

This is the fourth installment of e-mails sent to me by Fr. Carl Subler, a Catholic priest who graduated from VHS in 1993. Fr. Carl is currently serving in the US Military, stationed in Afghanistan. Fr. Carl's words are submitted here in pretty much unedited form. His words appear in italics. Readers should take into account the fact that these messages are being composed in a war zone, where each and every person in the area is in imminent danger each and every day.

All,

*As I mentioned earlier, my battalion is tasked with logistical support of the infantry battalions. Sometimes we receive requests from other units. This mission would take us far from the usual combat support that we can get. For example, if we are hit with a complex attack (roadside bombs disabling vehicles, then a coordinated small arms attack) we can have a quick reaction team to our location to back us up with even more firepower than we carry with us (we carry a lot anyway). In addition, we have CAS (Close Air Support) which are helicopters (or even fighter jets such as the Marine AV-8B Harrier). Because this mission required us to push out quite some distance, we took our own infantry with us. That's not saying our own 402 Brigade Support Battalion people can't fight their way out of a problem, but by their very jobs, they are not infantry and maneuver types. The infantrymen use their Strykers to go after the Taliban that would attack us, or in a show of force, make them think twice about attacking us with small arms and RPG's (Rocket Propelled Grenades).*

*Coordinating something like a long logistical convoy is akin to juggling chainsaws...not easy. Our battalion had to coordinate air support, route clearance, Afghan National Army elements, units within our own battalion, the supported unit, the infantry battalion, and the command unit for Kandahar.*

*We pushed out at 0500, and we knew this was going to be an interesting convoy because the road had not been traveled, nor cleared for some time, plus this was an area that the Taliban controlled. My hat is really off to the Route Clearance Package (RCP). These guys are good no question. Their entire job is to drive along our route and look for bombs.*

*The whole convoy itself took us about 16 hours of travel to get to our destination. There was a lot of waiting, especially after the route clearance vehicles started getting hit by the IED's (Roadside bombs). They found three of them (because their vehicles got hit by the blasts). Of course then, the convoy stops to see if there are any casualties. If the attack is not complex, we either tow or load the vehicle on a flatbed, and keep driving.*

*One of the guys hit in the route clearance came to Mass later that evening at the outpost. He was Ok, but he looked a bit shaken up. After Mass (I preached about the Rosary) he came up and asked me if it was ok if he took a Rosary and learned how to pray it. He was asking because he was Lutheran and wanted to be sure if it would be ok. "Absolutely," I said, but I told him not to bitch to me later when he became Catholic because he was praying the Rosary. He laughed. I didn't know he was Lutheran when he received Holy Communion, but even if I did, I'm not sure I would have had it in me to not give him communion...you see, he's been hit 5 times already by roadside bombs...that's his job, to find bombs. And he knew he had another clearing mission in the morning. I wonder how much of that a guy can take before he throws in the towel mentally or physically for that matter. Well, I figure if he's gonna start the Rosary; the Blessed Virgin Mary can help him out by her prayers. I know the theology of the sacraments and that one is to be in full communion with the Catholic Church to receive communion...I got it...but again, I didn't know until after the fact...man the Reformation really complicated matters for Christians...it cleared some things up for the Catholics, but divisions in the Christianity really suck...especially in combat zones. Well anyway, I even had two Muslim interpreters come to Mass as well...they did not ask for Rosaries...no they did not go to Communion.*

*Back to the route clearing mission. They finally found a fourth one that was very large... the engineers set detonation cord around it, and blew that bomb, which was a tremendous blast. What was really interesting was the Special Forces guys were watching our convoy come through*

*the area at night. All they saw were the blasts, and the really big blast, that was the one where they "felt bad for us". They didn't know it was a command detonated one, they thought one of our vehicles got hit. So our convoy was getting hit, and there really wasn't anything they could do at the time.*

*At any rate, we finally made it to our outpost to deliver the supplies. Since it was so late, we pulled our cots out of the vehicles, and hit the rack for the night. The Strykers positioned themselves in their protective circle with 360 degrees for the field of fire.*

*As soon as the sun was up we could begin the process of downloading all of the fuel, ammo, food, front-end loader, forklift, generator, and everything else you can need to supply the outpost. Since these guys have very limited contact with the rest of the world, I brought a bunch of Copenhagen and Marlboros for them. Plus some books that have been sent to me, I didn't even open; they are now with the Special Forces "Somewhere in Afghanistan".*

*We did have a chance to go into a little nearby village. The Taliban have pretty much closed up the whole place, and there are only a few tiny shops open. So we walked around town checking things out. We went in a very relaxed mode. It was weird knowing that just down the road was a Taliban occupied village, but there we were going through town like we were going to the mall. Don't worry, there were still plenty of guns around should the need presented itself. We ended up buying a lamb from one of the local farmers. He butchered it and we ate that plus some of the local rice we bought. The idea is to make the town safe for the people to return.*

*There is a small medical clinic that was there for the people, and now it is shut down and all the medical equipment destroyed (if there are any doctors reading this that know how to get a hold of any surplus medical equipment, hospital beds, anything that a hospital might want to donate...put your feelers out because I know of a place in Afghanistan that is looking for it...it can be delivered to Kandahar and from there my battalion can load it and bring it to the clinic...and I can get pictures of the whole thing and send them back...speaking of which, I just received an email from First Sergeant Gamez up in Qualat about all of the school supplies he has been getting. So far he has received about 30 boxes full of stuff for the schools in the area...he is grateful and I'm trying to get back to Qualat to go out on the delivery mission with him to get the pictures)*

*At any rate, the download of supplies to the SF went great; those guys are fantastic to serve. They are very secretive by their nature, and they are they stick together as a unit very tight. Their selection process is rigorous and even if a guy does all of the physical training without any difficulty, he can still make it to the end of 1 or 1.5 years of training, and still not make it to the SF teams, he can be voted out by his peers because of personality reasons.*

*Later on that day, there were some Taliban observed next to the road (no doubt setting bombs for our return trip). A mortar team set up and I've got some shots of them dropping mortars on the Taliban.*

*Back home near the 4th of July, occasionally I'll get over to Indiana and buy fireworks and set them off. This kind of reminded me of that. The launcher is in place; next you just open the fireworks and set them off. Here they were shooting HE (High Explosive) rounds at the Taliban, and it reminded me of setting off the fireworks... pick up a box, find out what kind of munition you want, open it up, launch it, and wait for the results. All we were missing was the beer that goes along with fireworks. We had the explosives and the cigarettes. Hell, even the other soldiers sat around watching them launch...just like fireworks back home.*

*They are very careful about determining which people are the Taliban and which are just locals... again, U.S. forces are very careful not to kill civilians...it happens, as it has in all wars, but they are cautious, even cautious to the danger of our own troops. In past wars perhaps we might have destroyed the whole village without thinking twice...not so now, from what I've seen. Again, civilian casualties are going to happen, that's part of the tragedy of war, but sometimes the press doesn't report (maybe because they don't know) some of the sacrifices our troops are making to ensure that civilians not be hurt or killed. They are quick to report when civilians are killed however. I watched a company commander hold off on firing mortars, because he wanted to absolutely confirm he was not shooting at innocent Afghans, rather than Taliban planting bombs.*

*The easy solution would have been to kill the suspects, guarantee our safety and move on, but he didn't. He made the tough call, and I think the right call. On the flip side, when we confirm they are Taliban, they usually die.*

*Speaking of on our way back, we rolled out of the village and headed back to KAF. We got stopped in a bad area by a fuel truck getting stuck in the ditch, so we had to wait for our wrecker to pull it out. And waited and waited. Soon after, a Stryker got stuck; our wrecker pulled him out as well. So the convoy stopped and started and stopped and started the whole way back. At one point, we were stopped for quite awhile waiting for clearance (about an hour), the guys wanted to get out to smoke...there is a "no smoking" policy inside the vehicles, so we had the .50 caliber gunner scan the area first, then we dismounted and everyone "used the latrine" and smoked cigarettes. Imagine that, guys stopping in Taliban controlled areas to get out of the armored vehicles to smoke...this "no smoking" policy is gonna get someone killed.*

*The initial part of the road was pretty clear; a sniper team had shot two Taliban working to plant a bomb, so we had sniper cover. We also had close air support via helicopters.*

*Those helicopter pilots are good. I heard over the radio one of them took some small arms fire, and very calmly the pilot radioed that he had to head back to base to get a new helicopter, but that he'd be right back. There was no anxiety or excitement in his voice, he might as well have been describing going to the library instead of taking machine gun bullets to his chopper. He did manage to return fire with some rockets. Indeed, those helicopter pilots are good, and cool under fire. We arrived safely back to Kandahar...to get ready to do another mission.*

*More to follow...*

*-Carl*

