

# The Impact of Federal Service Optometry on the Profession: An Historical Perspective



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# Relevant Financial Relationships

**NONE.**

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# World War I



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# World War I



- During WW I, the profession was in its infancy
- Education varied from university degrees to apprenticeships
- Many states did not yet have licensure



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# World War I

- Optometry has been contributing to the mission of the US military since World War I
- Prior to WW I, there was a small standing Army. Entry was limited to those with good uncorrected VA
- When manpower was increased to meet to war demand, this was no longer the case
- No recognition of the profession by the military, though many optometrists served in unofficial basis



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# World War I

- At the conclusion of WW I, the military was dramatically decreased and ametropia was no longer a concern



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### Interwar Years

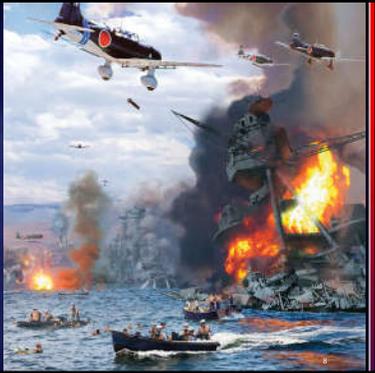


- By the beginning of WW II, the profession had matured considerably
  - Creation of the American Academy of Optometry in 1922
  - Education more standardized
  - Licensure in all states




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### World War II



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### World War II

- As WW II began, the need for soldiers and sailors, even with poor uncorrected VA, again dramatically increased



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### World War II

- Still no career ladder for optometrists in the Army
  - Not recognized as a profession
  - Served as enlisted men, not commissioned officers.




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### World War II



- Optometrists in the Navy were commissioned beginning in 1941.
  - First recognition by the federal government as a profession.
- Again, at the conclusion of the war, the military was dramatically decreased

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### Cold War

- As of 1947, due to the efforts of the AOA, Army optometrists were now commissioned, as were those in the newly formed Air Force




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### Cold War



- ODs were now part of the health care system, not operating in isolation
- First time ODs practicing within hospitals
- First time ODs credentialed
- First time (on an unofficial basis) that ODs used pharmaceutical agents

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### Korean War



- With the outbreak of the Korean War there was a massive manpower build up again
  - ODs served throughout the war as recognized professionals

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### Cold War

- At the conclusion of the war there was again a major decrease in manpower, but not in optometry
  - Due to the manpower needs of the Cold War optometric numbers were actually increased



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### Vietnam War



- At the beginning of the Vietnam War there was again a large build up in overall manpower
  - Optometrists were included in the "Doctors' Draft"
  - Optometrists were assigned to combat divisions
  - Provided greater direct support to the mission than ever before

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### Scope of Practice

- Originally, optometrists were specifically forbidden from using Diagnostic Pharmaceutical Agents (DPAs) or Therapeutic Pharmaceutical Agents (TPAs)
- Often done unofficially, "under medical supervision" or "exception to policy"



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### Scope of Practice

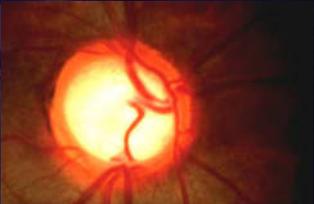


- ODs gained experience and knowledge of the benefits of pharmaceutical utilization
  - Impetus for the movement to use these agents in the civilian world
  - This experience was used to argue safety and benefits in state legislatures

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## Scope of Practice

- Regulations gradually modified in the 1980s to officially allow the use of DPAs and TPAs in all branches of the military
- Sometimes initially used a formulary of anesthetics, mydriatics, cycloplegics, anti-infectives, steroids, analgesics, etc.
- Required change in credentialing



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## Operation Desert Shield/Storm, Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom



- Conflicts again lead to a manpower buildup, primarily through mobilizing the reserve forces, including many optometrists
- ODs again in combat divisions and other forward elements proved their importance in achieving the mission
- Provided medical eyecare in addition to traditional optometric care

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## Humanitarian Missions

- From the Vietnam War to present
- Broad scope of medical and traditional optometric services



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## Operation Desert Shield/Storm, Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom



Major Charles Robert Soltes, Jr., OD  
 VA Blind Rehabilitation Center

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## Veterans Administration

- Optometrists were first placed on the staff of Veterans Administration (VA) hospitals in 1947
- In 1973, Public Law created a position for a full-time Director of Optometry within the Department of Medicine and Surgery
- The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Optometry Service was created by Public Law on October 21, 1976 with the establishment of the Director of Optometric Service position.



John Townsend, OD

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## Veterans Administration



- VA is the largest healthcare education organization in the U.S.
- Optometry students began training in the VA in 1972
- Morbidity of patient base is ideal for education of students and residents on ocular disease

Harlingen HealthCare Center  
 VA Texas Valley Coastal Bend Health Care System

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### Public Health Service

- Dr. Paul Owen, First USPHS OD
  - 1966
  - PHS Indian Hospital, Phoenix, AZ
  - Effort to combat trachoma
- Grew to 100 Commissioned ODs plus additional contractors



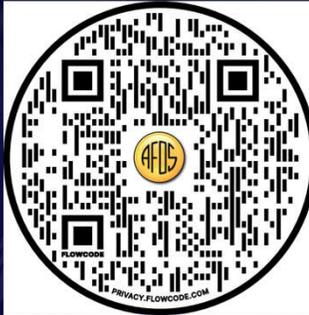
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### Summary

- **Federal Service Optometry's Impact on the Profession**
  - First hospital-based care
  - First multidisciplinary practice
  - First credentialing
  - First exposure to medical eye care

For additional information:  
McAlister WH, Weaver JL, Davis JD, Newsom JA. Military optometry from World War I to the present: An overview. *Hindsight: Journal of Optometry History* 2021, 52(1): 4-8.

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