

## Chapter 53

# ROLE OF THE GUANTANAMO BAY PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT

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## Introduction

*Welcome to “The Pearl of the Antilles”*

Guantanamo Bay Naval Base, Cuba, often referred to as “GTMO,” contains a joint task force (JTF) comprised of Army, Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard personnel (Figure 53-1). The joint troop aid station, Kittery Beach Aid Station (KBAS), provides medical and dental care to all the military members of the JTF. A joint medical group (JMG), as the medical command structure for the JTF, supervises the providers and corpsmen who care for the patients at the camps, as well as oversee KBAS. The joint detention group (JDG) oversees all activities for the



**Figure 53-1.** Joint Task Force–Guantanamo Bay logo.  
Photograph courtesy of Joint Task Force–Guantanamo Bay.



**Figure 53-2.** United States Naval Hospital Guantanamo Bay (USNH-G).

residents in each camp, including life support functions (food, clothing, housing, etc). Each camp has its own medical clinic that provides medical care to the individuals who reside there, including specialty care. Residents of the camps receive all care within the camp facilities. US Naval Hospital Guantanamo Bay (USNH-GB) provides care for all personnel assigned to Naval Station Guantanamo Bay, government employees, family members, and contractors (Figure 53-2).

## Supervision

Physician assistants (PAs) are traditionally general medical officers and are supervised, as outlined in Army regulations 623-3,<sup>1</sup> 40-3,<sup>2</sup> and 40-68,<sup>3</sup> by battalion (BN) physicians in the 525th Military Police (MP) BN and, as available, a rotational MP BN (a separate headquarters element usually assigned to the JDG; typically a reserve or National Guard unit with responsibilities such as facility security). Credentialing and privileging for all providers of the KBAS and the camps are processed by the JMG.<sup>4</sup>

## **Unit Structure**

The 525th MP Detention BN and the rotational BN are each assigned a PA and a physician. Both Army BNs and the JMG provide medics and corpsmen to work in the aid station; however, not all of the rotational units that make up the JTF bring medics, so the number available fluctuates. KBAS also has an independent duty corpsman who is supervised by the 525th MP BN surgeon. The JMG provides a dentist and two dental technicians, as well as a physical therapist (who splits time between the clinic and the camps), a physical therapy technician, and a nonspecialized corpsman to augment physical therapy for KBAS. The 525th MP Detention BN and the rotational BN provide a preventive medicine officer and technicians to the JMG. The clinic officer in charge (OIC) reports operationally to the 525th MP Detention BN commander and clinically to the JMG.

## **Roles and Responsibilities**

Traditionally, the PA with the 525th MP Detention BN has been the OIC of KBAS, based on either rank or experience.<sup>5</sup> The USNH-GB commander (serving jointly as the JMG commander) decides which provider will take the position. The OIC is responsible for medical readiness, including patient care, quality management of clinic personnel, tracking information about service members attending medical temporary duty, monthly clinic reports to the JMG commander, rating the noncommissioned OIC, completing line of duty medical recommendations, and attending a variety of meetings held by the JMG, JDG, and both BNs. KBAS is tasked to complete all influenza vaccinations and tuberculosis screening for all JTF members prior to their departure from the island, in addition to routine and urgent health care for their patient population.

## **Desired Skills and Attributes**

Desired skills and attributes of a PA at Naval Station Guantanamo include:

- operational experience,
- rank of senior captain or junior major,

- secret clearance,
- experience as medic trainer,
- graduate of the Captains Career Course, and
- outstanding written and oral communication skills.

## **Training**

Other than traditional credentialing requirements, no training is required for the position. Training in Basic Life Support, Advanced Life Support, and Pediatric Life Support is available at USNH-GB.

## **Key Factors**

### ***Transportation***

The position in 525th MP Detention BN is typically 1 year long, with 25 days of leave authorized during that year. Outside of leave, departure from the island is not readily available. Rotator flights occur every other Tuesday, originating at Naval Station Norfolk, Virginia, with a stop at Naval Station Jacksonville, Florida, for passenger pickup, then on to Guantanamo Bay, and returning by same route. Every Friday, a rotation flight from Naval Station Jacksonville to Guantanamo Bay and back occurs. Medical evacuation for urgent patients can be done via the existing rotator schedule; however, emergent medical evacuation is conducted using Tricare evacuation processes.

### ***Rotation Battalion***

The provider position in the rotational BN started in February 2014 as a permanent rotation. The slot for the general medical officer is a 3-month billet, and the slot for the PA is a 9-month billet on temporary change of station or temporary duty orders. These positions are filled by the National Guard and reserves. When lack of funding has prevented authorization of the rotational BN, the only medical providers available have been part of the 525th MP Detention BN, which limits access to care and requires the OIC take a larger role in providing medical care, as well as shifting administrative responsibilities to noncommissioned officers and other staff.

### ***Patient Population***

All service members aligned with the JTF receive care at KBAS, which is open Monday through Friday and provides service to military personnel only. Service members are Army active duty, National Guard, and reserve; Navy active duty and reserve; Air Force reserve, and Coast Guard reserve. The Guantanamo service member population tends to be older than the average active duty personnel seen in US military clinics. Because many are reserve component, they may or may not have access to routine insurance and health care, and their medical records may not be readily available for review. The majority of patients are seen for musculoskeletal injuries sustained during morale, welfare, and recreation (MWR) sports.

### ***Medical Assets***

Medical assets on the island outside of the aid station consist of USNH-GB, which provides limited emergency room, obstetrics and gynecology, optometry, pediatric, family medicine, and general surgery services. Limited ultrasound in the context of obstetrics/gynecology and general surgery may be available depending on the assigned provider. There are also occupational health and physical therapy services at the hospital complex. The hospital has a psychiatrist, but the JTF population primarily receives behavioral health care from the Joint Stress Mitigation and Restoration Team. Other specialties such as cardiology, dermatology, neurology, podiatry, otolaryngology, pulmonology, orthopedics, and urology rotate onto the island for patient care on an as-needed basis. Imaging services, such as computed tomography, limited ultrasound, and radiography, are available at USNH-GB. Providers at the aid station who want to review the actual images for ordered exams cannot be accommodated (at this time) due to insurmountable firewall issues. Magnetic resonance imaging and broader use of ultrasound are not available as of publication; personnel are routinely sent for medical temporary duty to Jacksonville Naval Station.

### ***Medical Supplies***

The biggest hurdle for providers at Guantanamo is working within the constraints of supplies arriving by barge, and frequently running

out of commonly used medications such as acetaminophen and diphenhydramine. This assignment is similar to providing medicine provided in rural America, where access to specialty care requires extensive travel, and medications and procedures may not be readily available. Providers often need to consult with the command about patient care to determine if medical temporary duty off the island should be authorized and funded by the unit, if evaluation and treatment by a specialist is needed and unavailable on the island.

### ***Housing***

Housing on-island is unique. Unaccompanied or single officers are housed in furnished duplexes and assigned roommates of the same gender. These houses have two to four bedrooms per unit. Company-grade officers tend not to be housed with field-grade officers. Cell phone service is available. Internet access can also be purchased and is sold based on speed and number of devices.

### ***Morale, Welfare, and Recreation Activities***

MWR activities are plentiful on Guantanamo, with “fun runs,” bike rides, and triathlons scheduled throughout the year. Arts and crafts activities such as ceramics and wood-working are offered, and recent movies are shown nightly in three different outdoor theaters free of charge. Swimming lessons are available for beginners and are free (up to 10 lessons) for military members. Kayaking, paddle boarding, scuba diving, spear fishing, intramural sports, sailing, fishing, automotive skills, and boating are also available.

All boating activities require an MWR captain’s license. Training and testing for the license is available, and licenses are printed for a small fee. Scuba diving requires certification; if incoming personnel are already certified, they require only an orientation dive. There is a hyperbaric chamber on the island for dive emergencies.

### ***Medical Training***

With the exception of the medics assigned to 525th MP Detention BN, the rotational units, National Guard, and reserve units provide aid station staff. Many of these medics do not work in the medical field during

their civilian jobs and perform medical care only while deployed. It is therefore necessary to have a strong training program and validation system (including Department of Defense instructions 1322.24<sup>6</sup> and 6040.47<sup>7</sup>) in place to ensure medical information passed to the providers is correct and relevant. Because of their lack of experience, many of these soldiers are eager to engage in quality medical training.

### ***Volunteer Opportunities***

Many service members deployed to Guantanamo participate in volunteer activities, including “Safe Ride GTMO,” “liberty” activities (Navy MWR equivalent), and beach clean-up, just to name a few. Many of the participants volunteer extensive time, contributing significantly to the health and welfare of service members, contractors, and families and are eligible for the Military Outstanding Volunteer Service Medal.

## **Lessons Learned**

Due to the number of orthopedic injuries related to MWR sporting activities, a strong understanding of orthopedics is imperative. A PA with experience doing joint, bursa, and trigger joint injections is essential to providing care at this remote site. Having a physical therapist available is a valuable resource, but these providers are available only part time because they also provide treatment at the camps.

## **Tips for Success**

Due to limited storage, it is recommended all assigned personnel bring essentials only. Limited organizational clothing and individual equipment is required at this site. There is also a limited availability of uniform items through the Naval Exchange, so picking up additional boots, uniforms, and essential military clothing is best done prior to arrival. In addition to military clothing, a supply of fitness clothing, as well as shorts and other lightweight clothing, is recommended. The 525th MP Detention BN providers are each assigned a vehicle for transportation during their time here. Soldiers cannot ship their vehicles to this location but can purchase a vehicle at Guantanamo; however, these vehicles often have mechanical problems and cannot be shipped off the island.

## Conclusion

Guantanamo Bay Naval Base provides a unique opportunity for a PA to practice rural style medicine on a diverse, older population of patients. In this assignment, PAs will be able to enhance history-taking and physical examination skills while decreasing reliance on advanced imaging. Outside of medicine, there are numerous opportunities for personal education and development, as well as a plethora of activities for relaxation.

## References

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## **Facebook Pages**

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