

# Military Orientation for Brain Injury Professionals: The Total Immersive Experience



*Dr. Whitlock and Dr. Cody are physicians at Northeast Rehabilitation Hospital Network*

When Dr. James Whitlock, Jr., Neurologist and Medical Director at Northeast Rehabilitation Hospital in Salem, NH, began treating military veterans for injuries sustained in the line of duty, he quickly found himself thrust into an unfamiliar world filled with new terminology and foreign circumstances of injury.

Listening to soldiers recount the events that caused head injuries left Dr. Whitlock with many questions, “How can being bounced around in the turret of a Humvee while wearing a protective helmet possibly be violent enough to cause serious injury?” or for that matter “Exactly what does the inside of a turret look like?” and most importantly “What else might I be missing?”

As a doctor committed to thorough care for his patients, Dr. Whitlock began to ask his patients for help understanding “their world” as an active duty soldier. He promptly realized that his layman’s interpretation of details was tainted by misinterpretation. Seeking a way to truly grasp his patients’ experience, with the goal to provide the most appropriate care and treatment, he began to read books and watch movies recommended by his patients. While helpful, he felt he needed a more tangible understanding of their lives as soldiers.

So Dr. Whitlock turned to the New Hampshire National Guard for a solution. Was there a program that would immerse a non-military clinician in the environment from which their patients have come?

## Doctors in Kevlar?

While a program did not exist at that time, nearly one and half years later LTC (Ret) Kevin Major, Major General William Reddel, Lt. Craig Sanderson, and many NH National Guardsmen have made it a reality. On May 14th, twenty four clinicians treating military patients at VA Hospitals had the opportunity to spend the day experiencing the daily activities of soldiers on the front lines at the Military Orientation for Brain Injury Professionals held at the NH National Guard Regional

Training Institute in Center Strafford, NH.



Everyone in attendance were active participants in activities that included a simulated medevac scenario complete with transport by a Black Hawk helicopter for all, rides in contemporary convoy vehicles dressed in Kevlar gear and disorienting roll-over training in a Humvee simulator. All of these activities were designed to immerse the participants in the unfamiliar environment of the military so as to better understand and treat their patients.

## What a Difference a Day Makes

For Dr. Whitlock, his experience during the Humvee ride revealed just how violently a soldier is tossed about while the driver is accelerating at lightning speeds across treacherous terrain. Even with a helmet and protective gear, the exposed metal infrastructure of the vehicle and the unsecured items inside posed threat of injury at any moment. In



It was evident that the participants took away a better understanding and appreciation of their military patients. One nurse practitioner said that it was one of the best educational experiences she had ever had. An attendee who provides counseling services met with a veteran days after the event. She had been treating him for three years. He was aware that she was going to participate in the training and her experience at the Military Orientation for Brain Injury Professionals was the focus of their conversation. She found that the level of their communication seemed to move to an entirely new and better level.

As for Dr. Whitlock, he was most impressed with the servicemen who led the participants through the program. Their professionalism, humor, teamwork and camaraderie were evident and a vivid reminder of why many soldiers, even when receiving treatment for severe injuries, want to get well enough to return to active duty.

Undoubtedly, with hands-on training as offered by the Military Orientation for Brain Injury Professionals, medical professionals treating injured soldiers will be better equipped to help them return to a full life with their families and, in the best of cases, to their extended military family as well.

*If you would like more information about future programs or would like to speak with Dr. Whitlock about his immersive experience and its value as a medical professional treating military patients, he may be reached at: [jawhitlock@northeastrehab.com](mailto:jawhitlock@northeastrehab.com).*



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