

HEALTH & HEALING

Sights Set

Blind veterans aided by doctors, dogs and devices



David Szumowski and Speedwell

PROVIDED BY DAVID SZUMOWSKI

By Matt Alderton

ON MARCH 20, 1969, tank platoon commander David Szumowski was leading a recovery mission in South Vietnam when a rocket-propelled grenade struck his tank. After that, the 23-year-old Army lieutenant saw the world differently. Which is to say, he no longer saw it at all. Due to injuries sustained during the blast, Szumowski left Vietnam totally blind, just 40 days after he'd arrived.

"I had to start from scratch after that," says Szumowski, 75, a retired superior court judge and author of the memoir *Reach for More: A Journey From Loss to*

"It's done wonders for my mental health ... it's very therapeutic having a warm, furry thing lying on my feet."

— DAVID SZUMOWSKI,
Army veteran
blinded in Vietnam

Love and Fulfillment. "A lot of things I took for granted had to be relearned or learned in a new way so I could do them safely. And that was just the physical aspect of blindness. Eventually, I had to deal with the emotional aspect, too."

Transitioning back to civilian life is difficult for many service members, who often struggle to find employment, build relationships, manage post-traumatic stress and otherwise integrate into society. For blind veterans like Szumowski, the challenge is compounded by the innumerable frustrations that come from being a sightless person in a sighted world.

"I went to law school pretty quickly after I was injured, and that kept me focused for a while. But after that I had a lot of time on my hands to think about what it was to be blind. I had to find a job, which wasn't going well. I probably

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Guide dogs typically work with a professional trainer for four months.

GETTY IMAGES

abused alcohol more than I should have. For a couple years I began to really take a nosedive. Then, finally, I decided I was better than that," says Szumowski, who eventually relocated from Denver to San Diego, where he got a job with the Department of Veterans Affairs before ultimately commencing his legal career.

Although Szumowski primarily attributes his outcome to his own wise choices, for many blind veterans, success or failure often hinges as much on external support as it does on internal drive. Fortunately, there is ample help available.

RELEARNING THROUGH REHAB

The VA estimates that there are more than 130,000 American veterans who are legally blind, and more than 1 million who have low vision that impedes their daily lives. Depending on the type of trauma or disease and how far it has progressed, vision issues can range from light sensitivity and depth perception difficulties to loss of peripheral vision, central vision or

both. All can create obstacles for veterans.

"When you're a blinded veteran, you go from being somebody who's driven to defend the nation and care for others to somebody who all of a sudden is dependent on others for even the most basic needs," says Donald Overton, executive director of the congressionally chartered Blinded Veterans Association (BVA) and a blind Army veteran. "We want folks to understand that regardless of what your life experiences are or what type of trauma you have, you can fully integrate back into society and find success."

The VA's Blind Rehabilitation Service (BRS), which operates 13 inpatient residential Blind Rehabilitation Centers (BRCs) around the country, is one of the most powerful vehicles for blinded veterans to regain their independence. At BRCs, qualifying veterans receive complimentary and comprehensive counseling, along with adjustment-to-blindness training that teaches them how

to orient themselves, navigate, communicate, perform activities of daily living, use technology and participate safely in social and recreational activities.

"These are specialized care centers with highly skilled professionals who equip us not only with the necessary skills for independence, but also with the support systems that are so important when you experience the challenges and frustrations we all experience as blinded veterans," says Overton, who notes that the VA also offers outpatient rehabilitation clinics and in-home rehab services for blinded veterans who can't commit to a BRC inpatient program, which averages six weeks.

Army veteran John Todd, a gunship pilot who was blinded by enemy gunfire during Vietnam, received services at the Central BRC at Edward Hines Jr. VA Hospital near Chicago. "The training was superb," says Todd, 74, who is now a government and law professor at Rochester University in suburban Detroit thanks

to career advice he received from an educational psychologist at the Central BRC. "After I attended blind rehab, I lived in New York City for about four years. I walked up the street. I took cabs. I dated women. I went to restaurants. I'd learned that I could do anything, so I did everything."

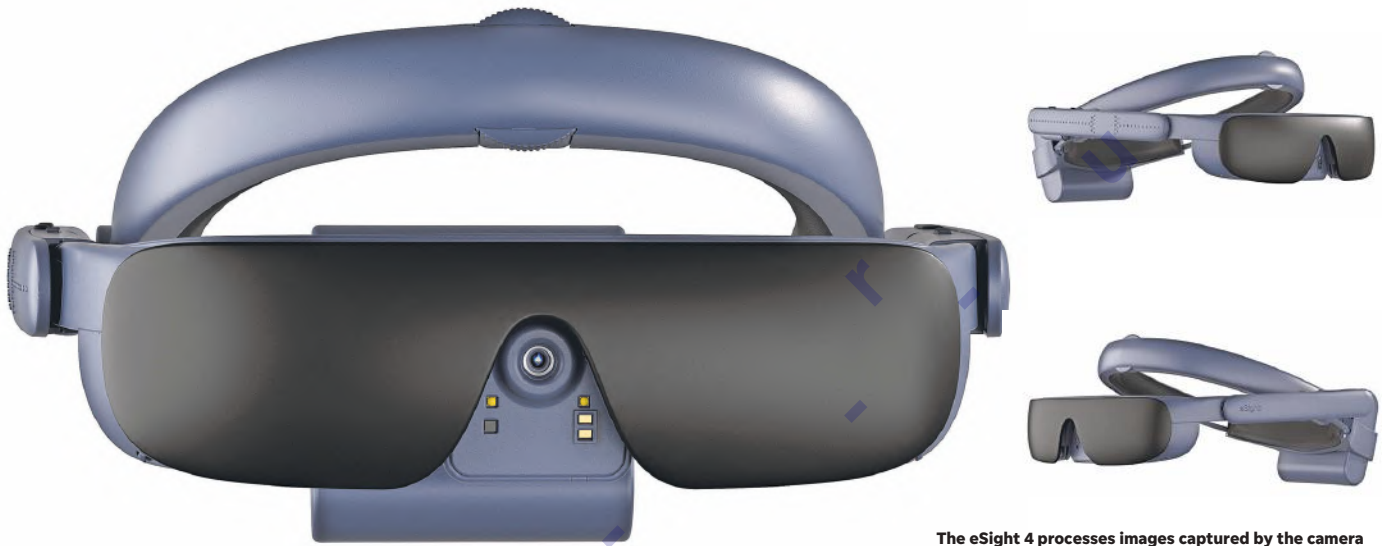
CANINE COMPANIONSHIP

Even after veterans graduate from BRCs, some require ongoing assistance to navigate the world. For more than a century, service animals have been one of their most revered tools.

"We help people enhance their independence, dignity, self-confidence and mobility," says Glenn Hoagland, president and CEO of The Seeing Eye, which has made more than 17,000 human-dog matches during its 91-year history. "When we turn 16, most of us get a driver's license that gives us enhanced

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The eSight 4 processes images captured by the camera

mobility so we can go wherever we want. For the blind individual, a Seeing Eye dog is their wheels — two legs, four paws and two minds working together to enhance their ability to navigate the world without the help of others.”

Guide dogs — typically German shepherds and Labrador and golden retrievers — are raised to 2 years of age, then trained for four months before being paired with an owner, who receives 24 days of rigorous on-site training with their animal before they take them home. Although it costs \$70,000 to train each dog, blinded veterans pay just \$1 in symbolic tuition; the balance is covered by charitable donations. In addition, the VA will pay for veterinary care if the veteran's blindness is service-related.

Szumowski has had six guide dogs; the latest is a golden retriever named Speedwell. “A cane is a wonderful and useful tool that tells you lots of information as you're walking. But it's slow. A dog is very fast,” explains Szumowski, who considers service animals more like partners than pets. “You take care of the dog, and the dog takes care of you by always being ready to protect you. It's done wonders for my mental health, too; it's very therapeutic having a warm,



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furry thing lying on my feet.”

VISIONARY TECHNOLOGY

Service animals are high-touch. Increasingly, however, many blinded veterans are going high-tech thanks to new solutions that make routine activities easier.

A major priority for BVA has been making smart home products more accessible to vets. In August, President Donald Trump signed into law a BVA-

backed bill that makes veterans with service-connected blindness eligible for VA housing grants that they can use to purchase adaptive housing or make their present homes more accessible by installing such features as voice-activated light switches, window shades, thermostats, security systems and appliances.

For Jack Appel, a 96-year-old World War II veteran who suffers from macular degeneration, especially exciting is a new class of wearables that can help

low-vision users optimize what remains of their vision. Appel uses the OrCam MyEye, a voice-activated, lipstick-size camera that mounts to a pair of glasses and uses an optical sensor to recognize text, faces and objects, information it then transmits to a small speaker above the user's ear.

“I use it for reading mostly,” says Appel, whose device was purchased for him by the VA. “I love it.”

Another new device, the eSight 4, pairs head-mounted cameras and screens with sophisticated computer processing to capture visual information that's enhanced with light and magnification to help vision-impaired users. The eSight 4 retails for \$5,950, but veterans can purchase it at a reduced price through the VA.

“Technology is really starting to tip the scales for the visually impaired,” says eSight advocate Maj. Gen. Gale Pollock, a retired two-star general, former deputy surgeon general of the Army and former chief of the Army Nurse Corps. “If you're a veteran who has vision issues, there are solutions. None of them is perfect — none of them is going to give you sight like you had before — but you have options.”