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An Honorable CALLING

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By Cheryl Lock

For Justin D'Arienzo, Psy.D., clinical psychology isn't just a job — it's an adventure

It was probably about the time that he was being lowered via static line onto the deck of the Canadian frigate ship, the HMCS Regina, from 40 feet above that Justin D'Arienzo, Psy.D., ABPP, began to wonder why exactly he felt so obligated to join the Navy.

Or maybe it was even before that, when the clinical psychologist was working as the director of psychology services for the joint medical group of the joint task force at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba as the inmates took part in the longest hunger strike ever recorded in history at a prison.

Or maybe he never did second-guess. After all, he had specifically asked for both of those assignments.

A SACRIFICE FOR DUTY

"I joined the Navy out of a sense of duty as a result of 9/11, but also out of familial obligation," the doctor said. "I come from a long history of family military service, and I always thought it was something I was going to do. I was just waiting for the right time."

And so Dr. D'Arienzo was commissioned as lieutenant in the Navy after completing his doctorate degree at Nova Southeastern University in Florida, and would spend 20 months out of the next three years away from his family on deployment.

"My whole experience being away from my family for 20 months has really helped me appreciate all the time I spend with my children now, and just enjoying the simple things in life," he said. "Hearing my kids say my name or chasing them around the house, or even just being together as a family, you really come to cherish every moment, because I feel I've missed so much."

One of the things Dr. D'Arienzo ended up missing was the birth of his second child. "It usually takes psychologists one to two years to get licensed, but I was so motivated to fight in the war on terror that I found a state that would license me faster, and I got licensed six months after my internship and was quickly deployed to Cuba," he said. "I was very excited about the opportunity, but my wife was pregnant and gave birth five days after I arrived overseas. So that was definitely tough, but I believed in the mission and that got me through."

THE MISSION UNLIKE ANY OTHER

The mission that Dr. D'Arienzo chose to take on at Guantanamo Bay was working in two capacities — the first was assessing the psychological health of the detainees, and the second was running the behavior modification program at the prison. Both were equally straining.

"Like any prison setting, we had the same prevalence of psychiatric problems with the inmates there," he said. "So about 10 to 20 percent had psychiatric problems like depression, anxiety and suicidal behavior. They used me to evaluate these people and make recommendations for treatment."

To make a complicated situation even more difficult, even though most of the inmates spoke English (Dr. D'Arienzo said many were even educated in the United States Ivy League school system), they would pretend that they couldn't, and so interpreters had to be used.

"We had to use Arabic, French, Pashto and Urdu interpreters, and that made it more difficult to figure out whether someone was psychotic or not," he said.

It wasn't just the language that was a barrier though; there were cultural issues as well.

"In the Islamic belief system, it's normal in times of stress or prayer for the people to see genies, or spirits, and to talk to them. American guards would hear or see this and think the inmates were psychotic, when in fact these people were just taking part in a cultural practice."

Just as Dr. D'Arienzo was starting to get his bearings, the hunger strike began.

"The strike started very shortly after I was there," he said. "There were about 150 striking at the beginning, and by the time I left there were about eight that still were."

Obviously a hunger strike brought up its own set of ethical dilemmas for the military men and women at the prison.

"There was this huge controversy with the American Medical Association, Amnesty International, the Red Cross, all these groups, about force-feeding detainees and allowing them to passively commit suicide — as if saying if they were making a political statement, that was okay," the doctor said. "What we knew, though, was that if we allowed even one of those detainees to die, it would cause a political outcry and riots in an area where there already was so much unrest."

So Dr. D'Arienzo set about teaching the medical staff how to get the detainees to eat. Part of the plan was consistency; the other was positive reinforcement. The detainees were often starved for attention, he said, and by praising them for eating and even, strangely





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Dr. D'Arienzo with his wife Erica and children Aiden (top), Julia (left) and Katherine (right).

enough, giving them an option as to what kind of liquid supplements they would receive, the detainees slowly started to come around to eating again.

"It was bizarre that these people were hunger striking, and we would be giving them Hagan Daaz ice cream, but the choice helped them snap out of it."

Despite the conditions he worked in, Dr. D'Arienzo said for the most part he wasn't too worried about things going wrong.

"There were times when I didn't feel safe, and there were a couple people you would see who were not locked up, but usually they were behind a protective barrier," he said. "But more often than that, the things I was doing were exciting, so that outweighed anything else."

A NEW ADVENTURE

Not long after heading home from Cuba, Dr. D'Arienzo was shipped back out again, but this time his job took him to Japan and the USS Kitty Hawk submarine.

"I joined the Navy because I wanted to be on a ship, and to be, in essence, a true Navy sailor on an aircraft carrier," he said. "So I contacted a specialty leader when I got home from Guantanamo Bay and requested to be on a ship. There happened to be a ship in Japan with an open slot. I was in Pensacola for six or seven months and then shipped back out to Japan."

In Japan, Dr. D'Arienzo ran the mental health department and the substance abuse program, working on psychological care, resiliency training, suicide watch and alcohol prevention, among other things.

"A lot of what I did was occupationally related work," he said. "We did have some suicide attempts, though. We had one gentleman who thought he was part of Nostradamus's prophecies. He had downloaded all of these pages off of the Internet and made personal references to the prophecies that he thought linked himself to them. He ended up getting medically boarded out of the military."

One of the more harrowing experiences Dr. D'Arienzo had while in Japan — if there is only one to be picked — occurred during an annual operation called RIMPAC — Rim of the Pacific Exercise. While taking part in the operation, which occurs with participation of units from Australia, China, Japan, Peru, South Korea and others, a sailor on a Canadian ship made a suicide attempt and then continued to make suicidal threats. The captain from the HMCS

Regina called over to the American ship to see if they could use Dr. D'Arienzo for help, since the Canadians did not have their own psychologist on board.

"So I went to the air office to check in and see what I needed to do to get onboard the other ship," Dr. D'Arienzo said. "I said I was there to fly over on a helicopter and asked what materials I needed to take. That's when a lieutenant told me they were going to be dropping me onto the landing pad on a static line."

Dr. D'Arienzo assumed they were kidding. It wasn't uncommon for pranks to occur on the ships, and he figured this was just one of those 'let's pull a prank on the psychologist' kind of things.

It wasn't.

"So I got on the helicopter and soon after an airman came over to me, pulled off my headset and said they were preparing to drop me on a static line," he said. "At this point I still thought it was all a joke, but soon enough there I was, getting harnessed and connected to the line, and then jumping out of the helicopter on the static line, all the way down to the ship. When you're in the military, you just find yourself doing these kinds of things."

A RENEWED FOCUS ON THE HOME FRONT

It wasn't all static lines and hunger strikes for Dr. D'Arienzo, though. While in Japan he did some traveling to Hong Kong, Malaysia and Australia. And the lessons he learned while in the military and abroad were ones he found just as valuable as the experiences he had.

"What I learned at Guantanamo Bay broadened my perspective and gave me a more global view and a deeper understanding of tribal mentality," he said. "It's hard for the United States to be in battle, or even public debate, against countries with a tribal perspective because we are so global. I never really understood that until I was there and saw the disdain the detainees had for me, not just because they were in prison, but because I came from a different set of cultural values."

These days Dr. D'Arienzo is an inactive reservist, which he will remain for a minimum of three years, but he uses what he learned in the military every day in his private practice.

"What I have found that is different is that in the civilian sector, when people seek services, it's usually because they actually want help. In the military, most of the time they were trying to avoid something. But the pathology is still the same — it's your typical financial or marital problems, anxiety, depression — it's fairly similar," he said. "But the way I treat things, because I was a military psychologist, is what's mainly different."

Dr. D'Arienzo says he relies on briefer treatments, and that because most of his patients are cash paying, he's not held to certain criteria stipulated by insurance companies. He makes house calls and will see patients for hours at a time, if need be.

"Since so many psychological problems have an environmental origin, I like to get in the environment to get a better understanding and see what, if anything, I can change about the way these patients are living."

And if there is anyone who should understand the importance of environment, it would be Dr. D'Arienzo. From Virginia and Pensacola to Cuba and Japan, Dr. D'Arienzo has been anything but typical in his employment choices. Today, however, when he finds himself sitting at his Jacksonville home with his three children (Aiden, 4; Julia, 3; and Katherine, 20 months) and his wife Erica, who is pregnant with their fourth child, he often finds himself fondly remembering past experiences, but excited about where his life has finally led him.

"As excited as I always was to take up my assignments, it was hard to leave my family," he said. "When I left Japan, it was time for me to stay home. I was ready to be a dad." **FD**