



News Release

UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

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NEW HORIZONS LANDS CAFB MEDICAL CREW IN EL SALVADOR

CHARLESTON AIR FORCE BASE, S.C. – Ten Charleston AFB members returned recently from a New Horizons humanitarian deployment to the Central American republic of El Salvador.

Sponsored by U.S. Southern Command, New Horizons deployments are part of a series of military exercises to build partnerships and improve the quality of life for people in Central America, South America and the Caribbean.

Steve Lucas, U.S. Southern Command spokesman, said New Horizons exercises have been going on since the early 1980s.

“They are really a great deal for the taxpayers,” said Lucas. “They get the most bang for their buck. We’re accomplishing real-world, hands-on training while benefiting folks at the same time.”

Lucas said the missions usually involve medical and engineering personnel from any or all of the military services.

The CAFB team that participated in the latest New Horizons deployment included members from the 437th Medical Group Deily Dental Clinic, Optometry Flight, Family Practice and Public Health. The group spent two weeks on the mission and teamed with other military members from Lackland AFB, Texas, to treat El Salvadorian locals with a variety of problems.

“We (optometry) saw 1,481 patients,” said Staff Sgt. Constance Dangerfield, Optometry Flight NCOIC. “We saw mostly middle-aged to older patients and some school-age children.”

Thanks to a Florida chapter of the Lions Club, Dangerfield said the group was able to help many of the patients. After making a few phone calls, the Lions Club had 3,000 pairs of eyeglasses waiting for the group when they got to El Salvador. The leftover glasses are being shipped to Peru for a similar humanitarian mission in June. Even with all the glasses, some people couldn’t be helped.

“There were some people we saw that we just couldn’t do anything for,” Dangerfield said. “There was a 104-year-old man who needed surgery, and we don’t do surgeries.”

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Dangerfield said the main complaint her patients had was burning, itchy eyes from the sun. She also had a lot of middle-aged and older patients whose eyes were so bad, they said they couldn't even read. The people she treated didn't have sunglasses or hats to help keep their eyes safe. Even though the group didn't have sunglasses to hand out, Dangerfield said she still felt as if she helped the people she saw.

"They were all very grateful," said Dangerfield. "Helping them and seeing how they live made me realize that I can make a difference; as far as eye care goes."

Airman 1st Class Carmen Stanco, Deily Dental Clinic dental assistant, said she also felt she was helping to make a difference, but doesn't feel like two weeks was enough time.

"I want to go again," said Stanco. "It's an eye-opening experience, and it made me grateful for all the things I have. Instead of being tourists, we were actually working with the locals and seeing how they really live."

The dental crew performed a lot of extractions, placed some fillings, and did some scaling and root planting (in-depth teeth cleaning), according to Stanco. She said most of the patients were between 5 and 18 years old, and their teeth were already rotted out.

"They eat a lot of mangos, and their main crop is sugar cane," said Stanco. "There's also a lack of minerals in the well water they drink. That combination ruins teeth quickly."

Even though the villages the team visited have local dentists, Stanco said huge lines formed to be seen by U.S. military health care professionals.

"When Americans come, they think we have some great technology with us," said Stanco. "All the local people know about their local dentists, but they don't go unless they hear the Americans are coming. It's weird because with the equipment we had with us, the local dentists were capable of doing anything we did. They were actually very skilled dentists."

Stanco blames the lack of dental visits on money. She said the people she treated were poor and couldn't afford even the most basic dental care.

Capt. Melinda Alsabrook, Family Practice, said the country does provide health care to all of its residents, but no one has the money to buy any medication or even get basic, needed nourishment.

"A lot of patients we saw had headaches," said Alsabrook. "They don't drink enough water. They have wells, but they have to travel pretty far to get what limited water is available."

Alsabrook said the water situation actually worsened about a year ago because the country suffered a major earthquake. Now, the sewage is stagnant and any pipes that moved water prior to the earthquake are not working. The conditions were a lot different than what Team Charleston members are used to. To make sure the team was able to work hard fixing the locals, Capt. David Newman, Public Health, went along to keep the team healthy.

"I worked mainly at the base camp to keep the water supply and food supply healthy," said Newman. "It was already set up and working, I just had to maintain it."

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Newman said he did get the chance to work with some of patients, and from what he saw, they were all very thankful for the medical care they were receiving.

When the combined CAFB and Lackland AFB team departed, the 29 members had collectively treated 6,190 patients, according to Col. John Hill, 437 MDG commander.

“This was a mission where everyone won,” said Hill. “It fostered goodwill between our two countries, some of El Salvador’s people received much needed medical care, our medics had the opportunity to see and treat patients with much different needs than they normally see here at CAFB and finally, it was tremendous morale builder.”

The CAFB and Lackland AFB medical team was the last medical team to leave El Salvador as part of this New Horizons deployment. Medical and civil engineer teams will continue to travel to South and Central America in the future as part of the New Horizons program.

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