

The Miami Herald

Posted on Sat, Apr. 04, 2009

USNS Comfort docks in Miami amid humanitarian mission

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The ship doesn't live up to its name, at least for its crew -- though to the thousands abroad it will provide care for, the name United States Navy Ship Comfort is apt.

The super-tanker-turned-floating-hospital looks like a giant block of concrete as it navigates west through Government Cut channel escorted by five tugs, just a weekend away from a lengthy Caribbean and Latin American medical mission.

The 894-foot, 10-story-high ship is docked in Miami from Saturday through Monday, where it will fill out a crew of 900 and stock enough medical supplies for a four-month care-taking mission.

First stop: Haiti, a poor country that almost annually suffers some type of natural or man-made disaster -- and where medical care is as hard to come by as the trees that used to dot its now barren hillsides.

"Personally, this is the highlight of my career," notes Capt. Tom Finger, the ship's master since it stood by injured soldiers during the first Persian Gulf War in 1990 and through ongoing Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Though its primary mission is to aid injured military, the ship served as command and control in New York City during 9/11 and outside Louisiana during hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

The current humanitarian mission will take the ship to seven Latin American and Caribbean nations, including Antigua, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Panama.

By the first week of August the plan is for the USNS Comfort to return to its home port of Baltimore.

Its medical capabilities seem endless: 12 spotless operating rooms for its 20 surgeons, five dental rooms, the most modern scanners and MRIs around, 5,000 units of blood, 1,000 beds and enough boats and helicopters to transport hundreds of patients a day.

Doctors aboard are from Canada, France, Chile and the Netherlands. U.S. military personnel come from the four services and the Coast Guard. Almost 400 aboard are civilian volunteers.

Included in those volunteers Saturday were about 150 from Miami. Among them, Lt. Jean Paul, a Haitian by birth who is an executive assistant with the U.S. Public Health Service. Sporting military fatigues, Paul said his sleeping quarters were fine. Asked whether he planned to visit family in Haiti, he refused to stray from the company line.

"My objective is not to visit my family," he said, arms crossed behind his back, standing tall. "It's to offer support."

The complications of surgery are eased somewhat by the nine months of preparation the crew put into the voyage. When it docks in Nicaragua, for instance, staff already knows where it will move its mobile dental labs.

Doctors already have patient records and have been in contact with doctors abroad, saving precious time for those

requiring surgery.

The last similar mission for the ship was in 2007. The USNS Comfort is one of only two such ships under the U.S. arsenal. The other is the USNS Mercy, based in San Diego.

Also aboard the ship Saturday were 500 teddy bears. No one was quite sure where they were going, but everyone seemed to know where they came from.

A group of girls from the sorority house Phi Sigma Sigma at Florida International University brought them ship side, packed in boxes.

The bears were all donated, said FIU senior Catherine Vallin, 21.

"We love to give back," she added.

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