

Soldiers Find Faith on the Front Lines

Though some disagree with America's involvement in the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, Christian U.S. military officers have witnessed God's miraculous intervention.



[] The idea of Christians enlisting in the military poses a dilemma for some people. After all, if Jesus Christ is the Prince of Peace, how can anyone who claims to follow Him enter a profession in which killing people is an obligation? As a born-again believer in Christ for 24 years and the father of two young Christian men who serve in the armed forces, I certainly sympathize with those pondering this question. I know Jesus is the only source of lasting peace. And as a believer I am sure God takes no pleasure in war.

Yet the U.S. military is full of Christians. And the faith of these warriors has been brightly displayed in recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. You may not have heard their testimonies on the evening news, but I can assure you that many people in the Army, Navy, Air Force and Coast Guard have witnessed God's miraculous intervention in recent days.

I have heard some of the miracles from my own two sons. David is a Marine and Nathan is in the Army. David is a combat veteran of both Iraq and Afghanistan. Nathan is still in training, but he will at some point be called upon to fight in the current global war on terror.

David decided while in high school that he wanted to enlist. Several times during his senior year, before June 2001, I felt prompted by the Holy Spirit to encourage him to prepare for battle.

He was scheduled to leave for boot camp in August 2001. As our family laid hands on him the night before he left, the Holy Spirit spoke to him through me in prophecy. God said David would see combat and that He would protect him and cause him to prosper in difficult times if he followed the Lord fully. Little did we know how soon tragic events would unfold.

The next month, the September 11 attacks made David's calling clear: He and his fellow Marine recruits would be trained to wage war against Osama bin Laden and those who supported his terrorist army.

David joined dozens of other Marines in April 2002 as they rotated into one of America's more storied Marine battalions: the 2nd Battalion of the 8th Marine Regiment, or 2/8 for short, based at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina.

A Special Mission

The 2/8 is known as "America's Battalion." Several of the soldiers who became close friends with David were committed Christians and represented a cross section of this country—coming from more than seven states. We soon learned that almost every senior officer in this battalion served Christ.

From the time Lt. Col. Royal Mortenson took command of 2/8 in December 2001, he had a strong conviction that he would be leading the battalion into combat. He helped pull together what would prove to be a superb group of senior staff officers, company commanders, and senior noncommissioned officers—the company and platoon sergeants who get the job done. He developed a rigorous training schedule to prepare the 900 Marines under his command.

Amazingly, many of the Marines of 2/8 had been prepared for the war against Saddam Hussein long before Operation Iraqi Freedom began in March 2003. Col. Ronald Bailey was the commanding officer of the 2nd Marine Regiment, under which 2/8 would be placed as part of Regimental Combat Team 2 (RCT-2), a major ground unit during Operation Iraqi Freedom. More than a year before taking command of the 2nd Marines in July 2002, before the 9/11 attacks, the Holy Spirit showed Bailey that he would be called to lead his unit into combat in Iraq.

Capt. Brian Ross, the commanding officer of Golf Rifle Company within 2/8, had a similar experience. "I knew even before I checked into 2/8 that the battalion would see combat," he says.

By late 2002, David was receiving clear instructions from the Holy Spirit. From his prayer time he sensed the Lord leading him to mentally focus on three key skills during the training: fire and movement, urban warfare skills and knowledge of his weapon system.

As 2002 came to an end, the political situation with Saddam Hussein in Iraq was heating up. The Holy Spirit began leading my wife and me to pray daily for the entire U.S. military, from President Bush down to my son David and his buddies in 2/8. Protection, wisdom and courage were our primary requests.

God also instructed us to pray for the protection of the Iraqi people. We also asked God to help them understand that the United States was there to help them by removing Saddam Hussein. Sure enough, in early January 2003, the 2/8 battalion was alerted. They scrambled to prepare for deployment.

As the American military assembled in allied Middle East countries, the Holy Spirit continued to direct many churches to pray. In our home church near Buffalo, New York, on February 9, 2003, more than a month before hostilities started, two prophecies proved to be

accurate.

The first said there would be a war with Saddam Hussein, believers would help bring about the will of God through prayer and believers should not trust in military strength but in the power of intercession. The second word said that in the coming weeks God would wake up Christians in the night hours to pray and that He would cause Iraqi terrorists to become confused, fearful and ineffective.

What many of the Marines of 2/8 had believed for a long time was now becoming clear to us at home: The United States would fight a war against Saddam Hussein, and it would be a just cause.

Spirit-Directed Intercession

With the deployment, 2/8 Marines and their wives, families and friends began praying in earnest. God almost immediately began answering prayers while leading believers into deeper and bolder petitions.

The battalion had not been selected to have an embedded news reporter, so communications with the families back home would be infrequent at best. But several wives of 2/8 Marines launched an organized prayer effort and asked God to provide a way for the families to receive news and to remove the barriers preventing regular communications. These prayers were answered in mid-March, shortly before the start of the offensive, when Kerry Sanders of NBC News

hooked up with Mortenson.

Sanders' team had the necessary satellite communications equipment to work with a forward unit, but they had not yet been assigned to a battalion. From their position with the 2/8, he and his crew provided daily reports and some of the best news coverage of the war.

Prayers also affected the commander. Don Rogers, the chaplain for 2/8, requested one-on-one time with Mortenson in his stateroom to pray for him. "I've never done this before, but I am your chaplain," Rogers told Mortenson. They met about once a week and continued this practice later while in Kuwait until combat began.

At home, people began to post the names and pictures of their loved ones in 2/8 on prayer boards. It was not uncommon for service personnel to have four or five different churches praying for them by name.

My son David's picture was on the prayer boards and lists of at least five churches in western New York. The senior pastor of Lovejoy Gospel Church, Ron Burgio, added David's name and those of the other deployed military personnel from the church to his prayer list—which was prayed over by 70 intercessors. These people prayed for David's protection daily.

At the 2/8 base in Kuwait, chaplains from RCT-2 and 2/8 improvised to create a church for worship services. Using a large chow-hall tent, chaplains ran two Sunday services, both Catholic and Protestant. More than 600 Marines attended the packed meetings.

As war became imminent, Marines penned what they thought might be their final letters to their families. In a letter dated March 7, David wrote us: "Not everyone is given the opportunity to do what we are doing for our country. ... I'm so thankful to be part of this. The Lord is consuming me with joy and happiness. May He do the same in your lives."

As parents, we remembered the prophetic words spoken over David in August 2001. This gave us amazing confidence. We knew God would protect him.

The Lord added another important prayer to our requests. He led us to ask Him to give David, his buddies, and the men of his battalion supernatural strength and endurance just as the prophet Elijah received in 1 Kings 18 when he outran Ahab's chariot.

The implication for the men of 2/8 was clear. They would need supernatural endurance in order to succeed in this conflict. This bold "Elijah prayer" became our daily request.

Miracles in War

Operation Iraqi Freedom began on March 19, 2003, and 2/8 was scheduled to launch into Iraq the next morning. Shortly before launch,

Capt. Seth MacCutcheon, a Christian and commander of the Combined

Anti-Armor Tank platoon (or CAAT platoon)—which consisted of 16

Humvees loaded with rockets, grenade launchers and heavy machine

guns—asked Chaplain Rogers to pray over his vehicles.

The job of the CAAT platoon was to find and destroy enemy armor

before the enemy could attack the battalion. Rogers understood the

seriousness of MacCutcheon's request.

“When Seth asked me to pray, I laid hands on every vehicle in 2/8—more than 70 Humvees and trucks—praying that the vehicles would

not be hit and for safety of the men who would ride in them,” Rogers

says. “I prayed about 20 seconds over each one.”

The start of the conflict unified Christians across the nation with an urgency to pray. Echo Rifle Company Capt. Kevin Yeo's family

was one example of this. Yeo's wife, Andrea, and seven other women

began to intercede.

Andrea prayed every night. During the course of the war she became the focal point within Echo Company for numerous prayers for the

wives and families of her husband's Marines. Of roughly 150 men in

Echo, Andrea was in direct contact with more than 50 families. Parents and wives called her or sent e-mails to say, "Our church is praying for Kevin, Echo and 2/8."

A Catholic, Andrea found comfort in asking God to send a guardian angel to protect her husband. Another woman, Patricia Williams, enlisted business associates and even a group of nuns to pray. Andrea and Patricia contacted two cousins who are priests in Argentina who reported back that they had coordinated prayers at many churches.

We now believe that, by a conservative estimate, more than 50 churches and 2,000 believers prayed for these soldiers regularly. And we know God answered!

God's answers began almost as soon as the offensive started. I am aware of more than 40 specific answers to prayers and 35 miracles of protection. The Marines of 2/8 readily credit God with sparing lives. In each case Marines would normally have died.

Amazingly, not one 2/8 Marine died during the offensive, despite the fact that they saw some of the heaviest fighting of the war. Furthermore, not one Marine lost an eye, limb, finger or toe, or was otherwise disabled.

A total of 40 Marines from 2/8 were wounded during Operation Iraqi Freedom—mostly from shrapnel. But all of them recovered. Here's

a small sampling of other testimonies of God's miraculous protection

that members of the battalion witnessed:

1. On the afternoon of March 21, in Washington, D.C. (about 9 p.m. in Iraq), Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld announced during a press conference that the Iraqi leaders were becoming increasingly "confused." This was the first reported confirmation of an answer to specific prayers that God had led His people to pray.
2. While fighting off an ambush on March 24, Golf Company suffered no casualties. This was miraculous because my son David's squad had rushed across a distance of two football fields while exposed to Iraqi machine-gun fire. The Iraqis fired at the Marines at point-blank range yet always missed their targets.
3. The Fox Rifle Company was the target of a major Iraqi attack on March 24. Five Marines were blown up to 30 feet through the air from enemy rounds, yet they walked away. An incoming mortar round hit and broke an overhead power line instead of landing on a four-man mortar crew situated directly beneath the line.
4. On March 23 the 2/8 battalion captured enemy prisoners of war who provided the first evidence of missing U.S. Army Pfc. Jessica

Lynch's whereabouts. These Marines went on to provide much of the intelligence that led to her rescue.

5. The Iraqis were using a hospital to fire upon 2/8. Meanwhile the family of Marine John Cain prayed fervently back in Oklahoma and Arizona for hours throughout the day of March 25. Just in time, God provided a sandstorm to cover the attack of Fox Company that captured the hospital. The company had to cross a huge open field into the face of Iraqi fire, but no Marines were hit crossing the field because of the unusual weather pattern.
6. The Lord caused the sandstorms to cease with a torrential downpour the night of March 25. The rain turned hard, sunbaked ground into soft mud. The next night, Iraqis attacked the logistical rear area of 2/8, which contained ammunition, fuel and food. Instead of Iraqi mortar rounds exploding on contact—which would have sent a lot of deadly shrapnel flying everywhere—the rounds sunk into the mud and exploded underground, preventing dozens of injuries and saving lives.
7. When the Iraqi forces were whipped badly after just a few days in An-Nasiriyah, from March 23-26, the remaining Iraqis ran and hid in fear. The battalion began to capture scores of Iraqis who

otherwise would have been killed or wounded.

8. No Marines were killed or wounded while riding in any 2/8 vehicle. Furthermore, no CAAT platoon Humvee was lost because of enemy fire. God answered Chaplain Rogers' prayers.

9. God provided supernatural stamina and endurance to these warriors, just as we had prayed. They received the strength of Elijah.

My son David slept only 45 hours over the 31 days of the heaviest

fighting. That's an average of 1-1/2 hours per night. Later he testified: "It was weird. I always had energy, and I knew it was from

the Lord. I was always volunteering for patrols and guard duty. Just

like Elijah in 1 Kings, the Spirit of the Lord came upon me. I got so

used to it, I didn't think about it."

I realize that these testimonies are only a fraction of the amazing stories that are emerging from the Iraq war. The same miracles

that happened among the soldiers of the 2/8 battalion were repeated in

countless other regiments.

One of the greatest miracles, of course, became obvious in late

January 2005 when the world watched Iraqi citizens participate in a

free election. I am sure that many American soldiers gave thanks to God

that day when they saw these liberated people brave the threats of

terrorism to move one step closer to democracy.

I hope all Christians in the United States will continue to pray for our men and women in uniform. If we will allow the Holy Spirit

to energize and direct our intercession, we will see fewer casualties

of American soldiers and civilians and a swifter end to this conflict.

"The calming effect of prayer and faith works wonders for your nerves.

It is as if the Lord provides a shield of protection. During the

fighting God looked out for me and dozens of other Marines by preventing some artillery shells from bursting near our fighting

positions."

Glenn Thomas is the author of God Saw Them Through (Creation House), an account of the 2nd Marine Battalion's experiences

in Iraq. He lives in Buffalo, New York. For more information about his

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