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Utah Guardsmen help get Afghan boy heart surgery

In California: An e-mail campaign, plus favors and donations from families and friends, will get Asedullah Ibrahim a necessary operation

 By Dawn House
The Salt Lake Tribune

Next week's hurdle will be the last, and perhaps the most dangerous.

A dark-complected Afghan man dressed in a long, flowing caftan and turban, holding the hand of an 11-year-old boy, could spark suspicion when the two change planes in Germany, New York and Los Angeles.

Any stress, from an overly aggressive security guard searching the boy to walking more than a few steps, could cause the child to collapse, perhaps die.

Back at Bagram Airfield in north-central Afghanistan, Chief Warrant Officer Layne Pace can only hope all will go well for Sarbavz Khan Ibrahim, his son Asedullah and their Afghan interpreter during the long journey that will end at Loma Linda Children's Hospital in Southern California. There, surgeons at the facility, owned by the Seventh-day Adventist Church, will perform - at no cost - life-saving surgery to repair a hole in the boy's heart.

"I wish I could have sent a soldier to escort them," said Pace, a Utah National Guard Apache attack helicopter pilot. "When Asedullah gets any kind of stress, he drops like a rock. It's just a matter of time that the wrong stress will kill him."

Pace first saw the frail, ashen-faced boy when the West Jordan-based 211th Aviation Battalion delivered blankets, clothing and shoes to the remote Afghan village of Jagdalek. That same month, in October, the group flew in a flight surgeon, who said that without an operation the boy could live at most a year or two, perhaps as little as a month.

"It broke our hearts to leave him there," said Pace. "We're only a bunch of pilots - we had no medical contacts to do what needed to be done."

Pace began by contacting coworkers at the Orem Department of Public Safety, where he worked as the fire chief. The Utah unit also had tests and blood work done on the boy at the Egyptian hospital in Bagram. Many e-mails later, a Utah surgeon and medical staff agreed to perform an operation for free, but neither Primary Children's Medical Center, LDS Hospital nor University of Utah Hospital would agree to waive hospitalization costs in the short time in which a response was required, Pace said.

Pace kept sending out pleas. One e-mail found its way to Shelby Grant, whose husband Chad Everett, an actor from the TV series "Medical Center," is spokesman for Gift of Life, a Rotary charity that provides open-heart surgery to Third World children. Once Grant and Everett got involved, other e-mails and checks started pouring in.

"You and your soldiers are the ones who deserve all the credit," Grant wrote to Pace.

An evangelical church in Hershey, Pa., sent \$650. A friend chipped in \$300. The Utah soldiers raised \$1,000. A flight unit stationed in Kuwait contributed \$2,500, and Anysoldier.com, which sends care packages and gifts



Eleven-year-old Asedullah Ibrahim is slated to travel next week with his father from their home in Jegdalek, Afghanistan, to Southern California for an operation, provided at no cost to the family, to repair a hole in Asedullah's heart. Members of the West Jordan-based 211th Aviation Battalion helped coordinate the effort to help Asedullah and bring him to the United States for surgery. (211th Aviation Battalion)

to GIs, raised \$2,500. A Texas medical center offered to waive all hospital fees but needed additional tests. Then officials at Loma Linda, which

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father and a translator for free.

The bureaucratic-red-tape hurdle came next. U.S. embassy officials advised it would be better that Asedullah's mother, rather than his father Sarbavz, accompany the child to get through all security checks.

"I said that wasn't going to happen," said Pace. "In this part of the world, we don't even see females."

Sen. Mark Dayton, D-Minn., who already had sent \$450, made repeated telephone calls to the U.S. embassy, as did Rotarians in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Suddenly, the visa application process was sped up to two days.

"I still can't believe it happened so fast," said Pace in a telephone interview Saturday. "Now, we've done everything we can out here. I just hope that someone convinces Sarbavz to wear Western-style clothes during the flight to minimize any stress."

Pace remembered the dark days when it seemed nothing could be done. There were no medical facilities in Afghanistan or Pakistan that could have performed the surgery to repair the hole between the two ventricles in the child's heart. During cardiac tests at Bagram Airfield, he tried to explain to Sarbavz that he and his unit would do everything they could to get his son to the United States.

"He's a pretty macho man, but he cried," said Pace. "Sarbavz thought it was the end, that I was saying it was over. He said what we had done meant everything to him. He was grateful."

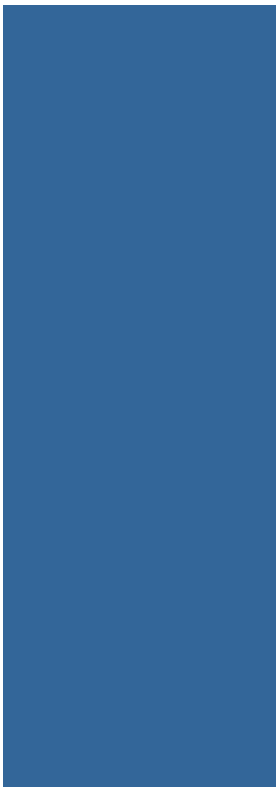
has a medical facility in Kabul, Afghanistan, stepped in.

Money to travel to Kabul and Islamabad, Pakistan, for visas and funds for the boy's family were paid for during the time his father, Sarbavz Khan Ibrahim, would be away.

"Please do not get the idea we are rich," wrote Jerry Daly at Loma Linda University in offering additional help. "I just want to make sure we cover all the bases in getting these people here and returning them home as easily and safely as possible."


In Bagram, Maj. Thomas Greene of Orem happened to know the vice president of the airline JetBlue. Founder David Neeleman, a Utah native, arranged with Pakistan International Airlines and his company to fly the son, his

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