

Western Pennsylvania Guide to Good Health

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Dr. Michael Scheel of Southwestern PA Orthopedics-- From the Baghdad Battlefield to Peters Township

By John Fries

Imagine this scenario: you're a newly minted doctor. You've graduated from medical school and completed your residency, and you're ready to practice as an orthopedic surgeon. But instead of meeting with hospital and medical practice administrators to discuss your future, you find yourself on a military plane high over the Atlantic and en route to Baghdad.

It's wartime, and you're a U.S. Air Force enlistee who just spent three years in active duty in Dayton, Ohio. Now, you owe Uncle Sam five months on the front lines of Operation Iraqi Freedom. The war is raging, casualties are mounting and you're one of the medical professionals whose job it is to treat those who pass through your surgical unit.

That's the life Michael Scheel, MD left behind only a few months ago.

Scheel is the newest member of the medical staff at Southwestern PA Orthopedic Associates. An orthopedic surgeon who is, in his own words, "a generalist," he looks forward to meeting and treating patients of all ages with all types of orthopedic problems--sports injuries, sprains, strains, joint problems and more.

For Scheel, a North Hills native and 1990 graduate of North Allegheny High School, joining the staff at Southwestern PA Orthopedics was an easy decision. "I did my residency training with Dr. David Welker at West Virginia University," says Scheel, who also attended Penn State as an undergrad and received his medical degree from the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. "He and I also ran four or five marathons together, including the Boston Marathon. After spending so much time with Dr. Welker, I knew I wanted to work with him once my active duty was up, and I've been looking forward to it."

Sports medicine is a natural for Scheel, a self-described sports junkie. "When I was growing up," he says, "ESPN was always on at our house. And I always played sports. I also recall being treated in the Passavant Hospital emergency department many times for sports injuries." Becoming a doctor always seemed to be in the cards for Scheel. "In school, I was always interested in the sciences, and in interacting with people. Those interests were instrumental in my choosing a career in medicine, since that gives me the opportunity to have both."

Scheel found practicing medicine on the battlefield to be an interesting, though intense, experience. His patients included members of the U.S. military, as well as those from other coalition forces, including Australian, British and Iraqi, and a significant number of Iraqi civilians.

"We worked in a large, permanent military medical facility that was built on the site of the former Saddam Hussein International Airport--now Baghdad International Airport,"

he recalls. "I was the only orthopedic surgeon there. I'm glad I did it. Although it was a very rewarding experience, it's also one I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy. We saw injuries that were really dramatic; things you wouldn't see in even most intensive care hospitals. For example, trauma care for injuries resulting from gunshots, falls from helicopters--things like that."

While there, he treated a number of soldiers engaged in elite special operations. "Members of the Navy SEALs and Special Forces would sometimes get injured while performing overnight maneuvers, so they'd be brought to the unit in the middle of the night. We'd treat them, and they'd want to get back out there and complete their missions."

With his military duty behind him, Scheel looks back and remembers a much different environment than the one that's often presented to the public. "We treated lots of Iraqi citizens, and the majority of them were positive," he says. "Saddam Hussein's people lived in luxury, and he was a ruthless murderer. During his reign, the majority of citizens lived in absolute poverty. We're helping them change things for the better."

Happy to be back home, Scheel looks forward to a day-to-day experience that will be pleasantly challenging and much more tame than his time in Baghdad. That includes spending as much non-work time as possible with his wife Kelly, also a North Hills native, and their four-year-old son, Noah.

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