

OPERATION SMILES:



A Legacy of Operation

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Asia-Pacific Defense FORUM
Winter 2002 – 2003

In January 2002, members of Special Operations Command, Pacific (SOC-PAC), headed by Brig. Gen. Donny Wurster, deployed as Joint Task Force 510 (JTF 510) to support Operation ENDURING FREEDOM – Philippines.

More than 1,200 members of SOC-PAC and its components joined their counterparts from the Southern Command of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), then commanded by Lt. Gen. Roy Cimatu. The mission was to advise and

assist the AFP to help combat terrorism in the country. Much of the mission took place on the island of Basilan in the southern Philippines. Basilan was a stronghold of the terrorist group Abu Sayyaf. This group had terrorized the citizens of this beautiful island and wreaked havoc with its economy.

The eight-month mission was a success in many ways. Through their combined efforts, the AFP and JTF 510 created a more stable and secure Basilan. By the end of the mission, the two forces had built

81 kilometers of road, improved an airfield and port facility, and dug fresh water wells.

One of the most important elements of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM – Philippines was the extensive medical care given local civilians in OPERATION SMILES. Twenty U.S.-Philippine teams that included medical personnel from the Philippine Government, the AFP, JTF 510,

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ENDURING FREEDOM

A U.S. Army nurse assigned to JTF 510 examines a young Filipino child in Bunguiao Barangay of Zamboanga City during one of OPERATION SMILES' 20 Medical Civic Action Projects (MEDCAPs) that provided medical help to the people in the Mindanao and Basilan Island areas.

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and non-governmental organizations provided medical assistance to more than 18,000 citizens. Today, the legacy continues with a long-term U.S. security assistance program that combines AFP and U.S. military training and continued humanitarian assistance. JTF 510 has transitioned to a smaller task force that works closely with the AFP in ongoing humanitarian assis-



A young mother and child listen to medical care instructions being given by a U.S. Army Special Forces doctor.

tance projects on Basilan, to include the upgrading of 14 schools, seven clinics, three hospitals, and 25 fresh-water wells.

Walking through rain soaked, muddy roads for several kilometers, the residents of Bunguiao, a small village north of Zamboanga City, received assistance from soldiers and medical specialists of the AFP and the U.S. Army's 3rd Battalion, 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne), from Fort Lewis, Washington.

Working side by side, Philippine and U.S. physicians, dentists, and other health care providers brought medicine to a

remote and poor area of the Philippines, as part of OPERATION SMILES – one of the largest medical civic action programs in recent history.

The U.S. participants in OPERATION SMILES were Special Operations Forces of the Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines (JSOTF-P). JSOTF-P is an organization established by SOCPAC in January 2002, when SOCPAC and its components deployed to the Philippines as JTF 510. JTF 510's mission ended in July 2002 and has transitioned to the present JSOTF-P.

The JSOTF-P's mission is to conduct and oversee humanitarian civic action programs and to be the command and control element for the upcoming Security Assistance Modules that are part of the U.S. Pacific Command's long-term security assistance partnership with the AFP. From August through September 2002, members of the JSOTF-P participated in more than 20 Medical Civic Action Projects (MEDCAPs) on the island of Basilan and in Zamboanga City, Mindanao.

Located in the southern portion of the Philippines, the 1,200 square kilometer island of Basilan has gone through several dramatic changes over the past few months. When JTF 510 soldiers first arrived on Basilan in February 2002, the island was a safe haven and stronghold for the Abu Sayyaf terrorists. Residents lived in constant fear, and basic



Villagers from a primarily Muslim barangay on Basilan Island line up patiently for registration, screening, and free medical care.



A Philippine soldier unloads some of the \$100,000 in donated medical supplies for one of the MEDCAPs.

services such as health care were not available. Today, Basilan is much different, due largely to the peace and stability brought about through the combined efforts of the AFP and JTF 510. The MEDCAPs of OPERATION SMILES are, in many ways, the capstone of the overall operation.

Services Provided

The MEDCAP in Bunguiao was one of four MEDCAPs conducted in the outskirts of Zamboanga City, on the island of Mindanao, 15 miles north of Basilan. The other MEDCAPs were on the island of Basilan. They provided a variety of services to all who traveled to the MEDCAP sites. After completing the initial registration, each patient's needs were identified and the patient guided to the appropriate specialist. Those identified with no care needs or health concerns received basic health care information and sundry items. Those identified for further treatment were assessed according to their needs and the medical specialties available at the site.

In Bunguiao, AFP and U.S. doctors provided pediatric care, dental care, minor surgery, optometry services, and medical consultations to 1,200 villagers. AFP dentists pulled teeth under field conditions. Although the facilities were spartan, over 230 teeth were safely pulled that day. Doctors conducted over 260 eye exams and made 26 cataract surgery referrals. In all, the combined MEDCAP team conducted 340 medical consultations for adults and over 400 for the children of Bunguiao.

A Case to Remember

The island of Basilan has many serious medical challenges – rabies, tuberculosis, leprosy, and scabies. Because they cannot afford long term or critical care, many inhabitants let their diseases reach critical-lethal stages. One case was particularly memorable.

A woman came to the MEDCAP site on Basilan seeking medical care for a skin problem. Maj. (Dr.) Chris Pappas, a U.S. Special Forces surgeon, said, "She had a mole diagnosed at the Zamboanga City Medical Center 10 years ago as cancer, but she was unable to get the necessary treatment. As a Muslim, she used her face veil to cover the growing lesion, which devel-





PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARMED FORCES OF THE PHILIPPINES

A Philippine Army veterinarian treats a small dog as one of the free services offered to the people in OPERATION SMILES.

A Philippine Army dentist does dental work as part of OPERATION SMILES' six weeks of combined Philippine-U.S. MEDCAPs.

oped to a full thickness erosion of the right side of her face, her nose, and the facial bone and muscular structure beneath her right eye.”

“A counterpart Armed Forces of the Philippines surgeon saw her, cleaned the wound, and referred her for follow-up care. She actually came to a second MEDCAP, where we developed a concrete plan to help her. Our team medic on the ground, SFC John Hines, with the help of a local Philippine nurse, Yasmin, brought the patient, with her sister, up to Isabella, Basilan, via the commercial ferry to the Zamboanga City Port,” said Maj. Pappas. “We picked them up, took her to the Zamboanga City Medical Center where she was admitted to the hospital for evaluation and treatment under the supervision of Dr. Monsanto, a local Philippine ear, nose, and throat specialist, who works with a plastic surgeon from Hawaii.”

Dr. Monsanto stated that the patient had to be treated for tuberculosis for three weeks before she could have surgery. “There was some discussion of sending



the patient home for these three weeks, but they surmised that they might not see the patient again – so they decided to keep her and her sister hospitalized for the next three weeks – a victory,” said Maj. Pappas. “I cannot help but believe that she will be a daily reminder to her community that a group of strangers cared and made a difference.”

A U.S. Air Force flight surgeon examines a mother and her son during a MEDCAP on Basilan Island.

Combined Effort

Providing care to the citizens of the Philippines was truly a combined effort. The JSOTF-P members worked side by side with Philippine military doctors, nurses, local medical and dental college students, and the Philippine Department of Health. Maj. Pappas was a key player in this combined effort. The AFP and the Government of the Philippines provided medical and dental personnel, naval and ground transportation, and the security support necessary to make this operation the success that it was.

The AFP brought 30 doctors and nurses representing several specialties from different parts of the Philippines to conduct the MEDCAPs. “These specialists brought specialty care, such as a local dermatologist diagnosing the many cases of leprosy and tuberculosis, which most of us Americans have never seen first-hand,” said Maj. Pappas. “They also brought the technicians who took blood smears to rule out malaria for those with nightly fevers.”

Several Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) provided their expertise and resources as well. Two key NGOs were Tzu Chi, headquartered in Taiwan, and Knights Bridge International.

Dr. Anton Lim in Zamboanga heads Tzu Chi’s local chapter. Dr. Lim organized over 30 Philippine volunteers to assist with the



Philippines Lt. Gen. Roy Cimatu, then Commanding General of Southern Command, meets with (L to R) Brig. Gen. Donny Wurster, USAF, Commander of JTF 510; Col. Bill Ball, USA, Deputy Commander of JTF 510; and Col. David Fridovich, USA, Commander of the 1st Special Forces Group (A).

set-up of several MEDCAPs around the city. His volunteers worked tirelessly alongside members of the AFP and JSOTF0-P, earning their respect and admiration.

Knights Bridge International contributed to the operation by donating \$780,000 worth of medical supplies to five hospitals and clinics on Basilan and in Zamboanga City.

Mission Accomplished

Providing care to the local inhabitants of Basilan and Zamboanga City was a once in a lifetime experience for the Philippine and American members

of the MEDCAP teams, who eased the suffering of many.

The U.S. Special Operations soldiers treated a variety of rare illnesses, some of which do not exist in the United States. This huge MEDCAP effort provided valuable training and experience for the U.S. military medical professionals who treated local villagers.

A very important benefit of the MEDCAPs was to reconnect the people in the terrorist-threatened region to their government and the AFP by demonstrating care for their health and well being and strong commitment to their security. □



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U.S. Army Special Forces medic signs his autograph for smiling local children at a MEDCAP.