

# An Incredible Personal and Professional Sacrifice

**W**e have not generally commented on personal-interest stories in this space. However, a recent story about one of our California component society leaders made such an impact on us that we felt it important to share.

The news these days features reports almost daily about Americans making personal and family sacrifices to serve this country in Afghanistan, Iraq, or other areas in the world in which the United States is engaged in conflict. Sacrifices and tragedies associated with military service have been commonplace in the past year and a half. Families are separated for lengthy periods, financial well-being is interrupted, and lives may be lost. We hear about these losses on a regular basis.

Although it has not always been true in previous world conflicts, it seems that today very few of us engaged in the profession of dentistry long term, serve in the military reserves and experience this kind of disruption in our lives. As a result, dentists are infrequently reminded about the sacrifices that some colleagues must unexpectedly make in the middle of their careers. And that is why this story is rather special. There may be other stories of dental colleagues that will emerge, but for now, this one can serve as a reminder of how fortunate we are to have individuals like Robert Hale, DDS, serving our country with skill and compassion, and representing our profession in exemplary fashion.

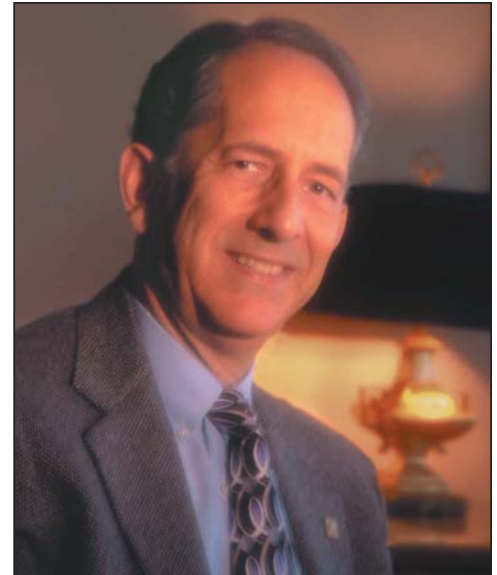
Lt. Col. Hale, an oral and maxillofacial surgeon in Northridge, Calif., is a reservist. He was active in San Fernando Dental Society moving toward president-elect of the dental society when he was called into active duty last October. He served in Kuwait and is currently in Afghanistan.

His story has come to light via two pathways, electronic mail transmission to family

and friends, and a story carried by CNN. The latter supplied us with some of the facts and the inspiration to share his story. It should come as no surprise that a skilled oral surgeon is an important and valuable commodity in a war zone where severe, life-threatening emergencies are confronted in multiples. In a CNN interview, he contrasted his previous office experience of treating one emergency at a time, with his wartime experiences in treating mass casualties, as many as 18 at once. The fact that Bob Hale has been on active duty for an extended period without an opportunity for time off, only underlines the fact that there are few individuals with his surgical skills currently available for active military duty. To add to his challenges, he has also had to dust off some of his general dentist skills when general dentist support has not been available.

Interruption of an individual's personal and family life is a major sacrifice. The impact on his professional career has also been severe. His practice, which he worked hard to build for 18 years, was forced to lay off dedicated personnel; and it had to be put up for sale. His family of four has faced an 85 percent reduction in income during this time. He seemed most concerned about the lifestyle changes his family was facing back home. The impact of these sacrifices will probably require significant time and effort to overcome when his active duty commitment finally ends.

To these sacrifices, the personal risks and dangers faced by Dr. Hale and those serving with him in Afghanistan must be added. There are infectious or dangerous insects and reptiles, and as he stated recently, "Worst of all, are the 1 million mines ...



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“Worst of all, are the 1 million mines ... we even have our own minefield by the hospital.”

we even have our own minefield by the hospital.” Imagine having to avoid land mines on the way to work. In a war zone, one might also expect that there are constant dangers to all personnel from unexpected gunfire and other weaponry. The facilities are apparently very basic or, probably in many cases, substandard when compared with what we would normally expect.

Recently, he even experienced a “professional” emergency most of us would dread. At the very least, we might lack the strength and mental composure to deal with the dilemma he ultimately faced: He cracked a tooth! Having another dentist available to help would offer a reasonable solution to such a problem. That was not the case. He was forced to provide his own therapy. When self-administered antibiotics did not prevent infection, he was forced to extract his own tooth. Thirty minutes later, he was back in the operating room treating a 12-year-old with an AK-47 wound to the face.

When Dr. Hale was interviewed by CNN, he reminded those who would hear the interview that his work to save lives was important and that he needed to be there. He stated this with conviction, despite the lengthy separation from his family, the horrible conditions he has faced on a daily basis, the potential dangers to his health and well-

being, and the major sacrifices to his professional career. His young sons, distanced from him at this important time in their lives, also stated their belief that their father was doing important work. One son cited the civilian children who were injured for whom their father provided much-needed care.

As this was written, his family received word that he would probably be relieved from active duty in early August, 10 months after his commitment began. Dr. Hale and his family will have endured great sacrifice during this period. We hope his remaining days of duty and his return were safe.

In enduring the hardships and sacrifices he faced, Dr. Robert Hale demonstrated a different kind of professional leadership, a type that is frequently missing these days. His only agenda was to serve humankind, whether military or civilian, without thought of personal gain. At the same time, he seemed almost oblivious to his own personal and professional sacrifice, not to mention his own personal safety. We hope his colleagues and friends will honor him for his selfless contributions and for his outstanding representation of his profession. It is also our hope that other members of the dental profession who make similar contributions will be similarly recognized as they complete their active duty commitments. **CDA**