

UNMC ALUM LEADS AIR FORCE MEDICAL EFFORTS

by Chuck Brown



Lt. Gen. James Roudebush, M.D., Air Force surgeon general, chats with a wounded soldier returning from overseas at Andrews Air Force Base, Md.

GROWING UP IN GERING, NEB., LT. GEN. JAMES ROUDEBUSH, M.D., HAD THREE HEROES – HIS MOTHER, FATHER AND HIS FAMILY PHYSICIAN, JACOB KRIEG, M.D.

Dr. Krieg made house calls, many of them to the Roudebush residence to clean up the numerous cuts, bumps and bruises the adventurous Dr. Roudebush incurred because of his youthful exuberance.

“Dr. Krieg was really like a member of our family,” Dr. Roudebush said, “and he was an excellent example of what a family physician should be.”

Dr. Krieg’s influence motivated Dr. Roudebush toward a career in medicine. It’s a career path that began at UNMC in the 1970s and has led to his current position as Surgeon General of the Air Force.

Dr. Roudebush entered the UNMC College of Medicine in 1971 after earning a bachelor’s degree in pharmacy at the NU school of pharmacy, which was then in Lincoln.

During his four years at UNMC, Dr. Roudebush would receive what he called an incredibly well-rounded education that left him prepared to handle the military family medicine career he eventually would undertake.

“The strong didactic training and the hands-on training I received during clinical rotations, particularly in rural areas, set me up well for what followed,” Dr. Roudebush said.

He also recalls feeling fortunate to be around amazing UNMC professors and clinicians including Michael Sorrell, M.D., Mary Jo Henn, M.D., Edward Holyoke, M.D., Ph.D., and LeRoy Meyer, M.D.

“These people were setting the standards as far as medical education was concerned,” he said.

What followed was a military medicine career that was necessitated in part by a need to pay off mounting bills related to medical school. As he was entering his second-year at UNMC, Dr. Roudebush applied for and was accepted into one of the first cadres of the military’s Health Professions Scholarship Program.

He chose to enter the Air Force for two reasons: it offered one of the best family medicine fellowships around and he loved flying. He even had a private pilot’s license.

But his vision wasn’t good enough to enter flight school, so Dr. Roudebush started down the road toward a distinguished career in military medicine, although it didn’t seem at first that it would be all that long.

His first station was at F. E. Warren Air Force Base in Cheyenne, Wyo., which is about 100 miles from Dr. Roudebush’s native Gering.

“The way it set up, I figured I’d finish my training and my first tour, then hop on the road, head home and set up a practice,” Dr. Roudebush said.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the Panhandle, Dr. Roudebush fell in love with the Air Force and his role in the service. He loved working with the patients and their families.

“I found it extremely rewarding,” he said. “I still do.”

So instead of heading home, Dr. Roudebush stuck with the military which has allowed him to practice all over the globe, including Europe and the Middle East.

After working in several clinical settings, Dr. Roudebush moved into administrative posts and served as commander of various clinics, hospitals, medical centers and command areas before moving into his current position.

As surgeon general of the Air Force, Dr. Roudebush advises Air Force and Defense Department senior leaders on medical aspects of the air expeditionary force and the health of Air Force personnel.

Dr. Roudebush manages more than 43,100 people assigned to 75 medical facilities worldwide. Many of these medics play a critical role in the care of American service members wounded while fighting the war on terrorism.

“What I really do is make sure every Air Force medic can do their job,” he said. “I work to ensure they have the right training, resources, policies and support to carry out our mission.”

Last fall, Dr. Roudebush visited UNMC during activities related to Air Force Week in Omaha. The general was amazed at the progress that has occurred at his alma mater.

“I was very impressed,” he said. “The tradition of solid, high-quality education was certainly very evident and the university has progressed impressively with technology and research.

“I was delighted to come back and see that kind of progress. I still consider myself a Nebraskan and seeing what has happened at UNMC makes me very proud of my heritage.” ☺