

Wounds of war: A chaplain on call

by [Gregory S. Clapper](#) in the [June 28, 2005](#) issue

"You're going to Germany? *Sweet!*" That was how news of my deployment was greeted by more than one member of my Air National Guard unit—the 181st Fighter Wing of the Indiana Air National Guard.

In the military, the initial criteria for evaluating whether an assignment is a good one include its opportunities for travel and sightseeing. Deployments to training bases like Volk Field, Wisconsin, or Gulfport, Mississippi, are met with yawns or pity. Trips to war zones—the “sand box”—earn you a measure of admiration. Trips to Nellis Air Force Base (next to Las Vegas) or Tripler Army Medical Center (in Hawaii) are greeted with a knowing grin and a slap on the back. A trip to Germany seemed to fall into this latter category. That is, until I described what I would be doing.

I was one of a small number of National Guard chaplains selected for duty at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center. This is the major U.S. Army hospital in Germany where the badly injured troops from Iraq and Afghanistan are taken.

Landstuhl serves as the central hospital for the U.S. military in Europe, and real-life challenges to any worldview show up everyday, some battlefield-related and some not. The first night I was on call, the neonatal intensive care unit beeped me and said it had a “demise.” A baby born earlier in the day had died and I was to go and be with the family.

When I got there the father was ever so gently swabbing the baby, meticulously cleaning his child's body. The father was a veteran of war zone deployments and had taken care of many of his buddies when they were injured. Now he was cleaning the child's little body, working around the tubes, getting the baby ready for the graves registration people. During the next four hours with this young family I prayed with them, stood outside their door as they had time alone with their child, made phone calls to inform the grandparents (at the request of the parents) and kept vigil with the father, who was reluctant to give up his child.

In the eyes of the world this man was a soldier, and our soldiers are often treated like a Rorschach inkblot onto which we project all of our support for, or anger about, U.S. foreign policy. But that night all I saw was a flesh-and-blood man who had just had his heart split open with grief. Here was a son, husband, brother. Not an instrument for some politician's ego, not an unwitting dupe in some global scheme he cannot comprehend, not an impervious Rambo. Here was a broken man looking for a healing word from his Christian tradition. Here was a man whose heart was just as broken as that of any other father in his shoes—or boots. I was honored to represent the church to him, wearing the same work clothes that he wore.

I spent a lot of my time in the psychiatric ward. It was not a popular spot for the distinguished visitors who would regularly tour the hospital. Senators and generals were happy to visit those who had physical wounds; they looked on with pride when the wounded were awarded Purple Hearts. In the psych ward, however, the wounds were of the mind and spirit. The wounds did not have the same kind of clarity as those on the other wards, and opportunities for compassion were less straightforward.

Three times a week I led a “Spiritual Wellness” group on 9 Charlie. When I talked with previous chaplains, it became obvious that my predecessors had followed a variety of approaches. Some would start by reading a story—rabbinical or biblical or secular—and simply ask the patients to respond. Others would lead a more traditional devotion. I found myself simply asking a few leading questions, such as “What do you want to be free *from*?” and “What do you want to be free *for*?”

The point was to get the patients—typically between six and 20 at a time—to talk with one another. When one person talked, that often invited the response of others, and soon they were interacting with each other's life stories. As one of the civilian therapists, the kindly Father Marc, a retired military chaplain and a Roman Catholic priest, told me, the patients mainly heal each other. Facilitating that interaction is the best we can hope for, especially given the fact that most of them will be on the ward for a week or two at most before they are sent either back to the States or back to duty.

It is hard to generalize about the patients. Many had conditions that would be found in any psychiatric ward anywhere in the world, such as depression or bipolar disorder. Many of them had attempted suicide. Several had been devastated by “Dear John” letters or by marital infidelity. As they talked about their realities, many

past issues surfaced, such as physical and sexual abuse, or parental neglect and its accompanying low self-esteem.

In our chaplain training for dealing with tragedy, we are told that the greatest predictor of people having a hard time dealing with a trauma is a past history of trauma. If you have problems before going to war, going to war will often make them worse. And many of these men and women had come from “downrange”—the universal military term to describe the war zone, whether it be Iraq or Afghanistan. “Downrange” is a term that comes from the firing range—it is the direction of the targets, the place where the bullets hit.

Even without a previous history of trauma or abuse, the experience of being downrange brings its own devastation. One soldier said that he felt he lost his soul when he had to pick up body parts of his friends after they were blown apart by an improvised explosive device (IED). He asked me if he could ever get his soul back. Another soldier said it is impossible to be a Christian in war. Since many in the group were committed Christians, this comment sent a kind of electric shock around the circle. You cannot kill and love at the same time, he said.

Some agreed with this soldier, while others took great offense at his comment. This was one of the few times that I made an explicitly theological intervention in the group, and put aside my role of group facilitator.

I asked the group to think about a soldier in World War II who crosses a hill and beholds the gates of a concentration camp. He sees the guard standing at the gate, and he also sees the gaunt prisoners in their striped uniforms being led into a gas chamber behind the guard. At this point he has a choice, and I asked the group to reflect on this choice.

Let’s suppose, I said, that our soldier is a Christian. Jesus taught that love is to be a sign of his disciples (John 13:35) and further, that love of enemies is to be the defining feature of Christian love—the very thing that defines Christian perfection (Matt. 5:43-48). And yet it seems that killing will take place before his eyes, one way or another. Either he will do nothing while the inmates are led to their death, or he can fill his sights with that German guard, pull the trigger and begin stopping the march to the ovens.

In short, this soldier is forced to decide whom to love. Does he love the German guard so much that he does not kill him, or does he love the inmates so much that

he does kill the guard? Christians are told to love all people. But sometimes, I told the group, the world—this world that God created, but a world that is also broken and sinful—makes us choose whom we will love. Sometimes we are presented with a Sophie's choice in which none of the options are pure and good. If we want to love the group of Iraqi women with purple fingers fresh from the voting booth, then we will shoot and kill the insurgent who is racing his bomb-laden car toward the polls.

There was silence in the room. A few heads slowly nodded. There was nothing else to say. They were not silent out of respect for my rank or position, for that had not stopped them from voicing their own views, at times quite vociferously. Their eyes said, "That's how it is downrange." No John Wayne heroism for glory, medals and honor. Just simple, terrifyingly hard choices that often have to be made in a split second. No high-minded just war theory juxtaposed against the simple pieties of pacifism. The world sometimes makes us choose whom to love. That's it.

The brokenness that comes from having to make those heartrending choices is captured in a conversation that I had many years ago with a retired active duty army chaplain. This true southern gentleman was in many ways the stereotype of the gallant, patriotic soldier, a decorated Vietnam veteran who proudly displayed his uniform at our annual conference gatherings. Yet this same man once told me something that left me slack-jawed with surprise. The military uniform, he said, is humanity's badge of shame.

Few would debate the proposition that war is one of the worst realities that can befall humanity, and from that point of view it is hard to disagree with my friend's assessment. But then he said something else. If the military uniform is humanity's badge of shame, he added, wouldn't Jesus count those who wear it as his disciples? Jesus came for the despised and rejected, the sinners and the outcasts of the world. Those who wear humanity's badge of shame are, by definition, some of these people, my friend said—some of those Christ came for.