

## Wounded Warriors Get Heroes' Welcome at Andrews - *Continued From Page 11*

Meanwhile, the 779th ASF's medical administration team at Andrews tracks every inbound patient's medical status and knows exactly what care they need and what treatment facility they're headed to. Airman 1st Class Chelsey Morgan and her team call themselves the "brains of the operation," keeping their eyes glued to a computer-based global patient tracking system to ensure no detail falls through the cracks.

Thirty minutes before the Sept. 28 flight's arrival, the facility staff bustled with final preparations. Ambulance crews readied to meet the aircraft. A forklift prepared to offload patients' bags. Litters and wheelchairs were moved into position.

"What we do is very much a team concept," Stoneburg said. "We work very closely together to coordinate all the details of our missions, both the inbound and outbound flights."

Driving their efforts is a recognition that every minute counts when getting patients, particularly those with the most serious conditions, to care.

Combat troops typically arrive here within 72 hours of suffering a severe battlefield injury -- a vast improvement over past conflicts, Stoneburg explained. During Operation Desert Storm in 1991, it took 10 days. The average was 21 days during the Vietnam War.

Today, patients categorized as "urgent" are moved even faster. "These are patients that, if you delay, you lose a life. If you delay, you lose a limb. If you delay, they lose their eyesight," explained Air Force Col. Steve Cramer, the 779th Aerospace Medicine Squadron commander. "So the faster we're able to move, the better their outcomes will be."

That concept drives the staff as they offload critical-care patients with choreographic precision and transfer them onto ambulances against the backdrop of roaring C-17 engines.

"This is America at its best," said Air Force Col. (Dr.) Richard Niemtzow, a 779th Medical Operations Squadron physician who boarded the aircraft as soon as it landed to greet the patients. "You see sergeants carrying colonels and colonels carrying sergeants. You see African-Americans carrying Caucasians. You see Mexican-Americans carrying Chinese-Americans. Everyone is one team, all working together for each other."

Niemtzow or another colonel, as well as a chaplain, are part of an official party that welcomes every arriving patient to U.S. soil. "We tell them we're proud of them and appreciate what they have done," he said. "But we also assure them that they are going to continue to get the best-quality care available."

The official greeting sets the stage for a no-holds-barred effort to make patients... **Continued Page 15**

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### "NOT MANY HAVE SERVED IN TWO WARS"

After earning a bachelor's degree in 1999, Robert and Karrie married and began raising her daughter Cassandra. Groff had earned his bachelor's in accounting from the University of Illinois at Springfield in the spring of 1999, and was now working at a large accounting firm in Peoria. In September 2001, Groff was at his desk early when another employee came in and told him to turn on the TV. Shortly after the second World Trade Center tower fell in New York City, Groff telephoned his superiors to find out if he needed to report to his unit. As a Soldier, he knew war was coming. In November 2003, Sergeant Robert Groff was called to duty in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

*The first time I was deployed it was just me. This time I had a wife and child. In February, Karrie and my stepdaughter, Cassandra, along with my parents, came up to Fort McCoy to say good-bye.*

### THE 724th IN Iraq

By the time the Illinois Reserve unit was called up, Groff had become a Platoon Sergeant. Groff's unit, the 724th Transportation Company, was responsible for hauling bulk petroleum in their five-thousand-gallon tankers along the dangerous thoroughfares of Iraq. From tanks and helicopters to HMMWVs and the generators that keep the air conditioners humming, nothing operates in Iraq without fuel. In wartime, fuel is as important as bullets.

*We all went together, guys who had been together for five or ten years. We'd gone to each other's weddings, been over to each other's houses for dinner, and now we were in Kuwait, training and waiting for our vehicles to arrive.*

### CAMP ANACONDA

The 724th rolled into Iraq from Kuwait in the middle of the night in early March 2004. Groff knew that the Army training he had received in the previous 12 years had prepared him well. His unit had bonded at Fort McCoy and, although he had never been shot at, he felt confident in his ability to lead his men. They were well-trained, well-equipped and ready for their mission.

The next day, they reached Camp Anaconda, a bustling base with jets landing and personnel moving in and out. For the first few weeks, Groff and his Platoon Leader would perform "ride-alongs" with the unit they were replacing, to learn the routes, radio procedures and mission operations of the fuel convoys that would soon be handed to the 724th. Groff felt more confident with every briefing.

### APRIL 9, 2004

On April 9, 2004, at 10:30 a.m., a 23 vehicle convoy composed of civilian vehicles and members of Groff's platoon rolled out of Camp Anaconda and... **Continued Page 15**