

From Costa Mesa to Iraq: BAND OF BROTHERS IN CHRIST

Story by Christmas McGaughey
Photos by U.S. Marines

When they joined the United States Marine Corps and moved to Southern California four years ago, a handful of young Christian men had no idea how God would knit them together through tragedy and victory on the front lines of battle. After fighting side by side in Iraq, this band of brothers is serving Christ at CC Costa Mesa and beyond—even taking a Bible college class together and praying God will use them to spread His Word.

Lance Corporals Jason Bell and Seth Bigalow, both members of the USMC's 1st Light Armored Reconnaissance (LAR) Company C, shared how God worked among their company in Iraq.

I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the LORD.

Psalm 118: 17

Grief and Glory

It was New Year's Eve. The young men of the 1st LAR "Charlie Company" had been fighting for weeks and weeks in one of the



Jason Bell

bloodiest conflicts in Iraq—Fallujah—and tonight they were nearly punchy with relief and anticipation of celebrating the New Year. In 30 minutes they would be done for the night, and soon finished with this tour in Iraq.

Fellow Marines and brothers in Christ, Jason Smith, 21, and Jason Bell, 20, pulled over for one of their last routine checks in the Al Anbar Province 40 miles west of Baghdad. Though he was the younger of the two, Jason Bell was proud of his friend after seeing his renewed com-



Marines of 1st LAR Charlie Company face constant firefight in Fallujah, Iraq.



Military dog handlers travel in a six-wheel drive "Cougar" armored vehicle at dawn to perform house-to-house searches.



Scouts with the 1st LAR found a hidden weapons cache while searching a house during Operation Steel Curtain.



Private 1st class Michael D. O'Neill and James P. Donovan, combat engineers with 1st CEB attached to 1st LAR, place an explosive device in a bunker so it can be destroyed.

mitment to the Lord. God had been doing amazing things in their company over the last several months—those who had been far from Christ were turning back to Him, and Bell had been leading a growing Bible study among the company. One man who recommitted his life to Christ had even insisted on being baptized while they were in Kuwait, so they dug a three-foot trench, lined it with plastic, and baptized him with all the men watching—a testimony to the

unbelievers and a celebration to the believers. Inspired by such examples in the Charlie Company, Smith had recently returned to the Lord and began reading his Bible. The two men had several conversations about God's Word and serving Him, and Jason Bell was excited to see what God had in store for his friend.

As they pulled their Light Armored Vehicle (LAV) over, it suddenly exploded from a landmine. As Bell scrambled from the rubble, he found that Smith had been killed. Back at camp, Jason sat stunned, grieving and wondering why God had allowed his friend to die.

"I was so confused: 'Lord, I don't know what You're doing. This guy was just changing his life, following You,'" Jason recalled. He read in Romans 9 about how God has power as a potter over the clay, and chooses

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Lance Corporal Jason Bell

photo by Corporal Ken Melton

Iraq

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photo by Kim Komenich



Cpl. Rodolfo Fuentes, Jr. and 19-year-old Lance Cpl. David Reister of Sacramento, CA, say a prayer before the boots, identification tags, and rifles of Cpl. Jason Morrow and Staff Sgt. Raymond during a memorial service.

photo by Corporal Mark Sixbey



Lance Cpl. Seth Bigalow, far left, with fellow members of the 1st LAR Battalion. The platoon was assigned with disrupting operations, border security, and stabilization operations in the western Al Anbar province.

Iraq

how He uses each person's life. Still, Jason didn't understand and shared his grief with a Christian brother. "He encouraged me not to focus on the things I don't understand but what I do know—that God loves us, that He's good—the simple promises of the Word." Later, he was comforted by Romans 11:33, "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!" He prayed and trusted that God had a plan.

A few months later, Bell was heading to Smith's home in Phoenix, AZ. "What could I say to a family who had just lost their son—me, who was in the vehicle with him?" Jason recalled. But when he got there, it was Smith's parents who spoke to him. Before their son died, he had written to all of his family members, encouraging them to read their Bibles and go back to church. He even told his fiancée of his renewed commitment and said they shouldn't be married unless she had the same desire. "It was just amazing, all the fruit that came from it—his parents are right with God now; his fiancée got saved." Jason Smith's

funeral was packed by people touched by his life and faith.

"There are so many stories about guys who died in battle and how God used it; it was incredible," Bell said. "I've started writing them all down."

One of the staff sergeants often gave believers a hard time about reading their Bibles and going to Christian services. Bell felt prompted to share his faith; the staff sergeant said he believed in honor and courage, not religion. It wasn't about religion, Bell had explained, but about having a personal relationship with one's Savior, Jesus Christ.

Many listened to their conversation. A few months later, the sergeant courageously gave his life to save his company. Later, Bell learned that the sergeant had asked the chaplain several questions about God and said that Bell was a constant witness to him. "He said he wanted to be like me, and that I had tried to convert him every day. I was amazed because I had only shared with him that one time," Bell recalled. "It was evident the Holy Spirit was working in his life."

Another young Marine, Blake, also had scoffed at Bell's commitment to Christ. "He mocked me when I was praying. 'Who are you praying to? It doesn't work;

“There’s a kind of guilt, not being able to be there with your brothers and help them when the fight is going on.”

Lance Corporal Seth Bigalow



photo by Staff Sergeant Jim Goodwin

Lance Cpl. Joseph C. Soto places the helmet of Lance Cpl. Michael L. Ford on Ford's rifle during a memorial service.

nobody's listening.' I was surprised because I had talked to him before and he seemed to believe in God." Bell gently told him, "I'm here for you, whatever is going on." The young man ran out of the room in tears. Weeks later, he apologized and told Bell that he'd been angry at God because a friend of his had died. "I was so excited and happy for him that he had accepted the Lord," Bell said. A few weeks later, Blake was shot and killed in battle.

"Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints."

Psalm 116:15

Trusting in Tragedy

Seth Bigalow, Jason Bell, and many other Marines from Charlie Company had been

together at CC Costa Mesa and in training. But Seth was assigned to a different area than the rest during the Fallujah conflict. Knowing many of his friends had fallen, Seth had to endure their loss from a distance. A few miles south in the Najaf area, Seth was not allowed to join the others in their battle or their mourning afterward. And the only Christian brother from CC Costa Mesa who had been assigned with him was Steve, wounded and sent home three weeks after they had arrived in Iraq.



Seth Bigalow

"We trained together," Seth said, "so when you have good friends who die, it's hard when you can't be there. There's a kind of guilt, not being able to be there with your brothers and help them when the fight is going on."

Seth recalled, "From then on, it was a time of a brokenness—a good brokenness—a time in the desert, physically and spiritually." Opening his Bible for comfort, Seth read Job. He cited Job 1:21b-22. ***"The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.' In all this Job did not sin nor charge God with wrong."*** Seth recalled, "Job didn't charge God with doing wrong. I realized I didn't react how I should have; I was really questioning why things were going on. So I really learned to walk by faith."

Barely 20 years old and isolated in a hostile land, Seth learned a great lesson in faith. "We have a choice in trials—whether we're going to harden our hearts or seek after God. In trials, you either draw closer to God or you choose to walk farther away from Him." Seth added that having a foundation in God's Word helped him rely on God's promises despite his emotions or grueling circumstances.

Seeing God's hand in their friends' deaths, Jason and Seth also glorified Him for sparing others.

God Spares Some

The staccato drumming of gunfire was the constant backdrop of Fallujah, Iraq—one of the bloodier battlefields of 2004. Jason Bell, then 20, knelt and braced his body as he shot a rocket through a wall. At his side was a journalist named Scott who had been shadowing him for several days, asking Jason questions about his faith and the Bible. Jason let go the rocket, the boom ringing in his ears. In a matter of seconds, a grenade landed near them. Jason instinctively stood, shielding Scott from the blow. In an instant, the explosion ripped through the vacant house, sending shards of metal straight into Jason's face.

Scrambling to his feet, Scott asked Jason if he was all right. Even though his face was bloodied from the shards, his wounds were not threatening. Scott happily thanked Jason and embraced him. "I've never had a guy kiss me on the head before," Jason recalled, laughing. "He's a great guy, invited me to stay at his home any time. He has a wife and several kids back home. I was thankful the Lord did use me to shield him." Though he was awarded the Purple Heart for saving Scott, Jason said he barely knew what was happening at the time and credits God for protecting them both. After his wound was treated, Jason learned: "The piece of metal that went into my face stopped just short of my sinus cavity, a few inches below my eye. If it had gone into my eye, it would have killed me."

A New Horizon

Now back in the States, Jason has a desire to teach God's Word—perhaps in a rural part of the U.S. where there is little verse-by-verse teaching. Seth also has a shepherd's heart and is working with young people at CC Costa Mesa. Several of the Marines from their company are taking a Bible college class at CC Costa Mesa, and others have gone to CC Bible College in Murrieta. Jason added, "Just knowing where a lot of the guys are now—walking, growing, and seeking after the Lord—we're convinced that God handpicked our company." 🙌

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Lance Corporal Seth Bigalow