

Operation Walking Shield brings dental care to Red Cliff Tribe

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RED CLIFF — The dentist in the lime-green smock spoke soothingly to his patient, reciting the familiar mantra of dentists everywhere.

"Just relax and open wide, please."

The dialog may have been similar to an ordinary dental clinic, but the setting was certainly not: An olive-drab tent set up in the parking lot of the Red Cliff Community Health Center.

The dentist's dress matched his surroundings — under his smock, Lieutenant Colonel. Thomas Casey wore the camouflage green battle dress uniform of a U.S. Army soldier. His dental technician, Specialist Randall Padilla also wore combat boots and an Army uniform.

Both are members of the 808th Den-Tech Team of the 330th Military Medical Brigade, stationed at Fort Sheridan, Ill. The Team is at Red Cliff for a two-week training rotation as part of "Operation Walking Shield," an innovative Department of Defense training program that allows military personnel to develop their skills capabilities and resources while at the same time assisting with the civic and community needs in Indian Country.

The presence of the Army Reserve dental unit is the result of a partnership between the Red Cliff tribe and the non-profit Walking Shield American Indian Society. The society was created by a contractor and enrolled Lakota Sioux member who returned to his home reservation and was astonished at the pervasive poverty he saw. Drawing on his experience with the Department of Defense, he recognized conditions faced by emerging tribal nations are similar to those faced by other third-world countries that the U.S. military construction and medical units use for Innovative Readiness Training. The Walking Shield American Society links military construction and medical units facing IRT requirements with economically distressed Indian nations to provide construction, medical, dental, humanitarian, and nation-building services. According to Patty Deragon-Navaro, Health Director at the Red Cliff Community Health Care Center, the presence of the dental unit has been a major boon for the Red Cliff community.

"We have a shortage of dental care because of a shortage of funding that is now being provided," Deragon-Navaro said. "For us, the dental unit is providing a lot of care that has been needed for quite some time. Many of the little people have never been to a dentist before. For many of the adults, it has been years and years since they have seen a dentist."

The dentists are providing general dental examinations, cleanings and fillings: basic dentistry to be sure, but for many of their clients, it is general restorative dental care that has been until now, an unattainable luxury.

"The clients are overwhelmed, they are very appreciative of the services they are being given," Deragon-Navaro said. "I think the community as a whole has accepted them."

The dental team currently serving at Red Cliff is the second that has rotated through Red Cliff. The first unit saw a total of 140 patients.

"We are not quite sure how many we will be seeing with this team; a lot of work this rotation is seen as a result of the exams done by the first rotation."

The cavernous green tent where the dental work takes place looks like something out of MASH from the outside, but it's equipped with all the sophistication the modern Army can provide: air conditioning, a canvas floor, portable dental chairs and lights, an x-ray unit. A team of four dentists is kept busy, while technicians prepare fresh instruments.

One of the dentists, Lieutenant Colonel Ron LaFianza said the conditions were "a little more Spartan" than those in his civilian practice with the North Chicago Veterans Administration.

"But the treatment we are providing is essentially the same," he said. "It just takes a little longer."

LaFianza said the Reservists have been "welcomed with open arms" by the Red Cliff staff and the patients he has been treating.

"They are very appreciative. They make us feel really wanted," he said.

LaFianza said the training, particularly for the enlisted personnel has been "exceptional."

"It's a win-win situation," said 808th Executive Officer Captain Arthur Walus. "This is the first time we have ever done anything with a Native American community. It's been very rewarding. It would be great if we could come back again."

Walus noted that although the treatment was routine for the dentists, many of the technicians have other civilian jobs and their opportunities to keep their skills sharp are limited.

"The training for them is invaluable," Walus said.

But its value for the soldiers aside, Walus said the real payoff was helping a community who badly needed the skills the 808th had to offer.

"Yesterday we had a patient who came all the way from Ironwood, Mich.," he said.

"She had three impacted molars and worked at a ski lift making minimum wage. The treatment she got, had she been able to afford it, would have cost a minimum of \$1,500 plus. She wouldn't have been able to afford it. Here we were able to provide the services gratis. And she was so appreciative. It gives you a good feeling, it really does."