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Title: Field hospital at Abu Ghraib saves insurgents' lives
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Field hospital at Abu Ghraib saves insurgents' lives

In Iraq, there are many symbols of U.S. self-confidence, but, in my opinion, one of the most powerful is the Army field hospital at Abu Ghraib. Flew a helo from Camp Victory to Abu Ghraib. One's view of the flat, dusty landscape is broken by blast walls and security fences in every direction. We hop from the helo and our short walk in helmet and body armor leaves me dripping in sweat.

(Now, that is good news. If you are sweating, your body still is doing its job. When you stop sweating, you are suffering from heat stroke and have only a few minutes to get the body temperature down before brain damage or death can occur. Of course, if you are the one who has stopped sweating, you will be oblivious. That's what friends are for.)At the hospital entrance, what a transition! One minute, you are in a torn country where electricity is unreliable, the water is bad, disease and hunger are common, dust is everywhere, and the heat saps your strength. And then you enter through a dust-lock and, except for the fact that the walls are plastic rather than concrete, you are in a well-run American city hospital. The lights are bright. The air is clean, cool and moist. The floors clean. And most importantly, the doctors and other staff have that look of calm professionalism that they must teach in medical school.

A young lady tells us to leave our weapons with her. Such is the atmosphere of the place that I and my band of killers, without a word of protest, sheepishly surrender our five pistols, three rifles, and one machine gun. She gives each of us a hat-check receipt in return.

This hospital serves not only guards and other coalition forces, but also the detainees at the prison. For the usual reasons, except for emergencies, the detainees and other patients are kept separate. Upon arrival, each detainee receives a physical. The most common complaints are malnutrition, dental problems, eye problems, and injuries.

About 20 percent are suffering from malnutrition. To bring their weight up to healthy levels, it is not enough to simply provide sufficient calories. It is also necessary to provide the types of foods to which the detainees are accustomed. This challenge is complicated by the requirement that any local foods used must meet U.S. standards.

About 40 percent of detainees had moderate or severe problems with their teeth. One dentist said he saw more serious cases during three months in Iraq than he sees in three years at home, including rotten teeth with exposed nerves. With some astonishment, a technician related that draining the infection from one detainee's abscess tooth produced about 30 cc of fluid. I don't think I want to know how much a cc is.

Most of the eye problems are related to the constant dirt and heat. They tend to clear up relatively quickly with the proper medication.

Injuries, including gunshot wounds and broken bones, are another major medical problem. Some of these injuries are recent, while others go back years. The hospital is set up not only to provide emergency room life-saving care, but also reconstruction and rehabilitation. How do these men live for years with the pain of hunger, rotten teeth and severe injuries? One answer is the wide availability of potent pain-killers. No prescription is necessary and they are relatively cheap. A significant number of the detainees are addicted to pain-killers when they arrive.

The guided tour lasted several hours, with visits to the wards, labs, intensive care, and operating rooms. At each stop, an amazingly young doctor or nurse gave us a detailed brief and answered questions. Tour complete, we line up with our hat-check receipts in hand to get our weapons back, followed by the exchange of small gifts and the taking of group photographs. (Among the latter is the classic blackmail picture of one aging colonel surrounded by 12 pretty nurses.) And then we step into the blast of oven-hot air for the walk to our helo for the flight home.

Of course, there is one fundamental way in which an Army field hospital differs from a quality U.S. city hospital. The hospitals in Bethlehem, Birmingham, or Baltimore are rarely in danger of being attacked by heavily armed insurgents. Weeks before our visit, the insurgents attacked the Abu Ghraib complex using trucks packed with explosives, rockets and mortars, rocket-propelled grenades, machine gun fire, and small arms. If they got through, it would guarantee headlines in every paper in the world.

The explosions from the attack were so loud that some hospital personnel thought the insurgents had already gotten through. But the insurgents didn't even break through the first layer. A key reason was a young Marine machine gunner who kept his head when he was the only one whose fire was not suppressed. Alone, he ignored the incoming rounds, leaned into his gun, and coolly shifted fire from one target to the next, breaking up the attack. Then the reaction force arrived. When the Marines finally ceased firing, the gate was still intact, but the ground outside was littered with burning equipment, and dozens of wounded or dead insurgents.

Inside, it seemed that the firing had barely ceased before the first of the wounded Marines and insurgents arrived. Within two hours from the beginning of the assault, at least one insurgent had his life saved on the operating table by the doctors and nurses that he had come to kill.

Frank M. Gunter, a colonel in the U.S. Marine Corps. Reserves, is at Camp Victory, outside Baghdad, in Iraq. Gunter, 55, is an associate professor in the economics department at Lehigh University in Bethlehem. A longer version of this story can be found on-line at mcall.com.

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