



Friday, February 26, 2010

The reflections of a Philly-trained doc in Afghanistan

Commander John York in the **interventional radiology** laboratory wearing shorts. He was at the gym before rushing to the IR lab for an emergency case.

Several years ago it was easy to forget my friend John York was in the Navy. To me John was a father and husband, an excellent ultimate Frisbee player, a young doctor in advanced training at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital, a friend with two young children cheering me and my wife on as young parents ourselves, and a happy all-around good guy whose only flaw was being a Cowboy's fan.

After living in Philadelphia since 2001, John finished his fellowship at Jefferson in 2008 and the York family moved to Virginia. John was posted at the Navy base in Norfolk.

Last September came word that Commander John York would be deployed to a NATO medical unit in Kandahar, Afghanistan. On February 25 Commander York, an interventional radiologist, listed 21 lessons learned during the first 148 days of his deployment in a war zone.

John was half way through his stint in Afghanistan when he made his list. His thoughts are powerful insights about medicine and life. Each time I read them I get choked up. Here's the list:

- 1) **Interventional radiology**, a subspecialty that relies heavily on the latest and greatest technology, can work and excel in a tent operating room with a regular OR table and a C-arm. The ability to do cases while the patient is on the table undergoing a massive resuscitation attempt is vital, and incredibly exciting and rewarding.
- 2) Skype may be the world's best invention for people away from home. Even if the quality is lousy sometimes, the ability to see the kids and home is priceless.
- 3) Watching a non-beating heart in a severely injured soldier suddenly start beating, is both frightening (because I know what challenges lie ahead for him) and awe-inspiring.
- 4) Making the kids laugh on Skype by simply putting Curious George on my head and spinning around in my chair makes me happy.
- 5) What may be perceived as inappropriate laughter or comments in the setting of severe trauma helps keep us sane.
- 6) I like looking at the moon and stars, with the knowledge that the same moon and stars can be seen by my family.
- 7) I love working dogs.
- 8) I love pictures of our goofy Boxer, Lilly, sleeping the days away. That's one way to get through a deployment.
- 9) I love the picture of Ruth and the kids in the snow. Smiles of joy.

- 10) I'm not going to put down 148 lessons learned.
- 11) Injured kids make my heart hurt.
- 12) When the rocket attack alarm goes off, it's worth hitting the deck.
- 13) Nargis: An Urdu word that means daffodil. A name of a cyclone. A name of a Bollywood star. The brand of tissues that they put in our dining facilities to use as napkins. One wipe of anything slightly moist and they shred and do nothing remotely useful, therefore, we have taken to using the word "Nargis" as an epithet.
- 14) Curry with mango chutney is one of God's great creations!
- 15) Desserts named "Spotted Dick" should probably be avoided.
- 16) Courage: pre-positioning tourniquets on your legs before you go out on a mission with the expectation that you will hit an IED.
- 17) Watching a priest give last rites to a patient while we are trying to save his life is both disturbing and an acknowledgement of our limitations.
- 18) Plane watching on the flight line is a great way to pass the time.
- 19) Having a good roommate can make or break a deployment. I am lucky.
- 20) Having a strong support system can make or break a deployment. I am lucky.
- 21) I miss my family.

Here's the link to John's blog, *Stranger in a Strange Land: Thoughts and Musings of a Deployed Navy Doctor* ... <http://yorkdeployed.blogspot.com/>

Posted by Josh Goldstein @ 2:58 PM

About Josh Goldstein

Josh Goldstein is a health reporter who covers health care quality, patient safety, clinical care and hospitals. He has developed computer databases that have enabled him to do sophisticated analyses of health care trends and quality of delivery. Josh, 43, is a graduate of the University of Chicago. He currently lives in Philadelphia with his wife and two young daughters.

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