

Debrief

Your impact on the lives of blind veterans



Welcome



Adrian Bell CEO, Blind Veterans UK

I am honoured to introduce my first edition of Debrief as the new CEO of Blind Veterans UK. Since I joined the charity in April, I have enjoyed every moment of meeting the beneficiaries and seeing the impact your donations have on their lives. I hope these articles show you how much of a difference you make.

Being involved in rebuilding lives gives us an enormous amount to applaud and commend. Quite rightly, there is a lot of celebration in this issue: accomplishments, milestones and anniversaries. We open with blind veteran Margaret, who has not only turned 100 but published her Second World War memoirs. On page 6, you can join us as we remember the start of the Iraq War and the end of the Korean War, as well as the end of National Service on page 11. Hearing from veterans who sacrificed so much in the conflicts is really eye-opening.

Of course, we also celebrated the Coronation of King Charles III, with

activities at our centres and by taking part in the Big Help Out. These wonderful days happen thanks to the dedication of our staff and volunteers. You can find out more about the work done by one of our community teams on page 18 and by some of our volunteers on page 13. One team you might recognise - if only by the sound of their voices! - is our Supporter Care team, featured on page 15. They were keen to introduce themselves to you and let you know how much your calls and donations mean to them.

On page 8, we're looking ahead to one of our most important times of year. This November, you could get involved in Remembrance. We have activities happening across the country and would love to hear from you. Another way to get is involved is by playing our weekly lottery. There is really big news about that on page 10!

I hope you enjoy reading all about the wonderful achievements of our blind veterans. None of it would happen without you.

I wish you a wonderful summer and rest of 2023.

Best wishes

Adrian.



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A WAAF at War - Blind veteran Margaret releases war memoirs after turning 100

Bletchley Park veteran, Margaret Wilson, has recently published her war memoirs, thanks to fellow blind veteran, Simon Mahoney

Margaret Wilson, a 100-year-old Women's Auxiliary Air Force veteran has just achieved the incredible feat of publishing her memoirs from the Second World War.



Blind veteran Margaret

Margaret's book, entitled 'A WAAF at War', tells the story of her huge contribution to the war effort, which included handling barrage balloons during the Blitz and intercepting enemy messages at Bletchley Park.

Margaret says, "I feel honoured. I can't believe that I've had a book written about me and it makes me happy to know that my stories can be shared with my family and friends."

Margaret's book came about because of her long-standing friendship with fellow blind veteran, Simon Mahoney. Simon, a published author himself, volunteered as Margaret's telephone befriender during Covid and the pair struck up a wonderful friendship. Simon was so taken by Margaret's stories from the war, that he ended up interviewing her and used special software provided by us to type up her book.

Margaret says, "During the Covid lockdowns, I was lucky enough to be connected with Simon via telephone to support me through that challenging time. I've loved our regular calls.

"When he said that he wanted to write a book about me I never thought it would actually happen, but he's truly amazing at making things like this come to life!"

Meanwhile, Simon, a former Royal Marines Officer who lost his sight due to glaucoma, says: "Having been in awe of Margaret's amazing stories, I jokingly suggested that she should write a book. She simply said, 'I leave that sort of thing to you.' And in that moment a mad idea was born."

Margaret's war years are full of fascinating tales. She joined the Women's Auxiliary Air Force in 1941 initially serving in Balloon Command and then as a wireless operator, before going on to work as a Morse slip reader at Bletchley Park.

Margaret says, "The work was hard. We got bombed left right and centre. I don't know how I'm still here. I remember watching a plane come down at RAF Syerston and having to send a message to another airfield down south, saying, 'It is with regret we have to inform you that your son was killed'. It stays with you. You can't forget things like that."



After signing the official secrets act at Bletchley Park, she keenly remembers being sworn in by a Justice of the Peace. She says, "He told me to never ever talk to anyone about the work we were doing there and that I must take it to my end of days."



Margaret on Remembrance Sunday

Later in life, in 2016, Margaret started receiving our support, having lost her sight due to age-related macular degeneration, which has left her unable to see well enough to read or write.

She says, "You try and get by as long as you can when you're told you're losing your

sight, but when it started to get very bad I did feel really miserable.

"Blind Veterans UK is the best thing that's ever happened to me. The biggest benefit is being around others who are getting on with life, even though they have much worse sight than me. Everyone helps one another.

"I can't thank Simon enough for his kind words and support. He's become such a dear friend and I still look forward to our calls."



Margaret's book, A WAAF at War, is available on Amazon.

Profits from sales will go on to help more ex service men and women rebuild their lives after sight loss.

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Remembering Iraq and Korea

2023 marks the anniversary of two conflicts that saw members of the British Armed Forces lose their lives and their sight. It is 20 years since the start of the Iraq war and 70 years since the end of the Korean War.

As a charity that was founded in the First World War we have been here to support veterans of every conflict and war since then. This includes those who were injured in Korea and Iraq. This is the story of two such veterans, separated by over 50 years, who share the connection of being supported by Blind Veterans UK.

In March 2003, the United States and her allies launched an invasion of Iraq. British soldiers remained in Iraq for another six years. 179 British troops or Ministry of Defence civilians died during operations in Iraq. Many more were seriously injured.

Craig went to war in 2003, a week after his 18th birthday. He and his regiment, First Kings, were excited to be heading to Iraq.

"It was all I wanted to be. I'd trained so much to do my job. I quickly went out there and realised that it's not a game or a war film. It's actually real."

It was on Craig's second tour in 2006 that his life changed forever.

He was based in Basra working alongside special forces on reconnaissance. The day he was injured, Craig had been dispatched as part of a team to arrest terrorists.

He said, "I was on the building's roof, fighting for about 20 minutes before I was struck by two rocket propelled grenades."

They're normally used for shooting at armoured vehicles or helicopters and the damage they inflict is brutal.

Craig received serious injuries to his arms and head and unfortunately lost all his vision. After months in hospital, he was determined to adapt to sight loss and to get mobile again.

While visiting one of our centres of wellbeing he met a Second World War veteran who had been blinded at the Battle of El-Alamein.

"He shared with me how angry he'd been until one day he thought 'Who am I actually angry with? Where's this getting me?' He told me to move past my anger and accept my situation. That one meeting with a fellow blind veterans made me who I am today."

The Korean War began in 1950 and ended in July 1953. 1,100 British soldiers were killed in the war which still has not officially ended.

Tom joined the Army as a boy soldier on VE day in 1945 when he was just 14 years old. He served in Korea as part of a Mortar Unit which was attached to the Gloucestershire Regiment.

Tom became a Prisoner of War and was sent to North Korea for two and half years. After the armistice was signed, he went back to England and continued to serve in the Army for a total of 32 years.

On having been a Prisoner of War, Tom says: "I consider myself incredibly fortunate to have survived what I did. I lost six friends in battle and in the camp.

"I did try to escape. Me and a friend were caught before we left the camp. I think we were given away. I was put into solitary confinement and taken out every day to question because they wanted to know who helped us escape. But I didn't give anybody away."

Tom lost his sight later in life due to age related macular degeneration. He started receiving help and support from Blind Veterans UK in 2012.

Tom, now 92, says: "I had heard of Blind Veterans UK, St Dunstan's as it was then, during my time in the Army but wasn't initially aware that they could help me."

Tom received training and equipment from us to support him to continue to live independently with his sight loss.

He says, "I've been to both the charity's centres and it was marvellous. They really look after me and I cannot praise Blind Veterans UK enough though I do try every opportunity I get."

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Remembrance is a significant time for Blind Veterans UK

It's a time that we come together to remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice. We reflect on our charity's history and the support provided to thousands of blind veterans since our first war blinded made their way home from the battle fields of the First World War. We consider how different those lives would have been without vital funds raised and donated by supporters like you, who believe no veteran should battle sight loss alone.

In 2022, you helped us ensure veterans across the UK received life changing support to rebuild their independence, confidence and mental well-being. You also helped them to be involved and take part in events during this important time of the year. Wreath laying, parades, military weeks - these were valuable opportunities for our veterans to come together to remember, funded by your generous donations.



Group of Blind Veterans, Summer 1918



Blind Veteran Steve in a Scorpion tank at Military Week

How are you planning to remember?

It's never too soon to start thinking about how you will mark this important time and we have lots of opportunities for individuals and organisations to aet involved.

Gift a Wreath

Laying a wreath is a symbol of respect and something valued greatly by our veterans. Could you or your organisation gift a wreath and enable a blind veteran to take part in a commemoration in their local community? For more info or to register your interest visit

blindveterans.org.uk/giftawreath

20 Oct - 12 Nov 2023

From War Memorial Walks to Pin Badge placement, could you organise an activity or event during this time to ensure the fallen and those left behind are not

forgotten? Visit our website for more ideas or tell us about your own plans. Register to get all the help you need to start planning to remember.



blindveterans.org.uk/planning Prefer to speak to a member of the team? Call 0300 111 22 33



Blind veteran Billy, marching to place a wreath



Victory over Blindness pin badge



Our weekly lottery top prize is doubling to a huge £1000!

We are really excited about this news!

The first draw with the new prize is on 18 August, and from then on - every week someone is guaranteed to win £1000. We'd love it if you could take part. As well as lots of other prizes to be won each week, as a lottery player you'll have the added bonus of being automatically entered into our quarterly raffle - where you could win £15,000!

You can play for just £1 a week. Each ticket you kindly purchase helps support our nation's bravest ex-Service men and women to rebuild their lives after sight

By increasing our top prize, we look forward to welcoming more players to our lottery - and supporting more blind veterans. We can't wait to announce the

first winner of £1000 - will it be you?

Blind veteran Chris knows how much of a difference your generosity makes. He spent 11 years in service with the Royal Navy, before losing his sight in later years due to pseudoxanthoma elasticum. He says, "It was a difficult time. I'd always been so independent and now I was having to ask people to do things for me."

When Chris joined the charity, he began to regain the independence that he desperately missed. He says, "Blind Veterans UK dispel the myth that if you're blind you can't do certain things. With the help of their specialist training and rehabilitation programme, you soon realise that you can do many of the things vou did before and more besides."

Visit lotterv.blindveterans.org.uk/debrief to play or scan the QR code or you can phone us 0330 002 0285. Good luck!







National Service

John, now 84, began his training in August 1958. After war had dominated his childhood, he welcomed the feeling of stability and a sense of belonging that National Service gave him.



John on Remembrance Sunday

John was sent to Malaysia during its internal conflict. He remembers mud and mosquitoes but says it opened up the world to him and travel became an important part of his life. He says National Service made him a better person: more confident, skilled and responsible. Promotion training meant he learned how to lead people and that, as well as working with officers from other countries, prepared John well for his future business career.

Today, John is fully blind from age-related macular degeneration. Sight loss hit him hard and his wife said he became very depressed before he started being supported by Blind Veterans UK.

"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." Liz, John's wife

John says that being part of Blind Veterans UK has given him back the sense of belonging he felt during National Service. We are so glad to hear that, John!

"It's something that I'll never, ever forget. It'll be with me all the time. I really enioved my time with the National Service." Bob, blind veteran



Bob on Remembrance Sunday

Bob had been keen on a military career but was nervous about committing. He thinks 90% of the National Servicemen wanted to get back to their families and to the trades they left behind. But Bob enlisted, having enioved the education and training he would otherwise have missed out on. National Service, he says, was a step up the ladder he would otherwise not have had. He trained as a nurse, and was in Berlin after the war, with the Nazi prisoners in Spandau prison among his charges. He describes it as an unpleasant but fascinating time. He left in 1961, as the Berlin Wall went up, and went on to Singapore, having been named the Army's Top Male Nurse.

Bob. 88, was awarded an MBE in January this year. His wife died 18 months ago, Bob was on his own, struggling with macular degeneration. He has visited the Llandudno Centre twice and is grateful that there's someone on the end of the phone if he needs them.

"Blind Veterans UK has been a great help to me. I appreciate everything they do for me and there's always someone I can turn to if I need any help." Bob, blind veteran

Many of those who served are struggling with sight loss - donate here to help them.

blindveterans.org.uk/ns



Coronation celebrations

Blind veterans gathered across the country during the month of May to celebrate the Coronation of Their Majesties King Charles III and Queen Camilla.

During the week leading up to the Coronation, our two Centres in North Wales and Sussex held their 'Kings, **Oueens and Coronations' themed** wellbeing breaks. They decorated buildings in Union Jack bunting inside and out and put on fun-packed programmes of roval-themed activities to celebrate the big day.



Veteran Wilson and Maureen at the Coronation Newcastle event

Blind veterans enjoyed activities such as baking Coronation cupcakes and the creative took part in making a giant Coronation crown.

Right royal trips to royal locations, such as Hever Castle, the Royal Pavilion, and Caernarfon Castle, where the King's investiture as Prince of Wales took place.

Both Centres held their own 'street' parties with our wonderful catering teams putting on delicious buffet lunches.



Supporters dressed in red white and blue

The Big Help Out at Llandudno

In tribute to His Majesty The King's public service, The Big Help Out was planned for Monday 8 May to encourage people to try volunteering for themselves and join the work being undertaken to support their local communities.

We were delighted to host the Big Help Out at the Llandudno Centre with 100 people, including the Sea Cadets and Scouts, taking part.

Events took place across the whole country including a Coronation lunch in Newcastle that our new Chief Executive, Adrian, was delighted to join, Our Blind Veterans UK choir, Vision in Song, performed at a Coronation tea party in Colchester. The performance was themed with each song having a link to the King.

All at Blind Veterans UK send our Loyal Greetings to His Majesty The King.



Veteran Vivian and Adrian, CEO

Volunteers week 2023

The charity celebrated Volunteers' Week 2023 which took place between 1st -7th June. It is a time to recognise the extraordinary contributions volunteers continue to make, as they support members in many wonderful ways.

Over the past twelve months volunteers at the charity have kindly given over 19,000 volunteering hours of their time to support members - what an incredible achievement! That is just a headline figure, behind it is the dedication, compassion. energy, and skill volunteers have given to help blind veterans who need support as well as, running lunch clubs, providing companionship, supporting fundraising efforts or enhancing our service offer in the centres. Volunteers have played a vital role for the charity over the last year; generously providing their time to help improve the lives of so many members.

Volunteers are integral and always work at the heart of the service we provide for members. Volunteers' week is an opportunity to showcase the range of volunteering opportunities we have on offer. Volunteer fairs and other events were held, to encourage people to try volunteering for the first time and help people find out how, through volunteering, they can make a significant difference to blind veterans in their local area. With the move to the new Rustington site this was a great opportunity to showcase the new volunteering opportunities available, where an event in the pavilion was held to recruit new volunteers in the area. There were also several external events attended, like the one at the Suffolk Show.

This year to personally thank volunteers. each individual volunteer received a card designed by members which was supported through the national creative

wellbeing project and the team behind it. Volunteers were delighted by this member designed card which came with a heartfelt thank you from members across the country.



The card made for volunteers

We couldn't do what we do without our wonderful volunteers. That is why we welcome volunteers from all walks of life around the UK to volunteer and make a huge difference to members locally. We welcome further applications from people who would like to volunteer for the charity, and we have a diverse number of opportunities available.

If you would like to volunteer for the charity, please email volunteer@blindveterans.org.uk or visit blindveterans.org.uk/volunteering for the latest opportunities. We look forward to hearing from you!





volunteersweek.org/get-involved



How technology adds colour to blind veterans' lives

One of the most important aspects of rebuilding a life after sight loss is finding the right technology for each blind veteran. Your support means each veterans 'technology kitbag' can be bespoke - depending on what their needs are at their particular time of life.

There are key devices that make people's lives easier: a voice activated phone, talking kitchen equipment, a liquid level indicator so the blind veteran can make their own hot drink safely. But now technology is so advanced and varied that it can help in all kinds of wonderful ways.

Blind veteran Chris, 39, was injured by a rocket attack in Afghanistan. He suffered a fractured skull, neurological damage, total sight loss in one right eye and has only peripheral vision remaining in the other. A long rehabilitation process followed and technology helped him reclaim his independence. Then, a Blind Veterans UK photography week inspired him.

Photography allows Chris to make full use of his love of the outdoors and being surrounded by nature. Technology helps

him get the most from his talent. Once he has chosen his composition, Chris uses "focus peaking" to help him take the best shot. "I can tweak the focus and when I'm bang on, it tells me."

I think you'll agree, the results are absolutely beautiful.



Chris's photo of Over Owler Tor

This August, we are launching **Operation Technology Kitbag.**

The aim is to provide each blind veteran with the kit they need to live independent and fulfilling lives. Find out more at blindveterans.org/kit

Introducing our Supporter Care Team

Our Supporter Care Team are your first point of contact here at Blind Veterans UK. They are always here to help with any aspect of your support for the charity.

What does it mean to you to work for **Blind Veterans UK?**

Alistair: "It is an honour to work for Blind Veterans UK, and to be helping veterans of the British military that are affected by sight loss. It's great to be part of a charity that has such an incredible purpose, one that has helped so many veterans over its long history and helps so many veterans in such tough circumstances today.

It's always really touching how generous our supporters are. That feeling never fades. People who want to help other people - it's a great thing to be a part of."

Lauren: "I feel very proud to work for Blind Veterans UK. The blind veterans are so positive and uplifting - I've learnt a lot from our blind veterans. I handle enquiries from phone calls and am also responsible for the mail. I'm the one that reads all your letters - I love your letters!"

Gabrielle: "Speaking to our supporters and blind veterans is the most special part of my job. When you speak to the blind veterans that we help, and the supporters that make the support we provide possible - it feels very special to be a part of that."

What message would you like to give to our supporters?

Lauren: "Something that our supporters say a lot when they donate is 'I am sorry it's not much, I wish I could give more' - I would like to say to all our supporters: every donation we get, no matter what size - every donation counts."

Gabrielle: "Especially with what's going on at the moment and during the cost-of-living crisis, every donation is incredible - it really means something."

Alistair "I would like to say an extra special thank you to all our supporters. As much as it might sound cliché to say that every donation counts - it truly is the case.

We are keen to hear from our supporters and for them to keep in touch with us - we encourage them to keep doing that. Without your generosity, we wouldn't be able to support the thousands of blind veterans we have. Our supporters mean everything to the charity."

Ways to contact Supporter Care:

Call us on 0300 111 22 33. Lines are open Monday to Friday, 9am -5pm, excluding public and bank holidays. Or you can email us at: supporter.services@blindveterans.org.uk

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A gift of hope and inspiration

Following a life of service and a long history of generous support for Blind Veterans UK, we are honoured that Ray has left a gift in his Will for his fellow veterans. Ray's wife, Jeannette, shares his remarkable story.

Ray joined the Royal Navy in 1965 aged 16 as an Artificer Apprentice at HMS Fisgard. Achieving top Shipwright Apprentice, he was posted to HMY Britannia and embarked on a 35,000-mile round trip during a Royal Tour of the Antipodes. He then went on to serve on submarines at HMS Dolphin before successfully entering BRNC Dartmouth. He was commissioned into the Fleet Air Arm and gained his Observer Wings in 1973.

Amongst many notable appointments, Ray went on to become Chief Ground Instructor at the Helicopter Ground School at RNAS Culdrose. He was one of the few 'A Category' Qualified Observer Instructors. At Culdrose, Ray undertook numerous search and rescue sorties, one of the most remarkable covering 800 miles from Cornwall to take an Injured seaman from the Russian fish factory ship "Vladimir Atlasov' in the Atlantic west of Shannon. It was the longest mission recoded from the station at the time and took nearly 9 hours.



Veteran Ray in uniform

Ray's experience and knowledge then led him to oversee development and service of the Super Lynx Helicopter. A man on a mission, Ray took control of the multi-million-pound programme which had been languishing at the point of termination. Ray's 18 months of furious work saw the project succeed and a generation of naval aviators were able to benefit from the Super Lynx before its retirement in 2017.



The fun side of Ray on a canal boat holiday with friends

In recognition of this achievement Ray was promoted to Commander. He finally stepped ashore in 2002 having served 37 years in the Royal Navy, continuing to work in aviation until his retirement. Ray's wife Jeannette tells us:

"Ray held our veterans in the highest esteem. His Father, a CPO Chef in the Royal Navy, endured three sinkings during World War 2 and survived! That had a lasting impression on Ray. He personally understood the bravery and suffering that Servicemen and their families can experience. Ray's career reflected the quality and professionalism of all our Armed Services. So many have paid a high price for that commitment. We should always respect and appreciate them. Ray certainly did".

We are so grateful to inspirational Ray for this gift, that will bring hope to future blind veterans and rebuild their lives.

To find out how you can join Ray in rebuilding a future for blind veterans with a gift in your Will, contact Alice:

020 7616 7923

giftsinwills@blindveterans.org.uk blindveterans.org.uk/leaveagift



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News from a region

Here's an update from Emma who is Community Team Leader covering West Sussex, Surrey and East Berkshire.

Emma

We are a busy team of support workers, rehabilitation staff, a volunteer co-ordinator and volunteers, who provide an invaluable service to our members both face to face and remotely.

When the Pandemic hit, we, like many other charities were forced to look at our service offer and think creatively in how we could meet the needs of our blind veterans under the new landscape. As a community we started running virtual coffee groups, and then remote social activity groups on popular subjects. These included groups such as sports, music. quizzes, history, gardening, food and drink, sea swimming, carers support and most recently a bereavement support group.

As we moved out of Covid we were conscious of not simply going back to our old working ways, but to continue with the things that had proven successful during that time. We now work in a blended way, providing face to face visits, social events and activities, and also continuing to support our blind veterans digitally and remotely. This has proven a vital lifeline for those who can no longer socialise as they once did pre the pandemic.

This year we have some exciting things on the horizon for our blind veterans, a boat trip to Windsor, cruising down the Chichester Canal, and our annual journey on the Bluebell Railway. We also have a community holiday booked for September to our Llandudno Centre of Wellbeing, where we will support our most isolated

and lonely blind veterans to be with their peers for a week, getting involved in a busy activity schedule when there. In the past our community holidays have proven a great success, with lasting friendships forming. One of our blind veterans attended a holiday shortly after his wife passed away. He described the experience as saving his life, when he was struggling with grief and felt he had nothing to live for. He made friends with people who lived near him, and found a new support group to help him navigate through his loss. He has since holidayed independently at our Brighton Centre with friends he made during the trip.



A blind veteran receiving a hamper that he won in our Christmas draw

All of the above is only possible due to our supporters. Without vital funds from people like you, we couldn't be there for blind veterans in our communities. Thank you.

Keep up with news by joining our regional Facebook groups -

North England - /BlindVeteransUKNW South England - /BlindVeteransUKSE Wales - /BlindVeteransUKWales Scotland - /BlindVeteransUKScotland



Get inspiring stories directly into your inbox

Our veterans achieve incredible things despite their sight loss, and we would love to share them with you.

Stories like blind veteran Mike who is set to become the first blind person to crew a hot air balloon across the Atlantic.

Navy veteran Mike and his wife plan to set off from Canada and land on the other side of the Atlantic around a week later. breaking two Guinness World Records in the process.

Our monthly newsletter is full of amazing stories like Mike's as well as the latest charity news, events and volunteering opportunities.

See how your support is making a difference to lives.

Sign up today by visiting: blindveterans.org.uk/debrief

FREE GIFT



What's more, every new subscriber will be entered in a free prize draw to win one of 10 Blind Veterans UK Victory over Blindness badges to Mark the fifth anniversary of 'The Lads' statue at Piccadilly station, Manchester.

You must sign up by 1 September. T&Cs apply - see blindveterans.org.uk/pin

Did you know?

By becoming a digital supporter, you are saving the charity print and postage costs, so more money can go to supporting blind veterans achieve victory over blindness!





Your support has made blind veterans feel like VIPs. Now is it your turn?!

1st Prize

£15,000

2nd Prize **£1,000**

Plus 30+ other prizes.

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

Phone **0300 111 2233**

Play online raffle.blindveterans.org.uk/debrief



Raffle closes 22 September. Draw takes place 29 September

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.



BeGambleAware.org

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