



Rebuilding
lives after
sight loss

Debrief

Your impact on the lives of blind veterans

Winter 2024



**Served.
Blinded.
Supported.**

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Welcome



Adrian Bell CEO, Blind Veterans UK

It has been a very busy time for the charity and I am delighted to share our latest news with you. Without you, of course, we wouldn't be hitting milestones like moving into our wonderful new Centre of Wellbeing in Rustington. Read about our emotional farewell to Brighton and arrival at our new seaside home on page six.

Remembrance Sunday is an immensely important time for our blind veterans. I was very proud to march with them to the Cenotaph and to hear how they commemorated the day in their local communities across the country. You can read about it on page four and also hear how important our volunteers are on days like this, on page 13.

One piece of equipment that helps blind veterans attend events like Remembrance is a cane. Canes can be the key to rediscovering lost independence and our rehabilitation officers supply hundreds of them each year. Turn to page 19 to find out how

many types there are. Cane facts are just part of the resource library we've been putting together for anyone in contact with visually-impaired people. The details are on page 18.

This issue is bursting with ways that you can support us. There's information on gifting a wreath, fundraising events and endurance challenges on page 12. Our raffles and weekly lottery are fun ways to get involved and could benefit you, too! It all helps our veterans struggling with sight loss, including those who served as part of their National Service. Last year, we marked the 60th anniversary of the end of National Service. Hear from veteran John on page 16.

And finally, if you want to see the difference your support makes, go to page 11. We recently held our first in-person Founder's Day Awards since the pandemic, celebrating the achievements of some truly amazing people whose lives have been not just rebuilt but transformed. Thank you for everything you do for the charity.

With very best wishes for 2024,

Adrian.

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Group photo at the London Cenotaph

Marking Remembrance across the whole country

2023 saw many important anniversaries for our veterans, not least the 20th anniversary since the invasion of Iraq and 70 years since the end of the Korean War.

More than 40 blind veterans marched at the Cenotaph in London on Remembrance Sunday, while others attended events at our centres or laid wreaths on our behalf at local events across the whole country.

The majority of those marching were able to gather for an informal reception at the Victory Services Club. It was a great opportunity for everyone to meet with old friends and make new ones.

Blind veteran Peter made the extraordinary gesture of bringing handcrafted models of the Cenotaph, cut himself and painted by his wife, as a gift for every blind veteran marching.

Peter started receiving support from the charity in 2021. He says: "Before I lost my sight, I was really into woodwork and craft. I thought that was out of the window and was close to throwing all my tools away,

but Blind Veterans UK has given me the confidence to rediscover my hobby and shown me there are still ways to do things, it may just take more time."

His wife has created a Facebook page called 'The Blind Artisan' through which Peter is able to sell small woodturned and laser etched items similar to the Cenotaph models he created. He very kindly donates the profits to us.

On Remembrance Sunday, our contingent gathered on Horse Guards Parade where wreaths were laid by blind veterans, Dennis and Mark. Second World War veteran Dennis, who is 97, was marching at the Cenotaph for the very first time and described it as "The proudest day of my life".

Mark has terminal cancer and many of our supporters will have followed his skydive earlier this year to raise money for Blind Veterans UK. Mark also carried a wreath as he marched with his son, Ben, for the last time. He said: "Being at the Cenotaph this year was incredibly important to me. It gave me the opportunity to remember those who died in conflict one last time.

"The overwhelming support from the nation as we march past is a truly special thing to experience. I've been told I don't have long left so this was the last time I got to stand beside my fellow blind veterans and I was determined to be there."

A group of blind veterans supported by the charity also marked Remembrance at Brighton train station. A two-minute silence, during which the trains were stopped, was held and wreaths were laid at the London, Brighton and South Coast Railway War Memorial.



Tony laying a wreath with Danny

Blind veteran Tony, who served with the RAF Police, said: "Having the opportunity to lay a wreath and to be part of Remembrance Day events is a wonderful thing. I laid the wreath on behalf of Blind Veterans UK which was an honour. It's an honour every year that I stand to remember the fallen.

Our Centre of Wellbeing in Llandudno hosted a special themed Military Week to help the 40 blind veterans who attended reflect on their own military experiences.

During the week, the veterans enjoyed many trips, including to the Imperial War Museum North in Manchester and the Royal Air Force Museum in the Midlands. On these trips, they heard stories from museum guides, had the opportunity to explore real-life RAF aircraft and artefacts, including the world's oldest Spitfire.

There were also some fantastic talks and demonstrations for blind veterans to learn more about military history. The Historical Warfare Day was particularly special, with a talk from the National Military Working Dogs Memorial charity. Re-enactors from the 1979 group and the Anglesey Hussars ensured everybody was alert for the afternoon activities with a cannon firing!

On Armistice Day, we were delighted to open up our Centre in Wales and welcome local people in the community to mark the occasion with us. They included serving armed forces personnel, local cadet units and the Mayors of Llandudno, Colwyn Bay and Conwy. Attendees were invited to plant their own poppy in the 'Field of Remembrance' with knitted poppies donated by blind veterans, volunteers, supporters and staff.

As we have now moved into our new Rustington Centre of Wellbeing, our residents took part in Remembrance alongside their new community for the first time.

Two of the Centre's residents, 102-year-old Nancy and 100-year old Ken, joined local blind veteran Jim Dunn, 82, in laying wreaths during the town's Remembrance Service.

Jim was one of several blind veterans who was laying a wreath as part of our 'Gift a Wreath' campaign where we invited local groups, businesses and organisations to Gift a Wreath to be laid by blind veterans at local Remembrance events.

Thank you to all those who helped us provide wreaths to veterans to lay at local services across the country. If you would like to read more about blind veteran Tony and how your support gave him hope, go to blindveterans.org.uk/remember



The Blind Veterans UK sign at the entrance to the new centre of Wellbeing



A seating area in Rustington

Sussex by the sea!

In Autumn 2022, we began the process of moving to our new Centre of Wellbeing in Rustington, West Sussex.

Our standing down event in Brighton was a heartfelt tribute to the Centre's history and the veterans it has served. The event was filled with music from artists who have had close ties with the Centre over the years, coming back one final time to say goodbye.

These included the Brighton Male Voice Choir and the Not Forgotten Association. Our guests and blind veterans had a wonderful time, dancing along with all the musical acts.

The highlight of the day was an exhilarating spitfire aerobatic display. Members of the local community could be seen lining the street to watch the display as our guests waved and clapped as the spitfire tipped to give its salute.

We lowered the flag for the final time in an emotional ceremony at the Brighton

Centre of Wellbeing and then watched on the big screen as the Rustington Centre of Wellbeing flag was raised.

The Rustington flag was carried there by a group of blind veterans and volunteers who marched all the way from our Brighton Centre. They also hand delivered our time capsule, buried at Brighton in 2015 to mark 100 years of Blind Veterans UK.

The capsule contains items and documents detailing the history of our charity. Among them is a talking watch and other equipment given to blind veterans, a memory stick containing images from the Brighton Centre's history and a copy of The Argus, the local paper. It is still set to be opened in 2115, 100 years after it was originally buried.

Mark was one of the blind veterans walking the time capsule to Rustington. He said: "It's a tradition in the army to march from your old barracks to your new ones so this is a great way to mark the closing of the old Centre and the opening of Rustington.

"Blind Veterans UK has been supporting veterans like me for 108 years so it's even older than the regiment I was in. It's so important to remember the veterans that came before us, so I was so proud to be part of the group transporting the time capsule to the new Centre."

A particularly poignant moment came when the group reached the Rustington Centre of Wellbeing with the time capsule and flag. The construction team on site lined up in a guard of honour and applauded them as they arrived.

Blind Veterans UK Head of Centre, Lesley Garven MBE, said: "It was a very special day, with music being enjoyed and memories being shared. It was fantastic to be joined by many of our blind veterans who have had their lives transformed in this building.

"The life-changing work we do here will be continued in our new Rustington home and we look forward to becoming a real part of that community and having new people join the team to play a real part supporting blind veterans every day."



Lesley Garven with blind veteran Terry touching the new statue in Rustington

Soon after this, our permanent residents were the first to move in to our Rustington Centre of Wellbeing. The area they moved into was the first to be completed and the remaining rooms and facilities were finished to welcome our first blind veteran guests over Christmas. These blind veterans were primarily those who would otherwise have been on their own for Christmas.

Work is still to be completed on the landscaping and some of the other buildings that surround the main site and we plan to hold a formal Opening Ceremony in spring. Your summer issue of Debrief will contain a special feature on our new Centre and the difference it is making to blind veterans every day.

What do YOU have in store for 2024?

Sharing a meal with family and friends and chatting over a mince pie is something we all look forward to during the festive season. Meanwhile, stepping back into our normal exercise routines and putting the treat box to the back of the cupboard in the New Year is something we tend to put off.

The festive season is a funny old time - and often very stressful. As fun as it is, it can

also leave us feeling exhausted from looking after others, and desperate to do something for ourselves.

Taking on a challenge or fundraising activity for Blind Veterans UK, isn't just about raising vital funds for our veterans. It can also give you the motivation to put away the Christmas treats - and the perfect excuse to focus on your own wellbeing.



Meet Ben:

Supporter Ben is looking forward to taking part in the London Marathon this April. He signed up for one of our charity places after deciding he needed to do something to improve his mental and physical health.

"Enough was enough. At 26 stone, I was finding life difficult, and I wanted to set a healthy example for my two children." Knowing the difference the funds he is raising makes - his great grandfather is a blind veteran - Ben has been able to stick to his training. He has also been motivated by the updates sent to him as part of his supporter journey, which keep him up to date on how his fundraising makes a

difference as well as supporting him with his training and fundraising. Since signing up, Ben has progressed well with his weight loss journey and is feeling positive about his forthcoming challenge.

"It's going to be an emotional event, personally for me it will mark my incredible achievement of reaching a healthy weight and completing 26 miles, which would have been impossible when I first signed up. I'll also know I have helped other families like mine, to give their loved ones back their independence and freedom after sight loss."

Ben is hoping to raise £1,900 for our charity. You can read more about Ben and show your support and help him to reach his fundraising target.

blindveterans.org.uk/ben

Whatever changes you're looking to make in 2024, we have the fundraising activity for you and we will be with you every step of the way with words of encouragement and stories to keep you enthused and motivated.



Two supporters at the finish line of the London to Brighton Cycle

Take on a challenge

Whether you sign up to one of our places in the London Marathon, Great North Run or London to Brighton Cycle, or decide to sign up to a challenge of your choice, our team will be on hand to help keep you on track with your training as well as your fundraising.

You will be sent all the resources you need, including branded sports tops to help remind you who you are doing it all for each time you step out of the front door for a training run, bike ride or trip to the gym. You will also be invited to join our Team Blind Veterans UK Facebook group - a chance to meet other participants online and share training tips, stories and discover how your support makes a difference. View our challenge events:



A family giving up Technology

Give it up

Is 2024 the year you want to give up a long-held vice? Why not sign up to GiveItUp for blind veterans? You'll receive all the help you need to make your challenge a success. Find out more



A group doing a quiz

Get sociable

Is 2024 the year you would like to spend more time with family and friends? Is it the year you would like to get to know more people in your community? We have lots of ideas for events that will help you achieve this goal, while creating an opportunity to raise vital funds to support blind veterans.

Get involved today by visiting blindveterans.org.uk/fundraisingideas



New Year Raffle

£15k

GUARANTEED JACKPOT

It could be you

£1 per play

Tickets cost £1 and help to rebuild blind veterans' lives

Phone 0300 111 2233

Play online raffle.blindveterans.org.uk/debrief



Raffle closes 22 March. Draw takes place 29 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.



Person responsible for the raffle and lottery: Richard Neate, Blind Veterans UK, 3 Queen Square, London WC1N 3AR. Blind Veterans UK is a registered charity no. 216227 (England & Wales) and SC039411 (Scotland). Licensed by the Gambling Commission under the 2005 Gambling Act. Registered license number 008297.



A group photo of veterans, family and staff at the awards

Founder's Awards recognise our amazing blind veterans

In October last year, we held our Founder's Awards which mark the founding of Blind Veterans UK when Sir Arthur Pearson opened the doors to war-blinded veterans in 1915 for the very first time.

including nominees and those who nominated them. They listened to speeches and video messages about those nominated and enjoyed a delicious evening meal.

Nominees who could not attend in person were still able to join the ceremony via an online video link.



Blind veteran Jules with his certificate

One of the winners on the night was blind veteran Jules. He won the Inspiring Community Award and said afterwards: "I was blown away to have been nominated, let alone to have won. I feel very proud and humbled. I don't think I do anything out of the ordinary so to be given this award for doing what I enjoy doing is an amazing feeling."

These awards recognise the inspiring contributions of those who share the same boundless spirit as our founder and help us celebrate all that's great about our charity.

You can read about all our winners by scanning the QR code here. Congratulations to all our winners! blindveterans.org.uk/founders23

The categories, which include Sporting Achievement and Creative Achievement, allow us to celebrate our blind veterans who have best demonstrated success in rebuilding their lives after sight loss.

Over 35 guests attended the ceremony,





Gift a wreath and other ways to support blind veterans

This year once again, we supported blind veterans who choose to mark Remembrance by taking part in events close to home.

Our Gift a Wreath campaign gives businesses and organisations the opportunity to help ensure these veterans can play an active part in Remembrance, while also ensuring they are able to receive life-changing support in their own communities.

We would like to thank all those who took part in 2023 and are delighted to discover the experience was just as rewarding for them as for our veterans. Scan the QR code to see what getting involved meant to them and to register your interest in getting involved in 2024:



“Not only have we gifted a wreath, but our money will also help Blind Veterans UK to continue with their excellent work which enables blind veterans to thrive after sight loss.”

Kelly - Tom Owen and Sons Funeral Directors

Other ways you can support

Whatever you do, know that your support will change the lives of blind veterans across the country.

- Become a corporate partner
- Remember a loved one
- Leave a gift in your Will
- Fundraise for us
- Volunteer
- Play our raffle
- Play our weekly lottery
- Visit our online shop

blindveterans.org.uk/giftawreath24

Volunteering

The volunteering service has had a very busy time over the last couple of months. We teamed up with the National Creative Wellbeing Project to produce a Christmas card designed by blind veterans for all volunteers, to allow us to say thank you and recognise the contributions of all volunteers across the year.



A number of volunteers also supported the London Remembrance Parade, so that blind veterans could march together and pay their respects. Volunteer Lee Whitfield says, “The London Cenotaph is a memory that will live with me forever so thank you, it’s a tick off my list”. Tim Eckersley, Member Engagement Lead says, “Volunteers are vital to the success of events like the London Cenotaph. They help shape the lived experiences of our blind veterans and are simply irreplaceable.”

With the standing down of Brighton and the opening of the new Rustington Centre of Wellbeing, the team have been busy recruiting and welcoming new volunteers to Rustington. Training sessions for volunteers have been ongoing to ensure they are well equipped to support visually impaired veterans and enhance the service offer at the Centre.

Recently, one blind veteran at the Centre was matched with a volunteer in a befriending role. The volunteer has a weekly visit to see the veteran, and they have already developed a great relationship, with the previously isolated and lonely veteran seeming brighter and more engaged in daily activities. This has been achieved by the volunteers support and encouragement. This highlights the importance and significant difference volunteers make for our blind veterans.

So far this year, volunteers have given a total of 10,695 hours of their time to Blind Veterans UK. This demonstrates how volunteers continue to be an integral part of the service here at the charity and we continue to search for more volunteers across the four nations to support blind veterans locally in communities or in one of our Centres of Wellbeing. We are just about to introduce a new online learning platform for all our volunteers. This will allow volunteers to access training from the comfort of their own home, as well as enhance their knowledge and skills to continue to provide support in a holistic way. It’s a great time to get involved in volunteering, making it more accessible and easier to volunteer.

We need your help to continue this incredible work. If you’re interested in volunteering, you can see all the latest opportunities on our website blindveterans.org.uk/volunteer or get in touch at volunteer@blindveterans.org.uk





Blind veteran Simon in uniform



Blind veteran, Simon, shares his experience of using our Free Wills Service

We all know that having an up-to-date Will is important, but the process can seem daunting. That's why we've partnered with two free Will-writing services to make the process simple and easy.

Our online provider has worked closely with vision impairment charities to ensure its service is accessible for those with sight loss, ensuring that writing a Will is as straightforward as it can be.

We also work with a provider offering face-to-face and home visits to make sure that free Wills are available to everyone. Blind veteran, Simon used our free Will Service and said, "The whole process was

very painless. The solicitor talked me through it, explained any problems and I felt at ease. I wasn't forced into making any decisions I wasn't sure about making, and everything was explained in full so I understood what it all meant."

As well as being surprised with how easy it was to write his Will, Simon is now keen to share the benefits and importance of doing so. "I think making a Will is an incredibly important thing, at all ages.

As well as being surprised with how easy it was to write his Will, Simon is now keen to share the benefits and importance of doing so.

We want to make sure anyone that anyone can write or update their Will in a way that suits them. With 60% of adults not yet having a Will in place, our Free Wills Services are available to all that would like to benefit.

ex-Servicemen and women living with sight loss.

You can call us on **020 7616 7923**, visit **blindveterans.org.uk/freewills**, or tick the box on the enclosed donation form for a free Will referral.

"I think making a Will is an incredibly important thing, at any age. Without a Will, it's difficult to sort things out, and I wanted to make sure my assets go where I want them to go. If you've got a Will in place, you have that peace of mind that your loved ones are looked after".

To leave a gift in your Will to Blind Veterans UK you just need our name, address and registered charity number:

Address:
Blind Veterans UK
3 Queen Square
London
WC1N 3AR
Registered charity number: 216227

If you use one of our Free Wills services, there is no obligation to leave a gift in your Will to Blind Veterans UK. But we would be extremely grateful if, after you've provided for your own loved ones, you considered leaving a percentage of whatever remains to support





John, blind veteran on Remembrance Sunday



Bob, blind veteran on Remembrance Sunday

Here for the thousands of National Service veterans

2023 marked the 60th anniversary of the end of National Service in the UK.

Over two million men were called up as part of National Service and between 1947 and 1963, sadly 395 National Servicemen were killed in service.

The men who completed National Service are now at least 77 years old. At Blind Veterans UK, we know that are far more likely to be experiencing difficulties with their sight.

The 2021 Census asked questions to determine our veteran population for the first time. It showed that the male population of England and Wales over the age of 75 is far more likely to be a veteran than not. This rises to 95 per cent more likely over the age of 85.

Many of those who took part in National Service don't view themselves as veterans. However, as far as we are concerned they have served their country and fully deserve our life-changing training and support.

In 1958, John began his National Service. He was trained in intelligence and it was an experience he relished. Not only was it fascinating, but he says it made him a better person.

He says: "It gave me self-confidence and new skills. You learn how to lead people and take personal responsibility. And if you had a task to do, you did it with pride. Other people depended on you so you got on and did it."

He took this work ethic into his career, where he also appreciated having worked under commanding officers from Australia,

New Zealand and the United States. Combined nations' operations prepared him for business relationships.

John is now completely blind. His wife, Liz, says finding Blind Veterans UK - after he was diagnosed with age-related macular degeneration - made such a difference to John. She says: "He was extremely depressed before he went to the Blind Veterans UK induction. He was never like that before. When he came home from that first visit, he was so different, it was like a weight had lifted. The kids said he was like the dad he had always been again."

John has managed to stay busy and engaged. His support worker has advised him on which bits of equipment he should try, like a voice-activated "Alexa" device to access information and store his lists. He can also still make his famous lemon drizzle cake. John says the secret is in measuring everything, including weighing the eggs.

Blind Veterans UK provided him with a set of talking scales so the magic can still happen. It's so useful to him that John has named it Gerald! "He's a great friend," he jokes.

Above all, John is grateful that Blind Veterans UK gives him the same sense of belonging as National Service did. He says: "They draw people together, helping you and being there for you. It's the Blind Veterans UK family."

We know there are thousands of veterans like John, who completed their National Service over 60 years' ago, and are entitled to our support but not receiving it.

If you, or someone you know, served in the Armed Forces, including National Service, and are now struggling with sight loss, then please get in touch.

Call 0800 389 7979 or visit blindveterans.org.uk/apply where you can also find a simple eligibility checker and online referral form to submit an initial enquiry on someone else's behalf.



A man sitting at a desk working on a computer

Sight loss resources for independent living

We've been developing a growing library of sight loss resources on our website.

These resources are being put together with the aim of helping anyone with a vision impairment to live independently. They are also full of insights for family, friends and members of the public.

Produced by staff in our Member Support Hub, the resources are packed with guidance on all aspects of daily living. Our knowledgeable team, made up of sight loss advisors, rehabilitation officers (ROVIs) and IT experts, advise blind veterans on eye health and sight loss equipment.

One of our ROVIs, Bryan, who has a vision impairment himself, says: "Losing your sight can be incredibly scary and debilitating. Our resources share practical solutions for getting around the day-to-day challenges that many blind and partially sighted people face, whether that's struggling to read the post, go for a walk or even get dressed in the morning.

All the information has come from our long experience of working with blind veterans. Some of the tips we share are very simple - for example, putting an elastic band around a shampoo bottle to easily identify it - yet small fixes like these are tried and tested by our blind veterans and really do work."

Our sight loss resources include a wide range of topics, including:

- **Getting ready for the day** – tips for washing, grooming and dressing.
- **Navigating public transport** – planning your journey and making it safer.
- **Counselling services** - support with the psychological impact of sight loss.
- **Different type of white cane** – useful information about canes and cane tips.
- **How to guide** – a step-by-step guide for members of the public.

We will continue to add to our resources regularly. To have a look through, please visit blindveterans.org.uk/resources



Mike, blind veteran, with a symbol cane

All about canes

A cane is one of the most important pieces of equipment a blind veteran can receive. Often, it's how they get their freedom and independence back.

But did you know that our Rehabilitation Officers have four options when issuing a cane. Every blind veteran is assessed and exactly the right cane will be offered, depending on where they are in their sight loss journey.

Symbol canes

This small cane is designed and issued to increase confidence when out and about. Its sole purpose is to highlight a visual impairment to other people. As they are designed to indicate sight loss, they do not have the required strength to be used as a mobility aid.



A telescopic long cane

Long canes

Long canes are rolled or tapped from side to side as the visually impaired person walks, to locate and avoid obstacles. Blind veterans must attend a specialist course with a qualified rehabilitation officer before using one – but with the right training, will be able to enjoy safe and independent travel. The length and speed of walking stride will affect the length of the cane required.

A long cane costs £40 and the user will also need training. This is why your support and donations are so important – each year we need to supply hundreds of canes to help give blind veterans their independence back.

You can help! donate.blindveterans.org.uk/cane

Guide canes

A guide cane is issued following advice from a rehabilitation officer to help locate obstacles. The visually impaired person holds a guide cane diagonally across their body with the tip in constant contact with the ground. It is used to find obstacles in front such as kerbs, steps or furniture.



A cane with reflective tape

Cane accessories

The **cane tip** is a very personal choice for the long cane user because it is in contact with the ground and transfers information up the cane to the hand. **Reflective tape** can be put onto white canes and walking sticks used by people who have a visual and a hearing impairment.

Our top prize has doubled. You could win **£1,000** every week!

Play for the chance to win one of 34 weekly prizes, while also helping to support blind veterans to rebuild their lives.



£1
per play

WEEKLY LOTTERY

Sign up online at
lottery.blindveterans.org.uk/debrief



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

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