

This is the final installment of *Father John's Journal*.

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I wrote my first journal entry for the Daily Southtown on the flight from the United States to Kuwait.

I distinctly remember looking around the airplane full of soldiers. I recall wondering who would be injured and who would be killed during this yearlong deployment. A year ago, everything was unknown. What will it be like going into a combat zone? How will I manage? Will I be able to do what I am trained to do and help soldiers?

A year later, I have answers to most of the smaller questions. But to the bigger questions — like should we have invaded Iraq in the first place and how long should we be there — to these I have insights but no definitive answers.

Over the year, several acquaintances and one friend were killed, several more were injured. While you pick up and carry on the next day, these people are never far from my thoughts.

Recently we reached the dark milestone of our 2,000th military personnel killed. I am more acutely aware than ever that each death is a terrible, irreversible loss. That young man or woman will never see their parents, kids, spouses or friends again. And for the survivors, how do you bury your child? How does a 4-year-old say goodbye forever to his dad? How does a young wife pick up the pieces of her life after watching her husband's remains get lowered into the earth?

I've been a priest for over 15 years and presided at more funerals than I can count. But the pain, grief and sense of loss that accompanies the tragic death of a young person never dulls. The mystery of suffering remains inscrutable.

Upon reflection during this past year, I feel honored and privileged to have been able to serve my country but most especially to have been able to serve my fellow soldiers.

My appreciation and respect for these remarkable people has grown, not diminished with familiarity.

Maybe that is the real story of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the soldiers, Marines, airmen and sailors themselves. They are real people who sweat, bleed, laugh, goof off, kill and die. They aren't perfect angels, and few will qualify as saints. But they are deeply committed, highly professional, well-trained and fundamentally decent human beings who have an enormous burden of responsibility placed on their shoulders.

If one looks at the bigger picture it is clear that these men and women have acquitted themselves well. I know it sounds syrupy but I am sincere when I say that America can and should be proud of the people serving in uniform.

For me personally, that's what matters. I entered the Army Reserve because I wanted to be of service to soldiers. Recalling to mind the myriad of faces, stories and crazy circumstances of the war, I do feel a sense of satisfaction.

In a small way for some, I may have been able to make a difference. That makes it worthwhile.

As I look to the future, I feel sadness and excitement. I leave the pastorate at St. Cajetan Parish, and that is difficult, even painful. In the coming weeks it looks like I'll be sent to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. That will bring a whole new set of challenges. I'll have to keep up with some of the most physically fit, well-trained soldiers in the Army. I suspect I'll also attend "Jump School" and learn firsthand what's it's like to jump out of a perfectly good airplane.

I can't even begin to imagine what the future will look like. I do know that serving soldiers while wearing the uniform feels right. The rest I'll place in God's hands.