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News Release

University President Visits Alumni in Combat Zone

Bethesda, MD---Charles L. Rice, M.D., is probably the only health sciences university leader in the U.S. to hold an alumni reunion in an active combat zone.

Dr. Rice, who is President of the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences (USU), spent the past week visiting the school's alumni in Afghanistan, as well as those in Germany stationed at Ramstein Air Base and Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, who are providing care to servicemen and women.

USU, located in Bethesda, Maryland, on the grounds of the National Naval Medical Center, educates health care professionals dedicated to career service in the Department of Defense and the United States Public Health Service. Students are active-duty uniformed officers in the Army, Navy, Air Force and Public Health Service who are being educated to deal with wartime casualties, disasters, emerging infectious diseases, and other public health emergencies. The university's curriculum incorporates real-life lessons learned from Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan and other parts of the world so that students are better prepared to care for patients as uniformed physicians, nurses and scientists.

Dr. Rice, who was accompanied on the trip by U.S. Air Force Brig. Gen. (Dr.) Byron C. Hepburn, a 1987 graduate of the university and the command surgeon for the U.S. Air Mobility Command, toured U.S. medical facilities throughout Afghanistan, and visited an Afghan provincial hospital at Charikar to discuss local needs and how the university could best provide assistance. He also handed out university sweatshirts to graduates, including two alumni from USU's Graduate School of Nursing, and used the opportunity to recruit prospective students from among U.S. military personnel.

"I am deeply moved by the dedication of our troops and especially proud of the service of USU alumni in-theater," said Dr. Rice. "It is extraordinary to witness the courage and commitment of these men and women as they use the skills and knowledge they have accumulated to care for those in harm's way."

While in Bagram, Dr. Rice was able to visit a number of the patients, both U.S. and Afghani, who have been treated by USU alumni, including a 3-year-old girl who almost lost her life from injuries suffered during a bomb blast while allegedly being used as a human shield by Taliban members. Four graduates at the Craig Joint Theater Hospital there - Col Gary Arishita ('86), LtCol Randy McCafferty ('93), Maj. Chetan Kharod ('96), and Maj. Charles Reilly ('97) -- were responsible for performing the lifesaving surgery.

“Our alumni and their colleagues in the medical facilities in Afghanistan are working not only to care for our troops but also to improve the lives of the Afghani people,” Rice said. “It is also a great privilege to visit USU alumni and hear their stories; they are an inspiration to me as a physician and an educator.”

Of the university’s more than 4,000 physician alumni, the vast majority serve on active duty and are supporting operations in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere, offering their leadership and expertise. Currently, approximately 30 percent of the physicians assigned to the 86th Combat Support Hospital in Baghdad are graduates of USU, including the unit’s deputy commander, Col. (Dr.) John Rowe (’88).

USU’s unique mission and its graduates have become the focus of an upcoming feature film, “Fighting for Life,” produced by Academy Award-winning filmmaker, Terry Sanders. The film is scheduled for release in early spring 2008.