

## Service *in the Desert*

### Excerpts from the journal of an army medical corpsman.

by Richard L. Klingler, MD

*There are many Christians who serve in the Canadian, U.S. and other armed forces. The Editor's own father was a Christian Naval surgeon. The present chief of the British army, Sir Richard Dannatt is an openly professing Christian.*

*Col. Klingler is a U.S. army physician who has served two tours in Iraq. As his story shows, the work of God is being powerfully carried forward even in one the grimmest, most terrible places on earth—the battlefield.*

**I**t was 3:00 a.m. Although the sun's rays had retreated hours before, its hot breath refused to dissipate from the steppes of Kuwait's Ad Dibdibah plain. The heat attacked us from all sides. Airborne sandy powder hung above us and dimmed lights as if in a London fog.

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One by one, all members of the battalion encircled our small “Band of Brothers” and cluster of convoy vehicles—they had, without being ordered, chosen to wish us safe passage on our sojourn to Iraq. As the Chaplain prayed, we all wondered if our souls were ready should *HE* request an inventory of our lives.

My army unit was being tasked for a mission in Iraq. That morning, I prepared to move out with a small lead element that was to reconnoiter an area where the main body would relocate to—our destination was Ad Diwaniyah, Iraq. This was south of Babylon where civilization had begun.

Intelligence briefings warned that insurgents had been active along the route we were to travel. Appropriate

Force Protection info was given—suddenly, the desiccated saliva in my throat grew to a dry, furry mass the size of a tennis ball; swallowing failed to ameliorate the choking sensation.

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Why was I there—in Kuwait—and now heading for Iraq??? Collectively, that question was infecting us all. In retrospect, I believe God had had a hand in my being allowed to serve, in the

military, in a time of war. Although a 9mm pistol hung from my belt, *HE* allowed me to serve *HIM*, and the Army, without it ever leaving its sand encrusted holster.

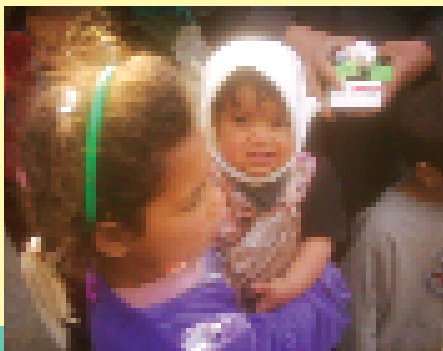
The sun, a most unwelcome fiery orb, soon began its westward migration, and our vehicles, pregnant with supplies, groped the sizzling hardball with the speed of a glacier. Each glance, from right to left, recorded a cerebral picture as vivid as a 10 billion pixel image.....charred tank skeletons, gun emplacements that had lost their duels with “smart bombs,” breached sandy berms and towns with masses of children acknowledging us with smiles and thumbs up gestures.

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### Working out of a canvas M-5 aid bag was as high-tech as it got.

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Although I was tasked to keep our battalion's health in check, my real job was waiting for me up the road. My itinerary was prepared by *GOD*, and the Army afforded the venue. Serving in a fixed base, air-conditioned “C.A.S.H” hospital (where everyone wore daily fresh fatigue uniforms) was *NOT TO BE*. Instead, I was to travel, eat, sleep and suffer with a line unit. Working out of a canvas M-5 aid bag was as



high-tech as it got. The battalion medics were tapped to minister to wounded Iraqis, and Islamic insurgents, in the city prison.

Upon arriving at our destination—Camp Edson—the U.S. Marines greeted us and did all they could to assist us in our mission. Soon, a dedicated Iraqi physician showed up at the compound gate and asked for our assistance. The city hospital was critically low on medicine and supplies. After visiting the local hospital, I realized that *GOD* was again involved in my odyssey.

Although not officially sanctioned, the medics “procured” a huge cache of medical supplies. Daily, we made our way to the hospital where the medicines were received with smiles of biblical proportions. That Iraqi hospital was choked by a sea of desperate souls—limbless, weak, filthy and dying; looking into their eyes told vivid stories about how miserable things had been.

Work at the prison was grueling, hot, frustrating and endless. Within its sand coloured walls were

fly infested cells that reeked. Individuals from Al Qaeda, Hamas, Baath Party, along with street criminals were all crammed into sweltering cells. All seemed to have an eclectic array of maladies—infected bayonet/ gunshot wounds, abscesses, burns and festering, maggot laden sores.

Administering whatever antibiotics we had to the sick would have triggered a peer review investigation, in the U.S.; however, there, by God's hand, no matter what was used afforded improvement; and the wounds healed. Despite the heat, sweat, filth and flies, seeing the prisoners' smiles, on our daily rounds, made me believe that what was being done, as crude as it seemed, was appreciated—again, *GOD* was there.

My tour of duty eventually came to a close. My exit from Iraq was in the belly of a Marine helicopter. After lift off, I gazed down at the barren, lifeless-appearing desert and reflected on my mission—I was blessed to have served my country, fellow soldiers and the wounded enemy. Somehow I know that our efforts made a difference.

*(Since this article was written, Col. Klingler has been back to Iraq for a second tour of duty.)* 