

Under fire and praying for life

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How do you cope with the tragic news of death caused by war? The recent deaths of Australian Broadcasting Corporation cameraman Paul Moran and four other journalists in northern Iraq brought home this question once again for Australians.

News of this tragic incident and others like it has stirred me to pray for the comfort and healing of those who are mourning the loss of loved ones. God is Life, immortal and eternal. Life isn't poured into a mortal body at birth only to be lost at some future time. Life is unending, because God is our source of life. This view of life may be radical, but it sustains my hope in life as undying. It comforts me in times of loss. It encourages me to pray for the safety of men and women everywhere who are working in dangerous situations.

Praying at such moments can seem hopeless when media reports portray danger as constant. But I'm refusing to be overwhelmed by hopelessness. Why? Because I've learned that even in war, when you're staring a life-threatening situation in the face, it's possible to be protected from harm.



Da Nang Bridge, Vietnam War

My brother and I were in Vietnam in 1969 during the Vietnam War. We sang in shows for the armed forces and worked out of the coastal city of Da Nang, not far from where a strategic bridge crossed a major river. Each end of the long structure had check-points manned by US soldiers, who were armed with machine guns. All vehicles crossing the bridge had to stop and be thoroughly searched. The Vietcong had tried several times to blow up this important river crossing.



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One morning our show set out across the bridge to perform at another military base. That afternoon we performed for the troops and received a warm reception. By the time we had packed the equipment, changed, and got into our hired white commuter van, night had fallen. As we drove along, we soon found that the only light for miles around came from the van's headlights.

We were still laughing and enjoying our success when we reached the darkened approach to the bridge's "Checkpoint Charlie." Instead of slowing, the driver suddenly accelerated as we neared the guard on duty. The guard yelled out, "Stop, or I'll shoot!" but the driver sped up. When we realized what was happening, we also screamed at the driver to stop. He ignored us and just kept going.

Machine-gun fire erupted, and I heard the spit of bullets. We dropped to the floor. With urgency I prayed: "Dear God, You are here. Your protecting presence is shielding us. You are our Life. No one can take Life from us. You are helping us. You won't let us die on this bridge. You are keeping us safe." I kept praying like this with all my heart.

As we reached the center of the bridge, our stage manager scrambled forward and grabbed the driver from behind. The van swerved from side to side, before coming to a stop.

Then the guards at the checkpoint ahead of us began firing on us. Again I prayed that God would keep us alive. I knew the soldiers feared that the van would detonate. I continued to pray for our preservation. I prayed that fear couldn't result in bad decisions being made. After several minutes, our vehicle was surrounded, and we got out at gunpoint. When a thorough search had been conducted, we were allowed to proceed across the bridge. The driver was taken into custody, and our manager drove us home to our village compound.

That night I learned that prayer is not a vain petition. It's powerful. It protects. I know, because the power of prayer saved all seven of us in that van. And such instances of preservation through prayer didn't occur just once during our 120 days in this theatre of conflict. There were so many occasions when we were protected that I could fill a book.

Prayer is more than positive thinking. It isn't just a last resort when you can't do anything else. Prayer is powerful and effective. It comforts and heals, and can protect and save lives on all sides of a conflict. God's protecting and saving power is a present help. Your prayer can, and does, make a difference.

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