

Faith amid the ruins

Chaplain works to preserve monastery damaged by war

By Kelly Kennedy

kellykennedy@militarytimes.com

MOSUL, Iraq — When 101st Airborne Division soldiers sent an anti-tank missile screaming into the side of a crumbling limestone building sheltering an Iraqi tank unit in 2003, they apparently didn't realize they had just assaulted the oldest monastery in Iraq.

As they carved "I love Debbie" and worse into the walls of the scriptorium, certainly they didn't understand the significance of the Crusader graffiti etched outside the entrance to the building.

And when they covered 500-year-old murals with white gloss paint and emblazoned the 101st's "Screaming Eagle" symbol above the entrance to the chapel, one can only hope they did not know that dozens of monks had been killed there, and that the monastery cradled the secret of the monks' lost bones — a secret released just weeks ago.

"There's a lot for archaeologists to look through," said Chaplain (Capt.) Stephen Dicks of the 28th Combat Support Hospital. "My

greatest fear is that it will be lost before they get here."

As Dicks walked through the grounds of St. Elijah's Monastery, or Dair Mar Elia, at Forward Operating Base Marez, he advised visitors not to stumble or fall; so far, soldiers have removed 360 pieces of unexploded ordnance, but much remains. A chain-link fence with concertina wire now guards the perimeter, and no one may enter the site without a chaplain.

The site dates back before 595 A.D., when Mar Elia built a monastery there — predating Muhammad and Islam. A mosque named after Jonah of "Jonah and the whale" fame stands within a few miles of the monastery and is considered important for both Christians and Muslims.

"When I went to seminary, I studied the ancient Biblical antiquities," said Dicks, a Southern Baptist. "To think the Christians in Iraq, and especially in Mosul, have the same lineage going back to Jonah is an exciting thing."

The limestone monastery and nearby buildings were renovated

in the 16th century.

As Dicks led the way through walls with stones peeking out of mortar and crumbling staircases, traces of the monks' lives could be seen: the scriptorium with windows, where monks would write down the words another monk read from an original text; the kitchen with a still-blackened chimney; the chapel with an altar; sleeping areas with raised stone slabs for beds.

Years before, Crusaders had also left their mark: The first two letters of Christ's name in the Greek alphabet are carved next to the front entrance. They came through the region in a bloody battle meant to retake the holy land and convert Muslims to Christianity.

"Everywhere the Crusaders went, they stamped their name," Dicks said. "We do the same thing."

But in the mid-1700s, Tahmaz Nadir Shah, a Persian leader, began persecuting Christians in the region. Though Christianity and Islam are based on the same history, Muslims consider Jesus a prophet rather than the son of God, and the Muslim prophet

Muhammad said the Quran came to him because people were not living according to God's will.

In 1743, Dicks said, Nadir Shah had all of the monks murdered within the monastery and then destroyed the buildings. But there was no cemetery, and the monks' graves were "lost," Dicks said.

In the 1700s, locals rebuilt the monastery using the same stones. Since that day in 1743, Assyrian Catholics have trekked to the monastery for St. Elijah's feast day. In World War II, locals rebuilt some of the ruins of the monastery, using the original arch over the doorway, to use as a shelter. After the war, the Iraqi army placed a tank battalion, as well as its headquarters, in the monastery.

According to the Geneva Conventions, the Americans still should not bomb such a place, but when the 101st arrived in 2003, the Iraqi army's tank division still had its headquarters at the site.

Now bullet holes pock-mark the door, and one wall is bowed in from the anti-tank missile.

"The 101st was fighting through room by room," Dicks said.

But that may have been the least of the damage. Because the Iraqi army had used the cistern as a sewage tank, the soldiers dumped in diesel gas and lit it up, charring a room behind the cistern.

They painted their logo above the

entrance to the chapel, and then painted the inside of the chapel glossy white — including the altar. They scrawled graffiti everywhere.

Finally, the 101st's chaplain Googled the site — and when he learned of its history, he evicted the soldiers and wrapped a fence around the perimeter.

Chaplains have since conducted sunrise services, promotion ceremonies and tours through the monastery.

About three weeks ago, Dicks wandered around the outside of the site and found a wall made not of rock, but of pottery. He pulled out a piece — though he said he's always careful to put things back exactly where he found them.

"When I pulled it out, a bone came with it," he said.

The monks "didn't go anywhere — they were buried right here in the wall."

With a little more research, he found that Iraqis in the Middle Ages typically buried their monks in clay jars in the walls of the buildings — not in cemeteries. He had seen examples of that when his unit was stationed in Tallil and they looked at other historical sites.

The chaplains let Iraqi officials know what they had discovered and are waiting for approval to investigate further.

"They ... know we're trying to preserve it," he said. □

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