

“I HAVE A HEAVY HEART BUT I’M ALSO VERY PROUD”

SCOTT YARRINGTON TALKS ABOUT REMEMBRANCE, REHAB AND REBUILDING HIS LIFE AFTER DOUBLE AMPUTATION



Why was Headley groundbreaking?

Author and historian Emily Mayhew explains why the DMRC performed “genuine miracles” **p52**



What the future holds for Blesma

The Association has stayed strong in the face of Covid, so what can Members hope for in the new year? **p18**

“The programme saved my life”

A pain management course changed John Sutherland’s world. He explains how **p42**



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NEWS

News, views and opinion
from the world of Blesma



Words: Jessica Mackinnon

Blesma does Remembrance Day with a difference in 2020

THE ANNUAL COMMEMORATIONS AT THE CENOTAPH WERE PUT ON HOLD THIS YEAR DUE TO COVID, BUT THE ASSOCIATION MADE SURE THE MILITARY COMMUNITY WAS REMEMBERED

Remembrance Day is always a hugely important day in the Blesma calendar as Members, staff, supporters and volunteers take time to reflect on the sacrifices of those who have served their country.

Despite it not being possible to attend the parade at the Cenotaph this year because of the coronavirus pandemic, the Association still paused to pay its respects to members of the military community with its first-ever Remembrance 11K.

The event brought the Blesma community together (albeit remotely) in local parks and neighbourhoods across the UK on Remembrance Sunday as more than 200 Members, staff, and supporters joined together virtually to complete 11K in

remembrance of both the fallen and those who came home injured. The participants also managed to lay wreaths in more than 100 locations across the nation.

“Remembrance Day is an important time to pause and reflect on the sacrifices of all those who have served our nation,” said Blesma’s Chief Executive Jon Bryant. “Although we could not attend the Cenotaph or gather in groups this year, I am pleased that we were able to come together online and hold the 11K event to commemorate them.”

Those who took part walked, ran, cycled, and even used an indoor skiing machine to complete the distance. And though fundraising was never the primary aim

of the event, the 11K raised more than £21,000 to support the Association.

“We were delighted with how many people took part in our first Remembrance Day 11K and helped to raise more than £21,000 for the Association,” said Tony Bloomfield, who oversaw the event as Blesma’s Associate Director of Fundraising before stepping up to take on the role of Blesma’s Operations Director. “We had people taking part all across the country as well as in France and America. Serving military personnel got involved, as did Members of the Association, staff and, of course, our fantastic supporters.”

The event was streamed live from Blesma’s Chelmsford office on the



“I’ve never given up”

Stanley Morgan’s battle with Covid (p28)

Association’s YouTube and Facebook channels so participants could join a live warm-up session with a personal trainer and experience the pre-event build-up.

The stream, which shared the work of the Association in the words of Blesma Members, supporters and staff, reached more than 8,000 people. RAF veteran, Paralympian and TV presenter Sean Rose – who is also a Blesma Member – kindly donated his time and expertise to host the event, which culminated in the laying of a wreath by the Chief Executive for the two minutes’ silence.

Members and fundraisers shared their inspirational stories and spoke about the importance of Remembrance in pre-recorded interviews and self-recorded home videos. Nerys Pearce and Andy Jepson told how Blesma and its Activities Programme had helped them turn their lives around, for example, while Jessica Bomber, granddaughter of Member Arthur Bomber who passed away last Christmas, retold her grandfather’s story and explained how the family would be remembering him.

Turn to p32 to find out how other Members commemorated Remembrance Day during lockdown. Tony Bloomfield talks about his new role as Operations Director on p58

“THIS IS AN IMPORTANT TIME TO PAUSE AND REFLECT ON THE SACRIFICES OF ALL THOSE WHO HAVE SERVED OUR NATION”

Below: Blesma’s Finance and Support Director Boston Mwense took part in the 11K



welcome



Welcome to the Winter issue of the magazine. It is a real pleasure to reflect on stories, advice, fellowship and achievement from across the Association. In this issue, we take a look at how different Members commemorated Remembrance under lockdown,

we say a grateful goodbye and thank you to Heather Betts and Pete Shields – two of our longest-serving members of staff – and we welcome our new Operations Director Tony Bloomfield to his new role.

Emily Mayhew and Rupert Frere bring back memories of Headley Court, while Brian Chenier gives an update on the vital prosthetic work that has continued under lockdown. We offer our congratulations to Mark Ormrod and Paul Findlay on the award of their MBEs, and to Jody Jones for her sporting excellence award at the Soldiering On Awards.

You will not be surprised to hear of online fellowship, Covid-compliant activities, new fundraising initiatives, vital support to Members, and on-going work to help manage some of the painful consequences of limb loss in this issue.

As I write, we are hearing some very welcome news about the development of COVID-19 vaccines, as well as improvements in testing. We ought to allow ourselves some cautious optimism as we reflect on the challenges and achievements of 2020, and consider what 2021 might offer.

If you received the Members’ Survey in the last issue of the Blesma Bulletin please have your say and help us plan for the ‘new normal’. We have already seen some great suggestions – and there are sure to be many more out there.

Have a very happy Christmas.

Jon Bryant
Chief Executive





The group, set up by BSO Tom Hall (inset), has featured speakers like Dr Fergus Jepson

BSO sets up ‘valuable’ health discussion group

Healthcare professionals have been sharing their knowledge and experience with Members living in the Wales and West area in Zoom talks.

The Amputee Health Discussion Group, organised by BSO Tom Hall [inset], allows Members to meet and interact with a different health professional every fortnight, giving them the chance to share their stories of pain and resolution.

So far, guests have included Peter McCarthy, the manager of Swansea Limb Centre, and Dr Fergus Jepson [above] of Preston Disabled Services Centre. Guests have offered information and advice on a range of topics, from pain management and nutrition, to prosthetics and self-care.

As a fairly new amputee of two years, Mark Barton has found the group hugely beneficial. “I’ve been getting involved as much as I can to learn from other Members’ experiences and generally be better informed about amputation, prosthetics and pain,” said Mark.

“I’ve learned basic things, like how to cope with sweat in your socket to prevent blisters. You can meet people at activities, but it takes time to share problems. These groups have been specifically designed to start conversations about limb problems and allow Members to swap our personal advice on what works and what doesn’t.”

As well as gaining advice and information, some Members, like Steve Fisher, have been helping the group by sharing their own stories. “Some Members are learning what to do if and when they get pain, but I could write a book about suffering, mental health and alcohol abuse, so I’m choosing to join the group to pass on my experience,” said Steve, who suffered with neuromas for more than 16 years after amputation.

“The talk that Dr Jepson gave about pain and suffering was fantastic, and I was able to relate to everything he said. The group offers a fantastic opportunity for people to listen to other Members and professionals, and seek advice and information. Tom is doing a fantastic job with this Zoom activity.”

Tom Hall said: “The discussion group is really valuable. Some of our Members are really starting to get to know each other because of the initiative, and the sessions give everyone the chance to discuss things openly but confidentially. The hope is to bring in more specialists to give advice and talks on pain management and the treatments that are available, as well as other areas of health for amputees.”

If you would be interested in taking part in a future Amputee Health Discussion Group, contact Tom Hall on bsowest@blesma.org or on 020 8548 7098

PUTTING THE MBE IN BLESMA MEMBER

BLESMA MEMBERS PAUL FINDLAY and Mark Ormrod have been awarded MBEs in the Queen’s Birthday Honours.

Former Royal Marine Mark [main image] has been acknowledged for his service to the Royal Marines and veterans, while former Royal Signals Corporal Paul [inset] was celebrated for his charitable services.

Since being injured in 2009, Paul has dedicated much of his time to supporting charities, raising more than £700,000 for good causes. During the Covid pandemic, Paul stepped up his charitable work further still by volunteering with a number of Essex welfare services, as well as Op RE:ACT and his local Round Table.

“It was a real shock when the letter arrived,” said BSO and Blesma Member Paul. “My military career has given me the knowledge, ability, and drive to help, so it came naturally to use those skills to help my local community during the pandemic. I’m immensely proud of the MBE.”

Mark, meanwhile, has never stopped challenging himself since he was injured. He has taken part in numerous endurance events, he has written a book, and has grown a large social media following that allows him to engage with a wide variety



of people and challenge the idea that disability should define achievement.

When the list was officially published, triple amputee Mark told his 36,000-plus Instagram followers: “It’s been a hell of a ride so far and I feel confident now that I’m on the right track and helping to make a difference. Once A Marine, Always A Marine.”

Tim is training hard to tackle Snowdon in the Spring



Tim targets Mt Snowdon three years after setback

Double amputee Tim Tomkinson has set his sights on climbing Mount Snowdon after a bit of help from Blesma. Earlier this year, with the Limb Centres closed in the height of the Covid pandemic, Tim experienced difficulties with

his prosthetics that left him unable to walk. After a call to his Support Officer, the Association was able to provide Tim with a lightweight wheelchair.

Almost five months later, when Tim was finally seen by his local Limb Centre,

he was able to use his prosthetics once again. To thank the Association for its vital support, Tim is now planning to scale the highest mountain in Wales; a goal he set himself after he had to cut short a previous climb due to severe pain.

“It’s been my aim since 2017, but I’ve been hampered by 10 operations since then,” said the 49 year old, whose left leg was amputated in 2015, followed by his right leg in 2019. “During the first lockdown, I spent most of the time using the wheelchair, but after I was seen by Oxford Limb Centre, I started hiking the very next day.”

Since then, Tim has been putting in the hours, training hard for the attempt. He has been hiking across a range of terrain in Bradgate Park, Leicestershire, and using a hand cycle that was donated by a fellow Blesma Member.

“I have friends who are ex-military personnel and some who are mountain instructors, so they are helping me get fit enough to attempt the climb,” said Tim. “I’ve never walked on rough terrain with two prosthetics, so it’s hard on my legs, but they’ve had me scrambling over rocks and walking up steep hills. It’s been good for me. It feels good to get out of the house, and get some fresh air and exercise. I haven’t got a date for the challenge yet, but I’m hoping it will take place in the Spring.”



Words: Jessica Mackinnon

CHOCKS AWAY FOR SOUTH WEST PHOTOGRAPHY GROUP

In October, four members of the South West Photography Group – Darran Thompson, Stephen Walters, Grant Harvey and Neil Owen – got together for the first time since lockdown and, along with Outreach Officer Sarah Payne, photographed aircraft at the Cornwall Aviation Heritage Centre.

“When they found out we were ex-military, the staff allowed us to climb up to the cockpits and take photographs inside,” said Royal Navy veteran Darran Thompson, who helped form the group with Neil Owen. “It was absolutely fantastic to be together again. Everyone left the day feeling so much better because we actually got out and saw each other.”

Throughout lockdown, the group have been holding weekly competitions for who could take the best photograph, while Darran has hosted a photography tutorial on Zoom every Thursday.

GARDEN GRANTS FOR MEMBERS

BLESMA OFFERS A GARDENING grant of up to £300 a year, which can be applied for using the form that was inserted into the Winter issue of the Bulletin. The application, which must be submitted by 31 December 2020, needs to be accompanied by receipts or a signed statement from your gardener. Blesma is not, unfortunately, able to award grants to Members who have paid a relation to maintain their garden.



An application form was inserted into the latest Bulletin. You can also download it as a PDF from the Grants section of the website, call 020 8590 1124, or email grantsadmin@blesma.org

LONDON MARATHON GOES GLOBAL IN COVID PANDEMIC

THIS YEAR'S LONDON MARATHON went virtual because of the pandemic, with people across the globe lacing up their trainers on Sunday 04 October to complete 26.2 miles wherever they were.

Five fundraisers – Pradip Rai (below), Matthew Benge, Hannah Leach, Lana Smith, and Hayley Hammond – took part for Blesma, raising £9,770 for the Association.

“Despite being 7,000 miles from the UK, Blesma made me feel part of such a special team,” said Hayley Hammond, BFBS Radio’s principal programmer, who completed the event in Brunei, where she is based with 2 Royal Gurkha Rifles. “It was made even more poignant for me as current serving personnel ran with me at various points.”

For Blesma Member Pradip, 48, from Kent, this was his first marathon. “It was tough because the route was undulating, and I had to put up with a lot of rain and constant headwinds, but I had the support of my friends along much of the route,” said Prad. “I finished in just under six hours.”

Former Paratrooper Matthew Benge had planned to take part in the marathon for Blesma in 2018, but a close bereavement meant he didn’t run. He decided that 2020 would be the year in which he would make it up to everyone who had pledged money for his attempt two years previously.

“Having served on operations and having friends who have been injured, I know how vital Blesma is,” said Matthew. “Running was hard; it rained throughout, and for the last six miles I had cramp in both calves, but I kept my focus and pushed through, completing the route in three hours and 36 minutes.”



Prad took part in his first marathon



Ex-Commando Ross was a key part of Channel 4’s reality show *The Bridge*

Ross puts military skills to good use in TV show

An injured veteran who lost a leg in an IED blast in Afghanistan has starred in Channel 4’s new reality TV series *The Bridge*. Ross Austen joined 11 strangers as they attempted to build an 850-foot bridge in 20 days to reach an island where £100,000 was stored.

“All I knew about the show was that it was going to be a once-in-a-lifetime experience, that it would be some sort of challenge, and that it would take place in the wilderness,” said Ross, an ex-Commando with the Royal Engineers.

Arriving five days into the challenge, Ross was able to bring a wealth of military experience and knowledge to the team, who were already behind on the build. While his team mates struggled from lack of food and sleep, which caused tension within the group, Ross remained unfazed and kept himself out of the unfolding dramas.

“I’ve built a few bridges during my military career, so I knew it wasn’t going to be a problem for me. I was able to bring my skills as a team leader and working in a team to the challenge. The weather, the rations, the living conditions, and the fact

that we were grafting all day didn’t bother me.

“What did make it hard was being on my prosthetic leg all day – trekking through woods and over different terrain, and doing a job I haven’t done since I was injured. Just the day-to-day of

having a prosthetic leg was the challenge, not the bridge building.”

Ross narrowly missed out on being voted to win the money in the final episode.

“I went out there to challenge myself, and if I can inspire people to get on and do what they want to do then so be it. I think I achieved that. The money would have just been an added bonus,” he said.





Robert Maxwell has built a fishing retreat in Northern Ireland



Words: Jessica Mackinnon

Fishing retreat built to help veterans with their rehab

Former soldier Robert Maxwell (above), who lost an arm in a road accident in 2004, has opened a fishing retreat to help wounded, injured and sick veterans. He began transforming five acres of his father’s farm in Clough, Northern Ireland in 2016 with the help of fellow veterans.

“When we started the project, I had no concept of what it would cost or how long it would take,” said Robert. “Some 300 people have passed through here since the pandemic started, and every one of those veterans has really benefitted from the fishing lake,” he said.

As an injured veteran, Robert knows all about the importance of rehabilitation in

a veteran’s recovery, and believes fishing offers many benefits. “Blesma showed me what rehabilitation was and how it can be tailored for veterans,” said Robert. “When veterans come here they are encouraged to relax in a calm environment – and there’s the added excitement of catching a fish.

“We are always asking visitors what they would like to see more of. We are working on accessibility for everyone, while also creating different aspects to the facility, such as photography, art and allotments,” said Robert.

For more about the project, contact Rob on letsdovsc@gmail.com or 07902 121859

CHANNEL SWIM SCOOPS SPORTING EXCELLENCE AWARD

Blesma fundraiser Jody Jones, who was diagnosed with stage four bowel cancer before swimming the English Channel in aid of Blesma, has been presented with a Soldiering On award. Jody won the Sporting Excellence award, which is given to the person or team that has overcome challenges, inspired others, and demonstrated outstanding achievement in the field of sport. The virtual ceremony was hosted by *Coronation Street* star Antony Cotton.

“The swim was incredibly hard,” said Jody after the challenge. “In theory, I shouldn’t have made it across the Channel, but like Blesma’s beneficiaries, I’m quite resilient.” Jody swam 21 miles across the English Channel in 18 hours, 14 minutes and 30 seconds, raising more than £11,000 for Blesma.



THE RESILIENCE SESSIONS: SERIES TWO IS COMING

THE RESILIENCE SESSIONS PODCAST, which grew out of the Making Generation R programme and pairs injured veterans with public figures to discuss overcoming adversity, is launching a second series.

The new series is available to download now, and opened with broadcaster and author Emily Dean in discussion with Member Darren Swift.

“The Members taking part in the Making Generation R programme want to help others develop the sort of resilience they have had to,” said Chief Executive Jon Bryant. “A number of those Members have had the chance to discuss their stories with public figures in the podcasts. These well-known personalities have stories of their own, and the benefits of sharing these are huge.”

The new series also features Olympic athlete and TV broadcaster Kriss Akabusi MBE in conversation with Mat Armitage, former NASA astronaut and International Space Station Commander Steve Swanson talking with Jack Cummings, singer and comedienne Judith Owen with Stephen van Niekirk, former SAS leader Billy Bingham talking about self belief and endurance with Alex Krol, and fire chief and author Sabrina Cohen-Hatton discussing identity and homelessness with Josh Boggi.

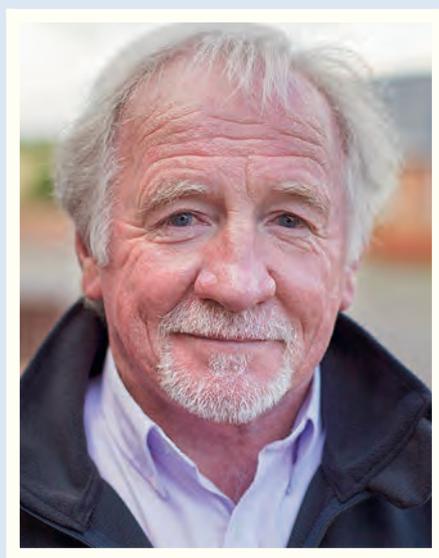
The Resilience Sessions podcast series is available to download now



Photograph: Hilde Hagerman

In the spotlight

Pete Shields



Stalwart Blesma Support Officer Pete Shields could write a book about his time at the Association, and it would be full of warm memories, tough battles, and triumphs for Members. He's been on the front line of Blesma's welfare efforts in the North East and Scotland for the last 15 years, serving his 'flock' of 300 Members and Widows with enthusiasm, humour and grit.

"It's been an honour," says Pete, who retired from the role at the end of November. "I will miss the Members, my colleagues, and being part of this great organisation, but I've loved every minute of my time here. For me, there's no greater pleasure than being able to assist someone who thinks that there's no assistance for them; to advocate on their behalf when they feel all is lost is one of Blesma's great strengths.

"We've successfully navigated our way through many encounters with statutory services, and represented Members at tribunals when they didn't think they stood a chance. To get a result for them gives you a great feeling. It gets them extra support or financial assistance, which can improve their quality of life no end. I think Blesma is like the military in that it adapts to circumstances and deals with them."

“

A LOT HAS CHANGED, BUT I LIKE TO THINK THAT OUR DEDICATION TO THE MEMBERS REMAINS A CONSTANT, AND WILL ALWAYS BE SO

”

I'LL LOOK BACK AND SMILE FOR YEARS

Pete's casebook has been full of complex claims and regulatory challenges for the last 15 years, but it has also been a place for humanity and enduring friendships.

"Helping the Members has been a great job, and meeting them and getting to know them and their families has been a real privilege," says Pete, who retired from the Army as a Lieutenant Colonel in the Royal Logistic Corps after a decorated 37-year career.

"I've got so many fun and warm memories of events. There's an amazing camaraderie in everything Blesma does, and I'll look back and smile about things for years."

Pete joined the Royal Corps of Transport Army Reserves in 1968 before transitioning to the Regular Army in 1971. His service took him on tours of Northern Ireland, the Balkans, and the first Gulf War, where he was awarded the Queen's Gallantry Medal for his actions guiding troops to safety when

a munitions dump blew up. He served as a lay magistrate on the Children's Panel in Scotland, and was awarded an MBE in 1995 for his work with social services. He left the Army in 2005 and, after a brief stint as CEO of the Yorkshire and Humber Cadet Force, heard of the Blesma post at the last minute. He raced from his home in Lincolnshire to make the interview panel in Essex.

"I got there just in time and was fortunate enough to get the job. A lot has changed since then, and the Association has grown, but I like to think that our dedication to the Members has remained a constant, and will always be so," he adds. "My motivation has always been clear: during my service I've deployed to Bosnia, Kosovo, and the Gulf, and completed four tours of Northern Ireland way back in the difficult days. Coming through something like that spurs you on to help people who have suffered more than you have.

"In the Forces, you're part of a team and you always want to help people in your team. I think Blesma is an extension of that ethos. I see the membership as my team; they are affectionately called our 'flocks', and the togetherness that Blesma provides is something unique."

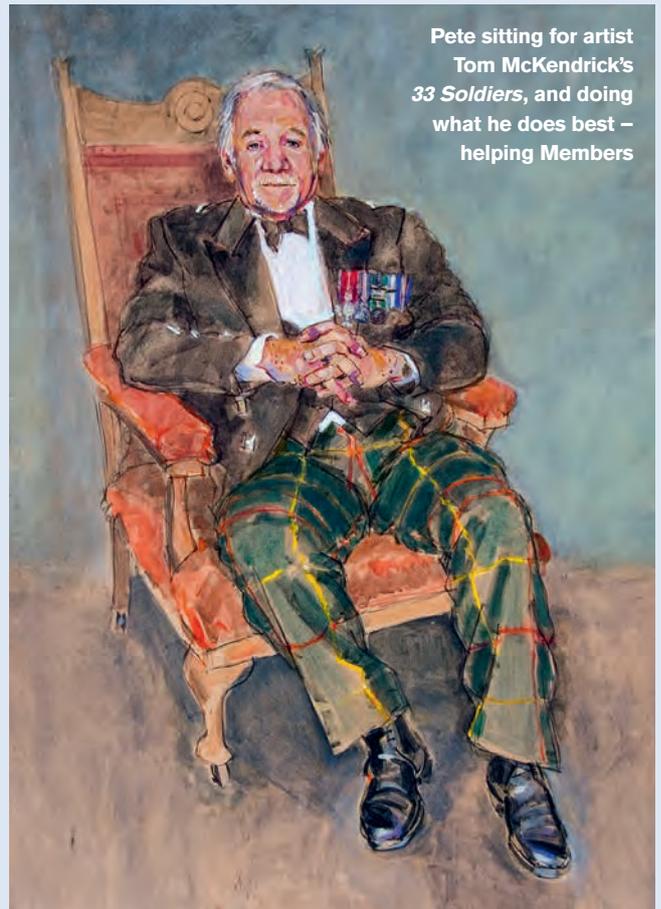
A LIFE OF PASSION AND COMMITMENT

Pete has helped Members secure a range of support over the years, and was instrumental in establishing a membership database which enables Blesma to have a greater awareness of Members' individual needs.

His retirement may reduce his workload but Pete is unlikely to slow down too much. His family designs, manufactures and sells ceramics to the retail and wholesale sectors, and his interests include clay pigeon shooting, weight training, boxing, IT and DIY.

"I wasn't ready to retire from Blesma when I got to 65," he says. "I'm still not really ready to retire at 70, but you have to stop sometime otherwise you don't allow fresh blood to come through, and there's nothing better than reinvigorating a system with fresh ideas.

"The passion and commitment from my successor will be just as strong. The Members won't notice any difference and Blesma, of course, won't miss a beat. I will miss everything about the job, but I'm thankful to have served the Association and its Members."



Pete sitting for artist Tom McKendrick's *33 Soldiers*, and doing what he does best – helping Members

↘ BLESMA BRIEFING

Limb loss in a time of Covid

BSO (Prosthetics) Brian Chenier looks back on a year that has impacted negatively on all our lives, and looks ahead to what the new year will bring



WORKING TOGETHER

Winter is here and, as the darker nights settle in, it is a timely opportunity to reflect on the year. COVID-19 has impacted negatively on so many aspects of our daily lives, making the year challenging for everyone. Members have often had to draw on every ounce of their resilience to cope with the impact of the pandemic, and their fortitude has been immense.

I would like to highlight the work of the NHS Limb Service and broader NHS Services, and thank the staff who have continued to deliver support during extremely challenging times. Their dedication is inspirational.

I would also like to draw attention to those who have supported Blesma Members and the wider limb loss community over the last nine months. We know from Members' feedback that, wherever possible, those most in need have been supported – often in very difficult circumstances. Innovative ways of working have been adopted and, as we continue to live and work in uncertain times, the commitment of those who care for us is unwavering.

As a result of lockdown, many organisations began to look for safe ways to continue their work and connect with each other. This has provided an opportunity for several charities that support people living with limb loss to collaborate by sharing ideas and information via video conferencing calls. Blesma has joined with The Limbless Association, Steel Bones, The Douglas Bader Foundation, Finding Your Feet and LimbPower on regular monthly video calls hosted by Steel Bones. These have allowed us to better understand what each organisation does and who it supports. It has also been a chance for us to simply catch up and check in on each other, which has been welcome.

This informal group has started to work together, sharing access to online events and information where appropriate. This allows us to make sure we are all able to issue the same information where joint messaging is needed.

Many of the problems faced by people living with limb loss are not unique to a particular group – such as veterans or young people. A unified voice may have wider impact. However, where unique issues exist for our membership, we will continue to take the lead.

PHANTOM LIMB PAIN STUDY

Phantom Limb Pain is, unfortunately, something that almost all amputees will experience at some point. For some, it can be incredibly debilitating. Blesma is a co-applicant on a new research study into possible treatment for Phantom Limb Pain that will begin next year. The study will be led by Guy's & St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust Pain Research Department, under the chief investigator Dr Adnan Al-Kaisy. This will be the largest study of neuromodulation in Phantom Limb Pain, and the aim is to recruit 100 patients over two years across six sites in the UK from April 2021.

One treatment that can help with Phantom Limb Pain is the electrical stimulation of nerves to block abnormal pain signals. This is done by inserting small wires into the spine and connecting them to a battery under the skin. The wires deliver an electrical field over the spinal nerves that stop pain signals from reaching the brain. There are two places in the spine where the wires can be situated; the main body of nerves (called the spinal cord), and the entrance of nerves from the limbs to the spinal cord (called the dorsal root ganglion).

The study aims to see if Phantom Limb Pain can be treated using a combination of electrical stimulation



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Photographs: Roddy Mackay, Andy Bate

at the spinal cord and dorsal root ganglion. The researchers want to compare the treatment against a placebo electrode that will be placed under the skin away from any nerve tissue. The patients will receive both implants, but only one will be activated. The stimulation uses a special waveform called burst that is not felt by the patients, so they cannot tell which group they are in. After six months, they will be able to switch groups if they have not experienced pain relief.

The outcomes will be measured at one, three, six, and 12-month intervals, with a focus on pain, medication usage, disability, use of prosthetic limbs, emotional wellbeing, general daily activity, health-related quality of life, and healthcare resources. The results will hopefully change how Phantom Limb Pain is managed, and so will be shared with local and national NHS commissioners, patient groups and guideline makers such as NICE, as well as being published in various medical journals and literature.

The research team will also use medical conferences, patient groups, charities, and social media to further spread the findings. Watch this space for further information.

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

A new study into Phantom Limb Pain is due to begin in April 2021

BRIAN'S FAQs

BSO (Prosthetics) Brian Chenier answers a number of your questions about prosthetics

What does Service-attributable amputation mean?
Amputation is classed as Service-attributable if it was the result of military service. Examples include blast injuries on operations, accidents during military training or exercise, or any other incident whilst 'on duty' that results in an amputation. The amputation may occur at the time of the incident/accident or some time after, perhaps following years of surgical procedures. Proof that amputation is Service-attributable can come in a War Pension or Armed Forces Compensation Scheme (AFCS) award where the amputation is specifically listed as an accepted disability.

What is a non Service-attributable amputation?
An amputation that is the result of an incident or illness that is not caused by military service. Examples include injuries sustained whilst on leave or 'off duty', or as a result of illnesses such as diabetes or vascular disease. If you are in any doubt whether your amputation might have been caused by your military service, you should discuss this with your Blesma Support Officer.

Why is it important to know the difference?
Following the report by Dr Andrew Murrison in 2011/12 the UK Government made special arrangements to support prosthetic provision to military personnel who had amputations caused by their military service. This included access to additional support and, where necessary, additional funding through their NHS Services for enhanced prosthetics based on clinical need. Although the mechanism for funding is devolved across the UK, the principle is the same. To access the funding, the NHS clinicians must first establish and prove that the patient has a Service-attributable amputation. This is done by production of the relevant War Pension or AFCS Award notice.



Does my prosthetic require regular maintenance and servicing, and how do I make sure it happens?
Your Limb Centre should make sure that you are aware of any maintenance or servicing requirements for any prosthetics you have. This is particularly important for prosthetics such as microprocessor-controlled knees. If you have not attended your Limb Centre for more than a year, you should make contact with the centre to enquire whether your prosthesis requires any maintenance as this could affect any warranties.



CYCLE CHALLENGE GOES LIKE A DREAM FOR HENRY DEAMER

A SEVEN-YEAR-OLD BOY HAS CYCLED 232km to raise money for Blesma. Henry Deamer from Stoke-on-Trent pedalled up to 10km every day throughout August with his mum, Ammy, as his support rider.

Henry challenged himself to break the 200km barrier after seeing a school friend complete a charity fundraiser in his garden.

“Henry comes from an Army family,” explained Martin, Henry’s father. “I served in the Adjutant General’s Corps for 22 years, Henry’s grandad completed 35 years in the military, his great grandfather served in both World Wars, and his great great grandfather was killed in WWI.”

Martin has seen first-hand how the support the Association offers has helped friends Denzil Connick and Rob Copsey.

Despite a few falls along the way, Henry cycled through his 200km target a week earlier than expected, clocking



up 22 hours and 22 minutes on his bike. He enjoyed the challenge so much that he decided to carry on until the end of the month.

“Lockdown provided Henry with the perfect opportunity to do something for other people,” said Martin. “He really enjoyed the challenge, and we didn’t once have to push him to get on with it. He realised that there was an objective to it, that he had made a promise, and that people had started donating money.”

You can still support Henry and his epic cycle challenge. Please visit <https://www.justgiving.com/fundraising/martin-deamer1> to donate

Lionel spends a whole month gaming for Blesma

Lionel O’Connor has completed a 30-day charity gaming live-stream in aid of Blesma and Mission Motorsport. Starting on 05 October, gaming fanatic Lionel live-streamed for 12 hours every day for a month, raising £272 for the causes.

“I love gaming, but this was a challenge,” said the 35 year old, who lost his left leg above the knee in Iraq in 2006. “I started to suffer from headaches during the first week from being in front of my computer for 12 hours a day, and family life took a bit of a hit! But the kids joined me for an hour-and-a-half a day, as did my Support Officer’s son. I had family and friends join in, too.

“I game a lot and thought this would be an easy way for me to fundraise, but I was mistaken,” said Lionel. “I wanted to see how the first week went before I let anyone know about the challenge, which meant the viewer numbers were low. I’d also chosen to game from 6pm to 6am because of my young family, but that meant fewer people were online. I could have done things differently but still really enjoyed it!”

Lionel joined Members and fundraisers on 21 November for the Association’s inaugural 24-hour Gameathon. Turn to p17 to find out more about the event

FORT TRIP HELPS MEMBERS RECONNECT

A small group of Members and their partners were treated to a trip to Weymouth’s stunning historic sea fort in September.

The outing to Nothe Fort, arranged by South West Outreach Officer Sarah Payne, gave Members in her area who had not been active online during lockdown the chance to reconnect with fellow Members.

“The six of us who attended had a great visit, and the weather was ideal to sit and have refreshments at the end of our tour,” said Peter Mckernan, 63, from Weymouth, who attended the trip. “The fort has many links with military groups locally, nationally, and internationally. If asked if I would put this on my list of attractions to visit again, the answer would definitely be yes. Thank you Blesma and Sarah for arranging the visit!”





“Kevin told me Blesma would be able to help with a ramp. Now it’s so easy to get out there with my electric buggy and take the dog for a walk. It’s given me my freedom back. I’m so pleased.”

After three months of waiting, Brian was finally seen by the prosthetics department at Colchester General Hospital at the end of July, and received his prosthetic leg in August. He has now started the process of learning to walk again, and has hired a personal trainer to help.

“I was quite confident after the initial walk. I had a ‘You can’t stop me. Don’t worry about giving me sticks’ attitude, but I’ve learned quite quickly that the journey isn’t going to be easy. I’m suffering a lot with blisters and wounds from the socket, so I need to take it slowly. I’m progressing well, but I won’t be doing John O’Groats to Land’s End any time soon!”

Now that he is walking with the aid of just one stick, Brian is content with his decision to have had an amputation, and credits his Army career for his positive attitude to recovery. He has already been helping new amputees in the hospital think more positively about their amputations.

Brian’s positivity boosted following Blesma support

A wheelchair access ramp part-funded by Blesma is helping a new amputee live independently once again.

Brian McGuffie, who served in the King’s Own Scottish Borderers, found himself confined to his house during lockdown after his left leg was amputated below the knee in April. Limb Centres were temporarily closed because of the COVID-19 pandemic,

so the process of Brian getting a prosthetic limb fitted was put on hold. Confined to his home, Brian turned to Blesma for help.

“I told my Support Officer, Kevin Long, that I couldn’t get in or out of my house because of our steps,” said 52-year-old Brian, who began experiencing excruciating pain in his left leg in August 2018 due to artery failure in his foot and ankle.

NOVICE KAYAKER NERYS COMPLETES TRIPLE CHALLENGE

Nerys Pearce will have to wait until 2021 to attempt to realise her goal of becoming the first person paralysed from the chest down to swim the English Channel.

“I got hypothermia nine hours into my Channel swim in October, and although I’ll be back next year, failing to complete my challenge didn’t sit well with me,” said the 39-year-old former combat medic.

The swim was the last event in Nerys’ Triple Endurance Challenge, which had already seen her complete 105 continuous miles using her wheelchair and hand cycle 100 miles around the Berkshire hills.

After having to abandon the swim, she decided she wanted to try something new. “A friend told me about kayaking, and



it only took 40 minutes for me to decide that I should kayak around some of the UK’s most famous lakes,” said Nerys.

So for her final challenge, Nerys and Abbi Wilkins (Blesma’s Corporate Partnerships

Officer) kayaked a combined 150km around Loch Lomond in Scotland, Lake Windermere in England, and Lake Bala in Wales from 16-18 October, completing the challenge in 78 hours and 43 minutes.

LETTERS

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

MCINDOE'S MAGIC LIVES ON IN TRUST

His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh was the hands-on and encouraging President of the Guinea Pig Club charity, which was founded in 1940 by Battle of Britain pilots who sustained severe burns while flying in World War II.

Their burns were often the result of extreme temperatures produced when high winds in crashing planes fanned high-octane fuel flames. These air crew, and their 800-some successors throughout WWII, were selected for treatment by Sir Archibald McIndoe and his innovative team at the Queen Victoria Hospital in East Grinstead.

Sir Archibald rebuilt them physically and gave them the confidence to rebuild their lives. Out of necessity, he had to develop new surgical techniques and novel approaches which, in turn, revolutionised plastic surgery. These men, on whom these tools and techniques were tried, tested and improved, called themselves 'guinea pigs'

They cheerfully continued to return to the hospital for remedial operations and check-ups for many years to follow. (The original



Guinea Pig Club Chairman Sam Gallop

McIndoe operating table can now be seen at the East Grinstead Museum, which is a valuable research centre.)

Looking ahead, and before they closed the charity's hangar doors, the Guinea Pigs set aside residual funds to create the McIndoe Guinea Pigs Memorial Trust. (They also made significant donations to the Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund.)

With this heritage, the McIndoe Guinea Pigs Memorial Trust funds medical research

in Britain into reconstructive surgery following personal injury. For several years it has supported work based at the Queen Victoria Hospital in East Grinstead, where the Guinea Pigs were originally treated.

The Trust is now funding a Royal College of Surgeons research project for the very first time. The project will investigate the immune response to transplanted skin in burn injury which can have a huge impact on scar outcomes and quality of life.

The work will be carried out by Daisy Ryan, a surgeon who is setting out on a research career. She will be working at the Department of Burns and Plastic Surgery at Stoke Mandeville Hospital, and with the Transplantation Research & Immunology Group at the Nuffield Department of Surgical Sciences, in the John Radcliffe Hospital, Oxford.

Daisy's grandfather was a Pathfinder pilot in WWII who flew on operations after sustaining burns on a training flight. Her father, meanwhile, is a serving Royal Air Force pilot. The Memorial Trust is very much looking forward to a long-term partnership with the Royal College of Surgeons.

Sam Gallop CBE

Those who have passed away

May they rest in peace.

BEARD AE	KRRC	HQ	10/2020
BENNETT B	DORSET REGT	HQ	14/10/2020
BERRY R	RN	HQ	NOT KNOWN
BETTS L	RN	HQ	13/11/2020
BURNETT H	RN	HQ	29/08/20
CLACHERS GK	RN	HQ	18/09/20
COOPER G	RAF	HQ	NOT KNOWN
COWARD MAV	R DRAGOONS	HQ	25/09/20
CRABB R	RAF	HQ	19/10/2020
DAVIES B	RAF	HQ	NOT KNOWN
FLANAGAN TJ	RN	HQ	29/10/2020
LEE L	RAOC	HQ	NOT KNOWN
LONG AH	RN	HQ	14/09/20
LOVEDAY LK	PIONEERS	HQ	14/09/20
MCIVER P	REME	HQ	30/08/20
MOLLISON JW	RE	HQ	12/10/2020
OGDEN T	R SIGNALS	HQ	27/10/2020
REYNOLDS EM	RM	HQ	4/11/2020
SWAN RG	KOSB	HQ	JULY 2020
THOMAS DR	RAMC	HQ	12/10/2020
WAREHAM JE	RAC	HQ	11/09/20
WATERMAN JR	SAS	HQ	01/09/2020



Colin Wilson takes part in the Dorset Fishing Competition

Fishing competition is “a great way to unwind”

Fishing could well be the perfect Covid pastime. The socially distanced outdoor activity ticks all the safety boxes, which is why the Dorset Fishing Competition, held in October, was one of only a handful of face-to-socially-distanced-face activities that Blesma has been able to host all year.

“Most fishing spots are in the countryside, surrounded by trees and lots of wildlife,” said Roger Fullbrook who organised (and won) this year’s competition. “Fishing is very calming; your mind can wander off and then, all of a sudden, you get a bite and your heart rate goes up!”

This year five Members – Grant Harvey, Colin Wilson, Terry Brooks, Andy Derry, and Roger – battled it out in the Dorset competition as the Association adhered to the government’s ‘Rule of Six’.

“We fished at Revels Fishery, who let us fish the lake for nothing again this year, while Tesco in Dorchester supplied us with

a free lunch,” said Roger. “The day was dry and bright – not ideal for catching fish, but good for us because the wind had razor blades in it! We started at 10am and fished through until 4pm – it was hard fishing but everyone caught something. I got a bit lucky because, with just a few hours to go, I hadn’t caught a thing!”

Members of Roger’s local angling club were on hand to help Blesma’s Members carry their gear into position on match day. “They were happy to stick around to help our guys with a bit of tuition – where to cast to, what bait to use, that sort of thing,” said Roger, who lost his left leg below the knee following a shooting accident in the early 90s. “Fishing helps a lot of Members; there’s always lots of banter and a fair amount of trash talking, but when we get together we also check how each other is doing and share a lot of useful information. It’s a great way to unwind!”

GARDEN GIVEN A NEW LEASE OF LIFE

INJURED VETERAN LEIGH WILBURN’S garden was given a Blesma makeover this summer, allowing him and his family some quality time outdoors during lockdown.

“Before the makeover, the garden was awful,” said Leigh, who served in the Royal Armoured Corps for seven years. “There was no grass and the kids couldn’t play outside because of the mess. I started to get stressed seeing how bad it was.”

A call from Blesma Welfare Rep Helen Cullen in April set the ball rolling, and by June the garden was finally re-turfed. Leigh and his children have since been able to enjoy a summer full of outdoor activities from trampolining to football to playing in a paddling pool.



NEWS BRIEFS

BLESMA MEMBERS TEAM UP FOR 24-HOUR GAMEATHON

Injured veterans Lionel O’Connor, Nik Eley, Daniel Bingley and Jack Cummings joined forces for a 24-hour gaming fundraiser in November. Nik, Daniel and Jack launched the event with a game of *Call of Duty* before players took turns to live-stream their gameplay over the next 24 hours.

Blesma Member Daniel was instrumental in helping the Association organise its first gaming event. “Gaming is a new venture for Blesma so we all wanted it to succeed, but we also wanted to make Members aware that there is an opportunity for them to game through Blesma and to encourage them to join the community,” said the 36 year old, who found gaming beneficial to his recovery when he was medically discharged in 2017 after a knee injury led to the loss of use of his left leg.

You can join the Game On For Blesma Discord channel at www.blesma.org/support-us/game-on-for-blesma



COUPLES WEEKEND OFFERS A WELL-DESERVED BREAK

Steven Rigby and his partner Ann Fletcher, along with Liam Thompson and his partner Elizabeth Falconer, took part in Blesma’s Couples Weekend in October which was switched from London to Warwickshire at short notice because of the Covid tiers.

“Blesma gave us the opportunity to get away that I desperately needed,” said Steven. “I really enjoyed being away from home for a few days and just chilling out.”

The couples spent two days in a spa hotel where they enjoyed the gardens, spa treatments, and evenings around a log fire.

“We were able to have a nice chat with Liam and Elizabeth, sharing our story and listening to theirs. We had a great couple of days,” said Steven.

Liam, 32, from Worcester agreed: “Malloy Court was a really nice retreat. The food and service were excellent, and the time in the spa was well-needed!”

2020 A YEAR IN REVIEW

FOR THE LAST NINE MONTHS, THE SHOCK WAVES OF COVID-19 HAVE IMPACTED SEVERELY ON ALL OUR LIVES. BLESMA IS CERTAINLY NO EXCEPTION, BUT CAREFUL PLANNING, A FOCUS ON SAFETY, AND A DESIRE TO PULL TOGETHER AND LOOK AFTER EACH OTHER HAVE HELPED THE ASSOCIATION STAY STRONG IN 2020

This year has been like no other for Blesma. For a charity that relies on person-to-person contact and group activities, COVID-19 has posed a unique challenge. But the staff and Members have risen to it – and Chief Executive Jon Bryant (right) is extremely proud.

“We have adapted very well,” says Jon. “When the pandemic started, we moved very quickly at head office, sent staff home, and have kept our processes under review. Touch wood, we’ve kept a safe environment. A few staff have been able to work from the office in line with government guidelines, but the majority don’t.

“Out in the field, meanwhile, we’re still delivering. The BSOs and Outreach Officers quickly got in touch with Members, and prioritised those who needed help the most. We switched from visiting Members face-to-face to making contact online, and our support teams spent a lot of time on the phone. They also worked hard to bring Members together so they were able to support each other, and that is fundamental to what Blesma does. We have enabled that, rather than directed it.”

The ever-evolving lockdown rules, which have changed throughout the year and through different regions,



have also brought many challenges. “We established that, under the rules, it was still possible to visit some Members if we absolutely had to, with the right precautions,” says Jon. “We gave the BSOs the power to decide what was appropriate, to make that judgement. It has been very complicated, because our Members are spread across four devolved nations, with different rules in each country. We couldn’t make sweeping decisions, instead they had

to be regional. The delegated model has worked well.”

The Activities Programme has been the most obvious victim of the lockdown. “Obviously, the programme has been seriously curtailed,” says Jon. “It would have been irresponsible to try to keep it going in its original form, so we had to adapt. By doing that, we’ve learned a lot. For example – and this might seem obvious – we’ve learned that if you take activities online, you can open them up to more Members, no matter where they live.

“I’m very proud of how the Activities Team have responded. They managed to rearrange some activities that were affected by local lockdowns, and have kept them running as well as possible. Initiatives like the breath workshop run by Emily Hightower in America,

Clockwise: BSO Paul Findlay spends quality time with his family, MGR has gone online in 2020, Jack Cummings leads a fundraising campaign, and Fiona Morrison (as with all Outreach Officers) has had to change her plans for much of this year



and the programme linking our veterans up with those in the Royal Hospital Chelsea, have been very successful and beneficial to our Members. So some initiatives will keep going, even after COVID-19 is over. Of course, though, we want to get back to organising national and local activities after the pandemic. We have to maintain those bonds.”

Jon, whose first day at Blesma coincided with the first day of the national lockdown, has had some adjusting to do on a personal level, too. “Nine months in, it’s certainly been interesting – extraordinary really,” he says. “Like so many others, we’ve been shielding at home, and so I have been doing risk management at work all day, then coming home and doing the same for the family. It’s certainly been strange.

“But I do feel settled at Blesma, despite the fact that I’ve not been able to get out among the Members, as was my initial hope. What I’ve found is that there is a great team in place, and we’ve got real strength in depth.

“Over the year, I’ve had to say: ‘There’s been a change; we need to do more of this and less of that,’ or: ‘We’ve got a gap in our structure, and everyone is going to have to compensate,’ and it has worked. I’ve been allowed to settle in by a strong team. It’s still very much a learning game, but I’m learning quickly from people who are willing to help me.”

MEETING MEMBERS IN PERSON

Jon has managed to attend one event in his first year at the helm. “I went to the golf day after lockdown was relaxed, and I did enjoy it. It was Covid-secure, and we delivered the event really well. I finally got to talk to Members face-to-face about the Association, what they want from it, what they’re interested in... that was a real moment. Apart from that, I try to interact online as much as possible. Enquires and reports come in, and I reach out when I can, but it’s not been possible to walk into a big room full of Members yet.”

While Jon admits the main focus this year has been on “dealing with the immediate”, Blesma’s long-term future is also always under consideration. “We still have to look to the future, free ourselves from the day-to-day, and say: ‘OK, where might we be in three or five years’ time?’” he says. “So we are looking at the membership, how our numbers are likely to change, and if we are getting the right support to where it’s most needed.

“And we take seriously the possibility that the UK might embark on military operations at some point in the future, which could increase membership.

“We also talk to other Service charities about our sector, and we are very aware of organisations and departments like the Office of Veterans’ Affairs that have initiatives that we might seek to influence. We’re watching the Overseas Operation Bill, which aims to protect veterans from difficult legal experiences, develop with interest. Then there’s the proposal to take the Armed Forces Covenant into law, where we provide an opinion.

“We’re also looking at what is happening to the NHS Prosthetics Service during the pandemic.

FOUR OF THE BEST BITS FROM A YEAR IN LOCKDOWN

BLESMA CONNECTS

The Association’s bespoke app launched at the start of the year to keep Members up to date with everything Blesma.

DIGITAL INCLUSION PROGRAMME

Blesma is helping Members stay connected with advice on getting online, finding the right equipment, or learning to use it.

REMEMBRANCE

The Association paused to pay its respects to the military community with its first-ever Remembrance 11K this year.

MAKING GENERATION R

Members have produced films of their talks for use online. So far, the digital talks have reached more than 28,000 pupils.

The Blesma golf day gave Jon the chance to meet Members



“At Blesma, we look out for each other. We’re still here for our Members and will continue to be as we fight our way out of the pandemic”

COVID-19 is creating a backlog, and we will need to prioritise how we deal with that. Overall though, I feel that our plans are standing the test of time.”

For now, the Association will continue to plan, both short and long term, with the Covid situation in mind. “We continue to book activities in, and the idea is that we’ll keep them on the stocks until a time comes when we have to decide to go ahead or not,” says Jon. “We need to consider the financial implications of this, and our ability to let people know early enough, if



“It is about the Members having confidence that we will support them and help them resolve challenges so they can regain and retain their independence”

**HEATHER BETTS,
DIRECTOR INDEPENDENCE
AND WELLBEING**

we are forced to cancel events. But we'd rather keep planning and cancel if we have to, rather than cancel everything for months at a time. It's a balancing act, and we will keep talking to the Members, through our BSOs and Outreach Officers, about their needs.

“Fundraising has been challenging, too. The way we carry it out has had to change. A lot of the events in which people support us haven't gone ahead, and we can't fundraise locally. But again, we've moved to other types of fundraising – the Remembrance 11K, our first ever blended event, was a real success, for example.”

There are some things, however, that are definitely in the diary. “Making Generation R online training has started,” says Jon, “and the team have already run some sessions for NHS staff, as well as for the education sector, while the next series of the Resilience Session podcasts was released in early December.”

Overall, Jon remains optimistic. “At Blesma, we look out for each other. We've worked really hard to keep up our contact with the Members, communicating in different ways, organising activities where we can, providing support where it's needed, and keeping the fellowship strong. We're still here for our Members and will continue to be as we fight our way out of the pandemic and deal with the consequences.”

Former Royal Navy officer Heather Betts has been working in the military charity sector since 2005 and is set to step down from her role as Blesma's Director Independence and Wellbeing in January.



Heather's naval career began a short time before women were allowed to serve at sea with the Navy (her first posting was in HMS INVINCIBLE) and she went on to deploy all around the world, before spending more than 12 years with the Association.

“I've had a wonderful career and it's been fantastic working for Blesma,” says Heather. “It's humbling to do a job in which you feel you're making a difference. I have worked with a team of people across Blesma who care passionately and will never stop trying to do their best for the Members.”

Since Heather joined in 2008, when there were only five area welfare officers covering the UK supported by



Clockwise: Heather during her final appointment in HMS NEPTUNE in 2004, New Entry WRNS Training Officer in 1989, in HMS INVINCIBLE off Corfu

HEATHER'S BEST BITS OF BLESMA

- THE PEOPLE**
"Meeting Members and Widows, and working with such a fantastic team."
- EFFECTING CHANGE**
"Developing the team and introducing initiatives such as the Outreach Programme, Members' Weekend and a transformed Members' Bulletin."
- BLESMA'S EVOLUTION**
"Being part of Blesma's evolution which has enabled it to stay relevant to all Members."
- WORKING WITH PARTNERS**
"The way we work across the military charity sector and statutory services, with an emphasis on collaboration as we strive to achieve the best outcome for Members."
- FAMILIES RESEARCH PROJECTS**
"Securing funding for two Families Research Projects. The findings of one have been incorporated into Blesma's Strategic Plan and have influenced delivery of services."

three office staff, the Association has grown in its ability to help Members transition from military life, adapt to their injuries, and live independent lives.

Heather's team has now strengthened to 24, which includes nine Area Support Officers and 10 Outreach Officers. "One of my personal highlights has been to oversee the development of what initially was a very small team so that we are now able to deliver more specialist support," says Heather. "It was not without its challenges as Blesma had to adapt and modernise to deal with a new cohort of injured veterans. We've also streamlined processes and increased our capacity over that time as Members' needs have become more complex.

"More is being demanded of us all the time, but we are in a very good place to meet that demand. The Outreach Programme is really making a difference, and we are delivering vital support even under the constraints that we are living in with the pandemic, which is a real testament to Blesma."

A naval career was no certainty for Heather, who was in her first year of an applied science degree at Sheffield City Polytechnic when she visited the local Naval Recruiting Office and was awarded one of two bursaries for the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS) on passing her Admiralty Interview Board.

"I will always be proud of having been able to do my bit. It has been an absolute privilege to have worked for this amazing charity"

After graduating three years later, Heather completed initial training and served at the Royal Naval Air Station Portland, before completing a term at Dartmouth Royal Naval College – which was the training pattern for female officers at the time – before passing out as a Probationary Third Officer.

"I'd always been interested in joining the military; it must have been something to do with those old war films that were always on TV on Sundays because there's no military background in my family, other

than my father doing National Service,” she says. “Members of the WRNS were not allowed to go to sea until 1990. I volunteered as soon as I got the chance, and went to sea in HMS INVINCIBLE in 1993 as the Captain’s Secretary. I will never forget joining INVINCIBLE at anchor in Portsmouth Harbour and climbing up the side of the ship on a ladder to get on board. That was the start of an incredible two years.”

Women crew mustered less than 10 per cent of the ship’s 1,000-strong complement at the time. “I really enjoyed the professional challenge,” says Heather. “We completed two six-month deployments in the Adriatic as the ship’s Harrier jets enforced the no-fly zone over the Balkans. INVINCIBLE hosted the peace talks and there were tense moments, but the whole thing was an amazing experience.”

Heather’s career continued as she served in the Type 23 frigate HMS SUTHERLAND – on station as the Falkland Islands Guard Ship – before returning to INVINCIBLE as its Refit Officer in Rosyth, Scotland. She also held training and recruiting roles before retiring as a Lieutenant Commander in 2004.

READY FOR A NEW CHALLENGE

After service, Heather worked for a medical charity followed by a period as the General Secretary of the Royal British Legion Scotland before taking the role of Blesma’s National Welfare Officer in 2008.

“I was ready for a new challenge and Blesma suited my skill set, experience and personality,” says Heather, who now holds the position of Director Independence and Wellbeing. “It has been a real honour to have made a contribution, and to see the charity evolve and remain relevant. One of the biggest challenges during my time was to understand what a new generation of injured veterans – those who’d served in Iraq and Afghanistan – needed from us. We had to listen to them and help them meet the challenges of transitioning to Civvy Street with severe injury, as well as continuing to support older Members, including veterans from WWII.

“We have always had the Members at the heart of what we do, but we weren’t always good at talking about what we did or how we did it. We’ve had to become more proactive about communicating with supporters and partners.

“I think Blesma has built a very strong reputation. We have earned that by staff first delivering what they said they would deliver – and then going the extra mile. We have a solid structure that allows us to support Members with expert guidance on matters ranging from social care to benefits to prosthetics, across a huge range of needs. Just as importantly, we help them see there is life beyond injury and get them together with fellow Members. It is about them having the confidence that we will support them and help them resolve challenges so they regain and retain their independence.”

Heather has been at the heart of Blesma’s role in connecting Members to support and services. Her remit was expanded in 2017 and, as Director Independence and Wellbeing, she is responsible for all membership matters including liaison with MoD recovery services



Above: Heather chairs a working group at Members’ Weekend 2019, and (top) enjoying the 2019 Gala Dinner with colleagues

and the NHS, prosthetic provision, grant making, Blesma’s welfare service in the field, and the Outreach Programme. Lockdowns and restrictions have been tough for everyone, and Blesma has had to recalibrate its contact with Members, presenting a huge logistical challenge for Heather and her team.

“Our BSOs and Outreach Officers have been very proactive in contacting Members and Widows during this difficult time, with video and telephone calls replacing face-to-face visits,” she adds. “We adapted quickly, moved things online, and made sure people felt supported. I am proud of what we have been able to do during these times, but it was tough for our staff and I was conscious of the potential impact on them.”

Heather’s plans are to spend time with her husband Martin, who recently retired from his job in London and, after 30 years of ‘service’, she is looking forward to a more relaxed approach; getting out into the countryside and spending time following creative pursuits.

“I will miss Blesma immensely, but I plan to enjoy this time,” she says. “At some stage in the future, I hope they will have me back as a volunteer. I will always be proud of having been able to do my bit, and of what Blesma’s staff have achieved. It has been a privilege to work for this amazing charity.”

“Activities are a key part of Blesma and we will keep running as many as we can. This has been a year like no other, but the Blesma spirit is strong”

JESS MARCH, ACTIVITIES MANAGER

At the start of the year, Blesma’s celebrated activities calendar was bulging with events that would take Members around the world in 2020, and provide them with challenges, experiences and enduring friendships. And then, a few months later, the coronavirus pandemic struck.

The 65 activities that had been risk-assessed, detailed, and organised with precision suddenly unravelled as restrictions bit deep and logistics fizzed with uncertainties and rapidly-changing regulations.

For Activities Manager Jess March, the obstacles presented themselves thick and fast as her team kept pace with the rolling onslaught of Covid and tried to save or adapt as many events as they could.

“We were desperate to keep as much of the calendar as possible because we know how important the events are to Members and their families,” says Jess, who is based at Blesma’s office in Chelmsford. “But every time we tried to adapt arrangements, the rules and regulations changed. We were having to cancel event after event as the virus got worse. It was incredibly frustrating and disappointing, but Member safety always has to be of paramount importance.”



The team had managed to run a paddlesports event in Florida and three Winter sports trips – two in France and one in America – before the rest of the 2020 calendar was thrown into complete disarray.

As the team began to work through the communications confusion of the early days of the pandemic, they kept a close watch on government instructions and the responses from travel companies, airlines, hotels and partners to keep Members informed.

“At first, it wasn’t clear how long we might be locked down for but we started changing international events straight away,” says Jess. “We pushed back events and selection, and kept Members informed as a clearer picture began to emerge, and crucial aspects such as airline travel and hotel availability were impacted.”

“There was a huge amount of effort and planning involved as things changed quickly and we moved events to a virtual platform rather than sending Members around the world. The Outreach Officers were brilliant in organising local events and we have been adding more where we can – the only three physical activities that survived were a fishing event, a couples’ weekend, and a training camp for the Race Across America (RAAM) cycle challenge.”



Jess March
Activities Manager

Face-to-face events and activities were quickly replaced with online sessions covering everything from yoga to baking





Above: the golf day in July was one of the few face-to-face activities Blesma has been able to run this year

The virtual content has included everything from adaptive yoga and pilates, and a succession of fitness workshops – both standing and seated – to a five-week breath workshop for stress and anxiety, a crafting course, Christmas cake making, photography, and a catch-up for the RAAM participants.

The Blesma Connects app, meanwhile, has played a crucial role in keeping Members updated and helping local contacts sustain camaraderie – a vital ingredient of all Blesma activities – through the lockdowns.

Meanwhile, work on the 2021 schedule is continuing at pace, and although restrictions are likely for some time, the team plans to continue to grow opportunities for Members and their families. The number of events offered centrally has risen over the last five years from 25 in 2014 to 76 in 2019, which were enjoyed by 501 participants, with 91 per cent reporting a positive contribution to their wellbeing and confidence.

“That positive experience is what matters so much to all of us. It’s not just the event itself; it’s what Members take away from it and the fact they are around other Members,” adds Jess. “We want to create that in virtual events as well, and getting that social aspect – forging those relationships with other Members – is even more important in lockdown. The friendships that

“The friendships that Members make and the social groups that form to support each other in tough times are our priorities”

Members make and the social groups that they form to support each other in tough times are our priorities.”

The Activities Programme has grown in its ambition over recent years, with an increasing focus on Members being involved in choosing and structuring events and, in some cases, organising and leading initiatives.

“Organising an event is a huge task as it involves more than just picking a place and booking flights and accommodation; the logistics and safety considerations are often complex,” says Jess. “We want to extend events so that everyone can take advantage of them, and that means the activities we offer cover way more than the



big international trips. They range from hobbies to an element of rehabilitation to going away with your partner or a few other Members; there is so much more to activities than pure adrenaline and adventure.

“The selection process we use is rigorous and can be time-consuming. We want to make sure those who will benefit the most are selected, but we also have to deal with a drop-out rate that can reach 50% as health and other concerns mean some people cannot attend.

“We want to ensure that all aspects of an event have been accounted for. Members’ safety is our primary concern and then we want to provide an experience that will have a real impact on people’s lives.”

A DIFFERENT LOOK FOR 2021

The possibility of coronavirus having been brought under control by Spring is far from certain, so the Activities Programme for 2021 will look different from ‘normal’. Even with the introduction of a vaccine, it will take time before international travel is running smoothly, while safety assessments will take longer still.

“We’re probably going to have to make activities more UK based, particularly for the first half of next year,” says Jess. “There will probably be a focus on one-day events rather than taking people away for longer

periods of time, and I realise that some events are more likely to happen than others. We are looking at all possibilities and are proactive in seeking events.”

While an activities brochure is usually inserted into this issue of the magazine for the following year, that isn’t the case this time around as a very limited Activities Programme is expected for the first few months of 2021. A full range of activities and events will be posted on Blesma’s website, in the monthly emails, via the Blesma Connects app, and in the magazine and Bulletin at a later date, however.

“We are also running a survey to establish what events are appealing to Members under the current restrictions, and we will be guided by our Members and their comfort and confidence levels, so their input to the survey is vitally important,” adds Jess. “Activities are a key part of Blesma and we will keep planning them and running as many as we can. This has been a year like no other for all of us, but the Blesma spirit is very strong. We will run activities throughout next year and will return to normal service as soon as possible.”

The survey was inserted into the Winter issue of the Bulletin. You can return it by Freepost, or complete it online at www.blesma.org/survey by 01 January 2021

JESS’ TIPS TO KEEP UP TO DATE IN LOCKDOWN

TIME TO GET CONNECTED

Visit Blesma’s Facebook group or log on to the Blesma Connects app to discover new opportunities. You can also sign up to receive the Activities email newsletter at meo@blesma.org

TIME TO GET INVOLVED

Why not share your passion or hobby with others by suggesting it as a Member-led event via the app?

TIME TO BE HEARD

Complete the Members’ survey that was inserted into the Winter Bulletin to have your say on all things ‘activities’.

TIME TO TRY A NEW ACTIVITY

Sign up for one of the many virtual events and try something new.

**“
I’VE
NEVER
GIVEN UP
IN MY LIFE.
I AM A
GUNNER!
”**



WHEN BLESMA MEMBER STANLEY MORGAN WAS ADMITTED TO THE ROYAL SURREY HOSPITAL WITH SEVERE COVID SYMPTOMS, LEAD CHAPLAIN ADRIAN TEARE SPENT TIME WITH HIM. THIS IS HIS ACCOUNT OF STANLEY'S STORY

You can't see it," says Stanley, his eyes glistening with the heavy tears of a long life ebbing and flowing through each breath. "You can't see it," he says again, gripping my gloved hand, "but I'm travelling to Jill now!" The clock has long since struck 8pm and the clapping has finished. The wards are hushed on Stanley's last night in hospital, and his excitement can't be contained.

But it was not always this way. Some weeks earlier, the Senior Sister on duty in the Emergency Assessment Unit called through to Spiritual Care. She described a lovely man who had come into EAU and who was very sick. He was one of the many coming in suffering from coronavirus, and was asking to see a priest. He was Roman Catholic Christian, but as the building was in lockdown no-one from outside could come in. "I've explained it to him. He's called Stanley, and he says he just wants to see someone," said the Senior Sister. "Will you come?"

GASPING FOR AIR

It is a nervous time when you don Personal Protective Equipment. It takes time and concentration to layer up: first the gloves, then the gown, then more gloves, goggles and a hair net, all crowned with a visor. A little wiggle to check that everything is in place and I laugh with the nurse helping me. I am sure I am not alone in asking myself if this is the time I catch it too.

Stanley is in a C-Pap mask. He is gasping for air, wincing with the pain of breathing. Each breath is terrifying for him; full of pain and effort. This will continue for weeks. The month is April, the day is Tuesday, and the time is 1.00pm. As he breathes out, Stanley watches his chest lower, and then forces his lungs to re-inflate.

Walking into a COVID-19 ward is a disorientating experience. Already wrapped in layers, your goggles start to steam up and your visor is unclear. The standard visual metrics of height and breadth and length and depth are slowly disappearing

as I walk towards the bed. The C-Pap mask completes the disassociation of space and time with the whistling noise of the air, and words spoken fight in the oxygen flow and float around each other inside the mask.

Stanley does not have access to the internet. He does not have a mobile phone. It doesn't matter, however, because he does have something to say. He has a message for Jill, his wife of 59 years.

At his bedside, I make my introduction and a first apology. "Hello Stanley!" I say as cheerily as I can, "my name is Adrian and I am the Lead Chaplain. Sorry I cannot get a Roman Catholic in to see you today, I'm Church of England."

"That's ok," he pushes out. "I just want to see the Padre."

I ask Stanley whether he has been in the Armed Forces as he is asking for the Padre. "Yes I was," he says, his excitement growing.



He was a National Serviceman in days gone by. "I was in the Royal Artillery."

"Well Stanley," I reply, "that's very interesting because I am a Padre to the Royal Artillery in my spare time. Tell me what it is that I can do for you."

Stanley tells me his phone number, and I scribble it down. Now I am able to pass a message to Jill. Then he tells me Pat's number. Pat is his Blesma Support Officer and is like family (I quickly learn all Stanley's friends are.) I have to leave his bedside as the desperate rasping draws air into his afflicted lungs.

I cannot risk hurting him by asking for more. He takes hold of my gloved hand and asks for some prayer time, and we pray for the doctors and nurses in the EAU, for Pat and, finally, for Jill. Stanley has started to sob, but I give his hand a squeeze and encourage him to keep fighting. He looks me in the eye and says: "I've never given up in my life – I am a Gunner!"

And what message does he have for Jill? Simply: "I love you."

I AM VERY WORRIED, OF COURSE

Jill is patient and calm and taking things in on the phone. She asks for descriptions because she cannot be there herself; of Stanley, of the room, and of the staff caring for him. "I'm very worried, of course," she says in her matter-of-fact way. I describe the situation and the machine that pushes air into his lungs, and she tells me she calls the hospital for an update every morning and every evening. Then she shares her pain. "The hardest part is that I can't see him," she says.

Jill has been with Stanley since forever. He suffered a compound fracture in 1956 in a motorcycle accident when he worked for the Forestry Commission, she tells me. He was responsible for planting some of the trees at Goodwood. His fracture could not heal and he lost his lower leg, and so the relationship with Blesma began. Stanley retrained and worked until the age of 58, "which was amazing," Jill says, with a hint of

pride in her husband's achievements. She pauses. A life, and a lifetime, are hanging in the balance. We return to the trees.

"Stanley told me about the trees, Jill. If he doesn't make it – I mean, if he dies that is," and my eyes are full of tears now, "he would like his ashes to be scattered amongst those trees."

The next pause seems to last an eternity. "I didn't know that," she replies.

"Do you have a message for Stanley?" I ask her.

"Tell him he's my one," she says quietly. "He's my one."

Stanley has been moved. From the EAU he has gone to Clandon Ward and a new clinical team is looking after him. Clandon Ward, like all of Levels C and D, is looking after coronavirus patients. The wards are full. For patients like Stanley, full PPE is needed at all times. All the patients are closely monitored 24/7, tended, turned and cared for.

At the age of 85, the statistical likelihood of Stanley being able to beat this virus is low. Everybody knows it. This amazing team has come together from all areas of the Royal Surrey family; from research medicine, gastroenterology, outpatients nursing and the central ward – staff who are all expert in aerosol-generating procedures and treatments.

The grief and trauma rippling through these coronavirus wards are palpable, and the way the staff have bonded to support, encourage and motivate each other is the most incredible thing. One member of the team comes up to me and whispers: "Please, not Stanley. Not another one."

THERE'S HOPE FOR STANLEY

Stanley would like a blessing. He doesn't need to know about the statistics because he knows for himself that time, opportunity, and chance are all tight. He has another message for Jill. He is struggling to breathe, but today he asks for the mask to be taken off. He would like a cup of tea, too. Dr Beth in the clinical team is the medical lead, and allows for 15 minutes.

Stanley is refreshed by the tea and feels half-human again now he is free from the C-Pap. His skin is sore from the rubbing. I ask if he is feeling any better, and he smiles the biggest smile as colour rushes into his cheeks. We seize the moment, whip out a phone to add to the decontamination procedures later, and take a selfie, giving a thumbs up for Jill. And in that photo is all of love and all of healing, and there's hope for Stanley yet.

A letter to Jill to accompany the photo...

Dear Jill

This situation is turning many things on their head; many old certainties and ways of doing, and of being, and of loving. I think I can be sure of this, however; Stanley does not need me as a go-between in order to know that your love for him is complete and constant and unending. He has no doubt about it. I think the pleasure he receives from me in his situation is knowing that I know about your loving

**"THE WAY THEY
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THANK YOU FOR
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relationship at a deep level, and that my ears have heard the "I love you" and that I am able to repeat it.

Stanley was asking if you had the photo yet. "She'll love it!" he exclaimed. I said that I was on my way to deliver it to you today. "Tell her I love her!" he said to me first. "What are you waiting for?" he said to me next.

You and Stanley are in my prayers, and this comes with my love.

Jill is adamant: "He's not to know. He mustn't know." She is not well and the GP suspects coronavirus. She buries her fears for his recovery. She places the picture of Stanley inside their house, and stands boldly for a socially distanced selfie to send back to the ward. I stand two metres from the door shouting messages of love at her, and wonder what the neighbours must be thinking. "Tell him I will have his jacket ready for him to come home in."

Stanley is over-the-moon happy. Would he be if he knew that she was ill, too? We do not know where the illness will go with her. Silence governs this moment between us all. In his hands is the photo of Jill from yesterday, freshly printed in the office, the first time he has seen his wife's face in two weeks of illness. Some tears have fallen on the paper, causing the ink to run. "Don't worry about that, there's plenty more copies to come," I tell him.

The Clandon staff on duty have seen it, the staff in EAU will see it later, and we all root for Stanley and Jill. He hasn't given up, and knowing his Regimental blazer will be waiting for him gives him another boost. "Once a Gunner, always a Gunner!" he tells me, reciting his old Army number again. We have prayers and a blessing again,

and we end with Jill. Always with Jill.

Stanley is getting better. He has turned the corner and is improving every day. It is slow, but it is real. This man, who has wrapped us all in his love for Jill, will be going home after a period of rehabilitation in the community hospital. Jill has recovered too, and is waiting for him with afternoon tea and cake at the ready.

GOING HOME IN THE MORNING

Joining the staff for a clap for Milford Hospital one Thursday night, I hear that Stanley is going home in the morning. Dr Helen, the consultant, tells me he has been waltzing on the wards – literally!

Everyone has come to Milford to stand on the grass in the evening sun and clap. The chief nurse stands shoulder-to-shoulder with the most junior doctor, the community matron with the healthcare associate. Those who have worked a full day stand exhausted with those about to work a full night. They are clapping the patients, they are clapping each other's endurance and forbearance, acknowledging each other's sadness at the ones who have been lost, and driving on each other's hope. Gratitude ripples across the lawn.

The walkie-talkie takes the sound inside to the wards, and to the staff and patients there. Many neighbours have wandered over to show their support. The children are waving and clapping from the balconies of the flats, and display their NHS rainbows with delight. Eventually, the sound gently fades, but the pride in determined strength remains and glows in the hearts of those present. Final conversations, greetings and goodbyes are made, and, revived now for whatever tomorrow holds, people melt into the night.

"I'm not good with words," Stanley says, "so I want you to give a message to the Board for me." It is night-time and everyone else on the bay is asleep. "The way they have looked out for me and cared for me and my wife since I've lived in this part of the world, and here I am again. Thank you for saving my life."

Stanley would like a prayer and blessing before we go our separate ways. We pray for the EAU, and for Clandon, and now for Milford and, last of all, for Jill.

"You can't see it, but I'm travelling to Jill now!"

Adrian Teare, Padre 106(Y) Royal Artillery is the Lead Chaplain at the Royal Surrey NHS Foundation Trust



Clockwise from top: Stanley visits staff of the Royal Surrey Hospital, Jill Morgan, Adrian Teare wearing PPE before a visit, Stanley on the Covid ward, and with staff in the chapel

Lest We Forget



THE NATION WAS FORCED TO COMMEMORATE THIS YEAR'S REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY IN LOCKDOWN, WHICH MEANT FRONT DOORSTEPS UP AND DOWN THE COUNTRY BECAME THE PERFECT PLACE FOR PERSONAL SILENT REFLECTION

Andy Reid MBE

ANDY, 44, LOST BOTH LEGS AND HIS RIGHT ARM TO AN IED IN AFGHANISTAN IN 2009. HE LIVES IN ST. HELENS, AND WORKS AS A MOTIVATIONAL SPEAKER. REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY HAS ALWAYS BEEN AN IMPORTANT DAY FOR HIM

FOR ANDY REID, THE MOST DIFFICULT part of this year's Remembrance Day was having to deal with the lack of camaraderie.

"What got to me this year wasn't the fact that I wasn't able to go to the cenotaph in St. Helens – it was missing being together with everyone, the lads, on the one day of the year that I always see them," he says. "I stepped outside and paid my respects at my front door, but I missed the social aspect; spending time with people who had done their bit for their country, and having a good crack after the service. This year, it was straight back inside and then back to the normal routine – the kids were watching Peppa Pig! So it wasn't the same."

Andy had a routine that he always followed on previous Remembrance Sundays. "I'd have a big breakfast with a couple of the lads who I served with, then we'd go to the parade," he says. "I used to have my own bar, and I'd have it done out with flags, and there would be a free glass of port for anyone who walked in wearing medals. Then we'd put food on, and spend the afternoon telling tales. But I sold the bar last November."

It's also a time for thinking about family, says Andy. "My grandfather served in the Royal Tank Regiment in WWII, and was a big inspiration for me to join the Army," says Andy. "He passed away when I was 11, but I remember him well; having Sunday dinner around his house, watching the wrestling on telly, and him telling me all his amazing war stories.

"I've got his photo in a frame and I also have his medals, so I always think about his generation and the sacrifices they made. I also think about the colleagues I lost on tour. I always feel grateful just to be here because some of my friends didn't make it home. Out of respect for them, I push myself so hard in what I do for charity."

Andy works as a motivational speaker and runs a café. "It's been a tough year because I've not been getting booked for speaking work as much due to the pandemic," he says. "The best bit about giving talks is always the chat afterwards, when people open up to you about their struggles. So I'm hoping next year we can get back to normal, as well as having a proper Remembrance Sunday."



"I ALWAYS FEEL GRATEFUL JUST TO BE HERE BECAUSE SOME OF MY FRIENDS DIDN'T MAKE IT HOME"



Words: Nick Moore. Photography: Ian Watts, Mercury Press



Photography: Andy Bate



“IT’S LOW-KEY AND THAT’S HOW I LIKE IT. I’M NOT ONE FOR A BIG FUSS. EVERYONE DOES REMEMBRANCE IN THEIR OWN WAY, AND THIS IS MINE”

Lest We Forget

Michael Swain

MICHAEL, 30, SERVED WITH 3 RIFLES AND WAS INJURED IN AFGHANISTAN IN 2009 AFTER STANDING ON AN IED. HE LIKES TO KEEP IT LOCAL ON REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY

What does Remembrance Sunday mean to you?

It is very important. I think back to all the Service personnel, and what they’ve given over the years, especially those who have made the ultimate sacrifice for this great country. I always try to share the day with other military personnel – that is the beauty of it. I share my experiences, they share theirs... it’s always a day full of stories.

What is your usual routine for Remembrance Day?

I go to my local village service in Henlow and then, after that, I go to the pub. It’s me and anyone else who has served, young and old. We have a few drinks and catch up, there are laughs and tears. It’s a local, low-key day, and that’s how I like it. I’m not one for a big fuss, I’ve never been to the Cenotaph. I like keeping it private. I don’t really want to be out there publicly in front of everyone, I like being with family and friends. Everyone does Remembrance in their own way, and this is mine.

How different was it this year for you?

It’s obviously been completely different. I caught up with my old military friends on the phone at home, and had a couple of drinks with them. It was still good to talk and we marked the two minutes’ silence. Afterwards, the family had a nice meal, but it was a shame – the candle always gets re-lit with my old military friends around this time of year, and we see how each other’s lives are doing. Hopefully, it will be nice to get back to that next year.

How has the rest of this tricky year been for you?

We’ve made the best of it and I’ve tried to keep busy. We’ve moved house, which was a long old slog with what has been going on, and we’re trying to get settled into the new place. The kids were off school earlier in the year, of course, but we were lucky with the good weather, so it wasn’t too bad.

You decided to have osseointegration surgery a number of years ago. How are you getting on?

It was definitely a game-changer. I’m walking fully unaided now, I play golf, I do all my day-to-day jobs. I had the procedure done seven years ago, and have kept moving forward with everything. Life is good now, it is pretty much normal.

Craig Winspear

CRAIG, 38, LOST HIS LEGS IN AN IED BLAST IN AFGHANISTAN IN 2011. HE PLANS TO BECOME A PERSONAL TRAINER, AND LIKES TO SEEK OUT NEW REMEMBRANCE SERVICES EVERY YEAR

MOST EX-SERVICE personnel have a routine for Remembrance Sunday. Not Craig Winspear. "I like to do something different every year," says Craig, who is originally from Hartlepool. "I live in Bedfordshire now, and my wife and I like to find a different service locally every year and go to that. We will meet new people



– I really like talking to older ex-soldiers – and then we will book a meal somewhere new and go and have a few drinks and something good to eat. It's great. I was due to go to the Cenotaph in London this year, but unfortunately that didn't happen."

Like everybody else, Craig's year has been heavily disrupted – which has been tough, given that he likes to keep busy. "I do all sorts with Blesma," he says. "Every year, I take a group of about 20 Members out to Virginia, in the USA, for the Warrior Week Patriotic Festival, and in December my wife and I lead a Blesma group to the Christmas markets in Germany. We couldn't do either of those this year because of the pandemic.

"It's been tough physically, too. I had surgery just before the first lockdown, and I didn't have the opportunity to get a new set of prosthetics afterwards, because the Limb Centres were closed. So I've not been as mobile as usual. But we have coped well otherwise, and I'm lucky to have a gym in my house."

Craig joined the Royal Logistic Corps as a Pioneer at the age of 26 in 2008. He was injured three years later, but considers himself lucky because several friends didn't make it back from operations in Afghanistan.

"For me, Remembrance is all about taking some time out to think about those close friends of mine who I lost," he says. "The rest of the year, life goes on, and you can more or less forget about difficult things, so it's good to have that time to really think about it. It can be a happy day too, because you can enjoy the service and then spend the day talking to people."

"THE REST OF THE YEAR, LIFE GOES ON, AND YOU CAN MORE OR LESS FORGET ABOUT DIFFICULT THINGS, SO IT'S GOOD TO HAVE THAT TIME TO REALLY THINK"





Photography: Andy Bate



Photography: Andy Bate

“THEY ARE THE REASON WE’RE HERE, LEADING THE LIVES WE DO TODAY. IT’S ALL THANKS TO THOSE WHO FOUGHT FOR OUR COUNTRY”



Lest We Forget

Wendy Baker

WENDY SERVED IN THE TERRITORIALS FROM 1989 TO 1995. A MOTORCYCLE ACCIDENT IN 1997 RESULTED IN HER LEG BEING AMPUTATED – INITIALLY BELOW THE KNEE – 10 YEARS LATER

For Wendy, Remembrance is very much a family affair. “My dad and my grandfather both served, so for myself and my sister Sarah [*pictured standing*] Remembrance is very much part of our history,” she says. “They’re the reason we are here, leading the lives we do today. It’s all thanks to those who fought and died for our country.”

Wendy’s father was a Royal Marine in WWII, while her grandfather was a Royal Engineer who served in WWI. “So many died and were injured in those conflicts. You are taught about them at school, but it’s so hard to quantify,” she says. “Thinking about our family on the day itself helps to quantify all that suffering. We’ve spent a lot of time researching our dad’s history, because he died when we were 15. He never really spoke to us about the war, but we know that he fought in Crete and was hospitalised in Egypt. It’s important to find out as much as you can. Their stories need to be told and continue to be heard.”

Wendy and Sarah are both members of the Royal Marines Association. “We got involved years ago to connect with other Royal Marines families,” says Wendy. “But this year, with everything being cancelled, it was just the two of us on Remembrance Day. We held our own two minutes’ silence, then we talked about dad and granddad. It did feel more personal, but a little bit different. I’m hoping to be able to take part in a parade with other Blesma Members next year.”

It has been a tough couple of years for Wendy. “In 2018, I had an issue with my leg which meant it needed to be amputated higher up,” she says, “and back in October I had surgery to deal with neuromas.”

Having her leg amputated above the knee has taken her a long time to get used to, she says. “My leg was initially crushed in 1997 in a bike accident. I kept it for 10 years, but then I was told it would have to be amputated as it was too damaged to repair,” says Wendy. “That gave me a new lease of life, and I threw away my crutches, but over recent years I’ve had lots of problems.” Blesma has been there throughout, however. “I don’t know where I’d be without them,” she says. “They’ve made a massive difference, getting me a new wheelchair and sending me on a trip. They’re so supportive.”



Lest We Forget

Hugh Gwilliams

HUGH, 69, LOST A LEG AFTER AN INJURY IN THE FALKLANDS WHILE SERVING IN THE RAF. FOR MANY YEARS, HE WAS TOO EMOTIONAL TO TAKE PART IN REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY

You used to mark Remembrance Sunday at home, but then started going to services. Why?

For years, I didn't do anything on Remembrance Day – I couldn't even take part in a local event because I felt too emotional and it was too difficult. But then, when my son came out of the Army, he asked if I would go with him to an event in Aylesbury. I reluctantly agreed, but it's now become a nice little routine. We alternate between doing that, and attending the service where we live in Weston Turville. I still don't think I could go to the Cenotaph in London. It would be too emotional for me. Everyone needs to handle the day their own way.

What do you do on the day?

We normally get up and have a bacon butty – it's become something of a tradition. Then we get dressed into our parade clothes and meet up with my son, who served in the Rifles. We take part in the parade at 11am and then spend the rest of the day together. For us, it is an opportunity to remember the fallen. As far as I'm concerned, that can be my wife's father's generation, who fought in WWII, through to those Service men and women who have been lost through non-military action. I've done some family research and I know that we lost people on both sides of the family in World War I. So it's for those who sacrificed their lives, friends who I've lost over the years, everyone. I don't run through a list of names, but they're all on my mind throughout the day.

How was this year's Armistice Day commemorations?

We had a very strange but memorable Remembrance Sunday this year. We were heading to Bicester and were trying to get there for 11am, but we got held up. We were cutting through a little village, and we were going to pull over and observe the two minutes' silence standing by the side of the road. As we stopped the car, we saw a vicar and a few local people, and so we joined in with them. It was unexpected, but fabulous.

How has 2020 as a whole been for you?

It's been difficult because I've been shielding, as I'm taking immunosuppressants. But we are lucky enough to have a big garden, so I've got space to walk around. Overall, I feel very fortunate.



“AS WE STOPPED THE CAR, WE SAW A VICAR AND A FEW LOCAL PEOPLE, SO WE JOINED IN WITH THEM. IT WAS UNEXPECTED, BUT FABULOUS”



Photography: Andy Bate

“WHEN THE PAIN CAME, I WOULD SCREAM THE PLACE DOWN”

THE VETERANS' PAIN MANAGEMENT PROGRAMME SETS OUT TO ADDRESS THE WAYS IN WHICH CHRONIC PAIN IMPACTS ON A PERSON'S QUALITY OF LIFE. JOHN SUTHERLAND WAS DUBIOUS – UNTIL HE TOOK PART

When the pain came, I would scream the place down,” says John Sutherland as he remembers his worst days of physical agony. “I was on a hospital ward with lots of other people, and the feeling was just awful. Afterwards, when I came home, I’d lie on the couch and yell my head off. The pain would be constant until I was given morphine.”

Up until very recently John, who is 69 and lives in Inverness, had been in a very dark place. A former captain in the Queen’s Own Highlanders, his left leg had been amputated above the knee in 2003 after a lengthy battle with calf problems. He was able to put up with the stump and Phantom Limb pains for the next 13 years, until he had a five-point heart bypass operation in 2016.

“I thought the operation would help my leg, but when the blood began flowing again the pain got much worse,” he says. “On a scale of one to 10, the pain that was with me 24 hours a day – what’s known

as residual pain – went up to a six or seven, while the phantom pain – which is known sometimes as a spike or flare-up – was anywhere between seven and nine, and completely incapacitated me for hours on end. I would use a prescribed cocktail of opioid drugs which never hit the spot with my pain levels. It was horrendous!”

Fortunately for John, help was on hand. His Support Officer, Steve Burton, told him of a programme run at the King Edward VII’s Hospital’s Centre For Veterans’ Health in London. The Veterans’ Pain Management Programme, a 10-day residential course, was set up in 2016 and is currently operating online because of coronavirus. It offers practical strategies to help improve quality of life alongside pain.

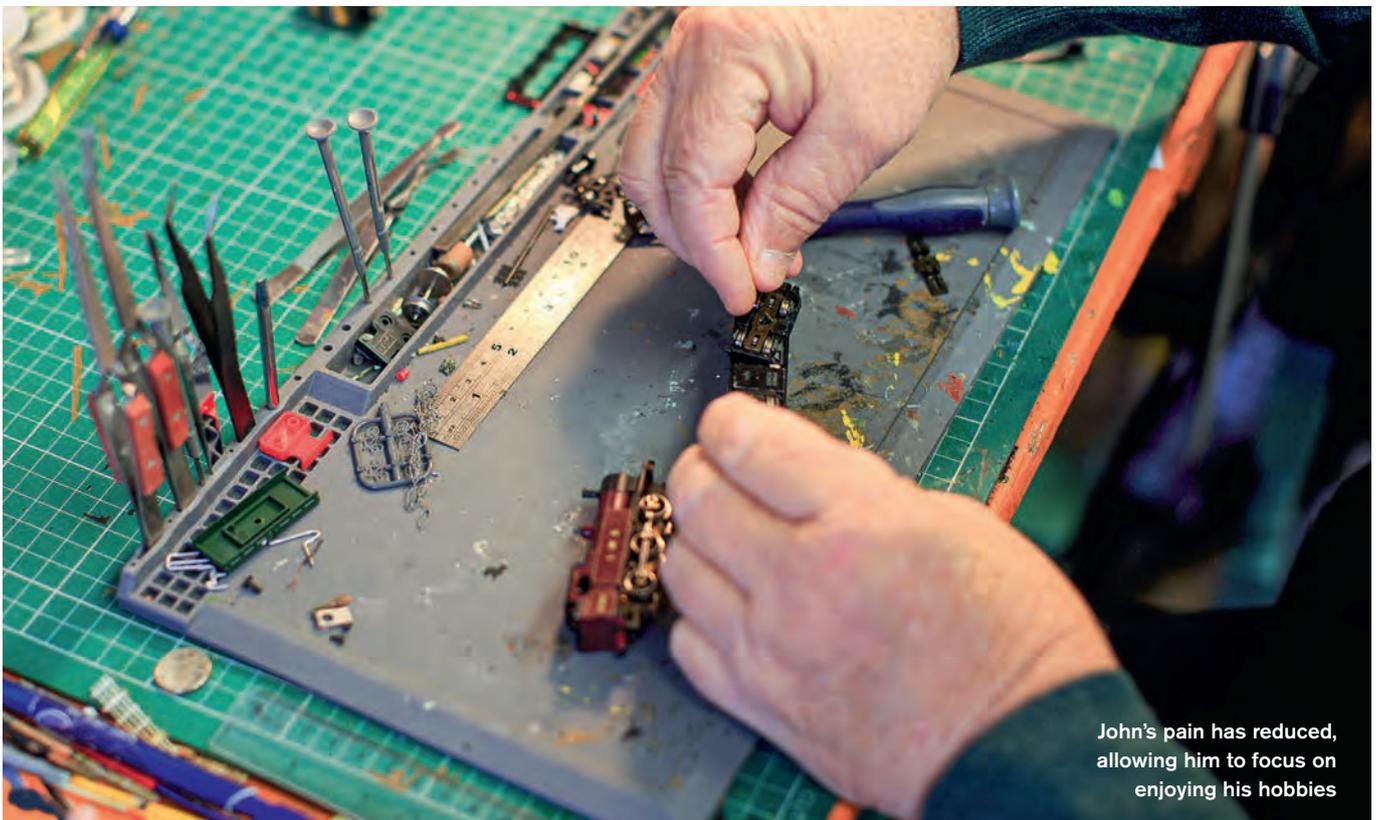
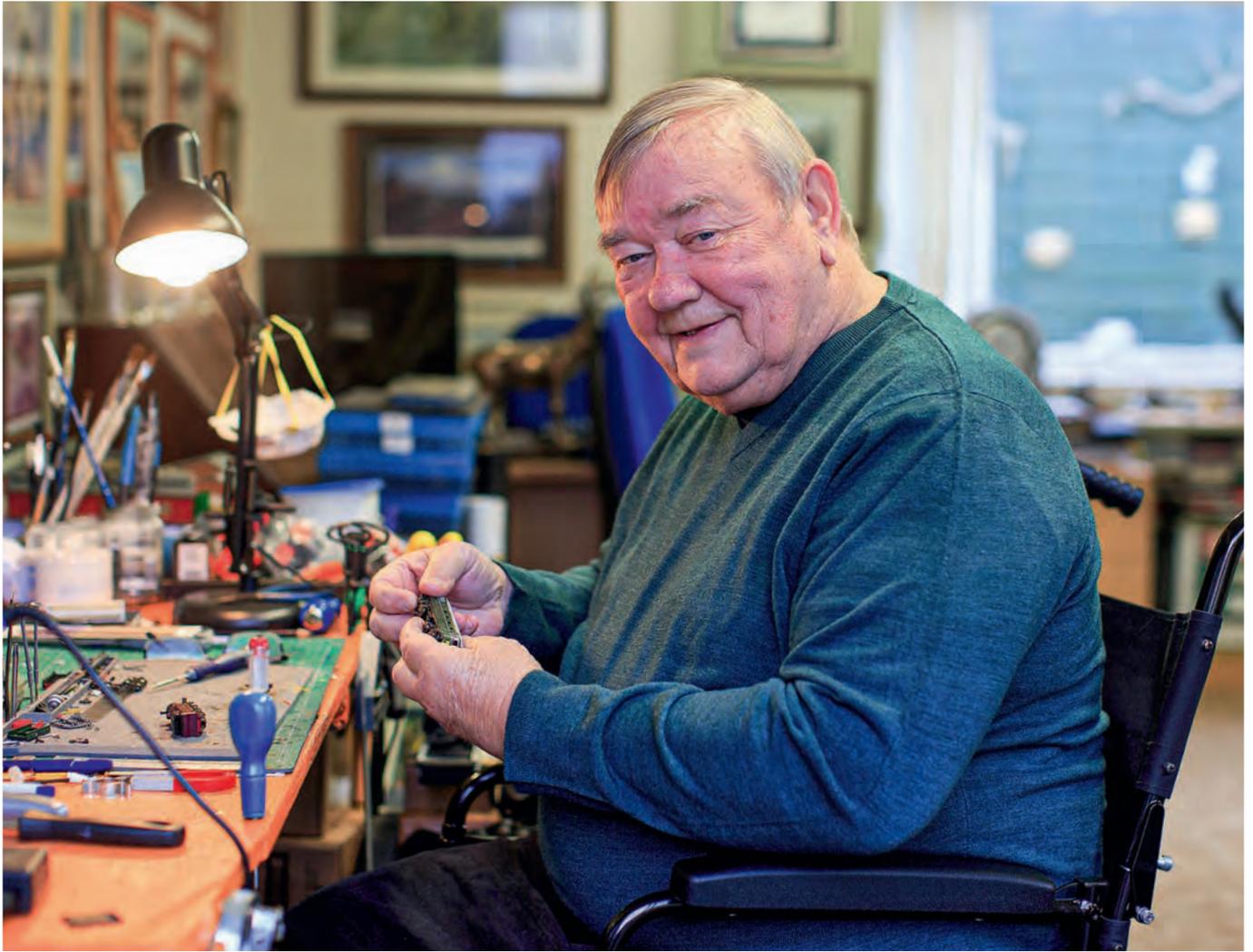
John was referred to the Centre – what did he have to lose? – and was invited onto the online programme in the height of lockdown in April. He was sceptical at first, but was hailing the programme’s therapists as “miracle workers” by the end of the course.



John refers to the clinicians on the Pain Management Programme as “miracle workers”



PAIN MANAGEMENT



John's pain has reduced, allowing him to focus on enjoying his hobbies

“WE LOOK AT THE IMPACT OF PAIN ON THE VETERANS’ LIVES. THE AREAS OF THEIR LIVES THAT ARE AFFECTED ARE FAR-REACHING”

The programme leaves no stone unturned when it comes to helping those in pain, and includes reviewing medication, helping to understand pain better, and learning to control its day-to-day management.

The clinical team includes a consultant in pain medicine, a pain nurse, a psychologist, a physiotherapist, and a psychiatrist – all of whom are specialists in chronic pain and its management. Together, the psychologist, nurse and physiotherapist lead the programme and, crucially, sit in on every session, so they all learn the same things about the veterans and can jump in with the relevant advice when required.

INTEGRATED AND INTERDISCIPLINARY

“The programme is interdisciplinary, so myself, Claire [*Fear, pain nurse*] and Jannie [*Van Der Merwe, psychologist*] are all in every session at the same time,” explains physiotherapist Suzanne Brook. “It’s not just physio, then psychology, then nursing. It is integrated.”

At the start of the programme, the most important thing for the team to do is listen,

says Suzanne. “It is vital for the veterans to feel as though they are being heard, and that we understand and acknowledge that the impact of living with pain is significant.

“Secondly, we want to show that the pain isn’t something they are imagining. Experiencing pain isn’t a case of needing to pull yourself together or toughen up, but it can be reduced. In a nutshell, we are looking at practical strategies to calm an over-sensitive central nervous system which will, in turn, allow people to feel more confident and in control.”

What those on the programme learn on Day One is crucial. “We carry out a session right at the start of the programme in which we look at the impact of persistent pain on the veterans’ lives, and it is massively significant,” says Claire Fear, the centre’s pain nurse. “The areas of their lives that are affected by their pain are far-reaching. Almost every aspect you can think of – from work to finances, relationships to mood, sleep, social life, exercise, fitness, hobbies... you name it, pain is right there in the middle. We talk about how our aim

is to try to address all the ways in which chronic pain impacts on a person’s quality of life. Put simply, we are looking to improve the quality of the veteran’s life.”

THE BENEFITS CAN BE HUGE

For John, the programme was a revelation. “I was unsure how doing a course could help me get rid of my pain, but I soon realised that the idea is to understand the pain and then work through different stages, using the mind to understand the central nervous system,” he says.

“Everyone gets something different out of the programme but, for me, the most important thing I learned was mindfulness. You train the mind to identify unhelpful thoughts, break them down, and then reframe them. The technique freed me from depression and emotional distress... all the bits that went with the pain.

“I apply the practices every day now, and through cognitive behavioural therapy and compassionate focused therapy, I’ve looked deep into my own mind. All this led to me being able to dwell less on distressing thoughts or images when in pain.”

The benefits for John have been huge. “My sleep pattern has changed. I sleep like a log now rather than spending half the night applying hot bean bags to my leg every 30 minutes, even though they weren’t actually achieving anything.

“From being a nine or 10 every day, I’m not getting any great pain now. The

SUZANNE BROOK

Suzanne is the clinical specialist physiotherapist at the Centre for Veterans’ Health



You’re a physio with a difference...

The physiotherapy in the Pain Management Programme is different from probably 99% of the experiences that veterans have had with physios before.

Pain management physiotherapy is not hands-on therapy. Most of the veterans will have seen many physios before and hands-on treatment will not have worked. This is not the veterans’ fault, but rather the type of physiotherapy is less helpful for those who have long-term pain. My main role is to provide information about, and give an understanding of, pain. We look at how it is linked to physical activity, and the impact that activity has on pain. We also discuss what veterans should do when they have pain, in terms of more or less, rest or push.

Is this often a quandary for veterans?

Yes. Often in the past, what has helped veterans succeed has been an approach of: ‘Get your head down and get through it.’ To crack on. But increases and changes in activity can often bring pain hours and days after. Sometimes, this means they’ll stop doing an activity or keep going so the pain levels increase – both of which can have a negative knock-on effect to mood, social life, and health.

So you help them do the right kind of activity, and reduce those that cause pain?

There is no ‘right’ activity. It is about the amount and what their central nervous system is used to. We share information so they can eventually manage their own activity, making informed choices about what they want to do. We want veterans to be able to take part in activities in a sustainable way, without paying for it with flare-ups. It might mean doing a bit

less of one thing, or building it up more consistently. We also talk about the central nervous system to understand what maintains pain. We look at why persistent pain is so different from acute pain. It is less to do with tissue damage and trauma, and more to do with how the nervous system has responded to injury and trauma.

How has running the programme online compared to doing it face to face?

Before we tried it, we thought it wasn’t going to work, but the statistical results have actually been comparable to the face-to-face groups we ran before COVID-19. It also has the benefit of being available to people who were put off by having to travel to London for the course, or who have responsibilities that make travelling here difficult. The feedback has been very good. It’s really rewarding work, and as a team we feel privileged to do it.

“I HONESTLY FEEL THAT THE PROGRAMME HAS SAVED MY LIFE. MY WIFE TELLS EVERYONE THAT SHE HAS HER HUSBAND BACK”

programme is so good, it's so different from sitting down with your GP who, it seems to me, is always on the clock.”

What is perhaps most incredible is that John is now almost completely medication free. “The programme made me realise that a lot of the medication I was on wasn't helping at all. Claire helped me to reduce and finally stop taking the pills,” John says. “Medications are rarely, if at all, the complete answer. I have adopted a different solution, which has meant a monumental improvement in both my mental health and levels of pain. I also learned that exercise, no matter how bad you feel, is extremely important, and I do something every day. I would recommend the course to anyone in pain – you find out so much!”

NO TWO PEOPLE ARE THE SAME

The experts at the centre find themselves learning a great deal from their patients, too – and they believe veterans are always keen to learn. “They're great to work with,” says Dr Jannie Van Der Merwe, the centre's consultant clinical psychologist. “They are

hungry for information, and we find we can present complex medical concepts to them at a high level, and they absorb them, take them on board, and really use them.”

However, the team are quick to stress that no two people experience the course



in the same way, and there can be no guarantee of success. “Because of the science of pain and how it is generated, we always point out that the programme's primary aim isn't the reduction of pain,” explains Suzanne. “It is about finding quality and meaning in what you do, day to day. And we don't tell people exactly what to do, we guide them. This is often a huge relief for veterans, who often come from a boom-or-bust background.

“So, for example, I always look at specific strategies around movement and flexibility, with a view to helping the nervous system calm down rather than allowing it to be pushed. We go with a less-is-more approach, and we want to get veterans doing a bit of something they can repeat. It's better than them doing something once and then never again.”

As the programme is run in groups, there's also a hugely beneficial social aspect to the discussions. “We became a really tight group, all chatting on Zoom and staying in touch,” says John. “It's great to be able to speak to people who really understand what you've been through. I honestly feel that the programme has saved my life. My wife tells everyone she meets that she has her husband back.”

To learn more, or to apply for a place on the Pain Management Programme, contact Caroline Dunne on 020 7467 4370 or at carolinedunne@kingedwardvii.co.uk

CLAIRE FEAR

Claire is the pain nurse at the Centre for Veterans' Health



Tell us a bit about how you help veterans deal with pain...

As a nurse, my biggest role is to look at the medication they are taking. We find that many people with persistent pain have been taking lots of medication for a long period of time, and it is often unclear if that medication is helping or actually causing more issues and complications. On the programme, we discuss the evidence for the use of medication, their limitations and side effects. People on medication don't always know what they are taking, how it works, or really why they are even taking it in the first place. We explore the role of pain medication and then work on personalised reduction plans for individual veterans, which they can then take to their GPs to discuss.

You also look at sleep...

Yes, we have sessions on sleep hygiene because people with pain, understandably, often have sleep problems. We look at mindfulness techniques that improve rest and relaxation, calm the central nervous system, and help with anxiety, distress and tension. We also discuss issues such as communication with loved ones, healthcare providers, and other agencies. There is often the sense among veterans in pain that they are not being believed or understood, so we want to help them get the right messages across.

Do you find the military approach to pain and injury helps or hinders your work?

There is a big rehabilitation approach in the military that often tends to focus on: ‘Let's correct that and build strength'. But pain management requires a very different approach, and veterans quickly realise and understand why what they

were doing before didn't work. That's when their confidence can increase quickly.

What do you love about the work?

It's great when you hear the veterans begin to talk differently about things that had been so negative for them at the start of the programme. It's amazing when they tell us they've gone into their garden when previously they couldn't, or they've played football with the grandkids for the first time, or reduced a medication that was making them feel as though they weren't themselves. They might start to feel like their old self is coming back, or that they're talking to family and friends more. To hear someone say: “I haven't left the house in 10 years, but this weekend I went for a walk with my partner,” is wonderful. They'll never say: “I now have no pain, or anxiety, or depression,” but they will often say they feel less. That is a great result.



DR JANNIE VAN DER MERWE

Jannie is the consultant clinical psychologist at the Centre for Veterans' Health



Talk us through your psychological approach to pain

Traditionally, people with pain will say the issue is mainly with a specific area of the body, but if a pain is persistent for six months or more, the central nervous system plays a role in the pain they feel. Persistent pain, PTSD, and negative changes in mood share pathways in the brain. So PTSD symptoms can make pain flare up, and vice versa. We get lots of veterans with pain trying to sort out a specific 'it', but we take heads and bodies as one system.

So reducing pain can also help with PTSD and mental health?

Yes. Around 75% of those attending the programme suffer from complex PTSD. Many of them say that after they have taken part in the programme, they are able to manage their PTSD better. Adjusting to civilian life with pain and PTSD can be very hard for others to understand. You can look fit and highly functioning but be in a lot of pain. We acknowledge how difficult this can be and discuss strategies that might assist in the management of these challenges.

You also work with friends and families on how to communicate pain better...

On one day we invite loved ones in, and we run a session on how to communicate the pain experience. Pain is invisible and can be difficult to understand, so we help people do that.

Does it also help, psychologically, being in a group with other veterans?

Very much so. Veterans can feel that they don't belong when attending a civilian pain management programme, but they feel very much at home and understood with other veterans. Our drop-out rate was very low on the face-to-face veterans' programme – at around just 2% – and on the Zoom version it is 0%. The veterans get to know each other on the programme, and afterwards, they stay in touch and support each other. It's another bonus of the course.



10 YEARS ON

SCOTT YARRINGTON WANTED TO JOIN THE ARMY SO MUCH THAT HE TRIED TO SIGN UP WHEN HE WAS JUST 15 YEARS OLD. SO WHEN HE SUSTAINED A SERIOUS INJURY IN AFGHANISTAN HE HAD TO RETHINK THE REST OF HIS LIFE

Scott Yarrington, 35, from Birmingham, served with the Irish Guards from 2005 to 2013. He was injured by an IED blast in Afghanistan in 2010 which resulted in him losing both legs above the knee, as well as seriously injuring an arm. Almost a decade after sustaining his life-changing injuries, we caught up with him to talk about rehabilitation, rebuilding his life, and the importance of Remembrance...

Tell us a bit about your military career
I'd wanted to be a soldier for as long as I could remember – I tried to join up when I was just 15 years old. I eventually walked into a Careers Office when I was 18 and joined the Irish Guards. I enjoyed

the training, and after I passed out I was posted to carry out ceremonial duties at Buckingham Palace and the Tower of London, which was great fun.

And then you went on operations?
I deployed to Iraq in 2007, where I worked as a Warrior fighting vehicle dismount and Mastiff driver. We got into plenty of fire fights on the road: one time, our wagons got hit and we suffered two fatalities. I had to drive the bodies to the air base. It was horrible. I went to Afghanistan in 2010 as a Section Commander. I was there for three months before I was injured. It was completely different from Iraq. We were on foot all the time rather than in vehicles, we were coming under fire on a daily basis, and we had to check the ground

with metal detectors before every step because of the threat of IEDs. We took a lot of casualties.

Can you explain how you were injured?
It was 29 December 2010. I remember that it was a freezing morning and we set off on patrol at about 9am, tasked with giving the Royal Engineers close protection. I took my troops onto a ridge that overlooked a road because we needed to spread out. As I walked up the hill, I remember my foot sliding, and then hearing a bang. I lost both my legs above the knee at the scene, but I didn't know that at the time. I looked at my arm and that had been blown open, and my kit had been blasted off me. I tried to call 'Man Down!' on the radio, but that had been destroyed. Two young soldiers

**“I LOST BOTH LEGS
ABOVE THE KNEE
AT THE SCENE,
BUT I DIDN’T
KNOW THAT
AT THE TIME”**

Scott with his son Alfie.
“Remembrance is more
important than ever,”
says Scott. “We need to
pass down the tradition,
as the World Wars seem
like a long time ago”





came to help me. They cut my gloves and trousers off, and made seven tourniquets – because of the nature of my wounds, every time they put a tourniquet on me, I just started bleeding again, higher up. But they did a brilliant job. They saved my life.

And then you were evacuated?

It took a while to get a quad bike up to me. When they did reach me I was conscious, but in incredible pain – every bump in the road felt like I was being stabbed with daggers. I remember being loaded onto the chopper and being in so much pain that I was screaming: “Please put me to sleep!” They did, and I woke up three weeks later in hospital in Birmingham.

What happened next?

I was in and out of the operating theatre at Bastion for three days as they cleaned up all my injuries and tried to stitch me up. They flew me home on a medical plane, and both my lungs collapsed during the journey. Then, in Birmingham, I was in surgery for another 48 hours. When I came round in Queen Elizabeth Hospital I still didn't know I'd lost my legs.

How did you find out?

When I regained consciousness, my dad was by my bedside. My arm was in a sling, and I asked him if I was going to lose it. He said the doctors didn't know yet. I asked him if my legs were OK and he said no. I asked if I'd lost one and he told me I'd lost both of them, but I was drifting in and out of consciousness so I kept forgetting and had to ask again. My poor dad had



Scott and his family – a decade after he was blown up serving in Afghanistan

to break the news to me quite a few times. In the ICU you have your own nurse and she was the person who finally brought home to me the fact that I'd lost my legs. I told her I couldn't wait to get out and play football with my eldest son and that's when she said: “You do know you've lost both your legs?” That was the first time it hit me. She was distraught. We both broke down crying.

How did you find rehab?

It was tough. The medical team thought I was going to lose my arm, but they told me of an experimental operation they could try. I decided to go for it. My hand was black and covered in crust after the operation, but a week later the crust came off and I could wiggle my thumb. In a few days,

all my fingers worked – it was such a relief. My prosthetics caused some problems, too – the first six weeks were particularly hard. At one point, one of my stumps swelled up and got stuck in the prosthetic. I couldn't get it off. They had to get the biggest bloke at Headley Court to yank it off while they scraped back my skin.

But things did begin to turn around?

After a while. The injury affected my marriage and we ended up splitting up quite soon after I got out of hospital. Later on, I remarried and had a second son. I was given the Afghanistan Service Medal by Kate Middleton on her first official military duty. She chatted to me for ages and I was in *Hello!* magazine. I was also part of the team that won the bronze medal in wheelchair basketball at the Invictus Games in 2017, which was amazing.

And you got involved with Blesma...

The Association has been great for me. I've taken part in Making Generation R, and I've also really enjoyed all the local events that have been organised by my Support and Outreach Officers. I enjoy the Christmas lunches, the days out, all the gatherings and family days. I've gone back to college to study maths, English and accounting, and I've passed an accounting exam. I volunteer with the Army Cadets, and they are interested in my time in the Forces. On Remembrance Day, for example, I keep it local. I would like to go to the bigger Remembrance parades some time in the future, but at the moment I feel as though it is important to pass down to the cadets the fact that it is a special day.

Remembrance Day was very different this year. How do you usually mark it?

For me, Remembrance is more important than ever because we need to pass down the tradition as the two World Wars seem a long time ago. On the day, I go to my local cenotaph in all my Irish Guards gear. When it comes to the moment of Remembrance, a lot of things and emotions run through my mind. I think about the friends I lost in Afghanistan and Iraq. When they play The Last Post, though, I always think of my grandad. He fought in WWII, and they played The Last Post at his funeral. It is very personal and I always get teary. I have a heavy heart on the day, but I'm also very proud, so it's a real mixture.

To find out how other Blesma Members commemorated Remembrance Day during this year's lockdown, turn to p32



AN ABSOLUTELY GROUNDBREAKING PLACE

IN HER BOOK *A HEAVY RECKONING* AUTHOR AND HISTORIAN EMILY MAYHEW WRITES THAT HEADLEY COURT WILL GO DOWN IN HISTORY AS A PLACE THAT WORKED "GENUINE MIRACLES". MANY BLESMA MEMBERS WOULD STRONGLY AGREE...





“Rupert [*Frere*] took an extraordinary set of photographs. They stand now as a tribute to a remarkable place,” says author Emily Mayhew

REHABILITATION



EMILY MAYHEW
Emily is Historian
in Residence at the
Centre for Blast
Injury Studies

The name Headley Court will resonate with almost every single military amputee of the last few decades. The Defence Medical Rehabilitation Centre in Surrey, which was operational between 1985 and 2018, set thousands of members of the British Armed Forces on the road to recovery. Among limbless veterans, ‘Headley’ quite simply became shorthand for rehab.

But while the building and its staff mean different things to everyone who has passed through the doors of the imposing mansion and spent time in its beautiful gardens, the advances in rehabilitation that were achieved there were genuinely revolutionary.

Emily Mayhew, Historian in Residence at the Centre for Blast Injury Studies (CBIS) at Imperial College, London has written a book, *A Heavy Reckoning: War, Medicine and Survival in Afghanistan and Beyond*, about the “casualty continuum” of the last few decades.

The book tracks the journey from the battlefield, through the recent advances in trauma medicine and rehabilitation, to look at what the future might hold for those living with blast injuries. It features these emotive photographs, which were taken by military photographer Rupert Frere [see panel, right], and concludes that Headley will go down in history as a place that worked “genuine miracles”.

“What Headley achieved was quite remarkable because those who were coming back from Afghanistan with very serious blast injuries from around 2008 were, in many ways, unexpected survivors,” says Emily. “Nobody was expecting them, nobody had prepared for them, and nobody had trained for them. If you had asked any physiotherapist or prosthetist before 2008 if a double amputee could learn to walk again, their mindset would have been; probably not.

“But suddenly, when bombs and IEDs were detonated in Afghanistan, their shock waves reverberated all the way back to Surrey. These were young men and women who didn’t just want to walk again, they wanted to run and play sports. They had expectations.

“I will always remember talking to a physiotherapist who worked at Headley Court, who told me about the first time he spoke to [*Blesma* Member] Mark Ormrod. He asked Mark, who is a triple amputee, what his expectations were, and Mark told him he wanted to be able to run again. The physio told me his first thoughts were that Mark was going to have to change his expectations, but very quickly he realised *he* was the one who was going to have to change *his* expectations.”

This kind of mindset, echoed by many, many injured Service personnel who came through Headley Court’s doors, led to one of the most astonishing leaps in the



RUPERT FRERE

Rupert photographed Headley Court for Emily's book. He worked in bomb disposal before becoming an Army photographer



How did you get to become a military photographer?

I joined the Army at the age of 16, in 1997, and first served in the Royal Logistic Corps as a driver in Kosovo, before performing the role of bomb disposal in Iraq. After that tour, I was at a recruitment fair and saw these guys surrounded by pictures of people windsurfing and riding motorbikes. I asked them what role they had and they told me they were Army photographers. It looked like a fantastic job, and I already liked photography and could take a good picture, but didn't know anything about the technical side. Despite that, I went for the aptitude assessment, and became a military photographer in 2007.

What's it like to travel around conflict zones taking pictures?

Because I missed out on performing a bomb disposal role in Afghanistan, people always say to me: 'You made the right choice to become a photographer'. But they always send the photographers wherever the action is, so it was just as dangerous! I've been shot at and blown up during my time as a photographer. It can be full-on, but shooting in Afghan was one of the highlights of my life – I was on the ground all the time.

What was it like photographing Headley Court later in your career?

It was really interesting. Headley has so much history to it. I had to really think about the shots to tell the story of the building. It's quite a creepy place when you're wandering around at night alone

though! But I really liked it, and the way that the building had been adapted and designed for the veterans was very clever. Everything there had a meaning, a purpose, and a use.

What are your favourite images from the shoot?

I like the picture of the drawer full of prosthetics [above]. In a way, the items are quite rudimentary, and you realise this is still how people start off when they lose limbs and begin learning how to do things again. It's a link back to what hasn't changed in decades of war. There may be advanced prosthetics now, but you begin with the basics. And I like the names scratched into the wall in the garden – it is real history. You can imagine squaddies walking there, having a smoke, and scratching their names into the wall.



The lawn at Headley Court came to be seen as a rite of passage for lower-limb amputees to conquer using their new prosthetic legs

“THERE WAS NOTHING IN THE TEXTBOOKS BEFORE 2009 TO SAY THIS WAS ACTUALLY POSSIBLE!”

history of military rehabilitation. “In a way, the staff at Headley didn’t have any alternative,” says Emily. “They had previously carried out a lot of sports rehab, and their mantra was; if you get a skiing or a rugby injury, we will get you back skiing or playing rugby. As a team, they worked out how to do things.

“But what really helped rehabilitate blast injury amputees was having a multi-disciplinary team approach. When the patients arrived, they sat down with a group of medics – consultants, physiotherapists, prosthetists – and they looked at everything. Goals were set, timetables were given... People stuck to their plans, kept their focus. It was intense, but this patient-centred approach brought rapid and permanent change.

“And the physios at Headley were prepared to do whatever it took. They were there for the pain, but were also providing psychological support – judging when was the right time for people to work on their own, or to try some competitive walking, realising when they did and didn’t want to talk... They learned it all.

“As a historian of complex casualty I could see that, in the past, healthcare professionals just didn’t talk to each other in this way. The pain people didn’t talk to the psych people, and so on. The patient could often be stuck in the middle. It wasn’t like that at Headley. It was joined up, with everyone on the same path.

Soon, staff at Headley were in a position in which they would be watching three double amputees standing on their prosthetics, chatting to each other in the garden. There was nothing in the textbooks before 2009 to say that this was actually possible!”

The garden at Headley has particular significance for many ex-Service personnel who have spent time there. Its lawn, long enough to whack golf balls down, was the perfect space for re-learning to walk in a pleasant, non-medical environment. “The lawn became a walking metric,” says Emily. “Could you walk to the end and then come back on your prosthetic legs? It was quite a way, and it wasn’t that even a surface, so it was a challenge and, if you got there, it afforded you an incredible sense of achievement. People would carve their names into the wall at the end of the garden [*above right*] to prove they had reached it.”

FROM BASTION TO HEADLEY

Emily’s link with photographer Rupert Frere came through a family tie. “My cousin worked with Rupert in the Army in Afghanistan,” she says. “His posting was in media liaison and he was assigned a military photographer. My cousin asked me if there was anything that I would like photographs of, because he knew I had an interest in this field.



Once they had negotiated Headley's garden, injured Service personnel would carve their names into a wall as proof of their success

"I asked my cousin if Rupert could get shots of the field hospital at Camp Bastion. It happened to be the year that the military suddenly started to suffer serious IED blast injuries, so Bastion was becoming a really important site for the treatment of trauma.

"Rupert photographed the MERT helicopters, the forward medical posts, everything... As a historian, these are the images that you want to exist. Then, in 2014, I was commissioned to write a book about the medical process in Afghanistan. By then, we knew that something extraordinary had been achieved, with hundreds of people alive who perhaps might not have been considering the nature of their injuries.

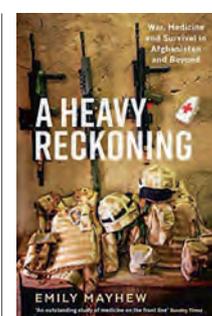
"I wanted to include Rupert's photographs from Afghanistan in the book, but I also commissioned him to photograph Headley, because I didn't have photos of arguably the most important part of this process; rehab. I asked Rupert to get pictures of the place rather than the patients. It was starting to close down, and was mostly empty, but that didn't matter because it was about the building, the fabric of the place, and in particular the garden. That's what people remember.

"Rupert took an extraordinary set of photographs. They stand now as a tribute to a remarkable place, and we have used them in the book, and in some exhibitions, to highlight the importance of rehabilitation."

As the Historian in Residence at Imperial College, Emily not only keeps a record of what is going on in the field of blast injury, but also interprets how things were done in the past, and how current researchers in the field can learn from that. "An article written 100 years ago can be as relevant as one written today," she says. "We might have a meeting about a topic and I'll say: 'They did this 60 years ago, I'll get the article for you'.

"I'm the only person in the country doing this, and I think it's the best job in the world. The CBIS is a bioengineering department, bringing solutions from engineering to the problems of the human body. In past conflicts, like WWI for example, the outcome for soldiers with blast injuries was very poor. The very nature of blast injuries impacts on the ability for those injuries to heal properly. Part of my job is to think about what might happen to this cohort of people in the future by learning from what has happened in the past."

Rupert's images and Emily's writing will stand as a record that will help to do just this. "Headley represents rehabilitation, and rehab is the best way of minimising pain for these patients going forward," she says. "I always talk about 'life beyond survival', and rehab is what secures that. Headley will go down in history as an absolutely groundbreaking place."



Emily's book *A Heavy Reckoning* includes these and other images taken by Rupert Frere



TONY BLOOMFIELD

Tony Bloomfield, Blesma's new Operations Director, knows there is hard work ahead, but is looking forward to helping drive the Association's direction in 2021

I joined Blesma in 2018 to take charge of fundraising after a spell at Blind Veterans UK. I've enjoyed it from Day One, and I'm delighted to become Blesma's Operations Director and have the opportunity to help take the charity forward.

I've been involved with the voluntary sector for 37 years. I have worked in fundraising, service provision and communications for charities and organisations involved in dementia, neurology, and post-natal depression, liaising with clinical commissioners and All Party Parliamentary Groups to further their causes and raise funds. I've helped advocate for, and set up services across the health sector, held briefings in Parliament, fought for resources, and campaigned for charities. In one role, I even hosted the Dalai Lama.

We have had a great year fundraising despite the pandemic. We have built a professional and dedicated team who have been pro-active during the year. We have put on a range of events; from a Remembrance 11K to a Gameathon. The team hasn't been phased by the challenge – I can't emphasise enough how hard they have worked in difficult circumstances.

Fundraising is important because it supports the Members and everything we do for them. You can see the results directly, whether that is in welfare grants or supporting projects like Making Generation R. The Association is small enough to really see the impact.

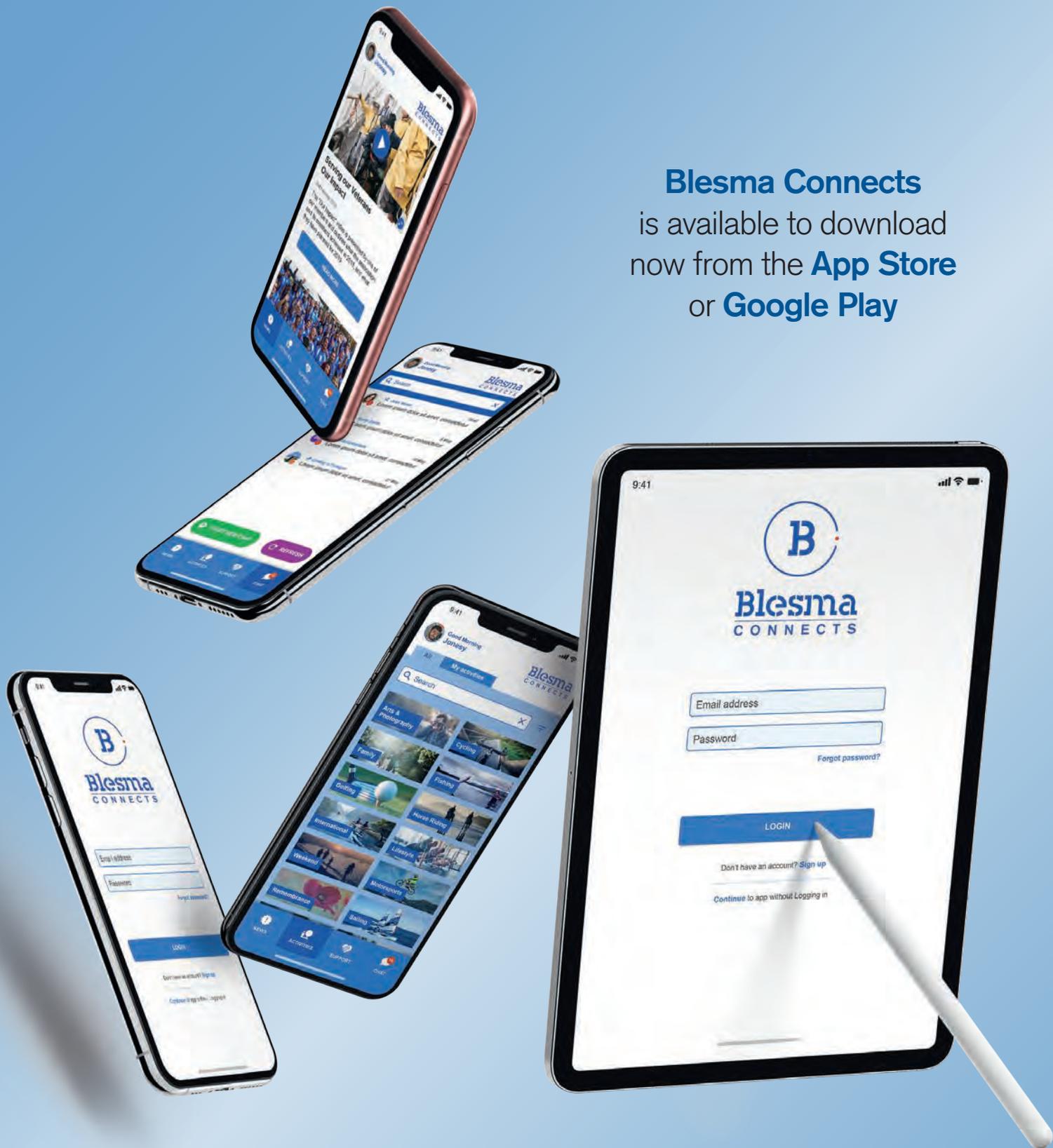
One of the biggest changes the Association faces as a result of the pandemic is that Members have not had the chance to get together. They are still supporting each other where possible, but that face-to-face contact is so important. We even have some new staff who have not had the chance to meet Members yet, but we hope that will change in 2021.

The BSO and Outreach teams have been amazing during lockdown. They have organised virtual activities and have kept in touch with Members and Widows to make sure they were ok both physically and emotionally, and to keep them involved and connected with others.

I'm positive about 2021. There will be challenges, obviously, and one of these will be restarting the Activities Programme. I am confident that we will be able to do that in the first half of the year, and the team in Chelmsford is working hard to make that happen. But safety is critically important with or without Covid, and we won't move forward until we are absolutely certain our Members will be safe taking part in any event.

“BLESMA HAS A STRONG AND COMMITTED STAFF, AND THERE IS A GREAT DEAL OF HOPE FOR THE FUTURE OF THE ORGANISATION”

There are three main pillars to Operations – activities, communications and fundraising. My job is to make sure they are linked, and to synchronise their efforts. Blesma has a strong and committed staff, and there is a great deal of hope for the future of the organisation.



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