Reflections: Service to Our Nation

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Abstract
Service to others is something that physicians understand and undertake on a daily basis. Military physicians are in a unique role of serving both our patients and our nation. Millions of Americans have answered the call to military service since the attacks of September 11, 2001. As otolaryngologists, we will increasingly care for veterans of the Global War on Terror. Service to our nation is a mutual goal that brings together people from very different walks of life.

Keywords
service, military, Global War on Terror, Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, traumatic brain injury, veteran

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Fifty-four years ago, President John F. Kennedy gave his inaugural address on the steps of the US Capitol1: “And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.” As distant now as that day may seem, it is noteworthy that we have spent nearly a quarter of that time engaged in a Global War on Terror. Despite nearly 7000 dead and hundreds of thousands wounded, our military continues to be engaged in the fight that was brought to our soil on September 11, 2001. The 2.6 million men and women who have served in the military in the post–September 11 period have answered our nation’s call to service. They chose to serve their country and their communities. They are teachers, police, firefighters, health care workers, and other municipal employees who continue to serve their communities and the greater good of the nation. As physicians, we recognize this motivation to serve our communities, and we understand the personal sacrifices that are often made in that pursuit.

A great way to try to better understand the sacrifices that veterans have made in service to our nation is to read one of the many true accounts of the war recently published.3 Books such as Redeployment, by Phil Klay, and For Love of Country, by Howard Schultz, capture both the grime and the glory of military service through a series of short stories. We owe it to our veterans to spend a moment with them in that experience. Signature war-related injuries from Iraq and Afghanistan include amputations, posttraumatic stress disorder, and traumatic brain injury.4 Our soldiers are increasingly surviving devastating wounds but are left with severe disabilities. Most of these service-connected injuries carry a significant disability rating, allowing wounded veterans to seek care at military hospitals initially and ultimately within the Veterans Affairs (VA) system. Through partnerships

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with academic institutions, the VA system has become the largest educator of physician trainees in the country.\textsuperscript{5} Care for veterans is increasingly becoming an integral part of residency training, which provides meaningful interactions between veterans and civilian doctors.

Otolaryngology residents often gain extensive head and neck cancer experience within the VA system. Oral cancer in particular has been found to have a higher prevalence in Vietnam-era veterans, relative to the general population.\textsuperscript{6} Other injuries, such as tympanic membrane perforations and noise-induced hearing loss, are routinely evaluated by ENT specialists. Military otolaryngologists make up a small but highly specialized and necessary resource for military medicine, both on and off the battlefield. Several senior military head and neck surgeons have published extensively on their experiences at the height of the recent conflict—from the ENT role of managing penetrating neck wounds\textsuperscript{7} to a series of microvascular free flaps for reconstruction of host nation civilians.\textsuperscript{8} Facial reconstruction continues to be a particular multidisciplinary challenge, of which microvascular-trained reconstructive surgeons have played an important role.

We are all familiar with images of returning soldiers as amputees and burn victims, as those now paralyzed, and as those recovering from the psychological toll of war. What may not be apparent, however, is the extent to which recent veterans of the Global War on Terror have reintegrated into society in the past 14 years. A recent \textit{Washington Post}/Kaiser Family Foundation\textsuperscript{2} poll found that many veterans are doing well—enrolled in college on the GI Bill, reintegrating into the business world, and starting second careers in government or teaching. Most of these veterans shy away from being called out for recognition. They have done what they expect any American would do in service to our country. We honor their service when we care for our own families, neighbors, communities, and, by extension, the rest of America. When each of us walks out the door in the morning determined to help our neighbor and to build our community, then we will no longer fear that our way of life is threatened; the only thing that we will have to fear is fear itself.

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