

They Said Yes: O&P Answers the Call

by **Sarra Mullen, CP** June 1, 2025 in **Postscript**

When one clinician returned from our first humanitarian camp in Ukraine, they told me, “My heart is full. This is something I’ll never forget.” That sentiment has stayed with me.

What began as a bold idea—sending American clinicians to provide prosthetic care in Ukraine—became one of the most meaningful efforts of my career. Estimates suggest 50,000 to 80,000 Ukrainians have lost upper limbs due to modern warfare. Before the war, only six upper-limb specialists were practicing in Ukraine. The need was urgent.

As a clinician and leader at Aether, a bionic hand manufacturer, I knew we had the tools, expertise, and—if we could rally them—the people to make a difference.

From left: Ben Carlson, CPO, Branch Hunsaker, CPO, and Seth Hills, CP, at a humanitarian camp. Photograph courtesy of Aether Biomedical.

An Idea Becomes Action

We partnered with Superhumans, a leading rehabilitation hospital in Lviv, just across the Polish border. Though they were seeing a surge in patients, they lacked experienced upper-limb clinicians. While initial calls for European volunteers met with hesitation due to the emotional weight of war, outreach to US clinicians brought an outpouring of support.

Over the past year, we hosted four humanitarian camps, sending 13 American clinicians. These volunteers



From left: Ben Carlson, CPO, Branch Hunsaker, CPO, and Seth Hills, CP, at a humanitarian camp. Photograph courtesy of Aether Biomedical.

took time off work, left their families, and stepped into uncertainty to help strangers.

What set this mission apart was its collaborative model. Rather than sending one clinic's internal team, we built a cross-disciplinary coalition from across the prosthetics field. Friends, former colleagues, and even those I barely knew answered the call.

We coordinated logistics from the United States to Poland, where volunteers were trained on our Zeus bionic hand and digital platform. Then, they crossed into Ukraine and got to work. Each camp lasted about two weeks.

By day, clinicians fitted and evaluated patients; by night, they walked a city marked by beauty and war. Air raid sirens were a constant, and hotel basements doubled as bomb shelters. Yet despite the challenges, many volunteers described the experience as transformative—a return to the core of why they chose this profession.

The Power of Technology

Aether's hands are designed for remote adjustment and local repair, allowing continued care even after patients return home or to the front lines. Patients received the same devices used in the United States, with 152 Newtons of grip force and 77-pound carrying capacity.

To date, we've fitted over 50 hands in Ukraine. Some of the most powerful moments came during final fittings, watching someone move or grasp again for the first time.

We continue to support Superhumans with two US technicians in Ukraine and a Polish clinical partner. We plan to resume the US volunteer camps shortly, as clinicians are asking to join.

This project reminded me why I entered this field. Sometimes all it takes is a few people saying yes—and everything can change.

Sarra Mullen, CP, is the chief innovation officer at Aether Biomedical.