

STORIES OF FAITH IN ACTION

Standing between the Chaos of War and the Soldiers in his Care

Command Sergeant Major Tom Behrends recalls his National Guard base in Iraq as an unexpected oasis in the desert.

It was a way station for other battalions on the move, who would stop for a night's rest or to refuel.

Because the area was a hotbed of IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices), the base was also a refuge for units who needed to regroup after being hit.

Chaplain Corey Bjertness, U.S. Army, and his assistant would be among the first to welcome them.

Behrends, a practicing Presbyterian, recalls, "It didn't matter to the chaplain who these people were. Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine. Christian, Muslim, atheist. These were soldiers in need. And the chaplain cared for them."

After attending to the dead and wounded, counseling the survivors was the chaplain's primary task. One of Bjertness's initiatives dealt with a more basic need.

Behrends notes, "The uniforms of these soldiers would be blood soaked from caring for their buddies. The chaplain had volunteers working round the clock at the washing machines so these soldiers didn't have to wash the blood out themselves."

As a chaplain in the Minnesota National Guard and full-time pastor at Peace Lutheran Church in New London, Minn., Corey Bjertness exemplifies the challenge and privilege of serving as a "citizen soldier."

When he was deployed to Iraq in fall 2007, the chaplain left behind his wife, four children and his call at a congregation in the midst of a multi-million dollar construction project.

He is grateful to their "massive support" in recognizing and honoring his military ministry to soldiers of all faiths—and no faith at all.

For Sergeant Sadie Brehmer, Chaplain Bjertness brought a sense of sanctuary in a place of chaos. While she does not attend church in civilian life, in Iraq she found a "safe zone" in Sunday services.

Of her chaplain, Corey Bjertness, Sadie says simply, "He was there for all of us. He would drop anything for anybody."



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