Chaplain uses experiences in OEF to reach others at prayer breakfast

By DJ Montoya

PETERSON AIR FORCE BASE, Colo. — Terrorism, various personal problems, and a sense of helplessness were the issues covered during a recent prayer breakfast sponsored by the 1st Space Brigade (Provisional) at U.S. Army Space and Missile Defense Command - Colorado Springs.

The guest speaker for the event was Chaplain (MAJ) Andrew C. Meverden, currently assigned to the 2/135th General Support Aviation Battalion of the 89th Troop Command, Colorado Army National Guard. Meverden is one of only two chaplains in the entire COARNG.

Addressing a group of early risers consisting of military and civilians from the command, as well as some curious next-door neighbors hailing from U.S. Air Force Space Command, Meverden's subject was "When you've got problems that can't be solved."

Known to all as "Chaplain Andy," the reverend touched upon recent experiences as chaplain of the 5th Battalion, 19th Special Forces Group (Airborne) Kabul, Afghanistan, August 2002 through July of this year.

"At different times in your life you are going to find yourself in the following kind of a situation," said Meverden.

"You are going to be in the midst of a storm. A storm that you didn't cause. One that you cannot control and you have no choice but to wait out."

"These kinds of problems are the most difficult ones to face because they make us feel so helpless. This current period for those of us in the military being faced with situations — ones we did not cause, or were forced into — sometimes relates to family separations. Other times it relates to hazardous duty. All we can do is wait out the storm."

Meverden added that other issues revolve around money, family, work, and even pets. But the important thing to remember about all such problems is that they are only temporary in nature.

Referring to himself as a wounded healer, Meverden said that he has been through the best and worst of life — witnessing much of both this past year in Afghanistan.

"You can endure anything if it will not last forever. That was the perspective I took when I said goodbye to my family here at Pete Field last year. It was 7,293 miles away. It was hard to leave my wife and children."

He also reminded the audience that the problems don't necessarily have to make one miserable.

"We can live this life with a sense of hope and optimism."

Meverden recounted growing up with a personal fear of the dark and how he dealt with it.

"It was our first night in Afghanistan and there was no electricity in Kabul. We had a little generator powering lights in the mess area. You take your food out about 50 feet away to eat it so the bugs don't get into the kitchen. And here I was standing with wire around us. We had about 800 new Afghan recruits whom we knew could possibly be infiltrators from al Qaeda and the Taliban. And there I was without an assistant — chaplains are non-combatants. I didn't have a weapon. I was standing in pitch-black darkness in Afghanistan. For some strange reason, from that moment on, I lost my fear of the dark. And then … other things happened and I lost other fears."

He then gave an example of how tragedies can be turned into blessings.

Dec. 14 and 16, 2002, are two days Chaplain Andy said he would never forget. He witnessed a live fire exercise between U.S. forces and Afghan friendly forces that led to a horrible tragedy — the accidental death of five local boys.

Despite extensive precautions to clear the area prior to the exercise, 10 boys came over the targeted area on top of the mountain and found themselves in the line of artillery fire.

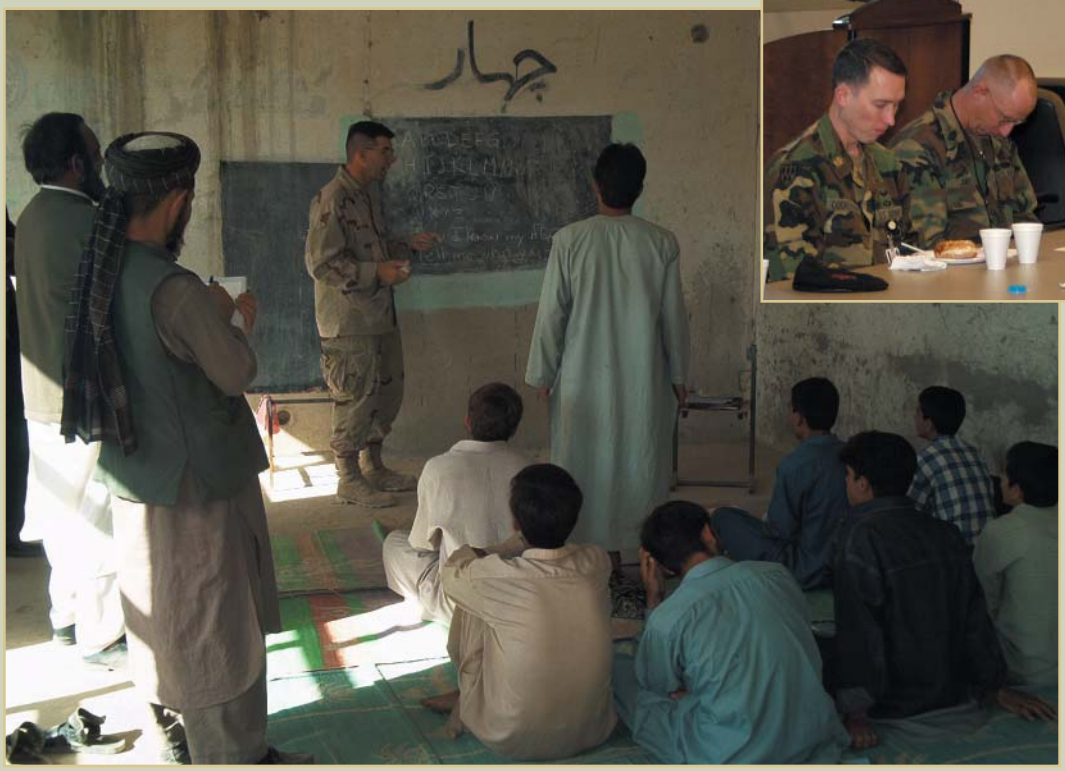
After the first barrage hit, five of them lay dying. When villagers and personnel from the camp realized what had happened and took action, it was too late. One boy died on the mountain. Two died on the stretchers coming down. Another died in the ambulance. A Special Forces medic from camp saved the fifth boy.

"It was a horrible tragedy," said Meverden.

"That night the Soldier who set the tubes — a Special Forces heavy weapons expert who had been in Somalia during Black Hawk Down — sat down with me. He said to me 'Chaplain, when I was in Somalia I had to shoot a 13-year-old boy because he would not put down an AK-47 that was pointed at us. I swore I'd never let myself be put in that situation again. Today I believe I'm responsible for the death of four boys. I did not come here to kill boys. I came here to get rid of terrorists.' And he handed me his weapon, put his head in his hands and cried."

The bodies were autopsied, cleaned up, and placed in body bags.

"I was there when the fathers and uncles came to



Left, Chaplain (MAJ) Andrew C. Meverden, Colorado Army National Guard, teaches English to members of a village in Afghanistan. Meverden spoke recently of his experiences at a prayer breakfast held at SMDC-Colorado Springs. *U.S. Army photo*

Above, members of SMDC bow their heads in a moment of silence at the beginning of the prayer breakfast. *Photo by DJ Montoya*

claim the bodies. I learned to say in their mother tongue 'I'm very sorry.'"

In a situation where understanding and forgiveness between both sides was necessary, it became apparent there was a problem. There was a sense of ignorance of local customs, hurt feelings, and bureaucratic hand tying which gave the wrong perception to the outside world.

Chaplain Andy used his skills and knowledge of the area's customs, in addition to what he considers divine assistance, to help aid the healing process and bring closure to the incident.

Prior to the accident, he had worked teaching English in the local village. One of the boys killed was a student of his. Meverden laid the groundwork through back channels to bring both sides together.

Through little gestures of good faith toward villagers and a simple local custom used when a life is taken or injured, forgiveness was achieved all around. The custom involved the giving of a sheep to the affected families and feasting with the relatives. The Soldiers expressed their sadness for the incident and the Afghans respond in kind by forgiving them.

"I remember what the spokesperson for the Afghans said. That man said 'You didn't have to bring us anything. Just your coming today is more than words can express. The fact that you have come today to mourn and shed tears with us for our boys shows that you see us as people, and not just mere animals. Our country has been at war and many have died, but since your coming last November the war has stopped. For the first time, there is the hope of peace and prosperity in our lifetime."

According to Meverden, the ceremony turned from a solemn occasion into a time of celebration and reconciliation.

"Many of us are caught in storms of our own," said Chaplain Andy.

"How we react to that storm is important. Remember they are only temporary."

Finishing his presentation, the multi-faceted Chaplain Andy took out a guitar and lead the participants in a couple of inspirational songs as the prayer breakfast came to a close.

Attendee LTC Mary Miller, executive officer for the SMD Battle Lab — Space Directorate, was moved by Meverden's address.

"I was intrigued by his experiences from the field," Miller said.

"Rarely does one get to hear or share stories that are of a person-to-person nature. It was also very compelling to see what one person can do or effect. It's like my mother used to say — how many ripples can one stone cast?"