

BUMED Oral History Project
CDR Sherri Santos, NC, USN

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Interviewer: André B. Sobocinski, BUMED Historian

Commander Santos grew up in Sioux City, Iowa, and in 1989 earned a bachelors degree in nursing from Morning Side College in Sioux City. Desiring to leave Iowa and go "where it does not get to be five or ten degrees below zero all winter long", she joined the Navy upon graduation nursing school. Following completion of the Officer Indoctrination Course at Newport Rhode Island, she reported to the Naval Hospital Camp Pendleton, California, where she served as a medical/surgical nurse on the general surgery and pediatric wards. In 1994 she was assigned to the Naval Medical Center, San Diego as the Division Officer for the Plastic, General and Surgical Services, but missing the direct patient care interactions she had enjoyed in direct nursing care, she worked as the On Call Nurse Care Manager for San Diego Hospice in her free time, and found that experience to be very fulfilling.

Subsequent assignments continued to be in nursing administration and training assignments that were removed from direct patient care. From 1997-2000 she was the Operating Room Division Officer at the Naval Hospital Yokosuka, Japan. From 2000-2002 she was a full time graduate student at the University of San Diego, and in 2002 was assigned as the Command Performance Improvement Coordinator for the Naval Hospital, Lemoore, California. She returned to Yokosuka in 2005 as the Quality Improvement Department Head and Command Risk Manager, and in 2008 returned to the States as the Perioperative Nurse Educator and Operating Room Department Head at the Naval Hospital Jacksonville, Florida.

In 2011 became the Clinical Coordinator for Joint Forces Medical Training at the Medical Education and Training Campus (METC) at Fort Sam Houston, Texas. Thus she became a METC "plankholder" as a member of the initial staff of METC, the consolidation of all military enlisted medical training that was directed by Congress in 2005, as part of significant changes in military medicine. At the time of this interview CDR Santos was the Program Director for the Consolidated Surgical Technologist Program, and in her off duty time she was employed as the Per Diem Case Manager at Grace Hospice in San Antonio.

A compelling experience was her OEF deployment in 2010 to the Kuwait Expeditionary Medical Facility, where she was placed in charge of a forward deployed team sent from Kuwait to the Role 3 Multinational Medical Unit in Kandahar, Afghanistan, which was severely understaffed at the time. They arrived at the hospital as the casualty caseload doubled. It was a difficult and challenging assignment, marked by rocket attacks and threats

of attack - which at one time had the her staff in position with loaded weapons to defend the facility from imminent attack -- plus the constant workload of trauma care cases. It was a life changing experience. She has vivid memories of particular cases, especially an Air Force MEDEVAC helicopter that was shot down with few survivors. The co-pilot, who was from a town near Santo's hometown, died from a closed head injury, in spite of heroic efforts to keep him alive. CDR Santos subsequently established contact with his family, and was able to share with them his care during his final hours.

CDR Santos' interview is instructive in the important issue of PTSD and care for the caregiver. The intensity of her deployment was compounded by the separation from her husband and children. She notes that for some of the staff "their lives have been ruined" due to their experience in Kandahar, and that it "really had a profoundly negative impact on their ability to come back." She believes that thirty percent of her staff had difficulty adjusting after they left Afghanistan, and she sought help herself with care by a therapist, with the result that "most of my symptoms have been completely or nearly completely eliminated."

Key Words

Care for the Care Giver
Combat Casualty Care
Consolidation of Military Medical Enlisted Training
Hospice Nursing
Nurse Corps, USN
OEF
Perioperative Nursing
PTSD
Rocket attack on a combat support hospital
Role 3 Multinational Medical Unit, Kandahar, Afghanistan

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