

REFLECTIONS

Carrying the Weight: Remembering Corporal Stephen J. Bishop

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You've probably never heard of Corporal Stephen Bishop, but you should.

War isn't just fought with bullets and bombs. Sometimes, it's fought with backpacks, soccer balls, and quiet conversations in dusty villages.

That was the work of Corporal Steven J. Bishop, a soldier in the 422nd Civil Affairs Battalion, whose mission wasn't just to win battles, but to win trust, rebuild communities, and bring a sense of normalcy to places that had seen too much war.

I served as the chaplain for the 422nd, and in June of 2009, we deployed to Iraq. Steven was assigned to a small team way out west in Tal Afar, a rugged city near the Syrian border with a large Yazidi population. It was one of the more remote and challenging postings, but also one of the most rewarding.

The Work of Civil Affairs

While combat forces secured battlefields, Civil Affairs teams go in and try to fix what war has broken. It is about working with local leaders, rebuilding schools, restoring water supplies, and creating opportunities for people who live in conflict for too long.

It is delicate work—diplomacy in boots, done at the ground level, one conversation at a time.

Steven and his team weren't just soldiers. They were bridge-builders, problem-solvers, and community repairmen.

Out on Mission—Backpacks, Candy, and Soccer Balls

I visited Steven and his team multiple times, going out on missions with them. We met with local leaders, assessed village needs, and—most importantly—spent time with the kids.

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The children of Tal Afar were just like kids anywhere else. They laughed, played, and lit up at the sight of a new backpack, a piece of candy, or a soccer ball rolling across the dusty ground.

Those small moments—Steven handing a kid a brand-new backpack or kicking a soccer ball around with them—were reminders that, even in the middle of a war, there was still room for connection and joy.

The Best Chow Hall in Iraq

Now, I'll be honest—not all chow halls in Iraq were created equal. Some were just a step above MREs. But the one at Steven's outpost? We were convinced it was the best in the whole theater.

Maybe it was just that everything tasted better after a long mission in the heat, but I suspect it had something to do with the company. Sitting down for a meal together—laughing, decompressing, swapping stories—was part of what made the team feel like a family. And then, one day, we lost one of our own.

The Loss of a Teammate

March was upon us, and our days in Iraq were getting short. Thirty days from home. Close enough to feel real, but not close enough to let down our guard.

Then came the call.

A medevac was inbound to FOB Speicher, our headquarters outside of Tikrit. Steven was on that bird.

I didn't know what had happened.

I was behind the wheel of an old, beat-up Toyota Hilux, tearing down the road toward the Combat Surgical Hospital. I had made that drive before—too many times—but something about this one felt different.

As I neared the hospital, I saw the Black Hawk with the red cross painted on its side, slicing through the sky, moving fast.

It wasn't slowing down.

By the time I got there, they were already wheeling Steven off the bird.

They were running. A medic was on top of the gurney, pressing down hard on his chest. I scanned him quickly, expecting to see gunshot wounds, blast injuries—something obvious.

But there was nothing.

No blood. No shrapnel. Just Steven, lifeless, being rushed inside.

Beside me was Staff Sergeant Russ Robinson, my chaplain assistant.

Russ was the best kind of teammate—steady, competent, and full of common sense. But more than that, he cared deeply for our soldiers.

A good chaplain assistant (or religious affairs special now) isn't just another soldier in the unit. They carry the weight with you. They stand beside you in the hardest moments, when words aren't enough, and silence has to do.

And on that day, I was grateful I wasn't standing there alone.

A Fight We Couldn't Win

Inside the hospital, the doctors and nurses worked with tireless hands and steady hearts. They fought for him with everything they had.

I prayed.

I prayed as I watched the flatline on the monitor, over and over again.

I prayed, hoping for a miracle.

But it wasn't to be.

That day, March 13, 2010, in Tikrit, Iraq, Steven J. Bishop of Virginia passed away.

The enemy was not an insurgent.

It was a hidden heart condition; one he never even knew he had.

For a moment after he was gone, we just stood there, speechless.

The medical staff stepped back, exhausted and heavy hearted. The fight was over.

They told us they were preparing his remains for transport.

Russ and I stood over his body. We prayed.

And then, I reached down and zipped up the body bag. I saw his face disappear, but I still see it today.

That thick black zipper is something I will never forget. Even now, I have a hard time with thick black zippers. They bring me right back to that moment, standing in that cold, sterile room, knowing we had to send a teammate home in a way none of us ever wanted.

It was surreal. I had been on both sides of death before—but nothing quite like this.

A short time later, our entire unit gathered at the hospital.

We stood in formation, silent and reverent, as we moved Steven, as dignified as we could, through a corridor of his brothers-in-arms.

A waiting Black Hawk stood ready.

Russ and I escorted Steven to Baghdad, where he would begin his journey home—back to the hills of western Virginia.

It was a somber flight.

Carrying the Weight

Some weights you set down. Others, you carry for a lifetime.

The weight of war is like that. So is the weight of loss.

Somewhere in a quiet corner of my mind, I still see the thick black zipper of Steven's body bag. I still feel the press of my fingers as I reached down and pulled it shut. I still hear the silence on that flight to Baghdad.

There are things you don't get to leave behind.

Even now, 15 years later, I stay connected with his family. Through social media, through messages, through quiet reminders that his life still matters.

I met Steven's father, a Pentecostal pastor, when I visited his family in Virginia. Grief sat heavy in the room, but so did something else—the kind of faith that doesn't break, even under the worst kind of loss.

His father had spent a lifetime praying over his son. And when Steven left this world, I was the one who prayed over him last.

That's a weight I carry.

And even though so much time has passed, they still carry the weight, too.

Because some love is too deep to be left behind. Some loss is too heavy to ever fully set down.

So we carry it—together.

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