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The Military: Faith Under Fire

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Army Chaplain Roger Benimoff heard the IED blast and saw the smoke rising. From his vantage point at a forward-aid station on the morning of June 7, 2005, he peered through a fog of dust as .50-caliber machine-gun fire erupted in the distance. Then the guns went silent. Benimoff helped medics get stretchers ready for the wounded. But when the soldiers of Fox Troop returned to station near Tall Afar, all they had was the bloodied corpse of one of their men. Benimoff began a familiar death ritual. The heat was closing in on 100 degrees; a smell of diesel fumes filled the air. Benimoff gathered the medics around the corpse of their comrade in the shade of an armored personnel carrier. Ignoring the din of rumbling engines and radio chatter, he began to pray in a strong and reassuring voice, quoting Psalm 121: I lift up my eyes to the hills--where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.

He prayed for the soldier's family. He prayed for the medics who had wanted so much to help. He prayed that God would look down upon their small circle and surround them with his love.

Yet at times in the Iraq War zone--and after coming home--Benimoff began to question that love. His experience, detailed in a daily journal and voluminous e-mails from Iraq shared with NEWSWEEK, is a tale of a devout young man who begins his time in Iraq brimming with faith and a sense of devotion that carries him into a second tour. "My heart is filled with prayer and God is giving me a discerning spirit," he writes at the start of that later deployment. "The spiritual battle I am engaged in is a minute-by-minute war." He is "on fire for God." But the start of a full-blown crisis of faith--one he grapples with as a chaplain at Walter Reed Army Medical Center today--is seen in his journal entry from that night near Tall Afar: "Can [I] keep doing this? Is the pain & the heartache worth it? ... God, please let me look to you and no other."

Benimoff's journal is written in a scribble of printed letters on 126 unlined pages. It's a tale of helicopter crashes, suicides, improvised explosive device blasts--and the professional, spiritual and marital troubles of soldiers seeking comfort. A mixture of adrenaline and devotion keeps Benimoff focused in the theater of war. Yet over time, his spiritual foundation is shaken by the carnage. The demons surface in full once he finds more time for reflection. After joining Walter Reed last June, Benimoff was plagued by questions. "I am not sleeping well and I am still scared," he wrote. "I was reading my Bible and I found my-self getting violently mad at God." For a brief period early this year, he came to "hate" God, and wanted nothing to do with religion.

God can be found or lost in a foxhole, but rarely does war leave someone's faith untouched. In some ways, Benimoff's story is common to people of all walks of life and all beliefs. It is the story of spiritual struggle--and of trying to accept a world of both good and evil, where pain and loss seem unconnected to faith and justice. Such tensions are magnified on the battlefield. Countless soldiers--not just chaplains--have struggled with how to reconcile a God of love with a God who allows the terror of conflict. For centuries theologians and philosophers have grappled with ideas of "just war": thou shalt not kill, but under certain conditions--to prevent wider bloodshed and suffering--slaughter by armies is acceptable.

Many American soldiers in Iraq wear crosses; some carry a pocket-size, camouflage New Testament with an index that lists topics such as Fear, Loneliness and Duty. U.S. troops have conducted baptisms in the Tigris. They often huddle in prayer before they go on patrol. Not everyone is comfortable with this. About 80 percent of soldiers polled in a

2006 Military Times survey said they felt free to practice their religion within the military. But the same poll found that 36 percent of troops found themselves at official gatherings at least once a month that were supposed to be secular but started with a prayer.

The survey didn't ask soldiers whether they suffered doubt or loss of faith. National Guard Specialist George Schmidt, 30, who was raised as a Methodist in Titusville, Pa., and became a Wiccan before deploying to Iraq in June 2006, says he saw fellow soldiers driven in different directions. "Either you're running to God, grasping to hold on to the guy you were before you came to Iraq, or you're running right away from him because of what you're seeing," he says. Schmidt is now being treated for posttraumatic stress disorder and anxiety at Walter Reed. Army Specialist Joe Schaffel, 24, who is also being treated for PTSD, went to Roman Catholic school in Sleepy Hollow, Ill. "I had faith until I got to Iraq," says Schaffel, who returned from his second deployment last September. "I haven't gotten it back since. Once you get there, you wonder how God could allow anyone to go through that."

It is up to military chaplains to help relieve battlefield stress, even as they may be suffering themselves. According to a 2006 military study, 27 percent of chaplains and their assistants in the field reported burnout levels that were "high" or "very high." Some of the potential effects of what the Army calls "provider fatigue" are acutely troubling for chaplains: hopelessness and doubts about spirituality.

No polls show how many chaplains have difficulty reconciling a good and loving God with the carnage of war. And it's clear that battle can both strain and strengthen faith. "I still have dreams where I'm throwing up little flag-draped caskets," says Chaplain (Maj.) Victor Chatham, who served with the National Guard in Kuwait in 2004, conducting funeral "ramp ceremonies" and debriefing traumatized soldiers. "It wasn't so bad blessing one or two caskets, but when there were 13 at once, it's a different kind of duty." He retired from the guard shortly after that deployment and sought therapy. He's still a believer, but he says "there is no way that questions of faith don't come up in an atmosphere like that."

Many chaplains think that war strengthens their belief and the spirituality of the troops they serve. "It is the trials of life that ultimately help us to grow in our faith," says Air Force Chaplain (Capt.) Trent Davis, who was deployed to Iraq in 2005. He recalls one soldier who wasn't much of a believer at home but decided to read a Psalm each day while deployed. The day the soldier started in his vehicle across the Iraqi sands was the day he read from Psalm 23: Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.

"After that his faith grew much deeper," says Davis.

Military chaplains are further stressed because there aren't enough of them. About 2,700 chaplains minister to an active-duty force of 1.4 million, meaning there's one chaplain for every 518 service members. In peacetime, the ratio is deemed adequate. But with the military fighting two wars, service members often need daily counseling to cope with emotional trauma. Many soldiers suffer spiritual doubts in war, but the stresses can be especially acute for chaplains. By ministering to men and women who are struggling to keep faith, many are forced to confront their own doubt again and again.

Chaplains are unarmed, but they go where the troops go. They help in any way they can. "When there were 17 or 18 bodies, it was more than mortuary services could handle," says Army Chaplain (Lt. Col.) Dick Olmstead, now retired, speaking of his deployment to Kuwait and Iraq in 2004. "Maybe it's not the brightest move to have chaplains opening body bags to place 40-pound bags of ice on dead soldiers, but you have to go where your hands and heart are needed." Still, after 20 or 30 ramp ceremonies, he says, "you can't help but wonder if God is really listening to you."

Benimoff didn't ever expect to enter into such a close relationship with God. Born in New York in 1972 to parents with Jewish ancestry, he was raised in a Baptist household by his mother and stepfather, who moved to Austin, Texas, when Roger was 7. The family went to church on Sundays, but Benimoff wasn't particularly devout. When he graduated from Smithville High School in 1991, he enlisted in the Army and was sent to Fort Riley, Kans. Later he joined the National Guard while studying for a criminal-justice degree at Texas State University-San Marcos. It was around this time, he says, when he needed "God's presence."

Benimoff didn't just want a job; he wanted a meaningful life. At a Baptist student-group meeting, he met his future wife, Rebekah McIntyre. "It was the first time I saw people practicing what they preached, and it amazed me," he recalls. "And I recognized her as having the kind of relationship I wanted with God--she was truly in love with the Lord." She was also very pretty and had a great sense of humor. He had found his family and his calling.

They married in 1996. Their first son, Tyler, was born just after Benimoff began divinity school at the Southwest Baptist Theological Seminary in Ft. Worth, Texas. Their second son, Blaine, was born during his chaplain residency at a Texas hospital. But Benimoff knew where he was destined to serve. He had already taken the summer of 2000 to complete the Army chaplains' officer program at Fort Jackson, S.C. "I had always been a soldier," Benimoff says. "What better way to serve God than to help soldiers spiritually and emotionally?" He went back to regular duty in the Army on July 16, 2003, as a chaplain and a captain. Three weeks later he was in Al Anbar province, in charge of the spiritual welfare of 1,100 troops.

Benimoff wasn't supposed to be on the front lines. He was a chaplain with the Third Armored Cavalry Regiment, within a support squadron not designated for combat. But in Iraq, that distinction is easily lost. On Nov. 29 that first year, Benimoff was resting in his office when the headquarters troop commander rushed in to say a convoy had been ambushed. Benimoff raced to the hospital to meet the choppers; he helped identify two dead soldiers. He recalled a verse quoting God from Isaiah 54:10, which he had passed out to soldiers earlier in the week: Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed.

He continued to use that verse in sermons; it captured the soldier's sense of grief and his own belief in God's steadfast presence. But it didn't explain why bad things happen to good people, a question Benimoff would face again and again from the soldiers he served with--and from within himself.

Once back in safe territory at Fort Carson, Colo., Benimoff learned he would soon be deployed again. This time he asked to be placed with a combat maneuver squadron. "These are the guys that go in and kick down doors and drive tanks," says Benimoff. "I wanted to be there for them." He confided in his journal, however, that he was not sure he'd recovered yet from the deaths he endured during his first deployment. And he was terrified of getting killed.

He headed back to Iraq in February 2005, this time to Tall Afar. "It was a ghost town when we got there, no one went on the roads," he recalls. "There were decapitated bodies on the street." Benimoff often traveled in Bradley fighting vehicles or Abrams tanks to reach soldiers in small outposts. "I could go to one post and the next day the soldier there might be killed by a sniper," he says. He writes in March, "I feel that God is maturing and blessing me ... [This] is almost a monastic type of existence." Later that month he quotes to himself from Hebrews 11:1, What is faith? It is the confident assurance that what we hope for is going to happen

Yet Iraq is a place that often kills hope. Soldiers come to him distraught as marriages fall apart. Others feel tricked by the military when their tours are extended. On April 20, he writes of a memorial service he just finished for a private first class. A week later a Bradley crew is badly shaken up after a roadside blast. On April 29, two soldiers are killed by an IED. "Already, I am repeating my pattern from [the first tour]: I am doing more memorial ceremonies than preaching ... I feel numb."

One day in May, snipers take aim at him and other soldiers on a hospital rooftop in Tall Afar. "The Army must be warping me," he writes, "because it was not a big deal to get shot at. Last time I was petrified." The adrenaline rush soon wears off; he writes that it is "hard for me to feel at all."

He's racked by contradiction. He is "getting to impact soldiers spiritually ... and personally as they go through this difficult time ... I am in the middle of history and I have a captive audience!" Yet looking back, he says, he could see that he was reaching a point "when your cup of grief gets full, you can't hear another horrible story." In a single two-week period there were four suicide bombings in the area he was stationed. He counseled his men on many questions he was struggling with himself. "They would ask me: if I'm a child of God, then why isn't God protecting me?" he says. "In the book of Job we see that God rains on the just and the unjust, but that's not always easy to accept. Some soldiers stop believing in God, others grow closer to him. Everything is accelerated in a war zone."

Soldiers would also feel hopeless because of domestic troubles "like when the water heater breaks at home and they can't help." In a June 19 entry, he writes of one of his men threatening to hurt himself to get home to a wife demanding a divorce. By this time, Benimoff's own wife is uncertain about what is happening to her husband, with whom she communicates by e-mail, instant message and hurried phone calls. "He would say some things that flew in the face of my own beliefs about God," Rebekah recalls. "Sometimes he would ask me: why does a loving God allow suicide bombers to attack civilians? We were both brought up with a picture of God that was different from the world he was seeing. But I was afraid he might turn away from God completely. The things he said didn't sound like something I

wanted my husband to be saying. But after a while, I realized that he was having a crisis. So I said, 'OK, better to let him test than to tell him 20 reasons why he's wrong!.'

As the months go on, there are more killings; more blood and shattered glass in the Humvees; and the suicide of an American soldier in another squadron. On Aug. 13, Benimoff writes, "I start the service in 45 minutes and I am really feeling 'out of it.'" Two days later he admits to himself, "I don't have a desire to totally give myself to God. However, I am praying that God changes my desire."

By November, exhaustion sets in: "24 critical stress debriefings for over 300 soldiers and six memorial services later I am very tired. I have so much anger inside." Yet Benimoff has been offered a chance to join Walter Reed as a chaplain working with wounded outpatients. He is excited by the prospect, but daunted by his own misgivings. Flying home in January 2006, his group is met at the Bangor, Maine, airport by a group of veterans. They include a World War II vet who speaks to them of his joy and pride in liberating Jews from a concentration camp. Benimoff later admits in his journal, "I do not feel the same about what I have done but maybe I will feel different years from now."

As time goes by, though, he feels worse. He sees himself growing emotionally detached and begins taking anxiety medication. When the insomnia subsides, there are nightmares. When he's awake, he's hyper-vigilant. He can't stop the visions: flags draped on caskets, C130s lifting off on "hero flights" to take a fallen soldier home for burial. He finds solace in running, sometimes several times a day; he loses 30 pounds in six months. He forgets to eat. "I was back in the States," he says. "I thought everything was supposed to be fine, but it wasn't." He avoids public places and he avoids his faith. "I am not doing my readings and I don't care," he writes on Aug. 28. "I have been ruined." Three months later, he adds: "Have I wasted 10 years of my life? My God doesn't protect me and I feel vulnerable!"

Benimoff becomes distant to his wife and sons. "He wouldn't respond to the smallest things," says Rebekah. "I'd ask, 'Do you want a sandwich?' and he'd say, 'I can't talk about that right now.' ... It was hard to go through that time, and in a way, we're still figuring it out." Benimoff's fear of groups even made it hard for him to attend church. "We went to a megachurch one time, with 5,000 people, and we won't do that again," says Rebekah.

Benimoff's journal ends Jan. 22 of this year. The last lines read: "I do not want anything to do with God. I am sick of religion. It is a crutch for the weak ... We make God into what we need for the moment. I hate God. I hate all those who try to explain God when they really don't know." By late March, during his first interview with NEWSWEEK, he was recovering his faith but the pain had not subsided. "The symptoms are still there; this past year has been the most challenging of my life," he says. "But I have a new relationship with God. I tend to be much more blunt with him."

As part of his daily rounds at Walter Reed, Benimoff strolls the campus gardens or the lobbies where outpatient vets congregate. Some are on crutches, some walk with prosthetics and some are in wheelchairs. His job is to be there, to say hello and to see if they need someone to talk to. Benimoff even offers up his cell-phone number, and tells the vets they can call 24/7. He invites 22-year-old Army Specialist Brent Hendrix, a Southern Baptist, to talk. Hendrix lost his right leg, and suffered multiple other injuries when an IED hit his vehicle last June in Al Anbar province. He talks with Benimoff about NASCAR--and later about how there's no time to think of commandments like "Thou shalt not kill" when enemies are shooting at you. Army Sgt. Andrew Buchanan, 25, who lost part of his right heel in an IED blast in Baghdad, tells Benimoff he's not much of a believer--but that his brother's a born-again Christian. He shows Benimoff a medallion of Saint George that his mother gave him before he deployed, and they chat about patron saints.

The rounds make Benimoff feel a certain kinship. The patients talk about their spirituality, and they can discuss "the same issues I am dealing with--anger towards God and grief over loss," he says. He shares a verse that best describes where he is today with his faith, Psalm 40:1-2. I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand.

After two deployments and his new mission serving the wounded from Iraq, anger and grief are daily companions. But, Benimoff says: "God gave me room to cry out as I flashed back to traumatic events and the soldiers my unit lost in those two deployments. He allowed me to slowly move through the mud and the mire." Now Benimoff is trying to look forward as much as back. "It's messy, it's not a pretty ending," he says. "I cannot tie a pretty bow on my story and I don't believe that God would want me to." He thinks of the soldiers whose lives were lost, but also of those who survived. He hopes that the verse of Psalm 40--I waited patiently for the Lord--

which is so meaningful to him, might help to lift the spirits of other soldiers who fall into the same slimy pit.

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

GRAPHIC: Light in the darkness: Now in training to minister to hospital patients at Walter Reed, Benimoff takes a moment to pray

FOG OF WAR: U.S. soldiers on patrol in Adamiyah, a violent neighborhood in Baghdad (top); Benimoff on an air base in Iraq

Comforting the afflicted: Benimoff talks about faith with Spc. Brent Hendrix, a 22-year-old amputee at Walter Reed

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