

Balboa naval hospital scuttles plans to treat badly injured troops

by Steve Liewer

SAN DIEGO - San Diego Naval Medical Center is backing off of plans to treat the most severely wounded combat veterans even as it ramps up its outpatient and rehabilitation services, hospital officials said Monday.

When they launched the Comprehensive Combat Casualty Care Center (C5) program last summer, the hospital's leaders called their facility a "West Coast Walter Reed" that was prepared to take on badly injured Marines, sailors and soldiers almost directly from the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan.

WOUNDED - "It was a lot more than I expected," said Seaman Marc Hoffmaster, 19, about his room at the San Diego Medical Center. "My mom really likes it." Journalists were given a tour of the outpatient facility. CNS Photo by Peggy Peattie.

But those plans never materialized for the facility, also known as Balboa naval hospital. Its commanders have decided to continue handling patients whose life-threatening wounds already have been treated at one of the military's two flagship hospitals on the East Coast, said Jennifer Town, the new C5 director.

"Our focus has been mostly in rebuilding their lives at this stage of the game," she said.

It's likely that the huge cost of treating badly wounded troops made Balboa officials hesitant to start taking in acute-care patients, said Dr. Eric McDonald, a former Navy captain and Balboa doctor who retired this month as chief surgeon for the Camp Pendleton-based 1st Marine Expeditionary Force.

"They may not have realized what kind of commitment they were talking about," McDonald said.

He and other health experts have said Balboa is struggling under the burden of treating wounded troops even as it sends some of its medical staff on combat tours and humanitarian missions. The hospital's officials have not responded to queries submitted Thursday by The San Diego Union-Tribune about the size of their staff and budget.

They instead allowed journalists to visit Building 26, the bachelor enlisted quarters of wounded troops. They scheduled the event after a flurry of media requests following the recent scandal over the care of outpatients at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington.

Standing near a big-screen TV in the barracks' basement lounge, Balboa commander Rear Adm. Christine Hunter said the quarters used to be the main hospital building until its replacement opened in 1988.

In the past three years, she said, an entire floor has been turned into 32 two-bedroom suites that each share a bathroom and kitchenette. Four single-room suites are customized for the disabled, and eight others are under construction.

Fifty-two Balboa outpatients are living in the building, Hunter said. The facility also has a gym, pool room, laundry rooms, TV lounges and post offices. A medic - or corpsman, in Navy parlance - is in the building at all times, as are Navy and Marine Corps supervisors.

Command Master Chief John Boldin, the hospital's senior enlisted sailor, said civilian workers clean lounges and hallways while physically able patients tidy up their own rooms, which are subject to regular inspection.

Seaman Marc Hoffmaster, 19, of Denver broke his ankle while on duty in November aboard the amphibious assault ship Peleliu. His doctors soon discovered he had a rare heart condition that required surgery. He's lived in the hospital barracks ever since.

His room is spare and neat, with a TV set, a walk-in closet and a colorful picture on the wall. A fuzzy blanket of red, white and blue lends a touch of home.

"It was a lot more than what I expected," Hoffmaster said. "My mom really likes it."

The suites lack telephone or Internet connections, but Boldin said, those are available in lounges and will soon be installed in the rooms. The kitchenettes have microwaves.

Golf carts can take the wounded around Balboa's sprawling campus, and a staff of sailors helps with off-base trips.

In a new basement office, service members leaving the military can get advice from the Veterans Administration and state labor counselors on the transition to civilian life.

On the medical side, the hospital has added a full-time physical therapist, a prosthetist for amputees and a Navy Paralympian to coach wounded troops as "warrior-athletes." Balboa officials expect to finish construction on a new ward for physical and occupational therapy in July.

Nearly four years after the invasion of Iraq, many of the improvements have been slow in coming, McDonald said.

He added that Balboa has escaped the worst of the troubles plaguing Walter Reed because its outpatient cases are far fewer and less complex than the ones at the Army facility. McDonald said Balboa has greatly improved its combat care in the past two years but still needs to boost its treatment of troops with brain injuries and post-traumatic stress disorder.

The Balboa facility also is adding patient-care case managers. Town said she has two on staff to handle about 90 cases, but that a third has been hired.

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