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772nd Forward Surgical Team

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JALALABAD AIR FIELD, Afghanistan (October 20, 2008) – Saving life and limb is all in a day's work for the 772nd Forward Surgical Team at Forward Operating Base Fenty, and they do it seven days a week.

A cramped plywood hut is known as the operating room and medical clinic to the crew of the 772nd. It is where surgeons and their staff perform operations from life saving amputations and bone graphs on Afghan civilians to life sustaining treatment on injured coalition forces soldiers; sometimes all of the above in less than a 24-hour period.

Due to the poor economic state of the country many Afghan civilians cannot afford the expensive medical care that is often needed. A simple broken bone left untreated can result in bone infection, loss of limb and possibly death.

Four days a week the FST staff runs a clinic where they treat local Afghans who have been referred to them by the Jalalabad Public Health Hospital.
In this program, the U.S. Forces and International Security Assistance Forces teamed up with the Nangahar Province Minister of Health to help give medical aid to people who would otherwise suffer due to economic circumstances.

“The care we give the local nationals is very important because the people can’t afford it,” Staff Sgt. Justin Steffans, Ward Master over Advanced Trauma Life Support and Intensive Care Recovery Clinic said. “Although at times it is very minimal, it’s more than they could afford elsewhere.”

Enaytullah is an afghan national who has been receiving treatment for a bone infection from the staff at FOB Fenty.

Twice a month for five months, Enaytullah begins his journey from a small village in Nuristan with an hour and a half walk over mountain terrain on crutches and with a metal brace screwed into his shin bone. After the grueling trek, he endures a five hour rollercoaster of a ride, to get his much needed medical aid from the FST.

After five months of treatment to eradicate his infection, the surgeons of the 772ND are able to remove soft bone from his pelvic bone and fill in the deteriorated hole in his shin. After applying the finishing bandages, and a few Micheal Jackson dance moves displayed by the operating room technicians and scrubs, it was time to move on to the next patient.

“By helping these people, it shows them that we are here to help, and that we are not here to ruin their way of life,” Steffans said.

Immediately following the bone graph on Enaytullah, the doctors began the
task of removing beads infused with antibiotics from their next patients leg, to inspect the progress they were making on eliminating his bone infection.

After replacing the beads and dressing the wound, the call came in. It was time to do what they are here to do. Four Coalition Force casualties were headed their way.

“Our sole mission here is trauma support to the war so when U.S. and Coalition Forces soldiers, local nationals or detainees are injured that comes first and the program clinic stops. We’ll see them again, but not today,” Steffans said.

After six hours of surgery on clinic patients and an hour of stabilizing a ISAF soldier injured by an improvised explosive device, the crew of the 772ND FST can relax again.

When asked how such a brutal schedule of treating the clinic patients and providing the trauma support for the war is possible, surgeons Maj. James Dickerson and Maj. Dirk Slade give all the credit to their staff.

“Of the twenty people here, there are only three physicians,” Dickerson said. “It’s really the medics and nurses that make this thing run, they are the backbone of the operation.”

“These guys are fantastic. They have a lot of experience, several being on their second deployment,” Slade said. “They are highly skilled with a lot of practical knowledge of the deployed atmosphere, they are invaluable.”

It is a serious job and takes a focused attitude when saving lives. So how do the people who call this their profession wind down from such a chaotic day? Just your everyday pickle eating contest or near beer drinking contest has been
known to do the trick before the next surgery or batch of wounded are rushed through the door.

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Cutlines
Maj. Dirk Slade, a general surgeon with the 772nd Forward Support Team, prepares a local nationals leg for a bone graph surgery at Forward Operating Base Fenty, Afghanistan.
Cpt. James Kesler, a Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetists with the 772nd Forward Surgical Team, prepares a local national for a bone graph surgery at Forward Operating Base Fenty, Afghanistan.
Cpt. James Kesler and Spc. Peter Maze of the 772nd Forward Surgical team, prepare a local national for a bone graph surgery at Forward Operating Base Fenty, Afghanistan.
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