Plastic surgeon Cmdr. Trent Douglas recently shipped out halfway across the globe on a five-month humanitarian mission for Pacific Partnership 2010. From May through September, he is on board the USNS Mercy, a 1,000-bed floating hospital equipped with 12 operating rooms and served by a 1,000-member crew comprised of medical, dental, veterinary, and surgical specialists, public health and other medical professionals, as well as the Navy’s Seabees construction engineers. Their mission is to work with local providers, non-governmental agencies and military from partner nations to aid medically underserved people in Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia, and Timor Leste. Along the way, they will build relationships, exchange information with local doctors and nurses, construct clinics, and bring the best medical care the U.S. has to offer directly to the shores of these often politically unstable developing nations.

This is not Douglas’ first tour on the hospital ship. He served in Pacific Partnership’s 2008 humanitarian trip to Southeast Asia and the South Pacific that evaluated 90,000 patients and performed 1,370 operations. Douglas was even on hand when Mercy’s surgical team became the first group of American military surgeons to operate in Viet Nam since 1975. “The 2008 mission was the neatest thing that I’ve ever done, and I’m very happy to be going back this summer,” he says. One of Douglas’ favorite memories of the trip was when he helped treat a disabled Philippine boy who had developed severe scar contractures following injuries from a bomb blast. Before his operation, the boy’s father had to carry him to get around. After surgery and two weeks of physical therapy aboard the ship, he was able ride the new bike the crew presented him.

In the coming weeks, Douglas will more perform than the cleft lip and palate reconstruction surgeries he’s used to in the States. He also will remove advanced cancers brought on by chewing the betel nut or eye and skin lesions caused by the intense sun of the tropics. Even with the advanced capabilities of the Mercy, he occasionally will need to operate in a makeshift OR on land or in swaying conditions on rough seas. But most importantly, he will improve the lives of patients living in areas with inadequate or inaccessible medical care.

This mission is the fifth annual U.S. Pacific Fleet endeavor of its kind. To follow Douglas’ progress, see postings on the Mercy’s Facebook page and in EAAvesdropping.

Douglas is a commander in the U.S. Navy and a staff plastic surgeon at the Naval Medical Center San Diego (NMCSD). He received an MD from Emory in 1995 and completed a general surgery residency at the NMCSD in 2003 and a plastic surgery residency at Emory University Hospital in 2006. His practice focuses on treating complex war injuries and breast cancer reconstruction. Douglas is married and has two children.