

## UMB Ties to the Hospital Ship, USNS Comfort

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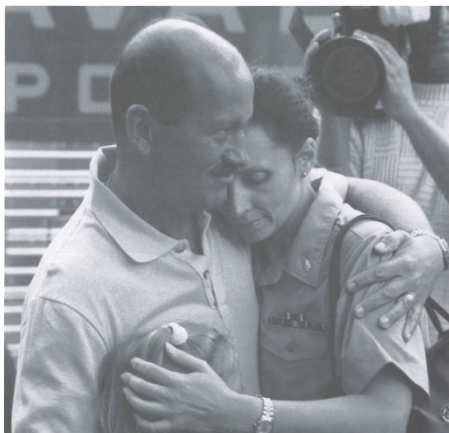


*USNS Comfort docked in Baltimore, 2010. Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

On [March 30, 2020](#) the USNS Comfort arrived in New York City's Harbor on a mission to provide assistance to the city's overwhelmed hospitals in the midst of the Coronavirus Pandemic. The USNS Comfort is a Navy Hospital Ship with 1,000 beds and 12 operating rooms, which has been deployed in times of crisis and peace around the world. The USNS Comfort is stationed in Norfolk, VA but for a significant portion of her life (1988-2013) as a hospital ship, she was stationed in [Baltimore's Port](#). The location is not her only ties to the city of Baltimore, as several UMB alumni and faculty served on this hospital ship during her 33-year history.

The USNS Comfort is actually the third Navy ship christened with the name Comfort. The first Comfort (USS Comfort AH-3) was a repurposed passenger and Army transport ship that was transferred to the Navy during World War I (1918-1921) and commissioned as a hospital ship. This USS Comfort, like the current Comfort, was stationed in New York's Harbor to support the hospitals during the 1918 Flu Pandemic. However, it was primarily used to transport wounded soldiers across the Atlantic following World War I.

The second ship christened the USS Comfort (AH-6) served the Navy as a hospital ship during World War II. Following the war the ship was

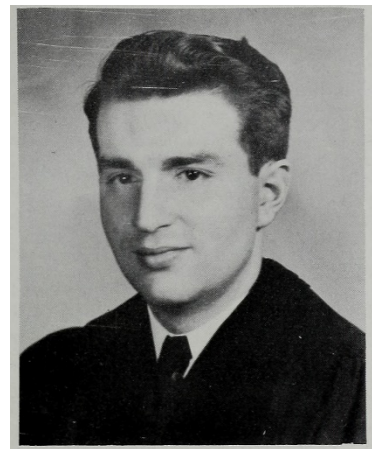


*Commander Barbara Vernoski, graduate of the School of Nursing, deploying on the USNS Comfort during Desert Storm, 1990. Image from Navy Medicine Vol. 81, No. 5.*

transferred to the Army. It was on this Comfort that Dr. H.G. Robert Knapp, University of Maryland School of Medicine Class of 1946, served as Chief

Medical Officer treating patients returning from Germany and Japan following the war. Dr. Knapp achieved the rank of Captain in the Army. After being discharged Dr. Knapp opened a private practice in Orthopedics and taught at the University of Arkansas. Dr. Knapp passed away in 2010.

The current USNS Comfort is a converted oil tanker; it was transferred to the Navy in 1987. The USNS Comfort served in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm in the 1990s. During this deployment, Commander Barbara Vernoski, Lt. Commander Barbara Schmitz, and Lt. Commander Elana Schavalend, all



*Dr. H.G. Robert Knapp, School of Medicine Class of 1946, from the 1946 Reflexions Yearbook.*

graduates of the University of Maryland School of Nursing, served onboard. Schmitz served as head of the Burn Unit on the ship and shared her experiences of wartime nursing with *The Washington Post* in 1990, "Some people felt like they didn't do enough when they died, even though we did everything we could. It's different at home - when they die they're 90. Here I'm writing the ages - 20, 22, 25 is the oldest."



*Lt. Commander, Eddie Lopez, School of Nursing graduate in 2002, served on the USNS Comfort in Haiti following the 2010 earthquake. From the 2010 Nursing magazine.*

The USNS Comfort was also deployed to New York's Harbor following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. During that deployment it served as a place for emergency workers to get medical care, rest, and showers while sifting through the rubble. In 2005, the ship was sent to aid Hurricane Katrina victims in the Gulf Coast and in 2010 it was sent to Haiti to provide medical aid to those injured in the earthquake. While in Haiti, Eddie Lopez, University of Maryland School of Nursing Masters Graduate in 2002, served as Lt. Commander on the vessel. Lopez reflected on his time onboard in a 2011 School of Nursing publication, "We worked 16-hour days with limited supplies. It was disaster medicine, which means you just do the best you can with what you have."

The USNS Comfort has also been deployed in peacetime missions as it was in 2009, when Brian Kirkwood and Andrew Pakchoian, then third-year students in the School of Dentistry, served with Dr. Patricia Meehan, assistant dean of admissions and recruitment, and Dr. Gary Hack, professor, on board the ship. In the mission, the members of the Dental School traveled throughout the Caribbean to work with other students and faculty from dental schools in the region on digital dentistry.

In 2013, the USNS Comfort left its home in Baltimore for the last time and was transferred to the Naval Station in Norfolk, VA, ending a 25-year history with the city. During that time, medical personnel, including several from the schools at the University of Maryland, Baltimore, saved thousands of lives.



*Drs. Brian Kirkwood and Andrew Pakchoian, School of Dentistry, served as dental students on the USNS Comfort during a peacetime deployment to the Caribbean in 2009. Image from the May 2009 Voice.*

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