

Gulf chaplain recalls stint during war

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Although they were stationed in the Persian Gulf Jan. 16, 1991, Father Richard Mattie and his shipmates aboard the USNS Mercy did not learn that the war against Iraq started until hours after the air phase had begun.

And they received the word not from military sources in Saudi Arabia, but through a phone call from the United States to the hospital ship.

"We found out that the war had started because a doctor's wife had called him from home in the middle of the night," said the commander and chaplain in the United States Navy. "He broke it to the captain, and he broke it to us."

Father Mattie recalled the events of that January morning — as well as the six months he spent in the Persian Gulf region — during a visit with relatives in Rochester April 25 to May 4.

The Hornell native was sent to the gulf shortly after being assigned as a chaplain at Oakland Naval Hospital in Oakland, Calif., on July 28, 1990.

When the ship arrived in the gulf in mid-September, it was one of the few military medical facilities in the area, Father Mattie noted.

At the time, the Rochester priest explained, military officials feared that the war could begin at any moment and that the 250-bed hospital ship could potentially have to treat up to 1,000 casualties at one time.

But as the days and weeks passed — and as field hospitals began to become more visible in Saudi Arabia — the Mercy became just one among many medical options, Father Mattie noted.

During the months of waiting for the war to begin, crew members staged drills to prepare for a potential sudden rush of casualties, once fighting began. The ship's medical personnel also kept busy treating men and women who required minor surgery or who had been injured in non-



File photo
Father Richard Mattie of Hornell celebrated Christmas midnight Mass for the officers, crew and patients aboard the U.S.N.S. Mercy, a hospital ship stationed in the Persian Gulf.



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer
Father Mattie, who was assigned as chaplain aboard the Mercy shortly after being stationed at California's Oakland Naval Hospital in July of 1990, visited with relatives in the diocese before returning to his post May 4.

combat related accidents.

Many soldiers were sent to the ship for treatment even when they didn't really need medical attention because military leaders wanted to have as many troops as possible ready for combat, Father Mattie reported.

"Saddam supposedly had a million men (in his army), and our numbers were so few," Father Mattie explained.

Once the fighting started, however, stories about the strength of Iraqi forces proved untrue. Casualties were so low, Father Mattie noted, that the hospital ship's personnel treated no combat related injuries.

"Some of the doctors and nurse felt like their skills were not being used," Father Mattie observed. "An awful lot of sacrifice went into this," he added, noting that many of the medical personnel were reservists who left their homes and practices to serve in the gulf.

Still, Father Mattie remarked, people were happy that the casualties among U.S.-led forces were so few. "It was remarkable," he said. "Most people saw that God's hand was there."

The ship's personnel were not aware of the extent of the damage and suffering in

Iraq, nor did they learn about the subsequent uprisings by Kurdish rebels, Father Mattie said. The priest attributed the lack of awareness in part to limited communications with the mainland. In fact, he noted, the ship's crew often received more information about the war from U.S. newspapers and magazines sent by friends and relatives than they did from military sources.


The periodicals that arrived before the war began also told about the demonstrations in the United States against the conflict and the questions religious leaders had about whether the war was "just," Father Mattie said.

In fact, Father Mattie recalled, he organized discussions on the ship about whether the conflict would be just, reading to the crew statements about the war by Pope John Paul II and the U.S. Catholic bishops.

Finally, Archbishop Joseph T. Ryan, head of the Archdiocese for Military Services, U.S.A., wrote in his Christmas letter, "in the last analysis, it would be a just war," the diocesan priest said.

Father Mattie agrees with that opinion. "It was just because of what you were hearing about what was happening in

Continued on page 18



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Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer
Father Mattie gets an enthusiastic greeting from students of Rochester's Our Mother of Sorrows School April 30 after presenting them with a plaque thanking them for their support during the war.