

IRAQ

story by Greg Schmidt

Staff Sergeant Mark Redding, worship team member at CC Jacksonville, NC, calls out to God during his deployment to Iraq. Following are excerpts from his diary.

The first time the local mosque blasts the Islamic call to prayer across loud speakers, it is apparent you are not home. The haunting sound makes one edgy and uncomfortable. Staff Sergeant Mark “Red” Redding became a spiritual warrior for his men, praying for God to protect and shield their base.

Excerpt from diary—“You can get in my way, knock me down, and cause me to stumble, but the Lord is my refuge; evil cannot hurt me there. The Lord takes care of me if only I will turn to Him for everything!”

By mid-summer, temperatures were soaring past 120 degrees. Mark’s unit was stationed at a forward operating base. Convoys continually encountered improvised explosive devices designed for maximum destruction. An anti-tank mine was detonated under a Humvee from Mark’s battalion. The blast separated the engine and ripped the axle and wheel off the front driver’s side. Despite the violence of the explosion, all the Marines on board walked away with only bruises.



Marine Staff Sergeant Mark Redding, second from left, with a mortar team from Golf company in Iraq.



photo by Lance Cpl. Zachary R. Frank

Marines fire at enemy insurgents who attacked them with indirect and small-arms fire.



photo by Lance Cpl. Caleb J. Smith

Marines lower boxes full of loaves of bread to be distributed to local Iraqi families during a humanitarian mission.



photo by Sgt. Zachary A. Babban

Marines search the exterior of a house during a mission to root out insurgents. This photograph was taken with night vision equipment.

On the day when Mark left for Fallujah, he wrote in his journal,

... read Psalm 39—how my heart hurt. Only God knows the length of my days here, and that is a mere breath to Him. And David asks God to lift his scourge from him, and all I could think was for the Lord to take me from this so I can once again rejoice with my wife. PRIORITIES—Keep my mouth shut, meditate on God.

Mark was meritoriously promoted to Staff Sergeant for excelling in his duties. In Iraq, he was far away from his wife, family, and country. Now, because of his promotion, Mark was isolated from the familiarity of his platoon. He was a staff non-commissioned officer and no longer “one of the boys.” There were a dozen lance corporals in his command who were on their second or third combat tour. In this environment of periodic mortar shellings, all night watches, and isolation, Mark wrote,

It is so easy to feel despairing here, thinking about how much longer we have, how much hotter it will be, and how many more times I will be shot at and attacked. I need to focus on praise and worship and being in constant prayer.

Combat is an environment of extremes—in an instant, boredom turns into chaos. Insurgents attacked his base with mortars. This attack was directed on top of his own mortar section. As men scattered for cover, his team manned their guns and returned fire—exposing themselves to the effects of the incoming rounds. The fins of a detonated mortar stuck in the ground within ten feet of the Marines. While 8 of the 13 men in his section were wounded, none were killed. All returned to duty that day.

I love the words, “In my distress I called to the Lord, I cried to my God for help.” It shows a broken and weak spirit that, in desperation, clings to the only one who can save. That’s how we need to be. The Lord protects us. He fights our battles and wins. “He shows unfailing kindness to His anointed.” This word anointed always catches my eye. I think back to when CC Jacksonville sent me off to this place and when Pastor Greg prayed for an anointing upon me. God has a purpose for me here, and He will be faithful to complete His good work in me. He has plans to prosper me and be a blessing to those around me, even if they don’t know Him.



Humvee destroyed by anti-tank mine. Miraculously, the Marines sustained only minor cuts and bruises.



First Sergeant Claxton, right, and Sergeant Major Swann, center, promote Mark meritoriously to rank of Staff Sergeant.

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Staff Sergeant Mark Redding



photo by Lance Cpl. Sarah A. Beavers

Lance Cpl. Wyatt Schertenleib and Lance Cpl. Adam Smith help secure a barrier in a canal to prevent possible floating explosive devices from hampering bridge reconstruction efforts.



photo by Lance Cpl. Sarah A. Beavers

Lt. Cmdr. James Pierce, a Marine chaplain, sets up a wooden cross as Marines, sailors and soldiers celebrate the holiday season.

“I will never be able to rise and conquer except by Christ’s victory, and it is that victory that I must daily cling to and rely upon.”

Staff Sergeant Mark Redding

Silent Drill

Mark had spent his first enlistment in the United States Marine Corps with the elite “Silent Drill Team” at Eighth and “I” Streets in Washington, D.C. A year after he was discharged from the Marines, he reenlisted to “take care of unfinished business.” After working the summer at a Christian camp in the Dakotas, Mark packed up his wife Sandi, daughter Hannah, and son William to head for Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. He had just started “round two” when he showed up for a Bible study at the home of Greg Schmidt, pastor of CC Jacksonville, NC. Soon after, he was sent out for a six-month deployment to the Mediterranean. It turned into ten months, with combat operations in Kosovo and Iraq. After only a few short months home, Mark’s was one of the few 2nd Marine Division Units slated to go back to Iraq. At the end of his deployment, Mark recorded this passage in his journal:

My conviction ... The world tells us that to improve is good, and independence shows strength. In God’s eyes, it is absolutely necessary that I be mindful of my constant dependence on God. I will never be able to rise and conquer except by Christ’s victory, and it is that victory that I must daily cling to and rely upon.

It is difficult to explain the minds of men who pass through combat. The lack of sleep, the danger, and the heat simmering from your body armor pushes your mental faculties. Mark was nearing the end of his deployment. Being near the end can seem to cause time to drag on. But as he read Psalms 42 and 43, Mark could feel the Lord strengthen him and the Holy Spirit infuse His motivation into him again.

Put your hope in God. Press on!

Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance. Psalm 42:5

Mark’s wife, Sandi, found out she was pregnant with their fourth child as he deployed to Iraq. As the time neared to return home, his anticipation mounted until the moment he stood face to face with his family. They rejoiced and praised God. A week later Sandi delivered a healthy baby girl, Abigail. ☺



photo by Lance Cpl. Sarah A. Beavers

1st Lt. Erin Kelly demonstrates for a student how to bead a bracelet during a visit to an elementary school in Iraq.

“In God’s eyes, it is absolutely necessary that I be mindful of my constant dependence on God.”

Staff Sergeant Mark Redding

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Mark reunites with his wife, Sandi, who is holding Grace, as William and Hannah look on.