

CBF-endorsed military chaplains minister on front lines during Iraq war
By Lance Wallace
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ATLANTA (ABP)— As Operation Iraqi Freedom winds down, the job of Cooperative Baptist Fellowship-endorsed military chaplains grows more and more challenging.

During the course of the war so far, five CBF-endorsed military chaplains have been deployed: U.S. Army chaplains Captain Geoff Bailey of Fort Bliss, Texas; Major Scott Sterling of Fort Jackson, S.C.; and Captain Michael C. Cox of Fort Hood, Texas; and U.S. Navy chaplains Lieutenant Erskine Alvis of Norfolk, Va., and Commander Ron Craddock of Hampton Roads, Va. More are expected to deploy as the mission continues in Iraq.

Although much of the ground combat and aerial assaults have ended, the ministry needs facing chaplains grow every day the soldiers, airmen, marines and sailors they serve are away from their families.

"Our ship left in mid January with no return date in sight," said Craddock, a Navy chaplain for 16 years. Craddock currently is assigned as battle group and command chaplain of the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Theodore Roosevelt somewhere in the eastern Mediterranean Sea.

"That is very stressing on a crew when they have yet to be told when their cruise will come to an end," he said. "Knowing the ending date helps the sailor deal with each month, then weeks and then days as they count down. It is a psychological thing for them and their lives rotate around that ending date. They want to see the light at the end of the tunnel, and for now, there is no light in sight. That is war at sea."

But chaplains can be at peace even during a time of war because they know their role and why they are in the difficult places in which they find themselves.

"Scott is doing very well," said Mini Sterling, wife of U.S. Army chaplain, Major Scott Sterling of Columbia, S.C., currently deployed in an undisclosed location in Iraq. "Every time I talk to him, which is not often, he is so calm. He's in high spirits because he's happy to be where God put him and with the soldiers."

Chaplains' responsibilities vary according to the circumstances of their deployment and their rank. Some who are with units on the ground are closer to the fighting. Others have supervisory roles. Craddock oversees seven junior chaplains and must see to the ministry needs of more than 7,000 sailors and marines in his battle group.

"I arrange helicopter support to take chaplains of different faith groups from ship to ship," Craddock said. "We call that helicopter with a chaplain on it a 'Holy Helo.' That is its call sign when flying with the chaplain aboard. ... We refer to it as 'circuit riding.'"

When not "circuit riding" himself, Craddock is charged with providing worship opportunities, hosting Bible studies, conducting marriage and pre-marriage counseling, as well as grief and crisis-stress counseling.

"Currently, there is no 'normal' or routine day at sea in this war," Craddock said. "We have to be very flexible in our routine out here."

During the war, the crew on board the carrier Roosevelt sleeps during the day and works all night. Each "day" begins about 6 p.m. with breakfast, staff meetings, and visitation – meeting the sailors and marines in their workspaces and providing on-the-spot counseling. They lead a daily devotion and offer a corporate prayer each evening over the ship's public address system.

For chaplains with troops on the ground, the challenges are similar in some respects and unique in others.

For Capt. Geoff Bailey with a Patriot missile battery of the U.S. Army – the 2nd Battalion's 43rd Air Defense Artillery unit – worship and ministry has happened in a variety of locations. Beginning with their initial encampment at Camp

Coyote in Kuwait, Bailey has led soldiers in prayers and led worship in the camp's "recreation tent."

"I want to help them smile – find the good in the situation," Bailey was quoted as saying in a report from Kuwait in the Albuquerque Journal. Bailey frequently ministers to troops who are passing through Camp Coyote on their way deeper into the battlefield.

Craddock recalls from his experience last year on the ground in Qandahar and Bagram, Afghanistan, as part of Operation Anaconda and Operation Enduring Freedom, that humvee hoods and rocks make fine communion tables.

"For those on the ground, some of their biggest challenges are finding the time and space to offer worship and communion," said Craddock, who has had six major deployments during his career. "They do it whenever, however, and with whatever tools or equipment they have. Sometimes that happens to be setting up communion or an altar area on the hood of a jeep, other times it may be simply making do without anything to set up on and shifting hands to do the best you can with what you have."

Craddock also said chaplains directly in the fight often have to work in the dark for the troops' safety, not even using a flashlight so as not to give their position away to the enemy. On the ground, limited water usage, few hot meals, the weather and the surroundings also pose great challenges.

"No matter where we are, on ground or ship, we often are faced with tough questions by the troops like, 'Am I going to hell chaplain if I kill the enemy coming at me with a weapon?'" Craddock said. "Fox hole Christianity is alive and well, but more so for those actually on the ground and in the direct line of fire than for those sailors at sea. It is not uncommon for a chaplain with a unit on the ground to see an immediate increase of interest in worship services as well as requests for baptisms. It happens in most, if not all, conflicts and is a natural human instinct when humans think that their lives may be coming to an end soon."

Brigadier General Charles Baldwin, a 29-year veteran of the Air Force currently serving as deputy chief of the Air Force Chaplain Service in Washington D.C., said Air Force chaplains live by the theme "Bringing God to people, and people to God."

"We are noncombatants," Baldwin said. "We do not carry weapons and are forbidden by International Law — the Geneva Conventions — from ever bearing arms in times of conflict. We are ministers, priests and rabbis who wear the uniform of our military service. We go where they go, even to the front lines when the troops deploy."

CBF-endorsed chaplain Captain James Pope, director for operational ministries for the U.S. Navy's Atlantic Fleet, is not currently deployed but is charged with ensuring every chaplain in the operational forces of the Atlantic Fleet is properly trained and has sufficient personnel, equipment and supplies to accomplish their missions. He understands the challenges and knows from firsthand experience what the chaplains face during deployments.

"Sailors, marines, soldiers, airmen and coast guardsmen may face their mortality more directly than will their contemporaries in college or in the business/professional world," Pope said. "Chaplains are on hand to help address some of those hard questions like: 'Why is this happening?' 'What happens when you die?' 'How can God still love us?'"

From an Air Force perspective, Baldwin said chaplains must help pilots deal with the possibility that this may be the "last mission."

"The reality of death is very near to those who go into harm's way," Baldwin said. "Some want to talk about it; others don't want to deal with it. The great privilege the chaplain has is to be available, anytime and anyplace."

Craddock said that although Navy personnel aren't in "fox holes," there are still a lot of spiritual discussions related to life and death, killing and being killed and there are a number of sailors who make professions of faith while deployed at sea during war time. Perhaps the most dramatic way in which chaplains see God at work during war and the most direct way churches and individuals back home can partner with the chaplains in ministry is through prayer.

One example occurred recently when Craddock's staff meeting was interrupted by a pilot who said his commanding

officer (CO) sent him to ask prayer for pilots still not back from a mission. High desert winds were preventing in-air refueling.

"The CO simply wanted us to seek God's blessings in the lives of his flight crews still out there," Craddock said. "We stopped our meeting, asked the pilot friend to come in and join us as we joined hands to lift each of the pilots up in prayer. We prayed for their safety and safe return and God heard our prayer."

"For us, prayer is critical," he said. "Prayer is powerful and to know that folks are praying with us and for us is powerful."

Whether it is disrupted sleep schedules, dodging bullets, or breaking tragic news to young men and women, chaplains deal with a great deal of adversity during wartime. They face no greater adversity, perhaps, than that of knowing their families miss them and want them to return home.

Suzanne Cox, the wife of Capt. Michael Cox, has two young sons to look after on her own while her husband is deployed as battalion chaplain with the 180th Transportation Battalion in Kuwait. Because he has been at a base camp, Cox has been able to call and e-mail home sporadically, but the separation is still very difficult.

"The hardest part during deployment is separation," Suzanne said. "Mike is a very dedicated and involved father. He is always taking care of their needs and playing with Nathan and Ryan."

Mini Sterling said their youngest daughter has had to face the realization her father won't be home for the most important events of her life to this point – prom, graduation and going off to college.

For Capt. Geoff Bailey and his wife, Sara, the separation has been particularly intense. The two are newlyweds, married on Dec. 21, 2002. They have been separated by Geoff's deployment since Feb. 11.

"He called the other day on his birthday, and I got to tell him 'happy birthday' in person," said Sara, a senior at Baylor University. "That meant a lot. He called me on my birthday from London while he was on his way to Kuwait. We've missed being together on both of our birthdays."

The Fellowship has endorsed 295 chaplains and pastoral counselors who minister in a variety of specialized settings, and the responsibility of George Pickle, CBF associate coordinator for chaplaincy and pastoral counseling, is to minister to them and their families.

"The vision of CBF is to be the presence of Christ in the world," said Pickle, who regularly checks in with the families of deployed chaplains. "In the war with Iraq, CBF-endorsed military chaplains are there as the presence of Christ, ministering to the United States armed forces. We thank God for their commitment and continue to pray for them and their families."

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– Photos available



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CBF launches new Web site to set record straight

By Lance Wallace

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ATLANTA (ABP) – The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) has launched a new Web site to keep the record straight about the Fellowship.

Linked to the Fellowship's home page under its "Newstand" and "About CBF" drop down menus, the site will correct misstatements and address ongoing attacks by groups that seek to discredit CBF and its ministries. The site can also be accessed directly at www.truthaboutcbf.net.

"As a Fellowship, we strive to be the presence of Christ in the world," said Daniel Vestal, CBF Coordinator. "It saddens and grieves us to be forced to give time and attention to defending ourselves against unprovoked attacks. For 12 years, our partners, our ministries and our identity have been maligned. Sadly, these statements most often come from our Baptist brothers and sisters. We will no longer allow misinformation to stand as truth and become a part of the historical record of this movement of Christians. We must respond and speak the truth with compassion."

The site will be updated regularly with responses to inaccuracies or false allegations as well as contain helpful links to other resources that provide balanced perspectives on Baptist principles, history and practice. Because the Fellowship aims to provide resources to churches and individuals, the site is primarily designed to be a trusted source of information to those in the pew who wish to have a balanced view of the Fellowship and its vision. Through the site, CBF will inform church members who often have no resources to refute false claims made on the local church level.

The site's debut contains several items on the nature of the attacks over the years, as well as a 1996 message from Vestal providing response to the propagation of falsehoods about the Fellowship.

"We are not investing negative energy in attacking or counter-attacking those who would undermine our integrity," said Ben McDade, CBF's director of communications and marketing. "My philosophy has always been that everyone needs accountability. CBF as an organization is held accountable by a Coordinating Council and by each of its partnering churches and individuals. In this case, those who lie about us will be confronted by their lies and will be held accountable for bearing false witness against their neighbor."



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Federal courts deal blows to state religious endorsement

By Robert Marus

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WASHINGTON (ABP) -- In two separate cases April 28, federal courts declined to allow state governments to endorse religious messages.

The Supreme Court declined, without comment, to allow a challenge to a lower court ruling that barred the commonwealth of Kentucky from posting a Ten Commandments monument on the grounds of the state capitol building in Frankfort. Meanwhile, the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that Virginia Military Institute, as a state institution, could not offer school-led prayers at mealtimes.

In the Kentucky case, Commonwealth Attorney General Ben Chandler argued the state should be allowed to place a six-foot-tall monument to the commandments in a prominent location on the statehouse lawn. The monument originally had been donated to the state by the Fraternal Order of Eagles in 1971 and displayed in an inconspicuous location on the capitol grounds. It was removed in the 1980s during a construction project and never put back.

But the state legislature in 2000 passed a resolution to re-erect the monument in the new location. The law directed the monument to be placed along other, non-religious commemorative artworks, and Chandler argued the display was meant as a larger tribute to the secular and religious forces contributing to the development of Kentucky's laws. But the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals disagreed, noting the monument depicted two tablets with a prominent inscription that began, "The Ten Commandments. I am the Lord thy God. Thou shalt have no other gods before me."

In the Virginia case, the High Court chose not to hear the state's challenge to the 4th Circuit's ruling that said mealtime prayers at the state-run military college were a violation of the First Amendment's prohibition on government endorsement of religion. School administrators dropped the prayers, a tradition at VMI, in 1990. But Gen. Josiah Bunting III reinstated them in 1995, saying the prayers would foster esprit de corps among the cadets.

But two VMI cadets sued the school. Neil Mellen and Paul Knick said their religious freedom was violated when they were forced to sit through Christian prayers before taking meals. "Although we recognize and respect a cadet's individual desire to say grace before supper, the Establishment Clause prohibits VMI from sponsoring this religious practice," the court said.

Church-state separationists lauded both rulings. "We've known for a long time that public secondary schools cannot sponsor prayer or other religious activities," said Barry Lynn, director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, in a press release. "This court has now extended those religious liberty protections to public universities as well."

But Family Research Council head Ken Connor, in his daily e-mail commentary April 29, said the case extends protections to college students unnecessarily.

"The Supreme Court long has distinguished between state-sponsored religious observances in elementary and high schools, where attendance is compulsory for younger children, and similar observances in colleges and universities where attendance is voluntary and students are older and more mature," Connor said. "[S]ince VMI does not compel any cadet to attend, or participate in prayers before meals, merely hearing a grace recited can hardly be thought an outrage against conscience."

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