

Paterson Pastor Bolsters Faith of Troops on Front Lines of Afghanistan, Iraq

By MICHAEL WOJCIK
News Editor

PATERSON - For Father Joseph Orlandi, a U.S. Army chaplain recently stationed in both Afghanistan and Iraq, the potent declaration "War is hell" is no hollow cliché.

Over the past year, this tough-as-nails Army colonel, who also is pastor of St. Michael Parish here, lived in real time the horrors and stresses of war that TV cameras can't begin to capture adequately. While tending to the spiritual needs of U.S. troops in the deserts of the Middle East, Father Orlandi witnessed unspeakable images - like the carnage strewn across a Baghdad street after a car-bomb blast.

In both war-torn nations, the popular priest - while wearing 70 pounds of body armor over his desert combat uniform - risked his own life for his fellow soldiers, often riding around in Humvees or flying in helicopters visiting far-off bases and battle zones. On those dangerous trips, he would feel that heart-pounding anxiety every soldier must feel in a war zone - the constant fear of being killed by gunfire, mortar fire, a roadside bomb or in the air by anti-aircraft fire.

"In war, you must be at peace with God. You don't know if you are going to come back alive," said Father Orlandi, who returned to civilian life July 2, when he touched down at McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey; after a few weeks of Army vacation, he came back to St. Michael's early last month. St. Michael Parish is planning a "welcome home" party for their pastor at 5 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 15 at the Excelsior, Saddle Brook.

In the heat of combat - not to mention in the heat of the region's scorching 115-degree days, Father Orlandi many times called on his 26 years of experience as an Army chaplain. The hard-bitten priest knew best how to survive in wartime.

"You must be on your guard at all times," said Father Orlandi with the Command Chaplain Section of the Combined Joint Task Force 76 at Bagram Air Force Base, Afghanistan and Camp Victory, Iraq. "It's not a game. It's about saving your life and the lives of your fellow soldiers. You could be killed," he said.

Yet, in the deserts of Afghanistan and Iraq the fears and stresses of battle - or just the threat of conflict - often gave way to a tremendous faith. In northern Afghanistan, the priest traveled far and wide to 15 remote Forward Operation Bases (FOBs), where he saw proud men and women in uniform hungry for the spiritual nourishment of Mass.

Six months later, Father Orlandi - himself a member and founder of St. Michael the Archangel Council 13060 Paterson - gave his soldiers some spiritual ammunition for their often difficult mission there. He helped establish Camp Victory Knights of Columbus Round Table, sponsored by St. Paul Council 11634 in Colorado Springs.

"The soldiers have a tremendous attitude; they are highly motivated; they work as a team; and they are focused on the mission," said Father Orlandi, who also helped conduct a much shortened Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) process, which brought nearly 80 soldiers into the faith.

The no-nonsense Father Orlandi told it straight - "A deep faith helps the soldiers deal with their mortality. They need a relationship with God or some other power. Faith - it's the only thing that kept me going. Sometimes, it was difficult."

Now back from the final deployment of his Army career, the pastor is re-adjusting to the less frantic pace of civilian life and his duties as pastor of St. Michael's.

"It's weird to switch from a military culture to a civilian culture. My body is here but my mind is there. It took a month to get all the sand out of my hair," observed Father Orlandi.

The 'flying priest' wins awards

For his efforts on behalf of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan and in Operation Iraq Freedom in Iraq, Father Orlandi returned to Paterson with two U.S. Defense meritorious service medals. Defense officials praised the priest's "powerful preaching and dynamic personality" that "helped to soothe the souls of those of his parish."

"No military member's need went unmet," military officials stated. "His pastoral care missions took him into harm's way on numerous occasions. He traveled more than 1,000 miles. He was under continual threat and attack was a constant concern. His presence served to encourage and strengthen our military members having a direct impact on the mission readiness of every Forward Operation Base he visited."

Father Orlandi's most dangerous mission? - Traveling by helicopter or Humvee convoy to the remote FOBs, which often were engaged with the enemy: the Taliban fighters. There during his short visits, he would say Mass, hear confessions and counsel soldiers of all faiths.

"The Mass gave many soldiers an hour break. They didn't have to think about war," said Father Orlandi, "known as 'the flying priest,' who once said a Mass in Spanish for a homesick Hispanic soldier from Texas; on his next visit to the base, five troops showed up for Mass. "The soldiers appreciated the value of my saying Mass for them," he said.

In his talks with the soldiers, Father Orlandi offered a lot of what he called "psychological support." He helped soldiers with a host of problems - from handling the stress of war to the sadness of being away from home, far from parents, siblings, partners and spouses.

"Some soldiers - men and women - have to deal with a 'Dear John' letter - a boyfriend, girlfriend or spouse, saying, 'I don't love you anymore and I've met someone else,'" the priest said. "I help them handle that. They are very happy to see me."

While out visiting the FOBs, Father Orlandi kept in contact with soldiers at the other FOBs via email or by phone. In his dangerous travels, enemy guns on the ground fired on his helicopter. On the ground, the priest and his convoy sometimes encountered another enemy - sandstorms. "You just stop the truck and hope it doesn't tip over," he said.

In Bagram, Father Orlandi was one of two Catholic priests, who served a virtual city of 12,000 soldiers and 3,000 civilians, complete with permanent buildings. About 45 minutes by auto from Kabul, the Afghan capital, the base was situated "in the middle of nowhere" surrounded by mountains in the barren wilderness. There, in a less-chaotic environment, the Italian-born priest worked with personnel from the Navy, Marines and Air Force and with soldiers from other nations, such as Britain and Italy.

In Afghanistan, Father Orlandi loved to brave the heat and to accompany the Army's Civil Affairs Unit to the local villages. There in these rather "Spartan" hamlets, soldiers would present the village elder with boxes of school supplies and clothes for the children.

"It's primitive living - mud huts topped with hay. Animals roam through the houses. They have less than nothing. But they are proud to be Afghans and are resilient," said the priest, who trains with the 77th Regional Readiness Command, from Fort Totter, Flushing, Queens. "When you give the kids something, they beam - like kids anywhere," he said.

Knights' roundtable for Camp Victory

After six months in Afghanistan, Father Orlandi was transferred Iraq, landing in Baghdad this past Jan. 18. He was sent to Camp Victory in northern Baghdad, a half-hour above the Green Zone. About 35,000 military personnel set up headquarters in the camp, which includes a former compound of Saddam Hussein's and the site of one of his palaces.

Again, he felt the fear of the average soldier firsthand. He would listen to the enemy insurgents fire mortars toward the camp.

"The falling mortar makes this specific sound. I can't duplicate it, but you know it," said Father Orlandi, who also would witness the bloody aftermath of a car bomb that exploded on a Baghdad street. "One young man who died was 21 years old. You can never forget that. I don't ever want to see that again."

After experiencing combat situations, grieving soldiers would come to Father Orlandi, telling him in detail what they saw, heard and felt. The military counsels troops right after an engagement to reduce their stress, to prevent suicide and to "keep them safe and focused on the mission," he said.

"After combat, some soldiers felt guilty. They thought they should have done more to save their buddies in the field," Father Orlandi said. "We tell them, 'No. it just happened. There's nothing you could have done.'"

While in Iraq, Father Orlandi did get something done - he helped start a Knights of Columbus round table, which began with 28 men. Today, nearly 80 men meet monthly, gathering for Mass, the rosary and fellowship and to reach out to others. While there, they gave T-shirts, shoes and sports equipment to the Civil Affairs Unit to distribute to the local children.

"It's simple: we fulfill the same role for the parish here in Iraq as we do back home," writer Patrick Scalisi reports, quoting a round table member, for an upcoming article in the Knights' international magazine, Columbia. "The environment that our service members live and work in is ever changing; our service members face uncertainty, injury and death everyday. The round table provides each of us with a support group that cannot only assist with our professional and personal needs, but also our spiritual needs," he wrote.

The members of the round table have a several fold mission, which includes: to be men of character who exemplify Catholic warriors in support of the nation's effort to foster freedom and to strengthen their Catholic faith to return as stronger men for their families, according to one member, Chief Warrant Officer Robert Petty.

Because Knights in the military are always on the move, Father Orlandi and the other founders decided to form a more flexible round table - a support group for Knights and their parish priests in areas where a council doesn't exist. Deployed Knights provide ushers, lectors and extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist to the deployed parish, Scalisi wrote.

After one meeting, Petty wrote an email to his fellow Knights, calling the gathering "inspiring in many ways. The rosary was beautiful and I felt a spiritual peace I have not felt before. Many of your testimonials during the meeting were touching."

Soldiers 'proud to be Catholic'

While at Camp Victory, Father Orlandi and other chaplains conducted the RICA process. Because deployed soldiers don't have much time, they completed the course in three months, about five months more quickly than newly initiated Catholics finish it in the U.S. They completed coursework that was available on the Military Archdiocese's Web site.

"The soldiers (who completed RCIA) are proud to be Catholic - it's part of their identity," Father Orlandi said.

In the Columbia article, Scalisi summed up Father Orlandi's recent war experience (this after a tour of duty in Kosovo), writing, "He is one of only handful of Catholic chaplains serving the armed forces in Iraq and understands that he places his life in God's hands whenever he climbs into an aircraft or ventures near a combat zone to comfort the wounded or anoint the dying."

"Soldiers are killed daily and the priest knows that a bullet or missile is indifferent to the fact that he is not there to fight," wrote Scalisi, concluding, "This is the daily experience of the men who serve as military chaplains for the U.S. armed forces in Iraq. For Father Joseph Orlandi, the experience was unforgettable."