

Faith On the Front Lines

American military personnel are sharing the gospel among their ranks, and the Holy Spirit is working among our soldiers during the war on terrorism.

Chaplain Maj. Thomas Solhjem listened intently to the U.S. Army Ranger next to him—a standard-issue tough guy with an added penchant for alcohol, chewing tobacco and cursing.

The two men sat on their parachutes waiting to rehearse a mission—which would eventually be carried out in Afghanistan—and the Ranger could barely contain his emotion. With tears threatening, he told Solhjem about his young son, about the sickness that had the boy in death's throes.

“He opened his heart to me,” Solhjem, 45, also an Army Ranger, told Charisma. “That was the beginning of me telling him that Jesus was trying to communicate with him.

“But I never pressure a soldier. I just share with him and let the Holy Spirit do the work.”

Fast-forward three weeks to October of last year.

Solhjem, his Ranger friend and others from the 75th Ranger Regiment were deployed to Afghanistan to help root out Osama bin Laden and Taliban forces.

The base camp from which they launched their operations was cramped and crowded. Looking for privacy, Solhjem and his friend found a quiet spot near the perimeter of the camp.

Their conversation moved quickly from their admiration of the night's starlit sky to the Ranger's son, before settling on the topic of faith.

"In a little while you're going to go into an uncertain future," Solhjem told the Ranger. "You really need to look at your life."

Though his instinct was to lead rather than fall in stride, the Ranger committed his life to Christ. As he did, tears streamed down his and Solhjem's faces.

Less than 36 hours later the Rangers had their first encounter with Taliban forces, and Operation Enduring Freedom officially began.

Being All They Can Be

Despite restrictions on proselytizing, as well as peer pressure and a prevailing military view that a relationship with Jesus is for the weak, many armed-services chaplains and personnel are bringing Christ's love and hope to the U.S. military's more than 1.3 million members and their families. In doing so, Marines, airmen, seamen and soldiers are finding peace during these tenuous times, and souls are being transformed for eternity.

The condensed chaplain motto goes something like: "We provide for our own; facilitate for others from different faiths than ours; and care for all regardless of their faith or lack of it."

In essence, a chaplain's main duty is to provide for the free exercise of religion for those in the military. But to do so, they must minister within the boundaries of military protocol, which prohibits their evangelistic efforts but does afford them well-defined liberties.

"As a chaplain I can only Christian service," says Paul Steward, 57, a U.S. Air Force chaplain endorsed by the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee). "But when I offer Christian worship, I am free to preach Jesus Christ crucified, buried and resurrected."

Chaplains, of course, aren't the only ones who must abide by protocol. From new enlistees to high-ranking officers, all are beholden to certain rules and procedures.

"There is not an overt oppression toward Christians," says Ron Sutherland, 43, an Army lieutenant colonel and pediatric urologist at Tripler Army Medical Center in Oahu, Hawaii. "But there are pretty well-defined prohibitions against proselytizing. The concern, at least in military medicine, is that the job that I do is funded by taxpayers' dollars, so I owe it to the taxpayers not to bring my beliefs into the equation."

But if asked about his faith, Sutherland does not hesitate to share it.

"We believers ascribe to a higher authority, and if the opportunity arises I will share my faith," he says. "I keep all kinds of things in my office that let people know I am a Christian. But I have learned to utilize a passive as opposed to active evangelism."

According to many of the personnel Charisma spoke with, among the most effective ways for the military's believers to share their faith is to follow the old Army motto: "Be all that you can be."

"We're not supposed to push our beliefs on other soldiers—especially while on duty," says Craig Schuh, 35, a captain with the military police at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, and a recent recipient of the Army's prestigious General Douglas MacArthur Leadership Award.

"One's faith is not an issue. As long as you are dependable and a good soldier, people don't care how you live your life," Schuh says.

"The best thing we can do is be the best chaplain and officer we can," says Steward, who ministered at the Pentagon after it was attacked in September. "If we know what to do and do it, others will notice. They will also notice if and when we don't."

Solhjem's uniform is heavily decorated. Patches, ribbons and medals on his arms and chest indicate armed conflicts he has served in (Operations Desert Storm and Desert Shield and now Enduring Freedom).

He received a Bronze Star for capturing enemies during Desert Shield. Another medal tells others he is a master parachutist. The crosses on his lapel indicate he is a chaplain. All of it, he says, only serves to further the kingdom of God.

"The medals and patches are a rite of passage and a gate of opportunity to minister to soldiers," he says. "When soldiers

look at me they get a visual image of who I am, but once they get past that they either accept or reject me depending on my credibility.”

Faith in the Trenches

Protocol isn't the only obstacle chaplains and personnel face when sharing their faith. Some Navy chaplains have sued because they say their careers were thwarted by unfair practices in the Navy's Chaplain Corps that favor liturgical over nonliturgical chaplains. They contend they have been unfairly passed over for promotions and that their opportunities in certain assignments have been limited.

They may have a case. Earlier this year a U.S. District Court judge ruled the chaplains had successfully stated their claim that military policies violate their First Amendment rights. But many say the most difficult aspect of sharing Christ's message of love and hope in the military is overcoming the impression that a relationship with Christ is a drawback.

“Christianity in the military is viewed as a weakness,” Jeff Bramstedt, 31, a Navy SEAL says, adding that before he became a believer he followed that line of thinking. “I remember hearing guys in my platoon talking about God or Bible studies, and I wondered what was wrong with them. I didn't realize there was a need for a relationship [with Christ] rather than just a [religious] lifestyle.”

The reasons, according to Solhjem, for Christianity's being viewed as a crutch are machismo and the fact that many soldiers have neither experienced nor seen a healthy and cogent relationship with anyone, let alone God.

"Many soldiers have not had anything spiritual in their lives," says Solhjem, who is ordained by the Assemblies of God and has been on active duty since 1988. "I see men coming into the military and it's appalling—their life experiences are so shattered.

"A majority of them are from devastating home situations with no family constructs and no basis for understanding what love is," he observes. "The challenges for chaplains are enormous. Many soldiers are not responsive to genuine concern right away because they have never experienced it."

Robert Washington, 38, a master sergeant at Little Rock Air Force Base in Arkansas, committed his life to Christ after a local pastor, Bishop James E. Bolden of Evangelistic Ministries Church and a former Army drill sergeant, reached out to him and led him to a relationship with Jesus Christ.

"My friends thought I jumped on a bandwagon and it wouldn't last," Washington says, recalling his conversion experience. "It was rough at first. The guys ridiculed me, but after they saw it was real, everything calmed down and they accepted me."

Because he remained true to his newfound faith, he says, at least five of his friends who once teased him eventually committed their lives to Christ. The key to maintaining one's faith, Washington and others say, is to follow through on one's commitment.

"As a Christian you have to decide from the start not to compromise," says Lance Cpl. Bradley E. Hoff, 20, based at Quantico, a Marine base in Virginia. "Others need to know what your convictions are, and they'll respect that, but what comes

with that are mocking and jokes—you have to learn to deal with that.”

Hoff says that for him the hardest part of being a Christian is a sense of being left out.

“People get used to not inviting you to whatever drinking party is planned for the weekend,” he says. “The hard thing is that I want to share in the camaraderie with my fellow Marines, but I have decided that what is ultimately more important is my relationship with the Lord.”

Shaken—But Not Stirred

After the United States was attacked in September, many believed a spiritual awakening was imminent, especially in the military. The logic followed the notion that if the country goes to war, military personnel will want to be assured that they are going to heaven, so many will commit their lives to Christ.

What fueled the spiritual-awakening talk was the number of worshipers who turned out for chapel services on military bases immediately after the attacks. But in the weeks that passed, the would-be awakening proved not to be long-lasting, as the number of those who attended chapel fell back to pre-9/11 levels.

“People were shaken up by the events,” Sutherland says. “But now many are returning to their comfortable, selfish lifestyles.”

Udell Meyers, who founded a ministry for Marines in Quantico, agrees (see related story on p. 39).

"I don't think the attacks had the impact we thought they would," Meyers admits. "As far as finding Marines giving us more of an ear—they haven't."

Navy SEAL Bramstedt emphasizes that military training is extremely dangerous, whether during peacetime or war: "September 11 did not mark the beginning of special ops or field training in the military."

Since October there have been 32 accidental, on-duty fatalities in the Army alone. More than 30 have died in direct combat or in accidents in Afghanistan.

"We have been training and living this lifestyle for times like this so others can enjoy their lives," Bramstedt adds.

But Maj. Grant Johnson, 46, an Army chaplain endorsed by the Chaplaincy Full Gospel Churches in Dallas and stationed at Fort Bliss, Texas, is optimistic that the terrorist attacks will have a sustaining spiritual impact.

"People are becoming less enticed with the things of this world," Johnson observes. "The soldiers are starting to realize that the thing that could make them really happy is God."

"People who began to look for answers are still in that looking stage," Steward contends. "Not many of them have fallen to the wayside. Many might not be seeking as

aggressively as they were in October through December, but they are not [spiritually] where they were on September 11."

For many, one of the most positive aspects of the attacks has been the attention the media has paid to President Bush's faith. His directive days after the attacks for Americans to step outside their homes or businesses to light a candle at 7 p.m. spoke volumes about the president's faith and inspired many believers in the military.

"Others might have said something generic, like, 'Pause for a moment of silence,'" Steward says. "But President Bush was very specific, giving us a date and a time and an action to take."

"I know military Christian people that are stoked about it," Sutherland says of Bush's faith. "The morale among Christian people in the military is higher than it has been for many years."

Vigils Foreign and Domestic

When Solhjem received orders to deploy to Afghanistan, he had little time to say goodbye to his family. It was 45 days before he could communicate with them. When he finally was able to, he learned his wife was being tested to determine if lumps on her breast were malignant.

"It raised me a notch on my dependence [on] the Lord," he says, noting that today his wife is cancer-free. "I learned to trust in the Lord. There was nothing else I could do, and we were at His mercy."

Struggling privately, Solhjem remained with the Rangers and carried on with his duty. Before every mission he and three other chaplains prayed for the commandos.

"I talked to them and learned where they were at spiritually. Then I'd pray with them according to the needs and dynamics of the group," he says.

Standard operating procedure for many chaplains is to accompany personnel under their care onto the field of battle. The war in Afghanistan has been no different. Chaplains have shared in the hardships and dangers with their men. This has meant fast-rope assaults and parachuting into hostile enemy territory as part of medical teams.

"Chaplains are very important in the combat zone," says Gen. Claude Kicklighter, 68, who once directed a theater of war during his 36 years of active duty in the Army. "In all of my commands the chaplain was someone I constantly worked with."

Beyond ministering to troops, the presence of a chaplain on the battlefield is critical to ensuring an ethical battle.

"When soldiers are in life-and-death situations the chaplains are the moral influence in that arena," says Ardon Schmidt, 68, a retired Army chaplain who served in Vietnam. "Under those kinds of conditions morality can slide because some soldiers resort to survival techniques and only respond to instinct."

Often, unexpected situations present chaplains with unique opportunities to be ambassadors for God.

At an undisclosed airfield, Solhjem was going about his duties when he received a request to pray for a group of commandos who were passing through. In their company was Hamid Karzai, the interim leader of Afghanistan. Solhjem led the special ops team in prayer and welcomed prayer for his country and the commandos who were risking their lives to ensure his safety.

“I prayed for their safety, their spiritual lives and their families,” Solhjem says. “It’s God’s strategy. He is using conflict to open up these countries to the gospel.”

The Ranger creed is never to leave a comrade on the field of battle.

Solhjem’s prayer is that every Ranger he’s in contact with will accept Christ as Savior, and thus he’ll never have to leave a Ranger behind. But for revival to sweep over his regiment, the Army and the military, it will take action on behalf of Christians, he says.

“It will take prayer and a fervent desire to see God move in our midst,” he says. “I have seen that in our spiritual leadership in the Army. But it’s going to take something of consequence to make our country turn to God, and it only began on September 11.”

God, Get Me Out of Here Alive’

How one Marine saw divine intervention during the Persian Gulf War

Phillip Pachecho had never tasted alcohol before joining the U.S. Marine Corps. After enlisting he consumed lots of it.

Why? Peer pressure and temptations, he says. Plus he just wanted to be one of the guys, even though that meant walking away from his relationship with God.

“I learned if I didn’t spend time with the Lord, I was going to stumble and fall,” Pachecho, 32, and now a minister in Dallas, says.

He hadn’t been a prodigal for long before he realized he needed Christ. His timing couldn’t have been better because in February 1991, he and his platoon were ordered to secure an Iraqi airfield after already having marched 15 miles. Though the orders gave Pachecho an adrenaline rush, he prayed a common battle prayer.

“Lord, You have given me this life, and You have a plan for me,” he says he prayed. “If You get me out of here alive, I am living for You.”

With the sun falling, Pachecho and his squad made their way across sand dunes toward their objective. As they did, enemy mortar rained down and exploded a few yards in front and behind Pachecho.

“I should have taken shrapnel from both hits, but I felt God’s hand was covering me,” he says, noting that the soldiers in front of him and behind him were hit.

“I wanted to get up and help my friends, but I couldn’t. It was like a force field was around me. I knew God was real.

“I’ve been serving Him ever since.”

-Kirk Noonan

God at Quantico

A Vietnam veteran has given his life to reach Marine officers at one of the nation's elite military bases.

A bar and dance hall in Quantico, Virginia, dubbed the "Rally Point," has been converted into a site where military personnel from nearby Quantico Marine base can come for spiritual help. Behind the camouflaged windows and memorabilia-lined walls, Udell Meyers and his wife, Janet, provide a welcoming atmosphere where Marines can just hang out, shoot a game of pool or relax with a cup of coffee by the fireplace. Sooner or later, the conversations at Rally Point usually turn to God and spiritual matters.

A retired Marine himself, Meyers became a Christian at age 16 during a Billy Graham crusade. He says his call to ministry came in 1965 when he commanded a platoon in Vietnam. During an ambush, one of his wounded men grabbed him by the arm and confessed that he wasn't ready to die.

"It tore at my heart," Meyers told Charisma. "I realized then that while the Marine Corps does a great job of preparing men and women physically and mentally—giving them great military prowess—they were not preparing them to die.

"I told God that if I lived through this, I wanted to be available to help military men make their peace with God, so when the time comes, they have nothing else to do but die."

When Meyers began Rally Point two years ago under the auspices of The Navigators, an international, nondenominational Christian organization, he and Janet decided to move from their home in the suburbs to Quantico.

"We choose to live here so we can share not only the gospel but our very lives with people," Meyers says.

Rally Point is open every day, providing opportunities for individual counseling, discipleship, Bible study, prayer and fellowship.

"No two days are alike," Meyers says. "For example, yesterday a young couple walked by and stuck their heads in the door. They were Christians, but were having problems in their marriage and had separated. I invited them to our home that evening where my wife and I were able to provide counsel."

Meyers works closely with the chaplains on the nearby base and often receives referrals from them.

"Because the Rally Point offers a nonthreatening, off-base environment, guys will come to us on liberty and often feel freer to talk about a problem," Meyers says. "While we are not trying to take the place of the chaplains, we do fill a certain niche."

Meyers is also known as the "town chaplain." When he first arrived in Quantico, he discovered that the 500-resident town had been without a church for more than 80 years. After meeting with the town council and mayor, Meyers offered to host a nondenominational Sunday-evening service at the Rally

Point for the townspeople.

Maj. Don Davis, area coordinator for Officers' Christian Fellowship, often helps out at Rally Point. He believes the ministry will have an impact on many who attend Officer Candidate School each summer at Quantico.

"I think we're going to see a revival of sorts due to Janet and Udell's ministry," Davis reports. "If we can reach the officers, we can reach the whole force."

Sandra Chambers

Praying at the Pentagon

Inside the nerve center of the Department of Defense, vibrant Christians are sharing Jesus with their colleagues in uniform.

At the Pentagon, various Christian groups are working together to provide what retired Col. John Rossi describes as "a vibrant Christian ministry" to the 23,000 military and civilian employees who work at the headquarters of the Department of Defense.

The Christian Embassy, a ministry of Campus Crusade for Christ, is one of the most visible groups at the Pentagon. Corky Eddins, who heads up the ministry, traces its beginnings at the site to 1978 when two Christian officers began meeting for breakfast once a week. It has grown into what is now a weekly prayer breakfast of about 50 people.

"The prayer breakfasts were my first opportunity to get to

meet other believers in the Pentagon,” says Cmdr. Laurell Brault, a congressional liaison officer for the Navy. “It’s so great to see people of all ranks coming together in Christ.”

In addition, Christian Embassy sponsors 21 Bible study-discipleship groups for officers and civilian leaders. Most are held in the Pentagon before work or during lunchtime.

“We see ourselves as a catalyst ministry to help fulfill the Great Commission,” Eddins told Charisma. “As a military-leadership outreach, we have helped to mobilize and train thousands of Christians who are now serving around the world, leaders who are in positions to help influence others for Christ.”

Capt. Lisa Hess, a staff member with the Air Force Chief of Staff, leads one of Christian Embassy’s women’s groups at the Pentagon.

“The military has always been supportive of spiritual efforts,” Hess says. “They see it as being a mission-critical, wartime key.”

Her group meets every Tuesday at lunch and draws as many as a dozen women of all ranks and grades, both military and civilian.

“We study God’s Word, but it’s not just an intellectual study. We also spend time in prayer, talking to Him,” Hess says.

Christian Embassy members work closely with Chaplain Col. Henry Haynes, who serves as Pentagon pastor to the military

and civilian personnel assigned to the Pentagon. The Chaplain's Office hosts more than 40 separate, weekly spiritual opportunities for people of all faiths at the Pentagon. An on-site prayer room is open 24 hours a day.

Another Bible study and discipleship group, Officers' Christian Fellowship (OCF), currently holds at least two Bible studies at the Pentagon, according to Rossi, a regional representative for OCF.

"We sponsor lay-led, small-group, inductive Bible studies in the workplace and in homes to encourage and equip Christian officers to minister effectively in the military society," Rossi says.

Independently led Bible studies and prayer groups also are being held at the Pentagon. A group of intercessors gather daily from 1 p.m. to 2 p.m. to pray for the country, as well as for political and military leaders. They meet in what they call the "war room."

Beginning last summer, Brault's prayer group experienced a definite shift toward an increased spiritual-warfare style of intercession. "Now we know why," Brault says. "The day before 9/11 there were five of us present, and we had one of the most intense prayer times we have ever had."

Those in Christian ministries at the Pentagon all agree that since 9/11 discussions about God have occurred more frequently. Most concur with Eddins' vision for ministry at the facility.

"We want to equip believers to be salt and light in the

marketplace,” Eddins says, “whether that be at the Pentagon or wherever God might send them.”

Sandra Chambers

Tough Guys Need Jesus, Too

Jeff Bramstedt, an elite Navy SEAL, found Jesus five years ago.

Jeff Bramstedt joined the U.S. Navy for the sole purpose of becoming a SEAL, an elite commando trained for all combat situations—sea, air or land. SEALs are among the first troops deployed when the United States goes to war or into battle.

When Bramstedt became a SEAL he relished his new life and lived up to the tough-guy image. He eschewed religion as something for the weak and embraced his hunger for control, adventure and sin.

In 1998 he met Greg Wark, pastor of Morning Star Church in La Jolla, California, near Coronado Island, where the SEALs train. The first time he met Bramstedt, Wark told him point-blank God had a plan for his life and that if he followed Jesus Christ, God would do amazing things in his life and use him to lead others to Christ.

“I cussed him out and told him to leave me alone,” Bramstedt says. “But I was in an ungodly relationship and was egocentric, and things started to crumble around me. Finally I said this is not the way I want to do things.”

He agreed to meet with Wark at a coffee shop. There, Bramstedt broke down.

“The Holy Spirit wrapped His arms around my throat, and I freaked out,” he says. “I cried like a baby, but I prayed the prayer. It’s been an uphill battle ever since. But now my eyes are open, and I can see where I am headed.”

Today, Bramstedt is still a SEAL but spends his free time ministering with Morning Star’s Force Ministries, an intense outreach that has been held on military bases, aircraft carriers and at high schools. During the ministries’ assemblies, SEALs talk about their adventuresome lives, and a professional athlete tells what life’s like in the big leagues. At a voluntary evening assembly, held the same day, SEALs share their testimonies.

“We are trying to activate all the resources we have to equip the body of Christ to reach military individuals and their families,” Wark says. “We are doing outreaches to bring the message of Christ to [military personnel], and we are finding an incredible receptivity.”

Kirk Noonan is news editor with the Pentecostal Evangel magazine and a frequent contributor to Charisma.