Hi again family and friends!

I sincerely hope this finds you all knee deep in snow and Christmas cookies! :) We are most certainly being showered with love here from all around the world. To those of you who have sent me packages, I truly thank you from the bottom of my heart. There's a girl here who has a reputation for being "most popular" for the amount of mail she receives. She leaves in a month and everyone tells me I may take her place. Not my goal, but apparently some of you are certainly helping me along! I am sending out individual thank you notes, but from what I understand, these take a very long time to get from here to there. My apologies!

Thankfully, right now we have been enjoying a somewhat slow time here at the hospital. We are always thankful for these moments, because for the past two weeks, we've been running our little butts off. To give you an idea of what we do and see here, I will tell you as much information as I'm allowed about the patient census. As far as Marines, we've had only one battle injury and he was essentially unscathed except for shrapnel all over one of his arms. The rest of our patients have been on the "village" side of the ward aka all Afghans. These patients range from babies to in their 80s. Unfortunately, we do not ever know their true ages and neither do they. The Afghan calendar is completely different from ours. They have typically been burnt, in car accidents (somehow the Afghani population here is aware of our facility and calls our ER for things...), and if they are somehow involved or caught in battle. We often take care of the wives and children of the Taliban. This is neither confirmed or denied by anyone official and often the stories are multifaceted. For example, we often assume if our female patient was shot when Marines came to her home to find her husband and her husband fled at the scene- her husband PROBABLY isn't the friendliest of characters. Or when two small boys come into the hospital without anyone because their father left them after he shot at Americans and ran from the car...or when a group of children were playing in a field that is often patrolled by the Marines and an IED killed all but one of them, that one survivor comes to us. These are difficult situations to be apart of and it reminds us every day to be thankful for the America we know and love - and for the people who defend what we have. Some of you may be asking why we take these patients - and often,
we question the same. But, this week we got to see how we are a part of the bigger picture. The uncle of our patient who is here with his 2 year old nephew who we have been treating for weeks here in the hospital, has agreed to help the Marines identify IEDs in his village, one considered to be highly dangerous. One step at a time as we all say...

Recently, one particular situation touched my heart in a unique way. For about a week and a half, the hospital helped an entire nomad family after their tent was set on fire and all of them became engulfed in flames inside. There were four children plus mother and father. Three of the children were burnt with less than 20% and the fourth was in critical condition at 30% body surface area burned. The father was completely okay and the mother just had facial areas affected. It was an extremely emotional and difficult time for them as well as the staff here. This family, all jokes aside should have been on the cover of National Geographic. Their smell, their outfits, their hair, their tribal tattoos and designs, their manners. It was unbelievable. They were needy, they were in pain, they had an intense body odor, we were all very ready for them to leave when one morning, the intensive care doctor came to get the translator so she could tell the family that the one son was going to die within the next few minutes. We had done everything we could, but he wouldn't make it. We watched as this family began to fall apart. With only a minute left for this child, (cardiac tamponade + a mirage of other things for you nurses out there) I carried his sister, the LPN working with me carried the baby, and we wheeled in the other brother to all see him. There was screaming and yelling and tears and chants to Allah...I walked out of the room in a trance and broke down a little later. No matter how different, how frustrating, how uniquely challenging this family was - the thing is that humans are humans. Pain is pain. Death is death from one culture to another. God's timing is impeccable. Just when I was thinking these people had not a single trait in common with the average American, I was humbled to see we are all His children. And we suffer the same.

One last more solemn segment, and I swear I'm going to pick up the tone of this e-mail. About a week and a half ago, I went to my first ramp ceremony. For those of you who don't know what it is or use different terminology - it's a time when members from a unit (or in this case hospital staff) honor the death of a service member as he/she is prepared for flight from the battle area with a final salute. A Marine was brought here to Camp Dwyer and we were unable to save him. All of the staff from the hospital lined up in two lines facing one another. As the service member was carried away, everyone salutes as the body is placed into the aircraft/military ambulance. This was a humbling and emotional ceremony that truly reminds us all of the reason we are here, the reason we wake up and (try to) never complain about our circumstances. Because there are heroes among us. I ask that you pray for the families of service members as they go through the stress of the unknown on a daily basis.

Lastly, I must say - we take all of these situations in stride and continue strongly because our job is not done. We are getting into the Christmas spirit listening to holiday tunes, icing cookies, having chili nights, hopefully winning the decorating contest and gingerbread house making contest, eating more candy and cookies than ever before in my life.... We will have a midnight service on Christmas Eve as well as a special service on Christmas Day. A group of us are going caroling with the wounded warriors here at Camp Dwyer which should prove to be quite fun. New Year's looks to be like one big party (minus the alcoholic beverages + sparkling juice/cider) We try to share all that we receive and save special goodies for fun occasions. Care
packages mean so much as we scavenge to provide birthday parties for our friends, items to decorate our gingerbread houses, etc. It pays to be resourceful here! :)

So yet again, I believe I have outdone myself with the length of this crazy thing, but hey - you can't say I never told you anything! In closing, I will include my little,

"You know you work in an Army CSH (combat support hospital) in Afghanistan when..."

1. The Marine patients say "It's been fun being here with ya Ma'am, but I hope I never see you again" and truly mean it because if they're back, they're hurt.
2. You start using Pashtu, the only Afghan language you can somewhat speak, only to learn your patient speaks Dari, a completely different language.
3. You have said to your patient not to spit on the floor more than six times in the first hour you're at work.
4. The Afghan father of an 8 year old girl with a tumor the size of a person's head on her knee who will die within the next 6 months states, "I do not want to go to the Mayo Clinic in America because if you amputate my daughter's leg, she will never get married." Wait, mister - so you're trying to say it's more important for your daughter to find a husband than to live longer than six months?
5. Each time you admit a patient and ask their name, you think you're in Aladdin and are looking around the room for the Genie because all of their names sound like a list of the characters.
6. You post "name alert" signs because three of your patients are named "Mohammed."

Things I will never take for granted:
1. SNOW at Christmas
2. The smell of a real Christmas tree and the option to have one!
3. Having a kitchen to cook what I want...and to BAKE at Christmas!

I love all of you and can't say enough how thankful I am for your thoughtfulness through packages, emails, messages, wall posts, letters, and love. I'll say it every e-mail because I don't know how I could ever truly show you how blessed it feels to have the support of so many.

Merry Merry Christmas to all of you! Bunches and bunches of love from Afghanistan!
Kristie/Kristina/KP

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So long now from Piney River,

Paul Saunders