

Father John's Service Begins/Flight to Kuwait

Hoping to help soldiers understand how God fits into the trials of war, the pastor of St. Cajetan Church in Chicago's Morgan Park community headed to Iraq last month.

The Rev. John Barkemeyer's youngest parishioners in uniform — whom he calls his "kids" — inspired him to become an Army chaplain.

"My job is ... to help them process everything so it doesn't haunt them for 20 years or forever," said Barkemeyer, a thoughtful man and Catholic priest of 13 years.

For at least six months, Barkemeyer will minister to Christian soldiers, sometimes saying Mass from the hood of a Humvee. The 41-year-old wants his friends and neighbors here at home to get a glimpse of what he sees and experiences in Iraq's sandy desert.

While flying to Kuwait to begin his tour as an Army chaplain, Barkemeyer wrote his first entry in a new war journal. After he got settled in Iraq, the priest e-mailed his words to the Daily Southtown. These journal entries will be published as an occasional series in the Southtown.

The first step to deploy to a combat zone is the processing. This takes place at an Army post in the continental U.S. I experienced it at Fort Bliss near El Paso, Texas.

Almost every aspect of a soldier's life is touched upon — including medical, dental, financial, legal, safety briefings, issuing the gear and uniforms, even a visit to the chaplain's booth. This process can best be described as one week of standing in line. It wasn't as bad as I imagined.

(At Fort Bliss), we sleep in an open barracks of about 100 people per floor. Bunk beds, common showers, one TV, a few computers for Internet access, and a table with snacks were the amenities provided. We are treated well by the cadre, the non-commissioned officers whose job it is to get us through this process.

Surprisingly, many of the 200 people in my group are civilians working for the Department of Defense or individual contractors. Most of them have prior military experience. Some of the Army personnel are here involuntarily. There is a doctor, lawyer and forklift operator who all would prefer to be back home.

The process of getting all 200 people certified for deployment is onerous. We move from one line to another, seemingly just to wait some more. Since I didn't have any official records of the vaccines I've had, I had to get them all again. I stopped counting after the ninth vaccine, although the one for the smallpox vaccine was actually 15 "shots" in succession.

By the end of the week, each of us have our gear, medical exams, briefings and all that that the Army deems necessary.

The night before we departed for Kuwait and Iraq, I was struck by two notions. There was almost no bravado displayed. A couple of the younger soldiers expressed an interest in righting some wrongs but other than that there was almost no "tough guy" machismo evident. Considering that we were going to war, I found that interesting.

On the other hand, there was almost no fear expressed either. In some of the briefings we received we saw some graphic videos of soldiers getting killed. And so, neither fear nor bravado predominate our mood. It seems like we are all aware that we have a job to do and we will do it to the best of our ability. Each one of us in our own mind is going to make it back safe and sound with all limbs attached.

It's not that we think we are invincible. We simply expect to be luckier than the 1,200 dead soldiers and Marines.

As I write this journal entry on board the plane, about two hours out of Kuwait, I look around the cabin. Doing the math, I realize not everyone is going to come back to the U.S. safe and sound. Some may be killed. Statistically, a number of us will be wounded.

In the short week we've been together I've already made some friends.

I selfishly hope that that the war doesn't touch any of them.