

Your impact on the lives of blind veterans

Debrief

Winter 2025



Heroes - then and now



Rebuilding
lives after
sight loss

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Welcome



Adrian Bell CEO, Blind Veterans UK

Dear supporter,

Welcome to the first 2025 issue of Debrief. I hope you enjoy the many stories of courage and determination, which are only possible because of your support. The feeling of warmth and joy on every page is just what we all need after a long winter.

This is a particularly special edition for me because of the pride I feel in our blind veterans when I look back at the photos on page four of Remembrance 2024.

I felt honoured to accompany our blind veterans on the march at the Cenotaph in London. Marching alongside Second World War veteran, Michael, the feeling of pride and camaraderie was incredible. Amazingly, at 100 years old, Michael marched every step.

Truly remarkable things happen every day at this charity, but still no one could believe it when, over the summer, two blind

veterans were reunited completely by chance after 70 years. The emotional meeting took place at our Llandudno Centre and you can read all it about on page 15.

We're also delighted to share the stories of some of our intrepid supporters on page eight, including Kelso and Danny, who despite their advanced years, have taken on unbelievably impressive feats to raise funds for Blind Veterans UK. Their dedication to our charity moves me to the core, as does that of all our supporters.

Thank you so much for your continued generosity. Our life-changing work happens because of you.

With my very best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Adrian B.' with a stylized flourish at the end.

Adrian Bell
Chief Executive



Our contingent at this year's march at the Cenotaph

Marching for our comrades

The National Day of Remembrance proved once again to be one of the most important events in our calendar.

This year marked memorable anniversaries for our veterans, not least the 80th anniversary of key Second World War battles in 1944, and the 25th anniversary of Kosovo.

Our blind veterans up and down the country attended their local Remembrance services to pay their respects to old comrades and friends who perished in battle, and 50 wreaths were laid on behalf of our charity.

Also, a proud group of more than 80 blind veterans and guides took part in the televised march to the Cenotaph in London.

Our contingent in London was initially meant to be led by two Second World War veterans, Michael and George, but sadly,

George, a D-Day veteran, passed away just weeks before the parade. However, two of his granddaughters marched with us in his honour, carrying photographs of their grandfather.

Meanwhile, Michael, who's 100 years old, was overjoyed to be able march for the very first time, leading our contingent alongside Falklands veteran Stephen, and our President Colin Williamson and Chief Executive Adrian Bell. You can read about Michael's experience over the page.

Stephen joined the Parachute Regiment in 1982 and was sent out to the Falklands almost immediately. During the Battle of Goose Green, he was shot twice through the head and woke on the ambulance ship to find he was totally blind. He started receiving our support a few years later.

After the event, he told us: "Sadly I lost a number of colleagues during the Falklands campaign, so I was thinking of them. It's so important that the sacrifices of those who died serving this country are not forgotten."

Our centres in Llandudno and Rustington hosted special military weeks which included visits to museums and military bases, tea dances, equipment demonstrations, and formal military dinners.

Under the theme of D-Day 80, our Llandudno Centre displayed portraits of D-Day veterans throughout the week and were also proud to host Second World War blind veterans, Mary and Arthur, who laid wreaths at the Remembrance Sunday ceremony in the town centre.

Joined by blind veteran, Anthony, who lost his sight in Afghanistan, together they led more than 20 blind veterans and staff on the Llandudno march.

Following the ceremony Mary, who turned 99 in December, said: "It was a great honour to lay the wreath and a most touching experience. There were so many people I knew who went in the war."

At our Rustington Centre, a wreath was laid, along with crosses of Remembrance, on the Garden of Remembrance in the cemetery close to our former centre in Brighton. The memorial bears the name



Blind veterans Anthony and Mary laid wreaths.

and cap badge of 350 veterans at the large St Dunstan's plot. A cross was also placed beside each of the 230 individual headstones.

Blind veteran Nancy, who's 103 years old, laid a wreath at our war memorial in Rustington while her fellow blind veterans, staff and volunteers marched proudly through the village.

Nancy said, "It's important to me that as long as there is breath in my body, I will go to a war memorial, to a service of Remembrance, and I will lay a wreath."



Blind veteran Nancy with her wreath

Michael's proud march... at 100 years old

The oldest of our group of blind veterans joining the National Remembrance Sunday march in London this year was centenarian Michael.

Michael marched at the Cenotaph for the first time with more than 40 other blind veterans supported by Blind Veterans UK.

Following the march, he said: "What an amazing experience, I've never felt anything quite like it. **The crowds cheering for us as we made our way around made me feel ten feet tall.**



Michael outside his home before the big day



From left: Our CEO Adrian with Michael and his son, Eddie, at the Cenotaph in London

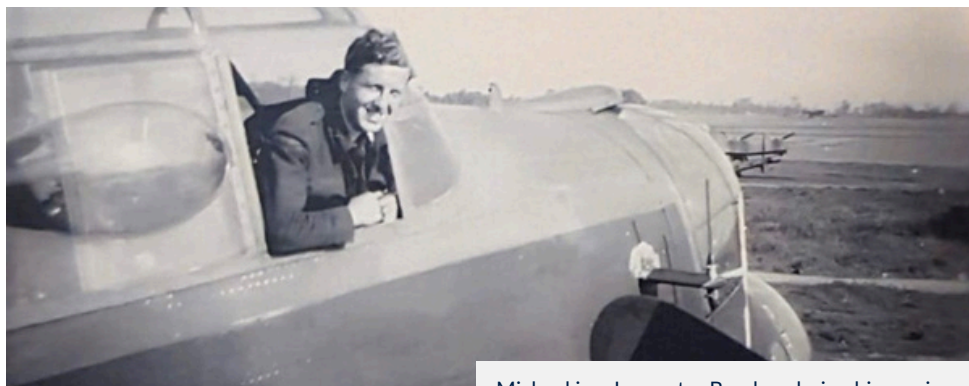
"I'm so proud to have finally marched here in my 100th year. And it was all the sweeter knowing that my wife and family were watching me on TV."

Michael was called up for war service in 1943, joining the Royal Air Force. He passed through RAF Cardington and underwent basic training at Skegness, before being selected for training as an aircraft mechanic. He served with 61 Squadron.

Remembrance is a solemn time for Michael. As a young RAF mechanic in the Second World War, he worked mainly on Lancaster Bombers and saw many a crew set off in their aircraft never to return.

He says: "When I was in the Air Force, we used to get a brand new Lancaster arrive and a new crew on their very first operation. Sometimes on that very first flight they'd lose their lives; they wouldn't come back.

"I used to service all the engines and run the Lancaster out. I remember one night we were all ready to go and after one of the Lancasters had taken off he fired a red ferry light, which is the sign of danger. He landed straight away but as soon as he did, it blew up with about 10 tonnes of bombs on it. The explosion left a great crater, but the miracle of it was that the rear gunner survived.



Michael in a Lancaster Bomber during his service

"As a mechanic I wasn't meant to be flying the planes, but I did so quite often. It was illegal, of course, but I remember the crew would always say that if the mechanic is happy to fly with us then he must be pretty confident in the plane!"

Michael lost his sight much later in life due to age-related macular degeneration and glaucoma. He says: "My sight started to go gradually because of the glaucoma at first. But I remember having just driven back from the west country, I got pneumonia and had to go to hospital and after that my vision had got a lot worse."

"I was driving until I was 94. That's the thing I miss the most since losing my sight. I'd driven since I was a young man in the RAF and it felt like I'd lost my independence."

Fortunately, Michael found out about Blind Veterans UK and started receiving our support in 2020.

He says: "Joining Blind Veterans UK has been ever so helpful to me. Every month or so we meet up as a group in the local area and all the staff are so helpful and kind. Being given the opportunity to march at the Cenotaph with Blind Veterans UK was fantastic. I felt ever so proud."

Chief Executive of Blind Veterans UK, Adrian Bell marched alongside Michael and said: "I was honoured to march with Michael and our group of over 40 blind veterans at the Cenotaph this year. I know many others have participated in poignant ceremonies in communities nationwide."



Michael holding our wreath

Fundraisers reach new heights

Here are just a few of the wonderful stories of determination and courage that we have received from our wonderful fundraisers.

Kelso's courageous climb

Supporter Kelso has successfully climbed the 153-foot mast of the Cutty Sark to raise money for our blind veterans – at the age of 90.

Kelso says: "It's amazing to think that I did this at 90 years and six months; the oldest person ever to climb the rigging. The highlight was reaching the yard arm and walking out to the most spectacular view over London."

Kelso, who completed National Service with the RAF, began to support our charity when his son was in the Army, serving in Northern Ireland, Bosnia, Kenya and Iraq.

He says: "Watching the annual Remembrance Day parade at the Cenotaph, I get quite emotional when the blind veterans march past with their heads held high. I'm full of admiration for them and for the people who help these ex-Servicemen and women to rebuild their lives after sight loss."

Kelso's courageous climb has raised over £1,700 for the charity. Thank you, Kelso!

Danny's daring jump

Blind veteran and former-paratrooper, Danny, made one final parachute jump at the age of 88 to thank us for our support – raising more than £2,200.

Danny says, "It was great, but I won't be doing it again! It was completely different to my jumps 70 years ago. My legs were wobbly for two days afterwards - I managed to use that as an excuse to get out of all sorts of household chores!"

Danny enlisted into the Army at age 17, in 1954, and served for five years as a heavy machine gunner in 1 Para Battalion. He says, "Joining the Army was my way of honouring my father who was a sergeant in the Royal Welsh Fusiliers. He was killed at Dunkirk during the Second World War."

Diagnosed with macular degeneration a few years ago, as Danny's sight deteriorated he and his wife, Carol, felt desperately helpless and alone. He says, "When I first lost my sight, it felt like there was nothing left that I could do." Carol adds, "We have no children or family left and we were really struggling. We didn't know what to do."

It was Carol who found our details online and, just two weeks later, they were visited at home by one of our local support workers. Carol says, "Knowing somebody's there for us makes a world of difference because I can't describe just how isolated we both felt."

Thanks to you and your support providing specialist aids and equipment, within weeks Danny was beginning to feel he had his life back. Now he just wants to help another veteran in the same boat. He says, "We've never looked back. Getting in touch with this charity is the best thing we've ever done."

If you're inspired by Kelso and Danny and would like to find your challenge of a lifetime, we've got loads of ideas at blindveterans.org.uk/fundraisingideas

Team veteran intrepid trek

In September, nine intrepid blind veterans set off from Eastbourne in Sussex on the South Coast Ultra Challenge - managing to take on distances from 25km to 100km.

The team persevered through the most gruelling conditions to raise money and help spread the word about our work. Prior heavy rain had left the ground extremely muddy and slippery, making it almost insurmountable for vision impaired walkers.

Blind veteran Wayne, who served for 18 years with the Royal Armoured Corps, managed to walk the full 100km in 24 hours and 30 minutes. The 65-year-old used to walk long distances while in the Army but hadn't done anything like this since losing his sight.



The team pause for a selfie during their challenge on the south coast

Wayne says: "It was tough but worthwhile. Not only were we facing the hills, but it was slippery underfoot which was physically and mentally draining. At the age of 65, to take on and conquer 100km is a very proud moment for me. My feet were a bit shredded, and my muscles were tired, but it was fantastic.

"I want to thank Blind Veterans UK as, without them, I'd never have achieved this. I hope to be back again next year."

The team set out to raise enough money for the cost of a rehab week stay at our Rustington Centre as they want to see more veterans benefit from the same support they've received. We're delighted to say that they smashed their £600 target and the money's still coming in...

If you'd like to support them, visit justgiving.com/page/bvuk-ultra24

DO IT!

FOR VETERANS

Get involved!

If the amazing stories we've shared in this issue have inspired you, why not set a date to Do It For Veterans. Here are some opportunities for you to get involved in 2025.

Resolutions

Take part in Give It Up and make a positive change for yourself while raising vital funds for our veterans. Resolve to try something new – sign up to a skydive, marathon or one of many UK or overseas challenges.

blindveterans.org.uk/resolutions2025

VE Day 80

This 8 May, join the nation in celebrating the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War - and the precious freedom our brave veterans fought for. Organise a Brew Up street party or a Dress Up, or how about getting creative with the number 80? You could sell 80 cakes, or even walk, run or cycle 80km over the month. For more ideas, visit

blindveterans.org.uk/VE80doit



Armed Forces Month

Join us in June to mark key dates in the military calendar; D-Day, the end of the Falklands War, Reservists Day and National Armed Forces Day. Visit our website for a host of ideas to help you commemorate and celebrate, while raising vital funds to support our blind veterans.

blindveterans.org.uk/afm25



Planning to Remember

Take on an activity or plan an event from 1-12 November to make sure all those who sacrificed their lives for our country are not forgotten, while raising funds for veterans across the UK who are struggling with sight loss. blindveterans.org.uk/plan

More ideas

Visit our website for more fundraising activity and challenge ideas suitable for individuals and groups any time of the year.

blindveterans.org.uk/fundraisingideas



Get in touch

If you have an idea for a fundraiser, do get in touch. Our team will make sure you have all the support and resources you need to make it a success. blindveterans.org.uk/tellus

Have you considered a regular gift?

We appreciate every donation you make. Without your generosity, we would be unable to rebuild our veterans' lives.

Making a regular gift is a great way to help build our charity for the future. When a supporter sets up a recurring – say, monthly – donation, it allows us to plan our services for years to come. As we know the funds are due to come in, we can commit to whatever it is the veterans need.

These regular gifts also help us keep our promises. The mission statement we're most proud of is our commitment to support our blind veterans throughout their lifetime.

According to our veterans who were blinded at a young age, this can be incredibly reassuring, as blind veterans Anthony, Simon and Andy explain.

Anthony joined the Duke of Lancaster's Regiment straight from school and just a few years later, aged 22, was seriously injured in Afghanistan after stepping on a 45kg explosive device.

Completely blinded, we've been supporting Anthony ever since and, thanks to your support, have helped him to rebuild his life. He says, "After I was injured in 2010, Blind Veterans UK approached me and haven't left. I trust them and the fact that they'll be there forever is comforting, as if someone's always got my back if I need help."



Anthony at our Llandudno Centre this Remembrance

We promise to support Anthony for the rest of his life. **A regular gift could make sure we can keep our promise.**

Iraq veteran Simon was just 28 when he was shot in the head and blinded by a sniper. Despite being left with horrific injuries, Simon, now in his 40s, not only works full time and lives independently, but he's also recently become the Mayor of Morley.

He says, "Knowing the support is there from the charity, not just for today but also for tomorrow, gives me the confidence to take up opportunities and try new things."

We can't know when the next service person like Simon will need intensive support. **A regular gift could help provide stability and help us prepare for the future.**



Andy and his guide from the 2024 London Marathon

And finally, Andy, who served in the Royal Logistics Corps for 19 years, was devastated when lost his sight to the genetic condition, retinitis pigmentosa. Forced to retire in his 30s, he started receiving our support and rehabilitation in 2011. Now 50, he says it's made a huge difference to his life.

Andy says, "Blind Veterans UK has invested a lot of time over the years to help me rebuild my life when I'd lost all hope. The assistive technology they've given me is fantastic. The equipment is obviously becoming more expensive and is getting a lot, lot better."

In the past year alone, Andy has managed to complete a 100k Ultra Challenge trek (see page 9) and marched alongside Simon and other blind veterans in the Remembrance Parade at the Cenotaph in Whitehall. He says, "When you donate, it means that we get to live a normal life. Everything that goes into the charity, we are absolutely taking full advantage of!"

Now he's looking forward to trying out even better technology in the future to make his life that bit easier. A regular gift could fund this and more.

Whichever way you choose to support us, you are contributing to our life-changing work. If you would like to set up a regular gift, all you need to do is fill in the enclosed form or donate online.

Even a very small amount each month will help give our veterans a brighter future. Visit blindveterans.org.uk/regular



Another way to make a regular gift to Blind Veterans UK is to play our weekly lottery! Visit lottery.blindveterans.org.uk/debrief



What a difference an hour makes...

It doesn't matter who you are, what you do or what skills you have, you could change a blind veteran's life by volunteering for us.

Did you know that people with sight loss who live alone could be at a greater risk of becoming isolated?

This is why, for blind veterans like Grace, who's 100 years old, an hour spent chatting to a volunteer is priceless.

The D-Day veteran says, "I joined this wonderful charity after losing my sight in my 80s, due to a mix of shingles and macular degeneration. It was a huge shock and very frightening indeed.

"Fortunately, my service as a 'Gunner Girl' in the Second World War gave me the strength to keep going. "I enlisted when I was just 16 (I was so desperate to join up that I lied about my age!) and went on to serve in the Royal Artillery. I remember D-Day very well as I was directing the guns at Land's End.



Blind veteran Grace and volunteer Paul

"I still like to keep busy, but getting out of the house becomes much more difficult with sight loss. This is why when I was asked if I'd like a visit from a Blind Veterans UK volunteer, I thought it was a wonderful idea. Paul made his first visit, and we got on really well. He's a very nice chap and we chatted about all sorts of things. I felt incredibly blessed to be surrounded by so much support as I celebrated my special birthday. I sincerely wish this for every blind veteran."

Just an hour's chat with a blind veteran in their home could really lift their spirits. You could also help them get out by driving them to an appointment or social event. As Grace says, "If you're looking for a local volunteering opportunity, I really urge you to consider this charity. You don't need to be a veteran yourself and there are different volunteer roles to choose from."

To find out more, simply email us on volunteer@blindveterans.org.uk, call us on 0300 111 2233 or visit our website at blindveterans.org.uk/volunteering

We'll meet again!

After serving together in Malaya decades ago, two blind veterans couldn't be more surprised to be reunited at our centre.

When blind veteran Arthur booked a holiday at our Llandudno Centre, he could never have imagined he would be reunited with his former comrade, Joe - 70 years on.



Blind veterans Arthur and Joe reunited after 70 years

The pair served together in the East Yorkshire Regiment as wireless operators as part of their National Service. They worked together in the 50s in Kluang during the Malayan Emergency.

Arthur said, "I just couldn't believe it. I hadn't seen Joe in over 70 years and now here we were at the centre. It was very emotional. I've never felt anything like it in my life. I was so happy to see him again. We just hugged each other in shock at first. We reminisced about our memories and talked about our families and lives since then."

Joe said, "I never expected to see Arthur or anyone from my company all these years later. It was brilliant to see him and great to talk about our time in Malaya and the other men we served with."

Joe started to lose his sight four years ago, due to a retinal vessel occlusion in his right eye and epiretinal membrane in his left. Shortly after, he found out about our charity and started receiving support.

He says: "It was extremely difficult because my sight went around the same time I lost my wife. It can be lonely living by myself, but when I go to the charity's centre I'm surrounded by people with similar experiences. It's so nice to have the company."

Meanwhile, Arthur lost his sight due to glaucoma and started receiving our support last year.

He says, "The hardest thing for me about losing my sight was not being able to read anymore, as it's something I used to love doing. Blind Veterans UK have been brilliant, though."

"The Llandudno Centre is an amazing place to visit. I had a wonderful time."

'Gifts in Wills have given me a second chance at life'

You may know our vice president, Billy, from previous mailings or even from the TV - he featured on *The Repair Shop* with his bugle last year! Here, he shares his extraordinary story of victory over blindness.

As a former staff sergeant, I served in the Royal Horse Artillery for 20 years. I lost my sight when serving in Bosnia.

I was exhuming mass war graves and a virus entered my eyes and infected both my optic nerves. Not long after, I woke up completely blind.



Billy in front of a Union Jack flag

My family didn't know what to do. My future had slipped through my fingers. I was out of work and became very depressed, suicidal even. My wife Karen was trying to balance a full-time job and look after the kids.

At first, I wouldn't accept help from anyone. I'd lost all my faith and trust. But, thankfully, Karen came across a leaflet for Blind Veterans UK and encouraged me to get in touch.



Billy with his wife, Karen, outside our Llandudno Centre

It was after my first visit to the centre that my new life with sight loss began. When I got home, Karen could tell straightaway a profound change had occurred in me. I remember her saying, 'Looks like we've got Billy back.'

The thing was, I'd never met a blind person before and assumed they'd all be miserable. But at the centre, I found the other veterans inspiring. They were in the same boat as me and yet they were getting on with their lives.

Hearing their stories made me realise that I needed to learn how to do things for myself, whether it was using the computer, getting out and about or even just navigating my way around the room.



Billy on a motorcycle breaking the world record

By accepting this, I was able to get back to doing the things I loved doing – and I went on to achieve more than I ever could have possibly imagined.

I've always been into motorcycles, and before long I had broken the blind solo world land speed record on a motorcycle at 164.87 mph.

Over the years, I've also carried the Olympic Torch, raced around the Top Gear track with Jeremy Clarkson, appeared on the Repair Shop and became the first blind mayor in the whole of Europe. I've even ridden the original Lloyds Bank black stallion!

With your generous support and that of all those who left gifts in their Wills for the charity, I've regained my sense of hope and confidence. I feel like I've been given a second chance at life.

Of course, I'm proud of all my big achievements but, to be honest, it's the ordinary things I've learnt to do for myself that have the most impact on my life. Making my wife, Karen, a coffee; helping around the house. Just being independent.

I wouldn't be able to do any of it without the help I've received from the charity. With support for five in ten of us at Blind Veterans UK funded by gifts in Wills, I can honestly say that these gifts are crucial in changing our lives.

This is why Karen and I have pledged a gift in our own Wills to the charity. We want this support to be available for future veterans. We hope you will consider joining us.

You've provided incredible support for veterans like me already and we are so extremely grateful.

A gift in your Will means that you can continue your support into the future as well, so that you can help veterans of today and tomorrow. Whether it's one per cent, 100 per cent, or anything in between. Leaving a gift in your Will really will make a big difference.



Find out more about pledging a gift in your Will by contacting Alice on 020 7616 7923, giftsinwills@blindveterans.org.uk or visit blindveterans.org.uk/leaveagift.

Watch Billy tell his story on video by scanning the QR code.

You made our D-Day 80 heroes so proud

We are delighted to let you know that our appeal commemorating the 80th anniversary of D-Day last year was one of our most successful, ever!

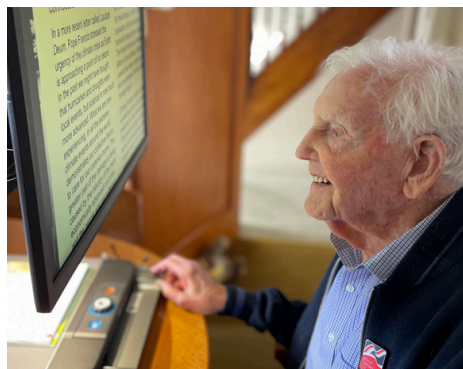
Thanks to your generosity, the special appeal raised an incredible £450,000. Meanwhile, for 16 of our D-Day veterans, it was a chance to share their extraordinary first-hand experiences of the invasion, perhaps for the last time.

In recent months, a number of those who took part have, sadly, passed away. We feel honoured and grateful to have been able to record their stories in their own words for future generations.

These brave men and women were keen to take part, despite their advanced years, in the hope that more veterans might benefit from our expertise and support. It was a real pleasure to be able to show them just how much interest there is in their stories, 80 years on, as the campaign received extensive coverage across local and national media.

One of those who took part, Bob, had quite a summer as he went on to attend the D-Day anniversary commemorations in France before celebrating his 100th birthday.

The former Navy gunner who, on D-Day, shot down an enemy plane while protecting American soldiers, couldn't have been



D-Day veteran Bob using a CCTV magnifier

prouder to receive his birthday card from the King. From us, Bob received a new piece of specialist sight loss equipment, as he could no longer read his own mail.

His new CCTV machine magnifies text to such a degree that he can even use it for looking at the wonderful drawings he receives from his great-grandchildren.

The device has been brilliant for giving Bob back some independence, which is so important to him. Thanks to your tremendous support, we can now supply many more blind veterans with this life-changing piece of kit.

Your commitment has meant so much to our D-Day veterans. Thank you once again for choosing to honour their service in this most meaningful way.

Read more about the 80th anniversary of D-Day: blindveterans.org.uk/dday

Looking back, with gratitude

Blind veteran Chris, who is terminally ill, shares his story to show the difference your generosity has made to his life.



Blind veteran Chris today

Army veteran Chris has been supported by our charity for the past 31 years, so we were devastated when he told us that he is terminally ill. Since the diagnosis, Chris has been reflecting on his life and the impact our charity has had on him. His greatest wish now is that more blind veterans can receive the same level of support and rehabilitation as he has.

Having joined the military at 15, Chris has such fond memories from his service, as well as a few unforgettable ones like waking up on the wrong side of the Berlin Wall!

His sight loss diagnosis came later and he remembers experiencing “overwhelming grief” as he struggled to adapt. Fortunately, all that changed when he joined our charity. We gave Chris the equipment and training he needed to get his independence back and, over the years, he says he’s really appreciated how much our staff have tailored this support to suit him.

He’s loved his visits to our centres where he’s tried all kinds of activities he never thought possible, surrounded by other blind veterans who understand.

He’s hoping to visit one final time with his wife while he is still able.

He’s also loved his chats with his Blind Veterans UK volunteer, who he says, “deserves a gold medal for the support he gives.”



Chris in his younger years

More than anything, Chris is grateful to you for making sure we’ve been able to be there for him throughout his sight loss journey.

He says, “Since that first day at Blind Veterans UK, I’ve never ever looked back. They’ve supported me through thick and thin.” It’s been our privilege, Chris.

Read Chris's full story at blindveterans.org.uk/chris

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and help to rebuild blind veterans' lives

Phone **0300 111 2233**

Play online raffle.blindveterans.org.uk/debrief



Raffle closes 21 March. Draw takes place 28 March.

No under 18 allowed to enter. No prizes will be paid to anyone under 18 years of age. Full terms and conditions apply, please visit raffle.blindveterans.org.uk/rules for more details.



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