

From the Front: Ministry in a War Zone

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As Deputy Chaplain, U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM), I have made a number of trips to CENTCOM's Area of Responsibility (AOR) in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). During a trip last December, I spent the holidays visiting service members and major command components, providing religious ministry. My most recent trip would be very different. Air Force TSGT (Technical Sergeant) Patrick Browning and I were directed to go into the AOR and capture "oral histories" from religious ministry teams in the war zone. The original itinerary did not include Afghanistan because the 26th MEU would have reembarked by the time of my arrival. (We would record their story during a visit on board USS BATAAN (LHD 5).)

As I prepared for the trip, I drew my "combat gear"—not really knowing if I would need it or not. My other professional gear, a tape recorder and audiotapes, I stowed away to avoid damage in the transit. I thought I was prepared for the assignment; I would later realize otherwise.

I went to record the experiences of those who had performed religious ministry in a war zone. While there, I was immersed in ministry myself. My intent in this article is to convey sights, sounds, and images, and to echo what I learned from the soldiers, Sailors, airmen, and Marines at the front. The focus of religious ministry shouldn't be chaplains—it should be our people—for whom I have a new and lasting admiration.

(For security reasons, I have omitted the use of last names to protect those supporting OEF.)

I was never sure what we might discover as we tried to document ministry in a combat zone. We began by visiting the Navy's Fifth Fleet. We also visited the Air Force at a nearby base camp, whose location cannot be disclosed. While visiting the Air Force Religious Ministry Teams (RMTs), we heard our first stories about the war. The chaplain and his assistants spoke about the crew of the Marine C-130 stationed at their base that had

crashed in Afghanistan. It was evident in their faces that the pain, hurt, and loss would not be erased by time—the experience had been seared into their souls.

The next series of oral histories came from the Navy Central Command (NAVCENT) chaplains. There we heard of another chaplain's experience while visiting a ship and doing what so many Navy chaplains do: deckplate ministry. While walking the weather decks of the ship, he came across a young Sailor standing watch at a 50-caliber machine gun. This young Sailor's responsibility was to diligently watch for small boats attempting to come alongside of the ship. He told the chaplain that his orders were to kill anyone on a boat that might make an effort to come alongside. With a pause in speech, the Sailor asked the chaplain, "Sir, if I have to kill that person does that mean I am going to hell?" The chaplain recalled how he was gripped by such a question.

While with NAVCENT in Bahrain, USS THEODORE ROOSEVELT (CVN 71) made its first port visit in 158 days—a Navy record! This port visit created a fortunate opportunity for us to meet with some members of TR's RMT to record their stories.

They highlighted the high spirit and morale of the crew that came from the Sailors knowing that what they were doing was necessary for the good of world peace and security.

From Bahrain, we went to sea to capture the stories of the chaplains assigned to USS BATAAN (LHD 5), along with the chaplains from the 26th MEU. The BATAAN had processed detainees and that (I believed) was a critical part of "the story." In addition, the MEU had been heavily involved in the capture of the airfield at Qandahar—more stories.

Because our time at sea would be short, we moved quickly to meet with the ship's RMT. We learned about the mixed feelings of the crew about having the detainees on board. These feelings included anger and uncertainty: anger toward the

foreign detainees on board—and the one American turned al-Qaeda—uncertainty over their own security with such dangerous people on board. I clearly remember one chaplain expressing his feelings about visiting the American al-Qaeda, for the first time. His anger was evident as he spoke of it; the pain was so real.

Soon after breakfast the next morning, we recorded the MEU chaplain's ministry experience on the ground at Qandahar, Afghanistan. His story included the several memorial services for Marines who had lost their lives in helicopter crashes and in battle.

We returned to Bahrain en route to our next stop: Coalition Force Land Component Command (CFLCC) in Kuwait. Here I began to realize that the days ahead would be even more challenging. I made a call to the Coalition Joint Task Force (CJTF/ Army 10th Mountain) Chaplain located at the airbase in Bagram, Afghanistan, to let him know we were attempting to come his way in the next few days. He told me things were "heating up" and the sooner we could get in the better. An operation would begin soon, which would make it tough to get into the area. I said I would do what I could to get there. The mission shifted from capturing oral histories when he abruptly said, "Ron, I may need your help as a fellow chaplain for a short while and do the oral history interviews later." I assured him that I would do whatever I could to help wherever I could.

We caught a C-12 to Kuwait, gathered the oral histories from the team, and (fortunately) found a military flight out the same day. We were on the ground in Kuwait for only seven hours. While there, word came in that the operation in Afghanistan had begun and our first casualties were being taken. I read the report fresh off the wire in the CFLCC office and knew we had to move quickly. It would become increasingly more challenging to head into Afghanistan. We first would have to go to another base in the AOR, the hub for military flights (Milflts) into Afghanistan.

The RMTs at the Milflts base play a major role in ministry in a war zone. The site is not only a heavy transient area for servicemembers going in and out of the AOR, it is also the Rest and Relaxation (R&R) Center where servicemembers are sent from Afghanistan. Additionally, it holds a large field hospital that can handle major casualties.

This base is where the "friendly fire" casualties from Afghanistan were sent for extensive medical care.

It was here that the Air Force RMT talked about its experience regarding the reality of the war. The chaplain's assistant spoke of running to the plane to help carry a wounded service member to the nearby hospital tent. She said this was the first time she faced the shock of witnessing the results of war. "I will never forget those moments for the rest of my life!" One of the chaplains spoke of attending to one critically injured service member who kept asking him, "Chaplain, am I going to die?" He kept reassuring and prayed with him in an attempt to calm him.

The chaplain's assistant observed that most of the attention was being spent on the more critically injured and she noticed that there was one casualty placed off to one side of the hospital tent. He had bandages over his eyes, having been blinded by a blast. She said that she felt terrible that no one was attending to him so she felt led to go over and just talk to him to calm him. I was moved knowing that while the chaplains were ministering to the severely injured, the assistant had attended to the less critically wounded.

Word came from the Air Transportation Operation Center (ATOC) that a flight for Bagram was going out that evening and we could get on it. Our intention was to get to Bagram first and then backtrack to Qandahar to interview the RMTs there. Soon we were off, with one stop at Qandahar to drop off equipment. I had heard and read of the flights going in and out of country (Afghanistan) at night without lights and soon was reminded of it. A little over two hours into the flight on the C-130, the white lights in the plane went to the red lights and then they were turned out altogether. I noticed that the windows were blocked over with cloth. I could feel the plane beginning its descent and knew that we were nearing the airfield at Qandahar.

Soon we were on the ground. This is where I felt I was beginning not only to capture the history of other chaplains, but to live it myself as well. The back door of the plane opened and I could see very bright lights, much like those that light up a football field. I asked about the lighting and was told by a passenger, "Oh chaplain, that is the detainee camp." I thought I had landed in GTMO! He

reassured me that we were in Qandahar and that there were still several very dangerous detainees held there. I felt a grip in my stomach as I recalled the experiences of the USS BATAAN (LHD 5) Sailors.

Waiting for the plane to take off, we were told by a soldier from the ATOC that some of the passengers would not be able to continue because Special Operation Forces (SOF) troops had to be moved forward. I used the time to record more oral histories from the chaplains assigned with the Army's 101st Division. The chaplains made our very cold stay that night in the terminal at Qandahar somewhat warmer by sharing their MREs and hot chocolate. I shall ever be grateful to them.

I "worked" the ATOC all night to get a flight out the next day. A C-17 heading to Bagram was due to arrive by midmorning. We would be ready. While standing near the ATOC where passengers waited, I was told we would be going in with some 80 SOF troops. As I stood there, a Chief Warrant Officer walked up and introduced himself. He was Navy Special Forces. We had talked a moment when his leading team chief came up. The CWO grabbed the team chief in a bear hug, pulled him close and told him, "Hey bud, sorry to bear the news, we lost two of ours last night in the battle. Go ahead and get the word out to the guys."

With that, the team chief's eyes and head dropped as if he was in shock and he slowly moved away to brief his team. It caught me off guard. I remember simply lowering my head and immediately praying for the families of those lost.

The C-17 landed and the team chief came to me and asked me to hop in the jeep for the ride out to the plane. Once we got out to the plane, he asked me to wait there until he came for me. The 80 SOF troops were lined up in single file. Finally, the signal came and the team chief called for me to come to his position. As I walked alongside him towards the door of the plane, he put his arm around me, pulled my ear towards his mouth and hollered (due to the plane engines): "Sir, we need you to pray for us as we are headed into a place tougher than hell!" I replied, "I have already been lifting you all up in prayer and will pray all the way with you to Bagram!" His thanks were simple and sincere.

We strapped in and the plane taxied. As we were lifting off the ground, I looked around the plane at 80 guys headed to battle—for most the first in their life—and I dropped my head to offer yet more prayer for their safety. As the wheels finally cleared the ground, I heard one SOF member begin to sing out "The Star Spangled Banner." Within seconds, the entire plane was singing the National Anthem. I was speechless. Moved to tears, I found myself singing along with them.

Our plane landed in Bagram about an hour later. As we got off the plane, the beauty of the huge snow-capped mountains surrounding the area



astounded me. I wondered how such evil could have existed in such a beautiful area.

As we made our way towards the ATOC, I began to see the real results of a country engaged in a prolonged war. Many of the buildings and houses were destroyed—most during the Soviet engagement in Afghanistan. An Army chaplain met us at the ATOC to take us to the CJTF Chaplain's Office. We had just left the ATOC, headed down a dirt path, when a huge explosion erupted behind me. I was grabbing for my battle gear, thinking we were taking "incoming," when the chaplain said, "Hey Ron, don't worry, that happens every day about this time, they are blowing up live mines."

We made our way to the Chaplain's Office, stopping off first at "Motel Six" where the post office and transient quarters were located. It was a bombed and burned out building they had fixed up for field offices and sleeping quarters—plywood boards placed over windows and plywood doors to keep the weather out.

We arrived in Bagram during Operation Anaconda. Many of the wounded and dead were being

brought back from the battle. Those with minor wounds returned to their units to prepare to redeploy into the battle. Many of their comrades who had not gone with them into combat were eager to get into the battle to taste the experience of war. It was interesting to hear the advice being offered by those who had just returned to those who were begging to go. The experienced warned the inexperienced not to wish for things when they had no idea what the end result would be. "You have no idea what you are asking for," was the comment of one soldier from the Army's 101st Division.

The chaplains at Bagram talked of long nights and short days without much sleep. I could see it on their faces; the fatigue was obvious. They spoke of praying with groups before they went into combat and of meeting with the wounded.

I remember the night hours in the camp at Bagram. It was hard to sleep, helicopters were coming and going constantly. If you tried to sleep, you did so with earplugs in your ears to tone down the noise of the choppers overhead.

As we were preparing to depart the camp to head home, the Catholic chaplain assigned with the 101st Division told me he had just been to the morgue to pray over the seven dead Americans who were brought in from the field. Only a few people were allowed in the room. He recalled that the unit chaplain (Special Forces) was there with him. The unit chaplain called each one by his first name. He felt the need to pray for each one of his comrades and friends.

During this mission, we captured over 900 minutes of oral history on tape. Many soldiers and

Sailors asked me. "Sir, what are they saying about us back home?" I could see the concern in their eyes and hear it in their voices, wondering if Americans would forget 9/11 and the reason they are fighting the enemy. I assured them that America had not forgotten September 11. "Americans are moved by your commitment to our country. You are not forgotten."

I have a renewed and enhanced respect for the young men and women serving our country today. Without exception, they demonstrate a tremendous pride in this country. The Sailors, soldiers, airmen, and Marines I met on the ships and on the ground in the AOR are real heroes. God bless them all.



Chaplain Craddock (right), permanently assigned to the Joint Forces Staff College, has been deployed to CENTCOM due to the War on Terrorism.