



Rebuilding
lives after
sight loss

Debrief

Your impact on the lives of blind veterans

Winter 2023



Together, we can

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Welcome



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

This will be my final introduction to an edition of Debrief before I retire. While I am sad to be leaving, it gives me immense joy to read how strong the charity is and I know it will continue to grow and evolve, thanks to you, our supporters.

The articles in this issue show just what can be achieved, with the right mix of support and determination. Remembrance Sunday captured that beautifully, with blind veterans and their guides marching proudly together. Read about the emotional day they had on page 5. On page 8, we remember one of our incredible blind veterans, Peter. He refused to let sight loss stop him living a full and independent life and we will all miss him dearly.

You can read about progress being made at our new Centre of Wellbeing in Rustington. The smart technology is going in – see page 10 – and a name for one of the refurbished rooms has been

announced, chosen by one of the blind veterans featured in our recent appeal and his story is on page 16.

I am always amazed how many different ways our supporters raise money for the charity. Some opt for our weekly lottery (page 15) or our raffle (page 19), both of which have new websites. Others embark on extraordinary challenges: marathons and epic bike rides. If you know anyone who wants to take part, turn to page 12. You'll also find out how to support blind veterans by shopping at our new online shop. I must also mention our volunteers, and all they do. They have been recognised with an excellence in befriending award – see page 14 – well done to all.

And finally, the wonderful work being done within communities, supporting blind veterans throughout the country. It is these regional groups that mean we can reach more blind veterans and reduce the isolation felt by so many. Page 18 shines the spotlight on South Wales but more communities will be featured soon.

I hope you enjoy this issue. I very much look forward to reading future editions of Debrief magazine. Together, we can support and encourage them all the way. I wish you a wonderful year ahead.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Nick Caplin". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline.

Best wishes
Nick

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BlindVeterans



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2022 at a glance



94%

The 'World Class' satisfaction score we achieved in an independent survey of veterans who use our services.

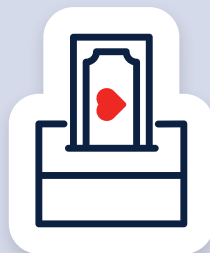


3,574

home visits or virtual home visits were made to our blind veterans by 223 volunteers, providing crucial companionship and support.

86p of every £1

donated is spent on charitable activities, with the remaining 14p going towards raising the next £1.



Over 1,500

of our beneficiaries have taken part in our National Creative Project since its inception, giving them a creative outlet and way to rediscover their passions.

1,931

befriending calls were made by our volunteers to isolated and lonely blind veterans.



Queen Elizabeth II 1926 – 2022

A history with Blind Veterans UK

Here we highlight just some of the moments that the late Queen contributed to and influenced in our charity during her Patronage from 1952 – 2016.

The Queen married in 1947 and, the then Princess Elizabeth, gave some money received as wedding gifts to her to us – £36!

In 1952 The Queen became Patron of St Dunstan's, as Blind Veterans UK was previously known, after the death of our previous Patron, her father, King George VI.

Elizabeth II made her first visit to our centre in Ovingdean in July 1962, accompanied by The Duke of Edinburgh.

In 1965 we celebrated our 50th anniversary and on 26 March, The Queen attended a reception at St James's Palace with 300 blind veterans

20 years later, in July 1985, The Queen visited Ovingdean, by now called Ian Fraser House with the Duke of Edinburgh again to formally open the new refurbished South Wing.



Queen Elizabeth II speaking to a blind veteran picture framing, 1985



The Queen at our Brighton Centre, 1962

We marked our 85th anniversary in May 2001 with a special reception held at Buckingham Palace. 250 blind veterans, 150 widows and widowers, and guests and escorts met the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh.

The next year, the Queen celebrated her own important anniversary with her Golden Jubilee in 2002. The St Dunstan's Standard was amongst those carried in a parade of 22,000 people through London. All there represented some aspect of her reign.

As Blind Veterans UK turned 100, one of her final acts as Patron was to allow the charity to mark the centenary with a garden party at Buckingham Palace in 2015.

The formal announcement came that Her Majesty would be stepping down as patron of Blind Veterans UK, as well as 24 other patronages in 2016.

This short summary of some of the moments where our former patron enriched our charity does not do justice to the tireless service she provided to us, the country and the world. It will never be forgotten and I hope you will join us in our thanks to her.



Margaret with guide Nicky and Guardsmen

A Nation Remembers

2022 saw a return to something that felt a bit more like normality for the 40 plus blind veterans marching at the Cenotaph in London. As well as activities at both our Centres of Wellbeing, blind veterans represented the charity and laid wreaths on our behalf at local events across the whole country.

This year had special significance for several reasons. It was the first year marching following the passing of Her Majesty The Queen but also the whole event was dominated by the 40th anniversary of the Falklands War and its veterans marched in great numbers, recognisable by their knitted scarves matching the colours of their campaign medal.

Several Falklands veterans led the Blind Veterans UK contingent including Terry Bullingham who lost his sight completely on board HMS Antrim, when four Argentine Skyhawk fighter-bombers passed over the ship, dropping a pattern of eight 1,000 lb bombs. Terry was

interviewed for the BBC saying: "I'll be thinking of those who didn't make it back. Especially those men we lost on HMS Glamorgan two days before the end of the war. I knew some of them very well and they will be in my thoughts."

Another Falklands veteran, and Blind Veterans UK Trustee, Alan Holderness spoke about the emotion of the day. He said: "It's been a tiring and emotional day. It's very poignant with it being the Falklands 40th but also poignant for me because at Blind Veterans UK we weren't marching with Maria Pikulski." Maria sadly passed away earlier this year and Alan added: "She would have been here keeping us all smiling through and that made it particularly emotional for me."

Afghanistan veteran Ken Facal said: "It's always great to march as a group and it makes you feel very proud. I was here last year and it was obviously quieter because of Covid but this year the crowds were back and cheering and clapping us the whole way around."

In the week running up to Remembrance, 28 blind veterans arrived at Llandudno for Military Week – an action-packed week full of military-themed activities and ending with local Remembrance Day commemorations.

The purpose of the week is to help our veterans reflect on their own military experiences. Our Wellbeing Support Lead, Mark Hollis, says: "Throughout the year we offer a range of themed weeks for our veterans to enjoy but this week, held close to Remembrance Day, is always one of the most poignant. It provides our veterans with an opportunity to reflect upon and revisit their own memories of service while being surrounded by others with shared experiences."

Blind veteran Major (Rtd) Lewis Evans, who attended the week, said: "Military Week at the centre is an amalgamation of nearly every core and unit in the British Armed Forces. We all get together and reminisce about old times. We laugh and joke, eat beautiful food and enjoy excellent accommodation, which culminates on Sunday when we march together in the Llandudno Remembrance parade."

Blind veterans also enjoyed Military Week at our Centre of Wellbeing in Sussex with a full itinerary of trips out to local military installations, presentations from guest



Guide Tim and blind veteran Terry



Blind veterans Billy and Ken

speakers and visiting military groups and plenty of entertainment alongside sombre remembrance on Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday.

The usual hustle and bustle of Brighton Train Station was replaced with silence at 11am on Friday 11 November as commuters, staff and veterans stood together side by side to remember those who have sacrificed their lives to ensure we all enjoy the freedoms we have today.

Blind veteran Tony Harbour laid a wreath on behalf of Blind Veterans UK. He said afterwards: "Laying the wreath on behalf of Blind Veterans UK is an honour. The charity is wonderful, they helped me so much when I lost my sight and showed me there is life after sight loss which I now tell everyone as it is so true.

"You can lose your sight but you've still got life and that is the most important thing and to be here today with friends from the RAF Police and many blind veterans has been an honour. It's an honour every year that I stand here and we do this."

Marches were joined and wreaths were laid across all corners of the country with the charity represented by blind veterans. They all represented us admirably and a huge thank you must go to all of those who did so.

Peter who was supported by Blind Veterans UK for over 50 years sadly passed away

Peter's wife Julie and daughters Michelle and Tanya shared his inspirational story.



Peter with his family during Christmas

In 1958 Peter joined the Royal Air Force as a photographer. It was whilst he was stationed in Cornwall that he met his future wife Julie, who he married in 1963. In 1965 Peter was posted to Malta with Julie, but unfortunately, he contracted an eye disease, toxoplasmosis, which causes loss of vision. Peter was sent back to the UK for further treatment in an RAF Hospital and was sadly discharged on medical grounds in 1967, aged just 28.

He and Julie moved to Brighton where he was taken under the wing of Blind Veterans UK, or St Dunstan's as it was then called. He enjoyed regular visits from one of the charity's Community Support Workers and was provided with rehabilitation training where he learnt canework, cooking, woodwork and how to read Braille. As an active person, Peter also thoroughly enjoyed the many activity weeks organised by the charity, which included horse riding, driving, white water rafting, tandem cycling, clay pigeon

shooting, archery and even soaring down the longest zip wire in the country near the Blind Veteran's UK Llandudno Centre. He always knew that he would be going to a safe place where he could socialise and have fun.

Peter's philosophy was to live life to the full, and not to let his sight loss get in his way. He loved spending time with his family, going dancing with Julie, and playing bowls and pétanque. He also forged a new career in computer programming after hearing about blind and visually impaired people training as computer programmers in America. Blind Veterans UK helped him join the training programme and offered database training at their Brighton Centre. Then, when he was 59, Lord Irvine, the Lord Chancellor, announced that Peter and eight others would be appointed among the first vision-impaired magistrates in England.

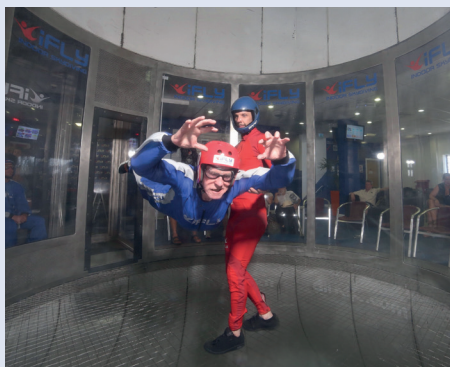


Peter wearing a St Dunstan's badge



Peter in the annual Remembrance march with Blind Veterans UK

Peter showed just how possible it is to lead a successful, independent, and fulfilling life with sight loss. But he also felt it vitally important to honour and support other veterans. Peter once said to his family that: "Remembrance is an homage to those who gave their lives in the First and Second World Wars, and anyone else who lost their lives fighting for us. It's a tribute to the friends and family of anyone who has lost someone in the armed forces. It's uplifting and an honour to pay our respects together and to represent a charity that continues to support us.



Peter indoor skydiving



Without Blind Veterans UK and its supporters, Peter wouldn't have been given the chance to forge a new career, live as independently as he did, or have the confidence to do things he never thought he could do with his sight loss. The charity, and those that support it, enabled him to lead a full and active life despite being severely sight impaired, and his life would have been completely different without their help.



Peter driving during a Blind Veterans UK activity week

Peter never forgot the important help and support he received from Blind Veterans UK for over 50 years. That is why he remembered the charity with a generous donation in his Will. He knew that his gift would help to give other sight impaired veterans the same opportunities that he had.

Thanks to Julie, Michelle and Tanya for sharing Peter's inspiring story.

If you would like to find out more about gifts in Wills including free Will writing services contact us:

T: 020 7616 7923

E: giftsinwills@blindveterans.org.uk

W: blindveterans.org.uk/leaveagift

Working with Amazon to create Smart Centres of Wellbeing

Blind Veterans UK is being supported by Amazon installing 120 Echo devices across our two Centres of Wellbeing. Our centre in Llandudno was the first to deploy the Alexa Smart Properties system, and one of the first of its kind in the UK.



Blind veteran Jules

They are working with Solution Provider, Vocala, to deploy Alexa Smart Properties for Senior Living, a solution that enables facilities to integrate Alexa into their properties. Amazon have provided 120 Echo Show 8 devices to be deployed across the two centres.

This enables our blind veterans to get assistance with orientation around the centre, access information, entertainment, and services, and the ability to call family members, using only their voice. It also benefits the care team by enabling them to make announcements, voice and video calls, and to send direct audio messages to other Alexa-enabled devices throughout the centre.

How does it work?

Orientation – A blind veteran will be able to self-orientate within any area of the Centre by asking Alexa. This includes getting from point A to point B and locating objects within a specific room.

Access to information - A blind veteran will be able to find information such as what's for lunch, fire safety procedures, and access news on the charity and its history by asking Alexa.

Access to services - A blind veteran will be able to find out what events are scheduled, play an audio book, and listen to music by asking Alexa.

We provide rehabilitation, training and support in order to illustrate that everyday tasks are still possible, using technology is achievable despite having a disability, and being independent and living a rich and fulfilling life can once again be a reality.

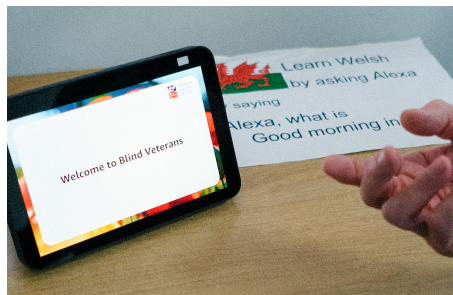
Our hope is that once a blind veteran leaves their stay at the Smart Centre they will take with them the digital communication skills they have learnt and continue their rehabilitation journey using smart technology at home. Equally, with support from Amazon, our staff and volunteers will be able to work with our beneficiaries to optimise the use of smart technology in their communities and everyday lives.

Harnessing technology has always been part of the Blind Veterans UK ethos and these "Smart Centres", powered by Alexa



Wellbeing Specialist Rhian demonstrates the new Amazon Alexa at the Llandudno Centre to Jules

Smart Properties, will further enhance blind veterans' experiences, and help them lead inclusive, independent, and fulfilling lives.



Pointing at an Echo Show Alexa device

Everything that our Smart Centre will be able to do is connected by the principal of giving blind veterans the tools to do more themselves and is an example of the charity's goal for them to live as independent lives as possible.

John Quintas, Director of Inclusive Communities at Amazon, said: "Our support to Blind Veterans UK allows us to demonstrate Amazon's commitment to all people with disabilities and our military communities around the globe. Our Alexa

Devices technology improves the quality of life for veterans by helping to make their lives more independent, accessible and fun. We are honoured to support Blind Veterans UK and to help transform their centre in Llandudno."

Our National Rehabilitation lead, Philippa Cubitt, said: "Having identified the need to make our centres truly centres of excellence, including in technological advancement, we reached out to AWS to find solutions.

"We're very excited to have Alexa as an integral part of the team at our Centres for Wellbeing. Firstly in Llandudno, but also when our new centre opens in Sussex later this year.

"Supporting our blind veterans with access to information, navigating their way around the site, making informed decisions, and interacting with others will be life-changing for everyone, especially the person adjusting to a vision impairment and, with our support, rebuilding their life after sight loss."

Hundreds of supporters apply for our limited charity event places each year in a bid to raise funds for Blind Veterans UK.

What's in it for them?

We couldn't help our veterans without the vital funds raised by our supporters and it's fantastic to hear they benefit from pushing their boundaries too!



Alison with her medals at the Angel of the North

Meet Alison, Great North Run

Just after her 39th birthday, Alison ran her first ever race and enjoyed the experience so much, she set herself a challenge - 40 races before her 40th. "Running is great for my physical fitness and mental health. I ran for Blind Veterans UK in memory of my granddad, who received support from the charity. He never gave up and this is something I reminded myself when completing my challenge." Alison has already signed up for her next challenge – the London Marathon 2023!

Meet Gary, London to Brighton Cycle

Naval Veteran Gary, wanted to prove he could still achieve any goal he sets despite his brain injury. "I had to prepare myself for slow progress at the beginning of my recovery and for the fact I would never be the same as I was before my injury. I couldn't run for 4.5 years but here I am today taking part in physical challenges to not only raise money for this amazing cause but to also push myself and achieve something. Gary hopes to undertake a sky dive as his next fundraising challenge.



Gary on his bike



Simon during his training holding up his dog

Meet Simon, London Marathon

Simon ran with 4 colleagues, as part of their company's commitment to raise funds for our veterans. The challenge gave them an opportunity to get to know each other during their training and fundraising. It also gave Simon motivation to overcome his own challenges. "I've experienced horrific back problems in the past, at times making it difficult to walk let alone imagine taking on a marathon. During training I've found that running helps - it is great for my mental health too."



Could you **Do It**
for blind veterans
and for yourself?!

Charity event places are open.
Visit our website to find out more
and apply for your place.

blindveterans.org.uk/yourplace

Got your own place? Let us know and we will help you
Do it for blind veterans.

blindveterans.org.uk/tellus

Visit our online shop

Whether you want a
training top, a cycling top, a
t-shirt or a mug for a cuppa
- we offer a range of
products with proceeds
funnelled right back into
supporting our blind veterans.

Visit the shop today at
blindveterans.org.uk/shop



Our befriending service receives top honour

We are extremely proud to announce that our befriending service has received the top honour of 'Quality in Befriending Excellence' as judged by Befriending Networks.

It is testament to the hard work of all our incredible volunteers and dedicated volunteering team, that we are one of only 11 organisations to have achieved this award in the UK.

The award acknowledges the significant difference our volunteer support provides to our blind veterans and highlights the quality of our volunteering service.

In order to attain the award, we were required to meet 83 indicators of good practice including robust volunteer recruitment and high quality standards in befriending process.



Volunteer Liam in veteran Ken's home



Selfie of Chrissie and Lorna smiling

This top-level achievement follows our award of the original Quality in Befriending standard early 2022.

Angus Maclean, Quality Officer at Befriending Networks, says:

"Blind Veterans UK's application and evidence exceeds good practice in befriending and is of the highest quality. It is clear both stakeholders and volunteers are supported and involved in the service development.

"Their policies and procedures are top-class, and their investment in focused training for both volunteers and staff is very impressive. Well done to the team at Blind Veterans UK for achieving fantastic outcomes for both blind veterans and volunteers."



Blind veteran Pete and volunteer Chris on Ben Nevis

Our befriending volunteers make a huge difference to the lives of our blind veterans.

If you are interested in volunteering with Blind Veterans UK, please visit: **blindveterans.org.uk/volunteer**



Blind veteran Ken wearing his military beret

You could win £500 every week play the Blind Veterans UK lottery

If you're not already a player, please do check out the new website at: **lottery.blindveterans.org.uk**.

The proceeds from the lottery help rebuild the lives of blind veterans like Ken, 36, who will need support for the entirety of his lifetime.

During a patrol at night in Afghanistan in 2010, he spotted an improvised explosive device (IED). As he warned his comrades to stand back, it exploded, leaving badly-injured Ken in a coma for a month. He lost the sight in his left eye completely and has minimal vision in his right. He says, "I felt sad and helpless. I didn't know who was who because I couldn't see their faces".

Adjusting to life after sight loss can be very traumatic. Ken says, "with the help of Blind Veterans UK, I could enjoy life again and push past my blindness". Ken has learned skills that have helped him to regain his independence. Lottery funding has provided equipment and training: he can now cook for himself and use his computer

independently. With each ticket you buy, more blind veterans will receive life-changing support, just like Ken has.

Not only does your support in our lottery provide vital rehabilitation, but you could also win some great prizes. We are so excited that each week, one of our wonderful supporters wins £500! There are many more runners up prizes up for grabs too.

Prefer to enter over the telephone? Please phone us on **0330 002 0285**

lottery.blindveterans.org.uk



WEEKLY LOTTERY



A winning name for a room at the new Centre

You may remember that in our recent Rebuild Appeal, we invited supporters to take part in naming one of the rooms at the new Rustington Centre of Wellbeing. Each one of the veterans who shared their story came up with a room name suggestion. It was then up to you, our supporters to vote which would be the winner!

With a large majority of votes, the room name winner is... **'The Welcome Room'**!

This room name was the idea of blind veteran Tom, who shared his moving story about writing a love letter. For the first time in years, with the use of the centre's CCTV scanner, Tom was able to write his wife a private love letter and surprise her with it.

Tom was delighted to find out his name suggestion was the winner. He says, "It really is a thrill, I'm privileged and honoured for that to be chosen. I've grown a few inches. I feel like I'm 10 feet tall".

Describing what inspired his choice, Tom says, "We're all made to feel so welcome, you feel so safe when you walk through the door. Every room should be called the Welcome Room because that's how we all feel".

Tom is looking forward to his first visit to the new centre. "I don't know what we would have done without Blind Veterans UK, to be perfectly honest. They've been so good to us."

The Rustington Centre Rebuild project is progressing well, on schedule for its summer opening. There is an enormous



amount of work involved in making sure everything in the building is accessible. Pillars are coming down and smart technology is going in. There will be a kitchen with talking devices, a gym with equipment designed for vision-impaired users, bedrooms that will be safe and secure. There are also two independent living houses on the site, that will be used for individuals and families to live in while they learn skills to master living with sight loss..

Betty, 97, is one of the Brighton Centre residents who will move into the new centre when it opens. She has been for a tour and been shown a 3D model that the blind veterans can feel to get an idea of the layout.

"They've taken into account our needs, our sight, our abilities and also our mobilities and I feel very privileged to have had somebody give me time and understanding and to take me all around the displays. I feel I know where I am going, I know how I can get in and out of the place, I know where the lifts are, the toilets and the rooms.

"I can only say on behalf of a long-standing member of St Dunstan's and Blind Veterans UK that I'm not only privileged but I feel today that I am very blessed".

Thanks to the donations coming in for our Rebuild Appeal, we will be able to offer a superior service to visitors like Tom and Betty. We are really looking forward to welcoming our blind veterans to the new Rustington Centre of Wellbeing this year.

If you would like to find out more about the Rebuild Appeal and be part of the charity's future, visit **blindveterans.org.uk/rebuild**.

Blind veteran Jules kept a diary during his recent visit to one of our centres - an exciting Activity Week at the Llandudno Centre of Wellbeing. Here is an extract from the day he went coasteering.

"I edged forward, it didn't seem to matter I couldn't clearly see, as all there was below was an abyss. Others have done it, so I was going to... once I surfaced, a huge feeling of exhilaration and achievement came over me. There was much more to the day but I had faced up to new challenges and laid to rest my illogical fear of the sea. This whole week has been a fantastic experience but today encapsulated it all".

You can read Jules' full report at **blindveterans.org.uk/jules**

News from a region

Here's an update from Ffion who is Community Team Leader covering Cardiff, Newport and Swansea.

We currently run a lunch club in Cwmbran, Cardiff, Porthcawl and a coffee morning in Swansea. These groups provide an opportunity for our blind veterans to escape isolation, create friendships, learn about other services locally and to realise they don't have to face sight loss alone. We also signpost and support veterans to events run by other organisations such as the Porthcawl and Swansea Veterans Hub. This opens new opportunities to engage with the local community.



Community members holidaying together in the Llandudno centre

Our telephone groups launched during the pandemic were so well received that we have continued to run these and now have several running across the community. One of our veterans said 'I just sit back and listen to all the war stories, and it is something I look forward to every week as I don't get to speak to many people.'

In December, we ran a community holiday to the Llandudno Centre of wellbeing. This gave our blind veterans a chance to holiday with likeminded individuals who live locally to them. Many have made

lifelong friendships and continue to meet and keep in touch with each other.

A blind veteran in South Wales told us that their life would not be worth living without the support from Blind Veterans UK. Following a home visit from their Community Support Worker and Rehabilitation officer they are now able to independently travel on the bus, have made numerous new friendships, attend local sight loss and veterans' clubs, can cook independently and have just joined a local craft group.

Without vital funds from people like you, we couldn't be there for blind veterans in our communities during these difficult times. Thank you.



Some blind veterans at a Cwmbran Christmas gathering

Keep up with news by joining our regional Facebook groups -



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



YOU COULD WIN

£15000

Play the Blind Veterans UK New Year Raffle and you could win BIG

Our raffle is a fun way to **make a difference** and be in with a chance to win a fantastic prize! As well as the **£15,000 jackpot**, we have **34 more prizes** to be won – and every ticket helps to **rebuild lives after sight loss**.



Tickets cost just £1, and you can get yours by calling **0300 111 2233** or online at: **raffle.blindveterans.org.uk**

Draw closes 24 March 2023 and will take place 31 March 2023

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[®]
Helpline: **0808 8020 133**

Person responsible for the raffle and lottery: Richard Neate, Blind Veterans UK, 3 Queen Square, London WC1N 3AR. Blind Veterans UK is a registered charity no. 216227 (England & Wales) and SC039411 (Scotland). Licensed by the Gambling Commission under the 2005 Gambling Act. Registered license number 008297.



Do you know someone like Ken?

We estimate that there are many thousands of veterans in the UK who could be entitled to our support.

If you, or someone you know, served in the Armed Forces, including National Service, and are now struggling with sight loss then please get in touch today.

Did you know?

We support anyone who has served in the armed forces, and also those who have lost their sight while on duty in the emergency services.

Visit: **blindveterans.org.uk**
or call **0800 389 7979**



Rebuilding
lives after
sight loss

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