

Public Health Service officers from NIEHS welcomed home from Ebola mission

By Eddy Ball

The work was physically demanding and the hours were long, but for NIEHS staffers Lt. Debra King and Lt. Cmdr. John McLamb, deployment to Liberia was something they'd do again. Now back in the U.S. with a clean bill of health, the two volunteers have returned to their regular jobs.

Linked Video

[Watch a November 2014 video about the Monrovia Medical Unit \(06:46\)](#)

Looking back on their two months at the Monrovia Medical Unit in Liberia, neither had any regrets. When asked if he'd return if the opportunity arose, McLamb simply said, "In a heartbeat." King added, "That is what I signed up for [as a commissioned officer in the U.S. Public Health Service]."

NIEHS and National Toxicology Program (NTP) Director Linda Birnbaum, Ph.D., spoke for all staff in an April 2 message. "The entire NIEHS family appreciates the service that John and Debra provided during this public health crisis," she wrote.

Establishing an infrastructure for the Ebola response

Initially an emergency response facility, the 25-bed treatment center expanded its scope to become a site for clinical trials for a National Institutes of Health experimental treatment known as ZMapp, a candidate therapeutic with antibodies produced in specially grown tobacco plants.

The efforts of staff involved in the response not only saved lives, but also helped create a safety net for care providers. Assuring healthcare workers that they would be provided the best care possible if they contracted the disease helped alleviate the shortage of health care workers.

King, a medical technologist in the NTP Cellular and Molecular Pathology Branch, was the lead for the on-site clinical laboratory, where she performed testing for basic chemistry, hematology, malaria, and HIV, in collaboration with nearby off-site facilities where Ebola testing was performed. As part of her duties, King reviewed and updated standard operating procedures, developed quality control measures, and submitted daily updates.

McLamb served as an infection control officer for the unit, ensuring that individuals who entered the hot zone were properly trained and outfitted in personal protective equipment. He was responsible for decontamination of workers and overseeing infectious waste disposal, as well as air monitoring related to chlorine disinfection and heat stress.

Sacrifice and physical discomfort

As part of what U.S. Ebola responders in Liberia designated team three, King and McLamb worked many long hours in watertight protective gear. The gear was unavoidable, because their work involved the possibility of direct contact with infected patients and their biological samples.

During their first weeks in Liberia, the volunteers worked six days straight each week and often ate military MREs — meals ready-to-eat. To help deal with the heat and struggles of putting on their gear and taking it off — a process that took at least forty minutes each time — King and McLamb both shaved their heads.

Support at home and abroad

They enjoyed the full support of their supervisors and colleagues at NIEHS and NTP, as well as their spouses and families, who assumed extra duties during the deployment.

Despite the long days at the unit, King and McLamb appreciated the reception they received in Liberia. They also managed to enjoy the tropical wildlife, especially the rich variety of insects and lizards. King went a step further into West African culture, by sampling the local delicacy of fried termites, during a termite swarm.

(Eddy Ball is a contract writer with the NIEHS Office of Communications and Public Liaison.)



Lt. Debra King (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Lt. Cmdr. John McLamb (Photo courtesy of John Maruca)

Protected from head to toe

Writing in an HHS.gov [blog post](http://www.hhs.gov/blog/post/2015/03/25/turning-tide-ebola.html?utm_campaign=032615_hhs_blog Ebola&utm_medium=email&utm_source=hh_s_blog_updates&utm_content=032615_hhs_blog Ebola_readmorelink), (http://www.hhs.gov/blog/post/2015/03/25/turning-tide-ebola.html?utm_campaign=032615_hhs_blog Ebola&utm_medium=email&utm_source=hh_s_blog_updates&utm_content=032615_hhs_blog Ebola_readmorelink) Capt. Calvin Edwards, a member of an earlier deployment with team one, described his experience in the outfits. "We worked 12-hour shifts in 90 degree heat and 90 percent humidity, often wearing head-to-toe layers of plastic gear that left us soaked in sweat within minutes," he said.

Living conditions had improved somewhat by the time McLamb and King arrived in Liberia. But the need to follow protocol remained, and they had to be just as safety conscious as Edwards had months earlier. "A single slip in protocol could expose us to a deadly virus ..." Edwards wrote.



King's desk is typical of workspace in the tents that made up the Monrovia Medical Unit. (Photo courtesy of John McLamb)



Not all work required full protective gear, but all was conducted in the challenging environment of the medical unit. (Photo courtesy of John McLamb)

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