



Rebuilding  
lives after  
sight loss

# Debrief

Your impact on the lives of blind veterans

Summer 2021



## Moving forwards together

### INSIDE

- p8** Getting creative during the pandemic
- p11** Colin's 63 laps in the name of love
- p18** 48-hour fundraising challenge

# Welcome



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

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

It certainly feels like it's been a long road, but we are finally starting to see some return to normality. The vaccine programme across the UK has been hugely successful, and thanks to our incredible NHS we are gradually seeing a way out of the pandemic.

This edition of your magazine is all about the future and how we, as an organisation and society as a whole are positively moving forwards, evolving and embracing new and exciting things.

Because of your generosity, we have been able to ensure our veterans have received world class-standard support throughout lockdown and

you have enabled us to transition our Intro Weeks to an online service, meaning nobody is missing out on the connections that have proved so valuable.

You'll read on page four about how our Members have been inspired to create during National Creative Week, I'd like to thank every supporter for making vital initiatives like this possible. Our veterans would also like to show their appreciation - we have received many wonderful messages of gratitude which you can see for yourself on page 12.

While we are largely now looking forward to a less restrictive way of living, we are also reflecting on how changes to the way we operate can become a more permanent way of providing the care and support our veterans need. We go into more detail about what this means on page 14.

Moving forwards there is a lot to be positive about - as restrictions are slowly lifted we are excited about new things to come and are forever grateful for the unwavering dedication from you, our supporters.

Take care

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

# Inside for you

Supporting our veterans through lockdown .....	4
Finding our feet after lockdown .....	6
Getting creative during the pandemic .....	8
Sight loss affects the whole family .....	10
Colin's 63 laps in the name of love .....	11
Thank you messages from our veterans .....	12
A new beginning .....	14
The scores on the doors .....	16
Why do we want your email address? .....	17
48 Hour Fundraising Challenge .....	18
Win big in our Weekly Lottery .....	20



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# Supporting our veterans through lockdown



Neena - one of our veterans

Neena Crossingham, one of our veterans from East Sussex has recently taken part in a “Virtual Introduction Week” organised by Blind Veterans UK as she was unable to attend our Brighton Centre earlier this year and be introduced to the charity in person.

Neena, 95 and from Hailsham, along with three other blind veterans joined a virtual meeting every morning which was organised and delivered by our staff. Neena says: “I was very disappointed when my introduction

week was cancelled earlier this year. I was excited to meet people from the charity and other veterans. I didn’t know how I would get on doing it over the phone, but I enjoyed it very much”.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, all veterans who had recently joined the charity would attend one of their training and rehabilitation Centres in Brighton or Llandudno for a weeklong introduction. During their stay, they would learn about how the charity could support them and meet other blind veterans. Due to the closure of both the Centres to visitors, the charity has designed a course that could be delivered remotely. Mark Hollis, Llandudno Rehabilitation Support Team Leader, says: “It has been really important that we continue to support new veterans like Neena, especially during this time of uncertainty and disruption. We want to be able to deliver something that is that is meaningful, social and informative”.

Neena joined the Army in 1942 and served in the Parachute Regiment in as a Shorthand Typist for most of her military career until she was demobbed in 1946. She says: “I was based in Bawbridge in Yorkshire and

I really enjoyed my time there. They were so good to us”.

Neena started to lose her sight gradually as she got older and has Age-Related Macular Degeneration (ARMD) and Glaucoma in both eyes.

“I had heard about the charity before because I grew up in Lewes and when I was younger, we used to go on holidays to Brighton. I remember there being a large building on a hill and my mother telling me to wave to the blind veterans. I have such lovely memories of those moments and I would have loved to have been able to go inside for the introduction week”.

Each session during the virtual introduction week, focused on a different topic such as “health and wellbeing” and “support networks”. These addressed the issues the veterans faced and helped provide support and advice from both the staff and the other veterans. Neena says: “It was lovely to be part of a group and hear so many fantastic stories from the other veterans. One gentleman spoke about his boxing career and even though I can’t say I have done a lot of that in my lifetime, it was still very interesting!”. Blind Veterans UK started the

virtual introduction week sessions in September and have been providing them for new members up and down the country on a weekly basis. Neena says: “Since the introduction week, I know now that the charity is always there at just the other end of the phone. Someone is always there and will try and help me. That really does mean so much to me especially during this pandemic.”

Nicky Shaw, Blind Veterans UK Director of Operations said: “Living in isolation, blind veterans need our help right now with daily tasks, such as the shopping, and constant emotional support through this difficult time. So we are temporarily changing our service and mobilising our staff to provide practical, essential support to help the most vulnerable.

“There is so much that we can and must do to support blind veterans to help them maintain physical and emotional wellbeing, and to feel safe, reassured and cared for during this crisis.”



To find out more about Blind Veterans UK’s Virtual Introduction weeks, please visit [blindveterans.org.uk/virtualintro](https://blindveterans.org.uk/virtualintro)



Research has shown some of life's simpler pleasures have been missed during lockdown, including...



**26%** missed experiencing a busy high street



**24%** missed a trip to the garden centre



**28%** missed merely sharing a smile

**Specsavers**

# Finding our feet after lockdown

Research by Specsavers, has identified what we can't wait to see, hear and do as lockdown restrictions are eased.

The study has also highlighted the importance of human connections. 40% said they want to see people without their masks, while 76% of people who enjoy a hug have found restrictions especially hard.

Dr Josie Forte, Specsavers' clinical spokesperson, says: 'There are some ordinary experiences that you would never have thought you'd miss until something unexpected like the pandemic happened.'

'As the sights, smells and sounds of daily life, however mundane, resume this summer, it'll be interesting to see how this newfound appreciation impacts people and how long it will last – or will many of us revert to taking such things for granted again?'

Pre-lockdowns, 83% of adults admitted that they took the freedom of their daily life for granted, but those polled estimated it'll take a further nine months following restrictions being lifted for life to feel 'normal' once more. 48% fear they'll find it hard to readjust to the way things were, while 33% want more quality family time and 21% will take

more moments to stop and reflect in future.

Dr Forte adds: 'There are definitely plenty of everyday moments to look forward to in the coming months so getting your sight and hearing checked will ensure that you can enjoy these moments to the maximum.'

We spoke to Blind Veteran Nancy Bowstead who told us what she was most looking forward to about restrictions easing: "I am most looking forward to seeing my family when we come out of lockdown. My family live in the Canary Islands, France, Wales and Devon. I have lived at the Brighton Centre for the last five years so I have spent lockdown here. I can't thank its staff enough for how they have looked after us during lockdown but I can't wait to see my family. I haven't seen them since my 98th birthday in September 2019 so I am hoping that I can celebrate my 100th this year with them!"



For more information or to request an appointment at your local store, visit [specsavers.co.uk](https://www.specsavers.co.uk)



## Getting creative during the pandemic

Our blind veterans across the country have been joining others virtually to get involved with painting during the lockdown period thanks to a new scheme to encourage creativity.

The National Creative Project was launched to keep veterans connected and to prevent feelings of isolation during the lockdown period. The project focuses on creative activities and allows veterans to get involved with different hobbies such as gardening and woodwork, from the comfort and safety of their own home.

Lewis Evans, 85 from Dinas Powys, has been involved with the Painting for Beginners and Improvers project.

He says: “I’ve always had an interest in art and craft and actually wanted to become an art teacher when I was younger. I submitted a painting for the charity’s Exhibition Fundraiser last year and it sold for £62! It was after this that I heard about the National Creative Project, so I decided to get involved”.

Lewis served in the Welsh Guards for 34 years and was discharged as a Major in 1987. He has been diagnosed with Wet Macular Degeneration and only has about 30% vision in his right eye. Fortunately, Lewis found Blind Veterans UK and he started to receive support from the charity in 2017. He says: “Blind Veterans UK has given me a new life.



Blind veteran, Lewis

I've been to our Llandudno centre many times and met other veterans. I've been part of the choir and I even sang for the other veterans during a coffee break once! I want to help the charity in any way I can".

Lewis has created many different paintings with pastels and watercolours. He has also created ink and pencil drawings. He says: "As part of the project, the charity sent me four different pictures of landscapes along with the equipment I'd need to recreate the picture. You can either copy those designs or create your own. I have created lots of different paintings with animals and some with winter themes. I have also painted a mountain scene of North Wales".

Dave Bryant, Art and Craft Instructor at Blind Veterans UK currently leads the painting project. He says: "The Painting for Beginners and Improvers project has been designed for members of all abilities to enjoy art. Members may choose to use their own materials or receive materials

and equipment as part of their pack. The NCP has allowed us to reconnect with members, such as Lewis, in a new and exciting way. The project has given members a new purpose and something to look forward to".

The painting group has monthly calls so the veterans can check in with each other and see how each other are getting on. This has been a great support for those who would have otherwise felt isolated during the lockdown period. Lewis says: "I am going to join my first call next week. It'll be nice to be able to speak to others who are doing the painting project. Painting has been great for me during lockdown. I live on my own and I don't like going out walking too much because of the virus. This has given me something to focus on".

Louise Kirk-Partridge, Rehab Lead Art & Craft at Blind Veterans UK, says: "There is a lot of evidence that creative activities play an important role in improving health and well-being. We thought it was very important that we could continue to provide this virtually for our members especially during such a challenging time".



To find out more about Blind Veterans UK's National Creative Project, please visit [blindveterans.org.uk/ncp](https://blindveterans.org.uk/ncp)

# Sight loss affects the whole family

From 7-13 June the UK celebrated Carers Week – a time to highlight the challenges carers face and celebrate their amazing contribution.

While we help blind veterans get back on their feet, we provide support to their carers and families. Blind Veterans UK is here to help them through:

- Tailored advice and support from our qualified community support workers
- Addressing the emotional and practical aspects of caring through sessions at our Virtual Introductory Weeks
- Signposting to other support services
- Providing opportunities to attend virtual events, carer sessions and meet other carers who are in the same boat

## Meet Linda, the previous winner of our Carers Recognition Award.

Linda and Tony have been together for over 30 years. In 2010, Tony had a stroke and his health hugely deteriorated, becoming totally reliant on Linda for care. While this affected Tony physically and mentally, it also



Blind veteran, Tony and his carer, Linda

had an impact on their relationship. Linda spends every day caring for Tony without support. He is unable to undertake any of his own personal care and has very limited mobility. However, Linda says she would never want anybody else to care for him.

Linda is described as selfless and humble and only ever wants to make sure Tony is okay, she remains upbeat and works tirelessly to ensure Tony is happy. Her nominee said "Caring can be a hugely demanding and thankless task at times, but Linda would never show it. She continues to ensure Tony has the best care and support possible, much to her own detriment, but she wouldn't have it any other way."

"Winning the award means a lot to me. It's lovely to be recognised. Thank you so much to Emma and everybody at Blind Veterans UK who have done so much for me and Tony."



Blind veteran, Colin and his daughter

## Colin's 63 laps in the name of love

84-year-old blind veteran Colin walked 63 laps of his local recreation ground in Suffolk to celebrate 63 years of marriage to his wife.

Colin completed two laps per day with each lap taking around 14 minutes to complete. When the weather didn't permit a walk, he was able to get his steps in at home on his treadmill.

He also used this challenge to fundraise for us a thank you for the support we gave him. Colin completed his National Service with the Royal Engineers between 1958 and 1960.

He started to lose his sight due to glaucoma in 2016 but late last year it accelerated quickly, and he was registered severely sight impaired in November 2020

He continued "I've had my initial introduction and assessment with the charity. We've talked about the things I struggle with at home and now they've gone off to source the things I need. They are getting me a device which converts written text to voice so I can still read the post, magazines and books. And they are putting me in touch with a local blind veteran who is equally as interested in rugby as me. It will be great to chat to someone in the same position as myself in the local area."

Colin completed the final lap on 8 March, his 63rd wedding anniversary.

"My daughter sensed that I was going through a grieving process as my sight deteriorated. Now I know that my desire to be positive was masking it. So I decided to do something not only to celebrate 63 years with my wonderful wife but also raise funds for Blind Veterans UK who are guiding me on this journey, adapting to life with sight loss."

**Colin, blind veteran**

# Thank you messages



## John Nicol

"I partially lost my sight seven years ago and fortunately came across Blind Veterans UK 12 months later. My life has become whole again and I've got my confidence back. I can now do things I thought I could never do before. The charity introduced me to archery, and I am now a qualified archery instructor! Thank you to anyone who donates to the charity because we really would be lost without it".



## Brian Marshall

"Throughout the pandemic, the staff, ROVIs and Case Support Workers have been a great support. They are always at the end of the phone, not just for me but for my wife as well. From the bottom of my heart, I would like to thank those who donate because without you, this support wouldn't be possible. In February, I did my own fundraising challenge for the charity, as I've realised this year how much our country relies on charity support and how important funding is to keep this going".



## Sandy Sanderson

"Blind Veterans UK has been lifesaving. They have been able to help me cope with my sight loss. Thank you to anyone who has contributed and given money, especially during lockdown. When I lost my sight, I put my camera down and thought my love for photography was over. During lockdown, I have started to join the photography group virtually via Microsoft Teams and it has reignited my interest! This wouldn't be possible without people's kind donations".



## Neena Crossingham

“I’d like to thank all the donors, especially those who have given during the pandemic. I joined the charity in December 2019, so most of my time with them has been in lockdown. I had my introduction week virtually and I now I join many different groups virtually on a weekly basis from the quiz group to gardening. It’s lovely to have something to look forward to when you’re stuck at home and I get so much out of it”.



## Gary Stevenson

“Thank you to everyone who donates and supports us. This allows us to be able to do things we didn’t think we could. During lockdown, I have been involved with the woodturning, woodwork and mosaics groups which are all part of our National Creative project. This project was designed by the charity to allow members to get involved with different hobbies, from the comfort and safety of their own home. It was created to prevent isolation during lockdown. Without support from donors this kind of initiative would not be possible”.

## 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 their local area.

**Please contact Amara Gordi in our Legacies team on 020 7616 7923 if you have any questions.**



# A new beginning



Blind Veterans UK has announced that they are standing down their training and rehabilitation centre in Ovingdean, East Sussex, to allow the charity to move to a new building.

Chief Executive of Blind Veterans UK, Major General (Rtd) Nick Caplin CB says: “Unfortunately our iconic, long-serving building near Brighton is now becoming less and less suitable for our purposes. We have decided to take the difficult decision to leave this building by 2024 and begun the search for a new home.

“This building has seen some historic periods over the last 83 years, not least the super-human efforts of all our care staff in protecting and supporting our permanent residents there throughout the pandemic. “The blind veteran population we support today is very different to that

of the 1930s and the average age of the veterans we support now is 87. So, this is an opportunity for us to move to a new building, offering different services, that far better suits their needs and the needs of future blind veterans.”

The building, located just off the seafront next to Roedean School, was first opened in 1938. The work of architect Francis Lorne, it is believed to be unique in being purpose-built for younger blind people who themselves had input into its design and functions.



“This building has seen some historic periods over the last 83 years, not least the super-human efforts of all our care staff in protecting and supporting our permanent residents there throughout the pandemic.”

**Nick Caplin**

Lesley Garven, Brighton Centre Manager, says: “It will be a sad day when we finally close the doors here for the last time but it is very important for us to remember that it is not the building that makes our Brighton Centre what it is; it is our

amazing people, our veterans, staff, and volunteers. And it is with these people that we will improve what we offer in a new building.”

“I think the move is a very good idea and it’s lovely that all us residents will be able to move together.”

Maureen Atkinson, 96, has been a resident in Ovingdean for three and a half years. She says: “I think the move is a very good idea and it’s lovely that all us residents will be able to move together. This is a great opportunity to start afresh and I just hope I’ll still be here to enjoy the new place when we do move!”

# The scores on the doors...

During a recent Member Data Survey, Blind Veterans UK were labelled 'world class standard'. An independent assessment focused on one question – 'the individuals likelihood to recommend an organisation'. In 2020 Blind Veterans UK scored 93 out of 100 in 2021, during COVID-19 this increased to 97.5%, which is considered "world-class".

## Is there anything Blind Veterans UK could have done differently during COVID-19 that would have supported you more?

"There's not a lot you can do in the current lockdown situation that we are currently in except keeping in touch on a regular basis. Knowing that a support worker is available if needed is a great reassurance."

"I've had an excellent service, especially in the early days where they rang me regularly. Now we have our monthly group chats. I can't see how they could've done anything else."

## What has been the biggest change to your life as a result of joining Blind Veterans UK?

"Blind Veterans UK gave me outlook and hope. I was on the verge of shutting down as I thought that was it and then I realised from talking to



others about their experiences that I had hope.."

"Blind Veterans UK provided me with equipment which has enabled me to live independently."

"I lost my husband to Covid a few months ago. He was also a member and the personal touch from them has kept me going just by talking to me as it's taken my mind off of what's actually happened. The remote quizzes have been a godsend I look forward to."

"I have done so much and I don't feel isolated as I'm involved in remote group chats, exercise classes, and IT via Microsoft Teams. They helped me to adapt the kitchen and garden and provided educational courses."



# Give your doormat the day off - switch to email!

We aim to save money so that we can invest more into our crucial work for those we support. By using emails instead of paper, we do not incur print or postage costs and the saving we make can be funnelled straight back into providing the best possible care and support for our veterans.



Not only that, but using digital communications means that we are doing our bit for the environment. Less paper, less ink and less miles all equal a smaller carbon footprint.

Please don't think that by handing over your email address you will suddenly be flooded with spam emails - we never share your data and will only contact you according to your preferences. The only change you might notice is a clearer doormat!



The average letter has a carbon footprint of about 29 grams of CO<sub>2</sub>. The carbon footprint of a normal email footprint is much less, about four grams of CO<sub>2</sub>.



If 20% of our mailings were switched to email we would reduce our carbon footprint by over a quarter of a ton across the year.



## Its really easy to do your bit...

Simply scan the QR Code below or visit [blindveterans.org.uk/stayintouch](https://blindveterans.org.uk/stayintouch) to complete the form and tell us your preferences. Alternatively there is a section on the donation form which you can return to us at your leisure.



## Yorkshire Engineer Regiment in 48 Hour Fundraising Challenge

21 Engineer Regiment in Yorkshire is taking part in a 48-hour challenge to raise money for Blind Veterans UK.

Twenty soldiers from the regiment will be taking part in a 48-hour challenge on Tuesday 1 June for Blind Veterans UK, the national charity for blind and vision-impaired ex-Service men and women.

Sergeant Keith Bryson, 31 from Doncaster, decided to organise the challenge after Simon Brown, a blinded Iraq war veteran who is supported by the charity, led a

Teams call back in February. Keith says: "Simon served in our regiment and talked about his experiences as well as the help he received from Blind Veterans UK. Naturally it was an easy decision to do something to contribute towards such a beneficial charity. He was very inspirational, and we decided that we wanted to give something back".

The team, who maintain all the military transport for the regiment, will aim to cycle 2607km and row 104km over 48 hours at their base in Ripon, North Yorkshire. They will be doing two-hour rotations in groups of

three and hope to reach their target before 8am on Thursday 3 June. Keith says: "We've been training intensely for the last month, using equipment in the gym. We'll be doing the challenge in the gym in our camp in Ripon. Hopefully we can raise lots of funds and awareness of the charity!"

Simon Brown, from Morley, joined the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers in 1997. During his career, he worked as a vehicle mechanic servicing and maintaining Army vehicles, serving in Germany, Kosovo, Poland, Canada and Iraq. He was blinded by sniper fire while on a recovery mission in Basra in 2006. He says: "During lockdown it was great for my own well-being to have something to do. Speaking to young service personnel who were in the same shoes I was 20

years ago, brought back some real nostalgia. I'm honoured and proud that the guys from my old corp have chosen to support Blind Veterans UK. I wish them all the luck on this epic challenge - although at my age I'm glad I'm not joining in!"

To support the 21 Engineer Regiment and make a donation, please visit: [justgiving.com/fundraising/keith-bryson](https://justgiving.com/fundraising/keith-bryson)

Nicky Shaw, Blind Veterans UK Director of Operations said: "Living in isolation, blind veterans need our help right now with daily tasks, such as the shopping, and constant emotional support through this difficult time. So we are temporarily changing our service and mobilising our staff to provide practical, essential support to help the most vulnerable.



# YOUR RUN, YOUR WAY!

Sunday 3 October

The virtual Virgin Money London Marathon will return this year, giving you a chance to complete the race in 24 hours wherever you are in the world!



Register your interest at  
[blindveterans.org.uk/  
londonmarathon](https://blindveterans.org.uk/londonmarathon)

# WEEKLY LOTTERY

Playing the Blind Veterans UK Weekly Lottery is a fun way to help blind ex-Service men and women rediscover a life beyond sight loss.

You could win a cash prize too! With 34 prizes to be won every week, you're in with a real chance to win the jackpot prize every week!



Sign up now by visiting  
**[blindveterans.org.uk/weeklylottery](http://blindveterans.org.uk/weeklylottery)**



**BeGambleAware.org<sup>®</sup>**  
Helpline: 0808 8020 133

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