

As the war goes on, so does the work of military

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Religion News Service

CHICAGO (RNS)—Once you've seen the brutal face of evil, you start looking for the tender face of God, Chaplain Robert Barry said.

Barry is an Air National Guard chaplain who spends his summers working with injured soldiers at Landstuhl military hospital in southern Germany, where American military personnel are taken after they are wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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It's also where Barry gets frequent prayer requests from patients and staff. No one at Landstuhl ever has turned down a prayer, he noted.

"Nobody has said, 'That's not necessary,'" said Barry, a lieutenant colonel in the 183rd Fighter Wing of the Illinois Air National Guard.

Barry, a Dominican priest, will serve his third tour at Landstuhl this summer during a break from his duties as campus minister and religious studies professor at Chicago's St. Xavier University.

Landstuhl, he said, is the most challenging ministry of his career.

"I've never prayed as hard as we do there," said Barry, 59.

And it's getting harder, as the military faces a shortage of chaplains. The Army National Guard, for example, is offering a \$10,000 signing bonus for chaplains. Major Timothy L. Baer, the chaplain in charge of recruiting, said he has only 340 chaplains to fill 770 authorized positions.

Lt. Col. Ran Dolinger, spokesman for the Army Chief of Chaplains office, said there are about 452 vacancies among 3,000 chaplain slots in the National Guard, Army Reserve and active-duty positions. About 300 of those vacancies are in the National Guard branches, he said.

"They don't have a lot of people who can and want to do this kind of work," Barry said.

Chaplains are among the first to greet new patients at Landstuhl after the 2,500-mile journey from Iraq.

A team of nine offloads troops arriving on stretchers, which can weigh up to 600 pounds with all the critical-care equipment.

Some patients may not even know where they are; some arrive with desert sand still in their hair. "You're in Germany," Barry tells them. "We're going

to take good care of you.”

Barry can fulfill the simplest request, like getting a toothbrush for someone who hasn't brushed his teeth in three days. But he is more likely to meet spiritual needs, administering the Catholic sacrament of the sick when requested. “I've never anointed so many people in my life,” he said.

Because combat armor protects the trunk of the body, the injuries Barry sees generally involve soldiers' limbs. He knows what to look for as he enters a patient's room.

“The first thing you look at are the bedcovers, and you look to see if there are lumps in the covers that should be there and aren't,” he said.

Patients with missing limbs are just beginning to grasp the significance of what has happened to them, an experience of secondary trauma that can be difficult to witness and respond to.

Barry recalls one patient in the intensive care unit, propped up in bed, “looking down, mouth open, both feet below the ankle gone,” he said.

Barry said he was changed by what he called the “raw, bold courage” of wounded warriors. “Things that were important to me before are less important now,” he said. Climbing the academic ladder is one of them.

He also has greater appreciation for the need for spiritual comfort.

“The word really has power with these people,” he said. “Shrapnel hits the body, but it also hits the soul, and that's where we come in.”

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