

Military chaplains: Prayer and humor hold a combat trauma unit together in Afghanistan

National Guard First Lt. Kurt Bishop listens to medics letting off steam, nurses coming to terms with death, and doctors showing stress.

By Lee Lawrence, Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor | DECEMBER 4, 2007

Forward Operating Base (FOB) Salerno, Afghanistan

Reporter Lee Lawrence spent three months embedded with US military chaplains in Iraq and Afghanistan. This is the last of six weekly print and Web video profiles of them. The series concludes tomorrow with Lawrence's personal reporter-on-the-job entry.

First comes a chirping alarm over the PA system, then a woman's lilting voice wafts over this dusty military camp: "Attention on the FOB, Attention on the FOB. Mustang blue. Mustang blue." The tone belies the seriousness of the matter, which is that casualties are incoming and the Army's 396th Combat Support Hospital team – "the Mustangs" – should be ready. The number of victims are color-coded: red for one, white for two, blue for three, and black for mass casualties.



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US medics, nurses, doctors – and a chaplain – converge in interlocking tents that form the hospital, preparing for the arrival of three Afghan National Army soldiers injured when their vehicle rolled over an improvised explosive device.

Faces are serious as the team checks supplies and readies the triage room. Among them, Arizona National Guard First Lt. Kurt Bishop – one of five chaplains at this forward operating base of 1,500 soldiers and contractors. He doesn't look the part of either soldier or cleric. His well-fed torso matches the round softness of his face, and he is more likely to trumpet his allegiance to the Ohio State Buckeyes than proclaim his Baptist faith.

"I'm burning that hat of yours," he fires at a medic who'd been wearing a Michigan cap earlier. The medic's attention is yanked from the business at hand, and he looks up, rolls his eyes in mock despair, and then gets back to work. Chaplain Bishop responds with a goofy grin, then scans the closed expressions of the men and women around him, scouting for opportunities to crack them open, if only for a moment. His jokes aren't always knee-slappers, but his almost childlike delivery breaks the tension the way a Roman candle momentarily dispels darkness.

Yet the moment the first stretcher is rushed in, Bishop is all business. He sinks into the background, his jaw working chewing gum, eyes sweeping the tented space. Noticing that a nurse needs a fresh packet of gauze, he picks one off the shelf and hands it to her. Then he pulls on blue gloves and shuttles bloodied bandages to the trash. As an X-ray machine is wheeled in, a young female medic scurries out of the way. She looks worried.

"The fat sterile guy will protect you from the rays," he says, pulling her behind him. She laughs. Her face relaxes. Mission accomplished, Bishop fades into the background watching, ready to lend a hand, a shoulder, an ear.

In this pressure cooker environment, Bishop offers release and relief, whether by listening to a medic let off steam, helping a nurse come to terms with a death, or expressing concern when a doctor shows stress. As the head of this medical team, Lt. Col. Richard Philips explains that by working together on the edge of life and death teams like the Mustangs bond intensely. But with the camaraderie and support also comes the danger of destructive dynamics such as extramarital affairs or pent-up anger. Having a hands-on chaplain is not only good for individuals; it helps the unit. From Colonel Philips's perspective, Bishop acts as an early detection system. Typically, he says, "we call the chaplain when people are drowning, but a chaplain like Bishop is here all the time. He sees them when they're struggling to swim."

Because Bishop has made himself part of the team, Philips adds, when crises come, "even the most foul mouthed, anti-Christian, I-don't-need-any-help person ... pulls [Bishop] aside and goes, 'You know, I did have a question about something.' I've seen more counseling go on by that little port-o-potty out back." He laughs. "You'd have to be here for a year to understand. We're completely cut off from normal life ... and we become like a family. The chaplain tends to the spiritual side that's intangible, and Bishop does that better than most."

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Bishop is new to the chaplaincy but not the military. His father was an Air Force fighter pilot; his older brother flies Army helicopters, and Bishop himself was an enlisted soldier with the 82nd Airborne from 1987 until 1991. He later joined the National Guard, working as a driver at the Officer Candidate School at Fort Lewis, Wash.

When he talks of being called to the chaplaincy, he means it literally. He was sitting at a Burger King, working through the aftershock of a girlfriend's Dear John letter with two chaplains he'd been chauffeuring. Then and there, he says, "I heard God, just as audibly as we're talking, say, 'This is what you're going to do: You're going to be a chaplain.' "

Last year he was commissioned an active-duty Arizona National Guard chaplain. "The call came in 1996," he says with a grin, "I was just a little slow."

Adapting to hospital duty, however, took him no time. The key to being effective, chaplains say, is building relationships. And for Bishop, the bond here was sealed over a tragedy two weeks into his deployment early this year.

Many Afghans heat with kerosene, often tasking the children to cut it with gasoline. And accidents happen.

"We were just coming out of the really bad [winter] season with a lot of burns," Bishop says, when a 6-year-old came in with burns over 45 percent of his body. But he was stable, and the team agreed he was recovering nicely. Then he suddenly and inexplicably died.

The team was in shock. Immediately, Bishop gathered everyone and, as they talked it over, he listened and watched. He says he'd spent enough time hanging around the crew that "I could tell Cejka wanted to open up, but she wasn't going to do it with everybody around. So I asked her to stay behind."

Sgt. Catie Cejka – an emergency medical technician – had been monitoring the boy, and her face still saddens recalling the event: "That was the only time I really talked about it, and I think that helped more than anything."

Had Cejka approached him at Sunday services or a Bible study, Bishop wouldn't have thought twice about addressing the issue in terms of his Christian faith. But their conversation took place at the hospital and, as a chaplain in a secular institution, he's not allowed to impose his religious views on others. Indeed, proselytizing would hinder efforts to establish the kind of open, trusting relationship that enables Bishop to reach out to soldiers in a time of need, whether to help them through troubles or to provide moral guidance. Like many chaplains, Bishop walks this church-state tightrope by preaching his faith at services and, at other times, letting the cross on his uniform suffice unless a soldier broaches the subject. "I did," Cejka says, "so we went into how this is the way things happen, you can't control them, it's God's plan."

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During the "Mustang blue," Bishop's radar is up. He sidles up to a doctor and, in a low voice, asks about the first patient. The doctor shakes his head. The head wounds are severe, he says; there is no recovery in sight.

"I thought so," Bishop says, then melts back into the bustle. When the patient is declared dead, Bishop helps curtain off an area where nurses will prepare the body for transfer to an Afghani morgue. Inside the curtained cubicle, Bishop then helps clean the Afghan soldier's face and body and wrap it in white sheets. Pulling a card from his pocket, he reads a Muslim prayer that asks God to look over the young man's family.

"They don't share my faith," he later says of the Afghan patients treated in the trauma unit, "but that doesn't mean that I don't need to be praying for them. If the least I can do is to read the emergency Muslim prayer off this card that I have, then I am going to do that."

Once the two survivors and the deceased have been moved to a local hospital, medics clean the floor, tidy shelves, align tables. Off in a corner, a man in jeans and polo shirt sits alone. Bishop has never seen the Afghan translator fall so quiet. Within minutes the chaplain is by his side, hand on his shoulder, speaking softly.

Later, on a slow afternoon, the translator approaches Bishop, smiling shyly. The chaplain recognizes the overture and engages him in a conversation that quickly veers to the tragedy and losses of war. The translator had known the Afghan soldier, and his death had hit hard.

After the translator leaves, Bishop stays on, watching the comings and goings of the medical team. "It is amazing to see them come together and lean on each other," he says. "It strengthens my faith because I know it's not a human thing, I know it's God working in people."

Southern Baptist tradition stresses witnessing, and Bishop has come to believe that "everybody witnesses whether they know it or not, and, here, once it gets into a room it's going to circulate. It can be 'hey can I bring you anything,' or it can be that shoulder to lean on, or that person to talk to when people are having tough times."

And every morning before he heads to the hospital, Bishop says, "I pray, 'God, help me get out of the way so you can use me.' "