Chaplain Turner's War: Chapter 1 of 8

Compelled to serve where the suffering was greatest, he headed to Iraq. He has already lost 14 men. What will become of the rest of his flock?

WASHINGTON --- Chaplain Darren Turner stands at the entrance to Ward 45-C at Walter Reed Army Medical Center with a special coin in his pocket and trepidation in his heart. He is here to see a warrior who only two months earlier was hunting insurgents in Iraq --- and is now a man without three limbs.

Spc. David Battle arrived here on Christmas Day, his legs and right arm blown off in a roadside bombing. On this dreary February afternoon, doctors still are not certain he will survive.

David Battle is a trophy of war. That's how Turner describes the nation's wounded.

Home on leave from Iraq, the Georgia chaplain did not have to visit Battle. He wanted to. He wanted to make this difficult journey before he must make another.

In four days, the war-weary chaplain, 35, will return to southeast Baghdad to shepherd his flock of almost a thousand soldiers in a Fort Stewart-based infantry battalion. He has already mourned with them the deaths of 14 men. He has comforted many of the 100 who have been injured. Some, like Battle, face uncertain futures with traumatic injuries.

Yet Turner feels unprepared when he visits the wounded --- a near-death experience can mess with a soldier's head. Not even the chaplain's spiritual armor can fully protect him.

He takes a breath and opens the door to the "warrior care" ward.

"Hi, David," he says.
Painkillers pulse through Battle's veins. He stares at Turner from a hospital bed, his eyes vacant, his broken body covered with white sheets from the neck down. His 2-year-old son, Ahmarion, sleeps at the foot of the bed. Battle's wife, Lakeisa, hovers over a mess of plastic tubes snaking from her husband's body. Turner can tell she is Jell-O wobbly under the steel veneer she's erected for outsiders.

This is why he became an Army chaplain. He wanted to be where the suffering was greatest.

Turner has visited the injured before, at Baghdad's combat hospital. Some guys are numb. Some put their trembling hands in his. The wounded are always wanting something that can't be explained.

The chaplain tells Battle and his wife that he feels privileged to stand in their presence.

"Even though you didn't plan this," Turner says, "you served your country. Anything you want me to tell the boys?"

Many of the soldiers in Battle's tight-knit tank company had walked over the same spot where the bomb exploded. They told Turner they felt guilty. Why were they spared?

The soldier from La Plata, Md., struggles to answer the chaplain.

"Tell all of them ..."

Battle pauses. Turner bends closer to hear his whisper amid the drone and beeps of hospital equipment.

"Tell them, thanks," Battle manages to say.

A tear rolls down his left cheek.

Turner's mind races to find the right words.

"You probably have had many bad emotions. But you got your life and your wife right here for you," he says. "She's a special lady."

Lakeisa's eyes scan the "Get Well" and "Happy Birthday" cards on the wall. Yesterday her husband turned 22.

"You are an inspiration," Turner continues, taking out the coin he has carried with him from Baghdad.

Decorated with a sword representing honor and a breastplate of righteousness, the shiny medal is Turner's way of bestowing hope to the wounded. A verse from Ephesians is etched on one side: "Put on the whole armor of God. Pray always."

Military tradition dictates that the coin be passed from one soldier to another in a firm handshake. But Battle cannot move.

Turner has thought long and hard about the presentation. A chaplain's job is filled with awkward moments like this, when words are inadequate but silence is not an answer.

This moment is particularly tough.

Jesus ran to crises. Turner wanted to do the same.
But eight months at war have left him distressed and drained.

Turner was so green --- new to the Army, new to the chaplaincy --- that his boss thought he might be better suited behind a desk in a support battalion, spared from combat missions.

Chaplain (Maj.) Jay Hearn knew that the 1st Battalion, 30th Infantry Regiment, part of President Bush's troop buildup, would be at the tip of the spear in Iraq, at high risk for casualties.

Just months before the deployment in May 2007, Hearn told Turner that soldier deaths were a chaplain's toughest battleground; that Turner could still serve meaningfully in Iraq without stepping into that ring of fire.

But Turner had learned in seminary that people in pain are wide-open to inviting God into their lives. He insisted on joining the 1-30th.

Chaplain Turner's war unfolded on many fronts.

He is a soldier on the battlefield. A counselor behind closed doors. A minister at the altar. A friend. A father.

He is the backbone of a rough and tough infantry battalion, on its third deployment in Iraq. As the sole chaplain, he absorbs all that befalls the soldiers. He shares in absolute joy --- and tragedy.

On this winter day, the wounded at Walter Reed are chilling reminders of war, particularly the war that begins here at home, away from the killing fields.

Standing at the head of Battle's hospital bed, Turner grasps the "Armor of God" medal in his left hand and places his right hand on Battle's shoulder.

"This is a really, really cool coin," he says, sticking to the plan he conjured for this awkward moment.

His eyes steadfast on the soldier's face, he slips the shiny disc into his wife's palm.

"I know you know that you still have a life to live. We love you."

Turner bows his head to pray. He asks God to give Battle and his family the strength they will need in the coming weeks, months, years.

"God is not finished with you yet," he says.

He gives Lakeisa a long hug and steps back out into the antiseptic hallway.

"Whew," he says, his face flushed red and his eyes moist. "I'm wondering why I have two legs and arms still."

The young chaplain has seen so many deaths. Today, for the first time, he has encountered the grim realities of life after near-death.

It is a new front in Chaplain Turner's war.

"If I were where he is, I'd be wondering, why me? I'd be feeling sorry for myself, maybe wondering why I didn't just die."
Oblivious to the rain drenching his patrol cap and uniform, Turner leaves Walter Reed for a nearby hotel where his wife, Heather, waits. The thought of again leaving her, and their three young children, is crushing.

**Turner** wonders what will unfold in the six months that remain in the deployment.

He can eulogize the dead, pray for them. But what will become of his flock still on the battlefield?

Even on a quiet, uneventful day in Iraq, the war within --- for faith, for sanity, for family ties strained by separation --- is ceaseless.

The soldiers come before **Turner** broken. Or oblivious to their own needs.

In a few days, the chaplain will be back in the ancient lands of the Bible, preparing for Easter. He hopes Christianity's humblest and holiest day, celebrated in the midst of war, will soothe and strengthen his soldiers' souls.

**CHAPLAIN (CAPT.) DARREN TURNER**


Married: Heather Holman of Snellville, 1999

Children: Elie, 7; Sam, 5; Meribeth, 23 months

Church affiliation: Savannah Christian Church, a nondenominational Christian church with an attendance of 5,000.

Graduated: Cherokee County High School in 1991; University of Georgia in 1997 with a degree in English education.

Early work: Taught English in Mongolia (1997-98) through a Christian organization called the English Language Institute of China; became assistant pastor (1999) at the Church of the Nations, a Christian nondenominational church in Athens.


Deployment: To Iraq in May 2007 with the 1st Battalion, 30th Infantry Regiment.

**ABOUT THE STORY**

In January, [omission] began documenting life at war with Georgia native Darren Turner, chaplain for the 1st Battalion, 30th Infantry Regiment, part of the 3rd Infantry Division at Fort Stewart.

They traveled with Turner to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington while he was home on leave and then caught up with him in Iraq, where they spent five weeks reporting this story.
shadowed the chaplain as he counseled soldiers, baptized several on Easter and dealt with the hardships of war. They also went on foot patrol with Bravo Company, 2nd platoon, which last summer lost six soldiers.

Every soldier in this story gave the two journalists permission to document their interactions with the chaplain. All except one of the scenes in this story were witnessed firsthand. The one reconstructed scene — the events of last summer — appears in Chapter 3 and was pieced together through interviews with soldiers who were there.

COMING TOMORROW:

Back in Iraq, the chaplain counsels a young sniper from McDonough who talks about being a trained killer.

Eight months at war have left him distressed and drained. He returns to Iraq fully aware of all he leaves behind — and all he faces.

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Chaplain Darren Turner prays with Spc. David Battle and his wife, Lakeisa, as their son, Ahmarion, 2, sleeps at the foot of the bed in the "warrior care" unit at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. Battle lost three limbs in Iraq.

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Leaving his family for a second time is crushing for Darren Turner. With his 18-day leave at an end, he says goodbye to son Sam and wife, Heather, before heading to the airport in early February.
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Turner is rejuvenated by joyful moments such as this --- joining Sam and daughter Elie on the trampoline in the backyard of their home in Richmond Hill, near Fort Stewart.
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Memo: First of an eight-part series following Georgia native Darren Turner, a chaplain serving in Iraq.
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One evening, a young sniper steps into the chaplain's office.

"Hey, whassup, sir?"

Spc. Brandon Smith is 20. He isn't religious and has little interest in Darren Turner as a spiritual leader. The two began to talk when Smith learned the chaplain's hometown --- Canton --- was just a few miles north of his own on I-75. Tonight the soldier from McDonough wants Turner's advice on life after deployment.

Soon enough, though, the talk will turn to killing.

"I just wanna do high-speed stuff," the sniper tells Turner. He'd like to join the Special Forces.

Smith was in a mortar platoon in the 1st Battalion, 30th Infantry Regiment. In Iraq, he was assigned to a sniper section of 10 soldiers. He was lucky, he says. He grew up hunting in the Georgia woods and likes to sit and wait for his prey. Not every soldier has that kind of patience.

His team has four "kills" so far, he tells Turner.

His personal tally: one.

Soldiers often stop by the chaplain's office at Forward Operating Base Falcon in southeast
Baghdad. Turner returned here from leave in February and promptly restocked his shelves with movies, books, beef jerky, trail mix and toothpaste, stuff delivered almost every week in care packages from America.

The convenience-store look is a camouflage to lure the war-weary.

If a conversation opens up, Turner will invite the soldier to sit in a cherry-colored upholstered chair he scavenged. He calls it the seat of contemplation. It can do for a soldier what a Band-Aid does for an open wound.

The young sniper, however, hasn't yet recognized war's burden.

He plunges into a description of the day he made his first kill.

His team was on a rooftop in Arab Jabour, surveilling the area with high-powered opticals known as the Long Range Advanced Scout Surveillance System. It was early in the morning and difficult to focus through dense fog.

Smith spotted a man trying to hide from choppers overhead. He saw him pick up an object, put it over his shoulder and attempt to cover it with a blanket. Smith thought it might be a shaped-charge explosive, the kind that can pierce even the sturdiest armored vehicles.

He opened fire with his .50-caliber rifle --- two rounds through the trees, two more on either side.

"I wasn't nervous or anything. I didn't feel nothing," he says.

"What did you think you would feel?" Turner asks.

"I guess I thought I would be upset," Smith replies, his baby face expressionless.

Like chaplains, snipers are a special breed, though they play opposite roles: Snipers live to kill. Chaplains live to help others go on living.

Only 2 percent of men are suited to the job of killing, Turner learned from the book "On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society." He thinks Smith might be one of them but worries about the impact on someone still so impressionable.

"What was going through your head when you pulled the trigger?" Turner asks.

"All I heard was the word: engage. Then I was like, OK, back to work. . . . I look at it this way: I saved other people's lives by killing that guy."

Turner never outwardly judges. He believes murder is a sin --- but doesn't believe all killing is murder.

He struggled with this issue while in seminary and wrote a research paper about the Bible's views on taking human life. He says the New Testament outlines a different mandate for people who "bear the sword" for a police force or the military. They are not bound to uphold the individual commandment in the Law of Moses, "Thou shalt not kill."

Scripture also tells him that war is sometimes necessary --- and inevitable in a fallen world of sinners. John Lennon got it all wrong in his song "Imagine," the chaplain says. Global peace is a pipe dream.
The sniper talks nonstop.

He helped evacuate a local militiaman injured in a bomb blast, he tells Turner. The man's legs were dangling. His hip, broken. His flesh, burned. Smith reached for his arm to lift him up --- but there was no arm.

"There's nothing like the smell of burning flesh," Turner says, knowing how its putridity can haunt a man.

"It's horrible," Smith says, spitting his Copenhagen Long Cut into an empty water bottle. "I'm 20 years old, pulled dead bodies out of a car. That's messed up."

The conversation turns back to killing. One death bothered the sniper.

He heard the howls of a wife and two daughters standing by the body of a man Smith's team had killed. Smith thought about how his own mother and two brothers would react to his death. He had a bad feeling in his gut.

"Most of the world doesn't live like we do," Turner says. "It changes you. So what are you going to do different when you go home?"

"I'm going to enjoy my life. I think I deserve to have a little bit of fun."

"You can get stupid when you get home," Turner says. "Do you think it's worth it?"

"Yeah, I know someone is going to die the first week we are home, or they are going to kill someone. I know a lotta people are going to go home and drink and do drugs and get crazy. I'm not going to lie. I'm gonna get completely wasted."

Turner, 35, sees a lot of himself in Smith. He was young and crazy once. At Cherokee County High School, he downed beer and smoked dope. He did more of the same at Reinhardt College, where he was arrested for possession of marijuana, and later at the University of Georgia, where he was arrested for public urination behind the Georgia Theatre. He went to court, paid his $180 fine and faced humiliation.

Fast-living college days eventually left Turner with a thirst he couldn't quench with a bottle or a pill or a line. One spring break, instead of piling into a car packed with party favors, Turner went home to Canton and picked up a New Testament.

For all his recklessness, though, Turner never struggled with the kinds of issues plaguing his soldiers. His alcohol and drug binges weren't escape from war.

It's only March, but the sniper has already planned his first few days back in Georgia in July. "I'm gonna buy a bike," he announces.

"Why don't you wait three months?" Turner says. "What's the No. 1 reason you want a bike? Because you want to go fast? Get a bicycle first. Get a moped."

Smith laughs.

When he was in McDonough on leave, he drove a motorcycle on 1-75, whizzing by his mom's car at 160 mph. He liked the high-speed rush. He needed it after Arab Jabor, he says.

"You're going to die," Turner says. "You think you can handle 160 two or three times? You
can't. Don't put your mom through that."

Turner tries to get his guys to see their actions through the people they cherish. For young, carefree soldiers, there is not much else to ground them.

Smith ponders Turner's words. He sits so quietly for a few moments that the only sound is combat boots grinding on gravel outside.

The chaplain understands Smith's compulsions. At his age, Turner, too, thought older folks just wanted to cut in on his fun. That was before he could see his own need for adventure through a lens of faith.

Early in his spiritual journey, he read "Wild at Heart" by Christian writer John Eldredge, who suggests American men have abandoned the stuff of heroic dreams, aided by a Christianity that tells them to be a "nice guy." God, says Eldredge, designed men to be daring, even dangerous.

Turner recognized himself in Eldredge's words. He always knew he was a little rough around the edges. His internal faith and external ruggedness, it seemed, could meld perfectly in the Army's chaplain corps.

But the wildness in the sniper's heart, Turner knows, could turn deadly. He can only hope that his words will temper Smith.

"Are you gonna go 160?" Turner asks. "You know who you are lying to if you are lying."

"I know," Smith says.

He picks up his weapon, puts on his sweat-ringed patrol cap and gets up to leave. In a few hours, he will be back at his outpost in Arab Jabour, peering through a scope, waiting for his prey.

Turner knows some soldiers survive Iraq only to become casualties at home.

He tells Smith: "Make sure you're not a statistic."

THE STORY SO FAR

Chaplain Darren Turner returns to Iraq after visiting the wounded at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington. He looks forward to observing Easter in this biblical land, but is anxious about what his remaining months at war will bring.

ABOUT THE STORY

In January, reporter [REDACTED] began documenting life at war with Darren Turner, chaplain for the 1st Battalion, 30th Infantry Regiment, part of the 3rd Infantry Division at Fort Stewart.

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They shadowed the chaplain as he counseled soldiers, baptized them and dealt with war's hardships. They also went on foot patrol with a platoon that lost six men last summer.
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COMING TOMORROW

The chaplain survives a rocket attack in Baghdad and recalls the horror of last summer.

Spc. Brandon Smith, 20, of McDonough, pulls security on a Bravo Company mission in Arab Jabour, Iraq. As a sniper, Smith is usually hidden from view as he sits and waits for his prey.

Just in from a remote outpost, a weary Smith discusses his war experiences with the chaplain, who understands his young soldiers' compulsions.
Soldiers from Chaplain Darren Turner's battalion patrol the farmlands and date palm groves of Arab Jabour, a Sunni district southeast of Baghdad. Among them is sniper Spc. Brandon Smith.

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Chaplain Turner's War: Chapter 3 of 8

A nightmarish summer of death and anguish deepens Turner's bond with the soldiers of Bravo Company.

In his black Army shorts and gray T-shirt, Chaplain Darren Turner crunches through thick gravel on his way to the gym, a place that relieves him, if just for an hour, of being friend and father to a thousand soldiers at war.

The 10-minute walk across Forward Operating Base Falcon is a routine part of Turner's day --- except when a rocket whizzes overhead.

He hears that eerie sucking sound and drops to his knees.

Boom! The missile slams into a dirt road about 75 yards away, shaking the ground beneath him. Shrapnel flies past, pingng off a concrete wall.

"I've already had my workout, and I haven't even gone to the gym yet," he says, trying to stay calm. "Wow. That was a close one."

His pulse racing, Turner runs instinctively into the first-aid station, where Master Sgt. James Alderson winces in pain. His blood-soaked shirt hangs on the back of a chair.

"That hurts," Alderson says to the medics. "Son of a ---" He catches his language in front of the chaplain.

Alderson has shrapnel lodged under his left arm, but he's going to be all right.

"I'm glad you're OK," Turner says. "Crazy day."
He runs brazenly back outside, unstoppable in his quest for a workout.

Last summer, Turner, 35, worried much more about dying. He learned to rely on his "bullet-proof faith."

On this day in early March, he isn't paralyzed by fear. Deep in his soul, he rests in his devotion to God.

"I don't want my kids to grow up without their dad. But I'm OK with dying," he says, scanning the gravel for shrapnel.

He picks up a shard of metal that's still hot --- a souvenir for his desk, a reminder of life's fragility.

He continues on his way through this crowded base in southeast Baghdad. Designed to house 5,000, Falcon's barracks were full when Turner's flock arrived in May 2007 as part of the troop surge ordered by President Bush.

The chaplain and his unit, the Fort Stewart-based 1st Battalion, 30th Infantry Regiment, were relegated to dusty tents.

Turner chose one tucked away at one end of the battalion's encampment, so soldiers could slip unnoticed into his office. A uniformed man seeking emotional help risks ridicule, especially in an infantry unit where a "suck-it-up" attitude reigns.

On his trek to the gym, Turner thinks about how close that rocket landed to the 70 rows of tents that serve as home.

As he nears the basketball courts, he hears someone call his name.

"Hey, sir! Over here."

The sun is high in the sky, and Turner strains to see who it is.

"Aren't you gonna play basketball?"

Turner squints and realizes the guys on the court are from the battalion's Bravo Company, here from nearby Patrol Base Hawkes for 24 hours of relaxation. Among them are Sgt. Luke Hitchcock and Spc. John Figueroa, known as "Hitch" and "Fig." It's the first time they've had a chance to play basketball together in almost a year.

"C'mon, sir, " they yell. "It's us!"

Turner can't refuse. Not after last summer. Not after what the platoon went through.

* * *

Fig was a zombie, his eyes vacant, his speech slurred. It was as though he was drunk all the time in a place where there is no alcohol. "Pray that I can keep my sanity," he told the chaplain last summer.

Not yet two months in Iraq, and Fig was useless as a warrior.

On July 6, the 24-year-old soldier from Bayamon, Puerto Rico, had entered a building suspected of housing insurgents in rural Arab Jabour. With him was his roommate, Pfc. Bruce
Salazar Jr. They were clearing the premises, eyes darting from corner to corner, M-4 rifles locked and loaded.

Arab Jabour, just 10 miles southeast of central Baghdad, had not seen a sustained U.S. presence since November 2005. In its absence the area had become a petri dish for terrorism. Amid the corn fields, tomato crops and date palm groves, a lethal and unseen enemy thrived.

That July day, a bomb exploded in the building with everyone still inside. Fig dodged debris crashing off the walls and ceiling. The billowing smoke filled his eyes and lungs. He yelled for help.

"Salazar! Salazar! Where are you at, man?"

When Fig got closer to where his friend had been standing, he was in complete disbelief.

He saw only pieces of flesh.

Four days later, a roadside bomb hit Fig's Humvee. His brain swelled from the concussion. He lost short-term memory. He was flown to Ibn Sina, the combat hospital in the Green Zone, for traumatic brain injury.

When Fig returned to Patrol Base Hawkes, where Bravo Company is stationed, disturbing dreams robbed his sleep. He shut down, quit speaking. He found comfort in food and gained weight.

Hawkes is a rustic outpost where last summer there was no electricity, no air-conditioning, no phones, no Internet.

No distractions.

A man can go crazy reliving his nightmares.

Fig's squad leader, Sgt. Hitchcock, could see his soldier going down. He had to get Fig help.

Hitch isn't sure God exists. But it had been a relief for him to talk to Turner about the day Salazar died. The chaplain, bound by rules of confidentiality, was "safe," Hitch figured. He sent Fig to see him.

Turner prayed with Fig for the souls of the dead. And for the souls of those who survived. Fig felt a calm that had escaped him the day Salazar died.

But on Aug. 11, Fig would need the chaplain again.

His platoon was clearing brush and reeds, potential hiding places for insurgents, when a young private took a shot from a sniper. He was evacuated to the combat hospital. Then, five Bravo soldiers entered a house to conduct a search.

It was booby-trapped: Thirty pounds of explosives hidden under the stairwell detonated without warning.

Fig watched in horror as only one man emerged alive.

Such is the nature of war here: There are no designated battlegrounds. Front lines are drawn through a neighborhood, a street, a house.
As their beloved friends' bodies were flown away, Fig and his platoon learned the private waiting for surgery to remove a round from his liver had bled to death at the hospital.

Turner arrived at the patrol base immediately. The Army's 13-week chaplaincy course had taught him plenty about how to handle "critical incident stress." But when he saw Bravo's 2nd platoon, it was as though he had studied for his finals and forgot everything on exam day.

He sat on the ground with them, cried with them.

Infantrymen think they're tough. But Turner knew their sorrow would leak out somehow. Maybe they'd get angry, take it out on Iraqi villagers or talk down to their wives. Maybe they'd threaten to kill themselves.

He gently prodded them to describe what they saw and smelled, what they feared most.

He knew he could not instantly heal his men. That could take a lifetime.

Turner returned from Hawkes to Falcon to plan another memorial ceremony in the chapel, where just a few weeks earlier he had eulogized Salazar. He worried there might not be enough room on the stage for five upended rifles, five pairs of boots.

The 3rd Infantry Division videotapes its memorial ceremonies to send home to the families. Turner encouraged speakers to look into the lens, to talk directly to the soldiers' loved ones.

"There is a time to heal, a time to die," he said when it was his turn to speak.

Then he turned to the camera.

"The sting of their deaths has pierced us deeply. Not only has it pierced us, but it's also reached their wives, children, fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters..."

He fell silent. His bottom lip quivered. He felt hot tears coming out of his eyes, stuff dribbling from his nose.

"It hurts so much to lose them," he managed to say. It was as though he had lost his own sons.

He retreated to his tent. He needed time and space to grieve. He had a hard time swallowing his own prescription that grief is a slow process. He wanted a quick out.

* * *

Chaplain Turner would conduct memorial services for 13 soldiers before 2007 came to a close. The ceremony would get easier with time, but not the heartache.

Turner's grieving shaped the way he would relate to soldiers throughout the deployment --- whether it was on a foot patrol or a basketball court, as it was on this afternoon at Falcon.

The earlier rocket attack has not fazed the guys from Bravo's 2nd platoon. Not after what they have suffered.

All but three soldiers have hit IEDs. Ten have received Purple Hearts. Six of the platoon's nine vehicles were destroyed by last August. Only eight of the original three dozen men remain at their patrol base. Some died. Others got sent home with injuries or were reassigned to less stressful duties.
Turner grabs the basketball. On the court, he shows no mercy.

"Damn, the chaplain's good," Hitch says. "I wouldn't have asked him to play if I had known."

Fig goes for a layup. He has learned to laugh and smile again. Now he's cursing himself for missing the shot.

"Hey, Fig, watch your mouth," Hitch shouts.

Don't want to offend the chaplain.

No one passing by would ever see them as nine guys and the chaplain, but simply as 10 soldiers on the court. Ten men who have an understanding honed from what they have already shared --- and what they fear is still to come.

THE STORY SO FAR

Chaplain Darren Turner's flock includes the outwardly wounded and the invisibly scarred. Some are like a young sniper who sought Turner's counsel, not yet fully aware of the impact of war. Others are like the soldiers of Bravo Company who lost six men and knew they needed the chaplain's help.

COMING TOMORROW

On a remote patrol base, a soldier desperate to save his marriage awaits the chaplain's arrival.

Chaplain Darren Turner checks on Master Sgt. James Alderson as he is treated for shrapnel lodged under his left arm. Turner relies on his "bullet-proof faith" to get him through attacks on Forward Operating Base Falcon.

Struggling with his faith, Bravo Company Sgt. Keith McKern (right), 32, seeks advice from Turner at Patrol Base Hawkes. After the horrific events of last summer, the soldiers relied on
Spc. John Figueroa, 24, shut down after he lost his roommate and five other platoon mates last summer. The chaplain helped him recover, but he wonders how long the memories will haunt him.
Chaplain Turners War: Chapter 4 of 8

Turner and his flock face a formidable enemy beyond the battlefield: the strain of separation from home.

Chaplain Darren Turner checks his watch. It’s 8 p.m. --- noon in Georgia. He slips into a designated break room in his battalion’s command center and dials home on the “morale phone.”

It is the Army's attempt to soothe the stress of deployment: 15 minutes of daily talk time for 15 months at war.

In South Georgia, his wife, Heather, 35, picks up her cellphone. She and the kids are finishing lunch at the kitchen table.

"Hi, babe. How’s it going?"

So begins a conversation Turner knows will go by too quickly. There is so much to discuss. More important, so much to convey.

Sometimes, Turner tells his wife about a soldier threatening suicide here, at Forward Operating Base Falcon. Sometimes, he just tries to glimpse life back home in Richmond Hill, near Fort Stewart. Always, he wants Heather and the kids to know how much they are missed.

What if this phone call is his last?

"Did you see the news today about the five guys?" Turner asks Heather, mentioning a suicide bombing that killed 3rd Infantry Division soldiers elsewhere in Baghdad.
Heather already knows. As the chaplain's wife, she felt she should stand at the helm for Army spouses and volunteered to lead a battalion family readiness group. Wives have been calling all day to make sure the casualties are not their own.

Heather is living the war almost 7,000 miles away.

"You know what, ladies, we have combat patches, too," she likes to say. "Ours are worn on our hearts."

The chaplain purposefully doesn't call home every night. That way if there is a communication blackout because of a casualty or if he is stuck somewhere, Heather won't worry.

"How are you all doing?" Turner asks.

Sam is about to earn his orange belt in karate, Heather says. She knows that talking about routine things takes her husband away from war, if only for a moment.

Their son wrests the phone away from Mom.

"Hey, Sam. What's up, buddy? You're getting your orange belt? No way! I'm so proud of you. How many 4-year-olds have an orange belt?"

Elie gets on the phone. Turner says: "Hold on, hold on. Let me tell Sam one last thing real quick."

The clock is ticking, but what he has to say is worth the time.

"Hey, Sam, you didn't let me finish. You know what I was gonna say? I love you."

Next he talks to Elie about her school project on Mexico.

"What kind of food do they eat in Mexico? Oh, the flan. That's good. Start with the dessert. Maybe y'all can make some tacos and spicy rice. I love you. Bye-bye."

Elie will turn 7 in a few days, Sam will be 5. Turner missed Meribeth's first birthday and will miss her second in June.

Family, says Turner, is not the Army's priority, even though it does what it can to ease the stress of war.

He knows if he stays with the 1st Battalion, 30th Infantry Regiment, he will almost certainly have to leave home again. The Fort Stewart soldiers have already been alerted for another deployment in November 2009.

Turner, 35, felt called by God to this work. He attended seminary at Regent University in Virginia expressly to join the Army's chaplain corps.

He wanted to help the suffering. But he didn't anticipate his own.

There's not much time left on the phone. Heather tells him Elie will begin karate lessons as well.

"Wow. So you're going to karate four nights a week. Sure you want to do that?"
Heather insists it's OK.

"We have 40 seconds left. How are you feeling?" he asks. Heather is sniffling from a cold she can't shake.

"We're getting cut off, sweetie. I love you!"

Fifteen minutes whiz by faster than a missile.

Turner encourages his soldiers to take advantage of the free calls. Sometimes, he whips out a global cellphone from his upper left arm pocket and hands it to a soldier. If he makes an excuse --- says "I'll call later. She's sleeping" --- Turner insists: "Wake her up. Tell her you love her."

He knows the most formidable enemy a soldier faces isn't necessarily on the battlefield, but at home, where anxiety and the strain of separation can exact a heavy toll.

At Patrol Base Red, an hour's journey from Falcon, the chaplain perches on a dusty concrete ledge with Spc. Zacheriah Taylor. Facing a row of smelly wooden latrines, the two men talk with the ease of friends on a fishing trip.

Taylor, 24, serves in an armor company of soldiers who know the innards of M1 Abrams tanks better than they know their own hearts.

On this day, he has been waiting to share a heartache with the chaplain.

Taylor's wife is unhappy. Unexpectedly, she told him over the phone that she wants out of their marriage. He feels helpless.

Turner has heard this story before. He is aware of 40 soldiers in his battalion who have been divorced since deploying.

Tactically, a 15-month deployment makes sense to Turner. It allows soldiers to get settled and know the territory. But emotionally, he says, it's a disaster.

Homefront problems multiply with longer tours. To make matters worse, more than half of the 1-30th soldiers have served in Iraq once or twice before.

Taylor says he knew his wife was struggling at home. Her father died last August. Her mother's kidney disease has recurred. Her sister is about to have a baby. Her brother, a young Marine lieutenant, is also deploying to Iraq.

It's a crushing feeling anywhere to hear your wife say she's walking out. But here, far from home on Iraq's battlegrounds, it's a moment of indescribable frustration. Taylor couldn't run to her. He couldn't hold her and say: "Don't go. Let's work this out."

He couldn't do anything but hang up the phone when his time was up and fester inside.

He stopped talking to his platoon mates, fearful his personal life would fuel gossip. He needed a confidant --- and finally found one in the chaplain.

Turner likes to remind everyone that soldiers wear two tabs on their chest. One says U.S. Army; the other bears their name. The latter is the chaplain's realm.

"I'm more interested in the soldiers' hearts," Turner says.

He routinely rides out to these smaller bases to talk to soldiers who otherwise might live out an entire deployment without ever being able to air their troubles.

He usually arrives with a much-heralded supply convoy carrying vats of mess hall chow: Salisbury steak, mac and cheese, green beans, succotash. It's the only hot food at this compound, structured around a house once owned by wealthy Iraqis.

A muezzin's call to prayer echoes from the village mosque on the other side of the protective wall. It was in another kind of service, held on this side of the wall, where Taylor heard Turner preach.

"Which would you choose?" Turner asked about a house built on sand or one built on rock. The easy fix or a solid start?

The words got to Taylor.

"I want to be there for her, but it's hard when I'm 10,000 miles away," he tells Turner.

The chaplain urges Taylor to "man up." It's advice he often serves up, unable to accept that fierce warriors would "just cave" when it comes to fighting for their families.

He tells Taylor that the Bible teaches men how to battle for marriages just as Jesus battled for spiritual victory. That every wife, every child, wants a husband and father who is on fire for his family.

Turner knows that with Taylor, a devout Christian, he can weave faith into the conversation. But as an Army chaplain, he often has to tiptoe through a religious minefield.

Though most soldiers list a Christian denomination as their religion, an Army flock includes Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Wiccans and even a few who fancy themselves Jedi Knights.

Turner doesn't profess to be a religious specialist. Islam was an elective he chose not to take in the seminary. He tossed the vial of holy water from his chaplain's kit --- he had no use for tools used by a Catholic priest. But if a soldier asks for a rosary or a Quran, he delivers.

Then there are the nonbelievers. With them, Turner takes care to spell god with a little "g."

As darkness descends on Patrol Base Red, Turner wants to make sure Taylor is prepared for the next conversation with his wife --- and many more.

Sometimes, he tells Taylor, he gives his wife of nine years a big hug when she's doing the dishes. Or he helps her fold the laundry.

"That sends her to the moon, man," he says.

Five minutes of quality time, he says, can lift his wife for a week.

Taylor is learning to be a better listener.

"Lately, my wife's been a lot more open with me," he says. "I told her things would be different when I get back."
He wants to show the world that he is a new man committed to Christ, committed to his family.

He asks Turner to baptize him on Easter, just a week away.

THE STORY SO FAR

Chaplain Darren Turner memorialized 13 fallen soldiers before 2007 came to an end. But comforting the bereaved is only one of his roles. He counsels soldiers suffering from the stress of 15 months away from their loved ones. He can relate: With six months left in Iraq, he, too, is homesick.

ABOUT THE STORY

began documenting the work of Chaplain Darren Turner in January while he was home on leave from Iraq. Then they caught up with him in southeast Baghdad, where they spent five weeks reporting this story. Every soldier in this story gave the journalists permission to depict their interactions with the chaplain. All except one of the scenes were witnessed firsthand. The one reconstructed scene --- the events of last summer --- appears in Chapter 3 and was pieced together through interviews with soldiers who were there.

COMING TOMORROW

Scarred by the deaths of his platoon mates, a Bravo Company soldier patrols the farmlands of his nightmares. He looked to the chaplain to regain his sanity once --- and wonders if he'll need him again.

Author:

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Date: 06/25/2008
Page: A1
Edition: Main

Chaplain Darren Turner relieves stress with a little late-night music in his office at Forward Operating Base Falcon, where the only embellishment on the tent wall is a poster-size photograph of his wife, Heather, and their children.
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Edition: Main

Chaplain Darren Turner and his soldiers play basketball by the tall, protective walls of Patrol Base Red that separate the troops from Iraqi children kicking a soccer ball on a dirt field in Arab Jabour.

On a dusty concrete ledge at Patrol Base Red, Turner (left) counsels Spc. Zacheriah Taylor, 24, who is struggling to save his marriage. The strain of separation from family can exact a heavy toll.

Part four of an eight-part series following Georgia native Darren Turner, a chaplain serving in Iraq.

Story Name: turner.0625_89230682
Send: Yes
Headline: Chaplain Turner's War: Chapter 5 of 8
Dek Head: A Bravo Company soldier who turned to Turner for solace must revisit the scene of his nightmares.

Story: THE STORY SO FAR

Last summer, Spc. John Figueroa saw his roommate blown to pieces, then lost five more buddies. The soldier from Puerto Rico turned to Chaplain Darren Turner to save his sanity. Now Turner tries to help Bravo Company soldiers understand their experience in spiritual terms on the eve of Easter.

ARAB JABOUR, IRAQ --- Who killed Jesus?"

Chaplain Darren Turner points to himself.

"This guy," he says. "Why did Christ die? He was the Lamb that forever took away the wrath of God."

On the Thursday evening before Easter, Turner delivers his sermon of the Crucifixion to a dozen soldiers sitting on cots doubling as pews.

The smell of barbecued ribs from afternoon chow lingers in the air. The noise of weights clanging in the gym next door can't be filtered out. Neither can obscenities flying from the mouths of infantrymen as they go about their daily chores.

Church can be many things in a place of war.

Here, at Patrol Base Hawkes, a small outpost in the heart of Arab Jabour, it is a no-frills Army tent that almost blew away in a dust storm a few days before.
Nothing is sacred here except Turner's words.

In a matter of hours, these soldiers will head out on a critical mission to clear al-Qaida safe houses. The chaplain tells them that wrath is a word they should readily understand.

It is, after all, what they felt last summer when six of their own died in grisly fashion and the enemy escaped unseen. It is an all-consuming fury that still seethes within, and threatens to haunt them after they return to Georgia.

The soldiers take small wafers from a pewter container. They put their lips to thumb-size vials of wine. It's Vendange, white --- the kind you get on an airplane. Turner keeps a stash locked up at the chapel at Forward Operating Base Falcon because alcohol is prohibited for American troops on combat tours.

This is how soldiers come to redemption here.

Hours after the service, they meander back to the same tent. Now a medic is preaching safety tips to the Bravo Company's 2nd platoon preparing for patrol.

Spc. John Figueroa, 24, has learned to smile again, even tell a joke or two. But when he goes "out there," in the villages of Arab Jabour, he becomes a different man, someone he can't even recognize.

He listens intently to the medic. Where the chaplain laid out the sacraments, "Doc" places his own lifesaving tools: multipurpose Israeli bandages, packets of oral rehydration salts and tourniquets.

Figueroa switches off his headlamp. At 4 in the morning, a full March moon blankets Arab Jabour with a diaphanous glow. "Fig" squeezes into the troop compartment of a Bradley Fighting Vehicle as it joins a parade of trucks rolling out the main gate, kicking up clouds of Iraqi moon dust.

"Here we go again, " he prays. "Please, God, protect me, protect my family."

Though far from safe, bucolic Arab Jabour, just a few miles southeast from the heart of Baghdad, is quieter now than it was in June 2007 when the 1st Battalion, 30th Infantry Regiment arrived, fresh from Fort Stewart.

Once-shuttered shops have started to reopen. Children carrying red and green backpacks walk to school again.

If the successes of the troop surge were to be calculated, the 1-30th's gains here would be part of the math. The Georgia-based soldiers, combined with allied Sunni militiamen known as the Sons of Iraq, largely chased the insurgency out of the area.

But Arab Jabour's is a fragile peace forged with the blood of Bravo Company soldiers:

Pfc. Bruce Salazar Jr., 24, of Tracy, Calif., got baptized the Sunday before he shipped off to boot camp.


Staff Sgt. William Scates, 31, of Oklahoma City, abrasive on the outside, teddy bear inside.

Sgt. Scott Kirkpatrick, 26, of Reston, Va., actor, poet and expert on odd facts.
Sgt. Andrew Lancaster, 23, of Stockton, Ill., a golfer, fisherman and big eater.

Spc. Justin Penrod, 24, of Mahomet, Ill., caretaker of a quadriplegic brother.

When he lost those platoon mates last summer, Fig relied on the chaplain to regain sanity.

"Some people die here. Some people die there. But it's hard to die like that," he says.

Now, eight months later, as he gets ready to traipse into potentially unfriendly territory, he still wonders how he will look on the inside when his tour finally ends this July.

Sun has replaced moon by the time the ramp drops and Fig dismounts his Bradley. His platoon traverses dirt paths and farmland dissected by canals grown hairy with bamboo to reach what are believed to be al-Qaida safe houses.

"This doesn't even look like war," Fig says. He can hear sheep braying and frogs calling in the canals. "Until something happens."

At one moment, the scene is reminiscent of Vietnam --- a platoon framed by a row of trees as helicopters whir overhead. But this is Iraq, land of improvised explosive devices.

The Bravo soldiers question families living in the first house they search.

"Seen any al-Qaida? Any IEDs?" they ask.

"La, la," comes the answer. No, in Arabic.

The Americans know villagers are reluctant to identify insurgents for fear of reprisal. They search the house anyway and keep going.

Three Sons of Iraq members, visible from afar in their orange reflective vests, lead the patrol along with a team of Navy explosives experts and a lone Marine with a bomb-sniffing dog named Dollar.

Fig gets angry out here when he thinks of how his roommate died. Pfc. Salazar was blown to bits along with an explosives team --- like the one in today's patrol --- in a booby-trapped house last July.

There were no bodies left to recover when Salazar died, no ceremonial Hero flight to the Baghdad airport for a final journey home. Fig never got to say goodbye to his friend.

"I still think, maybe, Salazar, he's just hiding somewhere," Fig says.

He scans the seemingly peaceful countryside before trudging through freshly irrigated fields, his boots squishing through mud as creamy as peanut butter.

"IED! IED!" screams one of the Iraqi militiamen. The explosives team runs to investigate. They radio the confirmation back down the dirt road to Fig's squad. Another controlled detonation coming up.

"That's awesome," Fig says. "We just walked by an IED. They are everywhere."

He makes the long trek back to his Bradley.

Fig just wants to return safely to his wife, Patricia, to be "normal." But he can't be certain he
will ever be that again.

"I don't want to hurt anybody back home," he says.

No one called him crazy when he was on leave in November, but he thinks he may need the chaplain again someday.

So does Turner.

After the arrival celebrations at Fort Stewart, after the dizzying demobilization paperwork, after the 30 days of vacation, some of Turner's soldiers will still be in the thick of battle. Only the enemy will have morphed from thundering bombs to silent demons.

The chaplain envisions a busy fall of counseling sessions to help soothe the wrath of soldiers like Fig as they slip back into life in America. He's certain the ghosts of Iraq will be along for that ride.

ABOUT THE STORY

In January, [deleted] began documenting life at war with Georgia native Darren Turner, chaplain for the 1st Battalion, 30th Infantry Regiment, part of the 3rd Infantry Division at Fort Stewart.

They traveled with Turner to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington while he was home on leave and then caught up with him in Iraq, where they spent five weeks reporting this story.

[deleted] shadowed the chaplain as he counseled soldiers, baptized several on Easter and dealt with the hardships of war. They also went on foot patrol with Bravo Company, 2nd platoon, which last summer lost six soldiers.

Every soldier in this story gave the two journalists permission to document their interactions with the chaplain. All except one of the scenes in this story were witnessed firsthand. The one reconstructed scene --- the events of last summer --- appears in Chapter 3 and was pieced together through interviews with soldiers who were there.

COMING TOMORROW

Baptizing soldiers at Easter is a challenge for the Georgia chaplain in a place where war stops for no one.

There were no bodies left to recover when Pfc. Bruce Salazar Jr. died, no Hero flight to the Baghdad airport for a final journey home, no chance to say goodbye.
A dusty tent at Patrol Base Hawkes serves as church for Chaplain Darren Turner as he delivers his Easter sermon on Christ’s sacrifice. "He soothed the wrath of God. He took the bullet that was headed for us."

Bravo soldiers take cover as explosives found on patrol of suspected insurgent safe houses are destroyed. It was in the same district, in Arab Jabour, that the company lost six men last summer.

"Seen any al-Qaida? Any IEDs?" the soldiers ask at the homes of Iraqis in Arab Jabour. "La, la," comes the answer. No, in Arabic. The women and children watch as the soldiers search anyway.
Supplemental Information (Chapter 6, 7, 8)
Chaplain Turner's War: Chapter 6 of 8

Baptisms at Easter are nourishment for Turner, but even a holy day can turn violent in Iraq.

On Good Friday, the day Jesus was nailed to the cross, Chaplain Darren Turner frantically saws off the top of an empty 3,000-gallon plastic water barrel and fills it with water.

He thought it would be "way cool" to baptize soldiers in a biblical river and had planned to dunk them in the muddy Tigris that snakes through the farmlands of Arab Jabour south to the Persian Gulf.

But the chaplain's routine request to satisfy his soldiers' spiritual needs met an insurmountable challenge.

Turner's battalion commander vetoed the river baptisms, not just because the medical staff feared infection from parasites in the water, but because of security.

What if someone opened fire from the opposite bank?

This is Turner's only chance to baptize soldiers at the patrol bases. He's determined to make it happen, and after 10 hard months at war, he has learned how to improvise.

He sets up his barrel in front of an old water wheel on the grounds of Patrol Base Murray. The elaborate feature is a reminder of what the base once was --- a vacation villa belonging to Saddam Hussein's sons.

Turner steps down into the tank and tells the small crowd gathered to witness the baptisms that this day is a milestone in the lives of two young soldiers. It's a first, too, for the 35-year-
old chaplain from Canton. He has never baptized a soldier before.

Spc. Zacheriah Taylor, the tank company soldier who just a week earlier sought out Turner to help save a dissolving marriage, wades into the water beside him.

"I've had some rough times in the past few months and realized the Lord is going to help me," Taylor tells the gathering, the afternoon sun glinting off the Army logo on his shorts. "I'm showing him today that I am handing my life over to him."

Turner holds his right hand up in the air and places his left on Taylor's shoulder.

"Bless him this day, Lord," Turner says. "Taylor brother, I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit."

Taylor goes in head first. There's no room to fall backward.


Refreshed from spiritual nurturing on such a holy day, Turner gathers his gear to return to his tent at Forward Operating Base Falcon. He will baptize other followers at the chapel there on Easter.

He feels honored to be part of a pronouncement that a soldier has found his soul at war. More often, he knows, the opposite is true.

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Cute bunnies and pastel daisies decorate the walls of the dining facility at Falcon. Some clever cook has even carved an ice sculpture next to the menu board.

But the long rows of tables are empty.

The troops are no longer allowed to congregate in one place in large numbers. They would make too tempting a target for the mortar-lobbing, rocket-launching enemy.

The heavily guarded base is under attack.

Turner hears despairing news: On Good Friday, while Turner was baptizing soldiers at a patrol base, Pfc. Tyler Smith, who served in another 3rd Infantry Division battalion, was killed by an incoming round, not far from Turner's tent at Falcon.

Base commanders have ordered everyone to wear full gear --- body armor with ballistic plates and Kevlar helmets --- when not in the protection of a "hard" building.

The Americans think the uptick in violence is related to rising anger within the ranks of radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army. Just a few miles away, the heavily fortified Green Zone in the heart of Baghdad is also under steady fire.

On Easter morning, Turner finds relief in the chapel, a plaster building in which he can take off his body armor. He takes a front-row seat at the 11 a.m. contemporary Protestant service, next to his chaplain friends, Capt. Johnnie Elder and Capt. Jeff Sheets.

Turner attended seminary with Elder, who serves in a 3rd Infantry Division cavalry squadron. In Iraq, the two are each other's salvation.
Chaplains are expected to be steely strong. But just as armored mine-resistant trucks are vulnerable, chaplains can't always escape the damage from emotional bombs. Around Elder, Turner can step down off the pastoral pedestal, unburden his own heart.

Sheets is a newer acquaintance of Turner's. He is also with a Fort Stewart unit, the 4th Battalion, 64th Armor Regiment. Turner jokes that the lanky chaplain ought to be dribbling a basketball instead of pastoring soldiers.

This morning, as the chaplains watch uniformed men and women file in with their body armor and automatic rifles, the sanctuary looks more like an arms room than a place of peace.

"He is risen!" they say in greeting each other, settling down for a sermon on the resurrection of Christ.

Toward the end of the service, Turner stands with two medics he has mentored: Sgt. Daniel Woods, who had a "foxhole conversion" on his first tour of Iraq in 2005, and Spc. Steven Goodwin, one of Turner's most ardent followers.

With each, Turner climbs into the chapel's baptismal tank, framed by two paintings depicting scenes of a Christian heaven.

"Thank you for this resurrection day, Lord, regardless of what's going on around us, behind us, before us, besides us --- even inside of us," Turner says.

Then he introduces his soldiers.

"This is Specialist Goodwin."

By his own admission, Goodwin was "not a nice person" when he arrived here last May. The 24-year-old from Circleville, Ohio, spent his childhood being dished from home to home by parents who divorced multiple times.

As a teenager, he picked fights on the street, then joined the Army and went to war hating Iraqi people. They all deserved to die, he thought --- payback for Sept. 11.

But after he treated Iraqi children, dying on a gurney, he began to question the war, and himself. Just a few days earlier, he had bandaged what was left of a 17-year-old Iraqi boy's hand, blown off by an improvised explosive device. The nerve endings were still intact. The boy howled in pain.

It bothers Goodwin that Iraqi children are getting hurt from things he believes America has "indirectly done." The roadside bombs, he says, "weren't here before we arrived."

He thinks all Americans should experience combat once, see the children growing up with Humvees and Bradley Fighting Vehicles instead of Matchbox and Hot Wheels.

In Iraq, the people he thought he hated helped bring Goodwin back to God --- and to the chaplain.

Knee-deep in water, Turner tells the military congregation he is proud of the new Goodwin. "He and I have had a good journey together."

Goodwin has asked Turner to be the minister at his wedding when the battalion returns to South Georgia this summer.
"God has brought him a long ways," Turner says. "I know this is special for him."

Goodwin confesses to his fellow soldiers that he was baptized when he was 9, then fell away from the church.

"After meeting Chaplain Turner, I've realized how much [God] has continued to bless me even though I had fallen so far."

Goodwin emerges from the water wearing a smile.

After the baptisms, Turner walks to the back offices of the chapel. The Easter services and rituals crown his time in Iraq, spiritual highlights that have kept him motivated since he returned from leave in Georgia.

He spent weeks honing his message to the soldiers on Christianity's holiest day, wanting it to be a crescendo of sorts for those who share his faith.

Exhausted by a whirlwind tour of the bases his battalion occupies, Turner is looking forward to a few days of solitude and prayer.

But war stops for no one.

On Easter evening, horrific news awaits Turner. Four soldiers in Chaplain Sheets' battalion died after a shaped charge hit them in the nearby neighborhood of Saidiyah. They burned alive in their Bradley.

This joyous day of Christ's resurrection is tainted with blood.

ABOUT THE STORY

began documenting the work of Chaplain Darren Turner in January while he was home on leave from Iraq. Then they caught up with him in southeast Baghdad, where they spent five weeks reporting this story. Every soldier in this story gave the journalists permission to depict their interactions with the chaplain. All except one of the scenes were witnessed firsthand. The one reconstructed scene --- the events of last summer --- appears in Chapter 3 and was pieced together through interviews with soldiers who were there.

THE STORY SO FAR

Since his return to Iraq from leave, Chaplain Darren Turner has looked forward to Easter, with the hope that it would bring peace to his flock. But Turner's desire to satisfy his soldiers' spiritual needs faces many challenges.

COMING TOMORROW

Under constant attack on a Baghdad base, the chaplain offers his soldiers spiritual security in a tension-filled Bible study.
Darren Turner finds a quiet interlude in the midst of war at a service led by his friend and fellow chaplain, Johnnie Elder, whom Turner met at seminary.

Darren Turner baptizes Spc. Zacheriah Taylor, 24, at Patrol Base Murray. The chaplain had to use a plastic water barrel after his dream of dunking soldiers in the Tigris was nixed for security reasons.

Turner watches medics he has mentored treat an Iraqi teenager who lost his hand in a bomb blast. From left are Pfc. Andrew Vanmeter, Sgt. Daniel Woods and Spc. Steven Goodwin.

Memo: Sixth of an eight-part series following Georgia native Darren Turner, a chaplain serving in Iraq.

Story Name: turner.0627_89889075
Send: YES
Headline: Chaplain Turner's War: Chapter 7 of 8

Dek Head: Under attack, Turner talks of a spiritual protection stronger than a bunker, more reliable than a buddy.

Story: THE STORY SO FAR

Four soldiers in a sister battalion have burned alive in their Bradley. Now Chaplain Darren Turner, who knows all too well what it means to memorialize so many lives lost at once, must comfort a fellow chaplain who faces what Turner did last summer.

BAGHDAD --- Incoming! Incoming!

The sirens sound.

Again.

And again.

Rockets whiz through the air.

Mortars land with a thundering boom.

Just two days after Easter, Forward Operating Base Falcon is under steady attack.

One soldier has been killed.

The troops scurry to 9-inch-thick concrete bunkers randomly placed around tents and buildings. They huddle in darkness, their faces illuminated by the strike of a match and the glow of Marlboro after Marlboro.
"At least I’m closer to God," jokes a soldier after spotting Chaplain Darren Turner at one end of a jam-packed bunker. It’s Turner’s second time in the bunker on this day. The medics he baptized on Easter are on full alert. While everyone else runs for safety, they grab their medical bags and sprint to the first-aid station, prepared to treat casualties.

"All clear. All clear," blares an announcement over the loudspeakers. The bunkers empty out.

Turner joins the medics, Sgt. Daniel Woods and Spc. Steven Goodwin, who are waiting for him to lead Bible study.

Under fire, the ancient Scriptures take on immediacy.

He pulls up a chair to complete a circle of soldiers gathered in an examination room. They open their camouflage-covered New Testaments. Woods is eager to read a passage from Matthew.

"Hold on a second, Woods," Turner says, straining to hear the radio. Could be another warning of incoming rounds.

Boom!


They begin reading.

Boom!

"Outgoing," Woods reassures them again.

It’s Turner’s turn to read: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs on your head are all numbered. So do not be afraid ..."

Turner threads together the language of God and guns.

"What does that mean for us getting shot at every day at Falcon?"

Do not be paralyzed by fear, he tells the soldiers, because God is in control of a believer’s life. He knows when a sparrow falls to the ground, when a soldier is under attack.

Woods clings to those beliefs. The 24-year-old from Dallas is on his second tour of Iraq and lost his roommate to a sniper in the slums of Sadr City. He wonders how anyone can live through war without faith.

"That dude King David was awesome," he says. "He mastered that whole fear thing."

He asks if anyone has seen the episode of the HBO series "Band of Brothers" in which the chaplain sits among the dead and dying, blessing them while bullets fly all around.

"It’s gotta be a true story," he says. He thinks it was amazing that the chaplain was protected.

"Ever see Chaplain Turner do that?" Goodwin asks.

"You probably won’t," Turner chuckles. "I’ll be in the bunker with the rest of you."
In war, every soldier --- those with faith and those without --- seeks protection. Sometimes, it comes in the form of a bunker. Other times, it's knowing that the guy next to you would give his life to save yours.

Turner offers his soldiers God's promise of protection, stronger, he says, than a chunk of concrete, more reliable than a battle buddy. The security is not physical but spiritual. Regardless of what happens externally, Turner believes, internal peace alleviates the fear and hopelessness that can prevail in a place of war.

That's the peace Turner held onto as his Humvee came under a hail of AK-47 fire on July 4th last year. The Army prohibits chaplains from carrying guns, though Turner thinks it's an outdated policy in a war in which the enemy no longer respects a red cross painted on a helicopter or the chaplain's cross Velcroed on Turner's uniform.

Faith is Turner's sole protection. It frees him from constant fear even as Falcon gets pounded.

"I think it requires bullet-proof faith to realize that your fate is ultimately in God's hands," he says.

Psalm 27 inspired Turner to become an Army chaplain. He reads it now, substituting the word bunker for shelter.

"The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? ... For in the day of my trouble, he will keep me safe ... in the bunker of his tabernacle ..."

He tells them he wanted nothing more than to lift the word of God in a place of war.

"Man, did I find that place . . ."

Goodwin finishes his sentence: "Yeah, at FOB Falcon."

War strengthens a soldier's faith --- or destroys it. Turner's faith remains unshakable, though Iraq has tested him in other ways.

"It sounded cool four years ago in my bedroom," he says, "with the AC turned down, with the popcorn popping in the microwave, with my wife queuing up a movie."

It was going to be such an adventure.

"I love you," Turner says, looking into the lens of his digital camera.

He's shooting a 15-second video to e-mail to his daughter Elie and son Sam. His wife, Heather, will play it for them at a joint celebration of their seventh and fifth birthdays.

"I'm so sorry I'm going to miss your party this weekend," he says, ending with a noisy kiss.

Four months remain before Turner's battalion returns to Fort Stewart.

He had hoped for uneventful days after Easter, but as April looms, a lull in Iraq's violence has been shattered by a fresh round of attacks incited by radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army.

Georgia seems so distant, life's ordinary moments so precious.
Turner hits the send button on his computer and closes his e-mail. The screen turns blank, his connection to home severed. Now for the business of war.

He walks across Falcon to visit his friend, Jeff Sheets, chaplain for a sister battalion that lost four soldiers on Easter Sunday. They burned alive in their Bradley after rolling over a powerful bomb.

Turner knows a chaplain's most demanding moment can also be the loneliest.

"How you doing?" he asks, stepping into Sheets' office.

Hunched over a plate of mess hall food that has turned stone-cold, Sheets looks spent. He has inspected the scene of the grisly incident, when the Bradley's steel was still hot, the smell fresh.

"Whew, " Turner says. "Did you see anything? Or smell anything?"

It was an oven in the Bradley, Sheets says. Not much was left in the way of remains.

At Fort Stewart, it was Sheets' job to knock on doors and inform families when 3rd Infantry soldiers were killed. He couldn't answer difficult questions about the circumstances of war deaths. Now he understands.

Here his role will be to memorialize the soldiers.

"You did all five guys together?" Sheets asks about the Bravo Company ceremony Turner conducted last August.

"We did, " Turner replies. "It's tough, man. I don't envy you this week. How many of those guys were married?"

"Two of the four, " Sheets says.

One has a younger brother who will arrive for a tour of duty next week. Another brother is serving in Afghanistan.

"Imagine mom and dad, " Turner says. "Three sons at war. One is already dead."

Top military brass, including Gen. David Petraeus, are scheduled to attend the ceremony. Sheets is under a lot of pressure.

Turner says a prayer with him, then heads back to his tent, thinking about his own tasks at hand.

He's already had to memorialize 13 battalion soldiers himself. (He was on leave when the 14th died in January and Chaplain Johnnie Elder led the ceremony.) Now Turner is trying to shift gears, to prepare for combat stress problems that may haunt his men when they are back at Fort Stewart.

Before they leave Iraq in July, he will begin discussing what it will be like to be just a regular American guy again. The Army calls it "reintegration." Turner calls it TLC for soldiers whose homefront issues can slide under the radar.

Don't go home and beat up your wife, he will tell them. Don't act like you're the boss again when she has been in charge for 15 months. Don't abuse alcohol. Or drugs. Get help if you
are having nightmares.

Turner fancies himself caring more about a soldier's heart than his warrior skills. But here, concern for the living is repeatedly interrupted by war's defining character: dying.

Turner discovers that like his friend, Chaplain Sheets, he will have to plan a memorial service.

Spc. Charles Jankowski, 24, was hunting for makeshift bombs hidden along the roads when one ripped through his Husky mine-detection vehicle. His death is the 15th for the 1st Battalion, 30th Infantry Regiment. Turner despieses this moment for all the obvious reasons, and for one that is not so obvious.

Why should he know of a young man's death before those who loved him most? A mother has lost her son, and she does not know what will surely be the most devastating news of her life.

Turner dislikes being privy to "sacred" information.

He may never meet Jankowski's family. But he must tend to the men who loved him here in Iraq.

He marches down to the motor pool to see the damaged vehicle. He lifts the tarp, gazes at the pock-marked steel; the flattened tire; the shattered glass. He tries to imagine.

To see it, touch it, smell it --- the experience will help him when he speaks with his soldiers.

A shepherd needs to smell like his sheep.

COMING TOMORROW

A dangerous mission for his soldiers pushes the chaplain to an emotional edge.

Faith is Turner's sole protection. It frees him from constant fear. 'I think it requires bullet-proof faith,' he says, 'to realize that your fate is ultimately in God's hands.'
Darren Turner (right) prays with fellow chaplain Jeff Sheets after four of Sheets' men burned alive in their Bradley on Easter Sunday. Turner knows the tough job that lies ahead for his friend.

Turner (center), Sgt. Daniel Woods (left) and Spc. Steven Goodwin head to the chapel at Forward Operating Base Falcon for a memorial ceremony for a soldier killed on the base.

Memo: Part seven of an eight-part series following Georgia native Darren Turner, a chaplain serving in Iraq.

Story Name: turner.0628_89300191
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Chaplain Darren Turner hurtles toward the motor pool at Forward Operating Base Falcon. He is anxious to see his men off to battle.

Turner is ordinarily not one for prayers before a mission --- he abhors the idea of a soldier nurturing a 911 relationship with God: Pray before you roll out the gates. Pray when a buddy gets hurt. Then stuff your Bible back into the trunk.

But Turner also understands the comfort that prayer can bring. And this mission to Baghdad's Sadr City is big.

It is March 28, and three 1st Battalion, 30th Infantry Regiment platoons in Bradley Fighting Vehicles and Abrams tanks have been called up to support U.S. forces already in the thick of battle.

An impoverished enclave of 2.5 million Shiites, Sadr City is unfamiliar and raw territory for Turner's soldiers. The battalion has not yet experienced urban guerrilla warfare --- it is more accustomed to the farmlands and villages of Arab Jabour.

"Hey, what's up, fellas?"
Turner greets the visibly nervous soldiers.

"Ready to ride?"

They reply in a chorus of "hooahs."

"I just wanted to come and encourage you guys before you head out."

Two men who Turner baptized on Good Friday are here. The chaplain notices several others who regularly seek him out.

With those who share his Christian faith, Turner takes extra risks to know them well, to love them as brothers. It's an emotional roll of the dice, because at war, any day could be a soldier's last.

Like today.

Turner reads aloud Psalm 140.

"Keep me safe from violent people ... who plot my downfall. The proud have set a trap for me; they have laid their snares, and along the path they have set traps to catch me."

King David's words resonate, as though they were written specifically about this war, where roads are booby-trapped with improvised explosive devices.

The soldiers bow their heads before the chaplain.

Several fall to their knees.

The next night, when the "all clear" sounds at Falcon, Turner crawls out of a bunker and heads back to the battalion's command center. After a steady barrage of incoming rounds, after news of a soldier's death the day before, Turner is looking forward to chilling out with fellow officers.

Tonight's show is "Hitman," the 2007 movie based on the video game of the same name.

Celluloid violence is often popular with soldiers, even with the chaplain. Turner can laugh through the fake stuff.

The movie is already in the DVD player when another officer walks in, stone-faced.

"Gator just hit an IED," he says about one of the 1-30 platoons in Sadr City. "The Bradley's on fire."

The room falls silent.

Turner is thinking what everyone else is: On Easter Sunday, four men in a sister battalion burned to death in their Bradley. This can't be happening to our own guys.

He steps into the tactical operations room at one end of the command center and stares at grainy images of Sadr City beamed back from an unmanned aerial vehicle.

Heat shows up black in the camera's night-vision mode. The entire Bradley is shades of black, the troop compartment the darkest.

As a newly minted chaplain, Turner had pleaded for an assignment with a combat unit that
would be at the tip of the spear. He had expected to see chilling scenes such as this, but even after 10 months at war, he is upended emotionally.

Nothing braces a man, not even a chaplain with unfailing faith, to watch comrades suffer. Turner struggles to find the right words. The stunned officers try breaking the awkward silence with nervous chatter about sports.

But they cannot escape the frightening scenario in Sadr City.

"I can't believe he's not dead yet," says a second lieutenant about anti-American cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. "We're not supposed to be in this fight."

U.S. commanders in Iraq blame al-Sadr's radical Mahdi Army for rising violence in Shiite areas.

Turner sits down with the officers, his head in his hands.

"I'm sick," he says. "I want to go home and take all these guys with me. Sadr City --- that place can burn for all I care right now. There are 2.5 million bad guys there."

Even a chaplain who counsels soldiers on managing anger cannot hold in his own fury, his urge for justice.

The officers wait. Details trickle in. Then, relief. The soldiers in the Bradley are alive. All nine escaped through the roof hatch.

They have been evacuated to hospitals in serious condition: burns, smoke inhalation, shrapnel, traumatic brain injuries. Doctors are unsure whether they will survive the night.

The sergeant major asks Turner if he wants to go to the Combat Support Hospital in the Green Zone.

That, too, is one of Turner's primary duties: to comfort the wounded.

The combat hospital, known as the CSH and pronounced "cash," is inside Ibn Sina, one of Baghdad's busiest and grimmest hospitals.

Turner thinks about all the time he has spent in the dreary hallways there. And of his journey in February to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, where he visited recuperating soldiers.

Spc. David Battle, who lost three limbs in an explosion, was still fighting for his life when Turner saw him.

On leave at the time, Turner did not have to make that trip, but he felt compelled to go. He stood beside Battle's bed, reassured his wife that their lives were far from finished.

He was humbled by their sacrifice.

The wounded, he says, are the trophies of war --- reminders of America's greatness and the price that is paid for it.

He felt called by God to help shepherd a flock scarred by war. He knows that though his soldiers will leave Iraq in July, Iraq will never leave his soldiers.
Chaplain Turner's war is destined to unfold even when he returns home to Georgia.

His thoughts are interrupted by the sound of the chief medical officer on the radio, inquiring about the condition of the injured soldiers. The sergeant major is still arranging a ride to the combat hospital in the Green Zone. Will Turner go visit the wounded?

It's been a pressure-cooker evening; God's foot soldier is weary.

"I don't want to go, " Turner blurs out. "I hate that place."

He slinks back to his office, puts his feet up on the desk, next to his laptop, and stares at the dog and dinosaur his children gave him.

Small toys, huge symbols of sanity.

It's nearly midnight, the trying day almost over, when a young soldier rushes into the chaplain's office. Anger flashes in Spc. Jason Denson's eyes.

He once served in the same platoon as the soldiers in the burning Bradley. He's fighting an urge to mow down every last Iraqi.

"I don't know what to do, sir, " he tells Turner, breaking down in tears, his arms reaching for the sky.

"Why is God doing this to me?"

Turner puts aside thoughts of his sleeping bag. He cannot turn Denson away without asking God to grant him peace.

He opens his Bible and asks the panicked soldier to take a seat across from his desk, in the red chair he scavenged, the one he calls the seat of contemplation.

ON AJC.COM

> E-mail the series to friends or read all of it online at www.ajc.com/chaplain

IN HIS OWN WORDS

Read more about Chaplain Darren Turner's war experience by going to his online journal at: www.caringbridge.org

Where it says "enter website name" type: turnerfamily

COMING HOME

On Memorial Day, Chaplain Darren Turner's battalion held ceremonies at five different battlefield sites to remember their 15 soldiers who died at war. The battalion is expected to return home to Georgia this week and has already been alerted for another deployment in November 2009.

The chaplain: After time at home, Turner will attend a Colorado retreat organized by John Eldredge, a Christian writer whose work inspired Turner. The chaplain wants to stay in the Army but has requested a change in jobs because he doesn't want to leave his family again. His preference: the Old Guard, a unit that would take him to Arlington National Cemetery to assist in the burial of as many as 18 men and women a week. Turner has one other very
important thing on his "to do" list: Watch UGA football. And lots of it.

The sniper: Spc. Brandon Smith, 20, plans to stay in the Army as a sniper. He still wants to buy a motorcycle.

The husband: Spc. Zacheriah Taylor, 24, baptized by Turner on Good Friday, struggled with his marriage and is getting divorced.

The medic: Spc. Steven Goodwin, 24, plans to leave the 1-30 Infantry and enroll in nursing school in February 2009. He is getting married on Aug. 16.

The survivor: Spc. John Figueroa, 24, wants to quit the 1-30 Infantry and go back home to Bayamon, Puerto Rico. He is considering an Army recruiting job.

The wounded: Five of the nine soldiers injured in their Bradley in Sadr City on March 29 were taken to Brooke Army Medical Center in Texas for treatment for severe burns. Four are still there; one has returned to Fort Stewart. The other four less seriously injured soldiers were returned to duty.

Spc. David Battle, 22, whom Chaplain Turner visited at Walter Reed Army Medical Center while on leave, is still recuperating from the bombing in which he lost three limbs. He has been fitted with prosthetics and could remain at the hospital for another year.

After 10 months at war, God's foot soldier is weary. Nothing braces a man, not even a chaplain with unfailing faith, to watch comrades suffer.

Author:

Before a mission to Sadr City, Chaplain Darren Turner reads Psalm 140: "Keep me safe from violent people..."

Distraught over the injury of his buddies, Spc. Jason Denson (right) seeks out Chaplain Darren Turner, who asks the shaken soldier to sit in the chair Turner calls "the seat of contemplation."
An exhausted Turner recharges with a "power nap" in his office at Baghdad's Forward Operating Base Falcon. On pressure-cooker days even a steely strong chaplain can grow weary.

Memo: Part eight of an eight-part series following Georgia native Darren Turner, a chaplain serving in Iraq.

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