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Christmas Reflection: Remembering Our Wounded Warriors and Those Who Serve Them

For my first Christmas as the Bishop for the Armed Services caring for clergy of The Episcopal Church, who serve the members of our military, I sensed the need to do something special and memorable to commemorate the annual remembrance of our Savior's birth. After talking with Carolyn, my spouse, and my staff about the possibilities and considering that I will only be able to have a first Christmas as a bishop one time, we reasoned that I should take advantage of this non-repeatable opportunity.

I decided to take a trip to Germany so Carolyn and I could spend Christmas at Landstuhl (Army) Regional Medical Center, where wounded service members who had been medically evacuated from combat environments were being treated. The vast majority of the wounded had been evacuated from Afghanistan.

Normally, seriously injured service members are hospitalized at Landstuhl for about two to four days for medical stabilization before they're sent on to major state side military medical centers in Washington, D.C. or San Antonio, Texas to receive further treatment for their injuries.

Having only been made a bishop a little over seven months ago, I'm little more than a novice within our church. There are lots of bishops -- dare I say most bishops -- who know more about the skills of bishop-craft than I do. However, when it comes to the being and doing ministry within the armed services, I've learned a great deal during 30 plus years of priesthood and military experience.

In Germany, while devoting most of our time to visits with injured service members and their staff care-givers, we learned two things. First, we learned about the incredible dedication of the hospital staff. For doctors, nurses, medics, technicians, chaplains, social workers and staff trainers, skillful aggressive compassion has become a way of life. However, it is a way of life that has a cost, at times hidden, to these highly motivated and focused persons. The cost is burn-out. Because the need is so great, these care-givers are willing to work for days and days on end, never stopping to provide for their own needs. Fortunately the hospital leaders have an initiative to assist staff members to retain their resiliency in the

face of the overwhelming demands of the work.

Our second lesson was learned when it became apparent that the wounds of service members were part of a physical, psychological and spiritual constellation. All appearances were that their physical wounds are treated with great care. Though equal effort and devotion is given to caring for their psychological and spiritual wounds, treating these injuries is difficult. Because psychological or spiritual injuries are not as obvious as physical injuries, it may take more looking and listening to identify these human wounds.

Over and over again, Carolyn and I experienced the humbling nature and character of being in a relationship to the wounded warriors and their care-takers. One evening we were sitting in the hospital USO across the table from Michael (not his real name), an explosive ordinance officer. As we talked I became aware that he was building a relationship with Carolyn. After telling his heart-rending story, finally he said to her, "You are a sweet lady, and you remind me of my mom. This is going to make it a lot easier to go home and be with my own mom." Then he got up, walked around the table and gave her a hug. Needless to say, there were few dry eyes at the table. I'm not sure who received the most from that experience: Carolyn, the people at the table or Michael.

I also was struck with what happened when we stood in the belly of a C-17 medical evacuation aircraft that was being loaded with wounded warriors to take them back to military hospitals in the United States. In particular, we were interested in seeing Stephen (not his real name), a seriously wounded service member, be loaded aboard. We had met Stephen in the Intensive Care Unit of the hospital just the day before. The precision and compassion of the staff who loaded Stephen and the other service members aboard and who would care for them during the flight was nothing short of overwhelming. I can honestly say that I've never seen anything that even comes close to this intensity of care.

Though our initial intent was to have a spiritual impact upon patients and staff at the hospital, at the very least it is easy to see that these tremendous people had an equal positive impact upon us. In our Christian tradition, when we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, we remember that if Jesus' gifts to us are to continue to live among us, His followers must literally be Jesus' eyes, ears, voice, hands and feet. In both simple and profound ways Jesus came to life in many of the persons we met at Landstuhl hospital. During this season of Christmas, I hope our readers will give thanks for those who have the fortitude of Michael and Stephen, and for those who courageously care for them.

Bishop James "Jay" Magness is Bishop Suffragan for Federal Ministries of The Episcopal Church. Based in Washington D.C., he is responsible for the pastoral care and oversight for armed forces chaplains, military personnel and families as well as oversight of federal hospitals, prisons, and correctional facilities. He retired from the U.S. Navy in 2003 in the rank of Captain, serving as command chaplain of U.S. Joint Forces Command and fleet chaplain for the U.S. Fleet Forces Command. Prior to those assignments, from 1997 to 2000 he was on the Navy Chief of Chaplains' staff as personnel manager of the Navy Chaplain Corps.