

Military chaplain: Marines in Iraq look to pastor for answers to tough questions

From a buddy's suicide to a religious ritual, young troops count on Lt. Michael Baker.

By Lee Lawrence, Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor | OCTOBER 30, 2007

Habbaniyah, Iraq

Under a sun-blached desert sky, Navy Chaplain Michael Baker and Marine Sgt. Bill Hudson Gross bounce in the back of a truck as it rumbles across Camp Habbaniyah. Clad in helmets and body armor in the 110-degree F. June heat, they're on a mission: to baptize Sergeant Gross.

"I am going to try to talk him out of it," confesses Chaplain Baker, a tall, lanky Methodist minister whose formal Mississippi-tinged speech and posture mask an often goofy sense of humor.



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It's not the baptism itself; it's just the part where Gross wants Baker to immerse him in the Euphrates, one of four rivers that the Bible describes as flowing from the Garden of Eden. For Gross, an infantry platoon leader who just weeks before saw two of his men wounded by shrapnel, the river has a personal connection. Two years ago he deployed to a small base on the river, where he turned his back on religion after learning of his father's death back home. Now that he has rediscovered his faith, he feels it fitting to be baptized in a river where, he says, "a lot of people gave up hope."

Baker enumerates the problems with Gross's plan: "There is the issue of water pollution and the issue of security," he says. By stepping into the Euphrates, they would technically be leaving the confines of the camp, home to the 3rd Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment. Safer to wear their 25-pound body armor and risk drowning, he wonders? Or better to stand in the river without it and risk being shot? His laugh at the predicament is loud and staccato.

For military chaplains in war zones, even very routine requests can prove challenging – as Baker has discovered, it is not always easy to satisfy basic emotional and spiritual needs of individual troops within the hard-edged, mission-oriented goals and guidelines of the command.

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The same week of the Euphrates foray, Baker found himself navigating far more difficult waters. Word came that a 20-year-old lance corporal had committed suicide. He shot himself with his M-16 rifle while on duty at one of Habbaniyah's guard posts. Baker got there right away. While the doctor tended to the victim, the chaplain focused on the other young marine on guard, who was ricocheting from shock to grief to what Baker terms the "would've, should've, could've."

When Baker went to the guards' barracks that evening, he found three of the young man's closest friends reeling from another shock. As Baker recounts the event his delivery is clipped, his eyes stern: A senior noncommissioned officer had visited the guard detachment and told them they could get through this and needed to realize that their deceased comrade was right then burning in hell. "[They] basically had this bombshell dropped on them," says Baker, whom the marines collared, wanting to know whether their buddy was truly in hell.

The chaplain was "flabbergasted" at the NCO imposing his religious views. Like all military chaplains, he must negotiate a volatile no man's land between church and state by serving as clergy in a secular institution. As such he is the military's "subject matter expert on religion," an authority he needs to exercise without imposing his own religious views on others.

The case here was clear: The marines approached him for his opinion. And he gave it to them in the hope that it would mitigate their hurt.

"From my understanding, God did not make any of us on earth the ultimate judge, jury, and executioner," he told them. "And if I am correct, I should be the only theologian attached to this Marine unit.... Ultimately, God is your friend's judge," declared Baker, who rebelled against the fire and brimstone approach of his childhood church and chose the Methodists' God of grace.

While chaplains are not to proselytize, they are however charged with imposing their "prophetic voice" and calling to task those, regardless of rank, who act immorally, unethically, or otherwise destructively. Chaplains pragmatically pick their battles. Though Baker believed the battle in the guards' quarters that day was important, he stated flatly afterward, "I am waiting to cool down a bit. I am still sort of simmering."

Far more pressing, was the question: What kind of memorial, if any, should mark the young man's passing? "The Marines are very code-of-honor driven," said Baker, "and for somebody to take his life, it's outside the code."

The ramifications become apparent in the days following the suicide. Two marines in "battle rattle" – helmet, antiballistic sunglasses, bulletproof vest – manning a checkpoint at one of the entrances to nearby Fallujah know about the suicide and express the kind of ambiguous emotions Baker hears from many in the ranks.

"He deserves credit for signing up and coming out," says the taller of the two, his hands resting on the M-16 slung across his chest. "But it's tough being here – it's easier to pull the trigger."

They don't think their dead comrade should be awarded the honor of a marine killed in action. But asked if the unit should refuse any memorial at all, their heads snap up. "He deserves something," the tall one says adamantly. His mate nods in agreement.

Back at Habbaniyah, outside the small guard booth at the main gate, Lance Cpl. Brandon Jones voices another view. Behind him stretches the same brown landscape that his dead buddy, until recently, scoured for eight-hour shifts. Corporal Jones was the closest to the marine who died, but he hadn't picked up that anything was amiss. The suicide, Jones says, didn't alter the fact that his buddy was always the first to step up for a task and to do it double-time. Told that the memorial ceremony might be altered, Jones looks pained. "He was a good marine," Jones argues. "Once a marine, always a marine."

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Sitting in the shade amid the faint scent of eucalyptus trees outside his office, Baker cuts to the chase: "In my view, death is not an end; it's sort of like a journey into the next room." Jones's buddy had lived honorably and his suicide was not his last act. Death, in Baker's view, is not final. "In the physical sense, yes," he says, "but in the spiritual sense you keep continuing on" and what happens next is "outside our realm of speculation."

Although there seems to be an unspoken requirement that units hold services for all deaths, regardless of their circumstances, Baker found that some battalions do not in the case of suicide. But he and the senior officers of Habbaniyah wanted the closure a service provides. Conspicuously absent on the day was roll call, taps, and the rifle rising from the boots and topped by the helmet. Baker, however, made it a personal tribute. As pigeons clattered on the metal roof of the A-frame chapel, marines filed past the young man's photograph, boots, and helmet. Three of his mates spoke about their friend to a congregation of 60 marines, some of whom, like Jones, clenched their jaws to hold in emotion.

In his eulogy of the marine, Baker stated plainly that the lance corporal is now "in the presence of God." He moved with ease through a ritual that was as much military as it was religious, avoiding terms that might exclude non-Christians.

The deceased, Baker later confides in private, "served with honor, courage, and commitment, and ultimately we don't know what inner demons he was battling. They could be just as real to him as some insurgent out there with an IED," he says, referring to the improvised explosive devices that present a constant threat to troops out on patrols.

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Given how combustible religion can be in the military, Gross's request for a Euphrates baptism proves an unexpected delight for Baker. His eyes widen in disbelief as he reports that the commanding officer has given the expedition his OK on condition the necessary security arrangements be made. And, when Baker pops into the medical unit, the medics roll their eyes and laugh, but prescribe postdip showers.

In the end, even though Baker protests he will try to dissuade Gross from a full dunk, he breathes not a word of this on the ride to the river. On the bank, while a dozen marines and soldiers fan out to keep watch for snipers, Baker and Gross pull off their body armor. The sound of Velcro ripping open punctuates the quiet chatter and the lapping of the water against the shore. Seconds later, sergeant and chaplain step into the cool, dark waters of the Euphrates. Baker places a hand on Gross's chest and rocks him backward.

The whole process takes no more than a few minutes. In the truck headed back, trousers dripping Euphrates water, Gross looks to Baker. "I wasn't under long but it felt like it was a long time." He hesitates. "That was pretty neat," he says in a tone that is far more serious than the words alone convey.

Beneath his helmet, Baker looks gratified.

•On Nov. 6: Part 2. Army Chaplain Pinkie Fischer uses her video camera to bring a bit of Hallmark to the world of war, keeping soldiers and their families together.