

# RAIK & FILE

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||| PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRADLEY SLADE |||

Curtis Bedont thought he knew what it meant to be in the military.

Though he spent his formative years on bases in foreign outposts, his fighter-pilot father never faced deployment. “In the twenty-two years he was in the Air Force, nothing ever seemed to happen,” Bedont recalls.

So when dental-school costs piled up, Bedont opted to enlist, imagining his time in the service would mirror his father’s. After completing basic officer training, he relocated his family to Schofield Barracks in Honolulu. The morning after they arrived, Bedont picked up the remote and clicked on the news.

The date: 11 September 2001.



Curtis Bedont  
BS MANAGEMENT, 1997

LEADING  
ALUMNI

“I woke up and the military had changed forever,” Bedont says, his voice catching.

Although Bedont was nearly five thousand miles away from the wreckage of the World Trade Center, the day’s tragic events would take him across the world to treat detainees in Iraq’s most notorious prison. Nine years of military service, however, taught the 1997 business management alum lessons that continue to guide his Portland-based orthodontics practice.

## ROOTS

Much of Bedont’s childhood was spent moving from base to base, but his family was stationed in Sumter, South Carolina, during his high school years. At the urging of his track coach, Bedont took up pole vaulting during his sophomore year. After breaking school records, his parents enrolled him in a week-long pole-vaulting summer camp.

On the first day the camp coaches had him use a larger pole than he was used to, and to give him momentum, they pushed his pole into the box. Then, on one attempt, they didn’t. “I freaked out,” Bedont says. “I let go of the pole midway through the vault and ended up going head first into the box.”

The fall broke one of his wrists and sprained the other. Along with two casts, Bedont took home a new motto: “Always hold on,” he jokes.

After high school Bedont was accepted to the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, where he completed basic training. The plan was to become a pilot like his father. The competition and physical challenge appealed to him, but the academy’s obstacle course—particularly the long, shrinking tunnels cadets had to crawl through—became a hurdle to his progress. “It was terrifying for me,” he recalls. “Every time we did the obstacle course, all I could think about were those tunnels getting smaller and smaller. The claustrophobia would overwhelm me.”

It only took a couple of months for Bedont to realize he would not be happy at the academy. Since cadets start training in June, he was able to switch schools just in time to begin fall semester at BYU.

Following his first year in Provo, Bedont served an LDS mission in Florida. After returning to BYU, he pole vaulted on the track and field team and later met and married Jody Cutler. The couple will celebrate their twentieth anniversary this December.

The most difficult part of Bedont’s undergraduate years came when he was choosing a major. He considered computer science and electrical engineering before deciding on

a career in dentistry. The obvious choice was to major in biology, but Bedont took a different route via the Marriott School.

“As a dentist I knew I would run my own business,” Bedont says. “What better thing could I study than understanding how businesses work and applying that to my own practice?”

## DRILLS

One of the first things new patients learn when entering one of Bedont’s three offices is how to pronounce the doctor’s Italian surname. For the record, it’s *bee-don’t*. Amid the office décor are framed degrees and a certificate of parole—a darkly humorous reminder of Bedont’s two months living in a jail cell in Abu Ghraib. “It wasn’t a big room, but I had it all to myself,” he says.

The prison made headlines in late 2003 when reports of egregious human rights violations committed by coalition forces began circulating. In 2004 photos detailing the heinous acts were broadcast on *60 Minutes*. More than ten years on, the scandal is still drawing breath.

Deployed to Iraq in 2004, more than a year after the crimes at Abu Ghraib had been committed, Bedont first arrived at Camp Victory, a part of the large military complex near

Baghdad International Airport. He recalls how one detainee was brought to his trailer blindfolded and handcuffed; Bedont was told the blindfold was there for his protection. Although the guards disagreed, he insisted his patient needed to see him. They allowed Bedont to remove the blindfold, and he completed the procedure.

“Highly valued prisoners were held at Camp Victory,” Bedont explains. “I remember thinking, ‘Is this what it’s going to be like at Abu Ghraib?’”

A few months later he was able to answer that question. One morning following his transfer to the infamous prison, he awoke to the sound of rapid-fire Arabic outside his cell. With his senses in overdrive, he crept cautiously to the door. To his relief, it was a group of Iraqi soldiers being trained in the quad. The marines in his block hadn’t notified him beforehand.

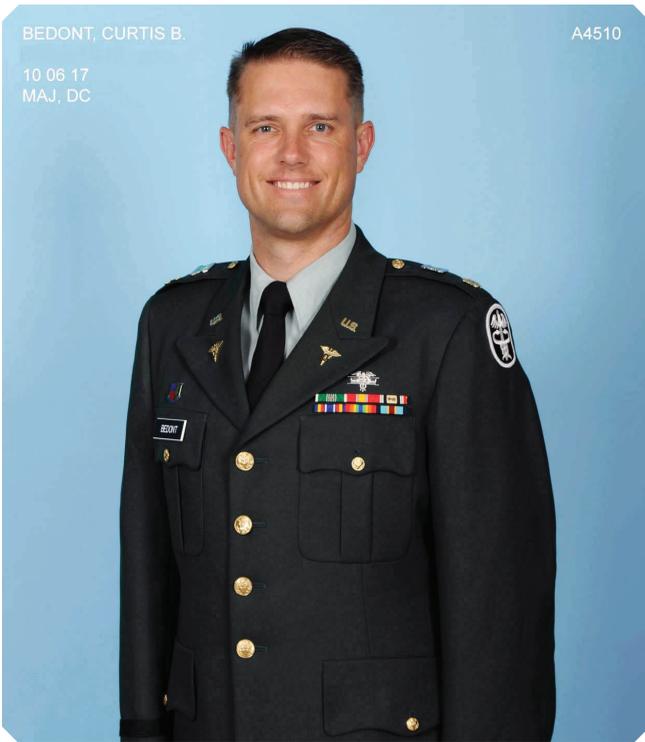
Little by little, though, the clamor of war faded. “We had mortars coming in almost every day,” Bedont says. “It’s freaky to begin with. You know you’re hearing explosions, but you get used to it.”

Abu Ghraib was different than he had anticipated. Patients were escorted to his chair unshackled and sans blindfolds. A translator was always present. “I made them



BEDONT, CURTIS B.

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## SERVING OUR COUNTRY BY SUPPORTING THE SOLDIERS THAT NEEDED HELP WAS A GREAT EXPERIENCE. I'M REALLY PROUD OF MY SERVICE.

comfortable as best as I could,” Bedont says. “I always explained everything I was doing.”

Bedont’s and other officers’ efforts to improve prison life, however, were overshadowed by past events. While he was there, CNN interviewed the prison’s hospital commander about the comprehensive medical care detainees were receiving. “A day or two later CNN aired the piece,” Bedont remembers. “It was all negative and focused on the past. That was disappointing.”

Unable to escape its harrowing image, Abu Ghraib was eventually disbanded, and many detainees and soldiers were sent to Camp Bucca, where Bedont finished his tour of duty. The new facility was an about-face from the dark days of its predecessor. Detainees were allowed to organize their own classes in literacy and religion. Cigarettes, tea, and other supplies were used as incentives for good behavior. And some detainees were allowed family visits.

When you ask Bedont what he took away from his deployment in the Middle East, his answer is simple: the difficulty of being a good leader. “Being in charge of a lot of people is very difficult,” Bedont says. “I was never a commander, and I took it for granted until I started my own practice. That’s when I realized that leadership means making hard decisions.”

He also learned a little about following inspiration.

### IMPRESSIONS

After earning his business management degree from the Marriott School in 1997, Bedont began dental school at Oregon Health and Science University. As an out-of-state student, his tuition was double that of his peers. He and Jody reviewed the debt their family would be facing by graduation and decided to explore other ways to finance his education. After weighing the options,

Bedont signed with the army and received the Armed Forces Health Professions Scholarship—a three-year, full-tuition deal.

It was after graduation that he found himself in Hawaii on the eve of 9/11 for his first military assignment. While at Schofield Barracks, Bedont was exposed to orthodontics. He became interested in specializing, but the army only accepted three dentists out of nearly fifty applicants into its orthodontics residency program each year.

To set himself apart, Bedont decided to earn the Expert Field Medical Badge (EFMB). With a 19 percent pass rate, the EFMB is one of the hardest army decorations to attain and encompasses a weeklong intensive field test and a timed twelve-mile march in full gear. Bedont got the badge on his first try and landed the residency.

The Bedont family began prepping for a move to San Antonio to begin the residency when the call came: Bedont had been selected for deployment. Although his obligation to the military was nearly finished, opting out of Iraq would mean giving up the residency he’d worked hard to secure.

His commander was firm. “You can go to Iraq or you can sign your resignation letter today. You have to make the decision now,” he said.

“Jody was adamant about me not going to war,” Bedont remembers.

“On my drive to the commander’s office, I had been praying about what to do. I received the most direct answer of my life. I knew everything was going to be okay.”

Before Bedont told his commander he would deploy, he called Jody to explain how he felt. To his surprise, she agreed with his decision.

“She has always supported me,” Bedont explains. “There have been times, especially during dental school and my residency, when I haven’t been home as much as I wanted to be. She has always been there to take care of our family.”

Just a few weeks after making that call, Bedont was on the ground in Baghdad. It’s a decision he has never regretted. “I shouldn’t have even had to think about going,” Bedont says. “Serving our country by supporting the soldiers that needed help was a great experience. I’m really proud of my service.”

### FAMILY PRACTICE

Following deployment, Bedont completed his residency in Texas as planned and then spent three more years in the army as an orthodontist in North Carolina. By 2010 he had completed his obligation to the military and was at a crossroads: stay in the army for another eleven years to earn retirement or leave and start his own practice.

“It was a really hard decision,” Bedont says. “Jody and I looked at a lot of different options and areas. We kept coming back to the Portland area, near where I went to dental school, and we happened to find a practice for sale there.”

The practice came with two offices: one in Portland and one in Sandy, Oregon. It wasn’t the ideal situation—Bedont wanted a single office—but the practice was available at the right time and in the right place.

Two months later Bedont’s realtor called. There was an opportunity to get into a new property in Camas, Washington, just across the river from Portland. It was closer to home and gave Bedont the chance to design the space from the ground up. Securing financing was uncertain, but he signed the lease. Luckily construction took more time than expected. Since the building wasn’t completed until Bedont’s second year running his practice, banks were more willing to say yes to the venture.

But finding space hasn’t been the only challenge associated with civilian life. “One of the hardest parts of being a practice owner is that I see patients all day and then I’ve got to run the business too,” he says. “While a lot gets done after hours, there is definitely satisfaction

**WHILE A LOT GETS DONE AFTER HOURS, THERE IS DEFINITELY SATISFACTION IN SEEING A PATIENT’S SMILE CHANGE AND IN KNOWING HOW THE WORK WE DO IS GOING TO CHANGE HIS OR HER LIFE.**

in seeing a patient’s smile change and in knowing how the work we do is going to change his or her life.”

While Bedont’s workdays are long, the move to the Northwest was designed to give his three kids—Julia, Jacob, and Anna—something he wanted as a child: a place to call home. Since leaving the military, the Bedonts have lived in the same town for four years—a family best. “We’re on a new adventure now,” Bedont says of putting down roots.

Bedont is immensely proud of his children, and the feeling is mutual. While none of the kids is directly following in dad’s footsteps, they are taking cues from him.

His oldest daughter recently started her freshman year at BYU, and his son attended the university’s pole-vaulting camp this summer. Before Jacob left for the workshop, Bedont gave him one piece of advice: “Always hold on.”

“Hopefully he doesn’t have to learn the way I did,” he says. **M**

