

Tribute to Major Charles Robert Soltes, Jr.

One of the principal purposes of the Medical Service Corps Annual Report is to recognize and pay tribute to the enormous contributions our officers make in supporting the AMEDD and the Army. At the heart of these efforts are the countless sacrifices endured by the proud men and women that make up our Corps. This idealism is particularly poignant during times of conflict when the mission may place our Soldiers in harm's way. With this in mind it is only fitting that we honor one of our own whose life was lost while fulfilling the coveted role of the Soldier-Leader.

Major Charles Robert Soltes, Jr., O.D., was serving as a public health officer with the 426th Civil Affairs Battalion, U.S. Army Reserves, in Mosul, Iraq. His unit had recently deployed from Upland, California with the critical mission of assessing and restoring infrastructure to improve the lives of the ordinary Iraqi citizen. Early correspondence from Rob indicated he was excited and optimistic about being given the opportunity to make a difference in people's lives. It was typical Rob, always the optimist. On October 13th, Major Soltes was in



a convoy returning from a meeting with local Iraqi health officials when a vehicle-borne IED rammed into his humvee and he was killed. Rob was the first optometrist ever killed in action while serving on active duty in the United States military. It is difficult to articulate the magnitude of this tragedy and the profound impact it has had on those who knew him.

Rob was all too familiar with the Army. His dad is a retired Army aviation officer with 30 years of service. It seems only fitting that *Stars and Stripes Forever* played from the parade ground outside the window when he was born at Beech Army Hospital in Fort Wolters, Texas. While growing up in the township of Boonton, NJ many of Robby's childhood friends recalled his love for the military and propensity for helping others. Rob Graduated from Morris Catholic High School in Denville, New Jersey in 1986 and went on to attend Norwich University in Vermont.

So much of who Rob was as a person stems from his experience at Norwich and he certainly

excelled there. During his four years, his activities ranged from class president, to the Corps Honor Committee, Beta Beta Beta, Ring Committee, Mountain Cold Weather, and the Ranger Challenge. What Rob took away from Norwich were the common values shared among all military members. Words such as honor, loyalty, integrity, esprit de corps, and love of country all had special meaning. Within his graduating class of 1990 Rob formed lasting friendships with some of the finest men this country has to offer. Rob's love of the University was evident and until the time of his death he served as President of the Southern California Alumni Club.

In 1994 Rob graduated from the New England College of Optometry in Boston, Massachusetts. During his time there he met his soul mate, Sally, and they were



married at the start of Rob's military career. He accepted a commission in the U.S. Army Medical Service Corps and was assigned to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas. Rob was the first graduate of the prestigious Brooke Army Medical Center's Residency Program and obtained advanced training in the diagnosis



MAJ Soltes serving proudly in Iraq

and treatment of ocular disease and acute trauma. Rob's subsequent military assignments included Chief of Optometry with the 168th MED BN in Teague, South Korea, and Director of the Optometry Residency Program at Keller Army Community Hospital, West Point, New York.

During this tenure Major Soltes served as an adjunct faculty member for the University of Houston College of Optometry, State University of New York College of Optometry, and North-eastern State University College of Optometry. Adjunct Faculty members dedicate an enormous amount of time developing the skills of young optometry externs that train at military facilities. This was in keeping with Rob's incredible commitment to furthering advancement in the optometry profession. In 1998 Major Soltes earned a fellowship in the American Academy of Optometry, a national organization dedicated to enhancing excellence in optometric practice.

After leaving active duty in 1999, Rob and his family settled in Irvine, California and he accepted a position as the clinical director at Irvine Vision Institute, a refractive surgery specialty center. Rob



became an optometrist with the U.S. Army Reserves and was assigned to the 7214th Medical Support Unit in Garden Grove. It was no surprise that Rob was as successful in civilian life as he had been with the Army. Rob was a pillar in his community and he immersed himself in helping others. He was an active member in the American Optometric Association, the California Optometric Association, and the Garden Groves Host Lions Club. In January 1994 Rob decided to join the 426th Civil Affairs Battalion because he felt the humanitarian aspects of the mission would provide him more of an opportunity to make a difference.

Rob leaves behind a tremendous legacy for each of us to emulate. He was guided by strong moral principals and always led by example. His sense of patriotism was awe-inspiring and he carried himself in a manner that bestowed credit to all those who wear a uniform in service of this country. Professionally, Rob not only possessed outstanding clinical acumen but he displayed a genuine compassion toward his patients. He was respected to the highest degree among his colleagues within the professional community. As a friend, you could not ask for a more dependable and caring individual. There was never a favor too big, a task too daunting, or a problem too difficult to solve.

Of all the admirable traits that Rob possessed as an Army officer, they pale in comparison to his dedication as a loving husband and father. Aside from his wife Sally Huong Dang, O.D., Rob leaves behind three incred-

ible sons Ryan and Brandan ages 10 and 7, and Robert Harrison Soltes, born on 12 December 2004. Rob is also survived by his father Col. (ret.) Charles R.



Soltes Sr., his mother Nancy, his brother Jeffrey, and his sister Carolyn. There are no words to appropriately describe the profound loss felt by Rob's family, friends, and the military community as a whole. Rob was truly one of the kindest men I have ever had the pleasure of knowing and he will be missed by all.

The MSC would like to thank MAJ Dennis Descarreaux for providing this heartfelt and touching tribute to MAJ Soltes for inclusion in the 2004 MSC Annual Report.