

# The Bugle

Summer 2022



**Sight Scotland  
Veterans**

Tackling vision loss together

[sightscotlandveterans.org.uk](http://sightscotlandveterans.org.uk)



## **Contents**

## **Page**

---

A message from Clair Bryan, Director of Services.....4

### **Veterans' Stories**

---

Calibrating binoculars in the desert: John McOwan writes a book about his service with the Desert Rats.....6

The Falklands War 40 years on: Royal Navy Reserves veteran remembers husband who was killed in action..... 13

### **Sight Scotland Veterans' Update**

---

Ticket machine prop makes a solid point at the Scottish Parliament.....19

New job titles and new multi-disciplinary teams..... 24

### **Get Involved**

---

All about Blind Golf.....25

Veterans Experience Groups .....28

You can support research being done by the University of Huddersfield .....30

## **A message from Clair Bryan, Director of Services**

---

The summer months are finally upon us, and even the weather is making some attempts to join in. I hope you're enjoying the longer days and lighter nights.

June is a special month in our calendar every year, as we mark Armed Forces Day. This is an opportunity to salute our forces and thank all of you for your hard work and dedication.

This year, it felt all the more special as we were delighted to be able to join in the Armed Forces Day festivities in our centres once again, with a week of commemorations.



Clair Bryan

It's great to be able to organise such activities again, something which had been much missed throughout Covid. Colleagues from our Independent Living teams also marked the occasion, with some joining Legion Scotland at their event in Edinburgh. I'm so pleased that we can join in such events again, as it means we can meet, and talk to, many more veterans like you who could benefit from our support.

This year, we're also marking the 40th anniversary of the Falklands War – and remembering those who lost their lives in the conflict.

In this issue of the Bugle, one of our veterans shares poignant memories of that time.

Looking to the future, I'm pleased to share that my team at Sight Scotland Veterans is working hard to keep building on the services that we offer you. Part of this will be a new service to support financial wellbeing. We're currently finalising our plans for this and will share the details with you soon.

We're committed to listening to our veterans and ensuring that your views are represented when we make decisions about our services. Our new Veterans Experience Groups, which you can read about in this issue, are an opportunity to have your say. Please do get in touch if you're interested in taking part – we would love to hear from you.

Take care,

Clair Bryan  
Director of Services  
Sight Scotland Veterans

## Veterans' stories

---

### **Calibrating binoculars in the desert: John McOwan writes a book about his service with the Desert Rats**

---

John McOwan, who lives in Peebles, has written a book about his time as an Instrument Mechanic with the 7th Armoured Division – the Desert Rats.

John began writing his memoirs in March 2020 and finished them in March 2022. The book, "A Centenarian's Memoirs of World War II" will soon be available to purchase from Whitie's Books and Crafts in Peebles.



The book has three parts: John's boyhood in Peebles; his time serving with the 7th Armoured Division during World War Two; and his return to France for 75th anniversary of VE Day in 2019.

John said: "I'd never given a thought of my army days until the 75th Anniversary. We were faced with the lockdown and I thought, I need something to occupy my time. I thoroughly enjoyed the writing – it was very therapeutic."

John, who is 101 years old, has macular degeneration. He wrote the book on lined paper with extra-wide spacing, which was provided by Sight Scotland Veterans. He uses a task lighting lamp above his desk to improve his eyesight.

"The older I get, the more light I need. I've put strip lights in every room," he said.

John took photos of his handwritten notes and sent them to a volunteer at Blind Veterans UK, who typed up his writing.

In the book, John wrote about his experience as an Instrument Mechanic with the Army's 7th Armoured Division, who became known as the Desert Rats.

John said: "I joined the Territorials a year before the war broke out. They found out from their records that I'd done repairs to clocks at my father's jewellery shop in Peebles, so I was transferred from the Royal Artillery to the Royal Army Ordnances Corp.

"I was given a trade test and classed as a First Class Instrument Mechanic. I was posted overseas in April 1940."

Initially, John was based at a workshop in Cairo. Then, he was posted up the desert at Mersa Matruh, where the 7th Armoured Division was formed.

As an Instrument Mechanic with the Royal Army Ordinatees Corp, John travelled with a mobile workshop.

“The Armoured Division were always on the go from one battle to another and we had to follow closely. When any of the tanks were repairable, we did what we could with them,” John said.

“We had fitters and motor mechanics who repaired the tanks and vehicles, and armourers that repaired the guns on the tanks and the armoured cars. There were wireless mechanics who repaired the tanks’ wireless set. Then, there was an instruments section.

John said: “As Instrument Mechanics, our main work was working on binoculars, which every tank commander used. With all the sand blowing about, the binoculars got filled up with sand.

“You’d have to strip them down and clean them, and adjust the prisms inside, so the binocular vision was what it was meant to be.

“The other thing we did was repairing typewriters. Every unit would have an orderly room and there would be clerks who would type out orders. There were Remington and Olivetti typewriters – they were wide open and, of course, they got filled with sand.

“Everything would be cleaned with methylated spirits and tissue paper. You’d use a puffer to blow the sand and dust out. Then you’d seal them with black heated pitch.”

John also repaired liquid compasses.

“They were a sturdy thing, filled with a spirit. Tank commanders would put it up to their eye and there’d be a wheel setting, to give a bearing.”





Navigating the desert successfully was crucial to the divisions' success.

John said: "It was very easy to lose your way in the desert.

"The way they used to navigate was, the engineers would get 40-gallon oil drums. They'd put a number on it and that would be a mark code. Each one of these would be added to a map, and they'd use those to navigate the desert."

While traversing the desert, the Desert Rats slept in one-person bivouac tents.

John said: "You'd have to watch out for scorpions. The scorpions would sneak in to get into the warmth. You had to be very careful when you woke up in the morning and lift your blanket carefully. Their tail and sting would curve over their backs. You had to be careful how you brushed them off: don't brush against their front, you'd brush them the other way, from their back forwards."

John and his mobile workshop followed the Armoured Division through the desert, before travelling to Italy in September 1943 as part of Operation Avalanche. Several months later, John and the division returned to the UK for a break. Next, they went to Normandy, where John landed four days after D-Day. John went with the armoured division through France, Belgium and Holland, and up into Germany, as far as Berlin, repairing instruments on request.

John said the German civilians he encountered in the later stages of the war were very courteous.

“There was one man, a man in his 50s, who we employed as an odd-jobs man. He’d come to work beautifully dressed every day and he always had a briefcase. I think most of the Germans were just relieved it was the end of the war because most of the cities were reduced to rubble.”

John was de-mobbed in 1946 and he returned to Peebles.

“After the war, nobody wanted to ask about it,” John said.

“People just seemed to want to put it out of their minds. Everyone was thinking about the future at that time.”

Civilian life felt strange to adjust to, he said.

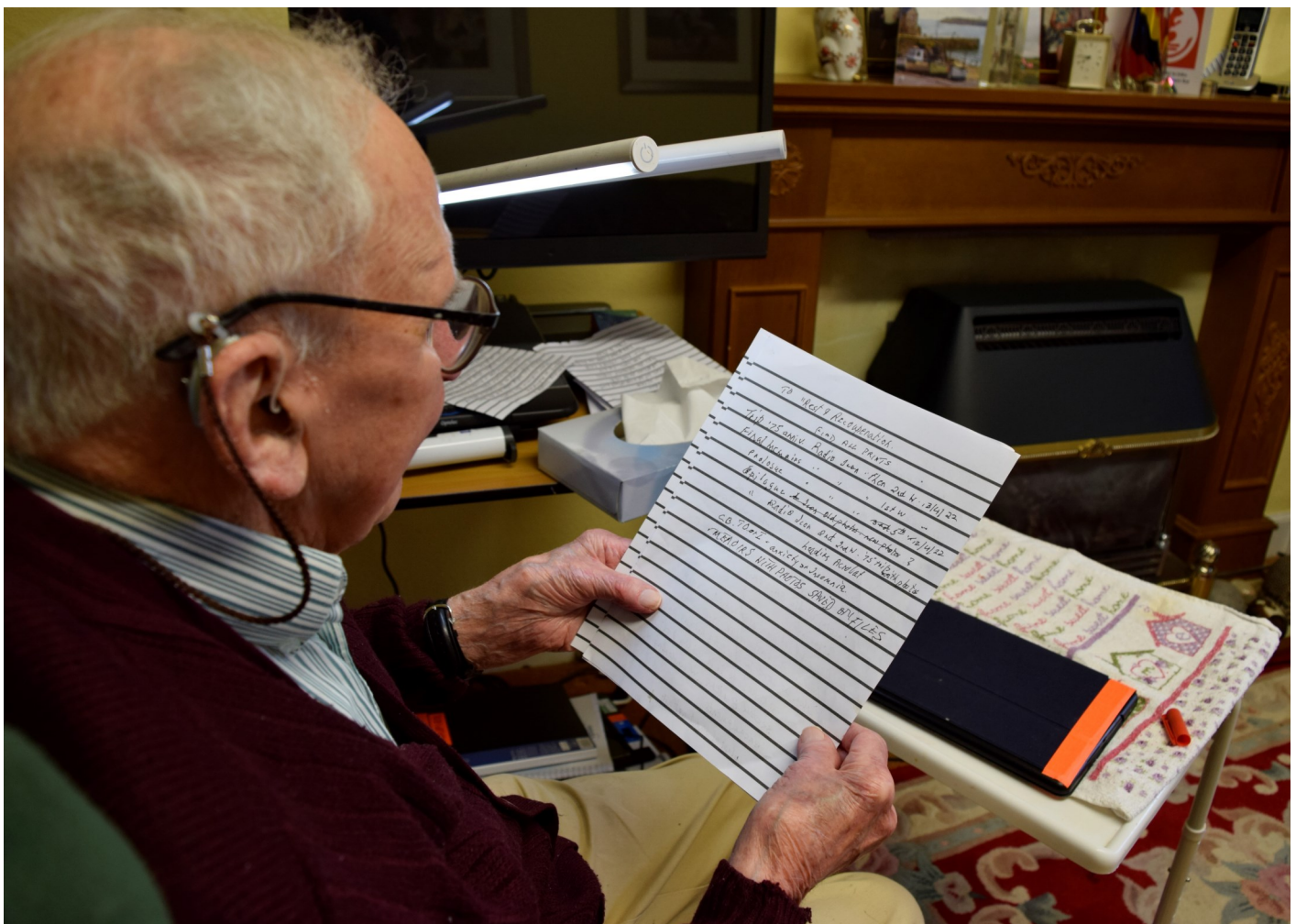
“We were in a totally different environment. When you were in the Forces, you got all your thinking done for you. When we arrived on civvy street, life was very strange. It took time to think for yourself for a change.”

John took over his father’s jewellery shop and worked there until he retired in 1990.

In 2019, he went with his son-in-law to the 75th Anniversary of VE-Day.

“We went on a cruise ship to France and visited the war graves there. I visited the actual beach I landed on, Gold Beach. I also saw a section of the Mulberry Harbour, which was still floating off the coast. We went to the beaches at Arromanches, and to the main Festival of Remembrance at Bayeux, where Prince Charles and all the dignitaries were. I had a chat with Prime Minister Theresa May and met President Macron. There’s a photo of me shaking hands with President Macron. I also met Sheridan Smith, who was an actor and singer, who is well known.

“I kept notes of it, and when I came home, one of my carers was very helpful and typed it out.”



John began writing his memoirs in March 2020.

John said: "Most days, I'd spend a couple of hours writing in the afternoon. It gives you time to think things through without overtaxing yourself.

"I suppose, the effort of trying to think back, is itself a bit therapeutic. You're normally living your daily life and don't give much thought to what happened in the past. But when you look back on it and when you have to remember things, suddenly it comes to your mind and you remember somebody's name you'd not thought of for 60 years, and it clicks.

"When it came to light, and I remembered things after many years, such as a lot of pleasant memories, I felt a lot of satisfaction," he said.

John McOwan's book, "A Centenarian's Memoirs of World War II", is being printed in late July in slightly larger and more legible print than a standard book. A bookshop in Peebles, Whitie's Books and Crafts, will stock copies of the book. People interested in purchasing a copy can contact Douglas Whittie at Whitie's Books and Crafts on 01721 588170, or email [whitiesbooksandcrafts@gmail.com](mailto:whitiesbooksandcrafts@gmail.com) to order a copy for delivery.

## Veterans' stories

---

### **The Falklands War 40 years on: Royal Navy Reserves veteran remembers husband who was killed in action**

---

In this 40th anniversary year of the Falklands War, the nation comes together to remember those who served and were lost.

For Royal Navy Reserves veteran Susan Dunham of Carnoustie, whose husband, Corporal Laurence George Watts, was killed in action in the Falklands War on 12 June 1982, this time of year brings back a multitude of memories and emotions.

Susan was seven months pregnant with their daughter, Laura, when she received the devastating news of her husband's death.

In 2010, she and her daughter were given the opportunity to take a poignant and emotional pilgrimage to the Falkland Islands.

In memory of her husband, who was so dedicated to his service, Susan, 68, wishes to share his story, and her journey of remembrance, with her fellow veterans.

Susan and Laurence first met at a hotel in Arbroath in 1974. At the time, Royal Marine Laurence, who was affectionately known to all as 'Lofty' as he stood at six feet four inches tall, was serving with 45 Commando. Susan was a radio operator with the Royal Navy Reserves, working alongside the Navy regulars.

After serving several years with 45, Lofty did his ship's draft with HMS Nubian before moving to Commando Training Centre

in Lypstone, Devon, to be on the recruit training team. He was then drafted to 42 Commando, based at Bickleigh Barracks in Plymouth.

The couple married in 1977. They bought a house in Exmouth and happily settled there.

“Lofty loved the job he did,” said Susan. “As well as all his friends in the services, he also had civilian friends. He was on the inshore lifeboat crew on the weekends if he wasn’t away.”

In January 1982, Susan found out she was pregnant. But as news of the Argentine invasion of the Falklands broke just months later, the couple braced themselves for Lofty to be called away with 42 Commando.

Susan said: “They had a few false starts with setting off for the Falklands. I was a bit jumpy at this because I didn’t think it boded well.

“Eventually they went down to Southampton and they got on the Canberra, which was one of the civilian liners contracted by the Ministry of Defence as a troopship. On the ship they did lots of fitness training and running exercises, and they had to teach the reporters and war correspondents who were accompanying them how to use weapons. But they didn’t have much in the way of equipment.

“While I was down in Exmouth, we sent out books and all sorts of stuff to the troops because they really didn’t have very much. It was the first war that people were more or less watching live in their living rooms. Not to the extent that they do now with social media, but you were glued to the news.”

On the night of 11/12 June 1982, just two days before Argentina surrendered and the war ended, Lofty was on operations with 42 Commando against Argentine forces on Mount Harriet. It was there that the 27-year-old was killed in action on 12 June.

Susan, who was seven months pregnant when Lofty died, says that the experience of losing a loved one in the forces, as a services person herself, is something that only people who have served themselves can truly understand.

Susan said: "I was actually staying with my mum in Carnoustie at the time. It was a Chief Wren and an officer from 45 Commando who came to see me to tell me my husband had been killed in action. But at that point, they didn't know details, which was difficult to take in. How could you believe it, especially when they had no details?"

"So, I think I was in a bit of denial to start with. No one had told them that I was pregnant either, so they got a shock as well.

"With being in the forces myself, I put my best foot forward and tried to put over that I was coping, but I wasn't. People found it hard that I bottled it up, but I felt I had to do that for Lofty, because he died doing the job he loved. He wouldn't have not been there."

Susan gave birth to daughter Laura that August. Enduring months of press intrusion, she says her grief and the pressure manifested physically.

"I had lost everything at the same time," she said. "I lost my husband, my best friend, the father of my child, and my whole way of life."

Susan said: "When it all happened and we had the press and everything to deal with, it all came out in my body due to keeping everything inside.

"Unbeknown to me at the time, that's when the bad gene for my Stargardt Disease got out as well, and when I started to have problems with my sight."

In November 1982, Susan was finally able to lay Lofty to rest in Western Cemetery, Arbroath, where he was given a military funeral.

As their daughter Laura grew up, Susan shared memories and pictures of Lofty. The family has some of his last photographs which had been taken on his camera, showing him on the Canberra and on the Falkland Islands.

But when it came to the Falkland Islands, the thought of the place Lofty had died created a sense of unease for Susan.

When the opportunity arose for Susan and Laura to visit the Falklands in 2010, the mother and daughter decided to make their pilgrimage there together.

Susan said: "It was a very emotional trip, but good as well. I thought it was really important for us to go. We had all these things in our minds about the Falklands – Laura saw it as some nasty set of rocks that took her dad from her. I didn't know what to think.

"When we made the stop at Ascension Island while the plane refuelled, we did think whether we were doing the right thing.



“While we were on the Falklands, we stayed in Liberty Lodge in Stanley. The lodge had been purpose-built for Falklands War veterans and families.

“We got in touch with locals who had helped the forces at the time, and they took us along the same routes that 42 would have taken. We managed to line up Lofty’s photographs with the landscape and took our photographs.

“We managed to find where the foxholes were, so you got an idea of where they were. I found that more difficult, I think, because I knew that when he was there he was alive, and when we went to Mount Harriet, where he died, it wasn’t the same because I knew he didn’t get any further. We laid flowers between what rocks we could find.

“Near Stanley they’ve actually planted bushes as a memorial wood, and they’ve put crosses for the people who were killed. One of them was for Lofty. The residents have been good, in making sure that the war will always be remembered.

“They’d left things in place, such as shells, ammo boxes, mess tins, boots, and carcasses of machine guns. It was quite poignant that they had left these things.”

Susan says the experience of being able to take this peaceful pilgrimage, to speak with residents of the Falklands and be immersed in the Islands’ landscapes and abundant wildlife, helped her in some ways.

Susan said: "What I hadn't realised is how big the Falklands are; how green they were and how full of life and wildlife they were. It was incredible. The farms were the size of ones in Australia and New Zealand. Things that blew my mind – the fields would be a funny shape and then if you looked to the side there would be beaches with clutches of penguins, so everybody's farm had clutches of penguins – it was amazing.

"There is so much life there. Being able to meet the residents and find out what they went through really helped too.

"I felt I had laid a ghost to rest, because it wasn't what I'd imagined the place to be like. It was the same for Laura, it wasn't anything like she had imagined. It definitely put my imagination to rest, and that helped.

"It was 40 years ago, which feels a long time, but it's not a long time when it all gets catapulted forward into your head again. I know the veterans will understand. You can explain to other service people but it's hard to explain to a civvy. You don't forget or feel better over the years, but you learn a sort of coping mechanism.

"For younger generations, the message I would have for them is that war is not something that's on your phone. It's real."

## Sight Scotland Veterans Updates

---

### Ticket machine prop makes a solid point at the Scottish Parliament

---

A replica ticket machine constructed by veterans was the centre of attention at a Scottish Parliament demonstration recently.

Veterans who attend the Hawkhead Centre in Paisley built the 4-foot-tall prop, which imitates a ticket machine at a railway station.

The Sight Scotland Veterans and Sight Scotland policy team showed the prop at a stall outside the Scottish Parliament in late April.



Our team asked MSPs and members of the public to try to use the machine while wearing spectacles that simulated different eye conditions.

This served to demonstrate the difficulty of accessing rail travel for someone with sight loss, unless they have a companion to assist them.

People visiting the stand were also presented with the Fair Rail Vision petition that Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans are running. With ScotRail now in public ownership, we are calling for a new national rail travel policy for Scotland which would enable free rail travel across Scotland for any holder of a National (Scotland) Concessionary Travel for Blind Persons card, as well as their companion.

Currently, there are different concessionary and companion schemes for people with sight loss in different local authority areas. We have heard first-hand from blind and partially sighted people about the confusion they have experienced due to this lack of consistency across local authority areas in Scotland.

Army veteran Gus Cross, who helped build the ticket machine prop at the Hawkhead Centre's workshop, backs the call for a new national policy for rail travel.

Gus, 50, said: "Due to my sight loss, my ability to get out independently has been affected. I can't really use the trains on my own. The problem is seeing what's on the timetables, so I'd have to have my wife with me. It gives me more independence to have someone there with me."



Army veteran Brian Carroll, 71, of Helensburgh, who also helped to build the ticket machine prop, is also supportive of the charities' Fair Rail Vision campaign.

"It's definitely much more reassuring to have a companion when travelling. There is too much information on the ticket machines to navigate around when you can't see the screens well.

"I think a new national policy for free rail travel in Scotland for blind and partially sighted people and their companions is a very good idea. There are people I know who can hardly see at all, and it's essential for them to have a companion with them when travelling."



**The Fair Rail Vision petition can be signed online at the website below.**

Here is a shortcut to the website with the petition:

<https://tinyurl.com/mryt9vwt>

Here is the full web address for the website with the petition:

<https://www.change.org/p/free-rail-travel-for-blind-partially-sighted-people-their-companions-in-scotland>



## **Sight Scotland Veterans Updates**

---

### **New job titles and new multi-disciplinary teams**

We are improving our services so that you, and veterans like you, receive consistent support and advice.

One improvement we are making is strengthening our regional area teams, who provide face-to-face support to you, at your home.

Previously, our Rehabilitation Officers worked in a standalone unit, separate to our Outreach Workers.

Going forward, Rehabilitation Officers will join Outreach Workers' regional area teams. This will help improve connections and communication, resulting in a better service for you and veterans like you.

In addition, Outreach Workers will have a new job title: Independent Living Workers. The responsibilities of an Independent Living Worker will remain the same though. So, you will continue receiving support to regain the skills you need to live as safely and independently as you wish to, from your assigned Independent Living Worker.

Thank you for reading. Please feel free to contact your assigned Independent Living Worker if you have any questions.



## Get Involved

---

### All about Blind Golf

---

Army veteran Ally Reid says his visual impairment condition hasn't stopped him playing – and loving to play – golf.

"You don't have to see it to tee it," Ally says.

"As golfers know, when you swing the golf club, you're not hitting at the ball – you're actually collecting the ball on the way through," Ally says.

Ally, who lives in Stonehaven, is playing in the ISPS HANDA British Blind Golf Open in Aviemore in July. He has played blind golf for 22 years and encourages other veterans with sight loss to have a go at Blind Golf this summer.

Blind golfers play with a teammate, a guide, who watches where the golf ball goes when it's hit. Guides can also assist with lining up the blind golfer's club behind the ball, and suggest the power to swing with.

Ally said: "I can see the ball at my feet and I can hit the ball, but where it's gone, I don't know. My guide tells me where the ball's gone," Ally said.

"If someone was totally blind, as a B1 or a B2, it might mean they'd have to set the club up behind the ball. But other than that, it's the same. It's all about what you can do, not what you can't do. There are means and there are methods."

Ally plays a round of golf every Friday and Saturday. His friends and relatives who play with him act as his guide, giving as much help as they think he needs.

"I really enjoy it on a Friday and Saturday because they treat me as I'm like them – I just can't see where the ball goes.

Guides will look out for obstacles too.

Ally said: "My guide tries to line me up if we're in a forested area and there's a gap in the trees. They might say 'I'm lining you up here' – and they'll stand in front and put their hand up, and say, 'There's your line'.

"Once you start building your confidence up, there's quite a lot you can do. You don't need to have played golf before, either – you can learn."

Ally said Blind Golf was a great opportunity to socialise and to travel.

"I've been to Japan three times to play Japanese opens. If I hadn't lost my sight, it never would've occurred to me to go to Japan," he said.

"I've played the Vision Cup at Lake Como in Italy, I've played in Canada, and the last one I played in, in 2019, was in Dublin. I'm lucky to have been able to go play on courses in other countries, specifically because they're holding Blind Opens."

The 2022 ISPS HANDA British Blind Open is being played in Aviemore this year, at the Spey Valley Golf Club, from Sunday 3 July until Thursday 7 July. Entry forms and more information can be found at the Blind Golf Scotland website: <https://scottishblindgolf.com>

Ally encourages veterans who are interested in Blind Golf to contact the coordinator in their district.

"We would love to hear from people who have retired out of it because they've lost their eyesight. Nearly all of us were in that position. If I can do it, other people can do it too.

"Everywhere in Scotland there is an opportunity to join our Blind Golf Scotland family of districts. You can contact your local district's organiser, or you could contact me."

Blind Golf Scotland has organisers in five districts. Contact details for the organisers in each district are below:

- Grampian: Ally Reid, 01569 762 046
- Greater Glasgow: Kris Adams, 07415 693 064
- Edinburgh & Lothian: Charlie Forbes, 0131 477 9007
- West of Scotland: Bennet Ward, 01655 883 859
- Tayside: Barry Hampton, 01382 543 234

# Get Involved

---

## Veterans Experience Groups

---

Would you like to have your say on future services ? Then we'd love to hear from you.

To make sure that our veterans community get the best possible experience we can offer from our services, we need to understand things from your perspective.

As part of our ongoing commitment to involving and listening to the veterans community, we would like to involve you in discussions about new services in order to help us make improvements and build services which are more accessible and more suited to your needs.

So, we are running a series of groups for veterans, where you can offer your thoughts and opinions. These groups are called the Veterans Experience Groups.

### **What will the groups be like?**

Participants will be asked to join one session per week, for an hour, for four weeks. These sessions will run over Microsoft Teams or Zoom.

If you would prefer to contribute to the topic of discussion one-to-one, rather than in a group (for example, if you cannot access the technology), this can be accommodated.

Each Veterans Experience Group will tackle a particular topic.

The current planned topics are:

- Financial wellbeing
- Sporting and Physical Activity
- Emotional Support
- Assistive Technology

In each one-hour session, you would take part in a discussion. You would be asked for your own experiences and invited to discuss different scenarios.

### **Who do we want to get involved?**

We are interested in hearing from veterans with any degree of sight loss: those who are yet to be or are newly diagnosed, veterans whose eyesight is deteriorating, and veterans with significant sight loss.

We would also love to hear from your family members, your carers, and or your friends. So please, get in touch if you are interested in joining a Veterans Experience Group. And if you have any questions please feel free to contact me.

Tom Scott  
Innovation and Impact Manager  
Sight Scotland Veterans

### **Contact Tom Scott:**

Phone: 07824 873 540

Email: [Tom.scott@sightscotlandveterans.org.uk](mailto:Tom.scott@sightscotlandveterans.org.uk)

## **Get Involved**

---

### **You can support research being done by the University of Huddersfield**

---

The University of Huddersfield is running a research project that investigates the mobility, mobility challenges and participation abilities of people with sight loss.

As a person with sight loss, you are invited to participate in this survey and assist the University's research. The survey should take around 15 minutes and responses are anonymous.

Your participation is highly valued as you will have first-hand experience of living with sight loss and how this affects your mobility. Learning from your experiences will help us understand these challenges and how we can overcome them, for the benefit of people with sight loss across the UK.

Senior Lecturer of Physiotherapy, Holly Knights, is leading on the survey.

To take part, please call the research team on 01484 257 466. You can leave a voicemail with your phone number if no-one answers, and a researcher will call you back.



**Thank you for reading the  
latest edition of The Bugle.**

**We promise to keep your information  
safe and will never sell or swap your  
details. If you change your mind about  
receiving newsletters, please email**

**hello@sightscotlandveterans.org.uk  
or call 0131 229 1456**



**Sight Scotland  
Veterans**

Tackling vision loss together