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Why the Army sees value in optical fabrication

FORT DETRICK, Md. – The old saying still holds true: “You can’t shoot what you can’t see.”

It may be cliché, but the phrase underscores the ongoing need for ophthalmic fabrication services within the military – a mission that historically dates back to World War II.

“Simply put, we provide the sight to fight,” said Sgt. 1st Class Jason Nichols, non-commissioned officer in charge for the optical fabrication lab at the U.S. Army Medical Materiel Center-Korea.

USAMMC-K is joined by its counterpart in Germany, the U.S. Army Medical Materiel Center-Europe, as integral forward-operating providers of quality corrective eyewear to Soldiers, Sailors,

Airmen, Marines and other essential employees and retirees.

Both centers are direct reporting units under Army Medical Logistics Command, headquartered at Fort Detrick in Frederick, Md.

Together, the two labs produced over 100,000 sets of single-vision and multi-focal prescription lenses for a variety of frames in the past fiscal year. That total includes standard issue and frame-of-choice glasses, as well as inserts for gas masks, eye protection and flight goggles for pilots.

“Optical fabrication is a multi-step process that can vary based upon prescription complexity,” Nichols said.

Lab technicians use specialized equipment, like a lensometer, to verify

the desired prescription of each corrective lens. They are then sized, smoothed and inserted into each piece of eyewear. The process also includes tinting, in some cases.

From there, they are inspected for quality assurance and readied for shipping to the user, often within 24 hours of receiving the initial request.

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ABOVE: Florian Peter, a prescription eyeglass maker inspector, does a quality assurance check on a set of new prescription glasses produced at the U.S. Army Medical Materiel Center-Europe’s optical fabrication lab. (Photo by Lt. Col. Marc Welde)



LEFT: Pvt. Brandon Stewart, right, an optical laboratory specialist at the U.S. Army Medical Materiel Center-Korea, uses a manual lensometer to spot a lens during a field training exercise in Chinhae, South Korea. In the background, Spc. Steven Sims, an optical laboratory specialist, inserts lenses into a frame. (Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Jason Nichols)



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QUICK TURNAROUND

Staffed by four Soldiers and about a dozen local civilians and contractors, the USAMMC-E lab handled over 62,000 orders throughout the U.S. Europe, Central and Africa command areas in fiscal year 2018-19.

That marks an increase of roughly 4,500 from the prior year, according to Ursula Gagne, chief and production controller of the center's Optical Activities Division.

Gagne said most single-vision orders can be completed within 24 hours, while bifocals typically take an extra day due to a longer fabrication process.

Regardless of the type or number of orders, the dedicated lab workers keep timeliness, accuracy and efficiency at top of mind as they carry out a crucial readiness mission.

"Readiness is the first word here," Gagne said. "The optical division supports readiness by ensuring every Service member in our areas of operation that requires prescription glasses receive spectacles and inserts when and where they need them."

The lab at USAMMC-K produced over 32,400 sets of spectacles in fiscal year 2018-19, Nichols said. Completed orders included 22,678 standard issue or frame-of-choice glasses, plus 6,503 gas mask inserts, 5,240 eye protection inserts and 775 prescription sunglasses.



Spc. Blaine Malave, an optician, mixes a tint for application on a set of lenses in the U.S. Army Medical Materiel Center-Europe's optical fabrication lab. (Photo by Lt. Col. Marc Welde)

GOING MOBILE

Unique from other optical labs, USAMMC-K also has a standing tactical mission. It is equipped to deploy into the field to establish a mobile lab in the event of a "transition to hostilities" to allow a more immediately available location to better equip warfighters entering Korea.

The first mobile optical repair unit dates back to 1942. Before then, Soldiers who lost or damaged their eyewear had to be removed from the front lines, resulting in lost time and transportation burdens.

USAMMC-K Commander Lt. Col. Marc Welde said an expeditionary team from the 563rd Medical Logistics Company stands ready to deploy to austere field locations to fabricate eyewear close to the point of need.

"During the rigors of combat operations, Soldiers will break their glasses," he said. "Our tactical commanders rely on the medical and AMC community to ensure combat power is maintained."

Nichols said the secondary lab operates through the use of a specialized vehicle, commonly called an "expando-van," and an optical fabrication field set.

"The newly established lab would be able to fulfill fabrication requirements for most common prescription eyewear needs, enabling Soldiers to expediently get back into the fight, while more complex prescriptions would be forwarded to the fixed facility for fabrication," he said.

'ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL'

To maintain readiness, the USAMMC-K optical fabrication team conducts field training exercises twice a year in conjunction with the U.S. Naval Hospital Yokosuka in Chinhae, South Korea.

It all falls in line with the need to ensure Soldiers remain ready to "fight tonight."

"If a Service member can't see, then they are effectively out of the fight," Nichols said, "which is why vision readiness is tracked as an integral part of a Soldier's medical readiness."

Welde said the forward-operating labs are "absolutely essential" to

"If a Service member can't see, then they are effectively out of the fight."

Sgt. 1st Class Jason Nichols, USAMMC-K

maintain the high level of readiness required by Army leaders.

In most cases, Service members deployed overseas can have new glasses in hand within a week, rather than several weeks if relying on a stateside lab.

"Having the capability here in Korea gets them back in the fight quickly," Welde said. "It's just another tool in the MEDLOG arsenal that most people don't really know about, but rely on." 



Pvt. Brandon Stewart, an optical laboratory specialist, inserts lenses into a frame at the optical fabrication lab at the U.S. Army Medical Materiel Center-Korea on Dec. 6, 2019. (Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Jason Nichols)

Army major recognized as honorary member of Korean Military Medical Association

SEONGNAM, South Korea – Maj. Mark G. Sander, deputy commanding officer at the U.S. Army Medical Materiel Center-Korea, was recently recognized as an Honorary Member of the Korean Military Medical Association.

Brig. Gen. Seog Woong, commanding general of the Republic of Korea Armed Forces Medical Command, presented the award during the association's 50th Military Medical Conference, a two-day event that concluded November 7, 2019 at the Militopia Hotel and Conference Center in Seongnam.

Sander's recognition came as a result of countless hours of collaboration and efforts to promote the Republic of Korea and U.S. alliance, as well as his "continued contributions to the development of Korean Military Medicine."

However, Sander said the alliance between the two countries "has had a bigger impact on me than I will ever have on it."

"We at USAMMC-K are considered a habitual contributor at the joint and combined planning levels, supporting efforts to synchronize events, understand requirements and logistics capacity issues, as well as build in opportunities where we can achieve synergy in mutual support," he said.

USAMMC-K is a direct reporting unit under Army Medical Logistics Command, headquartered at Fort Detrick, Md.

Sander said the award came as a "surprise," particularly considering the heavily clinical and scientific background of the association's leadership and overall subject matter.

"As a logistician, we thrive in both the theoretical and pragmatic, so we are able to forecast and sustain multiple potentials using available resources and reduce the risk to operations," he said. "But in that academically charged environment, I was definitely not well versed in the majority of their topics."



Maj. Mark G. Sander, deputy commander for operations at the U.S. Army Medical Materiel Center-Korea, shakes hands with Brig. Gen. Seog Woong, commanding general of the Republic of Korea Armed Forces Medical Command, after being recognized as an Honorary Member of the Korean Military Medical Association on Nov. 7, 2019 at Militopia Hotel and Conference Center in Seongnam, South Korea. (Courtesy photo)

Sander was quick to share credit with USAMMC-K Commander Lt. Col. Marc R. Welde, whom he described as a "driven and resourceful leader."

"(Welde) spends what I consider the dominant amount of his limited time focused over the horizon, developing the vision of how we should be operating, as he should," Sander said. "I see it as my job, as the DCO, to activate that potential and see his vision meet reality."

It was a recent presentation on USAMMC-K's capability and operational concepts, in which Sander appeared on Welde's behalf, that "likely...earned the notice" of the Korean medical leaders, he said.

Sander has served as the DCO at USAMMC-K since June 2018. He called the role a rewarding experience.

"There are so many ways to serve in this role, that I could spend all my time and be just as busy even if I

never once tried to represent us with our ROK partners," Sander said. "But it is so utterly rewarding to share experiences and be culturally savvy when the partners are as friendly as they are here." 

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*Maj. Mark G. Sander,
Deputy Commander for Operations,
USAMMC-K*

Army medical logistics leader delivers joy during holidays

FORT DETRICK, Md. – Nearly a year ago, Todd Bishop pulled into his garage and tears of joy welled up in his eyes.

Dressed in a red Santa Claus suit trimmed with silver fur and gold brocade fabric, Bishop had just returned from his neighbor's house where he surprised a couple children with gifts and holiday cheer.

"Those kids were just jumping out of their skin," said Bishop, a retired Army officer who now serves as the director of the Business Support Office at the U.S. Army Medical Materiel Agency. "It just brought so much joy. Like, 'oh my goodness, that just happened.'"

That was the moment that Bishop realized he would become "Santa Todd" each year.

"Seeing how much joy Santa brought that family brought so much joy to me," he said. "Everything about that experience was joy. That really resonated with me."

Bishop's path to the role as Santa was unexpected. In April 2018, he started growing out his salt-and-pepper beard. Bishop said his wife, Michelle, liked it as it grew and got curly, so he let it go.

Little did he know that a trip back to South Carolina later that year for a gathering at his alma mater, The Citadel, would lead to a "life-changing" event. It was there Bishop ran into an old classmate, Max Kuhns, or "Santa Max," who has been playing the iconic Christmas character for years.

"And his wife, Mindie, who I had just met, her first question to me was: 'Have you ever played Santa before?'"

The question caught him off guard.

"I was like, 'uh, no, playing Santa has never even been on my radar,'" Bishop said. "Her very next statement to me was: 'I'm making you a suit.'"

And to Bishop's surprise, she did create a beautiful custom suit that he now wears proudly as he donates his time to various charities, including Gold in Fight, a foundation dedicated to serving families in need due to hardships caused by pediatric cancer.

"I could tell his excitement right away," said Mikel Griffith, founder and president of Gold in Fight. "In the world we live today, it's nice to know there are people who want to help and give back...We're so appreciative of that."



"Santa Todd" poses for a photo with Army Col. Jason Sepanic and his son, John, 7, just before Christmas 2018. John is a member of Cub Scout Pack 1070 in Walkersville, Md. (Courtesy photo)



"Santa Todd" and his wife, Michelle, are pictured with Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan and First Lady Yumi Hogan. (Courtesy photo)

"Just the thought of seeing the joy that we will bring to these kids...it actually chokes me up just thinking about it."

*Todd Bishop, Director,
USAMMA Business Support Office*

Bishop does not charge money or collect donations. Instead, he is focused on donating his time to good causes.

This year, he was booked for several breakfast and dinner with Santa events, as well as a bowling with Santa event supporting the Fort Meade Exceptional Family Member program. He also donated his time to Marine Corps Toys for Tots.

Then, on the final weekend before Christmas, Bishop said he planned to participate when Gold in Fight delivers presents to the homes of the families they are supporting.

"Just the thought of seeing the joy that we will bring to these kids who are struggling with cancer...it actually chokes me up just thinking about it," he said.

Bishop, who has kept his focus on fitness from his Army days, describes his version of Santa as a "more modern" twist on the traditional St. Nicholas -- no big round belly or "ho, ho, ho" exclamations.

The beard, however, is still 100% real. He recalls the first child he interacted with actually tested his "beard authenticity."

"She asked, 'is that real?'" Bishop laughed. "I just leaned down and she pulled on it."

With a great big smile she exclaimed, "It is real!"



USAMMA loses one of its own: Gillis Bolden remembered as kind heart who loved helping others



FORT DETRICK, Md. – A smile that could light up a room, an infectious laugh and a kind-hearted person who would never hesitate to help others.

That's how coworkers of Gillis M. Bolden Jr. remember the 54-year-old, who died unexpectedly on Saturday, Nov. 16, 2019 in Frederick, Md.

"Every Soldier in the last couple years that has come through (the U.S. Army Medical Materiel Agency), they know Gillis," said Maj. Jonathan Williams, chief of USAMMA's medical fielding division. "He's definitely a great loss to the agency."

News of Bolden's untimely passing spread quickly throughout Army Medical Logistics Command and USAMMA, one of the AMLC's direct reporting units. Bolden had worked as a civilian human resources specialist for USAMMA since 2016.

Bolden, who served over 20 years in the Army, was often the first person a new Soldier coming to USAMMA at Fort Detrick would meet.

"He would drop anything he had to do to make sure the Soldiers were taken care of," said Capt. Ivette Daley, detachment commander for USAMMA. "He was that type of person that if I needed something, if anybody needed something, he was there for them."

Daley was that new Soldier back in March 2019. Bolden's first contact

with Daley was an email welcoming her as she transitioned from Fort Stewart in Georgia.

Daley said her relationship with Bolden and his partner, Lydia, quickly grew after she arrived at Fort Detrick.

"He was like my best friend here. He took me everywhere," Daley said. "If you saw Gillis and Lydia, you saw me with them. If you saw me, you saw Gillis. That's just how they took me in as part of their family."

Bolden, a Frederick resident, retired from the Army as a non-commissioned officer in human resources.

In 2004, he joined the ranks of civilian staff at Fort Detrick, first working for the Military Personnel Division. He left the post for about five years to work in local law enforcement, but later returned to continue his career in human resources.

Daffay Auguillard, a human resources clerk at MPD who worked with Bolden, described him as professional and respectful in the workplace, but also funny and a pleasure to be around.

She said she would most miss Bolden's ability "to change the world with laughter."

"He would have you laughing and crying at the same time," Auguillard said. "He was surely the life of the office party. We never had a boring day with Gillis."

After his second stint at MPD, Bolden transferred to USAMMA in March 2016. In those three-plus years, Bolden touched many lives as he left his legacy on the organization and its people, according to his coworkers.

"His outlook on life wasn't like anybody else," said Staff Sgt. Donald Hosea, non-commissioned officer in charge for USAMMA's G-1, which oversees manpower and personnel. "He liked to smile, joke around. And he was the least negative person."

Daley shared a similar sentiment, saying no matter how hectic the work environment would get, he always lightened the mood and loved to joke around.

"He was just happy, kind," she said of Bolden. "He always had a smile on his face and it was a light-up-the-room kind of smile. I'd never seen him in a bad mood."

Bolden's death hit many in the AMLC and USAMMA Family particularly hard, Williams said, primarily because of the impact he made through his personal interactions and relationships with everyone he met.

Like Daley and others, Williams shared a special bond with Bolden.

"I'm also a minister at First Missionary (Baptist Church) and he would come out to hear my sermons and support me," Williams said. "He was just a great friend."

Williams officiated Bolden's funeral service that was held on Nov. 22.

Daley recalled Bolden's love for exercising and coaching his sons' sports teams, but also chowing down on some Old Bay chicken wings and enjoying margaritas.

"And he had impeccable fashion," she said, cracking a smile.

Daley remembered a recent work trip where she, Bolden and others took some time to hike in the mountains near Ogden, Utah. Despite his strict gym regimen, Bolden seemed to prefer letting others in the group lead the way that day.

"I was like, 'C'mon Gillis, you go to the gym every day,'" Daley laughed, adding that she nicknamed him "Mo," short for molasses. "I would always have to tell him to hurry up. ... I think he was just enjoying the scenery."

Maybe it was the thin air in the Utah mountains, but maybe it was simply just the way Bolden lived his life – taking it all in, enjoying the little things and, most importantly, cherishing the people and friendships he made along the way.

"All the stories you hear about him, they are good stories," Williams said. "He enjoyed each day and respected all people. He was always quick to lend a helping hand." 

Army staff sergeant embraces physical fitness, wins first bodybuilding event

FORT DETRICK, MD – Army Staff Sgt. Rick Lash makes physical fitness part of his daily routine.

About two years ago, he got more serious about it in his off-duty time and started working his way into the world of competitive bodybuilding.

In just his second competition, Lash's commitment – early mornings, long hours in the gym and strict dieting – paid off in a big way, earning him a clean sweep at a National Physique Committee show on Nov. 9, 2019.

Lash, 36, a native of Venice Beach, Calif., took first-place in his class, his division and then won the coveted Best in Show award at the Northern USA Championships in Harrisburg, Pa.



Army Staff Sgt. Rick Lash appears on stage during the National Physique Committee's Northern USA Championships in Harrisburg, Pa. on Nov. 9, 2019. In just his second competition, Lash won first-place in his class, his division and the coveted Best in Show award. (Courtesy photo)

"I literally couldn't win anymore," he laughed. "I didn't even know there was a Best in Show. I had my eyes on just getting nationally qualified; second or above. But obviously I trained to win the overall."

Lash, who worked as an operations non-commissioned officer tracking, developing, and implementing different training programs for Army Medical Logistics Command before a recent deployment, wasted little time basking in the glory of his first win.

"It made me more mentally clear, more focused, obviously in better physical condition, and that helped in every aspect of my life this year."

Staff Sgt. Rick Lash, AMLC

Less than a week later, he was already back in the gym and starting work to bulk up, even as he prepared for his deployment to Kuwait in January. It is his third tour overseas, following stints in Iraq and South Korea earlier in his 17-year career.

After completing his deployment to Camp Arifjan, where he is serving as the medical non-commissioned officer in charge and managing operations at the installation clinic for personnel stationed there, Lash is eyeing a couple dates in 2021 to make his national bodybuilding competition debut.

"It'll give me a good solid year to focus on the offseason, which is where you get all your gains," Lash said. "You focus on all your development and then you shred down for your contest."

One of Lash's workout partners and fellow competitor, Army Staff Sgt. Charmond "Deon" Magee said Lash has shown a great work ethic and improvement in such a short period of time.

"He continues to grow, do the right things, and maintain discipline and dedication to the gym," Magee said. "He's a standout amongst a lot of people."

Lash credits the Army for developing his love of physical fitness, and it's been a big help in preparing for the new Army Combat Fitness Test that better aligns fitness with combat readiness for all Soldiers.

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“It’s a lot more grueling and more daunting than what the last test was for sure,” Lash said. “It’s total functional fitness, which is kind of what we do as bodybuilders.”

The new standards incorporate six events – up from three in the current test – and is set to become the official Army physical test of record by October.

The six events include the deadlift, standing power throw, hand-release pushup with arm extensions, sprint-drag-carry, leg tuck and two-mile run.

Magee, who won the overall men’s physique title at the 2018 NPC Baltimore Gladiator Championships, stressed the importance of Soldier fitness in any situation.

“It’s very, very important,” he said. “One fit Soldier out of six is not enough. If you have a group of six fit Soldiers that work together, it’s better because they have mental strength and can handle the physical demand, so the team will function better.”



Army Staff Sgt. Rick Lash wasted no time getting back into the gym after winning his first bodybuilding title on Nov. 9, 2019. Here, Lash performs a deadlift during a workout at OneLife Fitness in Frederick, Md., less than a week after the competition, his second overall. The deadlift is one of six events in the new Army Combat Fitness Test for all Soldiers. (Photo by C.J. Lovelace)

“It’s been a big help in preparing for the new Army Combat Fitness Test that better aligns fitness with combat readiness for all Soldiers.”

Staff Sgt. Rick Lash, AMLC

Lash said he did very well in his first unofficial go at the new test and has continued to improve his PT scores as a result of his pursuit of his bodybuilding goals.

“That’s really helped me shine a little bit,” he said of his focus on fitness and bodybuilding. “And as a result of that, it’s made me more mentally clear, more focused, obviously in better physical condition, and that helped in every aspect of my life this year.”

Lash also credits his recent selection for promotion to Sergeant First Class to his continued commitment to improving his body and fitness levels.

“It helps you find a discipline and maintain that discipline that we learn in the Army as far as food dieting, hitting your exercises every day,” he said. “It just overall makes you a better-rounded Soldier.”

Lash, who has parlayed his venture into a consulting business called Team Lash Aesthetic Bodybuilding, said he most enjoys the sport because it’s a “never-ending modification process” for the body.

While he admits there’s no such thing as the “perfect” physique, Lash said he just loves the pursuit.

“I’m extremely thankful (for the Army) because now I have goals outside of the Army that I can pursue after I retire, and hopefully become a professional bodybuilder and help promote the Army,” he said. 