

Ready on the Ground: A Chaplain's Reflection on Ministry at Landstuhl Medical Center

By Chaplain, Lt Col Brian Bohlman © 2014.

"Like cold water to a weary soul is good news from a distant land." Proverbs 25:25 (NIV)

I will always remember the first wounded warrior I welcomed to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center (LRMC) in Germany within hours after reporting for duty on an unseasonably hot afternoon in July 2006. I was tired and worn out from the long flight from Charlotte, NC but was determined to keep myself awake until the evening so I could get my body used to the time change. While receiving a hospital tour from Chaplain Greg Clapper, the chaplain I was replacing, we were notified that a bus of patients would be arriving at the ER entrance in about 30 minutes. Chaplain Clapper explained that this would be a good time to train me on how each wounded warrior is greeted by a chaplain as they are offloaded from the medical transport bus onto a gurney and wheeled into the hospital.



Maj. Brian Knutson, a Oregon Air National Guard chaplain, greets a wounded soldier arriving at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center from Afghanistan. Image by Meg Jones. Germany, 2010.
Photo link: <http://pulitzercenter.org/articles/germany-organ-donation-landstuhl-regional-medical-center>

As two white Air Force buses pulled up to the front of the ER entrance, I gloved up and stood behind Chaplain Clapper to watch him greet the patients. As he took his position at the end of the bus, an Airman from inside the bus shouted, "Are you ready on the ground?" "We're ready," was the reply from the group of eight service members on the ground that would grab the edge of the stretcher and lower it onto the gurney. Before each patient was offloaded from the back of the bus, a sergeant from the medical admin command would tell the chaplain the first name (without rank) of each patient so the chaplain could welcome them by name to LRMC.

As I watched Chaplain Clapper greet each wounded warrior, the reality of war settled into my spirit as I saw--for the first time in my life--the devastating blast and burn injuries that resulted from IEDs. The first patients offloaded from the buses were Critical Care Air Transports (CCATs) and were hooked up to life support equipment weighing hundreds of pounds. After the most serious patients were offloaded, Chaplain Clapper turned to me and said "Chaplain Bohlman, it's time for you to step in and greet." As I moved in to take his place at the end of the bus, the sergeant next to me said, "Chaplain, the next patient's name is John."

The moment had come and it was my turn to welcome my first wounded warrior to a safe haven, a place of refuge and healing. As we lowered the stretcher onto the gurney, I looked into the scarred and swollen face of a wounded warrior with severe burns and said the following: "John, I'm Chaplain Bohlman. Welcome to Germany! You're safe now and we're here to take good care of you. God be with you." At that moment John reached up and grabbed my hands and wouldn't let go as if I had a divine power to heal him on the spot. I took a moment to remind John that God was with him and I promised to visit him later. He finally let go of my hands and we continued to offload the rest of the patients. I will never forget John nor the 1,500+ other wounded warriors that I would eventually welcome to Germany during my tour of duty.

For over ten years, Air National Guard Chaplains and Chaplain Assistants have volunteered for duty at LRMC and provided vital ministry to wounded warriors on their journey

home. The ministry of presence, care and hope is the hallmark of the Chaplain Corps and represents the tools of the trade in caring for the emotional and spiritual needs of America's wounded warriors. I will never forget the faces of the warriors I greeted at the ER entrance throughout all hours of the day and night. My tour at LRMC was the most challenging--yet rewarding--tours of duty I had in over twenty years of military service.

As a new "greatest generation" of warriors dwell among us today, let us always be "ready on the ground" to support them and their families whenever they need us. These selfless warriors carried the torch of liberty and freedom into the most dangerous places on earth and we owe them the best our nation can provide and nothing less. Freedom isn't free!



Brian Bohlman (left), a chaplain with the South Carolina Air National Guard, visits with Army Cpl. Brandon Schadrie in September 2006, during his deployment to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center. Bohlman, who founded Operation Thank You, a troop-support group, shares notes of support his organization collected from people back home for deployed service members. Photo by Thomas Warner, Landstuhl Regional Medical Center Public Affairs. Link: <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1910548/posts>