



Father Gary DeRouchey of Pierre (S.D.) Council 2686 prepares to celebrate Mass at a military chapel in Iraq. Father DeRouchey, a military chaplain, received the pictured chalice and paten from Rosebud Assembly in Winner, which donated the items in memory of Michael J. Sharkey (inset), a deceased Knight and World War II veteran.



Bob Fousch (left) and Laren Tushim of Alex Semel Council 12989 in Lacombe, La., supervise the construction of a wheelchair ramp while Joseph McDermott (right, background) looks on. McDermott is a veteran of the Vietnam War who was wounded in combat and uses a wheelchair. When McDermott received a new scooter to aid his mobility, Knights built a wheelchair ramp at his home to help him get from the front door to the driveway.

## Sending them Home

Fourth Degree Knights from the DeSoto Province in North Carolina have been involved with a wounded warrior program co-sponsored by the Military Order of the Purple Heart since 2006. Under the leadership of Vice Supreme Master Robert J. Singer, Knights raised \$53,909 in 2008 to send wounded soldiers from Fort Bragg and Camp LeJeune home for the holidays, regardless of their rank, gender or religious affiliation. At the end of 2008, Singer received a certificate of appreciation from U.S. Army Gen. George W. Casey Jr.

## Base Bombing

Our Lady of Fatima Council 3223 in Indianapolis, Ind., received a U.S. flag that was flown over Baghdad, Iraq, in honor of the council and its ladies' auxiliary. Knights and their wives shipped 15 boxes of care items to a squad in Iraq whose base was destroyed during a surprise attack. The soldiers lost all of their military equipment and personal belongings. Sgt. Joseph Weston presented the flag to the council while he was on leave from Iraq.

## Military Shrine

Cardinal John O'Connor Assembly in Monroe, N.Y., provided an honor guard at the dedication of a new military shrine at Sacred Heart Church. Representatives from the Boy Scouts and the American Legion were also present at the ceremony.

## Patriotic Service Awards

Holy Cross Assembly in Germantown, Tenn., presented patriotic service awards to veterans at assisted living facilities in Memphis and Bartlett. Each award was printed with the veteran's name and branch of service. The assembly hosted a presentation ceremony at both facilities.

## A Special Operation

Members of Yukon (Okla.) Council 6478, along with their ladies' auxiliary and a parish youth group, shipped more than 50 boxes of clothes, school supplies and toys to a council member who is stationed in Iraq. The Knight, who is a member of the U.S. Army Special Operations, distributed the items to Iraqi children.

## Banner of Freedom

When Hopewell (N.J.) Council 7103 learned that 3,000 men and women from the New Jersey National Guard were being sent to Iraq, the council purchased two banners for the deployed soldiers. Both banners were signed by Knights and by parishioners at two area churches.

## Finger Rosaries

John M. Yencha Assembly in Parkersburg, W. Va., raised money to send 1,000 finger rosaries to U.S. troops serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. Each miniature rosary was accompanied by a leaflet on how to pray the rosary and a note thanking the soldiers for their service.

## Bowled Over

Precious Blood Council 5147 in Bath, N.Y., donated \$3,000 to the Bath VA Medical Center. The funds will be used to refinish the bowling lanes at the center's recreation facility, which is used to help rehabilitate disabled veterans.

## Peace from the Northeast

Bishop Peterson Council 4442 in Salem, N.H., donated funds to help support Peace from the Northeast, an organization that helps returning soldiers transition back into civilian life. Peace from the Northeast was started by Michael W. Petrilli Sr. of Council 4442. The organization sponsors support groups, organizes family outings and retrofits the homes of returning veterans with disabilities.

## Veterans Memorial Road Race

Christ the King Council 12165 and Father William Tyrrell Assembly, both in Tampa, Fla., co-hosted the Veterans Memorial Road Race to benefit the James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital. The event raised \$3,250, which was split among three VA programs and facilities.

## Sewing Equipment

Bishop John J. Kaising Council 14223 at the U.S. Army Base Camp Humphreys near Osan, South Korea, donated a sewing machine and related supplies to a group of women who make quilts for veterans with disabilities and for expectant mothers.

# A Soldier at Heart

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**A**fter six weeks stateside, Lt. Col. Eric Albertson, a U.S. Army chaplain, is leaving again. Rested from his second tour of duty in Iraq, the Arlington, Va., diocesan priest was scheduled to leave the week of Dec. 18, 2008, for the Southern European Task Force in Vicenza, Italy.

It's his eighth move in four years, and he will likely find himself back in a war zone at some point, possibly Afghanistan.

But Father Albertson wouldn't have it any other way. In fact, it's the life he dreamed of when he was growing up, and the life he once sacrificed to answer a higher calling.

by Stephanie Tracy

## WHAT HE DIDN'T WANT TO DO

Growing up in St. Michael Parish in Annandale, Albertson attended Thomas Jefferson High School in Alexandria and religious education classes at St. Michael. Though his mother made sure he and his siblings made it to Mass every Sunday and to confession regularly, Father Albertson admitted he didn't know much about Catholicism.

"There were a lot of things I never learned," Father Albertson said. "I didn't understand the Real Presence or know how to pray the rosary."

By the time he started studying business at West Virginia University, Albertson had stopped attending Mass. He signed up for ROTC with hopes of following in the footsteps of his father, a career Army officer.

His five closest friends, some of whom were also his roommates, didn't like that Albertson wasn't going to Mass. Finally, they convinced him to join them by pointing out that he would never meet a nice Catholic girl to marry unless he went to church.

## 'I'VE NEVER FELT SO RIGHT'

A few weeks after Albertson's return to Mass, a visiting Paulist priest gave a half-hearted, almost flippant homily on vocations. The priest said anyone who thought God might be calling them to be a priest or religious should, after receiving Communion, return to their seat, kneel down and ask God, and he would let them know.

Intrigued by the novelty of the succinct message, Albertson followed the priest's advice, said the prayer and left Mass ready to enjoy a lively Saturday night.

"I started chuckling to myself about this prayer. But it became a predominance of thought," Father Albertson said. "It kept me awake. When I woke up, it was the first thing on my mind."

After a few days trying to fight the nagging thoughts, Albertson decided to speak to the Newman Center chaplain, who offered to hear his confession and counseled him to continue praying.

"The more I prayed about it, the stronger it got," Father Albertson said.

Back home, he sought advice from his pastor, Father Jerome Fasano, who encouraged him to try at least one year in the seminary to get a better feel for his potential vocation. Albertson was worried because he'd already agreed to serve in the Army, but Father Fasano reassured him that if his vocation was God's will, "the doors will open."

Albertson was released from his contract with the military and soon found himself at Mount St. Mary's Seminary in Emmitsburg, Md. He agreed to give it a year.

"I was really focused on a career in the military and I was a little bit bitter," Father Albertson said. "I was like, 'Okay, God, you've got to let me know [if the priesthood is right for me].'"

Within an hour of arriving on campus, it was time for Mass.

"After Communion, my discernment was complete," Father Albertson said. "I've never felt so right about where I was and what I was doing. It was such a defining moment. I had peers that didn't have that gift of certainty. For me, God made it very clear in a very loving, very gentle way."

## BECOMING ONE OF THEM

Albertson put his dreams of the Army behind him. He was ordained by the late Arlington Bishop John R. Keating on May 10, 1986. But about 18 months later, thoughts of the Army resurfaced.

"The call to return to the military hit me with the same intensity as the calling to the priesthood," Father Albertson said.

He asked Bishop Keating about applying for the chaplaincy. And he continued to ask for six years before he finally received permission. In June 1993, Father Albertson left his assignment as parochial vicar of St. Lawrence Church in Alexandria to begin training and chaplain's duties with the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, N.C. He is one of less than 100 Catholic chaplains in the Army.

Since then, Father Albertson has served numerous assignments in and out of war zones with Army units in Bosnia, Iraq and



STEPHANIE TRACY/THE ARLINGTON CATHOLIC HERALD

Haiti, among others. He received a Purple Heart for a concussion he sustained in Iraq while on patrol with a group of soldiers in 2004. He's lived in bombed-out buildings, slept on cots, worked in the desert without air conditioning, lost sleep and ventured "outside the wire" for the sake of ministering to the troops.

He's eaten their food, commiserated during downtime, taken their pictures and practiced what he called "a ministry of presence."

"It's an incarnational ministry. You have to become one of the people you're ministering to," Father Albertson said.

Many of his charges are looking for basic knowledge about the faith, the same knowledge that Father Albertson once lacked.

"There's an enormous opportunity for catechetical formation, and they need quick, fast answers," he said. "I like being with the soldiers in forward areas. In a combat zone all the craziness falls off and that's pastorally very fulfilling. Although it's exhausting, it's so rewarding."

Years later, Father Albertson wrote to that Paulist priest whose words planted the first seeds of his vocation. The priest replied that his sermon was short because he didn't want to preach it. He said his superiors had asked him to preach on vocations in a last-ditch attempt to prevent him from leaving the priesthood. While the priest did take time off, he never left his vocation. The priest said he was amazed that, at the lowest point of his priestly ministry, God's grace was still effective. ■

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