

# MEDICALNEWS

# I am Navy Medicine and Dental Corps

**By Douglas Stutz**Naval Hospital Bremerton

It's been a dedicated journey of a lifetime and a career devoted to caring for others.

For more than three decades of the Navy Dental Corps 108 years of existence, Capt. Mary Elizabeth Neill has been able to commemorate her corps' annual birthday and beginning, August, 22, 1912.

This year is no different from any of the last 32 years for the Baltimore, Md. native and current board certified staff periodontist. Neill is stationed at Naval Hospital Bremerton's Branch Health Clinic Bangor, providing specialty care for Navy Region Northwest active duty operational forces primarily assigned to submarines and aircraft carriers, along with also treating U.S. Coast Guard and Marine Corps personnel.

The Woodlawn Senior High School Class 1977 graduate went on to University of Maryland Baltimore County, and received her B.S. Biological Sciences in 1981, followed by adding University of Maryland College of Dental Surgery, Doctor of Dental Surgery in 1985. Several years later, her career in Navy Medicine began in 1988. Later on she added M.S. Biomedical Sciences and Certificate of Periodontics in 1997 from the University of Texas Health Sciences Center at San Antonio, and M.S. National Security and Strategic Studies 2016 from the U.S. Naval War College, Newport R.I.

"While practicing as a general dentist for several years in New York, I decided to pursue specialty training. I transitioned from private practice and received a direct commission as a lieutenant in the United States Navy Dental Corps. My first assignment was Norfolk, Va. where I spent a year at the Dental Center, then received orders to repair ship USS Vulcan (AR-5)," said Neill, noting that her interest in Navy Medicine and specifically the Dental Corps came about from the mentoring received from retired Navy periodontists while in dental school.

"I knew that the Navy could be a wonderful opportunity to grow, both professionally and personally," Neill said. "The Navy post graduate program in periodontics has a long-standing reputation as being among the best in the profession worldwide."

Neill followed her father's footsteps, who began his professional life as a Navy dentist before shifting to a lifelong vocation in academics.

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(U.S. Air National Guard photo by Senior Airman Sean Madden)

Members of the New York Air National Guard don personal protective equipment to assist the City of New York Office of the Chief Medical Examiner in recovering the deceased in New York City, May 2, 2020. New York National Guard members are supporting the multi-agency response to COVID-19.

# Soldier reflects on service with NYC Medical Examiner's Office

By Senior Airman Sean Madden New York National Guard

NEW YORK – A Yonkers resident and New York Army National Guard Signal Soldier reflected on her unlikely service in the state's pandemic response as she found herself working with the New York City Office of the Chief Medical Examiner during the city's darkest days of COVID-19.

Spc. Ashley Rodriguez is normally a Cable Systems Installer, assigned to Bravo Company, 101st Expeditionary Signal Battalion. Her role supporting the City of New York Office of Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) would be anything but a traditional military skill.

The New York National Guard assistance with the

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## • **Reflects** (Continued from front page)

City is considered one of the most difficult missions for the Guard during COVID-19, said Maj. Gen. Michel Natali, the assistant Adjutant General for New York and former dual status commander for response forces assisting the city.

As a result of a sharp increase in deaths that overwhelmed the OCME, more than 300 Soldiers and Airmen from the New York National Guard were assigned to support the recovery and processing of remains across the city from April to June.

To highlight the dramatic need for assistance, New York City Commissioner of Health Dr. Oxiris



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recovery of the deceased in New York Barbot told the New York Times April 14, that 3,000 more people died in the city between March 11 and April 13 than would normally have been expected during the same timeframe in an ordinary year.

Rodriguez was not even initially aware of the mortuary support mission and said she wasn't sure what to expect going into it.

Aspiring to a civilian career in forensics, however, Rodriguez saw the mission as an opportunity to get exposure to the field and see if it was something that she could handle. So she quickly volunteered for duties on April 1.

By April 15, the New York City Department of Health announced that there had been 6,840 confirmed deaths out of 111,424 reported coronavirus

In the first two weeks of her New York National Guard mission, the daily toll from COVID-19 rose from 378 deaths on April 1 to 651 deaths on April 15 before dropping back to 429 on May 1. City officials would report some 23,680 deaths before New York could reopen after flattening its curve in the summer.

"I'm a signal Soldier, not a mortuary assistant," Rodriguez said. "In the beginning, it was a scary experience."

For Rodriquez, she learned that she could handle the work.

They supported in-home recovery of decedents, transfer of decedents from hospitals, operation of a long-term storage facility in Brooklyn, and many other mortuary related tasks.

Deaths in New York City in that mission timeframe started at a peak of almost 500 each day, according to the city Department of Health, and only began to decrease in late April.

The Guardsmen and women were joined by an active Army mortuary affairs element, the 54th Quartermaster Company, who assisted the Medical Examiner's office with processing hundreds of remains.

Rodriguez and her team worked 12-hour shifts, recovering the deceased from a variety of causes, including drug overdoses, suicides and natural causes both COVID-19 and non-

She saw victims from all walks of life, from all across New York City, Rodriguez said, providing dignity and respect to the recovery of every decedent.

The grim nature of this mission, and the sheer volume of work needed, raised concerns among Guard leadership for the resiliency of the task force Soldiers, explained Command Sgt. Maj. David Piwowarski, the New York Army National Guard Senior Enlisted Advisor.

"Many of us have been to combat," Piwowarski said, "but this particular mission is very different, with handling human remains, every day, with long days, for weeks on end. I expect-



(U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sr. Airman Sean Madden)

New York Army National Guard Spc. Ashley Rodriguez appears before teh New York skyline August 27, 2020. A New York resident and Signal Soldier, she reflected on her unlikely service in the state's pandemic response as she found herself working with the New York City Office of the Chief Medical Examiner during the city's darkest days of COVID-19. Her story will be part of an address by General Daniel R. Hokanson, the Chief of the National Guard Bureau, to the National Guard Association of the United States (NGAUS) on Saturday, August 29, 2020.

ed that some service members would five-year-old daughter and her grandnot want to be involved in this rather grim duty. What we found was quite the opposite."

"The first few days it was really hard for me, but I felt I had to be resilient," Rodriguez said. "The experience definitely showed me I could handle a lot more than I thought I could."

She also described an additional sense of accomplishment and pride that came from the appreciation of the families of those who had died and were recovered by National Guard

about why the military was there, Rodriguez said. Once family members understood we were there to take care of their loved one, they became very appreciative and knew we were going to give their loved one dignity and respect, she said.

Two months into her duties, Rodriguez experienced a low point when a realization that recovering deceased infants would also be a part of the mission and credits her team with helping her cope and get through that difficult time.

"We essentially came together and agreed we needed to be here for each other and we came up with a coping mechanism," Rodriguez said. "If it wasn't for them, I probably would've requested to be taken off the mission."

Rodriguez completed her duty July 21, one of the longest stretches by a Guard member. During that time, her

mother, a city hospital employee, each contracted COVID-19.

While they recovered, they continued to give their support to Rodriguez while she carried on with her OCME mission.

When her part in the mission came to an end, another phase began, a unique effort put in place by the New York National Guard leadership and staff to help address the transition and mental toll on members coming off their grim duties.

"We did a demobilization that last-At first there was fear or confusion ed five days and focused on mental health," Rodriguez said. "They wanted to ensure that everybody knew that it was okay to not be okay and make sure that anyone who needs it, gets

> Rodriguez enlisted in 2016 and said she plans to be in the National Guard for 20 years. Her experiences so far, especially during Operation COVID-19, have given her a new perspective on her service.

> "I understood that as a Guardsman you come in wherever there's something that's needed and you fill a role," said Rodriguez. "The Guard does a lot more than you'd expect."

> Specialist Ashley Rodriguez's story will be part of an address by General Daniel R. Hokanson, the Chief of the National Guard Bureau, to the National Guard Association of the United States (NGAUS) on Saturday, August 29, 2020.

## • **Dental Corps** (Continued from front page)

on a Mediterranean deployment, I was born in the former Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point hospital. I still have the letters my dad wrote describing the amazing adventures of being a dentist at sea, and the beautiful ports he visited while on deployment. In one of his letters he spoke of how important serving others is to finding your purpose in life. I was one month old when this letter was written and his words and his example continue to influence my life choices,' shared Neill.

Just several years into her Navy career, Neill found herself – as many others did at that time – deployed as part of an international coalition against Iraq after they invaded neighboring Kuwait.

"Next thing I know we were steaming in support of Operation Desert Shield/ Desert Storm (1990-91). My husband, who was serving as a Navy explosives ordinance disposal officer, was also forward deployed. We would end up being apart for a year," recollected Neill.

That initial deployment would commence the beginning of Navy venture to see the world. Neill correlates her globe-trotting to her favorite Dr. Seuss (Theodor Geisel) book, Oh The Places You'll Go!

"It was his final work written in 1990, around the same time of my first deployment and the start of the Gulf War," stated Neill. "Little did I know that my favorite book written for children would

apply to my life in the Navy!"

Neill has relocated 11 times during her career, with each duty station providing unique experiences, different cultures, and lifelong friends. Duty locations have included Norfolk and Portsmouth, Va., San Antonio, Texas, Whidbey Island, Wa., Bethesda, Md., Washington, DC, Quantico, Va., Kandahar, Afghanistan; Newport, R.I.. Countries visited during deployments and command visits include Greece, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Japan, Italy, Spain, Qatar, and Germany.

Neill has held a host of positions, from ambulatory and emergency services to a plank owner as deputy chief of staff for Navy Medicine National Capital Area to executive officer at Naval Hospital Oak Harbor to commanding officer at Naval Health Clinic Quantico, to Navy Medicine East chief of staff, commanding officer of NATO Role III Multinational Medical Unit Kandahar, Afghanistan and deputy director for Medical Resources, Plans, Policy at the Pentagon.

"I have been fortunate to serve in a diversity of executive medicine assignments," Neill said, adding she has also enjoyed clinical leadership opportunities such as periodontics chair at Naval Postgraduate Dental School; specialty leader to the Navy surgeon general for periodontics; and various clinical staff dental officer positions.

Although there have been many unique experiences throughout her Navy career, Neill attests deploying to Afghanistan Neill replied, "I am home."

"The day before his ship was to depart supporting Operation Enduring Freedom resonates over all others.

"We had an incredible team of professionals working together from Navy active and reserve force, Army, Air Force, Australia, Belgium, United Arab Emirates, and a British Army Dental unit. I actually had the opportunity to work with the Army veterinarian and dental techs performing root canals and extractions for the Military Working Dogs. We provided critical trauma support to our warfighters and mentoring support of the Kandahar Military Hospital. The mission was incredibly purposeful and very much appreciated by the American and NATO forces. I have never felt more connected to my military service and witnessed, firsthand, the courage and tenacity of a fighting force and the unwavering dedication of their medical support team. The experience of assembling a group from all over the country and the world, and watching them form the most impressive trauma teams and incredible bonds of trust and friendship, was an experience that continues to inspire me in my role as a Navy Medicine professional,' exclaimed Neill, pointedly including a definitive caveat to her time down range.

"If I had to single out the 'coolest' experience with Navy Medicine, it would be receiving anchors as an honorary chief petty officer during my change of command in Kandahar. To this day, I am humbled and cherish that moment,"

As the Navy Dental Corps have done since their inception, Neill and the rest of the command's dental team - located at NHB and Branch Health Clinics Bangor and Everett – ensure continual support for the Navy surgeon general priority on operational readiness and the core mission of producing force medical readiness and medical force readiness.

"Navy Dentists have always been keenly focused on operational readiness. It is our main thing. We are very good at it. I am proud to be part of a team of professionals who care for patients above and beyond readiness with an emphasis on dental health and well-being. As a periodontist I support all specialty areas in coordinated treatment planning, as well as focus on prevention," said Neill.

Neill's Navy career has become a legacy of its own, with each year contributing more caring, more compassion and more competence in providing dental services to Navy and Marine Corps personnel and their families.

"Among my favorite sayings is 'the meaning of life is to find your gifts. The work of life is to develop them. The purpose of life is to give them away.' Being here as a member of Navy Medicine and the Navy Dental Corps has afforded me the opportunities to all three. I cannot imagine a more satisfying and fulfilling way to live," remarked Neill.

When asked to sum up her experience with Navy Medicine in one sentence,



(Official Navy photo by Douglas H Stutz, NHB/NMRTC Bremerton public affairs officer) Young at heart with a lifetime of wisdom... Capt. Mary Elizabeth Neill, Navy Dental Corps, assigned to NHB/NMRTC Bremerton's Branch Health Clinic Bangor, provides specialty care for Navy Region Northwest active duty operational forces primarily assigned to submarines and aircraft carriers, along with also treating U.S. Coast Guard and Marine Corps personnel. For her, it's been a dedicated journey of a lifetime, spanning three decades, and a career devoted to caring for others.



## Percy Bonefish

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# US Airman highlights the importance of protective equipment

By Cpl. Samantha Hall

Defense Department Support to FEMA COVID-19

HANFORD, Calif. – At the request of the Federal Emergency Management Agency and in support of U.S. Northern Command, through U.S. Army North, approximately 160 Airmen assigned to the 60th Medical Group, Travis Air Force Base, Calif., fulfilled a need for additional healthcare workers at eight hospitals across California.

"We are committed to assisting those in need as part of the ongoing whole-of-America response to COVID-19," said Lt. Gen. Laura J. Richardson, commanding general, U.S. Army North (Fifth Army) and the Joint Force Land Component Command (JFLCC). "At the same time, we remain flexible and capable of providing other defense support to civil authorities as necessary."

U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Jarrid Wilson is one such Airman and cardiopulmonary lab technician who is working at Adventist Health Hanford to augment civilian medical providers in need of support. He works on both COVID-19 positive and negative patients.

According to Wilson, the use of PPE is absolutely critical to ensuring civilian and military medical providers are able to treat patients.

"While we are working on the front lines at Adventist Hanford and across the board at these other medical facilities, PPE is our frontline for protection from this virus," said Wilson. "It keeps us safe while we're working with these patients."

The equipment that is used to protect the workers include N95 masks, gowns, gloves, face shields, and a set of headgear called a positive airway pressure respirator, or PAPR mask, that completely encases the wearer's head for maximum protection. Wilson states that, no matter how uncomfortable this equipment can be, a strong focus on protecting those who protect us is the only way forward.

"It may be uncomfortable for a lot of us, but at the same time, we're in this together," said Wilson. "It's important for us to do our part to protect ourselves as well as the individuals around us."

"America's military stands prepared and ready to respond in America's time of need, against all foes, whether COVID-19 or foreign threats," said Maj. Gen. Michael Stone, commanding general, Task Force Center-West, a task force formed from the Michigan National Guard's 46th Military Police Command which is U.S. Army North's subordinate headquarters providing command and control of Army, Air Force and Navy medical personnel deployed to California and Texas as part of Department of Defense COVID-19 relief efforts.

Following Center for Disease Control guidelines, like Wilson and his team does, helps prevent the transmission of COVID-19. It is a key component to maintaining readiness and the success of military medical personnel who have traveled across the nation to provide relief



(Mich. Army National Guard photo by Spc. Aaron Good

U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Jarrid Wilson, cardiopulmonary lab technician, 60th Medical Group, cleans his personal protective equipment after assisting a patient at Adventist Health in Hanford, Calif., August 4, 2020. U.S. Northern Command, through U.S. Army North, remains committed to providing flexible Department of Defense support to the Federal Emergency Management Agency in support of the whole-of-nation COVID-19 response.



(U.S. Army Photo by Lt. Col. Charles Calid

U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Jarrid Wilson, a cardiopulmonary lab technician assigned to COVID Theater Hospital-1, removes personal protective equipment prior to checking on a patient at Adventist Health Hanford, Hanford, Calif., August 4, 2020. Wilson is a member of a medical support team deployed from the 60th Medical Group, Travis Air Force Base, Calif., which integrated with hospital staff to provide medical support. U.S. Northern Command, through U.S. Army North, remains committed to providing flexible Department of Defense support to the Federal Emergency Management Agency in support of the whole-of-nation COVID-19 response.

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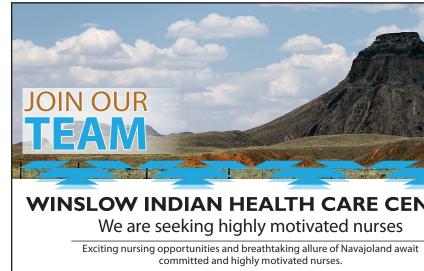
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