAF	HQ	17/03/2020
NORMAN SA	RAOC	HQ	February 2020
O'NEILL D	RN	HQ	02 April 2020
POLLOCK W	RAF	HQ	25 February 2020
PRITCHARD H	WG	HQ	Not known
RODGERS J	QOCHldrs	HQ	May 2019
RUSH JDM	RCT	HQ	10 May 2020
SHEARLAW P	RNF (FUSILIER)	HQ	09 April 2020
SINCLAIR AD	KOSB	HQ	27 April 2020
SKINNER CR	RAC	HQ	Not known
THOMPSON A	RGJ	HQ	25 April 2020
TIERNEY MP	RN	Portsmouth	December 2019
VINCENT I	RA	Bournemouth	06 April 2020
WEBB ER	RM	HQ	November 2019
WILLIAMS DE	RAF	HQ	21 February 2020
WILLIAMS GP	RN	HQ	01 November 2019
WILLIAMS HG	RASC	HQ	19 March 2020
WILLIAMS JM	RAF	HQ	February 2020
WILLIAMS T	RE	HQ	02 April 2020
WOODS FT	RAF	HQ	November 2019

NEWS ANALYSIS

What works in Northern Ireland

The second in a series of features that examines the unique opportunities presented to Blesma in different parts of the UK focuses on Northern Ireland



BSO Steve Burton

Connecting with Blesma Members across the six counties of Northern Ireland comes with unique challenges. Political and historical sensitivities are entwined with the dynamic progress of a region committed to a positive future. For Blesma Support Officer Steve Burton and Outreach Officer Fiona Morrison, that means extra considerations when it comes to building awareness of the Association's offer and support.

"Some Members have been totally immersed in the historical challenges of living in Northern Ireland, and understandably remain cautious about personal security and who they engage with" says Steve. "However, the Members' enthusiasm and desire allow us to maintain the same approach here as we do across the UK; we are focused on helping people live fulfilling lives and enjoy the camaraderie of other Members."

Blesma's role in Northern Ireland includes offering financial, practical and emotional support to its Members and their families. Steve, who has been the region's Support Officer since 2016 (and who is also responsible for Scotland and the Republic of Ireland) provides advice and support on any issue affecting a Member's health or wellbeing. His expertise includes prosthetic and mobility issues, and Blesma regularly contributes to the provision of wheelchairs, stair lifts, and home and garden adaptations so that Members can remain as mobile and independent as possible.

Steve is also responsible for liaising with statutory and third sector agencies on behalf of Members for specialist advice on matters ranging from housing to grants and assistance with the additional costs and hardships of disability.

"The Armed Forces Covenant is not wholly supported across the six counties due to the historical and political sensitivities," says Steve. "So it has been vital to forge relationships with key agencies such as the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, the Department for Communities, and Musgrave Park Hospital Limb Centre.

"We have also secured a seat on the Department of Health Armed Forces Liaison Forum and a full member seat on the Northern Ireland Veterans Support Committee (NIVSC). This allows me to engage at the strategic and operational levels with the Department of Health, and also gives me access to the Northern Ireland office on veterans' matters through the NIVSC. This engagement is important, and allows us to raise awareness of Blesma and the needs of our Members."

A GROWING SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Steve is assisted on a daily basis by Fiona Morrison, one of 10 Outreach Officers deployed across the UK, who joined Blesma two years ago. She admits to having "loved every minute of it" since – from organising events and liaising over practical support to just "sitting a while", sharing a cuppa and a chat with isolated Members and Widows to provide that vital human contact.

"I was born and bred in Northern Ireland so have grown up with the sensitivities here," she says. "We have achieved a lot in terms of outreach in the last two years; from initially sitting in a Member's home asking what their interests were and what their expectations of Outreach looked like, to scoping local facilities and amenities and then developing an activities plan that has led us to where we are today – organising activities and events, and encouraging Member-led activities. Last year, for example, one of our Members ran a six-week smartphone photography workshop to show other Members how to edit, enhance, and apply digital filters to their photographs. The sense of community here is growing all the time."

Fiona, a former Army Welfare Worker, has organised breakfasts, lunches, coffee mornings, trips out and, during the coronavirus restrictions, baking sessions and competitions, online quizzes and model making sessions. Events are coordinated in a central location or 'mirrored' in different counties to give as many Members as possible the opportunity to join in.

“ALL OUR MEMBERS HAVE A VARIETY OF NEEDS – AS YOU WOULD EXPECT – BUT WE AIM TO OFFER SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE”



Clockwise from right: Members and their families visit Group War Years Remembered; Lachie Morrison and Blesma Widow Jean McCready raise awareness; BSO Steve Burton takes part in a nature-based therapy workshop; Blesma Widow Isabella Law enjoys Christmas lunch with friends from Blesma



“Members really value the activities we put on because they provide the same sense of camaraderie that the Members had when they served. But it is important for them to enjoy events with their families, too. They feel their partner or spouse, who has supported them throughout, deserves to be there with them.”

Northern Ireland shares a border to the south and west with the Republic of Ireland, and is home to 56 Members and Widows, aged from 31 to 95, who live across an area that covers 5,456 square miles.

“Our Members have a variety of needs and levels of engagement – as you would expect – but our aim is to offer something for everyone,” says Fiona, who started work as a typist at RAF Aldergrove straight from school, taking a career break to set up a business with her husband before returning to the MoD, when she joined the Army Welfare Service and began volunteering for the NSPCC schools service.

“Relationships have grown and strengthened over the last two years, and it is important for our Members to know that Blesma will endeavour to meet their specific needs. For some, getting together is important, whether that is to take part in an activity or just to enjoy some company. Some Members are unable to attend events, so visiting them at home to have a chat and listen to their stories is important.

“Home visits are reassuring at any time of year, but particularly over the winter months which can be a lonely time for many. A visit can make such a difference to someone, and it is rewarding when you say goodbye and they tell you that you’ve brightened up their day.

“Blesma is now firmly on the map in Northern Ireland and we regularly get invited to meet groups, give talks, and collaborate with other organisations,” says Fiona, who is supported by eight volunteers including her husband, Lachie. “We stay very active on Facebook and through the Blesma Connects app, and Steve and I are always available to assist and support our Members.”

But even though they have come a long way in a short space of time, the team in Northern Ireland aren’t standing still. “We have made great advances in the last four years, and prioritising an Outreach Officer for Northern Ireland has been key to our success,” says Steve. “The membership is flourishing and developing into a close family-style community. My plan next is to venture south into the Republic of Ireland so we can build on the support to the Members there.”

Wherever you live, you can find the contact details for your dedicated Blesma Support Officer by visiting www.blesma.org/blesma-bsos

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Left: Fiona spends a lot of time raising awareness in the local community and (below) the daughter of a Member having fun during an event



FROM SAILING TRIPS TO SUPPORT DURING SELF-ISOLATION

Fiona looks back on some of her highlights from the last two years as an Outreach Officer

Is there one activity that you remember particularly fondly?

I can still remember my first Blesma event, which was sailing on Belfast Lough. I was really nervous, but two moments that day really stood out for me and sum up what Blesma activities are all about. The first was seeing the shared delight on the faces of a granddaughter and her grandfather. The second was the joy of a husband and wife as they sailed together. I hold those, and many other moments, dear.

Getting out and about is important to Members, isn't it?

Hugely important! I remember an All Out Trekking outdoor experience that we ran in the heart of Gosford Forest Park in collaboration with Disability Sports NI. It enabled Members to access the walking and mountain bike trails using battery-powered buggies. Activities like that, which are exciting and allow Members to get stuck in, are always very well received.

And Members have taken part in home-based activities...

Last year, a knitting and crochet project produced more than 200 hats that were delivered to neonatal units for premature babies. Members also made 35 'trauma teddies' that were given to police stations to comfort upset children who had been involved in serious incidents. This year, our crafters have turned their skills to lap and shoulder blankets which will be gifted to older Members and Blesma Widows.

How have the coronavirus restrictions affected Members?

They have not been overwhelmed as we have organised virtual activities such as quizzes, brain challenges, a Blesma 'Bake Like a Pro' competition, model making and jigsaw sessions to replace other activities. Our Members are also reviewing the book *Endal*, which was written by Member Allen Parton about his assistance dog that helped him recover from, and cope with, serious injury.

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Marking the 75th anniversary of VE Day



DURING WWII, SOME 750,000 BRITISH SERVICEMEN WERE KILLED OR INJURED, INCLUDING 12,000 WHO LOST LIMBS. THREE QUARTERS OF A CENTURY LATER, SOME OF THOSE MEN REMAIN BLESMA MEMBERS

It was a celebration the likes of which had never been seen. On 08 May 1945, after 2,076 days of fighting that had cost 60 million military and civilian lives, WWII was finally at an end in Europe and people across the continent could rejoice. VE (Victory in Europe) Day was greeted by a cavalcade of celebration; people poured into streets and parks in villages, towns and cities across the country to dance and sing. The joy reverberated around the world. A public holiday was declared in the UK and wartime leader Winston Churchill addressed huge crowds in central London to declare: ‘This is your victory!’

The Royal family, led by King George alongside a smiling future Queen Elizabeth who had just turned 19, had to appear on the balcony of Buckingham

Palace eight separate times to satisfy the jubilant crowds. On the country’s streets, meanwhile, colourful bunting replaced blackout drapes, the pubs were crammed with revellers, and bonfires kept the parties going until the early hours.

Allied forces had begun to overwhelm Nazi troops at the beginning of 1945 and, from early April, tens of thousands of German soldiers surrendered right across Europe. Then, on 30 April 1945, Adolf Hitler committed suicide. Berlin fell three days later, before Germany’s formal surrender on 07 May lifted a dark shadow from Europe. The Ministry of Information soberly announced: ‘In accordance with arrangements between the three great powers, tomorrow, Tuesday (08 May), will be treated as Victory in Europe Day and will be regarded as a holiday.’

Union Jack flags had been selling fast from April after the Allies' advances became unstoppable, and cloth rationing was relaxed so that households could buy red, white and blue bunting. Street parties were organised around the country and church services were packed – 35,000 people attended St Paul's Cathedral in London, while one church in Aston, Birmingham, held services on the hour throughout the day to cope with demand.

"There were parties in the day and, in the evening, lots of buildings such as the Houses of Parliament and Buckingham Palace were floodlit after years of blackout," says Alan Jeffreys, senior curator at the Imperial War Museum. "There were VE Day broadcasts, singing and fireworks, and the Board of Trade had checked in advance to ensure that pubs had enough beer for the duration of the celebrations."

Dr Jeffreys researched wartime diaries to reveal the mood of the nation; he found a combination of celebration and disbelief. "Nelly Carver, from West Norwood in London, recorded her thoughts and spoke about the bonfires and fireworks. She wrote: 'We went to bed absolutely happy, although it seemed dangerous to see light everywhere and to hear bangs in the sky.'

"The bonfires were even kept alight with furniture as families continued to celebrate, and Nelly wrote: 'The children who seemed so clean at the party were not in bed yet and were having the time of their lives; glorious, dirty with smoke, and dancing around the fires singing. Dogs were barking madly and more fireworks going off under one's feet. What a scene for London!'"

A DAY OF CELEBRATION

Similar events were being repeated across the UK. In Manchester, photographers captured children crammed around trestle tables that had been covered with white table cloths and laden with cakes and sandwiches, while crowds danced in Piccadilly Gardens. A report from 14-year-old Glaswegian Tommy Mac in the BBC's *WWII People's War* archive project stated: "The entire

“ There were parties all day and, in the evening, buildings such as the Houses of Parliament and even Buckingham Palace were floodlit after years of blackout ”



KENNETH AND BARBARA PICKARD

World War II veteran Kenneth Pickard has a special reason to celebrate the 75th anniversary of VE Day. It was the night he met Barbara, the love of his life, and the couple are still together after a chance meeting as the nation rejoiced the end to six years of intense conflict.

Kenneth had signed up in 1942 while an 18-year-old apprentice typesetter, and trained for D-Day before landing on Gold Beach with his unit. Their mission was to supply and service radio sets to keep frontline forces in contact as they forged in from the beaches. He was just 20 years old when he lost his right leg above the knee in combat shortly after the D-Day invasion, and spent the next nine months in hospital before Germany finally surrendered.

"I remember there was a lot of bombing and shell fire, and my right leg was hit by an explosion. The next thing I remembered was waking up in a field hospital where they amputated my leg before flying me home," says Kenneth. "I felt lucky to be out of it as lots of lads didn't make it back. It took a long time to rehabilitate, but you just got on with it."

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER

On 08 May 1945, Kenneth struggled to his local park on crutches to join the VE Day celebrations where 18-year-old Barbara thought he looked lonely.

"I went to the park on my own but wasn't thinking of meeting anyone, certainly not my future wife!" says 96-year-old Kenneth, who was serving with the Hampshire Regiment when he was hit by a mortar shell fighting in Normandy, France. "I was thinking about whether I would get my job back, and how my life would be as an amputee. I wasn't thinking about finding a girlfriend, but it is amazing that we met in that crowd and are still together 75 years later."

The couple lived less than 100 yards from each other in Trowbridge but had never met before.

"I was an evacuee during the war so I'd only just got back to Trowbridge when we met," recalls Barbara, who is now 94 years old. "I remember everyone was in the park, there was music and dancing, and Kenneth was on his own. I smiled and he gave a half smile back. He was very quiet but we started a conversation. He was worried about his job as he was an only child and had to look after his mother who was on her own. He didn't mention his injury, and has never really spoken about the war."

Fortunately, Kenneth was able to return to his job as a printer on the local newspaper, where he worked until his retirement, joining Blesma soon after he returned home from the war.

"It took Kenneth a while to ask me to marry him but we've had a successful marriage. I think tolerance and understanding are the secrets to any marriage," adds Barbara, who became a key figure in the Business and Professional Women movement, travelling the world to promote women's role in commerce.

The couple married in their local church some 18 months after they first met before settling in their home town where they still live with their son Malcolm, who is their carer.



Kenneth and
Barbara on their
wedding day (left)
and Kenneth in
WWII uniform
(below, far right)





Henry Harley had to have his left arm amputated after being caught in a shell strike in Germany in WWII



HENRY HARLEY

Former Infantry soldier Henry Harley recalls how not everyone rushed full tilt into the VE Day party. Victory celebrations were tempered by the loss of comrades, the vivid memories of terrifying danger, and the fact that war in the Far East and the Pacific would continue until 15 August.

Henry, now 94, served with the Highland Light Infantry and was involved in ferocious fighting across Belgium and the Netherlands as the Nazis were pushed back. Henry remembers being just 18 years old when he was ordered to enter a house on his own to flush out German soldiers before moving forward to check on enemy gun positions.

He managed to help a number of comrades to safety in the fighting with German troops in the German town of Kleve, near the Dutch border, before he and five fellow soldiers were hit by a shell.

“I remember turning to my right and seeing these shells come over. One blew my left arm almost clean off above the elbow and left shrapnel in my face,”

recalls Henry, who lives in Tunstall, Stoke. “The guys around me all dropped like stones – they were all killed in the blast. I was lucky but had to retreat quickly as I was losing lots of blood. I kept hold of my arm, which was dangling down, and managed to get back to safety before I passed out. I don’t remember anything else until I woke up in the hospital with my arm having been amputated.”

Henry spent time recovering at Dudley Hospital in the West Midlands before being discharged, and was recuperating at home on VE Day.

“I was glad to be back and safe, but lots of things had changed. I couldn’t get my old job back and had to get used to using a prosthetic limb,” says Henry, who went on to work in security for 37 years and married his childhood sweetheart Marjorie, who is now 93. “There were street parties on VE Day and they were great to see – of course it was right to mark the end of World War II – but for me it wasn’t only a time to celebrate, it was also a time to reflect.”



Words: Darryl Buckland Photography: IWM

city went a little mad. Schools were closed for the day. It was a day of celebration!’ He added: ‘I didn’t see too many drunks, now that I think on it. There was no need. The spirits were lifted high enough as it was. It was quite wonderful to see all the men and women in uniform hugging, kissing and generally flirting with the civilian population.’

However, Dr Jeffreys’ research mentions a restrained element to the celebrations: ‘Victory was well forecast so there were not the same levels of drunkenness as in 1918. Also, troops were still fighting in South East Asia and many were in PoW camps, so a lot of people didn’t feel like celebrating.

‘Fascinatingly, the tension of war took a while to relax. The Imperial War Museum has diaries of people who still took their favourite pieces of jewellery and make-up out with them every day after the war, as had become their habit in case their homes got bombed.

‘A civil servant called Robert Herman still left his best suit out at night so he had something decent to wear in case he was made homeless. He wrote: ‘There was no definite day on which one passed from a state of conscious apprehension to one of complete security. There was just the day when you had every chance of finding your home in the same state you left it in the morning.’

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‘Some struggled after the war and although there were grants made available for people to go to university or back to employment, it was a long process,’ adds Dr Jeffreys. One indicator of the tension felt by families was the divorce rate, which rose to 60,000 applications in 1947 compared to 25,000 in 1945 and only 8,500 in 1939. ‘By 1947, four million people had returned to civilian life from the military and some found it very difficult to adapt.’

Blesma was highly active during those early days, weeks and months following the celebrations of VE Day. The Association worked tirelessly to ensure that Members were provided with prosthetic limbs and financial aid to re-start their lives. The Association also campaigned for better work and employment support for amputees. Some 12,000 men returned from WWII having lost limbs and, with resilience and fortitude, as well as the support of Blesma, a great many set about meeting the challenges of rehabilitation.

The Imperial War Museum’s Victory 75 anniversary programme, with fascinating first-hand testimonies and diaries from the Second World War through VE Day and onto Victory in Japan Day (VJ Day), will run until 15 August. More information on VE Day can be found at www.iwm.org.uk/history/victory

Photographer
and filmmaker
Laura Dodsworth

Words: Nick Moore Photography: Laura Dodsworth

SCARS

Blesma Member
Simon Brown

INSTEAD OF SEEING A SCAR, CAN PEOPLE SEE A STORY? SIMON BROWN FEATURES IN A NEW DOCUMENTARY IN WHICH PEOPLE EXPLAIN HOW THEIR SCARS HAVE MADE THEM WHO THEY ARE

SCARS

Simon Brown was shot in the face by a sniper in 2006 while on a mission to rescue six people in Iraq. The REME soldier was blinded in one eye and left with just 20 per cent vision in the other. Simon, now 41, from Leeds, was also severely scarred in the incident. Earlier this year, he took part in the film *Scars: How Our Wounds Make Us Who We Are*. He and one of the film's co-directors, Laura Dodsworth, discuss the documentary and what it says about the physical and psychological impact of scars.

What was the idea behind the film, and how did Simon get involved?

Laura: I've focused for some years on telling stories about people's experiences using the body. Scars are interesting because we can have negative impressions of them but the experiences behind scars are often integral to shaping who we are. There's always a story behind them, and I'm drawn towards the complexity of human experience. The aim was to challenge perceptions of scars. My co-director, Rebecca Lloyd Evans, and I wanted to have a breadth of experiences in the film. I saw a poster for a military charity and thought it would be interesting to speak to a war veteran.

Simon: I work for Blind Veterans UK, and when Laura and Rebecca contacted the charity to ask if we could put them in touch with someone who had facial scars, I ended up chatting to them. The film shows resilience through adversity and looks at how society views scarring. The film looks to dispel myths about scarring and show that people aren't ashamed of them. We're not hiding our scars, so don't hide from us.

Laura: We wanted to show people from all walks of life, with different types of scars and varied experiences. Lots of projects about scars focus on the body image angle, trying to make them look beautiful. But we wanted to focus on the stories, on people in their environment, how they've become the people they are today. There aren't many people who don't have a scar. The longer we live, the more we will acquire.

How was the filming process?

Simon: It was interesting. It's not the first time I've talked about my experiences, but when you do these things something new always comes out. When I saw the finished film, I was impressed by the other people in it. It's a varied group, with different reasons for their scarring. And we're all in different



stages of acceptance. For some, a scar can be a bigger part of their personality than it is for others. Our physical appearance does have an effect on the way the world perceives us whether we like it or not.

Laura: Simon was very comfortable and confident talking about his scars. He was revealing and personal. He's told his story a few times because he does public speaking, but there was still a freshness and rawness to what he said. In the film, we feature people with very recent scars, like Cordelia, who is still in treatment for a brain tumour. Then there is Pete, who was born with a visible difference but has had his whole life to process it. Simon's injury was a while ago, and it was interesting to talk to someone who has changed as a person and who is getting on with life.

You talk about initially hiding yourself away post-injury, Simon...

Simon: At first, I couldn't see the scars, and so I couldn't understand. A scar always feels bigger than it looks. You build an image in your head of what it looks like. There were also a lot of other factors that kept me at home. It had been a highly traumatic

experience, I had been to hospital, and my confidence was knocked. I just felt safer in my own environment. I was also angry, and the people at home were the safest people to lash out at. It wasn't fair on them, but that's often what happens. I didn't feel right going out. What if someone said something?

Then you came to accept the positive attention of friends and family?

Simon: Yes. I was broken after my injury. What I did on the day I was shot wasn't relevant to me, but my mates were proud of me. They took me out. I was feeling vulnerable, but when you've got an amateur rugby league team taking you out on the town, you are quite safe! My mates didn't mind the scarring, and they took the mickey. It was instant. It builds real friendships. I quickly became known as One Blank, like the domino. Rugby teams have a similar camaraderie to the military.

Laura: I think, in general, people are becoming more open about revealing scars. Simon has scars on his face so he can't hide them, and everyone will form an instant opinion and judgement on them. I like that he uses quite bold and varied glass



“This is not the first time I’ve talked about my experiences, but when you do these things something new always comes out,” says Simon, pictured at home during the filming of SCARS

but in a way there is something beautiful about the timing because it’s about human resilience. During coronavirus, it is almost like the whole world has realised, en masse, that we are going to die one day. Life means living, and living means acquiring some scars. These people’s scars have changed them, they’ve thrived, they’re inspirations. So for the people who have watched the film, I hope it has reached them in quite a moving way.

How do you feel about your scars today?

Simon: Day to day, I don’t worry about them. I wear the scars, they don’t wear me. There is a reason for them and I can’t get rid of them. If someone isn’t happy with them, they can find out about the scars or they can ignore them. The film actually reminded me of one of the scars that I tend to forget about, which is the one across the top of my head. That’s where they peeled my face off to reconstruct my skull. It’s a good nine inches long. Most of the time it’s under my hairline. I only remember it when people point it out.

Laura: I think a key thing to learn is that we shouldn’t assume we know someone’s story if we see a scar, or a visible difference to someone. You have no idea what has happened. So instead of automatically bringing in fear or judgement, we should stay open minded and compassionate.

“DAY TO DAY, I DON’T WORRY ABOUT THEM. I WEAR THE SCARS, THEY DON’T WEAR ME. THERE IS A REASON FOR THEM AND I CAN’T GET RID OF THEM”

eyes. Because you can’t hide, you might as well make a feature of it. He quite likes to prompt conversations. That’s better than people shushing, pretending not to see, or being polite. He creates the question and it’s a bold and honest way of going about life. That’s got to be a good thing.

How do you feel about the final film and what did you learn from it?

Simon: It showed me that mental scars can be much more raw than physical ones. I thought that about the lady who had been abused by her partner and can’t date anyone with the same star sign. But she is finding strategies and moving forward. Then there is the lady with the brain tumour who doesn’t want to hide her scar, so she shaves her head. That’s her coping strategy.

Laura: I agree. It depends on what and where the scar is. Helen [a self-harmer]

hides her scars because she can. They’re on her arms and she doesn’t want to be judged. Christina [who had been abused] had a tattoo to cover her scar completely because she didn’t want to be honest about what caused it. Pete [who was born with a visible difference to his hands] has to show his scars every time he shakes hands. He holds his scars out towards people, there is no hiding from them.

Simon: It’s a good point. Some scars can be hidden much of the time. Maybe you only show them to people once you trust them. I haven’t got that option – even a COVID-19 mask doesn’t help! But everyone in the film is moving forward with their lives. None of them are hiding, and I thought that made the film very powerful.

Laura: We’ve had some very positive feedback to the documentary. It’s a funny time for it to come out, during COVID-19,

Can you explain what it’s like losing your sight, rather than a limb, Simon?

Simon: Eighty per cent of the world we perceive around us is through what we see. We are lazy with our other senses. Visual impairment stops you being able to drive, you need tools to read your email, and you can’t read people’s body language. You lose orientation and control of situations. It makes things more time consuming. It can be massively disorientating. Try standing in the middle of an airport concourse, shut your eyes for 30 seconds and you’ll get an idea. There are similarities to Phantom Limb Pain, too. You can cover your working eye and still ‘see’ something, like a picture or a dream. Your brain doesn’t believe the eye is dead. It’s very strange. So there are some similarities with amputation. But we all have different experiences. For me, that’s what’s great about Blesma. It’s a social thing – connecting you with people who are in a similar situation – or perhaps worse. It’s about working together.

Watch SCARS at [theguardian.com/news/ng-interactive/2020/apr/27/scars-how-our-wounds-make-us-who-we-are-video](https://www.theguardian.com/news/ng-interactive/2020/apr/27/scars-how-our-wounds-make-us-who-we-are-video)



FITNESS IN LOCKDOWN

SELF-CARE IN SELF-ISOLATION

WITH EVERYONE IN LOCKDOWN IT HAS PERHAPS NEVER BEEN MORE IMPORTANT TO STAY MOBILE, MOTIVATED AND MINDFUL. MEMBERS, SUPPORTERS AND PARTNERS ARE ALL HELPING OUT

The coronavirus crisis is posing a very difficult challenge for the Association. As a charity that champions the power of group activities and relies on face-to-face contact with its Members, months of lockdown have meant many aspects of the Association have had to be taken back to the drawing board. And perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than for the Activities Programme.

“We realised early on that we had to stop all our events to keep our Members safe,” says Jess March, Blesma’s Activities Manager. “Vulnerable people are most at risk from the virus, so month by month we’ve been cancelling everything, and will have to do that until there is no doubt about Member safety.”

Keeping people healthy was an immediate priority, so the decision to try and put together a series of exercise videos and online calls was swiftly made. Thanks to the likes of fitness trainer and Member

Gregg Stevenson, yoga instructor and Blesma supporter Lizzie Croxford, and resilience coach Emily Hightower, a number of workouts and group sessions have been produced to aid Members’ health, wellbeing, and mindfulness during the pandemic.

“We knew that people would be unable to get out and do the things that benefit their mental health,” says Jess. “Exercise and meditation are key, but we realised these were things we could continue online. There aren’t many adaptive tutorials available, so it’s been good to get this up and running quickly. We’ve had a good viewing rate on the videos, and feedback from Emily’s breath course has been amazing.”

“It’s great to see Members connecting online, and we’ve realised that this can help our activities in the future,” says Jess. “One reason why people pull out of activities is because of nerves, but in the future, if they can get used to an activity online first, we can hopefully reduce that.”



Emily Hightower

Emily is a resilience coach who helps high performers who have been exposed to trauma to become steady, empowered, and rested. Thanks to the involvement of BSO Kevin Long she has been running a series of breath workshops for Members

Emily Hightower might not be an amputee, but she knows how difficult circumstances can affect your mental health – and how to find a way back to wellness again. “My own trauma brought me into the work I do,” says the 46-year-old resilience coach from Colorado, USA. “We often need to heal ourselves before we can help to heal others, and there was a ton of instability in my formative years. My mum had a traumatic brain injury, and my dad committed suicide when I was 15. But I was lucky that I had a mentor who brought me into yoga. It helped me survive. And eventually I got into yoga Pranayama breathing. That is what helped with my own trauma the most.”

Emily now has a company, Intrinsic, which runs workshops and courses for veterans. The focus is on controlling the breath which, in turn, improves wellbeing, pain control, and mental health. She has partnered with Challenge Aspen Military Opportunities (CAMO), a course that many Members have attended in Colorado, as well as the annual ski trip. Now, during the coronavirus lockdown, she is leading a group of Members on a six-week course via an online video conferencing app.

BREATH WORK WORKS FOR BLESMA

“I’ve always loved working with the Blesma group when they come out for the CAMO adaptive sports camps,” says Emily. “At the camp, I am their stress physiology teacher. We have had some great results. When I speak to them later down the line, and find out that they are breathing through their chronic pain and reducing their stress, and often managing to get off some of their medication, that is so special.”

CAMO has been a useful post 9-11 tool for veterans, she says. “Through the global war on terror, we saw that the distinct needs among the combat veteran population were growing. My focus has been on healing.

“But I found that breath work was often more effective than yoga. When you’ve got a room full of Blesma Members on a course, all with different physical and cognitive challenges, it can be difficult to adapt the physical yoga. Breath work is acutely powerful, and is accessible to everyone regardless of their injury, so we focus on that.”



Emily’s course teaches people to understand and regulate their nervous system. “We train people to read the condition of their nervous system, and we teach physiology, neurology, and how the brain reacts to stress,” she says. “There are tangible cues from your body that you can come to understand. Everyone reacts in a different way to stress – from hyper-arousal to anxiety, boredom, depression, and everything in between.

“Voluntary breath rewires the neurology of the stress response. Once we start to practise breath patterns, they can have a big effect. It’s not just about feeling good or contemplating life, this is a tool to change the way your brain sees your trauma.

“We breathe from a different part of our brain when we breathe on purpose. From there, we learn how the breath ties in with traits in the nervous system. They

can be sympathetic, awakening, arousing, de-activating, relaxing... When you pause the breath, for example, you activate present-time awareness that is an enormous resource in the human body.”

Emily teaches her groups more than 20 different breathing patterns, all tailored for different circumstances – whether to lift you out of a funk or calm an over-active mind. “You can down-regulate out of a panic response, and you can renegotiate a cascade of chronic pain. It is a great tool for people who are feeling pain,” she says.

Emily’s lockdown Zoom group is already providing some incredible feedback. “We are seeing changes in their nervous system, in their behaviour, in their life,” she says. “One gentleman was so activated by his anxiety that he needed to separate from the group for most of the time. He even wore noise-cancelling headphones a lot at home because the sensory input of daily life was too much. After doing some training on a CAMO retreat, and using these techniques every day, he is now a mentor – and the calmest person in the group!”

“He shared with the group that he has greatly reduced his dependence on medication. His breath helps him become aware, make conscious choices, and even manage his pain.”

As ever with Blesma, the group get a lot out of being together. “I’m so impressed with the community aspect of the group,” says Emily. “Many have shared experiences of combat, but this goes way beyond that. The Association makes sincere efforts to change lives. The charity really listens. Kevin Long, the BSO who put this together, has gone out of his way to help everyone.

It is inclusion through action.”

Emily hopes that lockdown can have some positives. “This is such a stressful time for the world, and I don’t want to gloss over the issues and stresses that it is causing people,” she says. “But it can also be an opportunity, because it can be a learning experience about our discomfort, loss and pain. This can be a doorway to stability that we may not have found at any other time.”



To learn more about Emily’s course talk to your BSO or read about The Skill of Stress course at intrinsicway.com

TRY ONE OF EMILY'S DE-STRESSING BREATHING EXERCISES FOR YOURSELF

"Human beings are designed to breathe through the nose most of the time," says Emily. "If a lion jumps out on you, for example, you'll breathe through your mouth – shallow and fast. This gives you a rush of adrenaline and cortisol, which is great for a survival situation, but not when you're stuck in traffic or at work!"

"All of us are operating in 'anxious world' all the time which tells us to do more, faster, and with less. This exercise returns you to your senses – and reminds you that you have a lot of choices, one of which includes just *being*. That's a huge resource."

1. Try to identify agitation in the nervous system, notice when you experience a high level of anxiety or when pain is getting out of control. This is a good time to take back control with a breathing exercise.

2. Inhale through the nose for the slow count of four. This will open up the lungs and activate tissue in the deepest part of the lungs. "It changes the chemistry in your brain," says Emily.

3. Pause for a count of two and then exhale, out of the nose or mouth, for a count of six. "The pause creates awareness and stillness in the nervous system, and allows you to take in extra oxygen," says Emily. "The long exhale deactivates you, telling the body that this is a safe, relaxing time."

4. Wait for the next breath, through the nose, to come. "Don't force it – become embodied in the breath in a way that can shift your state of reactivity to active engagement," says Emily.

5. Repeat the cycle*.



*Let go if you experience tension. The Skill of Stress online course at www.intrinsicway.com will help you find the way

WHAT IT MEANT TO A MEMBER

GERRARD MURDOCK

Gerrard, 48, from Norfolk, served with the Coldstream Guards and is a bilateral amputee

How did you first get involved with doing breath work with Emily?

I first met Emily last year on the CAMO expedition in Colorado and started doing breath work out there. To be honest, I was sceptical at first, but then she taught me something called the waterfall breath and that really calmed down my anxiety. It really clicked with me, and I've been doing it every day since. It really works so well.

How has doing breath work benefited your health and wellbeing?

I make time to sit down and do it every day. I had very severe PTSD and breath work has taken away a lot of that. I was very shy – I basically stayed indoors and didn't go out for two years. Now I get out in the world all the time. I go out on my kayak, and I use the breath work when I'm out. It helps me notice the river – to smell it and breathe it. I see the world differently. I also use the breath work to help me overcome stressful situations. I'm a much calmer person now – I don't get so angry or frustrated.

It's also helped reduce your medication...

Yes. The breath work helps with my pain. I was on a multitude of painkillers and now I'm on just one a day. The doctors can shove all kinds of tablets in you, but finding something as easy as breathing to help you – now that has turned my mental health around! And my partner and I are having a baby soon, too!

How have you found the group sessions that Emily has run during lockdown?

The Zoom workshops have been great. Meeting other people who can benefit from this, like I have, is very enjoyable. Emily is a great teacher and a great mentor. Lots of the people in the class are now starting to chat outside of the group and help each other, too. Blesma has got me living my life again!



"I USE THE BREATH WORK TO HELP ME OVERCOME STRESSFUL SITUATIONS. I'M A MUCH CALMER PERSON NOW – I DON'T GET SO ANGRY OR FRUSTRATED"

Gregg Stevenson

Gregg, 35, from East Lancashire, is the PTI at Preston Limb Centre. While serving with the REME in Afghanistan in 2009, he stood on an IED, losing one leg below the knee and the other above the knee. Gregg has produced a series of exercise videos for Members

Having been through the rehab process as an amputee must inform your job as a PTI...

It has. I lost my legs when I was 24 years old, and Headley Court was part of a long road to recovery. My rehab was great, and I qualified as a PTI when I left the military, simply for my own resettlement and fitness at first. But it led to me working for the NHS. I was attending the gym in the Preston Limb Centre, and I asked if I could get some work experience. Talking to other disabled people in gyms, I realised there wasn't much reliable information about what exercise we should be doing. People were wary of recommending something that might do damage. So I started looking into it. Should someone do a certain amount on a rowing machine? Can their leg take it? Might a certain deadlift benefit an amputee's lower back? Would a medicine ball help with trunk stability?

And it went so well that you ended up getting a job at the centre...

Yes, I manage the gym there now. It's been a slow process, because the gym always had to be about benefiting people's health – not getting a six pack and massive biceps. We started with basic exercises. I'm lucky that I have an NHS physiotherapist who I can bounce ideas off to make sure they are legitimate. But I have learned a lot, and people there have come to trust me.

You've also learned from being around the fringes of elite sport...

I tried out for the GB Paralympic rowing team for Tokyo 2020, and was training seriously with them for a year. I'm involved in Nordic skiing now, too. As an aspiring Paralympian I've been lucky enough to be around very good conditioning guys, and some true champions. What I found interesting was that these people still do



the basic supplementary exercises almost every day. It's all the stuff we did in rehab that stabilises your muscles, and I realised I'd not done a lot of it since my time at Headley Court.

Who are your lockdown videos aimed at?

I wanted to include exercises for those who maybe don't spend much time in the gym. Those who are getting older or gaining weight... and those of us who aren't the whippersnappers we were when we had our limbs blown off! The big picture is that amputees are more sedentary than most people, even if we try hard to be active. We are sat down more and walk less. That risks skeletal damage, diabetes, high blood pressure, medication... As amputees, we also have different gaits and put more pressure on our skeletons. We still want to take part in sports and chase our kids in the garden, but you need conditioning to do that. The videos are aimed at helping with those sorts of things.

What kind of exercises are in the videos?

I had to reign myself in a little bit. I might have wanted to include handstand push-ups to show that disabled people can kick ass, but this wasn't the Gregg Stevenson show. So the first video concentrates on simple mobility – spinal extensions and stretches. It's about getting people out of the hunched position we adopt when we look at our phone or laptop. We're opening the shoulders, and doing some core and leg work. Then there's a standing session.

So it's nothing to be scared of?

Absolutely not. They are familiar exercises, it's not about being a Jedi. I want Members to be realistic, but the videos are also legitimate from an NHS point of view, with real benefits. It's also about finding out what motivates you – then you've got far more chance of getting dragged away from whatever you're watching on TV. It's important to find training you can really benefit from. We're going to have two sessions a week over six weeks, and people can always go back and pick bits out. The feedback so far has been pretty positive.

How important has it been to pull this together during the lockdown?

It's great that Blesma got this going, and great that the Association has adapted. But that's standard Blesma: very proactive and forward thinking. I could have spent a long time making the videos perfect, but that wasn't the most important thing – they needed to be out as quickly as possible. If you take part in a six-week block you'll benefit from mobility and strength exercises – you'll definitely get something out of it.

Have a go at Gregg's online workout videos on Blesma's YouTube channel. Search Blesma at www.youtube.com



A man with prosthetic legs is performing a bench press in a gym. He is wearing a blue t-shirt with "blesma" and "AMERICAN VETERANS" printed on it, and tan shorts. He is lying on a black "BULLDOG GEAR" bench, holding a barbell with weights. The gym has a dark background with a window and curtains on the left.

Gregg's workouts
feature familiar
exercises that offer
some real benefits

**“WE STILL WANT TO TAKE PART IN SPORTS
AND CHASE OUR KIDS IN THE GARDEN, BUT
YOU NEED CONDITIONING TO DO THAT”**

Lizzie Croxford

Lizzie, 32, from Fulham, has been involved with Blesma for a while because her husband, Stuart, is a Member. She owns and runs ThreeZero12 Fitness in London, and has kindly produced a series of yoga and pilates videos for Members to try out during lockdown



How did you get involved with Blesma?
My husband, Stuart, has been a Blesma Member since he was injured in 2012. He was initially injured in Afghanistan, and then he had a second accident on a charity sailing boat which resulted in his leg amputation. I got to know Blesma through Stu, because the Association was there to support him when he needed it – especially helping him out in his work with the Endeavour Fund. I normally do one-on-one teaching and regular group classes. During lockdown, of course, all my clients have had to move online. It has been a learning experience for me – I’ve got to grips with technology like Zoom and YouTube, which I never thought I would!

You ended up running some Blesma trips...
Last April, we ran a cycling training week in Mallorca. It focused on getting Members out on their bikes, but I also ran yoga and pilates sessions in the mornings. Then, last September, we ran a trip for Blesma Members and their partners that included boating and paddleboarding, and again we offered yoga and pilates. We were meant to be running another trip to Mallorca this April, but that had to be cancelled.

What were those early yoga sessions like with the Members?
They were great. A big motivator for me is the importance of supporting Members’ partners as well because I know what it’s like from my own perspective. I struggled with my mental health around four years ago, and it took a while to realise it was to do with what had gone on with Stu and

his injury. I came to realise that traumatic situations can also really affect partners and family members, and I wanted to give those people a voice and some support.

How did you come to offer classes online?
We were meant to be cycling in Mallorca with Members when the virus kicked in, so we spoke with Jess (March, Blesma’s Activities Manager) about how we could help Members continue with a healthy approach to life despite the lockdown. I said I’d be happy to do some stuff to give out to the Members. I’ve recorded four videos so far, which I’ve enjoyed.

What have you featured in the workouts?
I started with one on mobility, then a low level HIIT (high intensity interval training) session, and then a couple of pilates workouts. The idea is to combine the HIIT, yoga and pilates where possible for a three-day-a-week programme. It has been a challenge to create something to suit all Members because they all have different backgrounds, injuries and abilities. The first video catered for as many variables as possible, including standing, sitting, and working on the floor. The other workouts have been slightly more focused for those who are a little bit more mobile. Some people are already very active, so finding the balance can be tricky. I’ve done the exercises in 10-minute blocks with a mix of floor and standing work, so I think most people can take something out of them.

What do you hope Members will get out of trying the exercises in the videos?
That they discover a series or exercise that they find beneficial for their rehab or daily life. That’s been a big thing at the retreats we’ve run. We have had people of all ages trying yoga and pilates for the first time, enjoying it, and then keeping it going. I remember a Member in his sixties who’d had a leg amputated high up who had never done yoga before. He was keen to ride his bike but had never been taught how to keep mobile in between training. He’d been through the medical system a long time ago, and we could show him how to support his body differently. It’ll be great if we are able to start some people off and get them inspired to try more.

Have a go at Lizzie’s online workout videos on Blesma’s YouTube channel. Search Blesma at www.youtube.com



Finding something that works for you is ideal, says Lizzie. With the current situation, what is there to lose?



Trustees' Annual and Strategic Report 2019

Every year, the Association must publish an annual report alongside a set of financial statements. Below is an abridged version of the most recent report

Last year, Blesma continued to work hard to support its 3,027 Members and Widows. The Association received 162 new Members in 2019, including 35 who have loss of use of limbs, and is processing 41 additional membership applications. Much of what we achieve is unchanged year on year in that supporting our Members is undertaken on a daily basis – as it always has been. At its heart is the ethos identified by those who founded Blesma in the shadows that followed WWI; that Member shall support Member. This support is moral, practical and effective.

The rich background that we have in supporting each other comes from the knowledge and experiences of our many Members over decades. In this respect, our perspective is unique. We know about living with limb loss in all stages of adult life. Members tell us their stories in their own homes. We strive to understand and to deliver need. Such knowledge is our enabling achievement. Our beneficiaries are also Members with a vote on how Blesma is run. Their guidance and scrutiny promote genuine impact and efficiency, ensuring Blesma is responsive and relevant in all that it does.

Blesma's rehabilitation activities continue to go from strength to strength, with many Members relishing the challenges they

present, including those giving to society by inspiring resilience in youth through the Making Generation R programme. Our welfare services are in high demand and are reaching our Members – especially the most elderly and infirm – through our regional Support and Outreach Officers, and our Branch and Volunteer network. This has become even more critical as the coronavirus emergency imposes isolation upon our membership.

The COVID-19 crisis has significantly impacted upon Blesma's planned activity. A number of activities planned to take place during 2020 have been postponed or cancelled. Our Blesma Support Officers are actively engaged in providing support to Members where needed and, where possible, activities and engagement are taking place online. The Senior Management Team is actively engaged across the military charity sector, continues to assess the likely impact of the crisis, and is reporting regularly to the Board of Trustees.

The COVID-19 crisis has also seriously affected the environment in which the charity operates. Financial considerations have been made and the Association remains steadfast in its determination to be there for its Members, through life.

In accordance with the Strategic Plan, the Charity's Lines of Operation, Priorities and Outputs are explained as follows:

Security

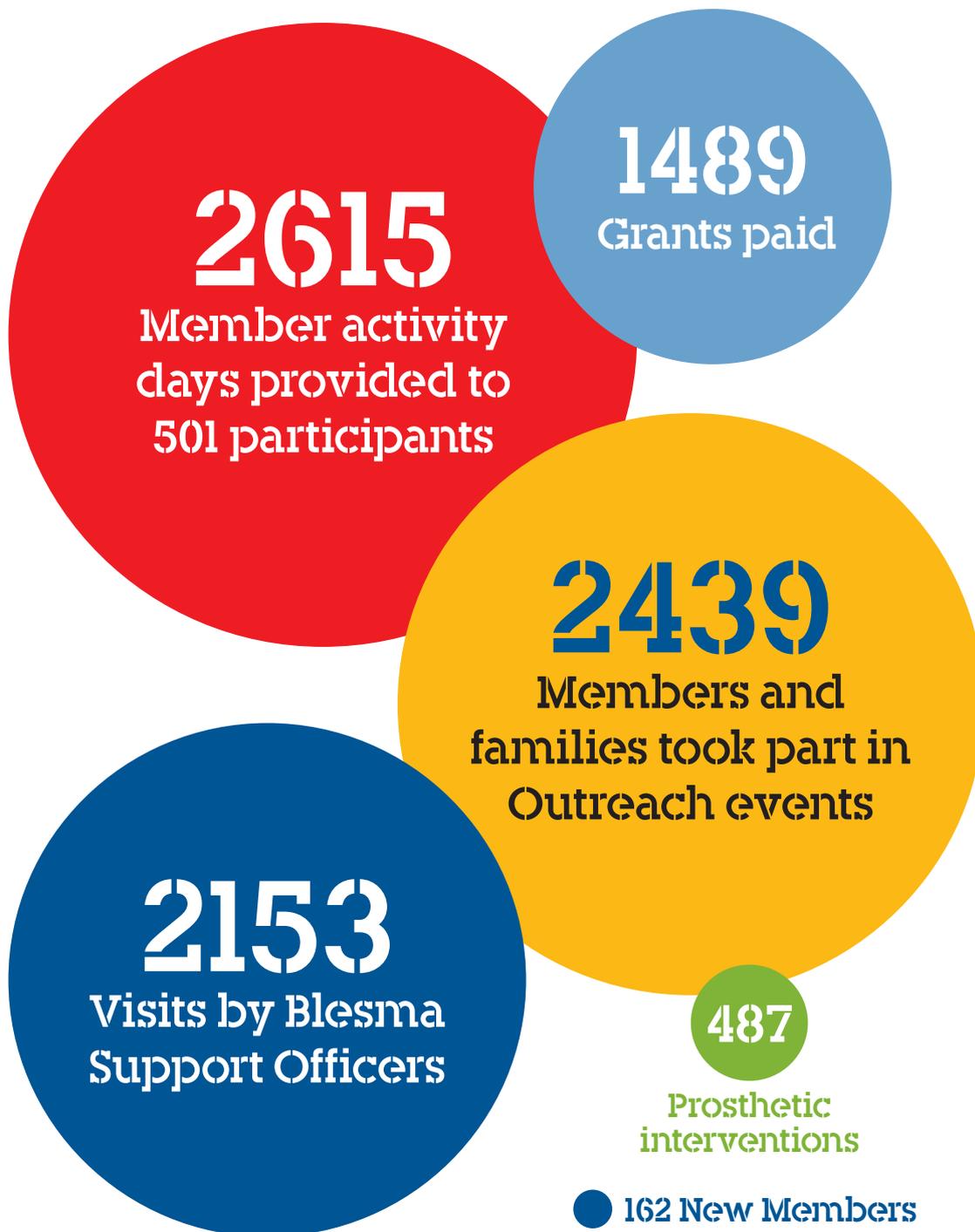
Nine Area Support Officers and nine Outreach Officers, reinforced by a body of volunteer Welfare Representatives, provide Blesma's comprehensive 'Welfare Service' and are the main source of information regarding how our Members fared during the year.

Their work is supplemented by a further Support Officer; Blesma's Support Officer (Prosthetics), who focuses on working closely with the NHS – at the working level with the Limb Service to resolve individual Members' prosthetic issues, and at the strategic level in contributing to policy development for provision of prosthetics and mobility aids to amputees and those suffering loss of use of limb.

The Support Officers work closely with Veterans UK to resolve War Pension and Armed Forces Compensation Scheme issues for individual Members, and with the Defence Recovery Capability where they visit Members in the Defence Medical Rehabilitation Centre Stanford Hall and in Personnel Recovery Centres who are undergoing rehabilitation and/or transition to civilian life.

Following guidance from Trustees and long-standing practice, Director Independence and Wellbeing, working

Blesma 2019 in numbers



closely with the Chief Executive, decides how grants to promote independence and wellbeing are distributed and to whom.

In 2019, the Blesma Independence and Wellbeing team made:

- 1,431 home visits and 722 other visits
- 1,489 individual grants to 885 recipients

In 2019, Blesma continued to observe and monitor developments in prosthetic provision to Members across the UK. By working at an individual level, advocating for those Members who require support

locally at the NHS Limb Centres as well as campaigning for changes nationally, improvements continue to be made.

For those with Service-attributable amputations, the Veterans Prosthetics Panel (VPP) continues to provide an excellent process for funding of components in England. Eligible Members living in the devolved administrations have similar access to state-of-the-art prosthetics via slightly differing mechanisms.

Following on from a meeting in 2018 with representatives in the Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Department

to discuss ongoing and future provision of prosthetic care to attributable amputees, specifically with regards to maintaining a minimum like-for-like provision to those issued by Defence Medical Rehabilitation Centre (DMRC) Stanford Hall and those issued by the VPP, Blesma is represented on the Northern Ireland Prosthetics User Group.

Blesma remains involved in the NHS England Prosthetic Service Review, and BSO (Prosthetics) attended the NHS Limb Service Centre Managers Conference. The Association continued to monitor the support to Members referred to the



Complex Prosthetics Clinic at DMRC from the NHS for the management of complex prosthetic issues, and into the Veterans Trauma Network (VTN) in England. NHS Wales established a major trauma system in 2019 incorporating a Veterans Trauma Network similar to that in England, with input from the VTN in England and Blesma. This access to NHS and military experts in trauma can prove life-changing for those Members who are eligible for this treatment pathway.

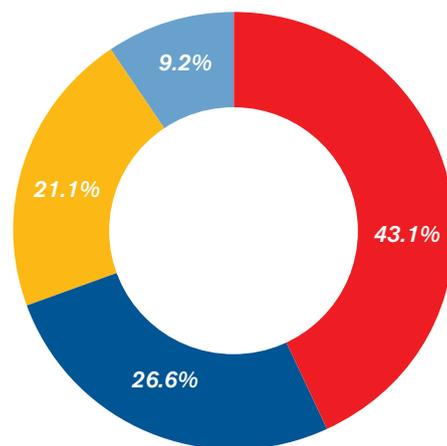
BSOs support individual Members who wish to claim War Pensions, Armed Forces Compensation Scheme awards and DWP benefits, including representing them at hearings and tribunals. There has been a reduction in the number of Members requesting representation at tribunals, but a significant increase in requests for support in preparing claims and mandatory reconsiderations.

Blesma continues to engage with the DWP and delivery partners, highlighting issues affecting veterans. This includes monitoring changes to existing policy which may disadvantage veterans who are in receipt of disability benefits as a result of attributable injuries. The Association is also working with the Scottish Parliament on the Scottish Social Security Review which will see the delegation of disability benefits to Holyrood.

In addition to Blesma shifting focus towards providing more support to elderly and infirm Members in their own homes, the Association continues to reinforce its support to Members' carers and families, including engaging with them during home visits and involving families in local activities arranged by Outreach Officers.

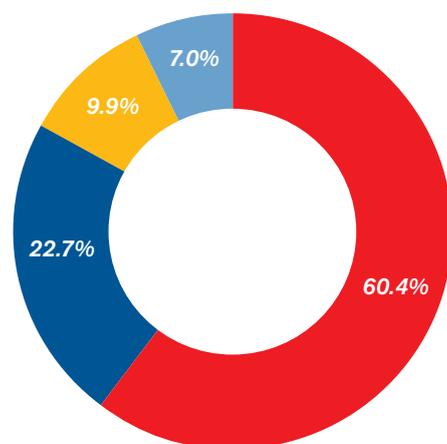
A review of the delegated financial authority for the Director Independence and Wellbeing and Blesma Support Officers towards the end of the year has enabled the charity to effect support more quickly. This support is now virtually a bespoke service to meet the individual Members' needs, and

INCOME



Legacy	43.1%
Other	26.6%
Donations and Grants	21.1%
Investments	9.2%

STAFF, ATTRIBUTABLE AND GOVERNANCE COSTS (apportionment)



Membership Services	60.4%
Fundraising	22.7%
Awareness and Representation	9.9%
Activities	7.0%

in the last 12 months has included disability and mobility aids such as life-lines, stair lifts, bathroom adaptations, wheelchairs, Electrically Powered Vehicles, and ramps.

Blesma has also supported Members who have needed respite or residential care. The enduring pressure on health and social care budgets continues to threaten service provision both quantitatively and qualitatively. Blesma keeps a close watch on where gaps in support leave Members vulnerable, and will continue to step in to meet their needs whilst always holding the State to account where appropriate.

Blesma's LIBOR-funded Outreach Pilot has proved successful in reducing isolation through a programme of local events:

- More than 213 local activities organised
- 1,052 Members, 262 Widows, 569 partners, 226 carers and 330 children were engaged with

Evidence of the positive impact of the work of the Outreach Team led to the Trustees' decision that the Association will fund the continuation of the Outreach programme when the pilot ends in May 2020.

The original bid for LIBOR funding for the Outreach Pilot allowed for one Outreach Officer for each of the Blesma Areas, and in the case of BSO (Scotland, NI and RoI) the priority was seen as supporting Members in Northern Ireland.

However, concerns that Members living in Scotland could be at risk of isolation led to Blesma creating and funding the additional post of Outreach Officer (Scotland) from January 2020.

Identity

Blesma's long-established Activities Programme is a central part of the offer to Members and is a key component of the Association's aim to promote confidence and self-belief in support of rehabilitation.



Activities provide opportunities not only for physical and mental engagement, but also for social interaction, with a camaraderie that is at the heart of any Blesma event. All types of Member are catered for, events are often challenging, many are ambitious, and all aim to be rewarding.

The activities on offer in 2019 had the usual mix of adrenaline-fuelled events such as the off-road British Columbia Bike Race and adaptive diving in Florida, to the less energetic but stimulating golf tuition, poetry workshops, and storytelling through photography, with a range of challenging and innovative activities in between, all of which were arranged within a supportive social framework.

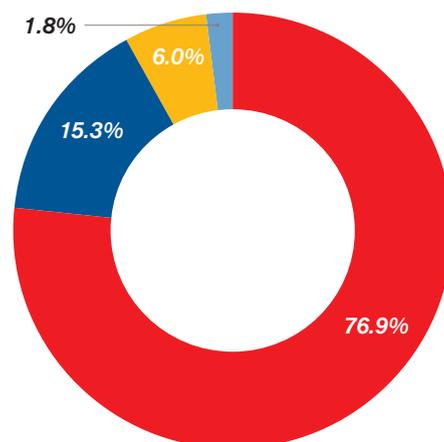
Once again, the theme of supporting those who care for the injured formed part of the Programme, with additional family-centred events such as a family activities week and couples' weekends. Feedback and evaluation are integral parts of all events, providing invaluable information for the continual development and improvement of the Activities Programme. Post-event follow-up by Blesma staff is a distinguishing factor of Blesma's Activities Programme and acknowledged best practice within the Service charities sector.

In 2019, Blesma delivered 76 activities of 33 types with 501 participants, 104 of whom were new to the Programme, taking part in 2,615 days of activities. Since its inception, Blesma has been an association defined by a fellowship of shared experience where Members have supported and mentored one another. This interaction between Members is tangible in Blesma activities, and 47 of the 76 events were Member-led.

SOME HIGHLIGHTS OF THE PROGRAMME INCLUDED

- Borneo expedition; working with young people and isolated communities in the rainforest
- Participation in USO Warrior Week in Virginia, USA

“Much of what we achieve is unchanged year on year in that supporting Members is undertaken on a daily basis”



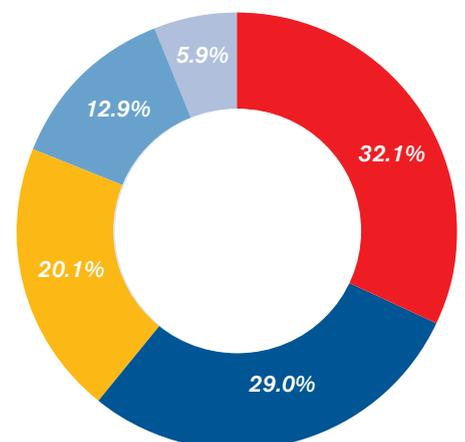
EXPENDITURE

Membership Services	76.9%
Fundraising	15.3%
Awareness and Representation	6.0%
Investment Management Fees	1.8%

MEMBERSHIP SERVICES EXPENDITURE

(Wellbeing, respect and realisation of potential)

Activities	32.1%
Advice and Support	29.0%
Grants and Assistance	20.1%
Overheads	12.9%
Engagement and Other	5.9%





In 2019, Blesma delivered 76 activities of 33 types with 501 participants taking part in 2,615 days of activities

- Horseback riding in Arizona, USA
- Annual Winter Sports combined with a Ski Bike event in which five adapted snow sports were included to allow Members maximum access to the slopes
- Multi-disciplinary water sports expedition to the Bahamas
- A Fitness and Lifestyle course introduced 10 Members to improved nutrition and exercise regimes to help transform their lives

At the elite sporting level, Members continued to excel. Martin Hewitt summited Mount Everest and Lee Spencer broke the world record for a solo row across the Atlantic, becoming the first amputee to do so and beating the able-bodied record by 36 days.

Other Members continue to work towards the Paralympics in Tokyo and the Invictus Games in The Netherlands, and five Members competed at World Championship level.

Connectivity

Being connected is the foundation of the Association's proposition to its Members, it is why Blesma exists. Representing the needs and aspirations of Members is fundamental to Blesma's work and goes back to the dark days of neglect following the First World War – with some 44,000

amputees struggling to live in “a land fit for heroes”. It was then that Blesma's tradition of advocacy was born and that work continues whenever it is needed. Recent conflict has seen the need for modern advocacy, which has led to better compensation, better after care, and better prosthetic support for amputees.

BSO (Prosthetics) represents Blesma on the steering group of the NHS England Prosthetic Service Review which is looking at the current service and asking if it is ‘fit for purpose’, with a view to ensuring that patients' needs are met going forward.

The Association is also involved in a collaborative project supporting Health Education England in delivering a series of half-day and full-day training sessions for GPs across England. The package provides not only an excellent learning opportunity for the GPs about health needs for veterans, but also introduces them to some of the many Service organisations that can help.

In a more complex realm, Blesma has represented the Confederation of Service Charities (Cobseo) assisting NHS England and the Ministry of Defence in developing a policy for the most injured requiring continuous healthcare; *Integrated Personal Commissioning for Veterans*. Making Generation R, which provides Blesma Members with the opportunity to train



as motivational speakers and workshop facilitators, continues to thrive. Through the programme, Members tell their stories of trauma and recovery to youth, and facilitate workshops on the theme of resilience and overcoming challenges. This inspires children and young people, especially those with additional needs or who are at risk of exclusion from school, in communities throughout the UK.

The programme has developed year-on-year since 2015. In 2019, 60 trained Blesma Members reached 30,000 young people in 490 sessions, while the Making Generation R micro-website had almost 10,000 visits, and sessions have been delivered online.

In 2020, Making Generation R plans to train more limbless veterans and reach similar numbers of young people, as well as 1,000 adults working in the First Responder community. The programme also plans to increase the number of veterans who are trained in facilitating skills.

Amongst Blesma's wider target audience, the estimated 2.5 million members of the ex-Service community, the Blesma brand is increasingly recognisable and understood. On a national level, this awareness of what Blesma does and stands for continues to result in requests for our contribution on influential media outlets, relevant



The free app, which is available to download and use on smartphones and tablets, will open up new channels of communication for Members, making it easier for them to organise local activities and keep up to date with information.

Members can access as much or as little of the service as they require. The app will energise the activities experience, for example, as Members will be able to apply for an activity directly through the service, and then meet others who will be going on the trip, discuss any plans with them or the Activities Team, and share experiences of previous events. It will also make it easier for the Activities Team and BSOs to coordinate events and collate feedback, in turn, influencing future activities.

Resourcing

In 2019, excluding the exceptional sale of the former Head Office in Chadwell Heath, 87% of all income came through fundraising, with the rest from investment income from previously raised funds.

Although income was down, Blesma fundraising performed well, holding its own against competitors in an increasingly difficult fundraising landscape for Armed Forces charities as many funders have moved on to other causes.

Fundraising remained efficient, with 8p in every pound of income in 2019 planned to raise funds in 2020. Blesma also gathered 3,637 new supporters in the year, the majority through in-house led Direct Mail campaigns.

General Data Protection Regulation causes little concern despite increased administrative overheads as the Association remains ever vigilant, and exemplary fundraising standards remain a constant in all our activity. Blesma paid its Levy to the Fundraising Regulator and continues to ensure the Regulators guidelines on personal information and fundraising (consent, purpose and transparency) are adhered to.

Blesma does not employ agencies to raise funds from the public in the name of Blesma. The Association's fundraising activities are monitored closely, whilst its fundraising ethics and promise, complaints policy and privacy policy are published. Blesma's safeguarding policy towards vulnerable people is adhered to in all fundraising activities. There were no formal complaints relating to fundraising in 2019.

The above is a synopsis taken from the Trustees' Annual and Strategic Report 2019. You can read the full report online at www.blesma.org/news-media/annual-report

Government committees and boards. *Blesma Magazine*, with more than 35,000 readers, and our continually evolving website, with 174,000 annual visitors, remain central to the communications and fundraising efforts. Website traffic has increased by 7.4% in the past 12 months, with the audience increasingly accessing www.blesma.org through tablet and smartphone versions of the site.

In line with national trends, social media usage has grown significantly in importance both within the Association and amongst supporters, providing the ability to tell

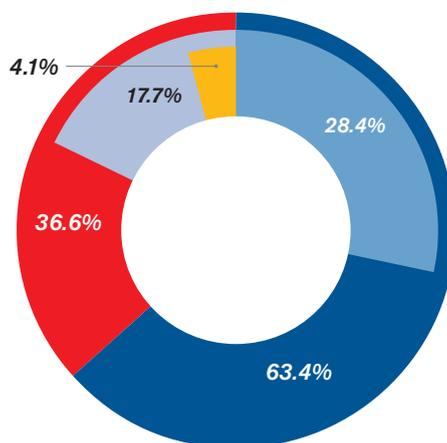
Members' stories to enhance Blesma's ability to assist its people to lead independent and fulfilling lives.

Blesma has been at the forefront of connecting limbless and wounded veterans with one another for the best part of a century and this ethos has been central to Blesma's thinking as it looks ahead to the next 100 years. Launched in early 2020, Blesma developed the Blesma Connects app, a digital hub that will bring Members closer together by fostering independence, mutual support, and a camaraderie from shared experiences – key Blesma values.

THE AGE OF BLESMA'S MEMBERS (excl. Widows)

Members aged...	
65 years and under	63.4%
66 years and over	36.6%
45 years and under	28.4%
80 years and over	17.7%
90 years and over	4.1%

(35.5% of all UK veterans are under 65 years of age; RBL Household Survey)



Making Generation R

Resilience through Inspiration



Making Generation R Goes Digital

WHEN YOUR GOAL IS TO INSPIRE THE NATION'S YOUTH TO BECOME MORE RESILIENT YOU'RE NOT GOING TO LET A GLOBAL PANDEMIC GET IN YOUR WAY. TIME TO REWIND, RETHINK, AND PRESS RECORD

The hugely successful Making Generation R programme has shown its own resilience with a new online resource that has been created to help teenagers cope with the pressures of lockdown.

Members may not be able to go into schools in person to tell their inspirational stories about overcoming adversity, but their voices are still being heard at what is a critical time for the wellbeing of young people.

That's because a team of 30 Members have produced film versions of their talks – each one designed to help viewers build resilience – that can be used by teachers in discussion with online groups or via a school's own technology platform.

"Before the coronavirus pandemic hit, Making Generation R (MGR) had delivered face-to-face sessions to more than 70,000 people," says Blesma's Operations Director,

Ian Waller. "We wanted to continue with the programme through the COVID-19 lockdown and keep our Members engaged, so we have produced digital versions of the Members' stories as well as a digital resource pack that allow us to continue to run the resilience workshops at a time when the schools are shut.

"Being a teenager is difficult at any time, but particularly when they are not able to be in school or see their teachers



"The messages around resilience have never been so appropriate," says Ian Waller

and friends, when their education has been reduced, and when they are probably very anxious about their future. These are anxious times for us all and the messages around resilience – which form a key part of MGR – have never been so appropriate."

A DIFFERENT WAY OF WORKING

The resource is having a powerful impact, with many teachers having rated it as an 'excellent' wellbeing resource, whilst one student who took part in an online session left a comment stating: "I feel that I will be able to recover from the pain I am going through during lockdown."

Switching from delivering engaging and effective face-to-face sessions for an attentive audience in a school workshop is, however, vastly different from relating a story directly to a camera that has been set up in the Member's home. It presents personal and logistical challenges but The Drive Project, a social enterprise that has

MAKING GENERATION R

been working with Blesma to deliver MGR over the last four years, has provided extra training sessions to smooth the transition.

“Not all our Members are experts at filming, so we made sure those involved worked with an experienced film producer to ensure the best possible film quality,” says Ian. “The results are very professional and, although you can never replicate the live experience, this is the next best thing.

“Our Members’ stories are still incredibly powerful and can have such a big impact on an age group that has had a lot to contend with during lockdown. Teenagers have not been able to see their friends or go to school, and it is easy to feel dislocated and distressed. Our Members’ experiences and coping strategies can provide vital support during this time.”

The Members’ stories are introduced by veterans Mat Armitage and Luke Delahunty, who help to set the scene and encourage discussion and exercises to synchronise with the lesson plans devised by schools.

The films feature clips of the Members using their coping strategies in everyday life to underscore their importance. Finally, pupils are encouraged to leave messages and feedback, which allow them to connect with Members who are dealing with their own experiences of lockdown.

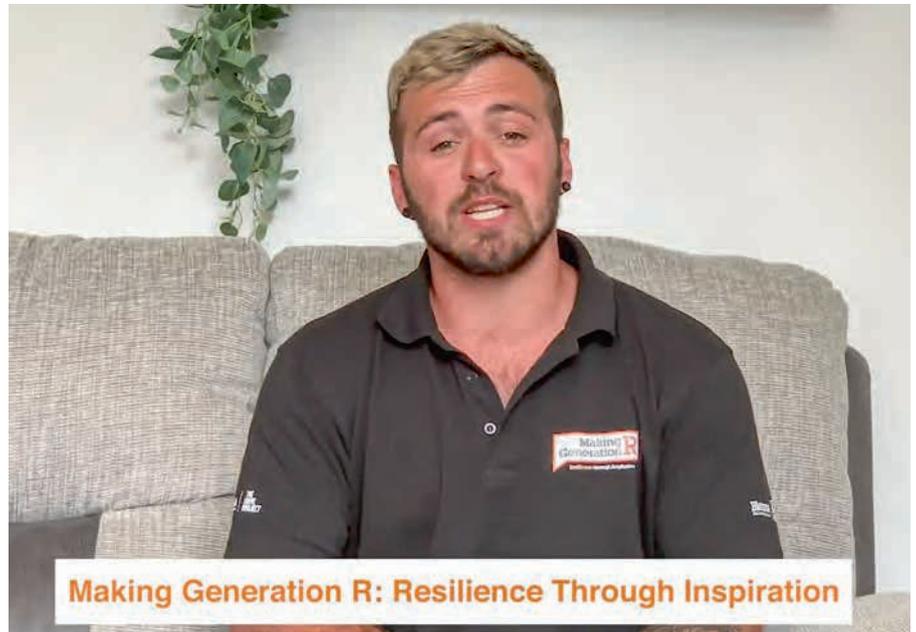
“Each Member had three training sessions with a facilitator to understand technical aspects of film making such as getting the lighting right in their home and the various ways of recording,” says Grace Staniland, managing director of The Drive Project. “Speaking to a camera in your front room rather than to a live audience is very different and once you have finished talking you are left with silence – there is no feedback or reaction – which can be challenging.

“The delivery has to be different, too. Storytelling techniques that the Members have learned need to be tweaked because dramatic pauses can be held for a lot longer in real life, whilst comic timing is affected because there is no laughter at the points you have built for.”

THEY NEED HELP MORE THAN EVER

Josh Boggi (right) is one Member who had delivered a number of successful live MGR sessions before lockdown and who has adapted his story for the online resource.

“It took a bit of getting used to but I’m really pleased with the result and it is great that MGR is still getting into schools,” says the 33-year-old former Royal Engineer who stepped on an IED in Afghanistan on New



Blesma Member Mat Armitage introduces the videos and has recorded his own story

Year’s Eve 2010, two months into his third tour of duty. He lost both his legs and had to have part of his right arm amputated. At the age of just 23, Josh initially faced a battle for survival before having to work hard to rebuild his life.

“When lockdown was announced I had just arranged to do more talks in schools so I was gutted about that, but this is a great alternative,” he says. “The current situation must be really tough for a lot of teenagers – some would have been taking their exams now, so there is a lot of uncertainty.

“A lot of Blesma Members have been to hell and back before managing to put their lives back together. We have found that our stories can help pupils build their resilience. They need help now more than ever, and although we can’t physically get into schools, we hope our videos help. It’s just 20 minutes of our time but if it helps students deal with the pressures of this strange existence then it will have been well worthwhile,” says Josh, who is married with a nine-year-old son.

“It’s good that students are going to have access to this resource through what is proving to be a tough period. The main point I make is that if you need help, ask for it. Talk to your friends or your teachers. Our stories show that no matter what happens in life, you always get another choice. As long as you are resilient and you have the willpower, you can change your life.

“And as Members we get a lot from these sessions and from connecting with teenagers because we see it as something

positive coming out of a dark moment. It demonstrates that you can overcome adversities with resilience.”

The online resource has already been delivered to more than 28,000 young people aged from 11 to 18, and is also being offered to first responders to help them process the trauma of being on the front line when it comes to treating coronavirus.

“Making Generation R originally came from Members who wanted to give back. They were always being asked how they were injured, so we invested in teaching them to tell their stories with impact so that other people could benefit,” says Ian. “Our Members get a lot from being able to give back to society – it promotes self-esteem and the confidence to achieve.

“The Blesma approach is about leading independent and fulfilling lives, and our Members have approached this challenge in the same way they approach everything. There is a little bit of difficulty to overcome because we can’t go into schools, but they have adjusted and are all keen to continue helping others.

“Our Members are empowered by using their personal stories of how they overcame life-changing injuries and dark days. It helps with their recovery and feelings of value to society as well as helping young people cope with a range of stresses.”

For more on Making Generation R and the new digital resilience resource for schools and first responders, visit www.blesma.org/making-generation-r

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Josh Boggi sees MGR as “something positive coming out of a dark moment”





PAUL FINDLAY

As a Support Officer and below-knee amputee, Paul is perfectly placed to understand Members' needs in times such as this

The support Blesma has been able to offer its Members has changed dramatically because of lockdown. We've not been able to do home visits, but technology has allowed us to engage with Members and connect them to one another.

I spent the first few weeks with Outreach Officer Jess Linge trying to phone every Member in our area to identify who was high-risk and who felt vulnerable because of their medical situation, mobility, or lack of a support network. We also looked at how we could get those who didn't have access to technology connected in line with Blesma's Digital Inclusion Programme.

It's been very sad to hear how lockdown hasn't changed for some Members. One person told me he has been in training for lockdown for seven years! The only people he speaks to are Blesma, another charity, and a carer who comes once a day.

I've heard other stories from Members who are making the most of this time by doing DIY, taking up new hobbies, and volunteering. One Afghanistan veteran has been helping a Widow Member with her weekly food shop. Members are keeping one another's morale up, and also doing welfare checks on each other too, which is great.

I'm fortunate that I'm fit and don't need support. I know how difficult it can be for isolated people, so in the evenings and weekends, I've been volunteering in my local community.

I've been helping out with the Essex Welfare Service, delivering food and medicine, and doing home checks. I've also volunteered with Op RE:ACT – working closely with the NHS in hospitals, making phone calls, driving, and putting hospital beds together. On top of that, I'm a member of the local Round Table. Twice a week we collect food donations which we give to our local food banks.

I've also been working with Health Watch Essex, have become a Trustee for Haig Housing Trust and, with a friend, have set up the COVID-19 response Facebook page for my local area. It's brought a sense of community spirit.

My military career and Blesma experience have given me the knowledge, ability, and drive to help. In the military you learn how to plan and keep calm in a crisis. Blesma has given me the experience of working with vulnerable people. If you have that ability, why wouldn't you do something for the good?

“I AM IN NO DOUBT THAT, GOING FORWARD, WE WILL CARVE OUT A WAY TO SUPPORT OUR MEMBERS EVEN MORE THAN WE DID BEFORE”

The sooner we can get back to visiting Members the better; being able to support Members in their environment is what sets Blesma apart. I know all the Support Officers are itching to get out and see their Members. That's why we do the job.

Blesma has proven it can adapt to crisis and I'm in no doubt that, going forward, we will carve out a way we can support our Members even more effectively than we did before.

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Paul



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Veteran and Author of ‘You’ll Never Walk’

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