

Your impact on the lives of blind veterans

Debrief

Summer 2024



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blindveterans.org.uk/debrief



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Welcome



Adrian Bell CEO, Blind Veterans UK

Welcome to the Summer 2024 edition of Debrief. It has been a truly exciting few months for us as a charity, not least because our Patron, Her Royal Highness The Duchess of Edinburgh officially opened our new Centre of Wellbeing in Rustington. You can read about what it meant to the blind veterans she met on page six.

Her Royal Highness's visit was just a day after the charity commemorated the 80th anniversary of D-Day. We are delighted that our veterans, including the star of our cover, George, felt so honoured. Meet George and find out more on page four.

Every blind veteran is unique and the Blind Veterans UK staff use different ways to support them. On page 12, we shine a spotlight on the work carried out in our communities. Page 18 shows how vital our volunteers are. For blind veteran Carole, it is equipment that has been life-changing - and life-saving. Read her story on page 10.

For all of this support, our blind veterans depend on you, our wonderful supporters. There are many ways you can get involved. This edition features different fundraising activities, both national and local, as well as corporate endeavours (page 16). You can enter our raffle and play our weekly lottery. There is the chance to win wonderful prizes whilst helping blind veterans, too.

And finally, D-Day 80 has reminded us of the importance of Remembrance. We must never forget the service and sacrifice of our veterans, and the freedom we have today because of them. As we approach November, there are suggestions for how you can "plan to remember" on page 14.

Thank you for continuing to support blind veterans. You really are rebuilding lives and none of this would be possible without you.

Best wishes
Adrian.

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 [BlindVeterans](https://twitter.com/BlindVeterans)

D-Day 80: Honouring our brave heroes

This year marks the 80th anniversary of the D-Day Landings in Normandy - the most decisive turning point in the Second World War.

At Blind Veterans UK, we took this opportunity to share the extraordinary first-hand experiences of our veterans who were there, serving across the Navy, Army and Air Force. Risking their lives for freedom and peace, each one played a critical role in what is still the largest seaborne invasion the world has ever seen.

We partnered with an award-winning photographer, Richard Cannon, to capture and share the images of 16 blind veterans who served on, or influenced, D-Day in some way.

We shared the portraits alongside the veterans' stories in our own commemorative magazine and they were also displayed at the National Army Museum in London and the newly opened Winston Churchill Centre for Education and Learning in Normandy.

We were also able to display the images on the digital screens at Outernet, London, right in the heart of Soho, as well as in Portsmouth.

One of the veterans, George, who's 99, made a special visit to see the digital billboards in London and enjoy the celebrity that came with having his name up in lights.



D-Day veteran, George, with his billboard in London

George served as a gunner on a torpedo boat during D-Day, tasked with escorting American forces to Omaha and Utah beaches, and protecting the fleet from German E and R-boat attacks.

He said of the billboards: "My sight is quite limited so I couldn't see it in detail, but it was exciting to be there and know I was up there with my fellow D-Day veterans. My son described it to me which was nice.

"It's so important that we commemorate anniversaries like D-Day. It keeps at the forefront of peoples' minds that war is no good whatsoever."

George was also guest of honour at our special dinner in London for blind veterans to mark the 80th anniversary.

George and the other WWII veterans attending were presented with a silver Blind Veterans UK coin.

Around the country

We joined the rest of the country in lighting a beacon to remember D-Day on the beach outside our Rustington Centre at 9.15pm on 6th June. The beacon was lit by our President and blind veteran Colin Williamson and many people from the local community came. We were also delighted to welcome BBC Radio Sussex who broadcasted their breakfast show from our centre.



Llandudno's knitted poppies

10 blind veterans and escorts attended the D-Day 80 parade in Llandudno with staff and volunteers which marched along the promenade to the war memorial. Our Llandudno Centre also created an amazing D-Day 80 poppy display in the grounds out of the knitted poppies.



Blind veteran, Jim, and Lord lieutenant Louise Fleet

Our South Wales Community Team was proud to arrange an event to mark the 80th anniversary of D-Day in Swansea. Two of the veterans attending fought on D-Day and others served during WWII. We were delighted to be able to bring them together for the first time to mark the milestone. Huge thanks goes to Bridgend and Vale Business Club for sponsoring the event.

We were also joined by the Veterans' Commissioner for Wales and the Lord Lieutenant of West Glamorgan who presented blind veteran Cyril "Jim" Lewis with replacement medals after the originals were stolen many years ago.

Blind Veterans UK CEO, Adrian Bell, said: "When talking to our veterans about their experience of D-Day, many often dismiss or trivialise as unimportant the part they played. Many say that they were no more than a small cog in a huge enterprise. However, when we take a step back and consider the scale and ultimate success of the operation, it could not have succeeded without such commitment from so many people playing their part. Here at Blind Veterans UK, we salute them all and are proud to be here to give them the support they need to live independent and fulfilling lives after sight loss."

You can find out more about our D-Day veterans and their extraordinary experiences of D-Day, and access special content such as personal photographs and diary entries from the day at blindveterans.org.uk/dday80

Our new Rustington Centre opened by Royal Patron HRH The Duchess of Edinburgh

In June, we welcomed our patron, Her Royal Highness The Duchess of Edinburgh, to formally open our new Rustington Centre in West Sussex.

Her Royal Highness visited the charity at our new south coast home in Rustington, seeing first-hand the difference made to the lives of the blind veterans we support. We completed the move from our previous south coast home in Brighton at the end of last year.

Blind Veterans UK Rustington Centre Manager, Lesley Garven MBE, said: "After an initial phased opening, particularly ensuring that our small number of permanent residents were settled in, the building is now operating at full capacity, welcoming blind veterans from across the country for holidays, themed and activity weeks and for specific training and rehabilitation.

"We had over 80 years of history at our Brighton Centre, and we've had such a warm welcome from the local community in Rustington that I know we'll be making new memories here. It was such an honour for our blind veterans and our new staff team for our Royal Patron to visit and formally open our new south coast home."

On a tour of the building The Duchess of Edinburgh met with veterans who served in the Second World War. She also met a group of blind veteran archers and even tried her hand at mosaic making with veterans who enjoy art and craft.

The Duchess also unveiled a very special plaque, carved from wood and made by two blind veterans, Peter and Gary, who have been supported by the charity to continue their hobby of woodworking.



HRH The Duchess of Edinburgh talking to blind WWII veteran Maureen

Her Royal Highness also assisted with the ceremonial reburial of a time capsule that was dug up from the charity's former centre in Brighton and marched to Rustington by a group of blind veterans last summer.

The time capsule, buried in 2015 to mark 100 years of Blind Veterans UK, contains items and documents detailing the history of the organisation. Among them is a talking watch, the first piece of equipment offered to every Blind Veterans UK beneficiary. It is set to be opened in 2115, 100 years after it was originally buried.

Before the unveiling Her Royal Highness said: "What a perfect place, a sensorial place with wonderful surroundings. Here you're getting a whole environment, inside and outside. So, thank you so much and I hope it will be a very, very happy place. Well, it already is."



HRH The Duchess of Edinburgh talking to blind veteran Alan Walker on his exercise bike

One blind veteran, Alan, had the opportunity to meet The Duchess during the visit. As our flagbearer, Alan had the important job of raising the Royal Standard when the Royal party first arrived so he was over-the-moon to also have the chance to talk to Her Royal Highness in the charity's new gym.

Alan said: "I serve as a standard bearer for Blind Veterans UK, so it really is the ultimate honour to raise that Royal Standard for the time The Duchess of Edinburgh was with us. I was also proud to speak to Her Royal Highness and get across the impact the charity has had on me since I lost my sight."

Alan joined the Army in 1976 and served 14 years as a Qualified Chauffeur Bodyguard in the Falklands, Germany and the UK. He lost his sight on Christmas Day in 2012 after being hospitalised with a pneumococcal infection in his eyes and brain, which caused him to become completely blind in his left eye and have only 30% sight in his right.

He began to receive support from Blind Veterans UK in 2013 and, since then, the charity has supported him in retraining as a gym instructor. He now represents the charity at events across the country as a standard bearer. He was also one of a group of blind veterans that contributed to the design and layout of the new Rustington Centre.

Her Royal Highness ended up staying for over half an hour longer than she was scheduled to as she wanted to speak to as many blind veterans and staff as possible.

The Duchess was delighted to be the first person to sign our new guestbook, and did so in a chair made by a blind veteran specially for our former Patron Her Majesty The Queen when she visited us for our 50th anniversary in 1975. We look forward to welcoming many more guests to sign our guestbook in the future.

Beryl's story: A lifetime of support

The compassionate war-time volunteer who went on to leave a gift in her Will

One of our longest-serving supporters, Beryl, was dedicated to helping blind veterans throughout her life.

During the Second World War, she helped numerous blind veterans regain their independence in her role as a volunteer. Today, after leaving a gift in her Will, she leaves a legacy that extends long into the future.



Beryl during the war

Beryl's daughter, Lucy, says, "She always valued the work of Blind Veterans UK and it inspired her subsequent work in occupational therapy. She continued to donate to the charity throughout her life and I'm delighted to know that the gift she left in her Will is helping future blind veterans in such practical ways."

Lucy kindly shared Beryl's story

Born in November 1925, and originally from Solihull, Beryl had a clear memory of the bombing of Coventry during the war. Her family offered accommodation to a mother and young children afterwards, and this willingness to help people continued throughout Beryl's lifetime. She went on to work with Blind Veterans UK (known then as St Dunstan's) through the Red Cross, caring for wounded and blinded young airmen.



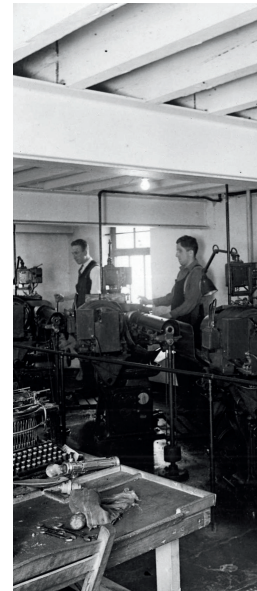
Church Stretton during the war years

She even relocated with the team when our former Brighton Centre was requisitioned by the war office, forcing the charity to move its training and rehabilitation work to Church Stretton in Shropshire.

At Church Stretton, the charity was loaned several properties in the town and its headquarters was at the Longmynd Hotel. Huts were put up in the grounds of the hotel, on the lawn and the tennis courts, and the garages were converted into workshops.



Guide wires used in Church Stretton



An industrial and factory workshop at Church Stretton

A separate house was found for the Voluntary Aid Detachments – Beryl and the fellow female volunteers – and another for the teaching staff.

Beryl worked with the team helping more than 700 men and women who were blinded in the war. She helped as the veterans were given support, training and rehabilitation to adapt to their sight loss and go on to live fulfilling lives.

This included physiotherapy and practical workshops in areas such as leatherwork,

model-making and – for those who wanted to go into factory work – industrial training.

All the blind veterans were encouraged to be independent. For example, guiding wires were placed from the footpaths from the Longmynd down to the town so they could find their way unaccompanied. Also, a special relief map was made of the surrounding countryside so they could feel it and get an understanding of the layout of the land.

Sadly, after a lifetime of supporting blind veterans, Beryl passed away in November 2022, aged 97. We are so grateful for everything she did for the charity. Her memory lives on through all those she helped.



To find out how you can join Beryl in leaving a lasting legacy for blind veterans through a gift in your Will, contact Alice on 020 7616 7923, giftsinwills@blindveterans.org.uk or visit blindveterans.org.uk/leaveagift

Last night Alexa saved my life

Blind veteran Carole, 80, shares how IT training during her Blind Veterans UK telephone group paid dividends after an accident at home.

Carole is a huge fan of her Amazon Alexa. The former RAF Senior Aircraftwoman, who served in Northern Ireland in air traffic control in the 1960s, only recently learnt how to use the virtual assistant technology. Yet it's already saved her life.

After losing her sight in both eyes in 2019 due to macular degeneration, Carole, who lives alone, says that these days she sees the world as a "fuzzy place". So, she was delighted when she was taught how to use simple technology, including Alexa, in her monthly telephone group.

The lesson prompted her to set up her device, which turned out to be very fortunate as, just a few days later, disaster struck. Carole explains, "I started running a bath and then went looking for Christmas decorations under my hinged storage bed. While I was reaching under the bed it collapsed on my arm, trapping me."

In pain, alone and unable to reach her mobile phone, Carole frantically reached for her careline alarm system but couldn't get a signal.



Blind veteran Carole

She says, "I was in extreme pain and was terrified I'd be stuck there overnight as I didn't have any visitors coming that day."

Thankfully, she remembered her Alexa session and was able to call out to her device and make a phone call for help. She phoned her doctor through the device who then called the emergency services. Help arrived within the hour.



Alexa is able to make phone calls



An Alexa screen device

The paramedics told her that had she been trapped there overnight she would have sustained much greater damage to her arm, including the possibility of toxicity in her blood or even losing the arm altogether.

Carole says, "If it hadn't been for Alexa, I don't know what I would have done. I would have been there all night with my bathroom flooding."

Fortunately, she made a speedy recovery and was

even able to go on a cruise she'd booked a few days later – making sure she swapped out her short sleeve gowns for glamorous long sleeves to hide the bruising.

She's now keen that everyone learns how to use simple technology like Alexa.

She says, "I'm 80, widowed, vision impaired and live on my own. I'm an independent oldie. If I can use technology, anyone can do it!"



For more digital technology tips for people with sight loss, as well as guidance on other topics, see our sight loss resources at blindveterans.org.uk/resources



Blind veterans at a coffee morning in Cornwall



Blind veterans at a military event in Dartmouth

Our support in the Southwest

Here's an update from Aaron, our Service Development Manager covering the Southwest region.

In the southwest we tend to support our local veterans in a range of diverse ways to make sure we're meeting all their needs.

Supporting at home

We start off in the veterans' homes, working with them to identify the ways that we can make them feel more independent with everyday living tasks. For example, we might make sure they can make a cup of tea safely, or give them the training and equipment they need to reconnect with a beloved hobby they gave up after their sight loss made it too difficult. Whatever they need, we will try to help them to achieve it.

Face-to-face get-togethers

Your support also means we can run regular face-to-face social events across the community. These allow local blind veterans to meet one another and share tips, laughter and experiences. These regular socials, supported by staff and our wonderful volunteers, have an incredibly positive effect on the veterans, making them feel more connected and less alone. They realise that there is always someone they can talk to.



Aaron - Service Development Manager

Coming together remotely

During the pandemic, we explored ways in which we could support our veterans online and set up a few remote groups which have been hugely successful. For example, a virtual quiz group was launched in the lockdown and is still going strong today. The veterans love meeting up from the comfort of their homes to test their knowledge. They take it very seriously and are quite competitive!

Raising awareness

Our team have also been busy raising awareness of the Blind Veterans UK services at vision loss events in the local area. We build connections with other local services and professionals and speak to vision-impaired veterans who need our support. We also arrange for speakers from other organisations to come along to meet our blind veterans to share how their services can benefit them.

Enjoying a break

In April, we enjoyed a community holiday together at our new Rustington Centre of Wellbeing. This was a chance for our local blind veterans to experience the new centre and enjoy a break with others who live nearby. As a result, many wonderful friendships have blossomed and it's been lovely to be able to watch these grow.

The veterans were bowled over by the new centre and the staff there who were incredibly caring and friendly. One told us that it was the first holiday he and his wife had been able to take in over four years and that it had been nothing less than "life-changing".

Thank you

Everything we do simply would not be possible without the generous support we receive from people like you.

So, from all of us in the Southwest, we would like to say a big thank you for allowing us to give our veterans the chance to experience a fulfilling life beyond sight loss.

Keep up with news by joining our regional or Centre Facebook groups: [facebook.com/blindveteransuk/groups](https://www.facebook.com/blindveteransuk/groups)

To hear all our latest news, sign up to receive email updates [blindveterans.org.uk/news](https://www.blindveterans.org.uk/news)

How are you 'Planning to Remember'?

The response we've received to our D-Day 80 appeal and the D-Day veterans' stories from our supporters show us more than ever the importance of remembering the sacrifices of our veterans.

It's never too soon to start thinking about how you will mark Remembrance 2024. Whether you Gift a Wreath or organise an event or fundraising activity, you can help us ensure our veterans' experiences are never forgotten as you raise vital funds to support our blind veterans.

Planning to Remember

If you'd like to organise an activity or event between 26 October and 14 November, we have loads of ideas to inspire you, from war memorial walks to community brew ups. You could even ask your local place of worship to select Blind Veterans UK as its chosen charity for its Remembrance Sunday collection. Visit our website to find out more or sign up today

blindveterans.org.uk/plan

Already making plans? Contact our Community Partnerships team for fundraising advice and materials fundraising@blindveterans.org.uk

In 2023, a group from Mablethorpe, known as Flanders Friends, held a Remembrance Ball with an auction and raffle, raising over £1,700. Read their story to find out more about how they are Planning to Remember in 2024 at blindveterans.org.uk/flandersfriends

Gift a wreath

Our veterans greatly appreciate having the chance to lay a wreath on Remembrance to remember the fallen and show their respect. Could you or your organisation gift a wreath so they can take part in a commemoration in their local community?

Your gift will make this Remembrance extra special for a blind veteran, and also ensure that we can continue our vital support to help veterans lead independent and fulfilling lives.

For more info or to register your interest visit blindveterans.org.uk/giftawreath24



Tony at Brighton Station after laying a wreath

"It's hard to put into words what laying a wreath means to me. It's about remembering so many people, including my father who fought in the First World War, as well as fellow blind veterans no longer with us who were like brothers to me."

Read more from Tony and other blind veterans at blindveterans.org.uk/giftawreathstories

You don't have to travel miles to go the mile for Blind Veterans UK!

While many supporters travel across the UK to take part in iconic events such as the London Marathon and Great North Run using our charity event places, many opt to take on challenges closer to home. This gives them the chance to be part of local events or experiences - while also supporting our veterans.

Rebecca, Aberdeenshire – Kilt Walk

Rebecca wanted to fundraise for Blind Veterans UK to thank us for the support we've given to her 'granda' Brian, which gave her the perfect excuse to try one of Scotland's most popular - and scenic - events: the Aberdeen Kilt Walk.

Find out more blindveterans.org.uk/kiltwalk



Rebecca with her Grandad, blind veteran Brian

Simon, Cornwall – The Big Camel, Wadebridge Triathlon

This well known local event - consisting of a 400m swim, 26km cycle and 5km run - ticked all the boxes for Simon. An opportunity to push himself and raise vital funds in memory of his parents, while dressing up as a ninja turtle!

Find out more blindveterans.org.uk/triathlon



Simon did his challenge dressed as a ninja turtle

James, North Wales – Anglesey Cycle Challenge

Following a 200km coastal walk of the perimeter of Anglesey in 2023, James was keen to explore the island again. "Life can often get in the way, so saddling up to fundraise for Blind Veterans UK gave me 'permission' to revisit some of the places I'd discovered."

Find out more blindveterans.org.uk/triicycle



James on the Isle of Anglesey

If you would like help finding a challenge or activity on your doorstep, contact our Community Partnerships team fundraising@blindveterans.org.uk

Already got a challenge in mind? Let us know and we'll help you 'Do it for blind veterans' and for yourself! Simply visit blindveterans.org.uk/tellus

Blind Veterans UK needs YOU!

Do you have a connection to a corporate company?

We are currently looking to secure funding and support for our blind veterans by building partnerships with corporate companies.

These companies can offer a wealth of support, from funding to volunteering and even help with research, while in turn we can help them deliver their corporate social responsibility goals.



The full team at Llandudno for the Sopra Steria UK event

How you can help

Every mutual partnership begins with establishing strong connections with key contacts and we know many of you will have links to corporate companies.

As a supporter of Blind Veterans UK, your personal connection with these organisations could be the perfect starting point for a meaningful relationship.

So, if you or your friends or family have contacts or connections to companies that might want to benefit our blind veterans, we would love to hear from you.

All you need to do is send us an email to corporate@blindveterans.org.uk with the details and we will get back in touch to arrange a chat. Alternatively, visit blindveterans.org.uk/corporate to find out more.

Be inspired by our existing fabulous partnerships!

We work closely with a wide range of corporate companies to help our veterans. Our Amazon partnership has seen our Centres of Wellbeing kitted out in world-leading technology. We also partner closely with Specsavers, promoting eye health and the importance of regular check-ups.

And we recently ran a huge team fundraising event in Llandudno with our partner, Sopra Steria UK. Almost 50 members of their team trekked through Snowdonia National Park raising funds for Blind Veterans UK. Your corporate connections could achieve something like this too!

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.



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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Celebrating our volunteers

Appreciating the incredible support of our volunteers.

As the nation celebrated Volunteers' Week on 3-9 June, our blind veterans were busy designing cards for our brilliant volunteers to thank them for their ongoing support.

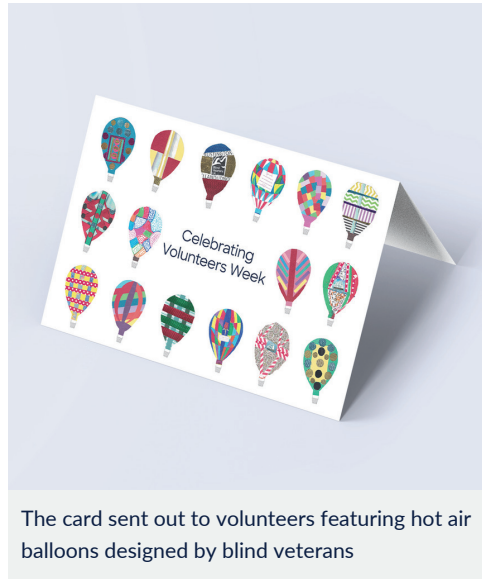
Over the past financial year, our volunteers have collectively given a total of 25,138 hours of their time to support our cause. This is a fantastic achievement – and an increase on the previous year's 20,000 hours. We can't thank them enough.

We're currently working to attract more volunteers, recently running a social media campaign which resulted in more than 400 new expressions of interest.

We're still looking for more volunteers to take on roles like:

- providing crucial companionship by visiting an isolated blind veteran at home.
- driving a veteran in your community to essential appointments and social events.
- getting involved with fundraising collections or helping out at our events.

By becoming a volunteer with Blind Veterans UK, you'll be part of an amazing nationwide team who are changing lives every day. And you'll get a chance to make friends and learn new skills too.



The card sent out to volunteers featuring hot air balloons designed by blind veterans

We'll invest in you by providing training and development opportunities, and we'll reimburse you for out-of-pocket expenses such as travel costs.

Every one of our volunteers plays a critical role in helping us rebuild lives after sight loss.

As one of our volunteers, Jack, says, "The opportunity to brighten up someone's day makes me proud to volunteer for Blind Veterans UK. It's a fantastic charity and joining is one of the best things I've ever done."

To find out more, please email us at volunteer@blindveterans.org.uk.

Or visit blindveterans.org.uk/volunteer

On the journey together

There's nothing quite like old comrades coming together to share tips, banter and support. That's why peer-to-peer support is such a key part of our rehabilitation offer. Not only do our veterans help one another through the practical challenges of sight loss, but they also provide mutual acceptance, understanding and a sense of belonging.



Blind veterans attend a virtual hobby group

Activities to suit all tastes

As well as delivering a full programme of activity breaks at our national Centres of Wellbeing in Llandudno and Rustington, our veterans can also enjoy local outings organised by their community team. In addition to this, our virtual hobby groups give them the chance to mix with their peers from the comfort of their home, learning from one another about hobbies like gardening, woodwork and painting.



Blind veterans attending a formal military dinner

Treasuring our military heritage

We've also launched a series of formal military dinners, held at bases around the country. These memorable events give our veterans the chance to dust off their medals and experience the camaraderie and traditions of the military once again.

In April, the event took place at HMS Drake in Plymouth where serving personnel were overjoyed to engage with blind veterans, and military stories - past and present - were shared by all.

Our veterans loved it, in particular 95-year-old Barry, who felt very emotional to be back on the base where he served. He told us, "It's been over 40 years since I've been inside HMS Drake. I stood where I used to run field gun and ate dinner in what was the old drill shed. I will never forget it."

Army veteran, Lee, 48, was equally as thrilled, saying, "It was such a great experience and so nice to be back on a military base again. All blind veterans should get involved."

None of this would be possible without wonderful supporters like you! Read more about the impact your donations have on the lives of blind veterans at blindveterans.org.uk/impact

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

1st Prize

£15,000

2nd Prize
£1,000

Plus 33
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 20 September. Draw takes place 27 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.



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