

## SPECIAL FEATURE

## Royal Navy Dental Deployment to the Pitcairn Islands February 2022 Military Assistance to Civilian Authority

By Surgeon Lieutenant Karolyn John, Poole, UK



Thinking back to my time as a student at King's College London Dental Institute, there are many reasons why I decided to pursue a dental career in the Royal Navy (RN). The thought of being able to combine such a challenging yet rewarding profession with the adventure and excitement of life in the Armed Forces was extremely appealing and I couldn't wait to graduate and start.

Whilst life as a RN Dental Officer mainly consists of UK-based shore assignments in busy single- and multi-chair clinics, there are ample opportunities to deploy overseas, either onboard warships in the middle of the ocean, or to remote communities to provide humanitarian and medical aid. My first solo deployment came soon after completing my

Officer Training at Britannia Royal Naval College and I was sent to join a Type 45 Destroyer in the Mediterranean to provide a mixture of emergency and routine dentistry to the ship's 190-person crew. There is nothing quite like performing an emergency extirpation in the middle of a sea state 5 to instantly fine-tune your manual dexterity. After my experience on HMS DEFENDER, I couldn't wait to receive another opportunity to deploy and eagerly anticipated receiving the call from my career manager. COVID-19 temporarily curtailed things but it was worth the wait as I received an assignment order for the 'deployment of a lifetime' as my career manager put it. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) requested dental support be sent to Pitcairn Island

in the South Pacific to provide emergency dental care to the remote island group's inhabitants.

Pitcairn Island is home to the descendants of the mutineers from HMS BOUNTY, a well-known story to any RN service person. In 1789 upon her return from Tahiti harvesting breadfruit, HMS BOUNTY was seized by her disaffected crew led by Fletcher Christian. Taken by the charms and beauty of the South Pacific and Tahitian women, the crew did not want to return to Britain and decided to cast adrift the Ship's captain Lieutenant William Bligh RN leaving him for dead, and settled on Pitcairn Island, essentially living out their days as fugitive pirates.

Today, the island is home to around 50 inhabitants, most of whom are direct descendants of BOUNTY's rebellious crew. The island is a UK overseas territory, so when the request for dental support was made, it was a clear duty of the RN Dental Service to fulfil this tasking. The island's inhabitants are a 14-day sail away from New Zealand and civilian transport to the mainland has been reduced due to the global pandemic, leaving many residents unable to access dental care in almost three years.

Within 48 hours of receiving my assignment order and several COVID tests, I was at Heathrow airport waiting to rendezvous with a RN Dental Nurse, Michaela Davies. Due to the short-notice nature of the tasking, we were unable to prepare a Portable Dental Unit (PDU). Additionally, we had been briefed that the Island's medical centre has its own dental surgery – whilst somewhat outdated, we were told that everything was in working order. I packed a kit bag containing essentials such as forceps, temporary materials, hand-pieces and burs and we made the 24-hour journey to Tahiti to meet with HMS SPEY, the RN Offshore Patrol Vessel (OPV) that would be delivering us to the island. Despite strict distancing rules, we were warmly greeted by the ship's captain and medical officer and ►►



« shown to our cabins where we would be isolating for the next 72 hours to mitigate the risk of cross-infection should we have been unfortunate enough to have caught COVID on our journey.

Tired and eager to rest after a long journey and starting to feel the effects of the dreaded jet-lag, I was quickly made alert by hearing the captain's voice over the tannoy, announcing that HMS SPEY had been ordered to sail to Tonga to provide humanitarian and medical aid in the aftermath of the devastating tsunami that had hit a few days previously. Our Pitcairn tasking was swiftly moved back and we set sail on the seven-day voyage to Tonga. The captain decided to retain his newly embarked dental team to support the Ship's small crew and help deliver emergency medical aid. HMS SPEY received international recognition for her efforts in delivering aid to the people of Tonga and it was a privilege to be able to play a small part in this.

Approximately three weeks after leaving the UK, the ship arrived at Pitcairn. We electively isolated for the seven days running

up to our arrival to again mitigate any risk of cross-infection and passing COVID to this remote island community, who at this point were not fully vaccinated. Isolating together in a 2 m x 3 m cabin for seven days with no access to any entertainment materials or internet had its challenges but after three years of global COVID restrictions, Michaela and I felt well prepared for the mental stamina required and kept ourselves occupied – and dare I say, sane – by discussing our clinical plan of action upon our arrival on the island.

We were informed that we would have four days to complete all required treatments. With this in mind, we organised our clinical diary to run from 7 am through to 7 pm. It was paramount for us to deliver as much dental care as possible and to utilise the time we had on the island. We were taxied to and from the island every day at 06:30 hours and 19:30 hours by the Ship's powerboats, which at times could be a little bumpy and therefore daunting in shark-infested waters. While there were doubts as to whether the required treatment goals could be achieved



in the allocated timeframe, my nurse and I completed all the necessary dental work to the same exacting standards expected by the RN. In addition to the pre-reported pain cases, we managed to conduct check-ups for over 75% of the island's inhabitants and also completed all treatment needs identified. These included simple hygiene treatments and advice, denture care advice, complex restorative treatments and surgical extractions. The island's remote location limits their access to routine dental care and periodic preventative interventions. Michaela and I seized the opportunity to conduct dental emergencies teaching with the island's medical team which consists of a visiting New Zealand GP and the island's resident nurse who is herself a descendant of the Bounty mutineers. We have remained in contact with them to advise on any acute dental issues that have arisen since our departure.

The islanders were highly delighted with the visit and requested follow-up visits if possible. There was also a request to advise on the modernisation of the dental facility and the Royal Naval Dental Service remains in contact with the FCDO to provide support with this.

I would like to express my gratitude for the warm welcome we were given by all the islanders. Their friendliness and hospitality made our visit an unforgettable experience. I do hope that we can continue to support them as much as possible in the future.

We arrived home six weeks after setting off on our adventure and I reflect with an amazing sense of pride over what we achieved in such a short space of time. It will remain a highlight in my career as a dentist and most certainly was the deployment of a lifetime. ■

