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Chaplain, assistant aim to help Soldiers become better spiritually

By Spc. Dustin Roberts
2nd HBCT PAO, 1st Inf. Div., MND-B

BAGHDAD – Multi-National Division – Baghdad Soldiers who serve with the 2nd Heavy Brigade Combat Team “Dagger,” 1st Infantry Division, trained for the better part of 2008 in order to prepare for their deployment in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The Soldiers focused on what their mission would be for their specific job field, worked on their physical fitness and sharpened their warrior skills to be ready to battle the enemy if need be.

These abilities are expected to be maintained every day.

For two individuals in the brigade, what matters most is the Soldiers’ inner wheel that maintains the desire to stay combat efficient throughout the deployment.

“If you look at what we do as an Army to train for battle, our skill sets and specific military occupational specialties are what we focus on; we focus on physical fitness, and we also focus on mental tenacity and perseverance,” said Maj. Peter Johnson,

the chaplain and spiritual leader in the Dagger Brigade. “With the culmination of those you really can’t sustain without a spiritual strength behind you.”

Johnson and his assistant, Staff Sgt. Matthew Forrester, both of Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 2nd HBCT, keep their schedules busy by reaching out to Soldiers and making sure religious services are available in all of the forward operating bases and joint security stations across the Dagger Brigade’s areas of operation.

Forrester keeps record of the spiritual needs by keeping in constant contact with the brigade’s subordinate units, ensuring there are no issues of spiritual fitness.

“I also talk with Soldiers and make sure morale is good. If I see anything that stands out to me that could be an issue, or if they request to speak with the chaplain, I will let the chaplain know,” Forrester said. “I try to reach out to the Soldiers as much as I can.”

In a scheduled yearlong deployment, said Johnson, it can be very difficult to balance life’s issues at home, whether financially, mentally or spiritually, and still successfully complete everyday missions in combat.

“How does a Soldier who was just had his world rocked, either emotionally or spiritually, focus on his job?” asked Johnson. “To be able to do that, you have to have foundation, which is a spiritual strength. It’s a day by day exercise of preventative maintenance, checks and services for the soul.”

It is crucial, he added, for Soldiers to be mentally healthy during the deployment by enduring through loneliness and stressful situations.

“Sometimes a Soldier will say that they can’t go on anymore. After an hour or two of counseling, the Soldier will still think it is hard, but they find out they can make

it,” he said. “Before they know it, it’s been 12.5 months and they are going home, saying: ‘Wow, I did it.’”

The two said that they don’t want Soldiers to just barely make it through the deployment but to mentally conquer in their inner battles to make them morally stronger.

“A specific goal that I would have is that we spend 12 months in a combat zone and the Soldiers go back as better Soldiers – not only in their job but in their character,” Johnson said. “They’ll realize there were ups and downs and hard times, but I hope they also become better persons for it.”



Speech.

BAGHDAD – Maj. Peter Johnson, the chaplain and spiritual leader of the 2nd Heavy Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, Multi-National Division – Baghdad, speaks to 2nd HBCT Soldiers during a memorial ceremony to commemorate the life of Pfc. Benjamin Tollefson at Camp Liberty Jan. 6.

Johnson and his assistant, Staff. Sgt. Matthew Forrester, check the morale of Soldiers daily and help them endure the stresses of the deployment.

(U.S. Army photo by Spc. Dustin Roberts, 2nd HBCT PAO, 1st Inf. Div., MND-B)



Morale.

BAGHDAD – Maj. Peter Johnson, the chaplain and spiritual leader of the 2nd Heavy Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, Multi-National Division – Baghdad, speaks with Soldiers operationally attached to the 2nd HBCT at Joint Security Station Adl Nov. 27. Johnson and his assistant, Staff. Sgt. Matthew Forrester, daily check the morale of Soldiers and help them to endure the stresses of deployment.

(U.S. Army photo by Spc. Dustin Roberts, 2nd HBCT PAO, 1st Inf. Div., MND-B)