



Rebuilding
lives after
sight loss

Debrief

Your impact on the lives of blind veterans

SPRING 2020



Meet our oldest blind veteran

104-year-old Ron Freer, p.6

INSIDE:

p.4 Helping Ralph out of isolation

p.12 March For Veterans

p.20 Sharing veterans' unseen stories

In this edition

Welcoming Ralph	4
Remembrance 2019	6
Meet nurse Eirian	8
A special anniversary	9
Reaching more communities	10
Will you March For Veterans?	12
Drena's lasting tribute	14
A 'daunting challenge'	16
A new-forged friendship	17
Getting the gang back together	18
Preserving their memories	20
A good night's sleep	21
A gift that keeps on giving	22
Events near you	23
Weekly lottery	24



How your gifts are spent

33% Care centre services

This includes the upkeep of our Brighton and Llandudno centres, where blind veterans can attend induction weeks and receive a range of training and support.

22% Welfare services

Your donations help us be there for veterans in their communities.

17% Supporting independent living

Your gifts help provide the training and equipment for blind veterans to live independently.

2% Managing investments

As a responsible charity, we have invested in commercial properties to ensure we manage the money you provide effectively.

4%

Reaching more veterans

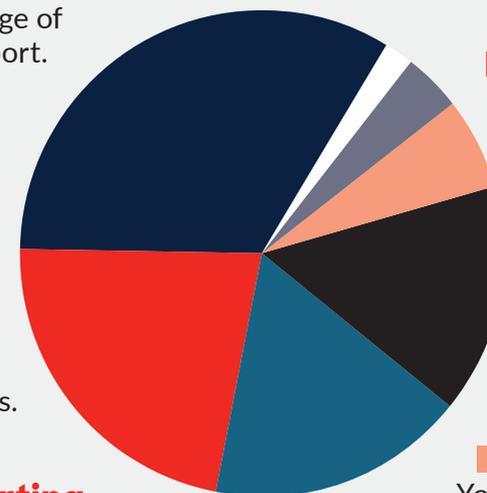
We currently only help 1 in 10 of the veterans who qualify for our support. You're helping us reach out to more.

6% Housing

You help us care for older veterans who can no longer live independently.

15% Engagement and marketing

For every £1 we raise, 83% is spent on helping blind veterans.



You helped Ralph feel '10 feet tall'

Ralph Dines, a former wireless operator and weapons trainer in the Royal Signals, found life a real struggle after losing his sight. As Ralph, 84, explains:

“I was devastated when told I was losing my sight. I had my own business still and had been driving for 56 years all over Europe. It was all over right then.

“It was particularly hard in 2013 because my sight became a lot worse at the same time as my wife was diagnosed with terminal cancer. The next two years were two years of struggling.

“I can't say how much the support of Blind Veterans UK means to me. All my family say that I'm a different person now.

“I've been to Brighton for my induction week when you learn about all the different tools you can use. I also went back for a driving week last year. I never thought I could drive again after losing my sight, but tearing around a racetrack in a go-cart at 40mph is one



of the best experiences I've had in years!”

Thanks to supporters like you, Blind Veterans UK provided Ralph with equipment and adaptations to make his day-to-day home life easier.

“I use the talking microwave Blind Veterans UK gave me every day. They also gave me a special magnifier that can blow up documents to a huge size.”

Ralph has previously marched with his fellow blind veterans on Remembrance

Sunday and remembers:

“It is absolutely fantastic. The crowd is 8 or 10 deep and when they start cheering and clapping you feel 10 feet tall, and that's with me sitting in a wheelchair. It makes you hugely proud, especially to be marching with your fellow blind veterans.”

With a gift today you could help provide another blind veteran like Ralph with a talking microwave which costs £358.

“I was in a deep dark place after losing my sight and my wife had passed away, but Blind Veterans UK dragged me out.”

Ralph Dines



Ralph is cooking up a storm with the new talking microwave he received after visiting our centre.



On Remembrance Sunday, Ron was part of a Blind Veterans UK marching contingent of 200 paying tribute to their fallen comrades.

A centenarian at the Cenotaph

The oldest veteran to attend November's Remembrance ceremony at the Cenotaph was a blind veteran – Ron Freer, who at 104 was born in the same year that our charity was founded.

The commemorations are especially significant for Ron, as he lost his own father in 1918 during the Battle of the Somme.

Ron joined the Army in 1931 and, on the outbreak of the Second World War, was posted to Hong Kong to defend the then British colony. In late 1941, the Japanese attacked Hong Kong including Fort Stanley, where Ron was based. After 18 days of fighting, his garrison surrendered against overwhelming odds.

He became a Japanese prisoner of war (POW) and remained so until the end of the war. It was this four-year ordeal that led to Ron losing his sight, because of the malnutrition he suffered in the camp.

After returning to the UK, Ron was supported by Blind Veterans UK (then St Dunstan's) and has gone on to live a full, happy and independent life. As he explains:

“Having lost my sight as well as my hearing, my future seemed very dismal and I didn't want to think about what lay ahead. This was until I was taken to Blind Veterans UK.

“I was given my confidence back bit by bit through training such as learning

Braille. My main objective, as a man in his early thirties, was to find employment. After I married, I had the opportunity of opening a new post office and my wife and I continued to operate it for 25 years. This was all thanks to Blind Veterans UK, who helped me to purchase the property.”

On the big day, Ron was joined by his fellow blind veterans and our Chief Executive, Major General (Rtd) Nick Caplin CB, spoke of the

importance of the commemorations to our charity:

“Remembrance Sunday is a very poignant time for our blind veterans as we reflect on the sacrifice and service of all members of the Armed Forces.”

“Blind Veterans UK was founded in 1915 and today we support more blind veterans than ever before in our history, providing them with the support and training to rebuild their lives after sight loss.”



“I would like to say a big thank you to everyone who has made the work of Blind Veterans UK possible. It is an extraordinary charity, which makes an unbelievable difference to the lives of veterans like me, and our families too.”

Ron Freer

‘A wonderful place to work’

Nurse Eirian Davies explains why she feels a special affinity with the blind veterans that, thanks to your support, she cares for at our Llandudno centre.

“From the start I had an affinity with the centre. I’ve served for 20 years in the Army reserves, and was deployed to Afghanistan with 203 Welsh Field Hospital, so there’s that camaraderie with people who have also served in the forces.

“To me, working at Llandudno is the essence of what nursing is. It’s about sitting down with our veterans, having a chat and a cup of tea, and making them feel special.

“It’s the stories they tell you too. I remember reading stories about things like D-Day and Monte Casino at school, and then all of a sudden I’m meeting these heroes and heroines. I think it’s amazing that the centre offers Military Week, when everyone can dress up and celebrate together. This Remembrance Sunday, we all went to the Cenotaph in Llandudno and held the Act of Remembrance together.

“I like that it’s a home from home for those we look after, and it’s just got that comforting feel. Our veterans feel safe here, which to us is the highest accolade you can get as all the staff think the world of them. Everyone’s smiling and happy as well, and nothing is too much trouble when it comes to looking after a veteran.

“This is a unique place for our veterans and I am in awe at how much it focuses on their needs.”



Nurse Eirian especially enjoys listening to our blind veterans’ recollections of military life.



Victory Over Blindness



Billy Baxter (centre) was enormously proud to follow in the footsteps of soldiers who lost their sight in WW1.

To commemorate the 1st anniversary of the opening of the Victory Over Blindness statue at Manchester Piccadilly Station, a team of blind veterans recreated the scene the statue depicts and marched proudly through the city. Billy Baxter was one of them:

“As a war-blinded veteran it fills me with pride knowing that the image is a reminder of my own journey,

and how I’ve rebuilt my life. It also symbolises trust. It shows how we lean on each other and it’s about peer support and teamwork.

“The march was quite profound. It brought people to tears. People asked questions and we were able to tell the statue’s story. The statue symbolises what this charity is about. It’s an image that people can immediately identify with Blind Veterans UK.”

 To mark the 1st anniversary of Victory Over Blindness, we have produced a range of exclusive merchandise, including a silver commemorative coin for £75. Visit blindveterans.org.uk/memorabilia to find out more.

You're helping us reach more blind veterans

Last September saw the launch of an exciting new initiative for Blind Veterans UK – a pilot community training week held in Weston-super-Mare, Somerset.

As so many blind veterans can find it difficult to travel or be away from home, we wanted to see if we could provide them with the same level of training and support that we do in our Brighton and Llandudno centres. So our team held the week and invited nine blind veterans from across the South West to attend.

The training was based around what veterans have told us they most need: help with IT, mobility and cooking. Ron Zaple, a veteran of the Royal Fleet Auxillary who served during the Suez Crisis, was particularly pleased to receive white cane training.

"I already used a stick, but people just thought I had a bad leg. With the white cane, people can see you're blind so they'll step out of the way.

"When you're blind, crossing the road can be a harrowing experience.

During the week we learned how to cross the road, walk along the pavement and go up and down stairs with your cane. It might not sound very much, but it's a hell of a lot.

"I also learned how to use a new soup maker they gave me. It does everything for you, so you're not worried about burning yourself or spilling it. I've already used it quite a lot. You can put any old leftovers in there and in about 18 minutes it comes out as lovely soup!"

Helen Couling, our South West regional Manager, said:

"As the number of blind veterans we support grows, there is a higher demand for training. Running programmes in the community means we can deliver training quicker and change the lives of more blind veterans."



Ron was one of nine blind veterans who attended the pilot week in Weston-super-Mare.

None of our work with blind veterans in their communities would be possible without the kind donations of our supporters. Thank you.





Join the team raising money for Blind Veterans UK

This March sees the 2nd annual March For Veterans. There are lots of exciting ways for you to march and raise funds for Blind Veterans UK, either individually or as part of a team.

March virtually for veterans

Why not take on the challenge of walking 100 miles during the month of March for blind veterans? That's only just over three miles a day! You can do your marching wherever and whenever you want, as your schedule and the weather allows. All you need to do is link up your fitness app to your giving page to keep track of your miles and donations.



You won't have to get your feet muddy if you do a virtual march for veterans.

March with others for veterans

This year there are 14 organised 10-mile walks around the UK to choose from, so wherever you live you shouldn't be too far away to join us. It's a great opportunity to meet blind veterans and join fellow supporters while raising much-needed funds. Alternatively, you could hold your own March for Veterans! Visit the link opposite for more information.



Lots of your fellow supporters had a great time doing last year's march.

Meet Seb the Super Fundraiser

Eight-year-old Seb and his dad were two of the many who took part in our March for Veterans challenge in 2019. Seb went above and beyond and raised over £700 in sponsorship for taking part in the 10-mile walk last March.

Never one to shy away from a challenge, Seb said that taking part in the march "meant helping people who can't see and giving them a chance to be supported and experience everything that everyone else does in life."



Seb showed just what can be achieved when you put your mind to it.

His dad, Dan, who has worked with Blind Veterans UK for eight years, says:

"We have all been amazed at how much Seb managed to raise. Every donation he received made him smile as he knew each pound would mean so much to one of the veterans at Blind Veterans UK.

"Seb loves helping anyone in any way he can and so when he heard about it he couldn't wait to start! He wanted to do it again the next day, although personally I'm quite thankful we didn't have to!"

Could you be a superstar like Seb? Visit the link below and register today.

 To register or find an event near you, please visit blindveterans.org.uk/march. Thank you.

A lasting memorial

When Drena Brown lost her husband Michael in 2016 after 62 years of marriage, she wanted to create a lasting memorial to the 'love of my life' in a place they both held very dear.

"Michael lost his sight in 2005, and Blind Veterans UK made such a difference to his life. The support he received was immense. His Community Support Worker equipped him with tools that gradually gave Michael back his independence.

"He received a CCTV reader so he was able to read his own letters without relying on me. It was such a boost to his confidence doing something on his own without my help. Michael was also provided with software to allow the computer to enlarge text so he was able to use the computer again.

"Michael had such a great time at the Brighton centre. One of my favourite memories is him singing with the Brighton Male Welsh Choir at the chapel. So when I started

thinking about a memorial to him, the centre seemed the natural place.

"I got in touch with the team and we decided on a bench with a beautiful view overlooking the sea. It couldn't be more appropriate as Michael was a sailor. He will be at peace there."

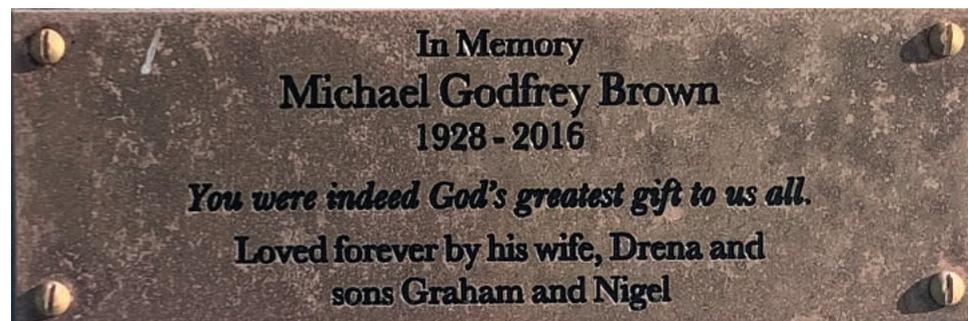
"I feel it is an honour that I have a lasting memorial at the Blind Veterans UK's Brighton Centre. My husband and I have such fond memories here – and now I have a place to come to reminisce. I cannot wait for my sons who live in America to come over and see it.



This is the bench facing the sea at Brighton which Drena dedicated to Michael, who served in the Royal Navy on HSM Rotherham.

"I would definitely encourage other supporters who have given in memory of a loved one, to consider a lasting memorial with Blind Veterans UK. I feel very honoured to have a bench

in Michael's name, and am sure others will get a similar feeling if they do the same."



Please get in touch if you would like to give a gift in memory and create a lasting memorial to a loved one or visit blindveterans.org.uk/giftsinmemory.

Taking on the Atlantic

A four-man rowing crew, is taking on an incredible challenge for Blind Veterans UK – rowing the 3,000 mile breadth of the Atlantic Ocean. The Ancient Mariners team is skippered by Guy Munnoch who says:

“My wife and I have collectively served over 35 years in the military and our respective families have been steeped in military service over many generations. The charity’s backdrop of ‘Accept; Adjust; Achieve’ – for me, says it all. Blind Veterans UK is my natural charity of choice and I can think of no finer tribute to those veterans who have so selflessly served our country.”

The Ancient Mariners are one of 30 teams from across the globe taking part in the Atlantic Challenge, which is the world’s toughest annual rowing race. Guy and his crew; John Moorhouse, Mike Winn, and Steve Hughes are aiming to complete the race in 60 days.

If they make it the quartet will be world record breakers – they’ll be the oldest team of four to row across any ocean with a combined age of 257 years.



The four-man team are taking on a huge challenge for Blind Veterans UK.

A bond across the generations

Sue Davies volunteered with Blind Veterans UK to help veterans facing isolation.



You can watch a video of Sue and Evelyn together at blindveterans.org.uk/evelyn

Sue soon found she was enjoying the experience as much as the person she was visiting, Evelyn, a former driver in the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force.

“Sometimes we go to Sainsbury’s for a weekly shop, or to a boutique to select a new outfit. It helps me to see what challenges someone with sight loss faces. Reading sell-by dates on food, for instance, is something I had taken for granted. Choosing a birthday card is so much more complicated when you can’t see categories on the shelf or read the greetings. Spending time with Evelyn is fun, makes me a better person and I always look forward to our visits.”

Evelyn looks forward to Sue’s visits just as much as Sue looks forward to visiting her:

“Sue is a real diamond. We get on so well together and always end up having a laugh and a cup of tea.”

Sue would encourage anybody who has a few spare hours to get involved.

“It’s so rewarding. A lot of people live with isolation and I hope people get involved with volunteering, as everyone has a neighbour living a few doors down who may be lonely.”



 Visit blindveterans.org.uk/volunteer to find out about opportunities near you.

A century of reunions

The very first reunion of blind veterans took place in 1920 in Bristol. Since then, these invaluable events have been attended and enjoyed by generations, who have relished the opportunity to meet up with old pals, sharing stories and words of encouragement... along with the occasional beverage.

On this page you can see pictures of some of our earliest reunions, while the reunions on the next page, with photos taken by blind veteran Mark Pile, all took place in 2019.



Blind Veterans packed out the Royal Albert hall for a 1935 reunion.



They might be more comfortable out of the rain. Belfast 1926.



This event, in Bristol in 1925, certainly drew a crowd.



Say 'cheese'. Early Bournemouth blind veterans posing for a photo.



These veterans loved getting together at the Bristol reunion in July.



Exeter blind veterans relished the chance to wear their 'Sunday best'.



Cornwall blind veterans enjoyed a lovely spread.



Here's the Cardiff reunion.



A lovely meal in Swindon.



Portsmouth veterans said it with flowers.

Sharing our veterans' Unseen Stories

We recently launched an exciting new podcast series *Unseen Stories*, where you can listen to the reminiscences and experiences of blind veterans past and present.



Fred (left) shared his story before sadly passing away in 2006.

In the first episode Fred Bentley remembers the D-Day landings, during which he lost his sight:

“There was so much happening; men were dropping like flies, treading on mines, getting caught on barbed wires. You’re so busy and buoyed up for it that the fear goes. No one needs to tell you to board, no one needs to tell you to get up the beach. It’s horrendous looking back on it, but you do these things.

“I was lumbered with a pal of mine who couldn’t swim. I said hang on to my pack and I’ll get you ashore. In the infantry you have one buddy. If he goes out and he’s only got the price of the pint he’ll get two halves; he’ll only have half and give you the other. That’s the friendship you form. And quite frankly, sometimes he’ll save your life.”

Following his injury, with the support of Blind Veterans UK, Fred went on to build a successful marriage and career in the car trade. Looking back he said:

“I haven’t had a bad life. No complaints anyhow. If I was born again I’d do the same thing.”

You help support cutting-edge research

A number of blind veterans recently collaborated with scientists at the University of Oxford, as part of an important research study looking at how visual impairments affect sleep and biological rhythms.

Our body’s internal biological clock, or circadian clock, enables the body’s daily cycles to synchronise with the Earth’s solar day, meaning that the body remains alert during the day and feels ready to sleep at night. But losing one’s sight can completely throw out these rhythms, leading to insomnia and disorientation.

Additionally, sleep and circadian rhythms disruption is an underlying symptom in many of the most challenging diseases of our time, including cardiovascular disease, cancer and neuropsychiatric diseases. The participation of our blind veterans in the study will allow scientists to monitor their sleep, looking at a variety of psychological and biological markers.

The study could lead to advances in the diagnosis and treatment of sleep and circadian rhythm disruption – which in turn could help generations of blind veterans adjust to life with sight loss.



Dr Renata Gomes (left), Chief Scientific Officer at Blind Veterans UK, working in the Oxford University labs.



You can hear Fred’s and more *Unseen Stories* at blindveterans.org.uk/unseen-stories

Leave a lasting legacy for blind veterans

Gifts in Wills make up 50% of our voluntary income

After discovering the Free Wills Network through Blind Veterans UK, Simon Brown felt it was the perfect opportunity to get his affairs in order.

"I think if you're even thinking about making a Will, then it's definitely time to make one. It's vital to make sure your loved ones are looked after and it has really given me peace of mind.

"The whole process was painless. The solicitor talked me through it and I felt at ease. They didn't force me into making any decisions I was unsure about and everything was explained really clearly."

The Free Wills Network allows blind veterans and our supporters to have a Will written for free by a solicitor in their local area.

"Sadly, there are 50,000 veterans across the UK that still need support. That's why Simon is so acutely aware of the importance of gifts in Wills to Blind Veterans UK:

"These amazing gifts and the people behind them give veterans like me a lifeline for years to come."



For more information contact Jamie Rae on **020 7616 7953** or jamie.rae@blindveterans.org.uk

Events near you

There are lots of exciting opportunities coming up for you to challenge yourself and have fun while raising much-needed funds for Blind Veterans UK

Bath Half Marathon

15 March



Brighton Marathon

19 April



London Abseil

23 May



Brighton Armed Forces Day

28 June



Brighton 100 mile challenge

12 - 13 September



Find out more about these events, and others besides, at blindveterans.org.uk/events

Win big like Mrs Stanford



At just £1 per entry, you could win big by entering our exciting Weekly Lottery with a top prize of £500, with all proceeds going towards helping ex-Service men and women living with sight loss. If you take part, you will automatically be entered into our Superdraw with the chance of winning £15,000 four times a year. Winner Mrs Stanford, shared how she felt on winning:

"I am absolutely thrilled as it's my birthday in three days time – although I'm going to be spending the winnings on my granddaughters. It's wonderful to know that by taking part I'm supporting Blind Veterans UK, who my late husband Stanley had such high regard for."



To enter visit weeklylottery.org.uk/blindveterans.

WEEKLY LOTTERY



BeGambleAware.org[®]

You must be 18 or over and live in Great Britain to play or claim a prize. Full Terms and Conditions apply, please see weeklylottery.org.uk/blindveterans/lottery-rules for more details.

