



# SHEPHERDS IN THE WILDERNESS

**Photos**—Capt. Ray Geoffroy, TSgt Shawn McCowan, SSgt Jeffrey Nevison; **Story**—TSgt Shawn McCowan; **Video**—SSgt Neal Uranga

***Chaplains have been an integral part of American military history since long before the nation was founded.*** Their scope of duties

developed alongside the changing nation. Today's Chaplain Corps has expanded its role from "battlefield minister" to the Religious Support Team. At Bagram Airfield, several RSTs are situated strategically at various locations to better shepherd the needs of their "flocks;" Airmen at war in the desert of Afghanistan. The Chaplain Corps and RST mission provides for the spiritual, emotional, and mental wellness for all Airmen, regardless of their belief system.

Just after sunrise on Sunday morning at a remote part of Bagram Airfield, members of 455<sup>th</sup> Expeditionary Security Forces Squadron both arrive from, or prepare to, begin a convoy "outside the wire." As they gathered their equipment and weapons, Chaplain (Capt.) Joshua King arrived to offer prayers and a message to anyone interested in participating. Within minutes, nearly a dozen Airmen gathered together with him.

His message to them focused on "spiritual armor." The message related to them and was well-received. One of the participants, SrA Alex Brame, strongly related to the topic, taking notes while the chaplain spoke.



**SrA Alex Brame (left) and A1C Alex Washington**

*"Chaplain was right on about the armor of God. These plates are not my armor. This equipment is not my real protection. It can only stop a bullet. And even then, sometimes a bullet can get through. God's armor, God's word, is my real protection. Even if something happens to me, I know God is my protection,"* said Brame.

A1C Alex Washington attended the same devotional. He said he appreciates the

message because of the nature of the chaplain's duty.

*"The chaplain's service is a morale booster. We look up to him. A chaplain has more insight than a leader or a counselor. He has insight into God's word. Counselors just have their own insight rather than God's insight. They are just another person,"* said Washington.

***More photos [HERE](#) — Full story [HERE](#) — Mission video [HERE](#)***

Chaplain King said he was happy to help those Airmen start their day with a spiritual message, regardless of their belief system.

“I’m a chaplain to everybody in all faiths. We’re here for them whether it’s worship, confidential counseling, on-site ministry, advising leadership, or spiritual, ethical, moral, or family issues. We make sure faith integrates effectively and appropriately,” said King.

King pointed out that his mission supports the Air Force’s focus on “all-around Airman fitness.”

“The Air Force talks about being fit to fight. They promote being fit physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Some of the challenges here are spiritual in nature. We support part of that fitness,” said King.

King complimented Security Forces leadership for their strong support of the Chaplain program.

“Leadership has inspired a morale here that is rare. This team, including sector commanders, created a deep sense of camaraderie. Leadership works hard to make this very difficult job easier. The RST enhances that morale. When a team member speaks with a Chaplain, it strengthens them and enables them to focus on the mission throughout the day.”

As another long workday begins for men and women on the flight line, Chaplain (Capt.) Molly Lawlor and her Chaplain Assistant, TSgt. Steven James, prepare for worship services and visit nearby work areas.

“Our Airmen Ministry Center is a lot closer to the workstations, so we’re able to have a lot more access and interaction. We’re ready to go when the mission needs us. In building resilience, we help build relationships in their unit, and keep the relationship strong with family back home,” said Lawlor.

Lawlor makes sure those under her team’s care know they are able to help with almost any life-issues.

“People hear ‘Chaplain,’ and think it’s only religious stuff. But if you just have problems going on in your life, or you’re stressed, or you just need someone to listen, we’re that person too.”

Lawlor has a favorite saying she uses to



***TSgt. Steven James (left) and Chaplain (Capt.) Molly Lawlor***

let her Airmen know the RSTs are available for anything.

“We’re here for the good the bad and the daily. And there’s a lot of daily in a deployed environment.”

Her Chaplain Assistant, TSgt. Steven James, has a special affinity for flight line ministry. He used to be an aircraft maintainer. But he said something was missing.

“There was always that sense of satisfaction from putting a bird into the air and metal into the fight, but it lacked that personal touch. I traded weapon systems

from aircraft to people. Now I'm able to have a more meaningful and positive impact on lives on a day-to-day basis," said James.

Knowing the demands and life of a maintainer taught him the importance of taking care of them.

"Unless we have people dedicated to take care of our individuals who comprise our war-fighting force, the system will break down. We're there as a Chaplain Corps to build them back up so they can continue with the mission they are charged to do."

Managing and taking care of that Bagram Chaplain Corps is the duty of Lt. Col. Jim Glass, 455th Head Chaplain, and MSgt. Jason Tober, Superintendent of Chaplain Operations. They manage and guide the five RSTs. He truly embraced the RST program because the teamwork enhances



**Chaplain (Maj.) Larry Kittle (right)**

both members' ability to do their job in ministry.

"Sometimes it takes a long time for an Airman to warm up to an officer. But when an enlisted person like MSgt. Tober walks in, they immediately welcome him. So he is able to be my eyes and ears where I would never be able to have that level of insight," said Glass.

Glass said spiritual fitness has an especially important role in a deployed environment.

"As Chaplains, we are tapping into an individual's connection with that which is above and beyond himself or herself; their ability to find a balance with who you are in the greater scheme of things. Once I understand who I am in the bigger scheme of things and God's purpose for me, there is a balance and peace within my spirit that allows me to function in whatever kind of environment I find myself in."

That need to find one's place and find peace might be most important in a military hospital. Chaplain (Maj.) Larry Kittle is the hospital chaplain. Just like the hospital staff, he attends to both wounded military members and other patients that arrive for treatment, even if they might have been the enemy.

"Our primary mission is to be visible

reminders of the holy. In this context, it is often unholy situations we find ourselves in. So we provide hope to the staff and patients. I think every religion has the belief in a higher power. I still try to lend comfort and encouragement in any way that is appropriate," said Kittle.

Sunset, the end of most people's day, meant the beginning of duty for others. Security Forces' "Reaper" team prepared to depart with a new kind of send-off from Chaplain King. TSgt Jose Pena-Rojas, a "Reaper" squad leader, helped King begin a new devotional before they begin a convoy.

"We are restricted to the area because of our duties. So the chaplain came to us. This is something I wanted someone to do for me when I was younger. I care about them, and I believe young Airmen could benefit from religious guidance. I think it's important to learn about God and country, and why we believe," said Pena-Rojas.

Throughout the day and night, members of each RST shepherd stepped back to hand those in their care back to their duties in the difficult conditions of wartime at Bagram.

But not before they each bowed their heads to quietly deliver each of their flocks into stronger hands.



"I'm a chaplain to  
**EVERYBODY** in all  
**FAITHS."**

*—Chaplain (Capt.) Joshua King, 455 ESFS Chaplain*



—To learn about a career in the Air Force Chaplain Corps, click [HERE](#)

“We’re ready to go when mission **NEEDS** us. In building **RESILIENCE** we help build relationships in their units...”

—Chaplain (Capt.) Molly Lawlor, Bagram Flightline Chaplain (right)

**“The chaplain is out here with  
US, leading from the FRONT.  
He picks us up and he’s willing to  
talk, to listen, and offer  
support.”**



*—TSgt Jose Pena-Rojas, 455 ESFS*



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