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War's Stresses Take Toll on Military's Chaplains

By SARAH ABRUZZESE

KILLEEN, Tex. — On a recent morning, an Army chaplain, Lt. Col. Richard E. Brunk Jr., met with a suicidal soldier who had served in [Iraq](#), drove across Fort Hood to greet 70 activated reservists, attended meetings on future deployments and then retreated to his computer to counsel members of his military flock around the world.

Finally, just before 4 a.m. the next day, after stealing an hour's sleep, Chaplain Brunk stood on a tarmac shaking hands with soldiers bound for Iraq, murmuring words of encouragement and offering an occasional hug.

As a casualty of war himself, he knows what soldiers can experience. Injured in Iraq in January 2005, Chaplain Brunk suffers from moderate brain trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder and depression. "I've been really pushed to my limits and beyond," he said. "At times, I've really wondered if I could get through."

Just as it has claimed so many other members of the military, the war in Iraq has taken a toll on chaplains. Although they do not engage in combat, chaplains face the perils of war as they move around Iraq to visit troops. None have been killed, but some, like Chaplain Brunk, have been wounded. Many report post-traumatic stress disorder and other stress problems.

In the past year, the Army has begun to recognize those problems among chaplains and is ensuring that those suffering from stress disorders receive medical treatment at military hospitals.

The Army's chief of chaplains, Maj. Gen. Douglas L. Carver, has mandated that every military installation offer programs to ensure the mental well being of its chaplains. A spiritual center will open this summer at the chaplain training headquarters at Fort Jackson, S.C., and chaplains will be invited to retreats.

"We are doing more for the chaplains because the chaplains are doing more," said Lt. Col. Ran Dolinger, a spokesman for the chief of chaplains. Because of multiple deployments to combat zones, Colonel Dolinger said, "they just needed more help."

Created by the Continental Congress, the chaplaincy is charged with ensuring that every soldier can freely practice his or her religion, especially in war. Trained in various specialties, chaplains today do a broad variety of tasks, including offering advice about Islam to battlefield commanders, monitoring soldiers for signs of stress and counseling struggling Army families back home.

The Army has about 2,500 chaplains, with 250 serving in Iraq and Afghanistan at any time. The length of their tours of duty varies.

No battalion goes into a war zone without a chaplain. But a shortage — particularly acute among Roman Catholic priests, mirroring a national trend — has left Army Reserve and Army National Guard units and those stateside stretched thin. In a combat zone, chaplains crisscross hostile terrain to reach soldiers of all faiths.

Chaplain Brunk, a retired Army chaplain's son and a 57-year-old Lutheran minister, had been in Iraq only a month when he was wounded.

On a sunny morning during a service at Camp Victory in Baghdad, three missiles struck nearby, shattering the windows and spewing rubble. The blast threw him to the marble floor.

As he lay amid the chocolates he had been saving as a treat for after services, he could see a fellow chaplain mouthing words but he heard nothing. His eardrums had been ruptured, and he had an undiagnosed brain injury.

"They told me I had a really bad headache," he said. "They told me to get some sleep."

He said he still did not remember the first three days after the blast, including a telephone call home to talk about the birth of his grandson. Several weeks later, he passed out at a meeting.

He was treated at hospitals in Iraq, Germany and the United States, and returned to Baghdad in May 2005 to finish his deployment. He was sent home again, however, after doctors found blood clots in his brain, caused by exposure to five explosions during his time in Baghdad. Like a boxer repeatedly punched in the head, the trauma had been cumulative.

Chaplain Brunk still has headaches, which he says make his head feel "like a sizzling hotplate," and he hears a rushing sound like a waterfall.

"I started to get very angry, crying uncontrollably," he said, speaking of his post-traumatic stress disorder.

A sergeant who had been in Vietnam recognized the symptoms and told a doctor, who sent Chaplain Brunk home.

Since being stationed as the chaplain for the Fort Hood Mobilization Brigade in January 2007, Chaplain Brunk has counseled soldiers but has not been able to talk to his wife about his own experiences. He withdraws to his quarters on weekends, and said he sometimes felt uncomfortable in large groups, as he was last month when sending several hundred soldiers off to Iraq.

Other chaplains have said they face similar reorientation and stress issues. Maj. Mark Nuckols, an Army reservist, is completing his second yearlong deployment in Iraq. Chaplain Nuckols said in a telephone interview that he ran a retreat outside Baghdad for chaplains.

When he returned to the United States after his first tour of duty, Chaplain Nuckols said, he found it hard to empathize with his Lutheran congregation in Austin, Tex. "I needed time to myself, to decompress and be able to get my head straight," he said. At first, he said it was hard to compassionately deal with people's ordinary concerns after counseling soldiers on the battlefield.

Since returning home from her deployment in Kuwait, Lt. Col. Rachel Coggins, 53, a Baptist chaplain, said she had been taking part in an online peer support group for military chaplains.

Chaplain Coggins ministered to thousands of soldiers funneling through Kuwait, either headed for Iraq or on their way home. Earlier, she had been stationed at a military hospital in Germany.

The strains of dealing with so many soldiers and then returning to a new life — her husband had moved the family to Arizona from Georgia — left her emotionally exhausted, she said.

But for her and others, there is no thought of leaving the Army. The mission, they said, is too important.

“It’s the right place to be,” Chaplain Brunk said. “I stand in awe of our soldiers.”

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