

Military chaplains: An Army captain keeps tough soldiers in touch with their softer side

The divide between home front and front line is bridged by a chaplain's good ear and ever-present video camera.

By Lee Lawrence, Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor | NOVEMBER 6, 2007

Salerno and Bagram, Afghanistan

At Forward Operating Base Salerno, weekly briefings of the support battalion are down-to-earth, nuts-and-bolts affairs. Inside air-conditioned metal shipping containers, surrounded by aerial photographs marked "SECRET," soldiers report on risk assessments, mission accomplishments, and the operational needs of the 500 soldiers here who keep the war machine running.

Capt. Shareen Fischer – clad in tan and green fatigues, hair pulled tight in a no-nonsense bun – clutches her Power Point remote as she admonishes the leaders of the men and women of Alpha, Bravo, and Charlie companies to be prepared.



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For Mother's Day.

The troops, Captain Fischer says, "can start thinking right now what they are going to say either to their mom or to the mother of their children." Because she will be coming around with her camera to tape the next video she sends back home to families.

Her tone may be mil-speak, but her message is Hallmark. And nobody so much as blinks. The woman, after all, is their chaplain. Her soldiers work out the logistics of supporting small bases scattered across southern Afghanistan, getting fuel, food, and equipment to them – and Chaplain Fischer supports the support troops.

For Fischer this means hours of listening, counseling, and using her camera to bridge lives that are worlds apart – a healing, nurturing presence in the midst of a war in which the casualties can be relationships with partners and families back home.

While her work might seem soft in a world of weapons and tactics, there is hard evidence that it contributes to the overall strength of the military.

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Salerno is on "light discipline." At night, soldiers open and shut doors quickly and, outside, use red flashlights, undetectable by Taliban in the surrounding hills. It's at this time – when stars by the hundreds pop out of the pitch-black sky – that the phone room is at its busiest. Soldiers line the long narrow space, chairs pulled up to open carrels, heads tilted forward in attempts at privacy.

Here, anger often spits out through clenched teeth. The person in the next carrel may not hear but, at the other end, the words come through clear and hurtful.

Fischer recalls a paratrooper who sought her out because "he'd been talking really rough to his loved one ... degrading her. He started to see her self-esteem go down," and the relationship grew increasingly tense.

Fischer says she reminded him that "this is a critical time: She's taking care of the children and trying to keep everything stable back in the rear. You need to encourage her and praise her." As the soldier changed his tune, the tension eased and the relationship improved.

Because the Army assigns chaplains to a unit rather than a base, Fischer spent two years with the battalion before deployment. "That comes in handy," she laughs, "because I'm building relationships with the paratrooper, the spouse, the children, the dog – everybody!"

But, in deployment, she only gets one side of every story. "So I'm only going to deal with that one side. 'What can you do? What changes can you make? Let's not focus on your spouse. Let's focus on you,' " she tells soldiers.

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In the mess hall, in bunkers during a rocket attack, hanging out by the pool table, soldiers gripe about extended tours, and some deride decisions made in Washington. But it isn't despondency over the war or its prosecution that propels them to knock on a chaplain's door at 2 in the morning. It's the Dear John letter. It's news of infidelity. It's a wiped-out bank account because a girlfriend went on a spending spree to cheer herself up – "mall therapy" with the serviceman's checkbook.

The military has recognized this and, says Dennis Orthner, a professor at the University of North Carolina who researches military families, the Army in particular has "ramped up family support services, largely led by chaplains." Divorce among Army personnel – with the exception of female enlisted soldiers – has dropped since 2004, and he believes it's due in part to the Army's investment in families and "an enlightened chaplain corps."

The crucial area for couples, in his view, is communication. "Couple communication is what drives the relationship quality," says Professor Orthner.

This is where Oprah and military meet. A RAND Corporation report this year said the effect of marriage on performance and retention of service members "may have significant implications for national security." The key isn't whether service members are married, but whether their marriages are healthy.

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A self-diagnosed introvert, Fischer doesn't readily confide in people, and when she jokes with her paratroopers, there's an underlying calm – some chaplains approach soldiers with a slap on the back; Fischer greets them with a wave and a smile.

Fischer, who has never shed the childhood nickname of Pinkie, left her native Brooklyn, N.Y., to study architectural engineering in Oklahoma, where she fell in love with the idea of missionary work. So she switched to the Rhema Bible Training Center and prepared to leave for the Philippines as a missionary.

"But I just didn't have peace in my heart about making that move," she says. So she waited. She prayed. "And that's when the Lord put it in my heart to be a chaplain in the military."

Not exactly sure what that was, she researched it. At peace with what she learned, she enlisted in the National Guard and set about meeting the chaplaincy's requirements – a bachelor's degree followed by seminary, which she completed at Oral Roberts University. In 2005, she was deployed in Iraq. In early 2007, she once again packed up with her paratroopers, this time for Afghanistan.

She is part of a chaplaincy whose focus has expanded and evolved over its 232-year history. Concerned with the high rates of venereal disease among troops in World War II, chaplains zeroed in on personal morals. In Vietnam, they initiated drug counseling. And since 1974, when the country shifted to an all-volunteer military, chaplains took on family counseling.

So Fischer's mission specifically includes helping soldiers build healthy marriages. It echoes what civilian pastors do: premarital counseling and helping young men and women see themselves and their behavior more clearly. "And then, being Airborne," she adds, "it's a different sheet of music altogether with the [operations] tempo we have and the various missions we do and back-to-back deployments." Not to mention the limits security concerns place on what soldiers can discuss on open phone lines and in e-mail. This is where the video camera comes in handy, giving families back home a glimpse of daily life downrange.

For the top brass, this is money well spent. For Fischer, it's religious conviction in action. "Marriage is an institution that God has established, and you see that all throughout Scripture," she says, from Genesis through the New Testament. "Even God Himself talks about how it pains him to see divorce," Fischer adds, pointing to a passage in Malachi that enjoins men from "putting away" – or divorce. "All it does is bring division and separation between those that love each other. So by any means necessary, I try to work with the couple to keep that marriage together."

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On a breezy April day Fischer has flown north from Salerno to Bagram Air Base to poke her video camera into the workaday lives of Task Force Fury's soldiers, also known back home at Fort Bragg as dad or mom, husband or wife, son or daughter.

From under the floppy brim of her boonie hat, Fischer frowns at gathering clouds that could threaten a group shot for a Mother's Day greeting. But within seconds she breaks into a toothy smile as another cloud gathers before her: the blue-gray camouflage of soldiers' fatigues.

They crowd together, laughing, and Fischer, camera raised, gestures for them to squeeze in tighter. "On behalf of the Combat Logistical Patrol here at Bagram Airfield," a staff sergeant calls out. And 30 voices bellow, "HAPPY MOTHER'S DAY!" In the hoopla that follows, they tease Fischer about making them work overtime. "I'll buy you dinner," she counters, offering a choice of base cafeterias.

Camera still in hand, Fischer wanders the motor pool. Crouching next to the rear axle of a truck she records two soldiers in T-shirts pounding lug nuts loose. Fischer will later edit these and other scenes into a 10-minute video and send it via the Web to Capt. Benjamin Coffman, head of the unit's Family Readiness Group at Ft. Bragg. He organizes monthly meetings where, on average, 50 spouses and "lots of fun, noisy kids" come together to exchange stories and dip into the world of a spouse, child, or parent.

Back in Afghanistan, Fischer saunters up to another group of soldiers and with good cheer starts the process again. The architecture student-turned-chaplain knows the importance of a solid foundation.

•On Nov. 6: Part 3. Army Chaplain Shmuel Felzenberg, an ultra-Orthodox rabbi, reaches across faith lines in work with Afghans and American soldiers alike.