PITT-TRAINED NURSES DESCRIBE LIFE ON THE FRONT LINES
FAR FROM HOME AND FAMILY LIFE, in an environment so austere that the landscape sometimes seems plucked from another planet, University of Pittsburgh-trained nurses are working on the front lines of Operation Iraqi Freedom. These men and women of the military are providing care to U.S. troops and Iraqi locals, and—in some cases—medical training to both U.S. and Iraqi personnel. Their stories vary with their circumstances, but they share common ground in the training they received at the School of Nursing, which infuses the vital work of their commitment in the Middle East.

For many of the six Pitt-trained nurses within the ranks of the U.S. Army’s 345th Combat Support Hospital’s anesthesia department, a 90-day mission in Iraq represents their first overseas deployment. After months of advanced training, they find themselves traveling across multiple locations treating war zone casualties.

The group, which includes Captain John Jones (BSN ’99, MSN ’01), Captain Bill Teskey (BSN ’98, MSN ’02), Captain Kurt Kline (BSN ’01, MSN ’04), Captain Scott Pearson (BSN ’98, MSN ’05), First Lieutenant Brian Keller (MSN ’06), and First Lieutenant Jason Trudell (MSN ’06), wrote a letter to the School of Nursing describing the severe conditions of life in Iraq.

“Deploying to Iraq was a shock for each of us, especially the heat. Our arrival in July slapped us all in the face with 130+ degree daily high temperatures,” they wrote. “The heat can best be mimicked by turning your oven to broil, opening the door and putting your head inside while aiming a hair dryer at your face.”

The group also has endured almost weekly sandstorms, which they compared to taking a full bag out of a vacuum cleaner “and hitting it like a piñata while a fan blows directly at it.”

For as far as they can see in any direction, the landscape is sand: no terrain features or vegetation of any kind. In the letter, they compare it to the surface of Mars.

When daytime highs dropped to 110 degrees, the group was relieved. “Apparently we have acclimatized,” they wrote, though they added, “Given the heat, it is a constant challenge to stay hydrated.”

The group trained at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas, where they networked with a variety of practitioners ranging from surgeons and anesthesia providers to intensive care and emergency nurses.

“In these interactions with the providers of other specialties, we each discovered how thorough and complete our education at Pitt had been,” they wrote. “We can each say with confidence that the didactic and clinical experiences gained in Pitt’s Nurse Anesthesia Program are second to none.”

The hospital staff includes people from 44 states in the union covering cases ranging from simple sedation and regional anesthesia to anesthesia for major trauma. They also work to educate the clinical nursing and allied health staff in topics such as anesthesia, resuscitation, and trauma. In addition to all of these responsibilities, the group is involved in certification of basic, advanced cardiac, and pediatric advanced life support taking place in theater.

The nurses participate in didactic education meetings with local Iraqi physicians and nurses and, in August, taught basic life support and basic and advanced airway management to the resident and attending physicians of the local teaching hospital. They also are working on a comprehensive educational program for Iraqi citizens who are interested in becoming nurses, which are absent from Iraq’s current health care system. Typically, Iraqi doctors manage individual patients, and routine bedside care is provided mainly by family members. Through their educational meetings, the nurses hope to demonstrate the role of the nurse as a health care provider and ensure that patients are safe and receive appropriate treatment.

The group expressed gratitude to their families, employers, and others for supporting their mission.

“It is nothing short of an honor to be taking care of the troops tasked with the duties of the front line,” the nurses wrote. “The risks they take and responsibility they shoulder each day is beyond comprehension. In the event they need medical care of any kind, they are met with strong providers and an enthusiasm of the highest degree.”
Alumni Meet in Kuwait Prior to Deployment Throughout Iraq

Editor’s note: This letter from six School of Nursing alumni who were deployed to Iraq was addressed to John O’Dannell, director of the Nurse Anesthesia Program.

Greetings from sunny (and extremely hot) Iraq! Several Pitt grads decided to meet up in Kuwait prior to traveling on to our final destinations throughout Iraq: Jason Trudell and Brian Keller at Al-Asad Airbase, Kurt Kline and Bill Teskey at Tikrit, John Jones at Al Kut, and Scott Pearson at Talil. All support the 345th Combat Support Hospital with the exception of John Jones, who is attached to an FST [forward surgical team]. The University of Pittsburgh Nurse Anesthesia Program represents about one-eighth of all anesthesia providers in theater at present. Although our mission varies to some degree based on our locale, the mission always revolves around managing massive trauma all the way down to such common things as an acute appendectomy.

We all agree that such learning activities as acute crisis leadership training (ACLIT) and the variety of clinical experiences that Pitt had to offer were extremely beneficial downrange. We provide anesthetic in some of the most austere and unforgiving environments. Sand, lack of transport for supplies due to bad weather conditions, and overall enemy activity necessitate the need for adaptation and quick thinking when faced with taking care of critical patients.

Further, the ability to function as a team has never been more important. Our team of four anesthesia providers at Al-Asad account for one-fourth of all providers, which include general/trauma surgeons, urology, psych, ER, and family practice. Anesthesia [specialists are] expected to function in many roles and are treated as independent providers who one minute will be intubating a critically ill patient and placing them on a draw-over vaporizer/vent to placing a chest tube on a patient with a pneumothorax (obviously a little different than stateside).

For the current and future students of the University of Pittsburgh: We all agree that the education we have received from the University of Pittsburgh Nurse Anesthesia Program is second to none. However, saying that, we also realize that hard work, perseverance, and motivation go a long way. We truly believe that we, as military CRNAs, have one of the most important jobs: Taking care of the men and women of the United States armed forces. The lessons in hard work, perseverance, and dedication carried over from Pitt are the standards we hold ourselves to on a daily basis. There are going to be good days and there are going to be bad days, you win some [and] you lose some, but always remember nothing in life worth fighting for is ever easy. Hard work does pay off, and your patients are trusting you with their greatest possession, their lives. They, as patients, turn to you in a time of need. You owe it to them to be the best that you can be 100 percent of the time.

Best of luck to all the students, and remember: You get out what you put in.

Respectfully,
Jason Trudell, CRNA, MSN
Brian Keller, CRNA, MSN
John Jones, CRNA, MSN
Scott Pearson, CRNA, MSN
Kurt Kline, CRNA, MSN
Bill Teskey, CRNA, MSN
Major Returns to Roots in Small Baghdad Clinic

by Jamie Cornali (BSN ’93) from an assignment in Iraq

I AM A MAJOR ON ACTIVE DUTY FOR THE PAST 15 YEARS. I graduated with my BSN from Pitt in 1993 and was commissioned through the ROTC program there. I subsequently graduated from the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences in 2004 with my MSN as an FNP. I am currently working at a small clinic near the Baghdad airport as the sole health care provider here. I work with six army medics and provide primary and emergency care to about 2,500 individuals.

I have found my nursing training to be invaluable here. Many times I have had to go back to my nursing training to take care of my patients (i.e., remembering how to mix and set a drip rate for IV antibiotics—no IV pumps here!). I also have had to train my medics on primary care assessments. Their training primarily consists of emergency care assessment and skills (rightly so), but where I am, 95 percent of the care is primary care. It took several months, but they are all now quite competent at their assessment skills. It is wonderful to see. In fact, most have loved it so much that four out of six plan on becoming nurses: two are entering civilian programs, and two will be going through the military’s LPN program. I am still working on the other two.

Another thing I am proud of is the new chief of the Army Nurse Corps (Major General Patricia Horoho, MSN ’92) is a fellow Pitt grad!

Hail to Pitt,
Jamie Cornali

Caring for Our Nation’s Sons and Daughters

WHEN I GRADUATED from Pitt’s BSN Program in 1998, I was well prepared to pursue a nursing career as an Army Nurse Corps Officer. The program had offered clinical rotations at large hospitals with complicated patients and had blended didactic work with challenging clinical practice.

Throughout my 10-year military career, I have drawn upon these experiences to meet the clinical demands at my various commissions. As a new RN, I confidently assumed the role of charge nurse on a busy ward. To hone my skills as a medical-surgical nurse, I attended a four-month Army ER/ICU course. Then in 2005, I graduated from the U.S. Army’s Graduate Program in Anesthesia Nursing and am now practicing as a CRNA.

My commissions have taken me from the large medical centers of San Antonio, Texas, and Washington, D.C., to small community hospitals in California and most recently to Keller Army Community Hospital in West Point, N.Y. The most challenging experience so far has been my deployment to a remote Forward Operating Base in eastern Afghanistan. As part of a field medical team, I was chief nurse anesthetist, operating on military and civilian casualties in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. Beginning with my very first assignment at Brooke Army Medical Center as a staff nurse on a step-down ICU, to an emergency room nurse at Fort Irwin, Calif., and then to my current position as a CRNA at Keller, I have proudly cared for our nation’s sons and daughters. I believe the education I received at the University of Pittsburgh has been the backbone and the foundation of my professional success.

Major Allan L. Long (BSN ’98), Staff CRNA
Keller Army Community Hospital, West Point, N.Y.

(As this issue of Pitt Nurse goes to print, Major Long is preparing to deploy to Iraq.)