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Dr. David Wilhite gives Iraq veterans Brian Holdt and Tim Seckel a reason to smile. © J. Ellis Newman/Plano Profile

## Plano dentist David Wilhite

# Showing his support

By Cindy Boykin



"We hear all the time, **'We support the soldiers,'** but what does that mean?" Tim Seckel asks. "What does it mean?" he asks again.

Army veterans Tim Seckel and Brian Holdt both served in Iraq and both survived IED explosions. Others in their groups did not. Everyone understands the bodily toll war takes on the soldiers, but what few people realize is how significantly their dental health is impacted. Formerly handsome smiles become a source of tremendous pain, and often embarrassment. Dr. David Wilhite comes to their aid.

"It's really awesome to see Dr. Wilhite, his family and staff giving up time and money to help us," Tim says. "He went to dental school to make a living and provide for his family, not to give stuff away. But they're seeing us for free. Who does that, except special people. When your mouth hurts and your teeth hurt, you're miserable. Your whole body hurts. We're getting our lives back, thanks to Doc."

Brian agrees, "Ditto, to everything he said. You don't see this very often. My whole attitude, everything, is better. I have yet to tell somebody what I'm going through without them crying. This has been emotional for me—my whole family."

These two men are among thousands of soldiers who went into the service with healthy teeth, but now suffer unbearable pain due to serious trauma, relentless environmental hazards, and unavoidable neglect.

Brian, who served two tours of duty in Iraq, describes, "When I came back from Iraq the first time, I noticed the outside of my teeth becoming coarser, almost like a fine grit sand paper. I didn't think anything of it, but then they started feeling really sensitive.

"When I went back to Iraq the second time, they ended up pulling two teeth out in the field. Given the conditions—the dust and all that—dry socket is inevitable. You can eliminate sucking through a straw, smoking a cigarette, and everything, but you're still going to get it. I was in pain for two months."

"What kind of dental facility did they have over there?" Dr. Wilhite asks.

Both Brian and Tim laugh. Brian pats the arms of the conference room chair he is sitting in

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and answers, "You sit in a chair about like this, and they hold your head back."

Tim adds, "Maybe they give you a shot of morphine, and you're good."

Brian, who served in the Army for about eight years total, spent nearly a year and a half in Iraq. Explaining the impact the dust had on his teeth, he says, "You're not going to get the sand out of your mouth, even if you have a face mask on and everything. It's like putting salt or sugar in your mouth and swishing it around until it coats the inside of your mouth. It just sits there like a light sander."

A report in Huffington Post (2/7/2013) confirms and expounds on Brian's description, saying "ubiquitous dust...can linger in the air for days after a dust storm and gets continuously kicked up by boots, wheels and gusts of wind." The report indicates that the teeth, mouth, and lungs are particularly susceptible to the damaging impact because, "with high temperatures and low humidity, a soldier tends to breathe through the mouth rather than the nose, especially when wearing heavy armor and exercising."

In addition to the gradual environmental impact is sudden trauma to the teeth. Brian was in a Humvee when it hit an explosive device. Instinctively, teeth clench and the impact can break and shatter teeth. It had a devastating impact on his teeth.

Tim experienced the same thing. "I got blown up on August 17, 2007," he begins. "It killed my lieutenant, who was in the rear seat, and it broke my back. I had to crawl to safety. I couldn't walk, they had to carry me. I didn't even think about my teeth, but I had teeth that were cracked, and this tooth was blown out. Doc extracted three of my teeth here that were broken."

"They weren't salvageable," Dr. Wilhite interjects quietly.

Office manager Nancy has been instrumental in coordinating the veterans' dental care through RAW, Rebuilding America's Warriors. She confirmed with Tim, "But you did go into the military with strong, healthy teeth and a nice smile, right?"

"Oh yeah," Tim answers grinning, "I was pretty." Everyone laughs at his good nature.

Nancy appreciates the optimism and fortitude these men possess. "They deal with a lot," she confides. "They are putting up a really good front, but Tim is hurting right now. We can't take care of everything at once. It's a process. We try to do as much as we can every week to get them finished."

Brian is actually having work done today. His pre-procedure sedative is beginning to kick in, and Dr. Wilhite needs to get started on another lengthy procedure with him—one of many more yet to come. Brian struggles a bit to get his balance as he stands, and Tim hops up. "I got you, brother," he says, putting his hand on his back, walking with him to the exam room.

Nancy shares, "If you get to know them like we have and you look behind their eyes..." her own eyes beginning to tear up, "...they are the sweetest, kindest men I've ever known. And that's part of why I want to do this. They need so much. I never knew this was going to happen—that I was going to feel this way."

Partnering with RAW, who connects veterans (2001-present) who have served in Afghanistan and Iraq, Dr. Wilhite's office has helped eight patients at an estimated cost of nearly \$110,000—doing everything from root canals, fillings, and crowns to reconstructive work. One of their patients, a 28-year-old in Marine Special Ops, had such severe dental trauma that they had to pull all of his teeth. Every tooth was broken, shattered, missing or decaying. Dr. Wilhite's team is going above and beyond by providing the much more expensive implants and dentures that will give him more effective and longer-lasting chewing ability.

Once Dr. Wilhite realized the commitment in time and money, was it hard for him to justify all this volunteer dental work? "No, not at all," he answered. "My father was a medic in WWII. He went in on D-Day plus 1 at Omaha Beach. He patched up the guys who had been injured the day before, and all the way to V-E day and beyond." Proudly, he is following in his father's footsteps.

Nancy adds, "After we worked on our third patient, I asked the staff if they wanted to continue, because everyone is involved. They all said yes, let's do this! The whole team feels this way."

Tim and Brian knew they would experience different types of losses in the war, but one loss they did not anticipate was their smile. Dr. Wilhite is helping them get their smiles back.

"I smile at my daughter's football games now," Tim says. "She's a drill team captain, so she's always in pictures. She has been in drill team for four years and has never had a picture with me smiling. This past Friday, she finally got a picture of her dad smiling!"

Veteran's Day is Monday, November 11. We salute those who serve our nation, and those who serve our nation's heroes. For more information about RAW, contact Dr. Wilhite's office in Plano at 972.964.3774.



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