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Care Givers: Helping Friends and Foes

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## Care Givers: Helping Friends and Foes

## Abstract

Approximately 2700 men and women serving in the Armed Forces have lost their lives in Iraq since the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Additionally, thousands have suffered physical, emotional, and mental injuries that will affect them for the rest of their lives. Enemy combatants and innocent Iraqi civilians have also suffered from similar tragedies. In the midst of gunfire, blasts from rocket propelled grenades, and a constant barrage of mortar rounds, medical personnel on the front lines have witnessed first-hand the suffering associated with death and destruction. From the secluded area of Camp Dogwood, Iraq to the bustling city of Baghdad, medical personnel from the 549<sup>th</sup> Area Support Medical Company proved their significance by providing the highest level of medical care to all those in need of care, whether friend or foe.

For several years, the American medical department has been called upon to provide top-notch medical care to both friend and foe. A code of medical ethics governed by the Geneva Convention has dictated the way medical services are provided on the battlefield. From World War I to Operations Desert Shield and Storm, medical personnel maintained strict adherence to this code. After September 11, 2001, the concept of conventional warfare would be forever changed. As America deployed forces into Afghanistan and Iraq, American medical personnel would answer the call once again to provide their services.

During Operation Iraqi Freedom I, Soldiers from the 549<sup>th</sup> Area Support Medical Company (ASMC) were called upon to uphold the medical standards dictated by the Geneva Convention. As First Sergeant for the 549<sup>th</sup> ASMC, I had the opportunity to see first hand the heroic efforts exhibited by medical personnel on the battlefield. From the most junior Private to the most experienced Field Grade Officer, words can not express the care, compassion, and dedication provided during combat operations. Though faced with the challenge of providing care to allied forces, Enemy Prisoners of War (EPWs) and displaced Iraqi civilians, the Soldiers from the company exceeded all expectations by performing their duties in an exemplary manner. The actions taken by medical personnel on numerous occasions and at various locations support this claim.

Mortar rounds showered in like golf-ball sized hail during a severe thunderstorm. The never ending sound of gunfire echoed across the horizon. Although ever present, the sights and sound of war seemed to generate a deep calm in the Soldiers. At approximately 0915 hours on 13 April 2003, four field ambulances raced across the desert sand of Camp Dogwood, Iraq towards the company's Treatment Tent. As the ambulances came to a shrieking halt in front of the treatment tent, medical personnel moved out quickly towards the ambulances. With swift, yet

controlled movements, medics downloaded casualties from the four ambulances. Unaware of the fact that some casualties were American Soldiers and others were EPWs, the medics immediately triaged the casualties, placed them into treatment categories and gave initial life-saving measures. Over the course of the next four hours, casualties were ushered into the treatment tent, given proper medical treatment and then moved to the Patient Holding Area to be monitored.

Once all the casualties were stabilized, word spread throughout the company about our “special” group of patients. Evidently, three Iraqi casualties were part of an Iraqi unit that had been engaged in a fire-fight with the American Soldiers that were also taken from the field ambulances. As medical personnel realized that they were caring for EPWs, many struggled with this fact both physically and emotionally. The thought of enemy combatants sharing the same tent with our American brothers caused a tremendous burden on the hearts and minds of our medics, nurses, and doctors. On one side of the Patient Hold Area lay American Soldiers with life threatening injuries, amputations, severe burns and gunshot wounds. Across the tent lay enemy combatants riddled with bullet holes and suffering from many of the same injuries. As time passed, everyone got past their emotional and physical scars to care for the wounded, whether friend or foe. As a result of the efforts provided by medics, nurses and doctors from the company, all the casualties survived their injuries. Eventually, battalion headquarters tasked the unit to provide medical care for an EPW camp. The Soldiers from the unit readily accepted the assignment and eventually treated numerous EPWs and displaced Iraqi civilians.

In July 2003, medical personnel from the 549<sup>th</sup> ASMC once again exhibited their expansive medical capabilities. While still located at Camp Dogwood, medics from the unit spear-headed the evacuation of 328 Soldiers and 62 patients from the 28th Combat Support

Hospital (CSH) during an explosion of the Captured Ammunition Holding Area (CAHA). Within seconds of the initial explosion, medics from the Evacuation Platoon gathered their “Battle Rattle”, prepped and prepared their ambulances for movement, and awaited orders to move forward. Simultaneously, medics, nurses, and doctors in the Treatment Platoon prepared the treatment and patient hold areas to meet the expected influx of patients. Like a fine oiled machine, as the order rang out to move forward, the Ambulance Platoon, along with personnel from the Headquarters Platoon, drove their vehicles into an area being sprayed by rockets and ammunition to evacuate those in need. In record time, all patients and personnel from the 28<sup>th</sup> CSH were safely transported to our area of operations. After consulting with medical staff from the 28<sup>th</sup> Combat Support Hospital, staff members from both units quickly bonded into a cohesive team which provided patients continuity of care. Although crammed into tight quarters, medical personnel from both units adapted to the environment, modified working arrangements and utilized the talents of everyone involved to make the best out of a difficult situation. Over the course of approximately 36 hours, the combined forces of the 549<sup>th</sup> ASMC and 28<sup>th</sup> CSH developed a close working relationship that lasted throughout Operation Iraqi Freedom I.

In September 2003, a team of medics from the 549<sup>th</sup> ASMC were the first on the scene of a suicide bomber detonation at entrance of Camp Taji, Iraq. Although no American Soldiers or allied forces were seriously injured, medics afforded Soldiers, who witnessed the detonation, the opportunity to express their feelings and emotions. Rather than providing hands-on medical treatment, medics used their training to help Soldiers share issues that could affect them mentally. By taking a proactive stance to help provide care to try and prevent and/or reduce the symptoms associated with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, the medics were able to identify

individuals requiring more in-depth treatment. As a result, medics quickly referred Soldiers needing mental health counseling to the proper treatment facilities.

In December 2003, medical personnel from the unit led the combined efforts of medical services from six nations at Camp Babylon, Iraq in response to a Mass Casualty incident in the city of Al Hillah, Iraq. As ambulances from the unit and allied countries brought casualties to the treatment tent, medical personnel quickly transferred the casualties to litters and provided life-saving measures. As a result of the combined efforts of everyone involved, all casualties were either stabilized locally or forwarded to a higher echelon of care. Additionally, actions taken prior to the Mass Casualty incident were critical to its success. Medical personnel from all the services had participated in mock casualty exercises prior to the incident. The lessons learned from these exercises helped to build the cohesive team of medical personnel that performed superbly during the real life incident.

From January to February 2004, a group of medics and a Physician Assistant teamed up with a Special Forces unit to provide medical and dental care to residents of Al Hillah, Iraq. Although this mission was not assigned to the 549<sup>th</sup> ASMC from higher headquarters, the Soldiers and Physician Assistant from the company volunteered to assist the Special Forces unit that requested assistance for this endeavor. The Humanitarian efforts provided by these Soldiers enabled over 350 Iraqi civilians to receive dental and medical care free of charge. As a result of their efforts, three Iraqis were identified to have life-threatening ailments and were evacuated to Iraqi hospitals to receive the care required to meet their needs.

In addition to the efforts noted above, medical personnel from the 549<sup>th</sup> ASMC provided Level I and II Combat Health Support to over 3,000 American Soldiers, Marines, Seabees and Airmen while simultaneously providing care to over 1,500 allied troops from ten different

countries assigned to the Multi-National Division in South-Central Iraq. Although Level II Combat Health Support is normally provided by a Combat Support Hospital, doctrinal changes were made which enabled the unit to combine with the 160th Forward Surgical Team (FST) to meet this requirement. Even though this was a first on the modern battlefield, this decision proved to be a beneficial asset.

Although faced with many challenges while deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, medical personnel from the 549<sup>th</sup> ASMC maintained a professional attitude and continued to provide an optimal level of medical care. Whether treating friend or foe, the medical care given equaled or exceeded care provided by any major medical facility in the United States. From the initial efforts at Camp Dogwood to the final battle hand-off at Camp Babylon, medical personnel from the 549<sup>th</sup> ASMC exhibited a sense of care and concern that enabled them to meet all their missions. As a result of their efforts, hundreds of Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, and civilians are alive today.