

2017

Nursing in a War Zone

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Recommended Citation

Nelson, Scott Bernard '94 (2017) "Nursing in a War Zone," *Linfield Magazine*: Vol. 13 : No. 2 , Article 7.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/linfield_magazine/vol13/iss2/7

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Nursing in a war zone

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Joe Romero '07 put his nursing skills and team training to work during a 90-day deployment in Iraq last year. His team was involved with 68 surgeries.

The al Asad Airbase in western Iraq is big. Really big. So big, in fact, that a decade ago it housed more than 17,000 U.S. servicemen and women and civilian contractors. It had a movie theater, two swimming pools and a Pizza Hut.

By the time Joe Romero '07 landed at al Asad in April 2016, it was a very different place. Still big. But U.S. Marines had dismantled much of the base before handing it over to the Iraqi military, leaving a “pretty austere place,” Romero says.

Romero’s road to that austere place started, in many ways, 7,000 miles away at Linfield College in the classroom and on the football field. For a long time, Romero, a nursing graduate, didn’t think he’d ever again experience the camaraderie and sense of shared mission he found as a college athlete.

“But that,” he says, “was before Iraq.”

Romero joined the Army Reserve in 2011, to earn a stipend while he worked toward a master’s degree in nurse anesthetics at the University of Southern California. These days, he is a Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetist (CRNA) at Boise Anesthesia, a group medical practice that contracts with hospitals and surgical centers to provide anesthesia services. And he’s an Army captain.

When the opportunity came to volunteer for war-zone duty with the 948th Forward Surgical Team last year, Romero jumped at the chance. Secretly, though, he harbored doubts about U.S. involvement in the country. Since the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in the wake of the 2003 invasion, he says he has had a nagging feeling we were involved in an unnecessary conflict.

His perspective changed the May night four small children playing in a field were hit with a mortar shell near al Asad. Romero was among 20 doctors, nurses and other medical personnel in the trauma bay that night.

Ultimately, they took a four-year-old with shrapnel in his belly into surgery first. Romero says he was surprised how tiny the boy was. And how much blood they had to transfuse into him to keep him alive.

Seeing those innocent kids in pain and clinging to life is an image that sticks with Romero to this day.

“It’s a powerful moment, where it just hits you how much war sucks,” he says. “There is collateral damage from the good guys, too. I get that. But ISIS is brutal. Mothers and children lit on fire, attacks on residential areas like this, horrible stuff.”

When things would get especially frenzied in Iraq, he says, “I could just hear Jay Locey or Coach Smith in my head, talking about how to tackle a problem as a team. Or Ad Rutschman lecturing us on the essential qualities of good leadership. I thought about those things a lot over there.”

The Linfield years, he says looking back, were “about becoming an adult, a leader and a good human being. And understanding the bigger world.”

– Scott Bernard Nelson '94