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WVU anesthesiology chair called up for active duty

Dr. Robert Johnstone ordered to Texas military base



Submitted Photo

Dr. Robert Johnstone, chair of WVU's department of anesthesiology, reports for active duty Thursday.

BY JAKE STUMP

The Dominion Post

America's prescription for war will include one of WVU's finest doctors.

As chair of the WVU department of anesthesiology, Dr. Robert Johnstone will swap his doctor's gown for a set of military fatigues later this week.

Johnstone, 58, a husband and father of three daughters, never expected the U.S. Army Reserves to call him to active duty.

It wasn't what the doctor ordered.

"Life is full of surprises," said Johnstone from the WVU Health Sciences Center Monday, after administering anesthesia to an 86-year-old and an 8-year-old. "I've been in the Reserves for more than a decade. This war crept up on me. They don't always mobilize physicians. But I'm glad to go and glad to serve my country."

On Thursday, Johnstone will report to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas. The fort is home to Brooke Army Medical Center, one of the military's largest hospitals.

Johnstone's trying to change his orders, however, to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., because it's closer to his Morgantown home.

But wherever he goes, Johnstone will be doing what he does best.

"I've always been an anesthesiologist," said Johnstone, who attended Cornell University. "In college, I worked a summer job in operating rooms. Before graduation, I knew what I wanted to do."

A colonel in the U.S. Army Reserves, Johnstone is an individual mobilization augmentee -- he trains two weeks a year with an Army Reserve unit in the country, but doesn't belong to a specific outfit.

"It'll be the first time I've gone to war," said Johnstone, the first WVU department chair to be activated for Operation Noble Eagle. "I was scheduled to go down to Haiti -- that would've been fun. But at the last minute, intelligence advised against it."

Johnstone's military experience dates back to the early 1970s when he served in active duty at Fort Rucker, Ala.

Since then he's overseen anesthetics in civilian and military operating rooms across the country.

"At the university, we do 20,000 anesthetics a year," said the Vermont native. "I figure I've been responsible for half a million anesthetics. It's pretty exciting."

Johnstone inherited his dedication to medicine and military from his father, who served with the 100th Division in Europe during World War II. An Army physician, Johnstone's father helped liberate the Nazi concentration camp at Dachau.

Every other known male in the Johnstone family has also served his country.

Johnstone's uncles fought in the Korean War. One of them wears a tattoo that reads "Death before dishonor."

His cousin, Charlie Norton, is featured in "Death Valley: The Summer Offensive, I Corps.," a book about the 1st Marine Corps in Vietnam.

Johnstone's just following tradition.

"I'm doing what I'm supposed to do."

He's not even letting age get in the way, as he's kept himself in tip-top physical form.

"I'm proud of the fact that I've got perfect physical fitness scores," he said. "I work out all the time. A day without exercise I consider a bleak day."

Johnstone's been spending his few last days before activation with family, friends and co-workers.

"They've been as surprised as I've been," he said. "And they've been very supportive."

This past weekend, he helped his 12-year-old daughter paint her bedroom three shades of green.

"I'll worry about my family, but I'm grateful that I have wonderful friends and neighbors to look after them," he said.

In the most recent anesthesiology department newsletter, Johnstone wrote about filing his taxes, getting new glasses and arranging for others to mow his lawn while he's away.

"This planning is difficulty, not knowing how long I'll be gone," he wrote.

Whether it's one week or one year, Johnstone will serve his country and practice what he loves simultaneously.

"I'm hoping it's 90 days, but they can keep me as long as they need me," he said. "Anesthesiology is a hidden world that most people don't get to see. I tell people it's the greatest miracle of modern medicine. You can take a person who's awake, make them fall asleep in an instant, and then in a few seconds, make them awake again. It's a shame people can't see it. That's what the military needs. What you need for a real war are trauma surgeons and anesthesiologists."

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