

# SAINT FRANCIS VASCULAR SURGEONS TREAT WOUNDED WARRIORS

## Visits to Army Hospital Tap Clinical, Emotional Strengths



Steven Ruby, M.D.

It was a unanimously bold decision when all three members of Saint Francis' Section of Vascular Surgery each decided to volunteer for two weeks at a U.S. military hospital in Germany to treat wounded soldiers and Marines, many of them suffering from horrific injuries. Yet, that is exactly what the three surgeons of Vascular Associates of Connecticut recently did over a two-month time span.

Steven Ruby, M.D., Eugene Sullivan, M.D., and Scott Fecteau, M.D., each spent two weeks as Red Cross surgical volunteers at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, a U.S. Army hospital, through a program organized by the Society for Vascular Surgery. They were the first vascular surgeons from

Connecticut to participate in the program, caring for service members injured in Afghanistan and Iraq.

"We all wanted to do this, and we mutually agreed to shoulder the impact on our practice to get it done," says Dr. Sullivan. "At Landstuhl Medical, we worked as part of an interdisciplinary team of surgeons, critical care physicians, nurses, dietitians, and military residents based in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) to provide daily care for these wounded warriors."



Scott Fecteau, M.D.

Opened in 1953, Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, located in southwestern Germany, is now the largest U.S. military hospital outside of the United States, with 149 inpatient beds and neonatal bassinets, and 218 beds in its Medical Transient Detachment. It is currently serving outpatients from Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. Located in the German state of Rhineland-Pfalz, in Landstuhl, Germany, it is situated about

three miles south of Ramstein Air Base, and serves as a mid-point in the evacuation of wounded service members from Afghanistan and Iraq back to military hospitals in the United States.

Injured service members are first treated at a mobile base in a forward combat area before being taken to an in-country hospital for additional surgery. They are then airlifted to Germany for further surgical care and wound management prior to returning to the United States.

"Our job was to provide intraoperative evaluation of injured extremities, looking for vascular injuries and assessing vascular repairs that had been done in the previous 36 hours," says Dr. Sullivan.

Dr. Sullivan explains that during their two-week stays, he and Drs. Ruby and Fecteau made rounds with the military team, provided consultations both on the wards and in the operating rooms, and assisted



Eugene Sullivan, M.D.

with various types of vascular and nonvascular surgeries. Following rounds, the vascular surgeons' days were varied, depending on the flow of patients. During "downtime" the surgeons carried local cell phones so that they could be summoned immediately to the Hospital if needed.

During their rotations both Dr. Ruby and Dr. Sullivan also presented grand rounds to the Landstuhl staff, sharing their knowledge of leading-edge treatments and techniques with their military peers.

"We saw devastating injuries," recalls Dr. Ruby of his two weeks at Landstuhl.

The patient who affected him the most was a 19-year-old Marine who had stepped on an improvised explosive device (an IED) while on patrol in southern Afghanistan. "He had lost both legs and was facing the loss of his left arm," notes Dr. Ruby.

As this patient was being readied for the operating room,

Dr. Ruby spoke with him for more than an hour.

"He never complained. He never asked 'Why did this happen?'" says Dr. Ruby. "I told him that we were very proud of his service and he started to cry. He asked me why I was there. I told him that I was a vascular surgeon volunteering there for two weeks. He thanked me for being there. Imagine that – he was thanking me!"

Dr. Sullivan notes that losses of limbs are typical injuries that service members sustain when they encounter an improvised explosive device while on foot patrol in Afghanistan.



"These injuries differ from those suffered by troops in Iraq who tend to patrol in vehicles," he explains. "The soldiers and Marines in Afghanistan have body armor which protects their trunk but their arms and legs are more exposed. These are wounds unlike any we see among civilians."

During their 14-day stays, the three surgeons usually worked variable hours each day and were on call 24/7. They estimate that, combined, they treated approximately 40 patients in total during their stays.

While there, the Saint Francis surgeons stayed at the Ramstein Inn, located adjacent to the Hospital. Suites featured sitting and bedroom areas, a galley kitchen, and wireless access. Off-duty time was usually filled by visits to local restaurants and cultural spots, and working out in the gym. They communicated with their families and friends back home via cell phones, e-mail blogs, and skype.

As he wrapped up his two-week rotation, Dr. Sullivan wrote in his blog: "I don't regret for an instant taking time away from my private practice to come here and volunteer both my time and expertise to help these unfortunate soldiers. Being here has been very personally rewarding and I would definitely volunteer for another medical mission in the future."

Dr. Ruby summarizes his experience by adding, "What was the most impressive, beyond the bravery of our soldiers, was the teamwork between surgeons, nurses, anesthesiologists, and consultants. Many of these injuries were very large and very complex. In some ways they are unique injuries, and I am sure no other trauma service on this planet sees this kind of volume. This requires people to work together. Our soldiers are fortunate to have this group of dedicated healthcare providers on their side."

For surgeons interested in learning more about this volunteer program, e-mail [kathleen.martin2@amedd.army.mil](mailto:kathleen.martin2@amedd.army.mil).



A CENTER OF HEALING – Located in Germany, Landstuhl Regional Medical Center is an Army hospital that serves as a mid-way point of care for American service members injured in Afghanistan and Iraq. Saint Francis vascular surgeons Steven Ruby, M.D., Eugene Sullivan, M.D., and Scott Fecteau, M.D., each spent two weeks at the hospital in a volunteer program organized by the Society for Vascular Surgery.

Photo by Steven Ruby, M.D.

