



SEVERAL BLESMA MEMBERS
HAVE TAKEN PART IN A NATIONAL
ARMY MUSEUM EXHIBITION AND
PANEL DISCUSSION ABOUT THEIR
UNIQUE EXPERIENCES ON THE

ROAD TO RECOVERY



“I wanted this to be a hopeful exhibition; these people have suffered but have managed to build a new life,” says curator Sophie Stathi

Battlefield medicine has pushed the boundaries of capability in recent years and ‘unexpected survivors’ have been given hope and rehabilitation pathways that were unimaginable a generation ago. But the road to recovery from life-changing physical injury or mental trauma is fraught with new challenges for medical and support teams as well as those who are rebuilding their lives.

Their journeys are explored in *The Road to Recovery*, an exhibition running at the National Army Museum (NAM) which features the testimonies of Blesma Members Simon Brown, Dave Henson and Harry Parker, as well as former Army officer Gemma Morgan and Victoria Cross recipient Johnson Beharry. It frames the challenges they faced after life-changing injury and how they, medics and support staff slowly constructed ways of coping with their revised physical and psychological futures.

The roles of medical and support staff feature large in the exhibition, with visitors greeted by a panel displaying a quote from Headley Court physiotherapist Major Peter Le Feuvre, stating: “Rehabilitation starts the moment a life is saved. From that moment, we start to consider life beyond survival.”

The free exhibition displays symbolic

items from each of the five contributors, ranging from prosthetics to medals, which accompany audio and video contributions on the uncertainties of recovery from both the veterans’ and the clinicians’ viewpoints.

“I wanted to produce an exhibition with a modern focus on service personnel who had suffered life-changing injuries or severe PTSD,” says Sophie Stathi, NAM’s Senior Curator, Collections Development and Review. “The stories of these unexpected survivors, who might have died if they had been injured a few years earlier, cannot

always be explored in depth in the rest of the museum. I really wanted to follow their story all the way to what happens later in life, once they leave the Forces.

“It is a critical area because, bearing in mind how young they were when they were injured, they have to live with their injuries for the rest of their lives, and they have to manage them somehow. I wanted this to be a hopeful exhibition; these people have suffered terribly but they have managed to build a completely new and, as they often say themselves, better life.”



Sophie started researching and interviewing for the exhibition as Headley Court was closing and handing over its role as the Military Defence Rehabilitation Centre to Stanford Hall in Nottinghamshire.

“We asked the five veterans to provide an object that relates to their service or recovery,” she adds, “and have displayed those alongside objects from Headley Court, but their voices are the main draw. Everyone’s journey is different. Some talk about post-traumatic growth, for example, while others talk about post-traumatic stress disorder. I tried to choose people who were different in terms of their injuries, their backgrounds and the lives they built after leaving the Army.”

“The exhibition explores the challenges soldiers face, the help they receive, and the resilience they need to continue on their path.”

Simon Brown, Harry Parker and Gemma Morgan gave a compelling insight into their struggles and achievements at a recent Q&A session at the museum with former soldier and *Declassified* podcast host Michael



Declassified podcast host Michael Coates

Coates (above). The trio detailed the moments their lives changed, the initial impact of their injuries and illnesses, and how they gained strength and purpose through their recoveries.

“One of the main elements of recovery is the importance of having people around, whether that is a medical or support team, or friends and family. The road to recovery is much bumpier if you don’t have that,” says Michael, whose award-winning podcast features a range of military figures and delves into post traumatic growth and human development.

“It was great to hear their testimonies. Everyone’s recovery is different and totally

THE ROAD TO RECOVERY EXHIBITION

The Road to Recovery is free to attend at the National Army Museum, Royal Hospital Road, London and runs until 28 August.

The first floor exhibition takes visitors through the five veterans’ stories with information panels and audio clips detailing their service history, the incidents that changed their lives and their individual recovery journeys.

Audio tracks cover each aspect of their story and large-print booklets are available.

The exhibition’s curator Sophie Stathi (below) interviewed veterans who had been treated at Headley Court along with staff at

the facility to create a compelling insight into the collaborative nature of recovery and how it varies from person to person.

“For all who have suffered a life-changing physical or mental injury, the road to recovery is long, hard and often paved with setbacks,” the exhibition states. “This exhibition explores the challenges soldiers face, the help they receive, and the resilience they need to continue on their path.”

More details about the exhibition can be found at: www.nam.ac.uk/whats-on/road-recovery



The exhibition focuses on service personnel who have suffered life-changing injuries



Details of Simon Brown’s facial injuries

individual to them. Some people don’t want to talk about it but we have learned so much from service personnel who have gone through experiences like these. They have taken action and have impacted other people and society on how disability is now viewed, particularly amputation and PTSD. They are not a victim generation, they are a generation of growth and development, highlighting issues and also the positives that have resulted from that.

“They also engage with research at places like King’s College and Imperial College. They are selfless with their injuries and illnesses and that helps change the future of medicine and other people’s recovery.”



HARRY PARKER

HARRY LOST HIS RIGHT LEG ABOVE THE KNEE AND HIS LEFT LEG BELOW THE KNEE IN AN IED BLAST IN AFGHANISTAN IN 2009

Harry, from Wiltshire was a 23-year-old Captain in the 4th Battalion, The Rifles when he was injured. While leading a foot patrol in Afghanistan in 2009 he stepped on an IED and, as a result, had both legs amputated. He was resuscitated three times on the helicopter journey back to Camp Bastion and had 11 operations at Selly Oak Hospital in Birmingham. He is now an artist and the author of two books.

ON THE INCIDENT

“We were based west of Lashkar Gah and I remember it being very challenging from a leadership, personal and operational point

of view. People were getting hurt. It was a very unpredictable patch. On the day I was injured we had been on an operation and were just withdrawing. I didn’t feel that the situation was lethal. The sun was coming up and it felt sort of relaxed in a way.

“We got to a position where I could see the camp and I thought it was time for breakfast. I walked across the field thinking it would be safe but there was an improvised explosive device dug into it. I just remember being flipped over by the violence of it. In some senses I was quite lucky. I had a traumatic amputation of my left leg and my right leg came off because of infection 10 to 15 days later.”

ON RECOVERY

“I came round in intensive care and the doctors, my parents and friends gradually gave me the news. I remember my mum saying: ‘You’ve still got one testicle’. I was in hospital for six weeks and have never been back. I was driven down to Headley Court and then it was the rehab phase; that was a combination of the physio, the prosthetist and myself – and we were going to learn to walk again together, as a team.

“I was an in-patient for about a year. The process of learning to walk again felt very positive; the chance to be active and overcome something gave me a purpose.

“My injury, for the most part, is something I now feel quite positive about, but there was a moment when I thought: ‘This is it – I’m not going to get any better. You can throw every £80,000 prosthetic at me but at the end of the day I am disabled.’ I found that hard to swallow because when you are going through recovery, you think you are going to get better. For me, there was a sort of plateau and at that moment it became all about family, finding a new community and a new job, a new purpose – that’s what recovery is for me.

“I think the military has got better at allowing people to find new communities, and I was so lucky with my education and family that I had the opportunity to go back and practise art and write. But I know that lots of people in the military don’t have that.

“Managing the injury becomes a day-to-day thing, quite automatic, so it’s about finding new ways to be a part of a community, being an asset to this country and society as a whole. So many of the injured community are contributing and are an asset to society.”





GEMMA MORGAN

GEMMA ISN'T A BLESMA MEMBER. SHE SUFFERS FROM PTSD AS A RESULT OF WHAT SHE WITNESSED DURING HER TIME IN KOSOVO

Gemma, from Surrey, was a 24-year-old Captain in the Royal Logistic Corps when she was deployed to Kosovo in 1998 to observe and verify instances of ethnic cleansing. The horrors she witnessed contributed to her PTSD, which was only diagnosed three years after she left the Army, cutting short a career in which she was tipped to be a future Colonel.

ON THE INCIDENTS

“My job was to verify atrocities taking place which meant building close relationships with the locals. We would pick up on the atrocities and start to film them; these

were people you had built relationships with. There were no normal military boundaries in place – we didn’t go back to the barracks at night and hand over to another patrol, we were staying in a house, in the community, being watched. There was a constant threat.

“Children would come and ask us where their dad or brothers had gone. I would keep getting flashbacks from one particular ambush. I’d seen dead bodies before but this was different, the car had been attacked and there were 60 bullets in the passenger’s side. The nightmares were of a woman who came to the front of the cordon and just fell where we were standing. Her boys were in the car. I still remember the noise, the grief, the howl.”

ON RECOVERY

“I came back home and there was no decompression and no shared experience because I had been the only one from my regiment on that mission. There wasn’t a role for me, so I was given the job of itemising the silver in the Officers’ Mess! I tried to talk about what I had seen but people would stay away from me so I just withdrew. I started self-medicating because I couldn’t sleep – I would drink to be able to sleep and then I’d wake up two hours later. I’d be in the bar earlier and earlier, and there wasn’t anyone to talk to.

“I got some treatment but it was exposure therapy – looking at the photos I had taken in Kosovo. I was put on medication then I was permanently downgraded because



I’d attempted suicide. I didn’t want to kill myself, I just wanted it to stop. I felt betrayed and angry, and that developed into a rage which set my recovery back and meant that it became far more complex, because there were all these layers over the top of what started out as PTSD.

“I left the Army of my own accord – sticking two fingers up – which I regret now. I struggled for years until I could no longer function. My husband sought private help and I tried all sorts of therapy. It wasn’t that the memories went away but I was able to remove some of the fear from them.

“Living with PTSD is exhausting. Everything is a threat you have to cover off. The biggest turning point has been to take a holistic approach – the breathing, the movement and the cognitive piece have been incredibly helpful; the therapy I’d had before missed the spiritual component.”



SIMON BROWN

SIMON LOST THE SIGHT IN BOTH EYES WHEN HE WAS SHOT IN THE FACE WHILST ON OPERATIONS IN IRAQ

Simon, from Leeds, was a Corporal in the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers. He completed one tour of duty in Kosovo and two in Iraq before he suffered a gunshot wound to the face as he was helping recover stranded comrades in a stricken vehicle on operations. The attack resulted in complete loss of sight in his left eye and 80 per cent loss in his right eye. The 26 year old spent 17 days in an induced coma and has had 25 reconstruction and eye operations over the last decade.

Simon now works for Blind Veterans UK and is a coach for Leeds Rhinos physical disability rugby league team.



ON THE INCIDENT

“I was in a patrol of five vehicles. We were getting absolutely peppered by the enemy and we wanted to subdue them and withdraw but the driver said he couldn’t see where he needed to go. The other vehicles pulling off had kicked up all this dust, so I put my head out of the turret and said: ‘Yeah, you’re clear, just go!’ and that’s when I felt the impact. The bullet went into my left cheek and out of my right. I put my thumb in my mouth to keep my palate up and we got out of the killing zone.”

ON RECOVERY

“I woke up in the UK and could hear the doctors saying to my parents that I was blind. I only had light perception. They told me that my left eye had been destroyed and that they didn’t think I’d recover any more vision – that was the dip before my recovery started.

“Because my unit was still away on operations I had to find a new family. I needed to work out what I was going

“WE LOOK AT WHAT WE DON’T HAVE WHEN WE SHOULD REMEMBER WHAT WE DO HAVE. I AM A SURVIVOR”

to do next and my community, my family, and the rugby team that I used to play with all rallied around. The rugby guys used to ‘kidnap’ me on a Saturday, get me drunk and leave me on my dad’s doorstep. It dawned on me that they didn’t see me as a different person and that awakened in me that I was the same person, I just had different challenges. I was lucky that I had a family and a community outside the military to rely on.

“That mindset started in hospital when I was feeling sorry for myself and found out that two of my mates had died in an IED blast. It got me thinking: ‘Why am I sulking? I’m still here.’ We look at what we don’t have when we should remember what we do have – I am a survivor not a victim. It dawned on me that I needed to refocus my life and my recovery around what I still had instead of what I had lost.”