



## Dental Soldiers provide health care, encounter Indian culture

*Story and Photos by Staff Sgt. Kent Ambrose*



Pvt. Lorena Morales, left, and Capt. Diana Zschaschel-Grob check teeth of a local patient

In the Black Hills of South Dakota, in the land of Chief Crazy Horse and General Custer, soldiers rallied in the pre-dawn hours to drive south through 70 miles of grasslands to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation.

“I cherish the opportunity to help people, to go places,” remarked Capt. Alan Chien, dentist with the 185<sup>th</sup> Medical Company out of Stanton, Calif. “Imagine coming to South Dakota with the Army.”

Whether yanking out rotting teeth or performing other services, these soldiers specializing in dentistry were busy. For the third year, through medical exercise Walking Shield, the Reservists provided basic dental care to American Indians of the Oglala Lakota tribe.

Nine soldiers, consisting of three dentists, two hygienists, and four dental assistants, worked with 17 employees at the Pine Ridge Health Care Facility Dental Clinic. The 185<sup>th</sup> treated 167 walk-in patients, adults and children, from the reservation.

The most common service during the two weeks of training was drilling

teeth and filling them with liquid silver “amalgam.” Other times they pried out wisdom teeth, snapped x-rays, scraped away plaque and instructed patients to bite into molds from which dentures would be made.

During the summer months, when the children are out of school, the clinic gets very busy and cannot accommodate all of the patients, said Jose Rodriguez, chief of the clinic.

“The dental need here is very high,” added Michael F. Gmurek, deputy chief. “And the prevalence of (dental) disease is higher (than average). Our working relationship with the soldiers is very good. They do more than the minimum. They could just fill one tooth and have a patient come back in a return appointment, but they’ll do as much as they can (in one sitting).”

Rodriguez and Gmurek briefed the soldiers on the kinds of dental care and problems they would encounter among the reservation residents. Many of the adults needed denture work, including upper and lower dentures and bridges (partial dentures). Tooth decay was also common and many of the residents needed crowns. They also explained the cultural, traditional and religious beliefs of the Lakota Indians; formerly know as the Sioux, and how their beliefs influenced their view of medicine. A cultural sensitivity video explained many of the fears older Indians have about modern health care and how many of them still use traditional remedies.

Wanda “Buffy” Yellow Boy, a dental assistant at the Pine Ridge Clinic for the past 11 years, says the clinic really appreciates the Army Reserve. “We all get along really well and joke around,” said Buffy. “They (the soldiers) enjoy the sites and going places. They are interested in our culture.”

Pfc. Lloyd A. Cobarrubia, dental assistant, noticed the difference working on the reservation compared to life back home in Southern California. “You have to adjust a little, you’re out of the noise and traffic, a real quiet town,”

he said.

He observed how cooperative and appreciative his patients were. Cobarrubia assisted dentist Capt. Carlos A. Horiguchi, refining the skills he learned at advanced individual training, recently. He and Horiguchi drilled out four cavities on a patient. Cobarrubia got instruction on using the light-curing unit, a bright light that helps harden and set “composite” plastic resin fillings.

Before starting to clean a patient’s teeth, Staff Sgt. Ted Schofield often conversed with them about their cultural and oral histories. Schofield was also taken by his patients’ surnames. “All the different last names like Yellow Feather, Blue Legs, Many Wounds, they are fascinating.” he commented.

This was the third annual training for dental assistant and Cal Poly Pomona student Pfc. Yiu L. Ng, who went to Germany last year with the 185<sup>th</sup>. Ng saw that helping Pine Ridge residents was a key factor in exercise Walking Shield.

“If we have the resources we should help people,” said Ng. He also knew the necessity of the training. “We get lots more hands on training (here),” he said. “It is a very good chance to practice (our skills).”

Elliott, 10, came in with his mother for a checkup. The possibility of having cavities, though, did not stop his big smile when Capt. Chien and Ng greeted him in battle dress uniforms. When asked how he felt about the Army giving him a checkup he said with a grin, “fine.” Unfortunately, Elliott had a few cavities and would have to come back for fillings. Capt. Chien



Capt. Carlos A. Horiguchi, left, and Pfc. Lloyd A. Cobarrubia, a dental assistant, help give a patient a filling.

admonished him to brush his teeth more regularly and gave his mother a tooth-cleaning plan and a new toothbrush. Elliott, like all the kids that come to the clinic, got to pick a new toy—in this case a large red comb--out of the clinic toy box.

Eugene, a Pine Ridge resident, took the bad news of needing teeth pulled in stride. “Go ahead and take them,” he said assuredly to his dentist. Being treated by soldiers seemed to inspire him to talk about his experience as a Marine in the South Pacific during World War II.

Staff Sgt Pedro E. Rodriguez, NCO in charge of the exercise, was responsible for training the dental assistants. He taught them procedures including maintaining patients’ dental charts, sterilizing instruments, prepping the patients--which included giving gowns and protective shields during x-rays--and knowing the difference between a surgical bur, a tool used for root canals and a round bur used for removing decay.

“After the assistants get familiar with the dental instruments they begin to get accustomed to working with the dentists, which makes everything smoother,” said Rodriguez. He was also responsible for admitting patients and scheduling appointments with the clinic receptionist.

Capt. Diana Zschaschel-Grob, dentist and officer in charge, and her assistant Morales, pulled two lower wisdom teeth (third molars) from Heather Brings Plenty. This was the first time Morales had assisted in such a procedure.

Part of Zschaschel-Grob’s mission was to train the dental assistants. She said the assistants do not get to practice their skills everyday like her and others who are practicing dentists. The other part of her mission was to promote health care to the Native Americans here, to encourage the patients to follow up with dental care and to make regular visits to the clinic.

It seems the 185<sup>th</sup> accomplished both objectives at the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation during exercise Walking Shield. Next year the 185<sup>th</sup> plans to train at a reservation in Sheridan, Wyo.

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