

INSURING HEROES AND HEROINES

U.S. Army Dentists Making A Difference On The Battlefield

(NAPSA)—As U.S. troops continue to take strides toward the stability of Iraq, U.S. Army leaders consider the health care and overall safety of soldiers a top priority to complete the mission. Part of the care soldiers receive comes from members of the U.S. Army Dental Corps, including Lt. Col. James Houston, a Bronze Star recipient who is commander of the 502nd Dental Company, based at Fort Hood, Texas. Lt. Col. Houston's unit was deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom from June 2003 to March 2004. During that time, the 502nd Dental Company worked with the 561st Dental Company (out of Vilseck, Germany) to treat approximately 7,000 troops in Kuwait and 5,000 troops and civilians in Iraq.

Lt. Col. Houston and his team provided dental care and hygiene education in Iraq, sometimes in areas where insurgents were still active. Before deploying, the 502nd Dental Company trained stateside—not just to be prepared for treating dental patients, but to be prepared for all aspects of a soldier's mission. The company performed convoy and gas mask exercises, as well as weapon exercises two to four times a year. "We've become soldiers first and dental officers and dental assistants second," said Lt. Col. Houston.



Source: U.S. Army

While Lt. Col. Houston and his company—made up of 64 enlisted soldiers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs), plus 27 Army Dental Corps officers trained in field dentistry—cared primarily for U.S. and Coalition forces, they also provided much-needed dental treatment for local Iraqi people as part of a humanitarian effort ingrained in Operation Iraqi Freedom. "We'd go and set up in villages with our tents and treat the local Iraqis who really had no infrastructure for health care," said Lt. Col. Houston. "What really impressed me was how much they appreciated what we were doing. I think we made a great difference."

Providing dental care to Iraqis became a part of winning the confidence and respect of local communities. In addition to the six areas in Iraq where the 502nd Dental Company set up treatment centers, the company also visited an orphanage several times and gave toys and school supplies to Iraqi children. In recognition of

their efforts in Iraq, Lt. Col. Houston, in addition to four members of his company, received Bronze Stars.

Because of the rewarding work the 502nd Dental Company has done in Iraq, Lt. Col. Houston is seeing as much as 70 percent of his team re-enlist when offered the chance. "Our company has set records for re-enlistment, so I'm highly complimented, but it's all the NCOs who make a difference and are preparing them better for their deployment," said Lt. Col. Houston.

Should the 502nd Dental Company return to the Middle East, Lt. Col. Houston is confident the groundwork his team helped set for improving the well-being of soldiers and civilians will still be intact and that his people will be ready. "We are an entity that soldiers in theater rely on for support," said Lt. Col. Houston. "We know what to expect now when we go back." In fact, as evidenced by their preparations stateside and experiences in-theater, the 502nd Dental Company epitomizes Army values of training its soldiers to be strong, self-assured and confident individuals who take pride in being soldiers and in making a difference for themselves, their families and their Nation.

To learn more about Army dentists, visit healthcare.goarmy.com.