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COMBAT CHAPLAIN WITH V CORPS TASK FORCE IS MINISTER TO VARIEGATED FLOCK AS WELL AS KEY 'SPIRITUAL LIAISON'

By Capt. Ryan M. Rooney

Task Force 1st Battalion, 7th Field Artillery, 1st Infantry Division

FORWARD OPERATING BASE SUMMERALL, Bayji, Iraq – Perhaps one of the most critical members of a military task force doesn't carry a weapon. He's the chaplain.

As the head of the Unit Ministry Team of Task Force 1st Battalion, 7th Field Artillery of V Corps' 1st Infantry Division, Chaplain (Capt.) Dave Bottoms ministers to the spiritual needs of the task force's nearly 800 Soldiers here. As the chaplain for the "First Lightning Battalion," combat chaplain Bottoms goes by the radio call sign "Holy Lightning" when conducting tactical operations.



COMMAND SGT MAJ WAYNE L. SANDERS
Chaplain (Capt.) Dave Bottoms of Task Force 1st Battalion, 7th Field Artillery of V Corps' 1st Infantry Division, talks with Hussein Ahmed Mahjub, a provincial council member, and imam Amin Khalaf Abid, during a city council meeting in Bayji, Iraqi.

As an Orthodox Presbyterian chaplain, Bottoms presides over a weekly communion service for Protestant Soldiers. But he doesn't just restrict his ministering to the task force's Protestants.

"I perform my own faith, but facilitate the faith of others," says Bottoms. Following a car bomb attack in June, Bottoms even consoled Muslim Iraqi bystanders wounded in the attack. Though he cannot pray with them or lead them in Muslim prayer, he was able to reassure the wounded and encourage them to pray.

As a combat chaplain, Bottoms has also learned how to serve as a minister under conditions much more austere than many other ministers ever face. He has conducted services on the sand-blown hoods of Humvees during the long tactical march the division made from Kuwait when it arrived in Southwest Asia and in an improvised chapel in the battalion's conference room.

Bottoms says he was inspired to enter the military chaplain corps by an Orthodox Presbyterian Navy chaplain who ministered to Marines in Bosnia. His inspiration, however, took a slightly different path at first.

Bottoms grew up as an Air Force dependent. He likes to say he "became a Christian through the chaplaincy," when he heard about the life of Christ from an Army chaplain as a teenager.

He initially served as an Air Force chaplain. But after marrying Army attorney Capt.

Jennifer B. Bottoms, he transferred to the Army Chaplain Corps to be nearer to his wife.

Jennifer Bottoms is also now deployed with the 1st Infantry Division, as part of their Staff Judge Advocate team in Tikrit, Iraq.

"One day I literally took off my Air Force BDU shirt, put on an Army one, and went off to my Army Chaplain's Basic Course," Bottoms said.

The Bottoms' union has provided some interesting twists in their marriage and careers. There have been occasions when he has ministered to Soldiers being prosecuted by his wife. Though both are deployed to Iraq, their duties have kept them apart. They haven't seen each other since deploying.

In addition to serving the task force as a pastor and spiritual counselor, Bottoms assumed a unique operational role upon arriving in Bayji. Recognizing that the city's imams, or Muslim prayer leaders, are among its most influential leaders, the task force commander, Lt. Col. Kyle M. McClelland, chose him to serve as his "spiritual liaison." Via the common role he and the imams have as spiritual leaders and theologians, Bottoms is able to connect with them and in turn connect the task force to the city's religious community.

"(Chaplain Bottoms) is a 'combat multiplier' beyond explanation," McClelland said. "He has been there for it all. We have had some pretty rough days here in Bayji, and his counsel and guidance have been simply remarkable. He is a gifted leader who is immersed in his vocation and is pivotal to our success on the battlefield. We are blessed to have a Soldier of his talents."

Bottoms says he enjoys his role here immensely and looks at it as an honor.

"I have seen some people come to belief in God out here in a fresh, new way," he says.

"I consider it a privilege to serve Soldiers who have given up easy access to their own spiritual resources."

