

# Nurse UNDER Fire

by Michael Chillstrom



Photos (above): from left, K. Johnson, P. Sinqfield, C. Umbuger, S. Sanders, T. Carter, M. Meyer, K. Robledo, J. Akaka, S. Shaffer in front of a helicopter; (right): from back left, D. Thornton, J. Woods, M. Meyer, J. Richard, S. Sanders on a mission with seven patients, including a Canadian reporter and US Navy Seal.



## A dedicated team brings critical care into the world's hottest war zones

TWELVE MILITARY MEDICS SLEEP ON COTS IN A CROWDED, CHILLY TENT IN WINTRY AFGHANISTAN. A SMALL HEATING STOVE, ALSO the tent's oven, provides insufficient heat. In the middle of the night, somebody tears open the door and yells, "You've got to be on the flight line five minutes ago! We have casualties!" There's no time to hit the snooze button, rub your eyes, or even sneak in a quick yawn. In an instant, everyone must be dressed, out the door with their equipment, and sprinting to the runway. This is the fast-paced, heart-pumping thrill ride of battlefield medicine.

"The first time that happened was an adrenaline rush," says US Air Force (USAF) Captain Scott Sanders, BSN and BBA. "I was pumped! We train for real-world deployments. This is what it's all about." Sanders, a critical care nurse, has been on active duty with the USAF since 1999, having won numerous awards, including the recent Company Grade Officer of the Year for the Group (2002). He is assigned to Wilford Hall Medical Center, San Antonio, which is the largest medical facility in the USAF. He is also a member of a Critical Care Air Transport Team (or CCATT), a highly mobile team consisting of a critical care physician, respiratory therapist, and critical care nurse. CCATTs are essentially flying intensive care units, capable of treating the most severe casualties anywhere in the world. Most of the Air Force's CCATTs are based at Wilford Hall Medical Center.

### Mass Casualties Every Night

ON SEPTEMBER 11, SANDERS' CCATT DEPLOYED TO NEW YORK CITY AS BACKUP MEDICAL SUPPORT. THEN, IN THE WEEKS AFTER the September 11 attacks, CCATTs began deploying to various war zones. On October 13, 2001, Sanders' team received notice



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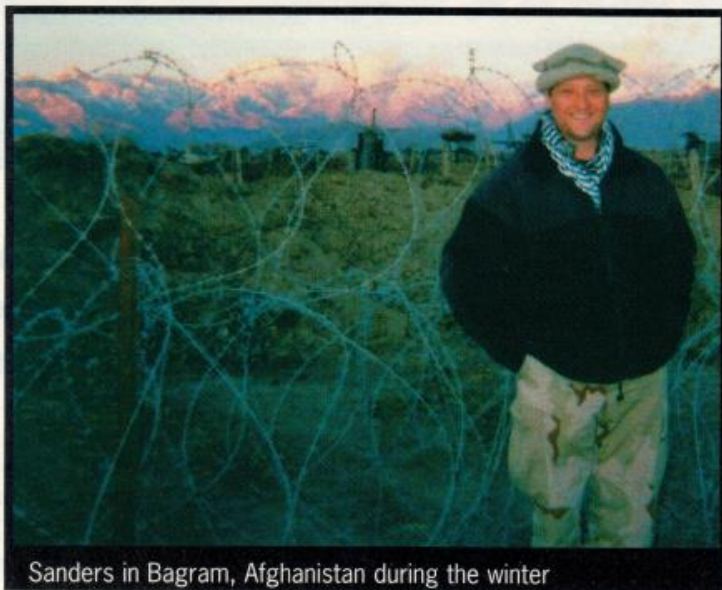
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that they would ship out in two days. It was the beginning of a six-month deployment to Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Turkey, Oman, and Germany, during which Sanders got an up-close and personal view of war.

During Operation Anaconda, when allied forces battled Taliban and Al-Qaeda fighters in the largest and bloodiest battle of the Afghan war, Sanders' CCATT was attached to Special Forces units. Around their tent at Bagram Airbase north of Kabul, Sanders and his colleagues found human bones – bits of hands, scapulae, humeri – though they were unsure whether they came from victims of the 10-year war with Russia, or more recent Taliban and Northern Alliance fighting. And right behind their tent, in an area Sanders had walked through during the five days he had been at the location, unexploded ordnance was found and cleared by disposal personnel. Every day at least five unexploded ordinances were detonated for safety. This was probably the biggest threat to American soldiers.

"Operation Anaconda had mass casualties happening every single night; it was nonstop," Sanders recalls. His team cared for aircraft crash victims, and people with gunshot wounds, land mine shrapnel wounds, grenade blast injuries, and many orthopedic injuries. "We were the most tired then and we were the most busy then, but now, after the fact, it's what I'm most proud of. One day I'll be telling my grandkids about this."



Sanders in Bagram, Afghanistan during the winter

photo courtesy of: Scott Sanders

CCATTs also flew with Special Forces medics or aeromedical evacuation medics on board C-9 Nightingale, C-17 Globemaster III, C-130 Hercules, and C-130 Talon aircraft. The bombed landscape was littered with old, downed aircraft from years of war. Almost no buildings were fully intact. Says Sanders, "some of the feelings are not describable. Every mission we flew into or out of Afghanistan carried a *real* threat of having some Taliban holding a rocket launcher over his shoulder and shooting at us. We would sometimes forget, but now that I think about it ... those were real bullets, real bombs, real mines, and real death out there all around us."



During the six-month deployment, seven of Sanders' CCATT missions involved the critical care transport of patients to an established hospital in Europe. Sanders will never forget Sergeant Hess, an Army sergeant in ordnance disposal who lost a leg in a mine explosion: "[He] had a great attitude. While we were air-evacuating him out he said, 'Bet you don't know anybody else who can be in two countries at the same time – my leg's in Afghanistan and I'm here flying.' I can't imagine being 27 years old, having my leg blown off, having shrapnel wounds and being able to joke about it like he was."



An Afghani man transports a patient in a wheelbarrow to Bagram Air Base for free medical services provided by Western troops

Not surprisingly, strong bonds formed among the members of the team. "We definitely had a good-ol'-boy deployed family," Sanders says. "I'd land somewhere and one of my buddies on another CCATT would have a place for us to stay, as opposed to us sleeping out in the snow. We found a way to take care of each other. It's a huge emotional help knowing that you know these guys out in the middle of nowhere."

### On the Home Front

PRIOR TO JOINING THE USAF SANDERS WAS A DECORATED combat engineer (1988-1996) with the Army National Guard, and he is a veteran of Desert Storm. While braving the dangers and hardships of life in combat zones, Sanders misses his wife and three children in Texas. "It's tough on the family when Daddy's gone for six months. No matter how much you love the deployment stuff – and I do – you miss your family," says Sanders. "Most of my neighborhood was deployed, so all the wives stuck together and all the kids stuck together. It was more than just my family going through this, it was the whole community."

In June 2003, Sanders will be starting a Master's degree program in nurse anesthesia. And he also likes the fact that he no longer has to wash his clothes while showering, sleep on cots, or wait in line for an hour to make a 15-minute phone call home. "It's nice being able to hug my kids when I want to," he says, smiling. **MH**

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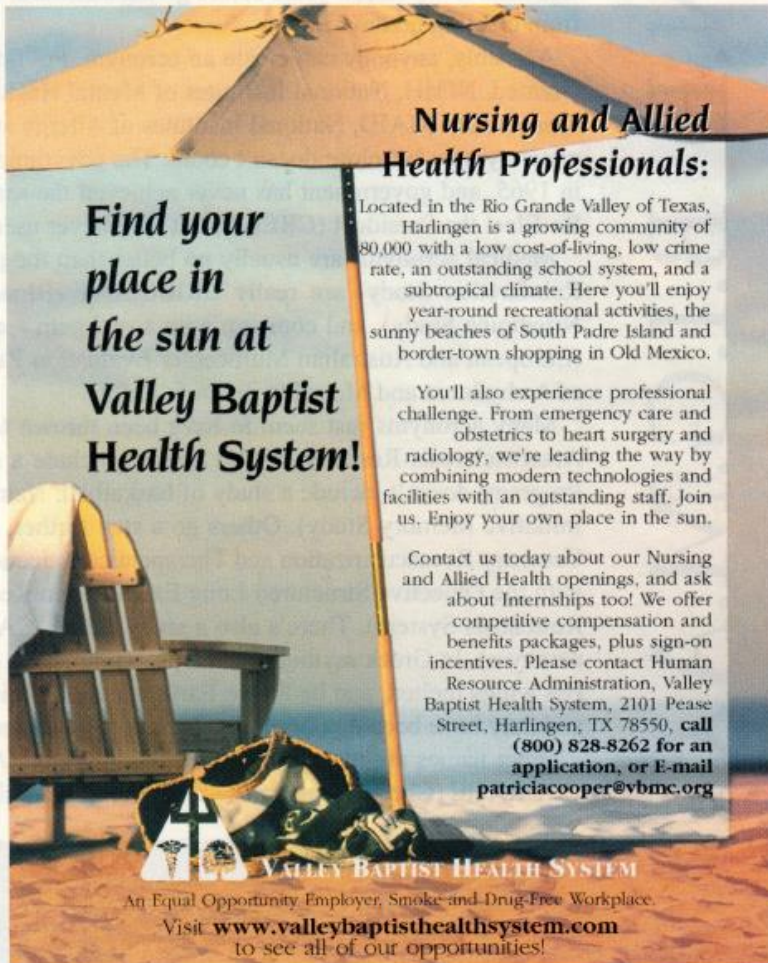
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