**For Immediate Release           Contact:   Monica Gilmore**

**October 11, 2019                                                                                                          252-822-3486**

**American and British Blinded Veterans Unite in Birmingham, Alabama**

      A joint initiative of the national Blinded Veterans Association (BVA) and Blind Veterans UK is bringing together veterans with vision loss from the United States and the United Kingdom. The occasion will be Project Gemini exchange, scheduled for October 13-19 in Birmingham.

Now in its ninth year and known as Project Gemini for the transatlantic cable that connects the two countries and continents, the week of activities will include tours of the VA Blind Rehabilitation Center, rock wall climbing, scuba diving, archery, Red Mountain Park Zip Line and a tour of the Southern Museum of Flight.

BVA National President Army Maj. Tom Zampieri (Ret.), said “These veterans learn from one another and share their experiences in the area of blind rehabilitation, adaptive technology, resilience, and recovery after sight loss. As peers we understand these challenges together.”

Zampieri also emphasized the importance of Project Gemini in fostering understanding between the nations as participants establish new friendships, share knowledge of rehabilitation and communicate their personal experiences regarding their own adjustment to blindness.

BVA participants include three U.S. Navy veterans: Lonnie Bedwell, Marlene Davis-Lilly and Adrian “AJ” Mohammed, as well as Army veteran Raquel Welch. Participating from England are Blind Veterans UK President Colin Williamson, Major Peter Graves. Royal Air Force member Kerry Reed and Navy veteran Janice Price. Retired Army Ranger Joe Amerling from Georgia will serve as a volunteer coordinator. Lakeshore Foundation is supporting the veteran’s various events all week.

BVA and Blind Veterans UK together established Project Gemini in May, 2011. Each year four U.S. blinded veterans are hosted by the Blind Veterans UK. Project Gemini seeks to raise public awareness of the issues facing war veterans with vision loss and help them to discover opportunities for their lives after blindness. Project Gemini was recognized in the UK with the “Soldiering on Award 2017” in Britain’s International Category. It recognizes individuals and groups who successfully work together with the armed forces community in the United Kingdom.

        Blind Veterans UK is a national charity, working on behalf of visually impaired ex-servicemen. Tracing its founding back to March, 1915, during World War I, it offers free and comprehensive support to UK blinded veterans. For additional information, visit [**blindveterans.org.uk**](http://blindveterans.org.uk).

BVA’s earliest beginnings occurred March 28, 1945, when World War II blinded servicemen convened in a formal meeting at Avon Old Farms Convalescent Hospital in Avon, Connecticut. The association was established at that time to represent blinded veterans. For more information, visit [www.bva.org](http://www.bva.org)

# # #

**RAQUEL WELCH**

***Former U.S. Army Private First Class***

As a former private in the United States Army, Welch’s military career was in logistics where she was stationed in Camp Humphreys in Korea. In 2009 she was diagnosed with a brain tumor, causing complete vision loss.  A resident of Biloxi, Mississippi, she is a single mother of four children, two boys and two girls.  She enrolled in the Biloxi, Mississippi Dept. of Veterans Affairs Blind Rehabilitation Center in 2012, and will continue further training at the Hines, Illinois, VA later this year. Welch joined the Blinded Veterans Association in 2018 where she was sponsored to the organization’s convention through Operation Peer Support. She is an active member of OPS and the Women Veterans Group of the BVA.  Ms. Welch enjoys mosaic art, listening to audio books and long distance running. Welch said she is excited to participate in Project Gemini and welcomes the opportunity to meet other veterans with similar interests and experiences.

**MARLENE DAVIS-LILY**

***Former U.S. Navy Specialist***

Marlene Davis- Lilly served in the United States Navy as an Aviation Boatswains Mate and was stationed at Naval Air Station Sigonella Sicily.  Davis-Lily leads a kayak team in Little Rock, Arkansas, and is married with two children and three grandchildren. She has served as a police officer and a mental health social worker. Currently she is the vice president of the BVA’s Arkansas Regional Group. She is an accredited Veteran Service Officer who assists veterans in the claims process and a member of volunteer services of her local VA medical center.

**LONNIE BEDWELL**

***Former U.S. Navy Petty Officer***

Former U.S. Navy Petty Officer Lonnie Bedwell was critically injured in a hunting accident in 1997 that took his sight. That didn’t stop him from raising three daughters as a single father and becoming a renowned adventure sports athlete. He holds first blind descents kayaking the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon, the Zambezi River in Africa and the Gauley River in West Virginia. He was named a 2015 National Geographic Adventurer of the Year. He has climbed notable peaks such as Mt. Kilimanjaro and is an avid downhill skier. He volunteers in his hometown in southern Indiana as a roofer and construction worker supporting veterans related nonprofits and local schools. He is an advocate for blind/visually impaired individuals, veterans, and individuals facing adversity in their lives. His goal is to motivate and inspire people to embrace life with confidence and courage. He has appeared on the Today Show and the Steve Harvey Show and on Outside TV, and has been featured in many news outlets and publications. He is the author of the award-winning book “*226: How I Became the First Blind Person to Kayak the Grand Canyon”* and shares his passion for adventure and overcoming obstacles with audiences around the country as a motivational speaker.

**ADRIAN MOHAMMED**

***Former U.S. Navy Petty Officer***

Adrian "AJ" Mohammed served in the U.S. Navy as a Master at Arms First Class Petty Officer. He was deployed with the Marine and Naval Security Forces from 2003-2004 operating in the Middle East in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. He lost most his vision through injuries while on patrol in May, 2004. He invested two  years recovering a military hospital. Adaptive Sports is what made a difference in his life. Having a constant pursuit and striving to do new things and break down barriers is what truly makes him unique despite his injuries. Being outdoors, meeting new people, inspiring others and paving the way for other blind veterans has become his passion. He said his desire is for other blinded Veterans to “See no limits” in what they can do.

**BLIND VETERANS OF UNITED KINGDOM**

**PETER GRAVES**

Peter Graves is a former Major in the British Army who served for more than 40 years in various roles. He is parachute trained and saw service in the Middle East, Africa, Norway, the USA and Germany. After service he worked as a teacher and now works as a moderator in schools around the country. His interests include skiing, playing the guitar and harmonica and generally enjoying life.

**KERRY REED**

Kerry Reed is a former Royal Air Force Aerospace Systems Operator and served in the UK before being medically discharged. She now works in our Llandudno center in North Wales as a masseur.

**JANICE PRICE**

Janice Price joined the Women’s Royal Naval Service in 1982 and trained as an Aircraft Engineer. She left the service after 30 years as a Chief Petty Officer, serving predominantly in the UK. Interestingly, she never once went to sea in all of her 30 years of service.

**COLIN WILLIAMSON**

Colin Williamsonjoined the Royal Regiment of Artillery in 1972 and was discharged in 1977. He served two combat tours in Northern Ireland in the mid- to late seventies on Britain’s Operation Banner. He went on to serve a further eight years in the Reserve Army where he specialized in communications and battlefield reconnaissance. He was discharged with the rank of corporal. He was appointed President of Blind Veterans UK in 2017. Colin initiated Project Gemini in 2011 with help and support from the Blinded Veterans Association National President and close personal friend Thomas Zampieri. Williamson invests what little spare time he has going to the gym and generally keeping physically fit.