

**NOT FOR PUBLICATION
UNTIL RELEASED BY THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH
HOUSE COMMITTEE
ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**

**STATEMENT OF
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CHAPLAIN CORPS
MARINE CORPS RECRUIT DEPOT
PARRIS ISLAND SOUTH CAROLINA
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
CONCERNING
POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER AND OTHER MENTAL HEALTH
PROBLEMS FROM THE RIGOR OF A COMBAT OR HARDSHIP DEPLOYMENT
ON
MARCH 11, 2004**

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Chairman Simmons, Representative Rodriguez, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee:

This statement will focus on the need for military chaplains to be involved in pastoral counseling of veterans returning from combat. A recent professional experience will help introduce the issue. After this anecdote, the logic for chaplain presence and involvement will be presented. It will be followed by a discussion of issues encountered in a battle field setting; examples of the aftermath of a deployment in which the stress of deployment problems were not addressed contrasted against a deployment in which the stress of deployment was addressed; and finally, possible strategies for the ways chaplain involvement can improve the readiness of service members.

Several Marines and Sailors returning from Operation Iraqi Freedom have received new orders to Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island. Each of these people had different experiences in Iraq, saw different aspects of the war, and reacted to it in different ways. One Marine who was part of the push north to Baghdad in western Iraq, returned home and began to experience nightmares, cold sweats, emotional (although not hallucinatory) mood flashbacks, and a feeling of distance from his family. The chaplain of his battalion, aware of my experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq, and my training and professional experience with pastoral counseling issues referred the Marine to me for counseling.

Pastoral communication between military chaplains and eligible employees of the Department of Defense is considered privileged; however, he gave me permission to share his story if I ever found it useful in the Core Value classes I teach to Marine recruits, or in other appropriate settings. He only asked that I not reveal his name or rank.

In counseling situations such as the one with this Marine, I usually allow the individual to guide the conversation. But in the course of the conversation, I am sometimes able to identify and point out possible issues of which the Marine or Sailor may not be totally aware, but which may be contributing to their problems. In this case, the Marine had been reluctant to talk in depth to anyone about the things he saw and experienced in the push north to Baghdad. He felt ashamed because he believed his issues were the result of some personal deficiency. I am not certain when the issues first appeared, but I had the impression from our conversation that he was immediately bothered by his experiences, carried that burden with him throughout the war, and suffered from increased difficulties when he was reunited with his family.

I told the Marine about some of the stress related issues I sometimes deal with in my own life after serving in Afghanistan and Iraq. These include an increased startle reflex, and a strong reaction to weapons fire on the rifle range – when I hear a sudden volley of rifle fire, I jump and sometimes find myself looking at the ground to check for tire tracks or foot prints to indicate those areas where I can walk without fear of stepping on a land mine.

Suddenly the Marine seemed engaged. He told me how one of his recent responsibilities had also taken him out to the rifle range, and after arriving on the range, the first volley made him jump, and for a split second, he thought he was back in Iraq and needed to find a secure place in which to take cover. From there, he started opening up and sharing things with me that he had not told to anyone else.

His first disturbing experience was when he saw the body of a dead enemy combatant. Based on the condition of the corpse, it was obvious that the person had been dead for several days.

This prompted me to share a similar experience of some of the Marines in Afghanistan. In the Khost region of northern Afghanistan, they had discovered fresh graves that had been disturbed and opened. Investigation revealed that the graves contained the bodies of children who appeared to have died from natural causes. The images of these innocent children were haunting several of the Marines and they needed someone to talk to in order to process the event.

I explained to the Marine in the office that he and other Marines in Afghanistan had all been suddenly confronted with their own mortality when they encountered the bodies of other people. By sharing my experiences, the death and the horror I saw, and the death and the horror that other Marines and Sailors experienced, I was able to gain the trust of the Marine in my office that day. I was able to assure him that what he was going through was normal. I offered him techniques that would help reduce some stressors in his life and perhaps diminish others. I also offered suggestions on how he could help his wife better support him as he continued to cope with his experiences in Iraq.

About five weeks later, after the holiday season, we met again. He was feeling closer to his family and was able to enjoy the holiday season with them. Now that he was happier, his wife seemed happier.

This story illustrates how shame, uncertainty, and a feeling of unique isolation can aggravate stress issues associated with combat experience. Seeking out a chaplain can often be a first step towards recovery. Because military law considers conversation with a chaplain to be privileged, service members see chaplains as a safe resource for help. The chaplain can serve as a reality check and a source of unbiased information. The chaplain can either offer initial help in overcoming stress or if the problems persist, recognize the need for referral to qualified medical professionals for specific treatment.

In addition, service members suffering from stress issues associated with combat may seek out their unit chaplain because they have already developed a relationship of trust, borne out of the shared discomfort, misery, boredom and terror of deployment. The chaplain was there with them as they risked their lives in dangerous situations. The chaplain's unique position of trust, confidentiality, and accessibility helps ensure that feelings of shame or fear of exposure will not cause the service member to delay seeking help. Now, more than ever in the history of warfare, the presence of a chaplain is critical to the emotional and spiritual health of service members in deployment situations.

Some writers have suggested that warfare today has become a twenty-four-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week activity. During the Civil War, combat ceased at sundown when soldiers returned to their camps and sat around the fire to recall the day's events with each other. But with the advent of advanced weaponry, combat can now be conducted at any time and any place. In the past, the threat came primarily from explosives hurling lead, iron, and steel. Today, the stressors are more difficult to identify as combatants deal with the threat of unseen biological, and chemical, and radiological (CBR) weapons, protective head-to-toe suits necessary to defend oneself from bio-chemical attack, suicide bombers, dirty bombs, and asymmetrical warfare on a scale never before seen in history. While past generations dealt with longer separations from home in difficult conditions, the total stress is greater today when one takes into consideration all the strange and terrifying unknowns. And because the stress is constant, there is insufficient time to process it as combatants did in past generations. To help our service members deal with combat related stress, several tools are available.

Strenuous physical activity can help deal with stress. By simply working out, service members can mitigate some of the stress of the day. Another important tool offered by

Chaplains is Critical Event Debriefing (CED) within small groups of trusted peers, guided by a trusted leader, following a format that is proven to diminish the effects of the trauma of combat or disaster situations. This setting is similar to the civil war campfires around which soldiers processed the day's events. Today, one trusted leader, due to the nature of the office, is the military chaplain who serves with the combatants on deployment and is with them in combat.

Comparing my return from Afghanistan with Battalion Landing Team 3/6 (BLT 3/6) to my return from Iraq with 2d Assault Amphibian Battalion (2dAABN) will help illustrate how effective CED with chaplains and other mental health professionals in the field can help reduce stress in combat veterans.

Due to limited transportation assets, BLT 3/6 returned from Afghanistan to their ships in the Indian Ocean over a period of about two weeks. For several weeks the ships of the amphibious readiness group remained in the area in the event they were needed for further operations. When we received the order to return to the United States, circumstances prevented us from arriving home until three months after our retrograde from Afghanistan.

In Iraq, after 2dAABN, in support of 1st Marine Division, reached Baghdad, we were soon ordered to move south to a city closer to the Kuwaiti border. We remained at that city for several weeks, waiting for our turn to move to Kuwait for one of the limited flights out of the area. Marines and Sailors were free to move about when they were not on duty. Although they were restricted from going beyond a certain distance or into areas suspected to be unsafe, they were not as confined as they would have been aboard a ship. They were also free to relax whenever they had completed their appointed duties. Since the area was considered safe and the threat of CBR attack highly improbable, the greatest stress was waiting for the next mail

shipment. Marines and Sailors had time to share their experiences when they were comfortable doing so.

When we received word that we would soon be moving south to Kuwait for flights home to the United States, I began developing a stress control class to be presented to all hands before we left our last position in Iraq. Over a three-day period, all Marines and Sailors received basic guidelines on how they and their fellow Marines could practice CED, focusing on the main points necessary to reduce stress in their lives as part of our combat and operational stress control efforts.

Despite the fact that 2dAABN was flown from Kuwait to the United States in less than twenty-four hours, and before that endured worse conditions than BLT 3/6 in Afghanistan, I ministered to fewer post deployment issues than I did after Afghanistan. While this is non-scientific, anecdotal evidence, and other variables were undoubtedly at work, it does suggest that the presence of a trusted chaplain helps with prevention of stress related problems after deployment.

In my present assignment at Parris Island, I have come to believe that if time and resources permit, effective prevention of stress related issues should begin in basic training. They would also be given the tools they will need to mitigate the effects of the emotional trauma and stress that comes with war. Helping recruits recognize that life includes death, and that everyone eventually dies, may help recruits with the day they are finally confronted with their own mortality, and help them work through the trauma of violent death, whether it occurs on the battlefield or due to accidents or disasters.

The military chaplain, especially one who was with the unit as they went into battle, is viewed as a trusted, confidential, and accessible resource. His office, in garrison, or under a tree

or shelter-half in the field, is considered a sanctuary for military personnel. The chaplain can be a safe resource and asset in helping the troubled service member. And if the chaplain recognizes that the service member needs professional help beyond the skill level of the chaplain, the service member's trust in the chaplain will help overcome the denial, resistance, and shame that might otherwise prevent the service member from seeking necessary assistance.

You cannot put a price on emotional and spiritual well-being. Sea Service Chaplaincy is a critical dimension in fostering the holistic well being of Sear Service personnel. The U.S. Navy Chaplain Corps seal says it best, - Vocati ad Servitium - We are called to serve.