



Rebuilding
lives after
sight loss

Debrief

Your impact on the lives of blind veterans

Winter 2022



Marching proudly on

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Welcome



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

Happy New Year from all of us at Blind Veterans UK.

As we continue to inch our way back to normality, I'd like to offer my heartfelt gratitude for your support throughout the pandemic.

Thanks to you, we've been able to weather the Covid storm and I'm delighted to share we're now offering some face-to-face support again, albeit cautiously. As you will see on page 4, our veterans were hugely appreciative of the chance to come together for Remembrance and found the whole experience incredibly moving.

I'm extremely proud of the way our staff have responded to the crisis. One shining example is our care manager, Blanche Back, who was awarded a British Empire Medal for her

outstanding leadership. Blanche's story, which you can read on page 7, clearly illustrates the Blind Veterans UK approach and I know she would be the first to dedicate the award to the whole team.

Your generosity meant we were able to launch a number of remote initiatives during lockdown, many of which are still going strong. One of our veterans, Mark, talks with passion about his online photography group on page 14. Meanwhile, our popular National Creative Project has inspired some amazing artwork, not least the stunning 'Collaboration in Colour', made up of dozens of individual contributions (see page 6).

What better example of the sheer brilliance that can be achieved when we all work together? If the pandemic has taught us anything, it must surely be that this is the most essential ingredient for success.

Thank you again for playing your part. We simply could not do what we do without you.

With my very best wishes

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Nick Caplin". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

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2021 at a glance



97.5%

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

95%

The percentage of our veterans we were in contact with in the first 30 days of the pandemic to assess their needs.

857

The number of veterans receiving remote training during the lockdown.

4,245

The number of veterans and bereaved family members we've supported remotely through the pandemic.

12,441

The number of telephone befriending calls we've made to our veterans over the past year.



Proudly marching on

The National Service of Remembrance holds special significance for Blind Veterans UK as it is a chance to formally remember the sacrifice of our fellow Ex-Service men and women, and their families.

It's also a treasured time for our veterans to get together with one another to share their memories and remember old comrades.

After last year's Remembrance commemorations were curtailed due to Covid, many veterans were delighted to be able to mark the occasion in the traditional way once again this time.

Around 30 blind veterans gathered in London to join the march to the Cenotaph, while others attended their local services. In fact, the charity was represented at parades all around the country, including Brighton, Llandudno, Newcastle, Bath, Leeds and Plymouth.

Our veterans were even invited to take part in the ceremony at the Stow Maries Great War Aerodrome in Maldon, Essex. Nine local blind veterans attended the First World War military aviation museum and held a position of honour, taking the salute from those marching.

In Llandudno, 12 blind veterans gathered at our centre for Military Week, an unforgettable, activity-filled few days, culminating with a Remembrance Sunday Parade through the town.

The veterans - nine of whom served in the Second World War - enjoyed visits to the Royal Welsh Reservists Centre in Colwyn Bay and RAF Cosford Museum, then proudly marched together along the seafront, cheered on by hundreds of locals.

One Second World War veteran, Margaret, said, "It meant everything to march in the parade. It's very touching - you think about all your comrades. It's been an excellent week."

Meanwhile, in London, one of our veterans, Wayne, from Rugby, marched for the very first time and found the occasion incredibly moving. He says, "Remembrance means a lot to me as many of my family are ex-military, including my father, brother, uncles and cousins. It means a lot to be able to thank them."

The former soldier served in Germany, Cyprus and Northern Ireland and lost his sight due to macular damage caused by Toxoplasmosis. He says, "When I first got the illness, it hit me hard. I was a young man, doing well in my military career,



Margaret at Llandudno Remembrance



Wayne and partner Karen preparing to march.

playing football for the army. And I lost all of that overnight. Blind Veterans UK has been brilliant because they get you to realise there is a life there.

"It was an honour to march with the other blind veterans. It's so important we never forget those who have served for our country. It was one of the proudest moments of my life."

Remembering your loved ones



Why not create an online Tribute Fund in memory of a loved one? Keep their story alive while you help Blind Veterans UK provide lifelong support to ex-service men and women with sight loss now and into the future.

Find out more online at blindveterans.org.uk/memory or contact us on tributefunds@blindveterans.org.uk or 0300 111 2233.



A kaleidoscope of colour and texture

To mark one year since the launch of our National Creative Project in September, we unveiled 'Collaboration in Colour'.

Inspired by the 'Thank you NHS' rainbows of the first lockdown, Collaboration in Colour is a stunning artwork made up of contributions from our veterans, staff and volunteers. It was just one of many creative activities available to help our veterans from feeling isolated during the lockdown.

Project lead, James Cowland, says, "This activity was conceived to celebrate the breadth of diversity within our organisation. We asked everyone to express themselves on 5 inch square bases in whatever style or medium they would like."

As Project lead, Lou Kirk-Partridge, says, "We wanted to provide a meaningful activity with social opportunities that our veterans could join in with from home. Our first activity kit was sent out in September 2020 and since then we have sent out well over 1,000."

"We plan to display Collaboration in Colour in our centres for all our visitors to enjoy. After that, we hope to take it on tour. It's proof of what can be achieved when we all come together with our small contributions to create something amazing."

To find out more about Blind Veterans UK's National Creative Project please visit blindveterans.org.uk/ncp

Blanche is awarded British Empire Medal

Last Summer, Blanche Back, Care Manager at our training and rehabilitation centre, was formally recognised for her outstanding work during the pandemic

Blanche was presented with the British Empire Medal by Lord Lieutenant of East Sussex. She received the award for her outstanding work leading the care at the centre during the pandemic.

Blanche says: "It's an absolute honour to be presented with this award. Just to be nominated was amazing so I couldn't believe it! Everyone has worked so hard to provide the best care for the veterans who are residents here."

Blanche joined the charity six years ago as a nurse and became a care manager four years ago. She says: "When I was a student nurse, I did a placement at the centre and I absolutely loved it. I always knew that I wanted to come back. It's great to hear the veterans' stories. All the staff are amazing as well."

Blind Veterans UK Chief Executive, Nick Caplin, said: "This is wonderful recognition of the role that Blanche has played, of her leadership and compassion and of the example that she has set, day in, day out. Blanche



Care Manager, Blanche

would be the first person to say, and believe, that it should be an award to all the staff who stepped up to the plate magnificently during the difficult time of lockdown."

As a result of the pandemic, we adapted our services to support our Members, 90% of whom are aged over 70 and were advised by the Government to self-isolate. Our National Support Service has helped many blind veterans through this period of social isolation.



Find out more about the support your donations provide - visit blindveterans.org.uk/oursupport



Research has revealed the worrying impact of Covid-19 on eye health, including...



23%
drop in eye
examinations



25%
drop in eye
tests



235,000
missed eye hospital
appointments

Specsavers

Covid-19 could cost the economy £2.5 billion due to few eye tests and delayed treatment

A NEW report paints a stark picture of the impact the Covid-19 pandemic has had on eye health in Britain – with experts warning of a ‘ticking timebomb’ and significant fallout for years to come.

The State of the UK’s Eye Health 2021 report*, commissioned by Specsavers in collaboration with leading eye health experts and charities, counts not only the additional financial burden now facing society but, more worryingly, the real cost to people’s sight.

With more than 4.3 million fewer eye examinations provided (a 23% drop) and more than 235,000 necessary eye hospital appointments missed or delayed throughout the pandemic, eye health experts are predicting a surge of referrals to ophthalmology services, which are already stretched. Early detection and management of eye conditions is vital so any delay could be detrimental.

Giles Edmonds, Specsavers clinical services director, says: ‘As comprehensive as this report is, we, along with our colleagues and partners throughout the eye health sector, suspect that these early findings are just the tip of the iceberg.

‘The pandemic meant that eye care services in the UK were withdrawn, reduced or restricted, and despite Specsavers being open for care throughout the pandemic, our stores alongside other high street opticians saw a drop of almost 25% in eye tests across the sector. This has led to a reduction in referrals and the treatment of serious, and sometimes symptomless, eye conditions

that can lead to irreversible and permanent sight loss if not detected and managed in time. The eye health sector and the NHS has a ticking timebomb on its hands.’

The report also revealed that referrals to ophthalmology services fell by 316,000 between March and December 2020, compared to the same period in 2019.

Giles Edmonds adds: ‘Now is the time to implement change, such as fast-tracking technology, that will help to secure long-term sustainability of patient-centred care. Our business has invested £45 million to bring world-class optical eye test technology, OCT1, to 1,000 of our high street stores. This technology, previously only available in hospital ophthalmology departments, has transformed our evaluation of a customer’s overall eye health.’

And for people concerned about their eye health, the message is simple: ‘Regular eye tests are so important,’ says Mr Edmonds. ‘If people have missed their appointment during the pandemic, I urge them to rebook. We are still adhering to strict safety precautions in our stores. As we look to focus on community optometry, we’re ready to take on the challenge of tackling the backlog and feel positive about the future.’



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



Celebrating a decade in Llandudno

Our training and rehabilitation centre in north Wales first opened its doors on 19 September 2011, so we marked the 10-year anniversary with a special gala dinner.

Our Llandudno Centre has supported more than 4,000 veterans with stays since it opened, teaching vital skills for independent living, building trust and confidence and giving veterans and their carers somewhere to relax and enjoy one another's company.

Centre Manager, Kathy Boardman, says: "It's been an amazing 10 years supporting blind veterans in north Wales and we're not finished yet.

"In the time we've been here, 4,157 blind veterans have benefited from stays at the

centre, with many making multiple visits to receive rehabilitation, training and respite. Our veterans now have a whole range of themed weeks to choose from, like gardening and history, to re-engage with hobbies and interests.

"Our outbuildings have also been converted to independent living spaces, where our blind veterans can learn and apply vital skills in a safe setting."

Veterans who were visiting the centre were delighted to be able to join in with the celebrations. Geoff, 83, from Wigan, who was visiting for the very first time, said: "My stay here has been just unbelievable. The staff are so caring and can't do enough for you. To be here at the same time as the celebrations made it extra special too.



“They’ve given me all sorts of equipment, like a smart phone, this week and I can’t praise the whole experience enough. I only wish I could stay longer!”

Three local veterans also attended and spoke about the friendship they’ve formed over the years through visiting the centre.

John, who’s 83, said: “People think it’s strange but I am being completely honest when I say that I am now actually very grateful that I lost my sight.

“It was obviously hugely hard when it first happened and I thought things were over for me. But now I look back and realise that if it hadn’t been for losing my sight then I would never have got to experience this marvellous place and this marvellous charity.

“Not only have I made some great friends here, but I also met my partner. From being quite a miserable guy in a very dark place, I’m now the happiest I can imagine.”

Fellow veteran Tom, 88, said: “I remember

when I first started coming here and John had been volunteering, helping support our blind veteran archery sessions.

“He rang me up and I told him it wasn’t for me, but he persuaded me and thank heavens he did. It’s wonderful; more about the friendship than the archery

“My wife and our friends outside the charity have all noticed the difference in me since we started coming here.”

Meanwhile, their friend John, 91, said: “This was the first time I’ve been back to stay since before Covid. It’s been so nice to get back in and see old friends and all the lovely staff.

“Throughout the lockdown my Blind Veterans UK Community Support Worker, Lisa, called to check on me every week and, if there was ever anything I needed, it was sorted straight away.

“The atmosphere in this building is magic. We’ve had such a brilliant week.”

Find out more at
blindveterans.org.uk/Llandudno

D-Day from the air

Second World War pilot and blind veteran, Harry, aged 101, shares his experience.

Early in 1939 it was obvious there was going to be a war. I was 19 and working for an insurance company in Hartlepool when I saw an advert in the paper for the RAF. I applied and passed the entrance exam and a very stiff medical. Then war broke out and my training quickly progressed.

I'd just turned 24 by the time of the D-Day invasion. We'd been told we'd be flying army officers, but I didn't know where. We flew all over with them in the end. I was then sent to Normandy to drop the officers off and bring back the walking wounded before I was moved over to France permanently.

We took 12 Auster aircraft over, flying in formation and escorted by a Walrus plane just in case anybody ditched. I remember the flight was an hour and 50 minutes and we only had two hours' worth of petrol.

Once in France, my job was to deliver all the personnel and mail to the various units. In Antwerp there were Doodlebugs



Harry pictured today



Harry pictured in service

and V2s exploding all over the place. It was a great relief when we changed planes from the Anson 1 to the Anson 5 as at least we no longer had to wind up the undercarriage by hand.

I was finally demobbed in December 1945 and returned to work the following February. I married my wife, Maisie, four years later and we had our son, David. We were happily married for 67 years, until she died in 2015. I was diagnosed with macular degeneration and can't read now, even with a magnifying glass.

The staff at Blind Veterans UK have been amazing. I've been on courses and received life-changing equipment. The 'table reader' is a godsend for reading and doing crosswords. I feel the charity has given me a life again.

Experience the joy of volunteering



Volunteers with the revamped benches

At Blind Veterans UK, we simply couldn't operate without the dedicated support of our amazing volunteers. Volunteer Support Lead, Jess Wood, praises their incredible commitment during the pandemic.

“ Hearing first-hand from veterans just how much difference our volunteers made throughout the pandemic has been one of the most rewarding parts of my job.

Even at the most intense periods of the lockdown, our volunteers stepped up magnificently, consistently offering telephone and online support to our veterans, many of whom live alone and had little social contact with the outside world.

All our volunteers are supported by volunteer coordinators who are based both at our centres and out in the community. These volunteer coordinators were on hand throughout to provide guidance and make sure our veterans received all the support they needed.

Since the easing of restrictions, we've cautiously reintroduced a number of our volunteers to their front-facing role and I've heard lots of lovely stories of veterans and volunteer reunions. It's been wonderful to hear about them enjoying simple, everyday pleasures together once again, like going out to their local café for coffee and cake.

As life continues to get back to normal, we are carefully welcoming some of our volunteers back to our training and rehabilitation centres to help with the maintenance of the grounds. In October, a team of volunteers cleaned and tidied up of the graves of deceased Members in the Brighton area, while others revamped the benches at our centres. ”

If you'd like to volunteer for us, there are so many different ways you can get involved, from visiting veterans in their homes to raising money, to helping out at one of our centres.

All the opportunities can be found on our website at volunteer.blindveterans.org.uk

The blind photographer



Mark in the centre of the action with his camera

Blind Veteran, Mark, 56, from Bath, talks about his weekly photography group and bringing along his hero, the celebrity photographer known simply as 'Rankin'.

“ I first met Rankin a couple of years ago when I was asked by another organisation to take behind-the-scenes photos for a campaign he was shooting for them. I'd actually dropped my camera that morning, so he ended up giving me a go on his – 50 grand's worth of camera. It was an amazing experience.

I was born with strabismus which developed into amblyopia, whereby my brain doesn't compute what my eyes see. When I was 16, I was told I'd lose my sight by age 30. I'm 56 now and have about 15%

vision left – light and dark perception in my right eye and tunnel vision with a blurry end in my left. Everything's a bonus, as far as I'm concerned.

Ironically, I didn't get serious about photography until I was blind. Thanks to the encouragement of Blind Veterans UK staff, I've now got a workshop with all my own kit and regularly take on voluntary photography jobs. I've done weddings, football matches, all sorts.

I think having a visual impairment means you have to work a bit harder than others to take decent photos. You have to know your camera and know where the buttons are and what they do. I can't use the back digital screen, but I can use the view finder, and I use sound as well. I might take 1,000 photos in a 90-minute football match. It's just practise, practise, practise. You have to find your own way.

The online photography group was borne out of a discussion with other blind veterans about how to help others through the lockdown. It's helped keep us all busy and sane while we've been stuck indoors, and there's usually a bit of friendly banter which is all good fun.

We often get guest speakers to come along to the group. David Bailey joined the last Photography Week we had in person, so I was really chuffed when Rankin said he'd like to come along to our online group. About 20 veterans attended and their questions were brilliant. He was so open and honest. It was really inspiring.

We all enjoy the group so much that we're happy to keep it going for as long as possible. ”

On your marks, get set to support our veterans!

Taking on a challenge is not only a great way to raise vital funds to support our work with blind veterans – it's a sure fire way to keep you motivated with your own fitness goals. We have charity places in a number of headline events across the UK.

Great North Run – 11 September

Enjoy the friendly North East welcome and electric atmosphere while taking part in the UK's favourite half marathon. Join over 57,000 runners on this 13.1 mile route through Newcastle, over the iconic Tyne Bridge before finishing along the stunning coastline of South Shields.



London to Brighton Cycle – 11 September

Leave the buzz of the city behind you and saddle up for this 55 mile journey from the heart of London to Brighton seafront. Make your way through the idyllic English countryside, putting your pedals to the test on Ditchling Beacon. Stop off at the picturesque village of Turners Hill to refuel before heading off for the finish line at Brighton!

London Marathon – 2 October

The world's best known, most coveted marathon event with competition for places requiring as much determination as the event itself. We have limited spaces on the 2022 team, giving the most dedicated supporters the opportunity to take on this reknown challenge while raising vital funds to support our blind veterans.



Charity places are limited. Registration fees and minimum sponsorship applies. To apply for a place and raise funds for blind veterans, select your event and complete our online application form at blindveterans.org.uk/eventscalendar



We support blind veterans all over the UK. Join our Facebook group local to your area to find out what's going on in your community and how to get involved.

Go to facebook.com/blindveteransuk/groups

Will you consider a gift in your will to Blind Veterans UK?

Gifts in Wills equate to about 60% of our voluntary income each year. We rely on this generosity to help ex-Service men and women of every generation rebuild their lives after sight loss

How our friendly team can help you

We have a helpful Gifts in Wills Guidance Pack that we can send you by post or email or you can email or call us directly with any questions – or just to chat.

Thinking about writing your will? We work in partnership with Bequeathed and the Free Wills Network to offer free will-writing services to our supporters. Get in touch with our team by phone or email and we can discuss these in more detail with you.

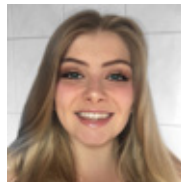
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Contact Us

Email: giftsinwills@blindveterans.org.uk

Phone Abigail Barton: 07810 504632

You can also find more information online:
blindveterans.org.uk/leaveagift



Tameside Veteran completes one million metres challenge

A Blind Veteran from Tameside in Greater Manchester has completed one hundred 10k runs to raise money for Blind Veterans UK.

Steven, 42, from Ashton-Under-Lyne, set himself the challenge over nine months, finishing with the Manchester 10k at the end of September. He says: “When I finally finished the challenge it was quite a relief – it felt like it was carrying on forever! It’s been a struggle as there’s been a few injuries along the way. In the beginning I was averaging three to four a week but towards the end I was doing two a week.”

Steven joined the Infantry in 1996. He was in the 1st Battalion Kings Regiment, serving in Cyprus, Northern Ireland and Kuwait, before being discharged in 2001. He lost his sight after leaving the Army when he developed amblyopia in his right eye and became a Member in February 2019.

He says: “The charity has helped me a lot and it’s great to be able to do something like this as a way of giving back. In terms of my sight, my outer vision isn’t too bad so I’m OK if I stay close to hedges or curbs. I do have assistance sometimes from my girlfriend and my sister who run with me, but their work commitments mean sometimes I’m on my own.”

“Finishing the challenge feels like a nice accomplishment, particularly as I only got into running about two years ago as a way of getting fit. The charity really helped with this. If someone said to me 18 months ago that I would have completed this challenge, I wouldn’t have believed them!



Tameside Blind Veteran, Steven

“Now I’ve done it, I’ve decided to carry on running. I want to see how many more 10ks I can do up to the end of the year.”



There are 50,000 blind veterans across the UK that still need us. Together we can help rebuild blind veterans’ lives after sight loss.
blindveterans.org.uk/supportus

Adventure in Llandudno



Jules, right, loved the social interaction

As we emerged from the pandemic, our centre in North Wales ran a pilot Wellbeing Week for Working Age Members to help us assess how and what we offer moving forward in the new world we find ourselves in.

The week focused on using the outdoor environment and adventurous activity to support Members' wellbeing. It provided veterans with the opportunity to be active in nature and push boundaries in a safe and supportive environment.

Blind Veteran Jules, 63, from Surrey, attended the week and says, "My sight loss started about 15 years ago. When I eventually joined Blind Veterans UK, I could tell straightaway what a wonderful charity it is.

"I've received so many benefits, from the brilliant introduction week to my CCTV reader which has really enhanced my life. I now volunteer as a telephone befriender for the charity. Before I was just surviving; now I'm living.

"When I read about the opportunity to attend the Wellbeing Adventure Week at Llandudno, I thought it would be a good chance to do so much of what I have missed in the lockdown. I felt so fortunate

when I heard I'd been selected."

This is an extract of Jules' diary of the week:

Monday

Our first real chance to start the bonding process and my initial feeling is that the week is really going to fulfil my hopes and expectations. At long last I'm meeting new people and bonding in a way that I haven't been able to do for 18 months. We didn't even feel the need to divert into a pub as we were all chatting and enjoying good laughs.

Tuesday

As we met for breakfast, we could feel the benefits of the previous evening's interactions. However, setting off for a day of kayaking and paddle boarding, I had my concerns about how I'd deal with being in such a strange situation. I wondered if the camaraderie we had started to build would hold when all were thrown into this different environment.

My fears were groundless. We laughed as we struggled into our wet suits and the session was fulfilling in so many ways. The discussion afterwards gave me a great opportunity to reflect on the fact that I had tackled my concerns about going into the water and I thoroughly enjoyed the paddle boarding. The day rekindled my ability to totally trust what others are telling me and I enjoyed a huge feeling of freedom that I haven't experience for years.

Wednesday

Tandem cycling today - an experience new to all but one of us. It would have been easy to have felt very vulnerable on the open roads but having the support team in their vehicle and on their bikes reassured



At Aber Falls in Snowdonia National Park

Thursday

Our final day of activity was hillwalking. The walk was perfectly chosen as it was strenuous, though not so difficult we couldn't enjoy it. As always, we were blessed with great support staff and even had the bonus of receiving a brief introduction to the art of Qi-Gong, something that I will be keen to continue when I get home.

Follow up

I feel more motivated and refreshed than ever. Instead of putting my walking boots away when I got home, I now put them on every morning and do what I call 'active walking' – fast walking for an hour in the park. Also, my community support worker, Noreen, has very kindly found somewhere local for me to take up paddle boarding. I'm deeply grateful to all the staff involved in making the week so special.

With your support we hope to run more Wellbeing Weeks this year.



Learning the art of Qi-Gong



Follow us on social media!



BlindVeterans



blind.veterans



blindveteransuk



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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
lottery.blindveterans.org.uk



BeGambleAware.org[®]
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 for more details.