



Chaplain (MAJ) Bill Heisterman prepares soldiers for deployment to and return from Iraq and Afghanistan with the Mobilization Readiness Battalion at Fort Dix, New Jersey. Heisterman served in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2004. He is a doctor of ministry participant at AGTS.

A typically early start to another long day: a 3.5-mile run, a quick shower and shave, devotions and several administrative tasks. By 7:30 a.m. it was time to welcome a unit of soldiers returning from Iraq. After a year-long deployment, these soldiers and their families are about to face many challenges. Through the Chaplain’s “Welcome Back,” we invite God into their reintegration process.

My next occasion to interact with these soldiers occurs during their reintegration debriefing, done in small groups to afford a safe environment for each soldier to share their stressors experienced during the unit’s deployment and their expected stressors upon returning home. The debriefing also provides me the chance to share my experiences upon returning home after a long deployment,

to train the soldiers on how to handle common challenges and to offer resources to assist them and their families.

Throughout the reintegration debriefing, I remain transparent, discussing how the deployment affected me and my family. I speak about my lack of patience, outbursts of anger, and aggressive driving habits and how all of these are common struggles for many returning soldiers. I



admit to them my fears about the reintegration process but also share how God has blessed my entire family through the experience. I want to let them know that even a chaplain who trains others on the dynamics of reintegration is not immune to the struggles. The process is difficult and scary and requires hard work. But I explain that we can find hope.

Next, I must lead “Battle Mind” training for another group of soldiers on how to prepare spiritually, mentally, emotionally, physically and relationally for their upcoming trip to the “sandbox.” The training goes well and once again brings to the forefront many of the lessons I learned during my tour in the combat zone.

Although I have a “Suicide Awareness” briefing and a counseling session, I must take a call from the Casualty Notification office.

A 20-year-old specialist has been killed in action in Iraq, and I will be on the two-man team assigned to inform his mother of his death. (My oldest daughter, Nina, is 20, so this hits close to home.) As we near his family’s home, I think about a conversation I had with my wife, Dorothy. Normally the soldiers’ families experience a sense of powerlessness and stress that eases with a routine phone call, then builds again until the next anticipated contact. Two months without contact had forced Dorothy to face her

greatest fear: every time the doorbell rang unexpectedly, she braced herself, preparing for the possibility that two soldiers would be there to tell her, “The Secretary of the Army regrets to inform you that...” Now I would be one of the soldiers standing at the door forcing this mother to face her greatest fear.

My mind wanders from mundane thoughts to the realization that, for this mother, every dinner from this day forward will never be the same. But I find strength and encouragement in my experiences and the promises of God: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God” (2 Cor. 1:3–4).

