

Thursday, 21 Aug 1997

LVES and ME, PART I.

Good Afternoon Doris. I write letters while walking on the beach. I can't see well enough to use pen and paper (for making notes), so what I do is formulate my thoughts in my mind, then when I come home I put those thoughts into an e-mail. I've decided that in as much as the story you'll be publishing is primarily 'low-vision' people's problems, and low-vision aids, then this is what I shall address. I'll make an exception to the topic at hand only in the explanation of how I became visually impaired.

I was shot on the right side of my head.

I'm going to tell you the sequence of events of what was truly 'the week from hell'. My intention here is for your benefit in knowing the circumstances of my having received a gunshot wound. I doubt it would be something you would want to include in your article, as the simple sentence, above, is probably sufficient to explain my vision loss. But, for your benefit:

At approximately 11:00 P.M., on the 16th of May, 1976, I was alone in my apartment (which was a studio in San Diego, CA) talking on the telephone with a friend of mine who lived on 'the other side of town',

as the saying goes. Someone walked up to the window, which was about 12 feet off to my right side and fired two rounds from a 12 gage shotgun at me. I was holding the telephone in my right hand to my ear (this is important to relate to you because the telephone and my hand absorbed quite a bit of the shot and could have been the reason why I didn't die on the spot). The following information was related to me later, once I finally regained consciousness - in a hospital bed: I told the person I was talking to on the telephone that I had been shot. He said the line went dead immediately thereafter. He was living with his parents in East San Diego. He told his Mom what I said and was apparently in a momentary state of shock, but nonetheless believed me. His Mother called 911, she had him get in her car and she drove to my apartment.

I had been taken, by ambulance, to hospital by the time they arrived. There were, of course, police officers on the scene. They had established the following facts, as factual as Police Detectives can be: The first shot was absorbed by my hand, telephone and head; I went immediately to the floor upon being shot; the second shot was absorbed by books and pictures which were on a shelf to my left; there were two holes in the window screening, thus the conclusion of two firings; I crawled from the living room into the kitchen, apparently

an immediate action on my part - the Detective in charge said that my previous military training and time I had spent in Viet Nam (I was with the boats, PBRs and SWIFTS as a part of Naval Delta River Forces at Binh Thuy, VN, on the Mekong River (I was primarily a courier) is the reason I immediately went to the floor and out of the room, thus avoiding being hit a second time.

As a result of this shooting, I lost my right eye. I wear a plastic prosthesis which most folk don't realize as being artificial. The optical nerve from my left eye was damaged such that I awoke with what can only be described as shadow-vision. I see things, people, whatever, with the unaided eye, but only as objects which require quite an effort (I think of my self as 'hard of seeing') in that I have to spend time studying whatever it is I'm looking at in order to figure out what IT is.

My vision is rated as 20/1000, counts fingers at about three inches. I actually am able to figure out what I'm looking at if the object/s, people or whatever are within about three feet of me - with no visual aids. But, after about an arms length away, everything just sort of fades in and out, according to lighting and distance and I have no idea what the objects are ... this is where the 'low-vision' aids come into the picture.

21 years ago, when my world became a flat, fuzzy picture (with only one eye to see with, monocular vision, I have no depth perception; the fuzziness I can describe as something akin to looking outside your house during the winter when the window is frosted over) there was very little in the way of low-vision equipment that was available to me. After being in and out of several hospitals, I found myself living with a friend in the Louisville, Kentucky, area. I was more than a bit paranoid about living in San Diego, so when an offer was made for me to move, I took it! I could have lived with one of my siblings, but I didn't want to burden them as they all had their own, young, families to deal with. My Mom had just been married to her second husband a few months earlier and the only way I could have lived with them would have been for her to leave him and get an apartment or house (he/they were in the RV business and literally had no place for me). I sure couldn't live alone - I was in quite a "state"; spent most of my time feeling sorry for myself. I kept thinking my vision would return and every morning, for months, I would sit and hold the newspaper in my lap, waiting for my eye to focus on something. This, of course, never happened.

My prognosis was, and remains the same, that my vision would never improve. It could be that someday I will lose the remaining vision because there is a shotgun pellet

lodged against the optical nerve, the same pellet which partially severed that nerve and put me in the visual realm I've been, and am, living in. The Doctor's agreed it would be too dangerous to try and remove that pellet since there's not much of that nerve left and it could be severed completely during the surgical procedure. One Doctor joked with me that probably nothing would ever change - just avoid any blows to the head that might cause that little piece of lead to finish off its cutting job. My Mom, who was present at that time immediately told me she was going to get me a football helmet and that she wanted me to wear it the rest of my life - to avoid blows to my head, and total blindness, of course.

While in the Louisville area, I was contacted by a man from the Veteran's Administration. This fellow was totally blind and wore two plastic eyes. He talked me into going to the VA Blind Rehab. Center at Hines VA Hospital in Chicago, IL. I really didn't want to go to such a place, I just wanted to keep sitting on my butt, feeling sorry for myself and let my new roommate take care of whatever it was I needed taking care of. When this blind fellow found out about me and my situation, he drove from Chicago to visit me (he, of course, had a driver and used a VA vehicle for the trip). I was so very much impressed, maybe I should say "in awe" of

this very 'handi-capable' person that I made the decision to go through Blind Rehab Training. I spent three months at Hines. I learned to read and write braille. This was really difficult - at age 31 it's a lot harder to learn to use the tactile senses than at earlier times in ones life. I've found the most proficient users of braille are those persons who learned this as young children about the same time that sighted children are learning to read ink print.

I was taught personal living skills such as hygiene stuff, cooking, using raised line checks for paying bills and signature cards (so when I needed to sign my name, this template would be positioned at the proper spot by someone and I would then affix my 'John Henry')

I had almost daily mobility training, while at Hines, and ultimately I was able to go places on my own. I used the long white and red cane to find my way around, but was pretty much limited to places I had previously been taken to by mobility instructors. This was a problem for me for many years because I wanted to get out of the house and just go walking, but I was limited to taking the same path over and over again. Since I'm 6 Ft. 1 In. tall, and can only make 'ready sense' of objects within arms length, I couldn't see the ground at my feet. This is why I used the

long cane and had to be shown different routes by sighted guides before I could navigate them on my own.

About a decade later, I found myself living in the Pullman, Washington, area of the Inland Northwest. Near Spokane, there I met Dr. Wiley, a 'low-vision specialist'.

Doris, I need to stop here. I told you this would be long, so I'm going to do it in parts. My eye is telling me it's time for a rest. I will start with Dr. Tod Wiley and my introduction to low-vision equipment.

Also, please note that WebTV does not have a spell check system. I'm trying to pay attention to my spelling, but I'm afraid you'll probably find many errors in my writing.

CUL Jim