

Hagwood was chaplain in Kuwait, Afghanistan

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By PAUL COLLINS - Bulletin Staff Writer

Lealice Hagwood said it was difficult knowing that her husband, Chaplain (Capt.) C. Lee Hagwood Sr., was in harm's way in the Middle East, but she thought it was an opportunity for him to serve God in a greater capacity.

But "we're so grateful he's back," she said Friday. Lee Hagwood, who has a doctorate of ministry and is the senior pastor at Agape Bible Christian Fellowship in Martinsville, recently returned from a yearlong deployment to Kuwait and Afghanistan as part of the Virginia (Army) National Guard's 134th Chaplain Support Team.

Lealice Hagwood said she was "a little apprehensive at first" about her husband being deployed, but she thought he could help provide support and comfort to service members in combat zones.

While he was away, she said, they communicated mostly via e-mail, and he was in the prayers of their family and the congregation at Agape Bible Christian Fellowship. "We definitely missed his presence," she said.

The Hagwoods have been married nearly 30 years, and their four sons are Carl "C.J." Hagwood Jr., James Hagwood and Benjamin Hagwood, all of Lynchburg and all graduates of Liberty University; and Joseph Rueben, who will graduate from Martinsville High School on June 5.

Lee Hagwood said he's pleased to be back home in time for the graduation, especially because he missed his son's birthday. Lee Hagwood said that during his deployment, he spent about a fourth of his time in Kuwait and three-fourths in Afghanistan. He was the chaplain manager at Kuwait Naval Base, Camp Patriot, in southeastern Kuwait, and garrison chaplain, USFOR-A (U.S. Forces-Afghanistan), New Kabul Compound, in the capital Kabul. In both countries, he worked with personnel from all branches of the military and civilian personnel. He declined to discuss some specifics about his deployment because some information is classified by the military and because of confidentiality between chaplain and the people who receive counseling.

In Afghanistan, Hagwood, a Protestant minister, performed or made arrangements for other faith leaders to perform Protestant, Catholic and Jewish worship services as well group Bible studies, independent Bible studies and other religious education. He tried to enable people of various faiths, including Islam, to express their religious beliefs, he said. "Services were very well attended," he said.

He also was involved, on average, in about 125 counseling sessions a month, he said.



Chaplain C. Lee Hagwood Sr. of Martinsville (left) recently returned home after a yearlong deployment in Afghanistan and Kuwait. His wife, Lealice (right), said the family is grateful to have Hagwood home again. He is pastor of Agape Bible Christian Fellowship in Martinsville.

Military personnel face many stresses, including, for many, coping with life or death situations every day; working 12 to 18 hours a day, seven days a week; and being away from their loved ones while being concerned about their problems, Hagwood said. "People deployed with you are your family away from home," he said. In counseling and in other ways, Hagwood said, he tried to give distressed people hope, based on faith. "The foundation is the Holy Bible. Faith comes from hearing the word of God," he said.

He said getting people in distress to focus on hope is "futuristic." They may not be hopeful because they can't see past their immediate problems, Hagwood said. But he said he tried to get people to remember when they felt God had helped them or other people overcome problems, and to believe that God can do that again. "You can trust in God. As people, we will fail or give up" at times, but "God never fails, and his word lasts forever," Hagwood said. "God becomes very ... real in a combat environment. Confronted with life and death situations," he said, many people want "straight, black and white" answers to such questions as, "Is there a God?" and "How do I know God is real?"

Hagwood said he doesn't think he has met an atheist in a combat zone, and the vast majority of people he met seemed to grow in faith rather than lose faith. Hagwood also helped with humanitarian work, such as distributing donated school supplies and clothes to Afghanis. He said it was rewarding to see smiles on children's faces and hear Afghanis' gratitude when they received donations, and he hoped donors also were helping the families of U.S. service members.

Many U.S. civilians, he said, do not fully appreciate the sacrifices made by those in the military. During his deployment, he said, he saw great patriotism, courage under fire and a drive to perform with excellence among personnel. "When you have to bury someone, and I've had my share of doing that," said Hagwood, "you realize how life is precious." He added, "People need to take more time to care for one another."

He said he wishes more Americans would seek pastoral counseling rather than abuse one another. Counseling can help people consider the best options for themselves and their loved ones, said Hagwood.

Another lesson he learned from his deployment was that in Afghanistan, one of the poorest countries in the world, compared with Kuwait, one of the richest, people in Afghanistan have survived decades of war in modern times by depending on each other. In addition to the problem of warfare, he said, the Afghanis "have nothing, dirt streets. I can't even describe their houses. If they can make it ... and depend on each other as a tribe and as a community, we can make it. God is not going to leave us or forsake us."

Hagwood, an Air Force veteran, joined the National Guard in 2006. He was the battalion chaplain of the Virginia (Army) National Guard's 429th Brigade Support Battalion in Danville before he was deployed to Kuwait and Afghanistan.

In addition to serving his church, Hagwood is an assistant professor at Carolina Evangelical Divinity School in Greensboro, N.C., and an adjunct professor at Danville Community College. Agape Bible Christian Fellowship will have a celebratory event in October to recognize Hagwood for being pastor and for his military service.