

Story by Nikki Brochetti

# RETURNING FROM BATTLE



Lance Cpl. Ji H. Kim provides security during a patrol in Haqlaniyah, Iraq. Photo by Sgt. Brian M. Henner, U.S. Marine Corps.

**The U.S. Marine's heart was in turmoil from what he had witnessed in combat: day after day of bloodshed, his nerves constantly on edge from the intensity of life-and-death battles. He knew Jesus Christ was the answer. He sat beside Pastor Rick Barnett in the deserted sanctuary. The pastor's gentle manner made him feel at ease. Taking a deep breath, he began pouring it all out. His heaviest burden was guilt from all of the enemy forces he'd helped kill.**

"Does God still love me?" he asked, his voice broken. "I've killed so many people."

The pastor listened, his heart pierced at the weight of the burden the man had been silently bearing for so long. *O Lord, please show him Your love*, the pastor prayed silently. Feeling led by the Holy Spirit, Rick encouraged the Marine with Scripture, recounting Old Testament stories in which men of God fought bravely in battles as part of the Lord's will.

The Marine asked about the sixth commandment: "Thou shalt not kill" (Exodus 20:13, KJV). Rick explained that serving one's country in combat is different than murdering someone in cold blood. They

discussed God's grace and the supernatural peace that passes all understanding (Philippians 4:7). At the end, they prayed together. As time went on, they had several more talks. Soon, the Marine's heavy load was lightened by the grace and love of God.

"I believe [they] just need someone who will listen to their stories—someone who will help offload their burdens ... and point them to Christ," said Rick, pastor of CC Okinawa, Japan, a fellowship with many U.S. military service members and their families. "Most of the men I've spoken with are believers who can testify to God's faithfulness while deployed."



U.S. Marines conduct a twilight patrol through the deserted streets of Husaybah, Iraq. Photo by Sgt. Brian M. Henner, U.S. Marine Corps

## Danger After Battle

Combat stress can be lethal for returning troops who don't know Christ. U.S. military leaders are linking reckless behavior to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or an addiction to adrenaline. For example, in a single 31-day time period, five Camp Lejeune Marines were involved in serious motorcycle wrecks. Three of them died, and a fourth lost a leg. They had recently returned from heavy combat in Iraq. The incident made national news and prompted increased safety measures for returning service members.



Pastor Rick Barnett

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Pastor Rick Barnett

More than one-third of U.S. troops coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan have been diagnosed with combat stress (including PTSD, anxiety, adjustment disorders, substance abuse, and depression), according to a recent study from the Archives of Internal Medicine.

Those familiar with the military have heard of these risky behaviors. "Some confess to missing that adrenaline rush," said Rick. "They look to get that 'rush' back."

The rigors of war can also be grueling for believing troops who come home

spiritually exhausted or wounded. Calvary Chapel believers have been ministering to service members and their families and offer suggestions for reaching out.

## Lifting Up Wounded Warriors

To fellow pastors, Rick suggested, "Invite them (returning service members) to come talk just one on one, and let them—in safety and confidence—share their experiences, release their emotions, and allow the God of all comfort to comfort them through His Word."

The church can be supportive as well. When members of CC Okinawa return home after combat, the church acknowledges them and welcomes them back during the Sunday morning service—an expression of support and appreciation. The CC Okinawa youth have started ministering to military families with a deployed parent by washing cars, mowing lawns, or playing with younger children. To reach single Marines, the church carpools troops to church and hosts hospitality nights, inviting the Marines to home-cooked meals and fellowship at church members' homes.

As part of renewed emphasis on safety programs, many returning service members go through a re-integration program immediately after arriving at their home stations. But many are still in need of healing.

"The folks I've spoken to told me they just want to get home, so they won't say, 'Yes, I've had nightmares or jumpiness,' because they know that would only delay their returning home. So they say what they must to get home," Rick explained. "What we can offer as brothers and sisters in Christ is to let them share their stories, their fears, their pains."



*In a recent Armor of Light outreach at Camp Pendleton, CA, Pastor Steven Brown, right, encourages a U.S. Marine before praying with him. Every month, Armor of Light shares the Gospel with new recruits as part of its pre-deployment program.*

*Photo by Jon Rogers, Armor of Light*

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Gunnery Sgt. John O’Donnell

### Ways to Minister to Combat Veterans:

1. While service members are deployed, minister to the family in practical ways.
2. Personally invite military families to church functions.
3. Pastor is available for the service member to share experiences and emotions.
4. Recognize and welcome returning vets without making them uncomfortable.
5. Arrange carpooling to church for single veterans or those with no vehicle.
6. Invite singles to home-cooked meals, fellowship, and Bible study.
7. Organize retreats for returning vets and family.
8. Watch for signs of combat stress while interacting with spouse and family.
9. Help veteran feel his or her importance as part of the church body.

Married to an officer in the U.S. Navy, Cindy Langley of CC Okinawa shared what her unsaved friends are experiencing: “Their husbands are suffering from nightmares and isolating themselves once they return from war. One friend told me that her husband drank himself to sleep every night for a couple of months so he wouldn’t have nightmares.” She added, “[Believers] can make such a huge difference in a military family’s life.”

### Best Defense: Spiritual Armor

Pastor Steve Brown, with endorsement from CC Costa Mesa as a chaplain to the U.S. Marine Corps, three years ago began the “Armor of Light” program to prepare Marines for combat stress before they are deployed. Steve says PTSD usually affects 20 percent of those engaged in combat; however, he testified, less than 1 percent of those whom God touched through the “Armor of Light” program have come home suffering from PTSD.

*Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed.*

1 Peter 1:13 (NIV)

Also pastor of Armor of Light (a branch of CC Costa Mesa located at Camp Pendleton), Steve finds ways to minister to returning Marines who don’t yet know

the Lord. “When they come back from a deployment, we have an outreach—a barbeque with signs saying ‘Here’s to Our Heroes’—then we build relationships and share the love of God with them,” said Steve. Many believers volunteer.

Gunnery Sgt. John O’Donnell, who attends Armor of Light, says the best way to minister to service men and women is not to make them stand out but let them be part of the church.

“We join the Marine Corps to be part of something bigger than us, and when we’re put on a pedestal, it makes us feel uncomfortable. Letting Marines feel like a part of the church is important,” he said. Many would enjoy doing service projects or helping out in some way. “Many guys with combat stress have had their faith shaken, and they need a mission from God.”

### Healing for Families

The home front is often hit the hardest after deployments, said Pastor Steve: “The way I really recognize combat stress ... is how it affects the families—the way they treat their wives and children.”

With the help of CC Costa Mesa, CC Green Valley, and CC Running Springs, Armor of Light is planning several retreats for returning warriors and their families near the Camp Pendleton Marine Base.

“Our hope is that they can experience God’s love, reconnect with families, and have a revival. We also encourage single Marines to come to the retreat. The Lord put on my heart Isaiah 40:1 “‘Comfort, yes, comfort My people!’ says your God.’ I truly believe if we can get them to that place where they [are aware of their] need for the Lord, the Holy Spirit will do the rest,” said Steve.

Staff Sgt. Joseph Morales, a U.S. Marine and member of the Armor of Light church, testified that the Lord sustained him through six deployments in his 14 years of service. “Because the Lord is in our lives, deployments don’t affect us as much. He answers questions that [unbelievers] can’t answer and become fearful of.” He encourages believers to reach out to returning service men and women—now and in the future, as the Lord leads. 🙌

*He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, “He is my refuge and my fortress; My God, in Him I will trust.”*

Psalm 91:1-2

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*U.S. Marines with 1st Marine Logistics Group bow their heads in honor of fallen comrades during an evening vigil at Camp Al Taqaddum, Iraq.*