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Hospital Ship Homecoming Brings "Comfort" Back Home to Baltimore

By: Bureau of Medicine and Surgery Public Affairs

BALTIMORE (NNS) -- Hundreds of excited friends, family and members of the local community crowded Canton Pier in Baltimore for the homecoming of hospital ship USNS Comfort (T-AH 20) March 19.

Comfort deployed Jan. 16 to provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations off the coast of Port-au-Prince, Haiti, as part of the international mission, Operation Unified Response.

Excitement grew as the hospital ship became visible as it emerged under the Key Bridge in Baltimore, and media helicopters flew closer to get a better view.

"Manning the rails" in traditional Navy fashion, Sailors in their working uniforms lined the flight deck sides, as Comfort made a steady final approach to the pier. After safely mooring, the crew streamed off to meet their waiting loved ones.

"It's great to be back in Baltimore," said Capt. James Ware, commanding officer of the medical treatment facility aboard Comfort. "In the past year the Comfort has conducted a pre-planned humanitarian mission and now our disaster relief mission in Haiti. I'll always remember the dedication and teamwork demonstrated by our Comfort team members, and it was an honor to help the people of Haiti."

While in Haiti, Comfort treated 871 patients and performed 843 surgeries. Soon after arriving on station, Comfort was receiving patients every six to nine minutes during its first four days and had more than 540 critically-injured patients on board within the first 10 days. During this initial

phase of its mission, the Navy hospital ship ran 10 operating rooms at full capacity to care for injured Haitian, American and other foreign national earthquake victims requiring surgical care. This deployment marked the first time the ship reached full operational capacity, utilizing all operating rooms and beds, since it was delivered to the Navy in 1987.

During the ship's mission, Comfort worked closely with Haiti's Ministry of Health and health care professionals from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), international relief organizations and non-governmental organizations to secure follow-on care for patients in recovery.

U.S. Southern Command released Comfort from the mission Mar. 9 after determining that the need for Comfort's capabilities declined significantly during the final weeks of its mission. The ship made a brief stop in Norfolk, Va., March 13 to offload 500 members of the medical team and some equipment. Two hundred members of the team remained on board for the trip home and were warmly welcomed by members of the Baltimore community.

"We are very proud of the men and women who served aboard Comfort during this important mission to Haiti," said Shah Islam, a Baltimore resident and owner of a chain of local Dunkin Donuts stores. "We're honored to be here today to express Baltimore's pride and appreciation with free donuts and coffee for the families and crew to thank them all for their service to our country."

In addition to the nearly 1,000 Navy medical personnel who operate the hospital, Comfort also has 79 civil service mariners aboard who provided vital support to the medical team. The mariners maintained a reliable supply of fresh water and electricity to Comfort's operating rooms and patient wards (the interruption of which could mean the difference between life and death), transported 45 patients to the ship's anchorage from shore and another 445 back to shore following their treatment, ensured the delivery of cargo ranging from blood supplies and medications to jet fuel and maintained the ship as a livable space for as many as 1,800 people.

"My crew of civil service mariners performed exceptionally well in this highly demanding situation," said Capt. Robert Holley, Comfort's civil service master. "They were presented with 101 different problems to troubleshoot and there was something new every day, yet each time we received a request for help, the answer was 'yes.'"

Having completed her mission to Haiti, Comfort will be kept pierside in Baltimore where a small crew of mariners and Navy medical personnel maintain the ship and hospital in a high state of readiness. When needed, Comfort can be ready to deploy again in five days.

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