



Remembering 9/11 and its Ties to People Who Serve

By: Bruce Pokarney

Most everyone alive on September 11, 2001 knows where they were when New York City's World Trade Center was attacked by terrorists. Dennis Nelson was in his early 50s at the time but served his country a decade earlier as part of Operation Desert Storm, an armed conflict with Iraq led by the US to liberate Kuwait. **Dennis' life of service - and his faith - came into focus during each of the two events and continues to be a central part of who he is as a member of Bethlehem.**

Like most Americans, Dennis was shocked when he heard the news on 9/11. "To think of the number of people dead and injured, we need to always keep them in mind," says Dennis, who also saw how the country came together at that time—a show of unity and even patriotism not widely common these days.



Dennis' life of service started at a very young age. Dennis remembers joining his mother late at night as a 5-year-old, helping clean and close up his father's tavern in the small South Dakota border town of New Effington, where he grew up.

"My father would turn up the radio at closing time right when the radio station was going off the air for the night," Dennis recalls. "They always played the National Anthem. I was always either putting my hand over my heart or I was saluting."

Dennis had a similar patriotic feeling when he watched military veterans march in town.

"I wasn't sure what they had done in the service, but I felt like I knew them and what they had sacrificed for our democracy and freedom," he says.

That led to his own military service beginning in 1971 when Dennis joined the Army Reserve, which committed him to several weeks of training each year. Dennis served as part of a munitions company and rose to the rank of sergeant first class. In 1990, his company was deployed in preparation for Operation Desert Storm. For six months, Dennis and his company stored and issued weapons ranging from bullets to bombs in a makeshift depot built in the sands of Saudi Arabia.

"This wasn't just going to another state for training. There was an enemy over there, and we were fighting for something," says Dennis, who could see occasional explosions on the horizon some 20 miles away. "You don't want any of that kind of stuff around munitions. We had \$260 million worth of ammunition, from a 45-caliber round to a multiple-launch rocket system."

Dennis remembers attending church services in the desert, presided by army chaplains. **Being in a combat zone has a way of bringing together a soldier and their faith.**

"There's so much that could happen, and you just never know," he says.

Dennis' life of service goes beyond the military. For years, he was an administrator for Aberdeen's New Beginnings Center, which eventually became part of Lutheran Social Services and occupied property owned by Bethlehem directly across the street. Dennis served on the church council at the time Bethlehem built its new church. Currently, you can often find Dennis and his wife, Rae, helping distribute meals at Wednesday Supper. The Nelsons embody Bethlehem's mission of touching lives by welcoming, worshiping, and especially serving.

When he looks back at his life of service and its connection with the events of 9/11/2001, Dennis has a message:

"Remember the deceased, the injured, and the damage that occurred, and don't let that happen again. So what do we need to do? We need to work together. And sometimes we have to set politics aside."

At times when Americans need to come together, Dennis Nelson and US military veterans like him can be role models for faith, service, and love of country.



A bracelet that Dennis wears that reads "Love To Serve"

Thank you for being a vital part of Bethlehem and for your support. With your partnership and the power of the Holy Spirit, Bethlehem is touching lives each and every day – connecting us with God, one another, and our mission in the world.



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