

HELP!

I'M BEING DEPLOYED



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Barrett Craig

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Introduction

“Pack your gear up tonight, PFC Craig; we’re leaving for Kuwait tomorrow!” Those were the words I heard from my squad leader on my answering machine after returning home from a night of fun with my friends. My heartbeat immediately kicked in to high gear. I was excited. I was scared. I was slightly in shock. All my training as a marine had led to this moment.

I entered boot camp in August 1996. At the ripe age of eighteen, I stood on the infamous yellow footprints, met my Drill Instructor, and my life changed forever. As military members know, D.I.s train us in every aspect of military life. On one occasion, in an attempt to prepare us for how suddenly deployments might come, our D.I.s played a mean, but plausible, joke on us.

They began a class by showing us a sobering documentary of recent past wars and the young men and women like ourselves who had fought. The documentary showed the hardships of war, the harsh conditions, and the pain of combat etched on the soldiers’ faces. As the reality of deployments and war began to hit home, one D.I. quickly ran in, flipped on the lights, turned the video off, and said, “Listen up, recruits. We have a situation on our hands. We’ve just got word that things have got hot again in the Middle East. Your presence is needed immediately in support of a combat operation. Your time here in boot camp will be cut short by three weeks, and you will report directly to Marine Combat Training School for three weeks of

intensive infantry training, after which you'll immediately be shipped overseas." My heart started to race and my palms began to sweat. What did this mean?

Our D.I.s let us squirm and sweat a little before they admitted to their mean little joke. As a loud sigh of relief echoed around the room, they laughed. We learned our lesson: deployments come suddenly, and we have to be ready.

Sixteen years later, now as a chaplain, and having deployed numerous times to numerous countries, I still feel the whole mixture of emotions when I leave: excitement, fear, anxiety, loneliness, panic, uncertainty, grief (leaving family and friends), anger, frustration, and even joy. Deployment is still hard.

You may be reading this booklet in preparation for your first deployment. You may have already accomplished several deployments. Or perhaps you are a spouse, parent, or even the child of a deployed military member. Regardless of your situation, it is my desire in these few short chapters to prepare you for deployment, to provide a biblical framework and strategies to help you successfully navigate through it while walking faithfully with Christ, and to help you to rest in the gospel, to finish well, and to do it all to the glory of God.

What Makes Deployment So Difficult?

Aren't the difficulties of deployments self-evident? We don't need to point out the obvious. We're away from those we know, living in a foreign land, and working long days in difficult conditions. Deployments are just hard.

When we train for battle, the military tries to create worst-case scenarios or a difficult environment here at home in order to prepare us for the real thing abroad. As is often said in the military, "To be prepared is half the victory," and soldiers must be prepared for the difficulties. That's why we train when it rains, through the night, without food, with heavy gear on—and we do it all over again. We attempt to foresee every possible scenario and prepare for it.

In the same way, we as Christians must plan for the spiritual difficulties that may lie ahead. We must prepare and think through them in order that when those difficulties come, they won't be as surprising and hard. Yes, some of the spiritual difficulties of deployment are self-evident, but not all. Either way, whether we are seasoned in deploying or new to deployment, we can always prepare ourselves better spiritually for the difficulties that may come. Think through the following hardships you may face.

The Spiritual Difficulties of Separation

When the brow of the ship is raised or the airplane takes off, the shock of separation will be inevitable. Be prepared for these:

- Separation from your familiar and safe environment, such as your own home, your familiar neighbors, your neighborhood
- Separation from your regular routines and special events, such as the coffee shop you hang out at or the holiday parties you always attend, and maybe even family birthdays
- Separation from friends and family, the ones who are closest to you, those whom you lean on and love, and around whom you can be yourself
- Separation from your church, Sunday ministry, your pastor asking “How are you doing?,” and fellow church members taking you out to lunch and making you laugh

The Spiritual Difficulties of the Unknown

While on my most recent deployment, I had the privilege of participating in the “Crossing the Line Ceremony.” This is a time-honored Naval tradition whereby the Sailor or Marine who has yet to cross below the equator must undergo an initiation rite in which he or she is “cleansed” from being a Pollywog so as to become a Shellback.

You might be asking yourself at this point, “What does that mean?” As a newly appointed Shellback, I’m sworn to secrecy about the ceremony so as to provoke fear in all future Pollywogs. (But I can assure worried mothers that the ceremony was done very tastefully and safely, and is good fun.)

But what makes the Crossing the Line Ceremony so difficult? It is the fear of the unknown, the same thing that makes deployments so difficult. Where will I go during my deployment? When will I return? What will my living conditions be like? Will I have any Christian friends? What will I eat? Will I be able to make contact with my family? Will I cope? What will our days look like? Will I have to fight? Will I get injured? Will I die? Will my buddy die? The list goes on, and the questions invariably become more difficult.

The Spiritual Difficulties of the Military Environment

When on deployment, especially in a combat zone, your whole soul and body are constantly on the alert. What's going to happen? Where's my rifle? Where are the exits? Where can I find cover? Am I ready? The military environment on deployment, whether in a chopper, in a plane, on a ship, or on the land, is intense. Everyone is on edge. After all, life and death are in the balance.

At this point, you may have begun devising a plan to avoid your deployment altogether! Deployments are hard! I understand. Yes, there are innumerable things that make deployments great too, but you must be prepared when these various spiritual difficulties come. I want you especially to be prepared with the knowledge that the Lord is very kind to his children, and if you are a believer, you should expect nothing less. He's got you. He really does. That's why I want you to keep reading.