

Soldiers Find Faith on Front Lines in Iraq

Hundreds of U.S. military personnel came to Christ and were baptized during the war.

There are no atheists in foxholes.” The phrase is often quoted among military chaplains, who say the war in Iraq brought many soldiers to faith in Christ and created opportunities to minister to their families.

Communicating with Charisma via e-mail, military chaplains said there were baptisms in the desert—using water bottles or makeshift baptismal pools—as well as opportunities to counsel soldiers who lost friends in battle. On the home front, ministers were providing aid to families of reservists, some of whom had been short an income since their loved ones were deployed.

Air Force Capt. Steven T. Dabbs, who was stationed in Kuwait, offered grief counseling to two Marines who lost three friends when one of their helicopters went down. “One of the Marines looked up at me, and as his blue eyes filled with water, he said, ‘I want to know Jesus as my Savior,’” Dabbs wrote in an e-mail to colleagues. “After I led them in prayer, I saw them off as they returned to their posts.”

Chaplains said soldiers were more responsive to the gospel, though the reaction was typical of wartime trends when people are more mindful of their mortality. “We hear reports of good things all the time, of soldiers coming to faith,” said Air Force chaplain Kenneth Stone, who is based at the U.S. CENTCOM headquarters in Florida.

Chaplains said soldiers gathered for worship services whenever they could find the time, and several participated in Bible studies in tents at night or carried camouflaged pocket-sized New Testaments distributed by Campus Crusade for Christ. In the midst of war, "my prayer is that God would bring glory to Himself through this conflict," said Col. Ron Crews, a chaplain in the Massachusetts National Guard.

British soldier-turned-evangelist Mark Reynolds said he witnessed an outpouring of the Holy Spirit at a training camp in Catterick North Yorkshire. Sixty recruits came to faith in one month, he said, with an estimated 700 to 800 soldiers making professions of faith in the last year.

"I can't explain it," he said. "I'm not doing anything different, although I must admit I have been bolder in the way I approach the men recently."

A 22-year military veteran, Reynolds said new converts were given Bibles and as he saw them off, "I've told them to remember God's promise to be with Joshua wherever he went, and I've encouraged them to read the Psalms written by David, the warrior king."

For one soldier's parents, a videotaped baptism circulated through the media brought comfort when their son, 22-year-old Army Spc. James Kiehl, was found among the dead during the rescue of Pfc. Jessica Lynch. "I cannot overstate how important it has been to this family to have that video of their son being baptized, and how that can replace in their minds the image of their son's body," the Kiehls' pastor, Jim Holt of Comfort Baptist Church in Comfort, Texas, told Baptist Press.

Knowing that Marine Pfc. Juan Guadalupe Garza Jr., 20, accepted Christ two years ago after a classmate invited him to a youth service at Bedford Christian Community in Temperance, Mich., has motivated the Assemblies of God church's youth group to become bolder evangelists, their youth pastor said. News of Garza's death April 8 during the battle for Baghdad had many of the teens in disbelief, youth pastor Rick Flood said, but also reminded them that tomorrow is not promised to anyone.

At home Christian organizations offered assistance to the families of servicemen. The Salvation Army distributed thousands of care packages as part of its "Operation Compassion From the Home Front" campaign, with similar efforts under way across the country.

In addition to giving food and clothing, many Christians supported the troops through prayer. After the conflict erupted, people signed up to pray for troops at a rate of 10 per second at one time, said Ted Haggard, founder of the World Prayer Team, which features a link to the Presidential Prayer Team on its Web site.

Two Christian aid workers said prayer led to their rescue March 31 after they had been held by Iraqis for 10 days. Kenyan truck drivers David Mukuria, 53, and Jakubu Kamau, 37, were rescued by British troops when the 7th Armoured Brigade seized control of Al Zubayr in southern Iraq, The Sun reported.

"God must have given them the power to save us," Kamau said. "It really was a miracle that they came."

Friends and family of Pfc. Jessica Lynch also credited the power of prayer for her dramatic rescue April 1. "Our prayers came through," said friend Daniel Smith, 18, The Washington Post reported. "She made it."

Similarly, relatives of the seven rescued POWs thanked God for their return. "We thank God for watching over them," Army Spc. Shoshana Johnson's father, Claude Johnson, said, the Associated Press reported. Her mother added: "I know [Johnson] was scared, but by her praying, she would get through it," The El Paso (Texas) Times reported.

As the statue of Saddam Hussein bowed to coalition troops April 9, intercessors encouraged Christians to pray for Iraq's next leader. "Let's pray for the Lord to raise up a wise, compassionate man who will lead Iraq into a new era of freedom, that Iraqi citizens will enjoy a society based on liberty and fairness," Haggard wrote in an Iraq Prayer Alert. "My prayer is that under Iraq's new president, Iraqi Christians will be free to worship and proclaim Jesus to their fellow Iraqis without any repercussions."

Franklin Graham's Samaritan's Purse and the Southern Baptist Convention were poised to take relief into Iraq when the war ended. Both World Relief and The Salvation Army were developing plans to aid the Iraqis after the war, and Convoy of Hope had collected a half-million pounds of wheat from Indiana to be distributed in Iraq at the war's end.

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