

I am an Army Chaplain serving in the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division. At the beginning of January 2007 the President of the United States ordered the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne's Second Brigade to be the first unit in the Operation Surge Mission to Baghdad during Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) V.

Initially I served in the Green Falcons, BSTB Support battalion at Camp Taji, Iraq. That particular battalion consisted of Military Intelligence, Communications, Military Police, Engineers and Headquarters Support Personnel. I had many good memories with those serving in that unit in the early months of our deployment. I developed friendships with many that will last a lifetime.

In April I was ordered by my Brigade chaplain to move forward to an Infantry unit in the thick of the fight in Baghdad. I was honored to have been considered for the position, yet I approached the new assignment with some trepidation. I knew that what was being asked of me would have challenges; I had no idea that the road I was to walk with this unit in the coming year would forever change my life.

I was assigned to the "White Falcons" 2-325 Airborne Infantry Regiment. This unit has a proud and elite historical heritage stemming back to World War II. It has been involved in the center of many historical battles wherein its Paratroopers have played a major role in securing our nations freedom during significant junctions in history. This too was a critical time for our country and the security of Iraq. Saddam Hussein had been executed, sectarian violence in the Sunni and Shiite neighborhoods was at its height, Muqtada Al Sadir – who controls Sadir City (approx 3 and a half million people) was openly at war with American and Coalition Forces, Iran was said to be producing weapons for Al Sadir used to fight Americans. On the Western side of Baghdad, in the Adamijah neighborhood was the Sunni section which had many of the former members of the Baath party openly fighting our American units. Lastly, was Osama Bin Laden's Al Qaida network trying to gain a foothold in the neighborhoods and openly rally the Muslim people against the West. It was in the middle of all this the 2-325 Airborne Infantry Regiment was ordered to live, engage the enemy and restore order for the Iraqi people.

For me, this was a very challenging and historical year in ministry in the Chaplain Corps. I served at the Combat Outpost at COP Callahan in the Shaab neighborhood Baghdad, just outside of Sadir City with an Airborne Infantry Battalion that sat in the center of the fight and at the tip of the spear. I was the lone chaplain for 1500 Airborne Infantry Troopers and their Task Force.

The 2-325 occupied an abandoned mall on the outskirts of Sadir City. It was named Combat Outpost Callahan based on the last name of the first Paratrooper killed in our unit during the initial fight.

Infantry Soldiers were a different breed of Service men than who I was accustomed to working with. Their surroundings were austere and often deadly. Their duties demanded a mental, emotional and physical toughness that far surpassed anything I had ever seen or experienced. Yet I was surprised to learn that many of them were devoted Christians. Their faith was simple yet profoundly committed. It's amazing to me how clear one's theology can be in a foxhole. Living with these men in the middle of a heated war zone carried me through an education and spiritual growth that I never received while at seminary. The road of an Infantry Soldier in war is filled with suffering and hardship.

As I walked the war torn streets with these men, I initially gained their respect when they saw I walked with them as a chaplain without a weapon. One SGT said to me after we finished a patrol, "Chaplain, the boys and I were talking about you out here without a weapon; we either think you're crazy or you have a lot of faith. We'd like to believe the latter. None the less we respect that you have come with us."

I don't view myself as overly brave. Quite honestly, there were many times I was terrified. I simply made it my daily prayer to follow my flock and lead by example. Having an Infantry flock demanded I walk with them on the field of battle. It was the assignment God gave me. I simply tried to be faithful.

These men taught me many things about courage. Regarding my faith these men taught me to stand bold. I'll never forget one occasion when a wounded Soldier was brought to the Aide Station. He was missing an arm and leg. He was yelling in pain. I told him, "Be strong Soldier, God is here. May I pray with you?" He shook his head and I started to pray... "Dear Lord..." No sooner did I start praying than the Soldier grabbed me hard with his good arm and pulled me to his face. He screamed back at me as blood from his lips splattered across my face...."SAY JESUS CHAPLAIN! YOU MUST SAY JESUS!" I responded back, "You are exactly right Soldier...Dear JESUS, be with this Soldier now...In JESUS NAME, Amen!" Sometimes the political winds demand we water our faith down. It was a young wounded Soldier, who gave his very body for our country, to teach me to be strong in my faith and proclaim the name that the Bible says "is above every name."

It is with mixed feelings of sacred honor and sorrow to say that I was with nearly every wounded in Action and Killed in Action Soldier in our unit during this deployment. I was on the streets or in the Aide Station when one of our boys went down. I was the last voice they would hear as I would whisper a prayer in their ear before they were placed on a helicopter bird to a hospital in the States or before they slipped into eternity. Many of our young men paid the ultimate price for freedom. The words of the Apostle John take a deeper dimension when I read, "Greater love has no man than this, than that he lay down his life for his friends." It was young American Soldiers that gave me the deepest and most profound reflection on the selfless love of Christ; it was a costly love that he paid with His life.

Our Aide Station has some of the best combat medics and trauma doctors I have ever seen. I was fortunate in the initial period to earn a place at their table. We have an American Army Officer Doctor who is Muslim by faith. He watched me as the first casualties came in. I positioned myself at the head of the patients – out of the way of the staff, calmly whispering prayers and words of comfort in the ears of the wounded. After a few incidents, this doctor told me, "Chaplain, it's interesting to me that the prayers that you pray for these wounded have a better calming effect than the morphine I give them .I want you to know that you are always welcome as a part of our team." I took that as a real compliment and I give God the glory. His presence was always there and always felt. It is in times when suffering is greatest that the ancient text carry the most powerful impact and His presence is strongest felt, "Yea though I walk through the valley of the Shadow of death, I will fear no evil...FOR YOU ARE WITH ME!" The comfort is in knowing that God goes with us in every circumstance.

The time for our unit to return to the States is coming soon. My heart and prayers extend to all the friends and families of those who were killed. My prayers extend to our wounded and their families. I will be returning home soon with these brave, young American warriors who have fought the good fight. They are men of honor. Many of them, like myself, will carry memories and emotions that are too powerful to share. It will impact us forever. Yet I am proud to report that the next generation of Americans still carries heroes. As long as our country has men and woman like this-we still have bright days to come. It has been my pleasure and a true honor to be their chaplain. I walked with these Warriors where most will only read about. Through this experience God has deepened my faith. When the history books are written; my hope is that new upcoming chaplains will see the importance and sacred trust in their spiritual roles and that others will see the dire need for chaplains to be present. To God be the glory and may God continue to bless the United States of America.

Respectfully submitted

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