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Chaplain answers calling overseas

By CHUCK CRUMBO
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When the wounded arrived at the U.S. military hospital in Germany, Lexington's Brian Bohlman and a group of medical workers rushed to their side.

As "team captain," it was Bohlman's job to welcome the newest patient to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center near Ramstein Air Base.

"Hi, I'm Chaplain Bohlman," he'd say as the injured service member was carried from the ambulance to the hospital's entrance. "You're safe now. We're here to care for you. God be with you."

Sometimes the wounded responded with a "thank you." Others weren't conscious.

One soldier reached up to touch Bohlman's arm much like the bleeding woman in Luke 8:43, who touched the hem of Jesus' garment to be healed, the Protestant chaplain recalled.

For three months, the S.C. Air National Guard chaplain worked at Landstuhl, where wounded troops from Iraq and Afghanistan are flown before being brought to military hospitals in the United States. Bohlman returned to South Carolina earlier this month.

"I don't think there's any higher calling than to be there for your fellow serviceman and servicewoman," Bohlman said. "It's something I'd like to do again."



THOMAS WARNER/LANDSTUHL REGIONAL MEDICAL CENTER PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Chaplain Brian Bohlman gives Cpl. Brandon Schavrie a card thanking him for service to his country.

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Bohlman, a captain and graduate of Columbia International University, is director of the "Operation Thank You" ministry at www.SoHelpMeGod.org.

Before he deployed, Bohlman's organization collected signatures from 5,000 Midlands residents on pre-printed cards, thanking U.S. troops for serving their country.

He handed out the cards while visiting the wounded at Landstuhl. "It kind of helped me break the ice," Bohlman said.

The troops seemed to appreciate the effort.

"The cards let you see that there are people out there who care about what we're doing," Cpl. Brandon Schavrie told the hospital's public affairs office.

Bohlman said his most special memories were of seeing troops, whose chances of survival were slim when they arrived, sitting up in their beds three days later.

There also were stories about miracles on the battlefield.

For instance, one Catholic soldier, a tank gunner, dropped his rosary while praying. When he bent over to pick it up, a sniper's bullet zipped over his head.

Not all days were good, though.

Bohlman had to console the family of a National Guard member from Nebraska whose Humvee ran off the road, plunging into a canal. Rescue workers battled to revive the soldier, then got him to Landstuhl, where he was pronounced dead.

A chaplain — Bohlman in this case — usually is with the family when the medical staff breaks the bad news. That's because "they (family members) need someone to pick up the pieces," Bohlman said. "That's the chaplain's job."

Tours of duty at Landstuhl are restricted to 90 days because of concerns that a chaplain — like a nurse or doctor in the hospital — can suffer "compassion fatigue," Bohlman said.

Nearly a month after returning home, Bohlman said he "struggles a bit because my thoughts are still with everybody over there."

"My main goal was to plant a seed of hope ... and offer people some light in a very dark world."

Reach Crumbo at (803) 771-8503.

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