NAEVR Participates with BVA in BVUK Research Week

In late February, BVA held its Research Week and engaged BVUK’s Dr. Renata Gomes, Chief Scientific Officer, in Capitol Hill visits with Members of Committees with jurisdiction over defense and veterans issues, as well as in visits with British Embassy senior defense staff and officials at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center.

The following week, NAEVR’s James Jorkasky joined BVA President Thomas Zampieri, PhD in participating in BVUK’s Research Week. BVUK, founded in 1915 as St. Dunstan’s and in response to the large numbers of British troops returning from the World War I battlefields having lost their vision due to explosions or exposure to chemical weapons, is one of the Royal Family’s preferred charities. BVUK’s Research Week had two main goals—to inform senior UK officials, American Embassy London defense staff, leaders in UK vision research, and other UK-based Veterans Service Organizations about BVA and BVUK entering into an agreement to conduct research jointly and to gather support for a US-UK Joint Ocular Trauma Care Task Force that could enhance those research efforts.

Regarding joint research activities, the British and American military have experienced more than a century of shared battlefield experience. This includes ocular casualty care, beginning with the early battlefield treatment guidance provided by the UK in World War I and the blind rehabilitation programs at BVUK for British and US casualties and extending to UK guidance for the first US-based vision rehabilitation programs. In that spirit of cooperation, BVA and BVUK plan to conduct a wide array of joint research activities within a Centre of Research and Innovation that draws from the US and UK veterans populations to determine needs and best practices for rehabilitation, evaluate the effect of advanced therapies and treatments, generate new solutions, and study the psycho-social impact on veterans and caregivers—all to enhance quality of life. As Dr. Zampieri has stated, “Our two nations fought together, our veterans rehabilitated together, now let’s research together.” As an example, in response to the current COVID-19 challenges, BVA and BVUK have joined efforts on the global pandemic survey open to all communities.

Key to this research effort is a US-UK Joint Ocular Trauma Care Task Force, which has been recommended by UK defense officials as a means to advance ocular trauma care and research. Emerging from a 2017 Joint US-UK Task Force Charter establishing an international partnership to advance interoperability between the allied military services, the US has not yet supported the Task Force, and the respective BVA and BVUK Research Weeks in Washington, DC and London focused on obtaining support for this effort, especially with Members of Congress. Official support from both nations could potentially facilitate access to veterans databases that would support large and statistically powerful epidemiologic studies.

NAEVR Attends Trauma Recovery Conference, Reception with Prince Harry

As part of the week’s events, NAEVR attended a conference hosted by The Royal Society and Invictus Games Foundation entitled Trauma Recovery: New Science and Technology for Mental and Physical Health. BVUK Chief Executive Major General Nick Caplin (Major General, retired) spoke and engaged Dr. Zampieri in a panel discussion. During the meeting’s evening reception, Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex, greeted participants in one of his last official duties, as he created the Invictus Games as an international adaptive multi-sport event. First held in 2014, the Games were named after Invictus, Latin for “unconquered” and inspired by the US-based Warrior Games.

British Parliament Recognizes BVA’s 75th Anniversary

The Right Honorable Dr. Julian Lewis, a Member of Parliament, was joined by nearly 40 of his colleagues in the House of Commons in supporting a motion recognizing BVA’s 75th anniversary. The motion read as follows:

“The House celebrates the forthcoming 75th anniversary on March 28 of the Blinded Veterans Association of America and recognises their close and developing partnership with Blind Veterans UK (formerly St. Dunstan’s) in the area of research into sight loss; and acknowledges the unique value of the UK-US Joint Ocular Trauma Task Force; and urges the government to support this Task Force and endorse the planned Centre of Research and Innovation for Blind Veterans.”

BVA traces its roots to a March 28, 1945, meeting of World War II combat-blinded veterans who were recuperating at Avon Old Farms Convalescent Hospital in Connecticut.

Project Gemini Reflects BVA/BVUK Partnership

Project Gemini is a joint program of BVA and BVUK that was started in 2011. Its objective is to provide veterans who have recently lost their sight with opportunities to interact with those who had previously lost sight yet are leading productive lives. During the week of activities held every May, the veterans discuss blind rehabilitation and readjustment training, adaptive technology for the blind, and the latest vision research. The highlight, however, is the opportunity to visit attractions throughout the UK and participate in tours that facilitate tactile access to items being described, such as architectural elements, armor, and jewels.

NAEVR’s James Jorkasky participated in 2012 and David Epstein participated 2015 upon BVUK’s centenary, attending a Royal Garden Party on the grounds of Buckingham Palace hosted by Sophie, Countess of Wessex, who now serves as the Official Patron.