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## **Faces of Honor helps those who help U.S.**

### **Peoria surgeon among those donating services to injured veterans**

U.S. servicemen and women who suffer facial injuries in combat may be eligible for free reconstructive medical care through a national group of plastic surgeons that includes a local doctor.

Dr. Harrison C. Putman is among about 170 doctors with the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery who is participating in the new Faces of Honor program that was launched in October. The program complements the academy's Face to Face program, which began in 1992 and provides free medical care to victims of domestic violence and children overseas who suffer facial deformities.



"I've always felt strongly about the Face to Face program, and these are two of the reasons I feel equally strongly about the Faces of Honor program," Putman said, pointing to photographs of his two nephews, 1st Lt. Army Ranger Jim Comfort, 25, and his 23-year-old brother, Spec. Drake Comfort, who is with the Army National Guard out of Bartonville.

"We're a very close family, and my son, Chris, is best friends with these guys," Putman said in his office on Knoxville Avenue.

Jim has been in Afghanistan for about 10 months, and Drake returned this summer after serving there for a year. Neither of the brothers has been injured, but three men in Drake's platoon were hurt in June when their truck was hit by an improvised explosive device, or IED.

"We were on a convoy, and they were in our lead truck," Drake said.

The most severely injured was Staff Sgt. Jason Shallenberger of Morton, who suffered facial burns. Spec. Jared Flaminio of Pekin and Spec. William Steele of the Chicago area suffered leg injuries.

"Jason has the best doctors in the world working on him at a military hospital in Texas, but he could maybe take advantage of the Faces of Honor program when he comes home," Drake said. "I think it's a great program. I'm proud that my uncle is choosing to help people who have fought for their country."

Faces of Honor was the brainchild of academy past-president Donn Chatham and received full support from the board of directors, of which Putman is a member.

Chatham, who has offices in New Albany, Ind., and Louisville, Ky., said the idea for the program grew from his belief that Vietnam vets were not treated well by America in general and his concern that U.S. soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan are also fighting an unpopular war.

"Last year, a National Guard unit from my community was deployed to Iraq. Within a few weeks, one of the men was killed, leaving a young wife and young baby," he said. "I began trying to figure out a way that either I or other colleagues might be able to somehow show our appreciation to what these men, women and families were going through."

Noting that about one-fifth of the survivable injuries from Iraq and Afghanistan involve the face, head and neck, Chatham said, "This seemed like a possible service we could offer them. It's a public thank you to all the brave men and women who have done what most of us were not asked to do. And, if we can help improve the quality of life for just a handful of veterans, it will be a good thing."

The program is meant to supplement care already provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

"The VA medical system has many fine and well-trained (physicians), and I believe most veterans with injuries receive excellent care," Chatham said. "The idea with Faces of Honor was to offer an additional level of reconstructive care to those veterans who may have returned to their homes and may possibly not be living anywhere near a VA facility."

Putman said surgeries he and other academy members might perform for veterans could include repairing cheekbone or jawbone injuries, fixing breathing-related issues from nasal injuries, skin grafting, scar revision, lip reconstruction and even hair restoration related to scalp burns.

"I think this program, like the Face to Face program, helps bring closure to victims. Whether the injuries are from domestic abuse or war injury or a congenital deformity, sometimes the physical improvements are not as significant as the emotional or

psychological improvements," added Putman, who received a community service award from the academy this year.

Chatham said some surgeons have already been providing care for a handful of veterans, but the academy is trying to get the word out to more soldiers.

"We want veterans to know they have one more friend to help them, if possible. We don't expect legions of veterans to come streaming in. We want to try to help one at a time as they become aware of this," he said.