

Tahoe doc puts skills to work at Army hospital in Afghanistan

By Rebecca Wass

Kyle Swanson, orthopedic surgeon for Barton Health's Tahoe Orthopedics & Sports Medicine, has seen and dealt with medical and hospital conditions that few people, let alone doctors, have experienced. He has operated in gated and guarded hospitals, in places far from home and treated patients with injuries, deformities and disease – many of his colleagues could hardly imagine.

Deployed to Afghanistan in 2005, just after completing the San Francisco Orthopedic Residency Program at St. Mary's Medical Center, Swanson spent six months at Bagram Air Base. There he treated Afghan civilians, army, national police and U.S. military personnel.

"When it's an American soldier, the intensity level increases dramatically," he said. "So our goal is to stabilize them and get them out of there and transfer them out as quickly as possible ... most were transported to Landstuhl, Germany, from both the Iraq and Afghanistan theaters."

Swanson recalls when they had 10 critical patients at once and he had treated an Afghan general that was injured in crossfire with the Taliban.



Kyle Swanson will be on a panel at Lake Tahoe Community College on Sept. 11 at 2:45pm. This community commemoration of 9/11 begins at 2pm.

“We donate our time and technology when we cross seas and as these patients had very little money, the general felt like he should pay me in some way, so he gave me an Afghan rug that was in his family for generations ...,” he said.

They never turned anybody away.

“It didn’t matter who they were,” Swanson said. “It was very gratifying because the local civilians just loved that we were there. They were receiving treatment that was not available to them. The medical care in their major cities is probably about 100 years behind.”

Besides providing emergency treatment, Swanson and a fellow orthopedic surgeon held a civilian clinic twice a week where they took care of all kinds of orthopedic conditions.

“These are people who have never had health care their whole lives, so you would see things you never saw in the United

States for the most part," he said. "A lot of limb deformities and infections.

"Many of the injuries we saw were from landmines. When the Russians pulled out of Afghanistan they left "one land mind behind for every man, woman and child," he said. "There are approximately 25 million land mines in Afghanistan today."

Along with medical care, the Army provided everything from education to nutritional food to toys.

"A lot of the military families would send toys over to the kids," Swanson said. "It was great to see the smiles on their faces. It makes you feel really privileged to live in this country."



Lake Tahoe doctor Kyle Swanson spent time in Afghanistan with the U.S. Army.

Photo/Provided

"I went right after my residency and its something you literally get thrown into. Initially it's very overwhelming and nothing can prepare you for the injuries you see. You have to rely on your training and apply it."

Swanson believes his experience in Afghanistan made him a better surgeon.

“Going overseas and treating people in underserved areas reaffirms the reasons one goes into medicine. I hope to be able to volunteer my services again sometime in the future since my experience was so rewarding both personally and professionally. “

Rebecca Wass is the communications specialist for Barton Health.