

Southtown Article #25 Detainee Operations

Detainee operations are probably the most sensitive work of the U.S. military in Iraq. Any action taken here could be a worldwide media story in a matter of hours.

Everyone has seen the photos of the abuses that took place at Abu Ghraib. The misconduct in some way has affected every soldier, Marine, airman and sailor in theater. We have all been stained by prisoner abuse even though it occurred months and even years before we arrived.

In a particular way, it affects those of us who work at detainment facilities the most. We are under heightened scrutiny and suspicion not because of our actions but because of the actions of others. I can't help but draw the comparison to the priest sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church. Guilt by association is hard to escape. It doesn't seem to matter that the vast percentage of priests have never been involved in misconduct. In the eyes of many, we are all guilty.

There is another parallel. Rarely do you hear of the good work that is being done day in and day out. Only the negative is publicized.

I have been at the largest detainment facility in Iraq, Camp Bucca, for six months now. I can honestly say I have never witnessed any mistreatment. What I have seen is quite the opposite. I work in the hospital here and have seen outstanding medical care provided. It is probably better than many Americans have available. But that is a story someone more qualified in medicine than I should tell.

But I do have a unique perspective to offer. Several months ago, a Catholic detainee asked if he and a few others could attend mass. I told him I would be open to doing this but that I would need to seek permission from others. I wasn't very optimistic I would get the go ahead.

I brought the matter to the Commander. He immediately said he thought it was a good idea but that he too would have to check. He sought approval from a two star general who also supported the idea. Finally, it was cleared through legal channels to make sure there were no obstacles.

I was expecting a lot of feet dragging, derisive comments and ultimately a "no." It could not have been any different. Not only was it OK, but people seemed genuinely supportive.

I said mass that Sunday in a classroom building for five detainees. I had no idea what to expect. Would they be hostile and antagonistic? After all, I wore my desert fatigues and could come and go as I pleased; they wore their yellow jump suits and were otherwise confined behind a chain link fence.

I also admit I wasn't convinced of my safety. Even though there were two guards in the back, if the prisoners decided to rush me and if they had a makeshift knife, well, it wouldn't have been a good situation.

What actually happened was quite different. We spoke mostly through the help of a translator although two of the detainees could communicate in English. They expressed their gratitude for being able to attend mass. There were smiles, handshakes and well wishes.

I had never said mass through a translator before. It was awkward but not intrusive. I asked one of the detainees to do a reading from the Bible. To my surprise, he chanted the Arabic words in skillful tones.

Following the Scripture readings was the homily. I don't know if it was because of religious hunger or simple curiosity but the guards standing in the back of the classroom moved up close to the front so they could hear.

Since things were going so well I decided to push my luck. Since Jesus said in the Gospels to love your enemies and pray for your persecutors, I thought I would address this directly in the homily. I told my small congregation that every Sunday at mass with the soldiers, we pray for them. I admitted it wasn't always easy. Some detainees are accused of killing and mutilating American soldiers and Marines. It seems much easier and natural to hate but this is not what our faith teaches us.

"So here's the deal," I told them, "We pray for all of you and it's not always easy. I want you to pray for us." No doubt some of their family members or friends have been killed by American troops. As hard as it was for us, I imagined it would be equally hard for them. But they did so. It was a powerful moment. So much of this war is fueled by fear and hatred but this was a moment of grace and understanding.

After mass concluded we greeted each other again and handshakes were exchanged. Each Sunday thereafter our prayers for each other became easier and more natural. Speaking with the soldiers and detainees involved I noticed something they said. Since our Sunday ritual began, much of the animosity and tension between us dissipated. There was never any confusion as to our roles, but it seems we became people first and foremost. We weren't simply people in yellow jumpsuits or desert fatigues. We were people bound together by our common faith. That faith allowed us to deepen our respect for each other.

As I get ready to return to Chicago, this experience with the detainees will be what I am most proud of. It was probably the first time in Operation Iraqi Freedom history that a chaplain performed worship services, not for his own people but for detainees. But more importantly, it was a profound experience of grace that offers hope. We are not predetermined to hate and fear one another. Maybe, somehow with God's help, there will be a way that this can happen for us all.

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