

Combat Chaplain Makes the Best of the Situation to Meet Soldiers' Needs

By CPT Ryan M. Rooney, TF 1-7

(Task Force 1-7, FOB Summerall, Bayji, Iraq) Perhaps one of the most critical members to the military task force, though he does not carry a weapon, is its chaplain. The need for spiritual support and guidance only increases when the unit is deployed on a mission like Operation Iraqi Freedom, and the Army Chaplain Corps is there to care for our soldiers.

As the head of the Task Force's Unit Ministry Team, Chaplain (Capt.) Dave Bottoms ministers to the spiritual needs of the nearly 800 soldiers of the First Infantry Division's Task Force 1-7 at Forward Operating Base Summerall, near Bayji, in North-Central Iraq. As the chaplain for the First Lightning Battalion, CH Bottoms goes by the radio call sign "Holy Lightning" when conducting tactical operations.

As an Orthodox Presbyterian Chaplain, CH Bottoms presides over a weekly Holy Communion service for Protestant soldiers. However, though not all of the task force is Protestant, those soldiers still have spiritual needs. "I perform my own faith, but facilitate the faith of others," says CH Bottoms. Following an attack with a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED, or car bomb) in June, CH Bottoms was even able to provide solace to Iraqi bystanders wounded in the attack. Though he cannot pray with them or lead them in a Muslim prayer, his presence and efforts provided reassurance as he encouraged seriously wounded Iraqis to pray.

Another difference between CH Bottoms' role as an Army chaplain and that of his civilian counterparts is that he must deploy to forward theaters when called upon. As part of his duties, he has also learned how to serve as a minister under conditions much more austere than many other ministers ever face. From sand-blown HMMWV hood-top services on the long tactical approach march up from Kuwait to leading weekly services in an improvised chapel in the battalion's conference room, CH Bottoms has learned to make the best of a situation to make sure soldiers' spiritual needs are met.

CH Bottoms was inspired to enter the military chaplain corps by a Navy chaplain of his faith who ministered to Marines in Bosnia. His inspiration, however, took a slightly different path at first. CH Bottoms grew up as an Air Force dependent and likes to say that he "became a Christian through the chaplaincy," since he first heard about the life of Christ from an Army chaplain as a teenager. Having grown up in an Air Force family, he initially served his faith and his country as an Air Force Chaplain. But, after marrying an Army Judge Advocate General Corps (JAG) attorney, CH Bottoms transferred to the Army Chaplain's Corps to be nearer to his wife, who is now deployed with the First Infantry Division's Staff Judge Advocate in Tikrit, Iraq. "One day I literally took off my Air Force BDU shirt, put on an Army one and went off to my Army Chaplain's Basic Course," says Chaplain Bottoms.

As a dual military family, CH Bottoms and his wife, Capt. Jennifer B. Bottoms, serve in the army together. They met while she was in law school and he was stationed at Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, North Carolina, where he served as an Air Force Chaplain. On some occasions, CH Bottoms has ministered to prisoners prosecuted by his wife, a Trial Counsel for the Army, which can make for an interesting situation.

Though both are currently deployed to Iraq, their duties keep them separate and they have not yet been able to see each other since deploying, though they hope to soon.

In addition to serving the Task Force as a pastor and spiritual counselor, CH Bottoms also assumed a unique operational role upon arriving in Bayji. Recognizing that the city's Imams or prayer leaders are among its most influential leaders, the Task Force commander, LTC Kyle M. McClelland, chose CH Bottoms to serve as his spiritual liaison. Sharing a common role as spiritual leaders and men of God, CH Bottoms was able to connect with the Imams as a fellow theologian. During one discussion, they were able to agree "that man is a reflection of God's image, and that from this idea comes the idea of the basic dignity of man," says CH Bottoms. By serving in this special role, CH Bottoms is able to connect the Task Force to the city's religious community in a way that another soldier couldn't and perform a valuable service to the coalition effort in Iraq.

In the words of the Task Force 1-7 commander, LTC Kyle M. McClelland, "Dave is a combat multiplier beyond explanation – he has been there for it all. We have had some pretty rough days here in Bayji and his counsel and guidance have been simply remarkable. He is a gifted leader who is immersed in his vocation and is pivotal to our success on the battlefield. We are blessed to have a soldier of his talents."

Chaplain (Capt.) Bottoms enjoys his role as a military chaplain in Operation Iraqi Freedom immensely. "I have seen some people come to belief in God out here in a fresh, new way," he says. He finds that the most unique and satisfying aspect of his service as an Army chaplain in Iraq is that he is "bringing the Word and Sacrament to what we would consider the middle of nowhere. I consider it a privilege to serve soldiers who have given up easy access to their own spiritual resources."

CH (CPT) Bottoms talks with Hussein Ahmed Mahjub, a Provincial Council Member, and Imam Amin Khalaf Abid during a city council meeting.



Photo: CSM Wayne L. Sanders

CH (CPT) Dave Bottoms in his improvised chapel in FOB Summerall, Bayji, Iraq



Photo: CPT Ryan M. Rooney