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NAMRU-6 Peru – Where the Bugs and Bacteria Roam

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(NO COMMENTS)

By Capt. Dave Service, commanding officer, NAMRU-6 Perú

Editor's note: This is the first in a series of six blogs highlighting the vast capabilities of NAMRU-6.



Who out there knows that almost one in every six commands in Navy Medicine is a research laboratory? And who knew that each lab is about the same size as a Naval Health Clinic? And did you know that some of them are operating in far off places like Cambodia, Egypt, and Ghana? Unless you happen to be assigned to one of the labs, most of us aren't aware of the vital behind-the-scenes medical research that takes place outside our treatment facilities. Starting with this piece and over the next few weeks I'd like to introduce you to the special people and mission of one of these unusual commands; [U.S. Naval Medical Research Unit No. 6 Perú](#).

To start, NAMRU-6 is one of only five overseas infectious disease labs run by the Navy and Army. Moreover, it is the only U.S. military command on the continent of South America. Operating on the front lines in the [battle against infectious diseases](#), we chase, capture, and seek ways to kill the germs and bugs that threaten the health of warfighters and civilians around the globe. That's right – world wide.

It turns out that bugs don't really care who they bite, and microbes don't care whose cells they invade. They're an equal opportunity enemy that is agile and merciless, and that doesn't pay much attention to international borders. In defense of this threat, the U.S. Navy formed a coalition with the Peruvian Navy to wage war against these devastating common foes, and we're gaining ground.

NAMRU-6 was originally established in 1983 as a small detachment of the Naval Medical Research Institute in Bethesda, Md. and was housed in the Central Peruvian Navy Hospital in Callao, Perú. Back then it was just a handful of scientists working with a bare-bones set-up that could have found a place in a Beck song, "two pipettes and a microscope".

Today NAMRU-6 is a stand-alone command with a staff comprised of 13 U.S. Navy, Army, Air Force, and Public Health Service officers, plus a physician from the [Tulane School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine](#). The officers are a grab bag of [Medical Service Corps](#) and

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Medical Corps disease specialists, and are among the best in the world at what they do. Working shoulder-to-shoulder as de facto junior officers are three varsity enlisted personnel, (two Second Class Corpsmen, and an Army Staff Sergeant). In addition we have an expert civilian staff comprised of a comptroller, a logistics and contracting officer, and a safety manager. Talk about a “Dream Team;” they are all retired military with more than 80 years of active duty experience between the three of them, and they’re still serving their country. In addition, more than 320 scientists, physicians, and technicians from our host nation conduct the lion’s share of the research while providing essential continuity, insight, and expertise to our common struggle against disease. Their loyalty to the cause is eye-watering, and some have been with the unit for almost 30 years.



From left to right: LCDR Matthew Kasper, LT Kimberly Edgel, CAPT David Service, LCDR Maya Williams, CDR Frederick Stell, and LT Carlo Traverso in the NAMRU-6 lab.

NAMRU-6 now actively collaborates with the government, military, and academic institutions of 15 countries throughout Latin America, and just last week the Surgeon General of a neighboring nation asked for our assistance developing their own advanced laboratory capability.

It goes without saying that the Navy has the best ad campaign of any of the services. Next time you hear the narrator say that we’re a “Global Force for Good”, think about how a small band of dedicated Sailors, Soldiers, and Airmen are projecting smart power in the cities and jungles of South America. Think about NAMRU-6.

Thanks for reading. Please check back in the coming weeks for snapshots of our efforts in the long war against infectious disease.

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[October 2014 \(15\)](#)

[September 2014 \(20\)](#)

[August 2014 \(14\)](#)

[July 2014 \(13\)](#)

[June 2014 \(8\)](#)

[May 2014 \(11\)](#)

[April 2014 \(9\)](#)

[March 2014 \(14\)](#)

[February 2014 \(7\)](#)

[January 2014 \(7\)](#)

[December 2013 \(7\)](#)

[November 2013 \(12\)](#)

[October 2013 \(7\)](#)

[September 2013 \(14\)](#)

[August 2013 \(13\)](#)

[July 2013 \(11\)](#)

[June 2013 \(22\)](#)

[May 2013 \(15\)](#)

[April 2013 \(14\)](#)

[March 2013 \(14\)](#)

[February 2013 \(14\)](#)

[January 2013 \(12\)](#)

[December 2012 \(11\)](#)

[November 2012 \(11\)](#)

[October 2012 \(7\)](#)

[September 2012 \(9\)](#)

[August 2012 \(12\)](#)

[July 2012 \(13\)](#)

[June 2012 \(17\)](#)

[May 2012 \(22\)](#)

[April 2012 \(14\)](#)

[March 2012 \(13\)](#)

[February 2012 \(14\)](#)

[January 2012 \(13\)](#)

[December 2011 \(13\)](#)

[November 2011 \(20\)](#)

[October 2011 \(22\)](#)

[September 2011 \(12\)](#)

[August 2011 \(16\)](#)