

BUSINESS WATCH

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Battle-tested ophthalmologist

■ Weichel brings Army expertise to patients in Bowie

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STAFF WRITER

After 13 years in the Army, there is little Eric Weichel has not seen when it comes to eyes.

During that time, Weichel, 38, sharpened his ophthalmological skills with everything from routine checkups for recruits to treating soldiers wounded in improvised explosive device attacks.

He chose to take his skills to the private sector last year, joining at the Bowie branch of the Retina Group of Washington, D.C., which has nine locations in the area.

"There's no civilian problem I couldn't take care of at this point," he said.

Whereas Weichel spent his military days responding to systemic injuries in which the goal is always to save the person over the eyes, his days now consist of testing for and treating macular degeneration, retinal tears and detachments, and eye problems associated with diabetes.

"We deal with a lot of stress, but being able to stay calm under pressure is always helpful. Conditions can be traumatic for a patient with retinal bleeding or detachment," said William B. Phillips II, another ophthalmologist with the Retina Group.

He said Weichel's experience ensures he is well-rounded and won't have trouble interacting with patients.

"All retina people know each other; it's a small community," Phillips joked.

Weichel began his career in internal medicine after graduating with a bachelor's and medical degree from Northeastern Ohio Universities College of Medicine. He was the first in his family to pursue the occupation. Weichel



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"There's no civilian problem I couldn't take care of at this point," says former Army ophthalmologist Eric Weichel.

joined the Army Medical Corps through a scholarship and was soon shipped off to an internship in Hawaii.

"I definitely saw some surfboard injuries in Hawaii," he said.

Weichel was a flight surgeon for an attack helicopter battalion, when he became more keenly aware of the vision issues in the military. Deciding eye care would be a good combination of his medical and surgical training, Weichel shifted from a general practitioner to an ophthalmologist. The career move took him to the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, where he soon faced the "chaos" of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

He also served under the Army as faculty at the National Eye Institute and as attending surgeon at the Washington Hospital Center, Anne Arundel Medical Center and Georgetown University Medical Center. He has written 40 research papers on eye treatment.

What Weichel remembers from his time in the Army were the intense conversations he had with the families of

the wounded; the American Red Cross would often fly them to the hospitals.

"One of the reasons I got involved in research was to answer their questions. Many times they wanted answers to questions, and we had no answers," he said.

He was discharged as a lieutenant colonel, which he describes as "middle of the road" for doctors.

Weichel decided to take up private practice to provide a more stable life for his three children, ages 5 to 9. The family has moved six times in 13 years.

"I'm enjoying the autonomy of not working for the Army and not having someone always saying, 'You have to leave your family and go somewhere else,'" Weichel said.

Weichel lives with his children and wife of 12 years in Olney. He spends his free time golfing, fly-fishing and skiing.

He said his greatest change since leaving the military is learning to market himself, because there were always plenty of patients in the military.

"Private practice requires you to be much more engaging," he said.