

Local Hero

Baton Rouge Doc on 3rd Tour in Afghanistan

by: Karen Stass



He'd deny the title, but there's little doubt in the mind of anyone that has met Dr. Chris Mandry, a local doctor whose self-professed need for excitement and challenges has led him into some tough spots. When we first spoke with him he was making last minute preparations for his third deployment to Afghanistan as a Lieutenant Colonel with Second Battalion, 20th Special Forces Group, an Army National Guard unit out of Jackson, Mississippi. Soon after his unit's deployment, the level of violence in Afghanistan intensified. In a recent update from the front, Mandry indicated that the missions are tougher than anticipated with more losses. It's not the news anyone wants to hear, but we're certain for Mandry and his unit that only hardens their resolve.

Prior to joining Special Forces, Mandry served in the Louisiana National Guard for a few years and in the Inactive Ready Reserve for several years. He is also a Lieutenant with the Special Operations Division of the New Orleans Police Department, a tactical unit with

whom he performed rescues in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. His day job is Chief of Emergency Services at Earle K. Long Medical Center where he founded the LSU Emergency Medicine Residency Program. And, as if that was not enough, he also owns C&M Medical Services, an emergency medicine physicians group, which provides emergency room staffing at private hospitals,

including Lane Regional Medical Center and St. Elizabeth Hospital. You might also remember that Dr. Mandry was featured in our post-Gustav coverage (HJBR Nov/Dec 2008) for setting up a feeding station providing hot meals to EKL staff when the hospital lost power. "But I don't play golf or tennis," Mandry joked. "If I tried to do those things as well, I wouldn't be married!"

Although he lives and works in Baton Rouge, Mandry was born and raised in New Orleans and completed his emergency medical training at Bogalusa Community College. In 1986 he came to Earle K. Long for additional training in internal medicine and stayed on to start the Emergency Medicine Residency Program in 1992. The three-year program has since graduated approximately 170 physicians, about half of whom have stayed in Louisiana to practice. A fact that makes Mandry very happy. "We're really proud to be helping the physician manpower situation in Louisiana, especially in emergency medicine."

Mandry's desire to serve his community and country is clear, but he is not alone in that commitment. In fact, he said, there are a large number of medical professionals in the Baton Rouge area, some of whom he works with, that have deployed with reserve units to the Middle East, generally spending three-month terms at combat support hospitals there. But Mandry does not deploy with a medical unit and his skills as a physician, which are important, are far from his only role overseas. Instead, as a member of Special Forces, Mandry serves one year tours at forward bases

around Afghanistan where the Afghan troops far outnumber the Americans. And while he carries the title of Battalion Surgeon and is considered a "doc" by his comrades, he also participates in a lot of the other aspects of Special Forces deployment, from combat operations to winning hearts and minds. When asked why he would choose that route, Mandry said it's just the kind of work he prefers, combining all the different aspects of service. "We work with the locals and try to win hearts and minds. We work in smaller groups and have a bigger impact. I think." Mandry's units involved in what they call Foreign Internal Defense or FID missions, where they work with the host nation forces as advisors, helping to hone their military skills. They also perform non-kinetic operations, which involve improving the welfare of the people through building deep water wells, providing generators, vaccinating herds, vaccinating the people, carrying out medical missions, providing dental care, etc. "It's the one place where you can combine everything I like to do—the soldiering aspect with combat operations—as well as doing good things for the villages," said Mandry. "We're acting as advisors and in Afghanistan it's important that everything has an Afghan face to it, both for the kinetic operations, combat operations, patrols, and the non-kinetic, winning hearts and minds, doing medical or civilian types of work."

Because of the war on terrorism, Mandry's units on a three-year cycle, deploying to Afghanistan in 2003, again in 2006, and now in 2009, each time for a full

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year. Yet, said Mandry, everyone at LSU, Ear K. Long, the faculty, and residents have been very supportive. “I think people realize the importance of the global war on terrorism and they’re extremely supportive.” Mandry said the faculty at EKL is doubly supportive because there are actually two members in Special Forces units. Dr. Dan Godby is in Third Battalion, 20th Special Forces Group and also deploys for a year at a time, but as luck would have it, has never deployed at the same time. “Where I’m going now, when I come out, he will go on,” said Mandry. “So for Ear K. Long and the Emergency Medicine faculty it’s a double whammy, but they are just superbly supportive.” Mandry said that just with his program there is an Emergency Medicine resident that is a SEAL and another that serves in the Navy Reserve. “I think the people who have an emergency medicine personality, that like that uncontrolled, chaotic environment with exciting patients coming in, and being challenged,” explained Mandry, “I think that’s the type of person who likes the military and likes to do interesting things in the military like Special Forces and the SEALs.” Mandry said he has really enjoyed Special Forces. “It encompasses everything—so dering skills, humanitarian aid—everything is interesting.”

from what he can do for an individual, said Mandry, keeping a child burned by the makeshift cooking apparatus the villagers use. “That doesn’t equate to ‘mission success’ necessarily, but on a personal satisfaction level, feels broken down into personal interactions, helping make a difference in their lives,” said Mandry. “On the 30,000 foot level, the strategic level of the global war on terrorism, the satisfaction is different; it’s being able to participate in the big mission, fighting the extremists, playing a part in that,” he said. “Here in America we have a great, great life, so many freedoms, so many opportunities that we kind of take for granted. When you get over there you see a large population that is basically without electricity, without sanitation service, without clean water, it’s very primitive. It makes you aware and gives you tremendous appreciation of what we have.” Prior to his experiences overseas, Mandry said he was a typical guy taking full advantage of what America had to offer without really understanding that what we enjoy is here because of what people have done before us. “It’s very special, precious, and not shared by a lot of the world’s population. It’s given me an appreciation of what it means to be to be an American.”

There is obviously great satisfaction in serving your country and doing good works, but anyone who has ever deployed

knows that it’s not a ways easy to keep your spirits up, to avoid crushing homesickness. Mandry admits that the hardest part of deployment is the downtime, when you have a chance to miss home and your regular life. For some, letters from home, care packages, the occasional phone call are bittersweet pick-me-ups. But Mandry goes a little further. Inside his helmet he keeps a photo of a man falling from the World Trade Center on 9/11. “I kept it inside my helmet and I carried it there in 2003 and 2006. It’s pretty torn and stained and scratched, but I’ve got it there and if I start feeling sorry for myself, I take my helmet off, look inside, and look at that poor guy and I say, ‘You know what? I’m really having a great day.’ That’s my little trick.”

We asked Mandry what it felt like to be called a hero. “I’m appreciative of that, but none of us are heroes. We are fortunate enough to be healthy, to have the opportunity and the support to be able to go over there and do what’s right.” He quoted Luke 12:48 “To whom much is given, much is required” to explain his motivation. “Just the fact that I had the advantage of education, undergraduate education, medical education, residency training, it puts me in a position where I can do

things, touch so much.” Mandry also wants to ensure we pass on to the next generation on a stable America, where we are free to go about our business, able to work hard and get an education, to explore opportunities. Quoting Thomas Paine he said, “If there must be trouble, let it be in my day, that my child may have peace.” That goes with my philosophy that we enjoy so much, so much is given to us, and we have a responsibility to see that it goes to the next generation. As far as the hero thing, I’m not a hero, I just show up.” ❖