

Operation Restoration finds prosthetics for Iraqi civilians

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MINNEAPOLIS

One day last year, while driving a Humvee along the dusty roads of Baghdad's Green Zone, Capt. Steve Lindsley spotted two young Iraqi men, both amputees and tottering on makeshift crutches.

And so, Lindsley found the first two patients for Operation Restoration, his makeshift prosthetics clinic for Iraqi civilians funded in part by Plymouth, Minn.-based Otto Bock HealthCare.

Ali, 14, had lost his right leg above the knee in a hit-and-run traffic accident seven years earlier. And Taleb, 20, was a child when his leg was amputated below the knee, because of complications from a cancerous tumor. Neither had ever received proper prosthetic care.

Lindsley, of Monroe, La., was deployed to Iraq as a logistics officer with the Mississippi Army National Guard's 112th Military Police Battalion. But his civilian job as clinical manager at the prosthetics and orthotics clinic at Mississippi Methodist Rehabilitation Center was never far from his mind.

"While in the Green Zone, I started seeing Iraqis walking around; some of them didn't have limbs. That was where I decided that I needed to try to help," he said.

So Lindsley and his friend, Sgt. Chris Cummings, set up a free clinic in the huge basement kitchen of one of Saddam Hussein's palaces. "The palace has been bombed and wasn't in very good condition, the lighting was poor, the electrical substandard," Lindsley recalled. "We made do."

With space considerations out of the way, Lindsley and Cummings set about supplying the clinic. Otto Bock immediately came to mind, since Lindsley had a previous relationship with the company for his civilian job. Otto Bock employs 340 at its U.S. headquarters in Plymouth, though its privately held parent company is based in Duderstadt, Germany.

The decision to donate products to Operation Restoration was an easy one, said Sara Hakanson, Otto Bock's director of marketing. "We were really touched by (Lindsley's) personal initiative. This was about a guy who wanted to make a difference."

Initially, conditions at the clinic were rough. Lindsley recalls using a pizza oven to mold plastic for test sockets for prosthetics and orthotic braces. He used a disarmed 81-millimeter mortar tube for riveting straps and parts onto limbs he built.

"At first, we had skepticism from the military and from others as to whether we could pull this off," he said. "But the patients were very believing. They think America can do anything."

Lindsley said he would work at the clinic after completing his "day job" as a logistics officer, which meant volunteering a lot of nights and off-hours. He said many others stationed in Baghdad offered their free time, as well.

As of earlier this month, the clinic had treated 76 Iraqi civilians, less than a quarter of them injured in the current conflict, Lindsley said. Several were injured during the bloody Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s and had never received proper care during Saddam's reign, he said.

Lindsley has returned home after serving 14 months. Cummings, from the 478th Civil Affairs Battalion, has taken over the clinic's operations.

And what about the clinic's first patients, Ali and Taleb? Taleb was able to walk down the aisle at his wedding.

And, after spending a few hours instructing Ali how to walk with his new limb, Lindsley drove him back to a checkpoint and dropped him off. Ali headed off, walking two miles home. Lindsley said he watched for a bit and, when he turned around, he discovered Ali's crutch propped against the Humvee.

"I guess he didn't need it anymore," he said.