

Review

The journal of
Blind Veterans UK
September 2019

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George Wood
- a pilot's story

Echo - the guide
dog's tale

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updates

Across the water

Our veterans visit the
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Rebuilding
lives after
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Pen to paper

It's a source of minor pride to me that I can look at myself and think of all the peculiar little things I've accomplished in my life – from digging my own vegetable patch satisfactorily, and actually producing things that are edible, to restoring a 105-tonne diesel locomotive from scrap condition. Yet there is one blip, one dark cloud on the horizon that I'm unable to conquer. I have never been able to write my novel.

This may not seem like a big deal to most of you, yet to me it is as irremovable a mark of failure as the lion stamps are on the side of eggs. My dreams of becoming a Joyce, a Greene, even a W H Awdry (author of *Thomas the Tank Engine*), have truly crackled and gone up in smoke amid a welter of innumerable drafts, half-forgotten ideas, and fiendish plot twists. I have to admit that now, as middle age encroaches (I'm in denial), it's not going to happen.

Which is why I have such respect for those who do enter the select club of the writer, and no more so than when those authors are our Members. We've featured our veterans' work before, and in this issue, we have a brace of authors who are stepping up – Alan Johnson, with his thrilling autobiography

of his time as a dispatch rider during the Desert campaign of the Second World War, and John Bennett, who at the other end of the spectrum has produced the intriguingly titled children's book *Mr Pinklenose*.

It takes a vast amount of discipline to write a book of any considerable length, no matter what the subject, and I can only offer high praise indeed, to those who have resisted the temptation to not break the writing ritual and wander off, feed the cat, water the aspidistra, and so forth.

Elsewhere in this month's magazine, we publish the first part of the story of George Wood, the fighter pilot who became a member of the clergy after the war was over, and there's a sensational account of our Members' tour to the battlefields of Normandy.

As always, enjoy your magazine, and see you next month.

Chris Gilson
Editor



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On the cover

Richard Jones lays a wreath at the D-Day memorial in Normandy during our visit



A terrific faith

Your message from your Chairman, Air Vice-Marshal
Paul Luker CB OBE AFC DL

If ever I'm about to get above myself, Blind Veterans UK has a very effective way of bursting my bubble. I have touched on this sort of thing before. Being a former member of the 'Two-Wing Master Race' (or a pilot, as other sensible people would call us), I am prone to bouts of self-importance, self-absorption, self-delusion – well self-everything really.

It normally starts in the bar, when I'm listening to somebody shooting a line. Rather than just smile, my instinct is immediately to search my memory for a better story which demonstrates my greater prowess, my superior valour, my effortless ability to find and evade trouble, my finer feel for the ridiculous – and then "spin a dit" of my own (as the Navy would say). And all of this conducted in an overloud voice which ensures that everybody in the pub (and probably every other pub in the village as well) is aware of what a totally good egg I am. This is the default position for most pilots: most of us know that we could have played the role of Captain Flashheart in *Blackadder* with rather

more panache than the understated performance of Rik Mayall.

So, it comes as something of a humbling and bubble-bursting experience in this month's *Review* to read of the exploits of George Wood, a World War II pilot interviewed by Chris Gilson. I was already vaguely aware of George's adventures in 1943, having seen a short video clip about him on the RAF



Caption: Paul Luker

Benevolent Fund web-site. In some respects, it is a typical tale of the casual way in which George's generation faced adversity and dealt with it. But that would be an altogether too simplistic analysis. George's story provides an insight into a different sort of personal fortitude and mind-set from anything that I have had to confront. Importantly, it also gives a glimpse into the immense courage shown by the many French people who accepted the horrendous risks of supporting the Resistance throughout the period of German occupation.

Many faces

It seems to me that courage has many faces. In George's case, at the moment his aircraft was hit high above Ploujean-Morlaix airfield, he would have been driven in part by a sense of survival, in part by training and in part by what he had doubtless mentally rehearsed before setting off on this and other sorties. Once on the ground he was literally and figuratively in a different country. At this point, with choices now available, he made the conscious decision to escape and evade – when, as you will read, another side of personal courage comes to the fore.

During the war all aircrew were told it was their duty to avoid capture: much easier to say than to do. But it gives a glimpse into the mind of the military.

“At this point, with choices now available, he made the conscious decision to escape and evade ”

Then and now we hope to confront our enemies under the cloak of some sort of code of conduct. Notwithstanding that we are hell bent on doing each other mortal damage in the course of that duty, and if later captured we expect and hope to deal with each other chivalrously. George had been called by the State to take on the country's enemies. The prosecution of that act took great courage – as it did for countless other young men – but once his aircraft had been hit it took altogether greater bravery and determination to obey the instruction to escape. It also took a terrific faith.

A higher order of courage

By contrast, the French civilians who then helped George demonstrated a different and, some might reasonably argue, higher order of courage. For them there was no formal compunction to take on the Nazis. While they may have deeply resented the fact that their country had been occupied, the risk of confronting their invaders for many French people was just too high. For those who did and were then



“Those of you that have made that first step will probably know much more about what that means”

unfortunate enough to be betrayed and captured by the Gestapo the outcome was most often a brutal death. For them there was no mutual respect, no chivalry. It speaks volumes for their personal courage that they were prepared to put their lives and the lives of the families at such risk to play their part in the conflict.

What many of them did might seem quite mundane nowadays. To hide an escaping airman in a haystack or to provide a little food to keep him on the run doesn't sound like much. Even contacting the local Resistance in order to get him into one of the escape ratlines might not sound like an act of valour. Yet it most certainly was, when measured against the reprisal that would surely have followed had that act been discovered.

Quite often the greatest displays of personal courage are found in the simplest things. Within our own numbers I suspect that we find them almost every day. Confronting

blindness and being determined not to let it beat you is one powerful example for me. I have not had to do it myself but I meet so many of you that have, that I cannot help but be moved by it. Those of you that have made that first step will probably know much more about what that means.

A little in common

George and I share a little in common – but nothing on the scale of what George faced in 1943.

George was flying a Westland Whirlwind when he was shot down; my first operational tour was also spent flying Whirlwinds (but in my case a now-antiquated helicopter, not the fighter-bomber known to George). I commanded RAF Odiham which was, long before my time, the base from which a large number of flights were mounted into France to support special operations and to which escaping aircrew were returned.

For many years after the war it became home to the annual reunion of the RAF Escaping Society and, over the years I had the good fortune to meet and chat to some of its members. One thing has stayed with me following our chats. They were always far more interested in talking about the exploits and bravery of others, rather than about themselves.

Interesting times

Your message from your Chief Executive,
Major General (rtd) Nick Caplin CB

We live in interesting times as the country considers options and tries desperately to understand how the future will unfold.

Uncertainty is not unusual, but this has a particular feel. It's a little like sailing through water which appears calm enough, but there is a 'short chop' on the surface which is disconcerting, and you are aware of deep undercurrents that can and might well cause mischief. The skies above are also looking sinister, but you are unsure whether the storm will hit us or pass us by. Our political landscape is currently very unpredictable and it would take a brave person to bet on how this will settle down later in the year, if indeed it does.

Life-long support

From within this picture of confusion has emerged an initiative that will

have direct impact on our veterans. One of the early decisions of Boris Johnson's administration was to create a new Office for Veterans Affairs →



Caption: Nick Caplin

(OVA). This provides a focus overseen by dedicated ministers in the Cabinet Office, aiming to ensure the whole of government pulls together to deliver the life-long support our veterans deserve.

A similar model has existed in the USA for many years, but it is a novel departure for the UK. The new office will take time to take shape, and time will tell how effective it will be. From the outset, we are keen to work with it as it develops to ensure that issues that affect blind veterans are among the first thoughts of ministers, not the last.

We have extended an invitation to meet Johnny Mercer MP, the new Minister for Defence, People and Veterans, and hope that this can be achieved in the near future. This will build on the relationships that we have already established with the Ministry of Defence and the Defence Select Committee.

Outside of the field of defence, we have stepped up our ties with elected politicians across a broad field to raise both awareness of our profile, and to seek their support. We have met and spoken to over 50 MPs and members



PHOTO BY KEVIN GRIEVE ON UNSPLASH

“From within this picture of confusion has emerged an initiative that will have direct impact on our veterans”

of the House of Lords in the last year, bringing them up to speed with our community work and inviting them to get more closely involved with their constituency blind veterans.

In recent weeks we have briefed Tracey Crouch MP, the Minister for Loneliness



and Alok Sharma MP, the Secretary for State for International Development. Additionally, we have recently hosted visits by Michael Ellis MP, the Minister for Transport who was interested in our autonomous vehicle trial, and Gutto Bebb MP who was interested in our work in and experience of disability inclusion.

We've already hosted a visit to Brighton by Stephen Morgan (MP for Portsmouth South) and will be briefing Chris Bryant MP on our interests in brain injury. So while on one level Westminster is confused and turbulent, important work continues and we will continue to engage on behalf of Blind Veterans UK whatever the shape of the administration.

More shouting

Finally, a bit more shouting from the rooftops. Huge congratulations to our Standard Bearer Brian Eldridge, and his wife Margaret who have just won the Pétanque Home Nations Championship with the rest of their England team.

Brian has played in competitions all over Europe this year including Denmark and Poland and finds Pétanque to be an excellent sport to pursue, even though he has only four percent central vision remaining. Whether at work or at play, Brian continues to fly the flag for Blind Veterans UK. Congratulations again.

In Your Community

On the shelves

Over the last few months we've been working to improve the library facilities at our Brighton centre.

Staff and volunteers are now welcome to borrow from a broad collection of audio CD books, large print and regular



Caption: Come and enjoy the new facilities at the Brighton Centre

print books, music CDs and DVDs. We're delighted to say there has been a marked increase in use, which gives us a new problem - we need more items.

If you're a regular visitor to the centre, or if you're coming down to stay we would really appreciate it if you could consider donating any audio CD books or large print books you can spare. We are also getting a record player, so donations of records are also welcome.

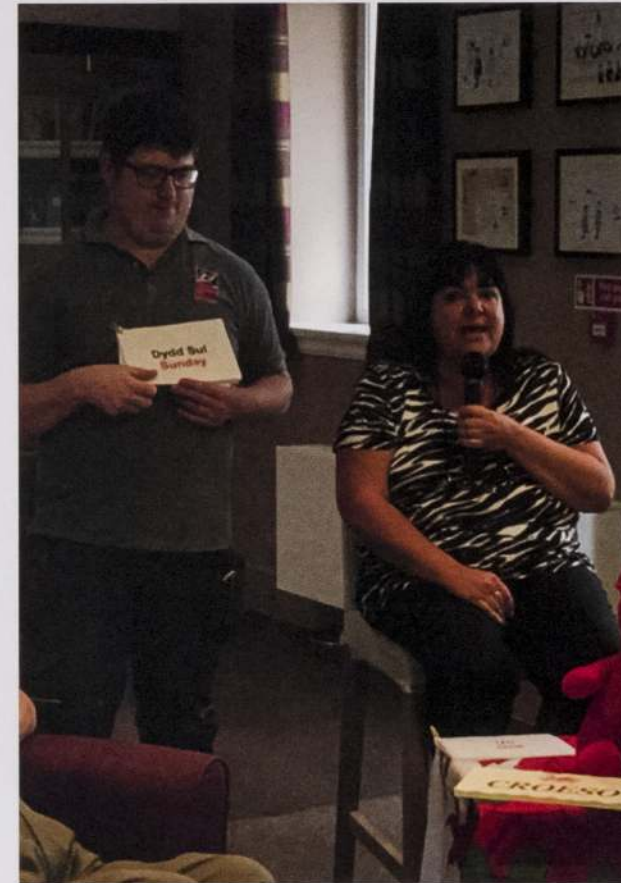
Claire and Jo, the Brighton Centre librarians are available on Thursdays, and are happy to help with any library related queries.

Different tongues

Our Llandudno Centre has started holding Welsh workshops for both Members and staff.

The sessions have covered such topics as counting to 10, the days of the week and greetings.

Rachel Roberts is hosting the sessions, assisted by Welsh-speaking Members. The workshops will be held every



Caption: Llandudno Centre Welsh workshops have begun

Wednesday at 3pm for anyone who wants to come along and learn some Cymraeg [Welsh].

Ceramics mural project at the Brighton Centre

Some of our veterans at the Brighton Centre have been working on a ceramics mural project with local artist Jack Durling.



Caption: The ceramics mural at the Brighton Centre

The theme of the project was 'nature' and everyone decorated a tile which were then all fitted together as an art piece, which is now displayed in the Inner Garden at the Brighton Centre.

The project was also part of Brighton University's 'Community Arts Showcase' and our Members had the opportunity to go and see their masterpiece on display!

Wet Wheels boat trip for our Members

On 6 August, 18 Members from Community 11 (Yorkshire) braved the changeable British summer weather and enjoyed a trip on the Wet Wheels boat in Whitby.

All were given the opportunity to drive the boat - which they thoroughly enjoyed. The boats were perfectly accommodating for our veterans, and everyone had a great time on board.

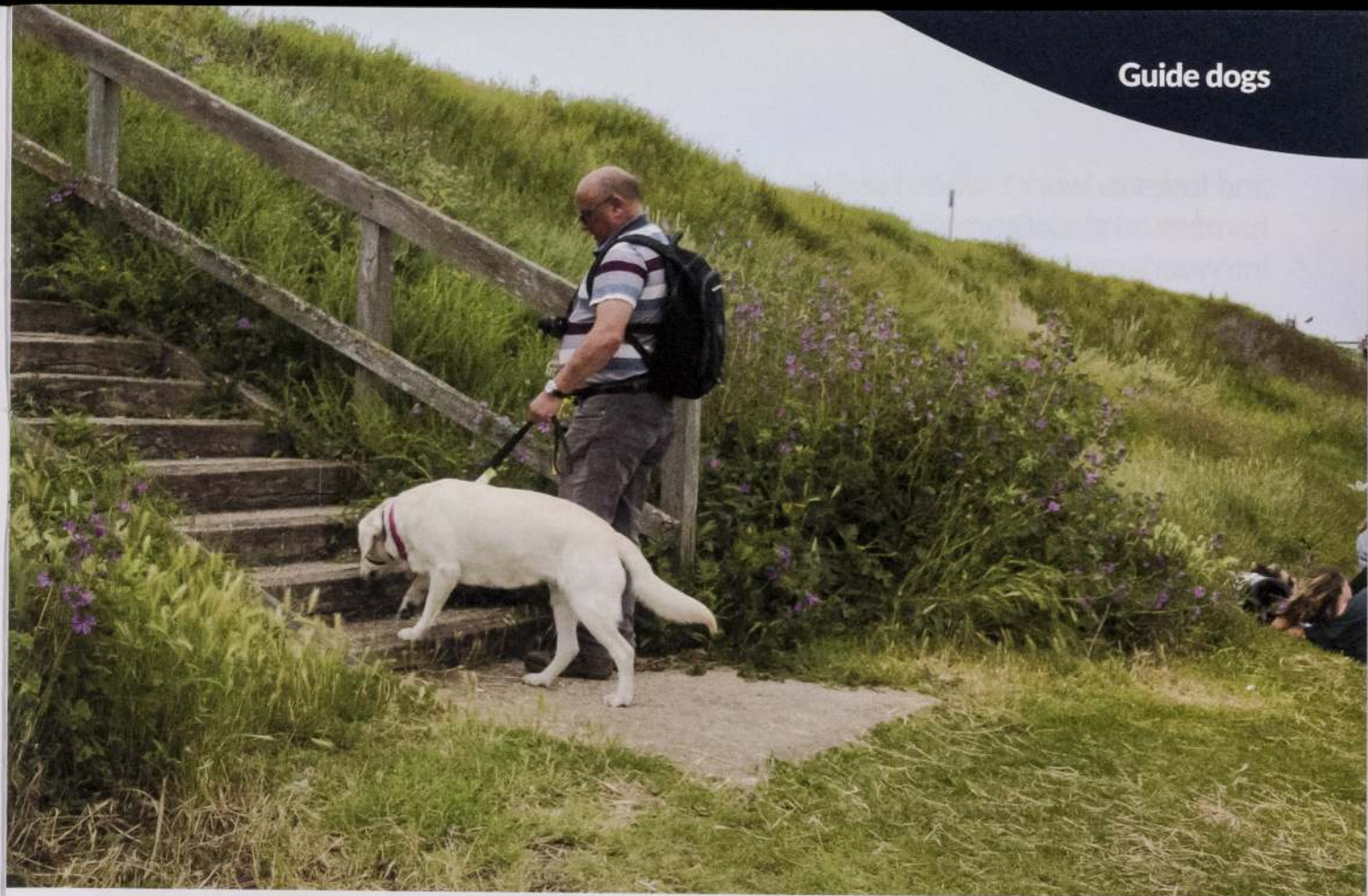


Caption: Gordon Johnstone from Wareham

Gordon's gardening project

One of our Members Gordon Johnstone, from Wareham in Dorset has been working on a gardening project in his local area.

He identified a piece of land that needed considerable work and gained permission from the town council to beautify the spot. Gardening has given Gordon the opportunity to feel like part of the community. He says: "I have no chance of ever being lonely or isolated".



Caption - Mark and Echo

Echo - and how she changed my life

Member **Mark Pile** talks about his guide dog Echo, and offers some useful tips

My guide dog Echo joined me in 2017, and after some intense training I brought her home, and my life changed again for the better.

We built up our activities slowly, but it

was great fun. Echo comes everywhere with me now - she is not only my guide she is my best friend and does more than just take me from a-to-b safely. She always has one eye on me even when she is not in her harness →

and loves to work - when I put her harness on she automatically goes into work mode and is so proud to be wearing it.

Having a guide dog has given me the confidence to go out - I have learned to relax more and I trust her to take care of me. As I am a photographer my attention has to be on my pictures, but she is so wonderful. I can find a place I would like to take a photograph of

and she will just sit until I have finished, without any complaints. I think she says to herself, 'Great he's got his camera out again, so we will be here for a while', and just waits patiently.

Echo and I have travelled to a lot more places than I would have done without her. These include London Underground and the centre of London. We even went to the Tower of London to photograph the One Team



Caption: Echo the Guide dog

“Having a guide dog has given me the confidence to go out - I have learned to relax more and I trust her to take care of me”

Awards last year and we travel on all modes of transport now.

Life saver

Echo has saved my life twice so far, as she stopped me getting knocked over on a crossing when cars failed to stop - my white cane just couldn't do that.

I have to say Echo works very hard and likes to play hard when she can. She also likes to meet new people if it's the right time for her to do so. Sometimes it isn't always possible for her to interact with other people, as she may be resting or just walking with me on her lead but not her harness.

Even when Echo is just on her lead, although she is not in full working mode she is still looking after me - for instance if we were to reach some steps she will show me where the bottom step is by putting her front paws on it, and if we are coming down she will just stop.

I really like to encourage people to ask before they touch a guide dog, as you

don't know what the owner wants the dog to be doing. I also encourage people not to call a guide dog at any time - I know some people think you are allowed to touch or call a guide dog if it does not have a harness on, but this is just not the case. I would always ask people to talk to the owner first, as they know what's best for the dog.

If you are thinking of applying for a guide dog I would always recommend it, but remember they are a lot of work. You have to provide them with exercise or free runs, along with feeding them, grooming them, playing with them, plus you will have to get used to dog hair, as all dogs lose hair at some time or another. They do change your life...

My tips:

Whether you are visiting one of our centres or are out in the community, please remember that guide dogs are working dogs, and must not be distracted when working. When a guide dog is working they will be wearing their harness. Do not pet them, try to get their attention or offer them food. Even if a guide dog is out of harness please always ask if it is ok to say hello.



Caption: A simple fish pie made from this recipe

Fish pie

Our chef **Penny Melville-Brown** shows you how to make a traditional English fish pie

A very traditional English dish that is wonderful on a cold winter evening at home. With some of the more luxurious types of fish, this is equally popular for parties and entertaining. Watch me put this heart-warming winter dish together

at bit.ly/2yXbM68

Method:

- Heat oven to 200°C fan, Gas 6.
- Cover potatoes with cold water, bring to the boil to cook until done.

My tips:

Smoked haddock is very traditional but it should be properly smoked not just dyed. Luxury versions can include prawns, pieces of monkfish and more.

A drop of cream can make the mashed potatoes wonderful (especially if you are not using the cheese).

The peas really add colour so sweetcorn could be added too.

Fork over the mashed potato topping to give ridges and then scatter flakes of butter to get a crisp and toasted top.

Drain and mash with the butter, milk plus salt and pepper to taste.

- While the potatoes are cooking, heat the remaining butter, flour and spring onions in another pan and cook for 1-2 minutes before whisking in the milk. Bring to the boil and simmer for a few minutes until thickened, stirring constantly to avoid lumps.
- Remove from the heat and add all the remaining ingredients except

Ingredients

Topping:

1kg Maris Piper potatoes, peeled and chopped in halves.

Dash of milk.

Knob of butter.

Handful of grated Cheddar cheese (optional).

Filling:

3 ounces butter.

3 ounces plain flour

4 spring onions finely sliced.

1 and a half pints milk.

300 - 400g fish (a mix of salmon, cod, smoked haddock and other fish will do), filleted, skinned and boned.

1 teaspoon of mustard.

Small bunch of chives, finely chopped.

Handful of frozen peas.

the topping. Stir gently to start firming the fish, de-frosting the peas. Place in oven proof dish.

- Top with mashed potato and Cheddar cheese
- Cook in oven for 20-25 minutes.

From the sky down

Chris Gilson interviews Member George Wood about his time flying the Westland Whirlwind in this first installment of a two-part feature about his life

At the age of 97, Father George Wood's eyes light up when he thinks back to his beloved Westland Whirlwind, the twin engine fighter-bomber that was, arguably, before its time. George is one



Caption: George on his recent trip

of very few remaining Whirlwind pilots alive, as the aircraft had a relatively short service history.

"You'll never find another fighter as complete," he says wistfully, "it was the best of all time."

For George, the story began in January 1922, when he was born in East Grinstead, West Sussex. Even by the tender age of 10, he was sporting a .410 gauge shotgun and helping out at his grandparents' farm. Saturday nights were often spent in the cinema, spending a well-earned florin and smoking noxious menthol cigarettes that had a tendency to crackle in the dark atmosphere.

A keen Scout, when war broke out on 3 September 1939, he took part in



George Wood

Caption: 263 Squadron pilots gather round a Whirlwind fighter

fire-watching – looking for incendiary bombs around the Wimbledon district, while hunting for shrapnel from the ack-ack (anti-aircraft gun) batteries stationed nearby. As he describes, a typical night would involve being woken at 2.00am, before handing over to the next shift of fire-watchers at 4.00am, at 6.00am he was up and cycling. He wryly noted, "I looked forward to being called up, so I could enjoy an uninterrupted night's sleep."

By 3 March 1941, he was old enough to join up and headed straight for the Royal Air Force at RAF Uxbridge.

"The main reason I joined up for air crew was that I avoided being called up for the army. I spent three days being thoroughly interviewed while they decided what you'd end up doing –

pilot, navigator or gunner."

The result was that he was chosen for pilot training.

A new era

Life in the RAF for George began with a spell at Regent's Park, before he was sent to the Initial Training Wing (ITW) at Stratford-on-Avon, where he received a lesson in life when dealing with his new commanding officer. George remembers him as a martinet, with one particular incident coming to mind.

A Percival Proctor (light communications) aircraft spun in and crashed adjacent to where George and the other recruits were 'square bashing' at the time. The young men were made to form a cordon around the →



Caption: A relaxing moment for 263 Squadron pilots at RAF Warmwell

wreck as it burned along with the three men inside.

The next day the CO told the assembled pilots he had done this so as to teach them a lesson, and even on church parade the next day he berated the victims – an incident that remains fresh in George's memory.

George's next stop was Perth, Scotland, where he joined 11 Elementary Flight Training School to gain his wings on the versatile de Havilland Tiger Moth bi-plane. However, progress was not smooth, with the weather playing a part.

"It took me three months to fly 12 hours because the weather was so bad. If you came down any lower [south in the country] where the weather was more amenable, you got shot down by a Messerschmitt. You had to keep out of the range, and Scotland was the only place."

On 23 September 1941 George flew solo – ironically enough two years later to the day he would be shot down over Morlaix, France – and his world changed.

"That first flight took me into a world I never believed existed, it was a dream world up there. When you go solo it's



Caption: Flight Sergeant George Wood

even more exaggerated because then you're king of the world. It's wonderful to be up there alone."

George wasn't to stay still in Perth, and by the end of 1941 set sail for America in the former French liner Pasteur to complete his flight training. This was under a lend-lease agreement that saw 300 pilots train with the US Army Air Corps (USAAC) as UK Aviation Cadets.

Time abroad

George made his way to first Halifax, then Moncton (in Canada), before heading to Montgomery, Alabama to begin his training. After Montgomery,

George moved to Americus, Georgia for 'primary training' on the hardy Stearman Kaydett bi-plane. He then went to Macon, Georgia to begin flying the Vultee BT-13 trainer, an aircraft he particularly enjoyed.

"It was wonderful. It had such a wide undercart, you could just drop it down from dizzy heights."

Next stop was Dothan, Alabama, for a move to the North American Harvard – George's first aircraft with a retractable undercarriage. Finally, in August 1942 he received his [metal] wings from a USAAC General. Upon his return to Canada, these were replaced by RAF cloth pilot's wings, which George dutifully sewed on soon afterwards.

Sadly George's journey back across the Atlantic proved to be very eventful when he was embarked upon the SS Awatea, a former New Zealand mail liner as part of troop convoy AT-20. The voyage had already started when the escorting destroyer USS Buck collided with the troopship causing the deaths of seven men. Luckily the Buck survived, despite heavy damage. Another destroyer, the USS Ingraham was not so lucky though, and coming up to investigate the collision, was herself struck and sunk by another vessel.





Caption: The Westland Whirlwind was arguably ahead of its time

The Awatea returned to Halifax under a shroud of fog, and George returned later than planned from New York on the nearly-new Cunarder Queen Elizabeth, along with 15,000 other men.

“We were sleeping head to toe in a cabin because we were sergeant pilots. We ate breakfast sometimes in the middle of the night, but most of all it was just so crowded.”

George’s journeys hadn’t stopped yet – after a brief spell in Bournemouth, he was posted to 5 Flying Training School flying the advanced Miles Master trainer at RAF Ternhill, before moving

to 61 Operational Training Unit at RAF Rednal, near Oswestry. This involved him flying Spitfires for a short while and, due to his obvious prowess on the type, he was initially posted to North Africa to join a Spitfire squadron.

Fate intervened at this point when the ship George was due to sail in developed engine faults. Instead, he handed his tropical kit back over at Liverpool and left to join 263 Squadron (code letters ‘HE’) at RAF Warmwell. It was a fateful move for the young pilot, as it was his first introduction to the Westland Whirlwind.

Designed by Edward ‘Teddy’ Petter,

who later went on to design the Folland Gnat and English Electric Canberra and Lightning, the twin-engined fighter-bomber was bedevilled by engine problems and being underpowered at height. Yet, it was also manoeuvrable, rugged and loved by the pilots who flew it.

“I thought the Whirlwind was a really beautiful aircraft, and was taken with it from start to finish. It handled like a Spitfire, and was very aerobatic.”

Unlike the Spitfire, taking off was a much easier affair,

“You didn’t need to weave from side to side when taxiing. You had perfect vision and could see everything in front of you.”

From the start George was thrust into the action beginning with an anti-shipping strike against minesweepers. The cost of the action was heavy, with one Whirlwind pilot and two Spitfire pilots from an escorting squadron being lost.

With four cannon in the nose, the Whirlwind packed an almighty punch, as well as being an effective bomber. George’s log book for the day, makes the point admirably, noting:

“Bags of flak – two minesweepers

“We ate breakfast sometimes in the middle of the night, but most of all it was just so crowded”

damaged, P/O Maxie Cotton DFC [Whirlwind pilot] killed – two Spits’ missing – 1hr 10mins duration.”

As George later noted, at most it was seven minutes sighting, engaging and getting away from the enemy. The rest of the time it was just ‘toing and froing’.

Time to recoup

At this point, 263 Squadron featured many new pilots with limited experience, flying what was probably the most advanced fighter in the air at that time. As a result, it was sent on a rest period to RAF Zeals in Wiltshire for some intensive training. At the same time, the CO changed, and it was taken over by Squadron Leader E R (‘Reggie’) Baker.

The rest period at Zeals was soon over, and by July 1943 it was back at Warmwell again. For the young Sergeant George Wood, the war was truly about to begin.

■ Find out more in Part Two next month.

An actor's tale

Esmond Knight was not only a decorated war hero, but a successful film actor and one of our Members. Rob Baker tells the story of a remarkable man.

The representation of blind people in plays and films by sighted actors has often been a controversial topic: can the sighted ever truly fully inhabit the character of a blind person, and ought a blind actor instead play the role? Sighted actors preparing for such parts have sometimes sought advice and assistance from organisations such as ours. In recent years members of Blind Veterans UK have provided help to Alec Newman, who took the lead role of a soldier blinded in Afghanistan in the film *Greyhawk*, and to Joe Kloska, who played a war-blinded officer of the First World War in a very successful revival of Somerset Maugham's *For Services Rendered* at Chichester Festival Theatre.

The career of Esmond Knight is especially striking in reversing this scenario: a visually impaired actor who had a long and successful career playing the roles of sighted characters.

Esmond was born in 1906 in East

Sheen and grew up in Putney. He was educated at Westminster School and, after having become interested in the theatre, decided upon an acting career and successfully auditioned at the Old Vic.

He went on to make a name for himself on stage, on radio and then in film, where a key meeting was with a young Michael Powell, who was assistant director of a film in which Esmond was acting. Powell later became famous and very successful through his film-making partnership with writer Emeric Pressburger. Powell later wrote of his first encounter with Esmond that he was 'a real find'. Esmond's early

“Esmond went on to feature in one of the most renowned naval incidents of the war, the battle with the Bismarck in the Denmark Strait”

career also included a role in an Alfred Hitchcock film, *Waltzes from Vienna*.

By the time of the Second World War, Esmond had become a well-established actor, and had worked again with Michael Powell. He had also got married, to the actress Frances Clare. The couple had a young daughter, Rosalind, who would herself go on to have a distinguished acting career. Esmond was briefly in the Local Defence Volunteers, later known as the Home Guard, in Kent, whilst staying with his uncle there, but not long afterward joined up as a Lieutenant

with the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve.

Esmond went on to feature in one of the most renowned naval incidents of the war, the battle with the *Bismarck* in the Denmark Strait. He was serving on the *Prince of Wales* and a shell from the *Bismarck* hit the bridge of the ship. Thirteen men were killed, and Esmond received facial wounds from the flying debris. The damage was such that he went on to lose his left eye entirely, and all his sight in the other.

Esmond went to hospital in



Caption: On stage at Church Stretton in 1941



Caption: In costume for Agincourt

Iceland, then to Mearns Kirk Hospital in Glasgow, and then in August 1941 came to us at our then wartime base of Church Stretton in Shropshire. He was taught Braille by Joan, Viscountess Buckmaster, an enthusiast for the arts who spent a lot of time aiding our newly blinded veterans; we have delightful pictures in our archives of her on tandems helping them ride around the area. Lady B, as she was affectionately known, also worked with Esmond on a play, in which both performed together with several other Members, and which was especially written for us by the then famous playwright and novelist Clemence



Caption: Being taught typing in 1941

Dane. Esmond later wrote about the experience of acting at Church Stretton that '...it was a heaven-sent opportunity just to test out if blind acting was actually a possibility.'

In March 1942 Esmond left Church Stretton. He worked during that year on an autobiography, *Seeking the Bubble*, which he dictated to a young lady who had recently completed her training at St James' Secretarial College, Annabella Cloudsley. Annabella would go on to serve with the RAF later in the war and after losing her sight much later in life would herself become a member of Blind Veterans UK.



Caption: Esmond painting in 1974

Public speaking

Esmond was also occupied with public speaking engagements and with some radio work but a significant development came when he was cast in a small role in a film, *The Silver Fleet*, which his old friend Michael Powell was producing. Esmond was keen that audiences who knew about his loss of sight had, as he put it, 'no feeling of false pity' for his character on account of it; on this occasion being cast as 'an extremely nasty Nazi Gauleiter' probably helped with that!

The success of *The Silver Fleet* and Esmond's convincing performance in

it as a sighted character helped ensure a happy return to his acting career. Another very positive development came following two operations on his surviving eye by a controversial but ground breaking surgeon, Vincent Nesfield, which restored some light perception.

Esmond's acting career soon gathered speed again and he appeared in several films now regarded as amongst the finest ever made in this country. He was cast in two roles, and also narrated the introductory sequence, in Powell and Pressburger's *A Canterbury Tale* and played Fluellen in Laurence Olivier's *Henry V*. He also returned to acting in the theatre. This period of his life was eventful for Esmond both professionally and personally, with a separation and then divorce from wife Frances. In 1946 he married another actress, Nora Swinburne.

Esmond remained actively engaged with the life of St Dunstan's, as Blind Veterans UK was then called. In 1944, whilst appearing in a play at the Blackpool Grand, he and co-star Evelyn Laye visited those of our blind veterans who were at our then centre in Blackpool, which was used by those who needed time for convalescence. A few years later he was one of a number of our blind veterans who spent a week's holiday together at Butlin's →



Caption: Esmond's paintings

at Clacton-on-Sea as special guests of Billy Butlin. Esmond also kindly helped and advised another of our members who would also go on to a successful acting career. Zofia Ksiazek was a young student in Warsaw before and during the war and had drama lessons there.

She went on to join the underground resistance and to be blinded during the Warsaw Uprising. Zofia came to us in 1946, was determined to become an actress despite her loss of sight, and gained a place at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London.

When interviewed for the Review in 1993 she remembered being in touch with Esmond and Nora, and Esmond coming to visit her and talk to her about the profession when she was at our Brighton centre. Zofia went on to return to Poland and to success in her career there as an actor, and also a poet.

Back at Church Stretton

In 1950 Esmond found himself back in Church Stretton! This was for a role in another Powell and Pressburger film, *Gone to Earth*, which was shot in the area. His daughter Rosalind also appeared, albeit only as an extra, in this film. They worked together properly a few years later, on Laurence Olivier's film of *Richard III*. In 1959 Esmond had the extraordinary experience of working on a film which re-enacted the events which led to his own loss of sight, *Sink the Bismarck!* He played not himself, but his commanding officer.

He said of this role that: 'Making the film was an incredible sensation. The reconstruction was so perfect that it took me right back to that day. It was uncanny to live again the last few moments of when I had sight – for the film covers the actual entry of the shell that blinded me.'

Find out more about Esmond's career in October's edition

Meeting up

Ailie MacDonald-Wilson presents more highlights from this year's Reunions

Bristol Reunion 2019

We had the pleasure of hosting a busy and emotional reunion in Bristol this summer at Ashton Gate, Bristol City FC's ground.

As well as veterans and their guests

enjoying the accompanying piano playing, we had the honour of witnessing the presentation of the Legion d'Honneur medal to Member Grahame Bridges. Honorary Consul Madame Josette Lebrat made the presentation, having given



Caption: Grahame Bridges and Mme Josette Lebrat

Grahame the title of Chevalier (or Knight). She said: "Mr Grahame Bridges, you are a living witness to a history you wrote on our soil, a history which shaped your identity, our identity, and those of Britain and France."

"It is through the courage of men and women like yourself, British veterans, that our parents across the Channel were able to regain their freedom."

A round of applause completed the ceremony and the reunion dinner.



Caption: Lloyd Tarr who turned 88 at our Exeter Reunion

Exeter Reunion 2019

With many new members from across Devon and southern parts of Somerset, the Exeter Reunion in July proved to be an occasion for making new friends as well as re-establishing old acquaintances.

Special mention was made of blind veteran Lloyd Tarr, who not only wore his latest medal from conflicts in South Korea with pride, but who also celebrated his 88th birthday that day.

Doreen, the wife of a Devon veteran, also delivered a range of knitted items. She has been busy making these for a number of years - she has lost count of how many scarves, blankets, hats and gloves she has made - and she donates them to Blind Veterans UK. She assured us that her dedication and support to fundraising for the charity will continue for many more years!

We also had the honour of displaying the latest piece of art in the Victory Over Blindness showcase. Veterans from the Devon community created a tactile showpiece, using the seven First World War soldiers from the life-size statue that stands proudly in Manchester, with a colourful sunrise behind them, signalling the hope of a new day.

Kent Reunion 2019

Members in the Kent area travelled from all ends of the county for the Kent Reunion in what was to be a truly celebratory mood for the day. Soon after arrival, guests got stuck in catching up with old friends and welcoming new recruits to the charity.

The Marriott Hotel & Country Club in Bearsted, Maidstone proved to be a very welcoming new venue despite an impromptu - and luckily false - fire alarm at the start of the day, which did nothing to dampen spirits for our Members and staff!

Very well received were the new Blind Veterans UK badges featuring the Victory Over Blindness statue, being a great success among Members with many of them choosing to sport the tasteful new addition to our memorabilia. In fact, noted by many of the staff were the high proportion of very snappy dressers in the group, always a pleasure to see.

Thanks to Jackie Harbor, who stepped in after our Chairman, Paul Luker was unable to make the event.



Caption: Bill Stammers and Alfred Llewelyn



Caption: John (centre) at our Llandudno Centre

For the children

Member John Bennett has written a new book for children. Here he tells **Lynette Denzey** about his inspiration

Member John Bennett from Shrewsbury has rediscovered his confidence and published a children's book.

John, 59 and ex-Army, joined the charity in 2017 having lost his sight

due to Ptosis and Myasthenia Gravis, causing paralysis of his eye lids.

He recalled his father telling him and his brother and sister stories he made up about an imaginary creature called Mr Pinklenose - stories he then told his

grandchildren. There were no pictures or drawings of this magical man: they all used their imaginations.

He decided he wanted to share the stories with others and - not least - leave his children and grandchildren with something tangible to remember him by. He came up with the idea of putting the Mr Pinklenose tales into a book.

We arranged for him to attend an X-Forces week on starting up a business - a course John found extremely useful. It covered all aspects, including assessing whether the proposed business was viable, how to go about making business plans and preparing budgets. They thought his book sounded like a good business proposition.

The result is John's recently published first book, *The Amazing Mr Pinklenose* (suitable for children ages 2-7) which can be ordered online www.pinklenose.com, and he is donating part of the proceeds of sale of each book to the charity.

Extremely depressed

John joined the Royal Corps of Signals in 1976, and trained as an interceptor operator serving in Germany, Northern Ireland and the Falklands. On leaving the Army in 1986, he went to work for

the Civil Service at GCHQ. His last job was with British Telecom, but due to his sight loss he lost his job, severely knocking his confidence, and he became extremely depressed.

John and his wife had been to an introduction week at our Llandudno centre. They both enjoyed the week, making new friends and trying out various activities. Before losing his sight, John had enjoyed playing golf, something he thought he would never be able to do again, but we showed him that it was possible, was something he could still do, and he has since returned to Llandudno to take part in golf weeks there.

With our support John has regained his confidence and independence with long cane training, and with equipment we have provided including magnifiers. He says the introduction week was life changing, he began looking forward, planning what to do next with his life. He said, "The charity got me to believe I can do things I never thought I would be able to do again". His wife, Liz, said that the introduction week, and the charity's support, had made a huge difference to them as a couple, "and all for the good!"

John has shown that determination and drive, with a little help from us, can make what was a dream become reality.

Raising Dust in the Desert

Alan Johnson, one of our Members from Cockermouth in Cumbria, has written *Raising Dust in the Desert*, which documents his time as a despatch rider. **Laura Weir** tells more

Alan Johnson joined the Royal Signals at just 19, and served in the Egyptian desert for five years before coming back to the UK for a further two. He was discharged in 1947 and left with so many stories and experiences that he wanted to share. Alan explains: "There is a lot [to be] said so be prepared to spend a bit of time to read it all".

As a despatch rider, Alan was required to deliver urgent orders and messages between headquarters and military units on a motorcycle. He was a keen motorcyclist and first started riding in 1936. It is a sport which he is still very enthusiastic about today, despite being no longer able to ride himself. Alan says: "I was riding my bike until I was 90 and then I had my stroke and was put in a ward in Whitehaven for

a year. As a result, I've not been able to do the one thing I love – riding my motorcycle".

No stranger to pen and paper

Prior to writing his book, Alan was no stranger to putting his pen to paper, as he began a new career in journalism when he started writing historical and technical articles for the national motorcycle press at the grand age of 80. He says: "I have written about 8-10 articles which I have kept copies of".

Alan joined Blind Veterans UK in 2018, and for someone who had been so active, his stroke and its implications made him feel at a loss. Alan explains: "I was not doing very much and was sitting there thinking 'what next?'

I then received a phone call from Ben Hood who introduced me to the charity – he was terrific".

Since becoming a Member, Alan has regained a lot of self-confidence and brings all his ideas together into this book. As he says: "I enjoy Blind Veterans UK's proactive attitude and thanks to them, I feel like myself again".

He will be celebrating his 100th birthday next year, which he hopes to spend with his family. He explains: "I have big plans for my centenary. I have

a large, extended family and I want to do something special to mark it. I hope that whatever I decide to do, I make my family proud".

"As a despatch rider, Alan was required to deliver urgent orders and messages between headquarters and military units on a motorcycle"



Caption: Alan Johnson turning 99 at our Llandudno Centre



Family News

Birthdays

Stella Savage who celebrates her 100th birthday on 4th September.

Elizabeth Hardinge who celebrates her 101st birthday on 10th September.

Frank Harrison who celebrates his 100th birthday on 4th September.

Sidney Whitehouse who celebrates his 100th birthday on 8th September.

Ernest Foard who celebrates his 104th birthday on 5th September.

William Greaves who celebrates his 100th birthday on 8th September.

Marjorie Theobald who celebrates her 101st birthday on 5th September.

Condolences

It is with deep regret that we record the deaths of the following and we offer our heartfelt condolences to their widows, widowers, families and friends.

Hilda May Barbara Bailey who died on 1st August 2019. She was the wife of George Bailey.

Christina Brooks who died on 1st August 2019. She was the wife of Bernard Brooks.

Doreen Clegg who died on 23rd July 2019. She was the wife of Richard Clegg.

Rose Hedworth who died on 24th July 2019. She was the partner of Leonard Pell.

Vida Adaline Allan Hendry who died on 1st June 2019. She was the wife of Donald Hendry.

Yvonne James who died on 1st July 2019. She was the wife of the late John James.

Jessie Catherine Macleod who died on 13th June 2019. She was the wife of Donald Macleod.

Pearl Mills who died on 10th July 2019. She was the wife of the late Colin Mills.

Denis Temple Redshaw who died on 18th July 2019. He was the husband of Marie Redshaw.

Zoe Leighton Stewart who died on 9th August 2019. She was the wife of the late Alan Stewart.

Beryl Whiteway who died on 1st August 2019. She was the wife of the late Lionel Turnbull Whiteway.



ANDREW RIDLEY / UNSPLASH



In memory

It is with deep regret that we record the deaths of the following members and we offer our heartfelt condolences to their widows, widowers, families and friends

Gordon Bailey of Spalding, Lincolnshire died on 2 August 2019 aged 85. He served as a Lance Corporal in the 9th Queen's Royal Lancers.

Hazel Baxter of Southsea, Hampshire died on 17 August 2019 aged 93. She served in the Royal Navy as a Leading Wren in the Women's Royal Naval Service.

Maurice Bennett of Wolverhampton, West Midlands died on 2 August 2019 aged 92. He served in the Royal Air Force as a Senior Airman at RAF Cardington.

Norman Bennett of Wigan, Lancashire died on 16 August 2019 aged 80. He served as a Lance Corporal in the Royal Army Medical Corps.

Walter Benning of Ramsgate, Kent died on 17 July 2019 aged 98. He served in the Royal Air Force as a Leading Aircraftsman 1st Class Armourer.

James Billingham of Arundel, West Sussex died on 25 July 2019 aged 85. He served in the Royal Marines as a Marine 1st Class.

Edwin Blackburn of Birmingham, West Midlands died on 16 August 2019 aged 89. He served as a Lance Corporal in the Royal Army Service Corps.

Mary Bradshaw of Swadlincote, Derbyshire died on 30 July 2019 aged 93. She served as a Private in the Auxiliary Territorial Service.

Barry Brookefield of Broadway Worcestershire died on 1 August 2019 aged 82. He served in the Royal Air Force Police as a Corporal.

Alan Brown of Bristol died on 24 July 2019 aged 82. He served in the Royal Air Force as an Aircraftsman.

Roy Charlton of Nottingham, Nottinghamshire died on 14 August 2019 aged 84. He served as a Private in the Royal Army Service Corps.

Alastair Dewar of High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire died on 17 July 2019 aged 96. He served in the Royal Navy as an Able Seaman.

Andrew Dougan of Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire died on 5 July 2019 aged 84. He served as a Piper in the Scots Guards.

Alexander Duncan of Seaford, East Sussex died on 21 July 2019 aged 92. He served as a Private in the General Service Corps.

Jeanne Edney of Lisburn, County Antrim died on 1 August 2019 aged 95. She served in the Royal Navy as a Wren (HSR).

Arthur Flint of Warminster, Wiltshire died on 1 July 2019 aged 91. He served as a Corporal in the General Service Corps.

Marguerite Ford of Wirral, Merseyside died on 23 July 2019 aged 96. She served in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force as a Corporal.

Kathleen Fraser of Barnard Castle, County Durham died on 0 August 2019 aged 94. She served in the Royal Navy as a Wren.

John Gallagher of Cannock, Staffordshire died on 19 August 2019 aged 86. He served as a Private in the Royal Army Ordnance Corps.

Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy of Aldeburgh, Suffolk died on 16 July 2019 aged 86. He served as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Royal Scots Fusiliers.

Jack Graham of Southampton, Hampshire died on 1 August 2019 aged 94. He served in the Royal Air Force as Leading Aircraftsman.

John Graham of Hyde, Cheshire died on 8 August 2019 aged 71. He served as a Lance Corporal in the King's Regiment.

Sydney Gregory of Rossendale, Lancashire died on 1 July 2019 aged 92. He served as a Corporal in the General Service Corps.



Mervyn Griffiths of Wirral, Merseyside died on 14 August 2019 aged 70. He served in the Royal Air Force as an Aircraftsman.

Brian Guy of Swanage, Dorset died on 29 July 2019 aged 94. He served as a Sapper in the General Service Corps.

Keith Haddock of Crowborough, East Sussex died on 30 July 2019 aged 81. He served in the Royal Air Force as a Senior Aircraftsman.

Michael Hardman of Norwich died on 12 July 2019 aged 82. He served in the Royal Air Force as a Senior Aircraftsman.

Raymond Haywood of Coventry died on 17 July 2019 aged 87. He served in the Royal Air Force as a Senior Aircraftsman.

Norman Hirst of Dewsbury, West Yorkshire died on 10 June 2019 aged 91. He served as a Private in the Royal Army Ordnance Corps.

Stephen Hockley of Ashton-under-Lyne, Lancashire died on 11 July 2019 aged 70. He served as a Gunner in the Royal Artillery.

William Hughes of Criccieth, Gwynedd died on 19 July 2019 aged 93. He served as a Private in the Royal Welch Fusiliers.

Ernest Johnson of Birmingham died on 14 August 2019 aged 88. He served as a Driver in the Royal Army Service Corps.

David Jordan of Hindhead, Surrey died on 1 June 2019 aged 82. He served in the Royal Air Force as a Leading Aircraftsman.

Ronald Lobb of Felixstowe, Suffolk died on 21 July 2019 aged 89. He served in the Royal Air Force as a Senior Aircraftsman.

Peter Lowen of Clevedon, North Somerset died on 1 July 2019 aged 101. He served in the Royal Air Force as a Warrant Officer.

Ernest Lowing of Longfield, Kent died on 15 July 2019 aged 91. He served in the Army.

Derek Marland of South Queensferry, West Lothian died on 22 July 2019 aged 88. He served in the Royal Navy as an Able Seaman.

Leonard Mills of Hertford died on 1 July 2019 aged 94. He served in the Royal Air Force as an Air Mechanic.

Margery Morris-Richardson of Salisbury died on 17 August 2019 aged 104. She served as a Corporal in the Auxiliary Territorial Service.

John Murphy of Peacehaven, East Sussex died on 25 July 2019 aged 92. He served in the Royal Air Force as a Corporal.

Maurice Nicholson of Sheringham, Norfolk died on 31 July 2019 aged 93. He served in the Army.

Geoffrey Poulter of Elland, West Yorkshire died on 22 June 2019 aged 98. He served in the Royal Air Force as a Flight Sergeant.

Kenneth Price of Bampton, Oxfordshire died on 14 August 2019 aged 93. He served in the Royal Air Force as an Aircraftsman.

Betty Punnett of Henfield, West Sussex died on 13 July 2019 aged 91. She served in the Royal Air Force as an Aircraftswoman.

George Purvis of Doncaster, South Yorkshire died on 16 August 2019 aged 95. He served as a Signalman in the General Service Corps. →

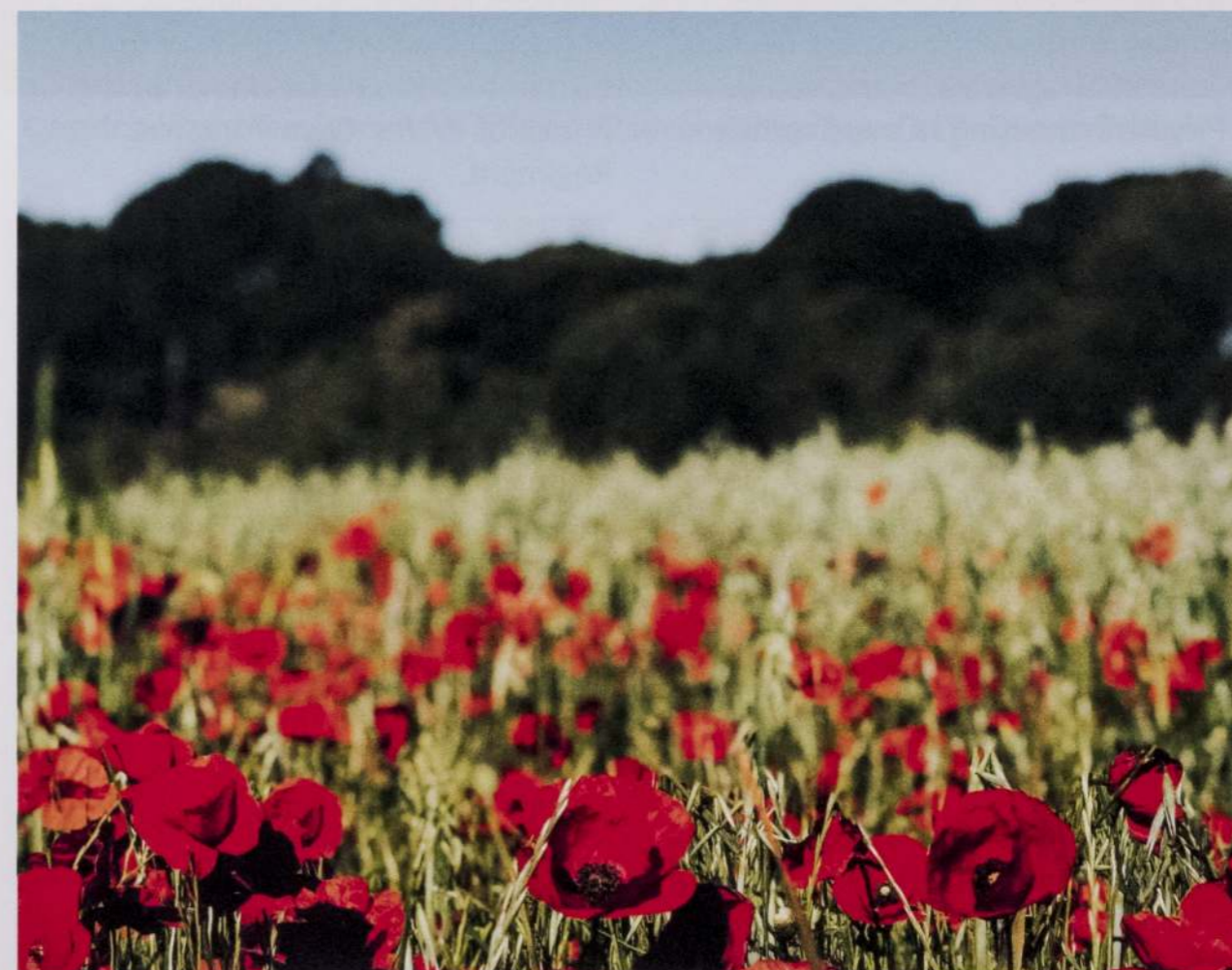


PHOTO BY BEASTY / UNSPLASH

Dargan Sidgwick of Southminster, Essex died on 30 July 2019 aged 100. He served as a Corporal in the Royal Army Ordnance Corps.

Alan Smith of Balerno, Midlothian died on 21 July 2019 aged 91. He served as a Lance Corporal in the General Service Corps.

Frederick Smith of Spalding, Lincolnshire died on 27 July 2019 aged 94. He served as a Lance Corporal in the General Service Corps.

Thomas Smitton of Liverpool died on 1 June 2019 aged 92. He served as a Private in the King's Own Scottish Borderers.

Roy Spencer of Ellesmere Port died on 1 August 2019 aged 86. He served as a signalman in the Royal Signals.

Kenneth Stanley of Birmingham died on 7 August 2019 aged 79. He served in the Royal Navy as a Leading Electrical Mechanic.

Alan Stewart of Chichester, West Sussex died on 7 August 2019 aged 99. He served as an Acting Major in the Royal Artillery.

Donald Stubbing of Waterlooville, Hampshire died on 17 August 2019 aged 95. He served in the Royal Navy as a Shipwright.

David Swales of Stevenage, Hertfordshire died on 12 August 2019 aged 88. He served in the Royal Air Force as a Corporal.

Derek Swatten of Durham died on 9 June 2019 aged 74. He served as a Royal Navy Chief Yeoman.

Joan Tucker of London died on 1 August 2019 aged 95. She served in the Royal Air Force as a Leading Aircraftwoman.

Michael Turner of Sheffield, South Yorkshire died on 9 July 2019 aged 81. He served as a Drummer in the Prince of Wales' Own Yorkshire Regiment.

John van Hegan of Walton-on-Thames, Surrey died on 10 July 2019 aged 97. He served in the Royal Navy as an Electrical Mechanic 4th Class.

John Wallace of Norwich died on 29 July 2019 aged 94. He served as a Corporal in the General Service Corps.



Caption: Our Members with a Blind Veterans UK plaque at Pegasus Bridge

Hallowed ground

We recently sent some of our veterans to France, to revisit the Normandy battlefields. Our chaplain, **Clare Callanan** was there

Imagine the scene... a beach in Normandy on 6 June, 1944. A beach upon which some of our Members landed. A beach that 75 years ago was the site of massacre, noise, blood and

horror. However do we honour and commemorate that?

Monday, 15 July this year had seen a coach loaded with veterans, staff, →

bottles of water, chocolate bars and multi packs of crisps leave Brighton, cross the Channel underwater and arrive tired but excited in Caen for our first night. Tuesday and Wednesday were going to be busy visiting beaches, cemeteries and museums - all in the expert care of Brian the guide and Dave our driver. Team Blind Veterans UK were ready to go.

At Bayeux Cemetery, our first stop (the largest Second World War cemetery of Commonwealth soldiers in France) the crimson red roses nestled against the gleaming headstones. The cemetery contains 4,648 burials, mostly from

the invasion of Normandy. The Bayeux Memorial, commemorates more than 1,800 casualties with no known grave. There are also 466 graves of German soldiers.

We stood at the small memorial stone for our Act of Remembrance, the words 'Their Names Liveth for Evermore' starkly chiselled for us to reflect on the connection we were making with those names and humanity by honouring them. The bugle called crisply and cleanly in the fresh early morning sunlight as a small boy, standing looking on with his father translating, took the cross we offered him to a grave.



Caption: Our members visit a Douglas C-47 Skytrain at Merville

We were there to know and pray that we "may live as those who are not their own but who are bought with a price." The muted silence that is unique to such places as this settled us as we prepared to learn more of the events of June 1944.

Shifting waves

The stories of our veterans began to surface. Eddie Gaines had spent many weeks training and living on the landing craft in Poole Harbour that he was later to use ferrying soldiers from ship to shore in the early hours of 6 June 1944. He recalled the horror of letting the ramp down and not

knowing whether the bodies in the shifting waves underneath were alive or dead. Just along from the Bedford Boys Monument on Omaha Beach, we stopped at a small memorial set back off the road. It marks the site of the first US war cemetery in France established directly after the landing. For Eddie this was a significant spot and he laid a wreath.

At Utah Museum, the veterans were welcomed and presented with a medal of thanks which they proudly wore the rest of the day. More facts and stories accumulated and this time our Act of Remembrance was at the site of →



Caption: Eddie Gaines



Caption: Ron Cross at the Juno Centre

a landing craft set on the edge of the dunes outside the Museum. The bugle called in the heat of the sand, people gathered to observe with us and a wreath was laid.

The bustling weekly market in the town square of Sainte Mere Eglise welcomed us later in the afternoon. Here we recalled the significance of the village when in the early morning of 6 June, mixed units of US Airborne divisions occupied the town, giving it the claim to be one of the first towns liberated in the invasion. There were heavy casualties for the paratroopers, and the light from burning buildings meant they were easy targets. One incident involved a soldier whose parachute caught on the spire of the church and could only hang there for two hours, pretending to be dead before being taken prisoner. The incident was portrayed in the movie *The Longest Day*.

The interactive museum was detailed and vivid, with realistic sound and light effects of the paratroopers. For Bob Irons, one of our Royal Air Force veterans, this simulation was very moving as he recalled similar events with the British paratroopers.

A welcome ice cream, seated in the square, was a refreshing end to a long day as we prepared to return to

our hotel that Tuesday. A long day, but we knew that we had honoured the injunction, "At the going down of the sun and in the morning we will remember them."

Four chaplains

Ranville Cemetery is the third largest Second World War Commonwealth cemetery in Normandy. It has been referred to as the Airborne Cemetery, since the majority of the British 6th Airborne Division (655) rests here. Up to 82 regiments and corps from the British Army are represented, with 203 men killed on 6 June, 1944 alone.

Included here are four chaplains; Revd George Kay (Chaplain to the Forces) CF was killed on 7 June, 1944. Two notes into the Last Post played by Member Kev Alderton - and with heads bowed - an echo came from the surrounding trees and building.

The notes seemed to come back to us as if to make quite sure that we knew the importance of what we were hearing and doing. Our prayer here was one of thanks for the privilege of remembering, "Those on whose shoulders we stand, whose lives were given in time of war and conflict".

The battle of Merville gun battery was part of Operation Tonga. When the 9th Parachute Battalion arrived

over Normandy, its descent was dispersed over a large area - so instead of over 600 men, only 150 with no heavy weapons or equipment arrived. Regardless, they pressed home their attack and succeeded in capturing the battery, with the surviving 75 men trying to disable the guns. The museum here has a Douglas C-47 (Skytrain) aircraft, which was made available for us to climb into if they wished. The full impact of the small space, heat, noise, darkness and sense of fear for those who had been on board was evident.

A brief stop at the memorial of Piper Bill Millin on Sword beach reminded us

that the pipes, drums and bugles are ancient instruments of war and calls to arms. Millin, the only man during the landing who wore a kilt - it was the same Cameron tartan kilt his father had worn in Flanders during the First World War - was armed only with his pipes and the sgian-dubh, or "black knife", sheathed inside his kilt-hose on the right side. We stood and honoured a man of bravery and skill with our own bugle call; albeit with the bugler not being in a kilt.

A rousing welcome

The Juno Beach Centre is Canada's Second World War museum and



Caption: Member Eddie Gaines lays a wreath at the Utah beach museum

cultural centre located in Normandy. It pays homage to the 45,000 Canadians who lost their lives during the war, of which 5,500 were killed during the Battle of Normandy and 359 on D-Day.

As our veterans and staff approached and walked in to the centre, the public lined up and clapped. A visiting school were playing a concert and adapted to us leading an Act of Remembrance at the memorial outside. Their pure young voices wrapped around us as we assembled, and after the wreath was laid by Member Richard Jones, they sung again as we slowly and quietly returned to the bus.

Member Ron Cook talked us through his experiences as a tank soldier, landing on the beaches. He laid a wreath of his own at a recovered tank that stands alone in the dunes a few metres along from the Juno Centre. I was reminded of Rev. Skinner, a chaplain, who took it upon himself to recover many bodies from tanks during this invasion in order that the soldiers

“This is it. Running for beach by 0700. Under fire by 0710. Beached 0725. Man either side of me wounded”

themselves did not have to see their comrades' remains inside.

Skinner wrote in his diary on 6 August: Squadron Leader offered to lend me some men to help. Refused. Less men who live and fight in tanks have to do with this side of things the better. My job. This was more than normally sick making. Really ill - vomiting.

"Up 0500 hours: cold, wet, sea rough. This is it. Running for beach by 0700. Under fire by 0710. Beached 0725. Man either side of me wounded. One lost leg. I was blown backwards onto Bren Carrier but OK."

Finally to Pegasus Bridge museum, built alongside the canal, with our final act of remembrance at the side of the original bridge. Final group photographs taken, prayers said, thoughts treasured, reflections and memories stored. Our final Reveille, the sense of a new day dawning.

Team Blind Veterans UK was ready to return. It was a tired group that Thursday, crossing underneath the channel of water that had been crossed 75 years previously. We were not so loaded with water, chocolates or crisps this time. But we did return full of sun, stories and a sense of honouring and being honoured.

Unpacking those burdens

Our chaplain, **Clare Callanan** looks at how the circles in our lives shape our lives on a day-to-day basis

The image of a pebble falling into a still pool and creating circular ripples radiating out from that point is a beautiful and often calming one. Out of interest, from a physics perspective, I researched the reasons for this phenomenon; I can assure you that I am now far from calm. In fact I wished I had not started it. But I digress - back to the ripples and circles!

Imagine the centre of that circle. I feel that we can see something in our own lives that works in a similar way. We have several circles around ours; possibly a partner, then family, then friends and social circle, then the wider world.

For most of us, every day, we come into contact with real live human beings from one or more of those circles. Maybe at work, or out shopping, at the doctors', or having visitors. Some of them may be complete strangers →



Caption: Clare Callanan

but our world is full of people with whom we interact at some time. Those interactions, small or large, brief or long term, can be life affirming or deeply unpleasant. So maybe we need some rules to live by, and we all recognise that need surely? Sometimes though it seems a reminder is always useful.

As an Army chaplain, part of my remit was to teach and demonstrate the Values of the British Army. These are Courage (both moral and physical), Discipline, Respect for Others, Integrity, Loyalty and Selfless Commitment. Time and again, it seemed to me that however much we discussed and found examples of those values, we kept coming back to Respect for Others as one that seemed to underpin so much of our lives in so many ways.

It was very important to show soldiers that though I had no doubt of them demonstrating courage and discipline and the other values whilst in the course of their duties (and indeed I saw that daily when I was in

“As an Army chaplain, part of my remit was to teach and demonstrate the Values of the British Army”

Afghanistan), but also that these were life values. Vital to all of us, at all times, throughout all of our lives.

Embedded value

I strongly believe that we are to treat everyone with respect or what's it all about? It is an act of will, a decision to make to do that. Every world faith has such a value embedded in its true teachings. Whilst training for ministry I was encouraged (and certainly continue to be challenged!) to 'see Christ in others'. Maya Angelou once said 'If we lose love and self-respect for each other, this is how we finally die.'

It is easy to see our own 'circle', family, group, or any level of community as the right one, the important one. But every community sees itself as that. How much more to draw that circle to include more rather than to exclude even one. And it is very easy to exclude for whatever reason. We assume an "us" and "them" situation, when really we are all "them" and we are all "us".

And those ripples just keep on gently radiating whether I know the sine equation or not.

Incidentally, for some interesting night time reading you could try this website...

bit.ly/2ZpoF8X

Contact telephone numbers

Harcourt Street 020 7723 5021.

The Brighton Centre 01273 307 811.

The Llandudno Centre 01492 868 700.

The Booking Office for the Brighton centre: To book accommodation at the Brighton centre telephone **01273 391 500**. If you have care needs please first contact your Team Leader or Community Support Worker (CSW).

The Booking Office for the Llandudno centre: To book accommodation at the Llandudno centre please telephone **01492 868 700** for bookings and ask for the Booking office. If you have care needs please first contact your Team Leader or CSW.



Member Support Hub: 01273 391 447 for ROVI and IT enquiries.

New members: If you know someone who could be eligible to join Blind Veterans UK, they can phone our Membership Department on freephone **0800 389 7979**.

Review Editor: You can telephone Chris Gilson, on **020 7616 8367**, email at revieweditor@blindveterans.org.uk or write to him at **Review Editor, Blind Veterans UK, 12 - 14 Harcourt Street, London W1H 4HD**.

We value your feedback and use it to improve and develop the services we provide. If you would like to make a complement or a complaint then please contact us. Email feedback@blindveterans.org.uk, write to us at Blind Veterans UK, 12-14 Harcourt Street, London, W1H 4HD, call **0207 7235 021** or ask a member of staff to help.

A different format?

If you would like your copy of Review in a different format, then please contact your Community Support Worker, or ROVI for more information.



£4.99
for a pack
of 10 cards

Would you like to order some Blind Veterans UK Christmas cards?

We are delighted to announce that we will be selling Christmas cards again this year.

The cards depict the charity's Victory Over Blindness sculpture at Manchester Piccadilly Station.

You can pick up these cards at the centres or you can order them by calling 0300 111 22 33.

The cards come in packs of 10 and we are asking for a suggested donation of £4.99 for each pack, plus P&P.



Rebuilding
lives after
sight loss



Your charity needs you



Rebuilding
lives after
sight loss

Dear Friends

Blind Veterans UK is a charity in need of funds. Many people are unaware, but we receive no government funding for our work and we need your support in generating much needed income to support our beneficiaries.

There are more than 50,000 blind veterans in the UK, most are over 75 years old. At the moment we can only support one in ten of them.

For every £1 raised, 83p goes directly towards rebuilding the lives of blind veterans. To continue to provide life-long support to visually impaired ex-service men and women, we need your support, today.

If you are not able to participate yourself, how about sharing the information below through liking a social media post or getting your local book club or church group to put on a bingo or quiz night.

We need you to spread the word and encourage people to fundraise for us.






Major General (Rtd) Nick Caplin CB
Chief Executive
Blind Veterans UK

 blindveterans.org.uk/fundraise



For every £1 raised,
83p goes directly
towards rebuilding the
lives of blind veterans.



 @blindveteransuk
 @blindveterans
 @blind.veterans




How you can help

National and local fundraising events


We buy places at a number of national and regional events so that supporters can fundraise for us whilst doing something they enjoy. Details of the events can be found at blindveterans.org.uk/myfundraising

We're asking for your help to spread the word and encourage your friends and family to join in. We are always looking for people to make a difference by running, cycling, swimming, trekking, abseiling and everything in between. If you are unable to participate yourself why not ask your friends to share information at their workplace or let your local running club or gym know about our challenge events?

Alternatively set yourself your own challenge and we will be there to support and cheer you on every step of the way.


 blindveterans.org.uk/myfundraising

Fundraising social events

 blindveterans.org.uk/social-events

If adrenaline events aren't your thing why not choose one of our many social events including; bingo, brew up, a quiz night and many more. Organise your own March for Veterans, join in one of our 14 planned walks or take part virtually. Or why not take on the Virtual Land's End to John o' Groats team challenge. It doesn't matter what you do - just Do It for Veterans!

Regular giving

 blindveterans.org.uk/donate

You can set up a regular gift to the charity. This is done through a recurring monthly direct debit. These vital regular gifts give the charity security to make sure we can fulfil our promise to help blind veterans for life.

Weekly Lottery


 blindveterans.org.uk/weeklylottery

Enter our lottery and every week you'll have the chance to win one of 34 prizes, including a jackpot of £500. The cost is only £1 per week for one chance every Friday or £2 per week for two chances. This is only £4.34 or £8.67 per month by direct debit. Players can buy a maximum of 5 tickets per month. Weekly Lottery players also receive automatic entry into our quarterly superdraws, where you could win up to £15,000 plus other prizes.

Who cannot take part in the Draw?

All Blind Veterans UK staff, volunteers and members are permitted to play the raffle/lottery, except those working within the engagement directory, finance and SLT, their immediate family and those living with them.

Raffle

 blindveterans.org.uk/superdraw

Players have the chance to win up to £15,000 plus 33 smaller prizes every three months.

The cost is £1 per ticket, up to a maximum of 50. Tickets can be bought online. If you need paper tickets, or wish to sell tickets on, these can be requested, however this will incur a cost to the charity.

Amazon Smile

 smile.amazon.co.uk

Did you know that when you shop on Amazon they'll donate 0.5% back to Blind Veterans UK?

It's easy and all you have to do is:

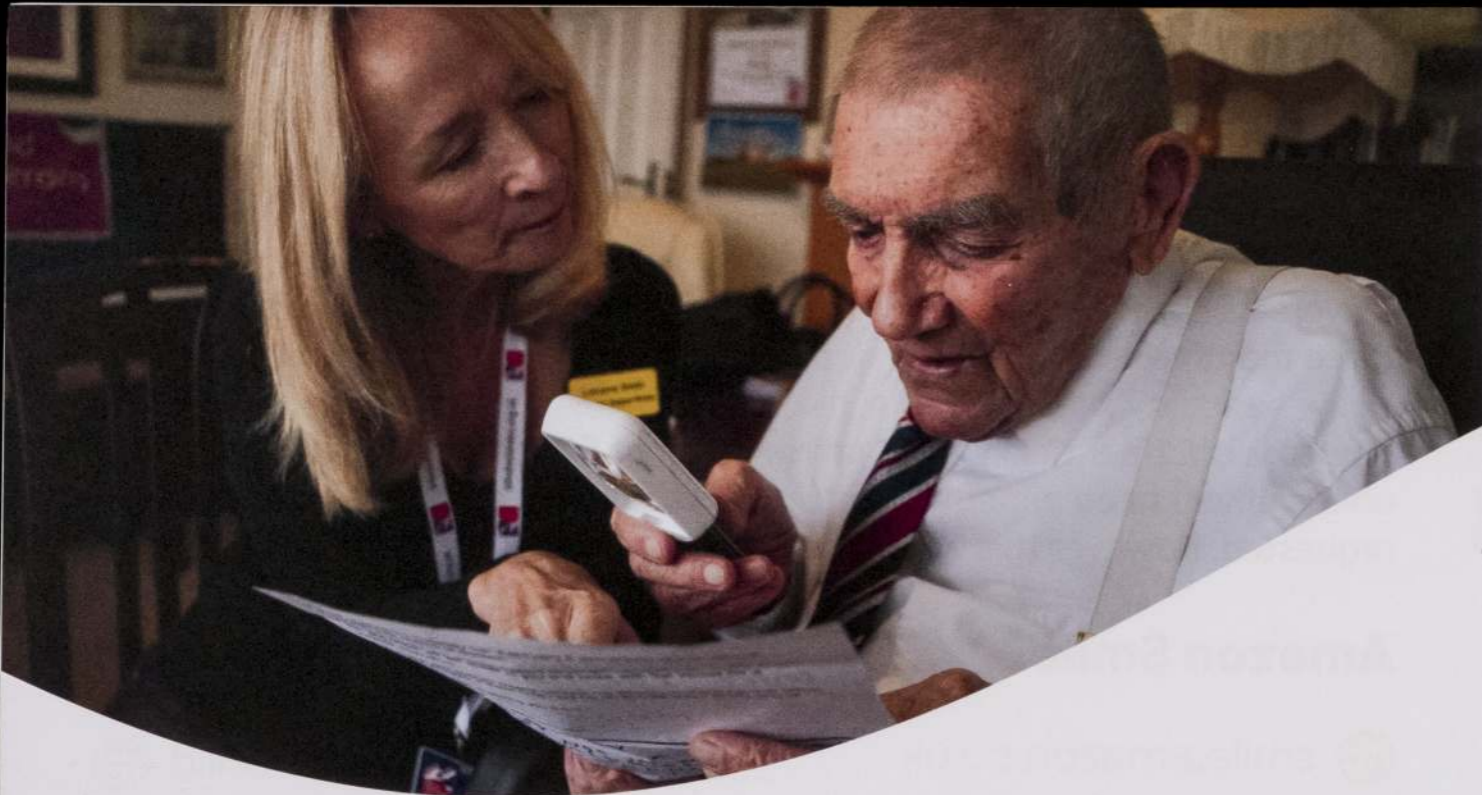
- Use **smile.amazon.co.uk** instead of your normal amazon.co.uk
- Select Blind Veterans UK as your chosen charity
- Start shopping and we will receive donations directly

Amazon doesn't charge any fees on these donations, so change your settings now.

Christmas e-cards

 dontsendmeacard.com/charities/E168

Why not send an e-card electronically this Christmas and donate the money you've saved on cards and stamps to Blind Veterans UK instead.



Victory Over Blindness merchandise

- For a suggested £3 donation we have metal pin badges of the Sculpture
- For a suggested donation of £4.99 we have packs of 10 Christmas Cards illustrated with the iconic silhouette of the Sculpture
- For a suggested donation of £95 we have a beautiful, limited edition sketch of the sculpture by the artist Johanna Domke-Guyot – only 100 produced.

All items are subject to postage and packing. For more information, please call **0300 111 2233** or email supporter.services@blindveterans.org.uk


Facebook fundraisers

 [facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com)

Is your birthday coming up? If you are on Facebook, you can easily set up a Fundraiser and ask family and friends to donate to us on your behalf with the occasion of your birthday or any other celebration.

Simply create a post and choose the option 'Support charity'. Search for 'Blind Veterans UK' and select it from the list. Then simply write your post to encourage your Facebook friends to support your fundraiser.

Recycling for Good Causes

 recyclingforgoodcauses.org

Do you have unwanted phones, jewellery, old digital cameras, MP3 players or currency cluttering up your drawers? Don't know what to do with them?

Well, we have the perfect solution for you, and you can help raise money for Blind Veterans UK in the process. Recycling For Good Causes is our charity partner who will collect and recycle unwanted household items with the proceeds coming directly to the charity – win win!

Free Will service


You can write or amend your Will free of charge through our Will-writing partners.

You can either:

- **Meet a solicitor:** Talk to your community team, e-mail legacies@blindveterans.org.uk or call our Legacy Team on **020 7616 7953** for a referral to a local solicitor – only your name and address is required.
- **Go online:** bequeathed.org/p/blindveteransuk and complete a simple online form (please note that it is not currently VI-friendly. We are working on this).

We'll cover the cost of all simple wills, including mirror wills. Complex issues (like managing assets abroad) may carry a charge.

In memory

 blindveterans.org.uk/giftsinmemory

Would you like to remember a loved one and support Blind Veterans UK at the same time? You can do this in the following ways:

- Donations in lieu of flowers at a funeral. We can provide you with a donation box or you can simply post the donation to the London office.
- Set up an online tribute fund which is an online space where family and friends can remember their loved one together whilst donating to the charity blindveteransuk.muchloved.org/tributes
- Remember your loved one with a lasting memorial such as a special bench with an inscribed plaque, a fruit tree, Remembrance book inscription or paviour at one of our centres. We also offer pavours at the National Memorial Arboretum.

Contact inmemory@blindveterans.org.uk for more details.



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Blind Veterans UK,
12-14 Harcourt Street,
London W1H 4HD

Tel: 0300 111 2233

Email: supporter.services@blindveterans.org.uk