

## ***Journey to Excellence: Development of the Military and VA Blind Rehabilitation Programs in the 20th Century***

by Stephen Miyagawa, 1999. Galde Press, Inc. 288 pp.  
ISBN 978-1880090763

Reviewed by Jerry Mullins

Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialists (COMS) likely recall learning about the history of the relatively young Orientation and Mobility (O&M) field and how our current white cane skills and techniques originated in the waning years of World War II. Established to meet the challenge of rehabilitating wounded service members who were blinded in battle, these developments were the foundation for the profession we now practice.

In the recently published first issue of *The New RE:view* (Volume 1, Issue 1), Rodney J. Kossick reviewed a biography of Russell "Russ" Williams, who COMS will also recall from their studies. Williams is revered along with Dr. Richard Hoover and Warren Bledsoe as "pioneers" in the field of O&M. Williams, blinded in 1944 while fighting the Nazis in France, learned skills for independence while an inpatient in the Army's Valley Forge General Hospital. Later, as an instructor in that program, he taught the skills he learned, refined them, and, in many cases, developed new ones. At the end of World War II, the military turned over control of blind rehab to what was then called the Veterans Administration, now Veterans Affairs (VA). Williams was named chief of the VA's first blind rehabilitation center—Hines VA Blind Rehabilitation Center—where he continued and expanded the mission of reintegrating veterans with vision loss back into their families and communities.

Stephen Miyagawa, a veteran blinded during the Korean War and author of *Journey to Excellence*, was a grateful recipient of training and services provided by the Hines VA Blind Rehabilitation Center. Throughout his life, he credited his skills and

---

The New RE:view  
Summer 2023, Vol. 1(2) 73-75  
DOI: 10.56733/TNR.23.010

© 2023 Association for Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired

confidence to the training he experienced through the center a mere four years after the program was established.

The book that Miyagawa would eventually write, *Journey to Excellence: Development of the Military and VA Blind Rehabilitation Programs in the 20th Century*, is a captivating account of the origins, challenges, and successes of the VA's blind rehabilitation programs. Miyagawa completed the Hines Blind Rehabilitation program in 1952. For the next 57 years, until his death in 2009, Miyagawa supported, advocated for, and dedicated his energies to the mission of VA Blind Rehab. Through the years, he created, edited, and wrote for several publications aimed at blind veterans, including the *CBRC Torch*, the official publication of the Central Blind Rehabilitation Center at the Edward Hines, Jr. VA Hospital.

In his book's forward, Miyagawa described his writing as a labor of love and his personal tribute to the VA blind rehab specialists who guided him through his own blind rehabilitation training. Far from a dry retelling of history, the author skillfully blends historical information, new research, archived government documents, and more than 100 photographs into a book that not only educates but also inspires with tales of the triumph of the human spirit.

Miyagawa's personal interviews bring the book to life and drive home the importance of blind rehab for veterans with vision loss. The book highlights the pioneers and innovators of orientation and mobility and blind rehabilitation. They tell in their own words how, through trial and error, they worked together to develop a training program for blind veterans. Many of those practices, techniques, values, and beliefs are foundational and are still adhered to today.

Most importantly, it's the poignant words of the blind veterans themselves that illuminate the power of the work performed by the blind rehabilitation staff. Through individual interviews, veterans recount their "journey to excellence" from the traumatic loss of their vision in battle to a VA blind rehab center where—through hard work and good attitudes on their part and with compassion and innovative training techniques on the part of the blind rehab specialists—they returned to society with their dignity and independence intact.

Miyagawa devotes a part of the book, "Chapter 8: A Young Soldier's Introduction to Blindness," to his personal tale of being injured in battle by a mortar shell that killed one of his buddies and caused his own blindness. The rest of that chapter details his training at Hines VA Blind Rehab Center, particularly the long cane training that allowed him to travel confidently and independently. Miyagawa summed up the importance of his blind rehab experience when he wrote, "The eventual absence of regrets and bitterness, diminished frustrations and fears, plus the regained dignity and self-esteem, could be attributed to the superlative comprehensive rehabilitation training."

Although not recently published, *Journey to Excellence* provides a rich and valuable account of the incubation and expansion of O&M by its earliest champions. It also gives us uplifting accounts of the significant impact they and their work made on returning military members who had lost their eyesight in service to their country.

A hard copy of *Journey to Excellence* can be readily found by searching the internet using its full title and author. Purchase prices from online merchants range from \$10 to \$30, plus shipping.

### Reference

Kossick, R. (2023). Book review: Russell C. Williams, a journey well traveled. *The New RE: view*, 1(1), 63–65.

---

**Jerry Mullins**, M.Ed., COMS, CVRT, Blind Rehabilitation Specialist, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Corresponding Author email: [texas.diagnostician@gmail.com](mailto:texas.diagnostician@gmail.com).

*Published online 31 October 2023*