

Foreword

By Colin Williamson, President Blind Veterans UK

My first recollection of hearing about St. Dunstan's (now Blind Veterans UK) was from a work colleague whose brother-in-law was a member of the charity. I had been left severely sight impaired after suffering a trauma to the skull, which had robbed me of the sight in my right eye and left me with no central vision in my left. My first thought was that the charity probably wasn't for me; I was still fairly young, had a steady job and had a young family at home.

My work colleague at the time, Terry, had told me many stories about how well the charity had looked after Chris, his brother-in-law and a long-term resident in the nursing wing of Ian Fraser House, the charity's national training centre in Ovingdean, near Brighton on England's south coast.

My first visit to Ovingdean took place in 2003, not long after I'd been registered blind. I attended what is known as 'Intro Week', where new members to the charity learn all about Blind Veterans UK and what they can do for blind and visually impaired ex-servicemen and women. I was assessed to see what sort of equipment I would require to help me live an independent life, I took part in sporting activities such as archery, acoustic rifle shooting and bowls, I used the gym and indoor swimming pool and I got to know some of the 'old and bold' members of the charity; members like former President of the charity Ray Hazan, (whom I succeeded as president in 2017) a former officer in the Royal Anglian Regiment who had been blinded by a parcel bomb in Northern Ireland in 1973, which not only took his sight but also his right hand and his hearing.

I learnt a lot from Ray in those early days. Writer John Ruskin wrote 'The first test of a truly great man is his humility' and I believe that can be said about Ray Hazan.

In a society where fortune favours the strong, modesty can often be misinterpreted as being weak but that can't be said of Ray. He was the person I turned to the most for advice and guidance during my early years with the charity. He has the uncanny ability to command your attention and make you feel like you're the most important person in the room when he is talking with you. Respected and admired by all, his only fault is that he's the worst joke teller I've ever met. He's the man that can't reach the punch line as he's too busy laughing at his own joke!

I for one will always be grateful for his friendship, his wisdom and more importantly his unselfish and unwavering commitment to this wonderful charity. I have enjoyed many adventures with Ray and his late wife Robbie over the past decades including ski breaks to Italy, walking holidays in Austria and battlefield tours of Europe, and I always look forward to meeting up with him whenever I visit Ian Fraser House.

Another remarkable man was the late Harry Beevers. I first met Harry when I became a member of staff for Blind Veterans UK, running an initiative called the 'Cadet Challenge' competition where we encouraged cadets and youth groups to help raise awareness and funds for the charity.

A Castleford man, Harry loved nothing better than listening in on the radio whenever his beloved 'Cas' rugby league team were playing. An intelligent, well-liked and respected former school teacher, Harry had been a Sergeant in the Education Corps and had served in East Africa during National Service. Harry was a comic at heart and loved telling funny anecdotes and jokes. One of his stories involved how he was inducted into the army.

Having inherited the genetic eye condition Retinitis Pigmentosa, Harry had struggled with his sight ever since childhood. When his call-up papers for National Service dropped through the letterbox of his Castleford home, Harry's Mother told young Harry to go down to the recruiting office and explain to whoever was in charge that although he'd like to thank them for inviting him, he couldn't join the army as he couldn't see very well. Harry took up the story;

'I'll never forget it, it was a lovely bright summer's day with not a cloud in the sky. I walked down to the local recruiting office and walked straight past the queue of men waiting patiently outside of the building and found myself looking up at a very tall and fearsome looking Sergeant with a bristling moustache and carrying a cane. I explained about my sight problems and asked if he could help sort out the small matter of me not joining him and his fellow soldiers in their future plans.

The Sergeant looked at me with a bemused look in his eye. He asked me to wait there whilst he went inside the office and spoke with his superior, who happened to be the doctor, a Captain in the Royal Army Medical Corps. A few minutes elapsed before they both came down the steps and the Captain took hold of my arm 'Look up at the sky' said the Captain, 'what do you see?'

I squinted up at the sky and said 'the sun' to which the Captain gleefully replied '*that's ninety three million miles away, how far do you want to see you little bugger!*'

That was it, I was in the army!'

Another of Harry's tales was about a holiday he took to Spain one year '*Joan (his wife) and I went to a little café and asked to look at the lunch menu. I have Crohn's Disease so I had to be very careful what I ate. I decided to just have a beef sandwich and a cup of tea, so Joan called the waiter over and I tried explaining in my very limited Spanish what I was after but the waiter couldn't understand what I was wanting, so Joan mimicked writing on a piece of paper and the waiter disappeared and came back with a blank sheet of paper and a pencil. I asked Joan to draw a cow and two slices of bread. Joan did her best and handed the paper back to the waiter who duly did an about turn and headed back into the café only to return five minutes late with two tickets for the bullfight!*'

I mentioned earlier about attending ski holidays with the charity; skiing was not something I'd done before apart from a week on an annual exercise called 'Snow Queen' when I was serving in Germany with my regiment, which actually turned out to be just a week-long drinking competition with a bit of snow thrown in.

Ray Hazan, with the help of his fellow blind veteran Gerry Jones, had started the St. Dunstan's ski club back in the seventies and it was, and still is, a popular event in the calendar. Gerry is

a former Captain in the Royal Corps of Transport and a qualified helicopter pilot who was blinded in a helicopter accident. A huge fan of the band Dire Straits, Gerry and I shared a room on one of Blind Veterans UK ski trips to Canazei in the Italian Dolomites region. During the week, if the weather isn't playing ball and the ski lifts are out of action, the group migrate to the local Wellness centre to make use of the saunas, jacuzzis and swimming pools. On one of these visits, a group of us, including Gerry, were sat in a hot tub chewing the fat and boasting how good we were on the planks. One of the cold water taps for the tub was in the shape of an old-fashioned telephone handset; I nudged Gerry and said how posh this place was as they had a telephone connected to the hot tub; Gerry was impressed!

Twenty minutes later I had picked up the 'handset' and pretended to talk into it; '*Gerry Jones?*' I said out loud so that he could hear me, '*sure, he's here, I'll put him on*' and made a pretence that it was the hotel calling and that they would like to speak with him. I passed the 'handset' to Gerry and he immediately placed it to his ear '*Hello*' he said, '*Gerry here, how can I help?*'. It was at this point that I turned on the tap and a jet of freezing water shot into Gerry ear. Gerry emitted a mighty roar and everyone within striking distance dived for cover as his arms started flailing around and a string of expletives erupted forth. What a sight, ten blind people trying to climb out of the tub and run off in different directions, whilst a 'madman' uttering oaths and threatening unspeakable acts of violence staggered off in pursuit!

I have been very fortunate to meet many courageous blind and visually impaired veterans during my incredible journey with this charity. Ex-servicemen like Andy Allen, who lost both legs above the knee and was blinded as a result of an explosion in Helmand province in Afghanistan in 2008. Andy has since gone on to become a respected politician in his native Northern Ireland.

Other veterans of the war in Afghanistan like Kennet Facal and Billy Drinkwater have also inspired me. Both Ken and Billy were blinded in the same IED incident but both have gone on to lead full, independent and useful lives and are a credit to their communities.

Billy Baxter is another; ask anyone who has ever visited our Llandudno centre in North Wales if they have heard of Billy and they'll tell you they know of no one better! Billy lost his sight as a direct consequence of the Balkans conflict but that hasn't stopped him leading a full and active life.

On the 2nd of August 2003, he set the blind solo world land speed record on a motorbike with a speed of 164.87mph (265.33km/h), and in 2004 he was a guest on the BBC television programme *Top Gear* and drove a lap of their circuit as the 'Star in a Reasonably Priced Car'. He was guided around the circuit by the exaggeratedly nervous host, Jeremy Clarkson, and his official lap time was 2:02 minutes.

Billy is now the official Town Crier for Llandudno, North Wales and is a valued and well-liked member of staff at the Blind Veterans UK Llandudno Centre.

Another blind veteran who has set numerous world records is former Royal Corps of Signals soldier Mark Threadgold. Chief amongst his personal achievements are three world records. The first came in 2002 when he became the world's fastest blind circumnavigator of the Isle

of Wight in a rigid inflatable boat, travelling 57.74 nautical miles in just 1 hour and 50 minutes. In 2003, Mark set the Water Speed World Record in the Ultimate Blind Class when he drove a blade runner offshore racing powerboat across Windermere, reaching 99.19mph. Later, in 2006, Mark set the record for the deepest scuba dive and closed-circuit rebreather dive by a blind person after diving 103 metres in the Red Sea, and in 2017 he successfully summited Mount Kilimanjaro.

Steve Sparkes, a former Royal Marine and Falklands War veteran came to the charity in 1992 after losing his sight in a diving accident whilst training for Special Forces selection.

In 2018, Steve became the first blind person to row the Pacific Ocean when he crossed the finishing line in Honolulu 82 days after setting off from Monterey, California, a grueling 2,400 mile row.

For some elderly members of the charity these sporting achievements are beyond them, but for those blind veterans to walk unaided to the corner shop is in itself a courageous feat. They now live in a world surrounded by darkness and every day is a challenge, but obstacles are overcome and barriers are constantly being knocked down.

I'm proud to be a member of, in my opinion, one of the finest military charities in the world and I love being a member of the Blind Veterans UK family.

I hope you enjoy reading this book.

Colin Williamson, President Blind Veterans UK