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Eye doctor helps soldiers see in the battlefield

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by Dr. Neal A. Sher

 My dad and uncles saw action on the battlefield in World War II. I was more fortunate when I joined the service in 1972, during the Vietnam War. My time was spent as a commissioned officer assigned to the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Md. The biggest danger I faced was the Beltway traffic and a few aggressive lab rodents.

About five years ago, I began offering laser vision correction surgery at no charge to local soldiers deploying to Iraq or Afghanistan. The excellent eye hospital where I work, the Phillips Eye Institute in Minneapolis, also waives its facility fee, so the surgeries are completely free for the soldiers.

Most of these men and women are in the National Guard or Reserves. They can't get surgery through the military, and they usually can't afford it on their own. Wearing glasses in a war zone poses challenges: the eyewear can fog up, blow off or limit side vision. Contact lens use in the harsh desert or mountainous environment isn't practical and is prohibited by the military.

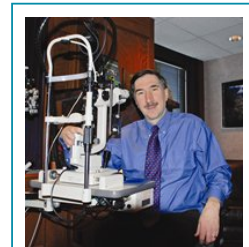
Many of the soldiers' stories have touched me, but two have stayed most in my thoughts.

A father of a 19-year-old Marine wrote to thank us for improving his son's vision. The soldier was ambushed and severely injured by a makeshift explosive a few months after arriving in Iraq. He attributed his son's survival, in part, to his ability to see well and move to safety. I give the bulk of the credit to the brave and skilled combat medic who stopped the bleeding from a lacerated femoral artery. But the letter meant the world to me.

I also recall a 40-something National Guardsman with five young children from a small town in southern Minnesota. His wife was with him for his exam. When I inquired about his deployment date, she burst into tears upon hearing his answer. He hadn't told her he was being sent back to Iraq six months sooner than expected.

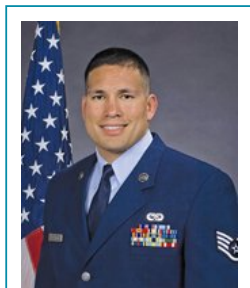
This was his third tour of duty. He knew the danger he'd face and hoped having his vision improved would keep him safer. As he explained this to his wife, her fear and shock subsided. When she turned to thank me, I didn't know what to say. I pray he will return soon to his family.

In a busy and high-stress ophthalmic surgery practice, I hear occasional complaints about everything from waiting times to parking costs. It comes with the job. But having treated more than 160 soldiers, I haven't heard a single complaint from one of them about being deployed - sometimes for the third or fourth time. It's been my privilege and honor to offer this surgery to the fine men and women who are putting their lives on hold and in jeopardy to serve their country.



Dr. Sher has been a board certified ophthalmologist for nearly 25 years. He's a partner at highly rated Eye Care Associates in Minneapolis, an adjunct clinical professor of ophthalmology at the University of Minnesota Medical School and an attending surgeon at the Phillips Eye Institute.

Since 1988, he's devoted considerable time to studying and working in the field of refractive eye surgery.



Philip Alejandrino

Sher gives guardsman 20/20 vision

Before Dr. Sher corrected his vision with laser surgery in April, Philip Alejandrino couldn't tell a light switch from a doorknob without his glasses or contact lenses, he says. Now, when the 29-year-old Guardsman deploys to Iraq for the second time, he'll return with 20/20 vision.

"When you're out in a war zone and there's the possibility of deadly force, not having to worry about my glasses will be a major relief," says Alejandrino, a Minneapolis police officer assigned to the U.S. Air National Guard's 210th Engineering and Installation Squadron.

"You don't notice what a life-changing event eye surgery is until you actually have it," Alejandrino says. "I still don't

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know how to express my thanks to him. I've pretty much been blind since third grade. It just kind of leaves me without words."



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