

Jacksonville doctors more appreciative of life in U.S. through deployment experiences

physicians

Dr. Robert Roland Powers is better known to patients on the First Coast for his work in obstetrics and gynecology, having worked in private practice in Jacksonville since 1991 until he joined the Orange Park Division of OB/GYN Associates in 1995.



Dr. Powers on deployment in 2006.

who serve

By R.P. Whittington

But in February of this year, he took on a role he's become accustomed to since 9/11 – serving as a U.S. Navy Captain as Deputy Fleet Surgeon for the 7th Fleet, where he's responsible for humanitarian and disaster relief.

"They are typically short trips, but I'm usually deployed about 50 to 75 days a year," Dr. Powers said.

Although he has served in the U.S. Navy Reserves for 31 years, his deployment activities didn't begin until 9/11. Since that time, he's served in a variety of locales on the other side of the world – countries like South Korea, Japan, Iraq, Kuwait, Nigeria and Thailand, to small countries like Bahrain, an island in the Persian Gulf, Guam and other Pacific Islands not many have heard of.

"I'm usually in an oversight role, helping command central in dealing with mass casualties and training other officers in the medical corps," he said. "The deployments have taken me to places I would have never seen, very remote places where people have, literally, nothing."

Like many of the other First Coast doctors who are deployed overseas on a regular basis, the trips have made Dr. Powers appreciate the comforts and modern technology we take for granted as Americans.

As with many physicians called to serve, the missions have also left him with some poignant memories.

"On one trip, I was training a battalion to go to war," Dr. Powers said. "Later on the same deployment, I had to help identify the remains of a valiant female medic who was in that same group I trained. That's probably the hardest thing I've ever had to do."

DOING THE RIGHT THING

While Dr. Powers began his overseas deployments nearly a decade ago, Barry Steinberg, M.D., Ph.D, D.D.S., Associate Professor of Surgery at the University of Florida College of Medicine in Jacksonville, says he was "a late starter."

"I joined late in life to do the right thing," said Dr. Steinberg, who was deployed during the writing of this article and answered questions via e-mail from Afghanistan. When he volunteered to go to that country in 2008, he was transferred to Civil Affairs Command, attended airborne school then headed off to Iraq.

"When I returned, I went to Civil Affairs Command on active jump (paratrooper) status, then earlier this year I transferred to Fort Bragg as a Deputy Command Surgeon at the U.S. Army Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations Command," he said.

Afterward, Dr. Steinberg requested a tour with a civil affairs unit in Afghanistan, ending up in south Kandahar as an advisor to the Afghanistan National Security Forces – which he understatedly said has been "quite fascinating."

"It's been very active," he said. "We've had nine rocket attacks since I arrived here."

Dr. Steinberg serves in an advisory role and serves under the International Security Assistance Force, a team formed under the auspices of NATO, which conducts operations to reduce the capability of the Taliban Insurgency and support the capability of the Afghan's National Security Forces. Along with American forces, he serves along with British, Canadian, Dutch, German and Slovakian support personnel.



Dr. Robert (Roland) Powers directs a mass casualty drill with Seabees while stationed at Fort Hunter Liggett, the largest US Army Reserve Command post located in central California; Dr. Renaurt stands guard; Dr. Gob at Chow Hall in Kuwait



Above:

Dr. Renuart with children at a school house near Kabul, Afghanistan, while taking part in a Medical Community Assistance Program (MEDCAP) mission. Since just after World War II, members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and, more recently, the European Union, have incorporated MEDCAP missions into peacekeeping operations in the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq.

Below:

Dr. Renuart is proud to serve his country; Dr. Hasbey aboard a UC-35 Army Jet as he readies to fly from Kuwait to Iraq and back on a mission.



“The new position I have here is exciting, but the living conditions are deplorable,” he said. “My outlook continually evolves when I’m deployed, and I ‘smell the roses’ much more than I did before and minor issues get more diminished when I’m at my practice, but I look forward to my return.”

Despite the hardships, he recommends that any of his physician counterparts should “absolutely” consider deployment.

A STATE REPRESENTATIVE ANSWERS THE CALL

Through his election to the State House of Representatives, many local residents have seen the name Dr. Ronald Renuart. What they may not know is that, in addition to his work as a family physician through Baptist Medical Center in Ponte Vedra, he’s been involved with several deployments through his affiliation with the Florida Army National Guard.

“I joined the national guard 20 years ago when I was a medical student, but it was only after 9/11 that I began my deployments,” said Dr. Renuart, who currently serves as a Colonel. “I was called out to serve in a medical support battalion during the first surge into Iraq. We set up in Fort Stewart, Georgia, where we prepared all the equipment necessary to support our military action. We were supposed to end up in Turkey and invade from the north, but when that country refused to let the U.S. stage in the country, we ended up in Kuwait.”

By May of 2003, Dr. Renuart found

himself in Baghdad serving as a field surgeon. He’s also served as chief medical officer from 2004 to 2008 and as a flight surgeon in 2007.

“During my deployment to Afghanistan in 2005 and 2006, we were sent out with an infantry brigade out of St. Petersburg,” he said. “It was ironic; because I was deployed with a medical school classmate I attended school with at Nova Southeastern University.”

While none of the experiences have affected his existing practice, it has taught him to be “resourceful” during deployments.

“When you’re there, you need every resource you have to take care of the troops and those who are injured,” he said. “Certainly, the experience teaches you to be very resourceful with what you have at your disposal.”

He says one of his most gratifying experiences was helping two Afghan boys receive heart surgery at Wolfson Children’s Hospital in Jacksonville.

“During my second tour, we were going into the community and visiting a local school when a father brought his son in to see us,” he said. “The boy had a severe heart defect. He was eight years old and when I saw him the first time, he was actually blue in color and smaller than most kids his age. My medical school classmate gave him a pass to come in and see me in the troop medical clinic.”

A week later, another father brought his year-and-a-half year old son by the clinic.

The children, two-year-old Azad and eight-year-old Tamin, both had congenital heart defects. Azad had a single-functioning ventricle which was causing severely-impaired oxygen levels, while Tamin was suffering from a condition called “Tetralogy of Fallot,” causing a chronic lack of circulation.

In the U.S., Dr. Renuart says their problems would usually have been repaired within their first months of life. With no heart surgeons in Afghanistan, he called around to see if he could find someone in the Tampa Bay or Jacksonville area that would perform the surgeries at no charge.

“My wife sent me a care package and

used the local paper to wrap up the contents," he said. "That's when I saw an article about a group called 'Patrons of the Heart' which was looking for five kids to transport from third-world countries for heart surgeries. I was chief surgeon at Baptist and contacted Hugh Greene to help. He presented each case to the group and they took both of them. That was in January of '05, two days before my tour was over. That May, I met both boys, with their fathers and a translator, at the Wolfson Children's Hospital and their surgeries were a success."

He added that the entire incident reaffirmed his faith in divine intervention.

"It was amazing that the doctor was in the same hospital system I served in," he said.

SERVING 24 HOURS A DAY, SEVEN DAYS A WEEK

Like Dr. Renuart, Dr. Benjamin Goh, a geriatrics specialist in Middleburg, also serves in the Florida National Guard.

"I joined the guard in 1989, but my deployments didn't begin until after 9/11," he said. "I went to Iraq in 2005, and I was deployed to Kuwait in 2007 and 2009."

Dr. Goh, who also serves as a Colonel in the guard, says being part of a group practice makes it easier to him to deploy when the time comes.

"Having partners who can cover my patients helps a lot," he said. "Also, I stay in communication with the office. I've even emailed patients from the field and they've emailed me about specific issues while I'm away."

Dr. Goh says that the deployment setting builds a unique camaraderie that would be difficult to emulate at a practice back home.

"Certainly, you appreciate what you have at home, but there's a big difference in the way you interact with the people there," he said. "You're serving

with them 24 hours a day, seven days a week and there's a morale that develops. It's almost like you're in a special fraternity. You develop a deeper bond with people when you're all under fire together and that's something you really can't achieve with your co-workers in the office. Also, there's a higher sense of purpose when you are treating our servicemen and women. They are an incredible group of people, especially given their level of sacrifice."

He added that, under the conditions he's experienced on a deployment; your emotions are heightened all the time.

"It's very different from the more laid-back atmosphere in the office."

APPRECIATION FOR HEROES AND THEIR FAMILIES

Terry Hashey, D.O., the medical director for the family practice First Coast

Family Medicine, served in the U.S. Coast Guard Reserve for eight years, then with the Texas Army National Guard and the U.S. Army Reserve. He's now in the Florida National Guard and assigned to the 1-111th Aviation Regiment.

His deployments began in 2006, when he first traveled to Afghanistan, and he served two tours in Kuwait and Iraq last year. As this story was developing, Dr. Hashey was serving as a task force flight surgeon in support of an aviation task force and stationed in Camp Buehring in Kuwait.

As the battalion flight surgeon, Dr. Hashey provides primary care, occupational and preventative medicine, along with emergency medical care when necessary, for the air crews. The aviation medical section includes a flight surgeon, a physician's assistant and three army combat medics.



During his most recent deployment, Dr. Hashey was involved in a Live Fire MOUT (Military Operations in Urban Terrain) Exercise. He notes that the group "shot all day, kicked in doors and rescued hostages in a training environment. Great training. Real bullets, but pretend hostages."; Dr. Goh at Camp Liberty in Baghdad.

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He says the experiences have helped him learn more about aviation medicine and had the unexpected effect of keeping him more fit than he was before the deployments began.

"I've improved my skills when it comes to treating trauma and I've also learned more about aviation physiology," Dr. Hashey said. "At the same time, the deployments have improved my physical fitness. We have a lot of time to exercise and that has translated into keeping in better shape."

Dr. Hashey says he also has more appreciation for the sacrifices made by U.S. servicemen and servicewomen, especially the challenges that they and their families have to endure during deployments.

"The soldiers, sailors, marines, airmen and coast guardsmen have to leave their family for a year or longer and still keep everything together," he said. "It can be challenging being deployed for four months or more a year. But it can be just as challenging for those families left at home who have to keep the home clean, the kids fed; bills paid and fix everything that breaks. The military member volunteered to put his or her life on the line for liberty. The families back home don't volunteer, yet they still serve with honor and dignity to support the troops."

In his own situation, Dr. Hashey says his wife put her career in veterinarian medicine on hold to take care of the business aspect of his business.

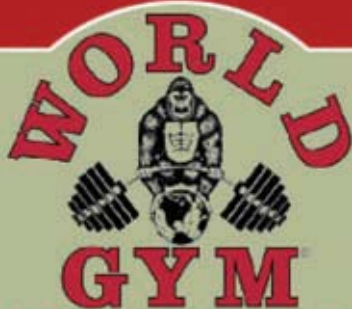
"She and my children have been real troopers dealing with the stress and change that comes when I'm away for four months at a time," he said. "I hope that everyone who reads this article thanks a family member of a deployed soldier. The families back home are the real heroes in this and every story."

He says the most gratifying part of his deployment is helping America's heroes come home healthy.

"Regardless of one's political beliefs, it's a great honor to serve side-by-side with America's sons and daughters," he said. "I work with amazing people who inspire me daily." **FD**

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