

Northern New Jersey

## A preemptive surgical strike

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BERGENFIELD — Two-dozen soldiers heading for Iraq no longer need to stress about dealing with foggy glasses or sand-whipped contact lenses on their upcoming tour of duty.

Ten members of the Army's 2nd Battalion, 113th Infantry Regiment piled into the Bergenfield offices of Dello Russo LaserVision on Thursday for a free round of corrective eye surgery. The day before, the family-run business, known for treating many of the metropolitan region's radio and television personalities, performed the procedure for no charge on about a dozen soldiers in its New York offices.

The soldiers, who said they are part of the largest military deployment from New Jersey since World War II, said they've all

wanted the surgery for years.

"This is just the best thing that could have happened," said Spec. Randall Bisset, a 21-year-old from Colonia trained as a sniper and scout. "Glasses fog up. They're uncomfortable with the night vision goggles, and contacts dry out and you have to look for solution in your bag in the middle of the field. You can't endanger your unit like that."

Jing Shi, a 13-year Army veteran from New York, said she learned during her first tour in Iraq in 2005 how poor vision can affect a soldier.

"It's really hard to wear contacts," said Shi, a second lieutenant. "It gets up to 140 degrees. I know people whose contacts melted in their eyes."

Shi and others in the regiment — most of them bespectacled and all wearing camouflage uniforms as they awaited surgery in the Washington Avenue office — said the \$4,000 fee normally charged for the procedure would have been a stretch financially. Most said they didn't expect to be able to afford the surgery until they received bonuses upon returning from Iraq.

Staff Sgt. Robert Marks of Rockaway said "it was like Christmas" when he found out during a routine eye exam that the Dello Russos would perform the surgery for free.

"You can't really do our job with glasses," said Marks, who is also a sniper. "The reflection from the lenses will give away your position. ... Dr. Dello Russo is an American hero. Getting the support really means a lot to us."

Performing free operations on military personnel has become an ongoing cause for the Dello Russos, who said this is the third round of surgeries they've performed in as many years. The practice was founded 40 years ago by Joseph Dello Russo.

"We have tons of patients in the military, police officers," said Dr. Jeffrey Dello Russo, son of the founder. "We just found a bunch of people from [their regiment] and decided to do the surgery for free. ... These guys are in pretty extreme environments that are not suitable for glasses. ... It didn't sound safe or ideal."

Dello Russo's brother, Dr. James Dello Russo, said the technology has come a long way since the family performed its first laser surgery in 1990. Surgeons have replaced the invasive and less precise blade used in the past with pinpoint-accurate laser technology. The procedure begins by creating a digital map of the eye, then lasering open and lifting back a flap on the outermost

surface of the cornea. A laser then applies minute light pulses to remove cells and reshape the area just beneath the surface of the cornea. The surgical procedure takes roughly 10 seconds for each eye, and the cornea heals within hours.

Soldiers are among the fastest healers, James Dello Russo said.

"They're really America's best because they're in perfect health," he said. "We know that young patients heal faster, and they're very compliant because they're in the military. They're the ideal patients."

Minutes after the surgery, the soldiers were milling around the office wearing dark sunglasses over their bloodshot eyes. Before his surgery, Staff Sgt. Lisandro Peralta could barely identify 6-inch tall letters during a vision test. Within an hour after the procedure, the West Orange native could flawlessly pick out letters a fraction of the size — a sign that he now has 20/20 vision.

"Everything would have been blurry from this distance," Peralta said after the test, motioning to the letters on the wall just 5 feet away. "I would have been a terrible [court] witness."

Peralta and other members of his regiment will return to the Dello Russos' office today for a follow-up eye exam. They will require a light regimen of eye drops for the next week before they take a final eye test. Most of them will head to Texas about June 20 for training, followed by a deployment to southern Iraq by early September.

Staff Sgt. Jorge Marin of Paterson said he was relieved to have the surgery performed before deployment.

"It's one less thing to worry about," he said.

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