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How the Royal British Legion serves the North West

By Andrew Harris



ABOVE: Poppy Appeals enable the Royal British Legion to provide past and present service personnel and their families with much-needed help. LEFT: Leon Parker and his dog Misty. Facing a brighter future thanks to the Legion.

The Royal British Legion is so much more than many people think it is. Like an iceberg, with only the Remembrance role showing, and away from the public gaze it helps and supports today's men and women in the Armed Services as well as veterans and the families of service personnel past and present in almost all aspects of their daily life.

The scale of what the Legion provides is impressive. Using the latest annual figures –

- 38,771 families contacted the Legion's national helpline and Area offices for assistance
- 7,837 individuals attended a break centre or participated in a Child's



LEFT: Colin Hughes was helped by the Battle Back Centre. BOTTOM LEFT: Colin Hughes helps and supports the Royal British Legion.

simple summary. The ability of the Legion to help is better illustrated by examples –

- Leon Parker from Cheshire is now 24 but was homeless and living on the streets for 3 years after leaving the services. He was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and had been living rough in a tent for 3 months when the Legion found him. The Legion stepped in to help Leon by finding him a place to live, paying the deposit on a property in the Wirral and providing some furniture to start him off.

To cut a long story short, Leon now has a new life, new friends and a new career and hopes to see his daughter who he hasn't seen in nearly a year. He is now working as a chef in a 5-star hotel and explains *"I was at a real low point in my life and without the support of my friends and the Royal British Legion I dread to think what might have happened."*

With Army veterans Mel Pengelly and Simon Parker, Leon went on to organise a marathon hike from the Wirral to Snowdon in North Wales to raise money for the Heswell District Poppy Appeal. The Legion's Community Fundraiser for West Cheshire – Ruth Jones – said *"Leon's story is sadly familiar but the Legion raises money so that we can provide lifelong support for the Armed Forces community by helping those in need."*

- At the age of 70 army veteran Colin Hughes – who grew up in Wavertree but now lives in Birkdale near Southport - says a Royal British Legion course at the charity's renowned Battle Back Centre has given him a new lease of life.

For 10 years Colin was a Piper with the 1st Battalion of the Queen's Own Highlanders based in Aberdeen. He said *"I joined the Army in 1969 and, despite being a musician, was a soldier first so there were exercises and we had to do the same as any other soldier. I went on operations in Northern Ireland and we were basically a foot patrol – the same as everyone else."*

Despite being a keen sportsman Colin has been hampered by injury following a string of operations on his left leg caused by an army injury. He explains *"I fell down a trench on exercise*



Adventure Break

- £5.4 million was released for beneficiaries
- 2,458 families were supported by the Legion's Benefits, Debt and Money Advice services and
- The Legion was active in 28 counties as well as the UK

North West England has always provided disproportionately more personnel for the Armed Forces than

our population – now just over 7 million – would suggest. Recent figures indicate that 20% of the Regular Army – and 25% of the infantry – were recruited here. This is a proud boast but results in our region having a disproportionate need for past and present service personnel and their families to be supported when they need help.

So how does the Royal British Legion help those in need? Needs and responses vary too much to permit a



ABOVE: Dave Griffin - far right - recovered through arts. LEFT: David Street (left) hit rock bottom but after serving just 2 years didn't expect to be helped by Dave Wakeham of the RBL. He now has a new flat, a plum job, girlfriend and confidence. Of the RBL he said 'It's like having a family I never knew I had.'

during a wet, freezing cold night in Germany. It was a six-foot drop in pitch darkness. My last operation was in January 2016 so I go to the gym and swim as often as possible to keep the mobility in the leg." Colin was one of the first veterans to be able to sign up for the course and added "My hearing may be going and my leg is knackered so I have to accept my limitations but this was an opportunity to be with the lads again and enjoy the banter, the understanding and the empathy of the armed forces community."

Colin came away from the Battle Back course buzzing and ready to do more. The multi-activity course has been running for serving personnel since 2010 but veterans like Colin can now join thanks to the Legion having sufficient funds.

- A former gunner from Greater Manchester who served in the Royal Artillery is starring in a theatrical production which has received rave reviews at some of the top theatres in the UK.

Dave Griffin from Timperley starred in *Unspoken* – a production being delivered by Bravo 22 and funded by the Royal British Legion's Recovery-through-arts programme. Dave recently joined the rest of the cast for a special performance in front of an invited audience at the House



LEFT: Victoria Squires is the Family Support Worker for Walking With The Wounded in Greater Manchester. BELOW: The Handy Vans initiative – in Cumbria for now - meets the needs of many people in the armed services community who struggle with basic home repairs, maintenance and adaptations. LEFT BELOW: Neil Pantin provides the new Handy Vans service in Cumbria. BELOW: Doug Farrington is understandably proud of his service all those years ago.

who have similar or shared experiences.”
So far Bravo 22 has helped more than 400 wounded, injured or sick personnel and their work has been enjoyed by more than 400,000 people.



But what of the other services now being provided by the Royal British Legion? We give three examples –

- A new support service has been launched in Greater Manchester to help the families of former servicemen and women. The pilot is a first for Greater Manchester and supports veteran’s partners and families across the county.

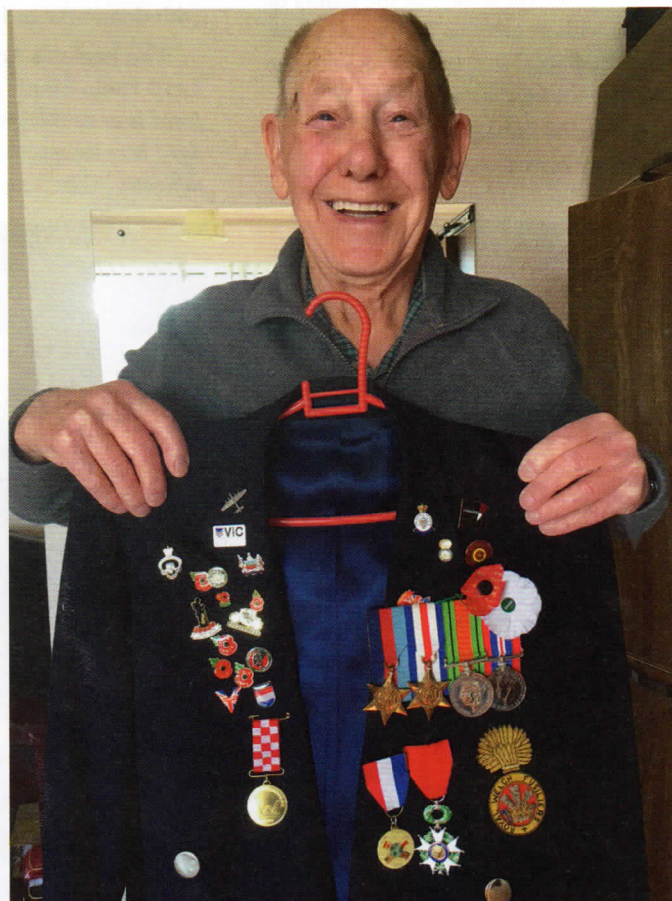
The Royal British Legion has teamed up with Walking With The Wounded (WWTW) charity to tackle issues surrounding mental health, PTSD, domestic violence, finance, housing, employment and education.

WWTW Family Support Worker Victoria Squires explained *“Alongside the Legion we’ve always worked directly with veterans but we recognised that whilst veterans are getting support their families are often left behind – so this is a new pilot scheme to work directly with those*

of Commons before a run at the Sadler’s Wells Theatre in London. The show received rave reviews and standing ovations from sell-out audiences in Liverpool, Birmingham and Edinburgh.

Dave joined the military in 1976 and was deployed to Northern Ireland when, in his final tour in 1987, he was shot in his left leg and evacuated to a London hospital for 3 months then transferred to RAF Headley Court for 18 months of rehabilitation. He explained *“I first got involved with Bravo 22 through an arts project in Manchester, creating a life-size sculpture to summarize the events of 1987. But being a singer, taking on this role in Unspoken has been the realisation of a dream for me. Art has been a massive factor in helping me to recover from the scars of battle.”*

The Legion’s Area Manager for Greater Manchester Alison Bunn commented *“The Legion’s arts programme, including Bravo 22, gives former members of the armed forces the opportunity to learn new skills, improve confidence and come together with other individuals*





ABOVE: They were often very young. Doug joined in 1943 aged 17 and left in 1947. ABOVE RIGHT: Jim Healy from Withington in Manchester denies being a hero – but he is. BELOW: Jim Healy – top right - when young about 1944.

families and improve their outcomes.” Victoria continued “A lot of families I’ve met need emotional support . . . but I also get involved in practical issues such as homelessness and I’ve helped to house two families already in the first weeks of the project. There’s no better feeling than being able to help an entire family.”

• The Royal British Legion Admiral Nurses offer specialist support, information and advice to the carers of people with dementia. The service has been developed in partnership with the national charity Dementia UK.

To qualify for support the carer or person with dementia has to be a



beneficiary of the royal British Legion – which includes anyone who has served in the British Armed Forces, their family and their carers. The Legion recognise that due to our ageing population there is a need for further investment in dementia care for the armed forces community. There are almost 200 Admiral Nurses in the UK working in a variety of care settings and they work on some of the most complex cases and provide expert one-to-one practical, clinical and emotional support. Admiral Nurses focus on the needs of the person with dementia and the carer.

The Legion’s Admiral nurse National Lead Paula Smith says “I feel immensely proud to be an Admiral Nurse because each day I have the opportunity to make a real difference.” The Legion is the biggest

employer of Admiral Nurses. They don’t just treat admirals!

• In February 2019 the Royal British Legion launched a Handy Vans Service for Cumbria. The aim is to provide a free service for past and present armed forces personnel, veterans, their dependents and carers who are eligible to help them with home repairs and maintenance to allow them to remain safe and secure in their homes. Help includes:

- Household safety
- Changing light bulbs and tap washers
- Putting up shelves and grab rails
- Fitting smoke alarms & carbon monoxide detectors
- Fitting and changing door locks & other security features
- Building access ramps & storage sheds to house electrically powered vehicles provided by the Royal British Legion
- Installing care phones

The Handy Vans Service in Cumbria is provided by 37-year old Neil Pantin from Carlisle who is the first fitter to be employed by the Legion in the County. There are now 23 RBL Handy Vans across the UK. People wanting to know more or use any of the 23 services are invited to contact the team on 0808 802 8080.

It is impossible to describe all that the Royal British Legion do which is, like most of an iceberg, invisible. What will be highly visible, however, are events to mark the 75th anniversary of the allied sea-borne invasion of mainland





ABOVE: The Royal British Legion has just celebrated 5 years of its 'Pop-In' Centre in Liverpool – the first of 16 throughout the UK. BELOW: Landing Craft Assault as operated by Jim Healy aged 19.

Europe which led to the defeat of the Nazi regime 11 months later – probably the last to be attended by those who were there. It was the largest sea-borne invasion in history involving – at the outset – more than 5,000 ships and vessels, 11,000 aircraft and 160,000 allied troops of whom more than 50,000 died in little over a month of fighting. As well as soldiers, sailors and airman from Britain, Canada and the United States, Australia, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, the Netherlands, France, Greece, New Zealand, Norway, Poland and what was then Rhodesia also suffered terrible losses. Cynics may wonder why we should still remember



them but the freedom, peace and prosperity of Europe – including the UK – was won by their sacrifice. It is their legacy.

The flagship memorial event will be up to 300 Normandy veterans sailing to France on the Fred Olsen ship Boudicca. The voyage will provide a safe passage – this time – with a fully supported travel package departing Dover on the 2nd June taking in events in Poole and Portsmouth before crossing the English Channel so the veterans can attend the commemorations in Normandy on the 6th June – the day of the invasion.

93-year old Doug Farrington from Oldham will be joining the ship. He signed up all those years ago *“To stop Hitler! I had a job to do and I did it – and I’m glad we gave people back their freedom to laugh, dance and enjoy themselves – which is what I do. I go out and dance the night away. What’s wrong with that? But under Hitler you wouldn’t have been able to.”*

94-year old Jim Healy from Manchester was Coxswain of a Landing Assault Craft carrying Canadian troops

onto Juno beach. Aged just 19 he spent ten days on the beach after his landing craft was damaged in rough seas. He said *“I still don’t know how many of those soldiers we dropped off died and which ones survived which is sad for me. I often think about them; we offer our condolences at various times each year and I know the Canadians suffered heavy losses on Juno Beach but I never knew them really which is quite hard.”*

How can you not remember sacrifice like that? The Royal British Legion is needed on so many levels. Please support them so they can support those who are hurting or in need. Please visit www.britishlegion.org.uk or call 0808 802 8080.

Andrew E. Harris – mail@andrewharris.co.uk - gratefully acknowledges the help provided by Jon Keighren of the Royal British Legion in the preparation of this article. All the images are courtesy of the Legion.

