

NO ONE LEAVES UNSCATHED

I fear what war does to our soldiers. One young man I met recently is 19 years old. He has spent the past 10 months as a gunner on a Humvee in Iraq. He's good at what he does. In the Army he's known as being a "high speed/low drag" soldier. He's survived roadside bombs, car bombs and small arms fire. But he is scarred on the inside. How do you live in this environment and not lose some of your innate goodness? We live in a world where we are considered infidels and less than human. We know we are a target every minute of every day. We are aware we are hated and despised by many.

This young soldier will return home without any shrapnel or bullet wounds. But he is a casualty of war none-the-less. He asked me, "How do I reconcile doing what I do as a soldier and as a Christian?" He came face to face with evil on a regular basis. He struggled trying to do what is right in a situation that is rarely clear cut. I worry that the experiences of these past 10 months have wounded his soul.

As we spoke, my respect and admiration for him grew. He's a decent, hardworking, thoughtful young man. The Army is filled with men and women just like him. Perhaps this has been my greatest surprise during my two months on deployment. I have encountered thousands of extraordinary people who wear the uniform. The one characteristic I have noticed in every soldier I have met is humility. They may have seen combat frequently. They may have performed well beyond the call of duty. But I have never ever met a soldier who considers himself a hero.

I guess that's why I consider it such a privilege to be a chaplain to them. Soldiers ask so little for themselves and are unbelievably grateful for the smallest of kindnesses. Maybe one day they will come to understand just how remarkable they truly are.

Yet I worry about them. I worry about the soldier returning to Baghdad. He was walking in camp with some buddies. A mortar landed and killed two of them. He didn't even get a scratch. Although rationally he knows it doesn't make sense, he is afraid to leave his tent. He has no fear of going on patrol in the streets of Baghdad. But he doesn't feel safe going to and from the dining hall anymore.

I am concerned about the soldier whose mother was just diagnosed with cancer and whose sister is severely disabled. He not only has to be anxious about coming home safely. Now he isn't sure how he is going to be able to provide for his family.

I guess everyone gets wounded by the experience of war. The injury may be physical, emotional or spiritual but it's hard to come back home unscathed. I worry about my soldiers. I know it sounds hokey but they become like my kids. I hope each one of them will be ok. I pray for them and for this intention every night.