# FROM CORPSMAN TO PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT – STILL SERVING ON THE FRONT LINES

Photo: Johnnie Gilpen, PA-C in Sulphur, OK

Johnnie Gilpen, PA-C, is a former U.S. Navy Fleet Marine Force (FMF) Corpsman who attributes his inspiration for becoming a PA to the Navy Corpsmen who forged the profession fifty years before becoming the world's first team of physician assistants. [MORE].

Since 2010, Gilpen has been a member of the Regional Emergency Medical Service Systems and Disaster Medical Response Teams (REMSS/DRMT) - first as a paramedic and now as a physician assistant. Five years into his career as an emergency medicine PA, Gilpen has employed his decades of experience and skills to serve countless Oklahomans when they need it most.

Gilpen's most recent assignment was to assist in the recovery efforts after an F4 tornado struck the town of Sulphur on April 27th. He deployed as a member of the REMSS/DRMT Region 3 Team, alongside responders from Murray County EMS, the Sulphur Fire and Police Department, the U.S. National Park Service, the Oklahoma Highway Patrol's Emergency Medical Service Unit (EMSU) team members, and multiple NGO's.

"I have worked for Murray County EMS in some capacity since 2009," stated Gilpen. "Though it was not my hometown, I still have close ties in the community, so it felt like I was helping my neighbors."

By the time Gilpen arrived Sunday, the emergency rescue operation was over, and it had shifted to recovery operations. There wasn't much of a medical need clinically in the traditional sense.

Gilpen was assigned to the Incident Management Team, working closely with the Incident Commanders to help establish public health and responder health priorities, such as establishing a Responder Rehab point, working with the U.S. Public Health Service to establish an appropriate site for their incoming field clinic, and getting bottled water from the supply receiving area on the west side of town to the destruction path on the east side. Much of the city's water system was down, and people weren't leaving their houses for fear of looters. Working with Samaritan's Purse and Lowe's, they delivered pallets of bottled water block-by-block in the town's hardest hit areas to residents and responders while coordinating with the local county health department providing tetanus shots to anyone who needed one. One story stood out and impacted Gilpen.

"Every day was a unique story. We met a man who had been babysitting his grandson when the tornado passed over his house. He told me if his grandson hadn't been with him, he probably would have died. That's because he usually watches tornadoes from his front porch. At his grandson's insistence, they climbed into the neighbor's cellar with the rest of his family. The tornado hit and destroyed his home. Thankfully, they both survived."

Prior to becoming a PA, Gilpen also worked for the Department of Homeland Security Center for Domestic Preparedness and the Department of State's Anti-Terror Assistance Program as a Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear, and high-yield Explosive (CBRNE) epidemiologist and instructor teaching hundreds of first responders in the U.S. and abroad in places like South Africa and the Philippines how to respond to incidents as he saw in Sulphur. Combined with Gilpen's military background, he said he has walked alongside and among giants. Spending several days in the Sulphur aftermath, he reflected on the similarities.

"I took off work from the Children's Hospital Emergency Department to be in Sulphur. I felt like it was where I was supposed to be. Seeing people come together, everybody working together, focused on a mission larger than oneself, was amazing. For those few days, I got to work and walk among giants again. For someone who has never served in the military, or worked in these types of environments, nor among the caliber of people you interact with – this may sound a little morbid given the loss of life, the extent of destruction, and heartbreak surrounding the disaster, but I can honestly say - it was some of the best days of my life. These first responders and community members are heroes."

Gilpen is also involved in a new project and hopes to rally fellow PAs to join REMSS/DRMT. Gilpen has been working with Brad Lancaster, the REMSS/DRMT Region 3 Director. They want to add more PAs to DRMTs since EMS providers aren't allowed to give tetanus shots, which becomes a need in disasters.

"It seems simple, but when you have people who are afraid to leave their homes due to the potential for looting or fear of getting injured to debris, downed powerline, etc., this is a public health task we can perform going door-to-door. At the same time, make sure people have all the medications and supplies they need."

More than 100 hundred homes were destroyed, 32 had major damage, and 33 businesses were severely damaged or destroyed. People lost their medications, and the local pharmacy was also damaged.

Gilpen said, "These are just some of the things 'boots-on-the-ground' PA's can do to help alleviate some of the burdens that EMS, fire, and police can't. This is where we can step up, help, and add another layer of care during disasters."

The program is still in its infancy; however, the lessons learned from the Sulphur event are helping establish guidelines for the future. The concept has already been deployed in Florida and Texas EMS and disaster settings.

"PAs love to help people, and people need help more than just emergency care in a disaster. It's a perfect match for anyone in our profession."

Anyone interested in knowing more can reach out to Gilpen at jgilpen@gmail.com.