Happy New Year and welcome to the winter edition of The Bugle, Scottish War Blinded’s quarterly membership newsletter.

In the first edition of 2020, we focus on the emotional impact of sight loss as we feature two members speaking openly about their mental health.

In addition, one member who served in the Korean War shares his experience of life on the front line, and find out what happened to David on-board the Arctic Convoy in the second half on his story. We also share our top tips, updates from Scottish War Blinded, and more.

The Bugle is available in the following formats:

- Email - large print
- Post – large print
- Audio – USB (return envelope provided)
- Audio – CD (does not need to be returned)

If you would like to receive future editions of The Bugle in a different format, please contact Eilidh. Alternatively, please contact your Outreach Worker.

You can contact Scottish War Blinded’s Membership Communications and Engagement Executive, Eilidh, by phone or email.

Eilidh writes The Bugle, as well as the recently introduced bi-annual regional newsletters, The Honour and E-news. As well as keeping you up to date through newsletters, Eilidh manages the new members’ private Facebook group and engagement projects, such as the recent 500-mile challenge.

To become part of Scottish War Blinded’s member Facebook community, simply log in to Facebook and type ‘Members and Friends of Scottish War Blinded’ into the search bar. Request to join the group to see the latest updates pop up on your news feed.

Here is how to get in touch with Eilidh:

Phone: 0131 229 1456 (extension 2047)

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Army Veteran and Fellow
Scottish War Blinded Member
Bravely Speaks out about Battle
with Mental Health Following
Army Career

Please note: Readers may find some of this interview upsetting. This story includes reference of a suicide attempt following active service. This is Tommy’s story, told in his own words, which he has shared to let others know that it’s okay to speak openly about mental health.

Tommy Moffat served in the Queens Own Highlanders from 1974-1986 and was part of a specialist unit during the Northern Ireland conflict.

The 65-year-old has struggled with his mental health since leaving the army and wants his fellow veterans to know that it’s okay to talk about how you’re feeling; whether it’s related to sight loss or any other aspect of life.

Twelve years in the army: ‘I felt at home there’

Homeless and sleeping on a bench in Glasgow city centre, the offering of three hot meals per day is what initially drew Tommy to the army. Tommy said: “I left home at 16 because I had a violent father. It was sink or swim.

“I was homeless for three years before I joined the army. When I initially went to enrol, I was turned away because I was underweight and undernourished. So I ate everything I could and went back one month later.

“I was told I wasn’t going to make it. By the time I finished training, I was the best at personal training and shooting and I was the most improved recruit. That comment always stuck in my mind and made me want to succeed.”

The 19-year-old sports enthusiast excelled at army life and was selected for the Battalion’s boxing, running and skiing teams.

Tommy was one of 24 people to be selected for the Northern Ireland Patrol group and underwent one-and-a-half years of intense training before heading to Northern Ireland in 1978. The specialist group was changed to the Close Observation Platoon shortly after and was the first of its kind in Northern Ireland.

“We had to spend weeks or months on end hiding outside suspected terrorists’ houses to give information to the intelligence team,” he said.
“We experienced a lot of fighting. There were only four of us in a group and we were out alone with very little protection. We were also a target.

“We worked 24/7 for a year. We slept on the ground in a sleeping bag. Towards the end, men were crying and wetting the bed. They were just given a sauna and three days off and then sent back to work.

“I liked being out in the field, covered in mud and soaking wet. I felt at home there.”

In 1982, Tommy qualified for a special elite posting to Hong Kong where he worked as a gym instructor for two years whilst recovering from stressful service. Then in 1984, Tommy was sent to the Falklands before returning to Northern Ireland on a two-year posting.

Tommy married his wife of 34 years, Liz, whilst in Northern Ireland, and their first son was born there. However, after two years, Tommy left the army as he found it “financially impossible to stay” due to having children from a previous marriage.

The father-of-four looks back on his army career as a positive experience, saying: “Nothing is hunky dory all the time, but the positives outweighed the negatives.

Image shows Tommy sitting in his home
“I would have stayed in the army if I could. It was exciting and there was a purpose to it. The boys gave me a sense of family. We lived in each other’s pockets and all knew each other’s business.”

**Adapting to civilian life: ‘I paid for army life later on’**

“I was disappointed when I came out of the army,” Tommy said. “I had to make a new life when that wasn’t what I wanted. I had dependents and it was a lot of pressure.”

After Northern Ireland, Tommy returned to Glasgow in 1986 with his wife and son.

“I got a house and a job in the security business, but the job didn’t last long,” he explained.

“It was low pay and long hours and I started getting into trouble. I had a military mentality when it came to certain situations, so I would fight on the job. Things were going south and I couldn’t adjust to civilian requirements.”

After a couple of years, Tommy quit his job after his fighting episodes were becoming more frequent.

“One night, I got into my car and smashed into all the cars on the street. I didn’t know what was wrong.

“That is the moment I realised I wasn’t well – a wee light went on.

“I was put into a psychiatric hospital for six weeks after that where I was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

“I wasn’t sure if traumatic or frightening experiences were coming back to me. At the time of these experiences, I just thought my life was exciting. But I paid for that later,” Tommy said.

Tommy’s brothers-in-law gave him a part-time job in their garage to keep him going. “After a while, I was getting worse and I was drinking to help me to get through. I was getting no rest and I was angry all the time. People started to become cautious of me,” explained Tommy.

“I quit my job and things got really bad again. For four years, it was all a bit of a blur.”

Tommy was referred to Combat Stress’ Hollybush House, a treatment centre for veterans with mental health issues, by the War Pensions Scheme and then to the Scottish Veterans’ Garden City Association.

“Support from veterans’ organisations is what got me through,” Tommy said. “We lived in an area which had a big gang culture, so we were given a house in Hamilton in 2000 and I received my war pension. It felt like a burden
had been lifted.

“It was a turning point getting the house. Liz was in charge of inside and I did the garden – we worked together. We would sit and admire what we had and things were looking up.

“I had my wife and kids and I was happy. I didn’t want my kids to be frightened of me after the upbringing I had.”

Then, in 2008, Tommy’s mental health took a turn for the worse and he attempted suicide.

“I just wanted to escape,” he said.

“I was almost feeling better but that didn’t even come into it. I had forgotten about my whole recovery. PTSD comes and goes in spurts, it just takes one thing to trigger it. I’m never safe.”

Since then, things have been on the up for Tommy and his supportive family.

“It was all bubbling up to that point. I still haven’t beat it and I doubt if I ever will, but I’ve learned to cope with it,” Tommy said.

“I still don’t sleep at night and when I do, I fight in my sleep. I have to sleep with a barricade between me and my wife and I can’t allow my grandkids in the bed.

“Noise is still a big thing for me - I’m always aware. There are episodes that I’ve tried to forget. The mind is a great tool, it can block things out.

“Now when I look at the house and my family, I think we’ve done a good job.

“We’ve been through tough times but we’ve managed it and we’ve achieved a lot.”

**Diagnosis: ‘I’m fighting to have as long as possible’**

As well as having to cope with a mental health illness, Tommy has dealt with several physical health challenges along the way, including a heart attack and stroke in 2009.

In 2018, Tommy was diagnosed with glaucoma and also has diabetic related sight loss.

“My sight is another challenge I had to deal with,” said Tommy. “I was banging into things a lot and I lost my driving license.

“My sight was a concern. I was trying to hide it from Liz, she’d already been through enough. I wanted to get through it myself, I thought I can live with sight loss and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

Then in July 2019, Tommy was “hit with a bombshell” when he was diagnosed with Parkinson’s with dementia and given six months to two years to live.
He explained: “It’s really vicious. I was shocked. As well as glaucoma, the Parkinson’s is causing blurry vision and hallucinations.

“I’m fighting to have as long as possible and I’m keeping myself occupied. I was told I could have longer if I keep active, so I’ve been lifting weights at the gym.”

Tommy has been a keen weightlifter for many years, having competed professionally in the Scotland Weightlifting Team in 2009. Tommy said: “Physical activity has always been good for me. It has a positive impact on me mentally.

“I was still down when I was competing, but weightlifting helped me through. It was determination and a bit of selfishness, and a sense of purpose in doing something for myself.

“I was on the team for a couple of years but competing took the fun out of it. It was no longer a hobby. “Now when I’m feeling bad, I go to the gym or hunt for a piece of antique furniture to do up.

“When I’m at the gym, it can be difficult to see the weights and if things are left on the floor, I can trip over them.

“When I’m lifting it’s a great feeling. I’m in my own wee zone where I can forget about everything else.”
Life now: ‘It’s important to be true to yourself’

Recently, Tommy set himself a weighty gym challenge of lifting 50 tonnes over the course of five days in a bid to raise awareness and funds for Scottish War Blinded. Tommy was referred to Scottish War Blinded in 2018 by the War Pensions Scheme and attends his local lunch group as well as golf trips with his outreach worker, John, and fellow members.

“The lunch groups are the best thing as I’ve been able to get to know people,” Tommy said. “I didn’t realise how good it would be. I have a laugh at golf as well.

“I have a lot of respect for everyone I meet at Scottish War Blinded, especially the older members who served during World War Two. They suffered and worked through trauma. I met a WW2 veteran at the lunch group called George, speaking to him makes me feel really humble.

“It’s important to talk about mental health, especially making sure your family know what’s happening. It’s important to be true to yourself, which is hard. I was in denial for ten years.

“People all over the world are going through the same thing, but without the support I have had.”

Scottish War Blinded Member Talks Sense about Life with Dementia

An army veteran who was diagnosed with early onset dementia at the age of 57 is speaking out about common misconceptions of a dementia diagnosis and the emotional impact a diagnosis can have.

Agnes Houston, of Coatbridge, has sensory loss as a result of dementia and after finding very little support available, Agnes now shares her knowledge of the condition to help others who are also experiencing sensory loss.

Agnes, who worked as a nurse before managing the office in a chiropractic unit, said: “My boss noticed that I was forgetting people’s names and my colleagues couldn’t read my writing anymore. I wasn’t acting like the normal Agnes.

“I would wake up four hours before work because it took me so long to get ready. I had to double check everything I did. I couldn’t remember if I had showered or had my breakfast.

“My boss told me that something was seriously medically wrong with me and I told him I disagreed. Four months after that, I was told it was my last day – I wasn’t allowed to come back until I had been to the doctors.
I phoned my friend to tell her what had happened, and she agreed that something wasn’t right. ‘You’re not the Agnes we know and love’, she told me.

“I was very disillusioned and I felt betrayed. How could they be saying this about me? I thought, I’ll go to the doctors and I’ll show them there is nothing wrong with me. They’ll be eating humble pie for years,” laughed Agnes.

However, Agnes was shocked to be diagnosed with dementia of the Alzheimer’s type in 2006, a time which she describes as a ‘numbed existence’.

“I had gone from a professional person who people looked up to, to a nothingness. People spoke about me rather than to me and I felt like I had been rubbed out. I sat in a corner and life just went on. I had no job and I felt like I had no purpose. I felt like life was over.

“My identity had been taken away from me, I felt disempowered and I didn’t know who I was anymore. It was as if one minute I was Agnes and the next I was just dementia.”
Agnes was also stripped of her role as caregiver for her father, who also had dementia. “One day, someone from Alzheimer’s Scotland visited my dad and he turned around to me and asked me how I was doing. I burst out crying.

“He was the first person since my diagnosis to ask how I feel. Nobody asked how I, Agnes, was feeling. They would ask how the dementia is but never how are you?

“This man spoke to me as Agnes and not the dementia. He referred me to the Scottish Dementia Working group to meet others with a dementia diagnosis. I’ve never looked back.

“The group taught me to laugh again. I had been put in a place where people with dementia didn’t laugh and they didn’t have an opinion. I went to the working group and they were all laughing and they were normal. It was great. They had learned to accept it and get on with their lives. “

Agnes became Vice Chair of the Working Group in 2009 and Chair in 2011. “I learned that dementia doesn’t take everything away.

“I learned about the four A’s: Aware, Accept, Adapt and Avoid,” explained Agnes. “You have to become aware that you have got a condition, then you have to accept that you have the condition and adapt – and if you can’t adapt to a situation then avoid it and avoid people who are a nuisance.”

Although dementia is classed as a mental health condition in the UK, Agnes also has physical symptoms as she has suffered from sensory loss from the very beginning of her journey living with dementia, as well as short term and long term memory loss.

“Before I was diagnosed, my sight was deteriorating, my hearing was becoming more and more sensitive and my skin was sore to touch. People were telling me it was tiredness or the menopause. I wasn’t offered any help when I explained the issues I was having with my sensory loss.”

Agnes was eventually diagnosed with neurological sight loss due to dementia and hyperacusis which is sensitivity to noise.

In 2015, Agnes wrote a booklet with the aim of helping others experiencing similar symptoms. “I was inspired to write the booklet because people were being left in the dark. They were told about memory loss and nothing else. By this point, I had all of this knowledge so why wouldn’t I share it?” Agnes said.

Due to the success of the booklet, Agnes was awarded a Churchill
Fellowship in 2016 to enable her to further her research into sensory loss. The mum-of-one travelled to Ireland and Canada with her daughter, Donna, to research how other countries are helping people with sensory loss.

Since then, Agnes has gone on to publish her first book, Talking Sense, in May 2019. Agnes said: “When people talk about dementia, they only concentrate on memory. No one talks about sensory loss. I want this book to let people to know that dementia is more than memory.

“Memory is only one wee bit of the brain, there is so much more to it.

“If Talking Sense had existed when I was diagnosed, it would have been so much easier. It would have been less emotionally traumatic,” said Agnes.

“If my family members had read the book at the time of my diagnosis, I think they would have understood me better and could have supported me. Instead, I stopped getting invited to things because dementia was seen to get in the way. For me it’s not though, it’s sensory loss that is in the way.

“Dementia isn’t the most important part of this book, sensory loss is. People with PTSD or those who have had a stroke experience similar symptoms so it will be useful to them and their families too.

“Talking Sense gives people knowledge of different symptoms, so they can be aware of them when they are with someone who has dementia.

“The book shows who to go to for support and where useful organisations are located.”

Agnes hopes that the book can help people experiencing sensory loss avoid the experience of being alone that she encountered as a result of her diagnosis.

“There’s a lot of work still to be done with the mental health and emotional side of dementia.

“Emotionally, I was stripped of Agnes. I had to build myself up again. I’ll never be the Agnes I was before dementia, but I quite like who I am now.

“Now I would say to anyone to not be afraid of a dementia diagnosis. Find peers and learn and then just have fun and enjoy life. Having dementia does not mean that you can’t laugh and enjoy yourself. To get there, you just need to do the four A’s I mentioned.”

Agnes, who was awarded a Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (MBE) and is a well-known advocate for dementia and sensory loss, joined Scottish War Blinded in April 2018 and attends the
Hawkhead Centre once a week. “Scottish War Blinded is so important to me because my weekly visits allow me to regain skills,” said Agnes.

“The team at Scottish War Blinded never tell me I can’t do something. Instead, they ask how they can support me to do it safely. That’s what I want to happen in the dementia world.

“The staff are great at providing training and the members help each other come to terms with sight loss. I really benefit from seeing other members using different bits of equipment or techniques to overcome day to day issues.

“Seeing other members using their cane and hearing John speak at The Gathering inspired me and made me realise that I need to make friends with the cane rather than seeing it as a symbol of my disability.”

If you would like a copy of Agnes’ book on sensory loss, please contact Head Office on 0131 229 1456 to request your free copy.

The Process of ‘Going Blind’ - Expert Piece

Dr Mhairi Thurston is highly regarded in the sight loss community, having been diagnosed with sight condition Retinitis Pigmentosa (RP) at age 40. Mhairi is a senior lecturer in counselling at Abertay University in Dundee and has a particular interest in the social and emotional effects of acquired sight loss, due to having a visual impairment herself.

Here, Mhairi talks about the process of ‘going blind’ as she explains: “We can understand something of the experience of acquiring sight loss by thinking of it as a process.”

Mhairi has broken the ‘process of going blind’ into five stages. She explains each stage below:

Stage one starts with the diagnosis of an eye condition. During the stage, people can experience a range of emotions, particularly shock, panic and fear.

During stage two, people tend to use strategies to hide their sight loss. It is important for life to carry on as before. They might not want to use any low vision aids in public, such as a white cane, due to embarrassment and being in denial about their sight loss. Due to this, engagement with rehabilitation services are unlikely to be successful in this stage.

Stage three represents a point where the loss of sight begins to impact on the person’s life, so that there are enforced lifestyle
changes, for example, the loss of a driving license or the inability to get out and about unaided. It is at this point that the person experiencing sight loss may be particularly aware of a multitude of losses, practical, emotional and aspirational. This may lead to the very challenging realisation that life can no longer be lived as it previously was before sight loss. I call this the “point of impact.”

Stage four is when a person fully engages with rehabilitation services, such as getting a white cane or a guide dog. This is an immensely difficult stage emotionally. I call it “coming out as a blind person” as “the blindness” is no longer private. The person may struggle to come to terms with a new public identity as a blind person and they may find people react differently to them.

The final stage in this process is where the person begins to accept their sight loss, perhaps through re-conceptualising themselves or their sight condition. A variety of strategies such as scaling the eye condition against a life-threatening condition (e.g. “It’s not going to kill me”), looking on the bright side of life (e.g. “Look at what I can do, not what I can’t do”), or appreciating how sight loss may have brought unexpected, positive life changes (e.g. “My sight loss has actually made me a better person”).

However, this process is not strictly linear. Sometimes the stages don’t necessarily happen in a set order.

For example, one participant from my first research study recounted his experience of attending an eye appointment at the hospital clinic. During the appointment, he was advised not to drive again as his sight had significantly deteriorated. As driving was a significant aspect of his employment, he immediately phoned his employer to share this information. The employer identified a solution involving registering him as disabled at work. So for this person, the point of impact came almost simultaneously at the time of his diagnosis.

In contrast, another participant described losing her sight over many years. She reported it was not until her partner died in later years that her sight loss really impacted her. In this case, the point of impact came many years after diagnosis. Defining the stages is an attempt to capture a process of acquiring sight loss.

The process also highlights that different types of emotional support might be needed at different times in the process of losing sight.
For example, in stage one (diagnosis), frontline support might help a person cope with the shock of the diagnosis.

In stage three (point of impact), counselling might help someone identify and cope with multiple losses.

In stage four (outward signs of sight loss) counselling might help a person explore how they feel about change of identity, whilst peer support might help model practical ways of coping.

People who are unable to move on beyond the point of impact (stage three), may be most at risk of depression and anxiety.

For older people with sight loss, it can be particularly challenging both recognising and admitting that they need support with their mental health. I think it comes from a ‘stiff upper lip’ culture. The younger generation are far more likely to seek out this type of support.

Coping with sight loss on top of aging can be especially challenging, and there is no shame in asking for, or receiving, emotional support or counselling to help with this.

I firmly believe, when your head is in the right place, anything is possible.

Research on the Mental Health Impacts of Visual Impairment

Scottish War Blinded and its sister charity, Royal Blind, have published a report on the emotional and psychological impact of sight loss in order to increase the awareness of the mental health needs of people with sight loss.

The “Emotional Support for Sight Loss” report, published in partnership with the Mental Health Foundation Scotland, has found that mental health problems that arise from sight loss are too often sidelined, leaving people to cope with depression and anxiety alone.

Sight loss can have a significant emotional and psychological impact on people’s lives, with fear, isolation, loss of self-esteem and depression having an impact. Yet according to the recent study, emotional support is rarely offered on diagnosis.

If you would like a copy of the report, please contact Eilidh on eilidh.mccartney@scottishwarblinded.org or 0131 229 1456.

If you have been affected by any of the stories on the emotional impact of sight loss, or wish to speak to someone about your experience, please contact your outreach worker.
Part Two: Merchant Navy Veteran who Sailed the seas during World War Two as part of Artic Convoys Relives his Experience of Life at Sea

In the last edition of The Bugle, we shared part one of the experience of a Merchant Navy veteran who was on-board one of the Arctic Convoys of World War Two.

To recap, David Craig set sail to Russia in 1943 aged 17. In his first expedition, the Radio Officer had to deal with many challenges along the way, including severe weather conditions and enemy fire.

The convoy arrived in Russia in February 1943. The sailors spent three months at the Kola Inlet in Murmansk, Russia, during which they encountered several attacks by the Germans.

Then, on 4 April 1943, the ship came under attack once again.

Here, we share the second half of David’s incredible journey:

David recalls vividly: “I was playing chess in the officers mess when ‘action stations’ sounded and I heard the gunners overhead open fire.

“I went through the pantry, looked out of the door, and saw two JU88 bombers coming up the river.

Everybody was firing at them but they turned away when they got near the ship and started to buzz off.

“Silly me, but I thought we had beaten them off which used to happen occasionally as the Germans had more sense than we gave them credit for.

“I stepped out on deck and was walking along, but unknown to me, the planes had released their bombs before turning away. Four five-hundred-pound bombs exploded at one side of the ship and one one-thousand-pound bomb exploded at the side nearest me and I was blown off my feet.

“I wasn’t conscious of this at the time but it blew me right across the ship and I landed on the steel deck with a whollop. Well, I think it knocked sense into me because I came to and I was starting to get up when one of the gunners who had seen me came running down onto the deck shouting ‘are you alright Sparks?’

“I looked round behind me and there was a nice hole through the steel deck where the bomb had gone right through. When I got to my feet I looked down the hole and it had gone right through the deck below it and into the coal bunkers.
“The Steward then sounded that lunch had been served in the officers mess and shouted ‘grub up, grub up’. So we all went away and got our lunch, because one unexploded bomb is not as important as lunch,” laughed David.

After dinner, the Captain ordered David to signal the British Naval officer in Murmansk to ask whether any bomb disposal personnel were available. But there were none in Russia.

“Although the Dover Hill was only a battered old merchantman, she was our home and no German was going to make us leave her while she was still afloat,” said David.

“The Captain gave everyone three choices: Take a lifeboat to shore for safety, stay aboard and work the ship, or volunteer to get the bomb out of the bunker. Now, I was 18 years of age and I knew it was a bit of a stupid thing to do, so I hesitated for a minute, but the officer next to me who had a wife and two kids stepped forward, so what could I do but also join the squad.

“Nineteen of us volunteered. If the bomb had exploded I would have been blown to bits, but you see I believe that there is always a time to be born and a time to die and I knew my time hadn’t come.

“We had no equipment and none of us had done bomb disposal work. We only had a few shovels borrowed from our stokehold and 19 stout hearts when we started digging back the coal trying to find the bomb. We didn’t know we’d have 22ft to dig before we got to it!

“When we had dug about 10 feet down into the coal we found the tail fins and, by their size, decided our bomb must be a 1000lb one. Unfortunately, the Germans discovered what we were up to and came back and bombed us again, hoping to set off the bomb we were digging for.

“Due to the bomb explosions and the concussion of our own guns the coal fell back into the space where we were digging and things got difficult at times.

“I was ordered to stay with the Captain as the Royal Navy had sent a small destroyer down the river to anchor about half a mile away from us with orders to render assistance if the bomb was to explode. In other words, come and pick up the pieces.

“After two days and two nights hard work, we finally got the bomb up on deck.

“By this point, a Russian Red Air Force Officer had volunteered to help us because he knew we
wouldn’t be able to get the detonator out ourselves.

“One of the sailor’s came running up to tell me that everyone who volunteered had written their name on the bomb apart from me, so they weren’t letting anyone touch it until I had my name on it too.

“I went down to the deck where the bomb was to write my name, but they had all written their names so big there was no room. I couldn’t roll the bomb over in case I set it off so I wrote my name using chalk around the detonator after carefully cleaning all the muck off.

“Most of the crew were Scottish or Londoners, and the Londoners like a cup of tea before they do anything. So, as we had the bomb on deck and had all written our names, we went for a cup of tea in the officers’ mess before we did anything else.

“After finishing our tea, three of us volunteered to go back and help. We said: ‘We’re British Merchant Navy Officers so we’re not leaving the Russian alone to take the detonator out’; not that we could help him.

“We had no equipment or skills but we volunteered to accompany him. He started with a big extractor to unscrew the detonator but it stuck after a few turns. He had his foot up against the bomb and was swearing at it at the same time and it wouldn’t move. So, he went into his pockets to get a metal punch and a hammer and started to hammer the side of the detonator. Every time he hit it the hair on my neck stood up straight against my duffle coat.

“He got it moving and unscrewed it and said the bomb was safe, so we dumped it over the side into the Kola Inlet, where it probably lies to this day.”

The 19 crewmen who bravely volunteered were commemorated for their role in digging up the bomb. Five Senior Officers were awarded the Order of the British Empire (OBE) and 14 were awarded the King’s Commendation for brave conduct.

The ship lay at anchor during the summer months, exposed by long daylight hours which resulted in frequent attacks. David said: “Three out of four ships were damaged, including ours, so on 17 May we left the Kola Inlet and moved to Ekonomiya at the mouth of the Dvina River. I think to give the gunners a rest.

“We spent the rest of the time at the White sea just passing the time. We were very scarce of food and suffered from malnutrition. We were living off of spam and black bread
for breakfast, lunch and dinner. The bread tasted like vinegar.

**Heading Home**

Eventually the winter came which brought long periods of darkness, so in November 1943, the sailors were finally given the long awaited go ahead to leave Russia and sail home.

“We used the dark to stay safe. We couldn’t leave any earlier as that would mean sailing across the North Cape in daylight hours which would result in us having no shelter.

“We joined convoy RA54B and sailed round the edge of the ice to the north of Iceland and then dropped down to avoid the Germans. The Germans attacked another convoy headed to Russia but didn’t bother us; they had had enough of us,” said David.

After 10 long months at sea, David and the rest of the sailors arrived in London on 14 December 1943. David said: “When we sailed up London River towards Surrey Commercial Docks, with our Red Ensign flying and patches on our decks and side, we were as proud of the old ship as if she had been a spick and span Navy vessel arriving in port.”

After spending Christmas at home and ‘fattening up’, David returned to college to get his chief’s ticket before joining a liner ship as Chief Radio Officer. “I sailed all over the world. I was in Greece when the war ended.

“I fell in love with a girl from Kilmarnock and I didn’t fancy leaving her to sail around the world. So I gave up being at sea and worked in Kilmarnock.

“When I was in Russia, I never thought of being courageous. All we wanted to do was to stay alive and stay in one bit,” David exclaimed.

Today, David has macular degeneration and lives with poor sight, but is supported by Scottish War Blinded and his daughter, Dorothy, who lives nearby.

**Army Veteran who Served in the Black Watch Royal Highland Regiment during the Korean War shares his Experience of Life on the Front Line**

Jimmy Rodger, of Dundee, was called up for national service at the age of 18 and wanted to follow in the footsteps of his uncle who was a Pipe Major in the Black Watch during the Second World War.

However, things initially did not go to plan for the keen piper. “After six-weeks of training, I was selected for another regiment but I was desperate to get into the Black Watch,” said Jimmy.
A belt maker to trade, Jimmy, now aged 86, said: “I went to see the Pipe Major and I was told it was bad news. He told me I wasn’t getting into the pipe band as they weren’t recruiting any more national servicemen. ‘Is that all?’ I asked him. So I decided to sign on and become a regular.”

The step-father-of-two served as a Piper in the Black Watch from 1951-54, the majority of which was spent in South Korea during the Korean War and Kenya during the Mau Mau uprising.

Having spent nearly one year in Germany, the young Piper returned to Crail in Fife to be re-kitted before travelling by boat to Busan in South Korea in May 1952, a journey which took over six weeks. “We all knew what was happening in Korea but we were care free at the time,” Jimmy said. “What else could you do?

“We were told that there had been a break in the 38th parallel and that North Korea, with support from China, had overrun an awful lot of South Korea. Places like Britain, France, Canada and Australia all had to send forces and do their share to help the south,” said the grandfather-of-four and great-grandfather-of-three.

Jimmy and the rest of the Black Watch Battalion joined the 29th British Infantry Brigade on the front line near Panmunjom on the border at the 38th parallel.

The pipe band was also a fighting platoon meaning Jimmy spent most of his time on the front line during his time in Korea, but the bagpipes were never far from the passionate piper.

Jimmy said: “When I was at the camp, I heard a song on the radio called Arirang which is a Korean folk song. I couldn’t understand anything apart from the rhythm, so I created my own version on the bagpipes.

“We would spend six weeks on the front line then we would get two weeks off at the camp to get a shower and a bed and the South Koreans would provide entertainment. They got very excited when I played Arirang on the bagpipes.”

But life on the front line was far from Jimmy’s experience of camp and didn’t come without its challenges.

“On the front line, we dug holes in the ground called hootchies to sleep in which we covered with sandbags to make a roof,” Jimmy explained. “Four of us shared a hootchie, but there would only ever be two in it at a time, unless we were being fired at and needed to get out of the way.”
“There were times on the frontline when shells were flying towards us and we would say: ‘roll on death. Demob is too slow’.

“We couldn’t do anything when they were battering us. Some nights it would go quiet and we could walk about on guard. One night in particular, I remember hearing ‘go home Scottie, let the Americans fight their own battle!’

“It was coming from a big wire hanging from a plane circling above me. All I could hear was a loud buzzing noise and I saw a massive speaker hanging in front of me.

“They wanted to show us that isn’t our war.

“They would hang microphones on the barbed wire fences around our compound to play music for us. We just reckoned that we would rather that than them shooting at us. It made us feel more comfortable.

“There was a mutual respect. The Chinese were just young laddies. I mean we were young but they were even younger.”

Image on the left shows Jimmy as a piper in the Black Watch, and now on the right
The front line ran along the border between North Korea and South Korea which was dominated by hillside. Jimmy said: “The units were all defending different parts of the line, but we took it in turns to defend the highest point, called the hook, as this was the most heavily attacked part of the line.

“The Chinese wanted the hook so they could see what was happening behind the lines. The Americans had already lost it three times. They were good at attacking but not defending so lots of American lives were lost on the hook as they were too exposed. They would shake hands before going up the line as if they were not coming back.

“We refused to defend the hook unless we could dig deeper.”

On 17 November 1952, the Black Watch were defending the hook when they came under attack. “It was freezing cold, around -30 degrees and we hadn’t finished digging the deeper trenches,” said Jimmy.

“We were attacked by a bomb. The pipe major next to me lost his leg and I was knocked out.

“The next thing I knew, a sergeant was shaking me and asking if I was alright. I eventually came to but I didn’t know where I was or what had happened. The sergeant passed me my steal hat and told me to keep it as a souvenir. The shrapnel from the bomb went right through.

“We were surrounded by the Chinese. Anyone who was capable of getting out had to get themselves up to the top of the hill. We went up through the trenches – it was pitch black apart from the shells that were exploding around us.

“We went into the trench at the top of the hill, although it still had no roof, and there were around 30 of us standing shoulder to shoulder with one another,” said Jimmy.

“There was smoke all over the place because of the shells. We were on the highest point facing away from the frontline and the commander told us to throw our hand grenades, rifles and ammunition belts over the side of the hill.

“We called on a defense attack which meant our own defense had to fire above us, as close as they could.

“Two big tanks came up the hill in front of us. The next thing we know a tank was right above our heads.

“Everything went even darker. The other tank was over the other side of the trench.

“Then we heard ‘fire’.
“But before the tanks were able to fire, we were hit.

“The tank went on fire right above our heads. One of the boys jumped out with an extinguisher and that is when I heard on the radio: man severely injured. The voice on the other end asked if he was breathing. Eventually the radio boy replied to say he was dead – he was our signalman.

“We couldn’t go anywhere, so we said the Lord’s Prayer for the man who had lost his life.

“Then the message came to open fire. The whole place lit up and that’s what saved us. That’s how we saved the hook.

“When daylight came, we didn’t recognise the place. The ground was still smoking.

“We kept the hook but we lost around 100 men that night.”

In July 1953, the conflict eventually came to a ceasefire. “It was decided that a border would remain along the 38th parallel, there was no negotiating,” Jimmy said.

“A peace agreement has still never been signed so to this day there are no open borders.”

The Korean War is often referred to as the forgotten war. “People just don’t realise how important it was,” said Jimmy.

“If South Korea was taken by China and North Korea, there would have been third World War.”

Looking back on his army career, Jimmy said there were “good times and bad times.”

He said: “I got to play the bagpipes at balls and galas so it wasn’t all gloom. I spent three weeks in Tokyo playing at lots of different events which made a change from army life.”

Jimmy’s unit travelled from South Korea to Kenya where he fought against the Mau Mau uprising until August 1954.

Jimmy settled in Dundee and worked in the textiles industry until he retired in 1991. His deteriorating sight, caused by glaucoma, means he now receives support from Scottish War Blinded’s outreach team. Jimmy can no longer play his beloved bagpipes, although he still enjoys playing the chanter and can fondly remember the songs he played during the army.

Were you in South Korea during the Korean War? Or do you know of anybody who was? Jimmy is keen to hear from anyone who served in the Korean War, or was in the Black Watch. If this applies to you and you would like to get in touch with Jimmy, please contact Eilidh by phone or email.
**Home Energy Scotland**

Home Energy Scotland is an energy advice service funded by the Scottish Government. They provide free and impartial advice on how to make your home easier to heat, which will help you to save money, make your home warmer and more comfortable and reduce your carbon footprint.

Home Energy Scotland can point you in the direction of where to get a benefits check or find out about any discounts or options available to help with your energy bills.

Depending on your situation, Home Energy Scotland states that you could also get help with the costs of insulation, draught-proofing, or heating systems.

Their advice is individual to you and, no matter what your personal or financial situation is, they can help.

Home Energy Scotland gives advice mainly over the telephone, but they are also happy to visit you at home if you would prefer.

For more information call Home Energy Scotland free on 0808 808 2282. Advisors are available Monday to Friday from 8am to 8pm, and on Saturday from 9am to 5pm.

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**Tesco Helps Customers with Hidden Disabilities**

Tesco has introduced sunflower lanyards in its stores for those who have a disability and may require additional assistance.

Following a successful pilot, the lanyards were introduced across the country in December 2019 to ensure its stores are more accessible and inclusive. Tesco states on their website: “The sunflower lanyard acts as a discreet sign that the wearer has a hidden disability and could require additional assistance.

“Tesco colleagues will be able to offer help such as speaking face-to-face to allow lip reading, packing bags and taking them to customers’ cars or reading labels for partially-sighted customers. Every store will display a permanent sign which says that the sunflower lanyard is recognised there.”

We understand that shopping can be a daunting task for those with a visual impairment. Tesco’s new initiative aims to eradicate any uncertainty, helping you to do your food shop more confidently and comfortably.

For more information, please speak to the help desk in your local store.
Creative Corner

Poetry by Dave Phillips

Scottish War Blinded member and keen poet, Dave Phillips, whose poems are regularly feature in The Bugle, recently demonstrated his work at an exhibition showcasing how creativity can benefit the mental and physical wellbeing of veterans.

Help for Heroes’ Creative Force Scotland exhibition featured artwork by Band of Brothers’ veterans and their families who are recovering from physical or psychological injuries.

Dave said: “Band of Brothers is a group of people who support each other by lifting each other’s spirits. It’s about helping each other through the mental aspect rather than the physical. We understand each other.

“I’ve been inspired by seeing what other people are capable of. It just goes to show that people’s souls aren’t broken as a result of the forces.”

The exhibition inspired Dave to write the following poem:

**Creative Force**

Broken bodies
Broken Minds
The wheelchair bound
The lost, the blind

The permanently spoilt of war
Duties done for ever more

No solo Trans-Atlantic Row
No yomp with Harry in the snow

No Paralympic medal fame
No place in the Invictus Games

Yet just as broken
Just as stressed
And maybe not so young
Nor blessed

With any superhuman fitness
The work they do bears solemn witness
To the battles they still fight each day
Each piece reminds us of the way

They use the function that remains
To give some respite from the pain

And here in wood and paint and clay
In words and photos on display
These veterans reach out a hand
To help you try and understand

The strength that they all still possess
Is really neither more nor less
Than the amputee
Up Everest
Poetry by Jimmy Johnstone

In the last edition of The Bugle, we shared the story of Jimmy Johnstone, a 51st Highland Division veteran who was captured at St Valery during World War Two. He survived five years as a prisoner of war, predominantly in Poland. His ordeal in the camps concluded with an unimaginable death march through freezing temperatures as the German army succumbed to the Allied invasion.

Jimmy’s story was shared in national and regional newspapers and, as a result, Jimmy was united with Sandy, the son of Bert Petrie, one of the soldiers he was seeking.

Jimmy said: “Meeting Sandy was very emotional as I didn’t think I would get any response to my appeal. I just couldn’t believe it was happening.

“We talked about Bert and life in the POW camps. I spoke about when we met. This was while we were waiting to go into the ‘cooler’ after one of my escapes. I told Sandy what a brave man his dad was. He stood up to the German guards and refused to work until they got more food. The German guard held him at gunpoint but he didn’t give in and they got more food. I admired Bert for that.”

Jimmy wrote a poignant poem about his experience of World War Two which he would like to share with his fellow veterans:

When I returned at the end of the war
From the Stalag where I’d been confined
I read of the battles the allies had fought
Stalingrad, Alemein and the Rhine
With pride in their hearts
People spoke of Dunkirk
Where defeat had become victory
But nobody mentioned the Highland Division
They’d never heard of St Valery
No stories, no statues for those who were killed
No honours for those who were caught
Just a deep sense of shame
As though we were to blame
Though I know in my heart we were not
So I’ve moved to a country I’ve come to call home
But my homeland is far o’er the sea
I will never return while my memories still burn
On the beaches of St Valery
Upcoming Trips and Activities

The Gathering and Northern Gathering
Due to the success of last year’s events, we are pleased to hold two Gatherings again in 2020.

The Northern Gathering is for members in the northerly areas of Scotland and will be held at the Hilton Treetops Hotel in Aberdeen on Thursday 2 and Friday 3 April.

Our flagship event, The Gathering, is for all members. Once again, the event will be held at the Golden Jubilee Conference Hotel in Clydebank, on Thursday 3 and Friday 4 September.

As these events are so popular, we will be making some changes to how places are allocated.

In discussion with the Members’ Councils, it was agreed that a first come first served arrangement was no longer fair. Instead, when invitations are sent out, members will be able to request a place but attendance will not be confirmed immediately.

Places will be allocated when all requests have been received, with priority going to those who did not attend in the previous year.

We hope more newer members and their guests will now be able to experience these special events.

Invitations will be sent to members later this year.

Reunions
There will be 13 reunion lunches held in locations throughout the country from May to August.

For a list of dates and venues, please visit the ‘events’ tab of our website. Alternatively, please speak to your outreach worker for details of your local reunion.

Members will receive an invitation to their nearest reunion for themselves and a guest closer to the time.

Bowling and Archery Competitions
Our annual bowling and archery competitions were both won by the Hawkhead Team in 2019.

This year, Team Linburn is out for revenge!

For those who do not attend a centre and would like to take part in the bowling or archery competitions, you are most welcome.

The date and venue for both competitions will be published in the coming months. Any member who can get themselves to the events will be welcome.

Hawkhead is the team to beat!
Members’ Challenge 2020

After the huge success of our first members’ challenge, which saw members throughout the country take part in Gordon’s 500-mile walking challenge, we are delighted to be planning another exciting challenge for members to take part in this summer.

Feedback from last year’s event showed us that members enjoyed getting involved, whether as part of a group or individually. For many, the challenge has had a lasting effect as members have continued to walk on a regular basis.

This year, the challenge will involve more physical activity and we hope to include distances covered by other forms of exercise, such as swimming, cycling or even climbing.

More details will be revealed in the spring edition of The Bugle in April.

We hope to have even more members take part throughout the country. Let’s make this year’s challenge even bigger and better than last year!

Members’ Council Update

Our three Members’ Councils continue to provide essential feedback, suggestions and advice to Scottish War Blinded staff.

Details of the two Centre Members’ Councils can be found on the centre noticeboards. The General Members’ Council is for anyone who does not attend a centre, details of who to contact are as follows:

Jo Long (Inverness)  
j.long3@btinternet.com

Rod Murchison (Inverness)  
themurchisons@googlemail.com

Alf Gibbons (Dundee)  
alf_gibbons@hotmail.com

Harvey Grainger (Aberdeen)  
harveygrainger@btinternet.com

Ally Reid (Aberdeenshire)  
allyureid@hotmail.com

Alan Reid (East Renfrewshire)  
alanrd5@aol.com

We would love to hear from anyone interested in joining the General Members’ Council. The Council meets three times a year in Perth and keeps in regular contact via email. If you are willing and able to be part of an important aspect of the way Scottish War Blinded provides its services, please contact Rebecca at rebecca.barr@scottishwarblinded.org.
**Outreach Workers’ Transport**

All Scottish War Blinded staff are part of the Royal Blind Group and there have been some changes made by the Group to the way that staff transport is organised. This will not affect your outreach worker making a visit to you at home, but in some areas may mean they no longer provide transport directly to you.

We know that this may cause some inconvenience to a few of you, and if it means you can no longer attend regular events, please discuss alternative arrangements with your outreach worker.

**WW2 Veterans Appeal**

Are you a World War Two veteran who would like to share your experience of life during the war?

This year marks the 75th anniversary of VE Day. To commemorate, we’re looking to share the stories of World War Two veterans in our newsletters and in local and national newspapers, for fellow veterans and younger generations to learn from.

If you would like to share your World War Two story, Eilidh or Jos, both of whom work in the Marketing Team at Scottish War Blinded and write stories about our members, would be honoured to pay you a visit to chat to you about your time in the forces.

If you are interested, please contact Eilidh on 0131 229 1456 (extension 2047) or email to eilidh.mccartney@scottishwarblinded.org.
Thank you for reading the latest edition of The Bugle. If you would like to give feedback or submit content for a future edition, please get in contact with Eilidh:

Get in touch:
Email: eilidh.mccartney@scottishwarblinded.org
Phone: 0131 229 1456 (extension 2047)

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