



Rebuilding  
lives after  
sight loss

# Debrief

Your impact on the lives of blind veterans

AUTUMN 2019



## Commemorating their courage

Our D-Day veterans, 75 years on

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# You're part of our past, present and future

# A fantastic year – all thanks to you



**Colin Williamson**  
Blind veteran  
and President of  
Blind Veterans UK

Earlier in the summer, as you can read on pages 18 and 19, I was honoured to attend the unveiling of an English Heritage blue plaque for our founder, Sir Arthur Pearson, at his former home in London. After losing his sight to glaucoma, Sir Arthur made it his mission in life to help those blinded in WWI to rebuild their lives. He could not have done so were it not for the support of the British public who funded what later became known as Blind Veterans UK.

As many of the stories in *Debrief* attest to, supporters like you are as crucial now as they were in Sir Arthur's day. You make our work possible which, in turn, helps blind veterans to come to terms with sight loss and rebuild their lives. **Thank you.**

During 2018/2019 you and your fellow supporters have helped us reach more blind veterans than ever, providing them with the support, training and equipment that shows them we have not forgotten their service to our country. Thank you for your wonderful support.



**897** new blind veterans welcomed to our charity



**40,000** hours given by volunteers to help our veterans

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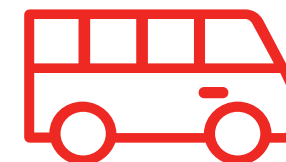
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You're helping blind veterans to grow



**1,000** local events held, to help blind veterans beat isolation



**751,000** miles our vehicles spent on the road, transporting our veterans to our centres and events.

**There remain over 45,000 ex-Service men and women who qualify for our support that we could be helping. Please give what you can today to help us be there for them.**

# You helped Nancy and Peter find love again

Your support helps run our Brighton centre, where love blossomed between 97-year-old World War Two veterans Peter and Nancy.

**P**eter joined the army in 1943 and was sent to Normandy about a week after the D-Day landings in 1944. During his service, he was shot in the right arm by a sniper. He later went on to get married and have a family but sadly his wife Betty died in 2012, aged 89.

Similarly, Nancy had two children with her late husband who also died aged 89. When she was 17, in 1941, Nancy joined the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) and served on a gun site in Swansea for the remainder of the war.

The two met last year when Nancy was visiting a friend at the centre, where Peter, who has macular degeneration, is a resident. Peter recalls:

“This lady came and sat next to me in the lounge after dinner. She had a spark about her and we hit it off immediately.”

After keeping in contact by phone, in October last year the couple got the news they had been longing for – Nancy, who lost her sight after suffering two strokes, would be moving into the centre too.

Nancy says: “Peter proposed in November and I couldn’t be happier. It really has been a miracle and we love each other to bits.”

Peter and Nancy shared a love blessing ceremony at the centre, and were delighted to invite their fellow blind veterans, friends and family.

Chaplain Clare Callanan who officiated said:



Peter was in the Army during WWII while Nancy served in the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS).

“Peter and Nancy have found a mutual love, respect and understanding and that is something which should be celebrated. This is a blessing to us all as part of the Blind Veterans UK family.”

After the ceremony Nancy said: “We are so happy. This is home. The Blind Veterans UK centre is our home.”



“We’ve had a lot to face in our lives and we just want to enjoy each other’s company. We are looking forward to doing all sorts of things together.”

Nancy Bowstead.

# We will never forget them

On June 6, blind veterans of the D-Day landings, together with Blind Veterans UK staff and supporters, gathered in London and Llandudno to remember the sacrifices made by so many on that fateful day 75 years ago.

**T**he London commemoration was held aboard HMS Belfast, who had herself been involved in the invasion and fired some of the very first shots 75 years ago.

Amongst the blind veterans in attendance was Ron Cross. Ron served in the 79th Armoured Division, and was one of the first soldiers to storm the beaches, landing on Juno Beach on H-Hour. He was part of a Churchill tank crew clearing the beach of German ordnance. Ron movingly recalled his experiences:

“At one point the tank got stuck and I had to get out – there were bullets and mortars flying – and get it back into service.

“Fortunately, I’d trained for that eventuality and knew there was a job to do, so I just got on with it.”

Today Ron is 99 and has lost his sight to macular degeneration.

He has been helped by Blind Veterans UK since 2012.

“Blind Veterans UK are marvellous. Three years ago I couldn’t write a letter any more, but I went on an IT course and they’ve given me all the training and equipment I need.

“I have a special screen that magnifies what I write and software that reads it back to me. I can send emails now which is so important for keeping up with my grandchildren.”

On the day our Llandudno centre also welcomed blind veterans and their families to a march from the Llandudno Promenade to the Cenotaph, followed by a remembrance service.

Blind Veterans UK has supported many veterans who lost their sight on or after D-Day but, crucially, we now support many more D-Day veterans who have lost their sight much later in life. We can only continue to do so with your continued kindness.



Our veterans were joined by some of our new and current Corporate and Major Donor supporters, who were honoured to meet and hear from those who fought on the Normandy beaches 75 years ago. For more info on how you can partner with us, please contact Jo Billings on: [joanne.billings@blindveterans.org.uk](mailto:joanne.billings@blindveterans.org.uk) or call 020 7616 7931.

# You Marched for veterans

Last March, lots of blind veterans and your fellow supporters got together to MarchForVeterans. A series of fun and well-attended marches across the country helped raise a **fantastic £11,672**. A huge thank you to everybody who got involved and please see opposite for how you can take part in March 2020.



Martock



Brighton



Colchester



London



National Memorial Arboretum



Llandudno

“I’ll definitely be back next year! If anyone out there thinks they can’t do it – trust me – they can. It was a great day for a great cause.”

Mark, who marched in Llandudno.



**Register for MarchForVeterans 2020**

We’re busy making exciting plans for MarchForVeterans 2020 and have already scheduled 13 marches across the UK. Find out more and register at [blindveterans.org.uk/marchforveterans](https://blindveterans.org.uk/marchforveterans)

# You helped John with his labour of love

**J**ohn Bennet, a former corporal in the Royal Signals has an extremely rare condition called myasthenia gravis. The condition affects the signals that the brain sends to the body and can mean that John's eyelids can become 'locked shut' at any time, without any notice.

The condition means that John is unable to drive and is no longer able to work for British Telecom. After a few months John became very frustrated at having so little to do, until a visit to the Blind Veterans UK Brighton centre gave him an idea.

"I needed to find something to do to keep myself busy and told some of my fellow blind veterans how I'd always wanted to

write a children's book. They gave me loads of encouragement and for the first time ever I thought 'hold on, I could actually do this!'"

John's book was based on a character invented by his own father, whose exploits John had then passed on to his two children. Bringing the character to life was a labour of love for John, and he was as proud as punch when the book was published this year with illustrations by Louise Saunders.

John also received training in using a long cane:

"I was really reluctant to go out because I could fall over at any time. But learning how to use the cane has given me back

the confidence I lost. I can even get the bus on my own, which a year ago would have been unthinkable.

"It's been a tough journey but Blind Veterans UK has been with me every step of the way."



John at the launch of his book.



It costs **£34** to provide a blind veteran like John with a long cane.

# You're helping Les rebuild his life

**L**es Fryer, who lost his sight to age-related macular degeneration (AMD) was a keen sportsman when he served in the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (REME), playing football and cricket to a high level and travelling from one base to another.

But losing his sight meant that Les lost a lot of his valued independence, and he struggled to come to terms with his loss. Les, 83, says:

"When I lost my sight around four years ago, I became a bit wayward. Losing your sight makes you very frustrated. Through Blind Veterans UK I saw a counsellor and she was an absolute boon for me – I lost all that anger and it made a huge difference.

"I recently lost my wife and at first I was lost without her. What has been a huge help is my weekly visits to the Blind Veterans UK rehabilitation and training centre in Brighton, where I've met a lot of new friends. We all have great fun together. I recently took up blind bowling, something I thoroughly enjoy.

"Without Blind Veterans UK I would

be devastated. My life revolves around it now."

Les regularly attends Blind Veterans UK events such as his local lunch club, and recently went on a trip to a golf driving range. He doesn't think he would be able to enjoy any of the new activities he takes part in without supporters like you.

"It's no understatement to say Blind Veterans UK has rebuilt my life."



**£532** could help pay for another blind veteran like Les to attend an **introductory week** at one of our centres.

# You helped give a warm welcome to Henry

**H**enry Szmydt, who was one of the tens of thousands of Poles who joined the British Armed Forces during WWII, recently enjoyed his introductory week at our Llandudno centre.

Henry joined the Royal 2nd Tank Regiment on 1st January 1943, and did his training in the UK. He fought in the Battle of Monte Cassino during the Italian Campaign and ended up receiving five medals before he was discharged in 1947.

He later married Elsie, whom he met while working for Courtald's in Derby, but sadly lost her a few years ago. Henry really enjoyed the warm welcome he received at the centre and appreciated the attentiveness of the staff.

During his visit, Henry mentioned that he had been unable to attend the commemorations for the 75th anniversary of D-Day. On hearing this, staff volunteered to take him to the Llandudno Cenotaph where he is

pictured on the right, finally being able to pay his respects to his fellow comrades. Henry laid a wreath in their honour and the moment meant an enormous amount to him. He says of the support he has received from Blind Veterans UK:

"I'm ever so grateful to the charity and really enjoyed the week's induction in Llandudno. The Merlin CCTV magnifier is really, really useful. It means I can read my mail and take care of my correspondence again.

"Blind Veterans UK has already made such a difference to my life. I'm coming back to the centre for more IT and fitness training – it's given me something to look forward to again."

Henry was delighted to visit the Llandudno Cenotaph and pay tribute to his fallen comrades.



A **CCTV reader**, like the one which has done so much to help Henry regain his independence, costs **£2,154**.

# Irene's lasting legacy

Your fellow supporter Irene Pain, explains why she is happy to be leaving a gift to Blind Veterans UK in her Will.

“I first encountered Blind Veterans UK many years ago when the ladies group of which I was secretary invited a speaker from the charity. The gentlemen, called Nigel, had lost his sight in the Falklands and his speech was inspirational. I later got to know him and he once told me:

“When I lost my sight I

thought my life was over, but Blind Veterans UK gave it back to me.’

“I was fortunate enough to visit the centre in Brighton and I was hugely impressed. They give blind veterans so much confidence and the training to look after themselves. They can cook, they can look after their homes, they can go out and do things.

“The charity has always been close to my heart, so when it came to making a Will, after I'd made provisions for my family, I made sure I left a gift. I think it's important to make a Will because I want to make sure my estate goes to the people and causes I care about – and I certainly don't want the government deciding where my money is spent.

“Our ex-Service men and women have protected our country. If they are then unfortunate enough to lose their sight, they deserve looking after. And that's what I want my gift to do – I want to make sure that in the future blind veterans are looked after.”



For more information on leaving a gift, please contact our Legacy Team by emailing [legacies@blindveterans.org.uk](mailto:legacies@blindveterans.org.uk) or by calling **020 7616 8365**.

# Margaret's story

95-year-old Margaret Wilson was proud to attend our Remembrance Day commemoration last November and catch up with fellow WWII veterans.



Yet even though many years have passed, Margaret will not discuss her work as a Bletchley Park codebreaker in detail. As she explains:

“I was sworn to secrecy by a Justice of the Peace. He said to us ‘what I'm going to tell you, you take with you to the end of your days. You do not repeat anything’.”

Margaret has stayed true to her word, despite much of her work at Bletchley Park now becoming declassified. She is also incredibly modest about the role she played:

“I once said to a friend that I was only a small cog in a big wheel. He said to me ‘without that small cog, the wheel couldn't move, remember that’.”

Margaret began to lose her sight to macular degeneration in 2016, since then your support has helped Blind Veterans UK welcome her into our family.

“When I lost my sight I felt really low. But after visiting the Blind Veterans UK centre I instantly felt uplifted. It helped me to accept my own sight loss.”



“At the commemoration I thought about my friends who were bombed. I am always thinking of them.”

Margaret.



# Blind veterans test driving the future

Pictured at the launch day of the trial are, left to right, Tony Harbour, Dr Renata Gomes, Nick Caplin and Mark Threadgold.

**F**or the last six months blind veterans have been involved in an exciting and truly groundbreaking initiative – a trial to determine how driverless vehicles could impact the lives of people with sight loss.

The autonomous driverless pod was developed by a Coventry-based technology company called Aurigo. The pod operates by responding to on-demand requests and can carry up to four people at a time around the centre. A number of our blind veterans have been putting the vehicle through its paces at our Brighton centre, to help iron out any problems with the design and technology.

Our Chief Executive Nick Caplin explained that “many of the blind veterans we support say that not being able to drive is one of the most significant things that hits you when



you lose your sight. It's another way of losing independence and can make people more isolated.”

The pod has been called ‘Arthur’ after our founder Sir Arthur Pearson and the first ever blind veteran to test-drive it was Mark Threadgold. He was a

keen motorcyclist before the accident which led to his sight loss, so losing his licence was a massive setback. Mark said:

“When you lose your sight your independence is something which is taken straight away.

“These pods could give you that back,

and that would be absolutely fantastic.”

Feedback from blind veterans like Mark will be crucial in the continual development of the pod and creating a gold standard design so that it will be more accessible for people with sight loss and a range of disabilities.



“It’s my 15th wedding anniversary next year and it would be lovely to say to my wife that I could take her for a drive in the pod down to Brighton Pier.”

Tony Harbour, blind veteran.

# Honouring Sir Arthur Pearson's achievements



**T**he plaque can be seen on the front of the building at 21 Portland Place, Marylebone, now the home of the Association of Anaesthetists, where Sir Arthur lived with his wife and many of our blind veterans.

Sir Arthur was a newspaper magnate who sadly lost his sight to glaucoma in 1913. Refusing to be bowed by his sight loss, Sir Arthur went on to found our charity to help those who lost their sight on the battlefields of WWI.

His philosophy, which remains central to the work of Blind Veterans UK today, is that blindness should not be allowed to prevent people from living independent, productive and happy lives. As he said:

“I wanted them to be led to look upon blindness not as an affliction, but as a handicap. Not as a calamity, but as an opportunity.”

One of the blind veterans attending the ceremony was Peter Price (70), who lost his sight due to cone dystrophy. Coincidentally Peter's grandfather, Ernest Sayers, had lost his sight to the same condition during WWI and joined Blind Veterans UK in the year Sir Arthur died. Peter still carries with him his grandfather's

Braille watch, which Sir Arthur personally presented to all blind veterans. Today Blind Veterans UK provides all new blind veterans with a talking watch.

Ronald Hutton, Chair of English Heritage's Blue Plaques Panel, said:

“Sir Arthur was a tireless advocate for blind people. We are delighted to celebrate his legacy here today, in a house once listed in the street directory as ‘Pearson's Hostel for Blind Officers.’”



Joining Peter Price (right) were his fellow blind veterans Simon Brown and Colin Williamson, our President. The plaque was unveiled by Colin and the Hon Marya Egerton Warburton, Sir Arthur's great-granddaughter.

# You've helped Alan break new ground

In April, blind veteran Alan Lock completed the London Marathon an incredible seventh time! But that's not Alan's only achievement.

Since losing his sight he's climbed mountains, skied to the South Pole and in 2008 became the first-ever blind person to row across the Atlantic Ocean. Here he explains how Blind Veterans UK has helped him on his journey.

"Just three years into my career in the Royal Navy as a Marine Engineer, I lost my sight to a rare genetic condition. Everything I'd ever dreamed of was gone. It was a crushing blow.

"Blind Veterans UK were key to helping me rebuild my life. They gave me back the confidence I had lost.

"Speaking to other blind veterans helped me decide that I wasn't going to let sight loss stop me doing the things I wanted. They also helped me with equipment like magnifiers, to make daily life that much easier – and do special things like read my daughter bedtime stories.

"The Marathon this year was really hard because I'd been ill the week before



Alan completed the course with his guide Colin (left) despite having been ill the week before.

and in the last couple of miles I was really suffering. But knowing I was raising money for Blind Veterans UK meant there was no way I wasn't going to finish.

"Blind Veterans UK have been incredible, both in terms of practical adjustments to my home, and active support in allowing me to pursue my passion for sport and other physical endeavours. I am so grateful to Blind Veterans UK and all its supporters."

# You sow the seeds of confidence for blind veterans like Bob

A group of blind veterans recently got together at our London headquarters to brush up on their gardening skills.

Activities like gardening can be great for veterans' health and wellbeing, giving them a real sense of purpose and the opportunity to get out of the house and forge new friendships.

As well as gardening we arrange activities like baking, card making and even chair-based yoga – and they are always tailored to the needs of vision-impaired people so that they can get the most out of attending. Isobel Whelan, a Rehabilitation Officer for the Visually Impaired (ROVI), often attends the sessions and believes the main benefit for our blind veterans is the boost it gives to their confidence. "We often see transformations taking place during activity days. The veterans all support each other and share advice to help them with the activities. Many of them live alone, so it's a great opportunity for them to talk to others in the same situation, and they often find that they have a lot in common."

That was certainly the case for Bob Wyeth, who did his National Service as a Driver/Mechanic in the Royal Signals.

"The gardening session has allowed me

to get out of the house and there was nothing I needed to worry about as Blind Veterans UK arranged everything.

"The company is what I enjoyed the most – there was a great camaraderie between us all. It's great mixing with other visually impaired personnel.

"The support I've got from Blind Veterans UK has grown my confidence no end – which means I can continue to do the things I love."



Bob especially enjoyed the great company during his gardening session.

# Meet your star fellow supporter, Ann Leo

In June, Ann completed the gruelling 22-mile D-Day challenge for Blind Veterans UK. She wanted to raise funds as a way of saying thank you for the care her father, Peter (97), receives.

**“My dad has always been a gentleman and has been the most wonderful husband, father and grandad. He served during WWII as a Leading Aircraftman and I am so grateful that his turn has come to be looked after and cared for by the wonderful charity that is Blind Veterans UK.**

"Dad has age-related macular degeneration and joined the charity in 2016. He was allocated an individual support worker, Isobelle, who became an integral part of his life. He also attended training programmes at the Brighton centre to help him live as independently as possible in his own home. As Dad's sight and general health deteriorated, he moved into the Brighton centre

as a resident in February this year.

"I am in awe of the care and kindness Dad receives. Every time I visit I come away even more impressed, the staff are angels. It is so difficult to find the words to describe what the atmosphere

is like, you have to visit yourself to experience the vibrancy and love. Fundraising is the very least that I could do.

"The D-Day challenge was tough physically, but an amazing experience. Most of all though, my dad was so proud."



Ann did the challenge to say thank you for everything Blind Veterans UK have done for her dad.



## Join the team raising money for Blind Veterans UK

Over the months to come there are lots of opportunities for you to help raise much-needed funds for ex-Service men and women living with sight loss.

### Simplyhealth Great South Run

20 October 2019, Southsea

This 10-mile flat run, starting and finishing on Southsea seafront, is ideal for runners of all ages and abilities.

Last year's event saw 20,000 people taking part and a wonderful time was had by everybody as huge crowds cheered on the participants from the sidelines.

### Christmas Carol Concert

10 December 2019, Marylebone, London

Please join us for the 10th year of our magical Christmas Carol Concert. The evening brings together celebrity readers and musical performances from special guests during the evening, as well as tasty mince pies after the service. All money raised will go towards helping blind veterans to rebuild their lives after sight loss.

### London Landmarks Half Marathon

29 March 2020, London

The sixth running of this hugely popular event gives you the chance to support Blind Veterans UK while experiencing London in a unique way. The run starts on Pall Mall and ends on Downing Street. With roads closed throughout the route, you'll be able to enjoy iconic landmarks like St Paul's and the Tower of London.



Find out more about these events, and others besides, at [blindveterans.org.uk/get-involved/events/calendar](https://blindveterans.org.uk/get-involved/events/calendar)

# Win big every week

At just £1 per entry, you could win big by entering our exciting Weekly Lottery, while all proceeds go 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.

Top prize **£500**

2nd prize **£200**

3rd prizes **£50 x2**

4th prizes **M&S vouchers x30**

To enter visit [www.weeklylottery.org.uk/blindveterans](http://www.weeklylottery.org.uk/blindveterans)

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LOTTERY**



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