There is a mess tin hanging on the wall of Stan Grimsey's room. He ate his thin rations from it during his time as a prisoner of war. Alongside the tin there are old photos of skeletal men, ribs protruding like furrows in a ploughed field, face gaunt, cheeks hollow. In a plastic bag, Stan keeps a small, non-descript piece of wood. It is from a sleeper under the notorious Thai-Burma railway, which bridged the River Kwai, and which Stan and his fellow prisoners built under the hard gaze of brutal Japanese guards.

But also on the wall are pictures of happier times. From last year, for example, when Stan, who is 87, completed another half-marathon. It took him 'ages', he says, but he is justifiably proud that he was the oldest ever to finish the 13-mile race. An incredible achievement, particularly given that Stan lost his sight as a result of his three years and eight months as a PoW.

He is now a resident at St Dunstan’s, an enormous, art deco edifice on the South Downs at Ovingdean, near Brighton, and part of a charity which, since 1915, has been offering training, rehabilitation and residential and nursing care to ex-service personnel blinded either while they served or subsequently.

St Dunstan’s was founded by Sir Arthur Pearson, an early newspaper magnate, blind himself, who was appalled that men who had lost their sight fighting for Britain were encouraged to learn new skills, allowing them greater independence.

Just over two decades later came another influx of blind servicemen, many, like Stan, having lost their sight because of malnutrition during their years in captivity during the Second World War. Fighting with the Suffolk Regiment, Stan was captured in Singapore and was, he says, ‘knocked about a bit’. He glosses over much of the horror involved in being ‘knocked about’, but says his sight started to fail while he was working 18 hours a day, more than half-starved, on the 267-mile railway. The guards showed no pity, he says, and 16,000 men died.

Down the corridor is David Taylor, born in 1908. He wore a black armband when the Titanic sank and remembers the soldiers going off to fight the Kaiser’s army. A soldier himself in the Second World War, he too was captured by the Japanese and forced into work, drilling the face of a coalmine and was blinded when dynamite exploded unexpectedly. Two years later, the Americans dropped an atomic bomb on Nagasaki. 20 miles from where David was held. ‘The cloud was still there five weeks later when the US marines got us out’, he says, although he had to rely on his pals to tell him so.

St Dunstan’s is home to people who have endured much more than most. Many have lost their sight in the most horrific circumstances, but wandering round the giant, airplane-shaped building, in every corner there is a sense that adversity has been displaced by triumph. There are posters featuring beaming ‘St Dunstaners’ accomplishing extraordinary things – a successful attempt on the world blind water-speed record, for example, and a 165mph ride on a motorbike, with nothing more than a couple of beeps in his ears to guide the solo blind rider down a straight line.

Jackie Greer, the nurse who is head of care for St Dunstan’s, explains what the charity can offer those who come to Ovingdean. There are 107 beds of which 40 are for residents, trainees and holidaymakers. Criteria for acceptance by the charity were changed in 2000. Formerly, St Dunstan’s catered only for those who had lost their vision.
while serving, but now it is open to all whose sight has failed, providing they were once in the armed forces or Merchant Navy. This means, for example, that an ex-soldier whose spouse and main carer has recently died and who needs to learn new ways of being independent can come and stay and be taught new skills before returning home, sometimes to a specially adapted flat or house. The facilities at St Dunstan’s are excellent. On the medical side, there are visiting physiotherapists, GPs, a chiropodist and a dentist, as well as a social worker employed by the charity and a welfare officer. Spread over seven floors there are craft workshops, a gym, a swimming pool, a training and rehabilitation centre, a ballroom and two bars, as well as assorted quiet rooms, TV rooms, a chapel and, outside, extensive grounds and a footpath down to the sea.

The overall impression is of either a small town or a large hotel and at first the indications that this is in an institution catering solely for the blind and partially sighted are difficult to detect. But Jackie Greer points out the small signs: the buttons on the banisters indicating the floor number; the letters on the guide rails round the walls which mean the dining room or lounge is nearby; the mats next to the dining tables which guide residents to their places; the black-on-yellow name badges – apparently easiest for those with sight problems to read.

The training kitchen, where people who have lost their sight recently can learn to adapt, there is an array of gadgetry designed to make life easier: a machine that reads barcodes and tells a blind cook that this is a tin of vegetable soup or baked beans; a gauge that beeps when a mug is full; ‘bump-ons’ – little plastic markers – next to the cooker indicating where the centre of the hot plate is; a device designed to help cut bread in regular-sized slices. IT skills are popular with trainees, and computers are adapted to use software that speaks, allowing equal access for blind people to the world of email and internet. Keyboards have especially large letters or, like the cookers in the kitchen, have markers that indicate reference points. And a CCTV machine allows those with some residual sight to scan personal letters or documents and read their magnified contents on a screen.

In the craft workshop, an array of activities is underway. Christmas wreaths are being made, stood-rops woven and rugs knotted. Craft instructors teach everything from ceramics to picture framing, with the aim of building confidence, increasing dexterity and developing technical skills.

In the sports hall, a bowls match is going on, in front of a large mural depicting some of the more hair-raising activities that St Dunstaners have undertaken, such as mountain-climbing and canoering. Beneath it, a sighted bowler uses a clock system to tell her blind team-mate where his bowl has ended up relative to the jack. The crisp, white uniforms of the bowlers indicate that this is serious stuff. On other days the hall is used for archery and acoustic rifle shooting.

Independence relies on mobility and St Dunstaners are taught to navigate safely and confidently with a cane, using their other senses to learn how to cross roads and discover new routes. This sort of training is also undertaken in home environments, extending work opportunities and helping ensure that social networks are maintained. ROVs – rehabilitation officers for the visually impaired – are responsible for assessing need and helping each St Dunstaner regain a level of independence.

Although many of the St Dunstaners are veterans of earlier conflicts, younger people attend for training, too. Among them a former army cadet who was only 14 when he was blinded by a terrorist booby trap. And not all are men. Jessie McNulty has lived at St Dunstan’s since 2001, having first begun to lose her sight 20 years ago. ‘It took a while to adjust, but you get used to it,’ she says. Now 83, she was initially too young to serve in the last war but later joined up nonetheless, despite her father’s opposition, and was sent to France and then Germany to work as typist as the war came to an end. ‘I read a lot,’ she says, when asked how she fills her days now – by which she means listening to tape-recorded books. ‘And I go for walks.’ She also goes ten-pin bowling at the nearby Brighton Marina.

To some extent, resident St Dunstaners live in their own world where needs are met and wants are few. But the charity’s work means it is a world without barriers to the one the rest of us inhabit. Likewise, for those who live in their own homes, St Dunstan’s is all about enabling blind and partially sighted people to access the employment, entertainment and transport networks the rest of us take for granted. And as another Remembrance Sunday approaches with British troops still heavily engaged in Iraq and other areas of conflict, it seems the charity’s work is far from over.