

WITH TEARS AND PRAYERS

What has been happening to cities and towns all across America has just happened to Cleveland, Tennessee: The struggle in Iraq has just gotten very personal. Cleveland's National Guard unit, part of the 278th Armored Cavalry Regiment (and the company with which I spent six years), rolled out in a convoy this morning, headed for training at Camp Shelby in Mississippi, and possibly to Iraq.

It's a tough time for spouses, children, parents, co-workers in business and industry, church members and the community at large as relationships are interrupted by the miles that will separate them.

Lola and I were part of the crowd that poured into Westwood Baptist Church Wednesday afternoon for a service of prayer. It was a season of eloquent petitions to God, plenty of tears, and expressions of love and support for the Guardsmen and their families. The troops marched in behind a color guard and took their seats along the first few rows. They were grateful for this strong expression from the community.

"Prayer is better than any weapon we've got," said Ron Arnwine, one of the soldiers. His wife, Kaye, is a veteran of the Gulf War and is still active in the Chattanooga Guard unit.

Fellow Guardsman Tim Bohannon, 22, is leaving behind eight-month-old twins, Natalie and Regan, and his wife is expecting another child. Knowing the community will support his family during his absence is helping alleviate the pain of separation, he said. "I'm really proud to be a member of this community after the way they have treated us," he said.

All across our nation, and throughout Life Care, families are dealing with loved ones marching off to war in defense of America and the freedoms this nation guarantees us. It's a sacrifice no one can understand until it is experienced. Those of us who remain owe them our gratitude. For duty to country. For service to mankind.

--Beecher Hunter