

A CHAPLAIN'S REFLECTIONS ON COMBAT EXPERIENCE OFFERS INSIGHTS INTO RETURNING VETERANS' NEEDS

"What's important is that you'll share a quiet conversation with us."

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SINCE SEPTEMBER 11, 2001 more than 17,000 of Pennsylvania's National Guard soldiers and airmen have been deployed as a result of the Global War on Terror (GWOT). Of the 17,000 Pennsylvania Guardsmen and women, who have deployed for the GWOT, more than 5,500 have been involved in direct combat.

I am one of that number.

I served with the 1-110 IN, 2/28 ID under the control of the 2nd Marine Division. We were stationed in the heart of the Al Anbar province 55 miles west of Baghdad in one of the most dangerous places in the world. As you might expect in a high intensity combat environment, inter-service rivalry melted away and we lived, worked, ate, slept, trained and fought together as a cohesive band of brothers, Americans one and all.

We conducted Combat Operations and had contact with the enemy on a daily basis. As a result, we now personally know the thunderous earth shaking of rocket and mortar attacks. We felt the forceful blasts of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). We experienced the single deadly accuracy of enemy snipers and we stood toe-to-toe with enemy combatants in multiple gun battles. The explosive power of rocket propelled grenades (RPGs) was commonplace. Booby traps of all shapes, sorts and sizes were regular discoveries.

Despite all this, we experienced great success. We oversaw two national elections, stood up an Iraqi Army Brigade to whom we turned over battle space, recruited and trained Iraqi police officers, destroyed enemy arms and munitions and neutralized, captured or killed enemy combatants.

Our success did not come without cost.

Overall, our Brigade lost 83 soldiers, sailors and Marines. My battalion lost 15 and awarded 61 Purple Hearts, the military's award for being wounded by enemy combatants. Some of those wounds were horrific; all of them, I suspect, were life changing.

One of those lost was one of my best friends, LTC Michael McLaughlin from Mercer, PA. He died on a cool

but sunny Thursday afternoon in January when a single pellet from the vest of a suicide bomber struck him in the back of the head. So did about 40 Iraqis applying to become police officers. What the news failed to tell the American public was that after the human carnage was addressed, those Iraqi Police Recruits, more than 1000 of them, got back into line in the hopes of bringing law and order to their land.

... as excited as they were to go home, many were equally afraid. And they don't know why. It doesn't make sense, they tell me. They are confused, anxious and embarrassed. They are not sure how they will be received when they get home. They are afraid they won't fit back into their family or circle of friends. They are nervous about what long-term effects this experience will have on them—physically, emotionally and spiritually."

For those of us who have tasted it, the experience of combat is unlike anything we knew before or we will experience again. And it's not simply the fighting, the fear, sweat, blood, smells, noise, exhaustion, strain and pain; it's also the everyday living.

It was hard. Very hard.

So was the transition home.

- ☒ For 18 months I was surrounded by men with guns. When I came home, I felt vulnerable without them, even in church.
- ☒ For 18 months, I suffered the indignities and depravities of military life in a combat environment with a core of friends. When I came home I felt lonely without them, even when surrounded by family or other friends.
- ☒ For 18 months, I kept a constant watch on my surroundings and the people around me. When I returned home, I could not break the habit but remained hyper vigilant outside the walls of my home.

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- For 18 months, I studied every piece of garbage or discarded junk along the road. When I came home, I couldn't stop. Riding in the passenger seat always made me nervous when someone would drive over a piece of trash.
- For 18 months as a leader of soldiers, I had to keep my emotions in check. When I came home, people told me I was distant and withdrawn.
- For 18 months, I shared common goals and values with others upon whom I depended literally for my life. When I came home, I found dishonesty, hypocrisy and malevolence in people who claimed to be my friends and share common values.
- For 18 months, I had no choice about what to wear, what to eat, what to do or when to sleep. When I came home, I was overwhelmed by choices, sometimes to the point that I was unable to make decisions.
- For 18 months, I dealt with issues that were literally life and death, ones eternal in their scope. When I returned home, I found people worried about matters of no consequence at all.

So let me tell you about what soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines were worrying about just one month before we came home. These are excerpts from the last letter I wrote home. It has a title, "Quiet Conversations."

Many times clergy participate in quiet conversations. Sometimes the tones are soft because someone is inviting us into a private space in their being, a place generally reserved for no one but themselves. At other times, the voices are hushed because the person is revealing some past hurt or sin. They may be embarrassed. They may not want to revisit the experience but something inside their soul pushes them to uncover what has been buried for so long.

Some of these conversations are one-sided. Sometimes there's no need for me to speak. I must only listen... with my heart as well as my head. At times these conversations center on life's difficult questions. Many are the "why" questions. Or the "how" questions, seeking advice more than answers. And sometimes, all the other may want is to be heard, to be truly heard and understood. Maybe for the first time.

Many of the quiet conversations I am having these days center on the subject of fear or anxiety. The fear is not combat. Most of the soldiers couldn't wait to return home. Yet, as excited as they were to go home, many were equally afraid.

And they don't know why. It doesn't make sense, they tell me. They are confused, anxious and embarrassed. They are not sure how they will be received when they get home. They are afraid they won't fit back into their family or circle of friends. They are nervous about what long-term effects this

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experience will have on them—physically, emotionally and spiritually.

Active duty units return together to the same place and begin training all over again. They are not separated from one another. They live together on a base and continue to socialize and work together. They remain "Army." We, however, who have carried weapons everyday for a year and a half, who have drawn the blood of strangers and who have shed our own—we who have laid in ambush for the enemy, watched him through the grasses and then cut him down so that our homes, families and nation would be safer—are now going to be asked to put aside our weapons, our sense of security, to leave one another behind (a thought so repulsive here that it is part of the soldier's creed, "I will never leave a comrade") and return to the life of a civilian where most of you have no idea what we have endured or suffered. How could you? What will it be like to be "normal" again. How does one even define normal after all this?

I worry about them. Who will translate for them what has taken place? We still have much to contribute to the world at large. I have not talked to one person who thinks America owes us anything. What we have done, we have done freely and without compulsion. We do not expect reward or recognition.

What we want, what we crave—but what so many may be afraid to say, is your patience, understanding and support. This deployment has been difficult but the readjustment and reintegration into the lives we left behind also will be difficult. Without you, we will not be able to do it. We need your help. We can't do it alone. We are counting on you.

So please, if on some peaceful evening as the sun is melting on the distant horizon or during some fierce afternoon thunderstorm with the rain pouring down and the thunder cracking, if you find us sitting alone, don't be alarmed. If we linger a little while in the pew Sunday morning after the service is over, or if you find us sitting outside in the car alone or in some room in the house—join us. Sit with us. We may say nothing at all—or we may say a great deal, maybe more than you'll want to hear.

But what's important is that you'll share a quiet conversation with us.

You may not have to say anything at all. Your silent presence speaks volumes. It is a language we need to learn anew. It is the language of love.

Thank you for your unwavering support of America's military personnel. And thank you for all you do for our service men and women.

May God bless you and those you love and may God bless America.