Guard medics back in action aiding inmates

By JAMES MINTON
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ANGOLA — A little over a year ago, the 159th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital forged deep into Iraq, providing medical care to wounded Americans and Iraqi prisoners of war.

On Friday, 22 members of the New Orleans-based National Guard unit went into the Tunica Hills to treat prisoners of a different stripe.

This time, the medics have walls, floors and air conditioning. They don't have to fight sandstorms, sleep in tents or ride in 5-ton trucks.

Gov. Edwin Edwards activated the unit to give the chronically short-staffed Louisiana State Penitentiary hospital a chance to catch up on its backlog of inmates needing medical attention.

Working with Army medical personnel again brought a feeling of deja vu to hospital Administrator Elia Fletcher, a retired Army Medical Services Corps lieutenant colonel.

CONTINUED FROM 1B

"I love it... it's wonderful," she said, "They have the opportunity to provide some real medical care here."

Assistant Warden Dwayne McFatter said the prison placed an extra 100 inmates on Friday's "call-out" list for hospital visits, while 150 are on today's list and 100 will be called Sunday.

Deputy Warden Richard Peabody said Angola's six full-time physicians each work two hours overtime Monday through Friday because of the backlog, but a contracted emergency room physician is on duty on weekends.

Col. Phillip Marler, the unit's commander and one of six doctors reporting for Angola duty Friday, said his staff was handed the assignment two weeks ago, initially for a 90-day period of weekend duty.

"We had numerous staff visits for planning and briefings," Marler said.

 Corrections officials said the National Guard's involvement is part of Angola's efforts to fulfill a 10-year-old, court-approved agreement on medical care at the isolated penitentiary.

The staff shortage — Angola is authorized to have 10 full-time physicians — is a major complaint in a civil rights lawsuit filed by Angola inmates earlier this year.

An intensive recruitment campaign is under way, Fletcher said. Two more doctors will join the staff in July. "When we bring our doctors up to 10, that'll give us 490 (manhours per week), which is what the consent decree requires."

Marler said his unit's doctors, nurses, laboratory and radiology technicians, and records and supply specialists will provide care for ambulatory patients in a clinic setting.

Some patients may be referred to the 159th's general and orthopedic surgeons, who will perform the needed surgery at Medical Center of Louisiana in New Orleans.

"This is just a little edge... a little more help," said Angola physician Robert Barnes. "It will help us see patients close to the time of their complaints."

"I think it's pretty thoughtful of them to come up here," inmate Terry James said as he waited to see a doctor. "We need a few more doctors here."

Army medical Spec. Charles Ritter checks the vital signs of Angola inmate Franklin Jones on Friday afternoon in the Louisiana State Penitentiary infirmary as another medical specialist helps.

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Page 1B | Column 5