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# **Operation Lone Star: a joint effort**

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WESLACO, Texas (July 31, 2003) --

“An Army of One.”

“Accelerate Your Life.”

“Cross into the Blue.”

No matter what slogan they identify with, the military personnel involved in Operation Lone Star 2003 are helping Rio Grande Valley residents live healthier. For two weeks this summer, three elementary schools in South Texas were converted into makeshift clinics where Naval Reserve and Army and Air National Guard personnel worked together to provide dental and medical assistance to the underprivileged residents of the community.

The annual humanitarian exercise has been a joint effort ever since its debut in 1999. Army National Guard Lt. Col. Zerline J. McNeal-Ingram of the Austin-based Texas Medical Command Group is the executive officer of the clinic at Chapa Elementary in La Joya, Texas. She has been involved in every Operation Lone Star since its induction and has seen the growing relationship among the services.

“I was involved in this operation even before it was officially called Operation Lone Star,” said McNeal-Ingram. “During the first exercise, the clinics were set up in tents, and all the military services made significant contributions.”

McNeal-Ingram related the joint efforts of Operation Lone Star to her experience during Operation Desert Storm, where she worked with services from different countries as well as with different U.S. services.

“Desert Storm involved joint forces as well as forces from countries like France and Italy,” she said. “Every service has a different way of looking at things, but what matters is we all served the same purpose, much like that of Operation Lone Star.”



Air National Guard Tech. Sgt. Gilbert Cisneros Jr. of the 149th Medical Squadron, San Antonio, checks the blood-sugar levels of Rio Grande Valley Residents during Operation Lone Star 2003. According to Cisneros, joint exercises such as Operation Lone Star make it easy to work with other services because everyone wants to help those in need. (Texas National Guard photo by Sgt. Kevin Bromley, 100th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment)

Air National Guard Tech. Sgt. Gilbert Cisneros Jr. of the 149th Medical Squadron in San Antonio also credited his previous experience of working with different services as facilitating his relationship with other service members as part of Operation Lone Star.

“I am quite comfortable working in a joint-forces situation,” Cisneros said. “I worked in a joint-service situation at a Combat Casualty Care Course at Camp Bullis. I think that as any soldier, seaman, marine or airman gain more experience working with one another, they become more comfortable in that environment.”

While many of the physicians and dentists participating in the humanitarian mission have prior experience working in a joint-service setting, many military personnel are new to Operation Lone Star and to working with other services. Navy Reserve Cmdr. James Eric Hibbs of the 4th Dental Company at Fort Worth noticed obstacles can come with being new to a joint-forces mission.



Navy Reserve Cmdr. J. Eric Hibbs, 4th Dental Co. at Fort Worth, Texas, performs a tooth filling at Chapa Elementary. “We are all working together on one team,” he said. “I don’t think one service is better than another.” (Texas National Guard photo by Spc. Derek Del Rosario, 100th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment)

“I have been a part of Operation Lone Star before, but it’s still a re-learning experience,” the dentist said. “I still have to brush up on the rank structure when I work in a joint environment. For those who are new to working with other services, it can be a big challenge to handle a different rank system.”

Air National Guard Tech Sgt. Phillip G. Casillas of the 149th Medical Squadron in San Antonio also agrees that learning and recognizing different military titles in the services can be daunting.

“It takes time to get used to new rank structures,” said the airman. “For me, the insignia on Navy uniforms are very hard to learn. I think when people run into a situation like that, it’s all about informing ourselves by asking questions.”

According to Hibbs, being informed about another service member’s branch is not a problem.

“I think everyone loves to be a teacher,” Hibbs said. “People like to talk about their military service to members of other services. They are proud of the service they are in and want to share that with others.”

McNeal-Ingram said that being educated on different services is a good way to facilitate communication among the services. She gave an example in regards to her own service.

“A lot of people do not understand what the Army National Guard does,” said McNeal-Ingram. “When they realize we are part of ‘an Army of One,’ they get a better concept of our mission and how it is similar to their own. It is all a matter of education.”

Being informed about different services’ rank structure is not the only thing that can help a joint mission. Understanding other branch-specific differences helps avoid confusion during joint exercises. According to Hibbs, not knowing about a different service,s organizational structure also can be an obstacle.

“Sometimes, the administrative side is different among the various services,” he said. “Being aware of the different processes and procedures of another service and things like understanding their chain of command can help promote a team effort.”

Despite the differences among the services, McNeal-Ingram believes that since Operation Lone Star is a humanitarian mission, it helps keep all of the services as one team.

“In my opinion, medical groups tend to blend easier than other fields do,” said McNeal-Ingram. “It is easier for personnel in the medical field to work together because we share a common goal: to promote health care and leave a situation better than it was before, no matter what uniform is worn.”



“Helping people in need is the mission, and we are all working together toward that goal,” said Dental Technician 2 Anmarie Wilson of the 24th Dental Co., Marietta, Ga., in describing the teamwork of the joint forces involved in Operation Lone Star 2003. (Texas National Guard photo by Spc. Derek Del Rosario, 100th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment)

Navy Reserve Dental Technician Annmarie Wilson of the 24th Dental Company in Marietta, Ga., also believes that the common field the services share is a great assistance to the team effort of the military personnel during Operation Lone Star.

“Even though this is mainly an Army exercise, all the services share the same goal,” said Wilson. “All of the military personnel here want to lend a helping hand and to provide those in need with medical and dental care they lack access to.”

Operation Lone Star 2003 marks the first time the Army National Guard has led the mission. In previous years, the training exercise was led by the Marine Corps Reserve. According to McNeal-Ingram, however, the particular service that directs Operation Lone Star does not play a factor in the humanitarian mission’s effectiveness.

“It does not matter whether the Army, Navy or Air Force leads this mission,” the executive officer said. “As long as we all maintain our military bearing and respect each other, we can work together as a collective unit.”

Whether soldier, seaman, airman or Marine, people from the services agree that the training receive is helpful to their own service’s preparation for a possible real-world mission.

“Being part of the Air Force, I am more accustomed to giving shots to adults,” said Cisneros. “This exercise gives me a chance to immunize children. It’s a new experience, and it gives me gainful experience to what reality is like. These low-income areas, this is reality.”

Hibbs acknowledged how the two-week operation helps the Navy’s involvement with the Marines.

“The Navy needs training to go into the field with the Marines in different conditions,” Hibbs said. “Exercises like these gives us a chance to test, evaluate and replace the equipment we might plan to use in the field.”

McNeal-Ingram feels that Operation Lone Star provides strong medical training that Army National Guard members can use in the future.

“The experience gained at this operation can be used in a disaster-type situation,” said McNeal-Ingram. “It gives our soldiers a realistic view of an environment where we might be called to help.”

Despite their different affiliations, Cisneros, Hibbs and McNeal-Ingram have high expectations and hopes for the future of Operation Lone Star.

“I wish there could be more humanitarian efforts here at home as well as abroad,” said Cisneros. Operation Lone Star has promoted good will between people and the military, and he hopes that it can continue to do that.

Hibbs agrees that Operation Lone Star provides a great opportunity for different services to develop a relationship with each other.

“I don’t believe one service is better than any other,” the Navy dentist said. “This mission provides great training for all the members of the different services. This mission should continue because not only does it provide a humanitarian aid, it also helps every soldier, airman or seaman with training that can be used during war time.”

McNeal-Ingram wishes that not only different services but also different fields of training could be involved in Operation Lone Star missions.

“One year we had military police here helping with safety issues and taking care of crowd control,” the Army Guard officer said. “Maybe in the future we could have engineers from the different services help the community.”

She also suggests that an award which encompasses all the services would be a great addition to Operation Lone Star.

“Different services should be recognized with a joint award,” said McNeal-Ingram. “It would be nice to see a joint award, not just an Army, Air Force or Navy award. The troops would be proud to receive an award that included all the services.”

With the operation in its fifth year, McNeal-Ingram says it has been running the smoothest it has in its existence. She thinks that as the operation continues, so does the relationship among the services.

“We haven’t totally arrived yet, but we’re getting close,” she said in describing the strong bond among the services. “We are all Department of Defense troops, and as long as everyone understands that and respects each other, we can be one team working together to benefit the future.”

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