

Cochlear Implant Brings New Hope to Vietnam Veteran with Hearing and Vision Loss

By Rebecca Novak Tibbitt

Vietnam veteran Erick Meine, 71, of Duxbury, Massachusetts was born with normal hearing. But exposure to loud noise during his service in the Army led to hearing difficulty over the course of several decades. Two incidents stand out to him. The first was a mine explosion near a perimeter that he was guarding and the second was when a machine gun inside a bunker echoed loudly. His hearing was never the same.

Flash forward to 2007 and a lifetime of hard work in the automotive, landscape and construction industries. Tinnitus had set in, and with the persistent ringing in Meine's ears he often needed to ask others to repeat themselves. By this point, though, his hearing had progressively worsened and he relied on hearing aids.

During a routine eye exam, the optometrist noticed an abnormality. Meine had developed a tumor at the base of his skull, which led to deteriorating vision. By 2015, he was completely blind and deaf.

Life was frustrating for the veteran, who was used to living independently. Meine communicated through palm printing, where others would spell out letters of words on his hands. Communication was excruciatingly slow, but it was his sole link to the outside world.

A Life-Changing Trip to California

Unable to get around, Meine says that he eventually became housebound. He came to rely on two health aides who assisted him for three hours a day. It was hard to ask for help, but he stayed in close contact with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) where he had previously volunteered in the low-vision clinic. The VA suggested that he make a trip to the Western Blind Rehabilitation Center in Palo Alto, California. This visit led to a recommendation for Meine to pursue a cochlear implant—a decision that would change the course of his life.

The surgeons and audiologists at the West Haven, Connecticut VA were clear with Meine that it might not work, but he moved forward with the thought, "Let's do it. What do I have to lose?"

Because of his medical history with his tumor and need for future MRIs, Meine was implanted with a MED-EL cochlear implant, the only cochlear implant that is FDA-approved for high-resolution 3.0T MRIs without the surgical removal of the internal magnet. This feature came into play sooner than Meine—or anyone else—anticipated.

Meine received his cochlear implant in February 2017, and was told to take it easy for the next six weeks to allow the incision to heal. However, a week after his surgery, he fell off his second-story balcony, causing a concussion and a cut that required staples. Because the fall knocked him unconscious, he underwent both an MRI and a CT scan. He was devastated thinking that the implant wouldn't work, but still had five more weeks to wait before he would find out.

The day finally came for Meine to receive the external processor—the component that connects to the internal implant by a magnet.

"To my amazement and surprise, it worked right away!" said Meine.

Returning to Independence

Meine could hear sounds, but it took time and rehabilitation to understand and discriminate words. He says that one of the first things he noticed was that no one had to write in his hand anymore to communicate, and, while there are occasions when he has to ask someone to repeat themselves, he says, "There's no comparison."

Looking back, he suspects that some people might have seen him and walked away because communication was too difficult. But now, he can go to the community



Erick Meine was able to do some surfing with the help of the New England VA Adaptive Sports Program.

center with his health aides and talk with people. Even daily tasks that many people take for granted like going to the store have been turned around because of his cochlear implant.

“I can talk with an associate when I need help,” Meine says. “The cochlear implant makes other people appear in my life. I don’t need to be 100 percent dependent on others to help.” He’s also found a new love for audiobooks, and listens to them for several hours a day.

While his tumor has continued to grow and he will need further MRIs to monitor his condition, Meine is optimistic for the future. While in Palo Alto, the recreation center staff had accommodations for anything that he wanted to do. Their attitude was, “If you want to do

something, you can do it!” While there, he went fly fishing, kayaking, rode a tandem bike and went horseback riding.

The experience inspired Meine to connect with the New England VA Adaptive Sports Program, where volunteers work with veterans who have disabilities to help them participate in sports. This past summer he went surfing for the first time. With a WaterWear cover and a sports headband he was able to hear instructions—and the waves. **HLM**

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