

SO feature

Local plastic surgeon has a

REASON TO SMILE

Bob Russell learned something long ago about practicing medicine. The Springfield plastic surgeon took it to heart when he was counseled that part of his duty was to give back.

"I had a resident who went out to Norfolk (Va.), which is where Operation Smile started, so it was nothing altruistic on my part," said Russell, who has been teaching medical students for years, of his first experience with the medical charity group. This was a case of the student teaching the teacher.

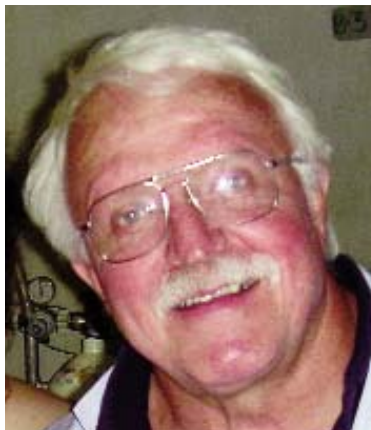
The resident talked him into taking part in a mission, and that was it; Russell was hooked on the organization.

"I thought, 'What the heck? It's a trip to a foreign country,'" Russell said of that first mission he took part in more than 20 years ago. "I went and I thought, 'This is pretty good.'"

So good that Russell has volunteered his time as a surgeon and teacher with Operation Smile International ever since. His talents are put to good use caring for children with congenital facial deformities and burns in a number of countries around the world.

He and other like-minded volunteers travel the world giving away something we all take for granted and something few of us do enough of: smile.

If you're born with a cleft lip, you can



Above: Bob Russell recently spent time in Papua New Guinea working with Operation Smile. **Opposite page:** Russell prepares for surgery during his mission in Papua New Guinea.

probably speak fairly well, according to Russell. Those with a cleft palate likely speak nasally. When you have difficulty talking, smiling is likely not your highest priority.

Add to that the logistical problem of being born far from medical care and having very little in the way financial means. That makes for a deformity that is pretty certain to be a permanent thing. Enter Operation Smile.

In August, Russell went on a six-day mission to Papua New Guinea. He was gone for a total of 10 days.

"It takes two days to get there," Russell said of the island nation that sits above Australia and below Vietnam between the

Coral Sea and the South Pacific.

Russell said one memorable thing about the area is the fact that so many of the world's languages are spoken there. According to a U.S. government Web site, some 820 indigenous languages are spoken in Papua New Guinea, that's more than one-tenth of the world's languages present in this small area.

For Russell's part, he and the medical team saw 250 people and surgically treated 76 of those. The medical team was made up of nurses, anesthesia doctors and nurses, pediatricians, dentists and plastic surgeons.

One of the greatest challenges for Russell was the sleeping quarters onboard ship. The bunks are arranged in threes — that's a bottom, middle and upper bunk. Russell, who has two new hips, chose the middle bunk out of necessity.

"It was three-tiered bunks. I couldn't take the bottom, and I couldn't take the top," he said. "But I could manage to get myself into the middle bunk."

Russell and the rest of the medical team did their work onboard the USNS Mercy, a U.S. Navy hospital ship.

Russell said the ship's operating room was pretty impressive, right up to modern standards.

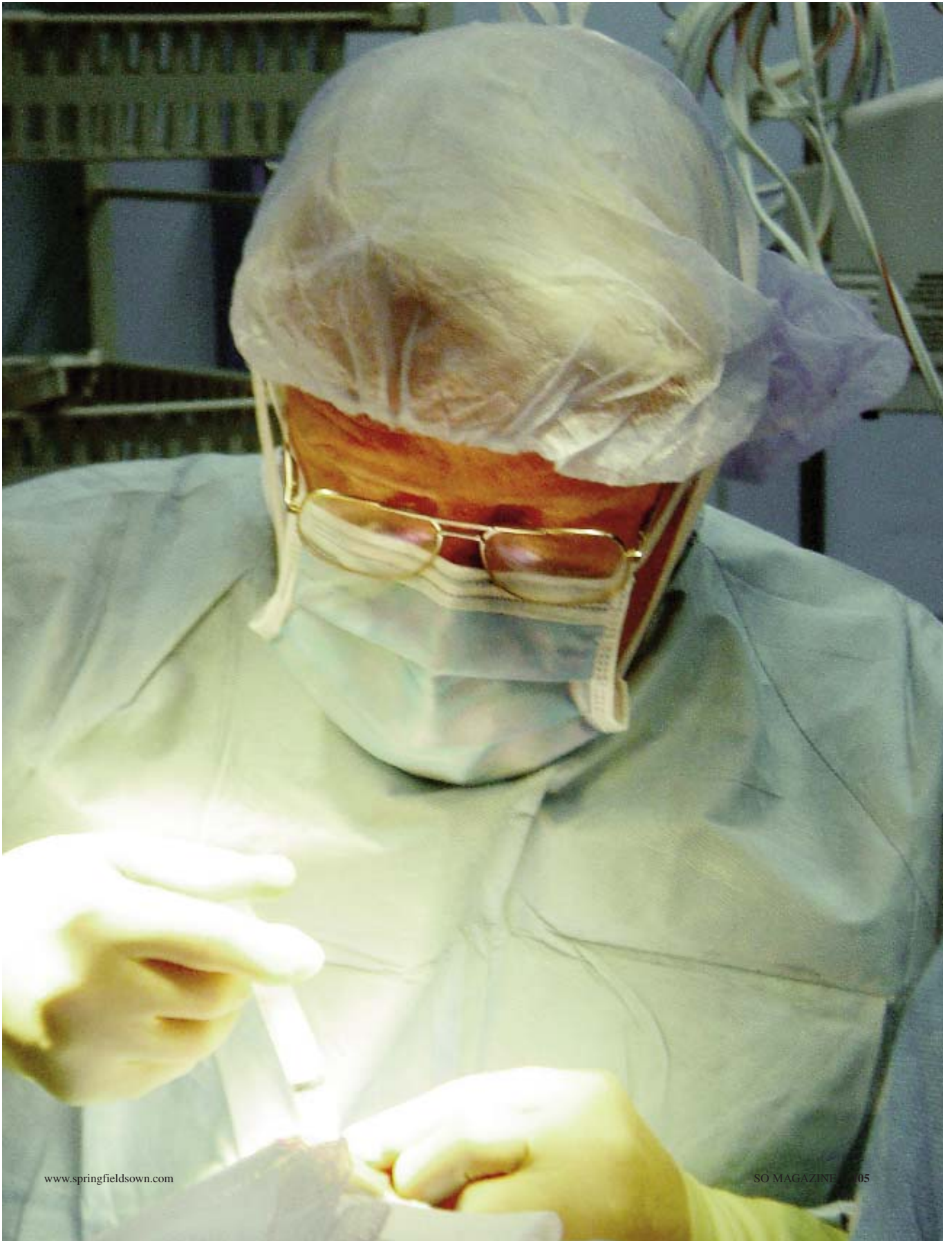
"The O.R. was just like we have here at home, very modern," Russell said.

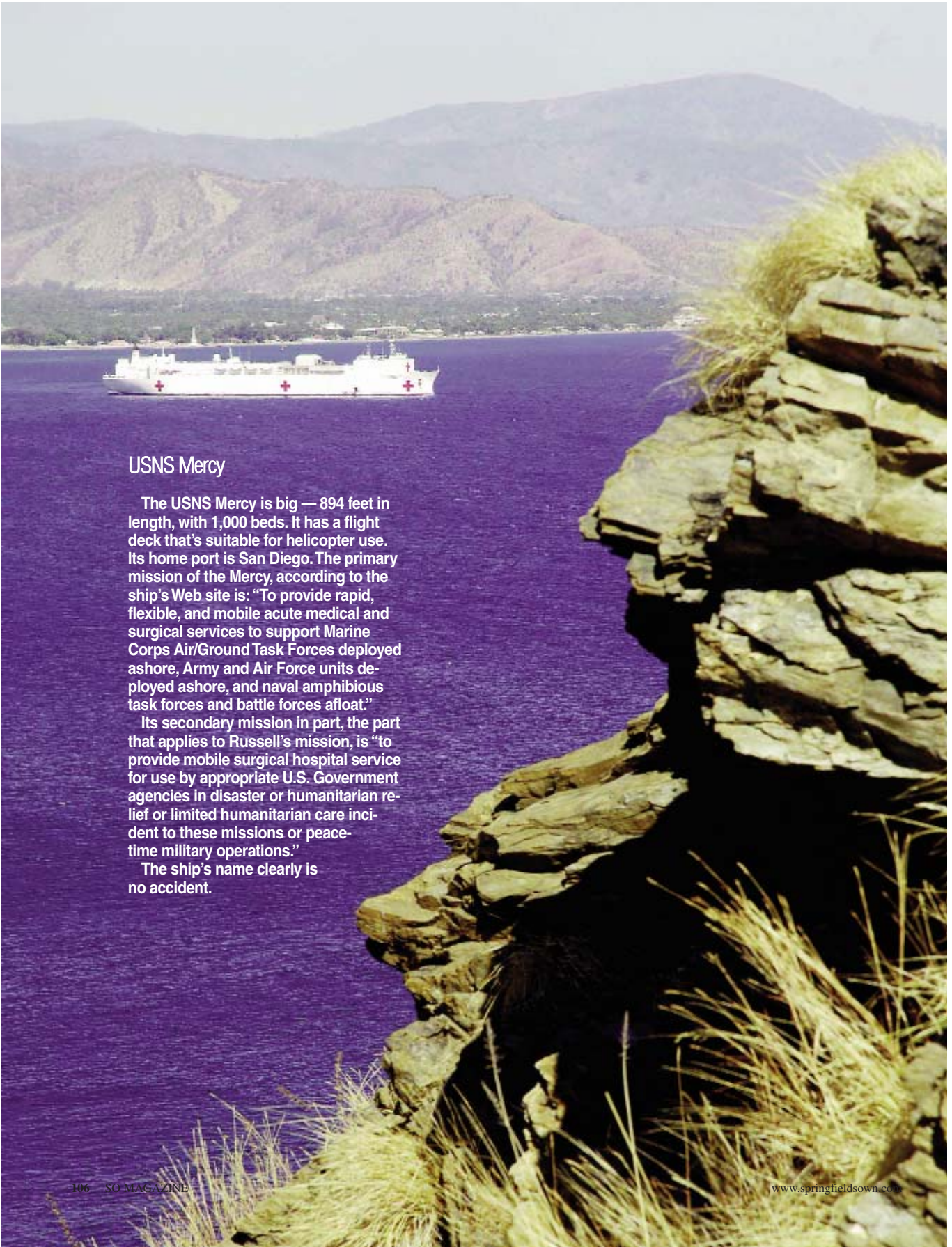
Russell said that the mission was plenty of hard work and not without some necessary precautions.

"Wherever we went, we had armed

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STORY BY JOHN MOODY / PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF BOB RUSSELL





USNS Mercy

The USNS Mercy is big — 894 feet in length, with 1,000 beds. It has a flight deck that's suitable for helicopter use. Its home port is San Diego. The primary mission of the Mercy, according to the ship's Web site is: "To provide rapid, flexible, and mobile acute medical and surgical services to support Marine Corps Air/Ground Task Forces deployed ashore, Army and Air Force units deployed ashore, and naval amphibious task forces and battle forces afloat."

Its secondary mission in part, the part that applies to Russell's mission, is "to provide mobile surgical hospital service for use by appropriate U.S. Government agencies in disaster or humanitarian relief or limited humanitarian care incident to these missions or peacetime military operations."

The ship's name clearly is no accident.

Operation Smile

Changing Lives One Smile at a Time

Operation Smile, according to its Web site, "is a worldwide children's medical charity dedicated to helping improve the lives of children born with cleft lips, cleft palates and other facial deformities."

Founded in 1982 by Dr. William P. Magee Jr., a plastic surgeon, and his wife, Kathleen, a nurse and clinical social worker.

The mission Russell went on was part of the Pacific Partnership 2008. It brought together an international group of physicians, medical students and other health care, security and administrative professionals from a variety of military and civilian backgrounds. The aim was to bring medical and dental care to those in need in the western Pacific and Southeast Asia.

The mission included more than just medical personnel. Veterinarians made the trip to check on animals and advise local people in caring for their animals. Public health water experts were there to assist locals with the quality of their drinking water. There were also skilled craftsmen along who put on building clinics.

In terms of American participation, the Navy, Army, Air Force, U.S. Public Health Service and Reservists all took part. There was a medical crew, security forces, an aircrew with two helicopters, legal, public affairs and even a contingent of the U.S. Navy Band.

To find out about making a donation to Operation Smile or to volunteer, go to www.operationssmile.org.



Guillermo from Nicaragua before and after undergoing surgery to repair his cleft lip.



Images by Jason Towlen/Operation Smile

guards with us, and there was boat circling the Mercy with armed military guards," he said.

The most memorable and satisfying part

for Russell is helping people who really need it.

"These people have nothing," he said. "They try to give you little homemade purs-

es, crazy stuff like that. They are so grateful.

"We're doctors, so we get paid pretty good and all that. So, you're supposed to give something back, not just take." ■

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