

**Memory of Enlightenment:
Accounting for Egalitarian Politics of the Blinded Veterans Association**

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In an important article laying out the interface of disability studies and oral history, Karen Hirsch has argued that oral history serves to free disabled people's voices, which have long been neglected and misinterpreted by mainstream, able bodiest scholarship.¹ Her point is certainly correct; yet it can only take us so far. The oral history testimonies of people with disabilities do provide them with the opportunity, long denied, to speak for themselves and to narrate their own stories. But, as Hirsch implies in her essay, oral history testimony is not unmediated truth, even if it is partly the creation of the very historical subjects we are endeavoring to understand and simultaneously provide with an empowering voice. It comes enveloped in a haze of ideology, memory, self-interest, and not infrequently self-deception. In order to analyze the meanings of such testimony, in all of their complexity and ambiguity, we must be prepared to problematize testimony, interrogating it with sharp and close questions, as historians do with the other sources they use.² In this short essay, I mean to show how it is that the oral history testimonies of blinded veterans of World War II about the origins of the anti-racist politics of the Blinded Veterans Association (BVA) may at one and the same time get the narrative history of that commitment wrong, while expressing what is for these men a larger, symbolic truth about their experience of confronting and coping with blindness. The complexity of the meanings of their testimonies is evidence of the challenge we face in decoding the oral history testimonies of people with disabilities.

The BVA was founded in the spring of 1945, at the dawn of the American civil rights revolution and amidst the growing consciousness of the terrible consequences of Nazi racism. Its founders were men who had recently been blinded in combat, or by accidents and disease, while serving in the American armed forces in World War II. The principal purpose of the BVA was to stimulate self-help and solidarity among blinded veterans and to combat any discrimination against them on the basis of their disability that might block their reentrance into the civilian world. Its founders feared they would come to share the fate of the civilian blind, whom they saw reduced to socially marginal denizens of sheltered workshops and recipients of pity and charity.³

From the start, these men, whose new organization by 1947 would represent some 1200 (85%) of the 1400 blinded veterans of the war,⁴ took a strong, public stand against racism and anti-semitism. Their politics would put the organization in the progressive forefront of veterans' groups in encouraging equality and mutual understanding among Americans. In sharp contrast to the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Veterans of World War II, and the Disabled American Veterans, the BVA fully opened its membership and leadership positions to blinded veterans of all backgrounds, including a broad spectrum of racial and ethnic minorities.⁵ Among the founders were Jews, and among the early national, elected officers were African Americans.⁶ Just as the BVA fought to have guide dogs admitted to public places in the name of enhancing opportunities for the blind, it actively lobbied for the passage of civil rights legislation for African Americans, in sharp contrast to the larger veterans organizations, the leadership of which feared the politics of race would divide their northern and southern wings and refused to address racial issues.

Whenever possible, the BVA combined its disability politics and its anti-racist commitment. One noted instance was widely reported by the press in 1946. When Sergeant Isaac Woodward, an African American with four years military service, was blinded as a result of gratuitous, savage beating by civilian police in South Carolina, the BVA called for the prosecution of Woodward's attackers, who evaded all efforts to bring them to justice. At an early opportunity after Woodward's

convalescence, the BVA inducted Woodward into its ranks at a ceremony at its New York City headquarters, to which it invited the press. The BVA's commitment to this admirable egalitarian creed is symbolized by the official insignia it adopted in 1948: a large, six-pointed military star, contained within which are two masculine hands, one of them dark in color and one of them light, grasped in friendship and solidarity; just above the star are a Cross and a Star of David.⁷

My interest in the civil rights politics of the BVA was stimulated in the course of my research on the representation of veterans with disabilities in World War II era Hollywood movies. I discovered a now obscure feature film, *Bright Victory* (1951), which, at moments with surprising effectiveness, attempted to link the story of the blinded veterans' anti-racist commitment with their rehabilitation. The movie itself was based on an equally obscure novel, *Lights Out* (1946),⁸ which was written by Baynard Kendrick, who is remembered today among devotees of the mystery as the creator of detective Duncan Maclaine, a combat blinded veteran of World War I whose acutely developed compensatory sensorium is the source of his investigative genius.⁹ Both the film and the novel trace the spiritual journal of Larry Niven. Niven is a young, Florida-born blinded veteran, whose unreflective racism is gradually transformed into a commitment to racial equality, as he painfully embarks on the path to rehabilitation at army hospitals and training facilities.

There he is surrounded by veterans of all colors and religions, each of them, whatever his background, equally traumatized by losing his sight and all of them needing the practical assistance and moral support of one another to save them from giving in to feelings of helplessness and despair. Niven must fight two battles simultaneously, the one against his own deeply ingrained racial prejudices and the other against the profound hopelessness and suicidal rage with which he had initially confronted his disabled condition.

Both *Lights Out* and *Bright Victory*, with its purposefully more upbeat title, are for the most part highly conventionalized products of mid-century, middlebrow, mass culture, and cannot help but appear dated to those examining them today. A melodramatic romance of the boy (Niven) gets girl (Judy), boy loses girl, and boy and girl are reunited variety pushes the plot along in both the book and the movie. Larry Niven painfully finds love after rejecting Judy, because of his initial fear of dependence, just as he painfully finds the capacity to love himself as a blind man after being tempted by suicide and to love his friend, Joe Morgan, the African American blinded veteran whom he has at first rejected because of his color. Moreover, from the book's dedication to a blinded veteran and BVA founder ("To Lt. Lloyd Greenwood, USAAF, who has vision.") and the acknowledgments (among them one to "the enthusiastic interest of the boys who have sacrificed their sight so that the people of the world might have another chance to see"),¹⁰ we know we are in for much clichéd metaphorical manipulation of the imagery of blindness and vision, light and dark, black and white, and ignorance and insight. Like Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*, Kendrick necessarily reverses associations of light, clarity and truth: Nevin's blindness - his darkness - must lead to his enlightenment. It is his blindness that brings him to understand, among other things, the insignificance of color as a marker of a fundamental human difference and the illusive benefits of sight as a way of perceiving the world.

To anyone interested in investigating the possibility of historical connections between the civil rights and disability rights movements, these materials, however didactic and dated, present a compelling possibility for tying together two of the most important human rights insurgencies of American history in this century. In searching for an hypothesis to explain these connections, one is naturally, and somewhat reluctantly, led to wonder whether Kendrick has the story right. Stereotypes, positive and negative alike, are very superficial wisdom. Still, perhaps the pilgrimage of Larry Nivens is in some way representative of that of the BVA and its founding cohort toward their outspoken egalitarianism. After all, nothing in the general and, as observers have remarked, greatly diverse, political, racial, religious, ethnic, and regional backgrounds prior to blindness of the cohort that became the BVA's early membership would have led one to predict so forthright a stand against prejudices that were very deeply embedded in their society and in the other veterans' organizations.¹¹ These men were a cross-section of an America rife with prejudices. There is certainly little, if any, evidence

of pre-war anti-racist activism among those who led the early BVA. We are naturally led to inquire what there was in the shared experience of this group of men - an experience of military service, traumatic injury, blindness, rehabilitation, and group formation - that stimulated their egalitarianism. There is as yet no analytical history of the BVA to assist us in answering this question.¹² The BVA's official record is silent, as if perhaps to say the organization was born, without the birth pains Kendrick described, with its egalitarian politics in place.

Why not then proceed to let Kendrick dictate a hypothesis about the BVA's politics: that they were born in internal struggle, within and among men who shared their society's prejudices, but who in the process of rehabilitation had an experience of political enlightenment?

Acceptance of this hypothesis is given legitimacy by the fact that Kendrick was by no means an unknowing observer. His lifelong commitment to the blind began during World War I when, as a young American volunteer in the Canadian Army, he visited St. Dunstan's, Great Britain's respected facility for the rehabilitation of blinded servicemen. As he later related, he left awestruck at the compensatory abilities of the blinded veterans he met. After returning from the war to a business career in Florida, a place he both loved for its natural beauty and hated for its reactionary racial politics, he began to publish the Duncan Maclaine mysteries, which required him to do extensive background research at blindness agencies and rehabilitation facilities. His ingenuous, commercially successful books as well as his frequent presence among them as a researcher, made him well-known among professional blindness workers. As a result, though too old to serve in World War II, he was asked by these professionals, many of whom shifted their attention during the war to the rehabilitation of blinded veterans, to visit armed forces hospitals and give encouragement to these frequently despairing men. When early in 1944, the Army opened its central, post-hospitalization blind rehabilitation facility, Old Farms, at Avon, Connecticut, he was asked to serve as a full-time volunteer, teaching courses of his own innovative design in accounting, English, and creative writing. Because the Army sustained most of American blinded casualties, and almost all of these men would undergo rehabilitation at Old Farms, Kendrick actually came in contact with a large, representative sample of the blinded veterans. Old Farms is the setting for much of *Lights Out*, and its work is featured extensively and realistically in *Bright Victory*.¹³

It was at Old Farms in late March, 1945, that 130 of the resident blinded veterans, all of whom were then in rehabilitation and were among Kendrick's students, formed the BVA. He was placed on the board of directors, on which he was the only sighted member, and given the title of "Honorary Chairman." He worked for the BVA for a year setting up its New York City headquarters and producing its publications. From the start, his activities were aimed at training the blinded men to replace him and to run the office themselves, as they soon came to do. Kendrick thus initiated the BVA's commitment to the struggle for equal employment opportunity for blind people in its own offices.¹⁴

This detail about Kendrick is important for establishing his authority not only to speak about and for the blinded veterans, but to render their history with insight and accuracy. To be sure, Kendrick was an artist. His novel is not history and it is evident that he folded into it a number of disparate elements (his own Florida experience; his hatred of segregation; his liberal internationalism; the blinded veterans' rehabilitation) that were familiar to him and over which he could easily take artistic control. Yet his vision of men transformed by a devastating injury and learning to live with themselves and with each other again in new ways, including mutual tolerance, is not at all implausible.

The greatest problem for this surmise is that the blinded veterans themselves do not remember their history as Kendrick rendered it in his novel, or as the Hollywood version of Kendrick's novel formulated it for the screen. Ask them to analyze the origins of the BVA's progressive politics, and they will tell you the explanation is simple: blindness overwhelmed every other consideration in their lives; and anyway, they say, what difference does skin color, of all things, make when you are blind?¹⁵ In effect, they suggest, blindness was an instant, democratizing force in their lives, obliterating mili-

tary rank and all the other fragmenting social categories and identities that divided them and bringing them together in experiences, perceptions, and needs. But they will also hint, when further and closely questioned (and this is a distinctly minor and reluctantly granted point in their re-creation of the BVA's history of egalitarianism), that there were men at the military rehabilitation institutions where their cohort was formed, and even later in the BVA itself, who were not such staunch egalitarians and were slow to accept egalitarian principles, and that struggle sometimes resulted from the clash of values and views. Clearly they seem to believe that blindness should have overwhelmed bigotry, but they themselves have been too immersed psychologically in the complex and transformative process by which this actually did occur in real time to stand back and make sense of their own participation in the process.

We move closer to understanding the meanings of their testimonies when we understand the grounds for their impatience with Kendrick's novel and the movie. Russ Williams, a member of the BVA's founding cohort who ultimately became the head of the Veterans Administration blind rehabilitation service, told me that he found Niven an unsympathetic character, vacillating and indecisive. Neither Niven nor Judy, he said, knew what they wanted, and they agonized endlessly about it.¹⁶ I believe that Williams is not simply being impatient with the genre of melodrama here. In his suffering and confusion, the character of Niven represented for Williams and others fears of what they might have become if they surrendered themselves to isolation from their fellow blinded veterans, to the impulse to recreate the social hierarchies of the pre-war experience in their post-injury lives, and, above all else, to self-pity.

Thus, men like Williams and other BVA leaders developed an ethic that insisted on solidarity, commitment to one another's welfare, and a positive attitude that was open to rehabilitation and refused to indulge in regrets. How else could they begin to face the challenge of their disability but by collectively building solidarity and mutual support on the basis of their military comradeship and discipline?¹⁷ Blindness incurred in adulthood (and in many of their own cases; as wounded combat veterans, with little warning or time for preparation) was as fundamental a challenge to autonomy, self-confidence, and self-respect as these men could imagine, especially in a society in which people with disabilities had to struggle constantly against prejudices and discrimination in behalf of their inclusion, dignity and autonomy. Mutual respect, and hence drawing from the group courage to go on with their individual lives, seemed to them the sine qua non for successful rehabilitation and reintegration. So deeply embedded in the consciousness of the BVA's founding cohort were such beliefs that to this day they continue to deny or to minimize whatever ideological divisions there were in their ranks, for, even when involving significant principles or deeply held beliefs such as the superiority of the white race, these were minor compared to the need to face blindness together. The official narratives of their history are telling in this context: they are conceived largely around the practice of solidarity and mutual assistance, while underplaying other possible narrative strategies, such as rehabilitation or the struggle to maintain government benefits, which ultimately became a major BVA undertaking.

Thus, the desire to maintain solidarity has led to both an organizational public memory and an informal oral tradition that have written the history of internal struggle out of their understanding of their collective past. In no way does this discredit them, but then neither does the story that Baynard Kendrick told.

Endnotes

1. Karen Hirsch, "Culture and Disability: The Role of Oral History," *Oral History Review*, 22 (Summer, 1995), 1-27.

2. Joan Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry*, 17 (Summer, 1991), 773-797; Edward M. Bruner, "Experience and Its Expressions," *The Anthropology of Experience*, Victor W. Turner and Edward M. Bruner, eds. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), pp. 3-30; Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on The Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany:

SUNY Press, 1990).

3. Francis Koestler, *The Unseen Minority: A Social History of Blindness in America* (New York: David McKay, 1976), pp. 258-286; Robert B. Brown and Hope Schutte, *Our Fight: A Battle against Darkness* (Washington, D.C.: Blinded Veterans Association, 1991), passim; Robert Brown, *The Fight Goes On: Perspectives on The Blinded Veterans Experience and The Work of The Blinded Veterans Association* (Washington, D.C.: Blinded Veterans Association, 1994), passim; "The BVA: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow," *BVA Bulletin*, 45 (March/April, 1990), 3-5.

4. *BVA Bulletin*, I, 6 (September, 1946), 2.

5. Congress of Industrial Organizations Veterans Committee, *Veterans' Organizations* (Washington, D.C.: Congress of Industrial Organizations, 1946), pp. 1-4; William Pencak, *For God and Country: The American Legion, 1919-1941* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), pp. 68-69, 81-82, 99; *BVA Bulletin*, I, 3 (June 15, 1946), 7, II, 8 (August, 1947), 3, III, 3 (January, 1948), 6, VII, 4 (July/August, 1952), 5.

6. *BVA Bulletin*, I, 5 (August, 1946), 8-9, II, 6 (June, 1947), 6, II, 7 (July, 1947), 6, II, 10 (October, 1947), 1, III, 7 (May, 1948), 1, VI, 4 (August/September, 1951), 8.

7. *BVA Bulletin*, I, 5 (August, 1946), 14, I, 9 (December, 1946), 5, II, 3 (March, 1947), 6, II, 5 (May, 1947), 6, III, 7 (May, 1948), 1; *New York Times*, August 9, 1946, April 13, 1948; Koestler, *The Unseen Minority*, p. 282.

8. *Lights Out* was published by William Murrow and Company of New York City. *Bright Victory* was adapted for the screen by Robert Buckner, who was also the producer. The director was Mark Robson. It was released by Universal International.

9. Robert A. Baker and Michael T. Nietzel, *Private Eyes: One Hundred and One Knights, A Survey of American Detective Fiction, 1922-1984* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1985), pp. 163-166; Baynard Kendrick, "Duncan Maclaime," *The Great Detectives*, Otto Penzler, ed. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1978), pp. 128-140.

10. Kendrick, *Lights Out*, pp.ii, iv.

11. Alan Blackburn, "The Army Blind in The United States," *Blindness*, Paul A. Zahl, ed. (Princeton University Press, 1950), p. 272.

12. There are instead the two BVA official publications that were designed to accompany fund-raising appeals and that combine history, biography, and analysis of current activities; Brown and Schutte, *Our Fight*, and Brown, *The Fight Goes On*.

13. *New York Times*, March 23, 1977 (obit.), IV, 18; *Who Was Who in America*, 1977, VII, s.v. "Kendrick, Baynard"; Koestler, *The Unseen Minority*, p. 280.

14. *New York Times*, March 23, 1977; Brown and Schutte, *Our Fight*, p. 17; Koestler, *The Unseen Minority*, pp. 281-282; "The BVA: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow," 5.

15. In-person interview: Edward Huyczyk, member, BVA Board of Directors (1946-1948), August 7, 14, 1990. Telephone interviews: Edward Huyczyk, December 9, 1992; Russell Williams, BVA Board of Directors (1945-1948), retired Head, Veterans Administration, Blind Rehabilitation Service (1948-1975), July 24, 1990, December 11, 1992; Ray Frey, President of BVA (1946-1948), July 24, 1990; Irvin Schloss, President of BVA (1967-1968, 1968-1969), BVA employee (1948-1958), December 9, 1992; Dr. Ed Glass, member of the founding cohort of the BVA, July 24, 1990. I have been questioned by oral historians about the relative merit of the telephone interview, which I depended on in my contacts with these men. The assumption of those skeptical of the effectiveness of the telephone interview is that it does not allow for the establishment of trust and rapport between interviewer and interviewee. To this plausible criticism, I respond in two ways. First, the telephone is an equalizer in the relations between the sighted and blind people, who cannot profit in personal encounters from such cues in the visual field as body language and facial expressions. Second, the men I interviewed were not without information to the effect that an academic researcher was poking around the BVA's history, and they might expect to be contacted by him. Several, in fact, knew about my project before I explained it to them. They were not taken by surprise, and were quite ready for me.

16. Telephone interview, Russell Williams, July 24, 1990, December 11, 1992. Williams' rejection of the book and the movie has not been lessened in any way by the fact that both he and Ray Frey, the BVA's first president, served as consultants to the movie makers. Their role was limited, however, to consultation about largely technical matters having to do with rehabilitation.

17. Brown and Schutte, *Our Fight*; Brown, *The Fight Goes On*; "The BVA: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow," 3-5. The military-sounding titles of the two BVA publications cited here suggest something of the solidaristic, comradely ethos present in the BVA's official memory.