

Making Money Caring for Troops



News stories about troops in difficult situations always raised for me the question: *if the troops are taking care of defending our country, who is taking care of the troops?* That thought pointed me toward the army chaplaincy. I knew that ministry to the troops would mean going on their missions and sharing their ordeals. In his coaching before our deployment to Afghanistan, the 82nd Airborne Division

chaplain stated that worship services and memorial ceremonies are the two areas in which chaplains “make their money” taking care of the troops in combat. During our current mission, I have shared with my troops the joy of celebrating Christmas and been plunged with them into the tragedy of losing fellow soldiers.

I’m out with my unit in Sabari District where we are conducting Operation Matoon, a joint mission with Afghan Army and Afghan Police forces to clear local villages of Taliban leaders, illegal weapons, and an IED cell. This mission has given me a stake in the excitement and the hardship these paratroopers bear. We came out here before Christmas, and initially I thought I would only conduct Christmas worship with the troops at Sabari. But on Christmas Eve Captain Cairns asked me if I would travel with his convoy to the Bak District Center and hold a Christmas service for his troops there too. He could drop me off there and pick me up in the evening to return to Sabari. “Sure, that would be perfect! When do we leave?” I asked. “In about twenty minutes,” he said with a grin.

Things go that way in Afghanistan, but it worked out just as we had planned. The next morning, Christmas day, we had a worship service in the mechanic’s motor-bay tent here at Sabari District Center. It was wonderful to spend some time together with the troopers and officers to celebrate a cherished holiday so far from home. For me, conducting field worship services is one of the most rewarding things I do here.

But we didn’t take time off from the war, despite the holidays. One Staff Sergeant in my unit has called this a “quietly dangerous war,” and, indeed, the clear blue sky on the second day of the New Year belied the danger faced by a National Guard convoy in our area. At the Sabari command center, we were pitched into crisis management mode when the harried convoy commander called: one vehicle hit an IED and men were

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wounded at the scene. For the next several hours, we patched together resources to secure the site, evacuate the casualties, and recover the burning scrap metal that just a few hours earlier was an armored Humvee. The IED strike killed a National Guard soldier, a local interpreter, and seriously wounded two other Guardsmen.

My work started in earnest when the convoy's remaining soldiers returned to Sabari. I spent time talking and praying with them about the event and the death of their friend, Sergeant Hill. Two days later, I worked my way to the National Guard base to assist with the memorial ceremony. He wasn't in my unit, but since we wore the same flag on our shoulders, I counted him as my own. The Sunday afternoon ceremony was a formal yet somber event. It allowed his fellow Guardsmen to honor their fellow warrior and grieve their fallen friend. Sometimes the most important parts of my job are also the most terrible.

I'm glad to be out with the troops. None of us enjoys being separated from our families on this deployment, and I look forward to our once-a-day a hot meal just like the rest of these Paratroopers. It looks like we will be on this mission for another week still, so I'll hold at least one more worship service here at the Sabari District Center. I hope I have already done my last memorial ceremony. Some facets of this ministry seem like 'easy money,' but there are other aspects you can't put a price tag on. Our division chaplain was right, worship services and memorial ceremonies are real money-makers when it comes to taking care of our troops.

