



NURSING IN A WAR ZONE

Online-only content for "The Vietnam Women's Memorial: Better Late than Never," by Kay E. Schwebke, MD, MPH, in the American Journal of Nursing, May 2009, p. 34-40.



Nurses in all branches of the military are serving in both Iraq and Afghanistan in a variety of roles. We invited the Army Nurse Corps, the Navy Nurse Corps, and the Air Force Nurse Corps to ask members to send photos and brief reflections of their experiences. Here are some that we received.

—Maureen Shawn Kennedy, MA, RN,
editorial director

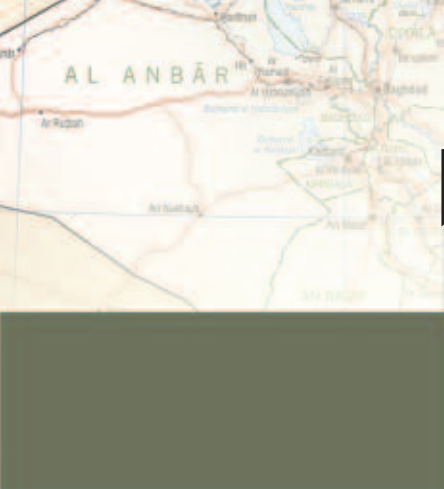
Captain Jeff M. Wilson is currently serving as a flight nurse with the 332nd Expeditionary Aeromedical Evacuation Flight at Joint Base Balad, in Iraq. Working as part of a crew of five, including two other nurses and three medical technicians, Wilson sees patients in the first few hours after injury, including those who have sustained gunshot wounds, blast injuries, and psychological trauma. After they stabilize the patients, they transport them to other facilities in the region or to Germany for additional care. He writes, "Caring for patients with a variety of medical conditions is challenging when you factor in the stresses of flight associated with their injuries. . . . While treating the physical wounds of our patients is the priority, holding the hand of a fellow service member is a small gesture that treats their emotional needs and alleviates their fear." Photo courtesy of Capt. Jeff M. Wilson.



Colonel Christine T. Rem poses with Iraqi civilians in Ramadi, which is 70 miles west of Baghdad in the Al-Anbar Province and at the southwestern tip of the Sunni Triangle. Rem was at Camp Ramadi and served from March 2007 through February 2008. She was a member of a Department of State "embedded provincial reconstruction team" as part of the 2007 "surge" into Iraq. She was a consultant and liaison on health and women and children's issues and worked to recruit and train nurses and midwives. "I traveled in convoys five days a week off the base to the Ramadi Municipal Community Center, where I worked with the City Council Directorate Generals of Health, Education, and Women's Affairs, assisting them in reconstruction and rebuilding efforts," she wrote. "Iraq has only 30% of the necessary health care professionals [it needs] to provide health care to its citizens." Photo courtesy of Col. Christine T. Rem.



Captain Kristine M. Varga served two tours in Iraq: in 2004 she was with the 67th Combat Support Hospital at Mosul (in northern Iraq) and this January returned from a 15-month tour in Baghdad with the 86th Combat Support Hospital. She wrote, "It was hard to predict what each day would hold. Some days were very busy with multiple casualties and a sick call overwhelmed with sick patients, and some days we would patiently wait. It was feast or famine. I can honestly say that there was never a typical day in Iraq." About her colleagues, she noted, "We may have come from different walks of life, but we all had something in common. We were in a war zone, far away from our loved ones, unsure what each day might hold. Holidays and birthdays were tough, but we helped each other through the homesickness, loneliness, and sadness of being away from home. And at the end of the deployment, when it was time to say goodbye and go our separate ways, it wasn't hard to realize that we'd become a family." Photo courtesy of Capt. Kristine M. Varga.



First Lieutenants Roxanne Waldner (far left) and Kimberly Pulis (second from right) both served at Camp Bucca, near Umm Qasr in southern Iraq, with the 115th Combat Support Hospital from Fort Polk, Louisiana. Here they pose with a patient (between them) and her sister. At the "Bucca Burn Center," as the camp facility is known locally, the nurses provided care to the 13-year-old Iraqi girl, who suffered life-threatening burns over 30% of her body. The girl was admitted in early November 2008 and was discharged in late January, after 13 weeks of recovery. Photo courtesy of Col. Kathleen Ryan.



Captain Elizabeth Cracraft (right) is an army nurse case manager with the 115th Combat Support Hospital stationed at Camp Bucca in southern Iraq. In these photos, she's instructing Specialist Natasha King on the medication administration procedure for detainees. Camp Bucca is the site of the "single largest 'theater internment facility' in the world," wrote Colonel Kathleen Ryan, the chief nurse and officer in charge of Bucca Hospital. Its mission is "care and custody with dignity and respect." Her staff provides care to more than 8,000 military personnel and 15,000 Iraqi detainees, including immunizations, primary care for chronic illnesses, eye and dental care, mental health, and minor surgery. Photo courtesy of Col. Kathleen Ryan.