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For Immediate Release:

Field exercises prepare students to practice healthcare in complex, dangerous situations

Bethesda, Md. – First- and fourth-year medical students from the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences (USU), along with students from the university's Graduate School of Nursing, deployed this week to take part in "Operation Kerkesner" and "Operation Bushmaster." These annual field training exercises are part of USU's unique curriculum, which provides students with simulated "real-world" experience providing medical care in support of war-fighting, peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance operations.

The exercises will take place at Fort Indiantown Gap, Pa., July 14-23, 2009.

Operation Kerkesner prepares first-year medical students with the skills and training needed to operate in a hostile field environment. "This field-training exercise is more than an acclimation and training process to orient the students of USU to life in the field; it is a transformation process," said Air Force Major (Dr.) Glenn Burns, who leads the Kerkesner exercise. "This is an educational event which will continue to teach the students long after they return home. The goal is to allow an inexperienced new officer to become part of a disciplined team, and to take an experienced officer and challenge him or her in ways they did not know were possible."

Operation Bushmaster is best described as a large, complex, evaluated practical laboratory exercise in a simulated combat field environment. "It is different from most field exercises in that the students are graded as part of their academic curriculum," said Charles Beadling, MD, Col (ret), USAF, an assistant professor and director, Center for Disaster and Humanitarian Assistance Medicine in the Department of Military and Emergency Medicine at USU.

"We take advantage of the experienced faculty and 'teachable moments' with the students to instruct, but there is a major emphasis on assessing their knowledge, skills and attitudes as military officers," said Dr. Beadling. "The magnitude and complexity of the activity are also unique. We have more than 180 students, including USU and foreign medical students, along with Graduate School of Nursing students. More than 100 officer faculty, enlisted staff and civilians will provide the training, evaluation and support for the operation."

The exercises include all aspects of military field training, including establishing field medical camps, operationalizing combat care tactics and techniques, identifying and supporting medical evacuation, and managing the limitations of medical care in flight. In the field, students treat patients while simultaneously organizing movement of their facility, performing triage, evacuation and managing mass casualty situations during the day and night.

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The Bushmaster exercise is the capstone of the USU curriculum, merging classroom knowledge and battlefield training to treat combat trauma patients suffering from wounds like those caused by improvised explosive devices. “For nearly 30 years, USU has been charged with preparing graduates for the realities of war and disasters,” said Dr. Charles Rice, president of the USU. “There has never been a more critical need. Our students leave us knowing that when the time comes, they will be ready. The graduates know that the men and women who sacrifice so much for our nation deserve the best possible care.”

The field exercises prepare students for natural or man-made disasters, help them develop cultural sensitivities, and enhance their capacity to practice field preventive medicine in mitigating the threat of water, food-borne and insect-transmitted illnesses. They also test the knowledge and understanding of permissible rules of engagement.

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About the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences

Located on the grounds of Bethesda's National Naval Medical Center and across from the National Institutes of Health, USU is the nation's federal school of medicine and graduate school of nursing. The university educates health care professionals dedicated to career service in the Department of Defense and the U.S. 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, natural disasters, emerging infectious diseases, and other public health emergencies. Of the university's nearly 4,400 physician alumni and more than 400 advance practice nurses, the vast majority serve on active duty and are supporting operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, offering their leadership and expertise. The University also has graduated more than 600 public health professionals.

Note to media:

Media representatives are invited to experience these exercises, so long as prior arrangements have been made and confirmed. These activities take place on an active National Guard Training Facility. Contact Ken Frager, kenneth.frager.ctr@usuhs.mil or 240-281-2738 for details.