

# Newly deployed soldiers benefit from chaplain's experience in Iraq

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OKLAHOMA CITY (ABP)—“How do you plan to stay in touch with your family while you’re deployed?” Baptist Chaplain Jim Kirkendall frequently asks young soldiers.

It’s one of the many topics Kirkendall addresses during personal visits with military personnel of the U.S. Army’s 95th Division in Oklahoma City to prepare them for deployment to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Soldiers are required to attend mandatory briefings by many Army departments—from the judge advocate general to family readiness. During these sessions, Kirkendall addresses the emotional impact of deployment and suicide prevention. He shares experiences from his own yearlong deployment in Iraq.

From 2006 to 2007, Baptist Chaplain Jim Kirkendall was in Balad, Iraq, where he counseled soldiers and visited the wounded and workers at the Air Force Theater Hospital and the Contingency Aeromedical Staging Facility. (ABP Photo)

From 2006 to 2007, Kirkendall was attached to the Logistics Support Area Anaconda in Balad, Iraq, where he counseled soldiers and visited the wounded and workers at the Air Force Theater Hospital and the Contingency Aeromedical Staging Facility.

Kirkendall saw suffering among civilian and military personnel. While visiting soldiers and chaplains at the Air Force Theater Hospital, he heard, "Trauma code ER, trauma code ER." He and another chaplain arrived in the emergency room as medics rushed into the facility a boy who had been shot in the head.

"So there he was, a small 10-year-old with no family around him but with two Christian military chaplains, each holding onto his hands and praying as he died," Kirkendall said.

While in Iraq, he ministered to a mixture of American, Filipino, Indian, Pakistani, Turkish, Russian and Iraqi civilians, as well as personnel from all branches of the U.S. military. He also conducted training sessions for 25 junior chaplains.

"At LSA Anaconda, suffering was demonstrated by being absent from our loved ones for a very long time; death of a comrade; frustration in the office due to overbearing supervisors; lack of communication with family; spouse deciding to start a relationship with someone else and leave the soldier in Iraq; injured soldiers with limbs violently removed from their bodies; civilians caught in the middle between scratching out a living and having a war exploding around them; to interpreters using false names so their identity would be concealed," he said. "And the list goes on. The bottom line is God is still there."

Now, Kirkendall—a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship-endorsed chaplain—talks with Oklahoma-based soldiers about the challenges they are likely to face. He also serves as the state chaplain for the Oklahoma Office of Juvenile Affairs.

"I love being a chaplain because I have a unique ministry of going where others cannot go," he said. "The average pastor doesn't get to go behind the fence of the medium and maximum secured areas ... with 12- to 18-

year-old adjudicated juvenile delinquents ... (or) to serve in a combat zone and serve soldiers where life-and-death issues are addressed every day.”