How Does the US Collaborate with its Allies on Defense Vision Research?

Project Gemini, a joint initiative between Blinded Veterans Association in the US and Blind Veterans UK (formerly known as St. Dunstan's), enables veterans who have recently lost their sight with opportunities to interact with men and women who have led happy and prosperous lives despite their blindness and can serve as role models. In May 2012, in its second year, a group of blind US veterans travelled to England for a week to meet with blind United Kingdom veterans. During the week, the veterans discussed blind rehabilitation and readjustment training, adaptive technology for the blind, and vision research, as well as visited attractions throughout England, many of which provided special tours in which the participants touched objects being described, such as armor, jewels, and architectural details.

This year, the four American Army veterans who were blinded in OIF, including Steven Baskis, Dexter Durrante, Timothy Hornik, and Mark Shrand, interacted with UK veterans Billy Baxter (blinded in Bosnia), Darren Blanks, Bill Drinkwater, and Ken Facal. BVA Director of Government Relations Tom Zampieri, Ph.D., VCE Director Colonel Donald Gagliano, M.D., VCE Associate Director of Rehabilitation and Reintegration Bobbi Hillen, and AEVR Executive Director James Jorkasky also participated. Blind Veterans UK’s Cadet Youth Challenge Project Officer Colin Williamson and Membership Manager Simon Brown served as hosts.

On May 21, the delegation visited Moorfields Eye Hospital in London, where it was hosted by 2012–2013 ARVO President Peng Khaw, M.D., Ph.D., who serves as the Director of Research and Development and Director at the National Institute of Health Research (NIHR) Biomedical Research Centre (BRC), based at Moorfields, and the University College of London (UCL) Institute of Ophthalmology. Moorfields’ researchers informed the audience of more than 50 invited guests about groundbreaking research to save and restore sight.

"It was a pleasure and an honour to meet these brave American and British veterans, most of whom have lost their sight while serving their countries. We were able to explain to them some of the state-of-the-art research being carried out here and at other NIHR research facilities elsewhere in the country. The work we discussed included some exciting and positive developments in regenerating damaged and diseased nerve cells and new stem cell transplantation and drug delivery discoveries which may in the future lead to people with loss of vision having it restored.” −Dr. Khaw

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Executive Director
James F. Jorkasky
240-221-2905  jamesj@eyeresearch.org

Director, Government Relations and Education
David H. Epstein
240-221-2902  depstein@eyeresearch.org

1801 Rockville Pike, Suite 400
Rockville, Maryland 20852-1606
www.eyeresearch.org

Blind Veterans UK’s Brighton facility, the base for Project Gemini, hosts veterans for respite care, convalescence, training, and social activities

The entire group—US and UK blind soldiers, hosts, and guests—prepare for a tour of London and boat ride on the Thames prior to an afternoon of discussions at Moorfields Eye Hospital

Left to right: BVA’s Tom Zampieri, Ph.D., VCE Director Colonel Donald Gagliano, M.D., Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Jacks (Royal Centre for Defence Medicine, Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Birmingham), Air Vice Marshall Paul Evans (Commander Joint Medical Command and Surgeon General-Designate), and Dr. Khaw

Blind Veteran’s UK Simon Brown (left) and Colin Williamson (right) greeted the US delegation, which included (left to right) AEVR’s James Jorkasky, blind veterans Tim Hornik and Steve Baskis, BVA’s Christina Hitchcock, blind veterans Mark Shrand and Dexter Durrante, and BVA’s Tom Zampieri, Ph.D.