

Southtown Article # 22 Hitting the Wall

Although I have minimal experience running marathons, I am familiar with the sensation of, “hitting the wall.” Some where along the eighteen to twenty mile mark, I’ve felt my body say, “That’s it, stop, no more.” All the readily accessible fuel the body stores, is gone. Every step is a struggle. The only thing that keeps you going is determination and a good deal of stubbornness.

The Army offers a two week break for soldiers deployed for twelve months. It is a chance to leave Iraq for a time of rest and recuperation or “R&R.” When I arrived in November I was pretty sure I wouldn’t need to take R&R. I figured I could hang in there and do OK without the time off. Boy, was I wrong.

A couple of months ago I was asked what dates I wanted for the leave. Since I hadn’t signed up for it, I figured I wasn’t going to get a chance to go. There was no way I was going to look a gift horse in the mouth so I picked some dates and have been eagerly awaiting the time ever since.

I ask myself, “what happened?” How did I go from doing just fine to feeling mentally exhausted? The only thing I can think of is that about the beginning of July, I “hit the wall.” The affects of deployment are cumulative. You don’t really pay much attention to the stress. Instead you try to stay focused on the challenges of the particular day. But in the end it catches up.

I know this or at least I should know this. Part of my job as a chaplain is to give both stress management and R&R briefings to the troops. I’ve done that probably 100 times. Maybe I figured since I intellectually know the material, it would have less effect on me.

Now I find myself thinking about going back home for two weeks. It’s odd. I can’t quite comprehend what it will be like to be home. Two weeks with no gun fire, no 150 degree days, no uniform, no mission to accomplish. As I write this, I can’t really conceive what that will be like.

I tell the troops in my briefings that here in Iraq we live in an abnormal situation. We become so accustom to it in our daily lives that it seems normal but it isn’t. Normal is life back in the States. When we go back home we have to revisit what we think of as normal.

I’m looking forward to seeing family and friends. I’m looking forward to walking along the Lakefront and eating in restaurants. I’m looking forward to a few pints of Guinness beer. As an introvert, I’m looking forward to quite time alone without the constant presence of 2,000 of my closest friends. I’m looking forward to relaxing.

It is definitely time for R&R. I know I’ve “hit the wall.” I know it is time for a break.