

Story idea for print media, 1,500 words**How I Reclaimed My Life at a VA Blind Rehabilitation Center**

by William L. McGee

On the morning of August 13, 2003, my wife, Sandra, arrived home to find me sitting at my desk, staring off into space. “Sandra,” I said, “I have some bad news. I can’t see.”

That morning I had suffered a hemorrhage in my left eye—my last good eye as I called it—that would render me legally blind. Diagnosed with Age-Related Macular Degeneration (the loss of central focus vision), from that day on I would never drive again, never recognize faces again, never apply toothpaste directly to my toothbrush again, and on and on for a laundry list of other ordinary acts that I once took for granted.

I had made it through World War II, serving as a Gunner’s Mate in the Navy, and disembarked my last ship in 1946 with 20/20 vision. Easing back into my former life as a cowboy, my eyes were as sharp as ever. I could spot a whitetail deer on any ridge.

During my “suit” years in radio and television, I used my eyes to write and publish a series of “how-to” books on broadcast advertising sales. I was always a voracious reader. I tried retirement, but while researching my family’s roots, I got immersed in researching what really happened during the amphibious operations in the Solomons Islands. This need to know launched me on a new career as a military historian.

So in 2003, as I closed in on my ninth decade, did I hear the worst news of my life: “Bill, you are legally blind.” With AMD now in both eyes, my ability to see fine detail had vanished. I began picturing my life without driving or reading. As a writer and publisher, I felt lost. Groping for a quick solution to my loss of independence, Sandra and I moved to a small town where I could get around on foot to basic services such as a barber, the bank, the post office and a grocery store. I was not looking for sympathy; I just wanted to be able to continue doing what I loved the most: reading and writing. My frustrations and impatience were increasing by the day.

Then, in 2008, while attending a support group for men with vision loss at the LightHouse for the Blind, I learned about the powerful work being done at the VA Regional Blind Rehabilitation Centers located throughout the United States. As a military veteran, I was eligible even though my disability was not service connected. I could join a band of blinded brothers and sisters for six weeks of live-in training at a Blind Rehab Center near me. Together we would learn about low vision aids and techniques for coping with our sight loss.

Walking through that Open Door

My application was approved for the Western Blind Rehabilitation Center in Palo Alto, California. The “WBRC” housed 30 “students” (as we were called) with a handful of us “graduating” each week. Instruction in each treatment area was on a one-on-one basis affording us the time to get to know one another.

The six week treatment program included a daily schedule of vision loss rehab in various treatment areas: Visual Skills, Orientation and Mobility, Living Skills, Manual Skills, and, for some, Computer Access. (The Computer Access Program is separate from the regular treatment program and requires a separate application process.) Other treatment areas included a weekly forum with staff psychologists; recreational outings such as bowling, bocce ball, and weekend tours of Northern California; and Family Training of a spouse or other close family member to learn specific support techniques. The goal of each treatment area was the same: to achieve the highest level of independence possible.

Visual Skills

Upon my arrival, the optometric team examined me thoroughly to establish a baseline for how much useable vision I had left. I learned how to use a handheld magnifier for reading labels and price tags—a great tool for shopping. I tested several newer models of closed circuit televisions (CCTVs)—a desktop magnification device that enlarges text for reading. I had completely given up on reading distant street and store signs until my instructor handed me a monocular telescope. And since my TV had become more like radio for me, he introduced me to a spectacle-mounted telescope for viewing images on the screen. Now I was feeling more in control of my surroundings and the world was opening back up.

Orientation and Mobility

My favorite treatment area was Orientation and Mobility because it took place mostly in the outdoors. With my “O&M” instructor by my side, we hit the busy streets in downtown Palo Alto. The instructor gave me assignments like, “Bill, let’s cross this intersection,” “Lead me down this sidewalk,” “Take me to where the van is parked,” and “Find the emergency exit in this building.” We figured out the distance at which I spotted obstacles—whether they snuck up on me from the ground or surprised me at eye level. I mastered the long red-and-white cane and was soon safely crossing busy intersections, even those without a stoplight. Every lesson was practical, maybe even lifesaving.

As my confidence grew, I mastered traveling alone. On Friday afternoons, I would catch the Redi-Wheels paratransit service in Palo Alto, followed by a 30-minute ferry ride across the San Francisco Bay, and walk the final three blocks to my home. This gave me particular satisfaction knowing I had just saved my wife a three-hour round-trip in the car.

Living Skills

This treatment area focused on routine tasks at home. I acquired a talking watch, a talking calculator, and an alarm clock with large numbers. My instructor also selected a digital recorder the size of a cell phone which he thought would be ideal for my work as a writer. Since I had expressed a strong desire to be in the Computer Access Program, the instructor got me prepped by providing a room to practice touch typing with Talking Typer™ in the evenings. To my surprise, my Living Skills instructor had less vision than I did and amazed me with his stories of snowboarding and river-running.

Manual Skills

How could a legally blind person be expected to make a leather belt? By learning to feel their way through what my fellow students called “the dreaded belt assembly.” How could I use a power saw to cut wood? By mastering “the click ruler” where I could feel or hear the increments of length. And what was the purpose of putting blindfolds on nearly-blind people? To learn to use our sense of touch to expand our problem-solving repertoire.

Computer Access Program

Five years earlier, I had given away my computer thinking I would never use it again. However, due to my strong desire to continue writing, the WBRC approved me for Computer Access in my third week. My instructor familiarized herself with my website and my writing, and asked Sandra to email us a manuscript to practice on. I learned the basics of ZoomText™, a software program that enlarges text on a computer screen so I could copy-edit a document. Another great feature of ZoomText for me was the audio. ZoomText can read a Word document out loud. This feature would come in handy a few weeks later when a young military historian asked me to critique his manuscript.

Walking Out that Open Door

Every Tuesday the WBRC celebrated new graduates with mine coming on April 21, 2009. Though I was initially devastated to lose my vision in 2003, this “back to school” experience at the WBRC has changed my life. Even though it goes slowly, I can read and write again, and every day the outdoorsman in me comes alive as I grab my cane for a two or three mile walk. I cannot thank the WBRC staff enough for the valuable training and the visual aids they afforded me. I also want to thank the members of Congress who continue to vote to fund this valuable program.

This article is based on *Learning to Cope with Sight Loss: Six Weeks at a VA Blind Rehabilitation Center* by William L. McGee with Sandra McGee, BMC Publications (January 2010). © William L. McGee. Available in print and on Audio CD from www.BMCPublications.com and www.Amazon.com.

William L. McGee grew up on a Montana ranch. In 1942, at 17, he joined the Navy and served in the Pacific Theater. After the war, he returned to cowboying followed by a successful 32-year career in the film, radio and TV industry. McGee is the author of the acclaimed Pacific war trilogy, *Amphibious Operations in the South Pacific in World War II* and *The Divorce Seekers: A Photo Memoir of a Nevada Dude Wrangler*.