

CH (CPT) KEN BOLIN

Report from deployment to Iraq

Chaplain Bolin is a West Point graduate, and former Army infantry commander in the Iraq war. Ken graduated from Dallas Theological Seminary as a Bible Churches Chaplaincy Ch Candidate and via our endorsement has entered the active duty Army again as a chaplain. Drawing on his experience as a line officer and now as a chaplain, Ken is sharing with prayer partners his experiences and insights in ministry while deployed to the Baghdad area of Iraq with a Military Intelligence Battalion.

Warren Dane, Ch, Lt Colonel, USAF (Ret.) BCC Director of Chaplaincy

20 October 2007

Greetings to you in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. As the subject line says, this will be my last update from Iraq. I know that my last one prior to this was late in September, so please forgive me for the lag; this last month has been very, very busy. Thankfully, God has been very gracious to us, and has kept everyone safe. As my last update said, my traveling days here are done. Although I don't necessarily like being stuck here "inside the wire," it is nice to know that the next time I leave it will be to begin the trip home. With these last few weeks, I've been busy paying special attention to some different things. I spent some time with all of the leadership, identifying those Soldiers that we could qualify as "high-risk". Although I can't reveal details as to why they might be so categorized, it's important that we recognize who may need special attention when we get back. Unfortunately, we've had more divorces than I care to recount, although not so many that I couldn't count them all).

Relationship issues abound. Work and career issues abound, sometimes tied to legal issues, but not always. Others are going home struggling with the grief of either brothers-in-arms having died, or having to confront the fact that dear family members are now gone. There aren't many from our unit going home with PTSD from my perspective, but I'm also not a mental health professional (I'm a caregiver for souls). Over the first 90 days or so back in Washington, however, we'll truly see how people adjust to being back in the USA.

My replacement, however, arrived here about a week ago. He and his unit came from Fort Bragg, North Carolina. It's great to see another chaplain come in. Fortunately for me, he is a more experienced chaplain than I am. He actually pinned on his cross as a chaplain back in 2001, serving in Fort Drum, New York, as well as in Korea (the land of his birth). He is a man with a pastor's heart, and he loves his Soldiers. For his part, he's been with his unit for nearly a year already, so when they deployed, he already knew his people and many of their problems. When new units come in, they get normally between one and two weeks to get accustomed to being here. That being said, the chaplain's hand-off usually takes about half that time. Because of his experience and maturity, though, we were able to get our hand-off done in about four and a half days, which was great. It is still a bit hard to let go of the mission, though, knowing that what was once my area of responsibility is now his. At the same time, though, it's also a good feeling.

It's truly hard to believe that this odyssey is nearly over. In a week, I'll either be back at home or moving in the right general direction to being there. 435 days since our official arrival in theater of 12 August 2006 seems like an eternity ago. In one way, it's hard to imagine not waking up to the same surroundings every day. When I talk with my replacement, I have to keep in mind that he and his Soldiers came into the theater of operations last month already knowing that their stay was going to be around 15 months, as opposed to the normal year that many of us used to look forward to. To be perfectly honest with you, I don't think I'll really let it sink in until we get on a commercially-chartered passenger airliner down in Kuwait to begin the long flight back to Washington. Then I'll be able to take off my boots, relax my feet, and walk around to check on my troops in relative ease, knowing that we are no longer in the danger of combat. As my commander has reminded some of our folks, though, we can't just stop at that point. I, and we, will have to continue to work, just shifting our focus. Instead of

focusing on combat operations, it will be the process of returning to a level of readiness, first personally, and then professionally, that will allow us to deploy again at any point in the future, should our country need us to.

With that last part said, I will be preaching my final message twice tomorrow, 21 October. I've done quite a bit more preaching in this first year than I understand many of my peers have. I've written at length about that previously, so I'll not belabor it here. I hope and pray that God continues to use me for His glorious purposes. As my final note of this last update, I have a couple special prayer requests.

First, I ask that you would continue to pray for our country. This doesn't just encompass our troops, although they are assuredly part of that request. The fact of the matter is, though, that the military is, and always has been, the long arm of our policy-makers. So, from the President on down to the lowest Team Leader, I ask for you to pray for our leaders, for wisdom and discernment, that they would seek the Lord's will, rather than asking Him to bless their own personal wills. May God also divinely reach out and protect not only the 319th Military Intelligence Battalion (our replacements), but every service-member everywhere around the world, as they are true servants of their country, fulfilling their duties and obeying those over them as described in Romans 13:1-7.

My second prayer request is much more personal, and I earnestly ask it. As I've helped many Soldiers through hard times over here, I have been blessed that the Lord has watched closely over my family. Here in this last week of the deployment, though, it seems as though our turn has come. Our 4-year old, Paige, for those who know her and for those who don't, is extremely ill right now. She is very prone to ear infections, and came down with a rather bad one a couple weeks ago. Since we knew she was allergic to penicillin products, the doctors tried a different antibiotic. It worked for a while, and then she had to go back on it when she got an ear infection in her other ear. Evidently, something happened, though, and she developed an extreme allergic reaction to this new antibiotic. She has developed Henoch-Schoenleih Purpura, which the doctors told Sharon is a one in a million type of diagnosis, and they've never seen a case so severe as hers. It's caused extreme swelling over parts of her body, gotten into her blood vessels and joints, and has made it very difficult for her to even walk at times.

She wasn't admitted to the hospital, because there's nothing they can do for her; it must run its course. So Sharon is staying home from her Reserve Drill this weekend to watch over here. If blood shows up in her bodily excretions, then it may have hit her kidneys (and potentially other organs), and we'll be in big trouble if that happens. We dearly covet your prayers for Paige, her safety and healing. I do not even want to imagine having to come home to the potential loss of one of our little ones.

Thank you for reading. Thank you for praying. Thank you for joining me, albeit from a distance, during the course of this long deployment. I look forward to the return. I pray that God continues to watch over each and every one of you, and that your desires would be shaped to follow His will.

May the Lord bless you and keep you. May He make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you. May He look upon you with His favor, and grant you His peace, Amen (Numbers 6:24-26).

24 September 2007

Greetings to you this day, another day given us by the Lord. I hope and pray that God has continued to watch over each and every one of you, and that you daily see God's hand at work in your life. There is nothing more inspiring than to see prayers answered and know that God is with you.

Before I go any further, let me clarify something that may have been confusing, or even alarming, from

my last message. I made some statements about how I feel regarding America. I stands by those statements; they are my feelings inside. What that does not mean is that I am resentful or feel superior to those who feel differently. I am very thankful to my family and friends for a wonderful childhood, and for a good family life now in the USA. America has changed, even in my short lifetime. Even 20 years ago, America was more aligned with the "idea that is America," which I mentioned in my last update, than it is right now. I am disturbed by how things are going in America now, today, but I also know that God has me right where He wants me. I am proud of the uniform that I wear each day, and I love my family, friends, and Soldiers. I am doing what I am supposed to be doing. I hope that this clears things up a bit.

As far as the last 10 days or so, I have taken my last trip to visit Soldiers; I am done traveling on this deployment. It's a good feeling. I was down south last week in the city of Diwaniyah for a few days. It was a very pleasant visit, although it's a bit hotter down there than it is here. One civilian woman I spoke with said that she knows it's going to be a cool, wet winter this year, because it only hit 150 F one day this summer. Yes, that's right, she said only one day at 150 F or above. Up here in Baghdad, the hottest it got was about 120 F, give or take a couple degrees. So, there's a difference. Our ride back to Baghdad, though, was a great ending to our travels. The crew chief in the Blackhawk we were riding in told us to take off our helmets, and he gave my assistant and I the extra headsets that they keep for VIPs. So, we rode along listening to the flight crew and other air traffic, flying with no helmets at a few hundred feet off the ground for the couple hours of flight time it took us to get back to Baghdad. What a great flight!

With less than 30 days to go, all we have left ahead of us is to finish up the packing and cleaning, and then give all of our folks their formal redeployment and reunion briefings. It's a good feeling, but what it means is that there is really a lot to do, and not a whole lot of time left to do it in. Our replacements should be in Kuwait sometime this week, and coming up here in a couple weeks. It's going to be a whirlwind from here on out. I should have two more updates to send out to all of you before I head back to Washington. Stay in touc, and please keep us, and our replacements, in prayer.

16 September 2007

My brothers and sisters, family and friends, I am very thankful for you, especially on a day like today. As we crossed that small, yet seemingly important mark of 400 days here in the Southwest Asia theater of operations, I again realize how blessed I am, and how much God pushes me to grow.

I've been traveling again, having had three trips since my last update. For the first time this entire deployment, I actually got stuck somewhere when a windstorm came through and helicopters couldn't get to my location. The weird thing was that it wasn't one of those big sandstorms that people sometimes imagine, what we would call a "shamal". It was just a little bit breezy, but there was a lot of sand up in the air; it made the entire sky appear light brown or orange. Those types of conditions can be very localized at times, too. For instance, on this particular occasion, helicopters still flew, but they just didn't stop in the one place I happened to be at that day. So, my last trip begins tomorrow. I'll be for the better part of the coming week, visiting some folks that I really haven't seen since June. It'll be the end of my "farewell tour," also. When I get back, I'm staying in, getting all of the redeployment briefings ready, packing up all my belongings, shipping things out, and generally getting ready to welcome in my replacement in a little less than a month. What a lovely thought.

All of this coming transition, though, has had me thinking about a great many things. I've been taking stock of my time here, looking to see how much or how little I've actually grown during this time. Looking at the suffering that I've seen and heard of. I've wondered about what God has done with me,

what good He's used me for, as well as what I've done to get in the way of His using me more. I believe that some of my Soldiers have thought about similar things, but obviously not from a vocational ministry perspective.

As I've mentioned before, my Soldiers continue to grow more and more aware of spiritual things, and often engage me in conversations about spiritual topics. Sometimes they are serious issues, but at other times, they are issues that truly aren't issues, but just points of curiosity. For instance, during my latest trip, one of my younger Soldiers asked about praying for food. He took it as a given that we pray before every meal, but he wondered if it was equally permissible to just simply pray over your entire shopping cart at the grocery store, and thereby cover all of your food at the same time. We chuckled about the question, and I explained that it's not necessarily the existence of food that we're praying for, but rather the meal that it provides for us. On a bigger point, though, since he was looking for ways to save time, there are better areas of our lives that we can address in an effort to save time other than cutting back on the time we give, be it small or large, to prayer.

On a very personal note, I've done some personal spiritual questioning, as well. I'm still working my way through John Piper's "Suffering and the Sovereignty of God," which is quite a wonderful book. What I've come to realize for myself is that our suffering is relative, based on what our lives are like, and it's customized to our own predilections. This is kind of like Jesus' speech about marriage and divorce, in which he gives the "exception clause" in Matthew 19, but Mark doesn't record it in His gospel. All four of the Gospels had different audiences and different aims, but God challenges us all. He allowed for the inclusion of that clause in Matthew's writing because of the Hebrew approach to divorce, but not in Mark's work, which was aimed more at the Greeks and Romans. Challenges and suffering work in the same manner here. I've thought about what challenges I've faced, and wondered about the fact that I don't really suffer in many ways. That is an absolutely true statement.

Over the last few years, I've become a bit disillusioned with things in America. That disillusionment becomes exacerbated when I am overseas, especially here in the Middle East, where you can see people doing their very worst to one another, where poverty is rampant and orphaned children swarm to Soldiers for anything. I love "the idea that is America" (I put it in quotes because there is now a book out by the same name), but I don't like America very much at all anymore. Now, I am a military member, a chaplain in the US Army. I am a part of a subculture that has chosen its own distinct set of values (Loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, personal courage - LDRSHIP) that appear to be very high, indeed. Based on consistent evidence, though, the Army is still a microcosm of the American culture overall, with all of the same trappings, violations of integrity, and workplace politics. At times, it has made me physically ill. To be completely honest, I went so far as to legitimately investigate the option of transferring to the New Zealand Army to be a chaplain for them. They are formally recruiting US military service-members, to include chaplains. Due to my military service obligations, though, I cannot do so. Since then, I have realized that this is part of the "thorn in my side". I cannot always choose the environment in which I will minister. I had a choice to make, which I finally made on a mountain top back in 2003. I chose to follow God's calling and direction. Sometimes, I suffer because of the words, actions, or attitudes of others. That is beyond my control. I wear an Army uniform, but I am a servant of God, first and foremost. He has allowed me to be where I am. I once heard a senior chaplain say that if there is anything else in the world that you can do other than this, then go do it. Only be a chaplain if that is the only thing in the world that God will allow you to do. I think it complements well the statement by another chaplain that lamented the fact that being a chaplain was the only thing God saw fit to use him for, and that he hadn't been used to actually do more.

I am where I am because God put me here, and He knows best where to use me. Sometimes, the

geography of my situation drives me nuts, but I know that will place me where he wants me when he wants me there. Who knows, perhaps someday God will use me for something more, something with greater impact upon not only individual people, but the nation or the world. Only God knows, and only time will tell.

I will sign off for now. May God continue to watch over all of you, guiding you in the right path for His glory and for your benefit.

5 September 2007

Well, things keep progressing here, and I thank God for that, and for the prayers that I know you have been sending to the Lord on our behalf. We've gone far over the one year mark, and we are still safe and protected here in Iraq, with no combat-related deaths and only one partial leg amputation (and that man is actually doing remarkably well).

On the personal side, I am doing very well, though more than ready to be back at home with Sharon and the kids. The ministry here is draining me more emotionally these days, as family problems for some of my Soldiers are picking up. It's amazing how such a thing as an extension here will be enough of an excuse for some spouses to just give up on their marriages. People are always looking for excuses it seems to do something wrong to each other. It's really very sad. So, I find myself pouring more into some Soldiers now than I have in the past, and some days, it just sucks the life right out of me. Fortunately, I have a God who turns around and fills me right back up again.

I continue to travel to see my Soldiers. I tell them that I'm on the farewell tour. Each place that I go now, it's the last time that I'll visit that location here in Iraq, even though for a few places, it's still the first time that I've been to that location. I can honestly say that I love to travel over here, as hot as it gets at times. For some helicopter rides, we have the doors closed and windows in, and for others, we have the windows out. I can see helicopters flying over head some days with doors open, but I never seem to be able to get on one of those. Oh well. I can say that being up there with wind moving quickly inside the helicopter is better than being on the ground when it hits 100 at 0830 and is still 100 at 8 at night. It makes for some long, hot days.

As I noted a few weeks ago, maybe even a couple months ago, the longer we are here, the more conversations turn to spiritual things. I've found a few more atheists around (there actually are atheists in foxholes). I have no problem with them on a personal level, I would ask you to pray for their salvation, though. As Soldiers, they are closer to death than many other people, and I am concerned for them. I've seen the seeds of faith planted in different circumstances over here, but the Lord has not yet allowed me to see any of those seeds sprout and bloom into a new believer over here. I do know that 3 of my Soldiers did actually come to faith and get baptized, but they were far up north, detached from us and working for another unit. I praise God for their experience here. It's an amazing blessing sometimes to be pulled away from all of the distractions of Western culture. It helps one to focus and think about true priorities.

Well, the chapel programs here continue to grow. We typically have 25-30 in our morning chapel service, and about 20 in our evening service. To be honest, we're nearly at capacity. It's an encouraging thing, with civilians worshipping alongside Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine personnel. Frequently, we also have Iraqi-born US citizens who have returned here as interpreters. I am meeting more and more of them these days, Assyrian Christians and Chaldean Christians. Many of the Assyrians were born up north, in the Kirkuk or Mosul areas, while the Chaldeans were born down south, normally near Basra. Their cultures are so ancient, and I love talking with them. As much as I love my family and

miss them, I am thankful for the opportunities and experiences God has given me over here.

Well, we have less than 50 days to go. Our replacements are in their final stages of preparation back in the US. I speak with my replacement over email once or twice a week, and he seems to be grateful for all of the information that I've passed to him. I do pray that I've done everything I could to adequately prepare him, and that God will protect them as they leave friends and family for their 15 months here in Iraq.

I will sign off for now. I do thank you again for your love and friendship. Your prayers have been invaluable, and I covet them still. May God continue to bless you all and guide you in His will, for your joy and for His glory.

27 August 2007

Brothers and sisters,

Greetings to you in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. I realize it's been nearly a month since my last update, and I apologize for that, knowing that I don't communicate nearly often enough with many of you. The last few weeks have been busy, filled with blessings, and rife with challenges, as well.

Just after my last update, we said farewell to our Reservists, the men and women of Company C, 373rd Military Intelligence Battalion (US Army Reserve). Major Shawn Watts took his soldiers back to Washington to demobilize and return to their friends and families. It was, and is, a hard thing to do, to say goodbye to people, especially when our bonding has been in the combat zone. I consider Shawn and some of his soldiers to be good friends now, and I hope to hear from them in the future. As part of the farewell, we held an awards ceremony and a battalion party with band and homemade ice cream (thanks to my parents and hometown of Manlius, IL, who provided the ice cream makers and ingredients). A couple days later, we put them on busses and waved goodbye as they left for Baghdad International Airport.

Ever since then, things have been a whirlwind of activity. For me, those reservists were the main focus for the month of July. I didn't travel; I stuck around Camp Slayer to ensure that last minute issues got addressed, as well as to give them their redeployment preparation briefings. I enjoyed the time, but I go a little stir-crazy if I spend too much time cooped up. Once they departed, I began to travel with my assistant again. During the time of transition in which we sent them home, we also assumed command and control of another unit's mission, as well as their soldiers. So now, I have responsibilities from the city of Taji, just north of Baghdad, all the way down to the Kuwaiti border in the British-controlled territory of Basra and south of that. Essentially, I'm now covering the Military Intelligence Brigade's resources across the southern half of Iraq. I like it, because I like to travel.

So travel I do. My assistant, SGT Wallace, will go do anything that our mission requires, but he doesn't especially enjoy flying. Although it's faster, safer, and more convenient than a ground convoy, you have to have a lot of tolerance for flying. That's something that he sometimes doesn't have, and we joke about it. It became particularly pronounced when we flew with the Brits way down south. The pilots seemed content to fly in the right general direction of our destination, but they flew low and fast, with frequent banks, rapid ascents and descents, and anything else that would make them a hard target. This made our helicopter rides feel more like roller coaster rides. Fortunately for me, I rather enjoy roller coasters, so I had a wonderful time.

The Brits are an unusual set of folks. They address chaplains as "Padre", so that's what I got called for about a week this month while I was down south. It was kind of nice, to be honest. Ironically, between a fixed-wing flight and a helicopter flight, a young private grabbed me with, "Padre, do you have a few minutes for me to talk with you." After that, we proceeded to spend the next 4-5 hours discussing various personal issues. I thank God that He has a use for me everywhere I go. There are times when I feel pretty useless, but He lets me know when I'm in the right place.

So, in addition to visiting soldiers that we've just taken control of, we are also on our farewell tour, visiting our other locations for the last time during the deployment. Just a couple weeks ago, SGT Wallace and I participated in our last convoy of the deployment. We went out to one our closer locations on the banks of the Tigris river, and upon return, had a small verbal celebration back at the office. We still have a half dozen trips ahead of us, but they are all by air. Praise be to God, another benchmark is down.

So, we have approximately 58 days until we are free to begin leaving. Our extra extension pay has kicked in, and we feel as though we're getting close. To be quite blunt, these two items are the only things keeping morale afloat in our unit at this time. Personal problems that hadn't come up before are beginning to hit soldiers squarely in the face, and we're spending a lot of time trying to help them deal with, and potentially recover, those situations. In that regard, I'm very, very thankful for the presence of other chaplains back at Fort Lewis, as well as my wife. Sharon and I knew from day one that ours was a shared ministry, and because of our previous military experience, we have a calling to work with and help military marriages and families as they deal with the hardships of deployment, and the problems that deployments uncover in marriages.

My biggest single concern, and the area in which I request your greatest prayer, is for leaders. I genuinely like about 99% of the people that meet and / or work with. I still do, but some people truly don't realize when they allow life circumstances to influence their attitudes, they greatly impact the mindsets of everyone else around them. Specifically, when leaders don't deal well with the stress of the combat zone, they can harm the entire unit, and each individual person in it.

So, this is how things have gone for us recently, as well as my biggest concern at this point. I am thankful and blessed for all that's happened, and I ask that God would grow me and foster within me a continuously strengthening hunger for Him and the righteousness that comes from a deep relationship with Him.

May God bless each and every one of you, and may He watch over you and your families, as He has been watching over me and mine,

1 August 2007

I apologize for the length of time since my last emailed update. The last couple weeks have been very long, and very hectic.

For the last couple weeks, we've been spending a large amount of time preparing our Reservists, 72 of them, for their return to home, to friends and family. It's rough at times, considering the fact that we would all be going home right now, if not for the extension. So, between classes, briefings, and counselings, we've spent a lot of time with a lot of people. Today we had the award ceremony for those Soldiers, to honor them for their service. After that, we had a battalion party, sort of a send-off for them. It was a very long day, and that didn't even include counseling sessions. As those Soldiers finish up their time here, some of them are bitter about what they did and did not accomplish. Some of them

are angry because they don't feel as though they received an award commensurate with the work, dedication, and results that they brought about here in Iraq. And others are simply tired of dealing with the same people and the same problems. You see, they've been together, away from home, for 15 months now. They left home in May 2006, three months before the actual deployment. We'll stay three months after they leave. For our unit, it all works out very equitably, with everyone being away from home for 15 months.

Thus, I have a lot more counseling sessions, it seems. Last week was my busiest week of the entire deployment with regards to counseling. One of the young NCOs in that company of Reservists last night commented that he wondered how I did it. How is it that a chaplain can just take everyone else's "stuff" and be able to help people? My response to that is pretty simple. It all comes back to paying attention and taking care of yourself, spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and physically. For a lot of Soldiers, what they want is to be heard; they want to know that someone cares about what they think and feel. The chain of command has enough to do with mission accomplishment. A great leader will ensure that his or her Soldiers know that they are cared for, but in the combat zone, the leader can often get overwhelmed with "making things happen." Enter the chaplain, and the combat stress team.

Our roles are complimentary, but it all goes back to Soldier-care. For some Soldiers, what they need, if you will forgive the expression, is a bit of a case of "diarrhea of the mouth." They need to get everything off of their chest, to vent, to be heard. Spending every waking moment around the same people for over a year, especially people that you didn't choose to spend that time with, can be difficult, frustrating, and aggravating. So, a lot of Soldiers go to the chaplain as a safe place to get everything out.

There are times when Soldiers want help solving a problem, but those are less frequent. Sometimes they just want advice, and then sometimes they want intervention. Of course, that can be difficult to mix with the legal requirement of confidentiality, or privileged communication, that goes along with being a member of the clergy. Most of the time, though, I can convince a Soldier to go to their chain of command themselves about the issue. Sometimes they come to me without ever having gone to their chain of command, so I remind them that their chain can't fix the problem if they don't know about the problem. If that's not the case, though, then they usually end up giving me permission to discuss at least a part of their issue with the chain.

With all of that said, our Reservists are doing ok as they prepare to leave. Some of them have rarely, if ever, left the FOB, but some of them have been through some pretty horrific events that they will choose to share with others at home in their own time and way. May God watch over them as they return home, and may He keep them safely in His arms as they come to the understanding that they are not alone, even when they feel completely lost.

I ask for your continued prayers for them, and for us. I am going to sign off for now. This has been my biggest concern for the last couple weeks. When I next write, they will have been gone for a bit, and I'll be out traveling again shortly.

I pray that all is well with you, and that God continues to remind you of His everlasting love.

17 July 2007

My brothers and sisters, I write to you a note of thanks, praise, and encouragement from the Lord.

It's been ten very long and drawn out days since my last update, although there are some things that I

cannot share with you about it. Let me say primarily, though, that it has been a time of intense spiritual exercise and growth for me, becoming more attuned to God's voice and influence. At the same time, I have seen my body reshaping. As I learned just a short couple of years ago, and as I remind my people here, we are a whole person. Your spirituality impacts your physicality and vice versa. So, I have been engaging in a spiritual exercise that I've never done before, and it's been very rewarding. I had very specific reasons for it, and I feel peace for the first time in a while about that particular issue. I am very thankful.

You know, when we as Soldiers engage in Physical Training, or PT, we do it for a reason. Yes, we have a test on our fitness level twice a year, but more importantly, our fitness level impacts the life or death of many on the battlefield. I realize only now, as I write this, that our spiritual fitness does the same thing on the battlefield that is life on earth. When I exercise spiritually, it enables me to be in a better position to help people, both thru my own fitness, and by showing them how to get fit. This is a great thing to share, and so I share it with you. The Spiritual Disciplines are sometimes difficult to engage in, since they are disciplines, and they take discipline. Many of us lack the discipline for certain actions in life. I remember a sermon preached during my first preaching class in which one of my classmates preached from Proverbs on gluttony, effectively. It's kind of the overlooked sin of ministry. Ironically, many people in older generations will more readily trust a preacher that is thick around the middle than one who is skinny and works out five days a week. I've been convicted on that before. I now have a handle on it, though.

Now, aside from my own personal spiritual growth, how are things going here? Well, it's a tremendously mixed bag at this point. We are 340 days into this thing, and we are preparing our Reservists for their trip back home. They've been gone from their families and friends for over 14 months, because of their pre-deployment training. It's time for them to go home. It's a bittersweet time, though. For me, many of them have become part of my extended family; I care for them. Just as when I was a company commander five years ago, they are my kids. I would do anything for their welfare and safety. Unfortunately, we aren't going home with them. Our active duty folks recognize the fact that if it hadn't been for the National Command Authority (President and Secretary of Defense), we'd be on our way home too. Instead, we have about 104 days till we finish our mission, and then we begin the long trip home after that.

So we have a lot of changes right now. We are taking responsibility for Soldiers from other units in different locations than our Reservists were in, so throughout August and September, I will be traveling extensively to see them, get to know them, and help them make it through this extension. It should honestly make the time just fly. My goal will be to fly as much as possible and not spend too much time in ground convoys. There are advantages to both sides, but I love to fly.

As always, I covet your prayers for my Soldiers, and I ask that you pray for me, that I would be fully submissive to the Lord and His uses for me. I really don't have too much more to say for now. If you have any comments or questions, I would love to hear them (or read them). May God continue to work with each and every one of you, and use you for His ultimate glory.

7 July 2007

My brothers and sisters, today is 7 July 2007, the much talked about 07/07/07. To God be the glory that people are talking about it, because recognizing it means that we will end up talking about Him, unlike with last year's 06/06/06.

In the meantime, I greet you in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of the Father. It is a wonderful day here in Baghdad today, for which I am very thankful. Let me precede the rest of this message by asking for your forgiveness for a couple things - first, I think I'm only going to send updates every 10 days from now on, just to keep it straight in my head, something that I had not previously told you; second, this message may be a bit muddled, due to the fact that I didn't get much sleep last night and I'm going through an experience right now that is, for me, unique, and has my mind in another place (not bad, by any stretch of the imagination).

Today is day 330 of our overall deployment. Depending on how you do countdowns, there are only about 115 days left till we give up our mission to our replacements and leave Iraq. Our Reservists are getting excited, since they will be gone in less than a month, although they are still very cognizant of the jobs and missions that they still have to do out there. Over the next couple weeks, I'm going to be fully engaged with them, giving them updated reminders on topics such as suicide awareness and prevention, communication with family and friends, and how to have a successful reunion. About a week ago, I finished up a review of all the incidents our Reservists have been through, both personal situations and military engagements. It's amazing to see how different this place can be, depending on where you are, and what you are doing, even in the same unit. The purpose in reviewing this, as all chaplains that I know have done and will continue to do, is to make sure that the Soldiers that go home get the best and most appropriate follow-on care possible.

My biggest fear and concern for this entire deployment has centered around what our men and women will bring back to the USA inside of them, where no one can see. To use a very extreme example, a hyperbole, I think of it as the John Rambo case (First Blood, Rambo, etc.). On the surface everything appeared fine, but inside there was something very wrong. Some of my kids - I do look at them as my kids, just as I did when I was a commander - have been through some horrific events, the kind that would turn your stomach. Others, however, have dealt with nothing more than personality conflicts or office frustrations. Each person's experience is completely unique, and that is something that we just can't forget or minimize. To be completely honest, I'm very glad that I took extra counseling classes in seminary, because without them, I would have been very under-prepared for my mission here, in spite of the fact that I've done the job from the other side of the fence prior to becoming a chaplain. I say thank you to my professors who receive this email - your efforts were not wasted, and I pray that God will continue to drive me to constantly grow and learn and develop as a person, and as a minister.

As part of that growth and development, God has reminded me again of the importance of spiritual discipline. Just like exercise and physical fitness, the spiritual disciplines help to train our souls and bring us closer to God. For those who are unfamiliar with them, I'm talking about things like worship, prayer, Scripture reading, fasting, chastity, silence, solitude, etc. If you want to read a wonderful book on the subject, try "The Spirit of the Disciplines" by Dallas Willard.

Right now, I am engaged in an exercise of certain disciplines, and it is really making a difference inside me. I've found that my prayers are more sincere and heartfelt, as well as more frequent. My time in the Word is more revealing, in that I notice more. Generally, I feel purer, cleaner, and closer to God. I subscribe to a lot of podcasts from iTunes. One that I've been listening to recently is doing some very unique and powerful things in ministry. The founder, a pastor from MI, went on a 40-day tour last year called the "Starving Jesus" tour, in which he and another minister visited 40 cities from coast to coast in 40 days while fasting the entire time. One thing struck me when they discussed the end of the fast, though. They said that they actually mourned the end of it. They mourned the fact that they were stepping away from the closeness that they felt with God during their time of fasting. I think I can understand that, but only a little bit at this point. When you engage in certain things, or abstain from

certain things in life, and fill that time with God, you foster that relationship in ways that hadn't been done before.

I've fasted before, and I remember that feeling every time I broke the fast. It's almost like going back to life as normal. The problem with that is that life as normal should mean life lived close to God. I'm sure that those who engage in the disciplines regularly and frequently would confirm that the more often we do things like this (choose a discipline, not just fasting), the more that closeness to God invades our everyday life, even when we aren't exercising our souls. One of the guys from that tour said that after having gone through his first fast, he later engaged in more of them, and in 2006 fasted for a total of 125 days. Now, it's not a competition, nor is it about numbers in any way, shape, or form. What I hear, though, is that this guy really hungers for that closeness to God.

Each morning here, I email out to all of my folks (at least all the ones I have email addresses for) a verse of the day, accompanied by a point of interpretation / application. I do this on the Secure Internet, not the regular one you all operate on, because there are more people here that have access to the SECRET side than the open side. So, each morning I do this. My verse for tomorrow is from Numbers 6, talking about the vow of the Nazirite. Verses 2-3 are very important for what they say, because they specifically mention that anyone who WANTS to take a special vow, separating themselves unto the Lord, must do certain things. The rest of the passage outlines those things. At issue is the fact that if they want to do this, then they have certain things to do, certain hurdles to cross over. So often in our lives, we identify things that we want to do, goals to accomplish, dreams to fulfill. We often fail, though, in doing what need be done to reach those goals. I know; I have done it more frequently than I ever care to remember. Those of you who make New Year's resolutions could attest to the same. What I am finding right now, this day, this very minute even, is that by exercising not only the body, but also the spirit, these things can be accomplished. Praise be to God that He is good. He is doing wonderful things in the midst of a very fallen world, a world of death and destruction.

Before I go, I would like to ask for your prayers on a few things. First, I received an email from a dear brother from seminary yesterday, John Fann (I didn't think you'd mind if I mentioned you by name, obviously). He and his wife are about 29 weeks along in a high-risk pregnancy, and could truly use your prayers that God would keep her, Heather, and baby Maddie safe and sound until the time arrives for her birth. May she arrive a strong, healthy, beautiful little baby girl. I also ask for your prayers for another brother, Scott Morris, and his family, Kristie, Ethan, and Elijah, as they prepare to join Sharon and I out in Fort Lewis, WA, where Scott will be stationed for his first assignment as a new Army Chaplain. I'll actually arrive back at home before he comes out from finishing the Chaplain School. May they have a very safe trip out, and be able to easily establish themselves there (remember - our home is open for you to stay in while you house-hung; there's plenty of room). I also ask for you to say a prayer for the staff, faculty, and students back at Dallas Seminary, that God would continue to carry them through hard times; that they would continue to rely upon Him, and that they would always find themselves ready to "Preach the Word". Last, but surely not least, please continue to pray for our Soldiers and their families. I have said it before, and I will say it again. Our families who are left behind have it much harder than we do. Please pray for the strengthening of marriages, for the perseverance of spouses and children, and for the safety of all of us.

I thank you for your love and friendship, and I look forward to sharing with you again in another week and a half.

24 June 2007

317 days Deployed

137 days Remaining (assuming a return to home no later than 9 November 2007)

To my friends and family, brothers and sisters,

Greetings to you in the name of God our Father, and Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son. I am thankful to you for your prayers, for they have carried me through many a day. I have been blessed to hear back from a number of you, and your messages have been delightful, encouraging, and thoughtful.

It's been a little over two weeks since my last update, and much has happened. As you might imagine, there are some portions of it that I cannot talk about. I must say, though, that the weeks and days have been full, exhausting, and full of blessing.

The biggest thing that I have to share with you is the shift that I'm seeing in my soldiers. The longer we are here, the more I get brought into their lives. I am thankful to God that, in spite of my failings, He continues to use me to help in situations that I am in no way qualified to help in. Soldiers and civilians continue to come to me to talk about what's wrong in their lives, and what role God would play in their lives. I have a small number of soldiers right now that have, without a doubt, pretty severe PTSD. When they come to me, though, they come to me for the spiritual side of things, because they have said that they don't feel as though combat stress (i.e. mental health) professionals are really doing much to help them anymore.

NOTE: For those who read, listen to, or watch the news, the Army announced nearly a week ago that they were seeking to add a significant number of mental health professionals to our ranks to assist in maintaining the mental and emotional stability of our Soldiers. I must question this, though. Combat Stress folks have helped some of our soldiers. More and more, though, our soldiers walk away with medication. I had one conversation with a doc over there who said, "Yes, but look at who you are sending to us." It's true that our soldiers have problems, and some of those are outside of my realm of expertise. One thing that I have learned, that has been stressed to me over and over, is to remember that I am not a subject-matter expert on everything. Nevertheless, I am doubtful about the effectiveness of a significant increase in mental health support to Soldiers. All I believe it will accomplish, in my personal opinion, is that we will be able to diagnose and medicate soldiers more quickly and on a more widespread basis. I don't truly believe that any of it will help to alleviate or prevent mental or emotional damage to our Soldiers. What will help? Not sending them over here so often for such a long amount of time.

So, the questions that soldiers bring to me are becoming less superficial. For those questions that do appear superficial at first, we can more quickly move beyond those symptoms and begin to explore the true issues at the core of the problems. Increasingly, my Soldiers are coming to me with questions that are spiritual in nature, completely skipping the superficial stage completely. When they don't, though, they have no problems when I engage them with questions like, "How's your walk with God?" So, life and death are leading straight to the spiritual conversation. Issues of conflict with other people are leading into the issue of loving God includes loving your fellow man. Frustration is leading to the ideas of mercy and grace. It's hugely intimidating, yet hugely rewarding.

Today was a first for me. Last week, as I finished up the morning service at the chapel, one my fellow chaplains, who was supposed to be leading the service today, asked me what my plans were. He wanted to "team preach" with me. So, we got together a few times over the course of the week to exchange ideas, iron out our respective pieces, and go over the entire thing to ensure transitions were solid. It

seemed to be a great thing today. We received feedback from some of the folks that attended to let us know that they appreciated getting two slightly different but complimentary perspectives on the Scripture passages that we were using. God was at work, and as with most times that I've been up preaching, a lot of it seems a blur as I think back on it. One of our other local chaplains has a problem with preparation. He likes to "percolate" during the week, and then not write anything down until Sunday afternoon for the evening service. We have gently reminded him that not only does God deserve better effort than that, but that God has given us abilities, and when we don't use them to do what we can do, we have sinned. I think he's gotten the point; he's a good man with a good heart, and really desires to do good to help the people here to grow in their relationships with the Lord.

With that out, I believe that I will close things for today. I must be honest, I am so exhausted today that I nearly fell asleep at my office desk this afternoon. As I end, I want to let you know about something I read just today. (I have discovered that my reading has become a bit voracious; I finish one book only to immediately pick up another one) I am currently reading "Velvet Elvis" by Rob Bell, founding pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids, MI. When he was starting to feel burnt out, he went to a counselor. That counselor said his problem was sin. The explanation was the following: "Your job is the relentless pursuit of who God has made you to be. And anything else you do is sin and you need to repent of it." That's a huge statement and a tall order, but I sat and pondered it. It's got me thinking about all the people that I'm trying to take care of. So, I find myself once again stepping back just a bit from the huge pile of things that I've accumulated on my plate (not necessarily different things, but time-consuming things). It's time for a Sabbath again.

So until next time, may God continue to watch over you, and over our Soldiers.

07 June 2007

300 days Deployed

154 days Remaining (assuming we'll be home no later than 9 November 2007)

To my brothers and sisters in Christ,

Greetings to you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

I realize that it's been a few weeks since I last wrote to you. I have been busier than normal over the last few weeks. The time has been one of blessing, though. I have had the chance to see some of my soldiers that I haven't seen in literally months, due to where they are located. I've also had the opportunity to see my old mentor, and the man who set the example for me of what a chaplain should be. Because of how busy it's been, though, I've been thoroughly exhausted during my spare time.

So, with that being said, let me give you some highlights and let you know how things are going.

About a week and a half ago, my assistant, my commander, and I traveled down to Al Diwaniyah to see our soldiers. That is the point furthest to the south where I have folks. It is a true multi-national area, though, with Poles, Romanians, Latvians, Mongolians, El Salvadorans, and Americans, along with some others I am forgetting. It was a blessing to see soldiers from so many different nations gathered in one place. I last experienced that when I was in Egypt back in 1999 with the Mutli-National Force & Observers (MFO). We spent about 4 days down there checking on our folks, talking with them about specific issues of life that they are struggling with, and just enjoying the 115 degree heat of the desert. When we returned, we traveled with the Chief of Chaplains of Latvia, Elmars Plavins, a Baptist minister who spends part of his time traveling away from his church to see his soldiers here, in Afghanistan, and

in Kosovo. He seems to be a wonderful man who desires nothing but to pursue God and take care of the men and women he is charged to minister to.

In the last few days, I had the tremendous honor to spend some time with Chaplain (Colonel) Alvin "Sonny" Moore, the command chaplain for US Army Forces Command (FORSCOM). He was my chaplain from 1994-1996 back at West Point. I was honored when he arrived here. He knew that I was back on Active Duty as a chaplain, but I had never told him I was deploying or that I was in Baghdad. We had gathered in a reserved room at one of the local dining facilities, and when he came in, he nearly walked past me, then caught me from the corner of his eye, hit me on the shoulder, went to set his tray of food down, and came back and gave me a big bear hug. I think all of the senior ranking chaplains in the room wondered how it was that this little captain could know the FORSCOM chaplain. He spoke with all of us in the chapel after lunch, and had dinner with the senior chaplains that evening (I was honored again to be specially invited to the dinner, since it was obvious from lunch that I knew him and was friends with him). This visit is just a month short of the 2-year anniversary of the death of his 4th grade sweetheart and wife of nearly 40 years, Martha, back during the 4th of July weekend in 2005. She died one month short of their 40th anniversary. The wisdom he left with us during that visit was invaluable, and I shared it with our commanders and staff the next morning at our battle update briefing. He is a true man of God, one of those men who exudes holiness and manliness at the same time. When I prepared to leave the dinner, he allowed me to pray for him, and he said that if I want to go back to be a chaplain at West Point, just to let him know. I do believe that I will take him up on that, if he's still on active duty in a couple years when I'm ready to move.

I also had the pleasure recently of seeing my sweetheart, Sharon, via a government video-teleconference. My unit and hers are sister battalions under the same multi-component brigade. We wear the same patch, even though I'm in the active duty battalion and she's in the reserve battalion. We gathered as a staff to put together lessons learned from our last 10 months deployed here in order to pass those along to her unit, as they are about a year away from their deployment over here (pending changes in the political-military landscape). It was great to spend a few minutes seeing her over the screen.

Ministry is keeping me busy, as it always will. A couple weeks ago, I went through the entire week with only 19 counseling sessions. Last week, however, I ended up with 32 counseling sessions. In all honesty, the extension has already taken a mental toll on many of my folks. As I said one or two updates ago, it's not a direct correlation. Soldiers aren't complaining about the extension. The extension has brought about a consequence, though, of soldiers having to deal with mental, emotional, and spiritual issues for a longer amount of time than they were prepared for. In some ways, it would have been much better to know at the outset that you would be here for 15 months. When you are getting close to the end, only to have it move further away, you lose something. That's why there are quite a few folks who give up near the end of Special Forces Assessment and Selection (SFAS). Near the end of SFAS, some classes conduct a very long footmarch. It's individual, and timed, although no one knows what the time really means (they don't know what time you have to make in order to pass). Sometimes, they lead students to believe that the end is right around a particular corner about 16 miles into the footmarch, only to have the end really be another mile or two down the road. Many people have been known to give up at that point, because they have mentally, emotionally, or spiritually broken. The same thing happens in war. When you think you are at the end, only to have it go on for a longer period of time, you lose heart. There are days when I have found myself in this same position. God's grace continues to carry me through, though.

So, for now, we prepare to get our Reservists gathered up and sent home in about two months. Once we

get to that point, then we start packing up our things. Honestly, we have to break this time up into chunks. So, this month is operational. Next month, we gather our reservists and prepare them for going home. In August, they go home and we begin packing our things. In September, we continue operations while coordinating the process of our own redeployment. In October, our replacements arrive and we prepare them to take over our mission, and we go home in November. It all seems so nice and tidy this way, like a very solid line of progression. It's much easier to look at it this way than to say that we have five months till we go home. Throughout the process, I pray that God continues to use me to minister to His children here, that they would never doubt that He is with them at all times, watching over them and guiding them through every difficulty.

May you today be blessed to be used by God to minister to those around you, as well. Until next time...

21 May 2007

My friends,

I know it's been only a short time since my last update, but it's been very busy, and I felt the need to update you again.

Before I launch into the rest of my update, I want to say what a joy the last couple days have been. It's been overcast, breezy, and rainy here, which has actually made it cool in the mornings. It's a huge contrast to the 105+ temperatures we've had for the previous week. I didn't think we'd have any more days like this until near our departure from Iraq, but here we are. Because of the wind, there's been a lot of sand and dust in the air. This morning during our daily update briefing, the weather was briefed as "it's going to be raining mud today". It didn't, and these couple days have reminded me of being back home on the farm, especially the smell in the air. The longer you're away from home, the more you miss it (if it was good to start with).

Your prayers have been very evident, and very important, especially over the last few days. I must say that I find it slightly ironic that today, in the calendar of the church, is the celebration of Christ's ascension to the right hand of the Father. It is a day in which we remember Christ's exaltation, which assures us of our place in heaven with Him.

My last update was early in the morning on the 14th (Baghdad time = Eastern time +8). After over nine months of really nothing happening to my unit, we got hit. A few months ago, we did have the suicide that I wrote about. On Monday, one of our convoys got hit by an IED, and another one got hit on Tuesday. Both could have been catastrophic. Instead, I had one of my Reserve soldiers lose part of his left leg, and another Reservist had a severe concussion. We could have easily been preparing a memorial ceremony for eight soldiers right now. Instead, we're sending one home for a prosthetic, and we're just checking up on another. It's enough to remind you how good and gracious God really is. Then yesterday, Wednesday, we received the official notice that our extension got approved. So, we will be coming home in early November, instead of early August. Our Reservists will still go home in early August, though, so we are already starting the process of packing up their things to put on the boat back to Fort Lewis.

Now, I need to make some statements about my last message, some clarifications, if you will. If you read the DoD report on combat stress and its affects on soldier ethics, you will already understand that my message was not about generalizations. It was about that report. Our soldiers are doing the right things, by and large. The report I referenced even says that. Regardless of what soldiers may feel about the conflict, or about the Iraqi people, they are disciplined enough to do the right thing. So, **there**

is a difference between what we see on the outside, and what's happening on the inside for a certain percentage of service members. That is my concern.

Before I went on leave, I had a great talk with a friend and mentor in the chaplain ranks, a man who has walked the path that I am now walking, and he's doing it from a vantage point only a few years ahead of me, which is extremely helpful to me. The concern that he and I share is not what the soldiers are necessarily doing, because they are disciplined. The concern is what we, the military that represents the American people, is doing to our soldiers - to their spirits, their souls. My final project in seminary was a paper that examined the role of the church in the Global War on Terror (specifically the conservative Christian political "right"). In my research, I remember reading some articles on ethics related to policies of the government on torturing/not torturing terrorists and enemy combatants (a terrorist is, by definition, not a combatant, but an illegal participant in conflict, and is not legally covered by the Geneva convention). The thing that sticks in my head about that reading was that torturing does more to change and damage the person who conducts the torture than the person who receives it. Read that again, or as the psalmist writes, selah. No one is doing it, thankfully, but the principle is something to think about.

I'm worried about my soldiers' hearts, in spite of their disciplined and right actions. I'm worried about what we're going to bring back to the United States. Most of our folks will adjust ok, but some won't. We will do what we can, but we often forget the maxim "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." So what am I doing as a chaplain to prevent, you are probably wondering? I'm doing what I do, what I love to do. I walk, I talk, I listen, I counsel. I wipe up tears. I challenge when necessary. I take care of soldiers and leaders, and I try to bring the light of God's Word into life in combat. I conduct Incarnational ministry, and I do it imperfectly, because I am human. The point is that in spite of that, there is so much going on here, too much at times. You hear and see news reports. We see the unedited pictures, which we are not allowed to send home or post on personal websites. We read reports of what goes on at every level, from the local neighborhood to the national government. Sometimes my guys and gals deal well with what they are exposed to, but sometimes they don't.

Tuesday morning, I went up to the hospital to see my soldier who lost part of his left leg. He was in good spirits, and showed us the big chunks of shrapnel that they pulled out of his leg. Due to God's grace and his personality, he will be fine, although even he will likely have some periods of depression while in rehab learning to function with his prosthetic. Others might not respond so well. Leaders take things like this personally. We didn't even lose anyone, unlike the unit across the base that lost six soldiers in one IED hit on their Styker earlier this week. I have to go over and talk with their chaplain in a week or so, after they've gotten through their memorial, to see how he's dealing with it, and how he's ministering to his soldiers.

The biggest beef that I have with the way that things are right now is that we are a military at war. We are not a nation at war. Not since WWII have we been a nation at war. One of the results of that fact is false expectations. War is dirty, nasty, and bloody. When I was a senior at West Point, a Brigadier General by the name of Hamilton came and spoke to my class, and one thing he said that stuck with me was, "War is simple. It's about killing people and breaking things." But America is not at war. There is an expectation that we won't kill people or break things. The expectation is that we will protect and serve (wait a second, that's the police, not the army), to include doing so for the Iraqi people. We will rebuild and facilitate. As a former combat arms soldier, this really grates on me, and I understand why things are the way that they are. As a chaplain, I remind my soldiers that we are here for the Iraqi people, pure and simple, to make their lives and their neighborhoods safer.

Recently, I've been doing a good job of continuing to exercise my mind through reading. One of the books I most recently finished was "Confessions of a Reformission Rev." by Pastor Mark Driscoll of Mars Hill Church in Seattle. One of the chapters of the book opens with his recollections of a conference in which the founder of Amway spoke about the lifecycle of an organization. Mark applies this to the life of the church. I was easily able to see it applying to the life of the military as well (or perhaps the government, if you care to go to the extreme). I wasn't going to quote it, but I don't want to mess it up, so please pardon me. The following is from page 143 of the book, writing about phase 3 of the organizational lifecycle, also known as defensive justification, or the failure stage. This is a rather long quote, so don't get exasperated (just go get the book - I'm not getting paid to say that, it's just that good a book).

"In the defensive justification phase, something has gone terribly wrong and has failed at the management stage. Or the church succeeded at the management stage but never returned to the creative phase and got stuck with a bunch of well-organized managers running the church but no creative and visionary new ideas to move the church forward. When this phase sets in, the church begins to stall, plateau, and slowly decline. People are less motivated to serve, money is less generously given, and a cloud of lethargy and complaint begins to settle in. This is because some leaders in the church start to act defensively and justify their failures rather than finding creative or management ways to overcome them. **In this phase, time, money, and energy are spent to explain problems rather than to fix them, which is the primary clue that organizational death is on the horizon unless changes are made.** (Bold is mine, not Mark's) Because the church is in the defensive posture, people start to leave the church, and the best and brightest people are no longer attracted to the church because it has lost sight of any risky mission that calls people to rise up in faith. The peculiar truth of the defensive justification phase is that many of the excuses in this season are in fact valid. But whether or not they are valid, the fact remains that they need to be overcome."

So, I find that true, in the church, and in the military as I've seen it from my low perspective. My perspective is extremely limited, though, so I cannot say that it is true across all military organizations. In fact, I would like to say for sure that it is not true across all organizations. I know of some that do not have this problem. Some do, though.

So, I've spent a lot of time recently reading, counseling, and thinking. The discipline of prayer is growing for me at this time, as well. I have made the Cadet Prayer from West Point my desktop background on my computer, so that I always have it in front of me when I start my computer up. It is helpful in the morning to think about those words that I recited with hundreds of other service members and family members every week in the Cadet Chapel. My goal is still to retire from the position of head chaplain, US Corps of Cadets, 20-30 years from now.

Well, I think I have dumped everything from my brain and heart that I've got for today. I still sincerely request your prayers for us. The streets are getting more dangerous, and so are the politics. Please keep our leaders in prayer, so that they may make wise, God-honoring decisions. Please continue to keep Dallas Seminary in prayer, with the problems that have hit them over the last few months, as well. I look forward to hearing from you, and spending more time with you at a later date.

May God bless you as you seek to reside in His will

4 May 2007

I greet you after a long break in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and our Father in Heaven.

I realize that I did not forewarn you of my departure, and so you may have been wondering where my latest update was (I realize that many of you have much more important things going on in life, though). I am very happy to report that I had a wonderful R&R leave back in the Fort Lewis area with Sharon and the kids. I left Baghdad on 12 April, got home on 14 April, and left to return on 30 April, reaching Baghdad again on 3 May.

The last couple days have been a bit exhausting as I've been striving to catch up on what's happened in my absence. I was pleased to find out that my chaplain assistant was very diligent in not only his regular duties, but also spent additional time circulating among the soldiers to ensure that they are cared for. This was hugely important in light of the blanket extensions ordered by the Secretary of Defense for all active duty personnel. I watched a replay of his press conference a few hours prior to my departure from Baghdad, so I knew what was coming when I got home. At this point, though, we still know little more here in the 502nd than we knew at that time.

What we know is what the policy says, which indicates that we'll return in November as opposed to August. We also know that nearly half of our soldiers will return home in August, due to the fact that they are Reservists. Additionally, many other units that received the extension notice have already received official extension orders (our deployment orders were only good for 365 days), but we have not. Supposedly, we will receive the definitive word sometime in the coming week. Many are hoping that we go home in August, but we must all plan to stay until November. I won't go into a diatribe about how wonderful my leave at home was. Suffice it to say that, in the words of Goldilocks, "this is just right." It was neither too long nor too short, neither too busy nor too empty, and we avoided the normal period of conflict that occurs for many right before departure at the end of leave. I could not have asked for anything more in our time together. I thank God for it, and I thank my wife for it.

Now, I have some prayer requests. Obviously, I seek your prayer support for my assistant and I as we endeavor to continue loving and supporting this group of soldiers in light of the extension. I saw CNN this morning (my time) about the recently published report on the level of combat stress. I tend to agree with the report's findings. I also seek your prayer support for the minds and heart of our soldiers.

Finally, I have a prayer request that is special in my heart at this time. As I flew both directions on leave, I passed thru Dallas, where I saw some friends and seminary peers each time. I learned during this visit that Dallas Theological Seminary has been going through extremely difficult times of late. I specifically ask you to life up the faculty of the seminary, many of whom have either lost loved ones recently or are in the process of facing terminal illness with loved ones. To my professors who read this, my heart weeps for you, and I pray (and shall continue to pray) that God lifts you up in this difficult time, reminds you of His love for you, and guides you safely through your grief. I admire and love you as brothers.

With that said, I shall sign off for now. I thank you for reading, and I look forward to writing again in about a week, hopefully when I have more definitive word on our future in this deployment.

7 Apr 2007

Greetings to you in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Happy Easter to you this day. Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again. May you celebrate this day joyously. I thank God for your many prayers. There have been quite a few days of late that I know I would not have made it through were it not for your prayers on my behalf.

By the end of this week, I shall be heading out of Baghdad on my R&R leave. I am so very thankful for that. The week has started well, though. We held our Easter sunrise chapel service this morning out on

the end of a small peninsula that juts out onto a lake here on Camp Slayer. We were surrounded by peaceful water (and just a few drops of rain) and illuminated by a bright moon in the early dawn as we gathered to sing our praises, read the Word, and contemplate the gift of the Resurrection. There were three chaplains who worked together, with our assistants, to make the service happen, and we had about thirty people attend, both military and civilian. Afterward, many of us went to the dining facility together to enjoy some more fellowship. It was a wonderful time.

My counseling load seems to continue to build. I continue to see some soldiers and NCOs these days who have never before wanted to sit and talk. For some, it's just a time to vent. For others, though, they come to me seeking input on their problems and different ideas to help them get through. Although I can't and won't tell anyone what to do, I thank God that He gives me ideas to share with others, ideas that they can choose to use or not. May God use me to help others, and not allow me to do or say anything that would dishonor Him and hurt someone.

My assistant and I have a busy week ahead of us. The last week has been busy as I try to wrap up a few things before I leave, so as not to overwhelm him. We are traveling again this week, though. In fact, we're traveling the three days prior to my leaving, which will surely make these last few days absolutely fly by. Some people of various ranks have questioned my doing that, saying that I'm crazy to travel right before I leave. For some, it's just the fear that something will happen to them right before they are scheduled to go home. For others, they recognize that their heads will not "be in the game" when they are that close to going home. What I am sure of, though, is that I'll be able to focus on my soldiers when I'm there. When God puts soldiers in front of me, my entire attention goes to them, to what they may be thinking or feeling. I consider if they need help with something, and if so, how I could be useful in helping them. I remind my soldiers that I can't fix every problem, but I can help them with ideas or resources that can help to find solutions. I honestly have no fear of anything happening, and I have no qualms with going out to minister right before I walk out the door.

Other local chaplains will be here to provide ministry support for my soldiers while I'm gone, and my assistant will be here for those who just need to sit and talk with someone (he is good at listening). Ironically, right after I get back, one of the other Camp Slayer chaplains goes on leave, so I'll help to cover his soldiers, and when he comes back, the third Slayer chaplain goes on leave. So, all of us will have gone on leave by the time my replacement gets here. That will be great for his transition time coming in.

19 Mar 2007

My brothers and sisters,

Well, I have only 4 more groups to attend to before my suicide prevention travels are done. I've traveled more days than not in the last couple weeks, and this week is not much different. At the end of this week, though, I am going to split forces with my assistant. I'm going to send him out on a trip to cover the last group of 4 soldiers for suicide prevention, while I attend the National Prayer Breakfast here in Baghdad. The Army Chief of Chaplains, CH (Major General) David Hicks, will be speaking. I've been told that the presence of chaplains on this base complex is pretty much required, although I have four total tickets for my battalion. I'm sure it will be good. I had the pleasure of hearing him speak back at the Chaplain School in Fort Jackson about 18 months ago. He is truly a man who desires to do the work of God.

I've been pondering a lot of things recently, especially as I get closer to my leave. My battalion executive officer (the 2nd in charge) is my rater for evaluation purposes, but she is also the chief of staff, and has given me much good counsel over the last few months. She and I will sit down soon to

discuss the chaplain coverage plan for while I am gone. I have begun to look back on the last few months, and I have started noticing the things that I have done that have been good, as well as those things that need adjusting. My predecessor in this position, Aaron Peck, is very similar to me in terms of mindset and background. Because of how our unit is organized, he operated very independently of other chaplains, and actually avoided quite a few. He passed on to me some of his views of other chaplains, although I determined to make my own calls after getting to know people. Because of the deployment, I haven't gotten a chance to know those folks. What I did do, though, was to bring that independent spirit of chaplaincy with me into the combat zone. I know I should not have, but it was so easy to do, since we deployed as an independent unit from Fort Lewis, falling in under another unit from Fort Hood. There's a competitive spirit that borders on antagonism (sometimes embracing it) between our units for a variety of reasons. I must admit, though, that I have learnt much from my brothers in ministry, regardless of background. Parallel to this, I have begun to foster a closer collegial relationship with the other two chaplains on my own little part of this base, specifically as we prepare to jointly conduct the Camp Slayer Easter Sunrise Service. I truly enjoy spending time with fellow chaplains. I get a spiritual refresher, and a chance to dialogue at a level that I rarely get in my unit.

On another side of this, I have found that I have spread myself too thin. My sermon preparation is not what it should be, and my sermons, though following the guidelines of observation, interpretation, and application, are lacking in power in the transitions and sometimes in the illustrations. I know that they can and should be much better. Although I've received A feedback for them, I know that they have been C work. What's interesting about this is the change it's made in my perspective on chaplaincy. When I first got here, I saw it as natural that we should continue holding unit-level chapel services in our immediate area each week, just as the unit before us had. The chaplain of that unit, though, did not travel so much as a fraction of the amount that we do, and his relationship with the soldiers was weak, so I doubt he had a lot of counseling. Additionally, I learned that on other bases, senior chaplains did much of the preaching, while the junior chaplains (who generally need more preaching experience) had to deal with preaching once ever couple months or so. As I look at my priorities of ministry, though, I realize that my frustrations with those situations was off-base, and perhaps sinful. I and other battalion-level chaplains have anywhere from 200-700 soldiers to care for, to provide pastoral care and counseling, in addition to advising the command on issues of religious support and influence. Senior chaplains have many fewer people to directly minister to, leaving them plenty of time to put quality into their sermons. It's a matter of time and priorities. This has me thinking of shutting down our unit-level chapel services when I go on leave, instead of trying to get another chaplain to fill in for me. I'm also considering keeping it shut down when I get back, and just tying into the local Camp Slayer chapel, Freedom Chapel. This would provide me with more time to devote quality to my sermons, as well as more collegial support from the other chaplains on the camp. As a supporting idea, we used to average 12-15 people per week in our service, with as many as 24 at one point. We now average about 5, partly because of operational tempo, and partly because some of our regular attenders got shipped off to other locations. That is just support, not a primary reason to shut down our service, but it supports the idea. Besides, the Freedom Chapel is less than a mile away, only about a 10 minute walk. So, I would like your prayer support, that God would grant me wisdom on how to proceed, and what to change, that regardless of how this works out, it would be for God's glory and the growth of our soldiers. That's what is on my mind and heart today, so I thank you for reading it. I pray you have a wonderful day. I'm going to sleep now, as I leave on another trip tomorrow morning, but not nearly so early as I did this morning (I had to get up at 0100 this morning to get ready to go).

Blessings to you all, and may the grace and peace of Christ be with you.

14 Mar 07

Brothers and Sisters,

Greetings to you in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and the Father in Heaven. It's been a crazy 10 days since my last update. Just to let you all know, our memorial ceremony (not a service) went very well. I was surprised to see chaplains come out of the woodwork. I didn't know until days later that chaplains flock to all memorials, not in the same way that passer's-by slow down at accidents, but rather in order to assess how folks are doing at these things. Because I'm the unit chaplain, and I make comments, and have to deal with the death in my own way, there's a wide recognition that there is ministry help needed. After the ceremony, a couple senior chaplains came up to me, commenting on how appropriate my comments were, as well as to tip me off to some soldiers that seemed to be having a harder time than others. I am so very thankful for the presence of men like this around here, not only for their ministry to soldiers, but for their ministry to me.

Well, we're traveling again now. I'll be on the road and in the air for the next 3 days. Because of what happened, I have to give suicide prevention training to all of our folks (save some at the more remote locations, who will receive the training from their supervisors at those places). Unfortunately, we weren't given much lead time to get the training done. Oh well, semper gumbly.

I'm feeling a bit "off" this evening, as I'm up much later than normal, and I have an early departure in the morning. Coupled with that, I've had 15 counseling sessions over the last two days. I have had a lot of folks start coming to me recently that have never really sat down with me to discuss serious issues before, so I'm drained not just physically, but also mentally and emotionally. With that said, please excuse me for the time being, and I'll write again in a few days. As one last note, I am pleased to report that I finally have my leave date settled, and it now shows up on the report that tracks those types of things. I will begin my Exodus on 13 April. It should take a day or two to make it out of Southwest Asia and back to the USA. Once I know my day to hit Dallas, I'll let Sharon know, so she can email you all. I'm not sure how long my layover in Dallas will be, but I likely won't try to shorten it any, even though I am anxious to get back to my wife. You all are a true blessing to me, and I thank God for you from the bottom of my heart.

27 Feb 07

It's a glorious day today. 200 days in this theater of operations concludes today with only 165 more to go. February is nearly over, and although it is the shortest month of the deployment and calendar year, it was the longest month that we've had, due to many, many moving pieces on the chess board of Iraq.

Let me thank you for all your prayers. As I reminded the chain of command this morning, we have much to be thankful for, having gone well over the 1/2 way mark with only one injury, and that soldier is recovering well and back to work in Fort Lewis. We have been very blessed, considering some of our folks tread in the more dangerous parts of Baghdad regularly. God has truly shown His gracious love and protection many times over.

Each time a convoy prepares to leave, I offer up a prayer at the end of the actual convoy briefing, and then go from truck to truck, asking for God's hand of love, mercy, grace, and protection upon those who will ride in it. Although not everyone in my unit is a believer, God knows His children, whether they choose to engage in a relationship with Him or not. After all, Jesus Himself declared God's grace to be both upon the believer and the non-believer (Matt 5.45). Always, though, these prayers, both corporate and individual, seek to bring my soldiers a greater awareness of God's presence in their lives, so that they will be drawn to praise and glorify Him.

This week is a fairly relaxing one for us (that is the Unit Ministry Team or Religious Support Team). We aren't leaving the base this week, but rather taking some time to back off a little bit, reconnect personally, and catch up with the soldiers that we have here on this base, giving folks some aid in dealing with combat stress and deployment separation. From previous experience and other people's experiences, I remind our folks that the 6-month mark thru the 9-month mark is about the hardest time of this deployment. We all know that we're over the hump, but we can't quite reach out and touch the end of this thing yet. Additionally, because we're looking at being home, the idiosyncrasies of our brothers and sisters here grate on our nerves a little more than normal. It's a hard time. Fortunately, between our office and the combat stress control office (formerly known as mental health or mental hygiene), we can help a lot of people work through their issues or find a way to lessen their perceptions of the stress they are under.

So that's where we are sitting. You all can see the news each day, and you see it at times that are more convenient to your watching (i.e. not early morning or late night, as we have it here). You probably know a bit more about what's going on here at the macro level than I do. All I know is that we're doing ok overall, but ever in need of your prayers, so please don't stop them coming.

Blessings to you all, and I look forward to sharing a little more time with you in a few days.

23 Feb 07

My apologies for taking so long to send this update out. The last week and a half has been a whirlwind of travel. I normally try to space my soldier visits to other FOBs out over the entire month, but some of the trips I had scheduled for the beginning of the month got cancelled for various reasons. So, 2 weeks ago I had a 2-day trip to the location that was furthest from Camp Slayer. Last week, I had 3 day-long trips out. And this week, I had another 3 day-long trips. Due to the timing of the trips this week, I got very little sleep for the better part of the week, though.

I'll be taking the day pretty much off either today or tomorrow, except for the normal required meetings and any emergency counseling sessions. I realized about a week ago that I was really trying to do too much. I remember my missions professor in seminary, Dr. Larry Waters, said one time that if you find yourself exhausted, tired, fatigued in ministry, that there are generally two potential reasons: the first is that you are trying to do more than what God wants you to do at the time; the second is that you are trying to do God's work, but in the flesh and not the spirit. I believe that I've been guilty of both, and am in need of a mini-sabbatical, some time alone with the Lord.

So, with all the traveling I've been on, how are the soldiers doing? I would like to say that everyone is doing great, but that would not be entirely true. Between the 6-month and 9-month points on these year-long deployments, many people feel the crunch and reach "critical mass," both personally and professionally. You see, we all know that we are over the hump. There are 169 days remaining on this deployment, at most (barring an extension). Soldiers' eyes have gone from what we left behind to what we might see ahead. The problem is that there is still a significant amount of time and activity between us and home. The most dangerous parts of a deployment are right after arrival and right before departure. Right now, though, we're getting into the unanticipated blues period, when things should be going just peachy, but people can't explain the funk that they are in. For those of us who have deployed before, it's no mystery at all.

What has been very convicting for me has been my role in this. I have 3 personal devotionals that I go through each day. I begin my morning with "Strength for Service", a devotional put together during WWII and republished with some additional contemporary devotions over the last few years. Around

mid-morning, after the first meeting of the day, I read the Navigators daily devotional in my email (since it doesn't come out until that time for me here). In the evening, I go through Blackaby's Experiencing God Day by Day. In that one, over the last few days, I've been very convicted by reading devotions about being salt and light to the world around me. The devotions focused on what we see around us. If we, as Christians, don't see a change in the people and surroundings in our area, what does that say about our influence or the fruit of our lives? Of course, we have to balance that with God's sovereignty and the free will of each person, but the point is still there. When you couple that with the notes in the second paragraph above, I'm sure you can easily see my conviction. Hence, my additional incentive to seek a sabbatical.

There is such a huge need for ministry here. There are so many people hurting, both Iraqi and American (as well as our coalition partners from the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Poland, Mongolia, Korea, Uganda, Colombia, El Salvador, and any others that I either haven't seen or heard of). Now, as you read news reports, you can see the active duty Army is doing better than in previous years, with fewer units without chaplains. The National Guard is hurting severely, though, as is the entire Department of the Navy (which supplies chaplains to the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard). Only the Air Force is actually turning applicants away. The bottom line for this is that the potential is there for me to never rest and still have plenty to do. The Lord has put me in this place, and I take the calling seriously. I have to remember to not take myself too seriously, though, because I am only the tool.

So, to return to the question of our soldiers. I had as my personal goal for this deployment to help get the battalion thru with no divorces. Thus far, there have been 2 filed already, and there are probably 2-3 more on the way at this point in time. Yes, I feel as though I failed my soldiers in this regard (again, especially in light of the above statements), but I know and recognize that we live in a fallen world, and that bad things will happen even when people's hearts are generally in the right place.

Some people are also a little down-trodden at how things are going here. One of my challenges has been to keep people focused. Being in an intelligence unit, a lot of my folks read high-level intelligence reports from around the nation, not just on their own little areas. My guys, by and large, make a difference daily on the micro level. What they get frustrated by is their own perceptions of the macro level. I fight constantly to remind them that God has given them one small area to be responsible for, to make a difference in. To an extent, they have to look at the bigger picture, in order to get a complete frame of reference for the information that they gather. They let it get to them, though.

With all of that said, our soldiers here are doing a great job of doing their jobs. They are working hard to try to make Iraq, specifically Baghdad for our unit, a better and safer place for the Iraqi people. I dearly ask for your continued prayers for them, and for me, so that I would be a more pliable tool for God's ministry to them on a daily basis.

Thank you, and may God guide you in His will for His glory today,

10 Feb 07

My brothers and sisters,

Hooray! We are officially on the downward slope of this 365 day deployment! 183 down - 182 remaining. God bless America!

Well, the last few days have been completely exhausting. As a matter of fact, my sitting down to write this message is about the only thing keeping me away right now, and it's only 1335 (that's 1:30 pm). For

the last couple days I've been traveling. Yesterday was the day that just wouldn't end. We spent a total of probably 7 hours in the trucks, and that was having made stops at a couple different places. As we arrived back at our home base, though, I had to have our truck crew take me somewhere other than back to our battalion area, because I had a soldier waiting on me for a counseling appointment, which lasted another hour and a half. In the end, I made it back to our area around 2200 last night, and then was up until 2330 getting some work done, only to wake up at 0350 on my own and continue to get the work done that I'd intended to finish last night. It's no wonder I'm so exhausted.

Thankfully, my soldiers are doing well. Everyone knows that we're about 1/2 done with this deployment. Recently, I received three boxes of materials on Combat Stress, Deployment Separation, Sleep Management, Dealing with the Injured and Dead, and Redeployment Issues. So as we travel for the next couple weeks, I'm going to be giving these things out to our soldiers, telling them about the materials, and not simply dropping them off. Fortunately, when I ordered this stuff, I ordered enough for our unit and the unit coming in behind us, whose leadership is still here now getting briefings from us to help them when they come back in force and take over the job from us. Hopefully this will help to set them up for success.

While we were out on our two-day convoy, we made a stop at a State Department facility, where the leadership asked if we'd like to do a worship service. It took me a few seconds of thinking to say yes. I am a chaplain now, but I've been a line officer before, so I was thinking about the missions they had going on, and whether I'd be a nuisance, distraction, or help. So, throughout the day, my assistant heard many people talking about the fact that we were going to have a service that night. When the time came, though, only one soldier showed up. In a small way, it was a little disappointing. We had gone to the trouble of getting crackers and sparkling grape juice to do communion with, digging through their storage room to get English and Spanish Bibles out, and even copying some pages out of the two hymnals they had to make mini song-packets for those who might show up. The way I see it, though, we were available, which is God wanted us to be.

With that, I believe that I'll close this message. Please continue to keep us all in prayer; I know that prayer got us through some of the more uncomfortable times in the last few days. I believe I'm going to try to "recharge my batteries" a bit this afternoon.

29 Jan 07

Well, I am fairly tired as I write this message. It's Sunday afternoon. This morning's service was a blessing for me, and hopefully for the other 17 people that joined me. It's always interesting to see who shows up, and whom God decides needs to be there on any particular Sunday. This is my fourth week in James, and we covered James 2:1-13 on favoritism today. Since we work and operate in a meritocracy (i.e. the military), it's a bit interesting to remember that this isn't the perfect world. The perfect world is one of a theocracy under the benevolent dictator we call God. Since none of us humans are perfect and benevolent, though, dictatorships are not a good thing for us.

But, I rolled from the service directly into a walking counseling session to and from lunch, which is about a mile away. So, I'm pretty well drained, mentally and emotionally. It should be an interesting day, though, since we have a Hail and Farewell this evening, welcoming some new officers that just arrived here. Following that, we have a professional development session on intelligence operations, which I'll attend so that I can get to understand Sharon's mission even better. These are events that we throw into a category called "mandatory fun". These are generally things that the command thinks would be good changes to the routine, and fun for soldiers to do, yet we have to make them go in order to get them out of their routine. Usually, we go begrudgingly, but end up having fun when it's all said

and done.

We are about 10 days from the 1/2 way mark of this deployment, as you can see from the subject line of this message. At this point, we're starting to see more family issues come up, along with more soldiers starting to get on one another's nerves. This general malaise and irritation should last for the next couple months. After that, everyone will join together in looking forward to the light at the end of the tunnel marking the end of this deployment. Of course, we as leaders must keep in mind that anything can happen. Shortly before we came over, a unit from Alaska got extended after they'd already sent a few folks back to Alaska from Iraq. If you've seen the news recently, another unit, this one from FT Drum, NY, got extended in Afghanistan, also after having sent a few folks back home. Although none of us believes that we'll get extended here, since the people who normally get extended are "trigger pullers", and not intelligence people, we must all keep in mind that anything is possible. An extension is within the realm of possibility for us, even though it's not likely.

I suppose I'll close for the day. I'll talk with you again in a few days. I truly do covet your prayers, not only for me, but also for my soldiers. Additionally, please continue to prayer for my family and the families of the rest of the folks deployed over here. As I've said before, and still believe vehemently, the families left behind have it much harder than we do.

May God watch over you and guide you in His wisdom today.

18 Jan 07

I almost forgot to send this message. I'm glad to send it, though. I have just a couple things, my brethren, that I want to talk about in this email. First, let me add some clarification to a statement from my last update. In that message, I made a statement about orders that are not "illegal, immoral, unethical, or unsafe." I received a question about "unsafe," in light of the fact that we are in a combat zone, and there is no safe place, truly. What that means is that the military has a much larger emphasis now than in previous conflicts on what is called "composite risk management." We recognize that there are a lot of things out there that can kill soldiers. Historically speaking, the percentage of soldiers that die from non-combat related injuries has been on the rise over the last century. With each passing conflict, that percentage has steadily grown, such that there is currently a fairly even split between the number of soldiers that die from contact with enemy forces and those that die of non-hostile actions (accidents, etc.). Even in our own unit here, we have had a number of soldiers get injured through accidental injuries, with only one soldier having received a gunshot wound from a stray bullet. No one has died, though, so I feel blessed in that. The bottom line is that the chain of command has the responsibility and mandate to try to minimize unnecessary risks on our soldiers, so that they can focus on hostile forces. There, I believe that is complete.

Now, the other thing I want to write about this evening (your time) is the latest trip I took. I made a trip down south of Baghdad, farther south than I'd previously been. I actually don't want to talk so much about the locations or anything as what I saw. I saw two main things while on that 2-day trip. The first is that we have soldiers out in remote locations, sometimes very remote, doing great things and performing missions with huge responsibility. They are doing a great job in spite of some very large challenges. I was terribly impressed with what they are able to accomplish with what they have. The other thing that I want to mention, and the last thing, is something that hit me pretty hard - the Iraqi people.

I traveled farther from Baghdad on this trip than I had ever traveled before, and I did it by ground convoy, not by helicopter. So, I had more of an opportunity to observe the Iraqi countryside and people

than I ever would have imagined. We passed through a number of small towns and villages, in addition to the drive out of the Baghdad metropolitan area. Some of the images that I saw will stick with me forever, or at least I hope that they do. Have you ever seen something that really stuck with you? Sometimes, the image could be a good one, something that you want to hold onto forever. Sometimes it could be a negative one, but profound in the way that it connects you back to the world and reminds you of how fallen a world this really is. I don't know how well I might explain any of this, so please bear with me. I will seek more to share the images, without much of the personal impact. I won't attach any pictures to this email, because I know that some of you have internet access that wouldn't be able to download large pictures. Some of these things I don't have pictures of anyway.

I have pictures of Iraqi men, women, and children out in the markets, bright colored fruit on stand after stand. The men, and sometimes children, selling this fruit probably depend on the sales to support their families, yet there are dozens of these small fruit stands in each town along the road. I saw many men, and a few young boys, sitting next to fuel cans and jugs along the road, trying to sell black-market gasoline for vehicles. The few gas stations we saw either had lines that extended upwards of a 1/2 mile, or had their gates closed completely.

Although this country produces a large amount of petroleum, the people here don't have an easy time getting it, especially in light of the fact that we use so much in our military vehicles. It is not much of a surprise that in this modern age, the people here probably never travel far from home, for lack of true ability to do so, save for public transportation, buses, etc. I saw many men, and some whole families, out herding sheep, whether alongside the major roads or out near the canals that spread across the Iraqi countryside. The cattle just seem to graze wherever they want, but between the cattle and the sheep, these probably provide not only a source of income, but likely also a significant amount of the meat that they will eat.

I am almost to the single largest thing that hit me, but before I get there, I noticed throughout all of this something particular about the people as a whole. By and large, the men mostly dressed in traditional garments with dark colors, usually solid colors, with a lot of black or grey. The women, however, usually either wear black or very bright colors. I don't think they do so to bring attention to themselves. I haven't really given much thought to why they wear such bright colors in a society that puts women behind the men. A thought for another time, I suppose. The last image that I want to share before I end is one that is very profound, and I hope it sticks with me for the rest of my life. As I was looking out the window of my HMMWV (High-Mobility Multi-Wheeled Vehicle - also pronounced Humm-v), I saw what appeared to be a woman, a mother, returning to her home a significant distance from the nearest town. She was walking up to her home, and a young child came up to her and took what appeared to be a small bag of groceries from her right hand to take them back inside. In the first moment of noticing this, I thought it sweet that the child would do this to be helpful, and then I noticed the make-shift crutch.

Under the left arm of the woman, she had what looked like a makeshift crutch extending all the way to the ground. Over the next couple seconds, before she got out of my range of eyesight behind the vehicle, I noticed that she walked in an unusual way, because she was missing either most or all of her left leg. I nearly began crying, because of the notion of how much this conflict has cost the local people.

Our American culture and society are so worked up about the fact that we have lost a little over 3000 US soldiers. Every life is priceless, yet we as soldiers expect that some of us will not come home from conflict. We volunteer for it and desire to serve our country, even if it means some will not return with us. We will cry over each lost life, and we will miss every brother or sister killed. Honestly, though, our society has no realization whatsoever of what this has cost the Iraqi people. Between the initial

conflict (the "war"), and the ongoing sectarian violence that is placing Iraqi against Iraqi, the people here are paying more terrible a price than most of us can imagine. How selfishly arrogant are we for throwing such a huge pitch-fit (usually used to describe our screaming children) politically over our situation when others have it so much worse?

Selah. (means think about it)

13 Jan 2007

God's blessings to you this day. This message will likely be relatively short. I'm currently stuck in someone else's office because of a change in uniform. Sometimes the local authorities put out a change based on local activity level. If you can't get in that heightened uniform level, then you have to realistically stay inside for protection reasons.

That affects me today. After lunch, I stopped in to visit some soldiers and got stuck in their building. So, I'm writing from that office today. I haven't been out visiting recently, but I did hear that some members of the chain of command are trying to do what they can for the soldiers, in that they are bringing soldiers that they know are under particular stressors back here to Camp Slayer from other places in order to let them relax for 3-4 days. We can't realistically send them away anywhere to relax, but we can bring them back here, where there is less going on.

My assistant came back just a couple days ago. The role of a chaplain assistant is flexible, yet quite defined. Here in the combat area, his primary mission in life is very specific - it is to keep me alive. He is my bodyguard. In accordance with the Geneva Convention, the US Army Chaplain Corps recently put a statement in regulation saying that chaplains will not carry weapons as noncombatants. So, I am the only person in my unit with no physical weapon. It's kind of amusing, because we have weapon statuses over here. The highest one is "red", at which soldiers have their magazines in their weapons with a bullet loaded into the chamber of the weapon. Recently, when entering an area in which we emptied weapons and came out of "red" status, a soldier asked me if I went to "amber" or "green", and I told him that no, the chaplain is always "red". My weapons are spiritual ones; the Word and prayer are always within reach and used to ask for God's protection and our guidance in His will. It's kind of fun, especially having formerly been an Infantry officer. The soldiers know that I know my way around the weapons, better than some other people do, in fact. But, I go without because that's no longer my job.

So, other than that, what does my assistant do? He takes care of administrative details like some of the reports that we file weekly with our higher headquarters. He also sets up for worship services and cleans up after them. He plays guitar for fun, though, and chooses to do the music for our services. It's kind of nice, but I know that I'm spoiled. I have my own music minister for a service that averages about 15 people a week. I am blessed, though, because he is a believer. There is no faith requirement for a chaplain assistant, yet I have one that loves the Lord and dearly seeks to know what His will is for his life. I am thankful to Him for him and the ministry that He has us involved in here. In addition to all of this, I have him put up the "Verse of the Day" around the battalion area (in all the company headquarters areas, the motor pool, and the MWR building [morale, welfare, and recreation]). When we get ready to go out to visit troops, he also coordinates the movement piece, talking with the company that is affected to get rehearsal times if we go by convoy, or just to make sure that the company remembers that we are going out to visit their soldiers when we fly.

25 more days until we reach day 180, 1/2 way home. What a glorious thought. Almost as good is the thought that I've got about 90 days left till my leave. Sometime in April, probably the latter half of April, I'll be heading home on leave for 2 weeks. This is my third deployment to this part of the world, and the second one on which I took leave. If this time is like last time, though, it will be harder for me

to return here from leave than it was to deploy in the first place. Honestly, though, a lot has changed, personally and professionally, since then, and I don't believe that this time will actually be like last time.

Well, I believe that I will end for now. I hope that you all are doing well this day, and I thank you again for your continued prayers for all of our soldiers over here. Remember, soldiers do not make policy. They fight and win our nation's wars (Douglas MacArthur). Civilians are policy makers. So, no matter what goes on in the political world, it's up to us to obey and do our jobs the best that we can, so long as they are not illegal, immoral, unethical, or unsafe.

8 Jan 2007

Greetings to you in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. I am trying to do a better job holding myself accountable to send these messages out on a more regular basis. The last five days, since the last update, have been a mixed bag of challenges and blessings (unless, of course, you count the challenges as blessings). As normal, a few more of our soldiers have qualified for the "Combat Action Badge" over the last few days. For those with prior military experience, this is a badge that allows soldiers of any specialty to show that they have been in an actual combat situation with the enemy firing upon them, and perhaps even firing back. Previously, only Infantrymen and Medics had badges to show this kind of thing. As with everything, though, time brings change. Our soldiers are doing great things in trying to help the Iraqi people live in safety. Some of our folks have taken the effort to make trips out to the local Civil-Military Operations Center to start visiting young Iraqi children that come in to get things like school supplies and medical check-ups. I wish every soldier had that opportunity, because it might help them see the importance of what they are doing in a more clear way. Amusingly, one of the pictures that most stands out is one of a young Iraqi boy, taken during the Islamic month of Ramadan, that is in deep blue with the words "Jesus Rules" across the front of it. Neither he nor his family is Christian, but he was wearing the shirt anyway. God will make His name known, will He not?

I made a couple trips out last week, which I previously wrote about, though I am not going anywhere this week. Starting next week, though, I think that I'll be on the greater Baghdad tour, actually spending at least one night away from the safety of the Victory Base Complex for the first time. I am thankful that I have the chance to spend the time out visiting my soldiers, though. It's refreshing to see their faces and hear their concerns.

Here in Iraq, chaplains operate under what is called "area coverage," meaning that they take care of their soldiers at their locale, as well as the soldiers of other units that are collocated with them. Technically, this means that my soldiers in other locations are no longer my concern, but rather under the ministry of a chaplain at that location. Realistically, though, soldiers generally won't go seek out a chaplain that they don't know. We, as chaplains, have to get out there and get to know the soldiers where they are, if we ever want them to come to us with their problems or concerns. So, what I have seen is that my soldiers haven't really gone to another chaplain out there much, if at all, but rather spend time talking with me when I come to visit, even if it is four to six weeks between visits. It's touching to know that they like me, and yet it also provides pressure to make sure my visits are frequent enough to actually do some good for them. I have heard that "no one cares how much you know until they know how much you care." I believe I've put that in an update to you before, but I see it more and more the longer that we are here.

We are quickly approaching the six-month or half-way point of our deployment. I ask for your prayers more than ever for our soldiers. Historically, this is when things really begin to get bad, psychologically and emotionally, for our soldiers, over the course of the next month or two. We've all been living together for about half a year, and we get on each other's nerves. We lose sight of the good that we are

doing here, and just want to go home. Fortunately, the redeployment plan is already in the infancy stages of being formed, and that is a great thing, because it means that we are starting to plan for going home. Although I can't put it in this email, we even have received tentative dates for our return from Iraq. Of course, nothing is final until it is done, and then it is subject to debate.

So, with that, I will close for now. This is an exciting time, and yet one in which we have to really focus, so as not to lose what we've worked so hard to achieve. Truly, we are our own worst enemies, collectively and individually, spiritually and professionally. May God guide us in His will and protect us as we try to follow it.

2 Jan 2007

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to you! Grace and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. I hope and pray that 2007 has started in a better way than 2006 started, or even than it ended. Remember, each day begins anew, with unlimited potential for good, for service to God. On New Year's Eve, I actually preached a sermon on the current position of Christ at the right hand of the Father in heaven, since we'd talked about Christ's coming on Christmas Eve. In military terms, it translated to something like "Jesus and the Blue Force Tracker," since our opponents are typically referred to as red forces, and friendlies are blue forces - this has nothing to do with politics and everything to do with military conflict. One thing that I noted, though, is that Jesus' mission here on earth, to reveal the Father and to redeem us from our sins, was not the same as is His mission at the right hand of the Father. What does He do now that He has geographically relocated His physical body to heaven? He acts as our eternal High Priest (Hebrews 7-8), the only one qualified to serve in that position. So, His geographical relocation also involved a change of mission in a way.

So, my point to the soldiers was that as the story of Christ entered a new chapter with His ascension, so too, our lives, in entering a new chapter, specifically the year 2007, can take on new meaning. We have the potential to begin something totally new, even if we don't relocate geographically. It was an encouraging message for me, and I think it was for my soldiers, as well. So how did we bring in the New Year? Actually, it was much the same as sending out the old one. I came in to work in the morning and watched the ball drop in New York City over live television just before our first meeting of the morning. We also began to prepare for the return of the thousands of Muslims who had made the pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, for the annual Hajj celebration. They are still in the process of returning. Who knows what that will mean over the coming days. I can guess, but I may not be right.

The last couple weeks for me, personally, have been a change from the norm. I have not traveled much, but I have been busy with counselings. There are a lot of soldiers who are away from their families for the first time ever, and that's hard for them to deal with at this time of the year. Additionally, we're now almost a full five months into our deployment, so those who haven't gone on leave yet are starting to feel the effects of being gone for so long. We are still the only service who deploys their folks for a full year at a time, so we're at a disadvantage in terms of time away.

Starting yesterday, I began to travel again. Unfortunately for me, though, my trip yesterday was my only trip by helicopter for the month. The rest of my travels for January will be by convoy, which could be exciting. Thus far, though, God has shown His faithfulness in keeping us close to Him, protected from the assaults of the enemy. Although I wouldn't talk about it at the time, there was one trip last month when we should have probably been blown up twice. The gunner in my truck noticed that our whole convoy had rolled over a bunch of wires strewn across the road, a typical sign of a particular type of improvised explosive device (IED). A short time later on that same convoy, we came across a place in the road where all the civilian traffic was crossing over into our lane of traffic, and when we turned,

we passed the cause for that, a stationary vehicle on an exit ramp with the trunk open and what looked like two containers of fuel in the trunk, with fluid leaking out from the vehicle. That was an explosion waiting to happen, and as we passed it, I braced myself for an impact that never came, praise be to God. Everyone took it in stride, and we continued on with our mission.

Back here on lovely Camp Slayer, we should receive a new chaplain today. A few weeks ago, a new Civil Affairs unit arrived, all Reservists from around the country, but they came without a chaplain. Their chaplain, Chaplain (Colonel) Metcalf, is scheduled to arrive today sometime. I look forward to this, as he will be the senior chaplain on our camp. Right now, I have one peer, another captain, and myself here, with 3000-5000 people on the camp. Many are civilians, so we have no obligation to them, according to Army doctrine. I know, though, from the talks that I have had with some of them, that there is a serious ministry need there. Having another chaplain on the camp should help. Chaplain Metcalf's assistant is out on a mission and doing me a favor, though. While he is on his mission over the next few days, he is going to take pictures for me of the ruins of Babylon. He already has pictures of the gates of the ancient city of Ninevah, which is far north near the current city of Mosul. I really have lamented that I haven't gotten the chance to go see any of these places, but with the current situation in the country, it's hard to justify time to see those places. Dr. Seidel and Dr. Kreider, could someone please mention this to Dr. Taylor, since the one thing he had asked me for was pictures of the ancient ruins? Once the young sergeant gets back from Babylon, I'll talk with him to make sure he got plenty of pictures before I send them back.

Well, it is time for me to get going, as I need to get ready for the morning commander's update briefing. I am blessed that my commander desires that I open up each morning with a Scripture verse and prayer, to get us started off on the right foot. It is a privilege for me, as well as a way to keep me accountable, to my God and to my commander. Please continue to keep us in prayer here, as there is no time or place that is truly safe. Thank you very much for your prayers, love, and support.

23 Nov 2006 (Thanksgiving Day)

Greetings to all of you, my brothers and sisters. I am thankful to God for the prayers that I know you have been lifting up for us. I am please to report that all of our soldiers are safe. God has brought each and every one through good and bad days without serious injury. Do not be alarmed at the statement "serious" injury. A few soldiers have received cuts and scrapes through minor mishaps, but not nothing that they were not able to quickly recover from. While death looms all around us, God has constantly guided our steps and protected us from harm.

I apologize for the fact that it has been almost two weeks since my last update. I must admit that there are many days when I note something that I would like to share, but by the end of the day, I am so exhausted that I do not have the energy left to sit down and write. I find frequently that without a good night's sleep, I begin to drone at my computer shortly after I sit down. So, I engage that problem most often by doing my admin work in the morning, when my brain is fresh, and walking around to talk with my soldiers in the afternoon, when my ears work fine, even if I don't process every detail so quickly as I might have in the morning. I am not giving my soldiers left-overs, but rather making sure that I can minister effectively in all situations. I am a natural introvert, but I have begun to discover that I get a renewed energy and sense of purpose when I can go around and talk with and listen to my soldiers and their concerns. It truly is invigorating.

I have been challenged recently in my attempts to get out and see soldiers at other FOBs. There is a lot going on right now, so I have made fewer trips out. Although I am a minister first, I do have staff officer

responsibilities, as well, so the extra time that I have been spending here I have used to accomplish staff officer work in things like unit history and holiday preparation. Speaking of holidays, Happy Thanksgiving! If you know of any soldiers who might have an especially difficult time over the holidays, please keep them in prayer. These times are to be enjoyed by most, but for some, they can be extra painful.

I must admit something at this point. A couple weeks ago, sometime around my last update, but not on the day of my last update, I went through a bit of a hard time. My soldiers are very conscious of the fact that I am the sponge that absorbs all of the hardships of the unit. So, they ask me frequently how I am doing, and many have offered to lend an ear to me. I know that I cannot burden those that I minister to, though; it should be someone outside of my own unit. For a few days, though, I felt somewhat overwhelmed by everything that was going on in people's lives. I asked some senior chaplains about this, as I know that some of them see psychologists, just as I know of some pastors who see counselors regularly, not to fix a problem, but to prevent a problem. I considered making an appointment at Combat Stress (what used to be known as Mental Health or Mental Hygiene). The day that I prepared to do just that, God lifted the burden from me that had been weighing me down. This was not a visible thing, but rather a spiritual one. I cannot explain it, but I am thankful for it. Quite honestly, I believe that this burdening is one of the reasons why I have an increasingly hard time sitting down to write these updates to you. When this deployment started, I was very full of energy, and just getting to know my soldiers. Today, I still have a lot of energy for ministry. I know my soldiers and their problems very well, though, sometimes better than the soldiers think I know them. There are times when my emotional reserves just disappear due to the thought and feeling that I put in to what they go through. While getting out to my soldiers is invigorating, it still takes quite a bit out of me.

So, I will end this message with that. I hope that it does not alarm or depress you. What I encourage you to do, though, is to remember that these things are felt by every person in ministry. One of my personal goals is to minister to those who minister. I have actually begun engaging the chaplain at my next higher unit and ministered to him a bit. Your pastors need the same thing. October may be pastor appreciation month, but ministry knows no limits in time or space. We in vocational ministry are as human as everyone else. We minister out of the abundance of God's grace, and out of our own spiritual / emotional / mental reserves. May God use you today for His ministry to others, because no one person's reserves are able to do it all. Once again, I thank you for your time, your love, and your prayers. I look forward to writing again at a later date.

10 Nov 2006

Overall, the weather has cooled tremendously, and it's actually cold at night. The down side of this is that it's no longer hot enough to keep the flies away, so we are constantly overrun with flies. The bats in our local area keep the bug population down, but the flies are just spreading as nothing I've ever seen. The geckos tend to stay inside, and they keep down the bugs and spiders that might otherwise be in our rooms, thankfully.

I've had a mix of success and failure in continuing my visits to our soldiers. I've had two trips this week cancelled, but I'm scheduled for two or three next week. There are still three different locations that I have yet to get to, unfortunately. Next week, I'm supposed to hit one of those three locations. Dr. Kreider, please let Dr. Taylor know that if everything goes well, I'll be sending back pictures of the ruins of Babylon, from the air. Some of my peers have already made the trip there, and they said that the pilots gave them the opportunity to really see the ruins, take pictures out the helicopter windows, etc. I'm really looking forward to that. In the meantime, some of my soldiers have come back through my location, either for maintenance on their vehicles or to go on leave. It's a requirement that everyone see

me prior to departing on leave, but it's also a blessing for me, because I am then available for last-minute problems and prayers, concerns that they might have. Sometimes they just use me as a sounding board, but sometimes there is advice needed.

Speaking of advice, I continue to make my rounds on foot through the Camp Slayer area where I live and work from day to day. I have found almost as much counseling work during my "walkabout" times as I have dedicated for office time. Now that we are seriously into this deployment, both soldiers and families realize that it's going to feel a lot longer than we really thought. I've really started noticing more regular gunfire and explosions, and I now know that it will feel weird to go home and not hear any of that. Fortunately for me, my room is in an interior room of the building, so I don't hear that fighting when I go to sleep, so I have no fear that I'll have sleeping problems back at home.

I have truly heard some serious problems and situations that soldiers are facing, whether professional or personal, whether here or back in the USA. One of the things that I try to keep in mind, and I occasionally ask soldiers about, is what they have learnt from their experiences and what they will do with those lessons; how will they use those to help others? Sometimes they have thought about that, but most of the time they haven't.

I want to share something else that I've learnt. I've been trying very hard to make sure that my chapel messages are Biblically-centered (seems obvious, right?), as well as my advice. Recently, I have received quite a few compliments, most indirect, on what "I've" been doing to help people. Whether it's in counseling situations or in preaching, people appreciate getting that perspective on their situations, even if they don't know it's the Biblical perspective that I'm giving them. I've heard this from Sharon, passed on by other women; I've heard it from my soldiers, sometimes passed to them by other soldiers. I've never been good at receiving compliments, but I've gotten quite a few of them, telling me that I'm more active a chaplain or a better listener than any other that they've had. Here's the bottom line for me - To God be the glory! God has put me in this place, and that is totally His doing. He also gives me strength each day, because I am, by nature, an introvert.

I get reenergized by having quiet alone time, but obviously God gives me this so that I can go back out there and do well with other people. Dr. Seidel, does this sound familiar? It reminds me of a pastor in the D.C. area that either you mentioned in a class, or I've gotten one of your stories mixed up with one of Dr. Gary Barnes' stories. Ideally, my quiet alone time would be time for prayer and study, but sometimes it's just time in the quiet before bed, or even time typing a rather therapeutic message like this one. Either way, I am here and still going by His grace. Before we arrived at Fort Lewis, I had hoped to go to an Infantry unit, so that I could truly learn my job without having to deal with coed issues of a mixed gender unit. I know now, though, that I am in exactly the right place.

I know that these messages are general and not so detailed as some of you would like but keep in mind that Operational Security is a necessity, and it is real. I have no doubt that there are people that have been killed because they revealed too much information over non-secure means of communication; I just don't know how many people it has happened to. And with that, I will conclude this message. I thank you again for your prayers. We have started receiving Christmas boxes. I'm not sure how many have been received to date, but I do know that they are coming. Thank you, thank you, and thank you.

25 Oct 2006

I'm not sure where to begin today. My head is spinning a bit, but I'm thankful that the time is going by so quickly. I've reenlisted two soldiers in the last couple days. These are the first two reenlistments for our unit on this deployment. Normally, this is an honor for a member of the chain of command to

perform, reenlisting a soldier who has decided to stay in the Army. Yet, I find a statement holding true, which I first heard in my Chaplain Officer Basic Course, "no one cares how much you know until they know how much you care." I believe that I've mentioned that statement in an earlier update, but it's definitely true now. I've included just one of the photos from our reenlistment this morning. In the background is the Al-Faw Palace, Saddam's royal palace. This isn't our normal area to work in, but it's a nice area, and we give soldiers the right to choose who their reenlisting officer will be, as well as where the ceremony will be, barring safety or security issues. So, I got to enjoy a couple of nice honors here.

Family issues for soldiers keep popping up, though, which keep me busy, sometimes into the nighttime. How I wish I had more time to do my physical training (PT). There is no requirement for units to conduct PT over here, or to conduct PT tests (physical fitness tests), although they are encouraged to, if time permits. Every unit is different, though, as is every person's mission. My mission often keeps me busy at odd times; I've counseled soldiers until well after 9 the last few nights, which leaves me drained. I pray for God's strength and discipline to keep me doing the right things.

It's evening here, and I have a meeting to go to, and final preparations to make for my chapel service in the morning, so I'll close this message. I know that it is brief, but that's how things are sometimes. I've noticed that I have long counseling sessions, and I have short ones. Sometimes, they are even a minute or two long, somewhere in the dining facility or someone else's office. We get through each one, though, by God's grace. Thank you for the blessing of your prayers, for us as a whole, and for me as one man.

10 Oct 2006

I thank God for all of you, because I know that you have been praying for us, and praying for me. By this point in our deployment, each of the companies in our intelligence battalion has done at least one convoy. Most of the time, though, we try to fly wherever we have to go. On nearly every convoy, though, my soldiers have had some experience that has caused someone to tell me when they returned that it was "eerie" or that the prayers that I lift up have worked. To God be the glory, because my soldiers have prepared, but God has protected. I remind my soldiers often of Proverbs 21:31, "The horses prepare for battle, but the victory belongs to the Lord." We do the possible, but God Himself does the impossible. Personally, I know that you've been praying for me because I still have energy to do this mission, and with a smile on my face at that. As an introvert, I recharge thru private time, personal time spent alone in the quiet. So much of my time, though, is spent around the soldiers.

Sometimes it is tiring, extraordinarily so. I know that it is God who is powerful enough to fix people's problems. I know myself enough, though, to know that I am a "fixer", and I want to either fix problems or help people find their own solutions (much harder, but much more satisfying). There are issues, though, that I cannot touch, that I cannot find any reasonable solution to, because all of the human responses are basically impossible. So, I fess up to the fact that there is nothing that I can do. That's hard, and there are times when the person talking with me has tears running their face, and all I want to do is join them. It's hard; it's a very hard life that we lead (and I'm not even getting shot at). Each day, though, God gives me renewed strength to be His representative, "to bring soldiers to God and bring God to soldiers". It is a huge honor, and a huge responsibility.

So how are my soldiers doing? Those out at the FOBs (Forward Operating Bases) are doing great. They are tired, but they are motivated by their mission, which makes their days satisfying and their time go by very quickly. I have heard many kudos from the units that they are supporting, and I've talked with some of the chaplains out there that support them each day. Even those chaplains are struggling

sometimes; their world is so different than mine here on Camp Slayer, well protected. So how are the "Fobbits", the people who stay here and don't really venture out? Theirs is a different world, one in which we can truly say, "we came to war, and garrison broke out." Many people here are concerned with the same things that they were concerned about back in the USA, which are such petty things.

One of our First Sergeants told me yesterday that he listened to a group of senior non-commissioned officers argue about whether soldiers had to wear reflective belts with their physical training uniforms when they came to the dining facility. What a stupid thing to argue about when you're a scant 500 meters from the wall, with people on the other side that either don't care if you die, or are seeking your death! People have gotten spoiled here, to be honest. Once a week, here on this great big place we call the Victory Base Complex, each dining facility has a surf and turf meal. Sometimes there are T-bones, sometimes ribeyes. Sometimes it's shrimp, but other times crab legs or lobster tails. The government obviously spends huge amounts of money taking care of us. If you aren't out at the FOBs, it's easy to forget that you're in a combat zone, until a stray bullet or rocket comes over the wall and you see or hear it go by.

So for me, part of my job is reminding our soldiers here on Slayer that they are doing a good job, that it matters to our soldiers out there at the FOBs, and that this is a short time, after which they will be back at home. As I close this particular message, I'm going to attach a picture. It's a picture taken last week when I went out to one of our FOBs. I was blessed to spend a little time with a friend I have not seen in three and a half years. He was my chaplain when I was in Saudi Arabia back in 2002-2003. He helped me get through some interesting days over there in Saudi, and I am forever grateful for that, as well as the fact that he's the one who sat down with me one day and said, "Ken, don't worry about the money. Just apply to DTS and let God figure out where you will go and how to pay for it." Well, here I am, serving alongside him. He's actually watching after one of my teams of guys for a few more weeks before heading back to Germany. His name is Matt Kreider, and he's a tremendous man of God, a man who loves his family so much that whenever he speaks about them, his whole head turns red. He is my friend, and my brother.

So, with that, may God bless each and every one of you. May He watch over you and be gracious to you. May He look upon you with favor, and grant you His peace. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

3 Oct 2006

I am thankful for your prayers because I know that I cannot do this ministry on my own. I have made mistakes here, and I know it. In God's grace, though, no one has been hurt, and I have learnt and grown from this errors in my own judgment. God has reminded me that this is his ministry, not mine. People continue to ask me around here how I am doing. Praise be to God for this, because in my mind, it means a couple things. First, it's another confirmation that God has me in the right place. Second, it means that God has tied me into this community of faith in such a way that His love is communicating through me and being reciprocated. All I have to do is continue to point people to Him. That makes things seem so much easier at times.

Recently, I went through a personal revelation. All my live, I have been a morning person. Even in seminary, which I approached as my job, I got up at 4 am to go to the gym before classes. I have always been more mentally acute in the morning than at any other time of day. So, after 30 days in country here, I finally realized that I'd been setting myself up for failure each day. It was my routine to go to my morning meeting, then spend time on "walkabout" seeing my soldiers and spending time with them, and then sitting down to my admin work and study time in the afternoons. Well, when my bottom hits the

seat in my office, it's been sending a signal to my brain that it's naptime, and I've been falling asleep (of course that's an exaggeration, but it gives the general idea). So, I'm now working with my body's rhythms, doing my work in the mornings, when I can focus, and circulating amongst my soldiers in the afternoon, because I don't have to concentrate quite so much for that. Even still, either my plate continues to grow fuller or someone gave me a bigger plate when my back was turned, because I am constantly challenged for time. Between staff work and soldier-care, I have a very hard time preparing messages for Sundays. So, that's my main focus now, making time for the message. I need to and I have to.

So how are the soldiers doing? Well, I last sent out a message on Friday, after having two great trips out and about by helicopter last week. Yesterday I did a driving tour of the local area to see soldiers that are not at my location, but are close enough that I don't have to go "outside the wire" to get to them. It was a great time, and I got to see soldiers that I haven't seen in a month, although some were out working, so I still didn't see everyone. My assistant and I drove all over the place, and went into some places where they escort us, because we're not authorized to see everything that's there. It was an interesting trip.

Overall, though, the soldiers are doing very well. They seem happiest when they can do their jobs and focus on that. Disappointingly, though, that means for many soldiers that life goes in a cycle of "mission - sleep - mission - sleep", with meals thrown in when they can get them, but time with the Lord is pretty much nonexistent. I've talked with chaplains at some of the locations I've visited, and we've talked about services. I've also made sure, though, to remind them that just because a soldier knows where the chaplain is or when the service is does not mean that the soldier gets any benefit from the chaplain. This is one marked difference between a pastor and a chaplain. The pastor is there when his people need him, at the church or the hospital or at home; this is vitally important, because the people need their pastor.

The chaplain, though, is not only in those places, but is also required (yes required) to be there at the place of duty, the place of mission, the place where the action happens. It's a draw on energy and time, but I've heard more feedback than I can record just in this deployment, all 2 months of it (almost), about the fact that I seem to be everywhere at once. One person used the word omnipresent, at which point I reminded them that I am not that, because only God is. Their response was that I'm "God's man" here, and I'm doing a good job of representing Him. Again, to God be the glory. This has given the soldiers comfort that I care for them, and that I'll be there for them. In some of the most unlikely cases, the soldiers that seem to have no interest in spiritual things, they've come to my office to see me, in part because I spend time in their work areas checking on them.

So yesterday was driving, and I was blessed in it. Tomorrow is another helicopter ride, this time to a place where I have a bunch of folks, but my previous attempts to get there got cancelled by someone outside our unit. So, this morning I'll find out whether we can truly go there or not. I pray that God allows it, because there are a few soldiers there who truly need ministering to, and others that I connected with well while we were in Kuwait.

On a separate note, I recently received information on the one "morale tour" that is allowed here at this time. There was a time, before all the sectarian violence here, when soldiers could take trips to Babylon, Ur, and Ninevah to see the ancient ruins. With all the violence, though, those days are gone. At this point, though, there is the opportunity to go to Tallil, and see ancient ruins thought to be Abram's childhood home, or something very akin to it, as well as the ziggurats of the ancient world. At this point in time, we don't even have time for that. I'm hoping that we'll be able to do it at some point in the future, though.

Well, I am sorry, but I have to go now. It's time to get ready for my morning meeting. I hope and pray that God continues to bless you, and that you have a wonderful day with Him.

29 Sep 2006

God is so gracious. I have once again had the truth and depth of human depravity shown to me. I had two blessed and wonderful trips this week to see my soldiers at sites away from the area here. Our soldiers are truly doing amazing work, focusing on mission. I am blessed, though, to bring the spiritual back into their lives. Without fail, each time I see my soldiers, they are so busy that they don't have time to go to chapel or to go even see the chaplain. But I have spoken with the chaplains at these sites, and they are there to take care of our guys and girls. They know that if they stay in their offices, the soldiers will never come find them. It's up to them as chaplains to go find the soldiers, and they are. No matter where I go, though, my soldiers engage me in conversation over spiritual issues, and we have great discussions, whether we agree or not. What a wonderful way to spend my time!

One of my peers out there, a man whom I've never met before but I now know as a brother, showed me pictures of some of the things that they are facing on a daily basis out there. There is so much going on that you never see back there in the States, and that you really don't want to see. The people over here are doing horrific things to one another, and the innocent, both adult and child, are suffering in the process. It is completely heart-wrenching. I could tell that the chaplain there was affected by it, so I spent some time with him, as well.

The nice part about all of this, though, is that I'm traveling, seeing the country, and seeing my time go by very quickly. It's hard to believe that September is over, and I'm nearly 1/6 of the way through this deployment. Some people don't like it when I tell them how far along we are, but that continuously changes over time, as it will for the entire tour of duty.

Back here in Camp Slayer, things are rolling along. Soldiers are beginning to understand that we are here to support our brothers and sisters out there, the ones who are out doing the work around the city. Although there is something of a garrison mindset here ("We went to the war, and the garrison broke out all over the place!"), the soldiers are maintaining a state of vigilance and not getting complacent. That is extremely encouraging to see. Day in and day out, though, there is always something going on. For many soldiers, there are family issues that are popping up. Most of those issues are small ones, but the big ones do come up from time to time. And then there are the workplace, stress, and deployment related issues. Many times, these are just occasions when soldiers need to vent, and I'm the best person to be able to listen objectively, and with no fear of repercussion. If I can help them to decompress through that, then praise be to God. For me personally, it's all good, because I can let the venting ones go while focusing on those with real issues.

Real issues - it's very interesting to see how leaders respond to things. Having been a company commander previously, I know what to look for, what a leader should be doing. The leaders here are all doing a wonderful job of buffering for those under them. They buffer the relatively unimportant things that come down from higher. Unfortunately, they also absorb a lot of frustration in the process. My commander and I have recently begun a prayer regimen together of praying for leaders early one morning each week; this was at his request.

From top to bottom, though, leaders have long been on my mind. The soldiers are basically doing very well, adapting to their situations and doing everything they can to be the best of their abilities. The leaders are the ones I get concerned about, because they deal with a lot more of the mental and

emotional challenges. I will not minimize those things, because they apply to everyone. As the leaders buffer, though, they also absorb, and that hurts over time. So, I have begun to just "hang out" where the leaders are more, especially in the evening. Ever since the deployment started, I've made it my routine to break bread with the leaders, as that's usually one of the only times that they have to relax, and some don't even have that. So, as I close out this message my prayer request for you is to offer up prayer for our leaders, from the Commander in Chief (even if you don't like him) all the way down, because every leader makes decisions that can affect, and even end, someone else's life.

Thank you, and God bless you. I'll write again in a few days.

20 Sep 2006

First of all, please accept my apology for it being a week and a half since my last update. It truly has been a little crazy at the beginning since we fully took over our mission from the preceding unit. Back on day 32, we did our official Transfer of Authority ceremony, where the preceding unit cased their unit colors to take back to the USA, and we unfurled ours, which were cased back on August 4 in Fort Lewis, WA.

Ever since then, we've been on the run. Some people thought that once the old unit was out of the way, we could settle into a routine. Honestly, though, it'll be at least 90 days (or about 50 days from now) before we can get into a routine. For the time being, many people are sprinting, which is not good when facing a one-year marathon. Part of my job has been to help and listen to those who are starting to go through that realization that we're here for the "long haul". It's a hard shift to make, for soldiers as well as for families. For those who have been through it before, this just sometimes adds to the frustration, knowing that this is the second or third time in the last four to five years.

So, it's the little things that really get to some people. For quite a few of our soldiers, it's fishing. There are a lot of lakes in our immediate area, so some like to take leftover food off their trays from the dining facility and drop pieces in the lake, watching the fish swarm and nibble at them. Others actually go fishing to catch and release (there is no eating these fish) fish as a small sense of accomplishment. I inherited three fishing poles when I arrived here; I have given away two and I have a soldier who has requested the third one (after I offered). I honestly don't have time to fish, but some of these soldiers do, so I may as well make sure that they get used.

Other soldiers desperately need an ear. One NCO recently broke down in tears with me. He and his wife have a special needs child, whose brain isn't fully developed. She's five but acts like a 3-month old. Her therapist told him that they hope she'll be actually walking by the time he gets home from this deployment. It's a hard situation. For the entire life of this child, their youngest of three, no one has ever reached out to sincerely help them. Even since arriving at this unit months ago, they've been in the hospital with her six or seven times. No one has gone to see them, and they've asked for no assistance. At this point, part of it is pride. A couple days ago, though, I sat and listened to him and asked questions until the floodgates just opened. He thought someone had asked me to come talk to him, because I walked into his work area, looked at him, and just asked specifically how his family is doing. It was a God-directed moment, but that's what it took. So now, he has opened up to talk and accept from me in ways that he says he hasn't done with anyone else. His wife, however, will likely continue to turn down offers of assistance, according to him, because they haven't had any in five years. Please pray for them, that God will help them set aside their pride, and that others will come alongside them to lift them up in sincerity and love.

Finally, I ask you to pray for leaders. My commander and I began this Monday morning with a prayer

for leaders at 0530, prior to PT. From the president down to the lowest soldier and everyone in between, we sought God's filling, wisdom, and guidance for each member of the chain of command, by name. My commander is a Godly man, and a man whom I trust. He takes his work very seriously, though, and so many people are having a problem with him. Even I have a hard time pinning him down once in a while. Quite simply, though, we must make a decision to trust in our superiors, just as we do with God, because as Romans 13:1-7 directs, God has placed authorities in their positions, and we must obey. I promise to reengage these updates on a more regular basis. If you would like to get the previous updates I've sent out, please email Sharon at sharon.bolin@us.army.mil. I don't have all my previous messages saved, but I'm pretty sure that she does. As a last prayer request, I ask for your prayer for my own strength, wisdom, and courage. I have started traveling out to see my soldiers, which is wonderful, but back here in our camp, I have a lot of soldiers, and a lot of administrative tasks. In addition, I'm running one worship service a week, about to take over a second from a senior chaplain who is going on leave, and I've been asked by some soldiers to start up a third. I really appreciate some Godly direction on what to engage, and what to pass by.

Thank you for your friendship and love, and for your prayers as we continue in this mission,

4 Sep 06

Well, my time of transition is nearly complete, praise be to God. I got a chance to visit some of my soldiers today. My main mission was one of the lieutenants, though. Her husband has been over here for some time, and now she is camped out in his area. A week ago, one of his vehicles was hit by an IED, and he lost two soldiers, and all but one were injured in some way.

So, soon as these two married officers finally found each other, he dumped everything that had happened onto his wife. So, she had not only been dealing with her own situation, but has also had to absorb and mentally / emotionally deal with that of her husband. She has some great support in the battalion, but I really wanted to get up there and see how she was doing. Amazingly, she is doing ok. She's one of those people who would rather know everything, the bad included, than be left to wonder what's happened. So, as long as she knows, everything will be fine.

On a tangentially related note, I need to talk about my battalion, about the leadership specifically. Actually, it's not just the leadership. I have recently realized that I am in a unit filled with true servant leaders. From some of the junior soldiers to my peers and my superiors, I have been asked a couple times each day how I am doing, and how my family is doing. That's my job to ask those questions. I am honored that they are so cognizant of these things. For those who know me, one of my personal passions is ministry to leaders, because they are so often left alone (ever heard, "it's lonely at the top?"). So, my unit is not like that.

As I look around at my peers, though, whether it's those I'm serving alongside now, or the chaplain that I'm replacing, I don't see many who have the same relationship with their soldiers. As part of my discovery, today I asked the chaplain and assistant (together a unit ministry team or UMT) that we're replacing if anyone ever ministered to them. Their answer was a unified and resounding negative. I found that truly sad. What it says to me is that not only did their soldiers and peers not find it important to return their love, but even the chaplain above them was too distracted in his own mission to reach down and help to nurture and grow them.

For those of you out there who are in leadership, please read this paragraph again, and remember how important it is to reach out to those in leadership, whether they are above you, below you, or your peer. For those of you who are on the original email list for these updates, may this help explain my thoughts

about the chaplain I'm replacing. A minister who does not feel loved cannot truly give love, nor can one share hope who has no hope to share.

Those are my thoughts for the day. It has been a long day, and at times exhausting. With each day, though, may God mold me, and may God mold you, more into the image of His one and only begotten Son, Jesus Christ.

2 Sep 06

Iraq. This is a great improvement from Kuwait. It's actually somewhat green, which is great. It's easily 10 degrees cooler at the hottest part of the day. It's also where we will actually be conducting our work for the next year. These first few days, however, are nothing but work. It's an extremely busy time for us as we learn what our predecessors have been doing, and we learn how to do everything ourselves, without getting anyone killed. I now realize that the news really only reports the big stuff (which I cannot elaborate on here). Fortunately for us, this has got to be the nicest place in the country to be stationed.

When I think of Iraq, I think of the pictures in the magazines and on the internet of soldiers sleeping in dug out holes during the actual invasion. Here in Baghdad, though, we've got hard buildings. Rank determines whether someone has roommates or not, although my assistant and I are in a separate building completely. I feel bad, at times, knowing that there are other places where soldiers still have virtually nothing. There are places where my soldiers are where they have virtually nothing.

My soldiers have already spread to the four winds. Some of them spread as soon as they hit the ground, so I did not get to see them off. I am again thankful that God gave me the opportunity to talk with each one before leaving Kuwait. For those that came to our camp, though, prior to heading out, I did get to talk with them again, and they are looking forward to our visits to their FOBs (Forward Operating Bases).

One group, which has a couple guys who used to be Marines, even asked me what my favorite drink was, since they know that I don't drink coffee. An NCO from another asked me to send word out prior to coming, because he wants to set aside some time (a couple hours) to talk with me about some personal things. I cannot describe the feelings that I have for these guys. They are my brothers (in some cases far older brothers) and sisters, but they are also my kids.

Although I deliberated on this next point, I feel that I must make a note in here about my predecessor before closing this update. I have the utmost respect and trust for all people, until they give me a reason not to. My predecessor here is a really nice guy, a much older guy. He was not an original piece of the unit we are replacing, though. He joined them from another location for the deployment. Because of this, it seems as though there was a great deal of angst from the beginning between him and the leadership of his unit. It continues even now, a year later. That's ok; people don't always get along.

What isn't acceptable in my eyes, though, is that he and his assistant (I think his assistant caught this from him) whine and complain a lot. I asked his boss about some lessons learned here, and on the negative side, he specifically mentioned that, talking about how the chaplain should be the most optimistic person, the most pleasant person, to be around. As Christ is the eternal source of hope, so the chaplain should be the greatest point of hope in the unit.

I can say, without a doubt, that my predecessor provides no amount of hope in his complaining. Again, I thank God for a few things in this area. First, I thank Him for giving me the greatest job in the Army

in a unit that I love. I thank Him for leadership that are almost entirely all believers, and I thank Him for filling me with hope that overflows (I have frequently told soldiers who are having a rough time that hope is my business). May God never allow me to be the black hole of hope.

That's all I've got for this morning. I meant to send this last night, but didn't get around to it. I hope and pray that you all have a great day, and I'll write again in a few days.

26 August 06

One danger in doing these updates is that I won't have enough to write about. So, I'm going to play it by ear when it comes to how often to write to all of you. For the time being, though, I do still have things to write about. While my load of counselings is picking up, my commander is very gracious with all of it. Last night, I was 5 minutes late to a meeting with him and the rest of the staff. Normally, my commander, a very devout man (praise be to God), has me open the meeting in prayer. I missed that, but when my turn to speak came, I apologized for being late. He instantly cut me off, saying, "Chaplain, you never need to apologize, because you are out there doing good work." I don't know if anyone talked with him or not, whether soldier or leader. I am thankful for his leeway, though, in making sure that the soldiers are taken care of.

Some people in the Army have been saying for years "mission first, soldiers always." As a matter of fact, I have said it myself. I now realize that this statement makes no sense at all. In practice, what I did, and do now, is put soldiers first. What I've realized is that when we, as leaders, put soldiers first, they will take care of accomplishing the mission every time. When we begin to care more about the job than about the people, though, they will know it instantly, and the entire unit will suffer. My commander cares about the people. Unfortunately, the commander above him has already shown, many times over, that the people are just numbers, and his sole focus is on his personal management of the mission. This is causing soldiers to lose some motivation, buffered by the fact that my commander and all those under him are still doing what they can to alleviate the problem and take care of the people. If they weren't doing that, we would be in trouble, I think.

This morning, the commander and command sergeant major took me with them out to the firing range to see our soldiers shoot. The soldiers welcomed me with open arms, and despite the heat and their fatigue, some of them even joked with me. I believe that we're going to go out with them again tomorrow morning to see them go through a convoy scenario with live ammunition, supposedly the best training event that we go through in preparation for moving north.

"Ministry of Presence". We can define this as ministering to someone by simply being there, by being available for them when and where they need you. Yesterday I talked with my commander about ministries when we move up north. After that discussion, which focused on different ways to provide ministry to the unit as a whole, I asked him, "Sir, how can I minister to you?" His reply was comforting, "Chaplain, you are right now." I honestly believe that this has two distinct and important meanings. As a chaplain that has previously been a commander, I saw, and see, all soldiers as my children. In that regard, I'm ministering to him through taking care of and loving his kids.

Secondarily, in sequence but not importance, is that concept of the "ministry of presence". I try to spend as much time as I can most days making the rounds and talking with my soldiers. When we move up north, I'm working on not going into the office each morning until I have done exactly that, because I don't want to get locked to the computer or the office (an easy trap to fall into). Because of my personal passion for ministry to leaders, though (Jeff Miller, I'm sure you can remember our talk about this), I try to lock away time each day to spend with leaders. Usually, this pans out to be eating with

leadership, whether at the company or battalion level, whether commanders or staff personnel, whether officers or non-commissioned officers. I find this time very valuable.

When I spend my time with the junior soldiers, I get one perspective on how things are going, as well as hear their complaints. When I spend time with the leaders, though, I get a view of a little bit larger picture, and I can take some of the lower complaints and see if there is a reason why things happen the way they do. Later on, then, I can take some of the bigger issues that come up, and talk with the commander and command sergeant major about them, as I did in the truck going to the firing range this morning.

Lord God, thank You for Your guidance, for the soldiers and leaders that I am serving with, and for the opportunity to serve here in Your ministry. To God be the glory. May God continue to bless each of you, until we next meet again,

24 August 06

I am continuously thankful to God for the little things. The desert is a beautiful, if deadly, place. From the sunrise to the sunset, and many things in between, this place is lovely, if only you can keep cool or get fully acclimated to the heat. I have realized that I am becoming fully acclimated, although I still have some way to go. I feel cool if the temperature dips below about 85F. Here, it's easily over 110F by about 9 in the morning, and yesterday it was still 117F between 5 and 6 in the evening. Surely we are far from home.

Soldiers and families seem to be realizing that we are here for the long haul. It's taken about a week for me to begin getting busy, but now that we are fully here and incorporated into this theater of operations, we are getting more notes from home. Fortunately for me, the soldiers are coming to me more and more as I spend time with them, and they realize that I care. As my instructors last year at the chaplain school said, "Soldiers don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

Honestly, I believe that this is absolutely true in any ministry. Interestingly, the sign that lets others know you care can be very different, changing with your society and culture. For those in the foreign missions area, just the fact that you are willing to leave everything else behind and go where God called you could be a significant sign to those you wish to minister to. For me, though, I'm here with them, and the more time I spend with them, doing what they are doing, unafraid to get out, get hot, get sweaty, and go into harm's way, the more may God be glorified.

I have been blessed this day with being able to give two different soldiers good news about their families back home, even in the midst of helping a couple of other soldiers deal with issues beyond their control.

I ask you to continue, in these times, to lift up our soldiers to the Lord for strength, courage, and perseverance. I also thank all of you prayer warriors out there who have been praying for us, and for me. It has come as a surprise to some, but I am a natural introvert. I regain strength and energy through quiet moments of solitude, which is especially hard to come by in a tent with 100 other guys. The Lord has continually given me everything that I need, though, to work in His ministry to these men and women. There have been hard moments, and hard days, even just till now. The Lord always knows, though, exactly the right time to send me a note of encouragement through a soldier or leader in my unit. For me, this is all I have for today. I thank you, and I miss you. I look forward to sharing with you again in a few days.

23 August 06

Well, my friends, this will be my last update from Kuwait. I'm heading out of here tomorrow, and won't be up online in Baghdad until a day or two later. As we wind down our time here, some folks are realizing the full gravity of our situation. The operations officer for our battalion asked me today if I could give communion, and if I would give communion. So, I'm going to do a small communion service today and another one tomorrow, since this is the last time for a while that we'll all be in the same place.

Speaking of which, we had a picture taken this morning with the higher unit, a brigade, the we fall under for our deployment here. We're from Washington, but they are from Texas. Honestly, there's no love lost; it's not because of home location, but because we operate in such different manners. They are very hands-on, micromanagers to an extent. We are very hands-off, rewarding people for coming up with their own solutions.

So, God is giving more opportunities for ministry service, and I am thankful. One of our companies is made of mobilized reservists, and their company commander got promoted to major right before we left. He and I have hit it off in a big way, though, and we frequently get together to discuss how things are going. I truly foresee a long friendship with him, much more so than with any of my other peers.

One thing that has really surprised me in being here is that so many soldiers are not who they seem to be. So many of them seem so tough on the exterior, yet they are so tender-hearted on the inside. Some are covered in tattoos, and they love the Lord tremendously. Some seem at first to be trouble-makers, yet their only problem is that they are immature or naive. There is a ministry for each one of them, though.

I know that this might sound a lot like a church, but it's not. In a church, they could remain anonymous, coming and going each week without being noticed. Here, though, I notice everyone; that's my job. I circulate through the soldiers regularly, and will continue to do so once we spread out around the Baghdad area. That's what God is leading me to; that's what my commander wants, and that's what his commander wants of me. So, the soldiers now expect that they will see me regularly, regardless of where they are.

Check out www.globalsecurity.org sometime. You can find the locations and names of almost every base in or around Baghdad, or anywhere else in Iraq, pretty easily. I'm not sure where they get their information, but they have a lot of it. As for me, I'll be at Camp Slayer. Well, I think that's it for now. I'm getting tired, and I have a communion service to give, and I need to call my family one more time before tomorrow's bus ride. So, keep us in prayer, and I look forward to seeing what God does with all of us over the coming months. Until next time,

I had the communion service. We had 7 people come, nearly all of which were Roman Catholic, which I am not. It was interesting, and a wee bit intimidating, especially since I don't do a lot of what they expect from a Catholic communion service. All went well though, and God continues to work in His amazing ways.

21 August 06

I praise God for His goodness, and for all my brothers and sisters who follow Him. I also thank God for His continued confirmation of my position as an Army chaplain. Over the last couple days, I have seen counseling pick up, as soldiers begin to hear about problems from home, and others begin to just worry about family back at home.

My predecessor and I thought it would take a few months, but God in His providence has allowed me to get out and meet, speak with, and get to know the soldiers much more quickly than my normally introverted personality would regularly allow. So, the soldiers see me as approachable and someone who listens, which I am thankful for.

This morning, my chaplain assistant and I went to the contemporary Protestant service. This little chapel on Camp Buehring, Kuwait was absolutely packed, with chairs brought in from other buildings. I pointed out to my assistant that there were about a half dozen soldiers there from our unit, and only a couple others from other intel units. Other than us and a few civilians, everyone else there was from either the 10th Mountain Division, the 25th Infantry Division, and the 82nd Airborne Division. The praise team was also a pleasantly surprising mix, with the commander of the camp, a colonel, playing the drums, the Provost Marshal (in charge of all the police and security personnel) playing guitar, and a couple other high staff personnel leading the vocals. I was really encouraged to see all that leadership setting an example of faith. That's something that all the soldiers can look at and be impressed with.

Yesterday we had a few heat casualties, had to stick about a half dozen soldiers with IV bags, and had to take two soldiers to the medical clinic to make sure that they were OK. At the end of the day, we found out that the thermometer for the camp pretty well bottomed out (or topped off, if you look at it that way). It's a circular thermometer, and went well beyond 120, and buried itself somewhere around the bottom, I believe past 130. Even the civilians that oversee the firing ranges said that it's the hottest day that they

remember. God-willing, the next few days will not be the same, since our soldiers have to make trips out to other training events over the course of the next five or six days. May God keep us cool.

From time to time, we've actually gotten some clouds, which has been wonderful.

Aside from that, I'm blessed that God's allowing me the opportunity to really partake in His ministry. There are some senior leaders that are really engaging me in discussion, and I'm thankful. Soldiers are beginning to ask me for help in finding specific Bible passages, and sometimes specific verses. Thankfully, God has delivered me to the exact spot in Scripture that the soldier was looking for each time. I pray that I continue to stay in His Word (I'm studying through Psalms now), and that it continues to change me.

By the way, it's the 20th for us (the 11th was Day 1). The countdown is on. Please keep our soldiers in your prayers. They truly love the Lord; don't let anyone get away with saying otherwise. For most that are out here, they are here for their buddies or for their families, although many joined the Army for their country or for the money. Should anyone ever think differently, though, soldiers don't fight (I mean fight, Infantry-style, close-in combat) for their country or for their families. They fight for each other.

13 August

Yesterday we got on the ground in Kuwait, Camp Buehring to be specific; who knows how long we'll be here. It was 130 on the tarmac at Kuwait City International Airport when we landed, and 122 at our camp when we got here. Today was no less oppressive in terms of the heat, though it was a little bit easier to deal with. I suspect that each day will be like that. Supposedly the temperature is significantly cooler up there, though the newsletter they publish where we're going lists the highs to be around 117 these days, so it probably won't be too much different. I suspect that the main difference will be the humidity, since we're so much closer to the Persian Gulf here.

Our trip was fairly uneventful. We intended to spend a couple hours in Germany on the way, but it

ended up being five hours. The Lord allowed me the opportunity to make the rounds of the soldiers about four different times, and I had a great time doing just that, meeting soldiers I hadn't previously met, having discussions about a variety of things.

At one point, I was engaged in a discussion of the essence of spirituality with a young soldier who proclaimed to be an atheist (according to the Army's categories), but was in some way spiritual. He was impressed that I was open to listen to him, and we had a great dialogue, with no one trying to convince the other of their position, but rather, explaining and asking questions.

Although I did not get a full presentation of the Gospel in, I was able to bring in "this is what the Bible says" and "this is what Christianity is actually about". He even found himself at a point where he couldn't answer a question about a comment that he himself had made. May the Lord continue to work on him throughout this deployment.

United Airlines treated us like royalty on the trip. Someone put me in business class, which on an overseas flight was better than any first class I've been in. Our flights were 9 hours and 4 hours in length, and I got a decent amount of sleep. Thankfully, I'm feeling no real jetlag, although I did wake up at 0330 this morning, with no ability to get back to sleep.

The last 18 hours here on the ground have been fairly empty. We have little to do so far, so most soldiers have been eating and sleeping and shopping a little bit. My boss had me go around and see what the options were for soldiers to get in touch with home, how much they cost, and how long the waiting lines were. What I found was a little depressing, because the lines of communication back the States either go down (on the free ones) or cost quite a bit (\$1 for 12 minutes on the internet). Fortunately, I was able to find some restricted access points through chaplain channels that I can use when soldiers have an emergency and things like that, which is a great relief.

Since we're mostly here now, our yearlong countdown has begun. I am thankful for the soldiers and leaders here in the 502nd Military Intelligence Battalion, and I pray that they and I will work well together for the benefit of our soldiers, knowing that when the soldiers are taken care of, our mission will see its accomplishment.

Ken Bolin
Chaplain (Captain), US Army
502nd MI Battalion
Multinational Corps-Iraq
PRO DEO ET PATRIA
1 Corinthians 9.22b