



Notes from Balad Air Base, Iraq

by Chaplain Matthew Franke



Chaplain Matt Franke sits on a hardened shelter at Balad.

Jan. 15:

Tonight I'm heading out to spend time with one of my units as they arm up to escort truck convoys across the country. These guys are not security forces personnel. They are transportation folks (bus and truck drivers) who have volunteered to do about two months of training and six months

of time on the ground here. It is dangerous duty.

They intersperse in truck convoys with full-armor Hummers and armored gun trucks packing a lot of firepower. Unfortunately, they do get hit regularly with IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices). More than 50 purple hearts have been given out in this squadron alone.

Next week I will work closely with a large number of them who are about to return home to "normal life"—where the person cutting in front of you on the highway probably doesn't have a bomb in his trunk to kill you and where the debris alongside the roadway is probably just trash. Please keep them in your prayers.

Jan. 24:

Last week Chaplain Thomas and I spent one morning doing a redeployment briefing for 65 airmen who are returning to the States after six months of duty as convoy escorts (gun truckers). We met in one of the hardened aircraft shelters used by the Iraqis in years past for their fighter jets. They were quite happy to be going home. In the course of six months and about 90 missions each, they saw explosions on their convoys and were fired upon. Some received purple hearts. Many of them had to return fire or fire upon vehicles that come too close to the convoy.

It is an emotionally strenuous task, not knowing if that encroaching car is someone who's late for work or someone who has 500 pounds of explosives trying to get into your convoy to detonate ... The visit at Speicher with our detachment of gun truckers (convoy escorts)

was quite productive, with a number of counselings and a chance to see where they live and work.

Conditions there made coming back to Balad something to look forward to! God continues to provide opportunities for ministry and blessings in the wilderness.

Jan. 27:

On Tuesday, two Army soldiers came into our hospital. During the night, their Bradley Fighting Vehicle had somehow rolled over and into a river. Of the seven soldiers in the vehicle, only these two survived. Five of their friends drowned inside the vehicle. That night our chapel staff was tasked with a "Patriot Ceremony" for their five friends.

Volunteers formed a cordon at the tail of the C-130 cargo plane that would carry their bodies out of Iraq. A salute was rendered as each flag-draped casket passed through the cordon.

Ch McCrory and I followed the last casket into the hull of the plane and invited the cordon to join us in the aircraft. We held a short memorial service with Scripture and prayer, rendered one final salute, and left in the darkness at 0330.

McCrory, our hospital chaplain, also arranged for the two surviving soldiers to ride with us to the flightline. We got them clothes to wear and they joined us in the cordon and inside the plane to say goodbye to the five men with whom they'd spent every day for last two years. By the time we got the survivors back to the hospital, it was 0400 when we rolled into our beds—tired, but knowing we had honored the dead and helped the living.



Ch Franke by an armored truck.

Feb. 2:

The elections have come and gone. You have probably heard much more information about them than I have since I don't watch much TV over here. I would say the general feeling of most men and women in uniform is "validation." That is to say we feel our sacrifices and service here are worth it. Our military's efforts and your support are not in vain.

The Iraqi people have stepped forward in the face of terrorists to reclaim their country. What they have done is incredibly brave! Every week I speak with Iraqis who have been attacked by insurgents and whose lives and families have been threatened for having anything to do with the Americans, Iraqi Police, Iraqi National Guard or the cause of freedom. It is a

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brave thing for an American soldier to go into an Iraqi town with armored vehicles, body armor, and enough firepower to level a house not knowing who or what awaits him and his unit. It is also a brave thing for an Iraqi to serve as an interpreter, put his name on a ballot, or show his face at the polls (many on camera for the world to see) when insurgents threaten to track you home and kill you and your family. We hope and pray their bravery will continue and that they will help us ferret out the insurgents in their midst ...

Tonight we got a call asking if we could do a Patriot Detail in two hours (short notice). I was chosen for the duty. I called the mortuary to find out how many human remains we would be honoring. The response was, "We have 10 caskets, Sir! They are all British."

Tonight the cargo plane was filled with 10 six-sided caskets, each covered with a Union Jack and carried on the shoulders of six British soldiers. The Brits had no idea that we (Americans) would show up to form a cordon (80 yards long). It was the biggest turnout I have seen yet. When I arrived at the aircraft, I was surprised to find they had their chaplain already in the cargo bay awaiting the caskets.

The Brits conduct a similar, yet very different ceremony. So the chaplain and I discussed on the tailgate of the plane how it would be done. He performed the ceremony and asked me to stand alongside him and read the Scripture. It was a somber, yet wonderful moment when members of two coalition allies came together to honor fallen comrades. The Brits were deeply moved by the honor we gave their dead! We were deeply moved by the sacrifice they had paid!

Feb. 9

I sat next to an Iraqi woman last Friday night who works with the U.S. Army. More than 20 Americans in the Engineering Battalion she translates for have been killed in the past year. But her commander told how her smile radiated for days last week when she voted for the first time in her life! She has a new hope for the future of her country. As I sat beside her I noticed a tear run down the side of her face. It was a tear of joy! ...

Today is Ash Wednesday. The church season of Lent has begun. I can think of lots of things that I could choose to "give up" for the next 40 days—carpeting, private restroom, kissing my wife, hugging my boys, running with my dog, etc. But then, I really don't have to make a daily choice on those! (Actually, I'm thinking of abstaining from ice cream. I love it and it's served every

day here at the dining facility.)

Fasting or abstaining from some good gift of God during Lent doesn't make us any more worthy of His love. Instead, that daily sacrifice serves as a reminder of how much God has sacrificed for us. Sure, service personnel make sacrifices. But, honestly, it's nothing compared to the sacrifice Jesus made for you and for me—His life on the cross. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust." It hits home here every night we do a Patriot Detail. I find myself wondering if the person under the flag-draped coffin had the sure and certain hope of the resurrection. We honor their service and sacrifice, but it's Christ's service and sacrifice that matters for eternity.

Feb. 19

Last Wednesday I toured the one prison area still used as a prison. This is for "prisoners" (not detainees) who have committed crimes like theft, rape, murder, etc. One of the American Deputy Wardens gave me a two-hour tour through the facility. You have probably seen or heard about the prisoner abuse that occurred here. I actually got to walk into those cell-blocks where the abuse occurred. We also toured the kitchen and bakery, isolation area, hospital ward, and visitation area.



The Balad chapel even has a steeple!

The second level included a large room running half the length of the prison corridor. At one time, 3,000 Iraqi prisoners were in this one room for quite some time (no running water or toilets). When the Americans arrived in 2003, the room was filled with prisoners standing in nearly a foot of human excrement. Years ago, the Iraqi prison warden had informed the government (Saddam Hussein) that the prison was overcrowded, Saddam sent his son, Uday, to fix the problem. Uday arrived and went through the room shooting every third man. When 1,000 men lay dead on the floor, he told the warden, "There; you don't have an overcrowding problem any more."

At the end of the tour we went to the "Death House." It is estimated that since the prison was built in the 1960s, between 20,000 and 30,000 people were killed there by hanging. On one end of the building are the isolation cells where a prisoner was kept before the execution. The cell walls are covered with people's

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Chapel service at Balad.

names and the dates they were there.

In the middle of the building is the “dismemberment room” where prisoners were tortured for any useful information they might yield before they were hung.

At the other end of the building is the hanging room. Two sets of metal drop doors are controlled by two levers. We moved the levers; the gallows still work. I could only imagine being in one of the death-row cells on one end of the building and hearing the sound of those metal doors opening on the other end of the building, knowing that would be your fate as well. ...

As we flew back to Balad on Friday, our helicopter crossed the Tigris River as it flowed through Baghdad. It reminded me that this is the part of the world where all our troubles began. If you read in Genesis 2, you’ll recall that the LORD God planted a garden around here and the rivers flowing out of it included the Tigris and Euphrates. It was around here where Adam and Eve ate the fruit that God forbid them to eat. In Romans, we read, “Just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man (Adam) the many were made sinners, so also through

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Notes from New Orleans

by Lynn Christensen

Soon after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, I traveled there to help in whatever way I could. I tried to pray with people. Ninety-five percent of the time, whoever I prayed with would seek me out later for more prayer and to thank me for ministering to them.

Sometime during my third day, when I was visiting with the medic at Boat Station New Orleans, a crew member came and informed the medic that a civilian was at one of the sentry posts asking for help. His insulin levels were out of whack; he hadn’t taken any insulin medicine since before Hurricane Katrina hit. All the medic could do was take his vitals, then arrange for an armed escort to the FEMA location at Interstate 10 and Causeway.

The medic asked if I could help the man, so I went and spoke with the man for awhile. It was one of the most difficult things I have done. I don’t know why. I’ve talked to many in bad situations—as a pastor and now as a chaplain—but this time it was different. The man was pretty thin. He had a poodle in his lap and stroked the dog as he talked and wept. His family was separated from him, and all he had left was this poodle belonging to his daughter. His own dog wouldn’t leave the house, so the man left his own dog perched on top of the TV—the only dry spot—and went out looking for help. He was determined to carry his daughter’s dog until he found her.

The medicine he needed was not available, and I knew the emergency phone number given us to “find missing persons” did not work, so I was left feeling pretty helpless. I spoke to him plainly and as honestly as I could. I said, “I don’t know how to help you, I simply have nothing more to give you that the CG hasn’t already given you” (which was an MRE, water, and a ride to FEMA drop-off).

So I offered the only thing I could, not knowing if he would receive it. I offered to pray with him. He shook his head yes and then bowed it. As we closed our eyes

and I began to pray, this man cried uncontrollably. I had a tough time finishing the prayer—heck, I had a tough time concentrating. When I said “Amen” and looked up I saw the sentries looking away in order not reveal their own tears.

The man with the dog and I parted ways. He went on to FEMA drop-off and I returned to the station. Between the heat, the circumstances, and this last incident, I was done. The few hours there had taken a toll on me.

We are happy to get “So Help Me God” back in publication. This ‘new’ edition has material from AF chaplain Matt Franke’s deployment to Iraq, Navy chaplain Lynn Christensen’s surprise visit to New Orleans immediately after Katrina (Lynn is assigned to CG in Milwaukee), a paragraph from Ch Gary Williams, USAR mobilized in Iraq, and an Epiphany message from Ch Tim Sowers, USAF, also in Iraq.

If you have stories, anecdotes or reflections you’d be willing to share with fellow Lutheran military personnel and chaplains, send them my way (photos would be frosting on the cake): Ted.Wuerffel@lcms.org. Ch Schreiber, MAF Director, and Nancy Rowley our faithful MAF secretary, join me in wishing you good health, safety, and Gospel energy.

—Ch Ted Wuerffel, SHMG Editor

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Epiphany Notes:

A light that shines in the darkness

by CH (MAJ) Timothy E. Sowers



One of the first books I read as I prepared to come to Iraq was *Bin Laden—The Man Who declared War on America*. In the opening pages of the book, the Quranic concept of war is discussed. “The Koranic way of war is infinitely supreme to and more effective than any other form of warfare because in Islam a war is fought for the cause of Allah and therefore all means and forms are justified and righteous... Terror struck into the hearts of the enemies is not only a means, it is the end in itself. Once a condition of terror into the opponent’s heart is obtained hardly anything is left to be achieved. It is the point where the means and the end meet and merge. Terror is not a means of imposing decision upon the enemy; it is the decision we wish to impose upon him” (Bodansky, 2001, p. XV).

After being Iraq just a few days, I began to understand this quote as I saw the effects of terror. I shared Ps. 27:1-6 with soldiers and commanders: “The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life of whom shall I be afraid? When evil men advance against me to devour my flesh, when my enemies and my foes attach me, they will stumble and fall. Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then will I be confident. One thing I ask of the Lords, this is what I seek; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple. For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his tabernacle and set me high upon a rock. Then my head will be exalted above the enemies who surround me; at his tabernacle will I sacrifice with shouts of joy; I will sing and make music to the Lord.”

David, the writer of Psalm 27, placed his hope and confidence in the Lord. During Epiphany, we too look to our Savior, a light shining in the darkness, bringing us peace and confidence to stand firm in our faith even in the midst of terror.

As a brigade chaplain, I work with seven battalion chaplains. Each chaplain has a story to tell of God’s grace and protection from roadside bombs, rocket and mortar attacks, and small-arms fire. Not only has the Lord graciously provided protection but He has opened the door to ministry, to proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. One of the first soldiers I prayed with, after he was struck by a roadside bomb, grabbed my hand. Though part of his face was injured, he could only say,

“Thank you, Jesus ... Thank you, Jesus.” He was thankful the Lord of Light was with him and saved him from the vicious attack.

Keep our chaplains and soldiers in your prayers. Remember the people of Iraq. There are many brave soldiers here performing their duties with a heart of patriotism, willing to give their life in pursuit of freedom and democracy for Iraq, fighting terror here so the United States might enjoy peace and security.

From Chaplain Gary Williams, in Iraq:

The ministry continues to keep me busy. I have spent much time lately with a young man whose wife may be cheating on him. It is hard to get across to their hearts and minds that commitment to our spouses means we concentrate on our behavior of love rather than on what they do or don’t do for us. Only Christ can give us the power of forgiveness in our own lives to do that. I think of John 6:66—the many disciples who “left” Jesus because what they were hearing was too hard.

God is merciful and patient with us, though. In fact, that is what sets our Lutheran ministry apart: we preach Christ crucified, who is patient and merciful. Other pastors preach to soldiers what they must do to get themselves right with God. Believe me, I hear that kind of painful confession coming from soldiers all the time. What a joy to proclaim God’s love and forgiveness in Christ!

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the obedience of the one man (Jesus) the many will be made righteous” (5:18-19).

Years ago I traveled to Israel and Jerusalem. So I figure I’ve been where sin began and ended. It started somewhere around here with Adam and Eve. It ended in Jerusalem on the cross. Oh, we still live with the consequences of sin (to include this war and prisons full of thugs, felons and insurgents), but Jesus beat that crafty serpent! “The kingdom ours remaineth!”

Feb. 27

People often ask me, “Do you have a chance to share about Jesus with the people over there?” Believe me, people are open to hearing the Gospel! It’s amazing how being here (away from all distractions and routines of “normal life”) can lead people to evaluate their lives and their faith. After this morning’s service, an individual told me how he was eating in the dining facility last night with a soldier from his unit. This soldier was searching for meaning in his life and asked him what was different about him. The individual invited the soldier to the chapel service this morning and he came. “Sir,” he told me, “You were a such a blessing this morning! That was exactly what my friend needed to hear!” It’s amazing