

The Spiritual Lives of Soldiers: Part II - At War

by Fr David Alexander

I am a chaplain of Marines. I eat with Marines, run with Marines, sweat with Marines, freeze with Marines. I sleep next to Marines in the dirt, jump out of airplanes with them, crawl through mud and sand with armor and gear and more or less suffer alongside of Marines every day in training. I pray with them, for them, over them. I go to war with them. I listen to them every day and laugh with them and bear with their rough edges, and as a result I am there with them in the moment of crisis – be it physical, emotional, psychological, or spiritual. We have had plenty of crises lately. My Marines and I have just recently come home from Helmand Province in Afghanistan.

I have been asked to share a few thoughts here on the spiritual life of warriors in combat, and I will do so in my own simple way. It seems to me that in combat Marines need, more than anything else, to be able to live with the profound knowledge that God is never far away, but near. They need to know that God is active in protecting them, and in protecting their families back home, and that what they are doing in war is not irrevocably driving them away from God. This is, by the grace of God, the knowledge that I humbly share with them each day, as best as I can.

In the middle of long deployments, no matter how strong a warrior's faith may be, everyone seems to go through times when God feels far away. Comrades fall, the faces of loved ones back home grow dim, and every miserable day seems to blend into the next. Chaplains often find that their most profound and fulfilling work is to simply be out and about among the Marines, praying with them, encouraging them, saying a blessing before every convoy, every patrol, and every combat mission. In the military we call this ministry of presence, and in essence it is a reflection of our Lord's incarnation as

a function of the priesthood – the priest as chaplain is never far away from the men of his Battalion or Regiment, and calls to mind the presence of God wherever he goes. For the Orthodox Marines he serves with, he does even more, prayerfully offering the sacraments, which in the mystery of faith unites them to God.

Chaplains are asked to pray in combat far more often than they could have imagined would be the case, because of the special spiritual vulnerability of his warriors in prolonged times of crisis, fear, and loneliness. I have seen some Marines experience positive spikes in their prayer at the beginning of a deployment. They turn to God more fervently and often than they have perhaps in many years, and find deep consolation for their souls. However, as the tour continues, and the pain and fear they are experiencing deepens, that newfound comfort in prayer can begin to weaken or wane, and they may lose heart. It takes a very deep

rootedness in prayer to carry us through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and it is very difficult to try to grow those roots in the season of crisis. Access to God through prayer is an incredible gift, because it reminds us of His nearness to us in every season and place – even in that wild, dangerous, and weary land called Afghanistan.

Along with their chaplains and prayer, Marines love angels, imprecatory Psalms, and patron Saints, and gain from them a strong sense of protection. One of our platoon sergeants was leading a convoy in Northern Helmand Province when he and his Marines came under attack from Taliban forces. When he heard the first explosion go off, he began praying, and said later that he strongly felt the presence of angels around his truck, around the convoy, and even in his truck. He says he was sure they



Fr David at St Andrew's Orthodox Church in Kandahar, Afghanistan (built by Romanian Orthodox soldiers).

were there. A second explosion struck his truck a moment later, and although he sustained a fairly severe injury that required an emergency medevac once the situation stabilized, no one else in his vehicle was injured. When I visited him in the hospital he could speak of nothing else but the fact that the angels were with him, and kept the other Marines in his truck safe. This became one of the favorite stories among people of faith in our Battalion. Marines love hearing about and talking about angels, because they see them as the direct protection of God – powerful, unseen protection and help in the face of many dangers, troubles, and temptations. Talking about angels is another thing that reminds warriors of the closeness of God.



Now, whoever said that there are no atheists in foxholes hasn't been to Afghanistan lately. I have a number of good combat Marines that claim to be atheists, and several more who simply want nothing to do with God, even if they don't necessarily argue against His existence. Nevertheless, the majority of Marines are very interested in being close to God, and some think about God almost about as often as they think of home, or their own mortality (which, if you're wondering is usually very often).

Living with Marines is not easy. They are often crass, tough as nails, coarse, and outspoken. They work in the worst places on Earth, fighting to make

it a better place in the way that they understand things. The chaplain lives with them and attempts to pray with them and for them without ceasing. The Holy Martyr Archpriest Vasily Martysz, an Orthodox chaplain for Polish forces before his martyrdom under communism, once said of his difficulties in ministry: "I will not run away. Christ did not run." And those are words that American Orthodox chaplains take to heart. We attempt to unite men to God, by the grace of God, in whatever way we can, and in the midst of war. We ask that you pray for us, and for the men under our spiritual charge. Glory to Jesus Christ!✠

Fr. David Alexander is a priest of the Antiochian Archdiocese and a chaplain with the United States Marine Corps. Several years ago while on sabbatical from the military to pursue a ThM degree at St Vladimir's he ministered to soldiers at Ft Dix and the McGuire Air Force base in New Jersey. He and his wife Heather live with their daughter, Eve Marie, in coastal North Carolina. He serves on Sundays at St. Nicholas Orthodox Chapel.

*He maintains a blog on Ancient Faith Radio: **In the Valley of the Shadow of Death - A Chaplain of Marines Speaks His Heart and Mind from the Front Lines of Afghanistan.** More of his articles can be found at*

<http://www.antiochian.org/node/22949>

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In the course of his career, Dr Cavarnos knew many prominent people. He has written of his long friendship with the Greek iconographer and writer, Photios Kontoglou, who brought about a revival of Byzantine iconography. He also knew some of the Orthodox Church's great Spiritual Fathers, such as Archimandrite Philotheos Zervakos.

When Dr Cavarnos lost his sight, he embraced the monastic life and was tonsured at St Anthony's Monastery in Florence, AZ. I believe he always intended to end his life in a monastery, and that this was the fulfillment of his fondest wish.

It was my privilege to know Dr Cavarnos for almost forty years. Whenever my wife and I would travel to the Boston area to visit family, we always tried to make time to visit him at his home in

Belmont, MA. He was a major influence in my life through his books, lectures, and paternal counsel. Our conversations at his home were just like his books: uplifting, edifying, and soul-profitting. His books remain as his legacy, and will continue to inspire and instruct future generations of those who seek the heavenly Kingdom.

There was an understandable sadness when I heard that he had completed the course of his earthly life. However, there is also a sense of joy because he is, I believe, with God and with all the saints who ever lived.

May the Lord be merciful to the ever-memorable servant of God, Schemamonk Constantine, and give him rest in Abraham's bosom, and number him among the just.✠

Jacob's Well
Spring 2011