

Duty

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As they unload the patient from the ambulance and carry him into the hospital, blood steadily drips off the litter, staining the bright white sand below their boots. A young Iraqi soldier, perhaps perhaps only 18, covered head to toe in deep penetrating wounds from an improvised explosive device (IED) blast, lies motionless on the litter. As my team quickly tends to his extensive injuries, I subconsciously consider the probability that he will not survive, especially after the lengthy delay it took to be evacuated to our facility. The odds are already heavily stacked against him...despite this, we work diligently to resuscitate him. Our orthopedic surgeon stabilizes his injured extremities as I work with my fellow trauma surgeon to control his intra-abdominal hemorrhage. After we finish, we prepare him to be transferred to the next level of care in the capital city. We do not speak the same language and I will never know if he fought alongside US soldiers or against us. But as I watch the ambulance drive off to the check point on the periphery of our base, I deeply hope he makes it back safely to his family.

There is something truly special about caring for traumatically wounded soldiers, men and women who willingly put their lives at risk to protect their country. As a daughter of two Army officers, I developed a sense of duty to support my nation and its soldiers at a young age. I am humbled every time someone extends their gratitude to me for my service, but it is infinitely more humbling to be able to care for the soldiers who willingly put themselves in harm's way to protect our freedom.

I did not know what a forward surgical team (FST) was until I was a surgical resident. My introduction to the concept of a surgical team that works near the frontline redefined my career trajectory. As I learned about far forward combat care by listening to my mentor's stories, I realized how perfectly it fit my desire to care for soldiers in harm's way. During residency, I cared for wounded soldiers who had been saved by their fellow soldiers on the battlefield in the OR after being evacuated from the frontline. That was when I realized that I wanted to play a vital role in helping wounded soldiers return home to their families. Shortly after graduating residency, I was deployed to Iraq with an FST, and my lifelong dream of caring for wounded soldiers was finally realized. It was the culmination of many years of training, sleepless nights, and countless triumphs and failures. Working in an abandoned office building in the middle of the desert, we operated on everything from stab wounds to the heart

to IED blasts that left soldiers with mangled limbs. Many of my nights were spent sleeping on a cot on the floor between the operating room and our makeshift intensive care unit, waking up when nurses or medics summoned me to the patient's bedside. Between the threats of indirect fire and waves of badly injured patients, we trained as a team to prepare for the next patient who needed our attention.

As an active duty Army surgeon, I have been fortunate enough to have the opportunity to take a brief hiatus from wearing my uniform to train as an acute care surgery fellow. I am part of a small group of Army surgeons who has the privilege of being trained by civilian trauma surgeons. The military is in desperate need of well-trained surgeons who can manage critically ill and injured patients in remote environments. This fellowship also puts me in a position to help nurture the established bond between civilian and military trauma surgeons, and I am honored to be able to share lessons learned on the battlefield with my civilian counterparts. I am also incredibly grateful for the knowledge and experience gained during my civilian training that will allow me to provide exceptional care for our soldiers.

Throughout fellowship, I have been indelibly changed by the patients I have treated. I will never forget the faces and room numbers of the patients who taught me what it means to be an acute care surgeon, because they have instilled in me a deeper understanding of not only the value of life but also the value of the freedom I am helping protect in my duty as a military surgeon. People often tell me they could never imagine doing my job, but I know that I have the greatest job ever, to be able to serve my patients and my country. The unique challenges that we face each day motivate me to fight for a better outcome for the next patient, to advocate for prevention before the next patient is injured, and to develop my technical skills to give the next victim the best chance for survival. After completing fellowship, I will return to the military to care for soldiers and their family members. As an Army Trauma Surgeon, my patients demand expeditious management in an austere environment. I am incredibly grateful to those who have gone before me, the surgeons who have laid the foundation for the profession I have been so fortunate to claim as my own. With great humbleness, I am honored to follow in their footsteps, both at home and overseas. For honor, for duty, for my patients, for our soldiers, and our country, I am a Trauma Surgeon.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I extend my deepest gratitude to the soldiers, sailors, and other military personnel who sacrifice their own safety and comfort to protect our freedom. I would like to thank the surgeons who have trained me over the past 17 years to be the trauma surgeon I am today. I would also like to thank Dr Samuel Ross for his invaluable advice in the final creation of this article.

DISCLOSURE

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Submitted: February 6, 2020, Accepted: February 11, 2020, Published online: March 12, 2020.

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Presented at: EAST Annual Scientific Assembly 2020, Oriens Lecture.

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DOI: 10.1097/TA.0000000000002653