

Maj. Charles Robert Soltes Jr.'s youngest son hadn't been born yet when the Irvine optometrist was killed by a suicide bomber in Iraq. But thanks to an act of Congress, Robert Harrison Soltes will be able to see his father's name emblazoned on a new rehab center for blinded service members.

For Sally Dang, Soltes' widow, who is also an optometrist, getting this center named for her partner in business and in life is one way to honor the man who in 2004 became the first U.S. optometrist ever killed in action. "A lot of people ask me, 'doesn't it make it worse you constantly talking about your husband?' " Dang said.

She doesn't see it that way. "It feels so natural to talk about him," she said. "This isn't just to honor his memory for our family, but the naming of this blind rehab center will honor all the military optometrists who are working overseas and here."

The center is scheduled to open next spring, in Long Beach. It will be named the Major Charles Robert Soltes Jr., O.D. Department of Veterans Affairs Blind Rehabilitation Center. **The bill to authorize that name was introduced by Rep. John Campbell, R-Irvine. Last month, it passed the House 417-0 and on Monday, April 19, it passed the Senate without the need for a roll call vote.**

Dang and Soltes met on their first day at the New England College of Optometry in Boston in 1990. She saw his short hair and strong manner and wasn't surprised to learn that he was from a military family and had gone to military college.

"I know this sounds corny, but he was an officer and a gentleman," Dang said. She knew she was hooking up with a military man and that they would be moving around a lot. And that she might have to see him off to battle. Soltes and his family had moved to Irvine in 2000 where the two set up a private optometry practice next to Dang's father's medical office in Garden Grove. Dang and her family immigrated to Orange County from Vietnam when she was six years old.

Soltes had joined the Army reserves in 1990 and served on active duty as an optometrist from 1994-1999. But Dang said her husband wanted to contribute more than he could in the medical services reserve. So he transferred to the Civil Affairs unit. In 2004 he was deployed to Iraq to command a public health team charged with setting up seven hospitals to help the Iraqi people get medical care. He'd only been there a few weeks when he was killed. "In his last e-mail he told me he'd just gotten the Iraqi leaders over there to agree to let us help. He was so excited," Dang said. Dang said she supported Soltes' military career. Her only trepidation was that she knew she'd be delivering their third child while he was still overseas

The day he died, Dang said she awoke in the middle of the night "and just felt something was wrong. I went to e-mail him. It was about the time he was killed. Twelve hours later someone was at my door," she said, telling her that Soltes had been killed. Soltes, 36, was killed by a suicide bomber in a mobile improvised explosive-laden vehicle who intercepted his convoy in Mosul, Iraq. Soltes would never see his youngest son. And his two older boys, Ryan, now 15 and Brandan, now 12, would grow up with only memories of their dad. Dang found out on the day of his funeral that her husband had kept a journal for his sons.

"After my husband passed away it was a very lonely time for me to go back to my profession without him," Dang said. "When I started out in optometry, Rob was my classmate, my colleague, my partner."

She said she slowly went back to work so she could provide for her children. And she was committed to working with veterans who had eye injuries as a way to honor her husband. Her plan was to build a center so she could continue that work and to name it after her husband.

A colleague she was talking to about her idea suggested she not build too close to the blind rehab center the Veterans Administration was planning to add to its medical complex in Long Beach. When she realized that this center was to become the state-of-the-art blind rehabilitation facility, she decided to try and have it named after her husband. "This is so necessary for the new vets who are returning with traumatic brain injuries" Dang said. She explained that sometimes veterans returning from deployment slowly lose their vision over a year or two or more. "Some are blown so close to a blast that they lose their vision and the rest of their body is fine."

Deciding to try to get the new VA center named after her husband was one thing. Getting it done was another thing. As with everything congressional there are strict rules about getting any federal facility named after someone. First she had to get a member of Congress to introduce a bill. **Once Campbell heard her story, there was no problem. He said the story "and the passion" that the family has for Soltes – plus his role as an optometrist - convinced him to try to make it happen.**

**Once Campbell introduced the bill, under the rules he had to get all 53 California House members – Republican and Democrat- to sign onto it. His staff did some of the work. But, to finish the job, Campbell spent two weeks buttonholing California members on the House floor.** And there was more. Thomas Zampieri, head of congressional relations for the Blinded Veterans Association, became involved after meeting Dang. Zampieri got required

letters from support from all nine federally-chartered veterans service organizations.

Campbell wasn't the only Orange County lawmaker pushing for this. The VA facility is in Rep. Dana Rohrabacher's district. "Today, by naming this new facility after him, we are ensuring that Major Soltes spirit lives on," Rohrabacher, R-Costa Mesa, said on the House floor. "Every time a patient's quality of life improves, Major Soltes, his dedication to service, will be continued." At a time when partisan rancor accompanies virtually everything done in Congress, this measure bridged that divide. After passing in the House it quickly got scheduled on the Senate calendar – with a little more lobbying from Zampieri and Dang herself who visited Senate offices in Washington.

On Monday evening, Sen. Daniel Akaka, D-Hawaii, chairman of the Veterans Affairs Committee, spoke up for the measure. "Major Soltes was a dedicated Army officer and an outstanding clinician, educator and military optometrist," Akaka said. "And naming the Long Beach VA blind rehabilitation center in honor of him will be a fitting tribute to his lasting memory."