



Rebuilding  
lives after  
sight loss

# Debrief

Your impact on the lives of blind veterans

SUMMER 2020



# We're in this together

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# Welcome

## Major General (Rtd) Nick Caplin CB CEO, Blind Veterans UK



### I hope this edition of Debrief finds you all safe and well.

At the start of 2020, I imagine that, like me and everyone here at Blind Veterans UK, you may have been looking forward to a year of celebrations. I thought this summer issue would be packed full of VE Day parades, ceremonies and street parties to celebrate the 75th anniversary.

Little did we know, we would be in the middle of the worst worldwide crisis since World War II. I think it's so poignant how 75 years ago, our World War II veterans had fought long and

hard for us and, 75 years later, it's very much our time to fight for them.

Your support for our veterans at this time has been truly astounding. You've answered our appeals, donated online and sent messages of encouragement. **You'll read on page four how, thanks to you, we've taken immediate action against COVID-19 and set up a National Support Service for our veterans.** Even though they're in isolation, they're not alone. I'd like to thank every supporter for making this possible.

Despite the virus, nothing was going to stop us making VE Day 75 a day to remember for our beloved World War II veterans. **Look on pages eight and nine to see how, together, we did them proud.**

I always see Blind Veterans UK as a big family pulling together for our family members of all ages. Supporters like you are at the very heart of that, please believe me when I say we're all thinking of you and your families during these challenging times, just as I know you're thinking of our blind veterans.

Take care,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Nick Caplin". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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# On the frontline of COVID-19

Thanks to supporters like you, we're always on the frontline of our veterans' welfare. When COVID-19 suddenly gripped the UK, in the most challenging national crisis since World War II, we were needed more than ever.

COVID-19 ripped through the nation quickly and mercilessly, and our response had to be immediate. Thanks to you and everyone in the Blind Veterans UK family, it was. When the guidelines to lockdown and socially distancing were announced in March, we made urgent changes to our services to make sure all our veterans were taken care of.

**More than 90% of our blind veterans are over 70 and most at risk of coronavirus.** With so many suddenly having to isolate, we immediately put all our routine work on hold. Because of the donations you so generously give, we were able to instantly introduce a **National Support Service** for our veterans, with a telephone helpline, so we could reach them with practical and emotional support.

In the first three weeks, **we spoke to over 4,700 veterans** to identify who was most at risk and find out what was needed to manage the difficult months ahead.

We found worried members who needed help right away with daily tasks, such as shopping, picking up medication and walking guide dogs.

We connected veterans with volunteers and staff and they're now enjoying regular phone chats which, as you can imagine, really are a lifeline.

**Thank you for helping us to be on the frontline of this battle for as long as we're needed.**

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## Can you help?

As the crisis continues, we need funds to keep our National Support Service going.

**£14**  
funds one hour of support

**£113**  
funds a full day of support



# David is staying safe, thanks to you

At the beginning of lockdown, we stepped in to help David in Suffolk with his shopping. And it was all because of you. Thank you!

David Gant, an 80-year-old Army veteran from Stowmarket, is 'black-blind', meaning that he has no sight whatsoever and relies on his wife Jean for his care. David's multiple health conditions mean that the married couple of 56 years are in complete isolation for the duration of lockdown.

**"We normally get our shopping delivered but there was no online delivery slot available with our local supermarket for two weeks. I got in touch with Sallie-Ann, my Community Support Worker at Blind Veterans UK, who was round the next day with the shopping, staying at a safe distance at all times. I can't say thank you enough, we're so grateful."**

**This is how your support is helping during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thank you!**



# One man and his dog

Meet Bridgwater-based blind veteran John Hardy who has been walking up to five miles a day with his guide dog Sidney to deliver prescriptions and supermarket essentials to people in his community.

John, who has been with us since 2015, has walked over 170km over the past month to make sure that people in his community are able to get exactly what they need during the lockdown. He says, **“I want to get out there and help in any**

**way I can. I have dropped off items for about 120 people in total and I think it’s just so important to help your local community at a time like this.”**

Sidney has been with John for three years and helps with all the daily trips. John welcomes the exercise, **“I live in a rural area so if I have three houses to go to one day they could be very spread out. Both Sidney and I enjoy the exercise and it’s a great way to keep fit.”**

Since joining Blind Veterans UK, John has had IT training and been given equipment to help him cope with day to day life. He added, **“I want everyone in my community to be looked after and that’s why I want to go out and help in any way I can”.**



John picking up supplies from the staff of Boots, Bridgwater.

# How to help someone who is visually impaired with their shopping

Shopping used to be something many of us just did, but since the outbreak of COVID-19, it's become a major operation. It's harder than ever for sight impaired people as it's particularly difficult to be aware of social distancing rules. Here are some guidelines to help you to shop for anyone who is blind or partially sighted in your community.

- Firstly, always talk to the person you're going to help to find out their needs, preferences and usual system.
- Find out if they have any allergies or dietary requirements? Do they want a particular brand or are they happy for substitutes? Would they prefer microwave meals or other ready meals? Would they like vegetables or fruit that is pre chopped to make cooking easier? Perhaps they always buy ready meals that have the same cooking time and temperature.

- Next, chat to them to see if they have a system for sorting and labelling food that they may need your help with. They might use talking tin lids – used to record the content of the tin, pen friend – a system which records contents on a sticky dot attached to the food, an elastic band system – such as one band for peas, two for beans, three for fruit etc or they may need help with writing

the contents or cooking instructions in large black felt tip on a sticky label.

## And here's how to help you label and deliver safely

- Label the food before delivering it.
- Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water for at least 20 seconds before and after handling the packaging.
- Clean any devices thoroughly, such as a **talking tin lid** or **pen friend**, with antibacterial wipes before and after handling.

## Thanks for helping!



# VE Day 75 - a celebration like no other

As you know, VE Day 75 promised to be a huge celebration for our veterans. However, due to the outbreak of COVID-19, eagerly anticipated events all over the UK had to be cancelled. We were absolutely determined that the day should still be a day to remember.

It may not have been the day we planned, but VE Day 75 saw a street party held at our care home in Brighton, a socially distanced ceremony in Llandudno and 30 virtual parties nationwide, featuring over 160 WWII blind veterans.

CEO, Major Nick Caplin said, **“Our goal was to have at least 75 World War II veterans join a virtual table at this 75th anniversary event but we ended**

**up more than doubling that with 166, which was absolutely fantastic.”**

One of the highlights of the day was a recorded message from our Patron, HRH The Countess of Wessex, which was played to all the veterans. The icing on the sticky buns was a spectacular Spitfire flypast, right over the Brighton Centre, which made everyone’s day.



## Special thank you

After weeks of being confined to their rooms, veterans at the Brighton home could only celebrate VE Day 75 thanks to supporters like you and Mail Force, a new charity set up by the Daily Mail. More than 13,000 readers pledged money to supply essential PPE that allowed staff to put on a party. **Big backers included actor Sir Michael Caine and retail entrepreneur Sir Tom Hunter, who donated £100,000.**

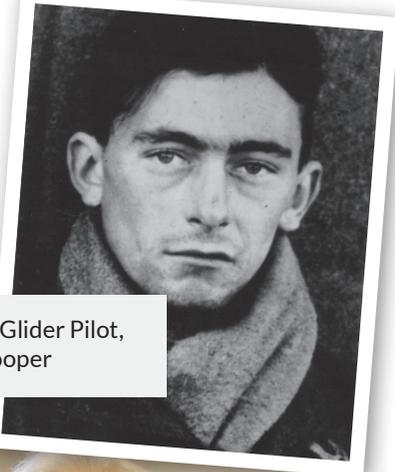


In Shirebrook in Derbyshire, 97-year-old World War II veteran Margaret Wilson took part in one of the virtual parties. Margaret initially served as a wireless operator in World War II but later in the war she trained in Vital Communications and went on to work as a Codebreaker at Bletchley Park.

**“At 10 there was such a pandemonium - everything that could make a noise was out. People were blowing trumpets and banging drums and parading through the streets. They asked us to join in, but we were in our pyjamas and we were back on shift at Bletchley the next day too!”**



One resident who particularly enjoyed the Spitfire flypast was former Army Air Corps (AAC) glider pilot Jim Hooper. When VE Day came in 1945, Jim had just been freed from captivity, after taking part in the Long March across Germany in sub-zero temperatures for four weeks. His feelings were mixed – part relief, and part concern at still being in close proximity to the fighting.



WWII Glider Pilot,  
Jim Hooper

**“There was still a danger of straying into a German patrol and getting killed right at the last moments of the war. So yes, I was relieved, but I was occupied in thinking: *how am I going to get back to the British now?*”**



Jim today

## Commemorating VJ Day?

Share your photos with us on social media @blindveterans on Twitter and Facebook



# Let's hear it for our heroes

Being blind can be isolating at the best of times. During this time of crisis, two of our veterans, John Williams and Gary Stevenson have been getting in touch with other veterans to make sure they know they're not alone in isolation.

Thanks to supporters like you, RAF veteran and former teacher John Williams says he's been helped immeasurably by Blind Veterans UK. In these challenging times, he decided he wanted to give something back.

**"I decided to check in with some of the veterans to see if there's anything they need. As Welsh is my first language, I've been singing the hymn 'Calon Lan' to a few of them."**

John's community support worker Lisa, who is also one of his former pupils says, **"What John is doing to help is invaluable. He is always singing when**

**he's at the Blind Veteran's Llandudno Centre, so it's lovely that he is able to bring some of that joy into our veterans' homes. He is such a lovely man."**



In Derby, Gary Stevenson has signed up to volunteer too, as a telephone befriender, calling up other veterans to make sure that they have everything that they need.

Gary has been volunteering as an IT Instructor for the past year and wanted to continue volunteering during lockdown. He says, “**The charity have**

**given me so much, it’s the least I can do.** Normally I go into veterans homes, help them with their IT problems and show them how to use new equipment. As I can’t do that at the moment, I have been contacting some of them just to check up on them and have a chat. If they need anything, I pass their message on to the right people.”

**“The charity is like one massive family. You turn up at the centres and everyone is so friendly and welcoming. I’m proud to be part of Blind Veterans UK and I want to help in any way I can so I can give something back. It’s important for us all to look out for each other at the moment.”**



# He gave them their freedom, now he's part of their future

A former school headmaster, blind veteran Bill Ridgewell was in a trench on the outskirts of Caen on July 5, 1944, as he watched allied planes bomb the French city to free them from the Nazis. All these years later, he's helping teenagers there to learn English in lockdown.

Bill's relationship with the teenagers began in 2017, when a group of veterans travelled to France and visited their school. The students gave them vials of sand or soil, depending on whether they stormed the Normandy beaches or dropped from planes.

Some of the students later visited England. **They were there to watch as Bill received his Legion D'Honneur, France's highest military and civilian medal, for his service in France during the Normandy campaign.** The students and veterans have been writing to each other ever since.

While in lockdown, the children and the veterans are swapping stories about their lives. Bill's daughter Mary takes videos of him around the house. You can see the school teacher in Bill as he names everything in his home and garden, to help the kids work on their English.

**Billy says, "The exchanges let daylight into this dark time of lockdown, I'm delighted."**



World War II blind veteran, Bill.

# Special salute to Specsavers

Arthur Forth, 95 from Irchester, signed up to the Army in 1942. He served with the Kings Own Scottish Borders during World War II in Northern Europe and Germany. He sustained serious injuries to his back and ears, caused by shrapnel from an explosive device. It was later in life that macular degeneration stole Arthur's sight. He now has no central vision and only very limited peripheral vision.

Ever since his diagnosis, we've been supporting Arthur. He says, **"Blind Veterans UK have given all sorts of gadgets and gizmos to help me stay independent at home, I don't know what I would have done without you."**

"My vision got so bad that I couldn't use a normal mobile phone to stay in touch with my children. Blind Veterans UK gave me a phone with these enormous buttons that even I can see, meaning I can call my children whenever I want. **I'll always be grateful for the support I've received.**"

Arthur also wants to thank his local Specsavers in Rushden for their 'outstanding service'. He says, "Following my diagnosis, I went for my annual check-up with Mr Darby who was absolutely fantastic and extremely patient with me. He really took the time to understand my needs and advised me to change from varifocals to three separate pairs of glasses."



**"I can't thank Specsavers enough. I've told everyone about how great they are and even my carer now refuses to see anyone apart from Mr Darby!"**

# Thank you for helping John to live again

John Taylor, a former radio operator in the Royal Air Force, re-found life after sight loss at our Brighton Centre, he can't thank you enough.

After joining the Royal Air Force in 1957, training as a Special Wireless Operator, John was sent to Hong Kong to gather intelligence, he served for three years and later went on to teach at Bletchley Park and work with computer systems.

John gradually lost his sight after being diagnosed with Glaucoma, **"I was 40 when I started to lose my sight, I had just bought a new house and was planning to do it up. For 23 years we had the condition under control, however, soon after, I lost all my sight".**

John explains how the hardest part of losing his sight was losing his ability to drive. **"We had to get rid of the caravan, our home from home, and that felt like the hardest bit."**

After losing his sight, John joined the local bowls club. He bonded with a chap who was in the RAF and also happened to be a wireless operator. He too had sight loss. He was a member of St Dunstan's and asked John if he'd ever heard of them. When John said no, he suggested that John phone the chairman that evening, he said, "You won't regret it."

How right he was! After becoming a member, John took up many new

skills, including touch typing, archery and cooking. However it was crafts that became his true talent and, since joining, John has made hundreds of items including poppies for Remembrance Day.

He has also been on many specialist activity weeks including horse riding, **"We had a rope between my horse and the instructor's and slowly cantered down the North Devon Downs. That was my best day out".**

However, John hasn't stopped at equestrian skills, he recently attended our skiing week. **"I've never skied in my life, I didn't even know how to put the boots on. But by the end of the week, I was racing down red routes."**

John also enjoys the radio play society and records short plays with all the other members on a Friday afternoon.

Describing Blind Veterans UK, John says, **"My friend Albert said, 'you won't regret joining', how right he was! It's also the best charity in the world! It's so unique because of what we've all done and been through, I suppose that's what gels us."**



**Making a donation today could help to restart and rebuild another veterans life after sight loss. Thank you.**

# Going the extra mile

When the London Marathon was postponed earlier this year, blind veteran Darren Blanks decided that nothing was going to stop him from running 26 miles to raise urgently-needed funds.

Veteran Darren Blanks from Cumbria was all set to run the marathon on 27 April. When it was postponed, he pledged to do it from home instead, running 26 miles around his garden. He said, "It will be 10 years in June since I lost my sight so I decided to run the London Marathon for Blind Veterans UK as they have supported me throughout that time."

**"Even though the London Marathon was postponed, I still wanted to do the challenge to support the charity. The care team works so hard, especially at the moment, as a lot of the veterans are in the vulnerable category."**

Darren, who has previously completed seven marathons and 16 half marathons, completed 436 laps of his garden on the day to make up the 26 miles.

**Darren's total currently stands at over £2,000, a truly marathon effort for his fellow veterans.**



Darren, running for Blind Veterans UK.

# Great ways to fundraise at home

With mass gatherings and sponsorship events cancelled, we're missing out on a whole lot of fundraising, just at a time when our veterans need us most. The good news is, there are many ways to fundraise from home.

## DRESS UP!



1. Dress up in any costume of your choice.
2. Take a selfie! Be sure to use #DressUpForVeterans and tag us @BlindVeteransUK
3. Text: TEA to 70111 to donate £3 or TEA to 70025 to donate £5 and then nominate three friends to join in!

**More great dress up ideas at [blindveterans.org.uk/dressup](https://blindveterans.org.uk/dressup)**

Hold a Swot Up quiz night to raise funds. Whether music, sport or history is your specialist subject, we've got you covered, and because our handy quiz pack has everything you need, all you have to do is invite your players via Zoom, Skype, Facetime or Microsoft Teams.

**Download our quiz pack at [blindveterans.org.uk/swotup](https://blindveterans.org.uk/swotup)**

## SWOT UP!



If bingo is your thing, it's time to dig out your dobber for blind veterans. Our bingo night pack has everything you need to host your very own Shout Up event. Just adapt it to your favourite virtual platform, then it's eyes down for a full house.

**Your bingo night starts here! [blindveterans.org.uk/swotup](https://blindveterans.org.uk/swotup)**

## SHOUT UP!



# Your support means everything

Every time you donate, fundraise or play our lottery and draws, it means more to our veterans than you could ever know. Here are their messages of thanks.

“Even the smallest things mean a whole world of difference to us.” **Mick, Beverley**

“Massive thank you for your selfless acts of care and compassion to all the members especially our most vulnerable - you are all angels and heroes xx.” **Janice, Borne**

“The staff and volunteers are amazing during normal circumstances. They are now going above and beyond to make sure we are all safe and well.” **Kerry, Anglesey**

“A huge thank you from us here in the South-West. I live in quite a rural area but staff are available 24/7 should I need them.” **John, Exeter**

“Amazing work. Even the most vulnerable who are in self-isolation don't feel alone and unsupported.” **Andy, Berwick**

“I'm going to sit outside tonight and give a huge round of applause for all of the staff at Blind Veterans UK!” **John, Edinburgh**

“Even in the most challenging of times, the charity is here for me. I know that I only have to pick up the phone as there are people out there who care greatly about me. That gives me hope each and every day.” **Carl, Llandudno.**

# Your views matter



Last year we launched our Supporter Panel, as a way of getting to hear more about your views on how we raise money, how we can improve and how we can better serve our blind veterans. Anyone over the age of 16 can join – all you need is just 15 – 30 minutes a month to complete an online survey on your computer, tablet or mobile phone – no special device or app needed.

We're very grateful to all our existing Supporter Panel members – you're helping us and the blind veterans we support, and the guidance you provide is crucial. We warmly invite any of our readers to take part – remember we'll ask you to complete no more than one survey a month, and you can leave at any time.

**Please visit [blindveterans.org.uk/supporterpanel](https://blindveterans.org.uk/supporterpanel) or call our Supporter Services team on 0300 111 2233.**

## Will you help the sacrifice of our blind veterans live on?

Gifts in Wills make up 50% of our voluntary income. The Free Wills Network allows blind veterans and our supporters, over the age of 55, to have a Will written for free by a solicitor in your local area.

**For more information, please contact Jamie Rae in our legacy team on 0207 61 6 7953**

£75  
excl p&p



# Victory Over Blindness

Limited edition sterling  
silver coin

Drawing inspiration from our iconic Victory over Blindness statue, Blind Veterans UK has struck a special limited edition coin dedicated to its first blind veterans.

Minted in hallmarked sterling silver, the coins are numbered to a run of 3,017 pieces – the exact number of blinded First World War veterans.

Exquisitely packaged, each coin features a plaque dedicated to an individual soldier, sailor or airman who was blinded in the conflict and helped by us.

To purchase your coin, visit [blindveterans.org.uk/memorabilia](https://blindveterans.org.uk/memorabilia), or call Customer Services on 0300 111 22 33.



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