

May 24, 2009

My husband, Jim Carter, has been an Army Chaplain for over 21 years. During our time in seminary, Jim became interested in joining the army. The thought was disconcerting, to say the least. It was “unknown territory” and the slogan “join the army, see the world” held no particular appeal. I was rather fond of small town living.

We finally settled on a “middle of the road” approach. We would join for three years to test the waters, so to speak. Most importantly, we wanted to be where God wanted us. Our first duty station was Ft. Stewart, GA, near Savannah. Immediately we were welcomed and drawn in by our unit and by the chaplain’s group on post. Everyone was friendly and engaging. I especially appreciated the chaplain’s wives group they had on post (as is customary on every post). The chaplain’s wives met for coffee every month. We had wonderful fellowship and lots of fun. It was great. I began to love the environment and the ministry.

Before I knew it, two years had passed and the time came for a decision to be made as to whether or not we were going to stay in the army. We talked and prayed. We both felt that this is where God wanted us. Jim signed the papers, thereby obligating himself to three more years as an army chaplain.

Two weeks later, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. Three weeks later Jim went to Iraq. My first thought was, “Hey! Can we get those papers back??” I eventually had to settle in to the fact that Jim was going to war. I had wonderful friends in the unit and among the chaplain’s wives. We bonded together and made it through a very difficult time. Our country had not been to war in a long time and no one really knew what to expect. We had been told that one in four of our men would not come home. Thank God, those predictions were wrong. Ft. Stewart lost less than 15 soldiers, total.

It was a difficult time, but I learned a lot about myself. I never would have imagined that I could be an army wife, ready at a moment’s notice to take over everything about our lives: bills, financial planning, household concerns, etc. But with the grace and strength given by God, and the support of wonderful friends and family, I made it. I realized through that experience that God gives grace the moment we need it. I heard many stories of the testing or tragedy of others and thought, “I just couldn’t do that” or “there is no way I could handle that situation.” I realized that I couldn’t handle anything without the grace of God to see me through. And His grace is sufficient in any circumstance. He carried me through, not by my might or power, but by His Spirit.

Jim came home, healthy and whole, and we moved from Ft. Stewart to Germany and enjoyed three great years there. It was fascinating to see how other cultures live and to actually make friends with some of the German people with whom I could barely communicate. We also became life long friends with many other army families.

Our final year in Germany brought the realization of my life’s dream: parenthood. Sarah Elizabeth was born in 1993 and was followed two and a half years later by her brother, David. There we were: a real army family, complete with two kids and a dog. We

enjoyed many assignments through the years and learned to find the great things about each place. Our children learned to adjust to different situations. They learned to meet strangers and to be comfortable in new situations. They learned that they could go just about anywhere in the world and find their way.

I remember one particular August evening in 2006 in El Paso, TX. Jim and I were sitting in the swing on our front porch talking while the children cleaned up after dinner. We were wondering where the Lord would lead us next. We weren't due to move until the following summer. I told Jim I didn't care where we went next, I just didn't want him to deploy. He said he understood how I felt; and although I took note of the "pregnant pause" that followed, I left the conversation breathing a measured sigh of relief.

A few weeks after that, Jim got a call from the Chief of Chaplains Office informing him that he had been selected to be the Division Chaplain for the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, based at Ft. Hood, TX. They had been deploying on a regular basis since Operation Iraqi Freedom started. They wanted to know if Jim would be interested in being the division chaplain, beginning January, 2007. The plan, at that time, was for the division to move to Ft. Carson, CO and there was little possibility of a deployment during Jim's tenure. Jim was thrilled. This was a job that he had dreamed of for many years. He would be responsible for the spiritual welfare of 15,000 soldiers and their families. He would have the pleasure of mentoring younger chaplains and ministering to the division staff during this massive move to Ft. Carson.

It seemed perfect. Jim called the Chief of Chaplains Office back told them that he would be honored to accept the position. We were surprised that we would be moving after only 18 months in El Paso, but thrilled for Jim to have this opportunity. We were set to go.

About six weeks later, headquarters called and said that the "operational tempo" had intensified and that the division would be moving to Ft. Carson, but the Division Headquarters would simultaneously deploy to Iraq along with other units in the Division. They would leave for Baghdad in the fall of 2007 and be gone for 15 months.

When I heard the news I went to my knees, and I don't mean in prayer. I was mortified. This was not in my plan. I not only lacked the confidence to go through this, I didn't believe I could. Seems life had been going so well that I had forgotten those lessons I learned from the first gulf war. There I was, facing another war and ashamed of the unyielding panic that gripped my heart. At the same time, I knew that God had called Jim to this position. I could not reconcile what I knew and what I felt.

Like every military family facing deployment, we had our concerns, fears and doubts. How could we do this? A 15 month deployment meant two Christmases and two sets of birthdays. Why did it have to be so long? Would they possibly shorten the length of the deployment? So many questions, so few answers.

I went through the first Gulf War as an "MNCer" (married, no children). I knew I could get through because I had done it before, but what about my children? How was I supposed to take care of them by myself? How could I ease the pain of this deployment for them? I felt overwhelmed as I faced this ominous task.

Sarah is a girl after her mother's heart. I knew I could minister to her with a little extra time at the local mall and a good foot rub. But what about David? He and Jim were so close. They did the chest-bump everyday that rolled. They played sports together and worked out all that testosterone as a team! What could I possibly do to help ease his pain?

A friend from Phoenix called one pre-deployment day to see how we were faring. He asked me to voice my greatest concern. I shared with him my burden for David. He listened intently and then encouraged me with these words: "Understand that if God has called Jim to this deployment, then He has called David to this season as well. Don't stand between David and his Creator. Move to the sideline and pray that David will mature in his personal relationship with the Lord through this experience."

Wow. I never imagined that I had postured myself between my Lord and my child. I was simply following my mother's heart and the natural instinct to protect my child from pain. But woe to me if I ever stand between the Lord and something He has ordained for my children. He is Wisdom and Strength. And as hard as it is to imagine, He loves my children more than I. They were His long before I ever knew them and they will be His long after I am gone.

The dreaded day of deployment finally came on Dec 8<sup>th</sup>, 2007. I lay awake most of the night before just looking at Jim and praying for him. We went to headquarters at 8:30 am. It was such a difficult time. After our goodbyes, the soldiers in Jim's group got in vans and off they went. I walked with Sarah and David back to the van and found cards that he had written for each of us. We read them and cried together.

We decided that we would go help a shelter that was distributing Christmas food baskets to needy families. I thought it would be good for all of us to get our minds off of our problems and to try to help others. We spent a couple of hours there and decided we would go by the PX before going home.

We stopped at Burger King to get a late lunch. We were all thinking a lot and talking little. Then David announced, "Well, I am excited." Sarah and I looked at him like he had gone crazy. "Please share!" I said.

"There are three reasons" he said. "One, I am thinking about all the soldiers that dad will be able to help over there. Two, this is the first real chance I have had to serve my country, and three, I am thinking about all the kids that don't even have dads."

Whatever tears I had withheld to that point, I promptly left on the table at Burger King! I was both amazed and thankful that David could think and express those thoughts while I was sitting there in shock...knowing that the Lord would take care of us, but wondering how.

We went to Blockbuster and rented the entire Star Wars series, went home and got in our pajamas, ordered junk food and "vegged" the rest of the day. At bedtime I went in and prayed with David, then with Sarah. After I prayed with her, she said, "Mom, if you get

lonely, there is plenty of room in my bed.” Later, when I went around to lock the house and set the alarm, she had already done it. What a blessing she was to me at that moment.

That was the first of many expressions of love and kindness that my children extended to me. I was so touched by their determination to take care of me. They could sense the burden and the sadness that I felt. I was torn between wanting to cry with them and wanting to be strong for them. I prayed diligently that God would give me the strength to be authentic with my children.

He answered that prayer. I learned to be honest with my children without overburdening them. I could tell them that I was sad or that I was missing dad, without sharing the details that soldiers had died that day or that I lost contact with Jim after hearing a loud boom in the background. I saved the details for my battle buddies – my friends who were in the same situation as I. This honesty with Sarah and David also gave them permission to share their hearts. They didn’t feel pressured to wear the “I am brave, strong and true” mask if in fact, they were having a lousy day. We talked and prayed and found TRUE strength in our Lord, not in our synthetic efforts to suppress our sadness and fear.

There was another unusual encouragement that came in the form of a dream about a week after Jim left. I dreamed that the four of us were on vacation. We were going to a restaurant to have dinner. Jim let us out at the door and drove off to park the car. We waited inside. We waited and waited. Jim didn’t come. The hostess came up to us and said that Jim had called and said that he had been called away and was not going to be able to join us and didn’t know when he was coming back.

We were frightened and confused. The hostess invited us to go to the porch at the back of the restaurant and wait until we could figure out what to do. We went to the porch where Sarah and David sat on the swing and comforted each other. I was so upset and lost. Suddenly I became aware of the sound of rushing water. It grew louder and louder. I couldn’t imagine what it was. It seemed to come from the back door. I walked over and opened the door. There directly before me was the Red Sea, parted. I awoke the next morning with tears of gratitude. I knew that God would see me through and that, like the people of Israel, He had “brought me to this place” for His purpose to be fulfilled in my life.

Some of the lessons learned:

The difficulties of war were many. I missed Jim more than words can express. There were times when the loneliness was palpable. Transitioning from a two-parent to a one-parent home was a tremendous challenge. There were times when it was logistically impossible and I had to phone a friend to take one child to soccer while I took the other across town to tennis." We had to accept the challenges and make adjustments. I learned to ask for help.

God took care of us all. He had my children’s best interest at heart. He knew how they could grow through this and they did. They are stronger now than they were before. They

have been tested and approved. It was not always easy, but it built great strength and confidence in my children. I learned that it is neither helpful nor beneficial to try to protect my children from something God has ordained.

I learned to look around. I never dreamed how difficult it can be to be a single parent. There are so many responsibilities and concerns. I wanted my children to maintain their activity level, but logistically, it was impossible. Thank God for wonderful friends who were willing to help. But my experience lasted only 15 months. Single parents never get a break.

There were others that made an impression. When I went to pick David up from school each day, I saw the special needs class coming out early to get on their own bus. I thought about their lives and the lifelong struggles they face. There was one little girl whose journey to the bus was especially difficult. A particular friend in her class watched her every day. If she struggled, he would rush to her rescue, take her by the arm and help her to the bus. If they had trouble together, the teacher was quick to step in and guide them both to the finish line.

Those children were such an encouragement to me. I admired their focus and tenacity, their determination to take one step at a time. They were a daily reminder to me that my troubles were “light and momentary.” They also demonstrated some very important principles: keep your eyes on the goal, take one step at a time, and get help when you need it.

I learned I couldn't do everything or meet every need. There were needs everywhere I looked. There were hurting families everywhere. There was a sense of sadness everywhere. It was impossible to go on post and see the construction crew extending the handicapped parking lot yet again because of so many wounded warriors, without feeling sad and burdened.

In the early stages of this conflict, they held memorial services for each soldier, as was customary. But because we were losing so many soldiers it became literally impossible to hold that many services. They decided to have one memorial service a month. I rallied our division chaplain's wives and we provided food for those services. That was a way to minister to the families of the fallen and to the other division leadership wives who would've otherwise been responsible. I learned to be very prayerful and intentional about how God meant me to get involved, remembering that I had two children and good friends who relied on me. Prayer was the key. I learned that when I saw a need I was first to pray, asking the Lord if He wanted me involved and how so.

I learned to find “battle buddies” who were friends in the same situation. We joined forces, so to speak, helping each other with children, chores, rides, babysitting, whatever needed to be done. We talked and listened to each other too and that was one of the most important elements maintaining my emotional health.

I also learned to go back to common sense basics. Whenever things began to get out of kilter, I found that something was typically out of balance in the three basics for health:

eating right, resting well and getting exercise 3-5 times a week. One of my battle buddies also became my exercise buddy and that was a blessing to both of us.

I learned to get down on my face before the Lord...literally. There were days when I lay face down on the floor and prayed for help, direction and strength. I never rose from those times feeling weaker. Not once. God gave us everything we needed and more. He blessed our time and helped us all to see that we could make it on our own. Being in God's word made a tremendous difference. I taught two Bible studies while Jim was gone and I thrived more during those times than any other.

I learned more about trusting the Lord. He loves me and cares for me. I learned that so many of my thoughts, hopes and dreams are centered around comfort. I want everything and everybody to be OK. That is not what the Christian life is about. It is about serving Him wherever, whenever, and however He calls and trusting Him with the details.

I also learned that in those moments when I felt I couldn't go on, I was right! I couldn't! What a relief to realize that God didn't mean for me to do it in my own strength, although I found that to be a constant temptation. God meant for me to lean on Him and to find comfort and encouragement in community. In making that choice, I grew closer to Him and to others. I learned to give and receive.

Jim has been home for six months now. We have moved on from Ft. Hood to another assignment. We are so thankful to be together as a family and are enjoying many of the things that we used to take for granted like taking walks together or playing family games. We laugh a lot and enjoy each others company more because we are so thankful for it. We are blessed.

For those of you who may be thinking about a career in the military I would encourage you do two things. One, please consider the soldiers that fight for our freedom and safety. They have been making incredible sacrifices for us, especially in recent years. They deserve good chaplains who can help and support them and teach them about the love of Christ. The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Secondly, don't make a decision based on fear. As I reflect, that was my main hesitation when Jim wanted to join. God has not given us a spirit of fear.

There are times when being in the army is the greatest challenge I have ever faced. It has also been an incredible source of personal growth. We have traveled and seen places and done things that would not otherwise have been possible. It has given our family a much broader view of the world. It really has been a wonderful adventure and I would not change it. In the difficult times, we grew closer to God and learned much about His love and comfort. His strength became ours.

I have talked to so many loving "church folk" who want to be an encouragement, but just don't know what to do. Please contact the office of our PCA endorsing agent, CH Doug Lee, and find out about our currently deployed chaplain families. Write them. Call them. Send the children letters, games, cards. Send gift cards of all kinds to mom, to include restaurants and maybe even a spa. Our chaplain families give so much to others. Small acts of kindness are a great encouragement.

Jim and I are grateful for the friendship, prayers and support that we have received over the past 21 years from our church, both local and at large. Our home churches (Mullins PCA Mullins, SC, and Monroeville PCA, Monroeville, AL) were wonderful to us through this experience. The PCA at large, also blessed us in prayer as they were kept informed by our endorsing agent, CH. Lee.

We appreciate all the love and support that we have received and ask for prayer as we continue to serve Him in the military. It is a “high adventure” calling, for sure, but the Lord has blessed us beyond measure and we are ever thankful for His love and continual presence with us. To God be the Glory.

Terri Carter