

The Spiritual Lives of Soldiers:

Part II - At War

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Jacob's
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I am a chaplain of Marines. I eat with Marines, run with Marines, sweat with Marines, freeze with Marines. I sleep next to Marines in the dirt, jump out of airplanes with them, crawl through mud and sand with armor and gear and more or less suffer alongside of Marines every day in training. I pray with them, for them, over them. I go to war with them. I listen to them every day and laugh with them and bear with their rough edges, and as a result I am there with them in the moment of crisis – be it physical, emotional, psychological, or spiritual. We have had plenty of crises lately. My Marines and I have just recently come home from Helmand Province in Afghanistan.

I have been asked to share a few thoughts here on the spiritual life of warriors in combat, and I will do so in my own simple way. It seems to me that in combat Marines need, more than anything else, to be able to live with the profound knowledge that God is never far away, but near. They need to know that God is active in protecting them, and in protecting their families back home, and that what they are doing in war is not irrevocably driving them away from God. This is, by the grace of God, the knowledge that I humbly share with them each day, as best as I can.

In the middle of long deployments, no matter how strong a warrior's faith may be, everyone seems to go through times when God feels far away. Comrades fall, the faces of loved ones back home grow dim, and every miserable day seems to blend into the next. Chaplains often find that their most profound and fulfilling work is to simply be out and about among the Marines, praying with them, encouraging them, saying a blessing before every convoy, every patrol, and every combat mission. In the military we call this ministry of presence, and in essence it is a reflection of our Lord's incarnation as

a function of the priesthood – the priest as chaplain is never far away from the men of his Battalion or Regiment, and calls to mind the presence of God wherever he goes. For the Orthodox Marines he serves with, he does even more, prayerfully offering the sacraments, which in the mystery of faith unites them to God.

Chaplains are asked to pray in combat far more often than they could have imagined would be the case, because of the special spiritual vulnerability of his warriors in prolonged times of crisis, fear, and loneliness. I have seen some Marines experience positive spikes in their prayer at the beginning of a deployment. They turn to God more fervently and often than they have perhaps in many years, and find deep consolation for their souls. However, as the tour continues, and the pain and fear they are experiencing deepens, that newfound comfort in prayer can begin to weaken or wane, and they may lose heart. It takes a very deep



Fr David at St Andrew's Orthodox Church in Kandahar, Afghanistan (built by Romanian Orthodox soldiers).

rootedness in prayer to carry us through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and it is very difficult to try to grow those roots in the season of crisis. Access to God through prayer is an incredible gift, because it reminds us of His nearness to us in every season and place – even in that wild, dangerous, and weary land called Afghanistan.

Along with their chaplains and prayer, Marines love angels, imprecatory Psalms, and patron Saints, and gain from them a strong sense of protection. One of our platoon sergeants was leading a convoy in Northern Helmand Province when he and his Marines came under attack from Taliban forces. When he heard the first explosion go off, he began praying, and said later that he strongly felt the presence of angels around his truck, around the convoy, and even in his truck. He says he was sure they

