

Three months with US military chaplains in Iraq and Afghanistan

Reporter on the job: Rockets in the shower, gravel in the rollers, and a mouse in the guard tower.

By Lee Lawrence, Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor | DECEMBER 5, 2007

Bagram air base, Afghanistan

It was 4 a.m. when my partner, Terry Nickelson, and I landed at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan last March to begin a three-month embed with the military. We'd spent three nearly sleepless days traveling to Afghanistan from Atlanta via Frankfurt and Kuwait. The Kuwait transit camp had eaten up most of our energy. That was where we first encountered gravel – not the small, friendly kind that crunches delightfully underfoot, but a big, fat species of gravel that the military has imported by the ton to keep down dust and drain away rain. The downside is that even a short walk feels like a workout on a low-budget beach. (First mental note to self: at any future embed, no suitcases with wheels.)

At Bagram outside our quarters – two windowless cells in a one-story building – Terry and I met to plan for the next day. Our proposal to make a documentary on military chaplains had received approval and our access also extended to a series of chaplain profiles I would spin off for The Christian Science Monitor. It was hard to believe, after many months of planning, that we were actually here, staring at the shadowy presence of mountains in the distance.

Suddenly, light bloomed over that dark outline – and we thought we were seeing the war ... until thunder rumbled. Truth is, it was often hard to remember we were in a war zone, especially on big bases like Bagram. The cafeterias served just about everything from chili to surf and turf and hand-dipped ice cream – not to mention a never-ending supply of chunky peanut butter cookies (and my family worried that I would lose weight). Given the plethora of contractors, there seemed to be almost as many people in civilian clothes walking up and down the main drag as there were military. And the buffer zone separating us from the outside was so large that my husband and brother back home knew far more about what was going on in the rest of Afghanistan than we did. (Note to self: Thank them for their news-filled e-mails.) We had not yet found the supply of "Stars & Stripes" newspapers, and though TV screens played CNN and other channels in the cafeterias, the background noise was so high we had to rely on the crawl at the bottom of the screen. The news anchor might have been talking about the war; we were reading about Anna Nicole.

Probably the most surreal incident in that connection was looking up at the TV at lunch one day to find Stephen Colbert arching an eyebrow, his irony garbled by the bad acoustics. The soldier at the end of my table was straining to hear and having better luck than I. But he wasn't laughing.

Even news that directly affected us was sometimes hard to get. Again in Bagram, Air Force personnel at the hospital asked us one day whether we'd heard that the base had come under attack the day before.

Really? Yes, mortars rained down just inside the perimeter for about four hours – or was it six? Accounts varied, and nobody we spoke to could tell fact from rumor because, though we'd all been right there, we hadn't heard or seen a thing.

By contrast, when rockets hit Salerno, a medium-sized FOB (forward operating base) south of Kabul, we all knew it. I'd just spent two days hopping in and out of Black Hawk helicopters, shadowing Air Force Chaplain Gary Linksy as he traveled to seven tiny outposts to say mass. I'd already discovered that the dust, whether whipped up by nature or the

whir of rotor blades, acts like those old dry shampoos that absorb the oil in your hair, leaving it technically clean but feeling dull and gritty.

When I got back to Salerno, I headed straight for the shower trailer. I had the place to myself and was all lathered up when I heard the first big boom. It felt like the world had taken a convulsive in-out breath.

People talk about the fight or flight response – my response was freeze and focus. I stood still, water pouring over me. Then my focus narrowed: Rinse off. Get dressed. Gather toiletries. Poke head out of trailer.

I could see the walls of various structures coming in at angles to one another, as deserted and stark as a De Chirico painting. Another boom. Do I leave? Stay put? Someone is speaking over the loudspeaker, but I can't make out the words. Then laughter – guys must be playing cards over in that tent, so how bad can this be? But, wait, that's not a tent. That's a bunker. A bunker. I need to be in that bunker.

The thought propelled my legs, and the next thing I knew I was staring up at a man with an open, kind face and a body so massive the largest size neck armor was too small. I took one look at Sgt. Robert Walker and stuck to him like glue. When the next rocket hit, those of us near the opening of the bunker saw the dust kick up 300 yards away.

"How bad can it be?" one soldier said, "The guys in the guard tower are still there."

Right on cue, the guys in the guard tower charged down the stairs, chins tucked in and backs hunched. I looked at Sergeant Walker. When he headed for a bunker farther inside the FOB, I was right behind him. (About a week later an all-female singing group called Purple Angels performed at the base – and who do you suppose was their designated driver and bodyguard? You know it – Sergeant Walker.)

We sat in the next bunker for about an hour. A soldier told me all about his wife; a civilian contractor explained bluntly that we were basically defenseless – "If a rocket hits the bunker square on, we're gone." And a jolly-looking fellow brought us bottles of water. (It was my introduction to National Guard Chaplain Kurt Bishop, whose operating room ministry I would later profile for the Monitor.) And here I was clutching toiletries instead of my camera. I consoled myself, thinking that maybe a camera would have stifled conversation – but I now doubt it. (Note to self: About the camera – never leave hooch without it.)

Largely, troops were pretty open and happy to talk once we'd hung around for a while, and especially after we'd gone on patrols with them. At one small FOB, Terry literally ran with marines on three consecutive night patrols. .

I spent hours in guard towers, usually late at night when the watch feels the longest. I heard about future plans ("My ambition," one marine said, "is to get a job I can quit, not signing on any dotted line"), girlfriends back home, and the boredom (on one tower, the guys had been feeding a mouse and were a little worried that he hadn't shown up in a day or so; in another camp, marines spun a fantasy of being on an island with just one obstacle between them and freedom; the challenge was devising ever-weirder ways to get around it).

At first I felt like an interloper – a woman their mothers' age coming in from the civilian world, asking questions, filming – but there was something I hadn't counted on: the power of diversion. I was something different. I broke the routine, and Lance Cpl. Chad Travers a few days later told me in a flat Rhode Island accent, "That was the fastest hour of the watch." So maybe I'm not quite as entertaining as a Purple Angel, but still...

In order to get a feel for what chaplains do and how they fit into the military, Terry and I had from the start decided we needed also to document the lives of the troops. We hadn't realized just how much we would appreciate the diversion this, in turn, gave us – especially with units that got out of their vehicles. For once, we could see the world directly without the mediation of a dirty Humvee window.

Still, it wasn't exactly your usual reporting. We were wearing body armor and helmets and arrived with a bevy of heavily armed men.

Surprisingly, this didn't always get in the way. More than once, Iraqi women pulled me in for a chat, whether they were the wives of sheikhs, teachers in a school, or just women in a neighborhood soldiers were patrolling.

On one mission with a Minnesota National Guard unit in Iraq's Anbar Province, we went to Tourist Town, on the banks of Lake Habbaniyah, a huge body of sparkling blue water that came as a shock and relief in this land of tans and browns. It turns out that Saddam Hussein spent some time in a Swiss resort and liked it so much he duplicated it here.

There amid pine trees and pink oleander, a woman wearing a deep blue head scarf and long caftan had just finished baking flat bread in an open oven and mimed the process for me. She and her teenage daughter invited me in for tea.

It felt rude to stomp into their home with boots, but every time I tried to untie them, they shook their heads and stopped me. So I shed the helmet, and the sight of my sweaty head triggered fits of giggles from mother and daughter. I couldn't tell whether it was my foreign brazenness that tickled and perhaps embarrassed them or whether they were laughing at my helmet hair.

While the woman heated the tea on a kerosene burner, we communicated in gestures and facial expressions. I gathered that life is tough with kerosene being so expensive and a husband out of work, that they are Sunni from Baghdad and left when violence erupted, that their future is a blank page onto which the hand of Allah will inscribe their fate – inshallah.

(Note to self: Be grateful.)