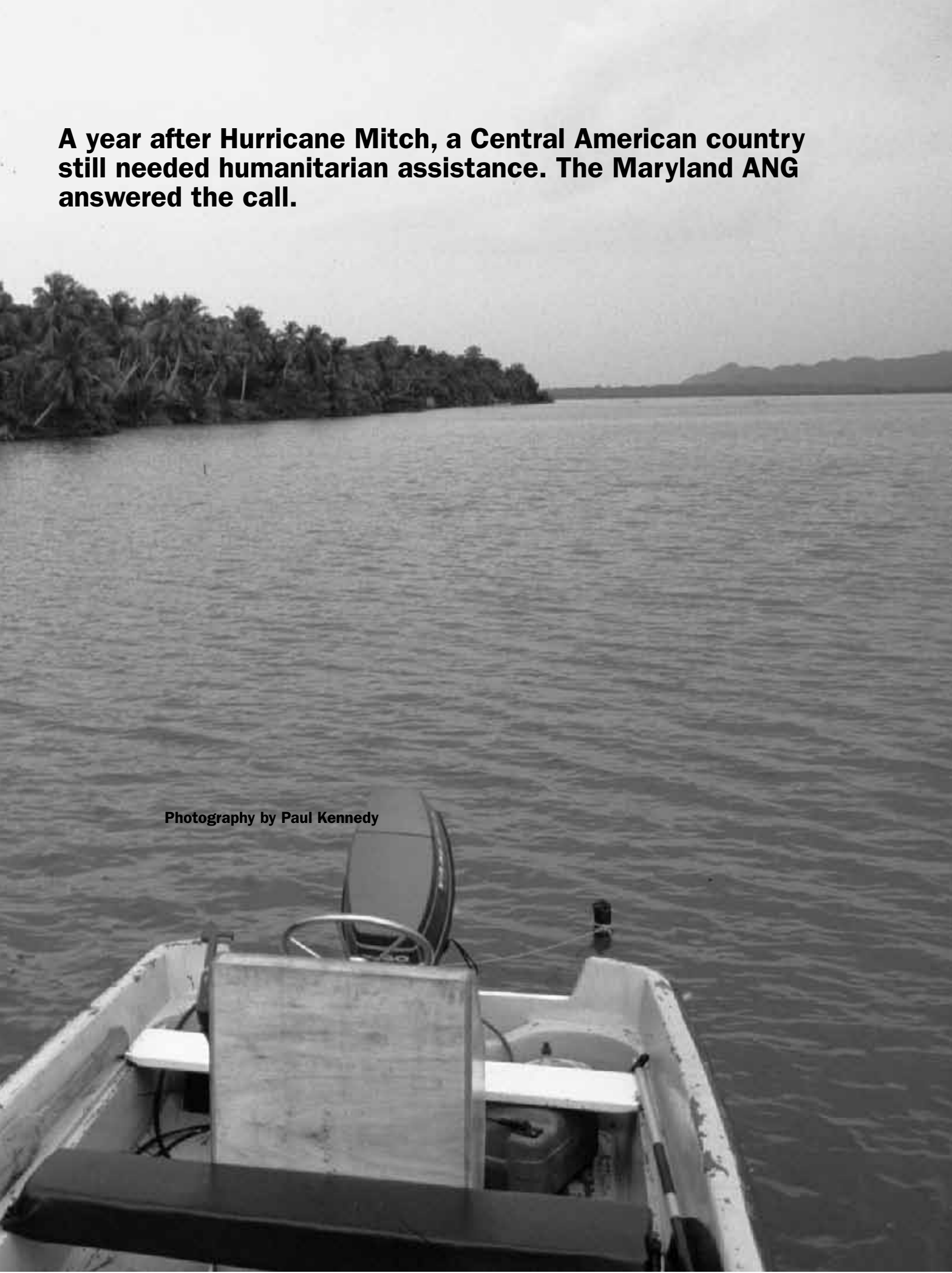


Tropical Relief

The small country of Belize, still recovering from a 1998 hurricane that was one of the strongest Atlantic storms on record and that devastated much of Central America, got some much needed medical assistance this summer from the Maryland Air National Guard's 175th Wing, Baltimore. More than 10,000 people died in the storm, which left some 1.5 million homeless in the region.

A year after Hurricane Mitch, a Central American country still needed humanitarian assistance. The Maryland ANG answered the call.

Photography by Paul Kennedy





Bounded by Mexico to the north and Guatemala to the south and west, Belize sits on the Caribbean Sea. The country is just under 9,000 square miles, about the size of Massachusetts. Formerly called British Honduras, it was a British colony until it became independent in 1981.

At left, members of a 175th Wing C-130 aircrew plan a mission for the nearly seven-hour flight from Baltimore (Martin State Airport), to Belize City, the country's largest city. The wing sent 30 members of the 175th Medical Squadron and several from the 175th Security Forces and the wing's Services Flight on a 15-day deployment to Belize. The 175th MS undertakes at least one humanitarian mission every three to four years.

At right, with laptops, books, and MREs (Meals, Ready to Eat), these ANG personnel are well-prepared for their flight. Among the Guardsmen on this humanitarian mission were some who have more than two decades of ANG service and have taken their medical expertise to similar locations over the years. One of these "old-timers," SMSgt. Barbara A. Courtney, a full-time physician's assistant at Johns Hopkins Hospital, put it simply: "We like being used."



From Belize City, the 175th MS traveled by bus to small and isolated villages, such as Dangriga, Gales Point, Hopkins, and Pomona. There they set up shop, usually in the village schoolhouse, to offer routine and emergency medical care. The Baltimore ANG medics would operate a clinic for one to two days at each location—operating solely from supplies and equipment they brought with them into the country.

At left, some children hold coloring books and dental care kits they've received from the Guardsmen. The 175th also donated medical supplies and equipment to the Belize health care network.



Above is a section of Gales Point, a Creole village that was the last stop on the ANG's humanitarian mission. At right, a Guard member administers vitamins to a baby in the reception area of the temporary medical clinic set up in the village.



As many as 300 men, women, and children waited in line for medical treatment at each village. Some who could not be treated in their own villages walked or took a bus to catch up with the ANG medical personnel at their next stop.



Originally inhabited by Mayans, Belize today is a mix of Central American and Caribbean cultures. It is the only country in Central America where the primary language is English, but Spanish, Creole, Mayan, and Garifuna (Caribbean) are spoken as well.



Although prepared to face everything from malaria to HIV, the 175th MS practiced lots of basic medicine on this mission. The medical personnel found that—among the children, at least—intestinal worms made up 60 percent of the medical problems. SrA. Alesha Knaub, a five-year Guardsman, persuaded the youngsters to take their worm pills by offering juice with the medicine.

In Belize, the ratio of physician to patient is one per about 1,500, as compared to one per 365 in the US. The need is there. As Lt. Col. Phillip Brown, deployment commander, noted, "While we understand our overall commitment as Guardsmen lies in the protection and defense of the United States, the Maryland Air National Guard is a service of people reaching out and caring for the needs and the well-being of other people."

Medical technicians had a chance to apply their training in prepping and dressing wounds. "All this training is applicable and necessary, not only in peacetime but also in wartime," stated Lt. Col. Vickie Pollard, a nurse with 24 years in the Guard. "But above all the training, watching [175th members] bond together as a team and look out for one another has been heart-warming for me."



Another team member said the experience was eye-opening. "These people, for the most part, have nothing, yet they don't complain. ... They are a proud people and don't expect any handouts, yet they are grateful for the help we've given to them," said SSgt. Greg Phillips. "Maybe they've learned some things from us, but I've learned a whole lot more from them."



It was muggy, with temperatures in the mid-80s, and the mosquitoes never quit. Some team members even became sick themselves, but they still continued to work. "I have found in all my years of volunteering to be a part of these humanitarian efforts, that the need doesn't rest," said Capt. Harold Archer, a nurse and 21-year Guardsman. "The need gets greater."

At left, in a rare free moment, though, some of the ANG personnel took time for a different type of interaction—basketball.



The makeshift clinics, like the one above, were the setting for everything from general medicine to tooth extractions. At right, a young patient receives some novocaine before dental work begins.



SrA. Kristina Paxton (above), who served four years on active duty before joining the Guard, commented on the challenges of the Belize mission: "While I learned a great deal on active duty, I was never exposed to this side of the military."



At left, a woman's smile is evidence that the efforts of the 175th were welcome. "It makes me feel good knowing that I'm bringing some relief to their situations," said Knaub. ■