

Nurse Educator's Tour/San Antonio  
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Driving to work on this almost-spring morning, the sun rose high in the sky, the birds squawked in the trees, and the streets were lined with kids waiting for the school bus. It was a typical Boston morning with most of us answering the “call to work.” Among us Americans though, there are some who have answered a very different “call to work” with a morning routine that differs dramatically. For they must employ safety strategies in armored vehicles while driving along bomb-embedded ways and carrying more than 50 extra pounds of protection on their bodies, while toiling in the 120 degree heat. They call themselves “Warrior Soldiers”. I call them friends.

In the middle of this cold and snowy New England February, the Army's Boston Health Care Recruiting Team invited me to the Nurse Educator's Tour in San Antonio, Texas—specifically Fort Sam Houston and its renowned Brooke Army Medical Center. Checking the National Weather Service, it appeared that San Antonio was enjoying 75 degree days and my bags were packed before I even accepted the invitation. Hailing from New England, I half-expected to be met at the airport by cowboys on horses and a “bar-keep” offering me sarsaparilla with country-western songs playing in the background, but what I found was the historic River Walk, the Alamo, and nurse educators from all over the country who checked the same weather reports.

The tour started early the next day with a bus ride to Camp Bullis, named for John L. Bullis, a lieutenant promoted to brigadier general, who in the 1870's led the Seminole-Negro scouts during the Indian Wars. Situated on 28,000 acres of prime Texan land, this installation provides training areas, firing ranges, and logistical support to Fort Sam Houston. One of its main charges though, is to prepare Army medical personnel—doctors, nurses, medics, and technicians to be combat-ready in order to ensure mission success on the battlefield.

In battle, the cry is “Protect the Medic, Protect the Corpsman” for it is the medic—the “68W”, also a thoroughly trained combat soldier—who is responsible for providing first response, first aid, and front-line trauma care. The symbol of these medics is “The Star of Life”, and it's no wonder! Watching these dedicated young men and women train and minister to their “simulated” casualties, I was struck by the organized chaos that was unfolding. Flashes of uniforms running from tents to gurneys, shouting orders, hoisting stretchers to waiting transports—whether to “strikers”, the armored ambulances equipped with advanced medical technology, or med-evac helicopters, their skill and precision was impressive and inspiring. Not only were they rough and ready specialists in their assignments, they were also as polite as could be. One said to me, “M'am, I would not want my mother to use that latrine, please use this newer one.” His mom must be SO proud!!!

Three thousand additional acres make up the site of Fort Sam Houston, in the city of San Antonio, “the mother-in-law of the Army,” as so many military personnel and their families have come to call this city “home”. More than 27,000 people can call this installation their work-place. It is here, at the Brooke Army Medical Center and the Center for the Intrepid, that combat casualty care, science, and technology all come together and take center stage for the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being of our soldiers.

‘Brooke’ is a Level-1 trauma unit used by both the military (and the city of San Antonio) to provide the Defense Department’s only burn center. It is here that, by rapid response, in about 36 hours from distant battlefields to Texas via the military hospital in Landstuhl, Germany, that medical personnel can actually save bodies covered in serious second- and third-degree burns. If needed, a precision team of burn experts are flown to Germany from Brooke to assess the situation. On arrival at Brooke, victims are cleared of blisters and dead skin, stabilized, and then sent to the operating rooms where damaged skin can be removed to stave off infection, or skin grafts can be performed to cover exposed areas. Part of the tour of this amazing Center was the very large shower room where hydrotherapy is given. Standing there, I became aware of how hot the room was without any added heat from the showers. We have to remember that without skin, burn patients cannot maintain their core body temperature so these rooms must be kept between 90 and 100 degrees. Temperatures in these showers are so high that the care-givers often swoon. The average burn casualty spends about a year in the hospital and two additional years as an out-patient. In the fight against burns, research and technology are increasingly critical to the battle. Clinical research is a huge component of the Brooke Army Medical Center’s mandate, as it is through this research that important discoveries can be made to improve the morbidity and mortality rates in burn victims.

Bombs, bombs, and more bombs! One minute he’s on patrol with three others in the back and the driver and himself in the front. A sudden flash of light, and in a second, his life is changed forever. The back seat was gone altogether and so were the occupants. Those in the front were burned over 70% of their bodies. The man he once was may be gone; but from the medically induced coma and the reconstructive surgery, he will battle back to take his place as a husband and father, a brother and son; but he’ll always be more than a ‘friend’ to his loved-ones. Above all, as an American soldier, he’ll rank as peerless—a survivor who gave his face and fingers, as well as his rest and comfort, that we might sleep peacefully and find more than he will as we glance in the mirror at daybreak.

The word “intrepid” means bold, brave, dauntless, relentlessly courageous, and resolutely fearless. The Center for the Intrepid is financed with funds donated by over 600,000 Americans. The Center offers severely wounded military persons the absolute best in rehabilitative care. This four-story, 65,000 square foot out-patient facility caters to amputees, limb salvages, and advanced burn patients, giving them access to the most innovative technology available. Facilities

include a gait lab for balance and a motion analysis lab with 26 infra-red cameras, so amputees can analyze the alignment and timing of motion. Of particular importance is The CAREN system, a huge dome developed by a Dutch motion picture company specializing in 3-D animation. It offers a 300 degree screen that creates “virtual realities” such as walking a trail in the woods. A double amputee in a harness, with the help of a shifting platform, can ‘train the brain’ to perfect a sense of balance as part of rehabilitative therapy. The in-house prosthesis lab allows for research and the fabrication of limbs, which can be more comfortably fitted. There is indoor running track, a climbing wall, and a wave pool with a small surf board that serves as both a place of recreation and rehabilitation as you face the turbulent water.

I saw him out of the corner of my eye as I stood waiting for the rest of the tour. Walking through the door, he had a smile the size of Texas and was similar to any other 18 year old. Yet there was something different about him. As he moved closer I noticed that his gait had an up and down bounce. When he cleared the counter that separated us I saw that his arm and both legs and feet were made of metal, but that smile was flesh and spirit. The care and compassion of the team of medical visionaries in this rehabilitation program has made these wounded soldiers able to smile each day as they find alternative ways to perform the simple daily tasks we take for granted. That team includes psychiatrists, orthopedic surgeons, and highly specialized therapists, for respiratory, occupational, and physical challenges. Even the support staff is exemplary in their tireless efforts.

One of the last sites we visited was the simulated mobile tent hospital on the grounds of Camp Bullis. For those old enough to remember, it seemed like the set of the TV show MASH. As I entered the triage tent the smell of plastic filled my nose. There were no windows and the tiny triage area had six gurneys on wheels nearly side by side. It happened so suddenly—my heart started racing and it was difficult to catch a breath. Then my head felt woozy and in an instant the entire week came together in my mind’s eye. I could hear the cries of the medics, and could see gurneys flying through the door flaps. The medical people moved faster than I ever could and I feared they might slip in blood spills on the plastic floor. Somehow I knew what critical thinking skills must come alive in this trauma-care setting. Suddenly I had to leave the tent and catch a breath of air. I needed my heart to stop pounding and I realized that I could never do what this required—react in a heartbeat, faster than a breath. The Captain followed me out into the Texas sunlight to ask if I was okay. I tried to explain what was happening, what I felt and what I saw in my mind’s eye. He smiled as if he knew just what I’d seen, as if he’d been there for real.

Our itinerary also included other visits, the Army Medical Center, the Department of Nursing Science, and the new Warrior Family Center, which provides a comforting respite for the families of wounded soldiers while they get the care they need. Another inspiring facility built by private donations. There was “down”

time also, like the trip to a real Texas BBQ place, where I thought the creamed-corn was “corn chowda” being from “Bawstin” and all!!

Never wanting to forget, I still hear,  
“M’am, I wanna go back.”  
“M’am, I would do it all over again.”  
“M’am, I’m Warrior Soldier.”

I drove to work today on a tree-lined street...