Task force soldiers give the gift of sight

Capt. Greg Hutcheson, the Task Force MedFalcon Optometrist, performs an eye exam on a young Albanian girl as her grandfather holds her up, Feb. 23, in the Kotlina town schoolhouse. Most of the glasses distributed during the Optical Civilian Assistance Program were donations from organizations in the U.S.

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CAMP BONDSTEEL, Kosovo—Residents of the small town of Kotlina in the Ljuboten Mountain Range in Kosovo are seeing much clearer now after receiving new glasses.

Task Force Falcon soldiers braved the sometimes treacherous drive to perform optical exams and distribute glasses as part of an Optical Civilian Assistance Program out of a packed town schoolhouse, February 23. They examined and gave glasses to more than 30 people.

"Getting up there was a challenge, with the sharp turns and steep inclines," said Capt. Greg Hutcheson, the Task Force MedFalcon optometrist. "The drop-off was kind of scary. But the suspense of the drive up there was all well worth it because of the difference we got to make."

"Most of the people in the town, and throughout Kosovo, have never had glasses at all in their lives. They have no idea how well they can actually see, according to Sgt. Kenneth W. McClendon, an Optical Technician with Company C, 47th Forward Support Battalion.

"What we did today was just to try and give them a pair of glasses that are close to what they need as we can give them," said Sgt. Jeff D. Freeman, an Optical Lab Specialist with Company C, 47th FSB. "We did our best to maintain the same standard of care we have for everyone else but we were limited in what we could give them by the supply of glasses that came entirely from donations."

After seeing to the optical needs of an Albanian girl, Hutcheson gives an elderly Albanian a vision test.

"We did a glasses drive in Germany because we knew we were not going to get any humanitarian aid for these OPCAPs," Hutcheson said. "We contacted optical clinics throughout Europe and the States. We also contacted the Lions Club chapters in Indiana, Nebraska and Missouri. They shipped us approximately 6,000 pairs of glasses at their own cost."

The soldiers did face some difficulties finding the right prescriptions and a reasonable fit with the frames.

"It was also sometimes difficult having all of the communication with the patients going through an interpreter, plus some of the patients could not even read the chart because of their age or their education," Hutcheson said. "The people we saw were mostly far-sighted versus the States, where most people are near-sighted. We were lucky to hit the jackpot in getting them the glasses that we did."

The soldiers get to perform OPCAPs three to four times a month in small towns throughout Kosovo. They see people who might not otherwise get a chance to see a doctor.

"With the mission of helping the soldiers, we cannot get out and do this as often as we like or could," McClendon said. "It makes it a little easier for us, being away from our homes and our families, to be helping these people so much and to have such an impact on their lives. We had an 80-year-old man in here today who has probably never seen beyond two feet in front of his face and now he can see just as well as anyone else."

Hutcheson congratulates one of the younger Albanians upon issuing him his new pair of glasses.