

# Veterans Newsletter NI



Issue #3

May 2025

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Veterans' John Ross and Janet help step into spring celebrating service, stories and new beginnings

## Springing Forward: Celebrating Progress, Connection & What's to Come for NI Veterans

Spring has sprung, and with it comes a fresh wave of activity across Northern Ireland's veteran community. The last few months have been incredibly busy and there's even more to look forward to in the weeks ahead.

In this edition, we bring you updates and stories from across the region. From the inspiring Veteran Roadshows held earlier this year, to the Minister for Veterans and People, Alastair Carns MP, visiting in March, there's been no shortage of momentum.

We're also pleased to share early plans for Armed Forces Day in Newtownards this June, and take a look at how organisations across Northern Ireland are preparing to mark this year's VE Day commemorations.

Plus, we're excited to introduce a brand new initiative, the Veterans Commissioner's Podcast, offering a new platform to hear from voices across the veteran community.

There's a lot going on, a lot to celebrate, and a lot still to come. We hope you enjoy reading this latest edition of the Veterans Newsletter Northern Ireland as much as we've enjoyed putting it together.

Warm regards,  
The Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner's Office

# Reflections on My First 100 Days as Veterans Commissioner

David Johnstone

Now that my first 100 days in post have passed, I suppose I can no longer refer to myself as the 'new' Veterans Commissioner! The 1st of January already feels like a distant memory, especially with the team reminding me that we've logged over 140 engagements in that short time.

It has been invaluable to get out on the ground and meet with veterans, elected representatives both in Northern Ireland and Westminster, and the many organisations dedicated to supporting our veteran community. I've been truly humbled by the incredible work being carried out, often on a voluntary basis, by charities whose sole motivation is to serve veterans and their families.

Our office continues to work closely with the Veterans Welfare Service and the Office for Veterans' Affairs to help ensure veterans receive the health and welfare support they deserve. This collaborative effort is vital in delivering the joined-up services our community needs.



NI Veterans Commissioner David Johnstone, Royal Irish veteran at Coleraine Veterans Roadshow & Minister for Veterans & People Al Carns MP



Answering the hard questions for Cool FM in an interview regarding legacy.

Legacy remains a significant part of my remit, and I remain steadfast in ensuring that those who served during Operation Banner are not overlooked or unfairly criticised. Their service must be acknowledged with the dignity it deserves.

The role of Veterans Commissioner is nothing if not varied, something that has been particularly evident in recent weeks. I had the honour of presenting medals to the family of Dean Lockhart, who sadly passed in 2021 from hidden wounds. Shortly after, I had the great privilege of presenting a framed image of poppies to Captain John Gough, a Second World War veteran, in celebration of his remarkable 100th birthday.

These moments, both solemn and celebratory, serve as powerful reminders of the importance of this role, and the ongoing need to honour, support, and remember those who have served.



NI Veterans Commissioner & Veterans Champions for eight of our local Councils.

**Email: [Commissioner@nivco.co.uk](mailto:Commissioner@nivco.co.uk)**





# Once a Warrior, Life Beyond the Uniform

## A New Podcast Series from the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner's Office

When David Johnstone was appointed as Northern Ireland's Veterans Commissioner, one of his first ambitions was to capture and preserve the powerful, personal stories of local veterans through a format that was both accessible and engaging. This ambition gave rise to *Once a Warrior, Life Beyond the Uniform* – a brand new podcast series that shines a light on the lived experiences of veterans from across Northern Ireland.

This podcast is a first for the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner's Office, a bold and innovative project that has grown through collaboration, reflection, and the remarkable willingness of veterans to share their stories.

Over the past few months, eight episodes have been recorded, featuring an inspiring cross-section of veterans who served in different conflicts and roles, including:

- Members of the Ulster Defence Regiment (Home Service)
- A former paratrooper & Falklands War veteran
- A female Royal Army Combat Medic with experience in Afghanistan
- An RAF engineer
- And Alistair Carns MP, Minister for Veterans and People, who offers his own unique perspective from the front line



Above – Veteran Army Medic Rosie Rowbotham talks about her time in Afghanistan and studying for her Masters in Emergency Medicine



Left – UDR (CGC) Veteran Charlie Marno records our first podcast, paving the way for other veterans to open up about their experiences – giving an honest account about serving during the Troubles in our own hometown communities.



The podcast explores not only where and how these veterans served, but also why they joined, what they experienced during service, and how life has unfolded beyond the uniform. It's about the people behind the medals – their motivations, memories, and transitions into civilian life.

This is only the beginning. The Commissioner's Office hopes to include as many diverse voices as possible, with a special focus on hearing from World War II veterans before their generation is lost to time. Future episodes will also include those who served across the globe in humanitarian and peacekeeping roles – reflecting the full scope of Britain's military presence around the world.

*Once a Warrior, Life Beyond the Uniform* is available to stream now via Podbean, and can also be accessed through our website [www.nivco.co.uk](http://www.nivco.co.uk), as well as Spotify, YouTube, Amazon, and Apple Podcasts.

**SUBSCRIBE NOW**

**If you would like to tell your story, please get in touch with the Veterans Commissioner's Office by emailing: [commissioner@nivco.co.uk](mailto:commissioner@nivco.co.uk)**

We encourage everyone to subscribe, listen, and share this important work. These are stories that matter – to our history, to our community, and to future generations. Thank you to all the veterans who have bravely stepped forward to share their voices.



# Listening, Learning, Leading: Minister Carns Engages with Northern Ireland Veterans

At the beginning of March, the Minister for Veterans and People, Alistair Carns MP, visited Northern Ireland for a series of engagements to gain a deeper understanding of the current landscape – including its service communities, support organisations and importantly, Northern Ireland veterans.

As a veteran who served in Cookstown during Operation Banner, the Minister noted the significant transformation Northern Ireland has undergone since the days of the Troubles. His visit offered the opportunity to meet with organisations and charities dedicated to supporting veterans and their families. Among those he met and visited were representatives from the Veterans Welfare Service Northern Ireland, Ashes to Gold, local Council Veterans Champions, the Royal Irish Museum and the Veterans Commissioner for Northern Ireland among others.

A key part of the visit was the Minister's attendance at a Veterans' Roadshow in Coleraine, where he was able to meet veterans face-to-face and hear directly from them about their experiences. The event showcased the support structures currently in place for veterans, highlighting both areas of success and areas where improvements could still be made.

During his engagements, the Minister met with veterans from all backgrounds, including members of the Serving and Ex-Serving Women's Network and veterans involved in legacy work. His open approach provided an opportunity for candid conversations about the needs of the veteran community.

During the course of his visit, Minister Carns also sat down with David Johnstone (NI Veterans Commissioner) to record an open and candid interview for the new podcast series – Once a Warrior, Life Beyond the Uniform. They discussed the Minister's time in service, his decision to leave the Royal Marines after a successful career, and what he hopes for the future. The full podcast is now available to listen or view via the NIVCO website or on [www.Podbean.com](http://www.Podbean.com).

The visit was a valuable opportunity to showcase the services and support available to veterans across Northern Ireland, and to share best practices that ensure veterans and their families continue to receive the assistance they deserve now and into the future.



Minister for Veterans & People, Alistair Carns MP meets NI Walking for the Wounded Case Worker Louise McCreadie at Coleraine Veterans Roadshow – March 2025



Minister for Veterans & People, Alistair Carns MP talks to a veteran at Coleraine Veterans Roadshow



NI Council Veterans Champions, NI Veterans Commissioner & OVA NI meeting with Minister for Veterans & People, Alistair Carns MP – March 2025



# Veterans' Roadshows Are Back – Connecting and Supporting Northern Ireland's Veterans

Already this year, roadshows have taken place in Cookstown, Lisburn, Coleraine, and Omagh, with the next event scheduled for Bangor on the 3rd of June. These events are designed to connect veterans and their families directly with organisations that offer vital support, advice, and services.

More than just an information session, the roadshows offer a relaxed and welcoming space for veterans to catch up, reminisce, and share experiences. They create a safe environment where veterans can be themselves, reconnect with old friends, and discuss any support needs they may have.

The Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner's Office is committed to making sure every veteran knows help is available if they ever need it. So far, the roadshows have reached hundreds of veterans and their families and continue to be a vital outreach tool for the community.

Each roadshow includes a light lunch, opportunities to meet supportive organisations, and a chance to celebrate and recognise service in an informal setting.



Veterans catch up with each other at the Veterans Roadshow in Cookstown – Jan 2025



Laura from Reading Force with veterans and families at the Veterans Roadshow in Omagh – Apr 2025



Mark Ewing of VASP & Sarah Waugh from Combat Stress



Veterans at the Cookstown Veterans Roadshow – Jan 2025



NI Veterans Commissioner David Johnstone, Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council veterans Champion James Tinsley and UDR Veterans at the Veterans Roadshow, Lisburn – Feb 2025

**If you would like to register for an upcoming roadshow, please visit [www.nivco.co.uk](http://www.nivco.co.uk).**



# Upcoming AAVS Veteran Activities

## Get Involved!

Spring and summer are shaping up to be a vibrant season of connection, support, and wellbeing for our veterans' community, with a host of exciting initiatives and events organised by AAVS. Whether you're looking to stay active, meet fellow veterans, or simply enjoy the outdoors, there's something for everyone:

### Veterans' Breakfasts – East Belfast & Shankill

Join us for a warm welcome and great conversation at our monthly Veterans' Breakfasts, held on the 2nd and last Saturday of each month. Locations alternate between Ledley Hall in East Belfast and the Shankill Road, providing a relaxed space to connect with others over a hearty breakfast.



Veterans attending the AAVS veterans Breakfast at Ledley Hall, Belfast for great craic, banter, connection and even a free haircut!!



### AAVS Veterans Community Gardens – Opening May

Coming soon to the Shankill Road, our Veterans Community Gardens will offer a peaceful sanctuary for veterans and their families. With opportunities to engage in horticulture, crafts, and outdoor cooking, this new space will promote wellbeing, learning, and connection. Opening date to be confirmed – stay tuned!

### AAVS Tri-Service Football Club

Calling all footballers! The AAVS Tri-Service Football Club is open to veterans from all branches of the Armed Forces. With training sessions and matches scheduled throughout the year, it's a great way to stay active, build friendships, and enjoy the spirit of sport.



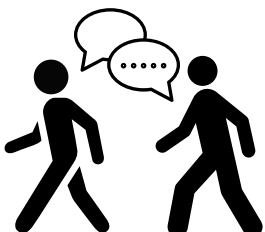
Left – The AA Veterans Tri-Service Team competing against Orangefield Over 35s (Crocks) on Sunday 6 April 2025

### Race the Sun – Saturday 31st May

AAVS is proud to launch Race the Sun, a challenging three-discipline charity event in support of veteran services. Participants will hike, cycle, and kayak the full length of the River Bann, from source to sea – starting at sunrise and finishing by sunset. All funds raised will go directly to support the work of AAVS. A true test of endurance, teamwork, and purpose.

### Wednesday Walk 'n' Talk – Launching 30th April

Our new Wednesday Walk 'n' Talk series kicks off on Wednesday 30th April, starting with a scenic walk through the Cregagh Glen in East Belfast. These weekly walks are open to all fitness levels and provide a fantastic opportunity to enjoy the outdoors while engaging in casual conversation and camaraderie.





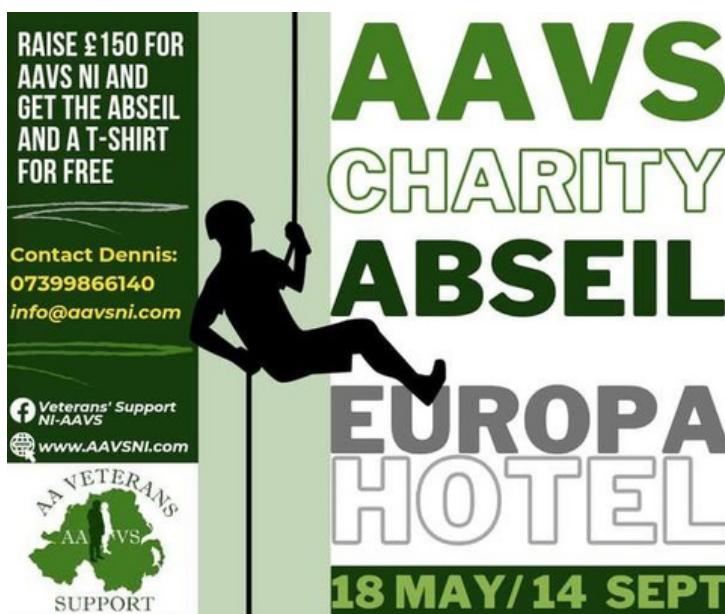
# Take on the Challenge of a Lifetime – Abseil for AAVSNI!

Fancy ticking off a bucket list adventure while supporting a great cause? Now's your chance! Join AAVSNI for a thrilling abseil down Belfast's iconic Europa Hotel – choose from two dates: Saturday 18th May or Saturday 14th September.

By taking part, you'll be helping AAVSNI continue its vital work supporting veterans across Northern Ireland – providing assistance, advocacy, and community to those who've served.

To register or find out more, contact Dennis on 07399 866 140 or email [info@AAVSNI.com](mailto:info@AAVSNI.com).

Why not get involved – or just see what AAVSNI can do for you?



Whether you're interested in sport, wellbeing, socialising, or simply being part of a supportive community, there's a place for you at AAVS. For more information or to get involved, please get in touch or follow us on social media.

**To contact AA Veteran Support, Tel: 028 9074 7071 or Email: Info@aavsnl.com**

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## North Coast Veterans Visit Malta to Explore WWII Heritage

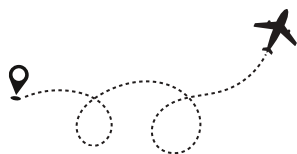
A group of five veterans from the North Coast Veterans Group recently travelled to Malta to visit key Second World War sites, as part of an educational and commemorative trip from 1–5 April.

One of the highlights of the visit was a warm and memorable stop at the Royal British Legion, Malta GC, where the group was kindly welcomed by Chairman Peter Gauci and Secretary Steve McCarthy. The meeting was an opportunity to hear about the important work the RBL continues to do for veterans living in Malta GC, as well as the range of commemorations they host throughout the year.

During the visit, plaques were exchanged, and stories and experiences were shared, strengthening the connection between the veteran communities of Northern Ireland and Malta. It was an honour to represent Northern Ireland veterans and learn more about Malta's proud history and continued dedication to remembrance and support.



Pictured (left to right): Stephen O'Hara, Joe McLaughlin, Steve McCarthy (rear), Peter Gauci, Christopher Laverty (rear), Ken McClatchey and Tommie Linton MBE.



# Marking VE80 in Kilkeel: Exhibition, Veterans Breakfast & Street Tattoo Celebration



Veterans Military Breakfast featuring some of those in attendance – Sat 15 March 2025



A full room of veterans and locals attended historical talk by historian Quincey Dougan about VE Day at the VE Day Exhibition hosted by the Schomberg Society – Kilkeel



A taste of history, a local pupil dresses in WW2 uniform that formed part of the VE Day Exhibition in Kilkeel

As we approach the 80th anniversary of Victory in Europe Day, the Schomberg Society in proud association with the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner hosted a series of commemorative events in Kilkeel to honour the service and sacrifice of our veterans.

## VE80 Exhibition – A Tribute Through Time

The exhibition that ran from Monday 28th April to Friday 2nd May 2025, the VE80 Exhibition showcased artefacts and memorabilia from the VE Day era alongside intricate displays from the Veterans Modelling Group NI. A special highlight of the week was the historical talk by historian Quincey Dougan on Tuesday 29th April, exploring the significance of VE Day. Refreshments will be provided.

## Veterans Military Breakfast – A St Patrick's Day Salute

On Saturday 15th March 2025, Reivers House hosted over 80 veterans and guests for a St Patrick's Military Veterans Breakfast, organised in partnership with Newry Mourne and Down District Council Veterans Champion, Cllr Henry Reilly. The event paid tribute to military traditions with the piping in and presentation of the shamrock. Attendees heard a powerful story from Noel Downey of the SEFF Victims Group, while Charlie Marno from the NI Defence Gardens Scheme offered support and advice.

A special performance from Piper Mark Smyth and the Kirknarra Highland Dancers added a memorable cultural flourish.

## VE80 Street Tattoo – A Grand Public Celebration

In Kilkeel Town Centre on Monday 5th May a VE80 Street Tattoo, and evening of remembrance, music, pageantry, and community spirit took place in the heart of Kilkeel. The Tattoo with marching bands, performances from The Victory Rollers, Kathryn Stewart's Highland Dancers, Fifes and Lambeg drums, and re-enactments marking the VE80 anniversary.

The parade followed through the town, culminating at the Mourne Esplanade with an act of Remembrance and the lighting of a commemorative Beacon and a 21 cannon gun salute. Special guests included the NI Veterans Commissioner and the Lord Lieutenant for County Down.

This free event was open to everyone, and we're proud to have local veterans involved in every stage of its planning and delivery.

We would like to thank all members of the public who come out and support these meaningful events as we honour 80 years since VE Day.



# Thrive Together: Building Stronger Support Networks for Veterans and Families

Thrive Together marks the second phase of the Veterans, People, Places and Pathways (VPPP) programme and represents a significant step forward in enhancing support for the UK's veteran community. While the original VPPP programme focused solely on veterans, Thrive Together expands its scope to include veterans' families, recognising the vital role they play in the transition from service to civilian life.

The programme is designed to build sustainable, resilient support networks that offer timely, tailored assistance. It aims to empower veterans and families alike through seamless access to physical and mental health support, strengthened peer connections, and integration into local communities. By fostering collaboration and long-term partnerships, Thrive Together is working to secure a stronger future for all who have served.

Spanning 10 areas across the UK, the Thrive Together programme is led in Northern Ireland by Brookhouse Health and Wellbeing. As part of the initial development phase, Brookhouse undertook a series of in-depth, face-to-face consultations across Northern Ireland in late 2024. These sessions revealed a strong desire among veterans for local hubs that provide opportunities for peer support and meaningful connection.



Following this consultation phase, the programme opened to bids from organisations for Armed Forces Covenant funding. As a result, six veterans' hubs across Northern Ireland were awarded grants:

- Londonderry Veterans Hub
- Military and Police Support of West Tyrone
- Regenerate Veterans Group, Portadown
- Beyond the Battlefield, Newtownards
- Brookehouse, Fermanagh
- Schomberg Society, Kilkeel

Each of these hubs will contribute to a mutually supportive, cross-connected network, helping to ensure that veterans across the region can access the help they need, whether it's through their local hub or through referrals within the wider network.

Here in Northern Ireland, we benefit from a close-knit and highly informed veterans' support sector, where organisations work together to make sure no veteran is left behind. The Thrive Together programme builds on this strength, aiming to reinforce and expand the support systems already in place.

Stay tuned for our next issue, where we'll share more updates on when and how the Thrive Together programme will be fully operational across Northern Ireland.



# Veterans Champions Across Northern Ireland: Local Support, Lasting Impact

Across Northern Ireland, each of our 11 councils has appointed a Veterans Champion — individuals committed to supporting and connecting veterans in their local areas. These champions act as signposts to services, build peer networks, and foster greater understanding of military service within our communities.

While approaches vary across councils, the shared goal remains the same: to ensure veterans are recognised, supported, and never left behind.

In North Down, Trevor Cummings remains a dedicated advocate, regularly engaging with veterans groups and community events. North Down will also proudly host this year's Armed Forces Day on 21st June at Newtownards Airfield.

In Antrim & Newtownabbey, Alison Bennington has grown the Veterans Breakfast network and supported wellbeing initiatives, including a successful veteran fitness programme. She also recently helped commemorate the lives lost in Massereene Barracks, underlining her commitment to remembrance.



Veterans Champion for Mid Ulster Eva Cahoon pictured alongside NI Veterans Commissioner and Vice-Chair of Mid Ulster Council Wesley Brown

Eva Cahoon in Mid Ulster has supported events for former UDR Greenfinches and helped relaunch the Veterans Roadshow in Cookstown, reconnecting veterans with vital services.

In Omagh & Fermanagh, Errol Thompson coordinated a well-received Veterans Roadshow in April, helping foster a supportive environment for local veterans and organisations.

Henry Reilly, representing Newry, Mourne & Down, continues to support veterans through outreach, engagement, and respectful advocacy in what is often a complex and sensitive setting.

Billy Ashe in Mid & East Antrim supports a dedicated veterans programme that offers both recognition and practical help to those who've served.



Veterans Champion for North Down and Ards Council Trevor Cummings alongside veterans attending a Veteran Breakfast at Beyond the Battlefields, Harbour House in Portavogie

James Lawlor of Belfast City Council recently brought forward a motion for the council to sign the Armed Forces Covenant — a key pledge to ensure veterans are not disadvantaged. Although narrowly defeated, his continued efforts reflect the importance of building understanding and inclusion within a diverse political landscape.

Philip Anderson of Causeway Coast & Glens continues his active advocacy, having helped deliver the Coleraine Roadshow, attended by the Minister for Veterans and People.

Left: Veterans Champion for Causeway Coast & Glens Philip Anderson chats to veteran and Welfare Case Worker Tommie Linton.







Above: Veterans Champion (Errol Thompson) and Chair (John McClaughry) for Fermanagh & Omagh District Council alongside NI Veterans Commissioner

In Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon, Lavelle McIlrath and Margaret Tinsley work tirelessly to represent and connect veterans, attending events, assisting individuals, and advocating for fair access to support.

Derry City & Strabane: In the northwest, Janice Montgomery and Chelsea Cook continue working together to ensure veterans in Derry City and Strabane are supported and represented. The Londonderry Veterans Hub has recently secured funding through the Armed Forces Covenant Trust as part of the Thrive Together project. The hub will serve as a safe, central space for veterans – offering connection, peer support, and access to services in the region.

Across every council, Veterans Champions are playing a quiet but powerful role in strengthening connections and delivering support.

To find your local Veterans Champion, visit [www.nivco.co.uk](http://www.nivco.co.uk).  
Wherever you are, there is support – and there is always a connection.



# Honouring Our Heroes: The Northern Ireland Veterans Awards Are Back!



We are thrilled to announce that the Northern Ireland Veterans Awards are returning! This is a wonderful opportunity to recognise and honour the incredible contributions of veterans who have made a significant impact on our society.

If you know a veteran who deserves recognition for their work, effort, or dedication to Northern Ireland, we encourage you to nominate them. Applications opened on 11 April 2025 and will close on 6 June 2025.

To find out more about the awards or to submit a nomination, please visit: [www.veteransawardsireland.com](http://www.veteransawardsireland.com).  
Let's come together to celebrate the remarkable achievements of our veterans!



Last years Veterans Life Time Achievement Award Recipient - Charlie Marno being presented his award by Alana Colenso of Thales (Main Sponsor)



# Celebrating a Remarkable Milestone: Captain John Gough's 100th Birthday



In April, Captain John Gough had the honour of celebrating his 100th birthday with the Regiment, in a special gathering hosted by the Ulster Branch Irish Guards Association. The celebration was held at Captain Gough's home, nestled on the edge of Newry, where his family welcomed us all with warmth, and surprisingly, the weather was kind enough to match the occasion.

Throughout the week, Captain Gough had received many visitors, but today was particularly special, as we came together to mark the incredible milestone of him becoming 100 years young. A truly remarkable man, Captain Gough shared many stories from his time in World War II and reflected on the comrades he served with who sadly never returned home..

The Veterans Commissioner for Northern Ireland, David Johnstone, had the privilege of meeting Captain Gough in his drawing room, where he presented him with a framed history of the Poppy, showcasing how its design has evolved over the years. John was genuinely delighted with the gift.

The day was filled with visits from distinguished guests, including His Grace The Duke of Abercorn, Lord Anthony Hamilton (Ulster Branch President), Sir William Hall (who spoke about Captain Gough's military service), Catherine Champion (Deputy Lord Lieutenant for Co Down), Lt Col Simon Nichols MBE, Major Jimmy Parke (Irish Guards), Regimental Mascot Dmr Aldridge, and serving soldiers in home service uniform. Many members of the Ulster Branch Irish Guards Association, Republic of Ireland Branch, the Newry Royal British Legion, and other supporters also joined to honour the occasion.



Top Left: Captain John Gough alongside the Irish Guards Mascot and handler.  
Left: John receives a framed art piece of the 'poppy through the ages' from the NI Veterans Commissioner, David Johnstone standing alongside members from the Ulster Branch Irish Guards Association.

With over 160 guests in attendance, the atmosphere was one of pride and admiration. During the celebration, Captain Gough was presented with an Irish Guards Wolfhound statue by Major Jimmy Parke, on behalf of the Regiment. Captain Gough's wife, Eleanor, was presented with a bouquet of flowers, and I had the pleasure of presenting Captain Gough with a birthday cake to commemorate the occasion.

A heartfelt thank you goes to everyone who made this day possible. The Gough family has expressed their overwhelming gratitude for the support shown to Captain Gough, and they wanted to ensure their personal thanks were sent to all who contributed to making the day so special.

Finally, a very special thanks to Ricky McGaffin. Ricky has maintained a close relationship with Captain Gough and his family for many years, and it was evident when Captain Gough personally thanked him earlier in the day.





# WWII RAF Veteran Fred Jennings Celebrates 100th Birthday with RAF Flypast

Fred Jennings, a World War Two RAF veteran and long-standing volunteer with the Ulster Aviation Society, marked a momentous milestone this February – his 100th birthday. To celebrate the occasion, Fred was honoured with a spectacular RAF flypast, organised by friends and colleagues at the Society.

Born in Newmarket, Suffolk, Fred joined the RAF in 1943, working on the installation of radar systems into B-25 Mitchell aircraft. His wartime service took him across Europe, including to the Netherlands and Belgium. He recalled being one of only a few RAF radar specialists embedded with Dutch forces during the conflict. While stationed at Melsbroek, now Brussels International Airport, Fred even survived an attack by German Focke-Wulf 190 aircraft by diving into a nearby bomb crater.

Following the war, Fred was posted to RAF Agra in India, where he fondly remembered the view of the Taj Mahal from the air traffic control tower each morning. He later joined the Ministry of Civil Aviation, which led to his move to Northern Ireland in the 1960s to install radar systems at Nutt's Corner, one of the first of its kind in the region.



RAF Veteran Fred Jennings reflects on a birthday gift to acknowledge his service and centenary year, at a 100<sup>th</sup> Birthday event at the Ulster Aviation Society



RAF Veteran Fred Jennings photographed during his service in WWII

Now based in Lisburn, Fred has been a dedicated volunteer with the Ulster Aviation Society for over two decades. He played a key role in developing the Society's radio display room and library, contributing to the preservation of aviation history in Northern Ireland.

To honour his 100th birthday, the RAF arranged a flyover of an Atlas A400M aircraft above the Society's hangars, an unforgettable tribute to a man described by Ulster Aviation Society Chairman Ray Burrows as "an outstanding example of living history."

The Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner was honoured to attend the celebration and to mark this remarkable milestone alongside Fred. It was a fitting occasion to recognise not only his service during the war but also his enduring contribution to the veterans' and aviation communities.

Reflecting on his century of life, Fred remarked on the sudden end of service life and joked about his longevity, saying, "It's a matter of avoiding fast women and slow horses."

We extend our warmest congratulations to Fred on reaching this incredible milestone and thank him for his remarkable service and continued dedication.



NI Veterans Commissioner David Johnstone congratulates Fred Jennings on his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday alongside Ulster Aviation Society volunteer Paul Young

# Help for Heroes Expands Services in Northern Ireland

Help for Heroes has significantly strengthened its presence in Northern Ireland, now with a dedicated team of ten staff delivering a wide range of support to veterans and their families. Services include welfare assistance, clinical advice, occupational therapy, and psychological support through the charity's Hidden Wounds programme.

At the heart of this expansion is the newly formed Community Development Team, led by Fiona Sinclair (Manager), alongside Community Builders Alex Baillie and Glenn Barr. Their mission is clear: to build stronger, more connected veteran communities across Northern Ireland by listening, collaborating, and supporting local initiatives that enhance wellbeing and tackle isolation.



Community Development Team, led by Fiona Sinclair (Manager), alongside Community Builders Alex Baillie and Glenn Barr



Community Builders Alex Baillie & Glenn Barr visit Regenerate Veterans Group - Portadown



Alex Baillie & Glenn Barr alongside Omagh and Fermanagh Veterans Champion Errol Thompson

Help for Heroes is proud to be part of the growing and dedicated network of support in the region, working alongside the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner, Veterans Champions in local councils, and a wide range of community and voluntary sector partners — all committed to helping veterans and their families not just survive, but thrive.

Get in touch:

Email: [northernireland@helpforheroes.org.uk](mailto:northernireland@helpforheroes.org.uk)

Call: 0300 303 9888

Website: [Help for Heroes – UK Armed Forces and military veterans charity](https://www.helpforheroes.org.uk).



Together, we're building a stronger future for the Armed Forces community in Northern Ireland.



Alex Baillie & Glenn Barr alongside Northern Ireland Veterans Awards organiser Jason Gillard

## Understanding Visual Impairment – Training with Blind Veterans UK & Guide Dogs NI



Attendees at the Sight Guided Training conducted at Guide Dogs NI HQ in Belfast in Association with Blind Veterans UK - March 2025

In March 2025, Blind Veterans UK teamed up with Guide Dogs Northern Ireland to deliver insightful sight-guided training for members of the veteran community and support organisations.

Organised by Karen from Blind Veterans UK and facilitated by Tory and the team at Guide Dogs NI, the training offered a powerful, hands-on experience designed to help participants better understand the daily challenges faced by individuals who are blind or visually impaired.



From learning how to offer safe and respectful assistance to gaining insight into the barriers faced every day, it was a meaningful and eye-opening session that encouraged empathy and awareness across our community.

A sincere thank you to all who helped organise and deliver this important event.





# Wings, Wheels, and Heroes: Don't Miss Armed Forces Day 2025



Newtownards will come alive with breathtaking aerial displays, a military parade, and a wide range of family-friendly entertainment during Northern Ireland's Armed Forces Day celebrations in 2025. Hosted by Ards and North Down Borough Council, this national event will take place on **Saturday 21 June at Newtownards Airfield**.

The day will offer visitors a fantastic opportunity to celebrate and honour the Armed Forces community — those who are currently serving and those who have served — while also gaining insight into the vital work of the Royal Navy, Army, and Royal Air Force.

## Highlights will include:

- A stunning display from the C-47 Dakota of the Royal Air Force Battle of Britain Memorial Flight.
- A thrilling performance by the UK's premier military parachute display team, The Falcons.
- An exclusive appearance by the Red Arrows, the RAF's world-famous aerobatic team, making their only display in Northern Ireland this year.
- A military parade through Newtownards, featuring service personnel, cadets, and veterans.
- A special drumhead service and flag-raising ceremony at Newtownards Airfield.
- Live music from the Band, Bugles, Pipes, and Drums of the Royal Irish Regiment.
- A traditional beating retreat to close the day's celebrations.



There will also be cookery demonstrations, technical challenges, live performances, and activities suitable for all ages, making it a fantastic family day out.

Don't miss this incredible event, where the Armed Forces community will be showcased at its very best!



# The Ulster Defence Regiment Benevolent Fund: Here When You Need Us Most

Since 1972, the Ulster Defence Regiment Benevolent Fund has been proud to stand behind those who once stood for us. Dedicated to supporting former UDR members, their widows, widowers, and dependents, the Fund continues to provide vital assistance during times of need – confidentially and compassionately.

Do you know a loved one, friend, or neighbour who served in the Ulster Defence Regiment? If so, they could be eligible for support through our wide network of trusted partners, offering financial, healthcare, mental health, and wellbeing services.



## Financial Advice and Support

- Guidance on benefits and claims
- Emergency financial support
- Assistance with priority household bills
- Support towards essential living costs
- Help with specialist medical equipment costs
- Funding for home adaptations to improve quality of life

## Healthcare Support

- Free membership of the UDR Benevolent Fund healthcare scheme
- Fast access to a consultant
- Financial assistance with consultant fees and diagnostic tests
- Contributions towards dental and optician fees
- Support for a range of therapies
- Access to discounts on products and services

## Mental Health Care Support

In collaboration with Brookehouse and the Veterans Welfare Service NI, we offer clinical psychology support, physiotherapy, and group therapy interventions such as horticulture, equine, music, art, and nature-based therapies.

## Wellbeing Support

We also provide organised events and services including:

- Family and disabled soldiers' support groups
- Apartment respite breaks
- Christmas luncheons
- Befriending services for those who need a listening ear

If you or someone you know could benefit from our help, please don't hesitate to reach out.

Save our number, you never know when you might need it.

### Contact Us:

**Phone:** 07720 677 838

**Email:** [udrbenfund@outlook.com](mailto:udrbenfund@outlook.com)

**Website:**

[www.udrbenevolentfund.com](http://www.udrbenevolentfund.com)

**Confidential, compassionate support, when you need it most.**





# Recording History, Healing Minds: Reading Force Hosts Military Memoir Writing Event in Belfast

Reading Force was delighted to host a special event focused on military memoir writing at the Northern Ireland War Memorial Museum. The session was led by Alison Baverstock, founder of Reading Force and an experienced publisher, who has conducted significant research into how recording personal memories can positively impact wellbeing and mental health, particularly for those with a military background.

Attendees travelled from across Northern Ireland to take part in an open and honest discussion about the value of transferring memories from mind to paper. The event explored how writing down personal experiences can:

- Ensure a first-hand perspective is preserved for future generations
- Lift the burden of remembrance from the individual alone
- Offer partners, families, and descendants an invaluable connection to their loved one's service and sacrifice



Alison Baverstock, Founder of Reading Force, alongside Laura Watson (Reading Force NI) and veterans present at the Memoir Writing Workshop in Belfast March 2025

**READING FORCE**

**Tell us a Story...**

**Reading Force Memoir Writing Competition 2025**

Reading Force is delighted to announce its 2025 writing competition for adults and children & young people.

Prizes include the chance to be published by Pen & Sword publishing house and *Army & You*, *Homeport*, and *Envoy* magazines.

This competition is generously supported by legal firm Bolt Burdon Kemp.

Entries can be submitted from 1st May 2025

**Who can enter?**  
This is for tri-service members of the armed forces community, including serving, veteran, spouses, partners, children, young people and relatives.

**What kind of writing can be submitted?**  
Entries can be memoir, or biography of a military friend, relative, or admired person.

**What are the entry requirements?**

**Adults**  
Please submit a synopsis of your planned book, a short biography of yourself or the person you are writing about, and the first two chapters to a maximum of 5,000 words.

**Children & young people**  
Please submit a piece of writing between 500 and 1,000 words. This can be a poem, memory, reflection, or true story. You are welcome to include an illustration.

**How to submit?**  
Entries can be submitted from 1st May until 31st August 2025. All submissions must be emailed to: [info@readingforce.org.uk](mailto:info@readingforce.org.uk). Posted submissions will not be accepted.

**Prizes**

**Adults**  
One winner will have their book published by Pen & Sword Publishers. The author will receive an advance on royalties, and full royalties thereafter. 2nd and 3rd place winners will each receive a £100 book token.

**Children & young people**  
One winner from each service will have their entry published in the Family Federation magazines, *Army & You*, *Homeport*, and *Envoy*. 2nd and 3rd prizes in all three service categories will be £50 book tokens.

**GOOD LUCK!**

Full details can be found here:  
**[www.readingforce.org.uk](http://www.readingforce.org.uk)**

T: 07566 200 299 ReadingForce readingforce ReadingForce

Reading Force is a registered charity, company, and limited liability partnership. Registered Charity Incorporated Organisation No. 111980. Charity number.

Importantly, the session also highlighted that recording these memories does not mean they must be published. Simply creating a written record can offer peace of mind and the potential for future generations, or regimental historians to learn from and reflect on them.

For those wishing to take things further, Reading Force's "Tell Us a Story 2025" memoir writing competition is now open. Full details can be found on the Reading Force website.

Given the success and impact of this event, Reading Force is planning similar sessions across Northern Ireland. If your group or organisation would like to host a workshop, please get in touch via [info@readingforce.org.uk](mailto:info@readingforce.org.uk) – we'd love to hear from you.

Let's ensure these vital stories are not lost, they are a gift to us all.



**To contact Reading Force**  
**Email:** [info@readingforce.org.uk](mailto:info@readingforce.org.uk)  
**Visit:** [www.readingforce.org.uk](http://www.readingforce.org.uk)





# Op Banner Exhibition Displayed in Portadown



NI Veterans Commissioner joins veterans and attendees at the St Patrick's Day Big Breakfast & Op Banner Exhibition in Portadown - March 2025

Last month, the Op Banner Exhibition was successfully displayed at Carleton Street Orange Hall in Portadown, drawing strong local interest and engagement. Alan Murphy from the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner's Office worked alongside Glen Espie from Mid-Ulster Victims Empowerment (MUVE) to transport the mobile exhibition to the venue. MUVE continues to play a vital role as caretaker of the exhibition panels, and their support in moving the exhibition across Northern Ireland remains deeply appreciated.



The exhibition was hosted by Portadown Heritage Tours and was open to the public from 14th to 21st March, offering visitors the opportunity to reflect on the service and sacrifice of those involved in Operation Banner.



The display was accompanied by the St Patrick's Weekend Big Breakfast event on the Saturday morning, which brought together members of the community in a spirit of remembrance and support.

Thank you to everyone who attended and helped make the exhibition such a meaningful and well-supported event.

If you would like to see the Op Banner Exhibition come to your area, please contact the NI Veterans Commissioner's Office at:  
Email: [commissioner@nivco.co.uk](mailto:commissioner@nivco.co.uk)

Top Left - NIVCO Head of Office - Alan Murphy alongside UDR veteran Glen Espie help set up the Op Banner Exhibition.

Top Centre - Artefacts on display  
Top Right - Uniforms and artefacts on display at the Op Banner Exhibition, Portadown





# Veterans Commissioner Supports The Great Tommy Sleep Out



NI Veterans Commissioner, David Johnstone, joins friends and veterans for a sleep out in the Mourne Mountains as part of the Great Tommy Sleep Out

At the end of March, the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner took part in The Great Tommy Sleep Out, a national fundraising initiative organised annually by Royal British Legion Industries to raise awareness and funds for homeless veterans.

Joined by a group of friends, the Commissioner braved the elements for a night in the beautiful but rugged Mourne Mountains, camping out under the stars in solidarity with those who have served but now face life without stable housing.

The campaign shines a light on the challenges many ex-servicemen and women experience after leaving the Armed Forces, particularly those who find themselves without a home. The evening was not only a gesture of support, but a practical way to help generate funding for essential services that provide accommodation, employment, and mental health support to veterans in need.

We extend our thanks to all those who took part in the Sleep Out and to everyone who donated to this vital cause. Every effort brings us one step closer to ensuring no veteran is left without a place to call home



*The Mourne's at Day Break -  
or 'Stand Too' as many veterans know it!*



*A clear and cold night for the  
Great Tommy Sleep Out*



# NI Veteran & Family Support

This list does not include all services available in Northern Ireland, please contact the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioners Office for further information of available veteran services.

## Local Veteran Support

Veteran Welfare Service NI  
**E: [dbsafvs-vws-ni@mod.gov.uk](mailto:dbsafvs-vws-ni@mod.gov.uk)**  
**Tel: 02890 420145**

Northern Ireland Veterans  
Commissioner's Office  
**E: [commissioner@nivco.co.uk](mailto:commissioner@nivco.co.uk)**  
**Tel: 02825 483169**

Andy Allen Veteran Support NI  
**[www.aavsnri.com](http://www.aavsnri.com)**  
**Tel: 02890 747071**

Decorum NI  
**[www.decorumni.co.uk](http://www.decorumni.co.uk)**  
**Tel: 02891 457565**

Military & Police Support  
West Tyrone (MAPS)  
**[www.mapswesttyrone.org.uk](http://www.mapswesttyrone.org.uk)**  
**Tel: 02882 245459**

MUVE – Mid-Ulster Victims  
Empowerment  
**[www.muve.org.uk](http://www.muve.org.uk)**  
**Tel: 02886 763349**

South East Fermanagh  
Foundation  
**[www.seff.org.uk](http://www.seff.org.uk)**  
**Tel: 02867 723884**

Veterans Advice-line for  
Statutory Professionals  
**E: [vasp@sommenursing.org](mailto:vasp@sommenursing.org)**  
**Tel: 07551 397384**

Ely Centre  
**[www.elycentre.com](http://www.elycentre.com)**  
**Tel: 02866 320977**

Regenerate Veterans Group  
**Email: [regenerateveterans@outlook.com](mailto:regenerateveterans@outlook.com)**

## Veteran Health & Wellbeing

BLESMA –  
The Limbless Charity  
**[www.blesma.org](http://www.blesma.org)**  
**Tel: 0131 2262910**

Brooke House  
**[www.brookehouse.co.uk](http://www.brookehouse.co.uk)**  
**Tel: 02889 531223**

Combat Stress  
**[www.combatstress.org.uk](http://www.combatstress.org.uk)**  
**Tel: 02890 269990**

Defence Medical Welfare  
Service NI (Veterans)  
**E: [referralsNI@dmws.org.uk](mailto:referralsNI@dmws.org.uk)**  
**Tel: 0800 999 3697**

Help for Heroes  
**[www.helpforheroes.org.uk](http://www.helpforheroes.org.uk)**  
**Tel: 0300 3039888**

Inspire wellbeing  
**[www.inspirewellbeing.org](http://www.inspirewellbeing.org)**  
**Tel: 02890 328474**

Royal British Legion  
**[www.britishlegion.org.uk](http://www.britishlegion.org.uk)**  
**Tel: 0808 802808**

Beyond the Battlefield  
**[www.beyondthebattlefield.org](http://www.beyondthebattlefield.org)**  
**Tel: 02891 228389**

Walking With The Wounded  
**[walkingwiththewounded.org.uk](http://walkingwiththewounded.org.uk)**  
**Tel: 01263 863900**

## Benevolence Funding & Finance

Army Benevolent Fund  
**[www.thesoldierscharity.org](http://www.thesoldierscharity.org)**  
**Tel: 02892 678112**

Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund  
**[www.rafbf.org](http://www.rafbf.org)**  
**Tel: 03001 021919**

Royal Navy &  
Royal Marines Charity  
**[www.rnrma.org.uk](http://www.rnrma.org.uk)**  
**Tel: 02393 871520**

SSAFA –  
The Armed Forces Charity  
**[www.ssafa.org.uk](http://www.ssafa.org.uk)**  
**Tel: 02890 327740**

UDR Benevolent Fund  
**[www.udrbenevolentfund.com](http://www.udrbenevolentfund.com)**  
**Tel: 07720 677838**

Make the Call  
**[www.nidirect.gov.uk/makethecall](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/makethecall)**  
**Tel: 0800 2321271**

## Pensions

Forces Pension Society  
**[www.forcespensionsociety.org](http://www.forcespensionsociety.org)**  
**Tel: 02078 209988**

Veterans UK  
**[www.gov.uk/government/organisations/veterans-uk](http://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/veterans-uk)**  
**Tel: 0808 1914218**

## Jobs/Training

Forces Employment Charity  
**E: [a.sturgenor@forcesemployment.org.uk](mailto:a.sturgenor@forcesemployment.org.uk)**  
**Tel: 07805 725242**

## Legal Support

Reid Black Solicitors  
**[www.reidblack.com](http://www.reidblack.com)**  
**Tel: 02895 922744**