Military chaplains: a Presbyterian pastor patrols with his flock of soldiers in Iraq

Army Capt. Ron Eastes carries a big responsibility - but no weapon - in his 'ministry of presence' with the 82nd Airborne.

By Lee Lawrence, Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor | NOVEMBER 27, 2007

Baghdad

Vendors and shopkeepers are gearing up for business along a market street in the northeastern neighborhood of Adhamiya, when a platoon of American soldiers disgorges from Humvees. The soldiers fan out up and down the street. Even on a low-key patrol to make their presence known and gather intel, the soldiers have to stay on the qui vive. Eyes dart up to rooftops and down side alleys; while one soldier smiles and nods greetings to a vendor, another peers to the back of the store.

From a distance the soldiers are indistinguishable: domed helmets, dark glasses, and tight-fitting armored vests in camouflage grays and greens. But closer inspection reveals differences. From the back of one soldier, a radio antenna quivers: platoon leader. Across the chest of another, only gloved hands – no rifle, no side arm strapped to thigh: chaplain. In orbit around him, another soldier, rifle ready: chaplain's assistant and bodyguard. Should fighting break out, he'll shove his charge behind a wall, to the ground, under a vehicle.

Chaplain Ron Eastes is on this patrol with members of his 82nd Airborne Army unit not because he is helping with the platoon's mission, but because the platoon itself is his mission.

"I've heard it said that a shepherd needs to smell like his sheep," he explains, "and if I'm going to care for these guys, I need to be where they are."

And being where they are can mean joining soldiers in a ritual of cigars and banter as a distant mullah chants the call to prayer and the sky darkens beyond the concertina wire at their combat outpost (COP) in north Baghdad. Or playing cards with troops visiting from a smaller outpost. Or walking, outside "the wire," among stalls selling housewares and food in a Baghdad bazaar.

The smell of sheep, Chaplain Eastes knows, comes with more than a whiff of risk.

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Eastes, a captain, isn't new to the military. As an enlisted soldier in the '90s, he served two years in this same battalion in Fort Bragg, N.C. But there was something missing. Eastes says he felt that "eternal significance wasn't there, and I longed for that."

So, in December 1999, he left active duty and enrolled at the Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte, N.C., always thinking that, if he could just "marry the military and ministry, that could be my niche." Five years and two children later, he joined the chaplain corps.

Although one of his primary duties is to provide religious services, Sunday mornings aren't the best gauge of his effectiveness. Fighting the whir of the mess hall air conditioner one Sunday last May, the soft-spoken West Virginia pastor dissected the Book of Job to a congregation of four. Sure, this conservative Presbyterian would love to look up one Sunday and find the room packed. But, unlike a civilian minister, he can't count on the soldiers at COP War Eagle to share his theology. So Eastes applies his denomination's notion of grace. "We differentiate between common grace and sovereign grace," he explains, sitting in a cubicle inside the camp's former gym. On the wall behind him, the faces of his children stare back, the third only 2 years old. "God causes the rain to fall on the righteous and unrighteous [and] the sun to shine on the wicked and the righteous." That is common grace, he says. "Sovereign grace: the Gospel. Probably 95 percent of my ministry is common grace."

Capt. Jon Harvey, an energetic officer who heads a battery called The Bulls, has a more secular term for this: "This isn't going to sound nice, but Ron is like background noise. And that's exactly what a chaplain should be."

The value of this "background noise" comes clear on a day when soldiers detain an Iraqi sniper suspected of wounding a high-ranking US officer. After poring over intel reports, they decide to apprehend the suspect at his workplace during what looks like a routine patrol. From the operations center back at War Eagle, Eastes follows the soldiers' reports and is pleased that no shots are fired, no doors kicked in. And, within hours, the soldiers are back, and the detainee is shut in a cell with plywood walls and padlocked door. A soldier sits on a stool beside the door while two others watch from nearby. The prisoner and soldiers wait in silence.

Well aware that a soldier's anger can flare at the sight of a man thought to have shot one of their own, Eastes strolls over with calm concern and pauses by the guard. From a distance it's impossible to hear what the chaplain and soldier are saying – but the words exchanged aren't what is important. What matters is that Eastes is getting the soldier to talk; if there is pent-up anger, he can spot and, he hopes, defuse it.

"There's probably a little venom that boils up," Eastes later says with characteristic understatement, "but I've been impressed by the way [detainees] have been treated [here]."

He volunteers that this hasn't always been the case in this war. "We aren't going to run from that. But these guys know the difference between right and wrong." And Eastes aims to keep reminding them.

It is a classic example of what chaplains call their "ministry of presence." Its effect is as impossible to quantify as that of a guardrail on a mountain road: Nobody can know how many accidents – if any – are prevented because of its presence, but we believe it makes a difference. In war, when a sense of right and wrong can disappear into the fog of adrenaline and anger, the chaplain can act as a "guardrail," and officers who rely on them as such talk about the value of troops having a safe place to let off steam and regain equilibrium.

"There's a switch that a soldier has to flip somewhere mentally and emotionally that allows [him to consider] an individual to be a target," Eastes explains. In war, "there's something healthy about seeing someone as an enemy."

By doing so, soldiers can overcome what some psychologists term an innate resistance to kill. What makes this war especially difficult is that the switch can't stay permanently flipped because, as Eastes says, they're "dealing with folks day in and out." Should a sniper open fire during a fact-finding mission, military training will kick in and flip that switch; and, at the end of the day, Eastes will be on the lookout to make sure it has "unflipped." And if soldiers have pulled the trigger or seen comrades killed or wounded, he's there to help them process the experience or to get them other help.

Even on missions deemed too dangerous for Eastes to accompany, he tries to provide a presence. When the platoon headed out to capture the suspected sniper, Eastes joined them in the motor pool to offer a prayer for those who wished it. In a semicircle of bowed heads, he read Psalm 91, popular verses of protection. He then prayed: "If they have to make a split-second decision, I ask you to give them wisdom; if they have to make the decision to shoot, to engage another individual, I ask that the bullet goes straight."

The issue of prayer has been politicized in recent years, with the focus entirely on when and how chaplains can pray in Jesus' name without excluding or offending non-Christians. But this overshadows another important question: Should chaplains ask for divine intervention in the outcome of war or limit prayers to petitions for protection and the right conduct of war?

Often a line only becomes visible when a chaplain crosses it, and Eastes's own prayer could be said to come close. Some might interpret it as a request that God favor his unit's mission; others might hear a request that no innocent bystanders be hurt. As an officer, Eastes makes no bones about wanting US soldiers to be successful; he is equally clear that his concern is the conduct of war, not whether God endorses it.

Even well-defined lines are sometimes contested. In the US, chaplaincy historian John Brinsfield notes, Civil War generals defined chaplains as noncombatants long before the Geneva Conventions. In 1909, the military designated a specific position to assist and protect the chaplain.

Still every war has chaplains who break the rules. In 2003, a convoy came under attack in Iraq, and the chaplain picked up a rifle and joined the fray. Like many chaplains, he had prior military service and was no stranger to firearms.

Chaplains generally agree that they shouldn't fight, but some would like to see chaplains, like noncombatant medics, have the right to carry a weapon for self-defense. Eastes's grandfather, a World War II chaplain, "was given the option to carry a .45. He chose not to. But," Eastes adds, "this is not our grandfathers' war." Chaplains have no guarantee that, if captured, they'll be treated as noncombatants.

Every Army chief of chaplains since World War II has argued that arming chaplains would detract from their primary focus of caring for soldiers and open the way for commanders to use them as combat assets.

Eastes agrees that there are powerful arguments for the interdiction, but he says that, as a father and husband, he would like to see the senior leadership reopen the debate. In the meantime, he is neither crossing the line nor letting the risk it entails stop him from meeting his men where they are – on the streets of Baghdad.

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