A CAREER PATH TOWARDS MILITARY OPTOMETRY

Military optometry can be a very satisfying and rewarding career option for graduates. Optometrists can achieve their goal of building a career in the US military while providing the highest quality in patient care. The military optometrist receives support in many different areas and is recognized, not only as a physician, but as an officer as well.

Military scholarships provide financial incentives and help students to develop leadership skills while still in optometry school. Students who are accepted into the Health Professionals Scholarship Program (HPSP) receive funding for 100 percent of their tuition, required textbooks, and academic fees, while also earning a monthly stipend for living expenses. When students graduate, they immediately enter active-duty service as a Captain with a one-year commitment for each year of scholarship. Currently, NECO has three students who hold HPSP scholarships; over the past ten years, twenty-two students have received the HPSP scholarship. Here are the stories of three recipients—Army Colonel Donovan Green, Air Force Captain Nicholas Jones, and current fourth-year student Alina Wheeler—describing their career choices and how their experiences at NECO prepared them to take a leadership role in the military.

COLONEL DONOVAN GREEN

Colonel Donovan Green’s path to military service was established while in college when he entered the ROTC. Originally, he intended to pursue a career in medicine and attend medical school upon graduation. He joined the Army to round out his academic portfolio. He soon discovered he wasn’t interested in being a medical doctor, but did want to work in healthcare. It was a visit to an army optometrist that convinced him that optometry would offer what he hoped for in a health care career.
Donovan’s NECO experience provided the opportunity to complete a fourth-year externship rotation in a military hospital. “My first time in a military environment in Europe was on this rotation in Germany. I came away from this experience with an understanding and appreciation of the scope of practice I would enjoy once in active service.” Colonel Green believes his clinical experience at NECO was diverse and extremely valuable. “NECO provided me with extensive patient care experience beginning from year one and prepared me for success in meeting all the challenges I would confront later in my career.”

“When I entered the Army, I was the only eye care provider stationed at the Supreme Headquarters of Allied Powers in Europe (SHAPE) Health Care Facility in Belgium. This experience quickly prepared me to handle any contingency, both related to patient care and to military leadership. Suddenly, there was no one to bounce anything off of or ask ‘Am I doing the right thing?’” Thrust immediately into a leadership role in the military, Colonel Green felt well prepared. “Fortunately at NECO, leadership was an attribute that was fostered from the very beginning of my optometric career.” As a military optometrist, Donovan appreciates the flexibility, variety, and wide scope of practice. “I can practice as taught and based on my own experience; I can prescribe medications and treat complicated cases. I am only limited by what I feel comfortable doing. Because all health care services fall within the military system, it is much easier to co-manage a patient’s care in a multidisciplinary environment.”

On July 3, 2013, 21 years after starting his optometry career at SHAPE, Colonel Green became Commander of the entire Health Care Facility, where he now oversees all medical services and specialties. “When I entered active duty, I never thought I would be in the military 22 years.” But Colonel Green has found opportunities to become a leader in the world of military optometry and health care. “The fact is, when you enjoy what you do, there is motivation to continue. As optometrists, we don’t usually get the opportunity to take command and this role is not only unique for me, but for the College and for the profession as well.”

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Recent graduate, Captain Nicholas Jones, entered the Air Force for different reasons; yet his experience has been equally rewarding. During the summer after his first year at NECO, Nick visited a friend in Idaho and began talking about the education debt he was facing. “My friend’s grandfather asked me if I had ever considered serving in the military. When I got back to NECO, I met with a recruiter and got the ball rolling. Six months later, I was commissioned.”

For Nick, the HPSP program felt like a natural choice to manage his debt and secure a career upon graduation. “The military offered to pay for three years of my schooling in return for three years of service on active duty.” Although the decision felt like a good fit, he almost lost his chance to honor his commitment. On a ski trip during his third year at NECO, Jones hit a tree while snowboarding and had to be evacuated by helicopter off the mountain into emergency surgery. When he awoke two days later, the doctors told him he would be out of school for at least one semester, maybe more. He was heartbroken thinking of his friends graduating without him.

According to Captain Jones, NECO mobilized resources to help him continue with his studies. Within days, President Clifford Scott and Dean Barry Fisch contacted him. “Immediately, I was motivated. Teachers recorded every class. Students took notes for me. It was up to me to get back on my feet, but NECO helped me stay on course with my classes. When I got back to school two months later, everyone was supportive. I was also able to make up missed clinical work.”

Nick graduated on time and entered the Air Force feeling competent to manage the responsibility he had in his clinical setting. “Working at Travis Air Force Base in California, I practice the full range of medical optometry including ordering MRIs, co-managing surgeries, and other in-depth work. I’ve seen patients from the ages of eight months to 100. When I joined the Air Force, I felt mentally and clinically prepared, and I owe that to NECO. The professionalism and values that NECO represents mirror the military.”

Captain Jones explains that every day is different. His patients have included a distinguished three-star general, an ambassador to Afghanistan, and the pilot for Air Force Two. “I’ve had interesting experiences with amazing people.” But Jones knows he is an Air Force officer first and an optometrist second. “I have additional duties beyond patient care. I was sent to Randolph, Texas to be trained on night vision goggles. I’m now an instructor and the base expert on night vision goggles. That is one thing I did NOT learn in optometry school!”

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“I don’t think I really understood the essence of being an officer in the military when I signed up. If I had not had the diverse clinical experiences at NECO and taken on leadership roles at the College, I certainly would not have been comfortable calling myself a Captain in the military. I feel truly blessed in this job.” Captain Jones explains that he chose optometry because he appreciates the balance of responsibility and flexibility. “We’re not always saving lives, and we don’t always deal with people dying, but we still know we are making a difference in someone’s health.”
For Alina Wheeler, OD, 2015, her path into Army optometry was almost predetermined. Serving the military is a way of life in her family with her father and brother who both have careers as Army pilots. When Ali decided to pursue a path in the military, she reflected on whether this would allow her to pursue an important long-term goal: having a career that would improve the lives of others. “I am honored that I am one of several optometrists who will practice in uniform, having received the HPSP Army scholarship at NECO.”

While Ali may have grown up with the military, it was not until she heard about the HPSP scholarship that her vision of optometry and military service intersected. “Passion and opportunity are two focuses of my life. While on my path to becoming an OD, the opportunity presented itself to accept this scholarship, which pays for my education and provides a stipend for living in Boston. There is a lot of honor in working with the service in America, as it is an amazing country. I see it not as a sacrifice, as many others do, but as an opportunity.”

Currently in her fourth year, moving from a rotation in China to one in Portland, Washington, Wheeler finds herself in a unique position amongst her peers. “I have a job after graduation!” But getting a job was far from the only reason she chose to pursue the military scholarship. “The military has given a lot to me through my dad and my brother, and I wanted to return the favor in my own way. The best way I know how, from my clinical experiences thus far, is to make a direct impact on the lives of others through improvement and management of individual needs.” Pointing to her brother’s and father’s careers as pilots, Ali is intimately aware of the importance of vision to those in the military. “It is crucial for vision to be maintained at a highly functional level in the military, so I will take pride in being able to care for soldiers and their families through optometry.”

As immediate past president of the Student Council, Ali Wheeler feels that her leadership role at NECO and the intense clinical immersion have been the most advantageous experiences to prepare her for her career. “As a student leader, I worked closely with the administration; this will be helpful for my future as an officer. Clinical care is still very exciting to me, and I have learned more than I thought possible in these last three years; I cannot wait to see what the next three bring. I have appreciated getting exposure to alumni, networking, and having top-notch preceptors and mentors.”

Reserve Lieutenant Wheeler is looking forward to making an impact on individuals connected to the military while serving her country. “Service has many different definitions, depending on who you ask. I can serve the American people and practice optometry. Individuals like my father and brother, both of whom I greatly respect and admire, will walk into my office, and I will be responsible for their visual needs while they are ensuring my freedom and safety. It’s truly a privilege.”

To Colonel Green, Captain Jones, and Reserve Lieutenant Wheeler, the military HPSP scholarship provided the opportunity to pursue a unique opportunity. Each is thankful for the NECO experience that prepared them as leaders in their field.