

Published April 10, 2009

## **Lacey man works to meet soldiers' spiritual needs**

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JOINT BASE BALAD, Iraq — Soldiers at Highlander Chapel typically wear camouflage to Sunday services and tuck their M-4 rifles under the seats. The screaming of overhead fighter jets can interrupt the sermon.

It's in this atmosphere where **Sgt. Monty Webb** of Lacey is in his element. Every third Sunday, the 39-year-old preaches the message of Christianity to others in the 81st Brigade Combat Team's 1st Battalion, 161st Infantry Regiment.

Webb isn't a chaplain. At least not yet. The Gig Harbor native and seminary student enlisted in the Washington National Guard in May 2008 after a 16-year break in military service. He intended to deploy as an infantryman.

By experiencing what the grunts do daily — on this deployment, that's escorting supply trucks — he feels like it will prepare him to best serve their spiritual needs in the future.

"My end goal is, hands down, to do what will make me the best chaplain, preacher and server of the Lord," said Webb, who attends Faith Evangelical Seminary in Tacoma.

The roots of his desire to minister to others stem from listening to his father's stories of service in the Vietnam War.

Some soldiers served in places so remote, Webb's father told him, that it could be a month or longer between visits from a chaplain.

Webb wanted to be the chaplain who would go wherever needed, no matter how tough the mission.

The journey hasn't been easy. He served on active duty for four years before bad knees forced him from the service in 1992. A divorce two years later sent him on a six-year drinking binge. He drank a bottle of whisky daily and bar-hopped to try to hide his addiction.

"I didn't want the bartender to think I was an alcoholic," he said. "But they knew — my friends knew, my family knew."

He met his future wife, Cynthia, in 2000. Webb said her unflinching belief in him gave him the strength he needed to end his drinking — although it wasn't an instant change, and he lost many friends because of it.

Webb finally shed the remnants of that lifestyle in summer 2005. He and his friends traveled to the Tri-Cities for a golf-filled long weekend. He was eager to show his buddies that he was a changed, sober man.

Webb was drunk by 10 o'clock the first night.

"I really fell on my face," he said. "At that moment, I realized I couldn't fix things on my own."

Webb was religious much of his life, but his faith deepened near the end of his drinking struggles. Cynthia and he decided in 2004 that his future was in the ministry and the military.

He trained daily and lost 70 pounds. Doctors did surgery to repair damage in both of his knees. But the National Guard rejected him on medical grounds when he sought to re-enlist.

He had no such problems when he joined the Army Reserve in 2006, then transferred to the Guard in May 2008, three months before the 81st Brigade was mobilized for federal service.

Webb spends much of this tour as a truck commander, helping guide convoys as they leave Joint Base Balad in central Iraq to bases across the country.

And every third Sunday, he preaches at Highlander Chapel, the house of worship for many soldiers of the battalion.

"He invests his life in the lives of his soldiers," said Maj. Joe Hammel, the battalion chaplain with whom Webb works often. "He doesn't force himself or his faith on others, but he's always available for questions. They ask about eternal, spiritual matters, and he tells them what he knows from the Scriptures and from the heart."

The brigade returns to Washington this summer. Webb will resume studies at the seminary, where he's less than three years from earning his degree. His plans after that, he said, aren't his to make.

"God has put me on this path," he said, "and I know He'll guide me the rest of the way."