Clearing the fog of war

The “fog of war,” a term used to describe confusion in the heat of battle, is something of a cliché. But any soldier will tell you that few things are as important in battle as clear vision, and Neal Sher, MD, has been providing a unique service in that area—he performs vision-correction surgery for servicemen and women who are going into combat zones, free of charge.

Sher fulfilled his military duty during the Vietnam War by becoming a researcher with the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Md. He downplays that service by saying he didn’t do anything more dangerous than drive on the Capital Beltway. But his family has a history of military service, and early on during the Iraq War, he saw an opportunity to help.

In 2004, Sher, an ophthalmologist with Eye Care Associates in Minneapolis, began offering free vision-correction surgery to soldiers going into combat zones in Iraq or Afghanistan. One of his first cases was a 19-year-old Marine about to be sent to Iraq. A few months later, the Marine was critically injured during an ambush. The soldier’s parents wrote to Sher, thanking him for the surgery, which they credited with allowing their son to see well enough to get to safety after being wounded during the battle. The Marine subsequently had a full recovery from his injuries.

Sher notes that in a war zone, contact lenses and glasses can cause serious problems for soldiers—in fact, wearing contact lenses is forbidden by military regulations because they can cause eye infections. “Contacts are very difficult to wear in a dry, dusty, dirty environment,” Sher says. “Glasses have a lot of downsides. They fog. They can be blown off. They limit your side vision. There are a lot of problems.”

Sher has now provided corrective vision surgery to more than 250 servicemen and women. When all the technology and provider services are figured in, the average cost of Sher’s procedure is approximately $5,000 per soldier, which he, his clinic, and the Phillips Eye Institute provide free of charge.

Sher says providing the service is very rewarding. “Getting to meet the young men and women that I have met is an honor,” he says. “They’re the most uncomplaining group of people I have ever met. They’ve been asked to do a lot. Most of them have been deployed once before going back, some of them deployed two or three times before. Many have families with young children; sometimes both the husband and the wife are deploying and a grandparent will have to watch the kids. There are a lot of hardships out there. I just consider myself very fortunate, and I wanted to do something to help these people going out.”

One day in 2008, while going through his mail, Sher took a second look at an envelope he had nearly thrown out. In it was a letter from Gen. David Petraeus, at that time commander of U.S. forces in Iraq. The letter extended personal thanks from Petraeus to Sher for his work in performing the vision surgery. “Our young troopers continue to serve, against all popular expectation and in the face of difficult circumstances, in part because they know they are appreciated by their country,” Petraeus wrote. “Your provision of free corrective eye surgery is an exceptional and tangible expression of that appreciation, and you can rest assured that it is making a difference in the day-to-day lives of those service members you have treated.”